Summary

Dana Scully seeks to find answers to the losses she has suffered and the questions uncovered by her work with Fox Mulder. Those answers aren't all they seem, as she learns truths about what happened to her and about Mulder's tragic family past.
"So, this is where you grew up?" Dana Scully stretched her short legs as she stepped out of her partner's sedan, a car that was in dire need of a good wash after all the miles it had seen in the last few weeks. Fox Mulder shrugged as he rounded his car, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his dark jeans, part of an outfit that Scully had to admit she wasn't used to seeing on her tall, lanky partner. He looked younger when dressed so casually, his dark hair mussed from the wind blowing in their car as they made the six hour drive from Washington DC to Chilmark, Massachusetts, sitting on the western end of Martha's Vineyard, just off the mainland coast. He looked easier, more carefree - except for the muted sadness in his eyes as they swept up the raised, green lawn to the house of his childhood. There were far too many bad memories in this house and certainly too many questions, perhaps more than even the two of them knew about or understood.

It was those questions that had caused Mulder to ask her up on a Saturday to go with him to his childhood home. Despite having just spent the weekend before doing this same heartbreaking duty at her own sister Melissa's home, Scully had readily agreed to the task, in part because she understood just how Mulder felt, sifting through the remains of the life of a departed family member. Yet, Melissa's life had been simple, easily boxed and stored, divvied up between friends and family, with no secrets that went beyond sisterly ones. Mulder's family was seemingly filled with the sort of unspoken truths that Scully couldn't imagine among her close-knit family. There in the large, craftsmen style home were possible answers to why Mulder's sister, Samantha, disappeared all those years ago, who these men were working in the government who tried so hard to destroy the X-files and Mulder's work, and why they abducted Scully a year ago and what did they do to her. Perhaps those answers might not be found in Bill Mulder's files, but certainly he knew about what was going on, and perhaps even participated in it.

So it was, hesitantly, Mulder moved up the concrete walkway, bounding up the small steps that led to the wide front porch that covered the front of the house. "Mom's been here every day for the last few weeks. She got most of the family portraits and had the furniture moved or stored. All that is left is Dad's office, really, and she refused to touch it. She asked if I would." He grimaced as he turned to her, reaching in his pocket for a house key. "Thanks for coming with me on this."

"Not a problem." She smiled, stifling the yawn she wanted to respond with. She'd been up far too early and had slept far too little on the long car ride. "Besides, I've always wanted to see the house where Fox Mulder grew up, throwing baseballs and shooting hoops."

"You make it sound so idyllic." Mulder cracked his first smile of the day as he unlocked the door into a hollow, sounding hallway. Musty air flooded outside as dust motes danced in the air. Just inside, Scully could see the empty house, with its bare-bones furniture and what looked like paint supplies stacked in the corner by a stairway.

"Mom's getting the place repainted and fixed up for sale." Mulder shrugged, eyeing the buckets and tarps as he moved into the first room off the hallway, what looked to be a living room. He hissed between his teeth as he shook his head in wonderment. "It's hard to believe in just weeks my entire childhood is gone."

Not that Mulder had much of a childhood left, Scully thought as she followed him into the spacious room that lead to a dining room, also equally empty. "So your mother is getting the house?"

"No, I am, actually, once everything goes through probate, but Mom got all the stuff inside." He wandered into the next room, his heavy footsteps echoing against hardwood floors in the giant rooms. "I'm having Mom do the work on the place for me to sell it and I'll split the profits with her.
Really, the house is as much hers as it was Dad's. She and I lived here after the divorce until I graduated high school and left for England. That's when she got the place in Greenwich and Dad moved back here." He opened the door off the dining room that Scully presumed was the kitchen. It was a large, spacious area, filled with the sort of cabinets and countertops she was sure her mother would have died to have while raising her four kids. She tried to imagine a young, rambunctious Fox, filled with his endless, perpetual energy, racing in from a game outside to tell his mother about his adventures, his bright-eyed kid sister tagging along behind.

"You must have had a pretty decent time of it growing up," she murmured as she ran a hand across a marble counter, glancing over her shoulder at him. "At least till Samantha disappeared."

Mulder paused in his wandering, as if surprised by the statement. "Yeah," he admitted as his expression softened considerably, a wry smile tugging at his full lips as he looked out the back window into a sprawling back yard. "Mom made home great for me and Sam, and when Dad got home on the weekends from DC it was almost like those stupid televisions shows. For a while it was perfect; big Christmases, trick-or-treating without fear of the neighbors, endless summer baseball games, trips to the vacation home in Rhode Island." He turned from the window, glancing down at her as she moved beside him to look out on the slightly overgrown yard. "It's amazing how golden everything looks when you are a kid, before the grown up world of secrets and lies sets in."

"Yeah," Scully murmured sadly as she leaned against the windowsill, watching her partner as he roamed the kitchen, finally moving out again restlessly. She had gotten to hold on to that sense of childhood much longer than Mulder ever had. She wondered when he had finally lost her innocence? Was it that horrible moment when her mother told her about her Sunday School teacher's murder? Was it when Melissa announced quite calmly over dinner that she no longer wanted to practice Catholicism as she didn't believe in Christianity? Maybe it was the afternoon she had spent in Daniel's office, resting in between rounds at Stanford University Hospitals, when his wife called and she overheard the message. It was that call, more than anything else, that had set her feet firmly on the pathway that led her where she stood at the moment, in the household of Fox Mulder's childhood, helping him piece together the mysteries and tragedies that surrounded his entire family and lead those back to one of the biggest mysteries of all. Just what was the government hiding from the people and why was it so important to keep secret?

"So which one was your room," she called to him, unseen somewhere else in the house, as she followed in her athletic shoes and jeans, already beginning to feel slightly sticky and damp in the July heat. She had this impish desire to see the room that Mulder had called home, had papered with baseball players and had filled floor-to-ceiling with comic books. At least, she reasoned, that's how she imagined his room looking as a child. It was most likely empty now and perhaps had been for years, ever since Mulder had packed his bags and headed towards England for school.

Mulder peeked his head from out of the hallway, a puzzled, amused frown on his angular face. "Why," he wondered suspiciously.

"For the same reason you were endlessly amused by pictures of my in overalls and braces," she retorted. He had been fascinated with the pictures of her as a child she had recovered from her sister's belongings.

"Mom has most of my things." He pointed up the stairs. "Mine was the first room on the right, looking out over the backyard. There was a tree there I used to like to climb in-and-out of to sneak out of the house and run over to my best friend's house."

"The one whose house burned down," Scully asked curiously. Mulder looked surprised she remembered that story and his fear of fire. Frankly how could she not, with the image of Phoebe
"Yeah," he nodded. "Sam's room was right next to mine. There used to be a door that connected the two, so she could come in at night when she had nightmares. I remember I used to put a chair in front of the door to keep her out, but she'd just come in through the other door."

"Sounds like she was as much of a handful as you are," Scully teased lightly.

"Mom always complained that between the two of us she'd go crazy." He moved from the stairs to a room just down the hallway, behind the staircase, to a door that was locked and shut, one that Mulder produced a key to as opened the door and flipped on the light. The musty, un-lived quality that permeated the rest of the house particularly filled this one corner. The books, boxes, and dust that filled the air choked Scully briefly as she glanced around the small, cramped space.

"Looks like someone was here recently." She pointed out to a jumble of photos and papers on the battered, worn desk against one wall as Mulder flipped on the single light in the room.

"Yeah, me." Mulder gathered the pictures up carefully. "This is where I found the photo with Victor Klemper." He held up another photo for her as he gathered the rest up, another black and white photo of two men standing together talking. She took it between her fingers as Mulder continued to shuffle papers and photos lying the in a box nearby.

"Is this your father?" She frowned as she studied the photo from what looked like the late 60's or early 70's. Short, sturdy Bill Mulder, then with a shock of dark hair, gesticulating as he spoke with another taller, leaner man. He too was dark haired. It was longish as was in style at the time and there was something about him that struck her as so very familiar. The smoldering cigarette in his hand was the link as she gasped, her gaze flying to Mulder's knowing one. He didn't stop working, even as she shoved the photo under his aquiline nose. "You know who that is!"

Mulder nodded slowly as he continued to pull out desk drawers filled with papers and files.

"I believe that's the same, black-lunged son-of-a-bitch we know and love." He smiled grimly as he pulled out a handful of files from a drawer and began sorting through them quickly. "I don't know his name and Mom conveniently doesn't remember. Maybe he doesn't have a name, I don't know." He shrugged, neatly stacking some files on the desk and tossing others to the floor carelessly, as if he planned to throw them away.

"Mulder, this means this man is someone you might have known growing up." The enormity of it struck her like a thunderclap, a lightening strike to her brain. "Do you remember him at all?"

Mulder had an eidetic memory, but she didn't think it went back as far as his childhood. "My father had many of his co-workers over for parties. It wasn't uncommon to have them stopping by randomly when I was young. To be fair and honest, I don't remember much of the adult parties around here. Mom tried to keep us out of Dad's business, and as he worked for the government, I was fine with that. It was boring, grown up stuff." He shrugged as he reached for more files from his father's desk. "Compared to the other secrets Dad's been keeping, him knowing our mysterious, smoking friend seems pretty tame."

"We don't know what his work entailed." Scully slipped the photo of the smoking man and Bill Mulder in the box with the others. "After all, you said it yourself, your father went to work for the State Department right out of college. He might have got drawn into something well over his head and was unable to get out of it. After World War II the government was bringing over all sorts of scientists that the Allies would have cheerfully liked to see tried at Nuremberg. Maybe your father couldn't help the role he played in what this all eventually became."
"Perhaps," Mulder replied distractedly as he tossed a stack of files aside on the floor. "But does that explain about Samantha?"

Scully felt her stomach clench slightly as she leaned against a corner of Bill Mulder's desk. She had come to the same conclusions herself the minute she realized the part that Mulder's father played in the mysterious tests they had found evidence of in the now missing DAT tape. What if there was more to Samantha Mulder's disappearance than just a simple case of child abduction? What if the work his father did had something to do with it? He had said that he was partly to blame for her disappearance, that he had been warned. The well-spoken, British man who claimed to have known Bill Mulder told his son directly that Samantha had been taken to keep their father compliant, to prevent him from spilling the secrets of the secret consortium and their projects. If it were true, then what had happened to Samantha? Why was she still gone? And why were there clones of her running around the country? Had she been forced to undergo the same tests that Scully had? Or had she been subjugated to something else completely different.

"Do you really believe these people took her to keep your father's silence," Scully asked frankly as Mulder finished going through his father's files and gathered up the ones he wished to keep, setting them in a pile at the doorway of his father's office.

"I don't know what I believe." Mulder reached for another desk drawer. He paused, glancing up at her slowly as he sat down heavily in the ancient desk chair his father had in the room. "It makes sense, in hind sight. If these men are as powerful as they say they are, and if they did indeed fear my father revealing their secrets, then what did Dad know and how devastating was it that they felt the need to take my sister? And why her? Why not me? I saw my name on the file. Was I supposed to go instead of her? Why? And why did Dad let me feel that I was responsible for it for all those years, knowing that it was the fault of the men he worked for? Why... why couldn't he just tell me?" Mulder threw his hands up slightly in the air, looking and sounding lost and confused.

"Do you think he even told your mother?" Scully wondered aloud, remembering what Bill had said about his wife's anger with him, how she hated him for destroying his children.

"Mom knows something," Mulder conceded heavily, fiddling with a stapler he pulled out of the desk drawer. "She knows something but she doesn't want to discuss it. That's been Mom's standard MO since the night Samantha went missing. If she doesn't talk about it and pretends it didn't happen, she doesn't have to deal with the pain it caused for her and others. Mom is and always has been the Queen of Denial." He tossed the stapler into the drawer haphazardly. "I love Mom, I do. I think she always thought that if she ignored the problem, then it would fix itself eventually, except Samantha never came home and Dad was murdered in the end by the very men whose truths he gave so much to protect for years. I have to know why that happened. I need to know what was on that DAT tape, why we found all of those files in that mine in West Virginia, and what they have to do with the work Dad was doing and if any of that has anything to do with my sister."

Scully glanced around the dusty, moldering room, filled with what looked to be fifty years of files, books, and papers. Somehow she highly doubted that Mulder would find much here beyond the photos of his father and perhaps a few cryptic, vague files that may or may not shed any light on anything, but it was a start. After the loss of the DAT tape with all of the evidence of what the government's secret plans were involving their strange tests and their genetically engineered virus, this was the only other lead they had that might help to set them on anything resembling the right track. It wasn't quite as bad as starting over from square one again, but it sure felt awfully damn close.

She sighed as she gazed up at the shelves. "Whatever your father was doing, Mulder, whatever secrets you uncover about him and his work, I firmly believe one thing. Your father loved you and
I think that whatever decisions he was forced to make, in the end, he couldn't have been prouder of you and the man you became. I think for your father you were everything as a man he always wanted to be, always wished he could be." She thought of the sad, regretful person she met at the hospital. "I think his hope for you was that someday you could do what he could not in his lifetime, stand up to those forces he knew were out there threatening the world. And as frightened as he was of losing his only son, I think that in his own ways he tried to help you as well."

Mulder studied the open drawer, filled with office supplied, leaning his elbows heavily on his knees as his dark head bowed down. She couldn't see his expression, but the set of his lean shoulders fell slightly, as if some silent weight had just slipped off of them quietly to the floor.

"Do you really believe that?" His question was so soft, she almost couldn't hear him.

"Yes," she replied simply. She had to believe that. She couldn't fathom the idea of the man she saw in Alaska not loving and caring for his child. "And whatever you find out about Samantha and your father's involvement in her disappearance, I think your father was put in the most horrid of situations. Don't judge him harshly, Fox. There might be reasons behind why he did what he did that you don't understand yet, reasons that I don't understand yet. But I can't believe he did any of this out of malice or evil. I have to believe he did what he did because the choices he was given were no choices at all."

Mulder's head tipped up finally, his eyes shining brightly in the dim light with tears that filmed them. "I have to believe that too."

Gently, Scully reached across the desk for the top of his head, running her fingers through his soft, dark hair, a gesture of comfort and affection. Her heart ached for Mulder's loss, as surely as it ached for her own. His father's death only added to the wound of his that had never healed, would never heal until he understood the bitter drama that swirled around his parents and sister, and threatened to drag him down with it as well.

"Do you think the sins of the father are passed down to the son?" Mulder asked quietly as he looked up at her sadly, leaning back in the chair, away from her reach, picking up the photograph of Bill Mulder and the smoking man.

"I think the son was meant to redeem the sins of the father," Scully replied, glancing at the picture in Mulder's long fingers.

Mulder nodded quietly, his gaze inscrutable, as he studied the picture in silence.
In which Mulder attempts to bribe Scully with coffee.

She should have known something was up when he set the coffee down in front of her. Not that it was uncommon for Mulder to bring her coffee, if he stopped in the morning, which he did about once a week, he would bring her a cup. He even knew how she liked it, lots of cream and two sugars. But there were those rare occasions he would bring her the extra special coffee, brewed at a spot near his house that Scully rarely got because it was so far away from her own. It was the one she would swing by if she happened to be anywhere in the area.

Mulder brought that coffee that morning, set it beside her computer and shuffled nonchalantly over to his desk, as if nothing was going on, all grounds for raising Scully's suspicions. She frowned down at the paper cup, then up at him as he pretended to busy himself with setting down his things and turning on his computer. She watched him for long moments, her eyes boring into the side of his head as he studiously watched the boot up screen on his monitor kick into life. It was their first full week back at work since the tragedies that struck both of their families. He might have simply bought it as a gesture of gratitude with going up to Martha's Vineyard with him, or it could just be Mulder being unusually nice, perhaps a tad sentimental given all they had been through in the last few weeks. But then, she reasoned, Mulder was rarely ever that sentimental. He just wasn't the type. No, there had to be something going on. Mulder didn't bring her this coffee unless he had a craving for it or it was her birthday. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms, eyeing him suspiciously.

"What have you done this time?" She asked mildly as he shuffled papers on his desk.

Mulder pretended to look affronted by the question. "What makes you think I did anything?"

"Come on? Jake's Coffee? You only stop by there if you are dying." She pulled the cup to her, reasoning if he brought it, she might as well enjoy it while it was still deliciously hot and steaming in the cup. "I know it can't be for feeding your goldfish while you were supposedly dead."

This comment did elicit a snort of laughter out of him, but he still refused to give. Scully wondered if he wasn't enjoying himself, playing this game of making Scully guess. She continued. "Perhaps being dead gave you a cosmic desire to have Jake's?"

"Not with the long lines there," Mulder murmured, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he studiously avoided her gaze.

She let her mind uncoil the evidence in front of her, growing over it step-by-step. "That means either you want me to do something you aren't sure you will be able to talk me into or you have a case you are fairly certain I won't want to do." It seemed the only logical conclusion to why Mulder would come into the office, bearing the gift of the bean and a carefully schooled avoidance. "Unless it's both."
"I'm pleased to see you cultivating your new found powers of instinct, Agent Scully. You are learning to go with it." Mulder smirked, delight dancing in his expression as he finally spun his chair to face hers, leaning back in it to grin playfully at her across the office. "Turns out that you are right on both counts."

"I'm turning into a veritable psychic." She snorted, setting aside her coffee, eyeing him warily. "What's the case?"

"Nothing with aliens or my father's secrets, you'll be glad to hear. Know of Connerville, Oklahoma?"

Outside of the tragic events earlier in the year in Oklahoma City, of which the FBI had been fully involved in, Scully couldn't say she really knew a lot about the state, "Do I have a reason to know anyplace in Oklahoma?"

"There isn't much to know about Connerville, except for one thing." Mulder reach around and behind him to his open email and clicked a button. Beside her, Scully's own computer sounded, as the email arrived in her open inbox. Curious, she cut her eyes sideways at Mulder as she clicked on the digital file, her eyes scanning it curiously.

"Who sent you wind of this?" She read what sounded like the description of a simple electrical death. What was particularly strange or even and X-file about that?

"After the Federal Building bombing earlier in the year, much of the low grade work has been fielded to Dallas and Kansas City. This was sent my way by the Dallas office, which ran across it on an Oklahoma State Patrol wire of ‘weird ass shit’. They thought it was right up my alley."

"A lightening strike?" She frowned out him dubiously. "Mulder, did it occur to you someone might just be sending you this to mess with you? See if Spooky will bite?"

"The thought had occurred to me, yes." He nodded pleasantly. "But then I began looking at how many of these sorts of accidents happen every year out by Connerville."

"Every year?" Scully was curious about the sound of that. "Lightening strikes aren't that common in the US."

"That's what I thought, till I saw they had five last year."

"Five? In the same town?"

"Same general area, yeah. Now, I will grant you that Oklahoma is tornado alley, but short of the town having a sparkling personality, it doesn't particularly explain why five people would be struck down in the span of twelve months/ Well, unless God likes using Connerville for target practice."

"That's statistically impossible."

"Glad you think that way!" Mulder beamed, flipping his chair around to his computer. "I booked us flights to Oklahoma City in two hours. I've scheduled for us to meet with Stanley Johnson, the county corner, to look at the body."

"The body of a fried, pizza boy?" Scully felt her eyebrows fly up in what was becoming a common reaction for her whenever Mulder got that look in his eye. "What excuse do we give them? 'Hi, we are the FBI, we heard you seemed to have problems with getting your pizza in a timely manner and we wanted to investigate?'"
"I try that line on my pizza delivery boy all the time and he never cuts me any slack." Mulder sighed in mock consternation.

"Why do I have a feeling we'll have Skinner screaming at us in two days after he'd had a complaint lodged about us by the local authorities about how you've been sticking your nose in their cases and acting like a pompous ass?"

"I think Skinner will be relieved that we don't have government conspiracies chasing us down for secret information and trying to kill us, don't you?"

Mulder's point wasn't lost on her. "All right, I'll go. But I would like it stated that I don't see anything unusual about this, short of lightening strikes. And if it turns out you suspect it's alien spaceships looking for a good anchovy pizza, you are walking back from Oklahoma."

"What sort of aliens do you know of that put anchovies on pizza?" Mulder looked disgusted by the idea.

Scully tacitly chose to ignore him.

Chapter End Notes

Only because it really has been that long (as much as I deny it), the tragedy referenced is the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April, 1995. For those of you who don't remember or weren't alive, it was a horrific act and the worst terrorist attack before 2001, and the FBI was involved.

Still stuns me that some of you wouldn't have remembered it. I will go sit in my rocker like an old person now.
The Games We Play

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder tries to understand the primal urges at play in video games.

Scully was a good profiler, but she wasn't a great one, nor did she have any particular keen insight into the human mind. But it didn't take Fox Mulder or a lie detector to pick up that this kid - Zero - was lying through his teeth about something. She was curious as to what it was he was lying about.

"So I'm taking bets. Do you think that his parents were really so cruel as to name their child 'Zero' or do you think it's an oblique reference to that young man's potential IQ?" Mulder cracked a sunflower seed cheerfully between his teeth.

"A man who has the first name of 'Fox' should cast not stones. You think he saw what happened?"

"As positive as I am that Zero in there isn't going to be cracking into Mensa anytime soon." Mulder returned to the burned and melted car that had once belonged to the unfortunate pizza delivery boy. He leaned into the window once again, glancing around it briefly, before turning to Scully's curious gaze. "I read a study recently from Stanford's School of Psychology regarding increased aggression amongst young men and teenaged boys in the last fifteen years. The study's hypothesis stated that the researchers had noticed that the largest jumps in these age groups seemed to be related to those young men ages 12-25 who spent two hours or more of their day playing video games."

"I've heard those studies, too." Scully leaned mildly against the hood of the car, crossing her arms. "Usually when some parent group gets up in arms about the content of the things that children play now at days and demands Senate sub-committees to ban *Barney and Friends*.

"I completely support banning *Barney and Friends*." Mulder reached into his pocket for more sunflower seeds. "On a psychological level, though, when you think about what video games are doing, Scully, they are tapping into that human desire of competition, to fight someone else to the death, over food, resources, a mate. When it comes down to it, video games are similar to sports. They give humans, especially aggressive, testosterone filled young men, a way of channeling those aggressions into a socially acceptable form."

"Given the rate of the increase of obesity in this culture, I would hardly consider video games a sport."

"Pizza and nacho cheese aside, what are sporting contests in this country other than ritualized battle, a way to prove the skills and adeptness of one person or group of people over another? Among teenage males in particular, this a way they can show off their virility and dominance."

"So we are really discussing what, pissing contests?"

"In a way." He grinned pointing back to the arcade across the way. "If you noticed the initials that appeared most on that list in there, DPO was the most prevalent. Zero, Boy Genius in there tells us that the pizza boy was in there filling quarters in the machine. What if Darren took exception to someone else trying to make claim to something he's so dominant at?"
"In case you missed my wonderfully enlightening conversation with Sheriff Teller this morning, Mulder, I think the autopsy showed all of us that this kid died because of a lightening strike."

"But even you, Scully, can't buy the fact that a lightening strike could happen with that much precision, at that high a frequency." Mulder pulled out the ace she knew he had in his pocket. "Connerville is know for producing lightening. What if Oswald figured out a way to have it channel precisely where he wanted?"

"What, like Thor?" Scully's tone dripped of skepticism. "Mulder, they have a complex series of equipment out there created to attract lightening when it occurs. What is Darren Oswald doing, standing on top of people's cars with a lightening rod?"

"Maybe." Mulder reached for the burned out, melted plastic sign used to advertise the pizza place that the deceased had worked for. "Or perhaps Darren came out here where his rival was otherwise occupied and rigged something to conveniently work as a lightening rod."

Doubtful, Scully thought, looking over the car. The tires should have grounded the vehicle, if nothing else. "You came up with this theory based solely on the idea that these boys played video games?"

"I've seen the Gunmen get into nasty fights while playing Myst. Langley once went after Byers with a plastic spork."

"Dare I even ask why?" She sighed, rubbing the sudden twinge she felt just above her right eyebrow.

"Best not to ask those questions," Mulder replied, turning for their rental car. "I think if anything we should talk to Darren Oswald, see what he remembers from that night. Maybe he'll have more brain cells to rub together than his friend Zero in there."

"Judging by the amount of time he seems to like playing that video game, I would doubt it." Scully followed after him, glancing dubiously back at the arcade. "I suppose playing video games and rotting your brain on flashing, colored images is better than a pissing contest any day."

"Remember, Langley, Byers, plastic spork," Mulder called back.
"Ow!" Mulder hissed as she ignored his petulant looks, slapping an ice pack on his scorched and blistered palm. All that damage from just one spontaneously burning cell phone, she frowned, as he immediately jerked his injury away from her, cradling his hand close to his chest.

"Two minutes on, two off, and use some of this on it." She passed him a simple burn cream she managed to grab at a pharmacy on their way back to the hotel from visiting Darren Oswald at his place of employment. "Honestly, I don't know how you got burned so bad." She frowned worriedly at his right hand.

"I tell you, the plastic was melting practically in my fingers," he muttered as he sat back on his hard-as-rock hotel bed, clutching the ice pack tightly in his injured hand. "It was as if everything short-circuited inside and caused the battery to heat up and explode."

"Which is probably what happened." She put away her now ubiquitous medical kit, a necessity she was discovering on any case with Mulder. "How is it that if you aren't infected with alien viruses, you are shot or burned or something else horrible and I have to patch up?"

"I don't know. I must hang with people who like shooting at me," Mulder responded obliquely.

Scully glared at him, not amused. "I suppose you can't help an exploding battery, though I would tell you to go to your cell phone company and lodge a complaint. You could have been seriously injured."

"I don't think it was the cell phone." Mulder shook his head, frowning briefly. "The phone's brand new. I lost my old one in the boxcar in New Mexico. I bought that one last week."

"Brand new phone, perhaps there's a glitch with the battery," Scully replied sensibly, preferring not to think of the boxcar in New Mexico and how close she came to losing her partner.

"No," Mulder muttered vaguely. "I would have noticed it getting continually hot, a slow build up, I would have pulled it out earlier. But it exploded on me spontaneously, almost as if someone wanted it to catch on fire, perhaps to distract my attention."

"Distract your attention? Who? Darren Oswald?"

"I don't know, Scully. Don't you think it's a bit strange that he was present at two, strange, electrical anomalies which, while not totally unheard of, are quite rare occurrences on the whole?"

"Mulder, the boy wasn't even touching you? What do you suggest, he can blow things up with his mind?" She closed her medical kit and crossed her arms in front of herself. "Honestly, when can coincidence just be enough?"

"When has coincidence ever been that simple in any of our cases," Mulder retorted, sitting up again swiftly. "Think about it, the human neuron is simply an electrical system, rigged between our
brains and our organs and extremities. What if Darren Oswald's survival from lightening strike wasn't just a fluke?"

"Mulder, I will grant you that there have been known to be cases of humans whose personal electro-magnetic fields have been out of whack, but we are talking about people who can't keep watches on time and accidentally short out their earphones. They can't control lightening any more than people can control the winds or the rain. It's stuff of comic books and video games."

"Funny analogy, when you put it that way." Mulder set down his ice pack on the bedside table and restlessly rose, pacing the room. "I think Darren Oswald became just like one of his own video game characters. Maybe he can control electricity."

"How?" She glared at him as paused his pacing just in front of her.

"I don't know. Perhaps his accident, perhaps being struck by that much energy at one time, racing through his body, it fundamentally changed his ability to process and store vast quantities of potential, electric energy."

"Did your mother ever yell at you for watching too many scary movies as a child?" Scully deadpanned as he shook his head and began pacing again. "Mulder it is impossible. I will grant that Darren Oswald was damn lucky he wasn't killed by that lightening strike, but what you are suggesting is a basic change in his body chemistry."

"Do you want to buy that Jack Hammond's death was as simple as a lightening strike?" Mulder pivoted at the end of his pace, turning to face her. "Is the scientist in you really satisfied that this death was caused simply by fate and weather conditions?"

Mulder knew her well and he knew she wasn't happy or satisfied with this outcome either. "No, but in the face of any other evidence against it, it is the most plausible explanation we have, whether we like it or not."

"Plausible, but not the right one." He came to a stop less than a foot in front of her again, close enough she had the momentary, fleeting desire to back away an inch or two, to put more space between herself and Mulder's suggestions. "Whatever happened to following your intuition, Scully? Your intuition is speaking here. It's telling you something isn't adding up. Why are you letting the science drown that voice out?"

Scully stared up at him, her sister Melissa's words from their last conversation together ringing in her mind. *You are so shut off to the possibility there could be any other explanation except for your rigid scientific view of the world.*

"There is a difference between listening to intuition and ignoring facts." Her heart ached as she reached behind her for her medical kit. "Perhaps you should ask yourself why it is you are so dead set on looking for the outrageous when there is a perfectly acceptable explanation right in front of you."

"Did you accept the fact that I was dead?" Mulder's stoic expression was marred by the pained curiosity in his eyes.

She swallowed, feeling slightly trapped, resenting that he could so easily turn her own words back on her like that. Glaring at his hand, she nodded towards the ice pack still sitting on the table. "You better reapply that. It will reduce the swelling."

She slid away from his physical presence, trying her best to keep her face neutral, her posture
ramrod straight, to hide the anger and sadness their argument had surfaced in her. Would every argument between them be this way from now on, Mulder unwittingly pushing buttons that recalled the loss of her sister, their last argument, the guilt she felt over it, the fact that she knew, deep down, Missy had been right. "Don't forget to apply the cream before you go to bed."

She glanced back over her shoulder, before quickly moving out of the door.
In which Mulder empathizes with Darren Oswald.

It was a small wonder why Darren Oswald had a crush on Sharon Kiveat. Late twenties, pretty, charming, she looked as if she walked straight out of some teenage music video fantasy. Even Mulder had noticed, not that Scully was particularly surprised, as he not so surreptitiously followed Mrs. Kiveat's steps into the hospital where her husband was being cared for.

"She's a married woman, Mulder!" She prodded his ribs pointedly, earning a bashfully innocent look. They sat in their rental, making sure that the woman got safely inside, before returning to the police station where Darren Oswald was being detained.

"No wonder Darren is hot for teacher." He smirked as he directed the car out of the hospital parking lot. "I wish I had a reading teacher like that in high school."

"You didn't need help with reading."

"I would have if she were teaching it."

Scully's only response was to roll her eyes. Best not to encourage him. "Didn't you ever have a crush on a female teacher?" Scully could recall a quite girlish crush she had on her Chemistry teacher in high school, a young, tall man with dark hair and smiling eyes.

"You didn't see the female teachers at my high school." Mulder pretended to shiver. "I think my English teacher actually dated Walt Whitman when he was alive."

"I thought Walt Whitman liked men?"

"After seeing this woman I can understand why. Anyway, you heard what Sharon Kiveat said about Darren, how he confessed to having powers."

"Mulder, we don't know if he wasn't just saying that to impress Sharon." Scully recalled all to well the lines teenaged boys used on her to try and get her to go out with them. "Teenage boys are very prone to all sorts of fantasies, especially sexual ones. And give Darren's home life and delusions of grandeur, as evidenced by his attachment to that video game he loves to play, I tend to believe that Darren's really just playing out some grandiose fantasy world he has created in his own mind, one in which he is the super hero he imagines himself to be, complete with saving his boss and winning the heart of the love of his life, Sharon Kiveat."

"The EMT claimed he even saw Darren lay his hands on Frank Kiveat's chest and jump start his heart, and Sharon just confirmed for us that Darren admitted to her he had powers. What will it take for you to buy into the fact something is going on here?"

That was just it, she sighed. She knew something was going on. She just couldn't put her finger on what. "Mulder, I'm not saying that Darren wasn't involved in Jack Hammond's death or even Frank's attack, even the deaths of the three others on that list of people. You are right, lightening doesn't strike twice, not like this. But how can I walk into that sheriff's office, look him in the eye,
and tell him that Darren Oswald is guilt because he swears up and down he has powers?"

"So we should let a kid go and allow innocent people to die just because it sounds crazy that he would? Scully, Sharon Kiveat was afraid to speak to us today because of Darren. She's afraid to leave her house, practically. Whether the kid is shooting lightning bolts out of his fingers or not, he is some sort of threat, and we should, as law enforcement agents, take that threat seriously."

He was right, and she knew it. "Sheriff Teller is already throwing a fit about this and I'm the one left explaining to him how this is even possible."

"But you believe Oswald had something to do with those deaths?"

She glared at him sullenly as she leaned into her seat, realizing she was quickly losing this argument. "Mulder, I will grant you that the coincidences are far too clean, and that yes, it does appear more and more like Darren Oswald had something to do with all of those attacks. How she was supposed to explain this as anything better than Mulder's "death by emissions of direct electric current" was anyone's guess. "We only have proof, though, that he's stalking Sharon Kiveat. We don't have proof to hold him on anything else."

"We'll have proof when we tell him his beloved, Mrs. Kiveat told us about his secret and is afraid of him," Mulder responded perhaps a tad too confidently.

"I'm not so sure of that, Mulder. What if Oswald is too far in his delusions to buy that Mrs. Kiveat would sell him out like that, would be afraid of him."

"Perhaps challenging his delusions enough will cause him to break, to confess."

"Mulder, he's a teenaged boy, not a hardened serial killer."

"I don't know, Scully, young, white, male, has taken out four victims so far, delusions of grandeur, call this profiler silly, it sounds like a closet case of serial killer to me."

"You know what I mean," she replied, frowning. "If we push to hard, it might do as much harm as good."

"Tell that to Sharon Kiveat, terrified, standing at her husband's side." Mulder replied darkly. "Frankly I'd rather crush a kid's delusions than allow him to get a second crack at Frank Kiveat, don't you think?"

God damn, but she hated it when he had a point like that. "You'll have to talk Teller into it. He's just looking for a reason to accuse us of false arrest and call the Bureau to complain. And after everything we've been through of late, Mulder, I don't think Skinner will have much patience for those sorts of hijinks from us for a while."

"Somehow, I don't think Sheriff Teller will have much more patients with my theories, Scully." Mulder's intoned dryly. "Why do you think I'm having you talk to him?"

"Great! Thanks!" She sighed in exasperation.
Irony was one of those things that Scully liked in book, sometimes in a good movie, but never in a case. It never boded well for the future reports she had to write and it never gave them the clear-cut answers they always wanted, but hardly ever found, and these answers were sure to annoy the hell out of Mulder, she realized, as she clicked off her cell phone and stared down the hallway where her partner stood staring into Darren Oswald's room. For once, why couldn't they get a case that was neatly tied at the end?

Her steps rang hollowly in the concrete hall as she moved towards where Mulder leaned, studying the boy inside. He had of course gone after Sharon Kiveat, but not before killing Sheriff Teller in the process. Electrocution. Conveniently enough for Darren, however, both the observatory outside of town and the National Weather Service both recorded atmospheric lightening the night before, which essentially blew the heart of Mulder's case right out of the water for the District Attorney. He couldn't prove the kid had powers enough to kill anyone, least of all the sheriff. They only thing he could prove was Darren's threatening behavior towards Sharon Kiveat, which almost guaranteed a long, ugly, protracted, embarrassing case in court for Sharon and her husband. Perhaps happy endings happened at the end of the thunderstorms in Kansas, just not Oklahoma.

"I just got off the phone with the coroner. He's ruling Teller's death accidental." She moved beside Mulder to look into Darren's cell. Inside the teenager was mindlessly staring at the television set, flipping between channels as if he didn't see them.

"Lightning?" Mulder's voice dripped with sarcasm. "What about the scientists at the observatory? What do they have to say?" She knew he would jump right to that.

"They also reported lightning last night. I talked to the DA. He has no idea how to begin building a case."

"What about the tests I asked for," he snapped, as if that would logically explain everything. She sighed, mentally preparing herself for the tantrum she knew would come once she admitted what the results were.

"They came in five minutes ago," she admitted slowly, as thunder clouds gathered on the face of Mulder's brow, his expression turning stormy.

"And?"

"Nothing unusual was detected, Mulder."

His eyes and hands flew heavenward as he whipped around angrily, looking for a moment as if he would kick a foot through concrete wall, before turning back on her.

"The electrolytes, the blood gas levels, brain wave activity, based on the science of all the data that's been gathered..."
She drifted off, not knowing what else to say. She understood his frustration. Frankly it wasn't right, it wasn't fair to those who had died, to Frank and Sharon Kiveat, to Sheriff Teller, and nothing in those tests or in that autopsy proved what Scully suspected was the truth, that Darren Oswald could do things that no other human being could do.

"Darren Oswald is a perfectly normal, perfectly healthy kid. You believe that, Scully?" His eyes glittered down at her.

When she didn't reply, he only snorted. "Neither do I."

She didn't know what to say to him. It was clear Oswald had done something, but without the evidence to prove it, what more could she say? What was it she told him a year ago, about science and the burden proof? She used to rail at Mulder about chasing his theories without the corroborating evidence, how it was vital for him to start producing tangible facts with his cases for people to take him seriously. It was only just now she was starting to just appreciate just how maddening and frustrating that process was for these cases, how completely defeating it could be when you know exactly what is going on and have no evidence to prove it. It was a small wonder that Mulder so resented her presence when she first came on to the X-files, forcing him to do that which seemed so impossible to do at times.

"What is the DA able to hold him on?" Mulder loomed over her, as if she were the one who was personally responsible for the predicament their case now found itself in. She bit back her irritation. Mulder wasn't angry with her in particular, but she was there, in close proximity to his infamous, incendiary temper.

"The DA is working with Sharon Kiveat right now to see if they can make the stalking and threat charges stick. It's complicated by the fact Sharon willingly left the hospital with Darren, but with my witness, perhaps they can get that much of the case to successfully go through. But the Sheriff's deaths, the other kids…"

She glanced in the room where Darren stared mindlessly at the television. Scully admitted it to herself, if she hadn't witnessed what Darren had done at the hospital with the lights, she might have thought twice about Mulder's theory on lightening. And that was after two years and all that they had seen together. There was very little, if any chance, of making any grand jury agree to what they believed. Mulder's disappointment tasted bitter in her mouth as turned to glance up at him.

"Let's go home, Mulder," she sighed, reaching for his elbow. "Let the DA work this out."

He looked, for the briefest of moments, as if he wanted to refuse her, to storm into the DA's office and argue his case, and perhaps the Mulder she first met two years before, the recluse hiding in his basement office, might have tried to do that. After the recent weeks and months he had gained some perspective and learned how to pick his battles for once, which ones were worth the effort to try and fight and which ones were better to leave alone.

"Do you honestly feel we should leave this one, Scully?" Mulder's words fell soft and unsure between them, resisting the desire to fight this. He was leaving the decision in her hands. Scully could feel something subtle shift between them, as if the balance of their partnership moved ever so slightly. Old Mulder would have taken off without her, made the demands and waited for her to talk him off the ledge. But the last weeks had changed both of them, in large and imperceptible ways. She would be an idiot not to think that Mulder's near death experience, coupled with the deaths of his father and her sister and all that he had discovered from those events hadn't made Mulder more introspective, more cautious and aware concerning his steps and actions. It was a step in the right direction at least, but it meant no justice for those that Darren Oswald potentially had killed. Perhaps it was just as she said when Melissa died, the dead still spoke and they always...
would.

"Let's go home, Mulder, there's nothing further you and I can do."

His eyes burned for the briefest of moments, but he turned away, his long legs striding down the hallway away from her as she stood by Darren Oswald's prison. Mulder wasn't pleased, but he would leave it for now. He knew all too well they had bigger questions, more important answers to find than those concerning Darren Oswald. Even so, Mulder was a man of integrity and a keen sense of justice, and she knew that it was pricking under this, the knowledge that not enough was done.

Was enough ever done, she wondered, as she watched Darren Oswald staring at his television, dispassionate about all that he had done.
"What do you know about the Stupendous Yappi?" The cynicism fairly dripped off of Mulder's words, rolling through the office as he stepped in the door, file in hand, glancing back to where Scully sat behind her table, writing up her report on the Darren Oswald case. She looked up at him inquiringly, her mind trying to place anyone with so ridiculous of a name, searching through case files and stupid, pet tricks, before it settled somewhere on a late night infomercial, on while she had been restless and eating a pint of vanilla fudge ripple ice cream.

"Isn't that the guy on those TV ads, that psychic?" Scully seemed to remember a tall man with shocking dark hair and this weird thing with his eyebrow. "He has some 900 number you can call and see if your husband is cheating on you or if you'll win the lottery?"

"That's the one." Mulder threw himself into his office chair, spinning it briefly as he tossed the file on his desk before pushing it around with his long legs to face her again. "Apparently he's now moved on to 'police psychic', using his powers with the Minneapolis PD to help them find serial killers."

"More serial killers in Minneapolis?" Scully's pulse fluttered uncomfortably as images of Donnie Pfaster flickered for the briefest of moments. "What is it about that place that breeds them?"

"Snow. That much time indoors would drive any man to vicious murder."

Scully could imagine for a man full of Mulder's kinetic energy the idea of long, cold winters must sound like one level of Dante's hell.

"So where was the Amazing Yappi when I was being kidnapped by Donnie Pfaster and hidden in a closet?" Scully wondered, not bitter at Mulder in the slightest, but dubious of any man's so called skills, especially when she had faced first hand the sort of fear and terror she could only imagine other victims felt at the hands of deranged murderers. It irked her that any man would go about making a celebrity of himself based off the pain and suffering of other people, psychic abilities or no.

"Well, let's just say the FBI and myself both have a little more faith in my criminal profiling abilities than in Yappi's 'all seeing eye'." Mulder tapped the file on the desk beside him. "Seems there's been a rash of murders in Minneapolis, the police there are stumped. The detective on the case has called in this Yappi as an outside consultant, but his superior, being understandably dubious, called in to Agent Bock who immediately thought of the two of us for this case."

"I can't imagine why," Scully muttered darkly, ignoring the now familiar fear, anger, and embarrassment that seemed to associate itself so much with the events of the last year, Duane Barry and Donnie Pfaster in particular. Perhaps, she realized, it was silly, even detrimental for her to have these feelings and reactions. It was the sort of anxiety that could happen to anyone, and had happened to anyone, but she was an FBI agent, as a trained professional she shouldn't let that happen. As a woman, she couldn't let that happen, not without appearing weak in front of her male
counterparts. Not that Mulder ever once saw her as weak, even if his over-protective streak was wide and long. If he thought she was weak, he wouldn't suggest taking a case in Minneapolis regarding serial killers.

Scully was surprised at Mulder's radiating skepticism over this Yappi. Frankly, having seen Yappi's commercials, how could she blame him? The man oozed patronizing sympathy and unbridled arrogance and that was saying a lot considering she worked with Fox Mulder. Scully had noticed a trend in certain cases, especially ones involving psychics, that there was a certain reticence on Mulder's part, a caution that he hardly ever showed on other cases of supernatural phenomenon. Luther Boggs was a prime example of someone who claimed they could see and receive messages from beyond and Mulder had treated him with scornful disdain.

"What is it about psychics you don't like, Mulder," she finally asked, as he flipped the file open, reviewing the particulars of the case.

"I happen to believe a great deal in the psychic phenomenon, Scully. I just don't believe in people who use the idea of psychic abilities to defraud and disillusion the public. I've kept up on the studies involving ESP and precognition. I've even involved myself in several research projects on the subject. But you can't tell me a man whose idea of a psychic reading is twitching his eyebrow suggestively and charging you 99 cents per minutes to tell you where your missing cat went is legitimate psychic phenomenon. It's people like Yappi who give a bad name to the entire idea and who undermine the legitimate work going on in reputable centers around the world."

"Ignoring the fact that psychic phenomenon is still considered highly suspicious by most of the scientific community," Scully teased lightly, a smile curving as she met his exasperation impishly. "I'm not saying the work they do isn't scientific, it just surprises me you discount so many psychics out of hand."

"Yet, if you look at the body of our work so far, you'll notice that I don't have anything in particular against psychic phenomenon, such as mental connections between people with emotional bonds or even the idea of psychic healing."

"Just people who go on television and purport to tell you who your Mister or Miss Right is, correct?"

"As if there is such as thing as 'the right' person for anyone." Mulder snorted dismissively.

"Not much of the romantic are you, Mulder?"

"If I'm looking for romance, that's not the 900 number I'm going to call," he grumbled.

"I don't think you call that one for romance either." She shot back, cheekily. It at least earned her a small smile out of her increasingly grumpy partner. "So what is the MO of our serial killer anyway? Please tell me it isn't hair and nails this time."

"Nope!" There was a dark, mirthful glimmer in Mulder's eyes. "Psychics."

It was one of those ironies in life that Scully thought was almost too good, too perfect. "You've got to be kidding me?"

"Seems our serial killer shares my opinion on those who undermine the work. Wonder if he's a Yankee's fan, too?"

"So do you have a profile yet?"
"I'll work on it this afternoon, before our flight out to Minneapolis. Wouldn't it be nice if it turned out to be Yappi in a fit of angry rage at all of those second-hand psychics who underscore his legitimate work as a late-night, infomercial psychic?" Mulder looked rapturous at the thought.

"You are a sick man," Scully chided, though she noticed she couldn't help the amused grin that crept up on her face.
Mulder looked as if he couldn't decide to clap his hands like a hyper schoolboy or chase after Clyde Bruckman and slap a pair of handcuffs on the man. He turned from door Bruckman just walked out of, to Scully, back again, spinning slightly as he did, before he stopped, stock still, and placed his hands at his waist as if afraid he might try to strangle something if he didn't put them there. His face turned to her with the sort of speechless question Scully was now very used to getting from her partner, begging her for a thought, opinion, insight, something.

"I guess he had to go home," Scully murmured as she continued to stand in the living room of the latest, dead psychic, about in the spot where both Yappi and Clyde Bruckman had stated the dead woman and her killer had initiated sex. That thought caused her to move a few inches away from it in with mild disgust, glancing from the bloodstains to the doll that Bruckman had picked up and handled briefly.

"You realize what that man could be?" Mulder's breathed in astonished awe.

"The killer?" Scully stuffed her hands into her pockets, glancing around the now well-traveled, well-searched room of Madame Zelma, lover of dolls.

"Or psychic," Mulder retorted, obviously miffed she hadn't given him the answer he wanted in the first place. "Scully, the man seems to be completely legit on that score."

"Mulder his performance was hardly better than the Stupendous Yappi. He was just minus the model and the sunglasses." Scully was hardly any more impressed with his answers than with Yappi's. "After all, what did he really tell us about the crime that we didn't already know?"

"We know our murder feels he's being puppeted, literally not in control of his own actions, as if someone else is pulling the strings while he acts out these murders."

"If left you for twenty minutes on your own devices, Mulder, you would have come up with that one." Scully snorted, waving her hand at the blood stained carpet. "You're a man with a psychology degree and a background in doing this type of thing for a living, and you are no more psychic than…"

She pointed towards an ornate candlestick sitting on one of the shelves of dolls in Madame Zelma's home. "You're no more psychic than that candlestick."

"Try telling that to the people who call me Spooky." Mulder quipped lazily, clearly not persuaded by her arguments. "Even as a criminal profiler, Scully, I can't see details of a crime, I can only make suppositions on a murderer's next move based on a pattern of behavior. Clyde Bruckman saw that there will be another death."

He frowned as if it suddenly just occurred to him exactly what Bruckman had said. "We need to get a hold of the police, have them dredge Glenview Lake for the next body."
"Mulder, the reason he knows about the body and where its at is he's somehow related to these murders!" Scully stopped him before he could get ahead of himself, seeing exactly where the snowball of Mulder's thoughts was headed. "Even if he didn't commit them himself, perhaps he knows of the person who did and misdirecting for them, possibly a friend or business associate."

"Did that look like someone who was covering for a crime," Mulder smirked as he glanced back towards the door where Clyde Bruckman made his not-so-ceremonious exit. "I think Clyde and Archie Bunker should get together and go bowling sometime."

"I don't know." Scully shrugged thoughtfully. "In a way, he sort of reminds me of you."

Whatever Mulder had expected to hear in that moment, it certainly wasn't that. His head whipped around, incredulously glaring at her. "Why would you say that?"

"Well, when you think about it, there isn't much different between you and Mr. Bruckman," Scully offered, leaning lightly against the round, cloth covered table where Madame Zelma used to read her fortunes. "Look at the two you, loners who have keen insight into human actions whose ability to use that insight leaves you feeling disaffected and resentful. Often this leads to anti-social behavior, such as gruffness, sarcasm, and a tendency to be patronizing to those around you."

Madame Zelma's apartment rang for a moment in uncomfortable silence as Mulder stared at her blankly, as if unsure what to say to such a statement out of her about him. In all fairness, Scully realized, it was perhaps the first time she had ever called Mulder out on his behavior, his inability to play well with others. And while it was one thing to have Skinner call him an outsider and maverick, which was almost a badge of honor in Mulder's book, it was another to have the one person he was perhaps closest to in the world point it out to him.

"I'm not disaffected," Mulder retorted finally when he seemed to find his indignation.

"Is that why you greeted me on our first day as 'the FBI's most unwanted'?"

"Perhaps my methods are unorthodox, my ideas laughed at, but I like to think I'm a quite charming person when it gets down to it."

"You can be, especially with pretty, blonde secretaries." She grinned back, much to Mulder's annoyance. "The truth is, Mulder, you aren't a very nice guy and one doesn't need an 'all seeing eye' to figure out that you can be a bit of a resentful jerk."

"And here I thought it was just part of my roguish charm," he muttered mulishly, waving towards the front door again. "I, however, am far from psychic and Clyde Bruckman is the real deal."

"So you say, Mulder, but we won't know till we find that body and even then it doesn't prove anything more than he just happens to know how to find these bodies. Frankly, that's not looking very good for Mr. Bruckman's innocence, even you have to admit that."

"Do you really think that man we just spoke to is really capable of murdering those people?" For the man who was dubious of anyone who displayed so called psychic abilities in general, Mulder was tenaciously clinging to this one. Perhaps, Scully mused, it was because Mr. Bruckman was so understated in his abilities, so reticent, so very much like Mulder in his own way, that her partner could accept this man's powers when he was so willing to ignore the same thing in others.

"I think that he certainly knows far more about this case than anyone should. And frankly, I can't decide if he's playing a game with us or really believes the lines he's spouting."

"Or maybe he really is psychic, Scully, and is seeing these facts because he has some connection
that we little understand."

"The only connection I'm going to be studying is between myself and my hotel bed." Scully yawned widely as if to add emphasis. "We'll call the Minneapolis police and have them start a search in the lake and call us if they find anything."

"You'll see, Scully, there's more to Bruckman than just piss and vinegar."

"Speaking as someone who knows." She moved past him to the door, pulling out her cell phone to call the police."

"Speaking as someone who believes in the guy."

"Funny, he didn't look like a guy who wanted people to believe in him. He looked like a guy who just wanted to be left alone."

"And thus we find the major difference between myself and Mr. Bruckman. I want people to believe my truth." Mulder smirked, triumphant.

That much was true, Scully thought to herself. "Perhaps, because Mr. Bruckman with his psychic abilities knows a very important lesson about insisting on forcing the truth. Down this way lies madness."
What A Way To Go

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder makes a startling, but heartfelt, confession.

Claude Dukenfield, aged forty-three, divorced with two children. He made $87,000 dollars a year and was a non-smoker, which on the whole would have been a good thing for him, health wise, had something else not killed him. Sadly, from her best, medical examiner guess decided that he had been strangled and then like the others had his entrails removed, before being tossed in his exceedingly shallow, unmarked grave. What a way to go.

"Wasn't it the Romans who used to use entrails to read the future?" Mulder stood well away from her autopsy table, looking mildly disgusted but determined as he watched the proceedings. It was a big step for him, actually staying in the room as she worked, and frankly for Scully it wasn't a very welcome step.

"It's said the Romans and their Etruscan forefathers used to have augers, priests specially trained in reading signs and symbols. They would slit open the guts of an animal and study the entrails to understand what portents the future held. It was a practice they held well up into the Christian era." He crunched thoughtfully on sunflower seeds, occupying himself with this task rather than paying attention to the fact that Scully was pulling out about a foot of intestine left still in tact in the body by the murderer, cut off from the rest of the organ.

"I also heard Romans believed bird poop on your head was good luck." The slippery organ slick and rubbery in Scully's fingers as she worked. "Mulder, why are you sitting in my autopsy room? Why aren't you chatting with your new friend, Mr. Bruckman?"

"If you haven't noticed, Clyde isn't exactly the world's best conversationalist." Mulder cracked a seed between his teeth and tossed it in the trashcan he had at his feet. Whether it was there for that purpose or in the event Mulder could no longer handle watching her remove body parts was hard to say. "I had him go home for now, no good he could do here.

"No looking at cards and telling you what's on the other side, or predicting what light is going to flash?" Scully's charity in terms of Mulder's fascination with Bruckman had worn thin. The game was up for her and frankly what she couldn't figure out was how he was connected to all of this. Judging by the way the bodies were killed, the strength it took to wrestle a man the size of Dukenfield enough to strangle him, let alone the virility to have sex with someone like Madame Zelma, it all spoke to a man younger than Bruckman. But he knew something about who this was. Why was he playing this game, leading them on? If he could see the murderer, why didn't he just tell them who he was?

"Bruckman's visions don't work like that," Mulder replied, as if to her silent question. "He sees only the deaths of people, the details and circumstances, but nothing more. He can't see anything else in particular, and that's not exactly uncommon in psychics. It's long been held that psychic abilities are varied and vast. We hardly understand the parts of the human brain that we have studied, let alone those regions we haven't. It is quite possible that some psychics only manifest one, particular skill out of a range of them and hone it to pinpoint clarity, rather than a range of skills we associate with psychic talents. Instead of reading minds, or picking up the emotions, Bruckman only really
sees the future, but not the entirety of the future, just how people die."

"A nifty trick, considering he's in the insurance business." Scully sighed dryly as she set the intestines aside and reached inside the wide-open chest cavity to look at the victim's lungs and heart. "You'd think he'd be a bit more successful at it, knowing how people die."

"That's just it, Scully. Would you believe it if I walked up to you and said that I know how you'll die? I think Bruckman just ended up in life insurance because he can't stop thinking about death, about all the little factors that lead up to that death and it's that hyper focus that has pushed his entire life, ever since 1959, the night the music died."

Scully raised an eyebrow over her work goggles as she leaned over the body. "Didn't know you were a big Don McLean fan."

"Can't sing a note, but you have to admit it's fitting." He fished in his plastic bag for more sunflower seeds. She glanced at him as he did it, wondering for a moment if he really believed his entire theory, if he felt that Clyde Bruckman really could tell exactly how someone died.

"So how about that auto-erotic asphyxiation?" She adjusted her work light over the body. She was gratified to hear Mulder gag and choke on a seed shell in the distance and tried to swallow the evil grin that lurked around her mouth.

"What about it?" He croaked when he could speak, still coughing and spluttering into his closed fist.

"I don't know. Do you think that prediction had anything to do with you?"

"Why?" He sounded vaguely scandalized by the thought, a funny response coming out of Mulder.

"Just curious. He said it to you."

"He asked me if the words have any meaning for me." He protested weakly, still coughing lightly as he glared at her.

"I don't know, Mulder, you asked how you were going to die and I want to be prepared if I get any strange phone calls from the FBI or your apartment manager regarding the state in which they find your body someday."

Mulder took an almost perverse delight in teasing her with his porn laying about the office or shooting off suggestive comments to see if he could egg her into some sort of reaction. So, it was vaguely surprising, and more than a little hysterical to see him react so strongly scandalized to the very idea that he might even think about doing anything like being choked to the point of near death just for sexual thrills. "Scully, I don't know what idea I've given you about my sex life…"

"I have lots of ideas, Mulder, but to be honest, I don't think much about it." She smiled sweetly at him across Dukienfield's body, leaning against the table. "In truth, I couldn't care what you do in the privacy of your own home, or who with, or how. In fact, I think the less I know about it, the better. "Certainly better, she thought, trying to push out any image involving Mulder, pretty blondes, and a choking implement out of her mind. Granted, the idea of Mulder physically wasn't unappealing, but she really didn't want to think of him in a compromised position and she being asked to identify his remains.

"You really think that's a way I get off, don't you?" He still sounded mildly outraged by the idea, but also vaguely intrigued. A curious smile tugged at his mouth, his eyes narrowing as he watched her face redden ever so slightly. "You are thinking about that right now."
"I am not!" She shot back too quickly, hiding her guilt by returning to carefully study the spongy mass of Dukenfield's lungs. "If anything, I'm praying I never have to find you in that sort of embarrassing predicament."

"I'm never in that predicament." Mulder laughed, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair with a slight air of triumph. "Besides which, I'm too busy to have much of a love life anymore, as I'm sure you've noticed by the quietness of our office phone."

She had noticed, but hadn't said anything. "What? Run through the pool of pretty faces at the Bureau?" Perhaps it was a tad accusatory, but Mulder flipping the tables on her like that had unsettled her, destabilized her in the pecking order, and she desperately didn't want him to notice just how flustered he had made her.

"I suppose I woke up one day and realized I couldn't sleep my way around to satisfaction and happiness," he replied simply. "So I stopped."

"Just like that? Stopped?" Scully arched an eyebrow skeptically, but refused to look up at him. "Fox Mulder, the inveterate gigolo, just stops cold for no reason?"

"I had reasons." His reply was simple and honest and suddenly all the play and kidding had gone out of his tone, in fact out of the room. Startled by the new, sudden shift in the conversation, Scully looked up at him questioningly, meeting his now very sad, serious gaze.

"You remember what I told you about when you were gone, when Duane Barry took you. How I said I wasn't proud of everything I had done at the time?"

Scully nodded quietly, studying her partner's now very stoic expression, a sign that something major was troubling him, something that Scully had avoided speaking with him about for nearly a year.

"Kristin Kilgar was the name of the woman from the case I did in Los Angeles, about vampires."

"I remember her." Scully recalled studying the picture as she sat at home with Melissa and wondering whether the woman had anything to do with what Mulder had alluded to ever so vaguely.

"She died in the explosion that blew up her house, but it shouldn't have come to that." Mulder studied his shoes, shoulders hunching in guilt. "To say I was angry and lost, perhaps a bit of an understatement."

He shrugged as he fiddled with the seeds still cupped in his hand. "I had failed you, Scully, and I was wandering around in this dark place, unable to find you, unable to protect anyone, not you, not Samantha…and I thought Kristin needed my protection."

Scully watched him, realizing how odd this scene was, she standing over the body of a man dead in a case they were investigating, he pouring out his heart over sunflower seeds and body parts. Not that anything about their partnership and friendship was ever conventional, but the oddity smacked her consciousness as she carefully removed the blood and viscera covered latex gloves on her hands, setting them beside the body as she moved around to where Mulder sat, studying his knees, picking at them with his free hand as he rattled seeds in the other.

"I don't know why it was it occurred to me to end up in bed with her. She was attractive, damn seductive. Perhaps it was because she was a lost soul, like me, looking to feel something, anything other than the guilt. In the end I wasn't paying attention like I should have. I had sat up telling
myself I would watch for danger when it came. When it did, I was asleep. She had me run out of the house and then blew the place to kingdom come."

So now the story came out. Scully was hardly surprised by it, but something inside hurt just a little. It had taken so long for him to tell her. Even more, her heart ached for Mulder, for the self-condemnation he wore around himself, for the fears that ruled his life, and the blame he took on for even her loss, now Melissa's loss as well. She knelt down in front of him, trying as best she could to make herself eye-level with him.

"Will I be wasting my breath by telling you that none of this is your fault?" She smiled tightly, hoping to at least earn a small one out of him in return.

"Probably." He rewarded her with a tiny uplifting of his mouth. "I realized that night that my self-destructive tendencies are one thing when they are aimed at simply myself. All psychologists are a bit broken, I believe, its what drives us to the study of the human mind, and I had spent years trying to fill in the hurt and loneliness with one encounter after another. Kristin was just one of others, I think that was perhaps the last one of others for a while." He rattled his seeds again, before popping one in his mouth, a distraction as he formulated his thoughts. "So Mulder, the inveterate gigolo, stopped trying to sleep with anything in a skirt. I discovered it wasn't what I wanted anymore or what I needed."

It wasn't the sort of confession she had expected from him, giving him crap about dying by auto-erotic asphyxiation, and in all honesty, when she thought about it, it wasn't surprising about Mulder either. She had sensed something deep had shifted in her partner during her disappearance, but hadn't asked what or why. She had been too lost in her own personal demons to bother noticing his. "So does this mean I won't find you tied up in your closet with a bag over your head or a chord around your throat?"

It was her way of cutting through the tension and it worked, as Mulder snorted, nodding his head. "If I'm found in a compromising situation, Scully, you can know now it was a set up." He grinned thoughtfully. "Though, who knows, maybe Bruckman's prediction is fuzzy. Maybe he didn't mean that I would die by a sexual asphyxiation, but maybe through an accident. Perhaps I'll drown, or be buried alive, or be smothered to death.

"As if those are any better." Scully frowned at the gruesome prospect. "How about we'll just say for now you die a natural death, in your bed, with your family beside you and call it a day/"

Mulder looked ready to protest, but watched her for a long moment before acquiescing. "Fine, family and all of that." He didn't sound hopeful that would be the way he would go. Frankly, Scully wasn't so sure it was the way he would go either, but she could always wish for that sort of future for him.

"Don't you want to know the way you'll die?" Mulder watched her as she rose and moved back over to the exam table.

"Not really," she replied, though she knew even as she said it that it wasn't completely true. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know or not. "I suppose there is something about knowing that makes you fatalistic about it all, takes the zest and purpose out of life. Perhaps its just better not to know, to live every day of your life to its fullest, without regrets."

"You sound like a Hallmark Greeting card." Mulder laughed, crunching another seed. Scully shot him an irritated scowl as she reached for a fresh pair of latex gloves.

"Well, if you aren't pleased with my insights into the human psyche, Mulder, than stop asking me
questions and let me get back to my autopsy."

"Fine, fine," he muttered as he rose from his seat, loping to the door lazily. He turned to glance her direction as he did, watching as she returned to work on Claude Duchenfield's body. "For the record, Scully, I'd never like to know how you die, either. I'd rather not think of you ever doing that."

She wanted to shoot back at him that of course everything does, but the words died as she opened her mouth, realizing what it was Mulder was trying to say. She smiled instead. "Get out of here, Mulder, if you want any autopsy results anytime soon."

She returned to the body as the doors of the autopsy lab clanged shut.
"You know, chocolate cake was always my favorite. Say what you will about banana cream or coconut cream pie, but there's something sinful in eating chocolate mixed with whipped cream." Clyde Bruckman balding head bent over the tray cake slices, examining each one as if considering how best to man his attack. Scully raised an idyll eyebrow, but chose to ignore any further comment as she primly sat on the edge of the bed at the Le Dampino Hotel, pulling her pencil skirt primly around her knees.

"When I was a kid, there was this diner downtown, handmade the best chocolate cakes. Course, it got knocked down in the seventies to make some high-rise office building. People have no appreciation of the past." He clucked and shook his shiny head, ringed by gray hair, before picking up a plate and fork. He settled in one of the hotel's winged back chairs and began eating, pausing as his eyes fluttered close in appreciation. "This is real cream. Not the phony stuff. I know the difference. And the chocolate, very rich. Look at these cute little doilies they put everything on! You sure you don't want to join me?"

Scully gathered her paperwork and politely shook her head in the negative. Though, to be honest, a slice of decadent cake would be ideal now. She doubted she'd be able to swallow it with the tension she felt, knowing Mulder was down below looking for the murderer, while she played babysitting duty for one grumpy, old man. Still, Clyde was proving to be much less gruff and surly with her alone than with Mulder present. Perhaps it was Mulder's insistence on using him as a guinea pig that brought out the worst in Bruckman.

"So, what are you doing?" He waved his fork at the paperwork she was studying.

She glanced down at the lists of names and personal records. "Studying background checks. This is what detective work is really like." She couldn't help but get one small dig in to him about his so-called psychic abilities. "We can't come up with suspects by having visions."

"Jealous?" He smirked, swallowing a forkful of chocolate cake.

"Not particularly." She leaned back against the headboard of one of the two beds in the room. "I can't imagine seeing everyone's deaths is a lot of fun."

Bruckman paused in his inhalation of the pastries, as if surprised she had come to that conclusion. "And I thought you believed I was full of crap."

"I'm not saying your not, but I am saying that if I could, I don't think I would want your power."

"You are obviously the brains in the outfit!" Bruckman chortled, leaning back in his seat as he pushed back the tray of cakes. "What's with your partner anyway? What sort of FBI agent believes in psychics?"

"Mulder has a very open mind regarding a great many things," Scully replied diplomatically, if a
trifle defensive. "He's worked a lot in the area of paranormal phenomenon."

"Don't tell me he chases after alien spaceships, too?" Bruckman stared at her aghast. Scully met his disbelief with an even stare but refused to answer one way or the other.

"And his names really Fox?" He uttered this with the disbelief that anyone would have that sort of name in real life.

"It's a family name," she replied, knowing only that it was what he told her when they first met. She had no idea how it even got to be a family name.

"Phew, what a piece of work!" Bruckman shrugged, rising from the chair and moving to the opposite bed. "Seriously, if he keeps this up, it will be the end of him someday."

That wasn't precisely the sort of thing Scully wanted to hear, not after coming so close to losing him just months before. "Is that what you see for him?"

Bruckman was cagey. He grinned as he settled onto the bed, toeing off each shoe as he swung his feet up onto the mattress. "I thought you said you didn't believe in those type of things."

"I thought you said you saw how people died."

"I see a lot of things. For your partner, he's got a lot of ways to go. He's a man of adventure, Fox Mulder. He's just damn lucky to have you around."

"Why's that?"

"He'd have been dead already if you weren't there to pull his butt out of the frying pan and the fryer." He shrugged, as he plumped up a pillow. "Man's damn lucky to find someone like that in his life, damn lucky." He looked sadly regretfully as he sank into the pillow, lying on his back as he stared up at the ceiling above.

"Why didn't you ever settle down, Mr. Bruckman?"

"Clyde," Bruckman corrected her gently.

"Clyde," she repeated with a warm smile. "You could have found a lovely lady, settled down….""With this sort of gift?" He shook his head slowly, sounding horrified at the idea. "Imagine finding the girl of your dreams and falling madly in love, but knowing almost from sight how it was she was going to die. Perhaps it was in your arms, as you grow old together, maybe it's in a horrible accident or unexpected illness. What if she leaves you in the future, and she dies with someone else. No, this type of thing tends to take the romance out of everything."

He had a point, she supposed, though an incredibly depressing point. "So you had no romance in your life, not even when you were young?"

"Oh, I had a girlfriend once." Bruckman affirmed, grinning in reminiscence. "Her name was Peggy. Prettiest girl in the Twin Cities. Dark hair, blue eyes. It took me six months to get around to asking he out. She used to love rock and roll, too. Drove her parents crazy with it."

Scully tried to imagine a much younger Clyde Bruckman courting a pretty young girl in a classic 50's sweater set, with a bow in her hair, the sort of cute, romantic picture that one would see in a Doris Day film. "Whatever happened to her?"
"She dumped me for my best friend," he replied matter-of-factly. "The night before the concert as a matter of fact. I spent two weeks pay on tickets for that night and she dumped me for my lousy best buddy who had the IQ of concrete brick."

Not exactly what she had envisioned when she had asked him about romance. "Err…I'm sorry?"

"Well it worked out in the end. She didn't age well. Last time I saw her playing bingo at St. Olaf's. She was 230 pounds and had a mustache. Just goes to show you that not even I can see everything about the future." He grunted in self-satisfaction, snuggling further into his pillows, oblivious to the puzzled, amused look from Scully on the other bed.

"Well, I suppose one has to thank God for small blessings then." She turned back to her notes. She kicked off her own shoes and swung her feet up to the bed with as much ladylike grace as she could manage given. She settled her back against the headboard, curling her stocking clad toes into the blanket as she propped the paperwork against her knee, glancing over it carefully. So far nothing stood out about any of the characters she had found in files they had pulled, nothing strange or unusual, not that she was even particularly sure what she was even looking for.

"You know you won't find your killer staring at a stack of papers," Bruckman called from across the beds as she fiddled with the television remote, but neglected to turn the device on. Resisting the urge to snap at him, Scully at least rewarded him with a cool, disapproving glance.

"Did your visions tell you that?"

"No." Bruckman shook his head. "But it just stands to reason, don't you think. After all, if you all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, with all of your skills and tools at your disposal, couldn't pinpoint this guy without me around, what makes you think that looking through every Joe Schmoe who fits your criteria will help you any more?" He set down the television remote restlessly, before lacing his fingers across his broad, barrel chest. "I mean, think about it, part of the reason this guy is doing this is his anonymity. He's feeling that he's nothing more than some puppet in someone else's play. If he fit some sort of profile or rang anyone's bells, you think you would have picked him up sooner than this."

He had a point and Scully wasn't going to deny that, but he hit her irritation buttons and she found herself biting her lip briefly before replying. "Well perhaps it would help if in one of your visions you saw the murderer in a mirror so we knew what he looked like."

"I'll remember to tell him that next one I have." Bruckman glanced sideways at her. "How come you don't ask me?"

"Ask you what?" She deliberately feigned ignorance as she continued with her work.

"About how you die," he continued calmly, as if this was a common question for him to receive. "Your partner didn't seem to have any hesitation."

"Mulder would believe the moon was made of cheese if you told him so and would ask you to pass the crackers." This conversation was quickly starting to annoy her.

"You align yourself with a man you obviously believe is whack job and then presume to preach to me about whether or not I have psychic abilities?"

"I never said Mulder was a 'whack job'." She glared at Bruckman who cheerfully shrugged at her outrage over his choice of words. "I think Mulder's brilliant, quite frankly, amazingly insightful and grossly underappreciated."
"But you don't buy a single word of his ideas about psychics." Bruckman pointed out airily.

"Well…no." She did admit that, a trifle uncomfortably. "The truth is, Mulder has his beliefs and I have mine. He has always kept his mind open to those things that most conventional investigation would write off as being too improbable to consider. I have always relied on my science, the skills I learned in college and medical school, the logical progression of facts that reach a particular conclusion."

"And your reasonable, logical conclusions lead you to believe that I'm full of crap and your partner, who is the one pushing the whole psychic murders angle, is a sane, logical fellow." He tisked softly, clearly unimpressed. "Man's damn lucky to have you around, very damn lucky."

Why in the hell did he keep saying that, she grumbled in irritation. "Did you really see Mulder dying by auto-erotic asphyxiation?" She blushed slightly thinking about the implications again.

"What? You don't want to think of your partner like that?"

"Mulder can do whatever Mulder wants, but I know for a fact he's not into that."

"So you asked him?" Bruckman was delighted.

"Did you really see him die that way or not?" Scully barked lightly, becoming more flustered with this conversation by the minute.

"The truth?" Bruckman paused, as if considering the whole thing for a long moment. "I was pulling his chain to see how he would react."

For whatever reason, that admission relieved Scully in ways even she couldn't understand and perhaps didn't want to. "You said you saw lots of ways for Mulder to die though."

"Well, not lots, but possible ways."

"Does everyone have a number of possible way to die?" She thought of her own experiences in the last year, her abductions, her run-ins on cases, nearly being infected with strange diseases, almost being shot in Mulder's apartment.

"Most don't, but most aren't FBI agents either. Most people live quiet, boring, normal lives. They have marriages, houses, mortgages, kids, and jobs. Their lives are sedentary and dull and death sort of comes up on them as an afterthought. They've lived their lives, they've done everything else there is to do in life except this, and so it happens. They die in their beds or of a disease, and their loved ones accept that death is just another part of living, a natural part of the cycle."

It was something so much like what her sister Melissa would say, that Scully felt the now familiar ache deep in her soul twinge ever so slightly. "And Mulder? Why is he different?"

"Well, best as I can figure, you and your partner lead such dangerous lives doing what you do, death just sort of hangs out waiting for something to happen. Some people are like that you know, and they get lucky. Sometimes they can get out of it."

Just like she got out of that coma she was in and Mulder got out of his boxcar. The two of them seemed to have a veritable habit of cheating death whenever it was most convenient. She wondered if there was anything particularly supernatural about that or just pure luck and determination at play. Perhaps all of her mother's prayers at church on Sundays actually worked.

"How about your end?" She asked aloud after a long moment of silence, setting down her files and
curling up on the bed comfortably, turning to study the older man on the other bed.

"What about it?" He yawned.

"It's something you haven't explained. Can you see your own end?"

"I see our end," he quantified, frowning at her a little shyly as she cocked her head curiously by way of response. "We end up in bed together."

Scully's curiosity gave way to disbelief as her eyebrows rose and she smirked disparagingly at him. He flushed slightly as he rushed to explain.

"I'm, I'm, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that!" He stuttered, looking now completely mortified by how his words came out. "I don't mean to offend you or scare you, but not here, not this bed. I just mean I see us quite clearly in bed together. You're holding my hand, very tenderly and then you're looking at me with such compassion and I feel tears are streaming down my face. I feel so grateful. It's just a very special moment neither of us will ever forget."

Scully didn't know if she should laugh at him or be completely appalled by what he suggested. In the end, she chose skepticism as a safe and happy medium. "Mister Bruckman, there are hits and there are misses - and then there are misses." She shot him a pointed, if humorous look.

"I just call them like I see them." He shrugged, smiling.

"Somehow, I doubt I would find myself in that sort of situation."

"I don't know you're a medical doctor. Who knows what's going on with me?"

"You seem hale and hearty enough at the moment and with your FBI protection so thoughtfully set up for you by my partner, I don't think you have anything to fear regarding someone coming to kill you, either."

"You say that now," he grumbled loudly.

Scully chose to ignore him. She glanced over her shoulder at the file on the bed beside her, but realized she couldn't concentrate on it anymore anyway. Bruckman was right, it wasn't helping her in the slightest figure out who their suspect was, and really she doubted scanning through the backgrounds of hundreds of potential Donnie Pfasters in the Minneapolis area was going to do her psyche any favors. Instead she rose, moving across the room to her briefcase, opening it up as she dug inside for several long moments.

"Off to the ladies room to do whatever it is women do in bathrooms," Bruckman inquired impudently from his bed.

"Nope!" She grinned, pulling out a package of red, Bicycle playing cards. "How's your poker game?" She waved the packet in front of him.

"I thought FBI agents weren't allowed to gamble."

"Not for money," she admitted. "Just to pass the time so we don't sit here picking at each other anymore out of sheer boredom."

He liked the sound of that, apparently, as he rose and followed her to the small table in the hotel room. "What's a nice, Catholic girl like you doing playing poker?"
"My father taught me." She sat opposite Bruckman, pulling out the plastic-covered cards and shuffling them quickly in her small hands. He watched her work, obviously pleased and fascinated as she expertly split, shuffled, and mixed the cards.

"What did your father do, work as a card shark for the mob?" He glanced up from her small fingers to her mad grin.

"Nope! Dad was a captain with the US Navy. Made rear admiral eventually. He used to have his Navy buddies come over every Thursday night when he was in port and they would sit in the garage drinking beer and smoking cigars. When Dad was home I'd cling to him, practically. So to keep me occupied, he taught me how to play poker."

"And I'm sure your mother approved." Bruckman laughed.

"She frowned on it, but decided it was harmless enough. Of course, she didn't know Ahab was letting me sip from his whiskey glass." She started dealing cards between the two of them with a deft hand. "Five Card Draw?"

"Works for me," He shrugged as he picked up his hand. He studied it for long moments before tossing away two cards and accepting to fresh ones from Scully's deck. "So, why haven't you asked?"

"Asked what?" She smiled mysteriously.

"About how you die," he returned.

"I'm not interested." She nodded at him to lay down his hand.

"One pair." He sighed despondently as she laid down her own hand.

"Three of a kind." She laid down her hand for him to see, before scooping up the lot and passing it to him. "You deal the next hand."

He did so, taking the cards and working them, though without the expertise she had shown earlier. "So, how come you aren't interested?"

"What makes you think my fate is any different than Mulder's?" She sought to sidestep the question by changing the discussion topic.

"I didn't say it wasn't, just that I was surprised you weren't curious."

Frankly, she was surprised as well. It wasn't that she wasn't curious, she realized, it was that she had seen what lay ahead. She recalled that moment speaking to her father and his words to her that it wasn't her time. "I know now that death is nothing to fear, not really." She shrugged as she accepted her cards from Bruckman, and studied them briefly before plucking out the one she didn't like and passing it back to him. "I've faced that road before and I came back smarter and wiser for it."

Whatever Bruckman had to say on the issue, he only nodded sagely by way of response. He passed her another card before picking up his own hand. "Wise words for someone as young as you."

"Well, like Mulder, I've faced death a time or two." She laid down her hand, all high cards this time, beaten by his two pair.

"And yet, you wouldn't like to at least have a heads up when the real deal comes down the pike at
"you," Bruckman queried curiously. Obviously it never occurred to him that someone might turn down his offer of prognostication completely.

"Nope." She shook her head, accepting back the deck of cards for her own deal. "Besides, literature is filled with all sorts of dire warnings about what happens to those who dare to attempt to learn of their own future fate, only to misinterpret what would happen with fateful consequences."

"Cautionary tales?" Bruckman waggled an eyebrow. "Like what, may I ask?"

Of course he would ask, Scully thought, as she racked her brains for examples to give him spur of the moment. She thought of her father teaching her poker, of him reading Moby Dick to her. "Well, you know the story of Captain Ahab, right?"

"White whales, madmen chasing after revenge, I think I get the picture." Bruckman accepted the hand Scully pulled for him.

"Well in the book, he is told by the harpoonist, Fedallah, the circumstances surrounding his own death. He tells Ahab that he can only die under these certain conditions, terms so unlikely that Ahab assumes that they couldn't possibly happen, so he couldn't possibly die as Fedallah suggested."

"Why do I sense you are making some uncomfortable parallel to me here?"

Scully smiled at the older man. "I'm not saying anything one way or the other about your abilities, Mr. Bruckman, rather what people do with the predictions you give them. For example, Ahab heard from Fedallah exactly how Fedallah saw Ahab's death. Ahab interpreted it literally. He thought that each of the scenarios set out by Fedallah must actually come true in order for his death to occur as each scenario described couldn't possibly happen in the circumstances he was fine."

Bruckman nodded as he listened, passing her back one card and accepting another card in its place silently.

"So, Ahab chases after the whale and gets to the pivotal moment described by Fedallah. Except, what he doesn't know was that Fedallah was calling his vision like he saw it." She grinned as she parroted back his own words to her from earlier. "Ahab didn't understand that Fedallah's vision was allegorical, and that all the conditions set forth were actually symbols for things that would actually happen. Caught unaware, Ahab does what he meant to do all along and kills the whale, but doesn't realize he is fulfilling the terms of his own death and thus dies in the moment of his greatest triumph, taking himself and all hands save Ishmael down with him."

"That's a sad story." Bruckman clucked, shaking his head. "Really sad! They make you read this in high school?"

"My father and I used to read it together when I was younger. It's why I refer to him as Ahab." She smiled softly, thinking of the nights curled up with him and his worn copy of the book. "So, Ahab mistakes the prophecy and as a result, dies. A similar fate happens to Macbeth."

"Still, you're not the least bit curious?" Bruckman tried one last time. She grinned at him and shook her head as a knock at the door indicated that Mulder had at last returned to cover his shift watching over their acerbic charge.

"That must be Mulder. Time for the midnight shift." She set down her cards and rose smoothly to head to the door, but paused. Ahab, whales, and her father's words to her be damned. She really was curious about whether or not Clyde Bruckman could see how she died. She turned on her heels and
walked back over to him, curious.

"All right. So how do I die?" She rushed the words out in one breath, almost embarrassed to even say them out loud.

Bruckman stared up at her, blinking, before a slow, pleased smile creased his face. "You don't."

What was that supposed to mean? She stared at him as he grinned at her, trying to decipher exactly what he meant by those words. Was he referring to the circumstances at hand? Perhaps to some unknown event in the future that threatened her life? Was he honestly suggesting to her that she was really immortal?

Mulder's knocking persisted. Slowly she turned to answer it, regretting seriously she had given in and asked the question at all. Still, she thought, as she shot a glance back at Bruckman before peeking though the peephole in the hotel room door, at least he seemed happy with the prospect that she wouldn't die. Maybe, despite all of Bruckman's attitude and grouchesiness, he wasn't such a terrible bad person after all. He had said she wasn't going to die, which was more than he said for Mulder.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets a new pet.

"I swear to God, Scully, if you buy that dog a tiara and a sweater, I will never speak to you again." Mulder glanced back in his rearview mirror in mild disgust at the newest addition to Scully's household, the now deceased Mrs. Lowe's Pomeranian who bore the unfortunate name of Mr. Fluffy. He hadn't been particularly impressed with the small, poofy, red furred dog, especially given the fact that technically it had been found nibbling on the fingers of its now deceased mistress. He was even more scandalized when she announced that the "ratty little fuzzball" was actually going to come home with her.

"It's a dog, Mulder, it's not a doll. I refuse to treat it like it was Barbie." Scully turned and smiled at the dog that curled in the back seat of her partner's car, tired from his journey and obviously confused as to where he was.

"It's not a real dog, it's an overgrown rat." Mulder sniffed derisively as she reached back to scratch behind one of the perked up ears. "A real dog is a Golden Retriever, or a Labrador, something that fetches and will viciously bite the leg off of all intruders."

"How many dogs did you have that viciously bit anyone," Scully shot back dryly, having seen pictures of Mulder's childhood dogs. None of them looked aggressive enough to harm a fly.

"My dogs didn't need to, it was Chilmark, but the point is that dog couldn't bite off a toe, let alone a leg."

"He did a good job on Mrs. Lowe's fingers."

Mulder looked slightly green at the thought.

"Besides, Mulder, he needs someone to take care of him and love him. And the pound said that if they didn't have any takers in six weeks they would have to put him down. Look at that face," she sighed as she watched the dog blink slowly at her, panting. "Can you deny a face like that, Mulder? Could you let a face like that really get put to sleep?"

Mulder glared dubiously at the dog from his mirror. "It looks like a fluffy rat."

Scully could see she was fighting a loosing cause. "I don't know, with those ears and that face, he looks a little like a fox to me." She grinned slyly at him. "And like another Fox I know of, I don't think I can just ignore him just because other people think he's odd and strange."

Mulder clearly didn't appreciate the comparison. "I've never munched on the hand that fed me."

"Are you kidding, you bit it clean off and went for the other one!" She turned back in her seat, eyeing her partner dubiously as Mulder grunted in unappreciative response. "Perhaps that's my mission in life, taking in strays with sketchy backgrounds who really turn out not to be as bad as all of that once you get the whole story."
Her response mollified Mulder enough that he at least quit giving the dog evil glances as he merged into DC traffic. "So what are you going to name the puffball anyway?"

"What? Don't think 'Fox' is a good name?"

His only response was to glare sideways at her.

"Okay!" She laughed, grinning at Mulder's discomfort and irritation. "I was actually going to name him Queequeg, I think."

"Queequeg?" Mulder frowned for a moment. "After Moby Dick?"

"Yeah." She smiled, thinking sadly of her last interaction with Clyde Bruckman, of the story of Ahab and the prophecy, and playing poker with him in his hotel room. "Queequeg was said to be a cannibal, but despite that everyone in the crew of the Pequod thought highly of him. He turned out not to be as bad as his reputation." Sort of like Clyde Bruckman, she realized dolefully. "Anyway, given the predicament we found him in, I thought it was a good name, all things considered.

"Queequeg."

"Queequeg."

Mulder let the name roll around his tongue. "I suppose it's much more dignified than Mr. Fluffy."

"I'm glad you approve." Scully smirked at him. Silence fell between them as they drove into the city of Washington, towards Scully's apartment where Mulder planned to drop her off. Her thoughts drifted invariably to Clyde and how they found him, alone in his apartment, lying with a bottle of pills on his bed and a plastic bag over his head. It turned out it had been Bruckman, not Mulder, who had died from asphyxiation alone in his room. It had been the one part of his prophecy that had come true. The two of them in bed and she holding his hand, tears in her eyes.

"Why do you think he did it," Mulder asked quietly beside her. Once again he seemed to somehow divine the turn of her thoughts. wondered that since they found the body. Suicide wasn't uncommon in lonely men his age and she could only imagine what it must have been like for him all these years, believing he could see the future. "I don't know. Perhaps he wanted the visions to end. Perhaps this was his way of thwarting the killer. After all, Harvez didn't die and neither did you."

"What? Killed himself so death was busy when it came knocking for myself and Havez?" Mulder sounded intrigued by the idea.

"Something like that." Scully recalled something that Bruckman said while they sat in the hotel room together, discussing the nature of death. "I think he had come to the end of his life. He knew that death would come for him eventually, and he had done all that he wanted to do. And he was ready to meet it. He already knew how he was supposed to go, all he needed to do was to simply do it."

She couldn't help but think of Melissa as she lay dying, a gunshot wound to her head. Death was simply the next stage in life, Missy would say. "I don't think Bruckman feared what death would bring him. And perhaps in dying, he thwarted whatever it was the murderer saw would happen."

Mulder was quiet but watched her in mild surprise. "Those are bold statements coming out of you, Agent Scully."

They were, she realized with a bit of a smile. "Yeah, I guess they are."

"So did you ask him how you die?" Mulder drew slowly closer to her home in Georgetown.
"Mmmm…yeah." She stared out the window towards the muggy, late-afternoon sunshine outside of Mulder's car. She would have to take Queequeg for a walk when they got in, she reminded herself complacently.

"And?" Mulder's curiosity almost burst out of him. She turned to his expectant gaze slowly. She wasn't even sure she understood Bruckman's prophecy totally.

"He said I don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't die," she clarified thoughtfully. "I don't know what that means, but he just said I don't die."

Whatever it meant, it was answer enough for Mulder. He smiled contentedly as he pulled off towards her home.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully must deal with patronizing.

"They call it 'The Walk'." The warden of the Eastpoint State Penitentiary was an affable, friendly, Southern gentleman type and the sort of good-old boy you could find in the less-tourist centric areas of Florida. He sat back in his creaking desk chair regarding Mulder and Scully from across an expansive desk in what amounted to little more than a concrete room in an aging facility, typical of far too many prisons in highly populated states like Florida.

"It's called that for obvious reasons." The warden shrugged by way of meaning, giving Scully one of those delicate looks that said he hated to offend her female sensibilities. Not that she was sure what "female sensibilities" were and if she even had those. She wondered vaguely what the man would say if she mentioned she regularly spent days up to her elbows in human entrails.

Mulder must have had a similar thought as he glanced sideways at her, humor lurking in his otherwise serious gaze. "It's the last walk most of these men take before their lives are ended, correct?"

He was poking at the warden. The other man glanced at Scully briefly, but nodded. "It's the home of some of our most hardened criminals. Murderers, serial killers, men who've done dark things, and I'm warning you of this because it's not often they see any outsiders, particularly female ones."

He now nodded pointedly at Scully, who sat primly in her white suit, and met the warden's skeptical gaze evenly.

"I'm well aware of just what sort of criminals sit on your death row here, sir." Scully expression hardly flinching. "I'm also aware that we were contacted to investigate a strange murder here. I'm a medical professional whose been with the FBI five years and I'm sure Agent Mulder here can attest to the fact that I've handled men just like the ones I'm sure we'll find there before."

"I have the body of the guard of course, as you requested. Are you going to bring in the county corner to take a look?"

"No, I'll do the examination myself," she replied promptly. "I know he of course filed a preliminary report on the cause of death, but I wanted to do a more thorough search." She glanced sideways at Mulder. "We have yet to form a theory as to how the guard might have died and perhaps a quick look over the guard's remains might give us clues that the corner in his initial findings wasn't looking for or perhaps misunderstood."

Whether or not the warden was startled or shocked by Scully's cool handling of what amounted to a
dead body, he didn't seem inclined to try and argue or play the "concerned gentleman" card further.
"Well then, I suppose I'll escort the two of you over to Q block. If you give me a moment, I'll give my boys a heads up so they can make sure you two are safe while you are over there?" He rose, gesturing to the door of his office as he waited for Scully to first rise and exit, followed closely by Mulder, walking out into the stark, dark, gray concrete hallway of the correctional facilities main offices. "Let me have the front desk call over to make sure they know we are coming."

Scully watched the genial warden turn from them and move towards the reception area down the hall. She sensed Mulder move up close behind her, his right arm barely brushing the back of her left, his breath soft against the top of her ear as he spoke. "Nice handling in there, Scully. Better than pulling out your weapon and capping a knee."

She couldn't help but smile just a little at the idea. "Don't think it didn't cross my mind. But it's far from the first time I've run into that in law enforcement, you know that."

Almost imperceptibly she could feel his fingers move just about her elbow, not grabbing, but resting there as his tone turned serious. "He does have a bit of a point. This isn't a place where I would send any woman, armed or otherwise. I know you've seen worse, dealt with worse, and you can handle yourself just fine, but if at any point you feel uncomfortable about any of this…"

"I know, I'll step away, Mulder." She cocked her head up, glancing over her shoulder up at him with a small look of irritation mingled with appreciation. His overprotective at times could be annoying, even smothering. But there was true worry and concern on his face as she nodded slowly. She knew he was thinking of their run in just months before at the Cumberland Correctional Facility in Virginia, how she had nearly been infected. But there was no contagion involved in this case to her knowledge, no Pinck Pharmaceutical conspiracy or government cover up. It was just a plain old, simple, spooky X-file. This, she thought with a slight sense of disparagement, this she could handle.

"Agents!" The warden called from down the hall, as Mulder's fingers briefly tightened on her skin, before dropping casually to his side, the worry, warmth, and concern that had lightened Mulder's stoic face now turning business-like and formal. There was a case to solve, a strange mystery to ferret out, and Mulder's mind was already turning to just what could be going on in Q Block to all of those that Neech Manley thought wronged him over his eleven year stay there. Scully couldn't help but be warmed, ever so slightly, by the wariness for her safety, so different from that of the warden. There was no condescension there, only respect and affection for someone who always seemed to be the one saving him at the last minute. What was it Clyde Bruckman had said about Mulder? He was a damn lucky man to have her around.

Perhaps she was pretty damn lucky having Mulder around, too, she thought, as she fell in step with him towards the warden, her shorter steps trailing ever so slightly behind.
The List

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has a close encounter.

Two-dozen pairs of eyes followed her every move, flickered in the darkness as she walked, bright in her white suit. They roamed over Scully's skin, up her petite form from the tips of her shoes to the top of her bright head, the first woman they had seen in how long? Despite the assurances that she had given both the warden and Mulder, there was the small part of her that was well aware that she was a woman in a very masculine environment, one compounded with the anger, hate, and frustration of men who knew that the only way they were possibly leaving this cell block was to meet their date with the man in the gas chamber, and she could feel that hate and resentment like a miasma clouding the block as she moved towards the showers, she could almost see it hanging in the air, clinging to the dark-gray painted walls, thick with the condensed heat of the sticky, Florida, late August summertime. This place bred rumors and superstition. It was a place of no light, no sun, now air, and no hope. The only things anyone had to hold on to was hate and fear. It was small wonder then that a story about a executed convict coming back from the dead to enact his justice on those he held a grudge against held such sway and took root in their imagination festering like the bodies in the under-cooled prison morgue. Ghost lurked in the shadows of cells, death waiting to claim them inevitably, whether it be in the gas chamber or at the hands of one of their fellow, doomed convicts, snatching them away well before the time they wanted to go.

Strong, able fingers closed around her mouth even before she could see them, could react or scream. Quietly the voice in her ear whispered, "I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to talk to you, okay? I know who he's going to kill. There's a list. one of the cons has it, a man named Roque."

The powerful hand released her as she spun away, glaring at the tall, African-American guard, who looked silently guilty, sorry he had frightened her, but terrified of something. Of what? Neech Manley, returned from the dead?

"Who are you," she demanded, her voice shaking slightly. She hated that.

"My name's Parmelly. I want to help you." He looked sincere enough, but for what reason? He was just a guard here. But then Scully knew about guards in prisons. They saw things and heard things, from the prisoners, from each other, and they often knew things that wardens would rather keep quiet. She wanted to ask him why, to demand it out of him, but in the distance she could hear the voice of the other guard, Fornier, calling to her, as Parmelly slipped, quietly back into the shadows of the shower, without even an explanation at all as to why he was resorting to all of this secrecy.

She turned to Fornier waiting at the doorway of the showers, watching her with curious wariness. She shrugged by way of response, glancing around the drab, depressing room. "I was just looking around."

Fornier curiosity deepened into dark disapproval. "Not a place for a woman to be doing that alone." He waited for her to move past him and fell in step behind her. She wondered if it was for her own protection or to keep her from snooping further into things that the warden would rather the FBI didn't find inside this prison.
Mulder was still in the prisoner Speranza's cell and she didn't even bother to catch his eye or urge him to finish up. "Mulder, I'm ready to go."

His head snapped up and his eyes searched hers for the briefest of moments. Only he would get the meaning behind those words, the layers of anxiety that lay just beneath her cool, demanding surface. She was doing just as he had asked as she came in. When it got too much, she was leaving. He nodded quickly.

"Okay, I'll be right there." He glanced at Fornier, who waited patiently as Scully turned and marched right towards the door at the end of the block. She raised her hand, palm flat against the heavy metal door, banging loudly as her voice carried, almost shrilly, through the bars inset in the doors one window. "Guard!"

Behind her Mulder's loping steps sounded easily enough in the open space of the cells, not bothering to mask the concern as he leaned in close around her. "What's wrong, Scully?" His tone carried a small, hidden threat in it. If her skin didn't want to crawl off her body she perhaps would have smiled at the idea of Mulder trying to do anything to anyone who upset her.

"I'm just ready to get out of here," she replied evenly, waiting as the guard outside the block carefully unlocked and opened the door, allowing herself and Mulder out. As he did, she felt eyes on her once again, specific eyes, watching her with a sort of knowing. She turned her face towards the first cell, the one with the man named Roque, the one who supposedly knew Parmelly's so-called "list". In a place like this, she could see why anyone would believe anything.

Just the closing of the large, clanging door behind her allowed the muscles in Scully's neck to loosen, as suddenly the air became easier to breathe around her. She exhaled slowly, unclenching the fists she didn't even know she had formed as Mulder stood watching her, dark concern on his face as he worried his lower lip gently.

"You okay?" He appeared torn between checking her head-to-toe for injuries and storming back into the cell block to demand who had spooked her so much, and really, now that she was away from that block, from those men, from that hopelessness superstition and fear, she felt quite silly for reacting the way that she did. Her cheeks flushed as she nodded, her composure returning as she initiated their walk down the hallway towards the reception and entrance of the prison.

"I was startled, that was all," she muttered, becoming more embarrassed by the idea by the minute. Really, it was a prison, it was not like she hadn't been in one of those before. She tried to place herself back on stable footing, falling into the familiar forms of investigator and agent, pushing aside her nerves. "I was approached by one of the guards in there, a Parmelly. He came out at me in the showers. He didn't want to be known, but he claims he wants to help us?"

"Help us by scaring the hell out of you?" Mulder growled, not heatedly, but certainly not particularly pleased. She shot him a brief, appreciative smile, but continued on.

"He said there's a list. I guess he means it's Manley's list of people he planned on killing, the one he swore he had when he was executed. Parmelly is of the opinion that Roque has it."

Mulder's eyes were sharp as he frowned. "Did he say why?"

"No, he didn't say anything much at all. Almost as soon as he got that much out, Fornier came looking for me and he hid. Parmelly apparently didn't want anyone to know he was talking to us… or that he knew anything about this so-called 'list.'"

"He didn't say who was on it?"
"No."

They neared the reception desk, turning in the badges given to them as federal law enforcement visitors and gathered the weapons they had turned in. Scully signed out of the visitors log with a perfunctory hand, waiting for Mulder as she slipped her service weapon back in its holster. Without a word between each other they walked out of the prison's front gates, though Scully could hear Mulder's mind whirling, spinning with the information she shared. He at least waited till they reached their rental car outside before theorizing further. "You think Roque has the list and is orchestrating the murders within the prison."

He didn't ask it was a statement of fact for him. It was strange and bemusing how well he could read her now. But then, it was Fox Mulder, his specialty was reading people, and as close as they had become in the last two plus years, and after all that they had been through together, she would hope he knew a thing or two about her.

"Why? You think it really is Neech Manley's reincarnated spirit?" She teased him more out of habit and comfort than because she really suspected he thought that. Her unease wanted to fall into familiar patterns of discourse between them.

"I didn't say that, but how much influence does a man like Roque, sitting on death row in Florida, really have in the outside world? He's there for simple murder, not organized crime, not gangland killings. I doubt he's had a visitor from the outside once since he's been on the block."

"Perhaps he isn't organizing it from the outside then. Perhaps it's an inside job with the guards, using Neech Manley legend as a cover. Why else would Parmelly approach me like that, afraid to allow Fornier to see him talking to me?"

"Could be," Mulder acknowledged as he unlocked her door. "I want to talk to Roque further on this. I doubt he'll give me much, but it will at least give me something to work on to see if he's lying or not."

"I'll see if I can get in to see the other body tomorrow then." Their familiar roles in the case came easily as she stepped inside the car. Now well clear of the cinder-gray prison, Scully felt herself returning to something of normality, the oppressive despair now gone as she shook herself slightly. She had let her imagination and the fears of both Mulder and the warden get the better of her. She was a strong, confident FBI agent. This should not bother her in the least.

"Thank you," Mulder murmured quietly as he put the keys in the ignition, starting the car. It was a non-sequitur and she stared at him in surprise, confused as to what the sign of gratification meant.

"What for?" She couldn't think of anything in particular she had done that day he needed to be grateful for.

"For doing what I asked, for leaving when you felt you needed to." He didn't look at her, instead focused on pulling the car out of the parking space. "For doing the very thing you always ask me to do and I always conveniently seem to ignore."

She laughed slightly. "For taking personal responsibility."

"Something like that," he replied wryly. "I do worry about you, Scully. I know your capable, talented, brilliant, strong, those are all things I understand about you. I've seen you come out of things that would crush a lesser person, male or female. You don't have to prove anything to me. I worry you try too hard to prove it to yourself."
The reactionary part of Scully's brain wanted to tacitly remind him that he was the one constantly fluttering over her, wanting to hold her back left and right if she got so much as a paper cut. But then perhaps that was why he over-reacted, Scully's fierce independence meant she never asked for help, never begged for understanding, and never, ever allowed herself the luxury of weakness or fear. It was okay to not be fine, he was saying. If only it were that simple for her to be that way, even around him, especially around him, a man whose very life might depend on her reactions and whether she could handle something as simple as interviewing a man on death row. How many times in just the last year had her levelheaded reactions and her ability to stay cool when others might become flustered saved him, especially when he wasn't in the best frame of mind?

"I'm fine, Mulder," she murmured quietly, wrapping around the old, familiar blanket of plausible deniability. "Just fine."
Reincarnation

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder discuss the possibility of reincarnation

The cold air from Mulder's hotel room smacked into Scully's perspiration-covered face, blowing through her drenched blouse as she found herself toppling over onto his bed quietly without leave or invitation. She managed to avoid the spot where it was clear Mulder had been working, curling gently on the other side, the one closest to his Artic cold air conditioner. For his part, Mulder barely reacted as he stood by the doorway, save for the slightly raised eyebrow and shrug he gave her as he closed the door behind her grand entrance.

"That exciting of an autopsy?" He moved beside her on the bed, adjusting his reading glasses as he picked up the files he had been reading before she entered. She glanced over at him, comfortable in his rolled up shirtsleeves, not a hint of perspiration on his brow.

"I don't know why they even bother calling that a morgue. It's an oven. By the time I got a chance to get the body to cold storage at the county morgue, advanced decay was already setting in." She sighed in frustration as she plucked at the sticky fabric clinging to her skin. "God, it's hot outside Mulder. Whose bright idea was it to come to Florida in late August?"

He smiled mildly as he read through the paperwork but didn't respond otherwise.

"Anyway, Fornier was killed the same way the others were, suffocation, not the trauma of having his head hacked off." She held up the autopsy report in her hand and tossed it in the general direction of her partner. "Green Bottle Fly larva in his lungs."

"Mulder's long, aquiline nose wrinkled in disgust as he picked up the report. "Is that even possible that quickly?"

"Well it's not likely, but I suppose it's not impossible," Scully admitted slowly as her hair, damp underneath, began to dry itchy to her neck. "But then again, since it's Dante's purgatory outside, I'm fairly certain anything is possible there."

"Catholic symbolism at its finest." Mulder chuckled as he set down the autopsy report and reached for the files he had been looking at, laying them on his lap. "Neech Manley was well versed on Catholic dogma regarding death and purgatory, Buddhist and Hindu too, as well as some Jewish and Islamic texts, even rare Gnostic works not seen since the Middle Ages."

Somehow that didn't strike Scully as terribly surprising. "He was on Death Row contemplating his own demise. Not everyone can be like Clyde Bruckman, channeling their obsession with death into a psychic power. Perhaps Neech Manley was just trying to find some hope, some meaning for the end that life had dealt him in prison."

"I don't deny that, but what I really want to know is if he really believed the ideas he was formulating in his head. Speranza seemed to think he did, that he actually had begun to believe the ideas he was spouting there in prison about reincarnation and life after death."
"He was a man facing death for a crime he swore he didn't commit, Mulder, looking for some sort of way to rectify the injustice he felt. I don't see why he wouldn't start looking for ways to at least tell himself that this death was just a means to him finally freeing himself from the shackles of this life, to exact his revenge on all of those who did wrong to him."

"How very Old Testament of you. I like a woman who can handle a little vengeance and smite," Mulder quipped drolly. "Still, from a psychological, even a humanities sort of viewpoint, you have to admit that it's rather interesting how he's turned all these religious, dogmatic viewpoints to fit his own personal idea of reincarnation - everlasting life. When you think about it, many, if not most world religions offer some sort of promise of life after death, a world beyond where one can go if their heart and mind is pure, or if their cause is just."

"And you think that Neech Manley tapped into that somehow with his mish-mosh of bastardized and truncated religious dogma?" Scully, curled on her side facing him now raised herself on one elbow, glancing at the copied pieces of paper Mulder had spread out before him, all snippets of things that Neech Manley had studied while he was in prison. "Frankly, if that's the case why the hell do I bother with going to mass, even just at Christmas and Easter?"

"I keep asking the same thing," Mulder muttered teasingly as he pointed out to one file. "Here he has highlighted a work by Pope Gregory I, also known as the Great, regarding purgatory and the release of a person's soul, that the soul returns to thank those who had prayed for its release. He had Quranic texts where he has singled out the reward for those great warriors who die for the faith receiving their ultimate reward in heaven, and stories from Maccabees about Jewish martyrs who died for their faith, their persecutors punished in horrible ways for the sin of forcing the faithful to break the covenant between themselves and God."

"And your point?"

"Think about it, Scully, all through human history it has been claimed that those of great faith have been able to perform and do great deeds, like the ones outlined here, based on the strength of their faith alone. What if Neech Manley's faith in his own, piecemeal dogma was enough to actually do what he believed it would, reincarnate him in order to exact his revenge."

Scully blinked mildly at Mulder's insistent face. There had been a time, not so terribly long ago, when she would have rolled her eyes and argued disparagingly with him about the how his idea sounded. But she realized that sort of criticism just tended to bounce off of Mulder and only fueled his determined belief. "So we no longer believe that Roque is orchestrating these murders on his own and using Neech Manley as a cover?"

"I don't think Roque is the one doing it." Mulder took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes briefly. "I spoke to him today. He tried to use his influence to get protection, to make a deal."

Not surprising for a Death Row inmate. "Did you speak to the warden about it?"

"Not yet, but you know he's going to nix the idea. Roque's on Death Row for the brutal, gangland style murder of three people, there's no way any judge would commute his sentence, even for the lives of three people."

"Still, it's worth some sort of shot, don't you think. I mean there are three people whose lives can be saved out of this."

"Try convincing any judge in Florida that these mean are at risk because of the disembodied, angry spirit of a man they killed months ago." Mulder leaned against the headboard, crossing his arms as he stared off into he distance. "I think Roque is afraid of something, that's why he wants the
"What? That Neech Manley is out to get him? He supposedly knows the list, Mulder, he would know if he was on it."

"That may not be why he's afraid of Neech," Mulder replied. "And I don't think he's worried about being killed, at least not by Manley's reincarnated spirit."

"By who, then?"

"It's a prison, lots of things happen in a prison. People slip, fights go down, guards look away. Remember, Jeffrey Dahmer died in prison, bludgeoned to death by a schizophrenic fellow inmate while on work detail and no one noticed."

"Speaking about God's will," Scully murmured pointedly as she picked up one of the scattered papers, glancing it over.

"God's will or not, Roque knows how it goes in prison. All he needs is for one guard to look the other way and he's a dead man."

Mulder's theory could be right. Roque could just be leveraging to get himself out of a situation that would kill him before the State of Florida planned to. "Do you think he actually knows anything about Manley's list then, really?"

"Maybe, but he's not talking till he gets his deal. But I don't think he's the one orchestrating the murders."

"If not him, who?"

His green eyes slid to hers, meaningfully. She should have known the moment she asked the question.

"You know, Mulder, for a man who doesn't buy into God or organized religion, you sure seem quick to buy into their rhetoric when it suits your theories."

"I never denied the possibility of miracles, Scully, only in the person who is executing them."

"You are such a bundle of contradictions." She snorted, rolling her body off the side of his bed and swinging her legs down as she rose. "I'm going to take a shower and try to feel human again. Then I'd like food, preferably not pizza." She shot him a dirty look that he seemed oblivious to.

"So is that how this works, Scully? You grace my bed and leave?"

She had wondered when he'd get to the inappropriate remarks. He had waited longer than usual.

"I'm hardly the first, Mulder," She grinned as she reached his door. "I'll call you when I'm ready for something real to eat."

"What does a shower and healthy food have that I don't have?"

"Comfortable reality," she shot back as she closed his door behind her.
Let It Go

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is frustrated by Mulder's relentlessness.

"It's over, Mulder. Let's go home."

The sticky, hot Florida breeze tore at her hair and Mulder's jacket as they stood at odds by the side of the road, Mulder's unanswered questions racing and swirling between them. He wanted to go back, he wanted to find the truth, perhaps find the evidence the Neech Manley indeed didn't die at the hands of his executioner months ago. He had that look in his eyem the familiar pleading look, the one that begged her to just this once come along, give in, come play a little longer in the field of the impossible. Why was it she always felt like the bad guy, the responsible partner reeling him in from hanging off the cliff? When had her job description gone from debunking his work, to being his partner, to now being his babysitter? Something Clyde Bruckman had said struck her. She was always pulling his ass out of the fat and out of the fryer, and perhaps another day, another case she might be more willing to put up with Mulder's crazed desire to chase that which he had no proof for.

Silently she turned, returning to their car, unwilling to give the idea any further thought. She wanted the cool air of the airport, she wanted her shower, and she wanted her bed. Scully reached for her door, glancing back to see if Mulder followed. He did so, slowly and regretfully, the troubled frown still worrying his brow as he caught his bottom lip between his teeth in frustration. This was bothering the hell out of him.

"What if justice hasn't been done here, Scully? What if all of this really was an elaborate set up by Neech Manley?" Mulder leaned against the top of the car, staring across the hood at her. "Doesn’t it bother you that a potentially innocent man's name is being sullied in the name of a convenient ending?"

"How is it convenient when we have no evidence to disprove Parmelly's involvement?"

"We have no evidence to prove it either. All of our theories are suppositions, based mostly on the word of the prison warden, who has more reason than most to happily see this entire case put to bed. No more questions, no more fears, everything can settle back to normal and he can go back to his prison abuse without the FBI nosing around at every turn."

Scully pressed her lips together firmly in a grim line. She wasn't about to say that Mulder was wrong in this. She didn't want to argue, at least not here, not on the side of some road. She slipped inside the car wordlessly, settling in as Mulder followed suit, watching quietly as a lonely car passed them going the opposite direction down the road. Mulder was sullen as he started the car, pulling it back onto the road, quiet for long moments as they sped down the highway towards Tallahassee and the airport there. She knew he hated this, she knew it was eating him, that he found this morally wrong and frankly would rather just turn around and continue poking at this, like a scab on a barely healing wound, to see if there was any further pus he could press out of it. But there wasn't anything, not anything that would prove useful or substantial to this case or his work at any rate.
"You're like a bulldog sometimes, Mulder." She sighed, finally, after long miles of silence between the two of them. "You get something in your teeth and you won't let go. Sometimes there is noting else to do but let go."

"I'm not being obtuse or stubborn, Scully. I don't think Parmelly did it."

"Based on what evidence?"

"Based on what I told you, Parmelly wasn't one of the guards on duty the night of the murders and he didn't know the name of the executioner who killed Manley."

"Suppositions on your part," Scully snapped.

"Intuition," he retorted, a word that Scully was heartily beginning to tire of hearing. "I know something is wrong with this case, Scully, I know it in my bones and you know it too." His eyes cut sideways, glittering with irritation. "You know it, but don't want to question what is a neat and tidy ending for a case that bothered you from the beginning."

He was hitting dangerously close to home and god damn it she didn't like it. "Are you implying that I looked for the most convenient answer in interest of expediency?" Her tone was frozen as she stared at him, her face stiff in quiet challenge.

"I'm saying, Scully, that when push comes to shove and you don't feel comfortable with where a case is going or what the evidence is suggesting you would rather ignore the outlying factors in favor of something that covers the most plausible sets of data. You ignore the real answers because they can't fit into neat labels you can present in your reports."

"And that is somehow worse than your suggestion that Neech Manley has returned from the dead to enact his revenge on all those who wronged him. Mulder, it's nothing more than a ghost story, passed around Death Row between men condemned to die for their crimes and who are terrified of what that means. I will grant you that the story was convenient to use as a ruse, but to suggest that Manley is anything but dead in your report, without any evidence to back up the claim, would be grossly negligent. And after everything we've been through, after how hard we've had to fight for the X-files, and after your own admission on the importance of such evidence, how can you sit there and honestly tell me that intuition is a viable way to conduct an investigation?"

"Because not everything in this world can be explained by simple facts and figures, there are things that we have to go on with blind faith. As a woman who cherishes the cross around her neck, I thought you would have been the first to get that." Mulder's heated words lashed across the car, hitting Scully hard. She blinked silently, feeling stung. Melissa, Mulder, all of them called her out on her belief.

"Whether or not I attest to my beliefs or not, Mulder, I'm not reckless. I don't throw around ideas and hope they stick, all the while placing myself, my work, and others in jeopardy based on a half-baked hunch." Her words were cutting and perhaps she meant them to be. Perhaps a part of her wanted to hurt him, because whether she wanted to admit it or not a part of her was angry with him, bitter. Despite her relief at his survival and ignoring the fact that she didn't hold him really responsible for what happened, she couldn't ignore the fact that her sister's death and the damage to her career and reputation stemmed from Mulder's unwillingness to leave well enough alone, to accept when things couldn't or shouldn't be pursued further.

Still, she had cut him deeply. His jaw tightened so hard that she could see the muscles work under the skin as he glared at the road straight ahead, the ribbon of sticky asphalt in front of them. "I wouldn't be reckless, Scully, if the stakes weren't that important."
His voice was quiet and low, gravel in the cabin of the car, but she knew he was right. Men would kill them for the information the two of them knew. She knew as well as Mulder did just how dangerous and damning that information was, just what it would speak to about their own government. But Neech Manley and the poor, unfortunate Parmelly had nothing to do with that. "The stakes are important, Mulder. Just not for this."

He nodded, slowly, the long fingers of his hands that had been clenching the steering wheel relaxing slightly. Heavy silence filled the space between them, pregnant with the accusations so casually tossed between them in those moments of anger. How weighty was the baggage they now carried, Scully wondered, as she despondently watched the road roll beneath them. The better question, she supposed, was would they always stand in opposition like this; he always chasing after the next monster, dancing into hell, with darkness threatening to swallow him whole, while she waited to fish him out again. More so, did she want to continue to stand there, on the edge of it all, hoping to pull him back from that darkness before it managed to take them both down into its depths?

At the moment, if she were honest with herself, she just didn't know.
Cleveland, Ohio quite possibly was perhaps one of the most depressing cities to ever be in and Scully watching it through the windows of their rental car, knowing she was only there for the duration of one case didn't improve the view in the slightest. Wasted, abandoned buildings, devoid of life in a region severely wracked by the loss of the steel industry that had economically created it, a river that was just now coming back to life from near ecological disaster, a city whose only claims to fame seemed to be that they were the supposed birthplace of rock-and-roll and had quite possibly the worst sports teams known to man at the moment.

Scully only knew the last tidbit of information because Mulder had mentioned it as they had picked up their rental at the airport, grimacing at the gray sky. As usual, he took the wheel, while she perused the police report one more time in interest of being on top of what was going on. Not everyone in the world could have Fox Mulder's eidetic memory. "So why did you take this case again?"

"Reminds me of some cases a few months ago in the south, in Mississippi."

"A serial killer?"

"Quite possibly. He went quiet for a while, but he's popped up again, maybe. The MO sounds disturbingly familiar."

"What is with you and weird, serial killers?" The X-files were filled with them, all sorts of strange cases of unsolved murders, with patterns often only Mulder could see.

"Can take the boy out of VCU, but can't take the VCU out of the boy." He grinned, unashamed. "I can't help my interest. Sometimes the monsters we need to fear in society are the ones that hide within us."

"If you say so, Mulder," she replied, shrugging. "So what was up with the cases in Mississippi?"

"Four women, all single, all lonely hearts, found dead. The case was quite a sensation a few months ago out of the Jackson field office and they sent it my way."

"Because it was strange," she prompted, wondering why it was a field office, albeit small, felt it necessary to boot a local case over to Mulder.

"Among other things." He was being maddeningly evasive this time and she wondered what the big surprise was in this, what the strange, X-files angle was that would cause her to start yelling at him in protest with a perfectly reasonable explanation regarding what was going on. "The only common connection was that they were single, unattached women, all looking for love - lonely hearts."

Lonely hearts. The term conjured images of Beatles album covers and horrible, torrid romance novels. "Lonely hearts? What, is that the politically correct way of saying they were single, adult
women?"

Mulder was as perceptive a man as any she had ever seen and she knew he could sense danger in her words as surely as if she had stuck a giant, neon sign on her forehead. "I meant no implication by what I said, Scully. All four women answered local personal ads in the paper and had described to their friends finding a perfect man who 'really knew them', before all turning up dead. The lonely hearts connotation was simply meant to imply that these are women who were actively seeking companionship through specific means, not women who are single in general." He raised a corner of one eyebrow as he glanced at her sideways. "Just so you know, I wasn't implying you."

Scully felt her mouth twitch as she snorted slightly. "I am far from a lonely heart, Mulder."

"Good, because do you know how hard I would grill you for meeting anyone you met through a personals ad?" Mulder sounded scandalized by the though. "Or the Internet. From what I hear from my old colleagues, that is the next, new thing. The amount of work we got from personals ads, the rapists, murderers, molesters, kidnappers, it makes you wonder why anyone tries to find true love and happiness through those things."

It was few and far between the list of things that truly bothered Fox Mulder and Scully wasn't particularly surprised, given Mulder's history with his sister and the types of cases he had worked on as an adult, that this would be one of them. "Mulder, in a million years I don't think I would go about finding true live between the grimy pages of a newspaper."

Granted, she thought with some disgruntlement, it had been a couple of years now with no relationship for her, something of a long dry spell. "I'm not exactly looking at the moment either."

She wondered briefly if she said that for her own benefit or Mulder's.

"Why not?" Mulder's curiosity was typically about as delicate as using a sledgehammer to hang a picture. She could see the tips of his ears flush a slight pink as he studiously watched the road in front of them. "I mean, let's face it Scully, you aren't unattractive. Frohike says so."

"Ahhh, the wisdom of Frohike." Scully smiled dryly. "And would he date a fire hydrant with a wig if we told him it thought he was hot?"

"The jury is still out on that one," Mulder conceded, regretfully. "But really, Scully, don't you get the mother guilt of grandchildren and a family yet?" He spoke with the unspoken, weary tone of someone who all too frequently got that sort of discussion out of his own mother.

"I'm hoping Bill and Tara hop to it with the kids soon and they take me off the hook." Which was only partially the truth, she did want those things, eventually. "I suppose someday it will work out for me. But right now I'm enjoying my career and the work I do. And frankly, performing alien autopsies and chasing after psychic serial killers is interesting enough work for the moment."

Mulder laughed, but made no further comment as Scully continued.

"Besides, what would you do without me around, Mulder?" That comment was both worried and resentful from her. She hated to think what could possibly happen to her partner should she leave him to his own devices. His confession about Kristen Kilgar in Los Angeles while Scully had been missing was enough to clue her in that Mulder tended to leave his better angels at home when there wasn't someone there to call him off the edge of madness. And yet, she felt the same twinge she felt the week before while arguing with him on the side of the Florida highway. Did she really want to do this forever. When she did decide to give this all up, to pass all of this work on to someone else in favor of something new in her life, would she be able to or would she forever
attaching herself to Mulder and his insecurities, hoping to save her partner from himself? Was it her job to even continue doing that?

Mulder's mood, like hers, seemed to sober as he cast a thoughtful look her way briefly as he drove. "Someday, I can only hope you find the person you are meant to be with in life and have the kids and family and career your family wished for you. You deserve happiness in your life."

He said it with such sincerity, such conviction, that she paused, taken aback for a moment by his simple statement of determined belief, as passionate as if he had said he believed his sister was walking through his front door any day. Mulder's blinding, passionate, stubborn belief, that anything was a possibility and could happen perhaps would be naïve in anyone else, foolish, and even dangerous. But in Mulder, it was just who he was, just as much as his acerbic sense of humor or general need to ignore any set standard of professional rules.

"And you don't deserve happiness in your life?" It was the only response she could think of to say. He shrugged, nonchalant, as if the idea hadn't really occurred to him.

"I think, if I find the answers to the mysteries I am searching for, that I will have found happiness." It was simple, honest, and so very Mulder. "Anything else I get along the way would just be cake."

Samantha, the truth about his father, why any of this happened and why it tore apart his family's life. If Mulder could understand these truths about himself she could well imagine him finally coming by a sense of peace. But would that be happiness? Perhaps for Mulder he hadn't been able to think much beyond that private hope.

"Just don't turn into a lonely heart, yourself, Mulder, spending the rest of your life turning to vague hopes and phantom images to fill the emptiness in your life."

"So you are saying my porn collection can't replace a good woman?" He grinned, self-deprecating.

"Men can be lonely hearts, too, you know. Not everyone needs to chase after personal ads to be a lonely heart. I just don't want you to come to the end of your search and find out there is nothing left for you once you get there."

"We'll see, Scully." It was all the promise she knew she was going to get out of him. "Good women in my life are hard to find."

Scully felt the silence become pointed as she shifted uncomfortably in the car and watched the depressed streets of Cleveland's waterfront pass by.
A Woman's Place

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has to deal with the patriarchy.

There was something disturbingly comforting about the scent of antiseptic chemicals in a sterilized environment, something that spoke to order, impartiality, the matter-of-fact world of science. Scully took a moment as she entered the Cleveland Police morgue to revel in it briefly, to allow the feeling to sink into her bones as she swallowed hard against Detective Cross's complete dismissal of her at the crime scene that morning. Despite Mulder's atypical vague explanations and short behavior that morning, Cross would have much rather spoken to Mulder at his worst than Scully who, if truth be told, was the much more socially well-behaved half of the team.

And that was just it, Cross didn't see them as a team. He saw Mulder, the man, and ignored Scully, the woman. Chauvinism and misogyny in the world of law enforcement was hardly a new or unique thing. Despite women being involved in the FBI for years now, at the Academy it wasn't uncommon for her to run into instructors or fellow students who questioned a woman's place in this type of world, especially a woman who was as petite and small as she. Much more irritating were those that assumed because she was a woman she had no brain for investigation, that for whatever reason her hormones, her emotions, her breasts and uterus would somehow make her less objective in matters than a man would. Besides galling her own keen intellect and capabilities, it somehow reduced her to nothing more than a stereotypical caricature, a creature who was led around by her emotions at a whim, who would allow her judgment to be clouded the minute something questioned her femininity. Heaven forbid, she thought sourly, that anyone with a penis could ever be reactionary or could ever let their own emotional issues cloud the judgment they had in any particular investigation. Obviously, those who held to this school of thought had never met with, worked with, or had to keep Fox Mulder from jumping off any one of innumerable bridges into the abyss.

"Can I help you?"

Scully spun on the balding, middle-aged, bear of a man, adjusting voluminous, pale green scrubs he must have just changed into. He stood easily taller than Mulder and looked more akin to a football linebacker than a medical examiner. His smiling, round face creasing ever so slightly into a curious frown. She smiled by way of return, holding out a professional hand to him.

"Special Agent Dana Scully. I called you regarding the Lauren MacKelvey autopsy?"

"Oh yes, Agent Scully, Gene Kramer." He covered her fingers in a large paw of a hand, warmly pumping her arm before gesturing back to the tiled, pristine lab in the back. "Come on back, they just brought the body in an hour ago. I had my team get it processed so you could get right in there." He ushered her back to his facility, smiling warmly as he sized her up quickly. "I didn't think that the FBI would send out a pathologist for this type of case."

"They normally don't, but I do field work. My partner received the call from Detective Cross regarding the murder and given the strange nature and the fact that we already had a case on file similar to this one we came out to investigate."
"I bet that went over well with Jim." Kramer nodded knowingly with a small, derisive smile. She could only assume "Jim" was the erstwhile police detective. "I hadn't bothered telling Detective Cross, yet. Actually, my partner is the one with the request I perform the autopsy."

"Probably a wise move on your part," Kramer acknowledged with a long-suffering look as he led her into the lab. "You'll find all the standard things in these drawers and there is a locker room off the lab here with an extra set of scrubs you are welcome to."

"Thanks," Scully murmured gratefully as Kramer leaned congenially against the bank of drawers that kept the small utensils of their shared trade; scalpels, clamps, mirrors, things that were easily lost if not neatly arranged in the autopsy bay.

"You know I've worked with Jim Cross for twenty-five years, he's been on the force for longer. And there's never been once case in all that time that I've seen Jim work with a woman. I've even had talented female ME's he's refused to do his autopsies. I'm stunned that he's even consented to this much with you."

"I don't think he had much of a choice," Scully replied dryly, glancing around the area once before meeting Kramer's eyes frankly. "He's by far not the first chauvinist I've met working in this field."

"Well, Jim's funny about that. He doesn't think of himself as sexist. Frankly, he doesn't mind them being on the force, he just doesn't think they should be investigating murders." Kramer was nearly apologetic for the detective and perhaps it would have irritated Scully more if she didn't realize that after all these years it was highly likely Kramer and Cross were something of friends, even if they didn't agree. "Jim comes from a school of thought among older investigators that women just don't handle certain cases well, especially cases that involve potential attacks on women."

It was an argument Scully had heard many times and bore no more logic than the idea that a man could be less emotional and more reasonable on a case. "And I take it you don't hold with this theory?"

"After med school and working my ranks through pathology, hell, I've seen women handle things that frankly grossed me out, and I've yet to see a woman who was less of an investigator just because she has one different shaped chromosome than I do." He grinned again, the wide, affable smile in his broad face. "And frankly, Agent Scully, if I do say so myself, you working the system around Jim sort of indicates to me you are one of the sharper pencils in the box, something I'm sure will piss him the hell off."

"Can I honestly expect this sort of treatment the whole case?" The idea fairly made Scully tempted to simply do the autopsy and head home and leave Mulder to his freaky work. She had no time for "old-school", chauvinistic bullshit and worried Cross pulling his stunts would only serve to hamper the investigation. "I don't want to have whatever findings I've discovered dismissed simply because I happen to be female."

"I don't think he'll dismiss them, but he will tell you, in no uncertain terms, that he doesn't think this is a place for women."

"Four years at the FBI, two of those teaching pathology at the Academy, and I can't handle a little blood, guts and gore?" Scully sniffed as she crossed her arms in front of her. "If only he knew half the cases I worked on with my partner."

"You can bring a horse to water, Agent Scully, but you can't make him drink." Kramer threw up his plate-sized hands. "Jim will go to his grave thinking that men are the superior investigators and one
of these days he'll figure out it doesn't matter how you are built or if you can carry children or not, intellect and intelligence are not the purview of the male half of the species."

"Hopefully sometime before the end of this case," Scully breathed as she glanced back towards the locker room. "I'll change and get ready then. You don't mind me performing the autopsy on this?"

"Help yourself." Kramer waved as he pushed himself away from the counter. "I'm backed up today and its one less body I have to deal with. Besides, you look capable enough without little, old me."

Scully found herself liking the giant man who looked much to big to be performing autopsies in the first place. "And if Detective Cross protests?"

"I think I'll be out to lunch." Kramer chuckled jovially, making his way to the door. "Have fun, Agent Scully."

"Sure," she smiled as he lumbered away, watching him as he went. Well, she reasoned, at least one person didn't believe her an idiot just because she was born a woman. Pity Cross didn't. With mild irritation she turned towards the locker room to change, a small part of her hoping Cross came in and saw her performing the autopsy, a tiny, petite woman cutting into a bodies chest. Perhaps it would make him think twice of just what she was capable of.
My Partner

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder expounds on why Scully is an amazing partner.

Was it a comment on herself or Mulder that Scully hardly blinked at the suggestion that their killer was a fat-sucking vampire? Even Mulder seemed to recognize the craziness in the statement, but she had to admit he had a certain type of rationale behind his hypothesis, a scientific understanding that wasn't completely outside the realms of reality. It was just creepy and gross. Could she tell him it was creepy and gross with a straight face?

From across the main workroom of the police precinct, Detective Cross moved to them, waving papers in his hand. "I've combed every faculty list and academic journal in Cleveland. Came up with thirty-eight names. I figured we'd divvy up the list and I'd get the Captain to put some more people on it."

Door-to-door searching? Inwardly Scully cringed. It was a risky business, sending people who weren't intimate with the case already out there to try and help investigate. What if they overlooked the killer because they didn't know what to look for? What if they found the killer and the suspect reacted badly, possibly injuring or killing the officer. Yet, it was thirty-eight people, and with only the three of them they couldn't possibly finish that entire list quickly. With a serial killer threatening lives, time was of the essence.

"I'd like to brief them, if that's okay with you?" Scully half expected the already hesitant detective to balk at the idea. The idea appeared to cross his mind, for the briefest of instances, as his lips pulled tightly across his mouth into a grimacing smile.

"Sure," he nodded, not meeting her eyes. "I'll just call the boys together."

The pointed dropping of the word "boys" wasn't lost on her as she felt her hair bristle slightly and her expression harden a fraction. It was a subtle and not said to be provoking, but much more in that way that bespoke someone who didn't think about the insulting things they said on a regular basis. She could raise an issue about it; she could call him out right there on it and create a scene. But scenes were never something Scully particularly liked, and frankly it could potentially harm their work on the case more than it would help. After all Cross had called the FBI in to investigate, and if Scully had a formal complain to issue on the matter, she had proper channels to go through. Throwing a temper tantrum and giving into all the worst stereotypes Cross already had in mind would not benefit the situation in the slightest. It was best to let the matter drop…for now at least.

"Scully, you remember the Donnie Pfaster case?" Mulder's tone was airy and conversational, and it nearly stunned the icy irritation out of her. Her head whipped to face him, as all the myriad emotions of hurt, anger, desperation, and terror coalesced inside of her chest, the horrifying memory of Pfaster's silky voice playing in her memory. It was on the top of her tongue to snap at Mulder for his question, but his eyes met hers, reassuring, silently asking her to trust him.

"Yes," she replied as evenly as she could, the sound sticking in her throat. "Yes, Donnie Pfaster was that case we worked last year in Minneapolis. Serial killer, taking the nails and hair off his victims." She managed a shrug, as nonchalant as she could given the subject matter.
"Pfaster?" Cross paused, his graying eyebrows quirked in expectant confusion. "Why hair and nails?"

"Donnie Pfaster was a fetishist. He had a thing for hair and nails from the dead." Mulder fell into his criminal profile mode easily, rattling off the information as if he were working a case and not discussing a situation that had come very close to getting her killed. "It isn't uncommon for fetishists to escalate to serial killing to heighten the sensation they get from their particular act. Donnie Pfaster had gone from stealing from the dead to killing women."

Detective Cross's face blanched visibly, the lines deepening as the full implication of what that meant hit him. "So you're saying killers like this sicko are something you've handled before?"

"Well I have, yes, as a criminal profiler, but I actually didn't get the break in that case. Agent Scully is how we caught Pfaster." Mulder didn't miss a beat. "She was able to pull a print off of a piece of evidence out of no where and help us track him down and her work on the case was invaluable."

Scully felt her cheeks burn slightly, reddening more with the obvious lie Mulder was telling than with any sense of self-effacement. She had been captured, tied up, thrown into a closet, and had just barely escaped with her life because Mulder had arrived at the very last second to save the day. Had he not come busting through the door of Pfaster's home, would she have gotten out of there in one piece that day? And that wasn't mentioning the effect the case had from her from the start, the helplessness, the revulsion, and the memories of Duane Barry it brought to the surface. She had been a wreck from the beginning when she thought about it, and probably should have stepped away if her stubborn pride hadn't prevented her from doing it, talked her out of looking weak around Mulder. She had nearly gotten herself killed was what happened, had she stayed in Washington, like Mulder had urged her too, she would have been fine.

"I have to say," Mulder continued conversationally. "There were quite a few people who worried about Agent Scully working this sort of case. Felt that a woman working a high profile serial killer case, especially when he targeted women, might be too much for her. But she handled it as well as any agent could have, perhaps better." There was warmth in his last words, and a hint of pride that made Scully smile slightly, pushing back at the terror that always accompanied that event in her mind.

"I used to work in Violent Crimes and Behavioral Sciences, Detective Cross, and I'm just saying that of all the many people I've worked with over the years, none have shown as much intelligence, skill, and capability as Agent Scully, and not even a tenth of the courage in the line of fire. And that's not to mention the fact that she's a medical doctor and can cut up a dead body like it was a chicken and not blink twice, I can't even sit in the autopsy room." He grimaced visibly, pulling a disgusted face at her, earning a truly amused grin from Scully. "She's more than capable of handling the troops for you if necessary. Hell, she keeps me in line, and if you've heard a thing about me you know that's a feet in and of itself."

"I don't know about keeping you in line," Scully managed to mutter dryly as she met Mulder's grin gratefully.

"Better than most." Mulder shrugged. "Anyway, Detective Cross if you can get your men together and Scully if you can fill everyone on the details? I think that our killer is getting desperate. I don't think he was able to finish what he wanted to do with the prostitute and might strike again out of desperation and need, and that will be sooner rather than later."

It was perhaps the most eloquent put down Scully had ever heard out of Mulder's mouth, well thought out, subtle, without being angry and accusative. And he did it on her behalf of all things.
Cross blinked for a long moment between the two of them, as if he too were stunned by what just transpired. He was no idiot, despite his rhetoric, and she knew Cross got the gist of Mulder's comments completely. With a small nod to Scully, he turned, calling to one of the other detectives to "gather the boys up."

Perhaps he wasn't happy about it, but she though she saw something akin to respect in Cross's eyes as he turned away.

"So, what does a fat-sucking vampire who quotes Italian poetry look like to you, Scully?" Mulder continued, as if the previous conversation hadn't happened. "I'm voting that your scorpion comparison will bring us the guy, he'd stick out a little bit don't you think?"

"I'm still stunned at just how reasonable and well-spoken you sounded, Mulder. I think I blanked out everything else from my mind." She stared at him, impressed. "Anyone else you might have punched them in the face."

"I don't punch people in the face," he protested in the face of her skeptical look. "Okay, Skinner doesn't count, I was under the influence of hallucigenic drugs."

"That aside, Mulder, thank you." She stammered, feeling her face flush again at the words he used in regards to Donnie Pfaster. "You didn't need to cover for me that way, or make that up about Pfaster."

"Make what up?" He sounded truly mystified, his eyes crinkling in surprise. "I spoke the truth."

"Mulder, I was a wreck during that case, I was Cross's worst nightmare there. Everything he espouses about women on these cases, I was."

"Scully, given a different type of case it could be me acting that way. All of us deal with our own demons on certain cases. We are only human and how close was that to your abduction? Just months? Weeks? Honestly, anyone else would have been a gibbering mess. You not only helped us identify Pfaster, you kept your cool in the face of your capture. You were nearly escaped when I found you."

"I wouldn't have escaped if you hadn't come in just then," she shivered slightly as she recalled Pfaster standing over her, gun in hand, preparing to kill her rather than allow her escape.

Mulder remembered too. "Well, perhaps it took the both of us. I think that's true for most things in life, that its never just a single, individual effort. But the truth is, Scully, you aren't weak or insipid, and no matter what Cross feels about women in general. And you are my partner."

He emphasized that word "partner" allowing it to hang between them, filled with all sorts of meanings based on their equal experiences, their shared successes, their shared losses, but more than anything their shared friendship. "I've had male partners and female partners, most not even worth my time. I can honestly say, Scully that I would have tried a hell of a lot harder to get rid of you earlier on if you hadn't proven to be the capable, intelligent, and brave person you are. And I'll be damned if some haggard, old detective in Cleveland of all places tries to insinuate otherwise."

If Scully was the type of woman that Cross seemed to assume that she was, perhaps she would have dissolved into emotional tears, a way of releasing the brimming emotions of gratitude and appreciation she felt at the moment. But she settled instead for a small smile of gratitude, heartfelt and grateful at Mulder's appreciation for her and her friendship. "I suppose then you have given up of suspecting my motivations on these cases." It was a teasing dig, a way to divert the flustered swirl she felt at the moment, the desire to blush furiously and duck away for no particular reason at
"Well if you are a spy, you're a piss poor one, Scully." Mulder shook his head, grinning ruefully before gently reaching over for her elbow, propelling her towards the conference room in the precinct where already detectives were beginning to gather. "Though, I have to wonder, you took my fat-sucking vampire theory rather well. Should I start worrying about where the real Dana Scully went?"

"Don't worry, I've yet to formulate a good retort yet. Maybe when my awe over your compliment goes away."

"I'm not that big of a jackass," he protested mildly.

Scully let the arched eyebrow she tossed up over her shoulder at him answer for her.
No Longer Lonely

Chapter Summary

In which Scully realizes she isn't alone.

The dead are no longer lonely.

Their flight from Cleveland was quiet between the two of them. Mulder had taken up the responsibility for writing up rudimentary notes of the case while Scully had tried to distract herself. Yet her novel had gone unread and even the In Flight magazine had been flipped open and put away. Finally she resorted to curling up against the window of the plane and trying to nap, but her mind was too full and her thoughts had raced.

Virgil Incanto wasn't a monster because he had a strange mutation that prevented his body from creating adipose. That simply made him unfortunate. Really he wasn't even a monster for trying to feed the hunger he faced because of it. No, what made Virgil Incanto a monster was subtle, insidious, and disturbing. It was the way he preyed on the fears of innocent women, seeming to enjoy the games he played with their insecurities and emotions, luring them into his trap with sweet words and promises he had no intention of fulfilling. It left her cold thinking about it. Why was it the true monsters in this world were always creatures that saw their prey as nothing more than objects? Donnie Pfaster, Virgil Incanto, what part of their development had cut them off from their humanity, that part of themselves that would have told another man to stop? No matter what Incanto's condition, he was still a human being, he still thought and reasoned as a human being. He could certainly appreciate Renaissance Italian poetry. Some small part of him had to be human enough to understand it. Was it his condition, the anger and bitterness he developed because of it, that turned him into the creature they had arrested back in Cleveland?

"Incanto was right in a way." Mulder's low monotone rumbled softly beside her. "The dead are no longer lonely."

Scully cracked an eye open, knowing Mulder realized that she had no more fallen asleep than she had sprouted horns from her head. He was watching her, worry creasing his eyebrows as he twiddled the pen in his hand between long fingers. "When you think about it, death is about the only time any of us stop worrying about being alone."

"That's a rather macabre though, Mulder, even for you," she tried to tease him, to get a smile out of his dour mood. But even that didn't seem to penetrate as she shrugged sullenly, flipping through the papers he had spread across the tray table in front of him.

"One of the first things you learn about serial killers in Behavioral Science is that they have a tendency to de-humanize their victims, to see them as property, objects, items to collect, sexual playthings. All tend to lack empathy and guilt, seeing the world by their own rules, ignoring what society presents as what is or is not morally acceptable. They rationalize the behavior, explaining away what they've done with any number of reasons."

"I think it is the idea of 'giving them what they wanted' that upsets me most," Scully admitted. "It hints at a level of consideration in his victims that is calculated, cruel almost. These were women who were doing what so many of us do, looking for love, for companionship, to no longer feel..."
alone." How many times had she and Missy had this very conversation together, two wistful young women, looking for "that perfect, understanding man". Scully thought of poor Ellen, Incanto's failed victim, a woman who had bared her soul to a perfect stranger online, thinking that he was going to provide for her all those things that no one else in Ellen's life had been willing to grant her.

"When you think about it," she continued introspectively. "So much of how we are defined as women is through the lens of masculine perception. Consider Detective Cross and how he reacted to my presence on the case. A woman's place was not to investigate this sort of crime and consequently in his worldview women had no place working with him. But that is the least of the challenges most women face in our society. Consider the women that Incanto lured to him, all of them were women who even dubbed as 'lonely hearts', women looking for love and who had yet to find acceptance because of their body types. They lacked the perfect model bodies. They didn't look like the women who grace your pornographic magazines. They became victims of societies expectations for what is attractive and Incanto knew that. It was how they eventually became victimized by him."

"Using society's moirés to justify his actions and it does make it hard to argue with his logic," Mulder muttered grimly. "After all, he was giving them what they wanted when no one else would, showing them love and affection when we are so quick to judge them by their appearance. For Incanto, he rationalized that he was acting in an equal person contract. He was giving these women what they wanted, a sense of romance, of understanding, of not being alone. He was giving them something, in the end, that we as a society seemed to refuse to give them, a sense of worth."

"It doesn't justify his actions, Mulder."

"I didn't say it did, but it is the justification he as a serial killer is using, and in a way perhaps he sees himself as less of the monster that we judge him to be."

Scully considered this for long moments as she shifted in her seat, trying to stretch muscles too long cramped in one position. "How could you deal with this every day when you were a profiler, Mulder?"

"Why do you think I left?" He gathered the files scattered before him, as overhead the plane crew warned them of their approaching descent and asked for all loose items in the cabin to be put neatly away. "At some point it begins to wear on your soul. When every girl you see wears the face of your missing sister, you begin to wonder what sort of sick bastards took her, how they treated her, what are they doing to her…"

He paused for a moment, painfully, before continuing. "It's not a career for everyone and even the ones who are good at it don't stay with it forever. It tends to usually have an adverse reaction to any semblance of a personal life you want to achieve."

Perhaps, Scully thought quietly as she watched Mulder put away his thing, it wasn't simply women with body issues who were lonely in this world, anyone who didn't fit into societies norm would be lonely, whether they were women who were overweight or people who believed that aliens had abducted their sisters. They were all easily led astray by people who told them what they wanted to hear, giving them hope despite it all.

"You know," she sighed as she adjusted the belt around her slim waist and brought her seat upright again. "I do feel for Cross's family though. As much of a jerk as he was, he still didn't deserve to die the way he did."

"It could have happened to any of us, you, me, any of the cops out there looking for Incanto." Mulder shuffled the files into his briefcase, sticking it back under his seat. "Well, maybe not you?"
"Why not me?"

"Look at you." Mulder reached across the armrest between their seats and grabbed one of her wrists between his thumb and index finger, practically ringing it. "You are too scrawny for his tastes, Scully. What sort of red-blooded, fat-sucking vampire would want someone who subsists on nothing but grass and leaves?"

"I'm sorry if my efforts to fit into societies expectations of conformity would offend Mr. Incanto's gourmet tastes." She sniffed half in exasperation, half in dry amusement.

"I don't know about Incanto's taste. I personally wouldn't turn my nose up at you." There was a wicked gleam in his eye as he leaned back mildly into his seat, preparing for landing. Scully had become inured over the years to Mulder's risqué comments, all of the dancing on that fine line between harassment and obnoxiousness, and usually meant to simply goad her into a reaction. But a small part of her brain was startled by the comment and the meaning underneath it, as somewhere in her consciousness a part of her fluttered excitedly at the thought.

A part she snapped at harshly before granting Mulder a mischievous smile. "Be careful what you wish for, Mulder."
On Suicide

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder gets Scully to investigate a case of suicide.

"The Catholic Church still says suicide damns your soul?" Mulder's statement was more a question then a declaration. Scully glanced between their desks, her concentration torn from the report she had been writing regarding Virgil Incanto and Mulder's questioning gaze.

"I think they've softened their stance considerably from that in recent years." The corner of her mouth twitched slightly. She was well used to popular misconceptions on her faith, and Mulder's very rudimentary knowledge of religion in general and Catholics in particular wasn't any surprise to her. "Planning on offing yourself?"

Her flippant statement earned a wry smile from her partner. "No, as a matter of fact despite my penchant for self-centered behavior, which you take such delight in pointing out to me, I can't say I've every been a big fan on the concept of suicide. What with all the people I keep pissing off, I find I have new and unique reasons to live everyday."

"A unique outlook on life, for sure." Scully rolled her eyes as she leaned back into the chair at her rickety table. "And why in the world is this important?"

"There's been a rash of suicide attempts amongst officers stationed at Fort Evanson, Maryland. Notice I said attempts, none have been successful." Mulder rose from his desk with a file in hand, sauntering to her table to pass over the information. "Victor Stans, whose medical report is on top, has tried now repeatedly to kill himself only to have something go one during every attempt to prevent it. This last incident involved him locking himself in the hydrotherapy room and throwing himself in water with temperatures hot enough to boil a chicken."

Scully glanced over the medical record and accompanying pictures, hissing air through her teeth as she viewed the extent of the man's injuries over his body. "These are third and fourth degree burns."

"Man's lucky to be alive, or unlucky, as the case might be." Mulder grimaced. "It seems that Stans recently lost his entire family in an unfortunate house fire. His wife and two children were all killed. He tried to save his family's life, but inexplicably was the only one to make it out of the fire alive."

Scully murmured sympathetically, her heart going out to the horribly scarred man. "I can see now why he tried to kill himself."

"Funny thing is that's the same MO of Staff Sergeant Kevin Aiklen, family all killed in their beds as he tried to save them, another house fire."

Scully's eyes widened suspiciously. "That's a rather odd coincidence."

"That's what some Senators up on the Hill are saying as well." Mulder crossed his arms as he stood over her table, nodding at the paperwork in front of her. "Apparently there are questions being
asked, especially by the families of the victims. Several of them have felt stonewalled by the
general in charge in terms of the investigation. It was Stans' family that approached the Senate
sub-committee on this one."

"This is a touchy area, Mulder," she warned warily. They had been through this before with the
military and irate families, and usually without any clear results. "You know how closed mouthed
the military can be with internal matters and the Army even more so. And they do not like the idea
of anyone external poking into their affairs."

She closed the file with a sharp snap and passed it back to Mulder. "Especially not noisy members of the Justice Department."

"Oh come on, Scully, when have we let the bluster of military types stop us," he teased joyfully,
hardly quelling under her sharp glare. "Besides, you're an admiral's daughter, it's not like you can't
handle an irate general or two."

"Why in the world are you even considering stirring up this hornets nest?" She could see the eager
anticipation in his eyes. There was something of the masochist in Mulder. She recognized that long
ago, which combined with his almost boyish need to stir up trouble could be a worrisome
combination.

"It's not me this time, it's the Senate." He waved his hands innocently as he meandered back to his
desk. "The problem that the Army has is that the families of the victims and their wives are in the
home states of some pretty powerful Senators, ones who have been agitating for a while for
reforms in the Army's handling of soldiers with emotional problems. And they are set to use this as
a plank in their campaigns. You can see where the chain starts here."

"So the Senators go to the Justice Department for a little help, who in turn go to the FBI." Lest
Scully ever forget, she was still an employee of the Federal Government, part of the civil service,
and as such was subject to the whims of powerful politicians whenever they got it into their heads
to do something that fostered "change". "So we are to be the convenient fall guys for the Senate
sub-committee should the Army get pissed off we are crossing over department territorial lines,
right?"

"That's the idea!" Mulder reached for his coat.

"So how does this end up on our desk?" Ahe had yet to see that connection. The FBI in general,
perhaps she could understand, but only the vaguely strange and disturbing cases ever came to them
and that was usually only after Mulder had sought them out.

"Both Aiklen and Stans claimed that some ghostly apparition of a soldier appeared to them,
holding them both back from saving their families the nights of the fires, and both have claimed to
see this solider since, usually as they have tried to kill themselves."

There it was, the pay off. "So you mean to tell me they both shared the same vision of this
apparition?" She just did manage to reign in the skepticism in her voice…only just. Not that it
mattered because Mulder could sense it anyway.

"I'm making no suppositions on paranormal behavior on this one, Scully, not till we can rule out
psychological first. But I'm not ruling it out either."

"I wouldn't expect any less of you," she replied simply as she reached for her things. "So, where are
we going?"

"Fort Evanson, I have a feeling there is some military brass there I'm about to piss off."
"I can’t take you anywhere, can I Mulder?"

"Come on Scully, you have to admit its kind of fun."

Thinking briefly of her own brothers, Scully really hated to admit that she had to agree with him.
In which Scully goes toe-to-toe with an Army officer.

Every inch of the woman's tall, stiff bearing spoke of intimidation. She hardly seemed cowed by Mulder's polite but indifferent height slouching over her and certainly not by Scully's firm but diminutive presence. In fact, she glared down her nose so hard at Scully, for a moment she had to wonder if the woman's stiff neck could move at all. Clearly it did, because the woman whipped her sharp gaze between Mulder and Scully, as if wondering which one of them to hold personally responsible for this.

"I've been asked to have you suspend whatever investigation you've begun here." Her voice was cold as she directed her wrath at Mulder first. If Scully hadn't been amused, she might have been slightly nettled.

"Asked by whom, Captain?" Mulder smoothly glanced at the pin and name tag on the left shoulder of the woman's olive green uniform. Indeed, her name was Draper, with the officer rank of Army Captain. Mulder had been reading up on his military ranks, Scully noted with approval, obviously he wanted to know just how far he could get away with pissing off members of the US military before they started pulling rank with the Justice Department.

Unlike many other women in the face of Fox Mulder, Captain Draper clearly wasn't impressed. "General Callahan. Lieutenant Colonel Stans' commanding officer," she returned crisply, obviously believing this would end the argument. Captain Draper apparently didn't know the FBI that well.

"Is something wrong?" Scully kept her tone innocuous, knowing exactly what was wrong with this. Callahan, and by extension his junior officer, felt that their toes were being stepped on by a civilian member of a different branch of the government. Nothing like a little, interdepartmental pissing contest in the Executive Branch of government to make life interesting, she thought, realizing that for completely inane reasons this woman's uppitiness was irritating her. Why, Scully couldn't put her finger on. Perhaps it was the way this woman stood there over her looking so…tall. Maybe it was the giant rod shoved so far up her…

"Protocol requires that all criminal investigation of military personnel to be conducted through military channels and their superior officer." Draper rattled off this information as if she had memorized the entire Army dress code, which she probably had. And there was no surprise there, Scully had warned Mulder coming into this case that the Army did not appreciate it when others stuck their noses into Army investigations, Senate inquiry or no.

Despite the warnings, and perhaps because of them Mulder flashed Draper his trademark, smart-ass grin. "What, we didn't sign in at the front desk?"

Even Scully had to smile slightly at that. Draper was hardly amused. She glared at Mulder's lazy shrug as she replied diffidently. "You're in breach of code and procedure."

"Excuse me, but is General Callahan the superior officer?" Scully could sense that Mulder's flippancy would only cause the junior officer to continue stonewalling them, and pushing the issue
with the general himself might be the only way to make the stiff, unmoving wall of military
protocol see they were serious in their intent to continue this investigation, code be damned.

She might as well have asked Draper if the moon was made of green cheese. "Ma'am?" She
frowned in confusion at Scully as if this was an unusual request to make.

"Assuming we would want to investigate him, whom would we talk to," she asked with all
seriousness, waving the implication of suspicion in front of the over-protective Draper's nose. Not
that there was anything Scully was particularly suspicious about concerning the General, save what
was beginning to smell more and more like a discreet cover-up. But Draper didn't know that, and
she could see alarm rise, ever so slightly in the woman's cold demeanor.

"Investigate him for what," she demanded sharply, leaning into Scully's space.

"Whatever," Scully replied, raising her shoulders causally, meeting the woman's flashing eyes,
unflinching.

The woman pursed her pretty mouth into a hard, straight line, for a moment her professional mask
tightening as she swallowed whatever irritation crossed through her mind. Scully could almost see
her dark hair pull hard against her scalp, smoothed back as tightly as it was against her head. Draper
responded with barely controlled resignation. "General Callahan is the senior officer."

The truth was Scully already knew that. She just wanted to get this infuriatingly imperious woman
to admit it. "Then why would you like to speak to him on our way out." She dropped this as an
afterthought, something they might do as a formality, not as the precursor to their investigation as
Draper, and likely Callahan, would have expected. Draper's lips turned white at the edges for the
briefest of moments before she pulled them back in a tight response.

"I don't know that he's available," she replied harshly, clearly at her wits end with Scully's
infuriating end run against all authority the captain had.

Out of the corner of her eye Scully could see Mulder standing to the side, looking between the two
of them as if he were watching competing sides of a tennis match, clearly delighted by what was
taking place. She made a mental note to kick him later, hard.

"Ask him to make himself available." Scully ordered Draper as if she were speaking to some snot-
nosed, raw recruit at Quantico and not a commissioned officer within the US Army who had a
good three inches on her and more arrogance than she knew what to do with. "Tell him that it's our
protocol. In the mean time, we'd like to finish up with Lieutenant Colonel Stans." She paused
meaningfully for a moment before glaring at the other woman meaningfully. "You never know
when he might try to kill himself again."

Scully meant for her final words to be a slap, to let the Captain know exactly why it was they were
there and what it was they were investigating, and just what Scully's opinion on the Army's so
called "investigation" up to that moment. The message got through. Draper locked eyes with her,
incandescent, as she spun, stiff and reserved on her heels, marching back down the hallways with
the sort of precision that would have made a drill sergeant on the parade field proud. Scully
watched her go, anger pounding in her ears. She knew the Army would try to block them. But she
hadn't expected some prissy, uptight bitch to swoop in there, trying to push them both out with
threats and intimidation. She didn't even have grace enough to come up with a good excuse, only
waving the book of military protocol under their noses.

"Let's finish this, Mulder," she snapped, turning back towards Stans' room, looking up to see
Mulder's beaming, exuberant, ear-to-ear grin.
"Have I mentioned just how incredibly sexy I found that entire exchange?" He grinned, glibly, looking truly impressed and delighted. It had the effect of dampening her ire, but making her suddenly self-conscious, as she glared first up at him and back down the hallway towards the stalking captain.

"I'm glad I got to fulfill whatever sick fantasies go on in your head, Mulder," she snapped as her cheeks flamed briefly. Honestly, the man had a libido that wouldn't quit and now she was getting sucked into it.

Mulder seemed unfazed. "You should have seen yourself, Scully, you were magnificent. Like that fluffy dog of yours going against a wolf."

"Queequeg," she corrected snappishly, hardly pleased with being compared to her Pomeranian in either size or temperament.

"Whatever! Seriously, Scully, I was amazed. No backing down from you."

"Do I back down from you?"

"No, but I've got charm and wit, and besides, you think I'm cute." He pointed this last out triumphantly.

She knew she would rue the days he admitted that to him. "As you pointed out, I grew up with a rear admiral for a father and I have two commissioned naval officers for brothers, not to mention having to push myself through the ranks of the law enforcement as a woman." She wondered how much of that same problem made Captain Draper the hard ass she was now. "I can handle someone in uniform, and their rules and regulations and can tell them to shove it up their ass."

"I like this side of you, Scully, the rebellious bad girl. It's strangely attractive."

"Don't get used to it, Mulder," she replied with dangerous sweetness as she opened the door to Stans' room, ignoring the small voice in the back of her brain that was giddy for the briefest of moments at having stood up to Draper without flinching. And maybe, if she admitted it to herself, she was a tiny bit pleased that Mulder was so impressed. Not that she would ever admit that out loud to him.
General Callahan watched the fatigue garbed military police with a granite face, silent as they moved quietly about his yard and house, his flinty eyes glimmering as he stood with one arm around his equally quiet and sober wife. Scully could hardly blame them for their shell-shocked wonder, their dazed blankness as they stood together in the dining room, in the one sanctuary they as a family had carved out for themselves. She thought briefly of her own parents, lifetime military themselves, who had so many other concerns and worries swirling around them that their home was the only safe surety the Scully clan ever had in their life. She doubted that her parents would have handled a situation like this any better.

"Have they turned up anything yet," Callahan's asked tightly as Scully drew near, with a worried deference that was a stark reversal from the prideful self-assurance he had displayed the day before when she and Mulder had first pressed him on the matter of the deaths and attempted suicides at Fort Evanson. Callahan was a military man, to his bones, and much like her own father he had been drilled to keep calm, to be stoic in the face of danger. But she could see the terror lurking just below the surface, the worry for what was happening to his men, perhaps now to him. She never could, for the live of her, figure out why it was that the US military took such scrupulous pains to hide the events of stalking, as if it were a besmirch on the uniform, as if she didn't see this same fear and worry played out again and again in non-military homes, husband's seeking to comfort worried families after home invasions, crazed people disrupting the lives of the innocent. Why had the General, and for that matter the Army, taken such pains to cover this up, and what were they afraid of the FBI finding out?

"Footprints and fingerprints, so far. Your investigative unit will send the fingerprints through the NCIC database, see if we find a match." She tried to smile reassuringly to the couple as Mrs. Callahan clutched at her husband's embracing arm.

"Why are they doing this to us," she wondered in a soft, frightened whisper, her eyes wide as she glanced up at her husband, than back at Scully.

"We don't know, Francis," the general responded gently, his arm tightening around her. "We don't know what is going on."

It was that simple admission that hit towards the truth for Scully. It explained why the general had been so reticent, why the Army had blocked their initial inquiries, they didn't know what was going on and they couldn't explain it. Better to ignore it and hope they can find a break than to reach out for any assistance they could in order to stop the fear and find the justice. Despite a lifetime as a Navy brat, knowing the culture and protocol of the Cold War military, it struck Scully as confusing and foolish, but her own private rant would do nothing to reassure the frightened couple or discover why two innocent men lost their families in frankly horrifying manners.

"The FBI is doing all we can to offer assistance in the investigation." Scully reassured Francis Callahan gently, her eyes gliding up towards the General's impassive ones. "You're husband has worked with us to see if our expertise in these matters might help us catch the person or persons.
It wasn't the total truth, but it was all Mrs. Callahan really needed to hear. She nodded mutely as she glanced towards the stairwell up to the second floor of the neat, comfortable base house. Sitting in the growing darkness at the top was the dark head and bright eyes of Trevor Callahan, staring down the stairs at his parents. Scully watched the boy for a moment, her heart going out to the little boy who fretted away from his parents, nervously twisting his fingers in his lap. She could recall being a child like that once, worried about what was going on, but trying to hard to be like her father, strong in the face of danger and worry. All she desperately wanted was for Ahab to swoop her up into his lap, to cuddle and hug her and tell her that everything would be all right.

If she was honest with herself, there were still days she felt very much like that.

"Excuse me," Scully murmured politely as she nodded perfunctorily at the Callahan's, pulling away from the fretting couple and moving up the darkened staircase to their son. The boy hardly moved as her footsteps lighted the creaking, oak steps, though she could tell by the careful way he ducked his head that he knew she was coming. He reminded her for a brief, amusing moment of Mulder when he wanted to avoid whatever probing question he knew was coming out of her. She stopped before getting to the top of the stairs and knelt to perch two steps down from the boy, about eye level with him as he worried the knee of one of his jean legs between his fingers.

"Hey Trevor," Scully greeted him brightly, leaning an elbow by the boy's worn and fraying sneakers. "My name is Dana."

He glanced sideways at her, blue eyes under a dark fringe of lashes. "Hi."

"You doing okay up here?" She glanced beside the boy on the stairs, where a series of plastic toy soldiers lay in a variety of fallen poses, as if tossed about by an imaginary explosion.

"Yeah," he replied evenly, his small shoulder's straightening just like hers did as a girl when she wanted to put up a brave front. It charmed her at the same time as it tugged at her heart and a part of her inexplicably wanted to wrap the boy up in an a hug.

"You know," Scully began slowly, filled with reassurance. "It's okay to be scared sometimes. I know I am."

Trevor didn't reply, but he did stop plucking the fabric at his knees briefly. Little boys in particular, Scully knew, hated to appear scared. Her brothers had always put up brave fronts, just as she had. "I know its scary to have strangers come to my home. I've had it happen and I was scared."

Terrified would be the right word, she thought darkly as images of Duane Barry and Eugene Tooms flashed before her eyes. "I know it feels like you can never be safe again, but you will. We will catch the bad guys, and we'll send him to jail."

She had expected her placating words to be of some comfort to the boy, but instead his head flew up, eyes wide as he stared at her accusingly. "That's not what happened with Tommy's house or with Sarah's." His pale, freckled cheeks were pinched with fear. "Their houses burned down. Is my house going to burn down, too?"

Tommy? Sarah? With horror, Scully realized he was talking about the dead children of the other men on the base, children that Trevor of course would have known from school everyday. "What happened with Tommy and Sarah?"

Trevor's chin wobbled dangerously as his eyes began to shine. "No one talks about it. At school
they say there's ghost that haunts the place, some Civil War guy who wants to get revenge for
dying. They say he burned their houses down." Trevor wrapped skinny arms around his knees.
"What if I'm next? What if the ghost is coming for me?"

The confusion of murder distilled into the very real, childhood fear of the boogey man, a fear of
being killed in your bed by an unseen, unstoppable force. Scully could remember the very same
sort of stories being passed around the naval bases she grew up on, mostly started by her own elder
brother, Bill. "Trevor, I can promise you the man who was here today wasn't a ghost at all. The
man who was here earlier was a real person and he left clues behind, and we can use those clues to
find him."

Scully reached up from where she was leaning to pat the small boy's knee. "We'll try everything in
our power to make sure we find him and that he doesn't hurt you, okay?"

Trevor looked vaguely dubious. "What if you can't get him?"

"We will," Scully replied with all the confidence that the forensic science she had learned in
Quantico had instilled in her. "And you and your mom and dad will be safe."

Trevor stared at her for long moments, his young, round face hesitant as he nodded carefully. "My
Dad's a general, you know." He intoned this with a sort of warning that made Scully smile inside.
Obviously he had heard General Callahan rant at more than one junior officer and enlisted man in
his time. She recalled all too well she and her siblings using that very line on some of their friends
growing up, with the same level of implied warning.

"I know," she replied with as much solemnity as she could manage. "That's why we want to make
sure you are safe."

This finally seemed to reassure the boy, who acquiesced finally, his body relaxing as he propped
knobby elbows on his knees. "So you and that other man, you investigate crimes, like on TV?"

"Yes," Scully affirmed, though she didn't think their work was anything nearly as glamorous as the
stuff seen on TV. "Agent Mulder and I work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI."

"Are you good at catching bad guys?" It seemed a valid question to an eight-year-old.

"Well," Scully had to pause here. Depends on your definitions of "good" and "bad guys" she
supposed. "We do catch a lot of bad guys, yes." Arresting them was a different matter all together.

"Do you carry a gun?" He was curious and perhaps to his mother this question would sound
worrisome, but Scully understood the train of thought. How could you catch bad guys if you didn't
have a gun?

"Yes I do," she assured him, feeling the press of it against her right hip.

"It's weird that ladies carry guns," he declaimed with innocent solemnity, unaware at how
politically incorrect that statement was and had been for years.

"That's okay, I know how to use it on the bad guys, and that's all that matters," she reassured him as
she rose with a broad smile. "And we'll get this one for you."

Trevor seemed to be reassured at last. "Okay."

Scully beamed at him briefly, reaching towards the boy's thin shoulders, pressing them between
her fingers by way of the embrace she by rights couldn't give him, though a part of her would love
to. She saw so much of herself in the boy's worry and concern, so much of who she was as a military child, and so much of what she rather hoped to see in her own children someday. And yet she was a professional, there on a job, nothing more or less. Still, she couldn't help but have a small part of her fall in love with Trevor Callahan, if just a little bit. She prayed that their perpetrator really was as simple as the man whose fingerprint they lifted and that it wasn't the boogey man from Trevor's schoolyard horror stories.
The Sandbox

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates a family's grief.

Francis Callahan's gut-wrenching, anguished sobs rang through the hospital lobby, causing Scully's stomach to clench so hard she didn't know if she wanted to get sick or join the poor, heartbroken mother in crying. Beside her Mulder was gray-faced, stunned to silence as the military police report. Trevor Callahan should have been safe enough, playing in his own sandbox, a personal guard just steps away from him. The soldier had looked away for only a moment, just long enough to light a cigarette. In that blink of an eye, Trevor was gone. In the distance Trevor's mother keened a high, thin "why" in a strangled voice, the sound of such ultimate, heartbreaking pain. Could anything be greater than the mother's pain over a loss of a child? Perhaps the loss of a spouse? What if it was all of the above, ones entire family lost in a single moment? Why had those other families died, those other children? Why had Trevor died?

"Did the soldier see what happened at all?" Mulder managed to murmur in the quiet, controlled monotone that usually keyed Scully that Mulder was anything but quiet and controlled. The carefully school expression, the detached stoicism belied the anguish that she knew he felt, that he always felt when it was a child's death. She pressed closer to his elbow, ever so slightly, brushing her arm against it as they stood, speaking to the MP sergeant who had responded to the desperate call to save Trevor's life.

"It was like I said." The sergeant replied with that military formality just barely covering his own, shaken emotions. "Corporal Sandoval turned his back for just a moment. When he turned back the entire pile of sand had covered him over and he began working to dig the boy out immediately. When he found him unconscious and in respiratory distress, he called in the paramedics and myself."

"And he saw no one there?" Scully knew that the sergeant had stated this in his initial report and knew her ragged tone sounded accusatory. But it made no damn sense that a boy, just out in a sandbox, playing a game of toy soldiers for Christ sake, would die without someone there to do it, without someone there to deliberately and meticulously murder him. The sergeant's lean, clean-cut face hardened in the face of her sharp words, his eyes flashing briefly, but his tone was formal and business, hardly betraying the sting he felt at Scully's cutting tone.

"I'm only reporting what my man told me, Agent Scully. He saw no one there and so far we've found no evidence of any tracks or fingerprints. Not like the last time."

The last time when they had found the mailman, Quinton Freely, lurking on the premises, frightening the Callahan's. "Is Freely still in custody?"

"Still locked up, ma'am. It was the first place we looked. Freely couldn't have gotten out of his cell to do this."

"Then he's working with someone." It was the only logical explanation, the only thing that made sense in the face of the evidence. "Or he was working for someone the entire time, someone who had to finish the work now that Freely was imprisoned."
"Scully." She could feel the firm, insistent press of Mulder's fingers reach up on her shoulder, pulling her anger and attention away from the sergeant and up to him. "Can I have a minute?"

She hadn't noticed till that very moment how the sound of Francis Callahan's grief rang dully in her head, how her jaw clenched itself so tightly she could feel the muscles in her neck pull at the strain. Something inside of her wanted to scream along with her, to hit something, or to just rush to the grieving woman and comfort her. Anything to stop the agony, the sound that stirred poignantly and painfully within herself, the part where her own hurts and losses sat and ached dully with each wracking sob ringing in Scully's ears.

"You okay?" Mulder quietly pulled her to one side of the clean, tiled area, his hand remaining protectively on her shoulder as he leaned in closely, into that personal space that he never understood to begin with. She nodded in what she hoped would approximate a perfectly calm reaction.

"I'm fine," she responded, glancing over towards the dutiful sergeant. "How did Freely do this?"

"I don't know," Mulder admitted heavily, clearly unhappy that even his keen insights were at a loss here. "I've yet to figure out what his motives for being involved even were. Quinton Freely isn't an instigator; his personality doesn't lend itself to that. You saw his apartment, you heard his nickname, Roach. He's a survivor. He ducks undercover at the first sign of danger, hiding elsewhere till the smoke clears enough for him to come out again. He tends to follow and is easily intimidated by others. Perhaps it was why he felt safe around the military to begin with. If anything he's doing this on someone's bidding. Perhaps he's not even doing the murders himself, but is setting up the circumstances that allow someone else to do it."

"Who?" She pressed harshly, not even sure why she felt the need to be angry and frustrated. Why wouldn't that horrible tightness in her chest go away as she thought of Trevor Callahan's prone body, his mother weeping over it? It was the sound her mother had made when the doctor's announced that her sister had slipped away from them, as she crumpled into the shorter, slighter shoulder of her younger daughter who tried to hold all her mother's pain and anguish, a lost daughter who shouldn't have died, and her little sister's inability to bring the men who did it to justice.

"We'll have to get Freely to admit it, if he feels safe enough to do that. Somehow I think that anyone who's able to manage this will have cared Roach enough that he'll want to crawl somewhere and hide."

"I think he'll admit to anything when he realizes he's going to take the fall for someone's crime. Perhaps once he hears the list of crimes we can prove he did…"

"Scully!" Mulder's fingers pressed into her skin in mid-rant, his stoicism giving way for a moment for true concern and worry as his dark eyebrows knit together over a troubled frown. "You need to take a moment? Maybe let me handle Freely?"

He was concerned for her and she should have been grateful, not reactive. But it was her first defensive mechanism against the raw emotions that she was unable to clamp down on in that moment and she flashed at him briefly. "You're the one who starts seeing images of his missing sister every time there's a missing girl involved, Mulder. I think I'll be fine."

Her words hurt him. As good as Mulder was at hiding those things, two-and-a-half years and hours of time working together, learning the mannerisms, the physical cues of the other person meant she could tell even when others couldn't. He stiffened, ever so slightly, before relaxing in resignation, throwing up the stoic walls once again. Perhaps if she'd been anyone else, the cocky smart-ass
would have emerged, or the angry malcontent, venting his own frustration at the death of an innocent. But it was Scully, and he would only swallow it and nod, not stooping to his normal childish, evasive maneuvers for sticky subjects he had no wish to handle.

"I only worry Scully," he muttered with just the barest hint of the wound he felt at her lashing out. "I know it hasn't been a good year for you. Just don't let your own losses direct you away from what the true goal is here. Just speaking from experience, as a friend of mine might speak to me."

Mulder's finger's slipped from her shoulder as he turned from her; hand's slipping into his pockets in order to curl his shoulder's protectively about himself. "Let's got chat with Freely. Perhaps you are right, if we lay enough of his accomplices crimes at his feet, he'll reveal who our real perpetrator is." He slouched away from her, back towards the MP, his words a low rumble as he addressed the upright, stiff soldier, too quietly for her to hear.

She was fine, she muttered silently to his back, glaring at him while he couldn't see. She was just fine, as fine as anyone could be after so tragic a death. She didn't need to step away, she was thinking perfectly rationally. She didn't know what Mulder was thinking. She was just fine…just fine.

Down the hallway Francis Callahan continued to weep over her now lost son.
Better Angels

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the trauma of war.

The cursor on Scully's screen blinked rapidly at her, winking in and out of existence like a maddened firefly as she continued to stare at the unwritten report in front of her, the words she should say unwilling to form themselves into any sense of a cognitive thought. She had prepared herself to methodically pick through the details of the case; of Trevor's death, the discovery of Freely's body and Leonard Trimble's involvement, of Victor Stans deliberate murder of the man he believed to have tormented his life and that of his brothers-in-arms. But as clearly and meticulously laid out as she had worked out each detail in her mind, it suddenly occurred to her she couldn't write them. She couldn't force herself to spit them out in black and white in her report. Trimble's anger towards society and everything still felt abrasive and scouring, even days after his death. How could so much anger manifest itself in the way that Mulder suggested? More so, at least in Scully's mind, how could someone so methodically and completely destroy the lives of innocents for the sheer pleasure of seeing another human being suffer, with the cold calculation of a man who felt himself wronged? It was disgusting and sad, and somehow despite her protests, Scully couldn't bring herself to blame Victor Stans for the murder of Trimble. It reminded her something her father had once said about putting down a sick dog. Sometimes it's better for everyone in the end, including them. And it bothered her, when she really thought about it, that she even had that thought in the first place. As a doctor, she never could, it was against her oath.

"Have you discovered a way to see through space and time over there?" Mulder's teasing came as if from a distance, cutting through the tangle of her own conflicted thoughts. She turned to where he sat behind his familiar desk.

"I was just...thinking," she replied distantly, ignoring the smirk from Mulder as he leaned back to prop his long legs across his desk. Obviously he knew she was thinking, but his question had been to prompt her to confess to what. "Victor Stans, he is going to be allowed to get away with murder you know." She replayed the scene from the hospital, Stans pressing the pillow over Trimble's face, his truncated, amputated limbs hardly twitching as the breath was suffocated out of his lungs.

"Was it murder or self-defense," Mulder asked in response, lacing his fingers over a slightly improved tie than his usual fair. "After all Trimble - Rappo - was torturing these men, ruining their lives, and wasn't even allowing them the release from their torment of death. Can we really hold it against Stans for what he did?"

"But we have no evidence that Trimble was doing what you suspected he was doing, throwing his soul out of himself to torment those men and their families. Frankly, I don't know how much of it I can buy."

That was the crux of her problem, she realized, as she glanced at her still empty screen. "What you are suggesting is that this man could somehow psychically project his anger and rage into a sort of physical form, able to set fires, haunt people, and kill young children."

Saying it out loud made it sound even more fantastical to her, as she pressed her fingertips to her temples.
"Phantom limbs are a common and accepted medical condition, Scully, with amputees feeling the effects of long lost limbs sometimes years after the limb has gone missing."

"Trimble's psyche wasn't amputated, Mulder. And amputees can't walk with phantom legs or write with phantom hands. They are no more than nerve impulses, nothing more or less."

"What if Trimble's psyche was amputated, though, cut off from himself, fed by his anger and hate to the point it became almost physical."

Perhaps with anyone else Scully would have scoffed at this as madness. "Whether he did or didn't, Mulder, what I can't understand is why?" She closed her eyes briefly as she tried to fathom it. "These weren't the enemy, hell they were children, innocents who had nothing to do with Trimble's injuries."

"No, but in Trimble's mind their father's did." Mulder stretched one arm across his desk to the case file, pulling it close enough for him to read. "Leonard Trimble was injured in the Gulf War when Freely accidentally set off a grenade, nearly killing him. It was an accident, but in his statement during his recovery, Trimble blamed the US government for allowing someone as incompetent as Freely into the US Army and his commanding officers for sending a raw, scared kid into a fight without warning him of what was going to happen, about the things he would see and the horrors of war. He said that if they had, Freely wouldn't have become scared and perhaps wouldn't have pulled the pin when he did."

He pushed aside the file, his head cocked thoughtfully as he pulled on his bottom lip, tugging it as he considered. "Did your father ever see direct combat action while he served?"

"No," Scully admitted as she tried to remember her father's stories. "Outside of the Cuban crises and the Fall of Saigon, where his ship was stationed as people were getting out of Vietnam, he was never involved in anything overtly military. Bill saw some time in the Gulf during the war, but was stationed off the coast."

"Dad was too young for World War II," Mulder murmured, frowning at Trimble's file. "My mother's brother-in-law, Uncle Joe, he went to Korea. He sometimes had stories for us kids, of the things he saw. He remembered seeing things, pretty intense stuff, It was why he tried to dissuade my cousins from joining the military."

"Post-traumatic stress takes on many forms, Mulder, but a spiritual antagonist?" Somehow Scully couldn't quite accept that, no matter what horrors the human mind witnessed in times of war.

"One of the things that psychologist notice with those who come back from war, especially ones who have see extreme combat is that soldiers faced with doing acts that tear at the moral code set up by their society either break under the pressure of what they are doing or they become desensitized to it. In Vietnam, this was seen again and again as soldiers came home, having killed entire villages of innocents, many of them now hardly blinked at the idea of the death. It was as if their mind, in trying to rationalize what was happening around them, managed to become un-attuned to the basic humanity that characterized it, as if it shut itself off, cutting itself off from everything that made the soldier a feeling, caring person, and only focused on the anger as a way to drive the soldier to do the horrible things they were asked to do."

"Trimble wasn't in Vietnam, though, and the US Army was hardly burning villages and raping women in Iraq."

"There have been off and on reports of things that happened, all covered up by the Defense Department." If anyone could sniff out a conspiracy, Mulder could. "But more than that, Trimble
behavior didn't manifest itself till after his accident, after the event that drove Freely over the edge had taken Trimble's entire identity away from him. He was a soldier in the US Army, now unable to function because of the careless mistake of one frightened boy and the indifference of an Army who sent him in to do their dirty work.

Mulder sighed as he shook his head, closing the case file with one finger. "What is that poem again, about boys being sent to fight in old men's wars?"

It stunned her that Mulder even found an ounce enough of sympathy for Trimble to rationalize his behavior. "So we should feel sorry for Trimble, despite what he did to Francis and Trevor Callahan, or the Aiklens, or the Stans?"

"I never said we shouldn't hold him accountable for what he did, Scully, I believe Stans already has," Mulder object softly. "But I am saying that I am saying that Trimble's wounds were not only physical, they were psychological as well, and our inability to address that fact killed those people almost as surely as Trimble did. Wars do terrible things to people, give them experiences that they struggle to understand. Ask Skinner sometime about it."

Skinner? Scully frowned at Mulder, curiously wanting an explanation, but he wasn't forthcoming. Instead he swung his shoes off the corner of his desk, straightening in his chair as he turned to his computer. "Trimble couldn't help the fact that the war destroyed the better angels of his nature. Perhaps, we should ask ourselves how to prevent more Leonard Trimbles in the future."
Happy Birthday

Chapter Summary

In which Scully calls on Mulder to wish him a happy birthday.

It was Saturday. Only crazy people were up at this hour on a Saturday. Scully stifled the yawn that tried desperately to pry her jaws open as she tried to balance two coffees, a bag of donuts, her dog's leash, and still manage to press the elevator button to call the rumbling car down to the lobby of Fox Mulder's apartment. It groaned and hummed as it came to life, causing Queequeg to prance at her feet nervously, his glittering, coal-black eyes flickering up at her in his foxy, auburn furred face.

"Cool it, Queequeg," she commanded mildly as the dog continued to jitter and whine. His curly-cue tale waggled. "I don't care if he does call you a giant, furry rat. Don't pee on his carpet or I won't hear the end of it."

The Pomeranian snorted as the door opened, almost mocking her. As if having Fox Mulder as a partner wasn't enough, now she had a personal companion who took the same perverse delight in ignoring her commands as he did. It was a pity Mulder took a dislike to her dog; they two of them really were so much alike. Perhaps that explained Mulder's antipathy to Queequeg, he didn't like the idea of competition for the most ill behaved child in her life. She snorted as the thought as the elevator doors clanged shut behind her and ground upwards towards Mulder's floor. There she was, early on a Saturday morning, with a bag filled with freshly made donuts and Mulder's favorite coffee from Jake's, the place whose brew she lusted after but it was unfortunately closer to his apartment than hers. It was a rare Saturday at home, one where she could have curled under her blankets in the cool of early fall, perhaps read a book, done her laundry, cleaned her already immaculate apartment, anything other than get up and drive to Virginia. Why was she doing this for her work partner again?

Sleepily, she paused in front of Mulder's door with its crooked, brass 42 hanging drunkenly on the dark wood. With arms and hands full and Queequeg pattering about her, she raised one sneaker-clad toe to kick, lightly at the door, rattling it around the door frame as it reverberated through the hallway. It could have awakened the dead, let alone the sleepy Fox Mulder, who was little expecting this early of an arrival on a weekend. She paused as she heard something that sounded like a thump on the other side of the door and deathly silence for the briefest of moments.

Should she try knocking - okay, kicking - again she wondered? She glanced down at the impatient Queequeg, who grunted in the sort of doggish fashion that seemed to indicate he had no idea why she was even doing this to begin with. Frankly he would much rather been in bed.

"Some help you are," she muttered as just behind the door she could hear a shuffling, as of someone carefully looking out the round, glass peephole just above the wobbly numbers on Mulder's door. It was soon followed by the sound of a chain moving and locks turning. It opened to the darkness of Mulder's apartment.

"Scully?" Mulder's voice was thicker and deeper than normal as it croaked at her by way of question, his dark, tousled head peeking around the door as he leaned against the door frame with one arm. He blinked muzzily into the dim light of his hallway, before his cloudy eyes fell on the
tapping dance of her dog. Queequeg grunted and panted at the sight of Mulder in his doorway.

"There a reason the powder puff is in tow," he rumbled quizzically.

He wasn't even awake yet and he was already starting in on her with the insults to her dog. "And here I was trying to be nice, Mulder." She held up the coffee. "Jake's even."

His sleep glazed eyes brightened as they fell on the dual cups in her hands. "And what's the occasion at...whatever God-awful hour of the morning this is?"

"Happy belated birthday!" She grinned broadly holding out one of the cups. "And if you think you wiggled out of it by being in meetings with the Defense Department yesterday regarding Stans and Trimble, you are sorely mistaken."

She glanced at his still, partially closed door. "You plan on letting me in or do I have to stand out here all day?"

Mulder seemed to consider it for the briefest of moments, before shrugging mildly and pulling away, holding open the door for her as came inside, Queequeg trailing behind her.

"I was going to suggest drinks last night, but I was too tired once we got done being interrogated over General Callahan's treatment of the case. I frankly couldn't think straight." She moved comfortably through Mulder's apartment to his living room, to the coffee table, setting down the hot drinks and paper bag carefully, and unlooping her dog's leash from around her wrist, unclipping it from his collar. Queequeg joyfully sensed the freedom he now had and made a run for the direction he had just come, nose already rushing to sniff out some corner of Mulder's darkened apartment.

"He'll be fine," Scully muttered by was of preemptive reassurance as she turned on her partner, the first glimpse of him she had since she had come in. She paused, realizing uncomfortably that it hadn't occurred to her that she might have caught Mulder at an awkward moment, or at least at a moment when he wasn't particularly read for visitors, clad as he as in only boxers. Not that she hadn't seen Mulder mostly unclothed or even naked before, having had to preside over treatment on a nearly dead, almost frozen Mulder in Alaska. But the panic and fear that had gripped her as her partner lay there, infected with an alien virus that was threatening to congest his heart and clog his veins had meant the last thing she had paid attention to was the fact that her partner was sans clothes - or that her partner was a very athletic man.

The flush and hideous realization that had hit her that day in Gibsonton, Florida in the circus performer camp crept up on her again. Fox Mulder was a very attractive ma. Now, she was in much more familiar circumstances with him at this moment than she had been. She wondered briefly if it would be unseemly or perhaps even tipping her hand if she asked him to put a shirt or other clothes on?

"Well!" She croaked, wishing to God her face didn't feel so damned hot. "My dog, yes, Queequeg, he won't harm anything."

Mulder watched her with sleepy dubiousness as she waved towards the donuts and coffee. "Breakfast?"

Why did her voice have that unnatural squeak to it?

"I had hoped my cunning plan to avoid my birthday worked," Mulder grumbled, as blessedly he reached for a t-shirt lying over the back of one chair and pulled it over his head. Scully tried to not
watch as he did it, though she caught the still pink, round scar that marked his left shoulder, the remnant of those horrible weeks the summer before. He seemed to hardly notice it and she kicked herself for getting worked up over something so trivial as an unclad Mulder. Honestly, she chided herself as she remembered the terrified moments as she had tried to staunch the flow of blood from her bullet; it wasn't exactly like she hadn't seen Mulder this unclothed before.

"How's your scar," she blurted, by way of asking something, anything to divert her attention from the direction it was going. Mulder paused for a moment in adjusting the fabric over his stomach, as she indicated his shoulder, finally understanding what she meant.

"It's fine." He didn't look particularly concerned. "It's a good thing you are such a good shot. I can tell people it was a wound received in the line of duty."

Scully ducked her head, glancing around the room for a place to sit. So far the only place seemed to be his well-worn leather couch, still indented from where he had been sleeping on it. How did he manage that, she wondered, his long frame folded onto the leather couch. "I'm glad it wasn't worse than it was." She chose the corner of the couch she suspected his head had been at, and curled there, grabbing a cup of coffee as she did.

If Mulder noticed her discomfort or embarrassment, he hardly mentioned it. Instead he hungrily reached for the white, paper bag, stuffed full of sugary pastries, flopping on the other end of the couch from her, his horse blanket crumpled forlornly under him. "I'm surprised you even remembered my birthday. I was kind of hoping you wouldn't." He sounded disgruntled, but there was a particular boyish delight that seemed to peek through the muddled haze as he shook the bag around, looking at the fatty, sugary offerings she brought. "How did you know I like apple fritters?"

"It's what you always order when we get donuts." She chuckled, watching as he carefully pulled the large, lumpy friend bit of dough and apples out of the middle of the bag, passing the grease-coated paper over to her, companionably. "This place I found had just finished a fresh batch when I showed up this morning."

Mulder's response was an appreciative grunt as he tore through half of the pastry in one bite, chewing happily as he leaned back into the seat cushion and stretched his long legs across to the coffee table in front of them. At least, Scully smiled softly to herself, he liked his breakfast well enough as she picked out a cake donut from the collection she had purchased. "I thought in lieu of a birthday cake, an apple fritter would do."

"Uh huh," Mulder mumbled, muffled by donut still in his mouth. He sat up long enough to reach for the coffee in front of him, before settling back against the couch cushion again. "So what does a guy do to deserve favorite donuts and coffee on a Saturday morning from his partner?"

"Isn't your birthday enough?" She knew he hated his birthday and usually took great pains to conveniently not mention that it was coming up. "I figure after two years of you side-stepping the issue, I could take the initiative and do something."

"Technically you're a day late, my birthday was yesterday," he pointed out impishly.

"Better than missing it all together," she replied glibly, breaking off a piece of donut and tapping it gently before popping it in her mouth. "After all, the first year we worked together you didn't even mention your birthday and I didn't find out till you were shot in North Carolina I had missed it totally." She recalled noting it while filling out paperwork for the hospital. "And last year we were quarantined somewhere in Washington after Trepkos and the entire mutant spore affair."
"I didn't mind that birthday." Mulder sipped happily at his coffee before polishing off the rest of his apple fritter in one bite.

"I bet you didn't, I got you football tickets." She glanced towards a suspicious looking Queequeg, who had found some particularly interesting spot under a table in the corner of Mulder's living room.

"It wasn't just the tickets," Mulder reached for the donuts in the bag between them, peeking inside as he considered which donut to attack next. "I didn't mind the company on my birthday, either."

"I didn't even remember to mention it, though." Truth be told, in the emotional state she had been at that point, so soon after her own abduction, she wasn't particularly surprised she had forgotten. "So I decided this year I wouldn't let you get away with ignoring it. and if that meant coffee and donuts at some awful hour of the morning, at least you would know I remembered." She watched as Mulder tucked into a jelly donut, the same sort her father used to like. It made her secretly smile as she recalled the cold, Saturday mornings on the pier in Baltimore, just her and her father with coffee and donuts, watching the ships come in.

"So, why do you hate your birthday, anyway?" She was curious to see if it was the same reasons everyone hated their birthday or if like everything else in Mulder's life was connected to the painful past of his family.

"It's not that I hate my birthday. It's more that I never liked bothering to celebrate it. Even as a kid, Mom was big on the huge events with my school friends and it usually always ended up with some kid puking after eating too much birthday cake, and someone going home with a black eye after a bad 'pin-the-tale-on-the-donkey' incident."

"I think I had a party or two like that myself." Scully chuckled, remembering the parties involving her siblings and the kids from the base. "Charlie actually got so mad at one of those parties, I think for Missy actually, he deliberately broke his arm to get the attention."

"Deliberately?" Mulder's dark eyebrows rose to his hair. "How did he do that?"

"Stuck it in the downstairs toilet and twisted." "Ouch!" Mulder winced, his right elbow jerking sympathetically. "Did he realize it would hurt the way it did?"

"No, else I don't think he would have done it." Scully sipped placidly at her coffee. "So why do you hate your birthday now?"

"Now, it's just a pain in the ass. And if you hadn't noticed, I'm not exactly Mr. Popular in the office. Last time I got people together to get drinks, Jerry and Reggie were alive."

Of course, Scully thought sadly, his old partner and boss, the last people he was close to before he took on the X-files. But now both of them were dead and he hadn't been close to anyone else professionally since, at least till she had stepped into his life.

"Well it doesn't mean I can't do something for you," she smiled cheerfully. "And I figured if I brought you gifts at an earlier enough time of the morning, you couldn't protest, and you wouldn't be awake enough to manage."

"A very sneaky end run, Agent Scully," Mulder conceded as he finished the last of his donut. "I suppose this means I'll have to try and remember your birthday this year?"
"I won't ask miracles out of you, Mulder" She swallowed the last of her own pastry, dusting the crumbs from off her fingers. "Do you even remember for sure when my birthday is?"

"February," Mulder replied with at least a modicum of confidence.

"You remember the day?"

"What time is it in the morning, Scully? Don't ask me such questions when I had been sleeping so soundly." Something he rarely did anymore, she acknowledged. She felt a slight pang of guilt, waking him during one of his rare moments of sleep.

"Fine," she replied. "For a man with an eidetic memory, it stuns me you can't remember something that simple."

"Did I mention how early it was?"

"Point taken." Scully finally gave in, leaving off tormenting him for the moment, as at her feet, a tiny paw brushed itself down her jean leg and a small whimper somewhere below her indicated that Queequeg was making a particular request that would cut her visit with Mulder short.

"My emperor commands," she sighed, as Queequeg began to prance impatiently in front of her. "I think I better go."

There was a hint of regret in Mulder's eyes, but he quickly covered it up by glaring at her fluffy dog. "Dog's got a bladder the size of its brain."

"Well, unless you want your apartment to smell like dog pee, I better get him outside." She rose quickly, grabbing the leash where she had set it carelessly on his coffee table. "Anyway, I didn't want to let your birthday go unmarked or ignored."

She waved at the rest of the donuts in their bag. "And while it's not precisely the healthiest of breakfasts, it's your birthday, so thus there are no calories."

"Because that's the first thing I always think about when eating," Mulder snorted derisively, rising to follow her as she put the leash on Queequeg's collar and grabbed her half-drunk coffee. His impudence softened to gratefulness as he moved behind her to the door. "Thanks for being kind enough to remember though. It meant a lot."

How could he not think she wouldn't want to commemorate the passing of another year with Mulder alive and well, she thought, especially considering how many times she had nearly lost him in this one-year alone, let alone the number of times he had almost lost her. "I don't know, Mulder. How old does this birthday make you again? Thirty-four?"

"Too old," he groaned as he opened the door for her and the impatient Queequeg, who danced outside of the door, straining on his leash.

"Not old enough to stop being a pain in the ass," she grinned cheekily up at him. "Enjoy your birthday, Mulder, I mean it. Be thankfully you've made it to see another one."

Her point wasn't lost on him as he nodded in understanding. "It's not for lack of trying on my part."

"I know. I rather like having you around though, so don't make this a habit." Queequeg yanked and whined on his lead, causing her to tug it slightly. He settled down immediately, but not without a disgruntled glare. "I need to get going before Queequeg decides to gnaw on my toes."
"Right." Mulder nodded, leaning against the door casually as she moved down the hall, with the sort of easy laziness that reminded Scully for a moment of the state she had found him in when she had walked in. Her stomach lurched, filled with donut and coffee, swirling in the sort of way that would have had Missy laughing hysterically at her, if Missy were alive to do so. Who knew, she perhaps was sitting in the afterlife feeling rather self-satisfied at the moment.

Damn Missy and her pointed comments, Scully growled mentally as she covered her momentary embarrassment by reaching down to scoop up her now very impatient pet. "Happy birthday, Mulder, even if I am a day late." She straightened, plastering a cheerful smile on her still warm cheeks, wondering what the protocol was at this juncture when wishing a friendly co-worker a happy birthday first thing in the morning when he was standing at his door in his underwear. How did she and Mulder get to the point when she could just great him at his apartment in his underwear anyway?

"Thanks," he nodded to her squirming dog. "Don't squeeze to hard, he may go off like a lawn bird."

The image was both horrifying and amusing and Scully chuckled as she made quickly for the elevator. In her arms, Queequeg protested being held so tightly by his mistress as she glanced backwards, briefly, at her barely clad partner.

"Why in the world did I think this was a brilliant idea," she murmured softly in the dog's pointed, furry ear as the doors closed in front of her, Mulder watching her inscrutably as she disappeared into the elevator. "Honestly, Queequeg, my partner?"

Queequeg's only comfort was to wiggle around enough to manage to lick her nose with his small, pink tongue.

"Thanks," she sighed in disgust as she wiped dog slobber from off her nose.
Little Girls

Chapter Summary

In which Scully worries about Mulder's triggers.

She didn't know what to expect out of Mulder first thing Monday morning, not after her impromptu visit at his apartment, perhaps a thank you, perhaps he would brush it off, as seemed to be Mulder's typical fashion. It was by far not the first time she had ever surprised him with a random gift, nearly ever Christmas gift exchanged between the two had been more surprise than expectation, but it was much more the fact she had gone so out of the way to do something nice, just for him, without being asked and without expectation. After all, she reasoned, the man had saved her life, had refused to give up the search for her when others would have, and trusted her even when common sense probably told him he shouldn't. What were a little coffee and a few donuts on his birthday? Who else besides his mother would even remember? The tragedy of Mulder's family was that it left him so very alone, not just in terms of his own mutual kin, but in terms of his other human connections and what little comfort Scully could give him as a friend she didn't begrudge.

She did wonder about the new parameters of their working relationship. Perhaps, before her abduction, she would have considered their partnership that of friendly co-workers, those who shared the same working goal: the X-files and the truth that was in them. But after her abduction, his illness, their mutual losses, they had forged some sort of bond stronger than just friendly co-workers. Now they were much more friends who happened to work together, people who could be frank and honest with one another. No longer did she fear Mulder's tirades and anger when she called him on the carpet, or when his personal demons got in the way of clear judgment. And he had given her his trust, even if he still tried to shove her away and keep her out of the worst of his usually dangerous escapades, at least she believed it was more or less out of his fears for her and not out of his distrust of her involvement in his work.

So much had changed, and yet, Mulder's inability to not call her at ungodly hours of the morning had not. Perhaps, she groaned as she reached for the phone at her bedside, this was some sort of divine payback for having woken him with birthday donuts and coffee. However, it could hardly be justification, after all she had done something nice for him, something to cheer up what would have been a forgotten commemoration of the day of his birth. And besides, she groused, how many times had Mulder called her at all hours to discuss things as meaningless as the Home Shopping Network?

"Scully," she managed to croak into the phone, the static sounds of Mulder's cell phone crackling over the air of her phone receiver.

"It's me," Mulder supplied, almost needlessly. "Sorry to wake you, but we've been called on a case."

"Called on a case?" She frowned as she glanced at her bedside clock. It read 6:30, about the time she would wake up anyway. "Mulder, where are you?"

"Dulles. Look, I'm on a plane that leaves for Seattle in twenty minutes. How fast do you think you can get there?"
"Seattle?" Her sleep-addled thoughts flew to visions of green, glow in the dark bugs, crazed geologists running from mutant spores, and mentally deficient twins being possessed by their more intelligent brothers. "Do you realize the Pacific Northwest has it out for us, Mulder?"

"I'm beginning to wonder about that." Mulder chuckled on the other end of the line, his voice sounding thin and reedy over his phone. "This time it's a kidnapping, a fifteen year old girl, straight from her home, the only witness her younger sister."

"A kidnapping?" Alarm bells began to sound in Scully's brain as she came more fully awake, sitting up in her bed and throwing off her covers. She didn't need to hear the details to see a picture of the story forming before her, a young girl taken without warning from her home, a sibling who was the lone witness, distraught parents, few to no leads, it was a tale now as familiar to her as it was to Mulder. And it was a case her partner of all people had no business being on. "A kidnapping should go to Missing Persons, Mulder. How did you get this case?"

"When the Seattle field office reported the it, I got wind of it and asked if we could be put on it." Mulder was utterly shameless in admitting this and Scully was hardly surprised. It wasn't a particularly unusual tactic of his, horning himself in on a case that he shouldn't be on. What was worrying her is that Mulder knew he was emotionally compromised by this specific work and yet he did it anyway.

"Mulder, Skinner isn't going to be terribly thrilled to hear you took this and personally I'm wondering what in the hell you are thinking?" She couldn't help but sound thunderous, something inside her very Catholic, guilt-ridden soul was appalled at the lengths that Mulder would go to expiate his own imagined sins. "You were the one who just told me to back down on the Trimble case when the boy died. How can you expect any less from me?"

"I don't, Scully. That's why I want you there." His response surprised her in its honesty and it caused her rising anger to at least quell itself briefly. "Look, I know how this looks and I know my own faults, but there is more to this case than just a simple kidnapping and I think I have a connection that may be of some use for this missing girl if I can get there fast enough and convince this person to help."

"Person? I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"I'll explain more when you get there," Mulder tried to assure her, the noises of the air terminal behind him as one of the typical service announcements sounded over the air port PA system. "I don't think that the victim has a lot of time, Scully, so we have to move quickly, try to get her out of there and back home in one piece."

Back home. His last words were delivered with Mulder's frenetic, energetic focus, but she could hear the underlying hurt and determination just below the surface. No matter what Mulder said, how he tried to spin this, she knew why he took this case, and she knew whom it was he was trying to bring back home. Certainly, bringing back the missing girl was his priority, but it wasn't the little girl in his heart he was trying to recover.

"Mulder, for a moment, won't you ever be free? Just for the moment, won't you just put those demons to rest and not chase those demons?"

If it had been as recent as a year ago, she perhaps couldn't have said that to him without him becoming angrily defensive. Instead he was quiet on his end of the phone, as if thoughtful. She couldn't tell if he was truly hurt by what she said or if he was simply formulating what to say next. The distance of advanced communications meant that her ability to read her partner's body language was non-existent here. If only she could read him across a cell phone.
"I'll see you in Seattle when you get there, okay?" His response was far from curt, but there was a heavy weariness she had not heard from him before whenever she brought up Samantha. "Bring an umbrella, it looks like the weather is getting nasty outside."

An odd statement from him, but it was one of avoidance. He was done with the topic, for now. "All right, I'll see you when I get into Seattle. I'll give you a call."

"See you then." He clicked off the phone, leaving Scully to stare at the ringing receiver in her hand heavily, worrying creasing her brows. As a responsible agent, she should force Mulder off this case, use Skinner's leverage to take him off, and perhaps a more responsible Scully at a different point in her career would have. But as Mulder's friend, she knew what he was asking from her was her support, her help, and her understanding, knowing what this case will do to him. And as his friend, she couldn't do anything less than fly to Seattle and stand by him on this case.

Without thinking she dialed her mother's number. She doubted her mother would be terribly surprised. "Hi, Mom! I have a case in Washington state, you think you can come and grab Queequeg for a couple of days?"

She hoped, for Mulder's sake, they found the girl quickly, and alive.
Broken Things

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is frustrated by Mulder's own brokenness.

Blood types were not fingerprints. While no two individuals shared the same fingerprint, many individuals shared the same blood type, especially along family lines. Blood type could be used to include or exclude particular suspects, especially when dealing with an extremely rare type, one not shared by anyone else in the victim's family. Amy Jacob's blood type was B positive, one of the rarer blood types in the United States. It was only shared in its rarity by the O positive blood type, the one that belonged to Lucy Householder. Funnily enough, both blood types appeared on Lucy's work uniform, the one she bled on the night she collapsed at her station in the fast food restaurant where she worked. While the possibility that someone at Lucy's work could also be B positive was out there, it was very slim, and one would still have to ask themselves how it got on the front of her uniform in the first place.

But that led to other questions. Such as how a woman who collapsed in front of a shift full of people in a restaurant across town manage to get the blood of a kidnapped girl on her at the exact same time. Scully had a feeling she knew those were the questions that would spring instantaneously to Fox Mulder's mind as she flipped thought he results one more time, her scientific brain reviewing the data just to be sure. Mulder thought process, while scarily intuitive at the best of times, tended to follow just as many familiar grooves as the average mind and she could already hear words such as "psychic" and "victim" in his as yet unvoiced argument. Lucy Householder was a victim once as well, a little girl who had been taken in much the same way Amy Jacobs had been, whose entire life had been marked and ruined by that one event. Scully didn't need to be a psychoanalyst to know what Mulder saw in Lucy, and it was that empathy to Lucy's struggle, to her hurt, pain, and disillusionment that Mulder would cling, even when all evidence turned against her. Sadly, she recognized, the evidence she had made no more sense to her scientifically than it would Mulder and till it did Scully had a feeling he would stand by Lucy Householder's side no matter what she said. She knew Mulder well enough she had no doubt that this was where it was going.

"Mulder!" She called his attention to her. "I got something - something weird."

Weird wasn't precisely a scientific term, but it would do well in this instance. Mulder glance curiously down at the files in her hand. "What?"

"I was going over Lucy Householder's medical work-up and something hit me." She pointed to the sheet of paper with Lucy's basic medical information. "Her blood type is O positive."

"Yeah?"

"Forensics lifted two blood types off of her work clothes, O positive and B positive. Two guesses as to what Amy Jacobs' blood type is?"

There was the skepticism in his expression as he played through the rational that he knew Scully was going to use. "How could it be Amy Jacobs' blood? Lucy was all the way across town."

Damn good point, she wondered, but it didn't change facts. For a brief moment she felt as if she
were standing in Mulder's shoes, trying to convince herself of some outlandish theory that seemed to fit the evidence at hand. Rather, she quantified, it was more that she was trying to point out to Mulder that the evidence at hand was incriminating. Though hell if she knew how to even begin explaining it. "I don't know, Mulder, but it begs the question."

Unsurprisingly Mulder's defenses swung into full actions. "Why? Because it matches the victim's blood type? How many people have B positive blood, Scully? One-in-five? That's got to be hundreds of thousands of people in the local population alone."

Try one in thousands, Scully wanted to retort. Neither Amy nor Lucy's blood type was particularly common. Not wanting to resort to a base statistically argument, Scully brushed it aside. "We're not talking about the local population. We're talking about a woman who is tied to this case who had somebody else's blood on her uniform." It was a fact of evidence they just couldn't ignore because they felt sorry for her. And she could tell by the anger surfacing in Mulder's dangerously calm gaze that this was exactly where he was going and what he had already done with Lucy Householder. She knew he shouldn't have taken this case.

He leaned down to Scully's smaller level, inclining his head ever so slightly, looming over her. It was the only hint of just how irritated he was by Scully's assertions regarding Lucy's guilt. "Lucy is a victim, Scully, just like Amy Jacobs. If she's got any connection to this case, that's the extent of it."

There was the word victim, just like Amy, and just like Samantha. Scully pursed her lips to blurt out the angry accusation she wanted to hurl at him, instead shrugging calmly as she snapped the file closed. "Well, we'll know soon enough." There was a certain sense of self-satisfaction as she watched the wary concern that caused Mulder to pull away from his unconsciously threatening stance, watching the files in Scully's hand with concern.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm running a PCR on her blood to see if there's a DNA match."

There they were, at the impasse between science and instinct, their old, familiar crossroads. She was always clinging to what could be easily categorized and defined, he was insisting that there was something just around the corner, behind the curtain, they just had to wait and be patient, they would find it. Perhaps Scully could be patient for some things, the truth about her sister's murderer's, what the tests were that put the chip into her neck, why it was Samantha Mulder was taken from her family and what role Mulder's father had in the events that circulated around all of this. Those answers she could wait patiently for. But there was a little girl, a fifteen-year-old, with all of the world ahead of her, who may be dead or in danger if they didn't get to her quickly. And so far this was the best lead they had so far, as dubious and as ill fitting as it was. And the hell she could justify letting it go because of Mulder's own personal neurosis about his sister. She knew he was going to ask it of her, she could already feel the pleading from him, the silent request that she understand and trust him on this.

"Will you do me a favor? Will you keep that under your hat?" Mulder looked carefully around to see if anyone, especially Eubanks, had heard. Damn it and him, she thought quietly. A girl's life was in danger and he was far more concerned about the girl who had already made it out of her capture than the girl who sitting in it.

"Why," she charged, tempted to ignore his request. It was irresponsible. It was playing with the life of a child who could be saved because he felt sorry for the woman who might have something to do with it.
"Because I don't want Lucy Householder treated like a suspect in this case until it's absolutely certain she is one, okay." He didn't wait for her confirmation as he whirled on her, his manner almost hostile, as if she personally had accused Lucy Householder of doing the kidnapping. Which, she suppose in a manner of speaking, she had. And he resented her for it. Because in Mulder's mind Lucy Householder wasn't just Lucy Householder, she was Samantha Mulder and perhaps in a weird twisted way, she was Fox himself. It was that kinship of surviving something so horrific in her childhood that drew Mulder to Lucy. She was a kindred spirit, a person so broken by life's traumatic events on an innocent child. How could he not empathize with her? He was that child once himself.

"You should never have taken this case, Mulder." She muttered more to herself than to his retreating figure as she tapped the files against her open palm. He wasn't going to like the ugly truths about where this led, she felt, and she had a feeling that she knew exactly what this test was going to reveal. She was less worried about Mulder's own anger to her than she was about his own mental state. She doubted, however, she would ever be able to talk him off this one, not until Amy Jacobs was found.
When Push Comes To Shove

Chapter Summary

In which Scully confronts Mulder and he brings out some hard truths.

Pissed was never a word that entered into their partnership. Scully could count on one hand the number of times she had seen Mulder angry with her. There were times he was irritated, yes, and perhaps frustrated with her, but few and far between were the times when Mulder was every really angry at her for something she did. His temper was legendary, frightening even, but it was never directed at her. If anything Mulder was more forgiving of her than often she was of him. Right now, however, his ire formed a palatable barrier between them, a solid entity that vibrated with the heat of his fury. If it was an emotional attack she was used to out of Mulder, perhaps she would have simply shrugged it off as another of Mulder's childish outburst. But this wasn't his usual behavior. This was different and her skin itched with the weight of the silent accusations she could sense rather than hear fall off his lips.

"What are you doing?" She tried to be friendly, cavalier even as she leaned against one, temporary wall of the cubicle Eubanks had lent to them in the Seattle field office, a place for the two of them to set up shop in their efforts to assist in the Amy Jacobs case. On Mulder's borrowed computer, she could see in black and white a photo of Lucy Householder, a mug shot from some arrest, her wide, hollow eyes glaring accusingly at Scully from across the space. It was the look that Mulder gave her earlier when she and Eubanks had attempted to bring Lucy in. Since then, he hadn't bothered to look at her or speak to her.

Unsurprisingly he hardly bothered to answer in this instance, either. He scrolled past Lucy's pathetic, waifish image, the little girl lost who had somehow gotten involved in this case, in a disappearance that was so very much like the experience that Lucy had been forced through. Scully wasn't an idiot. She knew that Lucy Householder was a victim once herself and she knew that she had no real, scientific evidence to link how Amy Jacob's blood got on her at the time, no matter what DNA tests said. It was likely no court could or would hold up any charges over her, but she had gone with the evidence, she had followed the genetic trail. DNA told her that the other blood on Lucy Householder's uniform that night was the blood of Amy Jacobs and if nothing else it meant that Lucy knew much more about what was happening then she was letting on. Damn it all, why was Mulder treating her as if she had somehow personally betrayed him? She longed to smack the back of his head, hard, to do something, anything to earn a reaction out of him. But in this mood, she dared not. When push comes to shove, Mulder was dangerous when angry. It was best not to poke the bear in its den.

She sighed heavily. Despite the fact she could breath Mulder's desire for her to leave him alone, she inched into the cubicle, wrapping arms around herself protectively as she made herself a physical presence within Mulder's world. Petulant as he could be, he would eventually relent, look at her, even if it was in angry accusation. She leaned against the opposite wall, covered in the gray, tweed-like substance they insisted in carpeting offices with now at days. "Eubanks has an APB out on Lucy. He suspects she might be heading out to where she was found years ago, but he's got men out looking for her."

Again silence. It was enough to make Scully want to scream, but she remained cool, still, her
composure fixing her face as she watched the side and back of Mulder's impassive head. "Eubank suspects that Lucy perhaps suffers from a form of Stockholm syndrome, that she has in the years since her abduction begun to identify with her former kidnapper."

Her words were the catalyst to break down the wall of silence, if not the wall of anger from Mulder. His head whipped around, his eyes flashing. "You saw the video. Did Lucy Householder look like a girl who thought her abductor was her new best friend?"

No, Scully admitted to herself. If anything Lucy Householder looked like more an animal than a child, a terrified girl who had been broken in both mind and spirit. "Mulder, you are a psychologist, you know that this isn't a perfect science. And who is to say what Lucy has done, psychologically, to deal with all of this over the years. You said it yourself, it's a wonder that she has even managed to come this far."

"You didn't see the look in her eyes when I showed her that photo, Scully." His voice was raw and low, accusing in its insistence. "You didn't see the fear, the torture, you didn't have to chase her down as she tried to run, terrified of a picture." He spat his words out as he spun his chair to face her in the confined space, focusing his anger on her now, leaving Scully with the distinct feeling of being slammed and pressed against the fabric covered barrier behind her. She was beginning to seriously rethink this idea of confront the agitated Mulder, even if she had tried to approach it reasonably.

"No, I didn't." She acknowledged reasonably, meeting his rage evenly. "But there is a girl who is out there, Mulder, who is just as scared and just as hurt, and you are so focused on Lucy as a victim that you seemed to have forgotten Amy Jacobs. And this isn't about Lucy or you. this is about her and the fact she may not have much time."

She had hoped her words would have the effect of slapping reason into Mulder, but it was quite the inverse. In one, fluid motion he threw himself up, towering suddenly over her as shot towards the ceiling, reminding Scully just how short she was compared to him. It made her swallow hard as he glared down at her, filled with barely controlled tempestuousness as he leaned in closer. His voice was vibrating, low rumble as he spoke. "This has everything to do with Amy Jacobs, Scully, and with Lucy Householder. Carl Wade took both of those girls and I don't think that Amy's blood on Lucy's shirt was a coincidence."

His admittance of this last statement surprised her.

"Why," she demanded, trying very hard to be un-cowed in the face of Mulder's stormy mood.

"Lucy was horribly scarred, marked forever by her experience. Everyday of her life, every moment of it, all she can see is the dark cell she was kept in. That is her entire existence, even after thirteen years. Those type of marks don't leave you."

He of all people should know. "So she is somehow connected to Amy Jacob's through shared experience?"

"Something like that," Mulder acknowledged grudgingly, "You are Catholic, Scully, it comes up again and again in the stories of your own religious tradition, the martyr's who suffered as Christ suffered, who felt the same wounds and pain. They shared a commonality of experience."

"Amy is hardly Christ and Lucy hardly a saint." Feeling nettled he again seemed to reduce her own faith to base superstition, she countered back with her familiar territory of science. "Psychic connection or no, Mulder, it doesn't explain how Amy's blood was found on Lucy?"
"Can you explain it, Dr. Scully?" His challenge was almost mocking despite the seriousness of his expression and she knew it was mocking, because she didn't have an explanation, at least not one that fit any more than his psychic connection theory.

"I don't know what to think," she snapped, feeling cornered by his anger and his accusations. "I know that Lucy knows something more than she is admitting and I want to know what that is."

"So do I, but now we have to find her." he smirked sarcastically, whirling away from her in one turn and facing the computer screen. She watched as he clicked on the screen with his mouse, inputting the information to print the flyers. She could hear in the distance the large, monstrous printer boot up, gears whining into life. It occurred to her, as she watched him bend over his keyboard, that his anger wasn't with her for not believing him. That was something she did on a fairly frequent basis and it normally never upset him like this.

"You're pissed that I told Eubanks, aren't you?" It was the only explanation she had for his reaction and a part of her stung at the fact that she knew without a shadow of a doubt this was the reason for Mulder's behavior.

"It was the one thing I asked you not to do, Scully," he murmured without looking up from the file. "I asked you to keep it to yourself and then Eubanks is busting in this girl's door. Now she's lost and Amy Jacob's is still out there."

He was hurt, yes, but not over Lucy Householder. He was hurt by what she did. Immediately justifications flew into Scully's mind, surfacing almost unbidden. "Mulder, what was I supposed to do? The DNA test came back conclusive and Eubanks asked us here for assistance, anything to get this girl back."

"You couldn't trust me on this?" His statement was accusatory and yet pleading. He stood again, facing her, the brunt of his anger dulled by the confusion at her actions. "After two years, after everything you and I have been through as partners, you had to chose this of all things to question me on? Not alien conspiracies, not criminals profiles, this?" It was confusing to him, and to be honest it was confusing to her as well. "You are a woman of integrity Scully, no one says you aren't. But your integrity has never lain with the rules and politics of the FBI. It was always with the truth and the victims. Why question that now?"

His words, while low, steady, and quiet, cut deeply, and she felt her jaw twitch slightly as she controlled the urge to stare at him, mouth agape. "You honestly think this was about politics?"

"You have never, ever broken my trust before, Scully, not once."

"And what makes you think I broke it now?" She demanded, smarting from his assertions. "I had information at hand I thought was in the best interest of this case, to help get Amy home to her family." She thought of the girl, alone, in the dark, wanting nothing more than to see her parents and sister again, to go home. "Think about it, Mulder. If it was me, would you not want every insight into the case, no matter how small, in order to get me home again."

Scully fully admitted it was a slightly cheap tactic, playing on her own abductions and his lingering guilt over what happened. It had its effect though. Mulder backed down. The fury that had been there was almost preferable to the hurt he displayed now. "I suppose then I'm not the only one with demons when it comes to cases like these."

She had opened the door to that, she knew it, but it didn't hurt any less as she realized that he had hit the nail a bit squarely himself. "You asked me here because you wanted me to keep you grounded, because you knew what these sort of cases do to you. I was trying to do what you
"I also asked you to sit on this information, Scully, to not tell Eubanks, for the exact reason that just happened." He glanced across the top of the cubicles to Eubank's desk, close to the regional ASACS office. "If you believe for a moment I don't want Amy Jacob's back, you're mistaken. But I don't think that Lucy Householder did it, and I think she's being drug through this, reliving all of this against her will, and we are helping her do it. But right now, she's the only link we have to that young girl. I don't think that you or Eubanks understand just what that link is. Now between you both, we've lost it."

It was rare that Mulder had the righteous high ground on her. She mutely watched as his long legs stalked out of the cubicle, as he stormed moodily towards the printer. She had, of course, thought twice about telling Eubanks. When the DNA results had come in, she had intended on waiting, talking to Mulder about it before she said anything to the agent-in-charge. But the idea of Amy Jacobs, alone and scared, her crying mother, her frightened sister, it had made her think twice, had made her speak up despite the fact that Mulder had asked her not to.

_I suppose I'm not the only one with demons when it comes to cases like these…_

She was no victim, she told herself, as she trailed behind Mulder's longer strides. For that matter neither was Mulder. Her own abduction happened well over a year ago. She had recovered physically and emotionally, for the most part. Her life, her world wasn't ruled by the specter of a long-lost sister and a broken childhood. It didn't drive her in everything that she did, in every case she took. Her own sister's scattered ashes and the scar on the back of her neck from the chip that she had removed all coalesced to laugh at her and call her a liar. She ignored them as Mulder stood, gloowering at the copy machine, print outs of Lucy Householder's doe-eyed faced glaring accusingly up at the both of them.
**Grown Men Don't Cry**

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is unnerved by Mulder's emotional breakdown.

Grown men didn't cry.

Scully came from a long line of stalwart, military men who had taught her the value of a cool head in the face of danger and how to keep herself together when the world was falling apart. She couldn't remember a single moment when she had ever seen her father so much as become misty eyed. Perhaps he had choked a little the night she had descended the stairs of her family home in Baltimore to attend prom with Marcus. Maybe there had been a suspicious well of emotions the day that Bill and Tara married as he spoke at his eldest child's reception. But she had never seen her father once, in his all-too-brief life, let loose a torrent of heartbreaking emotion from the depths of his own soul. But then, she recognized, her father did not carry the same well of it that Fox Mulder did.

The sound of Mulder's sobs, ringing through the clearing outside of Carl Wade's home as he bent over the body of Lucy Householder, unnerved her, a noise that strangely didn't belong beside the jarring lights of the EMT vehicle and Amy Jacobs quiet chattering. At first, she thought it was some animal in the brush, some horribly wounded creature somewhere nearby. Her heart jerked within her at the sound. It was only as she and the group of agents surrounding Amy pushed the thinning gathering of branches and brambles that she understood the source of the noise and saw the crumpled form of her partner beside the white covered medical gurney.

She had always known Mulder wore his heart on his sleeve, much more than Scully ever did, and she had always known that Mulder was broken, but to see him so shattered, over the death of what had amounted to be a stranger, had tilted her world ever so slightly. Mulder was the man of boundless hope and fathomless faiths, whose sheer force of kinetic will propelled them both through the uncertainty that the X-files brought to their lives. He stood firm even when she fell apart. Melissa had warned her of the darkness that hid in Mulder and she had seen it from time to time, most evident when he was in a fit of temper. But this was a manifestation of it that she had never seen before, and as she had rushed across the clearing, leaving the bedraggled, terrified Amy Jacobs in the hands of other agents, her first thought had been to stop it, to fix it. Ignoring the stunned, uncomfortable looks of her fellow agents and the poor, prostrate form of Lucy on the EMT stretcher before her, she had gently pulled Mulder away from the body, leading him towards their specific rental car, parked far to the side of the action.

He had said nothing and Scully had wondered if he had even noticed as her small hands firmly guided him to the car, his expression tortured as he stared blindly at the scattered fall leaves at his feet. She been in this condition just the year before when she had crumbled in Mulder's arms, Donnie Pfaster's glittering eyes watching as she sobbed her heart out. She wanted to reciprocate the gesture for her partner, to wrap him tightly as he had done her, to hold the pieces together, to somehow make this right, to make it better. She got Mulder away from the curious eyes and murmured whispers behind cupped hands, and without even asking leave from Agent Eubanks, she drove him back to the hotel, all thoughts of Amy Jacobs, Lucy Householder, and their case set aside for the moment.
She used to believe that grown men didn't cry.

Scully had left him in his room when Eubanks called her back for a return. Thankfully Eubanks had asked no questions. She frankly wasn't in the mood for answers as she filled out the paperwork and assured him that Mulder would be fine in the morning. Scully knew it was a lie, but it was close enough to the truth. Mulder would slap on just enough professionalism to get him home, caring little about what people would think or the rumors that would start. It was habit for him now, rote, something he had perfected ever since the November night in 1973. Eubanks hardly understood that.

It was with great caution Scully approached the door of Mulder's hotel room, unsure of what to expect as her knuckles rapped softly. She strained to hear any noise, the sound of the television on a baseball or football game, but silence rang. She paused, holding her breath. Of course Mulder wouldn't do anything drastic. He already told her that anything as extreme as taking his own life wasn't something he espoused, and yet she couldn't help but wonder and worry as she carefully and quietly opened the door into the dimly lit space, peeking around with her breath held, as if preparing for whatever she might find on the other side.

Mulder's green eyes watched from a swollen face. He laid on the bed, dull and quiescent, his frenetic energy stilled. He stretched across the double bed, almost too small for his length, his tie missing and shirt undone, his hand folded over his snow-white undershirt. But his shoes still remained, tied neatly on his feet, as if he had somehow forgotten in the middle of undressing just what he was doing and why. It was as if the weight of his own grief had caused him to collapse, tumbling him onto the bed like a forgotten doll. She didn't know how to approach this, whether to come at him with the perfunctory, business-like manner of her medical training, or with the caretaker's sympathy, with soothing words and understanding smiles. Frankly, she didn't think he wanted either. She realized, as she paused by the bed, she didn't know what he wanted.

Grown men didn't cry, certainly not Fox Mulder. When they did, what did one do about it?

As if sensing her dilemma, Mulder broke the stifling quiet with a low rumble, his voice pulling, cracking in a throat made raw. "Eubanks pissed I made a scene?"

"No," she replied honestly, removing the over coat she had been wearing all day, as if his breaking of the silence in the room had finally given her leave to make herself comfortable in it. She tossed it over the back of the one chair in the cheap room, uncaring that it draped to the floor. Without asking leave, she settled herself on the corner of Mulder's hard bed, physically forcing her presence on him in a situation she knew he could easily shut her out of.

"Frankly I think he was just relieved to get Amy Jacobs home, alive, in one piece." Scully continued as she settled one slim hip against Mulder's shins, the warmth of his leg bleeding through the fabric of her trousers, warming her wind-chilled skin. "She's at the hospital at the moment. Doctors are looking her over. Her family is there with her." It was their miracle of the day, their big win. Another few moments and Amy Jacobs would have been dead. Perhaps she should have been dead. Instead it was Lucy Householder who had paid the price of Carl Wade's obsession.

"Lucy's body was taken to the morgue. I made arrangements with the King County ME to look it over in the morning with him." She deliberately avoided the bruised look from her partner as she continued. "I also spoke with Lucy's mother. She lives not far away, in Tacoma. I informed her about what had happened." She grimaced as she recalled the shocked, quiet confusion of the woman on the other end of the phone, stunned at the news that her daughter, taken so long ago, was dead.
"How did she handle it," Mulder asked with sad curiosity.

"Well, as well as any parent who was hearing from the police their child was dead." How well did anyone take these things? Her own mother's heartbroken sobs still reverberated in her memory at the loss of Melissa. "Though, to be honest, I don't think that Mrs. Householder was surprised. She and Lucy's father divorced shortly after Lucy was returned and Lucy's life was anything but easy. I think she was actually rather expecting this phone call at some point. I just don't think she was expecting it like this. She's coming in the morning to collect Lucy's remains and her things. I promised her we'd go to the halfway house in the morning and collect what was left."

Not that Lucy had much, Scully surmised, a sad, broken girl with fragments of a childhood that was taken so violently away from her, one hat was nearly taken from Amy Jacobs as well. "At least, in the end, Lucy was able to help someone like herself, someone who was facing the very same demon she did."

She wanted the words to be comfort to Mulder, to remind him that Lucy's death had not been totally in vain. Victim that Lucy was all of her tragic life, she had not gone out of this world allowing the same horrors to befall another innocent. She had succeeded in saving the life of one little girl, even if she had been completely incapable of saving her own.

"This morning when I saw her, Lucy didn't understand what was happening to her." Mulder's eyes flickered to the ceiling. "I showed her the picture of Wade. She became frightened. She ran. I don't know if it was from him or too Amy, I can't tell. She just wanted it all to stop, she wanted it all to go away. I think that for years, the drugs, the prostitution, the running away from home, she's just longed for it all to go away. She wanted to make it good again, like before."

That same longing rang loud and clear in Mulder. Scully could hear it in every word that weariness of a world that seemed to take delight in torturing the innocent. The fractured pieces of her partner floated, barely meeting together on the surface, carefully placed to give the semblance of order and responsibility but only just covering the same raging torment that had driven Lucy's unfortunate life. Samantha wasn't the victim that Mulder equated Lucy with on this case, it was himself.

"I don't remember much about the night that Samantha was taken," Mulder picked up the threads of Scully's own mental dialogue. "It was right after Sam's birthday and right before Thanksgiving. My parents had gone to the neighbors to play cards, some sort of pre-holiday dinner party. I was left in charge. We were playing Stratego and Sam was mad I wouldn't let her watch the show she wanted. She got mad at me and that's all I remember, really. Everything else is a blur, images I picked up from my work with Dr. Werber years later."

"My mother says I was hysterical for the most part, and to be honest I don't remember much of the next week. It's as if I woke up at my grandparents' house for Thanksgiving and everyone had forgotten. They hadn't, of course, but it was oddly surreal. There were my father's parents, there were my parents, and there I was, and no Samantha. It was as if she hadn't existed, as if life could just carry on without her there to be a part of it. No one said anything. It was as if this horrible event that no one could explain had never happened, as if Samantha never existed. But I knew she had. I could hear her calling for me every night when I slept. I would go into her room and just close my eyes and hope that when I opened them she would be there and she never was. And I kept thinking to myself if only I had been faster, if only I hadn't argued with her that night over the TV, if I had let her win at Stratego more often or had tried hard to be a better big brother to her, she would have still been there. No one would have taken her."

The story was as familiar to Scully now as if she had lived it. It was the pain that was new, the raw bleeding out of a wound that she had only been able to glimpse before now, but never allowed to
touch, to see with any sense of clarity. Bill Mulder had hinted at the depths of his son's pain, but Scully had not ever been given a chance to witness the full extent of it and a part of her wished she hadn't.

"Mulder, you were a child," she tried to reason with him, knowing it was useless. "And you know now that you had nothing to do with your sister's abduction. Your father's work, whatever it was, that had nothing to do with you."

"Why was my name on that folder in West Virginia? It was supposed to be me, wasn't it?" His dark eyebrows rose in mild challenge and Scully found she couldn't respond to that. She had no more idea about why his name appeared there than he did. "What if I was supposed to go instead of Samantha?"

Why him? Why her? For that matter why Lucy Householder? Scully fell into the familiar platitudes of her faith, the words her priest would have murmured to her in the words of the confessional as she raged against what was happening. "Mulder, we can't ever know or understand why it is these things happen sometimes. The point is that you had nothing to do with Samantha's abduction. Men, evil men, men who think they can play God, they had something to do with this."

"Logic and reason often have nothing to do with the pain of loss." Mulder replied with the equanimity of the psychologist, the tired understanding of someone who knew pain because he had lived it. "It doesn't mean that every day of my life I don't feel that responsibility, that guilt with every little girl like Amy Jacobs who comes across the FBI's desk. I think to myself that if I could just save one more girl like that, one more child, that even if I never see Samantha again, I would have done some good in this world, that her loss would stop sometime."

"But it doesn't work that way, does it?" Scully thought of the tortured sound of Mulder's sobs as he bent over Lucy's body. "You couldn't save Lucy Householder from the man who took her."

"And she couldn't ever flee from the prison that Carl Wade had trapped her in thirteen years ago." He allowed his gaze to drop from the ceiling to where she sat. "Sometimes there are prisons that trap us no matter how hard we try to break free of them."

Lucy Householder had finally broken free of hers, Scully thought sadly. That couldn't be the only route left for someone like Mulder. She didn't want to think like that. He swore that suicide was hardly the way he could imagine himself going, but she had to wonder every time he followed another lead, another trail that led to danger and possible death, was there a small part of Mulder that threw caution to the wind for that very reason?

"You aren't Lucy." It seemed like a silly, foolish statement to say. Of course he wasn't, but there was a part of him, she knew, that felt that he was. "Lucy was trapped in a circle of her own pain and her longing to escape it. She couldn't function as a normal adult. She allowed herself to be defined by the event that had so shaped her."

"And I haven't? I'm a man who chases shadows, hoping that one of them will turn up my long-lost sister. A man who threw away a stellar career and all the promise that it had to become the laughingstock of his peers and the joke to his superiors. My work is barely tolerated, let alone taken seriously, and at a point in life when most of us would be settling to mortgages, homes, and families, I chose to chase my own personal demons in the belief of some sort of self-justification, an extirpation of my sins."

Mulder had once told her that all psychologists were broken. It was why they chose the profession. It wasn't as if he didn't know what was wrong with him, Scully realized sadly. He just didn't know what to do about it, much like Lucy Householder. Quietly, she reached out for some sort of
physical comfort, resting her hand lightly on top of the leg she sat closest to, trying to impart what reassurance she could by way of a simple touch. "Perhaps, one could look at the choices you've made that way, Mulder. But I would prefer to think you have instead chosen to find the truth rather than live in a comfortable lie, which many others might have chosen instead. You cling to that hope that despite everything you live with and put up with now, that someday you'll find that key that will let you out. You'll find that truth about Samantha. And it's that hope that makes you different than Lucy."

"Hope." He rolled the word thickly on his tongue. "Perhaps."

Even the man of boundless faith could and did have times of doubt. With as much grace as she could manage after a day of running through brambles in shoes not made for such activity, Scully rose, her finger's pressing lightly for a moment against Mulder's leg as she straightened. "I've booked flights for us at two tomorrow. Do you think you can manage the paperwork for the case while I do the autopsy with the ME?"

"Sure." Mulder shrugged with tired apathy, pausing for one brief, thoughtful moment. "I can go to the halfway house in the morning, gather Lucy's things for her mother."

"Thank you." Already Mulder was trying to fit back the façade of his normal life over the gaping wound. While it would always be there, just under the surface, he would at least pretend to function normally, even if they both knew he was hanging on just by a fingernail. "I think I'll call it a night. Might even be talked into a pizza later, if you are interested."

"Not so much," Mulder admitted, a rarity for him. Usually the very idea of anything packed with carbohydrates and fat would be a siren call for Mulder's ravenous appetite. "Take the opportunity while you can to eat something disgustingly healthy, it might not come again soon."

"I'll keep that in mind." She chuckled, gathering her coat as she made her way towards his room door. "If you need anything, even just to talk, I'm next door."

"I know." The first smile she had seen out of him since Lucy's death played briefly before disappearing. "I'll see you in the morning?"

"Sure." She slipped out the door, carefully closing it behind her.
Dinner with Mom

Chapter Summary

In which Scully comes home to have dinner with Maggie.

If her dog were any more excited, he would pee on the runner in her mother's front hallway.

"Queequeg, down," Scully commanded in a voice that rang with the tones of her beloved father, snapping the Pomeranian's attention out of his futile attempts to hurl his tiny body up into her arms. This was a feet complicated by the fact that Queequeg had yet to figure out that as a dog he was not gifted with the ability to fly.

"He's just happy to see you." Maggie Scully rounded the corner to the hallway, arms extended to embrace her youngest daughter. "I didn't expect you for another couple of hours!"

"We were able to wrap up business in Seattle a bit faster than I thought," Scully grimaced, once again cursing the name of Washington State. It never seemed to work out for them in that area. She returned her mother's hug, wrapping her arms a moment longer than usual, clinging to the familiar comfort of motherly affection. How tightly was Mrs. Jacobs holding her daughter Amy tonight? Did Mrs. Householder wish she had perhaps given her daughter one more hug, one more embrace before she had died?

"Rough case?" Maggie could read her daughter as well as Mulder could. Her bright, blue eyes cut through her daughter's collected façade as they swept up and down Scully's petite form, as if a visual scan could reveal the stress fractures on her soul.

"Something like that," Scully admitted as she pulled off her long overcoat and handed it to her mother's outstretched hand. "A child abduction case. Fifteen-year-old girl taken from her bedroom by an assailant, turned out to be a photographer at her school."

"A photographer," Maggie was askance, horrified as she placed Scully's long, black coat on one of the pegs that lined one side of the hallway, right beside the warm, thick coat that had been Ahab's in life. "As in school pictures?"

"That's how he found the girl's address." Scully reached down to scoop up her impatiently whining and prancing dog, wiggling in her arms trying to find purchase enough to reach her face with his short, pink tongue. "He was a serial child molester, perhaps even murderer. The local field office is still sifting through the man's property, looking for bodies." She yawned, sighing heavily as her mother's warm, comforting hand propelled her from the hallway through to the living room. In the distance Scully could smell Maggie's lasagna baking in the oven, her stomach purring at the thought.

"And the girl, did you find her?"

"Safe and sound, back with her family tonight," Scully replied as she flopped on the couch, toeing off her shoes and snuggling her dog closely before settling the yipping fluff ball beside her. He didn't stay as he took the opportunity to jump off the couch and prance around her feet, his jet-black eyes shining in his foxy, little face.
"Then it was a win." Maggie always had the habit of reducing Scully's cases into wins and losses, the mark of her long and familiar exposure to the Cold War mentality of the US military. There were days that Scully wished it were as simple as "wins" and "losses". Certainly in many ways Amy Jacobs qualified as a win, but Lucy Householder's death most certainly did not.

"Yes and no." Scully sighed evasively, her heart aching at Mulder's heartbroken sobs, a sound that Scully hoped and prayed she would never, ever in her life have to hear again. "We lost someone on the case, a woman, a former victim. She was the only girl to ever escape from the man." Well, at least physically escaped, Scully reasoned. Lucy never escaped Carl Wade emotionally. "She died helping us find the girl…I guess in a way you could say she gave her life to make sure that Amy got home safely."

She of course expected the sighs and gasps of sympathy from her mother. Such horrors were hard for Maggie to imagine. Was it a mark on Scully that she hardly batted an eye at such cases now? Was it a mark of her work in the FBI? Was she becoming jaded like so many she saw in the Bureau over the years, people who had seen the worst of humanity for so long they were hardly horrified by what they saw anymore?

"It seems unreal to me how anyone like that could exist in this world." Maggie had claimed the armchair next to the couch and Queequeg had treacherously leapt to her mother's lap, settling happily while shooting his mistress a smirking look. Scully glared at him, but he cheerfully ignored her as Maggie rubbed one of his pointed ears. Frankly she shouldn't be horribly surprised. After all, Maggie spent more time with Queequeg than Scully did, and she guiltily remembered why it was that she hadn't kept a pet in the first place.

"They do, Mom. I see them all the time." She sounded so cynical as she said it, thinking briefly of the monsters she had seen in her short time as a field agent, both those who were out and the open and those in the shadows. "I ask myself how I put up with it day in and day out, and I work strictly as an investigator. I think of the work Mulder used to do, criminal profiling, getting inside the heads of the perpetrators in the hopes of finding them, of divining their next move. And it makes me shudder to think of the depths he had to plumb to get there, the things he had to see, the understanding he had to reach." This case had nearly broken Mulder. How had he managed those years as a profiler? How had he kept that façade together, seeing the things he saw, as broken as he was, as hurt as he was? Like Lucy Householder, it was a wonder that Mulder had made it as far as he had without crumbling. Scully was certainly at a loss as to how he managed that and it spoke to Mulder's own private courage as well as the power of his own faith and belief. Lesser people perhaps would have been crushed under the weight of those very same trials.

"How is Fox doing?" Maggie always seemed to sense the tenor of her children's thoughts. It usually didn't take much for Maggie to be prompted to bring up Mulder in discussion. It was always the sideways comment, the curious quirk of a dark eyebrow over guileless blue eyes, the motherly concern in her voice. Since her disappearance, Mulder had practically become the fifth Scully child, her mother fretting over him as she would her own distant sons, Bill and Charlie.

"He's all right." Scully's reply was deliberately vague. Despite her mother's obvious affection for her partner, it still wasn't Scully's place to lay open every demon that Mulder had before someone he hadn't entrusted with them, especially considering how hard it had been to earn that same trust. "Of course any missing girl case is hard for Mulder. I don't think he can help but see Samantha in every one of those little girls."

Maggie had long ago heard the story of Mulder's missing sister, her everlasting well of empathy overflowing as she clucked softly and cuddled the wiggling Queequeg briefly. "Why does he do it then, take those case? I can't imagine the hurt he feels, that wound he reopens every single time?"
There was a hint of recrimination there, as if she was reproving her daughter for allowing Mulder to take those sorts of cases. As if Scully could stop him!

"Absolution." It was true, she thought, and in terms so simple that it spoke to the familiar weight of penance on the Catholic soul. It spoke perfectly to the grief and remorse that ran beneath the surface of Mulder. "He wants to feel that somehow he's made up for the loss of his sister, the one he let go all those years ago. And so he chases after aliens and takes on cases that wound his soul for the very reason you and I go to confession and say our Hail Marys." It was a twisted sort of penance driving her partner, a sort of symbolic mortification of the soul, a self-flagellation that left no physical scars, only emotional ones.

Fox Mulder, the patron saint of the eternally damned. It was an almost ridiculously fitting image. Mulder who would throw away career, reputation, even his own personal safety in search for his truth, a truth that over time had started to encompass her as well. Over two-and-a-half years she had slowly been sucked into the void of questions with no answers that swirled around the mystery of Samantha Mulder. It wasn't her quest, it wasn't her sister, and yet she had been as directly effected by it as he had been, perhaps more so. She had lost her sister over this, nearly her own life, and while it wasn't Mulder's fault, no more than his sister's disappearance was, she could feel the tug within her reason that screamed at her that she was starting to slowly, surely lose herself to this. Hadn't she lost so much already?

"Dana?" Maggie cut through her thoughts, her finger's light on Scully's arm as she shook her with the same sort of gentleness she used to wake her daughter up as a child. "Hello? Earth to Dana!"

Scully turned blinking, startled eyes at her mother's mildly amused, slightly concerned face. "Sorry, just…long case and I'm tired." Tired wasn't even the right word for it. She didn't know if there was a right word for it. Was there a word for it? How many times had he stood here, just after speaking to some hire upper within the Bureau about Mulder's behavior, after rushing across the country to pull Mulder's ass out of some other jail, standing by his bedside at some hospital after barely putting him back together again physically, pulling him from the brink as he ran off once again in the search for his evidence, his proof, something he could use to show the world he wasn't insane. Mulder's pain ached in her chest as she felt her head ache, piercing her skull just above her right eye. Could she keep holding him together indefinitely? Was it her job to do so? She wanted the answers. She wanted to know the truth about what had happened to her and why her sister had died. But did she want to learn those horrible truths at the high cost Mulder seemed to be paying?

"You all right, honey?" Maggie now fretted, her fingers wrapping around her daughter's forearm. "Yeah, just a stress headache." She waved, plastering a smile on her lips. "Nothing more, all the flying around gets to you after a while." Looking for some distraction, she rose, unfolding herself off of the couch and moving towards the kitchen, towards the siren call of baking lasagna and garlic bread. "When's dinner? I'm starving."

"Soon," Maggie replied, not looking all together convinced by her daughter's show, setting down the yipping Queequeg and following behind. "You know…it's been a while since you've taken any time off." She began her opening volley with the sort of rehearsed wariness that set Scully's nerves on edges. Glancing sideways at her mother, she grabbed a water glass from the cabinet above the sink, shrugging as she filled it full from the tap.

"I'm saving up what I have for Christmas." It was a plausible enough explanation, though in reality she hadn't given it much thought. "I thought you and I were flying out to see Bill this year?"

"Oh, I know, I just wondered. You've been through a lot in the last few years, Dana." There it was, Scully realized. She barely turned to her mother, leaning against the doorjamb of the kitchen as she
sipped slowly from the glass, hoping that if she did it long enough, her mother would leave off this conversation.

No such luck. "I just wonder if you've had a chance to process it all yourself. I know you worry about Fox, about how he handles these things, but I know that he must worry the very same thing about you."

"Why? Has he said as much to you?" Mulder usually was the up-front and direct type, not one to go behind her back and through her mother.

"No, he doesn't have to," Maggie replied evenly. "I know that Fox cares about you a great deal, Dana and anyone who would care about you would be worried for you right at the moment."

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Why don't you talk about Melissa anymore?"

She hadn't expected her mother to drop her sister's name. Inside she winced, as if struck, but outwardly she simply frowned, perturbed that her mother would throw Melissa at her for no reason. "Melissa is dead. Why would I keep bringing her up?"

It was cold, yes, and perhaps a little final. But what good or use was there in dwelling on a fact she couldn't change, no matter how much she wanted to or how much she longed to. Wasn't it enough she had a case open on her sister's killers, was looking for them, and weekly checked the case file to see if anything had been turned up? As it was she kept staring at the backs of dark-haired men, wondering if they turned around if Alex Krycek's face would appear before her. Would she arrest him? Would she shoot him? Maybe she wouldn't have to if Mulder got to him first.

"You can still talk about her. She's dead Dana, but it's not as if she didn't exist."

"Mom, why are we having this conversation now?" It was pure petulance, she admitted that, but she had just spent two days in perhaps one of the most heart wrenching cases of her career and she wanted to bring up every sore point Scully had in one night.

"Your brother, Bill, you know he was never in favor of your sister and father being cremated and spread at sea."

"Well, Bill had tombstones made." Maggie hugged herself uncomfortably, as if preparing for a verbal onslaught from Scully. "And I had them placed in the family plot at the church cemetery, where Grandma and Grandpa Scully are buried."

"Okay?" What was this about, if anything? Was her mother worried she would be angry at Bill for his presumptuousness, perhaps irritated that her brother had somehow subverted the wishes of her father and sister. "Whatever Bill feels he needs, Mom, he paid for it, it's important to him. I don't see what is wrong with that."

"There's nothing wrong," Maggie clarified tightly, her blue-eyes darkening with worry. "But…I don't know, Dana, I thought, well, if it made you feel more comfortable, you could go there...."
"And what? Talk to an empty gravestone?" For whatever reason the idea upset her. "If I hadn't been returned, would Missy have gone to the family plot to speak to the empty gravestone you had put there?"

It was unfair and deliberately hurtful, she recognized that. Maggie's expression filled with pain before she swallowed it just as quickly as it had gathered there. a trait that Scully was well familiar with. "Probably not," she admitted, a sad smile flickering to life briefly. "Missy would have yelled at Bill for holding on to the dead instead of celebrating the living."

"Perhaps you should take her point." Why was she being so aggressive to her own mother? She realized she was lashing out for no good reason. Yes, her mother had hit sore points for her, very sore ones indeed. But was she really angry with her mother for the topic of Melissa or was she still unnerved by Mulder's breakdown the day before? Remorsefully she put down her glass, suddenly filled with shame for attacking her mother for no real reason she could even fathom.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her nails scraping against the granite top of her mother's kitchen cabinets. "Mom, I'm sorry, I don't know why…"

She threw her hands up in frustration, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. "I'm just tired."

It was all the excuse she had at the moment. She was tired.

Silently, Maggie crossed the space between them, her arms wrapping around her tightly, as if the harsh words and pointed barbs had never happened. She quietly pulled her daughter to her and held her, as if she were still just a little girl who needed to be comforted after a rough day at school.

"I love you, Dana," she murmured softly with the assurance only a mother could have. "And I worry about you. And it's all right to be tired. I'm sorry for pushing." She pulled away, just enough to smile down at her daughter as she reached up and smoothed the hair off of her forehead. "You always were your father's daughter, stubborn and determined to do it your way."

Scully grinned, despite the mild exasperation from her mother, feeling oddly comforted despite the statement. "I can't help that, Mom. Look at the man you married for the explanation."

"He would have just snorted and said that it was my fault for luring him with my feminine wiles." Maggie pulled away, chuckling as she did. She missed her husband, Scully knew that. She could tell by the way her fingers reached to twist slightly at the ring she still wore. "I have something to cheer you up for dinner!"

"Cheer me up?" Scully blinked, mystified at the oven. "Besides lasagna?"

"Better than that." Maggie grinned. "Look in the fridge."

Scully did as her mother commanded, opening the door curiously and glancing inside. The box that sat on the middle shelf was unassuming in its plainness. It was the sticker on top that made her grin.

"Chocolate cream pie?" Not just any chocolate cream, her favorite chocolate cream pie, from her favorite bakery. "Expecting me to have a bad day?"

"No, but sometimes a mother has a sixth sense about these things." Maggie winked as she turned to the oven, glancing at the casserole dish within. "This will be ready soon. You want to set the table?"

"For just the two of us?" Scully had rather hoped to talk her mother into paper plates and sitting in
front of the television. She should have known better, if could be Armageddon outside and Maggie would still want dinner at the dining table, no questions asked. Her mother's horrified look seemed to clarify this.

"Let me just set the table." She reached into the cabinet to pull out two plates and two glasses. At least, she sighed with a sense of some small reassurance, some things in his life never changed. She was glad that dinners with her mother were one of those things.
In which Mulder is curious about an alien autopsy video.

Whatever Mulder's feelings, no matter how broken he was underneath it all, he always did have a nose for a good mystery, even if that mystery came in the trapping of a dubious alien autopsy video with a picture that look as if it was ripped straight out of an operating room surveillance camera. Scully's eyes flickered over the figures moving in the tape, all in medical gear and covered in gas masks. Why the gas masks? She stood in front of the large television on its stand, squinting through the bad images, as Mulder moved beside her his long fingers pointing at the fuzzy figures as if hoping to make her see the things that he himself saw. "But it does look authentic, I mean, the setting and the procedures. It does look as if an actual autopsy is being performed, doesn't it?"

If he said so. Her eyes crossed slightly as if it were one of those 3-D pictures where the image popped out at you from a myriad of colored waves and patterns. "Well, technically," she admitted as she shrugged, her suit coat pulling slightly across her shoulders. "I don't know why they would be wearing gas masks." If they were dealing with hazardous materials, they should be wearing haz-mat suits.

"Well, maybe it's this green substance they seem to be extracting from the subject." Mulder pointed yet again to something that perhaps could be vaguely called green and a substance. Scully couldn't exactly be sure. He seemed to think she could divine it as he shot her his expectant "Doctor-Scully-please-tell-me-what-this-weird-shit-is" look. "Can you identify this?"

"Olive oil? Snake oil?" It could be anything for all she could tell. "I suppose you think it's alien blood?" She couldn't help the teasing condescension in her voice.

Of course, she realized, you could always trust Mulder to play along. "It's widely held that aliens don't have blood, Scully." He smirked at her playfully.

She wanted to point out the case of the Reticulans and their black blood, or so he had told Tom Colton years ago, but instead rolled her eyes and returned to studying the video. "I guess that begs the question, if this is an alien autopsy..."

"Where's the alien," Mulder finished, frowning darkly as he worried his bottom lip briefly between his teeth. Scully nodded, glancing back at the video. Nothing about the video screamed alien autopsy, despite what the cover may have told Mulder.

"What's so intriguing to me is the striking lack of detail here," he insisted, defensively, answering her unspoken thoughts.

"Well, what do you want for twenty-nine ninety-five?"

"Not that," Mulder insisted, still frowning uncertainly at the television. "That autopsy you saw on TV was so fake precisely because it tried to show too much."

"And this is real because it doesn't?" Somehow Scully was failing to see Mulder's logic.
"Yes, and because…"

Mulder paused as he pointed the VCR remote at the machine and clicked fast forward, causing the magnetic tape inside to whirl. The blurry figures on the screen rush forward in a blur of static and shadows till he hit the stop button. The figures returned to their normal pace, as behind them the door to their autopsy lab burst open, flashes burst onto the darkened scene as the sound of popping gunfire hailed out of the television. Just as suddenly as the shots began, the image turned to static, blurring everything as white noise filled the office.

What in the hell was that?

"Who's selling these tapes?" Scully frowned up at Mulder as he stopped the video and ejected it from the machine.

"Some guy in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Claims he pulled it off the satellite dish at two in the morning." He turned to his desk, tossing the plastic cartridge on top. "He says he was able to unscramble signal from one. His souped up set up was able to read, though he couldn't say where the signal was from or who was supposed to be getting it."

"You did your research." She wandered to his desk, picking up the discarded tape and studying it critically. It was a crude affair, no professional labeling, simply a sticker on the front, hand-written in black felt tip. As unoriginal as one could expect with an underground sort of job as this, she thought, frowning down at the black plastic, turning it over in her hands, puzzled. "Why would anyone stage something like that in a fake alien autopsy?"

Mulder flopped heavily into his chair, shooting her an infuriatingly smug look. "If it weren't for that last scene, I would be inclined to agree with you on the potential reliability of this video. But the amount of special effects that would go into creating something like that is far more than what it is worth to sell on handmade videos for $30."

"I don't know, I can get Steel Magnolias for $15 at Blockbuster," Scully pointed out impishly, leaning one hip against the corner of Mulder's desk. "Someone's making a profit off of this. But beyond that, how come no one noticed or said anything? Surely there would be a report of a mass attack at a lab somewhere."

"Not if it was secret."

"You think that the government came in and massacred an entire autopsy bay filled with doctors, then proceeded to allow the evidence of their crime go out across satellite airwaves?"

"I think that the government is the one who ordered the autopsy or whatever they were doing on that video and for whatever reason the desired to hide the evidence. That was what the gunfire was about. I think the video is the security camera, relaying images back to the government regarding what is going on. It wasn't shut down ahead of time and the signal was sent off automatically. Somehow this guy in Allentown caught it."

"How is he so sure it's an alien?" Scully had seen nothing on there that even remotely looked like an alien body, or rather, she had seen a decided lack of effort put into showing off what was being presented as an alien life form by the videos distributor. "I was barely able to make out there was an autopsy going on period."

"I don't know, Scully. The green substance, we've seen it before, you and I."

The green ooze. The stuff that had killed Agent Weiss in Syracuse and had nearly killed Mulder,
not once, but twice. It was the same substance that the Samantha Mulder clone had reduced itself into after being pulled from the cold water in Bethesda, Maryland. And it was a substance that traced itself all the way back to the substance known as "Purity Control" and the strange, malformed fetus that Deep Throat had her steal in exchange for Mulder's safety.

"You don't think that what they had on the video was Purity Control?" She swallowed hard as she thought of the engineered pathogen that had nearly killed her partner.

"I don't know what I'm thinking, Scully, all I know is that what we learned from the documentation on that DAT tape, the files that we saw and read. We know that the government has been working for years on a vaccination. We can only presume its for whatever virus that Purity Control is. There was testing done, on human test subjects, like the ones I saw in that boxcar before my impromptu, attempted demise." Mulder was flippant now about his near-death experience, despite the horror Scully still felt over it.

"So what are you suggesting," she challenged.

"What if this video is not an alien autopsy at all? What if it is actually the testing of Purity Control on a subject, a human subject, in an attempt to hybridize alien and human DNA?"

"You still believe what Viktor Klemper said? That our government is attempting to use that engineered virus to change human DNA?" It wasn't impossible, Scully admitted begrudgingly. What else would an engineered virus be used for? Viruses were essentially capsules filled with DNA or RNA, and once attached to a living cell would change the DNA encoding in the nucleus. Most of the time that usually only resulted in a minor cold or the flu, the body's immune system over-reacting to the invaders attacking it.

"Scully, I know what I saw in the box car in New Mexico," Mulder murmured with the certainty of a man who hadn't nearly died in the very boxcar as someone tried to hide the evidence of the work they were doing this very virus. "Those people, if you could call them that, they looked different, like they had been altered. You said it yourself, viruses can be used for gene therapy, for changing the genetic make up of an organism."

"In theory, yes." Scully was reluctant to go along with this, no matter if Mulder's rationalization made an odd, weird, disturbing sort of sense. "But only in the small scale, Mulder. What you are suggesting is the changing of an entire human beings physiology, and nothing like that is even medically possible."

"We seem to keep running into this wall of medical impossibility, don't we?" Mulder's eyes glittered briefly as he leaned back in his chair, an impossibly knowing smirk on his face. "Every time you tell me it's a medical impossibility, yet it's there, Doctor Scully. Tell me how that is."

He was taunting her? Why? She frowned at him, unsure if she liked it, no matter how teasing it seemed on the surface. "Perhaps, what you think you are seeing isn't what is actually going on."

How many times had they run into that in cases?

"Maybe." Unsurprisingly he wasn't buying into the most logical explanation wholesale. "Still I want to go to Allentown, check it out."

She blinked at Mulder's shift in conversation, backing up several paces mentally to where Allentown sat in the flow of conversation. "You want to speak to the guy making the videos?"

"Best way to see if this is on the level or not. No use quibbling over alien viruses if it isn't."
"And what, you'll use your psychic powers to detect if he is telling the truth or not?"

"While my abilities have been called 'spooky', Scully, I have never been arrogant enough to say I'm psychic."

Conceited ass! She scowled at his playful grin. "I can't believe we are chasing after a man who makes videos that he sells in the back of your porn magazines."

"I'd invite you to investigate the making of those videos, Scully, but I didn't think you were that type of girl."

Under normal conditions, maybe, Scully perhaps would have let that comment slide with an eye roll or a disapproving pursing of the lips. It was the sort of comment Mulder frequently dropped, more to tease her or distract her than anything else. Still, whether it was perversity or just bad habits picked up from her partner, she found herself leaning across the corner of his desk, smiling sweetly at his curious gaze.

"Who's to say that I'm not that type of girl?" She grinned as she pushed off, propelling her way to her own table, silently glorying in the stunned, stupefied expression on his blank face.

"And just for that, Mulder, you get to make the travel arrangements for Allentown," she replied smartly as she sat in her creaking chair, shooting her still gob smacked partner a triumphantly impish grin. "If you don't mind?"
In which Scully is brutally honest with Mulder

Mulder had that look, the one that said he intended to do something he knew would likely get him in trouble, but didn't care, and worse, he expected her to be a full participant in his act of anarchy, and to go along with it complicity. So there she was, following his tall swagger to the rental car, a mischievous gleam in his eyes despite all the seriousness of his expression. He popped open the trunk and quickly reached inside, yanking out a leather satchel she knew belonged to neither of them. It looked very much like the satchel that Japanese diplomat had been carrying. In the confusion of bringing in the man to the local police station and explaining the entire situation that it was one piece of evidence they hadn't brought in or at least Mulder had decided to deliberately leave in the car.

Curious, she watched as closed the trunk and put the case on top, opening the brown leather and pulling out a file folder from within. Without regard to where they were who might be about he flipped it open, eyes eagerly bright as they scanned the top page. Clearly the episode of the DAT tape and the trouble it had cause had taught him nothing, Scully noted sourly, as she glanced around the parking lot briefly. No one seemed to be watching, but they had thought that before, in much more secure locations than this one. She wanted to call him on it, but he passed the top paper off the pile, his long fingers absently handing it to her as he continued to study the remnants of the file.

"What are those?" She glanced that paper handed to her, a list of names and numbers. She scanned the paper quickly, her eyes stopping at the word MUFON at the top. It rang a bell as she tried to think, her brain rifling through the hundreds of initials she knew from her medical training....MUFON.....

"They look like satellite photos," Mulder drawled slowly, his brows creasing as he flipped through the stack of thick, black and white pictures. "What would he be doing with these?"

It hit her exactly what MUFON meant: the Mutual UFO Network. It was among a list of various UFO organizations Mulder kept tabs on, along with NICAP, his strange friend Max Fenig's organization. The list seemed to be made up of MUFON members, with the first name circled as if specially singled out.

"What would he be doing with a list of Mutual UFO Network members in the greater Allentown area with the name Betsy Hagopian circled?" She pointed out the top most names in the dim light of the parking lot, angling the paper so Mulder could study it better.

"Maybe he was going to fit her for a pillowcase. too," he quipped dryly, referring to the dead body of their alien autopsy video maker. His full mouth pressed into a thoughtful frown, plans and ideas fluttering across his face. "Why don't you stick around, get a motel room and check it out in the morning?"

Get a room? Scully felt her eyes widen blankly at him as he closed the file and threw the papers back into the satchel, the familiar, determined kineticism returning as she rounded the car for the
drivers side. He was having some sort of mental dialogue with himself, and it always spelled trouble when she wasn't in on the conversation. "Where are you going?" She tried not to sound as alarmed as she felt and failed miserably.

"I'm going to go back to DC like a good boy, like Skinner told me to do, and show these to a few friends of ours." He rounded the car, shooting her a suspiciously innocent look as he opened his car door. She knew better. She watched him, glaring at him from across the top of the car, her arms folded.

"Why do I have a feeling you'll be in DC just long enough to have the Three Stooges tell you just exactly where those ships are at before you run off without me to do something infinitely stupid and exceedingly dangerous? Meanwhile, I'm stuck here doing the leg work for you with the expectation that when you get your ass handed to you, and you will, I will be free and clear to get you out of whatever fix or jam you have managed to get yourself into this time."

"Why do you assume I'll get my ass handed to me?" Mulder look mildly affronted.

"How's that bruise on your chest from your manhandling this morning?" She raised a pointed eyebrow, knowing it would bruise his ego and wound his pride. "As usual, you are taking your vague hint of a curious tidbit, call it evidence, and are tearing off for parts unknown with the vague promise that any of it will turn out a case for us."

She hit home with him, Mulder was clearly perturbed by her jab, impatience pulling his gaze heavenward as he threw up his hands. "It's sort of odd that a man selling illegally produced alien autopsy videos for $30 a pop shows up dead and the only person we have at the scene of the crime is a Japanese diplomat who conveniently speaks no English and who is carrying military satellite photos of US naval ships and a list of MUFON members. I don't know, Scully, but it all strikes me as a tad convenient, a series of strange confluence of random facts that don't make sense. Perhaps I'm merely crazy or just spooky for thinking that there might be a reason out there that explains all of them, rather than just some of them."

His words stung. "That's a tad unfair, don't you think?" Ice formed in her voice as she met his annoyance levelly.

"Is it?" His eyes flashed brilliantly for a moment before he pushed off from the car, rounding it slowly. "You said it yourself, none of this tracks. You see the strings being pulled here, you know that whatever is being presented to us is a sham, and yet you are throwing it at me that I am the one who is obtuse here for following what leads we have presented before us." She pivoted and watched as he rounded up to her, ablaze with his indignation. "You are the one, Scully, who has beat into my head that before we can make any claims we need proof, evidence. Here I am, ready to find it, and you are calling me out on it."

Did he really want to make this as simple as he was right and she was wrong? He stopped, slowly, his toes so close they almost met her own as he stared down at her. Mulder would never, ever in his wildest dreams would think of physically harming her, but there were times when even she had to wonder as she swallowed, unnerved by his presence so close.

"In case you don't remember, Mulder, your track record with unverified evidence and solo side treks has been less than stellar, or has New Mexico completely left your mind?" She glared up at him, happy for the moment that she had something to justify her worry and skepticism, evidence she could throw at Mulder that she wasn't being unreasonable in her assessment. "And what was it before that? Alaska? Puerto Rico? How about Doctor Sacare or Wisconsin when I had to drag you from a jail cell with Max Fenig?"
She shook the MUFON list under Mulder's aquiline nose. "You would have me do background work that any fresh-faced recruit straight out of the Academy would do so you can do what? Chase after evidence in the hopes that you can come back to Skinner and prove that you were right? Take the wool off everyone's eyes? Show that it's a sham?"

"Do you really believe that any of this is about my own ego, Scully? Do you think I go out there and do what I do for kicks?"

"No," she admitted hotly, lifting her chin defiantly as her knuckles flew to rest on her hips. "I think you do it because it's the only way you feel you can clean the guilt from your soul. I don't know, Mulder, you tell me. You don't have the stomach for killing yourself, but that doesn't mean you wouldn't willingly throw yourself in situations where circumstances might just do it for you."

She had said that thought out loud.

It was only when the words hung in the air, sparkling like frozen shards between them in the cold, fall air that Scully realized just how hot her temper was, just how flushed her skin felt as the blood pounded through her veins. Had her voice really been ringing that loudly in the darkness of the police parking lot? She had just spoken what she had privately concluded days ago, as Mulder sobbed over the body of a girl he hardly knew.

All she could think to do was to apologize. "Mulder, I'm sorry…"

"You were being honest." He cut her off with an impatient slash of his hand, long fingers slicing at her apology. "And if you weren't honest, Scully, you would be less of a partner and a friend."

Friend? He had said the word with all of the assurance of one who actually believed it. "I shouldn't have lost my temper and I shouldn't have said those things."

"Would it have been better to not let me hear it?" His dark eyebrow quirked pointedly over his stoic expression. "After all, you could have allowed me long ago to just fall on my own sword of stubbornness and self-righteousness. It perhaps would have been easier for you."

His words underscored the doubts and questions that had plagued her these months since New Mexico and Melissa's death. How long could she continue holding him together, stand in the background keeping down the fort while Mulder continued to chase every devil, demon, and dark cloud that ever climbed above the horizon? Why should she even question this? She chose to stay here after all. She knew that this was Mulder, this was always the way Mulder would be.

"Let's me get a room." Scully chose the options that required the least effort on her part, giving in. "I'll drop you off at the airport and keep the car to use tomorrow."

"You don't have to," Mulder began, but she turned from him, cutting him off, reaching for the car door.

"I'll do it, Mulder. You're right, there is something going on here." She wouldn't deny that, even if she didn't like this. "I'll check out these names and call you about it tomorrow."

She slipped into the car without looking back up at him, waiting for him to climb back into the car.
She Is One

Chapter Summary

In which Scully realizes she is one.

We're all going to end up like Betsy...

Scully fingered the scar on the back of her neck, the small rise of skin that had healed over the place where five months before she had found the small device placed under her skin. Despite its absence she had felt the weight of it, silently, for all of those months, her fingers curling self-consciously around her neck, her manicured nails running across the lump of scarred flesh, as she gently pressed a finger there, probing it. It reminded her of a time she hardly thought of now, a time she couldn't remember anyway, her abduction, her fight to survive, the pain and confusion of the unexplained period of her life over a year before. It had happened and not just to her. She wasn't alone and as much of a comfort as that should be to Scully, the idea that there were others, she found that it wasn't. The DAT tape, the information contained on it in the incomprehensible strings of Navajo Code talk swirled with the knowledge of the implant under her skin and Betsy Hagopian, dying of a cancer they couldn't treat.

What had they done to her?

She lay in her hotel room, the usual, cheap affairs she always got for these cases, little more than cardboard with a roof and a mattress thrown inside. She had long ago given up on the television. She had turned it off and lay curled on her side, wrapped in pajamas and a blanket against the cold November chill, wondering why it was she couldn't get warm. Her finger stroked the area of her neck until the skin felt raw and sore, the area rising in a welt far bigger than scar that she sported. She longed to call Mulder about this information, if nothing else just to feel she had someone to talk to, to express her concern to, to hear him tell her why it was that she would be fine, not to worry about this. But she didn't. Hell, she didn't know for sure where he was.

God, she wanted Missy. Melissa would be the first person she would usually call, before even her own mother, especially her mother. Melissa had been whom she had gone to when she had found the bit of metal there in the first place, had urged her to go to the psychiatrist and try to recall those memories of the abduction she could no longer remember. But it had frightened her, had terrified her into running, hiding from what she experienced, Melissa accusing her of ignoring her intuition, of fleeing from what she might learn about herself. Scully had grown angry with her sister, unwilling to admit that perhaps Melissa had been right, and now her own truths were smacking her in the face, standing there in the person of the women from Betsy Hagopian's MUFON group. She had watched them all pull out their implants, all rattling in plastic medicine bottles, glass containers, a Ziploc bag that was crumpled and worn from sitting in the bottom of the woman's purse for years, all containing the proof of what Scully had been denying for months. These women were dying because of what had happened to them. Dying to cover up the truth of the vaccinations, of the tests, of Purity Control, and whatever work it was that Bill Mulder and that strange, cigarette sucking asshole were mixed up in. What were they doing? How as this Asian diplomat involved in it all, and why was he trying to cover the truth?

Why did it have to be her? It was the ultimate question, the one she would never dare to voice out
loud to Mulder. Despite her commitment to their work and her loyalty to him, her growing questions of late, her fears, the constant flow of her own questions about whether she could follow him whether she could hold him together stemmed from this one aching, unspoken wound in her life, one she had glossed over with well practiced ease. Why did any of this have to happen to her? She was simply a doctor, a pathologist, wanting to do right in the world, to do something to make a difference, to help someone. Out of no where she was chosen to work with this man, to be set on his quest, to reign him in, to shut him down. She had done nothing that was asked of her. She had chosen to help him rather than challenge him, to befriend him rather than make an enemy and as her punishment she was taken, stolen from her own home, subjected to tests she couldn't remember, but which clearly were killing these women, and then sent home, barely clinging to life, with a chip in her neck and no memory of what she had lived through. She had asked for none of this, had wanted none of this. Perhaps she would have been better off walking away from Mulder when he asked her to. When they had closed down the X-files, he had warned her, had told her that they couldn't speak, they couldn't even be seen together again, and yet she had flouted that, had deliberately forced him to recognize her and include her, ignoring every warning he had on the subject. Mulder had warned her and she hadn't listened. Perhaps he had known something of what could happen, even if he didn't know exactly how it would happen. She had laughed at him, thought him paranoid, had secretly written off his misgivings while at the same time pushing herself into his work out of her own sense of moral and righteous indignation. She was a woman of science, she had reason, and like any good scientist, she told herself she was asking the hard questions, doing the right thing. Scully had stubbornly stayed and refused to accept the easy answers despite the warnings, despite the efforts by Mulder to keep her out of it. She had hated him for that, even as she resented his propensity for throwing himself where angels feared to tread. She had hated him for trying, vainly, to protect her. Now she knew why he had. Her fingers clamped, hard, around her neck, cupping the red skin, her fingers cool against it.

We're all going to end up like Betsy...

The recognition on Lottie and Penny's faces had been unnerving. She could see it in Penny's eyes as she had held Scully's hand and for whatever reason she remembered the gesture. She felt as if she had been there before, had held Penny's hand before, remembered that level gaze and warm smile from some other memory, some other lifetime. Her logic screamed at her she didn't know this woman. Why did she remember her though? Damn it all, why did she remember that white room, those images? They flashed in her memory, dancing tauntingly in front of her minds eye, like broken bits of a tattered movie reel. She had vague images, things she recalled from her session from earlier in the year; pain, fear, sounds, alarms, and now among that jumble of confused impressions she added Penny's face, the soothing sound of her voice, the press of her fingers against the palm of her hand. There were questions, machines, and she hurt, God she hurt. All she wanted to do was go home, to see her mother, to see her siblings, to see Mulder.

Tears dampened the pillow her head was propped on, turning cold against her cheek. Scully had asked the oncologist just what sort of cancers riddled Betsy Hagopian's body. There didn't seem to be a kind she didn't have. It was as if her entire body decided to act against her, to turn on her, consume her, and hide all evidence of anything that was done to her. Scully had watched the bird-frail woman as she had lain before her friends, dying. Would that be her fate as well? Would she be condemned to die in a similar fashion, for a disease designed to hide the truth of what happened to her, to cover up the lies about the tests, the vaccinations, the "merchandise" as the files from the DAT tape had called it. Would she be like these anonymous strangers, like these women who shared her experiences, who knew her face, who knew her secret fear? She clutched her neck, her nails digging into the flesh of her skin briefly as she pulled her knees to her shaking chest, sobs muffled into her already wet pillow. She was one, like them, like Penny, like Betsy. What had they done to her?
In which Scully breaks a heart.

"Agent Pendrell?" Scully kept her voice soft as the slight, red haired man bent over what appeared to be one of the most delicate of instruments, so engrossed in his work he hardly noticed her loud footsteps against the cold tile of the Sci-Crime lab. She had never had an occasion to be here, the slick surfaces and chrome covered counters struck her as something oddly from a science fiction movie.

"Agent Pendrell," she repeated again, this time a little louder as he had yet to look up from the board covered in copper and bits of glass that glittered in the light from the overhead lamp over his workspace. Her call had the desired effect this time. He spun and whirled on her, eyes wide as he bumped the work he had been so intent on, sending it skittering across his workspace, bits of wire and other delicate sounding objects scattering from the positions they had originally been placed in.

"I'm so sorry." She glanced in dismay from the jumbled project to his mildly exasperated look that flashed into surprise as recognition lit on his boyish face.

"Agent Scully!" As if she hadn't just disrupted what could have been days, even weeks, of work, he tossed the razor thin tools he had in hand aside, his irritation replaced by helpful cheeriness. "How are things with you and Sp… I mean Agent Mulder?" His pale cheeks flushed pink for the slightest of moments as he tried desperately to cover up near slip of tongue that Scully was sure wasn't a new term to Pendrell in connection to her partner.

"We are busy as always," she replied congenially, ignoring the faux paux Pendrell had nearly committed and digging to the heart of the matter. "We are on a case now, a case that has turned up something a bit unusual, something more up your alley as a matter of fact." She reached into her pocket, pulling out the glass phial she had procured from one of the women of the Allentown MUFON chapter, the metal implant rattling nosily in her hand.

"I was hoping you could tell me something more about this." She passed it over to his outstretched fingers, childish curiosity lighting on Pendrell's inquisitive face. As she recalled from her memory this was actually a fairly common look for the man, the very young head of a very new division for the FBI crime labs. He had been among Scully's very first class of students at Quantico, a tech expert recruited by the FBI from Stanford, he had never even been so much to a family funeral let alone seen a dead cadaver in an autopsy course. She had felt bad that he had been one of her first victims, though certainly not the only one that day, getting sick in the sink of the autopsy bay. He at least maintained enough dignity to not pass out, unlike two of his other classmates, and she'd always respected the fact he stuck with it, despite the unhealthy shade of gray he had assumed for the rest of class.

"Well," Pendrell began slowly, turning the phial over again and again, the sound clinking in the stillness of his lab with a tiny, sort of hollow sound. "I can take a look at it under the microscope, see what I can tell you about it." He grinned cheerfully as he jerked his head towards the back of the lab. "Where did you find it?"
Scully pondered briefly how to answer that. Pendrell had been out when she had her own chip examined. "A woman connected to the investigation found this during a routine medical exam. It was embedded under the skin of her neck."

"Really?" Pendrell's pale eyebrows raised in fascination as he led her towards the back of the labs, frowning down at the small, pinhead of metal that clattered innocuously. "Did she know it was there before?"

"No," Scully replied simply. She waited for the skeptical, amused look, the question on what Spooky Mulder's theory on this all was, perhaps a crack on aliens and implants. But Pendrell was surprisingly not forthcoming; shrugging his shoulders under his lab coat and turning on the large microscope he stopped in front of.

"Well, it could be anything. Perhaps a bit of shrapnel from some injury she didn't know she had?"

"She can't remember ever having an occasion where it would have happened," Scully murmured through suddenly numb lips, grateful for the moment that Pendrell was engrossed in the chip. She watched quietly as he pulled out long, thin tweezers from a work drawer and gently, carefully teased the delicate chip out of its container. How much of the truth about what she knew should she admit to Pendrell? He had always struck her as decent enough, a good scientist with a quick mind and sense of humor that seemed to be able to roll with the strange things he would see form time to time. But as friendly and genial as Pendrell was, there were certain things Scully was positively sure she could never openly throw at him, and a conspiracy on the part of the US government to experiment upon its citizens was one of them.

Pendrell had the chip under the lens of the powerful microscope, fiddling with his keyboard as he glanced down through the viewing oculus of the instrument. With each keystroke and adjustment he made he seemed to become simultaneously more excited and more confused. Was this a good or bad sign, she wondered, remaining silent as he worked, despite the fidgeting nerves within her, the secret worry regarding just what it was that Pendrell might find on the tiny bit of metal. The skin on the back of her neck itched as she waited as still and as silent as possible. Just let the man to do his work, she breathed to herself, staring at the blank computer screen beside the workstation.

"Hmm....amazing!" Clearly he was intrigued by whatever it was. He had the same excited spark she saw many times over in Mulder whenever a new, exciting, or intriguing clue caught his attention.

"Do you know what it is?" Her voice remained calm and neutral though her brain was screaming.

"Looks like some kind of microprocessor." Though by the tone in his voice it looked like no microprocessor he had encountered before.

"So you're saying that this is man made?" Rather than alien made, she chided herself.

"What else would it be?" Certainly the idea of anything being particularly extra-terrestrial had not and would not occur to Pendrell. "I mean, it's definitely state of the art."

With a gleeful smirk, his hands moved quickly over the keyboard, and with a few strokes brought up an image on the monitor, an up-close view of what Scully surmised was the implant covering the screen. It didn't look terribly dissimilar from the board she had found Pendrell working on when she had first entered, except smaller, denser and so much more minuscule.

"The microlithology's extremely complex." Pendrell's words echoed her own thoughts. "I've never seen anything even close to this density."
But if it was man made, it had to be created somewhere, by some company. A sliver of excited relief cut through her raging anxiety as reason came to bear within her again. If someone created it, then that had to be traceable, and perhaps it could lead them to a path that might just give them answers. "Any way of finding out who manufactures it?"

"There are a few companies out in San Jose, couple in Boston. Could be any one of them." Pendrell shrugged, leaning against the counter as he thought. No one name, but it at least gave them some leads, some place to start. She glanced at the computer monitor again, staring at the maze of complicated electronics that held the secrets as to what it could possibly do to anyone it was implanted into.

"What are these chips used for?"

"Video games, brake systems, they're finding new apps everyday. I just read about one being designed to help the severely disabled operate computers using brainwaves."

Her heart leapt practically into her throat. "How?"

"Through direct electrochemical interface with the cerebral cortex." Pendrell looked as awed by the idea as if she had just suggested that aliens had landed on the White House lawn. "Pretty incredible, huh?"

"Yeah," she murmured quietly, her thoughts racing as she stared at the image on the computer screen. This chip could, in theory, control the center for memory and consciousness in the brain, suppressing the memories of the events that happened to her. Her throat tightened painfully as she swallowed around the memory of visiting Dr. Pomerantz, the therapist Melissa had sent her too. The terrifying images that had surfaced during that visit floated to mind, the blank spots in her memory suddenly trickling in, like sands through her fingers. It had all begun the minute she removed the offending chip from her skin.

"Agent Scully?" She turned, blinking blindly at Pendrell's concern, remembering suddenly he was there, watching her with curiosity. "Does that help your case at all?"

"Yes." She breathed out in a long exhale, nodding reassuringly. "Yeah, it does. If you could do me a favor, send me a list of any company that might have manufactured chips like this?"

"Sure. It will take me a day or so, but I can get you a list. There are not a lot of companies who do this sort of thing out there. It's a really specialized field, and this type of work blows what conventional labs are doing out of the water."

"Conventional labs? What do you mean?"

"The labs that do this work tend to be small labs, working specifically only on this type of work. Most get funding from particular companies, sometimes the government, all for doing special projects."

"Would the government have commissioned something like this?" It was the closest Scully was willing to touch on the idea with Pendrell this could be something more than just random coincidence.

"Well, theoretically they could for some of their research, but why would that factor into your case?" Pendrell's ruddy eyebrows flew to hair a shade or two lighter than her own.

"It's just a hunch," she replied diffidently, ignoring Pendrell's obvious curiosity, "Something that Mulder has me checking out."
"Mulder? He probably has some sort of conspiracy involving the government and military and mind control, right?" He chuckled, kidding, but he had unwittingly hit far too close for comfort for her. Scully's could only stare at him, mute, as Pendrell sobered in an instant, his face now flaming bright red as he cleared his throat in obvious concentration.

"I'm just saying - I mean Mulder's brilliant, but, you know..."

He wavered off, suddenly finding his shoes particularly interesting. "So, I'll get those labs for you, okay?"

"Sure," she replied slowly, for a moment feeling for the now very embarrassed lab tech. In all honesty, Pendrell was simply stating the very same sort of ideas that had been bantered about the Bureau for years regarding Fox Mulder. The poor guy had just tried to make light of a situation everyone else took seriously.

"Thank you, Agent Pendrell." She softened her hard expression with what she hoped was a grateful smile, if she could manage that after the last few days. "Keep me posted?"

"Sure!" He nodded eagerly, his eyes floating guiltily around the lab at anything other than Scully. "And that crack about Agent Mulder...I mean..."

"It's all right, I'm sure he's heard them all before." She nodded towards his workstation. "I'll get in touch with you tomorrow."

Scully scolded herself quietly as she moved away from the now pensive Pendrell, back out of the lab. She shouldn't have been so harsh on him, but the thought of what he said of the chip that he still had under his microscope, it unnerved her. Her memories of the event that had so defined her life for the last two years. Why would they go to such extremes? What had they done to her and the other women, and more importantly, why?
Faces

Chapter Summary

In which Scully remembers a face from her past.

The white place. A lab? She had seen enough labs in her lifetime, it should have occurred to her during that first visit with Dr. Pomerantz, but she had run fleeing from the flashing memories, her terrible fear blocking out what now hindsight told her was going on. That white place was a lab, very similar to the one she now studied carefully in Mulder's $29.95 alien autopsy video. Over and over again she ran the video, back and forth as the images traversed and reversed before her eyes. Doctor Ishimaru's fingers moved over the keypad of the tape as she focused in on his face. Was his face one from the vague memories she now dredged up from the depths of her forcibly suppressed sub-conscious? Was he one of the men who had performed the tests on her she had only read about in the DAT tape files? Was she only merchandise to him?

In her minds eye she could remember images, less real memory than simple impression. The sounds of machines, the feeling of cold, dark faces with white masks watching her inquisitively through goggles, with the sort of scientific detachment she would give a corpse on her autopsy table. They are speaking, but in words she can't understand, words that are foreign on her ear. One takes off his mask, leaning down to her, as if to speak. One whose face matches that of Ishimaru. Was it really him in her memory or was it just a dream, her mind placing this man's face there because it wanted to? Inside her stomach filled with ice, cold dread as she stared at the man stilled in the picture. Was he one of the men who put that implant in her mind?

Hurt! She had hurt all over. What had they done to her? What had he done to her?

From somewhere far away the phone beside her jangled, crashing into her thoughts interrupting the tattered threads of fractured memories. Automatically, she picked it up knowing even before she placed the cold plastic to her ear who it was that was calling. "Scully."

"Hey, it's me." Mulder's voice was distant and tinny, obviously his cell. She frowned down at his empty desk chair, realizing that it hadn't occurred to her to wonder where her partner had gotten himself to now.

"Where are you?" The sounds of what sounded like at train sounding in the background of wherever Mulder was at.

"A train yard in Quinnimont, West Virginia. A group of Japanese men just put someone in one of those boxcars we saw in the satellite photos."

The satellite photos? It took Scully several long moments to remember the black and white images that Mulder had pulled from the Japanese diplomats satchel, the ones that had set her on this path down her terrifying memory lane. "I thought you said that it was our government's railroad." Japanese men? Had Mulder caught these scientists in the very act of doing to someone else what they had done to her? The idea disgusted and horrified her.

"Something serious is going down here, Scully."
"What do you mean?"

"The thing they put in the train? It was alive."

Alive? Instinctively her eyes flew up to the screen, to the still image if Ishimaru, the face she remembered from her broken recollections. "Mulder," she began, quavering, fearful comprehension dawning on her.

He didn't seem to hear her. "I got to get on that train. It's hooking up with a Canadian passenger train outside Cincinnati."

"Mulder!" She paused, licking now suddenly dry lips as her mind spun furiously, pieces she hadn't realized even existed now falling into a scintillatingly bright focus. "I was right about Doctor Ishimaru. He's not dead. In fact, he's on your videotape."

She could hear him pause for a hairbreadth of a moment. Was he seeing the picture too? Or was he simply too focused on whatever mad plan he had going on at the moment to really understand what it was she was telling him. "Well, that's where you know him from, then."

If only it were that simple. "No, that's not where I know him from at all."

There was long silence on the other end of the phone. Puzzled, Scully wondered for the briefest of moments if Mulder had lost cell phone connection, as not even Mulder's steady breath on the other end could be heard. "Mulder?"

"Yeah, I'm here," he muttered, distracted. "What do you mean you known him from something else? Medical circles?"

"No." Ishimaru's face floating over her hovered in front of her eyes, "Mulder I remember him from my abduction, from wherever they took me."

She didn't say "From whatever they did to me." She didn't have to.

"Are you sure?" It was Mulder's standard line of questioning, indeed it was standard for anyone investigator to ask that question, he hadn't meant it to question her own memory. Mulder of all people would be the first to believe her on this. But it still stung, the unstated implication. Could her memories be reliable from a time till very recently she had protested she couldn't recall.

"As sure as I can be about this," she sighed unsteadily. "I don't know what happened or what they did, but for whatever reason I remember him."

"Could it be the chip?" He had leapt to the conclusion she had come to only after speaking to Pendrell on the chips qualities. She shouldn't be surprised.

"I don't know for sure." She hesitated. Always the scientist, always reserving judgment. "I have Agent Pendrell up in the science crime lab looking at one of the chips for me, he should have the results tomorrow."

She waited silently on her end of the line, expecting Mulder to press her, to force her to recall further memories with the sort of zeal she had seen him turn on other abductees, newly returned. Wasn't that what she was after all, she reminded herself, staring at the seemingly endless wall of filing drawers filled with hundreds of case files. She was an abductee, an unsolved case, one who until recently had no recollection of what it was that was done to her. Her memory, the treasure trove inside, if she could access it could give Mulder all the answers he could ever want on the truth of what was going on. It would certainly give her the story of what it was that had occurred
to her over a year before, when Duane Berry had drug her out of the comfort of her home. Was she ready for that story yet? Was that a wound she was willing to pick at and open?

He surprised her. "I have to go, Scully." He was apologetic in his abrupt departure. "I have a train to catch."

"You won't do anything stupid?" Alarm bells began to go off despite her haze of fear and images of Mulder turning up dead alongside the train tracks outside of DC came immediately to bear.

"I want to track this, Scully. I want to see if I can find out what it is they put inside."

"They've already killed people on these train cars, Mulder, you saw that in the video, you saw that in New Mexico." She swallowed, the link between Mulder's last near-fatal episode and this forming easily in her mind. "Whatever it is they are hiding in these boxcars, they are going to great lengths to cover up the evidence. And they proven before they are willing to kill you along with it."

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on being blown up out of existence again," Mulder teased lightly. "Besides, I don't have my Native American medicine man to save my ass on this one."

"I'm not joking, Mulder," she scolded, as the timer on the video's pause feature released, and the images on the screen flashed forward again, unaware that death lay in wait for them in mere moments. "They tried killing you once. They killed Ishimaru. Don't do anything stupid."

"You know I can't make that promise, Scully."

"That's exactly what I was afraid of," she breathed as the gunshots tore through the boxcar lab, blurring across the television screen.
Was it some sort of sign that Mulder's building supervisor smiled and greeted Scully by name as she passed him in the entryway of the building?

"Hey there, Agent Scully! Mr. Mulder out again?" The thin, wisp of a man was cheerful enough, wiping greasy hands on his coveralls. He had no way of knowing that at the moment Mulder was attempting to gain access to a secret lab attached to a train heading to Canada. Perhaps his easy-going smile might have faltered, even melted, if she had mentioned the fact she was half frightened her partner was doing something terribly, terribly foolish.

"Yeah." Her answering smile was tight as she fumbled for the keys she kept in her pocket. The rattled between her fingers as she punched the "up" button for the elevator. "I'm going to go check on his fish."

"Not a problem, ma'am." The little man nodded genially. "I'm just glad we have the likes of you and Agent Mulder around. Crazy things happen around this place, you know. Remember the poor, old lady last summer who shot her husband?"

She did remember. She had been the one to call the investigative officer and have him check the woman's medical samples for the same, LSD like substance that she had found in Mulder's bloodstream. "Yes, well I'm glad we can be of some small service." She wasn't sure what sort of service, given the propensity they both seemed to have for having their apartments broken into by outside parties. The bell of the elevator sounded, blessedly, as the doors opened, offering her escape.

"I'll just go upstairs then," Scully muttered awkwardly, rushing inside and punching the button for the fourth floor. It was weird enough being so familiar around this building even the super said hello. Unless he suspected something more risqué going on. She blushed at the idea that ran through her head. Honestly, did everyone just assume because two, reasonably attractive people were partnered together professionally and happened to get along well as friends it automatically meant they were sleeping with one another? Mulder had mentioned once it was on the rumor circuit. She had been horrified at the time, worried what people thought of her as an agent to even believe she would do something like that. Weren't other partners close though? Wasn't that the point of all those team-building seminars the Bureau loved to throw, building trust between agents? Seriously, how much trust was there between herself and Mulder? He had her feeding his fish? She wasn't terribly sure, however, Mulder would return the favor with Queequeg.

Unsurprisingly, Mulder's hallway was still and silent as she entered. Did anyone bother to come out of their apartments at all here, she mused, as she fumbled through her keys, searching for the one with Mulder's name tagged on it. She should have noticed the sound of steps, so foreign in this setting usually, but had focused on the little brass key and singling it out from the other pieces of metal on her chain.

"Agent Scully!" The voice was deep and dark, startling in the silence of Mulder's apartment. She
whirled at the sound, a tall, dark man standing just outside of the shadows by the bend in the hallway, one that led to another set of apartments Scully had never seen. Mulder's informant. Had he been waiting there for her or had he simply just stood their, betting that Mulder would come home eventually?

"What are you doing here?" The man advanced on her despite her angry accusation. Their last meeting in this place had not been a friendly one. His indifference towards Mulder's life had become clear that night, as she had desperately tried to find where her partner had gone to in the hopes of saving his life. And this stranger had been less than forthcoming. Yet he always seemed to be right on the spot should he have a need of Mulder for whatever plans he had going on in whatever shadowy realm he chose to abide in. She was hardly surprised as his impassive face glared in agitated consternation, his eyes flipping down towards the keys in her hand.

"Have you spoken to Agent Mulder?" His tone was urgent, and something in his cold gaze caused the now familiar fear to sputter into life again.

"No, why?" It was something of a lie. She hadn't spoken to Mulder in at least an hour.

"He's in danger." He stopped just inches away from her, a large shadow hanging over her. She tried not to shrink away from him as he loomed, hands stuffed into his dark, black trench coat.

"How do you know?" Was he watching Mulder, following his every move, just to see what he would do next, to see how to thwart it? She didn't trust this stranger and his motives? He had made it perfectly clear that Mulder and his welfare was solely dependent on whatever plans this man had. And she had no doubt that his concern for Mulder's welfare now meant precisely that Mulder had hit on something painfully close to whatever this man was involved in.

"He's tracking a train. You can't let him get on it." There was a silent threat somewhere in those words, Scully could feel it. Still she chose to ignore them as she defiantly met his insistent glare and slid the key to Mulder's apartment firmly into the lock of his door.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she breathed, the words tripping off easily as she opened Mulder's door and stepped inside, intending to slam the thin door in the man's face. Before she could even get the door shut, however, one dark, leather clad hand slammed it back open, the tall man's broad shoulder's filling the doorway menacingly.

"You've got to get word to him," the man insisted, oblivious to the flash of anger that shot up through Scully, as she fairly bristled at the man's overtly high-handed demands. What in the hell made him think he could come into Mulder's home and demand she believe him and call Mulder off of whatever crazed scheme he had at the moment? As much as she would rather Mulder wasn't out there trying to do something she had no doubt would get him killed, she also knew that the only reason this man would be here now trying to bully her into doing something was because Mulder was onto something here...something that may, potentially, have something to do with what happened to her.

"Why should I trust you? You've lied to us before?" She wasn't about to back down, not to him or anyone else. She had been down this road before with another of Mulder's informants, and Mulder had nearly died because of it.

"You're wasting time!" The man seethed between straight, white teeth, his black eyes flashing. "Do you understand?"

Time? What did time have to do with anything? He meant something by it, but was unwilling to come out and say it straight, to admit to something she could catch him on. He was a cautious man.
He had to be, she surmised, dealing in the shadows he seemed to lurk in. Time? The train was on a schedule. Would there be a certain point where it would stop somewhere and drop off the car that it had picked up elsewhere? Perhaps so that a repeat performance of the video tape's massacre could be staged? Maybe, but something told her that wasn't the likely case. The man had said time was running out…running…

"There's a bomb on that car, isn't there?" Panic rose as she almost blindly reached for her phone.

"It's not set to go off now." The man grabbed her arm even as the phone was mostly out of her pocket. "It's set to release at a certain location in Montana. The car will be detached from the train, which will continue on to Vancouver, leaving the passengers none the wiser. In the wilderness the train will be detonated, and the evidence on board the boxcar that Mulder is looking for will be destroyed."

"What evidence is on there," she demanded hotly, yanking her arm out of the man's tight, iron grasp. Unsurprisingly his mouth clamped shut as he straightened. He was depending on her fear for her partner to override her desire to know just what it was that was being hidden on the boxcar, the very same type that was used for the tests performed on her.

"What is on that car?" She repeated again as the man's dark eyes narrowed dangerously. They were at an impasse. He wanted Mulder to avoid that boxcar, as did she. But she couldn't be sure that the man's reasons for trying to prevent Mulder's access didn't have to do with his desire to hide whatever it was on that car at the moment.

"Are you willing to gamble your partner's life on that, Agent Scully?" His voice was cool and nonchalant. "You once chastised me for putting his life in danger heedlessly. Are the answers really so important you would do the same thing?"

The comparison would have been laughable if the situation wasn't so deadly serious. "I have no guarantee that Mulder will do as I ask." Hell knows he usually didn't when it meant bodily harm and or bodily death.

"You're the only person he'll listen to about this," the man replied. And damn it all, she knew that, too.

"Fine." Without taking her eyes off of him, she raised her phone and punched the number one on her speed dial, the one that connected straight to Mulder. She waited as it rang, praying it would go through.

"Mulder!" His voice was tight and breathless on the other end. Had he gotten on the train already?

"Mulder, don't get on the train/" She stuttered as quickly as possible, hoping he hadn't managed to board it yet.

There was a surprise pause on the other end, before Mulder returned, sounding querulous. "Why not?"

"Because they know where you are," she returned, her eyes meeting the man's as she spoke. "And they know what you're doing."

"Who told you that," he demanded, his suspicions immediately raised. Damn Mulder and his perception. She swore irritably to herself as she turned from the man at the door.

"Look, Mulder, it's just too dangerous."
"Who told you, Scully?" She couldn't evade this, not with him. She glanced back at the man, wondering what to even say. The man stared back at her. She knew without him saying it she couldn't tell Mulder it was him.

"It's coming, Scully." In the distance she could hear the train whistle, as the wind picked up over the static, cellular phone signal.

"Let it go," she barked, dread gripping her, knowing that it was useless.

She was hardly surprised when he replied shortly. "I can't."

"Mulder…don't get on that train," she was fairly shouting now, but it was no use. He didn't respond as she heard the train approach over the phone. "Mulder? Mulder!"

There was no response. Just what in the hell was he doing?

"Mul…." Static cut in and then her cell signal went dead. For the briefest of moments she flashed backed to the horrible moment on the road in New Mexico, when Mulder's phone cut out on her as she drove back to Washington. He had been inside one of those damnedable boxcars then, too, and it had nearly killed him. She turned to the man in the doorway, eyes wide as she held the now dead phone in her hand.

"I want to know what's on that train?" She slipped the phone into her pocket, eyes flashing, not caring for the man's lethal glower.

"It doesn't matter now," he shrugged indifferently, as if he hadn't just been begging her to keep her partner from off that car not thirty seconds before.

"Our government is operating a secret railroad. They put something on that train in West Virginia, something living."

All too briefly there was a flicker of appreciation in the man's eye, surprised she had pieced out this much. "What more is there to know," he asked maddeningly, clearly unwilling to divulge anything she hadn't already figured out.

"What the Japanese have to do with it. How a man named Ishimaru is involved." The man she remembered from her newly resurfacing memories.

"That I don't know."

Don't know? Scully fumed astounded at the man's gall. He swooped in out of the shadows, filled with dire threats and horrible warnings, demanding she call her partner, telling her that it was imperative, and yet gave her nothing to help her save him. What did he know, and why was it he knew that Mulder could potentially die there? Who knew Mulder was at that train car?

The man turned, making to leave, and without thinking Sully reached for her weapon, pulling it out easily enough and training it on the man. "Don't tell me you don't know, you smug son of a bit…"

Too fast for her to even see him, the man grabbed the gun from her, easily disarming her without even leaving a bruise upon her pale skin. Stunned, she stared at her now empty hands, then up at the man, who looked torn between amusement and empathy.

"There are limits to my knowledge," he growled, his large hands nearly palming her weapon.

"I don't have time for your convenient ignorance," she snapped, tired of this stupid game they all
played, this silly dance over information, real lives were at stake, Mulder's life was at stake.

"What were you going to do," the man taunted lightly. "Shoot me? Just like the men that shot your sister?"

The air fled her lungs as she realized what he said, the mocking glint in his eye leaving her nearly speechless. When she did speak again, her tone was accusing. "You know them too?"

"You want to know what's on that train? Who killed your sister?" His dark eyes glittered in the dim light of Mulder's apartment. "You find out what they put in your neck."

He knew about that as well? Why was she not surprised. "The implant?"

"It holds more than I could ever tell you. Maybe everything you need to know."

Everything she needed to know? Her mind spun at the possibility of what he was saying. The chip perhaps did more than suppress her memory. Pendrell had said it was a microprocessor, It carried a great deal of information, Perhaps all of the secrets to what had happened to her could be found in that one, tiny piece of silicon. But how to extract it, how did she find those secrets?

Wordlessly the man in front of her handed back her gun, handle first. Without a word she took it back as he left, moving towards the way he came, back towards the shadows he emerged out of. She watched, silent and thoughtful, thinking of the chip that she had given to Pendrell that morning. She reached into her pocket again, pulling out her phone.

She made it through the formalities of the FBI switchboard to the Sci-Crime lab, praying that she might still catch Pendrell there. She doubted it. Most normal, sane people went home for the evening to enjoy what semblance of a life they had. Scully was pleasantly surprised though when Pendrell picked up at his extension.

"Agent Pendrell, it's Agent Scully," she breathed, stepping out of Mulder's apartment and closing the door behind her. "Do you have time this evening to study that chip again with me?"
Had Agent Pendrell been any other FBI crime lab agent he would have been far less cheerful about seeing Scully at his office at 7:30 at night.

"I was wondering if you would be able to get in." Pendrell grinned as she swept through the Sci-Crime lab door, cursing rush hour DC traffic under her breath.

"I was out in Arlington when I called and it seemed everyone in Northern Virginia had the same idea I did." She threw her overcoat on the nearest chair that looked the furthest away from anything potentially delicate and breakable. "I'm sorry for keeping you so late."

"It's not a problem! Anything I can do to help!" Pendrell waved off her apology as if she had simply asked him to fetch her a cup of coffee, not give up his entire evening. "Besides, you chip has proven a tricky mystery. Its not often we get those down here."

"Tricky?" Her eyebrows raised curiously as she glanced at the station where Pendrell had been working. "How?"

"Let's just say I won't see this sort of complex chip in a remote control car anytime soon." He waved her over to the complex set up of electronic equipment and computers. "I ran some preliminary tests on it, just to see what the chip was designed to do." He pulled a rolling office chair from one of the workstations and held it out for her, the sort of gracious move that Scully rarely saw out of fellow, male FBI agents these days. She smiled grateful as she took the seat and rolled it closer to the computer monitor that Pendrell had earlier displayed the chip in full view under the microscope.

"As you can see, the chip is pretty quiescent now." Pendrell moved between the various machines around his set up, flipping on switches as he returned to the microscope. "Chips work just like the nervous system of the body, working on electrical impulses to read and perform functions. In this case, this chip was overlaid with a neural network of sorts, a complex data storage device if you will."

"Like a computer disk?" Scully tried to relate it to something a bit more tangible.

"More like a computer hard drive, only unlike a computer hard drive, this chip is limited in what it can do. It's created for a specific set of processes, unlike a computer which can usually handle many processes simultaneously."

"So what was the chip designed to do?" That was the crux of the question Scully wanted answered. Could it hold the truth about her missing memories and the testing done to her?

"That's what my tests tried to find out." Pendrell bent his bright head over the microscope, clicking blindly at his keyboard as he did so. On the monitor a graph appeared with various lines running across it.
"This graph shows the electronic impulses I'm feeding to the chip." He looked up enough to nod at the screen. "I'm feeding the chip impulses. The graph is recording its output, which, when I remove the current, changes slightly but continues. This means the neural network is storing information."

That was just what she had hoped to hear- and feared. "Biological information?"

"That was my first guess. You've already told me the chip was placed subcutaneous under the back of the neck, right?"

She nodded slowly, feeling the scar tissue on the back of her neck twinge.

"So it makes sense that it would be recording impulses traveling to and from the central nervous system." Pendrell frowned at the graph, his eyebrows crinkling thoughtfully. Something obviously wasn't making sense for him.

"But what?" Scully's voice cut sharply as she glanced between the graph and Pendrell's studious confusion over it.

"But look at the graph." His fingers circled one area of the data, one that apparently had meaning for him. "Those are what we call reverberatory loops. They indicate the presence of circular neuronal activity in the brain."

She felt her mouth dry as if filled with cotton. "Memory formation." Flashes of the white place blazed alive in her memory.

"Yeah. The chip seems to be mimicking that process, replicating the memory process in the brain."

"Like a computer hard drive," That explained his earlier analogy.

"Yeah, but no hard drive we've ever seen. This kind of neural network could be not only collecting information, but artificially replicating a person's mental processes."

"You could know a person's every thought." Ice began creeping down under the skin of her neck, trickling and freezing down her spine.

"Frightening," Pendrell agreed gravelly, shuddering slightly under his white, lab coat. He rose from the computer, rounding the table to what looked like a desk beyond. Quietly Scully followed, the sickening idea of just what that chip might have taken from her memory churning in her stomach.

"Anyway, I showed the chip to some of my tech heads and they weren't as blown away as I thought they'd be," He sounded vaguely disappointed.

"They've seen this technology before?"

Pendrell flipped on a light over his desk, rummaging across a field of papers and receipts, sticky notes and discarded pens. "Well, they've seen neural nets before, but never one as complex as that. Nor are they likely to anytime soon."

"What do you mean?"

"The chip's so delicate that I effectively destroyed it when I began working on it, but I found something in the silicon matrix, what I believe is the name of the manufacturer." Deftly he plucked up a sheet of paper from one of the piles.
Scully didn't need to be told where it was made, she had a sinking feeling she already knew. "It's Japanese, isn't it?"

If the tech heads' lack of enthusiasm for the chip hadn't deflated Agent Pendrell, her question certainly had. "How did you know?"

"Oh, it was just a guess." She shrugged, glossing over the flush on her face as Pendrell passed her the paperwork, Japanese characters circled on the page.

"Well, I checked for you. I assumed you'd want me to." He sounded rather proud of himself for thinking of it. "But there's no record or information on the manufacturer either here or in Japan, except this."

He passed her another sheet, this one a computer print out with a West Virginia address and a Japanese name; Zama. She frowned. He wasn't Ishimaru. An associate perhaps, someone working with him, perhaps a fellow Cold War refuge brought over by the government?

"I had Fed Ex, U.P.S., the postal service, every commercial courier go through their computer records. They turned up one shipment, sent to a Doctor Shiro Zama at a research facility out in Perkey, West Virginia." Pendrell was fairly beaming now, bouncing on the balls of his heels briefly, delighted he had been able to sift out a piece of data that Scully was fully willing to admit she highly doubted either she or Mulder could have found. And for only ten hours, even Scully was impressed by the fast turn around, this type of investigation normally would drag out through any other FBI lab for days.

"Well done, Agent Pendrell." She meant it, most lab techs, especially those who knew her work with Mulder wouldn't have been bothered with taking her phone call this late of an evening and certainly wouldn't have stayed late to explain it all to her, nor have bothered to track down Zama's West Virginia address. They were all crucial links to whatever it was that Mulder's informant wanted her to find, the information to what it was Mulder was tracking down on that train. She didn't have that sort of time to waist, and bless Pendrell for doing the work without questions or hang ups, simply because she asked. On impulse she reached for his arm, patting it gratefully as she frowned down at the West Virginia address, already wondering how long it would take her to drive there at this time of night and find this Zama. "Keep up the good work," she murmured thankfully as he flushed a bright, lobster pink in front of her.

"Hey, thanks," he shrugged affably. "Keep it up yourself."

His turn of phrase gave her pause. He didn't know about the case she and Mulder were working, did he? She blinked at the poor man for the briefest of moments. Had she given something away? She had simply said that the chip was from a woman, and it had to do with a case, but no other specifics. Would Pendrell be terribly shocked, though, if she had told him where it was from? After all, it was an X-file and to be honest, who in the department didn't know the strange things that entailed. Perhaps he would be someone worthwhile to go to in the future for these types of things that came across their desk.

After all, she smiled, he was quick, he was eager, and very, very sweet in his own way. A nice kid, in that nerdy sort of way, she supposed. And good enough to give up an evening to help her save her crazed partner from himself, she realized as she glanced at her watch, praying that she had enough time to get to wherever Zama's address was in West Virginia and get to the bottom of whatever it was on that train before Mulder did something exceedingly foolish and got himself killed. Perhaps, she mused she might even find some evidence of what exactly was done to her in one of those train cars. What tests had they performed on her and on Penny Northern and Betsy Hagopian? What did it have to do with Purity Control or with the green ooze she saw in the video?
And what did this all have to do with the burnt out boxcar laying in the New Mexico desert near the Hosteens' home?

Thank God for Pendrell, she breathed as she rushed to her car, one of her few good finds from her days teaching. If she made it out of this latest escapade alive, she'd have to think of some way of making this up to him.
In the Name of Science

Chapter Summary

In which Scully discovers just how far science can go.

Perkey was as rural and quiet of an area as one could find this close to the Washington DC metropolitan area. Not far from Harper's Ferry, it was tiny, remote, tucked in between the rolling hills that trapped the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, the sort of remote place where people could hide things they didn't want found, such as secret government experimental programs. Her eyes roamed the darkness along the winding, country road, searching for the area from the address that Agent Pendrell had given her. So far the hills were ominously silent. Mulder's informant said that she could find all the information she needed to know on that chip, about her abduction, who killed her sister, about what was on that train that they were so intent on destroying. If she could find out, get Mulder off of there…what in the world had possessed him to board that train? It was a rhetorical question at best, she knew that. It was Mulder, careless and heedless as always, hell bent on his truths no matter what the cost. He had a penance to pay, and as usual it was up to her to fit the pieces of the mystery together before he did something completely stupid.

Resentful much, she asked herself, as the headlights of her car landed a small street sign, almost invisible in the darkness, Rural Route 214, to her left along the deserted highway. She turned onto the road, scanning it for a gate, buildings. Several miles later, and over a rise, one particular grouping of low, squat, gray buildings caught her eye, the sort of industrial look favored by everything from county road commissioners to military barracks compounds. It lacked any sort of signage introducing itself and in fact Scully wasn't all together sure it was the place she was looking for. She slowly pulled her car up a crunching, gravel drive, waiting for a locked gate guarded by a stern looking soldier, curious as to why a woman from the FBI was driving up at a time well after midnight. Eerily enough, she found none. The gate that should have enclosed the property now hung open drunkenly, flung wide but left as if forgotten. Scully paused, her brake lights glowing an red in the growing fog surrounding the area. Was this Zama's facility, she wondered, glancing at the map lying on the seat beside her.

The buildings in the distance were dark, there were no signs marking this as any place special. In fact all signs of life seemed missing from the expanse of squat buildings and wide, grassy yard. Carefully, she pulled her vehicle up the drive, parking it as she turned off her engine and watched the area for long moments. If anyone did have a secret testing facility in this area, either they hadn't been here for some time, or they had gone to great lengths to hide its secrets. The protection and activity she would have expected for such a place were non-existent. Had Pendrell's information turned up an old, abandoned sight? Bitter frustration threatened to overwhelm her, but she ignored it, reaching behind her in her backseat for a flashlight. Quietly she stepped out of her car, flipping on the white beam to cut into the darkness, shining it around the overgrown lawn towards the buildings beyond, lighting her way as she made her way to the closest one. So still was the night and everything in it, the nearby woods were even eerily silent as she walked. Her breath was loud in her ears as she moved, misting in front of her in the chill, November air. There was no one here, she realized, and certainly nothing that marked this as a place where any sort of secret testing was done. Nothing in the cloudy, resurfacing memory spoke to her that this should be a place she should remember. She paused, shining her light around the buildings. Nothing moved.
She was giving into the niggling thought that despite Pendrell's best efforts, his investigation was for naught. Clearly there was no one and nothing here. Frustration warred with defeat inside of her and the desperate thought that Mulder was still on that train, still trying to find whatever was on that doomed boxcar. She had no way of stopping the train or him until she found evidence of what was on that boxcar, evidence enough to use her authority to stop the train. So far, she had nothing.

The sudden bang off towards her side made her heart leap as she spun, concentrating her beam in the direction of the noise while silently cursing that she couldn't hold it and reach for her weapon at the same time. Perhaps an animal, she tried to rationalize, when she found nothing under the shine of her flashlight, but in the distance just beyond it she could hear someone scrabbling, and her eyes caught something flickering in darkness.

"Hey! Stop!" She yelled, as suddenly the noise of not just one but several footsteps sounded by her, all moving towards the first of the squat, gray buildings.

Without thinking Scully took off after them, flying across the grassy expanse, her flashlight catching glimpses of white tennis shoes in the flickering light. None of the feet seemed to want to listen to her. Into the building they ran as she followed suit, skittering up a set of wooden stairs that let into the dark building. She paused in the doorway, flashing her light around. Nothing. It was a large room, expansive, with bunks covering the walls like a dormitory of some sort. There was a desk close by and a lamp on it. She reached for it, seeking to shed some light, but pulled back her probing fingers as the soft skin scorched on the heat of lamps reflector. It had been on till recently, judging by that heat, but the room and the building appeared vacant now. She turned her light towards the back of the room and each of the windows. There was no other door than the one she had entered in, and none of the windows were open or even easily accessible for anyone to climb out. She stepped carefully into the room, looking towards the beds, wondering if anyone was cowering behind some piece of furniture, hoping she wouldn't see in the darkness.

Another sound behind her, a creak, and she spun again, training her light on the spot. A figure was rushing through a trapdoor in the floor, pushing down almost as soon as her light trained on the spot. If she had blinked she would have missed it, but thankfully she caught the movement and moved slowly, carefully towards the spot in the floor where the trapdoor almost fit seamlessly with the rest of the wood. A chord stuck out, incongruous with the other wood panels. Scully bent to pluck it up between her fingers and pull. It came up easily and she shined her flashlight down into the darkness below, as murmurs and fearful whimpers rang up from underneath her, and one figure, bald, pale, and cowering held up its hands over its face, murmuring plaintively.

"Please, don't hurt us!" The voice was a masculine one, though if Scully had to judge by his oversized, misshapen head she would have never have guessed what gender he was until he spoke. What in the hell had happened to him?

"I'm not going to hurt you," she breathed softly, staring down at the huddled figures, all watching her from deep, misshapen eye sockets. They looked, eerily enough, like the very images of the aliens Mulder was forever chasing after. Carefully she raised her free, left hand, high enough that they could see it. "My gun is put away. See, I'm a federal agent." She swallowed hard as she crouched down closer to the hole. "I was looking for Dr. Zama."

The collective group of them either didn't seem to hear her or were too frightened to say anything. They continued to huddle closer to one another, as if for protection from the lone women above them wielding a flashlight.

"Who are you? Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm an FBI agent." She fumbled in her long, overcoat pocket for her badge, flipping it open with her left hand to show to the group below.
The speaker, the man bold enough to say something in the first place, lowered his hands carefully as he gazed up at her. "We - we live here. We've lived here at the facility most of our lives.

Most of their lives? For what reason? "What kind of facility?"

"The Hansen's Disease Research Facility." He blinked up at her from his ruined, misshapen face.

"Hansen's Dis... do you mean this is a leper colony?" Did they have those anymore in the United States? A treatment had been discovered years before, the disease was curable. Why did this place exist?

"No more. The facility's closed now." He glanced around to the other lepers around him, all with their sunken, white faces and heads elongated more than was natural for a human. What sort of leprosy did that to anyone?

"I..." she began helplessly, horrified by the pitiful scene before her. "Look, I came here looking for a Doctor Shiro Zama."

"Doctor Zama isn't here anymore. None of the medical staff is."

"Where did they go?" And why would they leave their patients alone here, huddling in the dark like frightened animals.

"Well, they all left right before the death squads started coming," he said mournfully, with the shell-shocked sort of tone in his voice that said that he had not only seen something horrible, he had barely escaped it himself.

"What death squads?" Just what had happened hear? What was going on? Death squads were terms one used in reference to Nazi Germany, not a research program for lepers in the middle of West Virginia.

"That's who we've been hiding from." He waved an elongated hand towards his compatriots, all of who watched her with solemn fear. "We thought you'd come to kill us, like they killed all the others."

"Others?" Her mouth went dry as she stared at them. "You mean that you are all that's left?"

The man nodded solemnly, silent and grievous.

"How? Why?" She was nearly too stunned for words. It was unimaginable what he was suggesting, that anyone would do this to poor, helpless people in this day and age, in this country even. Except they were willing to mow down an entire boxcar full of doctors on Mulder's video and they were willing to blow another up to hide their evidence. And then there was Betsy Hagopian, dying in the hospital in Allentown. Of course these things could happen, they were happening all around her the entire time, as far back as Deep Throats death in her arms. These were men who would stop at nothing to hide their evidence, even at the death of innocents.

"Can you show me," Scully asked quickly, holding a hand out to the man speaking.

He stared at her hand reluctantly, as if still fearful she was going to kill him.

"I promise, I'm not hear to hurt you. I'm hear to stop this." She said this last bit on impulse. Not that she could do much to stop what had happened already. She could however learn of what was going on, find out what was occurring in this camp, to these people, and bring it to light.
The man watched her outstretched fingers for a long, breathless moment. Then, unsteadily, he reached one of his long, cold hands, and wrapped it around her small one. He ignored the murmurs of his fellows as he climbed up the ladder, Scully helping to keep him steady as he scaled up to the top. He wasn't much taller than her and seemed stooped by the disease that obvious ravaged his body. In the darkness, his sunken eyes seemed to glitter, the resemblance to one of Mulder's gray aliens becoming more eerily distinct. He was dressed in worn, dirty linen clothes, almost pajamas, and on his shirt was printed the last name "Escalante".

"Is that your name?" She pointed towards his left breast pocket, his eyes following where she pointed.

"Yes," he whispered, something like a frown crossing his scared visage. "Mando. Armando Escalante." His English was flawless, but he spoke his own name with a pronounced accent. Mexican perhaps?

"How long have you been here?" He had said most of his life.

"Since I was eighteen. Ten years," he shrugged, shuffling his feet. "They took me because I had the disease."

"Hansen's?"

He nodded briefly at Scully's question.

"Where are you from?"

"They found me in Brownsville," Escalante sighed. "I guess you can say I was from there. My abuela, she took me to a clinic there. That's when they found the Hansen's Disease. Next thing I knew, someone showed up telling her that they had a place that could make someone like me better."

"And she let them take you?" Ten years here, ending up like this. Clearly something had gone horribly wrong. Escalante shrugged again. Perhaps with everything he had seen in these last days, it mattered little to him why or how it was he ended up here.

"Abuela, she was a good Catholic. She thought this was the answer to her prayers. I came. They never let me out again."

"What sort of tests were they running here, Mando?"

He watched her quietly again with his deep, glittering eyes. "Come, I'll show you."

Scully glanced down at the others, all watching her and Escalante with fearful gazes. "We'll be back," she tried to assure them as she reached for the trap door and closed it firmly, gesturing for Escalante to lead so that she could follow him in the darkness.

Her flashlight could hardly keep up with the younger man in the dark. He moved them carefully, building to building, across the yards of the facility towards a growth of trees must on the outskirts. Familiar with the territory, he picked out a path through the tangle of tall trees and low-lying bushes, slowing enough to allow Scully to follow at her more encumbered pace.

"How many have been killed," she gasped as she hurried up behind him, trying to keep up.

"Hundreds. All but us."
Hundreds? Could he be serious? "I don't understand how there could have been hundreds of people here when leprosy is supposed to be a treatable disease." The frequency of outbreaks was so small, it was hardly heard of in the United States anymore. Certainly not enough for hundreds of patients at this facility.

"Well, it is," he muttered grimly, though Scully was unclear what he meant by that. "Me and the other people back at the hiding place, we're the last. Our disfigurement forced us into the camps before there was a treatment."

But there had been a treatment for decades, a very effective treatment for the last twenty years. Zama had lied to these people. But why?

"Who were the others?"

"We never knew," Escalante replied, shaking his head. "They began arriving several years ago, but they were kept apart from us."

"And they had Hansen's disease?"

"No, no, they had the Hansen's deformities. Doctor Zama would round them up in groups for treatment. And then the ones that returned always came back worse, with terrible burns all over their bodies."

Worse? If they didn't have the disease, what were they receiving treatments for? A niggling voice in the back of her brain reminded Scully of Mulder's video, of the substance he pointed out. Could this be another angle of their experiments, people who had been subjected to the Purity Control virus and who were now suffering from its effects? She shuddered as she thought of it, thought of Escalante and his horrible deformities, and how they were used as a cover up for what was really going on. Just what did this Purity Control virus do to people?

When they broke through the woods it was into a field, large and empty. In the distance a mound of earth lay, turned over a deep trench in the soft dirt.

"Over there," he shuddered, pointing with one inhumanely pale hand towards the ditch, moving steadily to it, glancing over his shoulder to see if she followed. Scully did, her light leading the way, half afraid of what she might see inside. Escalante stopped, glancing sadly over the edge, his face pensive as he waved her up, urging her to come and see too.

"Oh….my…" She gasped as her eyes locked on the scene below. "Oh my god!"

Hundreds of bodies lay piled below her feet, like a nightmarish scene out of black and white film of the German concentration camps. Bodies, more deformed even than Escalante's, lay heaped on one another, their bodies riddled with bullet holes, like some horrible re-enactment of the very stories heard from Jewish survivors of World War II. They all lay, like broken dolls, human bodies with horrible alien heads, features looking like something out of one of Mulder's abduction stories - or the boxcar in New Mexico he had founs - or the baby she had recovered in the Erlenmeyer flask, the one with the same rounded, flattened head, and the large, rounded eyes. Was this what Purity Control was designed to do to people? Was this what they were trying to test it on? What had they done to these people? What had they done to her?

"There are more of these pits," Escalante murmured sadly beside her. "They just dump the bodies on top of each other, like they were garbage."

Over the trees, through the valley in which the facility sat, there was a distinct thumping of blades
against air, the sound of a helicopter coming from somewhere. Instinctively, Scully's eyes flew
upwards as she searched the skies. Escalante besides her becoming agitated.

"They're coming!" He panicked, fear causing him to turn from her and run, back the way they had
come.

"Wait! Hey!" She glanced at the light that was beginning to approach over the clearing, confused
as to what Escalante meant by running. Was it the death squads again? Why? Didn't they believe
they had killed everyone? The light shined down on them, pinpointing them both.

Escalante screamed "No!" He ran faster for the woods.

Scully paused, unsure of what to do as the white, hot light from above suddenly blinded her. She
wondered if it was pointless to run from whatever it was coming or if Escalante wasn't right, she
should hide. Deciding at least to follow him, she rushed after him, back the way they had come,
the light following them both as they dodged through the trees and underbrush again, red lights
now dotting the woods where only moments ago there had been none. As suddenly as the
helicopter appeared, she was surrounded.

Red lights flashed and a hard, cold voice in front of her growled, low and deadly. "Move and your
dead."

If the threat wasn't enough to stun her into quiet, the shot in the distance was. She stilled, her blood
freezing at what she knew was the consequences of that meant. She turned to the sound, uncaring if
they fired on her for it.

"You killed that man," she whispered, glaring at him as he returned her disgust with cold
indifference.

"You are trespassing on private property." His gun remained fixed on her, unyielding. From the
side, one of the other soldiers closed in on her, grabbing one of the arms she now held up in the
face of the weapon trained on her.

"I'm a federal agent here conducting an investigation," she snapped, as the soldier immediately
began patting her down, finding her weapon instantly. He confiscated it, ignoring her protests as
his fellow's eyes narrowed on her dangerously.

"You have no authorization to be here."

"Look in my pocket." She glanced at the soldier at her side. The man did as she asked, slipping a
hand in first her right, then her left coat pockets, pulling out the billfold that contained her badge
and holding it up to his compatriot. The other man's cheek twitched slightly before he nodded.

"Take her back to the facility." He spat the words out as if he were sorry that she wouldn't meet the
same fate as poor Escalante. Scully's heart went out to the poor man, who had done nothing more
than become ill with a rare disease. He had been used as a convenient cover for the sins of others.
Why had those people back there been killed? And why did they look the way that they did?

"Move!" The man with the rifle trained on her waved the muzzle in the direction of the facility.
From there she could hear the sounds of shouts and screams. They had found the others. Scully's
stomach lurched much as she did through the underbrush, pushed along by the men with the guns.
She didn't need to ask what would happen to the poor souls, hiding for their lives in their cellar. She
had already seen what would happen to them.
What Lies to Believe

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is given the party line.

They at least hadn't shot her. It was more than she could say for the poor unfortunates who had huddled under the floorboards of the bunk hall. Where they were now, Scully couldn't say. The thought left an acrid taste in her mouth as she quietly followed the two soldiers inside. She couldn't tell if these men were regular army or not. In the darkness there was nothing distinguishing about their uniforms. But then, she reasoned, would there be anything distinguishing about a secret group of military butchers send out to kill innocents in the hope of covering up the governments dirty secrets? For once sounding just like Mulder didn't bother her in the least. Sadly, it wasn't a comfort either as she stepped inside the now lit bunkhouse. She had expected that she would be led to there to wait while the interrogated her, perhaps threatened and scared her like they liked to do with Mulder on all of the occasions he was caught. To her surprise, however, a man was waiting inside, watching as she came in. He lounged on one of the tiny cots, the thin mattress looking too small for the man's huge girth and frame. He blinked up at her, pale face pink and flabby in the yellow lamplight, his beady eyes stern as he glanced to her armed escort.

"I'd like to speak with Miss Scully alone." He had a deep, rasping voice, with a hint of a nasal unctuousness that spoke of a man who was used to high society and giving orders. Obviously he had some sort of authority. The two soldiers nodded wordlessly as they turned and left, hardly questioning the order as they did.

"How did you know my name?" Her eyes narrowed, cutting at him darkly as he rose from the cot, his size increasing as he stood and straightened his well cut, three-piece suit. He was a man of means, that much was clear, and obviously a man who knew exactly what was going on here.

He shrugged casually at her question. "I know most everything about you, Dana."

The skin around her scar crawled again, nerves rippling down her spine. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you know." He faced her directly now, his gaze meaningful.

She did know. Her mouth went dry as she watched him cross to her slowly, his heavy footsteps echoing strangely in the empty room. "Who are you? What is this place?"

"This was one of the most frightening places on the earth." He paused in his pacing, inches away from where she stood. "A place where society sent its monsters to live in shame and isolation. Now, their disease is all but conquered. Science has eliminated thousands of years of misery."

Science - her science - the reason that she valued and prized. His words weren't random, she could feel that. They were deliberate ones he knew would speak to her. After all, he admitted that he knew everything about her. But science had nothing to do with the people lying broken at the bottom of that pit, their monstrous faces slack with death. Science had nothing to do with Escalante's murder just feet from her in the woods.
"I've seen your methods of elimination," she replied icily, unfazed by his reason. "What happened to the man who was with me in the forest? What about the people who were in this room?"

"They had been exposed," he drawled vaguely.

"Exposed to what?" She snapped, irritated by his lack of concern for the innocents who lay in a cold, unmarked mass grave just feet from where they stood.

"The same thing all these victims have been exposed to. They were victims of an inhuman project run by a man named Zama."

Not just Zama, she glowered. "You mean Ishimaru. You hid him here after the war. He stayed here and he continued his experiments." Just like Viktor Klemper, the German scientist she met. He lived not far away from Perkey, here in West Virginia. Ishimaru and Klemper must have worked together on this. The pictures from Mulder's father's office, the ones of the men gathered together in front of the Strughold Mining Company, Klemper, Ishimaru, and Bill Mulder…even the smoking man. They were all a part of this, this plot that left hundreds dead, murdered by military forces, and that cause Betsy Hagopian to lie dying in a hospital.

"The ruler of the world is no longer the country with the bravest soldiers, but the greatest scientists." The man sighed, as if understanding the course of her thoughts. "Unfortunately, Ishimaru began to conduct his work in secret, not sharing with those who had risked much in giving him his asylum."

The man was lying. As much plausible deniability as he would like to claim, there was desperation in his voice, a need to distance himself and those like him, the men in the picture, from the work that was occurring here.

"What was he exposing these people to?" She waited for the next lie to fall from his thick lips.

"Terrible things," he whispered hoarsely.

That much was clear from the evidence she saw in the pit outside. "What kinds of things?"

The man refused to meet her eyes, looking away as she pressed him, her voice sharp in the cold night. He did know. She had suspected as much. Fear spiked through her as she recalled the white place and Ishimaru's face hovering over her. "Have I been exposed?"

"I don't know," he replied sadly. That much at least had been an honest answer, but it did nothing to appease the rise of dreadful anger that rose up within her.

"Who knows," she demanded, her voice hard as she challenged him, eyes blazing. He stood there, looming over her with his abstract placations and appeals to her scientific mind, trying to bend the truth in front of her rather than giving her even the semblance of an explanation. People were dying, people like her, women who had been exposed to something. For all she knew it could be the very same disease the poor victims of this camp had been exposed to. She could be dying. Of what and why?

Her words seemed to cut at the man somewhat. His glittering eyes ducked as he nodded, sighing apologetically from his deep chest. "Please, I'd like to show you something that will give you your answers." He moved around her, towards the door of the bunkhouse, and held it open for her to exit, watching her expectantly as she stood, considering for a long moment. He was offering her at least something of an explanation. But why? And for what ends? Did he know of Mulder's presence on the train to Canada? Was he trying to fill her with one story to subvert whatever
conclusions Mulder came to from his investigation of the train? What lies was she supposed to believe, she wondered to herself, as she stepped past the large man into the cold, November air, stuffing her hands inside her long, coat pockets. The man followed, nodding to the waiting soldiers who watched them both impassively. In the distance was a long, black Lincoln Continental, waiting quietly with its lights on and its engine purring.

"It's not far from here, Miss Scully. I promise I will return you to your vehicle here in one piece, unharmed, once we are done."

As if that were the least of her worries right now. She nodded mutely as she followed his invitation, and stepped towards the vehicle, waiting politely as the man held open one of the heavy, black doors so that she could step inside the warmth first. He followed closely, his bulk causing the car to dip ever so slightly as he nodded towards his driver.

"To the train yards," he instructed simply as the car pulled away from the camp, leaving the soldiers and the helicopter, and pulling back out onto the winding country roads of West Virginia. They were going back the way they had come, back towards the town of Perkey itself.

There was silence for long moments in the cabin as Scully considered all that she had seen, piecing it together with the fragments of her memory and all that she had learned thus far regarding the virus known as Purity Control. The ruler of the world is no longer the country with the bravest soldiers, he had said, but with the greatest scientists. Creating a completely bio-engineered virus or viruses would give any military an amazing advantage in any future military engagement. Imagine, a virus that was made of completely synthetic, non-terrestrial compounds, the damage it could inflict on a populous, without the sheer destructive force of a nuclear weapon. Rather than consuming a country in hellfire and radiation, simply torture their populace with disease and deformation; deplete their numbers by filling them with poisons and having their own bodies kill them off. It was an insidious method of murder, a disgusting and disturbing way to fight ones enemies. She thought of their case just last spring, of the outbreak in the jail facility not far away in Cumberland Virginia, and the Pinkh Pharmaceutical scientist she had worked with. He had warned her that there were secret tests like this going on all over the country, and not just through them. Had he known and suspected that these type of programs existed? Did he know of Ishimaru, Zama, Klemper and their work? Perhaps or maybe he had just been exposed to enough of his portion to suspect that there was an even bigger picture going on.

"We'll arrive at the train yards soon," the man murmured beside her, as if reassuring her that they were indeed going to a real, physical location. Scully thought of Mulder, on a trains somewhere in the middle of the country, with a boxcar that he believed carried an alien, a boxcar she knew would be detached in Montana and conveniently exploded before he could get off the train to investigate the evidence.

"Why the boxcars," she asked, thinking of the one in New Mexico, the one Mulder had seen pilled high with corpses that sounded eerily similar to the dead in the leper colony.

"The boxcars were Ishimaru's idea," the man replied. "They were spaces that were easily outfitted with labs and could be used to perform any sort of experiment, but were portable enough to take to any location while still mobile to keep them out of detection."

"And you say that you had no knowledge of the work he was doing?"

"It was not authorized, no?"

"Just who are you, anyway," she snapped irritably. "Who are all of you, giving authorizations, allowing people to be grabbed fro their homes for testing they give no consent to, to be tortured
and tracked with chips in their bodies?" Irate, she allowed her fear and frustration to flow over the
man, her face flushing in the dark. "Who are you and all those men who knew Bill Mulder? What
did he have to do with this? And why are you playing with these experiments?"

The man was quite for long moments as she silenced her tirade. Scully wondered if he even
intended on answering. He drew a long, pensive breath, turning towards the window and the
passing nighttime outside the window.

"Democracy tells our society that as a collective the citizens chose their government, who will, in
turn, run their country and govern their nation in fair and decent terms for the populace who chose
them." He didn't quite sneer at his own words but Scully could hear a faint hint of disdain. "What
your civics lessons never teach you is that this is a myth, a convenient lie. Governments are run by
those who know and understand the true flow and current of what is going on in the world, groups
who meet in shadowed rooms over cigars and Scotch and carefully weigh the scales of power on
the globe."

"You are trying to tell me that this, all of this, the virus, the people infected, the testing, Ishimaru
and Zama's experiments, are part of some power game for you?"

"Miss Scully, the rules of modern politics run like a schoolyard fight. He who has the best toys
wins. Since the Cold War the United States has led in this effort to get the biggest, best, and most
effective toys in the schoolyard and has stopped at nothing, even its own citizens lives, to get it."

"The Cold War is over," she replied, stunned at the callousness of the man's answer.

"Only for some." The car turned sharply off of the road they had been traveling on, gravel
crunching under the tires as Scully glanced out of the window. In the darkness outside she could
see lights shining ahead and rows of metal shipping cars lined up, hulking low across the open
expanse in front of them.

"You can stop," the man called to the driver, who slowed the car by a particular line of silver,
windowless cars. They looked exactly like the cars from the video and the one Mulder described in
New Mexico. The man stepped carefully out of the car on one side as Scully opened her own door
and clambered out. She glanced from the silver train car to the man.

"Do you remember any of this yet," the man asked quietly, unexpectedly. He knew she had
removed the chip. How?

"No," she replied, her breath misting in the cold.

"Come along." He rounded the car, meaty hands stuffed into his long overcoat against the cold as
he mounted the metal steps from the tracks to the car inside. He politely held the door open as
Scully moved behind him and entered the interior, lights flickering on automatically as she stepped
inside.

"The experiments were all conducted here," the man murmured behind her ear. Scully had stopped,
surprised as her eyes glided over the metal and chrome lab before her, state of the art and gleaming
in the florescent lighting. It looked nicer than even the labs she worked in at Quantico and exactly
like the video that Mulder had paid $29.95 for. She could feel the man's presence behind her, his
bulk moving around her as his heavy steps clicked on the metal floor.

"Takeo Ishimaru had been a brilliant, young virologist before the war. He'd studied in Germany
and even through the conflict worked closely with German doctors on his findings, mostly
performed on Chinese and Korean prisoners of war."
"Prisoners of war?" Scully arched a scoffing eyebrow at the man. "I've heard stories of what the Japanese did to those prisoners of war."

"I know." The man nodded, unabashed. "Germany, got the weight of the blame for war crimes after the atrocities of the Holocaust, but Japan has its own weight of guilt. Ishimaru had worked together with a German geneticist at the time, one who was equally as guilty for atrocities to his Jewish charges."

"Viktor Klemper," Scully provided, remembering the gentlemanly German doctor, working in his green house with his orchids.

The man nodded. "When the war ended, both men were wanted for war crimes trials, but it was arranged through the US State Department to bring them both here, on condition they continue their work for the US Defense Department."

The State Department arranged this? A crucial piece of this puzzle now fit in for Scully. "That's how Bill Mulder was involved in this."

"Bill Mulder was a young man at the time, intelligent, quick thinking, and a patriot," the man replied, perhaps a trifle defensively. But was his defensiveness for Bill Mulder's sake or his own? "A consortium created to ensure safe passage for these scientists, to give them US protection from the Soviets, China, and Israel in the Cold War, and to have them continue their work for our government."

"So we could have bigger and better toys than anyone else on the playground?" Her voice rang cold in the chrome and glass of the laboratory.

"Each man was given a new identity upon arriving in the United States and lived in seclusion and out of the eyes of the scientific community. For some, such as Klemper, the shift was seamless. Ishimaru felt confined by the work being performed. He wished to expand it. He and Klemper had been working on a virus, one with devastating effects on those infected with it."

"Purity Control." It was making sense to Scully now, the pieces fitting together. But how did the Erlenmeyer flask she had taken from the military facility in Maryland fit into all of this?

"The virus was created by our government for use and was tested on standard subjects," the man explained. "I believe you met Doctor Berube?"

"The one running the experiment on monkeys, yes." It was the case that first drew Purity Control to her attention, the one that ultimately had shut down the X-files in the first place.

"Unknown to the consortium facilitating these experiments, Dr. Ishimaru had branched out his experiments, reached out to other governments, especially his home government. He desired to further his research beyond simple animal test."

"You expect me to believe that he ran an operation of human testing on a disease your group had created, without your knowledge?"

"Agent Scully, how often do things slip past the knowledge of your superiors at the FBI," the man rasped. "Ishimaru took on a new name, Shiro Zama, and used his influence to open the Hansen's Disease camp here in West Virginia. As a leper colony, no one would think to question it. The disease is so deforming that the effects of the virus and its treatment would be hidden. He began by gathering those from society that no one would notice were missing; transients, the homeless, the destitute, the mentally ill, people that Ishimaru knew would not be missed."
Scully thought of the pit in the camp, filled with hundreds of bodies. Cast off like garbage, Escalante had said. Was that how they had been seen? As people that no one wanted or cared about?

"That doesn't explain the women. Why the women in Allentown? Why me?" She glanced up at the bright lights overhead, remembering a very similar one haloing the face of Ishimaru - Zama she guessed now. Who was this man?

"Ishimaru - Zama - had a variety of experiments he was running. I don't even know all of them, no one does. Our group had at first sanctioned the abductions. We believed he was merely gathering data as controls; men, women, and children. It was only later we realized that he was actually performing other experiments. We don't know the nature of what was being done."

No one knew what happened to her or to those women in Allentown? She couldn't make herself believe that this man, Ishimaru, could be the sum total of all the evil done here without anyone's knowledge of what he was doing. "You have no idea then why I was taken a year ago and left to nearly die in a Georgetown Hospital?"

The man blanched slightly in the face of her anger, but met her furious expression even, a hint of regret in his pale eyes. "You were taken from Agent Mulder in order to stop his work. It was recognized that rather than counteracting his theories, he was coming to rely on you more and more to support them. It was hoped that by removing you, knowing Agent Mulder's history with his own sister's abduction, it would be enough to discourage him from his course of investigation."

Sickness clenched her stomach, disgust so potent it had no words. If she could have cried, perhaps she would have, but she was too stunned even for that. "You mean to tell me I was taken for no other reason than to emotionally cripple a man you feared?"

"The decision was heavy handed, but it wasn't a decision I was a part of."

"Of course not! Plausible deniability." She sneered at him, disbelieving, this person who stood there, so cool and distant from it all. "And I was given to this butcher?"

"We didn't know at the time to what extent his program was going. Ishimaru took great pains to hide his experiments. It was only recently, when it came to light that he was dealing with his own government and others for the rights to some of his findings, that the full breadth and scope of what was happening was revealed."

The full breadth and scope? Scully could barely wrap her mind around it. Mutely, she glared at the man as she walked around him, further into the car. Her memory sluggishly reacted to the things around her, the curve of the metal walls, the feel of the cold metal beneath her fingertips. She didn't want to remember this place. Something inside of her rebelled at the idea. But she did remember. God, it hurt, so badly, and she had been so scared, and she had begged for Mulder to find her. She had been underneath his nose the entire time.

"Ishimaru placed those chips in each of his experiments." The man murmured quietly from the doorway to the lab proper, watching as Scully moved from table, to counter, to machine, her memory slowly rebuilding a picture it had been forced to forget. "The chips were designed to erase the memory of those he had experimented on, to track those that had been part of his project, and to record data regarding them and their progress."

Just like cattle. Scully felt a hysterical laugh bubble in her throat, but she swallowed it down. There had been cattle in Wisconsin. Had that been Ishimaru, or had that been this group? Did it matter? It was all lies, lies upon lies upon lies. Which ones did she believe? Her fingertips glided across the
polished steel. This at least she remembered, this much had been real. "Why was the Japanese diplomat in Allentown at the scene of a murder?"

"I don't know," the man rumbled. "But my guess is that he discovered the video was the murder of four Japanese scientists who had been working with Zama. I don't believe he killed the man."

"Who did," Scully asked. The man didn't respond. Somehow she couldn't bring herself to be surprised.

"What was he carrying surveillance of US naval activities?"

"The Japanese had been monitoring the progress of the US navy to raise a downed, Russian ship, the Talpus. They had tried to recover it themselves, but had been thwarted. It was a nuclear sub. Our guess is that the Japanese hoped to recover the material for their own plans, some of which perhaps involved Ishimaru's experiments."

"With radiation?" Scully remember Escalante mentioning burns. "He was experimenting with radiation and this virus?"

"To see if it had any noticeable effect in treatment, yes."

Her head throbbed with this knowledge, it ached, and a part of her longed to go home and cry, to hide her head under a pillow, to forget any of this had happened. How had she been drawn into this? She was just a forensic pathologist, a woman who went to work everyday, teaching people about how to cut up dead bodies and somehow she ended up drawn into this secretive world of half-truths and horrific experiments, of ruined lives and political intrigue. Now she was a part of this and so was Mulder. He'd been a part of all of this since before he was born. Poor Mulder.

The train! Her sluggish memory managed to rouse itself enough to smack her consciousness. Mulder was on that train to Canada, the one with Ishimaru, or Zama, or whoever he was, and a boxcar with his latest experiment. "Mulder found where Zama is going. He's on that train."

"We know." The man reached into his pocket, moving further into the lab as he fumbled inside. Mulder's informant had said they were tracking his movements. "You knew and yet you didn't stop the train?"

"To stop the train would have tipped our had to Ishimaru that we knew what was going on. Our hope was to destroy him and the evidence before he escaped with it to Canada and thus out of our reach."

"So you rigged the car with explosives to blow up in Montana, far from any human contact."

"It was necessary." The man pulled out a cell phone. "The victim inside the car has been exposed to hemorrhagic fever. Should there simply be an accident, whoever found the car and the body would be exposed."

Hemorrhagic fever. Scully swallowed. "Will anyone on the train be exposed now with it there?"

"No. The subject is being kept in a contagion safe zone. However, I know from long experience, such zones are usually no sure guarantee that your partner will stay out of them." The man began dialing a number.

"My partner?" Scully stared down at the phone.
"Mr. Mulder must be stopped before he does something very foolish, Miss Scully." The man sighed, shaking his head as if he was a parent over an unruly child. "I worked with his father a long time. I would hate for him to become a victim of his own stubbornness."

"How," she began, but the man held up a hand, quieting her as he placed his phone to the side of his full, chubby face.

"Yes, can I speak to Mr. Mulder," the man asked politely, as if he expected for Mulder to be near whoever it was he called on the phone. What was going on?

The man was silent, patiently waiting for several seconds before someone began speaking on the other end. "Mr. Mulder, I have someone here who'd like to speak with you." He glanced at Scully, lowering the phone and handing it to her. She resisted the urge to rub the face plate against her coat sleeve, to rub off the slime and vileness. Instead she slipped it up to her ear.

"Mulder, its me," she breathed, relief bleeding through her fear and confusion, a part of her just happy to hear his voice.

"Scully, where are you?" She could sense the instant alarm in his voice, the sharp note of anxiety.

"I'm in West Virginia," she explained, knowing that would do nothing to allay his worry.

"Who dialed this number?"

She wished she could give him a name, but she knew that this man would never give it to her.

"Mulder, we've gotten involved in something, but it's not at all what you think." It's not aliens, she realized, it was something so much worse.

"What are you talking about?"

"Whatever is on that train is not alien." She ignored the incredulity in his voice. She knew he wanted to believe it was. He would believe it till she proved to him otherwise.

"You're wrong, Scully," he snapped, words that cut no matter if this was by far not the first time he had said them to her.

"Mulder, Ishimaru, Zama, he was experimenting on human subjects. He'd been doing it for years, operating out of a leper colony."

A door closed on the other end as Mulder snorted softly over the phone. "Well, whatever his name was, Scully, he's dead. I don't think this has anything to do with lepers."

Dead? Scully glanced towards the man briefly. They had planned to kill Zama. That must be why he had someone on the train he could contact. "The leper colony was just a front. The tests weren't just on lepers. They were on the homeless, immigrants, the indigent, on the insane, they were brought here and they were subjected to diseases and radiation tests."

"Who told you this?"

"The man who handed me the phone." Mulder never could buy the reasonable explanation. Scully frowned, but then again, she admitted softly, how much of this story did she believe herself? She had been filled with so many stories, so many half-truths and lies since her return from her abduction. How much of this was contrived simply because they knew her, knew she was a scientist, knew the explanations that would best make sense to her.
"Well, why do you believe him?" Mulder always sensed the tenor of her own thoughts and could always find the weak points to challenge her. And she wouldn't say he was wrong in doubting, but she knew this place. She couldn't ignore that truth."

"Mulder, I'm standing in a train car just like the one in your alien autopsy video, only I realize that I've been here before."

"What are you talking about, Scully?"

"This is where they brought me, Mulder. This is where they put the implant in my neck, in one of these cars." Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, as she thought of the pain, of the fear, now fresh in her slowly recovering memory. She swallowed against them, setting her features, refusing to give in.

"Scully," Mulder breathed, a wealth of fear and frustration seeping out of him as he murmured her name. She knew he wanted to tell her this man was playing on fright over what happened to her, but she knew now it wasn't all of it. She remembered.

"It all makes sense, Mulder. Ishimaru Zama, he was using the secret railroad to conduct his tests across the country. The women in Allentown, they all remember these cars."

There was static briefly on the other end of the line.

"Scully?" Mulder's voice cut through the white noise, wondering if she was still on the other end.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah. So what are you saying, that Zama is the one who abducted these women?"

"What I am saying, Mulder, is that there is no such thing as alien abduction."

She might as well have said that everything in Mulder's world was a lie. She could hear the stunned silence on the other end of the phone, guilt creeping inside of her as she realized what she had just said. All the air seemed to be sucked out from the other end of the phone as a ringing silence met her declaration.

"It is just a smoke screen, created by our government to cover-up the biggest lie of all," she continued, feeling the man's pale eyes following her as she paced the small confined of the boxcar lab, waiting for Mulder's vehement denials.

"What about the UFO I saw them working on," he challenged, but with considerably less heat than before.

"That wasn't a UFO Mulder. It was a piece of a Russian nuclear sub that was raised. More lies."

"How can you be so sure?"

Because she was a scientist, she thought bleakly, glancing up at the man. "Because I have what I told you I needed, Mulder, proof." She felt the weight of that proof under her fingertips, in her memory. "Two weeks ago, the president made a public apology for secret radiation tests that had been conducted on innocent citizens up until 1974."

It had been all over the news, a scandal she had hardly paid attention to at the time, but which made a stunning impact on her now. "Only guess what?"
"Those tests never ended," Mulder concluded darkly on the other end.

Everything about their partnership was built on trust, the trust that she had in Mulder's faith, and the trust he had in her scientific proof. This was killing him, she knew, telling him this, destroying the theory that had carried him through so many years of searching for Samantha. But she had the evidence. She was standing in it. She was it. His search on the train was nothing more than a wild goose chase, one that could very easily get him killed. "Mulder, listen to me. You have got to stay out of that train car."

"Why?" His tone was surprised and a tad guilty. Something told Scully that her warnings were preparing to fall on deaf ears.

"Because there is a bomb on board," Scully sighed, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up. "Mulder, if that bomb detonates, thousands of people are going to die of hemorrhagic fever. That's what the test subject inside has been exposed to."

"Well, Scully, you're a little late," he admitted heavily, as the sinking feeling inside of her landed in her middle. Somehow she knew that. "I'm locked inside that train car."

"Well, then we've got to get you out of there. That device is on a timer."

"Where is it," he asked harshly. She could hear him roaming the area where he stood.

She glanced towards the man who watched silently. He nodded and pointed to a ventilation grid in the front part of the compartment, up above in the ceiling.

"There should be a ventilation grid on the ceiling. It's hidden up inside."

"Step back," Mulder ordered to someone, probably the person who had the phone originally. "Open that."

She waited, long breathless moments, vaguely hoping they would find nothing there, that there wouldn't be a bomb. But her instincts told her otherwise. "Did you find it Mulder?"

"Hold on!" He grunted. "Oh yeah, I found it."

"How much time do you have?" Hopefully enough to get off the train.

"A little over an hour-and-a-half."

An hour-and-a-half? That was nowhere near Montana. Panic filled her brain as she realized that either someone had lied to her or that this plan had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

"Look, Mulder, you've got to get them to stop that train so we can get you off of it." She glanced to the man whose placid, fat face now frowned in concern at her alarm. She mouthed the words "hour-and-a-half" at him.

Clearly it wasn't what he had expected. His expression became alarmed as he looked towards the door of the train car, his eyes wide. "Have him stop the car at the next station," he whispered.

"They want you to tell the engineer to stop at the next station," she relayed to Mulder quickly. Clearly this wasn't part of the plan even this man knew about.

"Why," Mulder demanded.

"So we can get the bomb squad out there." She glanced to the man, who now was no longer
listening. He moved towards door of the car and Scully began to follow him. "You need to get a hold of the engineer and evacuate the train."

Static buzzed in her ear as Mulder's voice broke and crackled on the other end of the line.

"Mulder," she called, swearing silently under her breath. "Mulder?"

The call dropped without any further preamble.

"Where's the next stop?" The man was already gathering his entourage fervently.

"It's not on the map." She doubted it anyway, else Mulder would have mentioned that. "You are tracking the train?" She handed the man his phone.

"I'll begin placing calls immediately."

She moved out of the door of the car, continuing down the steps. "You had no idea this would happen?"

None," the man insisted. "This wasn't the plan. The train is somewhere in Iowa. We can probably pinpoint where it is, but if it is a small town, bomb squads might not make it from the state patrol in time."

"So, what, a train full of people and Mulder will have to die?" She stopped to stare at the man.

"If Mulder is smart he'll have the train leave the car behind. We can have crews on alert for when the explosion occurs and hopefully keep the damage minimal. The train and its passengers should survive unscathed."

"But not Mulder?" She stared at him, open-mouthed.

"Mulder knew what he was doing boarding that train, Agent Scully. I can't help him from his own stupidity."

If she hadn't been disarmed, she would have been sorely tempted to shoot the fat, son-of-a-bitch where he stood. Instead she spun, stalking back to the car in quick, hurried steps.

"Get me back to my car as fast as you can. I have to make it back to Washington." It was an hour drive at least, perhaps longer, and she would have to speed the whole way there. Mulder was locked inside a death trap. Somehow, she needed to get him out.
Why Do You Do This?

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is caught on the other end of a deadly Mulder phone call...again.

If the West Virginia State Patrol wanted to stop her for speeding, fuck them. She'd flash her badge and keep on driving. The deep, dark sky was slowly degrading from velvet dark to just gray on the horizon. Scully hardly felt the exhaustion as she tore down the highway, pushing her car back towards Washington as fast as she could. At this time of night there were few other cars on the road. She said a prayer for small miracles. Beside her on the seat her cell phone rang. In the stillness of her frantic thoughts it startled her and she jumped slightly as her hand shot out for it. The number wasn't familiar to her, yet she already knew who it was.

"Scully," she barked, holding her phone to her ear as she tried to maneuver her car without killing herself.

"Scully, let me tell you, you haven't seen America till you've seen it from a train." Mulder quipped lazily despite the nervous tension she heard in his voice. He was still on the train car; she knew it. Disappointment crushed the small hope she had clung to as she frantically dashed away from the ruined leper colony.

"Damn it, Mulder! What happened?" She had told him to get off the train, not stay on it.

"We're not going to make that station, Scully."

"Yeah, I figured that. Do you have any idea where you are?" She prayed it wasn't anywhere near a large population.

"No, but I'm sure they'll find us. We probably lit up every spy satellite in this hemisphere. It was the only thing to do, Scully." The overweight man was right, he had sacrificed himself and the train car for the rest of the passengers. "If you're right about what's on this car, an explosion outside a populated area would reduce the risks."

The risks for everyone but him. Once again Mulder had placed himself in an untenable situation that could get him killed. Always, always with Mulder she stood by watching him do this. She felt anger prickle in the corner of her eyes as she swore to herself. "Mulder, if I'm right, they're not going to want to find you." Something about the overweight man's concern clicked in her mind. He wasn't worried about Mulder or what was inside, but rather if it was in a populated area or not. What if it wasn't? Would they bother with bomb squads and HAZMAT squads if Mulder had done what the man suspected and stopped the car far from a populated area? Perhaps he would allow it to blow up, allow the bomb to do what it was designed to do.

"You don't think I'm right, do you?" She realized Mulder wouldn't have come to these conclusions. He believed that whatever was in that car was valuable, that they would come and get it, an alien-human hybrid. He didn't believe her. And he was willing to bet his life on the fact they would want to come for it.

"We'll have to wait and see," he murmured, determined, as if this were some sort of giant,
"We're not waiting for anything, Mulder, we got to get you out of there as fast as we can!" Images of the bomb exploding with him still inside resonated through her mind.

"I'm fielding all offers and suggestions," he returned, for the first time revealing a fraying spot to his cocky, cool exterior.

Damn it all! "Okay, I'm almost to DC, let me think. I'll call you as soon as I have an idea."

She didn't give Mulder a chance to respond, clicking off her phone as her thoughts turned wildly around her. Someone, somewhere among Mulder's contacts must have the authority to get a team out there quickly. Without thinking, she looked for the exits that would lead her to Mulder's apartment rather than her own in Georgetown. Something there must give her some clue as to someone to call to fix this.

She came to a screeching halt in front of Mulder's place, grateful that she now had a key to the front door and no longer had to be buzzed in. The super had passed it to her earlier that evening, shrugging that since she was always over checking up the place, she might as well have it. Honestly, she wondered vaguely, did the man believe that because she had a badge she had super powers? God knows she wished she had them now, her nerves jangling a she pounded on the elevator button. Nothing seemed to be moving fast enough. She glanced at her watch. There just wasn't enough time.

Mulder's apartment was much as it had been the evening before when she stopped by. His fish rushed to the front of the tank as she passed by; obviously agitated she had not thought to feed them earlier. She had no time for guilt though as she flipped on his desk lamp and tore through Mulder's papers, looking for an address book, a slip of paper, anything. One slim, black folio caught her eye and she opened it up, finding a list of addresses and numbers inside. She flipped through it quickly. Most were unfamiliar names that Scully suspected were tied to one UFO network or another. Her eyes fell on one name that while not being particularly familiar did have a title in front of it that carried a lot of weight; Senator Matheson. With quick fingers she reached for the phone on the corner of Mulder's desk and dialed, holding her breath as her call rang through.

Unsurprisingly she hit the automated voice mail message. She pressed zero for the live operator at the switchboard for the office of the US Senate. A surprised sounding woman answered, clearly wondering why someone was calling the switchboard at this time of night.

"Yes, hello, my name is Dana Scully and I'm trying to reach Senator Matheson at home. I've already tried him at his office." Scully realized just how lame this sounded and worried the woman on the other end might be thinking the same as well. "Please, this is an emergency, can you reach him? Yes, I'm at, uh, 555-0199. Thanks. This area code."

The voice on the other end haltingly agreed before politely and promptly hanging up. Scully wondered if the call would even be placed, let alone returned. Damn it all! She tossed the black book on the desk in frustration, frantic eyes roving around for something, anything to help in this situation. In one of Mulder's drawers sat the roll of masking tape. It jogged her memory. She had been up here months ago, looking for Mulder, and had seen a masking tape X on his window, just moments before a bullet had grazed her brow, nearly killing her. The X had been a signal. Grabbing the roll, she moved to the window, the bullet hole that had been punched through still clear in the glass. She ripped off two pieces of tape, forming the shape an X and studied it for a long moment. Would he come or would the man simply ignore it, leaving Mulder for dead as he had before. She had no idea who the tall, black man even was, let alone what his motives were for involving himself in Mulder's work. Obviously it was in his best interests to warn Mulder off, for
all the good that did, but it perhaps might not be in his best interest to save Mulder's life. It was the
best she could do, she realized, as she turned from the window and wandered over to Mulder's
television set. His stacks of videos towered beside it and she was almost afraid to look at the titles.
But at the top of the stack sat one video that looked very familiar, with a computer generated label
on the top - alien autopsy. Mulder hadn't purchased one but two of those things. For once she was
glad for his paranoia. He probably was afraid one would get lost. She snagged it, turning on
Mulder's television and slipping it into the VCR, waiting as the signal switched to the now familiar
video. Scully studied the layout of the lab. Glass doors sealed off a surgical area, while only the
train door sealed by a keypad locked the front. She watched as Ishimaru entered and exited through
it, moments before a squad of gunmen opened fire inside. There was a code he punched in, one that
went too fast for her to catch, but if she slowed it down….

She whipped around for her purse, finding it where she had tossed her coat on Mulder's couch. She
dug out her phone and glanced at the time. Her heart leapt into her throat - six minutes, no time.
Blindly she pulled up her most recent phone call and dialed it, praying that she was right about this.
She had to be right about this!

Mulder picked up on the first ring. "Yeah?"

"Mulder? I think I've got something here."

"What is it," he asked tightly, all pretense of joking gone now. He was terrified.

"I think I may have a code for you," She rewound the tape, rewinding it as Ishimaru began
punching the numbers. "I'm watching Ishimaru punch it into a keypad in one of the train cars."

"What are you watching?" Clearly this was an idea that not even Mulder had thought of.

"Your alien autopsy video."

"You mean I might get my twenty-nine ninety-five's worth after all?" Well, perhaps not all joking
was lost as Mulder's tried and true defense mechanism kicked in once again. Scully said nothing as
she glanced at her watch.

"I've got six minutes left, is that what you have?"

"Let's hope not." He refused to look. She couldn't blame him. "What's the code?"

Scully inched the film ahead with Mulder's VCR remote, watching Ishimaru's finger move
painfully slow. "One."

She kept inching as his hand hovered across the keys. "One, zero…"

The next number was lost as the scientist then moved a scan card up and ran it through. She
growled in frustration as she hit rewind, stopping at the same spot again and slowly moved the
form forward again.

"Wait, are you there," Mulder asked frantically.

"Yeah, yeah, one, zero…”

She paused, waiting for his finger to finally hit digit she missed. "One."

"One, zero, one," Mulder echoed breathlessly on the other end of the line.
"And a three." She squinted at the television. "Then a three…"

"Three, three…” Mulder paused on the other end, expectant.

Scully stared at the film, trying to make the last number out before Ishimaru scanned the card. It happened so fast it just wasn't clear, his hand obstructing the view. She rewound it again, trying to catch it. "I can't see the last number clearly, his hand gets in the way."

"Tick-tick, Scully," Mulder muttered anxiously.

As if she didn't know that, she realized, glancing at the time on his VCR. "I know I'm sorry. I think it's a one."

"You think it's a one?" Mulder was incredulous desperation cracking through his voice. "Are you sure?"

God, she wasn't, and she had no idea what to tell him. "Yeah, I'm sure, I'm sure." She wasn't and it terrified her.

"One," he muttered. There was a relived sigh for the briefest of moments before a horrible clatter sounded on the line, and the sounds of some sort of fight or struggle.

"Mulder," she shouted, but there was no response. "Mulder!"

This couldn't be happening again. Terrified she stared at her phone. This had happened in the train car in New Mexico, Mulder on the phone with her, suddenly disappearing. She had thought he had died then. But she had no way of knowing where he was now, no way of getting to him, no way of knowing if he was still alive. She frantically held the phone up to her ear again, hoping for something, anything out of him. But just as she did, the line went horribly dead again.

This couldn't be happening.

For a long moment she stood there, wondering what to do. Should she call Skinner? What good would it do with as little information she had? Perhaps the Gunmen? They might be able to track the train. But that would do her no good if the car had already exploded. She had no way of reaching the overweight man again. Perhaps she could track the cell phone position down? But what could it be if the phone was destroyed now and the signal now lost.

Mulder could be well and truly lost and she had no way of finding him.

Too stunned for words, she collapsed on Mulder's couch, the still image of Ishimaru punching in the numbers onto the keypad blurred on Mulder's television. She had tried. Was it enough? Numbly she raised the remote still in her hand and turned off the video, the local, early morning news now on the television. She watched it without seeing it, without hearing it. Mulder could really be dead now. But he might have made it, her brain insisted. He could have. Mulder lived up to his first name, he was wily and smart, and had made it out of tighter spots even than this. He could be fine now, sans a cell phone for whatever reason, unable to call her, unable to let her know he was all right.

The news continued, flickering from traffic to local concerns without so much as a hint of a story regarding an exploding train car. Something like that would be big news. Was it truly so far in the middle of nowhere that it hadn't been noticed yet? She watched intently for some time, waiting for the flash of breaking news. It never came. Instead it turned to the Today show, with perky commentators drinking coffee and smiling cheerily at the camera.
Her cell phone was silent and no knock sounded on Mulder's door.

Exhaustion crept up on her suddenly and she had no idea of when she actually fell asleep. Her cell phone rested on Mulder's leather couch beside her and it rang and chimed loudly as she jumped up, snatching it to her ear, her eyes flying to the clock on Mulder's VCR. I was nearly eleven. Please, God, let this be Mulder.

"Dana Scully?" The woman on the other end of the phone had a high, nasal voice, sounding vaguely of the Midwest. Scully frowned.

"Yes?" Her heart tattooed loudly in her chest as she held her breath, her hands shaking.

"I'm calling you in regards to Fox Mulder. The information we were able to gather is that you are his emergency contact person?"

Oh God, she sighed, tears pricking her eyes. "Yes, yes, is he all right? Has he been hurt?"

"He's fine, Ms. Scully. He's suffering from some sort of altercation, but the doctor's believe he'll be all right." The woman's nasally voice oozed soothing concern. Scully could have kissed her if she was standing there, but resorted instead to relief as she barely reigned in her shaking voice.

"Where is he? Where are you?" Already she was mapping out her plan, running down to her car, grabbing her overnight bag and cleaning up there at Mulder's before rushing off to Dulles and wherever Mulder was.

"I'm sorry, I'm with Winnebago County Memorial Hospital. Mr. Mulder was brought in here a few hours ago."

"I'm sorry, miss, if I seem obtuse." Scully's frightened, sleep addled brain tried to remember if the woman had even introduced herself. "Where is Winnebago County?"

"In Iowa," the woman replied slowly. "I'm taking it that you weren't with him here on a case. You are with the FBI aren't you?" Clearly it hadn't occurred to this strange woman that Scully wouldn't be located somewhere locally now.

"No, I'm not, I'm in Washington DC at the moment." Not for long. "I'm hopping the next plane to….Des Moines?" How did one get to Winnebago County? Where the hell was it in Iowa? She'd only ever been to Sioux City, on a case with Mulder years before, and that was over by Omaha.

"Waterloo might be closer," the woman offered helpfully. "So I'm taking it you'll be here by this evening to see Mr. Mulder?"

"As soon as I can get there," Scully muttered, visions of what she would do to him once she got a hold of him running through her mind, perhaps throttle him. "Keep him tied down till I get there."

"Excuse me?" The woman gasped, shocked at Scully's flippancy.

"Never mind, I'll be out of DC as soon as I can," Scully replied, rushing out of Mulder's door to the case she had in her car.
"Finally, you're here! When do I get out?"

This was how Fox Mulder greeted her, Scully thought irritably, as she leaned against the doorway of his hospital room, his medical file in hand. No apologies for scaring her so completely, no explanations as to why his face looked like he had met the business end of someone's hiking boot, no boyish smile and puppy eyes, begging for forgiveness for once again running off without her, leaving her to pick up the pieces. Instead it was "Hey, Scully, when are you going to spring me from the joint?"

The motherly, middle-aged nurse who was attempting to read the machinery beside his bed cast Scully a look of sympathetic understanding. Scully had a feeling that Mulder had been in his usual, rare hospital form, somewhere between a petulant toddler and an angst-ridden teenager.

"Who says I'm checking you out of here, Mulder?" She met his expectant, if swollen, expression coolly as she waved the file up at him. "Dr. Sayre just had a chat with me and he wants to keep you in the hospital for observation overnight. You earned yourself a nice concussion."

"I feel fine," Mulder insisted yanking his arm away from the nurse who had been attempting to put a blood pressure cuff on him. "Honestly, I've had a nap, I've taken my meds, and I've even eaten the green jell-o like a good boy. And I prefer red." He scowled at the poor woman in her dark, blue scrubs, "Nurse Ratched over here keeps prodding me with needles and drawing blood just to see me squirm."

"Mr. Mulder, with a disposition like that its small wonder I keep poking you," the woman replied calmly, ignoring his protestations. "It's a good thing your such a pretty face. Well, I imagine it would be pretty if it didn't have size 12 tread marks on it."

Mulder snapped his mouth shut angrily, surprisingly at a loss for a witty retort. As always, Mulder was the example of how not to behave when in a hospital setting. She decided to relieve the poor woman of the man-child behavior and sauntered over to his bed, giving the nurse's arm an understanding squeeze.

"Quite the scare you gave me there, Mulder." The poor, beleaguered nurse made her way out of the room before Mulder could turn on her again to complain. "Are you planning on making a habit of nearly getting yourself killed while on the phone with me?"

"Happenstance doesn't make habit," Mulder grumbled, flushing red underneath he bright purple of his face. Someone really had gone at him viciously. His eye and cheekbone were swollen and lived, and it was a wonder that his nose wasn't broken. The damage could have been much worse. Frowning, she reached long fingers towards the broken skin of his cheekbone, gently probing it as he winced ever so slightly, but didn't pull away.

"Any reason why your assailant wanted to leave such a lasting impression on you?"
"I think he didn't expect me to live long enough to find him and return the favor." He sat patiently as she moved from his abraded face to the bump on the back of his head, brushing through his thick, brown hair to study it. "I might not have, if someone hadn't rescued me out of that car."

"Lucky that," Scully murmured tightly, though she was thinking the same thing herself. "I checked with the local authorities, Mulder, no one even heard of an exploding train car this morning. Not that I'm surprised. Do you know how far into the middle of nowhere you really are? The closest flight I could get was Waterloo and it was another two hours for me to drive up here."

"I think that was the point. Fewer people, less question." He grimaced only slightly as she gently prodded the goose egg on the back of his head, but said nothing as she pulled away.

"Well the good news is that you'll live, the bad news is that I doubt that the train car or whatever was on it was as fortunate." A part of her felt sick at that. Proof of what was performed by Ishimaru, or Zama, or whatever he called himself was all gone now, neatly removed, all evidence hidden, all easily explained away for any who cared to look. Had that been the plan all along?

"Have you tried calling the Forestry Service, the FTA, the Iowa State Patrol?"

"All of those, Mulder, and not a word." She leaned a hip against his bed, her arms crossing in front of herself. "I had to do something on the drive up from Waterloo. They all now suspect I might be crazy myself, asking about something that doesn't exist. And I can't say I blame them. This was all too convenient. Had this all been planned, laid out for them? The videotape, the Japanese diplomat, the train cars, the leper colony, had they been strung along this whole way to get to this point? They knew the entire story and had no evidence to back it up. Once again, they were at square one.

"There must be something," Mulder insisted with the sort of confidence that hinted that she wasn't trying hard enough to find it. Anger flared briefly, but she tamped it down. After the night before, the discovery of the chip, the leper colony, his near death, she was too exhausted to argue any further.

"I don't know what to tell you, Mulder," she offered wearily. "I know what I saw in that camp. I know what the man told me."

"And you believed him?" His words weren't accusatory, but they didn't carry the silent question as to why. She hadn't told him about the chip or her resurfacing memories.

"I had Agent Pendrell study one of the chips I was able to get from the women in Allentown. It turns out that the chip contained the name of Shiro Zama. Pendrell did the legwork and found the leper colony in West Virginia. Zama…Ishimaru…he had performed experiments there for years on living subjects. The chips were his way of tracking his progress and hiding their memories." She swallowed hard, remembering the man's face leaning over her as she hurt.

"Pendrell discovered the chip was able to run a neural loop, a way to block or alter someone's memories. The women in Allentown all said that when they removed their chips they began remembering things about their experience, about what was done to them. Some of them even remembered me."

Why was it she didn't remember any of them?

"And how about you?" Mulder had said little of the chips, of the connection of the women in Allentown to her own experience. She wondered if he feared it, if he was as afraid of what it would mean as she was. Just as much as Mulder wanted the proof of what was done to her, she suspected
he was just as apprehensive of knowing what it was exactly that happened to her, of what that might mean.

"I've remembered some things," Scully acknowledged calmly, as if she were discussing the findings of her latest autopsy. "The train cars, Ishimaru."

She shrugged, such little, inconsequential things in the grand scheme of things. "Nothing that prepared me for the sight of that leper colony. What they did to those people, Mulder...they were butchered like cattle, as if they weren't even human."

"What if they weren't completely human anymore," Mulder insisted, eyes dark.

Somehow she knew that he wouldn't quite let that idea go. "Mulder, these people were sick. They were disfigured by a disease that our own government created, and was testing on people without their knowledge or consent."

"A disease you yourself have referred to as 'extra-terrestrial'."

"That's because its basic structure was like nothing produced naturally on this planet, not because I believe it's from a real alien." She clarified for what felt like the hundredth time with him. "It is engineered, created in a lab and intended as a weapon in a war where being able to one-up the enemy was the priority. It is a hold over from a Cold War we are no longer fighting and that is no longer important. It's a weapon that is obsolete and they are covering up the evidence of its existence before it can come out, so that if word of this ever leaked they can simply brush it off as an old, unauthorized program on American citizens, make apologies, and brush it under the rug, just like they did with the radiation testing two weeks ago."

She sighed. It was beginning to make perfectly, disturbing sense.

"Is that the answer that you can accept?" His eyes glittered as the pressed her. He knew she was uncomfortable with that answer. As always, Mulder knew.

"I think it's the best explanation," she replied honestly. Would she ever find out the truth about what had happened to her or would she end up like Betsy Hagopian?

"You still don't know what they did to you, Scully," Mulder murmured, giving voice to her own, unspoken thought.

"I know." But did she want to? She wasn't sure. Was it worth the pain of knowing? Was it worth Mulder's life? She frowned at his hospital gown, heartily sick of the sight of him in a hospital bed. She had lost a month of her own life. She had lost her sister. Would she be destined to lose Mulder as well?

"Hey!" Sensing the tenor of her thoughts once again, Mulder raised a finger under her chin, tilting it up to look up at his ruined face. God, she realized, it made her sick to see his face like that, to know someone had injured him that way.

"I'm alive. I'm all right." He smiled, a bit cockeyed given the swollen nature of the skin and tissue. "I'll get out of here and we'll do...something." He frowned as he glanced up towards the darkened window of his hospital room. "What is there to do in Forest City, Iowa anyway?"

"Get you the Winnebago of your dreams. The factory is not far from here."

"As tempting as that is, I'm not going to explain to Skinner why that ended up in my expense report. I think we'll have a hard time explaining the stay in the hospital."
"Yeah." She reached up fingers to curl around his hand, squeezing it briefly before pulling away. "Let's get you healthy and I will get you home, okay?"

"I'm healthy now," Mulder began to protest again, but stopped with one stern glare from Scully. "All right, overnight. I better get waffles in the morning out of this. A man cannot subsist on green jell-o alone."

"Waffles it is." She grinned, acquiescing against the part of her that rebelled at feeding him such heavy, fat laden food so close after a nasty head injury. "And then it's back to DC where you will take care of yourself for the rest of the week."

"Is that a threat, Doc?" There was the wicked glimmer in his eye. He must be feeling better.

"You wish, Mulder." She flushed, despite her immediate protest. "Don't think I won't sick Frohike on you if you don't behave. He'll do anything for me now."

"You are nefarious in your ways, Dana Scully." He sighed dramatically, tossing himself back on the bed.

"Keep that up and I'll have him deny you your porn, too."

This effectively shut him up.
In which Scully considers faith and evil.

She was exhausted, but the darkness offered her no peaceful slumber. She lay quietly in her bed, staring at the red numbers on the clock beside her. One thirty seven. Perhaps she would get to sleep. Likely not. Scully laid on her side, watching the clock tick by, her finger tracing the scar on her neck idly.

What had they done to her?

The phone call had come shortly before ten. Penny Northern's voice had choked with tears. Betsy had lost her fight with the cancer that riddled her body. She slipped away early that evening. It was Saturday, not even two weeks since she had met the strange group of women in Allentown. Already she was so ingratiated with them that this stranger's death affected her. Betsy Hagopian had been someone just like her, an abductee, and now she was dead because of what Ishimaru had done.

Just what had been done?

Her chest rose and fell, her breath entering into her steadily as she lay there, listening to her body, as if hoping it would speak to her and reveal any secrets hidden, should there be any. She drifted as she lay in the comfort of her soft sheets, her mind tossing about from one idea to the other. Mulder's latest near death experience, the crumpled bodies laying in a shallow pit on her feet, Agent Pendrell's silent awe at the chip she had presented him, the vague memories of pain and fear accompanied by the sight of Ishimaru's face looming over her. Scully wrapped her arms around herself tightly, but found they brought no comfort to her. At her breastbone she could feel the slight weight of the tiny cross she wore. No succor came from that either. Her fingers rose to clasp it briefly, slim and warm from her skin.

When Penny had called about Betsy, Scully had answered with the words her mother had always murmured in times of distress to people as comfort. "I will pray for you." They came naturally to her now, from all the times she had heard it repeated from her mother's lips at church, to a friend, to her own children. And while Scully was certain her mother meant those words, she was always more devout than Scully was, they were an empty promise falling from her own lips. A dry, meaningless comfort to those that were in pain, something that was meant to be a balm to them, but in which Scully had no intention of participating. She hadn't truly prayed in years. She couldn't remember the last time she had gone to confession. Mass was something she attended on Christmas and Easter with her mother because it was what the family did together. And while she could stand there and look at Mulder and state without blinking that she was a woman of faith, her practice of that faith was about as non-existent as Mulder's own. He at least was more honest about it. Where had her faith gone? As a child she had never questioned the idea that God saw her, knew her, spoke to her. Whenever the nuns in school mentioned it, it had frightened her. She had tearfully raged at Bill and then broke down in front of him when she had accidentally killed the baby rabbit she had tried to keep alive and hide from him. God was going to punish her. She had screamed God was going to punish her for murdering the creature. Poor Bill had tried to comfort her, apologizing for
teasing her about it and had helped her give it a proper burial. He had assured her that God wouldn't hate her forever for killing an innocent rabbit even if the Bible said you shouldn't. Even now, it was Bill's words that she remembered whenever she faced down a suspect at the end of her weapon. *God won't hate you for an accident.*

When had she stopped listening to God? Even after the rabbits untimely death, she had lived in fear of the sisters' injunctions. Then there was the day her Sunday School teacher had died. He had been so young, Scully hadn't thought it fair and the anger she had felt towards God that day was perhaps the first time she had ever felt that way in her life. Tomas Gonzalez, a sweet, mild mannered man, he had the makings of a priest and wanted to take up orders when he finished college. As Scully had watched her elder siblings drift away, she found herself in that awkward place in life where she still clung to her tomboyish-ness but longed to be taken seriously. Tomas had been her friend, an adult who treated her as an adult. He had called her Scout, after the girl in "To Kill A Mockingbird". He had said that Scully reminded him of that character, a girl growing up in turbulent and changing times. She had adored him, and perhaps had a crush on him in her own way. He lived in a poorer part of San Diego than she did, not that any part of San Diego was exactly a "bad" neighborhood, but those areas filled with Mexican immigrants like Tomas' family always seemed to have more crime, more gangs, more trouble. It was that sort of trouble that took him one afternoon, right on his front lawn, as he tried to break up an argument between two people. Scully could never understand why someone would dream of hurting Tomas, someone who was destined to take vows, to live for God. And God had allowed him to die like that. Tomas hadn't been a martyr like those she learned about in her catechism classes. He had just been a man and God had allowed him to die.

She learned resent God that day, though she didn't realize that was what she was doing. It was a blasphemy to hate God. She attended church, she took communion, she went to confession, and she said her prayers. And then Missy had decided not to go anymore. Scully had expected her sister to be thrown out of the house over that, but instead her family simply accepted it, though with the sort of tolerance that expected that she would return one day. But it caused a rift in what had been a very Catholic family. Bill had stopped going regularly during his later years at Annapolis, when the pressure of school had become too much for him to juggle both. Scully had done much of the same when she attended Maryland, dropping church nearly all together her freshman year, except for when she was at home. And Charlie had followed in his elder siblings tradition, making a vague attempt his freshman year at Annapolis and stopping all together soon after. Maggie hadn't said word one to her children regarding it.

Scully knew when she had stopped praying, stopped listening to God, when Daniel Waterston wandered into her life, handsome and older, offering her his mentorship and his affection. Perhaps, if she had listened, then she wouldn't have followed him so blindly, wouldn't have allowed herself to be seduced by his intelligence and taken in by his charm. But she was in no mood to listen to God or anyone else about Daniel, not until she found out about his wife. She had committed adultery, a sin, one as serious as killing her own pet. She had gone to bed with a man who was married to someone else. Somehow Bill's words of placation, that it was all just a mistake, an accident, brought her no comfort as she cried bitter tears and answered the curious inquiries of the FBI and Quantico. She hadn't gone to confession about Daniel. She couldn't bring herself to do it. How could she admit to anyone her sin, especially God? She swallowed that truth within her, buried it deep as she threw herself into her studies and into new relationships with Tom, Jack, Ethan, none lasting. She privately had supposed perhaps it was punishment for Daniel, for the fact that she had slept with another woman's husband, however unbeknownst to her at the time. But each time the thought occurred to her, she laughed it off, silly superstition born out of her childhood fear of God always watching.

Was he watching now, she wondered, as the cross slipped from her fingers? Had God watched as
Duane Barry broke through her window, grabbing her kicking and screaming into the night? Had God watched as she lay on Takeo Ishimaru's cold lab table, hurting and crying for Mulder to come, indifferent to the pain as he did whatever it was that he had performed on her? Had God watched as she stood at Betsy Hagopian's bed, wondering if this was her fate, if whatever did this to this poor woman would eventually do the same to herself, Scully? She had stopped speaking to God long ago. Did God even bother paying attention to her anymore? She couldn't be certain? If she were to whisper a prayer for Betsy Hagopian, would God even care? Was Betsy even Christian, she wondered, with a delirious laugh, and did that effect God if she asked Him to have mercy on the soul of a poor woman drug into someone's nefarious plot? Have mercy, Lord, on these poor sinners…

Somehow she wasn't surprised her phone rang. It was harsh in the stillness of her room, but she didn't flinch. She simply quietly reached for it, holding it to her ear. "Hi, Mulder."

"Couldn't sleep?" Mulder notoriously couldn't and it wasn't the first after-midnight call she received from him.

"No," she murmured softly. "Penny Northern from Allentown called tonight. Betsy Hagopian died this evening."

Mulder was silent for long, quiet moments on his end of the phone. "I'm sorry, Scully," he finally murmured softly, true regret and concern bleeding over the line. "Have you…"

"I have an appointment with my doctor next week," Scully assured him, but didn't know what else to say. Her last check up had been stellar and in fact every one since her abduction had followed that pattern.

"We'll get the evidence of what was done." Mulder meant it as a reassurance. Scully couldn't help somehow feeling that it was far from it.

"Right," she sighed heavily. "What's catching your eye?" She could hear the television blaring at his house in the background. The lack of moans and cheesy music seemed to indicate it was actually regular television for once.

"Late night televangelist, that's all." Mulder sounded vaguely amused by the idea. "Do you think God ever actually listens to anyone like that?"

Scully felt her heart pull in her chest. "I don't know."
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder finds a religious case.

Perhaps God was watching her after all, Scully mused darkly, as she crouched over the body. God also had a wicked, disgusting sense of humor, sending her on a case involving a murdered man of the cloth. The coincidences weren't lost on her as she slipped on a pair of thin, rubber gloves, scowling darkly at the body of Reverend Findley.

"Have they determined if it was a hate crime or not?" She swallowed past the irrational irritation she felt and glanced up at Mulder, newly returned from speaking to the officer-in-charge.

"The chief of police here in town doesn't think so," Mulder muttered as he crouched besides her, hovering over Findley's body. "He said that services ran like normal this morning, and that Findley was found like this by his wife when he didn't come out of his dressing room to join his family for lunch. Apparently she got alarmed because Findley hated fighting the Methodists for a spot at the local, Sunday lunch buffet."

Mulder's irreverent humor on the situation wasn't lost on Scully, but she found herself not caring. Rather than rolling her eyes or granting him some other small, childish form of acknowledgment, she simply ignored it as she pulled back the black robes Findley wore and prodded the now grayish, flabby skin of his throat. "I don't see how they haven't ruled out a hate crime? Why would they call the FBI otherwise?"

"That was me," Mulder shrugged. "The police chief saw I had a call out for all cases fitting this description. At first the chief was tempted to rule it as a simple homicide. Seems Findley had been stepping out with several ladies of Waynesburg for 'prayer meetings'. It was an open secret the good reverend wasn't just bringing them to Jesus during those meetings."

Scully didn't miss the note of wry amusement and justification in Mulder's voice. He was far from religious, in fact, if she didn't know better she would assume that Mulder was as atheistic as they came. Mulder wanted to believe, desperately, but not in God. Aliens, his sister's return, government conspiracies, yes, but not in God. Despite her own struggles with faith of late, at least she believed in a God. She just wasn't speaking to him. Mulder never went so far as to call religion superstition, he believed in too many superstitions to call it that. But the now-dead Reverend's infidelity only seemed to prove the worst of Mulder's suppositions regarding faith and somehow that bothered Scully.

"If the entire town knew he was having affairs with these women, why did they go to his church?" She frowned down at the red, bloody welts on the man's neck. His entire body seemed to be lying in a pool of his own blood, though she was unsure how that could be. The ligature marks cut into the skin, yes, but not so deeply as to cause this amount of blood loss.

"Despite it all, the town thought he was holy. We've worked faith cases before, Scully. Even when the evidence to the contrary is thrown at people, how many times do they still believe?" There was the hint of subtle mockery in his tone, that disdain for those who would throw themselves headfirst into religion.
Scully decided to tweak him gently. "I don't know. How many times have I presented evidence there is no such thing as aliens and you keep persisting in that belief? How come it's so far fetched for people to believe there is a God?"

Far from being chastened, Mulder seemed delighted she had set him down. "Touché, Scully. What have we got here?" He frowned down at the dead man's skin as she gently turned his head to study the other side.

"These ligature marks on his neck are consistent with rope or fabric burns, strongly suggesting that he was strangled. But there seems to be an awful lot of blood loss here."

"His parishioners said the Reverend Finley was bleeding from his hands like the wounds of the crucifixion."

It was enough to give the Catholic in Scully's soul pause. She stared up at Mulder, disbelieving. "Stigmata?"

"The sign bestowed by God upon the righteous." He sounded as if he didn't put much stock in God's opinions on righteousness and Findley. Frankly, if Findley was the sort of man Mulder described, Scully couldn't either. Immediately she reached for his hands, pulling them up to examine them.

"I don't see any wounds here in his hands, or wrists, or otherwise." Scully tried to cull her memories of saints and martyrs from her childhood. What was it with stigmata? Did they leave open, visible wounds after death or not? How about in the feet?

"No, I think this is a case of too much faith." He reached down one glove-covered hand to the dark, red stick pool lying under Findley's body and without warning dabbed a small amount on his tongue. He ignored Scully's horrified glance. "And too much sugar."

"What are you doing?" She was too shocked to shriek and too stunned to do anything but stare at him. Mulder had done many odd and strange things at crime scenes, but tasting blood was not one of them.

"It's fake, just like the others." He rose in mild disgust, Scully so disturbed by what he did that it took a moment to realize what it was that he had just said. She blinked up at him, realization falling into place slowly.

"Others?"

"I've been tracking a series of international religiously motivated murders. All of the victims have been so-called stigmatics and all of them have been frauds, like the Reverend here." He nodded down to the body as she stood, stripping off the prophylactic gloves from her fingers.

What was it that Sister Spooky had said about stigmatics in her youth? "According to certain religious lore, at any given time there are twelve stigmatics in the world, representing the twelve apostles."

"It's a claim that's wholly unsubstantiated, though there have been many pretenders." Mulder dismissed her childhood stories of Catholic mysticism, though not completely. "Eleven of whom have been murdered in the past three years."

Even if Mulder didn't believe in stigmatics, he obviously believed someone else did. "Eleven? Any clue as to the motivation?"
"Either we're dealing with a psychotic religious fanatic who's hell-bent on exposing these kind of frauds or a less programmatic psycho who harbors a murderous resentment towards the church. Maybe it's just a very disgruntled altar boy."

"Well, that narrows down the field," she muttered, following Mulder away from the body, out through the gathering of police and county sheriffs.

"Anyway, it's safe to say this guy carries a grudge and if I'm right about one thing, the killer is here and he's looking for victim number twelve."

"Twelve?" Scully followed her partner's beeline through the church to the yellow taped parking lot where his car sat. "He's killing off fake stigmatics, Mulder, not real ones."

"I don't think our killer knows the difference yet." Mulder slipped easily into his profiling mode, quickly deducing and calculating their suspect even as he walked towards the car. "I think our man thinks he's picking off the twelve stigmatics of the world. He's listening for the stories and is following the trails to murder each one of them."

That much made sense, Scully reasoned, but they still had no motive. "What for?"

Here, Mulder's profile on the fly stuttered. "It's hard to say," he admitted slowly, stopping at the car to unlock her door first. "Perhaps he thinks he can harm the church in some way by his actions, maybe he hopes to bring about the time of Revelation. Who knows?"

"The time of revelation? The death of the martyrs?" It was the only symbolism she could think of that made sense.

"You know your Book of Revelation better than I do." He unlocked and opened his door. "Anyway, let's stick around for a bit, see what the coroner turns up tomorrow on the body before heading back to Washington. In the meantime, I'll put out an alert regarding our suspect, maybe someone who knows Findley or went to this church can place out suspect for us."

"A night in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania." Scully eyed the small town dubiously. "Whatever will we do with ourselves here?"

"Order pizza and watch a movie?"

"Mulder, you really do like living on the edge, don't you?"
"This is why I never went into clinical psychology," Mulder breathed softly, his inscrutably calm belying the fact that he was bothered by the whimpers and moans heard coming from various corners of darkened hallways. They sat in a lounge of sorts, a dark place that had chairs and a carpet, but as few sharp, dangerous objects as possible. It was a room in an insane asylum to interview those who were mentally ill, of course it would try to have as few damaging things as possible. Scully hated to admit it, but the entire place had the effect of making her skin crawl ever so slightly.

"Well, speaking as a psychologist, what do you think is wrong with Daniel Kryder?" She leaned against one of the chairs, watching her partner pace the small area restlessly. They were waiting for orderlies to bring Kevin Kryder's father up from his room to explain to them why it is he felt the need to hold his son hostage at gunpoint. The obvious aside, Scully had privately wondered what the purpose of this exercise was. True, Kryder was guilty of some sort of abuse of his son, but what connection that had to the death of the minister in Pennsylvania still eluded her. She was certain it made sense, somehow, in Mulder's mind.

"Eschatology is not an uncommon fixation for people who suffer from psychotic breakdowns." Mulder's long strides paused at the window as he worried his bottom lip briefly between his teeth, his green eyes taking on a distant look. He was putting some sort of pieces together, but she wasn't sure in what configuration.

"Eschatology," she echoed, crossing her arms in front of her self. She dredged up the word from some well of religious education from her youth, frowning as it brought up images of horsemen and pale riders. "End times?"

"Specifically the cosmic battle between good and evil that results in the final victory of the forces of good. For Christians in particular the Book of Revelation is a wealth of symbols, mysteries, meanings, most of which have very little real link to the actual purpose of the book in the first place."

"I thought you didn't know anything about Revelations," she teased.

"I know a lot about psychosis though," Mulder shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers as he began to pace once again. "Kryder's condition is particularly atypical of those who focus on Revelation eschatology, the idea that the forces of evil are physical threats to those of good, that they are making real, visible efforts in this world to shift the weight of the cosmic battle."

"Why would Kryder focus on Kevin, then?"

"That part I'm not sure about," Mulder as he stopped in front of her. "It could be that he saw Kevin as being important, special, blessed for some reason. I spoke to his wife. They weren't practicing Christians, though Kryder had grown up in a Catholic home as a child. It could be that as his psychosis progressed, he began associating half-remember stories from his youth into his obsession..."
"Thus cutting his son." Scully followed this particular line of logic till its end. "Do you think that Kryder would actually go so far in his delusions? Would he actually abuse his son for the sake of his religious delusions?"

"People have done worse." Mulder shrugged. "I think what is more important now is why the cutting started again. Was it Kryder at all? Was it his wife all along? Maybe it is as the councilor suggested, Kevin acting out to try and get his father free from the mental institution. Whatever the case, I'm wondering if Daniel Kryder really was just a lone psychopath, or if he heard anything about our killer, if that didn't prompt his hostage episode."

For a man who had no faith in religion, Mulder was putting an awful lot of weight into the belief of others. Scully wanted to comment on it, but stopped short as the door to the lounge opened and a male orderly entered, asking the two of them to follow him.

"Sorry for this, its almost medication time, and we don't want the patient to be out and about after the drugs kick in." The orderly shrugged with the sort of bored indifference medical staffs seemed to develop in these sorts of facilities. "He should be fairly well-behaved though. Kryder isn't one of our violent ones. He mostly keeps to himself, reads his Bible, that sort of thing." The orderly did glance warily at Mulder's side. "Though just keep an eye on your weapons, just in case."

Instinctively Scully patted her suit coat for hers.

Kryder's room was two floors up, on the outward facing wall. I was a darkened room, with a heavy door and bars on the windows, but comfortable and neat, with a single bed and nightstand in the room. On the bed sat a man in his thirties, rumpled but composed, watching them quietly as they entered. Daniel Kryder hardly looked like a man who had potentially abused his son or had held him hostage. If anything he looked like a soccer father caught in his pajamas on Sunday morning, wondering why it was two well-dressed FBI agents were there to see him.

"You have visitors, Kryder." It was the orderly's way of introduction, as he nodded curtly to them both. "I'll be down the hall if you need anything."

"Right," Mulder muttered sarcastically, looking less than thrilled with the idea of being left alone with a mentally ill man, FBI agent or not. Scully couldn't blame him, but tried to put as pleasant of a face as possible on before smiling at the curious Kryder.

"Mr. Kryder, my name is Dana Scully, this is my partner, Fox Mulder…we are with the FBI."

"The FBI?" The initials seemed to impress Kryder whose eyes flew up to Mulder, then back over to Scully again. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Not that we suspect, no," Mulder replied with smooth reassurance. "We are actually here about your son, Kevin."

The boy's name had a mixed effect on the elder Kryder. His expression shifted from surprise, to wariness, to sadness, to understanding in the blink of an eye. He met their watching eyes frankly, as if he knew exactly why it was they were there.

"He's bleeding again, isn't he?" He sounded both awed and resigned, as if he expected this to happen again.

"Yes," Scully murmured, her incredulity slamming up instantly. "How did you know that?"
"Because the faithful know," Kryder responded with the same sort of resolute assurance she had seen out of the little, old women at church who went everyday to light their candles and make their prayers. Scully shot Mulder a doubtful look, but Mulder segued into his reason for speaking to Kryder.

"Mr. Kryder, the claims you've made for your son may have put him in danger. Do you know that?"

Kryder nodded, a misty expression forming on his face. "The child was in danger long before I ever made the claims. Since the day he was born, they've been watching him."

"They," Mulder pressed.

"The forces of darkness. They will come in the form of a powerful and respected man."

This time Mulder did meet her skeptical gaze, but only with a silent plea of patience. Scully had heard this sort of rhetoric many times over, usually in bad horror movies. But Mulder was the profession, and theoretically knew what he was doing. She bit her tongue and waited as he pressed Kryder further.

"These forces, what do they want?"

"To claim all souls." As if sensing the skepticism that was raging in Scully's mind, he turned his fervent eyes towards Scully's impassive gaze. "You must understand, this is the great war between good and evil."

"Armageddon?" She arched her eyebrow in delicate disbelief at the man's belief.

"God will find someone to stop it, someone who is strong enough to make the sacrifice." He spoke with the assurance of the true fanatic.

"He's chosen you?" Now it was Mulder's turn to sound skeptical, his voice just skating along the edge between doubt and sarcasm, an art form that he was skilled at. Kryder hardly looked ruffled.

"I'm merely a messenger," Kryder insisted placidly, hardly looking affronted. Mulder processed this for the briefest of seconds, and Scully could almost see him writing off Kryder as a garden-variety, religious psychotic, a man completely out of touch with any sort of reality. And as inclined as she was to agree with him, a small part of her thought that perhaps it was a bit unfair on his part. After all, how many people had the same reaction to Mulder when his talk turned to aliens and government conspiracies?

"Let's go." Mulder's long fingers reached for her elbow, a gentle prod for her to follow. Silently she turned to follow him out the door.

Kryder watched them dreamily for the briefest of moments, before calling out to them just as Mulder's pulled the heavy door of Kryder's room. "You must come full circle to find the truth."

Scully frowned, turning to the man as he smiled at her vaguely. His eyes were staring directly at her, not at Mulder, not at a random spot in the room, but at her, watching her as if trying to impart some secret meaning.

"Excuse me?" Mulder cut in, immediately on guard, alarm and a silent threat evident in his tone.

"Full circle to find the truth? I don't know what that means." It sounded like some cryptic sentence tossed at her by one of Mulder's informants, a word game designed to only give her the
information she needed without giving her the information she didn't. But there didn't appear to be any deceit in Kryder, only a slightly mad fervor that hardly seemed upset that she didn't understand what he meant.

"You will," he assured her quietly, his smile placid as Mulder's fingers clamped, hard, around her elbow once again.

"We better go," he murmured, low and harsh in her ear as he practically drug her away from Kryder's bed, out of the door of his cell. Scully followed without protest, glancing back at Kryder as he watched them go, his look thoughtful.

Full circle to the truth. It was such a strange statement, an odd comment on the entirety of their work. But what did he mean by it? Was he referring to Kevin, to the killer, to the X-files, to the truth in general? What sort of cryptic statement was it? And was it supposed to have a meaning?

"Scully, the man's psychotic." Mulder tone was dark above her as he finally released her arm. He glanced back at the man. "Don't believe all the things he has to say, much of it only makes sense to himself.

Funny, she though, wasn't that what she was constantly telling him. "Mulder, I'm not about to start believing the ravings of a madman based on something that esoteric." She was nettled that in a blink of an eye he went from her perfectly reasonable partner to a suspicious over-protector. Wasn't she always the one who had the level head in these situations, the one who always had to call him off following the madman down the merry path?

"I didn't say you were," Mulder replied, glancing sideways at the door. "But color me paranoid whenever a psychotic decides to give you encrypted messages he assumes only you will understand. I've been down that road before with men like Kryder, Scully…"

He paused, a wounded look haunting his expression for the briefest of seconds before it was gone. "And I have no desire to try and manage a manhunt for you again."

Scully's initial irritation melted ever so slightly, the visions of Duane Barry and Donne Pfaster rising to the surface again. "Daniel Kryder is in his institution, he's relatively well behaved, and besides, I don't think he means anyone any harm. Do you think he had anything to do with this latest incident with Kevin?"

"No." Mulder backed down visibly, agitatedly running his hands through his dark hair as altered modes once again into that of investigator, not over-protective partner. "I don't think he did, but I do believe that advertising it the way he does he's probably drawn attention from our killer."

"So you believe Kevin could be a target?" Kevin hardly seemed the sort. He was just a kid, a good natured, mischievous kid, going through a rough time with his family. How could he be some key part of a great, cosmic battle between good and evil? How could anyone else believe that? Somehow she didn't believe the phrase "God works in mysterious ways" applied here.

"I'll give the children's home a call, have them post an extra guard out, just in case someone tries something with Kevin tonight." Mulder was already reaching for his cell phone. "It could be that Kevin's father's psychosis plays right into the one suffered by our killer and Kevin might be stuck in the middle."

Scully paused as she watched Mulder lope down the hallway, cell phone to ear as he began speaking. Briefly she turned, glancing back at the doorway to Kryder's room.
You must come full circle to find the truth. The truth about Kevin, the killer or did Kryder's words even have anything to do with this case. Where they words that had a bigger meaning, a deeper nuance than just Kevin? Perhaps to the X-files? Perhaps to Betsy Hagopian and the chip that Scully had found in her neck. Was she supposed to come full circle and face the events of her own abduction before she could discover the truth of why she was taken, of what this all meant?

"Scully?" Mulder's voice called for her from down the hallway.

"Coming," she replied absently, turning away from Kryder's door.
Guardian Angel

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is confronted by true faith.

Perhaps Mulder worried about Scully around psychotics. Frankly, Scully worried about Mulder around anyone close to a child abduction case.

"Where is Kevin, Jarvis?" Mulder's eyes flashed vaguely like an avenging angel's, turning from hazel to brilliant green in an instant. It occurred to Scully she might want to call him off his righteous indignation, but knew that when he reached this state he tended to lash at anything in his way, including her.

"He's not here." Jarvis misshapen face was completely guileless and unafraid in the face of Mulder's anger.

"You took him!" Mulder shoved the man into chair, roughly pushing the taller man down as he pulled out handcuffs from off his belt. "You were identified by the children at the home, Jarvis."

The rough treatment caused Jarvis to gasp and groans lightly, his arms bending back as Mulder snapped them into place with more aggression than was absolutely necessary. While visions of lawsuits danced in her head for a moment, she dismissed them as she thought of Kevin out there, somewhere, bleeding and wondering why it is his entire life was upside down. Somehow her sympathy ended wherever that little boy was hiding at the moment.

"Where's the boy? What have you done with Kevin?" Mulder sat on the nearest piece of furniture in the dusty attic, lit only by a single window that looked out onto the lawn. Scully watched him out of the corner of her eye quietly as she glanced towards the window. So far he was behaving himself reasonably. But Mulder was fast and a missing child set off all the worst of his neurosis. In the blink of an eye he could cross a line she would have to force him away from, one that could bring the weight of the Justice Department on their heads.

Jarvis seemed keenly aware of the same possibility out of Mulder and looked to Scully imploringly instead. "He can't go home. It's not safe there. I told him that."

It was the wrong answer for Mulder clearly, his hand snapping under Jarvis's nose in an instant, a white towel stained rust colored waving in the ugly man's face. "Is this Kevin Kryder's blood?" Mulder's voice rang with barely suppressed rage and the threat of serious bodily violence.

"Yes," Jarvis admitted weakly.

"Did you hurt him?"

"No. I'm not the one that wants to hurt him," Jarvis insisted, again turning appealing to Scully, as if she would be the one more likely to believe his story over her enraged partner. She saw his eyes fix on the gold cross resting against her throat.

"If not you, then who is it?" She kept her tone reasonable, if skeptical, a contrast to Mulder's dark glower beside the man.
"I was only asked to protect the boy."

"By who?" Mulder rose, tossing the towel contemptuously aside, leaning in close to the man's ruined face, tiptoeing the line Scully knew she would have to call him down from if she allowed him to go too much longer. "Who asked you to protect him?"

Without even a shudder the man met Mulder's outrage confidently. "God."

Owen Jarvis' simple worried rang through the dust of the attic, humming into Scully's brain. It carried with it a certain weight and texture, a presence of strength, of conviction of faith. Jarvis hadn't said the word because he thought it was an excuse or as some dry platitude. There was a certitude in that word, the sort of faith that didn't come with hearing mass and taking the Eucharist every week. It was much more primal than even that.

And it was something that Mulder should understand, but never did. The word God only seemed to elicit a sneer out of him. "God? That's quite a long distance call, isn't it?"

"You don't understand." Jarvis' equanimity finally broke under the weight of Mulder's taunting. He glared defiantly up at him, dark eyes fervent. "Unless someone protects Kevin ..."

"It's the end of the world as we know it, right?" Mulder turned from Jarvis, disgusted.

"He who has ear, let him hear." Jarvis gave rejoinder, clearly not ruffled by Mulder's attitude.

"And he that has a tongue, let him speak!" Mulder spun, snapping back at Jarvis, his voice ringing loudly off the wooden beams of the old attic. "Now tell me where he is!"

Jarvis watched Mulder for long, inscrutable moments, as if considering whether deign continuing to convince him or to ignore him. Clearly he didn't. His crumpled face turned to Scully, glancing again at the cross at her neck. "You believe me, don't you?" His eyes lifted back to her face. "I mean, you must wear that as a reminder."

A reminder of a faith she no longer practiced. "Mr. Jarvis, my religious convictions are hardly the issue here."

"But they are!" His ill-shaped face became almost beatific, an inner glow lighting it, though his tone couldn't be more serious. "How can you help Kevin if you don't believe? Even the killer, he believes."

"And townsfolk wonder why I sleep in on Sunday," Mulder muttered darkly.

Jarvis' hopefulness seemed to die at Scully's marked reaction to his words, the confident surety of his words stealing itself into a disappointed ire all of his own. "Mass on Christmas, fish on Friday, you think that makes you a good Christian?" His words moved past Mulder, targeted for Scully alone. And despite herself she could feel the sting of them uncomfortably as her tiny cross lay heavy against her skin. "Just because you don't understand the sacrifice, because you're unwilling, don't think for a moment that you set the rules for me. I don't question His word. Whatever He asks of me, I'll do."

Though he was still bound with his arms behind him in the chair, Jarvis rose, unsteady on his clumsy feet.

"Sit down, Mr. Jarvis." Mulder instantly became guarded and Scully could see his hand reaching for hip where he kept his weapon.
Jarvis ignored Mulder. Instead he granted her partner a sad, pleading look, as if begging for understanding. "I just want to go to heaven."

With those words he ran, hunched over under the chair attached to him, and ran headlong to the one window lighting the room.

"Hey," Mulder cried as Scully gasped, trying to reach a hand for the man before he made a fatal leap. Too late, glass splintered and shattered in a rain of fine, scintillating pieces, as Jarvis fell, sickeningly, out of the third story.

"Damn it!" Mulder cursed as he rushed to the stairs. Scully instead moved to the window, fully expecting to see the man's crumpled, broken body on the grass beneath. Instead, miraculously, the man stood, shaking off the ruined remains of wood and glass, pulling at the handcuffs that bent his arms behind his back. The muscles of the man's arms strained, his shoulder's rippled beneath his cotton t-shirt and suddenly the steel links burst, as the man ran clumsily off the lawn, not bothering to look up at Scully in the window or back at the house, where she heard the downstairs door opening.

Mulder had just missed him. Swearing loudly, he moved to where the broken bits remained and looked up at her. The man broke his steel bonds without even a second thought after falling from an attic window and bouncing up again to tell the tale. What was she supposed to say to that?

"I'll be down," she replied to his unspoken request, moving down the stairs of the old farmhouse and out to the lawn where Mulder paced around the spot, his eyes roving the grass as if looking for some clue to tell them how Jarvis survived - or better still where he went. The grass lay over top of dirt, soft from a recent, cold rain, the weather not yet chill enough to freeze the ground.

"Looks as if it's soft enough here to at least break his fall." Scully dug at the spot with her shoe, the tip of it digging wetly in the squelching dirt.

"That's three stories, Scully, something should have broken."

"It gets better. He broke his handcuffs." She watched Mulder's incredulity turn to disbelief.

"You realize you are the one spouting the insane theory here? Those are carbon steel handcuffs, no one breaks them on a whim."

Mulder had a point, but that didn't stop her snapping at him irritably. "I know that, Mulder, but I saw him do it." What more evidence did she have than that she could see, measure, and understand, it was what made her a scientist. Only she didn't understand this, any of this.

"All I know is he got up and ran in the direction of the street." She hadn't even seen in what direction he had gone. "Where do you suppose he went?"

"Wherever Kevin went," Mulder replied grimly, his flashing eyes darkening considerably with his irritation. It wasn't precisely at her, it was at this, the entire situation, a missing child that should have been safe and was now on the run from a person who was intent on killing him. It could quite possibly be the man they even had in custody just moments before. "I think Kevin went where he felt safest."

Where did she feel safest when she was Kevin's age?

"Home." It was the most logical explanation. What child wouldn't want to go home first thing to hide from the bad guys of the world? "But Jarvis said he didn't want Kevin heading there. He said it was dangerous."
"If you were Kevin and you had just been kidnapped by that man, would you want to believe him?"
Mulder spun away from her, his long jacket flying behind him as he stalked to their car, keys already out of his pocket and in his hand. Perhaps Mulder was correct, Jarvis with his religious convictions truly believed he was doing the will of God, even if it was only his personal psychosis. But Jarvis had been adamant about the boy's protection; fearful of someone else he saw as the killer. How had he known about that anyway.

Scully rushed to follow him, thoughtful. "How did Jarvis know we were looking for someone murdering stigmatic?"

It was unusual for Mulder not to be on top of something like that, and to her surprise he waved it off, dismissing it. "My guess is that he overheard Mrs. Kryder at some point. Likely he's been watching the Kryder house for sometime, he probably heard not only where Kevin was, but also why. I can't imagine Mrs. Kryder was secret about it."

"You are assuming then that he was listening in on the Kryder's house this whole time, even after his father's arrest?"

"If anything, I believe that Jarvis believed his father, thought he was carrying out his father's work. You heard the rhetoric, Scully, it was the same crap that Kryder was spouting."

"But that doesn't make Jarvis our killer," Scully insisted. Mulder paused in his stride, glaring back at her accusingly for questioning his reasoning. "He's afraid of something hurting Kevin, the same as Daniel Kryder was. What if they are right? What if they both are afraid of whoever is out there, killing stigmatic?"

"Why do you want to believe him when he kidnapped the boy in the first place?"

"Maybe you should ask yourself why you don't?" Scully aimed directly for the sore spot between them, the one area of faith where they different nearly as much as over aliens. "You are willing to write Jarvis off as a religious psychopath and frankly I can't buy that, not completely. Strange, yes, fervent, certainly, but not everyone who has faith Mulder is a serial killer waiting to happen."

"I'm not out here criticizing your faith, Scully."

"No, but you are dismissing it because for once it doesn't fit into your world view." She slowly crossed to where he now stood still, rolling his eyes in denial of her claims. "You can't believe that anyone in this world would have faith enough to believe these things."

"I don't doubt people's belief in God, Scully, hell I don't know if I necessarily believe that God doesn't exist. What I don't believe is that someone who can go to such extremes is a sane and rational person."

"So if they believe in an entity that isn't there that may have an effect on their life, and belief passionately in that belief, suddenly they are crazy?" The hypocrisy wasn't lost on Scully. "Mulder, how do you know he isn't Kevin's guardian angel?"

It was a thought she hadn't wanted to voice, not really. It was the sort of thing that not even Mulder believed in, but she had seen the man fall from three stories, get back up, and rip his own cuffs apart. Stranger things had happened, but they were usually stranger things that Mulder actually believed in for a change. This time he didn't believe in it or her.

"Look, I admit my theological knowledge is sketchy at best and what I have is theoretical," Mulder conceded with the sort of placating tone she hardly ever heard out of him ever, and certainly never
addressed to her, as if she were the one screaming about aliens and conspiracies for a change. "But I can assure now, Scully, Owen Jarvis is nothing more than a sociopath with a taste for little boys and religious rhetoric. Sounds like a lot of priests I know."

"For once, can you not box my faith into easily labeled stereotypes that you can hurl at me when you want to remind me of your disdain? I may disagree with you on aliens, Mulder, but I hardly insult your intelligence and I don't go about castigating an institution that has stood for 2000 years, whether there is a God or not."

Scully didn't raise her voice, nor did she bristle with anger. She wasn't even sure why Mulder's words bothered her so much. He had always made his distrust for the Christianity and the Catholic Church perfectly clear. And it wasn't as if she didn't have her own anger towards God now, her own crises of faith, her own fears over what had happened to herself and those other women in Allentown. But his callousness over her feelings, his disregard for the traditions that had bound her family together and went back centuries, that bothered her. Mulder, ever the rebel and iconoclast, and Scully, ever the traditionalist, they seemed to be falling into stereotypes, caricatures of themselves and something about that didn't sit well with her.

The cold wind picked up, flicking both of their coats about them. Somewhere, Kevin Kryder was still missing, Owen Jarvis was looking for them, and they stood arguing about God and the church as if they were debating seminary students, not two agents trying to save the boy and solve a series of murders. Mulder's anger had banked some, his expression carefully apologetic as he nodded.

"I'm sorry for any generalities that might have offended you." It was a stiff apology, far too formal for Mulder, stilted and careful in its wording. Was he really sorry or did he simply want to say something to get them moving again and back on the case?

"Thank you," she replied softly, not even sure why she felt the need to pick this fight now, when it could have waited till after they had found the boy and ensured his safety. "We better get going."

Wordlessly they both moved towards the car and didn't say a word between them as they drove towards the Kryder's residence.
Hagiography

Chapter Summary

In which Scully grapples with hearing the voice of God.

The scent of old paper and binding glue brought a warm smile to Scully's lips. Memories of long ago days of all-nighters and large thermoses of coffee keeping her awake while she crammed for Quantum Physics and German finals sprung to mind. This time of year, McDonald Library at Xavier University was filled to brimming with nervous, flushed students, all busily working on papers and exams, the winter finals looming largely on the horizon. As much as Scully had loved and had thrived in an academic environment, this was a part of her education she neither missed nor mourned.

Behind the reference desk, a pretty young girl blinked curiously at her, all smiles and helpful courtesy. She returned her politeness, trying to be as non-threatening as possible. "I'm here to see Doctor Gallagher. He's expecting me and said to meet him here."

She pulled out her badge for the girl. "Special Agent Dana Scully."

The FBI shield made the girl's dark eyes open wide. She turned them up from the badge to Scully's face, then down again, nodding slowly and warily. Scully doubted that the girl had so much as seen a police officer before, let alone one on this very Catholic campus. Managing a somewhat pleasant smile, she dialed a number and spoke briefly into the phone.

"He'll be up front in a minute," she replied politely but cautiously, obviously wondering what the head of the religious text collection had done to cause an FBI agent to come to campus. Scully amused herself wondering what the girl would say if she said she had performed an autopsy on the body of someone blessed by God that day. Perhaps she would think Scully as touched in the head as Mulder currently thought she was. What a strange turn of events that was, having her partner thing she was the crazy one.

"Agent Scully?" Dr. Gallagher round a corner of the front lobby, with a benign smile and a mild, warm voice. He wasn't tall, but had the round, friendly face that marked him as being as Irish as she was herself, dressed in the black clothes and tab that marked him both as a member of the priestly order and the Jesuit brotherhood he had taken vows for. He took her outstretched hand, shaking it with delight.

"Imagine an FBI agent having enough presence of mind to speak to me!" The professor's eyes were wide behind his thick, wire-rimmed glasses. "Certainly not the first call a college professor expects on a weekday morning." Gallagher leaned in briefly, conspiratorially, his stage whisper loud enough for the girl behind the desk to hear. "I certainly hope no one here has done something strange or funny, have they?"

"No." Scully tried not to smile at the priest's relief as he nodded happily.

"Oh good! I watch all of those criminal procedure shows and it's always someone you wouldn't expect, the nice person down the street, or the victim's grieving spouse. I'd hate to think anyone here at the university could be guilty of doing something so unfortunate that it would bring the FBI
No, Dr. Gallagher, no one here is suspected of any crime." The girl behind the desk shot Scully a dubious look. "Can we speak in private?"

"Of course!" The genial professor led the way from the area, back behind a stack of books to offices tucked away from the regular student view. "I thought it strange that the Bureau would want to speak to a poor, Jesuit college professor of early church literature."

"You're an expert on hagiology, the study of saints' lives." Gallagher ushered her into a small, modern office filled floor to ceiling with books, papers, notes, and several icons, most notably one of St. Ignatius on the far wall. A seat in front of his piled desk was open and she took it, as he settled into a worn, comfortable looking leather office chair, battered and patched in several places.

"Well, hagiology is much more the study of the study of saints' lives. Hagiographies are the actually studies themselves, reverential writings about the life and work of saints, usually highlighting how blessed and holy they were in life as well as death." The professor steepled his hands in front of himself, falling into the same sort of relaxed, omniscient cadence she had heard Mulder take on numerous occasions when it came to paranormal activity.

"Most hagiography are colorful stories, tales of the adventures of saints; how they outwitted demons, defied those who tried to make them deny their faith, performed miracles, died as martyrs. At a time when most people were illiterate, story telling was a form of education as well as entertainment. They were a crucial way to impart the message of the church to those who were only newly converted to Christianity. Lessons were often interwoven with miracles. Doctrine was put on the tongues of saints who lived even before the time the doctrine was enacted. Some within even the church itself often call hagiographies nothing more than religious fairy tales, but I think they tell us a great deal about our history as a church, our growth, and how many of our dearly held traditions took root." He paused, his round face pinking under his glasses, hunching bashfully. "Here I am carrying on about this and I don't even know if you are of the same belief, dear."

"I was raised in the church, Doctor Gallagher," she assured him, fingering the cross at her neck. "That's why I'm here discussing hagiographies. It involves a young boy whose life may be in danger." Where could she begin with this and not make even this scholarly priest think she was as crazy as she suspected Mulder was beginning to see her.

"There is a child in Loveland. He's displaying marks that could be taken by some as stigmata." She was careful in how she worded that. She didn't want to dare sound as if she had the authority to make such a claim, but she couldn't deny that was what the injuries were supposed to resemble. "There is a man out there who is killing people who display these markings. Most are not real stigmatics. What I'm worried about with this boy…"

She paused, wondering how to phrase her statement. "His father swears that his son is marked by God. A man who used to work for the family died protecting this boy from this killer, knowing in advance the boy's life was in danger. He believed that by doing this he could ensure that his soul would reach heaven."

Scully licked suddenly dry lips, wondering is she was only imagining the skeptical look on the priest's face. "I performed the autopsy on the body of the man myself. His body wasn't showing signs of proper decay. I'm a pathologist, you learn to pick up these signs. It was as if his body was in stasis, and the fragrance…"

Here she paused, feeling foolish even as she said it. "I smelled flowers, Doctor Gallagher. A dead corpse smelling of flowers."
At least he wasn't looking at her as if she were mad.

"Really?" He looked impressed, even excited. "Well, that is something! I mean, I'm only an expert on literature and it isn't my place to confirm or deny miracles, but if it were one…"

His eyes shined for the briefest of moments, but quickly dampened at Scully's troubled frown. "Of course, I can't say for sure what is going on here, Agent Scully. After all, there are those who claim they see the face of the Blessed Virgin on toast, with people driving hundreds of miles to see it. It's not far from the realm of possibility that the wounds the boy has been displaying are not real. But there are those who would believe they are, even when the evidence has proven otherwise. As a Jesuit, we are always skeptical of such claims till they are proven, as you know, but we do acknowledge that miracles and signs such as stigmata do exist."

"Doctor Gallagher, I'm a scientist." She felt the need to quantify this somehow, to explain to him that she didn't simply believe every story from the faithful she ran across. "I believe in miracles, in witness, in God revealing himself to us in ways we can't understand. But I also believe science's ability to explain rationally the world that before had been relegated to myth and legend. It's a fine line to tread as a believer, I know that, but it has never failed me, till now."

She pressed her lips together, her teeth digging into the soft flesh briefly in the face of the man's sympathetic gaze. "You're a man of letters, Doctor Gallagher, but you are also a priest and a member of a monastic order. How is it you walk that fine line without becoming angry - disillusioned?"

"Not easily," the priest murmured sympathetically, leaning forward in his chair as he studied her carefully. "I took my monastic vows before becoming a priest, when I was still just a young man, finishing my undergraduate studies. At the time, I thought I knew all there was to know about God, Christ, faith, our world. To enter into the Society of Jesus is a rigorous study, one that I had prepared for since childhood. And yet, as I furthered my knowledge afterwards, took on my graduate studies, went to seminary, I remember feeling the frustration of seeing all the discrepancies in our world, of having all these questions of God. And I was met again and again with the face of the faith that had been drilled into me since childhood. I wondered how there could be a God who allowed such things to happen; wars, death, evil in our world, and yet professed to love us so much that he committed a sacrifice of a part of Himself for our personal salvation? How could any God love us and allow such things to happen?"

"Exactly." It was as if Doctor Gallagher had read her heart, had seen the struggle inside of her these last few days since Betsy Hagopian's death. Here she was, presented with people of such perfect faith and belief, when around her the world was falling apart. "How did you resolve any of that?"

"I didn't," he replied, apologetic at her disappointed frown. "It is still a struggle, one I pray and meditate over everyday, and I then I hand over to God. It is hard in our world, Agent Scully, when we understand so much of the details of how God works, to understand the larger picture of how this plays out for him. Much as John of Patmos divined in the Book of Revelation, the scale of what God sees is so much bigger than what we as humans can comprehend. You know, the book was written as an apokolypse, an unveiling of sorts, a way for John to reveal the greater vision of God's ultimate plan to the early church of the first century."

She hadn't known that, Scully admitted, and she shook her head, visions of damnation and hellfire springing to mind as she remembered reading the book in her Catholic school education.

"That is why it is referred to as a 'revelation'. John wanted to reassure the church that even in troubled times there is a meaning, a purpose for all of this suffering, the pain and anguish the church was facing wasn't in vein. Though their enemies were great, they would not triumph in the
face of God's greater glory."

Did Betsy die for a purpose? Was what was done to herself and the other women in Allentown done for a purpose? Was it all supposed to mean something in some grand, cosmic plan of God? Why did the idea make her chest tighten, her eyes prick? How could a God who claimed to love her, to love humankind, allow this to happen to good people?

"The boy we are protecting." Scully returned to her purpose of being there, thrusting the unanswered questions out of her mind. "Am I simply reliving tales I heard in catechism class? Is this really all just efforts of my subconscious trying to explain something that my science cannot? You said it yourself, hagiographies were mostly fantastical to begin with, stories told to entertain and instruct. I was a child when I heard these. Perhaps…perhaps I'm allowing my imagination to run wild in a case that could be as simple as a troubled boy and a mad killer on the loose."

Was she answering her own questions here?

"Perhaps," Doctor Gallagher admitted slowly. "Or perhaps there is a message here, a revelation. Perhaps God is trying to speak to you, Agent Scully. Perhaps there is a greater revelation here than just a murderer, something that you are supposed to see, to understand in all of this. Have faith, God reveals himself in time to everyone."

Gallagher's reassuring smile was almost glowing, almost beatific, almost like the look on Owen Jarvis' face before he threw himself out of the window. Scully blinked, hard, her mind stuttering as she looked at him again.

"Everything all right, Agent Scully?" Gone was the almost blessed glow about Dr. Gallagher and now was a softly concerned frown.

"Yes…yes, fine," she murmured, standing up and reaching across the desk for the man's hand. "Thank you for your help. I'm sure it will aid us in our case."

"I hope so. I hope you catch this man." Gallagher stood as she made her way to the door.

"It worries me to think someone is out there targeting religious people like that."

"We'll find him, Doctor Gallagher," she assured him warmly as she opened the door.

"Agent Scully," he called, stopping her before she could step out into the library. "Remember, God is always speaking. It is just that sometimes we are not listening."
Full Circle

Chapter Summary

In which Scully comes full circle to find the truth.

Full circle to the truth...

Daniel Kryder's phrase nagged at her, tugging at something inside her brain, like a ravenous dog with a bone, gnaw and pulling. What was it?

She had assumed that it was simply a cryptic message from a disturbed man, referring to any number of things from her own person issues, to the X-files in general, to Kevin in particular. But she hadn't understood what he meant by it, coming full circle. Return to the beginning? Going back to where they started from? Whose beginning, and for what? There weren't enough clues here to go on!

Have you lost yourself so much in science, Dana, you've forgotten to listen to your intuition?

It was Melissa's voice that came to mind, her sad admonition as she tried to convince her younger sister to face the truths about her own abduction. She had been ashamed of Scully that day, for not listening to what her heart had to tell her. Perhaps Melissa had been right. She had given in so much to her science that Scully hardly knew how to listen to what her feelings told her. Was God speaking to her? Was she too caught up in her own science to listen?

"Scully!" Mulder's voice thrilled with grim excitement as his hand caught her shoulder from behind, cutting off her contemplations. "They had a sighting of Gates. He tried to rent another car at the airport, under the name Forau again."

Her eyes turned upwards towards her partner's face, but caught on a sign that hung just over his shoulder. It wasn't anything particularly special. Just a recycling sign, hanging on the wall down the hallways from Daniel Kryder's room. Arrows bent towards each other, forming a sort of triangular circle, each feeding into the other.

Come full circle to find the truth.

"Did you hear what I said?" Mulder's voice snapped her to attention, her gaze sliding to his.

"Mulder, look."

He turned to glance back at the sign, obviously confused as to what the significance of it meant for her.

"Arrows that form a circle. Full circle to find the truth." Her mind leapt and danced furiously, connecting the dots that had appeared random before, aligning them into a picture that was beginning to make sense. Was this what Mulder did when he made his leaps in logic? Was this how he felt when it suddenly fell into place for him?

"Gates' company owns a recycling plant near here. That's where he's taken Kevin." She knew it, she was sure of it. It all made sense, Gates, his delusions, the cryptic message given to her by
For once it took into account not just the obvious factors but all of the factors. It was the entire picture. Didn't Mulder see it too?

Clearly, he didn't. "Scully, the man is at the airport. If he hasn't already killed Kevin, he's trying to get as far away as he can."

Was this how it felt when she shot down his logic, pointing out the obvious to him? Frustrated disappointment rose in her, but she knew it was useless to rage at Mulder about it. He was an expert in human behavior and he was working on the assumptions of what a killer like Gates would do in terms of an average serial killer. But Gates wasn't simply a murderer. He was a man filled with faith, with religious conviction and that was something that she understood. God was speaking, she realized, pulling on the intuition her sister had called on her to remember. God was speaking, and she was finally listening.

"I don't think so, Mulder." More than thinking, she knew she was right. Something inside of her told her she was right.

She didn't hope for Mulder to understand, not really. All the same it stung when his eyes narrowed derisively. "You think it's you, don't you? You think you're the one who's been chosen to protect Kevin."

Honestly, she wasn't sure. But she had to try. She had to believe in her gut instinct. A boy's life was at stake and if she didn't believe it and he turned up dead, she would be the one to blame. "I don't know. Look, if I'm wrong, I'll meet you out at the airport, okay?"

"Scully!" Mulder called after her as she ran down the hallway, passing the frowning orderlies and nurses, as she rushed to the rental car she and Mulder had been driving. Pulling out the keys, she barely considered how Mulder was planning on getting to the Cincinnati airport. She peeled out of the drive and gunning the small sedan towards the direction she recalled Gates factory to be. This had to be right, she told herself as she reached for her cell phone. This had to be where God had been leading her. Come full circle, listen to your intuition. God was telling her something here and her natural inclination towards science and reason be damned. She waited as the FBI switchboard picked up on the other end.

"This is Special Agent Dana Scully, badge number 2317-616. I need directions to the Gates Recycling plant outside of Cincinnati." She waited while the young woman on the other end of the line typed quietly on her keyboard. She rattled off the directions to Scully, blessedly uncomplicated. Gratefully she hung up the phone, expecting Mulder to call her regarding the car. The phone remained silent as she came up on the recycling plant.

The lot was empty, the facility closed on this Sunday, the only car sitting in the lot had Ohio plates. It could be the one Gates was driving, he had obviously been smart enough to switch cars at the airport, throwing them all off his track. She couldn't be sure, and she didn't have time to run a check on the license number. Hell, she reasoned, if she had thrown this much caution to the wind, she might as well carry it out. Carefully she stepped out of her vehicle and pulled her weapon, eyes and ears open for any sign of Gates.

The reasonable voice in her head chided her, told her it would be just her luck if she found a lone cleaning man, headphones on and mop in hand, rather than the deranged owner of the recycling plant. Mulder would call her from the airport, claiming Gates had boarded a plane, and would drag her to Wichita or Bismark in search of a man who thought he was enacting the coming Armageddon. She would be drug away again and Kevin Kryder would find no justice.

She was his justice, Scully breathed as she stepped into the dimly lit and dank air. Perhaps it was as
Mulder had suggested, she was supposed to be Kevin's guardian angel.

In the stillness a struggle broke out from above, a man's murmurs droning over the cries and pleas of a child. Mindlessly she rushed to the single set of metal stairs, glancing up to see the shadows of a tall man.

"Stop! Federal agent!" Scully's voice rang through the empty plant, the command in it causing Gates to spin around. Kevin was placed strategically in front of him. "I'm armed! Let him go! Let him go and we'll talk about it!"

"There's nothing to talk about," Gates called down, a manic undertone to his voice. "I was called upon."

Without even pausing to give her a chance to respond he ducked out of Scully's view and behind a pallet of recycled trash, Kevin's voice screaming at him, "Let me go!"

"No!" Clambering up the metal stairs two at a time, her feet nearly tripped as she rushed up to give chase, weapon still trained on the spot where she last saw Gates dragging the unwilling Kevin. In the distance she could hear the boy's frantic screams.

"Gates," she called out, seeing him ahead with the boy. He acknowledged her only in so far as pushing a pile of stacked crates in front of her, blocking her long enough to get well ahead. Cursing, she clambered around, her smaller legs working to give chase.

No, no, no, no, her brain screamed as ahead, another set of stairs led up to a machine that churned and rattled nosily. Dear God, she prayed, let me be faster let me stop this!

She skidded to a halt, aiming again for the top, her demand for Gates to stop on the tip of her tongue as without warning both tumbled off, falling from her sight as if dropping through the platform of the stairs.

"No!" This couldn't be right! This couldn't be how it was supposed to happen! Blindly she scrambled up the stairs, her heart in her throat, afraid of what she might find at the top. The shredder spun below, whirling lethally, as all around the top of the feeder mouth the unmistakable sprays of blood coated it in a slick sheen of dripping red. Gore hardly fazed her, not as a pathologist, yet her stomach lurched as tears stung her eyes, a violent retching closing around her throat. This couldn't be how it ended!

Tiny fingertips clutched at the edge of the platform, turning white with the strain. Scully found herself nearly crying with relief as she reached for the thin wrists below, and pulled up the terrified, pale faced Kevin.

"Kevin, hold on!" She gasped, her fingers slipping against the perspiration on his skin. "Hold on!"

She managed to wrap her slight fingers curling around his forearm, the muscles in her upper body straining to lift him up over the edge of the platform and out of danger. She heaved, as he was able to get enough of his upper body over to lurch forward, scrambling out of the sharp and deadly tines below, away from the churning machine, and into her arms as she grabbed him to her.

"Kevin," she murmured, clasping his shaking body to her, holding him tightly, tears stinging her eyes as she clutched, realizing he was alive, he was safe.

"I knew you would come for me," he breathed as she looked down at him, smoothing the hair back from his blood-splattered face. "I knew you would! God sent you to take care of me."
Maybe he had. God was always speaking. For once she dared to listen, to believe. Melissa's admonition to listen to her intuition rung in her ears as she hugged the boy tighter, giving vent to her brimming tears, for Kevin, for Melissa, and for Betsy.

Her phone ringing caused them both to jerk and jump, the sound shrill over the whirling of the machine below. Apologetically, she reached into her pocket, grabbing her phone, knowing already who was on the other end.

"You were right, Scully, he's not here. We checked on the flights and there is no sign of Gates."

"He was here, Mulder." The adrenaline that had been running through her moments before now subsided, leaving a dull ache in her arms, her knees weak as she leaned against the railing. She looked down below to the blood and gore that had at one time been a man.

"Was there? Where did he go?"

"No where." She reached across to ruffle the top of Kevin's head, wishing he wouldn't look, but knowing she couldn't stop him. "He's dead, Mulder. He fell into a garbage shredder. Kevin is fine. He's here with me."

"I'm on my way over." He cut off the line so suddenly she didn't realize he had left till her phone beeped at her. She glanced at it mildly. It was rare Mulder was ever wrong on these cases. She knew this would bother him for a while to come.

"Are the police coming?" Kevin pulled away, looking cautiously towards the door below, as if afraid to climb down just yet. He had been through so much these last days; the kidnapping, the death of Owen Jarvis, his mother, and now this. Something instinctively maternal reached out to the boy as she patted his shoulder.

"They are." She glanced at the stairs, slipping her phone into her pocket as she finally re-holstered her weapon. "That was my partner. He will be here in just a bit. Then we can take you."

Where? To the home? Did he have family to speak of here? His mother was dead, his father was in an institution. Where could he possibly go?

Kevin hardly seemed to notice. "I prayed when that man took me from the hotel. I prayed hard you would find me." His solemn face looked up at hers. "God answered my prayers."

Somewhere within her memory, Melissa smiled. "God is always listening, Kevin." Her cross-shifted against the skin of her neck briefly, cool against her skin. "Sometimes we forget that he's always listening."
"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." The memorized words tumbled from her lips, a familiar ritual, the timeless words of an ancient sacrament. "It has been six years since my last confession and since then I've drifted away from the church. I'm not sure why exactly."

Yes you are, Dana. You know exactly why you drifted.

"Have you come to confess?" The small, darkened cubby filled with the dark, comforting tones Scully always associated with the confessional booth. Here she could speak of her deepest sins and darkest desires; the fact that she was the one who broke Bill's football trophy, the way she envied her sister's grace and ease in situations, the fact that she had impure thoughts about a boy in her algebra class.

You never confessed the truth about Daniel.

"No." She wasn't there to confess the sins she knew still lay heavy on her heart. No, there were other things she had to bring before God, other questions that called her this day. "There's a man that I work with, a friend." She blushed slightly, feeling the need to clarify Mulder's presence in her life to this priest. "Usually I'm able to discuss these things with him, but not this." This Mulder couldn't understand, no matter how heard she tried to make him.

"Father, do you believe in miracles?" It seemed such a silly question to ask of a priest.

"Of course, I see them every day." He spoke with the quiet assurance of one who really didn't understand what she meant by that statement. "The rising sun, the birth of a child…"

"No, I'm talking about events that defy explanation," she clarified, her voice thick. "Things that I believe helped me to save a young boy's life. But now I wonder if I saw them at all, if I didn't just imagine them."

"Why do you doubt yourself?" The question wasn't chiding, rather curious. She licked suddenly dry lips, her thoughts on Mulder and his dubious looks, his outright condescension. He hadn't believed, the man of ultimate faith. He had never hidden his doubt of Christianity and had been nothing but up front about it from the beginning. Why did it bother her so much on this case?

"Because my partner didn't see them. He didn't ... he didn't believe them. And usually he believes without question." If Mulder couldn't believe it, could it really happen? So much of her faith, her belief was tied up with that of Mulder's. She followed him to hell and back in his pursuit for the truth. So much of her faith in her own work was tied up in Mulder's belief. Was it to that point she was questioning her own faith in God because of it?

The priest seemed to read her thoughts. "Maybe they weren't meant for him to see. Maybe they were only meant for you."

Miracles only she could see but others couldn't. Mulder would call it religious psychosis. And till a
few days ago, she would have as well. "Is that possible?" Really she had never thought of that, not once in her life, that God would send her, Dana Scully, a personal message only she would understand. That was the sort of thing that happened to the saints, to the blessed, not to an FBI agent who hadn't performed confession in close to six years.

"In the Lord, anything is possible," the priest replied philosophically. "Perhaps you saw these things because you needed to."

Why, she wondered. "To find my way back?"

"Sometimes we must come full circle to find the truth."

Full circle? Her eyes flew to the screen that separated herself from the confessor, allowing her to speak but not to see the man on the other side. Those words seemed to be the mantra of her days in Loveland, of her life really. Always coming back, coming full circle, going back where she started. Was this God's message?

"Why does that surprise you?" The priest was curious at her silence, her apparent surprise at his choice of words.

God is speaking…

"Mostly, it just makes me afraid," she whispered, tears stinging her eyes.

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that God is speaking," she sighed, tears thickening her voice. "But that no one's listening."

Least of all herself or Mulder.

The priest was silent for long moments. She couldn't imagine this was a conversation that came everyday into his confessional, this sort of crises of faith. She waited, her hands clasped in front of her, like long ago when she had first sat in the confessional booth, sharing her minor sins of gossiping and tormenting her siblings. How she wished her problems were as simple as that now.

"My child," the priest finally began, contemplative and considerate. "Many before you have asked that question. In this day and age, with so much before us that crowds and blocks God's message, many feel the way that you do."

"Do they see visions before their eyes, Father? Did they feel the witness of God in their life, a direct presence, his hand touching them?"

"Some do and for those I say take it as a blessing, a call to be aware, to no longer shut out God's voice from your life. Listen to those signs put before you, and trust them. Do not doubt your faith child. Even when the world is at its bleakest, when we think that God has abandoned us or has turned his back on us, he is there. We just have to search deeper to find the signs, to find his message for us, to have faith that there is a message for us."

God is speaking. Sometimes we just don't always hear it.

"Father, I went through a horrific experience a year ago." She had no idea why she was confessing this, admitting to this in this space, in this sacrament. But it seemed the right and proper thing to do, to bare her soul before God like this. "I was abducted by men who did things too me, things which quite possibly could have lasting effects on me. I met other women who suffered like I did. One of them died the other day, Father. They called to tell me. I was so angry with God that night.
I wondered why it was that God would have forsaken us? I wondered what God it could be that would allow something so horrible happen to good women."

She paused, starting down at her trembling hands in the dim light. "I'm an officer of the law, Father. I was here to solve a case, to protect a boy. He was a special boy; one that many felt God had blessed. I don't know if he was or not. Many do not, including my partner. But I have to believe, Father, that these people who risked their lives to protect this child weren't crazy religious fanatics. Something inside of me needs to believe that God spoke to them, just as I believe he was speaking to me."

"But you are afraid?" He hit the matter succinctly. "Of what?"

"I'm afraid of what this means." The tears that had threatening to fall spilled down her face, her fingers absently wiping them away. "Of what the message means for me and for my work. I'm afraid to go there, to go back there." Melissa had been right. She was scared of confronting the truths about herself. "I terrified of what I will find when I go back, go full circle. It could change everything."

"Yes, it could," the priest replied softly. "Or it could lead to the truths you have been looking for all along. You can't ever know until that step is taken. Perhaps these signs... these were God's way of pushing you in the direction you need to go."

Would she listen?

"Thank you for listening, Father." She rubbed her knuckles under each eye, trying to compose herself into the calm, collected FBI agent she was. Her fingers fluttered to the necklace at her neck, pressing it to her breastbone as she murmured a soft prayer along with the priest, the formula as familiar to her as her own personal information.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...*

There was blessed stillness in the church as she exited the confessional. In front of the icon of the Blessed Virgin there sat the table filled with votive candles, flickering in the dim light. Kneeling, she lit one, and murmured a quick prayer, for Kevin, for his father, and for the souls of his mother, Owen Jarvis, and her sister. She prayed for herself. She wanted to have the strength to do that which she feared.

She stood in one smooth motion, her heels clicking against the hard floor as she scanned the pews briefly. In the middle of the day no one was there, save for a clique of older women in the corner, fingers working strings of rosary beads, and a tall figure standing in the light of the open door in the back. He stood watching her as she moved down the center of he aisle, hands shoved into the pockets of his great coat, his green eyes glittering as she stopped in front of him.

"I thought I'd meet you at the airport," she murmured up at Mulder who shrugged, looking unapologetic for following her to what was a deeply personal, religious moment for her.

"I know, but then I thought maybe I could come see if God would truly strike me down for stepping inside of a church. So far, not even a little static shock." He held up his forefinger by way of an example, his mouth curving upward in a sly smile.

She should be angry with him. She had needed this moment, away from him and his doubts on faith, to contemplate and reflect on just what had been revealed to her these last few days. But she was glad he was there, standing at least with a foot into the world of her faith, peeking in the door respectably. Mulder she doubted would ever accept God in the same way she did, but at least he
could come to respect him.

"Maybe it's a sign God hasn't forsaken you all together, Mulder." She grinned, reaching up for his hand and squeezing it gently. "Maybe it's a sign he hasn't forsaken any of us."
"So this is the report you plan to turn in?"

Scully had gone into this discussion already prepared for a fight.

"That is the report that I'm handing Skinner, yes." She didn't flinch, ignoring the rolling eyes and working jaw of Mulder as he tossed the manila folder down on his desk. "Do you have a problem with it?"

She had asked the last question deliberately to bate him.

"Problem? I don't know, Scully, I wonder if you and I were working the same case at all." He rose, restless, stalking around his desk as he moved towards the creaking, ancient filing cabinets. It was a standard Mulder evasion tactic, something to occupy his hands while his mind furiously ran over facts, figures, formulating reasons to counter why Scully in all of her logic was wrong. "An Air Force cover up, two kids that where a witness to our military's attempts towards psychological warfare testing, perhaps a real, honest to goodness encounter with an alien entity that has bothered to identify itself."

"Lord Kinobite?" Now it was her turn to challenge him. Try as she might, she couldn't keep the jeering skepticism out of her voice, though admittedly, she wasn't trying that hard.

"It was Lord Kinbote and yes." Mulder slammed the drawer hard with more force than was absolutely necessary, causing the entire wall of metal to shake briefly. "Jack Schaffer swore he saw the creature too."

"Was this before or after the MIB agent who looked like Alex Trebek?" She hit her mark with that one. Point for Scully she privately gloated, smirking up at her scowling partner.

"Funny, you still couldn't remember letting me into your room the night before, that got left out of your report. Explain how I was sleeping on the opposite bed?" His eyes glittered in triumphant challenge before cutting suggestively as he closed in near to her. "Unless you were secretly pleased to find me there passed out in your bedroom."

Pity he was standing just far enough away she couldn't reach him with the toe of her high-heeled shoe. He'd learned. "Don't flatter yourself, Mulder, something I know you can't stop yourself from doing." He chuckled as he knew he got a hit in, and a good one too. Her face flushed furiously, both with the suggestion in his remark and the pride he was taking in getting that rise out of her.

"You want to walk into Skinner's office, tell him that the US Air Force is conducting illegal, psychological experiments on the local population using fake UFO's and Manchurian Candidate level hypnosis, aided and abided by mysterious 'men-in-black' figures?" She reached across the desk where he had tossed her well-written report, snatching it off a teetering stack of Mulder's notes, photos, and *Sports Illustrated* magazines. "Fine, then you can turn in that report. Turn it in
with my compliments and you can sit in the meeting and explain to him why we wasted three days and managed to annoy the Department of Defense yet again. I want to see what he'll say about your theories on Jesse Ventura and Alex Trebek."

"I didn't say they were Jesse Ventura and Alex Trebek, only that they looked like them," Mulder snapped back.

"Right and letting that nut job with the video camera in to our so-called 'alien autopsy' wasn't your idea either." She wheeled around to her table, slamming her file on the desk, gathering her coat, her briefcase, and her things. "If I end up on the Internet in some crappy, $29.95 video it better be because of some real and substantive work, not an Air Force pilot in a rubber suit."

How had she even begun to think the body they had found at the crash sight was and alien? Even now she felt horrified with herself for buying into Mulder's rhetoric. "Face it, what we had there was a case of two teenaged kids having sex when they shouldn't have, on Air Force property, witnessing a test flight with an experimental airplane, that was it and anything else to explain that away is simply a nice story to try and delude yourself."

She was pissed. She had meant her words to hurt. Three days before Christmas and she had a plane to catch to San Diego, and what was she doing? Trying to explain away perhaps the worst case she had ever worked with Mulder, who still insisted it was a cover up by the government on the existence of aliens. What the hell sort of alien was named Lord Kinbote? He wanted too much to believe this was an actual alien sighting he was willing to believe his entire rhetoric on men-in-black, military hypnotic mind-control techniques, and hell, even in aliens who lives in the center of the earth. It was the cherry on top of the shitty damn sundae their caseload had turned into the last few months. She needed a break. She needed a vacation. She needed to be away from him!

And it seems it just now occurred to Mulder she wasn't planning on staying to fix this report or play a game of witty repartee with him. "Where are you going?" He glanced with alarm as she shoved files and papers into her briefcase.

"Home, Mulder," she replied, yanking out the bright red card she had sitting in there for days, since before they got called to Washington state on yet another abominable case. Why was it all the crazy, horrific, strange cases happened in the state of Washington? What did the Pacific Northwest have against them?

"In case you don't remember, I took the rest of this week and all of next off." She doubted he did, even though she had marked it on his calendar, sent him an email, and mentioned it several times as a reminder to him. "I'm going with my mother to San Diego to visit my brother for the holidays. She hasn't been since Ahab passed." She paused briefly, the ache of her father and sister's passing coming and going in an instant. "I need to go home, I need to pack, I need to get my dog, and I need to get on a plane to San Diego. And I don't need sit here arguing with you over a case that was stupid, Mulder…an utter waste of our time."

She had simply meant to snap at him, to knock the silly, know-it-all smirk off his face. Scully hadn't really meant to wind him. To her dismay that was just what she did. His green eyes dulled, hurt hunching his shoulders as he threw himself back in his chair. It was worse than the petulant Mulder, irritated with her for not listening to his theories. It was Mulder stung that she believed their work to be silly, perfunctory, and foolish.

Now who's turn was it to feel stupid?

"Mulder," she began, realizing just how harsh she had sounded. "Look, Mulder, I didn't mean…"
"You were being honest, Scully." He waved her off as he pretended to busy himself with paperwork from his desk. More Mulder avoidance tactics

No, she thought, she was being bitchy, not honest. This entire case from beginning to end had irritated her, made her feel stupid, from the police detective who couldn't stop dropping the F-word every other sentence, to the crazed cable repairman who swore he was taken to the center of the earth and witnessed an orgy amongst the resurrected souls of the dead. She hadn't asked why an orgy. She was afraid to know the answer.

"Mulder, it's the holidays." She sighed heavily, picking up the red envelope she had intended to give him days ago. "Let's forgive and forget and head out of here on a high note."

"Does the high note involve a vixen-ish red Santa suit and a pair of thigh-high patent leather boots," he asked in morose hopefulness.

The image made her pause for the briefest of moments. "There you go, I try to bring us down to something nice and you resort to childish and tasteless."

"Mulder coping mechanism number two. You've known me for how long Scully and you are surprised by this?" He at least looked apologetic. "Okay, I'm sorry….well, a little sorry. Don't think I don't hope to see that out of you one day."

"Sexual harassment just has completely no meaning for you, does it?" She finally relented, passing him the red envelope despite the suggestive comments and the private smile she swallowed and in a million years would never allow him to see. "Merry Christmas."

He took the car between thin fingers, all pretense of childish teasing now gone, replaced by mild embarrassment. "I have to admit, Scully, I sort of didn't remember to get you anything."

"I figured when I realized you hadn't paid attention to the fact I was leaving for the holidays."

He winced, nodding.

"Honestly, Mulder, a man with an eidetic memory and the smallest things pass you by."

"It's the tunnel vision I get when someone mentions aliens." He studied the card briefly but didn't open it. Instead he bent down to tuck it into his briefcase quietly. "No more ties, I see?"

"I figure that's a hopeless cause with you," she teased, though his tie choices of late hadn't been so bad. She wondered if he was getting someone with better color vision to help him choose since she had brought it up. "And I wasn't in town for another football game. I hope you like it all of the same."

"Thanks." It was simple and perfunctory. But there was depth there, she knew it, this year had been their hardest yet and still here they were, still partners, still working together, rubber alien suits and raging teenaged hormones not withstanding.

"Anyway!" She turned for her things, slipping her coat on easily and grabbing for her briefcase. "I need to rush home. Mom flew out this morning from Baltimore and somehow I have to con Queequeg into going into his dog carrier." She had a feeling her dog would simply sniff and laugh at her. She shot Mulder a sideways glance, realizing she hadn't asked him about his holiday. Did he plan to see his mother for the Christmas after the events of last summer, the revelations brought to light after the death of his father? She didn't know and she hadn't asked.

Brilliant way of being sensitive, Dana, she chided herself.
"So, you'll have a good holiday then?" It was a hesitant question, but an effort on her part to make up for the snide remarks and snippy comments of just moments ago. At least part company for the holidays on friendly terms.

"Sure." The careless shrug, the careful avoidance. She was beginning to read Mulder like a book, perhaps as well as he read her. Something told her his holiday would be spent right where he was sitting, watching movies that involved girls in vixen-ish Santa suits while he poured over Rocky Crikenson's treatise on Lord Kinbote and his journey to the center of the earth. "You have a good time. Tell your mother happy holidays from me."

"I will," she murmured, knowing how fond her mother was of Mulder. Had they been home this year, Maggie would have guilted him to Christmas dinner. "You try to enjoy it yourself, okay?"

There was the wistful quirk to his mouth, so quickly hidden under a sarcastic roll of his eyes. "Me and this case file will have plenty to talk about over Christmas." He snorted as he glanced at his notes. "Get out of here. You have a puffball to pack and a plane to catch."

"Right," she nodded, hesitating for the briefest of moments. It hardly seemed fair, she realized, Mulder alone on the holiday. Sure, she was irritated with him, but it was Christmas.

"I'll call on Christmas Day, just to check in and make sure you added some egg nog to that fifth of scotch." She shuffled her things finally to the door. "Merry Christmas, Mulder?"

"You too, Scully." He smiled briefly, pretending to busy himself with the notes and papers on his desk.

She was beginning to read him so well, she sighed, as she made her way down the hallway towards the elevator.
No Place Like Home

Chapter Summary

Scully has a sneaky burger.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas....

Bing Crosby's smooth voice juxtaposed itself jarringly over warm, mild sunshine, swaying palm trees, and green mountains rolling gently to the blue-gray sea. Scully enjoyed the feel of warm, Southern California wind on her face, glad that this holiday she would be free of the stinging cold, piled snow, and icy roadways of the Beltway area.

"Gees, Shorty, roll the window up, it's cold!" Bill pulled his thin windbreaker closer over his workday, khaki naval uniform, glaring at his younger sister's teasing smirk.

"I'm thinking of one word to describe you right now Bill, and it starts with a 'p' and ends in 'ee'." She winked playfully, turning in her seat to check on the quiescent Queequeg, who whimpered and grunted mildly behind her. "Hope we get to your apartment soon, my Lord and Master will need a potty break."

"I can't believe Tara let you bring the dog," Bill grumbled mildly, shooting furtive looks towards the back seat. "It's not even a proper dog, Dana. You live in DC, you should have one that could protect you, like a Labrador or a pit bull."

What was with men and vicious dogs? She had this same conversation with Mulder? "Labradors couldn't bite the head off a flea, and I don't want a big dog in my small apartment. Poor thing would go crazy with me gone all day." With Queequeg, he was content to wander the small confines of her home, curling up on a couch all day to sleep. "Besides, whose to say a dog would bite off the head of any intruder that comes in?"

"I don't know, you've had plenty enough, it might help."

She didn't dignify her elder brother's comment with an answer.

The truth was Scully loved Bill a great deal, though she hated to admit it out loud. The eldest of all the children, he looked as different from them all as could be; tall, lean, rangy, with dark hair rather than the Scully auburn. He bore more of a resemblance to Maggie than he had his namesake, the elder William Scully. But in temperament and inclination he was all Ahab, from the top of his uniformed shoulder, to the top of his shining, black shoes, he was Navy through and through, raised from birth to follow in his father's footsteps, on track to become a captain himself someday. He lacked a great deal of Ahab's wanderlust, that had gone to their sister Melissa, but he had their father's sense of honor, hard work, and loyalty, all qualities he shared with his youngest sister. He also was practical, logical, and painfully protective, also traits he shared with his kid sister, which tended to cause the too siblings to buck heads quite a bit. It wasn't that they didn't love each other, but their similarities hardly made it easy for them to have normal, adult conversations. Bill always tended to see Dana as still some gapped-toothed, seven-year-old, barefoot and with skinned knees, begging to shoot her father's gun. Dana saw Bill as her over-dominating big brother, trying to play Dad when no one could take the place of her beloved Ahab.
But then there were moments when he turned out to be the best, big brother in the world.

"So, you want In-N-Out?" There was a naughty, furtive look in Bill's eye, the same one she would get impishly doing something she knew would irritate her mother.

"I thought Mom wanted dinner at six?" It was currently two, but Scully had to admit her stomach was on DC nor San Diego time and she was starving. "She'd kill us for ruining our appetite when she flew out early to cook."

"Shush, it's a sneaky burger. She'll never know!" Bill pulled off the busy freeway, down a ramp to where a large, red sign proclaimed the single, best fast-food burger joint in the world. Scully couldn't help but let her mouth water, just a little. How long had it been since she'd eaten and In-N-Out burger? Hadn't she and Ahab snuck one like this when they had flown out for Bill and Tara's wedding?

"Two Animal-Style, Double-Doubles, no fries, Cokes." Bill bawled into the speaker at the ordering window.

"You realize Mom's going to smell it on us the minute we walk into the door," Scully warned as he pulled forward, pulling his wallet out to pay. Grilled beef and onions and melting cheese assaulted her nostrils and her stomach loudly proclaimed it didn't care.

"What happened to my daring, kid sister," Bill replied, taking the bag of hamburgers and passing them over to her as he pulled into an empty parking spot, killing the engine long enough so that they could unwrap the bundles of greasy goodness. Scully moaned softly as the bit into her sandwich, snatching a proffered napkin from her brother as one, grilled onion slithered down her chin.

"I think your daring kid sister grew up," she replied when she had finally managed to swallow her mouthful of burger. "And besides, I was never one to cross Mom, if you remember."

"You are such a liar!" Bill mumbled around his own sandwich, snickering as he tried not to choke. "What about that time we all snuck down to the beach, before we moved to Baltimore? We stayed out all night. Mom called the cops on us."

She almost wanted to say no, but a vague memory of one summer night in July, shortly before Bill left for Annapolis came to mind. "God, that was right before we moved. You decided you wanted to hang out with your friend. What was his name?"

"Dennis...Dennis Jacoby had a Trans-Am. That's how it all got started. Missy had a crush on him and wanted to go too."

"And I threatened to tell if you took Missy and not me." Scully laughed, remembering how stubborn and angry she had been. "I was getting ready to start high school the next year and thought I was just as old as all of you and could do things you and Melissa did."

"She wasn't even sixteen yet and was trying to seduce my eighteen-year-old friend." Bill was clearly still appalled nearly twenty years after the fact.

"She really just thought his car was sexy. Dennis wasn't really Missy's type." She took another bite out of her sandwich, savoring the taste that you couldn't find in burgers back east. She couldn't understand why. "How were we supposed to know that his battery would die if we left the lights on?"

"We were stuck there, three in the morning, in the days before AAA and a battery charge, no cell
phones, and not a drop of change between us to call Dad. We were just lucky that cop who came along recognized us as Admiral Scully's kids."

"Or unlucky, we were grounded for weeks." Scully could still remember well the anger and disappointment from both her parents, especially Ahab, and how it hurt worse than when she had been paddled by the nuns as a child. "I still remember how jealous I was, you getting to leave for Annapolis and being free of Mom and Dad. It hardly felt like you got punished."

"Don't be fooled, I got punished." He finished the last bites of his hamburger, crumpling the paper up and tossing it in the empty paper bag. "Just not in the same way you guys were."

He grimaced as he started the car again, pulling it out of the restaurant parking lot. "That was the first time in my life I remember Dad ever being angry enough to want to hit me. Not just paddle me, but to strike me, one man to another."

"I never saw Ahab ever strike anyone. For a man of war, he hated violence."

"Doesn't mean he wasn't quite capable of it, just like I am, just like you are." Bill eyed her meaningfully as he pulled into traffic. "That next morning he pulled me into his study about as angry as I had ever seen him. Here I was, some smart-ass eighteen-year-old, getting ready to leave for Annapolis in weeks, and I let my younger sisters stay out all night in some guys car, down by the beach, where anyone could have come and hurt you guys."

"I think we ran across two homeless bums and a drunken migrant worker that night." Scully finished her own burger, neatly crumpling the paper between greasy fingers.

"But it could have been worse, Dana."

"And it wasn't. Honestly, Bill, its San Diego, not South Central LA, and it was quieter twenty years ago than it is now."

"That's not the point," Bill snapped, softening his harsh tone with a weary smile. "The point was that I was supposed to know better. I was supposed to be the elder brother, the responsible one, and the one taking care of the two of you, not getting you in trouble. What if it had been worse that night?"

"It wasn't."

"But what if it had been, Dana?" Bill's lighthearted mood shifted in a moment and they were back to the over-bearing brother mode. She felt her jaw tighten, the taste of freshly grilled onion turning bitter in her mouth.

"Bill, if we are going to turn this into another conversation about my decision to stay with the FBI…"

"Dana, why is it you always turn this into something about you? Did it ever occur to you that I know you are smarter than I ever was, that you are brilliant, tough, capable, and strong? Hell, Dana, you're a doctor and an FBI agent, you make most of my buddies look like pussies." His mouth lifted ruefully. "Seriously how many of them can cut up a dead body and take out a criminal in a single shot? I know you've faced down horrible men and I know you've killed them, too. Don't think for an instant that I ever underestimate my little sister."

"And yet?" She waited for the other shoe to drop, for Bill to come up with the insult that would undercut her, remind her that she was still his kid sister and always subject to his domineering.
To her surprise, it didn't come. "I'm proud of you, Dana. I am. But I never forgot what Ahab told me that day, about watching out for you and Melissa. You accuse me of being overprotective, but you didn't make a promise to Dad that day. He told me that no young man worthy of entering into the United States Naval Academy ever let his sisters come to harm. How could he be expected to protect his country if he couldn't watch out for them?"

"You know Ahab is the one who taught me how to use a gun, right?"

"I know." Bill chuckled. "And I know you can take care of yourself. You want to be angry with me, Dana, for wanting to protect you. But I made a promise, just as serious as the oath I swore as a naval officer, or that you swore as an FBI agent. And I've already let Dad down with Missy."

"Melissa was an accident, Bill." The burger in her stomach lurches painfully, the image of Melissa's blood staining her floor still bright in her mind.

"She was, but its all the more reason I worry about you. As much as I know you can take care of yourself, look at the danger you've been in since you transferred from Quantico? You've been abducted, nearly died, that enough almost killed Mom. And then Missy on top of it? Ever since you started working with that crazy partner of yours."

"Mulder's not crazy," she snapped automatically, flushing, readying for a fight. "You and Dad always assumed he was."

"The man believes in aliens, Dana."

"He's trying to find out what happened to his sister, that's all." Scully glared at the side of her brother's head. "He was a big brother once himself, Bill, and much like you he feels responsible for Samantha. Perhaps you might find out that you understand him a bit more than you think you do, aliens not withstanding."

Her words got through to Bill, he immediately looked contrite, "Perhaps I would, but you can't deny the work that he engages you in puts my little sister in danger."

"Mulder's a good man."

"I'm not saying he isn't. You wouldn't be so loyal to him if he weren't. But I've lost one sister to whatever work you two are involved in. I don't know what I'll do if I lose a second. I made a promise, but I'm not an idiot. I know I can't protect you from everything. I can just warn you, worry about you and hope you know what you are doing."

"I know what I'm doing, Bill," she replied, though without the heat she had felt moments before. Though, to be honest, there were days, like of late, she wasn't terribly sure she did know what she was doing, and she wasn't terribly sure Mulder did either.

"Now that we've had the traditional, Christmas chat, where I act all big brother and you get indignant, can we put it past us and enjoy the rest of the holiday?" Bill smiled hopefully, pulling off the freeway towards the area of San Diego he and Tara lived. "Besides, the apartments it too tiny for us to be fighting the entire week and we won't get base housing for another year at least."

"Base housing? Like where we lived when we were kids?" She remembered all to well the small, cookie cutter houses that the Navy provided for the families of their officers.

"I'm shooting for the same, exact house. I thought it would be perfect for Tara and I when we do eventually get around to making those babies you and Mom want us to start popping out."
"Can I help it if I want a niece or nephew to spoil? All I have is this dog!" She glanced back to the patient Queequeg who still sat quietly in the back, despite the burger she knew he could smell in the car.

"I refuse to look at that dog as my nephew, you know." Bill glared at the carrier through his rear view mirror. "And how about you? When are you going to settle down?"

"When the thought occurs to me to do it," Scully teased playfully. "I'm too busy to find a husband and make babies at the moment."

"And I'm not?"

"You're the one stupid enough to get married."

"I'm a good Catholic, you know I couldn't get Tara to sleep with me till I married her." She knew that was a blatant lie. Bill had been in love with Tara since he first brought her home to the family.

"I didn't see that stopping your good, Catholic self from behaving like the sailor you are." Scully arched an eyebrow at him. "Don't think I didn't hear about those either."

"You know nothing!" Bill sneered.

"That's okay, I keep all the really good stories for later tonight, after we've had a few bottles of wine, and Tara wants to hear about you and Jenny Bennett and that one time on the football field after the homecoming game."

"You wouldn't tell her that one."

"How much wine you got?"

"You are evil, Dana."

"Remember that when you get overprotective on my ass again." She smiled sweetly as they pulled up to the brown, stucco apartment building, Queequeg prancing in the back in anticipation. "Jenny Bennett, the sprinkler system, and a scar I'm sure that Tara has always wondered about."

"Why is it so nice having you visit on the holidays, again?"

Scully chuckled as her brother brought the car to a stop. Grinning brightly, she leaned over to press a quick peck on her elder brother's cheek. "You can choose your friends, Bill, not the people you are related to!"
Christmas Eve

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the holidays without her sister.

"You realize that sitting there at midnight won't make Santa Claus come any faster?"

Scully chuckled at her mother's teasing words. The matriarch of the Scully clan settled on the overstuffed couch beside her daughter, watching the shimmering Christmas tree as it winked softly in the darkness of midnight. Despite the fact her internal clock said it was 3 AM, Scully hadn't found sleep. Instead, she had resorted to cuddling her gently napping Pomeranian, staring absently at the relics of Scully family Christmases from long ago.

"I always hoped to catch him putting presents under the tree." Scully grinned softly, playing along with her mother as she made room for the other woman on the couch, shifting the protesting Queequeg. "I always had this suspicion he looked a lot like Dad."

"He did look a lot like your father, most Christmases at least." Maggie held out a mug of egg nog, thick and creamy and smelling of more than a little bit of her father's cherished Irish whiskey. "There were the Christmases when he looked a bit like me."

"Ahab's holidays at sea." Scully had remembered a few from her young childhood, before her father's rise in rank increasingly brought him to shore for longer periods of time. "It must be hard, this time of year, missing him."

"Mmm, yes." Maggie sipped from her own cup, trying to hide the sadness in her eyes. "I miss Melissa, too."

Of course, Scully thought. The sister who shouldn't have died.

"It hardly seems real that they are gone, sometimes, does it?" Scully curled deeper into the couch cushions, glancing at one of the silvery ornaments on the tree. It had been Missy's, etched with her name on the flat, metal surface. She hadn't really believed in Christianity for years, but never failed to take joy in the season. "I keep expecting Dad to call out from sea and Melissa from some divvy place up in Washington State where she's been celebrating with a commune."

"I know." Maggie laughed, thinking of all the holidays without the two Scully's most effected by wanderlust. "Your father and I sat up like this the last Christmas he was alive. He couldn't sleep either and we sat here watching the tree till morning, when Bill and Tara woke up."

Tears shimmered in her bright blue eyes, but didn't quite fall. "We talked all night, about past holidays, you kids, the grandkids we hoped would start coming soon. You father was looking forward to spoiling them. She sniffed, laughing at the memory, despite the pain. "It's till hard to believe he was gone just days later."

"I know." Scully had been home in Georgetown that holiday, spending it with her other brother, Charlie, the two of them teasing and joking over old holiday movies and Christmas cookies. It hadn't occurred to either of them that they would be bereft of the captain of their family so soon.
How things had changed since then, she realized, thinking of all the events that had occurred to her in those scant two years; the closing of the X-files, her abduction and near death, the return of Samantha, the loss of Mulder and her sister, all of that in a scant twenty-four months.

"Sometimes it seems it was a whole lifetime ago," she murmured, holding the cold glass up to her lips. A lifetime ago when she was Dana, the daughter, the sister, Starbuck, not Special Agent Scully, the efficient, skeptical, reasonable half of the X-files division, not Mulder's go-to person in a jam. Now it seemed that was all that did defined her anymore; autopsies, reports, weird things, they were the facts of her everyday life now. Before her father's death she would have laughed at anyone praying to a piece of cheese shaped like the Blessed Virgin. Now she had just received a message from God. What was her world coming to?

"Did you and Bill have your 'talk' yet?" Maggie hadn't asked about what took them so long on their car ride from the airport, though both siblings had furtively shared a look and smile when she hadn't mentioned the smell of grease and onions. The subject had past, though the conversation had not, not completely.

"Yes," Scully replied thoughtfully, ignoring her mother's surprised look. "No, it wasn't a knock-down, drag out fight like usual." Perhaps it spoke to the age and wisdom attained by both brother and sister in the years since he married and she had joined the FBI. "We were quite rational about it. He said he was proud of me and what I had become. And he explained why it was he was so over-protective of me as a brother. I don't think we'll come to any agreements, but at least we can understand the corners of the playing field we are coming from."

"That's all I ask." Maggie seemed content. "I don't like it when you kids argue."

"You know Bill. He and I are so alike, we hate admitting that the other might actually have a point."

"He just worries about you, Dana." It was Maggie's stock answer for all disagreements between her children, and Scully only met it with a nod. She had nothing to counter that statement with, no way of challenging it, and so she fell silent, watching the lights twinkle quietly in the darkness, rubbing one of Queequeg's fox-like ears gently as her dog snored.

"Are you happy, Dana?" The question was so out of place against the holiday scene that surrounded them. This had been a holiday that had always before made her happy. It wasn't that Scully was unhappy, seeing her brother and sister-in-law, sitting up with her mother. But she felt…

"Weighed down," she murmured, frowning slightly. "I feel weighed down. It's strange, Mom, I'm in a job that should be giving me answers, making me feel like I'm accomplishing something good in this world. And I feel that every case, every mystery we take on just adds a new layer of weight. And it answers nothing, not really."

Coming full circle, indeed. Going in circles, again and again.

"I suppose that's how anyone who works in this sort of field," Maggie murmured philosophically, the sort of comforting, motherly response Scully expected out of her. It was of course reassuring, but not what she needed at the moment. Hell, she wasn't sure what she needed? Answers? Another sign from God?

"How is Fox?" Maggie smoothly changed subjects, as always curious about the man that Scully seemed to spend far more time with than friends or even potential significant others.

"Mulder is fine." She assumed he was. She hadn't dared to try him and see how much of that fifth
of scotch he had managed to consume. "We're busy."

"I know. You keep calling and putting off dinner."

Guilt, one of those emotions so familiar to Scully now around her family, the slowly drifting daughter, whose work had brought ruin upon them, "it's just been hard of late, that's all. Mulder calls at all hours." She hadn't mentioned the women in Allentown, Mulder's most recent near-death experience, not the experiences she had in Ohio. "It's just been a lot of stuff."

Stuff. Her world was reduced to a single, paltry word; stuff.

"Would it do me any good to tell you I worry about you?" Maggie sounded resigned to the fact. "It was one thing when you joined the FBI, a dangerous job. But now, I don't know. I've always supported you in this, Dana, to follow your dreams. But I worry at the cost. And its more than your health and life, I know that is something you agreed to sacrifice the minute you took your oath. But are you sacrificing this at the cost of your happiness?"

"Who says I'm not happy?" To be honest, Scully hadn't given it much thought whether she was happy or not. She just was working, struggling, fighting, and searching for answers. But was she happy? She didn't feel unhappy. How was she supposed to feel?

"This is the most I've seen you smile in months. You don't see your old friends anymore. When was the last time you spoke to Ellen?"

"Ellen's busy and has a husband and child."

"That didn't stop you before. You used to see Ellen all the time and your other friends from college. And now?" She sighed, reaching over to scratch in between the ears of Queequeg, who yawned and rolled over. "Now your only companion is a thoroughly spoiled dog who seems to be the only grandchild I can hope for a while."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing."

"It isn't a bad thing, if you are happy with it." Maggie's steady gaze met her daughter's. "I just am not so sure that it's what you want."

"What if I'm not sure what it is I want, Mom?" Scully whispered, inexplicably feeling overwhelmed by her mother's statement. She wanted to find her answers, to find justice for her sister, to know that Mulder's work wasn't in vain. That she wasn't simply chasing around in circles, no matter if they lead to the truth.

"Better get to bed soon, love?" Maggie rose, leaning over just enough to press cool lips to Scully's forehead. "If you don't, Santa won't come."

"I'm a bit too old to believe in Santa." Scully chuckled softly at her mother.

"You're never too old to stop believing," Maggie called back softly. "Come to bed soon."
Phone Calls

Chapter Summary

In which Scully engages in a series of phone calls with Mulder.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Her laundry was done. Her clothes were unpacked. Her apartment was meticulously cleaned, even though she hadn't been home in nearly two weeks during the holidays. She even organized her medical journals by alphabetical order - twice. Scully sat on her couch, in the quiet of a Saturday evening, staring blankly at her telephone.

Where in the hell was Mulder?

Obviously her whole life didn't revolve around her partner. They hadn't seen one another in two weeks, not since she had left to go see her family in San Diego. She hadn't really expected to see him till Monday at the earliest, but she had tried calling him when she got in from the airport the day before...and when she got up this morning... and when she decided to have breakfast out instead of the run she should have done...and later when coffee got added to her adventure, she tried again. Still no word, only the monotone of his voice over the tape of his answer machine. She had left two messages, and feeling foolish, had refused to leave another. If he was anywhere with his cell phone, he wasn't answering. For whatever reason that bothered her.

It shouldn't. Mulder was a grown, adult male, relatively responsible and could do whatever he wished with his time. He wasn't beholden to her, he didn't need to dance attendance on her.

She stared at her phone for long moments, her thumbs twiddling.

She hadn't cleaned her gun yet.

Out came her weapon servicing kit as she set up at her kitchen table, wondering if her mother didn't have a point during their Christmas Eve conversation. After all, was she really happy? If she were happy, wouldn't she be out on a Saturday night like this, with her girlfriends, having drinks, complaining about work, and picking up young, eligible Washington power brokers who liked to show off the long list of political connections? She hadn't been hit on in a bar since...she paused, thinking back…that guy at the bar when she first began working with Mulder. He looked a lot like Daniel Trepkos. Worked in the Senate. She thought his name was Josh. He had been kind of cute she supposed. But she had turned him down. Hell, she realized with a sigh, the last date she'd been on was Rod, not terribly long after that. That had been years ago now, too, and she had lost touch with him. Anyway, all her single friends were married now, with children, and dogs, and no desire to go out to bars, drinking, picking up men. They would all look at her as crazy for not jumping on her insane but brilliant partner, with his cocky smile, his soulful eyes, the way he childishly would tease her by holding the coffee he bought her just high enough she couldn't reach it.

Where the hell did that come from? And damn it, where the hell was he?

She grabbed her phone, returning to her gun lying on the kitchen table, hitting the speed dial for
Mulder's cell. She hadn't expected him to pick up, he hadn't all day, but after two rings his bored, lazy voice drawled over the crackling sound of his cell phone connection. "Mulder."

"Mulder, where have you been? I've been trying to reach you all day!" She rubbed the surface of her weapon gently, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the grease and dirt collected on it.

"Oh, my apartment complex was being fumigated, so I thought I'd get away for the weekend. I came up to Massachusetts."

"Visiting your mother?" Wait, didn't she live in Connecticut?

"No, just, uh... sitting and thinking." He paused briefly before continuing. "Widespread accounts of unidentified colored lights hovering in the skies were reported last night. Look, Scully, I know it's not your inclination but, did you ever look up into the night sky and feel certain that not only was something up there, but it was looking down on you at that exact same moment and was just as curious about you as you are about it?"

Her screwdriver wasn't acting right.

"Mulder, I think the only thing more fortuitous than the emergence of life on this planet is that, through purely random laws of biological evolution, an intelligence as complex as ours ever emanated from it. The very idea of intelligent alien life is not only astronomically improbable but at its most basic level, downright anti-Darwinian."

Why the hell was the screwdriver not working?

"Scully," Mulder's spoke with weighty gravity. "What are you wearing?"

And just when she thought this conversation was getting too intellectual.

"I understand what you're saying, but I just need to keep looking." He sounded like a disappointed schoolboy. Mulder, always the quester, looking to the stars for answers.

"Yeah, well, don't look too hard. You might not like what you find." Was this polish for her gun any good? She sprayed it absently on a fork, studying it. Could she even use this fork now? Brilliant, Dana.

Mulder chuckled. "Isn't that what, uh, Doctor Zaius said to Charlton Heston at the end of 'Planet of the Apes'?"

Their work reduced to Charlton Heston movie quotes. "And look what happened," she pointed out, wondering if she'd go to house maker hell for throwing away a fork.

"Scully?" There was a hint of warning in Mulder's voice. "I've got to go."

Vision of New Mexico and Iowa fluttered to mind, along every other time she had been on the phone with him only to have him disappear on her. "Wait, Mulder what's going on?"

The dial tone rang in her ear.

Scully stopped, pulling her phone away and staring at. Jesus Christ, why did he do this? She swallowed the panic rising within her and considered. Mulder was simply at home in New England. He could be doing anything, running around old childhood haunts, perhaps just spending time considering all of the many things that had happened to him over this last year. There were no boxcars involved, no shady conspiracies. Honestly, Mulder had survived long before she ever
became his partner. Still, she sighed, she had ruined her fork. Bored of making a mess in her kitchen, she finished the work of servicing her weapon, cleaning and oiling it, putting it back in her holster.

Now what? Scully glanced at the glowing numbers of her microwave. Eight o'clock. What does one do at eight o'clock on a bored, Saturday evening? Eat? She moved restlessly to her fridge, rummaging through the scant things she had in there. Half a carton of orange juice, a loaf of bread, one head of lettuce, olives, turkey, and a container of Chinese food she was fairly certain needed to be tossed out quickly. Nothing particularly appetizing, but then again, neither was pizza. How was it Mulder could eat pizza without gaining a single pound? Scully prodded at the curve of her hips underneath her slacks. Since her abduction, she had shed the weight she had mysteriously put on thanks to whatever was done to her. Still, she was an agent with the FBI, she had to keep fit enough to do the work. But pizza sounded so much more appetizing than salad.

"A little pain today, Dana," she murmured, grabbing the lettuce and forcing herself to be happy about a nice, healthy, crunchy salad. She could add turkey. Maybe the olives, croutons? Did she even have croutons? Croutons couldn't be fatty if they go on a salad, right?

Behind her the tap of claws on her kitchen tile told her that her dog stood behind her, sensing impending food droppings on the floor. "Sorry, Queequeg, it's lettuce."

Her dog didn't seem to overly care. After all, she remembered, he did munch on his dead owner once. What was a little lettuce? It was about as inspiring and tasteful as her life at the moment. Bored...alone...on a Saturday night in her apartment.

Just what was Mulder up to anyway?

She flipped the television on lazily, not even sure what to watch on one of the crappiest nights of TV during the week. Should she just forgo it for a movie or hope there was something on the Discovery Channel. Luck! An hours worth of dung beetles. Why in the hell that was fascinating? She couldn't say. Perhaps it was something they put in the lettuce.

She couldn't even tear her eyes away as her phone rang again. Who knew bugs were this intriguing?

"Hello," she mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"I think you better get up here." As usual Mulder didn't bother with a greeting, cutting directly to the chase in a tone that sounded equal parts mystified and intrigued. For all she knew he could either be looking at a dead alien corpse or a dung beetle. Really, this was much more interesting than one would have thought, a show on dung beetles.

"What is it?" She didn't look away from the screen, her eyes glued to the mating habits of the small bugs.

"It appears that cockroaches are mortally attacking people."

That was enough to catch her attention. Her brain stopped, literally froze, as it tried to process what it was exactly Mulder had just said. "I'm not going to ask you if you just said what I think you just said, because I know it's what you just said."

Of course, its Mulder. These sorts of things popped out of his mouth all of the time.

"I'm crouching over a bug exterminator whose recently deceased body was discovered with cockroaches crawling all over him. The local sheriff says that two other bodies were found in the
same condition this afternoon."

How did Mulder get into these messes? "Where are you again?"

"Millers Grove. It has a large science constituency. The other incidents involved a molecular biologist and an astrophysicist, and the witness to this case is an alternative fuel researcher. These reports are not coming from yahoos out in the boondocks."

Scully wanted to point out to him that people with high intelligence also had a high probability of being excitable and extremely paranoid. But she decided that Mulder of all people already knew that. "Were there insect bites on the body?"

In the background she could hear Mulder conferring with someone in mumbles. "No," he finally returned, sounding less than confident.

No insect bites. Not unusual in the case of cockroaches, they weren't known for biting humans. "Cause you know, Mulder, millions of people are actually allergic to cockroaches. There have been reported cases of fatal reactions. It's called anaphylactic shock."

"Anaphylactic shock?" Amazingly enough he accepted her explanation without argument, almost with relief.

"Many such reactions have occurred to entomologists or exterminators." It was uncommon, but a fairly reasonable explanation for what was going on.

"Okay, we'll check that out," he noted absently.

"You still want me to come up?"

"No…no, I'm sure your right. Thanks, Scully." He hung up without so much as a goodbye.

Scully stared at her phone briefly, wondering how in the hell Mulder could have possibly been pulled into someone's case involving dead bodies and bugs. Perhaps, she reasoned, it was better not to ask. After all, it was more interesting than watching the mating habits of dung beetles.

Maybe not…

It was amazing how much time one show about insects could eat out of an evening. Scully was tempted to continue watching the next show on, regarding moths. How much did she know about moths, really? Perhaps the show could be insightful, even useful in their work, should they ever have a case dealing with killer moths….or….something…

Beside her on the couch, Queequeg began to itch behind one foxy ear, his back leg thumping loudly against the cushion. Wasn't it too late in the year for fleas?

Apparently not.

"Time for a bath, Queequeg," she ordered, grabbing her plate in one hand and dog in the other. Her Pomeranian protested, wiggling under her arm, but she managed to set him successfully on the kitchen sink, holding him still with one hand as she reached under the sink for his shampoo. "I promise, baby-dog, this won't hurt a bit."

Queequeg looked at her as if she was a filthy, rotten, evil liar.

She had already sprayed down her dog and had lathered his copper-colored fur into white peeks
when her phone rang again. Son-of-a-bitch, she breathed, as she rinsed her hands and reached for it, knowing who it was who had the devil's own timing calling her then.

"Hello?" She didn't manage to cut the exasperation out of her tone.

"I take it back, Scully, I think you better get up here."

"Another roach attack?" Honestly, what sort of place had Mulder found up there?

"Yeah, and this was no allergic reaction. Two witnesses claim they saw the victim screaming about cockroaches burrowing into him."

Eeeewwwhhhh…

She couldn't respond with that. "Are there still insects in the body?"

"We haven't located any yet, but there are wounds all over the body."

"From the cockroaches?"

"Well, the victim did attempt to extract the insects using a razor blade, but we're not sure all of the incisions are self-inflicted, except for the severed artery."

A severed artery? That would do it, she reasoned, but something had to set the victim off enough to make them cut themselves open enough to bleed like that. "Well, was there any evidence of drug use at the crime scene?"

"Uh, well, he did have a homemade lab set up, but I'm not sure what he was producing." She could hear him opening something over the other end of the phone, before exclaiming loudly. "Aw, man, smells like a septic tank! Would you make sure this gets analyzed, here?"

Sounded like a meth lab or at least someone's crude attempt at making one.

"You know, Mulder, there's a psychotic disorder associated with some forms of drug abuse where the abuser suffers from delusions that insects are infesting their epidermis. It's called Ekbom's Syndrome." She recalled that from some medical journal from years ago. Why had she been reading that? "The victim cuts himself in an attempt to extract the imaginary insect."

Mulder was silent on the other end of the line.

"Still want me to come up?" Behind her she a thumping and skittering from her kitchen sink.

"No, uh, you're probably right. I'm sorry to bother you."

"It's no bother." She was lying. "Bye!"

She clicked off the phone, turning at last back to her dog, only to find the red haired puffball had disappeared, covered in soap, running across her carpet.

"Hey," she shouted, chasing after him as he neatly leaped to his favorite spot on the couch and planted his soggy, wet bottom down, smiling up at her as he did it. Cheeky little shit.

"You finish your bath first," she scolded, scooping him up again, covering her in soap and wet dog smell. Queequeg was less than enthusiastic. He patiently made it through the rest of his bath, grumbling slightly, but then proceeded to hide after she had towed him dry, unwilling to wait even for the hair dryer she knew would warm him up. Just her luck he'd head for the very spot on
the couch he liked to sleep on and her apartment would smell like wet dog for weeks.

And as a matter of fact, so did she. Her bath beckoned and soap suds overflowed as she sank into them, luxuriating in the scent of lavender as she buried her nose in her latest read, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She had always wanted to give the book a read, but had of course begun backwards reading Truman Capote. She had started with *In Cold Blood*, a book highly recommended while she was at the Academy. It seemed strange to her that the same man who wrote such a gripping story about a real life murder case would turn around and write a book about the likes of Holly Golightly. She was halfway through when she realized her bubbles were gone and her water was cold. Time to crawl out, she supposed. It at least was a better way of killing time than watching dung beetles.

What was up with Mulder and his cockroach case anyway?

She had just settled herself comfortably on her couch, ensconced in pajamas and reading glasses, when her phone rang again. She picked it up without bothering to look at the Caller ID. "Who died now?"

"The medical examiner." Mulder hardly missed a beat, "His body was found next to a toilet, covered in roaches. I really think you should come."

"A toilet? Check his eyes." She had seen a case like this in medical school. "Is one of them bloodshot with a dilated pupil?"

"Yeah."

"It's probably a brain aneurysm." It was the most logical explanation, though to be sure, probably a slightly embarrassing one for his family.

"Brain aneurysm?" Mulder sounded slightly disappointed.

"Straining too forcefully is very common causation for bursting a brain aneurysm."

"Well, how do you explain the roaches, though?"

What the hell was this town's fixation on cockroaches? "Did you catch any?"

"Almost," he muttered vaguely.

"I don't know what to tell you, Mulder. I just hope you're not implying you've come across an infestation of killer cockroaches."

He was silent for long moments on the other end of the line.

"You aren't seriously considering…"

"Listen, Scully, you are right, not a biggie. Probably just a brain aneurysm."

Why wasn't she convinced by his words?

"Mulder, if you really want me up there."

"No, I'll get back to you if I do."

"All right, but soon. It's getting late."
As if Fox Mulder know how to look at a clock.

"Right, I'll keep you posted." He clicked off once again without saying goodbye. One day she would have to teach him proper phone etiquette. Honestly, killer cockroaches. Where did he come up with these ideas? Really, cockroaches that could take out a person. What sort of strange idea was that anyway? Why was she finding herself on her computer looking this up? Really, she didn't want to be involved, she didn't care. It was bugs, it could be anything. Perhaps it was just too warm where they were at for this time of year. Oerhaps it was something to do with the soil, or the climate.

She needed ice cream. The salad hadn't settled well with her and her stomach rumbled. As her modem kicked into life, she paddled into the kitchen, fetching a full carton of vanilla fudge ripple out of the freezer, grabbing a spoon from the drawer on her way out. Her web browser opened as she settled down again and began typing, looking up cockroaches and bugs in the Greater New England area. Twenty minutes in she hit on something, finally, that seemed to make sense with what Mulder had been describing to her. She hit his number on speed dial, glancing over the article on Asiatic cockroaches that had infested the United States.

"Mulder," he answered, breathless.

"Mulder, I've been doing research." She licked the vanilla and chocolate slowly off the end of her spoon. "Back in the mid-'80s, there was a cockroach species previously only found in Asia and since then, it's made an appearance in Florida. They've now completely established themselves in this country."

"Do they attack people?"

"No, but they do exhibit behavior different than our domestic breeds. They fly for long distances and they're attracted to light."

"But do they attack people?"

Clearly, the scintillating Mulder intellect was not so sharp tonight, she realized petulantly as she repeated herself "I'm suggesting that what's happening out there might be the introduction to this country of a new species of cockroach, one that is attracted to people."

"Well, that all makes perfect sense, Scully. I don't like it at all."

Why was she not surprised, she fumed quietly, ice cream melting off of her spoon.

"Did you know that the federal government, under the guise as the Department of Agriculture, as been conducting secret experiments up here?"

She had such a bad feeling about this. "Mulder, you're not thinking about trespassing onto government property again, are you?" How many air force bases and secret facilities had she drug him out of? "I know that you've done it in the past, but I don't think that this case warrants..."

"It's too late, I'm already inside."

Damn it all to fucking hell, she silently swore, smacking her desk with the flat of her hand. Why did he always do this? Why couldn't he just leave well enough alone, go through proper procedures, get a warrant.

"Well, what's going on," she finally asked petulantly. "What do you see?"
"I'm in a house. It's apparently empty."

Thrilling play-by-play, Mulder, she grumbled, scooping at the carton again and licking the spoon, "What does the place look like?"

"It's a typical two-story suburban house. Nice big living room, sparsely furnished." She could hear his voice echoing through the empty rooms, reverberating through the phone. "Nice carpets, fireplace, nice kitchen. Modern appliances." He paused. "Moving walls."

"Moving walls?" Had she heard him right?

"Yeah. They're rippling." Again, there was a pause, before Mulder screamed. The familiar panic set in. "Mulder?" Her voice was tight in her throat.

"They're everywhere! I'm surrounded."

This couldn't be happening again, this couldn't be happening again….

"Mulder, you got to get out of there right now!" Images of him being overrun by a black cloud of shining, cockroach carapaces chilled her as he screamed on the other end of the line.

"Are you all right?" Her blood running cold as other phone calls, other endings spun into her head. He panted. "My flashlight went out!"

Flashlight? Jesus H. Christ, she swore, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. "Mulder, what's going on?" She expected him to tell her something horrible or perhaps that he was overreacting.

"Got to go!" He snapped off the phone again, still without a proper explanation.

God fucking damn it!

Her blood pressure flew through the roof as she stared, speechless at her phone. She didn't know if she wanted to throw it at something or call him right back and kick his ass. What in the hell? He had cut her off without explanation, without so much as a reassurance, simply hung up on her while she's left wondering if he had been attacked by a giant cloud of ravening cockroaches? Okay, that did sound very, very silly, even to her.

Furious, she slammed the phone back on her desk as she put away her ice cream, now rapidly melting and turning soupy. Did Mulder ever think about the stupid things he ever got himself into? Honestly, she doubted it. A weekend up in Massachusetts turns into an X-file just by his very presence. It was as if Mulder walked around with a weird shit force field around him at all times, sucking strange, creepy, odd things to him just by happenstance.

"Fucking prick," she muttered in high dungeon, scooping up the phone again. She dialed him once more, praying he wasn't lying in some abandoned house, going into anaphylactic shock or worse. With Mulder it could always be so much worse.

His phone clicked on, but he didn't answer it, not really. "Not now," he hissed, snapping off again before she could get a word in edgewise.

Damn it, she breathed in irritation. She glanced at her clock. It was after eleven now. If he really needed her, he would have said so by now. She doubted she could even get a red-eye to Boston at this hour. And obviously, whatever stupid situation he had managed to get himself into this time,
he didn't need her involved with it. Why that bothered her, she couldn't say. She was going to bed, that was it. If the world should end in some cockroach-induced haze, well then he could call her about it then. It wasn't like normal sleeping patterns ever stopped Fox Mulder from waking her up.

Still, she kept the phone by her pillow, just in case.

Had she been asleep long? Her eyes had just fluttered shut when the phone rang, jarring by her ear. Scully snapped her eyes open, snatching the phone up sleepily. "Mulder, are you okay?"

"I can't sleep," he sighed. Scully's heart crawled, slowly, out of her throat as she ignored the desire to throttle him over the phone.

"What happened at the U.S.D.A. site," she asked weakly, wondering why it was she allowed him to do this to her time and time again.

"They're conducting legitimate experiments. I met an entomologist, Doctor Berenbaum, who agrees with your theory of an accidental importation of a new cockroach species."

"No, but she did tell me everything else there is to know about insects."

Only one word caught her attention in that entire exchange. "She?"

"Yeah, did you know that the ancient Egyptians worshiped the scarab beetle and possibly erected the pyramids to honor them, which may be just giant symbolic dung heaps?"

Funny, she thought sourly, that wasn't anything she had heard on her Discovery Channel program on dung beetles earlier. "Did you know the inventor of the flush toilet was named Thomas Crapper?"

Let him make of that what he would.

"Bambi also has this theory I've never come acro..."

"Who?" Scully almost choked on her own tongue.

"Doctor Berenbaum. Anyway, her theory is..."

"Her name is Bambi?" Honestly, in all seriousness? Bambi?

"Yeah. Both her parents were naturalists. Her theory is that UFOs are actually nocturnal insect swarms passing through electrical air fields."

Bambi? Strippers with fake blonde hair and large, plastic breasts were named Bambi. "Her name is Bambi?"

"Scully, can I confess something to you?"

About Bambi? Scully certainly hoped not. "Yeah...sure...okay."

She really didn't want to know anything about Mulder, his flashlight, and Bambi.

"I hate insects." He admitted this as if he was confessing to some horrible fetish that he was embarrassed to own up to, as if Mulder had one of those, she kicked herself.
Bambi?

When in doubt, Dana, fall back on science and reason. "You know, lots of people are afraid of insects, Mulder. It's just a... it's a natural instinctive."

"No, no, I'm not afraid of them. I hate them. One day back when I was a kid, I was climbing this tree when I noticed this leaf walking towards me. It took forever for me to realize that it was no leaf."

Why was Mulder confessing yet another strange, childhood fears to her? "A praying mantis?"

"Yeah. I had a praying mantis epiphany and, as a result, I screamed. No, not a girlie scream, but the scream of someone being confronted by some before unknown monster that had no right existing on the same planet I inhabited. Did you ever notice how a praying mantis' head resembles an alien's head? I mean, the mysteries of the natural world were revealed to me that day, but instead of being astounded, I was repulsed.

"Mulder?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure it wasn't a girlie scream?"

As if on cue, someone in the background screamed, loud and girlie.

"What was that?" Did she even want to know?

"I got to go." Before she could even say a thing to stop him, he was gone.

Damn it, that was it. Unable to sleep any further, she rose, calling her airline as she reached for her suitcase, freshly unpacked from her trip to San Diego. "Hi, this is Dana Scully, I need one plane flight to Boston and a rental when I get there. No, this isn't FBI business." Not yet that she knew of, though there might be a murder if she got her hands on Mulder. Queequeg was none too pleased about her rousing to pack a bag. Her dog rolled over on her bed and went to sleep, oblivious to his mistresses swearing and cursing as she hung up the phone and began to dress. It had been a mistake calling Mulder earlier, no matter how bored she was. No boredom was worth the headache Fox Mulder could instill on the most average, normal, sane person.

Her phone rang once again. Someone better have died again she snarled as she snapped it on. "What happened now?"

Chapter End Notes

True confessions....I've seen that dung beetle documentary. Watched it one night in college. It really is fascinating in a surreal way.
Mass Hysteria

Chapter Summary

In which Scully meets a town's mass hysteria.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The world was losing its collective mind.

"Watch where you are going, you stupid bitch!" A mother with three children screamed at her as she had tried to reasonably park her car in what could loosely be termed a parking lot.

"Excuse me?" Scully was fairly certain that when she had begun the attempt to cross the parking lot thirty seconds ago the mid-sized sedan hadn't been barreling at her full speed. It had only just stopped inches from her knees. The smell of burning rubber and car fumes mingled around her.

"You just stepped in front of my car, you fat cow," the woman bellowed angrily, her large, round face twisted in anger. Never mind the fact that Scully probably weighed a third of what this woman did. Her three, sallow-faced children stared blankly out the front of the window, as if they had never seen a human being before.

"Sorry," Scully murmured, more just to get out of the horrible woman's way, barely clearing the front of the car when she gunned the engine and peeled past the back of Scully's legs.

New England had always been famous for its charm, its friendliness and its manners. Fox Mulder notwithstanding, every small-town, New Englander she had met usually fell over them to be accommodating and polite, but all around her was screaming, swearing, blood curdling shouts, and threats with mortal injury, all over...what again? All she wanted was a map that showed her the way to Millers Grove, somewhere in this madhouse, so she could find her partner and this Dr. Bambi, figure out why everyone was losing their collective mind, including Mulder, and go home. Mulder could stay with Dr. Bambi if he wanted. He could massage her very, large...brain and pick it for more information on why Egyptian pyramids looked like dung beetle piles. She doubted that was the only thing going up in his mind.

Typical...

"Watch it!" Two men outside the door nearly got into a fist fight right in front of her, simply because one bumped into the other on accident. Inside people screamed, as an entire display stand of bug spray vanished in the blink of an eye. It was one of those moments Scully had only read about in Stephen King novels, where a perfectly sane little town spiraled into chaos and began eating each other in their madness. One woman ran out of the store, wild-eyed, staring at Scully as if she expected her to consume her whole right where she stood.

What in the hell?

No sooner had she stepped into the store than a man nearly bowled her over in his eagerness to get out. The poor cashier stood behind the counter, harried and frantic as he bagged someone's
groceries. Down the aisles people argued, pushed, grabbed things that she was certain they didn't need.

All she wanted was a road map.

"Excuse me," she asked with as much calm, rational authority as she could manage. "Do you sell road maps?" 

He nodded but barely looked up from his cash register. Not that she could blame him with the insanity going on in here.

"Can you tell me where they are," she prompted again, trying very hard to keep what little control she had left on her temper in check. After all, it wasn't the clerk's fault that she hadn't had any sleep, had just spent two hours getting from Boston to the middle of nowhere in the dead of night and was now being trampled by insane people.

"Come on, hurry up!" The angry woman waiting on the clerk ordered, shooting Scully a venomous glare as she did, as if road maps meant so much less than her bag filled with water, bug spray, and Ding Dongs.

Scully couldn't believe she was the only sane, rational being in this entire region. "What is going on here?"

"Haven't you heard about the roaches?" The woman's already crazed eyes widened brightly, glazing in manic resolution. "They're devouring people whole."

Jesus, Scully breathed. Mulder's insanity was infecting people.

"Everybody is getting out of here." The woman reached across the counter, grabbing her bag, the person behind her barely waiting for her to move to get their things to the register.

Common sense, Dana, remember it is the one weapon you have. "Have you seen the cockroaches yourself?"

"No, but they're everywhere," the woman assured her as she turned and ran for the door, nearly knocking over a man who shot Scully a pitying look.

"Roaches aren't attacking people, lady. They're spreading the Ebola virus."

Scully had to blink at him before she realized he was serious. He tossed money at the cashier and headed for the door, leaving her with the parting warning. "We are all going to start bleeding from our nipples."

Something inside of her brain broke, something deep and painful. Slowly, calmly, she reached for her badge in her wallet, holding it up as high as her short stature allowed.

"All right!" She yelled, the same tone her father used to use when giving orders on one of his ships. "I'm Agent Dana Scully from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I am assuring you that you are not in any danger. Everything is going to be okay if you just calm down and start acting rationally."

The entire store froze, listening to her, eyes wide as they followed her badge. There! Calm, reasonable government official reminding them that all was find and all right with the world. She lowered her badge slowly. "Now, where the hell are those road maps?"

No sooner had she turned from the clerk than two women scuffled and pandemonium erupted
around her. There were screams, shouts, someone shoved against her violently as everyone, including the clerk, dropped whatever it was they were doing and clawed their way to the door, clearing the store in less then half-a-minute.

There were no words for this moment, Scully realized, standing there, blinking and alone in the now empty convenience store. Merchandise littered the floor around, and at her feet, a box of chocolate candies spilled onto the white tile, looking amazingly like a small, oblong cockroach.

Mass psychosis? Worldwide panic? Such things had been heard of before, her grandfather used to tell her tales about Orson Welles live broadcast of War of the Worlds and how his grandfather's neighbor had cows that had been shot by frightened idiots, convinced that the creatures were Martians. Stupider things had happened in life. Sighing, she bent and picked up the box, popping one of the candies from inside in her mouth, and scanned the store. There were the road maps, right in plain sight. Did they have a map for the center of hell though?

She glanced down at the box of Choco Droppings. For such an unfortunate name, these candies were actually rather good.

Chapter End Notes

True facts: The Orson Wells "War of the Wars" incident did happen to my great-grandfather's neighbors. They owned a farm outside Hammonton, NJ, well within the broadcast zone, and people apparently people heard it, got spooked, fled, and shot their neighbors cows. Having grown up in Missouri, I can assure you, cows are not alien.
In which Scully and Mulder forget where they are during an argument.

God she hated him.

There wasn’t enough shampoo in the world to get the smell of fecal matter out of her hair. She could still taste it in her mouth, feel it under her fingernails, her eyes still stung with it. Scully had already taken three showers since arriving at the motel, so many that her toes and fingers squelched prunily against the rough carpet as she flung herself on the bed, wrapped in one fluffy towel around her slim body, another on top of her head, holding up her wet hair. She stared forlornly at the clothes she had thrown into a plastic trash bag in the corner, ruined. God damn, but she hated him. Calling her up, asking her stupid questions, getting her worried, only to come up here fearing the worst and having shit literally dumped on her head.

And then there was Bambi…Dr. Bambi! Scully's teeth cracked in her jaw as she stared up at the cottage cheese ceiling, seeing in her mind tall, beautiful, buxom Bambi, with her large, doe eyes, and the dazzling, perfect smile. Perhaps she was intelligent, Scully could at least give her credit for that, and yes, she had been nothing but polite to Scully, even when she had stood there, covered head to toe in manure. But there was the simpering way she had of saying his name, and not just Mulder, but his first name, Fox. He never let her call him Fox, not once. The one time she had attempted he had quickly shut her up with excuses, hiding behind a façade of liverwurst and root beer. It was always Mulder and she was always Scully, never Dana, never his friend, just his partner. Not like sexy, brilliant, fascinating Bambi. Who the hell named their child Bambi? Cut the crap about naturalists, unless they had been tied to trees for the last twenty years, wearing nothing but hemp and eat nuts, how in the hell could they not know? Perhaps her father had managed to sneak a fast one past her mother. It could explain why she became a scientist, after all, carrying that name with that body, wouldn't you want to prove the snickers wrong?

She doubted that it was Bambi’s brains that first attracted Mulder. Something clicked in the back of her mind, something Tom Colton had said when she first told him she was working the X-files. Something about her not being tall enough, not a brunette and Phoebe Green had made a passing, snide remark running in the same vein. Mulder himself admitted he tended to go for the leggy, brainy types. She shouldn't be surprised that he had tripped all over himself where Bambi was concerned. It wasn't as if Mulder tried to hide his attraction to other women ever or that he was apologetic about it. Why in the hell was it bothering her so much? Honestly, let him drool all over whoever, make an ass over any pretty face that came across his path, what the hell did she care if he did?

"Scully, you in there?"

She shot from her bed in an instant, her heart in her throat as she rushed to the thin, plywood door to her room and stared frantically out of the peephole into the hallway. Damn it all, she sighed, Mulder stood leaning against the door frame, new scrubbed and hair wet, meeting her eyes through the tiny tube of glass and metal apoletically.

"Scully," he called again, uncertain, his hand poised to knock.
"What?" She flung the door open, eyes blazing up at his startled face.

"I…err…” Hazel, green eyes widened as they took her in from head-to-toe. It finally occurred to Scully just how this might look. She was standing at her hotel room door, clad in nothing but a terry-cloth towel and it occurred to her just how terribly small that towel was. She was a short woman, still, it barely covered the parts of her that needed covered for her not to be arrested for public indecency. And she was standing in front of her partner like this.

"Can I help you?" She intoned with as much dignity as she could muster, lifting her chin high as the towel on top of her head wobbled precariously.

"I….uh…"

Mulder's face turned a shade of red Scully was fairly certain she had never seen on his face before, his throat working uncomfortably as he moved two paces back from the doorway. "I came to… err…apologize, for…you know…having you come all the way up here, and…stuff."

And stuff? Scully felt one of her delicate eyebrows arch coldly by way of response. "Not only did I lose a night of sleep, Mulder, I got shit on…literally." The indignity of her reception at the front desk of their motel had been bad enough. "And even worse, in the end, it all boils down to hysteria, fear and agitation stirred up by a deep sense of paranoia, something you should understand intimately."

Had Mulder even heard a word she said? He stared at her mutely, a pained look of confused consternation on his face. "Ummm….paranoia…yeah…look, Scully, you are right, just probably your good, old-fashioned, garden variety cockroaches and people are getting crazy over nothing."

"You didn't say that two hours ago in front of Dr. Bambi." Scully couldn't help but let the acid drip slightly as she crossed her arms in front of her barely clad self. "You were keen to show off your theories on alien, robotic bugs to her then."

It took a moment. Mulder was usually sharp about these sorts of things. His bright eyes frowned and then lit with a fierce, amused glee. "Why? You jealous?"

Scully had heard stupider things come out of Mulder's mouth, but not many.

"Jealous? Of what?" It was now her turn to flush in outrage. "Mulder, I don't care whose breasts you want to stare at, frankly, that's your business. I care more about you getting yourself killed."

"So is that why you hopped completely unnecessary plane to Boston in the dead of night, just to make sure I was safe and alive in the hands of a USDA scientist?" He stepped forward slightly, hands planted on his hips in his familiar, challenging stance. He might as well have been pacing their office in his suit and tie, not in the sweats he was currently wearing.

"I came up here because you seemed determined to make a case out of nothing more than public fear and a few sightings of strange bugs, and if I didn't, someone was going to get hurt, like you nearly did."

"I seem to recall being the one to chase you out of that warehouse before it blew."

She sneered. "I'm sure that dead doctor's family will agree with you."

"Can't help human error," Mulder bit back, now veritably looming over her. "And there was no reasoning with him."
"I'll remember that in the report."

"It wasn't an X-file, Scully, no reports to be filed." He smirked, triumphant. "Unless you want to get your pretty, little ass down to the local PD to file your opinion, I'm sure they would care about Asiatic, dung beetles."

"Cockroaches," she hissed, noticing with some slight discomfort the heat coming from off of him as he stood perhaps just an inch too close for her liking. He smelled at least better than he had when they first had come into the motel, of soap and shampoo, and a scent that she had come to define as Mulder. Why was she noticing something like that, she wondered, standing there, arguing with him over bugs in a hallway when she was barely clothed? Well, not clothed at all, really. Hell….

"Look, Mulder." She felt the flush now spreading over all of her exposed skin. "Cockroaches, robots…it doesn't matter now. I'm exhausted, you're exhausted, let's just go to our respective rooms and get some sleep, okay?"

Let me put some clothes on, she thought frantically, feeling horribly exposed in front of the one man she never wanted to feel exposed to.

"Sleep, right." He ran a hand through his damp, dark hair, his temper melting with the gesture as sheepishness replaced the annoying smirk. "Listen, look, I'm sorry for getting you up here, and I'm sorry I got your covered in crap."

His eyes flickered briefly to the towel around her. "And I'm sorry your clothes were ruined."

"I have more," she assured him quickly, though she wasn't sure why. "Just…well…"

She was standing there talking to him, barely clothed.

"You caught me at a bad time."

"Right." His gaze flickered up from the towel to her face, before looking away towards his own room. "Maybe I'll just go to my own room, get some rest, meet you up after that to catch a flight back home?"

"Sure, fine, whatever," she sighed, fighting the urge to yawn in his face. Really, she wanted bed, a few hours' sleep and hell, to get some clothes on and a door between she and Mulder, quickly. "A few hours sleep, and everything will be as right as rain."

As if it ever worked that way for them.

"Sweet dreams, Scully," he murmured as he moved down the hallway towards his own room. "And put some clothes on. It's freezing out here."

She stuttered in outrage for the briefest of moments as he flashed her a cheeky grin. God, she hated that man!
In which Mulder gets on Scully's every last nerve.

SNAP...crunch...crunch.....SNAP...

Scully felt her left eyelid twitch.

SNAP...

She took a deep, long, steadying breath, pausing in her typing to close her eyes, to center herself, to breathe deeply.

SNAP!

"Mulder, must you eat those damn things constantly?" She glared across the office at his long legs, propped up on the corner of his desk, the rest of him leaning back as far as his office chair would allow him to tip. The pile of sunflower seed shells collected in a pile by right elbow, as one after another of the small, oval shaped seeds popped into his mouth.

Snap, crunch...

"Huh?" Mulder looked up from the magazine he swore was research, something about monster sightings. As if deliberately taunting her he slipped another seed into his mouth, crunching it briefly, before slipping the shell out again onto the giant pile of slobbery, masticated, spent sunflower shells at his elbow.

"Mulder, must you eat those damn things constantly?" She glared across the office at his long legs, propped up on the corner of his desk, the rest of him leaning back as far as his office chair would allow him to tip. The pile of sunflower seed shells collected in a pile by right elbow, as one after another of the small, oval shaped seeds popped into his mouth.

"Your seeds. Must you eat them constantly?" Honestly, how did he not die of salt poisoning from the amount he consumed in a day?

"You've never complained before." He snapped back petulantly, crunching another seed defiantly, before whipping his feet down to the floor, snapping up in his seat like a jack-in-the-box. He reached for the trashcan under his desk and swept the whole pile inside with a practiced hand.

"Doesn't mean it isn't annoying," she replied in obstinate petulance.

She returned to her typing, the keys clicking smartly under her fingers. There was blessed silence for all of a minute.

Thwap, thwap, thwap, thwap, thwap...

She turned, slowly, to see one single, long yellow pencil, with a rubber eraser capping its end, bouncing around on the desk top, landing on papers, on magazines, on the blotter on Mulder's desk as he leaned over his magazine. He twiddled it between his fingers, perhaps unconscious that he
was even doing it. Did this man just have so much energy he could just sit still silently long enough for her to finish this report?

*Thwap, thwap, thwap…*

She rose, silently, pushing back her chair deliberately, her steps slow and measured as she moved towards his desk, expecting him to look up. He didn't. Perhaps "Elvis' Alien Baby in Mexico" was far too interesting for him to bother paying attention to her as she reached across his desk, and neatly plucked the pencil from him.

"Hey?" He yelped as she met his confusion with an unrepentant smirk. "What the hell?"

"Mulder, do you realize I've been working on this report for three hours now?"

"And?" He grumbled, nettled as she returned to her table, shoving the purloined pencil defiantly in her own neat, tidy penholder.

"You have twitched, you have twiddled, you have thumped and toyed with every single item in this office that would possible drive me up a wall and I'm no where near being finished." She fell back into her seat, nerves on edge as he watched her, quiet, for a long, pregnant moment.

"Does this have anything to do with Bambi calling?" Mulder asked it so seriously; she almost reached for the pencil and stabbed it in his eye in sheer rage.

"Why in the world would this have anything to do with Dr. Berenbaum?" She refused to use that name, Bambi. Honestly.

"She was really calling to speak to you." Mulder clearly didn't understand from the tone of her voice and her body language she had no desire to even discuss this. The man needed to learn female signals one of these days before she murdered him. She turned up a cold eyebrow as she turned to face him.

"I appreciate the fact that Dr. Berenbaum was polite enough to confirm my theories on cockroach swarming." There was more than a hint of triumph in her voice. "I don't know if you prancing around the phone like a lovesick puppy to take it back from me was totally necessary."

"I wasn't a lovesick puppy," Mulder snorted in angry outrage. "I wanted to ask her how her chat with Dr. Ivanov went."

"Is that why you asked her if she would be free in a few weeks for coffee?"

"A friendly conversation, nothing more." Mulder rolled his eyes, his full mouth quirked in a knowing smile. "You are so bugged by me asking out a smart, attractive woman instead of some cheap, brainless bimbo, it's killing you."

"You are imagining things, Mulder." Not for the first time either, she would like to point out. "Who you date is hardly any of my business."

"You're right, it isn't," Mulder shot back, just as the phone at the corner of his desk rang. Scully hardly had time to let the hurt his words caused register with her as he picked up the receiver, turning deliberately away from her. "Mulder."

Fine, be that way, she fumed, turning back to her own monitor, staring in blind rage at the blinking cursor in front of her. God, he could be such an ass.
"Right. Satanic cults you say? Yes…no, no that is something that my office handles, yes."

His office? Since when did he become lord and master, she wondered, but refused to turn and glare at him. She wouldn't deign to do it.

"Deaths…hysteria, yeah, I get it, that's actually a common phenomena in the sorts of cases. I can book the next flight out to your area, though it will likely be in the morning before we get in. Oh…funeral…well we could meet you at the chapel if you would like. Yes, my partner is something of an expert in pathology, she might be able to speak to your coroner."

Something of an expert? Now she did turn, mouth open, staring at him. His back was still turned, but she knew he could sense the outrage all the same. "Right, Detective White, look forward to meeting you." He had the same unctuous tone he used when speaking to Bambi Berenbaum. Scully's hunch told her the good detective was a woman.

"So we have a case?" She tried not to sound as snippy as she felt at the moment and knew she was failing miserably.

"Place called Comity is having a bit of a Satanic cult problem, they thought we could come and check it out." Mulder made it sound as if they were simply having a problem with the plumbing or the wiring. Satanic rituals were normal, a commonplace sort of problem.

"You know the last time we had a case with Satanic cultists you were spooked for weeks by a creepy biology teacher."

"As I recall, you were spooked too and seeing how close we both got to having our heads blow off with a .22 in a gym shower, I'd say we were on to something."

"So, what, we have another case of the PTA praying to demons in order to keep their town safe?"

"What, you think that soccer-parents who perform little blood rituals in their basement isn't a legitimate case for the X-files to investigate?"

"I don't think a bunch of drunken teenagers listening to Black Sabbath and inking upside down crosses on their heads necessitates a call to the FBI." She was picking a fight. She knew it. She didn't care. "You are the one who keeps insisting we need to legitimize our work, Mulder, and yet you chase after case after case of small-town hysteria."

"You realize just how demeaning and narrow-minded you sound there, right?" Mulder smirked, turning to his computer. "So I can get us a flight out bright and early in the morning."

"So you don't care about my opinion on whether or not we should take this case?"

"I don't give a rats ass if you stay or if you go, Scully. It's your life."

"Technically, you're the senior agent, you could order it." That was a stretch, but she wanted to taunt him. Besides, Skinner would never support it in a million years.

"Jesus Christ, Scully, what put you on the ra…"

She knew where he was going with that and felt her eyebrows nearly fly off her face as they shot skyward. Mulder literally choked mid-syllable, spluttering as he groped to cover for himself.

"...raging grumpy mood today." He stuttered, weakly.
A line had almost been crossed between them. She was a Navy brat; there wasn't a vulgar term she hadn't heard or used. But still, there were some lines of no return for partnerships. Slowly, carefully, she turned to her computer, turning it off, and reached for her briefcase.

Mulder watched her, saying nothing.

"I think I'll go home." Scully finally muttered as she stood with her things. "I will get some sleep, I will meet you at the airport in the morning, and we will pretend this whole conversation never happened.

Her only response was a grim, silent nod.

"Good night, Mulder," she whispered tightly as she made for the door, before pausing, turning to shoot one last pass across his bow. "If we are going on this case because you thought the detective had a sexy voice, I swear to God I will loose cockroaches in your home. I will hide them in your car. You won't get rid of them...for weeks!"

She turned on her heels and stalked, triumphantly, to the elevators, feeling smugly proud of herself.
A Hint of Skepticism

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully's tempers fray.

She was going to slap the smirk off of Mulder's face, swear to God she was going to do it.

"Thanks for being such a shining example of partner support and loyalty back there." Scully glared across the fleeing throng of mourners, all horrified at the sudden emollition of the dead, teenage boy's body. Already there were hysterical cries of "Satan" from across the fleeing cars as the strange man called Bob called for the town's people to rise up against the threat of Satan. She could feel a dull, aching throb forming just above the bridge of her nose, pulsing under her eyebrow. She rubbed at it fretfully.

"I don't know, Scully, could you have your stick of scientific skepticism shoved any further up your ass?" Mulder seemed unsympathetic as he strode to their car, impervious to the hysteria around him. "Dead kids, mourning families, strange shit happening, and you want to dust it under the rug as hicks getting worked up over nothing."

Scully paused in the middle of the sidewalk, looking at the chaos in the funeral home parking lot. All it needed was torches and pitchforks to complete a perfect, Hollywood version of "Kill the Beast." Perhaps she woke up on Oblivious Day and no one bothered to tell her.

"Mulder, I have never once doubted your brilliance, but does your IQ fly out the window every time a pretty set of breasts come into view?" Scully had noticed exactly where Mulder's gaze had been during their entire conversation with Detective White and that wasn't concerned sympathy in his eyes either. "For a man with a world-class degree and top marks out of Quantico, you seem to conveniently forget the methods of proper, police procedure whenever a woman is involved."

"How long have we been working together, Scully," Mulder retorted, hardly looking at her. "Obviously I'm not that big of an asshole."

No, she thought irritably, but he also never acted like a raging, hormonal twelve-year-old whenever she showed up in a room. Of course, if she weren't a foot shorter than him and had breasts the size of Texas, perhaps he would. "We've been through this at Miller's Grove, just days ago! Hysteria brought on by people's irrational fears of perfectly explainable phenomenon, reaching a fever pitch. Only instead of flesh-eating cockroaches, now its Satanist and you are irresponsibly feeding that belief by encouraging them to believe that it's even a possibility."

"You and I both know that we have well-documented cases of Satanic cult practices." He spun on her stormily.

"How do you know its nothing more than the word of two teenage girls trying to cover up the fact they were out in the woods with a boy doing things they didn't want their parents finding out about?"

"Things must have changed since I was a teenager. I never worried about ending up dead after an appointment at the local make out spot."
"You were obviously there often enough, I'm surprised you didn't."

Score a low blow for Scully, she thought peevishly, as Mulder's eyes opened in surprise. Okay, perhaps it wasn't an area she would normally go for an attack, but it had its effect as he flushed angrily. "So, what, you think I'm pursuing Satanic cults just to impress a woman?"

"The thought had crossed my mind." She straightened to her full height under the weight of his glare.

"Ignoring the fact that in the entire time you've known me I've always maintained a belief in the work of the occult."

"Even you can smell out true occult influence and stupid teenagers. You aren't stupid."

"No, I'm just a guy? I've busted my ass for eight years at the FBI to only be lead around by my libido?"

Well, when he put it that way….

"I don't know, Scully, excuse me for following up on a lead given to me by a legitimate officer from law enforcement. I didn't realize I was being a shallow, Neanderthal who objectifies women whenever he sees one cross his path. I mean, after all, my partner is a woman, I suppose it never occurred to me I was being a raging stereotype of male dominance in the world."

Now who was getting on their high horse, she wondered darkly. "It must be something, Mulder, for you to belittle me in front of Detective White like that. 'A hint of skepticism?' You couldn't impress her with your own keen insight, you had to tear down my intellect to show her how smart you are?"

That had hurt, she realized…a lot.

"You were the one the entire plane ride over here bitching about how this case was likely nothing, don't talk to me about tearing down intellect. If anything you had your mind made up before we even stepped out of DC."

"And so did you," she snapped back, stung that his accusations had the ring of truth in the. "You wanted to believe it."

"And you didn't, so here we are again, the believer and the skeptic. Ever get tired of being a stereotype, Scully, cause I know I sure as hell do."

Behind them was the squealing of tires and the call from Bob for them to meet together at the local Methodist church for an all night vigil against Satan's forces on their town. Murmurs rose amongs the remaining mourners, calls for spreading the word. Scully's head ached, her fingers reaching up to rub the area just above her nose.

"Fine, Mulder, whatever." She was too tired to carry this argument on. "You aren't being a chauvinistic male and I'm not being a raging, bitchy skeptic. Let's just get to the police station and figure out what in the hell these girl's saw that night."

"Fine." He shrugged indifferently as he snatched the keys out of his pocket, as usual the one to always drive. Stupid man. "Maybe if its not too much trouble, I could get you to even look at the remains of the kid. What's left at least after they put him out?"

"Fine," she muttered. After all, that was what she was here for, right, to be Mulder's science monkey. Nothing more, she sighed, and nothing less.
Scully hadn't smoked a cigarette since she was thirteen. She viciously tore the clear, plastic wrapping off of the pack of Morley's and pulled one out. It smelled of the cloying scent of Skinner's office, of dark, murky mysteries where she and Mulder had their chains yanked once again by some sort of shadowy bastard with a cancer stick. Well, Mulder was usually having his chain yanked. She was the one with half a brain and an ounce of reason. She was being left behind while he was running off to chase after ghosties, aliens, and really attractive small-town detectives.

Lighting the cigarette with vicious triumph, she pulled on it thoughtfully as she considered Detective White and her simpering smile, her peroxide blonde hair. She'd bet the boobs were fake too. Pity the detective couldn't fake the height. Scully regarded her own short legs with irritation. A woman could fake anything to be more attractive to the opposite sex except her height. Poor short, petite, fragile Dana Scully. She grabbed the remote from beside her bed and began flipping through the TV channels, looking for something, anything to take her mind off of her macho, pig headed, asshole partner. The same movie with its frantic music played on every channel. What sort of town had the same damn movie on every channel?

Angrily she clicked the set off again, as if the television had personally affronted her. Why shouldn't it the TV insult her, everyone else was. After all a man she thought she knew so well, a man she had thought she could trust and believe in had turned out to be no better than a lying snake anyway. He was more interested in getting down someone's pants than solving any real case. Not that there was really one of those around here. Scully launched herself off her bed, cigarette still smoking in hand, mimicking Mulder's words in low, angry tones. Sure, Detective White could use our help, she thought moodily? Why not? That trollop didn't look like she could find her way through a case with a flashlight and a road map. Maybe she just flipped her hair and flashed a little cleavage and got others to do it for her. Evil bitch. She stared hard out of the window of her room, pulling again on the cigarette. Why should she care who Mulder was shacking up with this time?

Why should you care, Dana, a voice in the back of her head asked her, sounding fairly reasonable in comparison to everyone else in this crazy town. Mulder has a life outside of the office, even if it is a sad, illusion of having a social circle. He's just your partner. Why in the world should it matter one way or the other what - or rather who - he does in his spare time? The angry part of her brain countered that quickly. She was an FBI agent, as was he, they had an obligation to the work. As a woman in a man's world, she knew that more keenly than anyone, and it belittled her and all other women to see the male agents pulling this shit all of the time, treating women as little more than servants or sex toys. Mulder so quickly dismissed her to go off and do all the scientific leg work on the boy's burnt coffin, insisting that he saw a horned beast or whatever, while he's off doing God knows what with that whore from the local police. He ditched her, Scully, his partner, the one who...
had pulled him out of multiple death traps, nearly been killed herself, and had put her entire job on the line for this misogynist shit-head. He ditched her to be with a pretty, pert, perfect blonde.

Rather than grounding the cigarette out, she opened the window, flicking the butt into the January air, staring fixedly into the parking lot. There was the car that she and Mulder driven to Comity, the standard issue, FBI rental job. Why was it he always insisted on driving it, she mused in mild annoyance? She was perfectly capable of driving, better than he was. She at least had a sense of direction. Instead he always got behind the wheel, leaving her to play shotgun, while he took every wrong turn and bad road known to man and she was left trying to just deal. God, she wondered briefly, why do you stick around with such a jerk if he doesn't even respect you enough to drive?

A shadow moved across the parking lot. Scully's eyes fixed on it, focusing in the darkness to see who it was. All she needed was to catch the blonde hair in the dim light from the motel and feminine figure to recognize it. She rolled her eyes in disgust as she saw Detective White move towards Mulder's room. How professional, a little roll in the hay while on the job. Her mind race to the part of the code of conduct against fraternizing while on duty. While strictly it applied to FBI agents, she wondered if it could be applied to local law enforcement. After all, it wasn't like she planned on fraternizing with the big headed lout, no matter if every now and again she found herself lost in one of those meaningful gazes of his. She, Dana Scully, certainly would never stoop to the level of getting girlishly giddy just by one of his double entendres, by the playfully teasing smirk on his face. Hell, she didn't give a shit if he had an intellect that made most of the knuckle, dragging, old-boys club at the FBI look like Neanderthals, or that he had read her collegiate senior thesis from the University of Maryland, the one that had sailed her into Stanford's medical school. Who cares if he respected her intelligence, if he didn't respect her as a person? Dana Scully for one would never fall for Fox Mulder's charms, she snorted, reaching for another cigarette. Let other women fall into his bed, she still had enough shreds of her Catholic girl exterior and a long, bad track record of sleeping with her teachers and co-workers. She knew enough than to be as idiotic as Detective White. Ignoring the fact, she thought irritably, that every once in a while, when he would give her that look…

The harsh jangle of her hotel phone caused her to drop the paper and tobacco tube in her hand and she rushed to grab it as her heart leapt to her throat. She listened with detachment to the police officer on the other end of the phone, rapidly writing down the information, part of her mind focused on what he was saying about another dead teenager, part of her mind still raging at Mulder next door with Detective White. When she hung up the phone, she stared at the paper, wondering if it would be at all worth it to interrupt them, or if she just say fuck it and go it alone. Perhaps, the evil part of her mind grinned, it wouldn't be so bad breaking into Mulder's nooky time. She grabbed her coat and gun, and closing her hotel room door she took five sharp, smart steps to Mulder's room, trying to ignore the giggle from Detective White. Mulder's voice rumbled something low.

Her gaze went first from Detective White, who was wrapped like ivy around Mulder's neck, as he glanced at Scully, shamefaced and startled. There was a pungent smell in the room, of frozen citrus. Her eyes fell on a clear, vodka bottle, with orange liquid, looking like a quick and dirty screwdriver. The calm, rational part of her brain, somewhere, realized that Mulder didn't drink well, hardly ever. Christmas was the only time she heard of him willingly drinking, but it was usually his reaction to extreme stress. But then, the still rational part of her mind reminded her pointedly, Scully hadn't picked up a cigarette since before she was in high school. What in the hell was going on, she wondered briefly.

She felt the next words tumble from her lips, cold and perfunctory. "There's been another death."

She turned on her heels and made for the car, the one Mulder was always driving. Mulder and
White followed close behind. She felt somehow betrayed, though she couldn't really place a finger on why she felt that way. Mulder moving on women was nothing new in the two years she known him, though getting drunk in a hotel room by himself was something she hadn't seen out of him. She wondered, with her bruised ego in hand, how it was she thought she had known this man so well, when it was quite obvious she did not.

Scully glanced briefly over her shoulder at the embarrassed pair following her and scowled.

Chapter End Notes

It should go without saying, if you've seen the episode, Scully is way out of character here. Well...maybe less out of character and more those dark, evil, lizard parts of the brain she never likes to talk about.
"When is your birthday again, Scully?"

She had just found the most comfortable position in the cramped middle seat that afforded her a chance to get the sleep she was denied the night before. She had been too busy dealing with hysterical teenaged girls, not to mention a very angry and confused police detective, or the townspeople of Comity who still insisted it was the devil's work bringing them to ruin.

"What?" She grunted without bothering to open her eyes to look at Mulder. She knew he was already on his laptop, trying to wedge his impossibly long legs under the table enough to begin writing his report while it was still fresh. Still fresh, alright, like a steaming, pile of cow sh…

"I thought it was late February, the same day as Jack Willis." He was mumbling more to himself now, a sure sign he needed sleep too, but as was usual for Mulder after a case, he couldn't get it to shut off.

"February 23. Its in a little more than a month." It was a not-so-subtle hint. "I'm not holding my breath that you will remember that."

"Ye of little faith!" She could hear his long fingers race across the keys.

"Why are you asking?" Now she finally did crack open an eyelid, glancing warily at him as he bent over his screen, watching as he nibbled his bottom lip in concentration.

"For the report."

"The case report?" She sat up a bit further, wondering what in the hell her birthday had to do with anything.

"Yeah. You know, I wouldn't think normally we would get along that well the two of us, just looking at our signs. You're a Pisces, I'm a Libra, but I wonder if there is something within the times we were born in and our full astrological make up that make us work so well together."

He might as well have been speaking Greek to her.

"What are you talking about?" She leaned over to see his screen. It was filled with charts and symbols and strange terms that had utterly no meaning to her.

"I got these from Madam Zirinka for the low price of $125. I thought they would be useful in explaining the events of Comity."

"The events of Comity?" As if this was somehow some sort of historical milestone that needed to
be researched and understood for posterity in the future. "You are literally going to hand Skinner a file that explains the last three days in terms of astrology."

"Scully, it all makes sense." There was that maddened joy in his voice, the delight that he had found something that explained the secrets of the universe perfectly. Well, at least in Mulder's mind. "Nature is ruled by the rhythm of forces around it, the tug and pull of the moon sets the tides in motion, creatures set their internal bio-chemistry to the movement of the universe around them. Humanity seems to believe that the movements of the planets and the stars have nothing to do with them, that they are simply the set dressings for some cosmic stage that we act out on but don't interact with. How can we deny that the universe has no influence over our day-to-day lives so flippantly as we do?"

"You realize you sound like one of those adds on the back of these supermarket rags you are always reading, the one that had Bill Clinton shaking hands with an alien."

She took a small satisfaction in seeing Mulder's balloon pop, just a little.

"You mean to tell me that you would rather believe that those two girls killed those boys out of spite?"

"No." Her throbbed as she threw herself back in her seat. "I can't even begin to explain why it is or how it is those things happened, but I do know that it wasn't because of the sun, the moon, or the stars in the sky, and it sure as hell wasn't about astrology."

Perhaps, if she really admitted it, Scully might have begrudgingly granted him a point on any other day. But every time she was willing to budge an inch with him, his snarky attitude and dismissive behavior of the last few days would come to mind, the belittling treatment, the way Detective White's arms were entwined around his neck.

"So tell me, Doctor Scully?" He drawled out her medical title lazily, knowing it would irritate her, especially because she never used it. "What was it in your scientific opinion that caused a town full of people to lose their heads completely for the last week?"

He had her pinned, and she knew it and she hated that feeling. Damn him. She squirmed as she ran through perfectly logical sounding explanations in her head. "Perhaps it was a situation like in Miller's Grove, one suggestion that took root in the collective fears and subconscious of the community, exploding into hysteria with the least influence, like a match to dry brush. It's winter, people are indoors more, they are listening to the television more, are cooped up inside with their imaginations, strange things are liable to be formulated when people are forced inside all day."

"You really believe its because they are all just a bunch of cold, bored hicks with nothing better to do with their time than to make up stories about Satanic rituals plaguing their town?"

"Mulder, you've studied these cults, not once did we find any definitive evidence of any sort of cult activity." Scully realized her voice was carrying when the woman across the aisle glared at the pair of them angrily, shooting Scully in particular a pointed look. She lowered her voice to a hiss. "Admit it, you went out there on nothing more than a plea from Detective White that peaked your interest."

"What is this obsession with you and Detective White?" His eyes widened at her accusation. "You've known me for nearly three years, Scully. How many times have you known me to take up a case merely because a woman detective called me?"

His face was calm but his eyes were shining, livid. In the close confines of the plane she had
nowhere to get to in order to diffuse this. And frankly, she realized guiltily, she probably deserved
the backlash she was about to get. He was right. She had never known a time in the last three years
when he hadn't taken a case that wasn't based solely on the evidence being presented.

"From the moment you got back from San Diego, you've been riding my ass. I don't know what
happened there, what epiphany you have reached, what reason you have for biting my head off
every time I turn around, but this isn't like you." There was hurt underneath the anger and a
justifiable confusion. Sickeningly, Scully realized just how she had been acting the last few weeks,
and realized she little understood it as he did.

"And I'm sorry if it upsets you that I'm a guy. I notice pretty women. It's hard wired in my brain."
He threw up his hands briefly. "Have I ever once objectified you, Scully?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask before or after the times he ditched her to keep her safe. She
wisely held her statement. "No," she managed weakly.

"Have I shown nothing but respect for your intellect and your abilities as a doctor and a scientist?"

"Yes," she admitted grudgingly, though frankly he'd been a tad of an asshole on that score this
case.

"And is it really so important to you that I drive so much?"

Okay, perhaps that was a silly argument.

"For the record, Scully, you are the best partner I've ever had." His exasperated words softened
slightly into ruefully confusion. "You are the first person I've worked with who hasn't used me,
hated me, laughed at me, or fucked me, literally or figuratively. You don't agree with my ideas
often, or my methods, but you always respected the journey, even if you thought it stupid. I know
more than anyone what you've given up to work with me."

He paused, anger draining to guilty sadness. "And I would do anything to give you back Melissa or
those missing weeks of your life. But I'm not going to stand here and be accused of belittling you
or objectifying you or any other woman. You are a partner, you are an equal, and you are my
friend, and if I haven't said that enough to you in the past, well then I'm sorry."

God, she sighed as she stared back at him. She had been a total bitch for the last few weeks. For no
real reason, she realized. Yes, she was frustrated, the discussion she had with her family at
Christmas had brought a lot of thoughts to mind about herself and her career. And yes, she was
resentful that every time the sky fell around Mulder, which was often, she was the one there to pick
it back up and piece it back together. Perhaps her jealousy over Bambi and Detective White was a
tad overblown...just a tad. After all, Mulder was her partner and friend. It wasn't as if she cared
who he dated, really. A private, small attraction and a close, personal work relationship did not
mean she owned him.

"Now, if you don't mind, I will return to my report, and you can return to not napping, and we'll
pretend not to speak to each other till we get to work tomorrow." He reached for his laptop,
moodily slipping on his reading glasses as he did so. Scully watched him for long, thoughtful
moments, chewing her lip nervously, knowing she had been the one, for once, to mess this up, to
damage their partnership with her behavior. Damn it.

"Do you need any help with it?" She offered meekly, not sure what to say to make her behavior
better.
"Maybe," Mulder replied quietly, glancing sideways at her. "What do you think caused the events in Comity, really?"

"Really?" Scully sighed, knowing that "I don't know" was about as improper of an answer as she could give. "Just say Satan, Mulder, it's as good of an explanation as any. Hell, it sounds more believable at this point."

"Satan?" He snorted, laughing lightly at her. "This out of you?"

"Satan and I'm sticking to it." She closed her eyes, settling back into her chair. "Wake me up before we land."

Chapter End Notes

Mulder does objectify women a lot and it rather bothers me how much he does, but, you know, baby steps.
Area of Expertise

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is called in on a case that Scully is not.

The weeks had managed to cool much of Scully's pissiness but had done little to repair the tenuous threads of their slightly worn partnership. January made way to early February and the weather in DC was still crap, but the cold wasn't simply seeping into the apartments and homes of the nation's capital. Scully thought that if she breathed she could see her breath hanging over her table as she glanced at the empty desk across from her. Skinner had called for Mulder and not her.

Mulder's paranoia was infectious, she decided, as she tried to busy herself with reports she had finished long ago, looking for typos she never had. It wasn't unusual for Mulder to see their supervisor by himself, in fact after the last case in Comity she wasn't surprised he had been called up. But there was a worried, fractious voice in the back of her mind that wondered if at some point she would cross a line with Mulder, if he would finally ask for her to be transferred or perhaps reprimanded, something to punish her for the behavior she had displayed. Not that Mulder had ever done anything of the kind ever in their partnership, but she had given him plenty of reasons over the years; questioned his methods openly, reported on him to their superiors, argued against his work…

And then there was the Bambi/Detective White thing. Yeah, not exactly her most shining hour.

Despite Mulder's reassurances of his happiness with her working with him, there were times, such as this, when even she had to wonder why it was she stayed on and why he allowed it. Personal feelings aside, when she faced the truth about what her original assignment had been with Mulder, she had failed miserably. Yes, once in a while she did provide scientific erudition to Mulder's stranger theories, but on the whole she did little to change the nature of Mulder's work. If anything she seemed to encourage it, to further it, and admittedly she was rather proud of that. One day, she thought dourly as she organized her pens and pencils by color, Mulder would catch on that her work was more of a hindrance than a help, a way of holding him back. That was why she was there after all.

And perhaps he wouldn't be as patient with her when the next Bambi Berenbaum came along and she lost her senses for a bit. What in the hell had possessed her?

Mulder's sloping footsteps from the elevator caused her to slap on a smile on her face, tight and ill fitting as he turned the corner into their office. He hardly noticed as he settled, file in hand, behind his desk, with the look of focused concentration that said something was afoot for him. Was it a good sign or a bad sign?

"Skinner have another set down over the Comity case?" Scully fully expected a rant against their boss.

"No, actually, a new case. Well, for me at least." He waved the file up briefly, not seeing the small, fleeting look of dismay that crossed her face.

"For you?" How she kept her voice so even and yet still so curious she couldn't imagine. "What is
"It's a profiling case, a serial killer they've caught already. They think there might be something going on, I don't know all the details yet, but I'm going to go look at the crime scene evidence right now. It's an ugly case, makes Donnie Pfaster look like a Girl Scout cookie salesman and I don't mean that in a good way. I know what that case did to you." Fear flickered in his eyes for a moment before he busied himself with the file.

Perhaps a week ago she would have bitten his head off. Now, she was much more circumspect. "I've handled other serial killer cases before. What's another dead body or two in my day?"

She tried to joke, to make it light, but it hardly cracked a smile on his face. "Mulder, Donnie Pfaster was weeks after my abduction. I wasn't in a good place." At least that was the line she was using on herself.

"But you aren't really worried about me seeing mutilated bodies, are you?" Something clicked suddenly as she saw Mulder's guilty shrug. "What's up?"

"The case is one Bill Patterson ran." He nearly mumbled the words as he turned to his computer.

"The Bill Patterson?" She had heard his name whispered in Quantico in tones of hushed awe. "You are being asked to follow up on of his cases?"

"Yes." Mulder hissed as he typed in his password into the FBI file database.

Something about this didn't smell right. "Patterson is a legend with serial killers. Why would they want someone to check behind him?"

"Because either there's a copycat or Patterson was sloppy," Mulder replied without looking up. "And you can't make be believe it's the latter, but I'm being asked to check it up all the same."

"When you haven't done a profiling case in years?" She didn't like the picture being painted here. "Someone wants to play politics with Patterson and is setting you up as the whipping boy."

"Maybe," Mulder replied evasively. "Either they want to catch Patterson at something or prove a point to Patterson for some reason. And as for me, well, either its their attempt to lure me away from the X-files back to profiling or another effort at having me shoot my own foot off so they can get me out of here completely."

He snorted thoughtfully for a moment. "They actually reminded me that profiling was what I was good at, it was what I was brought on here for, I'm a natural. As if stroking my ego would make the pill go down better."

Hell, she breathed, seeing the pieces sink together into a picture she wasn't pleased with. "Can you refuse it?"

"Not when Skinner gave me the case directly, I can't. Remember we work on the X-files at his pleasure and can be called on to work any other case at any time, as Skinner not so politely pointed out to me earlier today."
Damn. "So what are you going to do?"

"Profile a serial killer," Mulder replied softly, his computer screen flickering through case file information. "You can help if you want, Scully, but this could be nothing more than politics and I don't want you caught in that."

"Haven't you heard, the whole reason I was assigned to you was politics?" She smirked as she pulled up a chair beside his desk. "And besides if you are heading into the darkness of someone's mind, its best to have a friend with you, right?"
Patterson didn't have a clue. That was why Mulder was called on this case.

"Nemhauser?" Scully strolled beside the other agent, thoughtful as they maneuvered down the crowded hospital hallway. "You said you thought Patterson asked for Mulder to be assigned to this case. Why?"

Nemhauser shrugged affably. From what she could tell he was good-natured, unlike many of the types she saw around the Bureau, especially the type that Bill Patterson tended to collect. He didn't strike her as one to pass judgment based on the rumors of "Spooky" Mulder and his space ships. "Like I said, the first copycat murder threw Patterson for a loop. He won't admit to it."

He nodded ahead to the tall, balding figure of his mentor stalking well ahead of them. "Patterson has made his career out of catching bastards like Mostow. Now for this to pop up, I can see why he's worried."

"Worried about Mostow or his career?" Scully couldn't help the edge that laced her voice. Nemhauser was either used to it or missed the cutting completely.

"Patterson lives and dies by his cases, its what has made him a legend." Nemhauser shrugged thin shoulders, shoving his hands deeper into his trench coat. "He was one of the few who built up Behavioral Sciences at Quantico, who really pushed for the psychological study of criminals rather than just lumping them all together as mad psychos. Patterson has always prided himself on his ability to know these whack jobs, to understand them, to become them."

"And it bothers him that he let some detail slide? That he missed something that is allowing these murders to continue?"

"Patterson isn't as young as he thinks he is sometimes." Nemhauser was candid, surprisingly so given the fact he was attached to Patterson's hip. Perhaps that was why Patterson liked him. "That's why I think he's the one who went to Skinner with the request for Mulder. He's too proud to admit that he needs help on this, and if there's anyone who can break it, it's Mulder."

"That's the part I don't get." Scully stopped Nemhauser in the lobby, tugging at his coat sleeve. "You said he swaps stories about Mulder back in the day, but Mulder gets nothing but grief from him."

"Course, because Mulder didn't play Patterson's game." Nervously, Nemhauser glanced towards the sliding glass doors of the hospital lobby, looking for his boss, but found that Patterson had already moved on. "You have to understand what its like working with Patterson. Academy newbs come out wet behind the ears, all wanting to work with him, tripping all over themselves to prove to Patterson they can hack what it takes to be a profiler. Most can't. The rest are so busy politicking and kissing ass they miss the point. A few turn out to be pretty good. But then once in a while there are ones that even Patterson is blown away by. Mulder was one of those. Hell, Mulder is why I
went into profiling. You read his monograph at Quantico, right?"

"On Monty Props? Yeah." Scully had thought Mulder a genius even then, before she had ever heard the name "Spooky" used as a pejorative.

"Patterson was beside himself to get Mulder under his wing. But as you can tell from Patterson, he'll be damned if he sugar coats anything for anyone. Jesus, people were so excited about Mulder in the Academy you would of thought he was the second coming of Elliot Ness." Nemhauser sounded only slightly envious. "So Patterson made his only and greatest profiling mistake."

Scully couldn't help the tug of a smile that pulled at her lips. "He thought he could control Fox Mulder."

"Yeah. Boy, did he not know what he was getting into." Nemhauser laughed. "I wasn't there then. I heard stories. Patterson expected Mulder to worship him like everyone else did. Mulder promptly told him to fuck off. They disagreed on everything: profiling methods, suspects, you name it, and Mulder went and worked with Reggie Purdue directly, rather than Patterson. That pissed him off, too, Mulder preferring to work under a subordinate rather than Patterson. So then he tried to get Mulder's partner, Jerry, to turn against him?"

"He's the reason Jerry Lamada transferred out?" Scully's eyes widened as she recalled Mulder's first partner, the man who died years before, when she had begun working with Mulder.

"Not all of it, but a huge part of it. Patterson wanted Mulder to concede and give in. Mulder wouldn't do it. So Mulder just did it better than anyone else and on his own terms. It gave him the leeway to do what he wanted without Patterson's influence. He spent five years blowing everyone out of the water. It's why Patterson hated him, and yet admired him. To this day they still talk about Mulder over there, the way he could just see into people's heads. You probably have never really seen him in action, have you?"

"A little." Mulder rarely ever used his profiling skills anymore. She wondered why. "I know that its sometimes scary how his brain works, the connections that he makes on cases at times. I can't even explain how he does it."

"Yeah, that's why they started calling him 'Spooky'. It wasn't because of the aliens, that came later, it was because of how he pieced these cases together and he was always right. I don't know how he saw it, how he understood it. Its like he always knew."

"I know that." She smiled softly, thinking of the many times she'd seen that behavior out of him.

"Don't let Patterson fool you." Nemhauser nodded slowly, glancing towards the door. "Mulder stunned him, stunned everyone. Patterson I think was always impressed with Mulder. But he could never admit it out loud, and he certainly wasn't going to let Mulder know what he thought."

"Patterson must have been confused when Mulder left to start the X-files."

She was surprised Nemhauser didn't flinch or even titter at her mention of their work. "I think Patterson assumed it was just a passing interest. Lots of people had shown a passing interest in those cases, but none stuck with them, they were political suicide, everyone knew that. I think he assumed Mulder would dabble because it was something new and different. Let me tell you, these cases aren't cakewalks, serial killers, and murderers. Most anyone who gets into our division burns out in a few years. Its not unusual for people to go dabble in something else for a while, just to get a break. I don't think he thought Mulder would stick with it though."
"Sounds like Mulder drove Patterson all sorts of crazy." Scully could now see the root of Patterson's deep admiration and antipathy.

"It's a damn shame if you ask me. Mulder's the sort of genius that comes around once in a generation. I think a lot of people were disappointed he left."

"Including you?" She asked pointedly. Nemhauser fully admitted that he had gotten into this work because of Mulder.

"I had hoped to work with him, to learn from him. But he left right before I got out of Quantico. So, like so many others before, I tied myself to Patterson. What else could I do?" He didn't sound particularly sorry, but he did sound regretful. "I don't know, I look at the work Mulder did, the cases he broke, the profiles he wrote, and it makes me wonder why it is he gave that up to chase after little, green men."

"Gray men," Scully muttered before she could stop herself, blushing slightly as she realized what she had done. "Perhaps for Mulder the FBI was never about climbing up some corporate ladder or making a name for himself as a profiler. Mulder has always wanted the truth, for the victims, for the perpetrators, for himself. That's what drives him, that search."

Had Nemhauser ever considered that? Perhaps not, her words seemed to take him by surprise as he blinked down at her. "I heard he had lost a sister as a kid. I assumed that all this alien business had to do with that."

"If you really want to know, you can always ask him yourself. I know Mulder has a reputation as an ass, justifiably so. But I find that if you want the truth to any question, then it doesn't hurt to speak to the source itself. Certainly its better than FBI scuttlebutt."

She should know, she'd heard enough about herself over her time working with Mulder.

Nemhauser at least seemed to take her words to heart. "Maybe I will." He glanced once again at the door. "Patterson will be wondering what I'm up to. Let me know if Mulder figures out anything. If anything else just to ease the old man's mind."

"Sure," she nodded, watching the lanky man walk away. Nemhauser seemed like a rare breed in the FBI, a man with integrity despite the politics. It was a pity he was tied to Bill Patterson. He and Mulder might have actually gotten along.
What He Needs

Chapter Summary

In which Scully worries about how far Mulder will go on a case.

*Let Mulder do what he needs on this case...don't get in his way...*

Scully stared at the pieces of the utility knife in her gloved hands, the blood covered blade shiny in the dim light of her car. She prayed this wasn't what she thought it was, the knife that committed the crimes, the knife that had slashed the faces of those men. If it was, how did it get out here? And whose blood was covering it now? Mulder's? Or perhaps the poor victim who lay in the hospital, his face ruined? Scully's felt her tongue stick thickly to the roof of her mouth as she considered this. If it was the victim in the hospital, how did it get there, under the police vehicle? What was Mulder getting himself into?

Heart in her throat, Scully stared at one of Mulder's latest pieces of art, a dark, brooding, grotesque figure hunching over a yawning maw of black graphite, scribbled across the rough, white drawing paper. It was something out of a nightmare, out of madness, like nothing she had seen out of her partner in the three years she had worked with him. She had seen darkness in Mulder, had seen him dancing around its edges. When she first returned from her abduction there were still traces of the horrible place Melissa had sworn he'd gone to. And then again when the woman who had claimed to be Samantha had appeared back in his life. But at no time had she truly feared that darkness that seemed to always trail after Mulder, worried that it would truly consume him. Now she wasn't so sure.

Her fingers itched to reach for her phone, to dial Mulder's number and reassure herself that this was not the case, that he was fine. But she stopped herself. She had been a shrew of late and she cursed herself for it. What the hell did Bambi Berenbaum and Detective White have to do with anything? She had spent so much time yelling at him over the last weeks that her true concern and fear for his safety was not being overlooked, brushed aside as Mulder did...what? His cell phone had been off for days, he nearly had his face cut off that night by some attacker, and now the potential murder weapon lay outside, out of the evidence room and Mulder would have been in the prime position to snag it.

"Jesus, Mulder, what are you getting into?" Scully rubbed absently above the bridge of her nose. She sighed as she regarded the pieces. She could be wrong, her hunch could be off, it could be a different knife, a different blade used by the copycat murder. Mulder could have gotten off lucky with just a scratch. Both Melissa and Mulder had chided her for not following her hunches. Now that she did she was too afraid to know where it might lead her. The gaping abyss lay there, the call of darkness, with Mulder dancing as always just along its edge. She didn't know if she would be fast enough to snatch him away. Perhaps this time she wouldn't be, perhaps this time she would fail at it. Perhaps this time he would fall in, and all she could do would be to watch.

Her phone's harsh ring scared her so badly she yelped, tossing down the horrible figure on her coffee table as she reached for it. "Hello?"

"I didn't wake you?" Mulder's voice was rough and ragged, torn with exhaustion. When was the last time he had slept?
"No, I wasn't sleeping." She guiltily put the pieces of the knife to one side, as if afraid he could somehow divine she had it from over the phone. With Mulder, one never could tell. "How are you feeling? How is your face?" The slice across his cheekbone hadn't been deep, but it could have been much worse.

"Fine." His answer was simple and direct, no forced levity that usually distracted Scully from fretting over his various and sundry wounds. "I went and saw Mostow."

"Why?" Alarm rang in her voice. What reason did Mulder of all people have in seeing that man?

"I had to know why. I had to know why I only walked away with a scratch when everyone else died."

"Mulder, you were just lucky, that's all," she began, trying to will herself to believe that story.

"Was I? Or is there something about me it didn't want?" He was sounding delirious now, his words muddling into a pool of confusion.

"Mulder, are you at home?"

"No," he replied shortly.

"Where are you at? Let me come check out that wound of yours." It was as good an excuse as any to make sure he was all right.

"It's fine, Scully, it's just a flesh wound. It didn't want me." Mulder's reply was vague and drained, sucked away into the abyss. "I got to go."

"Mulder, wait," she called, but received her dial tone in response. She swore loudly, slamming the receiver hard against the table, ignoring the protesting crack and groan of the plastic. Damn it.

"What if I can't get you back from this, Mulder," she whispered, staring at the horrible, grinning face in black and white. "What if this time I can't save you?"
Sitting in front of an OPR board always reminded Scully horribly of sitting in the office of the sister in charge of her Catholic school as a girl. They all wore the same stern, hard faces, schooled to blankness, glasses glossing over whatever true thoughts or intentions they had in their eyes. Throw on a habit and a crucifix and she doubted she could tell the difference, what with the heavy air of righteous disapproval hanging around them like a shroud. Beside her at the table Mulder squirmed slightly.

"Agent Mulder, you were called onto this case by Assistant Director Skinner, is that correct?" The person speaking, someone named Taylor, pinned Mulder down where he shifted, his eyes piercing through her partner, causing him to still. Mulder cleared his throat and nodded before speaking up, sounding far more confident than he looked at the moment.

"That's right. Part of the agreement allowing me to work on the X-files under Assistant Director Skinner is that Agent Scully and I make ourselves available for other cases that require our expertise and skill."

"And you worked previously under Agent Patterson's unit, is that correct?"

"Yes." Mulder nodded, meeting Taylor's thin-lipped stare. "I was assigned to Bill Patterson's unit and worked directly under Reggie Purdue."

"But not under Agent Patterson?"

Scully's throat tightened as she glanced sideways at her partner. They were angling here, OPR always was, trying to close ranks to protect their own, and sadly Bill Patterson had more sway with OPR than Mulder did. It didn't discount one essential fact and that was that Bill Patterson was a murder and clearly not the man they all believed him to be. That wasn't going to stop OPR from trying to cover their ass as best as they could.

"No," Mulder responded evenly.

"Strange, Agent Mulder, given that so many are eager to work with Agent Patterson." It was so obvious what was going on here, even Scully had to glare at Skinner in disbelief. His face was schooled to careful neutrality, but the flicker of eyes he shot her way told her even he saw a railroad job coming a mile away.

"Why would my previous work have any bearing on this current case, Agent Taylor?" Mulder glanced from the OPR representative to the other assistant directors, coolly cocky for a moment, but Scully could sense the tension in him. "Bill Patterson is being called up on charges of murder. Is there a reason I'm being interrogated like I lied?"

Typical Mulder defense tactic number one: righteous indignation. He was playing a dangerous game. OPR could smack him hard for it. Taylor shrugged mildly, however, and returned to the
files stacked neatly in front of him. "Agent Mulder, were you aware that Agent Patterson requested you personally for this case?" The man pulled out a copy of the 302 forms Scully had seen. "Why would he request you? You haven't been in his division for years."

There was an undercurrent of a sneer under the agents voice as he hinted at Mulder's willingness to work in a less than respectable area of the FBI. Scully felt the color rise in her cheeks slightly, but it was Mulder who voiced her irritation, laced in his words. "I suppose that Agent Patterson felt that I needed someone outside of the case and his sphere of influence to solve this murder."

"Interesting, since you claim he's the one who did it." Taylor looked up, beady eyes over thick lenses. "Unless, you are suggesting that he asked for you hoping you wouldn't solve the case, because you were so far removed from it."

"I actually think that he asked for me because he knew I would solve the case," Mulder responded back, confident in the face of Taylor's superciliousness. "I think that Bill Patterson knew that he was involved, but couldn't trust himself to stop it. He reached out to me because he believed I was perhaps the only one who could."

The murmurs erupted at once, the whispers and shuffles, as Taylor's thin lips almost curled up into a smirk. "Really, Agent Mulder, are you suggesting that Agent Patterson had no control over these murders?"

Scully bit the inside of her lip, her eyes sliding to Mulder's. But he didn't meet her worry, instead focusing totally on Taylor. "John Mostow called it an entity, a demon that had possessed him. Patterson's own statement said the same thing, that it wasn't him, that it was something else. Call it a demon, call it an insane impulse born within the brains of these two men, whatever it was, it wasn't something either of them felt they could control. If you look in the average description of a schizophrenic, they would tell you the same thing."

"But Bill Patterson isn't a schizophrenic," Taylor challenged.

"No, but do you think that Bill Patterson under sane and rational circumstances would begin murdering people?" Mulder's voice rang softly in the room as his eyes glittered across the faces of the OPR board. "You all know Bill Patterson. He is the man who created the profiling unit for God's sake. Thirty years he worked with the FBI, there were people who begged to be put on his detail. Is that the sort of man who would randomly take out a knife and start hacking men's faces off? Perhaps it wasn't a demon like Mostow said, God knows, I worked enough of those cases to know what they did to your head. After thirty years, he could have broken. But I know this, Bill Patterson committed those crimes and he knew he committed those crimes, and whatever sane, rational part of his mind remained wanted them found. That's why he called me in on this. That's why he asked AD Skinner for me."

The silence in the room after Mulder's speech was deafening. No one moved or twitched, not even Taylor, who paused in mid-note taking to stare at the pair of briefly. "You maintain, then, that Agent Patterson is indeed the perpetrator of the crimes?"

"Of the copycat murders, yes."

"And it is in your judgment, then, Agent Mulder, that these crimes were caused by some sort of mental breakdown on the part of Agent Patterson?"

Mulder stiffened. Scully could feel the indecision. She knew he felt it was an entity, a demon that had taken over Bill Patterson. For once Mulder chose politics over conviction, though. "You can say that, yes."
"Right." Taylor jotted notes on the paperwork in front of him, quick, jerking movements of his hand. "And this is, of course, your studied profile on the situation, correct, Agent Mulder?"

The knuckles on his hand tightened, but Mulder nodded calmly.

"Thank you for your report, Agents. I'm sure if we have any further questions, we will speak again."

"Thank you." They both replied to the implied dismissal, rising so quickly that Scully thought they couldn't scuttle out of the presence of OPR fast enough. Scully shot Skinner a parting, furtive glance. He watched them both, impassively, but gave away no thoughts and no indication of opinions one-way or the other. As always, their careful, practical, safe boss, never rocking the boat, never making waves. Would he stand up for Mulder in there or would he allow her partner to take the heat so that the FBI could cover their ass when the truth came out one of their most respected own had list his mind?

"I don't know, Scully, that went rather well, don't you think?" Mulder's dry monotone breathed sarcasm as they closed the door of the conference room. "Though I have to admit their methods of attack are getting rather predictable. Start out with the charge that I'm throwing this against Bill Patterson because of some imagined feud between the two of us, follow it up with questioning my findings on the case, and try to entrap me into saying something stupid so they can have a neat out should it come out that Bill Patterson wasn't a man who had fallen over the edge. I had expected something more out of them, really."

"Why in the world don't they believe your assessment?" Her eyes flew from the closed room door to Mulder, struggling with the idea they would rather believe politics than one of their own could be a murderer. "You didn't come into this lightly, and your profiling is sound."

"It has nothing to do with my profiling, Scully, it's because I'm Spooky Mulder and Patterson is not." Mulder lifted his shoulders casually, but there was anger and hurt there, and she knew it. "The minute I left Patterson to go to the X-files I ceased being the golden boy of the FBI and was looked at as strange, a threat, different. You know that. That's why they assigned you to work with me. Neutralize Mulder, make sure he doesn't sound too crazy, too weird, don't let him make too many bullshit claims."

He threw himself against the far wall, his back making a thudding noise as he leaned against it. "Patterson was a hero for the FBI, a paragon. People got into the FBI because they wanted to work with him, become him. There are detectives across fifty states that all worked with Patterson at some point, have learned from him, uses his methods. I was the odd man out and the fact that I brought him down, they don't like that."

"You used Patterson's methods to get into his head though." The artwork that lined Mulder's walls still frightened her.

"That's because I had to with Patterson. It's the way he thinks." Mulder pushed himself off, pacing down the hall as she followed. "I don't get into their heads, Scully, I get into the way they think. There is a difference. I don't have to become them to understand what these people are, I just understand how it is their minds work. But Patterson, he became them because that is how his mind worked. And it dragged me along with it, but not totally. I could never quite become like him. Do you understand?"

"Not really," she admitted slowly. She doubted she would ever totally understand how it was Mulder did what he did. It was sadly something her scientific mind didn't quite grasp. She understood it intellectually, but there was a deeper level to it that seemed to belong only to Mulder.
"I was scared there for a while that you had been totally dragged down, that you had become like him, that you had fallen into madness."

He paused, stopping in the middle of the hallway to turn to look at her. Suddenly she felt foolish saying that, her cheeks flushing as she studied his well-made shoes on the ground. "I know you have been doing this for years, Mulder. I know you are one of the best there ever was, but I saw what was happening to you. I saw the pictures, the look in your eyes, I had never seen that out of you before. I've seen you go dark places, I've seen you tread that line that terrifies me, but not like this, and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to pull you out of this one."

That he would fall over the edge into the abyss, and end up where Bill Patterson was.

They stood there, without a word, Scully not sure what else to say to him. She as much admitted she was afraid of him going crazy, that she worried that he was being forced into insanity out of some political game on the part of Patterson. What did that say about her as a partner? She should be the one trusting Mulder implicitly, believing he would be all right and come out of this in one piece. Instead she had leapt to conclusions based on evidence presented to her, only to find out in the end that she was suspecting the wrong man. After all these years, after all they had been through together as partners, she acted as if she couldn't even trust him?

Slowly, Mulder raised his hand under her chin and tilted it up, just enough to force her to look up at him. Scully didn't want to see the hurt her words inflicted on him. Instead she found him smiling, gratefully.

"Did I ever tell you, Scully, if it wasn't for you I would have probably lost it long ago." He lowered his hand, the intimate gesture gone. "You're the reason I can wander along that edge, because in the end I know I always have my partner back there who is more than willing and able to reel me back if I need it. I think that was what Nemhauser was trying to do before he discovered the truth on Patterson. But he was too afraid to call it like he saw it. You…you are never afraid to tell me the truth, even when you think I don't want to hear it. And for that, I can't thank you enough. Someone needs to pull my head out of my ass, and I'm glad in the end that its you."

Somewhere down the hallway behind her, a door opened, feet shuffled, and Scully tensed, turned to see their boss leaving the conference room, an nondescript look on his face. She glanced up at Mulder who watched with equal dispassion, though she could tell by the taught line of his jaw that he was preparing for some sort of reprimand at least. FBI politics just always seemed to end up that way for him.

"There's not much OPR can do to you, Mulder. Patterson was caught dead to rights." Skinner's frown deepened as he ran a hand briefly over his balding head. "Truth is, they have stacks of complaints and warnings from the last five years, worries about Patterson's conduct and that perhaps the strain of it all was getting to him. In the end, they'll likely crucify Patterson's reputation on that as they let the legal system take its course."

"It's a damn shame," Mulder murmured softly over her shoulder. "Patterson was a good man, a good agent."

"But like you said, Mulder, something cracked." Skinner's dark eyebrows knitted briefly. "I was scared as hell for a while there it was you."

Normally Mulder would have responded to their boss with a wisecrack, a witty retort, but he remained wisely silent.

"Thank you for your help on this," Skinner replied with uncharacteristic appreciation. "You did
good work, both of you."

It was the most praise she had heard out of the man ever, Scully realized, as he turned smartly from
them and back towards meeting room. She watched him quietly for a long moment, wondering
what this farce of a meeting was called at all, if they had the information they needed to cover what
they wanted.

"It's to remind me that as they did to Bill Patterson with all of his legend, they can also do it to me
when I fall, too." Mulder replied, answering the question she didn't even vocalize. "Let's get down
to the office."
For What We Have Lost

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder actually remembers Scully's birthday.

The plainly wrapped box in the middle of her table so startled her; she paused in the doorway of the office, simply staring at it.

"Happy birthday, Scully!" Mulder passed her a cup of Jake's coffee with a shy grin. "I figured if you got me the best coffee on the planet for my birthday, it was only fair I return the favor." There was a boyish duck to his head as he turned back to his desk, a nervous flicker of his eyes as he glanced at her table.

"You got me a present?" She was so shocked, so flustered by it, she didn't know what to say.

"Well I'd open it before you get too excited," Mulder replied dryly, concern creasing in between his green eyes. "You might not like it."

"I don't know, I'm just stunned you remembered." She set her things down, reaching for the square box with a simple ribbon on the top.

"I think your pointed reminder a few weeks ago put it on my mental calendar." Mulder chuckled, settling in his chair as he watched her fingers make quick work of the blue paper. She paused at the black, cardboard box, raising a questioning eyebrow?

"A coffee mug?" It was about the right size for one.

"With as much as you drink, you'd think I'd get something that small? I need to hook you up with an IV drip." Mulder shook his head and laughed. "Open it."

"Okay!" She grinned broadly at him, flipping open the box and reaching inside. Her fingers closed around something round and leathery, and large enough to palm in small hand. Frowning in confusion she pulled it out to reveal…

"A baseball?" She pulled out a yellowing, tattered ball, its red stitching faded to a near pink. Not precisely what she would have expected for a birthday present, she realized with a hint of dismay. He was sitting at his desk, watching expectantly, as she studied the browning leather briefly. "Mulder, it's…a unique present."

Could she say something weaker than that?

Mulder hardly looked perturbed. "That it is." There was something he was getting at, a particular hesitation and tightness in his eyes, and it occurred to her that there had to be more about this baseball than simply an old piece of Mulder's childhood wrapped in a box. He wouldn't have presented her something this mundane without reason. Her fingers flipped it over carefully as she tried to make light of an awkward situation. "You know, Mulder, I don't know the first thing about baseball."

"You don't need to understand baseball to appreciate this," he replied, as her eyes fell on the
childish, black script on the back of the ball, so smudged and faded now it was nearly illegible. She squinted as she willed her eyes to make it out.

"F, happy birthday, S," she read carefully, her eyes rushing up to meet Mulder's. "This is from your sister?"

"She got it for my twelfth birthday, just weeks before she disappeared." Mulder stared at the ball in her hand wistfully. "She saved her pennies all summer to buy it. Was damn sneaky about it, too. I wondered why she was always whining for me to buy her ice cream. I was going out for little league the next year, right field. She wanted me to have a lucky ball."

His voice softened slightly, the echo of an ancient hurt flickering across his heavy-lidded eyes. "Sam wasn't so bad herself. Played mean short stop in sandbox ball."

"Fox," Scully breathed, a rare use of his first name. "I can't accept this. Its so sweet, but your sister..."

"Samantha would understand." Mulder shrugged, a sad smile pulling at his full lips. "I carried that ball around high school, but it's been in a box since I went away to Oxford. I haven't exactly played a lot of baseball since then."

Scully's small fingers wrapped around the stitching, pressing it into the pad of her thumb. "Mulder, how many things do you have left from your sister?"

"How many things do you have left from yours?"

It wasn't where she expected him to go, not the thought she had even considered. "Missy?"

"Scully, I know this is the first birthday you've had in your life without her here." Mulder nodded to the ball in her hands. "And I know you think you are okay with that. I know you'll probably meet your mother for dinner tonight, perhaps discuss work, how you haven't been getting out as much, how you've shut yourself off from your friends."

Mulder's words were ringing close so familiar, it hurt, and she found herself lashing out for no other reason than he was touching a sore spot. "What, are you profiling me now, Mulder?"

"No." He shook his dark head, glancing down to pick at his thumbnail absently. "No, I'm not Scully. I've been there and I know what it feels like to mark another birthday, another holiday, and know that someone you love isn't there." He shrugged, looking up again at the ball. "I don't think I tell you enough how much I appreciate you and what you do here. How much I appreciate what you've given up for you and what you do here."

He cleared his throat pointedly. "And perhaps neither one of us has been on our best behavior."

Perhaps. Scully felt a self-deprecating smile tug at her mouth. "Yes, I don't think we have."

"Detective White? Really?" Mulder teased, a grin lightening the somber mood. "Don't think for a moment I don't appreciate you or that I ever believe you to be anything less than my friend. We may not have been put together under the most ideal of circumstances, and I can't say I've ever brought more for you than shit since you've come here, but I do understand every bit of what you give and what you've lost."

She hadn't come there that morning, her birthday, expecting this. She had of course thought of Melissa that day, missed the silly gifts and early morning phone call she usually received from her elder sister. It hurt. Jesus it hurt to think of her gone, her murder unsolved, her death un-avenged,
the answers to Scully's questions still out there, just out of her fingertips. She rolled the ball lightly in her fingers, till her palm pressed against the faded, worn signature on the leather, the proof of a sister's love for her older brother many years after the little girl had vanished. For all that they had both lost, they still had these things to hold on to and keep them going.

"Thank you, Mulder," she whispered, her eyes misting lightly. "It means a lot."

"I know." He nodded, a wealth of meaning in those two words. "Now if I can teach you how to throw one of those things, perhaps how to hit one, that would be a birthday present. It's criminal you don't get the game of baseball, Scully."

It was Mulder's signal he was ending the conversation and she took it, rounding her table to sit down and sip the coffee he had brought for her that morning. "What's on the docket for today?"

"Frank Burst is coming down to meet with us, has a suspected serial killer on his hands, says he can 'push' his way into people's minds. I guess Burst heard of the Patterson business and decided to look us up." Mulder coolly glided over the recent case of Bill Patterson, though Scully knew it was still haunting him. She doubted that the darkness that he glimpsed in that case would leave him anytime soon.

"Pushes his thoughts into people's minds. That's different." Scully carefully set the baseball down by her computer, glancing at it as she turned her machine on. "Hopefully, this case will be less harrowing than the last one."
Scully's knuckles rapped on thick glass, barking slightly as Mulder's startled up at her. "I brought dinner?" She held up the plastic bag with the Styrofoam container inside, filled with the leftovers of the heavy, Italian meal that was currently sitting in her stomach. "Think that will let me in?"

Torn between surprise and hunger, Mulder nodded as he jerked his head to the passenger side door, eyebrows raised expectantly at the food in hand. "You didn't have to come out here, Scully, it's your birthday!"

"Wasn't that big a deal, Mom dropped me off. She says hello and don't do stake outs by yourself anymore." Scully was teasing, unwilling to admit she had fretted all evening, knowing he was out here in Falls Church alone, waiting for a phone call to the lonely booth on the expectation that Robert Modell would be there to answer it. "You know FBI policy regarding stake outs, Mulder."

"Do you want me to quote you page and paragraph again?" Mulder opened container filled with leftover spaghetti primavera. "Who puts veggies in their pasta?"

"Veggies are good for you, you'll like them," she replied absently, as she would a child. "Any sign of Modell?"

"Nope." Mulder glanced at his watch. "And at 11 o'clock at night, I'm wondering if he'll show."

"Who knows?" She yawned slightly, the heavy carbohydrates from the meal weighing her down as she snuggled into the seat. The car was war on this February night, she was full of wine and food, and it was comfortable in here. It smelled of coffee, her leftover dinner which Mulder was currently scarfing, and the scent of Mulder. She hated to admit she recognized even that, but it was a comfort oddly enough, like her potpourri at home, or the scent of her mother's baking when she went over for dinner. It signaled that all was well and she could relax.

"This is good. Where did you go?" Had Mulder really eaten down half of the box already? It was a giant box of leftovers.

"This place Mom knows of in Georgetown. Authentic Italian and best espresso in the city." She yawned again. "Not that it's doing me much good."

"I think I need a few shots of that myself," he chuckled, chewing thoughtfully. "I've been here for hours already, caught myself nodding off twice."

"Perhaps Modell got wise on us and won't show." She tried not to sound too hopeful. She'd rather be at home, in bed, sleeping in on a Saturday morning.
"Maybe," Mulder responded, scanning the area. "Or he could just be fucking with us because he can. It's hard to say."

Mulder didn't have to say that he was already prying inside this man's head. Scully knew he did it by habit. Still, the ghost of Patterson lingered in the tension of his voice, the frown forming around his eyes, the worrying of his bottom lip as he glanced around the empty parking lot. She wondered if he would be gun shy for a while yet, probing into the minds of others, and if it was such a smart thing for him to take on this Modell case so soon after Bill Patterson's fall from grace. Mulder was only human after all. He had frailties and weaknesses, just like everyone else.

"So do you believe that Modell can 'push' his way into people's thoughts, for real?" If she didn't strike up a conversation she would be asleep and she knew it. She should have gone home, but couldn't have left Mulder here, alone, in all good conscience.

"Well, there are precedents for the idea," Mulder murmured in his soft, low monotone as he chewed thoughtfully. "The CIA for years has toyed with the idea of hypnotic suggestion, of someone using the pitch of their voice and the tone they speak in to actually lay suggestions in people's minds, to effect a mode of behavior."

She chuckled. "Sounds like something from Dune. You know the book, with the Bene Gesserits and their ability."

Mulder's eyebrows nearly flew off his face in sheer surprise. "Did I just here you say you've read the most quintessential science fiction novel of all time?"

"Bill read it when he was a teenager and I picked it up." She shrugged, but was secretly delighted she had just raised a rank or two in Mulder's geek esteem. "I thought it was fascinating at the time."

"And here I thought you only read novels about prim and proper people in Regency England, all about manners and courting."

"Shows you what you know about me, Mulder. I read a wide range of things, including books on the occult of late, thanks to you. Brushing up on my Fox Mulder lingo."

"I have a lingo?" Mulder sounded delighted.

"Anyway, so CIA hypnotic suggestion, you think Modell is just tapping into the collective unconscious of everyone by speaking in a soothing tone?"

"It is an idea," Mulder admitted. "It's not that far out there when you think about it. After all, handlers use that same principle with animal training. Parents use the same idea with their children."

"You realize you just equated animal training and parenthood in the same sentence."

"Is there much difference?" Mulder smiled easily at Scully's snort of laughter. "We humans are attuned to different pitches and sounds meaning something, allowing us to understand subtext and undercurrents in conversation below the surface level of meaning. It's a survival mechanism. Perhaps Modell, in all of his fascination with being a 'ronin', a masterless samurai, has just tapped into something we do everyday, but didn't realize it. And he's exploiting that to play mind games with everyone and engage in a killing spree that we literally have no way of proving."

"You sound scarily rational on this case. Did they put something in that pasta?"

"I don't know, I think it's all gone." He tossed the now empty container into the back seat, wiping
his mouth with one of the paper napkins she had brought.

"Why would a man decide to just mess with the minds of people like that for no good reason? What in the world does Modell get out of it? Why?"

"My guess is he's a guy who's been frustrated in life somehow. I'd have to get more information, but I bet anything he leads a boring, normal life, filled with boring, normal things, and longs to be something greater. Perhaps he was frustrated in love, or in a career choice, and has fashioned himself a fantasy where he is the lone-wolf samurai warrior, a man who needs no master or anyone to make himself great. He creates a legend for himself by reaching out to the FBI and allows the word of mouth of his deeds to carry his greatness forward."

"Now who's been watching one too many Kurosawa films," Scully teased, making light of his earlier Yojimbo reference. "He's hardly running around DC with a katana strapped to his back."

"He doesn't have to. All he has to do is suggest to someone they throw themselves off a commuter platform in front of a moving train. Modell doesn't see himself as needing ordinary weapons, just as he doesn't see himself as needing ordinary morality. He sees himself as above such things, beyond them."

Don't they all, Scully thought drowsily, her head leaning back muzzily against the back of Mulder's car seat. She was beginning to think Mulder had a point. She shouldn't have come out, not after her birthday meal. She should have simply gone home, gotten to bed, and fussed at Mulder in the morning for doing this alone. She felt her eyelids drift closed, much against her will, and her head tilt, ever so slightly, causing them to flutter open once again.

"Hey!" Mulder's voice was gentle as his fingers wrapped around her forearm. Her eyes snapped open to his concern, as she tried, feebly, to look as if she were awake.

"I'm fine," she muttered in the bleary sort of way everyone had when they wanted to look away but they weren't. "I was just…resting!"

"Yeah, most people would call that sleeping." He chuckled as he pulled, gently, on her arm, causing her to topple closer to him. "Tell you what, its your birthday, you're tired and I'm as good of a pillow as any."

Under any other normal sense of propriety she might argue, but her head was heavy, and she admittedly was very tired.

"Okay" she yawned slightly, leaning her head heavily against Mulder's shoulder. "You aren't sleepy?"

"Nope," Mulder replied, shifting in his seat slightly to allow her to rest comfortably against him. "I'll wake you if he shows."

"Okay," she sighed, resting her cheek against the rough fabric of his overcoat, too tired to be bothered by how this looked or how comforting it felt to be in the sort of close proximity she might have frowned on if she'd been more awake. This was Mulder; she thought sleepily. She could trust him.

"Thanks, Mulder," she sighed drowsily, feeling herself fall into oblivion.

"Anytime, Scully. Get some sleep."
Seriously, this dates this episode, a phone booth in the wild in America. I saw one at a Disneyland parking lot a couple of months ago and was shocked they even existed anymore.
"Modell is likely at the out patient treatment clinic here." The SWAT Lieutenant pointed towards the area on the map with one dark, blunt finger, glancing up at Mulder. "I can have snipers positioned around the front and back, but we don't know what Modell's location within the building or how long he will be there."

"If Modell is there for treatment, it's likely none of the staff know he's up to anything." Scully's brow furrowed as she studied the map, eyes flickering over to Mulder's. As the next most senior agent on the case and the one that Frank Burst had come to regarding Robert Modell, Mulder had taken over as lead agent. He regarded her for long moments. He was thinking exactly the same thing she was. Modell could very well set up a situation in a charged environment such as a clinic to force the FBI's hand. Of course he knew they were out there, he knew and was expecting them.

"Get your men in position," Mulder ordered, waving at the map, standing up full in the SWAT teams recon vehicle. "Get back to me when your teams are in."

"Right." The lieutenant didn't even blink at Mulder's demand, merely moving to fulfill Mulder's request, moving silently past Scully's petite form as she moved out of the large police officers way. So now they wait, she sighed, watching as Mulder stared at the floor plans, worrying his bottom lip in thought. It was like some hyper-realistic game of chess, two equally matched and skilled combatants, meeting on the field of battle, like a classic, Japanese film. This wasn't a game though, this was real life. These were real people's lives. This was her partner's life. That thought had struck her too. She had stood in the room as Frank Burst had expired with nothing more than a mere suggestion in his head. His own body had turned against him, his heart stopping at nothing more than the words of a man over the phone, a man who had laughed as he did it, and then he turned right around and challenged Mulder to meet him, had dared him to do it. Damn it all, what was it about Mulder? Why had Modell taken Mulder's file and not Burst's from Holly's records room?

"He's going to sit in there. He knows we are out here." With the freakish ability only Mulder had, he already knew what Modell's next move was going to be. "He knows and he's just waiting for us to give in, to go in there and come after him."

"How does he know?"

"Because that's what the FBI has already done. Modell may be trying to live out his own fantasy, but he's also highly intelligent and quick on the uptake of human behavior. It's part of how he gets into these people's heads. You saw what he did with my files, Scully. It's a game to him and like any good chess player. He's thinking five steps ahead of everyone else."

"This isn't a game," she snapped angrily, perhaps with more heat than she meant to. "This is real life. Your life. You saw what happened to Burst."

"I saw." Mulder was surprisingly calm given the circumstances. "There's a reason Modell picked my file, Scully. I didn't follow Burst's game plan, I maneuvered around him, Modell knows if
anyone has a chance in hell of stopping him, it's going to be me. Burst was a good agent, no one doubts that, but you heard him, Oxford grad, all that bull shit. Modell's been playing around till he got an FBI agent on this detail he felt was a challenge, one that could live up to his belief in his own intelligence and abilities, what he felt was a worthy opponent."

"That's what Bill Patterson thought just a few weeks ago too, Mulder. I do not doubt your abilities in the least. God knows you scare me sometimes with them. You are frightening with that mind of yours. But damn it, how do you know he isn't playing you because he gets off on it? Face it, you've had that happen more than a time or two."

"Modell doesn't think like that. This isn't about messing with my head. It's about proving to himself that he has the control in this situation, about feeling powerful. You said it yourself, Scully, he's a little man trying to feel great. And how better to make himself feel great than mind fuck the FBI?"

He was right and she knew it. She didn't like this, not one bit, but she couldn't argue against it as she leaned against the bank of equipment, crossing her arms in front of her. "What makes you think he won't get into your head like he did Burst's or any of those other officers and agents?"

"I don't know that he won't," Mulder admitted. "But you got to admit, my head's a pretty scary place to be and it is harder for him to get inside it than it is anyone's."

"Are you willing to risk your life on that?" She murmured, tensing around her words. She knew what he had planned. He would go in there himself if he had to, to get Modell out without harming any more lives than necessary. Mulder would give him what he wanted before anyone came to harm.

"What else do you suggest?"

"I could go in there," she offered, knowing before he violently shook his head that wasn't an option. "Jesus, no Scully."

"It won't be expected, Mulder."

"He doesn't want you. He wants me."

"And you are going to give in to him?"

"Because I can beat him," Mulder insisted stubbornly, his voice rising sharply.

"Mulder, this isn't about winning or losing."

"Don't you think I know that?" He glared at her stormily, waving a hand at the floor plan on the table. "How many lives in there, Scully? One hundred, maybe? Don't think for a moment Modell won't be willing to sacrifice them just to get me out there to him and its better to give him what he wants now, draw him out, then to have him force me to something, don't you agree?"

He could end up dead in all of this, she realized, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do to talk him out of it. Scully nodded slowly, meeting his angry gaze, throwing up her hands in submission. "What can I say? You know him better than I do." He was the profiler after all and she was just the scientist. What the hell did she know?

"I do," Mulder responded, his frustration dissolving in the face of her worry. "But thanks for trying to watch my back, anyway."
Scully shrugged. "I'm your partner. It's what I'm supposed to do."

"More than that, Scully, you're my friend and you have a right to be worried." He crossed the small confines of the surveillance van in a single step, reaching for one of the hands still crossed in front of her. "Thank you for caring."

"Yeah," she whispered, wondering why it was that this time of all times she had to get misty eyed. "Your better work out your plans with SWAT. They won't like this idea."

"Right," Mulder pulled away, becoming all business once again. "I need to find out where Modell is and where in the building. Think you can call into the office and get that for me?"

"Sure," she replied, watching him unhappily as he moved to find the head of the SWAT team.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is forced to play a dangerous game.

"Why do we keep giving this guy exactly what he wants?" The SWAT lieutenant had a point as he took her weapon in hand, clearly unhappy with all of this. He glared down the hallways and glanced back at Scully meaningfully. It was the same, exact words she had used on Mulder not an hour ago. He had every reason to ask. SWAT had lost many of its own and Scully couldn't give him a clear answer.

"Just wait from a signal from me," she replied firmly, strapping on the last tie of her flak vest. The lieutenant nodded in understanding and slipped her weapon in his vest, placing his goggles over his face. Quietly he glanced up and down the hallway and gave her the clear signal. She began to move. Strangely in this situation, at this second, she felt calm, she realized, her heart still in her chest as she moved quickly down the hallway. For once she was simply acting on her FBI training, carefully peeking into the rooms where the patients sat, hooked up to life support in the oncology wing of the hospital. It would be so much easier to gas the wing, knock out both Mulder and Modell, and get them out. But these cancer patients were already in a fragile state, anything else would kill them. Whatever it took to keep them alive for however much longer they had left, that was what was needed - that and whatever it took to get her partner out of here alive.

The last door on the hallway led to a scanning room. Just inside reinforced window she could see Mulder sitting at a table, his jaw working furiously as he stared blankly at the wall ahead of him. Relief mingled with fear for a moment as she called his name softly. "Mulder!"

Her mistake. She opened the door to the small office and saw Robert Modell sitting where she had thought a blank wall had been. On the table between the two of them sat the service revolve that had once belonged to the now-deceased security guard. Neither of them bothered looking up at her as she entered, her steps muffled and soft as they sat there, unflinching, their palms flat against the table, their eyes locked. Mulder didn't even think to look her way. What had Modell done to him?

"Thanks for joining us." Modell's pleasant tone belied the menace in the room. This had been a set up all along, part of the game. He wanted Mulder, yes, but he wanted her too, his partner. Damn it. She had fallen for it.

"We've got a dozen law enforcement officers outside in the hall, another thirty in the parking lot."

"Regular convention!" Modell sounded pleased. This was what he wanted, an audience, to go out with a big bang, to make a statement to as many people as he could.

"Whatever you've got planned, it's not going to work out the way you want it to." She was full of bullshit and he knew it.

"You don't know what I got planned," he replied evenly, his eyes never wavering from Mulder's. Fear clenched in her gut so tight she could hardly breath as she glanced between the weapon on the table and the two men. Slowly, she moved towards the third chair, at the end of the table, near the door, watching her partner the whole time. Mulder's face was blank, expressionless, not even his
eyes gave way what he was thinking. Damn it all, it was as if everything that made Mulder who he was had been blocked off, sucked out of him. Frightened, she sat down, willing Mulder to do anything, to say anything, to break this man's spell.

"Two warriors of equal skill fight to the death," Modell began in a soft, sing-song sort of way. "One is a student of Japanese budo, the way of war." Carefully he picked up the revolver on the table and opened the chamber, looking inside. Scully knew without even asking what he was doing, dread coating her mouth thickly as he spun the chamber and clicked it closed.

"Budo teaches the warrior to leave himself outside the battle," Modell continued. "In other words to disregard his own death." He placed the gun down on the table again. "Because of that, the budo warrior always wins. I am that warrior. I don't fear my death. So I'm going to give you one pull of the trigger against me."

His slender, long fingers pushed the revolver across the table towards Mulder.

Oh Jesus, she breathed, he couldn't be serious. She stared, wide-eyed at Mulder, who picked the gun up blankly, as if he didn't even notice he was doing it.

"One-in-six chance." Modell's eyes glittered, as if he was enjoying this. Perhaps he was.

Silently, almost like an automaton, Mulder reached for the gun, fitting his finger to the trigger, aiming it at Modell.

"Wait," Scully frantically warned, eyeing the hammer of the gun. "Mulder, there's pure oxygen in this room. There's no telling what could happen if you pull that trigger!"

The sound of the trigger snapping cut her off, making her jump as the gun went off with no fire. Modell tensed, waited, and then exhaled, relaxing as a smirk flitted across his face, belied by the fear that flickered in his eyes.

"Piece of cake," Modell bragged happily, eyes narrowing. "Your turn."

Scully wasn't sure she had heard him right.

"Mulder, no," she whispered, feeling tears rising to the surface, angry, hot, terrified tears, ones that glided over the surface of the stupor Mulder was in.

"Mulder, yes," Modell insisted, delighting in the moments as Mulder slowly turned the gun on himself. "Go!"

"Mulder, listen to me!" Scully ignored Modell as she willed herself to get through Mulder's glazed façade. He would listen to her. He trusted her. "We can stop this thing right now, you and I can walk outside of this room…"

As if he couldn't control himself, Mulder placed the gun to his temple, cringing as his finger pulled off the trigger in one movement. The scream that rose unbidden to her lips died when the gunshot was blank. Pissed, she slammed her hands hard against the flat of the table, the sting shaking up her arms as she pushed herself away.

"No! Damn you, you bastard," she roared at the unmoving Modell, reaching a hand out to her partner. "Mulder, hand me the g…"

As if fighting with some unseen presence in his head, Mulder snapped back, glaring angrily at Modell, aiming the gun at him. It was the first sign of life she had seen out of Mulder since
entering the room, the first sign of anything that was Mulder, and she felt a sob escape from her throat though her tears remained brimming just on the edges of her lashes. There was some hope here he might fight it, Mulder was stronger than this, stronger than Modell.

In sick horror she watched as Mulder's arm swung away from Modell in a lazy arc and pointed right at Scully. This couldn't be happening, she panicked, her breath coming in shallow gasps as the tears she had been fighting finally let loose, tricking down her face.

"Mulder, you don't have to do this! You're stronger than this," she pleaded aloud, rooted to the spot where she stood, staring down the barrel of the weapon in Mulder's hand.

"Your turn, Scully." Modell chuckled, his eyes never leaving Mulder. "Got to play by the rules. Pull the trigger, Mulder."

Mulder's jaw tensed as he stared at her, sweat pouring down his face as she watched the inner struggle playing out in his mind.

"Mulder," she whispered, trying to reach that part of him that was fighting so desperately. "Fight him. You can fight this."

"Come on, pull the trigger, Mulder." Modell was almost manic in his glee for the idea. "She shot you, I read it in her file." Scully's stomach lurched as he said it. He hadn't just looked at Mulder's file, he'd looked at hers as well. "Payback time. Shoot the little spy!"

The word was a slap in the face, the harkening to the first thing Mulder ever said to her. It was alluded to every now and again, as recently as when she shot him months before. Could Mulder still resent her for that, despite all she had done to prove otherwise? Could Modell still play on that to convince Mulder to shoot her?

If Mulder shot her, he would never forgive himself. It would destroy him. Oh dear God…

Frantically she gazed around the room. There was a mirror above Modell's head, one she doubted he could see. Just behind in, in the hallways, there was a fire alarm. If she could get to it before Mulder was forced to fire, it would distract him. Mulder was good with his weapon, he might hit her anyway, but would he have enough strength to fight it long enough for her to get to the alarm.

Did he understand what she needed to do?

Rage fairly radiated off Mulder as his head jerked. He tried to force the gun away from Scully. "I'm going to kill you, Modell."

"Yeah, pull the trigger, you get another crack at me," Modell responded blithely.

She had to make a run for the alarm. She had to get Mulder to understand that. His eyes were dark with terror as she backed away and she knew it was taking all the strength in him in this moment to fight Modell's words, to keep himself from pressing that trigger that might very well kill her. Slowly, she began backing away.

"Scully, run," he gasped, as his finger every so slowly tightened on the trigger, the control he needed to focus on it diverted to warning her. "Scully…"

She could hear the chamber setting even as she turned for the hallway and the pull down handle across the way. Unlike Mulder, she was small and compact, a sprinter, and she made the distance so quick she hardly blinked before her fingers were grasping the handle.
She didn't see what happened next, only that the alarm blaring to life as the gun fire finally went off. She winced, waiting for the searing pain of a bullet. It didn't come, but was followed by a crash instead, she turned slowly to see Modell sprawled across the far wall of the room, a look of shock on his slackened face. The table between them was tipped, Mulder standing over him, automatically firing the gun that was now empty of any bullets. Around them SWAT swarmed the room, someone bawling out orders as Mulder in towering, silent rage continued to fire the gun. The alarm rang around them as she moved towards him. Only when he had clicked all six shots in the empty revolver did he lower his weapon. She carefully reached for him as he turned to her, eyes blank, quietly handing her the weapon that he had so nearly shot her with. Without a word he sank back into the chair he had been sitting in and buried his face in his hands.

"Get paramedics in here. Get this piece of shit out of here." The words were coming from far away as Scully knelt in front of her partner, feeling him tremble under her fingertips as she wrapped her fingers gently around his wrists and tried to pull at least one hand away. "Mulder, it's all right. He's down. I'm fine."

He hardly answered as he allowed her to pull his hands away, horror etched across his otherwise stoic face, tears she so rarely saw out of him glazing his eyes. Whatever control he'd exercised with Modell, it was shattered now and he was hanging on only by threads as the world spun around them dizzily.

"Let me get you out of here," she whispered, not letting go of his hand, but glancing at the head of the SWAT team.

He already knew what she was asking without her saying a word. "Get him out of here, for now."

Carefully, she pulled at Mulder's arm, and while at first he seemed blank, resistant, he finally rose, numbly following her out of the door, away from the crowd of officers and Modell's sprawled body. She didn't know if he was dead or not. Frankly she didn't care.

The reception area of the oncology wing was empty, cleared after Modell had taken over. She led Mulder to one of the plain, utilitarian visitor couches, forcing him to sit, which he did without a word. He hadn't said a thing since the alarm when off and it frightened her because she had no idea what Modell had done to him or his mind. What had he seen? Had Modell broken him?

"Mulder, I'm here," she whispered, sitting on the corner of the coffee table in front of him. "I'm here. I'm fine. You didn't shoot me." She reached fingers to his stunned, quiet face, trying to get him to look at her, not through her. "He's not here. You shot him, Mulder. Can you even hear me?"

He blinked, long and slowly, before nodding slowly. "I can hear you, Scully. I know." His voice was low and hoarse, breaking and cracking in his throat. "I knowm you're fine."

"Do you, Mulder?" She tipped his chin up to really look at her, locking eyes with him. "Look at me, Mulder. I'm fine. I'm not hurt. You didn't shoot me. This is all real."

Her words seemed to break through the cracks of Mulder's composure as something deep within him broke and he roughly reached out and grabbed her, pulling her up against him as he held her so tightly she could barely breath. Propriety and all be damned, she thought as he held on to her for dear life, tears soaking into her hair and past her ear, soft sobs shaking her as she tried to comfort him. She managed no more than a few, soothing noises, not even words really, soft sounds that one might give a child. Much as she had done when Donnie Pfaster had captured her, Mulder was now breaking down on her and she had to be the rock to hold him together. Despite the weight of the Kevlar vest on her body, she stood there for long moments, not moving as his sobs quieted and the crushing weight of his embrace slackened. Still he didn't pull away, not yet, as if afraid that doing
so he might just crumble.

"I saw things, Scully. I could hear his voice in my head." Mulder voice was no more than a whisper in her ear. "Not just outside of me, inside my head. He wanted me to hurt you, because he knew it would hurt me. He knew it was my weakness. He thought he could beat me."

"I know," she sighed, pulling away from him, wiping at his tear streaked face. "I realized it the moment he got me in there. But you were stronger than that, Mulder. You beat him."

"I almost didn't," he muttered, swollen eyes not looking at her.

"But you did. You beat him because Modell didn't understand something very key about us."

"What?" His voice was a ragged plea for her to give him something to hold on to.

"The two of us are always better together than separate," she replied simply. "And anyone who works with us knows that. Modell made the mistake of bringing us together to break you. How well did that work out for him?"

Her blunt, glib words lightened Mulder somewhat. "It was dangerous, Scully. You shouldn't have come in there."

"I'm your partner, Mulder. It's what I'm supposed to do."
Time to Face the Strange Changes

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the emotional shifts in her partnership.

She passed the ball between her fingers, feeling the faded stitching, the rough and old leather, the slightly worn spots where fingers had once grasped it to throw in some long forgotten game of catch. It was a gift from a long missing little girl to an older brother who was her best friend. It served as his gift, from a man alone in his paranoia to a woman who had impossibly gone from counterpoint and spy to his partner, his equal, and then his friend - his best friend.

She set the ball down firmly on her table staring at where it sat by her computer keyboard. Three years together. When she had walked through the door of his office, before she had ever heard of aliens, conspiracies, or Bellefleur, Oregon, she had been nothing more than a spy. She was sent from them, to control him, her entire purpose was to undermine his arguments, to question his findings, to make him doubt his beliefs. She hadn't come there thinking she was destroying a good man, a threat to the Bureau. In fact she had been thrilled to work with a man whose mind was still considered by many as being one of the most brilliant to come out of Quantico. She had relished the challenge of meeting his ideas with her science, had met his belief with her logic, and in the end found out that rather than being on opposite sides of the playing field, she and Fox Mulder were actually on the same side, just coming from different angles.

And where did that leave them? As partners they had come through so much. His tendency to want to protect her warred with her habit of walling off everyone emotionally, his blind focus on his goals butted against her adherence to a clear trail of conclusions that led from point A to B. Had they not been assigned to the X-files together, but to some different department of the Bureau, say white-collar crimes, or anti-terror, would they have become so close? Mulder, while respecting her mind and her capabilities, was also notoriously anti-social. He was a smart-ass who relished the idea of being considered a rebel within the Bureau's straight laces. Scully, ever the daughter of a Navy admiral, followed book and regulation, until she felt it unnecessary to do so at least. Anywhere else, perhaps, they would have made a great working pair, opposites whose very skills and personalities complimented each other. But were they opposites, really? Workaholics, devoted to what they saw as right, loyal to the truth above all else and each other.

That was the rub. Mulder's near breakdown at the hands of Robert Modell hit the crux of Scully's swirling thoughts. As a team they were effective, very effective. It was why she had been taken, after all, and anyone with half an insight into either Mulder or herself would know that the others greatest weakness had now clearly become each other. How had that happened? When had they gone from being partners, an effective working unit of the Bureau, to something more powerful, more potent, even more threatening. God, the look in Mulder's eyes as he went to pieces, crushing her to him, it made her sick to see him so horrified, so completely frightened. She didn't know what Modell had done to him, she didn't want to know, nothing had laid that sort of trip on Mulder in the three years they had worked together, not the questions regarding his sister, not his many brushes with death, not even Bill Patterson's recent tip into madness. Mulder had come out of each of those instances shaken, but whole, brushing off the experiences with his usual bravado and returning to work more determined than before. This had shattered him and that scared her. Not that Mulder wasn't a strong person, hell for what he'd been through in his entire life, he had an inner strength
few others in the Bureau ever saw. But she had always assumed that this core of himself would remain untouched, always, sort of like the sun and the moon in the sky, a fixed, scientific invariant, like time. With one swing of the gun, he had nearly fallen to pieces over her and that bothered her.

The truth was, she had known for some time that there was a change taking place in their partnership, one that she had chosen to ignore. She knew it existed, as did others. Her mother made sly comments and gave her knowing looks, and hell half the Bureau assumed they were sleeping together and had been for years. Even her own, late sister had laughed at her own insistence that she and Mulder were nothing more than work partners, professionals who got along very well. Scully of course had ignored all the signs of the shift; the increased amount phone calls when one or the other was bored, the showing up at each others places on random occasions just to say hello. Hell, she realized, she'd brought him home for the holidays once, though she had explained it away as her mother's request out of gratitude for his work to get Scully back in one piece after her abduction. Looking back, she should have suspected her mother's intentions from the start. Somewhere between Bellefleur and Duane Berry, between his father's death and her sister's, they had moved from work partners to friends. Not just friends who occasionally saw each other and shared friendly workplace banter over coffee either, best friends.

Those words struck her hard as she thought of best friends she had in the past. Her childhood best friends had all been fleeting. The only long standing one she had ever had was Ellen, and that was only because they had spent 4 years together in college. As her mother had pointed out at Christmas, even that relationship too was drifting in the face of the all-consuming morass of the X-files. The only one who got it, who understood was Mulder and it caused her to gravitate to him because he was a soul stuck in the same fate as herself, asking the same questions. But like minded inquiry was one thing. What was developing between them was something else.

Perhaps she could ignore the jealous impulses that crept up at the thought of Bambi Berenbaum and Detective White, or the frustrated, embarrassing flushes that would occur when she realized that she was far to physically attracted to Mulder than she was comfortable with. But there were things she couldn't ignore. The heartbeat she felt at the idea that he might be dead, the near panic that set in whenever she rushed off to Iowa or Alaska, fearing the worst. She thought of him as she lay in the trunk of her sedan, waiting for Duane Berry to kill her. She had prayed at every mile of that journey for Mulder to appear and rescue her. There was this thread between them, a thin, delicate chain of complete trust and acceptance. It went beyond just a working relationship, or even a personal one. It was the idea that no matter what, the other would risk their life before they ever dreamed of causing personal harm. It was that though that Modell had played on, that narrow tie binding them together and he had nearly snapped it with Mulder. She should have known, should have guessed when he made snide comments to Mulder about how well they worked together. He probably watched that night in the parking lot, her head on his shoulder. What partners in the FBI ever did that? Modell, like the shadowy men who liked to play with Mulder, had picked up the one thing that was both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness, their relationship to one another.

Damn it all…

She didn't know what to make of this. Experience with Daniel and Jack warned her from ever getting too emotionally attached to work partners. Yet, if she admitted it to herself, her relationships with them had been physical attraction couched in the trappings of her own fixation with her father, the need to have a male figure to look up to and worship and to shower approval on her. This…this was very different. Yes, Mulder was a dominating, male figure in her life but hardly a father figure, more like an equal, an infuriating, egotistical, self-centered, emotional stunted equal, but one none the less, one who treated her as his partner and friend. She followed his belief without question, admired his intelligence completely, and stood by him loyally even when she wondered herself if
he wasn't crazy after all. Those were qualities she had never had in her relationships with either Daniel or Jack.

Christ, she snorted to herself, what was she thinking? She had no intention of ever sleeping with Mulder, ever, much less falling in love with him. Her head ached as she shook it, rubbing absently at her eyes. She was over thinking this, over-wrought by Mulder's outpouring of emotion. The truth of it all was that Mulder and she had evolved partners to friends and perhaps there was something deeper there than just mere friendship, or even mere partnership, perhaps a certain respect and loyalty she had never had from anyone else, a depth of feel and caring that rivaled that she had with anyone in her family. It simply made her relationship with Mulder unique, like everything else about him. It hardly meant that she was falling for her partner. She refused to do that again. This wasn't love, after all, just a partnership.

She laughed, shaking her head as she turned from the ball with its childish writing. It must be hormones, she thought, or her birthday, or the Modell case, or something. She was losing her mind. She rubbed her forehead absently as she tried to focus on work, as the office phone rang beside her. She had forgotten she had moved it from Mulder's desk to her table for the day. He was out, a leave of absence in light of first Patterson, then Modell.

"Scully," she answered crisply.

"How's the homestead going without me there to bother you?" Mulder's voice was drawled and lazy, but underneath she could hear bored restlessness that probably prompted him to call.

"Skinner says two more days, Mulder, and he doesn't want to see your face. And I'm keeping the home fires burning all the same. Amazing that the little woman can do that while the man is away?"

"You never heard those words come out of me," Mulder admonished lightly. "I didn't have a doubt."

She didn't think he did. "How are you feeling?"

"Better for sleep and a few days of All My Children. Who is this Kendall person anyway?"

"Mulder, put down the remote and step away from Erica Cane, you are starting to scare me."

"I'm more disturbed you know who Erica Cane is, but I think my affection has been stolen by General Hospital now."

"Right, I've got to get you back to work, Mulder."

"Miss me, Scully?" His tone was warm and teasing and she hated to admit it made her feel much happier than she had any right in feeling.

"Who else do I get to baby-sit while I'm working? Life is too quiet without you." She sighed. Wasn't that the truth. She paused, a sudden thought hitting her brain, twisting her gut nervously as she stopped to consider what it was exactly she was asking. "You up for a visitor later?"

"Depends on what she's wearing."

She smiled. "A business suit and a pizza. That work?"

"I suppose it will have to do," he sighed dramatically. "When can I expect you?"
"Say 6:30. Maybe watch a movie."

"Do I get to pick it?"

"Do you own anything that isn't X rated?"

"Yes," he replied, hurt. "I do have some taste."

"In a few things, yes, movies and ties are not among those."

"The pizza better be good, Scully. See you at 6:30."

"See you then, Mulder," she smiled, hanging up the phone and reaching for the baseball he had given her. The times were changing. What did she plan on doing about them?
Justice

Chapter Summary

In which Scully realizes there is no justice for Melissa.

Failure was not an emotion Scully accepted lightly. She refused to cry, refused to break down in front of these prying eyes, not as she wandered through the hallway to the elevator, towards the safety of the office she shared with Mulder. He would be down there, of course, newly returned from his leave of absence after the Pusher case and tearing through the wealth of new evidence that had collected while he was gone. Already, he had called her that morning about a French salvage ship and satellite photos. She had just been wondering what in the world that had to do with anything when Skinner called her into his office.

They were closing her sister's case and any hope for justice for her sister's wrongful death died with it. Skinner's platitudes of course had been kind, but she knew in the end that was all they were, platitudes designed to make her believe that someone cared about Melissa, about her blood spilled across her apartment floor, about the men who would sneak into her house and do that to a woman who had nothing to do with the secrets of the X-files. She had failed her sister. In the months since her death, she hadn't even followed one lead up on Melissa's killers, trusting the case in the hands of Metro police. Even with her status at an FBI agent, it had done little to get much headway on what should have been a simple murder case. But in a city where everyone had some friend in a high position of federal government, and for a case that had the potential of upsetting very powerful figures, she wasn't surprised that it remained unsolved. Someone had shut it up, shut it down, and conveniently swept it under the rug. Who cared about one dead woman among the thousands in the nation's murder capital anyway?

Except that dead woman was her sister and she died not because of drugs or gangs, but because of Scully's work. It was her fault Missy was dead and she was no closer to finding who or why than she was months before when her sister had died in the first place. She punched the button of the elevator that led down to her office with Mulder. She could of course request the file from Skinner, take up the case, and do the research in her spare time, but she knew he would deny that request. In a million years Skinner would not allow her to take a case she was personally invested in, no matter how much self-control she had as an agent. People ended up hurt that way and she knew it. Perhaps she could ask Mulder to do it? She nixed that idea almost as soon as it came to her. Mulder had been through the emotional ringer this last month between Patterson and Modell. He still carried a great deal of guilt over the death of Missy. She wouldn't ask this of him either, if nothing else for fear of where his obsession would lead them all. She couldn't drag him out of another cell, not right now, and she couldn't risk him doing something stupid. Best to leave him out of this for now. Perhaps later, when things had settled, she could approach him.

So where did that leave her. Every day meant that the clues were growing colder, the trailer slowly overgrowing, till any hope of finding her sister's murderers was lost under the weight of bureaucratic red tape. She bit her lip thoughtfully as she entered the elevator, hugging the file she had in her hands to herself. Perhaps she could hire a private detective, a retired or off-duty cop who would be willing to do the leg work for her, to help her put together a case she could present to Metro PD and the FBI that will force them to take action? It was a lot of money, a lot of effort, but it could make them move when simple ideas of justice and fairness did not. But then, she realized,
her heart dropping sadly, if they were willing to drop it with barely a finger being raised to find the truth, what in the hell expectation did she have they would do anything if she had the evidence right in front of their noses?

The doors opened and the familiar molding smell of the basement assaulted her as she stepped towards their office, hearing Mulder move inside. A part of her wanted to run in there, to cry out her frustration against this wrong towards Melissa, but she held back. Whatever the change in their relationship of late, the subtle shift from partnership to true friends, this she felt she needed to hold on to for a bit longer. Let him chase after his French ship or whatever it was. She needed time to think about this, to consider what she wanted to do, what justice she wanted to give her sister.
"I'm looking for Commander William Scully."

The serious looking ensign eyed her suspiciously, as if he suspected her to be some sort of secret, Cold War spy. Scully bit her tongue as the young man gravely regarded her with disapproval she had only ever seen on the face of the nuns at her school growing up. "May I ask what business you have with him?"

She tried hard not to giggle. After all he was just a young kid, probably a ROTC intern and trying very hard to do his job well. Still, she couldn't help but take a small, childish delight in taking out her badge and flipping it hope for him. "Special Agent Dana Scully, FBI. I'd like to interrogate my older brother about the possibility of going out with him and my sister-in-law for dinner."

The boy's eyes widened to saucers as he looked first at her badge, then at her, then at the badge again. "I didn't know Commander Scully had a sister," he croaked feebly, his voice breaking nervously, his pale, acne-scarred cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

"Worse than that, he had two," Scully replied, her heart briefly aching for Melissa as she said it. "I'm the one who carries a gun."

She winked at him as she turned for the hallway. "I'm assuming he's down here?"

"Yes!" The boy choked as he watched her dark coat whip behind her, her steps clicking on the tile as she looked for the office door that belonged to her brother. His ship was in port, he was shore bound for some time, and that meant that Bill was stuck to a desk for the moment. Like her father, it disgruntled Bill to no end, but when she came up on the door of her brother's office she found him working diligently at his computer.

"What sort of security do they have around this joint that they let me in here," she teased as he spun his head around to look at her, surprise and delight propelling him out of his seat towards her. He grabbed her in a bear of a hug, crushing her tightly against the buttons and pins of his khaki work uniform as he nearly lifted her off the ground.

"Mom didn't say you'd be in town!"

"Mom didn't know," she replied, grinning mischievously up at her elder brother. "I'm in town for a case, just for the day/ My flight leaves tonight, so I thought I'd treat you and Tara to dinner."

"Dinner on you? What is the FBI paying you these days?"

"Enough for a good dinner out; seafood, Chinese, God I miss dim sum."

"I'll call Tara, see what she's in the mood for." Bill blinked at her, still stunned that she was standing there. "Pity you got here today, Charlie was here over the weekend. We went golfing and had a barbecue."
"Golfing? Pity I missed that." Scully rolled her eyes as she took one of the seats across the desk from him. "How is the baby doing?"

"He seems to be getting pretty serious about that one girl he's dating."

"Charlie serious about a girl? Heaven forbid! I didn't know he could spell commitment."

"I don't know, he's been dating this one for almost two years. That's a long stretch for Charlie."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Scully idly played with the pencil container on the corner of her brother's desk. "What, the two of you planning to leave your sister a spinster? Pressure me into settling down with kids?"

"I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind. You know most women your age are thinking about it by now."

Scully bit her tongue, unwilling to rehash a familiar conversation between herself and her brother. Instead she chose to change tactics, moving instead to the real reason she wanted to see her brother. A pleasant evening out with her siblings was one thing, but Bill was still in the Navy, and her discussion with Commander Johansen left her with questions she hoped her brother could shed light on. "The case I'm working on involved that ship that limped into port the other day, the Piper Maru."

"The salvage ship, yeah?" Bill leaned back in his chair, nodding vaguely as the name rung familiar bells. "I have a friend over at NCIS who says they are looking into it. Why is the FBI getting involved?" Not that Bill would ever get into a jurisdictional pissing contest with his kid sister over who got to investigate the case, but he was curious, and like herself would ask questions till he got answers he was satisfied with.

"The Piper Maru was involved with a salvage operation in the same area another salvage ship, the Talpus, was working earlier this year. We are interested in what it was they were trying to pull up from the ocean."

"This another one of your partner's crazy theories about aliens?" Bill scoffed automatically, his disdain for Mulder's work never something he exactly hid.

"Actually, I suspect this has to do more with a downed atomic weapon than aliens." She snapped back, as usual irritated by his assumption that Mulder and all of his ideas were crazed and unfounded. "You remember Commander Johansen? Used to play poker with Dad when we were kids?"

"Yeah! He had a son your age. You two used to be close." Bill nodded in vague remembrance. "He's retired now, though."

"He still lives out by Miramar. That was where I was this afternoon. Years ago he served on a sub, called the Zeus Farber. Ever hear of it?"

"The Zeus Farber? I think so. Some sort of tragic accident on a sub. Most of the crew died."

"They died of radiation poisoning." Johansen's painful words still rang with the confusion, fear, and loss he must have felt knowing that 137 other men never made it back to Pearl Harbor. "They were sent on a secret mission to recover the remains of a downed squadron that had been heading to Japan at the end of World War II."

Bill whistled low, his brow knitting. "How did you find that out?"
"Just got through talking to Johansen. A few months ago Mulder and I worked a case involving the 
Talpus, which was also trying to salvage in that area. Now, it is the Piper Maru. I've spoken to the 
doctors overseeing the Maru's crew, all but one are suffering from radiation poisoning."

"You think the Russians and French are trying to get their hands on some free, weapons grade uranium?"

"I don't know what is going on, Bill. I was hoping you could give me insight as to what the Navy's 
reaction to all of this is."

"What makes you think that the Navy has a reaction, or at least one they are telling me?"

"Come on, Bill. You and I both know the scuttlebutt that gets tossed around here. A strange ship 
comes into port, most of the crew covered in radiation burns, and no one has a theory?"

"Dana, I don't know how you think the Naval rumor channels operate, but NCIS is handling this 
one."

"And no one has even hinted at a theory as to what is going on?" Scully leaned against the front of 
her brother's desk, refusing to let this go. "Johansen and six other men barely made it out of that 
site alive and never got an explanation as to why. Then the Talpus, now the Piper Maru. Why 
would the US government leave weapons grade uranium lying there for anyone to snag and not do 
anything about it? At least they could post a lookout, keep other ships from going there."

"Of all people, Dana, you should know better than anyone that it isn't smart to start asking too 
many questions around here." Bill eyes narrowed as he nervously glanced towards the door. "Olay, 
there were a lot of questions being asked about the Piper Maru, what it was doing out there, and 
why. The thing is that area has been known for years to be off limits. Our ships won't go near it, 
nor will anyone else's. Hell, no one is supposed to know about the coordinates and what is there. 
It's supposed to be top secret."

"You know about it." Scully raised an eyebrow pointedly.

"Well, I know of it, I don't know where it is, no one does. For salvage vessels to be out there 
looking for what's inside means that someone has the information, not only about where the sight 
is, but what is down there, and is likely selling it to governments and organizations looking to get 
their hands on goods weapons grade materials."

"Someone is selling US military intelligence on the black market." Mulder was currently on a 
plane to Hong Kong, knowing he had pieced this much together already. Someone had sold the 
information to the Russians and the French, but how were the Japanese involved? And what did it 
all have to do with the MUFON members in Allentown and the now deceased Betsy Hagopian? 
And worse yet, what did this have to do with the chip in her neck?

"Dana, just what are you and Mulder getting yourselves involved in?" Bill's worry cut through her 
swirl of thoughts, bringing her back to her brother's office and his concerned, frank blue eyes.

"I don't know yet," she admitted. "It might be as simple as a leak somewhere in the DoD, or it 
could tie back to all of the other things we've ever investigated - back to the men who took me, 
who killed Melissa."

"Killed Melissa? I thought you said that was a home invasion, Dana, a simple accident."

"They closed Melissa's case file, Bill." The lump that had rested in Scully's throat ever since 
Skinner had told her the news swelled again, causing her eyes to sting. "Metro police said they
didn't have enough evidence to solve the case. My boss wants to keep it open, but…"

She paused, pressing her lips together hard against the onslaught of tears she knew were threatening. "How can a home invasion, where the weapon was left at the crime scene, when there are security cameras all over that complex, not be solved Bill? I work for the FBI, I'm a pathologist, I can find a killer by the bruise pattern he leaves on a victim. We can find hairs that give us DNA evidence; we can get into the heads of killers to find out their motivations behind their crimes. I know this can be done, if someone wanted it done." She felt her hands shake ever so slightly, anger, outrage, and guilt coursing through her. "It was my fault Missy came over that night. I knew it was dangerous, I was warned ahead of time that someone would try to kill me, just like they killed Melissa. I thought that the justice system would find them, that they would get them, and Missy would find justice."

Was there ever justice for the dead?

"Dana, why didn't you tell me this?" Bill's voice broke as stared at his younger sister in hurt and surprise.

"What could you do, Bill? It was a matter for the police and I thought, blindly, they would be able to solve it."

"Does Mom know yet?"

"I just found out yesterday. I didn't have a chance to tell her."

"Are you sure that the people who did this had something to do with what happened to you?"

She couldn't blame Bill for being skeptical. Hell, she might be too if she heard a story like this. "I was warned by someone I'm certain was involved."

Stony silence fell between them. Scully knew her brother. Bill was like her in so many ways, loyal and stubborn to a fault. He blindly liked to believe he could protect his family from all things. Her disappearance and Melissa's death, so soon after the death of their father and patriarch, had laid a heavy weight on Bill's shoulders, one Scully didn't believe he should carry but knew it was useless to try and stop him. For Bill, his worst nightmare after hearing that something had happened to his wife would be to hear that something happened to his mother or his siblings. So far he'd gotten that phone call twice in the last two years.

"Is whatever it is you and Mulder are looking for worth the price that this family has already paid? That you could still pay?" Bill's words weren't spoken in anger, but she could feel the sting of them on her guilty soul all the same.

"It might be the only chance I have at any sort of justice for Missy, Bill, to find the truth about these men, about what they did, and why, and expose it."

"If these men can get away with murdering our sister, what in the hell chance do you have of exposing them, Dana? And for what?" Bill's anger flashed to the surface, his arms crossing in front of him in a fashion she was intimately familiar with. "When did Mulder's quest become yours? Because in the end, this is what this is all about. He wants to find out the truth about what happened to his sister. Okay, I will give the guy that. But now he's drug you into it too. When will it stop? What happens if the next time someone breaks into your home trying to give Mulder a warning they find you there?"

"Don't you think I've thought of that?" She retorted with equal irritation. "But this isn't just about
Mulder anymore, Bill. These people, whoever it is that is interested in that wreckage, whatever the Piper Maru found, and they are linked somehow to whatever was done to me."

Bill rolled his eyes but she ignored him. "You may not believe me, Bill, but I know that it is happening and Mulder does too. And I can't sit by quietly and let my experience and the death of other women like me - or the death of our sister - go quietly by and hope that someone else out there will get it figured out."

As usual, the two Scully siblings were at lager heads, glaring at each other from across the ring, neither willing to concede to the other they had a valid point. Bill chin set, he sighed as he sat up in his chair and scrubbed at his face absently, his shoulder's slumping in his khaki uniform. "What happened to those golden days when we were kids, huh? When the worst trouble we'd get in was spending all night at the beach?"

"We grew up, Bill," Scully murmured quietly, her heart breaking at the same thought. "I saw some kids today at the base, playing hopscotch, just like Missy and I did when we were kids. I'd give anything on earth to have those days back, to just hug her one more time, to tell her I loved her, to take back all the stupid things I ever said to her. There are days I would kill to have those days back, to just be stupid kids again, driving Mom crazy."

"We still drive Mom crazy, just not for being stupid kids." Bill chuckled, running a hand through his hair. "Look, let me call Tara, see what she'd like for dinner. Let's just go out, have some drinks, as a family, before you have to catch your flight back to DC."

It was his concession, his way of sidestepping the issue. He wasn't giving in to her, but he wasn't going to try and talk her out of her position, and frankly that was all she could ask out of Bill.

"Okay." She gave in, watching as he hit the button on his phone that dialed directly to his wife.

"Truce for the evening, Shorty?"

"Truce," she smirked at his nickname for her. "As long as you quit calling me 'Shorty'."
In which Scully gets a phone call that her boss' has been shot.

She tried to avoid the blinking seven AM on her dashboard as she pulled into her apartment complex, her head so heavy with sleep she could cry. Scully felt her jaws crack as she yawned, tears leaking from her eyes from the strain as she blearily reached for her briefcase beside her in the seat. She needed a shower, she needed bed, and she needed to find peace in the oblivion from things she had been forced to deal with the last twenty-four hours. Her sister's closed case and whatever secret uranium stashes there were in the world could be forgotten for a few hours while she slept. Besides, Mulder was just now landing in Hong Kong, or so his message said on her cell phone when she turned it on after her flight. She hoped he was all right there. Mulder knowledge of anything Asian extended no farther than Godzilla movies as far as she could tell.

Her building was just stirring with the first, early birds of the day, stumbling out to their cars for work as she was stumbling in. She had tried to get some shut-eye on the plane, but her thoughts kept returning to her discussion with Bill. The Navy knew something was down there and obviously someone else did to. Who had the information and how were they disseminating it? Obviously someone in the DOD or with a tie to information out of the DOD. What about whatever was down there was so interesting to these other countries? What caused the strange, oily substance they found on the dive suit? And what was burning these men the way it did?

Queequeg fairly danced when she opened the door and Scully guiltily reached over to scritch an ear, thankful she had enough foresight earlier to rush home and put our food, water, and pads in case of accidents. All seemed well, and her dog whined, obviously in need of a trip outside. He hated to do anything more than pee on the pads and she was just trying to run through her fuzzy brain as to where she left his leash when the shrill sound of her phone cut through her thoughts.

"Scully," she murmured automatically, forgetting she was at home and usually answered with a simple "hello".

"Agent Scully? This is Kim Cook from the director's office."

Director - Kim - Skinner. It took Scully's brain a bit to fire, but she finally pieced it together. "Yes?" Her thoughts immediately flew to Mulder. Was he all right? He had said he was fine when she checked her messages. Why else would Skinner call her so early in the morning?

"We've just got some bad news. AD Skinner has just been shot." The woman's voice broke, tears thickening it as she sniffed loudly.

Scully heard her, but couldn't process the words right away. Shot? Skinner? Confusion and astonishment cleared the cobwebs of fatigue from her mind as Scully felt her senses come more into focus. "When?"

"About an hour ago. He's been taken to Northeast Georgetown."

Ten minutes from her house. "I'm on my way," she replied to her boss's secretary, grabbing her
keys up once again, nearly missing the impatient yelp of her dog at her feet.

"Shit," she sighed, knowing she couldn't make the Pomeranian with his teacup sized bladder wait. Besides, Skinner wasn't going to go anywhere while she let her dog pee. "Come on," she muttered, finding the leash where she usually left it, behind the door.

Ten minutes and one satisfied dog later, she was rushing to Northeast Georgetown, thankful that traffic was moving the opposite direction for a change. The emergency room was busy but surprisingly quiet as she entered, asking the front desk for Skinner's room.

"Agent Scully?" She turned to the sound of her name, recognizing the tall man who called to her.

"Agent Fuller," she nodded to him, glancing towards the unfamiliar female.

"Agent Caleca," Fuller filled in by way of introduction. "We got a call from Metro police."

"How bad is he?" She fell into the mode of an investigator by habit rather than as a friend, her brows creasing as she glanced between the two.

"We don't know. He's been in surgery." Fuller spoke as if he'd been there since the moment it happened. Unsurprising, anyone who worked on Skinner's team most likely had already heard, save for Mulder, and were already out there trying to assist in the apprehension of the perpetrator.

The FBI tried at least to take care of their own, even misfits like herself and Mulder. "What happened?"

"Looked like some hot-head drew a gun in a coffee shop." Caleca shrugged helplessly, as if to say the world was full of such crazed people. "Skinner happened to be in the way."

"What do we have on the shooter?" She wanted data. She needed to start processing this and they were feeding things to her in fits and spurts. They were FBI agents, they should have reeled this off for her automatically.

"We have a description from the waitress," Fuller replied. "A handgun was recovered in the parking lot, unregistered, no prints. Our guys got two partials off the cash register."

No prints, unregistered gun, and from the sound of it, nothing stolen. "Hair and fiber?"

"This just happened a few hours ago," Fuller protested, finally reaching the limit of the knowledge he seemed to be able to get. For whatever reason, this irritated Scully. Perhaps it was unfair, she realized that, but she'd been up for 24 hours, had just walked off a flight from San Diego having come back from telling her brother their sister's murder was still at large, and finding more questions than answers on their current case. And now she finds this, her boss shot under suspicious circumstances from what she was strongly starting to suspect was an effort to either shut Skinner down or shut him up. For what? For Melissa's case, or something else he was working on, some other file that crossed his desk?

She didn't know, but whatever patience she just had left snapped under the weight of Fuller's lack of information. "This is the assistant director who's been shot. We have to make all resources available." What authority Scully had in this situation, she didn't know, but no one else seemed to be getting their heads out of their asses, and if she had to pull out the ER doctor pissiness to whip people into gear here, she would.

Caleca caught Scully's arm before she had a chance to break into full rant, nodding down the hallway behind her. A gurney carrying Skinner was being wheeled out, the nursing staff carefully
taking him towards what Scully surmised was the ICU.

"Excuse me," Scully called to one of the scrub-clad doctors, rushing over to the side of Skinner's bed. "How is he?"

Without thinking, she placed one hand on that of Skinner's, a small gesture to let him know in his drugged state she was there, that someone was there.

"He came out of surgery all right, but he's still in a lot of pain." The doctor did not look surprised by her rushing over, or by Fuller and Caleca hovering nearby. Someone must have warned him that Skinner was FBI.

Despite the drugs and pain, however, Skinner looked strong, and felt it as his fingers wrapped around Scully's delicate ones, pulling her attention back down to his pained expression. His dark eyes were semi-lucid, as his mouth worked feebly, trying to speak.

"I've seen him before." The words were faint from Skinner's dry lips. "The man who shot me."

"Don't try and talk, Mr. Skinner." The doctor shot Scully an apologetic look as he began to wheel Skinner away again, breaking the contact between himself and Scully as her fingers slipped out of the man's tight grip. She watched silently as they took him off, Fuller coming up beside her.

"What did he say?"

"He knows who shot him," Scully replied, her mind spinning. Skinner was an Assistant Director with the FBI, no longer an active field agent. His place more often than not was behind a desk, not bagging and tagging bad guys. It's possible it could have been some random person from his field agent days, or hell just someone he saw at the coffee shop he frequented. But a random stranger wouldn't be so clean about not leaving prints. And someone with a vendetta out to get Skinner wouldn't do it in the open where anyone could see him. Something about this attack spoke to a statement that someone was trying to make. And Scully had a sick, sinking feeling she knew who the statement was aimed at and why.

"We'll need guards posted door Skinner's room, someone to watch over him." She was beginning to feel like Mulder, her exhausted, fevered brain running on overtime. "This wasn't just a random attack. Someone was targeting the assistant director. Set up a post outside of his room, set it up through the hospital and his doctors. If they protest, send them to me, I'm a doctor, I can reason with them."

She glanced between Fuller and Caleca, fully expecting one of them to start protesting about her sudden, take charge attitude. "He's in ICU for the moment, they'll most likely move him to a private room later in the day and I can check back then. Call me when he's moved."

She spun from them, her tired head pounding as she moved down the hallway.

"Agent Scully, where is Agent Mulder?" Fuller called curiously, as if seriously worried where the hell her partner was.

"That's a good question. Perhaps I'll figure it out after I get some sleep and I check on the Assistant Director. Good night."
It's in the DNA

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is called to a different hospital for a different co-worker.

Judging from the amount of time she had spent in hospitals of late, you would have thought she was still a practicing doctor. Without hesitation Scully went to the receiving desk at the emergency room, too stressed to think of being polite.

"Fox Mulder, please?" Her voice rang with the sort of authority that made FBI agents twice her size quell and rush to her bidding. The thin young woman behind the desk did much of the same.

"Down the hall, to your right, room 125." She pointed in the direction, her eyes flickering briefly to Scully's weapon. Perhaps someone had warned her that Mulder was an FBI agent. She didn't say anything as Scully spun on her heels on the tile floor and made her way without a word to her downed partner's room.

She hadn't formulated how it was Mulder went from being in Hong Kong, on the other side of the planet, to some back road in the countryside of Maryland, unconscious in the passenger's seat of a car that had been driven into a ditch. She was just glad that the Maryland State Patrol had enough foresight to check his badge and call her in, terrified that the FBI would toss up a shit storm if they bungled a situation with a downed agent. Still, she had thought the state patrol a tad suspicious when they asked her if her partner had a history of drinking. She snorted, Mulder and alcohol only seemed to ever go together regularly at holidays or when his ass was handed to him. The only thing Mulder needed to answer for was why he was in the middle of nowhere in a rental when he should have been heading back to DC, and why hadn't he called her when he got state side? He was asleep when she got to his room, his face far too slack for it to be a natural sleep. Had he been out of it this whole time? She glanced over his charts, and outside of a mild concussion seemed to be fine. Mulder's typical, dumb luck, any situation that might kill a normal human being and he seemed to dance out of it by the skin of his teeth.

"Mulder," she sighed, reaching up to brush his dark hair away from the bandage. "What in the hell am I going to do with you?"

He stirred, his eyes fluttering open as he pulled away, watching as he focused blurrily on her, his long fingers reaching up to the gauze pad on his forehead. Confusion warred with pain as he tried to sit up, glancing around his hospital room as he did so.

"Guess I'm not dead," he quipped, groaning as he frowned up at the white patch on his head.

"What happened," she prompted, surprised that wasn't the first thing he had said.

"Maybe you can tell me," he replied, a hint of worry in his voice as he tried, and failed, to look cogent.

"The state police found you unconscious. You were strapped in the passenger's seat of a rental car that had been driven into a ditch."
"We were run off the road by two men." Mulder sat up and looked suspiciously as if he intended on leaving this hospital soon. Sadly, Scully realized, she lacked the wherewithal to stop him. Mulder out of the hospital was more useful to her than Mulder in it.

"Who's 'we'?' Hadn't he gone to Hong Kong by himself?

He paused briefly shooting her a slightly guilty look. "Krycek."

Whatever name she had expected him to say, Alex Krycek's wasn't it. "Krycek?"

He was still alive? How did they always find him in the middle of these messes?

"He was in Hong Kong. He's got the digital tape." Mulder's already pale face grimaced, though not from the pain in his head. She suspected it was from the pain of frustration and irritation knowing how much that digital tape had cost them both. He'd lost his father, she her sister. "He's been selling information."

Scully's conversation with her brother flashed to the top of her mind. "Is that what the men wanted?"

Krycek hadn't been in the car when they found it, and Mulder's accident had all the markings of shadowy, government figures that would love to beat the hell out of whoever was selling the information of what was at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and causing this trouble to begin with.

"They ordered him out of the car. I thought they were going to kill him." Mulder paused in a rare moment of circumspection. "I thought they were going to kill us both. And there was this bright flash. That's all I remember."

It was a wonder he didn't get himself killed sometimes. She was frankly surprised he wasn't already. "Well, it may not be the best time to tell you, but you're not the only one in the hospital. Skinner's been shot."

All traces of confusion and pain vanished as Mulder's expression snapped to close attention, surprise focusing his mind to the situation at hand. "What's his condition?"

"A bullet perforated his small intestine. The doctor seems to think he'll be fine."

"Who shot him?" Already she could see the wheels within wheels turning in Mulder's addled brain.

"I'm not sure, but I have an idea." It wasn't a surprising idea, frankly, but one that rattled her more than she even wanted to admit. She held up the folder she had been studying when she got the call from the Maryland state police.

"What are those" Mulder glanced curiously as she passed it to him, looking at the strange graphs she had inside.

"PCR Results." She pointed to the first one. "This one belongs to the man who shot Skinner."

"Yeah, and who's this one belong to?"

She swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat, the one she willed away as she avoided Mulder's curious gaze. "The man who shot Melissa."

There was silence for long moments as Mulder studied the charts. "They match."

"Yeah," she whispered, reaching for the file, plucking it out of Mulder's long fingers. "We matched
"Scully, you're sure?" Mulder's tone carried more than a hint of warning.

"Mulder, these results don't lie." She snapped the file shut with more force than was really necessary. It made sense, it made a strange, disgusting, sort of perfect sense now, knowing what she knew. "Before we left for San Diego, Skinner told me Metro PD was closing the case on Melissa. Skinner was trying to fight to keep it open, personally, under him."

The piece fell perfectly into whatever puzzle Mulder was constructing in his mind, his eyes flitting from the folder to her. "Why didn't you tell me about your sister's case being closed?"

"So you could what, Mulder? Crucify yourself on that cross too?" It wasn't fair, she was snapping at him knowing it wasn't right to judge him like that, but unable to stop herself. "Can't I carry my own cross for once without you tying it to your own personal crusade?"

Her words cut him, she saw that, but Mulder, if anything, was good at hiding it. "Scully, I wasn't trying to take this away from you. I'm your partner. I'm here to help."

"Then help me find out why the same man who killed my sister shot Skinner. Why are they trying so hard to cover up my sister's murder?"

"I think you and I both know why. I think the bigger question is why they were trying to kill you in the first place, and who do they work for, and what purpose do they serve."

"Why is everything a conspiracy with you?"

"You were the one approached by the man at my father's funeral. The one who warned you? Tell me it isn't a conspiracy? They wanted that tape, Scully, and they were willing to kill anyone to cover up the information on it."

It all came back to that stupid DAT tape. "You said Krycek had it then? Did you get it back?" She knew he didn't, but she could hope he at least knew where it was, knew where to find the information of what had happened to her, to the other women from Allentown, what the "merchandise" was. Without the DAT tape they were holding the pieces without knowing how to fit them all together.

"No. We were going to get it when we were stopped." Mulder swore softly as he attempted to get up, wincing as a hand flew to his head. He shouldn't be getting up, she knew it, but knew she couldn't stop him either. "Now they have him?"

"Who?" That was the question she hadn't asked yet.

"DOD, CIA, hell, whoever knows Krycek has the tape and wants to kill him for it. I would guarantee he's flaunted that shit to someone deliberately, probably has used it to protect himself all this time. Krycek isn't working for who he once was. I don't think so at least. He wouldn't be using the tape as protection if he was."

"The rat looking for the easiest route to save his own skin?"

"It appears that way." Mulder sighed as he glanced at his chart. "You going to spring me out of here, Dr. Scully, so I can go back to work."

"You know they'll want to keep you here another night to monitor your head injury."
"Fuck that! You're a doctor, you can keep an eye on me."

"You're confidence in my abilities is overwhelming, Mulder," she smirked dryly. "I've got to go and check on Skinner, see how he's doing."

"And I've got some calls to make about the Piper Maru," Mulder was already making for the door. She had a feeling there would be an angry nurse trying to force him back to bed at any moment. "I want to check out that oily substance we found on the dive suit."

"Any reason why?"

"Not sure, but I'll place a call to NCIS to see if they can send it over." He shrugged at her startled look. "What?"

"Mulder, you just woke up from a mild concussive state and you are already trying to get out of here and back to work. I'm surprised you aren't puking in a bucket."

"Brains too busy to bother getting sick." He grinned a trifle lopsidedly. She'd have to keep an eye on him later. "Besides, if I had to stay long than an hour in this place, you know some nurse is going to get pissed at me."

"I know, Mulder. Why do you think I rushed over her to fetch you?"

"See, there's a reason you're the only doctor I can ever trust."
Dies Irae

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has the opportunity for vengeance.

One car barked her knee, another nearly caused her to roll over its dark hood, but she nimbly dodged both, grateful for once for her short stature that allowed her to dance dangerously through traffic after the dark jacket ahead of her. Her quarry wasn't as lucky. Taller than herself, though shorter than Mulder, he was clipped by an oncoming vehicle, rolling over its hood and falling to the pavement, before scrambling up again.

"Federal agent! Stop!" Scully had her weapon already out as cars honked and screeched around her. He was ahead of her, but not by much, his clipping having slowed him down considerably. Once she was on open pavement she was able to gain on him, her heart pumping in her ears, her breath burning in her lungs as the injured man ahead tripped and fell into the dark alley ahead.

"Federal agent! Stop right there!" Her command rang against the red brick walls surround them, as Luis Cardinale stilled, turning to face her, his face etched in her memory as she stared down at him, gun leveled. She had studied that face after they handed her the file, tried to memorize every outline of the man who had murdered her sister. Now he was there, panting and injured, groveling up at her with fear in his dark eyes.

"Please," he gasped, holding up a placating hand.

She ignored it, fury rising up in her, as he lay there, helpless. How dare he say that word, her mind stormed, when he killed her sister, her innocent, helpless sister, in cold blood? What right did he think he had to even as that of her? Cold ire and gut-wrenching heartbreak gnawed at her, in a way she hadn't realized she still felt in the months since her sister's demise.

"Are you the man who shot my sister?" She shouted the words, a vengeance she didn't think she was capable of lacing through them.

"Don't kill me, please," he begged, his eyes never leaving her gun.

Don't kill him? Had he even given Melissa that chance when she stepped into Scully's apartment?

"You shot my sister!" Her finger twitched on the trigger, but she held it steadily, as somewhere in the firestorm of her brain the cool, calm reason that defined her latched onto her righteous wrath and held her finger firm. That didn't keep her from feeling disgusted at the creature at her feet, whimpering and gasping.

"Please, I can tell you!"

"Tell me?" She moved her aim from his torso towards his face. He cowered further into the pavement.

"I can tell you," he tried to assure her.

"Tell me," she snapped, feeling the reason slipping ever so slightly, her face flushing.
"I can tell you what you want," he stammered, stuttering over himself. "You want Krycek! I can tell you where he is. Please…please don't shoot me."

Tell her where he is? He was a liar. She knew that by the nervous tick of his cheek, the way his glance flickered to her weapon. In that moment he would say anything, do anything not to be murdered. Not that she would murder him, she realized in a moment of perfect clarity, as in the distance sirens wailed. He was nothing more than a coward and a killer, a trained assassin who built himself up by the murders he committed for men with no names. And she was an officer of the law. She wouldn't kill him, no matter how badly she wanted to. Besides, she had no guarantee he wasn't right about Krycek, he could have killed her sister. If that was the case, Mulder had the son-of-a-bitch in hand and now he too was gone. She highly doubted Luis Cardinale knew a goddamn thing about that, else he wouldn't have dared to offer Krycek up as a scapegoat. It could have been him. It could have been either of them.

"Drop the gun." The command came from a man, likely the police behind her. Automatically she held up her weapon in one hand for them to see and pulled out her badge with the other.

"FBI," she called back, as the cops rushed up, one flashing a light on her and the badge, the other reaching for Cardinale. The downed man yelped as the cops roughly pulled him up, ignoring the man's obviously injured leg, spinning him around and away from her. The man who killed her sister - maybe. She swore harshly to herself, tears stinging her eyes as she holstered her weapon. Damn it all and him! Why couldn't this be simple? Why couldn't she have answers? Why couldn't she find easy justice? Perhaps shooting the son-of-a-bitch before he could speak would have been easier.

"Who's this asshole to you?" The cop not busy with Cardinale asked with good-natured asperity, clearly already having made up his mind that Cardinale was a piece of shit if the FBI wanted him.

"He's wanted in the shooting of an FBI Assistant Director," she replied numbly as Cardinale's rights were read to him. Any cop would feel for a fellow law enforcement agent being downed. Cops, like FBI agents, were notoriously protective of one of their own. "And he's suspected in the murder of my sister."

Suspected, not certain.

"Son-of-a-bitch," the cop whistled as his partner cuffed Cardinale. "Want us to take this fucker off your hands for you Agent…"

"Scully, Special Agent Scully," she murmured by way of an afterthought. "No, the FBI will want him, but I'd appreciate your help taking him in." Her shoulder's slumped ever so slightly as her anger seeped from her, down through her body, as if discharged into the ground. The adrenaline that had filled her now left a bitter taste in her mouth as she watched Cardinale with mute, cold eyes. He might be the man who killed her sister or he might not. She wouldn't know until he was brought to trial, forced to confess to his sins. But at least she had him, someone who could at least give her a hope of justice for Melissa.

"Agent Scully!" Cardinale's tired voice called from where he was pressed against the far wall, the cops looking on with disgust. "Agent Scully, I told you I could tell you where Krycek is. That is worth something to you."

"Shut it," the arresting officer hissed, but Scully paused, meeting the balding, Hispanic man's eyes.

"You have two minutes before you are taken away by Metro police. Whatever you have to say better be quick."
"Will it get me a deal?" Even in handcuffs with cops around, Cardinale wasn't too afraid to be cagey. Of course, he wouldn't. She had him dead to rights on attempted murder of an FBI agent alone.

"You'll have to talk to US District Attorneys for that. I'm not your girl." Scully inched closer. "But I might be able to put in a good word if you tell me where that rat bastard is hiding?"

Kill two birds with one stone, catch the men responsible for Missy and find that DAT tape with the information of what was done to her, all at the same time. Maybe she could say something to someone…maybe.

"North Dakota," Cardinale replied as up the alleyway a Metro patrol car pulled up, lights flashing. "An abandoned missile sight in North Dakota."

That was pinpoint accurate. "Where?" North Dakota was filled with them.

"I don't know," he insisted. "I just know that it is on the DAT tape, one of the sights they use."

"Who is they?" Her voice rang with more than a hint of threat. But Cardinale, now very aware she wouldn't kill him and knowing he was at least safe in the hands of the police, shut his mouth and shook his head.

"You talk to the lawyers first, then I'll tell you who they are." Fear warred with bravado in his gaze. "But not before."

She could just shoot him, she thought coldly and rather unrealistically. Perhaps the cops were thinking the same thing, as the arresting officer roughly grabbed Cardinale by the shoulder and propelled him towards the back of the patrol car.

"He'll be at the station, Agent Scully, if you want to send someone down to get him," He slammed the door in Cardinale's face. "Piece of shit. Sounds like he was into terrorism."

"Something like that," she murmured, watching Cardinale as he leaned into the back seat, his eyes meeting hers through the window. "I want to put extra security on this one. I don't want anyone near him who isn't cleared."

She glanced between both of the cops. "This man is wanted in a sensitive FBI case, and I know for certain that whoever he's working for will try to have him killed before morning if they can get away with it."

A look passed between the two, but they nodded. "We'll get on it, Agent Scully. Send your people over when you can." Clearly the idea of holding a valuable, federal suspect wasn't relished by either of these guys.

"I'm on it now," she replied, pulling out her cell phone, dialing Fuller at the hospital where Skinner had been. Her thoughts turned to the assistant director as she spun towards the end of the alley, seeing the ambulance still parked in the middle of the street, a phalanx of police cars now surrounding it, blocking off busy, DC traffic.

Come hell or high water, she thought, she was going to see Cardinale in court and in prison, and he would pay for Melissa's death, if it was the last thing she did.
A Hollow Victory

Chapter Summary

In which Scully realizes there is no justice.

The gravestones had been superfluous, but had come more on Bill's insistence than her mother's. Scully had gone alone with it because she could see the wisdom of Bill's argument. Someday grandchildren would come and they would want to know about their grandfather and aunt, who they were and what they did. Bill had wanted someplace physical for them to return to, something he could point out to potential children, to make those they had lost more real than just ashes floating across the top of an endless sea. So Maggie had given in and arranged for space near the family plot in Baltimore, a plaque for them both, father and daughter beside each other, lying quietly nestled in the rolling green lawn. Scully had to admit her elder brother had something of a point, though she would never tell him that to his face. There was a sense of rightness in being able to go to someplace other than the docks at the harbor to pay respects. Really, however, Missy would hate this, being tied down to one spot for all of eternity. Still, she would appreciate the view, Scully thought as she walked carefully through the flat gravestones. In her hands she clutched a bouquet of flowers, nothing particularly special. Melissa had never had a favorite flower, whatever had caught her fancy at the time usually was what ended up in Melissa's vase, and there were always flowers in it. She'd kept dandelions once for a whole summer, gathering them up every day, ignoring her sister's protests that they were only weeds.

God, she missed Melissa so badly it ached!

She had believed with all of her heart and soul that this would bring her closure, that finding the man who had killed her elder sister would quell the throbbing pain in her heart, the guilt she wore around herself every time she stepped across the portal of her own apartment. She could feel her sister's blood through the fibers of the new carpeting, could see it still staining the floorboards. It sat there in her minds eye, reminding her never to forget, to never let this crime done to such an innocent and free being go unpunished. Would the dead keep speaking to her forever? Would she ever find closure for this? What would Melissa want for her, she wondered, as she came upon the small, simple plaque bearing her sister's name, her entire life framed by the two numbers underneath. It wasn't long enough for her, it would never be long enough. Silently, she bent over, laying the flowers down, realizing that this action was much more for her sake that Missy's. Melissa would be standing there chastising her for clinging on like this, for not letting go - or perhaps not. Melissa knew her siblings well, and knew that for Bill and for Dana grudges were not give up lightly, ever.

Scully hardly paid attention as she heard the sound of a car pulling up, nor looked up when the door opened and closed. But she could tell the moment the long, sloping steps whispered across the grass who it was that was coming behind her. It was almost to the point anymore she could sense Mulder without seeing him, hear his thoughts without him speaking. How had that happened?

He slipped up beside her, his hand resting at her elbow as he smiled sadly down at her. He had of course known she was going to be there, she had mentioned it in passing to him that morning, that she would take an extra long lunch to drive up, to see Melissa. She hadn't told him why, though she doubted she needed to. Still if anyone would understand the mantel she wore now, smothering her,
that person would be Fox Mulder. His entire life had been defined by the very same guilt that she now felt so acutely. She watched quietly as he bent over the tombstone, leaving his own flowers for the memory of Melissa. In his own way Mulder had understood Melissa. The two were kindred spirits in many ways and it had been Melissa who had stood by Mulder's side in his darkest hour to date, while Scully had lain there nearly dying.

"I was just thinking about something that a man said to me." She watched as he stood back up, warm strength in his presence. "That the dead speak to us from beyond the grave. That's what's conscience is."

Mulder's eyes softened as a smile played across his full mouth, despite the worry she could see tightening around his eyes. "It's interesting, I never thought of it that way."

Neither had she. Tears pricked her eyes, as the jumble of emotions she had felt since Luis Cardinale's arrest erupted in her again, now with no case or barriers to hold them back. "You know I thought when we found him, this man that killed Melissa, that when we brought him to justice, I would feel some kind of closure. But the truth is no court, no punishment is ever enough."

Something inside of her burned violently at the words, as the lessons of her youth violently warred within her. The idea of a loving God teaching her of forgiveness clashing with that of a God of vengeance, one who struck down the unrighteous with justice. But was it ever enough?

She had a feeling by the look on Mulder's face and the gentle pressure on her elbow as he led her away that she would never find that justice, that even in this she would never find the absolution for her sister's death. "I came here to tell you something. There may be some justice, just not the kind you're looking for."

"What are you talking about?" She knew what he was talking about, but needed to hear it out loud before she accepted it.

"They found this man, Luis Cardinal, dead in his cell." He stopped, turning to face her, his eyes filled with apology, with compassion, but not with the vindication she had so been hoping for in her life.

"How?" The storm of emotions threatened to break, she could feel it boiling just beneath her skin, but she forced herself into the perfect calm of her existence, made herself meet Mulder's eyes unflinching.

"They made it look like a suicide. The men he worked for couldn't take the chance that he point his finger at them."

So simple, so neat, so convenient, they had it sewn up so completely that there could never be justice for the sister she had let die. "What about Krycek?" She knew he had something to do with it. Cardinale wouldn't finger him if he didn't.

"He was there. I know that." Mulder affirmed knowingly.

"You think they got to him, too?"

"I don't know, but if they haven't they will." Mulder looked torn as to whether he would be sorry about that or not. "I doubt it'll weight on their consciences though."

No, not like her sister's death would weigh on hers. "I think the dead are speaking to us Mulder, demanding justice. Maybe that man was right. Maybe we bury the dead alive."
Perhaps Melissa could find peace out there on the open sea, far away from the lonely gravestone with her name engraved on it. But Scully couldn't, not now, not ever. No justice, no vengeance, nothing to repay the debt of her sister's blood spilled by men with an agenda and it was all her fault. She had failed her sister again and there was nothing she could do to make this right.

"You all right?" Mulder's fingers reached out for hers, lacing around them wordlessly. She wanted to tell him with her usual stoicism that she was fine, to stiffen her spine and walk to her car, to show him that this miscarriage of justice would not affect her in her duties. But that would be a lie. She had never lied to Mulder, not once in their three years of partnership. Besides, she realized as a solitary tear traitorously found its way down her face, ignoring her careful self-control, he would know she was lying anyway.

"Dana," he breathed, wrapping arms around her without an invitation, a solid presence that hardly judged her for her moment of weakness. "I'm sorry. I wanted these bastards too, for her, for my father." She pressed her cheek against his suit coat, foolishly hoping she didn't ruin it with her small outburst of tears.

"Will it ever go away, then?" She murmured the words out loud, knowing that there was an irony in her asking them of Mulder of all people.

"I hope so," he sighed, releasing her enough to look down at her with his never-failing hope. "I keep going, Scully, because I want to believe that in the end there will be some sort of answer, for all of this. I want to know that these people we've lost haven't been in vain."

"Do you think we'll ever get that?" Right now, she wasn't so sure she could believe that.

"I have to." He replied simply, releasing her completely and stepping away. "Skinner is back at the office, now, if you would like you could go there as his doctor and give him the ass kicking he so richly deserves for being there." Mulder was obviously far too amused at the idea. And while it did have some merit, Skinner shouldn't be on his feet yet, and nowhere near a desk. But, she didn't have the heart to return to Washington, not after this.

"No, I think I'll go see Mom instead. I owe her dinner anyway, we haven't seen each other since my birthday."

Mulder nodded, for a moment looking forlorn at the idea of her not returning back with him to subject their boss to a doctor's dressing-down. "Sure! Give her my best."

"You could always do it yourself," she replied, wiping carefully at her eyes and shooting him a pointed look. "Mom asks about you. It's been a while since she's seen you."

"I am hardly ever in Baltimore."

"Well, now you are, so you don't have an excuse," she shot back, cutting down his excuse. "Please, Mulder, I don't want to have to see her alone. I don't want to have to tell her the truth about Melissa and her case just yet."

She needed him to be with her just this once, just to help keep her strong. Scully half expected him to say no, to weasel out of it with the uncomfortable guilt she knew he had around her family. But for once he didn't. He simply nodded, took her hand and smiled.

"How's your Mom's meatloaf?"

"Her fried chicken is better." Scully smiled softly, glancing back towards her sister's grave as she led the way to their parked cars. She had found the man who had killed her sister, perhaps that was
something of a victory, a small one at least. She should, at least for the moment, take some small comfort in that.
"Take any anthropology at Maryland, Scully?" It was one of those random, out of the blue sorts of questions she had quickly learned not to blink at when falling from the mouth of Fox Mulder.

"Didn't have to, I was a sciences major. Why?" She looked up from her steaming mug of coffee, her third of the morning so far, though her first at work. Her nights of late had been sleepless and Mulder's curious cheerfulness put her teeth on edge.

"Know anything about South American native tribes?" He was being deliberately vague this morning and for whatever reason it was pissing her off.

"No, I don't. Is there a reason you are prancing around like a hyper three-year-old waiting to tell me?"

She had taken the air out of his shiny, new case bubble. He dimmed somewhat as his full mouth quirked in a sort of hurt fashion. "Someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"To wake up would connote that I'd been asleep in the first place," she mumbled, gulping at her still hot coffee, not caring that it burned her mouth. Perhaps the bitter taste would remove the bitter mood she had sunk into in the weeks since Luis Cardinale had been found dead. She realized in a distantly vague sort of way it was unfair to Mulder, her behavior, the snappishness, and the irritation. He'd been nothing but unfailingly understanding. A part of her just couldn't stomach the idea of more weird shit right now.

Mulder's mood switched from delight to concern in a heartbeat, and for whatever reason she found that irritating as well. "Scully, if you need to talk…"

"I need to work, Mulder," she replied, softening her harshness apologetically. "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to press it, she could see that, but he paused, and deciding against it returned to the paperwork in his hand. "Boston PD called on a case of a murder at the Natural History Museum up there. Seems there's been a death in connection to a strange urn returned to the museum from Ecuador. One of the archaeologists working on the dig was found dead last night among the artifacts, including the urn, which the natives claimed at the time of its discovery carried a curse on it."

"A curse?" Of course, she thought, only just managing not to roll her eyes at Mulder when he muttered the words so seriously. "Been up watching old black and white horror films again?"

"Not my words, the museum curators," he shot back, a tad defensively. "A Dr. Lewton, head of the Hall of Indigenous People's exhibits. I spoke to him after I got off with Boston PD. He felt since this might have 'international tones' the FBI should be involved."

"And the moment he started spouting 'curse' they directed him to you?"
"Well, at least I fulfill a function and a purpose within the Bureau, right?" Mulder shrugged cheerfully. "In actuality, Lewton suspects someone is using the story of a curse to cause a stir about the urns presence in America. Seems the Ecuadorian government was none too pleased about their sacred, native artifacts being taken out of the country, even by a dig organized by the museum. I put in a call or two over to some of Dad's old friends over at State when I got off the phone with Lewton, apparently there was some hinky dealings getting the urn out of there."

"Is 'hinky' even a technical word?"

"It is for the State Department. Anyway, Lewton and a Carl Roosevelt, also from the museum, organized this dig when the state petroleum company announced plans to run a pipeline through there, upsetting the Secona Indians. The museum came in, all friendly and full of good will, promising them to rescue their ancient artifacts, but neglecting to tell them that they planned to do so by carting them off to Boston."

"So, what does this have to do with our murder again?" Not even the three cups of coffee were making Scully alert enough to follow the pattern of Mulder's thoughts, which even on his best days tended to fall less in a straight line and more in a spider web.

"Turns our Roosevelt died while on the dig in Ecuador. The Ecuadorian government told Lewton and the State Department that Roosevelt died due to a wild animal attack." Mulder paused dramatically, his eyes bright as he leaned against the desk behind him. "Funnily enough, that's exactly what looks like happened to our murder suspect in Boston."

"A wild animal attack? In Boston?" Scully knew better than to ask Mulder if he was serious. She knew he was. "From what?"

"I've seen more than a few drunken Celtics fans in my life, it's a possibility, but somehow, I don't think that's what's going on here."

"Lewton suspects a set up, then?"

"That's what he's saying," Mulder nodded, pushing off the desk and reaching for his suit jacket. "And I'm assuming you are suspecting that it really is a curse?"

"Drunken Celtics fans aside, how many people do you know of who could disembowel a man completely?"

"I've seen some of the manicures in those magazines of yours. Should I start naming names?"

"Funny!" he smirked, grabbing his overcoat. "Come on, G-woman, we are headed up to my hometown to poke at ancient Indian curses."

"Oh, joy!" She sighed, reaching for her own overcoat and briefcase, making a mental note to call her mother about the dog yet again. "Boston is hardly your hometown, Mulder, you grew up on the Vineyard."

"It's close enough. Just like saying San Diego is yours, though you went to high school in Baltimore."

"You don't even like the Boston sports teams."

"What are the San Diego teams again?"
Damn it! He knew he had her on the baseball team.

"Padres! Padres are the baseball team, and before you start casting stones, Scully, I would like to point out that Boston is the home of the Red Sox, Celtics, Patriots, and Bruins, none of which I follow or like."

"Hence why I don't think its fair you call Boston your 'hometown'."

"Are you just looking for reasons to ride my ass today, Scully?"

She had finally annoyed him and a small part of her grumpy soul was inordinately pleased with this.

"Yes," she replied, before breaking out in a small smile. She really had been, when it came down to it.

"God help me when you're in one of your catty moods." He scowled at nothing in particular as he lead the way out of their office and towards the elevator.

"You don't believe in God, either," she couldn't help but interject.

"Damn it, Scully..."
A Girly Scream

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is completely squicked by a bit of blood and guts.

There were few things in this world Scully was sure would truly disturb her partner on deeply, fundamental levels; fire, bugs, and bodily fluids. She had seen Mulder jump off moving objects, face down serial killers, even poke around graves with hardly a bat of one of his dark eyelashes. Her faith in her partner's bravery was without question, even when it did on occasion border on reckless. But the minute something viscous contained wholly within the body was involved…

"I think it's starting to rain." Mulder glanced absently up into the gray, New England sky, frowning when no other drops fell around he crime scene, strewn with the tangled body parts of Dr. Lewton. Strange, Scully thought, glancing around, the forecast had called for partly cloudy skies but had said nothing regarding precipitation. She frowned between the heavy press of silver clouds above to Mulder's confused face, spotting the dribble of dark, crimson red trickling down his temple.

"I don't think so, Mulder," she murmured, reaching up with a forefinger to swipe at it, knowing from years of experience exactly what it was. And it wasn't from him, she was certain. Almost in unison the two stared up directly above their heads, eyes lighting on something wet and shiny in the branches above, strung across it like demented Christmas garland, dripping viscous gore on the ground below.

"What the hell is that?" Mulder's horror was only compounded by the realization that whatever it was on his face came from the oozing organ in the tree above. Without thinking, he began to rub at his temple violently, smearing blood through the strands of dark hair there. If Scully had to bet her Stanford Medical School degree on it, she'd say that was Lewton's small intestines sagging across two main branches, the upper most part snagged and spun around the top branch, as if someone had flung it carelessly up there as a joke. She wanted to know how it ended up there, twenty feet above the ground below.

"Someone, get a ladder! Get that down from there and into evidence, please! It will have to go with the body." Scully's voice rang authoritatively to the closest police officers, all of whom gave her a mildly disgusted look of "you can't be serious" before glancing between one another trying to decide who the lucky winner of that illustrious task was going to be. Honestly, these were Boston cops; it wasn't as if they hadn't seen a dead body part or two before.

"Did I get it off?" Mulder whimpered beside her in a panicked voice, bending his head down just enough for her to see.

"I think you smeared it in," she replied dryly, doing nothing to help the level of revolted disgust he was feeling. Honestly, a grown man who was beat up, bruised, and shot at on a fairly consistent basis, and the sight of another man's blood bothered him? She was stunned he hadn't given off a hysterical, girlish scream, the way he was carrying on, rubbing at the spot, turning the skin pink.

"Come here," she sighed, taking pity on him and pulling him away from Lewton's car and the body parts scattered about. Really, sometimes Mulder could be worse than a child. Without a word, she
gabbed the elbow of his overcoat, pulling him towards their rental car as she opened the door, reaching inside for her briefcase.

"Always come prepared," she sighed, pulling out a package of handy-wipes, smirking up at his disgruntlement as she tore it open with still gloved fingers, the antiseptic, lemon scent cutting through the damp, March air.

"I can clean my own damn face, Scully," he protested as she reached up to his temple and the hair clumped up with Lewton's congealed blood. "I'm a grown man, you know."

"I've seen your apartment, Mulder, I don't know if you can spell clean," she sniffed, holding on to his shoulder with her left hand to force him still while she scrubbed briefly at the spot. Mulder frowned with indignity as he stood there under her ministrations, shooting furtive looks at the local PD, as if worried they would snicker at the big, FBI man being tended to by his short, female partner. Scully hated to tell him this, but with four feet of a man's small intestine waving in the breeze above them, Mulder's whining about a little blood in his hair was probably the last thing the boys in blue were paying attention to.

"There, all done," she whispered, patting down the now damp spot briefly, smoothing down the soft, dark hair against his head before he pulled away in brief irritation. "You're going to smell like lemon head for the rest of the day, you know."

"Better than smelling like a morgue," he grumbled grumpily, plucking the hand wipe out of her grasping fingers to run across his own palm, scrubbing at it as if he planned on going into full, invasive surgery.

"I resemble that remark," she protested mildly, grabbing the wipe back before he managed to rub his palm raw with it. "Which is where I plan on spending the rest of my afternoon with what remains of Dr. Lewton's remains, if they can get that intestine out of the tree over there. Someone had managed to get a ladder from somewhere, Scully assumed from a maintenance shed, but at only 6 feet, they were still woefully short in trying to get the dripping organ out of the branches. Dismayed groans and loud cursing in the unique, Boston accent punctuated the air, as someone called a suggestion that maybe they could grab a rake from the maintenance shed. Scully frowned, wondering how much that would damage any evidence on the intestine. She doubted anyone would be willing to listen to her suggestion on a cherry picker or a telephone truck to get it down.

"Well, Doctor Scully, how in the hell do you propose a man's innards got flung up into a tree like toilet paper?" Mulder eyed the process of intestine removal with a slightly green face.

"An expert on TP-ing your neighbor's trees, Mulder?" Scully hardly missed a beat, trying her best not to laugh openly either Mulder or the police, but felt her mouth twitching all the same.

"It was the Vineyard, we were easily bored." Mulder sniffed, turning away as someone managed to hook a gardening implement around the middle of the dangling length of flesh and tug it down. "Doesn't explain how that got up there."

"To be honest, I don't know either," Scully admit slowly, watching in dismay as they tugged to get the intestine off the branch, enough to get it off and allow it to slop to the ground with a sickening splat, earning more swearing from the police surrounding them. "The condition of the body when they found it indicates he was bent over the engine looking inside. If an animal came and attacked him, chances are he didn't even see it, whatever it was? Somehow I doubt it had anything to do with your theory on crazed Celtics fans."
"You haven't seen them when the Lakers are in town." Mulder turned from the squeamish police, all attempting to pick up the entrails with the garden implement without having to physically touch the organ. "I still say Mona Wustner knows something about this, something she's not telling us, and it has something to do with Bilac."

"Bilac couldn't do this, Mulder, nothing short of a wild animal could."

"And since many Bostonians I know don't have those around on leashes, it leads us back to Bilac, don't you think?"

"How so? Your jaguar spirit? You think Bilac is summoning the totem of a disgruntled Native American tribe to wreak havoc on a museum curator he had a spat with?" Somehow, this made more sense than her wild animal theory?

"I haven't heard any reports of rampaging, while animals running through Harvard Square, have you?" He glanced sideways at the men scuffling over the internal remains of Dr. Lewton. "Try to explain that, Scully?"

She hated when he had a point.
Appeasing the Goddess

Chapter Summary

In which Scully bemoans losing a cat fight.

Despite the make up she caked on that morning, Scully could still see the fine, red, puffy lines across her cheeks and forehead, marring her complexion as she studied her hand-held, compact mirror critically. Not that Scully was a particularly vain woman, no more so than anyone else, she surmised, but she still felt as if every eye in the office had turned to gaze at her that morning, wondering why it was Scully looked as if she had gotten into a literal cat fight and lost. Perhaps, she sighed as she frowned at the small circle of herself in her hand, it was because she had gotten into a catfight and lost.

"Cheer up, Scully, you look fine!" Mulder offered meager encouragement, seeing as he didn't have a scratch on him. How did that work out? She gets a cat latched on to her face and he comes out without a mark on him? It only seemed fair that if she had to be drug through tunnels and attacked by feral cats that he bear the same scars as well.

"You know, I'm glad I own a dog," Scully sighed, snapping shut her compact and sliding it into her purse. "Say what you will about Queequeg, but at least I don't have to worry about him drawing blood and leaving scars."

"Did you forget your dog was found eating his last owners remains?" Mulder never missed a chance to bring that up regarding her Pomeranian.

She glared at him across the office as he sat behind his desk, jotting notes across a well-used notepad, his spidery hand scratching audibly in the room. "Do we have the forensic report on Mona and Bilac's bodies yet?"

"Yeah," Mulder paused in his feverish writing long enough to snag a stack of faxed files, rolling his chair from behind the desk enough to hand them over to her outstretched fingers. "The ME up in Boston seems to want to stick with the animal attack theory."

"Ignoring the fact that there are no animals large enough to do that sort of damage running around Boston?"

"The ME seems pretty content to stick with the feral cats we reported, which up to this point were undiscovered. However, Boston Animal Control has stated that it is completely possible, given the museums rat population, that a pride of feral cats could have done this damage, however, they feel it is unlikely. Still, the ME has no better explanation, so he's sticking to it." Mulder sounded torn over whether he was impressed the ME went along with one of the farfetched theories or disgusted he settled for the most reasonable of all the farfetched ideas of how these attacks happened. Trust Mulder to be disappointed that an explanation wasn't crazy enough.

Scully glanced through the ME's findings, most of which were indeed consistent with an animal attack, though nothing of the size of a small, domestic house cat, even an entire pride of them. Bilac's remains caught her attention though as she glanced through the toxicology report.
"Did you see what the ME turned up on what was in Bilac's blood stream?"

"Yeah, Ayahuasca, your 'yaje'. You were right, Bilac was tripping, probably had been since he was down in Ecuador." Mulder leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs in front of him, thoughtful. "Many Amazonian tribes use it in religious ceremonies. They brew it from the leaves of any number of psychotropic plants in the region."

"And you don't think that it had anything to do with Bilac or these strange deaths?"

"Bilac ended up as dead as Mona did. Truth be told, I don't think Bilac was trying to promote these deaths to get the urn back to the Secona."

"What was he doing then?"

"I think he was trying to protect everyone." Mulder nodded towards the ME report. "When we found him at the museum, he said he was there because the Amaru would not be appeased. I think he was using the yaje to try and contact the Secona's jaguar goddess, because he knew that by taking the urn, everyone at the museum was in danger."

Was it disturbing that she hardly batted an eye when Mulder spouted theories like that? Disturbingly enough, it did make its own weird sort of sense in the profiler way. She could understand Bilac imbibing the yaje for that very purpose. "But it still doesn't explain the deaths. If Bilac wasn't responsible for them, are you really comfortable with the ME's finding that this was all due to freakish attacks by feral cats running around the Boston sewer system?"

"Perhaps that answer isn't that far off." Mulder shrugged eloquently, his shoulder rising and falling lazily, his drawling monotone thoughtful. "After all, we are dealing with a jaguar spirit, a goddess that takes the form of a large cat. What's to say the goddess couldn't take the form of wild, house cats?"

"You putting that in the report you're writing for Skinner?" She wouldn't put it past him.

"I think I'll say that the ME believes that these attacks were caused by a freakish, natural occurrence which happened to play into the fears of Dr. Bilac, aggravated by the yaje he consumed and the stories of the Secona Indians of Ecuador. How does that sound?"

Those were surprising words coming from her partner, who liked to regularly thumb his aquiline nose at convention just for the sheer perverse delight of it. Something about it didn't quite ring true for her. Mulder never caved in to the most probable, rational answer not if his life depended on it. Feral cats or not, it didn't explain those deaths, not really. She was a pathologist, she could read the lines between the ME's report. He had no idea and had grasped for whatever explanation in this whole mess fit the manner of death of the victims.

"You aren't arguing this one to the death, Mulder?" She raised cool, dubious eyebrows at him.

"I'm not going to argue the point is more like it."

She paused, studying him for the briefest of moments. He wasn't sick, she could tell that by looking at him. Outside of outside forces such as alien viruses and gunshot wounds, Mulder was never sick. So, why was he acquiescing so easily? "What did the State Department tell you?"

"That the request of the Secona Indians and the letter of Dr. Bilac had been received and they were not holding an investigation, pure and simple. They maintain that they decided this before the murders started happening."
"Do you believe that?" Scully certainly didn't. The State Department never moved that quickly over something they saw as trivial as an outraged Indian tribe.

"Well, I believe that the deaths at the museum certainly didn't help, especially when it came out that the whole reason the urn and the objects came into the museum's possession was because of an oil company that, ironically enough, the State department is rather keen on keeping happy for obvious reasons. Better to appease everyone, the oil company, the Native Americans, the Boston PD, and just shut the thing down, do the investigation, ship the urn home, and make everyone happy, including the jaguar spirit."

Amazed, Scully watched him, confused as to why exactly he was so happy accepting this. "Mulder, I must admit, I'm surprised at you. Normally you would be kicking and screaming and fighting this tooth and nail, knocking on doors at the State Department and insisting that these murders were committed by a foreign goddess exacting her revenge. What gives?"

He seemed amused by her incredulity. "In the end, the right thing is happening, isn't it? The urn is going back and that should clear things up."

"But Mona…Lewton…Bilac…the dog? Their murders will all go unsolved."

"I don't know about that," he smiled mysteriously, pulling up his long legs. "I think we know what caused it. But how do you bring an ancient, Native American goddess to trial? You of all people, Dr. Scully, would appreciate that."

"I do. I'm surprised that you do, too."

"Even I recognize that there are some battles that are worth fighting. This wasn't one of them."

He sounded so circumspect in that moment. She almost had to wonder if there really wasn't something wrong with him. "You feeling all right, Mulder?"

His response was to smirk and laugh at her. "Perhaps every so often I actually do pay attention to what you have to say, Agent Scully. Every so often."

"Mmmm, wish it was during those times you almost get yourself killed." She smirked at him as he chuckled, turning to his computer.
"Scully, your dog is looking at my leg as if it wants to pee on it."

"He won't, I just took him out."

"Doesn't mean he isn't thinking about it." Mulder sat on her couch glaring at her auburn-haired Pomeranian who sat blinking mildly at Mulder, hardly noticing him. Mulder's antipathy towards her dog had always been present. He had never quite gotten over his revulsion of seeing what the small Queequeg could do when starved for several days and left alone with the body of his dead mistress. Not a particularly good way of starting a relationship.

"Mulder, what are you, three?" She was snappish and grumpy, the light outside had barely turned the sky a pearly gray, morning slowly creeping over Georgetown as she fluttered around her apartment. She hated packing at the last minute and usually was better prepared than this. But she had barely finished her laundry from their last jaunt to Boston, and now they were running off to…

"Where is this case again?" She tried to snag a medical journal for the plane while munching on half of a dryly, toasted bagel, searching for the coffee mug she had left somewhere in the apartment after she had let Mulder in.

"San Francisco, FBI has been monitoring a series of illegal immigrant deaths, the last three have been in San Francisco. They called this one in when they got no headway on it." Mulder continued to watch her dog with dubious suspicion, but wisely turned the focus of his attention to the coffee mug she had passed him as he walked in the door. "Neither SFPD nor the Bureau can make heads or tails out of it. It could be people taking advantage of illegals, it could be Chinese gang activity, it could be drug smuggling, it could be all of the above."

"That's nice and vague." Scully snorted as she wandered into her bedroom, several newly cleaned blouses in hand, the last thing she needed to pack in her small suitcase. She'd yet to find her coffee, wherever it was. "Strange, that doesn't sound particularly like an X-file to me." Usually Mulder would balk at these sorts of cases, kicking his heels petulantly at the very idea of doing regular, FBI work.

"It's not. It came down from Skinner last night, part of his 'non-weird shit' quota he has for us. So we do a straightforward case every so often, make Skinner happy, make the other AD's happy, and everyone leaves us alone for a little while."

"How well behaved you are, Mulder. What's the catch?" She neatly folded each blouse, calling over her shoulder as she did so.

"Why does there have to be a catch?"

"Mulder, you don't do regular FBI cases if your life depends on it. There's a catch in here somewhere." She neatly piled the clothing at the top of the case, turning for the last toiletries she
needed from her bathroom to toss inside. Somehow, unsurprisingly, there was the coffee she had poured herself, sitting on the edge of the sink, right by her make up bag. Always the last place you look.

Picking up the thread of her conversation with Mulder, she continued as she scooped up bag and coffee cup from her bathroom, dumping the former in her case and closing its soft top. "After three years, I've caught on to a thing or two about you. What's the 'spooky' angel? Ancient Chinese mysticism? You suspect aliens are targeting the immigrant community?"

She paused long enough to quaff deeply from the now lukewarm coffee. "Human trafficking in rare body parts used in ancient, Chinese medicines?"

"You know, I was going to bust your ass on the 'spooky' crack, but the last idea is just gross, even for you."

She jumped and spun on her partner, who stood lazily in her doorway, cup of coffee in hand, watching her as she finished the last of her packing. He glanced around her bedroom with interest. "Have you changed things in here?"

"No." She frowned, feeling decidedly uncomfortable with him scrutinizing her most private of areas with such a critical eye. Mulder rarely came to her apartment, though he had a key, and rarer still did he ever see her bedroom.

"It looks different." He shrugged noncommittally.

"How would you know? The last time you were in here, you were delirious." That had been nearly a year ago, with Mulder glassy eyed and anguished, covered in his own father's blood. Then she hadn't thought twice about putting him in her bed, she needed a larger space for him to be comfortable while she worked on him. But he was healthy enough now, and it was vaguely disturbing having him standing there, in her personal space, lazily watching her as she zipped up her suitcase, pulling it from the bed to the floor. While he slept on his couch in the most public of areas, or at least she guessed he slept on his couch, she had her room, her inner sanctum of quietude. It seemed so personal having him in there, something vaguely forbidden.

God, being Catholic made her neurotic.

Clearly such notions didn't occur to Mulder, who shrugged as he finished off his coffee. "Who says there has to be anything strange about this case for me to want to take it?"

"Because it's you, Mulder." She latched on to original topic of conversation again, slipping the suitcase over her shoulder and herding her tall, lanky partner out of her doorway. "What gives? Where is the X-file angle?"

"You know you'd have had a great career in profiling, Scully."

"Don't deflect the subject! What is it?" She carefully moved through the house to the kitchen, rinsing out her coffee mug and setting it to dry before reaching for Mulder's as he followed close behind.

"The last body found was by a night watchman at a crematorium. He went to check on some noises he heard when he saw three figures with strange, painted faces rushing away into the night, disappearing. He went back to check and found the last victim being burned alive in the crematorium. Before he could manage to turn the thing off, the victim was dead and mostly ash."

"Jesus!" The very idea made the bitter taste of the coffee turn sour on her tongue as she stared up at
her partner. "Were all the bodies burned like that?"

"You'll get to read yourself when we get on that plane flight to San Fran." Mulder waggled an eyebrow knowingly, glancing at his watch. "Which we should be getting to if you are quite ready?" There was a hidden note of accusation there, as if he couldn't believe that she of all people would be late getting to something like this.

"You say that as if I'm chronically late for things." One time and he waved it around like a flag of her imperfections. She brushed past him, scooping up briefcase and coat, leaning over the couch to give her sleeping dog a scritch behind his ears before heading to the door.

"You think he'll be all right there, by himself?" Mulder glanced at the snoozing dog dubiously.

"What? There's no dead body around for him to chew on, he'll be fine." Scully sniffed, opening the front door. "Mom will check on him. He'll have food and water. He won't jump me the minute I walk back in the door to gnaw on my eyeballs."

"God, what is with you and the disgusting imagery this morning?"

"Pathology humor, squicking you out Mulder?"

"I think you need a boyfriend. Get out, date, see live human beings other than me for a change."

"In that, Mulder, I couldn't agree with you more."
"Do you know what they put in these things?"

"No." Scully ignored the childish dubiousness of her partner, who poked at one soft, steaming dumpling with a long, acrylic chopstick, as if expected it to sprout legs and fangs. It was highly probably in Mulder's imagination they probably did, hence the petulant, three-year-old frown as he successfully speared the bite-sized lump of shrimp and dough to bring it towards his face for a more critical inspection.

"Are you sure its edible?"

"It's dim sum, dumplings. Do you know how many times I ate here in medical school? I didn't die once." Palo Alto, where Stanford University was located, was only a short drive by freeway from San Francisco proper. "And I'm sure if I had gotten ill, I had plenty of doctors around me to quantify it as poison."

"I thought Chinese food meant noodles and stir-fried beef-and-broccoli."

"You really have the cultural awareness of a banana slug, don't you?" She sighed as she eyed the severe looking, Chinese women tooling around the large dining room, pushing silvery aluminum carts around large tables of murmuring diners. She was looking for the one that had the soft, bread-like bao, filled with pork inside. As usual in a dim sum restaurant, the one thing you want most was the one thing that never seemed to come around to your table. It didn't help that she was sitting there, one of the few Caucasian customers, with a man-child who kept inspecting ever item she pulled off the cart as if it might carry some sort of strange, foreign disease.

"When you said we were going out for some authentic, local food, I thought you meant tacos."

"You do realize just how bad that sounds, don't you?"

Mulder didn't seem to particularly care. He chose to nibble at the dumpling gingerly, and finding that it neither tasted putrid nor caused him to call over dead on the spot, decided that this first entry into his dim sum eating adventure was perhaps not so bad after all. Would the entire evening be like this, she wondered mildly as she plucked several dumplings onto her own plate and sipped gratefully at the fragrant, jasmine tea. She wondered what he would say if she snagged an order of chicken feet of the cart. He'd probably pass out from sheer disgust.

"Do you have any idea what we are eating?"

"Nope!" She shook her head as she waved towards one of the dour-faced women pushing the cart of trays carrying the very thing she wanted. "I used to come here once every couple of weeks or so though with some of the Chinese kids in my program. They swore by the place and I figured if anyone should know it was them. They usually ordered for us. I just figured out which dishes I liked and always pick those out."
"So we could be eating roasted rat for all we know, and you wouldn't know."

"After our last case, Mulder, do you really want to be bringing up rats around me?"

He paused thoughtfully, nodded, and quietly shut his mouth.

"Any word yet from Detective Chao on our suspect?" She gratefully reached for the platter of steamed, bready bun, passing the woman their dinner card filled with inked stamps.

"Not when we left for dinner. Forensics ran a trace on the glass eye. It's an okay job, but rather low grade for what is on the market now. They suspect it's a black market deal, probably through a doctor doing backroom medicine or someone who is being paid out through one of the Chinese gangs, they can't say for sure. Chao is doing some footwork on it."

"And the hell money?"

"Chao says he thinks he knows where it came from, but again, takes some footwork." Mulder set down his chopsticks thoughtfully as he frowned blandly at the plates in front of them, eyeing the bao with particular suspicion.

"Mulder, I promise I'm not going to feed you horse meat. It's perfectly safe!"

"It's not that." His eyes flashed for a moment with the brilliance that she came to recognize as some connection being made in Mulder's logic and from her guess it wasn't one he was comfortable with. He sucked on his bottom lip briefly, before shaking his head, troubled.

"I would never think ill of a fellow cop, you know that Scully."

"But you think ill of Chao?"

"Not ill, per se, just wary."

"Why?" He'd spoken to the man for all of five minutes that afternoon and had only exchanged brief phone calls since.

"I don't know," he admitted slowly, reaching for the pot of jasmine tea, his large hands delicately managing the fragile pot. "Nothing in particular, I suppose."

She knew better than that. Mulder was frightening with the ability he had to see the patterns no one else did, and obviously some pattern had just spun itself to life, one that perhaps only he could understand at the moment. "You suspect Chao might try to thwart this case somehow?"

"Maybe. I don't know." Mulder raised the tiny, teacup to his lips, frowning in distant thought. "Gut feeling more than anything else. I'll be the first to admit, Scully, my knowledge of the Chinese community here and the beliefs and customs that people here hold is minimal at best. And while I recognize that for the Chinese Americans and immigrants here it's a way of life they've had for decades, even centuries, whose to say that what we are dealing with here in this case isn't cultural, something that the bounds of our laws aren't equipped to deal with?"

"And you are afraid that Chao, being Chinese-American, will work to protect his cultural heritage over the oath he swore as a San Francisco police officer? That's a bit of a leap, don't you think?"

"He might not do it openly, even willingly. We all come into this line of work with our own biases, our own deep set, ingrained beliefs, whether its in aliens, science, or Chinese ghosts." He smiled pointedly. "We each come to this work highly protective of some aspect of our personal believe
and many of us our forced to question it, to rethink it, to examine it from different angles. But this is deeper than that. I just worry that for Chao he might overlook or brush off the obvious, even ignore it outright, because he won't want to believe that it has anything to do with our case."

"Including Chinese ghosts?" Scully had a feeling that was where her partner's ideas were turning.

"Maybe," he shrugged noncommittally. "We won't know until Chao gets done with the investigation, will we?"

"I suppose not," she replied, not wanting to think the worst of their fellow officer, but now unable to help herself thanks to Mulder's suggestion. She felt guilty even thinking it. No one made that suggestion of her whenever a case involving Catholicism came up. But didn't she do the same thing to Mulder every time they ran across another missing little girl? How did they, as law enforcement officers, ever completely keep their objectivity? Was there such a thing? As a scientist she wanted to believe there was, but as a human being, she had to believe that often there wasn't.

"Is there a reason that the women behind the carts all look as if they plan to shove a chopstick through my eye?" Mulder watched one of the carts pass by with apprehension, chewing thoughtfully on another shrimp dumpling, his conversation switching gears suddenly again. She was so used to that out of him, she hardly noticed anymore.

"I think its just part of the experience. Make you work for the food, rather than have it politely brought to you."

"You know, in future, I think I can live without your attempts for me to reach outside of my cultural comfort zone." He poked at the bao with interest, decided it was safe, and snagged it to his plate.

"Pardon me if I thought the profiler might appreciate some cultural insights for his case," she shot back dryly. "I can't take you anywhere, can I, Mulder?"

"Oh God, please tell me those aren't chicken feet that woman is gnawing on over there!"

No, she supposed, she probably couldn't.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully may need to check her privilege.

"Body parts?" Mulder sucked in cool air from the San Francisco Bay, his long steps faltering ever so slightly as Scully glanced sideways at him. His pained expression had nothing to do with the steep incline of the hill they hurried up, but she did suspect it had everything to do with a tiny frog leaping out of a dead man's chest. Mulder's constitution had gotten better in the years she had known him, but not that strong. Scully reached into her own pocket, a small sample jar with the strange, little prize smooth against her fingertips.

"The trade in illegal body parts has gone on for years. Families too desperate or ineligible to be placed on the normal donor lists often turn to underground means to find ways of helping their loved ones." Scully recalled all the warnings they as surgeons had all received about just where the donated organs they were readying to put into their patients had come from. "It's not uncommon for there to be rackets centered on the trade of human organs. While I was in medical school there was a giant scandal at a rival school regarding donated corpses intended for scientific study being harvested for parts, and there are hundreds of rumors of criminal rings out there who target people for the specific purpose of finding kidneys, bone marrow, livers."

"All right, I get the picture," Mulder muttered, gritting his teeth, hunching his shoulders in a mild shudder. "The question then comes down to why someone is targeting Chinese immigrants for organ harvesting."

"That's fairly obvious. Most organ harvesting happens in poor or undeveloped areas. It's rampant in areas of Asia and Africa, where buyers will offer a small pittance for an organ they can they resell on the black market for thousands of dollars. Many of those who sell their own body parts are desperate for any sort of cash. I suspect that this is what is going on here."

"And the ghost? Where Lo's body was found was marked by the symbol for it."

"Probably just a warning to someone. What it sounds like we are dealing with here, Mulder, is an illegal harvesting ring, probably related to the Triads, and that symbol was nothing more than a message to stay out of it. Perhaps a way of playing on cultural fears and taboos to keep the locals from cooperating with the police in looking too hard or fast as to what is going on."

"Police, like Chao?" As usual Mulder had no problem following the linear thread of her thoughts, frowning with cautious worry as they stepped up to the police precinct nestled just outside of the brightly colored, dragon gates of Chinatown itself.

"You were the one who said it yourself, Mulder, you wondered if Chao wouldn't be too close to this, his cultural ties making him too protective. And you have to admit he's been slow on the uptake on most of this case." All their focus on ghosts and festivals and the obvious facts were eluding him in a morass of Chinese folklore and legend, spun by Chao himself.

"Slow on the uptake? Isn't that a bit harsh?" Mulder paused in holding open the heavy doors, dubiously watching as she stepped inside.
"Come on, all that nonsense about 'xiong zhai' and hell money. We've been lead around our noses into the weird and mysterious and who has be the one doing it? He's obviously protecting something."

"You heard Chao say it himself, he doesn't buy into most of the legends of his parents. You call me culturally unenlightened, but aren't you painting Chao a little thickly with your brush over there? After all, not everyone who happens to have a Chinese last name believes in the same thing or is even necessarily ethnically Chinese. It would be like me looking at your hair and assuming your are Catholic, or someone looking at my nose and assuming I attend temple."

"Well beyond the fact that I haven't been to mass in years and your mother's family eats bacon, we weren't raised in ethnic communities, unless you want to call Martha's Vineyard ethnically WASP."

"I'm various flavors of Dutch on both sides, no Anglo-Saxon here," he shot back, slipping off his long coat. "I'm just saying it's a dangerous assumption you are building against a fellow officer. He's Chinese, yes, and I was worried about him being protectionist at the beginning."

"And now?" She stopped, turning to him with familiar challenge, crossing her arms as she wondered what brought this turn of opinion in Mulder's ever-complex reasoning. "You were the one who questioned him first, Mulder. You started this."

"Because I think there is more to this case than just a simple organ harvesting," he replied, unerringly meeting her irritated glare. "Like I said, there are beliefs and customs in play here that go back for millennia. There are levels of culture involved that we can't just brush aside and ignore for straight line reasoning."

Her reasoning, he meant. Scully bit her tongue, chewing on it softly, knowing he had a point, but still finding it irritating. "Chao doesn't believe in ghosts. He said so himself."

"Yeah, but the people he deals with everyday do, the people he has to talk to for this case. And what you have seen as being 'slow on the uptake' could be nothing more than Chao knowing what he's dealing with better than we do. This may be America, Scully, but the immigrant community here is barely removed from a whole other world, and without respecting that in this case, you may be making assumptions of an officer who doesn't deserve them."

"This after you said you were worried about him."

"Worried doesn't mean I believe he's colluding with the local crime syndicates, Scully, it means I questioned his objectivity. Though now, I'm beginning to wonder if I should have."

She hated the pointed look he was giving her as he reached inside his coat pocket for his crumpled bag of sunflower seeds. Damn him, how could he sit over dinner and tell her one thing and then turn right around and undercut her like that. "I want to talk to Chao."

His look said he thought it was a bad idea, but he didn't argue as she turned and followed behind, the sound of crunching seeds following her as she stepped up the old, darkened stairs. As a detective, Chao rated an office on the third floor, and she meandered through the ancient looking desks to a neat office in the corner, where she could hear his voice speaking in clipped, nasal tones in a dialect that she couldn't recognize. It nettled her, Mulder's implications, the veiled note that she of all people could be reacting with prejudice in this situation. She thought it was a fairly straightforward assessment of the facts presented. An organization, most likely originating out of the gangs within the community, decided to pray on the weak and vulnerable to earn money through organ harvesting and use a local cop to keep it quiet. She heard Chao's comments about his mortgage payments, the life he built for himself from his immigrant parents' humble beginnings.
That can't have come cheap. She knew police in most cities were grossly underpaid and that the
cost of living in San Francisco was outrageously expensive. Chao couldn't have been made
detective more than a few years ago. Perhaps the offer of financial assistance in exchange for his
covering up of the situation would go a long way to making Chao a respected, settled member of
San Francisco society, the immigrant kid who made good. It had nothing to do with what race he
was. That he was ethnically Chinese just gave him better access to the avenues that could afford
him such assistance. In the medical community she had friends who cut across all ethnic and
religious barriers and had thought of herself as being blind to the color of skin. But in investigative
work, such a blind eye was dangerous. Sometimes you had to go with the obvious prejudices, if
nothing else because they tended to lead to the obvious conclusions.

Mulder nodded at Chao, whose ear was glued to a phone as they entered, meandering to the
window with his bag of sunflower seeds, his coat tossed lightly over a random chair. She glared at
him as he ignored her, realizing this was his way of silently disagreeing with her assessment. Fine,
let him be that way, she sighed, her fingers pulling the sample jar out of her pocket. Not that
professionalism had ever gotten in Fox Mulder's way in his career.

Chao's conversation ended and he looked up at her expectantly as she handed him the jar. His
features turned to confusion as he studied the frog inside. "What's this?"

Mulder continued to crack seeds between his teeth, the snap of them reverberating around the
room.

"Maybe you can tell us. It was found in the body cavity of the man who was dumped in the grave."
She studied him as he frowned into the glass, but he displayed no obvious look of concern or panic.

"This?" He set it down with a frown. Clearly it wasn't something he expected, even if he was in on
it.

"You said the frog was a symbol of luck and prosperity. Unless this is somebody's sick joke, I'd
say it must have another meaning."

"Well, if it does, I don't know what it is. I mean, it could be some kind of. Triad symbol.
Something from organized crime." He shrugged dismissively.

Fine, if he wanted to play this game that way, then she would go straight to the heart of the matter.
"Maybe you can tell me this; have you heard any word on the street about the black market selling
of body parts?"

That caught him unaware. His dark eyes widened, disbeliefing laughter lurking just beneath the
surface. "Here? In Chinatown?"

"This man with the frog in his chest was missing a cornea and a kidney. They were taken prior to
the time of death before the final removal of his heart."

Mulder turned to watch the two of them, glancing at Chao quietly, impassively watching, but
offering nothing. Scully pressed on. "And I found what is known as 'sterile ice' on the skin, in and
around the incision on his chest. It is a substance that is used to preserve human organs for
transplant."

The detective looked as if she had just suggested aliens had decided to take up residence in the
district, shaking his head with a stunned chuckle. "I don't even know where to start."

"Well, we're going to need more help from you than that, Detective." Mulder's voice was soft and
drawing from the window as he let his gaze flicker over to Scully. Chao turned to it, eyes narrowing at her partner as he turned briefly from him to her and back.

"The implication being that I'm not trying to help?" The laughter was gone now, replaced by a much colder form of disbelief.

"No," Mulder shot back, making his stance at least perfectly clear. She might as well come out in the open then with her suspicious if he wasn't planning on making a united front.

"Either you resent us being here or you feel some kind of protectiveness towards the Chinese community."

Mulder grimaced as she said it, his full mouth quirking in disapproval as he returned to his seeds. She knew he felt she had no basis for her accusations, but he had been the one to bring it up first. How dare he turn from that position and leave her standing there, pointing the finger alone. Predictably, Chao's anger focused on her.

"Look, you don't even know what the hell you're dealing with here. This isn't some pretty little lacquer box you can just take the lid off and find out what's inside. You might see the face of a Chinese man here, but let me tell you something, they don't see the same face. They see the face of a cop. American-born Chinese, ABC. To them, I'm just as white as you are."

His dark eyes glittered at Scully, defensive as he jerked up, holding a piece of paper out to Mulder. Her partner took it, frowning down at it.

"You think because I speak the language I can get all your answers for you, but what good is an interpreter when everyone speaks the language of silence?"

Grabbing his coat, he slipped it on, making for the door as Mulder studied the paper, calling after him. "What is this?"

"It's the name of the company that installed the carpet in Johnny Lo's apartment. I just happened to run across it while I was sitting there twiddling my thumbs." His voice dripped with sarcasm as he shot another hard look at Scully. "You coming or not?"

She glanced up at Mulder, who didn't dare meet her eyes, but slipped the paper in his pocket, along with the seeds, and followed after Chao.

"Nice of your to back me up there, partner," she hissed as she rushed to keep up with his longer strides.

"I was perfectly fine with you hanging yourself on your own rope, Scully. You seemed determined to do it anyway."

"Chao knows something."

"Perhaps he does, but alienating him and assuming that just because he's Chinese like the rest of them and must know something is a good way of pissing someone off. I warned you, Scully, and you didn't listen."

"So you can now stand there and be sanctimonious, when you were the one questioning him in the beginning?"

"I didn't question him because I think he's involved. I questioned him because I think he understands that what we are dealing with goes beyond black and white laws and delves into
deeper cultural moires, something you in your leaps of conclusion there ignored in your rush to find an answer that fit the variables you had at hand." Now it was his turn to be angry, and heads turned to stare at the pair arguing openly on the floor of the police precinct, Chao included, his face inscrutable as he watched them.

"Not everything is about simple, straight-line analysis, Scully, no matter what the medical books and scientific pundits tell you. I would figure after three years of working with me, you would have realized that by now."

She wanted to formulate a response, but found she couldn't. Torn between fuming at her partner and scuttling away from his rather poignant and stinging set down, she chose instead to keep silent as he turned to follow Chao, his long strides leading him away from her, even as she paced behind more slowly. She could feel the curious questions burning behind her as she walked out, with as much dignity as she could muster.
"We were both didn't see it." Mulder's long, angry strides seemed to eat up the cracked, gray pavement as he strode down the hill, barely stopping at their rental as he spun on her. "This is a game they are playing."

His eyes glittered as he stared mindlessly at the clutter of tenement buildings, filled to capacity with hundreds, if not thousands of immigrants, mostly Chinese, all trying desperately to make it in their new country by any means possible.

"This isn't just a game, Mulder, its survival. That girl up there has months to live without the treatment she needs, if that long." Hsin's daughter, Kim, already looked frighteningly frail, dark bruises marking her far too pale skin. "Without a bone marrow transplant, she could die, and that's if she can get on a list and find a match quickly."

"I know that, Hsin knows that, and I bet anything that Chao knows that, too." Mulder's gaze snapped to hers. "You were right Scully. I was wrong. Chao was dragging his feet on this because he wanted to protect it. But I don't think it was just because he was getting paid off."

"I don't think it's as simple as Chao being another crooked cop. I think he's in over his head, involved in something that he didn't realize would go this far."

As usual his line of reasoning was all over the place and she scrambled to try and piece it together. "I still don't see where you going with this. What game, Mulder?"

"The organ harvesting ring is not run as strict give and pay, it's a game of chance." He slipped out the wooden tile that he found in Hsin's apartment from his pocket, holding it up. "My guess is that everyone who joins this game gets a complete work up done, just like Hsin, with the caveat that they know that if they get chosen, they have to give up a particular organ. It could be a cornea, or a kidney, or the heart." Mulder tapped his own chest for emphasis, his mind whirling, spinning out his theory even as he spoke. "They each bet money every time they go, that money is pooled, and the hope is that one night instead of being asked to give a body part, the lucky person will get the jackpot."

"They would get the pot." It suddenly fell into sickening place, the entire scheme. "They could keep this on for years, simply harvesting as they go, until it gets too hot, and they move on to the next community."

"And games of chance are very popular in Chinese culture, a stereotype I'm not afraid to make." Mulder bit his lip, thinking. "Chao wasn't just in this to get money to pay off his debts. I think he thought that someone would actually win. I think he hoped that it lived up to the promise that all games of chance make. You heard him talking about his grandparents, his parents, Chao busted his
balls to get where he is now, and he's suffered for it. He's not even looked at as being a real part of the community because he's a cop, born and raised in America. But allowing this, turning a blind eye to it, he's showing some loyalty to his community and showing he's 'one of them', allowing people to get a chance they might not otherwise get in the non-Chinese community."

"You were the one who told me I couldn't look at Chao as a stereotype." Mulder's words still stung painfully, the accusations he made.

"I think that's exactly how he threw us off, Scully, he isn't a stereotype. He wants to be one. Think about it, he's an outsider within his own community by being a cop. And I'm sure in those nicer parts of San Francisco, Chao's not exactly looked on without a double take and a bit of hesitancy, no matter how enlightened this city likes to think it is. No matter where he goes, he doesn't fit in. Doing this he can have a foot in both worlds, still protect the community he comes from, but live out the life of the white, American dream."

"So if he's being paid off. Why did they attack him last night?"

"Because he didn't pay attention to their warnings the first time. Chao was being paid off to hide the game, but when Lo was murdered, he couldn't keep it secret anymore. I think Chao figured out something about the game, that this was become more dangerous than even he anticipated, and he tried to put a stop to it. When he couldn't, he had the SFPD call the FBI in to handle it for him."

"He's been dragging his feet just enough to keep the organ ring happy, but giving us enough clues to figure it out on our own." Finally, Scully saw the pieces that Mulder did. "So, why attack him again last night?"

"I think they aren't happy the FBI is here." Mulder slipped the carved, wooden tile back into his pocket and pulled the car keys out. "I think it was as much a message to us as to him. And I think he's gone out to stop them. That conversation he had with Hsin, that wasn't about a fire escape. He was asking about his daughter. Chao wants to put a stop to this before the Hsin dies and Kim along with him."

"If that's true, then Chao could be the next body we find." She was rounding the car and opening the passenger side, slipping in as he began the ignition. "For the record, I would like it noted that I was right on this."

"For the record, Scully, if you want to bother keeping a record."
In which Mulder and Scully have to own a lot of cultural bias.

The scent of burnt, human flesh is unmistakable. Nothing quite smelled like it. It had a meaty quality that made you feel hungry until you got to the sweet, acrid notes over it and it suddenly occurred to you that what you were smelling was once a person, just like you. Burn victims were one of the few types of autopsy that truly made Scully feel ill, taking a day or two before she could even look at a burger again. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be much of Glen Chao left to make her want to lose her lunch.

"The minute he wasn't found at his house this morning I had the boys in blue checking out the local crematoriums. They found him about an hour ago. I checked with the owner, there were no cremations scheduled for today, in fact he was even shocked that the oven was on, so chances are this is our boy." The Adam's apple in Mulder's throat convulsively bobbed up and down, the cloying scent crawling under his skin as well.

"I won't be sure this is Chao till I can run some tests. We have little more than skeletal remains, these ovens are designed to work hot and fast." She nodded to the forensics team who busily bagged the now blackened, fragile bones and looked for her approval to remove them. Her face was grim as she turned back to Mulder. "They did this to shut him up, didn't they?"

"Can't think of a better way to keep it quiet. Dead men tell no tales and burned men leave no evidence." Mulder moved past the busy forensic team, to the door of the still warm oven, carefully peeking his head inside the ash covered inner part, eyes scanning the side. "If only ghosts could talk."

Ghosts? "That was the symbol they found in the crematorium they used for Johnny Lo."

"Got it here, too. My guess is it that it's a warning. The organ harvesting ring uses old Chinese legends to keep the locals from asking too many questions when another unexplained dead body shows up in the crematorium." He ducked out again, careful not to smack his head against the low opening of the oven. "No one is going to talk now, even if they were being reticent before, Chao's death is going to keep their mouths shut. The ring will move on to another Chinese community, my guess is further south to Los Angeles or San Diego."

"But why?" This was the part that puzzled her, the part that made no sense. "These people are victims. They weren't ever going to win that money. Chao proved that, the game was rigged. They were giving them their hard earned money and their own body parts in exchange for the hope they might get a return on it, but it was all a lie."

"Lie or not, Scully, this is their culture, their beliefs. They don't expect Westerners to understand, and in the face of that they would rather keep their mouths shut than explain it to us." Mulder shot one last, vaguely disgusted look towards the oven and made for the stairway up to the mortuary proper, Scully falling in behind him. "Besides, they knew what they were doing was illegal but were too desperate to care. That game, as sick as it was, gave them hope they could achieve something, even if it resulted in their deaths."
"I just don't get it." She sighed, grateful for the cleaner air of the mortuary above, where police were still questioning the poor, befuddled owner. "This will keep happening, these men will keep preying on these people's fear and hopelessness for profit, and no one will do anything to stand against it. These people didn't come to America to be treated like little more than fodder for someone else's profit."

"No, they didn't. But theirs is a culture that is ancient by any Western standards. Think about it, most of our ancestors are the people their ancestors ran out of China as barbarians and sent howling into Europe to rape, pillage, and plunder. Our society, our concepts of justice, of right and wrong are infantile compared to the beliefs and customs they bring over with them from their homelands, and we dismiss them with our Constitution and our laws, our individual, personal rights, our concepts of life and death. I don't know, Scully, perhaps in the minds of the people there at that game that night we were the outsiders, we were in the wrong, and that may be why they targeted Glen Chao. No matter what his face looked like, no matter where his parents came from, the fact he couldn't abide by the culture and beliefs that had sustained his ancestors made him just as much of an outsider as you or I are. Worse, he should be one of them and turned his back on them."

She had to admit, she hadn't looked at this entire situation from that angle, the angle that would make Chao the outsider, the one who was different. Chao's words the day she confronted him came back to mind. To her he might be Chinese, but to them he was as white as she with her Irish heritage and pale skin was. He had known then that exposing the ring could end up with his death. And she had been quick to question his commitment to the case, all because of the physical heritage they all had shared.

"I feel I've made a terrible mistake here." She felt heavy as they made their way out into the gray, Bay area sunshine. "You were right, I was so quick to make a straight line analysis based on the information present that I didn't take into account the fact that Chao might have in his own way been putting his own life on the line here. It fit neatly, he was taking pay offs from the ring to keep it quiet and in exchange he was turning a blind eye to what they were doing."

"Which he was, but not for the reasons you expected." Mulder paused thoughtfully outside of the crematorium, glancing down the rolling hill it sat on, out towards the Pacific Ocean in the distance. "You're a brilliant agent, Scully, don't ever think otherwise. You did what anyone else would have done, and you weren't completely wrong in your assertions."

"Yes, but I wasn't completely right either, and it cost a man his life."

"Isn't that how it goes in our business?" He sounded so philosophical about it, but then Mulder had been through this enough to be philosophical. "We've been partner's three years, our cases are so rarely about black and white, good or bad, faith versus science. Everything falls in shades of gray and we hope we don't mess up so badly that people get hurt in the process."

"And if they do get hurt?"

He thought for long moments before answering. "Then we hope that their ghosts don't haunt us forever."
In which Mulder takes issue with Scully for speaking to someone he asked her not to.

The basement office really wasn't big enough for two people. Clearly it wasn't big enough for two people when one of them was striding up and down the narrow length of it, his long legs slowly pacing between his desk, to the scary corner by the projection screen, and back again. Scully watched in meek silence as he pivoted carefully, his runner's grace keeping perfect balance as moved back towards his desk. He'd been at this for fifteen minutes, his jaw silently clenching and unclenching, his hands at his belt in the classic, Mulder confrontational mode. But he wasn't confrontational, not at the moment. In fact she preferred if he was, shouting at her, railing against her, telling her that she was stupid, inconsiderate, thoughtless. Not that she felt she had been particularly any of those things - okay, perhaps a little. Instead he was silent, barely sparing her a glance as he roamed, head high, shoulder's so tense she thought they would snap. Hell, she might snap if he didn't say something.

"Mulder," she began softly, hesitant as he strode past, looking up at him. He barely acknowledged she said a word. She had seen this behavior out of him before, once in a while, when he was truly beyond angry, when he was too hurt to speak. but it had never been at her. His wrath had always been directed at others. Scully was the one usually talking him down from the cliff. Now she was the one standing at the bottom of the ravine, waiting for him to fall on her with the full force of his fury.

"Mulder, I'm sorry." It was the only thing she cold thing to say in that moment, anything to stop the horrible, awful silence that was growing between them, like the plague, to get him to stop prowling like a caged animal and look at her, discuss this like a normal, grown up human being.

"Sorry?" He rolled the word around, let it rest on his tongue, a concentrated frown forming as he moved past her again without looking at her. "Sorry for what? Sorry that you deliberately did something I asked you not to do, or sorry that I figured it out and confronted you about it?"

Both, she wanted to reply. Instead, she chose a different tact. "It wasn't like I was hiding it from you. You knew Jose Chung had contacted me."

"And I knew that I made it clear that I didn't want him to touch our work."

"It's Jose Chung, one of the most respected, well known authors of our time. His work isn't exactly cheap, sci-fi trash."

"He's a hack, Scully, a well known one, who wraps up his pseudo-intellectual masturbation in the shroud of respectable philosophical questioning, and throws it into a two-bit action, adventure story straight out of Hollywood and makes tons of money off of people like you who consider him a genius." Now Mulder's voice did begin to carry, his hands waving angrily though he still refused to look at her. "How in the hell did he find out about that case in the first place?"

"Rocky Crikenson," she admitted, not particularly surprised it was the cable guy, of all people, with his orgiastic tale of travels to the center of the Earth, that had been the one to peek Jose
Chung's interest. "He had reached out to Chung's publishing company with a copy of his screenplay. No one wanted it, of course, but one of the editors thought it was funny and passed it along to Mr. Chung for a laugh."

"That should have told you something, his curiosity was peeked because he thought this work, that our work, was stupid and silly."

"The case was stupid and silly, Mulder." She couldn't take his simmering disapproval, snapping as she glared at his restless movements. "Honestly, an alien autopsy with a rubber suit, you claiming to have seen Alex Trebek?"

"I only said he looked like Alex Trebek," Mulder snapped, pivoting once again and stopping this time by her desk, looming over her in that decided way he had that would make anyone think about relieving themselves on the spot if they were unprepared. "Do you know what his book will do to this field, to the work of hundreds, not to mention the work I put five years of my life into?"

"Don't you think you are getting a tad carried away with this." She knew he wasn't. "After all, it's a book."

"As you so astutely pointed out, it's a book by a best-selling author, who happens to influence quite a few people out there, including you. Why did you even agree?"

Scully swallowed. She wanted to say she didn't know, that it was nothing more than a simple impulse, and there was a certain truth to that. The idea of their work being written about had excited her, and she hated to admit that she hadn't seen the harm in it, had not considered the ramifications in the same way Mulder had. After all, she had reasoned, it was just a book, it wasn't even going to use anyone's real names, and Jose Chung was really just using the two of them for reference purposes alone.

"I thought that in talking to him, Mulder, that light would be shed on the type of work we do, on the nature of the cases we comes across." As if that had been an atypical case, she chided herself. "I believed he would write an honest examination on the phenomenon of alien sightings and the work that goes in to trying to understand them."

"Honest examination?" Mulder could sense the malarkey in her words and snorted derisively. "Tell me, Scully, just how seriously do you take this work?"

"What are you insinuating?" Now it was her turn to let her temper flare, her arms crossing defiantly as she leaned back in her chair, looking up at him.

"I find it strange you are quick to speak to Chung, even when I asked you not to, to discuss a case that was hardly one of our better ones by your own admission. So how will Dana Scully come out of all of this, I wonder? Some paragon of sanity in a chaotic swirl of gibbering nonsense?"

"Mulder, I didn't portray you as a nutcase."

"No, but you are one of the few people out there who doesn't think I am one." He inched closer, now literally leaning over her. "To everyone else I'm Spooky Mulder. While I admire the fact that you can seemingly hold back that impulse to write me off as a whack job, most others can't, and no matter what you say or how rational you are, me and anyone like me is likely going to be painted as some sort of paranoid freak who looks for conspiracies in every dropped cheese wrapper."

He was so close now she could almost feel his breath on the crown of her head.

"You may have medicine to turn to if you get tired of having your reputation sullied, but this is my
life, my work, and I do take it seriously. There is no way that Jose Chung or anyone who would spend the money on his trash will ever see it that way or take it seriously. That is why I didn't want to speak to him."

And she knew he was right. Scully dipped her head finally, breaking away from the heat of his anger and stared down at her knees, looking for something to say to at least put her on some good standing in this. "Perhaps if you had told him all of this yourself, Mulder, in your own words, he would have listened, been sympathetic in his treatment."

"Do you honestly believe that?" He wasn't letting up.

"Do you find joy in thinking that everyone is out to get you?" She was angry, but lacked the true heat to really stir up any righteous indignation.

"No joy, Scully, but you've worked with me for three years now. How serious do you see anyone taking me?"

Point.

"I'm sorry, Mulder, I shouldn't have spoken to him. Will that suffice?" What else could she say? It's not like she could take any of it back now.

He stared at her, face impassive for long moments, before pushing back up and turning his back on her as he wandered to his desk.

"I suppose it will have to, won't it?" He grabbed his coat, swiveling towards the door.

"Where you going?" Somehow him leaving felt worse than him staying at his desk in full sulk. The oppressive anger might be gone, but she would be left with the weight of her own guilt.

"Out to convince a man that I'm not crazy." He didn't bother looking back as he strode down the hall.
The numbers on her alarm clock blinked large in front of her eyes, 4:30 am. She hadn't set her alarm for that time. There was no loud buzzing, no chiming emanating from the plastic body to inform her it was time to get up. So why was she wide awake, staring at the hot, red glow in the dark, well before she usually deigned to crawl out of bed and hug her coffee maker in the morning? Her phone hadn't sounded. Her alarm hadn't gone off. A creeping, tingling dread danced across her stomach and up her spine. It was a familiar sensation during moments like these, her mind flying immediately to Mulder, wondering in her sleepy haze if he had done something to get himself in trouble again. It wasn't the sort of logical thought she could explain, especially not with the thick, sleepy fog that hung about her as she stumbled out of bed, first to her silent answering machine, then to her cell phone. Scully frankly didn't want to give too much thought to why she was having an idea like that in the first place or what it could possibly mean about Mulder's influence. Check her phone, calm her unease, return to bed for another two hours, ignore the chiding voice in the back of her head laughing at her for being as paranoid as her partner.

Her cell phone blinked with one missed call and a message. Odd, hadn't she checked when she went to bed? Ignoring the dread that settled, cold and cutting in her gut, she dialed her voice mail, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She willed herself to wake up, her thoughts divided between panic and the lovely dark roasted, Arabica she had in the cabinet. She doubted after this she would even have an opportunity to go back to bed. She might as well start the caffeine infusions soon.

"Hey Scully, it's me." Her disquiet was increased as Mulder's nasal monotone murmured softly and hurriedly over the line. "I just got a call from Metro PD regarding a homicide called in by Skinner. I have no more information, and I'm a little confused as to why they called me in on this, but I'm heading over to the Ambassador Hotel to check this out. Give me a call when you get this." His perfunctory ending matched his perfunctory greeting, and he clicked off the message without so much as a goodbye, typical for their phone conversations.

Scully stared at her blinking phone, wondering if she was still dreaming but hadn't noticed. She resisted the urge to pinch herself, considering instead why her boss was doing to call in a random homicide at a hotel. And what was he doing at the Ambassador this time of night? He lived in the DC area, or so she assumed, and the Ambassador wasn't the sort of long-term resident hotel that many legislators and government officials found useful. So why was he there last night? Protocol and common decency told Scully it was none of her damned business what her boss was doing at an expensive hotel on his own free time, and it was that thought she used to shake herself mentally and turn to the kitchen. Her mouth salivated at the idea of hot coffee, but even as she filled the machine and measured the grounds into the filter, she couldn't shake the curiosity of why it was that Walter Skinner was at that place at that time, and what he could have possibly witnessed that would get not just the Metro police involved, but Mulder as well. Homicides were usually always the purview of the local PD, the FBI only ever got involved in rare instances, such as hate crimes or serial murders, or if the local police were ill equipped to handle the situation. In the so-called "murder-capital" of the US, Metro PD was hardly unequipped to handle a simple homicide. Did
Skinner simply want an FBI agent on scene because he himself was involved somehow? If so, why Mulder? As an Assistant Director, Skinner had several agents under his supervision, most of whom had less of a reputation that Mulder did. While Mulder's brilliance as a profiler was undeniable, he wasn't exactly known for playing nice with others, especially not the local PD. Many were the times she had to pull him away from some local law enforcement before he firmly planted his foot in his mouth. So why choose Mulder to play liaison, especially when Mulder's forte was the weird and the paranormal, not a prosaic homicide at a hotel? Why would Skinner care anyway?

The smell of coffee drove other questions from her mind as she poured the dark fluid into her Navy mug, sipping at it scalding hot before adding her cream and sugar. Nectar of the gods, she groaned, as she glanced at the clock on the microwave. She could be dressed and out of the door in an hour and to the Ambassador to see what was going on. She doubted with a homicide in such an upscale place they’d be out of there anytime soon. Perhaps she could fit another cup in too as she hurried towards her room, flipping on the shower in the bath as she moved to the closet for fresh clothes.

Her slowly waking thoughts swirled on the questions still top of mind. Why was Skinner where he was when he was and why did he want Mulder involved in this? Was it because it was something so strange he thought Mulder was the only one to understand? Or was it more because he needed Mulder's out-of-the-box thinking to wrap his head around this? And why would he care about a homicide that the Metro PD would stake as theirs in the first place?

It occurred to her that underneath all of these questions was the very real and solid fact that they were being called in personally to handle something for their boss, a man that in many senses Scully barely knew. Of course she knew him professionally, knew some of his history, but what more did she really understand about the man she answered to everyday? Much of what she did know about Walter Skinner was pieced together through observation and scuttlebutt, threaded though with the occasional proffered bit of personal insight he rarely shared with either herself or Mulder. She knew that Skinner had served a lifetime for the US government, first as a Marine, then as an FBI agent. She gathered that some college had happened during that time, though he never discussed an alma mater or a favorite sports team. He’d had some sort of strange experience while in Vietnam, that much she had drug out of Mulder in the days after her return from her abduction, but Mulder had said little about what that experience was, only that it made Skinner more sympathetic than he expected. Otherwise their boss was a strict, by-the-book disciplinarian for the most part, a man who tried hard to walk the line between two warring agendas, the one she and Mulder espoused with the X-files, and the one the man with the Morley cigarettes clearly clung to. It wasn't a job she envied him, knowing that it was dangerous for him to lean too far either way, but when things had looked their bleakest last spring, Mulder and his father both supposedly dead and Melissa dying, it had been Skinner who had come through for them both. Skinner had put his neck on the line, when he never had before, securing their safety and their positions in the FBI, and assuring her mother that she was alive and well. It was a stance that could have cost the Assistant Director dearly. She was surprised it hadn't.

Other than that, Scully's knowledge of Walter Skinner was limited, next to nothing. She had no idea about anything regarding his personal life. Did he have a wife and family? Did he have a close-knit group of friends? Was he close to anyone from his years in Vietnam? Did he hang out on the weekends, watching football and drinking beers with anyone? Did he even have a hobby, or was his entire life wrapped up in his work, his position, and the minutia of being an assistant director in the FBI? Frankly, Scully couldn't see her boss in anything beyond a suit and tie, behind his desk, busily reading through files. Why would he be at the Ambassador Hotel at this time of night?

She downed the rest of her coffee in one gulp, setting the mug on her dresser as she shuffled into her bathroom and grabbed a comfortably fluffy towel. Scully had a feeling this would be a long day and if she didn't want to have to break up a fight between Mulder and the locals soon, she would
have to hurry. It was hard telling what sort of damage the man would create if left to his own devices for too long.
In which Mulder expresses surprise that Skinner is married.

"You shouldn't have told her that." Scully shot a discreet parting glance to Sharon Skinner at the table behind them. She watched the two agents wend their way back through the diner before rising.

"Told her what?" Mulder's fingers moved to rest at the small of her back as he reached for the glass door, guiding her out into the damp, DC afternoon.

"That Skinner didn't do this." He ignored her sharp-eyed look, shrugging as he reached for the keys to his car without further comment. "Mulder, all the evidence we have to this point leads directly to him."

"Do you think he did it?" Mulder's question was frank as he turned to her, pausing in the drizzle. She could already tell by his tone he had a million reasons worked out why Skinner didn't, though she had a feeling very few of them had anything to do with the evidence presented.

She stepped cagily around his bluntness. "It's not about my personal feelings here. As a pathologist and investigator, I have to keep an objectivity about this. And as much as I respect Skinner, I can't dismiss that evidence out of hand because I respect the man too much to believe he did something like this. You heard what Lorraine Keller said about her client list. She hires escorts for some of the most prestigious men in Washington, probably the world. I wouldn't be surprised the men she finds on her list. If a Saudi sheik or a powerful Senator is hiring a twenty-two year old law student to spend the night with him, why is it so far fetched that an Assistant Director at the FBI would do the same thing?"

"Did you know that Skinner was married?" Mulder shifted topics erratically, though Scully hardly blinked at the change. Mulder's line of thinking was something that she rarely followed, even on a good day, and she had given up long ago trying.

She doubted anyone outside of Kim, his secretary, and probably the personnel office knew about Skinner's marital status. "No, I've never seen him wear a ring. But then again, I wasn't looking either."

"Not checking out the hottie boss?" Mulder danced away from her flying palm, moving towards the driver's side of his sedan, sobering slightly as he did. "Sharon seems like she genuinely loves and cares for him, but, I guess I never saw Skinner as the marrying type."

"That's probably why they are divorcing." Scully glanced towards Sharon Skinner's red trench coat, crossing the street to her parked car, oblivious to the two agents. You didn't have to look too hard to see the effects of being an FBI wife on Sharon Skinner, the lines of worry around her eyes, the loneliness, the hurt. Mulder was right, Sharon loved Walter, she would never have married him otherwise, and chances were the feelings were returned.

"I don't know, just the image of Skinner outside of work, taking out the trash or mowing the lawn,
it seems wrong to me on a fundamental level. And who would have thought that Skinner, the poster child for the lone wolf, FBI agent would have a wife?" Mulder seemed in shock and awe with the idea.

"You know, unlike you, most everyone else in the FBI has a life outside of work. Just because you are married to your job doesn't mean that everyone else follows your example." She met his smirk pointedly across his car before she slipped inside.

"Keeping some secret husband and family away from me Scully?" He chuckled as he started the car. "Skinner isn't exactly a warm, touchy sort of guy. You see him everyday at work, same as I do. Did you see him as having a wife tucked away somewhere, a nice home with kids and a dog?"

"I also never saw him as the type who would hire a prostitute either," Scully pointed out moodily. "You said it yourself, how well do we know our own boss? The truth is that we see him behind his desk, a hard, taciturn man, who isolates himself from his agents and with good reason. That is part of his job. But apparently, he can't open up to his own wife either."

She frowned as she watched Sharon Skinner pull away into the gray haze. "Though to be honest, for all of the things that Skinner must deal with on a daily basis, I can't blame him for keeping a few secrets from her."

"I don't think it was just the secrets, though, not if Sharon was leaving him." His tone was gloomy as he pulled out into traffic, going the same way Sharon had gone. "Skinner has seen a lot, much more than he lets on to most people. Vietnam, the FBI - he's mentioned a few things from time-to-time."

"A few things to you?" That was surprising. She wasn't aware that Skinner felt comfortable enough around Mulder to open up about anything, despite the respect he might have for the younger agent.

"Sometimes, there are things that even men like Skinner see that are more than they can explain comfortably to anyone else. And we know Skinner knows things, or at least suspects things, that in a million years he can't ever own up to, not even to Sharon." Mulder worked thoughtfully at his bottom lip. "That sort of secrecy can breed isolation, distance between yourself and those around you. Perhaps, Skinner thought by doing so he was keeping Sharon safe in the long run."

"And ruining his marriage to boot." It was very likely what had happened, though the thought depressed Scully immensely. It was no secret that their line of work had a high rate of divorce. It was why so many of them, herself and Mulder included, put off any such ideas of marriage till later in their careers.

"Perhaps, that was why Skinner was at the Ambassador Hotel last night. He's going through a divorce. He went to the bar. He didn't want to be alone, and he hires a call girl to spend the night with him. Quick, clean, no ties or attachments." It sounded brutal and cold, but it made sense.

"I don't think he knew she was a prostitute," Mulder murmured, shaking his head, but not elaborating. Scully refrained from reminding him that Lorraine Keller had his name and card number on file. "What none of this explains is why the girl ended up dead in his bed?"

That at least was an area she could bring insight to. "I have some theories. I'll have to do some research. In the meantime we need to get back. That was Kim, Skinner's secretary on the phone. Seems that OPR has sent in the bloodhounds."

"Already? He hasn't even been formally charged with anything."
"Well, Mulder, you seem to be the only person not convinced he did it at this point," Scully muttered dryly, unwilling to admit that frankly, she didn't believe her boss did it either. "And if you smell a set up, well then I wouldn't disagree with you, not with the rate they are moving on this. I told Kim we'd get there as soon as possible.

She felt the car speed up slightly as Mulder pressed the gas.
A Frame Up

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder suspects there has been a frame up of their boss.

Time was of the essence, but like most other rules and regulations in life, Fox Mulder seemed to ignore the fact that time indeed does march on.

"I don't know what you're expecting to find, Mulder, Skinner's hearing is in half an hour." Scully glanced at the time, briefly, mentally calculating how long it would take for them to dash to their boss's hearing without looking like idiots.

He ignored her as he settled behind the wheel of their boss's impounded vehicle, fishing absently in his trousers till he pulled out a pocketknife. Mulder, always prepared.

"I'll meet you there," he muttered absently, frowning at the deployed air bag, carefully studying the white material without touching it, before moving towards the steering column. One day, Scully privately seethed, she would convince Mulder that meetings with OPR or anyone else who held their jobs in their hands were not optional requirements. And, maybe, he would stop leaving her alone to fend for the both of them while he formulated some other half-thought out explanation that only served to antagonize them more. This time it wasn't their jobs on the line, at least not yet, it was Skinner's, and for some reason that raised the stakes for Scully just a tiny bit more.

"What are you doing?" She knew there was no stopping him and she might as well find out what was going on before she stepped into that room with the carefully blank looks of Agent Bonnecase and the OPR representatives.

Mulder's small knife sliced into the synthetic fibers of the air bag with a plastic, zipping noise as he carefully cut it away from its mechanism. "Collecting evidence."

Her partner at his cryptic best. Scully bristled as she watched him carefully remove the fabric and rise from the car. "Care to share with the class?"

This wasn't a time for his witty one liners or spooky remarks, and she highly doubted OPR would find his dry wit any more amusing this time than they did any other time when Mulder stood before them. Scully could feel the minutes of Skinner's career ticking by on her wrist, almost physically tapping against her skin.

"Skinner wasn't driving his car." Mulder uttered this as if it were a known variable in their investigation rather than something they were trying to prove. "He wasn't the one to run Sharon off the road, you and I know that. He no more tried to kill her than he would try to kill that call girl."

"Under the stress he's been under, with the lack of sleep, he could be doing anything under a psychotic episode." She didn't want to put it that way, but it was true.

"Do you believe that?" His slipped his knife in his pocket as he pulled out the air bag carefully and stepped out. He knew she didn't, she didn't bother to qualify it. "Whoever was in this car rammed Sharon Skinner, and when they did it, the air bag deployed. They were smart enough to wear
gloves to drive. The only prints on the steering wheel are Skinner's, however, they probably didn't think to cover their face."

He held up the bag in front of Scully hopefully.

"There could be DNA trace evidence, but it would take days to identify it, if at all. Skinner's meeting is in minutes."

"As always, you are right, Dr. Scully. But it's not just Skinner who is at risk here, it's you and me."

His eyes shined knowingly, making the connection she hadn't wanted to think about or even consider. "Skinner isn't always on our side, but he's the only help and protection we've ever had. And he's put his ass on the line more than once for us, which is why he's in this fix in the first place. If we don't do this, it's not just his career on the line."

For once, she couldn't fault Mulder's paranoia. "Skinner hasn't been particularly cooperative here and he hasn't made any of this look good for himself. If this is a railroad job, and I don't disagree with you on this, you'd have to find indisputable evidence on that thing that the man who is responsible for Sharon Skinner's accident wasn't him. And frankly, after everything we found on the prostitute, trace evidence might not be enough."

"It might have to be." Resolve caused the muscles in Mulder's jaw line to tighten as he glanced upwards, as if trying to stare through the concrete and steal beams of the Hoover Building. "That boyfriend of yours, Pendrell, he still in the Sci-Crime unit?"

The strangled choke, quickly silenced under icy irritation brought the tiniest of smiles to Mulder's mouth as he glanced down again. Scully's eyes narrowed. "As far as I know, Agent Pendrell is still with Sci-Crimes, yes, and I'm sure if you asked him politely, he would be more than happy to help you."

"No need to ask politely. I'll just drop your name." Despite the danger their boss found himself in, despite the meeting with OPR in only minutes, Mulder managed to eek mischievous humor out of the situation, clearly enjoying the irritation it was causing his partner. "You really have no idea that Pendrell has the hots for you, do you?"

If he was trying to fluster her before facing OPR, it was working. She felt her temper rise dangerously. "Because I'm a professional, Mulder, my mind doesn't have a couch and television in the gutter, like yours."

"I think its admirable that Pendrell notices that you are an amazingly lovely woman, but he always has the class never to mention it." Mulder was having too much fun as he led the way from Skinner's car in the impound lot to the elevators, stopping to toss the keys to the vehicle to the lot's supervisor.

Amazingly lovely? What did that have to do with anything? "Can you explain to me what my appearance has to do with Skinner's case?" Already her mind was shying away from the implication of Mulder's words, towards whatever excuse she would have to come up with to keep OPR off her back long enough for Mulder to find whatever he could.

"I don't know, I think you should hear it from time-to-time." Mulder's words stepped carefully as he paused at the elevators, his gaze guarded. "If Skinner perhaps had told Sharon that a bit more often, he might not be in this fix, and depending on the two of us to get him out of it."

True, Scully nodded, but what in the hell did this have to do with anything? "I have to think of a way to stall Bonnecase and OPR while you are working with Pendrell. Make it quick, Mulder, they
don't like waiting."

"I know." Mulder had been there before enough of these review boards to understand just how tetchy they could be. "If anyone could hold them off, you can."

"So full of compliments today, if I didn't know better, I'd ask you what you did that was going to piss me off." She glowered at him as the elevator opened.

"Nothing yet, but the week is still young."

She could only roll her eyes by way of response.
"Thank you, Agent Scully."

Scully turned to Skinner's secretary, surprised at the gratitude coming from he young woman. She glanced briefly towards Mulder, who was still making his way out of Skinner's office, still trying to press the answers out of their boss that Scully knew Skinner would never reveal. It just wasn't the way Walter Skinner operated. If he didn't wish to answer, he wouldn't, not for his wife and least of all them. Instead, she focused on Skinner's right hand, Kim, who had loyally stood by his side through all of this.

"Do you think Agent Mulder and I would leave AD Skinner out on a limb like that?" She tried to make light of the situation to the woman, but Kim only shrugged meaningfully.

"Others would. Others have. I've been working for the Assistant Director for a long time and I've seen it. That's part of his job, I guess, taking the fall for others when they screw up. It's rare I see one of his agents step up and shoulder the responsibility for him. I'm glad he has the two of you under him."

Scully blinked in surprise. It had never occurred to her, Kim's words. Of course she would stand up for her boss. It surprised her that others would not. One of the things they preached at the FBI Academy at Quantico was how one always stood for their fellow officer, no matter what. Loyalty was something that came easily to Scully, a lesson bred into her Irish Catholic, Naval family roots. It wasn't something she took lightly.

"I mean," Kim continued twisting her hands on her desk. "You were the first person I thought to call when the Assistant Director was shot. And then this..."

The other woman paused, before shaking her head. "It hasn't been easy for him, with the divorce."

Kim perhaps knew her boss better than anyone at this point, perhaps as well as, if not better than Sharon did. Kim at least had an insight to the life Skinner led everyday in his office, something his assiduously kept from his wife. "When did that start?"

"Shortly after he was shot," Kim confirmed, her voice low as Mulder finally made his way out of Skinner's office, closing the door behind him as he stepped out. "I was surprised. I know that things had been tense but...that soon afterwards?"

Perhaps that explained why he was up so soon after his attack. Scully's eyes flickered to Mulder's. There were pieces to this story they were missing, and it was bugging the hell out of him, out of both of them. "He started going to the sleep center right after Robert Modell broke in here and had Holly attack him, didn't he?"

Clearly Kim hadn't made the association. She frowned for a moment, thinking, before nodding slowly. "You know, now that you mentioned it, yeah. I hadn't thought about it, but it was around
"You think Pusher had something to do with it?" Mulder asked less out of doubt and more as a query of Scully's opinion. She could already see it was an idea that made sense to him.

"Well, I think it was a trigger, if anything. Perhaps revived old memories he's never dealt with, and seeing how he rarely confides in anyone, even his wife, it probably just built up, exacerbated by his injuries just weeks later when he was shot." Scully couldn't remember once any of the agents on duty guarding their boss had ever mentioned a wife. Perhaps that was why she had filed for divorce so soon after his injuries. Skinner hadn't bothered to let her in, even when he could have been dying.

"So divorce, stress, sleeplessness, that all I can easily understand." Mulder's voice was low and gravelly in her ear as he glanced surreptitiously towards their boss's door, ensuring he couldn't be heard. "They probably knew about all of it, the stress, the sleep clinic, Sharon leaving him, and used it all to build up a plan to remove him. A former Vietnam vet who is suffering from a mid-life crisis, breaking down emotionally, that all paints a pretty picture. What I don't get is how they knew he would be at the Ambassador? How they knew to set it up there?" His eyes glittered as the slid to Kim. The young woman blanched and flushed briefly under the sharp scrutiny of Mulder.

"He got his final divorce papers that afternoon. His lawyer brought them by. He left shortly after."

"But why the Ambassador. Come on, Kim, this was an elaborate set up, they knew Skinner's habits, knew his preferences, hell knew who to target to make this look as bad as possible." Mulder could have just as easily been grilling a suspect as discussing private details of Skinner's life with Kim. His tone was casual, lazy, friendly almost. He had that easy way with people when he didn't want to appear threatening, his method of coaxing the truth out of others.

"I don't know about 'bad',' Kim smiled sadly, shooting a sympathetic glance towards Skinner's door. "The Ambassador was where he met Sharon years ago. It was 'their' place, I suppose you could say, silly, but true. That's where he would have me book their anniversaries, special get-togethers. Those have been fewer and farther between of late."

"Walter Skinner, a rank sentimentalist," Mulder murmured in surprise. Scully only smirked. Mulder probably wouldn't know sentimentality if it smacked him in the face. "Did anyone else know about the court papers going through that day?"

"I don't know. Possibly, I mean court records are public, aren't they?"

"Mulder!" Scully's tone was light, but she knew he understood the warning. "I think we have a report to finish downstairs." Her fingers reached to tug gently at his elbow. "Thanks, Kim. Let us know if he needs anything else."

Kim nodded as the two agents made their way to the hallway, silent till they were well passed their boss's door.

"It was a set up the whole time, Scully. They knew that Skinner was having marital problems and they used that to try and destroy him." It was a conspiracy and Mulder was fairly glowing with the possibilities.

"Mulder, it's done," she warned, perhaps a bit too snappishly as they made their way to the elevators. "He's back and there is no way Skinner will want to pursue this anymore. Frankly, I think he's been through enough this year on many fronts; an attack, being shot, a divorce, and that's not to mention the crap we dump on his doorstep."
"They tried to kill his wife, Scully, not just ruin his career or his reputation, but kill his wife. Two innocent women had to die to further their agenda, and this is after they had already tried to kill him once." Mulder slouched inside the open, empty elevator. "Do you think that this will be the only attempt in the future as long as we work under him?"

He was seeing the long range, beyond the here and now. Mulder always could look at the patterns, the warp and weave of what was going on beneath the surface, and it unnerved her slightly to think that this was only an opening volley in what could be coming. "He's an Assistant Director in the FBI, Mulder, what more could they do to him openly without raising eyebrows?"

"I don't know," he admitted softly, the doors opening finally with a 'ping' onto the basement hallway where their office sat. "They wanted to remove him, and short of that, they wanted to subdue him. Skinner's been open in his support of us of late. I wouldn't count on that for a while, not after this."

Skinner had always sat on the fence with them, alternating between open support and cautious distance. Scully knew as well as Mulder his reasoning for it, to stay inside, to be the mediator between those who would rather shut down Mulder's work and themselves. But at what cost? It had nearly been his life the first time; it was nearly his wife's life this time. And Mulder was right, two innocent women died for no more reason than they were dispensable pawns in someone's game. What next?

"You think that he and Sharon will work things out after this?" Mulder slipped his keys from his pocket as he reached the office door, his name emblazoned on its front.

"I don't know," she shrugged, watching as he shuffled inside. "Skinner was so private about his life before. He will likely be doubly so now. Perhaps they will, perhaps they won't. I don't think he'll ever tell us one way or the other."

"Guess will just have to tune in to Kim's office gossip," Mulder muttered as he flipped on the lights. "Our boss is a strange, mysterious man."

"This is coming from someone who has the nickname of 'Spooky'." She slipped past him to her table, ignoring the glare shot at her as she got back to work.
On Saturday Morning

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is rudely awakened on a Saturday morning.

Scully couldn't believe this!

She should believe it, after all it was the first free Saturday she had in weeks and obviously that was too good to be true. but really, she couldn't believe this. A case! Mulder had to come here on a case. For what? Mulder hadn't gotten that far before she had rolled out of bed, slammed down the phone, and stomped out to her shower. Instead of sleeping in today, folding her laundry, catching up on her housework, Scully was now up before the sun on a Saturday, walking her dog on the drizzly, Georgetown streets, shivering as thoughts of murder fluttered through her sleep-addled brain.

"You done," she snapped at the Pomeranian, who blinked up at her in mild injury. Even Queequeg was pissing her off this morning. Poor dog. All he wanted was to go to the bathroom. What was to be done with him today? She swore mildly into the crisp, early-morning air. Her mother was out of town today, down in Virginia to see old Navy friends. Her friend Ellen perhaps could have taken him, but her brood had now grown from Scully's godson, Trent, to a new baby boy, one who could barely walk but thought chasing Queequeg was fun. After the last time, the poor thing had been so shell shocked the sound of screeching children had left him twitchy for weeks. So what option did that leave her? And where were they going anyway? And hell, why couldn't Mulder ever remember what a "weekend" was? Why did she agree to go? Why wasn't she still in bed? Tugging the leash, she turned towards home, grumpily praying Mulder was wise enough to have brought her coffee as some sort of peace offering for all of this.

He had. He was waiting outside her building, holding two steaming cups.

"Jake's wasn't open yet. You'll have to live with convenience store, but it's hot and I hear its got caffeine in it." He tried to shoot her a cheerful, lopsided grin, but it melted under the look she pinned him with as she unlocked the front door into the lobby. "I, err, would have been inside, but I couldn't get to my keys." He waved the cup under her nose again.

"Yeah," she growled, holding the door open for him, following behind with Queequeg, who pranced beside her, tags jingling. "What is it this time? Bigfoot sightings in Washington? Aliens dancing naked on hilltops in upstate New York?"

"I think you are confusing the traditional story regarding the fae and aliens, Scully, considering that to the best of my knowledge, aliens don't wear clothes anyway." He was poised for a full explication on fae, aliens, and his theories connecting the two, but seemed to wither under her glare as she unlocked her front door, stalking inside.

"It's Saturday. Do you know what day that is?"

"The day of the week named after Saturn, a distinctive Roman harvest god, father of the other gods. He somehow gets related to the Greek Kronos, who played a similar role…"
"You are determined to piss me off today, Mulder. What the hell are you doing here at some ungodly hour of the morning?"

"I told you, we got a case." His eyes flickered around the apartment, a frown growing. "Where are your things?"

"Mulder, you called me what, fifteen minutes ago?"

'Twenty. I thought you would be ready."

"On a SATURDAY, Mulder? I haven't even folded my laundry yet!" She waved towards the pile that she had dumped, unceremoniously on the end of one of her couches. "We were so late finishing up our reports from Skinner's incident for OPR, I came home, I went to sleep. Now my clothes are probably all wrinkled."

"That's okay, just toss them back in the dryer for a bit…"

He drifted as he realized they were not helping this situation at all.

"Do me a favor, grab whatever you think will work in this situation out of the pile. I'll grab my suitcase. You get to help me pack." She snagged one of the two cups of coffee from his hand before releasing Queequeg to his food bowl in the kitchen.

"Your clothes?" Mulder looked as if she had just asked him to stick his hand into a nest of deadly vipers.

"Yes, unless you really want me to wander around naked on this case." Something glittered briefly in Mulder's eyes before being viciously snuffed out, causing her cheeks to pink ever so slightly. What the hell had she just said? No, no more talking till she got more caffeine in her.

"Fold, now, I'll get my case." She barked at him with a snap that would have made Ahab proud.

"Yes ma'am," he mumbled, gnawing on his bottom lip as he gingerly reached for a t-shirt right on the top. Leaving him to the task, she stalked into her bedroom and grabbed her travel case, and wandered to the bathroom for the non-clothing essentials she would need.

"I don't know what to do with Queequeg," she called back to him, the problem of her pet still presenting itself as she stowed away her make-up bag and hairbrush. "Mom's out of town. It's too short of notice for anyone else."

"How about that one friend of yours that likes me," Mulder called from the other room. "Helen?"

Honestly, the man had an eidetic memory, except when he didn't care. "Ellen! No, Trent is fine with the dog, he's nine, but the baby terrifies him."

"How about one of those boarding places? You know, doggie day-care or whatever it's called."

"You know I hate those places. Besides, how long will we be gone anyway?"

"It's…err…hard to say." He was being uncharacteristically evasive. Alarms sounded in her mind as she frowned at her reflection over her sink.

"Mulder," she called, the edge of warning in her voice. "What are we doing on this case anyway?"

"Nothing, just missing persons, no big deal. So about the dog, " he flipped subjects so fast, Scully was surprised he didn't give himself whiplash. "How about one of your neighbors?"
"Mulder, I'm not waking them up at some ungodly hour on a Saturday to ask them to take in my dog." She wandered into her room, grabbed a serviceable pair of shoes and a pair of more professional pumps and tossed them into her bag. It was hard telling what she would need on this case. Why was he being so secretive? All she needed now was what sort of clothes she needed for the case. She did her mental check list; something professional, something serviceable, pajamas, underwear…

She stopped dead in the doorway between the two rooms, staring at Mulder and the object in his hand. Perhaps it should have occurred to her when he blanched at the suggestion of handling her clothes that this would be the reason. It shouldn't disturb her as a grown woman that her partner…her work partner…was standing there at her couch, a pair of her own, silk and lace panties in his hand. But frankly it did, and not for any of the reasons she would have expected.

For Mulder's part he was frowning at it as if it were a Chinese puzzle box, unsure of how to manipulate the folds of fabric. "How in the hell," he muttered, before sensing her presence across the room, his eyes gliding slowly up from the blue scrap of cloth in his hand to her blue eyes watching him.

Scully had always assumed Mulder had no shame when it came to sexuality. He certainly didn't act like he had any. But she had never seen his face get that red, or his eyes that large as the panties fluttered to the couch, dropped as if they had been on fire. "I…err..."

He choked frantically, stuffing his hands into his pockets, eyes staring askance at the offending article of clothing. "Maybe you should handle that part?" His normally gravelly monotone jumped two octaves and cracked ominously as he shuffled away from the laundry she had on the couch, avoiding the smirk she barely contained on her own flushed face.

"It's not like you haven't seen my underwear before, Mulder." She for one had never forgotten their first case together years ago, the hotel room in Bellefleur, her in her cotton bra and underwear. Admittedly the pair he found was one of her nicer pieces, her 'date' underwear, not that she went on those anymore.

"I know, just…it's women's underwear," he stuttered the words as he busied himself with his coffee and looking anywhere but at the panties she quickly folded and set aside.

"Yes and I am a woman." Did he ever remember that except at moments like these? "And you wouldn't have had to do this if you had called me at a reasonable time to go traipsing to…wherever we are going again?"

"Georgia, northern Georgia, by South Carolina." At least his voice had dropped back down to normal, warm Mulder levels. "There's a lake down there, mysterious disappearances."

"And how is this an X-file again?"

He shrugged. Definitely avoidance.

"Well, Mulder, if you aren't going to tell me why we are going, at least go get the carrier from the closet would you?"

"Dog carrier?" He blinked, clearly still addled by being caught with her underwear in hand.

"Yes. I'll just have to take him with us."

"Scully, it's a case! You can't take a dog!"
"Why not?" An eyebrow arched sharply at him as he grimaced painfully at her Pomeranian, newly returned from the kitchen, licking his auburn muzzle lazily. She rolled her eyes. The poor thing would forever be nothing more than a human eating monster to her partner. "Do you have a better solution for where he can go while I'm gone?"

He shrugged weakly. "Perhaps the boys can take him?"

Not even he seemed confident with that answer.

"The Lone Gunmen? Mulder, they can barely take care of themselves. No, the dog goes along. I'll pay the extra for his cargo. Besides, we are going to a lake area, right? Those are usually family friendly places for dogs."

"What if he gets lost?" She knew he was grasping at straws.

"I've got his leash. He'll be with me at all times." What was the problem here? "Do you really hate my dog that much?"

"No," he muttered, only half telling the truth.

"Then obviously you won't mind that he's there. He's a small dog! How much trouble could he possibly get into?"

Mulder wisely decided to remain mute on the subject, pulling from his coffee instead and moving towards the storage closet.

"It will take me only a few minutes to pack things for him, Mom has an emergency bag all packed for him normally." She nodded, glad that her mother, much like herself on a normal day, was prepared for all such strange eventualities. She began slipping clothes into her own case, smirking as she reached for the underwear she tucked neatly inside. "Mulder."

"What," he grumbled, yanking the plastic and metal carrier from its storage place.

"You better not have snagged a pair of my undies while I wasn't looking."

Perhaps it was cruel to do to him, but the cough and splutter as coffee nearly went up his nose was well worth it. Next time, perhaps, he would think twice before waking her up on a Saturday morning.
In which Scully surmises they are facing a case of scientific competition

Queequeg’s snuffled through the underbrush, earning a tug on his leash that caused the small dog to yip in annoyance at his mistress.

"Come on, it's bad enough I have one of you dragging me into this." She glared at the dog that trotted along beside her. Ahead of her Mulder stalked up the small path through the woods along the lake, the sloping tenseness of his shoulder's indicating that he was unamused by their discussion with Dr. Faraday.

"What did you expect, Mulder," she called out to him, scooping up her dog in irritation when he stopped yet again to chase after yet another woodland bug. He refused to answer as she handled the squirming dog, which took the opportunity to shove his tiny pink tongue up her nose. "Ugh!"

"Told you we shouldn't have brought him, Scully." Mulder's petulance was clearly extending to everyone and everything, ignoring the fact that they had this conversation at least twice so far this day.

"You know Mulder, you should quit the FBI biz." She snorted, huffing behind him, trying to catch up to his much longer strides. "Take up writing. 'Mulder's Guide to how to Make Friends and Influence People.' Might be a best seller."

"I don't know, Scully, I thought I was doing admirably well standing there and letting some egghead with a hard on for tree frogs undermine my life's work and kick me in the balls, don't you?" Clearly Mulder wasn't in a jovial mood. "I like how you took up the cause there. You assume Faraday did it?"

"You assume a sea serpent did it?" She arched away from her wiggling dog's probing tongue and tried to shoot her partner a pointed look. It was useless, of course he believed a sea serpent did it.

"Ancient dinosaur," he clarified coldly, turning back up the path.

"Mulder, ignoring Faraday's obvious antipathy towards all humanity in favor of his ecological worries, doesn't it make sense that Dr. Bailey's disappearance has more to do with scientific competition than with a supposed monster who lives in the bottom of a lake?"

"Just how vicious do you scientists get with one another?"

"Should I tell you the story about the cat fight between two of my physics graduate TA's at Maryland or not?"

That at least earned something of a smile out of Mulder. "Did anyone get that on video?"

"I must have forgotten my camera that day. The truth is in a day and age when every science dollar out there counts, competition is stiff. Someone like Bailey coming in and discrediting Faraday's work would mean thousands, if not millions of dollars in lost research funding and Faraday frankly
seems much more concerned about that than he does about the fact that anyone died."

"It still doesn't explain the scout leader though." Mulder's hiking boots squelched wetly in the thick, muddy clay as he climbed up a leave strewn embankment by their rental, offering a hand to help Scully up the treacherous terrain. She cursed ignoring her instincts to wear her athletic shoes, and prayed his reflexes would be fast enough to snag her if she threatened to tumble, Pomeranian and all, on her ass down the slick hill.

"The scout leader," she breathed when she made it to the top, shrugging as she frowned at her filthy boots in dismay. "Who says the two disappearances have to be related. Perhaps he just wandered in the woods without the kids and got lost, injured. It happens to hundreds of people all the time in the Appalachians. There is a trail that runs through here, the Appalachian Trail, hiked by thousands each year, and careless through-hikers wander off and get lost all the time."

"Through-hiking, huh? And here I thought you hated nature," Mulder smirked at her impractical shoes and fluffy dog and turned to the car. "The scout troupe wasn't exactly stuck in the middle of the Georgia wilderness, They were a group of ten-year-olds huddled in tents on the side of the lake."

"Perhaps the troop leader just fell into the lake?" Simple enough explanation, "What I don't understand is why you felt it necessary to jump from scientific competition and missing scout leaders straight to undersea monsters in the middle of fresh water lakes."

"Because it fit all the facts that were present," he replied.

"So do my explanations, only they lack the folk tale charm of yours." She set Queequeg down as whined loudly in her ear. He immediately bolted to the length of his leash till it jerked violently, causing him to fall back hard on his curly tailed bottom. It was sort of the same reaction she saw out of Mulder on cases like this, and with just the same look of injured pride.

"Why is it that when my theories involve folk tales and myths you automatically discredit them? In the past haven't we run into this before, the Jersey Devil, the demon worshipers in New England? All myths and stories have some kernel of truth in them."

"And you would rather believe a giant dinosaur is in here eating people rather than thinking it could just be as simple as the age old tale of man killing fellow man. I don't know, Mulder, that's a fairly Biblical tale. Not folksy enough for you?"

"If I wanted to hunt down murderers, I'd have never left VCU. The X-files are about the unexplained."

"They are also about finding the truth. Isn't that what you hold in highest regard?"

He ducked his dark head at her words, knowing that Scully was right.

"One of the things I've always admired most about you, Mulder, is that no matter how much you want to believe in something, you value the truth much more. It's what's driven you in your search for the impossible, in the search for Samantha. Sea monsters and extreme possibilities are well and good, but anyone can find what they want to see regarding their existence. Only a few people care enough to discover the truth, whether it proves or disproves it. That's the heart of being a scientist, Mulder, not to prove that they are right, but to find the truth about whether it is possible or not."

He studied the grass and gravel at his feet for long moments before finally cocking his head up just enough to squint at her in resignation. "Fine, the truth, whether it is crazy scientists and drunken
scout leaders or a big, blue monster in the middle of the lake. But don't close your mind to the possibility that this really is something less Biblical and more natural out here, Scully."

"I won't," she breathed, though she highly doubted the latter. She wouldn't admit it to him, however.

"Queequeg, come!" She yanked the dog's leash lightly, urging him to follow her. The tiny dog turned as if to come, but paused, fox-like ears perking up as it's pointed muzzle twitched, sniffing the air briefly and worriedly.

"Honestly, Queequeg, there is nothing out there to get you. Come!" She tugged the leash again, finally earning the attention of the pint-sized canine, who trotted along obediently. Though not without shooting worried glances back towards the woods they came from. It could be anything, she reasoned. It wasn't exactly like Queequeg was used to life outside of the confines of a metropolitan apartment.

"The dog listens to you about as well as I do," Mulder quipped, opening the driver's side door.

"At least I have him house broken. I'm still working on you."
In which Scully mourns the loss of her beloved dog.

Numb fingers scraped along painted plywood, as they clutched the now empty collar in her hand, the tiny name tag catching the faint light outside of the cabin. Queequeg! Scully's eyes burned as she stared at it mournfully, lowering her hand to outline the printed letters. She had named him Queequeg for the character from Moby Dick, mostly as a joke, because of how the dog had been found with his former mistress. Queequeg the cannibal who fled from home to see the world and ended up meeting his end due to the obsession of Captain Ahab. Her poor puppy! How different of a fate had he met?

The door swung open, Mulder's curious face melting into alarm as his eyes swept up her bedraggled state, the twigs in her hair, the mud splattered on her jeans. Perhaps she should have changed? Did she really look so bad to earn that glimpse of terror in his eyes? It at least shook her out of her stupor, as she held up the lonely collar, still attached to the leash, trying hard to fight against the welling of tears rimming her lashes.

"Queequeg," she managed in a strangled gasp, Mulder's long fingers reaching out for the bit of leather and metal slowly. "I was walking him, and something ate my dog!"

"Scully!" Mulder exhaled her name softly, looking if possible relieved about all of this. Relieved! He was holding her dog's now empty collar in his hands and he looked happy about it! "Are you okay?"

"I was just taking him for his walk and he ran off." Why was he so calm about this? Her one companion in the world, and he acted as if this was nothing? "He pulled away from me, he ran off, I tried to get him, but….

She bit at her lip viciously, the calm, rational side of her nature horrified at the hysterics she seemed to be devolving to at a rather alarming rate. "He's such a little dog and he got away so quickly, and I didn't see it. When I tried to get to him, his leash came back with this, and he was gone!" She waved at the collar, dangling in Mulder's hands, closing her eyes briefly against it.

"Just gone and you think he's been eaten?" It wasn't often you heard the note of incredulity in Fox Mulder's voice, but there it was, snapping her gaze open as she glared up at him. She wiped angrily at her tear-glazed eyelashes.

"Yes, eaten, Mulder! Whatever got Queequeg, he's gone!"

"You sure he didn't just run off, get caught somewhere?"

"He's a five pound dog! He probably looks like a tasty meal to something. And he's a coward, he wouldn't run far, would he?" She didn't know. Her first dog, the first pet she had ever owned, and she let it get lost in the woods and possibly eaten. What sort of mother was she?

"Errr….Scully, you want to come sit down?" He shuffled away from the door enough to allow her
access to his room, mild concern evident as he tried to usher her inside. He didn't care. She knew he didn't care, at least about Queequeg. Mulder had hated the dog from the moment she had declared she was bringing it home from Minnesota. But she didn't relish the thought of sitting alone, staring at the waiting dog food bowl in her room, the spot on the bed where dog liked to sleep at night conspicuously empty.

"Sure," she wobbled softly, brushing past him into his cabin. She collapsed without ceremony into one of the chairs in the corner, taking back the proffered collar from Mulder. He frowned once, but turned to the desk he clearly had been set up at, covered in glossy 3X5 photographs, all of them the ones from the ill-fated Ansell's camera.

"I'm sure he'll turn up in a day or two," he tried to offer helpfully, a false sort of optimism that didn't become Mulder brightening his words artificially. She said nothing by way of response, but only slipped further into her chair, not caring that her mud covered shoes tracked dirt onto the carpet. She fingered the tag on her dog's collar instead. Without another word, Mulder turned to his pictures, obviously at a loss as to what more he could do to comfort her.

Sensitive, Mulder, real sensitive. What did she expect, really, coming out of Mulder? He had woken her up at some ungodly hour, gave her little time to prepare, no way of putting her dog up safely somewhere, and now this had happened. Had it even occurred to him how inconvenient this would be to her? Had the thought even crossed his mind once that she might actually have things to do or that she had other priorities other than his damned monster cases? She doubted it, or if it did Mulder had dismissed it as inconsequential next to chasing down sea monsters for the world to see.

Mulder and his mad quest, his search for the truth, it was his one over-riding obsession over everything else in this world, herself included. And yet, she sighed softly, staring at the collar bleakly, she had been the one to say yes. She could have said no, could have told him to do it himself, alone, while she slept in, walked her dog, folded her laundry, saw her mother. She could have stayed in DC and told him she would see him Monday. But like the faithful right hand she was, she had obediently rolled out of bed, gathered her things, and followed behind him, Queequeg tagging along. She could have said no at any time. The fact that the thought hadn't even occurred to her was disturbing. He expected that if he snapped his fingers, she would jump, no matter what else was happening in her life. And why shouldn't he? He saw nothing else, knew nothing else other than his precious, damned X-files and wouldn't know anything going on in her world unless she pointed it out to him. And she never did. She never said anything, never did anything, she always came running. Why was it she couldn't say no?

He glanced at her ruefully, looking at least somewhat sorrier now than earlier as she remained silent and still in the corner. "I'm sorry about Queequeg."

She blinked but made no response.

"You know, I think I've learned something about these photos." His sympathy had clearly run out in the face of Big Blue the sea serpent. Always chasing the crazy quests.

"Mulder," she began, too tired to hear about this, to even care. It could be the missing link hiding out there on the goddamn lake and she wouldn't care at this point. She wanted to go home, to get away from this, to get away from him. She could hear him speaking, something about sights of the attack and locations, but she couldn't bring herself around enough to care.

"Could you repeat the last part again? I kind of faded out." She met his slightly irked expression dully.

"Which part?"
"After you said 'I'm sorry.'"

"Can you drive a boat?" His thought process was so far ahead of where she was at, he couldn't even bother going back to explain. Whatever, she hadn't said no in the first place, why should she start saying it now?

"I can 'sail' a boat, yes. My father taught me how when I was a kid." Starbuck following Ahab around, learning how to captain her own ship. That had been her. Was she always so star struck by powerful men?

"Good, I'm going to see if we can hire one. I need to go out here." He held up the map of the lake, pointing to some vague area in the middle of the expanse of blue.

"At night? It's dark out there, Mulder?"

"At least your grief hasn't dulled your powers of observation, Scully." He smirked as he rose, snagging the map, the gleam of adventure shining madly in his eyes. "Come on, a midnight cruise, you and me, sounds like a good way to shake off the blues."

"Only if you accidentally fall over board and get eaten." There was no way out of talking him on this crazy scheme. She already saw that. As if she would have said no in the first place. Hell, she'd already lost her dog to his stupidity, why not what was left of her sanity as well?
"Yeah...yeah...thanks for the update," Scully clicked her cell phone off as Mulder continued down the darkened, Georgia roads. "Faraday made it through surgery all right and the doctors say that it certainly appeared to be an alligator attack."

Mulder let out another disappointed sigh.

"I know, Mulder, it's not your monster." She reached over to pat his arm.

"Yeah." He sounded morose. "Still, if I couldn't have Big Blue, at least I can tell everyone I shot an alligator."

"Take comfort in small things," Scully reassured him, putting her cell phone back in her pocket. "Your just lucky the thing didn't get you. It was huge."

"I suppose," Mulder mused. "Still, if Faraday had lost his leg in the attack, you think he would have gotten a peg leg?"

Scully tried very hard not to snort with laughter.

"No, I'm serious," Mulder insisted. "I think it's a categorical fact that all young boys wish at sometime in their life they had peg legs or hook hands."

"Why in the world would any young boy want to maim himself?" Scully had grown up a tomboy, but couldn't exactly remember a time when she wanted to chop off a hand or foot.

"Didn't you ever want to be a pirate?"

"What, with an eye patch and parrot?"

"And a peg leg," Mulder added insistently.

"I can't say that the thought crossed my mind more than, well, more than while playing with my brothers."

"You would have been an awesome pirate. Like Maureen O'Hara in that old movie, Against All Flags."

"Is that the one with Errol Flynn?" She recalled seeing it on Turner Classic Movies late one night.

"Yeah, the sexy, red haired pirate mistress, trying to seduce the handsome, debonair British officer."

"Are you the one coming on to me now, Mulder?"

"I think you would have made a great pirate, especially with your wicked aim."
"Sorry, no desire for a peg leg, Mulder, and I'm attached to my hand and both my eyes."

"Don't know what you are missing, living the life of adventure."

"Mulder, you get seasick just crossing the Potomac to work."

"Are you making fun of me because you know more about boats than I do?"

"Ships, and yes."

"I think your father would have approved of a career in piracy for you. It's carrying on the Scully tradition of life at sea."

"Somehow, I don't think he'd be too terribly big on the thieving and murdering."

"And I don't see you as being the wenching type." Mulder chuckled.

"How do you know I didn't in college," Scully teased, causing him to turn to her, mouth hanging open. "Mulder, keep your eyes on the road."

"Scully, don't lead a man on like that."

"Sorry." She wasn't really. "So why a pirate?"

"Why not?"

"Well, pirates are outlaws, beyond the bounds of king and country. You are all for your truth and justice."

"Yeah, but give me some credit, Scully, I also have a healthy disregard for the law."

"I wasn't going to bring it up."

"I don't know, pirates represent freedom, a simple life, one where you just take what you need and to hell with the rest of the world, living as simply as you can on the high seas."

"You know, farming is a pretty simple life too," Scully suggested helpfully.

"Yeah, but it doesn't involve peg legs."

"Well, it could involve hooks. Farmers loose hands all the time in farming accidents."

"Scully, could you honestly see me within 100 feet of a tractor?"

"I couldn't see you within 100 feet of a ship either, I'm just saying."

"You are crushing my dreams, Scully."

"I can arrange for that leg to be removed if its what you really want."

"You could!" He sounded thoughtful for half a moment. "But, then I suppose it would make life on the X-files difficult. After all, you'd have to do all the running and chasing after suspects, and with those stubby legs of yours - ow!"

He rubbed the spot on his shoulder where her fist had just connected. "That hurt!"

"Maybe I can give you a hook for an arm instead."
"Thanks for being there for a man and his dreams."

"I wish your dreams were, I don't know, normal Mulder."

"If I were normal, would I be half as much fun to be with?"

"I suppose not."

They were silent for several moments. As the Appalachian foothills melted away around them, only the hum of the car engine and the sound of the wind outside their window filled the space between them. Scully tried not to think of the empty spot in the back of the car that had once contained her Pomeranian.

"You know," Mulder finally said gravely. "If I couldn't be a pirate, perhaps I could be a ninja."

Her thoughts already elsewhere, Scully frowned. "A ninja?"

"Because every little boy wants to either be a pirate or a ninja. It's the way the world works."

"Am I going to have to deal with this the whole car ride?" Scully sighed heavily as Mulder grinned madly at her.
"I think you better go." Dr. Stroman and two orderlies strained to hold down the thrashing arms and twisting body of Joseph Patnik. His screams echoed off the high ceilings and narrow walls, nightmarishly chanting, "He's here, he's here, he's here…"

The man's eyes were riveted to the image on CNN above them. Scully admitted she didn't know much about the situation in the former Yugoslavia. She knew there was a terrible war and that was all. But the words uttered between Patnik's anguished screams chilled her, words like "rape", "murder", and "innocent". They seemed to fill Patnik's fevered outrage as the doctor and orderlies tried to hold him down.

"Scully, come on." Mulder's fingers on her elbow pulled her attention from the television, her eyes snapping to his silently as he motioned her out into the hallway. Without a word or any further acknowledgement to Dr. Stroman she followed Mulder's quick steps, the shrill sound of Patnik following her close behind.

"What sort of psychosis was that?" If anyone understood it, Mulder would. His background in psychology explained these things better than her medical degree ever could. Already, he was turning over what he saw, formulating ideas as his teeth dug into the soft flesh of his bottom lip in concentration.

"I've seen cases like this before, it's not uncommon among schizophrenics, drug users, those who are suffering from serious illness. But Patnik hasn't had these things. According to the police report, Patnik was a mild-mannered sort of guy, happily married, was involved in the community theater group. He and his wife just celebrated their wedding anniversary."

"Sounds idyllic." And not even comparable to the situation she had just witnessed in the room behind them, the raving screams and mad, terrified eyes. "Dr. Stroman suggested methamphetamine abuse. Doesn't sound like something Mr. Patnik would have indulged in on a regular basis judging from the police report."

"No, and that's the confusing part." Mulder wove through a crowd in the hallway, deftly threading through and waiting briefly for her to catch up. "Patnik was fine until a week ago when he went on his murder spree. He started with the director of his theater group and ended with his wife, Sarah. He claims it was all the same man each time. Police say he didn't even recognize it was his wife in the car till they opened the trunk and made him look at it."

"Perhaps, there is something we don't even know about going on in his life; trouble at work, marital problems he and his wife didn't discuss, something to cause him to snap?"

"I don't know about that." He was being much more vague than usual and something about it caused Scully's skin to prickle nervously. Mulder knew something he hadn't shared yet. Why had he called her to Maryland that morning instead of the office? And who was it that sent him there?"
"What's up?" She prodded him both literally and figuratively, her fingers gently pressing his side, breaking his concentration as he shied away. Mulder was ticklish? She delightfully filed that information away for future use as she stared up at him expectantly.

He finally gave in. "Someone contacted me last night through private channels wanting to discuss a case. They gave me a newspaper article about Patnik, told me I needed to look into it or more people would die."

"That's nice and ominous. Did he say why?"

"No, that's what he wanted me to find out." The lobby of the hospital was quiet and mostly empty as they made their way to the parking lot. May's mild and warm weather was welcome as Scully squinted across the parking lot to her vehicle.

"Mine or yours?"

"Mine. Let's go to Patnik's house, then come back for yours and get a motel."

"We're close enough to home to drive, Mulder." There was a hint of wheedle in her voice, she recognized that. Two weeks removed from the disastrous trip to Georgia and the loss of her only pet, Scully was in no mood to hole up in a hotel again. "We could drive back up here tomorrow if we need to."

"How was that beltway traffic again?" Mulder shook his head, slopping to his car with keys in hand.

"What do you think we'll find that will justify us taking out a hotel and adding to our growing expense account?" That was what she wanted to know. Really, they had no reason to stay up there. What did he know that made it so imperative?

"I don't - yet."

"But you suspect?"

"I don't know if I suspect anything, either."

"Mulder!" She stopped, staring at him as he unlocked his car door. "Two weeks ago, it was a monster in a lake in Georgia and it turned out to be an alligator. Time, effort, expense, and all we had to show for it was a mildly interesting story in a newspaper and my dog dead, eaten by the thing."

He rolled his eyes, leaping immediately for the defensive. "I keep telling you I'm sorry about the damn dog. I'll buy you a new one if it will make up for it."

"That's not the point," she shot back, arms crossing as he rounded the car for his side. Though, she was half tempted to take him up on the offer of the dog. "The point is that first it's an alligators in Georgia, now it's some strange man approaching you with a case that might turn out to be nothing more than a someone who snapped under some sort of mental stress."

"A man who snapped and killed five people, including his wife, and swears that he thinks that he was killing the same man over and over? I don't know about how you feel about our job, but I only get the impulse to start killing people during long, budget meetings with accounting and Skinner."

"That's because they are berating you for taking out hotel rooms you don't need." She challenged him silently over the top of his car.
"I hate it when you're right," he muttered, eyes narrowing slowly as he sank into his car. She followed, slipping in and buckling up.

"I sometimes have to wonder why it is you drag me on these insane cases, if it's deliberately to drive me crazy?"

"You're my partner, Scully, you are the one who says that you are in it for the long haul. You can step away at any point you want to."

"That's not what I meant." His petulance surprised her, the hurt in his tone as he started the engine. Perhaps that was what it had sounded like, she realized, sighing. "I just have to wonder why you would trust a complete stranger with information like this? This isn't the first time people we hardly know have come to you with this sort of information, and every time it nearly ends up with one or both of us killed, and in one instance your informant."

She still woke from nightmares of Deep Throat dying in her arms. "All I'm saying is that you run off at the slightest hint of mystery and don't ask yourself what the repercussions from all of this are?"

"Do you think I haven't considered that?" His tone was mild, but she could sense the testiness in him, the way his jaw clenched ever so slightly as he drove.

"I trust you completely, Mulder. I just sometimes wonder about those people you talk to and why you trust them, and if they are playing you, or playing me. Hell, I don't know." Her head throbbed painfully as she rubbed it in mild frustration. "Trust no one, Mulder, the mantra of our life."

"Yeah," he nodded, glance sideways at her with vague concern. "You know I trust you completely too, don't you?"

"Yes." She pursed her lips softly as she gazed out of the window. "But I don't trust the people who come to you, Mulder, especially with secret information. What was that old phrase of Homer's? 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.' You sure you don't have a Trojan horse here?"

"I don't know," he admitted softly, as the conversation lulled to silence between them.
The Evil Done By Man

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is overwhelmed by the images of human atrocity.

Monsters, the world was filled with them.

Scully had paid only half-an-eye in the last few years to the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. She knew enough to know there was a Bosnia, that there were Serbs and Croats, and some sort of ethnic war tearing the region apart, yet she had little time with the X-files top of mind and all the detritus that went with it to pay attention to world events unless they caught her eye for one reason or the other. Right now, however, she couldn't look away from the images on the television screen, stark and inhuman pictures from a land half a world away, where people were butchered, battered, bleeding. It was small wonder that Joseph Patnik had snapped. Mulder could say what he wanted about violence on television, Scully wasn't wholly convinced that the dreadful scenes weren't what pushed Patnik over the edge. Even now, watching it for the endless hours she had been, she could feel the tension, the gripping claws of dread and revulsion digging into her skull, spiraling down her spine. The lack of compassion was shocking. There seemed to be no trace of awareness of the humanity in the images from war torn Bosnia, as if Miriskovic and those that followed him took no more thought for the dead and dying than they would a dead animal in the street. Children dying, women raped, bodies strewn across broken streets and falling out of crumbling buildings...

Life was treated so insignificantly, it wasn't even given dignity, given choice. What had this world come too? Scully raised her glass to her lips, the cold water flowing icy over her tongue. Perhaps the idea of humanity was an illusion, conjured up as an ideal that rarely ever filtered into the living, breathing world that everyone else inhabited. How many times had she as an FBI agent seen scenes like this just in the everyday? The child molested by a parent, the woman standing on the street corner, high as a kite and selling herself for the man who watched with threatening dark eyes across the way. How about the predator who moved through the night, picking off others to feed their darker passions for death and destruction? She had seen that side all too clearly, had stared at it in the face of Donnie Pfaster. The memory made her shiver as she sucked on an ice cube, crunching it hard between her molars.

Scully had witnessed much horror, and that was since her assignment to the X-files, and much of it could be traced to the hands of the men who had placed her there with Mulder, the very men who wanted her to destroy him, to ruin his work and break his spirit. They were dark men in shadows, who sent out others to do their dirty work of pillaging and polluting. How very different were they from Miriskovic, she mused contemplatively, studying the picture of the man frozen on the television screen. It was a grainy image, pixilated further by the television news feed. It had all the stark qualities one associated with perfunctory Eastern European photography, but even in its stark blandness this Miriskovic didn't strike Scully as a man who looked like the epitome of evil, a monster. He looked like an average man, a politician, a person who had a wife and a home, perhaps children, who occasionally liked a good book and a good drink. He looked far from a man who planned the regular murder of people in his own region as part of his daily list of things to do. Yet wasn't that how these men acted, these faceless people who kidnapped her and killed her sister? They looked like everyday men, they had families, homes, careers. They were men of power who had everyday little quibbles and probably cared little for the Dana Scullys of the world...
they abducted and tested. Did it ever occur to them that their victims were fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, wives and husbands, friends, lovers, people with lives of their own? Was their even an ounce of remorse for what they were taking away from them as they used these people in their experiments, their guinea pigs used to test weapons for a war that had passed them by? Did it even bother them as they lay in their warm beds at night? Did they ever feel guilt? Remorse?

The scar on the back of her neck itched and she turned her neck slightly to rub the skin against the collar of her shirt. Her eyes ached, her head was heavy, and really she should follow Mulder's advice, get to bed, get some sleep, and try to forget these images from the day. Scully smiled. Mulder could be an ass, he was the first to admit that, but he always looked out for her first, as any proper best friend should do. Her attention turned briefly to the wall that separated the two of them from each other. Her best friend? Damn if she knew how that happened. Perhaps he was Ahab to her Starbuck, relentlessly pursuing his white whale, fixated on his obsession to the exclusion of everything else. But there were times when the obsession would lay dormant and he would remember that there were things such as eating and sleeping. And then she could see her partner as the wonderful, charming, considerate person he could be. Pity those times were so few and far between. She could have used that person when her dog was eaten, rather than his cold indifference.

She turned back to stare at her glass of water. No matter how focused and obsessive Mulder could be, no matter his indifference to things that mattered to her, he was in all ways her best friend, her closest friend, the man she trusted with her life. He'd believed in her return from her abduction even when her own family had given up hope. He was the one she turned to for explanations on what happened to her and why, the shoulder she had cried on regarding Melissa's death. While he perhaps had not been particularly distraught over the loss of Queequeg, she knew he bore the burdens of her abduction and her sister's loss, no matter what she told him otherwise. He shouldn't, but Scully doubted she could convince him not to.

A phone rang softly, it sounded as if it came from Mulder's room. It was a bit late for a phone call. She frowned at her watch. Mulder had said he was going to bed. A call from the Lone Gunmen maybe? It was hard telling with those three, they never kept sane hours. She wondered if they even slept at all. Perhaps it was Mulder's mysterious informant again with more information. Who was it this time? And why had he been so reticent to share the information with her? Couldn't he have called her when this person reached out to him, included her in on the conversation? Why was it Mulder never allowed her to meet the men who fed him these half-truths and loose pieces of disparate information. She never saw these people until Mulder was in trouble, usually after he had ditched her to do something insanely stupid. For all the trust she gave him, how could he not show the same level of trust in return?

Mulder's voice was a low rumble through the small, thin space between the rooms. "Yes, I understand. All right. I'll come outside. Right. Okay. No, she doesn't. Goodbye."

Outside? Scully stopped the tape in the machine, Miriskovic's face disappearing as she sipped from her glass. She needed more ice. How could she have gone through a whole bucket just sitting here? Perhaps she should check her iron levels, she reasoned as she scooped up the ice bucket, moving out of the door towards the machine at the end of the hall. It really was late, she yawned, shrugging as the cold air from the machine misted into the warm air of May around her. The world was silent for the most part, save for the sound of crickets in the soft breeze tainted by the scent of cheap cigarettes. Someone was smoking. Perhaps the front desk person, bored at 3 AM, with nothing better to do.

She shuffled to the soda machine. She needed caffeine if she wanted to get through these tapes
before sleep. Her eyes drifted lazily over the parking lot as she pulled out change from her pocket, settling on Mulder's sedan. Her fingers automatically dropped the quarters into the soda machine's slot, each falling with a loud clunk that resonated harshly in her stomach, echoing the sound of her heart as it plunged right along with them. Was that Mulder sitting in his car? Why? She blinked, focusing bleary eyes on the side of his laughing, smiling face, widening as beside him in the dark the soft glow of flames briefly illuminated a craggy face and a mouth puckered around the thin tube of a cigarette.

No! No, no, no, no, no, no….

Mulder passed something to the smoking man, the very one that had tried so hard just a year ago to ruin them both. What was going on here? Why? Why would Mulder even have been talking to this man? Disbelief warred with horror as she watched them nod and smile together. From the street beyond a laundry van rumbled in, past the car, stopping for its daily pick up from the motel. Unthinking, she ducked behind the soda machine, as if they would notice her standing there over the laundry truck. This had to be a mistake, a dream, more like a nightmare.

Carefully she ducked around again, her eyes roving the area beyond the van, looking for Mulder's car again. But somewhere between the van's arrival and her ducking to hide, the car had pulled out, and was quietly turning on the street. Scully felt her mouth go dry, torn between screaming after him and reaching for her cell phone, demanding to know what exactly was going on here and why. This was the man she trusted! This was the man she had sacrificed herself for, had lost Melissa for. There had to be a reason, something to explain this. He wouldn't betray her like this, not now, not ever. This had to be a dream, a horrible, horrible nightmare, brought on by hours of videos and the stress of the day. That was it. Go knock on his door, the rational voice in her head told her, see if this is all a stupid misunderstanding. But that was his car, she saw it with her eyes, she couldn't change that fact. That was him! That was his car, it was hard evidence, and he had gone… somewhere. With a smoker? With the smoker? God, what was going on?

Numbly Scully stumbled back to her room, slamming the door behind her before leaning her back against it, sliding to the floor. This couldn't be what she thought it was, it just couldn't. Mulder wasn't like that, he wouldn't do this to her…this couldn't all be a lie. It was all a dream, that was all, just some sort of strange, weird dream. That was it.

If this was a dream, than why then did the bucket in her lap feel so damn cold?
In which Scully has a bit of a breakdown.

Adrenaline roared in her ears as she Scully scrambled through the piles of debris from her torn and ruined hotel room. Sheets clumped in a pile at the foot of the bed as wires hung from every electrical outlet, and papers scattered like snow on the ugly, well-worn carpet. She blinked stupidly at the tilted pictures on the walls, wondering frantically if there was anything that she missed. They were watching. They had been watching the entire time. Terror clenched her stomach painfully, making it hard to breath as she ran shaking fingers through her hair. When had it started? Obviously early, the FBI had recruited her right out of medical school. Had it started then, their plans, the ones to take her? Why her? She was just a regular person. All she wanted to be was a doctor, to help people. Why had they taken her? Why had they done this to her, stolen her life, taken her sister?

Who was this Fox Mulder, and how in the hell had they made her trust him?

Thinking back she should have seen the obvious from the start; the distrustful arrogance, the mind games he would play just to test her, to play with her. How long had they worked to cook up that story about his sister? Did he ever really even have a sister? Was the entire Samantha story simply just a myth? Perhaps it wasn't, perhaps she really had disappeared, but not the way everyone told her. Maybe she was a victim of this too, just like Scully, and Mulder was their pawn to further their agenda. What was that agenda? What had they done to her?

Scully spun around the room, eyes wide. Nothing, nothing, she'd found nothing. They were good, they always were, hiding their devices in nooks and crannies. They put one in a pen in Mulder's desk once. Or had he put it there? That was when they'd chased after the alien and found Deep Throat at the end, the man who died in her arms. Trust no one, trust no one, it was the last thing he'd said to her, the one truth she had to go by, and she'd ignored it. She'd trusted and ended up taken to a silver boxcar with shining lights and Dr. Ishimaru or Zama or whoever he was standing over her, and all the pain…..had it been the strange virus that did it? Did they plug her veins full of it, hoping she would die like Mulder almost did in Alaska? Mulder almost died. He wouldn't betray her if he almost died - unless that was planned as well. Lies, lies, lies….

From outside lights shined, glaring as bright as the sun through the crooked curtains, honing in on her like search lights. Them! She ducked down low, below the window, no one could see, no one could tell. Carefully she crawled along, over the mess of her room, to the door, pressing her ear to the thin wood. His voice she recognized first, that distinctive Mulder voice, slightly nasal, but low and urgent. He was talking to someone. The owner? The manager? Perhaps it was the smoking man, come along to take her. Her heart stopped as she held her breath listening.

"Wait," Mulder muttered, as Scully's eyes widened, staring at the door. Without warning it shook, violently, as his large fist pounded on it, rattling it in its door frame. He could break in at any moment. He was a tall man, strong, and the door wouldn't be a barrier for long. Still she had to do something. Blindly she reached for the chain, slipping it into the groove and skittering away, reaching for her gun. She wouldn't go quietly, not if she couldn't help it. They wouldn't take her
again, not to that place again, not to the pain and the fear, she wouldn't do it.

Scully waited, pistol in hand as she stood at the bathroom door, waiting to see who would enter first.

Metal grated against metal as keys clicked together. Her finger twitched as she heard the doorknob turn and the hinges creek, light slicing through from the expanding opening from the outside. Without thinking, she aimed, firing her weapon, discharging blindly, six shots. A full round. Without a second thought she turned, fleeing to the back of the hotel room. There was a door, not the closet. Did it lead to the outside?

Yes! The door swung open to a back parking lot, dumpsters filled with rotting garbage fermenting the air. Inside the door crashed down as Mulder successfully kicked it open, and she ran, her feet flying across pavement to the brush beyond. She had to get away. She would not let him catch her, because he would take her. Perhaps this time he would kill her.

Leaves and brambles tore at her clothing, scratching her skin, but she didn't care. She had to get away, away from here, before they found her. How? Where? She reached into her overcoat. She still had it on. Why she didn't know. Inside were her badge, her wallet, and her cell phone. The cell phone she tossed, they could trace that. No, she didn't need that. She needed to get out of here though. Could she call a cab? Would a cab in rural Maryland manage to get her back to DC? No, not DC, too dangerous there, they would know to look for her there. Someplace safe, to someone who would never betray her, not like Mulder had. What place was that? Her mother! Her mother would die before betraying her. Scully nodded as paused to catch her breath, sirens ringing in the distance. Maggie would understand. She'd lost one daughter to Fox Mulder hadn't she? She had seen the horrible things done to Scully as she lay there, nearly dying. She wouldn't tell, she would keep the secret. She had to get to Baltimore, that was all.

The highway hummed not far in the distance from the hotel. Someone would stop for her, she was sure of it. She moved in that direction, ignoring how her impractical shoes sank into the mud of a May rain, clambering up the brush and grass embankment to the side of the road. Someone had to stop if they saw her. Was it too late at night to find one soul willing to help out a Federal Agent?

Scully wandered, footsteps dragging through the gravel and dirt on the side of the road, not sure what direction it was even taking her as she scanned the darkness for headlights. What time was it? She hadn't bothered looking before fleeing. Traffic seemed to be coming one direction, from behind her. She turned to watch for the white-hot pinpoints of light over the horizon, her ears pricked for the rushing sound of air over a hot engine. It took several moments, but someone came. She waved her arms, hoping they would somehow see her dark figure in the night. The car slowed, stopped, pulling to the side of the road as a curious woman looked out at her, ghost white in her car. She blinked at Scully slowly as she reached for her badge, hoping it made her look less crazy than she felt at this moment.

"I'm Special Agent Dana Scully. I'm with the FBI. " The woman glanced at the glint of metal on the badge, then back up at Scully with wary doubtfulness. "Does Braddock Heights have a train station to Baltimore?"

"I believe so." The woman frowned, looking sorry she even stopped. "You really an FBI agent?"

"That I am, ma'am. I'm here on official business and it's vitally important I get to Baltimore."

"Errr, all right." The woman glanced in consternation at her passengers seat. "I can give you're a ride to the station. Will that help?"
"Immensely," Scully breathed, running to the other side and jumping in, almost urging the woman on as more sirens screamed in the distance. She needed to get out of here, quickly. "Thank you for your assistance in this matter, ma'am."

"Not a problem." The woman didn't sound as if she truly believed those words. "I hope everything is all right."

"It will be," Scully muttered absently, watching the police car that raced past them on the highway.
The Safety of Home

Chapter Summary

In which Scully goes to the safest place she knows - home.

It took Scully most of the day to get to her mother's house. The train went straight to DC, but she switched lines before then to take one that led to Baltimore. Once there she spent hours circling, one cab to another, through downtown, never stopping, her eyes roving wherever she went. Exhaustion ate at her, her head felt heavy with it, and she could have cheerfully curled up in the back of one of the musty, sour smelling taxis, but if she did Mulder might find her. Of course he would, with a profiling mind like his. He probably already knew she was going to her mother's. That was why she had to wait, till it was dark, in the secret and the silence of evening. She'd lost count of the amount of money she spent on cab fair when she switched to her last one and directed it to the suburb her mother resided in. She dozed, fretfully, finally feeling safe enough to rest, but her heart pounding inside of her brain thudded dully in her ears, and she couldn't stop the swirling thoughts surrounding it. Mulder had betrayed her, he had always known. She had never been the spy, always the guinea pig. They had done this to her. Why?

She rubbed viciously at her right eye, the pounding most noticeable and stabbing there. Had it all been a lie or had Mulder's quest been originally true, twisted in the time she was gone from him, perverted by his desire to get her back? Was this what it was all about? Had he sold his soul to the devil to gain her return? It didn't look like he was unhappy with the devil. They had been laughing together, joking. What was going on here? What did all of this mean?

"Lady?" The cabbie grunted over the back seat, smelling of cheap cigarettes and pickled peppercinis from the sandwich he had dribbled down his front. "We're here."

Scully blinked sandy eyelids, the front windows of her mother's house blazing as she handed the driver her last hundred dollars. She didn't bother to respond to the change he tried to give her as she poured herself out of the back door and stumbled up the red brick walkway, praying her mother was home tonight. She needed to see her mother. Her mother would make this all better. Her mother would make this go away.

The door flew open almost before Scully's finger left the doorbell, her Maggie's arms grabbing her tightly. "Dana," she breathed, as Scully felt her knees buckles, relief flooding her as she fought back the tears she'd been swallowing all day, the anger, the fear, the confusion. All she wanted was her mother, to lay her head on her Maggie's lap and have her stroke her hair and tell her that this was all just a bad dream.

"Mom, I'm so scared," she whispered as Maggie trundled her inside, not even bothering to take off her youngest daughter's overcoat as she moved her to the couch. "I've been running all day, I couldn't let him find me."

Maggie's worry darkened as she began all the familiar motherly routines; feeling Scully's forehead, her cheek, smoothing the hair back off her flushed face. It felt so good, Scully realized, as she closed her eyes briefly, leaning into her mother's touch. She could sleep here, now, just rest her head back and let her mother take care of all of this. No more running, no more worry, just rest....
"Dana, you're all flushed. Are you feeling okay?"

"Tired," she yawned, not even cracking open an eye. She hadn't slept last night, fleeing instead, and had hardly slept the night before. When was it that you were legally declared insane? Seventy-two hours? Did she qualify yet? A hysterical giggle tried to bubble up from inside of her, but she swallowed it back, sinking into the couch cushions.

"You've had us all so worried!" Maggie's sympathy was filled with reproach and Scully could feel her slip to the couch beside her. "Fox called here last night. I knew something was wrong."

"Mulder?" Her eyes snapped open, the anxiety clutching at her, ripping her from the comfort she was just now starting to luxuriate in. "You can't tell him I'm here, Mom, you can't….

"Dana, he's terrified right now! He doesn't know where you are!" Clearly her mother had no idea, didn't even suspect what was going on. How could she? Fox Mulder had fooled Scully for three years. Why not Maggie? He could be so charming when he wanted to be, all he had to do was turn on those puppy-dog eyes of his, drag out the bleeding heart story about his sister. Had her mother fallen for that line too? Fox Mulder, the broken man-child, forever looking for his long, lost baby sister.

"He lied to me, Mom, about all of this." Agitation sent her bouncing from the soft cushions, anger fueling her as she paced her mother's living room. "I saw him the other night, I saw him, he's in this with them, he knows."

"Knows what? In with whom? Dana, you're not making sense." Maggie's wide, blue eyes tracked her daughter as growing trepidation dawned on her. "Fox would never do anything to hurt you, Dana."

"Mulder," she hissed, spinning on her own mother. "He's not your son, you don't get to call him Fox." Scully never got to call him Fox. Was that one of his ploys to keep her distant, so he wouldn't feel so bad handing her over to them?

"Mulder, then," Maggie murmured low, pursing her lips tightly together as if biting back what she had to say. Why was her mother so afraid right now? What had Mulder told her?

"Mom, I saw the truth, finally." Scully paused long enough to face her mother, confronting her as she would Mulder in their tiny, dungeon of an office. "He…he was talking to the smoking man."

"The who?"

Maggie had no idea what that reference even was too. "There is this man, a powerful man, I think. I don't know his name, I don't know anyone who does. He is always there, pulling stings, smoking on his cigarettes. He is who assigned me to Mulder in the first place. He is the one who killed Melissa."

Her voice cracked then as memories flooded her, half remembered images of lights and needles, and her whole body aching as soft voices in a language she didn't understand murmured around her.

"He's the one who had me taken, Mom!" Stinging, hot tears coursed down her face, burning her skin as they dribbled down, unchecked. "They did things to me, horrible things! They ran tests and they hurt. And I could die, just like Betsy Hagopian, just like the women in Allentown, and this man did it all. And Mulder knows him! I saw Mulder talking to him."

She choked on her own indignation and pain as a sob tore its way through her stream of words. "I saw them sitting in Mulder's car, laughing. And then Mulder took the cable feed, and he didn't take
it to Agent Pendrell like I told him too. Mulder took it to them. He knows what they are doing, he's part of it, and he knows what they did to me. He did this to me!"

Her fingers covered her streaming face as she cursed herself. She never cried, she refused to cry. She was stronger than this, stronger than him. Why was she falling apart this way?

"Dana, honey, what is all this?" In the kitchen the phone rang, shrill across Maggie's stunned concern, but her mother made no move to rush to answer it. Instead, she rose to wrap her daughter up once again, pull her to her shoulder as she would have when she was a child, smoothing fingers through Scully's bright, copper hair.

"Mom, how could I have gotten this so messed up?"

"Dana," she crooned softly, simply holding her. "Things are mixed up for you right now. Just rest."

Rest. The word sounded like heaven to her. She could have stayed there, curled against her mother's shoulder for hours, days even. Forget that there was a conspiracy out there to hurt her, kill her, and use the virus against her. She could stay here and be her mother's little girl again forever. If only it were that simple.

"Are you hungry? Have you eaten?" Maggie pulled away, her eyes searching Scully's briefly, taking her disheveled appearance, the streak of dirt along her right jaw line. She hadn't showered even, nothing since she fled the hotel room in terror.

"No, nothing, I haven't been hungry." It was true enough, the last thing on her mind all day as she watched for shadowy figures was food. She slipped gratefully into one of her mother's dining room chairs, curling her feet up to one of the supporting rungs as she watched her mother bustle into the kitchen, pulling things out of the fridge, the makings of what looked to be a sandwich spread out onto the kitchen counter.

"Do you plan on at least calling your boss?" There was a forced lightness in Maggie's tone as she tried to casually chatter, slathering mayonnaise onto bread as she reached for a container of pre-sliced turkey.

"When things quiet down. I need to get evidence for him, proof. I don't think he knows about Mulder. I have to show them what he's been doing." The irony of her situation nearly made her break down into sobs again. Just a year ago she had been scrambling for proof that Mulder wasn't insane. Now she was scrambling for proof that he was a liar.

"Mr. Skinner will want to know, Dana, you're one of his agents." Maggie's firm instance was gentle, almost hesitant. Her mother believed her about all of this, about Mulder, right?

"Tomorrow, Mom. I'll call him tomorrow." From a payphone, she reasoned, one they couldn't get to before she fled. It was hard telling what sort of story Mulder had filled them with. More lies….

"Here you go." Maggie set the sandwich before her, watching silently as Scully dug in quickly, not even realizing till then just how starved she was. Her flight, her worry, they had taken so much out of her. Before she could even blink the sandwich was gone and Maggie was chuckling at her indulgently.

"I haven't seen you scarf down food like that since you and Charlie used to wander the dunes out by our old place at Miramar." Better times, happier memories. Scully smiled sadly as her mother removed the plate, wondering what she should do now. What could she do now? Was the FBI watching this place? Could she stay long enough to sleep, perhaps, to get her wits about her? She
needed time.

The knocker on the front door sounded three times. Scully froze, eyes glued to the front window.

"Who would use the knocker and not the doorbell," Maggie mused, wiping her hands on a dishtowel as she moved instinctively to the door.

"Mom, don't!" Scully reached for her mother's arm, finger's wrapping around it, stopping her.

"Nonsense, Dana, this is a quiet neighborhood, no one would…"

This time the knocks were louder, sounding through the house. Scully's eyes widened as they met her mother's.

"Please, Mom, it's him! He's here to take me, to kill me." Her voice was so small, pleading with her mother not to do it, not to let Mulder in. It was him she knew it was him.

"Dana, listen to yourself. This is Fox, your partner. He won't hurt you." Rising, she pulled away from Scully, smoothing shaking hands over her dark hair, even as Scully hissed at her from the dining room.

Mulder knocked again. Scully knew him, she knew her mother, and there was no way she was going to stop Mulder if his intention was to come for her. Scrambling, she moved behind the narrow partition between living room and dining room, pulling her weapon from its holster as she did so. As the door swung open she removed the safety, prepared if she must to defend her life and her mother's, even if it meant killing Mulder.

"Mrs. Scully, is she here?" How good of an actor Mulder was, that contrived worry in his voice.

"Uh, no." Maggie's low, soft contralto shook as she lied openly about her daughter's whereabouts. Mulder would see through that, Scully thought desperately. He's too good. Please, please let him just ignore it.

"You haven't been answering your phone." She could almost see him in the doorway now, prepared to push past Maggie into her own home, to look for Scully's hiding place. Her trigger finger slipped into position, her mouth turning to cotton.

"When I hear from her, I'll call, okay?" Now there was panic in her mother's voice, and Scully knew all was lost. Mulder could sense it, Scully knew it, she could hear him push his way into her mother's own home, ignoring her demands.

"I need to see her," Mulder insisted.

"Fox, please, go away," Maggie sobbed quietly, breaking Scully's heart as her jaw tightened. "Go away!"

"Sorry," he muttered, his steps invading the living room, so close to where she now stood. "Where is she?"

Without a word Scully stepped carefully around the corner, her gun level, aimed right for the middle of Mulder's back. The hell she was going to allow him to bully her mother, to take her away to be tested on, killed.

"Dana, put down the gun!" Maggie's fear sharpened now, snapping at her daughter as if she were a child running around with her father's service weapon. But Scully hardly blinked as Mulder spun,
eyes widening with both relief and shock.

He swallowed, hard, his jaw clenching quietly as he raised his hands. "I'm here to help you, Scully."

Lies, every word out of his mouth was lies. Handsome and charming, with his bleeding heart, how could she ever have been taken in by him? "I told you Mom, he's here to kill me."

Maggie seemed to be ignoring her, or to not understand what she meant by "kill". She moved to stand quietly by Mulder, like a front against Scully's righteous indignation.

"I'm on your side, you know that!" Mulder had the audacity to look hurt by her words, to look frightened. Had he practiced this on all those women he used to string along, the many women who used to call the office and leave hateful messages? How about Kristen Kilgar, the girl who died? She narrowed her gaze at him, shaking her head.

"Put it down, Dana." Maggie's voice was quiet now, pleading, trying to reason with her.

"Scully, listen to me very carefully," Mulder murmured, as if she were a crazy person, as if she were Duane Barry, someone he could reason with. "You don't know it, but you're sick with the same thing that drove those other people to murder. And whatever you think may be happening…"

Carefully, slowly, he took a step forward.

"Just stay back." Without hesitation she cocked the hammer of her gun. The sound rang through the stillness, as Maggie bit into her lip, hard.

"Dana," Maggie stepped forward, beside Mulder again. Damn it, she needed to stay back. "You're not yourself. He's telling you the truth."

"It's not the truth, Mom!" She lashed out angrily, tears blurring her vision. Lies, lies, lies! "He's lied to me from the beginning."

She might as well have really shot him. His eyes widened as he wordlessly shook his head, but she refused to give into his pleading looks.

"He's never trusted me."

Those words rang true. She remembered all too well those words of his when she stepped into his office. *I thought you were sent to spy on me.* He remembered them, too. He closed his eyes briefly, looking ever so slightly guilty. She didn't believe it for a second.

"Scully." Her name seemed to be ripped from some deep place inside of him, his eyes opening to meet hers. "You are the *only* one I trust."

How many times had he said that, too? And she wanted to believe him, to believe it was true. Her eyes stung as she fought against them, refusing to give into the tears threatening her vision. "You're in on it! You're one of them! You're one of the people who abducted me! You put that thing in my neck! You killed my sister!"

"That's not true, Dana," her mother insisted, even as Mulder paled visibly under her accusations.

"It is," she insisted with all the vehemence of a child.

But Maggie wouldn't listen. In fact she chose to step in front of Scully's line of fire instead. Maggie
was taller than her daughter, enough so that her own body blocked off any kill shot Scully could possibly get off. And while Scully was good enough to aim for the head on a normal day, tears, fear, rage all combined to make her aim unsure. She couldn't go for it, not with her mother standing right there.

"Dana!" Maggie's voice was soft and low, just as it would have been when she was a little girl, crying over some slight by some other child on the playground. "I want you to listen to me."

"Mom, just get out of the way," she snapped, begging.

"You know that I would never hurt you," Maggie continued, ignoring her. "I would never let anybody hurt you. That's why you came here, isn't it?" Damn it, Scully sniffed, Maggie knew that was why. Her mother was safe. "You're safe here. Put the gun down, Dana."

She was safe. Her mother wouldn't lie to her on this, not even with Mulder there. Her mother wouldn't have done these things. Why was she standing up for him? He killed Melissa! Confused, she could feel her weapon waver unsteadily, as her mother crept forward, hand outstretched.

"Put it down, Dana." Tears glittered in Maggie's warm, blue eyes, entreating her to listen. "Put it down.

Just as her father had taught her, she dropped her aim, allowing her mother to get close as she grabbed Scully's tearful face and pressed her forehead to it, whispering words she couldn't make out. All she wanted to do was cry, to sob, to break apart. What was she doing? What was going on?

Her mother's arms held her as she went to pieces, her mother's voice crooning softly in her ear.

From somewhere far away a ragged voice that sounded something akin to Mulder's murmured, "I'll go call an ambulance. She needs to be checked out."

"Thank you, Fox," Maggie replied softly as Scully clung to her harder, spending her terror and confusion as she sank to the floor, her arms around her mother.
Past Indiscretions

Chapter Summary

In which Scully puts everything into perspective.

"What, you didn't want your Jell-O?" Mulder prodded the jiggling, red mass with Scully's neglected spoon.

"It's all yours, I know red's your favorite." She shrugged in disinterest, gathering the few belongings she had actually there at the hospital with her, toiletries and clothing, her badge. Her gun was still in the possession of Mulder last she knew. She glanced sideways at him as he lounged in the one chair in her room, far too small for his tall, lanky frame. He seemed oblivious as his eyes turned to the television, digging into the plastic bowl of gelatin cubes. She'd almost shot him, almost killed him. Here was a man sitting glibly in the corner, eating her treat with the abandon of a child, and she honestly believed he was out to kill her, that he had betrayed her in the worst fashion. What in the hell had she been thinking?

He didn't need to look away from the television to know the tenor of her thoughts. "It wasn't you, Scully, I know that." His eyes slid to hers briefly, piercing and intent.

"Mulder, I stood there in my mother's house with a gun on you. I could have killed you."

"It's not the first time you've had a gun pointed at me." A ghost of a smile played across his face, the light in his eyes turning mischievous. "Last time, as I recall, you actually did shoot me."

Oh God! She cringed, the horror of that moment for her playing out in a spill of his blood as Krycek ran away down the alley in terror. "That time you were the one out of your mind, not me."

"See, this is what makes you the more responsible partner, you only shoot me when I'm insane, not when you're insane." He swallowed the last spoonful of Jell-O, setting the bowl back on her hardly eaten dinner tray. "You about ready to head out of here?"

"In a bit." She was dragging her heals, she knew it. Shame and anger at herself competed as she fidgeted with the few belongings her mother had brought to her. What must Skinner think, let alone her mother? Maggie had been all smiles and relief while she was there, but had said little about the fact her little girl had busted in like a stark raving lunatic, threatening to kill her partner over his perceived betrayal. Special Agent Dana Scully never lost her mind like that. She was the last person anyone would suspect of it. Mulder was the one most people looked to when they asked themselves which partner would go nuts first, but he hadn't been the one firing rounds at innocent motel managers, even when he had been the one who was crazy.

"The boys have the cable device," Mulder drawled smoothly. If he noticed her discomfort, he ignored it for the time being. "They are looking at it now. From what they can tell at the moment, it seems to work on the power of suggestion, signals emitted through the cable feed. It can send whatever message you want. This particular message played on people's secret anxieties and fears."

Scully nodded her head slowly, feeling no less foolish knowing the truth. "It worked even over video tape?"
"Yep!" Mulder glanced back up at the flickering television, the local evening news chattering. "The signal used light waves, which were just as easily picked up over VHS tape as over regular television. Because these people were watching large, concentrated amounts of the signal over a span of time, it hit them harder than several of their neighbors."

"What about you?" That was the part that had niggled at Scully, that had partially fed the fear and paranoia she had felt all day. "You spent hours watching those same tapes and they didn't effect you like they did me."

"Perhaps because manic paranoia is my normal, default state," Mulder quipped, though Scully hardly laughed at his self-deprecation. "You remember the tie you got me for Christmas a few years ago?"

She nodded, slowly. "I got it for you because you had such horrendous taste. You said it was because…"

She paused, it suddenly hit her, eyebrows flying upwards at his knowing look.

"The signal ran on a red-green wavelength. Remember, I'm colorblind."

"But you have anomalous trichromancy, you can still see reds and greens."

"I have a hard time with red, especially the darker it gets, the harder it is to tell from black. While I can tell your hair is copper colored, other reds I have a hard time seeing at all. My brain doesn't process that wavelength correctly. Because of it, the signal had very little effect on me."

Scully turned this over in her mind, settling back on the edge of her hospital bed, picking at the jeans she had changed into to leave the hospital. If it were true, a device causing this, what sort of things could such a device do? It was terrifying. Mind control on a grand scale. Someone could convince the populace to turn on each other or to watch quietly while the world went to hell. More likely, and more devious, one could convince those under the devices spell that nothing was going on, that there were no such things as strange, mutant viruses, that people who believed such things, even with all the proof in the world, were dangerous psychopaths.

"Certainly makes you think, doesn't it," Mulder murmured quietly from across the room. "Screw Madison Avenue and subliminal advertising, all I need is ESPN."

She hugged her elbows suddenly, a feeling of cold crawling across her skin that had nothing to do with the temperature of the hospital room. "Imagine what it could do! I was so sure, Mulder."

"I know," he sighed, scrubbing his face lightly. Despite his flippant humor, Scully could still see what the last few days had done to her partner, the strain around his eyes, the worry he didn't quite manage to hide as he watched her. She'd scared the hell out of him, and understandably so. She was his voice of reason, the one who remained calm when the world was going to hell. She'd said horrible things to him, accused him of horrible things - of Melissa.

"Mulder, you know I don't really blame you for Missy or for my abduction." She'd said it often enough to him. She also knew Mulder carried guilt around him like a comforting shroud. He had never let go of Melissa's death or her disappearance and she doubted he ever would.

"Scully, you weren't rational in those moments." He sidestepped the issue neatly, simply refusing to confront it. "I know you didn't mean it."

"I did at the time," she countered, her eyes wide and serious as she tried to engage him. He shrugged uncomfortably, trying to look away. "I told you earlier, I believed you had gone to the
other side, that you were working with him."

"The smoking man?" Mulder grimaced. "Look, Scully, he was involved, but I would never…"

"You told me once that you went to see him when I was missing." Scully cut across his words, stunning him with her memory.

He paused, mouth slightly open, as he nodded softly.

"What would you have done to get me back?" She had contemplated that question a great deal in the year-and-a-half since her return.

"I didn't make a deal with him," he snapped with a hint of anger.

"No, but would you have if he had offered it?"

"I'd have shot the cancerous bastard if I thought I could get away with it."

"But you did neither." She refused to back down on this. His shoulder's slumped sullenly, but he made no comment.

"It takes so little to betray a person, you know." She sighed, as the weight of confession pressed down on her. Perhaps it was because she was Catholic. That need to extirpate her sins by spilling her most cherished secrets bubbled to the surface, tugging at her to confess to him. Maybe it was her guilt and shame over the horrible things she had said to Mulder, her need to make him understand that she did trust him, completely, even with the dirty secrets that turned her so completely against him.

"I need you to understand, Fox, I do trust you completely." His first name caught his attention. She rarely ever used it, only when she truly wanted him to understand something privately personal. He hardly flinched, but nodded slowly.

"Trust is something that's not easily won by me." She settled back against the hard mattress of the hospital bed. "You move schools a lot as a Navy brat, you make friends one year, only to lose them the next when either your parents or their parents moved. It makes you a bit tough skinned towards new people in your life."

Mulder would understand that, the boy who lost his family.

"While my trust has gone to very few, it has been complete. And while I would love to tell you that my cautious nature means that I have had nothing but completely trustworthy people in my life, you and I both know that it's not true."

"So who was it that betrayed you so badly?" His tone was distantly curious, as if he were interviewing a suspect. Mulder in psychologist mode, she smiled.

"His name was Daniel. He was my mentor at Stanford. Head of cardiology there, brilliant, world-renown, a man who for whatever reason took an interest in me." To this day she still couldn't say why. "I was young, twenty-three, in my second year of medical school, still contemplating what I'd do with my medical career. I happened to go to one of his lectures. I thought he was a genius." The sycophancy of her youth, Scully cringed at the idea now.

"There are moments when you look back and you wonder what happened to all those lessons on life and love your parents taught you. You know my mother. It wasn't as if either her or my father would have ever approved of a romance with an older man." She shook her head softly, still
wondering at it even now. "At the time I was just dazzled that he was interested in my ideas. But it grew, more time spent together in lab, in discussion. He invited me to observe his surgeries. That led to inviting me to dinner - and you can see where this is going."

Mulder was an attractive man. He'd gotten in over his head with a woman before. Scully had met Phoebe Green. He knew perhaps better than anyone. And he nodded with a sad sort of perfect understanding. "That I do."

"I never bothered to question him," she mused softly, stunned even now that the thought had never even occurred to her. "He told me that he loved me, I believed him. I was young, I was in love, and I wanted to see what was presented to me. I'd heard he had a wife, but when I asked, he said they were in the middle of divorce proceedings. I didn't question it."

"Why do I see one of those nasty, soap opera moments coming?"

Scully snorted. Mulder really did need to stop watching those things. "I was well into my residency before it started falling into place. I should have picked up on the signs, the fact he never invited me to his home, or that he never took me up on offers to meet my family on the holidays. There was always some excuse. I took it in stride. One day I had just pulled a 48-hour shift, pretty typical when you are a grunt resident. I had some paperwork to do, I wanted to crash someplace quiet, and so I went to Daniel's office."

She still remembered the moment, crystal clear, one of those indelible images left in her memory.

"He got a call while I was in there and I ignored it. It hit his answering machine. It was his wife, calling about the charity event they were going to that night, and please don't forget to pick up the tickets. Just as calm and wifely as she could be, with not even a hint that she was distant, angry, hurt, all the things you'd expect from a couple divorcing."

"Clearly she hadn't got the message," Mulder muttered dryly.

"No, but I had. I confronted him. He denied it. So, then I decided to investigate on my own." The FBI had hardly been the first place she had tried out her investigatory skills. "Not only was he married, but he had a daughter only slightly younger than myself, an art student at Berkley. They had no idea about a divorce, about me and I didn't inform them. I confronted Daniel, but, it was messy."

The pleading, the begging, the promises, even the threats, Daniel had wielded them all. She had remained resolute, however, reminding him of her Catholic faith, that she hadn't gotten into this to be a home wrecker. She would not, could not be another man's mistress. He'd refused to accept that, but she refused to give in. He had felt confident she would change her mind, given time to allow things to settle. He assured her he would get his divorce, he would leave his wife. But that hadn't been the words she had wanted to hear.

"I had already shown interest in pathology. I'd been torn in my decision even without Daniel's influence. I switched my residency to complete it with the pathology department, which is where the FBI found me, and you know the rest of it." She smiled weakly at him, feeling slightly drained. This was the story of how she ended up being where she was when they had met, but it still carried the smack of shame, as well as all of the hurt she had tried to ignore for years.

"Daniel taught me a very important lesson. More than about affairs of the heart in the literal sense, he taught me that you could never truly know a person really. I had believed him implicitly without question, and one day that all changed. The man I had trusted so totally had based our relationship on nothing more than a lie."
She hadn't realized till she thought about it, horrified at what she had done to Mulder, that her pervading guilt and anger still had such far-reaching effects. It had been years now since she had even spoken to her former mentor and lover. She had cut herself off from him completely. But even now, the effects of that one mistake in her life, that one wrong choice wormed their way into her life, even into her partnership with Mulder. And that was where the shame truly lay for her in all of this. Mulder was not Daniel, he was far from it. He had been nothing but supportive of her, and she had waved a gun in his face.

"We all have demons, Dana." Mulder sighed, as if knowing exactly where her thoughts were leading her. "I have a broken family and a missing sister, you have a lover who broke your trust and abused your good faith. That was what the device was designed to expose."

There was no judgment or condemnation on his part, not for her at least.

"Not that I think I need to remind you of this, but I'm not Daniel." One dark eyebrow quirked in childish amusement. "Outside of you running into my hotel room in your underwear, I've yet to even get to see you naked."

Scully snorted, rolling her eyes, surprised it had taken him this long to drag out an inappropriate comment. It had done what he had intended it to do, break the ice, and earned a smile out of her.

"Scully, there aren't words enough to express how much I wish those things that have happened to you hadn't." Seriousness returned in full force, Mulder's humor turning grave. "If I could get back Melissa for you, in a heartbeat, I would."

"I know, Mulder."

"And if I could go back in time and take back those words about you being a spy, I would too." He looked as if he wanted to kick himself. "I didn't mean them. Hell, the last time I said it, I was in no better shape than you were the other day."

"I know that, too." Why had she believed otherwise under the influence of that device?

"There is a difference in knowing, Scully, and in believing. You are a woman of great logic and I admire that. I would never take that away from you. But the irony is that for all the faith that you do possess in your science, in your church, you don't have that for me."

The words stung as they hit her, protests rising immediately in her mind, but Mulder raised a hand to stop her, his expression pained. "I'm not saying you don't want to, Scully. I'm saying that, understandably, there is a part of you that refuses to give in completely, to believe me when I say I trust you, that you are the only one I trust, to believe I would do nothing at all to hurt you, ever."

His words were slow and heavy, as if they cost him energy and effort to say. "I had thought that what we had been through together, your abduction, last summer, Robert Modell, you'd have understood that."

She did, she wanted to protest. At least on an intellectual level she knew that, believed that, and yet something about this did ring disturbingly true, in a way she didn't want to admit. He was right on one level. Why? Why was she so afraid? He wasn't Daniel, he wasn't demanding her worship, her time, her affection. He wasn't demanding her heart or even love from her even. All he wanted was trust.

If possible, this bothered her almost more than the idea of having nearly killed him did, and for much different reasons.
"It's getting late, Scully," Mulder's words came from a long way off, cutting through her troubled thoughts, soft and tired. "Do you want to go to your mother's tonight?"

"No." That decision was firm at least. "I want to go home. I will need to go into work tomorrow."

"You don't have to. Take some time…"

"I need to explain myself to Skinner."

"Skinner isn't filing a report on your behavior. As far as he and I are concerned, there was a misunderstanding at the motel when you believed an intruder tried to break into the room, causing you to fire the rounds. The misunderstanding has since been cleared up."

"Mulder, there was a man hunt. I'll have to go under a psych evil at the very least."

"Aren't you lucky that your partner happens to be a psychologist with a snazzy degree from Oxford?" He smirked as he rose, grabbing her small bag of personal effects. "Seems he thinks that you are fit to return to duty immediately."

"After everything I've done to him?" Her eyes stung unexpectedly at those words.

Mulder shrugged. "I don't know, Scully, I have a feeling your partner is likely to do something else dumb ass in the near future that you'll have to bail him out of. And between you and me, I think the frequencies of you doing something insanely dangerous compared to him stack the odds in your favor a bit."

"At least he always believes in me, even when perhaps he probably shouldn't." She sniffled back a chuckle, following him out of the tiny, hospital room.

"Perhaps because you are the only person in the world he feels he can trust." Mulder's arm wrapped around her thin shoulders, squeezing gently, "Come on, if we make it home in time, I'll buy pizza."

"With mushrooms."

He sighed, long and heavy. "If you insist."
In the Eye of a Hurricane

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the statement Mulder made.

...for all the faith that you do possess in your science, in your church...you don't have that for me.

Red turned to green, and Scully pressed her car forward, eyes focused on the Virginia license plate in front of her, but her mind a million miles away from the traffic wending its way through central Washington. The coffee she had made that morning, strong and dark, did nothing to clear the confusion of cobwebs and clutter in her mind. One single thought managed to cut through the gray morass, weaving through the fog that had settled on her since the night she had nearly killed her partner in her mother's house.

...for all the faith that you do possess in your science, in your church...you don't have that for me.

Mulder's simple statement had cut her. She hadn't said anything, not since returning to work. She had wanted to confront him on what he meant by those words. How he could believe she didn't believe in him? He was the only thing in this whole, crazy mess she could believe in. Hadn't she told him once that the strength of his beliefs is what had brought her back, had made her carry on when she could have and should have walked away? How could he say that she had no faith in him?

Why did she almost shoot him? Why was she so ready to believe the worst?

The dichotomy of the situation dug at her and had for days. He wasn't right, she thought viciously, but then again, he wasn't totally wrong. It was that latter idea that had prevented her from calling him out on his words, had kept her silent as Mulder blithely moved along, returning them both to the familiar routine of strange casework that was her entire life now. He had thrown those words out there, and yet he refused to examine what they meant? Did he not even think about what they would mean for her? What did they mean for her? Hell, she wasn't even sure. Frustration ate at her, gnawing on the calm reserve that she depended on to hold her up, to keep her going. How could he say something like that to her?

She had faith in him, of course she did. She had faith in the fact that Mulder believed. Obviously she couldn't buy into every single one of this theories heart and soul, it wasn't who Scully was, it wasn't how she operated, and he knew that. He accepted that about her or at least she thought he did. Still, she had not allowed her strict view of the world to take away from the fact that she was at least willing to listen to Mulder, to give him enough credence to stand by his side, no matter how insane the theory. Wasn't she still here, three years later, despite everything that had happened?

But she did believe the worst of him, without even asking him, talking to him. God, the things she had said to him that night, the accusations, even thinking back, Scully could see how each word had landed like a physical slap against him. Hadn't she once accused Mulder of crucifying himself needlessly on borrowed guilt? And there she was, throwing it at him, practically, injuring him in a way she knew wounded him greatly. Mulder shrugged it off, slapped on a smile, and blamed the strange device. But she knew he still carried those words about him, concealed. Fox Mulder, the patron saint of borrowed angst.
As if he needed to borrow more. Her mouth worked dryly around the bitter aftertaste of coffee. How many cups of the stuff had she slugged down during frantic scrambles to chase down her partner? On the lonely bridge when Deep Throat died, in Puerto Rico, with Duane Barry, Alaska, New Mexico, Iowa, the list deepened as her patients thinned, as Mulder's angst and guilt fueled him in one desperate idea after another. Each time she chased after him, begging, pleading, threatening to pull him back from the edge one more time, to save him from his own demons no matter what the risk was to herself, each time coming closer and closer to losing him for good. For months now she had asked herself how far she could follow him, how long could she do it? Every time he did something like this, another part of her resolve crumbled, another tie of loyalty began to fray, and she wondered if all her losses had been worth it. And yet, she would steel herself, resolve to stand by the work, to stand by Mulder's belief and see this out. How could he say that she didn't have faith in him? Faith in him seemed to be the only thing that kept her going now. Certainly it was the thing that kept her chasing after him time and time again, yanking him back from his own determination to kill himself. Did he not realize what it did to her every time he did something like that? Did he not catch on how much it hurt her to see him on deaths door, how terrified she was each time she was certain he was dead? Did he really have no concept on just how much she cared about him?

Cared about him? That thought hit her just in time for her to slam on her brakes, keeping her from careening into the Virginia license plate in front of her. That thought had never entered her musings before. Of course she cared about Mulder, she chided herself. Mulder after all was her friend, her best friend now, she spoke to him more often than Ellen, more often than her mother, and certainly shared with Mulder nearly as many secrets as she had shared with Missy when she was alive. It only made sense, logically, that she would come to care for Mulder as something more than just the partner she worked with everyday. How many other partners would stand there in her mother's house, talking her down from the ledge, not even flinching away from the weapon she had trained on them? It was obvious that he cared for her, and likewise she cared for him. She would do anything for him, that much she had proven.

But her feelings about him weren't what he had called into question, it was her belief in him. Damn it all. Why had she doubted him? She cared about him, she stood by him, she remained by his side even when she tired of his demons getting the better of him she was there. But he was right, there was a part of herself she wouldn't quite let go. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop with Mulder.

That realization crystallized, bright and sharp in the muddle of her thoughts, a realization hardening as it suddenly occurred to her why Mulder had said that and what it was bothering her so very much. Logical and cautious, she was always the skeptic, always the one standing hesitantly waiting for more confirmation of facts before she would jump into the storm. But there she was, standing in the storm, as it swirled around her, and the only person she had to rely on, to believe in was Mulder. Her one lifeline was a man who frequently danced on the edge of madness without thought or consideration, threatening to take her with him. That was the only shelter she had in all of this insanity. And while she clung to him and his belief, she had to if she didn't want to be swallowed up by the forces tearing at them, she was just as afraid that he would prove to be as steady as a sailboat in a hurricane. He would go under, drug down by his all consuming obsession, and she would go down with him. She was damned if she did, and damned if she didn't. He was her one lifeline, but he could just as easily destroy her. And it scared the living hell out of her.

Her insight brought no comfort, though, no relief from the press of confusion that enshrouded her. It simply made the edges less fuzzy, more refined. She was partnered with a man who she needed to believe in to survive, but knew he could fail her just as easily. What in the hell was she supposed to do about this? Did she want to do anything about this? The truth was she didn't really know.
"Hey, I'm glad I caught you!" Scully's eyes blinked. Mulder's smile shining its way through her
dreary thoughts, as it finally occurred to her that not only was she no longer driving, she was sitting
in the parking lot of the Hoover Building, her car turned off, and she was standing beside it, her
things in hand. How long had she been standing there, staring at nothing?

"You okay?" Mulder's concern was immediate and she tried not to be irritated by it. His worry had
bordered on the edge of annoying, hovering over her since she was released from the hospital.

"Fine." She blinked up at him, schooling her features as she did so. "What's up?"

He held up a pair of keys to a fleet vehicle. "There was a hold up in Arlington, we're checking it
out."

"Hold up?" Her confusion shifted from personal to work as she frowned down at the stack of files
in her arms. "Mulder, that's a local matter and we've got paperwork."

"Funny thing about that hold up, people were shot."

"And how does that make it a matter for the FBI?"

"They walked away from the event without a scratch?" His grin broadened mysteriously. "News is
saying some guy showed up and began healing people by the touch of his hand."

Touch of his hand? "How did you hear about this."

"Local news and I'm curious." Mulder jangled the keys in front of her nose. "Come on, Scully, it's
an X-file! I don't have to drive far! All we'll do is drive there, ask some questions, come back, and
we can do your precious paperwork all afternoon."

She was going to lose this one, she knew it. Just trust him, Dana, she sighed. How much trouble
can rumors at a shoot out get them into?

"Let's go," she muttered, following behind him, the only hope she had to cling to in the middle of
the storm.
Quonochataug

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to keep Mulder together as they go to see his ailing mother.

Without even asking, Scully was on the phone with the medical center in Quonochataug, using all the authority she could muster with the nurses to find out what the situation was. Half an eye she kept on Mulder, glassy eyed and stoic, slumped in the small, vinyl airport chair, staring at everything and nothing. She paced in front of him quietly, waiting as she was bounced from the receptionist, to a nurse, and when she had to, she pull out her FBI credentials finally to get a doctor. The most information they had at the moment was stroke-like symptoms, but they were still running tests. They should know more by the time she and Mulder arrived.

She pivoted on her heels, facing Mulder's blank expression, her heart aching. Just that morning she had found herself fuming at him for his words about her not believing in him. How quickly that had flown out the window the minute he received Skinner's phone call regarding his mother. Her first thought when the news broke was "not again". Just a year ago he lost his father, a man who he had only just started rebuilding a relationship with after years of anger and hurt had separated them. The unanswered questions about his father's work coupled with the grief he still achingly carried over the lost opportunities with the man he had once adored in his life ate at Mulder. His family had dwindled in half, Bill was now dead, and Samantha's whereabouts still as unknown as ever. But at least there was one thread connecting Mulder to his past, Teena Mulder Now she too was starting to fail him. She prayed fervently that this wasn't as dire as it could be, hoping that if it was a stroke it was minor, survivable, with minimal damage. Mulder needed it to be. It broke her heart to think of the very idea of him being orphaned and alone.

"I just spoke with the doctor, Mulder." Her low voice murmured as she tried to gain his attention, to break through the haze of shock that enveloped him. "They are saying 'stroke like symptoms.' They don't know for sure what that means yet, it could be a stroke, or perhaps something else more minor."

"Stroke?" The word crawled from a long way off, breaking low and broken from Mulder's lips. His glazed eyes turned to her, trying to compute what that would mean. "Can she talk?"

"They don't know. She's been unconscious since they brought her in." She settled in the seat beside him, curling her legs underneath her. He nodded, hearing her, but did he understand. Her hand found his where it dangled on the arm of the chair, grasping his cold fingers. "We don't know what's going on, Mulder. It could be not as bad as feared."

"Yeah," he murmured raggedly, slumping further into his chair, his long legs lunging in front of him till he could rest his head on the back. He blinked up at the ceiling blandly, eyes sliding to regard her worry. "Thank you for coming along, Scully. I know you've had a rough few week, but not having to go there by myself..."

Her cheeks reddened inexplicably as she cut him off, rushing to reassure him. "I'd have dropped anything to come with you, Mulder." And not just because of the lingering sting of his words to her in the hospital either. "You needed me. And I know if it were my mother, you would have done the same thing."
"In a heartbeat," he assured her fervently, fingers tightening around hers. The small reassurances of their friendship, no matter the rough times, and obviously the last few weeks had strained it greatly, there was that quiet assurance of each other's presence no matter what happened. Her lifeline during the storm.

"Did they know who called her in or how she ended up there?" It was the first question out of Mulder's mouth the minute she explained what had happened.

"No, nothing yet, all they could say was that they received a 911 call." The vagueness concerned her. "You said it was your family summer home?"

"Yeah. I don't know what she was doing there."

"Well it has been a year since your father died. Perhaps she was just trying to wrap up some their old, shared property?"

"On the day my parent's divorce was finalized she swore she would never go back there."

The story behind that pain made Scully curious. "Why?" After all it was a summer home, not even the house Samantha was taken from. Scully didn't ever hear Mulder even mention it before today.

"Lots of reasons, mostly I suspect because of the memories." Mulder's broad shoulder's shrugged up to his ears as he shifted in the seat again. The memories agitating him physically as well as emotionally. "It was the one property my parents owned jointly. Dad got a month off every summer from the State Department. He'd drive up from DC, meet us up in Rhode Island, and we would spend some time as a family every year. It was one of the few times were Sam and I had Dad around as Dad. He was usually in DC during the weeks and only home on the weekends."

A missing father, that was something Scully could relate to. Her own father wasn't home for much of her childhood, out to sea, missing birthdays and holidays. The rare times he was home were so special and she cherished those times when Ahab could be something more than Captain Scully and could simply be "Dad."

"I would think then that the summer house would have good memories for your mother."

"I think that is part of the problem." It made sense to the psychologist Mulder. "I think for Mom she couldn't face a place where so many good things happened, not after the fall out from Samantha. It was like rubbing salt in the wound. We had some good times there over the years, from what I remember. Sam and I would spend summers running around with no shoes most of the time, little clothing if we could get away with it, usually dirty and sunburned. We'd play baseball or go swimming till we couldn't stand anymore and fall over, exhausted of a night."

"I'm trying to think of you as some long-legged, sunburned, dirty hooligan and it's failing me." Admittedly it was hard to see the adult Mulder, impeccably dressed in well-made suits, as being a grimey, grungy child at play.

"There's picture evidence of it somewhere The only time Mom would make us clean up was during the parties they would have on the weekends. Dad's associates from work would come up, men he knew from the State Department. They would grill, talk shop, sometimes they would bring their kids over and Sam and I would play. It all had the lingering air of golden paradise around it, the way he was describing it. For Mulder, this obviously had to be a much more carefree time, a happier time, before his missing sister, his parents divorce, and the whatever relationship his father had with the men who seemed to be involved in this conspiracy. Scully found herself wishing she could have known Mulder in those simpler times.
"When my parents divorced the place was closed up. I went with Dad a couple of times. He might have gone some after I left for Oxford. Mom refused to go, not even to clean the place out. She said she didn't want to think about it anymore."

"I'm surprised your parents didn't sell the place then, if it was so painful."

"I think the idea was that they planned on passing it to me and I could do with it what I wished." Mulder hardly looked as if he wished to do anything with it at all. Clearly his feelings for the place rivaled that of his parents, especially given that he hadn't visited it himself at all in any of those long years. "I never clearly understood why they didn't get rid of it themselves, which is why I can't figure out why it is she was there."

"I don't know, perhaps it was as simple as remembering your father and what he had meant to her at one point in time, before everything got so ugly." Scully had seen Teena Mulder at her ex-husband's funeral. Brokenhearted wasn't the word, but sad was, and regretful. Perhaps she no longer lived with the man, and perhaps there was a long history of hurt between the two, but clearly there was still some depth of feeling between them. They seemed to at least communicate between each other regarding the welfare of their son.

"Maybe," Mulder didn't look so sure. "My parents - the divorce was not pretty. My mother blamed my father for a lot. I think Samantha was just the most crushing blow, but there were fights, lots of horrible fights the summer before Sam disappeared. I don't remember what about. I tried to avoid them if possible, took Samantha outside, and pretended to not hear them. Mom obviously cared about Dad. When he left the State Department and got into the worst of his benders, sitting at home alone with nothing but his Scotch, she was the one who would take care of him. I was busy in Oxford, then with the FBI, and Dad and I had already had our falling out. I don't know, I think perhaps Mom was the only one who could understand the pain sometimes. They blamed each other, but at the same time I think they were the only two who truly got it as well."

In the drama of Mulder's family history, sometimes it stunned Scully when she considered the ripple effect it had, not just on the man sitting beside her, but on the entire way it shaped his life and the lives around him. All this pain, this loss, and now, his mother's illness, just one more blow, one more loss in Mulder continuing personal tragedy.

"I've been avoiding Mom since Dad's death."

Scully had wondered. Mulder wasn't exactly attached at the hip to his mother, but she knew he tried to keep in contact with her more often than not. During their first few years together he would mention phone calls from her and visits. Scully surmised that the only reason Mulder had any furniture in his apartment at all was due to her influence. The one time she had seen the pair of them interact was a case that drew them to Greenwich, where she lived. He had simply stopped in briefly to check on her, make sure she was all right. But the mentions had become fewer and farther between, and Mulder spoke of his mother less frequently since Bill Mulder's passing.

"Mom, she didn't want to talk about Dad, about his work. It was as if she wanted to forget. She kept telling me she wanted to move on."

"That's quite natural for many people in the grieving process." Perhaps healthier than obsessing over it, that is for sure.

"Mom knows things or at least knew things, she never wanted to face them and I never pushed her. I just…I got tired of running against walls with her, of pretending that nothing happened. It's been a game we've played since I was thirteen. Whatever Mom didn't want to deal with, she didn't. Perhaps I pushed too hard, pushed her away. I was angry. Damn it!" He bolted upright now, the
kinetic energy that had left him almost from the moment he heard about his mother now returning in agitation. "Whatever was going on hurt people, hurt you Scully. And I wanted to know, wanted answers, and I just pushed too hard, and now…"

He turned anguished eyes towards Scully. "My father died in my arms asking for forgiveness, Scully, for everything, for all the things he never got to say. What if the same happens with Mom?"

"Oh, Mulder!" Tears pricked at Scully's eyes as she reached for him, wrapping arms around his shoulders in a clumsy embrace, trying to give him what little comfort she could. "We'll get there. This won't be your father all over again."

"Are you certain? You're a doctor, Scully, and you've never lied to me about anything. Please don't start now, not for this."

"I'm not," she whispered, pulling back as she reached up to smooth the hair from his forehead. "I'm saying it as a doctor and as a friend. She might make it out of this all right, Mulder."

"And she might not."

"Yes," she nodded. "But you'll be there, with her, and she'll know that. She knows you love her, no matter what your arguments in the past were, just like your father knew. And both of them loved you."

Mulder said nothing, but the look on his face indicated he sincerely hoped that Scully was right.

Over the loudspeaker the announcement came up for their flight, a woman's soft, pleasant voice warning them all that boarding would begin soon. Quietly, Scully pulled away, grabbing her carry on and uncurling from the chair. She held out her hand to Mulder, who watched it quietly for a long moment.

"Whatever happens, I'm here, Mulder." No matter what her own issues, her own questions about her relationship with this man, he needed her, it was as simple as that. Those questions could be answered later. For now, he needed someone to hold his hand, to be there with him, to reassure him that he wasn't alone. She wouldn't let him be alone.

He quietly took her hand and stood, following her to the gate.
The Last One Standing

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has a frank discussion with Skinner on what this loss could mean to Mulder.

"Agent Scully, please have a seat."

Scully nodded quietly as she settled into the familiar office chair, knowing without Skinner having to say a word why it was he called her up there. Direct and no nonsense as always, Skinner cut to the chase, his usually stoic expression grimmer than usual.

"Did you and Mulder find Smith?" The object of Mulder's interest had taken to hiding, and despite a search had shown no signs of resurfacing since the moment he fled Mulder's custody the day before.

"No, sir. We have an APB out with Metro and Arlington PD, but so far...."

She paused eloquently, not sure what else to say. The man had vanished into thin air, slipping out from under Mulder's nose, almost literally, frustrating both agents as they searched the grounds of the Social Security office where he had once worked. "He hasn't appeared in his office and his address appears to have been a fake."

"Why?" Skinner's curt question was direct and to the point. It was the same question that had plagued Scully since this strange man had wandered across Mulder's radar.

"I don't know, sir. Agent Mulder seems to believe that there is something special about Jeremiah Smith, something he can do that makes him dangerous to certain people."

"Because of reports that he healed people?" No hiding the dubiousness in Skinner's tone, and he wasn't alone in his skepticism. "Did you see evidence of these claims, Agent Scully?"

"No. When Agent Mulder and I arrived on scene, the detective had already lost Smith. And before we could pursue it, you called him about his mother. That was why I called the interview with him when I returned. As you saw the other day when he came in, he claimed to know nothing of the event." Convenient how that had worked out. Scully no more believed it then than she believed it now, but had not pressed the matter further in front of Skinner. Now her boss was heartily wishing she had.

"Do you believe that Smith is in as much danger as Agent Mulder claims him to be in?"

"Honestly, sir, I don't know what to think." It was rare she was ever this candid on a case, not without Mulder there to mitigate whatever she was saying. But everything from start to finish about Smith smacked of something wrong. "I know that the supposed victims of that shooting the other day are on the news, discussing some sort of 'divine healing' that medical sciences is at a loss to explain. This man Jeremiah Smith has filled us full of lies and half-truths for no reason I can explain, especially not if he's a good Samaritan out there helping the wounded and dying. And Mulder seems to think that somehow the man who seems fond of ignoring the Hoover Building
smoking code wants to kill this Smith."

Skinner's dark eyes hardened slightly as he almost turned reflexively to the window, as if expecting to find a curl of smoke floating against the glass. "Do you think that our acquaintance really would care about something so strange as the claims of a man who can heal with a touch?"

"Sir, I would say you are in a better position than I am to divine what that man would and wouldn't care about." Her words were calm and distant, but the hint of accusation was there all the same. Skinner took the words without flinching, nodding silently as he rubbed at the still empty finger of his left hand. She had not inquired about Sharon Skinner or his marriage since he had specifically asked that the subject be dropped. Perhaps Skinner at one time had been able to have a beat on the enigmatic man who used to haunt his office, but clearly if they had tried to frame her boss for murdering a prostitute and his wife, Skinner hadn't had a friendly chat over Morley cigarettes and Scotch.

"I'm afraid that I'm about as clueless on this subject as you are, Agent Scully." Skinner's clipped words were shot back regarding her not-so-vague suggestion. "Does Mulder think that there is something special to this man?"

"I believe Agent Mulder is open minded to the possibility that there is. And I believe that he's been led to believe there is by the man who accosted his mother." Vague answers, deftly dancing around the few facts she had without making any real statements, that was what Scully was good at. Their work, much like science, was all about the claims that you made with the information at hand, and Scully didn't have much.

Skinner's mouth worked itself hard, thinning to a slit as thin as his eyes had become. "And do we know for sure this man did something to hurt Mrs. Mulder?"

If only, Scully wished silently, then perhaps they would have something, anything to pin on the bastard to drag him kicking into a holding cell, to stand accountable for the many questions she had. "From what little Mulder told me last night, this man was the last one seen with Teena Mulder before she collapsed, but he wasn't with her when it happened. They were seen arguing, Mulder doesn't know about what, and her stroke likely occurred sometime after that. After speaking with her doctor in Connecticut and her provider in Providence, my guess is that Mrs. Mulder was already suffering from conditions favorable to stroke activity, which was exacerbated by whatever conversation was had." Not that it gave her much satisfaction knowing this. She would have rather have given Mulder a just reason to beat the hell out of the man.

"And what is the prognosis on Mrs. Mulder?" Though his expression didn't waiver, Skinner's tone softened slightly, respectively. Mulder perhaps was a joke to many in the Bureau and a pain in the ass for Skinner, but he was a man who had just lost a father and now was in threat of losing a mother too. Skinner wasn't an unfeeling man. Professional, yes, but he always had an eye out for the well being of his agents, and Mulder's tragedies in particular had always involved Skinner personally.

"I spoke to her doctor this afternoon, they are still waiting but…"

She paused. Mulder was her partner, there was always a professional level of distance she tried to display at all times in front of Skinner, even though they both knew that she and Mulder's relationship went well beyond that of simple partners now. She felt the pang of Mulder's grief keenly, not only because of her own recent loss of Melissa, but knowing how utterly crushing it would be for him to stand there and watch the last link to his own past slip away from him, believing he was the last, the only. The injustice of it all cut at her, she ached on his behalf. Scully wanted nothing more than for Teena Mulder to rise, get out of her bed, and walk to her son, return
home, and live to see him finally come to his searches end.

"Her doctors say that there was significant blood loss during the stroke event. This means that there is pressure on her brain, in areas where fluid normally doesn't collect, and they have no idea how extensive the damage at the moment is. It could be days before they can tell how severe the damage is, and even longer before she regains consciousness, if she ever regains it."

She had told Mulder that Teena might walk away from this. It turned out that for once Scully had been the optimist. God, she wished she had been closer to accurate. Skinner did as well. He shook his head, sighing as he rubbed at his face tiredly.

"I know that pain, Agent Scully. I lost my father right after returning home from the Vietnam, heart attack. He dropped dead one day, right in front of my mother. That's the sort of pain, that never leaves you."

"No it doesn't," Scully agreed, her heart lurching achingly at the idea of Ahab's own similar death. "No offense sir, you've lost a father, I've lost a father and sister, and we both know the pain of it. But I don't think either you or I can comprehend what Teena's death would mean to Mulder, especially if that man had anything at all to do with it. After everything he's lost, his sister, his father, now this, all tying back to this person who seems to hover on the edge of Mulder's life, he will have lost everything with this, sir. And while no one understands the pain of a parent's loss better than we do. We still have families. Mulder has nothing."

Her words rang with certain harshness, cutting through the air between them, hitting Skinner. He hadn't carried out the thoughts down through, obviously, the entire implication. This wasn't as simple as the inevitable loss of a parent. This was part of a pattern that had defined Mulder's entire life and work. The man's jaw worked briefly as he looked away, processing her words, the meaning for long moments, before nodding to himself.

"Is this why Mulder is obsessed with this Smith person? To heal his mother?"

"Quite possibly," Scully acknowledged, though Mulder hadn't said as much. "I don't know how that smoking man is mixed up any of this, but perhaps he's convinced Mulder that this Smith is vital to his mother's recovery. I can't be sure, but I do know that with your permission, I'd like to do further investigation into the background of Jeremiah Smith, perhaps turn up something that would explain all of this?"

Scully should leave this alone and she half expected that Skinner would say the same thing. This was a matter for the Arlington PD, not the FBI. To her surprise though, Skinner's head inclined briefly, a curt nod followed by a heavy sigh. "Get me something good, Agent Scully, and keep me up-to-date on Mrs. Mulder's condition. I want to know ahead of time if I need to keep an eye out for any rampages on the part of one of my agents."

Scully took her dismissal and rose quickly from the chair, feeling Skinner's worried eyes on her as she moved through his office door. He wasn't the only one fretting over what would happen if the worst did come out of Teena Mulder's prognosis. Scully would be the one fighting to keep her partner from going under, and taking her along with him. She whispered another prayer, one of many she seemed to have muttered to herself the last few days, wondering if God was even listening to her. How could a man who had lost so much lose this too?
Circles Within Circles

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to get answers from Jeremiah Smith.

Scully didn't question Mulder, she just went.

"Come on," she muttered, grabbing gun, wallet, badge, and keys. The gun she settled on her hip in its holster, the rest she shoved roughly into her pockets. She didn't look at Jeremiah Smith or touch him. She merely held the door for him as he moved cautiously out into the hallway.

"Car is in back," she whispered softly, leading the way through the silent apartments, footsteps falling quietly on muted carpet. Smith followed without a word, mute as they found her car, parked quietly in its spot, hidden by the shadows of darkness as they both slipped inside.

"Were are we going," the man finally asked as he buckled himself in.

"We're meeting Mulder in Maryland." She started the car, backing up, eyes flickering around them in the darkness. What sort of threat did Mulder suspect for this man? Her eyes bore into the shadows, looking for military camo or men in nondescript suits, eyes cold as they bore down on Smith, but nothing appeared. If they were being watched, whoever it was hadn't caught on to Smith being there yet, or if they had they were being damn more cautious than usual.

"What are you," she found herself asking, half rhetorically, pulling the car out into the quiet street.

"Perhaps we should wait till Agent Mulder is here," Smith evaded softly.

"How about you tell me something now so I don't stop this car and kick you out," Scully snapped, already feeling on edge around this - thing. What was he? Who was he? All she knew was that there were half-a-dozen other men, all wearing his face and his name, all hiding in Social Security offices across the country. Images of the strange creature who came to her one night wearing Mulder's face came to mind, and it made her skin crawl.

"I told you I wouldn't hurt you, Agent Scully."

"I need answers, Mr. Smith, if that's your name." Her eyes flickered to her rear view mirror, scanning the road behind her. So far, no one was even on the same road. She licked dry lips as she stopped at the traffic light ahead, heart roaring as she tried to make her way to the closest highway.

"You have some," Smith shrugged mildly in the glow of the stoplight. "You already know about what I did in that restaurant."

"And I know about you and your 'brothers.'" What else was she supposed to call them? "The men who all look like you? Are they clones, like the Gregors, those abortion doctors who all ended up dead last year?"

"Not exactly, but I knew them."

"Than what are you?"
Smith sighed but remained infuriatingly silent.

"Fine. Perhaps then you can tell me why they want to kill you? What does all of this have to do with Teena Mulder?" That part she could at least demand out of him before she brought him to Mulder.

"I don't know Teena Mulder."

"But you do know that someone is trying to kill you."

"Yes." Smith sighed, slumping further into his seat. "It's why I came to you and Agent Mulder. I realized my actions had been too foolish."

"Too foolish? Because you drew attention to yourself?"

"I couldn't let those people die, not when it was in my power to stop it."

"How?" She couldn't help but look down to his hands, the ones that the witnesses all claimed touched them and healed them, just like Jesus. Her cross tickled against the skin of her throat as she swallowed.

"I'm not what I seem, Agent Scully."

"I think we've established that, Mr. Smith," she muttered darkly, pulling onto the highway. "What I need to know is what you know about Samantha Mulder. How do you know about her?"

"She's part of the program. She was part of their plan."

"To keep Bill Mulder silent about his part in the testing the government was doing?"

Clearly her knowledge of even that much shocked Smith. He paused, nodding slowly. "She was taken as insurance to gain his trust and cooperation."

"Why Samantha? Why not Fox?" It was one of the questions that anguished her partner, ever since they found the rumpled and fading medical folder in the mine in West Virginia the year before.

"Because she was more conducive to the tests being run. Your partner - there were other plans for him."

Plans? The word sank heavily through Scully's awareness, landing somewhere in the middle of her gut. There were plans for Mulder? Was Bill aware of this? Was Teena aware of it? She pried her tongue off the roof of a suddenly dry mouth as she tried to form words. "What plans?"

"The sister was needed for research. The son was needed to stop it."

"Research? What research?"

"You know what research, Agent Scully." Smith hardly spoke above a calm, pleasant murmur, but it might as well have screamed in her ear, smacked her in the face. Panic curled in her as her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "You were part of that same program yourself."

"I was used by men trying to create biological weapons to use in a game of 'what nation had the biggest and best weaponry.'" That was what the man at the leper colony had told her, that was what he had explained had been Ishimaru's pet project, hiding in the abandoned, silver train cars all over the country.

"That is what they wanted you to believe, Agent Scully, and it isn't exactly a lie, not in the strictest
sense. But the best lies are ones that are mostly true to begin with."

She stared sideways at him, trying to concentrate both on her speeding car, blasting down the darkened highway, and on Smith's words, what he was really saying. "What is the truth?"

"That you and thousands of other people have been nothing but pawns in experiments run by men just like those hunting me down, men who thought they could circumvent the inevitable by making a deal with the devil and coming out on top."

"By doing what? Creating clones?"

"More than clones, Agent Scully, clones are only a part of it. There are programs, hundreds of them of all types. The hope is that they can use the information to 'rob Peter to pay Paul' as the saying goes. But what they don't know is that this is futile, hopeless. Obsequiousness will not work here, resistance is the only way."

"Resistance to what? To whom?"

Smith's face darkened, but he said nothing.

"Listen to me, if you know something of what they did to me…."

"What they did to thousands like you. Think about it, Agent Scully. You already have so many of the pieces. The biological testing, the strange virus, the clones, the men who are after me, who have tried to kill you many times over. You know what you saw in that mine in West Virginia, Agent Scully, those files kept there."

"How did you know about that?"

"The point is that you have the evidence, the truth at your fingertips. Until you start understanding what it all means, what it all is leading to, my story is less than meaningless to you."

"What story?"

He seemed to ignore her. "You and Agent Mulder are our only hope of stopping this, of bringing it to light and standing against it."

Smith wasn't going to tell her, at least not alone. What the hell was going on?

"Do you know where Samantha Mulder is?" That was all she wanted, for Mulder's sake that was all she wanted. The rest of it, the answers to her illness, to what was happening to her, to what that virus was, or the clones, or Ishimaru, Zama, whoever, she could ignore those if Mulder finally, finally had the one answer he was seeking all this time. If she could know that he found the sister he had lost, that he wasn't alone, that all of this hadn't been in vain, then the rest of it could go to hell for all she cared.

"I know something of what happened to her, yes, and I know where he can find something of her."

Something?

"His mother is dying."

"I know."

Scully didn't want to ask how he knew. "This is all Mulder has ever wanted, to know the truth of what happened to his sister. If nothing else, give us that."

"I can't give you that without giving you the rest. She's as tied to all of this as he is, as you are."

More circles within circles, never ending, the serpent eating its own tale. It was enough to make Scully scream. Ahead on the highway the exit for the location Mulder directed her too came up, reflecting green in her headlights. She took it, glancing behind her once again for anyone following. So far there was nothing.

"Why can't any answers be simple, not once?"

"Because this isn't a simple danger, Agent Scully. The complications are more than you ever dreamed."

Scully said nothing as she pulled into the abandoned mill yard.
In which Scully helps Mulder and Jeremiah Smith escape.

"He's come to kill me."

Scully turned towards the careening vehicle pulling up to them, blinking against the white glare of headlights ahead. Behind her she could hear the scrape of shoes against concrete as Jeremiah Smith backed up ever so slightly. Blinded she couldn't see their pursuer, but clearly Smith knew who he was. His fear practically hummed in the air as the tires ahead screeched to a stop. The door opened and a man stepped out, a man Scully was all too horribly familiar with. His craggy, hard face was just as neutrally blank as he turned to them. She still saw that face in her nightmares, morphing in front of her eyes from the handsome, well known features of her lanky partner beside her, to the towering, massive, stony man who watched them, his eyes turned directly on Jeremiah Smith.

Slowly he pulled out a weapon. With a snick a thin, metallic probe glistened in the dim light of abandoned mill parking lot. Behind her she heard Smith's footsteps as he ran desperately for the darkened building. Ahead of her the creature advanced, eyes riveted on Smith's fleeing form, ignoring Scully and Mulder entirely. Her eyes lighted on the thin blade in his fingers as she began to reach for her gun.

"Stay out of his way, Scully." Mulder caught her arm, watching their pursuer carefully. "He doesn't want to hurt you. You can't use your gun."

She wanted to ask him how the hell he knew that, but didn't have time as Mulder turned to follow after Smith, his long legs quickly catching up to the quickly disappearing man, well into the building. Not use her gun? How was she supposed to stop this thing? She had been worse than useless the last time he had grabbed her, throwing her up against the wall and choking the life out of her. Ignoring Mulder's warning, she pulled her weapon, leveling it at the man as he strode up shouting out her warning. "Stop right there, sir!"

She might as well have been screaming at a brick wall. Rather than stopping the creature picked up the pace, running right at her, ignoring the muzzle of her weapon aimed at his broad chest. She braced herself as the freight train of his weight slammed into her, knocking her off her feet and hard into the dry, crumbling asphalt of the parking lot, ignoring her feeble groan as he continued on into the mill itself. Her lungs collapsing, Scully could do nothing but watch him go, her gun now lying useless, having skittered from her fingers the minute she made impact.

So much for being short and petite, she fumed quietly, cursing the particular genetic code that had passed her father's height and her mother's figure. Still, Scully doubted Mulder would have done any better, tall and athletic as he was with that creature barreling full bore at him. Slowly and painfully she picked herself up, sucking air into lungs that began to re-inflate as she scrabbled for her fallen weapon. Inside she could hear footsteps, but no shouting. There was nothing to tell her what was going on or where anyone's location in the darkness was. Fighting the urge to call out her partner's name, she ran in after them, eyes straining in the dim light to find the figures where she could hear them running. Above her on the second level men's heavy footsteps fell against the metallic floors, but as she looked up she couldn't see anything. Damn it! She had no way of
knowing how to get up there or where to go if she did find away. Several minutes of fruitless searching turned up nothing, and worse, the sounds of footsteps had stopped, as if the three involved had taken things outside. Shit, shit, shit….

Scully made for the door she had come in at, hoping to hell she could find them in the sprawling complex. As luck would have it, they found her, or at least Mulder and Smith did. "Mulder!"

Mulder's panicked face turned to her. He hardly paused, glancing back in raw panic. "Scully, get the car."

He hardly had to ask her twice. She turned heel and made for her sedan, pulling her keys out of her pocket as she skidded to a halt and slid inside. Her car started immediately as she flipped on the lights and ignored her seatbelt, gunning the gas towards the spot where she left her partner and Smith.

Out of nowhere a body fell straight onto the hood of her car, her heart stopping as her foot hit the brake, sending the car into a skid. Out of her window her eyes met those of the creature, the man hunting Jeremiah Smith. She wondered half hysterically if he would change in front of her again, his face melting into someone else. He didn't.

She did the only thing that managed to come to mind in that moment. She punched the horn on her steering wheel, leaning on it hard. She had to warn Mulder and Smith, wherever they were, and she had to get this thing off her car. For what it was worth the horn seemed to have little to no effect on the man. He climbed off slowly, as if he had merely tripped and fallen over a sofa, not onto her car, leaving a dent big enough to cost her a pretty penny in bodywork when this was done. Add it to her growing Mulder tab she thought dully as the creature took off again, in pursuit of Mulder and Smith, wherever they had gone.

Shit!

She slammed her car gear into park, turning it off as she tried to pursue the movements of tall figure of the creature as he ran for the back of the mill. Her shorter legs had no chance of catching up with him, not in time to stop him from catching up to Mulder and Smith, and she prayed the two of them had found some cover as she ran across the pavement and in the same direction, yelling Mulder's name. She had to warn him, to let him know danger was coming.

Her feet slammed painfully across asphalt as she skidded around the building, coming to the back where a large creek ran. Obviously a place where at sometime the wood would come down river to be processed by the giant mill, long before flatbed trucks began carting the trees in. Her frantic steps stopped short, however, as she skidded to a halt, staring at the body that lay crumpled at the foot of a pile of wood chips, motionless in the dim shadows as she approached. It wasn't Mulder, thank God, but it wasn't Smith either. The hunter lay there, motionless, a silver, ice pick looking implement sticking out of his neck. Whatever it was, it had stopped him, though Scully wasn't particularly sure how or why. Ignoring him for the moment, she climbed fearfully over the top of the pile, scanning for her partner or Smith, praying that both had made it out all right.

In the distance she could hear the buzzing sound of an outboard motor and two figures huddled into a tiny motorboat. Damn him!

"Mulder!" Her voice rang shrilly in the stillness of the night, loud enough to wake the dead, if the body below her cared to move. "Mulder!"

He didn't even bother to turn and acknowledge her screams. She watched as the two disappeared into the night, frustration warring with relief that they had gotten away. At least Smith was safe.
But where the hell was Mulder going? Providence? She hoped he wasn't so stupid or predictable. If they were hunting for Smith, if they knew he was with Mulder, the first place they would look is where Teena Mulder was hospitalized. No, he wouldn't risk that? Would he?

Clambering of the woodpile, she slid to the ground by the still form of the strange man, eyeing it warily. Should she leave it? Was he dead? She had no idea. The memory of him tossing her around like a rag doll urged her to leave him, to run and not look back, but the doctor in her prevailed. She leaned over, thumbing up one eyelid, looking for some sign of life in him, anything to assuage her guilt at leaving his corpse behind.

She should have listened to her memory.

She didn't have time to see the man's fingers thrust up to close around her windpipe, nor to escape before they bit, like iron bands, digging into the soft, tender flesh of her throat. She gagged as the force of the pressure he exuded on her, just as he rose from where he lay prone.

"Where are they going?" His deep voice was as devoid of emotion as she remembered. She knew her eyes pleaded with this man, if he was a man, as she tried to choke out air enough to answer.

"I...I don't know." Her voice was rasping in her constricted throat. On the edges of her vision black began to slowly creep in, as spots began to dance dizzily in front of the hunter's face.

"I need to know," he insisted matter-of-factually, insistent but hardly angry, as if Scully could guess what Mulder was doing. She shook her head feebly, fingers reaching up to claw desperately at his wrists.

"Please, I don't know." His nails cut into her skin as she could feel her windpipe nearly close shut. Displeased, the creature used his free hand to reach behind him, pulling out the thin ice pick from where it lodged in his flesh, glaring at it in mild irritation. Without another word, he released his death grip on her throat, dropping her to the ground as wordlessly he rose and wandered off.

Gasping and choking, Scully hardly paid any attention. For long moments she coughed, fingers rubbing at the abused muscles, tears forming at the bruising that ached where the man's fingers had been. She wondered, vaguely, if he would come back to finish the job with her, but something told her he wouldn't. Mulder had said he didn't want to hurt her. He was here after Smith alone.

Mulder! That one thought caused her to pull herself off the ground and back towards the woodpile, looking for any sign of her partner and Smith. Outside of the now distant hum of the motor, no sign of them appeared, no direction to where they had gone.

God fucking damnit she breathed, grabbing her cell phone from her pocket, speed-dialing Mulder's cell number. She waited, but he didn't pick up, not yet anyway. In irritation she sat through his recorded message, praying her vocal chords weren't too damaged for her to speak.

"Mulder," she croaked hoarsely, fingers rubbing at the abused muscles. "Where are you? Where are you going? That thing, he nearly killed me, he wanted to know where you are, and I couldn't tell him. He's going to come after you, wherever you're at." Somehow, she had a feeling the creature could find them, no matter what. It seemed to be attuned to Smith in particular. "Please tell me you aren't going to your mother's hospital. Call me when you get this. Tell me what you want me to do here."

What in the hell could she do, she thought glumly as she clicked off, watching the slow ripples of the water below silently for long moments. She climbed off the woodpile, turning to her car. Home, she would go home, try to sleep, and hope that Mulder did nothing foolish that got him
killed. Nervously she glanced behind her, resisting the urge to dial him yet again, and again, till he answered his phone. Instead she forced herself to her car, frowning in mild dismay as she examined the damage done to its front. She'd purchased this vehicle just as she had started her work with Mulder. Already it had seen more miles than she cared to think about, why was she surprised in the least that now it had a physical scar to go with the ones she herself bore. It wasn't the miles, it was the experience, or so they said. She glanced in the distance. The creature's car was still there, but there was no sign of him. Perhaps he decided to follow the pair of them on foot? Best of luck with that, she thought, sliding into the driver's seat as she pulled out her keys once again. She was too tired to bother with much more than tumbling behind the steering wheel, not even bothering to pay attention to the dark shadow sitting just inside, or the hand that snaked around her head and wrapped itself hard against her mouth. By that time, she cursed herself as the sharp, clicking sound of a blade being released sounded just by her right ear, and the needlepoint of something sharp grazed the skin of her temple.

"You need to find where they went." The man hadn't left after all. She had stupidly allowed him access to her yet again. Scully felt her insides turn the liquid as the point pricked painfully against her skin. All she could do was nod, to affirm she would do what he asked.

The creature released his grip, removing his left hand, and reaching roughly for her pocket. He pulled out her recently used phone, holding it out for her. "Call."

Scully did as she was told, hitting Mulder's voice mail again….and again…and again…
In which Scully gets to work.

"Agent Scully?" Skinner's dark eyes flashed as she turned back to him, stopping her on the way out of his office door. "Who is it that warned you about Mrs. Mulder's safety?"

Was it curiosity on Skinner's part or was it something more, a deep interest in who was feeding Mulder the secrets of these men who seemed set on toying with their lives. Scully paused, regarding her boss. What could she tell him? She no more understood the mysterious, black man than she did any of this.

"I don't know, sir." It was honest an answer as she could give. "He's the man you encountered once though, in the elevator of Mulder's apartment."

Memory flickered across the Assistant Director's face. His jaw hardened and set firmly, muscles twitching as he nodded ever so imperceptibly. "He's sure of this?"

"He seemed positive." To the point he tried to dissuade Scully from following up on her lead regarding the smallpox vaccination numbers. What was there that had him so worried? And if he was feeding Mulder information all this time, why would it upset him that she would pursue this line of investigation beside the effort to protect Mrs. Mulder?

"I will put a call into the Providence field office, perhaps one into Connecticut, too. Rhode Island isn't big enough to warrant the sort of staff we might need to keep an eye on her. Did he tell you the nature of the threat?"

"No, sir. He preferred speaking to Mulder." Why, she had no idea. Was it to draw him into a trap? Perhaps to tell him something that this informant didn't think Scully would believe? This man had never liked dealing with Scully if he could help it. What was it about Mulder that made him turn to him first, and whose game was he playing anyway?

"I'll send men to Mrs. Mulder's hospital room. In the meantime what is your plan?" Skinner spoke as if he assumed she had one. Scully knew she had the furthest thing from a plan, only hunches, random data that she suspected might mean something.

"I want to go over those number sequences that you and Agent Pendrell found. I'm meeting him downstairs to discuss what they might mean."

"You have an idea?"

"Possibly," she evaded, much to Skinner's obvious consternation. She relented, somewhat in the face of his irritation. "The numbers that the Jeremiah Smiths were collecting were smallpox eradication numbers, the vaccinations we all got when we were children."

"Smallpox? Why would they care?"
"I've yet to determine that, sir, but Agent Pendrell and I will hopefully have an answer sometime today." Hopefully being the operative word. She no more understood what she was looking for with this than Skinner did. But she wondered if it had something to do with the inoculations, and if so, than she had to start there, with the vaccination scar she carried.

"Determine it soon, Agent Scully. I have my own people to answer for, and there will be questions regarding Jeremiah Smith and what the FBI wants with him. I need answers as to why he's a person of interest and why it is the FBI is nosing around the Social Security Administration files."

"Understood, sir."

Completely, she thought, standing there anxiously by the door. Someone was calling Skinner into the hot seat for this, holding him accountable for Mulder's interest in the man and the can of worms they had just uncovered. What had started out as a simple investigation into an unusual happenstance was quickly turning into something much bigger, a threat to national security and Scully could see that Jeremiah Smith was quickly being taken out of the X-files hands.

Hopefully Mulder could find what he was looking for, before the hunter caught up to them both.

"This is your field of expertise. I need you to make this air tight." The words were straightforward, but the meaning was clear. He was putting his neck out on the line for this, for them. Mulder was now in Canada, doing God knows what. Scully was the one with the medical background, the capability of delving into the hard truth of just what Jeremiah Smith was doing, and present it unequivocally to the FBI. The ball was in her court now, and she had to make this good, or risk loosing complete control of this case and everything tied to it.

"Let me know what you find." Skinner dismissed her finally, allowing her to at last step through the threshold of his office, returning to the paperwork that seemed lay perpetually in front of him. Without a word she turned, managing a tight smile for the ever efficient Kim in the outer office.

Skinner could handle Teena Mulder's security, that she was sure of. It was the number sequencing that Scully had to focus on now. Twenty letter code, she had recognized it almost immediately when Skinner and Pendrell had brought it up. Any biological scientist would recognize that a twenty letter code automatically signals a protein amino acid sequence. The first three letters were the tip off though, smallpox vaccinations. Scully could guarantee that whatever this string of letters was, it was the opening code to the protein sequence to a virus, likely cowpox, the one used to treat smallpox, a string of DNA or RNA code that can invade a cell and alter its genetic make up, before moving on to replicate itself again in yet another cell. Similar to the virus she had seen again and again over her work with the X-files, the strange, unaccountable virus, Mulder's so-called "alien virus". She couldn't help but allow her thoughts to stray to it, to the one thing that these men seemed hell bent on protecting. Why? And did it have anything to do with the data the Jeremiah Smith's were collecting? If so, why were they interested? For what purpose? And was this why they were being hunted down and killed?

Her thoughts followed her as she made her way down to the labs that Pendrell occupied. He had been such a surprising asset and find in the last year or so, few were the people in the FBI who took their work in the X-files seriously, and fewer still were those who would throw themselves into it without question. Whatever Pendrell's opinion of Mulder, he was always willing to drop everything when Scully approached him, setting aside everything to help her with whatever strange, random, esoteric information she needed.

You really have no idea Pendrell has the hots for you, do you?

Mulder's light teasing surfaced, just as her fingers skimmed the surface of the Sci-Crime lab doors.
Why in the world had he said that? Just because the man was willing to drop everything to help her in a time of crises? And how would Mulder know anyway? She doubted he took two minutes to notice what clothes she was wearing of a day, let alone if a fellow agent found her attractive. She shook her head, shoving aside the silly, flippant thought as she pushed through the door, finding Pendrell at his desk, reading files in front of him, glancing up in surprise at her entrance.

"Are you busy Agent Pendrell?"

The fellow red haired man paused, stunned at her entrance, his face first shocked, then bright red. "No, I was just…"

"Good!" She nodded, no nonsense, ignoring the flush on his face and the nervous way his fingers immediately went to straighten the knot in his tie. "Because I think I made headway on this date. Can you call up the files?"
She'll Never Know

Chapter Summary

In which Scully must support a broken Mulder.

Genetic marker? They were all marked. For what?

Scully rubbed at the scar on her left arm absently as she paced outside of Teena Mulder's hospital room. It had been hours now, Skinner's impatience growing by the minute as they stood sentinel, waiting for Mulder and Jeremiah Smith's arrival. So far she had received no word on her erstwhile partner or his compatriot and all her attempts to reach him by cell phone had been met with his voice mail. So that left her to stand there with the questioning eyes of the other agents on her, waiting and pondering.

The Smiths had been collecting information on people with this particular protein injected through smallpox vaccinations. Why? What was the marker for? A way to track those who have had the vaccination? Everyone had, that was a given. Every child born in the last 50 years had the shot before they even went to school. So why track them? Were there concerns about the different strains of the virus or was there something else added to the particular inoculation that she and Agent Pendrell received as children? The strange, "alien" virus of Mulder's perhaps? Impossible! But then she had survived whatever they had done to her during her abduction. Could it be because of whatever they had included in the smallpox vaccination? Could she be inoculated against a mutated virus the government created in its Cold War, a weapon to hold against the threat of Soviet aggression? Perhaps the marker was there to log who had been inoculated and who hadn't, or perhaps the marker was the inoculation itself. If so, what did the Smiths want with it?

Her thread of tangled thoughts was cut by Skinner's shuffle and clearing of his throat, his eyes watching her pointedly as he crossed his arms across his broad chest. Scully quickly glanced towards her watch, then her phone then the clock at the far end of the plain, white tile wall. Five hours they had been there and Mulder was supposed to have arrived two hours ago. All she could do was shrug helplessly, ducking inside Teena Mulder's room to escape the disapproving glare of her boss. Where was Mulder? He wouldn't be this late, not for this.

"How is she doing?" Scully looked towards the nurse who patiently took the unconscious woman's vital signs, more than a little disgruntled at the armed, FBI presence in the hallway.

"The same as she has been." The woman had no sympathy for Scully today, and frankly she couldn't blame her. The entire floor had been invaded with enough agents to constitute a FBI raid, and they stood there, guns at the ready, crowding into the narrow hallway, waiting for a sign from Scully or Mulder's appearance. Damn it, where was he? Their work, their reputation, what little of it they still had, hung on her word and right now it was looking as if her word meant nothing in the face of Mulder's flagrant flippantcy. It couldn't be that, she sighed, studying Teena's inert body for long moments. She was so still, so quiet, a studied contrast to her son's usually boisterous energy. Mulder might be flippant, but not for this. Something was wrong, something had happened to him. He wouldn't delay this, not his mother, not the last, living close relative he had. Something had happened. Had the hunter finally caught up with them? Was he hurt, injured, and bleeding on the side of the road somewhere in Canada? Perhaps she should start calling the airlines, see if he even
At the doorway she could feel Skinner stop, glancing inside, and silently knew it was time to face the music with him. He couldn't keep agents here, not indefinitely. In resignation she turned, slipping out of Mulder's mother's room and out into the hallway. She could hear the faint murmurs of the other agents as they saw her.

"Five hours we're swinging in the wind, Agent Scully." Skinner was less than amused.

"Something's wrong. Something happened." She knew it. She couldn't explain why she did, but she believed it. For once she was listening to that blasted intuition Missy always told her she should pay attention to.

"You don't have a way of getting a hold of him?"

As if she hadn't tried. Scully glowered quietly up at her boss, but began reaching for her cell phone yet again. She'd left how many messages now, all unanswered?

From inside of Teena's room the nurse slipped out, glancing up and down the hallway as if surprised the agents were still there. Her frown settled on Skinner. "This is beginning to seriously compromise our ability to treat patients."

Scully could only nod as Skinner's impatience finally reached its breaking point. No Mulder, no threat, no point to keep agents here and away from their work. It would be hard enough explaining this use of manpower as it was. She needed to find out where he was, what had happened, why he was so delayed.

Murmurs from down the hallway caused her and Skinner to both spin, as relief poured through the fearful anxiety. Through the throng of gathered agents she saw Mulder's tall form, stumbling through blindly, looking as if he had walked out of Canada, not flown. Dull eyed, he shuffled through the long line, unseeing, his dark hair tousled and suit hopelessly rumpled as Scully rushed unthinkingly to him. "Oh my God! Mulder?"

He didn't answer her, not till she reached out to him, feeling him shiver under her light touch as he stopped, not even looking at her. He simply mumbled as the muscles under her fingers quivered. "I can't…there's nothing."

Nothing? "Mulder?"

He shuffled on, not shaking off her ministrations, but hardly noticing them all the same. She studied his pallid face, reaching under the mess of dark hair scatted across his brow, his skin clammy and sickly to the touch. "Oh dear, he's freezing. You're in shock, Mulder!"

His body was shutting down. Why?

"What happened?" Skinner's taciturn demeanor was underlined by real worry as he glanced from the unseeing eyes of his senior agent to Scully, looking to her for details, but she had none.

Mulder simply ignored him as moved without comment into his mother's room, a small boy creeping in to study her, shoulders hunched and head bowed. Scully had never given much thought before to the relationship of Mulder and his mother. Obviously, they had been close at one time. Scully had the impression that before Samantha, the Mulders had been a tight-knit, atypical, upper-middle class family. Mulder rarely spoke of her, though Scully knew she had an important place in his life. She knew he would visit from time-to-time, but more often than not would call. On occasion she would drag him to family holidays, which he grudgingly obliged with a grumble, but
never said no to. He was a devoted, if distant son, no different in his own way than Bill or Charlie were with her own mother. In the end he was just a little boy who wanted his mother hale and whole, who was frightened that she was lying there and could be dying. Then why did it shock and unnerve her so to see him standing over frail form of his mother, so shattered?

"She'll never know." His whisper was nearly impossible to hear in the stillness of the room. Without a word, she reached for one of the extra blankets, reaching up to throw it over his shuddering shoulders. From somewhere deep inside of him a choking sob welled up as she felt his knees buckle ever so slightly. "She'll never know."

His sobs were raw and painful as she quietly pulled him towards her, his dark head settling on her shoulder as he fell to pieces. Protocol went out the window as she laced her fingers through his soft, dark hair, stroking the back of his head as if he were a child. Tears soaked through her jacket and the collar of her blouse, his shoulders trembling so violently that she worried he'd collapse under the weight of his shock, grief, and exhaustion. Scully simply held on tighter, crooning soft noises into his hair, unthinkingly pressing her mouth to the fevered skin of his temple as he spent himself into silence. For long moments they stood there, Mulder still against her, shuddering quietly as she continued to hold him. But she was nearly a foot shorter than he was and the height difference soon physically forced them to pull apart, Mulder standing slowly, the weight of the last week stooping him as he stumbled backwards.

"Sit, Mulder," Scully ordered gently, pulling up a chair beside the bed that he just did manage to collapse in. He fell into it gracelessly, arms and legs splaying as she attempted to adjust the blanket around him once again. He wouldn't look at her, not even as she wiped at the tears stains across his pale cheeks, his bloodshot eyes didn't see her as he stared blankly at his mother's form.

"Mulder, where is Jeremiah?" The words were gentle. She didn't want to push him, but she had a feeling she already knew the answer.

"I don't know," he murmured, wincing slightly as her fingers found a contusion on his scalp, a lump the size of a goose egg lying underneath. Jesus, she whispered to herself, he probably was suffering from a concussion yet again. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what happened, but he supplied it, his normal monotone even more wooden as he shivered under her ministering fingers.

"We…we found a colony, a bee colony, up in Canada. They are using it to infect people with smallpox, some special kind."

Scully's blood ran cold at his words. Smallpox. She didn't stop her fingers smoothing out his sweat, drenched hair, but listened quietly, her mind blazing with information. Smallpox…the vaccinations…the genetic markers….

"I saw a man, he was dead. Bee stings. He was infected and dead in minutes." Mulder's words made little sense as she shivered again, pulling the blanket closer. "Jeremiah said this was how they planned on infecting people. He took me to the farm where they raise them." He paused, reaching up to stop Scully's fingers, feverish bright eyes turning up to her in heartbroken grief. "My sister was there, Scully."

She stilled, eyes widening at the words he uttered. "Samantha?"

"Just like she had been when she was taken. It was her, but it wasn't her." His eyes filled with tears again as he released her enough to dash then angrily away. "They cloned her, Scully. She was a clone, just like that woman was, the one who I lost on the bridge."

The woman he had willingly exchanged that night for Scully's life. She pushed aside her guilt.
"Mulder, it wasn't your sister."

"She looked just like her." Mulder seemed to not hear her. "Just like the night she was taken. But she couldn't talk to me. She didn't know me. They made her a drone, just like the bees, a drone to work and do nothing else." A hysterical chuckle bubbled from him as he scrubbed at his face again. "That thing, it found us, the man who took you."

"Mulder, I tried to stop it." For what it was worth, she had, but had nearly gotten killed in the process.

"He found us," Mulder continued. "I tried pleading with him, I told him I needed to save my mother. He called Jeremiah a 'traitor to the project'. I don't know what that means."

Perhaps Scully did. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Mulder reiterated in a soft mumble. "He tried to run. Samantha, she stayed. She didn't run. Not when he nearly killed me. I...I blacked out, I didn't see what happened. But I could hear her screaming, Scully, just like that night, I could hear her screaming and I couldn't stop it...I couldn't..."

Sobs cut off his words. She couldn't press him more. Whatever happened out there had broken him for now. He needed a sedative, sleep, perhaps food if she could coax it into him, and he was up for no sort of questioning, not from their boss at least. She knew Skinner was just outside of the door, waiting impatiently for some sort of explanation.

"Mulder, stay here, I'll be back. I need to speak to Skinner."

Not that Mulder was going to go anywhere. He hardly acknowledged her slipping away as she moved towards the door, closing it behind her as curious agents glanced in her direction. Skinner stood just outside the door face as impassive as always. How much of that broken diatribe had he heard?

"Mulder's in no shape for questions at the moment." She was firm on this. She may be Skinner's subordinate as an agent, but she was the trained medical doctor in this situation and would brook no argument with him on it. Thankfully her boss didn't seem inclined to disagree.

"What happened out there?"

Scully imagined that there would be many people asking that same question over the next few days. She wished like hell she had better answers for all of them.

"My guess, Smith is dead, killed by the very people we suspected wanted him dead in the first place."

"What happened to Mulder?" Clearly Mulder's breakdown unnerved Skinner. Mulder could be many things, but she doubted anyone save herself had seen him that broken before.

"He's probably suffering from a mild concussion, otherwise I think its exhaustion exacerbated by stress and the emotional toll of his mother's illness." Her eyes flickered to the room where he sat, knowing he hadn't moved an inch since she left him. "He thought that Jeremiah Smith could heal his mother."

Sympathy flickered in Skinner's eyes for the briefest of moments, before he nodded curtly, turning to the other agents in the hall. "I think we're done here. Let's head out."
Feet shuffled in the hallway as the agents made their way to the elevator, their voices a low, buzzing hum. She knew already the rumors were starting, the curiosity of what Spooky Mulder had been up to this time. It couldn't be helped, but it disgusted her vaguely that not even in his grief could he have the solace of anonymity. His mother could be dying, damn it! Did they not even have consideration for that?

"I want you keeping an eye on him, Agent Scully. Strap him down and sedate him if you need to, get him to rest. I don't want to see him near the office till he's in a better condition." Skinner's gruff words were softened by the real concern he had for his agent. "And keep me updated on his mother's condition, including any unexpected visitors she might have?"

The point was made. Scully nodded as Skinner turned from her, watching him as he moved down the corridor.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully discovers the miracle Mulder hoped for has some strings.

Scully squelched the rise of hope in her breast, tempering it with the caution of a thousand medical reports. The doctor in her refused to let go of the warning, of the wariness that such an unexpected turn had brought. The good Catholic in her was already shouting that it was a miracle, God finally listening something right in Fox Mulder's life. The friend in her tried to approach both with circumspection as she raised her cell phone to her ear, peeking inside of Teena Mulder's room with a small smile as the nurses spoke to her in quiet tones. It took three rings before her partner's gravelly, exhausted voice sounded on the other end of the line.

"Mulder?" He sounded as bad as he looked when he had left to go to New York, ignoring her pleas for him to stay in Rhode Island. Whatever had happened in Canada that had exhausted him so, the news of his contacts death in front of his own apartment had lit new life into him. He had left Scully at his mother's bedside.

"How is she," Mulder didn't bother with greetings or preamble. Fear dripped of his breathless words. He'd expected her to call and dreaded the results. Caution flew out the window in favor of a miracle, Mulder needed to hear that.

"She's awake, talking even!" Scully subdued tones couldn't hide the astonishment she felt at seeing a woman so many had given up for dead awake and alert again. "She asked for you. I told her I would call you, that you weren't far away."

She hoped against home he didn't feel guilty about not being there the moment she awoke. He was silent for several long, breathless moments. Scully paused. Was he all right? Did he believe her?

"Mulder…"

"I'm here, Scully, I…"

His voice broke, but he cleared it roughly, the gravel of his normal tone wavering dangerously as he spoke. "I'm at the airport, actually, just hopping a flight back. You still there with her?"

"I am! The nurses kicked me out for the moment, but when she's settled I'll get back in there."

"Thanks. Tell Mom…tell her I love her. I'm sorry I had to step away."

"I will, Mulder, I'm sure she understands." The mysteries of Mulder's relationship with his mother were complex, but at their heart was a man who loved the woman who gave birth to him. Perhaps in all of the confusion surrounding his sister's disappearance and his father's part in it, he had forgotten for the briefest of moments that very truth.

"Did you find anything in New York?"

"I did." Mulder was evasive, unsurprising, and she could hear him moving through the airport as voices echoed funnily in and out of his reception. "It seems our initials led me to the United
"The UN! Why?"

"Because its more than just our government who knows what's going on. Zama was a Japanese
national, Klemper a German, those fields that Smith took me to were in Canada. We aren't talking
about a small conspiracy hidden just within the confined of the US government here."

"Did this person give you any more information on these fields?" Scully ignored the "conspiracy"
word for the moment, focusing instead on the facts at hand.

"They are covering it up, telling everyone it was a failed ginseng crop. The bees and all the clones
have been taken." He didn't say "including Samantha". He didn't have to.

"Do you believe them?"

"I have no evidence to speak against it." Mulder's ever present frustration, the heart of his search,
scientific proof that what he was describing really was out there. "I know what I saw."

She didn't doubt him, not in the slightest. That wasn't the problem. "Why the fields? What were
they doing?"

"The cable worker we saw, he died of some sort of pox virus. Something that killed him almost
instantly, judging from the condition of the body."

"That's impossible, Mulder, there isn't a virus in that family that can kill that quickly. Death is
caused more often than not by fever. You found the body sitting there…"

"What if it wasn't smallpox that killed him?"

"Then what did?"

Mulder's tone became even more hushed, and she could imagine him looking for a hidden corner
somewhere in the terminal, away from the listening ears of the general populace. "You said the
Jeremiah Smiths' were collecting smallpox vaccination data, correct?"

"Yes. There is some marker in each of the scars, something they are following."

"What if there was something further in that vaccination, something we don't know about,
something they were interested in finding?"

"Another virus?" That had been what had popped into Scully's mind the minute she had found the
marker.

"Another vaccination." Mulder's agile thoughts had moved well beyond Scully's own roadblock in
the research.

"Another vaccination against what?"

"The strange virus you and I have both scene. The stuff that nearly killed me in Alaska."

"They've been giving smallpox shots out since before we were born and I found that marker in not
just mine, but Agent Pendrell's smallpox scar as well. I would lay odds that everyone who has a
smallpox vaccination from our generation onward has that marker."

"You saw those medical files in West Virginia. What if this is part of the program, to inoculate
everyone against this virus."

"But why? It's our own creation. Our government created this, Mulder, in their ongoing attempts to have the biggest, strongest, most dangerous weapons to threaten everyone else on the block with."

"That's what they told you because that is the answer they would want you to believe, the answer they could make most anyone believe."

"And what did Smith tell you?" Her voice was starting to carry slightly in the hollow tile of the hallway, earning a slight frown from a passing nurse. She turned, swallowing her skepticism as she moved further from Teena Mulder's hospital room door.

"You assume this virus is still man made."

"I have no proof that it isn't. Zama's work went into that virus, work he performed on me and countless other women."

"But you saw the Erlenmeyer flask, Scully, those bodies in the pit in West Virginia, Zama's test subjects."

"Radiation can account for that, especially if we are talking about a designed virus being developed in the Cold War, the height of nuclear technology. I don't know what I saw, Mulder, outside of one man's sick attempts to manipulate human DNA for a war that ended half-a-decade ago."

"This man, this Jeremiah Smith, he led you on a wild goose chase. We no more know what he was doing here with the smallpox vaccinations than we understand how he was healing those people. This may not be what you think it is at all."

"Or he might have been the key to everything, Scully, and I let him slip away."

And there they were, down the end of another long journey, staring at yet another dead end. How many times had they stood there, fighting so hard, the answers slipping out of their fingers the harder they tried to grasp them? The Erlenmeyer flask, the DAT tapes, and now Jeremiah Smith. The answers were right in front of them, but they could never touch them, never reach them, and they were now right back where they had started before Smith had even stepped into the fast food restaurant. How long could she keep staring at these dead ends?

"Is Mom still awake?" Mulder turned the tables on her yet again, pulling Scully from her dark musings, recalling her to the happy news she had called him about in the first place.

"I think so, she was a minute ago, but I'm sure they'll have her rest soon." Scully scuffed the floor idyll with the toe of one shoe, the leather rasping across the tile. "It's astonishing she's awake at all. I'm sure the doctors don't want to take any chances."

"You said that we had to keep faith, Scully. You were the one who said that as long as she was lying there, we couldn't give up. For once, it was your faith that kept me going."

A small smile pulled at her face, her heart tugging warmly in her chest. She wandered again, feet aching in her heeled shoes as she scuffed them lightly, taking the pressure off. "I'm a doctor, Mulder, but even in my profession, I've seen miracles."

"I didn't know till now I believed in those."

"I think you are the consummate believer, Mulder, you want to believe in miracles." Her toe rubbed across something on the floor, a bit of paper lying there, incongruous in the meticulously
clean hospital. "I don't think you have trouble believing amazing things happen, I think you have trouble believing amazing things happen to you."

He seemed to ruminate on that. "Perhaps, God doesn't seem to like to listen to me the way he likes to listen to you."

"That's only because I bribed the priests when I was a child," she smirked lightheartedly, earning a chuckle from him. She bent to pick up the strange, offending item from the floor to toss it in the trash and paused. Between thumb and forefinger she carefully plucked up the paper wrapped filter of a cigarette butt. The Morley brand. Smoking wasn't allowed in any hospitals she knew off, but she could imagine one man who would happily ignore and flaunt that rule. He had been here again, and recently too if this was lying on the floor. A janitor's sweep would have picked it up by now if it had been a while ago. Why? She glanced around her, down the hallways, as if expecting to see the man standing there, but there was no sign. Had he been there before or after Teena's miraculous recovery?

"Listen, Scully, they are calling my flight. I'll be there in an hour or so. Let Mom know I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Of course, Mulder," she murmured distractedly, hardly blinking as he cut off the line. She studied the stub in her hand, contemplating the descriptions of Jeremiah Smith's abilities. They said it was like if Jesus had come down and touched them and healed them, a walking angel on earth someone had said.

Angel or demon? She crushed the butt in her hand tightly. She supposed she would never know.
"You know, I'm perfectly capable of walking on my own, Fox William." Teena's exasperation only just did cover the exhaustion of the drive from Providence to Greenwich. Truth be told, after the two-and-a-half hour trip, even Scully felt ready to take a nap. "I know you're perfectly capable, so don't think you are getting this treatment everyday." Mulder gently cradled his mother through her bedroom door. "Hey, Scully, think you can turn down the blankets?"

"Sure," Scully murmured, feeling distinctively like a third wheel in this scenario, slightly embarrassed by this show of tenderness on her partner's part. From the moment the doctors in Providence had released her, Mulder had handled his mother like a fragile, china doll, carefully bundling her into the car, offering to stop at every other exit just to get her something to drink. On the one hand it amused Scully to see that his over-protective partner lavish his high-strung tendencies on someone other than her for a change. But it also revealed a side of Mulder she so rarely got to see in their work. She had seen him obsessed, petulant, and even murderous in his worst moments, charming, flippant, and devastatingly witty in his best.

Soft was never a word she put together with Mulder. It seemed an ill match to his Spartan apartment and nightmare of a desk, his running shoes left on the floor, his stacks of pornographic magazines and videos. He rarely had food in his fridge, she was frightened of his bathroom, and frankly she was stunned he did his own laundry. He was in every sense of the word "guy", a man who seemed as minimalist as could be, with few friends and fewer interests outside of his work. Yet, there he was, gently settling his mother onto the large, well made bed in the prettily decorated bedroom, easing the comforter up over her and ignoring the disgruntled protests and efforts to shoo him away. She also now knew where Mulder got his horrible hospital habits. Teena seemed little more willing to be fussed over than Mulder normally did.

"It's good to know that being a bad patient runs in the family," she teased.

"Scully doesn't know what she's talking about. I'm a model patient." Mulder only just did manage that lie with a straight face.

"Only when drugged up to the nines," she smiled back sweetly.

"I think I'll side with your partner, the doctor, on this one, Fox." Teena's eyes shown as they flickered from her son to Scully with an understanding glimmer. "You hated to sit still for so much as a band-aid when you were a child."

"My own mother betrays me." Mulder affected being wounded before the concern returned full force, worrying his brow as he reached for one of his mother's hands. "You need to get some rest, Mom. I've asked Scully to stay a couple of days. She'll be in the guest room in case you need anything. I'll camp on the couch downstairs. All you have to do is call and either one of us will be there."
"You are acting as if I'm some sort of simpering invalid," Teena groused, again not unlike her son.

"Mom, you just had a massive stroke that nearly killed you." His voice caught painfully for the briefest of moments. "I almost lost you."

The real fear and pain in her son's voice softened Teena's mulish stance considerably, as she finally allowed her true exhaustion to shine through. "I know and I will take it easy, I promise. I just don't want to be a burden to you and Ms. Scully." She admitted the last almost ashamedly. It was another thing that Mulder seemed to share in common with his parent, a vulnerable independence. Mulder looked poised to argue, but Scully cut him off, stepping in smoothly as the physician she was.

"How about you go downstairs and grab the bags, Mulder, while I take a chance to check your mother over." She didn't think she could have gotten any more pointed if she had a lance in her hand. Teena needed some breathing space and wasn't going to get it with Mulder fluttering over her.

"I'll be just downstairs if you need me." He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead, earning an acknowledging smile from Teena as he finally shuffled out. Scully waited till she knew he was down the stairs before closing the door behind him, leaving herself alone with the woman who was such a fixture in her partner's life.

"I'll try to make this quick," Scully smiled reassuringly as she reached for her case, pulling out her well worn stethoscope, the one she had since medical school, and searching for her blood pressure cuff. "Fox is right, you need your sleep."

"He worries too much, my doctors said I was fine, that it was miraculous."

"Even miracles can use a little monitoring." Scully gently eased up the sleeve of Teena's blouse, fitting the cuff around the bare skin of her upper arm. "How are you really feeling, Mrs. Mulder?"

"Tired," she relented, sighing heavily, but not without a small smile. "And you can call me Teena. After all of this, I feel you know me as well as anyone does now."

"Well I know your medical chart at least." Scully grinned, pumping the cuff as she watched the dial, briefly, satisfied with the pressure it gauged. "You can call me Dana."

For a moment Teena blinked in frowning confusion. "Diana?"

It took Scully the smallest of moments to understand and correct her. "No, Dana." She wasn't surprised at the slip, frankly it wouldn't be the last such gaff Teena might experience. Language was always tricky with stroke victims as was memory and often-inconsequential things could be forgotten or misunderstood. She shrugged reassuringly at Teena's embarrassment. "Don't worry, it comes with the territory. Your doctors say you're improving rapidly, things like that will happen less and less frequently."

"Yes, I hope so." Teena waivered uncertainly, sinking into her pillows, studying Scully for long moments quietly. For her part, Scully continued her exam, pulling out her penlight to shine in Teena's hazel green eyes. They were so much like her son's, Scully thought, studying them briefly. Mulder's resemblance to his mother was startling, short of the nose, which was the one bane of Mulder's existence. Not that Scully thought he had anything to worry about, the man was dangerously attractive as he was.

"Things are looking good," Scully nodded in satisfaction as she gathered her things to pack away again. "I could give you a sedative to help you sleep, but you look tired enough not to need it."
"Mmm," Teena nodded with no further comment. She was lost in thought, a frown puckering her
drawn face. "Fox said they found me at the old summer home in Quonochautaug?"

"That's what the doctors were told, yes." Did Teena remember any of it, the person she was
supposed to meet there? Clearly the details were either lost or so indistinct she had trouble piecing
them together. Nothing seemed to be clicking for her right away.

"I don't even know why I went out there." Teena shook her head in frustration. "I swore I would
never go back out there, not after…the divorce." She stumbled over her words, slurring them in
fatigue. "Even after Bill died, I left the property for Fox, to do with as he wanted. I didn't need…
want to go out there."

"Perhaps it will come to you later," Scully reassured her comfortingly, not wanting her to push the
point. "Remember, you're lucky to be as functional as you are. There will be spots of your memory
that won't work properly for a little while, neurological connections that will have to be re-grown
after the damage done. It will take some time."

"Time?" Teena sighed with the exasperation of the impatient, a tone Scully was intimately familiar
with. "It's disturbing to me that there is a whole chunk of my life I just can't remember, no matter
how hard I try."

"I know the feeling." That was a frustration that spoke volumes to Scully. She could empathize
with Teena on this in ways that she didn't even like thinking about.

Perhaps the woman understood. Her face softened, irritation fleeting as she took Scully's hand
gratefully.

"Thank you, Dana, for staying with me and for being there for Fox through all of this." Her eyes
flickered to the door, where downstairs she could hear her son rustling around. "I nearly left him an
orphan, alone."

"You didn't," Scully reassured her, squeezing the cool fingers gently. "You are still here and so is
he."

"Still, I'm glad he has you in his life." Teena's gaze was sincere. "The FBI is not the first choice of
career I had in mind for my son. But he tells me you've been an amazing partner with him, have
saved his life many times over."

Scully felt her cheeks flush, surprised by the woman's random praise. "That's my job as his partner,
to cover his back. And a doctor it's my duty to patch him back up again when he needs it."

"I've met his other partners and I can tell you none of them would have done for him what you
have. You are special in that." The woman's words were full of a weight of gratitude, one that made
Scully feel suddenly uncomfortable as she pulled her fingers away. Here she was, standing in the
grace of this woman's thankfulness, when just hours before all of this happened she had wondered
if she could even continue working with the man who she shared this particular danger with.

"Don't ever think for a moment that Fox underestimates you or doesn't care about you." Teena's
words seemed to uncannily echo her own thoughts. "From the day you walked in his office he's
always been impressed. But he is Fox." She chuckled ruefully, yawning briefly as she did so. "He
does take after his father in many ways, and I'm sure he never tells you that sort of thing."

"Every once in a while, he hints at it." Scully admitted, nervous with this whole conversation.
When Teena yawned yet again, she found her excuse to break it off, affecting her best, stern
doctor's look, pulling up the sheets further.

"Rest, Teena. You can fill me in on all the dirt of Fox's misspent childhood later." And Scully fully intended to ask. She needed ammunition to use in some future debate, and mothers were always the best source for the most embarrassing stories. "I'll check on you in a few hours."

Scully waited briefly, till she saw Teena's eyelids droop, before making her way downstairs, gently closing the door behind her. She could already hear the low hum of the television, murmuring softly as she wandered into the neat and tasteful living room. Mulder was sprawled on the couch, eyes glued to what she surmised was ESPN, pulling absently at his bottom lip.

"I think she'll rest a while." Scully perched herself on the back of the couch, glancing idly at the television. Some sort of baseball report was on. "Perhaps later I'll run out and stock up something for dinner. Something light for her."

Mulder shrugged absently but made little comment. Despite Teena's obvious and outstanding improvement, Mulder's usual ebullience had been subdued, his dynamic energy turned inward. Scully had said nothing yet. This disquietude in Mulder was something new, a facet of him she had yet to face, much like the tender side. She wasn't sure how to approach it.

"Unless you really want me to order pizza?" She gently prodded his shoulder, earning at least half-an-ear of attention.

"Pizza? That's a five letter word in my mother's house." He pulled his long legs off the cushions, giving room for her to sit. "At least I have baseball, Mom would never deny me that."

"See, she does love you after all." She slid off the back and moved around to settle on the seat next to him. Scully had no interest in baseball and frankly found most of the hyperbolic language being used by the sportscasters too confusing to follow, but she sensed Mulder wanted the company, if nothing else. Instead she let her gaze drift from the large television towards the photos on the wall, framed pictures of people who were strangers to Scully. Much like her own sister Melissa had, Teena had an affinity for the captured snapshots of memories long gone, better times than the ones that later plagued her family. Above the mantel of the neatly cleaned and painfully perfect fireplace sat a photo of two children, both dark haired, leaning against a tree in some long ago, forgotten fall. The girl she recognized instantly from the ever-present photo of Samantha on Mulder's desk, but the boy was hardly recognizable as the man who now lounged beside her. He was tall for his age, but sturdier than he would eventually become, his face fuller, younger, happier. There were hints here and there of the adult Fox, the eyes and the smile. What would he have become if the girl standing beside him had never disappeared.

"That was the summer before it happened," Mulder answered her unspoken question. "It was one of those 'back-to-school' photos Mom was fond of. She's got some others, including a classic one of me with no front teeth."

"Really?" Scully grinned in wicked delight as she rose, wandering to the mantle to find this photograph in question. She didn't spot any gapped-toothed Mulder pictures, but she did stop, startled at one black-and-white photo of a man looking remarkably like Mulder sitting in a large, lush front yard with a small girl grinning on his lap. Her fingers plucked the frame up to study it, glancing between the photograph and her lanky partner.

"Save for the height and perhaps your chin, this person looks just like you!" She held the picture up for Mulder to look at.

"Grampa Kuiper. Mom's dad. That's her when she was five, six, maybe." His grin was genuine, full
of good memories that didn't seem tainted by his sister's loss. "I look the most like him, act the most like him too. He was as paranoid as they came, but it made him a good businessman. Made it through the Depression much better than most everyone else did, and at the end of the day came out better for it. Seems he always suspected the fix was in with the markets."

"Glad to know that insanity is hereditary with you people," Scully snorted, suddenly wishing she could know this mysterious ancestor of Mulder's. She set the photograph down and picked up another, a wedding photo. "Is this your parents then?"

"Yeah." Mulder stood finally, moving to hover over her as she studied the glossy, black and white. His parents posed, looking impossibly younger than Scully had ever seen them, like some perfect conceptualization of a 1950's wedding cake topper. Bill Mulder, face smooth and free from the lines that came with years of care and guilt was a handsome man, clearly thrilled to be standing at the side of the tall, beautiful Teena. Unlike the tired, gray-haired woman upstairs, this Teena was young, glowing, and looked as vibrant and animated as Mulder did, giddily looking forward to the possibilities of her new life. Did she have any idea then how it would all turn out; the secrets, the loss, and the shattering effect to her family? She couldn't have, not then, perhaps neither one of these two, love struck young people did. How did the beaming, handsome fellow turn into the sad, lonely man that had come to her in Alaska, confessing the sins he had committed against his son? How had the dark-haired beauty become so meek and frightened of her past?

"Hard to believe those two people are my parents, right?" Mulder's words mirrored her own thoughts. "I used to think the same thing. Funny how things turned out so different in the end."

"They look so happy." She felt sad, painfully so, as if she flipped to the end of the romance novel to find out that the characters were separated in the cruelest of ways. "How did they meet?"

"Through Dad's work, like most things." The pervasiveness of Bill Mulder's career and how it shaped his life and those around him seemed boundless. "Mom had just graduated from Bryn Mawr and didn't want to go home to Ohio just yet. So she spent the summer with a friend. Her father worked in the State Department. They threw some big party one weekend and Dad got invited. Anyway, long story short, boy meets girl, doesn't manage to horrify girl, and they ended up hooking up."

"Hooking up? There is not a romantic bone in your body, is there?"

"Remember, my parents have been divorced for over twenty years, most of the dew is off that particular rose." He grimaced as he plucked the photograph out of her hands and set it up on the mantel once more. "Knowing what comes afterwards, what might have happened, I suppose the fairy tale isn't nearly as compelling standing from this side."

Was this what was troubling him still, the lingering doubts, and the presence of the cigarette man at his mother's sickbed. "Whatever happened later, Mulder, they still married for love. And clearly whatever went on, they did care for one another, else your parents wouldn't have kept in contact after the divorce."

"Guilt is as powerful of a motivator as love, you know that." There were no rose colored glasses for Mulder, not on this. The pain for him was far too deep. "I always assumed Mom left Dad because she blamed him for Samantha, and I'm sure that was part of it. But what if that wasn't all of it? What if...what if there wasn't just Dad in Mom's life?"

She knew where he was leading. "You mean the smoking man?"

"He was a friend of my father's, Scully, he was around. I don't remember him, but hell I was a kid, I
was too busy playing baseball and beating up my kid sister to pay any attention. He and Mom could have met on their own. Dad spent his weeks in DC, he'd have never known. Hell, they might have been carrying on for years."

"Mulder, this is all speculation." Alarmed she frowned up at him, wondering where this was coming from. "He might have just been at the hospital because he was the last one to see her before all of this happened. Perhaps he was concerned, guilty…"

"Do you think that man knows how to spell the word 'guilt'?"

He had a point. "Don't you think its assuming the worst of your mother, Mulder, to think she had an affair with a man who has done nothing but try to ruin your work and reputation for years?"

"I don't know anymore, Scully." His shoulders slumped as he cast a woeful look up the stairs. "Mom is all I have left in the world. No Sam, no Dad, my relationships have been spectacular failures. She's not getting younger, and this…I just sometimes wonder if everything I've always believed about my life is a lie and that Mom might die someday without me ever having found the truth. I'll end up standing by her graveside and that cancerous son-of-a-bitch will some oozing up, tying to titillate me with some half-true, vague comment about some past history, and I'll have no way to confirm or deny any of it. The worst part is that I can never ask her these things, not anymore. Hell, Scully, I'm lucky she can walk, talk, return to a normal life. Mom didn't want to discuss them before, now she probably can't."

The Mulder family tragedy, Scully realized, was not that they had been torn apart, but why they had been torn apart. That was the mystery, the one that drove her partner in his never-ending quest for the truth, for answers, and it clearly had no simple straightforward response. Was it Samantha's disappearance? Bill Mulder's work? Teena Mulder's infidelity? A mixture of all of the above? Would they ever know?

"I don't know what to tell you, Mulder." She didn't and God she wished she did. Her family, as dysfunctional as it was in its own way, seemed mundane, even normal in comparison to this. "All I can say is that for now, just be happy that something right turned out for a change. Your mother is alive, she's getting better, and she adores you, clearly."

The affection that Teena had for her son was hard to hide, with the walls plastered with photographs of him in baseball, basketball, and graduating high school, Oxford, the Academy. This wasn't a mother who was distant from the only child left to her. Instead, Scully mused, she was a woman who had seen too much, been hurt too much, and couldn't bear carrying the weight of her suffering, of her losses, not like her son could.

"You should enjoy the time you got back to be with her, Mulder. Those other questions will be answered, eventually. For now…."

Her eyes roved the walls beside fireplace, lighting on one of him and a young lady, clearly dressed for the Prom. "Tell me the story about her?"

She turned back to grin at him, deliberately egging him out of his black thoughts with a dubious snort. "Is that a mullet you're sporting there?"

"It was 1979, I think everyone had those." Mulder smiled tightly, clearly reluctant to let his dark mood go, but realizing he had no choice. "And there isn't much of a story. Chrissy Jones, the love of my life when I was a senior in high school."

"She looks cute." A blatant lie, Scully thought she looked stuck up, the sort of girl that Scully
usually detested in school. Not that she was about to insult a person she didn't know.

"She should be cute. She was on the cheer leading squad." A hint of a smile quirked mother's lips as his eyes slid slyly to hers. "Not the sort of girl you saw hanging out in the library after class studying to get straight A's in Chemistry."

"I wasn't studying Chemistry, I was studying History. That was always my sore spot." It bugged her that he had her pegged so well. "Besides, I was popular enough in high school." Which was true, even if she was never a cheerleader with the short skirt and all the boys chasing after her. "Why am I not surprised that Mulder-the-jock went for the air-headed cheerleader?"

"Would it make you feel better if I told you that she's now a school teacher with four kids and a mortgage?"

"No," Scully snapped, reddening. "Yes, maybe a little."

"Look at you, the cool, put-together Dana Scully able to get jealous."

"I'm not jealous, Mulder. I simply always resented people like that."

"Why?" It was an honest question from him, true puzzlement. "After all, you're brilliant, insanely capable, talented, attractive." He paused, shrugging. "How many other people in my life would drop everything to sit with my ailing mother just because I asked?"

"It's common decency, Mulder, and I'm a doctor, I couldn't say no."

"You could, but you didn't." He was standing so very close now, leaning against the mantle, looking down at her with those piercing eyes of his. Scully felt her throat close briefly as she tried to swallow past the lump that formed in it out of nowhere.

"You're my partner, Mulder, it's my job."

"You're my friend, Scully, and that's why I asked you. If our relationship were as simple as 'just partners', I would have expected a sympathy card and an offer to do all my reports while I was gone. You stepped up, you put yourself out on the line with Jeremiah Smith, and you put yourself out there. I know what you told Skinner and the other agents, about you and Pendrell's test. You didn't have to do that."

"They wanted answers."

"But you could have gone in there, said 'I don't know,' brushed it away, swept it aside, hell they probably wanted you to. But you didn't." His hand reached across the very short, impossibly small space between them, fingers searching for her hand. "You may not have been some hotty cheerleader in high school willing to jump in the back seat of my mother's station wagon, but you're the person who has stood by my side on this crazy journey, and you didn't have to. And I don't know how I could have gotten through these last few days without you there, holding me together."

As always, she thought, the one pulling him back from the edge of madness. "You would have done the same for me, Mulder."

"I would have." The first sign of life she had seen in him in days flared to light as he squeezed her fingers tightly for the briefest of moments, before letting go. "Outside of Mom, Scully, you're all I got. Sad but true, and if I lost that, hell, I don't think they would have enough straitjackets to carry me to the loony bin."
What in the world possessed him to say that? Scully's eyes widened as something akin to panic set in, snatching her fingers from his grip as she slid away from the suddenly overwhelming aura of his presence.

"You would be fine," she muttered, clearing her throat and looking suddenly for the purse she knew she set down when she came inside. Groceries, they needed groceries….yes! "You were fine before I ever joined you, weren't you."

"Yes," Mulder's tone was measured as he watched her, puzzled. "But you've given my work something it didn't have before, legitimacy. And you've given me someone who has faith in me. You're as part of my life now as anyone, Scully. I would hope…"

He stopped, as if looking for words, but not finding them. Instead he waved her off, the brilliance shuttering down, the moroseness returning like a shroud, enveloping him. "Anyway, thank you for being there. I really needed it."

Scully watched him, dry mouthed as he collapsed back on the couch, returning to the television show he had left, but knowing he wasn't really watching it. She had crossed some line there, trampled on a tender place that she had not meant to wound. And yet it was there, raw and injured, she could sense it, even if Mulder was hiding it. He was simply thanking her, expressing it in the best way the ever-emotive Mulder knew how. And she had run from it like a schoolgirl. Why?

"Mulder," she began, but he reached for the remote and flipped channels, clearly in no mood to rekindle the conversation. For now, it was over, and Scully had a feeling she would regret leaving the threads of this one unraveled, dangling dangerously in the uncertainty of their work.

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