Seasons: Fourth

The stakes become even deadlier for Dana Scully as she continues to stand by Mulder's ever deepening quest for the truth. As the consequences drain her physically and mentally, she and Mulder struggle to bring the lies to light, before it's too late.
Not Everything Dies

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to give Mulder a moral boost.

"Mulder, what do you think of a place with warm sunshine, cool drinks, beautiful beaches, and the only thing you need to wear all day is a bathing suit?" Dana Scully sighed longingly as she stared wistfully at her computer screen, a picture of just such a place slowly coalescing, pixel by pixel. Swaying palms and white, powder beaches surrounded a cove of aquamarine that screamed for her to run from her dark, dreary, basement office, kick off her shoes and pantyhose and book the first flight to wherever this was. At the moment she didn't care.

Fox Mulder, for his part, seemed oblivious to everything except for the file sitting on the desk in front of him. Thus far, his only response to her inquiry was a vague nod of the head, a gentle grunt, and a frown as his dark eyebrows met, quirk ing over his aquiline nose. This had been Mulder's position practically since she had stepped into their shared, basement office that morning, lost in thought with barely a glance up in Scully's direction. She had wondered for the first hour or so how long his tall, lean frame could stand being hunched over like that. She'd been sure the bathing suit comment might elicit some sort of reaction out of him, he rarely lost a chance to saying completely inappropriate things to her, a wicked gleam in his eye. There was not even so much as a speculative eyebrow raise. For all the attention he was paying, she could have been prancing before him in her underwear and he would hardly have noticed. She cleared her throat expectantly, sharp in the dead silence of their office, eyes laser focused on her partner.

It took several, long moments for her gaze to penetrate the fog of his own deep thoughts, but his hazel green eyes finally did tear themselves up to her, his expression startled. "What?"

"I can't believe you even missed my reference to bathing suits."

"Bathing suits?" He was mystified. He hadn't heard a single word she had said and frankly she was suspecting that he hadn't been terribly sure she had even been sitting in the office with him.

"Yeah, I brought up beaches, mixed drinks, a place where the only think you had to wear all day was a bathing suits. What you thought of such places?"

"Like a vacation?" Mulder rolled the word around on his tongue as if it were Latin or Greek. "Depends, would you wear a one piece or two piece?"

And there was the expected comment, much too late for Scully's liking. "As if you would ever find out, I wasn't discussing a mutual vacation, only one in general. It's July, Mulder, most of DC is out of town trying to escape the tourists and heat and here we are, stuck in the basement."

She frowned, pouting at the wall of gray metal that constituted the entirety of Mulder's life's work, the essence of what he had poured his heart and soul into, the X-files. It was everything he was, everything he lived for, and now by extension, it had become what defined her as well. Scully's entire world had narrowed in the last three years to the cases locked within the battered, rusting drawers, monsters and paranormal sightings, strange, unexplained occurrences, UFO's, and of course the never ending, twisted mystery of Samantha Mulder's disappearance.
"How much vacation time do you have, Mulder?"

"Why?" He had returned to whatever was holding his interest in front of him. At least he was trying to appear as if he were paying more attention now. "You looking to get rid of me?"

"I'm looking to get you out there to live your life." What was so enthralling he couldn't even bother to have a normal conversation with her? "Mulder, you've been through a lot in this last month, your mother, you need to take some time."

"I have taken some time."

"Time spent taking care of your ailing mother hardly counts." Teena Mulder's stroke just mere weeks before had nearly crushed Mulder, breaking him in ways Scully had never seen him crumble before. "Take a weekend, go somewhere, away from work, away from all of this." The wave of her hand encompassed their jumble of old furniture, hazy pictures, and stacks of unfinished files. "Do something!"

"I'd willingly take suggests, Scully," he muttered, though not very convincingly. "I don't know, I've never exactly been the 'weekend warrior' sort of guy, out in the woods with a backpack, me against nature, spearing fish for my sustenance."

"Except when there is a downed UFO involved, in which case I get a phone call from the military telling me to come pick you up."

"Touché!" He managed a small smile.

He was avoiding her point and skillfully too. "I have a feeling I'm losing this argument with you, aren't I?"

"I have too much to do to take a vacation now."

"Have you looked at yourself, Mulder?" In the weeks since Jeremiah Smith had entered into their lives she had seen her brilliant, energetic partner shut down, emotionally as well as physically. His mother's illness, the truths that had come out of it, had shattered something very deep within her partner, hurting him like nothing Scully had ever seen had. Mulder's relentless drive was still there, propelling him despite the obvious physical and mental exhaustion. But the energy, the spark that made Mulder who he was, that drew her along after him from one crazy scheme to another, that was missing. In its place was preoccupation, a Mulder that was only a shadow of what he normally was.

"I'm fine, Scully." It was her well-used phrase and she no more believed it out of him than he did out of her. Perhaps he defined "fine" as functional, but she did not. She rose, slowly rounding her table to his chair, leaning over his shoulder, curious as to what it was that so captivated his so much he couldn't even have a serious conversation with her.

Almost immediately the file folder snap shut, closing off access to whatever it was he was reading, cool, green eyes turning up to her in mild-irritation. "Can I help you?"

Since when had he kept secrets from her?

"I was just curious." She glanced at the nondescript file, then back to him. "The only thing I can think of you'd want to hide that holds your attention for that long is your latest porn delivery."

"It's nothing." He reached to shove the folder under a pile of other such folders, trying to neatly move it out of eyesight, forgotten in the morass of stacks on his desk. But what Mulder might have
in height, Scully more than made up in speed, and she nimbly plucked file away from obscurity, scuttling away from the long reach of Mulder's arm with an impish giggle. She ignored the curse he spat out as she flipped open the file, a grin splitting her face at her triumph.

"Damn it, Scully!" He was up and around the desk in an instant, prepared to snag the purloined item from her, but stopped as the smile she had worn melted almost instantly off her face, replaced by puzzlement. She slowly pulled out the black and white photo lying on top, of a nameless field where two children worked. The tow-headed boy was a mystery to her, but the dark haired girl beside her was not. Even she could recognize the now indelible image of Samantha Mulder, head bright in the sunshine.

"Mulder, where did you get this?"

"Scully!" He made another grab for the folder, but she held it away, staring up at him.

"This is what you saw in Canada, isn't it? What Jeremiah Smith was trying to show you?" Mulder had shared little of his experiences in Canada, only what he saw and that Jeremiah Smith had escaped, his whereabouts still unknown. "This is the field, the crops you were talking about."

"It's gone, Scully. The crops are gone and so are the clones of my sister. I've had them look and there is nothing there, no evidence."

"But this picture, Mulder it's some proof…"

"Of what?" Anger flashed to life, snapping across the distance between them, frustration animating him more than Scully had seen him in weeks. "I have proof that there is someone running around with my sister's face? The girl isn't even alive anymore, Scully, I heard her screaming. Believe me, that's not a sound I'm likely to forget, considering it's the same one I've heard every night, in every nightmare for the last twenty-three years."

Agitation fueled his fingers as they raked through his dark hair before he turned, pacing away from her. "I heard that thing, that hunter kill her."

"I know," Scully breathed softly, her heart sinking as she recalled the condition her partner arrived in at his mother's bedside, so shocked and disoriented she had considered sedating him just to force him to rest. "But if this photograph exists, Mulder, that means there was something out there."

It was little mollification for him. His long legs chewed up the small amount of space in front of the cabinets, his hands at his waist. "The person who gave it to me told me that 'not everything dies.'" He paused, turning to Scully. "I don't even know what she meant by that."

She? Scully was vaguely surprised. So far most of the people she and Mulder had dealt with in terms of secretive informants were men. "Is this the person you went to see in New York?"

He didn't answer, but then he didn't have to, Scully knew without him saying it that it was. Mulder had always been jealously guarded about the people who dabbled out information. It was only by happenstance, usually Mulder finding himself in trouble, that Scully had ever meet or come in contact with any of them. She never totally understood why, after all this time, he insisted on keeping them so secret from her, whether it was for her protection or theirs. If it was theirs, obviously he was doing something wrong, so far he now had gone through two. Scully wondered if this new woman was aware of the fates of her predecessors.

"Mulder, these children, this girl, she isn't your sister."

"I know that," he snapped, returning to his restless movements. "But those girls, they exist, that
woman who went to my parents - the real Samantha could still be out there, somewhere."

"She could be," Scully acknowledged reluctantly. "Mulder, anything is possible."

"Smith said they were drones, working those fields. For what?" He waved an impatient hand at the folder in her fingers. "Ginseng plants, bee colonies, what are they doing with them?"

Scully had considered that as well since Mulder's return. Jeremiah Smith had insisted this was the key to everything, this information he had shown Mulder, but at the moment everything seemed a mystery still, a puzzle, and the Smiths, even the cloned ones, were all now gone, vanished in to thin air, and all that Mulder had to prove any of his story was a photograph with a girl looking like his long-vanished sister.

"I can't be sure, Mulder, not till I have something to study. We know that Smith was gathering information on smallpox vaccinations. But I don't know what that has to do with bees, or ginseng plants, or any of this." With each new door that opened, more questions than answers came their way. They deepened the mystery, but by no means giving them closure or answers.

"We're here again, Scully, so close." His palm shot out, slamming hard against the bank of cabinets, the rattling shaking through Scully and banging through the hall. "Every time we find ourselves back here with what?"

He glared at the offending object still in her hand, eyes darkening on the photograph. "I'm certainly no closer to knowing why my sister was taken, though I've somehow managed to find out everything else about my family was a lie."

"You don't know that." Scully closed the file, her tone gentle, her thoughts turning towards Teena. "Have you asked your mother about why she was in the old vacation house yet?"

"No," Mulder mumbled darkly, throwing himself back into his office chair, arms and legs splaying as he tilted his face to the ceiling. "She's still so fragile. I'm afraid if I push her…"

He trailed off, helpless. At what price was Mulder's truth coming for him? Each new revelation brought with it a new wealth of emotional pain, a new piece to the puzzle that was his troubled life. How many more truths could he face before he buckled under their weight, taking Scully with him. Was Mulder's life her own, now? Could she stand there much longer along side of him and take that weight on as well? When would she break alongside of him?

"Mulder," she sighed, looking for some words of comfort. "The answers are there, you've always believed that."

She always depended on him believing that. It was his faith that carried her through all of this so many times. It was why she stood there by him even with all of her doubts. It made all of this worthwhile, or so told herself. "The truth is out there, that's what you've always told me."

His snort was dry and humorless, his gravelly monotone pulling from deep inside of himself. "It's getting harder and harder to believe when life take particular joy in kicking you in the teeth."

Mulder in a normal funk was nearly impossible to shake out of it. Scully had never seen him this far gone, this lost. She couldn't allow this to go on, not for her sanity at least, and not for his health. Snapping the file against her palm, she crossed to where he slumped in his chair, grabbing one of his dangling arms.

"Up, Mulder." Her command was much more forceful than her tug. The man was tall and large, and though she wasn't a weakling, he hardly budged.
"Why?" So far Mulder didn't seem inclined to assist her much in her efforts, frowning at her meager attempts to raise him with dubious amusement.

"Because you are so depressing it's pissing me off." She glared at him as he finally laughed outright, giving in and peeling himself out of the chair.

"And what does the good doctor say I should do about pissing her off?"

"Go outside," she replied, reaching for his suit coat and passing it over. "Go outside, be in the sunshine, walk around the Mall."

"It's nearly the 4th of July, the crowds will suck."

"Good, you'll have to behave yourself." Ignoring his dubious look, she grabbed his elbow and propelled him to the door. "We will get ice cream, we will enjoy the light of day for a few hours, and you will stop brooding for five minutes."

"Just five minutes? If I make it ten do I get a prize?"

"Mulder if you made it a whole afternoon I might give you anything you want."

"You in a two-piece bathing suit?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Her exacerbated smirk finally elicited something of a grin out of him. At least it was a first step.
In which Mulder attempts to bribe Scully with cherries.

It was 5 AM Central Standard Time and Scully had no coffee. This wasn't beginning to look like a promising day.

"Cheer up, Scully, it's the Cherry Festival in Traverse City," Mulder tossed the case file unceremoniously on her lap, hardly looking away from the road as he drove through the dawn gray countryside of northern Michigan. "Maybe we can swing by, get a taste of the cultural landscape of the upper Midwest?"

"I'm not letting you get away eating cherry pie every meal while we are here." She blandly opened the file, studying it in the first rays of dawn.

"I told you about that one guy I used to know of in the Bureau who had this thing for cherry pie, right? He was always on the search for the perfect piece. God, he was an oddball."

"Pot, kettle, do I need to continue?" Scully squinted, trying to decipher Mulder's chicken scratch, his cramped, spidery writing scrawling across the form. "Did the locals call us in on this?"

"They put a call through the local field office and it happened on my radar." As was typical for a case that came up with them, Mulder had yet again poached someone's case. She wondered what excuse he had this time. "I gave Detroit a call yesterday, said I was interested in it, they passed it over. They said it was likely only going to get lost in the shuffle anyway."

"Right." Scully highly doubted that. What was more likely was that Detroit field office would have politely told the Traverse City police it wasn't in the FBI's jurisdiction and bounced it back to them. That's what she would have done had this crossed her desk. But Mulder had a habit of picking up these dead cases, to the bemusement of most everyone in the Bureau. What Scully couldn't figure out was where the X-file angle to it all was.

"So a woman's abducted from a photo shop, her boyfriend is found dead, no one has seen or heard anything about it?"

"The only witness is the person who called it into the police and they only noticed because they found her boyfriend's body."

Scully studied the photograph included in the file. It was the sort they used for passport photos, distorted and swirled, a woman's terrified face trying to claw out of the picture. Scully's mouth dried and she quickly tucked it in with the paperwork. She thought vaguely of shattered glass, of screaming Mulder's name, of a closet with a gag in her mouth, and the sound of running water in a bathtub.

"What are your thoughts on that, Scully?"

Mulder's pointed question brought her out of her own memories and back to the present. This was a different missing woman, another abduction. She brought her thoughts back to focus on the
present. "Have the local police been contacted by this woman's abductor? No demand for ransom?"

"No, unfortunately. It's going on three days." The tendon in Mulder's jaw tightened slightly, the only sign of his own discomfort. Mulder had his own demons regarding abductions.

"Any additional leads?" So far the file was extremely skimpy on much of any kind of evidence.

"No, no hair and fiber evidence either. The rain washed it all away. The autopsy did come back on the dead boyfriend, though. It's a puncture wound through the left eardrum and into the brain, possibly from a long needle or awl."

An interesting way to kill someone, but still not particularly strange, weird, or spooky, at least not in the experience Scully had. "I'm still not sure how you and I figure into this investigation."

It was true. So far everything pointed to a straightforward, abduction case, one that the local police could more than handle. Why had this required a red-eye flight from DC to Detroit and a drive all the way across the state without her morning coffee?

"Don't you see the photo?"

Somehow, she had a feeling that was what was bringing this on. She studied the tiny picture again, forcing her skin not to crawl as she did so. The quiet excitement and curiosity in Mulder's voice made her wonder what he thought about it. "I assume that was taken by whoever it was who abducted her."

"It was taken by a sixty-five year old druggist moments before she was abducted. That's a passport photo from a local drugstore. The druggist who took that photo is the last known person to have seen Mary LeFante. Only he claims that wasn't the photo he was taking. He says the photo he was taking was normal in every respect. He only came forward to the police when he heard the woman was missing."

"Well, whoever it was that took this photo was obviously privy to the woman's abduction." Common sense told her that. How else would the photographer get that look in that moment, the raw fear and terror in the girl's eyes? Scully swallowed hard staring at it.

"That is what you would think," Mulder drawled peevishly, the tendon working yet again.

"What?" It was too early in the morning for these sorts of games and after a night of cramped planes and no caffeine, cooped up with Mr. Spooky, Scully was in no mood for his acerbic observations.

"Nothing," he mumbled, as ahead a sign announced them entering into Traverse City.

"How else would that photograph been taken, Mulder? It's likely the kidnapper left it at the pharmacy as a clue, a ransom of sorts, and the druggist just believed it was the one he had taken."

"Someone took the camera under the pharmacist's nose?"

It was a good point, and Scully hated conceding that.

"I'm merely saying that the pharmacist perhaps was mistaken in thinking that this was the passport photo he took. Obviously, whoever kidnapped this girl had been watching her, likely had followed her into the store. They could have grabbed it when the man wasn't looking and followed her out with it."
"And ran inside to leave it for the druggist to find again later?" Now Mulder was the one who sounded dubious. "Pardon my understanding of human nature, but that usually doesn't make you a good kidnapper?"

Why was she having this argument with him? "The pharmacist didn't see anyone coming in afterwards, anyone who looked suspicious?"

"He said it was quite for the rest of the afternoon, until the police were called in on the boyfriend's body."

"Maybe he didn't notice." She ignored her partner's disgruntled scowl, pausing thoughtfully. "Any security footage of scene?"

"Small town America where people leave their doors unlocked? No." His tone suggested she should have thought of that already and she bristled. "All we have is that photograph."

"And no theories?" Mulder was thinking of something, he had to be. Else why would he drag them all the way from Washington?

"Let's talk to the druggist first. See what he has to say."

Scully felt her heart sink as she studied Mulder's profile. No theories, a crazy photograph, a pissy partner, and no coffee in sight. This had all the makings of being one of those nightmare cases that left her wanting to shoot her partner in the head when it was all said and done. She tried to think if she packed extra Advil in her luggage. If not, she should probably pick some up at the pharmacy when they were there. She was sure something stupid would pop out of Mulder's mouth once they started their interview.
In which Mulder nerds profile speak.

The skull like images laughed mockingly from around the screaming image of Mary LeFante, her pale, elfin face contorted with fright as she swirled into the madness of the flimsy film, sinking into its depths. Scully stared at the image for long, quiet moments, ignoring Mulder as he further rambled around the room. If these were planted, whose idea of a smokescreen was it? How could they manage this? And if it weren't, if Mulder were right on his "thoughtographs" or whatever they were, what sort of thoughts would create this sort of image? Who had these sorts of thoughts anyway?

Her mind quickly supplied a name; Donnie Pfaster. She shivered and turned the photograph over, sliding it on top of the nearest counter. Even the idea of getting a glimpse of what went on in that monster's mind terrified her. Duane Barry at least had been a troubled, disturbed, frightened man, used by those who had another agenda. In her heart she couldn't fault him for what he had done, despite the terror it caused her. But Pfaster had been different. There had been true evil in his intent, a sickening psychosis that had twisted his mind as he had desecrated each of those bodies, had studied each victim with a critical eye, oblivious to the raw, snaking fear in their eyes.

"Scully?" Mulder's light touch caused her to jump, spinning in his grasp as he grabbed her, frowning in quizzical worry. "You all right?"

"Yeah." She tried shrugging off his fingers, pulling away finally, wanting distance between her and Mulder's careful concern. "Just wondering if your theory was correct, what sort of person would create thoughts like that?"

"Do you want my psychologist opinion or the FBI agent opinion?"

"There's a difference?" Scully tried to manage a wobbly smile, wanting to find familiar footing again. If she didn't, Mulder would resort to his protectivism, and she couldn't face that at the moment.

"The psychologist in me says it's a person who is deeply disturbed, psychotic, quite possibly with some sort of history of severe mental illness, likely schizophrenia, judging from the nature of the images. The sheer chaotic, dark nature of the picture strikes me as someone whose mind is broken in ways that are terrifying and nightmarish."

It was rare she got to hear Mulder fall into psychologist speak and it reminded Scully he really was good at what he did. It was a pity others didn't see that in him like she did. "And what does the FBI Agent say?"

"The FBI Agent says he's a fucking whack job, sicko stalker who could have killed the girl by now." That grim thought hadn't been voiced till now, and it lay heavy there, that realization. "Do you really believe that this is all an elaborate smokescreen to allow Mary LaFante to escape with the money, killing her boyfriend to get away scot-free?"
"We can't rule it out." Scully wanted to believe it was the likely scenario. The alternative was too frightening to think about. "Doesn't it make more sense, Mulder, the mail fraud, the credit cards, stage an abduction and flee, cutting out the boyfriend."

"I'd agree with you if it weren't for the photographs." Mulder's long fingers reached for the photograph she had turned over, leaving on the counter. "Something tells me this isn't exactly something you can fake with some bad chemicals or crazy exposure."

"But thoughts can manage it?" Scully almost scoffed, but checked herself. How many times had she said those sorts of words, only to have Mulder turn out to be right? "Say this man was some sort of stalker out to capture Mary LaFante? Why? Why haven't we heard of anyone else being taken with photographs being left behind?"

"Perhaps his other victims didn't conveniently have undeveloped film lying around." Mulder shrugged, setting down the picture with sharp eyes towards her. "Perhaps Mary LaFante was his first. Perhaps he's escalating from simple stalking to now kidnapping."

Why did he have to look at her as if he could see the disquiet lurking in her soul? "I'm fine, Mulder."

"I didn't say you weren't."

"But you were thinking it." She knew he was, could tell by the guilty flicker of his eyes to floor, as he shifted uncomfortably under the truth of her words.

"Scully, can you blame me for worrying about you?"

"I'm a professional, Mulder, I've worked on other cases like these, and ones that have nearly broken you, I might add." It was a snipe at him she probably could have left out, but it nettled her he jumped to hyper-protective so readily. As if the recent weeks with his mother weren't emotionally taxing for him enough. "We both have our demons with these cases, you know that. You will always see your missing sister in each one of these girls and I will forever remember being kidnapped and taken. We can't get around it, we can't hide it and this is our job. If you can put yourself out there time and again Mulder and say you are fine, so can I?"

Why did she feel the need to prove this to him?

"I know that," Mulder's tone was mild, but she could see him retreat emotionally and kicked herself for it. It was their habit of late, her snapping back, he pulling away. What had started this? "I just worried about you, as your partner and as your friend. And I won't sugar coat my own demons, but I know that I've never been abducted and held against my will by someone like this."

"If I need to step away, I promise I will." Scully slapped on a reassuring smile and hoped he bought it. "I won't play the game of pushing myself through this. If I'm truly uncomfortable, I promise I'll go sit in the Detroit field office or I'll go home to Washington and I'll let you finish up."

He didn't look as if he believed her. Hell at this point she was fairly certain that Fox Mulder could probably read her like an open book and knew that she was doing anything to get him to agree to this and move on. Surprisingly, he let it go. He nodded slowly, not bothering to hide the worry, but turning for the door all the same, fingers reaching in his jacket pocket for his sunflower seeds.

"Agents?" From down the hallway the sound of one of the postal inspectors calling for them brought Scully to full alert. "They found Mary LaFante, outside of town. They are rushing her to the hospital now."
Wordlessly, she followed Mulder's long steps down the hall, for now their argument forgotten.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder discusses how things make a terrifying sense from a certain point of view.

Transorbital Lobotomy. Scully's own eye twinged painfully, her fingers rubbing at the area just above the bridge of her nose in sympathy, a dull throb lancing through the bone and hollow space of her sinus cavity. It ached at the very thought of what had been done to Mary LaFante. The front lobe of the young woman's brain had been stabbed and prodded, shot through with narrow gouges from the thin shaft of the so-called "ice pick" used in the procedure. She thought of the strange, shape-changing hunter who had pursued Mulder and Jeremiah Smith weeks ago, the ice pick in his hand. She shuddered. She'd never use the tool ever again. She'd buy an ice maker first.

"I witnessed one of those sorts of lobotomies when I was in Oxford." Mulder was grim beside her, studying the print outs of Mary LaFante's brain scan. "They were still being performed in some hospitals in England at the time, though most psychiatric professionals by then doubted their effectiveness and humanity. Still, it wasn't pretty."

Despite his stoic demeanor, Scully could see her partner's face gray faintly at the thought. Mulder could barely stomach her autopsy room, she was impressed he had sat through a session watching someone having a needle moved around their eyeball and through their eye socket to the brain beyond.

"The truth is that few hospitals in the US will perform that procedure." Scully hadn't heard of it being performed regularly in years. "It hasn't been used regularly in close to thirty years, which still doesn't explain Mary LaFante. Whoever did that to her wasn't a professional. What they did was little more than butchery, shoving the orbitoclast through the socket with little care about what they hit back there." The vague look of blank incomprehension on Mary's face was heartbreaking and chilling, made all the worse by the photographs they had found at her apartment. Mulder claimed they were the product of a deranged mind. Only a deranged mind would be sick enough to do something so perverted as this.

"So we aren't dealing with a medical professional." Mulder was falling back into his natural mode, that of a profiler, easily slipping into the critical analysis, almost out of habit. "But it has to be someone who has some sort of knowledge of the procedure, even if it isn't correct knowledge, perhaps someone who witnessed it in school, maybe even a nurse or assistant." His teeth worked at his full bottom lip briefly, thoughts churning. "Perhaps even someone who has had the procedure done?"

"Someone with a history of mental illness?"

"It explains the photographs, doesn't it?" It did comfortably fit his theory. Scully grimaced. "Look, Mulder, I'm not saying this to dismiss your profile, but those photographs…"

"You have another explanation for them?"
He knew she didn't. She let go of the point for now. "Let's say it is someone with a history of mental illness, like you suggest. Why would he want Mary LaFante?"

"That could be any reason at this point, we won' know till we see who the next victim was. We know so far he seems to be targeting females, but we don't know why. It could be anything, something that is a painful reminder of the past. Perhaps its only things that this person can see. Maybe that's what is going on with the photographs. The images are what he sees around his victims when he grabs them."

Photographs, nightmare images, two missing girls, one with the lobotomy from hell, "Why can't your serial killers ever be normal, Mulder?"

"You say that as if serial killers were ever anything like normal." There was rueful bitterness in Mulder's voice, the weight of hundreds of cases from Mulder's past, ones he rarely ever spoke of. In his gloomier moments, Scully knew the things that Mulder had seen as a criminal profiler still haunted him, along with the memories of his sister. "Normal is a matter of perspective, dictated to us by culture and society. Serial killers are those for those norms have little to no meaning. Their view of the world is skewed, twisted. Their logic, patterns of thinking are off kilter. It's not as simple as waving them away as being insane, or crazy, or psychopaths. There is a method to their madness, a careful calculation that most so-called normal people can't see."

"You make it sound inspired, genius even." Scully smirked teasingly but inwardly shivered. "In a way sometimes it kind of is." Mulder's gaze darkened, carefully turning to Mary LaFante's brain scan, avoiding meeting her careless words directly. "It certainly takes the ability to see the world through lenses most people are too afraid or too close minded to look through. Perhaps that is why I'm so good at it."

A harsh twist of his lips formed a hard sort of smile. "If you already see things in the world no one else sees, it's not that far of a leap to understand how someone like a serial killer thinks. I guess you can say it's a mutual sort of madness. Some of us see aliens, others of us see monsters, either way we certainly don't see the same things when we view the world that the rest of you do."

Scully's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth in dry silence, the image of Mary LaFante swirling into madness. Was that what the man saw when he had grabbed Mary, the grasping, clawing images, dragging her into the vortex? Did other serial killers have their own demons like that? Did Donnie Pfaster? What had he seen that night he had run her rental car off the road in Minneapolis and drug her, groggy and frightened, tossing her into her trunk? Had he seen her as human or little more than one of his corpses, his personal, necrophilia playthings?

"You may see the world differently that some people, Mulder, but I don't think the things these creatures see." She shook herself, forcing herself to shake off the creeping feeling under her skin. Mulder could see the pathways into madness she could not, but that did not make him a denizen there. "I for one am glad you see the world the way you do. Aliens aside, it's that worldview that has saved me twice now and while it may not be what you do anymore, don't sell your talents short. You've done good work, Mulder, work that needed to be done. I don't know if I could have stood into some of the places you've had to go."

"You might have," Mulder shrugged, eyes still riveted to the carts, expression inscrutable. "You are much stronger than you give yourself credit for, stronger I am at times. It makes you a good partner." He shrugged, hands shuffling into his pockets. "You can at least stand on the edge of madness and step away from it. Me...."

He didn't finish his thought. He didn't need to. He echoed the very sentiment Scully had over and
over about him and about their partnership, Mulder dancing into the void, while she stood at the edges and tried to save him from it. It was the tenor of their relationship.

"Agent Mulder?" They turned simultaneously to the Traverse City officer who glanced pointedly between the two of them. "They have the place where the second woman was taken if you want to meet the officers over there?"

"Yeah." Mulder moved to follow, waving towards Mary' LaFante's medical file. "Let me go with these guys, Scully, see what you can find here on her condition. I'll meet you out at the sight?"

"Right." She watched as her partner whipped out of the room. Scully had never asked him what sort of dark places he had seen in his time as a profiler, though she had seen glimpses in the few cases that they had worked together. Mulder always had the darkness lurking inside of him and those were the cases that usually brought those shadows to the surface. As much as she envied her partner for his unique insight, there were times, like this, that she was profoundly glad that she didn't see the things or make the leaps that Mulder did. She didn't know what she would do with that burden.
She didn't need more than a glance at the crumpled figure in the weeds to know that Alice Brandt was dead. They had failed. She had failed. The innocent woman's body lay there, forlorn, surrounded by the sorrow filled faces of the local police, not even a whole day after she had been taken from her boring, humdrum office. She had tried, damn it!

She could hear the sirens in the distance as she waited in the driver's side of the car, hands clutching the steering wheel, watching for Mulder's lanky form to separate itself from the crowd. Scully wasn't surprised he lingered. The puzzle of Gerald Schnauz intrigued him, the twists and turns of the man's obviously sickened mind both repulsed and endlessly fascinated her partner. It was what made him so good at what he did. It held no interest for Scully, only revulsion and disgust. The man was little more than a monster, a diseased mind, who would beat his well-respected, dentist father into a wheelchair, than turn on innocent women and scramble their brains for nothing more than thrills. How had Mulder done this everyday, stand there staring at this, delving into the dark?

He wandered down the hill slowly, shoulder's slumped, his head cocked in that way of his that said he was deep in thought. Mulder was already reducing Alice Brandt into her basic components, trying to figure her into the equation that was Gerald Schnauz. How did this poor, innocent girl figure into the man's madness? Why had he killed her and not Mary LaFante? Why did he dress them in nightgowns, prod their brains with needles. What was the meaning of unruhe for him? Scully could almost sense the tenor of his thoughts, swirling madly in his brain as he wandered somberly to her door, squinting against the midday sun.

"Hey, Scully, that word unruhe - unrest - is bothering me. Maybe he thought he was curing them somehow, saving him from damnation, from those things in the pictures, you know, he called them the howlers."

Her head ached and her soul hurt. She didn't care what Schnauz thought, Alice Brandt was still dead. "It's over, Mulder."

"Well, then that photo wouldn't be his fantasy." Mulder persisted despite her words. "It would be his nightmare."

"What the hell does it matter?" Why did he care about how this man thought or what was going on in his sickened mind? They had him. Alice was dead and they had failed. She wanted to get out of here, to put this behind her, to forget about serial killers who cared no more about their victims than to use them and throw them away like garbage - like Donnie Pfaster.

"Because I want to know."

"I don't." Without looking at him she started the engine, waiting with only barely concealed impatience for him to climb inside the car. She had to drive, to get away from here. She didn't want to see the ambulance arrive for Alice's poor, dead body, to face the proof of her failure. She didn't
want to talk about it with Mulder. He would only analyze it, analyze her. Scully didn't want to be prodded, to be studied and broken down to be filed away in Mulder's mind, another pattern of human behavior. How could he do this all the time, everyday, pick apart these creatures brains, understand why they did the things they did, without going crazy himself?

"Do you want me to finish up this case?"

She flinched at the careful concern in his voice, neither too overbearing to annoy her nor to cold to sound indifferent. She knew he was biting his tongue, clamping down on his natural tendency for hyper-protectionism. But the implication still wrangled, the question lying underneath it all. Could she still handle this case?

"I'm fine, Mulder." She wanted to believe it herself. Would this be their argument every time they dealt with a serial killer? Mulder assuming she would freak out over remembered horrors from her own abductions and she bravely trying to assure him she was fine. Was she fine? She didn't know.

"How could you do this everyday back when you were profiling?" She forced herself to stare ahead, to watch the road and not look at her partner's worried eyes. "Three years working with Patterson, catching guys like this. I've seen you work, Mulder, there's a reason they call you Spooky. You pick them apart. You study them like I would a body, teasing out what it is that makes them tick. You know them better than they know themselves. Doesn't it ever just break you?"

"Honestly?"

Scully nodded silently, recalling the darkness that simmered just under the surface after she had returned from her abduction, the angry, dangerous despair that Mulder had only just managed to hide. Melissa had worried and with good reason. Scully had only ever seen glimpses of it. She could hardly imagine what it was like when she'd been laying there in a coma, Mulder not knowing if she would live or die.

"When I first got into it, I didn't think about it. It was little more than showing off, dazzling everyone with my high wire tricks. Jerry wasn't so far off, what he said about me in the early days. I would bounce from case to case, showing up Patterson. Likely why I pissed him off so bad."

"Among other things?" She finally let a small ghost of a smile trace her lips.

"Yeah." Mulder sighed vaguely. "I don't remember when it stopped being about who I was impressing, when I got sucked too far down into the pile of filth that I couldn't breath, I couldn't see, I just existed. One too many dead women, missing kids." His voice cracked over the last word.

"Don't think I delve into these people's minds because it's some sort of preoccupation with me, Scully, or that it's because I can't help myself. I have a talent, I know that, I cultivated it, and if I hadn't burned out, found the X-files, if I didn't want Samantha back so damned much, I might have ended up in Patterson's position."

"Than why do you do it?" Her eyes burned from the strain of looking anywhere but at him. She didn't want him to see how much it hurt, seeing poor Alice, alone, all by herself, lying in the weeds. Like so many other women Mulder had probably seen, like she herself could have been, once.

"Because of Alice." Mulder could read her mind. "Because there has to be justice for victims like her. Because there may be an occasion when I need to be able to piece together why Gerald Schnauz did what he did, what was driving him, why he felt it was necessary to take ice picks to
the brains of those girls. Perhaps not for his victims, but for someone else who fits his pattern, because perhaps then I could save them."

"Like you couldn't Samantha."

She hadn't meant to say that out loud. It was understood, of course, and it was hardly the first time she'd said something like it, frequently reminding him of it when his obsessions overwhelmed him. It just hadn't occurred to her how pervasive his sister's loss was to him, and how much it drove everything about her partner, even this.

He only regarded her with sadness. "And like I couldn't you."

She hadn't expected that. For the briefest of moments a memory surfaced, Mulder in the distance, high up on a mountain, a flash of light, and she was gone. He'd been there when she was taken, just too late, far too late.

"We have Schnauz, Mulder. He won't be going anywhere. He's going to go to be arraigned and tried and either he's going to prison or back to the institution, where he can be treated. Either way, I don't think I want to know anymore why he did what he did or how he made those nightmares on film. I think we both have dealt with enough demons for the moment."

He didn't argue as she lapsed into troubled silence.
Twilight Sleep

Chapter Summary

In which Scully awakes to an unpleasant shock.

It was the sound of muttering that woke her. The chattering cut through the heavy muzziness, as she tried desperately to swim out of the great depth of slumber she found herself in. Where was she? What had happened? She'd remembered being with Mulder, at the drug store, and going out to grab the car…a pain in her foot…and falling….

Her eyes flickered open into shadows, the only real light being cast by a single lamp, hovering over a dentists operating table. It was empty, save for a long, deadly looking needle, a leucotome, and a single bottle of twilight sleep. The fog in her brain cleared ever so slightly. Twilight sleep, dentists, Gerald Schnauz…..

A panicked voice in her mind started screaming not again, not again, not again….

She screwed her eyes tight, swallowing, pushing back the hysteria, breathing deep to clear her mind of the cobwebs of the drug. Think, Dana, don't gibber, what is going on? She opened her eyes again, searching the cramped space with its padded wars and gray darkness. Schnauz had his back to her, covered in his construction smock, murmuring to himself in words she couldn't quite make out. German, maybe? She couldn't be sure. Scully shifted, turning her ankles and wrists, feeling the sticky pull of glue and vinyl against skin. Duct tape. Damn it. No way of even working out of the stuff. Her long nails attempted to reach it, but it was a foolish thought at best. She was well and truly stuck. Captured again by another madman. Why did this keep happening to her? Please God, let Mulder be looking for her, let him have noticed. Damn her for not letting him puzzle out Alice Brandt's murder earlier, for rushing him off, for cutting him off and shutting him down. She'd been frightened, scared, she didn't want to know. And now…

*Unruhe*….unrest…maybe he thinks he's curing them….

"Let me go!" She found her voice, shaken and frightened, but strong in the near silence, causing Schnauz to turn. He hardly looked surprised. Instead he reached beside him, for a giant roll of large, silver tape, a kindly, almost benevolent look on his round face. Unlike the coldness of Donnie Pfaster, Gerald Schnauz reminded her of the doctors she knew as a child, the ones that had inspired her into the profession. He had that reassuring smile, the sort that she remembered when the doctor would bandage a cut or the dentist would look at her teeth. It would only take a minute….

"Shhh," he sighed, moving towards her, the tape in his hand pulling and tearing. Scully's mouth dried as her eyes widened, watching as Schnauz's thick fingers yanked and tore.

"Es ist alles in ordnung," he assured her, eyes slightly glazed as he reached to smooth her hair away from her face.

"It's over, Gerry." She forced more confidence into her voice than she felt, struggling to remain calm. Somewhere, Mulder was looking for her, she knew that. She had to distract him, to hold him off just long enough for Mulder to get to her. "Let me go!"
"Ich werde dir helfen. Du wirst deine unruhe bald vergessen."

What? Frantically she tried to piece together what Schnauz was saying, pulling from half-forgotten memories of early morning, German class in college. She wanted to do what…unrest? Above her Schnauz nodded and smiled, holding the tape taught over her mouth, lowering down to her dry lips.

"Aufhören!" Stop! It was the first useful word she could remember, giving Schnauz pause briefly, his maddened eyes frowning in surprise.

"Ich habe keine unruhe!" She had no unrest, she was fine and she had to make him see that. "Ich habe keine unruhe, ich brauche nicht gerettet zu werden."

She was fine, he had to understand that, and she didn't need to be saved. There was nothing about her that needed saving.

He shook his head sadly, that kindly, doctor-like smiling rising briefly on his lips. "Yes you do. Everybody does, but especially you."

"Why," she demanded, hoping to grasp the thread of his thoughts, to spin it and hold it, and lead him along, away from the deadly, sharp instrument, the leucotome, sitting on the dentists table beside her. Long enough for Mulder to piece this together, to find her. "Why me, Gerry?"

Her thoughts spun madly, reaching through what little she knew of Schnauz's past. He beat his father near to death, only months after his sister killer herself. Why? Had he beat his sister? His father? Had it been something the elder Schnauz had done? She could almost hear Mulder pushing her along, to go with her intuition. "Do I remind you of your sister?"

That caused a flicker, a twitch, and she knew she had connected with something.

"Why did your sister kill herself, Gerry? What did your father do to her?"

Another twitch and Gerry's face contorted, an inner conflict waging as he shook his balding head violently. "He didn't do anything. It was the howlers."

Howlers? He'd mentioned that, the things in the photographs, the demonic creatures. Get him on that, get him talking, anything to keep him going, "Okay then, lets talk about the howlers."

He hesitated, frowning in indecision, despite her efforts to sound reasonable, to hide the pounding fear raging in her chest.

"They live inside your head," he finally admitted, as certain of their existence as she was of him standing there. "They make you do things and say things that you don't mean and all your good thoughts can't wish them away. You need help."

Slowly he raised his finger towards her face. "You've got them."

Scully felt her eyes cross slightly as the blunt tip of his right forefinger brushed against her feverish skin, right at the spot above her eyebrow. It had been a source of pain for weeks, something she chalked up to the weather, allergies. It was as if he knew the spot, could sense the sinus pressure there, the dull throb that ached as soon as he touched it.

"Don't you feel them?" His voice was a wondering whisper above her as she fought back revulsion and tears.

"I don't have them, Gerry," she insisted, her resolve fading quickly under the weight of terror.
"They made you say that, just now, because they know I'm going to kill them." Carefully he reached for the leucotome as she fought desperately to find something else to give him pause.

"What if you are wrong, Gerry? What if there are no such things as howlers?" It was dangerous, challenging this man's delusions, she knew that. Perhaps if she made him angry it would give him pause, make him think. "What if you made them up inside your head to explain the things your sister said your father did?"

Fury rippled across his face, the first lucid emotions she had seen out of him. "Great, now they got you talking like Sigmund Freud." He leaned towards her face, eyes hard as he searched her wide-open eyes. "I am on to you! I know your tricks!"

He shouted so loudly her ears rang, his hot spit spraying her cheek. He pulled away, calming once again as his breath evened out, a clever sort of knowing curling his mouth into a smile. "Besides, I've seen them, in that picture your partner showed me. Pictures don't lie. You saw them, too."

Pictures don't lie. How could she argue empirical evidence like that? "If there are such a thing as howlers, Gerry, they live only inside your head."

Whether he believed her or heard her, Scully couldn't say. Sighing, he turned from her, returning to the end of the room, rummaging about, his broad back to her. Instinctively her eyes turned towards the table. Her left hand had just managed to work the sticky tape loose in the growing heat of the summer day to perhaps slip towards the table beside her. Maybe she could reach it enough to give her leverage, allow her to pry off the gluey substance.

Schnauz pivoted and returned, a large, clumsy camera in hand, oblivious to her efforts to force her wrist out, and pushing the table bluntly away. Scully tried not to groan in disappointment as Schnauz held up the camera and turned it to her, clicking the lens shut as the flash nearly blinded her.

"You say these are in my head," he murmured, clicking again. "But I'll show you. They were in that picture. I saw them. I'll show you."

"Gerry," she murmured, but he ignored her, clicking again and again.

"We need to wait." It was perhaps the best words she had heard out of him, and she nearly cried in relief as he turned away again, fiddling with the camera, setting aside the film he'd used, watching each of the photographs intently as they slowly developed. How long did it take this sort of photograph to turn again? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Was it enough for Mulder? She had always marveled at her partner's abilities, the leaps in logic he took, the lightening fast ability he had to understand a situation so completely on the barest of facts. She had yelled at him today for Alice Brandt, for breaking her down, for seeing her as nothing more than a pattern. God, Scully mentally cursed herself, she wished she hadn't. She needed that Mulder now.

Slowly she heard Schnauz pick up each photograph, a strangled gurgle emanating from him with each flip. More muttering in German and frantic looks towards Scully, each one more confused as he began to flip through the photographs. "What does this mean?"

Scully remained silent as he slowly paced over to her, eyes locked on the images in front of him. Did he see the howlers, the demonic nightmares she'd seen in the other photographs? Did he see something else even more fevered and horrid out of his broken mind? Did she even want to know? Carefully he pulled back the tray he'd pushed aside, spreading out the photographs. He studied each one, becoming more and more agitated, glancing up to Scully for answers that she didn't have. She dared to glance down towards the tray, the scattered pictures and the images on them. Each of
them was exactly the same, but none of them was what she expected. Schnauz had taken photos of her, she was certain of that. Instead each of the slowly brightening photographs had an image of him, lying on the floor, surrounded by the scattered remains of the very photographs he showed her.

"What does this mean?" His voice darkened, became more threatening.

Tears brimmed on the edge of her eyelashes, the terror she'd swallowed for so long now finally giving way. "It means you need help, Gerry."

Please, please listen to reason she silently begged, meeting his eyes imploringly. She didn't know if she was getting through at all. He turned, and studied the photographs again, his shoulder's stiffening in decision.

"No!" He shook his head knowingly. "I think what it means is that I don't have much time left."

Swiftly he reached for the tape once again and before she could think to say anything to stop him he had it over her mouth, smashing her lips against the glue as she screamed and thrashed under him. Her cries muffled, the sound humming against the tape, reverberating into her lips and tickling her nose. Out of the corner of her wild eyes she could see him reach for the leucotome and felt her blood freeze in her veins.

There was a squeak of springs, and the room shook, briefly. Schnauz paused, turning. Wordlessly, he shuffled towards the side, to a door she hadn't noticed before. He peeked outside. Mulder? Please God, let it be him! Frantically, Scully pulled at her left wrist, working the glue loose as her slick, sweaty skin dissolved the adhesive. Just a bit more, she could work it free, get the tape of her mouth and shout for Mulder's attention.

A crash and the unmistakable sound of Mulder shouting her name, the thrill of the sound was tempered by her urgent need to free herself, somehow. She wriggled the tape just enough that her slight wrist managed to slip out, finally, her sticky fingers pulling off the tape at her mouth. "Mulder!"

It was her answering cry that caught Schnauz's attention as he whirled, reaching for Scully before she could rip at the tape on her right arm. Schnauz grabbed her, trying to pin her down again, the leucotome threatening even as the entire room began to shudder. It sounded as if Mulder was throwing himself against the door.

"Help!" She fought off Schnauz with her free hand. Glass shattered. In a swirl of light and movement the door burst open, shots rang out, and Schnauz lay crumpled on the floor, Mulder's gun still trained on the now very still figure. All around him the pictures scattered, a fan of replicated images, over and over and over again.

"Are you hurt?" He didn't even bother looking at the body, his eyes blazing as he searched her over, confirming the negative shake of her head. It was only when he was satisfied she was all right that he turned to the others outside. "Get an ambulance!"

Would they need it? She didn't think so. She could already tell by the stillness of Schnauz's body, the laxity on his face that he was dead. Mulder could be lethal if necessary. She glanced up at her gray-faced partner, glowering over the scene darkly as she pulled the last of the tape off her right hand, turning it stiffly before reaching for her ankles. Gently Mulder reached for her hand, helping her from the chair. Her joints protested, too long taped into one position, but she stood, steadily, straightening her shoulders and stepping over Schnauz's body, blinking against the brightness of the outside world. It was later afternoon now. She hadn't been gone that long. He had been quick this
time.

For the second time that day she heard the sirens in the distance. She paused, staring at the red lights blankly, realizing they were sitting in a cemetery. Why a cemetery?

"I want you to get checked out." Mulder's fingertips rested on her back, his voice rumbling low above her ear, shocking her and relieving her as a part of her wanted to simply collapse back against him. Would it be unseemly to beg for a hug, a reassurance that she was all right, that he had reached her again? Yes it would she decided, leaning briefly into his fingertips before stepping away, nodding her head.

"I'm fine, Mulder," she tried weakly, knowing at a glance at his stormy, brooding glare he wasn't going to brook an argument. He needed her to do this for him so that he could rest assured she was okay. And hell, she admitted, it would be nice to just have a moment to hide away from the other officers and their curious gazes as they tore through the crime scene. "Is he...."

She glanced towards the trailer as the ambulance pulled up, cops standing around chattering on hand radios, already taping off the area.

"Dead?" Mulder shrugged. "Perhaps. I didn't care to find out."

He was so callous about it, that darkness that he held within himself indifferent to the fact that this had been, essentially, a very sick man. As terrified as she had been, she had at least seen that. Would he ever come to see the tragedy of the events that played out here? Would she ever be able to accept it?

"He only wanted to make me better," she murmured, the only thing she could think of at that moment.

"I'm glad, for one, that he didn't get a chance to try," Mulder replied solemnly, his expression inscrutable as he reached up to pull stray tangled hairs from the glue remaining on her face. "Get looked at and I'm taking you to the hotel. No arguments."

She had none, frankly, and for once acquiesced to Mulder need to protect her. She nodded as he turned, beginning to go back to the scene.

"Mulder," she called.

He turned quietly around.

"Thank you." She felt uncharacteristically open and raw. "Thank you for coming for me...again."

"I always will, Scully." He returned inside the trailer, calmly ordering the police at the scene. She was glad he was gone, as she wiped haplessly at stray tears.
In which Scully finishes up her final report and has a visitor.

The keys of her keyboard clicked under the fury of her fingertips, filling her darkened apartment with some comfort of noise as she worked.

Addendum to case report: After his death, a diary was found among Gerald Schnauz's belongings, written in the second person and apparently intended as an open letter to his father. It includes the names of his victims, the women he desired to save. My name is contained in the last entry. I have no further explanation for the existence of the photographs, nor am I confident one is forthcoming. My captivity forced me to understand and even empathize with Gerry Schnauz. My survival depended on it. I see now the value of such insight, for truly to pursue monsters, we must understand them.

Carefully, Scully picked up the photograph of herself, the one Mulder had taken at the drug store. Her frightened face twisted out of the film, fingers reaching out, grasping…for what? Purchase away from Schnauz or reaching out for Mulder to come and save her?

We must venture into their minds, only in doing so, do we risk letting them venture into ours.

She paused, staring at her computer screen thoughtfully, reaching for the cooled, coffee mug at her workspace. Gerald Schnauz had led a rather sad life. It was only after his death that they discovered the history of mental illness in the family; the mother who had died in an institution, the fear of the same problem in his sister, and the suspicions of abuse on the part of the father. The elder Schnauz had been a respected dentist but had also been a God-fearing Catholic, convinced that the demons that plagued his wife and daughter were things he could beat out. For a teenage boy, trying to make sense out of why his father might do something that horrific, howlers sounded like a logical reason. After all, hadn't she tried to do the same thing, rationalizing why horrible things had happened to her? Could she really fault the man's broken mind for making of it what he could?

The knock at her door was expected. Scully glanced at the clock on her computer. It was late, but not so late that she couldn't let him in. Quietly she rose, padding to the door, not bothering to check to see Mulder standing outside, a mildly disapproving look on his face.

"Opening your door to random strangers, now?"

"I knew it was you." She stepped away, allowing him inside, privately glad he had stopped by. "Coffee?"

"Already too wired." That was Mulder's normal state. He paced into her living room, hands in his jean pockets, settling on the edge of her couch nervously. "It seems quieter without the fuzzball around."

She rolled her eyes, moving to turn off her computer. "Rub salt in the wound, Mulder, thank you." She had just been thinking she missed Queequeg that night, the comfort of another living presence in her apartment. "What brings you out this way?"
"Couldn't sleep."

"And you didn't feel like calling?" She curled into the chair opposite him, feet pulled underneath her.

"Was driving around, decided I might as well." He shrugged, long legs stretching out in front of him as he studied her for long, quiet moments. Scully didn't flinch, but she felt herself blush under the scrutiny of his pointed gaze, ducking her head as she shifted. Was this how suspects felt when under his interrogation?

"So I was finishing up my report." She cleared her throat, looking for something to do to divert his attention, twisting her hands in her lap. "I'll have it in the morning, if you want to look at it."

"I trust your judgment."

"That's not why I thought you'd like to read it. I thought you would be interested in my insight, into what I learned about Schnauz."

"You aren't part of a profile, Scully." Mulder cut her off. "Besides, Schnauz is dead."

"I know, but the information might be useful, insightful to other cases." She paused, pulling her knees up as she wrapped her arms around them. "I have to apologize, Mulder, for the way I acted that day. For Alice Brandt, for what I said. I didn't want you to look into Schnauz. I thought we had him, that it was over, that that was the end."

"Scully!" He groaned her name, scrubbing at his face lightly as she continued, ignoring his protests.

"I can't do what you do, Mulder." She had never been able to do what he could do, breaking into a person's mind the way he did, laying it out like oh so many puzzle pieces. "Gerry Schnauz was nothing more than monster, that's what I wanted to believe. He was like Donnie Pfaster, another creature who killed and tortured because he was a sick, twisted individual who cared nothing for human life or the sanctity of it. I wanted to see him like I did Pfaster, to hate him, to blame him for the things I blamed Pfaster for."

"Pfaster was sick too, in his own way."

"No, Mulder, not in his own way." There had been a difference, she knew that. "Pfaster had made a choice, but he reveled in the darkness, enjoyed it. Schnauz's mind was broken. He couldn't make sense of the horrors he discovered, and so tried to explain them away with his own, twisted logic. He thought he was helping those girls, Mary and Alice. He thought he was helping me."

"The howlers," Mulder muttered, grim.

"The howlers." She reached up to her eyebrow and rubbed the place that Schnauz had pointed out. "All I could think when I woke up was to keep him talking, to keep him distracted, if I did I could give you time, to let you do what you do, because you had to find me."

"That's a lot of faith you put in my abilities, Scully. I've failed you before, I didn't get to you."

"You got to me this time. That is what matters."

He didn't look comforted by the idea.

"You were right to worry about me and my demons, you know." She gripped her knees tighter, so
hard she could hear the tendons creak. "I always thought of myself as strong, stronger than my own fears and misgivings, that I wouldn't allow what Donnie Pfaster or Duane Barry did to me affect my judgment as a law enforcement official. I was a good agent, a damn good one, I could be stronger than that, better than that." How many times had she chastised Mulder for his emotional connections, for the weight of his sister's memory that he always lugged with him? "And now I realize that I was simply being blind, allowing my common sense to be clouded by my pride and moral obligation. I should have stepped back on this case, the minute we realized what was going on."

"In your self-defense, how many times do you tell me the same thing and I ignore you?" His pointed amusement lightened the somber mood between the two of them, and she knew he was right. "Like you said, we all have demons, Scully. It helps make us who we are and it gives us empathy, the ability to remain human in the face of all the horror we see everyday."

"Do you ever get tired of seeing that horror?" How long had Mulder been at this now? Nearly a decade?

"Sometimes," he admitted slowly. "There are times you get tired of looking at the face of madness again and again, of trying to piece together the shattered remains of a broken mind, hoping against hope that you do it before the next victim, the next dead body turns up. And then there are times when it gets painfully personal."

"I have to admit, Mulder, I do get a little tired of always being the one drug off by the crazy madmen. How about you try it next time?"

"It's those tiny little legs of yours. They have a harder time catching me."

She snorted. "Perhaps its for the best. I don't know if I could pull off the miracles you do, moving heaven and earth to get you back."

"I don't know about that, Scully, don't sell yourself short. I think your more perceptive than you give yourself credit for. After all, you thought to keep Schnauz talking, to get into his head, to make him question what he was seeing. You have those instincts. You just need to learn how to trust them."

How many times had both Mulder and Melissa told her that?

What would have happened to him if she had died?

The thought rose unbidden to her mind and had in the days since Mulder had burst in, gun blazing. What if he hadn't made it to her in time? What if it were too late. What if Schnauz had succeeded in his lobotomy attempt and she was left incapacitated or dead and he had been the one to find her. Would he still have kept that composure? Would his demons have blinded him in that moment as surely as hers had?

"If you hadn't found me, Mulder…"

"Scully, don't!"

"But I'm saying…"

"I know what you are saying, but don't." He straightened up, suddenly agitated once again, bouncing off the couch to pace once again. "You are fine, you are alive."

"If I hadn't been, what would you have done?"
He stopped still, freezing where he stood, not daring to look up at her. "You didn't."

And there it was. Scully wanted to press this, to push him to think on this. It was a possibility they both had to face as FBI agents and now she had faced it several times. What would happen to his quest? What would he do it she faced something like this again and he couldn't stop it, couldn't get to her in time, couldn't prevent what was happening to her no matter how hard he tried? Would he carry on the work they had started together, to continue the search, or would he spiral down into the darkness without her there to hold him back?

"I need to get out of here. It's late." His voice was gravelly and low as he shuffled towards her door. "You need to get some sleep."

"And you?" She uncurled from her chair to follow him out, to politely see him to the door.

"I hear Plan 9 From Outer Space is on. Nice way to occupy the time."

"Sleep, Mulder." She leaned against the door, trying and failing to give him a stern look. He wasn't in the mood for mothering. "I'll see you in the morning?"

"With bells on." He flashed a hint of a smile, one that didn't quite reach his tired eyes. "Lock up when I leave?"

"Sure will," she promised, watching him lope down the hall, realizing uncomfortably that she had a feeling that Mulder may not be able to keep himself together without her there. She had no idea what that meant and less of an idea what to make of it.
"Salads aren't real food."

"Neither are sunflower seeds." Scully sniffed as she picked at her prepackaged greens and dressing, unenthusiastic about the fair, but determined to eat it anyway.

"I was contemplating a hotdog from the stand over there." Mulder gazed across the swath of green grass they sat on, enjoying a relatively non-muggy DC afternoon.

"You know what they put in those, right?" It was another vague and hopelessly doomed attempt to convince him to eat healthy. He only smirked at her doctor's warnings.

"Half the reason I eat them. Adds flavor." He dodged her swatting hand gleefully, laughing outright. It was a good sound, hearing him laugh. The last two months had been hell on him, his mother, and the death of the girl who looked like his sister, the Schnauz case. She had begun to wonder if she would ever see his mischievous grin again, that glint in his eye when he was bored and she was his only target. Today had come as something of a surprise, his desire to go outside, sit in the sunshine at the park, to enjoy life for a bit. Scully had hardly complained. Anything to escape the drudgery of the basement, even for just a little while.

"Come on, I'm buying." Deftly he snagged the plastic container from her lap, out of her protesting fingers, and tossed it easily to the trash bin nearby. Scully's whimpers of outrage were duly ignored as he grabbed her hand and pulled her up from the park bench. "How long has it been since you ate a proper hot dog?"

Scully bit back her obvious retort that no hot dogs were proper. "I don't know, Mulder, when was the last time you forced me to eat one?"

"Touché!" He grinned, slinging his suit jacket over his shoulder, casual and relaxed in his rolled up shirtsleeves. "Don't you ever miss being a kid, Scully?"

"Sure! I think everyone does." Her own memories drifted to lazy, hot San Diego summers, bone dry except for the swimming pools they frequented or the beaches they occasionally would visit, chasing down waves and hermit crabs. "I think my brothers, Missy, and I would spend every waking hour out of the house doing something. I would come home sunburned and covered head-to-toe in dirt and twigs and usually a bruise or two from picking some fight."

"Dana Scully, fighting with boys. I'd have never pictured that." Mulder chuckled dryly, reaching to his back pocket for his wallet as they approached the single cart. Scully hated to admit the smell of roasting sausages rumbled around her stomach, ignoring the proper salad greens she had been trying to consume. Her mouth watered embarrassingly as Mulder passed her one of the sizzling franks, thanking the vendor, and eyeing the condiments warily.

"Scully, so help me God, if you tell me you eat ketchup on a hotdog, I may request a transfer."
"Nope, mustard only, no onions."

"What, planning on kissing any boys today?"

"No, just hanging around you, unless you don't mind the onion breath?"

"I've seen you covered in manure, onions don't scare me." He shot her an evil wink and proceeded to pile his own bun high with them unashamedly. "And I don't mind kissing girls with onion breath."

"And you wonder why you are still single," she snorted, biting into her hot dog happily, praying none of the juice or mustard made its way down her chin and onto her blouse. Mulder expertly managed his monstrosity of a hot dog, deftly chomping half of it without even so much as a dollop of yellow on his silk tie.

They strolled companionably down the path. Summer had reached its zenith already, the oppressive humidity of the Atlantic Coast had lessened, though the sun still shone down, hot in the midday. In the distance she could see kids laugh, shouting, running, brightly colored water guns in hand as they shrieked, happily soaking one another.

"What were summers like for you out on Martha's Vineyard?" She picked the thread of their conversation up, watching the children at play, remembering her own long ago shootouts with her brothers.

"Not too different from yours. I spent a lot of them sunburned, covered in dirt, usually holes in my clothes. Mom never minded, as long as I didn't break a bone or break someone else's bone." He swallowed the last of his hot dog in a single bite, chewing thoughtfully.

"So family life wasn't so bad back then?" She almost hated bringing up Mulder's sister, the question of his parents, especially when the afternoon was going so well.

"Perfect, actually. Perhaps too perfect in light of recent discoveries." He frowned for only the briefest of moments, looking out over the field of kids, eyes softening into a smile. "I remember my friends and I would have games of guerilla warfare with water guns. I'd hide up in trees with my weapons and pick off people down below, unsuspecting of an aerial attack."

"I didn't think ten-year-olds needed to read the Art of War for a water fight."

"Water fights are serious business when you are a ten-year-old."

As if on cue, a high-pitched, blood-curdling squeal sounded behind them, causing them both to turn in alarm, half reaching for their real-life weapons. Out of the bushes, a sobbing, crying boy of eight broke through, gasping as he ran towards them frantically, an oversized water-canon in hand. Before Scully could react, Mulder's long arms had reached out to snag the soaked, terrified boy, holding him still even as he tried the squirm away.

"Hey there, wait up! What's going on?"

"He's going to KILL ME!" The boy sobbed, giant, fat tears, streaming down his sunburned, freckled face as he glanced desperately over his shoulder.

"Who is?" Scully crouched down in front of the youngster, immediately alarmed.

"Stephen!" The boy sniffled loudly, running the back of his filthy hand over his nose, large green eyes pale under his shock of soaking wet brown hair. "He's going to get me and kick my ass!"
"No one is kicking anyone's…ass." Mulder fumbled at the swear word, clearing his throat in chagrin as he too squatted at the boy's level. "Whose Stephen and why is are you afraid."

"There's the buttmuncher! Little fuh…"

Two pre-teen boys burst from the same bushes the youngster had come out of, one lanky and dark haired like the younger one, the other an African-American boy already several inches taller than his friend. They both stopped dead in their tracks, water pistols in hand as they stared first at their quarry, then at Mulder and Scully rising slowly beside him. The younger boy whimpered.

"You Stephen?" Mulder took the lead, glancing at the dark haired boy, likely the young child's sibling.

"Yeah and that's Jamie, my kid brother." Stephen scowled darkly at the boy, before apologetically shrugging at Scully and Mulder. "We were playing with the other kids and he got away from us."

"It's not true," Jamie muttered, holding his water cannon protectively. "You two went to go talk to those girls over there."

"I told you to stay with everyone else."

"I saw you kissing Ashley, with your tongue down her throat and stuff!"

"Okay!" Mulder jumped in as Stephen turned a bright, florescent red that threatened to boil over into violence if he didn't put an end to it. Carefully, he stepped between the two feuding children.

"So, how did it all get started?"

"Stephen and Kalil said they'd bring me to the park, but they just told Mom that because Ashley was here."

"He and his buddies ambushed us on the tennis court and soaked everyone."

"Why did you have your tongue down her throat?"

"Why don't I just beat your face in?"

Scully bit her tongue so hard she was sure she was drawing blood.

"Listen!" Mulder turned to the elder boy first, hand on his shoulder, silencing him before he could carry out his threat. "I'm sure Jamie is sorry he ruined your…conversation with Ashley."

"Am not," Jamie muttered under his breath, soon silenced by a similar Mulder hand on his own shoulder.

"I suggest that in the future chasing your younger brother through a park in front of two FBI agents isn't perhaps the best response to his annoying you."

All three boys' eyes widened as they looked first towards Mulder's stern expression, then to Scully's barely schooled one. She just clung on to her composer as they turned to look at the gun resting lightly on Mulder's belt.

"You really agents?" This time it was Kalil, quiet through this sibling exchange, speaking up with a hint of dubiousness. Simultaneously, they both reached for their badges, flashing them in front of the boys' earnest faces.
"Wow," Jamie breathed, clearly delighted.

"You aren't going to...you know...arrest us?" Stephen had paled considerably by this point, eyes nervously flicking to the handcuffs besides Mulder's gun.

"Not for attempting to kill your brother, no." Mulder just did suppress the laughter in his eyes under a stern reprimand. "How about in the future you don't ditch your little brother to make out with girls and he will promise not to embarrass you in front of them?"

Stephen looked long and hard at his younger sibling, who glared back defiantly, clearly not promising anything of the kind, but unwilling to say so with an FBI agent standing right there, "Fine."

"And you!" Mulder turned to Jamie, who was far too pleased at his elder brother's put down. "You know the quickest way to keep your life when you have an older brother is to not do things to piss him off, right?"

"But he was..."

"Doesn't matter. Someday you'll want to stick your tongue down some girl's throat, too, and would you want someone coming in and embarrassing you?"

Jamie clearly looked revolted by the idea, but shook his head in the negative.

"Fine, so how about we call this a truce, and you all go back to what you were doing, and no more threats on anyone's life, okay?" Mulder let both boys go, jerking his head in the direction of the other children. "And we'll pretend like this whole incident never happened, all right?" He patted his weapon gently as all three of them nodded, the elder two scurrying off back the way they came without a word or a look back towards them.

Jamie remained though, solemnly studying Mulder's weapon, before turning to Scully with a doubtful eye. "Are you really FBI agents?"

"What? The badge looks like a fake to you?" Mulder muttered mildly.

"But she's a girl."

"What about it?"

"I didn't know they let girls shoot guns."

"There's girls with water guns down there." Mulder waved towards the kids below, some of them clearly girls, running and screaming just as much as the boys they were shooting.

"That's different?"

"How?"

"The bullet's aren't real." Jamie snorted as if to say everyone knew that.

"Ohh," Mulder nodded solemnly, not daring to even look Scully's way. She knew the minute he did they would both crack. "What if I told you she not only has a gun, but she's a better shot than I am?"

"Really?"
"Yep. And she cuts up dead bodies for us, so we can see how people died.'

"Cuts up dead bodies!' Jamie's eyes became so large they threatened to fly off his head as he turned to stare, gapping at Scully's diminutive figure. "That's so GROSS!'"

"I know, you should see her when she's pulling out their guts."

"Mulder," Scully chided, though clearly Jamie was delightedly disgusted.

"Do they squish?" He was practically bouncing on his toes.

"Yes…a little." Scully wrinkled her nose at her partner who feigned complete innocents badly.

"How do you get to be one of those?"

"Go to medical school, become a doctor and don't get grossed out by blood." Scully patted the boy's soaking hair and glanced at the game below. "Don't you think you should get back to your friends?"

"Yeah." The boy looked regretfully down at them. "Wait till I tell them I met someone who cuts up dead bodies!"

"Joy," Scully murmured as Jamie grinned, taking Mulder's proffered hand with a serious, manly shake, then matching it with Scully's. With a mumbled, "thanks," he ran pell mell down the hill, sneakers slipping on the green grass as he shouted for his friends, all thoughts of terror at the hands of Stephen, his elder brother, forgotten.

"I think you just made that little boy's day, Scully."

"I don't know, I think he was pretty impressed with that badge and gun." She reached out to yank lightly on his handcuffs. "Though for a moment there I thought you were going to have to intervene in World War III."

"I was a big brother once. I understand the deep and abiding frustration."

"Samantha catch you with a tongue down some girl's throat?"

"Nope, holding hands. I heard about it for weeks."

"You disappoint me, Mulder. Just holding hands?"

"It was simpler, more innocent days." He chuckled, turning away from the idyll of kids in a water fight, back towards the entrance of the park and slowly to their office. She watched him stroll slightly ahead, his tall figure slouching along with a far off look in his eye, remembering other summers long ago, of another dark haired boy and his little sister chasing each other in golden Augusts.

"You're rather good with kids, Mulder."

He turned to her, a tad surprised. "Should I be bad with them?"

"No," she shrugged, not even sure why she said it. "Just, I guess most guys like you, single, no nieces or nephews, no small children in their life, wouldn't have handled that situation as well. They'd have ignored it, threatened to call the parents, marched the pair of them off to some adult figure."
"Ehhh, they were kids being kids, nothing more. Besides, I remember being a kid myself not so long ago." He paused in his walk long enough for Scully to catch up. "The truth is that for all the pain Samantha's disappearance caused, it also froze a part of me forever at twelve-years-old. I still remember the pains and hardships of being a kid, of all the crap you have to go through, of how scary it can be at times. But then I also remember the good things as well, like the fun of chasing one another around a park with water guns."

"Or how impressive a officer of the law can be with their badge and gun?" She snorted lightly, nudging his elbow softly as she reached him.

"Hey, it shut them up, didn't it?" He was hardly apologetic. "There's enough in this world we have to worry about as adults, some of us more than others. Perhaps we should enjoy being kids for a while, without all the other shit crowding in. Just enjoy life being as simple as a water gun fight."

"Yeah." Scully sighed contently, glancing up at the leaves above. Enjoy the simple things in life.
As a Mother

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates motherhood.

I never saw you as a mother...

Scully blinked at the wall between their rooms, hearing the scraping noise of Mulder doing something in there. Judging from the amount of static she could hear from the television and the occasional swearing from Mulder, he was fiddling with the antenna. As predicted, Mulder far away from cable television and regular cellular service was quickly becoming antsy. He'd never make it in the country; the quiet, the peacefulness, the lack of gunfire or alien conspiracies would drive him slowly mad. She couldn't say she was too settled herself.

Sadly, she picked through the Polaroid snapshots she had managed to get of the dead baby. The tiny, horribly malformed body was twisted and red but sadly pathetic on its tiny tray in the middle of a sink in a small bathroom. While a part of her was horrified by the very notion of this child's existence, another was heartbroken at the manner of its death. The little one had not asked to be created, hadn't asked to be made the way he was, and he equally hadn't asked to die in this manner. What was that verse her priests always used to mention? Suffer the little children to come unto me. All the thousands of women out there who wanted children, who were unable to have children and someone would toss this little one out into an abandoned field, defects and all. It bothered her on a primal level, that part of her that was a woman, who wanted to be a mother.

Wanted to be a mother. That was a thought that hadn't really occurred to her that clearly before. Scully swallowed around it, twiddling her pen haplessly in her fingers. Till that moment, motherhood had been a rather vague concept. It was something she thought about from time-to-time, especially as she got phone calls from friends with happy news on their latest offspring. Her best friend Ellen now had two, Trevor, her godson, and his newest little brother, Jacob. Ellen's newest child had come as a surprise to Scully, who had once been so close to her college best friend. And though she often served as Jacob's impromptu babysitter on the weekends, it only highlighted the fact that she had grown so very far away from Ellen and her other friends with their families and children. Here she was, thirty-two years old, still single, not even looking for a relationship, no children, no home, no legacy, outside of a friendship with a man who would likely go mad fairly soon if he didn't get his television working right.

She snorted, as another knock sounded on the other side of the wall. Mulder had said he had never seen her as a mother before. Why? Had it even occurred to him she might want that one day, to leave his quest behind and settle down with some stable man, buy a home, a dog, raise a pack full of rambunctious kids? She had never vocalized that desire out loud, especially not to him, but it had floated there, in the back of her mind. Babysitting adopted nephews was all well and good and she had to admit she took an inordinate amount of pleasure watching over Jacob when she had that time with him, but he was still Ellen's son, not hers.

Somewhere inside of her that biological clock ticked on and on. It wasn't only the Peacock boys who felt that biological imperative, she sighed, rising from the bed. When was the last time she had even gotten to entertain that imperative? Ethan? That had been years ago. And she hadn't wanted
children with him. Ethan had been a dalliance, a fun way to pass the time, like Jack, like frankly anyone since Daniel. That had been the last time she had seen herself with children, her girlish fantasies of living with Daniel, marrying, having his children. Perhaps that was why it horrified her so to know he hadn't left his old family behind. How could she sit there, dreaming of a life with him, of children, when he clearly couldn't be fair to the family he already had?

Perhaps that was why, at thirty-two, she was still single, still childless, she couldn't forgive herself for the sin of falling in love with a married man. She paused, staring at herself in the mirror above the worn dresser in her room. Mulder would say that this was a logical line of reasoning, her reticence to form new personal relationships was hampered by her own personal guilt over what had happened and tempered by the aching hurt Daniel's betrayal had caused. She didn't have relationships with anyone because she didn't want to face that sort of pain again.

Except for Mulder….

She paused, stock-still as she let that thought mull in her mind. Where had that come from? Mulder was her partner, her friend, her best friend when she admitted it. He was the reason she was standing there alive at that moment, and not dead at the hands of any numerable crazies they had on their various cases. Of course she would feel beholden to him emotionally for everything that he did for her, and she of course would feel tied to him through all the hardships they had suffered, the mutual loss of family, the many hospital stays by each other's bedside, the mutual awareness of the large conspiracy that had drawn her into it and had taken her away from him. There was a lot to link her to her erstwhile partner, good and bad. But would she really consider it a relationship? Not a romantic one, at least not in the strictest sense of the word. Much as she hated to admit it, Scully knew and had known for a while that the feelings that lay between herself and Mulder were far from strictly professional. It wasn't totally unexpected, she chided herself, often those sorts of bonds formed between partners in the FBI, close connections of friendship and trust born over stake outs and deadly situations. She and Mulder would hardly be the first.

But there were times, such as Mulder's observation earlier, when she became painfully aware that they were more than just partners or even friends. He was a very attractive man, and she was a reasonably attractive woman, and they were together - a lot. Her face flushed in the mirror as she turned suddenly, the idea twisting in her brain uncomfortably. It was Mulder, her partner, a man she worked with everyday. Yes, he was handsome. Her sister had referred to him as a "hottie" much to Scully's horror. She couldn't pretend not to notice how women would occasionally eye him, even in the hallways of the Hoover Building. She remembered all too well the string of women he once had calling the office when she first met him, though those were long gone now.

Much as Mulder had never seen her as a mother before, Scully had to admit she hadn't really thought of Mulder as...well more than Mulder before. Attractive, yes, there were always those moments of embarrassed realization, when's he felt herself physically attracted to her partner. Who wouldn't be? And she was certain that not all his playfully inappropriate banter stemmed from some deep-seated need to annoy her. The scientist in her shrugged this off. It happened. It was a perfectly normal, human response, just as normal as the Peacock brother's desire to procreate. But that was all it was, just a response. He was her friend, her very best friend, closer to her than even her family at the moment.

And yet there had been that painful awkwardness when's he had pushed him on the Schnauz cause, of what he would do if something had happened to her. Mulder didn't want to face that possibility. Why? She'd long known she was the only thing keeping her partner from jumping off the deep end totally, the one pulling him back from the edge. But what if she wasn't there? What if she did decide to walk away from all of this, to find a husband, raise a child, and become a doctor? What if she dropped this tomorrow and walked away to become a mother? What would Mulder do without
her? A better question, she privately wondered, what would she do without him? Could she walk away from all of this, his work, their quest, the questions about what had been done to her, to pursue a life more ordinary? Was she willing to leave Mulder behind to do it? And did she really want to walk away from him at all?

Well, aside from the need for corrective lenses and a tendency to be abducted by extraterrestrials involved in an international governmental conspiracy, the Mulder family passes genetic muster.

Down that path lay madness, she cautioned herself, shutting her eyes to all the possibilities that it brought up. Her friend, her very best friend, a man who she would give her life for if necessary, but still only her friend….

The knock on her door caused her to leap, yelping as she scrambled to answer it, swallowing the guilt of her own, errant thoughts. She barely glanced up at Mulder's perturbed face. He didn't seem to notice as he gestured to his room.

"You care to help me for a minute. I'm trying to get the TV to work right, and…"

"No, not at all," she muttered, willing away the flush on her cheeks as she reached for her notes on the table. "Besides, gives me a chance to go over some of these case notes with you."

"Was hoping to get the game," he sighed, forlornly, shuffling back to his room.

Mulder wouldn't make it five minutes in the country.
"Eggs, scrambled, wheat toast, bacon, a side of hash browns, and coffee, black." Mulder rattled off his order to the sleepy looking waitress, who dutifully scribbled as fast as he spoke and turned to Scully's politely neutral smile.

"And you ma'am? " The girl's big, cow eyes blinked mildly.

"Coffee. Just coffee."

"Nothing else?" The waitress didn't hide her skepticism as she glanced up and down Scully's trim figure. Obviously she felt that Scully needed the plate full of saturated fat first thing in the morning. The idea sounded far from appealing.

"Just coffee, two cups of it, please." She tried desperately to ignore Mulder's frowning disapproval and was failing. "And, maybe a couple of slices of toast?"

The waitress nodded, more pleased with this response. "White or wheat?"

"Wheat." She passed her unread menu back to the woman, rolling her eyes at Mulder's raised eyebrows.

"What? I like coffee!" She wasn't in the mood to be mothered by a man whose idea of breakfast could lubricate his car engine for a year.

"I know you like coffee. Hell I've thought about installing a permanent station in our office or at the very least hooking you up with an IV drip." Scully's inability to function without the stuff was a well-established fact, one that slightly alarmed Mulder at times. "I didn't realize you were on a new diet."

"You know saying the 'd' word in a sentence around a woman is dangerous," she growled, gratefully accepting the proffered cups from the waitress and reaching for the cream and sugar. "And I'm not, I just have no desire to die before I'm 40 of a heart attack."

"Are you kidding, it's the breakfast of champions!" Mulder sighed contentedly, leaning back as he smiled out of the window. Smiled? What was this place doing to him? "You know, I think I could like it in a place like this."

"Weren't you the one last night cursing the fact you couldn't get the game in your room?" Scully downed a large gulp of coffee and grumpily glared at the decidedly un-bustling town square of Home, Pennsylvania. It was one of those sleepy, Allegheny towns where the farmers would trundle in for coffee mid-morning and stay through lunch, but nothing else happened for the most part of the day.

"I was thinking on that. If I got a satellite dish, I think I'd be okay."
"You aren't seriously considering this, are you?" She knew he wasn't. Mulder was only wishing for what they all wished for from time to time, a life more ordinary.

"I don't know, can't you see me living out here among the wheat fields and cows?"

"Mulder I'm not sure you know what wheat fields look like."

"Drink more coffee, you are always so damn grumpy in the morning," he grumbled as the waitress came and set his plate in front of him. Scully tried not to wince at the amount of grease floating on the top.

"I'm just saying that I think I could be happy in a place like this." Mulder snagged a piece of bacon between long fingers. "The idea of not having to worry about people breaking into my home…"

"They can just walk in, the doors aren't locked," Scully mumbled from out of her coffee mug. She made need a third cup.

"Kids running around all summer, playing baseball, without a care in the world."

"Except for the creepy neighbors who capture and rape unsuspecting victims."

"You are determined to rain on my parade today, aren't you, Scully?"

"Mulder, you make this all sound so idyllic." She waved a hand impatiently out of the window. "You know better than anyone that this sort of peace isn't always really peace, and it doesn't last. You think that a life like this can recapture a childhood you lost long ago, ignoring the fact that a real crime has taken place here. And as my memory serves, small town American is were you most often drag us on some of your more interesting cases. Perhaps they don't deal with drugs, gangs, and violence here in Mayberry, USA, but it's far from some ideal."

Mulder paused in chewing, watching her rant, stunned for the moment at her diatribe. "Did I do something I wasn't even aware of to piss you off?"

"No," she mumbled, setting down her coffee, avoiding his hurt gaze. Yes, she wanted to say. A night of restless tossing and turning as she thought about what his words meant. How he had never seen her as a mother before? What did that mean? What did he mean? Hell, did she want to have kids? The myriad of paths her jumbled thoughts raced down had left her with little sleep. What she did get was filled with dreams of the poor, deformed, monstrous child, mewling in its shallow grave as it was tossed aside, unloved and forgotten. Just like Alice Brandt, and Mary LaFante…

She had a feeling she'd need to see a therapist soon.

"Don't you ever have thoughts about your future, Scully, of where you would want to settle down?"

She hadn't had them, really, not for a long time, not till he had to bring them up yesterday. "I hadn't realized you ever gave it much thought."

"I do from time to time." He returned to his meal, though with a tad less enthusiasm, obviously stung by her words. "I know it's hard to believe about me, but I do think about a time after the FBI. I think about what it would be like to be settled in one place, without having to chase every lead, visit every town. I even consider the dreaded 'm' word again from time-to-time."

"Mortgage?" She was trying to tease now, to take back the heat of her grumbling.

"No, marriage." He winced as her eyes widened dubiously. "I'm not saying today, but Mom has got
"Weren't you just agonizing over the fact that your parents' marriage was a disaster and your mother could have been having an affair with that smoking man?"

"Tact is so not your thing first thing in the morning." Mulder rolled his eyes. "My mother's illness got me thinking about things I keep avoiding, neglecting for the X-files. She has hinted for years she would love to have grandchildren. And I've always assumed it would happen eventually, after I found my sister, after I discovered the truth about Dad and his work, what happened to him, what happened to you."

She said nothing as she flagged the waitress over for another cup of coffee. "You surprise me, Mulder, I didn't think those type of thoughts ever went through your head."

"Now and then," he acknowledged, picking at his eggs. "I'm surprised you don't more often."

Oh yes, Mulder could read minds. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, you gave up a lot more than I did going down this road. I willingly let go of a promising career, you were forced to leave behind medicine, chained to a partnership with a man most think is certifiable, and made to chase little green men, at a very high, personal risk to yourself. I would think you of all people would thing about what life would have been like if you had chosen to turn down this assignment."

She could have turned it down, perhaps, had the white picket fence, the kids, someone like Daniel. But this led her back to the question that plagued her all night. Did she want to leave it behind? And frankly she didn't know.

"Perhaps I don't like going down that road of possibility," she muttered, looking to her coffee for a convenient excuse to sidetrack this conversation. What had gotten Mulder fixated on it? What had caused her to lay awake the night before considering it?

"Agent Mulder!" The waitress stood behind the counter, frowning in worry at the two of them, phone up to her ear. "I got Barney here on the line, he says he needs to speak to you."

"Down side of a small town, everyone knows where you are at all times." Mulder grimaced, rising to answer the phone as Scully picked at the dry toast in front of her, not feeling up to eating much of anything.

"Scully!" Mulder's tone was sharp, the dreaminess of his ramblings now replaced by focused diligence. "Pastor says he's out at the sheriff's house. He thinks the Peacocks were there."

"Are they all right?"

She knew by the grim look he wore they were not.
No One Expects the Spanish Succession

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully contemplate the nature of their case.

The television blared loudly from Mulder's room, some sort of game, likely baseball. It was the right time of year for it. Scully sighed, trudging over to the door. She could knock, but she doubted that with a baseball game on Mulder was in a horribly compromising position. Frankly she'd be surprised if he thought about sex for a very long time. She knew she wouldn't. She slipped her head around the door, peaking in at Mulder, sprawled across his bed, still dressed in slacks and an undershirt, his head propped up on both of the lumpy pillows from the bed. His eyes slid over to hers as she trundled in and collapsed, exhausted, beside him on the bed.

"I turned Barney's body over to his wife this evening." Scully toed off her shoes, stretching the muscles in her neck as she glanced quietly at the fuzzy picture. Whatever the local major league team was - Pittsburgh - was playing some other team she didn't recognize.

"How did she handle it?" There was sympathy in abundance in Mulder's voice.

"About as well as any new mother with a four-month old on her hands did." It was the worst part of her job, the recognition that the body she had so carefully and thoroughly disassembled was the loved one and family member of someone. "The Taylors' children are coming into town tomorrow for their parents. The son is in Pittsburgh, the daughters is in school in West Virginia."

"It's a shame," Mulder sighed, shifting to sit up on the bed as Scully curled up on it. "You wonder how many nights Andy and his wife stayed up, worrying about their kids far off in the big city, worrying about if they were all right, if they were safe so far away from their home. And look what happened to their parents, right here in the town they lived all their lives in."

Scully had thought the same thing herself as she had tried to piece together the shattered remains of Andy Taylor's skull, wanting desperately to make it presentable for his children. "I guess it just goes to show you, Mulder, that no matter how safe we feel anywhere, danger is something we all have to face, even if we feel safe enough to leave our doors unlocked.

"How about the Peacock boys, Sherman and George?"

"I think you were right with the parentage. I haven't gotten the test results back yet, but I suspect that Edmund was the father of the other two with his own mother. Just looking at the pair of them though…"

Her voice trailed as her mind tried to wrap itself around what she had seen in the autopsy, of what her scientific findings implied. "To get the sort of defects I saw in those boys, Mulder, this inbreeding can't have been a recent thing. It had to have been going on for generations."

"No offense, but did you get a load of the Peacock family tree?" Mulder grimaced, reaching for a file on the bedside table. "I'd say Sherman and George came by their good looks honestly. I did a bit of research on the Peacock family while you were working up the bodies. I ran to the county courthouse to run through records and then over to the local historical society."
He passed her the folder, thick with copies. "From our best guess, the Peacock's were here in this part of Pennsylvania well before Home was. What records they've found suggest that they were a cluster of small families, mostly English and Scottish, who settled here and intermarried. Over time they just became one family, and owned much of the land in the valley."

There were well over 200 years worth of official records, deeds, and marriage certificates at Scully's fingertips. She frowned down at them, flipping through a few. "So how did they dwindle from this to those two boys laying in the morgue?"

"Best as I can understand the family tended to keep to itself, even way back. I'm guessing that intermarriage between close relatives was common even then, and frankly it's not unheard of in this part of the world. The Appalachian Mountains are well known for their 'clannish' types, Scottish, Irish, and English immigrants who tended to stick with kinfolk and no one else. The Peacocks were no different. It worked. It kept the land in the family and kept them all tightly knit no matter what happened outside, from the Revolution to the so-called 'War of Northern Aggression,' as Mrs. Peacock put it."

"With that much intermarriage, the gene pool likely couldn't support it." The pieces began to fall into place as Scully nodded, looking through an entire stack of death certificates, quite a few for very young members of the Peacock family.

"The family started dying out, and with no one else to infuse it, we come to George, Sherman, and Edmund. They are the last of their line, Scully. The family is gone. I'm guessing that what happened is that the baby we found in the field was the child of one of the other boys, George or Sherman. The problem is, I think that by this point Mother Nature just said 'no.' The genetics were unable to support another generation, resulting in that child we found in that field."

"And it didn't occur to them what they were doing to themselves?" How could they not know in this day and age particularly, but especially seeing their numbers dwindle, their children born dead or dying. Hadn't it occurred to them that times were changing, that they needed new blood?

"Ever bone up on your European history, Scully?" Mulder's shift in subject hardly shocked her, but she had to pause briefly in thought, reaching back to her non-science classes in college.

"A bit, not much, I took what was required but was never a big history fan."

"Ever hear of the War of Spanish Succession?" When she shook her head in the negative, Mulder continued. "The Hapsburgs were a royal family who ruled in Spain and Austria. The Spanish line died out in the early 1700's due to the inability of the last Hapsburg King, Charles II, to produce an heir. As it turns out, Charles's family tree didn't have that many branches. His mother was his father's own niece, the daughter of his sister."

That made something in Scully's brain hurt. "Wait! What?"

"It gets worse! One of his female ancestors appears in his lineage fourteen times. The Hapsburgs were like many noble families at the time, they subscribed to intermarriage between uncles and nieces to ensure that land and wealth stayed within the family. The problem was they weren't so well versed on genetics. They didn't catch on why it was they were having so many stillbirths, so many children dying young. It took two wives and multiple tries for the King of Spain to produce Charles, and when he was born he was so deformed and defective that his family wasn't sure he'd even survive."

"All of this just over a little land?"
"It's more than just land, Scully, it's a legacy. It's the comfort of knowing that everything you have worked so hard to build up will continue in the succeeding generations. You said it yourself, humans have a biological imperative to reproduce, procreate, to bring themselves a bit of immortality. For some they don't want to see what they have brought to fruition change by outside influences, by strangers coming in and changing what they've got." Mulder pulled thoughtfully at his bottom lip, glancing at the baseball game without really watching. "It's like Sheriff Taylor, he didn't want to see his home change, for things to become different, but he knew it, felt it the moment we stepped into this case. People become inured in their comfort zones, they don't want to have to give up what is familiar to them, and some will go to great lengths to preserve that.

Fear of change. Scully could sympathize greatly, especially given the tenor of her own thoughts the last few days, the questions she had posed to herself about where she saw her life going. She sighed, closing the file and handing it back to Mulder. "It's just sad to think that this family sat here, watched the world go by them. They stagnated and died because of it."

"And yet they persevered for centuries doing what they did." Mulder shrugged, setting the file aside. "That's why Edmund escaped with the mother, that equally strong human need to survive, to carry on. Mrs. Peacock would do anything to protect her family, to keep it going, even if it means carrying on the family line with just Edmund."

Maybe one day you'll learn the pride, the love when you know your boy will do anything for his mother....

Scully considered Mrs. Peacock's words carefully. Would she ever know that same pride and love? Perhaps her child would never be a horribly deformed, homicidal murderer, but would she ever have a child? Would she have that same blind pride and love for a little boy, playing baseball, eagerly looking back to his parents for their approval as he came up to bat? How about when he graduated high school, college, married and had children. Something deep and yearning formed as she thought about it, an imaginary child-cum-man dancing across her mind.

"I suppose that's what it means to be a mother, in the end you stop at nothing to ensure that your lineage, that your family survives, no matter what the cost."

"So how did you learn so much about the War of Spanish Succession?" She changed the topic, looking to something frivolous. She had never taken Mulder for much of a history buff.

"You go to school at a place like Oxford, you get history thrown at you from everywhere. Some British noble or saint or something usually died in your favorite make-out spot."

"So it wasn't just Conan-Doyle's grave you got your groove on, then?" She couldn't help that jab and grinned broadly at Mulder's slightly unrepentant blush.

"I dated a girl who was sitting for History at Oxford. The Hapsburgs were her obsession. So I had to know them too if I was hanging out with her."

"Hanging out? Is that what they call it in Oxford?"

"No, they usually call it a thorough snogging, but I'm a proper New England boy."

"Proper, right! I bet that's what Conan Doyle would say."

"I think you'd be amazed, Scully, just how much self-restraint I possess when I put my mind to it."

She paused, her mouth go dry. That sharp undercurrent, those bright eyes. She sighed, standing, smiling down at him.
"Well, how about we call it a night, you dream of your geeky girls with slightly necrophilia tendencies and a high tolerance for your more absurd ideas and I'll go to bed and dream of my man with a high tolerance for being second guessed and his spotless genetic make-up, and we'll get a little sleep, eh?"

"I adore this kinky talk out of you, Scully, you should do it more often." There was the charm, the disarming smile, and the one she had seen on a hundred women, and herself when he was being particularly flippant. If she admitted it to herself - and that was a big if - that smile could just about make her do anything….almost.

"Good night, Mulder," she sighed, grabbing her shoes and shuffling for the door. She ignored the low, soft chuckle behind her.
"Mulder, I swear to God…"

"Agent Scully?" It was Kim's voice at the other end of the phone line, tired and curious as Scully sat up, blinking in confusion at her alarm clock. 3:45 AM. What in the world would Skinner's personal secretary be doing calling her at this hour?

"Kim, is everything all right?" Her mind flashed immediately to when Skinner had nearly been killed by the very man who had shot and murdered Scully's own sister.

"Yes, fine." Kim rushed to assure her. "The Assistant Director has been up all night and I've been up with him."

She hardly sounded thrilled with that. Scully wondered vaguely just how well Skinner's secretary was paid. She was sure it wasn't enough.

"He was wondering if you could come in early this morning. He would like to have a word with you regarding a potential case."

As the FBI willed, so she obeyed. "I'm on my way. Do you want me to call Agent Mulder?"

"Actually, the Assistant Director hasn't asked for Agent Mulder." There was a hint of surprise in Kim's cool manner, perhaps a trace of confusion. After three years working together with only one break in between, one usually did not see Scully without Mulder in a case. Mulder and Scully, they were very nearly a united entity.

Scully cleared her throat. "Tell Skinner I'll be in right away." She murmured a polite goodbye and hung up, groaning as she scrambled out of the warmth and comfort of her bed.

What sort of case was she being called on without Mulder? A part of her panicked at the idea for the briefest of moments, recalling all too well the last time they had been separated. She was supposed to be safe and sound in Quantico, performing autopsies and teaching students, and instead found herself carried off into the night by Duane Barry. She shivered as she flipped on the shower and shed her clothes, stepping inside. Perhaps her skills as a pathologist were being called upon here? It seemed the most likely answer if Mulder wasn't involved. It was likely just as simple as her performing a simple autopsy for someone. She should kick herself for such silly, frightened reactions, Duane Barry was dead, as was Gerald Schnauz, and Donnie Pfaster was locked away for life. One simple case on her own, without her partner, was not going to end up with her kidnapped yet again. That was a habit she had to break, and quickly.

Swathed in thick, cotton terry-cloth, Scully moved towards her kitchen, flipping on the coffee maker for at least one good cup before she moved out the door, toweling her hair dry as she walked. Really, she mused, why was it such a big deal that she was going to meet with Skinner sans Mulder? At one point in time she hadn't had a partner, she was simply Special Agent Dana Scully, not the other half of the Spooky Duo in the basement. After all, she wasn't tied to the hip with Mulder. Yes, she was committed to the work, to his quest, that had never changed, but she really wasn't his shadow. She was a good agent in her own right, a fine one, talented in her own area of expertise. So what if she got to let it shine just a little bit.

Why was she defending this idea to herself? What in the hell was into her?

She had been this way since the Schnauz case. It had crystallized all her silent worries she had for
years now, since her return from her initial abduction. How far could she go into this madness with Mulder? What was she willing to sacrifice for it? What would he do if she were to disappear from the X-files just as suddenly as she joined, be it to marriage and family, or job opportunities, or, heaven forbid, her own injury or death? It was becoming uncomfortably clear that Scully played a massive role in Mulder's professional life. She kept him together when everything else fell apart. What would he do if she was gone? He had no answer for her, and that bothered her, greatly.

She knew he hadn't thought about it. When she finally pressed him on the matter after her abduction by Schauz, he had balked, fled from her line of inquiry, and refused to discuss it again. There was a lot Mulder was refusing to discuss, like the conversation they had at his mother’s house. And there was that mysterious comment about seeing her as a mother. She scrubbed at her head vigorously, nearly leaving a burn on her scalp. She couldn't think of this, shouldn't think of this.

Things were changing with Mulder, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. She'd known for some time now, of course. After her abduction there had been a shift in their relationship, one she had little understood in those first, confusing weeks and months after her ordeal. She had been so wrapped up in herself she hadn't thought of how it had changed the dynamic of things between herself and Mulder. Then she thought he had died, yet another tie that bound them together, just as their mutual grief over their lost family members had. But it was Pusher, Robert Modell that had given her the first real awareness of that shift from friendly work partners to something more, to a relationship built on real trust and friendship. Not that she took Mulder shopping with her, or had girl talk, or anything silly or frivolous that went with a so-called "best friend." Rather he was the first person she called when she needed it. She could trust him with her life. She could have faith he would come for her, no matter what happened.

Did she always want him coming for her?

Blow drier, clothes, she went through the motions automatically as she pondered this new line of thought. As much as she respected Mulder, marveled at his abilities, and enjoyed working with him on a daily level, he wasn't her life. And for a while now she had noticed he was becoming that way. Old friends were becoming more distant, even her ritual of family dinners was reduced to once a month meals with her mother, if she was lucky. She jumped out of bed whenever he called, no matter the hour, and gave up weekends, vacations, lunches with friends to bury herself alive in the basement, while he sorted through the pieces of an ever-growing mystery and a broken family. And while she was as a part of that mystery now as he was, did she want her life defined by it? By him?

He coffee did little to clear the cobweb of worries from her brain as she sipped at it, applying make up, trying her best to look presentable at this God-awful hour of the morning. It was perhaps good she didn't have a steady relationship or a child right now. She couldn't imagine putting them up with these sorts of hours, this amount of stress. It did make her world rather lonely.

Mulder was right. She was grumpy in the morning.

Her watch read 4:45 by the time she managed to gather her things and make her way out the door to her car. The dark of pre-dawn was peaceful and fewer cars met her on the road as she wended her way through Georgetown towards the city center, where the Hoover Building was. She could tell Mulder she was heading in early to speak with Skinner. Perhaps she should. But a part of her held back. He would find out when he came in. She didn't need to share everything with him. This was her life still, after all. She didn't need to run every single thing she did through Mulder first. Especially not when it came from Skinner. She would let him know if she needed his insight. Let this be her case for a bit, let her figure out the angle. She was a good agent in her own right, even
without the great Fox Mulder there.

She washed away the hidden guilt with a last gulp of her now lukewarm coffee.
A Schoolboy Crush

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder gives Scully grief on Pendrell's attraction to her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I've got the results on your material analysis." Mulder tossed the paperwork onto her work station, staying well away from the strange, albino body of Owen Sanders. Scully glanced up at him but said nothing as she returned to the work of sewing up the unfortunate teenager, finishing up her grim work in order to send him home to his grieving mother.

"You know, you shouldn't string Agent Pendrell along the way you do, Scully, you are killing the poor guy." A seed cracked between his teeth as Mulder settled on one of the leather-covered stools. He met her cool gaze with an impudent smile and a lift of one not-so-innocent eyebrow.

"I do nothing of the sort, Fox Mulder, and you leave Pendrell alone." She carefully tied off and clipped the surgical thread she was using on her Y-incision, observing her handiwork. "Why do you enjoy taunting him?"

"I didn't taunt him? The man's in love with you. You'd have to be blind not to notice."

She had noticed or at least the fact that Pendrell had something of a crush on her. "Agent Pendrell is a respected colleague, Mulder, who takes an interest in our work and what we do."

"And he nearly passes out whenever you walk by."

Scully's glare could have frozen the entire morgue, but Mulder hardly noticed.

"I don't know, Scully, you should take it as a compliment. You are a highly attractive woman."

"What is with you of late," she snapped irritably, highly uncomfortable with this entire line of discussion. "First you see me as some Madonna figure, now you want to hook me up with Pendrell? When did you become some Jewish matchmaker?"

Mulder quelled slightly under the volley of her verbal assault. "Oh, don't say that word around my mother."

"What, Jewish?"

"No, matchmaker." He grinned as she cut her eyes at him, returning to the business of Owen Sanders body. "I'm not trying to push anything. I just thought that a nice woman like you should get out there, enjoy life a little."

"Does this have anything to do with the Schnauz case? Any residual guilt because I was carried off by yet another psychotic, serial killer?" If it did, so help her God, she had a scalpel in hand.

"No." She could tell he was lying, the way his eyes automatically diverted down and to the side.
Well, two could play at that game.

"I don't know, Mulder, now that you mention it, Pendrell is kind of cute."

That wasn't the reaction he was expecting. He nearly choked on one of his sunflower seeds as she smiled sweetly at him over the body in between them.

"Pendrell? The guy who never leaves the Sci-Crimes lab?"

"Well, you know, he and I, we are both scientists, he gets it. And he's always so sweet."

"He's a red head, Scully. Isn't there some law saying red heads can't be attracted to each other?"

"You have a thing for brunettes with long legs, don't you?"

Point. He grimaced uncomfortably, but he was already getting the game she was playing. She knew it wouldn't take Mulder long, it never did. "Getting a tad defensive, Agent Scully?"

"When did you feel you could start commenting on my love life?" Or lack thereof, she grumbled privately.

"Since when did you start getting touchy about a joke?" Now Mulder was seriousness, joking forgotten as he watched her swab down the unnatural, ashy gray skin, removing the blood and fluids. Scully didn't look up at him. She couldn't bring herself to do it. She had over-reacted, for no reason really.

"Why did you invite yourself on my case, Mulder?" She changed her line of attack, eyes sliding to the files he had set down, feeling nettled they were even there.

"Your case?" He drawled the words, indignation and mockery in his nasal monotone. "Gee, Scully, I didn't realize we were getting proprietary about our work."

"It's 'our' work now?"

She knew it was 'their' work, it always was, but she had meant to be peevish and it worked. Mulder's hurt rose to the surface briefly, before being ruthlessly buried under a veneer of indifference. "I always assumed it was. Perhaps I was mistaken, being your partner and all."

"My partner, yes, but Skinner assigned me to this case." She didn't care how childish that sounded, and yes, she was provoking him. "This is a straight scientific case, Mulder, not an alien or supernatural phenomenon in sight. Why can't you just accept that?"

"Why are you so willing to accept that this is as simple as some CDC hand off to the FBI?" It was Mulder's turn to get angry, eyes flashing gray as he lounged against the work space. Mulder was always the most dangerous when he was still like that, all of his usual frenetic energy focused onto one point. This time it was her, and she had pushed it on purpose.

"Why is it that you can't let me work one case on my own, Mulder? I was asked on this for my medical expertise, for what I bring to the table. They aren't looking for supernatural explanations or strange myths. They want hard, concrete evidence as to what is going on with these boys, what it is that is killing them."

"In other words you don't want 'Spooky' and his crack brained theories around to make Dana Scully, the serious scientist, look bad."
His snarl gave her pause. That hadn't been what she said. "Mulder, that's not what I meant."

"Well, Doctor Scully, you can tell your scientist friends that the material sample Pendrell pulled up was a seed, found on the victim. Turns out its from a rare, night blooming plant indigenous only to West Africa."

"Seed? How would it get..."

"I don't know, Doctor Scully, I'm only the pet urban legend expert here, meant to chase after ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night. I wouldn't know anything about science."

She had asked for that. She knew it. She provoked the reaction knowingly. She resented him being there, for taking an interest in her work, for insisting that it was nothing more than a CDC PR job to show that they did care about diseases ravaging young, African-American males. She resented that Mulder would want to make this something more than what it was. Couldn't he once just accept that some cases weren't about conspiracies, ghosts, or monsters hiding under the bed?

*I'm only the pet urban legend expert.*

Shit. She was the one pinning him to the simple stereotype, the man who was the FBI monster chaser. She hadn't wanted him and his theories, his suppositions, his out of the box thinking. "Mulder, I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?" He didn't believe her and rightly so. A part of her did mean exactly what he implied. Damn Mulder's insight.

"Not everything I do is an X-files, Mulder." It was all the explanation she could give him. "It is nice to know that my knowledge, my skills are called on for other things, purposes beyond the work we do."

"More important things than chasing down aliens, you mean."

"Damn it!" The heels of her palms slammed painfully on the gurney with Owen Sander's body, eyes blazing as she met his angrily hurt glare. She knew that he was right in that too. Perhaps a part of her did consider this more important than monster chasing and conspiracies. "Mulder, you know I have never belittled the work we do."

"But you've not always supported it."

"Just because I disagree with your from time to time, Mulder, doesn't mean I don't support it."

"Right," he snorted, scooping up the files again, turning for the door. "I'm sorry for stepping on your sacred cow there, Scully, I'll take my spooky ass down to the basement again and try to find something more worthwhile of my time and talents."

"Mulder!" She had started this, all because of a petty grievance that she wanted to do this case without him. It was stupid really, Mulder wasn't an idiot when it came to practical matters of science, far from it, and in reality, she could use his help on this and not just in handling files from Pendrell.

"I'm sorry," she called out, stopping him at the door. He turned, hands at his waist, classic Mulder confrontation mode. Why had she provoked him so? Was she really that annoyed by him stepping into this case? Did her pride mean so much to her? They were partners. How many cases had she worked with him when only his expertise was called upon?
"I'm sorry for making you feel that you aren't wanted on this case. You are right. We are partners. We work together and bring our mutual strengths to the table. I suppose I don't often get called upon for my expertise, Mulder. The FBI has pathologists all over the place. The idea of being asked my scientific opinion...perhaps I got carried away."

Mulder listened, nodding slowly, his anger abating, though she noted the hurt did not. "Perhaps I see conspiracies in every corner, Scully, and efforts to deceive, inveigle and obfuscate. But I also see things that most people don't. And I may be wrong in this, I may be an utter jackass howling at the moon, but if I can turn up one piece of evidence that will keep those boys from dying, isn't that worth more than your ivory tower of scientific inerrancy?"

Scully found she had no argument for that.

"Anyway, the seed Pendrell found, I'm going to go have it analyzed for you and perhaps go on a bit of a wild goose chase."

"What for?" He was taking off for the door again as she called after him.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing." He shrugged, passing through the metal doors without a backwards glance, leaving Scully to stare after his wake.

She had fucked up, big time. There was no doubt about it.

Chapter End Notes

Full Disclosure: I myself am a natural red head and I joke that there is a law that says red heads can't marry. I may make an exception for Pendrell.
In which Scully realizes her sciences has hit a dead end.

No pituitary gland.

Scully blinked at the PET scan, studying it again. This wasn't possible. How could Samuel Aboah be alive and functioning to the capacity he was without one? Any other human being would be crippled with hormone problems by this point, if they were even alive, and certainly wouldn't have reached the height of Samuel Aboah without some series course of hormone therapy throughout their life. How had he survived?

"I can't even begin to explain what we're seeing here, sir." She was as confused as the doctor working on Samuel Aboah. "I just hope this patient can provide us with some of the answers."

"You'll have to find him first."

She turned as Mulder rounded the corner, grimly meeting her confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"I was looking for you down in quarantine. Samuel Aboah's gone, disappeared."

"That's not possible. How?"

"I don't know. What does your science say?" Mulder's insolent eyes flickered to the PET scan on the light board in front of them. It had the effect he wanted. Scully flushed as the doctor next to her cleared his throat and quickly excused himself. He murmured something about speaking to security as he moved through the door.

"My science, Mulder, has proven the man has no pituitary gland." She reached up to the ghostly image on the screen, finger encircling the small, pea-sized area where the pituitary gland should be. "That is the gland that controls many major functions within the human body. Without it most people suffer from a range of massive health problems, from growth to blood pressure issues. For Samuel Aboah to be as healthy as he is he'd require extensive, expensive hormone treatments, something I doubt he's ever had access too."

"What if he did?"

"I don't see how, Mulder. The man is barely making it as an immigrant."

"Not through conventional treatment." Mulder's mind was racing again and Scully found herself blinking as she tried to keep up with it. "I spoke to someone in the Burkina Fasso Embassy today, the area that Aboah is from. He told me a folk tale from his childhood, about a teliko, an air spirit."

Scully bit back the immediate retort, swallowing it hard, slamming up the composure almost on instinct now. She had known the moment Mulder stepped onto this case that somehow, someway he would make this and X-file. "You are seriously trying to suggest that Aboah is an air spirit?"
"Well, I think that every folk tale has a seed of truth, just like the Jersey Devil?"

He had a point. "What made you go and speak to the ambassador?"

"Followed up a hunch." He was being maddeningly evasive and she supposed she deserved that. Mulder's first reaction to being hurt was to push anyone and everyone away, and she had hurt him on purpose and for no good reason she could understand at the moment.

"I went and spoke to someone regarding the bodies and they referred me to the ambassador. He'd seen that very condition before, on an international flight three months ago, right before the bodies started turning up in Philadelphia."

"Did he know the cause of the loss of pigmentation? What could be causing this?"

"Not exactly. He remembered a nightmare from his childhood, the _teliko_. It's a sort of air spirit that prowls at night, almost a vampire, attacking mostly children and young men. The ambassador swore he had such a visitation as a child, but instead of it attacking him, it attacked his cousin. The young man was found dead in his cow pasture, looking exactly like that."

"An air spirit?" Scully had behaved herself this long, she couldn't help the incredulity that oozed out, rolling her eyes at the seriousness in Mulder's face. Of course he believed that, because it couldn't be as simple as pathogens or infections for Fox Mulder. It had to be folk tales and vampires. "Did it occur to you that perhaps the young man died of the same thing that's killing these others, and that the victim on that international flight could very well be Patient X? Hell, Aboah could be the carrier, with his pituitary malfunction perhaps he's immune to whatever it is."

"That's what I'm saying, Scully, Aboah is the link."

"You think he's a wind spirit who hides up pipes?"

"Can you explain how he got up there?" His eyes glittered. He knew she couldn't. Biting her tongue, she subsided with her argument, allowing him to continue.

"What if the _teliko_ folk tale is based on something factual, just like the Jersey Devil? What if there was a group of people in Africa who genetically had evolved without a pituitary gland? This defect allowed them to do things others couldn't, hiding in places others would never think, but it also comes with a draw back."

"They need those hormones to survive." This was starting to make a strange sort of sense at last, Mulder's slow, steady grin spreading as she began to see what he was seeing. It was unnerving, sometimes, how he viewed the world, and even worse was that she was starting to understand it.

"What if these 'spirits' were nothing more than human beings who had evolved to hunt down and process the hormones they needed off of other human beings?"

"It's not unheard of in science. Animals do things like this all the time, creating specialized apparatuses and abilities to make up for deficiencies, and this is why evolution works." Which would mean something so very, very different here than what they were expecting and so very much worse. "Samuel Aboah then isn't a carrier of a disease."

"It means we need to find Aboah and arrest him for murder, Scully."

There was an almost audible click in her mind as the last piece synced, her eyes flying to Mulder's knowing ones. He'd put this together already, away from her microscopes and blood tests, following his own hunches and out-of-the-box thinking. Damn it, she breathed, how did he do that...
every time? The one case she should have had the leg up on, the one her science should have explained!

"The truth is, it was your finding here that brought it all together." Mulder's fingers reached up to the light board, to the small spot on the film where Aboah's pituitary gland should be and wasn't. How did he always know exactly what it was she was thinking, even when she tried to hide it? "If he's searching for the hormones he needs, that could cause the discoloration, right?"

"Possibly. I'd have to check with an endocrinologist." How did he do this, every time? Scully didn't want to resent him, not really, it was by far not the first time Fox Mulder had ever made this sort of leap in logic. But it upset her, perhaps galled her a little. Maybe she would have discovered this eventually, if she had given enough research and thought to why the gland was missing, more tests, more results, but not in half of the time Mulder had done it on hunches, assumptions, and African mythology. And it shamed her in a way, made her resentful. Was this how others felt when Mulder swept in, stirring up their cases, turning everything upside down with his theories and proving himself right in the end? It used to amaze her when he did it. Why was she so pissed off?

She gathered results, include the PET scan off the board. "Mulder, did anyone ever tell you that you were spooky?"

"Only a few hundred times." He grinned at her, pausing, a flicker of concern rising. "Scully, I didn't come in here and pull this out of my ass and find myself suddenly right. You know that. This was a team effort. I'd have never figured out the science behind the story if it weren't for you, and it's that science that is going to be how we prosecute Aboah when we get him."

"I don't know, Mulder." She didn't meet his eyes. "Something tells me that you might have figured it out all on your own, with or without me in the picture."

What would he do without here, she asked herself as she breezed through the door. Clearly he would still dazzle the world. Who needed a scientist when you were Fox Mulder?
Deceive, Inveigle, and Obfuscate

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder finds the kernel of truth even in folk stories.

"It's no use, Mulder." Scully didn't bother looking up from her case notes as the pretty nurse left, knowing the woman was shooting Mulder one of those shy, pleased smiles women always seemed to get around him. The Fox Mulder charm had turned on the minute that he was able to speak and move properly, only shortly after the whining had started. And like always, there had been whining, lots and lots of whining.

"Scully," he moaned, his voice cracking slightly as he drew out the last syllable of her name. "I feel fine, all better, no more weird, African toxin, I promise."

"Till your blood work comes out clean, I'm not letting you out of here." She deigned to look up at his pout and had to admit the nurse had a point. Mulder in full on childish mode could convince a nun to break him out of his hospital bed. Thankfully she was a doctor and a Quantico trained FBI agent and was immune to his pleading and petulance, if only just.

"Besides, you have no idea what those toxins might have done to your system and your medical record is as long as a standard, criminal rap sheet. It's a wonder the government insurance even still keeps you on the plan." The doctors at Mt. Zion had nearly choked reading through Mulder's medical history, than looked at her for some sort of explanation. Scully had only shrugged and waved it away as the dangers of working for the Bureau. "Between gun shot wounds, car accidents and alien viruses, Mulder, I think you can humor me for a few hours and live with a bit of a hospital stay."

He muttered vaguely about Jell-O but didn't protest any further.

"Anything new on Aboah?" Sensing defeat, he turned the subject to something more profitable.

"He's out of surgery, but they are watching his vital signs. The gunshot didn't do much damage, but his system can't keep up without the hormone treatments. They will give it a few days to see how the therapy works out." The doctors weren't hopeful, however. No one in the US had seen a case like his and already the Mt. Zion doctors were reaching out to other experts around the world. "They aren't sure how he's even lived this long."

"Evolution," Mulder supplied, shifting on his pillows. "Perhaps it was an adaptation formed out of living in the environment his people did, one that became so specialized it began to threaten his people's existence. There are examples of that in nature, right?"

"Yes, creatures such as the Panda have specialized their digestive tracks to only eat bamboo, which of course puts them in danger when their food source is inhibited, but I've never heard of that in terms of the endocrine system." Scully could hardly make heads or tales of it, the idea was so strange, and yet it was just there, within the grasp of medical science. They had the evidence right in front of them. "Perhaps it was as simple as a congenital defect that began hundreds, even thousands of years ago that was simply passed down along a certain family line and evolved into this."
"And as the people started displaying this defect, stories rose up among other peoples in West Africa trying to explain the it. Humanity is constantly hyper aware of the 'other', the one who doesn't belong and seeks answers as to why. The myth was likely started as a way to explain away something that these people couldn't understand at the time."

"Perhaps," Scully mused, frowning at the notes scrawled across her notebook. "But you have to admit it would have been a nice cover for Aboah and those like him. If you had to hide a defect that you possessed, how better than to hide behind the myth of a wind spirit who sucked the souls out of people?"

"That could be too. Using myths and legends to obscure the truth, to deceive, inveigle, and obfuscate, not something you and I see everyday in our case work is it?"

"No!" She laughed, the sarcasm not lost on her. She had been such an idiot on this, so ready to cling to her science, so sure of it, absolutely shunning any idea of a myth or a story that could explain what was a medical mystery to most everyone else. And because of it she had nearly missed the one thing that tied and explained it all. "I have to apologize, Mulder, for my behavior on this."

"What for?" He genuinely looked surprised and confused by this confession.

"I wasn't exactly on my best behavior."

"Seriously, Scully, I'm a perfect ass three-fourths of the time and you are apologizing about having a bad day?"

"You've got a point." She met his grin, chuckling softly. "I don't know, Mulder, I suppose sometimes it's intimidating being your other half?"

"Other half?" Mulder's vital signs soared slightly on the machine as his eyes widened at her words. "I would think we'd at least get a steamy make out session before we started using that sort of language."

"You know what I mean." She snorted, rolling her eyes at his mock horror. "I was assigned to work with you, but the X-files are yours, no matter what anyone thinks. And when we do get called on a case that isn't an X-file per se, it's for your skills as a profiler, skills that are terrifyingly good, but not what I do. I suppose it was nice for a change being wanted for my expertise, for being able to shine a bit in the spotlight of my own knowledge. And perhaps I forgot the lessons I've learned working with you, such as the fact that while science can explain why something happens, it can't account for the vagaries of human imagination. That just because something is a myth doesn't mean that there isn't some truth in it that science can explain. I mean, this has been the underpinning of our entire partnership for the last three years, my ability to give scientific credence to the work that we do, the ability to find the truth in the myth that you discover, and I threw it right out the window the minute my ego was stroked even just a little."

Her words stopped, shame giving her pause as she stared at the end of her partner's bed, where his long legs ended, his feet tangled in the blankets. Everyone had their petty moments, she realized that, and certainly she wasn't a stranger to them with Mulder. But this time was different. She had hurt him this time and knowingly. Scully knew his weakness, had worked hard to fight past it, to earn his trust. Why had she pressed so hard against it?

"That case last spring, where I was acting irrational? In the hospital you told me I should learn to trust you, Mulder. And you are right, I do fear trusting you. You are so blinding." It was the only word she had for it. "You believe so much, you do so much, and you understand so much. Being so
close to you sometimes is like standing near the heart of the sun, it's exhilarating and gratifying, but at the same time it can be consuming. And I wonder if perhaps I forget how to be me sometimes, Dana Scully, the pathologist and scientist, and not just Mulder's sidekick."

She expected his immediate protest. "You aren't my sidekick, Scully!"

"I know, but don't think I don't hear the comments of 'Mrs. Spooky' down the halls." She smiled at his obvious chagrin. "Mulder, I want to trust you, and I do trust you. You've saved my life many times over. If I have reservations it is because a part of me is terrified of what it would mean, of losing a part of myself to you forever."

"Would that be such a bad thing, Scully?" Mulder's tone had been quiet and conversational, but he might as well have shouted the question in the still room, have branded it on her for all the churning of emotions she felt stirring between them. She couldn't answer this question, didn't know how to even respond to it. What was he thinking, of course it would be! She was her own person still, their lives were not mutual - were they?

"Mulder, you need to get some rest." She fled for the cover of her doctor's professionalism, ignoring the unasked question, unwilling to even begin to think of the implications.

Knowing that the moment had passed, Mulder mutely acquiesced, pulling the blue, hospital blanket higher as he tried to sink further into his pillow. "Can't argue the doctor's orders, can I?"

If he meant anything more by that, she couldn't tell. He closed his eyes, sighing softly to himself as he did. Mulder so rarely ever just rested and she knew he wasn't then. He was shutting her out to process, to think and consider this interchange. What went on inside of his head? What did he see when he thought of her? Did she really want to know that?

For right now, Scully admitted, she really didn't.
In which Mulder's skills are called upon for a new case.

"A new case?" Scully had barely had time to set down her coffee and briefcase before Mulder had her elbow, propelling her back out of the door of their office.

"Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms called in the FBI on a case, they are investigating a potential cult in Tennessee. Seems there is a suspicion the group has been gathering arms."

"Arms! Waco again?"

"Something like that. The ATF has been building up a case against Ephesian for over a year now. They were tipped off when the locals began getting suspicious about their compound outside of Apison, Tennessee. Ephesian was starting to stockpile weapons, though he claimed he was doing so under legal state and federal guidelines."

"And now the ATF thinks he's not?" The elevator doors opened for them as they stepped inside. Mulder punched the number for Skinner's floor.

"ATF reached out to the FBI several months ago when it became clear that what they might be dealing with is a extremist, right wing Christian cult. So far it's been in anti-terrorism's court, but they hit a dead end, and approached Skinner for some help."

"You?" Scully found her eyebrows rising as Mulder smiled tightly, his shoulder's hunching almost apologetically under his charcoal gray suit. "Why you?"

"I'm the best they got." Mulder's gaze carefully avoided hers as the elevator doors opened.

"Mulder, they have an entire department of profilers, people who specialize in everything from serial killers to baby snatchers."

"Yeah, well Vernon Ephesian isn't your garden variety whack job, Scully. That's what they come to me for." Mulder's long legs ate up the space between the elevator and Skinner's office, as Scully rushed to keep up behind him. They barely had time to greet Kim's perfunctory welcome before Skinner was opening the door to his inner office.

"Come in Mulder, Scully." The tight, stoic glare Skinner normally wore during a case was up and firmly in place, revealing neither good nor bad as they filed in past him to the room beyond. Seated around Skinner's large, oval conference table were several unfamiliar faces, all watching Mulder in particular with curiosity.

"Agents, this is Mulder and Scully from our X-files division." Skinner nodded towards them as he motioned for them to take two of the seats. "Agent Kiley from the ATF has briefed you already?"

"He has me, sir. Scully's just walked in on this." Mulder shot her a sideways apologetic glance.

Kiley sat at the end of the table. He was a thin, wiry, and as nondescript as they came for a
government agent. H passed Scully a file as he began to debrief. "Vernon Warren, AKA Vernon Ephesian came onto the ATF radar approximately 18 months ago. His group, the Temple of the Seven Stars, began stockpiling weapons and ammunition on a property not far from Chattanooga, Tennessee. They were discreet, at first, but authorities became suspicious when several purchases were made through the names of women known to be tied to Ephesian's religions group."

"How did they get flagged down?" Scully opened the file and glanced over the pages of notes, wire taps, conversations.

"One of Ephesian's wives has a criminal background. She popped up automatically in the system."

The word "wives" caught Scully's attention. She blinked upwards at Kiley who nodded knowingly. "Ephesian's group espouses the idea of multiple wives. He himself has six that we know of."

"Do we know anything about this Temple of the Seven Stars? Mulder mentioned it was some sort of Christian cult?"

"Basically." Kiley's eyes flickered to the gold cross at her throat. "I hope I don't offend you with that sort of generalization."

"I don't offend easily, Agent Kiley." Scully shot him a small, reassuring smile.

"Do you know much about the Book of Revelation?"

"Just what I learned in Sunday School and some of the better sermons at Mass on Sundays." Scully could sense Mulder repressing a chuckle beside her. "The Apocalypse of St. John of Patmos, it was written as a critique of the Roman Empire towards the end of the first century AD."

"Impressive, Scully," Mulder muttered in a stage whisper beside her. She resisted the urge to kick his shin.

"I have to agree with Agent Mulder, Agent Scully, that's more than the average person knows and perhaps even more than Ephesian knows." Kiley hardly seemed impressed with this Ephesian man and Scully couldn't blame him. She had found the records on Vernon Warren, his rap sheet stretching back decades to petty robbery, assault, and threats against law enforcement. He held no serious job that Scully could recognize, a brief stint in a junior college, some military service, than a string of random positions, mostly with small, country churches in the most rural areas of Tennessee.

"Is he an ordained minister?" The churches intrigued her.

"Not with any known denomination, though he does claim to have pastored several. He started his Temple five years ago out of one of the churches. It has since grown into a small group, headquartered on property they jointly purchased and have built up as a compound. It holds perhaps thirty-forty members, but many of those are children."

That complicated things. "How many?"

"Fifteen or so, under the age of eighteen. The minute we realized that this was deeper than one whack job with a hatred against the government we called the FBI in."

It was Mulder who spoke out loud the question that Scully had wondered privately. "So you called me in and by extension you called in Scully. Why?"

"Skinner said you were the best profiler the FBI had." Kiley smoothly met Mulder's challenge. It
was obviously a well-rehearsed line and it was just as obvious neither herself nor Mulder bought it. Scully glanced towards Mulder. She knew there was something they weren’t mentioning and Mulder knew it. The question was if Kiley was going to have balls enough to admit it.

"I'm good," Mulder admitted it evenly, not to brag, more as an acknowledgement of what everyone else was saying about him. "And I have an 'unorthodox' way of looking at things."

The other man swallowed uncomfortably as his team shifted and shuffled, furtive eyes darting between one another.

"You're unorthodox view is well known, Agent Mulder, and yes, that's part of it." Kiley at least didn't flinch or smirk when saying it, though there were a few flickers of smiles among his agents. "Part of Ephesian's shtick with his cult is that he claims to have gifts, psychic powers. He claims he sees the future, that he can channel other souls, project himself out on the astral plane."

It was obvious what his team thought Ephesian's claims. They all looked to her and Mulder as if expecting them to start spouting immediately what they thought was going on with the Ephesian, to prove to them that either Ephesian was a nutcase or Mulder was. It was as if they expected Mulder to stand up with his bag of strange tricks, performing for them feats of rumor and legend. In the light of their arguments on their previous case, Scully felt shame creeping across her skin. It was one thing for fellow Bureau members to expect that, but now ATF as well? Perhaps the entire Justice Department would soon be at the door. Maybe Skinner would sell tickets.

If Mulder was bothered, he hardly showed it. "Is there any proof of Ephesian's claims?"

Now the snorts and snickers sounded outright, but Kiley remained cool, assessing Mulder for a long moment before shaking his head. "Not that we know of. Many of his followers state outright they have seen things, had experiences."

"Nothing verifiable, though." Mulder leaned lazily to one side of his chair, eyes distant. Was he seriously considering this? "Has anyone spoken to anyone from the compound directly, without the others?"

There's been contact with one insider, someone calling themselves Sidney. They've been our main source of information for what is going on inside. Sidney is the reason we've decided to move so quickly." Kiley paused, the only flicker of disturbance he had shown in their entire discussion finally becoming evident. "This Sidney says that Ephesian is hurting the children."

And there was the clincher. Mulder was hooked on this case. It had the two things he couldn't ignore, the possibility of paranormal activity and the threat to a young child. She knew his mind was already made up on this. She didn't have to see the resolution in his eyes. She could feel the vibrant sense of action just sitting there beside him.

Spooky Mulder, the FBI's favorite toy, when the weirdness began to happen, break him out to deal with it.

"I could forward you and Agent Scully everything we have on Ephesian and the Temple's activities."

"How soon can you start on this, Mulder?" It was Skinner who finally spoke, silent during much of the exchange.

"Immediately, if you would like sir."

"Kiley and his team are hoping to get enough evidence in the next few days to take to the Attorney
General for a warrant. A strong profile will go a long way in convincing her of it. We don't need another Waco on our hands." Skinner's point wasn't lost on any of them.

"I'll send the files over immediately." Kiley rose with his team to leave, all of them watching the pair of them speculatively. Scully didn't know if she should meet their curious gazes or make a face, just for the sheer impudence of it.

Mulder's fingers on her arm caught her attention, his silent nod towards the door. Without waiting for Skinner's dismissal she followed him out behind the team, keeping a discreet distance as the ATF agents wandered down the hallway. Scully was never one to get into inter-departmental pissing contests. They were all there doing the same job. But frankly a part of her resented the group of them as they made their way to the bank of elevators. Were they muttering to themselves, whispering about meeting Spooky Mulder, about how he hadn't batted an eye when Kiley mentioned Ephesian's psychic abilities? What had they heard about the X-files and the work they did?

"Planning on nailing one of them in the back of the head with one of those expensive shoes of yours?" Mulder eyed the distance between the last of the ATF agents and her shoes in amusement, studying the chunk-heeled, serviceable loafers under her trouser cuff.

"I might, just out of principle." She glared up at his laughing face, crossing her arms in front of her. "Mulder, they are using you!"

"No, they are calling up on fellow law enforcement resources."

"The case just happens to have a paranormal element and they call on Spooky Mulder?"

"Weren't you the one giving me crap last case about only caring if its got a ghost story in it?"

Never argue with a man who has a photographic memory. "Damn it, Mulder, that isn't the point. You don't like being made the pet ghost detective around here, why are you taking it?"

"Jealous?" Now he was simply trying to tease her out of her indignation, but she wasn't in the mood. "Come on, Scully, it's no secret what I do. And it's rare anyone seriously wants to take me up on the paranormal factor."

"So they can laugh at your opinions when you tell them what you think is going on?"

"I don't know what is going on yet, neither do they. That's why they are here. This Vernon Ephesian could be a perfect crank, a charismatic sociopath, no different than Charles Manson or Jim Jones. But then we both know how those two turned out and what happened when the FBI didn't take seriously their outrageous claims. People died. And if coming to Spooky Mulder to figure out what is going on saves a few children from dying an untimely death, so be it."

He almost had her convinced, till he mentioned the kids. "I knew they would get you on that."

"Not every case with a child will send me off on a terminal, depressive bender. It's part of what we do."

"You are being played here! There is something going on with this case. They are worried about something and you will be the fall guy when things go to hell on it."

"What, Agent Scully finally listening to her instincts and not just to facts and figures?"

"Don't try to deflect this, you know I'm right on this!" At this point she didn't care if they were
arguing in the hallway just outside of Skinner's office, drawing the curious stares from their fellow FBI agents. "When will you learn your own maxim, Mulder? Trust no one."

"I don't know, maybe I need kicking around a few more times before it gets into my thick skull." Mulder's sarcasm was dripping as he turned from her, stalking towards the elevators without her.

"Mulder!" God she hated when he got like this. She scrambled once again to catch up with him. "I can't be worried about you, about what this is about? Weren't you the one just getting angry with me about considering you the pet urban legend expert?" Lest she forget their nasty argument over the poor, dead corpse of the African-American boy from Philadelphia. Ehy did they always have these deep conversations around the dead? "Now you are willingly throwing yourself into this case with Kiley."

"Are you willing to call Kiley, tell him we can't do it?" He knew she wasn't.

"No." She sighed as the elevator sounded.

"So what, they are calling up old Spooky for a strange case. The truth is that there is no one else in the Bureau who has my particular insight. The closest they have is you. Ephesian may not have an ounce of psychic power, but none of them will know that because they haven't studied it like I have. That's why Kiley wants me on the case, to profile Ephesian, to see what makes him tick, to call his bullshit. And yeah, there is the risk that when the shit goes down, I'll get blamed. But hey, it's not like they don't kick me around anyway. What's a few more black marks against my non-existent reputation?"

Mulder was so blasé about this. Scully didn't know if she could be.

"All right, you are right." She threw up her hands, leaning unhappily on the far wall of the elevator as it settled in the basement. "I just wouldn't be doing my job as your partner if I didn't say anything."

"Believe me, no one values your judgment and opinion more than I do, even if I don't want to hear it."

That made her relent, a little. "Sometimes I wonder what it is that put the two of us together and why it is I stick around?"

"I don't know, Scully, but it certainly makes my life more interesting." The doors opened as they filed to their office.

"What, you aren't sick of having me around?" He actually laughed out loud at her statement. "Dana Scully, I don't think I could ever get sick of having you around."
Revelation

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder whips out a bit of theological knowledge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Scully had taken point on this interrogation. Mulder wanted to sit quietly at first, to observe Ephesian, to watch his reactions as Scully pressured him. She took her seat across from the man, acknowledging his lawyer with a curt nod, but turning her attention directly onto Ephesian. He wasn't a particularly striking man, not at first. But then he smiled, there was grace and charisma shining from his face, lighting up his plain demeanor. His eyes flickered to her cross and back up again.

"You are a believer, Agent?"

"Scully." She supplied her name curtly, glancing back towards Mulder who stood behind her, stoically watching. "This is my partner, Agent Mulder."

"He's not a believer, is he?" Ephesian nodded knowingly as he studied Mulder. "Do you know that your soul is in peril, Agent Mulder?"

"We aren't here to discuss the peril of anyone's souls, Mr. Ephesian. We are here to speak about your church." Scully caught Ephesian's attention. She turned it back to her coolly as he smiled, slowly.

"My church and my people are minding our own business, Agent Scully, preparing for the days to come. I would think you as one of the faithful would be mindful of that."

"Mr. Ephesian, as your lawyer, you know that you do not have to say anything that incriminates you." The man beside him cut in quickly, as if afraid that Ephesian would forget why he was there.

"It's okay, David, I don't have anything to say to the FBI that I'm afraid of." Ephesian's enigmatic smile seemed to encompass the whole room "What can I tell you?"

She might as well be direct, get the elephant in the room out of the way. "Where are the weapons, Mr. Ephesian?"

"Have you read the Book of Revelations, Agent Scully?" Evasion. It was the first tactic she suspected he would attempt.

"Yes." She squared his shoulders under his surprise. "I was raised in the faith, Mr. Ephesian, and I've read my Bible."

"The question is what sort of faith?"

He was playing games, trying to spin her around, and she knew it. Still, she went along with it for now, probing and prodding for a weak spot, if not for herself, for Mulder. "I was raised in the
"A papist!" He snorted. "You are about as clueless as your friend over there. You've been filled with nothing but lies, half-truths spun by men who claim to have sovereign authority from God, but who have lost their way. They don't remember the true faith. They lost it centuries ago."

"And you have found it?" She couldn't help hint of sarcasm. Theological differences between denominations were one thing, but the dismissing two thousand years of religious history left her bristling. "Tell me, who has given you this authority, this secret knowledge that you employ with your followers?"

"I was there when they gave it years ago."

"Who?"

Ephesian sighed, dreamy and distant. "The Apostle John Mark handed me this message personally. I was there when he delivered it. I heard it and I've carried it down through the centuries, from that time to this."

"Must wrack up a hell of a phone bill," Mulder muttered softly behind her."

"Strange, considering that you are still alive now. You hardly look old enough to have been alive in the time of the Apostles." She eyed Ephesian up and down, meeting his condescension without a flicker of an eyelash.

"I've seen through centuries, Agent Scully. I've seen many things. I've seen our Lord and Savior walk the earth, I've seen his Apostles preach. I've seen where the truth became twisted and the lies began." He sounded so positive, she almost believed him. "I go there often still, listening, learning, understanding the truth."

"Through your gifts of 'astral projection'?" She leaned back, eyebrows raised, unsurprised by Ephesian's sneer. Scully couldn't tell if this was all an act with him or if he had told himself this story for so long he believed it. Perhaps he always had believed it and his psychosis ran much deeper than even Mulder had imagined when he profiled him.

"I knew you were coming," Ephesian drawled slowly. "I've known for nine centuries. It was written in the Revelation of Jesus Christ. 'Behold, the devil shall cast some of thee into prison so that you may be tried. You'll have tribulation for ten days. Be though faithful unto death and I'll give thee a crown of life.'"

As he spoke, Scully could hear Mulder's steps scrape against the tile and felt him wandering behind her, indolently leaning against her chair. "But that message was to the church of Smyrna."

Practically chapter and verse, Scully realized, just managing to keep her careful composer as she glanced up at her atheist partner. Mulder was just full of surprises.

"It's my understanding that your temple is the reincarnation of the church at Ephesus." Mulder moved on smoothly, turning again to his place at the wall.

"Mine is the Temple of the Seven Stars." Ephesian clarified with an impatient glare at the back of Mulder's head. "All seven churches receiving the Revelation. And the members are not a reincarnation of the church."

"Are you?" Mulder posed the question, knowing already what Ephesian believed. Still it was disturbing, Scully thought, to see the laughter in his eyes, the surety in his words.
"Oh, yes! I was present to hear the Apostle John Mark deliver his message of the apocalypse."

Mulder made no further comment and clearly wasn't interested in pursuing this line at the moment. Scully retook the reins, drawing the conversation back to the case at hand and away from the control of Ephesian. "Vernon, if Sidney was unfaithful, did he receive a 'crown of life'?

Before Ephesian even had a chance to speak, his attorney leapt in again, finally relieved that he had something to comment on. "There are no members of the temple named or nicknamed 'Sidney.'"

"But I know you don't believe." Ephesian raised his shoulder's eloquently, another dreamy smile on his lips. "See, I don't care if you think that I'm Jim Jones or David Koresh. I don't need you to believe or even like me. But just for a moment, I'd like you to put aside your investigation, for your own souls. It is vital that you understand that soon - very, very soon - all unfaithful, all disbelievers, all beasts, if that means me or this 'Sidney' or you."

Ephesian pointed to Mulder where he slouched, eyes narrowing ever so slightly on him. "All will be destroyed by God's mighty men. It is what has been told by God will happen. It is what has been told by God we must do. Do this and the 'Lord shall preserve you from all evil. He will preserve your soul. The Lord will preserve your going out and your coming in.'"

"Are you threatening Agent Mulder, Mr. Ephesian?" Scully felt ice forming on her words as she cut through Ephesian's mish-mosh of half-remembered phrases and mangled Bible verses to the heart of what he was saying.

The lawyer again cut in, alarmed at the accusation thrown so calmly and coldly before Ephesian. "Mr. Ephesian made no such statement, Agent Scully."

"But he is admitting that his group has a militant view of the end times the Book of Revelation."

"My client has made no such claims. His statements are theological interpretations and nothing more." The attorney was now clearly nervous with the way this interview was turning and leaned in to whisper furtively in Ephesian's ear. The man listened, or at least appeared to, all the while his eyes remained fixed on Mulder's. For his part Mulder met the steady gaze with bored indifference. But the indifference was an act, a show to keep Ephesian from feeling he had a foothold. She knew behind the stoicism his mind was turning Ephesian over, picking him apart, and studying every nuance from the curve of his placid smile, to the turn of every twisted, religious reference. It was frightening at times to see Mulder work and perhaps more frightening still to realize that she could read him so well.

"I believe my client is done here." Ephesian's attorney was up and bustling his client out of his seat. Scully wordlessly glanced towards Mulder, who shrugged, but didn't seem concerned in keeping Ephesian. She nodded her assent as Ephesian's attorney led him to the door, quick to be away from the agents before anything else was said.

"Ephesian!" Mulder suddenly paused them, stopping them as the attorney's hand reached for the door. Ephesian turned to Mulder's call, clearly surprised that he would be stopped on his way out. "You said you received your information from the Apostle John Mark, that he was he one who spoke the message of the apocalypse?"

"Yes." Ephesian took pride in admitting that.

Mulder nodded for the briefest of moments, frowning as if assimilating that information. "That's funny, because the Apocalypse of John wasn't written by John Mark. It was written by John of Patmos." He slipped a sly, sideways look at Scully before continuing. "It was a response to
persecutions of the Asian churches by local authorities who saw Christians as dangerously subversive atheists, out to overthrow the established order of the empire."

He paused, letting that sink in. "Feeling dangerously subversive, Mr. Ephesian?"

Ephesian chuckled, but apparently decided that silence was the best response to a theological challenge he was ill prepared for. As quickly as he could manage, his lawyer hurried him out of the door and practically threw him into the arms of the waiting ATF agents. As he was led off, Ephesian turned, briefly, to glance back at Mulder, but the door closed on him, leaving the two FBI agents watching it in silence.

It was Mulder who finally broke the quietude. "He doesn't know who Sidney is."

"How do we know he isn't lying through his teeth and hasn't killed Sidney already, poisoned him like he was prepared to do to his wives?"

"There's never been a Sidney at the temple." Mulder pushed off of the wall, pacing around the table to where Ephesian had been sitting and settling one hip on the corner, looking down at the space Ephesian had occupied.

"But the phone call?"

"I think that whoever called was using an alias, something to hide who they are. Likely one of the members, too afraid to speak up as themselves, one of the men perhaps." He picked restlessly at his slacks, frowning at Ephesian's chair, but not really seeing it. "How cunningly he uses the word of God, wraps those ideas around a half-truth and nearly has you convinced he's a holy man."

"Not me," Scully huffed, rising from her seat. "I've met six-year-olds with a better grasp on Revelation than he does. Ephesian's theology is grown more out of backyard tent revivals than theological seminaries and he's using it to twist the minds of these people who don't know any better, save for Sidney, who is conveniently hiding somewhere."

"Yeah, well I don't think he expected us to call him on his bluff."

"Interesting how that worked." She watched him speculatively. "For a man who doesn't believe in God, you whipped out the Bible knowledge pretty quickly."

"I really just stole most of it off of you. I remember you had mentioned John of Patmos and so I read up on it, to understand what it is in the Apocalypse that Ephesian sees, what he uses. He's not nearly as stupid on these matters as you think he is. He knew the message behind Revelation and he's been using it at the bedrock of his entire message. The idea that while today we are persecuted by those in power, tomorrow will bring the Kingdom of Heaven and God's eternal reign on Earth, that's pretty powerful stuff to anyone downtrodden, anyone looking for hope, for leadership in dark times. Ephesian is capitalizing on that familiar refrain, just like thousands of others have before him for the last nineteen centuries."

"Yeah, well how many of these other people sat on a bunker full of weapons and ammunition hidden somewhere in Tennessee?" Scully couldn't quite bring herself to have admiration or sympathy for Ephesian, something about the way he twisted those very words her entire faith was built on and turned them into something so perverse. "How did you know that bunker was where it was, Mulder?"

She hadn't confronted him on that question. During the raid of Ephesian's property, when all the houses turned up empty, and they were prepared to call an end to the search, Mulder wandered into
the field and found the bunker. Everyone else had simply chalked it up to Spooky Mulder being spooky, plain and simple. But Scully knew as strange as everyone found Mulder's thinking, he rarely did anything just because. Perhaps one couldn't see why he did it right away, but there was always a method to Mulder's madness.

Yet he remained silent on it, shrugging his shoulders as he rose, shuffling around her and towards the door. "We need to speak to the other women in that bunker, the ones with him. Perhaps one of them might know something, might be willing to speak up."

"Mulder?" He had never given her the brush off before. She frowned at him and his curiously averted gaze. "It's me. I'm not those guys out there in the bullpen. I won't laugh at you no matter how strange it sounds. How did you know?"

His jaw clenched and tightened briefly, the sure sign that whatever it was, he was bothered by it. "I don't know, Scully. I honestly...I couldn't tell you. I just knew, almost as if I'd been there before."

She didn't have time to stare at him perplexed before he was out the door and striding away.

Chapter End Notes

In real life I have masters degrees in theology and am getting a Ph.D. in church history, so I think you, gentle reader, for indulging in my dorkiness in chapters like these.
Past Lives

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder's spookiness gets too much even for Scully.

Just knew? Even for Spooky Mulder that was a piss poor explanation.

Scully paused short of slamming her notes on the table on the desk in front of her, whirling around so fast on Mulder that he backed away startled at the suddenness of her attack. "What was that back there, Mulder?"

She didn't care that her voice carried perhaps a bit too loudly in the confines of their command center or that other agents were turning curiously to see what the latest scuffle between Mr. and Mrs. Spooky was. She was fixed on Mulder with his bemused expression, jaw silently working for several long moments till he pushed past her and to the desk he had more or less claimed as his work space.

"I will grant you that Melissa Riedel is a very sick woman, one look at her history can explain why." Scully had read it. She wondered if Mulder had. "Multiple arrests for petty theft, drug possession, prostitution. and a childhood in the foster care system, an abusive step-father. These are all the classic makings of the situation we saw in there."

"I'm not disagreeing with you, Scully." And yet Mulder wouldn't meet her anger face-to-face. Something about that woman, about the personality of Sidney, was getting to him, and Scully thought she had a sneaking suspicion as to why.

"What about this woman has peeked your interest in damsels in distress now?" She was being harsh, but she didn't care. "The fact that she has a hard luck case? The fact that she's obviously taken in by Ephesian?"

Every lost little girl would always be another Samantha to him. "Mulder, Melissa is obviously a very sick woman, but past lives...."

"How in the world did she know what Sidney knew?" Mulder's irritation erupted then, snapping back at her across the small space between them. More heads turned, more eyes watched as they continued to bicker with one another. "You heard her! She thought Ike was still President."

"Anyone with a fifth grade history textbook can figure that out! That's not difficult. Who's to say that Sidney isn't some personification in Melissa's mind of a protector? Obviously that's what he sees himself as, calling into the ATF, warning about the kids and the danger to them. My guess Sidney is likely based off of someone Melissa knew or someone she saw that she created in her mind as a guardian, a grandfatherly figure who always looked out for her."

"Looks like someone's been picking up the psych texts in the office." Mulder's sarcasm bit moodily at her.

"Well clearly someone has to, as the person with the Oxford degree in it has suddenly thrown them all out of the window." She didn't back down, crossing her arms and meeting his tempestuous glare
firmly. There had been a time when they first met that she would have backed off, given him space to cool down, come back at this from a different angle. Perhaps she had been more intimidated by Mulder and his intellect then, but now, at the moment, she was more irritated than anything.

"Does Melissa Riedel fit the criteria for MPD?"

Mutinously he didn't move for long moments before slowly nodding his head. "As far as I can tell, yeah, but I'd have to do more testing to know that for sure."

"And you don't think this is some elaborate act on her part?"

"Why? So you want to disbelieve her?"

"I don't. If she's a sick woman, than I'm more than willing to take that into consideration. What I want to know is why you are so willing to believe it's a past life? It's the first conclusion you jumped too, despite the fact that you just acknowledged that she shows the classic signs of multiple personalities."

"I can't explain it, Scully, I just…"

"Knew, I know." She threw up her hands, torn between stalking away from him in utter disgust or screaming at him that no such thing existed. She chose instead to collapse into one of the desk chairs, staring at him, not sure how to respond.

"Look, I'm going to have the labs back in DC run her voice against Sidney's, just to give us some sort of proof that the two of them are the same." It was Mulder's way of making himself busy, of ignoring the giant elephant standing between the two of them. Scully studied him as he nervously fidgeted, reaching for the phone. He was unnerved. It was so rare she ever saw Mulder so thoroughly and completely baffled. Something about this woman completely unstrung him, just like the field where they found the bunker. He didn't really believe that this had anything to do with a past life, did he? But why suggest it? He just knew….

"Do you think you knew Melissa in a past life?" It was a crazy suggestion, but one that made perfect sense with Fox Mulder. She knew she struck a chord as he stiffened and turned, setting down the phone, unused.

"I think that there is a bunker full of ammunition and weapons hiding somewhere that Ephesian doesn't want to discuss. I think that if we can't tag him on it, he'll be let go and perhaps we'll be stuck with a Jonestown situation all over again. And I think that if we don't figure out how to get to Sidney, to get him to confess…"

"Is this about Ephesian's church, or is this about proving a pet theory?" She had pulled the gloves off long ago, she might as well continue to fight dirty. "We have a woman in there whose led a lot of us out here around for not a lot of anything, and we don't know if she's really suffering from an honest condition or not. She could be a very good actress or she could be a very sick young woman. In either case, turning it into one of your X-files would be the height of irresponsibility now, especially when so many people's lives are on the line."

"Why do you assume that I immediately jump to the strange and weird for kicks?"

"Because in the face of the most logical of explanations you always turn to the strange and weird."

"I'm not willing to ignore the other variables on the table in order to cling to my presuppositions. You claim to cling to your science, Scully, but how can you explain away truths that are right in front of your nose just to stick with the plausible?"
"That's just it, Mulder, you aren't doing that here. We have no other variables, no unexplained phenomenon here. We have a woman who quite possibly is disturbed, nothing else. And you want to make this something that it's not."

It was becoming quite apparent that everyone was staring at them now and Scully felt her cheeks redden slightly at the scene they were creating. She let her voice drop softly, feeling the heat of her anger flee in the face of tableau they had presented. "Look, I understand that this case has unnerved you somehow. You are the one always-preaching intuition to me, to listen to it, and perhaps that was all this is, your intuition speaking to you. Don't make more out of this than what we have. It's not fair to that woman and its certainly too dangerous for this case."

For an instant mutiny flared in Mulder's expression, but he tamped it down to belligerent moodiness. "I'm going to put in a call to the lab, see if we can match up the sound patterns of Sidney's phone call with that of Melissa. That will give us at least something concrete to take to Skinner."

"Right." It was his compromise, she knew that, but still it stung as he coldly turned from her, busying himself with papers and a phone call to the lab. What was it about this woman, this case that made him jump to that sort of conclusion? Past lives? It wasn't outside of Mulder's rather large realm of possibilities, but it wasn't something he normally leapt to. Something in that field had jarred him and something about Melissa had drawn him to her. What?

"I'll catch up with you later," he muttered, spinning away from her without a glance, a clear sign she was persona non grata at the moment. She sighed, a throbbing headache forming as she rubbed at the bridge of her nose absently. With everything the last few months, especially the death of the girl who looked so much like his sister, it could be anything. At least that's what she kept telling herself.
My Soul Is Tired

Chapter Summary

In which Scully discovers the sad truth of Sarah and Sullivan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My soul is tired. I want to rest.

The heart wrenching longing echoed in Scully's thoughts as she pulled up to the Hamilton County Hall of Record. She had sent Mulder to the hotel for the afternoon, though to be honest she doubted he would stay there. He hadn't wanted to be alone, really, but Scully had thought it best. Mulder needed to process this. They both did. What he had said about Melissa, about Samantha, about her....

Scully ignored the painful ache that thought caused as she tried to think of something else, anything else. Sarah Kavanaugh, Sullivan Biddle, the names clung to her even as she tried to push them aside and focus on the case at hand. She needed to find that other bunker on Ephesian's property, the place where he was hiding the weapons, before it was too late. For all of Mulder's assuredness that they would find the truth by looking back at his past lives, the only thing they had discovered was that Mulder was buying into Melissa's own sad delusions. And she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

But love…love…souls mate eternal…we're always taken away….

Eternal love, not something she had expected to ever hear out of Mulder's mouth. And yet there he had been, weeping openly for a woman he'd known for hours, a disturbed woman who claimed she knew him from another life. A life where they had been lovers, torn ruthlessly apart by war, again, and again, and again…

"Can I help you?"

Scully blinked at the owl eyes behind the thick, soda-bottle lenses, realizing that somehow she had made her way from the rental car to the front desk of the small, musty smelling building.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I called just a little while ago. I'm Agent Scully with the FBI." She pulled out her badge for the middle-aged, dark haired woman. Her eyes went wider, if possible, behind her thickly smudged glasses.

"Oh, yes, you here on that Ephesian case." The drawl of the woman's Southern accent sounded knowingly as she beckoned Scully to follow behind her, into the depths of the shelves behind the simple oak counter. Neatly arranged books with cracking leather spines stood at attention down either side as the custodian's loafers scuffled across the polished, creaking wood.

"My name is Marion by the way, in case you need anything." She turned to shoot a brief smile at Scully, just barely containing the curiosity she had to be feeling, knowing a federal agent was in her building. It likely hadn't happened in a hundred and thirty years. "You said you were looking
into old maps, records of the property from during the war?"

Never mind that the United States had been in several wars since 1860, when one was this far in the South there was only one "war" they were discussing. "Yes, we think that there might be some sort of bunker or hiding place dating from the period that Ephesian might be using."

Marion nodded her neatly, bobbed head with the sort of understanding cluck that only Southern women seemed to ever manage. "Heard it all over the news. That Ephesian fellow doesn't sound right at all. You think y'all will be able to catch him?"

They had him caught. They just couldn't keep him. "That's what I need the maps for, Marion."

Scully disliked being so informal when on duty, but clearly the older woman didn't seem to mind. "Well from what I can tell, the property was owned by a James McCullough before the war. During the war, as you know, the Union forces rarely cared who owned what property and it was one of the largest areas of open land near the river, sitting on a strategic place for goods and transport."

She paused at the shelves to pull one large, dusty volume, smiling as she flipped it open briefly. "I believe this is what you want, Agent Scully. Maps and battle plans from the war for this area, put together by the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga." There was pride in her voice, the hometown scholars having made such a useful piece of work. "Come on over here, there's a work table I can set you up at."

The space in the back had the feel of a public library, simple oak furniture, rows of small drawers, and large books from the county registrar filling up one whole shelf across from her. "Should be quiet enough, few people come here during the day except to look up birth certificates or deeds from property development." Marion clearly felt disappointed more people didn't come and see her in the Hall of Records.

"I'm sure this will be fine, thank you." Scully smiled appreciatively as the older woman lingered for the briefest of moments, as if wanting to somehow participate in what was going on too. But she finally turned and shuffled away with a winsome smile and assurances she would be just up front if Scully needed anything. She watched for long moments as the woman shuffled away, unconsciously holding her breath.

Her fingers flipped across pages, thick with dust. Clearly, despite the best efforts of the local university, few people were actually interested in Civil War battlefields in the area. It took her some time to locate the map that held the area where Ephesian's compound now lay. During the Civil War it had been little more than undeveloped farmland, a pasture where a skirmish was held between Union and Confederate forces. Very little was said on the battle or the tactics used, only that the conflict had left many dead on both sides. More frustrating still was the fact that nothing was noted about a bunker or any other structures or landmarks in the empty field, not even the one that Mulder had found. Scully could feel the case slipping through her fingers, just as surely as the page gliding beneath her nails as she traced the map, willing for something, anything to make itself available to her. Perhaps if it were on this map it would explain the entire situation with Mulder and Melissa and the silly story of having known and loved one another in the past. It would be as simple as Melissa having found the bunker during her time living with Ephesian and in her disturbed state had merely made up the story of Sarah Kavanaugh and her long lost love to hide away from the horrors of a broken life. And Mulder, being Mulder, his own soul broken by his sister's loss, fell right into the act. That was it.

Except Mulder had said he was Sullivan Biddle. It wasn't exactly a name she could imagine him pulling out of thin air.
Closing the map book, she eyed the registrar books across the way. There was no way this person existed. And even if they did, chances were Mulder could have run across the name doing research on Ephesian and his property. Perhaps Biddle was tied to it somehow. But then how would that explain Melissa? Had Sarah Kavanaugh existed? Despite her better judgment, Scully rose, picking out the registration book that covered the whole of the 19th century. Flipping through the pages, she scanned each, covered in old fashioned, scrawling handwriting, each in faded, browning ink on yellowish pages. Her fingers paused at one name, printed neatly under her fingertip.

Biddle, Sullivan. On the next page over read the name Kavanaugh, Sarah. Scully tried to work moisture into her mouth, but was increasingly finding she couldn't. They had existed, both of them. Beside each name was inscribed in more modern hand an identical letter and number. Her eyes flew to the drawers across the room. They were card files, perhaps filled with pictures, maybe even a clue as to who this Sarah and Sullivan were and what they had to do with the property, if anything.

She found the corresponding drawer, pulling it open curiously, finding fragile, crumbling sepia toned photographs, so old and faded that the features of the people were now hard to make out. One was a man, a soldier, dressed in dark grays she guessed, hardly the standard dress of the Union officer of the time period. He was likely a Confederate. He stood tall and proud, a look of deep seriousness on his sensitive, young face. On the back it read "Sullivan Biddle, 1862." No date of birth or death.

He had existed. With shaking fingers, Scully turned the other photograph, that of a young girl, looking far too serious for her young years, but with a sweetness about her as she posed primly for her photograph, one hand tucked neatly into the folds of her large skirts, the picture of a proper, Southern lady. She didn't need to turn it over to know this was Sarah, but she did anyway. She wasn't surprised to see the woman's name with the date of 1858 on the back.

They could have known this by any means, Scully rationalized, her head spinning. A simple search, stories told around town, anything. It could be as simple as Melissa's irrational behavior feeding into Mulder's, and vice versa, that was all. It didn't mean that they knew each other in a previous life, that Melissa had once loved Mulder, that she was his soul mate, long gone.

Why did that idea hurt so much to think about?

Ignoring the clawing desperation that sank deep inside of her, Scully took both delicate photos in hand and moved up front where Marion sat at her desk, humming softly to herself as she worked on an ancient looking computer. She paused, smiling up at Scully who held the photographs out to her. "What can you tell me about these two?"

Marion's fingers adjusted the large glasses on her nose as she squinted down at the fading prints. "Ahh, you found Sarah and Sullivan! Pity, I didn't think of them."

"Them? You know of them?" Scully couldn't tell if she felt relieved or disheartened at the news.

"Every town in the South has some sort of tragic, romantic ghost story from the war, Agent Scully, and Sarah and Sullivan is one of ours." Marion's face took on a misty quality as she carefully took each of the photographs. "I should have realized you'd stumble on these two."

"Why?" A distinctly unsettled feeling crept down her spine at the thought.

"Well, Sarah Kavanaugh was the niece of the owner of that property, James McCullough. She was one of the prettiest, sweetest, most eligible young ladies in Chattanooga in those days. Her parents passed when she was young, from a fever going through. She was raised by her mother's kin. Still,
she had a nice inheritance in her own right."

"And who was Sullivan Biddle?" Scully frowned down at the photograph, browning at the edges, trying to somehow form the shape of Sullivan Biddle into that of Fox Mulder and failed. The two men looked nothing alike, save for the same, heavy lidded look as they stared into the camera.

"Sullivan Biddle was the son of the Baptist minister here in town, a good, upstanding boy from what I understand. But he wasn't part of Sarah's circle, you see."

"He wasn't part of the landed gentry here." This was beginning to have all the makings of the sort of tragic love story that Scully was dreading right at the moment.

"Sarah was due to inherit quite a bit of money and a plantation that would need someone overseeing it, who understood the business. Her uncle wanted her to choose someone more of her social upbringing, but she and Sullivan fell in love anyway. And of course you can guess what happened from there. When Sullivan asked her uncle for her hand, he refused the boy, said he needed to prove himself as a man, as someone who could take care of his future wife, who understood her way of life. So, in a fit of daring bravado, or perhaps childish foolishness, he enlisted with the Confederate Army."

Throwing himself into something dangerous and deadly just to impress the guardian of the woman he loved in the wild hope he would be able to win her hand. Scully felt her heart lurch within her. It did sound like something Mulder would do. She chided herself, she couldn't allow herself to believe this, to buy into this. It was a story, nothing more, one that Melissa and likely Mulder had run across at some point.

"So they died, Sarah and Sullivan. How?"

"That's the strange aspect of the story and why it's one of the local ghost tales." There was a small sense of delight in her words, like a child sitting at the campfire, her voice hushing. "Sullivan was stationed here, trying to protect the waterway from the Union forces. One of the best spots for them to cross and encamp was in the field where y'all are looking for that bunker right now. So our boys prepared to defend it, to set up there and prevent the Union from gaining the ground."

"Hence why there are bunkers there." This was all beginning to make an eerie, terrifying sort of sense.

"Right. Sarah's family lived close enough to see it, where the farmhouse stands now, I believe. In any case, her uncle refused to leave, stating he was not going to give up his family's home to a bunch of Yankee invaders stealing his lands. Sarah refused to leave him, despite Sullivan's pleading. So they stayed and the Yankees came."

There was infinite sadness in the story, as well as a deep irony. A group entrenched against the threats of outside, a woman staying doggedly by the side of a very foolish man, even when she was offered the chance to escape, her lover pleading with her not to do it. If there was any more déjá vu in this situation, Scully thought, she would scream. "Sullivan was killed in the battle?"

"Right there in one of the bunkers, along with most of his battalion. As for Sarah, she was found in the big house, her uncle weeping over her. A stray bullet had caught her in the temple. She probably didn't even know it was coming. Perhaps it was a blessing neither of them knew the other had died."

"Their souls could be together, always." Scully murmured, her heart swelling as tears misted her eyes, briefly. "How well known is this story outside of Hamilton County?"
"Known well enough someone wrote a novel about it, and I think there was a play, but it was all local."

"Would someone from Ephesian's group know the story?"

"Its likely, especially as that is the property her uncle owned."

"You said this was a ghost story. Has anyone reported sightings of Sarah or Sullivan?" Especially in a report that would have crossed Mulder's desk at some point, she silently added.

Marion chuckled. "Well you know I don't believe in ghosts myself, Agent Scully, but there is the occasional story that runs around here. You know how folk can be, a romantic story of star-crossed lovers, there are all sorts of claims that their spirits were spotted in the cemetery or out wandering around that field. Every year at Valentines and Halloween usually there is some crazy rumor about the ghosts of Sarah and Sullivan uniting in the afterlife like they never had in their own."

Except they hadn't united there either, if Mulder and Melissa's so called past lives could be believed. But somehow this was looking less and less like a past life, and more and more like a fantasy, spun out of Melissa's own broken mind, clinging to the romance of Sarah Kavanaugh and Mulder's own deep sense of guilt and loneliness, searching for something, anyone to connect to, to share his pain. Someone to connect to his pain that wasn't Scully.

That thought slapped her in between the eyes as she glanced at the photographs. "Is there a way I could borrow these for our investigation?"

"Borrow?" Marion sounded hesitant and understandably so. These were perhaps the only two photographs they had of the pair and much of the historical evidence of the time period was quickly beginning to become lost to time. "I suppose so, the Historical Society has copies as well, but these are our originals."

"If something should happen to them, I assure you, the FBI would reimburse you." Of course she'd have to explain to Skinner why it was she was making off with rare Civil War photographs in the first place. And somehow she doubted he was going to be particularly understanding of star-crossed lovers and Mulder's past life.

"I suppose so." She didn't seem comfortable with the idea, but equally seemed unwilling to say no to a Federal Agent. "Do you think they will help you with your case?"

"Maybe." Scully sighed vaguely, gathering them both up and murmuring her gratitude to the woman who had been kind enough to shed a bit of light to the mystery of just who Sarah Kavanaugh and Sullivan Biddle were. Not that it helped Scully much in her search for the bunker that Ephesian was keeping his weapons in. The only think she knew for sure now was that it existed, not where it existed. And short of getting a warrant, which a judge would be loathe to do now without any hard evidence of Ephesian's weapons stockpile, it looked as if Ephesian and Melissa Riedel would both be released.

What would Mulder have to say about that?

She paused in the parking lot, staring at the two pictures in hand, the sensitive, handsome solidier boy and his pretty lover, forever out of his reach. Did Mulder honestly believe this woman he had only just met was some embodiment of some long lost love? And why should she care if he did believe that? Mulder usually believed 100 impossible things before his morning coffee and she always suspected that he was more than a bit of a romantic at heart. So what if he insisted that somewhere, lifetimes ago, Melissa Riedel was his soul mate, just as Scully was always...well
always his loyal, expendable friend?

Why did it hurt her so very much to think about?

Chapter End Notes

You know, when I considered what Sarah's inheritance likely entailed in antebellum Tennessee, the story takes on a decidedly less romantic tone for me. Just saying.
In which Scully debates predestination with Mulder.

The meeting with OPR had gone better and worse than Scully had hoped.

"A fine report, Agent Scully." Skinner's sounded more positive than he looked, his normally stoic, plain features even more grim than usual. Meetings with OPR rarely ever made anyone in the FBI smile. Scully found she couldn't as she shot an apprehensive look back towards the conference room doors.

"What do you think will happen, sir?" The fall out from the Vernon Ephesian mess was instant and sensational, with CNN and every media outlet analyzing and over analyzing every move the FBI made in Chattanooga. And of course that placed herself and Mulder squarely in the spotlight, much to both of their chagrins.

"I have a feeling there will be a lot of pissing and finger pointing, perhaps a Senate oversight committee manhandling, and in a few months Vernon Ephesian and all of his followers will be written off in the popular media as nothing more than another sad story."

"Forty-five men, women, and children dead and it will be swept under the rug?" It was an outrage, really, to think that their lives would become nothing more than footnotes in Chattanooga popular lore, like Sarah and Sullivan. They would become a byword for any and all such groups out there, religious fanatics drawn up into the twisted theology of one, charismatic man, and the thought was depressing.

"It won't be totally swept under the rug, no, but I think ATF is going to get a large spanking from Attorney General Reno's office once they get wind that they acted before you and Mulder had found the bunker."

"Perhaps if Mulder had pieced together Ephesian's next moves sooner, we could have saved…"

"Mulder is a damn good profiler, Scully, but he's still only human, neither one of you should beat yourselves up on that. ATF pushed them too hard and Ephesian acted accordingly. We tried. That's all we could do."

Tried and yet people still died. And then there was Mulder. "Sir, thank you for being understanding about Agent Mulder not coming in. Cases like these, when there's a young woman with Melissa Riedel's background…"

"We all have our demons, Agent Scully." Skinner brushed her words off gruffly. "It took me a long time before I could handle cases with dead children and not think of Vietnam. We deal. Agent Mulder's been dealing with this for a long time."

He seemed to have all the confidence in the world that Mulder would able to shake this off. Scully couldn't bring herself to explain why it was that this particular loss so devastated her partner. She had trouble even wrapping her thoughts around the idea. Personally, she still didn't believe that
there could be any connection beyond that of sympathy between Mulder and Melissa, certainly not soul mates, tied together through all eternity with one another. She couldn't believe that. She wouldn't.

"Why don't you take a few days yourself, Agent Scully, clear your head." Skinner's suggestion was suspiciously sounding like an order. The last thing Scully wanted was to be alone right now, brooding on the sight of Mulder's devastation in the face of Melissa Riedel's death.

"Sir, there are still several of the bodies from the compound that need to have their autopsies completed, and I just can't…"

"Aren't there other pathologists who can do that?" Again there was the steel of command in Skinner's tone and she had a feeling she'd lose this argument. "It's not that we don't know what killed them, Agent Scully. Go home. Don't show up here till Monday or I'll take your badge away till then."

He meant it. Nodding reluctantly, Scully turned from her taciturn boss, knowing she didn't have much of a choice. Perhaps Skinner was right. She too needed time to process, to assess, to shuffle through her own feelings regarding this case. She was an FBI agent, yes, and a very capable one, but any sight like the one that had greeted her when she stepped into that lonely chapel in that desolate field would shock anyone. All those bodies scattered, the children, lips still stained from their fruit drink, looking as if they slept peacefully beside their parents. And then Melissa…and Mulder standing over her, shattered…

Spinning smartly away from her boss, Scully's steps echoed darkly down the hallway as she made her way to the parking garage. She didn't even bother returning to the office, her briefcase and purse in hand as she climbed into her warm sedan, the heat of late summer not yet having given into the cool of fall. She didn't have a place she wanted to go, really, or a place she needed to be. But Scully started her car anyway, pulling it out and pointing it in a direction that seemed to fit, not caring where she ended up as she wended through DC, only that she was moving and thinking.

Mulder had said little as they had started the sad task of checking the bodies and calling in paramedics. No one commented as his long legs had picked carefully through the fallen bodies, moving towards the door. But Scully had watched as he slipped outside and stood, for what seemed like forever, in the field just beyond, unmoving. It was later, when even she had to get away from the crushing desolation of it all, that she wandered out to check on him in the waning light of the September sunset. He stood there, the two photographs of Sarah and Sullivan in hand. Even through the haze of numb depression, that sight had cut through her, deepening the wound she already felt. It hurt to know that they had failed these people. But seeing Mulder so pained by Melissa's death in particular, Scully hadn't known what to say. She immediately had smothered her flash of hurt in the moment with guilt over anger against the dead, but hadn't bothered to analyze why she was angry, or why it hurt so much.

That had been a week ago now and there had been no time to turn those thoughts over in her mind. The firestorm that exploded with the media had drug her along, and though Mulder had given half-hearted efforts to stay involved, she'd forced him away from it. The last thing the FBI needed was for the media to probe a heart sore Mulder about how he knew and what he knew. It had all the potential for a nasty melt down that would look bad for both him and the Bureau and she wouldn't have it. He'd accepted her rational gracefully enough for him and had been quiet ever since, perhaps too quiet.

Without thought she turned her car in the direction of Virginia and Mulder's apartment. She had no idea if he would even be there right now. As usual, when Mulder fell into his pit of despair he
walled everyone out, including her. Would he have walled Melissa Riedel out, she wondered in
gauge peevishness, feeling immediately sorry for the thought. What had her mother told her about
thinking ill of the dead, especially a dead woman who had led the life Melissa Riedel had?

Traffic mid-day was practically non-existent as Scully crossed the Potomac and turned
automatically down the city streets that led to Mulder's own tired, shady apartment building. She
could see it, tall and depressed in the distance, as she paused at a four way stop by a high school, a
tall, chain-linked fence cutting off the school's athletic field from the street just beyond. Normally
she would ignore the expanse of green field with its track surrounding it, but something about the
lone figure racing around the far bend of the orange track caused her to do a double take. She
recognized the dark head and lanky gait immediately.

The car behind her honked as she lingered at the stop sign, and suddenly decided to turn right
towards the school, parking on the street by the fence and watching Mulder for a long moment as
he ran the track. It made sense him being there. Mulder always preferred something physical when
he was troubled or in thought, as if his restless energy needed release before he could focus or
come to terms with whatever was top of mind.

At the far end of the field she could see a huddle of teenage boys in pads and jerseys, all working
football drills, oblivious to the strange man running on their track. Clearly, Mulder wasn't that
usual of a sight, she mused, as she slipped through the gate and down the small, grassy rise to
the bleachers that lined the football field. She didn't call attention to herself immediately, only
sitting as she watched Mulder come around the far bend again, speeding down the straightaway
towards where she sat. She knew he saw her, that he knew she was there, but remained silent as he
slowed to a jogging stop, his chest heaving in gasping breaths under his faded, gray t-shirt, as he
shook his sweat soaked hair out of his eyes. It was always at awkward moments like this that it
occurred to Scully that she did find her partner attractive, brought home to her by the rare sight of
him in shorts and her brain inconveniently reminded her of that as he shuffled towards the
bleachers, reaching for a towel tossed there.

"How did you find me here?" It wasn't asked in anger or irritation, only surprise.

"I'm that good of an investigator, Mulder, and perhaps I've learned a few of your profiling tricks?"
He snorted softly. "Figured out I wasn't at home?"

"Nope, chance really. I stopped up there and saw you running." She shrugged as he flopped down
on the bench just below her, stretching out his tall form just at her feet. She primly tucked her long,
pencil skirt around her knees, watching him as he worked to get his breath back. "The high school
doesn't mind you using the track when the kids are here?"

"Nope." He gasped, nodding towards the football players in the distance. "I come by when I can.
They like having an FBI agent who uses the place. Keeps the kids in line, knowing I'm around."

She shot him a teasing smile. "Showing off your badge and gun again?"

"Perhaps they aren't as impressive to 16-year-olds as an eight-year-old, but if it keeps them from
trying to shoot one another, I'm all for it." He wiped at the lingering sweat on his face, watching
her speculatively. "How did the meeting with OPR go?"

"How does any meeting with OPR go?" Despite the many times they'd been called before the
Office of Professional Responsibility, the joke fell flat as she shrugged. "Justice isn't happy in the
slightest. The Attorney General islivid and it's all over the news, but the good news, I think, is that
the Bureau won't be left holding the bag on this one for a change."
"There's a first. The ATF going to finally pony up to their end of what they did?"

"I doubt it, but the truth is that they acted without conferring with the Bureau first. If they had, perhaps we could have saved lives." Including Melissa's she thought sadly.

"And no one is screaming Spooky Mulder had anything to do with this?" He sounded doubtful that could be possible.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Mulder. You tried to warn them what was going to happen."

"Not fast enough." That much was true and it was a weight that she felt she bore equally alongside of him.

"No, not fast enough, but perhaps we wouldn't have needed to if they'd not been so eager to find weapons and had perhaps calculated the human cost first."

"Perhaps." Mulder sighed, shifting to sit up as he stared into the distance, watching the kids as they ran. "Vernon Ephesian believed what he preached, Scully. He wasn't simply some charismatic asshole who twisted people for the sheer pleasure of it. He was a man who expected that the end times were here and he saw our investigation as a product of that. It was better to take them away than to let Satan have his flock."

"That's not something I can comprehend, Mulder, much less compute." It was against everything her faith believed and stood for.

"I don't think I do either, Scully, if I did, perhaps those people wouldn't be dead."

"And Melissa?" She couldn't help herself. The name tumbled out, so familiar to her because of her own beloved sister, but now so foreign and painful. She hated that. She hated even more that Mulder winced as she said it, the profound sadness that shrouded him that day now settling down once again.

"Perhaps you were right, Scully, Melissa Riedel was nothing but a very broken girl."

"But you don't believe that, do you?" She knew he didn't. He wanted to believe that these past lives were real, to cling to that romantic notion that out of nowhere, his soul mate had appeared, even for a moment. For a man who had known nothing but pain in his personal life, the idea that somehow, some way, a woman who could be his perfect "one", a link to a happier time outside of this crappy existence, she knew it was comforting to him, even if that love never worked out in the end. Perhaps in Mulder's twisted, warped sort of way, this was his idea of the perfect romance.

"I don't know what I believe, Scully." Mulder draped his towel over his head, effectively shutting her out of any thoughts she could discern otherwise.

"But you want to believe it." Why did she press him on this? Perhaps she foolishly hoped he would deny her, tell her that he couldn't ever really believe Melissa, despite her memories, that he didn't long for that girl to be alive so he could see if it was true, to see if they really were meant to be together forever.

"I'd like to believe there is something beyond this life we live, yes." It was a nice, safe answer. "I'd like to believe that there are people we are tied, again and again, through one life to the next."

"You can't believe that our souls are our own, that they live their appointed lives and move on?"

"Aren't you the one who told me that the dead still speak to us, crying for justice?"
He had to bring up the other Melissa in her life and that stung painfully. "I have to believe that though my sister's soul cries for justice, Mulder, she's in a better place, beyond this world, with my father and all of those who I loved who went before. I believe that once we've left this life, we've move beyond it. To be trapped over and over again, in an endless loop we don't even understand, it strikes me as...as..."

"Hell?" He cocked his terry cloth covered heat up at her, eyes curious. She wasn't in the mood for a metaphysical discussion with him.

"What does that say about our lives, Mulder, about our free will and choices? Does this mean that we are nothing more than puppets in one story after another, thrown together to relive that same sad story over and over again? You will forever lose Samantha, watch your father die, I will forever be your best friend, comrade-in-arms, destined to die loyally by your side."

"You aren't comforted by the knowledge that we've been friends through time?" Mulder of course took the other side, the opposite angle, it was what he did, what they did and always did. "If you had known at the beginning, when they assigned you to me, would that have changed how you approached our partnership, knowing that this was meant to be?"

That they were meant to be, friends forever, Scully standing by his side holding him back from the tides that threatened to swallow him whole, the loyal friend who stayed with him, even when he was doing something incredibly stupid, while he threw his heart around to others. How much longer could she do that? If any of this was right, and she couldn't make herself believe it was, how could she justify this action lifetime after lifetime? There had to be an end, didn't there? Sometimes, he would have to realize that she wasn't just some sidekick to have there to get him out of trouble, to cover his ass when he went off on yet another fit of self-flagellating depression. When would he realize that she was something more than just a fixture in his life, like his crappy apartment or his goldfish? He only ever seemed to care when her life was in danger somehow, and then it was only insofar as him having to accept the fact that she could very well be taken away from him. His attachment was bred out of dependence, not affection, not like the spontaneous love he had or a perfect stranger, a woman who represented a world of possibilities for him, possibilities he obviously didn't see with anyone else, especially not Scully.

Why had she thought that?

Scully's felt her cheeks flush as she ducked her face to pick at her gray skirt. "Mulder, I told you I wouldn't have changed a day and it wouldn't have changed the way I look at you."

Not that she knew in this moment how exactly she looked at him, and it was that unsettling thought that caused her to stand, stretching her back slightly as she looked anywhere but at the surprised look of her partner. "We are partners and we are friends, Mulder. Perhaps that's all we have ever been destined to be, if we believe your theories."

"At least we chose each other and it's not someone else throwing us together." Confusion warred with forced hopefulness as Mulder immediately sensed something was wrong, but was unable to pin it down. And she didn't want him to, she didn't want his profiler's mind ferreting this weakness out, finding it and studying it before she even had a chance to rationalize what was going on in her own mind. She wouldn't allow him that luxury.

"Funny, I don't see it that way. Your theory means we were meant by fate to live these same roles over and over again, nothing more and nothing less. And I don't think I can accept that. Call it my Catholic faith, call it my stubborn insistence that I do have some choice in my life, but I'm more than simple set dressing in a play. The world isn't just a stage for us to play on and we aren't just stock characters in a story. I didn't choose to be your partner because some men threw me at you to
debunk your work, and I didn't wander over to you because we've been friends from the beginning of time. I'm here, Mulder, because I believe in you and your work and because I need to know as well."

Her words still hung in the afternoon air as Mulder's stared up at her from his ridiculous towel, stunned by her diatribe, clearly not expecting the vehemence in her words. Scully had expected them either, but they had welled up, hot and angry out of her soul, as somewhere inside of her emotions churned sickeningly and she had the sudden urge to flee, to get away from her partner as fast as she could and return to Georgetown and the comfort of her home. She felt tired and spent. Perhaps these days off were what she needed.

"I'm going home." Her statement was flat and final, much like how she felt. Carefully she picked her way across the bleacher, her heels teetering wobbly as she stepped across, forcing her to accept the proffered hand of Mulder as she tried to manage to get down off the benches with a semblance of grace and dignity. His fingers burned against hers and they tightened as she attempted to slip her hand away, to retreat.

"Scully, if I've said or done anything to upset you…"

He sensed it, with Mulder's infinite capability to read her every thought. Her spine stiffened and she gently pried her hand loose, trying and failing to shoot him a reassuring smile.

"I'm fine, Mulder." Her stock, catch phrase, and the one she knew he didn't believe the moment she said it. She straightened her shoulders and turned for her car, stopping short of running full tilt by marching determinedly up the hill. She didn't look back. She couldn't bring herself to do it. She would see him on Monday. That would be soon enough.
The firestorm over Ephesian's mass suicide had not let up one wit for the Justice Department, but for Scully and Mulder things quieted down considerably in the weeks following the incident. Anger and questions shifted, and Scully was not sorry to see the ATF on the hot seat, especially considering it was their fault lives were lost. Mulder agreed, though he had little to say about any of it beyond that. They had conveniently stepped around the entire issue lying there between them, returning to the basement office and the X-files as if Melissa Riedel had never happened.

But Scully knew she had. She could see it in every far away look on Mulder's face as he sat at his desk, his long fingers twiddling a pencil absentely until he finally noticed her gaze on him. She pretended not to see how he had kept photocopies of the two pictures of Sarah and Sullivan, the former neatly repaired after Melissa had destroyed it. Marion at the Hall of Records had been less than pleased. Scully said nothing though as she caught him staring at them one morning, before he shuffled them away in a desk drawer that she was fairly certain housed the videos he swore he didn't own. It was as if Melissa and her memory had turned into some tragic, secret romance for him, hiding in his desk where he pined for a dead girl he barely knew.

It was so Byron-esque, she was disgusted by it, but Scully didn't say a thing, and that was how it had remained in the weeks since Chattanooga. A barrier had slid neatly between them since, dividing her table from his desk, her efficient coolness from his dark brooding. Not that anyone could tell from just a casual glance, they were polite as ever, worked as well together. But Melissa Reidel had come between them, or at least Scully had allowed her to come between them. Perhaps she should be more understanding of the dead, but the heartbroken schoolboy act had worn thin, leaving Scully heartily wishing they had never taken the Ephesian case at all.

"Earth to Scully!" Mulder's gravelly monotone finally sunk into her consciousness as she looked up over her computer monitor at him, frowning as he stood over her, waving a fax in front of her face.

"You doing okay?" He'd asked that question so many times over the last week she'd considered tattooing "I'm fine" on her forehead just so he would get the message. Instead she simply nodded, glancing at the blurry black ink. "Acton Center of Cosmetic and Reconstructive Surgery. Finally wanting to get to the bottom of your Ms. September mystery?"

"Someone lose their breast implants?"

"No, one of the surgeons stabbed a patient to death on the table, in full view of the cameras recording the entire procedure." Mulder waggled one dark eyebrow in excitement, spinning to his desk with the sort of bounce in his step he hadn't seen since before Chattanooga. "Dr. Robert Lloyd, part of the Acton Center, was scheduled for a routine liposuction at Greenwood Memorial, where Acton is contracted. The prep nurse says she informed him that his patient was ready, she
left him to start the procedure, and when she came back from prepping another surgeon's patient she saw the video of Dr. Lloyd stabbing the patient in the abdomen with the suction instrument."

"Stabbing?" Even she grimaced at the mental image, rubbing her own flat stomach in sympathy. "Did Dr. Lloyd know the patient personally?"

"No, in fact this makes the case all the better. The patient Lloyd killed wasn't even one of his. Lloyd was supposed to be working on a woman in for a liposuction procedure on her abdomen. The patient he killed was a man going in for hair plugs. The patient was anesthetized and didn't even know what was happening."

"Oh, no!" The doctor in Scully was horrified at the idea. It had all the trappings of one of the fantastic tales that would get passed around in med school among sleep deprived residents who began to wonder if they should slip something extra into that fifteenth cup of coffee. "How did Lloyd not realize?"

"The doctor said he can't recall any of his actions from the moment he stepped into the hospital that morning. He doesn't even remember going into surgery. When police took him into custody they claimed he was 'non-responsive'."

"Drugs?" That was the most obvious answer Scully had. Drug usage was the dirty little secret of the surgical community, the one that everyone turned a blind eye towards. It had been rampant in her days in the cardiology program under Daniel Waterston and it had been one of the big reasons for her to consider the switch from cardiology to pathology. The pressure of long hours, high stress cases, and all the small, tiny things that could go wrong with any major surgery often drove many to self-prescribing medication for themselves just to get by. Sleeping pills for insomnia was common, as were pain pills, anti-anxiety pills, you name it, it was imbibed in droves, and that wasn't counting the other illegal drugs.

"Lloyd admits to using some medications but insists he never took them before surgery. Police ran a test on him when they booked him, but so far nothing." Strange. Still, perhaps it wasn't that unusual, plastic surgery was a high-end business. People paid good money to look beautiful, hence why it had become such popular discipline when she was in medical school. How many times had Daniel bemoaned the best and brightest students gravitated towards cosmetology just for the sheer money factor? Little did many of them know that these places had such high volume that the work factor alone would burn them out long before they lost the ability to perform the surgeries. But the money was certainly nice.

"We could just be dealing with a case of mental or emotional fatigue, here, in which case I can't see what the X-file angle to this is? It's a case of manslaughter at worst and a nasty malpractice suit."

"Aren't you the one who is always yelling at me to take more realistic cases? So, we got one! What could be more normal than a case of a strange, accidental murder?"

"Except that's not what we investigate." She hated pointing out the obvious and for the life of her she couldn't figure out why Mulder would even sniff at a case like this. "What's the weird factor here?"

"Does there have to be one?" He shot her a lazy smile as he leaned back in his chair, ready for a full on banter session. Scully hardly felt in the mood.

"For you, always. Something your intuition is hinting at again? Another 'feeling' that will lead us
down the merry, goat trail, an ache in your toe this time, or perhaps a well-educated hunch?"

It was crossing a line, she knew that, and to be honest, Scully couldn't really say why she did it. He had teased, she had responded with a canon blast across his desk. It hit with all the painful immediacy of one too, hurt exploding across Mulder's lazy expression for a long, startling moment, before it was swallowed back, replaced by a hesitant shrug and smile, a convenient cover of the confusion she glimpsed.

"Sure, Scully, intuition. That's what Spooky Mulder is good for right?"

She sighed, flushing with guilt and kicking herself for her bitchiness, but he ducked away before she could even come up with a good apology, turning to his computer. "You mind if we take a flight out to Chicago in the morning? I'll call the police there, set something up for us to speak to Lloyd."

What could she say in response?

"Yeah, sure, no morning is fine." Her gaze lingered on him briefly as he nodded absently, slipping on his wire-rimmed reading glasses as he began clicking away on his keyboard, filling out travel forms. She should say something, Scully thought, at least beg forgiveness, claim it was hormones, a bad night's sleep, offer to buy him coffee, sunflower seeds, smile and make it up to him. But there was a corner of her pride that wouldn't allow it. Perhaps it wasn't fair. He hardly understood. She couldn't seem to make him understand and that was where her frustration lay, in between them, like everything else.
In which Scully vents her righteous indignation over the cosmetic surgery industry.

"There is something incredibly, decadently wrong about eating a deep-dish, Chicago style pizza while on a case regarding plastic surgery." Mulder managed to mumble the entire sentence around a mouth full of greasy, cheesy, sausage filled goodness. Not even bothering with a knife and fork, he dug right into giant slice of thick pizza, heedless of white dress shirt, silk tie, hotel comforter, or the many colorful Acton Center pamphlets spread out across the bed between the two of them.

"You know it's eating like this that has encouraged the obesity rate that then subsequently fuels the cosmetic surgery industry." It wasn't stopping Scully from helping herself to a slice, neatly placing it on a paper plate with a fork and knife and trying to balance it on her upturned knee. "We are essentially feeding a monster here, both literally and figuratively."

"That's because it tastes so good to do it." Mulder sighed in contentment, hardly breathing before inhaling another bite. If Scully hadn't grown up with brothers, perhaps she would be more alarmed. His attempts to swallow the pizza whole only elicited the smallest of eyebrow raises as she turned her attention to the full-color, glossy pages scattered before them. The covers blared with perfect, white teeth, the joy of satisfied customers of the Acton Center, all in their well-paid for, well-manicured bodies. So much money was dumped into the national obsession to look good without working for it. A few thousand dollars to make a smile perfect, to remove the wrinkles from ones face, to get that one spot on your thighs all the elliptical in the world couldn't remove. When there were children who couldn't get their shots or people dying of disease that were treatable but they couldn't afford it, what justice was there in people spending money on larger lips or slimmer hips?

"You think about it, the rise of popularity of plastic surgery in this country goes right along with the increased consumerism of the post-war years. Our parents were taught they could be anything, have anything, take anything, and we carry that out to its logical conclusion. We are a culture that takes and takes and takes, but doesn't want to deal with any of the consequences. We want to eat our hamburgers, fries, and pizza." She waved dismissively to her own slice, half eaten on her plate. "Americans have the highest incidents of heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes and yet we think we can wave it all away with a magic wand. Come to Acton Center, let us suck away the fat and make you beautiful."

Mulder thumped his own, lean, flat washboard stomach and reached for another slice of pizza. "Because it's hard work maintaining one of these."

"You know there are people who would kill you for that statement."

"Not you. You're the size of what, a thimble?"

She snorted. "Physiques aside, Mulder, doesn't it disturb you how willing we are to put a premium on looks, but not on our health, to subject ourselves to the rigors of surgery for perfection, rather than just simply going out for a run, or joining a gym?"

He shrugged noncommittally as she continued. "When I was in med school it was the hot new field
everyone wanted to get into. Everyone in my surgical class was in on it, they all wanted to get their
degrees, move to Beverly Hills or Manhattan, make the big bucks working cosmetic surgery, retire
when they were forty and live the good life. It used to drive Daniel crazy."

"Daniel? The bastard ex who broke your heart and didn't bother to tell you he had a wife while he
was doing it?" Mulder frowned down at a piece wayward sausage trying to make its way off his
pizza slice via a long strand of stretchy mozzarella. It was the first time Scully could recall him
ever bringing up Daniel, at least since she told him the whole story.

"Yes, well he was the head of the cardiology school and he saw many a good medical student give
it all up to be wooed into cosmetic surgery. The world is in need of surgeons, good ones, with the
skills and know-how to make a difference in the world, not another person who can stick silicon
breasts into another bottle blonde."

"I don't disagree with you on that, Scully, but the sad truth is very few people are as altruistic as
you are. Many people just want to live their lives, do their job, sock some money away, buy their
multi-million dollar houses with their sports cars and their trophy spouses and call it a day."

Obviously Mulder had difficulty seeing her moral outrage in this. "Doctors like Robert Lloyd are
pushed to the brink everyday through overwork and drug abuse to tear through their patient loads,
and now people are dying because of it. You don't think that we have a problem here?"

"I think we have a problem, I'm just not sure it has anything to do with drugs, overwork, or whether
or not this is an overpaid industry. I don't think Lloyd's condition was as simple as any of those
factors?"

"Possession?" The patented Fox Mulder conclusion. When given a choice between logical and
strange, always go with the strange. "Mulder, I think Lloyd will say anything at the moment to get
out of manslaughter and malpractice charges."

"How many juries and medical boards do you know who accept possession as an acceptable
excuse? Face it, Scully, no one in their right mind would bring it up if they didn't somehow believe
it."

"Given his problems with insomnia and the level of Somanil in his system, he could believe there
were giant, marshmallow men in that surgical bay that caused him to do it. Claiming either could
make a jury go a lot less hard on him in the end."

"Speaking of marshmallow men." He groaned, setting the last of his slice, uneaten, in the box,
sliding down on he sheets as he did so and rubbing his stomach in contentment. "I think I might
explode all over New York City at the moment."

"I'm not surprised." She had barely finished half of her one slice. "I thought you might inhale the
whole thing."

He yawned, patting his flat belly again, now full and lazy as he toed off his shoes. It was really
disgusting how he got away eating the way he did and looking like that. She sighed, giving herself
the rare moment to allow a linger gaze while her partner was slipping into a sleepy, food coma. In
all their years together she hadn't really allowed herself too many of these chances with her partner.
Professionalism aside, it was dangerous territory for anyone, least of all her with her already long
track record of co-worker romances trailing along behind her. In any other given situation, had she
not been his partner, hell if she had even been in a different department in the FBI, she would have
perhaps eagerly sought out a chance to approach Fox Mulder for a drink or a conversation...or
maybe not. When they had first met he'd been knee high in the secretarial pool. She'd hardly have
been noticed for the young, tall, pretty blondes and brunettes tossing themselves at his feet. But he'd left that behind after her disappearance. He hadn't been on so much as a date since she returned, excepting with his videos in his desk. She didn't know if he even gave any woman more than a cursory glance, like the nurse he saw at the hospital that morning. He hadn't given any indication he was interested in seeing any woman, burying himself totally in his work, at least until Melissa Riedel came along.

Why did she have to think of that? Her mood spiraling along with her thoughts, Scully gathered the scattered brochures, trying to straighten the mess her partner once again seemed to make around himself. It was what she was good at, after all. She was already halfway towards the half-eaten pizza box before he stirred enough to protest.

"You know I can clean for myself, Scully."

"I've seen your apartment. I'm not sure what your definition of clean is, but that's not mine." She set the remains in the small, motel refrigerator, gathering her notes up as she went. "In the morning I'll see if I can't get a copy of the surgery video from the hospital. Maybe it will give us some insight into what was happening to Lloyd at the time."

"Right." He yawned sleepily, snuggling deeper into the thin pillows. His eyes fluttered, then creased as he opened one thoughtfully at her as she gathered her things to leave. "Would you ever do it, Scully?"

"Do what?" She paused at the door, hand on the knob as she turned back towards his question.

"Get surgery done?"

"Plastic surgery?" It took her a long moment to realize he was serious. "No, never thought about it."

"Not even a little?"

What was this all about, she wondered.

"Perhaps when I was younger, as a teenager, during my 'braces and glasses' phase, when I wanted to look more like my sister and less like me." Sadly there wasn't a plastic surgery in the world that could make her taller. "You seriously considering it?"

Mulder rubbed at his nose fitfully. Somehow she knew that was what was bugging him. "I don't know, I suppose everyone has something they would change about themselves."

"Don't get a nose job, Mulder." She rolled her eyes, opening the door. "You are handsome enough without it."

"Handsome?" His eyes brightened, a slow grin spreading across his face. "You think I'm handsome?"

Lord, why had that slipped out? Her face flushed as she realized he would be insufferable now that she had said it. "Why in the world would you think about surgery?"

"I don't know. Guess I never thought of my nose as handsome before."

Mulder, the king of insecurity. She had see this man turn grown women into piles of goo and he knew he could do it, too. He had no idea what he did to the female sex? Bambi Berenbaum, Detective White, every other female suspect they ran across, and he had no concept how he could
flip on a smile, shoot them one of his scintillating, knowing looks, a crooked grin, a smart ass comment, and he had them eating out of his hand?

"If not a nose job, maybe something with my chin. It's so weirdly shaped." Mulder rubbed roughly at his growth of stubble in dissatisfaction, clearly unwilling to see himself as anything other than imperfect.

"I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you."

"What, a man can't feel insecure about himself physically?"

"Mulder, I could wash clothes off of your abs and you are telling me you feel insecure?"

"You have seen my abs?"

"I've seen you naked, unconscious and near death." He was egging her on and she knew it. "You are perfect the way you are. Don't fall into this trap/ Just, leave it and realize that there are some people out there who like you, big nose, weird chin and all."

"Perfect to some," he maintained petulantly, clearly enjoying her remarks and milking them for all they are worth. "It's easy when you are standing there with not a thing you would change about yourself."

"It's because I accept who I am, Mulder, and I don't seek to change that."

"And who you are is near perfect, Scully. A stunningly, beautiful woman like you, hell even I'm surprised no plastic surgeon has snapped you up yet and taken you away from this drudgery of a life with me to one of those multi-million dollar homes with a sports car he's funded through nose jobs."

Stunningly beautiful? Not words she had heard out of Mulder before. Others yes, but never him. It gave her pause. He'd mentioned she was pretty, attractive, yes, but Mulder said that about many women. Beautiful? Did he really think she was? What did he mean by that? And why would he say it? Confusion warred with the lingering bitterness of Melissa Riedel in her mind as she felt her cheeks turn crimson red, her eyes ducking from his as she turned to the door.

Mulder sensed immediately he had said something wrong. "Scully, look, I was joking…"

"No, it's fine, Mulder, I know, trophy wife, rich husband, all that." She tried to shrug it off, lifting her shoulders vaguely as she hugged the pile of glossy papers tightly to her chest. "Listen, I better get some sleep, and you too. No more talk of surgery for now. Get some rest."

Her uneasy smile did nothing to ease his now evident worry. "Sure! See you in the morning. I'll get the coffee."

"I'll hold you to that." She closed the door behind her firmly, hiding the whirlwind of panicked thoughts and emotions from him.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully chastises Mulder on his pride.

The silence in Skinner's office made Scully's skin itch. She refused to twitch or to even move a muscle as their boss reviewed the neatly typed report in front of him, one muscle in his tightly clenched jaw ticking ever so slowly to the beat of his heart. She tried to gauge it quietly, to count the number of pulses, to judge the rate at which his blood pressure was rising and falling and just how much explaining she and Mulder were going to have to do. Surprisingly he seemed calm for Skinner, perhaps too calm.

"So do you have an APB out for Jack Franklyn?" Skinner closed the file before leaning back in his desk chair to pin Scully down with his dark eyes. He had this way of sitting, leaning on one arm of the chair as if clearly needing physical support to wrap his head around the reports that she and Mulder submitted to him. Scully swallowed, nodding.

"I put one out as soon as we realized he was missing. Chicago police have a search out for him, but so far he's managed to elude detection. US Border Authority hasn't seen him cross into either Canada or Mexico, and he's not been seen at any of the major Chicago airports, train stations, or terminals. The search is ongoing, sir."

The muscle ticked again.

"We have four people dead, malpractice suits already being filed, and Chicago PD looking to us to even begin to know who to charge, if anyone. Do we honestly want to go to them with the charge that this was some sort of Wiccan curse?" Skinner hardly moved as his eyes flickered to Mulder, for once motionless beside her. "And I for one don't want to start some sort of literal witch hunt in Chicago when word gets out that people practicing ancient religions might be out there hexing people getting face jobs."

Scully could already see the headlines regarding this should it ever come out, the outrage from those who practiced Wicca, the old familiar hysteria from conservative Christian groups once they got wind that there were those out there who followed anything other than their black-and-white Bible. She had little understanding of the practice herself, though she'd heard enough lectures from her sister Melissa to know that modern day Wicca usually weren't the demon-worshiping, evil spawn of Satan they had been painted to be after four centuries of witch hunting. But then again, she was a highly intelligent woman with half a brain in her head, reactionary wasn't necessarily her style. That wasn't the case for the average American when the word "witch" was dropped on their nightly news.

"Sir, like any faith, Wiccans can use their beliefs for good and for evil." Mulder had already anticipated this argument, countering Skinner without a beat. "As you read in Agent Scully's analysis, we can never completely understand the apparatus behind how he influenced these people. We do know though that when a search of Franklyn's home was conducted by police, paraphernalia consistent with those who practice the so called 'darker' side of Wiccan arts were found, including complete patient and personnel lists for the Acton Center. Whether or not Franklyn actually managed to pull off a spell, the evidence is there that he's guilty at least of being
directly involved in those deaths."

"Somehow, I don't think the Chicago District Attorney's office will care unless we have something linking Franklyn directly to those murders, Agent Mulder, and short of him standing there with a gun to those physicians backs, we have nothing."

"Except for the face of Jack Franklyn in cold storage somewhere. You'd think that people might be able to tell us if they saw a man without one running around somewhere."

Points to Mulder for flippancy, Scully thought, as the usual Mexican stand off between her, Mulder, and Skinner ensued. Much longer and Skinner would lose his temper or Mulder would swallow his foot, and as usual she felt herself scrambling to relieve the situation before an argument began.

"Sir, all we can tell the Chicago District Attorney is that Jack Franklyn remains a suspect at large for questioning in regards to these incidents. To be honest, the DA there likely doesn't have enough direct evidence to charge any of the other doctors with anything beyond manslaughter, and I'm not sure even those charges will stick. I say we leave it up to them as to how they wish to pursue this."

It wasn't an answer Skinner liked, nor Mulder for that matter, who only shrugged at her suggesting, stopping just short of a full on sulk before schooling his face to careful neutrality. He wasn't willing to concede this, but this wasn't a battle he was willing to drag out either, not when there would be more serious ones in the future. Mulder had learned the fine art of choosing his arguments, finally, but only after years of bitter lessons on the subject. She had a feeling she was going to hear an earful of it on their way out of the office.

"Very well." Skinner snapped to attention again, reaching for his pen and scribbling across the report's bottom page with a hard, firm hand. "My recommendation then will be to hand this back to the local authorities for them to pursue as they wish. As such, agents, your case is closed."

His pen stabbed briefly, dotting the one "I" in his signature before he briefly inclined his head, his indication to them they were summarily dismissed. Scully had already begun the count till Mulder's expected meltdown. With as much graceful alacrity as she could muster she rose, her heels scraping against the carpeted floor as she let herself out, shooting Kim the briefest of smiles before moving out into the hallway. The heat she could feel radiating off of Mulder was incandescent. Perhaps they could make it to the elevator this time before he snapped?

Five…four…three…two…one….

"Turning this over to the District Attorney? You know that his office will do nothing about Franklyn!"

At least they had made it to the elevator bank. She calmly pressed one of the glowing buttons before turning to meet Mulder's petulant anger.

"Mulder, what else could we do? Skinner was right. If we go out there stating we are looking for a well-respected doctor who also happens to be a suspect in a murder investigation involving witchcraft and occult practices, do you know how fast that will get all over the media? Not only will we have outrages against real life witches, how solvent will the DA's case be against Franklyn? All the defense would have to do is paint the FBI, and you in particular, as a bunch of rabble rousing, sensation hounds looking to pin a murder on an innocent man in what is sadly a case of medical malpractice. Face it, Mulder, we couldn't recommend taking this to trial. We don't even have Franklyn in custody."
"He was responsible for those deaths and now he's walking free without paying for his crimes." Justice was so convenient for Mulder when his righteous indignation was involved. "Who is to say that in five years he won't do this all over again, in another city, with other victims?"

"If your theory is correct he's doing it in another man's face anyway. How do we even begin to catch him?" The elevator sounded as she met his anger coolly, turning towards the doors and stepping inside, moving to the far corner of where he stood, brooding. She studied him as he glared at everything and nothing at all. "What is bothering you more with this case, Mulder, the fact that the bad guy got away or the fact that it was as plain as the nose on your face who it was and you missed it?"

In an instant, ire flashed to life, eyes cutting at her in disbelief. "You think this is a matter of personal pride for me?"

"Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas. Sister Mary Margret used to quote that to me when I would punch a boy in school."

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Mulder's Latin skill obviously weren't rusty. In irritation he chewed at his bottom lip, turning from her to the opening doors. "Jack Franklyn hardly wounded my pride, Scully."

"But you're pissed off he got away all the same." She trailed behind him as he whipped out of the elevator and towards their office door, keys in hand. "Not everything is a grand secret, a raging conspiracy, some cases just don't want to be found out. Other agents deal with this all the time and it is hardly an issue for them."

"Other agents didn't want this case. That's why we had it." The office door opened with a squeaky pop. Mulder brushing it aside as she moodily crossed to his desk, flopping unceremoniously in his chair. Brilliant, Scully sighed, cranky Mulder for the remainder of the afternoon. She would spend the next four hours watching as he shuffled piles of nothing about his desk, stare moodily up at the ceiling and if she was really lucky, whip out his ever present basketball to smack on angst-ridden contemplation on the broken linoleum of the floor.

"Perhaps I'll go to lunch then. Want anything?" She couldn't handle the petulance, not today. Her head was throbbing again and her eyes smarted with it. She wanted out of the office, into the cooling fall air, a nice drink, a cookie, something to smile about and not think about Fox Mulder and his vanity.

"Yes." Mulder reached across his desk, fingers crawling around a pencil he twiddled between fidgeting fingers, even as he stretched his long legs up across his work space. "What's really going on with you?"

Going on with her? Mulder was known for his non-sequitur, but even that caught her off guard. "I'm fine, Mulder. I just want to get out of the office for a bit."

"It's not just that. It's the elevator just now, it is Skinner's office, it's the times we are together working, it's the times we aren't. We got back from Tennessee and you've been looking for reasons to pick at me, piss me off, get me angry, as if you need a reason to keep me at arms length. Why?"

She desperately wanted to say she hadn't done any such thing, that he was being over reactionary, as usual. But it was Mulder, quite possibly one of the most perceptive humans on the planet and she knew he'd see through her lie. "I don't know, Mulder. Perhaps its just the time of year, the season, hormones, who knows. I haven't been feeling well, perhaps I should get it checked out."
A flicker of concern arose for a moment. "I told you to take some time after the Schnauz case…"

"It's not that." She slammed the words between them, a line he couldn't cross. Why did everything have to come back to Mulder's never-ending guilt? "Not everything is about you, Mulder."

Had she meant to say that? A part of her wanted to, it was why it had slipped out. Everything of late, his mother, Melissa, his own damned guilt every time she as much as got a hangnail it all centered on him. Even the damned X-files themselves and her place on it hinged on him. For once, dear God, couldn't she just be pissy just to be pissy, without it having to be about him? Except it was about him.

What in the hell was going on with her anymore anyway?

"Look, I just want a coffee and a cookie. Do you want one or not?"

"No." The word was so chilled, so distant that Scully felt herself shiver from it and felt mild alarm as the veils slammed down quickly around Mulder. She hadn't seen those in such a long time from him, not since they had first worked together. So much had happened since then. Why was she choosing now to completely lose her temper?

"Fine, I'll see you when I get back." She blindly reached for her purse, stopping just short of fleeing from him, confusion warring with self-anger. She wished she could explain it to him, she really did, this behavior, this need to lash out at him. She realized, however, as she waited for the doors to open, she didn't understand these feelings herself.

What was wrong with her?
Chapter Summary

In which the Lone Gunmen tell their story about the shadowy figure who haunts Mulder and Scully's lives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The silence ran hours, days, now weeks. It rang in the basement and practically screamed everywhere else, the quietude between them. No more random phone calls as she prepared for bed, wanting to discuss infomercials, no more offers for good coffee, or random lunches wandering the National Mall, chatting about everything and nothing. Mulder hid behind his desk, nose towards his computer, pretending to look busy behind his reading glasses. Scully stayed to her table, organizing, filing, and collating everything and nothing in particular. There wasn't a new case, there wasn't anything, just the stretch of wounded pride and hurt feelings, sometimes punctuated by polite reminders of meetings and reports due. Scully wished she could say it was peaceful, relaxing even, a time to get so much done. But frankly she'd rather take fighting like cats and dogs than this polite silence. Her nerves rattled with each roll of his chair wheels every time he rose from his desk. She could no longer stomach the formal, brief greetings to each other of a morning. Something was going to break soon, but she wasn't sure if it was their partnership or her sanity.

As it turned out neither happened. Mulder simply turned another year older.

She hadn't meant to be unmindful of his birthday. She had it marked on her calendar, October 13, circled in bright red. It was a Sunday. Before the renewal of the Cold War in the basement, she had thought about offering to go by his apartment, take him somewhere for brunch, make a day of it. Not that she knew what Mulder would like to do for a birthday, he usually tried to pretend it didn't exist. She'd missed his first two birthdays and last year had determinedly showed up at his doorstep at some God awful hour on a Saturday with donuts and coffee, surprising her half-unclothed partner who had stared at her offering as if she had lost her mind. Friendlier times between them, to be certain. She had been flustered by his lack of clothing, he had hardly noticed as he wolfed down several donuts sleepily, worried that her dog might pee on his carpet. They had been close then, closer than now. She hadn't thought twice about so intimate of an act as showing up at his apartment with birthday breakfast. Now, she was working up the courage to ask him out for an after work beer, braving the Friday night crowds to at least make a token effort to show her appreciation for his birthday. She stared at the chasm between them, the divide between his desk and her table, and wondered how to even begin broaching it.

Mulder rose, his tall form unfolding from his chair as he reached for his briefcase, beginning to pack up for the evening. He said nothing as she watched him gather and stow away files, flipping through articles he was reading, powering down his computer. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but her voice was failing her as he methodically prepared to leave for the weekend, reaching for his trench coat, barely shooting a glance her way.

"Mulder," she managed to choke out, stopping him in mid-stride across the room. He turned, half surprised, half wary, frowning at her nervously twisting fingers in her lap.
"What are you doing tonight?" Scully couldn't have sounded any more like a thirteen-year-old if she tried. Her cheeks warmed as she stuttered on, past Mulder's confusion. "It's just that it's your birthday on Sunday, and I know you never like celebrating it, but I thought I could take you out for a beer, something, just to mark the event?"

Did her voice really need to sound that breathless and high?

"Oh!"

Had the man forgotten his own birthday? Judging by the look of surprise in his eyes as they widened apologetically, clearly he had or perhaps he had hoped she had forgotten? "Scully, that's nice, but I…."

He fumbled as his arms, laden with briefcase and coat, waved vaguely towards the door. "I had already made plans for tonight."

Of course, people often did make plans on Fridays, especially before birthdays. Why couldn't Mulder do that for his? "I hadn't meant to presume, I'm sure you have other things you'd want to do on the weekend. Perhaps Monday, I'll bring coffee again, something…"

She refused to feel defeated that her one gesture was shot down! She refused to feel defeated…. "Yeah, Monday." Mulder muttered, his bottom lip sucking between his teeth in agitation as he glanced from the clock on the wall to the door, clearly wanting out of there. "I mean, you remembered! That's half of the thought, right? That stands for something."

"Yep!" She tried to plaster a bright smile of agreement on. She was failing miserably. "So got big plans then for your thirty-fifth?"

He winced as she dropped his age. "Nope…I…err…was just meeting up with the guys…the Gunmen."

Well, Scully mused gloomily, could she blame him, the way she had behaved of late? At least the three of them didn't bite his head off for no reason. "Sounds like fun."

"Yeah." His teeth dug in again, thoughtfully. "Look, they are worked up about something or the other, I don't know what, but they called at lunch and wanted me to stop by. Maybe you can come with. We'll see what they want and then we'll go out after for that beer."

"I don't want to intrude, Mulder, not for time with your friends."

"It's Frohike, Byers, and Langley, I don't think that's intruding. Besides, Melvin's been complaining he hasn't seen enough of you lately."

"I don't see how that's a bad thing." It was a tease, the first they'd had in weeks, earning a small smile out of Mulder as she nodded in agreement. "Fine, let me get my things. Taking two cars?"

"How about one. The boys sounded particularly paranoid tonight." Not that this was unusual for the Lone Gunmen, if they weren't paranoid about something, than Scully would be more worried. "I'll drive. I'll drop you off at your car later."

"Right, sure." This was the friendliest they had been towards each other in days. It was surprising how easy it was. Wordlessly she gathered her purse and things, following behind Mulder to the parking garage, trying to swallow every shaking nerve she felt at this moment. Two weeks ago this
excursion would hardly cause her to bat an eye. Well maybe bat an eye in annoyance. Now she felt as if their entire friendship was eggshell thin and threatening to burst apart.

His car was silent as they drove. She didn't know what to say really. Questioning him about his mother's health seemed trite. Asking him how he was dealing since Melissa Riedel's death seemed bitchy. Silence seemed preferable and yet it was horribly empty. Days ago, they had chatted about everything and nothing. Now they both seemed lost in their own thoughts, or at least Scully was lost in hers.

The Lone Gunmen's office was dark as they pulled into the alley. Not even the camera above the door twitched as they exited the car, wandering up the shaky, metal steps to the front door, emblazoned with their business sign. For men who took paranoia as their byword, they did little to hide their existence and identity from the world. Scully frowned up at the still night-vision lens above her, seriously hoping that this wasn't some house call for alien nudy pics or a strategizing session for some video game she had never heard of. It would be like the three of them to cloud something as simple as that in an air of mystery and secrecy.

It took several minutes and more than a few mild threats from Mulder before they got an answer to Mulder's pounding. The slit in the metal door that served as a peephole slid open, a pair of pale, bug eyes behind Coke-bottle glasses peered out at them with tense suspicion, lighting on Scully with both appreciation and apprehension.

"I thought you were coming alone." The glasses turned towards Mulder accusingly as he held up his hands.

Mulder held up his hands in protest. "I thought you liked ogling Scully, Frohike."

"Don't use names!" He hissed at them through the door, slamming the metal trap shut, before a series of combinations and chains could be heard loosening on the other side of the thick steel. Eventually, with the grating of metal that badly needed oiling, the door creaked open into dimness, the scent of rancid pizza boxes and unwashed socks nearly making Scully gag.

"Come on in! We haven't got all night!" Frohike rushed them both inside, slamming and locking the door behind them, nervously flicking every lock again as he shepherded them to the back, main room. Despite the cool of mid-October outside it was warm to the point of roasting in there, computers whirling at alarming rates, turning Langley's pale, blonde hair green and giving Byers' bearded face an unnatural glow.

"So, I'm taking it the Doom LAN party is scrapped." Mulder tossed his trench coat carefully on a chair, not before checking it first, frowning expectantly at the secretive trio. His patience for their usual brand of cloak-and-dagger antics was clearly very thin.

"And why are you so worried whether I showed up or not?" Scully shot a hurt gaze at Frohike's direction, causing the short, pug like man to color in the neon glow of his computer monitor.

"The news we have for you is sensitive in nature. We would have taken more precautions if we'd known." Byers fidgeted nervously with a wand like device and for half a mad second Scully wondered if he'd come at her with it. He seemed to be stopped short by the darkening scowl on Mulder's face.

"If this is another attempt at telling me that the CIA has bugged your toilet again..."

"This isn't about Spook antics, Mulder! We've come across the Holy Grail!" Frohike paused, glancing nervously around the darkened room. "Did you put the protocol in place?"
"When we called Mulder." Langley rolled his eyes, ignoring Frohike's fidgeting.

"And have you run sweeps?"

Byers waved the wand madly above his head. "Three times."

"Boys, the Hoover building is less secure than this place."

"Mulder, we've seen FBI security, someone should talk to them about…"

Frohike punched Langley hard in the shoulder, causing the other man to yelp but shutting him up effectively, earning a hard look for his efforts. Frohike ignored him, turning to pin Mulder with a meaningful smirk. "Happy birthday, my friend! I've brought you all the information you could ever want to know about the one thing that breaks all of this wide open!"

"Really." Even Mulder sounded skeptical at that. "So what, Elvis really is an alien?"

"You can laugh, Mulder, but we busted our asses on this." Langley's hair vibrated with excitement as he leaned across his table, eyes hollow behind his thick, plastic glasses. "People have died for the information we are about to give you."

Scully paused in her efforts to find a clean place to sit and toyed with the idea of snagging Mulder's trench coat to lay across what could dubiously be called a couch. "Died? Is it really that dramatic?"

"We've only uncovered the key figure to everything, the man who sits at the center of an elaborate and dark conspiracy." If Langley leaned foreword in his chair anymore he'd fall off, face first. There was no denying the excitement or the terror he felt.

"Look at you," Scully murmured, automatically reaching a doctor's hand for his feverish forehead. "You're shaking."

"What's going on?" Gone was Mulder's laconic drawl as eyes narrowed at the three of them.

"Frohike's close…"

Langley was cut off angrily from by the other, who grabbed him roughly away from Scully.

"Don't use my name, what the hell's wrong with you? Now I'll have to kill you!"

_Oh, Jesus_, Scully breathed as Byers once again waived his wand in front of the other two men's faces. "Langley and I performed three sweeps."

"He's everywhere, he's everywhere." Frohike muttered frantically, clutching at poor, manhandled Langley.

"…with the CPM-seven hundred and did not detect a single bug." Byers pressed over Frohike's protests.

"The CPM-seven-hundred is a piece of crap." Frohike growled, tossing Langley aside haphazardly to stalk the small amount of room between where they stood and where Mulder's long legs stretched.

"The acoustic correlator is reading only passive sounds."

"I've been here twenty minutes and I still don't know what the hell is wrong!" All patience snapped in Mulder. "No one would kill you, Frohike. You're just a little puppy-dog."
Frohike turned viciously on Mulder's comparison, clearly ignoring the fact Mulder had several inches of height and FBI training to his advantage. "I don't utter another syllable till the CSM-twenty-five countermeasure filter is activated."

Not that Scully understood a single syllable the weird, little man was uttering now, but Mulder threw up his hands in acquiescence as Byers moved towards his own little corner of their shared den, clicking away at a keyboard for several moments. "No electronic surveillance known can cut through the CSM-twenty-five."

So this was supposed to be reassuring? "Okay, now tell us what you're so close to."

"Not a what, a who!" Frohike's voice dropped to an ethereal, dramatic stage whisper. "If you find the right starting point and follow it, not even secrets of the darkest of men are safe."

If Frohike's grave pronouncement made no sense to Scully, it clearly made every bit of sense to Mulder. His impatience gave way as he snapped to life, eyes glittering with excitement as Frohike trapped his complete attention. "Cancer Man?"

The words elicited the acrid smell of burnt tobacco in Scully's nostrils as Frohike's head wobbled up and down like drunken parrot.

"What did you find?" Mulder was up and over to Langley's computer in an instant, hanging over the blonde man's shoulder as the screen began to scroll, reflecting in the blonde man's eyeglasses.

Before Scully could even begin to voice her doubts, Frohike was at his elbow, a maniacal smile on his dwarf like face. "Possibly everything! Maybe his background, who he is, who he wants to be."

Slowly drawing up his own chair to Langley's workstation, Frohike settled in for what was starting to look like an extended story session. "August 20, 1940, Mexico City. A Stalinist agent assassinated Leon Trotsky with an ice pick. At that same moment, a thousand miles north, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he appears. The father was an ardent Communist activist. During the Nazi-Soviet pact, he kept the N.K.V.D. informed about American plans to enter World War II. He was executed under the Espionage Act of 1917, before his boy could walk."

This was going to take a while. Wordlessly, Scully settled in Mulder's vacated seat as he bent over the computer screen, completely enraptured by Frohike's tale. Like school children gathering for story time, they hung on the small man's words, as he sat, like some demented Buddha, gloved hands resting lightly on his round tummy.

"The mother, a cigarette smoker, died of lung cancer before her son uttered his first word. With no surviving family, he became a ward of the state, sent to various orphanages in the Midwest. Didn't make friends, spent all his time reading, alone, and then he appears to have vanished, until a year and a half after the Bay of Pigs."

"That's when we turn up this." Langley broke into Frohike's narrative, gesturing towards his monitor. "It's a US Army service record for this orphan kid. He has all the same background. That's his service photo. Look familiar?"

Mulder leaned in, squinting at the picture pixilating there. It was the standard, black and white issue, the stoic face of a young twenty-something man. He was handsome then, Scully supposed, over thirty years before, dark haired, serious, well before the ravages of nicotine and everything else the man had seen. She watched Mulder's scrutiny, searching to see any sign of recognition on his part. Clearly there was. His mouth pursed tightly against memories from some part of his childhood.
"What's his name?" The words grated out from some deep part of him, quiet and burning with intensity. Even the Gunmen paused briefly, glancing between one another before continuing.

"His name's been erased, as has most any other detail about him." Frohike picked up the reigns of the tale again, glaring blackly at Langley for stealing his thunder. "That's what makes tracking him down so difficult. He has no name, at least not a regular one he uses, nut we think that he was serving at Fort Bragg at the time and was recruited at the time of the Bay of Pigs by US Army Intelligence."

"For what purpose?"

"Killing Castro, likely." It was Byers turn to pipe up, his area of expertise finally coming to the fore. "The CIA was planning all sorts of operations at the time, everything from putting hair removal powder in his shoes, to slipping poison into an orange. It was one of their major focuses once Castro came to power."

"And we see how well that ended up." Mulder's dry retort mirrored Scully's own thoughts. "So where does he go from there?"

"He's not seen or heard from again for a year. That's when he turns up mysteriously in a photograph featured in the Dallas news on November 22, 1963."

The date even made the hairs on Scully's neck prickle. She wasn't born for another three months, but even she knew the magnitude of that date in the collective American experience. She knew without a doubt Mulder did too as his eyes widened impossibly, turning to meet hers across the dim light of the Gunmen's main room. "How do you know this man was in Dallas?"

"His picture is in public record." With a few keystrokes, Langley pulled up the photograph, black and white, with the headline "Presidential Assassin Found in Theater." Lee Harvey Oswald's startled face was pale in the glare of the photographer's flashbulb as a crowd gathered around him. Just on the edge, slipping out of sight from the curiosity seekers was the same dark head, the handsome features watching quietly. "We're thinking that he was directly involved somehow, perhaps setting Oswald up as the patsy for the whole thing."

Thank God the four of them were focused on the photo on the screen and couldn't see Scully's eyebrows raise sky high, her eyes rolling full circle in her head. It was hardly the first time Oswald's name had come up in conversation with these three and it would likely not be the last. She shouldn't be surprised that somehow this mysterious smoking man who had wormed his way into the very depths of their lives would somehow be linked by the Gunmen to the best known and most suspicious conspiracies cooked up by greasy, fidgety theorists over the darkest internet chat rooms. One evil, all-presiding boogey man to tie together the greatest crimes of the twentieth century, a man responsible not just for all the pain and suffering Mulder's family suffered, but aliens, and JFK too. So much for a beer once this was done. Scully had a feeling she would need something stronger than that. The next thing they would link this man to was Martin Luther King....

Just as the thought spun out of her head, Frohike proved she was psychic. "We picked up the trail again in Memphis, Tennessee, April 1968. James Earl Ray was arrested for the murder of Martin Luther King. Problem was that three cops involved in the arrest have sworn affidavits that state Ray pinned the murder on someone else, a man who was supposed to be staying with him, helping him sell the rifle they said was used on King. Guess who his description matches."

Byers cut in again, bouncing in his rumpled, tweed suit. "And he appears again in Los Angeles later that year, working as a paramedic who responded to the Ambassador Hotel the night Bobby
Kennedy was shot."

"Yeah, everyone says Bobby was alive when they took him out of the kitchen, but he's dead shortly after." As if Scully needed to see the smirk of snide dubiuousness on the blonde man's face to know where this was going. "We think he set up Sirhan Sirhan to do the dirty work and followed up to cover it all up after it went down."

"Then there is Watergate…"

"Don't forget the trip to Beijing first…"

"We have no proof of any failed attempt on Mao's life…"

The conversation began to devolve rapidly around Mulder, who stood startled like a deer in headlights. The joy and excitement that had welled up at him with the very thought of insight into the mystery of the man who had so effected his life spiraling into instant disappointment, and worse, angry agitation as his glared from first one of the babbling Gunmen to the other.

"So we working of myths and old wives tales here or what?" His fingers stabbed viciously at Langley's computer monitor as the blonde man rushed to protect it.

Well, well, well, Scully thought not without a dollop of smugness. Mulder could be trained after all. Even he was beginning to see the plot holes like a Mac truck in the Gunmen's wild tale of dark intrigue. She couldn't lace together the discrepancies for the boys in this one, as Frohike desperately tried to hold onto the quickly unraveling threads of Mulder's disintegrating attention.

"We know he became head of some organization within the government, one working secretly and covertly outside of the bounds of any official branch. We think it's the same one your father was associated with."

"My father worked for the State Department till the day he retired with his Scotch bottle," Mulder snapped, in no mood to field the secrets and lies that swirled around his own family past.

"Associated or not, we all know there's a connection between your father and this man." Byers reminded him pointedly. "And we know that he was in West Virginia, Christmas 1991, just after you took on the X-files."

"Where conveniently a fire broke out at a government research facility not two miles from a gas station he was filmed at, filling up his tank."

"What? Did you guys go through his garbage and rifle his underwear drawer while you were at it?"

"Don't think the thought didn't cross our minds, but he's moved since that impromptu visit you played on him, all dirty-Harry style with a gun in his face." Frohike's bright eyes flickered briefly to Scully, causing her to cringe as she remembered what that incident was about. Not one of Mulder's finer moments, threatening to kill the smoking man in his own apartment. "We are pretty certain he was involved in the accident. The time stamp at the station puts him in the right time frame."

"But no smoking gun, boys, and I still don't have a name. Why would he involve himself in blowing up government property when he could have someone else do it."

"We think something was there, something they wanted to cover up."

Five people died in that blast."

"We think they might have been desperate." Frohike countered, continually irritated by his compatriots constant interruptions. "It's at that point your work in the basement was getting attention on the top floor."

He turned in his chair to face Scully fully in her hiding place in the corner. "That's why you were brought in."

To shut him down, to prove his theories wrong, to undermine his work. That was why she had been brought in. How successful had she been, Scully wondered blandly. After all, they had been shut down, not long after she came on board. But Mulder was still here, despite it all. Had this smoking man been key in placing her with Mulder? And why? Why her, out of all the possible candidates he could have chosen in the FBI, out of all the other scientists working at Quantico? What had the smoking man seen in her he hadn't seen in anyone else? And was it on purpose?

Scully hadn't thought much about the man with the gimlet eyes, wreathed in smoke, who had been standing there on her first day in Scott Blevin's office. She had simply assumed he was part of the FBI upper echelon or OPR, someone who was interested in setting Mulder down and putting him in his place. Now, on hindsight, she had to wonder just what calculations, if any, went into the decision of her as Mulder's new partner. Was it as simple as the fact that she was a scientist or was it, as Tom Colton had said, the fact that they hoped to seduce him away from his work with a pretty face? If it was the latter, someone had obviously not done enough homework on Fox Mulder. She wasn't his type, in any way shape or form. She was too practical, too by the book, too rigid in her thinking to ever sidetrack Mulder from his quest. Whatever the reason they had put her with Mulder, she had failed spectacularly on any score, not that she had tried to be anything other than a good investigator and agent. Just what had they expected out of her anyway?

Whatever the reason, Mulder hardly seemed enthusiastic or curious. In fact he was already eyeing his watch, shooting Scully an apologetic look as he began inching back to his abandoned trench coat. "So, he pulled the strings to assign Scully to work with me. That isn't news either, Frohike. You're batting average is starting to slip."

"He assigned Scully to you because he was afraid. They all were. You were getting too close to the truth and Scully was supposed to trip you up."

"And she didn't, we know this. Someone muffed that plan. She's been working with me for three years and short of random moments of pissiness punctuated by the occasional bullet in the shoulder, she's been nothing but the finest of partners."

Mulder's sideways smirk was pure evil. Scully chose to ignore it, speaking up finally in this whole, mish-mosh mess. "So, Frohike, if this man was involved in some of the darkest conspiracies of modern times, killed off many of the greatest figures of an age, personally is responsible for my assignment to the X-files, why in the world does he do all this? What is his motivation? Why does he care? If such a man of great evil exists, there has to be a purpose in being evil."

She had thought to stump the computer hacker with such a philosophical question, but he surprised her with his insight. "Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.' His life has been anything but quiet, yet I believe nothing but desperate. He's the most dangerous man alive, not so much because he believes in his actions, but because he believes his actions are all which life allows him. And yet, the only person that can never escape him is himself."

"Escape himself? " Mulder's inelegant scoff rang through the poignant silence at Frohike's words. "I don't know, walking away and saying none of this is worth it might have been a start."
"Perhaps he was trying, but no one was giving him a chance?"

"What, joined Smoker's Anonymous? Is there a self-help group for cold-blooded murderers out there?" Understandably Mulder wasn't particularly sympathetic to Frohike's lament. The latter managed as much pained disappointment as he could muster, considering the subject matter.

"You're a pig-headed, Philistine, Mulder. No human is so evil that some small part of him doesn't long for the comforts and simple pleasures of a good life?"

"When I see the black-lunged bastard having a hot dog at a Yankee game on a warm spring day, maybe I'll give in a little." Mulder wasn't going to budge, not that Scully could blame him. Frankly, sympathy was the last thing that she could imagine feeling for the man who had been so instrumental in her kidnapping and near death.

Undeterred, Frohike reached behind Langley's monitor, earning a yelp from the other hacker, and pulled out a glossy magazine, a buxom blonde reclining in front of a snowy mountain on its cover.

"You read the last issues of Roman a Clef?"

That created a pause...a long one. Even Langley's pale hair turned pink as Byers looked scandalized and apologetic all at once, turning towards Scully, Only Mulder hardly seemed phased, grabbing the magazine with its scantily clad woman out of Frohike's hands. "Gees, Frohike, ladies in the room."

"Don't mind me, not the first time I've seen you with magazines like that," she drawled lazily. Mulder chuckled at her cool rejoinder, flipping through the magazines pages. "So, he likes his women, who doesn't?"

"Don't you do anything other than look at the pictures, Mulder? There's amazing stories in here!"

"I didn't take you for such a literary man, Melvin." Mulder's placidly flipping through the pages, paused briefly in the middle, his attention rapt for several seconds. As always, put fake boobs in front of Mulder and he was entranced.

"I got the tip off from an informant of mine. He's a fan of this mag. Not my style, too blonde and plastic for me, I prefer them a little more attainable." His fingerless-gloved hands snatching the magazine out from under Mulder's nose, he flipped away from blonde, tanned perfection to the articles in the back. "Jack Colquitt, man of intrigue, hard boiled, works in the dark cleaning up others messes, looking for redemption. Story sound familiar to you?"

"Raul Bloodworth? What sort of name is that?"

"A man named 'Fox' doesn't get to cast stones. Besides, we think it's an alias, a pseudonym."

"Why not? He doesn't use his real name for anything else, I can't see him wanting to use it on that tripe."

"I thought the story was good," Langley murmured to nodding Byers.

"The story is straight out of this Cancer Man's life; espionage, assassinations, regrets, a life trapped in the games of others, where all he can do is circle back in on himself, again and again, always playing the same, evil game."

Trapped within himself, going in circles, a feeling Scully was intimately aware of lately, it had been suffocating her. It had never occurred to her, as she was sure it had never occurred to Mulder,
that even their arch nemesis could feel that way. Had he ever been in love with Mulder's mother once? Had he seen in Tina and her children the life he could have had, but had thrown away to pursue whatever dark game he was playing? Had the near loss of his old love make him reconsider his life and the choices he had made? Or was Scully's mind turning hopelessly romantic as she sat here listening to this tripe, seriously considering the implications.

She needed to get Mulder out of here and get a drink soon. Her head twinged painfully as she rubbed her forehead absently. "So, what in the world does a story in a pornographic magazine tell us anyway?"

Frohike paused, shrugging. "It tells us that even he's careless at times, reckless. I'm hoping we can somehow use it to find the smarmy son-of-a-bitch."

"I thought you were just empathizing with him?" Scully couldn't keep up with Frohike's changing moods.

"I do, but the man is a ruthless, cold blooded murderer who hurt my friends. I want to nail his ass with everything I've got." He brandished the rolled up magazine as if it was the very implement he planned on using in his avowed retribution. "So far, this is based only on a story I read in one of my weekly subscriptions that rang a bell. I'm going out to check on the private hacker source that has been working on tracking a few leads that can produce definitive proof and then we'll have him nailed."

Langley and Byers stood in awe of Frohike's righteous enthusiasm. Somehow, though, the two agents looked even less than underwhelmed.

"Frohike, if you manage to nail a man whose killed JFK and managed global conspiracies with made up adventure stories from girlie mags, I swear I'll buy you a lifetime subscription to Roman a Clef." Mulder clearly didn't think that any of that was happening anytime soon, not in a lifetime long enough for Frohike to enjoy his magazine. The Gunmen's faces fell as he turned, full of apology to Scully as she rose, handing him his trench. It wasn't his fault, she reasoned, that the Gunmen were being weirder than usual.

"But the photographs! Dallas!" Frohike spluttered.

"I'm not denying that there isn't some connection there, but you boys are missing several links in your chain. And I've learned through painful ass kicking's from know-it-all scientists that you can't shoot your mouth off half-cocked about things like this, especially not about him." A sly smile played on his mouth as his fingers reached, hesitantly for Scully's elbow. "It's my birthday, boys, and a pretty lady offered me a drink. I'll see you sometime next week, all right?"

Without protest Scully allowed him to propel her through the musty apartment amidst Frohike's ardent vows of more, concrete information, as Byers' shuffled behind them to lock up the office. All the bearded man could manage as they stumbled out into the dark was a winsome apology and a mumbled "Happy Birthday, Mulder!" before shutting the door on them and remembering finally to turn on the outer light.

"Well, that was a complete and utter waste of an evening I could have been drinking at home, alone." Mulder's mild exasperation surprised her. Usually even at their weirdest, Mulder was highly entertained by the Gunmen, outside of her they were the closest things that he had to a social circle.

"They were trying, Mulder. They wanted to give you something good for your birthday."

Obviously they had thought it was good, and to be honest, it would have been the thing that the
Fox Mulder she had first met would have eaten up with a spoon, frantically running with to see how far he could get. But things had changed. She had changed him.

"The problem is, Scully, even if I believe half of that, which I don't, what in the world does it do for us? That smoking son-of-a-bitch is still just as untouchable, sitting behind the scenes pulling his strings. So what if he knew my father, or regrets his choices, or is a failed writer of bad, pulp serials."

"Yeah," Scully sighed thoughtfully, rounding Mulder's car. "But at the same time, I suppose this just goes to show that despite all the evil we lay at his feet, and there is a great deal, he's still just a human, not some smoke wreathed demon, hulking in the night, waiting to pounce."

The man was just a human, with human mistakes and more so with human mortality. He would get old and die one day. But would it free them of the man's machinations in the end? Or would his nicotine stained fingerprints still mark their entire lives?

"I should have just taken my shot at him when I had the chance," Mulder groused irritably with more bluster than seriousness.

"You don't mean that," she chided, slipping into the car, pulling her own coat around her against the growing chill of the fall night. "You aren't like him, Mulder. Yours is not a wasted life. He's a man caught in the fall out of his own decisions, trying to maintain his web so that he isn't consumed by a bigger monster somewhere down the line, and he will stop at nothing to ensure his priorities first."

She paused, guilt at her behavior for the last few weeks eating at her suddenly as she searched for words. "You on the other hand are a man who has proven he will do what he thinks is right always, for a perfect stranger or for a friend."

It wasn't quite an apology, but it was heartfelt, an olive branch held out tentatively for him to take. She could see him pondering her words, watching her out of inscrutable eyes as he started the car engine.

"Any place you had in mind for drinks?" Whether he had a comment on her efforts or not, he was clearly saving his thought. For now, he was fine with keeping the peace, and while it wasn't the complete acceptance that Scully wished for, it was at least a thawing of relations. She let out a soft sigh, smiling.

"Anywhere. Maybe that pub over by work, the new one. I heard from Pendrell it's a good place."

"Pendrell? You taking date advice from Pendrell?" Mulder couldn't help himself when she left an opening that wide. He needled it playfully, hoping to earn an arched eyebrow from her. Instead she grinned, half out of relief, half out of mischief.

"He at least's gets a better chance out of me than you do, Mulder." He laughed outright as he engaged the car, pulling away from the Gunmen's lair. "Besides, it's not a date, it's a birthday drink."

"Po-tay-to, Po-tah-to, Scully, it's still fraternizing with your partner."

"I've nursed you back to health, Mulder, the thrill is gone for me." And so their banter continued as he pulled out into traffic, the slings and pricks of mild teasing now filling the silence that had hung between them on their drive there. The world wasn't completely right again, not by a long shot, but things were better for now.
True facts, Sirhan Sirhan grew up with my ex-boyfriend's uncles and used to hang with them. He was often over at my ex's grandmother's house, and literally she said "He seemed like such a nice boy." Not even joking, she told me that. Do you know how bizarre that is? *mind boggled*
Marching Orders

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully are given a new assignment.

Was there ever a "normal" when it came to the X-files? If there was, life returned to it as the ice thawed a little, the wall thinned somewhat, and the hard feelings softened to bearable levels as they returned to normal operating conditions. Little more was said about the outbreak of bad behavior, thought Mulder did bring in Jake's coffee as a peace offering. For now, at least, things were quiet, even well behaved.

All good things come to an end at some point. Skinner's call to his office was the first in several weeks. Scully frowned sideways at Mulder as the two made their way to Skinner's office through the press of early morning arrivals to the Hoover Building. "You didn't egg Skinner's car again?"

"Tempting as the idea is, I rather like my ass attached to my body, thanks." Mulder held open the door to Skinner's out office, allowing Scully to step inside. Kim nodded them into their superior's office. Clearly the two of them were expected.

"Mulder. Scully," Skinner waved them towards two empty chairs in front of his desk, the third already occupied, though not for long. The graying man stood, tall and proud in his Army dress, tugging his olive drab coat tightly as he glanced between the two agents.

"General Bloch, two of my best, Agents Mulder and Scully." If Skinner was being ironic, he didn't show it, though pointed gaze he shot them both as they took the General's perfunctory handshake was obviously communicating the silent order to not prove his compliment wrong. "They specialize in difficult cases."

"I've heard." General Bloch replied knowingly, a smile almost akin to a grimace on his lean face, tanned with years in the outdoors at some point in his military career, likely Vietnam, judging by his age. His steely, gray eyes glanced Mulder up and down briefly. "Agent Mulder, you've been a particular pain in the ass for the Army for years."

"I try my best, sir," Mulder managed with only his brand of straight-laced, acerbic humor. Despite Scully's instinct to cringe and apologize over her partner, the General chuckled, nodding approvingly.

Skinner, however, didn't need reminding of the many times he'd had to bail out Mulder's ass from the DOD and the Army. He barely hid his scowl as he motioned them all to sit. "General Bloch has approached the FBI with a matter of utmost sensitivity and security."

Sensitivity and security? Mulder's interest clearly blazed to life at those words. Skinner continued. "At approximately 0600 this morning, Lieutenant General Peter MacDougal was shot close range in his own car. The gunshot was not self-inflicted. The military investigative service is preparing to go on scene with a forensic unit and will feed back to us as soon as they have information."

"Where was the incident?" Mulder fell easily into investigative mode, all wisecracks set aside as his mind began picking apart the situation presented to them.
"Ft. Evanston, MD, I believe you two worked on a case there last year?"

The case of the men who couldn't die? Scully remembered it all too well, young Trevor Callahan, the son of the General in charge of Ft. Evanston had died. The man Mulder had thought responsible had ultimately been killed at the hands of one of the other soldiers he had supposedly tortured. Afterwards the Army had cleaned up the mess, hidden it, and pretended that it hadn't happened. Now they were coming back with an entirely new problem from the same area. Scully found it interesting that they came to them first with their problem.

"General MacDougal was preparing for a Veteran's Day speech as part of the ceremonies rededicating the Vietnam Memorial. His driver claims that he arrived via helicopter, as scheduled, no one else was with him. He entered into his limo, alone, save for the driver, and they pulled off the base. They were only a block away when the driver claims he heard a gunshot go off. He said he stopped the vehicle, checked the back and found the general shot to death."

"He didn't see the event happen?" It seemed self-explanatory, but it seemed convenient to Scully that the one witness to the event didn't actually see it.

"The divider was up between the driver and the cabin. He says the General was looking through sensitive files." Skinner glanced cautiously at Bloch, but received no confirmation one way or the other. "Military Police are holding Private Burkholder at the moment."

"For questioning?" Mulder obviously knew better, else he wouldn't have asked.

"No, for murder," Bloch cut in, shooting Skinner an apologetic glance. He obviously wasn't a man used to sitting on the sidelines while others conducted the show, and he easily took the reigns from the Assistant Director.

"MacDougal was found with this." From out of his pin-straight breast pocket Bloch pulled a plastic bag. Inside it was a playing card, a face card, the King of Hearts. "You two are too young to remember much about Vietnam." He paused, shooting Skinner a meaningful gaze, the sort Scully had seen many Vietnam vets share with one another. "These type of cards were used by some squads to mark their kills. They called it the death card, sort of their calling card to the Viet Cong. Different platoons and squads would have their own unique ones printed up." He handed the bag carefully to Mulder's outstretched fingers. Scully leaned over to study it as Mulder flipped it over. Two crossed, bloody sabers were emblazoned on the back.

"Is there a meaning to symbol on the back?"

"Not particularly. Several groups used crossed sabers, but…"

The general paused, drawing out his last syllable in a gust of hesitant air. He frowned fretfully at the card and the secret it possessed. The Army always was closed mouthed about everything, it was the nature of being a soldier. One did not win wars without learning to keep ones mouth shut, to everyone. Scully knew from their many run ins with the Army over the years getting them to volunteer any information, no matter how trivial, was like getting blood from a stone.

"There is a group, I think the FBI has it on its radar. They are a right wing militia group, based out of Northern Virginia. They call themselves the Right Hand. They like to use those as their calling cards."

The FBI had heard of it or at least Skinner had. "Anti-Terror and ATF has been watching the Right Hand for years. They have a bunker fairly close to DC, just outside of the city in Virginia, though all their weapons are completely legit. Still, they like to flip a fat finger at us from time to time and..."
remind the Justice Department of their Constitutional rights."

Skinner apparently didn't think much of their rights or their need to express them. "They are led by an ex-Marine, Denny Markham, served in Vietnam and has loudly decried the government's supposed abandonment of POW's behind the lines there."

This wasn't the first time Scully had heard that argument. "I thought the State Department declared that all MIA's were accounted for years ago?"

"All the ones they are willing to admit to," Mulder muttered beside her as he studied the bloody playing card in his hand.

"Whether or not there are POW's still behind the lines in Vietnam, Markham's group has made known what they think about both it and the US government, especially how much they would love to see it change, by violence if necessary." Skinner's face-hardened, as close as he ever got to a worried look. "Perhaps the murder of the general is a first volley in exactly this sort of action."

"Why then would that implicate Private Burkholder?"

"We pulled Burkholder's files as soon as we brought him in." The speed of Army security even outstripped that of the FBI, which a surprise to Scully. "It turns out Burkholder's uncle is affiliated with the Right Hand group."

"Quick turn around on Army intelligence. And no one bothered to find this out about him before he was assigned to General MacDougal's detail?" Mulder picked up on the most obvious weak points of this scenario. "Does Private Burkholder have any sort of explanation?"

"None. He simply said he was in the front seat and heard and saw nothing. That isn't to say that he didn't facilitate someone waiting for the general in his limo."

"Do you think he'd agree to a polygraph test?"

"Military police have this, Agent Mulder."

"All due respect, sir, you are the one coming to the FBI. I'm assuming because you are worried that this is only the first of what could be several high profile hits on key military officials on a holiday honoring veterans of war. Assumptions of guilt aside, we need to find out information from Burkholder and if he's not guilty, we need to start asking the right questions, before anyone else gets hurt."

Bloch stared speechless at Mulder for long, strained moments, before turning to Skinner in disbelief. The other man's response was a faint smile and a warning glare at Mulder. "I told you they were two of my best."

As always, Mulder dazzled. Perhaps it was time she stepped in. "Sir, Agent Mulder has a point. If we can convince Private Burkholder to take a polygraph test, it will clear up one path of suspicion and help us focus on where we need to be to prevent any further danger to anyone else."

"Do you think you two can handle that?" It wasn't a question out of Skinner. It was marching orders.

"Can we have access to Private Brukholder?" Mulder's question was for the general. Clearly he wasn't comfortable with the idea, but he couldn't say no to them either. He had come to the FBI, he had accepted they would run this case on their terms. Scully only hoped he would be able to handle Mulder on Mulder's terms. That wasn't something any military types usually with dealt well.
"I'll contact Ft. Evanston, let them know you're on your way."

"Tell General Cahill it's us. He should remember." Rubbing salt in the wound, Mulder, Scully mentally warned him, earning a completely stoic look out of her partner. Well, almost stoic, save for the bedeviled glint in his eye. He was treading a fine line and she didn't like it.

"You two get up to the private. I'll get together a task force and get as much as I can on Markham and his men." Skinner fell into what he did best, planning, managing, and strategizing. "Come back to me when you have had a chance to run the poly on him, we should have more intel on Markham then."

"Right." Scully was already up and out of the door, Skinner's dismissal curt as always. She could feel Mulder's steps dogging hers as they made their way silently out of the office. He was thinking, she could hear it, even from in front of him.

"Quite the show you put on back there." She glanced over her shoulder at Mulder, deep in whatever possibilities he was running through his head. "Showing off?"

"Maybe?" Mulder always did like a good pissing contest with men in uniform. "I actually really wanted to see what this was really about?"

"About?" It had seemed straightforward to her what was going on. The murder of a US Army general wasn't something anyone took lightly.

"The Army wouldn't come to the FBI if this was as simple as assassinations being executed on their men. They have their own investigative services, they can do that by themselves."

"But anti-terrorism isn't something they are equipped to handle. That is why they came to us." It only seemed logical that the FBI, who dealt with homegrown terrorists everyday, would be the right group to turn to for a group like the Right Hand. "We probably know just as much if not more about this group than the Army does."

"Somehow, I can't quite buy that either." Mulder's paused thoughtfully, stopping and frowning back towards Skinner's office with the general still inside. "Bloch is scared, Scully. Here is something that someone isn't talking about and it isn't Burkholder. He's just some poor kid who was at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Figured that out without speaking to him?" She met his distracted not with an eloquently arched eyebrow. "No wonder they call you 'spooky'."

"Nothing spooky about it, Scully, common sense. The reason that kid was put on General MacDougal's detail was that there was nothing there to bust him on. And I don't care what Army Intelligence thinks they can do, not even the FBI can do a turn around on a background check in an hour and we do this for a living. Someone wants to pin this on the kid to get it out of their hair, but Bloch knows that this isn't as simple as one murder, it's potentially others. That's why they came to us, to try and stop it before other soldiers with stars on their collars start falling today."

"And you know this because?" That was the part she hadn't figured out how he'd pieced together.

"The death card. Our killer is marking his kills. If this is the Right Hand, they are making examples and they will take out as many high profile ones as they can, likely military. And if it someone taking out military targets with a calling card and no one the wiser, I can guarantee our private doesn't have a thing to do with it."

He had figured this out in ten minutes with the general? "You know you're scary sometimes,
right?"

In an instant the focused directness was replaced with a devilish smile. "I was going for sexy."

"You'll have to settle for scary, Mulder. Very. You just do that, just flip a switch and you just know."

"That's why they pay me the big bucks to hang in the basement, don't you know? Let's go chat with our private, see what sort of spookiness he isn't telling anyone yet."

Why did it have to be spooky?
The War That Never Ended

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder speculates on the war that has never ended for some.

As urban as Washington DC was, with its dubious title of the "murder capital of the country," it didn't take one too long to drive into the rolling, rural hinterland that surrounded it. Just within a couple of hours drive of the seats of global power were the sort of small towns and working farms one might have expected from the Civil War. Unlike the jaded atmosphere of beltway politics and cynical backroom intrigue, these were places where perceived concepts of traditional American values still held sway; freedom, liberty, honor, and duty. To the average, metropolitan city dweller on the East Coast it seemed quaint, even nostalgic to find a place where those ideas still lingered, but it was also the very areas that served as breeding grounds for those who took those same ideas to a whole new level of military extreme. Scully could already tell they were in one of those areas when she saw a picture of President Clinton's head with a large, red, crossed out circle.

"Isn't this the sort of place they filmed Deliverance in?" The large growth of trees and weeds on the side of the road barely concealed tall, wooden fencing blocking acres of land from view of the highway they drove on.

"I refuse to squeal like a pig, whatever they do to me," Mulder quipped dryly, focused on the winding ribbon of two-lane, black asphalt ahead. "Skinner warned us that Markham and his group were way out here, likely to keep prying eyes and ears out."

"Not that we don't know what they are doing." Scully watched the high barricades nervously, half expecting some camo-clad teenager to be waiting up there with an illegal sniper rifle, taking potshots at suspected Federal cars. "It's rather hard for the ATF to miss a giant bunker and fortress within driving distance of DC."

"Yeah, they only miss it if the lives of women and children trapped in a psychopath's cult are at stake."

Scully should have known that the Right Hand would remind Mulder of Vernon Ephesian and Melissa Riedel. She stiffened quietly beside him but chose to deftly avoid delving into the still, gaping wound, not after she had worked so hard to return the peace between them. "I've never totally understood the mind of those who chose to build up such operations; Ephesian, Markham, David Koresh, the men responsible for Oklahoma City. We have perfectly legal ways within our system to oppose things that we don't appreciate, to protest corruption that we see."

"Legal, but not always effective." Mulder spoke with the voice of long-suffering, a man who had for years seen the wrongs of a government who cared little to act. "There are many out there who for one reason or the other have tried through legal channels and have been rebuffed, or see the overwhelming blindness of our government to its own flaws and have taken to being militant to achieve their goals. It's an idea woven into the very mythology of our country, it's a thread that runs through our national psyche. When we don't like what is going on, we subvert our government and putting something else in that we like better. It's the very story we tell ourselves about our own country's founding. What more were the founding fathers other than an armed group of colonial rebels out to overthrow the status quo that was King George III's rule of his American colonies?"
"I can see that and I don't disagree, it is a part of our culture, but what Markham is doing is more than simply throwing over a distant monarch with few ties to this country. He's within spitting distance of the nation's capital with enough fire power to seriously compromise national security if he wished, and all because he is protesting the fact that not enough was done to bring home soldiers from a war that is now twenty years over and done."

"For some that war never ended." Mulder replied pensively, chewing on his lower lip thoughtfully as he slowed around a particularly deep curve in the road. "To us who were children then, or to the generation just behind us, the Vietnam War seems distant and ancient. We forget that there were real men and women serving over there, kids really, younger than us, getting shot at, getting captured, tortured, dying. I still remember all the news footage they would show every night and the body count they announced."

"I do, too." Scully was just old enough to recall it, but it hadn't made an impact on her really. She had only been eleven when Saigon fell and while she remembered it upsetting her parents, the event itself barely made much of an impact on Scully as a girl. "I suppose I missed out on the true weight of what was going on over there. My mother wouldn't even let me see the news."

"I couldn't get away from it with Dad in the State Department, even after the divorce. It was the topic of conversation whenever I was around his co-workers, at least the ones not involved in government conspiracies regarding the existence of extra-terrestrials." Mulder of course couldn't ever forget that last aspect of his father's work. "What about your dad? Did he serve over there?"

"Some, though he was Navy. Mostly he was stationed in Japan and the Philippines. His ship never saw direct fighting, though, but it was involved in some operations to Vietnam, usually involving shipments of goods, supplies, Marines." Scully tried to stretch back the vague, foggy mist of her memory back to those days, past the golden haze her childhood seemed surrounded with to the more serious aspects of the world going on around her. "I don't think Dad talked about it much. He didn't like to. Looking back he probably saw a good deal more than he ever talked about with us kids."

"He was probably like Skinner. He saw too many boys dying and didn't want to have to relive those memories."

Scully often forgot that Skinner had served. Of course he would have, he was the right age. She knew he was a former Marine, even Mulder had mentioned it before, but there was a collective gap between her world and that of the Vietnam War. She knew many who had served in it, but somehow that didn't feel real to her. "Has Skinner spoken much on his time there and what he saw?"

"Some. I know he nearly died, probably should be dead now. I'm sure that gunshot wound he earned last spring was nothing compared to what he received in Vietnam. I know that there was more than a few chemical attempts to forget the things he saw and experienced. Course you won't hear me mentioning that to OPR anytime soon."

"He'd hardly be the only one." Scully had heard other similar stories, likely Markham had one too.

"Its strange how we as a country were so gung-ho to stop the Communist threat in Asia, demanding that our young men serve in a war that we had no intention of winning, to give their lives and commit atrocities that no one wants to even think about today. And then when they get home, we ignore the pain, the trauma, the stress, we tell them that strong men suck it up while we try to forget about the embarrassment of America having its ass handed to it by an upstart, patriotic group no different really than we were two hundred years ago. When you think about that way, about how failed our government was in the entire war scenario, of how we let down the soldiers
we sent to serve, and then ignored them when they returned. Is it any small wonder that Denny
Markham's group exists?"

"No, not really," Scully admitted uncomfortably. "But there are thousands of other men who
served, men like General Bloch or General MacDougal for that matter, who didn't turn to
revolutionary outrage to try and release their grief over their lost friends, their lost youth."

"Everyone handles stress and grief in different ways, you know that. Some like your father and
General Bloch stayed in the military, put in their time, and told themselves that the US military was
morally right in its actions. Then there are those like Skinner, men who tried to move on with their
lives, threw themselves in work as a way of escaping the past, often to the detriment of marriages,
children, and themselves. And then there were the Denny Markham's of the world, the ones for
whom the war never ended, not even when they got home. They have spent their lives since then
looking for something to fight for and against."

Up ahead on the left the barricade gave way to a steel cattle gate topped with curls of lethal looking
razor wire, cutting off the entrance into the gravel driveway. Mulder slowed and turned, stopping
the car just enough to peer beyond the barrier inside. There was little movement, though Scully
knew instinctively that they were being watched. Markham likely knew they were FBI and was
just waiting for them to make the first move.

If Mulder was nervous, he hardly looked it. "Did you remember to bring the wine?"

"Right here in my pocket." Scully patted her overcoat where the warrant lay.

"So let's get this party started, eh?" He grinned grimly as he climbed out of the car, Scully
following right behind.
Based on Conjecture

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder calls Scully out on her recent behavior.

Men were dying and Mulder as always was spinning theories out of fairy dust and moonbeams. Skinner, for his part, looked as if he might just believe it.

"If he's invisible, why is he on this video, clear as day?" Skinner might be half falling for Mulder's theory, but he couldn't deny the facts on magnet tape right in front of his eyes. Nathaniel Teager stood there in stark black and white, very much alive despite what the US Army was trying to say, but certainly not invisible like every witness and Mulder were claiming. How was he doing this?

"I think he can hide himself from human sight by manipulating something that Scully has referred to as naturally occurring, a blind spot."

Scully blinked at him, stunned he had shaped all of this out of one, logically optical phenomenon. She had told him the eye doctors had laughed at her for even suggesting it. "That is conjecture, sir."

Her protests fell on deaf ears. Skinner was trying to wrap his had around this vague notion. "You mean when I look at him?"

"You might not be able to see him. Isn't it true that American soldiers have reported the unexplained appearance and disappearance of V.C. guerrillas? I've read the dispatches myself. I mean, maybe Teager learned something from his captors in 25 years of isolation."

Skinner weighed Mulder's words for a second before inevitably looking to Scully. It was his habit when interviewing the two of them, to listen first to Mulder's outrageous theory, than look to Scully for the confirmation on its feasibility. It was his way of judging how sound Mulder's ideas was without the benefit of one of her reports in hand. She knew he saw her hesitation, how uncomfortable she was with this. What Mulder was suggesting was physiologically impossible, not to mention neurologically unlikely. But time was running out and now two generals were dead. How many more would be hurt before days end? With a slight growl, he spun, stalking off down the hallway. Without a word she and Mulder both followed.

"I've got 4 miles of crowded streets where 31 military officers are staging for a parade into Freedom Square. If what you're saying has any truth to it, I can't protect these men."

"Call it off." It was the only thing to do in Scully's mind. They couldn't allow an event like this to continue when the public's lives were at risk and a killer was on the loose. It was madness to put people in that sort of jeopardy, which was why she wasn't particularly surprised when Mulder countered her.

"Parade or no parade, those men are going to be vulnerable. The only way to stop this killer is to catch him."

Skinner spun on them, desperate but clearly in no mood for Mulder's vagaries right now. "How do
we do that?"

"By finding the next victim before he does."

He made it sound so easy, as if this were a game and not real people's lives at stake. "Mulder, we don't have time."

"I know, which is why we need to start sifting through those records now. Teager is looking for specific officers, ones who were instrumental in declaring him dead and leaving him behind in Vietnam. We need to follow the chain and see who else, if anyone, is involved."

"Do it quick, Mulder, because otherwise I'm pulling the plug and its egg on my face with the Army if you drop this." Skinner's dark scowl scoured them both before he spun back, leaving them outside of General Steffan's study with no more answers and now the assignment of predicting Teager's next move.

"This is insanity, Mulder. We should call this off."

"Calling it off won't stop Teager, it will just delay him for a bit." Mulder muttered, distracted, his mind spinning in that way he had that was both terrifying and amazing. Normally Scully would give him space, but today she couldn't. The parade was hours away, with thousands of Vietnam vets all in the line of Teager's fire.

"What you are suggesting, you know its not possible. No man can simply make himself invisible."

"We've seen cases like this before, Scully, soldiers from Vietnam able to do things that are impossible. Remember, that's how the delightful Alex Krycek entered into our lives?" Mulder and his memory never forgot a thing, not that Scully could forget Krycek and that deceptive smile either.

"What was done to those men in that case is scientifically possible given the right chemical treatments. A blind spot in a human is a natural phenomenon, caused by the optic nerve passing through the optic disc, meaning there are no receptors there. Everyone has them. However it's a fixed spot, it can't float. And there is certainly no way that Teager can manipulate both blind spots in each eye on one person, let alone two."

"What if it wasn't optical? What if he's confusing the brain, making it think it sees one thing but in reality it sees another. That could have caused the burst capillary, the stress on the eye as the brain receives mixed messages."

"Perhaps, but unlikely. How would Teager do it?"

"How did Pusher do it?" Mulder was clearly setting precedent here and Scully didn't like it.

"I don't know how Pusher did it and even if I did, I don't know that what Modell did is what Teager is doing." Patience now worn thin, Scully felt herself snapping, her voice cutting through the hallway despite the FBI and Army staff inside the dead generals room. "Mulder we are grasping at straws here, you are throwing things against the wall to see if they stick while men are dying."

"Oh right, my conjecture." Sarcasm dripped from his words as he braced himself for an argument with her, hands on hips, eyes narrowing. "Isn't that what you told Skinner, it was all conjecture?"

"This isn't a contest to see who is right!"

"No, it's not, but you seem to assume I think that. You are assuming a lot of things about me
lately."

He wasn't just talking about this case either, and she knew it. "Mulder, now is not the time…"

"No, Scully, now is the perfect time. As you said men are dying. There is a very pissed off former Green Beret sniper running around with a grudge to fulfill, and everyone here is spinning around trying to figure out what to do about it without thinking about what is going on here. These are prime kills, Scully. Teager is treating this as if he was sent on an assassination mission in Vietnam, picking each target off one by one. We aren't dealing with a mad man who is targeting innocent people, these are men who left Teager behind in a hell hole for decades, went on with their careers and lives, and pretended that he didn't exist."

She wasn't going to argue with his profile of Teager, she knew he was right. "Mulder, I'm not saying you aren't right on Teager, I'm saying we can't just second guess him and hope we are right."

"I can second guess him, Scully. You know I can. Skinner knows I can, that's why he agreed to it." Mulder leaned in over her. "Or is it that you don't trust what I can do anymore?"

"What do you mean by that?" Her heart raced slightly as she craned her neck to look up at him, uncomfortably aware suddenly of his presence, of the way his tie was on crooked today, of the stubble growing just along his jaw line.

"You've been pissed at me for months, looking for ways to needle me." His accusation hit her square in the gut, as guilt curdled around the uncomfortable realization that he knew her dirty secrete. "You have been pissed at me and I don't know why."

"I'm not angry at you." She wasn't, really, but she knew in a way she was. She was frustrated, hurt, despondent, everything, and she had no way of expressing that, not that right now, in the midst of a crises, she could go about explaining that. But he was standing over her, eyes blazing, and she knew he saw through her lie.

"Have I ever once in our partnership belittled you?"

Hysterically she wanted to point out the one occasion with Detective White, but thought better of it. "No, not so much."

"Have I done something to deliberately hurt you or undermine you?"

He obviously didn't understand what Melissa Riedel did to her. "No," she murmured weakly.

"Than why in the hell have you been riding my ass? And now calling me out in front of Skinner when we don't have time for this."

"He wanted my honest answer, Mulder, and I wasn't going to lie to him."

"But you weren't going to trust me on this."

He caught her by surprise with that statement. Whatever protest she had on her lips then died as her mouth gaped open. She had no response to him.

"If this were a new occurrence, Scully, perhaps I'd be more inclined to be understanding. If I had done something to earn your distrust of late, I could perhaps see why I'm in the doghouse. I don't know what I've done. Ever since…"
He paused, painfully for a moment before continuing. "Ever since you had that moment last spring, you've reacted as if I really had betrayed you somehow, that I am in league with that cancerous son-of-a-bitch. And despite all the evidence I give you, the woman of science, I can't seem to get you to do something as simple as trusting me."

Scully didn't think he could have chosen more devastating words if he had tried. Had things really become so bad between them that he really believed that she didn't trust him of all people? Of course she trusted him…mostly. She just didn't trust his obsession, his passion, that it would drag them both to hell kicking and screaming. She didn't trust where he was willing to go for his quest, and whether she could go with him or whether she wanted to go with him.

"Mulder, this isn't the time or the place for this conversation." She had to shut this down before things were said that she would regret. They had a case to focus on, personal feelings, as always, would have to wait.

Slowly he withdrew, returning to his adversarial stance across the hallway from her, distancing himself, leaving her feeling strangely vulnerable. "We'll always talk later." She couldn't tell if he meant that statement to be sarcastic or not. "For now lets find Teager's files. I need to go talk to someone about MacDougal and Steffan and find out what their connection was beyond Teager."

"Talk to who?" She shouldn't have asked. She could tell by the way he became immediately guarded he was going to speak to his informant. Talk about someone having trust issues.

"You go with Skinner, help him coordinate. I'll give you a call when I turn up something."

"Mulder!" She didn't want to be left behind, but he ignored her as he strode off down the hallway in obvious anger. Perhaps he didn't care at the moment. He just needed to be away from her.

"Way to go, Dana, you sure know how to piss off people." And she knew she had no one to blame for this entire mess but herself.
Those We've Forgotten

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully air out their differences in a public space.

Whatever the conversation with Skinner was, it hadn't gone well. Mulder stormed away from where their boss stood, contemplative near the wall, his bald head reflecting in the shiny surface of the dark granite. How much of himself did Skinner see in Nathaniel Teager, Scully wondered, studying him quietly. He'd been just a kid in Vietnam, nineteen, twenty, and had seen things that Scully still couldn't imagine, even with all of her work on the X-files. She very much doubted he was willing to put up a fight for Mulder just to prove a point. Judging by the glare her partner was shooting to everything and nothing her guess was likely right.

"He's going to let them cover it up, Scully." His long strides tore across the grass and concrete, anger vibrating in his voice. "He's knows that was Nathaniel Teager."

"And even if he fought it, Mulder, what good would it do?" Had he honestly stopped to consider that? "Teager has been considered dead for years. His mother is still alive, you know. She collects pension on her son. Would you put an 83-year-old woman through all of that, relieving the death of a child she put to rest years ago?"

"This was a set up, Scully, calculated by someone in the government to remove those generals from play and clear up the State Departments own embarrassment about what they did to South Vietnamese soldiers still loyal to the US thirty years ago."

"Maybe it is, Mulder." She knew of stranger conspiracies out there, she couldn't deny this one. "But is it worth the fight? When you have so many others out there you are fighting?"

"This is worse than covering up a truth, Scully, a man was left behind, left to be tortured and then killed at home by the very government who set him on this bloody path to begin with. Where is the justice in that?"

"Where is the justice in any of this?" She waved an arm expansively across the long line of names, thousands of names, of husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, friends. "None of these men deserved what happened to them. All they did was answer the call of duty and they gave their lives for a war they had no idea we were going to lose. Would you try to find justice for any of them?"

Beyond them she could see Skinner wander away from his spot at the wall, further down, his fingers trailing along the inscribed names. How any of them did he know personally? "Teager was a tragedy, Mulder. But its over. Let him rest. Let his mother think of him dying a hero rather than an assassin."

"And forget him like the country has forgotten everyone else here?"

"Mulder, you can't win this. You know that." Reason was failing her with him today. It wasn't that she disagreed with him, it was a tragedy, Teager's death, it wasn't fair, but it was how the situation was. Scully couldn't blame Skinner for not wanting to fight it. Perhaps he of all people should be outraged, but he also had the biggest reason to want to move on, to forget. He had his own demons.
to wrestle with regarding that war, he didn't need to wrestle with another person's.

"What if it had been your father, Scully, or one of your brothers?"

"It could have been me, you know." She regretted those words the minute she said them. They added fuel to Mulder's already raging hot fire.

"It was you. The Bureau wanted to close the investigation. Your mother had a tombstone picked out as I remember. They were willing to leave you behind."

And he hadn't been. No, Mulder was never one to let go of anything till the truth was uncovered, not his sister, not Scully, not Teager. "And I'm glad you didn't, because I'm standing here today. But Teager is dead, Mulder, and nothing you can do now will help that. All it will do is raise the ire of the powers that yet again, and jeopardize all that you have worked for. Are you willing to do that again?"

"I'm in this for the truth, not to perpetuate further lies."

"I thought you were in this to find your sister and what they did to her - and to me." Her words sounded so forlorn coming out of he. It gave them both pause. Scully hadn't expected to sound so hurt. Guilt crept across Mulder's face as he turned briefly, pacing away in frustration. A rock and a hard place, and he was caught in the middle.

"You think I've forgotten what they did to you?"

"Sometimes." Scully shrugged hands into her trench coat pockets against the chill of November. It was cool as dry leaves rustled in the distance. "I think sometimes you forget that this isn't just about what you think is right and wrong. You plunge into that abyss without thinking, without looking...."

She paused, realizing what she was saying.

"You think I'm reckless?" He spun on her, angry. It wasn't what she meant, not really. Perhaps she did.

"I think that you are passionate, but sometimes in that zeal you forget that there are more important things out there." They had stood here before, the two of them, before the X-files had been closed she had said the very same thing to him. He hadn't listened then either. "You chase after every shadow, after every ghost, and hope it turns up something. You keep telling me the truth is out there, Mulder, but so are lies and so are dead ends, so are things better left alone. If you waste all your time and energy running down every dark alley, you'll be swallowed up by it."

"So that's what you call this behavior of late? Trying to save me from myself?" He could cut when he was angry, deeply, and Scully felt his words slice through to the bone. "You have done nothing but second guess me, question me, push me away, and then you tell me it's out of my own lack of self-preservation?"

"Of course I've second guessed you, Mulder, it's what we've always done, and it's how we've always worked." She knew it wasn't true, what she just said, but she knew it was different of late, and so did he.

"Not like this, Scully, not like now. You questioned me, but you kept me honest to the work and to myself."

Damming up one of his temper tantrums wasn't keeping him honest? "And you don't think I'm
He was slow in answering, his jaw working tightly. He wouldn't look at her. That scared her. Mulder always wore his emotions like a mantle. It was rare she couldn't ever read him, even from a distance. He wouldn't look at her now. He was hiding, from her. Could she blame him? She had provoked this out of him for weeks now. Did she honestly believe she would take it forever? Mulder was never known for his patient temper.

"I don't know what I did, Scully, to cause this or to make you suddenly not trust me, to push me away. I thought you would be in on this regarding Teager. I thought you of all people would be behind me on this."

"Why? Because I'm a Navy brat or because I disappeared like Teager and no one cared to find me? There are men out there who we both acknowledge are scheming and planning with a virus that could kill millions, one they continue to experiment with on innocent people. And we know nothing about the virus, or its origins, or how it's supposed to work. There are clones of your sister running around, not to mention shape-shifting creatures somehow mixed up in all of this, and there is a promise you gave to me in New Mexico that you would find out what it was that was done to me and why, because Mulder, I need to know that, I need to know what it was and why my sister died for it. I need to know why I was taken and to what end. The X-files aren't just about your private pursuits or your righteous indignation anymore, and you treat them and me as if they are, as if I'll sit here forever waiting for you to fight one crusade after another."

If his words had cut her, her words seemed to only add kindling to the blaze. "You know where the door is, Agent Scully, if you feel you can't keep up with the job. Far be it from me to keep you waiting from your answers while I chase down shadows and ghosts."

Before the red cleared from her vision he'd lunged away, trench coat flying behind him as he marched across the browning grass, fury in his wake. She wanted to shout at him, to tell him to go to hell, to do something physically harmful to him. But she stood, still as a statue, watching him go. His words still rang in her ears, clear in the cold air. She could quit. Perhaps she should, if he insisted so much.

"I wouldn't."

She didn't need to turn around to know it was Skinner, having come up behind their argument. Likely he couldn't help but noticed, she doubted the two of them were being particularly quiet.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that, sir." Scully sighed, too embarrassed to turn and regard him.

"Every partnership goes through it, whether they are married or work partners." His leather shoes whispered in the drying grass as he came up towering beside her. She forgot that Skinner too was a tall man. She was so used to seeing him behind his desk.

"One of the first lessons I learned in boot camp when I joined up was that you can't ever take the bullshit seriously." He squinted across the grounds to where Mulder still slouched in the distance. "Everyone was in the same boat, being insulted by the drill sergeant, facing exercises that tested you mentally and physically, breaking you down and building you back up as something different, more a Marine."

There was pride still in Skinner as he spoke, the knowledge of being part of that close-knit brotherhood. "But that sort of pressure took its toll. There were days when things were said, words exchanged, even a fistfight or two. But you always knew that in the end, when it was you and that person in the jungle with enemies all around, that person would die to protect you, no matter what
was said."

If only it were that simple. "Sir, this isn't Vietnam."

"No, but it's still a fight, isn't it?" His dark eyes slid sideways knowingly. "And you two will get over it, you usually do."

At least one person believed that. Scully mulled darkly as she watched her boss follow Mulder's path, away from the monument.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets an early morning phone call.

The ringing cut through her dead sleep as she fumbled, heart in her mouth, for the plastic receiver by the side of her bed. "Scully!"

"I just called a forensic team out to Bosher's Run Park out in Fairfax County, I'll need you here in case they find a body."

"A body?" Sleep dazed her brain as she sat up, rubbing at her heavy eyes, thick and gritty. "Mulder, what time is it?" Her room was still dark, and she couldn't focus on the clock by her bed.

"Little after 5. Look, I know it's early on a Sunday, but this came up..."

"Body?" The word finally sunk in. "What's going on?"

"I can't explain now, just get here when you can." Without further explanation the line went dead. Scully stared at the now useless piece of plastic in her fingers, the ringing of the dial tone on the other end digging into her brain. She'd been sleeping, the first time all week since the nasty argument regarding Nathanial Teager. Things had gotten ugly between her and Mulder, the silent sullenness had settled back in the basement again. Neither had felt particularly inclined to budge and Scully had fled happily to the weekend, grateful that there wasn't a case in sight. She needed time away from the office - from Mulder really - to set her head on straight and think this through. It wasn't the first falling out she and Mulder had ever had, nor by far the first time they'd gone without speaking to one another. This time felt far too serious though. They had both said harsh truths to one another that day at the Vietnam Memorial. Normally such tiffs between them ended up with one or the other buying coffee and donuts or at least a round of beers. Mulder was right. This was an argument that had been brewing for weeks, now splayed out ugly between them.

When she left Friday she thought for certain she wouldn't see or speak to her partner till Monday at the least, when they would resume their war of silent attrition yet again. She should have known nothing would come along to push Mulder's hurt feelings aside. The deep, dark, angry part of Scully, the one usually closest to the fore before she had her first cup of coffee, wanted to tell him to fuck himself. He had pushed her the other day, assumed she would blindly stand by his side in all things, and then told her to get the hell out if she didn't think she could handle it. What hell did he think this was, her first day on the job, wandering into his inner sanctum all politeness and skepticism? That young ingénue was gone some three years ago, closer to four, and in that time she'd pulled his ass from the clutches of death at least twice she could think of, sat by his bedside more times than she could care to recall, mourned his death, covered for him with OPR, drug him back from Puerto Rico, attended to his ailing mother, not to mention the one time she had gotten particularly nice and tried to clean his apartment for him when he was injured. Oh yes, and there was the fish! How many times had she made sure they didn't die while he ran off somewhere without even bothering to tell her. She'd stayed late working autopsies for him, blown off weekends with reports, given up dinners with her mother to work late or to go out of town. And none of this was counting the personal losses of her sister and hell, even her dog. After all of that, he had the audacity to stand there and tell her "you know where the door is"?
She needed coffee if she was going to continue this tirade.

With a whimper and forlorn sigh, she stumbled into her darkened kitchen, flipping on the coffee maker by touch without bothering with a light. Crashing into one of her kitchen chairs to wait, she glared at the digital display, as if holding it responsible for her partner's ever vacillating moods. Friday she was persona non grata. 5 AM on a Sunday and she's needed, vital. And that was the problem, she realized in annoyance. She was always needed, it was always vital. It would always be some other case of some person wronged, another Nathaniel Teager, a man screwed by the system. Mulder could chase these sad tales forever, one dark shadow after another, after another. Would there ever be an end of it?

Did he want an end? Perhaps that was the bigger question. Did Mulder ever want to end this? If he found his sister, uncovered the conspiracy, found the truth of what they did to her, would he ever be able to drop any of this? Was there a normal life for Fox Mulder? Even before he took up the X-files, Mulder had reveled in the darkness. His time as a criminal profiler had been legendary by everyone's accounts, but even Mulder admitted it had been harrowing and he'd run fleeing from it in the end, afraid of what he could become. But the alternative was it much better? Mulder craved that thrill of the quest, the hunt, the puzzle to apply to his insanely agile mind. She couldn't imagine a time when he would want to put it all down. But she could imagine a time she might want to. And what scared her was leaving him behind, alone.

The timer sounded, and she muzzily reached for her old, chipped Navy coffee mug, pouring fragrant, steaming liquid into the cup and sipping from it black before she moved for cream and sugar. She took comfort in the simple, domestic things in life like this, the pleasure of freshly made coffee in the morning. Mulder didn't even own a coffee maker. She couldn't imagine the idea. If Mulder found all of his truths, what would he do with himself? And what would she do with herself? That was a whole other question and she wasn't in the mood to even begin probing that one. She returned to her bedroom, finally turning on some light so she could see to throw on clothes and debated on just what sort of dig sight they were looking at. Should she stick with jeans or something more FBI and professional? And what did Mulder mean by a body anyway? Where would he be at 5 AM of a morning to find one of those lying around randomly? Did he say Fairfax? What was he doing out there?

Her brain finally alert to a sense of urgency, Scully threw open her closet, reaching for the first outfit she could think of. Whatever their personal differences of late, Mulder needed her on this case. She had a feeling that he would have some sort of strange, weird, and probably disturbing explanation for all of this waiting for her when she finally arrived.
The Breaking Point

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder tells Scully about his very last profiling case.

It was heartbreaking no matter how clinical and distant Scully tried being. Perhaps any other body, any other case she could be objective. She could see the pile of dry, brittle bones as nothing more than a puzzle, a sad, unfortunate mystery to be pieced together through her science and understanding of the human body. But there was something about the tiny form spread out on her table, the aching reality of the fabric from her pajamas. This had been a living little girl once, a bright, eyed child, and likely one who had no idea what was happening to her. Taken from her bed in the dead of night, the time she should be safest, it was hard to know now over twenty years after the fact what had happened to her physically. Had she suffered when she died? Was she scared? Scully didn't think she wanted to know the answers to those questions.

Mulder had kept a steady vigil over the tiny remains, closed off to Scully, his thoughts silent as she went about her work. He had hardly moved from the autopsy lab, unusual for her often-squeamish partner. He had forced himself to stay, to watch, to see the same things about the tiny body that Scully did. Perhaps he saw worse things, horrible things, he had broken the profile on John Roche years ago. In his perfect memory he still saw the nightmares of that case, of the thirteen other girls, of what happened to them.

"I believe her name is Addie Sparks." Her voice was low and soft, reverent as she wandered towards the table, the information she had just gleaned from the FBI databases in hand. "She went missing from her home in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania in June 1975. I contacted the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, ran a search through the database."

"1975 is too early." It was the first response Mulder had made since they brought the body in from the park in Fairfax County early that day.

"The match is right, Mulder." She had connected every detail on the body to the information in file, from the length of the bones to the missing teeth in the skull's jaws. "The height is right, the description of the sleepwear is right."

He was processing this in his ever-running mind, adding it to his profile, revising, analyzing, studying. "That would mean Roche started way before we thought he did." His face was a study in careful neutrality, vacant and withdrawn. Scully knew that look, the quiet intensity, the too-still distance from the world around him. It was that dangerous place, one she had only seen only a few times in knowing him. Once when his first partner Jerry died, once when his old boss Reggie died, during the Patterson case and when she returned from wherever she was taken.

She swallowed against the shiver that tried to claw up her spine at the thought. "Mulder we are going to have to verify this." She hated even suggesting it. It meant finding Addie Sparks parents, dredging up the ancient pain, watching as they relive the anguish that they likely never forgot. And Mulder would live it right along with them. "Are you up for that?"

He didn't respond at first, nodding silently as he fixated on the yellowed, aging skull. Scully didn't have to ask him what he was thinking, she knew. She knew that he was chastising himself for
letting one slip through his grasp so many years ago, dragging out the Sparks family nightmare. He was reliving yet another case in a litany of profiles of monsters, men who's twisted minds had been the objects of Mulder's sole focus for so long, and he was seeing in the broken bones of Addie Sparks another little girl, just about the same age, her whereabouts unknown, her body never discovered.

"Mulder, you don't have to go up to Pennsylvania, I can go…"

"Scully, I'll be okay." He wouldn't be, but like herself she knew Mulder believed that if he told himself that enough times that it might actually be true. "I'm the one who broke the case years ago, I know Roche, better than he knows himself."

"That's why I'm worried." She smiled tightly, though Mulder didn't share in her humor. If anything his face darkened.

"I suspected back then, Scully, and I didn't pursue it. I let Reggie talk me out of it. He said we had the man dead to rights. He was going to rot in prison anyway, but it didn't feel right. I knew then it didn't feel right."

"Do you think there are more than just the thirteen?"

"Perhaps," Mulder shrugged. "Roche was always careful, very logical in his thought process. We asked him about the thirteen victims we had and he admitted to that, no more, no less. He didn't lie and we didn't think to ask him about others, whether there was any more bodies out there."

"Would he have told you if there were?"

"Perhaps, if we gave him something he valued."

He couldn't stop staring at the skeleton, the tiny bones piled coldly on the steel table. He seemed to be imprinting every bit of it, every position, into his perfect memory. "This case got to you, didn't it?" Of course it would, most any case with missing girls in it did. But there was something darker here, more than his usual anguish over the long-lost Samantha.

"It was the last case I did for VICAP." Mulder shifted slowly, the chair creaking slightly as he moved. "I was already burned out by that time, but pride was keeping me there. Patterson, he knew what buttons to push to keep me going, to ride me till I couldn't stand it anymore. Reggie had started assigning me less intensive work, but this case, it stumped everyone. He begged me to take it as a personal favor to him."

His long fingers worried at a crease in his slacks mindlessly as he shrugged and continued. "They had the profile down to a white male, mid-thirties to forties, likely in a profession that allowed him to travel. The bodies were from all over the northeast, New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and buried just as randomly. They hadn't figured out when he started, or what the impetus was. They couldn't figure out his victim type. They knew he preferred young girls, eight to twelve. But they couldn't get inside of his head, to see the victims as he sees them."

"And you could." It was Mulder's gift, if you wanted to call it that. Scully had always been slightly in awe of it, though there were times, such as this one, when she didn't envy him the ability. "What did Roche see?"

Little emotion betrayed itself on Mulder's face, save for a few, ever so slight ticks. The sucking in of his lower lip as it worked between his teeth, the twitching of the muscle at his jaw, the slight downward flicker of his eyes. This was a place he didn't like being in, Roche's mind.
"The victims were all young girls, indicating someone with a fixation on that particular age. Many who prey after young children do so out of a need to reach back into their own childhood, to relieve a moment. Sometimes it is out of a desire to relive a loss of innocence. Sometimes it is to relive old pain. All of the more recent victims displayed signs of molestation and rape, indicating that the perpetrator likely suffered the very same victimization in his youth."

The inner rage of grief and pain turned violently out. The very idea of serial killers, after everything Scully had experienced at their hands, left her feeling cold. How had Mulder stood this before, case after case? "How did you discover it was Roche?"

"He was the only common variable. Four of the families recalled a salesman coming to their home in the weeks previous to the abductions. The FBI didn't consider him seriously, though, until he was linked through sales records to all the areas where the missing girls lived. After that it was fitting him to the profile. He was intelligent, but emotionally stunted, childish almost. He liked playing games. It gave him the feeling of a superior edge. He was a loner, had no family, few friends and spent most of his life on the road selling vacuums. A simple background check turned up that he had been in and out of foster homes as a child after it was discovered that his grandfather had frequently molested and abused Roche and his older sister. The sister ended up committing suicide as a teenager. Roche made it out."

"Perhaps he didn't," Scully murmured. Certainly not if the broken body before them was any indication.

"No, perhaps he didn't." Mulder agreed softly. "He didn't lie about it when he was caught. He at first wanted to play coy. He taunted us with the fact that he did it. But we found the bodies, we knew he was the one, and so he confessed, proudly so. He agreed that he murdered each and every one of those girls. He didn't mention Addie Sparks. I think he enjoyed the idea of having a secret, of having one last card in his possession. It was all a game to him, really, just as if he were a child, getting one up on the authority figure, on his grandfather. None of this was real, none of this hurt anyone. He was always right and he always won."

"And it didn't matter that fourteen families spent years wondering where their little girls were?"

"No." The syllable was like rough gravel pulled from Mulder's throat, the depth of understanding he had for those very feelings of loss still so very real to him. "Roche confessed and didn't even go to trial. He was sentenced to life. I was there at the courthouse when the judge read him what he got. He hardly reacted. I don't know if it was because he knew there was another body out there or because he didn't even realize that he was really going to prison. Afterwards I left the courthouse, went back to DC, and told Reggie I wanted out of VICAP. Hell, at that point I probably would have turned in my badge. I was so done with all of it."

"I can't blame you. I'm surprised you didn't." He would have hardly been the first FBI profiler to do that very thing. "What changed your mind? The X-files?"

"Not really." He exhaled in a long, drawn out sigh, stretching out of the chair, and slowly rising up from it, standing gravely over Addie Sparks. "Because of my sister, because I understood how each of those families felt, looking for their daughters. I already knew about my repressed memories. I wanted to pursue that, not to ignore it any longer. I wanted the truth, some closure, just like they received when Roche was sentenced."

In every missing girls face there was the memory of Samantha, and not even a real memory, a half remembered, hysterical nightmare from a frightened, twelve-year-old boy. But sometimes, as Scully learned painfully from her own nightmares, even those dreams of memories were terrifyingly real. She had more than a few of those herself.
"We better get on the road. Norristown is three hours from here and I don't want to keep Mr. Sparks waiting any longer to hear what happened to Addie." She nodded softly to the tiny skeleton on the table in front of her.

"Right," Mulder murmured quietly, not turning from the remains immediately. He hadn't looked away from them, not once. No matter what their differences were, their arguments the last few weeks, it pained her to see the hurt she knew he was trying so hard to hide. She gently reached for his arm, fingers lighting on it, finally drawing his visual attention.

"You found her, Mulder. She's finally going home."

Her words seemed little comfort to him. "Was she the only one still out in the cold, Scully?"

As he pulled away and made for the door, broad shoulder's hunched into himself, Scully had to admit she didn't know.
Lashing Out

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder has a temper tantrum.

She didn't flinch when Mulder's fist slammed into the drywall, cracking loudly with a sick slap, reverberating through the crowded hallway. Her heart thumping in her chest, Scully ignored the stares of passers by outside of Skinner's office, curious gawkers all out to see how Spooky Mulder was going to break this time. Scully wondered vaguely if she should start selling tickets.

"Mulder, stop." She might as well have been reprimanding Ellen's two children with the tone she used, and it had about as much effect on Mulder as it did them. He spun away from her moodily, wringing his now red and swollen fingers fitfully.

"What, going to run and tattle to Skinner your partner's lost what little marbles he had in the first place?" His long legs sped ahead of her, forcing her heels to click madly to keep pace.

"I didn't tell him about you hitting Roche, Mulder, Skinner told you that himself.

"You thought about it." That was sheer petulance on his part. Of course she had thought about it, it was her job to think about it.

"I'm your partner, Mulder, I watch your back."

"Looking for a good place to strike?" He was provoking her, He needed to unleash his temper on something and she was the only person within striking distance.

"You're being unfair." She wasn't going to rise to his bait, not on this, and certainly not in front of everyone.

"Am I? Like you've been for the last months, carrying on about how it's all about me, that I don't care who else is involved, that you are the one pulling me back from the loony bin?"

"I've never said you were crazy?"

"That's right, you said I was 'self-absorbed and reckless,' throwing myself at every shadow out there in the hopes of turning up my missing sister." He spun on her, hands at his waist, a solid roadblock she nearly ran over. "Are you going to tell me to throw away this lead too, to ignore Roche on this, he can't be trusted, he's a liar, walk away?"

"No." She met his ire, refusing to quell beneath it. "If you don't recall, I was the one who just a minute ago was defending you to Skinner on behalf of this case." She tried to not be hurt by Mulder's rolled eyes and doubtful chuckle, snorting in disbelief. "I agree with you. If Roche may know something about Samantha's whereabouts…"

"Is it because it's more comfortable to think of Roche as the reason Samantha disappeared or do you really believe he did it?" The question was so loaded Scully paused, trying to step her way carefully around the minefield Mulder had placed before her.
"I believe that we should follow up any and every possibility that might turn up evidence on your sister's disappearance."

"A nice, safe, scientific answer, Scully." He scoffed as he pivoted again, storming off back down the hallway. She couldn't win for losing on this, all she could do was follow him to the elevators, where people stared at his deepening scowl and shied away with nervous glances towards her.

If this was to pay her back for her behavior of the last few months, then he was doing so in spades. Frankly, she couldn't say all of his irritation was unjustified, because she had a feeling this was merely the explosion of months of anger and frustration brought on by her own bad behavior. She had picked this fight first, she knew that, and she couldn't really excuse her own culpability in any of this.

"Mulder," she called behind him as the elevator doors slid open and she rushed to follow him in. "What do you want out of me? Do you want me to tell you Roche did this, that it's OK to punch him in the face and make him talk?"

He didn't answer, choosing to glare moodily into the corner.

"Look, Skinner is giving you your chance to prove this, to see if one of those last bodies is Samantha. And perhaps it is. At least it would be the end of your search." She tried to put a hopeful spin on this, albeit an unhappy one for him. Mulder wanted to believe his sister was alive, not dead. "It will be closure for you."

"So that with my quest complete, I can step back gracefully and you won't have to babysit me anymore?"

"I didn't say that." He was being maddeningly frustrating.

"Hasn't this been what these months have been about though? You feeling undervalued, unappreciated by me for all of the things you do? Ignoring the many times I've nearly killed myself and others trying to get you back, to keep you safe."

Her face reddened at his words. "Mulder, if I wanted to step away from this, all of this, I could." And why hadn't she? She pushed the treacherous thought aside roughly.

"The old sea captain's daughter, loyal to the end? I don't know about that, Scully, passive aggressiveness seems to suit you just fine." The elevator jolted to a halt as her jaw dropped, the anger she had been trying to keep in check surging within her.

"Is that your clinical opinion, Dr. Mulder?"

He smirked at the use of a title he hadn't earned during his vaunted time at Oxford. "Why don't you tell me what is really bugging you, Scully?"

"Why won't you admit to yourself that this argument you are picking with me is really because you are scared of the truth?" She threw the words out as she stepped off the elevator behind him, glaring at him as he dug in his pocket for the office keys. "As much as you say you want to know what happened to your sister, you are afraid she was one of those girls, that she suffered the same thing they did, and it is killing you because any hope you had that she might be alive somewhere is dashed if she is one of Roche's victims."

There was a slight tremor in his fingers as they fumbled with the keys briefly. She'd hit a mark and effectively too, digging in one of Mulder's most sensitive areas. Her anger had gotten the better of her, had pushed her into stepping irreverently on a wound that was open and seeping right now and
The door popped open audibly as he reached inside and flicked a light on. "I want to see Roche this afternoon." He made no further comment on her words. In fact he barely looked at her. "I want to show him the last two hearts and see if he will talk."

"And if one of them is Samantha?" Would this be the end she had wondered if Mulder would ever find?

"Then I will deal with that then." He reached inside of his desk, to the baggie of cloth hearts, the last two, unclaimed ones inside. "You want to drive this time?"

Scully wordlessly reached for her purse and keys, swallowing the dread that settled in the pit of her stomach.
In which Scully gives Skinner their final report on Roche.

"Agent Scully?" Kim's bright, professional smile tugged her attention out of the file she was staring at and not reading, and the swirl of thoughts she found herself lost in as she sat in the waiting area of Assistant Director Skinner's office. She rose with a quiet nod and gathered herself, stepping inside the massive office where Skinner sat, as usual focused on some file. She wondered blandly if the man ever relaxed, ever stopped working. Perhaps not. Like Mulder, the work seemed to keep Skinner's demons away, his memories of a war that ended long ago. If only work was that effective at keeping Mulder's demons away.

"Agent Scully, have a seat." He barely looked up as he gestured towards the leather chair in front of him. She gracefully sat in one of the massive chairs as it threatened to swallow her small frame and sat up as tall as she could.

"You have the lab results back on the last victim found?" Skinner continued to write with his thick, ballpoint pen, jotting quickly as his hand flew across the page.

"I do sir," she murmured, glancing towards the empty seat beside her. "You didn't want Agent Mulder here for this?"

"Agent Mulder is damn lucky I haven't put his ass in suspension." Skinner's jaw turned rock hard as he growled loudly, but just as immediately softened. "Besides, this case hit too close to home for him. I knew it and let him run with it anyway. We are just damn lucky things didn't end up worse. For now, just leave him out. You can catch him up later."

Scully felt uncomfortable with the idea, but obeyed anyway, handing over copies of the lab results from her file. Skinner was right, of course, Mulder could be filled in later. But she had tried to never coddle him, he hated it, but this case had cut through his defenses and into the heart of his deepest pain, manipulated and pulled by Roche. How had the serial killer found out about Mulder's past, about Samantha, about his family? Had he really been in New England that fateful night in November 1973?

"The body of the fifteenth victim meets the description of Cindy Lambech, age nine, missing from her home in Reading, Pennsylvania since early in 1975. Roche had been in the area during the winter that year and I think a simple DNA test will confirm the findings. Her family is still there, I can speak to the parents."

It was a grim duty, much as speaking to Addie Sparks father had been, and Skinner obviously didn't relish the job or wish it on anyone. "You will assure the Lambech family this man was tried and convicted and won't be hurting anyone's children ever again?"

"Of course." She would add in that Roche was rotting in hell now for good measure, sent there by her partner's bullet, anything to bring comfort to a family who had waited so long to hear word on their long, lost daughter.
"How about the last victim, the sixteenth heart?"

"I just got back the lab results on it." She indicated the file Skinner had yet to examine. "The best the lab could tell was that the fabric was made of dye made between 1969 and 1974."

"Well within the window of Samantha Mulder's disappearance."

"Yes, but the pattern design doesn't match." Scully had combed through the various files and descriptions of the nightgown the young girl had been wearing that evening. "I checked it against Teena Mulder's statement from that night to the police."

"You didn't run it by Mulder first?"

"Sir, with respect to Agent Mulder's amazing memory, this is the one event he can not recall with any clarity, and in fact I am not sure that what he remembers now is what happened that night, and I don't think he's sure about that either." Not if he was so willing to believe Roche in the first place, to allow the man to get inside of his head for a change, to allow the man to break him.

"So you don't believe the last victim is Samantha Mulder than?" Skinner set down the report, leaning back in his broad, leather chair with sad thoughtfulness. She knew how he felt. It would have been nice if it had been Samantha. It would have neatly explained things and shut a chapter in Mulder's life, perhaps have begun to remove one of his demons. Skinner knew a thing or two about those.

"The truth is, sir, I don't think Roche was anywhere near Martha's Vineyard in the fall of 1973. He was in Boston, yes, the records show that, but they also show that his canvas area was north and west of the city. He never made it out to Cape Cod, let alone the Vineyard."

"Not even for a side trip?"

"It wouldn't make any sense, and he had no way of knowing of the Mulders. Bill Mulder worked in Washington during the week and Teena rarely took the children off the island into Boston, so he had no way of even running across them."

"And the vacuum cleaner Roche claimed he sold to Mrs. Mulder?"

"A birthday present in 1973 from Bill to Teena. He brought it back up from DC with him as a gift. It just so happens that model of vacuum was popular that year. I spoke to her this morning." Teena's memory was still spotty from the stroke, but it was one of the few bright spots she remembered from that year. It had worried her that Mulder had shown up randomly on her doorstep just days before looking for the item.

"Does she have an inkling about what this is all about?"

"No, I told her it was a case involving a vacuum cleaner salesman, but not that it involved Samantha. After all, next week is the anniversary of her disappearance, and with this, I didn't want to make it harder for her."

"Did Roche know it was the anniversary of Mulder's sister's disappearance?" It was bugging the hell out of Skinner that this man, this criminal, could not only get so thoroughly into the head of one of his best profilers, but had so much access to Mulder's personal life, and frankly it was bugging the hell out of Scully as well.

"It's likely, sir. Mulder claims there was some sort of nexus, a psychic link between the two." It went without saying to her boss how she felt about that theory. "I believe what is far more likely is
that Roche has spent the last years in prison studying Mulder. Much of this information is a matter of public record; the case, the details of Samantha's disappearance, even where Mulder lived as a child. A simple search through crime records or newspaper reports would have turned up that information. As for the other details, I think Roche was just a good salesman. He could read people and tell them what they wanted to hear to make them buy into whatever he was selling, whether it was a vacuum cleaner or the truth about a dead sister. He was a sociopath with little to no remorse and played Mulder like a fiddle at one of his moment vulnerable times of the year, the anniversary of his sister's disappearance."

"And Mulder's so-called dreams?" It was the last bit that didn't fit neatly into the case file. Skinner didn't like dangling threads.

"We all know Agent Mulder's mind works differently than the rest of ours, processes information in its own unique way. Chances are that the dreams were nothing more than Mulder trying to work through the nagging doubt he had about Roche all these years, mingling with the memories of his sister brought to the fore by the impending anniversary, and working out the pattern of where Roche hid the body of Addie Sparks."

It was all conjecture of course, pulled completely out of Scully's imagination and her sideways understanding of psychology. But it made a hell of a lot more sense than Roche reading Mulder's mind.

"Right." The answer clearly satisfied Skinner as he sat forward. "Well the son-of-a-bitch is dead now and won't be playing mind games with anymore of my agents. Do we have a lead on where the last girl might be?"

"No, we don't. Roche was the only one who knew." A small, mysterious smile tugged at her lips. "But she will be found one day. I don't think Mulder will rest till she is." It wasn't a good answer, it wasn't a neat, tidy one like the FBI liked, but it was what they had for the moment.

"Let's hope you are right, Agent Scully." He passed back the lab reports quickly, clearly done with the conversation. "Tell Agent Mulder that for now he's off the hook with Roche. I've smoothed it over, explaining to everyone that Roche had stated he was taking Mulder out to the body of the last victim and had managed to evade the Bureau. There will be a shit storm for it still but not as badly as there would have been if they knew the truth of what happened." Skinner was taking a risk, covering for them once again. "Try to keep a tighter leash on your partner next time, Agent Scully."

It was an order and she knew it. There were only so many times their boss could pull out miracles for them. "Thank you, sir."

She rose quietly, sensing the dismissal that was coming. As Skinner nodded, she made her way out of his office with a polite murmur for Kim as she passed and made her way towards the elevators. Mulder would be downstairs waiting. He had said little since shooting Roche. Mulder knew how badly he had messed this up, the danger he had put an innocent girl in, and that guilt, coupled with the draining emotions of the case, was enough to keep him behaved and sedated for the last several days. He had come to work, but hadn't been there, not really. Scully could tell he wasn't sleeping, not that he normally did. She imagined that when he tried bright lights and the high, shrill scream of his name punctuated his dreams over and over again. It was his usual nightmare. No wonder he hated his first name, she mused as the elevator doors opened on the basement. Every time he heard it he probably was taken back to that night and to the syllable that characterized all of his worst dreams.

He was sitting behind his desk, inert, papers before him, computer on, but not looking at either. She stopped, watching him as he turned his sorrowful eyes up to her briefly, not speaking. The raw,
aching wound lying there cut her heart, twenty years of questions, of guilt, of anguish still lingered there, pooling just under the surface. The hard feelings and cold words of the last weeks and months melted under the desire to simply move over to him, to hold him and tell him that his sister was out there, alive, and they would find her. But Scully couldn't give into that, not yet at least. Slowly she moved and set the file in front of him. Mulder stared at it blankly, not picking it up, studying it as he would a potentially dangerous animal.

"I got back some lab results. The dye analysis determined that the fabric of the last heart was manufactured between 1969 and 1974, but beyond that, there's nothing more they can tell us." He nodded, only half hearing her. This not knowing was eating him alive.

"Mulder, it's not Samantha." In her marrow, Scully believed that. If nothing else, it was the damned intuition that Mulder was always speaking about telling her that this wasn't his long-lost sister. "And whoever that little girl really is, we'll find her."

Mulder stopped just short of scoffing at her doubtfully. "How?"

How did she know? She didn't. But she knew Mulder. And that seemed to be all the assurance she needed. "I don't know, but I know you."

His eyes slid up to her, so full of emotion they were unreadable before he dropped them back down to the file in front of him. He was exhausted, rung out from this case, from all the emotions tied to it. "Why don't you go on home and get some sleep," she urged quietly.

Sleep? The idea amused him. The heavy, morose weight in the room cracked and broke just as something within Mulder did, and a laugh, a real laugh broke out of him, not hysterical, but deep, cleansing, ironic. Scully found herself chuckling with him. None of this was fair. None of it made sense, but for now life would go on. There were still cases to investigate, still unexplained happenstances to track down, and the truth, as always, was out there somewhere, as was Samantha, and they would find her, one-day.

Quietly she reached an arm around him, pulling him towards her and hugging him fiercely. He laid his head against her chest, like a child, the boy that had never let go of his sister's loss so long ago. Scully couldn't ever make that better for him. But she could at least offer some comfort, as his friend. She ran soothing fingers across his soft, dark hair, wishing not for the first time she could do anything to make any of this better.

She quietly let him go, receiving a grateful, sad smile as she left the office. Perhaps she would head home early as well.
"Why are we on an anti-terrorism case?" Scully's murmur was soft and low as she glanced hesitantly around the large war room, maps covering the plain white walls, one focused specifically on New York City.

"Skinner wants us involved." Mulder studied the map vaguely before settling beside her in one of the hard, cold metal folding chairs, stretching his legs out before him. They were the first inside the small conference room, but behind them Scully could hear other agents trickling in.

"What, we haven't done enough regular case work to suit him?" Scully had meant it as a joke but Mulder didn't smile. He hadn't smiled much in the last couple of weeks. Scully knew the nightmares were still going the memories dredged up by Roche. She hadn't said anything as Mulder buried himself in casework, staying far later than she did of an evening and arriving well before she did in the morning.

"Do you even know what the case is about?"

"Something having to do with Queens?" Mulder waved towards the pushpin-studded map on the wall.

"Very observant Agent Mulder," she snorted, glancing at the other agents who quietly settled around them, notepads and coffee in hand. "Think they are wondering what the two of us are doing here?"

"I think they are still trying to figure out who we are and if we really work for the FBI."

"We aren't out of the public eye that much." Scully didn't want to mention that she highly doubted anyone in the FBI would forget Fox Mulder.

"I don't think anyone that works here knows we have a basement, much less that you and I work in it." Mulder's eyes tracked a particularly tall, pretty female agent as she walked past, dark haired and curious as she smiled softly at him. Scully refrained from the urge to kick his shin, hard, mild irritation rising to the fore.

"Enjoying the scenery?" Her voice was a quiet, amused hiss.

"They don't let me out much to see the natives, Scully. Can you blame a man?"

"Pick you jaw up, Mulder, you're gawking."

"So is everyone else in the room. So what?"
"So, you are an objectifying pig?"

"You've seen my magazine collection, you have just now caught on that I am an objectifying pig?"

"You don't objectify me." That came out much more morose than she intended. And he picked up, one dark eyebrow quirking curiously at her as she suddenly found herself busy with the notepad on her lap.

"That's because you would shoot me if I did." The sly smile rose in his eyes if not on his face. "Besides, I think there are plenty enough men in this room who objectify you enough as it is."

"With her standing in the room?" She nodded towards the dark haired woman chatting at the end of their row with a young and obviously adoring younger agent.

"Dana Scully, self-conscious, I thought I would never see that?"

"Shut up, Mulder," her elbow found his side sharply as he grunted and laughed.

"Don't worry, Scully, people think you are hot. That's why they still assume we are sleeping together."

"Right, when we've fought like cats and dogs for the last three months." She snorted, unable to believe they were having this conversation in a room full of other agents.

"Ahh, well you know, the bloom is off the rose for us, I suppose."

"And that's why you are checking out other women?"

"You are jealous, aren't you?"

To Scully's ever-lasting relief a cluster of serious looking agents, Skinner included in the mix, took to the front of the room. She turned her pinking face forward, digging her elbow again one more time for one last, good measure. "You're impossible."

"But I made you laugh," he pointed out, slightly smugly. She had made him laugh too. That was a good sign, at least. The gloom that had enshrouded him the last few days was lifting if a slight bit.

"Good morning." Ahead of them one of the small group stepped up to a wobbling podium, a short man with close-cropped hair and a booming voice. His grim smile of greeting took in the room. "I'm Special Agent Charles and I'm the ASAC for this operation, coordinating between our office here in Washington as well as with the New York Field office and the NYPD." He turned behind himself and began rattling off names of the other men and women around him, including Skinner, the only AD directly involved, though anti-terror wasn't under his purview. That surprised Scully, as it should be under AD McGrath. The hard nosed, tough as nails assistant director had crossed she and Mulder's path once years ago, when she first began working with Mulder, pissed to hell that he had involved himself in a terrorist investigation. He hadn't taken kindly to one of Skinner's agents sticking his nose where it didn't belong in his department.

"Why isn't McGrath in this meeting?" She leaned over to whisper at Mulder. He didn't seem as worried about it as she did about the absence. He shrugged and leaned back, grimacing up at the proceedings. Strange, he wasn't even curious. A small break in FBI protocol usually never went without observation and comment with him.

"As some of you know," Agent Charles continued in his deep, ringing tones. "We have been watching the homegrown, right-wing revolutionary group Sons of Liberty. For those who don't
know, the Sons are a loose but militant conglomeration of radical anarchists, conspiracy theorists mostly who believe the US government has perpetuated the worst of lies."

Whether he meant it or not, Charles' eyes flickered to Mulder, causing several heads to turn his direction. Scully met the curious stares levelly as they skittered forward again. Perhaps this was why Skinner had sent for them.

"The Sons have led mostly minor plots up till this point, sabotages at military facilities, weapons plants, cargo shipments, most are traced and caught before they manage much harm to anyone. The group isn't organized or centralized enough for any massive action, often they work in individual cells with one leader and lack the capability and wherewithal to manage a full scale, serious national threat - that is until now."

Low murmurs erupted around them, a dull drone as Charles continued. "Over the last few months one particular cell, based out of the Dakotas, became more active. Their chatter grew more virulent, both over the web and the airwaves. We had monitored the situation, but found no hard evidence that anything particularly dangerous was being planned, not until evidence was sent to us regarding certain purchases being made in large quantities. Receipts for these items were sent to Agent Mulder directly in the X-files division."

Again all heads turned to Mulder, including Scully's, her mouth opening foolishly. He hardly seemed flustered by the attention. In fact he looked as if he rather expected it. He had known from the beginning why they were being called into this meeting. Why hadn't he told her?

Mulder rose smoothly at Charles' invitation, hardly flinching at everyone's stunned expressions, including Scully's. "Over the last six weeks, anonymous letters have arrived to me with receipts linked to this particular cell. On their own they seem innocuous enough, detonation cord from a construction supplier, fuel used for racing engines, fertilizer,you can all see where this is going."

Scully blinked, wide-eyed up at him. Six weeks? That was before the Roche case, before Nathaniel Teager. Perhaps it had been as far back as Chattanooga. Too stunned to be angry she listened, trying to imprint the facts in her muzzy brain, but finding she was too surprised to think clearly.

"I approached AD Skinner and Agent Charles with my suspicions and maintained contact with each new receipt. Each was signed by one of three different signatories, depending on the product being purchased, but each of the aliases matched one used by this particular cell within the Sons. The latest receipt I received yesterday, a first and last months rental on storage space in Flushing, Queens. This morning a fax came through our office with for a two-ton truck rental out of New Jersey."

"In case you all don't remember the events of last year, this is nearly the same MO used in Oklahoma City." Charles glowered darkly across the suddenly still agents in the room. "With the latest receipt, it is Agent Mulder's belief and our assessment that purchased goods were used to create one or more bombs currently being housed in the Flushing storage unit. Thanks to chatter picked up through our own channels, we believe that the prizes will be picked up tonight from Queens. Once they have them they can take their homemade prizes anywhere; the US Stock Exchange, any federal building in the tri-state area, hell if they are really aspiring, they could drive down here to Washington with it."

The short, pugnacious looking man bristled, personally taking insult at the idea. "The plan is to intercept the packages before they leave the lot tonight. Each of you has been assigned to a team on this to keep an eye on the facility and all its entry points and various outlying buildings. I also have several you on details on every route in and out of the area in Flushings. Agent Mulder, I want you and your partner in the facility with SWAT keeping an eye directly for the suspects. You've been
following this case from the beginning, you've got a better beat on what they may or may not do than we do."

Scully could do little more than nod blankly when Charles turned to her as he barked out orders to the other agents, directing them to dossiers being handed out to each of them, and outlining the objectives for their mission. What he said, or if it had any meaning really, flew past her as she watched Mulder quietly move back to the empty seat beside her. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Agent Scully?" A file waved in front of her face and she took it without seeing it, flipping through the information on the Sons of Liberty. Mulder took his as well, burying himself in the pages.

"You didn't tell me?" She managed to stutter the words out in the mild commotion around them as agents studied the intel and grouped together according to their assignments.

"I was told by Skinner and Charles not to." Mulder at least had the decency to look ashamed. "Whoever the informant was, he was reaching out to me, and they feared too many people in the know would spook him."

"Too many people? Mulder just two weeks ago you were about to get fired for letting a serial killer out of prison. What if you had been suspended? What would have happened to this case then?"

"Skinner was on it."

It occurred to Scully that it was Skinner who pulled the strings keeping Mulder out of trouble on that one. Oh the tangled webs woven. "You didn't trust me enough to include me in on this one?"

Logically she knew he was under orders, but it stung her pride he hadn't at least approached her when he received the first receipt, asked her opinion.

"You weren't exactly being particularly receptive at the time, as you recall."

It was his polite way of saying she'd been in a raging bitch at the time.

"Besides," he continued quietly. "It was right after Chattanooga, with yet another group bent on revolutionary anarchy. We saw how that ended. I didn't want to make the same mistake. I took it straight to Skinner and let anti-terror handle this before ATF could even get a whiff and make this into yet another mess. What they are planning here is another Oklahoma City, Scully."

"I know." He was right, of course he was right. "Unless you were up to something potentially dangerous and likely illegal, Mulder, you haven't left me out of anything in years."

His fingers tightened on the folder ever so slightly. "And I won't in the future, Scully, but in this one instance I had no choice. Please, I'm sorry if you are upset. Take it up with Skinner, I'm sure there are plenty of things that you two have discussed about me that you haven't shared."

Actually, Scully silently replied, no there wasn't. She tried to manage a reassuring smile and hoped it didn't look like she was ill. She felt ill, her head pounding fretfully.

"I promise, I won't run off and do anything stupid on this case," he grinned placating.

"It's you, Mulder," she sighed, returning to her files. "I'm sure you will find something to stir up trouble with."

Chapter End Notes
So, with the rise of all the many reports of the very real sexual harassment of late (and about time too), I've had to give some real thought into the rather blatant objectification Mulder engages in, not just in my stories but the show too. I mean, really, he crosses many lines all the time with Scully. I've decided not to change or alter these aspects of my story, and for a couple of reasons. First, I do believe that Mulder is very much this way, a man who believes he's outside the system and yet is a part of that system of objectifying women. We see it in lots of big and small ways throughout the series. I think it's important to remember that though he's the 'hero' of the series, in a way, he's also not always a great person to be around. David Duchovny even brings it up a lot, he's a bit of a broken creeper.

Second, having grown up as a teenager/young woman in the 90s, it was NOT the most enlightened period for gender relations. Scully is in fact a hero of mine because of this, she was a woman playing in this all-boys club that was the FBI at the time. The fact she did it and held her ground is saying something. This was the time period of Anita Hill, Monica Lewinski and all sorts of atrocious behavior on the part of men in power, and many of them didn't see anything wrong with it (and many still do not). This is the attitude Scully has to put up with all the time, not just from Mulder. So as much as I'd love for Mulder to be "woke" and realize he's a jerk-face cad, I don't think it would have occurred to him then. Hell, look around us now, how much has it occurred to anyone in the 20 years since?

All that being said, I am hoping and praying that the conversations going on now aren't just a fad and lead to serious discussion on what women have to put up with everyday. As for Mulder, if you think he's a bit of a objectifying jerk in these stories...you'd be right, he is.
Black Rock

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully connect with an old friend.

If it had been any other suspect being brutally smacked around by Mulder, Scully might have put up more of an effort to stop his more violent tendencies, however, sympathy always had run a little short for her where Alex Krycek was concerned. She listened to the other, dark haired man grunt in pain as Mulder's hand wrapped around the back of his neck, practically dragging him handcuffed out of the airport terminal. What security there was there that time of night glanced in mild alarm towards the scene they were creating until Scully flashed her badge. The shine of the federal shield caused them all to suddenly become very involved in something else.

"The Bureau proud of its police brutality?" Krycek yelped as the pads of Mulder's long fingers tightened into the muscles around his spine.

"You're in a really bad position to start smarting off, Krycek, so unless you want to sit in jail with your new terrorist best friends and learn the intricacies of the federal prison dating system, I suggest you start shutting up."

Mulder's threat was more of a promise, and Scully thought she could see his storming eyes flicker downwards to the holster he had strapped to his side. Krycek was walking a dangerous line baiting the beast. Mulder had already been through one emotional ringer of late and Krycek was the reason for several others. Personally, Scully admitted, she didn't know how reasonable she would be alone in a room with the slimy son-of-a-bitch herself. Visions of her sister's blood staining the floor of her entryway still haunted her dreams, right alongside the vague memories of the place that she was taken thanks to him.

Their steps scrapped and scuffled against concrete, echoing in the near empty and dark parking area deserted this late at night. Mulder tossed Scully his keys as he opened the back, roughly shoving Krycek in like sack of unwanted potatoes and slamming the door against the other man's yelping protest. "You drive, I want to keep cover on my old partner."

"Mulder, don't do anything stupid." Scully knew her warning was going to be taken more as a friendly suggestion, "stupid" being a random variable in Mulder's world of definitions.

"I won't kill him," Mulder offered in a less than reassuring tone. She somehow doubted that Krycek was going to get to wherever they were going without at least a broken nose and a black eye, and that was if he was lucky.

"Where are we going?" She rounded the car to the driver's side, eyeing Krycek staring furious and mute in the back.

"We can't take him to prison. The minute we do someone's going to know he's there. They took him once last spring, ran me off the road to get at him. This time they may just kill him."

"And this would be a bad thing?" She almost feeling guilty for asking that….almost.
"As much as I'd love to take him to a dark alley with a baseball bat, the truth is he is the only one who knows where that DAT tape is and he's the only one who knows all the information on it." Mulder met her frown knowingly, eyes flicking down at Krycek behind the thick glass of his sedan. "He knows what they did to you, about the tests, about what all of this is, Scully. He knows what's in those silos in North Dakota and he knows why they killed my father and your sister." He grimaced over the last words as if they left a bitter taste in his mouth. "He's right about one thing, we won't catch these men by bringing them to justice. No court in the world would try them. No jury would find them guilty. They are untouchable."

"You honestly believe that?" Scully didn't, or at least she didn't want to. But Krycek's smirk of disdain when she suggested it lurked in her mind and she wondered if perhaps she was too idealistic in hoping what she did. After all Luis Cardinale, Krycek's partner in her sister's death, was killed in jail before anyone could even touch him. What justice was there then for Melissa or for herself?

"I believe that Krycek knows the truth about who these men are and just how powerful they are and how entrenched." Mulder's fingers drummed lightly on the hood, thumping slightly in the emptiness around them. "We need to know where he was planning to take that bomb and why."

"And what about that black rock?" Scully held up the orange courier bag still in hand.

"I don't think that was what Krycek thought it was." Mulder shrugged, opening the passenger door and adjusting the seat for his long legs, purposefully slamming it hard backwards towards where Krycek's knees were bent.

Krycek swore loudly, pulling his knees up and slipping behind Scully as she settled in the driver's seat, pulling it forward. "I thought you were a big enough asshole when I worked with you, Mulder."

"That was shiny, happy, sparkly Mulder compared to what you will get from me now, Krycek." Mulder turned in his seat, his weapon out and trained on Krycek's suddenly still face. "Now, Scully is an impeccable driver, not even a speeding ticket. But last year was a long, cold winter, and you remember how roads in DC are. One nasty pothole, and my finger slips…"

He shrugged mildly, his lips curving up coldly.

Scully simply started the car.

"You're not an idiot, Mulder." Krycek's tried to plaster his bravado over his suddenly pale and trembling expression. "You know I have information you need. You wouldn't risk killing me."

Krycek was worse than vile, but he wasn't stupid obviously. Scully glanced sideways at Mulder as he nodded regretfully.

"That you are, Krycek, as much as I hate to admit it." Mulder slid the muzzle of his weapon towards Krycek's kneecap. "But you can get around with a busted leg, can't you? What's one appendage in exchange for your life?"

"You think I'll tell you anything you want to know just because you wave a gun in my face?" Krycek hardly sounded impressed as Scully pulled from the parking garage and into general traffic. Car volume was light this time of night around Dulles. "You think I haven't seen that trick used before, Mulder, and by much scarier men than yourself?"

"I think I've waved guns in their faces, too," Mulder smirked cryptically. "Now, where were you
taking that bomb?"

Scully could feel Krycek shift in the seat behind her, his long legs setting hard, preparing for an argument. "That's not how this game is played, Mulder."

"I'm not in this for games, asshole, start talking or I'll put your name and face all over CNN as the head of a terrorist ring. I think a few of your friends might appreciate knowing you're back in town."

This threat at least gave Krycek pause. "You got to give me more than that, Mulder. You know what I have is valuable enough to kill me for. They've already tried it, several times."

"And you were just enough of a rat to get off the ship before it sank?"

"I need protection, Mulder."

"For what? A bit of rock?"

Scully could feel Krycek's condescension through the seat as he snorted. She glanced back in the mirror to see him roll his eyes, laughing as he turned to gaze out of the dark window. "You see a hunk of rock, Mulder, and you assume it's worthless. That courier was bringing it from outside not because its worth something but because of what it hides."

"From where?" Irritated at Krycek's flippancy, Mulder dug his muzzle into the other man's thigh as a strangled yelp sounded from the back.

"I fucking don't know! You two should have checked with the airlines before you decided to manhandle me out of the airport!"

Scully wasn't about to admit he had a point. "How did you know about the courier at all?"

Krycek was silent for long moments before answering, likely only doing so because of Mulder's non-to-gentle prodding. "I've been monitoring the activities of the men who want that rock. They expected a shipment in today at Dulles, another coming from the West Coast, likely through either Hawaii or Alaska. The plan was that if one of the rocks were to disappear, the other would be available to them."

"And what makes it so valuable?" She watched him in the rear view mirror as he did the same. He studied her gaze briefly before replying.

"What's in it." Krycek's gaze flickered between the rear view mirror to the deepening thunderclouds on Mulder's brow. "I don't know what is in it, before you start bludgeoning me again, Mulder. I know it's important to their plans. There is something about it they want and they were willing to do anything to get it. People died getting that rock over here."

"I'm sure it can make the lame walk and the blind see," Mulder growled, glancing at the orange bag that now lay between him and Scully. "Unless that rock is turning water into wine, I don't see anyone outside of a college geology department caring."

"Then why is it that courier ran when he saw badges, huh?" Krycek's smiled superciliously at Mulder's scorn, eyes bright with secret knowledge. "Why would he rather abandon it than be caught with it? If it were just a rock, why would I know about it? And why would they hide it?"

Slowly Scully glanced towards Mulder, finding his dark, thoughtful gaze meeting hers in silent agreement. They both knew Krycek was right, this wasn't just some trick, some ruse on his part to
evade them again. Krycek wallowed in the darkness and hidden things that they only just skimmed in their work. He knew where all the bodies were buried and all the secrets were hidden, and chances were if he said there was something to the rock now burning uncomfortably against her thigh, there was something to it. They would have to find what and they would have to keep him safe till they did.

"Turn off up there," Mulder muttered in response to her unspoken thought, once again his own thoughts mirroring hers. "Crystal City."

Crystal City. Where Skinner lived. With a firm nod Scully signaled, making for the exit ramp that led to their boss' apartment. Skinner wouldn't be thrilled with the two of them arriving this late at night with this package in hand, but Skinner was no friend of Alex Krycek's and certainly wouldn't ask too many questions if the fact that he was involved in the terrorist cell was mentioned.

"You get to do the fast talking with him," she warned Mulder, lifting her chin towards the back seat.

"Believe me, I don't think he's going to cause one little problem, are you Alex?"

Krycek glowered stonily in response.
A black, oily substance coated the slide under the microscope lens. Scully's eyes blurred as they tried to focus, burning at the strain of too many hours staring at nothing more than a grease slick. She sighed, pushing away from the lab table, her head throbbing with the effort as she rubbed her forehead viciously with the heel of one palm. Hours she had been at this already with the comatose Dr. Sacks notes, watching the video of the procedure, the spray of the dark liquid as he cut into the rock, the screams as he collapse, inert to the laboratory floor. So far, nothing explained the death-like stillness of his body's function, nor about the fluid, where it came from, and why it had the effect it did on him.

"Any luck on an identification?" Pendrell tried to keep up his positive spirit though he looked and sounded as exhausted as she did. Scully smiled wanly and shook her head at the fellow red haired man, leaning back on her lab stool and staring blandly at the cold, white instrument in front of her offering her no answers, only further headaches.

"So far it looks just like oil."

Pendrell wrinkled his nose as he moved towards the microscope himself, one blue eye staring through the lens to study the smear himself. "Where did it come from?"

"My first guess would be that it came from the hydraulics of the drill that Dr. Sacks was using but I had a maintenance team go through the lab already and they said everything was in working order. Video from Dr. Sacks work, however, shows that the spray occurred at about the same time he began cutting into the rock sample Mulder and I brought him, indicating that could be the source."

"But he was just cutting a rock." The look of dubious doubt from Pendrell was hardly surprising to Scully. Frankly, she was more surprised she hadn't seen it out of the head of the SciCrimes Lab much earlier, considering some of the things she'd asked him to analyze.

"You ever hear of Daniel Trepkos, Agent Pendrell?"

Recognition lit almost instantly on the young man's face. "Yeah, sure! He was that cracked genius out of Cal Tech, worked in geology and robotics. He disappeared on some mountain a few years back."

"He didn't disappear," Scully murmured thoughtfully, rubbing fretfully at the dull ache in her forehead. "He dug too deeply and pulled up a sample with something inside of it he couldn't handle."

Poor Jesse, she sighed, remembering the young, graduate assistant who'd followed Trepkos up the mountain and died because of it. "Mulder and I worked that case. We know what happened though the army doesn't discuss it, an entire team was wiped out by what they found in that rock."
If Pendrell's eyes got any wider they would fly off his face in a minute. His Adam's apple worked frantically, as if priming itself to try and make some sort of articulate sound. It must have worked. "You and Agent Mulder? You're serious?"

"What do you think the X-files are, Agent Pendrell? We deal with strange things everyday, or haven't you heard the rumors?" She couldn't help but tease the other agent a little. She knew that Pendrell of course had a peripheral knowledge of what they did, logically he understood it was strange, unexplained cases. But it was one thing to know that Spooky Mulder dealt with crazy phenomenon and another to experience for oneself. Pendrell's eyes rolled wildly from the microscope to her and back before he collected himself, roughly clearing his throat as he tried to affect a nonchalant shrug.

"And is that what we are dealing with here, more of what Trepkos found in that mountain?"

"No," Scully replied promptly, feeling slightly guilty for worrying Pendrell as he slid in what he probably thought was an unobtrusive manner away from the sample on the microscope. "No, this is different. This seems to be petroleum based substance and judging from the type of rock, that is a possibility. We know it was smuggled out of Russia, which since the end of the Cold War has become a free-for-all for Western interests eager to plunder the country for its mineral resources."

"And Russia has plenty of them," Pendrell agreed, still eyeing the slide suspiciously as if he expected it to suddenly infect him from across the room. "Companies are paying millions of dollars to get into the country and find out what's in there to try and get a foot in the door."

"A rock containing oil from a new source would be big money if the right people get their hands on it," Scully agreed. But as logical of an explanation as it was, it didn't feel right. It didn't explain the condition of the geologist and it didn't explain why Krycek felt this rock was so important. She thought back, something pulling at her memory. "There was a case Mulder and I worked on earlier in the year…"

"Another strange infection from some other rock?" Pendrell was clearly going to be spooked by her story from now on.

"No, not quite." Her words did little to assuage Pendrell. "There was a French salvage ship, the Piper Maru, it wandered into San Diego, all of its crew displaying radiation burns. All of them, but one man. He had been underwater on a dive at the time. He was unaffected, but his dive suit was covered in a slick, oily substance just like the substance here."

Pieces were starting to click together disturbingly in Scully's mind. She could almost literally here the sound of them as an alarming pattern started to form. "Mulder found the diver in his home in San Francisco days later covered in this same substance. His wife was found in a Hong Kong bathroom two days later, same thing, and Mulder and Krycek…"

Krycek had disappeared from the car he shared with Mulder and hadn't been seen again until he turned up in Queens days ago. He said he had been found in a missile silo in North Dakota, ironically where they had been themselves looking for Krycek.

"When Dr. Sacks began studying the rock days ago. He mentioned that it contained fossilized bacteria, perhaps from Mars, he couldn't be sure."

"Dr. Sacks was infected from something in that rock." Pendrell's alarm rose again, though he made no move further. Despite the strangeness of everything Scully was telling him in that moment - and undoubtedly this had to be the weirdest thing she'd ever asked Pendrell to help her research - at his heart he was a scientist. And she could see the curiosity in his worried expression. He wanted to
know what was going on here as well, which is why Scully had asked him to help her on this. Outside of Mulder, Pendrell was one of the few she could trust in the FBI with any of the strange things she uncovered, and certainly the only other scientist who could view these things from her perspective.

"We don't know, but I do know that if this is the same substance we found off the Piper Maru it could contain a life form that has existed since before humans were even a mote in God's eye. And it's hard telling what that sort of ancient life form could do."

Was this what the Piper Maru had stumbled on months ago, not nuclear material for a bomb, but rather an ancient substance that could be played with, perhaps turned into a bio weapon to be used by the government, tested on innocent and unsuspecting people? Scully's mind reeled as possibilities, conclusions, and threads of logic came slamming into it, as years of unanswered questions began to make a certain horrifying sense. How did Mulder deal with this everyday, the awareness of knowing? She swallowed hard, her head aching at the weight of what was starting to come together.

"Agent Scully? You all right?" Pendrell's concern cut through the aching swirl of her thoughts and she met his worried gaze, smiling tightly.

"Yeah, its just things started to finally make a weird sort of sense." Her murmured vagueness was confusing to him, she knew that, but it wouldn't be confusing to Mulder. "Excuse me, Agent Pendrell." She slid from the chair she had been perched on, her fingers reaching for her phone in her pocket, already dialing Mulder's number as she made for the hallway.

He picked up on the first ring. "Mulder."

"It's me," she breathed, just restraining the rush of ideas that pressed to pour themselves out of her. "Mulder, Dr. Sacks...I think the fossilized remains he found in the rock were not what he assumed they were. I think he found a substance similar to what we saw on the diving suit from the Piper Maru last winter, the same, oily substance."

"What is it?" His voice was garbled over the cell phone, the sound of noise and loudspeakers from somewhere muffling him.

"I don't know yet, it could be the ancient bacteria that Dr. Sacks was referring to when we spoke to him." She paused for a breath. "Mulder, this could be the very substance the Piper Maru was looking for. What if this substance, this bacteria in this rock is what these men have been after all along? What if it wasn't nuclear material down there after all but this, the key to all of their biochemical machinations for the last fifty years?"

Mulder was silent on the other end for long moments, as if considering this. "It's a possibility, Scully, but we won't know till we know till we know where the rock comes from and why it's so important."

"Where it comes from?" The loudspeaker sounded in the background again. "Are you still in New York?"

"I won't be soon. I'm heading to St. Petersburg."

"Russia?" The word sprang out of her so forcefully it rang down tiled hallway loud enough for Pendrell in the lab to glance towards the glass window and out towards where she stood. "Mulder, why...."
"Look, I won't be going alone, Krycek is going with me. Conveniently, he speaks Russian."

That did not in any way make her feel better.

"His parents were immigrants." She remembered that from Krycek's background report. "Mulder, we have no diplomatic jurisdiction to pursue this overseas..."

"I've already got diplomatic papers and my flight leaves in half-an-hour. I'll let you know when I land."

"This is crazy, you can't just run off to Russia like this?"

"Would you mind feeding my goldfish while I'm gone?"

Damn him and his goldfish. "Mulder, listen to me, you can't run off there, not without letting Skinner know."

"No Skinner. The less he knows the better. We need someone who will have plausible deniability if something should happen."

"And you expect something to happen?" Memories of Mulder in Alaska, Iowa, New Mexico, Puerto Rico, and many other places where he'd run off without her with only half a plan sprang to mind. "I can't just drop everything and get to you in Moscow or St. Petersburg if something were to happen."

"Not asking you to, Scully. I need you to stay with Dr. Sacks and find out what that fossilized bacteria is and if that is what infected him."

How far would he go with this, her reason screamed. She'd asked him that earlier that day when he was so dead set on pursuing this rock. How far would he go and how far could she follow him? He wasn't asking her to follow him to Russia, but to stay in the lab, to find out what she could about the substance, about the doctor's condition.

"You still think it's something extra-terrestrial?" Why did she even have to ask him that?

"The rock was shipped from the Tunguska area, Scully, the sight of a massive meteor impact in the earlier part of the century. If there are fossilized bacteria in that rock likely it came from that crater and I can't think of anything more extra-terrestrial than that. Keep looking on your end and I'll let you know what I find on mine."

He sounded so confident. He always did. "Mulder, be careful on this one. I don't know if I will be able to get you out if something goes..."

"I'll be fine, Scully. Hey, at least I'm telling you before I run off and do the stupid crap this time."

That at least did make her smile. "Right. I'll cover with Skinner in the morning."

"Thanks."

"And Mulder!" One last warning sprung to mind. "Don't trust Krycek. Whatever his reason for us to know about that rock, he's only interested in it for himself."

"On my list of things that will happen when hell freezes over I think the Red Sox winning the Series and me trusting Alex Krycek are on the top of that list. But I'll keep an extra eye on him, just in case."
"He's standing there listening to this, isn't he?" A smile had worked its way on her lips.

"Handcuffed to me as we speak. I'll call you when we land." He clicked off without any goodbye. Mulder rarely used formalities when speaking to her on the phone. She stared at the device in her hand thoughtfully for long moments, imagining Mulder and Krycek in Russia, of all the things that could possibly go wrong, of Mulder lost and trapped there without a way out. That sort of situation was becoming the norm in their partnership, Mulder rushing off were angels feared to tread, relying on Scully to hold it all together for him. How far could she follow?

"Hey!" Pendrell's warm smile at the door caused her to look up, meeting it with one of her own. "No offense, but I'm alone in here with the fossilized, Martian Death Flu. You plan on running any more tests tonight?"

"No." She was too tired to think, she realized, her head twinging painfully. "I'll run the sample through the labs, see what I turn up. Let's call it a night. We'll fly back to DC in the morning."

Relief flooded Pendrell's face as he grinned. He was happy to get away from whatever it was they had been studying, thoroughly disturbed by it now. "You and Mulder must lead some pretty fantastic lives if this is the sort of stuff the two of you investigate all the time."

Scully chuckled dryly, her thoughts on her partner in Russia. "You don't know the half of it, Agent Pendrell."
An Alien Life Form

Chapter Summary

In which Scully suspects she's found an alien life form of a sort.

As was becoming disturbingly normal in Scully's life, none of this made sense.

"We haven't been able to give him anything but fluids for over forty-eight hours." The status of Dr. Sacks condition hadn't changed. He still lay comatose, motionless and unblinking, unresponsive to any stimuli, even the prick of the needle in his skin. Scully glanced over to where Pendrell worked, at a total loss despite all of her medical training.

"It doesn't help that he's in a restricted environment," Pendrell pointed out grimly, eyeing the quarantined area set up for Sacks with mild distaste before bending over the electron microscope again. Pendrell wasn't a medical doctor, though he was a scientist. Still he didn't understand the procedures that were vital when dealing with an unknown, infectious agent that could potentially get loose into the population.

"If he has been infected by some kind of organism we risk contamination." Hell, they didn't even know what he was infected with yet. "Are you seeing anything?"

Pendrell made an inarticulate noise, it sounded positive, but confused. "The blood in the carotid artery looks slightly thickened, possibly due to the decreased hear rate and blood pressure."

Scully's spun on him, his description sounding frighteningly familiar. He didn't look up at her, but paused, surprised at something behind the lens. "Now what's this - what the hell is this?

Fear spiked tangy in her throat. "What is it?"

"I don't know?" Pendrell pulled away, frowning in horrified confusion as his wide, blue eyes stared troubled at the still body of Dr. Sacks. "It looks like its concentrated around his pineal gland - and I think its alive."

Alive? Unwilling to dwell on what he meant by that image, Scully swooped down towards the microscope, squinting into the lens, focusing on the image magnified before her. She immediately fought the urge to cringe and back away. Pendrell was right, it was alive, whatever it was. Tendrils of thin, curling, worm like creatures sputtered and thrashed, wrapped around the tiny gland in the doctor's brain, threading around it over and over again.

"It looks like a nest." It was the first descriptive image that came to Scully's mind as she pulled up, swallowing the vague horror she felt at the sight. "Some type of black vermiform organism attached to the pineal gland."

"What is it?" Pendrell asked in a strangled gasp, his pale face tinged slightly green. Poor guy. It was rare in his high tech lab he ever dealt with anything biological let alone disturbing and biological. She grimaced slightly as she pulled up, glancing at the doctor's prone form.

"I'm guessing that's the fossilized bacteria in the rock, or perhaps not so fossilized." She pursed her lips, thinking quietly. "The organism's placement on the gland would explain why he is in his
comatose state. Likely the organism is altering the glands ability to create serotonin and melatonin."

"The hormones responsible for sleep cycles." Pendrell nodded grimly. "Is that why is blood is thickening?"

"Possibly," she acknowledged, though privately she didn't believe that was all of the case. "It could be due to the fact his system is shutting down, without the serotonin to keep him awake all his vitals are slowing down to only what is necessary to keep him alive." Why, she wondered, eyes flickering to the microscope.

"But?" Pendrell could sense the word in her tone. For all his happy-go-lucky charm and nerdy social skills Pendrell wasn't an idiot. His strawberry blonde brows quirked in worried apprehension, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and Scully realized that whether she liked it or not, Pendrell was going to be pulled into this mess, the same as herself, the same as Mulder.

"There is a virus that is out there," Scully murmured quietly, opening the Pandora's box of secrets that was the work compiled between herself and Mulder these last nearly four years. "It is an engineered virus, created by our own government during the Cold War. It is…alien in nature."

She chose her words carefully, not wanting to give the wrong impression about what she believed this virus to be, but knowing that Pendrell would take it that way anyway.

"Aliens? Like Mulder's little green ones?"

"Not exactly." She pulled up a stool, perching her petite form on it wearily, realizing this was going to be a long explanation to the other agent. "The virus is extra-terrestrial in that it doesn't match any of the DNA sequences commonly found on earth. That isn't to say that it hasn't been engineered that way or hasn't been created by something that isn't native to the planet."

Pendrell was starting to see the pattern as well, his scientists mind automatically following the path she was leading him down. "A meteorite, something from off world that might have a bacteria in it?"

"There's been rumor of bacteria found in meteors on the moon, and now they are saying there is a possibility on Mars. Think about it, Pendrell? We don't know what life is out there in our own little solar system, what organisms are out there effected by the radiation and forces off our world. NASA finds a rock with a fossilized form of virus, someone in our government comes up with a brilliant idea to utilize it…"

"And you have yourself a nifty weapon that no one can fight against." Pendrell concluded gravely, running nervous fingers through his coppery hair. "Do you and Agent Mulder have proof of this?"

"No," Scully replied quickly, but not for lack of trying. "You can imagine how difficult it is to get that sort of proof. But I've seen the virus at work. An agent in Syracuse was killed after being infected by it and Agent Mulder nearly died from it himself once."

"How did it get out? Wouldn't something like that be in a test tube in some facility somewhere under guard?"

"We think the government has been running experiments for years on that virus, perhaps other things." Scully's memory shied away from the leper colony in West Virginia, away from Betsy Hagopian and the women in Allentown. "There are people who carry the virus. I suspect that both Agent Mulder and Agent Weiss were infected by one of these carriers. It doesn't seem to affect
those who carry it, but once it enters into the blood stream of anyone else it starts causing the body to over produce red blood cells, constricting the arteries, causing swelling in the extremities and clogging the heart.

"But outside of the thickening of the blood, Dr. Sacks isn't displaying those other signs."

"That's the confusing part, neither Mulder nor Agent Weiss displayed the comatose state, the attachment to the pineal gland. Which leads me to believe that whatever this life form is either it has nothing to do with the virus we found, or it is the source from which the engineered virus was created."

And she had a suspicion that her latter assumption was the more correct one. She would need to study this more, to understand what the writhing mass attached to Sack's pineal gland was, how it reacted, and whether it was sentient, but if she could take a guess this was the life form that the government was modeling its virus on. This was why the rock was as valuable as Krycek said. This was also why ships such as the *Piper Maru* were out in the middle of the Pacific, looking for the remains of the downed World War II submarine. But it didn't explain the radiation burns on those men…

"So theoretically then," Pendrell began slowly, pacing the small confines of the makeshift quarantine set up at NASA Goddard. "What we are dealing with is an alien life form."

"In theory, yes." It was a far cry from Mulder's gray skinned, black-eyed aliens, but technically true.

"Well. I suppose I'll have to stop calling Mulder crazy behind his back, huh?" Pendrell tried to smile weakly.

"You wouldn't be the first or the last to have called him that," Scully replied with a small, disapproving smirk. "But I won't know anything till we can get some blood work done, see what is going on in his system. If I'm right, I know a course of treatment at least to prevent the thickening of the blood, but I don't know what to do about whatever is in his brain." She had no idea what it was or if it really was linked to the virus at all.

"Do you really think we can keep him from dying of whatever this is?" Pendrell didn't look hopeful, and to be honest, Scully didn't feel that way herself.

"All we can do is try, Pendrell." She turned to regard the geologist's body quietly. "After all, he didn't ask for any of this, did he?"
In which Scully worries about Mulder's continued radio products.

The green, LED screen of her phone mocked her with a single phrase-no calls. Nothing. No messages, no voice mails, no attempted calls. There hadn't been any for five days. Silence. No word.

Scully slid the phone into her briefcase surreptitiously, or so she thought. Skinner's dark eyes spotted her careful movement with the unasked question. She shook her head.

"Five days, Agent Scully, and nothing?" His low rumble sounded loud and magnified in the marbled hallway of the Capitol, standing as they were outside of the Senate sub-committee meeting chamber. Not that anyone else could hear in the small crowd waiting outside, their voices reverberating off of the tall, bright ceilings. Scully shook her head, glancing around at the bored pages, clerks, and random curious spectators who were being allowed entrance into this open meeting of the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Terrorism. Why was it so popular, she wondered? And more importantly still why did they care so much about the rock that she and Mulder found? Why would these men make something like that so public?

"I haven't spoken to Agent Mulder since he arrived at his location," she replied vaguely, annoying her superior once more with her lack of clear information. Skinner's jaw tightened as he paced in agitation in front of where she sat.

"I don't know why you and Agent Mulder didn't feel the need to confide in me what is going on here…"

"Because, sir, we need you to not know." She had already explained to Skinner their reasoning, though clearly he didn't agree. "When they call you up on to testify you need to be able to say you didn't know what Agent Mulder and I were investigating."

"And that somehow will look better for the FBI?" He paused in his pacing to glare at her.

"Sir, we don't know why they are even interested in this." She had to be the voice of reason here, to sooth Skinner's anxiety and still keep the balls in the air for them on this case. "This started as a simple terrorist plot in New York. Now it has blossomed into this, a confidential courier pouch containing a rock, US Senators suddenly deciding they care about it, and a man lying in a coma that medical science can't explain. If we give an inch to Senator Sorenson in there, they will shut this case down with the bogus line of "national security" and Dr. Sacks could be dead. We will have no more answers as to why they cared about that package, why that man was thrown off your balcony, or what part this has to play with Krycek or that attempted bombing in New York."

She was right, Skinner knew she was right, but it didn't make him happy. "And keeping me in the dark will help you how?"

"It gives you plausible deniability, sir."
"The man died falling out of my apartment, Scully. I'm obviously involved."

"You don't know why he did or what he was there for." She met his scornful snort evenly. "If it was just Krycek, do you think he would have left him alive?"

"No." Skinner's scowl deepened. "Scully, whatever game you two are playing here, this is dangerous, and they will want to know where Mulder is."

"I know, sir." She had guessed that the minute she saw his name on the subpoena.

"Are you going to answer them?"

"Not if I can help it."

"That won't fly with the honorable members of the Senate, Scully. You can perhaps try that trick on me or OPR, but the US Senate won't stand for it."

"If I don't, I could compromise Mulder's investigation, sir, perhaps his life."

"Do you even know for sure where he is exactly?"

Scully felt herself wilt slightly under his challenge, the worry that had been eating at her for days surfacing a little. "No, sir. He called me when he landed, but I have to believe he's alright." She tried not to think of Puerto Rico, of Alaska, of New Mexico, of Iowa, of other places where he'd nearly died, been found delirious, unconscious, or nearly dead.

Clearly Skinner's thoughts were already there. "You have quite the habit of pulling Agent Mulder's ass out of the fire."

Was he disapproving she wondered? "He's my partner, sir."

"And you are a damn fine agent and an amazing investigator in your own right."

"Meaning, sir?" She knew what he was meaning, Skinner didn't have to spell it out, but a part of her wanted him to, to have him say it out loud. Agitated he ran a hand over his bald head, glaring at her as realized that she was going to make him say the same thing other agents had said about her career and partnership with Fox Mulder.

"Are you willing to put your reputation and career on the line every time Mulder has a hair-brained scheme?" He snapped the words sharply, softening almost as quickly as he said them. "You've faced one suspension already while he ran off to New Mexico. You've been pulled in front of OPR more times than most agents see in their entire careers. Now you plan on fighting the US Senate on this?"

"I wouldn't do this if Agent Mulder didn't have a reason for it." That didn't come out with quite the confidence she had hoped and Scully knew Skinner could sense that too.

"Really?" He was calling her bluff. "Agent Scully, I know that you've invested a lot in this work. You've personally lost a great deal because of your involvement, I understand that, but as your superior...as a friend, I have to ask how far are you willing to go with this? How far are you willing to let Mulder drag you down with him?"

She wanted to bristle at the man, to jump to Mulder's defense and tell Skinner it wasn't his business, she didn't care if he was her superior officer. But she couldn't, not when those were the same exact questions she had been asking herself for weeks, months already. Wasn't that the very
conversation she had with Mulder just before he left for New York? How far could she follow him on this?

"I've committed myself this much, sir," she replied quietly, suddenly finding she couldn't meet Skinner's piercing gaze. "I have to give Mulder the time he needs to do this."

"Even at the risk of your own career, Scully?"

She shrugged quietly, looking towards the well-polished floor. What response did she have for him? What choice did she really have? She needed time for Mulder, if nothing else in the hope he would get home soon and in one piece. Hell she didn't know for sure where he was if he wasn't in one piece.

The doors to the committee chamber opened as a young, female intern greeted the assembly with an efficient, welcoming smile. "Please make your way inside."

There was a general shuffle, the cavernous hall filling with the milling noise of the small group of people waiting for entrance. Scully watched them silently, noting the presence of Skinner close behind.

"Do you know what you're going to tell Sorenson?" He was worried. Frankly so was she.

"I have a statement prepared." Whether she would be allowed to present it was another matter, but she didn't care. She needed to stall for time now, whatever it took.

"Agent Mulder better damn well show up soon, and he better have some answers." He paused a moment, the scowl firmly in place again. "And he better damn well thank you for saving his sorry hide, again."
"Too bad twelve hours isn't enough time to find a beach in Florida, one with white sand and enough
sun to bake me till I turn a golden brown." In the bright light outside of the US Capitol Scully
could see the gray lines of fatigue and stress lining her partner's face. Just what had happened to
him?

"Mulder, I tried to get a hold of you, but I had no idea…"

She resisted the urge to wrap her arms around him once more, to hug him tightly and assure herself
he was really all right, that he wasn't dead somewhere, lying in some shack in the middle of Siberia
or shot down in some back alley in Moscow. She'd spent the long hours in the small, federal
holding cell contemplating that horrid possibility, of Mulder lost in Russia and never able to return.

"It's all right. I'm all right." He smiled, his voice soft, as if trying to convince himself as much as
her. "It was a long, strange trip, Scully, but not unproductive."

"What did you find?" Cautiously Scully glanced around where they stood on the white, marble
steps, at the office workers and politicians who moved up and down, huddled in long, woolen
overcoats against the growing cold of December. All were oblivious to the conversation of two
rumpled FBI agents.

"More than I bargained for heading into this." Wasn't that always the story with Mulder? He
scrubbed at his weary face, running fingers through his dark hair. "What do you have on this
Charne-Sayre and what does she have to do with the rock?"

"She was a well known specialist in infectious disease, specifically the variola viruses. She's been
campaigning for years for the removal of the smallpox virus from the stores kept on file at the
CDC in Atlanta and whatever is left in Russia."

"And she's dead?"

"Killed a few days ago. A freak horse riding accident or so they said. She was an expert rider, had
been all her life. She accidentally had her throat stepped on by her own horse." Not even Scully
could buy that explanation.

"Accidentally?" Mulder didn't believe it either. "What is she to this case?"

"That rock we intercepted, it was supposed to go to her. I don't know why yet, but I do know that
what was in that rock wasn't a fossilized bacteria, nor was it anything we thought it was."

"It was a black substance, oily, almost living?"

"Yes!" Scully stared wide-eyed up at his vaguely green expression. "How did you…"

"That's what I found in Russia." They had stopped in the middle of the grand staircase and he

A Long, Strange Trip

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder worries about what he picked up abroad.
"And the rock contains this substance?" Scully swallowed, horrified at the implications of what that mean. "There could be an entire field sight thriving with this, Mulder!"

"It gets worse than that," Mulder continued grimly. "Whatever that substance is, they are testing it on people in that camp, trying to see what the virus does and how it reacts. They are introducing it to humans."

"Just like Bonita Charne-Sayre was." Scully had spent the last two days reading up on the head of the World Health Organization, of her work, of the companies she was involved with, and about the patient who had mysteriously died in one of the convalescent facilities. "A woman died in Boca Raton, in a nursing facility. The official autopsy said it was assisted suicide, but when the man performing the procedure testified, he described a worm-like, oily substance evacuating the woman's body. This is the same substance seen on video invading Dr. Sacks body as he cut into that rock we brought him."

"What is it?" Horror laced Mulder's words, as he turned even more ashen at her description.

"I don't know." She hadn't even had a chance to run further testing on Dr. Sacks, and now that he was dead she doubted she would get any further chance to. "Agent Pendrell and I were going to run testing, but this came up." She waved in frustration at the Capitol building in general, furious at what was looking to be needless interference on the part of lawmakers. For what? Two people were dead now, perhaps more.

"This substance, is it a virus, a bacteria?"

"I can't say for sure, Mulder. It could be a living entity, or it could be an agent for something else. But whatever it is, it's the same substance that the Piper Maru was looking for I think. I think this is the substance that they've been using to create the initial engineered virus from in the first place."

She paused as the color in Mulder's face continued to drain at an alarming rate. "Mulder, what is it?"

"I saw men in this place infected with whatever this is. There was a man there, he spoke English. He said that the men go there and they die."

"It does suppress the system, yes. Pendrell and I were able to find that the pineal gland on Dr. Sacks was shutting down the serotonin and melatonin levels in the body."

"Does everyone infected with it notice?"

"I haven't seen enough samples. I'd have to say no if this woman in Florida had it without anyone saying anything." There was something else. She felt her inner alarm go off as Mulder stopped at the bottom of the wind-swept steps, looking as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to sit down on them or get sick.

"Scully, while I was there, Krycek, that rat bastard betrayed me. He knew the men who ran this camp. I think he did. I was the stupid American who couldn't speak Russian. I don't know what he said, but he was buddies with them. Likely he knows people, people he's dealt with who were interested in the information on that DAT tape."

"Mulder," she murmured worriedly, fearing she knew what he was going to tell her, knowing what
"I couldn't get away from it! They had me trapped, pinned to a table, covered in chicken wire. I felt it." He swallowed, near panic, breaths short and strained as he finally collapsed onto the chilly, bottom most step, the adrenaline that had run through him the last few days ebbing away as whatever Mulder had been through finally came to the fore. "I could be infected, Scully."

Damn, she breathed. Damn, damn, damn, damn…

She closed her eyes, willing herself to steadiness. "Mulder you are fine."

"They ran some sort of test on me. I may be fine, I may not be, I don't know." He rubbed absently at his arm. "I think what they are trying to develop there is a vaccine, some sort of drug against whatever this is, a way to prevent infection."

Scully clung to the logic of his words, pushing hard against the panic that threatened to make her drag him to the nearest hospital. It's what she should do. "I think that is what Dr. Charne-Sayre was trying to do as well." More pieces fell together, the variola virus, the engineered virus she had seen all of those years ago carried in the body of Agent Weiss, the illness Mulder suffered from in Alaska, the description he made to her of a downed cable man lying by the side of a forgotten road in the back prairie of Canada….

"Mulder, I think I have it." She felt the light come to life as it made a horrible, frightening sense, her hands shaking not from the cold, but fear, as trembling fingers rubbed against her now throbbing forehead. "This substance, whatever it is, they've been used this to engineer some sort of extremely virulent strain of virus, one that is much stronger than the initial substance, one that kills. I think they are taking this substance, turning it into this disease, and piggybacking it to the smallpox virus. That's why Dr. Charne-Sayre wanted all the remaining stores destroyed, so there would be no possible way of tracing what they had done or mutating their work."

Mulder could see the thread of her thoughts as well, excitement coloring his pallid face. "The Russians know about the experiments and have been trying to find their own counter to it."

"Hence, what they are doing in the gulag, they are trying to create a vaccine against whatever it is we've developed. Mulder, this is just the continuation of the Cold War." Just as the man at the leprosy camp told her the year before. "This is their attempt to make bigger and better weapons, to have some upper hand in a war that should have ended years ago but hasn't."

"But where does this substance come from, Scully? I saw the crater, I know they are finding it in there."

"I don't know, Mulder." Her answer did nothing to alleviate the fear in his eyes. "It could be something that occurs naturally in the rock of Siberia, it could be something from the meteor. The same with whatever was on that submarine the Piper Maru found. I don't think anyone knows for sure save for the people in this experiment and perhaps Alex Krycek." The man with the DAT tape after all, she had no doubt the slimy traitor knew exactly what was going on.

Except that Alex Krycek, last she knew, was seen with Mulder. "Where is Krycek?"

"Dead, I hope." Mulder spat roughly on the ground, a gesture she rarely ever saw him do in public. The saliva glistened, cooling under the cold wind against the gleaming stone as he scrubbed at his haggard and drawn face. "Krycek thought he was being smart, having friends everywhere, playing both sides against the middle for his own ends. I don't know if he could talk himself out of this one, though."
Reading between the lines, Mulder had left Krycek to his fate, whatever it was. She tried to find some place in her that felt moral outrage at the idea and couldn't. Krycek had betrayed him, nearly killed him, infected him with...God, what if Mulder was infected?

"We need to run tests on you, get blood work done." She fell automatically into medical mode, nearly reaching for her cell phone to alert the nearest hospital.

But Mulder pulled his head up from his hands, shaking his head firmly, standing up at any mention of doctors and tests. "We need to get down to Florida before the committee reconvenes."

"Mulder, you were exposed, we still don't know what it was."

"That woman in Florida was as well and no one noticed it. Run the tests when I get back, I promise I'll let you. But for now, leave it. I need to find out what this is all about, why Krycek was involved, and what evidence we can get to provide for the honorable gentlemen of the Senate."

"Honorable?" Somehow she doubted the word had much meaning for them. But she nodded, knowing she wasn't going to win the battle today. Perhaps he was right and in the end he was fine. "Florida! Are we taking your car or mine?"

"Meet at your place and take a cab to the airport," Mulder replied, moving into quick action once again, his mind thoroughly preoccupied from whatever he'd experienced these last few days. "I'm going to be completely sick of flying after this."

"I'll remember that with our next case, Mulder." If they had another one, she thought ominously.
For Mulder's sake, Scully was thrilled with the test results.

"You're blood work is in." Scully set it in front of him at his desk. He stared at the papers, his expression set in the careful neutrality that belied the fear that lingered in eyes.

"You're fine!" She smiled broadly, pleased at the relief that flooded his face. Shaking fingers grasped results and studied them, even though she knew he likely couldn't tell what the test results said. "I compared your blood work to that of Dr. Sacks, or at least what we still had from Dr. Sacks."

"You're sure?" Of course he would still have lingering doubt. Why wouldn't he? They still had no idea what this toxin was.

"As far as I can tell, you are as healthy and hale as you ever are whenever you get sick with something, which thankfully isn't often." He had been frightened of what the results would say and so had she. She'd hardly breathed when the hospital faxed them over, praying that he wasn't infected with what had killed the geologist. Whatever the toxin was and whatever the Russian doctors had injected him with clearly it worked.

"I'm requesting further blood work done though to see if we can find anything in there to indicate what we are dealing with in terms of this infection and what the Russians may have developed for a cure. I think Krycek's crony sitting in federal prison is right, this is a biological weapon we've been keeping secret for a long time and the Russians are trying to develop a vaccine against it. Perhaps, if we can get the details in time to present to the Senate committee, we can…" She drifted off as the elation on Mulder's face drew back to careful reserve. "What is it?"

"The committee has stopped their investigation."

"What?" After all of this uproar, all of this drama over something as minor as an intercepted courier, something that was in the FBI purview in the first place, and now they were halting the proceedings? "Why?"

"My guess?" Mulder held up the test paperwork in his hand. "I think that when push came to shove with the evidence, they couldn't allow that to get out. This entire case has been a sham, a cover up for something deeper going on here. Krycek wasn't dragging me into this because he wanted me to find out about some homegrown terrorist plot. He knew what was going on, about the tests, about Dr. Charne-Sayre, about the nursing homes, and he knew that they were smuggling in those rocks into the US to continue their work."

"So why did he want you involved?"

"To expose it, to entrap them, but it was more than that. Someone was using Krycek to expose
something. My guess is that Krycek was being played just as I was. Whoever these men, this group of men conspiring around this, Krycek is on the outs with them. He's been using the information off that DAT tape for years to undermine their work out of revenge. Someone knew that, someone wanted to foil their work regarding this rock specifically, and they played Krycek, and they played the two of us. And we fell for it."

With mild disgust Mulder pushed away from his desk, leaning back thoughtfully in his chair, tugging at each shirt cuff as he fretfully rolled up his shirtsleeves. "We all played our parts so intricately, so well. Krycek contacts me, tells me about the rock. I intercept it and thus exposing its location. Someone, my guess the Russians, send one of their best men to go and retrieve it while everyone is otherwise occupied, and then he neatly takes it to Canada to bury it where it can't be gotten to, destroying it. No more rock, no more evidence, and the men here in the US no longer have their Russian resource. End of story."

"But that doesn't explain what it was, Mulder, or why it was so important." The image of the black bundle of writhing tentacles wrapped around Dr. Sacks' pineal gland sent shudders across her skin. "This wasn't normal. It's not even from this earth."

"Chances are it came from that meteor, the one that hit Tunguska. You and I both know alien life doesn't have to take the form of little green men. It can be as simple as a bacteria or a virus."

"This didn't behave quite like either one of those." There had been something more complex with this substance than simply a virus. It was almost intelligent. "Viruses and bacteria are much less complicated than this substance was."

"And yet we've created some sort of contagion that mimics it. I think no matter what this substance turns out to be, what is more frightening here isn't what it is or isn't but that we are playing with it in the way that we are. I saw that camp in Russia. You saw those people in that nursing home, and it's not just them, it is that work that Dr. Saccare was doing and whatever those clones were doing. Their blood contained the virus, this Purity whatever, and that was how I was infected and others."

He sat up again, leaning forward, forearms resting lazily on his knees, belying the bright intensity as his gaze met hers. "Scully, what if this is only a scratch in the surface of all of this? They are playing with fire here, like mad scientists from bad movies. These are men who are taking something so foreign, so alien, and introducing it into us. They could have been doing this for years. What we found, this black oil substance, the black cancer, it could be the link that explains all of this, the green acidic substance that I was infected with, the clones, and the tests they've run on countless innocent people, including you."

He was already running with this idea, threading it all together, weaving it into one grand conspiracy, and Scully couldn't necessarily fault his logic on some of it. But all of this? "Mulder, how can we explain away all of what we found with this substance? We don't even know for sure what it is or what is being done with it outside of what happened to you and the work of Dr. Charne-Sayre."

"You are the one who connected it back to the green blood I was infected with, not just once, but twice."

"And I do think they are connected. Whatever that green substance is, I think its engineered off of the oil substance. But that still doesn't explain all of this. I mean, why? Okay, so we have a bio-weapon developed off of what is essentially an extraterrestrial substance. But what did they do to those people to make they express the virus through the green substance? What is it? And why does it have that effect on people? And how is it different than the oil substance? All I know is that it is highly acidic and extremely toxic, its viral, and lacks the intelligence of the oil substance,
which is much more subdued. And that's not even going to explain the clones we found, all of whom had that green substance in their bodies. How were they made and for what purpose? And then there is the man who attacked me, the man who could change the shape of his face."

That still boggled Scully's scientific mind. She still had no answer for it, and doubted she ever would find one that satisfied her. "That man has the green substance in him as well.

She was rattling questions off at him, years worth of unanswered questions, pulled from the scientific facts she knew, and she couldn't piece any of these together. It was maddening, nothing fit, nothing explained anything else. The more they dug, the deeper they searched, the more information they brought to light, the more unanswered questions they were left with. They sat at a table with hundreds of tiny puzzle pieces that didn't fit together, unsure of what the picture to all of this even was.

"I don't know, Scully, for any of it." She knew that Mulder was as equally frustrated in this as she was. "But I do know that our evidence is all gone once again. Dr. Sacks is dead, as is Dr. Charne-Sayre and all of her patients. Alex Krycek is gone now as well, likely dead, and the only evidence we had left was destroyed."

"So we are back, once again, to square one?"

"Yep," Mulder nodded, surprisingly not as downtrodden this time as in times previous. She's seen him rage for days when they hid roadblocks like this before. Perhaps nearly dying in Russia gave him perspective this time.

"The US Senate now no longer cares about the rock, the deaths, or the truth, not that I think they ever did. I think that it was a ruse, really, just to get it back. But now it's gone, and no one will care, and the Senators can return to doing what they do normally, sleeping with their female interns, spending tax dollars on high-end meals, and ignoring the truth when it comes and slaps them in the face."

"You don't believe they are honorable men, Mulder, wanting to do the right thing in the end?" Skinner had wanted to believe that, he'd tried to convince Scully of that.

"Is there honor among thieves? I imagine the men who run this conspiracy, who are running the tests on those people in Boca Raton, or on you, they all think of themselves as honorable men too, trying to do what is best for the country."

For all the cynicism in that view, she couldn't deny Mulder's point. "Honor I suppose is a point of view."

"In their eyes, Scully, you and I are dangerous, malcontents who wish to upset the status quo. We think of ourselves as in the right, but in their eyes we are a dangerous enemy." His words sank in. They had never occurred to her before, that she could be viewed as an enemy. "And they will try to eliminate us somehow. Likely sooner rather than later."
Naughty and Nice

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder proposes to help out another department in the spirit of the season.

Did Christmas cookies have any real calories the week before the actual holiday?

Scully was voting no, or at least that was what she was trying to tell herself as she juggled an armful of shopping bags and her purse, while trying to munch on a giant, Mrs. Field's cookie shaped like a Christmas tree and drink a coffee at the same time. It was a feat of consumerist juggling that impressed even her. She had just managed to pull off the additional trick of walking while doing all of this without spilling just as her cell phone sounded. Of course, heaven forbid she take her scant lunch break to get some holiday shopping done without Fox Mulder calling at some point to interrupt her holiday gift buying zen. With as much dexterity as five shopping bags and a hot cup of coffee in hand could give her, Scully settled her purchase on the closest empty table she could find, detangling her wrist from the plastic. Arm aching minus the added weight, she dug in her pocket for her now quiescent cell phone, knowing in a second Mulder would redial and call again. She hit the 'talk' button on the first ring.

"Scully!" She sipped sullenly from her coffee and took another large bite of processed sugary, fatty goodness.

"Is Santa bringing me anything good for the holiday?"

Scully tried and failed not to laugh at the low, suggestive murmur at the other end of the line. "As rotten as you've been this year, I think you'll be lucky making out with coal in your stocking."

"Give me some credit, Scully, I've been a good boy about some things."

"Such as?"

"I at least warned you before I ran off to do something stupid."

"Most of the time. Though I wonder if calling me from the airport as you do it is an improvement."

"Hey, it's the effort that counts, isn't that what everyone always says this time of year when their great aunt sends them some horrible, pink bunny costume."

"Is there something you want to tell me about yourself, Mulder?"

He chuckled. "What, you don't have some horribly tacky gift from some family member you hate insulting?"

"None that I haven't donated to Goodwill with the hope they would find their way to another state far, far away."

"Speaking of a state far, far away," Mulder had been looking for a segue into his news she had sensed it. Another case, and just before the holidays, too. Oh, joy!
"We've got a case in California, up by Fresno. Thought you'd like some West Coast sunshine for a change."

"Do you know where Fresno is?" Having grown up in San Diego, it wasn't uncommon for Scully to find that outside of California few people in the US truly understood the geography of the state beyond the greater Los Angeles area, or for that matter understanding just how truly huge the state actually was. "It's up in the San Joaquin Valley, far away from any beaches or palm trees."

"But not far away from migrant workers." Mulder ignored her exacting corrections and carried on. "We have an unexplained death in a migrant camp just outside of the city. A woman was killed during a freak, meteorological event, one that's got the locals spooked."

"Shouldn't the county sheriffs for the area be handling that?"

"It's an illegal worker, Scully, I doubt county sheriffs in central California even noticed that she was dead." It was a cynical assessment but also likely a very true statement as well. "I heard about it through INS. I said we'd at least go and check things out, see what is going on."

Mulder doing a good deed at Christmas for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, there had to be a strange, X-files angle in all of this. "You are never filled with this much good will and charity this time of the year. What gives?"

"Are you accusing me of being a Grinch?"

"Yes!" She finished her cookie with a satisfied smirk and washed it down with the last of her coffee. "You already live in a cave by yourself and people call you funny names, all you need is a dog named Max and you will be set."

"Obviously someone has spiked your egg nog," he murmured, though he didn't deny her accusations. "The woman, Maria Dorantes, was caught up in a freak storm, I'm reaching out to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to see what was going on there two days ago to see what could have caused it. That's not what is worrying the INS."

"What's worrying them?"

"Folk rumors are already springing up amongst the workers, stories of what happened. There are rumbles of people moving, going elsewhere, and if they do that, then INS will lose track of them. They could move further into the country, get lost in the system, and they would have no way of finding them again."

"So they want the FBI to poke their noses into a local matter in what will likely only turn out to be a freak accident?"

"Where is your sense of Christmas charity, Scully, helping out a fellow branch of the Justice Department."

Charity? Humbug! "Mulder, it's a week before the holidays, my entire family is in town for the event, I still have a terrifying amount of shopping to do and you are dragging me out to Fresno to be nice to the INS?" She smelled X-file all over this and knew he wasn't admitting it.

"Not far from wine country, Scully, pick up a nice bottle of something for the family. That makes every family holiday meal go smoothly."

"I think I'll need a case of wine after this just to get through putting up with you."
"I knew I'd drive you to drink one day. When will you be back at the office?"

She sighed, staring at the small pile of gifts in front of her. "I'll be there in forty-five minutes?"

"Good, I want to see if we can get an overnight to Sacramento so we can be there first thing in the morning."

No rest for the wicked. "I suppose, Mulder."

"Don't sound like that, Scully! Who knows, Santa might bring good little FBI agents something special for Christmas."

"Like a new partner?"

"Now whose getting coal in their stocking, Scully?"

"See you in a bit." Rolling her eyes she clicked off her phone, staring in disgruntlement at her now empty coffee cup. It was Christmas. She should be eagerly looking forward to the holiday with her entire family. Bill and Tara were flying in, and Charlie even had leave for a change to spend with them. Instead she was being drug off, yet again, to do something else vague for Mulder on nothing more than an inter-departmental request. Merry Christmas, indeed!

She would need more coffee for this she decided grumpily…and perhaps another cookie.
"You know there are some days, Mulder, when I really, really hate you."

Mulder hardly sounded concerned from his end of the phone line. The sound of the passing of wind and traffic indicating he was on the road to somewhere. "What have I managed to do now to piss you off?"

"The list is long and extensive, but this time is a doozey." She stared at the computer screen in front of her with all of the information she could pull up on the infamous *chupacabra*, trolled from various Internet searches. Pages and pages of sightings, descriptions, and pictures of desiccated, hairless coyote corpses pixilated before her, none of which met the criteria for the body she had just autopsied nor the story from the old woman they met at the migrant village.

"Do you even know what a *chupacabra* is?" She tapped the phone with one finger, knowing full well he knew what a *chupacabra* was.

"A goat sucker, part of a legend that's circulated around Latin American communities for the last decade or so regarding a creature who attacks barnyard animals and drains them dry of blood."

"Yes, most of them are described as small hairless or spined beasts with fangs and glowing eyes, none of them are described as bald, gray, or dark eyed."

"So I came out here because I thought it might be aliens."

Count to three….slowly….

She should have known something was suspicious the minute he described the creature. "There are aliens involved, all right, but they are the all too human kind. What Maria Durante's died of was a massive fungal infection, or so the coroner is telling me. He'll know more when he runs the samples for testing."

"Fungal infection? Like athletes foot?"

"Worse! I think it took the poor man five minutes to stop dry heaving in the sink long enough to even work up the courage to touch the corpse." Scully doubted she would ever be able to eat mushrooms ever again. "But I can tell you this, however Maria Durante's died of, it had nothing to do with vampires, blood letting, or goats. And as far as I can tell from the information I have hear, I'm still trying to figure out how anyone can assume this woman's death has anything to do with it."

"Panic, hysteria, how do any of these things get started? *El chupacabra* is a modern myth, a legend at best, like albino alligators in New York, no one is sure where it came from or how it got started, but its settled in popular culture among Latino communities and has taken on a life of its own."

"Right!" Mulder's anthropological theories did little to assuage her mild irritation. "You told me we were taking this case because INS asked us a favor."
"And they did."

"And then you tell me its because they were afraid that stories of this goat sucker were going to get out and cause people to scatter."

"Which is a legitimate concern."

"And then I come to find out that you never really thought it was a goat sucker at all, but you felt the description matched that of the very aliens you've been chasing for years now."

"Right."

"And now I know that it isn't vampires or extraterrestrials but rather a nasty case of a fungal infection. So this leaves me begging the question, Mulder, why are we on this case again?"

"Do we know why the fungus attacked her?" There was a tired sort of determination in Mulder's voice. He was going to really fight her on this one? Didn't he always, though?

"No, we aren't even sure what it is yet. For all we know it could be something she came in contact with; a chemical out in the fields, something from one of the local farms, perhaps even the yellow rain the old woman claimed she saw falling."

"But no one else seemed to be effected by the rainfall save Maria and the goat."

"No one else was caught out in it, save for Eladio Buentes."

So his brother, Soledad, was claiming. Conveniently, that also made Eladio the only witness to the young woman's death. "We don't know if he did something to her, if he had access to something. Fresno State University is near here and they are constantly running agricultural science projects in this area, he could have run into anything he shouldn't have gotten his hands on. Think about it, a jealous man, in love with his brother's woman, desperate enough to do anything."

"Do your really think this is as trite as a daytime soap opera?"

"Mulder, I don't think this is anything," she snapped, stabbing at the computer mouse vicious in irritation, clicking off of web browser windows. "I think this is a matter for the local authorities and the INS to handle. I think it's five days before Christmas and I'm chasing down folk legends in the Central Valley of California and the most obvious answer is that Maria Durante's died of some freak accident that put her in contact with something she shouldn't have been. Nothing more, nothing less, and you are the one out there chasing down aliens."

"I think the politically correct term is illegal immigrants, Scully."

"Whatever," she snapped back. "Why are we here?"

"Isn't the mysterious death of a young girl enough?"

Damn it, but he was bring social justice into this. "I'm not saying that her death isn't sad, Mulder, but what does that have to do with us?"

"Do you think that Fresno County sheriffs are going to bother to find out why it is the girl died? What's one more wetback when they have hundreds more coming in everyday, faster than they can ship them back down to Tijuana?" He was calling on her sense of fairness and rightness and she knew it.
"I'm not saying her death isn't sad or that it shouldn't be investigated, Mulder. I'm saying it isn't our job, and short of you producing the killer or a bald, black-eyed, gray-skinned vampire with a predilection for barnyard animals, we don't have a reason to be here."

Was he listening to her? Scully didn't know. He was quiet on his end of the line for long moments. She could hear his teeth grinding as his jaw worked in that familiar sign of Mulder irritation.

"Look, I'm heading to INS headquarters to see if we can snag Eladio Buentes before he gets deported south again. How about you meet me over here when you're done."

"Fine," she sighed, agreeing to that much. Perhaps her message got through, she didn't know. Mulder could be stubborn about these things, often choosing to fight over small details that meant nothing to the big picture for Scully, but meant everything to him and how he viewed the world.

There was aliens involved all right, Scully thought sadly as she logged out of the coroner's computer. But they weren't the ones causing the problem. They were the ones being victimized by it.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully shares her love for Spanish-language melodramas.

Lozano shifted behind the steering wheel of his large jeep, the giant cab bounding with the man's movements. According to the dashboard clock they had been sitting for over an hour and there was no sign outside of Gabrielle Buentes' apartment of either of her cousins. Scully could feel her feet going numb.

"So," Lozano drawled slowly, dark eyes flickering to the rear view mirror to watch Mulder, thoughtful and quiet in the back seat. "You two believe in aliens?"

Scully just did contain her exasperated groan and settled for shooting Mulder a pointed glare instead.

"I wouldn't say we believe in aliens," Mulder quantified vaguely.

"I think Agent Mulder means that he keeps an open mind to the possibility of life from beyond our world, whether it be fungal, bacterial or otherwise." The hell she was going to be lumped into this, she thought mutinously.

"And you don't?" Lozano glanced from partner to partner curiously, as if still trying to make the pair of them out. In all fairness, the only one he'd really gotten to spend time with was Mulder, and Scully could only imagine the impression he had already managed to develop regarding her partner. Aliens, chupacabras, super enzymes, she was sure Mulder had been a hit with the INS agent.

"I am a scientist, Agent Lozano, and I prefer to keep a strictly scientific viewpoint on all things."

Mulder drawled from the backseat. "What Agent Scully means by that is that she at least tries to sound a little less crazy than I do."

Her frown only resulted in a mild, Mulder shrug. Far from being scandalized, Lozano seemed to find the banter amusing, chuckling in the seat beside Scully. "Well, I've heard crazier things out of people. My abuela, God bless her soul, used to believe she had an image of the Virgin Mary on a tree in her back yard. Do you think I bothered telling my 88-year-old grandmother from Oaxaca that she was senile? That woman could smack the crap out of me up until the day she died."

"Believe me, I understand the feeling," Mulder muttered softly, the sound of cracking sunflower seed shells punctuating his sentence. Scully was less than amused.

"So you really think that this enzyme, whatever it is, is causing these deaths?" Lozano returned to staring at the front of the darkened apartment, making conversation as he tried to piece together the strangeness of the case left at his doorstep. "I mean, where did it come from? And why isn't Eladio affected?"

"My best guess with Eladio is that something about him makes him predisposed to being immune to it, or at least to not suffer from the effects as drastically. It could be something about his skin
oils or anything else, we won't know until we find him." Scully had yet to pinpoint an exact reason why it was Eladio wasn't as affected by the enzyme as every other living creature had been. "All we know is that now that he has it on him, he's passing it on to everyone and everything he touches, causing mold to flourish at such a substantial rate that it overpowers the host, killing them. As for where it comes from, I couldn't even being to tell you."

"Meteors?" Lozano glanced back towards Mulder, who smirked in response.

"It could be," Scully replied evasively. "Till we get our hands on Eladio Buentes, though, I won't be able to tell you anything. He's a walking health hazard at the moment. Hopefully we find him soon."

"Hopefully," Lozano echoed pessimistically. "If he hasn't gone to ground somewhere else."

"I don't think he has," Mulder offered, sunflower seeds crunching. "Words gotten out about him. You saw how people reacted to him. Whether he is or isn't a chupacabra, the fact is that stories are already circulating out there and few people want to help him for fear of what he might do to them."

"I don't blame them." Lozano whistled low, shuddering slightly under his trench coat. "And if the rumors don't scare them into not helping him, knowing that Soledad is after him will."

"Two men, one woman, trouble." Scully breathed softly, meeting Lozano's knowing smile.

"So it's not just my crazy abuela who said that one."

"No, I think everyone's Mexican grandmother said that one," Scully replied dryly, thinking of the gray haired, olive skinned matriarchs she knew in her own youth.

"And you have a Mexican grandma hidden in your closet somewhere?" Lozano eyed her bright red hair and blue eyes skeptically.

"Sort of. I grew up in San Diego as a kid, my father was Navy. I went to Catholic elementary school my entire childhood and many of my friends were Mexican or Central American."

"Ahhh, so you got to adopt everyone else's abuelas. Fill you full of tamales and force you to watch their telenovelas with them?"

"More than a few," Scully admitted, grinning at the memories of afternoons where she was supposed to be studying with friends and usually was caught up watching the television melodramas, most of which she could hardly understand in their rapid fire Spanish. "You ever see telenovelas, Mulder?"

"Isn't that like a Mexican soap opera?"

"Not all of them are Mexican, but yeah, that's the gist," Lozano replied. "They aren't like American soap operas though. They are short and they only tell one story at a time. And usually it's always about this one couple that is brought together at the beginning, and you watch the entire series to see if they will get together in the end. But the point of the story is that it's like one of those supermarket romance novels, the couple can't get together right away, so all these tragic things happen to tear them apart."

"Or they spend the entire series not knowing each others feelings, each making silly mistakes in love till at the end they catch on that this was always supposed to be." Scully hated to admit those were the ones she liked the best.
"Wouldn't you call that a romantic comedy?" Mulder cracked another seed between his teeth, clearly not excited by either the thought of a cheesy chic flick or a telenovela.

"These are different though, more melodramatic. People from different classes falling in love, or dire enemies coming in and destroying their happiness on their wedding day, or a trusted friend betraying the couple and tearing them apart in some unexpected way."

"Or a beloved brother accidentally killing the woman they both love just by being in the same vicinity as her during a freak, meteorological event?" Mulder flippantly tossed his spent sunflower seeds out of the jeep's back window.

"I don't think a telenovela could go this over the top." Lozano snorted derisively, shaking his head in the darkness of the cabin. "The difference here is that Maria Durantes isn't coming back, which means that Soledad is out for blood against his brother. For Soledad, this is the ultimate of betrayals. In our culture, nothing comes before family - nothing. And as far as Soledad is concerned, Eladio put his desire for a woman before his own brother."

"But it was an accident." As irritated as Scully found herself with her own brothers often enough, she could recognize that accidents happened.

"Ah, well, it's like in the telenovelas, Agent Scully, sometimes passions run too deep and rational thought is thrown out of the window to create more drama, more tension. Soledad and Eladio aren't thinking rationally here. They are simply thinking from the gut. Their hearts are broken and they hate each other for it."

So much for blood being thicker than water. "Do you think Soledad will really try to kill his own brother?" Scully wanted to believe that the brothers would see reason before someone, likely Soledad, got hurt.

"I think that Soledad will see that his brother is sick and he will come to his senses, at least I hope so." Lozano didn't sound particularly certain on this point. "But to be honest, I hope we get to Eladio first."

They all lapsed into silence once again, watching the still apartment. Scully privately agreed with Agent Lozano, she hoped they found Eladio before his brother did, because she wasn't so certain that Soledad wouldn't try to kill his brother. After all, it happened in telenovelas.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets unreasonably perturbed with Mulder

Despite the twinkling lights along various offices up and down the corridors of the J. Edgar Hoover building, holiday cheer clearly didn't extend into the office of Walter Skinner, at least not right at the moment. "So this is the story you're asking me to report? You would think that with the resources we have we'd be able to find these men. I'm not hearing a good explanation of why this hasn't happened."

Scully paused, uncomfortable, not sure how to give her boss the sort of explanation he was looking for, or to be honest if there really was one. "Well, sir, they...umm..they have a way of being almost invisible."

Skinner's eyebrows shot up doubtfully over his thick glasses. "Invisible" was such a loaded word with the two of them.

"The truth is, sir, it's not really that they are 'invisible', but that no one wants to see them." Mulder rumbled low and dry beside her. "They are immigrants, so nobody cares."

That clarification made much more sense to their supervisor, though it didn't make him any happier as he glowered down at their report before reaching for one of his thick, ballpoint pens, scrawling quickly along the paper's bottom. "No one is going to be happy hearing a walking health threat is loose in the back hills of Central California, but to be honest this isn't the FBI's problem anymore."

He passed the file back across his large topped desk to Mulder. "Let the INS and CDC handle this and let's move on."

There was less of a suggestion and more of an order in Skinner's words as he frowned between his two agents. "It's the holidays, agents. Get out of here and enjoy the time with your families."

Scully certainly didn't need to be asked twice, rising quickly to make it for the office door. "Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you, Agent Scully. Convey my sentiments to your mother." Skinner's dismissed them both with a perfunctory nod, hardly watching the pair of them as they hurried out into his empty outer office, sans Kim's normal presence there. She was already home with her family for the holiday, and as soon as Scully could get down to their office she was planning on following suit.

"A whole week off!" Scully nearly squealed with anticipation, the idea of not having to be anywhere or cut up anything dead for an entire seven-to-eight days almost impossibly too good to think about. It made her giddy as she rushed beside her lanky partner down the hallway of the nearly deserted floor. "Imagine it, not having to wake up before six for anything, staying in pajamas till past noon..."

"Dana Scully, you are such a rebel." Mulder grinned, calling up the elevator to their floor. "I bet you plan on not showering or eating anything that doesn't come in a carton delivered to your
doorstep."

"Except that whole Christmas, seeing my family, having to drive to Baltimore thing sort of gets in
the way of that plan."

"I'm sure you're family wouldn't mind you in pajamas with three days of funk growing on you."

"Oh yuck, Mulder!" Her nose wrinkled in playful disgust, earning him a swat from outstretched
fingers that he neatly avoided as the elevator doors opened. He laughed unapologetically.

"Come on, its your brothers, they've seen worse out of you."

"True," she chuckled, silently looking forward to spending time with the elder Bill and the younger
Charlie. "Charlie gets in tonight, I'm picking him up from the train station here and driving him up
to Baltimore tonight. Bill and Tara fly in tomorrow from San Diego."

"Sounds like a full house."

Scully nearly missed the hint of wistfulness underlying Mulder's smile at the thought. They hadn't
discussed Christmas plans, they usually never did. Most years Mulder tried his level best to not
bring up the holidays at all, for understandable reasons. They were far from Mulder's favorite
times of the year. While Scully had a wealth of memories of Christmases with her family, Mulder's
stopped abruptly after his sister's disappearance. She knew he had family in North Carolina he saw
from time to time, but he wasn't close to them either physically or emotionally. If anything, this last
case with the Buente brothers had taught her nothing was deeper than family.

The elevator slid open into their dimly lit basement hallway, Mulder filing out before her. She
watched him shuffle ahead of her, unlocking their office door and move inside. This year hadn't
been easy for her partner, not with the combined hits of his mother's illness and the truth about his
father's involvement in the strange conspiracy that seemed to consume them both. Scully was well
aware that she had done little to make much of this easier. She couldn't explain her behavior, really,
wounded pride perhaps. Maybe fear. Their lives seemed to be spiraling into depths that frightened
her, the forces acting against them were becoming darker, more ruthless than Scully could have
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rounded the doorway into their shared office, prepared to bribe if she had to and get him to share Christmas with her family.

She was stopped short, however, as she nearly bowled Mulder over as he rushed for the door, his briefcase and long, wool overcoat over his arm. He drew up, an apology on his lips as he reached to keep her from falling over on her teetering heels, sheepishly shrugging as she righted herself. "Sorry, Scully, I didn't see you…"

"That's all right," She waved it off, frowning at the bag over his shoulder, the overcoat on his arm. "Where's the fire?"

"Well, not to point out the obvious, but I heard a rumor that tomorrow night some fat guy in a red suit planned to do a little massive, worldwide B&E to good little boys and girls, and that usually means most folks like getting the hell out of Dodge." He glanced down at his watch pointedly. "I figured you'd be out of here already."

"I was…I am." She floundered, confused by his hasty departure on a holiday she knew full well he usually hated. "I…errr…well I was going to…"

She paused, flushing suddenly, the courage of her convictions leaving her in a wash of sudden and uncalled for embarrassment. Really, you'd think she hadn't ever invited Mulder to her mother's before. "Mom wanted to know if you would like to spend Christmas with us."

Yes, sure, blame it on her mother. Let Mulder think it was her well-meaning, concerned mother's idea.

"Oh!" It was a single syllable, but it carried with it a wealth of surprise. Mulder's eyes widened, his cheeks flushing slightly, and it took a long moment for Scully to realize that the look on his face was regret and apology.

"Scully, wow, I…I'm glad for the offer, but…"

He cleared his throat roughly, suddenly finding the tips of his polished shoes particularly interesting. "I wish you'd said something earlier, I didn't think…"

"Well, it was sort of sudden," Scully admitted, suddenly feeling her own face flame as the uncomfortable situations she hadn't planned for suddenly became all too readily apparent. "I mean, Mom just mentioned it, and I should have thought…"

"Look, thank your mom for me, really." Mulder fumbled, shifting his overcoat from one arm to the other. "I mean, normally I might take you up on that offer, but with Mom's illness last summer and all of that."

Right, his mother's stroke. Scully hadn't thought of that. "Yeah, I guess you would want to spend some more time with her, of course."

"It's not that I would have said no to your family, but…"

"No, I get it, Mulder, you're family is first. And I suppose with everything going on, it's probably good you are heading home."

"Yeah, just for the holidays, my aunt and uncle are coming up from Raleigh for a change. We'll have Christmas in Connecticut, though I don't know if it will be anything like the movie." He smiled weakly, a poor joke by Mulder's standard fair. "I would wiggle out of it, but you know, I'm in it for Mom and it would mean a lot for her."
"No, I get it." Scully did, but it didn't mean she wasn't kicking herself mentally at the moment for not thinking of this. Why would she assume Mulder had nowhere to be and nothing to do for the holiday? "I guess...well, I know you are usually alone."

"I know and I'm not sure how I feel doing the family holiday. But I don't know, I guess nearly losing Mom put some things in perspective for me. And what's one Christmas?" He tried to shoot her a devil may care grin, but it wobbled and fell almost as soon as it lighted on his face. "I'm honored though that your mom thought to ask."

"Yeah, I'll let her know." She cut him off with a tight smile, waving off his apology. "So, you flying out tonight?"

"Yeah, in a few hours."

"You better get out of here, the airport will be a madhouse tonight."

They stood, awkward, staring at each other nervously, as if they hadn't been partners for years, as if they hadn't been through hell and back with one another. Like two teenagers standing outside of the locker rooms they shrugged and shuffled before Mulder finally took the initiative.

"So, Merry Christmas! Don't stay too late. Try to score some of your Mom's Christmas cookies for me."

"Sure," she smiled, ignoring the nasty thought that he could have some of her mother's cookies if he came with her. But of course he had his own family, Teena Mulder needed her son right now. Scully couldn't be petty about this. And honestly, why should she feel petty in the first place, it wasn't as if she had expected him to come. She honestly only thought of this five minutes ago. Why was it bugging her so much?

"Get out of here. I'll see you after New Years?"

"You'll be in the office before then, won't you?"

"I love my mother, but not that much." Mulder managed an honest grin. "Give my best to Maggie."

"As always," she waved as he made for the door, a small, regretful look on his face before he shuffled down the hallway towards the elevator. She waited till she knew he had entered and heard the metal doors close behind him before she let out a long, low expletive. "Shit!"

She turned to glare at her table in the corner. Well that had been damned awkward, she thought viciously, rounding her workspace to grab her own things. Honestly, she should have thought...but why should she have? It wasn't as if she and Mulder were attached at the hip. It wasn't as if they had to clear each other's personal lives with one another. Like two teenagers standing outside of the locker rooms they shrugged and shuffled before Mulder finally took the initiative.

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Why did she feel like such a schmuk for this?

She shouldn't, she assured herself, perhaps with more force than was necessary as she jerked her own briefcase up from its hiding place by a filing cabinet and began packing her laptop and files. Mulder wasn't beholden to her any more than she was beholden to Mulder. It wasn't like she had asked him before making plans to be with her family. Perhaps he expected the entire rest of her life to revolve around him, but that didn't mean her personal one had to. She was her own woman, after
all. There was no need for this guilt, this anger, this…

She paused in packing her things, seeing the envelope sticking out of her purse. Damn it. She'd forgotten her present to Mulder, a gift card, nothing more, but in their report to Skinner she'd left it sitting in her purse and forgotten to say anything about it. She had assumed, clearly erroneously, that she would have time to give it to him. After all, Mulder never did anything on the holidays willingly. He would live in the X-files office if he could get away with it. But today of all days he'd left. He decided today he had a life and for whatever reason it was pissing her off.

Scully plucked the simple envelope from her belongings and glanced at Mulder's desk. After weeks on assignments it was currently a riot of papers, files, and magazines, all piled in heaps that formed a mass that threatened to consume the desk in total. It teetered and wobbled as she approached it, studying it with a critical eye. Carefully, she set the card on top of one of the least threatening piles, placing the white envelope up with Mulder's name on the front. Perhaps he would notice it when he returned, perhaps he wouldn't, perhaps the entire precipitous mountain of paper would fall in on itself, and it would be lost in the morass. If it was, so be it. It wasn't as if he remembered to get her anything anyway.

She sniffed as she turned on her heels and grabbed her things, giving the office one last glance before she moved for the door. Over a week away from vengeful brothers, government conspiracies, and a partner whose idea of a good time was chasing dog-eating lake monsters. It would be nice to have a vacation from Fox Mulder after all, she told herself, closing the office door firmly behind her. It was better off he didn't come for the holidays anyway.
In which the Scully clan gets a holiday surprise and Scully must deal with annoying brothers over Christmas dinner.

Platinum and diamond flashed in front of Scully's eyes. She didn't know whether to squeal in delight or to burst out in disbelieving laughter.

"When? How?"

"Last week!" The young woman's name was Ashley, taller than Scully, dark haired, blue eyed, and as sweet as a future sister-in-law as she could imagine. She blinked from the tall, lithe girl to her younger brother, standing with an arm wrapped around her waist, grinning madly.

"And you agreed to marry this idiot?" Scully stared at the giddy, beaming woman as if she were slightly deranged.

"I have to agree with my sister on this one, Ashley, what sane woman would say yes to that thing?" Bill made a show of studying his smirking younger brother. "You realize you could do better than him, right?"

"Yes she does, jackass, and she said yes anyway." Charlie rolled his eyes at both of his older siblings, completely unfazed. "And don't act so shocked you two! It's not like we haven't been together for awhile."

"Yeah, but we weren't sure if it was out of pity or if she had figured out you were dating yet." Bill winked at his younger sister who snickered in conspiratorial amusement. This would provide fodder for the two of them against the youngest Scully for the entirety of the holidays. Already she could see Charlie gearing up for a long Christmas week.

"Don't worry, Ashley, Bill went through this when he and I were engaged, too." Pretty, blonde Tara dryly glanced between her husband and sister-in-law. "Charlie and Dana were both convinced Bill had somehow tricked me into it."

"Missy started it. She said she was surprised Bill had the gumption to ask."

"I had plenty of gumption," Bill replied smoothly, an arm around his wife of nearly five years, shooting her a soft smile. "Nerves were my problem."

"Way Tara tells it, you couldn't even speak, you just threw the ring at her and went to puke in the bathroom." Charlie could hold his own against his elder siblings and Scully could see a fight brewing between the eldest and youngest of the Scully children, one that would likely end up with someone's head getting noogied in front of her mother's tastefully decorated Christmas tree if it wasn't stopped. With the knack only Maggie Scully seemed to have with her progeny, she stepped in from the kitchen, dark eyebrows raised at her squabbling offspring.

"Unless the two of you want to walk to midnight mass tonight, in the cold, on Christmas Eve, I suggest you two stop bickering and all of you come in to eat." For all the threat in her tone, there
was a fond, almost nostalgic smile as Maggie glared at her two grown sons.

"What? Dana was involved in it too, you don't yell at her!" Charlie wasn't about to let her get out of being yelled at.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Charles." Scully feigned innocence, failing at it badly.

"Just make sure the mashed potatoes don't get to her end of the table," Bill whispered to Charlie loudly.

"Are they always like this?" Poor Ashley, having never been around the entire Scully clan together in one sitting, looked a little startled by the repartee.

"Pretty much. You grow used to it after a while." Tara stood, patting the other woman's arm in the friendly way of a fellow outsider to the close-knit family. "The good thing is they usually don't tend to see each other in mass except on the holidays.

"And you're wedding," Scully added, reaching for the woman in a friendly hug. She had been surprised when picking up her younger brother from the train station the day before to find the young woman with him. For her part, Ashley had been friendly and outgoing, but seemed slightly in awe of Scully. Their entire drive to Baltimore had been peppered with her delight that Charlie's big sister was a special agent with the FBI, as a pathologist. She wanted to know the cases she had worked on, the things she had done. Considering that both of her brothers were Navy, Scully had felt slightly self-conscious at the woman's interest. Surely, Charlie serving in Naval intelligence was far more interesting, but Ashley seemed eager to please and truly seemed to like Scully, even if she had seen Scully pick on Charlie unmercifully.

"Do you have a date set for it yet?" She might as well be conversational, Scully thought. She had always regretted not trying more to get to know the quiet, shy Tara, whom she had grown to develop a relationship with over the years in fits and starts. Ashley on the other hand seemed more approachable.

"Well, we are thinking late summer. Charlie won't get leave again till then to take a honeymoon and I'll have some time off from the university I'm at." Ashley, as it turned out, was an adjunct history professor, much to the delight of Bill, the family buff.

"Are you planning on a wedding with your family or here in Baltimore?" Tara was already calculating the miles they would have to fly again.

"I'm voting Norfolk. It's where we live, it's where our friends live, it's close enough for the Scullys to drive, and it's not so far from Ohio that my parents and sister can't get there."

"Have you told them yet?"

"Not yet! We're heading there for New Years, though I think my mother suspects something's up." Ashley and Tara giggled and grinned as talk drifted to weddings and engagements and Scully found she was suddenly cut off in the conversation as the family migrated rooms to the dining room. It wasn't on purpose, she knew, but she had little to offer regarding engagements and weddings, having never exactly been in the position herself. The stresses of suddenly cramming two foreign families together in matrimony as arguments raged over ceremonies and wedding dresses was unfamiliar to her from her myriad of friends who had married, but foreign to Scully personally. It suddenly hit her as she watched her two remaining siblings pair off with their partners at the dinner table that she was the only one never engaged at this table at the moment. It wasn't a comforting thought. She was the old maid of the family. Had Melissa been alive, she at least would have had
her elder sister to fall back on, neither one of them in serious relationships or looking to be at the moment. But she was alone in this, the single Scully hold out when it came to matrimony. How in the world had that happened?

The spirit of frivolity she seemed to develop whenever her siblings were in close proximity seemed to falter slightly as dinner wore on. Scully smiled at the jokes and took the gentle ribbing from her brothers with good humor. And she tried to get to know her future sister-in-law. Ashley, for her part, seemed fascinated still that she was soon to gain an FBI agent as a family member.

"So, what led you to the Bureau?"

Scully felt all speculative eyes at the table turn to her in unison. Her cheeks burned. It was an innocent enough question on the part of the newcomer to the family, who had no idea how it had wrangled with their father that Dana had given up her potential career in medicine to go into law enforcement, a seemingly spur of the moment decision. "I had just finished my medical degree and was trying to decide what to do with my life. The FBI recruited me out of school and so I applied to the Academy. It all sort of fell into place after that."

"That's such a big leap, though, from doctor to agent? What made you do it?"

A broken heart. That wasn't the answer Ashley was looking for or really any of her family was looking for. Scully had only ever told Melissa the truth about Daniel Waterston. Missy was one of the only people Scully knew she could trust with the truth. She hadn't even told her own mother about him. What could she say? That she had been sleeping with one of her professors, the head of her program no less? That not only was she doing something immoral by medical school standards, the man was married? No, she had never admitted any of that to any of them. Only Melissa…and Mulder.

So she fell into her familiar line, the one that was more or less true without the addition of her extra-marital affair. "Well, I got through medical school and realized I wanted to make more of a difference than just working at a hospital. I didn't want to just sit back and hope that justice was done. I wanted to be a part of that process. It wasn't an overnight decision for me, I did think about it a great deal."

"So she throws herself into a dangerous profession with a crackpot partner." Bill was trying to be funny again, flippantly smirking at her. It cut at Scully, her eyes narrowing at his cheeky grin, the harsh words of an older brother with whom this argument was old but never fully resolved.

"Must we have this conversation at the dinner table in front of Charlie's fiancée?" Up went her perfectly arched eyebrows, ice lacing her voice, as Scully met her elder brother's suddenly dimming humor with the some sort of cold resolve she showed the dismissive men she often found herself at odds with in her work.

"Dana, I was joking." Bill sobered quickly as immediately tension filled what had been up to that point a pleasant family meal.

"I know, Bill, but at what point do the jokes get old? I get it, you and Dad never liked me becoming an agent. I get that you think my partner is a joke, but he's not here to defend himself, and you are bringing this up in front of a woman who has just met me and doesn't know my partner at all, nor do you as a matter of fact."

It occurred to her in the middle of her verbal rant that perhaps she was overreacting a tad to Bill's teasing. It was by far not the first time he'd ever cracked wise about her profession or about Mulder. And while recent years had warmed her brother slightly to her profession, to the point he
admitted being proud of her, it was a touch point still for her. Perhaps she was just looking for a reason to snap out at anyone and Bill was painfully easy.

"Dana, I'm sorry." Bill flushed guiltily, a tinge of exasperation in his voice. "Look, I didn't mean to start up anything. It was me, just shooting off my mouth…"

"Nothing unusual there!" Charlie, the jokester, tried to bring levity in to ease the growing battle between his elder siblings, more to reassure his now thoroughly confused and slightly embarrassed girlfriend than anything else. He grinned nervously at Ashley. "Bill and Dana always buck heads every holiday. It wouldn't be Christmas without at least one flare up."

"And I heartily wish that there was a Christmas that it didn't happen," Maggie murmured dryly, exasperation flickering between her eldest child and her surviving daughter, mostly on Scully, who ducked her head from her mother's annoyance. Maybe she shouldn't have reacted at Bill with guns blazing.

"You have to excuse our family, Ashley." Maggie finally sighed, trying to reassure newcomer unaware of family politics. "In truth Dana's partner Fox is a very nice person and a good agent. He was very supportive during several rough periods." The last statement was clearly directed at Bill who grunted and nodded, not about to cross his mother on this. "And he's always had my daughter's back as a partner. And yes, perhaps his ideas are unorthodox, but he's a friend of the family."

And thus the brewing storm was neutralized as Maggie pointedly returned to eating with a look that informed her children they should as well. "I hope Fox has somewhere to be for the holidays. You didn't leave him to sit at home alone, did you?"

"No," Scully muttered promptly, already feeling the sting of one set down and quick to prevent another. Would it be bad form to down her entire wineglass in one sitting with her entire family sitting around her? She wished she could, she could use alcohol in her at the moment. "He went to spend it with his mother, the stroke and everything last summer, he felt he should be with her."

"Oh, right, I'd forgotten. How is she?" Maggie revived conversation again as the others began to work on their meals and chatter began again between her siblings and their respective partners. The tension began to dissipate slowly.

"Teena's doing better. I spoke to her the other week. Her doctors say she's nearly completely recovered, a veritable miracle." And one that left medical science and Scully herself flummoxed.

"I know Fox was very worried about her. It's good he's gone up to see her." Maggie always had a soft spot for Mulder, ever since the horrible days of Scully's disappearance. "And things are going well for you two at work?"

"Fine," she replied, perhaps a trifle to quickly. Maggie's eyes sharpened, but she chose to ignore it for the moment, only nodding.

"And things have calmed down?" She knew her mother was thinking of that day last spring when delusional and frantic Scully had barged into her mother's house, convinced of her partner's perfidy, nearly shooting him in the process. Thankfully, that incident hadn't gotten out into the family rumor mill or she'd have heard no end of it from Bill.

"That is all fine." Scully knew no matter how much she tried to reassure her mother there would always be that underlying sense of fear and worry for her. "Everything is good."

Her mother didn't believe her, she could tell. But Maggie wasn't about to bring it up at dinner, not
after the latest flare up. Scully's mother knew her children well, and she knew that she could see right through her daughter.

God bless family dinners, Scully thought with tired sarcasm.

"You know, Dana." Maggie's voice was pitched quietly, low enough to hide under the rumbles of her sons as they attempted to tell some horrible tale of their dangerous exploits from youth. "It's okay to be frustrated now and again."

"Who says I'm frustrated?" She couldn't believe she'd actually said that to her mother. Maggie's dark eyebrows rose in a perfect imitation of the look Scully had just shot Bill.

"You nearly bit your brother's head off. I know you two don't see eye to eye on many things, but was it necessary to snap at him like that over dinner?"

Maybe not, but she didn't want to say so. "I get tired of the belittling."

"It's hardly the first time he's said something like that."

"I know." Scully felt suddenly as if she was seven again and being told off for punching another little boy in class for insulting her in some way. "I guess I'm just tired."

What a loaded statement that was. She was tired, of everything, of fighting her own family, her co-workers, of trying to eek out and pull out every stretch of respectability for her work with Mulder, all the while praying he didn't do something stupid. She was tired of fighting so hard to keep her partner's feet on the ground and defending him against God and everybody only to have him run off and do yet another stupid thing, or worse, assume she would just take care it for him, like always. Her life consisted of her spinning plates, making sure none of the delicate pieces wobbled off and shattered. And all the while, her youngest brother was meeting someone and getting engaged. Her elder brother and his wife were working on having a child, seeing fertility specialists and might even be successful soon. And what was she doing with her life? She was becoming the snappish, grumpy, angry old maid, that was what. When would life start being about her, she wondered blandly, staring at the cold food on her plate. When would it be about the things she wanted and needed and not about the things she was doing for someone else, namely her partner.

Her mother cut into her thoughts with knowing worry. "Dana, you know it's been forever since you had time off."

"I'm taking it right now, aren't I?" An automatic response, she knew what her mother meant.

"Spending a week with your brothers is hardly a vacation. I should know." As if to make Maggie's point the two boys got into a spirited debate over just who was responsible for the unfortunate childhood incident of urinating out of their second story bedroom window and onto the neighbor's head below. Scully just did suppress a snort of wild laughter at Maggie's pained and disgusted expression.

"I have to agree with you, Mom, I don't know how you put up with twenty-plus years of this." She snickered, sipping from her wine and sighing. "And you are right. I do need a vacation, somewhere where there are no aliens or conspiracies, where I'm not chasing after pointless leads that take us nowhere. Somewhere where I'm Dana for once and not Scully."

When was the last time she was called Dana by someone who wasn't a close family member or soon to be one? Hell, when was the last time Mulder called her Dana?

"Then consider it. I'm sure Fox wouldn't mind. In fact he might be the first one to tell you to do it."
Somehow, Scully seriously doubted that.

From down the table her brothers were laughing uproariously over something that had both their respective mates rolling their eyes in feminine horror.

"Ask Dana!" Bill managed to chortle, his face beat red and eyes streaming. "'Truth or Dare' when we were teenagers, we got Charlie to run to Old Lady Miller's house with nothing but a strategically placed tube sock and a smile."

"Oh, I don't need to hear this!" Maggie moaned in brief, motherly dread. "Do I even want to know when you did it?"

"No, you don't," Scully replied, recalling all to well the incident in question and how she had thought it was just as dumb then as she did now nearly twenty years later. "Some things, Mom, are just better left mysteries."

With brothers like this, she sighed in sisterly bemusement, who needs strange, shadowy enemies?
Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men

Chapter Summary

In which Scully takes a call on a hate crime.

Scully hung up the phone just as Mulder shuffled in, sleepy and heavy-eyed, in from the cold, a giant cup of coffee in hand. He blinked in mild confusion at his partner sitting pertly behind his large and still very cluttered desk.

"Good morning?" The unspoken question in his words being "Why are you sitting behind my desk?"

Far from snapping at him that it was because she had no desk of her own, Scully instead smiled tightly, pointing at the phone at the corner. "Call came in from upstairs. I took it." The air was filled with the aroma of Mulder's fresh brew, still steaming in hand. She could recognize the scent of those particular coffee beans anywhere.

"You went to Jake's and didn't get me any?" She felt slightly hurt. Rare was the occasion Mulder ever stopped at the best coffee in all of DC and when he did he usually always got some for her.

"I didn't know you would be in." He frowned, muddled between his coffee and the petulant Scully. "I thought you were going to stay up in Baltimore another day."

"Well, I thought about it, but the gang all deserted and then it was just Mom and I cleaning up the Christmas decorations."

"You came to work to get out of putting away the holiday crap?"

Scully stood from Mulder's chair, rolling her eyes at his course phraseology. "I'd hardly call thirty-eight years of memories crap, but yeah, I got tired of being my mother's slave and ran for DC."

"And I thought you were the favorite child." Mulder smoothly moved around her to settle behind his desk, setting down his coffee and taking off his wool overcoat.

"No, just the most available one. How was your family holiday?"

"Good!" Mulder's tight, monosyllabic response was cryptic. He could be serious. The holiday could have been good with his mother, or he could simply have no desire to go into it at the moment. Respecting that, Scully nodded, turning back to her table, notepad in hand.

"The call was from the Civil Rights division, by the way." Perhaps it was better to move on to topics other than families for the moment. Scully tapped the pad lightly as she sat in her own chair, scanning the scribbled details quickly. "Last week there was a murder in a Hasidic Jewish neighborhood in New York, a young store owner was killed, shot twice and left to die."

"Nice to see religious toleration at this holy time of year," Mulder muttered as he settled into his chair and reached for his coffee, as if hoping it would relieve the dark circles under his glassy, hazel eyes. "Did they find the killers?"
"They hadn't yet. They had suspects, until last night."

"Last night? What happened?"

"A young man was found murdered in his home, the fingerprints of the dead store owner around his throat." That should perk Mulder up she thought smugly, waiting to let her words sink in. It took all of five seconds for his head to cock ever so slightly, thoughts buzzing so loudly she could almost hear them from across the room.

"Excuse me, you said a dead man's fingerprints?"

"You and I both learned at the Academy that each person's fingerprints are unique, no two are ever alike." She parroted back words to him he had used long ago when they studied the fingerprints of one Eugene Tooms. "So this has left the NYPD and the New York field office slightly flummoxed. The victim of the initial crime is dead, there is no denying that."

"They have the autopsy to prove it?" The first thing any good FBI agent would think of.

"No, because the family wouldn't allow it. They are strict ultra-Orthodox Jews, they don't allow autopsies of their dead."

Mulder digested that information for the briefest of moments. "The body has to remain whole for resurrection."

"I didn't think Jews believed in resurrection." Admittedly, not that Scully was particularly well versed in Jewish theology or lore, she had never exactly ever had the opportunity to learn it.

"It's a Jewish tradition that can be traced definitively to the time just before Christ when concepts of the afterlife and what happens change in the emerging faith of Judaism as separate and distinct from the ancient Hebraic faith." Mulder paused long enough to turn on his computer and drink deeply from his coffee, making Scully's mouth water with envy as he did so. "One of the ideas of the afterlife is that there will be a world to come where the faithful will go, their bodies will be literally resurrected from the ground and brought to be in communion with God. If a body is mutilated in any way before or after death there is no guarantee that the entire body will rise again to be a whole unit in the world to come."

"Do I want to know how you know this?" Between Mulder's eidetic memory and his giant and encyclopedic knowledge of all things random and esoteric in the world of religion and folklore, Scully shouldn't have been surprised, but even he caught her off guard from time to time.

"Zombies," he deadpanned, earning a smirk from Scully. "No, for a while when I was a teenager I toyed with the idea of getting in touch with my cultural heritage."

"Despite the fact you were raised Protestant?"

"Yeah, well I figured running off and becoming Jewish might piss my parents off enough that I could take subversive delight in forcing them to deal with my new religious outlook."

"What changed your mind?"

"No bacon cheeseburgers, that was too much for any man to bear." He kicked back his chair, frowning distantly in thought. "So when do we head to New York?"

"Got a flight out in two hours, the New York City Field Office already has let NYPD know we are on our way and I have the address of the victims wife and family."
"Nothing like a little murder to ring in the New Year."

"Peace on earth and good will to men," she sighed, already not looking forward to what this case would hold.
Rain splattered and drummed against the roof of their rental, Mulder through maneuvering traffic in the sodden, New York City neighborhood. Scully watched the people on the street dash between droplets, umbrellas turning them into tiny, nylon covered mushrooms, as along the sidewalk, men in long, black coats ducked water spangled, black fedoras against the opening of the gray skies. She studied these last figures in particular, clumped together against the gusty winds, long curls of hair from their temples now plastered to the sides of their face, tangling with the unfashionable beards, beaded with water. Even in the gloomy, wet, early 20th century brickwork of Williamsburg, they stood out, a relic from another land and another time. The rest of the world moved at the pace of light, but these men plodded along, against progress and the elements, clinging to the faith of their ancestors.

"They remind me of the stories my grandmother used to tell me." Mulder stopped at the watery intersection, the red light glowing red through the sheen on the windshield. He too watched the Hasidic Jewish men shuffle by, murmuring to each other with hands stuffed deep into coat pockets for warmth. "Her grandfather was a rabbi in some village Russia, or so the story goes. She said the men used to all dress like that on the Sabbath and trundle off to the schul for prayers. It was an entire way of life for them, the way they ate, the way they worshipped, who they married, an entire community of people who believed and acted just like they did."

"Unlike today where they have to fit into a city filled with strangers and fear those who hate them and see them as different, as threats." Scully had never understood the need of humanity to hate the other, the people different because of their skin color or religious orientation. Hate crimes were not something that computed in her worldview, her strict, scientific mind. It made as much sense to her saying Jews caused AIDS as saying Catholics caused cancer. The irrational fear and distrust had no real explanation outside of humanities own infinite capacity to create reasons to distrust one another.

"I don't think it was really that different in Russia back in the day. Sure, they had their town where nobody bothered them, but they were still threatened and harassed. My great-grandparents came to the US after a program there. They migrated here and settled down in a community not too different than this one. But the link was already broken. They weren't as religious as their parents, and their children less so. Grandma married Grampa Kuiper, who I think had a passing familiarity with the concept of God. I think there was a half-ass attempt to perhaps raise Mom and Aunt Mary as something akin to Jewish, but short of a few weddings and bar mitzvahs neither of them was particularly interested. Aunt Mary is an Evangelical Christian now. Mom more or less converted when she married Dad, but church was more for show for him for his family and for his career. Hell, we stopped going for even Easter and Christmas after Samantha."

"So in four generations your family went from being rabbis in Russia to lapsed Christians in Massachusetts? Is that the American story?"

"For some of us it is." Mulder smirked as the light changed and he pressed forward into traffic once
"Remember, being Jewish in the late 19th and into the 20th century was even worse, and many wanted to be anything but. That was before the Holocaust, before the Civil Rights era, when it was still OK to use terms such as "kike" and "yid" and to openly refuse service to anyone who looked "Semitic." Is it a small wonder then that so many Jews tried their best to fit into "normal" American society?"

"But this community hasn't." Her glance fell almost involuntarily on the storefront windows lettered in Hebrew, the unfamiliar symbols making no sense to her. "They've seemed to stand firm against any efforts at integration."

"Well different communities act different ways, and sometimes within a community there is more resistance to integration than with others. Often there are revivals within certain communities. This one in particular grew after World War II and the influx of refugees from Europe who had survived the atrocities there."

"And yet, people still fear them, ignoring all of the horrible things that have happened in the name of religious intolerance. I just don't understand."

"Hard to change two thousand years worth of propaganda and mistrust, even when your cold, hard science is thrown in people's faces. You should be one of the first people to understand that, putting up with me."

This was true, but Mulder could and would listen to science when he had to. "But you aren't a racist, and when you do argue science it is because you believe a possibility has some legitimacy. That pamphlet Jacob Weiss showed us was nothing more than hysterical drivel tied up with half-baked paranoia born out of centuries of falsehoods and misconceptions."

"I of all people don't disagree with you on any of that, Scully. I don't get it either. But you'll find that standing in the middle here we are between a rock and a hard place. This is a community whose traditions haven't changed in centuries going against people whose opinions haven't changed in centuries. Getting either side to talk on this case is going to be like getting blood out of stone."

And people would keep dying on both sides until someone started talking. So far, neither Jacob Weiss nor the owner of the print shop, Bjunes, seemed inclined. How many other young husbands and impressionable teenaged boys would die as age old hatred and distrust lingered between them?

"I think this makes me appreciate my own ancestors much more." Scully sighed, watching the windshield wipers tap and scrape in front of her. "Irish Catholics were just as hated and disliked as the Jews would be later. I suppose I never thought about how rough my own great-great-grandparents had it first coming here."

"Everyone's grandparents had it rough coming to America, whether they were English indentured servants, African slaves, Irish and German Catholics, Jews, now Eastern Europeans and Arab Americans. Everyone has their story of coming here as outsiders and trying to find a place in the American dream. But you have to admit, few have come with quite the baggage the Jewish community has."

"Maybe," Scully sighed sadly, heavy, grayness outside reflecting the turn in her mood. "It almost makes you wonder why people bother with the entire God thing at all if they all can't agree to disagree."

"No you see why I don't. I've never had a particular affinity for any religion, not for decades. Frankly, I've never really thought about the part of my family that came from Russia. Not that I'm particularly beholden to the Dutch members of my family either, but I saw myself as being one of
many Protestant, Caucasian males of Northern European decent, certainly not Jewish. But there are
some times when I think about my grandmother's family and I wonder if I shouldn't have tried
harder when I was younger to get in touch with my Jewish roots, get to know the faith of my
ancestors, maybe try to understand my grandmother's stories a bit more, learn who what that part of
my family was."

The human yearning to understand where they came from was basic and Mulder was no different
than anyone else. "Who knows, perhaps this case will give you some insight into your own family
after all."

"Maybe," he muttered noncommittally. "Though I doubt it will convince me to give up bacon and
cheese on my burgers."

"We can only ask for small miracles." She chuckled softly, her breath fogging the passenger's side
glass.
Sefer Yetzirah

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully look into a bit of kabbalism.

Young men in jeans and yarmulkes, crowded the hallways of Yeshiva University, backpacks slung over thick winter coats, their united front broken by the occasional grave looking boy, dressed head to toe in black, wearing the same somber garb as the men in Jacob Weiss' neighborhood. The wall of college students broke way for her as she wended her way through, and she smiled gratefully as she passed, trying to follow Mulder's taller figure in the gathering.

"Makes me miss my old university days." Mulder sighed with vague nostalgia, waiting as Scully finally made her way to where he waited at the top of the stairs, studying the plastic wrapped, charred book in his hands. "Back then the only thing you had to worry about was making sure you woke up sober enough to sit for your exams."

"Phoebe really drive you to drink?" She smirked at her mild dig, moving past him on the stairs, glancing at the baggie in his hands. "So do you think Jacob Weiss had anything to do with this?"

"Just because his sefer was found in Isaac Luria's coffin?" For once Mulder sounded like the skeptic, a position he rarely ever took. "No offense, but Luria was his son, in law if not in fact. Weiss has no sons. Likely Aria's husband was all he was going to get. Perhaps he simply placed the book in there as a memento to the dead, much as other people leave toys or letters."

"The professor said it wasn't common in Jewish burials to leave behind worldly possessions."

"But it's not unheard of." They lighted the stairs at the bottom floor of the library, similarly bustling with eager college students.

"Weren't you the one who had the book burst into flames in his hands?"

"You believe it was containments for the ground water."

"You don't believe that Jacob Weiss had anything to do with those boys' murders?" Sefer or nor sefer, they were running painfully thin on leads and so far all they had to show for their work was a self-immolating, combustible book, a body that was by any measure quite dead, and an angry father-in-law who showed no sorrow for the deaths of the young boys who took away his daughter's husband.

"I'm not saying he didn't have something to do with it, Scully, but I am pointing out that there is more than one reason a book of his could be in his grave."

"At the scene of a crime, Mulder. There was a dead boy there."

"We have no evidence Jacob Weiss was the one who killed the boy."

"You heard him yesterday, Mulder, he wasn't sorry at all to hear that the teens involved in the murder of his son-in-law were dead."
"And that automatically makes him a murderer?" Mulder studied the sefer briefly as they strode the busy halls of the university. "Besides, if this book is any link, we may be looking at something far more mystical than just murder for revenge."

"Mystical. You think that Weiss cursed these men with that thing?"

"Weiss or someone else who knows Kabbalism."

"I thought Kabbalah was the latest, New Age thing, something people could do instead of wearing crystals and reading auras." Hadn't her sister Melissa been reading up on it when she died?

"Kabbalism existed long before Madonna and her buddies started thinking Jewish mysticism was the hip new way to make themselves feel good about their empty, vacuous lives." Mulder grimaced as he cut through a crowd of students and made for the doors of the library building. "It's a tradition that is thousands of years old, and is a deep part of spirituality and folklore of the Jewish community."

"And what in particular about it makes you think it has anything to do with the deaths of these young men?"

"There are folk tales and legends dating from the Middle Ages and earlier about magic performed using texts such as the Sefer Yetzirah; the calling of spirits, the controlling of demons, saving young, impressionable men from the clutches of Lilith and her daughters."

"Lilith and her daughters?" Scully suppressed a snort as they wandered into the chilled, damp air outside, "Fear of womanly wiles, then?"

"Well you know what good, Jewish mothers tell their boys about you female creatures." Mulder grinned impishly, unmindful of the drizzle as he pulled out his umbrella and passed it to Scully. "Kabbalism is said to be humanity's way of understanding the relationship between God and his creation, to answer deep, philosophical truths about the nature of existence and how it works. And it's said that some people who study it gain hidden insight, knowledge that allows them to manipulate creation."

"Magic?" Somehow she wasn't surprised Mulder had gone there, only that it had taken him so long to get to that point.

"In a way, though not in the way we understand magic. It's more like understanding reality so well you can almost manipulate it rather than force it."

"Whatever you call it, Mulder, you are suggesting that someone used it to commit these murders."

"I've heard about crazy stories, Scully, of ghosts and corpses being brought back from the dead."

"They said the same thing about Jesus and they called that a miracle."

"But Jesus didn't kill anyone, that we know of."

"I don't know, Mulder, I don't know how we can go to the NYPD and Civil Rights division and start telling them that some magic book is what starting killing these people."

"How is it that much different than trying to explain how a dead man's fingerprints ended up on all of these victims?"

She frowned darkly into the gray mist. He had a point. They could no more prove one argument
than they could prove the other and none of this was explaining why these boys were dying. They needed to find their ground here. They needed to start from square one again.

"I think we at least need to go and speak to Jacob Weiss again, ask him about why his sefer was at the grave sight. He's already spoken openly against these boys, perhaps he'll give us something to link him to these crimes."

"Because that worked so well for us the first time." Mulder sighed, leading the way through the gray afternoon.
Their Home Is A Castle

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully speculate on the tragedy of Jacob Weiss' life.

The interminable rain spattered ice cold and sharp against Scully's scalp as she stepped out into it again, fumbling for the nylon umbrella and squinting up at the stark, damp façade of the Weiss' apartment building. She thought she could just see Arial in the window above, watching them with painful sadness as Scully and Mulder stepped out onto the rain soaked sidewalk and turned towards the synagogue her father studied at. After everything that both Jacob and Arial had been through, for their sakes, Scully hoped that she was wrong about this.

As if reading her thoughts Mulder's sentiment seemed to match Scully's own. "Her castle crumbled before she even had a chance to build it." He too studied the window of the Weiss' apartment for long moments before pulling out his own umbrella and matching pace to Scully. "I now understand why Jacob Weiss felt the way he did about those teenagers killing Isaac. Imagine watching your entire village murdered after digging their own graves?"

"Imagine being a child and seeing that." She shivered beneath the heavy wool of her coat and it wasn't just from the chill of January rain in New York. "The atrocities done in the name of nationalism and racial hatred will never cease to baffle me."

"Watching your entire family slaughtered, all of your village, everyone you knew, your entire way of life." Mulder loped beside her pensively, just as horrified at the implications as she was. "I have my own childhood nightmares to face, but even thinking of that is unthinkable to me."

"Would it be enough to drive him to murder?" She didn't want to think that, she didn't want to say that, but she had to. Despite whatever sympathy she felt for Jacob Weiss and what he had seen and suffered, she was an officer of the law and she had a duty to uphold. "You've seen serial killers and murderers snap over traumas less than what Weiss experienced as a child. Donne Pfaster was a child oppressed by his mother and sisters and he snapped and started taking hair and fingernails."

"Jacob Weiss is hardly a serial killer."

"But he could be a vengeful murderer." She couldn't let this go. Weiss was the only solid lead they had. "This is a man whose had to watch time and time again over the years as those he's loved were murdered by people who hated them for nothing more than the fact that they were Jews. You heard what Arial said, for the first time since his village died he had hope in his daughter's marriage. All those years and to have teenaged hoodlums, brainwashed on the vitriol that we saw in those fliers, come into his son-in-laws shop and brutally murder him the same way his people were killed, it could have been enough to finally cause him to snap back. You heard what he had to say about the law, he doesn't trust it, and why should he when everywhere he's lived the law has done nothing to protect him. It's perfectly logical for him to finally take justice into his own hands and avenge not just Isaac, but his village and his lost life."

Her reasoning was sound, if flimsy, but she could tell as he shook his dark head, frowning in consternation, that Mulder still didn't buy it. "And I would agree with you under normal circumstances, but I don't think Weiss is our man."
"Normal circumstances? Nothing about this case is normal!"

"That still doesn't mean Weiss is our man."

"And why are you so quick to defend him?"

"You heard what Arial said, Scully. Weiss found hope again through his daughter's marriage. He brought out the last treasure he had of his village, of his people. This is what he had been waiting to do for over fifty years, to let go of the past, to put it behind him. After all of that, after everything he had been through, I can't see him throwing it all away in a fit of vengeful anger."

"And that's precisely why I can see him doing it." She pulled up short at the corner, a red light stopping them as traffic passed by drearily. "To have that hope crushed so brutally and in such a similar way to his own family's demise, I could see Weiss willing to do anything to avenge himself on those who hurt his daughter as he himself had been hurt."

"In a million years, Arial would never agree to her father doing anything so foolish."

"I doubt Arial even knows what her father is capable of." The light changed to green and she stepped off the curb, mindful of the large puddle pooling just off the sidewalk. "How much of his life after the war does she know about, really? She just said he managed to keep that ring secret for fifty years. What else is there about him that she doesn't even know? When did he come to America and settle down with her mother? And what did he do before she was born? If he were just a ten-year-old in 1943, he would have still been a child when the war ended, an orphaned boy. Who took him in, who raised him, and what did he do for the nearly thirty years before Arial's arrival in the world?"

"Probably what all other survivors do, tried to move on with his life and forget."

"Forget by doing what? Arial is an only child. He has no other children, no other wife. We don't know who Jacob Weiss is, Mulder. We see a kindly old man whose been horribly hurt by life and we assume he couldn't have done this. We don't want to think he could have done anything like this horrific, but can we truly be sure?"

"What surprises me is that you of all people would assume on circumstantial evidence that Weiss is responsible." Mulder for once was waving evidence and proof under her nose, the role she usually played in this sort of argument. For a moment she felt herself falter, nearly stopping in the middle of the quiet Brooklyn sidewalk, devoid of all but the most stalwart of New Yorkers willing to brave the elements. He could be right and she could be simply trying to find someone, anyone she could logically use to explain what was turning into a totally illogical case. An angry and hurt Jacob Weiss fit that bill.

"I don't know, Mulder, I think of my father and his children. If I had been in Arial's situation when he was alive, widowed by a thoughtless hate crime, I don't know if his reaction would have been terribly different than Jacob Weiss'."

"I didn't know your father." Mulder's drawl was slow and measured. "But I'm willing to bet that he wouldn't killed a man for your broken heart. And somehow I don't see Arial's father doing that either."

Not for the first time in recent months they stood at an impasse, two opposites sides of an argument, neither one willing to budge from their respective vantage point. The story of their partnership, she sighed, glancing from Mulder's resolute expression through the mist towards the street where Weiss' synagogue was. Scully burrowed her free hand into her coat pocket, shrugging
off the cold as she tried to convince herself she was right in this, that Weiss was the lead they needed to take. Why did Mulder always make her doubt herself?

"Come one, Jacob Weiss is still at prayers. We should be able to catch him there." She turned to trudge along into the rain again, heartily wishing she could be out of it soon.
Truth and Death

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully ruminate on the sad love story of Arial.

Flashing lights cut through the gray haze, curious gawkers stopping on the soggy sidewalks to watch as Jacob Weiss was lifted carefully into the ambulance, an oxygen mask over his still face. Scully supervised the work as behind her a paramedic tended to Mulder, checking him out meticulously despite her partner's loud and disgruntled protests.

"Will you tell them I'm fine." Mulder grumbled, catching her eye and nodding to the bemused EMT, who patiently continued his work.

"He's right for the most part, Agent Scully." The man finally confirmed after a purposely protracted moment, needlessly flashing a light in Mulder's eyes to dilate them once again. "A few bumps and bruises, but on the whole he should be fine."

"I have no medical degree, I could tell you that," Mulder groused, pulling away quickly from the ministrations of the medical professionals and joining Scully as she watched the doors close on Weiss and the sirens begin to sound. "Think he will be all right."

"He should be once they get him looked at. Some esophageal bruising I suspect. He's damn lucky he doesn't have a crushed wind pipe or a broken neck." They had gotten to him just in time, cutting him down from his noose in the rafters of the synagogue, dangling grotesquely in the middle of a house of prayer.

"I say he's lucky to be alive, period." Mulder took back his suit jacket and heavy, wool overcoat, shrugging into both with a grimace and wince, ignoring Scully's pointed frown. "I got tossed around myself by that thing."

"Yeah, but good." She sighed, not completely sold on the idea Mulder wasn't more injured. Already around his throat she could see swollen fingerprints rising and she was shocked he didn't come out with a nasty goose egg on the back of his skull. Certainly, it might explain what he saw up in that dimly lit attic above the synagogue.

"You are telling me a man made of mud did all of this?" She reached up to brush the bruising at his Adam's apple lightly. He ducked away as the tip of her finger made contact with the rough skin of his throat.

"Not a mud man, Scully, a golem. According to Kabbalistic tradition, it is a creature formed from inanimate particles and brought to life, usually using the Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Formation. Jewish folktales speak of just such a creature being called up in the 18th century in Prague by a famous Jewish scholar and mystic of the day. He had created it to protect the Jews of the city from another pogrom on the part of the Holy Roman Emperor, and according to various forms of the legend, he let it run rampant, killing Christians and keeping them from sending off the Jews. I think the same thing was done for Isaac, using the mud from his grave. You remember the tattoos on his hands we saw?"
Mulder briefly pointed out the fleshy part just above his index finger, the part of Isaac Luria's hand that had the strange, faded symbols. "They were Hebrew for truth. The story goes that this is the mystical word that brings the golem to life. Remove the first letter, the aleph, and it becomes death, destroying the golem."

"Mulder, that's a folktale, a story I'm sure mothers used at night to keep their children in bed and asleep. You are telling me that is what was responsible for the death of those boys? Who did it, Jacob Weiss?"

"No," Mulder replied sadly, glancing across the crowd of police and onlookers to where Arial Luria sat quietly, guarded by several members of her father's synagogue. "I think Arial wanted to have her wedding day."

Scully's heart ached for the young woman sitting forlornly in the corner, her beautiful, mud stained white dressed wrapped in her father's coat, silent tears streaming down a face that tried to look brave. She struck Scully then as impossibly young and small to carry such a burden, the grief of loss. She had no idea when Jacob Weiss' wife had passed or how old Arial was when her mother had died, and now there was this, the loss of the man she had loved so desperately, not just once, but if Mulder was to be believed, twice. So much heartache for one young girl. It seemed sad and unfair.

"What will they do with Arial?" She hoped nothing. What could they prove really?

Mulder sighed, watching NYPD muttering between themselves with no thought or notion of discussing it with the FBI standing right there. "What can they do, Scully? The only proof they have of a crime is Isaac Luria's fingerprints, and we all know he's dead. And I don't see the DA of New York City really willing to try and make a case that ancient, Jewish magic is responsible for those murders. Likely they will let her go home on lack of evidence and chuck this case into the unsolved pile."

"It hardly seems fair to the families of those dead boys though, not knowing the truth."

"What, and breed more of the hateful sentiment that started this in the first place?" For once Mulder was dogmatic against the idea, a surprise to Scully. "These boys were raised in an environment that already hated Jews. What would happen if they heard it was Jewish magic that did this? I think for once its best just letting it remain a mystery. Let Arial find closure, let her move on with her life."

Moving on with her life. Arial had so much life to carry on with. She was twenty-three, twenty-four at best. That was a long time to live with the memory of loss. It had turned bitter and angry in her father, the memory of those long gone from his childhood. Would it be that way for Arial? Would she spend the rest of her long life a black crepe widow, mourning the loss of her first, great love. Scully hoped not. In her mind she liked to think that Arial would move on, like Mulder said. She would heal and she would allow someone else to love her, to marry her, and have a family with her. She wanted to think that Arial was strong enough to do that.

For the life of her, Scully thought with an aching heart, she didn't think she could do such a thing. It occurred to her that she too was no stranger to loss. In the last four years she'd lost her father and sister, not counting the many near misses with Mulder. She'd already had to bury family members dear to her. The idea of a husband was too unthinkable, ignoring the fact she didn't have one and had no prospects for one either. But the very thought of loving someone so completely left her feeling awed in a way of Arial Luria. Just imagining someone walking into Scully's life and earning enough of her trust to allow her to begin to think of loving someone that much, that in and of itself seemed overwhelming. A childhood of constant movement, coupled with her father's
military upbringing, had taught Scully to treat each new relationship in her life with wary caution. Let the other person earn your trust first, feel out the territory, then slowly allow them access into your affections. Consequently her circles of friends had always been smaller than those of say Melissa or Charlie, even Bill. But they had been good friends and true friends, the ones she had made.

Her list of lovers was even smaller. She'd had one serious boyfriend in high school, a handful in college, none of them ever more than just flings, and then Daniel. Her first big test of her heart, her one large failure, and since then she had only had half-hearted attempts with first Jack, then Ethan. It had been nearly four years since the later, and if she was honest with herself, Scully admitted that at this point she had given up on the idea of true love or even marriageable love. She was in her early thirties now, a career-minded woman. She had no time to see men of any sort, save for Mulder, a man whose involvement in her life meant madness, chaos, the unpredictable. Mulder who to whom she was tied through his web of conspiracy and intrigue, through her disappearance and her sister's death, through the truths only they knew, through the work only she understood. She was bound to him, linked through their shared experience. Perhaps, in her own way, it was as sure of a binding as Arial's was to her beloved Isaac. Except theirs was not a partnership of marriage or even love. There were no castles here, only deeper, darker conspiracies. And as much as she cared for Mulder, and Scully wasn't an idiot enough not to acknowledge the deep and abiding affection she had for her maddening and intelligent partner, she knew that as long as she stood by his side she would never know the sort of love that supposedly drove Arial Luria to resurrect her dead husband. She would never stand at the graveside of a lost lover, aching with that pain of loss, and try to find the inner strength to move on. In so many ways, she realized, Arial Luria was already stronger than Dana Scully would ever be.

"Earth to Scully!" Mulder's fingers snapped somewhere behind her left ear, causing Scully to jump and turn on her taller partner, a bemused frown watching her as in the distance someone helped Arial into a warm car, hopefully to take her either home or to her father.

"Lost in thought there," Mulder's gaze teasing but curious. Scully felt color race to her cheeks despite the stinging wet cold, turning resolutely to watch as Arial's car pulled away through the curious onlookers on the street.

"Just thinking about Arial, about her love for Isaac….about saying goodbye."

"Goodbye? Not planning on jumping ship on me yet, are you Scully?"

And if she were?

"Not yet, Mulder." She sighed, shooting him a tired smile. "Let's go home. I think we are done here."
Gather Ye Roses While Ye May

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the passage of time and what she may be losing.

Jesus, it was cold outside.

The Vietnam Memorial just barely kept out the cold, icy blast from the Potomac, ruffling Scully's red hair as she glanced out across the expanse of winter dead grass and black, reflective marble. Why did Mulder pick this place to meet? Why couldn't he have chosen a nice, warm coffee shop somewhere, or even a McDonald's? Who the hell would notice them at a McDonald's? Then again, who the hell would notice them at all?

"Our contact is late." Mulder paced the sidewalk, his reflection wavering against the names etched in stone, hardly noticing the cold. Damn New Englanders, they never seemed to flinch when the temperature dipped. Scully hadn't seen snow on a regular basis till she moved to Baltimore, and while she was now much more acclimated to winter than she had been as a Southern California girl, it still could get into her bones at times. Mulder, with all of his frenetic energy, hardly seemed to notice.

"I'm sure he'll be here," she murmured, more as a way to get him to stop fussing than to reassure him. "Who did you say this was again?"

"Russian immigrant who says he has information on KGB knowledge of a downed alien aircraft."

"Mmmmm." It was all the response Scully could manage as she huddled further into her coat against the January blast. Just the other day she'd been stuck in New York in the freezing rain, now she was back in DC in the cold. Scully was tired of feeling frozen, wet, tired, and overworked. Her head ached at an alarmingly frequent rate now at days, her feet were sore, and she didn't remember the last time she had a vacation just to relax. She needed someplace warm, Hawaii maybe, away from the cold and dark. They needed a case in Honolulu, at a resort hotel, where she could lay by the pool….

"Here he is."

Mulder's fingers at her elbow shocked her out of her revere as in the distance a man came across the expanse of grass towards them, eyes flickering nervously over his shoulder. Not that he had anything to be nervous about. Who in their right mind would be out here this time of night in January anyway? Did they expect dark, shadowy men to be hiding in the leaf bare trees and bushes with cameras, hanging off of light poles like demented squirrels? Even the squirrels had sense enough to be hibernating this time of year. Scully wished she was hibernating and not out here chasing yet another lead to another dead end regarding some other hypothetical alien aircraft somewhere. She wondered cynically if an informant came bearing green cheese he swore was off the moon if Mulder would buy it? He just might. Hell, most of the cheese in his refrigerator at home was green, if it was cheese at all, she couldn't be sure.

Mulder greeted the newcomer with wary caution, the same, careful dance she had seen him do countless other times. This would lead into a tedious "interrogation" as Mulder called it, she
usually said it was leading the witness. For the next hour she would be stuck here, listening to
some other half-remembered information about some other mysterious vessel that would invariably
end up sounding like a Frisbee on steroids and she would be drug into yet another half-baked case
with Mulder, drug to some other ungodly part of the world. She hadn't even had a chance to write
up her notes from the Isaac Luria case and the Civil Rights division was waiting for those. Never
mind what anyone else wanted or needed when Mulder had an idea in his head.

The Luria case….poor Arial. Scully thought of the sad, broken-hearted girl. Her father had been
released from the hospital finally, shaken up and bruised, but he would survive, like he always had.
They were both survivors, Jacob and Arial. Today would have been the week anniversary of Arial's
religious wedding to Isaac, married not just in law as they already had been, but in faith and in love
as well. But one moment, one singular period of time, and Arial was a widow before she was even
a bride. How fleeting it all was, her future, her life now altered forever by the acts of one group of
misguided teenagers.

How fleeting life always seemed to be. One moment and everything could change. Just like in this
place, she realized, glancing around the dark, cold slabs around them, the silent testament to the
thousands of lives lost in Vietnam. Men like Nathaniel Teager and even her boss AD Skinner, who
had joined the military out of duty and honor and one moment changed everything. Some were
captured and never seen again. Others were left crippled and maimed, or scarred in psychological
ways that still rippled through them even now, twenty years past the end of the war. And then
there were the ones who had names inscribed on the walls around them, the ones who never made
it home. One moment and all the promise of a generation was lost in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

How fleeting life was.

"And these unknown craft?" Mulder's droning monotone carried over the chill breeze. "Where
were the majority sighted?"

They would be here a while, Scully sighed, sensing that Mulder was just hitting his stride with his
so-called informant. Her attention drifted, snagged away from the thread of Mulder's meanderings
towards the monument once again. All along it's length she could see, scattered here and there,
small tokens and gifts left by visitors over the months since she had last visited. Teddy bears and
photographs, tiny American flags, hand written notes and wilted flowers huddled on the cold
pavement, tribute to those fallen. Scully couldn't even remember much of Vietnam. Her happy
childhood eclipsed what memories of it she did have. The families and friends of these men hadn't
forgotten, their memories clung to the black granite, visual reminders to everyone who passed by
here of just who these people were, the faceless names on black granite.

Scully meandered away from Mulder and his conversation, towards the closest wing of the
memorial. Her face shown pale and drawn in the blackness, and her eyes drew down to the base. A
hand-written note sat propped against the wall, a simple yellow card held down by a tiny toy car.
Was it a memento of a childhood now long gone, she wondered as she read the card. A letter from
a sibling to their brother now dead twenty years, the love and pain so evident in the simple words
and the quiet confidence that the loss was for the greater good. And beside the message, dried,
broken roses, left behind, now withered with the bitterness of the freezing winter wind off of the
Chesapeake.

The wind caught the edge of one of the crumbled petals, skittering it briefly against the sidewalk as
she plucked it up between her fingers. The soft, silken smoothness of it was now leathery and
fragile, the brilliant red faded to a dim brown. What had been the most lovely and brilliant of
flowers had now had the life leeched out of it, the vitality was gone. Fading away quickly was the
fate of most flowers. Life passed and faded in moments, singular moments that changed
everything, moments that passed without notice, life that seemed to move without a chance for her to even catch her breath, to stop, to see what she was missing. What was the phrase? Gather ye roses while ye may? Time was flying away and she was letting it, buried in the basement with Mulder in a morass of his personal flights of fancy, waiting for him to leap off that precipice yet again so she could drag him back up. There would be some other report to file, some other case somewhere he would want to check out, and she would go and watch life's moments pass her by.

"Scully!" She turned at Mulder's irritated call, frowning up at his impatience as his contact scuttled away into the darkness.

"You done over there?"

She blinked, turning back to the small display, fingerling the card left behind.

"Yeah!" She sighed, standing slowly as she pocketed the rose petals, slipping them carefully into her coat. Gather ye roses while ye may, indeed.
In which Scully finds herself resenting Mulder.

Spiritual place her ass.

Scully watched Mulder whip around the doorway to the office, bag in hand, partly envious of his time off, partly irritated. He wouldn't be taking it if he didn't have to, she knew that, and it was disgusting that he was forced to it. Mulder had no concept of "vacation." She wasn't much better. What was she doing instead of vacationing? Checking up on Moose and Squirrel? Is this what her life had devolved into, back and forth, up and down, her life in a standstill chasing one false lead after another, and all the moments of life passing her by. Her fingers slipped into her coat pocket, pulling out the delicate rose petals she found the night before. They looked even more ephemeral in the wan, florescent light of the dim office. She felt as dry and desiccated as they were, fragile and empty. Mulder's words stung, the callous flippancy.

You were just assigned. This is my life.

As if she hadn't lost anything to these damnable files herself? There were parts of her memory gone, the truth of what was done to her only coming to light in bits and pieces, her sister dead, murdered in Scully's own home, even her pet sacrificed to one of his stupid flights of fancy, chasing through the Georgia woods for a sea monster. And none of this was mentioning her career, her own track in the FBI that had once looked so promising. She could have chosen to return to it and left him and the X-files behind long ago. Common sense told her she should have. Mulder acted as if she had nothing personal invested in these files at all, as if she were nothing more than the sidekick, a fixture to be called upon when useful.

Hell, she didn't even have a desk. Nearly four years in the cramped, moldy basement and she didn't even have her own workplace.

Setting the petals by the nameplate that read "Fox Mulder", she grabbed the file from the top of his desk. Scully no more wanted to go to Philadelphia than she wanted a tooth extraction, but if she were honest with herself she didn't know if she had anything better to do that week. A defiant part of her wanted to toss the entire thing in the trash, turn on her heels, pack her bags, and head for someplace warm and tropical, and she wouldn't tell Mulder she was doing it. She would wait till Monday, come back with pictures and sunburn and smile sweetly when he complained that nothing was done on the case. If he wanted this so bad, if this was his life, well then he could do it. She would go live hers, sipping from mixed drinks and flirting with strange, exotic men.

It was a pleasant enough fiction, she thought, even as she flipped open the file and scanned it through. She knew she wouldn't go through with it, she never did, not Ahab's daughter. She was a woman of honor and loyalty, bred into her by her Navy tradition. Dana Scully never ran away from her duty. It was why she kept moving in an endless straight line, back and forth, back and forth, two steps forward, three back. Let other people live lives of pleasure and excitement. That wasn't for her. Let her elder brother finally create the family he and Tara always dreamed off. Let Charlie, the baby, finally settle down with the perfect woman. Let Ellen and her other friends drift away, let them all create perfect, happy lives while she lived alone, tied to a man and his pursuits, his life,
one she apparently was only assigned to but had no part of. The real world and a real life was clearly no place for Scully. She was needed for desk jockey duty for a man who chased aliens. Except, well, she had no desk.

The file closed in her fingers with a snap, her frustration venting in a long, aggravated sigh. Why was she so devoted to Mulder after all? She had never asked herself that question in quite that way before, never so bluntly at least. She defended Mulder to everyone, her family, her boss, to others in the Bureau, and yet never once asked herself why she did it. For certain, she was personally involved in the X-files now, there was an entire case file there with her name on it. She wanted to know what was done to her and why, and she wanted justice for Melissa's death. She wanted to know what the mysterious virus was that so many people had killed for, what it's purpose was, and why it even existed when it defied all logical science, but none of that had to do with Mulder. Why was she devoted to him?

At this moment she honestly didn't have an answer to that question.

She was his friend, yes, she cared about him, Fox Mulder had precious few friends, and fewer still were the people who actually cared honestly about his well being. She enjoyed working with him, that much was true. Mulder's intelligence, his frightening perception were a challenge to her, and they certainly kept her intellectually on her toes. There were times he was fun to work with even. He was devastatingly witty, often childish, and she had to admit there were more than a few times his need to give the finger to authority was appreciated by her, especially as she so rarely ever did the same herself. There was a lot to Mulder that made working with him agreeable enough. But even that didn't keep a partnership together, nor did it sustain it, and a work partnership did not make up a persons life. And therein lay the crux of Scully's problem, Mulder was her work partner, her work friend, and her colleague. He wasn't by any measure her entire life and he kept acting like he was.

Mulder had made it clear where he saw Scully in his life. She hadn't forgotten his visions from Chattanooga, when he was convinced he knew Melissa Riedel in another life. Whether Scully bought into it or not, Mulder saw her place as being the person who stood by his side and pulled him out of the fire when it got too hot. Even when the Bureau separated them and assigned them elsewhere, she did his dirty work, managing his autopsies, flying to Puerto Rico to save him from some other stupid decision, and covering for him when it wasn't even her place to do it. She should have earned a little respect for doing that, hadn't she, or at least have gotten her own desk and nameplate?

Perhaps it was time, she thought darkly, to start putting boundaries between her life and her work. For far too long now she had let the latter bleed over the former and she was missing out because of it. With the exception of Ellen, she hadn't spoken to her closest friends from college in forever, and even Ellen and she had been more out of touch than in of late. She hadn't even seen Charlie's engagement coming. How many of her the dinners and lunches she had scheduled with her mother had she flaked out on for cases Mulder drug her off on? Her life had become her work. Perhaps Mulder was right in his way, this wasn't his life, she had only been assigned. She shouldn't allow it to consume her, to swallow her and leave her as dry and empty as the rose petals on Mulder's desk. She would start taking her life back, she had to, and she would make Mulder understand this. For now, at least, she would humor him. She would go do what he asked in Philly. She would run the background checks, see what was up with these two supposed sources, and that would be it, nothing more. She wouldn't dig further on a case she believed had no merit, and she wouldn't kill herself over one of Mulder's hunches. For once she wasn't going to blindly go along with this and cover for him. Let him follow his own hunches when he got back if he felt like it.

Snagging the plane ticket from off Mulder's desk she studied it thoughtfully. One day in Philly
wouldn't kill her. Then she could take some time and do a little of the self-discovery Mulder suggested she try. It had been a long time coming for her anyway.
Drinks With A Stranger

Chapter Summary

In which Scully indulges in a drink with a pleasant stranger.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What, have you got a date or something?

Mulder's sneer burned her cheeks as the alcohol burned her throat, cutting through her reason. Ed Jerse watched her down the amber liquid with wide eyes, speculative as she gulped it in one shot. A trail of fire scorched its way to her stomach, pooling there in a tangled mix of liquor, apprehension and daring. This was dangerous, all of this was dangerous; the sleazy bar filled with cigarette smoke, the very suggestion of getting a tattoo, hell even the whiskey she just downed like it was a Coke. But she didn't care, for once she was going to do the unexpected, the impulsive.

"I was joking about the tattoo, you know." Ed plucked the solid, heavy glass from her fingers, staring at it in brief wonder. "I mean, since you seemed so interested."

"I think it's a good idea." She was lying. Special Agent Scully thought this was an insane idea, getting drunk in the middle of seedy Philadelphia and getting tattoos, plying herself with liquid courage. But Dana didn't care. She thought it was reckless, freeing...brilliant.

Ed nodded slowly, something of a sympathetic smile flickering to life for a moment. "You aren't what I expected, Dana, not at all."

"Really?" Where did that sultry note come from? A slow grin spread as she reached for the glass from Ed, setting it down before her and nodding towards the bartender to fill it again. "What did you expect out of me?"

More of the golden brown liquid filled it, almost syrupy, reminding her briefly of her father and his poker games and sipping the dregs of his whiskey glass when her mother wasn't looking.

"I don't know, you seemed so put together?" He laughed at his own words and she did as well. "You came into the shop in your suit, with your perfect hair, looking so business-like. I was surprised to see you there, really."

"And yet, you spoke to me." Her fingers wrapped carefully around the glass, raising it to her lips, sipping this one more slowly as she savored the alcohol and the sinful thrill that crept along her tongue. "Why?"

"I don't know." He her savor the drink on her tongue before swallowing it. "Perhaps, because I knew how you felt standing there."

"Knew how I felt?" Scully felt her temperature raise fever bright. "You don't know me at all."

"But I do, in a way." He smiled, soft and slow and mysterious and she felt a small part of her brain melt at that. He wasn't a bad looking guy, this Ed Jerse, not for a corporate America paper pusher.
Perhaps he was a tad ragged around the edges, a bit worn, but he was attractive enough. He didn't strike her as the type to normally hang in parts like this. He should be the sort who was at home with a family, perhaps the two children she'd seen in that burned photograph. There was a story there, and Scully wanted to find out.

"That picture in your room, the one of the two children. Are they yours?"

Bingo. The smile slipped faintly and he busied himself with the cocktail napkin he was twisting around and around on the shiny bar. "Yeah, my kids. They live with their mother."

"You're divorced." It was a statement, not a question. It explained the desperation that seemed to surround poor Ed, the hurt wariness she sensed in him just beneath the surface.

"Just finalized last week." Ed waved down the bartender, pointing towards Scully's glass indicating he would like one as well. Misery certainly likes company, especially when drinking. "It was what Cindy wanted."

Despondent wasn't the word to describe Ed as he accepted his drink and took a long pull from it. "We married just out of college, again, Cindy's idea. I wanted to wait, but she wanted her white picket fence. Whatever she wanted I gave her. I worked my ass off to do it. I took this job as a stockbroker, busted my ass to get her the house out in the suburbs, nice little neighborhood. I gave her the happy, perfect life she wanted. But it didn't come for free? I had to work for it. But she said I worked too much, I didn't spend enough time with the kids, I didn't pay attention to her or her needs."

His frustration spilled, hot and angry across the bar between them, a wound still seeping and gaping. "I did it all for her and yet it wasn't good enough. So, one day last year, she kicks me out. Says I don't deserve to be a husband and father and says she's already hired a lawyer. Before I could say anything, she had it done. Half of everything I have and I don't even get to see my kids unless she says its all right."

With a bitter laugh, he downed half of the potent alcohol in a gulp, not nearly as impressive as Scully's first whiskey, but still enough to leave him gasping and clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry for you." She murmured when he had caught his breath, earnestly apologetic. The raw hurt was clear and brutal in its intensity. Was this how the ends of relationships looked?

"Yeah, well..."

He shrugged, cheeks reddening furiously as he stared into the depths of his glass. "I hadn't meant to tell you that, not exactly impressive to a girl on a first date."

"I'm glad you did," she replied and found she was. Far from making Ed seem like a desperate loser, as he feared, it made him seem like an ally. He was a compatriot in pain. He was in that place too, that transition, looking at everything he had done with his life and wondering had he done the right thing after all.

"So what's your story?" He flipped on her, finally looking up, bold-eyed as he leaned back in his seat. "You said you were going in circles, worshiping men like your father over and over again, caught in the endless cycle of controlling figures who you adore, before you rebel."

His gaze flickered to the whiskey in her hand. "So what has you rebelling now?"

This was getting very, very dangerous, she breathed, as she suddenly was very aware of Ed's knee pressing between the two of hers in the cramped space, his fingers resting within grazing distance
of her knuckles around her glass. She felt for a moment as if she couldn't breath, her chest constricting with the weight of alcohol and attraction and the anger she felt right now as Mulder's dismissiveness, his sarcastic words, his assumption that she didn't know how to do her job as an FBI agent.

"There is this man I work with. He is brilliant, there is no other way other way to describe it. He's scarily intelligent, insightful, a man of great passion, of boundless faith. He's a good man, really he is, but…"

"But he also sounds sort of intimidating, if you ask me." Ed's fingers inched ever closer to hers.

Mulder was frightening, on so many levels. "He is, some might even say dangerous."

"So why do you work with him?"

"I was assigned." Mulder's hurled accusation now fell from her lips and it fit. "His work is considered by many where we are at as being unconventional, and I was supposed to bring a measure of reason to it all. And I do, or at least I try, but it's so easy to become caught up in his whirlwind and thrown far off course."

"And he doesn't care that you are caught up in it?" She could see the growing disapproval on Ed's face and surprisingly it pleased Scully seeing it. How many times had she yelled at her brother for saying those sorts of words, rushing to Mulder's defense? It sounded so different coming from a total stranger.

"It's not that he doesn't care," she replied quietly, stinging with guilt despite her thrill at Ed's sympathy. Mulder cared. Had she forgotten Donnie Pfaster and Gerry Schnauz, let alone Duane Berry? "But I think sometimes he just assumes that I will go along with it forever, go along with every one of his crazy schemes and half-baked theories and that I won't ever call him on it."

Her glass moved towards her lips again, drowning out the small voice in her head that was calling her traitor. "Take for instance what we've been working on of late. He had some total stranger come up to him feeding him a story, a complete line, it sounded like it was straight out of a cartoon, and he bought it hook, line, and sinker. But he runs off on some HR enforced spiritual journey and dumps this whole thing in my lap, actually expecting me to take it seriously and do all the crazy work for him. But when I look into it, it turns out to be something else entirely. So, I pass it off to the appropriate people up the chain. He assumes I've done something wrong, ignoring the fact I'm perfectly capable at my job."

"And why would he assume you don't know what you are doing?" Ed sounded so understanding, so in tune with where she was? She swallowed hard. Everything in the room had taken on a flare like haze to it.

"I think he assumes that I don't understand things the way he does. I think he assumes that I will just give him what he wants and step aside and meekly pick up the pieces because its what I've always done. I think he assumes he can run off and continue doing hair-brained things because I always allow him to get away with it. And so it goes, over and over again, the same old story, the same old song and dance."

"The endless circles, over and over." When had he begun to lean in so close? His cologne smelled faintly from his skin, and it suddenly occurred to Scully in a half-embarrassed sort of way how long it had been since she had physically ever been intimate with anyone. Why had that thought occurred to her? She flushed, staring into his bright eyes, wetting her lips nervously with a whiskey soaked tongue. It had been so long since she gave into attraction. Ed knew. Ed got it, working so
hard for someone else, giving him or her what he or she wanted, only to have him or her take it out of you again and again….

"Dana," he murmured, breath fanning her cheek. "That tattoo, if you don't want…"

"No," she replied without thought, without stopping for a second to even hesitate. If she hesitated she would fail. She tipped back her tumbler with the last of her drink, finishing the glass and setting it down with a hard thud. "Take me there, Ed. I want to do it, just like you. I want to mark this moment. This is the moment when I stop going in circles. This is the moment when I do something for me and stop letting those moments in my life slip by."

"Is it?" Surprisingly he was the voice of reason here. "Are you sure you are doing this to mark a moment, or is it really just you sneaking downstairs to get your mother's cigarettes and hoping you don't get caught, just to prove to yourself you can be your own person?"

"This is for me." No reasoning now, not in this, she was tired of reason. "Just take me down there, please, Ed."

For a moment, he looked as if he would refuse her, but it passed. He rose slowly, holding out a hand to her, taking her fingers in his. Her heart galloped in her throat as she stood, watching as he tossed two twenty-dollar bills on the table and quietly placed his fingertips in the small of her back, the place that Mulder's hand always rested. She flinched, then relaxed at his gentle leading, his prodding towards the door.

"Here's to fresh starts." He leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"And to ending cycles," she replied, desperately ignoring her nerves as she stumbled out to the freezing, January sidewalk.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just saying, I have been known to be in a funk and make poor decisions over a glass of whiskey or two. It happens to a lot of us.
Ouroboros

Chapter Summary

In which Scully faces the morning after.

Scully's eyes flew open into bright sunlight and she almost immediately wished she hadn't bothered with the effort. What had hit her?

Groaning, she reached behind her, beneath the shirt she was wearing -not hers, she noted - to the bandage taped to her back. Thick gauze covered a patch of skin at the small of her back and she thought hard as to why it was there. She didn't remember going to the hospital last night. What had she done? And why did her head pound with the throbbing of a thousand elephants running through her temples?

Then she remembered.

In a haze of whiskey and cigarette smoke she recalled the divvy bar with Ed Jerse, the man she met in the tattoo parlor. She had convinced him to take her back to the parlor, to get a tattoo of her own, something to symbolize this moment, the one where she took back her life. What had she been thinking? She rolled across the too-soft mattress and sat up to glance around the small, dingy room, looking for anything resembling a mirror. One long, thin one hung on the closet door, an inexpensive one with a plastic fame. She rose from the bed unsteadily, feet feeling thick and heavy as she stumbled up to it, turning just enough to see the pale expanse of white skin just above her tailbone. She hitched up the thin, white Oxford shirt and began to peel back the bandaging as carefully as possible.

She hadn't imagined it. She had gotten a tattoo. It was like some horrible story Melissa would tell after one of her rambles, a drunken night and some Celtic symbol in an embarrassing place. Scully hadn't ever planned on a tattoo, really, and certainly not this one. It was a perfect circle centered on her spine, an ouroboros, the serpent swallowing it's own tail. It mocked her, laying bright red against her skin, still swollen and puffy from the repeated passes of the tattoo needle. She fingered it quietly, wincing at the raw feeling as she let the foreign shirt drop over it, smoothing the fabric over her slim hips.

What had possessed her? Her cheeks flushed red at her reflection as she recalled straddling the tattoo artist's chair, the burning sensation of the needle scraping her flesh, the pain and pleasure of the prick of it. Shame and childish delight mingled as she recalled the tactile sensation of the tattoo, the mild horror of knowing she was doing something wrong and yet the thrill, and if she admitted it, the arousal of doing something so liberating. Had it really turned her on?

It must have. She hadn't gone to bed alone last night. She spun back to the bed, the one that had been occupied with Ed when she fell asleep. She didn't recall him getting up, but there was a dent on the other pillow and a rumple to the bedclothes on the other side. Dear lord, she realized with a half-shameful grin, girlishly giggling as she returned to the bed and crawled beneath the blankets again the chill of the room. She'd gone and had random sex with a perfect stranger last night. When was the last time she'd done something like that? College?

The prim and proper side of her was horrified. Dana Scully didn't do anything without weighing
But she ignored the rational horror, taking a certain triumphant pride in her moment of wild disregard for responsibility. She hadn't planned on going to bed with Ed last night. She'd had a lot to drink and the release of endorphins and adrenaline from the tattoo hadn't helped matters. She had stumbled to Ed's tiny apartment nearby, shivering in the rain and cold, feeling jubilant, changed. She felt like a new person had been born out of the fire of pain and whiskey, a person who wasn't tied to the guilt and responsibilities of Special Agent Scully. To Ed she was just Dana, a doctor, a woman who he had met at a tattoo parlor, a woman he thought pretty and desirable.

Ed said he'd sleep on the couch. She said she would check his scorched tattoo. They had somehow ignored both intentions, lips meeting in a heated, needy kiss that quickly grew into fevered moans and desperate groping. They tumbled into his tiny room, not caring that he had only just recently dissolved his marriage or that she hadn't been in a proper relationship in years. It had been fevered and rash, and she had loved every minute of it, relished the painful pleasure of half-forgotten sexual release as Ed cried her name into the dingy darkness. Not Scully - Dana, her first name, the person she really was.

Well, Mulder, she wondered smugly to herself, what would he say about her date now? Not that she would tell him of course, frankly it was none of his business if she had a one-night stand with anyone. As if Mulder could talk. She remembered well the laundry list of women who called their office looking for him, not to mention the speculative looks from pretty, young secretaries that followed him down the hall. When first they met, Mulder had his way with lovely young women whenever he wished, and she had said nothing about it. He could hardly judge her for doing something that he himself had done countless times at one point in time in their partnership.

Besides she reminded herself, she was a new Dana Scully, a different Dana Scully, one who wasn't beholden to Fox Mulder and his opinions for anything she did in her life anymore. Perhaps she would tell him, just to bring the point home. Would he roll his eyes and immediately look for ways to tear it down, or would he simply sniff in disapproval and shove another case at her and vow to never have her go on a fact-finding mission by herself again? Let him bitch and moan! She was going to enjoy this. Take that for his spiritual searching, Dana Scully had went in search of herself and found she was a sexy, wanted woman.

She rolled over, the mattress springs creaking as she wrapped arms around the pillow Ed had used in the night, wondering briefly where he had gotten to so early in the morning. What would she say to him, she wondered, with a foolish grin. Thanks for the rocking night? She snorted into the pillow at the thought, but sobered as she wondered in all seriousness just how she would face a man she had a one-night stand with? It wasn't something Scully was familiar with as an adult. What was the protocol for that sort of thing? In college, usually one or the other of you woke up and sobered, realized you were late for class, and rushed off with hurried apologies and promises of phone calls that would never come. But Ed was too fragile emotionally for that sort of thing. Christ, he was fresh off a divorce that had broken his heart. He didn't know when or if he would see his kids again, and here she was rolling into town with a gripe against her partner, looking for a quickie as way to prove to herself that she wasn't caught in the endless cycle of the personal relationships in her life. She had taken the opportunity to use a broken man to fulfill her own personal gratification.

And childish pleasure suddenly gave way to clawing guilt.

Ed had asked her at the bar, before they made their way to the tattoo parlor, if all of this wasn't really just her smoking her mother's cigarettes. He had laid it on the line for her, confronted her with the fact that all of this, the tattoo, him, all could be her way of doing something she knew Mulder would not approve of in the hopes of getting caught, in the hopes of proving to herself she
could be her own person, and she had ignored him. She had known then what she was doing and he had too. And still he had done it. Perhaps there was something to be said about loneliness and pain. It allowed you to go along with the humiliation of being used, even when you knew what was going on. Perhaps in his own way Ed had been doing what she herself was doing, trying to lose himself in a moment with someone and not thinking about the rational or reasonable. It didn't mean she feel any less responsible at this moment.

The endless cycle of her life, it was happening all over again. Scully buried her face into the pillow, growing with horrified frustration. She had fell right into it, like she always did. She had used Ed not for liberation at all, but because of the loss of control she felt, the growing sense that she was being swallowed by Mulder's quest. She hadn't freed herself from the endless cycle of her relationships. She had merely just taken the next logical step in the pattern. She was no freer now than she was two days ago, instead the circle was just swallowing her further down into it, consuming her whole.

In the distance in the cold, chilly apartment, a knock sounded at the door, firm and intrusive in the silence. Was Ed there to open it? Scully rose, frowning as she opened the bedroom door. No Ed, in fact the apartment was empty. Why was she alone? The knock continued, insistent on the thin pine. She grabbed her slacks, easing them on over her still sore, raw skin, and hurried to the door to answer it.

A fine mess you have gotten yourself into, Dana, she sighed, brushing her bed-tousled hair out of her eyes.
"Where is she?"

The dull, throbbing headache Scully had nursed for the last six hours flared in intensity as Mulder's demand rang over the insistence of the nursing staff that they couldn't just let him barge back there without permission. Let the brave nurses of St. John's Medical try and stop Fox Mulder when he was in this sort of mood, Scully thought dourly, as he snapped to anyone who would listen that he was her partner and her emergency contact and that he was going to see her despite them. There was no difference in Mulder's behavior towards medical professionals from when he was healthy to when he was the patient. If anything his lack of medication to sedate him made him worse.

Scully had tried to convince the nurses at St. John's that it wasn't necessary to call Mulder into this. But the word "concussion" slipped into the conversation with her doctors and she had little choice in the matter. They insisted she call someone to inform them of her whereabouts, and the choice boiled down to her mother or her partner. She wasn't about to explain to her mother why it was she had nearly been killed having a one-night stand with a psychotic murderer, not that she was looking forward to explaining this to Mulder any more.

Jesus, Dana, what have you gotten yourself into?

The door to her room stood open and Mulder's dark head peered around it cautiously, as if wondering if she were awake. She blinked back at him, silent as he shuffled in with the windblown look of having run for the nearest plane without even bothering to pack. There was an air of frantic worry he quickly suppressed under grim tension. He looked her up and down in her hospital bed, taking in at a glance the scrapes and bruises, a nice one blossoming on her cheekbone. He quirked one dark eyebrow silently at her like a disapproving father, meeting her resolved gaze silently.

"I have some bumps and bruises and they kept me observation regarding a possible concussion. Otherwise I'm fine." She answered the unspoken question bluntly, feeling no further need to explicate the situation.

"So I heard." Mulder studied her once more with his measuring, intense gaze, the one that left her feeling naked and exposed in front of him. Considering her activity of the past few days, she felt the inexplicable need to pull up her covers around her thin, hospital gown and sink into the rock hard mattress of the hospital bed. But she did neither, refusing to turn from his glare as he pulled up the rickety chair of chrome and vinyl beside her bed, wrapping himself in his overcoat as he settled.

"I tried calling you this morning when I heard no follow up regarding the case. You weren't at your hotel."

"You called my hotel?"

"Given the circumstances, Scully, do you really think you get the right to righteous indignation over this?" He sounded so pompous, as if she really were a child. She snapped her mouth shut,
unable to formulate a reasonable response, turning her hot face towards the hands twisting in her lap.

"So I tried calling your cell. It was off. I tried calling the airport to see if you had booked a flight. Nothing. And just when I get worried and began thinking I needed to start calling the police, they call to inform me that my partner was taken to the hospital after being assaulted by a man who is suspected in the murder of one of his neighbors in his apartment building." Mulder leaned back sullenly in the chair that ill fit his tall frame. "Which makes me wonder, if my partner was sent to Philly to follow up on a case involving sightings in Russia of UFO's, how is she involved in a Philadelphia PD murder case? I was hoping you could perhaps enlighten me on this one?"

"It was a chance encounter. It wasn't anything to do with your precious case."

"A chance encounter? You're date?" He bracketed the idea of "date" with his fingers in imaginary quotation marks, drawing the word into a sneer. Cold humiliation curdled in her gut, wondering if she hadn't made the wrong decision after all calling Mulder over her mother.

"I met Ed yesterday. He seemed nice enough. We went out for drinks. I suppose most grown adults would call that a date." The two operative words in that sentence being "grown" and "adults," two concepts that hardly seemed to apply to Mulder at this moment.

"Ed? I see." His words dripped with condescension. "So you went out for drinks not realizing that he was a man on the edge of a psychological breakdown?"

"I'm sorry, Mulder, he wasn't wearing his crazy t-shirt yesterday!" Scully finally snapped, her weariness and aching head coupling with her guilt and shame, breaking what little patience she had left at this point. "You would think that I'd have seen all the signs of an impending psychotic break, but perhaps I'm just inured from it working with you for so long."

It was a cheap shot, but an effective one. Mulder looked stunned for a moment, surprised at her comeback, eyes narrowing. "From what the detectives on the case are telling me, you're damn lucky that you figured it out when you did, else you could have been murdered and incinerated and no one would have been the wiser till I'd started putting out missing persons reports looking for my partner."

"It didn't get that far, stop being melodramatic!" She was tired of this. Couldn't he have at least waited till she was back in DC before he started demeaning her?

"Melodramatic? That's nice, Scully! Perhaps that's what I would have used to explain to your mother what happened?" It was his turn for a low blow and he took it. It irritated the hell out of her.

"Mulder, I went on a date and it went badly. Can we leave it at that?"

"I don't know, Scully, I'm not sure we can. I don't now how many more phone calls I can get about my partner nearly getting herself killed at the hands of strange men. I'm starting to wonder if you aren't getting off on being victimized by people who like to take advantage of you, let you loosen up that tough, G-woman exterior of yours."

If she could have reached him at that moment she would have slapped him right across his condescending face. "Is that what you think this was about?"

The words were low and dangerous and in an instant Mulder realized he had done something very, very wrong. But he was angry too, and not ready to concede the point. "Damn it, Scully, what the
hell am I supposed to think? You've been shitting on me for months and now you aren't even taking our work seriously. You barely took this case and then when you did you dump it off on the Philadelphia field office and declare it inconsequential so you can get some cheap romance with a local whack job."

"And did it ever occur to you that whether or not I do go find 'cheap romance' from a local 'whack job' it may not have a damn thing to do with your precious X-files?"

There was steel in her now, ice forming rock hard in her words. She didn't need this. She didn't need him, not after all of this. She wasn't going to take Mulder's indignation lying down. "For once this was about me, Mulder, and the fact that I wanted to get out and have some grown up time."

"Grown up time, right." He got the implication and he didn't appreciate it. "Grown up time with a man who had a nervous breakdown and killed a woman, nearly killed two."

"At least he's not chasing after thin leads on alien spaceships to give into his wish fulfillment regarding his missing sister." She shot her response back at him with deadly accuracy, pleased when it hit its mark. He paled visibly and she felt smug about it.

"Right!" Mulder's jaw snapped shut so hard she was shocked he could get the syllable out. "That's why I had to come and save your ass yet again?"

Yet again? He could go to hell!

"I don't recall me asking you to save anything! You were called at the hospitals insistence. If I had my way, I would have gone home and you'd have been none the wiser. I don't need a savior, Mulder. I certainly don't need you adding me to your list of private burdens so you can carry on your personal cause. I'm not a footnote in your crusade, nor am I your clean up boy, and I'm certainly not your whipping child to punish when I don't do the work to your satisfaction. I'm tired of sitting here letting my life pass by, watching while everyone else takes those chances that I give up to chase after you on one more case, one more lead. And if I'm not doing that, I'm sitting at home, trying to hold down the fort with our boss and whoever else is pissed off at you at the moment and praying to God you aren't dead somewhere on some train track or iceberg."

She was on a roll now, the suppressed resentment of months now pouring out of her in a spasm of release. "You carry on as if I have nothing invested in the X-files, that just because I was assigned means that you get to dictate them because this is your life. You live, eat, breath, sleep these cases, and perhaps I don't. Perhaps I want to have a life outside of all of this. But that doesn't mean this work means less to me, it just means I for one have my priorities straight. And I recognize that I don't want to do this forever, I don't want to be this forever. I don't want to be defined by being 'Scully' forever."

Silence. Her words stopped, and there was a horrible, aching silence that hung frozen between them. If she had dropped a bomb in this room at the moment, she didn't think she could have created the sort of devastation she saw laying there between them. She thought of Ed at the bar, the look of broken hopelessness over his lost marriage, his ruined home. She had wondered if that was what the end of a relationship looked like. She was seeing something of that now on Mulder's bleak, dumbfounded expression, and she wondered again just what had she done.

"So….Dana?" He purposely used her first name, a soft murmur in a ragged voice. "Tell me how you really feel."

She would have smiled if she could. "I believe I just did."
She remembered her father once told her that catharsis was good for the soul, but in this moment, Scully couldn't believer her soul would ever recover from this. She was fairly certain she just shattered Mulder's. It was necessary, they needed this, she was trying to believe that.

And into the ringing silence that enveloped them a welcome interlude broke in. "Agent Scully?"

She turned from her partner's recriminations to the small, mousy woman at the door with the friendly smile and bright, pink scrubs. The nurse seemed oblivious to the tension in the room, or at least chose to ignore it as she busied herself to the bed to check on Scully's vitals and duly record them.

"I just got your blood work back from the labs at your request. I had the doctor take a look, he agreed with your assessment, it seems that the dye they used on your tattoo contained trace amounts of ergot in it. Not enough to do any real harm, but it would sure make you feel loopy!" She laughed, blind to the disappointment her news brought Scully.

"Not enough for a hallucinogenic experience? Hearing things, disrupting auditory function?"

"Well not enough to cause a complete psychotic break, not in his opinion, but he'd have to follow up with blood work from Mr. Jerse." She glanced nervously at Mulder before continuing. "The doctor said everything else looks all right for now. He warned to take it easy with the head, but you know that. And he did notice some irregularities with some of your white blood cell levels. You might want to get those checked out when you get back to DC. Could be nothing, maybe just an oncoming bug, but since you are a doctor, you know you can't ever be too careful."

"Thank you." She took the offered charts from the nurse, absently reminding herself to look them over later to see what it was the doctor meant. Obviously the woman didn't want to reveal too much in front of Mulder, not that it would matter now, not after everything she had thrown between them. If the nurse noticed, she politely ignored it. "The doctor has cleared you to check out whenever you are ready."

"Thank you," she murmured as nurse hustled out, leaving the two of them alone again. The skin of Scully's lower back itched where the tattoo lay, but she refused to rub it, and she also refused to meet the eyes she knew were boring into the side of her head. She instead pretended to busy herself with her charts, wishing to hell that there were more ergot in her system to explain all of this. At least then she wouldn't feel like the consummate fool.

"You got a tattoo?" Mulder tried to sound funny, to pull out his trademark dry wit, but it was thin and strained and by no means amusing.

"I don't want to talk about it." God knows she wished she didn't have it.

"Will you at least tell me what it is?"

"No," she replied without looking up. She shouldn't have called him in.

"What, did you get your new boyfriend's name tattooed in an embarrassing place?"

She silently snapped shut her folder, not deigning to give him the satisfaction of an answer.

"Did you fuck him?"

The words were tossed out carelessly, like a grenade lobbed from the hand of a child, the vulgar implications designed to humiliate and cut her. He was angry about this. Her personal life, her
business, and he was angry about her having a one-night stand with someone? To hell with him, he
couldn't have this too. With as much dignity as she could muster she braced her shoulder, raised her
chin, and turned coldly to his angry smirk.

"I believe that is none of your business, Agent Mulder. Would you kindly step outside? I want to
get dressed and go home."

His jaw twitched, his hazel green eyes hardened, but he nodded, ever so imperceptibly. In one swift
motion, he was out of the door in a swirl of his wool overcoat, slouching out into the hall, leaving
the door wide open behind him. If she wanted privacy she would have to create it herself.

This was going to change everything.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully come to an impasse.

The flight home from Philadelphia had been less than pleasant.

She had tried to feign sleep. It wasn't a total lie, Scully was exhausted, but it was much more an excuse to hide within herself. Not that she needed it. Mulder had hardly said two words to her the moment she checked out of the hospital. His distance was palatable, both emotionally and physically. She was surprised he didn't change his seat at the airport and try to sit as far away from her as possible. She'd at least managed to get a separate cab home. It was a sleepless night with the ugliness of the last few days haunting her scant dreams, marked sharply by the words she and Mulder exchanged in the hospital.

When she finally gave up on rest she drug herself to the comfort of her bathroom and spent long moments studying the tattoo on her skin. She had to admit it was nice work. The brilliant red of the ink stood out against her pale flesh, highlighted by the black line work and the flecks of gold and orange for highlights. Melissa would certainly have approved, and if her sister had been alive, perhaps she would have laughingly shared it with her. Instead it branded into her back, a mark of her shame, of the trap she had set up for herself and fell squarely into.

Scully knew she couldn't hide from Mulder or this mess forever. Cheerlessly, she dressed and sipped at her coffee, barely tasting it as she readied herself for the day. Physically she ached, her head still hurt from the attack, but it would pass. Emotionally she felt empty. Not even the glut of DC traffic hardly roused her as a car cut her off two blocks before the Hoover Building. Quietly, she parked and shuffled inside and down to the office. What would she find behind the door? Would Mulder meet her with stony silence or acerbic sarcasm?

For a long minute she stood there, hand at the doorknob, indecisive. Never before had she felt this nervous walking into their shared office. Her memory flashed to the very first moment she stepped into Fox Mulder's world, the excitement and the nerves. That had been before she had spun into his orbit, before she had felt trapped by him. She was still young and eager to please. She had wanted to prove to this brilliant and taciturn man she was after the same thing he was. Now she wasn't so sure she was.

Shoulders back she turned the doorknob, allowing the door to swing open. Her heart fluttered with nervous disappointment. Mulder wasn't waiting inside. He was in the building, that much was certain. His overcoat hung behind his desk, his computer monitor was on, but he wasn't about. She wasn't sure if she should feel relieved by that or not. It didn't take long to wait. Scully had no sooner put her things down than the elevator doors opened down the hallway and Mulder's long, determined steps sounded on the cracking linoleum. He burst in, business like, glancing briefly at her before stepping around and moving to the wall off files, paperwork in hand.

"Welcome back!"

It wasn't a friendly greeting. So it was to be sarcasm then. Scully hardly flinched as he turned from her, flipping through files as she wandered to his desk. "You look a lot better than you did in the
hospital, and congratulations for making a personal appearance in the X-files for the second time. It's a world's record."

She glanced briefly over to where he dug and notice him pull out the file with her name on it, slipping paperwork inside. Oh yes, she was an X-file now too, in case she had forgotten. How could she be foolish enough to ever believe she could escape all of this, to be anything more than another piece in Mulder's epic puzzle?

Mulder continued to ramble, but Scully hardly paid attention. She pulled up the chair in front of his desk. He was angry with her. Perhaps he had a bit of a right to be. Scully couldn't imagine that it was terribly pleasant getting the phone call from the hospital and Philadelphia PD, not after other occasions he had received such phone calls. And yet she'd received them as well, many more times, had flown to all manner of places hoping against hope Mulder was alive. So what was this really about? Was he really angry with her that she passed the case off to the Philadelphia field office? Or was he really that put out that she dared to go on a date while supposedly out on a case? Was he pissed off she was out having a life instead of chasing down his aliens for him?

Still sitting on the desk in front of her were the rose petals she had gathered from the Vietnam Memorial the other evening. Quietly she plucked them up as Mulder sat behind his desk, rubbing the roughness between her fingers. If she squeezed just a little they would shatter and crumble. It was how she felt in that moment, just a little pressure and she too would explode into dust.

"So…"

Mulder cleared his throat, dragging the silence out till she finally turned up to look up at his vague confusion. "All this because I've…"

He paused, searching for words. "Because I didn't get you a desk?"

Oh God!

She wanted to rage at him, to laugh at him, to roll her eyes and call him impossible. Did he really believe this was so simple? "Not everything is about you, Mulder. This is my life."

Did he not get that?

"Yeah, but it's my…"

He stopped, as if thinking better of his words, tried to say something else, and failing that he gave up completely, sighing in frustration. Instead he picked up a pen and twiddled it, staring absently at the rose petal in her fingers.

It was his…what? Scully watched him for long moments, wanting him to finish, wondering what response he could possibly have. It was what? His work? His life? She understood the X-files were everything to him, but that didn't mean that included her life in it. She had given enough to him and his cause, her sister's life, her family's respect, her friend. She wasn't about to give him any more, not even the satisfaction of guilt over this. Why couldn't he understand this? Her whole world was not Fox Mulder and the X-files. There were things she wanted and needed away from this office that did not include him. Perhaps he didn't get it because for Mulder there was nothing away from this office and his whole life included her and the X-files. Was this what pissed him off about all of this, that she would dare to want something beyond him when he had nothing else in his sad, lonely life? What did he expect out of her? They weren't lovers. They were partners and friends, albeit best friends, at least until recently. Just as it was silly for her to resent him going this mother's over the holidays, how could he hold it against her that she wanted something beyond this office, to be
taken seriously as an agent, to not be treated as a child who didn't know what she was doing, to be allowed to have a life beyond the confines of the X-files themselves?

"Look, the Dallas case? Do you want to take it?" Mulder broke the silence by reaching for the file he had dug out of the cabinets, waving it in front of her. Had he been talking about this? She didn't know she hadn't exactly paid attention.

"I don't know, Mulder, this always seems to be your show."

"Right." He set the paperwork down listlessly, staring a hole into the cream-colored paper. This was worse than she could imagine with him. They both were caught in limbo, unsure of how to proceed, wary that anything they might say would only worsen the situation and spread them further apart.

"I know this isn't all about me," Mulder finally murmured, not looking up from the file. "Don't you think every time I see you in another hospital bed I don't know that? I just don't know where all of this has come from? Why this has started? What I can do to fix it?"

His words panged her. The emotional void that had filled her all morning now began to fill with sorrow and regret. "I don't know if you can fix it. I don't know if I want you fixing anything."

"Right." His shoulder's slumped in frustration, fingers running through his hair. "So we are at an impasse?"

Funny, that turn of phrase, as if they were trying to negotiate anything. "I suppose we are."

Silence rang between them as they each stared at his desk, unsure of what to do about the broken pieces of their partnership, neither knowing how to make it right.
By Way of a Peace Offering

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder offers a peace offering as tribute.

It was her life and Scully could do with it what she wanted! That was what she kept telling herself. It wasn't making her feel any better.

Mulder took the Dallas case but without her. Against her sense of responsibility, he told her to stay, he could handle this alone. His admonition stung, but she didn't challenge him. He obviously needed time and space away to think. So she let him go and piddled around the office, pretending to study the blood work from Ed Jerse, trying to find out how a seemingly normal man could lose control so completely in his life. She should be asking herself that very same question.

Mulder returned a day later and had little to say on the subject. If it was a non-case and Scully strongly suspected it was judging by his silent, surly mood, he wasn't about to bring it up to her, likely because he didn't want to hear her tell him "I told you so." Not that she would waive it in his face right now. Another time, she might have. But even sitting in the office together, quietly going about their work was painful. Worse than eggshells, it was more like stepping barefoot on broken glass, each step cutting painfully, but neither willing to make a sound as it ground into open flesh. And so a week went by with no words between them.

The silence gave way to contemplation, at least, moments of reflection as Scully considered all that had passed not just in the last weeks, but months as well. She wanted to find the thread of where this all had started to go wrong, of where the two of them had begun to loose course with each other. Skinner had once said partnerships, like marriages, were work, and it occurred to Scully she had no reference to any other personal partnerships in her life to draw on. She'd never been married, her longest serious relationship had been with a man who had lied to her about all of it. The only other comparison she could draw was to her own parents and half of their marriage had been spent separated by duty and responsibility. Scully had no way of knowing if this was even normal in a partnership of any kind, if such rifts were common. Worse, she didn't even know how to fix the rift now that it was there.

She had told Mulder she wasn't sure if he wanted him to fix it, but the truth was she did. She tried to tell herself that this was her life, the sad, dirty little fact was that as much as she wanted her life to be beyond her work, she also loved it just the same. Even in the months she had been forced off the X-files and back to Quantico she had missed the challenge of it, the unanswered questions. She missed the stimulation of seeking answers for cases that no one else even vaguely understood. And she missed most of all her verbal sparring with Mulder, the give and take, push and pull of their two intellects. It was why she had forced herself back into his life when he wanted nothing more than to shut her out. She wanted to be included on that journey too.

What had changed in the three years since?

Scully of course knew what had changed. She could start with her abduction and move on to Melissa's death. She could bring up the number of times she sat in front of OPR over the last four years, or the indignity of being held in contempt of Congress and thrown in to prison for the first time in her life. She could then highlight each and every trip she took to find her partner in some
other distant location he had taken himself to in order to find some evidence, or chase some lead, often ending with a near death experience. This wasn't what she had signed up for years ago when she had left behind Daniel and her medical career.

The truth was still out there and Scully wanted to be at Mulder's side to find it. She was personally invested now. But she wasn't sure if she could carry the cost of it anymore, and that was what this was all about, ultimately, her indecision, the battle she was personally having with herself. Was she willing to give up her life for the quest Mulder found himself on? Could she let go of her own hopes and aspirations to see this through? The way things stood right now, Scully wasn't so sure she could.

"A cookie for your thoughts?" On her table appeared a paper wrapped chocolate chip cookie and a coffee and an apologetic looking Mulder watching her with cautious concern. A peace offering, at least in a Mulder sort of way, he had never been particularly good with apologies, but he tried.

"Thanks," she managed something of a smile for him as he wandered back to her desk. He had the speculative "I'm a psychologist, talk-to-me" look on today. After a week of indifferent, cold silence it was surprising and welcome. It was Mulder ways of trying to thaw the ice between them. She had to admit she was thankful he was the one making the first move.

"Just thinking about...things." She shrugged, trying to put on a happier face but not quite managing. "Thanks for the cookie!"

"Well, I figured chocolate and sugar were good ways of earning my way back into Dana Scully's good graces, at least momentarily."

"Not a tactic you've tried before, but I won't say no to it." Scully broke off a corner of cookie, nibbling it and remembering she was hungry after all. She'd skipped lunch. "Any particular reason you are plying me with baked goods?"

"Got a case I figured you would be an expert on, and I'd rather have you talking to me than glaring at me." He grinned in his lopsided, boyish fashion, turning on the charm, trying to make light of the situation. "Strange case of a missing body from a morgue and no explanation as to where it went."

"Body snatching is hardly an unusual crime. Disturbing, yes, but not unusual. What is your interest in it?"

"Pittsburgh PD called because this ranked on their 'weird shit' meter. They remembered the two of us from the Peacock family case a few months ago, so they sent it my way because frankly no one there wanted to deal with it."

"What, they haven't seen a dead body before?"

"No, I think it was the fact it was a dead, headless body they were disturbed with. In any case, I could use you on this." His smile dimmed, his tone contrite. "Look, I know I was a perfect ass in Philadelphia, and I'm sorry. I suppose I was caught a bit off guard by it all. And I don't mean to ever demean you, and yes I know your life is your own, but I can't handle headless bodies any more than the fine members of the Pittsburgh PD can, and my manly honor refuses to not take this case on the grounds I would swoon like a girl."

"Swoon like a girl?" She snorted lightly at his pleading, puppy dog eyes. God help her with that pout. "You know I'll do it, no cookie bribery needed."
"I don't want you to feel like I'm forcing you to do anything. I never did." All smiles and pleading eyes were gone, replaced by grave seriousness and a flicker of something Mulder wouldn't quite let her see. "You were assigned to this, but you've stayed out of choice, and I haven't forgotten for a moment what it's cost you. I'm asking you along because I need your insight. You can just as easily say no."

Guilt. He didn't mean to make her feel that way, she knew that, but still it reared up ugly, making her wince physically as she pushed the cookie aside. "I'll go, Mulder, I'm your partner. No bribes needed." She had stirred this pot, she knew that, and if he was willing to try and bridge across the divide between them, she could at least do this. "What's with all the weirdness in Pennsylvania anyway?"

She couldn't tell if the grin that spread across Mulder's face was one of relief of amusement. "Don't know, but I don't plan on building a summer home there anytime soon. Next flight for the Steel City leaves in two hours. Think we can head up there?"

"I suppose someone needs to be there for when you swoon." She sipped her coffee and watched quietly as he made the arrangements, and contemplated, not for the first time, just what role did she play in Mulder's life? And if she did decide to pursue her life instead of his quest, what would he do about it?
Blood and Guts

Chapter Summary

In which Scully makes Mulder do the one thing that grosses him out.

Scully knew she would go to hell for this.

She would never doubt that Fox Mulder was a brave man, a capable man, a very good shot, tougher in a hand-to-hand situation than she was, and God knows the man was fit. That being said, she knew that there was one thing Mulder could rarely ever handle, and that was the gore and vicissitudes of the human body. She'd seen Mulder stoically handle blood, gunshots, and the horribly mangled body of Mrs. Peacock in nearby Home, but ask him to stick his hand into a vat full of dismembered body parts, excised human tissue, used human blood, bile, and other excrements of the human body, and he might very well lose any semblance of cool he had all together. Which was exactly why she was asking him to help.

"Mulder," she called over her shoulder, up to her armpits in human, biological waste. Her voice rang sweet and nonchalant as her short arms swirled hopelessly at the top of the mess. "I think I'm going to need your help. Your arms are longer."

Mulder looked as if she had just asked him to stick his arms into the mouth of a ravenous lion. "You want me to do what?"

"There is more gear in the locker over there." She ignored the decided green look that tinged his disgusted features. Mulder's eyes widened briefly as it occurred to him she was serious, his head swiveling from the containment chamber to the lockers by the door, and back again, wide with disbelief. "You really want me to...you're not serious."

"Mulder, I'm 5'3 if I try really hard on a good day. You're six-foot-forever."

"Two...6'2." His jaw jutted mutinously.

"Mulder," she whined, half turning, the long gloves she wore covered in disgusting, decaying bodily fluids. "Seriously, you are the one who begged for me to come along with you to work on this case."

"Cause I don't do headless bodies, Scully, I don't do anything that requires me poking around in bits and pieces of humans that should be on the inside."

"That's what I'm around for?" Her eyebrows rose imperiously behind the facemask, but her mouth twitched as she resisted the urge to call him chicken.

"You went to school for this!" He nervously tapped away from the containment chamber, eyeing it as if it might explode human remains all over him. "I went to school to probe in serial killer minds, you went to school to probe in their guts, and this is how this partnership works."

"Right," Scully nodded slowly, pulling up as much guilt as she could lie at his feet without bursting into hysterical giggles. "We both have our places, I'm the one stuck in the morgue while you are out there doing the crazy stuff, I understand."
That sobered him quickly. "Scully, that's not what I meant…"

"I know my place here, Mulder, doing my science bit to support your theories." She sighed overdramatically, turning on tiptoes to dig back through the slime. "Your pet lab monkey."

"My pet…what!" She didn't need to see his face to see the surprised outrage. That was okay. He didn't need to see the grin splitting her face at the moment either. "Scully, I don't think…"

"Just because you are afraid at getting all squicky over a bunch of body parts."

"You said excised tumors, Scully. Nasty hunks of mutated flesh."

"There might be a missing finger or two in here, too." She rejoinded gaily, paddling through the mess. "Oh, perhaps there is an eyeball!"

"You are a sick, disgusting woman, Dana Scully."

"Well I do regularly look at human entrails for fun and profit," she winked back over her shoulder at him, knowing he would cave soon. "Please? If we find the body we can wrap up this case, and you don't have to look or poke at another bit of human remains for the rest of time as long as I'm your partner."

"Is that a promise?" He looked as if he didn't believe her.

"Cross my heart, hope to die." She grinned as he reluctantly shuffled over to the locker, taking off his suit coat and tie as he went and petulantly glaring back at her as he reached for an apron and long, rubber gloves.

"I hope you know I'm doing this for you," he groused, slipping on each piece of gear as if he were preparing himself for a knightly battle. On went the apron, up went the gloves, and he reached for a facemask, his gloved hands clumsily fitting it over his face and dark hair. All he needed now was a sword and steed and he could take on that pile of human medical waste. Scully just did bite back a peel of laughter as he straightened his shoulders, took a deep breath, and slowly, ever so slowly, made his way hesitantly to the edge of the chamber. He paused now and again as if expecting a rotting, human hand to leap out at him from the depths and try to strangle him to death.

"I promise you all these bits are dead." Scully felt her voice warble with the effort of not laughing out loud at him.

"That's not reassuring at all," he snapped, climbing up beside her, his arms resting on the lip of the chamber. "God, the smell."

"How else are rotting human remains supposed to smell?" She had hardly noticed. To be honest, she had smelled and seen much worse than this in their work on the X-files, but she hardly mentioned that to her already squeamish partner. As it was he was gingerly digging one hand into the muck, his face turned away as he squeezed his eyes shut, a grimace of absolute and total disgust all over his face.

"You so owe me big time for this," he yelped, opening his eyes and unwillingly plunging in the other hand.

"I owe you nothing! Do you know how many dead bodies I've cut up for you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were a doctor of pathology. Wasn't that what you were supposed to do?" He manfully dug and then shivered as his fingers worked through the pile.
"So I ask you to look for one." She was unrepentant as she too continued to scoop and feel. They worked in silence for several long moments, she grunting now and again with the effort of trying to actually reach into the vat as it pressed into her chest, he groaning with abject disgust and horror every time he came across a vaguely recognizable body part.

"This is by far the most disgusting thing I've ever had to do in my life!" He tossed the tip of what looked like a finger at the far wall where it pinged and fell back into the sludge with a soft, wet plop.

"You had my do an autopsy on an elephant once. I was standing in a cave of elephant meat and entrails cutting out the poor creatures uterus."

"They got all the icky bits out first!"

"And then I had to carry the uterus out to the exam table. It was nearly as big as I was."

"Okay, that was sort of funny."

She tossed a blob of some scrap of flesh at his arm, causing him to yelp and skitter to the side.

"I can't help you are short like a gnome, Scully, everything is bigger than you."

"Most especially your head," she growled, not for the first time cursing the luck of her genetics making her the most vertically challenged in her family. "I'm big enough to kick you ass."

"And I still have the bullet scar to prove it." He shifted his shoulder in mock pain, a pout forming behind his plastic mask.

"And you'll have another if you keep this up," she replied, unrepentant. "Dig deeper, you're only stirring it up."

"Gees, woman, I am digging!" He indeed reached further in, nearly up past where the rubber protected his dress shirt. She could imagine the hysterics if anything got on it. "This is payback, isn't it?"

"Payback?" She too dug, reaching down the side of the vat and hitting a random bone. Her fingers grasped it hopefully, but it turned out to only be the severed part of someone's gangrenous leg, obviously not the whole of Leonard Betts.

"For Philadelphia?" He didn't look at her as he reached further, still coming up with nothing. "For the way I acted there."

Of course! Scully stifled a sigh. She had a life crises, Mulder assumed he was the cause of it. And he was, in a way, but he wasn't. He was involved, and yet it wasn't just about him, it was about... God, Scully wasn't even sure what it was about. "Mulder, all of this...this isn't all just about you."

She paused in her digging, turning to watch him as he steadfastly worked, keeping his attention focused on the dead body parts and not her. "I just feel overwhelmed is all. As if life is slipping past me and I don't even get say in it. And it's not just the work, or you, or any of this."

"I don't help matters much though." He smiled tightly, but still didn't look at her.

"Well, no. But I don't say no either."

"You could, you know. say no."
"I know that." Logically she did. But she never could bring herself to do it. She sat there in the shadow of Mulder's bright passion, following it, worshipping it, admiring it. She wanted to be a part of that too. But she was just as equally afraid that by doing so she would lose herself in it, she would lose her identity as an independent person. She couldn't ever be Mulder. But she wanted to be there with him on this quest. She just didn't know how stand there along side him and yet remain true to herself yet. And that was what frustrated her the most.

"So why did you sleep with Ed Jerse?" He tossed the question out quietly, hesitantly. Perhaps he expected her to tell him once again it wasn't his business, and a part of her wanted to. Why should Mulder care whom she had intimate relations with? But she found herself relenting under his meekness.

"Well I at least didn't sleep with a girl who thought she was a vampire," she teased, earning a wan smile out of him. "I don't know, Mulder, how do these things happen? A little too much to drink, endorphins kick in, whatever was in that tattoo ink. I suppose it had been so long." She laughed, shrugging as she swirled a finger in some sort of viscous fluid. "Seriously, it's been three years since Ethan. I'm no nun, Mulder, for all that I'm Catholic. And I was just tired of being seen as the lab monkey, the partner, the agent, the friend, the daughter. It was nice to just have someone physically want me for a night."

"I see." Mulder's answer was noncommittal, but she could see him processing it in that quick mind of his all the same.

"Do you?" She raised an eyebrow at him questioningly.

"We all have desires, Scully, the need to break from the norm, for release. You've seen my porn collection. Can I cast stones?"

"No, I suppose not." She laughed, realizing in that moment the absurdity of this situation. Here they were, up to their elbows in blood, guts, body parts, and other bodily fluids, discussing life choices and personal angst. Why did they always have these conversations over bits of human remains?

"When you were going through your secretary pool back in the day, was that why?"

He turned to her, surprised, amusement and shock lighting in his eyes briefly before he smothered it with a cool shrug. "Part of it. I actually didn't sleep with a lot of them, a few. Most of them I just flirted with shamelessly and returned them chastely home."

"And the few you didn't?"

"Well...I was in a bad place at the time." He turned back to his work. "I suppose I was like you in a way at the time. I just wanted to do something, feel something other than where I was, and I reached out for the first physical comfort I could. But I told you why I stopped."

"I know." She remembered well that conversation, over another dead body on the Clyde Bruckman case. "I didn't know Ed had killed that woman, Mulder. I didn't know he had anything wrong with him. All I knew was that he was a sad, lonely guy in a bad place, like I was, and he got it. And he thought I was an attractive woman, not an FBI agent, not another one of the guys, just me. Hell, I didn't even tell him I was FBI." He had only found that out later. Her stomach lurched slightly at the thought.

"You are an attractive woman, Scully." Mulder frowned sideways at her as if she had suggested that she wasn't and he thought she was crazy for it. Of course he could have just been as
completely baffled about why they were having this conversation over the type of things they were currently digging through.

"I know that, but…well, you know." She flushed, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with this conversation and the turn it had taken. "I'm sorry I scared you with that. I didn't know, and it never occurred to me a simple date in Philly would go so wrong."

"Yeah, well like I said, this state is crazy. People seem to be losing heads and body parts around here." He held up an indescribable one for emphasis. "And I've had some horrible, horrible date stories. One night if you get me drunk enough I might even tell you some of them."

"Shouldn't take too long," she mumbled, returning to her work and ignoring his agitated glare.

Silence reigned for several long minutes as they perused the foul remains, and it took Mulder practically standing on top of the container to find at least part of what they were looking for. With undisguised disgust he pulled upwards through the mire. "I think I found the toy surprise."

With a soft, sucking nose the rounded, bald head of the unfortunate Leonard Betts popped into view, the skin now gray colored, the eyes rolled back, the lips blue and puckered. It was certainly separate from the body and very, very, very much dead.

"That's his head, where's his body?" Mulder cradled the man's skull in his hands like a grotesque bowling ball. At least he didn't drop the heavy mass back through the muck. He glanced around the containment chamber briefly, calculating its size. "There's not enough room in here. Maybe he didn't dispose of the body. Maybe he got it out somehow."

"Why did he take time to dispose of the head?" That hardly made any more sense.

"I don't know," Mulder admitted thoughtfully. "Maybe there's an answer here. Something we should check out."

"Well we already know how he died, in an automobile accident. What more is there to know?"

"Maybe nothing." He gingerly handed her the head of the poor unfortunate Leonard Betts. "But it's all we got to go on right now. You should see if you could find a place where you can examine Betts' head."

She stared down at the head in her hands. "While you do what?"

"Check out his house. I know how he died. I want to see how he lives." With far too much glee he began to strip off the detritus of their dig through the bio-medical waste.

He lives? She frowned down at the very deceased head in hand. "Lived?"

"Lived." He waved it off, already gratefully heading out the door.
Feeling Spooked

Chapter Summary

In which Scully spooks herself.

It wasn't as if Scully hadn't dealt with severed heads before. As a first year med student, one of the first assignments she had in her basic anatomy class had been to work on a severed head, to dissect it and catalogue each part. Every medical student of course had to pass through the fires of anatomy and dissection, but Scully recalled the nervous giggles and vaguely gray, wide-eyed looks of her fellow students as her group was presented with it's tray, the body-less head floating on the cold steal like some sort of horrific, Halloween practical joke. They had of course seen a dead body at that point of their studies, analyzed it, catalogued it, but there was something about just the head, stiff and cold, skin tinged blue, lips purple, that had been particularly off-putting. They had of course done their assignment, but they had all agreed afterwards it was vaguely horrifying in that dissection, something none of them had quite been able to put a finger on.

Now ten years later Scully could put a finger on it. A severed human head was just ooky. Perhaps ooky wasn't a strict, clinical term, but it was how she felt as she approached Leonard Betts, or what was left of him. Of course she had seen worse in her time as a pathologist, and really it wasn't as if she couldn't handle this autopsy. She laughed at herself as she changed into scrubs, washing her hands and slipping on thin, latex gloves. This was her payback for making Mulder dig through the biomedical waste earlier. She was now psyching herself out, allowing the chills to run up and down her spine, much as a child who convinces themselves there is a monster outside of their bedroom window or something trying to eat their toes under their bed.

The human head was relatively harmless, especially when detached from its body, but that was the problem. It was the fact that it was detached. It was the wrongness of a head without a body that struck her. Severed limbs hardly made her blink, but a severed head was alien and foreign, and it typical even made the most hardened pathologist grimace slightly. A severed head made death all too real, perhaps a trifle horrific. A whole body made it easier to ignore the ways and means that a person met their end, not so much when the head was removed from the body, torn off like the top of a dandelion. Ripped or shorn, it still spoke to the fragility of life, one freak accident, one swipe of a blade, and that was it. There was no coming back from a beheading.

And Scully realized that she was being completely stupid.

Honestly she was a grown woman, one who had done her fair share of autopsies, who had just spent an afternoon up to her elbows in blood, guts, and body parts, and here she was scaring over one severed head. Rolling her eyes at the reflection in the stainless steel paper towel dispenser, she turned to stare Mr. Betts in the face. Really he looked just like a normal guy, around her age, already bald, plain features, a guy she wouldn't notice off the street. His file had read that he was an EMT working a call when the ambulance had been sideswiped. What a shame, out there trying to do good in the world and one false moment and this happens.

Scully gathered her tools, picking through them and arranging them, half an eye on the head in front of her, noting it. She'd cleared it of the viscous fluids and other detritus of its sojourn in the bottom of the waste chamber; the only DNA on it now should be that of the unfortunate Mr. Betts.
Did he have any family? She couldn't remember if his file indicated it or not. No one was raising a horrified fuss yet over the missing body, so Scully guessed that there must not be one, or at least not one anyone had discovered yet. It was unfortunate, really. No one seemed to care, not even for the part of Betts they could find. She would have thought that at least the family would want this part of him to bury.

Carefully she picked up the head, stiff and heavy in her hands, and carried it over to the scale. Ten point nine pounds, standard for a human head. She took it off again, setting it to her worktable, reaching for her tape recorder as she shook herself lightly, trying to rid herself of the last of her willies. With stern efficiency, she began prodding the only remains of Leonard Betts she had, fingers probing his jaws, thumbs lifting his eyelids, looking for the standard signs of death that appeared on a corpse.

"Case number 226897, Leonard Betts," she intoned sternly into her recorder with what she hoped was a cool, professional manner. "As remains are incomplete, all observations refer to a decapitated head. Weight, 10.9 pounds. Remains show no signs of rigor mortis or fixed lividity."

For emphasis she prodded the skin and probed the loose tendons of Betts' jaw, neither totally stiff with death despite the long period since the accident happened. "Nor do the corneas appear clouded, which would seem inconsistent with the witnessed time of death…"

She glanced at the wall clock comparing it to the time she saw stated on the death certificate. "Nineteen hours ago."

Strange, she thought, but perhaps with a perfectly logical, medical explanation. She wouldn't know until she cracked out her scalpel and began the dissection.

"I'll begin with the intermastoid incision and frontal craniotomy, then make my examination of the brain."

Without thinking she raised the sharp steel to the area she wished to incise, pressing firmly into the flesh with a practiced hand, cutting against skin and bone. So familiar was she with the motion, she hardly had time to register the flutter of Betts' eyelids as they squinted, then popped open, nor the silent scream of his mouth as his jaw fell suddenly, his lips working into a quiet "o". It was so unexpected, so horrifying, that Scully found herself blinking at the unreality of this situation, her worst nightmares since medical school screeching to mind as her scalpel clattered from startled fingers. She skittered backwards from the table as she gasped.

"Oh God!" Her heart thundered in her ears gloved fingers rose to her cheeks. Betts' eyes had no focus as they blinked, still rolled into the back of his head. It was clear that even if the muscles were reacting, it wasn't to the outside stimulus of her knife cutting deeply into them. It couldn't be, after nearly a whole day removed from the body, Betts was as dead as could be. It could just be his muscles were reacting from some sort of internal stimulation, perhaps leftover electrical impulses arrested at time of death just now allowed to free themselves for whatever reason.

He couldn't really be alive without a body…could he?

Jesus, she scolded herself, she was letting Mulder's possibilities invade her reason. He was spooking her now and he wasn't even standing there to do it. Damn it all. Feeling foolish, she cleared her throat, cheeks flushed in the cool of the morgue. Seriously, Dana, she sighed, reaching for her scalpel once again. Ghost stories and her imagination getting the better of her, and it was only a severed head, not the first or the last she had ever seen.

Even if it was the first head she had ever tried to dissect that had this sort of reaction.
Scully shook herself, returning to her work, ignoring the flush of embarrassment as she moved about her work. She could never, ever tell Mulder about this. She would never hear the end of it! Never! Even if it did squick her out…just a bit.
He's Not Dead Yet

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder argues the possibility of human regeneration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*God put him here for a purpose. God means for him to stay, even if people don't understand.*

"You realize what she's saying, Scully?" Despite the biting cold of winter in gray, overcast Pittsburgh, Mulder turned on her, eyes bright with contained excitement. Scully had a fairly good idea of what he obviously thought Elaine Tanner was saying about her son.

"All it says about Leonard Betts is that he's good at conning his mother into believing that he's something he's not."

"You saw his body make-up! What man do you know of walks around like a giant mass of tumors? He's a walking impossibility!"

"I know what I saw!" She snapped, unsettled by the samples of the head they had found, riddled in every fiber with cancer. "All we know is that there was a head and missing body and some man working awfully hard to hide his identity."

She was not about to concede the idea that Elaine Tanner's son was able to grow back his arm, leg, head, or any other body part. It was too ridiculous, too far fetched, too…

"You are bothered as hell to admit that humanity could possibly regenerate itself."

"This isn't one of your cheap, science fiction movies. No one comes back from a missing head, else the French Revolution might have had a very different ending. Growing back an arm, a leg that I can see, but a head? That makes a person…"

"Immortal, I know." Mulder was awed by the idea. "You've seen all of the changes living in the nuclear age has wrought on the human body. The simple act of harnessing the power of an atom has altered thousands of years of human DNA development, cancer incidents are up, and none of this is mentioning the chemicals that we've developed in the last century that we've put in everything, from our clothing to our food. Humanity has an infinite ability to adapt, to change with the environment."

He paused, reaching up long fingers to Scully's head, capturing a stray lock of her hair blowing in the freezing, icy breeze. Her eyes flickered upwards as she tried not to jerk away from the unexpected contact, her cheeks pinking despite the cold. "What else is pale skin and red hair but human adaptations to their environment, genetics trying too force the body to live in the cold, dark northern winters."

His fingers let the strands of her hair slip through, torn away on the wind again as his hand lowered. Scully watched the action out of the corner of her eye, mouth dry and heart fluttering uncomfortably as somewhere in her brain all of Scully's logic and her reasonable argument flew off
in the breeze, drug right out of her head by the movement of Mulder's fingers. Of course it came slamming back though the minute he began to speak again.

"Why is it so unreasonable to imagine that if humanity can adapt to long, cold winters, it couldn't adapt to the chemicals and carcinogens our industry has pumped into out environment? This is Pittsburgh, Scully, the heart of steel country. What's to say that Betts isn't a product of his environment here, a genetic anomaly for sure, but one born out of his humanities genetic need for survival."

God, he could sound so sane and rational if he wanted to, so scientifically reasonable. "Mulder, this is science fiction, a theory stripped from one of your late night, black-and-white, cheesy 1960's movies. This isn't the fifty-foot woman here, nor is it giant ants, this sort of evolution would take centuries to create, not one generation."

"It's happened in nature though, hasn't it?"

Scully paused on the frozen sidewalk outside of Elaine Tanner's house, staring at her partner and not for the first time cursing his quick mind and eidetic memory in an argument. For those who chose to believe Mulder was simply a crazed rogue chasing after moonbeams and spaceships, they never got that he understood the intricacies of science as well as Scully did, sometimes he was even better versed in areas than she was. Perhaps his mind went down the speculative scientific route, but he wasn't completely off base with his reasoning. If one wanted to, they could see the logic in his reasoning, even if the outcome was as strange and weird as one would see in a movie.

"Perhaps it has happened in nature, but that doesn't mean that this is what is going on with Leonard Betts. I think it's much more likely we are looking at a situation where Betts is involved in an illegal body snatching and he's hiding his identity even from his own mother. My guess is that he's been at this for years. He used his position as an EMT to get access to bodies and sell them to medical schools and organ donation centers."

"I'd say you had half-a-theory if Michelle Wilkes hadn't seen Betts alive one moment and then after the accident saw him sans his head."

"How do we know that Michelle wasn't in on it? The accident report stated that she hadn't seen the light change when the accident happened. Who is to say that this wasn't an elaborate set up? Betts fakes his death so he can recreate a new identity."

"And he kills Michelle Wilkes because she's the only one who knows the truth?" Mulder raised doubtful eyebrows, shooting her a look that normally she reserved for him and some of his more colorful theories. "Scully, I know I reach for theories sometimes, but as an expert in conspiracies, even I think that is a bit of a stretch."

"And you would rather go with the idea that there is a man out there who is able to regenerate his head from his body?"

"I think it's possible given the evidence we have at hand. We have no evidence that Betts was involved in the trade of dead bodies or that Michelle Wilkes was helping him. But we do have evidence that the head identified as Leonard Betts was a walking, talking human being once with enough cancer in his body to make sure he was not walking and talking. I say that's the road of weirdness we follow, because strangely enough it makes much more sense to me at this moment than the idea that this is all a clever conspiracy to hide some illegal body snatching."

Of course it would, she wanted to snap, the weird always sounds more reasonable to you than the sane. She held up the key they found in Elaine Tanner's house, engraved with a number and
belonging to what they surmised was a storage locker. "Fine! I'm betting we'll find our missing body in this locker, Mulder."

"Betting?" Incredulity turned to speculation in a heartbeat, an enterprising gleam lighting in Mulder's hazel green eyes, a slow smile pulling on his full lips. "So how much are you willing to bet?"

Scully paused, smirking up at him. "What do you want?"

"I hear there is this place here in town that puts the fries on their sandwiches, called Primanti's."

"Mulder, I'm not buying you that artery clogging crap."

"A bet's a bet, Scully, and you paid it out on the table." He wasn't about to let it go and Scully could see visions of horrible, fatty sandwiches dance in his brilliant head. "If we find our headless body in the storage unit, then I will buy you the healthiest food we can find in Pittsburgh."

"And if we don't?"

"Then I get my sandwich, with a milkshake," he announced triumphantly.

Lord, she breathed. "Could you at least eat something resembling a vegetable with it?"

"Pickles are vegetables," he announced confidently. "So do we have a bet, Scully?" He waggled one dark eyebrow, bouncing on the balls of his feet, delighted he was winning his way in this. Honestly, she sighed, worse than a toddler.

"Fine, we have a bet." He seemed oblivious to the icy stare of her glare or the irritated twitch of her mouth. "One day, Mulder…"

"When they start growing salad that tastes like bacon, maybe I'll consider it." He snatched the silver key from her fingers before turning towards their car. "Come on, Scully, I taste this French fry sandwich already. Let's get going."

Scully watched him jaunt off to their rental, rubbing fretfully at the twinge in her forehead. Mulder gave her a headache at times.

Chapter End Notes

As a fair skinned red head, I am proud of the fact that I am indeed a descendant of Northern European mutants. No super powers, sadly.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully faces a terrifying prospect.

If she rubbed hard enough, would it make it disappear?

Her skin felt raw and swollen above her right eye where her index finger picked absently, oblivious to the cold that surrounded her sitting in the rental car. The lights of the hospital looked warm in the darkness, but Scully couldn't bring herself to go in there, to a place that should be welcoming and familiar to her. It seemed sterile, cold, intimidating. Was this how the rest of the world felt about hospitals? She could see now why Mulder hated them so. He was inside, checking up on the status of Elaine Tanner and Leonard Betts. He'd asked her to go in with him, worried eyes watching her as she wandered outside again, once she had made her statement to authorities and she was clear the medical team had him in custody. Mulder knew with that uncanny sense of his something was wrong, that something had happened when Betts had attacked her, but she couldn't tell him, not yet.

She fingered the spot once more, earning another twinge that rang through the hollow space of her sinus cavity and spiked through her right eyeball. Betts had said she had something he needed lying right there, hidden inside of her skull. She had stared up at him, too terrified to think as she reached for the defibrillation paddles, thinking only to defend herself. She hadn't thought of his words, of what he was saying, till much later, till the medical staff carted him off.

You have something I need...

It couldn't be what he suggested, could it? She'd just had a physical not long ago, she passed with flying colors. She was the image of health! As if mocking her, the memory of the ER nurse checking her out of the Philadelphia hospital came to mind, the note on her blood work from the doctors who had attended her. They had seen aberrations even then, but she had been too busy being angry at Mulder, too resentful of his insinuations to pay attention to what was being said to her. Perhaps she wouldn't have noticed any more if she had been calm, she didn't know.

It couldn't be true, could it?

Betsy Hagopian's wasted face and cancer-riddled body came to mind. Scully admitted that it had been some time since she thought seriously of the women she encountered in Allentown a year before. They hadn't left her thoughts completely, but in the rush of her own personal angst with Mulder of late she had pushed aside the complicated tangle of those women, the conspiracy around the tests performed on them, and Scully's own part in it. Somehow, despite the fact she had seen the chip, knew it had been under her skin, had met the other women who had been affected by this, a part of her hadn't wanted to probe that deeply, hadn't wanted to know, afraid to know the truth.

Were any of them suffering from this now? Why had she not paid attention? She should have remained in contact with Penny Northern, with somebody from the Allentown MUFON group, tried to keep in touch with them. But she had remained silent with all of them, trusting in her investigative capabilities and Mulder's relentless search to provide her with answers as to what had happened to her during her weeks away. So far they were at a dead end. Scully still had no
information as to what happened to her or to any of the women she had met in Allentown, and now her worst fears since then had been realized; he was going to meet the same fate as they had. She too could very easily be eliminated for what these men had done to her. She was evidence, and she would have to be removed.

Scully shivered within the warmth of her great coat, less from the cold outside and more from the fear that now bathed her, the blind panic that seemed to blot out her reason. Never before had she found herself so terrified, but then never before had she ever faced something like this. Cancer. All of her lessons from Stanford started to spill into mind, one after the other, lymphoma, sarcoma, blastoma, the list went and on and on. Clinically she recited the many variants, the methods of treatment, the likelihood of survival. Some, if caught early enough, could be fully recovered from. Others crept up on you, stole your life before you even realized that they were there, ate through healthy, living tissue and formed masses of broken, dysfunctional cells. How strange and alien these diseases seemed when she was studying them years ago in medical school. They had seemed distant, bland, nontreating in the greater scheme of Scully's existence. She had never planned on being an oncologist, she had memorized them for knowledge sake alone, not for treatment. Was there a type of cancer that formed in the nasal cavity? What was it called? God, she couldn't remember one there. Why couldn't she remember it? She could be dying from this even as she sat there, and goddamn she couldn't even remember what it was called!

The urge to break into childish tears warred with the need to scream, to tear at her hair, to hit something hard. This couldn't be happening, not to her, not now. Instead of any of those reactions, she sat, staring coldly into the night. Underneath the terror and rage, her cool, simple reason reached out and told her simply that yes, this was happening to her, and it was happening now. And she couldn't hide from this and she couldn't deny this. She would have to face this and soon, before it was too late to do anything about it at all.

In the dark reflection of the passenger's side mirror Scully could see the tall, lanky shape of Mulder as he exited the hospital and made his way to her, hands in his coat, shoulders slumped. What would she tell him, she realized, watching his footsteps come closer to her. How could she tell him? She couldn't, Scully realized, not now. Not till she had answers, proof, a way to explain this all to him. She would get those answers soon. She would find out the truth of what was happening to her. And then she would tell Mulder.

She would tell him...soon.
Confirmation of Things Known

Chapter Summary

In which Scully seeks confirmation for what she already knows.

"Ms. Scully, the doctor will see you now."

Scully rose from the waiting room chair, smoothing her dark suit over her hips, clearing her throat to quell the churning of fearful nerves as she followed the smiling, scrub-clad receptionist through the doors to the office beyond. She'd chosen a doctor who was a friend of a friend in medical school, someone who was trustworthy but who had no connection to Scully personally. Scully hadn't bothered to explain to Dr. Hamedi why it was that she wasn't coming from a referral from her general practitioner. How did she explain to the oncologist she already knew what was wrong with her, she just needed the proof?

The cold, sterile exam area gave way to a neat, tidy office in the back. Long Venetian blinds cooled the air and dimmed the light inside. The receptionist showed Scully in, closing the door as Scully turned to the large desk and the short, friendly looking man stood and took her outstretched hand. He gestured to one of the comfortable looking chairs in front of his desk, waiting till she too had sat before he adjusted his lab coat and followed suit, flipping through a file on his desk.

"Ms. Scully, I have to say I was a bit surprised by your file to see you in here. You just recently had a physical for the FBI. You had a clean bill of health."

Scully expected the skepticism. Quietly, she handed over her blood work from her sojourn in the hospital in Philadelphia after her disastrous date with Ed Jerse. "I recently was checked out for a some injuries sustained while in the line of duty. They found something suspicious in my blood workup."

Dr. Hamedi took her paperwork carefully, grabbing wire-rimmed glasses from off his desktop, placing them on to scan the documents. A small frown creased above his aquiline nose, but Scully expected caution as he looked up at her. "I can see why this is cause for concern, Ms. Scully, but in and of itself…"

"I'm a medical doctor myself, Dr. Hamedi, and I do know that those levels in my blood work could mean anything or nothing. But I have a history, one you can see in my medical files."

"Yes, I read. You were abducted several years ago. You were found in a coma?" The doctor nodded, looking through her files again, as if seeking to confirm this.

"I was infected with a still unknown virus. I'll spare you the details on what it was, only to say that this virus contained DNA that was junk, useless, and yet it was floating around in my system. I have no idea what damage it did." It wasn't the whole truth, not really. Scully couldn't tell Dr. Hamedi about the chip found in her neck, or the women in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She couldn't tell him about Betsy Hagopian or how she had died of cancer. She couldn't use any of this to explain to the man that she was certain that she knew the truth. Leonard Betts hadn't been lying, she had cancer, and she needed this doctor to confirm it.
"And you use this as your basis for supposition that you have cancer?"

"Let's just say that the work I've done for the FBI has given me a strong suspicion." Her mouth was dry, her palms sweaty, but her expression was clear and calm as she met the other doctor's dark-eyed gaze. "I know this is unusual, Dr. Hamedi, but I'm fairly certain I know the outcome."

The man across the desk from her watched her for long moments, his expression unreadable behind his glasses as he fumbled blankly with his tie. He could say no in this moment, force Scully to go through her normal doctor, but she didn't want that. She didn't have the time to wait on doctors to get back to her with answers. What was it that Michelle Wilkes had said about Betts? He always could tell when someone was dying of cancer.

"Have you experienced any symptoms? Unusual pains?" The doctor finally spoke, seemingly willing to at least listen to her fears and not to dismiss them as hypochondria from an overworked FBI agent with a medical degree.

"Some, though I ignored them for the most part. Increased pain in my nasal-sinus region, headaches, some dizziness." As if in response the pain twinged again and she frowned against it absently. "This progressed to nosebleeds in the last few days."

"It is winter, typically a dry season for nasal-sinuses, especially given indoor heating systems. It's not unusual to experience winter nosebleeds."

"I've had four of them in the last three days." She replied firmly as Dr. Hamedi nodded and took note, scratching across a yellow legal pad in firm, illegible doctor's handwriting. "This coupled with my history and what I know from my work at the Bureau regarding my abduction, I felt it was necessary to look into this as soon as possible."

"And you wished to bypass the normal channels of healthcare?" Hamedi smiled ironically, not as an insult, but rather as a doctor who had been through those channels and knew how long they could take.

"If I can get this addressed sooner rather than later…"

She trailed off, for once letting the cool façade drop, letting the fear that twisted inside her to the fore in front of this perfect stranger. "I won't lie to you and tell you that I'm not afraid of what you will find. But I have my family and my work, and a work partner and I need to be honest with all of them. I need to know for myself. The idea of waiting for insurance to okay my visit to a specialist, for tests, for X-rays, I couldn't…"

"I understand." He held up his hands to stop her, a comforting, sympathetic smile on his round face. He removed his glasses slowly, sighing as he leaned back in his chair and regarded her once again. "I can have you go to the labs I work with at Holy Cross. I can set something up for tomorrow. We can take a look, see what we find, from there if we see what we suspect is a mass then I can run a biopsy, perhaps a needle aspiration one for now till we know what is going on."

A plan! It was something. Strangely enough it relieved Scully, relieved her more than she had felt since Leonard Betts had pinned her down in the back of the ambulance and made for the ridge above her eye. She smiled, shakily, nodding. "I can do that."

"All right." The doctor's smile was gentle as he closed her file, marking down a date and time on a notepad. "Tomorrow at eleven if you can. We'll get to the bottom of this."

He paused as he looked up carefully at her. "If they find out the worst, Ms. Scully, if you are right
in this...."

"If I'm right, Dr. Hamedi, then I'll take it from there. I can't think much past that at the moment."

He nodded slowly in sad sympathy. "I'll see you tomorrow, Ms. Scully. For your sake, I hope this is nothing."

Scully appreciated the man's honesty, but knew it was no use. She wouldn't be here if it was nothing. She already knew it was.
What Do I Tell Him

Chapter Summary

In which Scully struggles to find words to tell Mulder the worst possible news.

What would she tell Mulder?

Dr. Hamedi murmured softly beside her "Of course, there is still more testing needed. It will be difficult to treat, I won't lie, but we can plan some course of action."

"Of course." Scully sighed, staring up at the light board, to the X-ray of her skull, to the nasal cavity where the mass lay in the film, a nest of broken, consuming cells that rested in the bony wall between her sinus and her brain. It almost looked as if she could just simply take her fingers and pluck out the offending particle, cast it aside and move on with her life. If only it were that simple.

"If you would like some time..." It was the oncologist's way of trying to be tactful and give her space to process. She smiled and nodded at the doctor, who politely took his leave, trying to give her a reassuring smile. Scully watched the short man leave, waiting till the door to the X-ray room closed behind him.

What would she tell Mulder?

It had been almost an automatic reaction the minute her fears were confirmed. She called Mulder's cell phone, knowing he was out and about, telling him simply to meet her at Holy Cross Memorial on the oncology ward. It wasn't exactly the most ambiguous of messages, but she couldn't be too vague either, or it would cause Mulder to panic and tear into the hospital making all sorts of absurd demands. She didn't want that. She needed him calm for this. She needed him to listen to her. This wasn't going to be easy for him to hear and it was going to be less easy for her to tell him this.

Mulder, I have cancer. I'm dying.

Even in her own mind the words sounded unreal, cold and matter-of-fact, as if they were happening to someone else and not to her. There was another woman named Dana Scully who was suffering from a rare form of cancer that in time would grown and press in on her brain, killing her if she were lucky. If not she might suffer from crippling headaches first, perhaps even blindness, and then she would die as the mass either finally pressed in enough to end her suffering or the cancer metastasized into her body, invading her other organs, riddling her with the same tumors she saw in Leonard Betts. Unlike him, she would die though, a slow, agonizing death as her own DNA turned against her and her body began to fade as one organ after another failed.

This couldn't be what would happen to her, could it? Scully still couldn't make herself believe that this was what her fate was to be. Of course she'd thought about death, as an FBI agent how could she not. It was something she had to face on a daily basis, the possibility of her own mortality. A stray shot could take her out, or a deranged suspect, a slip and fall during a chase, a car bomb. Anything could kill her in this job, she'd nearly died several times already, but she had always secretly hoped she would die as anyone else would, snug and safe in her bed, her loved ones around her, a family left behind to carry on her legacy. She believed she would outlive her parents and would grow to live a long and fulfilling life. That was how she always secretly wanted to live her
God, she wasn't even thirty-three yet! Her birthday was in a few weeks. Till now she had been mourning the idea that she was in her early thirties, single, her life passing her by as she buried herself in Mulder's quest. And now even her work and the unanswered questions seemed insanely precious to her. How much longer would she have to pursue the work? Would she be able to even discover why it was she suffered from this, at whose hand, and what for? Would she truly be able to get those answers she had longed look for and had never found? Could she see this quest through to the end?

The last few months of bickering and argument, of petty squabbles over inconsequential things seemed to dissolve around her as Scully stared up at the X-ray in front of her. Who cared if he thought he was Melissa Riedel's soul mate or if she slept with Ed Jerse? What did it matter that she felt taken for granted and ill appreciated in their partnership? How silly and frivolous this all seemed in the face of everything now. How could she be angry with Mulder? How could she doubt him? Now he was all she had that was certain in her life, the only thing she could trust, Mulder and his never-ending faith, his endless belief that the truth was out there and they would find it. She would need that faith from him in the months to come. They both would need it.

Dear God, what was she going to tell him?

Scully had asked herself what Mulder would do without her in his life. It wasn't the first time she had wondered that very thing, but it was the first time she had stopped to seriously consider the implications of it. She had confronted Mulder and he'd hesitated, maneuvered out of answering, too afraid to face the consequences of what that could possibly mean for him. Now he would have no choice. He would have to think about it and she would too. For so many years now she had been the one holding Mulder to sanity, keeping him from drifting totally over that edge into the madness he kept insisting on pursuing. Who would take up that mantle now? Would there be another partner, another scientist brought in who would be caught up in Mulder's insanity, chasing his demons and his little green men? Would they listen to him patiently, remind him of why his plan was totally implausible, and try to reel him back in when he went off the deep end? Or would they run to Skinner, tattle to OPR, leave him out on his own, and by doing so leave Mulder and his quest unfinished? Would they allow him to at least find out the truth of what happened to her, to Betsy Hagopian, to the other women? Or would they ruthlessly shut Mulder down, ignore his pleas, and pretend that the conspiracies, the virus, the testing never happened, that they didn't exist.

Scully had a feeling she knew the truth of what would happen, but she didn't want to think or believe that, to see everything come to an end simply because of her death spoke of failure on her part, a part of her could not accept that. The other part of her told her she might have no choice. She will be dead, what did it matter if everything she worked for went to hell?

In that very moment Scully became extremely painfully aware of time, all of time she had been bemoaning these last few months. It wasn't an idyll complaint now. It was a full on awareness of every moment, every second as she stood there, fleeing from her like sand through a sieve. Everything that had been her life was draining away. There was nothing she could do to stop it. All she could do now was to place it all, everything, in the hands of the only person she could trust with it, to leave him her legacy and hope against hope she could see it through long enough to ensure he found the truth. She had to believe that Mulder would carry on despite this, that his faith would continue the work and would remain unshattered by what happened to her. She had to believe that everything she had suffered till now and everything she was preparing to suffer, that even the loss of her life had a purpose, one found in Fox Mulder and the answers he sought. She had to believe that, she wanted to believe that. Else all of this cancer invading her body right now, it would have no meaning.
Her life could not be meaningless.

Like the familiar beating of her own heart, she could hear his footsteps outside. Strange, she smiled. She hadn't noticed before how very familiar Mulder was to her now. She knew even the cadence of his walk as she heard it against the bare, hospital tile, the pace of his long legs, the frenetic energy as he approached. What would he be thinking when he walked up here? He was too intelligent not to have figured out that something was horribly wrong. Would he accept it, would he deny it? Would he be able to handle all of this? God, she didn't know? Mulder in so many ways as an emotional mystery, a man still carrying around the scars of a twelve-year-old boy who had lost his sister and his family. She had seen him crumble nearly to pieces at the thought of his mother dying just last spring. Scully wasn't family, though, only his partner and his friend. Could he be strong for her right now? She prayed to God he could be, because she knew that this one time she couldn't be strong enough for the both of them. She needed him for this.

Steeling herself, she turned towards the door just as he rounded it, a hesitant smile barely concealing the worry on his face. He had flowers in hand. Flowers? The absurdity of it for the moment chased away the questions and the fear, and brought a smile to her face. Only Mulder would bring flowers to an oncology check up. She wasn't even sick, not really."

"I stole these from some guy with a broken leg down the hall." He held them up proudly, ignoring the fact they were fresh and well watered, obviously newly purchased. "He won't be able to catch me."

The rakish smile, the small pride in a rare gift from him, caused her eyes misted at the gesture, nearly breaking her composure on the spot. She tried desperately to hang on to even her small bit of composure. What would she do without this man in her life and how in the world could she possibly leave him?
The Fine Art of Being Fine

Chapter Summary

In which Scully works to convince herself and Mulder that she is fine.

Scully tasted the warm, coppery trickle in the back of her throat first, before she noticed the warm, wet trickle down her top lip. Her aim on their suspect, usually rock steady, wavered slightly as she refused to gag on the blood gushing out of her nose, trying not to lose her cool, trying to remain the calm, collected Special Agent Scully.

"Scully?" Even in the darkness, she could see Mulder's eyes widen with fear as they locked on the dark smudge on her lip. It shouldn't anger her seeing Mulder's concern, but it did. It bothered her to have him see this weakness in her, to see her very human frailty. In irritation she dabbed at her lip, trying to play cool, trying to play it off.

"What?" She shrugged, indifferent, studying the thick, inky blackness on her fingertips. In the bright light it would be shining crimson red, her life bleeding out through her nose, flowing away in fits and spurts, much against her will, and damn did it make her angry. Mulder's eyes were impossibly wide and white in the darkness as he stood over the puzzled Kurt Crawford, their suspect seemingly forgotten.

"I'm fine, Mulder, quit staring at me." She wiped viciously at her lip, fighting the urge to spit on the ground near Crawford to get the blood out of throat. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" She knew he couldn't help asking, but it annoyed her all of the same.

"Yes, I'm sure, all I need to do is clean up a bit. Its just blood, Mulder, not like either one of us hasn't seen that before."

"Do you have a restroom she can clean up in?" Mulder leaned over and in one motion hauled Kurt Crawford struggling to his feet, the other man gasping with the effort. When he'd managed to find himself and stand, he nodded, eyes also flickering to the stain of blood on Scully's face. God, was she going to be stared at by everyone just because of a nosebleed? Angrily she lowered her gun. Mulder had Crawford in hand anyway. She dug in her pocket for a Kleenex for her nose.

"I don't need a restroom, Mulder," she began, but was cut off by Crawford.

"It's upstairs, in my apartment. You're free to use it." He didn't struggle, glancing between the two agents. "I have information to share with you two, this…isn't what it looks like."

"Then maybe you can start explaining why it is you are accessing the files of Betsy Hagopian's MUFON group?" Mulder drug Crawford to the main door of the building, reaching into the man's pocket for his keys to open the door. More slowly, Scully followed behind, the white, cottony tissue of her Kleenex soaking through. She hoped this stopped soon. It usually did, she never bled for very long, but each time since the first was progressively worse, progressively stronger. There would one day be a moment when she could conceivably bleed out of her nose all together, unable to stop the hemorrhaging.
She couldn't think about that right now.

Crawford's apartment was on the second floor, in the rear of the building, and Mulder unlocked the front door with Crawford's keys, motioning for her to stay outside while he took point to check out the apartment. She said nothing as he ushered Crawford inside, ignoring the growing disgruntlement at her position outside. She could still take point if she wanted. She wasn't an invalid yet, but she waited patiently till Mulder gave her the all clear before she came in. Crawford was handcuffed to a radiator in the corner, watching the pair of them silently as Mulder nodded towards a door down the hallway.

"Bathroom, get cleaned up. I'll have a chat with Crawford about what he was up to with Betsy Hagopian's records."

"Right," she murmured, trying to hide the crumpled tissue in her hands so Mulder couldn't see it covered in bright red. She slipped past him into the small bathroom holding a shower stall, a toilet, and a sink with a mirror. She closed the door firmly behind her and for long moments stood there, her head pressed against the cool pane, willing herself not to cry. She could not do this. She could not fall apart right now, not when everything was on the line.

She forced every fiber of her being to regain control, to stopper the horrible need to break down as she sucked cool air through her teeth. Forcing herself to stand, Scully looked towards the towel rack, finding a soft, dark washcloth and reached out for it, turning towards the sink. She flipped on the tap, cool water pouring over her hands and the terry cloth as she wrung it out, holding it up to her lip to wipe at the crimson residue already beginning to dry there.

Did Mulder already see her as weak? She watched her reflection in the mirror as she rubbed at the skin, trying to stem the trickle of fresh blood as she did so. He would never say so if he did, but she had to wonder if doubt had to cross his mind. Mulder had done it before in the past, had tried to put her up on a pedestal for "safety" and she had fought long and hard against it. She had carried on despite his need to protect her, had proved herself as capable as he was in dangerous situations. Would her cancer kill all those gains she had earned for herself over four years? She couldn't allow Mulder to think less of her, to see her as fragile, invalid. She needed to be involved in this in every aspect. This was her battle to fight, this was her war to win, and she couldn't seem weak in any aspect of it. She wouldn't allow herself to appear weak.

Carefully she cupped her hand under the cold water, bringing it to her lips and rinsing out her mouth. She spit it out into the white basin, tinged red but not much. The worst of the nosebleed seemed to pass. She was fine, for now at least. There would be other nosebleeds, she knew that, and some would be worse than others. But for now she was fine, she was alive, she could do this.

"Scully?" There was a tap at the door, Mulder's monotone voice low and worried on the other side of the door. "You okay in there, Scully?"

"Yeah, I'm just cleaning up." She cleaned the rest of the blood off her nose, sniffing against the rest, and rinsed out the washcloth. Hanging it neatly over the faucet, she exited, meeting Mulder's speculative gaze.

She was fine, really. She was the same Scully she always was. Soon, she would convince him of that as well.
Telling Her Story

Chapter Summary

In which Penny Northern tells Scully her story.

You have one remaining witness Agent Scully. I'd think you'd want to know what her story is.

Mulder knew the truth, just as surely as she did. Why was Scully so afraid to admit it?

The hospital where Penny Northern wasn't hard to find. Kurt Crawford knew where she was down to her room number. As much as Scully shied away from the truth, she knew Mulder was right, the only lead she had left to her to pursue regarding why she was now infected with cancer and what exactly was done to her was Penny. And as an investigator she had to follow that lead, no matter where it went. It didn't mean she wasn't frightened. Only once had she dared to prod the sensitive place in her fragmented memory where the truth of her abduction lay, right after she had discovered the fragment of metal under the skin of her neck. It had frightened her not knowing the truth and Melissa had convinced her to see a hypno-therapist to find answers. Even then she couldn't touch that part of her memory, it had been too terrifying to her. She had only ever had bits and pieces float to the surface, flashes of memories, of a bright place, a clinic of the men who had worked on her, like the mysterious Dr. Zama or Ishimaru, whatever name he went by. Scully had purposely avoided digging too deeply into her memories and had avoided trying to see what lay there. Now she had no choice but to face them.

Allentown Bethlehem Medical Center was quiet as she made her way to the ward where Penny Northern rested. Scully wandered the halls till she found the room number, pausing for long moments, hand on the doorknob, her heart thudding painfully in her ears. Everything could change with this. As if it hadn't changed the minute she was given the diagnosis of cancer. But this could really change things, this could explain everything she had secretly wondered about and feared for the last two years of her life. This could shed a horrible light on everything in that DAT file concerning Scully that she had always wondered about, or it could be nothing more than a preview of what was waiting in store for her as the cancer progressed, an example of what she too could expect in a few months time.

With a shaky breath she opened the door, peeking inside. The room was lit dimly from a single bedside lamp, giving the sterile room a homey glow it might not otherwise possess. On the single bed inside the familiar but withered face of Penny blinking up at her from the pillows, a wide, surprised smile creasing along her thin, gaunt face. She looked so tiny and frail against a bed that threatened to swallow her up, her once dark hair now covered over by a turban, indicative of the hair loss of chemotherapy. She held out a bird-fragile hand for Scully as she stepped inside.

"Dana, hello!" She looked truly pleased and thrilled as Scully stepped up to her bed, perfect recognition lighting her hollowed eyes. Scully paused in confusion, surprised at the instant remembrance and warm reception.

"I'm sorry? Did someone tell you I was coming here to see you?" She hadn't mentioned it to anyone on the hospital staff. Kurt Crawford? No, he was with Mulder. How did she know?

"No," Penny smiled her enigmatic smile, eyes bright as she reached for Scully's hand.
"Than how did you know it was me?" She'd only met Penny once a year ago. Could the woman really remember her that well?

"I recognized you." Penny's fingers were cold as they pressed into Scully's. "I told you when we met before last year. I held you and comforted you in the place, after the tests."

The place. Scully's tongue turned to cotton as visions of white lights and mask-clad doctors came to mind and she tried to squelch the involuntary need to shudder. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be insensitive, but I don't share those memories."

Penny only smiled in understanding. "It's all right."

Perhaps to Penny it was all right. The holes in Scully's memory unnerved her. "I've come to ask you some questions."

"About Dr. Scanlon?"

"No," Scully frowned, wondering why she brought it up. "Who is Dr. Scanlon?"

"He's treating my cancer. He treated Betsy, too. He thinks he might have isolated the cause, and if he'd caught it earlier he might have been able to do more for her and for me."

More for her? Scully's heart gave an impossible leap in her chest as something akin to hope dared to flare for an instant before she quashed it, her doctor's reasoning coming to the fore. "His name is Scanlon?"

"Yes." Penny shrugged. She frowned as she realized the conversation was slipping away from Scully's purpose in seeing her. "What did you want to ask me?"

"Penny, my partner and I ran into Kurt Crawford tonight. He is the one who sent me here. He told me about the others."

"The others, yes," Penny's smile faded, dimming like the light in the room till her face became awash with fatigue and pain. "They're all gone now. Poor Kurt, he's been trying to carry on the flag for all of us."

"All of you?" It seemed impossible to Scully. There had been fourteen women at least. They had all ranged from healthy, young college girls, to mothers, to vibrant, middle-aged women like Penny.

"It hit us hard and quickly." Penny sank back into her pillows, seemingly deflating in front of Scully's eyes. "We aren't the only MUFON group that has had this happen, but this hurt."

"And are you all that's left?" It couldn't be possible that the cancer could have spread this fast through such a populace without someone noticing.

"I'm it!" Penny spread her fragile fingers against the bedspread, shifting on the mattress slightly. "I wondered why I was the last one left. Perhaps I was left behind for you, so you could learn what happened to us."

Left behind for her. Had Penny always known, always suspected Scully would put it all together and come back. "What did happen?" The words were pulled out of Scully's darkest fears and deepest worries, springing to life on her lips even as a part of her didn't want to know what had happened.

"You really don't remember, do you?" Penny's hairless eyebrow rose in surprise.
"I never remembered. Not like the rest of you." Scully shook herself, wrapping her arms around her middle, suddenly cold and sick with the very idea of knowing. "I remember some things."

"The light? The white place?"

"I remember the doctors who did this to us." She could remember that now, after her visit to the train car in West Virginia. "There was a Japanese doctor who worked on us. Zama?"

"He was one of several. Most of his team were Asian, but I remember some Caucasian men as well. I never learned their names."

"What else do you remember?" Scully drifted, small pacing steps from the bed, wandering towards the heavy, tweed draped windows on the far wall. "Do you remember what was done to us?"

"Only vaguely. Even my memory blocks out some things. I remember tests, painful tests. I remember drills, and cold hands, and feeling invaded. I remember that we were all given some sort of illness that took us all a long time to recover from."

"A virus," Scully replied numbly, each morsel of information soaking coldly into her skin. "It was an engineered virus, created by our government to use during the Cold War, and tested on us to see what its effects would be."

"An engineered virus?" Indulgent skepticism lined Penny's questioned. "Do you really believe that?"

"Do you want to believe its aliens?" Scully spun on the woman as if she were Mulder, running agitated fingers through her hair. "I know what I remember, what I've discovered, what I've seen."

"I see." Penny looked for the briefest moment disappointed. What did she want out of her, Scully wondered. She ignored the hint of guilt that rose up inside of her as she paced back to the woman's bedside.

"What do you remember?"

"I remember many of the same things; the white light, the place, the doctors. But I remember many of the faces, too. Most all of them are gone now." Tears welled up in Penny's dark, sunken eyes. "I remember you best of all though. You were there for such a brief time and they did so many tests on you."

"Do you know what tests?" Scully felt her heart claw fretfully at her chest.

"No. Just that you were in a great deal of pain. You had many of the same ones we had."

"And I had different ones as well?"

Penny shrugged helplessly, her thin shoulders scrapping against the crisp linen. "I don't know. I just held your hand. You cried out a lot for your mother and for someone...a name I think."

"Mulder," Scully murmured, knowing without question that is was him she was likely calling for. "He's my partner at the FBI."

"Yes, Mulder." Penny nodded in confirmation, mulling the name over in her mind and sighing. "I tried to make it better for you, but they would come for you so often."

Scully closed her eyes. Her head throbbed with the knowledge as she tried to find it, to see what
Penny was talking about, but nothing came to her except the dull ache between her eyes.

"My story isn't much different," Penny continued quietly. "They began taking me when I was young, in college I think. And they did it over and over. Most of the time they would gather the same ones together. We all would recognize one another. Sometimes, they would bring in new people, like you."

Like her. She had been one of these women as well, as much as she hated to think about it, as much as a part of her wanted to deny it, it was true. "Have they taken you since they took me?"

"No," Penny responded firmly. "Not since I discovered the chip. We all discovered it and we all took it out, and I think that's why they are killing us now. They realize we all know and they want to destroy us before the truth is discovered."

"The truth?" Scully rolled the word off her tongue. She was hardly sick of the work by this point in her life. "What is the truth?"

"The truth, Dana, is in me and in you, the truth of what they did and what they are doing. That is what Dr. Scanlon is trying to find, that is what he is hoping to cure, to prevent what is happening to us happening in others."

The truth was in her. With trembling fingers she reached to the place between her eyes, squeezing against the throbbing, resisting the urge to break down at the bedside of this women and sob out everything she had learned in the days since Leonard Betts made his horrible pronouncement.

"Dana," Penny's words were warm and soothing despite the weariness that underscored each one. "Perhaps you should speak to Dr. Scanlon. He might help you find the answers you need."

"Is he a miracle worker?" Scully hated that she was being so angry at a woman who obviously cared for her.

"No," she replied simply. "But he wants the truth, the same as you, and he is the only person who is looking in the right place. Just go, speak to him."

"Right," she sighed, trying and failing at being more positive for this woman. "I'll go speak to him."

Perhaps he could explain to her what all of this meant in the language Scully understood, that of the medical sciences, or perhaps he could provide for her the magic cure that would make this horrible nightmare go away. She hoped for Penny's sake he wasn't just another clueless doctor, trying to make a name for himself off the pain and suffering of a group of women who had been through enough. Whatever the case, Scully knew that he was the place to start. If she had any hope of understanding what was done to her and why, she would have to begin with Scanlon and look deep into that place within herself that she feared so much.

God, she wished she wasn't so very terrified.
"Do you remember when we lived in Connecticut?" Maggie Scully's sighed from the chair she had curled into beside her daughter's hospital bed as the pair of them ignored a television show they were both pretending to watch.

"No," Scully replied sleepily, enjoying the feeling of her mother's finger's working through her soft, red hair, just as they did when she was a little girl.

"You were so young then. We lived there right after Japan. It was only for a year or two, and then we moved back down to Norfolk for a bit before we moved more permanently to San Diego."

"I remember Norfolk, the lights on the ships at Christmas. And going through the tunnel under the water." She had been delighted as a child by the idea of driving under the water across the Hampton Roads, ships floating and fish swimming above their heads. "Charlie was always afraid we'd drown."

Maggie chuckled, nodding. "Well, before we moved to Virginia, we lived in Connecticut. You were about three, just old enough to get out on your own, but young enough I couldn't leave you alone. But Charlie was just a baby at the time, and he was always so clingy and fussy."

"Sounds like Charlie," Scully sniffed. Even in terminal illness, she didn't miss an opportunity to poke fun at her younger brother. She ignored her mother's chiding look and smiled softly.

"Anyway, I often had to enlist your older siblings in keeping an eye on you for me. Bill was nearly seven by that time, and Missy was such a little mother. I think she assumed you were a living doll and God you hated that."

"Why do I see this story ending in bloodshed?" Scully felt herself warm to the dim memories of her earliest childhood, a part of her life she so rarely heard about anymore.

"There was bloodshed, as I recall. Bill got bored with watching after you one day and ran off with his friends, not telling me where he went, and he left Melissa, who was only five at the time, to keep an eye on you. To this day, I don't know what exactly happened, only that Melissa came running in, screaming at the top of her lungs that Dana was dead." The story brought laughter to Maggie now, though Scully was certain at the time laughing was the last thing on her mother's mind.

"So I panicked and ran full bore, with Charlie, to where you were laying in the backyard, pale as a sheet, covered in blood, a goose egg the size of a grapefruit on your skull. I was convinced you had killed yourself. So I called the ambulance, hysterical that my child was dead, and then you popped open your big blue eyes, sat up woozily, and told me that you were okay, you'd jumped and hurt yourself was all. Of course your eyes were crossing while you tried to explain this to me, but I didn't care. You were alive."

"I don't remember any of this." Scully chuckled, turning her head to look at her mother.

"Oh, I doubt you would, you gave yourself a good whack in the head. The ambulance ran you to the hospital, they said you had a nice concussion, to keep an eye on you for a few days and you would be right as rain. You had a thick skull, even then." Maggie chuckled, fingertips tapping against her daughter's scalp. "Needless to say your brother and sister weren't allowed to watch over you again till they were a bit older and you were a tad less prone to doing silly things like jumping
off of heights because you were curious."

"Yeah, well I'm no less prone, I just try to be smarter about it." Scully smiled wryly at her mother, glad she hadn't ever told Maggie about some of the more dangerous examples of her work and the trouble she got into.

"No, I suppose we never curbed you of curiosity." Maggie sighed in rueful resignation, the golden haze of memory sobering somewhat. "You were always so strong, Dana, and so independent minded. I always worried that it was because of me. There were so many other children, only so much time to give to them, and that meant that sometimes I had to focus on one while the others got ignored. And I never meant to neglect you."

"Mom!" Scully sat up in her bed, lifting up her head to stare at her mother's suddenly tearful confession. "Where is all of the coming from?"

Maggie blinked at her, tears leaking down her careworn face. "Why didn't you trust me enough to tell me? I could handle this, Dana. You didn't have to face this alone. I've already lost one daughter, I have already been here."

"I know, Mom." Guilt cut at Scully seeing the pain her mother was suffering, the pain she knew she had caused. "It was because of Melissa I didn't say anything, not yet. I didn't want to burden you with this till I knew more, till I understood."

Didn't Maggie understand that, Scully wondered? Did she really think she would have kept her out of this forever?

"God, Mom, I'm thirty-two, not even thirty-three yet! I don't even know why this is happening to me. I don't know where it is coming from, or why I developed it, and all I want is answers, to know that this is something I can beat. I wanted to know all that before I laid another burden on your shoulders, told you I was costing you yet another daughter." She choked on the last words, the painful burden of her sister's loss resting heavily on her in that moment. Her mother would lose two children, both of her daughters, and it would be all of her fault.

"Dana," Maggie breathed, standing suddenly from her chair and wrapping her arms around her petite daughter, squeezing her as tightly as if she were still the troublesome three-year-old scaring her mother half to death. "Melissa was not your fault."

"I knew that people were coming, Mom, and I forgot, and I let it happen!" She had never explained this part to her mother, had never confessed the truth, that she knew that there were men who were coming to her apartment and she had allowed herself to be waylaid by Skinner rather than stopping Melissa. She felt her mother stiffen and pull away in surprise, staring down at her in confusion.

"The police ruled it a home invasion…"

Scully felt her own hot, shameful tears brim and spill across her cheeks. "It was, but I was warned. It had to do with the case we were working on at the time, there were men…anyway, I was warned my life was in danger. And I was going to try and stop Missy before she got to me, but I failed. And she died because of it."

"Oh, Dana!" Maggie sighed, a long, drawn out, painful murmur, as thumbs reached out to wipe at the errant tears coursing down Scully's face. "Dana, you had no way of knowing! It was an accident."

"But I did know…"
"Did you know when something like that would happen?"

"No," Scully admitted, suddenly feeling as if mother logic was going to come into play, words that would make her feel like an idiot for carrying this guilt around with her for the last two years.

"Dana, it was an accident. Just as much as the one you had thirty years ago. Melissa no more intended for you to fall and hurt yourself than you intended for her to walk into your apartment and get killed."

"But Melissa was five, Mom, she hardly knew better."

"Dana!" Her mother's tone was firm, shaking her daughter out of her self-imposed self-flagellation. "You are my strong one, you always were. But because of that you've always carried your pain and your burden alone. And you need to stop."

Her mother's cool fingers smoothed hot skin of her face. "Just like this cancer, you think you can do this alone, but you can't?"

"I don't think I can do it alone, Mom. I told you…"

"How long after you found out?"

"A week." Scully felt so childish and young admitting that answer to her mother, as if she had broken the family's best china set.

"How long before you told Fox?"

She knew what her mother was getting at. "Only two days before you, Mom, I swear…"

"I'm not upset you told him first, Dana. I'm upset that you told him first and waited to tell me till you needed a favor."

A favor? "I was going to tell you…"

"Dana, I've seen my husband go off to war and my two sons followed in his footsteps. I've waited up more nights than you will ever know about worrying over your sister Melissa, wondering if she was safe, if she was all right. And then there was you my proud, stubborn, strong daughter who joined the FBI despite everything we told her. Do you think I haven't had to deal with hardship before this?"

"I'm dying, Mom!" The truth burst out of her in an angry scream as she wrenched away from her mother's hands, furious tears coursing down her face. Where was her composure? Where was her strength? "This isn't a case of me going off to war, I will die, and it will be horrific, and here will be no way of stopping it."

"Yes," Maggie replied simply, calm in the face of her daughter's outburst, as if she were throwing a temper tantrum over crusts still being on her peanut butter sandwich. "I know what cancer is, Dana, and I know how it could end. But I also know my daughter is a fighter, she always has been, and you won't take this lying down."

Quietly, Maggie sat again, reaching for one of Scully's tear-stained hands. "And I know you can't do this alone, either. You will need us. You will need your family. And you will need Fox. You can't hide away from us and pretend that you don't need us."

"I don't want to hurt you," Scully sobbed softly, knowing she was losing this battle. Perhaps her
mother was right about the alone part.

"There's so much going on in my head right now, Mom, so much I can't even tell you." She wiped futilely at her eyes with her free hand, trying to stem the flood. "All my fears about this, my procedures, the truth about what was done to me, what will happen to my work should the worst happen. God, my work, what would happen to Mulder?" She closed her eyes against the idea. She still remembered the stories of what he was like when she was abducted and she knew her mother had seen many of them first hand.

"There is so much I want to tell him, Mom, so much I know he won't be ready to hear or even wanting to hear. Mulder doesn't know the meaning of giving up, of stopping, but I need to tell him, he needs to hear what this work, what his friendship means to me."

"Aren't you being a tad fatalistic? You don't know. You could beat this. You could be fine."

"And if I don't? What if it gets to the end and I've yet to ever tell Mulder any of these things, to make him understand that he needs to go on, he needs to continue, even if I'm not there? What if I put it off till the end and haven't said anything? I don't want Mulder to give up on this, to quit, to think he's failed." He couldn't give up over this, Scully thought desperately. Mulder giving up would be tantamount to her failure as well. Her cancer, her death would be for nothing, and she couldn't accept that, not while she had breath to say something.

"Then tell him," Maggie replied simply, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Tell him?" Scully stared blankly at her mother through damp eyelashes. "He won't listen to me, not now. He'll think I'm giving up."

"Then don't tell him directly."

"Okay, perhaps the cancer is eating my brain, Mom, that doesn't make any sense."

Maggie smiled at her slowness, something she rarely saw out of her brilliant daughter. "You know, when your father was out to sea, it was hard to sit there and have the conversations with him I needed to have. It wasn't like I could just call him up while he was on maneuvers. And there were all these thoughts and issues that came to mind, things I needed and wanted to say to him, but wouldn't remember weeks down the line when he came home. So I started keeping a journal, a way of expressing what I felt and thought while he was away, and I would give it to him when he got back. And we would discuss it, so he would always know what I was thinking at the time, we could work out our issues. Sometimes he had the same thoughts and feelings, but had no idea I did as well."

"I haven't written in a journal since I was thirteen and that was only to cry over boys who didn't like me."

"Well, perhaps you should use it now to write to a boy who likes you very much." Maggie shot back, vaguely horrifyng Scully out of her teary depression.

"Mom," she protested in mild consternation, looking vaguely for a tissue, something to mop her face with. Her mother handed her one of from the box on the bedside table.

"If you haven't caught on to how much Fox cares about you, Dana, than I do have to wonder if cancer is eating your brain." Maggie turned Scully's flippancy on her, lightening the darkness for the briefest of moments. "The man would move the moon for you if he could."

Where did her mother get that idea? "Mulder and I have been through a lot, Mom, and we are good
friends. Best friends."

"I know," she replied in that infuriating way mothers had, with the sly smile that bespoke they knew things the rest of the world didn't. She wasn't serious. "Just be honest with him, and don't keep him out. He deserves to be included in on this."

"I know," she replied, quietly considering her obsessed, brilliant partner. Mulder did deserve to be there. But Mulder was already broken. Scully knew that from the moment he confessed to her in that dark hotel room in Bellefleur, Oregon. She didn't want to make this any worse than it was going to be.

Because she knew it was going to be much, much worse.
This had all been a test, even her treatment. Scully didn't know if she should feel angry by that or unsurprised by the perfidy of these men and the lengths they went to in covering up their crimes. All these women, used as lab rats and discarded, told they could be helped and lied to. She'd rage about the injustice of it if she had the heart.

"Dr. Scanlon isn't coming back?"

Penny knew. Scully squeezed the dying woman's hand, holding it in comfort as Penny had done so many times for her once. "No, I don't think so."

Penny nodded, sad resignation in her sunken, hollow eyes, filmed with unshed tears. Her frail fingers pressed with her feeble, waning strength into the firm, relatively healthy flesh of Scully's own palm.

"Dana, I want you to get well." Penny's whisper-soft voice thickened with emotion and urgency. "You've been such a comfort. You've got to be the one. You can't give up hope."

Penny's plea was as loud as if she had shouted it, squeezing tightly around Scully's already aching heart. She wanted to crumble in that moment, to break down sobbing in front of this woman she had come to call her friend in the few, short days she had spent with Penny. But she didn't.

"I haven't," Scully assured the woman softly through her own haze of tears and sadness. "I won't."

"You thought about it." Penny chided her softly, a smile creasing her gray face despite her obvious pain. "We all did. We all went through that period when we saw our endings like this, and we passed our fight on to the next one, knowing we wouldn't see this through to the end." She glanced briefly to the door. Someone was there, watching. Scully spun to face them, but whoever it was had moved on.

"A tall, handsome man was standing there watching you." Penny sighed wistfully. No one had come to visit her in the days. "Dark haired, wearing a leather jacket?"

"Mulder," Scully replied automatically, regretful for a moment he had moved on. Perhaps he knew what was coming, could sense it, and wanted to give the two of them their privacy. "He's my partner."

"Just your partner?" Penny gave her the same sort of look her mother would, a delicate arching of a hairless eyebrow and the faintest sound that could have been a chuckle. "If only the men I worked with looked at me like that."

Scully flushed but chose to ignore the insinuation. "Well, I have to admit it is nice having a work partner who is easy on the eyes." She tried to laugh, tried to smile, tried not to focus on what was coming. "He's been out there trying to find what they did to us."
"He found out about Dr. Scanlon?" Penny couldn't hide the betrayal she felt, the same that Scully felt knowing she had placed her hope in a recovery squarely in the hands of a man who had simply used them to carry on further testing, to further their disease and see where it ended up. They were being killed off by the likes of Scanlon, one by one by one.

"I'm so sorry, Dana, that you will be the last." Penny's apology drifted slowly from her. The pain was exhausting Penny. Her head was drooping on the soft pillows, tilting lazily on her neck as if it were too heavy to hold any longer. "You're the only one left to carry our story."

The only one, left alone. The weight of everything Penny was passing to her in that moment tumbled on Scully's shoulders, a strangled sobbing escaping despite her best efforts. "Penny, I'll fight this. Somehow I'll get the truth out there."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't be here with you helping you." Penny murmured so softly her words were almost lost. "Don't give up on this. Don't lose hope."

"I won't," she replied, trying to reassure her friend, praying she understood.

After long moments, Penny silently slipped into sleep, and from there it was only a waiting game. Scully quietly watched her vitals on the machines by her bed, as one by one they slipped and fell. It wasn't the first time she had sat vigil by a deathbed. How many times had she performed this same function in medical school and residency? As each beep of the machines slowed, as each function lessened, her heart grew heavier and heavier. The fragile hand she held in hers grew colder and more limp, the rise and fall of Penny's frail chest shallower and less frequent.

Scully was going to be alone soon, the sole survivor of a horrid experiment, the last link to what was done to these women. They weren't anyone in particular, simply normal women, housewives, mothers, daughters, wives, and friends, all had faced the misfortune of being chosen by some nameless, faceless group to be a part of their testing and experiments. They had suffered the indignities, had returned terrified, without even a memory to explain it, and now were being killed off before the truth could even be discovered. All of them that was, except herself. She remained for the moment, for what it was worth, she was alive still, she remembered, and the hell she would let this truth be forgotten. She would not, could not allow Peggy's memory or the experiences of any of these women be forgotten. She had to tell the world about this. Their story couldn't be silenced and buried, forgotten and ignored. It was up to her now to make sure it wasn't.

The long, whining, flat line sound of the machines at Penny's bedside finally bled into Scully's determined thoughts. Her eyes flew up to the flat line of lights scrolling across the screen. Penny's fingers in her hand were now heavy and limp and somewhere in the distance she could hear the nurses coming, knowing already what had happened. Despite all of her resolve for Penny to keep up the fight, deep inside of herself Scully could feel her heart breaking.

"Excuse me, Ms. Scully." The gentle touch of one of the floor nurses pulled her attention, and she nodded, letting go of Penny's still hand and standing, achy, from her seat. How long had it been? A few hours? She moved carefully out of the nurses' way, stumbling out into the hallway, her muscles straining and aching from the unfamiliar movement.

Unsurprisingly, Mulder sat just outside of the door on one of the benches, his long legs stretched out in front of him, face grim as he watched her, already knowing what happened. He stood, eyes deep and dark with sympathy as he shoved his hands in his jean pockets, silently asking her what she wanted him to do. Whatever it was, he would move heaven and earth to do it. Penny was right, Scully hadn't had any other male co-worker look at her like that, not the way Mulder did. How come she had just noticed that about him?
"She gone?"

The simple question didn't need to be asked, but he vocalized it all the same. He knew, in that way that only Fox Mulder ever seemed to know anything. Slowly she nodded, moving closer, hugging herself against the ache. Penny was gone now. Scully was the last.

Without a word, he stood and wrapped her up as the hot tears began to fall.
In which Mulder attempts to surprise Scully on her birthday.

Fox Mulder was abysmal at being sneaky.

"So, Scully, what are you up to today after work?"

Scully could see her calendar just fine. It was her first week back at work since finding out she had cancer and today was Tuesday, the 23rd of February. Her 33rd birthday. Some birthday. She was dying of cancer, there was a government conspiracy behind it, and she had absolutely no plans for the day. How depressing was that?

"Nothing tonight. I was meeting my mother for dinner, but we decided to have it last night." It had been a quiet birthday dinner for the two of them, the events of recent weeks subduing what normally was a fun event for mother and daughter. Scully supposed it was hard for the both of them to celebrate the anniversary of her birth knowing what was residing inside of her and what it could do to her.

"Want to go out tonight? Just for a drink?"

Mulder was trying his best to look so nonchalant behind his desk, sleeves rolled up, leaning back in the bored sort of way he had, with his impossibly long legs propped up on one corner of her eternally messy desk. In his hands he passed his ever present basketball, the sure sign he was nervous about something. Mulder used it as a tension breaker when his anxiety got the better of him or when he was deep in thought, and since there was nothing particularly ponderous for him to contemplate at the moment, she was guessing it was the former, and she also guessed with her keen deductive reasoning that it likely had something to do with the day's date.

"Drinks?" she drawled the word slowly, playing into his game for now. "Well, I suppose. Nothing in my treatment says I can't go out for a beer."

"Good!" Mulder flipped the ball from his left to his right hand cheerfully, glancing at his watch. "Nothing like a beer to lighten the mood, and there's that pub down the way we went to once. The one Pendrell was talking about. It's happy hour right now."

His eyebrows waggled mischievously over a suddenly boyish, lopsided grin. "Let's blow this Popsicle stand early and do some on the job drinking."

"You are such a rebel!" She snorted, glancing at her practically empty desk. Work was light this week, whether it was because of their time off or because Mulder was deliberately withholding it to coddle her, Scully couldn't tell. Knowing him it could be both. But it was her birthday and she didn't want to pick a fight. In fact, a beer with her best friend sounded ideal, more than ideal. It was better than whiling away the last two hours at the office, looking forward to a sad, lonely meal at home on her birthday, feeling sorry for herself. How pathetic her life had become.

"No moping!" Mulder rose, gathering jacket and overcoat, shooting her a playful, pointed look. "It's
not everyday you get free beers out of me."

"I don't remember ever getting free beers out of you."

"Keep that up and it might be a lot longer." He waited as she gathered her purse and overcoat, checking her pockets and touching up her lipstick. "Gees, woman, time is wasting!"

"The pub going somewhere I don't know about?"

"The world would move so much faster if women didn't slow it down."

"And men would always be caught without keys and wallets." She smirked, reaching for his keys sitting on the corner of his desk and tossing them to him. They sauntered out of the office, flipping off the lights and locking the door, wandering to the elevator companionably. Nice, normal, usual. For all that Scully's world had turned upside down in the last weeks, this at least was something that hadn't changed.

"So Pendrell found this place, huh?" Mulder called the elevator, the doors opening nearly automatically as they stepped inside and selected the lobby floor.

"He's the one who told me about it." The Headless Woman was apparently a favorite among some of the younger, more social agents in the main headquarters, an old bar that in the last few years had been converted over to an English style pub. It came complete with soccer jerseys on the walls and a fish and chip plate that Mulder had sniffed at and said was "passable" in terms of an American recreation of the sort of pub grub he got at Oxford. He said that was about where the similarities ended, but Mulder wasn't one to turn down a place with such a large beer list so close to work.

"I never would have thought of Pendrell being the young and hip type." The elevator deposited them on their chosen floor as they wended their way through the flow of people making their way through the lobby out to the brisk cold of late February in Washington DC.

"What? Just because he's in the Sci-Crimes lab you don't think he has friends?" Scully snickered at Mulder's crass assumption. Perhaps Pendrell was awkward, she would grant that, and yes subjects that left most people bored to tears fascinated Pendrell, but that didn't mean that he didn't like going out and socializing like the next person. Just because Mulder was an obsessed, stick-in-the-mud with no social life did not mean everyone was.

"No," Mulder hedged petulantly. "Yes, okay, I admit it. Pendrell's a geek!"

"But he's a geek who is nice and people like to hang out with."

"Unlike a man who spends his valuable time chasing aliens and calling 1-900 numbers?"

Scully waylaid the pout before it could get going. "Oh please, Mulder, how any women did you string along when I met you? You are attractive and you know it."

Always fast on his feet, Mulder didn't let her words drop. "So you think I'm attractive?"

"Oh brother," she sighed, feeling her cheeks heat up at the devilish sparkle in his green eyes. "You don't need encouragement."

"Sure I do, Scully, all I have are girly mags to keep me company."

"By choice." She rolled her eyes, shivering in the rush of cold air from the river across the federal
district, wrapping herself further into her heavy, wool coat. "You could date if you wanted to, you know. I can't think of a woman breathing who would turn you down on that."

"I think you would be surprised how many woman would." He shrugged as he shoved his hands deeper into his coat. "I don't have Pendrell's 'geeky-but-cute' factor."

"Why? You jealous?" Scully couldn't resist the urge to tease him.

"Maybe, though frankly I'm surprised that you haven't snapped up a Pendrell offer, since you like him so much."

Despite all of Mulder's kidding on the subject, Scully had never given the matter much thought. "Pendrell is very nice. He's a good friend and he's worked well under pressure on some of our cases, especially last fall when you ran off to Russia. He was the one who helped me pinpoint what was wrong with that geologist, and he didn't totally lose his mind doing it." Not many other agents in the Bureau would be willing to take on Mulder's work like that and keep a scientific perspective on it.

"In the end, Mulder, I just wasn't attracted to Pendrell. He's not my type." She shrugged vaguely, unsettled they were having this conversation. "I mean he's nice, and funny, and very sweet."

"See, you used that word 'sweet'. Women only use that for puppies, babies, and men they have no interest in."

"The psychologist making gross generalities much?"

"It's true, you know it." In a bored sort of way he reached into his coat pocket, picking out a packet of sunflower seeds. "So, what is your type?"

"Why?" How had this conversation devolved to this? She stared up at him as they waited at the crosswalk for the light to change. He was avoiding her gaze deliberately, something of the devil pulling at his full lips as he slipped a seed in between them.

"I don't know if I have a type." She avoided his trap neatly as the crosswalk sign changed and they began to walk. He hardly needed that information, she sniffed, and besides, she was fighting cancer at the moment. She had no idea how bad it was going to get and she wasn't about to saddle anyone with that sort of burden. How in the world did someone bring that up on a first date anyway?

Mulder, blessedly, let the subject drop, crunching thoughtfully as the pub in question came in sight. Ahead in the breeze Scully could see a painted sign swinging, a single light shining on it, the picture of a gruesomely headless woman dressed in Renaissance noble finery dominating the scene, black, Gothic lettering framing her disturbingly empty neck ruff. Inside the frosty windows, the lamplight was dim, but the large televisions over the bar blazed with a Georgetown University basketball game.

"After you!" Mulder held open the door as a blast of warm air greeted her, warming her chilled skin. She blinked in the low light, finding a table not far from the bar, small enough for two people and unobtrusive enough that the soon-to-be hordes of after work revelers wouldn't bother them.

"Let me get your coat," Mulder offered chivalrously, not an unusual thing for him to offer, but certainly suspicious. Scully narrowed her eyes carefully at his all too innocent looking face and passed her coat along, nodding towards the table she had chosen and wandering towards it. Perhaps he was gone longer than was strictly necessary for the hanging of a couple of coats, perhaps he wasn't, but Mulder gave nothing away as he cheerfully joined her at the table, waving over a
waitress and rattling off his beer and food choice. "Newcastle and a burger for me. And the lady?"

"Same here." She wasn't in the mood to be picky, frankly, nor to hear more of Mulder's quips on women making up their mind. If the waitress gave Mulder a knowing look, Scully ignored it. It may not be some hideous birthday surprise, it could be as simple as her checking her partner out. As Scully had told him, he was a damn attractive man. He cheerfully slipped out of his jacket, loosened his tie, and leaned comfortably back in his seat, eyes gravitating towards the game on the television like a moth to a flame. This was standard Mulder MO, sports or pretty girls on the television and he was engrossed, however, he was polite enough to simply check the score and turn back thoughtfully to her.

"You know, I'm endlessly amused that they call this a pub."

They had this conversation before. "What? Not enough of the beer and urine smell permeating the floorboards?"

"Well that and its always loud. Pubs I went to in England were just places people went for food and drink."

"You can't tell me there weren't crowds, hazes of smoke, and obnoxious drinking games, especially not in Oxford."

"Well, perhaps." He shrugged, smiling easily as the waitress brought them their beers. He grabbed his tall glass of golden, foaming liquid and took a generous draft of it. "I just remember being eighteen years old and figuring out it was legal for me to get a drink of beer every night of the week."

"How long did it take for that to get old?"

"Pretty quickly, actually. Try waking up for lecture at 8 AM with a hangover."

"Oh, I did that a few times myself, don't be fooled."

"Ahh, the wild side of Dana. Please don't tell me the prim and proper Special Agent Scully, MD was off doing underage drinking?"

"Mulder, I'm Irish, I'm surprised I didn't have it in my bottle."

"Lies and stereotypes, Scully, I've met your mother."

"True. But I won't say my father didn't look the other way when I sipped from his whiskey glass during his pokers games."

"For shame!" He laughed, easy and carefree. It was the first time in months she had heard him sound so light. It occurred to Scully how much she actually liked seeing that side of him, the smiling, happy Fox side of Mulder's personality. Too often he was his sarcastic, intense, dedicated self. She sometimes forgot that he could be anything else.

"What, you didn't swipe a taste out of your parents liquor cabinet as a youngster?" She couldn't believe that of her rebellious partner.

"I remember taking a sip of my father's Scotch during a dinner party once. I don't think he knew I did it, but one of the other kids at the party dared me to do it. I thought I had swallowed liquid fire."
"I bet you did," she snickered, sipping from her glass. "Did you get caught?"

"No, Dad was in one of those meetings." The emphasis on the word "those" left no doubt as to what sort of meeting it was and with whom. "But I refused to ever drink the stuff again till I was in Oxford and I met Phoebe's parents."

The infamous Phoebe Green. "You actually got as far as meeting her parents?"

"Well, I was the only person she could admit to them she was sleeping with on a consistent basis. I think it was more of a saving face sort of thing. Phoebe's dad was an up and coming MP in the Thatcher government and I think she was trying to earn brownie points with her parents on the decorum scale."

"So, bring home a sane looking boyfriend?"

"Well, I was the guy she duped long enough to stay with her for any extended length of time. Anyway, so I meet her parents and her father's this huge Scotch aficionado. So to make nice, I spent an entire weekend sipping different ones, learning about the taste, the flavor, the aroma, the aging process."

"Sounds fascinating!" She smirked. "So, was it a life learning experience?"

"God, no! I spent most of the weekend soused and don't remember a single damn thing he told me."

"Way to impress the lady's family."

He grinned, unapologetic. "I hope you are using the term 'lady' loosely. They were impressed with me, the son of a US State Department official. Would have been a nice feather in her father's political cap."

"So you are telling me that machinations are a Green family trait?"

"It was a nice preparation for my career, no?" He winked cheerfully, taking up his glass again. "Anyway, everyone makes mistakes."

"Yours tend to stick." Scully had noticed that Mulder made no mention of any other women in his life besides Phoebe. "What, you dated Phoebe fourteen years ago and she burned you out on serious relationships since?"

"Not exactly." He sobered immediately at her words, busying himself with the glass in front of him suddenly. Scully didn't need to be an FBI agent to tell there was a story somewhere there, one that in their four years of partnership Mulder had never told her and so far wasn't about to. Curiosity niggled suddenly. The investigative part of Scully was now hopelessly intrigued by what this was all about. Mulder had never given an inclination there was ever another woman. After all, she had fessed up about Daniel, hadn't she? Before she could formulate a question, however, plates hovered in front of her face, smelling of charred beef and fried potatoes.

"Excellent!" Mulder dug in without any prodding, as if he hadn't had lunch a few hours before. Scully was more circumspect with her meal, watching her partner feast as she slowly made her way through part of her burger and most of her fries. She wasn't as hungry these days, she hated to admit it, and if the fear and stress weren't enough, the medication she had started under her doctor's orders were. But she refused to let Mulder notice.

He was soon leaning back comfortably, twiddling a straw from his water in his fingers. The ruins
of his meal lay in front of him, decimated and conquered. Truly, the man shocked her at times. He
could go for days neither eating nor sleeping properly, then down an entire pizza and still have
toned body of an athlete. Scully wasn't about to deny she'd looked. Hell, how could she not, she
was busy trying to make sure he didn't die on her. She may be a professional doctor, but she was a
living woman as well for the moment, cancer not withstanding, and you'd have to be dead not to
see that.

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about what you said, Scully."

"Now there's a first!" She munched on a fry. "Which part, the cleaning your desk part or the
hanging out with Frohike, Langley, and Byers less part?"

"No, the life passing by part." The plastic straw bounced off the table as his fingers rolled it, before
he brought it to his mouth, slipping it between his teeth.

"Mulder, if this has to do with my…"

"I'm not just speaking about your illness." He glossed over that, waving his hand as if covering
over her cancer, unwilling to bring it out during their drinks and socialization. "You are right in
wanting to live a little. God knows I don't want you ending up like me, admittedly handsome, but
seen as mildly eccentric."

Scully snorted. "Mildly eccentric?"

"You said I was handsome."

"Continue," she pushed, before his ego got the better of him.

"Perhaps it is better to be Pendrell. Perhaps its better to have people respect and care for you in the
end, people who will truly have good things to say about you, rather than wonder what happened to
that crazy guy in the basement?"

"I don't think that people will say that, Mulder." Scully couldn't make herself believe that his
legacy would be that fatalistic. "There are people who respect you."

"But few who like me. Outside of you of course, maybe Skinner, on days when I actually turn my
reports in on time and they aren't too crazy." He chewed restlessly at his straw. "There was Reggie
once, and Jerry, but they are gone now."

The unspoken end of that sentence was that soon she would be too, and Mulder would be left with
no one.

"Perhaps, this should teach me to appreciate what I have, huh?" Mulder's words were tinged with
sadness, one she knew neither one of them wanted to go into tonight. Not this night.

Speaking of which…

Out of the back she could hear the cuing up of people to sing, none of whom could carry a tune.
Not that Scully could hold one in a bucket, but even she cringed as the familiar sounds of "Happy
Birthday" sounded over the talk and jabber of the pub around them.

She knew it.

Mulder looked extraordinarily pleased with himself.
"Mulder! Really, you shouldn't have." Her tone said exactly that, he really shouldn't have.

"Hey look, it's strawberry ice cream!"

Scully rolled her eyes as the group of waiters and waitresses, singing at the top of their lungs approached. She'd make him pay for this later...maybe after she had some of the strawberry ice cream.
"I don't think we're going to find Max Fenig after all."

Scully stared at Mulder's thoughtful face, wondering just where he thought a man's body could go in the wreckage of a downed, commercial jetliner scattered from one end to the other of an upstate, New York cow pasture. Over at least a mile grim reminders of what had fallen from the heavens lay scattered across the muddy earth; broken and shorn bits of metal, shattered glass, torn upholstery, filthy suitcases. And then there were the sad remains of the passengers of the doomed flight, like broken rag dolls thrown about. Frankly, if Max Fenig were on this flight, there would be nowhere else to find him, which meant that if Mulder suspected he wasn't in this sorrowful field, he wasn't on this flight.

"Just a few minutes ago you were absolutely certain he was on this flight."

Mulder shook his head gravely, deep in the stream of his own consciousness, frowning over the mangled and still smoking remains. "I'm beginning to doubt whether he finished this flight with the rest of the passengers."

What in the hell was that supposed to mean? Before Scully could raise an argument, excited screaming sounded from one corner of the main body of the wreckage, one of the workers calling out in the clear, early morning air. "Can I get a medic over here?"

En masse, the recovery workers turned to the one spot the yelling came from. The man who discovered it waved them over, face mask pulled down as he frantically tried to remove remains and metal from something on the ground. Scully scrambled over insulation and aluminum to the figure on the cold, soggy ground. The poor man lay there with vaguely blinking eyes, still trying to make out what was going on around him. His clothing was tattered and burned, parts of his now exposed skin scorched and red, and it was clear that there was internal injuries of some sort. He wheezed in shallow breaths, whether from smoke inhalation or from some sort of impact damage to his lungs was unclear. Scully, like everyone else, was just damned shocked that this man was still alive.

"We need an airlift to a burn unit as soon as possible!" Her voice rang on the chilled air, filled with the command of an ER doctor, snapping orders to the gathered volunteers. "This man needs oxygen and a saline IV."

Scully was dimly aware of people rushing to do her bidding as she bent back over the startled and disoriented form. "Sir, can you hear me? Sir?"

The man managed a brief nod, coughing weakly, eyes widening as he stared about him. It was clear he was rousing enough to begin putting things together, of what had happened to him. But it was freezing in the muddy field. The snows of January in upstate New York had melted, making the ground a soup of runoff and silt. Soon shock and cold would set in. Scully began barking further instructions to the eagerly awaiting people around her. "I need blankets, a coat, something
"Here!" Mulder offered his own coat, ever chivalrous as he was, despite the exasperation that flickered from Scully. The last thing she needed was for him to get sick as well. Still she took it, wrapping it around the burnt man's torso.

"Sir, what's your name?"

"Reb….reb….Rebhun." His scorched face creased in confusion up at Scully. "Did we crash?"

"Sir, you are all right, now, we'll get you to a hospital." She didn't want to tell him the truth, not yet. She wanted to wait till they got him stabilized. The shock of the news would do him no good.

"Was just flying back from business," he murmured, eyes drooping woozily, but thankfully not closing. Scully quickly checked his vitals. His pulse was low and thin but steady at the moment. The rattle in his chest worried her. It sounded more and more like a punctured lung.

"Medivac is on its way from Gloversville. We can life flight him to Albany." She frowned vaguely at the sky, as if that could bring the promised helicopter. "What's the ETA?"

"Ten minutes, fifteen at most." The man in an FAA jacket looked apologetic, as if he wished could simply produce the much-needed chopper with a snap of his fingers.

"All right, we need to get this man out." She glanced over to the ambulance on standby and the emergency technicians watching expectantly. "Come help us get this man out and stabilized till the airlift arrives."

Without hesitation the EMT's raced over, helping to move large pieces of shredded metal out of the way to more effectively get at the survivor. Scully allowed them to do their job, all the while her eyes on the patient, judging his vitals as best she could while they carefully removed the man from his broken seat, cutting him out of his seat belt and ever so gently uncurling him from it.

"Be careful. I think there might be internal injury, certainly a punctured lung."

"Right!" One of the EMT's murmured without irritation, he and his partners gently easing the injured man out and onto a red, plastic stretcher. The victim moaned softly, coughing from the effort.

"Secure him for now." Scully ordered, glancing at the FAA agent who had brought her the news of the helicopter. "Where will they likely land?"

"I would guess the road back that way." He gestured towards the small, two lane, rural highway that was the only way to the rolling fields of the crash sight. Scully frowned in that direction. It was at least five hundred yards, and much of that through the shattered remains of the plane.

"We'll have to get him over to the road. Start moving that direction carefully."

Wordlessly, the EMT's continued their work, stabilizing Rebhun as they figured out the best way to maneuver the injured man through the wreckage without jostling him too much. Somewhere in the distance Scully thought she could hear the beating sound of chopper blades against the cold, gray sky.

"Scully!" Mulder's fingers on her elbow caused her to spin. She had forgotten for a moment he was standing there, hovering out of the way. Scully had sort of taken command of the situation, fallen in the still familiar mode of a doctor who had done her rotation of the ER as a resident. "I want you to keep this man warm till the medical team gets here."
"Find out?" The physician in Scully was mildly outraged. "Mulder, the man is severely injured, he's lucky to be alive let alone conscious. I won't be able to speak to him for hours, perhaps days. Even if I could, he might not remember much of anything."

"He's our only witness, the only one who knows what happened on that plane." He held up a watch, culled from somewhere in the rubble around them, it's crystal smashed into powder but it's face still whole, shining dully in the misty, morning air. It too read 7:52, nine minutes from the reported crash time of 8:01. "This man is the only one who can explain why they are missing nine minutes."

Nine minutes. Mulder was right, they had personally experienced that same phenomenon before, in Bellefleur, Oregon many years before. At the time she'd thought he was crazy and had told him so. Now, with a tumor nestled against her brain and the vague memories of an abduction she couldn't explain, she wasn't so sure she could call him crazy anymore.

"Do we know why it was that Max was on this flight?" She sighed wearily, glancing up at the helicopter broke the distant horizon with a low, throbbing sound.

"Sharon only said that he was carrying something. He said it was important, proof of the government knowledge of alien technology."

Of course Max would say that. Scully silently sighed. Max was only really a half a step removed from Mulder on the paranoia scale. "We need to find out from Sharon what it was, where he got it, and where he was sitting. We need to know what he was up to and what that object he believed he had was."

"That's my sort of thinking." Mulder smiled grimly, glancing over the ruinous remains. "I'll call Sharon, tell her to bring what she can of Max's notes and things. You think once you get the patient stabilized you can get a lift back to Fulton County Airport and meet her?"

"How about I rent a car in Albany and drive over there." They had yet to pick up a proper rental and Scully had a feeling they were going to need it. She watched quietly as the chopper lighted on the road in the distance, the wind of its blades causing any remaining vegetation to bend and sway in its wake.

"Get going, Dr. Scully." Mulder urged her towards the helicopter as the EMT's carried their injured load. "Let me know what you find out."

Scully nodded, unable to scream over the sound of the helicopter's blades that rang over the broken remains of the airplane scattered like haphazardly across the sleepy, tree-lined hollow.
In which time seems to get away from Mulder and Scully.

It all came down to nine minutes.

"Mulder," Scully sighed, caught at an impasse with him again, standing in a hangar filled with silent, yellow body bags. Each one of them was a person who had a family and friends, people who were eager to have their loved one finally come home so that they could be put to rest, and Mulder wanted to quibble over the time on their wristwatches.

"Scully, I'm not making this up!" He gazed over the field of the fallen with that familiar intensity, uncaring of how it sounded. "These people deserve to have the world know what the last nine minutes of their life were all about."

"We have no proof of that."

"And they have no proof this was a system malfunction. It's a convenient story they are using because they don't have an explanation for the truth, and it works as good as anything else. Who in the world would question a systems malfunction?" Mulder shot a hand out, waving it expansively above the bodies. "And it doesn't account for why these people's watches were stolen."

"So you want to believe that someone came in here and took timepieces off of the dead in order to hide what exactly?"

"To hide the fact that something horribly wrong went on in the skies up there." Mulder's voice dropped, low and dark as he loomed over her. "Systems malfunction doesn't account for the damage seen on this plane. It doesn't account for the wounds these people suffered. Something else was going on, something people desperately want to shut up. That's why the watches were taken, that's why they are more than happy for the FAA to declare that this was a pure accident. No one will ask questions then."

"And where in the world have you gotten any evidence to support this theory?" Scully felt she had to hold on to reason in this conversation, even if Mulder's argument had its salient points for once. "We have no evidence that anything particularly untoward happened to cause some grand conspiracy to cover it up."

"You don't call radiation burns on the victims and residue on the body of the plane evidence of something untoward?"

"We don't know what Max was carrying in that pouch. He admitted to stealing something from the weapons facility."

"And how many nuclear devices do you know are designed so poorly that they explode in midair like that?"

Scully paused. He'd argued her into a corner. "None that I know of, and I admit had it been a nuclear device, it should have been more destructive than this. Only the plane was damaged,
"Precisely. But think, Agent Scully, where else recently have we seen mysterious cases of people suffering from deep tissue radiation burns?"

Scully obliged, spinning briefly through her memory. "The Piper Maru, when its crew came into San Diego."

"And also a down airplane in Wisconsin four years ago, one that was being pursued by one Max Fenig."

Scully was beginning to see the thread of Mulder's thoughts, where he was taking the disparate pieces of information. She didn't know if she was happy she could see his patterns. "So you think that this has something to do with an alien ship?"

"The flight radioed that something was going on at 7:52 PM. That was the last call the FAA got from the flight before it was seen going down nine minutes later. Something caused that airplane to lose nine minutes of its life. And I'm guessing Max Fenig had everything to do with that. We know he's a multiple abductee, he was taken before, in Wisconsin."

"So, following this line of reasoning, you believe that Max Fenig took something, possibly alien technology, that was intercepted by an alien ship. And somehow in that nine minutes they took the technology and then crashed the plane?"

"I don't think they crashed it." That was the part of the equation that Scully couldn't understand but somehow it made sense to Mulder.

"Then who did?" Where in the hell was he going with all of this?

"I think the reason this has been covered up, Scully, is that someone else figured out what was going on and was trying to stop it. And it didn't work out as planned."

"Who?"

"The National Transportation Safety Board did a routine investigation alongside the FAA on this crash to see who knew what, where, and when. When the NTSB does a report they speak to all the air traffic control towers in the area, civilian and military. The closest tower to this spot is at Von Drehle Air Force Base, not far from here."

"Did they file a report with the NTSB on what they saw?"

"That they did, but it was curiously lacking?"

"Lacking? How?"

"Because they are the first tower to see Flight 549 before it went down and reported it as dropping in altitude suddenly at 7:52. As they state it, the plane began a nosedive descent."

"But the FAA report states that the plane disappeared from their radars at 8:01." Scully frowned, the pieces not adding up on this at all. "If Van Drehle saw the place begin to crash at 7:52, with a drop like they are describing the plane would have impacted in seconds, not minutes."

"And yet there it was, on everyone's radar. So explain to me how that happens, Agent Scully?"

"I don't know," she slowly replied, the new pieces of Mulder's logic making disturbing sense. This
wasn't as cut and dry as Max Fenig smuggling a piece of purloined military technology, but it still didn't explain what happened to all of these people, laying like broken dolls in yellow body bags all around then.

"I don't either," Mulder admitted, "But I think we need to head out to the Air Force Base to find out."

"Mulder," Scully warned, a long and rather difficult history with the Department of Defense coming to mind as she recalled the many times they had bucked heads with one military official after another. "We go there asking too many questions, and the Air Force is going to have Skinner calling us back to Washington with our tails between our legs. And then he's going to ask why we are sticking our nose in an FAA investigation in the first place."

"Not the first time I've managed to piss off some other department of the Executive Branch." Mulder hardly seemed to care anymore. In fact he seemed to take a perverse pride in it. "Would you rather these victims' families all believe their loved ones died because some airline mechanic somewhere forgot to check a wire?"

"No." That was a greater travesty in Scully's mind, to let the deaths of the innocent go unpunished. She thought of Melissa briefly. "Fine. But don't push them too hard for questions. Don't piss them off, not if you want to get to the bottom of this."

"I'll be the soul of urbanity and wit," Mulder deadpanied, spinning from her, his coat flapping as he stalked through the yellow body bags. "Come on, we'll see if we can catch the officers on duty at the tower."

Some birthday, Scully sighed, following behind. Somehow she was completely unsurprised that this was spinning into something much deeper and much more complicated than either of them bargained for. That seemed to be the way with Mulder and these cases. As usual, she was scrambling behind, trying to catch up.
"Are you okay taking Sergeant Frish back to DC?"

Scully stared up at Mulder as if he had just asked her to go to the moon for him.

"By myself?" Oh no, they weren't playing this game again, Mulder going off into the face of danger while he shuttled her off. Cancer or no cancer, she wasn't about to be benched.

"Yeah," he replied simply with a wealth of meaning in his one syllable. Over the years together, Scully had become quite adept at seeing Mulder's thoughts, reading him as easily at times as others read books. The look in his eye was asking her, not demanding. He needed Frish safe, somewhere with someone he trusted, and the only person he trusted enough to do this job for him was Scully.

It wasn't being benched, but she wasn't happy with it either. "You just let me know what's going on, Mulder."

Relief and then warmth flooded his charming, cockeyed smile. "As soon as I know."

She didn't want to leave him behind. He hated playing this game with him. Scully watched as he ran off the plane, knowing he was going to go out to that freezing lake in the dead of winter to find what he thought was a downed UFO. She knew from long experience it was no use trying to talk Mulder out of doing something so dangerous and so life threatening. She watched him out of the window as the plane began its take off, waving to her as they sped down the runway. She wished that Mulder would stop for half a minute, to think of the danger he was putting himself in. She may not be around too much longer to cover for him like this. And then what would he do?

"Do you think the FBI can keep me safe?" Frish was quiet and troubled beside her, far removed from the upright and taciturn sergeant they had met at the Air Force base. He now plucked at his fatigues fretfully, watching Scully with fearful worry. She couldn't blame him, not if he was being targeted for murder.

"I'll call my boss in on this as soon as we get into DC." It was all the assurance she could give the young man. "We'll do what we can."

It wasn't much relief to him, sknew that. He hunched himself over as he glanced down at his twitching fingers, the events of the night, barely escaping not one, but two attempts on his life, were overwhelming to anyone, including an Air Force sergeant. His entire career, his life was over in the matter of hours, all because someone wanted to cover up the truth about why a commercial air flight went down.

"It's crazy!" He giggled in the sort of sad, manic way people had when the world turned upside down on them overnight. "I was just doing my job, I was following orders."

"I know," Scully empathized, her heart going out to the young man beside her. She knew exactly how he felt. God, did she know how he felt of late. All you do is your job, and suddenly your entire world is ripped away from you because of it.

"Gonzalez, he was a good man." Frish looked up at her, eyes filming with tears he would never shed. "We trained together the two of us, both of us were career military. We had the same story, joined up out of high school, didn't want a job as glamorous as flying jets, just wanted to have good, steady jobs."
His mouth worked, twisting against the emotions he was trying so hard to contain. "Jesus, he has a wife and two kids already. Who's going to take care of them? If they pin this on him, they won't get any of his pension."

Jesus, how deep did the fingers of this deception go? How many other innocents were to be effected by this? Was it not enough that a plane full of people died for this? Despite herself, Scully was stunned by the reckless abandon employed by those who were behind this cover-up, and how little they cared for the lives of so many people who had nothing at all to do with any of it.

"Do you have a family, Sergeant?" She had to ask. Chances were they would be his first worry if the FBI took him in for protection.

"A girlfriend, she lives in Schenectady." He shook his head, clutching it between his big hands. "God, I was supposed to go over there tomorrow after my shift, spend the weekend at her house."

"We'll let her know you are all right." Scully wanted to reassure the young man, but knew that right now probably very little was reassuring. She had been there herself, she understood.

"Do you think they will hurt her?"

"No," Scully replied emphatically. "No, that would be too obvious. She will be fine. It's you we have to worry about."

"Right," he sighed, rocking back into his seat, staring blankly at the window for long moments. Scully prayed he trusted her on this, that he didn't do something stupid when they landed. She was so used to expecting that sort of behavior out of Mulder, she had grown to assume it was typical of everyone else.

They were quiet for some time, only the hiss of air in the cabin and the sound of the engines on the wings keeping their thoughts company. Scully watched the clouds out of the window and wondered just what Mulder had in mind in terms of searching in that lake for the downed, third aircraft. Would he draw the attention of the same men looking for Frish? If history had anything to say on this one she would likely be dragging Mulder out of some brig at some point, if he wasn't charged with some sort of military crime. He had that habit.

"What's it like, being an FBI agent?" Frish's voice came from far away, his face still turned towards the thick, glass window. He was looking for something, anything to keep him occupied from what worried him at the moment.

"For the most part it's a fulfilling job." It was an honest answer at least. "Agent Mulder and I work with unique and special cases, such as this one. Though not all of them are this complicated."

"Yeah, complicated." Frish snorted in dry irony. She didn't think he found it that funny. "You two are close, you and Mulder?"

"I guess," she replied evasively, wondering why he asked. "We've worked together a long time."

"I wondered." He murmured, turning to glance at her. "You two look as if you get along."

This was an odd conversation. "Can I ask why?"

He chuckled, this time with real amusement. "Because I didn't seriously believe that you would let him go by himself to that lake. Whatever is down there, the Air Force is looking for it, too. If they killed my partner to hide the truth, what's to say they won't kill yours?"
Those were the very fears that Scully had been trying hard to ignore. "Mulder knows what he's doing, this is hardly the first time he's dealt with this." At least she tried to convince herself of that fact.

"Maybe he does," Frish replied equitably. "And I think there is something to be said about the faith you put in him. But if I were you, Agent Scully, I wouldn't have let him do it. As a partner and as a friend, I wouldn't have let him go out there alone."

Frish had no idea he was preaching to the choir here. "Sergeant, if you knew Fox Mulder, you would know that containing him is something akin to trapping lightning in a bottle. It's just as dangerous and difficult and usually just about as stupid."

Frish blinked at her choice of words. Mulder was one of the many aspects of this entire mess that he little understood when he got involved with it.

“Don't worry, Sergeant, if there is anyone who can get to the bottom of this for you, it is Mulder. I've learned that lesson the hard way over the years.” She smiled softly as she turned towards her window again, glancing at the bright lights on the ground below. "I've learned to believe because Mulder believes, and speaking from someone who's been there, sometimes that is the only thing you have to rely on."
Chapter Summary

In which Scully has to make a heartbreaking phone call.

Scully had told Pendrell not to be scared, just to breathe, he would be all right, and she would make sure of it. He had nodded, his blue eyes wide and confused as his lungs hissed and wheezed, blood blossoming across his chest. She had promised him that he would be fine.

"His blood pressure dropped, Agent Scully, there was too much blood loss." The ER doctor in charge had the sad, sympathetic look that Scully had always had trouble managing when she had done her turn as an ER doctor. Scully couldn't even remember her name. "We tried as best as we could."

"I know." Scully replied perhaps a trifle quickly, immediately feeling apologetic for it. I...I know. I worked in an ER once myself during my rotation."

Why did she feel the need to mention that? Some doctor she was. She couldn't even save her dying friend. She had allowed him to bleed while his murderer got away into the night. She had promised Pendrell. She had believed it would be all right.

"Do you want the Bureau to contact his next of kin, let someone know what happened?"

God, where was Pendrell's family. Scully knew so little about him, where he as from, where his parents lived. "Uh, yes, it's usually how these things are handled, through official channels."

She would have to tell Skinner to inform Pendrell's superior. What would she say to him? Sorry, your agent, a tech geek, was shot and killed while trying to buy drinks in a bar because I was stupid enough to bring a dangerous witness into a bar.

Poor Pendrell had been buying her a birthday beer. He wanted to treat her, to show her he cared, and that had gotten him killed. No matter how hard she tried to do what was right, someone she cared for died because of it. Pendrell hadn't even been involved in this case, much as Melissa hadn't been involved either. They were both dead, killed by others wishing to remove Scully for what she knew, for the threat she posed. Both of their killers were still out there, likely to never find justice. Scully's list of dead seemed to grow at a stomach-turning rate.

"Agent Scully?" The doctor's fingers at her elbow drew her out of her spinning, dark thoughts. The young woman smiled hesitantly. "Agent Pendrell's things...he was an armed agent. Should I release those to you?"

"Uh...yes." She nodded, suddenly realizing someone would need to take care of the real, tangible aspects of Pendrell's passing. What was the procedure on collecting a fallen agent's gun Sheand badge? She had never been the agent in charge of that before, not even with Jack Willis.

"I'll have someone bring those out to you then. And if there is anything we can do for the Bureau, areport on our medical findings..."

"I'll make sure to contact you." If she could ever remember the doctor's name, she thought, pulling
from her rapidly emptying reserve of self-control and grace-under-pressure.

"Again, Agent Scully, I'm sorry for your loss." The woman smiled in tight empathy, leaving Scully standing in the quiet waiting room, blankly watching her go, her dark ponytail and green scrubs lost in a crowd of others as she disappeared about her duties. She had other patients to worry about, other dying people rushing through her ER doors. As sad as she was for one FBI agent's loss, the young doctor had other duties to be about that required her immediate attention.

As did Scully, she reminded herself despite the guilt and grief that she had no time to languish in. Mulder still sat in a military jail, unsurprisingly under arrest for sticking his big nose into that damn lake in New York. She guessed she would likely have to fish him out of there once Skinner managed to speak to the right people and convince them to allow his wayward agent to go free. But for now he could stay there, cool his inquisitive heels for a while. She had to deal with this. If she couldn't guarantee she could save Pendrell's life, the least she could do was to make sure he was taken care of after death.

Despite the hour she reached for her phone, dialing Skinner at his home. She was unsurprised when he answered on the first ring, completely awake.

"Sir, it's Scully."

"How is Pendrell?"

Scully worked her mouth, trying to form the words that momentarily stuck in her throat. "Pendrell... didn't make it sir."

There was a long silence on the other end. Scully half feared that her connection was dropped in the thick walls of the hospital. But she could hear the long, heavy, grievous sigh on the other end. This was the sort of phone call no Assistant Director wanted to get. She could imagine him grimacing at the news, baldhead dropping between his shoulders slightly. It pained all members of the Bureau when an agent was taken out in the line, especially like this, even if it wasn't someone they knew.

"I'll let his superior know," Skinner replied gravely. "I'm sorry to hear of his loss. I know the two of you occasionally worked together on cases. It's never easy losing someone like this."

It wasn't easy the first time when she lost Jack, or the second time when she lost Melissa, or this time with Pendrell. "No sir, it isn't."

How calm she sounded right now. In reality, Scully would like nothing more than to rage, to hit something, to sob. Instead she calmly went about her duty, like always. "I'm taking the liberty of collecting Pendrell's things, his gun and badge in particular. I'll return those to the Bureau."

"Thank you. Did you have yourself checked out while you were there?"

Scully knew somehow Skinner would ask, and she tried not to let it irritate her. It was one thing having Mulder playing overprotective mother hen, terrified at the sight of a little blood from her nose, but Skinner had never witnessed it before, and she couldn't hold that against him. Not that he would allow her to anyway, she was his agent, he felt responsible all the same.

"Yes sir," she lied, boldface, not caring. "I'm fine. It's to be expected from time to time with my condition."

She spoke as if she were pregnant, not cancerous. "Do you have any further word on Agent Mulder?"
Get back to other distractions, step away from her personal illness.

"I just got off the phone with General Shalikashvili, Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I explained to him the situation as I knew it, that I had two agents on the ground with the FAA helping their investigation and that Mulder was unaware that the military was in any way running their own investigation in the lake." Skinner's tone made it clear he too had just lied on behalf of his own agent. "I asked that the military release Mulder in exchange you two would share whatever information you have into the incident with the Air Force task team charged with understanding how one of their fighter planes collided with a commercial airliner."

Collided with? "Is that the story they are telling you sir?"

"It is the story that is coming out of the Air Force, Scully, and as I'm a part of the Justice Department and not Defense Department, I don't have any way to call bullshit on it." Skinner's patience had clearly thinned with the events of the night and the hour of the morning. "This is the story the Air Force is giving the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Administration, and you know what, I think the FBI can go along with that for now. I'm not interested in starting a pissing match between the Defense, Justice, and Transportation Departments. And if we keep pressing this that is exactly what is going to start happening, with the bulk of it falling down on you and Mulder's head."

"But sir, Sergeant Frish's story…"

She couldn't accept that this man made all of this up only to be chased down, targeted for an assassination that ended the life of Pendrell. "Someone tried to assassinate him tonight. I can't believe that an attempt would be made unless he was speaking to some truth that is being covered up."

"I'm not denying your instincts here, what I am saying is that pushing this would do you no good." Skinner was firm, refusing to budge. "But it's out of our hands now. The military has taken Frish, and there is no way we can get him back, not after this. And I can't risk pushing the matter when they've been more than lenient about your partner and his antics tonight. Now I suggest you kindly go and gather your partner and convince him to accept these findings as well and to return to Washington ASAP."

His words were less a suggestion than an order. Had Skinner not learned what happened when one tried to convince Mulder of anything he wasn't willing to hear? "Yes, sir."

"I know this has been a tough night, Agent Scully. I won't pretend it hasn't been, and I know you've been through a great deal of late."

"This won't stop me from doing my job, sir," she rushed to assure him, sensing a "why don't you" coming somewhere in that sentence. She wasn't about to be prevented from doing her work over one simple nosebleed. Scully silently cursed the fact that Skinner had to be witness to one.

"I know," he replied a trifle regretfully. "Get your partner home, Scully, close this up, get some rest."

"Sir, I'm fi..."

"It's an order, Scully. I need you on my team still and I can't have my agents working at half capacity. No arguments."

Scully gritted her teeth briefly, knowing she could not argue with Skinner as she could Mulder.
"Yes sir."

"Good night…and thank you for being there with Pendrell."

Something in her boss' words struck her, stinging her heart as she found her tongue suddenly thick, her eyes pricking hotly.

“Of course, sir,” she managed on half a strangled gasp. "He was…my friend."

"I know. I'll speak with you tomorrow."

Wordlessly Scully clicked off her cell phone, staring at it silently for long moments. All of this and the military was going to cover it up. Frish would take the blame, using a half-truth to tear him down and hide what really happened to Flight 549. And Pendrell, his death was for nothing, an unfortunate accident. Not even taken down in the line of duty, just a poor sap that was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Would the lies ever, ever stop?

Scully's head throbbed, the tumor above her eye thrumming in time to her heartbeat, the one that for now still beat steadily in her breast. Lies upon lies, all of this, one after the other, after the other…

"Agent Scully?" She turned to a dark-skinned nurse holding a bag out gingerly to her, looking somber and apologetic. "I was told you were waiting for Agent Pendrell's things, his effects, his badge, and his weapon?"

Scully guessed it was the last that gave the nurse pause as she quickly passed the bag over. Scully checked inside, making sure the pistol was there along with its extra cartridge and nodded her appreciation to the woman.

"If there is anything we can do?" Of course she would offer. Everyone always felt bad when an officer of the law was killed, everyone wanted to help, but no one could help with this. The lies and the cover-up went too deep.

"I think you've all done everything you could, thank you." She turned away to go, fighting the mist that made it so difficult to see. She was sorry her promise had been but one more lie in a web of them, another empty promise she couldn't possibly keep.
What to Believe

Chapter Summary

In which Scully bails Mulder out, again, from the brig.

"May I ask what's in the bag?"

Scully wasn't about to argue with a fully armed member of the military police, especially not one who had been so polite. "It's clothing for my partner, Fox Mulder. I've come to collect him." She passed over the paperwork signed off by the head of Military Police for Von Drehle Air Force Base.

The young MP looked over the pages, nodded in satisfaction, and motioned to her bag. "Mind if I take a look?"

She passed over the duffle, one of Mulder's gym bags filled with a fresh suit and clean clothes. Before flying back to New York she had stopped by his apartment, perusing what passed for a closet and clothes storage at his apartment and had picked what she thought looked reasonable for a professional FBI agent in the field. It disturbed her that Mulder had a bedroom he never used. She wasn't about to ask what he kept behind that secret door. She was sure she didn't even want to know.

The young man made short work of his search. Young and serious, she doubted he had much of a desire to be seen pawing through someone else's underwear. He quickly zipped the bag closed again, passing it back over to Scully with a small nod. "If you follow me, ma'am."

Scully quietly did so, falling in step behind the tall man dressed in fatigues, her heels clocking in rhythm alongside the heavy combat boots of the Air Force enlisted man. He reminded her briefly of Sergeant Frish. She wondered just what would happen to the man. Scully couldn't imagine anything but a rigged court martial lay in the young man's future. She had just spent the last two hours listening to the Air Force's recordings of the tower communications. She could clearly hear Frish and Gonzalez giving coordinates, including the ones that led a jet fighter towards Flight 549.

She heard nothing regarding why the jet was going that way or anything regarding a third aircraft in the vicinity. It sounded like it was exactly what the Air Force was claiming it was, a tragic misunderstanding.

Except she couldn't make herself quite believe that Frish would concoct a lie like the Air Force was accusing, and she couldn't believe that a man who was running away from his own culpability would need to have an assassin set on him, one who was guilty of murdering her friend. None of that added up in the Air Force's neat and tidy explanation, but she hadn't brought that up to the Air Force investigators as she listened to the tape. If anything she planned to stay silent till she got her partner out of this joint. Unlike Mulder, she lacked the need to deliberately antagonize the military just because she thought she was right in her suspicions. Not that it would do them any good now, anyway, like everything else, it was going to be neatly covered up and ignored, and Pendrell's death would follow in the same pattern as her sister's, as Penny's...perhaps eventually even hers.

From down the hallway came the sound of more boots and as they rounded the corner Scully could see two other fatigue-clad men bearing between them the familiar form of Mulder. He was dressed
in green, scrub-like clothes, likely some sort of prison issue for the military, and he met her steady
gaze with wry smirk and a lopsided grin.

"Hey, Scully, you come to spring me from the joint?"

None of the MPs were amused by his wit and frankly neither was Scully. She waited patiently as Mulder signed off on his release. "I came to talk to you."

"About what?" Mulder airily handed back the clipboard. "The big, old misunderstanding?"

Mulder's dark sarcasm hardly surprised her, especially not when he was had been arrested by the military yet again, but Scully was in no mood to coddle him or to sooth him. She held her tongue while he sulked, allowing her MP escort to show the two of them to a room off the hallway, a singular, functional place, coldly tiled in white, but private enough to allow Mulder to change and the two of them to speak. Scully shot the young man a grateful look as Mulder stalked in. He took the duffel bag she brought and tossing it on the singular table in the room.

"According to the military, there was no misunderstanding." She watched as he dumped the bags contents, nodding in approval at what she had gathered. It wasn't that Scully believed the Air Force when they said that, but it wasn't something she could dispute with them either. She had no evidence to argue the fact.

"So all of the sudden they just decide to take responsibility for the crash of Flight 549?"

"They had no choice, not in light of all the facts that have come out." A part of her wanted to point out it was his doing the facts had come out in the first place, that he should be pleased. She knew it would do no good.

As suspected, Mulder snorted in derisive disbelief. "The facts? Have you heard their cover story? That the control tower gave bad coordinates to a fighter pilot, causing him to collide with Flight 549 in military airspace?" He grabbed the hem of his military issued shirt and tore it off as if it were personally responsible for the lies being spun around the deaths of all those people.

Scully knew he had a point. "They allowed me to listen to their recordings."

For what that was worth. Her gaze flickered from his burning, angry eyes, down his naked chest, as it suddenly occurred to her that her partner was shucking clothes off in front of her without a second thought to the fact she was standing there. His fingers were already moving towards the elastic waistband of his trousers as he stewed in his righteous indignation, oblivious to her. The temperature rose in her cheeks and she forced herself to turn to preserve someone's modesty, likely her own. Dear Lord, she blinked, wrapping arms around herself briefly as she studiously studied the singular window in the room, the concrete bricks in the wall, the sticky, all-purpose latex paint used to cover over them, anything but her partner getting dressed behind her.

She could hear the rustle of pants slipping to the floor as Mulder shuffled through his belongings, her gaze flickered from his burning, angry eyes, down his naked chest, as it suddenly occurred to her that her partner was shucking clothes off in front of her without a second thought to the fact she was standing there. His fingers were already moving towards the elastic waistband of his trousers as he stewed in his righteous indignation, oblivious to her. The temperature rose in her cheeks and she forced herself to turn to preserve someone's modesty, likely her own. Dear Lord, she blinked, wrapping arms around herself briefly as she studiously studied the singular window in the room, the concrete bricks in the wall, the sticky, all-purpose latex paint used to cover over them, anything but her partner getting dressed behind her.

She could hear the rustle of pants slipping to the floor as Mulder shuffled through his belongings, she guessed for his underwear and slacks. Jesus, she was acting as if she hadn't seen him naked before. Feeling foolish she continued, firmly shaking herself mentally to put her back on task. "If you believe them, the coordinates that Sergeant Frish gave to the fighter pilot were the exact path that 549 was on. Now, they would indicate that Sergeant Frish and his co-controller could not have seen Flight 549 in the airspace until it was too late."

"So they're saying the tower put those jets on a collision course?"

"Yes, and that they were the only two aircraft on the radar screen."
"And realizing his guilt, Sergeant Frish's fellow officer put a gun to his head." Mulder didn't buy into that any more than he seemingly bought into the rest of the Air Force's convenient truth.

Scully sighed, wandering to the window, glancing at the gray, rainy light outside. It reflected her mood. "According to the Air Force, Sergeant Frish lied to save himself. When he found out that his fellow officer committed suicide, he came to us to blame the military. That's why they pursued him, to bring him to justice."

Some justice, she thought. What sort of military sent an assassin to do their dirty work for them? She couldn't make herself buy the Air Force's explanation on this, no matter how cognizant it sounded.

"Then they could conveniently lay the blame on a dead man." Mulder sighed in vague disgust.

"Yes," she nodded, glancing over her shoulder, seeing Mulder mostly dressed. He tied his shoes and stood, grabbing his suit jacket.

"This second plane? They say it's a military fighter?"

"It was an F-15 Eagle according to an Air Force spokesman."

Mulder nodded slowly, carefully gathering his remaining things inside his duffle. "You believe that, Scully?" He grabbed his overcoat, left behind in the motel room, shrugging it over his broad shoulders.

"I don't know what to believe."

Mulder moved towards her, pushing up his soft, dark hair away from where it lay across his forehead, to a bright, pink patch across his pale skin. The uppermost layer of skin had bubbled up into tiny, pinprick sized blisters, none of which looked dangerous, only mildly irritating, as if he'd spent an afternoon getting too much sun, except it was gray and cloudy, in February, in upstate New York.

"You believe I got this from an F-15 Eagle?" His evidence and proof that all of what Scully had just told him was lies.

"Those look like radiation burns. Where did you get that?"

"At the second crash sight, in about fifty feet of water at the bottom of Sacandaga Lake."

How in the…

"You found it?"

"I followed a trail of bubbles down to the wreckage, but it didn't look like anything that might take off from an Air Force base." He spun for the door, snatching his duffle bag along the way. Now curious, Scully followed.

"What was it?"

"What collided with 549 was a UFO shot down by the military, taking the passenger plane right along with it." It was the theory Scully knew he had been working towards since before Frish even came forward.

"Except it can't be proven," she reminded him as she followed him out of the door and into the
"Why not?" He asked this with all the guilelessness of a child asking her why Santa Clause couldn't exist. Did he really believe he could just prove this to the world?

"Because they haven't been able to find any physical evidence whatsoever that Flight 549 was involved in a collision." That was the extra wrinkle in this story, the part she had gained from a phone conversation she had received that morning from the head of the FAA investigation. Interesting that he would see no collision while dealing with the wreckage when the Air Force apparently assumed there was one. More reason she couldn't buy everything that the military was telling her.

Mulder took the opposite view from herself, unsurprisingly. "How do you know he's not lying?"

"I don't, except that he seems to be the one man that truly wants to figure out what downed that plane and who came to me with information he had no reason to share.

Mulder's longs strides took them outside of the military building, past the nodding MP's and into the cold, dim sunlight outside. The brisk wind cut at Scully's exposed skin as they started down the steps.

"What information?" Mulder hardly broke his stride as he moved on, always rushing forward, his overnight stint in the brig hardly slowing his motivation or his investigation. Scully paused, she wasn't sure she understood the whole story Mark Millar had to tell her herself.

"He found Sharon Graffia wandering in a daze at the crash sight the night we left, after seeing lights over the area."

"Max Fenig's sister?" This at least slowed Mulder down. He stopped at the bottom of the steps, confused.

"That's the thing, Mulder. She's not Max Fenig's sister." More lies, more half-truths. They seemed to get them from all sides, even the ones that they were supposedly trying to help.

"Well who is she?"

"She's an unemployed aeronautical engineer who spent time in and out of mental institutions. That's where she met Max." Millar had done the legwork on this part of the investigation, something Scully should have done in the beginning and she had foolishly let the ball drop. Now someone outside of their investigation had this crucial key in their case, and it perhaps could have stopped all of this before it ever reached the point of FBI involvement in an FAA investigation.

"Why would she lie?" Did Mulder honestly believe that every person in distress that came to him did so with a pureness of heart? Did it not occur to him that even Sharon Graffia could have been playing him for her own reasons?

"I don't know," Scully replied, throwing a helpless hand out, confused as to why this plane, this crash, kept killing and killing long after it had made impact with the earth. "All I know is that this plane seems to be killing people as it sits there on the ground."

Her eyes stung and burned again, her mouth trembling before she clamped it firmly. "Mulder… Agent Pendrell is dead."

For the first time since he was released to her, Mulder stopped. Not just physically as he stood at the bottom of the steps, but mentally, stuttering in his thoughts as his mouth worked briefly.
Speech stumbled and stuttered out of him finally, as he shook his head in wonder, as if he couldn't wrap his mind around her words. "H-how?"

"Shot in an attempt on Sergeant Frish in Washington." Mulder's shock flipped instantly to grief and anger, his hands slipping into his pockets as his head bowed, saddened in his own way for the loss of someone he had gotten to know through their work. Mulder never saw justice in murder. And there was no justice in this, not for Pendrell at least. Scully already knew that they would never find his killer. It was a familiar story to them both now, not that it reassured her.

Scully's vision misted, a film of pain as her tumor throbbed in time to the tears forming. Pendrell had been her friend, just buying her a drink. "He saved Frish's life, Mulder, and maybe mine."

She turned, walking away, her steps hard against the pavement, confusion warring with heartbreak as she moved to the rental car, unsure of what to do or where to go. This entire case had been nothing but one lie after another, with more people dying because of it, and she wasn't even sure where they were supposed to go with this now, or what they were supposed to do. Behind her Mulder's steps rushed to catch up with her.

"Wait, Scully." His long arms grabbed her, stilled her and forced her to look up at him.

"What are these people dying for?" She snapped up at him, not really upset with him, but frustrated by the entire situation. "Is it for the truth or for the lies?" For that matter what were they going to believe?

"It's got to be the truth," Mulder insisted, firmly, fervently, without question. "If we owe them anything, it's to make sure of that."

Mulder believed this to the core of his being. It was who he was. Mulder could not believe even once that what he did served anything less than the truth. What would happen if that blind spot were ever turned against him? What if it already had been? Scully thought of Sharon and how easily he had bought her story, how quickly he had insinuated himself into all of this. Did he even realize that the truth often was whatever people wanted Mulder to believe?

"Scully…look, I know Pendrell was your friend, he was a damn good agent. But we can't allow doubt to stop us in this now." He sounded absurdly like a football coach, giving a pep talk to a beleaguered player. "I know where Max's trailer is, I got it off of the letters he sent to Sharon. It's a couple of hours drive northwest of here. There might be something there that tells us what it was he was carrying with him on that plane and why it was worth killing for."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we'll go back to DC, defer to the FAA's findings, and drop it." He sounded as if he was only saying that because he thought that was what she wanted. But it wasn't. She had promised Pendrell she wouldn't let him die. She couldn't fail him in trying to bring some justice to his passing.

"Let's just go, Mulder." She sighed, pulling away from his fingers, towards the rental car.
In which Mulder and Scully sit and listen to the voice of a ghost.

And the worst part is no one believes you. Well, uh... almost no one. So, I've devoted my life to providing all you disbelievers out there with proof, proof that there are extraterrestrial biological entities right now, as we speak, visiting our planet in alien ships for purposes of a rather troubling agenda known only to certain members of the government, uh, the F.B.I. and certain high-ranking members...

On the faded, color screen of Max Fenig's small television the man who called this squalid trailer home ranted towards the shaky, hand-held camera. His face shone with the same sort of intense belief and dogged determination she saw on the man sitting beside her in one of the faded chairs. Mulder hunched over his knees, watching his kindred spirit, Max's wild, curly hair barely kept in check under a faded baseball cap. Behind his Coke-bottle thick glasses, his eyes were just as wild as he continued his impassioned monologue, preaching to the unseen cameraperson and the unknown viewer of his video oration.

...of the military-industrial community who have recovered some of these very craft, not that they'd ever admit to it publicly... uh... of course. Nor, nor would they, uh, admit that they have salvaged some of this alien technology and are using it in military applications. No, that would be un-American and they won't admit it until someone confronts them with irrefutable, undeniable proof. Someone like me. And, uh... I should probably mention that I should do this at great risk to my own health and safety, but, hey, when every day's just another day you're going to get kidnapped by, by some little gray dudes from outer space, what's a few CIA spooks to worry about?

Mulder reached across to the VCR, pausing the tape on Max's grin, looking madly devil-may-care in the face of something so dangerous. He watched that still expression for long minutes, sitting up and leaning back in the creaking chair. "He sounds as if he's so confident his plan would work."

"He sounds exactly like someone else I know," Scully replied, one eyebrow arched over at him. "Face it, Mulder, this is you in so many ways. Perhaps you are a tad more circumspect in your actions than Max is, and you prefer a steadier paycheck, but those words....I could close my eyes and listen to them and if I didn't know better I would assume it was you."

"I would like to think I have better sense of style." Mulder mildly thumbed is overcoat, still watching the screen, unsettled. "You know, some things never change I guess. Max's hair style, his crummy trailer, his association with plane crashes."

"Except this one he happened to be on it." Scully studied the man as well, his milk-white face, his frantic smile. There had been something always twitchy and furtive about Max Fenig, even in her brief encounter with him. He'd known exactly who she was without introduction. He'd called her "enigmatic". Funny, that was a term that seemed to fit him so perfectly. On first glance, he seemed like a strange, delusional alien hunter, perhaps slightly less put together than even the Lone Gunmen, but no different than any of the other people they had seen out in the field, dancing around in green, glow-in-the-dark body paint under a full moon, calling for their "alien brothers". But that wasn't the Max they saw on the video, the anxious, nervous man, prepared to risk his life...
to do something that was quiet possibly dangerous to himself. What did it have to do with the
downing of Flight 549?

"Max was chasing a downed spaceship in Wisconsin, Scully. I don't care if the Army was saying it
was a downed, Libyan jet with nuclear weapons on it, have you asked yourself how a Libyan jet
can get into North American airspace without someone knowing?"

She admittedly hadn't. "No."

"He knew it was out there. I saw it take him, and he knew the military was aware of it too. I think
he's been working in the years since then to track down the pieces of that alien technology, to find
them and hopefully bring one of them to light."

"Mulder, whether it was terrorists or our own government out there in Wisconsin, what I do know
is that both Max and Sharon were working undercover at a high tech, weapons facility, and that
both of them are clearly disturbed. They could have conspired to take anything from there, thinking
it was alien technology from that plane in Wisconsin, and tried to pass it off as something it wasn't.
Whatever it was, it could be the reason that plane went down."

"Oh, I know it was the reason that plane went down, but I don't think it went down the same way
you think it did." Mulder rose, reaching for the television and VCR and clicking both off as he did
it. "And I don't think that it was parts for a weapons system they were making off with either. I
think Max was successful in finding some of the technology from that crash and he and Sharon
were trying to get it out, except they were intercepted by an alien spacecraft instead."

"An alien spacecraft?" Scully crossed her arms in front of her, lifting her chin up in challenge to
Mulder's insistence on including a UFO somewhere in this equation. "Mulder, I've listened to the
tapes, all we have is evidence that there were two aircrafts, Flight 549 and an F-15 Eagle."

"You heard what they wanted you to hear, Scully. Don't you think it's easy enough to edit a tape to
give you the parts of the truth they want you to know?"

"Of course I don't think that the Air Force is telling me the whole truth! I can't believe is that Frish
and Gonzalez gave wrong coordinates and covered it up. No one would send someone to kill Frish
if it were as simple as that."

"Than what do you believe happened?"

That part she hadn't completely put together yet. "I think that Max Fenig stole something that the
US military deemed important, something they were willing to stop getting out at any cost. Secret
military plans are harshly protected, you and I both know that by now, and I think they were
willing to stop at nothing, even downing a civilian aircraft, to get back whatever it was Max stole."

"And you think that's why they are trying to pin this on Frish?"

"Yes." As crazy as her own theory sounded, she didn't flinch from backing it. It was more plausible
in its own way than Mulder's. His sounded as if he could have plucked it off of the video of Max
they had just watched, alien ships coming to steal back their own technology. Mulder knew it too.
He looked thoughtful for the briefest of moments before shaking his head, unable to accept it.

"I'd agree with you, Scully, but that wasn't an F-15 I saw at the bottom of that lake. No fighter jet I
know off leaves radiation burns on people's skin." He sucked at his bottom lip thoughtfully,
chewing on it as he focused on some spot in the cramped confined of Max's trailer. "And I bet
anything if you ran a trace on every single jet they have there at the Air Force base, you wouldn't
find a single missing one. Think about it, the airliner went down on land. The other crash is in a lake. If the fighter jet had slammed into the airliner, they'd have gone down together."

"And Mike Millar said that there was no signs of impact on the airliner."

"There would have been if the fighter had hit it, and there would have been if the fighter had shot it down as well."

Mulder's last point shot Scully's theory dead between the eyes. She sighed, her breath whistling between her teeth as she realized it. "Damn."

"I think that what Max found was something the military wanted to keep away from the aliens, they had taken it from one of their crash sights. And when it was clear that the aliens were going to take it back, they decided to take out both sides of the equation to not only get the object back, but remove all evidence of it."

"And all these people have died for it?" The cold-heartedness of the action, the sheer lack of empathy or consideration for the innocence caught up in this boggled her mind.

"Is it better to sacrifice the lives of a few than to alert the world to something the government has been actively hiding for fifty years?"

He slowly raised a hand to her own brow, his index finger brushing against it softly, light as a feather. Her skin tingled with the contact and her heart skipped up into her throat. "They gave all of those women cancer, including you, and have never once cared who they've hurt doing that. What are a few hundred more people to hide their secrets."

Scully felt her throat tighten as he drew away, eyes sadly flickering from her forehead. "Mulder, this isn't the same."

"Isn't it? These are the same people, even if it is different projects. These people will stop at nothing to get at what they want. And that's why I fight so hard to bring this to light, because of people like the ones on that plane, like your friend Penny, like Pendrell. This is why I fight. And perhaps to anyone else I sound like Max Fenig, ranting about the lies and the truth, but the difference is I don't want to expose these things for expositions sake. I want justice for these people, for Max, for Pendrell, for those women in Allentown…and for you."

For her? Somehow, Scully hadn't thought of needing justice yet. She was still standing, still fighting. Till she could do otherwise she didn't need justice. And yet Mulder believed she did…or perhaps was willing to make her a part of his fight.

"I'm looking for justice as well, Mulder. But we also need evidence. And we are sorely lacking in that area."

"Maybe or maybe not. Frish is in military custody now, but Sharon isn't." Mulder moved around her, towards the door of Max's ramshackle home, the flimsy aluminum rocking slightly as he crouched his height under the doorframe and out into the open, blessedly fresher air. Scully followed. "Do you know where she is at now?"

"No, but I bet Millar does. And we need to speak to him anyway." Scully wondered how in the world the poor woman would be able to help. "What do you hope she can tell us?"

"What it was she and Max found and just why the US military would willingly kill someone to
keep it safe."
The stars were bright in the sky tonight.

The air was crisp and clear in Barnes Corners, New York, brittle with the last gasp of winter. The sky was so dark she thought she could look into infinity if she stood there long enough, the stars a diamond spangle on the velvety black of night. When was the last time she had ever bothered to look up at the stars, she mused quietly? When she was a little girl? When she was in Napa with Daniel? In the Pine Barrens of New Jersey with Jack? Not anytime recent she could recall.

Behind her the door of Max Fenig's trailer slammed, Mulder's heavy footsteps crunching in the gravel outside of the front door. Their case in New York was finished. Despite what they knew, they had no evidence to back up their claims. Mike Millar and the FAA team were forced to accept the findings of the Air Force, that it had all been a gross mistake. There was of course the expected outrage in the media, the calls for accountability, and the promise of Senatorial sub-committee oversight, but she ignored them. They only served to remind her of the truth, and like Max Fenig, she was now one of the few people who knew what had happened and who understood. Now it was up to her and to Mulder to carry that truth and to see to it that it was never forgotten, those sacrifices, those who were lost to them.

"You thinking about Pendrell?" Mulder always had his way of knowing. It was what made him such a good profiler. She smiled, nodding.

"I didn't even know his first name." She chuckled sadly, feeling slightly guilty for that. Someone she was so close to and she had never once asked him what his first name was. It had never occurred to her till it was too late to ask.

In the cold, her fingers fumbled in her pocket, seeking warmth, the tip of her right hand rubbing against the chilled, rounded, heavy metal keychain in her pocket. She pulled it out, fingering it with a sad smile.

"I was thinking about this gift that you gave me for my birthday. You never got to tell me why you gave it to me, or what it means, but I think I know. I think that you appreciate that there are extraordinary men and women and extraordinary moments when history leaps forward on the backs of these individuals. That what can be imagined can be achieved, that you must dare to dream, but that there's no substitute for perseverance and hard work and teamwork, because no one gets there alone, and that, while we commemorate the greatness of these events and the individuals who achieve them, we cannot forget the sacrifice of those who make these achievements and leaps possible."

Mulder shifted beside her, his booted feet dragging in the gravel. "I thought it was a pretty cool keychain."

Typical Mulder, ruining such a poignant moment, she sighed. Scully chuckled as she slipped the keychain back in her pocket, fingers wrapped tightly around it, falling in beside her partner as the
two of them strolled back to the car, each was wrapped in thoughtful silence as they came up to it, quietly staring into the bejeweled sky above. Rather than get into the warmth of the car, though, Scully moved to the cars front. Despite her shoes, she clambered as gracefully as she could manage onto the hood without scratching the glossy paint, curling her legs up as she leaned back onto the cool metal. She didn't bother to look at Mulder's surprise as she stared up into the heavens above. How many starry nights like this were left to her?

"Do you think the world will ever care about these sacrifices, Mulder?" She knew why that questioned bothered her. He did as well, but as if by mutual agreement they chose not to mention the "cancer" word between them.

"I think the world does care, they just don't know." Mulder's weight shifted the car lower on its front-end shocks as he joined her on the hood, sitting down and leaning back effortlessly. "But like you said back there, all truly great and good things in this world seemed to be carried on the back of the sacrifices that are made by the nameless few who give of themselves wholeheartedly for the greater good. And while history may not remember their names or faces, their sacrifice is no less extraordinary or valuable."

"I can't make myself think that all of this has been a waste." Her words were more of a sigh carried into the night. "After all of this - Max, Pendrell, those people, their deaths - it can't have all been for nothing."

"I don't believe they were." Mulder sounded so sure. "We have to keep the faith that they weren't. And we can't ever forget the sacrifices they made for the work, for the greater good. History may not remember them, but we can't ever forget. We shouldn't forget."

"Yeah!" She sighed, shivering slightly, but unwilling to turn away from the stars above just yet. "Where will this all end us? Will there be an end? What happens when we find those truths, Mulder, and we are able to finally uncover them. What then? Will life just go on as normal? Will we be able to live our lives, or will all hell break loose because of what we've done?" This was all pre-supposing she would have a life to live in the end, she silently added.

"You don't believe that the truth should be shared?"

"It's not that." She paused in her circumspection. "Even if Max did get that device, Mulder, and he was able to expose it to the world, would it have changed everything like he hoped? What would people do if they knew that aliens were real, or that the military was creating secret weapons that could cause untold damage? Would it change anything in the end? Or would they simply just deal with the damage, put it aside, and start some other new lie, some other new plan to keep from us. Will it ever stop? Will this fight go on forever for us?"

Mulder was silent when she stopped speaking, his breathing slow and measured as his breath fogged the air in front of them. It took him some time to answer, his tone a monotone drawl in the way he had when he was being particularly thoughtful. "I want to believe it will. I want to believe that at the end of the day all our hard work pays off, that we can see this through, that we can both go on to live our lives, do other things, and we can both see this through to its end."

"You mean you don't want this to be your life's work?" She was laughing at him and he knew it.

"It might just end up being that way, and if so, what can you do about it?"

"Live a life more ordinary?"

"I didn't used to think I would be able to."
"And now?" Scully turned her head to shoot him a curious gaze. She could see Mulder's full mouth pull back in a curious smile in the starlight.

"Perhaps I've come to believe in it a bit more. I've come to think it could be a nice possibility, if it happened. It's certainly a thought, an incentive that keeps me going, thinking that someday we will have won."

"Someday?" She rolled the word around her mouth, across her tongue. The idea of winning, she never used to think about their work in those terms, not till recently, not till she got sick, not till Pendrell died.

"It's funny, you would think that if human beings could figure out how to walk on the moon, we could figure out how to find a global conspiracy regarding aliens, right?" Mulder sighed in bitter disgruntlement.

"I don't know, have you ever tried to put a requisition order in for paperclips? I can see why we haven't found evidence of a global conspiracy."

"So you are saying blame it on the bureaucrats?"

"Paper pushers, they are all the cause of the world's woes. Evil spawns of Satan, I tell you." She giggled, thinking of the many papers she'd had to fill out over the years for things as minor as pens.

"Right, I don't think Skinner would appreciate us running a full scale investigation on the support staff for traces of demonic taint. But I'd love to see his face if I suggest it to him."

"I think that Skinner's a bit done with the both of us for a while. Perhaps we should lay low?"

"Maybe you are right." Mulder agreed, sitting up on the car again. "Jesus, Scully, it's cold! Let's go inside!"

This coming from the hardy New Englander. She laughed, for once not the one being the wuss about the chill in the air. Reluctantly, she slid down the front of the car, landing on her feet and straightening as Mulder reached a steadying hand to her elbow. As he did, he slipped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him in a casual embrace. It wasn't expected, and Scully stiffened briefly in surprise, before relaxing against his shoulder, the only part her head could reach. She leaned it against the warmth she found there, the solid strength that was Mulder, and she found some measure of comfort in it and him. God, it had been a long week.

"For what it's worth, Scully," Mulder murmured against her hair, his chin resting lightly on the top of her head. "Happy birthday."

A deep, body shaking laugh erupted out of her, bittersweet and appreciative. "Thank you. Some birthday, huh?"

"Not one of your finest ones. But hey, at least I wasn't trying to shoot you this time around."

"There is that." She smiled, turning to look up at him. "No Pusher creating havoc, convincing you to turn your gun on me."

His arm tightened briefly, almost spasmodically, before he let her go, rubbing her shoulders briefly before stepping away. "All right, Scully, we got to get out of this burgh and to someplace with food. I'm not about to raid Max's leftovers for sustenance."

"He has any?" Scully would be surprised if he did.
"I'm not about to find out," Mulder replied sagely as he crawled into the car. "We may be kindred spirits, Scully, but a man can not live on beans and weenies alone."

Scully smiled, following him into the passenger's seat. "You are a man of refined taste indeed."
In which Mulder and Scully discuss their next case over coffee and bagels.

For better or for worse life went on and so did Scully.

"So how big do you want the coffee?" Mulder didn't need to bother asking her if she wanted one, only how much of it. Scully thought for the briefest of seconds, looking up for the glossy magazine she was flipping through as they waited at the airport terminal.

"Smaller, I had some this morning, and unless you want me to sit on the aisle seat…"

"Not with my knees I don't. I need the room." He wandered off into the airport in search of caffeinated sustenance as Scully chuckled, watching him go. Mulder knew better than anyone what a beast she could be without regular coffee infusions. He fed her addiction when he could, if nothing else to keep her pleasant in his presence. It was to the point where usually he didn't need to ask.

Another airport, another case, Scully sighed, flipping through the useless, glossy magazine yet again, not really reading it. She simply wanted to have something to do with her hands. Anything to keep her from dwelling on the last days and weeks as she waited for their flight to Boston, bored and restless and wanting to do anything but think and dwell on her life circumstances. She didn't want to have to think about her cancer, Pendrell's death, the burden of all those people lost on that flight, of what was possibly to come for her and her own fight. How quickly life spun on you sometimes. Just weeks before she'd been angry and rebellious, and now the burdens of all of that weighed heavily on her shoulders.

Life seemed to work like that. In the blink of an eye time sort of tripped you up and changed everything on you. Just a few days before, she had attended the funeral of someone she considered a friend, had truly mourned his passing, feeling the guilt of it as she watched Pendrell's family weep over the loss of a brave son. Now days later, she was chasing yet another half-baked X-file in New England. The world kept moving, shifting and changing despite life's problems and tragedies. Scully wished she could just pause and catch her breath, take stock for half of a second. There just never seemed enough time for it.

"With a face like that, perhaps I should have got you the large coffee, or maybe I should have just spiked it with something to cheer you up." Mulder was crossing the gray, utilitarian carpet towards her with two steaming cups in hand and a paper bag tucked under one arm. A teasing smile was on his lips, but there was vague worry, poorly disguised, in his eyes. Scully doubted that worry would go away anytime soon and rather than becoming irritated she decided to ignore it, gratefully taking the warm, Styrofoam cup.

"At least it doesn't smell burnt."

"Fresh pot, just for you, three creams and two sugars, and a bagel." Mulder produced the paper bag with a flourish. "And since I know you hate onion and garlic breath its only got sesame seeds."
"Low-fat cream cheese?"

"I don't know how you can say that with a straight face, 'low-fat cream cheese'." He made a
production of pulling out the small, plastic cartridge and passing it over, pulling out a similar bagel
for him. "So I was thinking on this case, Jason Nichols up at MIT. What kind of murderer makes
up a story of some old guy showing up, warning him minutes before he killed his buddy in public
with witnesses everywhere."

"Perhaps the kind of guy who wants to get off of a murder wrap by looking insane." Scully set
down her coffee on a plastic table in between low-slung, vinyl chairs and attempting to carve at her
bagel with her plastic knife. "There was a driver and a bus full of people who saw the incident."

"Well, that's not totally true, the driver thought he saw Nichols pushing Lucas Menand in front of
the bus, but the truth is Nichols could have just as easily been doing what he said, trying to help his
friend. Nichols says Menand had dropped his stack of books and was picking them up out of the
middle of the street and didn't even see the bus coming. He was running to tell him that."

"That could be too, in which case the police will likely let Jason Nichols go on lack of evidence.
Which of course makes me beg the question…"

"Why are we going?" Mulder jumped in rolling his eyes, smirking as he bit into his bagel, sans any
cream cheese she noticed. They really could read each other now. "We are going because I want to
know who this old man was that warned him of his friends death and why some random campus
police officer ended up dead."

"You think this supposed old man had anything to do with it?"

"Well, perhaps." Mulder chewed thoughtfully for a long moment, washing down his bite of bagel
with his black coffee. "There are legends of things like this in British, Irish, and New England folk
history, of apparitions that appear to forewarn of others deaths, things such as grims, banshees,
spirits who come to try and alter the course of events by giving you a heads up in advance of your
death."

Pity that Pendrell couldn't have seen one of those before he went into that bar that night. Perhaps he
might still be alive. Scully sighed, swallowing her food and sipping her sweet, creamy coffee. "And
do they ever work?"

"Usually they end up scaring the recipient more than helping them. In fact in most of the legends
the person seeing the vision usually becomes so frightened they end up dying anyway, thus making
them a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"Seems to defeat the purpose just a bit, doesn't it?"

Mulder ignored her sarcasm. "There's been reports of these sorts of sightings throughout New
England history, as recently as ten years ago on the campus of Harvard University. There a young
student told her friends she saw an apparition of an old woman warning them not to cross a bridge
on their morning run. Of course, she told them but ignored the warning herself. She was killed the
next morning, having run out mysteriously in front of an oncoming van, and was thrown over the
side of the bridge, killing her instantly."

"And you believe this is somehow related to this MIT case?"

"Well same city, within miles of each other, what if we are dealing with something more than
Jason Nichols imagination? What if there is really something out there predicting these people's
He looked so serious about this, but then he always did. Scully blinked blandly at him, shook her head, and returned to her coffee, hoping it cleared her head enough to deal with this line of conversation. "Mulder, you walk onto MIT's campus, one of the centers of scientific study and research in this country, and start spouting stories about ghosts and banshees, and they'll probably ban you from the school. What you are proposing sounds like something out of the kind of ghost stories we used to tell each other when we were children, sitting around a camp fire."

"Except Jason Nichols is on film telling his story to the police."

"And who is to say that the story is even real, Mulder? He just watched his friend and rival get killed. Whether he did or didn't do it, he could have made up anything."

"We are talking about a scientist, Scully, not a con artist. What purpose would he have in making it up?"

"Speaking as a scientist, Mulder, my brain creates stories and makes things up to deal with those things it can't handle. It's what humans do."

"Right!" He slumped in his seat, popping the last bite of bready bagel into his mouth. "And here I thought you scientists lacked imagination."

"We have it, we just chose to ignore it," she replied sweetly, knowing she'd annoyed him and feeling slightly bad about it. She nudged him gently as he glowered, sipping his coffee. "I get Jason Nichols and his dilemma, I do. I remember being in school and the competition there was. The sciences were always so much more high pressured than the arts were. Everyone was competing to get some professors attention, to have their work be noticed. In a way, I was glad I didn't go into physics as a research scientist. I thought about it at first. I mean it's a glamorous, steady job to have, working for JPL or the military, even for MIT or Cal Tech. But the pressure was insane. The funding out there for work is so limited, and the expectations for results are so high, people have been known to do anything to get and keep it."

"Why didn't you go to MIT?" Mulder, apparently over his momentary sulk, glanced sideways in her direction. "You can't tell me they weren't interested in you."

"They were and I was interested in them, but MIT was far too high pressure. At the time I didn't know what I wanted to do, if I wanted to go into the sciences or into medicine and I didn't want to commit myself to a program that would demand so much of me when I wasn't so sure what I wanted to do with it. Maryland wanted me, it was a half hour drive from home, and UM is one of the top schools in the nation. I wasn't unhappy going there."

"So you didn't want to be a professional egghead for the rest of your life is what you are saying?"

"No, I had higher ambitions, Mulder, to talk to dead bodies all day and to hang out with a man who is working against global conspiracies to hide the truth on UFO's."

"See, Scully, you're living the dream." Mulder laughed, finishing off his coffee in one, long gulp.

"How about you? You grew up in Cambridge's backyard practically, you could have gone to Harvard or MIT, and if not, Yale is practically right next door."

"If you note, Scully, those are all New England schools, which means they are within safe driving distance of both of my parents." Mulder crumpled the paper bag the bagels had been stuffed in and shoved it into the now empty coffee cup. "And when I was eighteen years old I wanted to be
someplace farthest from. I got accepted at both Harvard and Yale. I applied on the request of my parents. But when Oxford took me in, I leapt at the chance. Think of it, a whole ocean between them and me, a different country, and a place where my father had no political influence to speak of. I could be my own man for once."

"I think every teenager wants that. Even I did."

"But you said it yourself you chose Maryland because it was within driving distance of home. I chose Oxford because there was no way possible for my parents to get there. I just wanted to get away, escape the memories and the anger and the hurt." He didn't speak with regret or sorrow, just a certain matter-of-factness that came with the passing of years and with personal understanding. "Besides, those were good years in Oxford, I won't take them back for anything. And I think I gained something I couldn't have staying here in the states for school."

"I can see that," she nodded, glancing at her watch and the gate of call they were supposed to go to. "It's a pity not everyone takes the view on higher education we did. Perhaps if they did, Lucas Menand wouldn't be dead."

"Perhaps he would be, Scully. We can't know that."

"You're saying your death omen ghosts can."

"Well, death omen ghosts can, but seriously, how many times do you run across those?"

"Hopefully only once in a lifetime, Mulder." She snorted, standing and gathering her things. "Though you might be the exception."
Einstein's Theory

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder reminds Scully what type of chutzpah she once had.

"Although common sense may rule out the possibility of time travel, the laws of quantum physics certainly do not." In case you forgot from your graduate thesis".

Damn Mulder and his eidetic memory.

He smiled down at her. "You were a lot more open-minded when you were a youngster."

As if Scully were that old now.

"I know what I wrote." She frowned up at him, wishing for a moment he hadn't read her graduate thesis before she stepped through the X-files office door. "I also know that the laws of physics would permit the theoretical possibility of time travel, but the limits of human endurance would prevent such a trip from ever happening."

Scully's medical training as a doctor had tempered much of the idealism that was bred into her as a budding, undergraduate quantum physicist. Quantum physicists were idealists, dreamers, they thought of the world could be. Doctors were scientists of the concrete, of what was there, of what was in front of them. Never the twain shall meet. Whatever dreamy possibilities she saw when she was a bright-eyed undergraduate seeking to impress her professors and the admissions board at Stanford Medical School, she was now a much more grounded, realistic human being, or so she liked to think, Mulder seemed to excel at chipping away at that perception of herself.

"Well," Mulder drawled, drifting towards the door of the grimy, well used hotel room the old man they had been pursuing was staying in. "There is one way sure to prove that theoretical possibility."

"How?" Scully trailed after him into the musty hallway that smelled of dust and mildew.

"Show this photograph to Lisa Ianelli and ask her if it was ever taken." Mulder pointed at the young woman who appeared in the photograph that shouldn't theoretically exist. "If she doesn't remember this picture, this means it hasn't happened yet."

"Which then would prove that it came from the future?" Scully couldn't buy this. "Mulder, how do we know that they aren't all three lying about this?"

"Who's believing in conspiracies now?" Mulder whipped down the hallway and towards the stairs, smirking as he went.

"Jason Nichols may or may not have killed someone to keep his funding. Who is to say that these three people haven't cooked up this entire thing in order to remove the barricades to their work and keep their funding for the project they want to work on?"

'And you call me paranoid." Mulder was unrelenting as he bounded down the stairs, pausing on the landing to wait for her slower steps. "What happened to that girl you used to be? What happened to the physics student at Maryland who dared to question Einstein and said that travel through time
was theoretically possible?"

"Mulder, I was twenty-three when I wrote that. It was a decade ago. I believed in a lot of things then, but things change." You grow up, she wanted to snap, but didn't. "Besides, it was quantum physics. It is the edge of where science takes us. It skirts reality and leads to the mystical."

"But it's not practical?" Mulder challenged mildly.

"Not everything is about the weird and impossible, you know."

"But isn't the essence of science questioning the world and what is out there? If people didn't ask why things work they way they do, would we have Newton's Laws or Einstein's Theory?"

"No," she admitted. "But sometimes a horse is a horse."

"Unless it's one of a different color." Mulder grinned, turning down the stairs again.

"Metaphors and quick one liners aside, this is rapidly turning into a murder case." She scrambled after her partner's longer legs on the rickety, molding steps. "And you want to bring up ancient history with me."

"Have you ever asked yourself why it is they assigned you to work with me?" His voice echoed up hollowly in the empty stairway and it gave her pause. She stopped, staring at his dark head as he continued to descend.

"What does my paper have to do with it?"

"Think about it!" Mulder stopped again, looking up at her. "You were a pathologist, a doctor, yes a scientist but one who had no business doing the sort of work we do on the X-files. Perhaps you could have worked in violent crimes, but why in the world did you assign you to work cases that dealt with the strange and weird?"

"To debunk you work, to trip you up, to close you down, to spy on you." She rattled off the tired old reasons, the same ones she'd heard the last four years.

"Really? 'Cause if that was the case, Scully, you've done a horrible job."

What possessed him to even go down this line of thought? "You think I was put here because of that paper?" She meandered down the steps, seeing him down below, watching her with glittering eyes.

"I think you were put with me, Scully, because you have the potential of the sort of thought you displayed in that paper. Whether you want to believe it or not, you can think outside of the box, you can see the possibilities of what can be. It's why you haven't completely balked up to this point, run off screaming, and had me committed."

"Don't think that the idea hasn't crossed my mind?"

Mulder hardly took her dryly tossed out threat seriously. "Scully, the reason you are a good scientist and a good doctor, and hell, even a good partner is because while you respect science and the conventions of it, you aren't tied down by or rigidly bound to them to the point you can see beyond the narrow view of the regular scientific community. The Dana Scully who wrote that paper was open to seeing a world of possibilities beyond what convention told her. After all, it takes some grit to stand up to Einstein as a 23-year-old hot shot undergrad."
He wasn't wrong. She had been a hot shot back then. "I was good back in the day, wasn't I?" She smiled slowly.

"You're still good now. You have to be to kick me in the ass as much as you do." Mulder waited patiently for her as she made her way down the stairs to where he waited, hands in his overcoat pockets. "Don't lose that spirit, Dana. Don't stop questioning what has always been accepted just because it's easier, more practical. That's what's made you such a good agent and a good investigator. And it's why I keep you around."

"You keep me around?" One eyebrow arched upwards at his teasing shrug.

"It's better than saying you were just assigned."

"Right," she snorted, plucking at his overcoat and pulling him down the last flight of stairs. "I know that I have some questions I want to ask Lisa about Yonechi, and about the work that Jason is doing, and why it is worth killing over."

"That's my girl," Mulder muttered, soft and low. She wasn't so sure she was supposed to hear it.
Quantum Physics

Chapter Summary

In which Scully reads her old paper and realizes how good she was.

*Although multidimensionality suggests infinite outcomes in an infinite number of universes, each universe can produce only one outcome…*

God, she had been quite the hotshot back in the day.

Scully chuckled softly to herself as she flipped through her senior thesis. She was amazed Mulder still had a copy of this thing. All twenty-five pages of it were neatly stowed in her personal X-file, right in front of the work he did on her abduction. She supposed it was as good of a place as any to keep it, a montage of her life since she had joined the X-files. It was proof positive, at least in Mulder's mind, that Scully could theoretically be a believer. Stranger things had happened in the universe. Perhaps that was her outcome in this one.

"A little light reading?" Mulder swept in from his lunch, smelling of coffee and grease from wherever he went to lunch and that indefinably comfortable scent that was Mulder. He swept off his trench coat, damp with rain from the outside and tossed it haphazardly over his chair. Mulder, chaos in a bottle, swirling into the calm quiet of the office, of her life, of her universe…

"I was reading my old senior thesis." She smiled, holding it up. "You still had it."

"Do I look like I throw anything away?" He held his arms wide over the clutter of his desk, smiling jovially, obviously in a good mood despite the early, March rain outside.

"I keep hoping," Scully muttered dryly. "It's not bad work, is it?"

"I thought it was pretty impressive." Mulder flopped in his chair, glancing across his desk at where she sat, skimming the pages. "Despite the possibilities of an infinite number of universes, the idea that each universe only has one outcome…I suppose that's the scientific way to say that you believe in fate."

"I guess. I never put it in those words." She crossed her legs under her pencil skirt, beating the toe of one of her pumps in a random rhythm as she laid down the thick body of her collegiate work. "I think when I was twenty-three I wanted to believe that all things were fated. Destiny I guess. I had a destiny and I was bound to fulfill it, once I figured out what it was."

"Sounds like most college students. Most other kids that age might go on a road trip, travel the world, get incredibly drunk and go on a week long bender and try to work those problems out. You write a physics paper to confront the perennial questions of who are we and why are we here."

"And what does that say about my psyche?" The corner of Scully's mouth lifted in a curious, small smile.

"That you are a raging nerd, Dana Scully, but only that." Mulder reached across the expanse of her desk and snagged it from in front of her, flipping it around to look at it with heavy eyes. "So have your opinions changed much in ten years?"
"I think everyone changes in ten years, especially 23-year-old physics students. Back then my argument was that in a universe of infinite possibilities, each universe might be different and unique, but the outcomes for each was the one it was always destined to have. But now…"

She paused, doubtful.

"You aren't so sure anymore?" One of his dark eyebrows rose curiously over her paper as he watched her.

"I don't know." She had believed so much as a young woman that her experiences since then had come to question painfully. "I at one time believed I would have the perfect life. I would be a doctor, I would marry some other doctor, have the white picket house and the 2.5 kids and be the ideal my parents wanted. Somehow I ended up an FBI agent working in a basement, single, unmarried, no kids, and now fighting cancer."

She frowned gloomily at the wall of filing cabinets, the solid front of X-files. "I can't say that if I had the opportunity, Mulder, I wouldn't go back and change some things. And yet, by my own words, I argue that you can't. Each universe is supposed to end up precisely how it is supposed to end up."

"Do you believe in another universe Dana Scully is any of those things?" Something bruised and haunted flickered briefly to life in Mulder's mild expression. Scully shrugged slowly, realizing she had to tread this area carefully. She knew he likely already carried the weight of guilt of her illness. She didn't want to exacerbate it.

"I believe that in other universes each of us made other decisions, that things that effected our lives in this universe perhaps didn't happen. I mean, it's a theory and possibility at the least that there are other dimensions where other events in our lives happened, if we even exist that is. But let us say there are other Dana Scullys and Fox Mulders out there. In some universe, perhaps, I went off and became a doctor and in some universe your sister was never taken and your father was never involved in a conspiracy."

She knew he had thought of it, had often wondered how different his life would be if Samantha hadn't been taken out of it. "Do you ever think about how life would have been different for you had Samantha not been taken? What would you have done or become?"


"Any plans that evolved past your twelve-year-old self?" She rolled her eyes in mild disgust.

"I don't know, I suppose I never got past the idea of wanting Samantha back." He sighed, setting her paper down, drumming his fingers against it. "Perhaps I would have ended up a professor or a psychologist, or maybe I would have ended up in the State Department with my father and likely drug into the same conspiracy he was."

"Do you honestly believe you would have followed in your father's footsteps?"

Mulder shook his head, "No, but then again we are talking about a universe of infinite possibilities, and following your theory, somewhere there is a Fox Mulder, and somewhere he might have made that decision. It is hard to believe, but then again I'm not that Fox Mulder. I've not had to live the life he has, and I know things he likely doesn't, therefore his decisions would be different because he in effect is not me. Just like the Dana Scully in some alternate universe isn't really you, but some other person who is living a life of experiences that you don't share."
"This supports my hypothesis that in the end each of our universes ends exactly how it is supposed to end, else we couldn't be ourselves." How philosophical quantum physics became once one got past the hard and fast numbers and facts and moved beyond that which could be tested and recreated over and over again in a lab or on a computer. Science became no more or less a way for mankind to ask the same "what if" questions that great minds such as Plato and Aristotle had asked centuries before. Who are we? How did we get here? Could our lives or our fates be any different? Perhaps, in a strange sort of way, this was why Scully had never had the quandary so many other scientists and doctors had when their reason met up against their faith. Her faith, her belief in the dogma of her church, never seemed to refute what she found in science, but rather her science seemed to somehow always be struggling to get to that point where her faith resided.

"Would you go back and change things, Scully?" Mulder's words cut into her thoughts, loaded with a wealth of worry and meanings in the layers between his curious expression and the neutral tone of his voice. She knew what he was asking. Even if he was loathe saying it out loud. Would she have chosen not to work with him? Would she have chosen a life without Fox Mulder in it?

"If we work on my hypothesis, this is the life I was supposed to lead in this universe. Thus, if we work on your argument regarding Jason Nichols and time travel, even if I went back and altered my past, who is to say that in this universe you and I wouldn't have met?" She smiled slowly, meeting his hesitant one. "Maybe it's fate, Mulder, no matter what, you were destined to be stuck with me."

"At least fate did something right by me for once, but I don't know how lucky you got with me around."

"I don't know." Scully rose, smoothing her skirt and crossing to her table, eyeing the Apollo 11 keychain he had so recently given her for her birthday. "I think fate might have known what she was doing sending you my way as well."
Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets conned into checking out an alien baby.

Scully should have suspected something the minute Mulder called her to tell her that he was picking her up for a case in West Virginia. She should have known something was up when he came with her favorite coffee in tow. Now they had just passed the toll to get onto the highway leading to Martinsburg, West Virginia, and Mulder was telling her they were looking for an alien monkey babies.

"Mulder, does it ever occur to you that grocery store rags are not a quality place to find cases for the Federal Bureau of Investigation?" She set down the pulpy, lurid newspaper with its headline regarding monkey babies, trying tiredly to think of some sort of way of talking her partner out of this hopeless line of inquiry. Not that it would do her any good, she recognized, but it was worth a valiant effort.

"The mother of that baby is named Amanda Nelligan, a single mother in Martinsburg. She wasn't in a known relationship and her friends and family were vaguely surprised when she announced to them all she was pregnant."

"So? Perhaps she was seeing someone on the side no one knew about or maybe she was getting fertility treatments. This is the late 20th century, women often do seek out IVF and other options to have children without the need for a meaningful relationship in order to get pregnant."

"How very Amazonian," Mulder quipped, earning a disapproving scowl from Scully. "Look, I don't care one way or the other why she was pregnant or how. What I do care about is the claim she made that the father of her child was an alien."

"The woman was in labor! Honestly, do you know how much pain and stress that is?"

"Nope! One of the many advantages of being a man, the other being, of course, that I can pee standing up and write my name in the snow."

Scully rolled her eyes and resisted the urge of rubbing the area where her cancerous tumor lay as it thrummed with the spike in her blood pressure. "A woman in labor can and sometimes does say anything. They've been known to break bones, enter rages, even to choke and injure nursing staff. We don't know that Amanda Nelligan didn't say that because of the stress."

"An alien? Seriously, I've heard of women demanding divorces, but claiming the father was an alien? And why keep it secret for nine months who the parentage belonged to?"

"Perhaps she had a reason for it. Perhaps she didn't know? Stranger things have happened." Mulder always wanted to look for the most outlandish answer before the most obvious. And while it made him a brilliant investigator at times, sometimes he drug them both out on wild goose chases when the most simple explanation could suffice.

"Could it just be as simple as a night with too much to drink and an embarrassing story to tell? I
mean, this woman could have just been out on the town, having fun, one thing led to the other…"

"You sound as if you speak from experience."

Scully ignored Mulder's hopeful leer. "I know that it happens often enough. I had many a friend do many an embarrassing act while drunk, and at least one of them ended up pregnant. Perhaps that was what happened with this, nothing more."

"That would explain Amanda Nelligan, but not any of the other women who have born babies with tails. Fifteen thousand people isn't that big, Scully. How are five babies born with the same defect?"

"Not to make light of stereotypes regarding the fine state of West Virginia, but this is a place with a population that has been prone to a certain level of stagnation in the genetic pool in some corners. Remember, we aren't terribly far from Home, Pennsylvania here, and that's only one example. While I don't think Martinsburg suffers from this problem, that isn't to say members of the population might not carry any number of genetic diseases and defects associated with intermarriage in close populations. Look at the Ashkenazi Jewish community. Genetically based diseases have skyrocketed in the last few years because of the close knit marrying habits of the families in generations past, exacerbated by the Holocaust. Even if the communities don't practice that now, they still have to deal with the fears of Tay-Sachs Disease and other genetic disorders carried through certain genetic lines."

"If that was the case, Scully, you would have wider reports of babies with that exact same birth defect all over the Appalachian mountains, or at least in West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. But the truth, is it's only in this one town, and it isn't an isolated, mountain community. It's a large town of nearly 15,000 that should be big enough for some genetic diversity."

Mulder reached across to her lap and tapped the newspaper sitting there, triumphant. "So unless you want to tell me that every one of these mothers was raped by some hillbilly with a birth mark nobody wanted to talk about, how do we begin to explain this?"

She hated it when Mulder started sounding like the reasonable one. "I don't see why we are investigating anything in the first place. We should leave it to the local health department and let them figure it out and if there are criminal charges to be placed they will contact the proper authorities, which may or may not include us."

"No harm in asking around, is there?"

Scully knew she was going to loose this argument. They were too close to Martinsburg to not at least do something while there.

Mulder at least was willing to compromise. "If nothing else, let's just call it research. If there is nothing here, if we poke around and it turns up a dud, I promise we'll turn right back around to DC, I'll buy you lunch, and you'll be home in your bed before ER is on."

As if any of this had anything to do with whether she got to watch TV that night or not, "We can ask around. But Mulder, I warn you, this may not turn out to be what you expect this case to be."

"When does a case ever turn out how I expected," Mulder shot back. He was just happy he had won this argument for the time being.
In which Mulder and Scully observe the cracks in the local plumber.

Eddie Van Blundht.

Scully silently studied their suspect through the two way mirror, gaze flickering back to the file in her hand, before staring at round face, sheepish looking man sitting in the interrogation room. He'd hardly looked up once the entire time he had been sitting there, focusing instead on picking at a hangnail for several long minutes, then his nose, before sighing rather despondently and tugging at his bottom lip, pulling it over the top, and trying to stare at it, cross-eyed.

"You know," Mulder murmured in vague fascination beside her. "You sort of have to wonder how a guy like that could possible knock up five women and none of them notice."

"I've got some theories on that." Scully was unwilling to share just yet till she was even sure that this Eddie Van Blundht was the man responsible for the paternity of the babies born with tails. She arched an eyebrow in wonderment at the man as he then pulled his lip down, as if in an exaggerated pout, then sighing in abject self-disgust slouched low in his seat, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Really, it's just…I have no words, Mulder!" She found herself as confused and yet fascinated by Van Blundht and the possibility of him having procreated as she might have been by a giant whale showing up in the middle of the street in her morning commute. "It just seems rather absurdly impossible."

"And yet it may well could have happened." Mulder muttered in awe, obviously just as disquieted and intrigued as she was. "Think about it, Scully, we are both young, attractive people. How sorry is the state of our love lives?"

"Well, I slept with a mentally disturbed murderer and you last had sex with a woman who thought she was a vampire." That tended to put things in perspective. "But then I would say your video collection might more than make up for it."

"The collection isn't mine you know. So the two of us can't get laid on a regular basis if our life depended on it, and this man here who looks like he has the intellectual capacity of a boiled turnip manages to reproduce not just once, but five times."

"It boggles the mind, admittedly, but remember it's still alleged at this point."

"The man had a scar from his tail removal, Scully, and he works in the same clinic that four of the women used to try and get pregnant."

"Which doesn't explain Amanda Nelligan," she replied sweetly, smirking up at him. "She claims she had sex with Luke Skywalker."

"Do you not think he did it?" Mulder scoffed in disbelief.
"You know we can't presume a thing till we get back some evidence, but that being said…"

Scully paused, staring at the strange man on the other side of the glass. "Mulder, I don't want to think about him doing it with anyone. And I mean anyone."

"I hear you on that," Mulder sighed in heavy agreement. "I just can't figure it out. How could he do it?"

"I've seen stranger things, you know, people you never think could find someone find true love and happiness."

"I've seen it too, but you always have to ask yourself how. What is it that these people see in one another?"

"I don't know." Scully shrugged, snapping closed Van Blundht's file. "My mother used to say that there isn't a pot so bent that there isn't a lid to fit it."

Mulder snorted cynically, tugging at his tie. "Mothers always have cliché sayings like that. My mother used to tell me the same thing when I hit the big nose and acne stage."

"What, the girls weren't always throwing themselves at your feet?" From the few stories she had heard of Mulder's teenaged years he hadn't sounded as if he was hurting for girls noticing him when he was a youth."

"Being an athlete and a wiseass covers a multitude of sins, and every boy has that moment when he thinks that the girl won't like him, that she will open her eyes and look at him and see this ogre, this guy who is a total loser. Some of us grow out of that, others of us don't."

He gestured towards the glass and to where Eddie sat. He now twiddled his thumbs across his rounded belly. "And then there are some who somehow persevere despite the fact that there is just no way socially that they even should."

And clearly Eddie Van Blundht was one of those aberrations in Mulder's mind.

"You know," Scully hedged, slightly guiltily. "We don't know anything about this guy."

She waved his file under Mulder's nose. "He's clean, a non-entity, a few minor things traffic violations his entire life. This is all about this man we know. We don't know what his personality is like, how he gets along with people. He could be very witty and funny, he could be sensitive and caring, a man who likes a little romance, likes to sit and actually listen for a change rather than argue."

"Scully, women always say that's the sort of man they want, and when they get him that man becomes the 'best friend' and they fall in love with the total ass hat."

Scully just managed not to roll her eyes at her partner's obvious reversal to a Neanderthal. "Some women find that attractive, Mulder. They certainly crave it when they have to spend all of their days being ignored, put down, and tossed aside in favor of hanging out with the boys over beer, football, and half-dressed chicks."

"Right," Mulder drawled out the single, dry, cynical note. "And that would explain how Don Juan in there managed to convince four married women to give in to his alluring charms and impregnate them with babies that all four of them claimed are their husbands?"

Way to be condescending, Mulder, she huffed. "I'm not saying that it is, Mulder, I'm just saying we
can't judge a book by its cover is all."

"I don't think the cover is that thick, We may be seeing the real deal here, as terrifying and horrifying as that might be."

Scully sighed, watching Eddie Van Blundht again for several, long moments. "I have to agree with you on this."

What would any woman see in this man?

"I got DNA samples from the all of the families, and I'm running it through Mountain State Universities Forensics lab. They should have the results for us within the hour."

"I just don't see how!" Mulder insisted, shaking his head in stunned amazement, even his normally acute and agile brain completely baffled by this phenomenon. Scully for once knew exactly how he felt.
"I have a theory. You want to hear it?"

What would Mulder do if she said no? Scully entertained herself with that thought as she arched an eyebrow speculatively at him, arms crossed as if girding herself against the weirdness that normally spewed from Mulder when these famous last words were spoken. She decided to take a wild stab on just what his brand of outlandishness would be this time. "Eddie Van Blundht physically transformed into his captor, then walked out the door leaving no one the wiser?"

That caught Mulder short. His eyes began to sparkle madly, a surprised grin leaping to life. "Hey, Scully, should we be picking out china patterns or what?"

Heaven forbid the sort of china patterns Fox Mulder would want to choose. "Mulder, why can't you just go for the simple answer?"

Honestly, they were standing in a police station filled with cops all concerned about their partner and Mulder had to start pulling out the absurd straight away. Scully glanced at the poor, woozy officer, moaning softly as his co-workers tried to coax him to the hospital to get checked out. "With that blow to the head, the deputy might just as well have identified McGruff the Crime Dog as his attacker."

"What about what the sheriff saw," Mulder challenged, unfazed.

"Two men, roughly the same build, same coloring, the addition of a uniform goes a long way to explain how one person can mistake one man for another at 3 o'clock in the morning."

She politely ignored the fact that Eddie Van Blundht had about thirty pounds on the man he had clocked in the head and shoved under his desk. It was a wonder he could fit into the extra uniform he had purloined from the dressing room downstairs. A stretch or not, this was easier to explain that a man who could shape shift. As if such a thing was possible.

Which obviously didn't stop Mulder from running with it if he thought it was cool. "Conversely my theory goes a long way to explaining how four married women could mistake Van Blundht for their husbands and how Amanda Nelligan could think it was Luke Skywalker. We've both seen something like this before, Scully."

Mulder's shifted in an instant to knowing and grave, as if she didn't remember that fact as well. There were nights she still dreamed of the face of the strange creature that they had met several times now, the man with the hard, craggy, alien features that could shift and morph to become anyone, including Mulder. That was the face he had worn when he'd attacked her the first time, the face of her most trusted friend.

"But what are you saying, that Van Blundht is an alien?" Even as absurd as the idea of shape-shifting aliens was, the idea of a shape-shifting Eddie was even stranger.
"Not unless they have trailer parks in space. This is something different."

"Mulder, you know I'm prepared to put up with most any sort of strange proposition out of you if nothing else for arguments sake, but humans can't alter their physical appearance at will. It's impossible. You saw the sort of surgery it takes just to change a person's nose or to remove their excess fatty tissue. Those doctors we investigated had years of training and the work they do takes weeks to heal from."

"But you and I both know that there are humans out there that we've run across who display abilities that science can't explain, for example, people who can run high amounts of electricity through their body without having any ill effects."

"We never proved that." She remembered Darren Oswald in Oklahoma.

"Eugene Tooms could fit through amazingly tight spaces and we never did figure out how he did it. By the time we pulled him out of that escalator there wasn't much of him left to study."

"And that's my point, Mulder, you assume this has to be the Same, despite the fact we have no evidence to even presume that is possible."

"And you presume was can't believe it because no one has ever seen it before." Mulder pounced on the weakness of her argument so quickly, Scully's head nearly spun. "So how does that work with your faith, Scully? I've never seen a man turn water into wine, but last I heard that was pretty dogmatic on the Christian side of things."

"Don't start bringing my religion into this, Mulder," she warned, the one taboo the two of them had always had in their many debates over the years. "My faith is now what we are questioning here. We are questioning whether or not Eddie Van Blundht can shape shift. I don't even know where you came up with the idea."

"Because it's the only explanation that fits all the variables. Think about it, each of the four married women swears on their children's lives they have never been with a man other than their husbands. These are women who have no reason to lie. Add to this Amanda Nelligan's clearly outrageous claim to Luke Skywalker impregnating her."

"Yes, because Luke Skywalker seducing anyone is the most ridiculous part of this theory," Scully muttered despite Mulder's dirty look.

"As I was saying, Amanda Nelligan believed she was with Luke Skywalker. These women believed they were with their husbands. That injured man over there believed he saw someone with his face attacking him. What if they are all right? What if they saw what they wanted to see because Eddie gave it to them."

Beyond the sheer impossibility of the suggestion, the creepiness factor was off the charts with this hypothesis. "So, stating hypothetically that Eddie can do this, make himself look different, why? Why would he take advantage of these women in this way?"

"You said it yourself, Scully. Who would sleep with Eddie Van Blundht?" Mulder's shrugged, a sort of empathetic gesture that said he didn't necessarily like what happened but could at least understand in a weird sort of way. "I think he's a guy looking for the sort of romance that he can't ever get in his face, and these women all wanted to have children with their husbands. You heard what he said, everyone got what they wanted. He doesn't see the harm in that."

While the profiler in Mulder might understand Eddie Van Blundht, the woman in Scully was
horrified and disgusted. This went against so many things deeply ingrained in her, against so many fears that many women had when it came their intimate relationships. "Mulder, that is the worst sort of violation. It's rape. The women aren't agreeing to this. They are being tricked into a sexual encounter with a man they believe to be one person, when it is really someone else, and however Eddie Van Blundht is doing it it's a crime, it isn't romantic. Imagine how these women feel! Imagine what their marriages are going through!"

"I'm not disagreeing with you in the slightest, Scully." Mulder held up his hands, palms facing her as if warding off the wrath of Scully in full righteous indignation. "Believe me, I have a mother, I had a sister, and my partner and best friend is a woman if you haven't noticed. Personally if this man is guilty, I'd like to throw him in bars myself, but we need to do more than prove that he is the father of these kids, any half-assed public defender could argue that these women might have all agreed to sleep with him because they were unable to conceive with their husbands. We need to prove that he did this to them when they were completely unaware, and if we can prove that, Agent Scully, then we can keep the bastard in prison so long he might start learning what its like to get some of his own medicine for a change, preferably from some large, ex-biker named Jim-Bob."

Mulder's idea of righteous justice was so very biblical. Scully couldn't suppress the snort that rose within in. "Fine, we'll need to find Eddie first. Any idea where he might have gone?"

"My guess, Eddie not being a Rhodes scholar, he likely is a creature of certain habits. He has a father still living, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, lives not too far away. That's the first place they looked for him this morning. No one answered."

"I wonder if the old man knows what Junior has been out doing?" Mulder reached out to cup Scully's elbow in his palm, fingers wrapping around it gently as he turned her around and towards the door of the station. "Let's see what Eddie Senior has to say about his little boy's activities and see if he can shed any light on how Eddie was doing this and where he might be."
In which it seems Scully really opens up to her partner.

This was what her life was reduced to, a Friday night at home working on a paper. Scully chose to ignore the small voice in her head making fun of her, firmly rooting her eyes to the medical tome in front of her. She had never seen anything like the Van Blundht case before. The lab techs and her fellow pathologists at Quantico were gibbering all over themselves as they studied and prodded the desiccated corpse. Scully had spent most of her afternoon geeking with fellow scientists, all flabbergasted by the example and what it could mean about studies in human musculature. This was quite the scientific find on the part of herself and Mulder and it could be a rather nice feather in her cap if she could put a paper together to present to the pathology community or to have published in one of the journals.

The problem was concentration. She didn't have it.

What was up with Mulder? That thought intruded in on her research, and she looked up from her work, staring blankly at her silent television. He'd been weird all day. Well, weirder than usual. While she handled the details of the elder Van Blundht's body, shipping it to Quantico, he'd filled their report with the local police, made a copy for them to turn into Skinner when they got in that afternoon. Normally he would have been thrilled with their findings, chattering excitedly about the implications, prodding her mind for the scientific explanations for how this sort of medical phenomenon could occur. She'd expected that to be the subject of his chatter the long two hours back to DC. Instead, he had quietly gone to the passenger's side of the car, got inside, and went promptly to sleep. Scully of course was surprised he hadn't taken his normal place behind the wheel, especially considering that it was his car they were driving, but she had said nothing, nudging him for his car keys when she got inside. After all, he'd taken a rather nasty smack on the head and she had kept half an eye on him the whole way back. He seemed fine, if quiet. She hadn't given it much thought, even during their meeting with Skinner where she'd carried the weight of the presentation.

Had he really misspelled "bureau"? Mulder spent six years at Oxford. He had studied under some of the strictest grammarians of the English language known to humanity, British university professors. He was usually more of a stickler for proper grammar than she was and had writings skills that left her own clinical observations in the dust. It wasn't Mulder's style to misspell a word in any report, let alone misspell it twice. Maybe the attack this morning left him more than just stunned? The idea worried her as she tapped her pen idyll against her stack of books and papers on her coffee table. Scully stretched out her feet briefly on the floor where she sat, glancing at her cordless phone. Should she call? Maybe? It was the weekend. She had no idea what Mulder's plans were, if he had any. Perhaps she could check in…

And perhaps she could leave him be and let him sort this out like an adult.

Scully shook herself, returning her attention to her studies, shaking chastising herself. Honestly, it wasn't as if Mulder wasn't a grown man, able to take care of himself. Here she was just months ago railing about how she couldn't have her own life, and the one night she had free to do something on
her own, she was worrying about Mulder's injured scalp and wounded pride. He was fine, she was worrying, and she was really using this as an excuse not to do the work she should be doing at the moment.

Paper….paper…yeah, her paper….

The knock that sounded at her door shattered what little grip Scully had left on the thread of her concentration. Hell, she sighed, tossing her pen across the paper-strewn table and leveraged herself upwards, stumbling on legs stiff from the unusual position on the floor to answer the sounding at her door. She glanced through the wall-eyed peephole to see who it was and found the visitor didn't particularly surprise her. Could the man really read her mind? Half annoyed, half-relieved, she undid the chain that bolted the door and opened it, frowning curiously at her partner's cheesy grin,

"Mulder, what's up?" Not that it was unusual for him to stop by randomly to see her, but rarely did he look so…awkward?

"Scully!" He shrugged, ducking his head before glancing briefly into her apartment. "Is this a bad time?"

"No," she replied, ignoring the still unfinished paper she was having trouble with anyway. "No, come on in."

She held the door wide for him to enter, spotting the bottle of wine he had in hand. She didn't think she had ever seen Mulder drink wine ever in their entire partnership. "Who is that for?"

He held up the bottle in front of him as if surprised he had it. "Uh…us!

Them? Mulder never came to her apartment to just drink, not before anyway. While she supposed there was always a first, it was…odd. Scully took the outstretched bottle, glancing it over. A Shiraz, not bad, not that she was a great wine aficionado. She didn't think Mulder was either.

"Okay, have a seat." She smiled, wandering to the kitchen as Mulder watched her go, tugging nervously at his gray t-shirt and spinning aimlessly around the room. Wine, huh? Scully studied the label briefly as she padded into her neat and tidy kitchen, setting the bottle down on the well-scrubbed, wooden table long enough to pull out her step stool and search her cabinets for her wine glasses. She hadn't used them in a while, she realized as she reached for them, safe and protected on one of the upper shelves. The glass was slick with dust and she carefully set each rounded bowl down, thinking on the last time she had used these. Dinner with Missy? That had to be it. It had been a while. Carefully she climbed down, grabbing each of the thin, crystal stems and rinsing each off briefly.

"So what are you working on?" Mulder's voice sounded from the living room. She figured he would be riffling through her work in a bit, curious.

"More autopsy data," she called back, riffling through her drawers and looking for her wine bottle corkscrew. It had made its way to the back of the utensil drawer along with her bamboo chopsticks and some old napkins from a restaurant called Large Marge's. "You know, everyone at the lab found Mr. Van Blundht pretty fascinating."

How did one attack a wine bottle again? Scully fumbled with the opener, screwing in the sharp, metallic spiral into the soft cork-wood, remembering to use the bending bit of metal to leverage against the bottle lip and wiggle the cork out. God she'd always been bad at this. "We discovered an additional anomaly related to the hair follicles in his scalp. I can't even begin to guess at the nature of it until we can run it through the transmission electron microscope."
"Sounds interesting," Mulder called back, sounding as if it were anything but.

"Yes, it is!" The bottle opened with a pop and the rich scent of fermented grapes wafted out. It smelled nice at least, not that Scully knew anything about bouquets or high notes or any of the strange things she heard people refer to when they were at fancy wine tasting. Carefully she gathered the bottle and the glasses and returned to the living room where Mulder lounged on her couch. Lounged? It wasn't as if he hadn't lounged on her couch before, but there was something different. Something about his body language that was just not right. She had spent four years getting to know the silent, non-verbal language of her partner in all of his moods, and she knew there was rarely a moment Mulder was ever uncomfortable. Was he all right?

"So seriously, Mulder, what's going on?" She set down the glasses and began to pour. "You okay?"

Was that panic on his face when she handed him his glass? "Yeah," he assured her breathlessly, as if it was perfectly normal for him to show up randomly at her door with wine in hand. "I was just kind of knocking around."

He cheerfully held up his glass to her in silent toast, and she responded in kind, smirking as her glass clicked against his. "I was just…thinking."

They each sipped from their glasses, Scully finding the liquid warm and fruity on her tongue. For what she knew of wines it was nice, she liked it. Beside her, Mulder spluttered. He never was much of a wine drinker.

"Uh…good," he choked, glancing with watery eyes down at his glass. "We…we never really talk much…do we?"

Scully blinked slowly over at him. "What do you mean, like really talk?" About anything besides their work? "No…no we don't, Mulder?"

Perhaps that was why they had the blow ups like the one that had precipitated after Ed Jerse. Would things have gotten that bad if the two of them had stopped wounding each other's feelings long enough to actually discuss the situation?

"Well what's stopping us?"

Scully wanted to reach out to her partner's smooth forehead and see if he had come down with something. "Mulder, are you…"

"I'm fine, Scully," he assured her, another cheesy, cheery grin splitting his face that looked decided un-Mulderish on his angular face. "Scully, why is it I always call you that anyway?"

"Because we are FBI agents and we always refer to each other by our last names." Scully had always privately believed the habit was a holdover from the old boys' club of law enforcement, when all men called each other by their last names, likely because they all had the same first one. After all, both of their fathers were named Bill.

"But why don't I ever call you by your first name?" He sipped more deeply from his glass this time.

"Call me Dana? I don't know, you do sometimes, I always assumed it was because you hate your first name so much you just tend to call everyone by their last."

"Fox," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "What were my parents thinking?"
"I don't know, maybe we can get that secret out of your mother someday." Not that Teena had given up many others. "Why in the world does this matter?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, flushing suddenly, finding a worn spot on his jeans particularly fascinating at that moment. "Don't you ever get tired of being Scully and Mulder?"

He knew she did. She had said as much when they argued over Ed Jerse. "Well, yeah, I seemed to recall saying it several times." Had it just finally sunk in for him? God, this all wasn't about her cancer, was it?

"Then why don't we be just us tonight, Dana and Fox." He sat up eagerly, setting down his wine and rising as he moved towards her stereo in the corner. Scully watched him cross the room in mild surprise as he studied the sound equipment, one of her few expensive splurges in the house, and glanced through her CD collection. Did he even know she had a stereo? And what was all this talk about being "Dana and Fox"? He hated his first name. Scully could imagine him demanding his wedding vows being read off as just "Mulder".

"Mozart or Al Green," he called back, long fingers perusing the CD's she had neatly alphabetized and categorized on her shelf.

"What?" Mulder might as well have been speaking a foreign language to her as he turned, two CD cases in hand.

"Mozart or Al Green?"

"Err…Al Green?" She gulped from her wine glass, completely bemused as Mulder turned on the stereo and slipped in the disk. It took several long moments of poking at buttons and a nasty whirring of gears before Al Green's smooth voice came to life over the speakers, filling her silent apartment suddenly. Scully wasn't even terribly sure why she had the CD, Al Green wasn't music she exactly kept in her car to listen to. She remembered Melissa had always joked in high school that All Green was great make out music.

"There!" Mulder nodded in satisfaction. "A bit of music to lighten things up."

He spun back towards her, but paused at the electric fireplace in the wall across from them. "We should light this baby up too."

"I'm not cold," she protested, sipping more of the wine and wondering what in the hell had possessed this man she worked with everyday. "Sure, but it would be fun! The fire, the music, loosen us up, you know. Let us be Fox and Dana." He grinned again, that same, strange twisting of lips and teeth on his face that didn't look quite right. Loosen them up, right! Wine, Al Green, now a fire. This was looking more and more like a seduction. Scully nearly choked at the thought, and downed the rest of her glass of wine in a shot, her face flushing with the alcohol and the totally, completely inappropriate thought. This wasn't a seduction, this was Mulder, this was her partner, this was her friend, he didn't…couldn't think of her like that…she couldn't think of him like…hell, wine, a fire, Al Green. Sweet baby Jesus...

"How do you get this thing started," Mulder muttered, fumbling with switches and levers. Scully should say something to him before he managed to explode them both, but he somehow figured it out, the flames leaping to live over her faux logs as he turned around looking extraordinarily proud of himself.

"So, what do you think?" You'd have thought he cut the logs and lit the flint for that fire himself.
"It's…nice," she gurgled, trying not to give into those nigglng fantasies she'd had from time to time, the ones that she totally and thoroughly blamed on Melissa. The ones where she remembered that her partner was very attractive, and very handsome, and what he looked like when he was sans clothing…she needed more wine.

"So is this your family?" Mulder had paused to study the pictures above her mantle, the random, framed photographs of the Scully clan she had managed to keep or collect over the years. Many of them were ones she had salvaged from Melissa's affects after she had passed away.

"Yeah," she replied, reaching for the bottle on the coffee table and pouring a generous helping. "You know Mom and Melissa up there." She watched him reach for one of the newer photographs of some family Christmas just before her father passed away. "Ahab...Dad, he's the bald man with the Santa hat on. Bill is the tall one in the back with the dark hair trying to choke Charlie, the short red-head in the front."

"Wow," Mulder breathed looking a tiny bit wistful. "Your family looks so normal."

"Well, as normal as a Navy family is, I suppose." She wouldn't go so far as to call them normal. "But we were happy."

"I always wanted to have a family like this as a kid," he sighed softly, setting the photograph down. Reason got through her mess of scattered hormones, reminding her that Mulder lacked the comforts of family and companionship that she had. He was very much a lonely person. Why didn't she remember that more often, think about that on Friday nights like this, offer to take him out for a beer more often? Usually because he was dragging her off on some case, she acerbically reminded herself.

"Well, you know you have a long standing invitation to Thanksgiving. Mom loves having you over." He so rarely took her up on the invite. "And you love my mother's pie."

"Looks like she already has a brood to cook for!" He shuffled back to the couch, settling comfortably beside her, reaching for his glass again. Scully ignored the way his jeans fit on his long, lean legs and the way his gray t-shirt clung just a little tightly to his washboard stomach, as well as the way the firelight played on the angles of his face. Where in the hell was all of this coming from and how in the hell had she just gone through half a glass of wine?

"Errr…yeah, well of course it's a tad less since Ahab and Missy passed away." She violently shifted her focus to her family's loss and not her partner sitting beside her. "But Bill is married now, and they are trying for a baby, and Charlie is getting married in the summer, so our numbers are filling out."

"And how about you?" Mulder's question caught her off guard. "Any plans for your future? Settling down, having babies?"

"Well, of course, sometime soon….maybe." If she beat this cancer, she silently added. If their work ever stopped, if she managed to make it through with her life and her sanity, "I mean with everything going on, it hasn't exactly made it conducive to finding that special someone."

Did he have to nibble on his bottom lip like that?

"Life isn't all about work, Dana!" His voice was velvety rough, eyes deep in the firelight as she stared at him. Scully's stomach gave a spiraling, heart-tugging lurch. Who was this Fox Mulder and where did he come from? He never spoke like this, ever! Was it her temper tantrum? Was it her illness? Was it the knock on the head? When did he get to be so…so…"
"You're right," she squeaked, tipping back her glass of wine and hoping to God it made it down her throat right now. When had Mulder started spouting lines like this? He was the man who slept at his desk when he could get away with it. Mulder knew no other life but work.

"What?" He nervously watched her as she stared at him, at a loss for words or coherent thought at the moment.

"Just…Mulder, you live for the work. They had to threaten you with docked pay to get you to take a vacation and you still cut that short." Scully ignored the fact he had come racing home mostly because he felt he couldn't trust Scully alone with the case she was working on. "I don't know, why the change of heart?"

"I don't know," he lifted his shoulder's sheepishly. It was a boyish gesture, but not in the typical Mulderish sort of twelve-year-old humor sort of way. "You know I just think you and I, we put so much into our work. I'm more than just some freak who believes in aliens and hangs out with geeks, you know."

"I never believed you weren't something more than that." The wine was coating her tongue acidly, but it was leaving her skin tingling and she felt herself smile loosely. God, this was a good feeling, a nice feeling, a warm, relaxing feeling, that was welcome after weeks of stress and fear. Scully felt herself melt ever so slightly into the cushions she curled against as she watched Mulder in the flicker from the fire.

This was strange and disconcerting this man in front of her. He wasn't anything like the Mulder she knew. He was spouting things about living life and talking, shooting her shy smiles that spoke of none of his cockiness, for the moment aliens and conspiracies were shelved. It was unnerving and gratifying all at the same time, and Scully couldn't really decide if she liked this strange, new side of Mulder that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere after four years. A part of her was delighted by it, but a part of her was screaming in the back of her brain that something wasn't right here. She knew Mulder, she knew every mood, every thought, and every tilt of his head, and something wasn't right. Mulder grinned at her, the strange, lopsided grin that wasn't his. Even still, it made her pulse do very funny things. She decided to drown out the screaming warning in her head with more wine.

"So, I'm more than just an obsessed geek. What about you? What is beneath the exterior of Dana the scientist?" He waved his hands at the stacks of papers, articles, lab tests, and other detritus of her now forgotten paper. "Who is this woman when she isn't chasing after me and writing out reports?"

It had never occurred to Scully that these were things they had never discussed between them before. Sure, there had been the off handed comment, Mulder's ever keen perception picking up on aspects of her personality, but he had never outright asked her about what it was she cared about or was passionate about before.

"Well, what is there to tell? I visit my mother. I like to shop." Mulder had noted her shoe-buying fetish more than once in mild bemusement when she came into work with a new pair. "I played the clarinet in my junior high school band."

"Clarinet? No way!" Mulder looked delighted, grinning wildly as he settled into the couch. "I thought girls always went for the violin or flute."

"No, clarinet for me. I thought it made me unique." In truth, looking back, it had probably only made her more nerdy. "I quit when I got to high school. We'd moved to Baltimore by then and I wanted to make a break, get a fresh start. So away went the old, dorky things. My clarinet, my
Catholic schoolgirl clothes, my glasses, sadly I couldn't get rid of the braces."

"I get it, you wanted to be the cool kid in school."

"Well, yeah. Not all of us were gifted with good looks and athleticism when we were young."
Scully sniffed in mock contemptuousness, reaching across the couch with one leg to prod Mulder's knee playfully with a toe. "And I was the middle child, I had Bill and Missy over me. Bill was like you, the athletic, confident one, and Melissa always did her own thing, no apologies, and people liked her for that. She was pretty and fun and outgoing, and boys liked her."

She paused sadly. "I always resented the two of them for that. I was the frazzled haired, knock-kneed, braces-wearing dork of them all. I wanted to be so much like them so badly! And really, I didn't need to worry. I came into my own eventually, it just took time."

"I guess it just works out for some people better than others," Mulder sighed mournfully. What was he talking about? She had heard his stories about the girls in the backseat of his mother's station wagon.

"Please, Mulder, I promised to never scandalize your mother with some of your stories from high school." She held up her wine glass in mock salute. "I was such a mess my first two years of high school. I didn't know how to dress, how to wear make up, how to make boys like me. And then I turned sixteen! The braces came off, the rest came together, the boys noticed."

She shrugged, flushing at the thought of telling Mulder any of this. Short of Daniel, she'd not mentioned much of her rather limited love life. It was never something they discussed.

"Don't tell me you became every Catholic father's worst nightmare?" Mulder snickered into his wine glass, sipping at the still nearly full measure of liquid. No, Mulder never had been much of a drinker.

"No, I wasn't as bad as Melissa. But there was one boy I think my father could have cheerfully killed." Scully giggled even thinking of the story. "Not that he was bad, but...well...you know."

"Know what?" Mulder's dark eyebrows rose, curious. Honestly, Mulder was usually much quicker on the uptake than this, he was the first one to slip in an inappropriate joke or comment if he could.

"You know! Marcus was just a typical seventeen-year-old boy. He had one thought on his mind all of the time, and it took all of my will to, you know, talk him down from that ledge so to speak." Jesus, she wasn't going to discuss this with Mulder, was she? "Not that it was the only thing about Marcus. He was a sweet, nice, talented guy."

"And I take it not so bad looking either?"

"No," she grinned, giggling into her wine glass as she smirked unapologetically. "Honestly, for once a good looking guy noticed me for a change and not my sister. Marcus was sort of like you now that I think about it. Smart, good looking, played sports. All the things a good, Catholic girl should want to bring home to dad."

"So what did he do to piss your father off so badly he'd want to kill him?"

"That is a very long story." Scully tipped back the red liquid, holding a mouthful on her tongue as Mulder watched her with baited anticipation. He really wanted to hear this, her stupid prom story? She swallowed. "All right, but I wanted it noted that none of this is my fault."

"Duly noted," Mulder nodded assuring.
"All right, so in high school my best girlfriend was named Sylvia. She was madly in love with this football jock. What the hell was his name?" He was one of those annoying people who only went by his last name, like Mulder. She grimaced. "Berkley, Berkson.....Berwood!"

"Berwood?" Mulder's voice cracked over the name as he snorted wine up his nose, spluttering. "What sort of name is Berwood?"

"I don't know, Fox, why do people have the names they do?"

"Oh, yeah." As if Mulder could forget his own name.

"Anyway, Berwood was as stupid as a box of rocks, but he was one of the football players and he was all right looking and Sylvia was madly in love with him. So I got Marcus to talk Berwood into asking Sylvia out to the Prom our senior year."

"Did the thought occur to him on his own?"

"I'm not sure Berwood knew what social skills were. He communicated mostly in grunts I think." Fifteen years gone and the details of some of her high school classmates were a bit lost on Scully. "Anyway, so somehow Sylvia and I convince our parents that it was okay to let Marcus drive us all to the prom. I told my parents I was staying at Sylvia's and she told her parents she was staying at my place."

"So you expected something to happen that night."

"Well...no. Expected isn't the right word, anticipated I guess is more like it. I think I was more wanting to just do something wild and unexpected, to not be the good girl for once. I was eighteen by this point, looking foreword to graduating high school, wanting a last hurrah and perhaps I really wanted to have that special prom night with Marcus."

How silly she'd been then, filled with romantic dreams of some magical dance with her then boyfriend, giving into the urges that her teenaged hormones had been screaming about for years. "Anyway, so we went to the dance."

"Was it in your high school gym?"

"No, school was too big, we had it at some ballroom at a hotel, and we had one of those cheesy themes too. It was 1982, I'm sure it was from Journey or something."

"Can't beat the classics!" Mulder nodded in approval. Really, Journey? She wouldn't have taken that for his style of music.

"I don't remember much of the event itself to be honest. I just remember being nervous. I remember Marcus giving me suggestive looks all night, I don't know I guess they were supposed to be sexy, I don't know." Scully chuckled, still feeling like a perfect idiot about all of this now even years later, experience making the whole thing much funnier looking back.

"So I don't know who suggested to leave, probably Sylvia. Anyway, they decide that we need to go someplace secluded. This led to the bright idea of a state park, because what bad, teen horror flick hasn't had some horrific scene of teenagers making out in the woods getting eaten by the monster."

"None of you thought of this before going out there?"

"Nope. I was too busy wondering what Marcus wanted and he was too busy trying to keep Sylvia and her idiot boyfriend from arguing and it was all a mess." She waved off the long forgotten
irritation. "So we go out there and we park not too far from the main road. And at first it was nice. Sitting in the car, watching the stars, something like this playing on the radio."

She nodded towards her stereo and the Al Green playing. "All the right elements for a perfect prom night, right?"

"Why do I sense a big 'but' coming?" Mulder reached for the now very nearly empty wine bottle, swirling the dregs around the bottle in surprise at how much was gone. Had he drunk any? Or was all of that her? Scully shook her very muzzy head and continued.

"So the other two leave us and we are just sitting there for the longest time, holding hands, like we were too terrified to even think about what to do next and I have no idea what the others are up to." Mulder tipped the last of the wine into her glass.

"So there we are at two in the morning, me and my moiré taffeta dress, and Marcus in…whatever the hell he was wearing."

She laughed trying to even think about it. "It had a Kelly green cummerbund on it." She remembered that much, it matched her dress. "Anyway, so I know that Marcus is thinking that it is now or never. And I'm thinking…"

She paused, watching Mulder lean forward, eyes wide, anticipating her next words. He was like some little kid at story time, intent on everything she had to say. God, it really was kind of cute.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, 'What is that siren I hear getting louder?'")

Mulder gaped in spluttered in disbelief. "Someone called the cops?"

"It was the fire department." She grinned as Mulder tried to comprehend that one. "My friend Sylvia and her idiot prom date…"

"Berwood," Mulder supplied, laughing.

"They had built a campfire that went totally out of control and so we all had to ride back on the…"

God, what was the name of the trucks the firefighters used to get the water? It was so obvious and she was too tipsy now to think straight. "What do you call it…the…pumper truck!"

How she dreaded calling her father about that as they sat and watched Marcus's car in the glow of what had gone from a normal campfire to a nearly raging forest fire as her boyfriend bemoaned how his parents were going to kill him for this.

"Yeah, Marcus was the twelfth grade love of my life." She snickered as she sipped from her glass, remembering a much more youthful, much sillier time. Far from being the cool, collected Dana Scully Mulder knew now, she had been a silly, rash young girl thinking of nothing more than that rite of passages for young people, the moment of losing their virginity. Not something she normally would have brought up to her partner…her very much, strictly work partner, she reminded herself forcefully.

"I can't believe I'm telling you this."

"I can't believe you haven't told me before!"
Really? Scully paused, watching him in the firelight's glow, quietly studying this man she had given so much to over the last four years. "I'm seeing a whole new side of you, Mulder."

It occurred to her that she meant that in so many ways, not just the idea that Mulder never just sat and talked about silly things like her prom night and the horrible mess she had made of that, but coming over with wine, sitting there with her just to chat. Nothing about cases or theories, no attempts to drag her back off into the night to poke at some dead body or run around somewhere dangerous with nothing but a flashlight. All he was doing was sitting, listening to her, talking like a friend.

"Is that a good thing?" He looked and sounded so uncertain, so sweet. How often did she ever see Mulder like this?

"I like it," she replied, feeling suddenly shy in the face of her admission. She did like this, communicating with Mulder on a real, personal level. They weren't just agents sitting here they were friends. Yes, friends!

"Do you ever wish," Mulder leaned in quietly, darkening eyes meeting hers. "Do you ever wish that things were...different?"

Hadn't they just recently had this conversation? "What do you mean?"

"The person you wanted to be when you grew up, when you were in high school. How far off from that did you end up?"

"Career wise, miles off target." He knew that.

"No, not just that," Mulder insisted, leaning even closer, his arm across the arm of the couch brushing hers. Scully could feel the heat of his skin, even despite the warmth of the fire and the flush of the wine. She could smell his soap and aftershave as he inched even closer. Alarms began firing in her brain, and yet she didn't move. She merely met his gaze frankly as something began screaming in her head again that this wasn't right. But the wine was making everything so very sluggish right now.

"Do you ever wish that you could go back and do it all differently?"

Scully nervously wet her dry lips "Do you?"

Had she ever asked him that question before?

Mulder nodded sadly and regretfully, leaning in even further, closer and closer. The screaming voice was on full on shriek somewhere in her mind, trying to break her out of the spell of watching her partner's full lips and soulful eyes, a combinations that, if she admitted it to herself, she had thought of in decidedly unprofessional ways from time to time. But now she couldn't avoid them as he came ever closer, and she found herself drunkenly mesmerized, glued to the spot as her heart stopped.

For a split second, Scully thought of Marcus and that prom night, of how she almost gave into him and a forbidden desire, and how she found herself in that very same position now. Reason pounded futilely in her brain as Scully realized that not only did she like this idea, she wanted this idea, and that was about as terrifying of a thought as she could imagine, and she didn't want to stop it. Her lips parted as he came near, a sigh escaping, though she couldn't tell if it was worry or anticipation. His breath fanned her cheek, warm and soft, his mouth just a fraction of an inch away from her own.
The violent slamming of her apartment door crashed in like a bucket of ice water, freezing them both in the act as Scully turned in confusion to whoever would dare to break into her apartment. The sight about made her already reeling, wine-addled brain blank completely at the unreality of the entire scene. There at the door, disheveled, sweaty, and panting stood Mulder, glaring wild eyed and outraged at the copy of himself sitting on the couch beside her. She turned towards that man, the one she had been speaking to all evening, who she had shared wine with, who she had so very nearly allowed to kiss her…and maybe nearly allowed to….oh dear God.

Faster than he had ever moved in her life, Scully scrambled off of the couch, away from the man she had thought was her most trusted friend in the world. Suddenly she couldn't get away fast enough, as before her the features she had quietly admired all evening melted and softened, turned flabby and became the sorrowful eyes and round, mild face of Eddie Van Blundht. Scully wouldn't have believed a single bit of it if she hadn't just seen it, staring at him as he shrugged. Whether it was by way of apology or dejection at getting caught, she couldn't tell.

Suddenly, whatever buzz that Scully felt from the wine was gone, and she felt very cold, very sick, and very, very humiliated. What had she just been about to do? She remembered a vague shame she had felt on one of their first cases, there had been some man who could touch her and send her hormones reeling. She had the exact same feeling now, the desire to weep, bury herself in horror, and puke all at the same time. That time it had been a complete accident. This time she had let herself get into this mess. She had nearly kissed her partner, only it hadn't been her partner. It had been a man who raped women unawares and called it romance. He was a disgusting, vile, pathetic human being and she had nearly let him get away with it with her. How far would she have let this go?

"Scully?" Mulder-the real Mulder-snapped her out of her hysterical thoughts, voice rough with unbridled anger as she finally realized he had Eddie pinned on the floor. The other man yelped mildly. "Handcuffs, Scully! You have yours?"

"Mine…handcuffs?" He didn't have his?

Of course not. Eddie must have taken them.

"Yeah, just a moment." She turned towards her room, steeling herself against the shame and revulsion and failing miserable as she fetched her cuffs and returned. At least Eddie wasn't putting up much of a struggle, not that he could possibly get away with it with the unholy angel of wrath that was Fox Mulder at the moment hanging over him like some demonic gargoyle.

"You have the right to remain silent. You know the rest." Mulder rose, ignoring Eddie's Miranda Rights, eyes blazing wrath as he hauled him to his feet and tossed him back unceremoniously on the couch. The other man grunted and whined.

"Police brutality, much?"

"Do you really want to see police brutality out of me, Eddie, cause I swear to God, if you hurt her…"

"I'm fine, Mulder." Scully murmured, quickly sensing things would become exceedingly ugly and violent in seconds if she didn't step in. "Nothing happened."

"Did he hurt you?" He ignored Eddie for a moment, turning to her tone softening, as he looked her over frantically. Didn't she look okay?

"Mulder, all he did was bring me wine and have a pleasant discussion with me." Besides that entire
kissing part, which hadn't happened. Lord! "I'm fine, really!"

Scully tried to smile, but felt it wilt a bit at the edges. She knew Mulder saw it. Mulder saw everything. Looking up at his stormy glare she knew this was the real Mulder, her Mulder. Dear God, why hadn't she noticed the difference before? She knew it! Something told her this wasn't right, and yet…

"I'm calling the police, have them take him into custody and ship him home." Mulder glowered at the cowering, balding man in the corner, as if he was contemplating shooting him just for the sheer pleasure of it. "And if you're lucky, Eddie, I won't slap your ass with assault of a federal officer while we are at it."

Eddie at least had the grace to cringe. "I just wanted to show Dana a good time. She's a lovely woman, a very nice one. Doesn't she deserve one?"

Neither one of them seemed to have much of a response to that.
Mere Inches

Chapter Summary

In which things are awkward between Mulder and Scully.

Scully couldn't bring herself to look Mulder in the eye Monday morning.

"I have to say, we have managed to make the local universities very happy with us." Mulder hung the phone up in its receiver, tapping one of his long, yellow pencils erasers first against the blotter on his desk. "Quantico has agreed to release the body of Eddie Van Blundht Sr. to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, they've shown an interest in the abnormal musculature of the corpse. They've agreed to do some of the preliminary research and share their findings with DA in Martinsburg in order to formulate their case against Eddie Jr. As it is, he's already going to prison for Social Security Fraud." Not an ounce of Mulder's tone sounded regretful for that fact.

"He confessed to stealing his father's checks?" Scully had settled across from him in the chair in front of his desk, trying to look busy clipping out newspaper articles that were of interest to Mulder. Not that she was paying any attention, really, it was something, anything to keep her from looking up at Mulder and seeing the same face she had so nearly kissed the other night, knowing what she had almost done, what she had almost felt...about him. Dear Lord...

"He couldn't exactly get out of it, we know his father's been dead for a while, and the checks were cashed under his father's name. Besides, the signatures matched Eddie's handwriting." Mulder bounced his pencil again, hard, nearly snapping it against the desktop. He set it down hastily, his agitated fingers roaming for something else to fiddle with on his desk. He reached instead for his basketball. "All these years and he got away with it. Stealing people's faces to play out his fantasies, knowing the whole time he was taking advantage of innocent people and not even caring."

Scully suppressed a shiver at the memory of Eddie as Mulder, of the grin on Mulder's face that wasn't quite him. She should have known it wasn't her partner, she had sensed it, but hadn't quite leapt to that rational. What had he said? He said he wished he could go back and do it all differently again? Had that been Eddie speaking, or Eddie speaking as he thought Mulder would in order to seduce her? Hell, she didn't know.

"Maybe he was just lonely," she offered as something of an explanation. It wasn't a good one, she admitted that, and it didn't make her feel better, but it was better than thinking of Eddie as a cold-blooded rapist. Despite her revulsion, Scully didn't think there was anything truly mean-spirited about him. "I mean, we said it when we brought him in, Mulder, how could a guy like that truly manage to convince any woman, let alone those women to sleep with him. Perhaps he resorted to this because he got tired of living his life as Eddie Van Blundht."

"And so he had to steal mine?" Mulder growled moodily, slapping the basketball against the tile of the floor so hard it nearly bounced away from him. "I was locked in that equipment room for hours, Scully. I was lucky maintenance bothered to come down there at all on Friday, normally they don't, else I might have been down there till dooms day and you might have had some serious explaining to do when I got out."
Scully had no response to that save for her face turning a bright, florescent pink. Instead she focused on the newsprint in her lap, dutifully cutting out whatever Mulder had marked without even bothering to see what the words on the inky paper said. Jesus, how could they even get around this?

"It's bad enough the man was masquerading as me." Mulder snapped the ball again, before snagging it and rising restlessly, pacing the small length of the office, settling the round, leather ball against one hip. Scully couldn't blame him. Just as unsettling as her experience had been, Mulder's had been equally disturbing. Someone coming into your world, your home, your personal space and pretending to be you was unnerving. People assuming they had conversations with you that were never said, or had seen you doing things you never did, or nearly kissing your partner in her very own apartment. Scully snapped at the thin paper with her sheers, nearly snipping the article she was supposed to be saving in half.

Perhaps she shouldn't be handling sharp objects at the moment.

"God knows what he would have done as me." Mulder paused in the middle of the room, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, a pained, nervous look on his face as he frowned over at her. "Scully, you know I would never take advantage of you."

So it had come to this. She knew she had to face the elephant in the room, even if she had hoped and prayed they would never bring it up. Carefully Scully set down the scissors and papers on his desk before she managed to stab herself. "I know. In four years, Mulder, you've been nothing but a gentleman. Hell, if you wanted to take advantage of me, you could have done it that first case in Bellefleur when I ran half-naked into your room."

He hadn't that night. Mulder had proven himself to her, shown he was trustworthy and honorable. Any other man in the Bureau would have tried to make a play in that moment, with her standing there in nothing but her underwear and a bra in the candle light. But he didn't. That wasn't the nature of their relationship, at least at the time.

And now?

"Look, nothing happened, Mulder. Not even a little." She tried to laugh it off, even if she didn't feel like laughing. She felt like her entire world was turned upside down. She had thought Mulder was going to try something that would change everything that night, and she had, for the briefest of moments, considered letting him. But the truth was that her Mulder hadn't tried a thing. That still didn't change the fact that deep inside, somewhere in the darkest parts of Scully, she would have let him if he had. And that part was vaguely disappointed that the real Mulder hadn't been the one on her couch, his breath on her cheek.

This really couldn't be happening…

"I know nothing happened, Scully, but I can't help but worry that…well, what if something had happened." Mulder began to pace again, avoiding her eyes watching him as he passed the basketball nervously from hand to hand.

Would that be a good or a bad thing? Was the idea of what might have happened that night so appalling to him? Was he really just disgusted by the idea of her? "What if it had?"

That stopped Mulder cold. Shocked to stillness by her calm challenge, he turned to her, eyes wide. His jaw worked as he found himself uncharacteristically short of a snappy response. He looked for all the world like he was a bludgeoned, baby seal, stunned at what she had even just suggested.
"Mulder, face it. We are both grown ups." At least she was trying to be and failing miserably at the moment. "Things…happen."

"Things," he echoed faintly, his power of speech returning. "Scully, those things…I mean, Eddie wasn't going to go for a little kiss and cop a feel."

Maybe not. What would she have done then? Scully didn't even want to think. "What is bothering you, Mulder, what might have happened if you hadn't broken in or what didn't?"

Did she really just ask him that? Did she really want to know the answer? Mulder blinked at her for long, measured moments, as if unsure if she if she was even speaking English. All of the comments on his part, the insinuating jokes, the implications, and she makes one simple statement and it turns his brain to mush Mulder's Adam's apple worked nervously, bobbing against his tie, his skin flushing ever so slightly under her direct gaze. "Just...well it's a good thing I came in, wasn't it?"

Yes! An unquantifiable yes! But Scully wasn't so sure whether it was because it interrupted her making a horrible mistake with Eddie Van Blundht or because she would much rather make that mistake with the man standing before her. It occurred to her exactly what she was saying and just how something like that would change everything, about their work, about their partnership, about their friendship. She couldn't think about this right now, not with everything else in her life going on, she couldn't think about this. Not now, perhaps not ever.

"I suppose," she finally replied after long moments. "It is a good thing you came in and saved the day, Mulder. Imagine the spot we'd be in if you hadn't." How could she have faced him again trying to explain how she had allowed herself to be seduced by someone who looked like him? How could she seriously admit to him that she would have gladly done it? God, she couldn't even give this any thought. This was wrong. This was dangerous…

"Yeah," Mulder mumbled faintly from across the room, busying himself with the ball in his hands. "Imagine having to explain that."
An Overnight Stay

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is glad for the excuse of cancer treatment to get away from work for a bit.

Scully never believed that cancer treatment would be a blessing in disguise.

"I'll be fine, Mulder, it is just a couple of days. Dr. Hamedi wants to be cautious. The imaging tests are merely to see where my cancer is and to make sure it hasn't metastasized." Scully shifted uncomfortably on the hospital bed, glaring grumpily at the nasty, green nightgown she had been given to wear. Mulder was being a mother hen of late, especially since the incident with Eddie Van Blundht.

"See you say that word, 'metastasizing,' and it scares the hell out of me, Scully!"

Mulder was not about to be appeased. In a way, Scully was rather glad he was being so overprotective and fussy, it kept her focus squarely on her illness and not on the whole new slate of questions so recently brought up in their relationship. As if the anger and angst of the last few months weren't enough, now they had to add attraction to the mix? She had spent months arguing that her life didn't center on him, that he wasn't her sun and her moon, and then one night with a man who wasn't even Mulder called all of that out and proved it to be a lie. And now she was in a hospital on top of it all. This was unfair!

"Scaring the hell out of you, Mulder, I'm the one in the hospital." Scully could feel a full on, Mulder level of pout coming on regarding being stuck overnight for testing. She wanted to be in her comfy, albeit decidedly less secure home, with her television and perhaps a pint of something cold and decadent. "I'm cranky, the bed sucks and I want ice cream."

Her ploy at sympathy worked. Mulder chuckled on the other end of the clunky, plastic hospital phone, "You want me to swing by and bring you some?"

"I don't think the nurses will let me have any. They are looking particularly aggressive."

"Trust me, I know how to sweet talk a nurse, I could bring you Ben and Jerry's if you want."

"Oh, the temptation was so there. "Mulder, it's out of the way and it's late."

"No worries! I was thinking of going out anyway."

"At this time of night?" Scully glanced at the clock. It was nearing ten and visiting hours would be over soon anyway.

"Yeah, something came up."

"A case?" Immediately Scully went on alert, both curious and worried. The hospital stay was unexpected. She had come in for her regular check-up with Dr. Hamedi and the next thing she knew he was checking her in for further testing. She hadn't expected the lay up and certainly hadn't expected to be out of action. And it always worried her when Mulder said something came up and
she wasn't there to prod out of him what was going on in the off chance that this "something" became much bigger than he expected.

"Maybe?" Mulder was being deliberately vague. "Some detective down in Desmond, Virginia emailed me. Apparently, this afternoon a worker at a shipping company delivery center went off to sneak a cigarette in the bathroom on work time. When she didn't come back, her friend found her in the stall, dead, covered in what looked like bee stings."

"Bee stings? Death by anaphylactic shock?"

"No one knows. The weird thing is that there were no reports of hives in the facility and there are no bee farms within sixty miles, so no one is sure how they even got in there."

"Well, bees are migratory. Africanized honeybees, the so-called killer bee, have been steadily making their way north into the US from Central America for decades, bees tend to have a moving pattern. And its spring, a time when they are particularly active."

"The detective's email hinted that this is one of the questions they are asking. In the meantime, they are having the Audrey County Corner do an autopsy, and he promises he'll send me the information on it in the morning. I'm thinking about heading out there tonight to see what is going on."

"For a bee sting? Do you know how many instances of kill bee stings occur in the US?"

"Are you overwhelming me with facts and statistics because you are grumpy about being in the hospital?"

"No," she scowled. Perhaps there was some truth in that. "What I want to know is why do you care about bee stings?"

"Because it's weird." Mulder uttered this as if it were obvious.

"Do you follow every weird case that some random police detective sends you?" Honestly, sometimes conversations with him were like talking to three-year-olds.

"Do you think that a police detective worth his credibility would come to me with this info if it wasn't unusual, Scully. Think about it, what police department ever wants the FBI horning in on this jurisdiction?"

"True, but he could just be a lazy cop." And Scully could just be petulant, lying in an uncomfortable bed, denied her beloved coffee till after her tests, and wishing she were at home on her own, comfy couch - even if it was so nearly the scene of her making a horrible mistake with Eddie Van Blundht.

"Lazy cop or not, I'm voting it doesn't hurt to have a look. And in the meantime maybe I can be persuaded to come by the hospital and bring someone a little bit of chocolate and sugar pick-me-up?"

"Fox Mulder, you are a bad, bad man."

"I hear that surprisingly a lot. Takes me twenty minutes, I zip down to the corner drug store, I grab a pint and a plastic spoon, I wave my badge at the nurses and I'm there."

"If you think you are so cocky as to smuggle illicit ice cream in here, Mulder, be my guest."
"You doubt my capabilities, Agent Scully?"

After her recent bout with the not-Mulder on her couch…no. "I'll see you in twenty?"

"You want Cherry Garcia or Chunky Monkey?"

"You choose," she smiled, finding that much to her surprise Mulder's ice cream run did cheer her up. She felt a broad smile lift across her face. "And if you can't make it past the nurses?"

"I suppose I'll be eating ice cream all the way to Desmond. It is a sacrifice I will have to make."

"It must be horrible being you Mulder," she laughed, feeling honestly better just by the banter that flew between them. "I'll see you soon?"

"Ben and Jerry willing," he replied.
Getting Caught Up

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder catches Scully up on the particulars of his case while she is bored in the hospital.

She was dozing to the inane nattering of the Today show when Mulder called the first time.

"Mrah?" Scully hoped that sounded like English.

"They must have given you the good stuff in there." Mulder's gravely monotone was both amused and envious.

"Between the ice cream and the uncomfortable bed, I think I got maybe four hours sleep." Scully shifted on the hard mattress as if for emphasis. "Some of the crappy motels we've stayed in were softer than this bed."

"And who is the one always laughing at me when I'm petulant in the hospital?"

Oh she hated his smugness first thing in the morning. "Point well taken. What's up?"

"Checking in on you." Mulder was fairly good at lying in general, but usually not to her, and she could spot it even when he wasn't standing in front of her. There was always a hesitant hitch in his voice when he tried to keep something back from her, a catch in his voice. Whatever exhaustion she felt she pushed aside as she struggled to a more upright position on the bed.

"So how did your meeting with the detective go?" Scully knew she hit pay dirt when her innocent question was met with a long, pensive silence. She half-wondered if he'd even bother answering or if he'd lost cell phone coverage until he spoke again.

"The detective was found dead near his precinct. I didn't even find out about it till his partner came to me wanting to know what was going on and what I knew about it. Man was killed execution style, left in the parking lot."

"Oh God," Scully gasped, eyes widening as she paused in her adjustments on the bed. "Do they know why?"

"That's why his partner came to me, I was the last person the detective spoke to or so his partner was told. Someone calling themselves 'Fox Mulder' visited him at the crime scene in Desmond. Shortly after that they then went to the morgue where the body was taken and signed in as me, and then took all of the evidence, including the woman who died."

"They stole the body?"

"Yep, and so far there have been no traces. All I have are copies of the photographs given to me by the dead detectives partner. Judging from the wounds on the body, I'd say this woman died of more than bee stings."

"How can you be sure?"
"Just a hunch at this point. Someone took pains to replace even the blood samples from the body at the labs. Whoever we are dealing with here is good, Scully, and they are working hard to cover up something. Why would they care if it was as simple as a swarming bee attack?"

Scully had to admit she didn't know. She pulled the standard issue blankets up around herself and wrapped her free arm around her middle. "Perhaps there is something about the bees? Maybe they are a genetic mutation. We've seen that before. Remember the glowing bugs in Washington State? They nearly burned a forest down and did everything they could to eradicate that."

"Yeah, but no secret government operation was sent in to cover up evidence on that one, and no one was murdered deliberately to hide it. The fact is that this bee attack is so random and so unexpected that I can see someone wanting to cover this up. I think something happened, something went wrong, and this woman's death was an aberration."

"It was an aberration anyway, Mulder, but I don't think it was a suspicious one."

"Maybe not." He had that vague sort of tone that hinted that he knew or had done something that he hadn't told her about yet. "Remember that farm up in Canada I went to with Jeremiah Smith. The one I saw Samantha at."

Could she forget? The memory of Mulder's broken sobs as he stumbled into his mother's hospital room still unnerved her. "You didn't have proof of it. You said they got rid of all of the evidence."

"They did, but I spoke to a specialist, a Dr. Valedespino, described the dead cable worker we came upon while there. That man's wounds were analogous to the ones found on the dead woman at the delivery center. He couldn't help me much beyond giving me information on Africanized bees and their swarming habits, but he did indicate that the wound pattern of the stings of the victims seemed unusual. Most swarm victims had a histamine reaction, causing their skin and muscles to swell and puff up as white blood cells worked overtime. These victims had large, open sores. They looked more like chicken pox than anything else."

"Chicken pox?" Scully frowned up at the inane chattering on her television. That tugged at her memory. "You remember Dr. Charne-Sayre, the woman who died while you were investigating in Russia?"

"The woman who supposedly died because of a horse accident?"

"She was an expert on the variola virus, the one that causes the pox diseases." Tired and grumpy she might be, but Scully's brain began racing as she began to string the bits of information that started flooding to mind. "The virus we keep running across is an engineered one, and to start it, they would need a base. The variola virus is almost ideal. Short of chicken pox, almost every form has been eradicated in most of the industrial world, and scientists think that soon they will have a vaccine even to chicken pox, which means that the virus strains are easier to control, easier to keep tabs on."

"Because they are only in labs, thus mutations can be carefully monitored." She could hear Mulder seize on the picture Scully painted for him, seeing immediately what she was getting at.

"Exactly. If they are engineering a virus to mimic that black oil substance we found, perhaps they are not only looking for how to create it but how it can be transmitted."

"Bees?" Mulder sounded surprised at the suggestion. "How would that work?"

"Insects are an easy way to transmit many diseases. Fleas have been known to transmit everything
from the bubonic plague to typhus. It could relate to all of this somehow."

"Have bees been known to carry diseases?"

"Not widely known, but that isn't to say that they couldn't be engineered to do such." The thought was disturbing in the extreme, especially considering how prevalent bees were in both urban and rural areas, and how often people were stung. "To even have a bee do that would mean it would need to have access to the virus, likely something it's ingesting."

"Pollen?"

"That's the thing, Mulder, I don't know of a plant alive that carries the variola virus. Plants are prone to viral infection, same as any living thing, but viruses that effect plants are different than ones that effect animals. The bees are simply acting as carriers."

"But how?"

"That you would need to speak to an entomologist to help you. I'm not up on my bug biology." Here was where her knowledge dead-ended, but the suggestion of what it meant was terrifying. Bees were a covert way of disease infection. Who would suspect it? If this were being developed it would be virtually impossible to prove how it happened or why. It could simply be explained away as a freak of nature, a strange development amongst bees. Who would think to suspect a very real, human scientist behind the attacks?

"Some good you are to me, Scully, laid up in the hospital, faking being sick, now you can't even tell me what this is all about." He was teasing to hide his frustration. Mulder didn't want to vent to her while she was in the hospital, she knew that, and she wished she wasn't there at the moment so she could be more of a help to him.

"That's exactly what I'm doing, faking being sick so I can get ice cream and sympathy out of you." She smiled, snuggling into the thin pillows. "I should be out of here tomorrow morning. If you haven't gotten any farther."

"Nope, if you get released tomorrow, you are going home and resting. If I need help, I'll go to Skinner. He's already involved in this."

"What, partnering with Skinner?" That was a surprise. Skinner was rarely involved in their cases.

"Yeah, well I've kept him abreast of everything, I needed someone I could trust in this with some of the information, especially if someone is using my name to kill police detectives. Anyway, I'll keep you up to date on things."

"Are you saying that just to appease me or are you saying that in the hopes I won't ply you with questions later?"

"You complain about how I am in a hospital!" She knew he was smiling despite the exasperation in his voice. "Get some rest, Scully."

"Will do," she replied as he hung up. For long moments Scully studied the plastic in her hand. Should she call Skinner? No, she was sure her boss could handle Mulder and this case. Still, this all left her unsettled. Bees, viruses, murdered detectives….

"Ms. Scully, you ready to get started?"

Scully glanced up at the nurse at her door, looking far too cheerful for any woman at this time of
the morning. "Sure, let's get this started." The sooner she was done the sooner she could get home and the sooner she could help Mulder out with this mystery before anyone else died.
In Too Deep

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder worries Skinner is in too deep.

Her own fluffy pajamas, her own blankets, and coffee, the sweet nectar of the gods! Scully could nearly climb into her steaming mug and soak in it if she could only figure out a way of getting that small. Despite all of the strange, tragic and weird things that had happened in her snug apartment in Georgetown, God it was good to be home. Scully spent an hour scrubbing hospital funk off of herself in the bathtub, up to her neck in bubbles, and now she happily sat ensconced on her couch, contemplating whether to read a completely fluffy book or call her erstwhile partner and see what developments occurred on his case in the over twenty-four hours since she spoke to him last. As luck would have it, the erstwhile partner appeared in her hallway, knocking softly against her door. Looking through the peephole she could tell this time it was the right person, the real Mulder. Something about the introspective, thoughtful scowl on his face when he thought she wasn't looking clued her in on his authenticity.

She opened the door with a teasing grin. "Eddie Van Blundht was waiting on my doorstep with a smile."

"Yeah, but was he bringing you muffins?" Mulder stepped inside at her silent invitation.

"I think I'll take muffins over wine for a while." She happily accepted the paper bag. "Blueberry?"

"Seriously, do you think I would buy any of that oat bran crap?" Mulder looked horrified by the idea, wandering into her living room as she trailed behind. "Am I allowed on the couch?"

Scully tried not to blush at the idea. "As long as you don't plan to change your face on me."

"I've tried to get rid of this nose for years, but no such luck." He collapsed onto the cushions on the opposite side of where Eddie sat, quietly watching her as she settled in the opposite corner with the bag in hand. "So what's the word from the doc?"

Mulder had shown remarkable restraint in holding out this long to ask her. "Well so far the testing is looking promising, but I'll have to go again in a few weeks to do another round." She didn't tell him that the test hadn't shown anything conclusive yet, hence why she had to go back for more testing soon. Why worry him when there was nothing to know. "So far we are in the same holding pattern we've been in since I was diagnosed."

"Good." He visibly relaxed, a small weight lifting from his shoulders, a hint of a smile finally crossing his face. It was so strange to see him there, watch him smiling after what nearly happened just a couple of weeks ago.

"You're case?" She needed to change the subject. "What did you turn up?"

"Oh!" He blinked as if the last thing on his mind at the moment was work. "Yeah, the bees."

"And the murdered detective? What happened with all of that?"
"The bees were a dead end." Mulder waved them off wearily, one of many dead ends they had run into in their investigation. "You were spot on about the bees and the variola virus. The expert I spoke to about the bees, Dr. Valedespino, he was studying the same sort of bees that killed the shipping employee. He was found dead in his office after a swarm attack, killed by a particularly virulent form of modified smallpox."

Smallpox? And no one noticed he had it beforehand? "How virulent?"

"They are guessing he died within minutes. The coroner was stunned by it. The best guess he had was that the smallpox was engineered to act in unison with the bee venom. As the body's histamine reacted to the stings, it spread the virus at a super accelerated rate. He was likely dead before all of the pox pustules finished forming."

The impossibility of it boggled Scully's mind, her eyes widening as she pictured the horrific way the man suffered before dying. "Smallpox normally incubates before symptoms display themselves. The theory is that death comes from the bodies sheer inability to deal with the scale of infection."

"I'm not saying this made sense to the coroner, but it was the best explanation he had. So far everyone wants to sweep his death under the rug as a freak outbreak of the virus, perhaps exacerbated by an unfortunate outbreak in his lab as he was working on some Africanized honeybees." Mulder only just did manage to keep the sneer out of his voice, his mouth working in mild disgust.

"And how did the bees from his lab get to a shipment warehouse in Virginia?"

"I think the story they are going to tell us is that the bees were being shipped to the scientist and a horrible misunderstanding occurred."

"But that isn't what happened?" Scully sank further into the cushions, wondering if she really wanted to know the truth of that statement.

But Mulder surprised her. "I think that is exactly what had been happening. But the packages weren't being shipped to Dr. Valedespino. I think there was a shipment of modified bees eggs that had been shipped to someone. But the package was damaged. It was rerouted to the distribution warehouse in Virginia, and no one knew what it contained. The bees eventually hatched and nested in the walls of the bathroom where the employee was found dead."

Scully was already thinking she might never eat honey again. "So how did the scientist end up with these bees?"

"Same way I found out the truth about all of the rest of this. Skinner took them to him not knowing exactly what these bees contained."

"Skinner found all of this out?" Their boss rarely if ever did active fieldwork anymore.

"Skinner was more deeply involved in this than you could even imagine."

There was weight and trouble in Mulder's words. "What do you mean?" She didn't like the storminess that clouded his expression, or the way he plucked at his charcoal slacks, worrying his lip in deep thought. Skinner had always sat at that most precarious of positions on the fence, caught between their work and the mysterious smoking man. He tried to balance each out while maneuvering the vagaries of the bureaucratic workings of the FBI. In so many ways he was their greatest ally and yet he also had the potential of being their largest stumbling block.
But Mulder didn't answer her question right away. He paused, thoughtful, silently stringing words together before speaking. "I think we've established that I pretty much behaved like an ass when you were found in the hospital in a coma after your abduction, right?"

Scully wouldn't call him an ass as much as distraught, but she shrugged indifferently, more to further the conversation.

"I did things which I'm not terribly sure were wise on the grand scheme of things." He was staring a hole into the slacks he kept plucking at. "I can't accept that fact that your life is being threatened by forces who wish to destroy me. When you first were diagnosed, I went into Skinner's office and demanded that he put me in contact with the smoking man. I wanted to talk."

Scully blinked blankly, too startled for words. "You…what?"

Mulder couldn't do that, wouldn't do that…

"Scully, this illness, you never would have developed it if you weren't taken, if they didn't run those tests on you, You wouldn't be dying." He stopped on the last word, choking on it as if it stuck in his throat. And still he wouldn't look up at her. "I was willing to do anything to fix this."

Oh God, please say he didn't. "Mulder, don't tell me…"

She stared at him pleadingly, pajama clad knees pulled up to her chest, feeling suddenly very frightened by the image of smoke and shadows and the sound of a gravely voice speaking quiet seduction into her partner's hopeful ear.

"I didn't, no." Mulder didn't sound as if he was too relieved by that. "Skinner talked me off that ledge. But he didn't talk himself off of it."

"What are you saying?"

"That the deal I didn't make is one Skinner tried to make…for you. Skinner made a pact with the devil to try and find a cure for your cancer."

Did they really believe her illness could be cured, just like that? "If there were a cure for my cancer, Mulder, don't you think that those women would have gotten it? They are all dead."

She was the last.

"I know, but hope is a very powerful thing, and this man…Cancerman, the smoking man, whoever the hell he is, likes to think he wields the power of life and death. I know I would believe it, if he offered it to me."

Mulder's quiet sincerity was heartbreaking and overwhelming. Would he risk so much, everything, just to get a handful of magic beans in the hopes of making her better? "Oh, Mulder!"

Surprisingly she found her eyes misting as she longed to reach over to the bowed head and pull him to her, to shake some sense into him and then hug him tightly and thank him for being the man he was, the sort of man who would do such foolhardy things for her. That devotion spoke volumes to Scully. Instead she simply reached across the couch, holding out her palm for his. His eyes slid from the trousers he was so focused on to where her fingers lay, and slowly he released his death grip on the now creased slacks and reached for them. She curled her smaller hand around his warm one, pressing all that she thought and felt in that moment against his skin, hoping he understood that which she couldn't express in words.
"Mulder, I have to believe I will get better. And whether it is through my mother's prayers, some miracle from God visited upon me, or through the science that I've relied on all my life, I cling to that as my hope. I cling to the idea that somehow I can find answers to all of this. But I won't…I can't believe that anything that man offers you or Skinner, that anything he has to say about my illness or how to cure it is in any way truthful. His entire world is built on lies and deceit, Mulder, and he is responsible for the deaths of those women and for my cancer. He knows how it happened and I don't think he has any intention to cure me. He didn't for those women. He simply wants to use you and Skinner to achieve an end and can drag you both along knowing you would do anything for the hope he dangles in front of you. But you can't let him do that. You can't let him win."

His large, long fingers tightened painfully for the briefest of seconds. "I know." He still hadn't met her earnest gaze. "Scully, if there was any way I could fix this…I don't want you to die."

His words were so childlike in their simplicity and aching in their pain, and they echoed the one raging protest that rang clearly in Scully's own heart. She didn't want to die. And God, she didn't want to leave Mulder either. Just months ago she had fought tooth and nail against him, raged and protested and acted like a petulant child at the very idea of losing herself to him. Now she would do anything to have just one more minute with him, one more day. She didn't want to leave him behind and everything they had worked on unfinished.

"I'm not dead yet, Mulder, and I won't be dead tomorrow. In a month, two, six, a year…I don't know. But until then, we have work to do. And I'm not giving up till the cart me away from it all, do you hear me?"

Her words amused Mulder, enough that he smiled softly and chuckled, nodding with slow resignation. "Don't get carted out on me just yet, Scully."

"I won't," she tried to reassure him, holding tightly to his curled fingers. She would try her hardest at least. Only time would tell how far the cancer would allow her to go.
In which Mulder suggests that he and Scully go bowling.

Work returned to normal, or as normal as the X-files ever got.

"How is your bowling game, Scully?" Mulder barely looked up from his computer as she entered. Over the years, Scully had become rather used to these random sorts of questions from her partner and she hardly missed a beat as she set down her briefcase on her table and pulled deeply from her large thermos of coffee. She found she needed that caffeinated jolt before trying to deal coherently with Mulder and his non sequiturs in the morning.

"Considering I haven't been bowling since med school, I'd say non-existent, and even then it was pretty abysmal."

"Your height not an advantage in your backswing?"

"Among other things." She ignored the jibe at her shortness and rounded her table to her chair. "I never could keep from hooking the damn things and guttering the ball completely. And when I did actually hit the pins, I never could figure out how to recreate it." Outside of track and field she had never been particularly good at organized sports.

"Not to mention the ugly shoes and the hell it is on your perfectly manicured nails." Mulder finally turned to face her, meeting her dryly-arched eyebrow with an unapologetic smirk. "I wasn't bad at it. When it comes down to it, it isn't much different than baseball, just an underhanded motion rather than an overhand." He mimicked a toss upwards, swinging his long arm along the side of his chair.

"I think most people would call that softball."

"You mock, but I was quite the ten-pin player back in ye-olde-days, when the cheapest date on a Friday night was to hang at the bowling alley mooching beers off the older kids."

"Wow, sounds positively Happy Days-ish." Scully ignored his snort of mild outrage as she turned on her computer. "So why are you asking about my bowling game? We aren't being conned into some Bureau league, are we?"

"Nope, a case. Well, I hope it's a case. Saw it on the eleven o'clock news last night."

"And this is better than scouring the tabloids for cases how?"

"Hey, last time we did that, we caught a sex offender who nearly got caught playing tonsil hockey with you." Mulder had her dead to rights and she grimaced as he looked slightly vindicated. "Besides, this one has a particular, X-files ook to it."

"Ook? Really, technical much?" She realized that Mulder wasn't going to go away with this. "Fine, what is it this time? A woman seeing the image of Elvis in her grilled cheese sandwich?"
"No, a man seeing a dead woman hanging bleeding from a bowling pin rack."

Okay, so perhaps that was different. "Was it some sort of mechanical accident?"

"Nope!" Mulder shook his head in spooky glee, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers, delighted in having a creepy story to tell. "So Angelo Pintero owns a bowling alley not far from here, usually closes at 2 AM. He was cleaning up the place and closing up shop when he notices that one of the pinsetters is cycling without setting down. He pushes the ball return to try and kick the system into gear, but the stuck ball comes up covered in blood. He goes to check it out and looks up inside and claims he sees a young woman caught in it, bleeding and trying to talk. So of course in a panic he rushes to call 911, but conveniently there are cops just outside of his establishment. So he runs to grab one of them."

"I'm still waiting for the ooky part," Scully intoned, blasé, still waiting for the weird, X-files twist she was promised.

"So Mr. Pintero gets outside and finds that the police are indeed there, called in on a murder. It turns out that the person found dead just outside of his establishment was the very girl he saw caught in the mechanism inside. Her throat was slit. Her death matched the description of two other victims found in the general area and meeting a similar description."

"So…what? The owner could be confused."

"About a dead girl in his bowling pin mechanism? Sort of a big thing to be confused about."

True, Scully acknowledged, but she was still struggling to see what Mulder's point was about. "And he's certain the girl he saw in the bowling pin mechanism was the dead girl outside."

"Certain enough that he was on the eleven o'clock news talking about it to the entire DC metro area."

"No offense, but I've seen some of the people they interview on the local news and some people will say anything to get their name and face on television. Besides, it isn't so bad for a small business owner to get his name out there."

"By saying his establishment is haunted by a dead woman who is found with her throat slit on the sidewalk outside of the front door?"

"There are strange, weird people in this world who get off on that sort of thing. Look at you!"

Mulder's face twisted grumpily. "Ha, ha, funny Scully. Scoff if you will, but I'm thinking what Angelo Pintero saw wasn't a ghost at all."

"Well, at least we can agree on something."

"I think it was what I suspected Jason Nichols at MIT of seeing. I believe it was a death omen."

"The last time you suggested that it turned out to be some old guy supposedly from the future."

Scully said supposedly in that she still wasn't sold on Mulder's theory, even if the science theoretically supported it. Quantum physics made her head hurt sometimes.

"But that doesn't mean that these sightings haven't happened. And given the description of what Mr. Pintero claims he saw, I think it's a high probability that what we are dealing with here might be just that, some sort of death omen, only here it is the spirit trying to tell someone of their impending death."
"I thought death omens were self-fulfilling prophesies of ones own death." In Scully's opinion, Mulder was sticking himself further and further down this slippery slope.

"Usually they are, but not always, especially given the fact that two other murders are associated with this bowling alley, or at least to the area it is in. Perhaps there is some sort of psychic phenomenon occurring that is causing these women to try and reach out, to warn others. I don't know." Eye's narrowing thoughtfully, Mulder flipped forward in his chair, propelling himself up as ideas began to spin wildly in his brilliant mind. Without a word, Scully began to gather her things to follow him. That was the look she knew well, the look of Mulder on the hunt.

"Hey, if we have time, want to take me on in a little ten-pin?" Mulder waggled a suggestive, dark eyebrow. Scully knew better than to take that challenge.

"How about I sit in the cheering section and occasionally bring you beer." Leave the sports to Mulder, she told herself. It was much more fun watching him at them anyway.
A Way With People

Chapter Summary

In which Scully stands up for Mulder.

"What is your partner? Some sort of crackpot?"

It was by far not the first time Scully had ever had this question directed at her, but something about Detective Hudak's dismissiveness annoyed her on this occasion. She drew herself up to all the full height she could manage in her heels and glared at the man, quelling him behind his desk where he had been pulling up the information Mulder had requested.

"Agent Mulder is one of the FBI's top profilers, Detective, and one who you might learn a thing or two from regarding your suspect in this case." Her tone filled the air with ice as she glanced at the stunned detectives still fingers. "You promised us the 911 information that you received at Penny Timmons death?"

"Err…right." Like a puppy newly spanked for piddling on the carpet, the detective turned to his computer, pulling up phone number. "Look, Agent, I don't mean to offend anyone, but honestly, coming in here discussing death omens? I know you deal with crazy cases over there at the Hoover building, but this is serial murder."

"Of which we also know a thing or two about." Her eyebrows arched pointedly, causing the other man to duck his head towards his monitor. "Serial killers usually are the FBI's purview, detective, and my partner specialized in them for years." Scully felt someone had to stand up for Mulder, especially as he had taken this particular opportunity to conveniently go missing, following up with the beat cops who had worked the crime scene that night. "And while Agent Mulder's methods are unorthodox, I can assure you that no one understands these cases better than he does."

"I'm just saying that us normal, average Joe cops know a thing or two as well." Hudak was obviously getting some gumption back after Scully's set down, scrawling a number across a yellow sticky note and handing it to her with an air of disgruntlement. "Besides, we were using your models to create our profile."

Scully couldn't blame this man one bit for being put out that the FBI was horning in on what should be a local, DC investigation. Still, she had to protect their interests. "Our model isn't right about everything, else they wouldn't keep Agent Mulder around."

It was perhaps his only saving grace, considering all of the other cracked things Mulder tended to do. "We aren't trying to take away from your investigation, we are trying to help it. Our interest is in finding out why it is that Mr. Pintero is making the claims that he is and what, if anything, that has to do with these deaths.

"And the FBI commonly chases ghost stories?" Hudak's disbelief was returning, and with it a hint of the snide that had caused her to come down on him earlier.

"I think that the FBI is willing to use anything as a means to ensure that crimes are solved and murders like this no longer occur." Scully knew the playbook when it came to pissing contests with
the locals. She just wished she didn't have to use it so often. She held up the note and smiled tightly by way of appreciation. "Whatever information we find that is useful we will be sure to share with you."

"I'll be waiting by the phone for that call."

The detective's sarcasm only produced stony silence. Quietly, Scully turned on her heels and made her way out of the man's office, grateful that at least Mulder wasn't there for the exchange. She feared he would have only made the entire situation worse by responding to the digs and taunts, worse he likely would have turned the tables and baited the man himself just for the sheer amusement value of it all. Still, Scully was less than thrilled with Mulder for leaving her to deal with the skepticism he had created while he wandered off to follow some itch in his gut that told him to avoid confrontation with the man heading up the investigation they were horning in on. One day, she sighed, spotting her partner in the bullpen beyond, she would have to teach Mulder how to play nicely with people.

Perhaps one day, when he grew up.

"What do you got?" She sauntered over to where he stood studying photographs in his hand.

"Crime scene photos of the victims. The officers said that the body was called in about twenty minutes before Angie Pintero ran out to them. The other bodies were all the same, some random phone call regarding a body." He passed the black and white photographs over, gruesome and stark photographs of Penny Timmons, pale against the gray sidewalk, a dark ribbon of gore across her thin neck. "The officer here was telling me that the two other women pretty much met the same fate."

"Sounds like a serial killer." Scully drew out a long sigh, glancing back at Detective Hudak. He was glaring at the two of them without trying to look like he was glaring at them. "You know you came in there rather like an ass, Mulder."

"What? The guy wanted my opinion."

"The detective didn't want you butting in, which is precisely what you did." Mulder rolled his eyes at her mild reprimand. "You do this every time, you come in all FBI know-how, flash your badge, and annoy the locals. They are just here doing their jobs."

"And I'm doing mine, trying to solve a case."

"Regarding a fetch?" Her eyebrows nearly flew off her head at his mild shrug. "Mulder, women are dying, serial murder is your specialty, perhaps you could offer to help them with their profile rather than tell them folk tales and asking them annoying questions."

"Annoying questions? I thought it was pretty insightful, considering now we know someone called in with Penny Timmon's supposed last words."

"Which she couldn't utter because her larynx was cut, so I'm not sure where you are going with this."

"She is me, Scully, the last words that Penny Timmons uttered are also the ones we saw written in the wax at the bowling alley. What if the words weren't Penny's last ones, but rather the phrase she heard the killer saying as she lay dying?"

"So you are suggesting the killer called the police?"
"It's not unheard of with serial killers. Some do it to taunt or show off what they've done. Perhaps 'she is me' is something meaningful to the killer, a sort of code, much like you would find in a note at the scene of the crime."

"Or it could just be a whack job trying to be a trouble maker." Scully held up the yellow sticky note and passed it to Mulder's outstretched fingers. "Why are you so convinced it means anything?"

"Because I don't believe Penny would have shown herself to Angie Pintero if she didn't want to try and let someone know how it was she died." Mulder's eyes narrowed into emerald slits at the detective sitting at his desk across the way. "Besides, their FBI Model is wrong. They aren't looking for a white male in his 20's. Look at those pictures, there's something not right about this."

Scully didn't want to know how he knew that, how he could even do that. "That spooky thing of yours, Mulder, you still got it."

"See and now you just find it endearing." He smiled broadly, reaching for a random phone on some empty, officer's desk. "Let's see where this number leads to and start from there. Maybe we can give the standard FBI model a run for its money."

Mulder really did love pissing people off, didn't he? Scully sighed, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.
Blood splattered crimson at her fingertip, spreading across the black print on the white page, fibers soaking it up greedily. So inured was Scully to the sight of blood, even her own barely gave her cause for concern till she felt the warm trickle of it down her lip and tasted the copper across the back of her tongue.

"Oh, Scully!" Mulder yelped as if she were a small child who'd begun to gush all over a fine, white carpet. And in a way she had, droplets rained across Harold Spuller's records, besmirching them as she reached up quickly to somehow stem the flow. Of all the times for her nose to bleed, and all over someone else's paperwork. Frustration warred with embarrassment as she smeared more blood across her hand.

"Yeah," she sighed, waving off his concern in exasperation. "It's okay."

"Are you sure?" Mulder's eyes were wide in his suddenly pale face. Scully didn't want to see the stabbing fear and worry so open there.

"Yeah, it's just…I'm fine." Please don't look at me like that, her brain screamed, desperately as she clawed onto her composure. "I just need to find a washroom."

Scully spun on her heels, fleeing from the pained expression on Mulder's face, more angry than frightened at the moment. Her eyes roamed the sterile looking hallway for the familiar sign that indicated "women's restroom" and blindly barreled to it, hand to nose to stop the trickle still flowing down her lip. Her free hand banging open the door as she rushed to the paper towels, grabbing one to begin stemming the tide, while she moved to the sink to flip on the cold water. Of all the times and places, she angrily muttered, as the cool stream ran over the sodden paper, her fingers pressing out the excess as she dabbed at her nose. Only once before had she had a nosebleed in front of Mulder, right after her diagnoses. While she had no idea what precipitated them outside of the cancer, it was damned inconvenient to be standing there in front of her partner with blood gushing out of her nose, scaring the living hell out of him.

God knows it scared the living hell out of her, too.

Scully swiped at her nose again. She admitted she had been careful in the sort of health information she had revealed to Mulder. Yes, she remembered her mother's injunction to not shut him out, but Maggie didn't know Mulder like Scully knew him. She saw the terror that washed over him as he glimpsed the red trickle down her upper lip. She was just damned lucky he wasn't pulling one of Skinner's routines and dragging her off to the hospital to get checked out. He might try it before the night was done. For years Scully had fought against Mulder's natural inclination to hyper-protectionism, the desire he had to wrap her in soft cotton and stick her on a shelf, so she wouldn't hurt herself. It had taken years of screaming matches and threats before he finally subsides, at least on the worst of the habit. She had refused to show weakness to him in anything. Now her own body was betraying her.
Damn it! It wasn't fair! She had too much to do, too much left undone, and she couldn't be seen as an invalid. In frustration, Scully snapped off the cold water, glaring up at the mirror over the sink, at her pale face and nose red from the water and the rubbing.

What she saw besides her own reflection made her heart stop in her chest, her blue eyes widen in horror as they traveled from her own pale, pinched expression to words that appeared in the mirror. It hovered on the glass like a demented child's finger painting, coagulating blood so dark, it nearly looked black, streaked across the otherwise clean glass by an invisible hand. The sentence read, "She is me." They were the final words of Penny Timmons, the girl found in front of the bowling alley.

It was like some horrible scene from the sort of spooky, ghost stories Bill told her as a child, except Scully was fairly certain she was awake. Otherwise would she have caught the unearthly moan sounding from the other side of the bathroom? Her breath froze in her chest as she turned, legs trembling towards a partition in the bathroom from whence the sound came. As if she were in slow motion she moved, half-terrified, but needing to see what was on the other side. Scully's heels rang off the tile in slow, measured beats as she rounded the corner to see the figure of a woman waiting on the other side.

The woman was as translucent as a moonbeam, but at the same time substantial. She was young. She wore an oversized, comfortable looking college sweatshirt, the sort that Scully remembered well from her own undergrad days. Her skin was so pale it nearly shined, and her dark eyes were wide with fright and sadness. Her ash-gray lips moved, her mouth opening as if she was trying to say something, but no words came out, no sound could be heard. As Scully watched, on the gleaming white skin of her throat there formed a dark line, slowly creeping from one side to the other. Before her mind could even wrap around what she was seeing, the black began to bead and pool, flowing down in dark crimson rivulets down the woman's skin, soaking the front of her comfortable sweatshirt, covering it with gore.

What the hell was going on?

"Scully?" The pounding at the restroom door caused her to jump so high that the scream Scully had been swallowing nearly leapt from her throat, her heart suddenly remembering to beat in her chest. All thoughts of nosebleeds disappeared as she turned towards the door, hearing Mulder on the other side, knowing he was concerned. She turned back to the window and the apparition she saw there, wondering if only she was going crazy seeing it. But in the blink of an eye from the moment she jumped to the moment she turned back the apparition had disappeared. The girl was gone and Scully was standing there alone.

"Scully, you in there?" Mulder's worried call had the underlying threat of his impending entrance to ensure that she wasn't lying in a pool of her own blood on the tile. Shakily, Scully tried to collect herself, throwing away the sodden paper towel and looking once last time to where the girl stood, checking the tile on the floor for signs of the blood trail that must surely be lying there. Unsurprisingly there wasn't one.

What had just happened here?

She turned to the sink, to the mirror where the bloody words had hung, alerting her to the wrongness of this situation. They too had disappeared, wiped away by the same invisible hand that wrote them, the mirror once again sparkling. There was no visible sign anywhere of what she had just seen. Quivering against what that thought might mean, she turned to answer Mulder's expectant question.

"Yeah?" Her voice sounded small and shaken in the large, hallow space of the restroom, bouncing
off the tiles. To her chagrin Mulder used that as an excuse to open the door, his normally sardonic
demeanor tinged slightly with panic. He glanced her up and down for a long moment, and as if
sensing something was wrong allowed his eyes to flicker around the restroom, looking for a
predator or stalker hiding in one of the stalls.

"They found another victim," he finally pronounced grimly, full mouth setting firmly into a pained
grimace. "A college student with her throat cut, just about half-a-block from here."

The girl in her college sweatshirt? Something cold and petrified formed in Scully's gut as Mulder
quietly left the restroom, closing the door behind him. She stared at it as it clicked into place, her
mind desperately searching for all the words Mulder had said about death omens. Why had she
been the one to see this girl? What did that mean? Was it a warning about the girl's death, to be
aware of it? If so why was Scully the person she chose?

Shoving down the volatile storm of terrified thoughts, Scully shook herself, reaching for the door,
trying to ignore the tingling in her nose and the dull throb just above her right eyeball.
Therapy Session

Chapter Summary

In which Scully goes in to speak to her therapist.

It looked as if only death itself could get Scully back into Karen Kosseff's office.

Scully had been reluctant to make the appointment. She hadn't seen the resident FBI therapist since Donnie Pfaster two years before. She should have come in for the stress and angst she felt about her work and Mulder, or at least when she first realized she was ill, but Scully had balked at the idea. It was silly, Mulder was a psychologist, she was used to being analyzed. Yet there was a stigma to visiting the woman, to sharing her thoughts with her, or perhaps it wasn't a stigma as much as it was her own personal inability to open up to anyone. The good captain's daughter didn't do that. Except now she was seeing visions of dead women in bathrooms. There was no denying her eyes. Whatever Mulder said about fetches and death omens, Scully needed to understand why her mind would allow her to experience something so horrific and terrifying. Why had she seen that girl dying?

"Dana?" Karen smiled broadly with the same sort of tone Scully's mother used when she sensed something wrong with her kids. It was warm and inviting, asking her to come and sit, pull up a chair, and share her worries for a while. Something deep inside of Scully responded to that and she smiled as she entered the woman's office and settled in one of the comfortable chairs.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"Water," Scully quantified, watching as the woman poured some into a paper cup and accepted it gratefully. She waited till Karen settled herself, giving the opening salvo to the psychologist as she settled herself with Scully's file.

"Two years, Dana. How are things?"

"Difficult. Hence why I'm here." Scully hadn't meant that as flippant as it sounded. Mulder was having a horrible effect on her. "I'm sorry, it's just…"

"I understand, Dana, I do. It's hard enough getting people in here for their problems, I hardly can expect them to come in here for an everyday chat. Short of a major crises, most agents forget I even exist in this building." Karen shrugged with a soft sort of look. "What's bothering you?"

As simple as the question was, it brought up so many complex ideas and emotions. There was so much bothering her. She was upset that she was seeing ghosts of dead women, something that she shouldn't be able to do. Why her? What did it mean? Was it because she was ill? Was it because she was dying? What would that mean for the truth she and Mulder had yet to find, for their work, for Mulder himself? What was wrong with her? Anxiety and stress and worry didn't even begin to cover it. What was wrong with her was…

"Fear." Scully intoned the single word, filling it with everything that she was churning inside of her at that moment. She was losing her battle against death, against cancer, and it scared the living hell out of her.
"We've spoken about your fear," Karen murmured softly, making a note in her paperwork, nodding with that annoyingly knowing way therapists had. "You've been afraid to express it to others, to Agent Mulder."

If only it was as simple as her fear of looking weak. "This is different."

"How?"

Scully paused at Karen's gentle prod, wondering where to begin. "Several months ago I was diagnosed with a cancerous mass, a nasal pharyngeal tumor that cannot be operated on and cannot be treated by conventional medicine."

How clinical she sounded saying that she dying. Karen immediately looked sympathetic, much as anyone who heard the news would. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mean for this to sound so dire." Scully tried to reassure the woman with a confidence she didn't quite feel herself. "My health has been good. I have been checked up on a weekly basis."

"You've kept working?" Karen sounded surprised that Scully would.

"Yes," she replied simply. "It's been important to me."

"Why?"

Scully would have thought the answer was obvious and it surprised her that the therapist didn't see it. It was because it was the only thing that kept her going during all of this, kept her sane, kept her fighting when she could have given up months ago. "Agent Mulder has been concerned. He's been supportive through this time."

"Do you feel that you owe it to him to continue working?"

Owe it to him? "No," she replied. Scully didn't owe him she needed him. Like always throughout their partnership, she needed his passion and belief, Mulder's unflagging faith that somehow they would find answers and get through this. Alone she was nothing, she couldn't possibly manage this by herself. But Mulder gave her strength…hope.

"I guess I never realized how much I rely on him before this, his passion. He's been a great source of strength that I've drawn on." It was why she couldn't bear to see Mulder worried or frightened by her illness. If he fell apart on her, where would she be? He was the one who believed when no one else did that she would be returned. She needed for him to believe that she would get through this, that they would somehow get through this.

"What happened last night, Dana?" It was the vague reason Scully had given Karen about her visit, the disturbing apparition that had terrified and confused her.

"I saw something. I…I don't know what to trust, if I saw it because of the stress, because the image had been suggested to me or if it was a suggestion of my own fears." This didn't make sense, not to her neatly ordered, scientific world. There were no such things as ghosts or death omens. However people did see strange things, confusing things when stressed, when sick or frightened.

Karen at least listened without staring at her as if she had been infected by Spooky Mulder's strangeness. "You fear failing him?"

Karen's words hit something inside of her, a pent up release of emotion breaking in one soft exhalation as her eyes watered. "Maybe."
She did fear failing Mulder. She feared that despite all of his belief she wouldn't get better, that she would die and leave him behind. She feared that all the faith he placed in her would fail as she withered before his eyes and everything they had both worked so hard together to build over the last four years would be for naught. Worse than failing her sister's memory, or Penny's memory, or even Pendrell's, she feared failing Fox Mulder.

"What did you see?" Karen asked gently.

Could she explain it to this woman without her thinking Scully crazy? "I saw a woman who had recently been murdered." She glanced at Karen to see if she understood her, that this wasn't something out of her imagination. "I saw her. It appeared as if she was trying to tell me something."

Scully could still see the young woman's mouth working silently in her transparent face, the blood pouring down her pristine throat.

"Do you know what?"

"No," Scully shook her head, knowing that wasn't completely true. Thinking back on it she wondered if the last words written on the mirror weren't the message the young woman was trying to get through to her. "She is me."

What did that mean?

As if sensing this, Karen called her out. "Are you sure?"

Scully paused, her eyes misting as she looked up at Karen. No, she wasn't sure, about anything. "Why would I see something like that? Mulder says that these could be death omens, and maybe they are the specters of people who have died, I don't know, but…but what if I saw this young woman because I am…dying."

She said it. The word that Scully had been afraid of saying out loud, it tumbled out of her with all of the finality of the grave. She stared at her twisted hands in her lap, willing the tears now brimming on her eyelashes not to fall. God, she didn't want to die, not yet. It wasn't her time, there was so much left to do. Why was her body betraying her now? Why had she been taken and experimented on, given this disease? What had she ever done to deserve this besides doing her job, the one they assigned her to?

"You know anger and grief at something like this is a normal part of the process."

Scully wanted to snap at Karen and snarl that of course she knew that. Every doctor who had ever gone through medical school knew that. But it was one thing to know and it was another thing to experience, to live it, to feel that clawing pain against your soul raging against fate and God for what was happening to you.

"Have you spoken to Agent Mulder about these things?" Karen always returned to Mulder in these conversations, and it was not surprising that she did. She was an FBI therapist after all, and Mulder was the one person Karen knew Scully was closest to, the one whose regard she held the highest.

One tear managed to track its way down Scully's cheek, escaping the confines she tried to keep it in, meandering down towards her chin. She wiped at it impatiently with the back of her hand. "I haven't wanted to burden him with them."

"Why not?" Karen made it sound as if it was so simple to just open up and lay these troubles on Mulder's shoulders.
"Mulder already blames himself enough for this." The open pain she had seen during her nosebleed ached dully on Scully's heart, the guilt she had seen lingering. "He always has blamed himself. My cancer was caused by my abduction two years ago, which we now know was orchestrated by people who sought to damage Agent Mulder's work, to tear down his credibility."

To take her away from him.

"You fear that leaving him alone will mean that he will fall victim to that guilt?"

"Yes, among other things, but yes. I know the dark places that hide inside of him. I know what he's lost. I know he will forever carry the guilt of his sister's disappearance with him, and then his father's death. Mulder's entire life has been a series of losses that have crippled him, but at the same time have driven him for answers." Scully sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, unwilling to give her tears purchase. "I don't know what this will do. My disappearance, by all accounts, pushed him to an edge I've never seen out of him before or since. And that was when we were only partners, before...before our partnership had grown to the level it is now."

Dear Lord, what had she just revealed about herself?

"I recall you saying you and Agent Mulder were close. You trusted him with your life."

"I do," Scully hurriedly emphasized, rushing to ensure that Karen knew that hadn't changed. "I trust him completely, that has nothing to do with this. I just feel..."

"You don't want him to see you as weak. You worry that he will somehow undervalue you as a person, undervalue your abilities, and out of his own sense of guilt, grief and loss will either try to stymie you for your own protection or failing that will crack under the weight of your eventual loss when it becomes clear that you will die and there is nothing he can do to stop it?"

"Yes," she whispered, dropping her eyes to her lap again, her fingers continually knotting around themselves. "He's lost so much...and he couldn't help this, my cancer."

Logically she knew there was little she could do to control Mulder's grief, but she didn't want this for him, a life marred by his continued pain. In her heart of hearts Scully never wanted to see that belief and faith of Mulder's vanquished, she wanted to see him find everything he had always sought. She wanted him to find his truth, with or without her there by his side.

"Dana, what are your feelings for Agent Mulder?"

"Excuse me?" The question so blindsided her she blinked, startled at the bland-faced woman.

"Obviously you trust him, from what you are saying about him you admire him."

"I do admire him. He's a man of brilliant intellect and uncompromising faith, a man who wants to do what is right."

"And you quite clearly care about him. You worry about how he will take your death."

Scully wasn't clear what the therapist was getting at. "Agent Mulder is my friend and partner. There is no one I'm closer to in the world."

"Do you love him?"

The question was so shocking, Scully felt as if she'd been shot. Her breath caught somewhere behind her suddenly lurching heart, her teary eyes widening impossibly as she felt her brain puzzle
over whether she should blush furiously or blanch pale under this line of inquiry. What in the hell? Had this woman said the word "love"?

"Agent Mulder is my partner, Karen, that hasn't changed. He means the world to me, but if you think we've done anything untoward?" God, she knew half the Bureau suspected it and had for years. What was it Mulder used to say? They think we are banging like bunnies in a broom closet. Scully had been mortified by the suggestion anyone would even think of something like that. That had been years ago though, before her abduction, before everything they had been through since, before Eddie Van Blundhdt and what she had felt for Mulder that night.

Oh….hell….

"Love comes in many forms, Dana. I'm not casting aspersions on what your relationship is with your partner exactly, only asking what the nature of your emotions are for him."

Karen, with her bland smile and warm tone made it sound so simple putting the words "Mulder" and "love" in the same sentence. As if those words didn't have specific meanings, ones that elicited all sorts of maddening, crazed emotions and thoughts in her rapidly spinning mind. "Agent Mulder means a lot to me."

It wasn't the answer that Karen wanted to hear out of her. The other woman sighed, shaking her dark head, setting down Scully's file and regarding her with a frank frown.

"Dana, I'm not here to judge you or to tell you what is right or wrong. I'm not going to run to Assistant Director Skinner to tell him anything unless it may seriously impact your work or the lives of those around you. What you tell me here in confidence remains just that, confidential. I'm not here to trip you or trap you into saying anything that will incriminate you in any way."

"I know." Scully replied, her cheeks bursting into bloom at the woman's set down, furiously trying to figure out a way to make her understand. "And the truth is, Karen, I…you…"

She stopped, words failing to make their way to her tongue for whatever reason. "What you just suggested is…I haven't ever thought of Mulder in those terms." Didn't she understand that?

"Why not?" Karen sounded as if it were perfectly natural to admit loving ones work partner. Well, not that Scully hadn't done that in the past, nearly all of her adult relationships had been with men she worked with. She had worked so hard not to fall into that pattern. She thought she had managed to avoid it. Had that been behind her frustrations last fall? Melissa Riedel, the anger and resentment she felt at how little she felt appreciated by Mulder, how tied down she felt with his work, was it all tied to the familiar spot she found herself in?

She couldn't be in this situation again, especially not now, not when she was dying. She couldn't do this to herself, let alone Mulder. But the memories of her couch and a bottle of wine, a warm fire, and the man she thought was her partner came to mind. She had wanted it to be Mulder. She had wanted to pour her heart out to that man, to share with him, to have it be him who leaned into her and kissed her, who seduced her, who she acquiesced into doing things she had only ever thought in passing about but never gave into, even in her wildest fantasies.

Scully could not be even considering this now, not with all of this going on.

"Dana," Karen's voice was soft. "You don't have to decide what that implication will mean today, or even if I'm right in all of this. I think you should, however, consider honestly what your feelings are for your partner. Consider how much of your determination to see this through is out of your efforts to please him and because of how you feel, and think honestly about your physical health."
Say no if you have to. You can't carry on forever. Your body will fail you. There is no shame in that. And if Agent Mulder feels for you half of what you feel for him, he will understand and he won't respect you any less."

Scully didn't know what to say or think about that.

"Perhaps what that vision was telling you, Dana, was that you should seriously start considering your own mortality, of what this illness means. Whether you have days, weeks, months, or years, you will have to face what this illness means and adjust your life accordingly. Just consider it. Right now, if there is any time you can be selfish about yourself and your time, this would be it."

Walk away from all of this? Months ago she had threatened it, had convinced herself she needed to do this, to walk away. She was hurt and angry with Mulder, petty feelings really in the grand scope of everything. But she had considered it then. But the minute she got sick she talked herself out of it. Now, and she had no choice. Her body was betraying her, and she wouldn't be able to continue even if she wanted to. She prayed Mulder wouldn't hate her for it when it finally happened.
Death Omen

Chapter Summary

In which Scully confesses to Mulder what she saw.

"I saw something Mulder."

For once Mulder stopped, his endless momentum stilling as feet ground to a halt against the concrete of the entrance ramp into the New Horizon's Psychiatric Center. He had been busy formulating his theory on the unfortunate death of Harold Spuller and his ability to see the visions of the dead women, picking Scully's brain for the scientific connection he needed to argue that Spuller's impending death was what gave him that insight into the death omens. But now Mulder turned, pausing in the middle of building his theory, eyes narrowing in the darkness. Scully knew then Karen Kosseff was right. She should have told Mulder. Hurt didn't begin to describe the flash of anger in his eyes as he wordlessly asked her for an explanation.

"The fourth victim," she murmured, feeling suddenly foolish for having kept this a secret. "I saw her in the bathroom before you came to tell me."

The memory of it lurked in her memory, like a bad horror movie replaying unrealistically in her mind's eye. Even now she couldn't quite bring herself to believe it happened, that there wasn't some perfectly logical explanation for it.

Mulder worked his jaw, swallowing at the irritation he was doing a poor job in concealing. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged, shoving her hands in her coat pockets and cringing at the hurt accusation in his voice. "Because I didn't want to believe it. Because…I don't want to believe it."

Didn't he understand? This was more than just about whether or not she wanted to believe in ghosts or fetches or what have you. She didn't want to believe what this implied. She didn't want to believe that her fate was the same as Harold Spuller's. She didn't want to believe that she had seen what clearly she had because it would be admitting defeat, because he was afraid of what it all implied.

"Is that why you came down here, to prove that it wasn't true?" He spat out the words, the old accusation, the sort he used to have when they were first partners and he believed everything she did was in an effort to work against him. Oh, if only it were that simple anymore.

"No, I came down here because you asked me." She would do anything he asked, Karen was right in that. Scully sighed. She refused to disappoint him, even if it meant facing the very thing that terrified her so. She couldn't fail him, not in something like this. As it was she would fail him soon enough.

He chose instead to nurse his annoyance with her. "Why can't you be honest with me?"

Did he really believe she lied to him? Mulder was the last person she would ever consider telling a lie to. "What do you want me to say? That you are right?" It was Scully's turn to turn on the defensiveness and angry, raising her chin mutinously as she glared at him. "That I believe it even if
"I don't? I mean...is that what you want?"

"Is that what you think I want to hear?"

They met each other hard stare for hard stare, Mulder's expression challenging her own, until finally her shoulder's slumped and her face fell.

"No," she whispered, feeling her anger give way beneath the weight of his frustration.

She had been wrong in not telling him, in not confiding in him and asking him. Telling Mulder what he wanted to hear was not how their partnership worked. He needed to hear her input, her way of seeing the world to give him a different perspective, to help him see things that he perhaps missed. He valued that out of her. And she had been too afraid of what it could mean if he was right on this theories, to tell him what it was that she saw, to trust him with what scared her the most.

"You can believe what you want to believe, Scully, but you can't hide the truth from me. Because if you do, then you are working against me and yourself." The passion and conviction that so defined this man she worked with rang in his words, his expression softening, eyes filled with silent worry. "I know what you're afraid of."

Of course he knew, Scully breathed. She closed her eyes against her fear mirrored so perfectly in his, the silent knowledge she had put together on her own. She was dying and scared the hell out of both of them.

"I'm afraid of the same thing," he murmured, the words cutting deeply as he uttered them. She couldn't have Mulder afraid. She couldn't have him carrying this. She couldn't allow him to risk what she knew he would if he knew that she was dying.

"The doctor said I was fine," she replied matter-of-factly, her tests at the hospital coming up clean.

"I hope that's the truth," Mulder replied. Did he mean that he hoped the tests were correct, or did he honestly believe that she was lying about that to him as well? A part of Scully childishly wanted to say that she didn't care what he believed, but she knew that she cared desperately what he believed, cared desperately that he didn't think of her as weak or ill, that he didn't see her as dying. His words had the effect of crushing whatever spirit she still felt at that moment. It was all too much, all of this, all she wanted was to get away from this, from the case, from him.

"I'm going home," she whispered, turning away from his petulance, and marching down the concrete ramp down to the parking lot and her car. In the distance lights flashed from the emergency vehicles there to collect Nurse Innes. She gave them only a passing glance as she got into her sedan. Mulder was angry with her for not trusting him yet again. He was hurt that she wouldn't be honest with him. What was she supposed to be honest about? That she was dying. That she now had proof? She had seen the dead girl, had watched the blood spill from her torn throat. She couldn't explain it, she had no reason to even understand it scientifically, and yet she knew with that intuition that Melissa had always yelled at her she needed to listen to. She was dying. Was that the truth Mulder wanted to hear?

The tears she had held back all day began to fall unbidden, streaking down her face in singular tracks as the sobs welled up inside of her. Soon she gave vent to a torrent, her fingers clutching the steering wheel as she felt her face break and crumble, all the months worth of silent terror and unspoken worry giving loose to the private pain she had kept bottled inside for so long. God damn it, she didn't want to die. She didn't want to be weak. She didn't want to be scared, and hell, she didn't want to leave Mulder.
Through the haze of tears she could see the ambulance in the distance finally begin to move and drive away from the center's entrance, carrying away the nurse who had murdered so many women and had likely killed Harold Spuller. Poor Harold, she mused, blinking wetly as she watched the ambulance go. He had known enough to understand that what the nurse was doing was wrong and it bothered and frightened him. Hopefully, Scully sighed, Harold at least was in a better place.

Her gaze drifted from the red, flashing lights to the rearview mirror of her car, watching the ambulance pull off into the distance when she stopped, staring at the reflection she found there. Just behind her seat she could see the translucent image of Harold Spuller in the back, quietly watching her in the glass. Startled Scully spun, turning in her seat to looking for the man's ghostly form, but instead found nothing but the empty, rough fabric of the seat behind her. Nothing…as if he wasn't even there.

He hadn't been…not really.

Stunned, she turned back around, her brain thudding hard against the point in her forehead, a steady tattoo of sheer terror. Harold Spuller was dead. She shouldn't be able to see him…not unless Mulder's theory was correct, and those that are dying have a special connection to those who have died. Which would mean…

She laid her forehead against her steering wheel and wept.
In which Scully points out to Mulder he isn't a loser.

They didn't speak to each other for days. Scully called in for two of the days. Her health was good, there was nothing wrong with that, but emotionally she was exhausted. The weight of everything, her illness, the visions, and the meaning of what Karen Kosseff had suggested about her feelings for Mulder wore her mind and soul down. For the first time since she began working with Mulder she called in for nothing more than not feeling like it. Mulder didn't complain. In fact he said nothing at all. She left the message on the office phone, half expecting him to call in a panic. But her phone remained silent, either he believed her when she reassured him in her message she was fine or he was still too hurt to bother arguing with her on the point. In all likelihood it was both. Mulder could sulk like few other people she knew.

When Scully did venture back to work finally, Mulder's greeting was perfunctory and curt. Eddie Van Blundht had requested Mulder's presence. Not a particularly strange demand, several of the people Mulder had busted over the years had asked for the same thing, but it was strange when they so obviously had Eddie dead to rights for what he had done. And while she doubted Eddie had little he could add by way of information, she still didn't say no when Mulder asked rather indifferently if she wanted to come. It was clear he didn't care one way or the other, but Scully knew what Mulder could be like when left alone with suspects, especially when he was in a bad emotional state. She chose to go despite his cold shoulder and the long car ride.

The silence followed them all the way to the Cumberland Reformatory where Eddie was housed. Thick and oppressive, it smothered even the vague hope Scully had that morning that Mulder might be out of his snit. But then again, she reminded herself, it wasn't fair to call it a snit exactly. She hadn't trusted him. She hadn't shared with him what it was she feared. Hadn't they stood there twice before, once with Donnie Pfaster and once when she was so convinced he had betrayed her to the smoking man? And here they were yet again.

She never seemed to learn her lesson. For Mulder trust was paramount, there were so few people in his world that he could depend on without question. She was one of them. Even Mulder's family lied to him, but Scully was one of the few who had earned that most precious of commodities from him. She had forced him screaming and kicking to let her into his world, but she had hardly extended him the same courtesy. She made demands out of him that she had no intention of keeping herself. What sort of partnership was that?

She couldn't make him understand she was doing it to keep him from this burden, because frankly, she could barely deal with the crushing fear of what all of this meant herself. She didn't want anyone else, her family, certainly not Mulder to spend what could be the last months of her life carrying that weight on their shoulders as well. It was all just too much...too much....

"Scully!" Mulder's fingers on her knee jarred her and it was only then she realized she had dozed. Fallen asleep in the car? Really? When was the last time she had done that? Concern flashed for a moment on Mulder's expression as she blinked up at him in surprise, but was quickly swallowed by
the mask of cool detachment he had worn all morning. He pulled away, climbing out of the car, his long coat flapping behind him as Scully shook herself and scrambled after him.

It was going to be one of those sorts of days.

Security was expecting them when they entered the correctional facility, taking their weapons and leaving them their badges as they signed in and waited for their guarded escort. Scully still wasn't sure why they were called there. Mulder hadn't even speculated on their drive over, though she imagined he had theories, he just wasn't speaking to her at the moment, thus wasn't sharing. She sighed. In a way she had no one to blame but herself in this. She knew better. Hadn't her own mother warned her not to shut him out? It was what she always seemed to do, even with family.

"Agents!" The guard beckoned for them to follow. Mulder briskly led the way, following down the broad, dimly lit hallways to the gray, institutional prison beyond.

"I'm afraid only one visitor at a time in the room, prison regulations." The guard looked at them apologetically as the made their way to the visitation area filled with small cubicles, windows dividing them down the middle to keep the inmates contained. Scully didn't even need to ask which of them was going. Eddie wanted to see Mulder, and besides she wasn't so sure she couldn't see the man without having her skin crawl at the very idea of what he had tried to do. Well, what she had nearly let him do thinking that it was Mulder who was trying to kiss her that night. She could trust Mulder with her body but not her heart apparently.

"It shouldn't be more than five minutes," Mulder muttered, barely shooting Scully a backwards glance as he entered the door the guard held open for him. Just inside Scully could see Eddie at one of the cubicles, wearing a baseball cap and a very bored, slightly dull expression. She had so nearly let that man touch her. The thought made her shiver as she wrapped her arms around herself, hugging her elbows.

"Ma'am, if you want, there is a television monitor here." The guard waved her over to a black and white console set up in the corner. "We use it to keep an eye on what is being said when visitors come in. You never know what could be discussed. You're more than welcome to use it."

"Thanks," Scully murmured, wandering to the tiny television set, watching the conversation between her partner and Eddie.

"Thanks for coming," Eddie opened genially as Mulder glanced towards the gaudy looking baseball cap on the man's balding head.

"What's with the hat?" Mulder was never one for niceties.

"My court appointed therapist makes me wear it. She says it's meant to bolster my self esteem." Right, Scully thought. What therapist in their right mind thought that was a good idea?

"Does it," Mulder asked, his question mirroring her thoughts.

"Not really," Eddie sighed, resigned. "The other inmates just beat me up and take it from me. Which would be okay, except that every week she brings me a new hat." He grimaced in obvious disappointment. "Plus, they keep me on some kind of muscle relaxant, so I can't make faces the way I used to. Did you tell them to do that?"

Of course Mulder had, but he didn't say as much. Eddie sighed, glancing around Mulder hopefully. "Is...is Agent Scully here?"
Scully felt the skin at the back of her neck tingle as she held herself. Right then she felt supremely thankful that she hadn't gone in there. God, did she even want to know what that man thought about her when he was alone? No, no she didn't.

Mulder was in no mood to humor Eddie, a glare flashing dangerously to life. "What did you want to talk to me about, Eddie?"

Eddie took the deadly growl in Mulder's voice in stride. "It's funny," he shrugged, leaning back in his plastic chair as he studied Mulder for long moments. "I was born a loser, but you're one by choice."

What did he just say? The undeniable creep factor that Eddie elicited in Scully vanished in a moment as anger rose to the fore for his accusation towards her partner. Loser? This man, who so nearly had raped her, was accusing her partner of being a loser?

Mulder for his part looked hardly ruffled. "On what do you base that astute assessment?"

Eddie leaned forward, almost as if he were imparting Mulder with priceless information. "Experience. You should live a little. Treat yourself." He shrugged, straightening, shooting Mulder a sad, almost envious glance. "God knows I would, if I were you."

Eddie Van Blundht, a man that nature had cursed with plain looks, no personality, and a rare, freakish mutation, had called Mulder out on one of his greatest sins, his inability to have a life. It had been what drove Scully crazy just months ago when she had been dying to do something, anything other than work another X-file, and yet she felt herself angrily longing to lash out at Eddie. What did he know of Mulder, of his work, of his passion? He had spent one day in the man's skin! How could he judge her partner based on that? How dare he call him a loser!

Mulder rose in one fluid movement, turning his back on Eddie's quietly covetous gaze. The guard met him at the doorway with a clipboard and Mulder hurriedly signed out, not bothering to look towards Scully and where she stood at the monitor.

"Good day, sir!" The guard called to them as Mulder nodded and spun down the hallway, Scully falling in beside him. He said nothing, but his eyes remained glued to his shoes as he walked, thoughtfully chewing on his bottom lip. It tugged at Scully's sense of righteous indignation. He didn't really believe that about himself did he? That he was a loser? He knew that he and Eddie were nothing alike, right?

"I don't imagine you need to be told this Mulder," Scully murmured, unfolding her arms from around herself and sliding them into her pockets. "But you're not a loser."

"Yeah," Mulder sighed softly, glancing sideways at her. "But I'm no Eddie Van Blundht either, am I?"

What was that supposed to mean?

Scully's cheeks flamed as she found herself staring straight ahead. Mulder suddenly becoming very interested in his sleeves, the nervous twitching of his fingers the only indication on how truly upset he was. Damn it!

"I don't think you're a loser," she whispered softly as they made their way down the hallway and away from the gray concrete of prison.

"I didn't say you did." Mulder answered stiffly as they wandered over to the front desk. Their conversation halted as they signed out and gathered their weapons, bidding security a good day as
they made for the facilities doors. Even as they stepped into the cool, spring rain outside Mulder had little response to her statement.

"Mulder, Eddie was a man who had to lie to get into bed with women. I've never known you to lie in our entire partnership."

"No," Mulder nodded vaguely. "But you still can't trust me, can you?"

His words cut to the heart of what this was all about for him. Scully found herself biting her tongue from the angry retort she wanted to snap at him, choosing instead to dig her hands deeper in her pockets.

"Mulder, it's not that I don't trust you. I trust you implicitly, more than my own family."

He snorted as he unlocked his car door, the misty rain dampening his dark hair.

"You think I don't because I didn't tell you about that vision?" She hadn't even confessed to the fact she had seen Harold later in her own car.

"You could confess to Eddie, couldn't you?" He was going for the low blow and they both knew it. Scully flinched under the hinted accusation but squared herself against it. If he wanted to bring this up now, than so be it, she thought stormily.

"As a matter of fact, Mulder, the only thing I bothered to confess to Eddie Van Blundht was how I had a failed attempt at sleeping with my high school boyfriend on prom night. Not exactly juicy information there." Had he really thought about this all these weeks?

"But you won't deny that you nearly allowed him to maul you on your couch that night?"

Jesus! Scully felt her forehead twinge. "Mulder, I'd had wine, it was late, Al Green was playing and all things considered with everything else going on in my life, I figure I could have a pass, right? One mistake, that is all."

"A mistake?" There was more than a simple request for information in that question. Scully paused, sensing the hidden danger there.

"Mulder, I trusted Eddie that night because I thought he was you." Frustration erupted out of her as she threw her hands up in the air. "It's not that I don't trust you with these things, hell I told you about my cancer before I told my own mother. Do you know how angry and hurt she was about that? I told you because you were the only person I could trust. And now you are angry with me because I didn't tell you about seeing one apparition that I'm not even sure I really saw?"

Her voice rang in the dampness, catching Mulder by surprise at her vociferousness. Her cool, collected demeanor was starting to crumble like wet sand in this mist, and Scully was vaguely wishing she had chosen to call in again today, or chosen not to come to Cumberland with him, or anything other than being in Mulder's presence right now. She was falling apart, and goddamn it she didn't want him seeing that.

"Did it ever occur to you, Mulder, that my 'not trusting you' with my fears and worries might have to do with the fact that I'm trying to be a good partner. It has nothing to do with fearing you or not believing in you or your work. How can I be an effective part of this team if I am confessing every little neurosis? And what's more, I didn't come to you with that apparition because, frankly...I'm dying."

Scully spat the fearful word out between them as some sort of challenge, watching Mulder blanch
under the weight of its meaning.

"You said it yourself, Mulder, Harold Spuller saw those women because he was being poisoned to death. I saw that woman because I have cancer. It scared the hell out of me what that meant, seeing that. I wanted to believe that it was anything, stress, my imagination working with your theories and my worries to create some figment that wasn't really there. You are angry because I didn't tell you? Mulder…I didn't tell you because I couldn't burden you with this."

God, didn't he understand.

So now it was out…most of it anyway. Jesus, why could he push her like this? Spent, she felt her shoulder's slump as she huddled in on herself, pulling her long coat around against the chill of the rain. She wanted in the car. She wanted to go home, have coffee, wait out the rest of the day and get to the weekend. Scully wanted to be anywhere but with Mulder's wounded sense of pride.

"I already carry that burden, Scully." Mulder sighed quietly, staring at his rain dabbled shoes.

Scully closed her eyes, willing her lost composure into some semblance of order once again. "Please, Mulder. I…"

She paused. She needed him, damn it, she needed him to be strong, to keep believing that they would persevere. She could have him fall apart on her, because if he did. What would that mean for herself. "Let's go home, please?"

Her pleading got through to him.

"Home…right." He nodded, as if he had forgotten where they were standing. He hit the keyless entry, allowing her to crawl into the dry, warmer passenger side. She huddled against the door, staring out of the window, and willing herself not to break down in front of him. She had done enough confessing today.

The drive back to DC was just as silent. Scully could hardly wait to get back to the office.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully's quiet weekend is interrupted by an unexpected phone call.

Perhaps some downtime away from one another to sort this all out was exactly what they needed. It was late on that Friday night when Mulder called. It surprised Scully, considering his quiet reticence on the drive back from West Virginia, she hadn't expected to hear from him till work on Monday at the very earliest. He hadn't acted like he wanted to speak to her even then.

"Scully, I'm heading out of town for the weekend," Mulder began, not even bothering with a greeting. "I know how you are about these things and was wondering if you could come feed me fish."

Scully tried not to cringe at the implication in his voice when stating how she was about "those things." Karen had warned her to speak to him about what she saw and Scully hadn't listened. It was her own fault now that her partner was angry with her.

"Sure," she smiled tightly, though he couldn't see it. "When do you expect to be back?"

"Sunday late, I shouldn't be gone that long." No word on where he was going or what he was doing. Scully wanted to ask but feared he would only shut her off.

"Well, perhaps this is good for you, Mulder, get out of town, relax some. Eddie Van Blundht got that much right this morning, you should live a little, treat yourself." God knows Scully wished she had done it more often.

"Right," Mulder hummed noncommittally. "You sure you are up to this? I know you were tired on your way back."

"I'm fine," she replied quickly. "I can manage some fish."

"Okay!" He took her protests on face value. "I'll see you Monday then?"

"Sure," she replied simply as he clicked off and tried not to feel bothered by the succinctness of the conversation or the lack of information therein. After all, Mulder had a life, and just like hers didn't center on him, his did not center on her. He could do whatever and go wherever he wanted without explanation.

Karen Kosseff's question bugged her for the rest of the evening. In fact, it bothered her for the rest of the weekend. "Do you love Agent Mulder?" The question bordered on ridiculous. Love Fox Mulder? She admired him, yes, cared for him deeply, and God knows she relied on his strength and passion…but love him?

That didn't mean the implication didn't niggle at her as she went about her weekend rituals. Those rare Saturdays and Sundays she got at home meant she cherished them. Laundry was done, bathroom was cleaned, floors were vacuumed, paperwork finished and organized. It pained her, briefly, when she ran across Queequeg's things in her closet to think of her dog, now gone a year. A weekend like this, with her all alone at home cleaning, she would have welcomed the company of
the tiny, red-haired puffball. It would have given her something to focus on other than her partner, off doing God knows what with God knows who. Not that it was any of her business.

Why had Karen suggested that she loved him? Even as she tried not to focus on the question it bubbled up as she scrubbed tile, and slipped in past her sheets and towels, surfacing as she reviewed her notes from the Harold Spuller case. Did Karen honestly believe her inability to share her fear and worries with Mulder was because she was in love? Well, Scully quantified firmly, there was a difference between loving someone and being in love. Even she knew that, from painful experience. And perhaps, if she admitted it to herself more readily, there was half a point in Karen's favor. After four years and every crisis they had been through and every truth they had discovered, there could be a case made that she did love her partner. You normally came to love people who were close to you in your life. She loved her family, she loved her friends in college, they were people she'd been through thick and thin with, and in that sense perhaps Karen wasn't too far off the mark. She certainly wasn't "in love" with him, that much was sure. Besides, with her horrible track record on that score, how could she, a woman suffering from terminal cancer, claim to be in love with anyone. Mulder was a constant presence in her life, someone she could depend on as surely as she could the sun and the rain. That didn't mean she was in love with him, only that she had come to rely on him.

Besides, she realized as she wandered into his apartment to feed his fish, she couldn't live with this. His world was that of constant chaos. She nearly stumbled over his running shoes at the door where they perpetually were, and she didn't even want to think about why there was a strange smell coming out of his kitchen. Quietly she tapped the fish food into the tank, watching the golden-scaled creatures bob up to feed before briefly turning to his window, gazing out. One of the panes still carried the residue of a masking tape X, with a neat, circular bullet hole cut into it. She turned to the wall above his couch and saw the matching hole still in the dry wall. Mulder's life was that of continuous upheaval and destruction. Scully felt like she was the one constant in it, the one sane and rational thing in his whole universe. And while she clung to him because of his passion and belief, she wondered if it was her steadfastness and grounding, the constancy of her life that gave Mulder his peace of mind.

What would he do when, not if, she died? Who would be his constant then? What did he do before she ever came into his life? Recalling the Mulder she first met four years ago, the angry, cynical, but strangely enigmatic man who had both frustrated and intrigued her, he hadn't had much in the way of grounding then. Wasn't that why she was sent to him in the first place, to bring him down to earth? Had they meant that as a punishment or as a boon?

She returned home, to her empty but sparkling apartment. Unsurprisingly, there was still no word from Mulder. Scully tried not to think of the curiosity she felt regarding her partner's whereabouts, nor about the lingering guilt she had over her perfidy in not telling him the truth about what she saw. She had hurt him and it wasn't just about his work or what he was trying to prove. She'd hurt him because she hadn't trusted him, and for Mulder everything; his friendships, his work, his life came down to trust. How much of his life was a lie? Even his own mother kept secrets that he had yet to pry out of Teena after all the pain and suffering she had gone through. Scully was the one person in his life that didn't come with some string attached, some secret agenda, something hidden.

Which of course meant she would have to make it up to him Monday. Perhaps lunch, she reasoned, someplace decadently greasy like he liked? Maybe a heart-to-heart about everything about all of this, including the mess that was Eddie Van Blundhilt, clear the air between them. They could get a fresh start. She needed peace between the two of them. Scully didn't know how much worse this was going to get.
She fell asleep that night without much effort. The physical work of the day and her meandering thoughts put her to sleep nearly instantly, relaxing into the comfort of her pillows and the fresh smell of newly cleaned sheets. Not even a dream marred her rest, and it would have been her most full night of sleep in weeks if her phone hadn't decided to ring at some ungodly hour, breaking her completely out of her slumbers.

"Mmmm…hello?" Her voice croaked brokenly into the receiver.

"Scully?" It was Mulder on the other end. What was he calling her for? Wasn't he out of town?

"Mulder, what time is it?" Scully rubbed sleepy at her eyes, blinking grit and haze out of her vision in a vain effort to read her bedside clock.

"I don't know," he admitted, sounding uncharacteristically confused. Was he hurt?

The red numbers on her bedside finally coalesced into some semblance of order in her brain. "It's almost 5 AM." On a lovely Sunday morning. too. This better be good. "Is something wrong?"

"I think so," Mulder replied vaguely, and it was now that Scully felt her adrenaline kick in. There was something small and frightened in his voice, a quality she never heard out of her partner. Fear spiked briefly as she began to rouse herself out of bed, command taking control of her actions.

"Where are you?"

"I think I'm in a...motel room." He didn't sound sure of that. "In Providence, but…"

Providence? Why there? He had gone there last spring when his mother was so ill, but he usually had no reason to be there. "Where?"

"Rhode Island," he quantified.

"What are you doing there?" He had no more reason to be in Providence than his mother had when she had her stroke.

"I don't know." Again with that hated response. Why couldn't he remember? Mulder had an eidetic memory, he never forgot. "There's…there's blood all over me."

Blood? Scully frowned, pushing back worry as the doctor in her took control. "Are you hurt, Mulder?"

"I don't think so," he sighed, not sounding any more relieved. "I think it's my blood."

Than whose blood could it be? What had Mulder gotten himself into now?

"All right, I want you to stay where you are. Don't move, don't go anywhere, don't call anyone else, and don't answer the door for anyone other than me. I'm going to get on the first flight I can get to Providence and I'll come straight to you. What's the hotel?" Blindly, Scully was stumbling to her closet, turning on lights and pulling out clothes she hoped would match.

"The Mariner's Motel, that's what the card in the room says." He didn't sound sure of that either. Scully held her temper in check, pulling off her pajamas and throwing on clothes.

"Right, don't do anything till I get there, Mulder. If I time it right I can get a shuttle heading that way, and I'll use my badge to bully my way on board if I have to." Scully wasn't above using the perks of her office if the situation warranted it.
"Okay," Mulder replied meekly, not even arguing with her. Something must be wrong.

"I'll be there soon," she promised. "I got to get off the line. Call my cell if you need anything before then.

He murmured what she thought was goodbye as she clicked off the line.

Oh damn it all, Mulder, she thought, just what had he gotten himself into now?
Suicide Pact

Chapter Summary

In which Scully uses her skills to prove Mulder's innocence

Fox Mulder didn't kill Amy and David Cassandra and Scully could prove it.

"Agent Scully, no offense, I know you want to help your partner, but I've already had the ME look at both of the Cassandra's bodies." Detective Curtis' sigh only just did manage politeness as he barely disguised his skepticism. Scully ignored him, quietly pulling out each of the unfortunate victims, carefully wheeling them to the center of the autopsy lab.

"Did you read the ME's report?" She didn't bother to glance up at the sheepish look on the detective's face.

"I skimmed through it, yeah."

"Detective Curtis, I'm a Stanford educated medical doctor, who received her pathology training at Quantico." She let that sink in. Scully hated showing off her credentials, but sometimes you needed to flash the know-how before people such as blue-collar Curtis took her seriously. "While I'm confident you are good at your job, Detective, I know I am at mine, and unlike you, I did read the ME's report, carefully."

Without further ado she removed the coverings over both pallid bodies and tried not to take a small bit of satisfaction at Curtis blanching. Side-by-side, the pair appeared rather sad. They looked to be in the late 40's or early 50's, a couple comfortable with each other. Amy was a bit worn, but endearing even in death, David had started to gray at the temples and was developing a middle-aged paunch. Scully could imagine they had been quite happy together, once. She moved around each body, picking up the report from the worktable as she did, flipping it open as her eyes moved along each point in the file. Her rubber shoes scuffed the concrete floor as her work scrubs whispered quietly in the stillness. If it had been Mulder in the room with her, he would already be peppering her with questions, seeking input and data to feed into whatever calculations his brain was making. Curtis merely watched in silence as she worked.

"The point of entry for each of the victims is wrong," Scully muttered finally, looking up at the man frankly.

"Wrong? What do you mean wrong? It's there?"

"Yes, but it's not right for a simple gunning down." Scully frowned briefly at the wounds in each of them. David's was high up and center in his chest and judging from the angle of the wound and the size of entry it occurred at a much closer range than necessary. Amy's appeared to be a single shot to the right temple, exiting out of the back of her skull on the left, back corner, leaving it a ruined mess. Scully bent closer to examine the entry under the tufts of graying, chestnut hair.

"But they were shot!" Curtis insisted woodenly.

"I quite realize that, Detective, but if you had bothered to read the report you'd figure out that Amy
was a suicide, not a murder." She stood snapping shut the report, holding it out to the perplexed officer, perhaps a tad triumphantly. "The residue by Amy's temple indicates the gun was held quite close, likely against the skin. I bet if we run it, it will match the residue we will find on David's chest."

"So, perhaps your partner held it there, we don't know." Curtis was being mulish at this point and it irritated Scully. Was he really so bothered by the fact that he wouldn't be able to bust an FBI agent for this murder?

"Detective, Agent Mulder is a weapons qualified FBI agent. He's a man who knows how to use a gun to kill if necessary." She waved towards David Cassandra's prone body and the wound in his chest. "Mulder is 6'2, about David's height. If he wanted to hit David in this region straight on he would have to stand some distance away, correct?"

"Right." Curtis frowned slightly, trying not to look green as Scully prodded the open wound.

"But Agent Mulder was covered in blood, which wouldn't have happened if he was aiming from across a room and standing directly with the gun held level at David'

"Except he could have been standing right in front of David, keeping his aim level."

"With Amy standing there watching?" Scully rolled her eyes. "Besides, the angle of the wound is wrong. If Mulder had been standing right in front of him, the bullet would have flown straight or downward in his trajectory through the body. Instead it went upward, towards his shoulder, ripping across his pulmonary artery."

"Which means that the person who shot him had to be shorter," Curtis murmured, softly grudging. Now the pieces were coming together for him, but not in a way that explained anything. Scully understood that feeling all too well.

"Likely it was Amy." Scully pointed to the petite woman on the other table, her head turned strangely as the back corner of it was now missing parts of the rounded skull. "The angle of her wound also indicated it was self-inflicted rather than fired by Agent Mulder. He's too tall."

"But the blood on his shirt, that was theirs." The police had already combed his hotel room and gathered whatever they could to use for forensic evidence.

"That it is, but I bet if you ran a blood spatter test on the shirt it would tell you the same story that these points of entry do. If Mulder did kill these people, he wouldn't have been covered in their blood."

"He would have been behind them, where the blood was exiting." Curtis didn't sound relieved by that idea. In fact he sounded downright frustrated. He had his murderer, a cut and dry case, but now he had a murder-suicide instead, one that was unforeseen and unexplainable, and one that could potentially be linked to the strange suicide of one of his own men for no more clear of a reason.

"You said Amy had a puncture wound in her hip?" Curtis slapped the medical report in his hand against one leg out of sheer vexation, glaring down at the poor, unfortunate Amy.

"Right here." Scully moved back the sheet lower down, discreetly showing the purplish bruising of skin on the woman's upper hip, near the buttocks. "It looks like an injection point. And there is the puncture near her frontal lobe. There is scar tissue up along her hairline from what looks like some sort of injection through the skull."
Curtis grimaced, wrinkling his nose as he glanced up along Amy Cassandra's forehead. "Why in the hell would she do that, or my officer? And what does your partner have to do with all of this?"

"I don't know," Scully admitted slowly. "But I have some ideas."

"Such as, since we are working on this case more or less together?" Curtis couldn't win out by screaming jurisdiction now, not with her involved so deeply, so he might as well join her.

"You said that your officer was into alien abductions. Swore that he was a victim, correct?"

Curtis nodded as Scully continued. "The truth is that I bet if we ask about Amy, we'll find she was under treatment for the same thing, abduction memories."

Scully wondered if she looked on the back of Amy Cassandra's neck if she would find a similar scar to the one on her neck, one with a single little computer chip inside.

"My partner investigates these sorts of claims for the FBI, alien abductions, that sort of thing. It is likely that the reason he came up here was because of Amy."

"Alien abduction? Seriously?" Curtis' eyes widened as he worked to contain a snort of disbelief. "I mean, that's what you do? I thought you were FBI agents."

Slowly Scully closed her eyes and counted to five, biting her tongue so hard she nearly bled. When she opened them she laid a cool gaze at Curtis. "Agent Mulder and I specialize in these sorts of cases for the FBI. We make no judgment calls, Detective Curtis. As I was saying, my guess is that Amy contacted my partner because of the work he does. He spent a lot of time out here in his youth, his family was known, it's possible the Cassandra's heard about Mulder through the grapevine and contacted him."

"That part I get and that explains what your partner is doing here. What I don't get, Agent Scully, is why they killed themselves in front of your partner, and why he didn't or couldn't stop them. And better yet, why can't he remember any of it?"

That was the part that scared Scully. Mulder's eidetic memory rarely failed. To have a whole section of his life gone without explanation was unthinkable. The only other time she had ever heard of him doing anything similar was the disappearance of Samantha so many years ago. To see him like she had that morning, huddled naked in his shower, shivering and lost, had terrified her almost more deeply than her cancer did. For all of his erratic nature, Mulder was the constant in her life. To see him so broken, falling unconscious at her feet…

"Agent Scully?" Curtis waved his hand in front of her tightly passive face. She blinked, frowning up at the other man.

"Any ideas on your partner's memory loss?" It was obvious he had already asked that question once already.

"Ketamine, used by veterinarians, usually, but it was in both Mulder and the Cassandra's blood work, and I would lay money that when they do the blood work on your dead officer, they will find it there too."

But who was prescribing it and why?

"We'll need to see if your officer was seeing anyone, a therapist or psychologist, and see if that connects to Amy Cassandra. Perhaps there is one who is specializing in a therapy that is using ketamine, one that both Amy Cassandra and your officer was using."
"How does that account for your partner and the husband?"

"I don't know yet." Scully pressed her mouth firmly shut staring at Amy's still face. What had she been doing? And why did it involve her partner? "It isn't a perfect line of investigation, Detective, but it's the best lead we got. And perhaps this doctor or therapist or whoever can tell us what was going on that led up to all of this."

Quietly Scully reached for the pale blue, linen sheets and inched each of them over the bodies of Amy and David Cassandra. Just what had been to desperately overwhelming for them to face, she wondered quietly as she carefully wheeled each of them back to their respective lockers. Why had they felt the need to kill themselves? And what did it have to do with Amy's supposed abduction.

The implant scar on Scully's neck itched under the collar of her scrubs, reminding her about the hole that still remained in her own memory.
"Turn here."

Mulder's hand was ghostly pale in the darkness as Scully's eyes followed it. She quietly signaled to the car behind them she was making a left hand turn and waited for oncoming traffic to pass before slipping onto the small, residential lane. Beside her she could feel Mulder tense as she slowly drove past the quiet, glowing homes of Teena Mulder's neighborhood. It didn't look much different than it had a year ago when she had been there attending on Teena during her stroke. It was the sort of quiet community that retirees lived in, few children, with the ringing silence of a population that commonly went to bed before ten at night. Scully couldn't remember the last time she had managed that.

"Are you sure your mother is even going to be up?" Scully pulled to a quiet halt in front of Teena's own small home, neatly trimmed and innocuous in this cookie-cutter neighborhood. No light shone from the upstairs window she knew belonged to Mulder's mother and there was no glow from anywhere downstairs either.

"She'll wake up. Mom was never a deep sleeper." Mulder's clambered out of the car with an indifferent shrug, preoccupied by whatever swirl of thoughts had kept him silent on the drive from Rhode Island to Connecticut. Scully had tired to pry them out of him, but he'd hardly spoken, stating only that he was finally beginning to remember things. What things? Memories of his childhood? Of the night that Samantha was taken?

"Mulder," Scully called as she climbed out behind him, warning in her tone as he made his way to his mother's door. "Mulder, remember when you barged in on her during the Roche case, when you thought your sister was dead? You scared the wits out of her. She is still recovering from that stroke, don't push her."

"She knows something, Scully, she always has, and she's always lied about it." The vehemence and anger out of her partner shocked Scully. They had always known and suspected Teena knew much more than she had ever allowed, but Mulder had in the past never pushed his mother. If anything since the stroke he had tried to shield her, to protect her. He hadn't even told her why it was he was here months ago digging through her basement, hadn't even wanted to bring up the subject of Samantha. What had caused this callous change?

"Go easy on her, Mulder," Scully murmured as her partner stormily marched towards the front door, jabbing at the doorbell over and over. Scully could hear the noise sound, loud and long, through the house. A light flipped on upstairs. Just as she had fearfully suspected, Teena had been sleeping. Damn it, she murmured under her breath as footsteps sounded within the house and a ghostly figured appeared at the door. Hinges protested as it swung open, and Teena's sleep-swollen face blinked tiredly at the smoldering glower of her son.

"Fox?" She reached for the door allowing them both access as Mulder brushed past her without even the benefit of affection or greeting. Stunned, Teena looked to Scully in confusion. For once,
however, Scully was just as clueless as the other woman, and everything within her told her this was about to be very, very ugly.

"I need to speak to you," Mulder turned on his mother, the righteous anger that Scully had seen so many times out of Mulder boiling just beneath the surface, threatening to ignite in the spectacular display of temper only Mulder ever seemed to manage. What in the hell was going on with him?

"What's happened, Fox?" As if sensing the danger emanating from her son, Teena's confusion turned immediately into a challenge. "Why have you come here?

"You've kept things from me, you've kept secrets from me!" He towered over his mother, voice cutting and ugly as he turned on her like he would a suspect who had lied to him.

Teena's eyes, so like her son's, widened in alarm as she turned Scully, who stood feeling quiet and helpless behind the unexpected and unexplained rage that was her partner. "What's the matter with him?"

Scully for one wish she knew. What was he thinking? "He's undergone treatment. He believes it's helped him remember things."

"Remember what?" Teena snapped impatiently, this time up at her livid child.

"You told me that when they took Samantha it was because you had to make a choice, but that's now how it happened." Mulder's words dripped burning accusation. "It wasn't your choice to make."

Teena went inhumanely still, the light of irritation fleeing her eyes as her face paled so quickly Scully nearly considered pushing her irrational partner to the side and grabbing the woman before she collapsed. But Teena didn't fall, nor did she look faint. Instead that familiar, painful look of bruised hurt rose in her expression, the one that Scully was intimately familiar with from Mulder. It spoke of a hurt so deep and so aching that there were no words to express it. It had never occurred to Scully until that moment that Samantha Mulder's loss was just as painful to her, perhaps more so. The loss of her daughter, of the child she had given birth to, that was a searing pain only a woman could ever see and perhaps only a woman could understand, and Mulder tore at it with abandon. He was clueless to the damage his words were doing to his mother.

"What do you want to hear from me?" Teena's words fell from lips so still they hardly moved.

"I want to know what happened that night on Quonochontaug, and I need to speak to you privately." Mulder shot Scully a wary glance. "You had some kind of relationship with him."

If possible Teena paled even further. "With who?"

She knew whom Mulder meant, Scully did as well, and it only served to enrage Mulder further. "You know who. The man who worked with my father, the man who came to you that night when I was twelve and forced you to choose Samantha."

Teena clearly had enough. "No, Fox…"

"Yes," he barked back, just on the edge of shouting over her feeble protests. "You betrayed my father, your husband."

"Never," she insisted, shaking her silver head against the swell of Mulder's outraged indignation.

"How far back did it go," he insisted without remorse, pushing Teena without thought or care to
the implications of what he was saying, of just what he was suggesting.

The result wasn't anything that any of them expected.

The sound of an open palm against skin rang stunningly though the hall, shocking Scully as Teena blazed, incandescent in front of her son. She quivered with the same sort of rage he did, hand still upraised from where it had connected with his face. Mulder blinked at her, momentarily paused, but hardly dissuaded as his fingers rose to the welt rising on his left cheek, ugly and red.

"How dare you!" Teena's voice shook as she spoke, unshed tears welling in her eyes. "How dare you come here and accuse me!"

Mulder looked only slightly sorry about it. "Who is my father?"

The question had the effect of a land mine exploding in the area. Never before had Scully ever, ever heard Mulder question this. He had openly speculated about the relationship between his mother and the smoking man, but he had never once begged the question on whether or not Bill Mulder was his biological father. Scully had never even considered the possibility that he wasn't.

Clearly, Teena hadn't either. "What do you want?" Her eyes blazed emerald in the dim light, glaring up at him with angry accusation. "Do you want to kill him again?"

Scully felt as if she stood on the edge of no man's land, staring across a mine filled field that threatened to explode if she even so much as breathed. Dear God, was Teena suggesting what she thought she meant by those words? Was it simply a trait mother and son had, trading deliberately low verbal blows specifically to see what the devastation would be? Had she said that just to cut off his tirade or because she actually believed that?

Mulder didn't even quell under the stinging accusation. "Just answer the question, Mom," he shouted, voice rising. "Answer the question!"

Whatever pride Teena Mulder had she pulled it from deep within herself now, standing straight and tall in front of Mulder, chin lifting imperiously.

"I am your mother and I will not tolerate any more of your questions." Her words were cold unto freezing as her burning glare flickered up Mulder's face. "You're bleeding, Fox."

Without a word, she turned, her white nightgown fluttering around her as she moved off into the house.

What the fucking hell just happened?

"Mulder," Scully breathed, not sure whether to chastise him or coddle him as she moved to face him, immediately focusing on the dribble of blood down his forehead. Her stomach lurched at the sight. Was this how he felt whenever her nose bled, this anxious fear that consumed all momentary reason.

"Here," she immediately reached into her pocket for her ever present Kleenex, her protection now at days for those unexpected moments when her body began to betray her. She reached up to his hairline, dabbing at the trickle carefully as Mulder winced.

"I can do it," he snapped mildly, reaching for the tissue, looking both dazed and ashamed. Scully let him take it, lowering her hand as he wiped, frowning down at the white, cottony paper and the bright smear across it.
"Do you want me to take a look?" The doctor inside of her wanted to prod him immediately, but she hesitated. The scene just now still stunned her too much. What was he thinking?

"No, I'll do it," he murmured absently, frowning down the hallway. "Let me...go to the restroom, I'll take a look. You better go look after Mom."

Something like regret fluttered briefly into existence but was squelched as he turned down the hallway. Scully watched him go with the same sort of distant thoughtfulness that had plagued him the entire car ride here. Dear lord, she breathed, rubbing absently at her forehead. What had brought any of this on? The ketamine? The treatment? Mulder's strange memory? Worried, Scully wandered further into the house to find Teena and see that she was all right.

The lights were on in the kitchen, and Scully could hear the sound of a teakettle humming on the stove, as the blue flame quickly heated the silver metal.

"Teena," she called, spying the woman sitting staring absently at the small, kitchen table, chewing on her lip thoughtfully, just like her son did when his mind was occupied. She started at Scully's entrance, watching her warily as Scully tried to shoot her a reassuring smile. How did she begin to apologize?

"Teena, I'm sorry for Fox. It's been...very rough lately." And how, she sighed, not even knowing how to explain it. "I had no idea. If I had know..."

"It's all right," Teena murmured, rubbing her bare arms absently as she hugged her thin gown to herself. "It's not the first time I've dealt with one of Fox's temper tantrums."

A dry chuckle pulled itself up from somewhere within her. "Remember I've had to deal with those since he learned the word 'no'. I think it was the second one he picked up, right after 'dada'."

Somehow, that didn't surprise Scully. "What he said in there, Teena, that wasn't justified, no matter what he's been through."

"No...but perhaps it's been a long time coming." She sighed in utter dejection as tears leaked slowly out of her eyes. She absently wiped them away, staring quietly out of her back window into a darkened yard. "Fox is always asking, always seeking. He's never let Samantha alone. I've told him to for years, but...he just can't."

"It's what drives him," Scully supplied, slipping down beside her. She looked so fragile sitting there, emotionally as damaged as she had been physically last summer. Scully had bonded with the woman who had played such a role in the upbringing of her partner. While Teena lacked the all-encompassing warmth that so characterized Scully's mother, that did not make Teena an uncaring or cold person. Rather, much like her son, she was a woman who had been hurt so much by the events of that long ago night in 1973, it had wounded her and scarred her, making her hesitant, closing her off from those things she didn't want to see or feel.

Just like Mulder.

But underneath that was a woman who was loving and caring, a woman who Scully had genuinely come to like. There was no question Teena Mulder adored her oldest and remaining child, the many pictures she had spoke to that. It was clear she regretted that she wasn't closer to him than she was, it hurt her that Mulder chose to stay away as often as he did. Teena was shy in a way her son was not, not as blunt in her speech or quick in her words, But she had every bit of Mulder's intellect and rapidity of wit when she chose, perhaps only slightly dulled by her stroke. She shared his dry humor and his love of the esoteric. She had proven she was quite well versed on a myriad of
subjects. But there was always about her the haunting sadness of the loss that all the Mulders had shared, but unlike her former husband and her son, Teena used that to hide herself from the things she didn't want to face, pretending that they weren't there. That included the driving need of her son to know the truth.

As was her usual role, Scully fell into explaining away Mulder's bad behavior. She was slightly galled she had to do this to his mother. "He's came up here to speak to a couple over the weekend, Amy and David Cassandra. I don't know if you heard on the news what happened to them?"

"The couple that killed themselves?" Teena nodded slowly, turning hazel eyes to focus on Scully. "What did Fox have to do with that?"

Scully still wasn't sure on all of the details, but she could guess. "I'm guessing Amy had some information that intrigued Mulder, and he came up here to discuss it with her. I think that he witnessed the actual murder-suicide as it happened."

"Witnessed?" Teena gasped, mouth gaping as automatically her gaze turned to the direction her son was at. Hurt or not, she couldn't repress her mother's instinct. "Was that why he was bleeding?"

"It might have something to do with it. He doesn't remember." Scully pursed her lips, trying to decide how much she should tell the woman about the case. "I am worried that perhaps Fox allowed himself to be treated by Amy's therapist using a highly unorthodox form of treatment that might be causing what you witnessed tonight. He claims he remembers things. I don't know how much of what he claims he remembers is actually memories or the treatment that was used on him."

"What treatment? What did they do?"

"I don't know." Scully would the minute she was able to get her hands on the patient files of Dr. Goldstein. She didn't buy for a minute that he didn't administer the ketamine to both Amy and Mulder. "But I do know that he didn't mean what he said in there, Teena. Fox loves you, he's just… confused."

Teena gave Scully a long, sad, measured look filled with the pain her son's words caused her. "Dana, I know you've been working with my son a long time. You know him even better than I do. Has there ever once been a moment when Fox has ever been confused about anything?"

Scully went mute. No, she admitted sadly, there wasn't.

On the stove, the teakettle began to whistle. Teena roused, silently rising to attend to it, pulling out a mug from the cabinet. "I was going to make some tea. Would you like some?"

"I better not," Scully hedged apologetically. "It's getting late, and Fox and I need to start heading back…"

As soon as the words left her mouth, the front door sounded, squeaking on hinges and closing with a decided bang. Both women paused, frowning at each other briefly as Teena set down the teakettle and Scully made for the front, calling Mulder's name.

"Mulder, where are you?" She opened the front door, stopping on the porch as she saw Mulder's car pull away into the dark, leaving her behind as Teena came up, equally confused.

"Did he just leave? Without you?"

"Yeah," Scully gaped, reaching for her cell phone in her pocket and hitting his car keys as she did.
She had been the one to drive there. She pulled them out, staring at them.

"He keeps a spare in his wallet," Teena murmured by way of rueful explanation. "It was a habit Bill had from locking himself out so many times, he taught it to Fox so he would always shave his keys on him."

Son of a bitch!

"I think he's heading back to that doctor, the one who has caused all of this," Scully breathed, punching Mulder's cell phone number angrily and getting nothing but his voice mail. Damn it! "I hate to ask this of you, Teena, but could I borrow your car? I need to stop him before he tries anything stupid. This doctor's treatments may have led to three people killing themselves, and I'll be damned if Mulder does the same."

"Dead?" Teena's eyes widened. "Let me go get my keys. The car is in the garage."

"Thank you," Scully murmured, frowning in the distance where Mulder had driven. Just what was Mulder trying to hard to remember?
"Where is he?" Scully turned at the frantic sound of Teena Mulder down the hallway, stunned to hear her there. "Fox Mulder, he was brought here. I'm his mother."

"Teena!" Scully stepped out of Mulder's private room, waving over the woman who looked exhausted and fraught with worry. "What are you doing here?"

"I got your message, about Fox. How is he?"

"He's quite for now," Scully reassured the harried looking woman. "How did you get here?"

"Cab, I pleaded with the local company that my son was injured in a hospital in Providence." Teena tried to pat down her short, silver hair, eyes flickering to the bed beyond Scully. "What happened, Dana? I don't understand?"

Neither did Scully. "He went back to Dr. Goldstein. I'm afraid that your conversation…I don't know, something set him off. He returned and received another shot of ketamine. It works as a powerful hallucinogen in humans, one that this therapist was using in his patience to recover repressed memories of past trauma."

Scully paused, letting her words hang meaningfully in the air. Teena nodded, shoulder's sloping. She understood what that meant. She knew her son's most private pain more intimately than even Scully did, because she shared it.

"You said you found him in Quanochontaug?"

"At the old summer house, yes."

"Again with that house," she whispered, visibly grimacing. "Bill and I should have sold it years ago."

Scully privately agreed. Clearly it held no good memories for either of the surviving Mulders. "The police were called when shots were fired at the house."

"But he's all right?" Teena clutched mildly at her purse strap, knuckles whitening.

"We'll know more when the results of his MRI tests are evaluated. Right now his doctors are keeping a good eye on him and he is sedated." Scully had demanded a full battery of tests on Mulder's system, blood work, brain scans, whatever she could think of. At this point she simply hoped their government insurance covered all of it, and better still she prayed that no serious damage was done to Mulder's brain by whatever it was Goldstein was performing.

"And the man who did this to him?" The mother's wrath rose in Teena's words, her expression hardening at the thought.
"He's in police custody as we speak, charged with criminal malpractice, along with a host of other things." The news seemed to relieve Teena somewhat as she glanced past Scully towards the bed in the room. She looked hesitant and shy going in, and Scully suspected the confrontation of the night before had something to do with it.

"You can go in. He's asleep at the moment." Scully moved aside, encouraging the older woman to move in to see her son as Teena slowly stepped inside. Like her Mulder, Teena's gaze was the most expressive part of her, and it lingered on Mulder's pale, still face with the patch of gauze where Goldstein's procedures had occurred. She tried to keep her composure, but Scully could see the telltale trembling of her mouth, the worry lines that formed across her brow. For a moment Scully was reminded of her own mother, standing by Melissa's bedside as her sister lay in the hospital. Was it ever easy for them to be there, watching over their injured children? Did a little part of them die as they held vigil, praying they would be all right and hoping that something, anything would bring their child back, right as rain? Would Maggie be doing this same thing sometime in the not-so-distant future with Scully?

She pushed that thought aside as Teena moved towards Mulder's bedside, slipping her smooth hands around one of her son's own. Gently, she reached up to his jumble of messy, dark hair, brushing it off of his forehead like she might have done years ago when he was just a little boy, tucked inside of his safe house in Martha's Vineyard. Back in those days, the only nightmares that marred his sleep likely came from monsters under the bed. Now the monsters were all too real and they haunted his memories with visions of his long-lost sister.

"This is the most still I think I've seen him in his entire life," Teena murmured thickly, cupping his cheek briefly. "Even as a baby, he wouldn't sleep through the night, and he always had more energy than I could ever hope to keep up with. I remember wishing that he would just…stop."

A choked, broken chuckle broke from her, shoulder's shaking briefly, as she bent her head. When was the last time Teena saw her son like this? Scully's heart broke for Mulder's mother, and she found herself moving to give the woman a reassuring hug, a gesture that was outside of Scully's more reserved nature. But there was something endearingly sad about Teena. Perhaps it reminded Scully of Mulder. She felt the need to reach out to the woman and assure her that everything was all right. "Believe me, he will be up and annoying us both soon enough. I guarantee the minute the sedative wears off he'll be demanding release from the hospital and harassing whatever nurses don't flirt with him."

This at least brought a watery smile to Teena. "Is he really so bad in hospitals?"

"Much worse!" Scully smiled, thinking of the many harassed hospital workers she had been forced to apologize to over the years.

"I've only seen him in the hospital once, back when he first joined the FBI. He broke his arm. It was silly, he fell chasing a suspect, and I remember panicking so much when they called. And he was so irritated at me for fussing." She smiled, shaking tears from her eyes. "I remember thinking that if this was the worst that happened to him, I would be very lucky indeed."

"I wish that you had been right," Scully sighed, thinking of the many times that she had sat by Mulder's hospital bed, including once with his father, Bill. Mulder always had the knack of throwing himself into reckless danger, never mind how it worried those who cared so much about him.

"Have you had any coffee yet today?" Scully was already dying with lack of caffeine, especially after an entire night up ensuring that Mulder was tested. She could imagine his mother was in much the same boat. Besides, Scully reasoned, they could both use a chance to just sit and talk. "I
think they actually have a Starbucks downstairs in this place if you care to join me."

The idea appealed to Teena, who brightened somewhat at the thought of something warm and a place to sit. She glanced at her sleeping son and nodded, pulling away from him at Scully's gentle prodding and followed the younger agent out of the door.

"You know," Teena sighed as they made their way down the hallway towards the elevators. "I know he's full grown now, but a part of me will always see him as my little boy."

Scully struggled to ever imagine the tall, handsome man in the room behind them as a little boy and somehow failed at it. She paused in front of the brushed steel doors, pressing the button to call the elevator up. "I suppose every mother does. Mine still sees me as a kid with skinned knees and pigtails half of the time."

"Well, if you are ever blessed to be a mother someday, Dana, you'll know why." Teena's smile was bittersweet as they stepped through the doors. Scully chose to go down to the first floor and the coffee shop found down there. "Bill and I never believed we could have children. We tried for years before we had Fox. He was our miracle baby in a lot of ways. When Samantha came along years later, it was icing on the cake for us."

It was clear that Teena had cherished both of her children. It explained why even years later, Samantha's disappearance still remained as much of an aching wound for her as for Mulder. The doors opened onto the bright, shining marble first floor, and in the distance Scully thought she could smell roasted Arabica. There was hope in the universe yet.

"I can imagine Mulder was every bit as prone to mischief then as now." Scully couldn't help but smile at the thought of a harried Teena pulling her son out of some other new problem he got himself into.

"Well, that was Fox." Teena had that sort of understanding sigh of a woman who had also been under fire with her eldest progeny. "He was always asking, always searching. If I had to hear the word 'why' out of him one more time, I swore I was going to go crazy. But he was always endearing about it too."

She laughed fondly as they approached the green-and-white Starbucks sign in the distance. "I remember asking him once in frustration why my answers weren't enough and how he smiled sweetly and said 'Cause, Mommy, they don't tell me everything.' I should have known then what I was getting myself into."

It was good to know that Mulder was always this way. "I have to say, I admire the fact that you kept your sanity for all these years."

"Well, it wasn't hard with Fox. You should know. For all of his persistence, you can't help but respond to his enthusiasm. He had that quality ever since he was little as well. Fox always was the leader. He was born that way! The world always seemed to revolve around him and we all fell into his orbit. Bill especially. I think he fell in love with Fox the moment he found out I was pregnant, but certainly the moment he was out of the womb, safe and sound. Bill adored Fox as a child, and at least when he was younger Fox adored his father."

There was no missing the regret there. Bill had confessed slightly to his crimes against his son after the disappearance of Samantha years ago. But Mulder's accusations from the night before came to Scully's mind swiftly. Did he honestly believe now that Bill Mulder was not his father?

"He was so different than Samantha," Teena continued as they moved inside the wood and tile
covered coffee shop, plastic feeling in its mass-market commercialism. "Everyone loved Samantha, even Fox, but she was always the quieter one, always the one eager to please, and she worshipped the ground her big brother walked on. She drove him crazy tagging along with him everywhere, to play baseball, down to the beach, out with his friends. He used to complain he couldn't get rid of her."

Scully laughed, remembering the very same complaint. "My older brother said the same thing about me. He was always complaining that I was tagging along and would never leave them alone." She hadn't worshipped the ground Bill walked on, but she certainly had found all the things he did personally much cooler. "I suppose when you are younger, everything the older kids do is much more exciting. Regular coffee?" She waved at the attending barista who offered them a friendly smile.

"Sure!" Teena nodded as Scully made their order. She waited till the girl behind the counter passed them their drinks before she spoke again, following Scully as she made a beeline to the cream and sugar.

"I don't want to imply that Fox didn't want Sam around, but you know how kids are. The truth is I think he always enjoyed her tagging along. Samantha believed in him implicitly, he was her hero. They fought like cats and dogs sometimes, kids do, but in the end they always made up. I think for her it was just hard seeing him grow up and grow away from her. And when she disappeared…"

Teena choked slightly on the words as she absently stirred milk and sugar into her coffee. "Fox blamed himself for not taking better care of her. I think he felt that all those times he wished she would just leave him alone finally culminated in that one event and somehow he had failed. We tried to convince him otherwise. But he never has let that belief go, has he?"

"No," Scully replied simply. "He never has."

Together the two of them found a corner to sit, away from the other customers wandering in with tired and wan expressions, other families of patients, Scully surmised. She sipped at the warmth of her coffee, letting the creamy, sweet, yet slightly burnt flavor roll across her tongue and down her throat. They sat in silence for some moments, Teena discreetly dabbing at the corners of her eyes while Scully pretended to busy herself with her cell phone. So much pain and suffering lingered, even all these years after Samantha disappeared. Did Teena really understand what happened that night? Was Mulder right in suspecting she knew more than she admitted?

"I haven't been a perfect mother, Dana." Teena sighed distantly, as if in response to Scully's unspoken question. "I admit to transgressions, things in my past that I am not proud of."

Her eyes flickered to her paper cup, the wooden table, anywhere but Scully's curious gaze. "But there was one thing I never did. In my heart I never betrayed my husband. I loved Bill…once. He was a good man. Much better than I deserved, perhaps."

Teena's confession was strange in light of what little Scully knew of the family tragedy, the story that continued to unfold about her with each passing year as Mulder's partner. Bill had intimated to Scully that it was his fault for the divorce over his reaction to the loss of Samantha. But then Bill hadn't mentioned the smoking man at all in the story. Had he played a part, and if so, what? Had Bill even known? Why had this strange, nameless stranger come to Teena's hospital bedside the year before, and what had he to do with her miraculous healing? Was there really a moment involving him that Mulder remembered?

"Teena, what happened that night, the one Mulder thinks he remembers. He said he remembered an argument involving Samantha, one with the man who worked with Bill."
Fear spiked briefly in Teena's eyes, but was soon clouded by distant confusion, as if she were trying to pull on some memory of something that fit the scant criterion Scully had to offer. "I don't know what Fox is remembering to be honest. Unless he's thinking of the argument Bill and I had that last summer we went to Quonochontaug."

"Argument?"

Teena nodded, looking ashamed at even admitting it. "It was the only one we ever had in front of the children, though it wasn't one we had intended on having."

Her fingers twisted tightly around the large, paper cup. "The truth was Bill and I were having marriage problems long before Samantha disappeared. That…that was just the giant log that broke the camels back. It had been threatening for quite some time."

"Mulder never mentioned anything," Scully replied, though somehow she wasn't terribly surprised. Something from her conversation with Bill Mulder struck her, the comment he made about Teena hating him for what he did to their children.

"Back in that day, no one ever spoke about marriage problems. It just wasn't done. Things such as marriage counseling weren't widely ascribed to, too much of a scandal if it ever got out that you were seeing a therapist for your broken relationship. No wonder everyone got a divorce then."

Teena shook her head ruefully. "The philosophy was to grin and bear it for the children. But that was precisely what was causing the problem. I was at home with Fox and Samantha on the Vineyard all week. Bill worked for the State Department in Washington all week. He would take the train home on Friday afternoons and get to be 'Dad' from Friday night till Monday morning, when he was off again. A call in the evening to wish them good night before bed, that was the interaction my children had with their father on a day-to-day basis."

Scully knew intimately that very same sort of childhood growing up. "My father was much the same way. He was named Bill, too. He was in the Navy, was active duty until I was in junior high school. As a very small child I remember him spending weeks out at sea, months even."

She didn't remember there being a particular stress on her parents' marriage over this, but she hadn't been paying attention. Like Mulder, perhaps, she had just chosen to ignore tell tale signs. She recalled her mother's story about the journal, the one she kept for her father while he was away. Perhaps there were times, Scully just never knew about them.

"Then your mother might sense some of my frustration," Teena replied sadly. "I loved Bill. I did. He was a man of great courage and integrity, something I see so much of in Fox. He wasn't a perfect father, either, but he was a good man…a very good man. And he tried. But the work he did…"

Scully felt her attention latch onto those words and grip them. What sort of work had Bill done? What did Teena know? But the other woman shook her head, returning to her story without explaining. "Bill took most of the summer off that year. I sort of forced him to do it. I wanted him to spend more time with the children. They were growing up. Fox was turning twelve that next fall, Samantha eight. Soon they would be out of the house and I didn't want Bill to miss out. I threatened him. The summer in Rhode Island was supposed to be his conciliatory action. He would spend time with Fox and Samantha and we would work on our marriage. He wanted to make it work, I know that. Bill loved his family. He didn't want to lose us."

"So what happened?" Scully felt voyeuristic asking, almost afraid to know the dirty family secrets that not even Mulder knew about.
"Work was always." Teena's sad smile had a hint of bitterness. "His work associates would come by often enough, both to the Vineyard and our summer house. In years past we'd have 4th of July barbecues and Christmas parties, and the men would wander off into Bill's office and talk shop for hours on end, smoking endless packs of cigarettes and drinking scotch as if it were water. I was used to it, really. But that summer I didn't want them there. I didn't want them near us or the family."

"Why?" Somewhere beneath the surface of Teena's words was something she wasn't telling, some truth that Scully could feel and sense, nearly touch, but which Teena neatly kept hidden away. She knew something, something that she couldn't face, something that had hurt her or scared her, likely both, and was too terrified to speak to those things that Bill met with his colleagues about in those smoky, scotch filled meetings so long ago.

"Bill's work was his work, it had no place at home, not with us when he was away from the office." Teena sounded as if she had nearly convinced herself that this was the truth. Perhaps in her mind it was, or at least a version of it. "That evening one of his associates stopped by, one I think you and Fox know about."

The one with the taste for Morleys? Yes, she and Mulder know him quite well.

"He'd stopped by unannounced. I was of course not happy about this, nor was I happy when he and Bill disappeared in the back for hours on end. Bill had promised me no shop talk, no work for two months, just myself, the kids, and him. He told me it was something brief, something he couldn't ignore. I of course was too angry to listen. I wouldn't back down. You know my son's temper, don't you?"

"A little too well, sadly," Scully replied dryly.

"Well, he comes by it honestly. I said things in hindsight I knew were unfair. I threatened to leave him, I threatened to take the children. I threatened a lot of things. I think by that point I was just too angry to care what I said."

Teena looked as if she truly regretted her remembered, harsh words. "Anyway, you know how these domestic disputes go. We shouted and raged, I burst into tears, he went off and sulked, and we eventually made up. I didn't realize till the next morning how much of it Fox and Samantha heard. They hadn't stirred. I had assumed they were asleep. But when they got up the next morning, Samantha came running to me in tears wondering if Daddy and I were going to divorce. And Fox—well, he took it as stoically as Fox normally does, trying to pretend he hadn't heard, but glaring at me accusingly for daring to threaten to take him and Samantha away from their father."

Mulder had never mentioned any of this. "Why doesn't he remember this?"

Teena shrugged, lifting her shoulders under her light, pale green sweater. "I don't know. So much of that time period was muddled for him after Samantha disappeared. He was just a child, and to this day I still don't know what he saw that night she disappeared."

Her eyes brimmed briefly again behind her glasses. "You know I was so terrified for him. Fox didn't speak for days after it happened. It took months for him to laugh again, to smile, to even cry. The crying was the part that scared me the most. He couldn't even cry over his sister. I thought he'd shut down all together, that we might not get him back. I remember trying everything. Bill….well…"

There was a long pause bringing up her ex-husband. Scully knew something of the story, or at least Bill's version of it.
"Bill never forgave himself for Samantha. He drowned himself in work and scotch, stayed away from home as much as possible. Our son needed him. I'm sure you can gather the rest." Teena finished, less bitter than Scully expected, but perhaps time had a way of giving a new perspective on the hurts caused so long ago by a man who was now long dead.

"Things were never the same for any of us after that. Bill and I separated and divorced before Fox even entered high school. For his part, Fox always felt that his father had abandoned him. He thought Bill blamed him for that night. The two had been inseparable since Fox was born and after that, there was this distance. Fox's idol had fallen, and Bill had allowed it. He never apologized for it, but simply allowed the anger and resentment to fester. I tried over the years to make things right between the two of them, but I was never successful. The two of them clung to their stubborn pride. It was never that Bill didn't care, but sometimes some hurts go far too deep, some weights are far too heavy."

The Mulder family tragedy was never so much about the disappearance of one little girl as the awful repercussions that the one singular event had on everyone close to it. Those repercussions were still felt to this day, in Mulder's life, certainly, but now even in Scully's. Her cancer, her abduction, they were all tied in their own, strange way to the long-lost little girl whose family could never get away from what her disappearance meant for them.

"Teena...Bill's work." Scully had never pushed the woman on this, but she found that she had to. So much of her life depended on it. "Mulder said you mentioned he had to make a choice, about Samantha. Did that choice involve his work at all?"

Scully could tell that Mulder was Teena's son. Her face took on that careful, blank neutrality, the same expression Mulder used when she strayed into areas he didn't wish to talk about. "I don't know what Bill's work did and didn't involve. Fox asks all the time, but the truth is that his father worked at high levels of the State department, highly classified evidence came his way all of the time. He had clearance levels that meant he knew things that he could never, ever speak about to me, to anyone. And I never, ever asked."

There was terror in her words, and some truth. But it wasn't the whole truth. The gut instinct that Scully so often ignored in favor of her science niggled at her. Teena knew more than she was allowing, but she wasn't going to part with the information willingly. "Teena, did you ever consider that Samantha's disappearance might have had something to do with that work?"

This was sacred territory, dangerous in fact, and probably well trod by Mulder already, but Scully had to ask. Unsurprisingly the other woman snapped back at her, almost instinctually, as if Scully had prodded an open wound.

"Of course." She blazed angrily for a moment before demurring, almost abashedly. "Because of Bill's position there was an investigation made. That was one of the first things they considered. Bill had been warned, they thought someone was trying to compromise him."

"And nothing was proven?"

"Nothing conclusive," Teena's lips thinned. "Really, Dana, this is all old news, and I know its Fox's obsession. I wish it weren't. I say this too you only because you are his partner and you obviously care about him and he listens to you. Is there anyway you can convince him to let this go, to stop..."

Did Teena want him to stop because of incidents like this, with Mulder trying some other foolhardy tactic to get at the memories he still had no recollection of? Or did she really just want to forget all of the pain and suffering of her family, to put it behind her and try to move on? Had she ever really
managed that in twenty-five years?

"If I could convince him to give this up, Teena, I would make him less of a man." Scully knew it was useless, and frankly she didn't want to even try. This story wasn't just about Samantha anymore, it was also about her as well. "The truth about all of this, about your daughter, about your husband and his work, there is so much of it that he can't walk away from now, that I can't walk away from." Scully felt her teeth dig into her bottom lip, nibbling as she rubbed fretfully at one well-manicured nail.

"I don't know if your son has ever told you about my own abduction several years ago or the results. But I was diagnosed several months ago with terminal cancer. It is a direct result of what was done to me during that time. Somehow your husband's work was involved in it. I don't know how. But many of his work associates were directly involved, and his name was in files containing the details. Whatever he was doing, those events have caused a lot of women to die. It has given me a cancer from which there is no recovery."

Her words had the effect of a slap across the other woman's face. She stared at Scully, stricken silent, her lips paling as they worked quietly around words that wouldn't come. When she finally did speak, it was stilted. "Cancer? Does Fox…"

"He knows." Scully glanced down at her own coffee cup. "I think actually part of what precipitated all of this was because he knows."

Teena was silent for long moments, staring at her, at a loss to say anything. When she did, it was with true regret and sadness, even apology. "Dana, I don't know what I can even say to help you. I….can't."

Somehow Scully thought that was what Teena was going to say. Not even the plight of her own illness could convince Teena to go to that place that scared her so much. In a way Scully couldn't blame her. She hadn't been able to face her own memories of her abduction for a long time, avoiding them at all costs, until at last her body finally began to betray her. Even now, she still couldn't look into that place to see the truths of what was done.

"It's all right," she reassured the woman with what Scully hoped was conviction. She didn't want to be angry with her, but she was disappointed. She could see why Mulder felt such frustration with Teena and why he spent so much time away. She held so many answers within her, knew so many truths. What could they do? Force her to relieve things that clearly pained her far too much to ever face again?

What if her reticence drove her son to another brink such as this? Could Teena live with herself, then?

"We may want to head back upstairs," Scully offered by way of closure. Teena nodded mutely, clearly still stunned by Scully's new, but perhaps relieved that this line of questioning was ending as well. Too many scars had been ripped open in the last twenty-four hours for her. Right now, she needed to heel, to collect herself, to spend time with her son and hopefully mend the tatters left by his impromptu outburst in her home last night.

And yet even as they gathered their things and returned to the elevators, Scully knew that this wasn't the whole truth out of Teena Mulder. There were things that were left unsaid. Why had the smoking man been there that night and why didn't Teena use his name? What was his relationship to Bill and why had he cared so much last year as to have her healed from what should have been a deadly stroke? Scully couldn't make herself believe that Teena's entire story about her argument with Bill Mulder was true. Perhaps such a disagreement had happened, but something told her that
it wasn't the one Mulder was remembering. If it was, why was the smoking man involved in any of it? Teena said she had transgressions in her past she wasn't proud of. Was she simply referring to threatening divorce from her absent husband, or was there something else? And did it have to do with the strange man who seemed to thread himself through all of their lives? Perhaps, Scully wondered quietly as they called the elevator down, Mulder was remembering more than she was giving him credit for, recalling a relationship that Teena, for whatever reason, would rather soon forget.

As the elevator opened for them once again, Scully followed Mulder's mother back on board, now wondering herself just what role the smoking man had played in the entirety of Mulder's life and what that had to do, if anything, with the X-files and her placement on them. Just how many strings did this man pull and how much was Mulder entangled in them?
What Price Truth

Chapter Summary

In which Scully asks the worth of Mulder's truth.

Scully hadn't expected him to actually answer the door. It was a good thing she had a key. She unlocked the entrance of Mulder's stuffy, musty apartment a crack, just enough to peek her head inside, as she called out his name into the emptiness beyond.

"Mulder?" Her voice was light, despite her worry, as she peered into the unnatural darkness, the bright light of the noonday Washington sunshine blocked by the closed shades of his apartment. She opened the door more fully to allow light from the hallway to enter, to illuminate the couch where normally Mulder slept. She had yet to figure out why he had no bed like normal people or how he slept on the lumpy bit of cushion and leather. He wasn't asleep there and in fact it looked as if he hadn't been there at all. Growing slightly alarmed, she called out again, this time her voice ringing in worry.

"Mulder, are you all right?" The fragile state of her partner's mind created all sorts of scenarios. Just days before he had been skulking in his parents' old vacation house in Rhode Island, threatening to kill himself with his own weapon until Scully had successful talked him down from the ledge. Mulder's mental state was still shaken, despite his release from the Providence hospital. He had greeted his mother's frantic worry with cold silence and had been little better towards Scully. Teena had been painfully hurt. Scully's heart went out to the woman who tried her best to hide the further wounds inflicted on her by her son's indifference.

She had checked Mulder out of the hospital despite his physician's worry for his mental health. She assured them that as his personal physician she could oversee him. Mostly she had wanted to get Mulder out of there before he proceeded to tear apart his mother any further. With more apologies to Teena and reassurances she would watch over him carefully she drug him back to DC. She personally ensured he was ensconced quietly on his well-worn, leather couch, resting comfortably. That had been last night. Where was he now?

Images of Mulder doing something else drastic came unbidden to mind. He had said next to nothing since his release, meeting all of her gentle inquiries with either monosyllabic responses or stony silence. Had he left the apartment? Where to and why? She had been loath to leave him alone, but exhaustion and the desire for the comfort of her own bed had broken her will and sent her happily home. Now she regretted the choice as she spun around Mulder's cluttered living room, looking for traces of where her partner had gotten to and finding none. She had told him not to leave, not to go anywhere today until she had a chance to look him over and check on the progress of the ketamine in his system. Had he ignored her yet again? Anger and worry sent Scully spinning towards Mulder's phone, mentally cursing her partner for not being able to follow even the simplest of instructions.

She had gotten no more than two steps when the closed door off Mulder's living room suddenly flew open with a rush of steamy, soap scented air. A very wet, very disheveled, and very confused Fox Mulder stood staring at her, clothed in nothing more than a large bath towel and an odd frown. Scully stopped in her tracks, staring at him in surprise.
"You're just lucky I didn't decide to come out of here naked." He finally broke the shocked silence, his hands moving to rest on his slim hips.

"I've seen you naked, Mulder, there's nothing shocking about that." Scully finally caught her breath again. In the past, it was always with the clinical detachment of a doctor and rarely with just the slightly panicked brain of Dana Scully. She found her mouth drying suddenly and her cheeks reddening inexplicably as he looked away from his amused smirk and pretended to suddenly be very interested in one of his couch cushions.

"Wish you'd return the favor once in a while, Scully, I find this unfair you get to see me and I don't get to see you. Apparently, you missed out on that part of 'playing doctor' as a kid." He didn't seem inclined to dress more appropriately, as he moved past her to the couch and sat down, his long legs still wrapped in terry cloth as he stretched them out to the coffee table to prop them up.

"I was the one with the stethoscope bossing people around, remember?" Scully tried to make light of it, still painfully conscious of her partner's state, but putting her best, most stoic face forward, calling once again on her panic and fear from just moments ago. "I tried calling you before I came over, but you didn't answer."

"Phone's off the hook," He shrugged, leaning his head back on the couch and rubbing his eyes.

"I knocked five times before I came in."

"I was in the shower." He looked back up at her and pointed once again to his towel. She didn't deign to look down at it.

"Damn it, Mulder, two days ago you were drugged up to the nines on some veterinary hallucinogen, which caused the deaths by suicide of three people and very nearly yourself." She didn't add that she nearly was one of those people shot as well. "I worry about you, Mulder. Is it wrong for me to do so?"

He shrugged, lazily, staring at some fixed point in front of him, his face blank as he stretched his long arms across the back of his couch. He didn't seem willing to address or speak to any of it, and something about this behavior infuriated her deeply. She moved around the couch to where he stared, placing her small frame right in his line of vision.

"Mulder, we need to talk about this, I need to be able to explain to Skinner why it was I had to spend a week in Rhode Island getting you out of a murder conviction and talking you down off the ledge."

"Tell him whatever you want, Scully."

She felt something snap in her brain then, like a physical 'pop' that caused her heart to run and her blood to pound in her ears. Her jaw became rock hard as her eyes blazed at him.

"Do you really love it when life rains on your parade?" Her arms crossed in front of her and it was all she could do not to grab the nearest object and fling it at him. "Are you only happy when you are miserable and the world is suffering around you?"

He took one brief glance at her and looked away, shifting on the couch as if to rise and move away from her, but she stepped closer and used her presence, if not her physical height, to loom over him.

"Are you so in love with being the morose, spooky, angst-ridden Agent Fox Mulder that you can't for once just consider that this is much more than just about you?"
"Scully," he began, but she cut him off with another angry barrage.

"Since I met you, you have let your career, your reputation, your job, everything ride on your need for the truth, your need to find Samantha."

Her words were hot and angry, and somewhere in the back of her mind the rational Dana was telling her she shouldn't press him so hard. But she was too upset and hurt to care at the moment. "What if I hadn't been able to make it up to you this week? What if you had died with Amy and David Cassandra and I had never known? Did you ever stop once to consider the position you were putting me in or how I would have felt if they had told me you were dead?"

He at least had the decency to look ashamed.

"Mulder, I'm already fighting one battle I don't know if I can win. I'm already trying to just keep me together. I don't know if I can keep us both in one piece."

Something in her deflated painfully, her anger washing into despair, as a finger moved unconsciously to the spot just above her eyebrow where she knew the cancerous growth lay. "I know that you need your answers, Mulder, but what you did was both dangerous and destructive. What price is your truth, Mulder? Your life or mine?"

If she had punched him in his gut, she didn't think she could have hurt him more in that moment. He stared at her at a total loss for words, as she looked away finally, feeling drained and empty.

"Look, I just came up here to check in on you. If you have any further seizures, make sure to let me know, I'll get you to the hospital. Don't try to drive yourself." She moved then from where she stood, past him towards his door. His hand shot out and caught hers before she moved completely away.

"Scully!" His voice sounded hoarse, broken. "I never meant to…"

"I know," she murmured with infinite weariness and slipped her hand out of his, quietly sliding out of his apartment door.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully catches up with her brother Charlie and plans for her mother's birthday dinner.

"Bill is reproducing?"

Scully held the receiver of her phone away from her ear, wincing and snorting with laughter at her younger siblings shriek of horrified outrage. Charlie was taking the news of his impending unclehood about as well as everyone expected.

"You know they've been trying for a while, and I do emphasize 'trying'." She choked on suppressed laughter as she imagined the look of undisguised horror on Charlie's face as it occurred to him what 'trying' in the context of having a baby entailed. No better way to squick a sibling out than to bring up the idea of sex.

It worked.

"La, la, la! You know I've seen Bill naked and I really don't see what the attraction is for Tara."

"You're his brother, Charles, not his wife." Scully snuggled further into her couch, munching on the leftovers of her lunchtime salad and grinning madly at the discomfort she was able to inflict as older sister. "And Bill's been married for five years. What else do you think he and his wife were doing?"

"Not….it!" Charlie strangled cry ranging across the phone line again. "Jesus, Dana, we have a strict rule, no talking about the sex."

"What, you and Ashley don't do those sorts of things?" Now she was just baiting him to deliberately earn a shriek out of him.

"That is so totally none of your business, unless you really want to carry that mental image with you."

"I think I'll pass," she replied airily, crunching on a carrot stick thoughtfully. "So face facts, Charlie, you are going to be an uncle come Christmas."

"I hope this kid inherits its looks from Tara," Charlie moaned.

"And it's disposition! Imagine a younger Bill around."

"Bite your tongue," Charlie hissed. "The world is ill prepared for that."

"Oh, Bill isn't so bad," Scully chided, all joking aside. Teasing Bill was easy for the two youngest Sculllys. They had been at the brunt of his big-brother tendencies for their entire lives. In truth, despite Bill's authoritative streak and propensity for picking at them both just to get a rise out of them, as a brother he was actually not as bad as either Scully or Charlie liked to make out. Overbearing at times, yes, but devoted to a fault, loyal, and would do anything to keep them safe...
and make them happy.

Sadly, that didn't include staying celibate for the rest of his life.

"You know Mom's going to be insufferable after this," Charlie sounded vaguely despondent. "And I'm next on the chopping block."

"Most people call it the wedding altar." Scully rolled her eyes heavenward at her brother's melodramatics.

"Grandbabies, Dana, Mom's been dying for some! And now Bill's providing after all this time, and there I am. What can I say when Mom starts making pointed comments about me and children?"

"Mom won't." Honestly her mother had waited patiently enough for Charlie to even propose to Ashley, she supposed she could wait for them to have children. "You two can hold off if you want. Who's to say you have to start having babies now."

"Ash is already giving me that look. The minute she heard about Tara, I knew the idea was there."

"So are you going to do it how Mom and Dad did and get pregnant before the wedding?"

"They did not!" Charlie yelped, and it only occurred to Scully after she had said it that she seemed to remember that Charlie was the only one left who didn't know that.

"I don't think I was supposed to tell you that."

"You are such a liar, Dana Katherine Scully."

"God's truth, Mom and Dad told me themselves the night before Ahab passed." Scully smiled past the pang in her heart, much less now after so many years. "If you do the math you'll figure it out."

Charlie was silent for several long moment but she could almost hear him do the calculations in his head. "Shit," he swore softly. "Now you went and told me that! And I know that Mom and Dad lived in sin!"

"Of course they didn't, they were engaged anyway. Don't you and Ashley live together?"

"Yeah, but I don't care about the priests giving me dirty looks." The double standard obviously didn't bother her brother in the least.

"Moving on, be happy for your big brother, and I'm sure the baby will be cute and happy and you will love it."

"I don't know about cute," Charlie insisted mulishly, "But I will love it I suppose. Just wish he had told us earlier. Three months already?"

"Well they wanted to make sure that this pregnancy took. They've had such a hard time just getting this far." Scully could understand that. The first trimester of any pregnancy was always fraught with difficulty, doubly so for anyone who was having trouble having a child. She certainly didn't hold it against her elder brother and his wife for keeping this secret to themselves. After all, she had a secret of her own. She still hadn't told either brother about her cancer. And it was beginning to look like a conversation she was going to have with them soon, especially after her last doctor's visit.

The tumor had metastasized, the cancer was spreading, and now it was no longer question of "if"
but "when". Scully had taken the news with surprising gravitas, all things considered. Dr. Hamedi had handed her the test results with a heavy heart, knowing that the suspicions they had held for weeks were at last confirmed. In truth Scully was not surprised. That intuition that Melissa had always teased her about listening to had known well before she saw the paperwork evidence in hand. She had known since she saw the apparition of the girl in the bathroom, since she saw Harold Spuller in the back of her car. She knew she was dying. This was merely her scientific proof of the truth.

Save for her mother, she had yet to tell anyone of her findings, not Skinner and especially not Mulder. Since returning from Rhode Island he had been so fragile and quiet. Only a few times had she seen Mulder in this state, always after a harrowing, emotional experience for him. The vitality that sparked him and drew people to him dimmed as he turned in on himself and began to question what he knew was right. Mulder was such a creature of action and reaction; reflection was something he rarely engaged in. He went with his natural instincts and hardly ever looked back from them. But at moments like these, when his entire world was now thrown into horrible question, he was left lost and spinning, trying to regain his momentum. And Scully was at a lost as to what to do to help him. And now with her current news, with the truth that she now knew, she was even less capable to help him. Soon she would have to step out of all of this all together, devote herself to her health, to preparing herself for what was to come. Who would be there for Mulder then?

"Hey, am I boring you all of the sudden?" Charlie was good-naturedly belligerent on the other end of the line, and Scully shook herself, returning to the conversation at hand with her younger brother.

"No, just…thinking. I'm sorry."

"So how are things going with Mom's birthday party? Sorry to sort of dump it all on you, but…well you are her favorite."

Scully rolled her eyes. So that was how he was going to play it. "Mom has no favorites, and if she did you would be it, since you're her baby." Charlie always did get coddled more than the rest of them did, or at least that was how Scully and Bill saw it. "You all left it to me because I'm the only one close enough to do anything about it."

"Yeah, well there's that too." Charlie did sound a bit bashful, after all he and Ashley weren't much further away in southern Virginia. "But I came up with the idea. I mean…well I was the one who thought we should do something nice for Mom's birthday."

"You call that having the idea?" This had been a plan in production for months between the siblings and their respective mates, since Christmas. Scully suspected it was more born out of Bill and Charlie's lingering guilt over their military duty making it hard for them to spend as much time with their mother as Scully did. The idea had been for a brought in dinner, one where they would force their mother to take a night off, enjoy the company of her children and friends, and feeling like a queen for one night out of the year. And as things usually did with these sorts of plans one thing led to another, and somehow the plan went from being dinner brought in from their mother's favorite restaurant to an expensive dinner party with their mother's friends and family. Suddenly there were invitations, good china, fancy wine, all the things that the Scullys would normally never have at a holiday meal let alone a birthday party. And as the event grew in both size and tediousness it of course was laid firmly in the lap of the one sibling who was detailed oriented enough to manage it, but was sadly the one least equipped at the moment to handle it all alone.

"I want you to know you all suck for leaving me with this," Scully growled, sulking. "Life has been
stressful enough as it is of late, and you leave me hanging."

"In my self-defense, I have a wedding to plan."

"What are you talking about? Ashley is planning your wedding, all you have to do is show up in a tux and say 'I do'."

"Right, it's as simple as that, when she's shoving color swatches in my face and shoving cake samples down my throat."

"Life is so rough for you, Charles." Scully yawned in fake airiness. "Besides which you and Bill came up with this party idea and you won't even be here, and he's not coming till the day of."

"I can't help that the US Navy doesn't work on Dana Scully's time schedule. You are a Fed, do something about it if you don't like it." Charlie to his credit had been very sorry that he was bowing out of the event. His duty called, and Scully knew that he would be there if he could have managed. "But Ashley is driving up to show Mom what we have planned for the wedding so far. We are thinking September for the big day, if that works all right with you?"

September…well all things considered Scully couldn't say no. In all honestly she had no idea if September would or would not work, given the nature of the disease that invaded her body and was now riddling it with broken and damaged DNA. She may make it the three months to see her brother and his fiancée get married or she may not. And Scully had no desire to interrupt what should be their happy and joyous planning with the news of her illness.

"It should work, as far as I know." It was as honest of an answer as she could give him for now.

"Imagine Mom, a wedding and a grandbaby in a year. You better think of something to top that come Christmas, Dana, or you will get the ass end of the gift giving from her."

Oh if Charlie only knew. Somehow she had a feeling that all she could manage would far from make her mother overjoyed. "Yeah, well I'll work on that. Listen, Charlie, I have to go. I have some work I need to get to if I have to do this thing for Mom." Suddenly the joy had been taken out of her conversation with her baby brother. For all of the good news that both her siblings shared, Scully carried the weight of her own bad news, and at the moment it felt horribly heavy.

"Sure," Charlie replied, hardly the wiser regarding his sister's rapid change in mood. "I'll call Mom on her birthday, try to make it up to her."

"Duty calls as always, Charlie. She was used to it with Ahab. You know she won't hold it against you."

"She never does, I'm her baby," he laughed. "Let me know how everything goes."

"Of course," she assured him murmuring her goodbyes and clicking off. Guilt panged her momentarily as she regarded the phone in hand. Charlie was getting married. Bill was having a baby. She should tell them both about her cancer, they didn't know at all. She should tell them all she was dying. But somehow she couldn't bring herself to do it. Not with all of this happiness around. She couldn't take away from that with her news, not yet anyway. They would likely hate her for not telling them, likely they wouldn't understand, vut it was her choice, and it was what she wanted to do.

And as for Mulder…

No, she couldn't lay this on him on top of everything else. Let him be pissed at her all he wanted,
she wouldn't be the one to break him. Let things happen how they would. This situation was no different that day than it had been a month, two months before. How was it different in its way than if she was injured in the line of duty? If she died at least she would know she went out fighting to the last, and not pitied and coddled by well meaning friends and family.

It was better this way, Scully was sure of it.
Dropping Everything

Chapter Summary

In which Scully drops what she is doing to rush to Mulder's aid.

It was her mother's birthday. Her elder brother was in town on a rare visit. Scully knew she should say no to this, to tell Mulder he could tell her about it in the morning, but there was that excitement in his voice, the thrill of discovery, the need to know that what he was dealing with was legitimate, hence his call to her. Mulder was the pied piper of Scully's world and she always answered his call. Bill glowered at her from the kitchen as he headed back into the dining room with a bottle of wine. He was not going to be happy to hear this.

"I'm on my way," Scully assured Mulder as she hung up the phone. She couldn't believe she gave into him again. And yet she shouldn't be surprised. Wherever the man went she followed him, even to hell and back, even when she knew she shouldn't, even when her health was giving out on her.

"So what did he want?" Her brother's voice caught Scully off guard as she jumped guiltily. She turned, her apologetic smile already firmly in place.

"Something has come up. Mulder wanted me to check it out." How could she gracefully get out of this situation with her mother and all of her guests?

"On your way home? Tomorrow?" Bill's face darkened. Standing there in his black uniform dress, chin jutting coldly, he reminded her for a moment of Ahab, the man he was named for. If only he had half of the command of presence. Her father was another man who could make Scully do anything, follow him anywhere. Bill only ever managed to grate on her patience. Still, she tried to at least understand his point-of-view. This was about their mother and Mulder was cutting in.

"No, right now. It can't wait."

"Why not?" His dark eyebrows rose in a perfect imitation of the habit she knew she had. Scully sighed. Bill was going to be difficult and belligerent and she had no idea why.

"Because that is the nature of our work, Bill, sometimes I have to give up nights and weekends and dinners with my family for it."

"Dana it's one dinner with your mother on her birthday. For Christ sake, has someone died?"

Scully couldn't be sure on that. "Bill, please, have I ever been called out on a family Christmas? Any other family event? You make this sound as if this is a habit of mine to interrupt our family get-togethers with work?"

"Not just a family get-together, Dana, this is a dinner we've planned for months, you've planned for months. Mom's been looking forward to it. After everything that's happened with Dad and Missy…"

Why did Bill have to bring them up in the conversation? "Bill it's not like I don't see Mom at least once a week. She'll understand. You she doesn't see! Go in there and make nice with the company." She tried to shoot him a sweet smile, the sort she knew used to charm him when they
were younger and at least get him to back down if not give in to her way. She reached up with lithe fingers to straighten his dress shirt. "Besides, you're her precious eldest and you live the furthest away, and I'm sure she'd love to hear about the baby."

"Dana, this isn't the point." He wasn't going to let it go. Bill never did when he felt he was in the right on something and that was usually why she and he bucked heads. "Mom says that you are busier than ever chasing around your partner and if it's not one thing with him it is another. Wasn't he just in the hospital the other week?"

Scully felt the winsome smile slip from her lips, her eyes rolling. She would really need to ask her mother to have a tad more discretion on what she told her brothers about the cases she worked. "It was a bad reaction to treatment Mulder was receiving from a psychiatrist who lied to his patients and was involved in the deaths of three of them."

"A psychiatrist? What, has your partner finally caught on to the fact that he's crazy? Everyone else has said it for years."

Bill's teasing about Mulder had always had a nasty edge. Neither Ahab nor Bill had thought much of Mulder and his pursuits, and Scully had always assumed it was born mostly out of their mutual concern for her as she went about her work. But in the years since Melissa's death it had become a tad more pointed, the sarcasm not just a joke, no matter what he tried to say. The Christmas before she had jumped on him when he had brought Mulder up in a disparaging fashion in front of their soon-to-be sister-in-law. She'd been also chastised for it as Bill had pulled the martyr card. But now she had to wonder how much of this was Bill simply being annoying, over-protective older brother and how much of this was turning into true, ugly resentment.

"Mulder's not crazy, Bill. He's a man who lost a sister once. I would figure you of all people would appreciate that." Without hesitation Scully went for the gut, a typical tactic in her fights with Bill. He was always older and stronger, but she could kick him where it hurt, and she knew that Melissa's loss gnawed at him like no other. Bill who had always been the "man of the house" when Ahab was off to sea, the brother who was always supposed to look after his younger siblings, he had felt Melissa's death nearly as keenly as Scully had, and she knew it as she used that in the opening salvo of her attack.

It worked. Bill backed off with a pained, stormy glare, pulling angrily at his thin, dark tie. "Just because he lost his sister doesn't have to mean he gets to take mine. I think one is enough for him, don't you?"

Scully felt herself straighten her shoulders bringing up her full, slight height in front of her tall brother. She was far from intimidated by the fact she had to look up at him as she felt her face harden in anger. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I came here to spend an evening with my family, not watch my sister run off on a case with a crackpot just because he calls her. He knew this was Mom's birthday. She had wanted to invite him."

Maggie had invited Mulder, much to Scully's private trepidation. Mulder in the last few weeks had been like a ticking emotional time bomb, and she had been relieved in a way when he politely declined. "She did invite him. He said he couldn't make it."

"So he could go and chase aliens with his conspiracy buddies?" Bill curled his lip in snide scorn. "And he knew this was happening and he still called?"

"He can't help when we get information on a case."
"It's Mom's birthday, Dana. You can't go?"

"Can't?" She snapped, dangerously. That sounded like a threat to her. Her eyes narrowed up at Bill's increasingly apoplectic look, as he realized he was crossing into territory with his little sister that could get him in a world of trouble.

"You would put your work and this man over your own family, Dana?" It was a line of attack he hadn't brought up yet, and he growled it out in frustration, flinging a helpless hand towards the dining room table. "What are you going to say if he calls during Charlie's wedding? How about when the baby's born? When are you going to be able to tell him no, you can't do this, you have other priorities in your life that need to be taken care of? You dance attendance on this guy not even thinking twice about it, and now you are running out on Mom's birthday?"

"When did you get the idea that I was abandoning the family all the sudden, Bill? Because I seem to remember being right here the whole time. While you moved out to San Diego and Charlie took off to God knows where, and when Missy chased after herself in Oregon or New Mexico or wherever she went to commune with life, I was the one who stayed here with Mom and Dad. I was the one who was there for Mom when Dad died. I was the one who was here for Mom when Missy died. I've been to every Christmas and holiday, and I've been here for every one of Mom's birthdays. And when you and Charlie put this crazy scheme together for this dinner party, I was the one who ran interference for all of you while I was trying to do my job, thank you very much, and I get crap from you for taking off to meet my partner over something that can't wait?"

Her voice was beginning to rise dangerously, nearly loud enough to carry into the other room where the dinner guests were gathered.

"Excuse me, Bill, but what in the hell has brought this up? Are you really pissed because I'm taking off to do the work with my partner I'm paid to do, or are you just annoyed because you have never, ever once liked the idea of me being an FBI agent and this is just more proof as to why it is a bad idea."

"Dana, you are so not going into that again, are you? You know I've told you I'm proud of you as an agent."

"Then why are you attacking this all the sudden?" She wouldn't let this go, not now that he started it. If Bill could be a bulldog when cornered, so could she, and she wasn't going to let go till she got to the bottom of whatever got him so pissy the minute Mulder's name was mentioned.

"You don't get it, do you?" He hissed low and venomous, in a clear effort to keep his tone down as well, though Scully could see the veins in his forehead pulsing with the effort even in the low light. She always did have that effect on Bill. "I never liked this Mulder, I won't pretend that I have. I heard he was a joke long ago and I never understood why you and Mom stood up for him so much. But I couldn't say much, he was your partner, the FBI assigned you to him. You had the choice to come and go as you pleased. But I've watched you over the years, Dana. You used to be…such a different person. When you joined the FBI, I wasn't for it, neither was Dad, but it was what you wanted to do. You were happy with that decision. But since you've been working with this Mulder I've watched you fade, Dana, get…swallowed, by all of this. And it wasn't just when you disappeared either, it was before, and its been worse since. Mom says you never talk to your old friends anymore. And I haven't heard you talk about any man other than this Mulder for years."

Scully winced as her brother brought up her love life, not something she ever wanted to discuss with him.

"And sure, you're here for the holidays. Yeah, you're here for Mom more often than we are. But I
never hear about you having a life anymore, Dana. Always Mom is talking about how you had some other case, some other trip out of town with Mulder. You spend more time with him than you do anyone else. Hell, I'd think you were sleeping with him if I didn't know you better."

"Jesus, Bill!" Scully felt her face flame to burning as she swore loudly.

"What? I know Missy used to carry on about how you two thought he was so attractive. Missy liked him a lot, but then Missy would like a raging Grizzly bear if you put a rainbow on it. And now you have Mom in love with him too. She won't hear a word against him, even when I say something. All she says is that 'Fox takes care of your sister.'"

"Which he does," Scully replied mulishly, trying to discern what her elder brother's point in all of this was. "You jealous that someone else watches out for me who isn't you?"

Bill glowered but he refused to take her bait. "Maybe he has your back, Dana, maybe he keeps you safe from men with guns. But if he really wanted to keep you safe, he would get you the hell off these cases and on to normal work for a change so you could have a life."

Perhaps Scully had thought that very same point once. Perhaps this was a conversation she had with herself hundreds of times in the last year. But it was different spilling from the mouth of her older brother, a man who was an outsider to the situation. Clearly, he didn't believe she had agency enough to do whatever she wished with her own life, with or without Mulder. Bill was crossing a line here, one that she didn't even allow her mother to cross. "Bill, what in the hell makes you think you can waltz in here and lecture to me about my life and how I live it."

"Someone has to, Mom sure as hell won't," he snapped back angrily. "Dad would if he were alive."

"Dad always trusted me to make my own decisions as an adult, something you clearly aren't capable of." Scully was incensed. "I'm not a child, Bill, and just because you are an impending father doesn't give you license to try and be my father. You aren't Ahab. You never were."

Scully would never dare physically slap her brother, but the effect of her words was just the same. Bill worshipped the ground their late father walked upon, much like she did. The words were as cutting as a knife to the heart. "No, I'm not Dad. If I was perhaps I would have been able to convince you of all of this years ago."

Damn it all. "Convince me of what, precisely."

"To go and get a real life, Dana. To not spend your entire youth chasing after a man who is running after moonbeams and fairy dust. You had a promising career in medicine, you can go back, have a life where you can maybe get married yourself, have kids, live normal hours."

"In other words live the sort of life you want for me, right?" Her words were acid as they fell from dry lips. "Because I am incapable of making life decisions on my own. Because as a woman, I should define myself within the confines of what you believe a happy life for me should be, as a wife and mother."

"Dana, I didn't mean that!" Bill exhaled in complete frustration. "I just want you to be happy, to be safe."

Off only he knew that all of this bluster, all of this anger at her was all for naught. She likely wouldn't live to see any of those things anyway. She doubted if she would live to see Charlie and Bill have any of those things.

"It's what Dad would have told you if he were alive, Dana." It was Bill's final, desperate plea.
"Maybe he would have," Scully replied quietly, turning from her brother's well-meaning gaze. "But he would have trusted me to make my decisions and to live my life how I saw fit. No one feels Melissa's loss more keenly than I do, Bill. I'm the one who carries the guilt of it."

She felt her eyes sting briefly as their angry words brought to the surface pain she normally kept very tightly in check. "But trying to pin me down and wrap me up, to keep me safe in the way you couldn't Melissa isn't going to bring her back. Missy didn't like being contained to what you defined as normal and neither do I. And the more you try to put me in a glass case, Bill, the more I tend to kick and scream against it.

Mulder knew that lesson painfully well at this point. If Bill wasn't so busy resenting him, he might be able to share a war story or two with her partner on that score. As it was she doubted that Bill would ever be anything resembling friendly with the one man she was closest to.

"Everything all right in here?" Both children turned guiltily to their mother as she wandered in, smiling faintly at the two of them. Scully was willing to lay even money that Maggie could sense the tension between them even from the dining room.

"It's fine," Scully replied quickly, slapping on a false, bright smile for her mother. "Mulder called, there's a case. I have to head out."

Clearly her mother was disappointed, though she tried to put on a brave face. "So soon?"

"You know how things go with the government, Mom, things like this don't wait."

Bill glowered darkly, but said nothing.

"Well, give Fox my love, tell him I'm sorry he couldn't make it tonight. I was hoping he could meet your brothers, or at least Bill since Charlie couldn't make an appearance."

"Yeah!" Scully glanced sideways at her brother, privately glad that Mulder had declined after all. "I'll send him your regards. You know he wishes you a happy birthday."

"I know." Maggie wrapped her arms around her daughter tightly, more tightly than usual. "Be safe! Give me a call later, would you?"

Scully knew that tone of voice. Maggie knew about the argument between siblings and was going to ferret out Scully's side of the story. "I will."

"Drive safe," she whispered, smoothing out Scully's hair briefly before turning to Bill. "Ashley was asking for you, Bill. She wants to ask you about some details for her and Charlie's wedding, and since he's not here, you are up!" Maggie's tone was pleasant, but both of her children could hear the subtle command in her words.

"Right, Mom," Bill acquiesced softly, shooting his sister one parting, measured glance before moving to the dining room. Scully watched them return to the party, feeling very tired all of the sudden. She didn't want to have to go. She didn't want to have to do this. She didn't want to argue with her brother. She had so little energy left for these things and even less time, and Bill wanted her to consider picket fences and babies on her hip?

Scully turned to the guest room to get her things. She would live her life her way, she assured herself, and she would meet her end her way as well.
The Holy Grail

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is convinced he has his certain proof.

As much as Scully ever hated saying her elder brother had a point, Bill did. This was always Mulder's pursuit, it was never as much hers, and yet it was consuming her life…literally.

"You think this is foolish?" Mulder was slipping into his coat behind her, already presaging her thoughts even though she hadn't spoken them. Mulder had a gift for doing that, but this was one of the rare occasions when he wasn't entirely on the mark.

"I have no opinion, actually."

"You have no opinion?" Mulder was dubious. It was rare in their partnership when she didn't have something to say, especially something against his point of view.

"This is your holy grail Mulder, not mine." It always had been, the search for the proof of alien life. How many times had they chased after semi-trailers and broken into government bases, gone into caves and mines looking for the scientific evidence that would support that aliens did exist? For Mulder, he quite possibly could have his truth in his hands and Scully was happy for him, if it turned out to be true, but it was still his truth, not hers.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mulder paused, falling immediately into hurt belligerence. Scully sighed patiently, turning to face him.

"It just means proving to the world the existence of alien life is not my last dying wish." Let him take that how he may. She had yet to confess to Mulder the truth of her cancer, of its spread. She didn't want to see the panic that would set in, the denial, the anger, and she didn't want her last few weeks of life on this planet to be spent in a lab with some body that may or may not be an extraterrestrial. There were things to do before she died, people she wanted to spend time with, namely her family. Bill was right, she owed that much to herself. She had given Mulder enough. Now she had to start thinking about herself.

But Mulder knew none of these things. He plowed on with his argument as he would any other time with her with any other case.

"What about Santa Claus or the Eater Bunny? This is not some selfish pet project of mine, Scully." As always he Mulder spoke with the fervency of that inner passion, that boundless belief and determination to know. "I'm as skeptical of that man as you are, but proof - definitive proof of sentient beings sharing the same time and existence with us - that would change everything. Every truth we live by would be shaken to the ground. There is no greater revelation imaginable, no greater scientific discovery."

There was a reason Scully followed him so blindly, she realized. You couldn't help but be swept up by Mulder's intense hope, the blind conviction he had in the revelatory power of truth. But sometimes not every truth needed to be known, not everything in the world had to be explained. He was right, if he could prove this it would change everything science had to say about the
development of life on this planet. But what would it give Mulder? Would it give him his sister back or his father? How about Scully's life?

"You already believe, Mulder." She sighed, tired. "What difference would it make? I mean, what would proof change for you?"

He shrugged. For him that wasn't the point. "If someone could prove to you the existence of God, would it change you?"

"Only if it were disproven."

"Then you accept the possibility the belief in God is a lie?"

Did he really want to reduce this to theological debates? "I don't think about it, really, and I don't think it can be proven."

"But what if it could be? Wouldn't that knowledge be worth seeking, or is it just easier to go on believing the lie?"

For Mulder all truth was worth knowing, but Scully didn't have that sort of luxury anymore. Time for her was running out. "I can't go with you, Mulder."

She almost couldn't believe she said the words. Clearly, Mulder couldn't either. He stared at her, blinking quietly, stunned to silence for long seconds. Scully had never said no. She had never not gone with him when asked, even on the most insane quests. She had fought and kicked and screamed for that right, considering the many times he had tried to keep her out. But she couldn't do this...not now.

Please don't hate me for it, she breathed silently, as she watched him swallow the hurt, trying to look understanding. "Can you at least look at those core samples? Tell me if they're a lie. That's all I'm asking."

That she could do, "I'll take them to American University tomorrow. I know of a geologist there we can speak to." Hopefully this wouldn't turn out like the last geologist they spoke to. The poor man had died from the strange, oil substance they had found in Krycek's mysterious rock.

"Thank you." Mulder breathed, grateful for at least that. "I will go myself up to Canada. I will talk to this team and see what I can find out. If I find anything of note I'll give you a call, okay?"

What else could she say to that?

"Fine, Mulder." He wasn't asking her to go along with him. He was asking her to merely look at data and report. No traipsing through caves, no hours cutting up a body. Just having someone else look at the data and give her a report. She should tell him about her cancer. She should tell him about her cancer. She should tell him they weren't looking at months anymore, but weeks, possibly even days. But Scully found she couldn't, not with the boundless excitement of possible discovery coursing through him. He was out to find his truths and she couldn't take that away from him.

"Listen, I'm sorry for pulling you from your mother's thing tonight." He offered his sheepish apology as they continued to move down the hall. "I know it was her birthday. I wouldn't have if it weren't important."

When wasn't it important for Mulder?

"She understands. Mom always does." It was Bill who hadn't understood and to be honest she
didn't have a good answer for her brother on why she did this. But at least for once she had said no, for her own sake. The world hadn't shattered. Mulder hadn't broken. His work would still carry on. Scully couldn't tell if she was relieved by that fact or not.
Her coffee was oily and slick, coating her tongue with burnt coffee flavor, but it gave her what she wanted. Across from her Michael Kritschgau grimaced as he drank deeply of his own from a chipped, heavy ceramic cup, the sort that was habitually used by all-night diners such as this one. It was quiet at this time of night in this corner of suburban Washington, but no one sitting within the vinyl and linoleum confines of the place would pay attention to the two of them. Or at least Scully fervently hoped that no one would.

"So start from the beginning," she ordered the tall, grim-faced man across from her. "Who are the people you work for, the ones who gave me my cancer?"

It was the most obvious question and the one Scully knew she was least likely to get a straight answer on. She was unsurprised as Kritschgau hemmed, hesitating for long minutes as he spun his mug between his large hands and tried to formulate some answer. "I work for the Department of Defense."

"Doing what?"

"Agitprop, idea dissemination, propaganda if you will. I head up the group that deliberately created the spin and policy of the DoD."

"The spin?" Scully rolled that word around her mouth for a minute, washing it away with the burnt, black coffee, minus her normal cream and sugar. "You worked to create the public perception of the dire need of a large, well moneyed, well fortified Defense Department?"

"Amongst other things. We worked in tandem with the State Department regarding areas of unrest. We created policy on US actions in military engagements overseas. You name it, we did it."

"So you are an over-glorified Press Secretary?"

Kritschgau seemed to find her comparison funny. "Agent Scully, you have no idea what I have seen, done, and created. And you have no idea of what I know because of it."

"Go on." She wasn't in the mood for these vague games. "How does a man who claims he creates political spin get involved with the sort of men who would want to take this evidence, and what does it all have to do with me?"

"It all has to do with spin, with perception in a way, but it's more than that, much more." Kritschgau grimaced as he glanced out of the darkened window.

"This isn't just about some new way of covering over the President's past indiscretions and ensuring that they don't hurt his poll numbers. We aren't talking about images or perceptions, but ideas, beliefs, about a reality Agent Scully. It was more than doing a song and dance to ensure a few more men up on the Hill voted more appropriations our way or some foreign minister somewhere didn't get his panties in a wad and decided to declare war on us. We are talking about a
long term, well planned, meticulous creation of a particular reality that was carefully disseminated into the American public, cultured, and fortified to the point that it has become the norm."

"Reality?" Scully's eyes narrowed as the implications of his words. "You mean you lied to the public."

"It's only a lie if it isn't true." Kritschgau reached for a smudged and scuffed silver spoon to twirl in his half filled mug. He regarded it for a long moment. "This mug is half empty, right?"

"From a certain point of view, yes." Scully didn't feel like word games and this was an old one, as simple as the basic logic courses she took while in school.

"But isn't what we believe in and know in this world true from a certain point of view." He pulled the spoon out, dripping brown liquid into his cup. "What is this?"

Scully rolled her eyes, grimacing. "It's a spoon."

"Why is it a spoon?"

"Because that is the name our language has given to it."

"But it's not as simple as that, is it?" Kritschgau tapped the spoon tip against the mug's edge, shaking off the excess and setting it down on the table between them. "Somewhere along the way, some person from some Germanic tribe somewhere in central Eurasia decided that this tool would be called something and someone else agreed with them, and so everyone in his linguistic group began calling it that. And as the linguistic group spread, so too did the name, morphing and changing till you end up sitting at this diner, you and me, discussing this same object that somehow over time has become known as a spoon. We call it that, Agent Scully, because someone else called it that, and because we believed them. That word became our reality…our truth."

Scully studied the scratched and nicked utensil between them. "What spoons have you created?"

Kritschgau leaned back in the vinyl covered booth, the fabric squeaking as he leveled his frank gaze at her. "You know that there wasn't even a Department of Defense until 1944, right in the middle of World War II. In the previous 80 years, since the Civil War, the US had been involved in four major military engagements and countless smaller ones and had the largest outgrowth of American imperial interests ever in its history. Now we have one of the largest militaries in the world, perhaps certainly one of the deadliest and most effective in human history, able to create devastation on a giant scale. Why is that, Agent Scully?"

"The rise of the Cold War, of course." She parroted back every history lesson she'd had from teachers and her parents all of her life. "The rise of the Soviet Union as a threat, the fear of Communism, the Eastern Bloc….

Kritschgau reached for the spoon between them and held it up. "We call it that because someone else called it that and we believed them."

"So you mean to tell me there was really no Cold War, that there was really no missiles pointed at us, that none of that was real?" Scully scoffed. "You mean to tell me that the last fifty years of our history was as simple as paranoia and fear?"

"I mean to tell you that it doesn't take much to make that paranoia and fear real. Think back on your history, Agent Scully. American industry, stagnate for years during the Depression, comes back to life under the vehicle of a World War II. Suddenly this country was booming. Industry was churning out weapons for the war effort, employing thousands, and those who didn't work making
weapons there were other industries geared up for the boys overseas. What had been a dead economy just a few years before roared into life with promise. When the war began dying down do you really think those who had invested so heavily in it were really happy to see all of that financial potential go away?"

Scully had heard this all before, from the Lone Gunmen mostly, but also Mulder. It seemed a favorite amongst their crowd. "So they come together and create the pretext of needing a large military to make money off of our ignorance?"

Kritschgau stared silently at her, holding the spoon between his fingers.

"Seriously?" Scully snorted, disbelieving. "This is the sort of fodder I've heard for years out of crackpots and conspiracy theorists."

"How better to hide the truth than by letting people think it's a lie?"

Scully wanted to retort but found that she couldn't. She snapped her mouth shut, her teeth rattling with the effort.

"Create an enemy that we need to fear. Choose one that happens to play on innate cultural anxieties. Create the signals to the populace that make them become suspicious, even fearful. Ensure that the enemy responds in fashions that are taken as threats. Respond in kind. Ensure that the public knows that there is a danger there, one that requires a large, military complex to protect them from this growing threat. Just add water and stir. It's not that hard. It's human nature."

It sounded so cold and clinical from him, the distilling of the last half-century into a recipe for a political standoff. "My father served for years in that military, my brothers serve now. Is their service about lies?"

"Not lies per se. The threat is true enough, but mostly because it was encouraged. The threat was needed to hide the truth."

"Which is?"

"That the men with particular self-interests wanted to continue the sort of heavily industrialized military build up that they began in World War II. They wanted to continue building planes and bombs and outfitting soldiers. They wanted to have a war so they could create bigger and badder weapons. Whoever has the most toys wins in this game, Agent Scully. Billions of dollars rolled in hand over fist, tax payer dollars, all going into manufacturing, development, scientific research." He paused, meaningfully.

"Human research?" Scully felt the coffee in her stomach roil.

Kritschgau's eyes flickered guiltily. "Anything is justified in a world where there is an enemy that must be guarded against."

"Even against innocents," Scully snapped, her head throbbing at the statement. "What did any of these people do to deserve this?"

"Not every experiment is fatal, Agent Scully." Kritschgau's words were both apologetic and defensive. "There were many tests, many experiments, over decades of research, and you were simply part of one."

"Why me?" It was the one question that plagued her since her return from her abduction, since her discovery of the cancer. "Why did they take me?"
"Because of your partner, because of what they wanted from him."

"Because they wanted him to give up?"

"I thought you knew your partner better than that. Fox Mulder's sister was taken from him twenty-five years ago and it's driven him all of his life to search for the truth. Imagine how much further he would take that search if he now could add a missing partner to his personal list of grievances?"

This didn't make sense. "Why would they want to spur Mulder on? They want to stop him, they want to shut him down!"

"Don't you think that if they really wanted to do that, they could have managed that a long time ago?" Kritschgau set down the spoon again, knowingly leaving Scully to ponder that as he sipped from his now cold cup of coffee.

There was a certain sort of sense in that. Mulder could have been shut down, many times over, and perhaps should have been. There was only the one time they had ever been successful at it. "They did once. He opened them back up when I was missing."

"And how do you think that was allowed," Kritschgau asked amiably.

"Skinner authorized it." That was all the more she knew.

"He didn't have the power before to keep it open, but he opened them suddenly when he had an agent go missing, allowing Mulder to return to the work he loved, now with a returned vigor as he searched for the partner he allowed to go missing on his watch."

Kritschgau had to be wrong in this. "They didn't take me to spur his work."

He nearly looked apologetic as he responded. "Not to spur it, to use him. There have been powerful men watch Mulder's career since he was at Oxford. They have guided him for years for just the purpose he serves, and you were an integral part of that guiding process."

A void opened somewhere beneath Scully at his words, draining all thought, all feeling, all sensation as she stared at him, wanting to deny all of this. A tool? She was nothing more than a tool to shape Mulder, to force him to do…what?

"Why? Why did they do this to him? Why to me?"

Before Kritschgau could answer, the only waitress attending the scant patrons wandered over. She held out a coffee pot filled with steaming, hot black coffee, smelling just as burnt as the stuff she had poured before. She at least managed a semblance of a smile on her faded, graying face, glancing between the two very still and quiet customers. "Anything else I can get you folks?"

"No," Kritschgau answered, as Scully remained stoically silent across from him. Sensing that they wanted their privacy, the waitress politely moved on. Kritschgau watched her shuffle away, her steps carrying her across the diner before he answered.

"Fox Mulder was always a special case. I'm not sure why, perhaps it was his father, but he always had men protecting him. When your partner started in on these aliens and conspiracies it was considered harmless at best. But someone higher up, I don't know who, decided that he would be useful to us, key to our efforts at hiding the truth."

"Key?" Scully spit out the word, hands wrapping tightly around her own coffee cup as she forced herself not to toss the refilled, hot liquid in the man's face. "You used him to create a lie?"
"We used him to perpetuate one. UFO stories had been used for decades, since the beginning really. They were good cover stories for the various projects we had. Lights in the sky were nothing more than new aircraft technology. Alien visitations and abductions, the distorted memories of people who had faced some of our secret, government tests."

"Creating a reality." Scully's eyes flickered to the spoon. "You used these programs to feed your Cold War machine for your own greed. To cover your crimes you created a story about aliens that was so fantastic only crazy people would believe it, and then you denied whatever they had to say. And because you are the government of course the rational public would assume that all this talk about glowing lights and abductions was all insanity, the ranting of a crazed few."

"It's sort of deceptively simple, isn't it? No grand, Machiavellian schemes, at least not in the sense of hiding the truth. All it took was a few cleverly placed sightings, some half-remembered experiences, and the rest seemed to take care of itself.

Scully felt violently ill as her head swam. All lies, all of their work, every bit of it. All those people, all those lives, Penny, the women in Allentown, even Pendrell. And what about her sister? Had she died for lies as well? And Mulder…God help her, Mulder, everything he had believed, his reputation in tatters, the weight of guilt he carried, all used as part of someone else's sick game. She could weep for him, weep for her, if she could manage to feel anything at that moment.

"Mulder became useful to us the minute he opened the X-files." Kritschgau watched her with sympathetic eyes. "His insistence on his work caused embarrassment to his superiors who refused to look deeper even when the evidence was right in front of their faces. Do you realize how close you and Agent Mulder were to the truth on so many occasions? You were a great foil for him, Agent Scully. Your rational, your insistence on empirical evidence, that would always give those in power the tools they needed to undercut Mulder no matter how hard he argued. And Mulder, being Mulder, would never back down, would never stop believing, even when all the evidence in the world proved the contrary."

His never-ending belief, Mulder's greatest strength and now clearly his greatest weakness. "So I was meant to undermine his work."

"In a way. You were meant to give your superiors rational reasons for doubting Mulder's progress, but you also drove him, and that was ultimately what they wanted. You forced him to look for evidence, hard evidence of his theories. And as he searched, they lead you both down the merry way. A clue here, some evidence there, all snatched away, all ruined in some fashion. And of course, you were the one who would argue then that you couldn't prove anything definitively because you had no evidence."

"Which only drove Mulder harder to find it," Scully whispered, fingers reaching up to rub her suddenly aching head. "Jesus Christ."

"And when you disappeared, that spurred him even further to find you. Even your cancer was beneficial to their plans. Each step they've taken has been calculated to send Mulder further and further down that pathway of belief, to give him what he ultimately wants."

"The alien body." It hit Scully then, a sickening bolt of realization at the grim confirmation in Kritschgau's eyes. "The alien body was set up?"

"Using cells known as 'chimera'. It is a hybrid of human cells and naturally occurring, biological anomalies."

And everything began to fall horribly in place. "The strange, black oil substance."
"It has been part of biological weapons testing for years. I believe you are intimately familiar with the virus that we developed out of it?"

The one Mulder had been infected with. "Purity."

"The same technology they've been developing for years as weapons for their imaginary war is what made that so-called alien body your partner found in Canada. It was placed there for Professor Arlinsky to find knowing that the first person he would call would be your partner. And if not, we knew that was the sort of story that would eventually get around to him, the kind he couldn't help but investigate. It was perfect bait."

And Mulder had taken it hook, line and sinker. "But how could you create it, the sediment."

"Do you think that's hard to fake? It was easy enough to do the process and it was just authentic enough to make Mulder accept it scientifically. All we needed for him to do was believe."

"But when he ran tests..."

"There will be no tests," Kritschgau replied firmly. "If the body isn't gone already, it will be soon. All we wanted was for Mulder to see it, to take this all public and to cause a stir. Can you imagine the preoccupation that would cause? People will be so focused on the spectacle of whether there ever was a real alien body or not. The debate will rage, the theorists will of course focus on the fact there was one and it is being hidden, the public will roll their eyes at the implausibility of it, and no one will think twice when its quietly revealed that the US government had performed secret experiments on civilians for years. That sounds much more plausible than aliens, don't you think?"

It was all so calculated, so cold and manipulative, so rational in its design. Scully almost couldn't wrap her mind around it all. "You would do this, ruin a man and his reputation, destroy what had been an amazingly promising career, and play on the all too real pain he was suffering from just to achieve your own ends? What sort of people are you?" Scully couldn't fathom it, why these people would do such a thing.

"In all fairness, Mulder put himself in this situation. He has been a willing participant in all of this."

"Because you've lead him down here," Scully seethed, eyes flashing at the man who at least had the grace to look subdued under the brunt of her wrath. "You made him do this. You've used him for your own ends, for your own agenda. All of this has been a lie."

"Not a lie, Agent Scully...a reality." Kritschgau emphasized.

"Reality, spoon, lie, I don't fucking care!" To hell with what this man knew about her disease, she wanted to arrest him, she wanted to take him into Federal custody, to have him confess to every bit of his crimes. She wanted to drag him before a Senate sub-committee and drag all of this out in the open, call CNN, do something. They ruined a man's life for nothing more than their own greed, and in the process, they ruined her own.

"Everything that you've allowed Mulder to believe has been a lie. And what am I? Collateral damage? I'm dying, Mr. Kritschgau. Am I a justified loss?"

Her words stung him, she knew that. He ducked his head, staring fixedly at the half-drunk coffee in his mug.

"I know something of that, Agent Scully...collateral damage." The cool that had characterized Kritschgau to this point faltered, his voice cracking as he cleared it roughly. "My son...only child. He is sick...dying. They say its Gulf War syndrome."
They say? Scully's righteous anger cooled somewhat as the man's shoulder's heaved briefly before he continued. "Jeremy joined the Marines because he wanted to serve his country, like his Dad. I was proud of him for doing it. I didn't know what we were doing to our own troops. I didn't know that the same biological weapons they have tested on you and thousands of others were used on our own men. That's why when I heard about the alien body, I wanted to come forward. I wanted to get the evidence and prove to you and Mulder what was going on. You two are the only hope I have for justice for my son."

Justice? Was there such a thing? Scully had once believed so for her sister. But now? How could there be justice against something like this? Men, who saw her as nothing more than dispensable, used to affect their purposes and then tossed away, destroying her life. And Mulder? Scully shuddered. This would shatter him. As if he wasn't already shaken from his clash with his mother just weeks ago. This would be a devastating blow to everything, calling into question his entire life, his work, his memories, the truth about his sister, all of it.

"We need to tell Mulder," Scully's mind raced. "He needs to hear this from you."

"All right," Kritschgau agreed warily. He didn't look positive about telling his story yet again.

"It has to be you. If it comes from me, he won't believe it." Not to mention that Scully didn't want to be the one who struck such a harsh blow, not to Mulder.

"Why do you think he'll believe it any better from me?" Understandably Kritschgau was dubious.

"There's no guarantee he will. But I'm not going to destroy him. He needs to know the truth. After all of this, after everything that has been done, he's owed that much. He's owed some answers."

Kritschgau blanched slightly, as if finally realizing the full, complicated weight of his decision to come forward. This could mean losing everything. He couldn't remain a silent informant in this. He would have to actively participate in blowing all of this sky high. Still, Scully had to give him some credit for not panicking into backing out immediately. Instead he quietly agreed as she reached for her cell phone, pausing briefly in dialing Mulder's number.

This would change their world, she realized achingly as she stared at her display. Everything they had worked for, struggled over, given their lives to. What would he say? She dialed, her manicured nail pressing into the soft key as it brought up Mulder's cell. He picked up on the second ring, sounding surprised to hear from her.

"Mulder," she murmured, meeting Kritschgau's steady gaze. "We need to talk somewhere. There's someone I think you should meet."
Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is called on to deceive, inveigle and obfuscate.

What in the hell did that guy say to you that you believe his story?

He said that the men behind this hoax, behind these lies, gave me this disease to make you believe.

Scully couldn't tell what was worse, the fact that she had to be the one to tell him that or the horrifyingly aching expression on her partner's face the minute that she did. All the secret fears, all the guilt, everything she knew he had harbored for all of these months flashed suddenly, as without a word he turned, spinning on his heels, and walked out of the warehouse. Scully stood alone, watching him go, left with two dead men and no more answers than when she had entered.

It didn't matter now. It had all been a hoax, a lie, a fantasy. Mulder had been the cruel victim of it.

He left the scene as she called in the Metro police and handled the details of the forensic team. No one questioned it when she explained her presence there as following up on a lead and coming up on the two dead men. The homicide detectives had merely waved it off as some sort of theft, perhaps of some black market artifact, and Scully had been happy to allow them to think that. She had merely asked that they forward her a copy of the forensic report when they were done for her investigation.

She had no idea where Mulder got to and the truth was Scully felt perhaps she needed to leave him alone for the time being, allow him his space to process. He would reach out to her when he was ready. In just a few weeks Mulder's entire world had come unraveled. Everything he had believed about himself, his family, his work had come under question. What was truth in his life now when so much of it was revealed to be a fabrication?

It was late before Scully even managed a cab back to her home. She couldn't remember at the moment where her car was even at, Mulder's perhaps? She was too tired, too head sore, too heart sore. Even her steps moved slower as she paid the cabbie and drug herself through the front doors of her building. The effort of even digging out her keys felt too much. She would like to blame her cancer and the so spread of death through her body, but she knew this was different. Her fatigue had nothing to do with the tumor anymore than it had to do with the late hour. This was a feeling that Scully had never known before, one that she wasn't particularly intimate with, and it undercut her, stealing what little hope and vitality she had left. It was the feeling of absolute and utter defeat. They had been used, duped, and now were being thrown aside, and there wasn't a single damn thing either of them could do about it.

The hallway of her building was still, silent save for her weary footsteps along the carpeted floors. The metal of her keys grated softly in the lock as it turned and gave and she stepped into the private comfort of her home. She paused, briefly, closing the door behind her, glancing at the floor beneath her feet. It was where her sister had been fatally shot, this very spot two years ago. For what? How futile it all seemed now. Quietly, she closed the door, locking the deadbolt behind her and affixing the safety chain. Too many people had broken into her home in the last four years. Scully felt violated enough for one evening.
Slowly, she wandered through her dark house, shedding her coat as she moved to the glowing light of her answering machine, pressing the play button. No new calls. Bill was right. She had let her life devolve, all for a cause where she thought she was doing the right thing. Wordlessly she turned to her bedroom, lit only from the streetlight from outside, blindly tossing her jacket at what she hoped was the chair in the corner, toeing of her shoes as she made for the bathroom. She wanted a shower, she wanted some comfortable pajamas, and she wanted some sleep, and then she would think about all of this and about what it meant.

Quick fingers made for the hem of her sweater, pulling it up automatically as she made to lift it over her head. It only occurred to her after the clothing crept up her skin that there was something off about the corner where she tossed her jacket. There was another presence in her room, the sound of another's breath, of eyes watching her silently as she began to undress. In that split second, as the awareness hit her, a familiar drawl wandered from the darkness, sounding vaguely disappointed.

"Keep going, FBI woman."

Scully spun at the leer, violently pulling her top down again over smooth, pale skin, pinpointing Mulder's lazy smile in the dark. "Mulder! What are you doing?" She blushed, cheeks glowing with heat. "Why are you sitting in my bedroom in the dark?

Mulder shrugged darkly, unapologetic. "It was too crowded in my apartment. I couldn't sleep."

It was too late and she was far too tired for Mulder's dry wit or flippant humor. "I'm not kidding, Mulder."

"Good, cause neither am I." He rose in a fluid action from the corner where he'd hidden, face grim and eyes glittering in the dimness. "There's a dead man on the floor of my apartment, and it's only a matter of time before he starts to stink up the place."

Dead man? Scully's mind stuttered as Mulder moved to the window, cautiously glancing outside. "What are you talking about, Mulder?" He closed the shade and reached for her lamp, flicking it on. "What's going on?"

Why was there a dead man? Why was Mulder hiding in her bedroom?

"Apparently, somebody thinks my life is interesting enough to put on video tape. My apartment's been under an electronic surveillance for at least two months." Scowling he reached inside of his jacket pocket, pulling out a plastic photo ID. "Look at this, courtesy of the US government."

Scully frowned down at the fuzzy, printed digital picture. "That's the man dead in your apartment?" This was unreal. Why was there a dead man in Mulder's apartment again? And how?

"Yeah, he works…worked for the Department of Defense." The grim look on Mulder's face deepened, turning in. There was something more to this than a random dead man in his apartment, Scully could sense it as Mulder withdrew.

"How did he die, Mulder?"

"A gunshot wound to the face."

Dear God!

Scully swallowed. Mulder shot a man. She had seen Mulder kill men before, but it was always in the line of duty. This was different. This was a man who had been spying on him. This was in cold
"Have you contacted anybody at the Bureau?" They had to call Skinner. They had to get him involved before this went any further.

"I can't to that Scully." Mulder shook his head already seeing where she was going with her plan. "I can't go to the authorities with this.

This wasn't some sort of alien hunting trip, Scully thought madly, this was a man murdered in Mulder's home.

"What are you talking about?" Her voice cut sharply at her partner as she realized that what had started as a simple case about another alien body was now rapidly turning into something else. Just like it always did. There was something about this time of year that ratcheted up the drama of their lives, and without a beat Mulder plunged on.

"This man, Ostelhoff, worked for the military." Mulder waved the badge again, his voice straining in barely disguised anger. "Are you beginning to get the picture? Do you see what's happening here?"

She did. Scully had seen it from the moment that Kritschgau sat down with her at the diner. "The hoax is connected to the military, just like Kritschgau said it was."

It was all true. Whatever vague hope she had that it wasn't died.

A storm was forming within Mulder, one that was threatening to break. "This hoax, your cancer, everything! It just doesn't lead back to the military, it leads right back to the FBI."

In Scully's personal reality there was an explosion, a burst of destruction like a bomb blast, rocking her core as she stared up at the ruthless fury in her partner's face and that edge of darkness that always seemed to haunt him. "What?"

"It isn't must the military who has been playing us the entire time, Scully, it's our bosses, it's our work. Everything since I joined the Bureau nine years ago has been carefully set up and orchestrated. Someone within the FBI is in on this and has been manipulating the both of us for years towards their own ends."

"Who?"

Mulder's full mouth thinned into a tight, white line, his eyes flat and hard. "I can't be sure. It could be Skinner, it could be Blevins, it could be anyone that smoking son-of-a-bitch got his stinking, yellow fingers on."

They both knew that man was somehow intimately involved, as linked to this as he was to Mulder's family. All of it was knotted together in a web of lies and intrigue that went back decades. Had Bill Mulder known any of this?"

As if finally noticing he was having this conversation in her bedroom, Mulder wordlessly turned, thankfully meandering out of the door and allowing Scully to collect her thoughts briefly; a government hoax, a dead DoD agent, and months worth of video taken from a spy camera watching Mulder's every move. Had the government been doing this the entire time? Had even their own bosses been following Mulder's every move, setting strategic tripping points for him? The very idea terrified and horrified Scully. The truth was that what Mulder could have stumbled
upon was the very proof of everything Kritschgau told them that night, that there were men that even she and Mulder had trusted who were deliberately and knowingly betraying them.

The very thought disgusted her deeply.

She could hear Mulder wander through her apartment, towards her kitchen. Scully followed, watching as he pulled out folded papers from his back pocket, flipping on the lights. Scully trailed behind, sliding to the table, curling in one of the chairs as Mulder placed his information in front of her on the well-scrubbed wood.

"This man, Ostlehoff, was set up in the apartment directly above mine. I caught him trying to destroy phone records on which the same number was called seventeen times."

Scully followed Mulder's point finger to the string of digits before her, "That's the PBX operator at the Bureau.

"Yeah," Mulder muttered in frustration.

"Who would he be calling at the FBI?" Scully's saying that Scully felt her safe world of trust increasingly shrink. It was one thing when nameless, faceless men out there were to blame for her condition, were the ones threatening her life. They were far away from her, distant, somewhere in the shadows. But this was a threat that was direct, possibly someone she knew, someone who saw her everyday. Her cancer was knowingly caused by a person who stood by and allowed it to happen without saying a thing.

"I don't know," Mulder reiterated. She could sense he was just as unnerved, but worse than that he was livid, angry, betrayed.

"Mulder, how long has this been going on?"

"Maybe since the beginning, since you joined me on the X-files."

"That would mean for four years we've been nothing more than pawns in a game. That it was a lie from the beginning." It was too much, this was too much. Exhaustion coupled with her sense of futility over all of this as tears pricked her eyes, glazing them over as she scrubbed angrily at them.

"Mulder, these men...you give them your faith and you're supposed to trust them with your life."

This was supposed to be how it worked. What happened to the world of honor, of trust? What happened to men like her father, like her brothers...like Mulder?

Slowly he kneeled beside her, meeting her at eye level, gaze deep with contained rage but also with the same pain and lost of assurance that she felt. Their mutual worlds were turned upside down. Everything they had ever believed and trusted in was gone. And all they had was one another.

"There are those who can be trusted." He spoke like one who had to believe that, who clung to that idea else he would spin off into total and overwhelming despair. "What I need to know is who among them is not."

The horrible anger he'd been holding within burned as she watched. It was a threat she had only seen a handful of times in the four years she had worked with him. It was that aspect of Mulder that frightened her sometimes, that part of him she knew was capable of shooting a man in the face and killing him without even a second thought. He reached for her hand across the table, wrapping his long fingers around her cool ones.

"I will not allow this treason to prosper," he murmured, voice hoarse with righteous retribution.

"Not if they've done this to you."
The tears that threatened brimmed to life. Mulder could be bemoaning his fate, angered at how he had been treated, manipulated, and puppeted about. But his first concern wasn't about his X-files. It was her and the cancer that they gave her, the disease that was eating at her, stealing her life away.

"Mulder, we can't go to the Bureau making these accusations." Who would believe them without any proof beyond a dead body and a list of phone numbers?

"No," he agreed softly, "But as they lie to us, we can lie to them, a lie to find the truth."

Without hesitation she nodded. "What do you have in mind?"

Mulder was suddenly much more circumspect. Perhaps he had expected more hesitancy or argument out of her. "Doing this, Scully, it's dangerous. What I'm suggesting could ruin both of us, certainly you."

"Mulder they've already taken all they can from me. What more can I lose?"

"You're credibility?" That bothered him, clearly. "Scully, you are the one person in this whole world I trust. You are a woman of deep integrity and the truest friend I've ever known. But I need you to put all of that, faith, honesty, loyalty aside to do the one thing I've never asked you to do for me, though I know you have a time or two.

"Mulder...I'm in this as deeply as you are. Whatever it is, I'll do it."

His fingers tightened around hers. "I need you to lie for me, Scully. I need you to talk into Skinner's office and I need you to tell them that the man in my apartment right now is me."

Lie about a dead body? "Mulder, in a heartbeat they will know it isn't you."

"No they won't. I meant it when I said he died from a gunshot blast to the face. He had a .22 in the apartment with him."

A .22 to the face that was total obliteration. Nothing of the man's features would be left. "Jesus, Mulder, how did no one notice?"

"God knows, but there is an old man up there with a television he keeps on loud all the time. I don't think anyone noticed anything different than normal. Hell, no one seemed to notice me carrying a man with his face blown off through the halls to my apartment either."

How had he pulled any of this off? "Even without the ID of a face, Mulder, a fingerprint analysis will turn up the truth, if not a DNA check."

"I know that, but it will stall them all enough for me to do what I have to do."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to find Kritschgau. I'll go to the Pentagon tomorrow." He pulled out Ostlehoff's card again. "This is a free ticket into Willy Wonka's factory here, and I want to know his secrets."

Even if you find the truth, they'll want you for murder, Mulder."

"A murder of a man who was spying on me for a government project that he was trying to help keep quiet, a project that is killing you? When I'm done reeking vengeance here, Scully, no one is going to hold it against me."
"If you get that far," she replied. This was insane, this was dangerous, and damn it she was all for it. What else did they have to lose? Where else could they possibly go?

"I'll find their secrets, Scully. For everything they've done to us for the last four years, your sister, your friends, Pendrell, we will bring them justice finally." That was the burning fire of holy retribution in Mulder's words. Would it really be as simple as that?

"I hope so," she whispered softly. What else would all of this mean if they couldn't?

Gently he rose, leaning in as he did so, his warm, soft mouth brushing the hair of her temple gently as he stood. It was a feather light kiss, there and gone again as Mulder stood tall over her. Scully tried to ignore how her heart rate picked up at the affection, the bond of two people who only had the absolute trust between each other to sustain them at this moment.

"They will call you soon. They'll want you to identify the body. You're my emergency contact." Mulder was moving out of the kitchen and towards her front door. Scully rose to follow him. "Just go in, look at the body and tell them its me. Try to sell it as best you can."

"I'll call up on those kindergarten acting roles I had." She smiled mildly. Trying to bring some levity. Mulder snorted but couldn't bring his humor to bear here.

"I'm going to lay low till morning. I'll call you when I have something definitive to give you."

They stood there, watching each other by her door, knowing that what they were committing themselves to was completely dangerous. Yet Scully felt a certain sort of peace about all of it. At least this time, when Mulder committed to a crazy plan, he was doing it with her. Somehow that made it all better to take, knowing that he was with her in this endeavor.

"Please be careful, Mulder," she murmured as he opened the door.

He paused, turning to her with a ghost of a smile on his full lips. "You do the same. You're all I got at the moment, Scully."

With that he turned out of the door and left, closing it softly behind him.
The Careful Web

Chapter Summary

In which Scully weaves a careful web.

Oh the careful web we weave…

Blevins' mild expression belied the fear in his glassy, dark eyes. He was afraid of her, of what she and Mulder knew. He was afraid of Kritschgau, of what he told them. Somehow Scully doubted highly it had anything to do with it being classified information. Someone wanted to cover something up, and they were willing to stand on Mulder's supposedly dead body to cover it up. Damn them, she thought harshly. Even if Mulder were dead, the indifference, the assumption that they knew anything at all galled Scully.

"You will be available tonight at seven?" Blevins glanced from to Skinner, whose expression tightened sourly in response. Scully watched her superior carefully. Was he in on this as well? Skinner had been their biggest advocate, but she knew that he too had fallen under the thumb of these men at various points. And she knew he had been willing to do anything they asked at one point to afford her a cure for her illness. Two months these people had been watching Mulder. Had it been on his call, in the vain hope that he could divine what Mulder could not?

"Agent Scully?" Blevins' unctuous tone cut into her thoughts as she turned to look back at the silver-haired man.

"Yes, it should be fine." Her body protested the time, wanting her to beg off, to ask for it to be moved, but she knew these men likely wouldn't. She needed to keep them occupied; she needed to keep them thinking that Mulder was dead. She needed to buy him time, and no matter if she were exhausted from a full night awake, no matter if the headache forming around the tumor in her sinus cavity were aching horribly, she would be there.

Blevins smiled a slowly, sad, sickeningly empathetic smile. "Good. I know that this has been difficult, Agent Scully. It is never easy for any of us when one of the FBI's own dies in such a manner."

Blevins poorly hid the insinuation behind the sympathy. Scully controlled the bristling anger that rose to the fore. For all she knew Blevins words could have simply been designed to provoke a response. No, she decided. She would take them at face value and nod gratefully, make a graceful exit, and get the hell away from Blevins and his superciliousness.

"If that is all, sir, I need to speak to police about Agent Mulder's remains." Scully glanced between Blevins and Skinner to look for permission to leave. What game were the two of them playing at, she wondered, as Skinner finally shot her a grim, pained nod and watched silently as she rose to leave. Scully swallowed the rise of panic as she coolly maneuvered through the busy halls, ignoring the glances and whispers moving like an undercurrent in the river of humanity. Word had gotten around already in some corners about Mulder's supposed death. Would this help their rouse? She hoped so. Mulder's work at the moment depended on her being able to keep up the pretense, and that only happened if everyone believed that he was indeed dead.
"Agent Scully!"

The deep, booming voice of Skinner stopped her before she could reach the elevators and the safety of the X-files office. Scully turned, seeing her superior's tall, balding head over the sea of other agents, schooling herself into proper, stressful grief. Not that it took much to do so. She couldn't falter in any aspect of her lie, not right now, not even to Skinner...especially not to him.

Skinner pulled up to her, just as grim as when she left. "Scully, I had nothing to do with Blevins call."

She was a grieving partner, or at least she was supposed to be, and she pulled on that to affect mild disgust and disdain at the entire meeting she had been drug through. "Mulder isn't even dead twelve hours, sir, and they are calling me out on the carpet for an inquest. If he'd been shot in the line of duty rather than a suicide I'd be sent to a therapist by now and give time off."

Her coolly angry words cut at Skinner and he grimaced apologetically. "I got word of this actually right before the call came in on Mulder. The DoD is up in arms about Kritschgau. They say that he's leaking secrets that are vital to national security and they called Blevins on the carpet."

"Why him, sir? Why not you? We don't answer to Blevins and haven't in four years." That honestly confused her. What stake did Blevins have in this? And was it related to what she knew knew about Kritschgau and the Defense Department manipulation of herself and Mulder.

"Because I'm too close to it." Skinner clearly didn't like the insinuation that statement made. "Blevins hasn't worked with you in years, but Blevins works directly with cross jurisdictional cases with the DoD."

"So now he's taken it upon himself to directly handle the situation?" Rather fortuitous if you asked Scully. She had to be suspicious of all of them, and it struck her as mildly convenient that Blevins received a call just hours after Kritschgau confessed to everything at Mulder's home, under a bug that was placed there by someone in the FBI. "He couldn't wait a day, sir, even to let me handle Agent Mulder's remains?"

"I know, this isn't how I would handle it, but these are matters of national security, Scully. This isn't just about another crazy case, this is about things that could compromise people's lives."

Did Skinner actually believe that statement or was he simply mouthing the words he was told. Was he trying to convince her so that she would compromise, give in like he had. "People's lives? Just like me with my cancer, sir?"

Skinner hadn't expected that response. He blinked at her, stricken. She had spoken out of the frustration of hearing the standard answer parroted back to her and now she regretted it. If he even suspected….

"Is that what this Kritschgau told you? That he knew how you got your cancer?"

Damn it! Scully mentally cursed herself for her mistake as she lifted her chin defiantly. "I'll reveal that to you tonight when I'm called into my meeting."

"Reveal?" Skinner snapped the word, all sympathy now lost in a momentary flash of angry irritation. "Agent Scully, if you know something...do you know what you are jeopardizing here by not coming forward?"

"Sir, all I know is that my partner felt it was easier for him to take a bullet to the head than it was to face any more of the truth and I want to know why."
It took every fiber of her being to meet Skinner's stormy gaze with anything approximating steadiness, but she did it, willing herself not to flinch. If she could draw up tears in this moment to make it more believable she would, anything to cause him to back down, to leave her alone to do her job and help Mulder find the truth. It would only be a matter of time, maybe a day or two before the coroner discovered the truth about Mulder's death, and she prayed that before that happened he found the answers they needed so they could bring them to light...even if that meant that she had to lie straight faced to a man she who she had up until last night considered an ally.

Whether Skinner believed her or not, she couldn't tell. But he at least backed off, if reluctantly. "I'm trying to help you, Scully."

Perhaps he was. Scully couldn't be sure of that assurance from her boss. "Thank you, sir, but right now I'd like some time to prepare myself for my meeting tonight."

She turned without dismissal, entering against into the mild throng of people, working her way to the elevators. Was she convincing enough? And would she be able to keep this up through her meeting tonight? She would have to lie, and lie convincingly to all of them, not just Blevins and Skinner. They would all need to believe that Fox Mulder was indeed dead.

*Mulder,* she breathed as she called the elevator, feeling the weight of Skinner's gaze still on her. *Please, please have found something soon!*
Tears stung Scully's eyes, like liquid fire, but she forced them to the surface. Let them see her despondency. Let them think that Mulder was dead. For the rest, let them all believe her lie as she unmasked all of theirs. She would have her justice if she could make it through the end of this meeting. The throbbing in her head that had been threatening all day was killing her and she wanted nothing more than to go home and sleep. Exhaustion from the past few days was eating away at her resolve, but she faced Blevins' with quiet determination, her voice trembling with grief she didn't quite feel, at least not for the man she was calling dead.

"Early this morning I got a call from the police asking me to come to Agent Mulder's apartment." She pressed trembling lips together, feigning horrified sorrow. "The detectives asked me…he needed me to identify a body."

"Agent Scully..."

Blevins at least sounded compassionate as he tried to cut her off. Scully pressed on, overriding the sympathetic stares from the men at the table.

"Agent Mulder died last night from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

She burst the words out on the stunned, quiet group, sniffing lightly against the tears. Behind her a door opened into the darkened conference room, a shaft of light in the hallway illuminating Skinner as he slunk in late into the proceedings. Scully watched him quietly as he avoided her stare, carrying with him a file she was certain was Mulder's autopsy report. He could call her entire bluff right here, right now. Her heart began to pound in her chest, a distant warning call as her head throbbed violently again. She was playing a dangerous game of chicken here. She had to be able to answer to these accusations and quickly. Would they believe a woman with a degree in forensic pathology would mistake the body of another as Mulder?

"Agent Scully," Blevins responded smoothly from the end of the table. "These accusations you've made…you've been given a disease?"

*I'm dying, you ass,* she wanted to snap, but she nodded perfunctorily. "Yes, sir."

Around the table she could see the flickers of doubt, the puzzled looks, here and there a smirking half-smile. Dana Scully once respected pathologist, now contaminated by Fox Mulder's cracked ideas. Even Blevins gave her that supercilious, condescending look as he frowned in obvious disapproval of her entire story. "These are serious charges."

Serious? These charges threatened to open wide a conspiracy of misinformation that went back more than fifty years. Scully glanced slowly around the room, finally allowing her eyes to linger on Skinner. He glanced guiltily down at his file, jaw working hard as his fingers tightened together in front of him. Scully addressed Blevins once again.
"Yes, sir, but I have proof against the men behind this, of the lies that I believed." Her voice rang out in the stillness as her head throbbed in time to it. "What I have here is proof undeniable that the men who gave me this disease were also behind the hoax. A plot designed to lead to Agent Mulder's demise and to my own. Planned and executed by someone in this room."

She paused dramatically, outwardly cool as she opened her file despite her heart racing with fear as she flipped to the test result pages, her eyesight blurring with it.

"What I have here is scientific evidence." She glanced down at her notes, at the black letters on white paper and the crimson drops that fell to it, spreading, soaking into the fibers. Drop....drop....drop...

No...this couldn't be happening now...

Panicked, Scully looked up at Blevins who himself looked stunned as he stared back at her. Her fingers reached up for her upper lip as the now familiar copper taste filled her mouth. This couldn't be happening, now when she was so close! Frantically, she wondered if she even had a tissue on her, she could simply hold it there and continue, but there was something terribly wrong this time. Blood filled her throat now, dribbled down her nasal passage at an alarming rate. It had never done that before, not with this sort of seriousness and volume.

The world spun and tilted crazily as beside her Skinner yelped, his large hands clasping on to her as she felt herself fall hard to the leather chair beneath her. She couldn't have this happen, not now, not when she was about to reveal the truth. Scully fought for control, to clear her head as above her Skinner's terrified expression waivered in and out of her eyesight.

"You," she breathed. She wanted to call him out, but her voice was weak now. She knew he had something to do with this, but she couldn't say it, couldn't form the thoughts. She was choking on her own blood as her brain went fuzzy and logic failed her. Somewhere there were hands that were grasping at her, clawing her down into oblivion as she fell, down, down, down.

Her life moved in strange, dreamlike sequences, punctuated by Skinner shouting and people scrambling around her. She thought she heard someone frantically on a phone. She was being lifted at one point, and then there was a mask over her nose and mouth as the word hypovolemic shock was pronounced. Ahhh, she was bleeding to death. Well that was well and good, at least she knew what was going on. Pity she couldn't wait till she could nail the bastard who did this to them.

Mulder, I'm sorry, she silently cried as lights and sirens assailed her. She had failed him. She had tried. Would he understand? She had worked so hard, the evidence for all of this was in her hands, and she had the misfortune of bleeding all over it. Scully hoped that she lived long enough to tell him she was sorry.

"Damn it, she's bleeding out faster than we can get fluids in her. Tell them to have A positive ready when we get to the hospital, okay?"

Bleeding out, just like all the lies, bleeding out to infect the populace, to shape their reality. Everything was one lie after another, after another, after another. They had lied to her to put her on the X-files. She wasn't supposed to debunk Mulder's work. What had Tom Colton told her so long ago? They wanted to use her to tear Mulder down. How prophetic he'd been. Perhaps she should tell him so, if he wasn't such a lying, backstabbing, brown nosing jackass.

Sounds were too loud, lights too bright, the world tasted of copper as she was wheeled into the ER. People chattered as she coughed and choked, as tubes were stuck into her arm, into her nose, down her throat. Someone ordered more blood, a saline drip, a bed to stick her in. Somewhere she
thought she heard Skinner. Damn it, she didn't want him there. She wanted Mulder. Who would tell Mulder where she was? How would he know? What if he panicked looking for her? The only one who knew he wasn't dead was Skinner. Would he use her illness to draw Mulder out? She had to get up. She had to get to Mulder, to warn him.

"Settle down, missy, you are not going anywhere." It was a nurse, a woman, who held Scully's shoulder to the mattress with a firm hand. Damn it all, Scully thought irrationally, she was a trained FBI agent, couldn't she take on one nurse in an ER? But she felt her eyes flutter closed again as someone murmured something about ICU and she heard Skinner bring up the word "cancer" in ominous tones.

She was not dying, she told herself, and she wouldn't allow herself to die, not yet anyway, not till the truth was shouted to the heavens. She had to make it out there, to be the one to tell it. She had to get out of this bed, to get back to Blevins, to call out the lies. She couldn't fail Mulder in this, not when she had the answers, not when she knew the truth. She had to get up. She needed to.

Her body laughed at her spirit as she sank into the abyss, drowning in it as voices swirled around her and she fell into nothing.
In which Bill Scully has a few things to say about Fox Mulder.

She was a dying woman. What more did Scully have to lose?

"Well then lay it on me," she croaked up at Mulder, perched as he was on the side of her hospital bed. She couldn't allow him to take the fall for this, to come so far to fail now. She couldn't die failing at this, too, at finding the justice for herself and all of those who had suffered because of what the government perpetuated. If she had to be the one to stand witness, she would. Besides she was dying. What more could they do to her now?

"I can't."

She knew even before Mulder shook his head in refutation that he wouldn't go for it. Mulder wouldn't allow it. He smiled softly but determinedly. Now wasn't a time for him to be stubborn about this!

"Yes, you can!" Didn't he understand what this meant to her, to their cause? "Mulder if I can save you, let me. Let me at least give some meaning to what's happening to me."

She silently pleaded with him to not allow himself to be taken down for murder. Skinner couldn't be trusted to hide the forensic evidence and they would want to know how Scott Ostelhoff ended up dead in Mulder's apartment. They would use that as a way to distract from the truths he had, to hide it and bury it before it came to light. She would die of a crime that would never be known, just like Penny, just like Melissa. They would succeed in their ultimate goal, destroying the man who held all of the truths in hand.

Scully would be damned if Mulder paid for the crimes of those men who sinned against her.

But she knew that he would deny her again, could see the words forming on his lips just as footsteps at the doorway interrupted them. Over Mulder's shoulder she could see her mother's dark head, and beside her, the tall form of Bill. Maggie blinked in mild surprise and obvious curiosity, glancing between Scully in the bed and Mulder sitting just to the side of her.

"I hope I'm not interrupting." There was that speculation in her mother's tone, the glimmer of knowing that tended to infuriate Scully so much whenever her mother was around herself and Mulder, as if she knew something secret about the two of them that Scully did not. Scully just did manage not to roll her eyes as Mulder jumped on the opportunity, seeing Maggie's entrance as his easy exit out of an argument he knew was brewing.

"No, I was just on my way out." Gently his pressed his fingers into hers on the bed between them. To her surprise, and Scully imagined to her mother's delight, he leaned in to where she lay, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek, much as he had when he entered the room. It was uncharacteristic affection from a man who was her work partner, and the third time in as many days that she had felt the small thrill of his lips against her skin and glimpsed the sad, apologetic look in his eyes as he pulled away. It made Scully's heartache at it, the small signs of friendship, of affection between
them. She couldn't die and leave this...leave him behind. Could she? Blinking back tears she smiled up at him, half in worry, half gratefully as he pulled away and turned to Bill standing watching warily in the doorway.

"Hi, I'm Fox Mulder. I don't think we've ever met." He held out his hand to her brother in the businesslike ritual of introductions. Scully glanced to her mother fearfully. Would her brother make a scene out of this?

"Bill Scully." Her took Mulder's hand in perfunctory politeness. Bill wouldn't be rude, at least not until he had made his introductions.

So far so good. Mulder shot her a parting smile as he wandered into the hallway with Bill, setting off alarms as Scully watched. Not that she didn't trust her brother, Scully reasoned, as she eyed from a distance whatever exchange was going on between her partner and elder brother. She just that she knew Bill and she knew Mulder, and while Mulder had no idea that her brother had a problem with him, she knew Bill would have no problem in stating so up front. She couldn't have Mulder distracted from his purpose, especially not with so much roding on what he was doing.

"I've brought some things for you, Dana." Maggie was already moving about the hospital room, setting down a bag and unpacking odds and ends. Her hairbrush, some toiletries, and the book she was reading at the moment, the little things that Scully wouldn't think of but she knew Maggie would focus on, ways in which she could control a situation quickly spiraling out of control.

"So," she breathed, pausing finally by her daughter's bed and looking at her, really looking. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm dying," Scully replied flippantly with a small smile to soften harsh words. Maggie grimaced and Scully immediately wished she hadn't said it.

"I'm better, Mom, much better than when they brought me in."

"Good enough to go home?" That was too much, too hopeful. Scully sighed. How could she treat this with the clinical detachment of a doctor and still break the truth to her mother.

"The tumor has spread through my nasal cavity." She spoke clinically, as if she were the doctor making the prognosis on her patient. "While it isn't pressing into my brain it has now reached the point that any stress or rise in blood pressure threatens to cause massive bleeding. I was lucky this time, they got to me quickly, otherwise I would have bled out before getting to the hospital."

"Dana," Maggie breathed, face paling at the words, eyes filming and widening with frightened tears.

Scully sighed. She didn't want to hurt her mother like this. "It is what it is, Mom. We've known for months this could end up being the situation."

"I know," Maggie replied, arms wrapping around her middle, as if she hoped to secure and protect herself against the onslaught. "I just...hoped we had longer."

Scully did too. She thought of Mulder and his work, of what he was doing. Damn it, she wished she had more time too.

Bill wandered back in the room with a grim look down the hallway. It wasn't lost on his younger sister as he tried to hide it beneath a false, reassuring smile that he flashed at his family. "So, that's this attractive partner of yours Melissa kept going on about. Guess he's not bad."
Bill was always bad at lying, he rarely ever succeeded at it, and it baffle Scully as to why he tried. "What did you say to Mulder?"

Guilt rushed to hide behind a nonchalant shrug as Bill waved it off, wandering to one of the chairs on the far side of her private room. "Nothing, Dana. I'm not threatening him with shotguns or anything."

Scully didn't buy that and frankly neither did Maggie. Her sharp eyes flickered between the feuding siblings. "Bill, don't taunt your sister, not when she's feeling ill."

She refused to say "dying" Scully noted.

"I'm not taunting her," Bill replied a trifle defensively. "I just don't like her assuming I did anything bad."

"Perhaps it's thirty-three years of experience talking," Scully caustically shot back, knowing she shouldn't allow herself to be worked up like this, not with her health. She felt like hell and likely looked it as well. Her body ached and her head felt heavy, but even then there was something galling about her brother's presumption that not even her impending demise could prevent her from getting annoyed over.

"I only asked him to leave the work out of here, that's all." Bill threw up his hands, stretching out his long legs in front of him. "I can't imagine he's here bugging you for any other reason."

Any other reason? Honestly, was her brother that thick? "No, no other reason Bill other than he's my friend and obviously scared to death for me."

Really, did he live in a bubble? Did he not see the look on his face as Mulder left, or the speculative smile from her mother? Even if it did irritate Scully that her mother took secret delight in the small affection shown her by her partner, it frankly pissed her off her brother didn't. Did he really believe Mulder didn't care and was unaffected by what was happening to her?

"For your information, Bill, I asked about work." She felt her eyes flash at her brother's suddenly shameful face. "Mulder came here to see me, he didn't come here to talk about it. I demanded it from him because…because damn it, it's my work, too. I'm invested. I care. And if I'm dying because of it, I might as well know what the hell I'm dying for, don't you think?"

Maggie gasped beside her, but Scully refused to back down from her brother. She may be dying, but she wasn't weak. "This is my life, Bill, and what I have left of it I will live how I wish."

"Cause you've done an amazing job to this point, obviously."

"As if this is my fault, Bill? There are men out there who did this to me, the same men who killed our sister, and I'm determined they will meet justice for this."

"Men who did this because of Mulder annoying the hell out of them. I lost one sister to this, Dana, and now I'm losing another, and you act as if he has no accountability for any of this."

"Mulder couldn't help this. He was played, I was played, we both were used in the cruelest of fashions, and I'm determined to see that those who did it are stopped."

"And you've bought into his craziness, Dana! Listen to yourself! You nearly died on us just days ago and all you can think about is getting back at some imaginary, shadowy group for an illness you couldn't prevent."
"Is that how you comfort yourself, Bill? Telling yourself that my cancer is an act of God that no one could prevent?"

"I don't know. You didn't bother telling me the truth long enough for me to formulate an opinion on anything?"

"Enough!" Maggie's voice rang, booming against the tiles of the room and down the hallway, cutting through her children's bickering with the heavy weight of maternal authority. She stood in the middle of the room, glaring from her eldest son to her youngest daughter, her expression a mixture of grief and rage as hot tears formed and coursed down her trembling cheeks.

"Listen to the two of you!" Her tone was steel, eyes flashing. "Why is it always like this between you. Ever since I can remember, you've torn at each other, picked at each other, and for what? Just to prove the other right?"

Maggie's hands clenched where they lay in her crossed arms, knuckles whitening. She was a magnificent sight when infuriated, one that scared the hell out of Scully when she was a child, and even now she felt her eyes turn down to study her hospital issued comforter in shame. She knew Bill in the chair across the room was cringing away from his mother's wrath.

"This is a time when we should be united as family together and the two of you want to bring up petty squabbling? You are grown adults, not children." She snapped at them both as if they still were three and eight, not thirty years past that point.

"Dana, you have just been told by your doctors that any stress could kill you. What part of you yelling at your brother is relaxing? What part of you taking out your anger on him is supposed to be good for you?" Scully flinched at her mother's very pointed and accurate observations. She felt her blood pressure recede under the onslaught, bowing her head even further as she recognized her mother had a point.

"Did it ever occur to you, Dana, that Bill isn't just here to annoy you, but because he cares about you as well? He's taken time off to be here with you, away from his pregnant wife and his job. He loves you, and while I won't say you don't have a right to do with your life what you wish, you might listen to what he is trying to say rather than snapping at him about how he's trying to limit you."

Damn it all, Scully thought petulantly. She was dying. The one thing she wanted to complete in this life tantalizingly at her fingertips and Bill was bullying her. Her mother was going to let him get away with that? She wanted to reply in a suitably mutinous fashion, but before she could work up the courage Maggie had turned on Bill, equally as irritated with him as her daughter.

"And you Bill," she paced closer to him and there was something very, very intimidating about their middle-aged mother closing in on her very tall son. Despite being a navy officer, she could see Bill cower as she approached. "Your sister is sick and all you can think of doing is provoking her?"

"I wasn't provoking," he dared to start before Maggie cut him off.

"Do you not see how much her work means to her? How much Fox means to her?" Maggie whipped the rhetorical questions at her son and Scully couldn't help but feel a tad triumphant at that. "I've never understood you and your father's insistence on belittling and mistrusting a man you haven't even met. I've met Fox Mulder, and I know who he is and what he is. And I know your sister, Bill, and I've been there for those cases, and I've held her hand, and I've heard her frustrations. I've watched her work. I was the one who sat with her grieving partner when she disappeared, and I was the one who bothered to get to know him. And I won't tell you I believe
every idea he has, William Scully, but I will tell you that I know that he's a man of integrity, who cares about your sister very much and would never, ever do a thing to hurt her."

"That's not what I was saying," Bill tried again, only to be cut off by a sharp gesture from his mother.

"You were saying his work is what endangered her, his 'cause'. Bill, Dana is a grown woman, one who can make her own decisions, and she could have chosen to leave at any point. And as much as I would have liked her to do otherwise, she chose this." Tears were falling fast and free down Maggie's face, her voice trembling with sorrow and anger. "Do you think I like seeing my baby girl throw herself into danger? Do you think I relish those late night phone calls telling me something is wrong? It's my worst nightmare, Bill, the same I've had for you and for Charlie. I've already lost one daughter, and now I'm losing another, And you both want to pick this apart and fight over petty arguments."

Her open, raw grief shocked both children into silence. Maggie of course had mourned when their father died, and again when Melissa had died. But it was as if Scully and her illness was the iceberg that sunk her unflagging spirit. Scully had never seen her mother so heartbroken, so hurt, and the worst part was that she and Bill were responsible for a huge part of it right at the moment.

"I will not hear you two bicker over Dana's work, Fox, or anything else while I'm here, do you understand?" She ground out the words despite her tears. "I don't care how overprotective you are, Bill, and I don't care how sensitive you are about your work and Fox, Dana. This is the last time we may all have together, and I do not want it marred by squabbles. If Dana wishes to speak about her work, let her, Bill. If she feels she can find justice for what has happened by doing this, then grant her that right, don't take it away from her."

Maggie wiped angrily at the streaming tears as she glanced at her shell-shocked children again, quivering with as she unleashed of painful emotion. "And Dana, listen to what your brother is saying. Pushing yourself got you in this mess, and you are no good to Fox or anyone else doing that. But for God's sake, please stop with the sniping and the bickering. Our time together is far too short for that and I don't want to remember this time with regret because my children couldn't find peace with each other, even in death."

Silence rang in the room, finally, as each sibling glanced sideways at the other with furtive, guilty looks. Her anger spent, Maggie seemed to deflate in front of them, shoulder's sagging as she turned aimlessly to the door. "I want some coffee and some fresh air, and when I come back, we will have no more of this arguing."

It wasn't said as a request. Quietly, she made her way out of the door, running her hands through her now frazzled dark hair, wandering vaguely down the hallway as Scully watched.

"Jesus," Bill breathed in his corner, staring at the door for a long time. "I haven't seen Mom that pissed off since that all nighter at the beach in San Diego, right before we all moved."

"I have," Scully replied solemnly. "The time I got busted out in the woods after senior prom."

"Oh, yeah. Weren't you supposedly making out with some boy?" Good humor was returning to Bill slightly in the face of humiliation. Scully chuckled.

"Yeah, Marcus, long story. I suppose we need to call this a truce, then?"

"For now." Bill stood slowly from the chair, grimly glancing in the direction their mother went. "Dana...I..."
"Just don't, Bill." Sheshook her head at her elder brother. "I'm tired. I only have so much energy to
fight, and I can't fight you now. I have to fight this. And whether you agree with it or not, this is a
fight I'm willing to take to the grave. It's...I have to believe that all of this is for a purpose. And
whether you agree with me or not on this score is a moot point. I only ask that you don't hinder
me."

Bill's expression was inscrutable as he watched her, finally bowing his dark head. "Fine, for your
sake, I hope you are right in this, I hope that this isn't one of your partner's crazy flights of fancy.
Cause God knows if I were left alone five minutes with him I would tell him exactly who I blame
for all of this."

So that was how it was? Scully sighed. There was no talking Bill away from this, was there?
"Blame who you must, Bill, but I promise you if you do a thing to hurt Mulder, I will ensure that
you will regret it long after I've passed on."

Whether Bill believed her threat or not was hard to say. He nodded coldly, stuffing hands into the
pockets of his slacks. "I better go find Mom before she decides to take up smoking again because
we've pissed her off."

Scully silently watched him go, feeling both guilty for her anger and defiant. Why couldn't her
brother for once just let go, stop being big brother, stop trying to protect her when she was past
saving? She didn't need his protection anymore.

Her thoughts meandered to another big brother, though, and his quest to find the sister he had lost
so long ago. Was Bill so very different from Mulder then? Was his concern so truly outrageous, the
lengths he went to try and protect her truly beyond the pale? Or did she simply not understand the
heavy burden that elder siblings carried, that weight of responsibility that defined them well into
their adult years?

Scully slumped into her bed, watching the doorway of her hospital room silently.
Mulder's suggestion brought the predictable chaos to the room.

"You can't be serious?" Bill's eyes flickered contemptuously from Mulder to Scully then to her doctor before landing on his equally dubious looking mother.

"Scully, it makes perfect sense, you know that.« Mulder ignored her brother, eyes burning with hopeful fire as he gazed at the small, metallic tube in her fingers. "The reason Penny Northern and Betsy Hagopian and all those women died was because they took the chip out, just like you did."

It did make sense. But would putting in another chip be of any help at this stage?

"You're trying to tell us that Dana was bagged and tagged like….like…cattle?" Bill was in no mood for any of Mulder's theories, valid or otherwise, and Scully felt utterly incapable of arguing the point with him at the moment. She stared at the aluminum tube between her manicured nails. Inside it could hold the only hope she had, the only promise of a future that was afforded to her. What had Mulder done to get this? From whom? Her eyes flickered up to his inquisitively.

Mulder looked away. That gave her pause. It was a classic Mulder evasion tactic. He knew how her mind worked. He knew where her thoughts led. He probably saw the moment the question popped into her head. He didn't want her to know, didn't want her to ask. Where had he gotten this from and who allowed him to have it?

"Crazy," Bill insisted loudly, angrily pacing in the spot, turning to glare at Mulder. "This is crazy!"

"Crazy in what sense?" Mulder met Bill's accusations. "In that it might save your sister's life?"

"You're not a doctor! You have no place in even suggesting this…this science fiction!" Bill spat the words as he waived to the vial in her hands. Bill was acting like an ass again, Scully sighed. She couldn't fault him. He didn't know the truth, didn't know the things she knew or the truths she and Mulder discovered. He had decided long ago that Mulder and his work were all madness and that Scully was a fool for following him.

"This is not science fiction," Mulder retorted stubbornly. Bravo for him, he refused to be bullied by Bill just as much as she did. Her brother had spent a lifetime getting by on bluster anyway. It's what made him a good commanding officer, his force of will. Their arguments had always centered on the immovable wall that was his will against her stubbornness. But Bill had met his match with Mulder. She'd almost pay money to see that argument, if her situation weren't so dire and if Bill's angry assertions weren't making her already pounding head hurt further.

"You've never heard of it," Bill insisted, glancing at the vaguely helpless doctor, the resident oncologist at Trinity named Zuckerman. Dr. Hamedi, her own oncologist had approved of him and any new approach he might have to her cancer. She doubted though that Dr. Zuckerman had expected the likes of Fox Mulder to descend with a magic microchip that would bring her back
from the brink of death. The poor man stared at Bill quietly, unsure of even what to say by way of response.

"Bill," Maggie tried to reason with her son, reaching out to him. "I think there's an obvious difference of opinion."

That was an understatement.

"Yeah," Bill muttered, glaring straight at Mulder with a look that said that the difference was him.

Jesus, she needed to take control here before Bill managed to stick his foot in this any more than he already had.

"I think," she began slowly, allowing her gaze to travel across everyone in the room, lighting finally on her brother's dark scowl. "That everybody here has their heart in the right place. But I need it to be my decision."

It was the same argument they had every time. Bill's expression flickered, first angry, then patronizing, before melting into pleading. "Dana…"

God, he was scared. Scully understood that. Bill had already watched one sister die, now another. In his mind, it all ended up back at the feet of Fox Mulder and his mad quest. For all their arguing and sniping, for all of her irritation with her brother, Scully really did get his hidden fear. He had promised Ahab long ago he would always look out for his little sisters and he was failing at the job miserably. Bill didn't want to lose her, and he didn't want her to follow some half-baked scheme from a man he had deemed a crackpot long ago, but in the end this couldn't be his decision, or her mother's, or even Mulder's.

"I know you are only looking out for me, Bill." She said it simply, without recrimination or accusation. "But I don't think you have all the facts."

It was her polite way of telling her brother he was reacting with no information on the situation at hand. He got it. He backed down, the bluster leaving him as he sagged quietly. Bill couldn't argue with her. Mulder might not be a doctor, but she was. He had lost this battle and he knew it. Her poor, frightened big brother, she thought sadly. If she could hug him at the moment, she would.

It was Maggie who broke the silence that followed. "Don't you think you should listen to your doctor?"

It was her way of finding a compromise in the situation. If only it were that simple, Scully thought.

"Yes, I am." Scully glanced at the doctor. He knew the truth that the others didn't. She was all out of options. Mulder's plan was as good as any.

"Would she have to stop her conventional treatment?" Mulder spun on the man so fast it made Dr. Zuckerman's eye's widen. He had obviously never met a man of the intensity of her partner.

"To be honest?" Zuckerman looked to Scully who gave him a slight nod. He might as well clue everyone else in on the truth as well. "The only approach I have left with her particular cancer is quite unconventional."

The ball then was left squarely in Scully's court. Every eye turned to watch her speculatively, only Mulder's had any sign of optimism.

What did she have to lose?
"I'd like to try this." She held up the vial. Beside her, she could hear Mulder almost audibly sigh in open relief. Scully refused to look at Bill.

"I don't even know what to do with it." Zuckerman cautiously frowned at the tube between her fingers.

"The last implant I had was just beneath my skin. There is a scar back there that you can see. My guess is that if you implant this in the same spot at the same depth it will do the same job." How should she know? She hadn't understood the first one, Pendrell had. He was dead now. This was all guesswork, a hope and a prayer on her part. But Mulder believed and she had to have faith that it was worth something.

"All right." The doctor crossed the room slowly, moving between Bill and Mulder to reach out and take the tube. "I'll see if I can prep you for this."

"Thank you." Scully smiled gratefully as the man wandered away with the precious potential cure, slipping it carefully into the breast pocket of his blue work scrubs. God, she hoped that this was everything Mulder prayed it was. What would he do if it wasn't what he'd been promised it would be?

"How do you get people to do that?" Bill muttered into the silence that reigned in the still room. His resentful gaze slid over to Mulder, disbelieving. "Everything you suggested sounds like complete crap, and yet you get trained doctors to go along with you."

"Perhaps because even trained doctors know that their information is limited." Mulder had that lazy drawl, the one that bespoke him doing something truly provocative in a few minutes just to annoy her brother. "You'd be surprised how open minded some people are when they realize that they don't know everything."

Simultaneously both Scully women sensed the brewing storm and quickly jumped in to intercede. Scully reached out for the sleeve of Mulder's jacket, pulling his attention, while Maggie grabbed Bill's arm with the motherly demand that forced him to mind her.

"I need coffee, Bill, and your sister needs some quiet." She glanced knowingly at Scully, tilting her head meaningfully towards Mulder as she did. "And I think Fox and Dana would like to talk without you causing a scene."

If Bill could protest, he didn't, as his smaller mother practically dragged him from the room behind her. Scully watched them go, half-smiling at the scene as she felt her shoulders sag in weary relief. Was it always going to be like this with Bill and Mulder? Dear God, she sighed, she hoped not.

"Was your brother born an asshole or did the Navy just make him one?" Mulder snorted as without leave or permission settled a hip on the corner of her mattress. Something about the gesture made Scully smile as she scooted her very tired body over enough to make room for him. Funny, she never did this to him in hospitals, usually because he was too ill behaved. But she didn't mind the proximity. Truth be told, she took comfort in it.

"Bill worries about me, Mulder." She gently reproached him, feeling she should stick up for her brother even if he was being a jerk. "Ahab was always out to sea and Bill was the oldest. It was his job to look after us. And just like someone else I know, he obsesses over it a lot, especially over the sister he let get hurt on his watch."

The analogy made its point. Mulder flinched, grudging sympathy flickering to life. "I don't know if I'm that big of an asshole."
Scully only met his comment with silent dubiousness and arched eyebrows. Mulder squirmed, ducking his head.

"Maybe a little bit of an asshole….sometimes."

"Mulder, if you and Bill could be any more alike in some ways, I think I would kill myself and get it over with."

"Hey, you seem to get along better with me than with him." Mulder's defense had a point. "You two seem to bicker like to wet cats with their tales tied together."

"Well, there's a lot of history behind that." Scully sighed, settling comfortably against the mattress, trying hard not to appear to snuggle too close to her partner beside her. There was something infinitely reassuring about Mulder being so close.

"When I was little I never wanted to be like Missy. I wasn't interested in dresses and dolls, I like guns and rocks and all of the things Bill did. Bill always wanted a brother. But he got two sisters in a row. So for a while I was Bill's 'little brother'. He would play with me like he would any little brother, trucks, and cops and robbers. And then Charlie came along, and as Charlie is two-and-a-half years younger than I am it took a while for Charlie to get around to doing all the boy stuff Bill wanted. But as soon as he did, Bill no longer had a use for me."

"Sibling rejection, not good." Mulder hissed as he shifted on the mattress, earning himself more purchase, forcing her to curl more to allow him on.

"You know how well I take that and well I tagged along anyway despite what he said about it. And Bill would get mad. He would always tell me that I couldn't go because I was a girl and I would get hurt. I couldn't figure out what he meant, after all I was always a girl and he wasn't nearly as concerned about all this before."

"A very scientific observation."

"Yeah, well I started early on that, you see." She chuckled. Even as a small child she had been precociously attached to logical facts. "I used to believe it was simply because his friends complained about it, and that perhaps was partly it. But as I grew older, I realized that when my father went out on duty he always had one of these 'heart-to-heart' talks with Bill. Stuff about being the man of the house, what have you. Bill worshipped the ground Ahab walked on, just like I did, and he took that so much to heart. I wasn't just a girl, I was a 'young lady', I was something to be wrapped up and protected, stuck on a shelf and kept safe from the world."

"And how well did that work out for Bill?"

"How well did it work out for you?" She reached up to poke his side underneath his coat. He yelped and jumped but didn't move away.

"Okay, okay, perhaps I can see your point about empathizing with your brother. It doesn't explain why you two fight the way you do or how your mother puts up with it."

"We always did." Scully shrugged, laying her head tiredly against her pillow. She felt exhausted, she knew she looked worse, but she didn't want Mulder to go away just yet. "Bill and I are alike in a lot of ways, if you hadn't noticed."

"Stubborn, opinionated, prone to telling me I'm crazy."

Scully smirked. "Neither one of us like being manhandled and we don't like being told what to do. I
predictably reacted badly every time Bill tried. And he would grow angry because I was being unreasonable and ignoring what Ahab had said about minding him. And we'd get into screaming matches, and Mom or Missy would have to come soothe the waters. I think Melissa took up being a New Ager simply because she had to find some peace growing up in between the two of us."

"Your mother is a saint, you know that." Mulder sounded awed by her mother's fortitude, and truth be told, Scully was as well.

"That was how Bill and I communicated, always have, even to this day that old knee jerk reaction is there. Ahab didn't want me in the FBI, thus neither did Bill, and it wasn't safe. Ahab heard strange things about you from certain corners, Bill took those and decided that you were insane and had friends of his check up on you just to make sure you were on the up and up."

"Your brother seriously spied on me?" With all the people spying on Mulder lately, Scully reasoned, why would Bill doing it too shock him?

"Well at least he didn't put a camera in your apartment." She smirked at him, quieting his outrage. "When Ahab died, Bill worried. And he had some legitimate concerns, I won't say he didn't."

"Such as?"

"Such as my work was eating my life," Scully replied softly. The very argument that she had given him just months ago, she realized. Mulder grimaced visibly, and she quickly reached out a hand to him, trying to soothe him.

"Mulder, I chose to stay, didn't I, even when I found out I was dying?"

"Even when you didn't tell me you were dying?" He was hurt by that, just as her family was. He hadn't said anything but she knew that he was wounded she didn't say anything to him about the gravity of her situation.

"And what, have you act like Bill and try to swaddle me up. Or worse, you spiraling into depression and guilt when we are so close to the truth that we can taste it?" She had her point, if she had told him, would any of this about Kritschgau have ever come out. "Besides, I didn't tell my family, either."

"Damn, Scully!" Mulder shook his head. "No wonder your brother is pissed at me."

Well, there were many reasons Bill was pissed at Mulder, but that wasn't one of them. "You know the real reason Bill is pissed at you, right?"

"I keep killing off his sisters?" There was guilty pain behind Mulder's flippancy, but Scully refused to indulge him.

"He's threatened by you, Mulder." The answer was fairly obvious to Scully, but amazingly it wasn't to her psychologist partner. Mulder turned to stare down at her as if the cancer had finally succeeded in making her crazy.

"Bill? The man who was just in here stating I was an insane lunatic who was trying to cure his sister with snake oil?"

"Mulder, all my life there's been some strong man around. And while I'm capable of taking care of myself, I've always had someone there who watched after me, usually because I was too damn stubborn to want help and needed someone to watch my back."
It was one of her worst faults, that tendency to stubbornly go it alone. "Bill had filled that role for a very long time. He's never liked a single person I've dated and now I have a male partner who is also my best friend, who I seem devoted to despite the fact that in Bill's opinion you're nuts."

It took only a second for Mulder to catch on to where she was going with this. "You mean he's jealous of me?"

"Because you are there to watch my back and keep an eye on me and that is his job." Scully doubted that Bill even realized he had that tendency. "And if there is a man claiming to take that job away from him he better be damn capable of taking care of me as Ahab would have wanted."

"I see," Mulder intoned thoughtfully as he processed this. It obviously made sense to him. "I suppose then I've fallen woefully short of your big brother's estimations?"

"Good thing I don't listen to him most of the time, isn't it?" Scully cut off Mulder's moroseness before it could blossom into true self-pity. She couldn't bear for him to play the blame game with himself, not over this, not when they both knew the truth about what had happened to her and why she had contracted this disease. She needed Mulder to finish this fight for her.

And hopefully, God willing that this chip prove to be what Mulder hoped, she would be there with him when he ended it.

"Mulder," she queried, catching him while he looked distant and thoughtful out of the window of her room. "The chip, where did you get it?"

She felt him physically close down with the suddenness of a slammed door in the face. As if her bed had suddenly been infested with red, hot coals, he jumped up, nervously jamming his hands into his pockets. Alarm bells rang in Scully's brain as he glanced to the door than at her apologetically.

"Look, that coffee that your mother was discussing. I think I need some. It's been a long few days."

"Mulder," she began, but he cut her off with an apologetic plea.

"Scully...don't...please...just don't."

What was it he wasn't telling her? There was something going on here, Mulder never shut her out. But he was now, avoiding looking at her, shuffling away, as if he were hiding something, keeping something away from her. What had he done to secure this chip? Last year he had gone to Canada to try and convince Jeremiah Smith to go back with him to Providence to heal his mother. What further extreme could he go to than that?

Scully stopped, a singular horrid thought rising to mind. She could nearly smell the cigarette smoke with the very vision of the person who Mulder might reach out to if he were desperate. Skinner had told her he had already tried once before. "Mulder," she breathed, not wanting it to be true.

"All that's important is that you get well, Scully."

"But not at that price, Mulder, not for what he will ask."

"He asked nothing for my mother." Mulder's words confirmed her suspicion. Damn it all.

"For what price, the truth?"
"No," Mulder shook his head. "Not that, I won't back down from that."

Scully couldn't believe this. "Mulder, this could all be a trick, that chip could be a ruse to get you to do whatever he wants."

"Maybe, or it could cure you, Scully, you don't know that."

"He's a liar." Why did Mulder do this?

"He may be a liar, Scully, but he's also the reason I got you back." Mulder ran agitated fingers through hair already sticking up with lack of sleep and desperation. "What do you have to lose doing this?"

Nothing, that was the problem, "I don't have anything to lose, Mulder, it's you who does. Your work, your sister, you could lose all of this."

Rather than speaking sense to him, her words seemed to deflate Mulder all the more. "I've already lost too much, Scully. My entire life has been a lie from the beginning. What more can I possibly lose if it means saving your life?"

Scully thought her heart would break. Not for her situation, but for Mulder, the man who she had followed because of his boundless belief. Something was broken inside, something had been horrible shattered by Kritschgau's story. Everything he had believed about himself, his purpose, and his family had been ripped away from him. Mulder was quite literally a man with nothing left.

Except for her.

"Dana," he whispered hoarsely. "Do this for me, please? Take the chip. We'll see if you get better."

There was still that big "if" unspoken between them. "And if I don't?"

"I've already murdered one shadowy man this week, what's another going to do to me?"

His words, the coldness in them, that burning fury, it made her shiver. "Mulder…"

"Just get the chip implanted, Scully. Let me worry about the rest."

With that he turned from her, shoulders and head bowed as he moved towards the door faster than she could think of a way to stop him. He was gone and down the hallway, leaving Scully reeling behind, clutching her comforter to herself, feeling suddenly at a loss.

"Mulder," she sighed, tears burning her eyes. "What have you done?"
It Is Always Darkest

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder goes through the darkest place before the dawn.

It had been two days with no improvement. The PET scans showed the tumor was still the size it was when Scully had the chip implanted. On the bright side, Dr. Zuckerman said, at least it was not getting any bigger. But it wasn't receding either. She could still die just as easily. Scully's heart broke at the news. She had wanted the chip to be true, for herself and for Mulder.

She cried herself to sleep in her mother's arms that night.

Maggie clung to her faith, smoothing down her daughter's hair and wiping her tears and assuring her God would not forsake her. Scully couldn't be so sure. She hadn't thought about God very much in this entire situation. She had been far too busy being angry with the men who had caused it, with finding some sort of justice against them. She hadn't considered her faith in any of this, at least not into the deity she ascribed to. All of her faith had been wrapped up in Mulder, the man who could do anything just by the sheer force of his personality and will. She'd seen him move mountains, come back from the dead, and perhaps a part of her thought that in the end he had pulled off saving her as well.

Scully's dreams were restless and fevered. There were flashes of light, of the white place with Dr. Zama's face hovering over her. She remembered Penny now some of the time, holding her hand as she cried. Her belly was distended horribly as silent tears coursed down her temples, and all she wanted was to go home. She wanted to go back to Mulder.

The creaking of door roused her, though not completely. Sleep and her bad dreams held her groggily as she lay curled in her bed. Her exhausted body and heavy eyes refused to stimulate enough to bother to figure out who was in the room with her. It could be a nurse, her sleep-addled mind reasoned, or her mother slipping in to check on her while she rested. It was late, she knew that much, it was still dark outside. Snuggling into the pillow further, she flexed her fingers hanging off the bed, sighing softly as she felt herself drift back into slumber.

The shock of contact from foreign fingers against her own registered vaguely in the haze and she sensed someone moving beside the bed. Still it didn't alarm Scully, she was safe in the hospital and there were nurses about, no one would break into her room and steal her away. The drowsiness thickened and settled, her senses dimming as slowly she felt herself sink into the mattress and oblivion once more.

Until she heard the soft, high-pitched sob.

It had the sort of quality that that came from those vague and yet futile attempts one might have to breakdown quietly without notice. It was the sort of wounded, heartbroken sound she had made several times in the last few months, sobbing in anger and frustration at her condition, at the fate she had been dealt, at her inability to do a single thing about it. The utter pain of the sound wrung her heart, and still she didn't open her eyes. She didn't twitch a muscle. In fact she lay there silent in the arms of total exhaustion, hovering on sleep, listening to the sobbing as the hand holding her own trembled with the weight of grief.
Scully could never forget the horrible, crushing sound of Mulder crying ever, not from the first time she had ever heard it. And she could recognize it as the man beside her thoroughly and completely went to pieces. It cut at Scully's heart listening, but somehow, something told her that moving now, allowing him to see that she was listening and aware was the wrong thing to do. Mulder was there to grieve.

How hard it was to keep her fingers perfectly still, to keep her breathing regular as she let out a soft snore. If Mulder caught on to the fact she was awake, it didn't seem to effect his position. She could feel the weight of his head on the mattress, the spread of salty tears dampening linen sheet. It was as if a wave of all of Mulder's grief was released in this one, horrific moment. The questions about his parents' marriage and the reasons for his sister's abduction, the relationship of the smoking man in all of this, her cancer, the truth that Kritschgau revealed to them, her brother's accusations and Mulder's own giant millstone of guilt. They all combined to crush a man that she thought indomitable, to drag him down to this.

Scully wanted to reach out for him, but she couldn't.

Over two years ago, they had been in this very same position. Scully had been in a coma, not expected to make it through, hovering on the edge of life and death. Mulder had come to her bedside them too, sent by her vigilant sister who sensed that he had been about to do something he might regret. Melissa had never speculated, though she suspected that Mulder had been waiting for someone, alone and armed in his apartment. How hard had it been for him then to sit by her side those long hours, holding her hand, making his goodbyes? How broken would he have been then if she had died without ever returning to their work? Would it have been as gut wrenching of a loss for him then as it was now?

Perhaps he hadn't been waiting to take out vigilante justice on those who had done this too her, but he had been doing something perhaps as equally dangerous and no less ill advised, she was certain of that. The smoking man was involved, he always seemed to be, dangling that thing which Mulder wanted most till just the right time, wrapping him in a silken web of vague promises and open invitations. Had Mulder realized what the catch was for what the man offered? Had he caught on yet that the chip he had placed so much faith in was not working? What was being asked of him for these broken promises, how deep had he gotten himself into this? Did Scully even want to know?

Mulder was a man of unshakeable faith. Even when common sense told him that he was wrong, he persisted, believing till the sky fell down around him in his truths. Scully had never had that sort of faith in her entire life, not even in the God she claimed to worship. Hers was a faith that was quantified and cautious, believing only when certain points had been met and every aspect was accounted for. She believed because it was the evidence to do so had proven conclusive. Mulder believed because there was no evidence given to him to not do so. And so they stood as two sides of the same coin, each complimenting the other in ways that were both simple and profound, Mulder now looked for the evidence to prove his belief and Scully had learned to believe because Mulder did so and there was no evidence that he was wrong.

But the evidence was now starting to accumulate that proved his beliefs, so long held, were as gossamer as butterfly wings and just as easily broken. He was lost without that faith to guide him and the only compliment he had, Scully, was dying. He would lose her, too. He would have nothing. All of his work, all of his searching, everything he had given up his career for would be gone. What would remain?

It was that sorrow that hurt Scully the most, because as much as Mulder mourned for her she also knew he mourned for himself. Scully at least could lie there in the hospital, surrounded by her family, and if she died she would have them there with her, supporting her. But Mulder was left
with nothing, and damn it all, it wasn't fair, any of it.

The storm began to subside beside her. The slow shaking stilled along with the tears, replaced by gentle snorts and sniffles as Mulder slowly began to rise. He continued to press her fingers between his, his thumb rubbing gently over her knuckles, an intimate gesture, one of many in these days since she had become so ill. There were the gentle touches, the soft kisses against her forehead, the little physical things that should have bothered her, especially in the wake of Eddie Van Blundht, but strangely didn't. Rather than feeling that there was something horribly wrong with the gestures, they were perfectly right, the sign of affection and support for best friends who cared the world for each other. Perhaps, as Karen Kosseff suggested, it was a sign that they did love each other. Why not, after all they had been through? If she managed to make it through even this, how much stronger would their friendship be? It would have to be, she reasoned. She would have to be the one to put Mulder back together again once all of this was all over. This time he had made that leap into the darkness and she hadn't been there to hold him back. And it was slowly starting to consume him. That scared her at the moment, more than the thought of dying did.

Ever so carefully, Mulder detached his fingers from hers, reaching briefly for the top of her head, stroking her hair with feather light fingers. She wanted to turn into the touch, but didn't dare as she felt him pull away. What did that mean, she wondered? Without a single word uttered she could hear his footsteps turn and shuffle quietly away, the door creaking on its hinges as he quietly stepped out again. Scully held her breath until she heard the sound of the door clicking into place and waited ten seconds more for extra measure.

Her eyes popped open and she turned, flipping over to stare at the dark paneled doorway in the darkness. Mulder was gone, but she could feel his tears still staining the mattress beside her, the only evidence of the scene that had just occurred. It was proof at least that it wasn't a dream. But what did it mean? And why had he done it? What had precipitated it? And how could she fix it, if at all?

She lay quietly in the darkness for a long time, unable to sleep as the quiet sound of Mulder's sobs replayed strangely in her head.
A State of Remission

Chapter Summary

In which Scully receives the best of news.

The plastic film between her fingers trembled. She held it up to the light streaming through the windows of her private room, staring at the space just above her right eye. Somewhere in the room she could hear her mother's hopeful gasp, her choked words. "Is it true?"

Dr. Zuckerman beamed beside Scully's bedside, mouth stretching in an impossible grin as he too stared at the PET scan print out, circling the area where the mass had been, looming large inside of her skull. "You can see since yesterday it's less than half of what it was and I will guarantee that by tomorrow that will be down to a quarter. The rate of shrinkage is unheard of. I ran it by Dr. Hamedi, your original oncologist, and he was stunned."

"What does this mean?" Bill's expression was tight, torn between hopeful and cautious. He wanted to believe, as did Scully, but he was no doctor. The scan, Zuckerman's words, they had no relevance for him. He turned pleading eyes to his sister, looking for explanations.

"It means," she breathed slowly as her entire world seemed to become unbearably light. "It means that my cancer is going into remission."

Maggie, trembling hands moving to cover her face, loosed a high-pitch keen before promptly breaking down into hysterical sobs in the arms of her son. Bill held his mother tightly, struggling to keep what little composure he seemed to have, tears streaking twin paths down his face. Relief wasn't even a word that began to encompass this moment for them. Joy, delight, elation, those emotions were all there on the faces and in the expressions of her family. And Scully watched, feeling strangely, inexplicably serene. She couldn't say why she wasn't a crying mess much as her mother was or why she wasn't huddled into her hospital bed at this very moment howling out five months of frustration and fear into her pillow. God knows a part of her wanted to, to simply breakdown and release it all, but instead a strange, quiet peace settled on her as the muscles in her shoulders relaxed and mellowed, her arms dropping with the film into her lap. The chip had worked after all. Mulder had been right.

"Dana, I don't even know how to explain it." Zuckerman kept repeating over and over, shaking his head in astonishment and wonder as he stared at her. Did he think her some sort of living miracle now? "I have to admit that chip your partner brought in, the one that we implanted, I wasn't sure it would work."

Scully hated to admit she hadn't been sure it would work, either.

"Is that what did it, you think?" Bill finally choked out, voice strangled by emotion and tears. "That chip is what saved her?"

"It's the only explanation I have. The treatment wasn't working and it's the only variant that can account for it." Zuckerman sobered slightly, smiling turning serious, though there was no containing the wonder and awe he was feeling. "We still need to run more tests, Dana. We can't let you go till we are positive."
"But it's a start." She smiled faintly, the doctor in her recognizing that they had to make sure, had to test, had to use science to support what was the most improbable of miracles. Despite the lingering questions in her heart, Scully knew the truth. Somehow, someway Mulder had moved heaven and earth to find the cure for her. But at what price?

With that thought in mind, Scully glanced around the room, her brother and mother standing weeping joyfully, her doctor still astounded, gapping at her, and one person who should be there in the room with her sharing this moment was not. "Where's Mulder?"

The question dropped awkwardly into the scene, happiness pausing as thoughtful frowns formed. Maggie was the first to shake herself, wiping at tears as she too glanced around the room and out into the hallway. "Didn't he have a meeting with the Bureau about your case today?"

"That was hours ago." Scully frowned down at her wristwatch. The meeting had been at 11 AM. Scully had begged and pleaded with Mulder to allow her to take the fall for him as he faced Blevins, knowing that the information regarding Scott Ostelhoff's dead body would get out and there would be no way he could explain it. That morning she had convinced herself she would be dead soon enough and that it didn't matter if she took the blame for a crime she didn't commit. Mulder couldn't think of allowing her to die taking with her his crimes. When he kissed her cheek and left her to Father McCue, she had feared that she was watching this man who had tried against all reason to save her reap a punishment he ill deserved. She had prayed with Father McCue then, not just for her soul, but for Mulder's as well. In not taking Blevins' deal, she knew Mulder was dooming his life, his work, and his career. But what the outcome of that meeting had been, what had happened to Mulder afterwards, she didn't know. There was no word, no phone call, nothing.

Worry spiked through Scully's joy as she looked to her mother. What if it had all gone badly? What if they were going to prosecute him? The silence was ominous. Nothing had been said and Scully couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing. Wouldn't someone have tried to notify her?

"I'm sure he's fine," Maggie rushed to assure her, though it didn't hide the alarm in her expression either. She glanced up at Bill for support. "He'd have called if something was wrong."

Bill didn't look nearly as positive as his mother, frowning with some reservation. "Perhaps he got stuck up with details, Dana. You know how the government is. If there was something serious, he'd have called."

"If he was able to." Scully fretted as she sucked her lip worriedly between her teeth. The joy of the moment had lessened somewhat. Mulder wasn't there to share it, and that seemed somehow very, very wrong. Carefully she picked up the PET scan from the blanket covering her and handed it back to her doctor with a pleased if somewhat dimmed smile. "Thank you for this, for all of this, your patience, your willingness to try, even when it looked hopeless."

"Thank you partner, Dana." Zuckerman took the film carefully, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder, frail under her hospital issued gown. "If he hadn't shown up with whatever that was, chances are we'd not have this moment. I don't know why I believed him when he brought it in. Common sense said I shouldn't have. But we were at our wits end, and he was so determined…I guess I believed it would work because he did."

Scully knew that feeling intimately well. She lived with it every day. "He has that effect on people."

"Well, tell your partner he's a good man in my book." Zuckerman nodded briefly to her family and made for the door, leaving the Scullys alone to digest and take in the miraculous news he had just presented them with. Dana was going to get well. Her life was her own again. She wasn't dying.
"I need to call Ashley!" Maggie suddenly spun, a whirlwind of pent up, exuberant energy as she searched for her purse. She dug through it, pulling out her cell phone, glancing at her two children. "I promised her to keep her updated for Charlie, he's still not home yet, and she's worried."

She was babbling, her words tumbling over each other in her delight, knowing she didn't need to explain to her children but sounding as if she just didn't know what to do with herself at the moment.

"Go!" Bill chuckled, waving his mother off as she nearly floated to the door, dialing as she went and moved down the hallway. Both siblings watched her, bemused, goofy smiles following her, feeling the same joy and relief that she did. Just that morning, Scully thought she might not make it through another day. Now she was looking at an entire lifetime. It was all so sudden.

"So, I guess I get to keep you around for a little longer to kick around and pester, huh?" Bill latched on to teasing as a way to calm what she was sure was his own swirling emotions. Dear Lord, as discombobulated as she felt in that moment, she knew her family was much the same.

"Yeah, you're not rid of me yet." She smirked as her brother all but collapsed in a chair beside her. "I think I managed to take a few years off of Mom's life, though."

"You, me, Charlie, Missy, I think we all have." Bill tried to make light of it and Scully appreciated that. "Really, Dana, I don't think Mom cares as long as you are alive to see her out till the end and not the other way around."

Alive God that word sounded so good. Tears filmed her eyes as she nodded. For the first time in months no pain screamed in the place she knew the tumor was.

"I was so scared, Bill." Her voice broke as the drops spilled over her lashes and fell raining onto her folded hands. "I believe in a life after, but I wasn't done with this one yet. I didn't want to die… to leave it…"

The sob that tore through her broke up that sentence and the words as beside her Bill rose again, wrapping his baby sister up against him as she finally let go and fell apart, much as her mother had moments ago.

"I know." He rocked her slightly as he did, squeezing her thin shoulders so tightly she feared they might crack. "You try to be so strong all of the time, you are always so stubborn, but I knew you were scared. So was I?"

"No, really," Scully managed to tease, despite her tears and stuffy nose. She pulled away to look up at the sibling she had always had the thorniest relationship with. "You glad I didn't listen to you and I did have that chip implanted?"

As ever cautious, Bill paused in circumspection before answering. She could tell as he worked it over he didn't want to say yes, he didn't want to admit to Mulder even having a chance at being right. But the proof was before him in a sister who was now going to be healthy once again. How could he possibly respond and save face?

"You don't have to like Mulder if you say yes, you know." She smirked mildly at him.

"Dana, it was never a question of Mulder wanting to save you or willing to do anything to do it. I just question the fact that he seems to not even care that he is dragging you into his quest when it is endangering you so much. You nearly died for his reckless pursuit."
Scully was in no mood to argue with Bill again over whether or not the pursuit was reckless or not. "Mulder isn't making me do anything, Bill. I choose to be here, to do this work. I want to continue it if they let us. Besides, don't you think that Mulder hasn't tried to convince me of the same thing?"

Apparently her brother hadn't. "He could demand a transfer for you, get you out of there."

"And I'd fight that," she replied simply as Bill frowned in frustration and started to sense some of her partner's dilemma. "Besides, for now I'm needed, the work continues, and I believe in this work too, Bill. And unless the Bureau says otherwise this afternoon, I want to go back. I need to go back, for myself, for Missy, for everyone along the way who didn't end up as lucky as I did."

He didn't like it and Scully hadn't expected that he would. But he knew better than to argue with her on it. "Fine…fine. Just…think about it Dana. How much further do you want to get involved with this? You've been given a second chance right now. Maybe you should take it and run with it."

That wasn't even a thought that had entered Scully's imagination. It startled her, the idea he presented, of second chances, of taking those opportunities now that she had so recently mourned the loss of. But there was still their work, if Mulder made it out of the meeting today. What would she do about that?

"Tomorrow," Bill murmured softly, pulling away and laughing at his sister's suddenly perplexed expression. "You can think about this all tomorrow. You'll have plenty of those to live with now."

She met her brother's laughter with a soft, relieved smile of her own. Yes, tomorrow. Thank God she would have one of those after all.
Some Things Live

Chapter Summary

In which Scully finds at least one nights respite and peace with Mulder.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mulder finally did come to her, well after Bill took her mother home to rest. Scully herself had nodded off, the elation of the day giving way to the weariness of the last few days, weeks, months. Like the night before, he slipped in, trying she knew to be silent as he slipped beside her bed. But the door creaked a little too loudly, the leather of his shoes scuffing the tile enough to rouse her. Her eyes fluttered up at him as he stopped, still in the wake of her bemused surprise, looking slightly shamefaced and apologetic for waking her up.

"I was just…you know…"

Mulder had one hand conspicuously behind his back, the other gesticulating in what she assumed was some sort of apologetic gesture. "I just wanted to check on you."

"Do you know what time it is?" Scully felt her mouth twitch as she glanced blurrily at her watch. She suspected it said sometime closer to 2 AM than was strictly necessary for a hospital visit, not that she minded.

"Well, the nurses won't say anything. They like me." Up went the dazzling smile that Scully had seen melt the heart of even the most hardened ward veteran. Truth be told, even her heart fluttered at it as she rolled her eyes and pointed towards the chair by the side of her bed.

"You might as well. I'm awake now." She muttered with fake exasperation. "I see how this is, when you are the one in this bed you harass the poor nursing staff. When I'm in it you schmooze them."

"Well, a man has to do what a man has to do." He sauntered to the chair at the side of her bed, ducking his head shyly as from behind his back he produced a single, peach colored rose, carefully wrapped in plastic, its end trapped in a tube of water.

"I beat up an elderly lady for this one. She didn't appreciate me tramping through her yard at midnight."

Scully stared at the blossom, speechless, grinning in delight at the singular, orange colored blossom, still tightly packed as she took it and held it gently to her nose, inhaling deeply.

"Mulder," she sighed. "This is beautiful, where did you get it?"

"Questions like that are why Santa Claus stops visiting little girls."

Just like her chip? Scully pushed that thought out of her mind. This wasn't the time and place for dark thoughts. "Thank you, Mulder, for everything, for all of this."
"All of this?" Mulder's shrugged, settling in the chair beside her, stretching out his long legs. He look exhausted, she realized, as he slumped deep into the seat, propping his elbows on the arms. When was the last time he had slept?

"Yes, all of this." Scully set the flower down carefully on the bedside table. "The chip, if it wasn't for that Mulder, I would have died."

"They think that is what worked?"

"It's the only variable Dr. Zuckerman can think of."

Scully watched the silent play of emotions on her partner's still face, his dark eyelashes hiding whatever was going on in his keenly perceptive mind. What had happened today? Obviously it had gone well enough. Skinner had already stopped by as Scully had tried to stumble through an apology. He'd waived her off, delighted that she was better, unwilling to discuss work at a time when she should be celebrating. That hadn't mean Scully wasn't dying to know the real outcome of that meeting that day, the truth of what happened, and why Mulder wasn't sitting in prison right now.

"How did it all go, Mulder?"

Mulder's eyes finally opened. "Blevins was the inside man the whole time."

"Blevins?" Why hadn't she considered their former section chief? "How did you…"

"I wasn't sure," Mulder replied with that mad sort of vagueness he had when he was performing a profile. "I had suspected when I found out he was the one who called the meeting in the first place."

"Why not Skinner?" That was her first thought and even now she was unsure of how Mulder had come to trust him when every instinct Scully had told her that it was their boss.

"Skinner was too easy. The truth was that PBX line went to the executive level. It could be anyone who was at least a section chief of better. Skinner of course would be a choice if you wanted to go the obvious route, and Blevins was betting on that. He knew that Skinner was just as dirty as he was when it came to that smoking, son-of-a-bitch, and he knew that as our direct supervisor he was the one who we'd come to suspect first."

Guilty as charged, Scully realized. She had followed that path easily enough. It was the most logical choice if one looked at the facts as presented. She had been so sure of the implication of Skinner, she had nearly staked her life on it. "So, again, I want to know how did you get to Blevins?"

"It was when he propositioned me this morning. He wanted me to pin it all on Skinner. He knew the truth about that dead body, he knew I did it, and he was betting that I would be desperate enough to take his deal. If Skinner was implicated and removed, Blevins was one of the most likely candidates to take his position and he would be the one who would oversea me and the work."

"So it was all a political move for him?"

"More than that, why else would he be so blatant if he didn't want to suppress the truth? He knew what Kritschgau told me. He was willing cut me a deal, clear my name and press charges on Skinner to put me in his debt and force me to ignore everything that Kritschgau said about the truth."
"And you found evidence of that?"

"No," Mulder shook his dark head solemnly. "I didn't have evidence of a thing."

Jesus Christ, she breathed, staring wide-eyed and open mouthed at her grim-faced partner. He had gone in there, no evidence, no tests, and simply accused the man? "Then how did you get away with it?"

"I went to Skinner after Blevins confronted me. He pulled up his files. He found that Blevins was on the payroll of a biotech company, Roush. It was enough to at least put a hold on things for now."

The sheer, unadulterated nerve he had in even doing it. "What if you had been wrong?"

"Well I wouldn't be harassing old women stealing you flowers this late at night, would I?" He tried to flash the cheek, but failed somewhat, his smiling dimming almost immediately. "It doesn't matter in the end, Scully. Blevins is dead."

"What?" Scully thought she misheard him for a moment, but realized that he was deadly serious. He scrubbed at his unshaven face tiredly, as if rubbing off the mire of confusion and exhaustion of the day.

"Skinner told me tonight. He was found shot in the chest in his office this afternoon. Clearly word had gotten out he was being named for his involvement and that his transactions would be easily traced. He was pronounced DOA at the hospital. There won't be an inquest or a trial."

"And the evidence?"

"Will be gone before anyone tries to pursue it."

All of this, all of this trouble, this heartache, the tests she had run, for nothing. "So we failed?"

All of the elation of her remission, all of the thrill and exhilaration of knowing she would live after all dimmed in the light of the sacrifice she had nearly made and the fact that it had come to naught.

"No!" Mulder jolted upwards in his chair and reaching over to grab her hand where it rested on her lap. Exhaustion fled from him for the briefest of moments as he blazed furiously up at her. "We haven't failed, we didn't fail. The truth is out there now. We know the men who are involved and we know the people who did this. The evidence for now may be gone, but we at least have some answers. You have your tests. Those are proof of the fact that they've been bioengineering DNA for years, using it to create everything from diseases to fake bodies. We know that they've been using pharmaceutical companies to create new drugs against these diseases, and we know they've experimented on thousands of people just like you. We know the truth, Scully, now we just need to find the evidence of it to bring it to light."

The truth, in a manner of speaking. Scully noted that not once in Mulder's words did he use the term "alien".

"And what about your quest, Mulder? What about your proof of that alien? What about Samantha?"

"My quest?" The phrase amused him as the fire banked in him, the determination he had just a moment ago dimming into sarcasm as he threw himself back again against his chair. "Kritschgau was right, Scully, lies, all of it. Even my mother said it. All these years I believed Samantha to be an abductee. All I wanted was proof of her, of them, that I wasn't some madman gibbering at the
"Kitschgau didn't know what happened to your sister."

"No, but my mother did. I went to her that night in Greenwich. I remember, Scully. I know you both thought I was crazy, but I remember that conversation. I remembered her and my father arguing."

"She said she was arguing with him because he wasn't paying attention to any of you, that she threatened divorce."

"Perhaps that's how my mother has chosen to remember it," Mulder wasn't about to get into an argument about it. "The truth was that the cancer man was there that night. He had come to talk to my father. There was something about tests, demands. They wanted something from my father. He didn't want to give it. So he was forced to choose."

"Choose what?" Scully had a sick, disgusting feeling she already knew what. It was the choice that Mulder had mentioned to his mother.

"Between two children, one to be used in their program and one not." Mulder tiredly recited this fact as if he wasn't one of the two children involved. "That mine in West Virginia, the one we found that file in, it had Samantha's name on it, but originally it had been mine. What if Samantha had been chosen in my stead."

"Why? For what purpose?"

"I don't know." That was the great secret, wasn't it? Why any of this was happening to any of them. "Part of some other aspect of their testing program, some other game they were playing to keep their lies going, I don't know. These men were willing to use you and thousands of innocent other women, who is to say they weren't willing to take an innocent girl to serve some other purpose?"

"Take her and never explain to you or your parents what had even happened to her? Never even give you a pretext of a lie to tell you where she had gone in all of these years?"

"Perhaps it was because she wasn't my father's in the first place." Mulder's grim monotone caught slightly as he murmured in a voice so small it nearly didn't sound like his. Again, that silent question, the wonder as to what had happened with his parents and how this mysterious man who had entered all of their lives was involved. Mulder persisted in his suspicions that the smoking man had carried on some sort of liaison with his mother. What Scully couldn't understand was why.

"Mulder, your mother insists that Bill was your father," she began gently, not even knowing how to begin tackling the complicated subject of Mulder's broken family. "All these years, would she lie about something like that?"

"My mother has the great ability to avoid anything she doesn't want to deal with, to the point of outright self-denial if she chooses." Mulder the psychologist perhaps knew Teena and her neurosis better than Scully did. "Can you honestly imagine any man willingly making the sort of choice my father did for any of his children? Its Sophie's Choice, literally, which one goes and which one stays."

"You don't know that Samantha died."

"She didn't," he replied simply, earning a wondering look from Scully in her bed. "She lived with the smoking man for years. She considers him her father, and hell, for all I know she might be."
What in the world was he saying? "Mulder…wait…what do you mean?"

"I saw her, Scully. Samantha is alive."

Alive? "How? You're sure?"

"He brought her to me. The smoking man, he brought her to me. We met, she was…she was just the same as that woman who came to me years ago. Just as beautiful. Just like Mom."

There was something broken in Mulder's words as he whispered them, something heartrending as he stared fixedly at the blanket that covered Scully's body. "She didn't want to talk to me, to see me, to even see Mom. She didn't want to discuss it. It was as if she didn't remember me or care about me. After all these years, Scully, after everything I gave up just to find her - my career, my reputation - how could she not care?"

Oh God, Scully breathed, staring at Mulder as he bowed his head and covered his face, shoulder's heaving with the weight of twenty-five years. The night before he had come in, broken. Had she come to him then? Had he seen her, this woman claiming to be his long lost sister? "Mulder, how do you know it was Samantha?"

"It was her, Scully. She looked the same."

"You insisted that last woman was a clone. You said you saw an entire clinic full of women that looked like her." Scully hadn't believed his story at the time but had been unable to explain how something like that was even scientifically possible. Now knowing what she knew about the strange virus and how the government had manipulated the chimera cells to make whatever they wished, she now understood how those things could theoretically be done.

"All it would take, Mulder, is a fertilized human egg containing those chimera cells and the right environment and they could create whatever they wished."

"I thought of that," Mulder replied honestly from behind his hands, the sound muffled and hollow. He lowered them, staring down bleakly at his feet. "But it wouldn't explain what they found in the smoking man's apartment."

Carefully, he reached into his rumpled suit coat, fingers pulling out a photograph from inside. He held it reverently for several long moments before passing it over to Scully.

"Someone in his building noticed a blood trail from his apartment. They called the police, concerned. When they got inside they didn't find a body, but they did find enough blood on the floor they don't believe that he survived."

Scully studied the photograph as Mulder spoke. It was one she had seen before. Teena had an identical one of a young Fox and Samantha, side by side some long ago fall, right before they started school. Mulder had pointed it out to her while she had been at his mother's house attending to her. "How did he get this?"

"The copy from my apartment was gone. I can only assume he went there after he heard I had died and took it, because it's been missing since."

"But why?" She fingered the dried, brownish blood that besmirched it, the bullet hole that ripped through it.

"That only my mother would know." Mulder replied softly, staring up at the photograph in her hand with sorrowful eyes. "He offered me everything I wanted, Scully; cure for you, Samantha,
safety from prosecution. All he wanted was for me to sell me soul to him, to give this all up and work for him, to follow in my father's footsteps."

She noted that he didn't clarify what he meant by "father's footsteps". "Mulder, you didn't…"

"I agreed to nothing, Scully." His assurance was immediate and firm. "He held it all out to me, everything I always wanted, and I didn't take it. I couldn't take it. He destroyed my life. He killed the man I knew as my father. He killed your sister. And he nearly killed you. If I gave in to him, to that man, to the person who has masterminded all of this, I would become him."

Thank God, Scully breathed, trembling fingers setting down the photograph she held, grateful tears brimming to the surface. She had feared what that man's demands were from the moment Mulder confessed to where he got the chip. "Mulder, no matter what you believe, no matter what you find out, that man is not your father. He is an evil monster who has manipulated thousands of lives and all to cover for a lie, a lie you know the truth about."

"Yeah," Mulder agreed disconsolately. "But knowing the truth doesn't make any of this better. I've been a man possessed of a quest that was nothing more than swamp gas and flashing lights. All these years they've called me Spooky. You've called me crazy. The truth is, you were all right. I've thrown caution to the wind, endangered myself and everyone around me because of what has amounted the grandest of lies perpetrated to use me to cover a secret so deep that we may never, ever have a chance to unravel it."

The true deviousness of the government's plan against her partner had come to bear for Scully, as she realized that the man she had so determinedly followed all of these years sat before her crushed, disillusioned, his entire world shattered around him as everything he had ever believed had been unveiled as nothing more than a gossamer web work of lies and half-truths. Mulder, the man who she had followed blindly, the man who she willingly stood beside even when her own brother told her it was folly, was a man who had his entire faith stripped from him in the matter of a few weeks. And now what was left was a man with his doubts, his fears, and even more questions than he had before.

"Where does that leave us, Mulder? Where does that leave our work?" It was their mutual work now, not just his own. She was still just as invested. She had so nearly given her life for it, and she wasn't prepared to let any of it go, not till she uncovered the truth of what was done to her for all to see.

"Exactly where it's always been," Mulder replied simply. "Just you'll get your wish for once. No more chasing after flying saucers."

Somehow that wasn't as much as a comfort as she knew he was trying to make it. "And as for ghosts, goblins, and things that go bump in the night?"

"At least I know there isn't a government conspiracy for those." Mulder tried to quip, something of a faint smile pulling at his full lips. "I am not giving up the X-files, Scully, I'm just shifting my vision a bit, becoming more circumspect regarding what it is all about."

"And that is?"

"The same as it's always been, really, the truth. Except that the truth perhaps wasn't what I thought it was in the first place."

Scully wasn't sure if she was relieved by that statement or not. "As long as you don't give up the search, Mulder, and don't leave me behind, either."
Her addendum did finally make him chuckle, his mood lightening somewhat. "Never again, Scully. I wouldn't dream of it. I heard how you took down your brother."

She laughed, picking up the photograph on her blanket and passing it back. "I'm here for the long haul, Mulder."

"Does this mean I still have to buy you Tony's?" Mulder took back the photograph, whining playfully as he tucked it back gently inside of his coat.

"I think surviving cancer for you deserves Tony's, don't you?"

"I see how it is. You return from the dead I buy you pizza. I return from the dead and what do I get?"

"My everlasting relief?" She sank down into her pillows and pulled her blankets higher. The hour was late and she was getting tired again. Mulder could see it as he rose, straightening as he made ready to leave.

"You get out of here, Tony's is on me. You better think of something good, cause this is the second time I've been dead and I don't want make this a habit."

"How about Chinese at your place then next week?"

"Kung Pao?"

"You get all the peanuts," she grinned up at him, happy to see him smiling at least.

"It's a deal." With the same self-assurance he had shown all week, he leaned in and grazed her brow with a soft kiss again, looking neither ashamed nor embarrassed. Scully felt her cheeks flush at the action as Mulder pulled away, glancing at the flower by her bed. "Next time I'll see if I can beat out an entire bouquet of those for you."

"You are horrible, you know that?" Horrible and yet brave, honest, brilliant, and caring, Mulder was all of those things.

"Yeah, but you put up with me anyway." Back was the cheeky smile as he reached for her hand briefly. "Sleep, Scully. I'll come in to see you tomorrow."

"You do the same?"

He nodded, reassuring her. "For the first time in forever."

She settled into her pillows, her eyes drifting as Mulder made for the door, gently smiling as she heard it close behind him. They both could now sleep easier for the nights to come. They both had earned it. Whatever truth they had gained from any of this, it didn't answer all of their questions. But for now, this small respite of peace, it was enough. Scully sleepily glanced at the rose on her nightstand and smiled, as she fell into deep, restful slumber.

Chapter End Notes

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