Bridges

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Bridges

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Summary

A family in a small town in New Mexico appears to be suffering the ill effects of an encounter with Black Eyed Children. While in the desert to search out the truth, Mulder and Scully find themselves confronting more than they bargained for, both in the investigation and in their personal relationship. Early Season 11, turns AU after "This." Past and eventual present MSR.

Notes

DISCLAIMER: Mulder and Scully and the search for the truth all belong to Chris Carter and Co. I'm just borrowing them. I promise to return them in no worse condition than Chris would.

Wow, it's been a lifetime since I posted an X-Files fic. It's kind of like coming home.:) I shall do my best to post chapters fairly regularly, but lately the muse has been insisting on working on later chapters rather than behaving and being all properly sequential, so the posting timing may be uneven at some points...just warning you...:)

Beta thanks to Annie, without whom I would probably still be sitting in a corner feeling sorry for myself and refusing to post.
Chapter 1

The rain had lasted for days. Scully had almost forgotten the feel of warm sun on her skin. The District had fallen into grey. Real storms she could almost handle. Flashes of lightning and pounding thunder and a quivering sense of excitement lifting the fine hairs on her skin. Reminders of a hundred trips to blustery towns in the vastness of the Midwest. But there was nothing but dampness and grey in this city. The skies seemed to draw the color from her skin.

In recent winters the cold had exacerbated the early pangs of arthritis she habitually denied in the fingers of her gun hand. There was a lot she denied these days. Dana Scully was a doctor by trade, even if that was not her official job at the moment. Less than reliable fingers and a growing demand for reading glasses added to the insidious conclusion -- she wouldn’t have the option of assisting in surgery much longer.

Hitting the ground hurt more.

For a few years, a few relatively quiet and misty years, when she had been a working doctor by day and somebody’s warm body in the night, Dana had lived with her heart on her sleeve. At least around the people who mattered...the person.

The misty bubble had shattered, and she had nearly drowned in unhindered emotion.

Walls were erected for a reason.

Denial was a comfortably worn suit. “I’m fine, Mulder.” A look away. Fashionable boots in place of sensible shoes, hair precisely waved in place of a messy bun, eyeliner and lipstick and all the armor with which she had carefully and painstakingly authored the entity that once had been Agent Scully. A suit she remembered and relished in its resurrection.

But the rain would not stop.

*****

“I’m sorry, you said, ‘Black-Eyed Children’?”

“Yes. Twice. No, I’m sorry, three times. Scully, are you even listening to me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Yes. I’m listening. I’m just...it’s hard to focus in the rain.” She pushed up in her perch on her stool, cleared her throat, and straightened her spine. “Continue. Please.”

Mulder hesitated. She kept her gaze steady and watched the predictable rush of analytical thoughts flicker across his pale eyes. A little offended that she hadn’t been listening (and she hadn’t, and she was actually sorry about that), a little weary that he was still losing her attention some days when he brought her what she deemed a creepsypasta that he was presenting as a “casefile,” and then...then there was concern. Because she had been better about listening, lately, better about giving him the credit he deserved beyond the crazy, better about giving his theories half a chance...and if she was blowing him off in the first 10 minutes, well maybe something was wrong and he should ask.

For a moment butterflies gathered in her stomach, and she wondered if he would ask and if he did if
she would answer. Because it was not then, anymore, it was now, and now they were two people who had once clung skin to skin in the dark, once spilled the most intimate secrets, once given utter trust and utter faith in every whisper and glance and caress and dropped each and every carefully constructed wall. So sometimes he asked, and sometimes she answered, and sometimes she didn’t, and it was all fucking confusing as hell.

"Have you heard of them?” was all he said.

She had no idea if she was relieved or hurt. “No,” came her simple reply.

“Should I start again?”

“Please.”

“Are you listening this time?”

She tamped down on her flare of annoyance. She deserved the snipe. “Yes. I’m listening.”

He cleared his throat with more show than necessary and brought up another picture on his laptop. A boy of no more than 12 stared out at Scully, a dark hoodie pulled close around his face and his wide eyes as black as oil. No whites at all. The picture, clearly Photoshopped, should have meant no more to her than the poster for a cheap horror film. But the moment the eyes connected with Scully's her stomach felt sick, ghosted by a shadow of a memory too deep and visceral to name. Marrow deep, quivering through her bones more than her thoughts. A dingy and yellow-lit stairwell, concrete with water stains, a smell of antiseptic and cold. Cold. Fear.

Mulder was looking at his notes as he began to speak and missed her reaction entirely. She was grateful. She couldn’t have explained if she tried. “The popular theory is that the stories began with a post to a mailing list…” Mulder. She needed to listen this time. She deliberately lifted her gaze from the laptop to focus on Mulder's face. "...by a man named Brian Bethel in which he recounted his story of his own encounter with the black-eyed children in Abilene, Texas, and that the story became a growing urban legend from there with similar stories appearing all over the internet. And, although it is true that any number of sensationalist and clearly fabricated stories and even videos of encounters with the Black-Eyed Kids, or BEKs as they have come to be termed, have appeared across the internet in the intervening years, the phenomenon actually reaches back much farther than its recent popularity. Researchers have begun finding stories from experiencers that contain distinctive matching elements from decades ago and from cultures with little contact with the outside world. One such story came from an older woman living on an Indian Reservation in South Carolina. The woman had no knowledge of the Black-Eyed Children phenomena and no regular access to the internet."

"Okay. So, what's the case we're looking at?"

Her question failed to shift the trajectory of his prepared presentation. "Stories of encounters with these children follow a fairly predictable pattern. A person, usually alone, usually at night, is either at home or in his or her car, and one or two of these children will knock on the door, asking for entry. The children often arrive in groups of two or three, sometimes with one child clearly older than the others, ranging in age from 6 to 16 but most often appearing in the pre-teen range. The children are all described as having pale and flawless skin, wearing plain, dark clothes, and often hoodies that allow them to shade their faces until closely inspected. The children will often look down or remain in shadow for the first part of the encounter, so the experiencer doesn’t notice the strangeness of their eyes until they’ve already been interacting.

"Typically, the children will ask to come inside and call their parents, or to use the bathroom. If it's a
car, they will often ask for a ride home. The children will use phrases that are clearly chosen to engender sympathy, claiming to be cold, or lost, yet their vocal tones are described as being impassive or monotone, out of sync with the situation, and often even out of balance with the season. A child will claim to be wet and want inside where its dry when it hasn't been raining or claim to be freezing in the middle of summer."

Scully drew a deep breath, ignoring the uncomfortable pull of the image still watching her from the laptop screen. "So...Mulder...what happens? I mean...they're kids asking for help..." She looks up at him with eyebrows raised.

Mulder nodded, clearly ready for this question and not finished talking. "Those who encounter these kids have an overwhelming feeling of fear. Of wrongness and impending danger. Grown men with military experience will find themselves huddling in a corner in tears, hoping the children will go away. Trained attack dogs will run from the door and hide in a back room whimpering. But experiencers also report the kids having a sort of hypnotic power, and victims will sometimes find themselves about to open the door to these kids when they had had no intention of doing so, shocked to find they had stepped forward or unfastened the door lock."

"Mulder...this feels like a lot of different legends put together...," Scully said, eyes narrowed, teeth catching at her lip. "Mothman stories, alien abductions, hybrids, even the dark fairy legends of--" 

"Admittedly, the stories bear strong similarities to those of other paranormal phenomena, yet this same distinctive pattern with the same landmark characteristics appears over and over again through the decades from all over the world. Including the unwavering conviction that a terrible fate awaits those who are lured into letting these children inside. One as yet unverified story tells of a couple who allowed two quite young Black-Eyed Kids into their house one cold autumn night, allowing them to stay only a short time before the 'parents' came to get them, but symptoms of illness began for the couple even as the children were in their living room, and in the weeks and months after the encounter both suffered a series of life-threatening illnesses and a general feeling of darkness and dread having descended upon their lives."

"Okay...so, what's the current case?"

"The case..." Mulder reached behind him and snatched a manila file folder from his desk. Case files were electronic, now, but Mulder was old school. He liked to print things, spread them on the floor, look for connections and patterns. He tossed the folder to Scully, and she barely managed to catch it between her hand and her knee, the loud slap echoing in their basement cave. She straightened the file and began paging through, grateful to have something to look at besides the image of the child on the screen. "The case is in a small town outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico," Mulder continued. "The Garcia family. Husband, wife, two children, and Mrs. Garcia's aging mother made up the household. Two months ago, the teenaged daughter, Mariela, posted a story on her YouTube channel talking about a visit to her family's house the night before by two young children claiming to be lost and demanding entry into their home. Her parents eventually gave in and brought the children inside, intending to call the local authorities to help the kids find their way home."

"Let me guess...the kids had dark hoodies and all-black eyes?"

Mulder pointed his pencil at her. "Nothing gets by you, Scully. The children were only with the family for under an hour before some adults dressed in black suits showed up at the bottom of the Garcia family's driveway and called for the children to come out and leave with them. The kids identified the adults as their parents and insisted it was okay to let them go."

"Okay. And the Garcia family is..." Scully turned another page in the paperwork balanced on her thigh, scanning the text and gleaning the essentials, "...oh my God." She looked up at Mulder, eyes
wide, and he lifted his eyebrows in acknowledgment. "The grandmother died of complications from necrotizing fascitis?"

Mulder nodded, expression sobering as professional excitement yielded to respectful sympathy. "Afraid so. And the bad luck doesn't stop there."

Scully continued to page through the information. "The younger brother...has been hospitalized and diagnosed with hantavirus."

"And the father was killed in a single car accident, Scully. No traces of alcohol or other intoxicating substances in his blood. No history of high-risk behavior. The mother has been experiencing unexplained nosebleeds, while Mariela's latest vlog post is detailing a painful rash on her skin that the doctors can't seem to identify. Yesterday, a school friend of Mariela's came forward stating that she too had seen these black-eyed kids in recent weeks, lurking under a streetlamp not far from the Garcia home."

Scully skimmed through the rest of the report. A lot of medical and forensic details were missing. She would need to see a great deal more information before she could even begin to put this picture together. She closed the file, rested it on her crossed legs and met Mulder's waiting gaze. He was standing beside his desk, balancing a freshly sharpened pencil between his index finger tips, the point of the graphite pricking into the pad of his finger in a way that made her teeth itch. His suit jacket was off and his shirt sleeves rolled up and she was cold just looking at him. And maybe...something else.

"Mulder, this is a horrible story for this family. But, although necrotizing fascitis is rare and rarely goes untreated long enough to be deadly, it is a substantial risk in those with a compromised immune system, and an elderly woman in a poorer part of town may have had some underlying disease that predisposed her to be vulnerable to the virus. I would have to see the rest of her medical records. As for the hantavirus, New Mexico is prime territory for infection from rodent droppings. Again, the lower economic status may have placed the boy in places of risk, rat-infested apartment buildings, even a friend's garage or basement. Maybe he went hiking with a scout troop. Younger children are highly susceptible to hantavirus, both due to their weaker immune systems and their less than meticulous hygiene practices. The daughter's rash could almost certainly be attributed to stress caused by the series of horrible events befalling her family. The same could be said of the mother's nosebleeds, particularly at the elevation at which they're residing and the overall dryness of the environment. And as for the father, we don't have anywhere near enough information to declare that as anything but tragic. The car could have malfunctioned, an animal could have run across the road. The man could have suffered a heart attack or a stroke or any other medical condition that impaired his judgement."

Mulder nodded and the barest hint of a grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Impressive string of rebuttals before your morning coffee, Scully, and I can't say I disagree with anything you say. But it does all seem like one hell of a coincidence, don't you think?"

"You're willing to take on this case on nothing more than the odds against a coincidence?"

He shrugged easily. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"Mulder, do you have evidence of a single incident where someone reported a sighting of these Black-Eyed Children, let them inside their home or car, and was seriously injured or killed as a direct result of the children's actions?"

"That's the thing, Scully...I think...we only hear the reports of the near misses."
"What do you mean?"

"I think the ones who let them in...aren't around to tell the story."

Scully let go an exhale that fell somewhere between an incredulous laugh and long-suffering sigh. She almost dropped the carefully balanced file from her knee, grabbed at it, and scraped her finger on a sharp edge. Then her falling gaze whipped past that damned photo on the laptop screen and her stomach churned.

"Well?" He was watching her like a poodle hoping for a treat. "What do you say, Scully? Up for a little trip to the desert?"

New Mexico. He wanted her to fly to New Mexico. There wasn't anywhere near enough in this thin folder on her lap to make these events into a case. The occurrences were tragic for the family, but there was no clear connection from one to the other. Scully couldn't imagine how Mulder was going to spin this to convince Skinner this case warranted a requisition for travel from D.C. all the way to a small town in New Mexico. She should be shooting this down right out of the gate.

New Mexico. Warm. Even this time of year. Dry. Warm. Dry. She had goosebumps up her arms beneath her suit jacket. Her bones felt damp. Dammit, dammit, dammit…

"I suppose…," she swallowed hard. Dammit. "It couldn't hurt to give it a day. Talk to some of the locals, see if…anyone else has seen these kids, had anything happen to them. If there's nothing there, we'll fly home in the morning."

Mulder's expression faltered. His lips moved but he seemed unable to catch hold of any words. He gazed at her as though she had just insisted that grass was purple.

Scully drew a breath and tried like hell to come up with an argument that made her willingness seem even remotely rational. Something scientific, something about potential toxic exposure and contagion, government experimentation in remote areas, brain-washing cult behavior, a rare childhood illness that affected eye pigmentation, something that would make sense of this sudden receptiveness and make it seem like her interest was even vaguely professionally valid. At best there was a health hazard that required some sort of investigation, but even then it was far from a matter for the FBI, let alone for the X-Files, and in the end, Scully gave up all pretense, dropped her shoulders, and said flatly, "I'm cold."

Mulder's incredulous exhale would have been funny if it hadn't all been so sad.

"Just don't ask me to explain this to Skinner," she said, a certain sharpness cutting into her voice as she pointed the file at his chest.

Mulder raised his hands in exaggerated innocence. "Wouldn't dream of it." He finally flipped closed that damned laptop and scooped it against his hip.

Nothing was as dark as it had been before the glimpses of light. Because she knew, she knew no matter how complex and uncertain and fucked up it all was, even if it never really got fixed, she knew she could stretch out a blind hand and he would grab for her, hold her, keep her head above water and never let her drown in the torrential rains. She had little left to hide when it all fell down.

Yet she had tasted a warmth and a freedom that haunted her silent dreams. Comfortable was comfortable for the time being. She needed things to hold still and stabilize and rebuild. And this Scully, this government agent with sleek suits, careful lipstick, complex scientific theories, and a knack for paperwork -- this was all she knew. The voice in her head that was cataloging things like
arthritis and presbyopia and new fluctuations in estrogen levels knew there was a precipice not far ahead. A point where a bridge must be built or an entirely separate path forged.

But for today...New Mexico called.

*****

"Come on, Scully. We're going to do something for fun. Just fun. You remember fun?"

They've been on the run for weeks. The warmth and togetherness have been beautiful in their own bittersweet way, but every smile has been a little bit tainted. Their son is still a gaping chasm of loss between them. Their work has fallen down around their ears. But they are together, again. On the road and in their element. No more longing letters and desperation for a single glimpse or touch. She has been able to sleep in his arms, able to sleep in a way she hasn't in what seems like forever.

They've been driving for hours and they are out of the desert and deep into the Midwestern planes. They pulled over for gas and have found themselves on the edges of a traveling summer carnival. Scully doesn't want to be on the edges of everything, anymore. Mulder must see her longing look at the carousel, because he takes her hand and leads her toward the wiry man at the gate with the dusty striped smock and the roll of tickets strapped to his belt.

"Mulder..." she drawls. She's trying for a protest, but the truth is, she has no valid argument. They have nowhere else to be, the weather is comfortably warm but not yet scorching, she's wearing sunblock, their gas tank is already filled, and...

"How much for that tilt-a-whirl thing over there?"

"The Green Machine?" the man questions, voice booming, like he has worked near loud machinery for too long.

Mulder nods. "Yeah, two for that, please."

"Green machine is three tickets a piece. We sell in rolls of 10, 20, 50, or 100." He points to the chalkboard sign listing the prices.

Mulder pulls out his wallet and hands over a $20 bill, working the whole process with one hand so he won't have to let go of her. Like they're teenagers at a school bizarre. "20 tickets," he says, and Scully chuckles softly, but she's enjoying the breeze and the feel of Mulder's fingers tangled with hers, and the idea of just forgetting it all for half an hour is dizzyingly appealing.

Nothing here is too crowded this time of day and this far out in nowhere so the attendant lets them ride the Green Machine twice in a row. It's one of those bench seats for two that swings out in flat circles at first, then raises up to weave in big aerial loops of its three arms, diving them down in little rushes of wind and thrill with each turn. Centrifugal force crushes Scully against Mulder's solid body on the outward swings and the downward rushes feel a little like heaven on her throat and her exposed shoulders, lifting the wild tails of her hair. The landing and stop are bumpy and awkward and it makes them laugh and ruins any style left to her hair. Mulder runs a warm hand through her tousled and sun-dried waves and looks at her like she's the most beautiful thing in this place or any other.

The sensory input pushes all thoughts of past and future from their heads and they are grounded in the thrill of the moment, waiting for the safety bar to release, and then kissing like a couple of kids, and being the last to notice they're supposed to get off the ride, now. Mulder helps her down, and she can't quite walk straight without his help after all that spinning and that just makes them laugh more
as they stumble their way out of the ride pen and back into the main fair ground.

Mulder whacks a mole and wins her a pink panda. Scully shoots a ping-pong ball into a glass bowl and wins them a goldfish. She gives her prize to a starry-eyed little blonde girl, because life on the road is no place for a goldfish.

"You're so damned beautiful when you smile," Mulder says as they walk back to the car, his arm around her waist and her panda still hugged to her chest. She turns from her perusal of the endlessly green and blue horizon to look up into the almost blinding intensity of his gaze. Her eyes fall to his mouth, those soft and luscious lips full of brilliance and crazy theories and inexplicable notions that she is somehow worth sacrificing it all.

She lifts her gaze lazily back to his, tilts back her head in a mix of challenge and flirtation. " Took you long enough to say so," she says. There is nothing but affection in her smile.

"That's 'cause you scared the crap out of me, Scully." He says it with a laugh, but she knows it's true.

"It's all right. I'm sorry. I must have been more sound asleep than I expected."

"It's all right," he said. "You must have needed it. The pilot just announced our descent. I wanted to give you a chance to get awake."

She nodded. "Thanks. Yeah."

"Scully?"

She jerked awake with a gasp. Airplane. She must have fallen asleep on the flight. On Mulder's shoulder.

"Whoa, hey...sorry," he is saying, long fingers settling over her forearm. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right. I'm sorry. I must have been more sound asleep than I expected."

His smile was gentle and patient and she found herself pulling upright and away, because she was still half caught in the dream memory and the scent of his aftershave and the mixed up sensations were confusing and unnerving and she didn't want to do anything stupid before she was fully awake. Mulder was still firmly grounded in 2018.

"It's all right," he said. "You must have needed it. The pilot just announced our descent. I wanted to give you a chance to get awake."

She had been on so many flights with Fox Mulder in her life, they had the system down to a science. She knew which pocket in his laptop case held his boarding pass, what size water bottle he liked to buy at the Hudson News shop, how many seats in front of the wing he preferred to be, which kinds of peanuts and pretzels he would squirrel away for snackage at the motel and which ones he would spit out, how many hours the flight had to be before he would take off his shoes, and where in the boarding process he was likely to decide he should probably go pee.

And he knew her. He would reach up and turn the air vent away from her when she was cold, grab her favorite Snapple for the flight when he was buying his water even when she insisted she really should have the diet, flip down the armrest that never quite leveled with the seatback between them, so she could fall asleep on his shoulder without the edges digging into her flesh. They had only known one another two years the first time she had poured herself onto a flight, literally beaten up, beyond exhausted, dragging on autopilot, bandaged and bruised and just wanting to get home, and
he had said simply, "Come here," and guided her to turn herself sideways on the seats, taking advantage of the empty windowseat beside them, and she had managed to curl on her side with her head in his lap. He had spread his winter wool coat over her huddled form and kept a protective arm across her throughout the red-eye flight, his deadly glare daring any flight attendant to point out the need for an "upright position" and proper use of the seatbelt. To this day she told herself he had never noticed the tenderness and comfort had made her cry. She had written it off as exhaustion.

Mulder had the case file folder open on his lap now, and Scully found herself confronted with yet another simulated picture of a Black-Eyed Kid. "What do you really think we're looking at here, Mulder? A hoax? A coincidence? Exploitation of some kind?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, Scully? I don't know. But whatever it is, I don't want to let it happen to another family if we can help it."

"Fair enough," she said, voice just a little stronger after the water, ground just a little soldier as she wrangled free of the dream. "We start with the coroner?"

"Yep. 4pm appointment." He glanced at his watch. "Our flight is coming in a little behind, but we gained two hours, so assuming the rental car is ready on time, we should make it."

"Sounds like a plan."

****

(End Chapter 1)
Chapter 2

Mulder still could not figure out why Scully had said yes to this trip. But he had decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Maybe she was just feeling nostalgic about their crazy escapades chasing werewolves and chupacabras (yeah, right). Maybe she really did just want an excuse to visit somewhere warm; he had found out when they lived together exactly how cold she could get sometimes. (She had said it had gotten worse after her cancer. That her internal heater had just never fully recovered.) Either way, she was by his side as they moved through the El Paso airport, rolling bag rattling behind her. He had learned long ago how to pace and temper his naturally long strides to walk beside her without making her rush to keep up, while still looking comfortable with his own gait. The habit returned without conscious effort the moment he was beside her. They had their practiced rhythms.

Scully's fingers brushed his as she reached out and turned his phone so she could read the reservation confirmation. "Did you say Enterprise?"

"Yeah, Enterprise." Her fingers were like ice.

When they emerged into the West Texas sunlight and settled wordlessly by the Shuttle stop for car rentals, Scully closed her eyes, shook back her hair, and lifted her face to the sun. Looking at her like this, freckles showing, hair pleasantly tousled from sleeping on the flight, he saw in her the 30-something woman with whom he had first fallen in love. The fierce, brilliant, kind, stubborn, fiery, whirlwind of red hair and resistance and scientific jargon who had spun into his life and turned his worldview upside down. He wasn't any less in love with the 53-year-old who was a little more open, a little more jaded, a little more broken, but no less determined to stand up every time she got knocked down. No less brilliant. No less beautiful.

For a while he had pretended time could change things, they could remember it all fondly, be friends, and move on. Now Fox Mulder had accepted his reality. Dana Scully would never be "less" of anything to him. For now, he was just glad to have her by his side Monday through Friday.

Change was on the distant horizon. Their comfortable truce was healing rifts. For now. They were finding their new normal. But Scully was hanging out at his place more and more, lines were blurring, doors opening, then abruptly closing. This wasn't a permanent solution. They were living as non-exclusive, platonic significant others and pretending that was a thing that could work for them.

The truth was, they were really bad at breaking up. So much so, that the rest of the world kind of assumed they were still together.

*****

Scully took the wheel of the blue Ford Fusion they had chosen from the row of options in the Enterprise parking garage. She didn't always like driving in the desert, her eyes were more light-sensitive than his. But today she seemed to want to be in control, and Mulder was willing to go along for the ride. Literally. Their first stop was hardly fifteen minutes from the airport. The El Paso M.E.'s office served parts of Southern New Mexico, which was why they were talking to the Coroner first, before making the drive up to Las Cruces where the youngest Garcia remained in the hospital, and then on to their ultimate destination of Verdad, New Mexico. The irony of the name was not lost on Mulder.

Scully skillfully maneuvered their car into a parking space outside the Medical Examiner's building, shutting off the engine with five minutes to spare before their 4pm appointment.

The late afternoon breeze was warm and soft as Mulder climbed out of the car. Desert air held a presence of its own, a prevailing peace that couldn't be matched in moist terrain. Maybe Scully had been onto something, bringing them here for a break from the relentless D.C. wetness. He caught her taking a moment to absorb their surroundings as well. Mulder left his briefcase on the floor of the back seat, tossed his suit coat on top of it out of habit, but the need for security precautions here probably wasn't nearly as high as at home. Scully had most of the paperwork they might need in her bag.

The building before them was low and long, pale adobe, like most buildings in this part of the world. Two stories up was considered quite the elevation, and three...well, that was practically a skyscraper. Scully shrugged back into her suit jacket despite the warmth, and he wondered if she was really still cold, or if she were merely anticipating the chill of the morgue. He was willing to take his chances and soak up some sun.

"They only autopsied the father, correct?" Scully asked, eyes on the file in her hand as she fell into step beside him, up the building's concrete walkway. No one else was in the parking lot; there seemed very little sign of life around them at all.

Mulder nodded when Scully lifted her gaze for confirmation. "Yeah, the grandmother was in the hospital prior to her death, so there wasn't any criminal question of cause of death. Illness through bad vibes doesn't play well on paperwork. But the father's accident didn't make a lot of sense, and the family asked for an autopsy to check for medical causes like you were suggesting."

"But we didn't have the report yet. When did this happen?"

"The accident was just three days ago. The autopsy only took place yesterday. We had the preliminary tox screen but not the full report."

Mulder pulled the main door open for Scully to pass through as she continued to scan the information in her hand. "Okay. Then hopefully the body's still here."
Mulder cringed at her back as her heels clicked on the tile floor of the interior rotunda. He would never be quite so practical (or, dare he say, enthusiastic) about inspecting dead bodies as Scully.

A desk slightly too small for the proportions of the entrance area lay directly in front of Mulder and Scully. A woman of no more than thirty, sun-bleached hair tied into a loose ponytail, looked up from her phone as they approached and seemed perplexed by their presence. They must not have gotten a lot of visitors here.

"Can I help you? We're closing in a few minutes."

Scully's eyes narrowed. "Your door says 5pm."

The woman just shrugged and waited to hear more.

Scully took a breath to speak, but Mulder jumped in. He pulled out his badge from his pants pocket. "I'm Agent Mulder and this is Agent Scully from the FBI. We have an appointment to see a Dr…"

"Johanson," Scully finished for him, flipping open her own badge.

The woman frowned at them, and Mulder wasn't certain if she was weighing the validity of their credentials, or merely annoyed at their intrusion upon her social media time. "I think he's still here," she said at last.

No one moved.

Scully leaned in a bit, eyebrows lifting. "Could you tell him we're here?"

The woman shrugged. "I guess I can go find him."

"That would be helpful," Scully mono-toned, words careful and distinct, like she was speaking to someone new to the language.

Ponytail woman pushed up from her chair, showing herself to be dressed in a full outfit of pink scrubs with purple clowns printed on them. Mulder found himself hoping she had not been one to assist with this particular autopsy. When the woman disappeared down a back hall off to their right, Mulder met Scully's gaze and the silent incredulity passed between them. Mulder just shrugged, and Scully gave a muted scoff.

"I don't think we're supposed to bother her after 3pm," he said quietly.

Scully just turned and let her gaze take in the details of their surroundings. She had wandered over to look at a community bulletin board and scan a rack of brochures, and Mulder had been about to follow her, when the clown-scrubs woman reappeared. She returned to her desk (and her phone) without a word, but she was trailed by an older man, sandy-haired, slightly plump, wearing a lab coat, oddly formal shoes, and a wedding ring that appeared painfully small for his thick finger.

"Agent Scully," the man said, approaching Mulder with a confident gait and an outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you."

Mulder instinctively shook the man's proffered hand, but his return gesture lacked commitment as he scrambled to make the correction. "Oh, no, actually, I'm Agent Mulder, this is--"

"Agent Scully." She had stepped up beside him faster than he realized and Mulder nearly poked her in the chest as he turned to direct Dr. Johanson's attentions.
Johanson glanced between them, looking confused for half a beat, then quickly caught up with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought...Of course, Agent Mulder. Agent Scully, good to meet you." He held out his hand. "You're the forensic pathologist?"

Scully shook his hand briefly, offering a tight-lipped smile. "That would be me."

Oh. That's why she was pissed.

"Please, come with me," Dr. Johanson offered, tone a bit placating. At least the man was smart enough to know when he'd stuck his foot in his mouth. He gestured down the back hallway from which he had come.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?" Johanson asked as they followed him down a second hallway toward the small silver doors of an employee only elevator.

"No, it was fine," Scully said. "So, you performed the autopsy on Joseph Garcia?"

"Indeed, I did. Have you been to our part of the world before?"

"Only briefly. What was your official cause of death?"

The three of them crowded into the surprisingly small elevator, and Johanson pressed a button for the basement level. Scully pushed herself into Mulder's zone to keep due clearance between her body and Johanson's and Mulder pressed a subtle hand to the small of her back.

"Impact wounds consistent with the crash," Johanson replied.

"And did you find anything suspicious in the condition of the body?"

"Well, not especially, I..." Mulder watched Dr. Johanson fidget just a bit, but his read wasn't that the doctor was hiding anything about the findings. Rather that this wasn't how things were done around here. They had hardly been together two minutes and Scully was pushing for the facts, the vital information she had come to obtain. Johanson expected small talk, pleasantries, then a ramp up to the technical exchange.

As the doors to the elevator slid open, Mulder offered a middle ground. "Have you lived in this area long? Worked this same job?"

Dr. Johanson nodded. "15 years in the job this spring. I grew up just north of the city, but I live up in Cruces, now. Been there over a decade."

He was leading them down a broad hallway, toward a set of double doors off to their right.

"You commute from Las Cruces down here every day?" Scully asked, following Mulder's lead, because she might be impatient by nature, but she was nothing if not an intuitive partner. "How long a drive is that?"

"No more than an hour, even in traffic. You can't ask for a more scenic commute."

"I would imagine so," Mulder replied. As far as he could tell on the map, the drive from El Paso to Las Cruces was a whole lot of nothing.

Through the double doors into the cramped but functional autopsy bay, Johanson crossed to a neatly stacked metal desk and lifted a folder which he held out in offering to Scully. "That's not my final report, but you can read the summary of my findings."
"Thank you, Dr.. Is the body still here? Would we be able to have a look?"

"It is."

"Did you happen to know the Garcia family personally?" Mulder asked, settling himself against the edge of an empty table, establishing a safe distance between himself and the examination area.

Dr. Johanson pulled on disposable gloves from a dispenser on the wall and moved toward the cadaver drawers on the far right wall. "Not personally, no," he said, "but I had heard Mr. Garcia mentioned. He taught at the grade school my daughters attended. He was well liked by the children. His death has been quite a shock to the local community."

"I'm sure it has."

Scully was scanning the report in one in hand and pulling out her own set of disposable gloves with the other.

"Honestly, Mr. Mulder, we're grateful for the FBI taking an interest in this case, and I am certainly happy to help you in any way I can...but," he scanned the drawer labels for the relevant name, then gave a heft to the drawer, bringing the sheeted body into view, "is there a particular reason the FBI is interested in this case? Anything I'm unaware of?"

Mulder nodded, folded his arms across his chest. "It would seem quite a series of traumatic events has befallen the Garcia family in recent weeks. The case came to our attention when it was suggested these events, though seemingly unrelated, might all have a single catalyst event."

Johanson took the few steps back toward where Mulder hovered. "Suggested by whom, if you don't mind my asking?"

"By Mr. Garcia's daughter, Mariela. She's spoken at length about her family's plight on her online vlog."

Mulder tried his damnedest not to look at Scully, could feel her glaring a dent into the side of his head. She had been a little distracted this morning when he had presented the case, and she had neglected to ask him directly just how this case had come to his attention and he had let her assume he had been contacted either by the family or by local law enforcement, and she was just now putting together that Mulder had stumbled across this situation all on his own, surfing the internet for spooky phenomena, and then started making phone calls.

Dr. Johanson's brow furrowed. He was looking at Mulder as though he were reassessing how he should approach this whole encounter with the Federal government, an expression Mulder had seen one too many times in his life, and he was just asking, "Just exactly what kind of theory are you considering here, Mr. Mulder?" when Scully conveniently interrupted by asking, "To what did you attribute these burn marks, Doctor?"

The two men turned to find Scully already well involved in comparing the report's findings to the body before her, the arm of Mr. Garcia's body lifted into her cradled hand as she closely inspected something near the wrist.

With one last glance toward Mulder, Johanson returned to stand opposite Scully, overlooking the body. "I saw those as well, and I haven't been able to reconstruct the source from the description of the accident. But if the burns pre-date the accident, it's not by more than an hour or two."

"They're not acid burns, not like battery acid or...." Scully was speaking softly, mainly thinking out loud. "May I?" She reached for the magnifying lens on the nearby tool cart.
"Please." Johanson nodded.

"They don't seem chemical in nature, it seems like heat, and yet... It's almost like a sunburn. Like...radiation. Have you tested the body for residual radiation?"

Johanson blinked. "No, I never even thought of it. I had no reason to believe Mr. Garcia had been exposed to any kind of hazardous radiation."

"It might be worth investigating," Scully offered, gingerly returning Mr. Garcia's arm to rest on the table.

"All right. I'll look into it and let you know."

Scully nodded, hands resting on the edge of the gurney, expression thoughtful as she kept her gaze on the body. "The rest of the injuries seem consistent with the description of the crash."

"I agree," Johanson said.

"But why did he crash?"

He shrugged. "I cannot come up with signs of anything medical. Either it was environmental...the malfunction of the car or something on the road...or it was...psychological."

Scully lifted her gaze to meet Johanson's. "You believe Mr. Garcia might have tried to take his own life? There are less traumatic and more reliable ways than a crash that might leave a person a quadriplegic before it killed him."

"I agree, it's extremely unlikely."

"Do you believe Mr. Garcia had any reason to want to kill himself?" Mulder interjected, pushing off the table and venturing a step nearer to the body.

"Like I said, I didn't know the family personally. But they had been through a lot."

"The man's son was in the hospital, his life in the balance."

"It's hard to imagine a parent abandoning a sick child before learning the outcome," Scully finished the thought for him.

"Indeed it is," Johanson agreed.

"Are police looking into defects in the car, do you know?" Scully asked, glancing toward Mulder as well.

Johanson nodded. "Sheriff Aster suggested as much when he escorted the body in. You'll know more after you talk to him, I would think."

"We plan to meet up with him as soon as possible," Mulder confirmed.

Scully went over a few more details of the preliminary report with Dr. Johanson, reviewing the injuries from the crash, the general state of the victim's health and primary organs -- Scully reading the story of a person's life, carved onto a scroll of flesh and bone.

They had said their thanks and were back at the car, Scully once again heading toward the driver's door, when she said across the top of the vehicle, "YouTube, Mulder? You found our case on YouTube?"
Mulder conceded a small, tolerant smile, and said openly, "I stumbled across something that might be of interest, I then did some research, contacted local law enforcement, and Sheriff Aster turned out to be quite grateful to hear from me. He's been concerned about the spreading rumors of a threat, and unsure exactly how to handle the situation. He welcomed the outside help."

She regarded him for a moment over the stop of the car, squinting against the low sun angling over the building. Then she gave a small nod and said simply, "All right."

Mulder debated mentioning the recent rash of UFO sightings that had been reported in the area as well. He decided this was a time to take one victory and be happy with it.

*****

The Organ Mountains rose in the distance to the east, peaks red-gold as the sun fell to their level in the west. An East Coaster by both nature and nurture, Mulder was always struck by the vast distances one could view in the Southwest. The vistas were undeniably beautiful if a bit disorienting. Concepts of mileage could be confusing in such wide-open and seemingly endless spaces. He had often thought life in environments like Virginia's, littered with closely grouped and vertical trees, must have seemed unbearably claustrophobic to one raised in this desert expanse. Like life in a high-walled rat maze. Mulder, though he appreciated the natural aesthetic of the desert, felt a little like he might just fall into space with nothing to hold onto and nowhere to hide. Maybe it was that second part. Mulder had spent his adult life needing somewhere to hide.

He was surprised by how at home Scully always seemed to be in this type of climate. Scully was a burrower by nature. She cocooned herself under blankets, chose the bed nearest the corner of the room, liked the window seat on late night planes where she had coverage on as many sides as possible. Yet the desert seemed to speak to her in a way he had yet to understand.

"Where would you want to live, Scully?" he asked without preamble.

"Hmm?" Scully glanced his way, eyes unreadable behind her Gucci sunglasses (and when had that happened, by the way, he couldn't remember when she had first shown up in those), but he could tell from her tone her thoughts had been miles away.

"If you could live anywhere, if your location weren't dependent upon your job. Where would you live?"

Scully shifted a bit, settled her right hand on top of the wheel and propped her left elbow on the door. She seemed to be giving his question genuine consideration. That was one of the things he loved the most about where they had come to in all these years together. She indulged him more, listened to him more. He didn't have to fight for these glimpses into her psyche.

"I mean...two years ago, I would have said I would still want to live near my mother. But now...I don't have that family tie to the D.C. area. It's really just the job. A few friends I hardly ever have time to see, anyway."

Mulder nodded quietly, letting her follow her train of thought.

"I guess...I would move somewhere warmer," she offered. "I would still want to be by the water, though. I love the desert, but...I grew up by the sea. And it feels...weird...to be too far away from the shore. Like I can't..." she gave a small, embarrassed laugh that was so preciously rare it warmed Mulder's chest, "...I can't...escape, or something. I don't know, that sounds stupid. I don't know where I'd be going."
"No, it's not stupid, I get it. I was just thinking that I tend to favor terrain with lots of trees because I need somewhere to hide, and this kind of openness," he gestured toward the expanse stretching out around them, "seems too exposing. And like I might fall over if I couldn't hold onto a tree."

Scully gave an indulgent chuckle, eyes still on the road stretching out so very far ahead. "I can see that," she said softly.

They rode in companionable silence for a few minutes, speedometer pushing 80, and then Scully said to the horizon, "Maybe New Orleans. It's a beautiful city, so much old and elegant architecture. And I like its resilience. It's like...they just keep buying that 'I Want to Believe' poster and drying out the files and insisting they can rebuild."

_Damn, Scully. You really do always keep me guessing._

"You think you could handle all the bugs?" Mulder asked.

Scully shrugged. "It's not as bad in the city." And Mulder couldn't help but feel she had given this more thought than he had been aware.

They rode for a while in companionable silence. Mulder fiddled with the radio and landed on something vaguely contemporary that both he and Scully seemed to tolerate.

He pulled out the paperwork on the case and put in a phone call to Sheriff Aster who had left word for him that he was out of the office for the night but looked forward to meeting with him in the morning. A call to the hospital where Christian Garcia was being treated followed a similar theme, telling him, well, yes, they could still visit the boy this evening, but a visit in the morning would allow them to speak with the primary doctors and nurses responsible for his care.

"Apparently nothing happens here after 5pm," Mulder said, tossing his phone back into his open briefcase.

Scully sighed, eyes still on the road. "Guess we go with the flow. Get some sleep and start as early as possible in the morning."

Mulder nodded, and he began silently entering the address for their motel into the GPS.

They arrived in Las Cruces in what should have been the thick of rush hour, but Mulder was finding it hard to believe traffic was usually lighter than it was now. There were distinct advantages to smaller towns. Verdad was another twenty minutes outside of this town, and Mulder had gotten them reservations at one of the only two motels in Verdad itself. They found the state road that would take them off the Interstate and toward their destination.

The large wooden sign, "Welcome to Verdad," was weathered but better cared for than some. "Look Scully, if you lived here, you'd be home by now." A small cactus garden thrived at the sign's base. "Welcome to Verdad," Mulder read aloud, "population just under 2,000 souls, elevation just under 4,000 feet." Scully wasn't the greatest at adjusting to increased elevation. In the past, they had traveled so much, her body seemed to have developed a sort of lingering tolerance and adaptability. But in recent years their work had not often carried them too far from sea level, and Mulder was quietly cognizant of her status. 4,000 feet wasn't enough for full out altitude sickness, but it was enough to make Scully a little more irritable than usual and a little lightheaded after dragging luggage up stairs. He spoke from experience on both counts. His own awareness of the elevation change didn't usually kick in until about 8,000 feet, unless he was trying to push himself running.

Buildings began emerging from the nothing around them, but there seemed to be no more than a few
blocks that made up the essence of Verdad's "downtown." By mutual consent, they stopped for dinner at the first decent looking diner they passed, only a block shy of their hotel according to the GPS. If they liked the diner, they might be able to walk back for breakfast.

The atmosphere of the place was lacking, but there was no wait and the food was decent. Standard fair, with a little bit of local flavor. Neither of them spoke much during dinner. Fatigue seemed to have set in after their long day and the two hour time shift that meant it was closer to bedtime than dinner in their heads. Silent agreement said there had been enough case discussion for the day and their brains needed to be in "off duty" mode for a while. Scully ordered a small salad with chicken strips that she didn't finish, but she did steal a few fries off of Mulder's plate and dip them in her ranch dressing. She drank an apple juice. He got her to smile when he realized "Flying Purple People Eater" was playing softly over the diner speakers and started singing along.

The sun was well gone behind the mountains when they arrived at the motel parking lot and the evening breeze was pleasantly cool through the open door as they checked themselves in at the cramped little office with the Pakistani man behind heavy glass and the hanging plants and wind chimes and the little pamphlet on the counter about a near death experiencer's journey through hell and back that lead him to Jesus.

At the car, Mulder retrieved their luggage from the trunk as they juggled briefcases and bags and abandoned jackets. "I'm 104," he said, glancing down at the envelope in his hand with both their key cards. "I thought you were 106, are these not all even numbers on this side? You're not next door?"

Scully nodded. "No, I think I am, isn't that 106 there?"

"Oh, is that just a maintenance door?"

"No, that one is, 106 is on the other side, just there."

"Okay. Have we got everything?" Mulder turned for a last scan of the back seat of the rental before closing the door. Scully was waiting with key fob in hand to lock the car behind him.

"I think...yeah...I..."

Mulder looked up when Scully's voice faded off. Her gaze had wandered to something over his shoulder.

"Did you lock the car?" he asked.

"Yeah, I..."

"Scully?"

He glanced over his shoulder to where something in the distance seemed to have captured her attention. "What is it?"

"Hmm?"

"Scully?" He looked again, but saw nothing but a street lamp in the far corner of the motel parking lot.

Scully drew a breath through parted lips. "I--It's nothing. I just...did you see...?"

"Did I see what?" He glanced between the distant circle of light and his distracted partner. The key fob still dangled from her fingers mid-task. "Did I see what?" he repeated.
But Scully just shook her head. "Nothing." She clicked the remote a last time to be sure the car was locked. "Never mind. It's locked. Let's go."

Mulder lingered a moment, giving one last futile glance toward the streetlamp, then followed his partner across the lot toward their doors.

"Breakfast at 6:30?" Scully asked, sliding her card into her door lock and popping the latch.

Mulder wrinkled his nose. "Sure, why not?"

"Take advantage of the time zone change, Mulder. It'll feel like 8:30."

He tossed her a wry smile as he opened his own door. The universal smell of painfully average hotel room wafted toward him.

"Goodnight, Mulder," Scully said with a little genuine warmth in her brief smile.

He returned the gesture and their gazes lingered for a comfortable moment. "'Night, Scully."

She pushed her way forward into room 106, suitcase gliding in neatly behind her, then closed the door with a distinctive snap.

Mulder stood several moments more in the New Mexico evening air before he embraced the average and entered room 104. Maybe there would be something good on HBO.

*****

On the morning she is meant to go for the job interview at Our Lady of Sorrows, Scully almost throws-up in Mulder's kitchen sink. She stayed at his house the night before, even though it makes for a hell of a commute to arrive for her mid-morning interview, but Mulder knows she is nervous and wanted the distraction. He is happy to oblige. He doesn't like the idea of her having a place in the city in the first place, he's gotten too accustomed to her constant presence in his world. But he can believe it is just for the job.

What he can't believe is that he has seen this woman face down murderers and monsters and fanged supernatural predators, unarmed, out-manned, tied-up, and blinded, and walk away steady and solid and fully in control. Yet the prospect of a job interview at a private hospital in D.C. has her standing at his sink, white-knuckled to the edge of the counter.

"Breathe, Scully," he says softly, open hand steady on the small of her back. She's sensitive there, responsive. He cups his other hand to the back of her neck, fingers cool against her flushed skin. "Don't think for a minute. Just breathe. You're okay. Listen. Do you hear the birds outside? The robins are back."

She draws a shaky breath. She is dressed and ready to go, though she has a little time. Straight black skirt that hugs her hips enough to make him think lustful thoughts, even at this most inappropriate of moments, elegant cream power blouse, heels high enough to be intimidating, not high enough to seem vain. Her hair is pulled back into a low ponytail held by a wide black barrette. She looks exactly the part she is trying to secure. Except for the pale green cast to her complexion.

"God, Mulder, I can't do this... How can I do this?"

"You're still thinking. Just breathe for a minute."

"I can't just stop thinking." Her voice is quivering, fingers trembling as she shakes out her hand, unable to keep still.
Mulder moves in closer, wraps a reassuring arm across her breasts, snugs her back against his chest. He places a tender kiss on the top of her head and whispers, "Dana. You know you can do this. You know you can. I'll be right here. I'm with you every minute."

She is quiet for a moment, and her breathing is still uneven, but something in her softens a bit. He can feel the shift in her thoughts through the lines of her body. "I wish you could come with me," she whispers, and there's a little ring of guilt in her voice that makes his hair hurt. Like she's not supposed to say it. She's not supposed to wish it. He still has to be in hiding. She's safe enough now, but he's not, he can't just parade through downtown D.C. with her. He can't drive her to this interview, hold her hand until the last possible second, hover inconspicuously in the hospital lobby, and catch her the moment she walks out. And she never asks, never asks for dinner in the city, a night at the movies; invariably says it's all okay. But in this moment of uncensored vulnerability, when she's had nothing but some dry toast and green tea and even that seems in danger of return, she lets the words slip.

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"I wish I could, too. But my heart's with you all the way. You know that."

"I know."

They're quiet a moment more, Scully drawing deliberate breaths, in through her nose, out through her mouth. She's quivering less under his steady hold. "Why are you so scared?" he asks. "If this doesn't work out there are other jobs."

"I just...I guess...I'm afraid...I've been away from normal life so long...away from traditional medicine for so long...that I don't know how to be that woman, anymore. That I can't. That...what skills I had aren't there, anymore."

"That's crazy, Scully. So, you may have a few rusty spots, you'll get it back in no time."

"What if I don't? What if I get the job and I make a mistake? I'd be responsible for children. Children who are fighting for their lives..."

Her chest is still shaking when she breathes, and Mulder moves a hand up to press just below her throat, warm and steady. It registers in the logical, observant part of his brain that this is a panic attack. Scully is having a panic attack. And he wonders if this is something that she does, something that is a part of the scope of her personality, and he just never got to see them before. The whispers of it had been there all along...from the nefarious mosquito bites on their first case together to the uncertain ground of a haunted house on Christmas Eve. It was believable that this full blown version was visible only to her most intimate confidantes behind closed doors.

He lets his fingers give a slow massage to her upper chest, leans down and kisses her ear. "Were you this nervous when you interviewed for the FBI?"

"Yes," she says simply.

"Med school?"

"Worse."

"10th grade concert band?"

"I threw up in the school parking lot. Cathy Gilecki saw me and told everybody."

"But you made the band."
"Third chair. I fucking hated Cynthia Amarado and her goddamned brown-nosing."

"So...that bitch Cynthia took first chair. Who was second?"

"Tom Stringer."

"You didn't hate him?"

"No." Another trembling breath. A little restless shifting in her heels. "He was really nice and he practiced really hard. He deserved second chair."

Mulder chuckles against her hair. Then he presses his lips close to Scully's ear, breathes in her shampoo, her perfume, the very class and elegance that is wafting off of her even in her semi-panicked state, and he whispers. "You've got this, Scully. Take a deep breath, stand up, put on that expensive blazer over there, and go show 'em how fabulous my girl is."

"I'm not a 'girl', Mulder."

"There she is," he says, affection warm in his voice.

Her next breath sounds enough like a reluctant laugh that he knows everything is going to be okay.

Mulder stared at the ceiling in the humming darkness of Verdad, New Mexico, the last dregs of late-night television flickering across the room, and a locked door and a maintenance room between himself and his partner.

Scully? Is everything going to be okay?

*****

(End Chapter 2)
Chapter 3

Scully lay across the motel bed, laptop open beside her, staring at the white speckle-board ceiling that could have been any motel room in America; a small metal sprinkler and smoke detector blinking its red eye at her in the dim light. But she was reveling in the small pleasures. Her pajamas were sleeveless, a silky tank top and loose, light pants. The silk had slipped out of position just enough to bare a glimpse of her midriff. And for the first time since she could remember, she wasn't cold. She could enjoy the air on her skin. At just after 11:00pm she had decided to indulge in their small-town obscurity and had opened the door to her room a crack, letting the sweet desert air wash through her room. She hadn't heard a soul pass outside in over two hours.

Scully had meant to go for a run, to shake off the day, to make sure her nap on the plane didn't keep her awake too late. But even though she had changed into her running clothes just after she had settled in, she had found herself hovering at the window of her room, regarding the shadows outside, and she hadn't quite been able to bring herself to venture into the night.

She had briefly considered inviting Mulder along for her run, but as much as she hated to admit it, he handled this elevation much better than she, and she hadn't wanted to have to stop him halfway if she got too lightheaded to continue.

In the end, she had decided it would be better to give herself another day at this elevation before she tried a run. She had settled on 30 minutes of squats and crunches and push-ups. A few yoga stretches followed by a hot shower.

Scully had felt decidedly better afterward, clean and comfortable, and the unsettled feeling that had been niggling at the back of her brain since morning had been calmed to an ignorable minimum.

Now she lay on the surprisingly comfortable mattress in the warm and gentle air, listening to her laptop spin up to productivity.

Scully lazily dragged herself to a sitting position and arranged the pillows so she could lean against the headboard. She stretched out her legs and pulled the laptop onto her thighs. She needed to know more about the legends of Black-Eyed Children.

A YouTube search brought up more than she wanted. The repeated images of what the BEKs were
supposed to look like splashed down her screen, and even in her state of careful relaxation, there was something in the pictures that brought a wave of nausea and cold. Scully drew a careful breath and reached within her for the well-practiced subroutine that carried her through the most brutal of autopsies, bolstered her through bloody crime scenes with solely the eye of a scientist and investigator. An observer. Sinking into study mode, the most familiar controlled territory of her life, Scully pulled her earbuds from her briefcase and started clicking through the videos and blog links. Information was power. Control. One link led to another, and after a while she started to filter out the blatant sensationalist fakes from the investigations with a trace of integrity.

Mulder was right, a distinct pattern of behavior emerged in the more believable of the stories. The irrational fear and sense of dread in the experiencers was compelling and contradicted the picture the facts painted of the encounters. The animal reactions drew Scully's attention. She placed a great deal of faith in the judgement of animals; she trusted their instincts sometimes more than her own. Not to say these stories were true until she saw such events for herself. But if they were true, the idea that these kids posed some type of danger, be it as simple as exposure to radiation or a contagious disease, gained greater credibility in the face of the animals' fear.

The light of the laptop and the droning voices in her ears eventually lulled her toward sleep. Her lids were drooping. She let her eyes fall closed, tilted her head back against the headboard and folded her arms across her chest as she indulged the currently running video. She could do without the manipulated visual images meant purely to frighten, anyway. The story was of one woman's frightening midnight encounter with the two Black-Eyed Children on her front porch, begging for shelter from the rain. The tale was being told as much as a campfire story as a factual report, but it was having its intended effect, and Scully admitted to becoming more aware of her still slightly open door.

When the woman was describing the persistent knocking echoing through her empty late-night house as she huddled alone against the wall on her darkened kitchen's floor, the sudden knock on Scully's motel room door scared the living hell out of her.

"Scully?"

She jumped so hard, she knocked the plug loose on her earbuds, and she had to slap at the keyboard to stop the video. Mulder was standing in her doorway, door pushed halfway open, knuckles still resting against the wood, looking mildly confused. "Whoa, sorry...didn't mean to scare you." His words contained a trace of an incredulous chuckle at her over-the-top reaction.

Scully's heart was pounding harder than if she had tried that run. Her hands shook as she fumbled to pull the earbuds from her ears and close her laptop. She pushed the equipment away across the bed. "Holy crap, Mulder....," her words were breathless, "...what are you doing here?"

"Well, I didn't come here to turn your hair grey. I was just making a run to the vending machines for a soda." He held up a can, jiggling it as evidence. "I saw your light was on. What are you doing awake?"

"Nothing." She combed her fingers through her hair, attempting to restructure her dignity. "I was just...doing some research for this case, and...I slept on the plane so I was still awake. Jesus, Mulder, you scared the shit out of me." She still hadn't slowed her breathing. She swung her legs to the floor so she sat on the side of the bed, hands gripping the edge of the mattress on either side of her thighs.

With a soft smile and just a trace of concern, Mulder moved casually forward and took a seat beside her. "What were you watching that had you so absorbed?"

She glanced toward Mulder, and then a second time when his raised eyebrows told her what he was
asking. "No, Mulder, nothing like that. I was just doing some research for this case. Learning more about the stories of these...kids."

Mulder popped open his can of soda, careful not to let any overflow onto her bed. He took a small sip, then held the can toward her in offering. She started to shake her head no, but honestly, it sounded pretty good right then, and she let him pass the can into her now slightly steadier fingers. She took a sip. Too sweet. She was used to diet. But the cool and moist felt good.

"So did you learn anything helpful?" Mulder asked, taking back the soda and chugging a bit more.

"I learned that these stories do exactly what they're supposed to do."

"And what's that?"

"Get under people's skin. Scare them. I just spent the last hour listening to these videos, and then when you knocked on my door, my brain was primed to jump to all the worst and most sinister possibilities. That's how these things spread, Mulder. Basic primitive fears. The monster that invades your safe shelter in the night, that begs entry. There's nothing more fundamental in the human condition than fear of the night predator. We make nests, hide our young in caves and in tunnels and pray nothing that lives in the dark comes and invades our nest."

As Mulder took another sip of his drink, his free hand moved casually to rub up and down her spine, and the momentary contact through the thin silk brought more needed comfort than she would have expected. She closed her eyes to breathe it in for a second, then couldn't hide the slight cringe when his warm hand fell away. She shifted half-subconsciously to secure more contact between their upper arms where they sat side by side. Like they had been sitting since the first year they met. Just a little closer than necessary.

"So, you think this is all power of suggestion, Scully?"

"I think it's possible. Earlier tonight, when we were getting our bags out of the car, I thought I saw something, someone, under the streetlamp at the edge of the parking lot. Two figures, not very tall. Young, probably. Their faces were hidden. Dressed in jackets, or...hoodies. It was too far away. But I glanced down at my suitcase, and when I looked back they were gone."

"Why didn't you say something at the time? I asked you..."

"Because I didn't see anything, Mulder. I saw people, in a public place. That's exactly what I'm saying, the very notion of these stories gets into your brain and leads you to attach sinister meaning to the everyday, the ordinary."

For a moment they sat in silence and Scully could almost hear the cogs turning in Mulder's brain. A car whizzed by on the distant main street.

"So, if this is all an urban legend, or a bunch of teenagers pulling a prank, then what about the Garcia family? How do you explain what's happening to them?"

"I don't, Mulder. Not yet. That's why we're here. But just because we can't explain it doesn't mean it's paranormal."

"We might save time if you just had that tattooed on your forehead." He gestured across her brow, thumb and first finger curled to frame the imagined text.

"You'd think you'd just see it there all by yourself by now."
Mulder took a last sip of his drink and sighed. As he pushed to his feet, he tapped her forehead and said, "Well, put some sugar-plum thoughts in there Scully, and get some sleep. Breakfast at 6:45." Then he caught her completely off guard when he briefly cupped a hand to the back of her neck, placed a quick kiss to her forehead, and said, "Sorry I scared you." He didn't make eye contact, just swung to face the door and lumbered away.

"You want this closed?" he asked from the threshold.

Scully nodded. "Yes, please."

"Night, Scully."

"Good night, Mulder."

She sat for several seconds staring at the closed door before she got up and got ready for bed.

*****

Mesilla Valley Memorial was a surprisingly well-appointed facility for Las Cruces. The building wasn't massive, but the halls were clean and colorfully adorned and the equipment glimpsed through doorways as Scully followed Mulder toward the elevator bay was up-to-date and innovative. As the elevator doors slid open, Scully gave a cursory smile to the two young nurses stepping out of the car before she and Mulder stepped in. She was subliminally aware that she was classifying more and more working adults as "young," and she didn't really want to think about the larger significance of that.

Scully really hadn't wanted to get out of bed when her Tibetan Gong phone alarm had sounded that morning. The early sun angling through the crack in her room's curtains had helped warm her to the idea of wakefulness. She and Mulder had elected to drive to the local diner to save time, and she had indulged in little more than coffee and a few bites of an apple while Mulder had wolfed down waffles with syrup and a side of hash browns.

It was now almost 7:30am, and they had gotten Christian Garcia's bed number from the receptionist at the front counter. Their destination was only one floor up, in the Pediatric Intensive Care unit. At least Scully's destination. Mulder was heading on up to the Medical Ward on five where he might find the care team that had handled Veronica Garcia's infection until her death. This building had thus far been a killing field for the Garcia family, a waiting place for darkness to take their loved ones. Scully only hoped young Christian's story would have a happier ending. There was so little that could be done to treat hantavirus. Intubation, fluids, and oxygen therapy were the primary assistive treatments. After that, it was ultimately up to the body to heal itself.

Mulder touched a hand to her back as Scully stepped through the doors opening for the second floor. "Meet you back here," he said, and she nodded with a quick, "Right."

The elevator had opened onto a wide central room with a sort of command center at its core. A massive circular desk was populated by three staff members, all busily engaged. Hallways led away from the desk in four directions. The colors in this part of the hospital were even more vibrant and engaging. Paintings of cartoonish animals paraded around the walls, and white puffy clouds adorned the ceiling. Scully stepped up to the counter and cleared her throat, awaiting the attention of the nearest nurse. 'Anna,' her nametag read. "Excuse me," Scully prompted after a moment's quiet.

Anna held up a finger, eyes still on the computer screen in front of her. "Just a moment." She reached for a pen and jotted something down on a small notepad beside her, then turned and gave Scully her attention. "Yes, how can I help you?"
"I'm here to see Christian Garcia? I was told he's in bed 15 in this ward?"

"Are you family?"

"No, I'm..." she pulled her ID from her pocket and flipped it open, "FBI. Special Agent Dana Scully. I'm also a medical doctor with experience in pediatrics. My partner and I are looking into the recent bout of illness and incident in the Garcia family. I just hoped to visit Christian for a few minutes."

The woman nodded. "I should take you in there myself, but I have a patient who's been calling me for the last 15 minutes for assistance, so I need to tend to her first. I believe someone from Christian's family is in with him right now. Can I trust you to respect their preferences, Dr. Scully?"

Scully nodded. "Of course."

"Fair enough." She turned and pointed toward the hall at the back left of the room. "Down that way, about halfway down the hall on your left."

"Thank you."

Scully made her way down the hall, this one decorated with a sports theme and paintings of giant baseballs and hockey sticks, until she reached Room 15. The door was open and the room housed a single bed. Hantavirus wasn't contagious from person to person, but the intensive requirements of its care no doubt necessitated a private room.

Scully took a tentative step into the room and gave a cursory rap of her knuckles to the door. "Hello."

A girl of 16 or 17 sat in the far corner of the room, pretty, voluptuous for her age, with long dark hair she had tied back into a loose ponytail. The girl was dressed in tight-fitted jeans and a bright orange V-neck sweater. Studded boots rested on the edge of the window sill, and what looked like a school book was propped on her knees. She wore earbuds attached to her phone.

"Hello," Scully ventured with a bit more volume when the girl did not look up.

This time she lifted her eyes, unfazed at first, perhaps accustomed to a regular stream of specialists and practitioners coming in to attend to the patient. "Hi," she said simply.

Scully took several steps closer, the hum of the machines increasing around her. Her peripheral vision registered the small figure on the bed to her right, swathed in a sea of tubes and surgical tape. "My name is Dana Scully," she said to the girl. "I'm an agent with the FBI. Would you happen to be Mariela? Is this your brother?"

The girl immediately dropped her booted feet to the floor with a clunk, closed her book, and pulled out her earbuds. "You're from the FBI? Are you here about what we saw? About what they did to us? To my Dad?"

Scully drew a controlled breath before she replied. "We're here to assist the local law enforcement in the evaluation of the situation. You are Mariela?" she prompted.

The girl nodded confirmation, "Yes, I'm Mariela Garcia. And this is Christian, my brother."

"Mariela. I'm very sorry about what happened to your father. And your grandmother. I can only imagine what you're going through right now. We're here because we're concerned about what's been happening to your family, about whether there is anything that has been overlooked."
Mariela nodded and stood up, setting her school book on her chair. "There is something being overlooked. And it's still happening. And the police won't listen."

Scully held out a placating hand. "You can be certain my partner and I very much want to hear everything you have to say, and we will investigate every possible avenue of concern. But first," she gestured toward where Christian lay, "may I have a look at your brother? I'm also a medical doctor."

Mariela seemed to be a bit flattened at the idea of being put off once again, but her concern for her brother was plain on her face, and she deferred to that concern. "Sure," she said softly.

Scully gave a small smile of thanks, tried to infuse the gesture with a reassurance that Mariela's needs would not be neglected either, and moved over to Christian's bed. She picked up his chart from the foot of the bed and began scanning.

"His pulse ox is staying steady on the oxygen therapy. That's good." She skimmed over a few more details, then returned the chart to its pouch and moved closer to Christian. The boy was conscious, blinking in and out of wakefulness.

Scully lay a gentle hand on the young boy's wrist. The file had said he was nine years old, but lying here like this, so small beneath all the equipment, he looked little more than six. "Christian, can you hear me?"

The boy opened his eyes and blinked toward her.

Scully gave him a warm smile. "Hi. My name is Dana. I'm a doctor and an investigator. I'm here to help you and your family."

The boy blinked at her, eyes wide and dark but clearly perceptive even in his groggy state.

"I know you can't talk because of the tube. That's okay. I'm just checking in on you. Your sister's here," she said with a glance toward Mariela, and the boy's gaze followed hers.

Mariela stepped closer to the far side of the bed. "It's okay, Chris, she's here to help."

Scully gave a quick scan to the dosage information posted on the IV. Everything she was observing followed the textbook supportive therapies for hantavirus, and Scully could see nothing she would have done differently were the boy in her personal care. The battle was now his to wage, but the chart indicated he had at least stabilized and possibly improved in the past 24 hours. She wouldn't say as much to Mariela; she knew too well how illnesses such as this one could give the illusion of improvement only to see the patient take a sudden and irreversible plunge into decline. But she smiled down at Christian and indulged a motherly moment as she smoothed the boy's hair back from his face, habitually feeling for traces of fever as she did so. "You're doing really well, sweetie. You just relax and rest as much as you can. The doctors here are taking really good care of you."

The boy's sincere brown eyes seemed to appeal to her for a long moment, an entreaty of sorts, for what she was uncertain, then he blinked his eyes closed once more and his strained breathing deepened.

After a moment, Mariela said softly, "Is he gonna be okay?"

Scully looked up at the girl, silhouetted now against the morning light. She weighed her words for a moment, decided Mariela was too smart to be spoken to as a child. "From what I can tell, he's holding his own. It's encouraging. But he still has a long way to go. The doctors will keep doing all they can for him."
"But it's not really treatable, is it? They don't have a cure?"

Scully swallowed hard. "No. They don't. They can only help Christian fight the infection himself. But evidence shows a significantly improved survival rate for patients placed in ICU as early as possible after illness onset. You and your family gave your brother his best possible chance by bringing him here as quickly as you did."

Mariela took that in and nodded, fingers fidgeting with the remote cord at the edge of Christian’s bed.

"He's a really good kid," she said at last. "I mean...he's my little brother, and sometimes he drives me crazy, but...he doesn't deserve this."

"I understand. I have a little brother, too," Scully said.

Mariela looked up, surprised, and Scully tried to remember what it was like when it was still surprising to see evidence of adults being people like you. "You do?" Mariela asked.

"I do. A younger brother, an older brother, and...an older sister. I remember what it was like. My brother drove me crazy, but I would have been crushed if anything had ever happened to him. Still would, actually."

Mariela nodded, then she tilted her head, studying Scully with an almost unnerving intensity. "What happened to your sister?"

Scully caught her breath and fumbled for words for a moment. Mariela continued to watch her steadily, brow slightly furrowed in concern.

"Umm...Do you...do you have school today, Mariela?" Scully asked.

The girl took a moment to register the diversion, then seemed to decide to let it go. "Yeah. I don't want to go. But my mom's insisting. I just have study hall first period today, though, so I skipped it to visit Christian for a little while. I have to leave soon."

"I'm sure your brother's very happy to have you here. Is your mother here as well?"

Mariela shook her head. "Not right now. She's been here so much, and now she's trying to plan my dad's funeral. We just finished my grandmother's. And she's missed so much work, I wanted to give her a chance to get something done this morning. I'm sure she'll be back in a couple of hours."

Scully gave a sad smile. "I'm sure your mother greatly appreciates your help. She must feel very alone right now. You as well."

Mariela shrugged. "I'm okay," she said, and it hurt Scully to see the girl's determined bravery.

They stood quietly a moment, then Mariela spoke, voice hushed and careful, almost afraid. "Do you know about the Black-Eyed Children, Dr. Scully? Is that why you came here? You know what they do to people?"

"Mariela, what do you think--"

Scully stopped at the footsteps behind her and Mariela's eyes darted to the doorway.

Scully turned to see Mulder stepping into the room.

"Hey," she said in quiet greeting. Then, turning back to Mariela, "This is my partner." Mulder moved into place beside her. "Agent Fox Mulder. Mulder, this is Mariela Garcia."
Mulder held out a hand across the foot of Christian's bed, and Mariela took it in greeting. "Mariela. It's good to meet you," he said. "I recognize you from your videos."

A small grin pulled at the corner of Mariela's pink-glossed lips. "You've seen my channel?"

Mulder nodded earnestly. "I have, and I'm very interested to hear your theories on what's happened here."

Mariela looked a little pained, and pulled her phone from her pocket to glance at the time. "I really want to talk to you guys, but I have to leave now or I won't make my second period class. My mom will kill me. Can I meet you after school? Will you be around?"

"Of course. Here." Mulder pulled his card from his pocket and held it out to Mariela. "Just give me a call on my cell when you're able to meet, and we'll meet you anywhere that works for you."

She took the card and tucked it in the front pocket of her jeans. "Thanks. I'll call."

"Please know, we're very sorry for you losses. Agent Scully and I will do everything in our power to assure your family isn't in any further danger."

Mariela looked like she wanted to say something more, but in the end she just nodded. "I'll call you after school," she confirmed. "We'll be here."

"It was nice to meet you, Mariela," Scully offered as the girl returned to her abandoned chair to gather her things.

"You too," she said, and then she was heading out the door, heavy boots clanking on the unforgiving floor.

Mulder turned to Scully. "Is anyone else from the family here? Her mother?"

Scully shook her head. "No, just Mariela. Her mother's involved in funeral plans for the father. Jesus, Mulder, I can't imagine planning two funerals in a row while my son is in the hospital with a life-threatening illness. And that girl, trying to support her mother and take care of her father and even go back to school while she's only days into processing her father's death. They're literally living through hell."

"I know."

"Anyone would look for an explanation for something like that. Some justification, some order to the universe. Something they could stop or control."

Mulder nodded. "I know I would."

"She's a very insightful girl," Scully said, staring out the window toward the distant mountains.

She could feel Mulder's eyes on her profile. "What makes you say that?"

But Scully only shook her head. She turned her attentions back to Christian and lingered by his bedside for a moment longer than necessary. She watched the pattern of his vitals on the screens.

"How's he doing, Scully?"

She drew a long breath, watched the rise and fall of the child's chest. "He's fighting. There's no
guarantee. The doctors are doing everything they should." She rested her fingers on Christian's thin arm one more time, feeling for the strength of his pulse, even though the monitors told her the factual information she needed to know. Sometimes human touch still needed to be part of the treatment plan.

"I'm sure they are." Mulder's tone was muted and respectful. Even he couldn't be excited about the destruction of a family, evil demons or no.

"He looks so little," Scully said quietly.

Mulder rested his fingertips on the small of her back. They stood together for another moment, and Scully tried not to think about how this felt, how they looked like parents standing here, how this wasn't their boy, but it could have been...years missed...a lifetime missed....high fevers, broken arms, first time driving, close calls where parents clung to one another and thanked their blessings their boy was once more safely tucked into his bed. She had no idea where her son would sleep tonight.

Scully turned and started toward the door. "Were you able to leave a message for the grandmother's doctor?"

Mulder nodded, falling into step beside her. "Yeah, she's not in the hospital today, but I got her contact information and left a message. I spoke briefly to one of the nurses who helped care for Mrs. Garcia. Hopefully, we can talk to the doctor by tomorrow."

"Nothing happens fast around here does it, Mulder?"

"Not so far. But we're supposed to meet Sheriff Aster in half an hour, so let's hope that gets us somewhere."

Scully pulled out her phone to check her messages as they stepped into the elevator. Mulder leaned back on the hand bar as they waited for the doors to close. Scully was about to click on the contact to send her brother a text, when Mulder asked, "Do you miss it?"

She looked up. "Do I miss what?"

"This." He gestured back into the hall from which they had come just as the doors swished closed on their view. "The pediatric ward. Being a full time doctor to the kids. I mean, you look...you look at home, there."

Scully exhaled on a soft hum. She slipped her phone back into her pocket, mentally noting to come back to the text later. "Sometimes I miss it," she admitted. "But it wears on you in its own way. The good days are amazing. The bad ones...brutal."

"I remember." Scully's eyes snapped to Mulder's at the intimate color in his voice. They hadn't acknowledged this kind of thing out loud for a while. How much he used to be on the inside of it all...really on the inside...feeling what she was going through right alongside her, holding her on the worst nights, sharing her pleasures at the victories.

"Yeah," was all she managed before the doors slid open and a group of loudly chattering visitors crowded eagerly into the cramped compartment, forcing Mulder and Scully to push their way out before the doors closed again.

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(End Chapter 3)
Chapter 4

Scully tossed the keys to Mulder as they crossed the hospital parking lot. "You drive," she said, and he was a little amused, because it was not a question or a request, just an instruction. No malice, just Scully.

Mulder squished himself into the cramped space behind the wheel, then proceeded to slide the seat back several inches.

Scully kept her attention on her phone for a few minutes as he navigated onto the main road.

The sheriff's station was back in Verdad, so Mulder had to negotiate the slight thickening of traffic in the heart of Las Cruces that passed for morning rush hour until they were once again at the edge of the town. The sun was already high in the sky. Mulder had tossed his suit jacket into the back of the car. He reached back now and pulled it through the space between the seats.

Scully automatically caught hold of the fabric, helping him negotiate as he drove. "What do you need?" she asked.

"Front left pocket," he said.

Scully pulled the jacket into her lap and fished in his pocket. They had never really had boundaries about things like this. Even before they had crossed the line from partners into couple, they had taken great liberties with one another's personal spaces and possessions. On multiple occasions, Scully had let herself into his motel room and packed up his things ready to leave some small town that had proven to be more the cause of its own problems than a victim. Now, she grasped the object he knew was the sole content of that pocket and pulled it out into her lap.

A glass bottle of her favorite brand of pink lemonade, exclusive to the southwestern part of the
country.

Scully looked up at him with a subtle expression that was a mixture of surprise, curiosity, and a more intimate brand of affection he had missed too much these days. "You got me a lemonade?" she said softly.

Mulder shrugged, glancing back at the road. "They had a vending machine upstairs at the hospital. It's the desert, Scully, you need to stay hydrated."

"Thank you," she said, still watching his profile with a lingering smile. She popped off the lid and took a drink.

The sheriff's station in Verdad was one of the more modern and well-maintained buildings on the town's main street. Mulder parked in one of the angled parking spaces at the front of the building. He followed Scully past the flowering cactus garden, through the double doors into the well-airconditioned lobby.

They pulled off their sunglasses, adjusting to the interior dimness. Mulder was reaching for his badge and approaching the young man in uniform behind the front desk when a voice called out to him.

"Agent Mulder, I presume?"

He looked up to see Sheriff Aster emerging from a glass-walled office to the right of the reception area. The man approached with a polite but subdued smile. He had an air of heavy shouldered responsibility.

"Agent Mulder, Agent Scully. Good to meet you. I really appreciate you coming out here."

The sheriff was a slender man, nearly as tall as Mulder. In his mid-forties, his sunbaked skin told stories of a life outdoors. His handshake was firm, a coiled and wiry strength radiating off his physique.

"We're glad to help any way we can," Mulder said.

"Sheriff," Scully said in greeting as he shook her hand in turn.

"Come on in, have a seat in my office."

Mulder let Scully step past him and choose her chair before he settled into the one beside her. The decor in the sheriff's office was nicer than what they had seen in many other towns the size of Verdad. The walls were painted in pastels and desert tones, and elegant framed photos of wildlife adorned one wall. The people here seemed to prioritize maintenance of law enforcement and hospital services.

Aster closed his office door, then he circled to his side of desk. He stood for a moment at his own chair, hands on his hips. A large window behind the desk had the blinds turned up to dampen the morning sun, but the sheriff was still thrown into dark silhouette. His brow creased with a flicker of concern, and his fingers drummed restlessly on his gun belt. "If you don't mind my asking, Agents, why didn't the FBI send someone from one of the local field offices? Why schlep you two all the way out here from D.C.?

Mulder nodded in acknowledgment of the fairness of the question. "Agent Scully and I specialize in cases that are unclear on their classification."

Considering Mulder's words, Aster turned his gaze toward Scully, and she met the challenge with a lifted chin and slightly raised eyebrow. Having Scully as a brick wall at his side was a tool Mulder had relished on many occasions. Of course, her impact could be equally damaging when she didn't believe in his cause, when the local law enforcement could read her lack of faith in his theory. But
today she was presenting a united front. So far. Maybe the lemonade had helped.

Aster nodded to himself, accepting their story, and settled into his padded leather chair. "Can I get you something? Some coffee? Water?"

"No, thank you, we're fine," Scully said. "We were able to stop by the morgue in El Paso yesterday evening and speak with Dr. Johanson about Mr. Garcia. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on the accident."

Aster gave a heavy sigh and folded his hands over his neatly organized desktop. A few inches from his fingers stood a perpetual motion machine of suspended metal balls, now hanging still. "Honestly, I can't find a clear cause for the accident. The car is still being looked at for any hidden mechanical failures. But there are no clear footprints or animal tracks at the scene that would indicate Mr. Garcia might have swerved to avoid something. No one has come forward as a witness. Johanson hasn't come up with anything on the autopsy. Preliminary tox screen looks clear. We're still waiting on the full report, but... The truth is, I'm at a loss."

Scully crossed her legs and leaned in a little, forearm resting on her knee. "Well, there are certainly many similar accidents across the country every day without a clear explanation. An internal distraction, something dropped on the floorboard the driver reached for, bad news on a cell phone call. I assume you've checked Mr. Garcia's phone records?"

"We're working on it, still waiting for that to come in. Honestly, if it weren't for the other circumstances, I probably would accept the accident as just that, a freak situation we'll probably never fully understand. We've had our share of those, especially at the speeds people drive on the open roads around here."

"So, exactly what other circumstances lead you to believe that this case is different?" Mulder asked.

Aster shifted his gaze off toward the far wall of the office, through the glass to the distant regions of the lobby. He shrugged. "It just seems like way too much of a coincidence, don't you think? All of this?"

Mulder could feel Scully's jaw tensing beside him. He refused to look at her.

The sheriff continued his thought without their response. "I mean, first the reports from the Garcias of the strange children at their house, then the grandmother's rare illness, the boy getting sick, and now Mr. Garcia's accident. This is an ordinary family, Agent Mulder. My sister's kids are on a swim team with Christian. I can't imagine why anyone would have it in for them, not like this. I used to work in El Paso PD. That's a border town. Not unfamiliar with the drug scene. And what we're seeing here...the systematic elimination of an innocent family...that smacks of cartel. Except these aren't drugland slayings. These aren't deaths that can be easily caused, if at all. It's like the family is...I don't know, cursed or something," he finished, shoulders sagging as if even suggesting such a thing were a sign of his failure as an officer.

"Are you saying you subscribe to Mariela's belief that these incidents were brought on by the Garcias' contact with the Black-Eyed Children?" Mulder prompted, knowing Scully wouldn't be the first to suggest the paranormal. She would leave that up to the sheriff. Mulder believed in taking the plunge early and finding out where he stood with the locals.

Aster turned his full attention onto Mulder, pulling up straighter in his chair and pressing his palms into his desk. "No, sir. I have heard the rumors, and that kind of thing spreads like wildfire around here. That is exactly why I wanted you folks to assist in this matter. I want to find the real cause behind this, not resort to folklore. All I'm saying is that I see how the idea would take hold."
"Are you familiar with the stories of the Black-Eyed Kids? Have you received reports before?"

The man sighed heavily. Still backlit from his office window, he appeared like a stone standing strong against the onslaught of light. "Look, Agent Mulder. There have been a few other reports about the kids, lately. But here's the thing: We're not that far from Roswell in one direction and White Sands Missile Range in the other. Huge swaths of land around here are inaccessible to the public, a testing ground for all kinds of government technology. Rumors run rampant down here, things get reported, stories spread… People blame the government for a lot of things. And when that doesn't work…"

"...they blame alien governments?" Mulder offered.

Aster huffed out a humorless laugh. "Something like that. But these people died for a reason. One we can explain if we look hard enough. And I want to get to the bottom of it."

"And we will do all we can to help you accomplish that goal, Sheriff," Scully offered sincerely. Aster nodded, seeming to sense her unclouded commitment to the facts.

"Do you think it's possible someone is preying on the community's vulnerability?" she asked. "Do you suspect hoaxes? Teenaged pranksters?"

"It's possible," the sheriff said, words slow and careful. "It wouldn't be the first time. It also wouldn't be the first time that imaginations just got out of hand and there was ultimately nothing there to see. If you don't mind, I'd rather start with the concrete evidence before I look too deeply into spooky stories. I hope seeing law enforcement taking clear steps will reassure the community that there isn't some nameless threat beyond our control."

Scully cleared her throat. "Well, in the interest of pursuing that course, could you give us directions to the exact location where Mr. Garcia's accident took place? We'd like to investigate the scene ourselves."

"Absolutely. I can take you out there myself, if you'd like."

Scully shook her head. "I don't think that's necessary, unless there's something specific you would like to show us we couldn't find on our own. I'm sure you have enough going on here without having to walk us through our job," Scully finished with a polite smile.

The sheriff started to reply, but broke off when a female officer wrapped her knuckles on the frosted glass of his open door and pushed it open a crack. The woman was at least a food shorter than Aster. Slender, but muscular, hair secured into a long tight braid. "Pardon the interruption," she said briskly.

"What is it, Janet?"

"Just got a call from the Monroes out on Camino de Primavera. Again. Seems like another domestic. Peterson is about 15 minutes out, but I thought you'd want to know about this one."

Mulder took the opportunity handed them. He did want to pump Aster for more details about any strange complaints in recent weeks, but Scully had had the right idea in trying to secure them access to the accident scene without anyone looking over their shoulders. He pushed up from his chair. "Like Agent Scully said, you clearly have a job to do, Sheriff. Just give us the location, and we'll be out of your way. We'll touch base later, compare our impressions."

Aster hesitated for a moment, eyes jumping from Mulder to the officer in the doorway, then he gave a decisive nod. "All right, Janet, radio Peterson, tell him I'll be right behind him." Janet nodded and
disappeared back down the hall. Aster reached for a pen and paper. He began sketching a quick map. "It's out on the county road. Here's the nearest mile marker. You'll see a small trail up the valley toward a ranch house in the side of the mountain. About 500 feet north of the turnoff, there's a large juniper tree on your left. You'll see the damage from the impact of the car and probably some leftover crime scene tape."

Scully took the proffered paper. "Thank you, Sheriff. We'll be in touch."

They were outside again in the increasingly intense desert sun, and Mulder was rounding to the driver's side of the car when Scully paused with her fingers on the passenger door handle, and said, "Mulder, did you notice the scar on the back of Sheriff Aster's neck?"

He looked up, wishing there were no sunglasses between his eyes and hers. Ninety percent of the important things Scully said in life were said with her eyes. "No, I didn't notice. What was it?"

She looked down. "Probably nothing. Just...it looked a little like mine." She pulled open the door and sank into the car.

Mulder stared at the car hood for a moment, then climbed into the driver's seat.

As Mulder navigated them out of the parking lot, Scully flipped open the manila file on the case and dropped the map onto the top of the paperwork. She read the names of the main connecting routes, and Mulder tried to relate them to what he had learned so far of the basic layout of the town. They didn't have an exact address to enter into the GPS. Scully had brought up a map on her phone and was zooming in and matching the road names to Aster's sketched route. Mulder couldn't help but notice that she unclipped a photo print of an online sketch of a supposed Black-Eyed Child from the left side of the folder, flipped it over, and re-clipped it so the face could no longer be seen. That was the third time in 24 hours he had seen her turn or cover one of the pictures.

"The exit for the county road Aster was talking about should be up next. About a quarter of a mile."

"Aren't we going toward White Sands? Is this a back route into the installation?"

"Maybe it used to be. There are only two gates, now. None of these old roads connect, anymore. At least not publicly."

"How do you know that?"

"We were out here before, Mulder."

He stared at her. "We've been to Las Cruces before?"

"No, but we were on the other side. Alamogordo, by Holloman Air Force Base. Back in...God, what was it....the late nineties? We never came all the way down here, though."

"Then, I repeat...how do you know that?"

"Well, I paid attention at the time. And I get bored on planes. Sometimes maps are the only thing to look at when you're snoring too loudly for me to focus on what I'm reading."

"Ouch."

"You asked."

"And maybe now--"
"This is your exit, right here."

"This?"

"Yeah, right here." Scully glanced over her shoulder to the far right lane. "You're clear, take it."

They drove down the county road in silence, watching as the buildings thinned, as their own elevation gradually rose and Las Cruces sank from view into the now distant valley.

"Are we getting close?" Mulder asked, watching an actual tumbleweed dance across the two-lane road. He was expecting a roadrunner any second with a determined coyote close behind. He realized they had passed only one other car in the last five minutes.

"Very," Scully said. "We're only one mile marker away." She leaned forward a bit, gazing out the windshield and off to her left. "In fact, I think that's the turn-off for the ranch house the sheriff talked about right up there."

"So, we should be close." Mulder touched his foot to the brake, intending to pull over as they approached the scene. But the pedal didn't fully respond. He tried again. The brakes felt spongy and sticky, like they couldn't find traction. He tried to angle the car toward the right shoulder, but the wheel would barely turn and the trajectory of the car rapidly shifted toward the left.

Scully caught on. "Mulder? What's going on?"

"I don't know...."

"Mulder, slow down!"

"I can't, the car's not--"

They were heading on an angle across the oncoming lane, toward a large cactus in a shallow ravine at the left of the road.

Mulder slammed down on the increasingly useless brakes, pulled up the emergency brake hard, and gave a last yank on the unyielding steering wheel. "Scully, hold on!" he cried, swinging out an arm across her chest just as they slammed into the ravine.

In the silence following the crash, the sound of their rapid breathing and the rush of blood in Mulder's ears was inexplicably loud. He turned his head toward Scully, neck a little painful in the aftermath, "Are you okay?"

Scully was panting through parted lips, eyes wide, staring at the cactus now tucked awkwardly into the front of their car.

"Scully?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I think I'm fine." Her voice was shaking. "Are you okay?"

"I think so, yeah."

Scully's fingers curled around his arm where it remained across her chest, and he let his hand fall to her lap.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I...honestly don't know. The steering wheel just stopped working, I couldn't turn the car. The brakes
barely worked, they only slowed us down a little. I'm sorry."

"That's not your fault," she said matter-of-factly, gaze scanning their surroundings. Scully snapped open her seatbelt and Mulder did the same, grateful when both latches responded normally. His life had been saved more than once by a seatbelt, but he was also just a little bit terrified of being trapped in a deadly situation.

Scully got out of the car and walked several feet back up the road. She was scanning the pavement, as though she could find something to explain what had affected their car, what had thrown them into the ravine.

Mulder trailed behind her, pulling off his sunglasses despite the glare. He was still feeling a little claustrophobic. She turned to him now, bewildered as her search came up empty. "Did something just go wrong with the car?"

Mulder shrugged. "You've got me, Scully. That's a lot of things to go wrong all at once." He turned back to the offending vehicle.

Scully came closer and stooped down to try to see underneath the car. "Do you think someone tampered with it? Sabotaged our car?"

Mulder shook his head. "I have no idea. It's possible." He looked over his shoulder, toward potential oncoming traffic. He squinted at a distant flash of yellow.

"Scully?"

"Yeah?"

He pointed up the road. "Is that where we were headed? Is that the tree Mr. Garcia crashed into?"

Scully pushed to her feet and stepped up beside him, hand shading her eyes as she followed his gaze into the distance. "Yeah, that should be it," she said softly, thoughts spinning almost audibly. He had told her once that he could hear her thinking. It was still true.

They turned back to their own useless vehicle and stared in silence for a long moment.

"Hunh," Mulder said at last.

They continued to stare and breathe for another long moment, steam rising off the crumpled hood of the automobile.

Then Scully said, "Okay, it's weird."

Mulder just bit his lip and nodded.

*****

The accident gave them plenty of time to investigate the crime scene while they waited for a tow truck. Not that there was much to see. A few days had passed since Mr. Garcia's crash. Animal tracks would have faded. Skid marks were faint. But the unnerving truth that Scully could not quite push from her awareness was that the pattern seemed uncannily similar to what they had just experienced. A tree on the left side of the road, just at the edge of the shallow ravine. No other cars around. No distraction. No clear reason for the accident.
The big difference: Joseph Garcia was dead, and they were alive.

Scully kept telling herself an examination of their car would show a clear mechanical failure. Or signs of tampering. Perhaps something similar would turn up on the Garcias' car as well.

Eventually, she gave up on the crime scene and walked back to wait by their car. The mid-day sun was glaring down on this barren expanse of ground, and the intensity was noticeable on the back of her neck and the bridge of her nose. She should put on sunblock. She had some in her briefcase.

Mulder drifted back toward where she stood, a thin sheen of sweat forming on his forehead. They weren't used to the heat, yet. Or the elevation. Scully reached through the open car window and pulled out her now quite warm lemonade. She drained the last of it, replenishing her fluids and giving herself a little sugar kick.

"You should get some water," she said to Mulder, and he nodded.

They had bought a twelve-pack of bottles the first night in town and left it on the floor of the backseat. He fetched himself a bottle and tossed one to her as well. She took a drink and found she was still surprisingly thirsty.

Mulder leaned back on the car door beside her. He squinted up at the wide expanse of desert sky. The clouds over the southwest could be vast and endless like nowhere else. "No stars this time, Scully," he said. He tilted his head down to her. "You want to play tick-tac-toe in the sand?"

"Pass," she said. "How long did they say it would take?"

He looked at his watch. "Another twenty minutes or so. Dispatch said they were short-handed today."

"Perfect."

"Hey, at least you're warm and dry, right?"

"There is that," she conceded with a brief smile. She took another drink of her water and stared at the sand and dust coating the toes of her black pumps. She would be finding traces of sand for weeks after this case.

No stars this time, Scully. Surrender to the flow.

Sixteen years could pass like a heartbeat.

*****

Their rental car dies about 10:00pm on a back road to nowhere. It takes a while just to track down a name and a general mile marker to give the tow truck driver; along with their aliases du jour, of course. They are June and Todd Hoffman this night. She has been going with months of the year, lately. In the past two weeks she has been April, Augusta, and October. She is a little partial to October. It is pleasantly exotic. Maybe she should dye her hair dark and pretend she is the grown-up version of a former goth girl.

Next month she is thinking of going with flowers. Rose, Lily, Daisy, Laurel.

She misses Dana. But he still whispers it to her at night. So she will never forget.

"How long has it been?" she asks, again.
"Five minutes since the last time you asked. Surrender to the flow, Scully. The nearest tow truck was ninety minutes away."

"Fine." She is not really that impatient, she is just tired. They were looking for a place to stop for the night when the engine gave out.

"Besides," Mulder says, "it's a beautiful night. Look up. Scully, look at all these stars."

He is right about that. No matter how much time they spend away from the city, she continues to be amazed by the virtual ceiling of starlight that blankets the rural night.

"Here, I've got an idea," Mulder says, and there is a slight sparkle in his eye that both warms her and makes her a bit wary as he rounds the car and rummages through the trunk.

"Mulder, we're not going fairy hunting in the woods."

"Don't be ridiculous, Scully," he says, head still in the trunk. "There are no fairies in this part of the country. They migrated in 1963. But, no, nothing as exciting and complex as that."

He emerges from beneath the trunk lid, carrying nothing but a thick blanket.

"We're not doing that in the woods either," she quips.

Mulder flashes a sarcastic smile and nods. "Another appealing idea, but wrong again."

He proceeds to open one of the car doors and step up onto the runner. With a bit of dramatic flourish, he spreads the thick if slightly dog-eared blanket over the top of the car. "Come on." He holds out a hand to her. "Let's do some stargazing."

A grin tugs at the corners of her mouth despite her attempts to remain cynical. "Mulder…"

He nods her toward him with his head. "Come on. Come on up."

She steps toward the car as Mulder steps down off the runner. He rests his hands on her hips, guiding her to climb up onto the front of the car and slip off her shoes. She is a little self-conscious about the angle as she climbs. About letting her blouse ride up and the snug low band of her slacks, because it's been over a year, but she still hasn't lost all the pregnancy weight, and it makes her feel like she is in the wrong body. It was easier when she still had her baby, nestling against her padded curves. Now she is just a stranger in her own skin. She wants to be hard and tough again.

Mulder loves her in every shape and she knows it, but it's still hard to believe some days.

She makes it onto the roof with a reasonable amount of grace. Mulder is right behind her.

They stretch out on their backs on the blanket, side by side in the warm, still night. The position is surprisingly comfortable. And she really is tired, really had meant to be finishing a hot shower and crawling into a welcoming bed by now. She stretches her spine, lets her ribcage spread as she draws a full breath of the night air. Mulder's body is a grounding and soothing warmth alongside her own. It's been a few months, long enough for them to get on each other's nerves a few times, long enough for them to snap and bicker and want to take breaks. But his very real presence beside her still has an air of wonder about it. She is grateful every time she looks up or reaches out a hand and bumps into his warmth, no matter how pissed she is at him in the moment.

"They really are beautiful," she whispers. She lets her thigh fall against his.
"That they are." There is that little bit of boyish wonder in his voice. After all he has lost, all the scars he bears. She needs that. His hope keeps her own alive. She wavered without him.

"Are you sorry you didn't become an astronaut, Mulder? That you never made it to those stars?"

To her surprise, his answer is quick and clear. "No. I think some things are meant to be seen just the way they are. From right here on Earth."

"I thought you wanted to know everything that's out there. Solve all the mysteries of the unknown."

"Actually, Scully, I think that's you. You're the one who wants it all to make sense. To study it all, classify it. Me...I want to see the possibilities."

Mulder is still watching the stars, but now Scully is watching him.

"And what do you see up there, Mulder? What possibilities do you see for us?" She tries for playful banter, but a whisper of the bleakness lurking in her chest bleeds into the words.

He turns to her then, tangles his fingers with hers and rests their joined hands on his thigh. He's so close in the dark she can feel the breath of his words. "Scully, I know," he says, with such intimacy and understanding and unclouded love it takes her breath away.

Her heart rate accelerates and her stomach flutters. "Know what?" she asks, but she knows.

"I know you went through hell while I was gone. I know you're still fighting your way back. I can't even imagine...I lost him, too, but I only had him for a moment. You..."

She catches her breath and looks back up at the stars. They don't talk about this.

"I know it's hard to see anything right now but the dark between the stars," he says to her profile. "But when you look closely, really really closely...you can see there are more stars, even in the dark places. They're just a little farther away. You need a little help to see them. But they're still up there. And they won't fail you."

She keeps staring at the stars and tries to breathe. She squeezes his hand hard.

They stay quiet for a long time.

"Do you think he'll love to look up at the stars?" she whispers.

"How could he not?" he says. "He started his life looking up at you."

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(end Chapter 4)
Chapter 5

Waiting for the tow truck, riding back to Las Cruces and the local Enterprise office, filling out a claim, being assigned a new car, coordinating with the police to have their first car examined for tampering before it got back into the hands of the rental company, trying to explain to the tow truck driver he couldn't just drop potential evidence at his local mechanic because he "trusted him"...the chaos ate up the rest of their afternoon as well as any opportunity for an actual lunch.

They finally emerged from the miasma in a shiny silver Audi A6 (a free upgrade in hopes of not getting sued). Scully was munching on a breakfast bar from her briefcase and sticking an occasional bite into Mulder's mouth as he drove when his cell phone rang. Mariela. She was free to talk to them between school and work.

"She wants to meet outside her high school," Mulder said when he disconnected the brief call. "It's not far from here."

Ten minutes later, he was steering the car into the high school parking lot against the surging tide of teenaged exodus. Less than a third of the spaces in the large side lot remained occupied. A smattering of students still made their ways to their cars, but the buses had already gone.

Mariela had asked them to meet at the picnic tables behind the baseball diamond. Mulder circled the school, then parked at the back edge of the blacktop. He and Scully walked along the side of the baseball diamond toward the wooden tables in the distance, the smell of old popcorn strong in the air. It was probably leftover cooking smells from the school kitchen, but the scent gave the feeling of an active baseball game, and Mulder could almost hear the crowd.

In actuality, the field lay deserted. Mulder found himself wishing he had a ball and a couple of gloves on him. They could have tossed around the ball while they talked. People often revealed more when their hands were busy.

The aging picnic tables were nearly deserted. Only three students sat on the benches -- two near the edge of the field, then Mariela on the table farthest from the parking lot. The girl stood as they approached. Her bulky school bag sat in the dust at her feet, her phone and a water bottle on the table in front of her.
Mulder held out his hand and Mariela shook it. "Mariela, thank you for meeting with us."

The girl gave an incredulous huff. "Thank you for listening to me."

Scully offered her hand as well. "We want to hear all available information. We're here to make sure nothing gets missed if we can help it."

Mariela nodded. "Thanks."

Mulder settled on the near side bench while Scully circled the table and took a seat beside Mariela. He gazed out over the baseball field and the open ground beyond the high school property. A lot of open space beside the highway. He turned back and looked down at his own hands. The table in front of them was supposed to be yellow, but the weathered boards showed years of faded and painted-over letters, mostly student couples declaring their undying love or trash talk toward neighboring school teams.

Mulder decided to start with the story Mariela probably most wanted or needed to tell. The one the other authorities didn't want to listen to. "Mariela, can you tell us about the night the kids came to your house? Take us through it? Would you mind?"

The girl nodded. "Sure." He could see the nervousness running through her at the mention of the kids. But there was an eagerness, too, just as he had seen in her at the hospital. She was keeping quiet about what she knew to try to support her mom, her brother. But she knew there was more going on, and she was starved for someone to listen.

"Had you ever heard of the Black-Eyed Children before that night?" Mulder asked.

"Not really. I might have heard it said around, but...I didn't really know what they were. Not enough to know what to watch out for. Maybe if I had..." She faded out and stared down at the bag resting against her leg.

"Just take your time and tell us exactly what happened," Scully said gently.

Mariela drew a deep breath, exhaled heavily, then said, "It was about 11 o'clock at night, I think. Maybe close to midnight. It was a Thursday. Christian was asleep, because it was a school night. But I was still up because I was working on a paper I had due for AP History that Friday. My dad had fallen asleep on the couch in front of the TV, my grandma was in her room, maybe asleep, I don't know. My mom was in the kitchen with me. Somebody knocked on the front door. It was weird just to have someone knock that time of night, you know? We were kind of nervous just because of that. But we thought it might be a neighbor who needed help or something. My mom went to the door and looked through the window to the side of it and she could see it was young people. Or at least...short, I guess. She opened the door a little but left the chain on at first, and she asked if she could help them. I was watching over her shoulder. There were two kids. One was pretty young. Younger than Chris, maybe six or seven. He was a boy. The older one was a girl, maybe eleven I would guess. But I couldn't really see their faces well. They had on jeans and dark hoodies with the hoods pulled up. The older one did most of the talking. She said they needed help. That they were lost and they needed to come inside and call their parents. It's not the safest neighborhood at night for little kids to be out by themselves. It's not bad, but, it's not great, you know?"

Mulder nodded. "Sure. They sound too young to be out on their own anywhere, anyway."

"Yeah. The girl's voice was...weird."

"Weird how?" Scully prompted.
Mariela frowned, seeming to look for the words. One hand cradled her phone, the other restlessly traced the edge of the rip in the thigh of her jeans. Her nails were painted a glittered blue. "It was like...like she was saying the words—saying they were lost, that they were cold. Even though it wasn't really cold outside. But it was like she was reciting lines. Like she wasn't really just talking about herself."

Scully drew a thoughtful breath. "Do you think she was being coerced? Do you get the impression someone was forcing her to do this? Maybe an adult hidden out of sight?"

Mariela hooked her glittery nail into the edge of her phone case. "I mean...it's possible, but...she didn't seem scared. If she were being forced to do this, shouldn't she have been scared?"

"Maybe," Mulder volunteered. "Or it could have been a less threatening situation. A con artist parent asking their kid to play a part in the ruse?"

"It's possible, yeah. But they seemed pretty...self-assured. Not like needy kids. But it wasn't just that. My mom felt it, too. She usually helps kids, like everybody's kids, you know? She's the type that sort of mothers every kid who comes near her. She used to work as a school nurse when I was little. And my dad being a teacher, there are always kids around. But my mom didn't want to let these kids in that night. She kept glancing at me, and we sort of looked at each other because we both just knew something was wrong. It was like...when there's a storm coming and everything just kind of...stops. The birds are all quiet, and the air makes the hair on your arms stand up."

Scully swallowed a little stiffly. Mariela was too involved in her own story to notice any reaction in her listeners, but Mulder caught it. He silently logged the observation and kept his focus on their witness.

"The kids kept getting more insistent about coming in," Mariela said. "My mom asked them to give her their parents' phone number and said she would call, but the kids just kept insisting they had to come inside. Like that was the most important thing. My mom had turned on the porch light, and when the kids looked up to ask if they could just use the bathroom, we could really see their faces. That's when we saw their eyes."

"And what did their eyes look like exactly?" Scully asked.

Mariela looked to Scully as she spoke. "They were all black. Like...completely black. No whites at all. No pupil you could tell from the iris or anything. Just black and almost...wet. Like oil. I've seen goth kids with the colored eye tattoos or with those creepy contacts that make their eyes all black, but...this was different. It looked...organic."

"But it was dark," Scully said, kindly enough.

"It was then, but after they came inside we could really see their faces."

"Your parents let the kids in?" Mulder asked.

"My Dad did," Mariela said. "All the talking woke him up, and he came and he just couldn't stand the thought of leaving them out there. He didn't understand why we hadn't let them in yet. I don't think he talked to them enough himself before he said to let them in. He didn't have time to realize...that it was...weird."

Mulder nodded. "So, what happened when you let them in?"

"First, Mom pointed them to the bathroom and went to get them some juice in the kitchen. Then the kids came out of the bathroom and sat on the couch in the living room where my dad and I were
They sat right on the edge, like...like they weren't used to soft chairs or something. It felt strange. My mom brought them juice and asked them for their parents' phone number again. She even offered to just let them make the call. Then it was even weirder -- they just said their parents would probably be out looking for them and their parents didn't have a cell phone, so it probably wouldn't help to call. The kids each took one sip of the juice, then just left the rest on the table. And they didn't really ask for anything. They both said, 'thank you for letting us in.' I think that's the only thing the younger one said."

"How long were they in your house?" Mulder asked.

Mariela shook her head. A gust of desert wind blew her long hair across her face, and she reached up to hook it behind her ear just as Scully did the same with her own. "That's the weird thing," Mariela continued. "Or...one of the weirdest parts of all the weirdness, I guess. It seemed like only about ten minutes, but when we looked at the clock after they left, my dad said it had been an hour since he woke up. I was feeling really dizzy, and I thought it was just because I'd been working on my paper for so many hours and it was so late. But my mom was kind of out of it, too, and she just said we should all go to bed. I don't even remember going to bed after that. I just remember waking up the next morning in my bed."

"Has anything like that ever happened to you before? Have you lost time?" Scully asked.

Mariela shook her head. "No. Never. And, no, I'm not taking any medication. I don't even drink."

Scully nodded. "How did they leave? The kids?"

"We heard this car outside, and the kids stood up and the girl said, 'That's our ride,' like this was all normal or expected. And when we went to the door and looked out, there was this dark car parked at the end of our driveway. We couldn't really see what kind of car, just some sort of dark sedan or something. None of us saw a license plate or anything. The police asked, but we couldn't remember anything. Later I found out Chris had been awake and looking out his bedroom window, too, but he didn't see anything more than we did. But there were these two people standing by the car with sunglasses on. Which was bizarre, because it was the middle of the night, and the only light was our porch light and the little lamppost in our neighbor's yard. Neither of the adults said anything, but the kids said right together, 'Those are our parents, we have to go with them now.' My parents didn't really want to just let these kids go off with some strangers at night, but...the truth is we just all wanted those kids out of our house. From the moment they knocked, everything just felt...dark. Like...when you're in a house where somebody's really sick or dying. And all your instincts are telling you this isn't a safe place, that something here is bad or...toxic. You know what I mean?"

"I do," Scully said, and Mulder was surprised by the simple and honest reply. For a moment his gaze lingered on Scully's profile, wondering what experience she had immediately identified from her own life, but Scully kept her attention on the girl.

"Everything changed after that night," Mariela said. "We should never have let them in. Do you know about them? Do you know about the Black-Eyed Kids?" She looked up at Mulder, gaze earnest and piercing, and Mulder gave the girl a soft nod.

"I have heard the theories. You're the first witness I've spoken to personally."

Mariela turned to Scully. "And did you know about them? Before this?"

Scully hesitated a beat, then shook her head. "No. Agent Mulder introduced me to the phenomenon when he came across your case."
Mariela looked pained. "I'm sorry."

Scully tilted her head and leaned in. "Sorry for what?"

Mariela swallowed hard and looked down at her phone as she spoke. "Once you know about them...they're supposed to be able to find you more easily. They're more likely to visit you. You might be...in more danger now."

Scully narrowed her eyes but didn't speak, choosing respectful sympathy over correcting what Mulder knew she saw as superstition, and Mulder saw the mother in her he had seen since their very first case that had involved a child.

"We just want to help," Mulder said. "That's our job. And sometimes that means running toward the fire," he added with a wistful smile.

Mariela turned her phone face up and pressed the side button to display the time. "I have to go. I have to be at work by six. Is there anything else you need to know right now?"

Mulder shook his head. "You've told us enough for now. Can we talk again soon?"

"Sure. Will you tell me if you find out anything before then?"

"Of course. I promise we'll keep you in the loop."

The three of them stood, and Mulder again shook Mariela's hand while Scully gave the girl a quick but sincere smile, thanking her for her honesty. Mariela snatched up her bag and hurried off across the parking lot toward an aged Geo Metro. Mulder guessed she had bought the car with her own money. The kid seemed to be a hell of a hard worker. AP classes, a job after school, helping with her brother. And losing half her family. Sometimes the world just sucked.

Mulder dropped back onto the wooden bench, facing away from the table this time, gazing out over the baseball diamond. The wind was picking up, little pieces of paper and old soda cups skimming across the rocky ground.

Scully sank to the seat beside him, moving with her usual grace and control. When Mariela's Geo vanished onto the distant highway, Scully said, "Have you noticed our observer?"

Indeed he had. A boy, probably another student, had been standing half behind a lone tree on the far side of the field, observing their conversation with Mariela with a singular intensity. He still hovered by the tree, too far away to hear, but watching their every interaction. "Yep. Do you think he'll approach if we sit here a little longer?"

"You think we'll get the frightened rabbit reaction if we approach?"

"Could be."

They tried sitting a bit longer, conveying a casual air. Mulder pulled out a package of sunflower seeds from his coat pocket and started munching. The boy kept watching, but made no move to approach. Mulder offered a seed to Scully, but she shook her head.

"Is your gun under your blouse or just your jacket?" he asked.

"My blouse. Why?"
"Want to take off your jacket and try going in alone?"

Scully lifted an eyebrow. "Mulder, did you just ask me to use my breasts as an interrogation tool?"

"Not specifically, although now that you say it, I can think of countless applications. But I was thinking no jacket looks more casual, less like an authority figure, and less like you're hiding something underneath it. Well...other than the obvious." He tossed away a seed.

"So...short, female, and non-threatening?"

"Only in appearance. Little do they know."

"Fine. Got my back?"

"Always and forever, bestie."

Scully huffed out a small laugh, and shrugged out of her suit jacket.

*****

She made her way across the sparse and gravelly field, stepping carefully in her heels and hoping there weren't too many goats' heads as she wandered farther away from the beaten path around the baseball field. She had lost many an expensive pair of shoes to these viscous little desert irritants.

The boy was watching her approach, and she tried to strike a comfortable balance between acknowledging his attention and scanning the field around them until she was close enough to speak. He was tall, close to six foot and solidly built. His dark hair was short and clean, but unkempt. Or perhaps it had just been victim to the wind. Scully stopped a good six feet from the boy. The continuing breeze fluttered her blouse over her skin.

"Hello," she ventured. "I noticed you watching us. Did you need help with something?" She kept her voice as calm and considerate as she could manage.

"Do you work for the government?" the boy asked, holding onto the tree trunk beside him like he might sidestep and use it as a shield any moment. The kid was wired, and that meant unpredictable. Scully kept all her observational senses in high gear. Her weapon was a comfortable weight at her back.

"I do," she replied gently. "My name is Agent Scully, I work for the FBI."

"And him, too?" He nodded toward the distant bench.

"That's my partner, Agent Mulder."

The boy's eyes went wide. "Agent Mulder? Fox Mulder?"

Scully lifted her eyebrows in question. "How do you know Agent Mulder?"

"Well, I don't, not personally. But my dad talks about him all the time. He's like...his hero or something."

"Agent Mulder is you father's hero? How so?"

"If you're his partner, you should know."

"I'd like to hear it from you, if you don't mind."
"The…" The boy glanced around them. He seemed to think he might be overheard, despite the wind and the wide open space surrounding them. "The aliens," he finished in a low voice. "My dad...he's pretty sure he was an abductee. And Mulder, he's stood up for so many abductees, you know? He's tried to help. When the government just...tries to make us sound crazy."

"Us?" she prompted.

"Yeah, well...it tends to run in families, you know? But is that what you're here about? About the lights?"

"What lights?"

The boy frowned. "You don't know? Are you really Fox Mulder's partner?"

"I assure you I am." More than I have been anything else. "But we are out here looking at a different case at the moment. Can you tell me your name?"

He ignored her question. "But you were talking to Mariela. She saw the kids."

"And what kids are those?"

"The Black-Eyed kids. They show up more when...they're around, ya know?"

"Have you seen the Black-Eyed Children yourself?"

He nodded. "Once. They came to our house. Stared in the window. Wanted to be let inside. But we knew better. We waited them out until they left."

"And when was this?"

The boy shrugged. "Six months ago, maybe?" He glanced away again, shifted his weight between his All-Star low-rises. He was dressed in a t-shirt and basketball shorts with a dark trench coat over the top. A bizarre combination in the afternoon's heat. He didn't have a bag on him, and she wondered if he had come from the school. "Look, I probably shouldn't be talking about this," he said. "But...ask Agent Mulder about the lights, okay? I'll bet he knows. That's where you should start. It all goes together. I know it does. I gotta go."

Scully took a step forward as the boy started to back away. "Wait, can I give you my card? If you think of something--"

But the boy just shook his head as he backed away and said, "Ask Ed Monroe. At the garage. He's seen them." Then he turned and took off at a run toward the path to a housing development on the far side of the valley.

*****

Mulder had been watching every small twitch of body language from Scully, every subtle glance his direction, every shift of her weight. But he hadn't caught anything that told him she was encountering more than she could handle, and she had never signaled for him to join in the conversation. Now that the boy had bolted, Scully walked back toward where he waited on the bench. He rose to his feet and tossed off the last of his sunflower seed shells, seeing the brisker pace to her step. She was fired up by something, and the closer she got the more he started to think this was somehow directed at him. Crap.

"So, who was our fan?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.
Scully slowed to a halt in front of him, folded her arms across her chest. "Appropriate choice of words."

He blinked. "Sorry?"

"That's exactly what he is, Mulder. A fan. Of yours. Or at least his father is."

"Scully, what are you talking about?"

She huffed out a breath through her nose and stared up at him for a beat. "His father believes he's an abductee. Maybe the boy, too. And apparently, they are long time followers of your work. They assumed you were out here because of 'the lights'. He couldn't believe I didn't know about them. He said I should ask you. Should I ask you, Mulder?"

Mulder sighed, bit down on the inside of his cheek. "I'm not sure how to answer this right now that plays out well for me."

Scully let go a sharp breath and narrowed her eyes, not at all charmed by his attempt at humor. "Let's start with the truth."

Mulder sagged, "I wasn't lying to you, Scully. We're out here to help the Garcias and to help Sheriff Aster manage the public perception of what has happened to the family. It's true, I was looking into a sudden outbreak of reports of strange lights in the sky near this area when I stumbled upon Mariela's blog. You've read the research, Scully, you know sightings of Black-Eyed Children are sometimes linked to UFO sightings."

"So, are you out here looking for UFOs? And, if so, when were you going to mention that to me? Or better yet, to Skinner?"

"Were you listening to me? I just said we are out here to help the Garcias."

"And who is Ed Monroe?"

"I have no idea. Who is Ed Monroe?"

"I don't know, but your number one fan thinks you should talk to him 'at the garage'. About the lights."

Scully brushed past him and retrieved her jacket from the bench, then stalked off toward the parking lot without a glance back.

"Scully...hey, Scully, wait up." He jogged until he was beside her, again. "Why are you so mad about this?"

"Why? Because I am working a case for which I clearly do not have all the information. Because my partner chose not to tell me."

"Honestly, I didn't think it was going to come up. Stories like this circulate all the time, Scully, and most of them turn out to have no basis in fact. You of all people know this. I had no reason to think the two events were going to turn out to be connected. We still don't know that they are. If it came up, I was going to tell you what I had read, of course."

Scully shook her head and narrowed her eyes, dangerously angry, but she didn't reply. She was still walking fast.
"Did the kid tell you anything else?" Mulder asked, trying and failing to keep the irritation from his own voice. "Does he know something about the Garcias?"

"He knows who Mariela is, knows she saw...what he calls the Black-Eyed Kids. He thinks they're connected to the lights. To abductions."

"Did you get his name?"

She shook her head, jaw tight and hard as she continued to glare at the horizon. "He wouldn't even take my card." Mulder was sure she had more insight to offer from the encounter, but every word Scully spoke seemed forced across her tongue through a monumental effort of self-control. She clearly had no desire to speak to him, but her sense of professionalism forced her to provide the essential facts. Nothing more.

Mulder sighed wearily as they neared the car. He clicked open the locks of the luxury he should have been enjoying driving, and Scully climbed into the passenger side before he could say another word. She slammed the door with far more force than necessary. *This was going to be a fun evening.*

*****

Mulder could sit side by side with Dana Scully for long periods of time without saying a word, and they could still be completely comfortable in one another's presence. Silence could be an intimate environment for them.

The silence on the ride back to the motel was anything but comfortable. Scully's gaze was fixed in the far gone distance, cold wafting off of her like a shimmering contrast to the surrounding heat.

Mulder elected to give her her space.

As he drove, he phoned Sheriff Aster and confirmed the details of the plan to get their rental car properly checked for tampering or damage. He promised they would be in first thing in the morning to file the official accident report. Then he asked the sheriff if he knew an "Ed Monroe at the garage."

"Really?" Mulder said into the phone with a pointed glance toward Scully. She returned his gaze on instinct despite her anger; always the professional. "Can you text me the address and phone number? Thank you. Yeah, we'll be in touch first thing tomorrow."

He hung up and turned to Scully. "You remember the sheriff left this morning on a domestic call?"

"Yeah. The...Monroes." He saw the idea light behind her eyes as she heard herself speak the name.

"Yep, one and the same. Ed Monroe. Aster's sending me the number for the garage."

Scully stared at the phone in his hand for a moment, then returned her attention to the horizon, withdrawing.

Mulder thumped his head twice on the seat back, then locked his focus on the road.

****

"Do you want to stop somewhere for dinner?"

Scully shook her head and turned to look completely out the side window without ever glancing his direction. "Just take me back to the motel."
Not "us", "me." Mulder felt a little like he was being dumped in the middle of a date.

****

Disconnecting his last call, Mulder slipped his phone back into his pocket as their steps slowed in front of their motel room doors. "No answer at the garage or on the home line. We can either call again in the morning or just drop by when the place opens."

"And what about the case we're on?" Scully snapped, and Mulder realized he hadn't heard any words from her in at least ten minutes. "Didn't you tell the sheriff we would be at the station to file a report on the accident in the morning? In case it's not an accident at all and someone's trying to kill us? Or do you think maybe that's aliens, too?"

Mulder scrubbed a weary hand over his face. "Scully, I never said--Christ, is this--" He was half a breath from saying, 'Is this the elevation making you this pissy or are we farther through the month than I thought?' but he managed to bite down on this in time. He had dug that hole for himself before, he knew just how much shit he had to climb over to get back out.

"Is this what?" Scully pushed. She never did help herself.

"You want to know if someone tried to kill us? Fuck the lights, Scully, this guy runs the local garage. This is Verdad, New Mexico, how many garages do you think there are? This guy is tangled up one way or another with what's going on in this town, so I don't think it's out of line to want to question him, see whether he serviced either of the cars involved in the accidents."

"Fine. Whatever." Her words dripped ice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He never helped himself much either.

"It means, Mulder, you're going to do whatever the hell you want to, whether I'm part of it or not. Like you always do."

"Like I always...I wasn't going to do anything without you! I told you, if the subject came up, I was going to tell you everything, I just didn't see the point if the two things stayed unconnected."

"Right, why would you give me all the information up front? Why not always keep me need-to-know?"

"I don't know, how many details do you need, Scully? Did I neglect to tell you what I had for breakfast Monday morning? Do you need to know exactly how far I was through the classic 1960s World Series game I was watching on satellite when I paused to phone Sheriff Aster about this case?"

Scully shook her head and turned to go, seemingly too angry to reply.

"Are you saying we shouldn't investigate the auto shops in town?"

He couldn't let it go. "Are you saying we shouldn't investigate the auto shops in town?"

Scully whirled on him as though about to match his tirade, but she only got as far as "I'm say--" before she stopped. She froze in front of him, blue eyes blazing. A beat ticked by in electric silence. Then she visibly sagged, closed her eyes, and exhaled hard. She rested her hands on her hips, and he swore he could actually see all the fight draining out of her onto the surrounding concrete. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I'm mad at you, but not...like this." She hesitated, shifted her weight, and tilted one foot back onto her high heel. "I'm upset about something else, and I’m taking it out on you. You should have told me about this sooner, but, you're right, the auto repair is a possible connection, and we should look into it." Her gaze was somewhere around his knees, but her tone was sincere, if
guarded. "We can drop by the garage in the morning on our way to the station."

Mulder floundered. He needed a few breaths to switch gears. He did have a right to be upset, but her apology had been direct and genuine and he wanted to rise to that, match what she was offering. He attempted to throw water on his anger. "Okay," he said carefully. "Thank you." His words felt inadequate.

Scully nodded acknowledgment.

The space around them was too still.

Mulder shifted his weight and fidgeted with the key card he had already taken from his pocket. "So...what’s really wrong?"

Scully shook her head. "It’s nothing. I’m tired. I’m probably hungry. Maybe I’m getting too old for this. Let’s just...get some food and some sleep."

“Scully...” His hand reached toward her, but he didn't take the step so he could touch. She stared at the ground. “You don’t want to tell me?” he asked with a shrug.

She breathed. Scully’s breath set the rhythm of his days. When she exhaled now, there was a whisper of pain in the sound. Like she was being wrestled, pulled in conflicting directions. "Can we just order a pizza and get some rest?" she asked.

After a long beat he decided to take what she was offering and let it go. "Okay. You pick out something, I'll buy."

She nodded and then disappeared into her room.

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(end Chapter 5)
Chapter 6

The pizzas came. Scully met him at her door and took her vegetarian and left him his pepperoni. She smiled, and thanked him, but she closed the door to eat on her own.

Mulder downed his carnivore supreme and a warm soda. Then an antacid. Scully might have had a point about age and life on the road. He remembered a time when he could have run on fast food and little to no sleep for days before feeling the effects. Tonight, he surfed restlessly through the sorry selection of analog stations on the small TV before finally muting the sound and listening for movement in Scully's room. He heard the shower running. A thump that might have been her suitcase against the wall.

He pulled out his laptop and ran through some more research on strange phenomena in the area. He tried to stream Netflix, but the motel Wifi was too slow. Mulder changed into sweat pants and a t-shirt and stared at the wall for a good ten minutes, before he snatched the key cards off the top of the television and padded in his socks through the night air to Scully's door.

He had a key to her room, just as she did to his. They had made that a standard practice a long time ago. A few life or death situations, and you really didn't want to be shooting out locks and smashing windows while your partner screamed for help when asking the desk for two keys at check-in was a viable option.

He considered knocking rather than risking pissing her off again, but they had lived together a long time, and he really wanted to appeal to that side of her right now. She had started entering his house without knocking, lately. So, he listened at the door for a moment, heard nothing, then slipped the card into her lock and edged the door inward a few inches.

"Scully?" he called tentatively, poking his head through the narrow crack.

She was seated on the bed in blue silk pajamas, legs tucked up to her chest, forehead resting on her knees. She lifted her head as he opened the door, but she didn't seem startled or even annoyed by his arrival, instead treating his presence as though he had been expected. Her face was a little pink, whether from fatigue or her shower, he couldn't tell. The room smelled of her coconut shampoo.

"Hey," she replied. Her earlier distance seemed to have been washed off with the day's dust. Her hair was down and loose and still just a little bit wet. He loved her longer hair. He had expected her to cut it when she returned to field work. But she was hanging onto the length, and he was enjoying the
way he got to brush against it when they walked together.

Mulder closed the door behind him, slipped both key cards into his pocket and padded further into her room. She hadn't turned on her TV, and her laptop was still on the table across the room. No book, no phone. It was too early even for Scully to be turning in for the night. Which meant her brain was spinning.

Mulder took a seat on the bed, close by where her bare toes were tucked beneath the edge of a blanket. She unballed a bit, body language warming to his offering. He rested a hand on her thigh and gently massaged. Scully cocked her eyebrow, as if questioning where he might be going with this, and he gave her a reassuring smile, making it clear this was not about that.

"Tell me, Scully," he said softly.

"Tell you what?"

"Whatever it is you're NOT telling me about this case. About you and this case."

She stared at him for a long time, breathed more deeply. He waited her out, a little afraid she would shut him out again.

"Why don't you like looking at the pictures?" he prompted, voice low and tender. He caught the small flinch that told him she hadn't known he had noticed.

Scully took a breath, started to speak a few times, but couldn't seem to find what to say. When she did speak, all she had was, "I'm not...It's not...I don't even..." She gave a sigh somewhere between frustration and pain and closed her eyes.

He could see where this was going. Or rather wasn't. Mulder nodded his head, expressing a firm internal decision. "All right."

He stood and scooped her up into his arms before she could stop him.

"Mulder, what the hell are you doing?!"

He dropped himself onto the bed and settled her between his legs. He leaned his back against the head of the bed, wrapped his limbs around her so she was comfortingly cocooned yet spared from facing him. He reached out and flipped off the bedside lamp, leaving only the faint glow from the bathroom light.

"Mulder, this isn't...we can't..." Her protest was sincere, but her voice was thin, her tone surrendering to the tide. She understood what he was doing.

This was something they had done when they had been together -- to help her talk, to help her open up when she was scared or uncertain. Back when everything had been more intimate between them. But they weren't intimate, now. Not really. And in a way, they were at work where the rules were supposed to hold.

"Humor me, Scully," he said into the back of her coconut hair. "Let's just pretend for a few minutes that you still like me, shall we? And let me do this for you."

"Mulder." Scully tucked a little closer to him, head turned over her shoulder, gaze firmly directed downward. Her voice grew quiet and honest in a way she rarely allowed anymore. "Mulder, I still love you. You know that."
Mulder took a moment to breathe, to untie the knot in his stomach. For a quick beat, he tucked his face into the curve of her neck. "I like to think so," he said. Because she kept doing that. Dangling little confirmations that tore out his heart. He lifted his head and inhaled. "All right, come on. Talk to me."

"I...I don't even know if I have-"

He rubbed her arm vigorously, brooking no argument. "Come on."

He felt her long exhale as her back shifted against his chest. All was quiet for a long moment, and he knew she needed the extra beats to connect, to open to him. But he grew concerned when he felt her trembling. It was subtle, but he knew her, knew her body, and it was there. "I don't know if it means anything," she said, "but I remembered something. When you showed me a picture of what the Black-Eyed Children are presumed to look like...I don't know if it just...reminded me of something. But...I think I'm remembering something...from during my abduction." Too many "somethings" in that sequence for a woman of such precise language. She was whispering, voice thready and tremulous. Mulder was subconsciously pulling her in tighter, trying to meld with her in silent support. "When I saw that picture...," she continued, "I felt something...bad...in my stomach. And I remember...a place, like a concrete stairwell. The light is a sickening yellow. And it's cold. I'm really cold. I don't know."

"You think these sightings of the kids are related to whoever took you?" He kept his mouth close to her ear.

"I can't tell. I don't know. It's so hard to remember. God, Mulder, it was over 20 years ago... It shouldn't still bother me this much."

"Of course, it should. You're a doctor, you know better than that." He paused a moment, then let himself add, "It sure as hell still bothers me."

Scully caught a quick breath. She was surprised. She was always surprised to hear he worried about her, for her. Damned if he ever understood why.

"Do you think Sheriff Aster has an abduction scar? A chip in his neck?" he asked.

"He has a scar. It could be anything." She was quiet a moment, then, "Do you know where people claim to have been seeing lights?"

"I found directions online. Looks like there's a hot spot just north of Verdad."

She didn't say more. Mulder refrained from asking if she wanted to check out the site. Her body was gradually sinking more heavily against his. She really was tired. And in all fairness, it was later in D.C.. Scully had always needed more sleep than he did. And she was likely feeling the elevation.

He could feel her brain working, rearranging the pieces, struggling to form an outline of the picture they sought. Her nails scratched idly at his knee, and he willed his body not to respond to the fact she was leaning against his crotch with only his worn sweats and her silk pajamas between them.

He drew a deep breath, and she shifted in his arms as his chest rose and fell. Mulder combed his fingers through her hair. "You want to see if we can find something on TV? Turn off our brains for a while?"

"Oh, is that why you watch so much TV?" she said with a promising note of playfulness in her voice.
"If you find the right bad sci-fi film, Scully, you can shut down your higher brain function entirely. You should hook me up to machines sometime, test the phenomenon."

"No, I believe you already."

"This you believe. None of my brilliant and innovative theories of the universe. Just my ability to deactivate my higher brain function."

She smiled briefly. Then after a pause, she said, "I'm all right, Mulder. You can go back to your room." Her words were a little lazy, soft and slurred. Every part of him wanted to stay right where he was until she fell asleep.

He released a long sigh. "All right." Scully sat forward, accommodating him as he made his way out from behind her.

"Waffles and bacon at 7am?" he asked as he moved toward the door.

Scully narrowed her eyes. "Coffee and some fruit?"

"To-may-to, to-mah-to," he said.

"Tomato's a fruit no matter how you pronounce it," Scully countered.

He stopped for a moment by the door, hand on the knob, and held her gaze. "You'll tell me if you remember anything else."

He didn't like the hesitation before she nodded. But she did nod.

"Sweet dreams, Scully," he said as he stepped out the door.

"You, too."

The door snapped closed between them.

*****

She is distracted all through dinner; quiet and internalized. She is warm and kind when he speaks to her, returns the kiss he sneaks in on his way to grab more mashed potatoes. But she sinks back into her own thoughts the moment he ceases to actively engage her.

She reads for a while after dinner, in her favorite chair by the fire. She rarely has time for such indulgences, these days. Her job keeps her busy during most hours not used for eating and sleeping. But she has a couple of days off going into the weekend this time, and it affords her a little breathing room.

At ten, she heads down the hall to get ready for bed. Mulder says he will follow soon; maybe they can watch a movie in bed. He waters the plants on the shelves of the living room wall. Then he remembers the wilting fern by their bedroom window. He takes the watering can down the hall and finds Scully taking off her earrings and dropping them into the ceramic dish on her vanity.

She hovers at her dresser, watching him work with the precarious plant. He's gotten a little better at keeping things alive since they came to this house. For all of her scientific knowledge, Scully is not the one with the gardening potential. He has found he may have a bit of a talent for it himself.

"Mulder?" Scully says.
"Yeah?" He sticks his finger in the soil to see how deeply the water has been absorbed.

"I was just wondering...I mean, if..." She fades out, sighs softly.

Mulder wipes his finger on his jeans and turns to look at her. "What? Wondering what?"

Scully draws a breath and tries again. Her fingertips flutter against the dresser top. "I just wanted to know if...if you could...maybe..." But she says, losing the thread, or her nerve, and looks down at the toes of her shoes. "Never mind," she says. "It's nothing." She turns and crosses to her closet.

Mulder sets down the watering can and takes a few steps across the room. "Scully?"

She shakes her head, pulls her nightgown from the closet and tosses it across the bed. "Forget it," she says.

Mulder moves around the bed. He catches and stills her fingers as she attempts to unbutton her blouse. She is still dressed in her work clothes. She is a little distractingly gorgeous. "Hey," he says, knuckles moving lightly over her the skin of her breastbone. "You want to ask me something? Just ask me."

She stares down at his hand, shifts her weight. The tenderness seems to appeal to her, and she takes a breath and tries again, but the effort goes nowhere.

"Scully?"

He watches the tension in her neck muscles as she forces a swallow. She shakes her head.

"Okay, let's try something," Mulder offers. "Let's make this a little easier for you. Come here."

"Mulder, what are you--?"

"Just trust me for a minute, Scully. Come on."

He leads her by the hand, settles her on the bed. He slips off her shoes, and he nestles her between his legs, leaning against his chest. He turns off the nearest lamp, bathing them in shadow, and pulls a blanket over her lap. The effect is warm and comfortable and he hopes she feels the same. The deep breath she draws in time with his shows promise.

"Now," he says, "you don't have to look at me. Nobody can see your face. You can pretend no one's ever gonna know. I just swept the room for listening devices this morning. All clear. No one can prove you said it, whatever it is. So...ask me what you want to ask me."

She chuckles softly at his over-the-top efforts, but there's still tension in every line of her body.

He gives her a long pause of silence to gather her thoughts and her nerve. He presses his lips to her hair and whispers, "It's me, Dana." The intimacy gets to her.

"I have my annual MRI tomorrow," she says softly. She swallows again. "It's just routine. Making sure I'm still...healthy. Cancer and tumor free. It's just that..."

Mulder tries to ignore the sudden sick feeling in his stomach. The ever-present fear of that time lives beneath his skin like an invisible cloak. Nothing ever scared him so much in his life. He works to keep the fear and tension from manifesting in his body in any way she can feel. "Just what? Is something wrong? Have you been having symptoms?"

She is blessedly quick to reassure. "No, no, nothing like that, I'm fine. I promise." Her voice is open
and comforting, and she squeezes his hand as she speaks. His stomach untangles a little. "It's just that..." She sighs, a note of self-deprecation in her tone.

He draws his fingers down her cheek and she leans into the touch. "You're afraid of the results, anyway?"

"Actually, no. I mean, it always crosses my mind, but...I've had enough clear results now, I don't really...expect it back."

"Then tell me."

He can't clearly see her face from this angle, but he feels it in her body and her breath when her eyes fill with tears. "I just hate the test," she whispers. She lets go a breathy and self-deprecating laugh laced with dampness. "It's just...it doesn't hurt, it just...the sound and the feel...it sucks me back into that time, and I don't ever want to relive that."

He cradles her close, presses a long kiss to her temple. "Oh, Scully...of course it's hard. Why would you feel bad about that? Those memories scare me, too."

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Why on earth would you be sorry?"

They are quiet for a long minute, but there is intimacy and connection in the quiet. He says softly, "What did you want to ask me?"

She takes a long time to reply, and he realizes this is it, this is the hard part for her. It nearly breaks his heart when she says simply, "Would you come with me?"

His sigh is audibly pained. "You've been doing this every year?" he asks.

"Yes."

"And it's been hard for you every year?"

She hesitates, sniffs. "Yes."

"And you've never asked me to come with you? Or meet you afterward and take you for ice cream?"

She gives a sad laugh. "No."

"Scully, of course I'll come with you. You should have asked me seven years ago."

She closes her eyes and leans more heavily into him. "I just...I feel like I should be able to handle it. It's something positive, it's taking control of my health, being responsible. I'm a doctor, I know what these tests mean, how they work. I've always handled my health needs on my own."

He squeezes her hand hard, rests his open palm on her stomach. "I know you have. And I know you can. But I'm here. And I love you. And if having me there, even if it's just out in the waiting room or in the parking lot, would make it a little better...what could possibly be wrong about that?"

He feels her gradually accepting this. One elegant leg stretches out a bit in the darkness and she releases a slow breath. At last she whispers, "Thank you."

"Always." The word rolls naturally from his tongue, and of all the promises with which he does not trust himself, he knows this one vow to be the truth.
She surprises him when she says, "Now you. Make it fair, you tell me something intimate. Something you're afraid to admit."

He thinks for a long moment, then decides to take the leap for her, because she asked for raw honesty, and with her relaxed and beautiful and trusting in his arms, he can't deny her.

"I'm afraid you're smarter than me," he says.

"It's 'smarter than I.'"

Mulder groans and buries his face in her neck. "Oh, Jesus Christ, Scully, are you just trying to kill me?"

She laughs, and the genuine sweetness in the sound is worth his own humiliation. "Come on, Mulder, I'm teasing you."

He draws a deep breath, but doesn't reply.

She feels it. "Hey," she says softly, shifting and turning into him. "You don't really think that, do you?"

He moves his hand soothingly up and down her leg. Soothing himself as much as her. Her skin quiets him. "Scully...you're brilliant. You know so much about science and history and...everything....sometimes, I feel like...you should be with someone who can debate those things with you better than I can. Who can keep up."

Scully shakes her head. "Mulder, I'm not smarter than you. You're just as intelligent. We've both seen each other's IQ numbers, you know this. You graduated with honors from Oxford. I'm just more academically focused. I store facts, and I hold onto them like security blankets, and I use them to try to make sense of my universe. I look for patterns, and I fall back on precedent. But you...you take the information and...you see something new. You make leaps. You discover things, you innovate. I don't have your kind of vision. And sometimes I feel like I'm holding you back."

Mulder sighs into her hair. "Well. Then...maybe we make a good team."

"You know we do. We always have." He believes she means her words, but she also knows better than to take his acceptance at face value. "Where's this coming from?"

He takes a long time to respond and she affords him that time. They have never been separated by silence. "Scully, I'm just a guy in a house in a field with a lifetime of crazy conspiracy theories, a proclivity toward irrational and sometimes unhealthy obsession, a failed career and a history of getting the people around me abducted. You're a brilliant doctor helping kids every day. You have a family, friends I'm sure miss you. Why are you here, Scully?"

He feels her deepening breath. She is looking at him, wanting eye contact even in the dimness, but he can't seem to look up from her thigh. "I'm here because this is where I want to be, Mulder. Because when I'm with you...I feel like I'm not a disappointment. Like...I'm worthwhile."

He didn't expect that. "What are you talking about?"

She exhales through her nose, closes her eyes for a brief moment. "Mulder, if you haven't noticed, for all my bitchy attitude and arrogance when it comes to science and medicine and FBI procedural protocol, my self-esteem as a person can be...pretty low. I need people's approval. A lot. You don't. You believe in yourself. Even when the world seems to be against you. And you believe in me."
"Scully, it's just that I gave up a long time ago on getting anyone's approval because it was never going to happen. Until you showed up and for some reason...you stayed. But that's not true for you, Scully. I'm not the only person who sees how amazing you are."

She shakes her head. "On their terms, maybe. But it's not the real me. Not...the me I want them to love. That's only you," she whispers, a little of the self-consciousness bleeding back into her manner. Her concern for him temporarily emboldened her. "I'm here, because you make me believe in myself when I can't on my own. Because you can make me smile when no one else can. Because you're the best man I've ever known."

Mulder doesn't speak; he can't speak. Somewhere inside him, the little boy who felt like his parents spent a lifetime wishing he had been the one to disappear drinks in her words like life-giving water. He feels both broken and healed by the utter sincerity in her clear blue eyes. He pulls her tight against him, tucks his face into her hair, and pretends his eyes aren't hot with tears. Scully. What the hell did he do to deserve her?

Scully shifts and turns her head. She nuzzles at him until he lifts his face to hers and lets her capture his lips. Their kisses are slow, tender, and drenched in emotion. She tastes like salt and ginger ale and mint candy on his tongue. When they part for breath, Scully breaks into a soft smile. "You want to watch a movie, now?"

"Hmmmm..." He waggles his eyebrows. "I might have a better idea."

She shrieks and laughs when he scoops her up and tosses her onto the mattress, flopping down half on top of her.

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Dana Scully listened to the faint murmur from the television on the other side of the wall.

She couldn't quite keep her eyes closed without images of blurry and half-realized memories flickering behind her lids. Finally, she pushed back the covers, grabbed her suit jacket from the back of the desk chair and wrapped it around her shoulders over her pajamas. She slipped into her shoes and opened the door.

The night air was still warm enough to be comforting. Darkness and silence stretched out before her. She leaned her shoulder against the doorframe and gazed up at the numerous stars as she breathed. A warm desert wind caressed her skin, and she tried to let it symbolically wash away the images trapped in her consciousness.

For the most part, Scully had always been comfortable spending time alone. She found a certain stillness and security in her own company. She needed to retreat into her head periodically and reset her sense of self and purpose. The control of solitude was grounding. Growing up with so many siblings, Dana had forever been fighting for space and time to herself against the constant onslaught of busy human presence. She hadn't had a room of her own until Missy had gone off to college. But at the same time, Scully knew she wasn't truly as independent as she appeared (or liked to believe). She needed people, she just needed them on her own terms and by her own parameters. But she needed them -- quite a lot. For the past year she had been noticing more than ever how much she had identified in her head as "one of the Scully women." For much of her life, at the end of the day it had been the three of them: Dana, her mother, and Melissa. When Dana had been very young, her maternal grandmother had been part of the circle. And for a while her mother's sister Katie as well when Uncle Michael's work had brought them to California. But a stroke had taken Nana when Scully had been in middle school. Then Aunt Katie had passed away Scully's first year at the FBI. Then Missy. Now...her mother.
Dana had always expected she might one day be the last Scully woman standing. She was the youngest, after all. But she had never expected it to happen so soon. And somewhere in the back of her mind, she had always expected there would have been a daughter. Or a niece. She opened her eyes and breathed deeply, pushing away a memory of the scent of Emily’s skin.

Some days Scully's mother hadn't understood her at all, but Missy had gotten it. Sometimes Missy and her inherent crazy had completely missed the mark, but their mother had shown unexpected insight into the workings of her daughter's mind. But even when none of them had understood her, her circle of women had been there with her. A warm nest to which she could crawl home. A quick phone call. An email or a surprise greeting card. An unspoken trust that if she ever reached out a hand, one of them would be there. A hand of a soul that loved her without reserve. Sometimes the losses felt like too much. Like every warm body in her life eventually melted away. Even her little ones.

She loved her brothers, but they didn't really know her. Mulder still stood beside her. And that scared her on a number of levels. And kept her standing.

Scully checked her coat pocket for her room key in case the door closed behind her and took a few steps forward to the edge of the walkway. She closed her eyes for another long minute, feeling the wind and the vastness of the country around her. The endless views here simultaneously made her feel connected to the universe and like she was very small and alone in the night. Somewhere to the east a coyote screeched into the darkness.

When Scully opened her eyes, a flicker of motion in the distance caught her attention. She squinted into the blackness toward the solitary street lamp at the far edge of the parking lot. Two figures stood beneath the yellow light, one slightly taller than the other. From this distance in the silhouetting light, she couldn't make out sex or age, only human form. The two looked very much like what she thought she had seen their first night in Verdad.

Scully strained to catch further detail, but the more she stared, the more the shadowy images lost meaning. She turned and looked down the length of the building toward the tiny front office. Not a soul was outside the rooms. Faint lights burned behind curtains of one or two windows near the far end of the building. She glanced toward Mulder's room, but all was dark.

When she turned back to the parking lot, the figures were gone from the circular glow.

They stood closer.

Scully straightened, senses on high alert, hairs rising on the backs of her arms. Her hand moved instinctively to the small of her back, but she was unarmed. Alongside a parked pickup truck, less than 100 feet from where Scully stood, two dark shapes huddled by the rear of the vehicle. It was too far for them to have moved so quickly. Especially without having made a sound.

Scully couldn't distinguish faces, but she felt in her bones that the figures were staring directly at her; the primitive sense of the predator stalked by the prey. The two figures stood unnaturally still, raised hoods giving a vaguely animalistic line to their outlines. Scully's pulse raced, adrenaline burning through her stomach. Her weapon was still in her motel room, and the small space between her back and the safety of her room felt like a chasm. Her mouth had gone dry and a creeping sense of wrongness crawled along her skin. The blackness of the figures seemed darker than the surrounding shadows, like an unearthly draining of light in the middle of a sunlit day. She felt like if she spoke, reality might crumble.

Scully turned for no more than a second to look once more toward Mulder's room, reaching out to
her partner at the sign of danger, but his room was silent and black. When she turned back, the children were gone.

With a sharp gasp of breath, Scully took three rapid steps back toward the door of her room. She glanced over her shoulder, squinting at the relative brightness, making sure no one had slipped into the room behind her. She kicked the door fully open to assure no one stood behind it. Stepping in, she snatched her weapon from the small table, then moved back out into the night.

Gun raised, arms extended, Scully scanned the parking lot, the length of the building. She paced a few doors down in each direction, searched the open spaces. At last she called toward the parking lot, "Is anybody there?" But she was greeted by nothing but silence and starlight. The sense of dread remained on her skin.

Scully searched every inch of her room and bathroom when she returned. She locked and re-locked the outer door.

She set her weapon on the nightstand and sank down to sit on the edge of the bed. She was shaking, her already tired body now quivering with residual adrenaline. The vague feeling of wrongness in her stomach had not subsided, and Mariela's words echoed in her head -- "All your instincts are telling you this isn't a safe place, that something here is bad or...toxic."

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(End Chapter 6)
Chapter 7

When Scully woke to her phone alarm the next morning, she had been sleeping on her stomach with her head turned to the side, and her neck damned near refused to straighten. The soreness from the crash had set in overnight. As had a shade of humiliation from her evening's confessions. Some gentle stretches and a hot shower, and she regained a reasonable range of mobility in her neck, though the muscles still ached. A few other things hurt, as well.

She drank a full bottle of water before leaving her room to make sure she was hydrated before starting her day. In the parking lot, she took the car keys off Mulder, not mentioning that her control freak side was exerting itself after the accident and she just needed to be behind the wheel. "You find the address and set the GPS for Ed Monroe's garage," she said as she sank into the driver's seat. Mulder seemed amenable enough to everything this morning. He must have slept well.

The day was a little cooler than the last two, at least at this early hour, and a handful of clouds scattered across the massive sky, showing hints of potential rain. Mulder surprised Scully when he noticed the slight stiffness in her movement as she scanned her surroundings before backing out of their parking space.

"Is your neck sore from the crash?" he asked.

"A little, yeah. It didn't want to move when I woke up. How about you, are you okay?"

He lifted a hand to the back of his neck, moving a little as if testing the muscles. "It's a little sore. And my shoulder, from the seatbelt."
"Are you okay? Do you need to get it checked out?"

He shook his head. "Nah, I'm fine. You?"

"You know, I realized something last night, Mulder."

"Hmm?" He was looking down at his phone, digging up the garage address. He pulled his glasses out of his suit coat pocket.

"Our first car had airbags, right? They didn't deploy."

Mulder looked up. "Damn. You're right. I was so busy trying to figure out what happened, I never even… Maybe the air bags were tampered with as well? Did Mr. Garcia's airbags deploy?"

Scully squinted out the windshield as she pulled the car away from the motel, mentally scanning the autopsy report she had read the first day in El Paso. "Actually, yes. He had injuries consistent with air bag impact."

"Hmph. So, maybe our car was just crap. We might not have impacted hard enough."

Her neck would protest this assessment, along with the dull headache that was starting to develop from the continual muscle tension, but Scully had definitely read about air bags that had been set with too high a response threshold. Later, she would look up the safety reports on their make and model of car.

Ed Monroe's auto shop was not far from their hotel. The building was the last structure on Verdad's Main Street before the desert reclaimed ownership of the land between Verdad and Las Cruces.

The "parking lot" was really just a rocky and dusty patch of ground beside the adobe building, scattered with a mix of aging sedans and pick-up trucks. The next building over stood abandoned and hollow. A sign in front of the garage with a few missing letters advertised state inspections and a twenty-dollar oil change.

Scully climbed out of the car, then took a clip from her suit coat pocket and quickly twisted her hair into a knot at the back of her head so she wouldn't be blinded by her own red locks in the strengthening morning winds. Vision trumped fashion. She had learned that lesson during an onslaught of wind and bees.

The doors of the auto repair bays were open as Mulder and Scully approached, and a harried-looking man in a business suit spoke rapidly with a boy of no more than sixteen dressed in a mechanic's jumpsuit. The boy appeared less than motivated by the man's obvious sense of urgency.

"I'll let my Dad know, Mr. Akins," the boy was saying as they moved within earshot of the exchange. He was wiping his hands on a shop cloth as he spoke. "But we've got a couple of cars ahead of yours right now. I'm pretty sure it's going to take the whole day. We don't have much help this morning, and I won't be back until after school."

The man shook his head as though this information sealed his foredrawn conclusion that this place was coming in far below his expectations. "Fine. Just...call me as soon as you know how long it will be."

"Will do, sir."

"You have my cell phone number, right?" the man prompted, hand resting on his belt, his agitation written in every line of his carriage.
"Yes, we do. We will let you know, Mr. Akins."

The man nodded tersely, hesitated as though he wanted to say more, but after a moment turned and walked briskly away. He pulled out his phone, probably calling for a ride.

Silence reigned following the man's brusque departure, and Mulder and Scully hung back for a moment, giving proper decorum to the separation of clients. After a beat, the boy in the jumpsuit turned to face them. He was nearly as tall as Mulder, his figure lanky but strong from physical work. Scully wondered fleetingly if William looked anything like this boy, now. Beneath his suit collar a polo shirt was just visible. He was probably dressed for school underneath. His nametag read 'Nate.'

"Can I help you?" Nate asked.

Mulder took a step closer, and Scully followed. He pulled out his badge. "Good morning. I'm Agent Mulder of the FBI, this is my partner Agent Scully. We were hoping we could speak with Ed Monroe. Is Mr. Monroe here this morning?"

The boy frowned, taking half a step back and drawing up into a wary posture. "Did something happen?" he asked. "Did he do something?"

Scully studied the boy's body language while she let Mulder do the talking.

"No, nothing like that," Mulder said, tempering his casual tone to ease the boy off his guard. "We just think Mr. Monroe might have some further information we could use on a case we're investigating."

The boy studied them in silence for a long moment, gaze shifting between Mulder and Scully. Then he nodded mutely, tossed his soiled shop rag into a nearby bin and walked off into the shadows of the auto bays.

Mulder and Scully exchanged a silent look of consultation then trailed a few steps along the boy's path. They were greeted in the first feet of shade by a sandy-haired man of perhaps fifty, average height, stocky, with the deep tan of a life spent outdoors and a seemingly perpetual frown. He wore jeans and a work shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"You wanted to see me?" the man asked, posturing with wide-planted feet and hands on his hips, clearly irritated by the interruption.

Scully took a half step forward, assuming the lead before Mulder could speak. She flipped out her badge. "Mr. Monroe?"

The man gave a curt nod, eyes narrowing as he sized up Scully. His gaze felt more like he was interested in her physique than her credentials. She tried to brush it off and stay focused on the case.

"I'm Agent Scully with the FBI, and this is Agent Mulder. We were told you might have some information that could be helpful to our case. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions?"

His expression said he clearly did mind, but in words he said simply, "What kind of questions?"

"Did you know Joseph Garcia?"

Monroe shrugged. "I'd seen him around. Think he brought in his car once or twice. Didn't really know him."

Mulder nodded. "Had you worked on Mr. Garcia's car any time recently?"
The heavier man turned to eye Mulder. He lifted his gaze to match the inch or two's height difference. "No, I hadn't worked on his car in a while," Monroe said, resentment clear in his tone. "You think I had something to do with the accident?"

"Why would we think that?" Mulder said with a light shake of his head.

"Well, I don't know, why are you here in the first place? I don't have anything to do with the Garcias."

"Are you aware of the unfortunate events their family has suffered of late?" Scully asked.

Ed looked a little uncomfortable at that. He glanced down at the pavement beneath his dusty running shoes and sniffed. "Bad luck runs in flocks around here," he said, almost under his breath.

"Why do you think that is?" Mulder's tone was a practiced neutral.

Monroe drew a long breath and exhaled slowly. He tilted his head and seemed to study both Mulder and Scully with a new eye, considering his next words carefully. "Did they tell you what they say happened?"

"We've heard a few theories. We'd like to hear what you think," Scully offered.

Monroe turned and stared at her for a moment. She waited him out with lifted brows. Just when she thought he might speak, the garage phone rang.

"Excuse me," Monroe said and took a few steps away to pick up a phone mounted on a metal support post of the work bay. "Monroe's garage."

Mulder took a step closer to Scully, and together they drifted in the opposite direction from Ed Monroe, taking a moment to let their eyes adjust to the dimness within and studying the environment in the garage. A table mounted to the side wall was heavily cluttered with a mishmash of tools and desk supplies. Invoices and pens and even an old-fashioned calculator mixed with greasy screwdrivers and tire gauges. Above the table, a long corkboard lined the wall, nearly every inch filled with mounted papers and photographs. A strange collage of family snapshots, seemingly from the families of several of the garage's workers, intermingled with pictures of sports cars and a large calendar covered in photos of nearly naked women posed beside hot cars.

Scully tried not to judge. Mulder had had a calendar like that hanging in their basement office once upon a time. And he was hardly irredeemable.

The phone call going on behind them seemed innocuous enough, something about ordering a part for a pickup and bringing in the vehicle for an overnight stay the following week. Mulder gestured toward a picture in the middle of the corkboard, and Scully leaned closer to get a better look. The shot showed a family posed in front of a sign for a zoo. The father was Ed Monroe, and Nate, the boy they had met first, stood to Ed's right. Nate was maybe three years younger than he looked to be now. At the boy's other side stood a girl of around six years old, wrapped in the arms of an attractive woman with long dark hair. All four figures in the picture sported genuine smiles. But photos could be deceiving; Scully knew that well enough first hand.

Behind them, Ed Monroe cleared his throat pointedly. "Anything else I can help you with?"

Scully and Mulder turned and moved back toward the daylight. "You were about to tell us your theory on the bouts of bad luck around here?" Mulder prompted.

But Monroe's mildly receptive mood seemed to have passed. He gave a quick shrug, hands still
defensively propped on his hips. "The desert gets in people's heads," he said dismissively. He tossed another appraising look toward Scully, his mind back off the topic and back onto her appearance. "Anything else?" he asked.

Scully saw Mulder consider his approach, the shift of his gaze, the slightly deeper breath. He took the plunge, "A little birdy told us you would be the man to ask about 'the lights'. Does that mean anything to you?"

Monroe's eyes narrowed as he returned his gaze to Mulder. "Who told you that?"

Mulder gave a light shrug and continued to wait expectantly for a reply.

"You're talking about the lights out in Miller's clearing," Monroe said. His words were more statement than question.

"Off the county road?" Mulder gestured vaguely in the right direction and the other man nodded. "Have you seen the lights yourself?" Mulder asked.

Monroe hesitated, then acquiesced once more. "Yeah. My boy and I have been out there to have a look. We've seen 'em. Same as ten years ago."

Scully cringed inwardly when Mulder took this information in stride, clearly already far better informed than she on the history of the sightings.

"I've heard the lights could be connected to what's been happening to people around here. Do you subscribe to that theory?"

Monroe tilted his head, looked out beyond the garage toward the highway. "They do appear together, it seems like."

"They?" Scully offered. "The lights and...?"

"You already know what I'm talking about here, right? The Garcias must have told you. About the way they come to the door and--"

"I don't suppose you have any cars available for rent?" The three of them turned to see Akins, the impatient customer, was back, standing just outside the repair bays, looking hot and angry at the world.

Monroe moved toward Akins, and Mulder and Scully trailed a few steps behind.

The angry man was still talking. "I've tried Uber and Lyft and nothing is coming up anywhere near here. Some of us have lives to get back to."

"Where do you need to get to?" Monroe asked, amicable enough in the face of the man's misdirected fury.

"I have a meeting this morning at the convention center in Las Cruces. And I now have less than twenty minutes to prepare my--" As he spoke, Akins lifted his arm to glance at his smart watch, and in juggling his briefcase and his suit jacket and a pile of paperwork, his phone flipped from his fingers and tumbled onto the gravel. Akins cursed under his breath.

Scully took a step forward, feeling the increasing power of the morning sun flush her skin as she crossed out of the shadow, and crouched down to retrieve Akins' phone. She had just caught the object in her grip and was pressing into her thighs to rise when Monroe spoke sharply from above
"You're FBI?" he nearly shouted, his tone both incredulous and suspicious; as though this claim were suddenly highly in question.

Scully glanced up, startled. She pushed smoothly to her feet and handed the dropped phone back to the impatient man beside her.

"Yes, sir," she said to Monroe. "We showed you our identification. Agent Mulder and I are FBI agents out here from Washington, D.C. Is there a problem?"

Monroe's gaze was trained specifically and intensely upon Scully. But she no longer felt lust or lasciviousness, but suspicion and maybe even a kind of fear or at least wariness.

Scully could feel her partner watching every little inflection of the exchange, ready to come to her defense, physically or otherwise, if required. She appreciated, as always, when he let her handle it on her own for as long as possible.

Akins was fascinated enough by the encounter to finally fall silent.

Monroe gave a sharp shake of his head. "No problem." Then he turned to the silent man. "I'll have one of my guys run you into town. Just give me a minute." Then to Mulder Monroe said, "We're done here." He walked off toward the office at the back of the repair bays.

"Thank you for your time," Scully said under her breath, and Mulder gave a sardonic chuckle beside her.

Akins continued to watch the two agents with fascination, and Mulder and Scully exchanged glances and turned to walk back to their car.

"Well, that was...odd," Mulder said, voice low as they made their way across the gravel lot.

"I'll say. Any idea what changed his attitude?"

Mulder shook his head. "Got me. He looked down at you picking up that guy's phone, and... I don't know what he saw. Was there anything on the screen of the phone when you picked it up?"

"No, it was dark."

Mulder bit his lip and shook his head. Scully thought he was about to speak when yet another car pulled into the lot, sliding up close beside theirs. A woman emerged from the driver's side of the dusty sedan that had probably once been a bright blue. She appeared to be in her mid-forties, dark hair woven into a hurried braid, and a large tote bag slung over her shoulder. She left the driver's door open and gazed across the top of the car as though she did not mean to stay long. In a moment, the boy, Nate, came jogging out of the glass door beside the auto bays, now dressed in khaki slacks and a polo shirt, a backpack slung over one shoulder. He headed toward the woman and the car, and when his gaze darted over to Mulder and Scully, the woman's followed.

Mulder took a step toward the woman. "Excuse me, would you happen to be Mrs. Monroe?" he asked.

The woman turned toward them. She pushed her sunglasses onto the top of her head, and she was clearly recognizable from the photo. "I'm sorry, who are you?" she asked cautiously.

Mulder flipped out his badge. "Sorry, Ma'am, I'm Agent Mulder with the FBI, and this is my partner
Agent Scully. Could we ask you a couple of quick questions?"

The woman's eyes darted warily toward the garage, scanning the building, presumably checking whether her husband was watching. "I have to get my son to school..." she said, tone less than convincing. Nate had reached the car and tossed his bag into the back seat. He watched the exchange across the top of the car in silence.

"Just quickly, Mrs. Monroe," Mulder said. "Do you know the Garcia family? Joseph and Donna?"

Mrs. Monroe exchanged a quick look with her son. "Only vaguely. I was on a school committee once with Donna. And I know of Mariela." There was something the woman wasn't saying, but they let it go for the time being.

Before Mulder or Scully could ask another question, Mrs. Monroe took a step closer and spoke in muted tones. "Are they...are the others okay? Mariela and her mother? Has anything else happened?"

"Nothing we know of," Scully volunteered, speaking softly and kindly in hopes of keeping the woman talking. Mrs. Monroe seemed genuinely worried, though whether for herself or the Garcias remained unclear. "What did you think might happen?" Scully ventured.

"Have they...have they told you? Do you know what they saw?" the woman asked with an intensely probing gaze.

From across the car, Nate said sharply. "Mom. Let's go, I'm gonna be late."

Mrs. Monroe ignored her son's words and said, "They let the children in. That's what happened. You can't let them in." Her chest rose and fell with increasing speed.

"Mom! We have to go. Now."

The woman met Scully's gaze for a moment with an unnerving directness. "Don't let them in," she whispered pleadingly. "They'll make you sick. They make people...worse...than what they are. The darkness."

Then before her son could admonish her again, the woman turned and climbed behind the wheel. Scully could see her hand move quickly, forming the sign of the cross over her body.

Mulder's attempted, "Wait, Mrs. Monroe, if we could just--" was rendered useless by the firm closing of the car door. Nate followed suit after a quick glare at the two agents.

Mulder and Scully took a step back to be clear of the car as it backed out of the gravel lot and zoomed toward the road.

"Is this town making any sense to you?" Mulder asked as they watched the cloud of dust behind the car waft into the air.

"Nope."

*****

As soon as they arrived at the sheriff's station, Mulder and Scully hovered by mutual consent at the hood of their car, comparing notes on all that had just happened. Scully sat back against the fender, legs crossed at the ankles. The wind toyed with the loose strands of hair around her neck, and Mulder's fingers longed to play with those errant strands. He knew their feel like his own skin.
"Mulder...what are we really investigating here? I feel like we have too many plates in the air. Like we're being led in ten different directions. Does it all tie together? Are we investigating multiple cases? I just feel like we're not seeing the bigger picture right now."

Mulder nodded as he propped a hand cautiously on the sun-heated car roof. He leaned a bit closer to Scully as he spoke and caught a heady wave of her scent. He felt more like himself when she was close. "I agree. We're still taking in information, trying to make sense of it all."

Scully narrowed her gaze for a long moment, then she sighed. "I feel like I need a chart."

"I can probably rustle up a whiteboard around here somewhere. We could hit the local Walmart, prop something up on the motel room wall and start drawing pictures."

She smiled briefly, exhaled heavily. He could see the cogs turning. "What do you think the Black-Eyed Kids are, Mulder? The way people react to the stories around here, they seem to be seen more as demonic than alien."

Mulder shrugged. "There are multiple theories circulating in the lore. Anything from aliens to visitors from the future, demons taking human form, or children born of matings with the devil when he comes to young women's beds in the night. The evil offspring of such a union are said to be rejected by the purely evil creatures of hell, yet feared and reviled by humans, forced to live in shadows on the outskirts of the human world and regarded as creatures of darkness and evil energy."

Scully stared up at him for a long moment, blue eyes ridiculously pale and unfathomable in the sun, and drew a slow breath through her nose. "I'm gonna go ahead and shoot down that last theory right now."

The corner of Mulder's mouth twitched toward a smile. "I thought you believed in the devil, Scully."

"I don't believe he wears a hoodie."

"Lucifer, Jr.? In his rebellious phase?"

Scully sighed. "You think the devil has been impregnating women of southern New Mexico?"

Mulder shook his head, shifted his position to rest one hand on his hip and lean more heavily against the car. Scully folded her arms across her chest, and he told himself this was to keep his wild theories at a distance and not him. "Is that so different from the alien abduction theories? Impregnation with alien/human hybrid babies?"

"Mulder, you don't honestly believe these are devil babies."

"No, I don't. But neither do I believe that we should discount what may be a folkloric explanation for a real phenomenon yet to be understood."

Scully closed her eyes and tilted her head in acquiescence. "I don't know," she said, "I just wish we had something a little more factual and a little less theoretical to work off of, right now."

"I'm with you there."

As if on cue, Scully's phone rang. She fished the phone out of her pocket, then said with a glance up at him, "It's the M.E. She swiped the screen and accepted the call.

"Hello?...Yes, this is she....Dr. Johanson. She flicked her gaze up to Mulder's as she spoke the man's name. "You did....yeah, I'd say. Can you think of any other reason for those
numbers?...Okay....Yes, we're about to speak with Sheriff Aster right now. I appreciate you following up on this. ...Thank you."

Scully hung up the call, kept the phone cradled in her hand and looked up at Mulder.

He lifted his eyebrows in question.

"The coroner checked Mr. Garcia's body for radiation."

"And?"

"And it wasn't off the charts, but the numbers definitely showed a degree of exposure that can't be explained in normal circumstances. Not for a school teacher."

"Johanson has no idea what could have caused that?"

She shook her head. "The burn on Mr. Garcia's arm gave off the highest readings. But there were traces across the body. Johanson asked us to ask Sheriff Aster to check the clothes Mr. Garcia was wearing during the crash. They're still being held in evidence."

"All right."

"Mulder, where are the clothes you were wearing yesterday?"

Mulder shifted his weight and bit the inside of his cheek. "Most of them are on me now."

Scully's mouth twitched in a response he couldn't quite pinpoint between amusement and disapproval. "I'm thinking we should scan our own clothes for radiation, just in case there's something out at the accident site. Maybe the same energy source is interfering with the functioning of the cars."

Mulder nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

*****

Filing the report at the sheriff's office proved less tedious than Scully had feared. They were able to get the name of the auto shop that had investigated Joseph Garcia's car, the same place that was currently analyzing their first rental. Turns out it was done in a place in El Paso that routinely worked with the police. So Ed Monroe had been telling the truth about having no recent dealings with Mr. Garcia and his car.

Aster dug up a spare Geiger counter, and Scully ran a quick scan over Mulder. The readings weren't high, but he wasn't clean either. This lead to a detour back to their hotel for Mulder to change clothes and bag the first ensemble as evidence. Scully took the opportunity to gather her own previous outfit and found her clothes giving off faint readings as well. They dropped both outfits back at the station to be held for the time being, and Aster promised to dig Joseph Garcia's clothes out of evidence for a scan. They were finally free to check out the site of the reported lights.

As Mulder guided the car back onto the highway, Scully took the opportunity to re-hydrate. The clouds were increasing and occasionally blocked the sun, but the temperature was still steadily rising. As Scully reached for her water bottle, Mulder, eyes still on the road, tapped the back of her hand with something cold. She glanced over to see another bottle of her favorite lemonade balanced in his long fingers.

She took the bottle and he returned his hand to the wheel, eyes still on the road. Scully gazed at his
profile with an incredulous grin. "Mulder, where did you get it this time?"

He shrugged. "Vending machine at the station. Grabbed it when I went to pee."

The gesture was a small thing, a stupid thing to fixate on, really. They had always done such things as partners, made sure the other had enough to eat or drink on their crazy marathon cases, learned each other's patterns and developed their own little survival rituals. But something about the lemonade on this trip felt less about survival and more about doing something to make her smile. And Scully couldn't deny the delicious warmth that trickled through her body whenever he made his offering. "Thank you," she said softly.

Mulder gave a brief nod, but Scully could see the traces of a satisfied grin on his lips.

She popped open the bottle and took a long drink of the sweet liquid. She was going to have to work out at some point to make up for these calories.

Mulder glanced between the map he had printed out from God knew where online (he claimed all the new satellite maps contained too much disinformation to be useful) and the lay of the road ahead of them. He poked a finger at the map. "Scully, if this is the clearing coming up here on the right, doesn't that mean the county road running the other side of the field is where our car accident happened?"

Scully picked up the map and studied it for a moment, comparing the not-entirely-scale sketch to her surroundings. "Yeah, I think you're right. You don't...I mean, you're not saying..."

Mulder glanced at her and waggled his eyebrows. "Electronics malfunctioning or shutting down all together during UFO encounters? Cars mysteriously stalling before an alien sighting or abduction and miraculously restarting when the ship has passed? Missing time? Malfunctioning camera batteries in the presence of strange lights? Radio interference? Traces of radiation in crop circles, often posited to be UFO landing sites?" He shook his head and turned back toward the road. "I would never." The slightest trace of a grin graced his otherwise straight expression.

Scully watched his profile with a rush of amusement and affection and some weird kind of nostalgia that was the landscape of their lives. This was her Mulder. Driving through the desert, or maybe a northwestern rainstorm with a can of orange spray paint and the uncrushable enthusiasm of a 12-year-old with a new comic book. And for that moment Scully felt like everything that had confused and tangled and darkened the space between them in all the blurry and treacherous intervening years had simply vanished on the desert winds and they were Mulder and Scully driving the country, searching for aliens and vampires and government cover-ups of psychic experiments. Mulder was lighting up like a kid on Christmas morning at the suggestion of the unexplained and Scully was good-naturedly poking holes in his theories and they were eating fast food and drinking lemonade and hiking through muddy woods and she felt like she had found her place in the world where she could be most herself.

This was how she liked her Mulder.

"What?" Mulder queried, catching her expression as he took the map back from her slack fingers, double-checking his location against the car's (apparently unreliable) GPS.

Scully couldn't quite suppress her affectionate smile. "Nothing," she said sweetly. "I just like seeing you like this."

Mulder's brow furrowed a little, torn between confusion and the contagiousness of her smile, and for that moment in the sun he was simply the sparkingly and infuriating and boyishly intoxicating Fox
Mulder she had fallen in love with somewhere among trashy motel rooms and infinite rental cars and a voice through the haze in her hospital room so very many years ago. Long before she had admitted the emotion to herself.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go check out your hot spot."

Mulder gladly followed her lead.

Which made the next moment so much more painful.

The flashback hit her like a drug straight to the vein. One moment she was as comfortable as she had been in ages, riding beside Mulder beneath an endless desert sky, and the next her subconscious answered her passive contentment with a cruel and ground-shaking replay of how she had come to this place in their lives.

Scully pulls the car to the side of the dusty road and turns off the engine. She sits in the quiet for a long time, just listening to the soft shush of the wind in the surrounding trees. The light has nearly bled from the day. Scully almost returned to her small apartment in the city she keeps for the 36-hour shifts. But she told Mulder she would be home tonight. And she is exhausted and she should want to go home. But the truth is the thought of the place turns her stomach. She prays every time she steps through the door that he will greet her with a smile, with enthusiasm for some new project. Every once in a while he does, and she lets it rekindle her hope that this is a turning point; a sign of change that will lead them back into the light. But it never lasts. She has been working for so many hours this time she can't remember when her shift officially started or ended, and she just doesn't have the energy to walk into that house and try to drag Mulder out of his office, out of his spirals, out of his darkness.

She breathes for a long time in the quiet. Then she starts the car and keeps driving.

She doesn't try calling out "hello" when she enters. She takes off her coat and makes her way to the shuttered room he calls his office. He glances briefly over his shoulder. Says only, "Hey. I'll be out in a little while."

She nods. Doesn't reply. He continues pouring over the papers sprawled on the desk in front of him. She goes to the kitchen and tries to come up with something for dinner. She can't remember the last time she ate an actual meal at a table with utensils. There is little food to work with here. He hasn't shopped while she was away despite the list she left on the table.

She patches something together and calls him to dinner, but he doesn't come.

She doesn't even know what set him off this time, what path dead-ended, what small frustration broke the camel's back. But she tries again to rouse him, and before she can stop it, they are having the same fruitless argument again, spinning in the same desperate circles. He is fighting the endless battle of his lifetime, but he's doing it now with his hands tied behind his back. He's drowning and he can't see he's swimming down. He won't let it go.

"Mulder, you need to get out of this room. Get into the sunlight. Do something else. There's more to life, more to you, than this quest!"

"What? What more is there, Scully? What am I supposed to do? Everything I have done has failed. I couldn't protect my sister, I couldn't protect my mother." His skin shimmers with sweat, his brow furrowing and ridged and worn. "I couldn't protect you, your sister, your health. Your daughter, OUR SON. I gave everything to finding the truth, and look where I am."
"You've helped people. We've saved people. The work we did had merit. Just because you didn't change the whole world, doesn't mean you didn't make a difference. That you can't still make a difference."

Her words are bouncing off deaf ears. Mulder grasps at the back of his head, claws his hair. She can feel the electric energy gathering in the room like static. He shoves up from his desk with a violence that startles her, paces the floor like a caged animal.

"It's all worthless! I'm worthless." A stack of books collapses at his feet as he kicks and turns, fists flexed. "I'm a fucking piece of shit, Scully! None of it matters, let them take it all!"

Scully tries to move closer, but she's not on his radar. He's lost in his own pain. He shouts, screams, shoves at the files and stacks on his desk. A storm of paper whirls across the room. Mulder grasps at anything he can -- a paperweight, his pen holder, his coffee mug she gave him for Christmas. He hurls the objects toward the wall and the window. Ceramics shatter and skid on the cold floor.

Scully dares two steps closer. "Mulder, STOP!"

"It's all fucking worthless!"

A picture frame hits the floor, and Mulder reaches for a box of old film reels.

"Don't do that. Just stop!" Scully grabs at his arms, his wrists, but he won't let her hold him. He's stronger than she when he needs to be, when he wants to be. It hurts more than her fingers when he pulls away and the reels crash to the floor.

Mulder shoves at his desk, nearly topples the whole piece of furniture against the fireplace. "What the fuck am I doing this for? What does any of it matter?" The ragged, desperate tone rips at her guts. She is aching and angry and terrified, but she won't release the grip she still has on his shirt.

Scully steps up onto Mulder's chair, uses the height and wraps her arms around his shoulders from behind. "Mulder...stop, please, stop, stop, stop..."

He is tensed and coiled beneath her touch like a predator ready for the attack; the power she feels is daunting. Emotion and muscle and adrenaline hum like a living consciousness. She holds on hard. "Mulder, just stop," she pleads, her mantra to him, mouth close to his ear, not so close she will get hurt if he jerks again in her arms.

But he doesn't fight. This time the electric vibration of emotion turns in on him, and she feels the trembling as the first sobs wrack his body.

Mulder turns in her arms and grasps hard around her waist, burying his face in her chest. She stumbles under the pull of his weight, but she makes her way onto her knees on his desktop, paperclips and scraps and broken fragments digging through into her skin. She holds on with all her strength as grief shakes his body and hers. She's so exhausted she's sick and running on empty, but she doesn't want to fail him, she can't fail him. They are all they have ever had.

"You're not worthless. You're not worthless," she repeats, her voice as breathless and ragged as his, her fingers gripping at his hair as she cradles him to her breast.

He grasps at her, at her back, her clothes, her flesh, pulls, holds onto her like a drowning man clinging to a lifeline. The force of the need steals her breath. She feels small and insufficient and unqualified to stand against the tide. But she will not move. She will not let go. "I'm here," she whispers. "I'm here. We'll figure it out. I promise. We'll figure it out. You have so much left to give."
Her heart is pounding so she feels the vibrations across her chest, hears the whooshing in her ears. His sobs are broken; she cannot feel the shard of his Christmas mug digging deep into her knee. The cut will leave a scar.

Over the next hours, she offers him domesticity and comfort to quiet the storm in his brain. She gets him to shower. She coaxes him to eat some soup. She lets him rest his head in her lap to watch some stupid string of sitcoms on TV that she can't recognize or understand.

She settles him in their bed and lets him hold onto her until he sleeps.

When she is certain he will not soon wake, she slips quietly away. In the dimly lit kitchen, she gathers the supplies to make herself a cup of tea.

While the water heats, she starts to shake. Scully slides down the cabinets and huddles on the floor in her pajamas, robe shimmering into silky puddles at her sides. She dissolves into silent tears on the waves of the aftershocks. Quietly and stealthily, she falls apart on the kitchen floor while her tea kettle boils dry.

Mulder pulled the car cautiously to the side of the road and reached once more for the map. He was saying something about a thorny patch of desert and the easiest place to park to make it on foot to the location of the most prominent sightings.

Scully was shaking and nauseous. She didn't know how close they were to the site, she didn't care, she just had to move, get out of this car, into the air....

"Scully? Hey... are you okay?" His fingers brushed her thigh.

She fumbled with the door handle. "I'm fine," she said, voice threadbare and unsteady, her words anything but convincing. "I just need some air."

She heard him say something else behind her as she finally made the handle work and pushed out of the car and walked away. She couldn't process the words and she didn't care, she just had to move. She had to breathe.

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(end Chapter 7)
Chapter 8

Mulder took one more look at the map, determined there would be an easier route to the site if they parked the car about another quarter mile down the road, then he turned off the engine.

Scully had already walked a good twenty feet from the car and was making her way up the thorny embankment to the open clearing beyond. Mulder waited another long moment, watched her stop at the top of the small rise, rest her hands on her hips and draw deep breaths of the open air.

She had left her suit jacket on the console between the seats, revealing her beige sleeveless silk blouse, her muscular arms slightly tanned already from the New Mexico sun.

She clearly preferred to walk, and they could make it to their destination from here.

Mulder grabbed the case with the Geiger counter from the passenger floorboard, shoved what was left of Scully's lemonade into his back pocket, and climbed out of the car.

He met her another ten feet beyond the rise. "Hey," he said. "You all right?"

Scully nodded dismissively, not quite making eye contact. "Yeah. It's just...the elevation, I think." Which it clearly was not. At least not exclusively. But Mulder knew when pushing was only going to get him a harder shove backwards. She gestured toward the map still in his hand. "Which way from here?"

Mulder held up the map against the landscape. "That way." He pointed at an angle away and left.

Scully silently plodded in that direction over the spiky ground.

On the other side of a steep-walled arroyo that took a little manipulation in Scully's heels, the terrain changed texture, and the shift seemed to demarcate the beginning of the so-called "Miller's Clearing."
Mulder looked at the map again and pointed toward a rise of ground off to their right. "I'm gonna say that over that hill we'd be able to see the state route where we crashed."

Scully wandered a few yards away. She kicked at bits of trash on the ground, soda cans and fast food bags. "Definitely looks like people have been hanging around here."

Mulder unzipped the case slung over his shoulder, took out the Geiger counter and powered it up.

Scully was eyeing the wide expanse of sky visible from the clearing. Mulder could see where this vantage point would offer prime viewing of anything strange in Verdad's air space. His gaze followed Scully's upward, and he was momentarily distracted from the equipment in his hand by the breathtaking view. The canvas overhead held some of the most fascinating layers of dissonant cloud patterns Mulder had ever seen. There was clearly a storm coming, but there was so much layered and contrasting information above them, he suddenly felt like a man unqualified to read a foreign language. He found himself imagining the Native Americans who had first claimed this place as their home, learning the true signals and messages nature gives without the deceptive middleman of science and man-made technology. He almost took out his phone to snap some pictures of the memorable phenomena, but then he realized Scully was already doing the same. She was the better photographer anyway.

Mulder began walking the ground, watching the readings on the Geiger counter. Nothing at their current location. He ran a quick check of his own clothes to make sure he was clean now and wouldn't be tainting the readings.

He began moving slowly in the direction of the state route.

Scully trailed alongside, absorbing their surroundings, the lay of the land and the perspectives. "If this is north," she said, "then White Sands Missile Range is that way." She gestured with an open hand toward a clearly visible expanse of sky over a neighboring hillside. "And the government land stretches far up to the north from there. The military as well as a local branch of NASA perform all kinds of air space tests and training out there. Practice missile and rocket launches. This air space is all owned by the government. No commercial flights. Who knows what they might be doing that would look strange to the untrained eye."

"Agreed, Scully. But you and I know better than anyone that just because the government is involved in or aware of something doesn't mean it isn't nefarious, nor does it mean it doesn't involve alien technology."

Scully remained silent and kept walking. A distant roll of thunder echoed off the Organ Mountains.

The Geiger counter crackled lightly, but still read nothing of significance.

"So what did you think of Ed Monroe?" Scully asked, glancing over briefly to catch his gaze as they walked.

Mulder wrinkled his nose. "I'm not sure. Inconsistent vibes, he's hard to get a read on. I've no doubt he knows more about all of this than he's offering."

Scully huffed at that. "I think that's a given."

"Why, what did you think?"

"I think his son was quick to assume he was in trouble with the law."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too. I think we need to ask Aster for some details on those recent domestic
calls from the Monroe family, give us some more perspective on what's relevant to our case and what isn't."

Scully nodded, rubbed absently at the back of her neck, and he wondered if it was still really hurting her from the crash. "I was thinking the same."

They walked farther.

"What do you think Mrs. Monroe was afraid of?" Scully asked.

"Besides Mr. Monroe?"

"That was pretty obvious, right? I may be making premature assumptions here, but she felt to me like a woman well-versed in keeping secrets she's been firmly instructed to keep. With consequences if she fails to do so."

Mulder agreed. In the distance he could just see the line of the state road. "An easy conclusion to jump to. I lost a little perspective myself once Ed Monroe started looking at you...like he looked at you."

Scully stared at the horizon and let that go.

After a few more paces, she said, "Do you think Mrs. Monroe has seen the Black-Eyed Children herself? Or knows someone who has? Someone she thinks has been affected by them?"

Mulder eyed her with a bemused expression until she noticed and frowned at him, her freckles bright from the sun. "What?"

"No 'alleged' Black-Eyed Children, Scully? 'Supposed'? 'So-called'? You're acknowledging their existence now?"

Scully rolled her eyes and reached out and snatched her lemonade out of Mulder's back pocket. "Mulder, the people in Verdad aren't completely delusional, they are seeing SOMEthing, even if it's a bunch of middle-schoolers dressed up in Halloween costumes. Just because I'm acknowledging a physical entity doesn't mean I'm conceding to its supernatural or alien nature."

"If you say so."

She took a drink of her lemonade. "You haven't answered my question."

"Do I think Mrs. Monroe has had some personal experience of this phenomenon? Absolutely, something has spooked her good."

Scully took a breath as if to reply, but just then the Geiger counter gave them a spark of a genuine reading. "Hello," Mulder said. Scully stepped closer, focusing on the readout from beside him. Mulder resisted the nagging impulse to pull out his progressive lenses to get a clearer read of the display; he hadn't told Scully about those yet.

"Which way is it tracking?" Scully prompted.

Mulder paced the ground, following the variable readouts. "I think it's more this way."

They trailed along, following what seemed to be a relatively linear track along which the readings were notably stronger than those of surrounding ground. The path led at an angle to their right, ultimately aiming to intersect with the state route a bit farther east than their original trajectory.
When they reached the top of the ridge along the road and looked up from the small screen, they found themselves roughly two hundred yards west of the tree around which they had wrapped their first rental car. In the distance Mulder could make out the crime scene tape from Joseph Garcia's crash.

Mulder and Scully stood at the side of the road for a long beat, getting their bearings, the Geiger counter still giving a consistent reading of elevated radiation over the 6 to 8 foot swath that formed an invisible brush stroke across the desert ground.

In wordless synchronicity they made their way across the road when it was clear of traffic and followed the toxic path until the readings abruptly stopped in a patch of underbrush about 40 feet beyond the far side of the road. Mulder searched the ground in either direction, but the signal grew weaker each time he moved away.

Neither of them could suppress the impulse to stand at the end of the "trail" and look up.

Scully stood, hands on her hips, now empty lemonade bottle still dangling from between her fingers. "Mulder, I thought aliens were out of vogue, these days. Aren't we supposed to be chasing another kind of government conspiracy now?"

"Yeah…" He looked back over the clearing from which they had come, down at the ground, back to the sky. "I'm not so sure the aliens got the memo, Scully."

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"It could be something underground. A leakage of some kind. Contaminated ground water," Scully said as she opened the car door.

Mulder tossed the Geiger counter onto the rear floorboard. "All true. Whatever the source, we need to get Sheriff Aster out here to investigate. Those kinds of numbers shouldn't be coming up in an area open to the public."

"If that same swath of radiation was there yesterday and we drove through it, that could be where we got the radiation on our clothes." Scully sank into the car, and Mulder followed before he replied.

"Yeah, but it doesn't seem strong enough to spread to our clothes when we were inside the vehicle with the windows closed, moving that fast."

She shook her head. "It's not. We must have walked back that far at some point when we were outside the car."

"Maybe."

Mulder started the engine but left the car in park. They stared around them in thought, as though the vigilante cacti or the turbulent sky might hold some of the clarity they sought.

"I do think we should come back here tonight," Mulder said, "see if we can catch a glimpse of those lights everyone's talking about."

"Maybe. Unless they cordon off the area to contain the radiation."

"Even if it's closed to the public, we should be able to get close enough to see the sky without entering that zone of ground."

Scully didn't reply. She seemed lost in thought, gaze on something far distant. Mulder shifted into
drive and looped the car onto the road, heading back in the direction from which they had come.

*****

The rain was still light when Mulder pulled the car into the motel parking lot, but the mix of rippling and ominous clouds overhead portended something more profound. Mulder wasn't honestly sure what should come next in their investigation. He and Scully had gone back to see Sheriff Aster and mapped out for him where they had found the elevated radiation readings. Aster was putting together a crew to send out to investigate the site. Veronica Garcia's doctor still had not called to talk to Scully. They still hadn't interviewed Donna Garcia, but the woman was dividing her time between sitting by her son's hospital bed as the boy fought for his life and preparing for her husband's funeral. All just days after having buried her mother-in-law. Mulder felt like they should gather all the information they could without Donna Garcia before intruding upon her suffering. Especially, when they really had nothing concrete in a traditional investigatory vein to ask or pursue. Skinner was going to want an actionable progress report soon or he was going to call them back to D.C.. Right now, the unidentified radiation was probably their best bet to extend their stay in Verdad. Potential tampering with their own rental car would carry weight as well.

On the drive back from the station, Mulder had suggested they stop at a sub shop for lunch. Scully had agreed, but in the end she had only taken a few bites of her veggie wrap, then folded her food back into its foil packaging to take to the motel. He had downed most of his own sandwich while she sipped her tea, but more out of habit than a healthy appetite. She had remained quiet and distant on the remainder of the drive, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out what had changed.

They got out of the car in the motel parking lot. Scully shrugged into her suit jacket and slung her messenger bag over her shoulder. The winds were becoming a distracting presence against which Mulder had to exert real effort to close the car door. He was starting to see why most online discussions he read of Las Cruces started with some reference to wind.

"Jesus!" he called out as a particularly enthusiastic gust nearly knocked him back a step.

Scully squinted against the onslaught, glancing his way in acknowledgment of the crazy, then started making her way cautiously toward the motel.

As they approached their room doors, the wind slowed, but the rain picked up its pace. Like on most buildings in Southern New Mexico, what should have been a rain cover over the walkway was really just a framework of open boards over which a tarp or awning could have been mounted. But of course nothing was mounted there, roofs and awnings were fodder for wild winds to rip away. So there was still no protection from the elements.

A rumbling of thunder drew Mulder's attention to the view beyond the parking lot. "Whoa..."

Scully's gaze followed his in response to his tone. In the far distance, the lightning was growing rapid and intense in a way Mulder had never before witnessed.

Scully took a few steps closer, her gaze on the far-off spectacle, arms folded tight across her chest. Electric light flickered over the mountains like a strobe show at a punk rock concert. Nothing like they would ever see in D.C..

"Wow," Mulder said softly, moving up behind Scully's right shoulder. "That really is something, isn't it?"

"It is," Scully breathed, words hovering in the pregnant pause between gusts. "Almost unreal. Is that really lightning? Not something man-made?"
"I think so. You can't even hear the thunder for most of that from here. It's disorienting how far you can see."

"I can see why people think they're seeing strange lights around here. The weather itself is a little eerie."

Mulder nodded. "You can feel the static in the air. Do you think the lights people are seeing might be some kind of natural phenomenon? Ball lightning or red lightning or something?"

Scully drew a thoughtful breath. "It's always possible. I've certainly never seen anything quite like this. But then, I wasn't raised in the desert. At least not this kind of desert." She shivered slightly as another particularly wild bout of flashes lit the afternoon sky.

Mulder instinctively brought his arms up around her to shelter her. Scully immediately stiffened and took a half step to the side. Mulder's arms fell away, cold glazing his stomach at the unexpected rejection. "Whoa. Scully, what's going on here?"

Scully shook her head. She turned toward him, but her gaze never rose above his knees. "It's nothing. I'm sorry. I just...I just can't do this right now."

"Do what? What are we doing? Scully, talk to me. I thought we were okay this morning, now you're ducking my touch? That's a new one. Talk to me. Did I do something?"

Scully cringed and hugged herself tighter. The rain was sprinkling down through the open slats and peppering their clothes. "No." She drew a hard breath, let go a deflated sigh. "No, I just...this is just getting hard. Working together like this."

"Working together. Working together is hard? I thought that was the one thing that wasn't hard for us. The one thing we were always good at. What are we talking about?" He leaned in a little closer, dipped his head, aching to claim her evasive gaze, reclaim their unbreakable connection. "Dana?" he prompted softly.

She flinched like he had struck her. When she finally looked up at him, the intensity of the pain and...something else...betrayal? fear? in her gaze almost made him wish she had stayed hidden. "Isn't this hard for you?" she said against the growing rustle of the rain.

"Hard how? Tell me."

"Standing here. Being together. Every day. Halfway. With the rest just...dangling right there, right where we left it. Right where we can't have it, anymore. Do you just not want it, or...are you okay with this?"

'Stunned' felt inadequate for the empty burn that filled Mulder's core, but it was all he had. She had left him breathless and wordless. How many years had it been since she had said something this vulnerable, this honest, about the two of them? About how she really felt? And now they were suddenly right in the middle of it all, in a rain storm outside a cheap motel in Verdad, New Mexico.

The raw openness her words engendered in him was quickly replaced by a flood of self-protective anger and resentment and the next words across his lips were fueled by an anger and bitterness he both regretted and relished.

"You're actually saying it out loud? Admitting you used to be with me? That we used to be a family?"
For more than a decade? And you're asking me if this bothers me? If I want that? That is all I have ever wanted, Scully! But believe it or not, there's a limit to my patience. And at the risk of sounding like a teenager, here...you broke up with me!"

Scully looked away across the empty parking lot, breath shallow and rapid, tongue toying with the backs of her teeth. “Broke up with you,” she parroted. Another moment of breath while he waited. The rain was starting to stick her blouse to her skin, and the pale from the cold clashed with her flush of anger. A trickle of water chilled the nape of his neck. "Mulder, I left because you were dealing with endogenous depression and you refused to get treatment. We were living on the edge of this...bottomless black pool, and you were pulling me down, and I had to make sure one of us kept sight of land. I left because my being there wasn't helping you. I left because I had to, not because...I didn't...love you..." And when her voice broke from anger to aching pain, his own fresh resentment sloughed away on the rainwater.

Mulder closed the space between them and reached out as he had always done. Taking care of her the only way he knew how. None of this was supposed to be about hurting her. "Okay. Okay. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Come here, you don't..."

But she pulled back, again, lifted a hand to block his touch, and he couldn't hide that it would have hurt less if she had slapped him. "No! No, Mulder that’s it...that’s exactly it."

"What’s it?" he asked, suspended between anger and desperation. "I don’t understand."

"This. You. You being...kind and understanding and...you making me laugh and making me feel...beautiful and like myself again, and...you acting like the person I fell in love with, only better, because we really talk now, but..." Her eyes shimmered with tears, and her lips quivered as she fumbled for words.

"But what? Scully, what? Talk. To. Me." He put everything he had into the words, willing the depth of feeling to carry to her across the space she had imposed between them, fighting to honor her intimacy barrier. He felt like they were suddenly 20 years back in their interaction.

"It’s all because you’re working, again," she said quietly. "Because you’re putting the work first, again. Instead of me. And it’s so easy to miss, because I’m part of the work, too, right now, so it feels okay. But when it stops...I won’t be enough, anymore. I won’t be enough to keep you who you are. Who you should be."

Mulder couldn't wrap his head around what he was hearing. "Scully...that’s just not true. That’s never been true."

"It is," she said simply. And there were so many years of resignation and pain in her two words, he felt suddenly too heavy to stand.

"Scully." He took a step closer, didn't touch, but intruded upon her space, breathed her air. She did not step back. Rain clung to his eyelashes.

"Mulder, you want me in your life. That’s what you’ve always wanted. And sometimes it’s my life, too. But sometimes that life’s not mine, and it’s not me. And you’re not able to come into my world. Or create a new one between us. With me."

"You don’t want to be here? You don’t want to be back on the X-Files?"

She looked up at him, painfully open for a fleeting moment. "Right now? Yes. I do. But I won’t always. And you will. In some form or another."
Mulder sighed, brow furrowed, pain keeping his muscles unaware of the damp and cold. He gazed down at her with a world of history and feeling in his eyes. There were so many old arguments here, so much heavily trodden ground, and so few real answers. All he knew was that Scully was not optional. She was never second.

In the seemingly unanswerable silence, Scully turned and took a step toward her motel room door.

"What can I do?" he said into the rain. "What do you need from me?"

She spun back to face him, fingers flexing and gripping at nothing, words tight and rapid. "Mulder, you can’t fix it. It’s an endless loop. I got out of it for a while, and now I’ve let myself be pulled back in, and I need to stop the slide, and..."

"Were you happy?" he asked, feeling like he had to raise his voice to carry across the space and through the wind and maybe over the years. "When we were apart?"

"What?" She frowned at him, thrown by the shift in the thread.

"When we weren’t together, and we weren’t working together...were you happy? Tell me honestly, Scully."

She let go a pained and pensive sigh. "I was...I...it was peaceful and...the work was satisfying, rewarding, and...I was finding my footing..."

"Were you happy?"

"Of course not." Her gaze dropped from his to the pavement in something too much like defeat.

"Do you think I would be happy without you? Working the X-Files without you? Scully, you’re the only reason I’m still doing this."

She shook her head slowly. "No, I’m not. Why? Why am I the reason?"

He dared a half step forward. "Because it’s the only way I can have you next to me, again."

Scully closed her eyes. Her hair was pulling into scattered waves in the dampness, the curls grazing her temples. "God, Mulder...I know you believe that’s true. And I do believe you want me here. But if you think...that you wouldn’t be pursuing this...without me..." She shook her head once more and turned away.

"Maybe," he conceded. "Maybe you’re right, maybe I would keep fighting. But I wouldn’t be as good at it, and I wouldn’t have such hope left, and I sure as hell wouldn’t feel like a whole or functional person."

Scully fell quiet. He could see the internal war, tumultuous and ragged behind her carefully stilled posture. And he had seen it all before, more than once. In the hallway outside his apartment, at the bottom of the steps of their erstwhile home in the country. He was always asking her to come back. To come home. And she was always in pain.

"I never wanted you to stay because I need you," he said, moving yet another step closer so he could gentle his voice. "You should only stay if I make your life better. If you need me just as much as I need you. That’s always what I’ve wanted."

"If..." Scully repeated, incredulity and tears thick in her voice. "If..."
He could see the disaster coming, see what she had heard and what she thought he meant. But he didn't know how to stop it or change it. His words were true, and they needed to be said, and now there was no way to take it back or hear her out or help her understand.

Scully lifted a hand to her forehead and turned away. "Oh, my God...I can’t...I can’t do this..." She took three rapid steps toward her door.

"Scully! Scully!"

She had swiped her card and she was inside and gone, door slammed behind her.

Mulder stood facing the cold green barrier with the silver 106 up against his nose. He futilely tried the handle and pounded with an open hand. "Scully! Scully."

He closed his eyes and remained where he stood, unable to bring himself to walk away. A moment later, Scully shocked him by yanking open the door. She was standing close, and her voice was a dizzying mixture of passion and cold when she said simply, "You keep saying I left you. You left us first."

Then she shut the door. And all his fight drained into the rainwater. He stood in the windblown chill with his eyes closed and his chest tight as the dampness infiltrated and hollowed his bones.

*****

Six months after Scully moves out of their house, Mulder is invited to the wedding of a mutual friend from the FBI forensics lab. Mulder stands at the bottom of his driveway with the small pile of mail from his box, the early spring wind chilling his bare arms and feet, staring at the invitation and knowing Scully will be invited as well. He doesn't want to say no just because he is in the habit of avoiding people. He doesn't want to say no because he thinks Scully will be there. He doesn't want to hurt her by showing up and he doesn't want to hurt her by looking like he's avoiding her. Always best friends, she said. Nothing works as well on the ground as it does in words.

He decides the easiest way is to confront the elephant in the room. He texts Scully two days after the invitation arrives and asks if she is going to the wedding.

She replies right away, says yes, she's going. She is very happy for Patricia and Steve.

So he asks if she has a date or if she wants to go together. As friends.

She takes sixteen hours to text him back. But she says yes, they should go together. It will be nice to see him.

Two days later she forwards him an email with a link to an article debunking the existence of Bigfoot.

He sends back a link to an article about a footprint cast that cannot be identified by zoologists.

Mulder picks up Scully outside her apartment in Georgetown. He sees her before she sees him. She's standing in the afternoon sunlight, gazing across the tree-lined street, her hair up in a French twist, loose tendrils fluttering in the wind. She is dressed in a pale melon-colored gown. Ankle length or just above with thin shoulder straps and a fitted bodice. Mulder doesn't know all the technical terms, he only knows the dress is silky and flowing and beautiful -- she's beautiful. She is self-conscious when she dresses up, though you would never know it to watch her. She used to stick to high necklines and conservative little black standards. She has blossomed into herself through the years. A thin shawl rests at her elbows, and she holds onto a gold clutch purse. Four inch strappy heels finish off the look, and a delicate gold anklet catches the sunlight. Mulder almost runs into a fire
hydrant trying to park.

The first few hours of the event go surprisingly well. Being next to Scully is the most natural thing in the world. Awkwardness can only hold so long between them before they fall into the inexplicable comfort in one another's space that has been with them since she first arrived in his basement hideaway. They don't have much explaining to do to their mutual acquaintances. No one has understood their relationship for years and the questioners gave up a long time ago, surprised only when they are not side by side in one form or another.

At the reception Scully has a few glasses of champagne and maybe not enough food to keep it from going to her head. The buzz softens her, and she smiles more and laughs a little, and they get caught up in the warmth and the sparkling lights from the chandelier and the inviting music.

As the night goes on, Mulder convinces Scully to join him on the dance floor. They dance well together, they always have. Partners know where and how the other is going to move. And Scully loves music more than she ever lets on. Mulder was shocked the first time he saw the extent of the music folder on her private laptop. He doesn't know why she considers this such intimate knowledge of her, but she guards her music time like she is writing in a diary.

She smiles and even giggles a little when he swings her onto the dance floor. They get roped into a couple of line dances Scully knows better than he does (lots of cousins' weddings, she says), and Mulder laughs as Scully attempts to direct him. He is once again impressed by what the woman is able to accomplish in four inch heels. Many of the other women are already down to bare feet.

In the dim light at the elegant venue, with Scully softened from the champagne and smiling and her hair gradually working more bits loose and flowing from its twist, he sees a priceless glimpse of the young agent he first knew. When her rare smiles were genuine and sweet and not tinged with underlying sadness like everything since she lost her sister, her health, her daughter, their son.

The celebratory mood quiets as the music shifts, and Scully falls into his arms for a slow dance. It's a song he knows she likes, and he lifts his eyebrows with a glance upwards as it starts and she smiles and nods, the champagne loosening her customary guarded acknowledgment of this tender pleasure. His hand is comfortably pressed to the silk at the small of her back, and she gradually moves in closer against him.

As the music continues its enchanting and haunting strains, the mood slows palpably. Scully is undeniably close, their bodies melding together as they always have. He can feel the familiar heat building between them, the remembered intimacy. Her breath is caressing his throat, and her fingers rest against the nape of his neck. Their bodies can't hide what their words tangle and shadow.

Then she breaks his heart when he feels the shift in her breath and realizes Scully has started to cry. Her tears are silent, secret. She hasn't stopped moving to the music. Mulder tries to ask her with his eyes what is wrong, but she just tucks in closer, buries her face in his neck. They finish out the dance as she cries soundlessly into his open collar, his pulse against her forehead, his mouth in her hair. Mulder shelters her as close as he can, protecting her from the crowd, from the night, from whatever it is that hurts inside. He cradles the back of her head, keeps his arm solid and unyielding across her back, supporting her with all he has. He keeps his lips pressed close, whispering small comforts she probably cannot hear, and her nails dig into the cloth of his shirt in acknowledgment.

When the music stops and the band announces a break, Scully turns and slips out of his arms. She never looks at him, never speaks a word, just vanishes through the crowd and out the door of the ballroom, like Cinderella at midnight. He tries to follow, but she is good and thoroughly gone. He tells the bride and groom she wasn't feeling well. They joke about too much champagne and he tries to smile. He leaves fifteen minutes after Scully and drives home.
He texts from his driveway to ask if she is okay. Twenty minutes later, she replies, "I'm fine."

At six o'clock the next morning, his phone buzzes and the screen reads, "I'm sorry I left you." The floor shifts beneath him and he feels like he has been punched in the gut. He stares at the five words as he slides down and sits on the wood planks of the floor beside his bed. He tries to breathe. For all the years after, he never has the nerve to ask if she meant only "....at the wedding."

They don't speak again for a month.

*****

(end Chapter 8)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Mulder and Scully and the search for the truth all belong to Chris Carter and Co. I'm just borrowing them. I promise to return them in no worse condition than Chris would.

Beta thanks to Annie, without whom I would probably still be sitting in a corner feeling sorry for myself and refusing to post, and to Erica who who makes me much more presentable to the world.

Come listen to me whine about the writing process-- I mean, join me for updates on the writing process on Twitter - @Rowan_D

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Chapter 9

The storm brought torrential rains. As the afternoon wore on and the weather app on Mulder's phone promised only more of the same, their prospects of staking out Miller's Clearing and glimpsing the local light show whittled down from slim toward none.

Around three o'clock, Mulder, who had been reduced to filling out online paperwork on which he was hopelessly behind, heard Scully's motel room door open and close. For an adrenaline-fueled moment, he thought (or hoped) she was coming over to talk, would be knocking on his door any second. But a minute later he heard a car rev to life in the parking lot. He glanced out the rain-fogged window in time to see Scully pulling away in their sleek rental.

Mulder took out his phone and texted her.

Where you going?

Her reply took a few minutes. Probably she had waited until she hit a stoplight.

Adoration. Basilica of San Albino, Mesilla. Text me if you need the car.

Responding to him was the only professional choice, and Scully was professional before all else. The honesty about where she was going was a little more intimate. She could have said "personal errand." Probably would have done so to another agent. There was a time long ago when she would have with him.

He was probably over-analyzing this.

He texted back Okay and left it at that.

Two hours, a lot of paperwork, and a bag of potato chips later, Mariela phoned Mulder. She wanted Scully and him to attend her father's funeral the next day. She said her mother was okay with it, that they would be welcome. Mulder took down the information, gave his condolences once again, and assured Mariela he and Scully would be in attendance.
He debated phoning Scully. He debated dropping by. She had returned to her room about twenty minutes earlier. Neither of them had had dinner, and he needed to tell her their new morning's plans. But he felt like she wanted her space. And some petulant part of him needed her to be the one to take the first step toward making amends this time.

He finally texted her with the update, including the details of the next day's service.

He opened her quick reply -- *Got it.*

Mulder flopped back onto the overly firm mattress and stared at the ceiling sprinkler. He swiped a hand over his tired eyes. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

*****

By 9:00am the next morning, Mulder started to suspect he had been sucked back into the 1990s. Scully had knocked on his door bright and early, dressed in a black suit and silk navy blouse, acting like nothing had happened between them the day before and asking if he wanted to walk over to the diner for breakfast. In a booth by the window, she showed him some research she had done on the history of strange sightings in Dona Ana County as well as the type of research and development being done at White Sands. At least the part that was public knowledge. She was leaning toward the radiation having something to do with government work. Apparently, she had spoken to Aster already and found out the police had closed off the contaminated area to the public but were no closer to understanding what had caused the problem. Aster was meeting with a military liaison that afternoon.

Somewhere in the 2000s, Mulder and Scully had stopped dealing with their personal problems by pretending they didn't exist, by going back to work and erecting walls that cordoned off messy emotions and sticky complications. Scully had stopped pretending she was fine when she had had only two hours of sleep and started admitting to the nausea and headaches. She had stopped saying she hadn't been crying when her pale skin made it abundantly clear she had. He had stopped giving her witty and meaningless replies when he was taking off on some wild tangent and started telling her where he was actually going. He had stopped saying he was fine to work when he was clearly running a fever or suffering from a migraine. And now here they were, comparing case notes and munching on diner toast, pretending they hadn't torn off all the bandages for a few minutes in a desert storm and left all their wounds exposed and raw.

1990s. Mulder's skin hurt.

At least she was still here.

When they were back at the car, Scully said, "Do you mind if I drive?"

He passed the keys to her, sliding his fingers over her palm as he did so. "Knock yourself out."

She was behind the wheel, focus straight ahead, when she said, "I hate going to funerals." It was the first real thing she had said all day.

"I think you've already done more than your share," he replied simply.

She gave the smallest nod and continued to drive.

*****

St. Xavier's Funeral Home of Las Cruces was a more modern structure than the church Scully had visited the day before. The building was low and long to combat the heat, but the exterior looked
more like it belonged in an east coast strip mall than as part of the native landscape. The location wasn't far from the hospital where the man's son lay, missing his father's funeral. Scully hoped they had at least left a close friend or relative to keep the boy company. He was aware enough to understand what was going on this afternoon.

She was trying very hard to approach today's task as a purely professional one. To survey the event for information just as she would a crime scene. She would give proper courtesy and sympathy to the victim's family while remaining personally detached. She had found this part of the job increasingly difficult through the years; once she had attended her own father's funeral, her sister's, Emily's, even Mulder's -- and now her mother's. Maybe Mulder was right. She had already done her share.

The location wasn't far from the hospital where the man's son lay, missing his father's funeral. Scully hoped they had at least left a close friend or relative to keep the boy company. He was aware enough to understand what was going on this afternoon.

The line to be greeted by the family stretched through the glass double doors onto the warm pavement, and Mulder and Scully worked their way forward in silence. She couldn't deny it felt good to have Mulder standing so close, a hand now and then at the small of her back. Yesterday had been rough, and her stomach was still in knots from the endless circles her brain had been traveling. She knew pretending nothing had happened wasn't the answer, but they had a job to do in a limited time frame, and this was a huge personal topic she had managed to rip open.

The crowd of mourners was impressive, and Scully credited this to Joseph Garcia's extensive involvement with the local community. As she and Mulder neared the front of the line, they could see the three women greeting each arrival -- Mariela, and two women in their late thirties or early forties. Presumably one was Donna Garcia, and the other was perhaps her sister? There was some resemblance. Both women were tall, attractive, and well-dressed, with long, wavy dark hair and striking eyes. The taller of the two appeared a little bit older and looked a little more care-worn, and Scully guessed this was Mariela's mother.

When their turn came, Mulder reached a hand out toward the taller woman, grasping her hand and placing his other hand lightly on top in a gesture of offered sympathy. "Mrs. Garcia? Fox Mulder, FBI. This is my partner, Dana Scully. We're so sorry for your loss."

Donna Garcia nodded. "Oh, yes." She turned to the woman beside her, "The agents Mariela spoke to."

Donna turned back toward Mulder and Scully. "This is my sister, Rachel. And, of course, you know Mariela."

Scully reached out for Rachel's hand. "Nice to meet you," she said softly. Then Scully touched a hand to Mariela's shoulder. "Good to see you, again. I wish it were under happier circumstances."

"Thanks," the girl said. Her long hair had been straightened and gathered into a low ponytail at the side of her head. She was dressed in an elegantly simple black dress with a short-sleeved bolero jacket. Scully couldn't help but admire the girl's poise and dignity amid the chaos that had become her life. She wasn't sure she herself would have had such strength at such a tender age. If she had lost her own father so young, she probably would have been clinging to Missy's hand and hovering behind her shoulder while her older sister handled the required social acknowledgments at their mother's side.

"Thank you for coming. I'm sorry I haven't had the chance to meet with you yet," Donna said. "I know Mariela said you would want to speak with me."

Mulder shook his head. "Don't worry about it. You have enough on your plate. We can speak whenever you're ready."

"I appreciate that you're trying to help. I'll contact you soon."
"Take your time," Scully said, knowing, of course, they wouldn't be able to stay in New Mexico indefinitely. But she had to put human kindness above travel requisitions and budget regulations. At least for the day.

Mulder moved to step away, to let the next guests come forward from behind them, and Scully was about to follow, when Rachel let out a startled gasp. Scully turned and to see a quick trail of red streaming from Donna Garcia's nose over her glossed lips.

"Oh, my God," Rachel cried.

"Dammit, not now," Donna whispered.

"Mom?" The alarm in Mariela's voice hurt Scully's stomach. This girl had lost so much, she was clearly terrified.

It took only a second for Mulder to grasp what was happening, and he pulled out a handkerchief from his inner coat pocket. Scully snatched the cloth from his fingers and took a step forward, trying to forget that Mulder had started carrying this handkerchief for her. She hadn't realized he had never stopped.

"Here, let me help. I'm a doctor," Scully said, lifting the handkerchief to Donna's nose as she cupped a steadying hand to the back of the taller woman's head. "Which way is the ladies' room?" Scully demanded of the surrounding women.

A nearby blonde in a dark blazer with "St. Xavier's" stitched on the pocket pointed down the hall toward the back of the building. "This way, first hall to the right." Rachel still clung to her sister's fingers as Donna and Scully moved away, but the older woman squeezed her sister's hand and tried to nod. "No, you stay, talk to everyone for me."

"Mom?" Mariela asked again.

"I'll be fine, honey. I'll be back. You stay with Aunt Rachel."

Rachel reluctantly let go of Donna's hand and tossed an uncertain glance toward Scully. Scully offered a quick sympathetic smile, then focused all her attention on her patient as Rachel turned to attend to Mariela. The nosebleed was still going strong, Scully could feel the blood soaking through the cloth onto her fingers.

The ladies' room was elegant and clean, flatteringly lit and blessedly empty. Scully led Donna toward a cushioned seat to the left of the sinks.

"Here, you sit down." She took the rag from Donna's nose, keeping it close to protect the woman's dress as she guided Donna's hand into place. "Pinch your nose, right there. Then keep your head tilted a little forward," she instructed. "I'll get you cleaned up."

Scully snatched a couple of paper towels from a wicker basket on the counter and splashed a little water onto the end. With a tender hand, she started cleaning the other woman's face. "Keep pinching, don't let go," she said as she worked. "Are you feeling faint? Lightheaded?"

"No."

"Any nausea?"

"No."
"Your color's good. When did this start?" Scully pushed to standing and reached for a fresh bunch of towels. She tossed Mulder's handkerchief onto the counter until she could wash it out.

"A few weeks ago," Donna replied with a brief glance up at Scully. "Before Joe's accident."

"And you've been seen by a doctor?" Scully dropped again to a crouch in front of Donna, carefully cleaning the woman's skin while doing the least possible damage to her makeup.

"Yeah, I've been seen twice."

"What have they looked at? Have you had any scans done? An MRI? I assume you've had bloodwork?"

"I had some bloodwork. All normal. I had an MRI."

"High blood pressure?"

"No."

"Any injuries? To your face or head?"

"No, nothing. I'm waiting to see an ENT in a couple of weeks."

Scully sighed softly. She had contained the blood reasonably well. "Keep pinching," she said, cupping a steadying hand over Donna's for a moment.

"My daughter thinks it's the curse of the Black-Eyed Children," Donna said with a trace of a wry smile. Her words had just the slightest elegant accent.

Scully drew a slow breath, then said, "I think maybe we should eliminate things like understandable stress and thin nasal passage linings first."

She pushed up from her crouch once more and settled gingerly onto the cushioned bench beside Donna. The two women were quiet for a few moments.

"Can I let go yet?" Donna asked.

"Give it another minute."

Scully debated the lines of presumptuous familiarity for a moment, then rested a hand on Donna Garcia's slightly hunched back as they waited. Her touch did not seem unwelcome.

A minute later, Donna cautiously released her pinch on her nose, and the stream of blood seemed to have stopped.

"Okay. That looks better," Scully said. "Here." She moistened one last towel and passed it to Donna.

Donna rose cautiously to her feet and stepped up to the sink. "Dear God, I look horrible." She dabbed lightly at the last of the blood stains around her nose.

"You look exhausted, not horrible," Scully said.

"Do you think I'm dying of something yet to be identified?" Mrs. Garcia's expression held just a hint of dry humor mixed with near undetectable fear as she met Scully's gaze in the mirror. Scully couldn't help but admire the woman's strength of spirit.
"Professionally, I can't rule out any diagnosis without further testing, no matter how unlikely." She stepped forward and began rinsing out Mulder's handkerchief in the adjoining sink. "But personally, I'm a big believer in Occam's razor. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one. You've been under an unreasonable amount of stress these past few weeks. You're in a dry environment at nearly 5,000 feet of elevation. Most likely this is your body's natural reaction to these taxing circumstances."

Donna nodded, turned off the water, and shifted to sit back against the edge of the counter. She tossed her paper towel into the trash, folded her arms across her chest, and drew a deep breath. "Thank you. For your help. Dana is it?"

Scully nodded. "Dana Scully. Just doing my job." She wrung out the handkerchief, then wrapped it in a paper towel and stuffed it in her pocket.

Donna gave a soft chuckle. "No, I don't think this is in your job description. I think you're a kind person."

Scully didn't reply. She could hardly say she had been the one with the handkerchief more times than she cared to recall. The last thing she wanted to do in the name of "help" was compare this woman's current situation to her own early symptoms of inoperable cancer. She said simply, "I'd say you deserve some kindness right now. I can only imagine what you must be going through."

The taller woman shook her head and stared down at her crossed ankles for a long moment. "I'm not sure I understand what I'm going through. It all still seems like a bad dream."

Scully nodded. "I understand how that feels."

"Veronica was my husband's mother, but...I've known her since I was seventeen. And after I lost my own mother in 2008, Veronica kind of stepped in and became a second mother to me. I never imagined I would wake up one morning, and all the parental figures in my life and my husband would have vanished in nearly one swipe. It seems I am the head of the household, now."

"I'm so sorry. I know it's not at all like what you're going through, but I lost my own mother just over a year ago. And I had already lost my father a long time ago. So...I know what a strange feeling that is, when you suddenly find yourself the oldest generation."

"Were you close? You and your mother?" Donna seemed eager to talk and less eager to return to the greeting line. Scully was more than willing to indulge the woman. She didn't want to see her patient jump back into the fray until she was certain the bleeding was firmly stopped.

"Yes, we were close," she replied honestly. "We didn't always agree or understand one another, but...we were close. I loved her very much. So you were close to your mother-in-law?"

Donna nodded. "We did not always see eye to eye, either. She could be a stubborn old bruja. But I loved her very much, as well."

They stood in sympathetic silence for a few moments.

Then Donna asked, "Have you ever been in love, Dana?"

Scully sucked in a breath and swallowed against a suddenly dry throat, but she found herself replying simply, "Yes."

"More than once?"

Scully rested her fingertips on the counter top. "I think so, but once...more so than any other."
"And that one...are you still in love?"

Scully cleared her throat, but her voice remained hoarse. "Yes."

"Are you still together?"

She stared at the silver faucet, the gold-edged ceramic soap dispenser. "Not exactly, no. It's..." She searched for words, tried to speak a couple of times, and finally gave an embarrassed laugh and went with the painfully obvious cliche, "It's complicated."

"Except it's really not," Donna said simply.

Scully lifted her eyebrows, begging elaboration.

Donna tilted her head with a slight narrowing of her kind eyes. "If you truly love each other, it's not complicated."

Scully allowed a trace of a wry smile. "Well...I wish that were true."

"It is. When you go through something like this, you know that it is. Since you and your beloved separated, has either of you been in an accident? Sick? In the hospital? Was your life in danger? Or his? Or hers?" she finished with a flash of smile.

"His," Scully confirmed. "And...yes. All of the above, actually."

Donna frowned, gaze conveying genuine sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that. But when those things happened, when you were watching him in the hospital, or you were waking up sick or hurt to find him by your side or on your phone...did it seem 'complicated' then?"

Scully allowed a slow breath in and out through her nose. Then she said softly, "No. No, it didn't."

Donna gave her a sad smile. "I should attend my husband's funeral now," she said.

Scully sighed and held the woman's gaze. "You should. But you won't be alone. There are people out there who love you."

"There are. In that I am lucky." Still showing no sign of movement, Donna gestured toward the bit of gold at Scully's throat. "You're a believer?"

Scully glanced down at her chest, resisted the impulse to finger her cross. "In my way, yes. I consider myself Catholic."

Mrs. Garcia stared somewhere around Scully's knees for a long moment, then asked, "Do you think my family is cursed?"

Scully immediately shook her head. "No. No, Mrs. Garcia, I don't believe your family is cursed."

"Then what do you think is happening?"

"I'm not sure, yet. That's what we're here to try to find out. But it might yet all be explained by nothing more than tragic coincidence."

Donna gave a mirthless chuckle. "I should probably think that's better. Less frightening. But I find I want something or someone to blame."

"I think we all do, when bad things happen. Maybe that's why we need the Devil. Then there's
always someone to blame."

"You may be right about that."

Scully stood in quiet support, with this woman she had only just met, for a few moments longer. Then she held out a hand and said, "Come on. I'll walk you back."

By the time Scully and Donna emerged from the restroom, the majority of the attendees had gathered in the small sanctuary for the service. Scully handed Donna off to her sister at the entrance to the sanctuary, and the two women exchanged a small smile of acknowledgment. Scully turned and scanned the crowd and caught Mulder giving her a low-key wave from a seat at the far side of the room. She looped around the benches at the back and slipped into the vacant seat beside him on which he had tossed their copies of the memorial program.

As Scully settled into her chair, Mulder leaned into her ear and whispered, "Is Mrs. Garcia okay?"

Scully gave a quick nod and whispered back, "I think so. Medically, at least. But she needs to get checked out."

Mulder nodded. He looked like he would have said more, but a man at the podium called for their attention.

Several speakers came forward during the service. Relatives, co-workers, former students. The tragedy of the premature loss was made all the more poignant by the clear display of the many lives this man's talents and kindness had touched.

Joseph Garcia's younger brother was halfway through a predictable but sincere speech, when Scully reached into Mulder's lap and grasped his hand. Because he was alive, and he was there, and this funeral wasn't his or hers, and she didn't want to ever take these moments for granted, no matter how fucked up it all was between them. Mulder was here, letting her retreat and be cryptic and distant, letting her work things out at whatever pace she needed, staying by her side no matter what. Neither of them had apologized, they hadn't resolved or fixed anything. The argument or discussion or whatever it had been yesterday would have to continue if they wanted to move forward. But right now, right this second, she took Mulder's hand, and he let her, and with a subtle but deeply concerned glance at her profile, he squeezed back hard.

Maybe he thought the funeral was just hard for her. And it was, but this wasn't about that. Gaze still on the man speaking at the podium, Scully moved her other hand to wrap over the top of Mulder's, making the gesture as much about him as possible. He cupped her fingers with his free hand. They held on like that in silence, not caring if it looked strange or unprofessional or confusing, just needing the contact and the affirmation, until the service was complete.

*****

They chose not to follow the procession to the grave site. Mulder promised Mariela they would speak soon and followed Scully back across the parking lot.

As their steps slowed beside their car, out of earshot of the majority of the crowd, Mulder gave a weighted sigh and swiped a hand down his face. He stretched his shoulders, rubbed the back of his neck. His muscles were still more sensitive to tension after the accident. "Well, that was kinda brutal," he said.

Scully gave a soft hum of acknowledgment and leaned back against the passenger door, staring down at her heeled shoes. "Did you get to ask anyone how Christian's doing? I didn't want to bring it
Mulder nodded. "Oh, yeah, I didn't get to tell you. When you were in the bathroom, Mariela said they were able to take him off the breathing tube last night and he's doing well on his own. Awake and hungry."

"Oh, that's wonderful. This family could certainly use some good news."

"And then some."

Scully narrowed her eyes and gazed up at him. "We still haven't heard back from Veronica Garcia's doctor. I think maybe we need to push that, again. And this morning when I spoke to Sheriff Aster, he was rushed and only had a moment to update me on the radiation, I didn't get to ask for details on Ed Monroe's recent domestic disturbances."

Mulder shrugged out of his suit jacket and hooked it by a finger over his shoulder. He loosened his tie. "Yeah, I'd definitely like to follow up on that. I don't know why it feels like it's connected, but it does. Maybe we can drop by and talk to the sheriff this afternoon."

Scully nodded her agreement but didn't speak. She returned to staring at her shoes for a moment, then without preamble or warning, she said, "Don't stop touching me." Her words were clear and strong, but her tone was so uncharacteristically shy, almost embarrassed, that Mulder felt his heart rise in his throat. "That's not what I want," she continued. "I didn't mean to..."

Mulder closed his eyes and drew a slow breath. Then he reached out tender fingers and smoothed back Scully's fiery hair in the desert wind. "I wasn't planning on it."

Scully gave a soft laugh, and it was bittersweet and laced with a deep ache, but it was real and it was warm. They hadn't fixed anything, and the argument would ultimately continue. But for this moment he felt like he knew she was still in there, they were still connected. And that made his world stand still, again.

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She wakes in the hospital and everything from her chest to her thighs aches and burns like fire despite the morphine. Now she understands why they say a bullet to the abdomen is about the most painful a person can feel.

Mulder tangles his fingers with hers and she thinks everything will be okay. Even if she knows it will not.

"Hey, Supergirl," he says, and she closes her eyes on a smile. She doesn't know how long it's been or when Mulder flew to New York or if maybe he drove all night. She is high on pain meds, and she tries to speak, but she utters something unintelligible and falls back asleep with his fingers caught in her own.

Dana Scully does not mind living alone. She enjoys it most of the time. She is not lonely per se, she doesn't require constant companionship. But what she misses, what she can never quite talk her way around, is human touch. Dana has tried hard in her life to be okay without constant physical contact. It is unbecoming an independent, career-minded professional. Meeting sexual needs is one thing, that can be framed as cosmopolitan and forward and admirable. But simple affection, warmth, connection...those things are more often overlooked or even seen as neediness or weakness.

Coming from a big family, there was always someone around to touch her. Dana's mother had strict rules to manage her passel of children, could be a bit of a terror if those rules were broken, but
Maggie never touched her children with anything but warm affection, and she touched her children often.

Missy, for all her annoying arrogance and self-righteousness, was an affectionate big sister. Sometimes Dana had pretended not to want it, but the truth was, her sister provided a level of security in her life she did not even understand until she lost her.

College friends filled in when Dana left home. Med school blessedly provided a roommate who thrived on hugs and hand holds and couch cuddles for their occasional exhausted movie nights. But the FBI was hard. Dana suddenly found herself in a job that left little to no time to nurture the few local friendships she had and even less time to spend with her family. Her work environment was one where any sign of supposed feminine weakness could freeze her place in the Bureau for years to come. Dana did not believe the need for human connection and affection was a weakness, but the stereotype existed in her world nonetheless.

And then she met Mulder.

She wakes at 3am in tears from the pain and trauma of having a bullet rip through her flesh, and she finds Mulder still there, defying visiting hours, jerking awake with a cramped neck and rumpled clothes in the hard chair beside her bed.

"Mulder? What are you doing here?"

"Sshhh..." He strokes her hair and kisses her temple and he smells like cheap soap and sunflower seeds and she breathes that in over the death and antiseptic.

"Where's Mom?" Her plea sounds more forlorn and childlike than she means.

"I sent her to a hotel to get some sleep," Mulder says. "Do you want me to call her?"

Scully shakes her head, embarrassed and aching and cold. "No, it's fine. I'm fine."

He continues to stroke her hair. His flesh is warm.

She worked with him only a few days before she threw herself in his arms for comfort after freaking out wondering if she had been abducted by aliens. Not her finest professional moment. But Mulder never seemed to mind. His hands found her even in those early days, guiding her through doorways, fixing her jewelry, catching her fingers to get her attention. He would wake her not by a socially proper nudge to her shoulder, but with a finger to her cheek or a hand nestled at the nape of her neck.

By mutual agreement, they opened their bodies to one another many years before they defined their relationship to themselves or anyone else. Either of them could touch freely, and the other would not pull away. The rare times they did were counted on fingers and signified deep rifts or raw pain.

Dana does not know if Mulder craves touch as much as she does, or if it is only she he wishes to touch. She is finding more and more that others are merely a substitute in her life for Mulder's affection. But she is grateful for what they have. She is grateful for those moments in his hallway, when he seemed to need her as much as she wanted to be needed. When he looked at her and asked her to stay. Not his partner, not his professional balance -- her. Even if he seemed to take it all back not long afterward.

"Here, take a drink." He holds the straw to her lips, cradles the back of her neck, and she sips the tepid water. The liquid feels good spreading through her throat and her chest. She needs sustenance and rest and sun.
"Thatta girl," he whispers. "Now get some more sleep. I'll be right here."

She knows that woman, Diana Fowley, is waiting in the wings. Scully knows that chapter has not ended in their lives. She feels a shadow descending, like a wedge between her and the man who has been virtually and literally pressed up against her side for five years.

"Mulder, go home. I'll be fine."

"Close your eyes, G-woman. I'm not going anywhere." The last sentence she hears sounds like, "I bribed the night nurse with Red Sox tickets, I know a guy."

And she can forget the shadow for a moment. Because he's her Mulder and he's here and she doesn't know what the hell she would do if he were gone. This is what she is too scared to admit in the daylight and without the painkillers. She has fallen down the rabbit hole. But if she doesn't admit it, maybe it won't be true. Maybe she'll never have to face the loss.

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(End Chapter 9)
Chapter 10

They stopped at a small and slightly grungy Mexican cantina off the main road heading toward the sheriff's station. The building was freestanding adobe, the narrow windows covered in flags and fliers until barely any sunlight bled through. Once they had gotten their food, Scully suggested they sit at one of the two mildly dusty tables that stood in front of the building. Mulder was happy to comply, even if the wind meant napkin wrangling would be a bitch. The restaurant interior was more than a little claustrophobic, and the heat from the kitchen was winning over the meager air conditioning. Fresh air and space were welcome. He was growing accustomed to the desert expanse.

Scully had forgone some of the spicier choices and chosen a simple taco salad from which she was now methodically removing all the black olives. Mulder started retrieving the olives from her napkin and throwing them onto the heap of jalapeno triple spice something over rice he had ordered off the intriguing picture over the counter.

"So, if neither our car nor Joseph Garcia's car shows signs of tampering, where does that leave us? Pure coincidence?" Scully asked.

Mulder tried to mumble something useful in reply, but he had just taken a large mouthful of triple something and could only squint and chew.

Scully kept talking in his place, dipping a piece of taco into a blob of sour cream as she processed out loud. "Radiation of the levels we were detecting wouldn't have any effect on the mechanical functioning of a car. The electrical system didn't fail. Our phones didn't stop, my smart watch was still functioning."

Mulder shrugged and was finally able to swallow. His throat burned from the spices, and he took a quick swig of lemonade before speaking. "Aside from notoriously inexplicable behavior of vehicles
near UFO activity, I have no enlightening theories to offer."

"But even if, for a moment, we accept those theories as valid, I just covered that. Aren't those stories generally based in the idea of EMF interference? And none of our other devices were affected."

Mulder nodded. "Often, yes, but not always. A substantial number of reports detail inconsistent losses of functionality. For example, the watches of two members of a group of three or four passengers might stop at the same point while the rest continue. A car engine might randomly die and then start again. Radios might or might not lose signal when the engine goes dead. Certainly the loss of all electronic equipment is the most relayed version of the story, but it's not the only version ever reported."

Scully popped a bite of taco in her mouth and kept talking as she crunched. "Yeah, but that's still during UFO activity. In close proximity to some sort of strange craft or machinery. There was no UFO activity when we crashed our car."

"Do you accept that there is ever UFO activity?" Mulder questioned with a hint of a grin. He took another bite of rice and red stuff.

"Aren't you the one always reminding me, Mulder? Unidentified Flying Object. There's no specification of alien origin in that description. Unidentified does not mean extraterrestrial. It only means the observer doesn't know what he's looking at. And this close to a military testing ground? I don't think an unidentified sighting needs to be an X-File at all. And what if it's something subterranean? Something we were driving over? The police or military should be looking for that as a possible source of the radiation as well."

"All very valid points," Mulder said as he reached again for his lemonade. Maybe a double spicy something would have been enough.

"So, I ask again -- Where does that leave us?"

Mulder shook his head and gazed across the dusty plain beyond Scully's shoulder as though the answers to the universe might lie somewhere between him and the horizon. "I think it leaves us still wondering why our scruffy little informant at the high school thought we should talk to Ed Monroe."

Scully quirked an eyebrow and met his gaze. "And why talking with us seemed to be the last thing Ed Monroe wanted to do."

Mulder nodded and took another bite of lunch, then another sip of his lemonade. His sinuses were starting to burn. He blinked and took another bite.

"So we talk to Sheriff Aster," Scully said around a mouthful of salad. "We find out what he's learned about the radiation, then find out all we can about the recent domestic calls to the Monroes' house."

Mulder tried to answer, coughed, nodded, then managed, "Sounds like what we've got at the moment. Dear God, there were more triple spices in the center of the heap than on the edges."

Scully stared at Mulder with a mildly disgusted expression, then said, "Mulder, you have got to stop ordering things when you don't know what they are."

Mulder loosened his tie, took another slug of his drink, and managed to rasp out, "You might have a point."

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The sheriff's station was quieter than they had seen thus far. An eerie stillness seemed to have settled over the whole of Verdad, as though the morning's funeral proceedings had affected the very movement of the air.

The woman at the front desk sported a nametag reading 'Washington', but Mulder recognized her as 'Janet' from their first visit. Janet was listening to someone on the phone when they stepped through the doors, and she nodded to them and held up a finger.

Mulder and Scully slowed to a halt in the middle of the lobby. After a moment of looking idly around, Scully reached into the pocket of her blazer and pulled out something small she wordlessly placed into Mulder's hand.

He looked down at the small item now resting in his palm. A travel-sized packet of his favored antacids. He looked over at Scully, who gave him a brief glance in response. "I didn't think you liked this kind," he said.

"I don't," she said simply.

Mulder gave a small smile and lowered his gaze to the tiny treasure, feeling undeniably warm in the quiet lobby. He unwrapped the tablets and tossed two into his mouth. He wondered how long Scully had been carrying these.

Janet held the phone away from her ear and covered the mouthpiece. "You're here to see the Sheriff?" she asked.

"Yes," Scully said. "Is he here?"

Janet nodded. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he's expecting you. We're just a little short staffed today. Go ahead and give a knock on his door."

"Thank you," Mulder replied, taking a step toward the inner office.

Scully moved ahead of him and knocked.

The Sheriff responded promptly to Scully's sharp rap. "Come on in."

Mulder pushed at the door and cautiously leaned his head inside. "Sheriff Aster?"

Aster looked up from his desk and waved them inside. "Agent Mulder, Agent Scully, come on in. Sorry, we're running a bit of a juggling act today."

"No problem." Mulder held the door for Scully, and they each took a seat in front of Aster's desk.

Aster kept his gaze on his computer screen for another moment, then clicked something with his mouse and turned to face them with a deliberate inhale as though to shift internal gears. "You wanted an update on the radiation," he stated, confirming they were on the same page. The small-town preamble of friendly chit-chat had vanished this afternoon and Aster was all business.

Mulder matched his demeanor to Aster's. "That would be helpful. Anything interesting come up?"

Aster shook his head. "We haven't found much more than you did at this point. We're keeping the area closed to the public, and scans of the surrounding areas have come up clean so far. I met with the military liaison about an hour ago, and at this point it looks like the military may step in and take over the investigation. They're claiming it's possible we're detecting residue from missile fragments, and they want to be certain they take proper responsibility. Nobody's told me much. It's the military and...honestly, around here...they own a lot of land. And even the surrounding areas that aren't..."
officially under their jurisdiction they tend to feel they have a certain degree of...privilege." The long-standing current of resentment beneath the sheriff's diplomatic words rang through loud and clear, and if there was anything Mulder could relate to, it was the endless frustration of running up against government authorities who played God and cut off one's best sources of information.

Mulder gave a weighty nod. "Understood," he said simply. "Have your guys looked into any underground sources yet?"

"No, not yet. We've mainly been doing surface scans and demarcating the contaminated areas. It took us a while to come up with all the proper protection equipment to proceed with the investigation without endangering any of our officers. We did test the water running through the underground pipes in that area, and it still meets safety standards. I can show you the report I printed up for the military liaison..." He reached across his desk and picked up a thin manila folder.

Mulder nodded. "You still have authority and control over the area right now?"

"Yes, sir, I don't expect that would change before tomorrow morning at the earliest."

"Then with your permission, this evening Agent Scully and I would like to--"

Mulder broke off his sentence when Aster's door swung open and Janet stepped into the room with a clearly concerned expression on her face. "Sheriff. Sorry to bother you, but we've got a situation."

"What's going on?"

Janet shifted her weight, one hand still on the doorknob, the other fidgeting restlessly with the butt of her holstered weapon. "It's Ed Monroe. He's got a gun on Vera and the kids. The little girl called it in, she's hiding outside the house."

"Shit." Aster shoved to his feet, dropping the radiation report and skidding his chair. "Cars on route?" he asked as he rounded his desk.

"Levi and Dawson, but they're coming from Cruces. We got half our people in training, people out at Miller's Clearing, and at Garcia's funeral -- bottom line, you're closest right now."

"I'm on it." Aster turned toward Mulder and Scully with a look of tense apology, drawing a breath as though to explain, but Mulder was already pushing to his feet, feeling Scully rise behind him. He said simply, "We'll follow you."

Aster hesitated, then nodded acceptance. Whatever objections he might have had to sharing his territory, this situation clearly needed expertise and manpower, and there was little choice but to accept the armed and trained help that was being offered.

Mulder drove their rental car. Aster took off with full sirens and flashers, but Mulder and Scully's rental was equipped with no such advantage. Mulder did his best to ride Aster's wake as they wove through the traffic, and he found himself unusually grateful for the added maneuverability of their upgraded vehicle. Midday traffic in Verdad wasn't a particular barrier to progress, so he was able to keep pace without too much stunt work. Nearer their destination, Aster killed the sirens and drove only on flashers. Scully quietly held hard to the arm rest. She had actually been pretty quiet for a while now, which was something Mulder made a mental note to look into as soon as no one was being shot at.

But Scully was all business and confidence when they rolled to a halt on the street outside the Monroe's home.
The house was in a disorganized and sprawling neighborhood with a fairly wide berth between lots. As Mulder got out of the car, he scanned the surroundings for points of vulnerability, places people might be hiding, angles that would benefit snipers. Out of the corner of his eye he registered Scully doing the same. This hadn't been a planned raid; no one had taken the time to don Kevlar.

The open visibility of the natural terrain worked to their advantage. The primary threats were the house itself, a minivan in the driveway, and two aging pickup trucks parked on the ragged grass at the side of the lot.

A quick flash of movement near the front bumper of the closer truck had both Mulder and Scully snapping their guns to the ready.

Aster's voice rang out from over their shoulders. "Kayla!"

Kayla. The Monroes' daughter.

Mulder angled his gun away from the girl but kept it raised. Kayla was crouched close to the ground, her dress dusty, long hair windblown and disheveled. Scully stepped up to cover Aster's back as the Sheriff jogged over to the girl and attempted to herd her toward the squad car.

Kayla clutched something in her hand, and Mulder realized as she moved closer the object was a cell phone. It must have been the phone the 911 call had come from.

"Come on, now, Kayla. How about you just climb in here for now," Aster was saying as he opened the door to the squad car.

But Kayla balked. She shook her head hard. "No. I need to see them."

"I know, Kayla, and you will, but right now you need to stay safe here and let us--"

"No!" Kayla shouted, and Mulder and Scully both glanced reflexively toward the house, worried about the reaction from Monroe if he should hear and perceive them as a threat to his child.

With a quick moment of eye contact with Mulder, Scully lowered her weapon and moved in close to Kayla. "Go," she said to Aster. "I'll help her."

Aster looked between Scully and the frightened girl for a moment, then nodded and turned to coordinate with Mulder.

Mulder let his gaze linger for a second, and he saw Scully drop to a crouch in front of Kayla. He could hear Scully speaking softly as he turned his attention back to the house, and he and Aster determined via gestures to each take one entrance.

"Kayla. My name is Dana. I'm here to help."

"He has a gun. My dad has a gun. I don't know what's wrong."

"You did the right thing to call for help, that was very smart and very brave. Now the best thing you can do is keep yourself safe and let us help your mom and dad."

"And my brother. My brother's in there, too!"

"We'll look for your brother, too, sweetie, I promise. Do you know I have two brothers? So I know how you feel. Come on. The best thing you can do for your family right now is to get into Sheriff Aster's car. You'll be safe..."
And then Mulder was too far out of earshot, circling to the back porch door leading into the kitchen of the home.

He could hear shouting inside. The words were unclear, but the male voice was strong, and the woman's sounded distraught. Something was shoved and hit the floor hard not far from the other side of the wall Mulder was backed up against. He edged his way along the rear of the home and up the two steps onto the chipped concrete outside the rear door.

The inner door stood open, only the screen remained closed, and even that hung just shy of the latch. This alone was a red flag in this part of the country. The wild winds could rip a loose and lightweight door right off its hinges.

Mulder listened for a moment longer, placing by sound that Monroe would be to the right of the door as Mulder entered, and Mrs. Monroe would be farther into the house and off to his left. He couldn't determine the location of the brother.

A thump and click from further back into the house signaled Aster was making his move, and Mulder took the plunge and entered at the same time.

"Police! Nobody move!" Aster called out as he moved into the open stretch of kitchen and living room from the front hallway.

"FBI!" Mulder shouted as he stepped in from the rear, sweeping his gun over the room, confirming the lay of the land.

To his left, Mrs. Monroe and their son Nate stood wide-eyed and frozen. To Mulder's right Ed Monroe stood with a startled and furious expression, a sawed-off shotgun aimed toward his family. *Jesus fuck.*

Monroe looked like a different man than the one Mulder and Scully had met at his garage only a day before. His hair was stringy and disheveled, his tanned skin beaded with sweat. Mulder wished like hell he and Scully had had the chance to ask Aster for a little more background on Monroe's case before they were thrown into this stand-off.

Vera Monroe was dressed in a wrinkled flowered dress, her hair tied up in a disorganized twist. Nate still appeared to be dressed in his school uniform.

"Get the hell out of my house!" Monroe shouted at the intruders. "This is none of your concern, Aster!"

"I'm afraid this is all my concern, Ed. Now how about you tell me what's going on here? What seems to be the problem?"

"She's the problem!" Ed jabbed the barrel of his rifle in the direction of his wife. "She talked to one of those demons, almost let it into our home! Now look at us! Look at where we are!"

Aster took a small step farther into the room, raising the hand not on the trigger in a placating and open-palmed gesture. "All right. Just slow down, Ed. Let's take this one step at a time and figure this out. Nobody has to get hurt, today."

"It's too late for that," Monroe shot back. "You can't undo it once it's done. We're cursed. They'll never stop coming. And it's her. She's the problem. Just like the Garcia girl."

Mulder caught a brief flash of orange hair in the desert sun through the window behind Monroe's shoulder. Scully was making her way around the house by the same path Mulder had taken. He kept
his gaze firmly on Monroe and on his weapon, giving no outward sign of what he had seen.

"All right, Ed, I hear you," Aster placated. "And we can get you away from your wife if that's what you want. But you don't want anyone hurt in the process. So you got to let us help you."

"You can't help me. You know that. You've never been able to help yourself." He threw a pointed look toward Aster.

Mulder took a step closer to Monroe, peripherally aware of a slight shifting movement of Vera and Nate behind him. "What exactly do you want to happen here, Mr. Monroe? You need to tell us what you need if we're going to help you make it happen."

"I want you and the sheriff to stop pretending you can do a damn thing to protect us and get the hell out of my house. This is about me and my wife. I'm handling this myself this time."

"Vera, don't you move," Monroe ordered, addressing his family directly for the first time since Mulder's arrival. "You let the cops take you and they'll take the kids with you, and you'll get them cursed and killed. I just got Nate away from that girl. You want your kids to die like the others? Like the Garcias?"

"Ed, please...," Vera Monroe whispered, voice tremulous through tears. "This isn't right. You know it."

And that was when Scully took her opportunity. She did exactly what she should have done; exactly what Mulder himself would have done. She had cataloged everyone's positions in the home. She had seen Mrs. Monroe trying to place herself between her husband and her son, seen her trying to give her son a clear shot toward the back door. Scully had understood, just as Mulder had, that Nate wasn't going to leave his mother behind and run. And Scully had seen that she could step in and place herself and her weapon between Monroe and his family. She saw the opportunity and she took it, moving quietly but swiftly through the door and into the line of fire.

Three guns to one and the family out of direct line of fire. This should have been the scenario they were all hoping for. The one that, if Monroe had any semblance of rationality remaining, would have led him to surrender.

Instead, when Monroe saw Scully, something in him snapped. "Get her out of here! Get her away from my house!" he shouted, voice raspy and bordering on hysterical. There was panic in his eyes.

"Monroe, just calm down!" Aster called out. "Agent Scully is a federal officer. We all want the same thing here. We don't want anyone to get hurt--"

"Shut up! You're fucking one of them, too! But it's the women they come for. Like my wife." He gestured toward Scully with his shotgun. "She's one of them. I saw her scar! They've taken her and
she's gonna draw them back to my house. Get her out of here!"

"Monroe, if you put down the gun, we can all get out of here, and everybody gets what they want. You just need to--"

The order of events had to be sorted later in Mulder's mind. He knew he was thinking God bless Scully and her uncanny ability to read body language. Because somehow, Monroe must have telegraphed the shot before he fully pulled the trigger. Which gave Scully just enough time to dive out of the line of fire and let the blast blow a hole in the kitchen wall, but not enough time to regain her stance and the aim on her weapon, before Monroe hurled himself toward her and grabbed her with his arm around her throat.

Monroe's movement was wild and clumsy. Because somewhere in the second between the shot at Scully and the end point of Monroe's dive, Mulder had fired his weapon and caught Monroe in the thigh. As the gun smoke settled, Monroe was on the floor with his back against the side of the couch. Scully's back was plastered to his side with his death grip around her throat. Monroe's gun was gone and so was Scully's, but the chokehold was real. Monroe was bleeding across the floor, and Mulder and Aster were still standing several feet away with guns trained on the two on the floor.

Mulder didn't know where the knife had come from or when it had started pressing into Scully's throat.

"Get my wife out of here!" Monroe shouted. "Keep her away from my son! Just give me my boy and my daughter and let us leave! We have the right to leave!"

Aster shook his head slowly and said, "Ed, you just fired at a federal agent and now you've got a knife to her throat. I'm afraid you just gave up your right to anything but a fair trial for a little while, now."

Monroe cinched his hold on Scully's throat, and Mulder felt sick at the soft whimper of pain this forced from Scully's lips. "What if I take her with me? Hunh?? You gonna risk her life stopping me?"

"Mr. Monroe, you're not going anywhere with that bullet in your leg. You need medical attention and fast. You're losing a lot of blood." Mulder gestured toward the wound with his weapon, speaking as calmly as he could. His aim was still on Monroe's chest, but Scully was so close, could so easily be shifted into the path of the bullet.

"Screw that!" Monroe snarled. There was a raggedness bleeding into his words that spoke of pain and fatigue. "I can fix that myself."

"And isn't that your driving leg?" Mulder prompted.

"My son can drive."

"Your boy's not going anywhere with you, Ed," Aster said firmly.

"Then maybe I'll make this little lady of yours drive for me. I'm sure she can handle that."

Mulder needed to keep Monroe talking, keep him distracted. He could see what Scully was doing. She was still dressed in a skirt and heels from the funeral services this morning. And Monroe wasn't holding her hands, only her throat. She was slowly sliding her leg up underneath her and reaching down to take her shoe in her hand. Everything about this plan was a risk. The knife was digging into her skin, drawing a pinpoint drop of blood. Any sudden movement and an involuntary muscle contraction could gouge the blade into her carotid artery.
"But didn't you say Scully would draw them to you?" Mulder said. "Isn't that what you're trying to get away from? That's not what you want, is it, Mr. Monroe. For your son or your daughter? A life on the run? Wasn't the point to protect your children, give them a more normal life?"

"This is HER fault!" he blurted with renewed venom, shooting his anger toward his wife. "She listened to them! That's what they wanted. They wanted to use her. Use all of us!"

Mulder nodded. "I know. I understand. They took my sister when I was young. I never saw her again." Mulder was aware of a brief sideways glance from Aster, and he subconsciously noted the need for a conversation later if they ever got themselves out of this mess.

Nate's voice suddenly called out from where he and his mother had moved behind Mulder, startling them all with its sudden introduction to the mix. "Dad, just stop! I'll go with you, okay? You can take me prisoner, get out that way. Mariela won't follow me, now. Just don't hurt anyone else."

Monroe's eyes locked onto his son's, a mix of whirlwind emotion playing out across the man's face, but no one ever got to hear what his reply might have been.

In what felt like a single heartbeat, Scully grasped her shoe and slammed the point of her heel into Monroe's gunshot wound. When Monroe flinched and screamed in pain and frustration, his grip on Scully tightened for just a moment, and Mulder heard her gasp of pain, but then his hold faltered, and Scully turned and used all her power to slam the heel of her hand up under Monroe's jaw.

In the first moment Monroe was stunned, Scully scrambled back across the floor and snatched up her weapon from where it had slid up against an end table.

That was all it took for Aster and Mulder to be all over Monroe. Scully was on her knees, gun trained hard on Monroe as they worked.

When Aster had kicked all Monroe's weapons away and secured the handcuffs, Mulder took a hard look at Scully. A line of blood trickled down the side of her neck, but it was only a trickle. The blade hadn't hit anything vital. She was breathing heavily and shaking, but he knew she could still fire and hit her target better than he. "Scully, you all right?"

She nodded tersely, eyes and weapon still tight on Monroe. "I'm fine."

Their breathing seemed thunderous in the descending silence.

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Scully could see Mulder scanning the crowd for her a moment before his gaze found hers. She imagined she had pulled his eyes to hers with partner power. The house that had seemed so threatening an hour before now seemed like an innocent bungalow dwarfed by the sheer number of vehicles and uniformed officers littered across its grounds.

Mulder made his way to the sheltered corner Scully had adopted for herself, a little away from the crowd, sitting back on the hood of their rental car.

"Hey," he said, stepping into her space. His tone was careful, deliberately casual, but she could feel the suppressed urgency. His gaze slipped momentarily to the bandage on the side of her throat.

She offered him a brief melancholic smile and closed her eyes against the midday sun above his shoulder, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. She was suddenly overwhelmingly tired in the aftermath.
"You sure you're all right?" Mulder asked, resting his hands on his hips. She could actually see the restlessness in his limbs. "You don't want the paramedics to take you in, let you get checked out?"

Scully drew a breath and summoned her voice. "I'm fine, Mulder. Nothing an ice pack and some Advil won't take care of. I am starting to think a desk job doesn't sound as bad as it used to, though." She winced as she brought a hand to the back of her neck. She hadn't yet recovered from the car crash before this happened to compound the soreness.

Mulder offered a kind smile, but Scully could see the worry still in his eyes, the way his fingers toyed with his belt loop as he tried not to touch her in the middle of a crime scene. She couldn't deny the concern made her feel better.

She wasn't seriously hurt, she really didn't need medical attention, but she had to admit she had lost some of her endurance when it came to the emotional aspects of these types of close calls; the feelings of violation that came with the physical assaults. She was still confident in her ability to handle herself, still willing to do her job, but her more youthful sense of invincibility that had carried her into perilous situations and back out on a regular basis was waning a bit in her fifties. Maybe she had lost too much momentum in her years as a doctor. Or maybe she simply had been slammed around enough for one career.

That was a dangerous train of thought. Scully locked it away with her practiced mental discipline, dredged up her steel reserves, and pushed to her feet. "We should head to the station," she said, "file our reports." She walked just a little closer to Mulder than necessary, brushing the length of her side heavily against his as she passed. He felt the deliberate moment, and ever so subtly brushed the backs of his fingers against her hip as she passed. She pretended the brief exchange didn't tighten her throat for a breath.

Aster gave a quick nod of acknowledgment to Scully as he crossed her path on his way to approach Mulder. The two men probably thought she was too far out of earshot when she heard Aster say, "She's quite a fighter, that partner of yours."

Scully closed her eyes as Mulder replied, "You have no idea."

*****

(End Chapter 10)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Mulder and Scully and the search for the truth all belong to Chris Carter and Co. I'm just borrowing them. I promise to return them in no worse condition than Chris would.

Beta thanks to Annie, without whom I would probably still be sitting in a corner feeling sorry for myself and refusing to post, to Erica who makes me much more presentable to the world, and a warm welcome to dear Miriam, my Water's Edge beta from way back in the day, now back to kick my ass in line once more!

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This chapter treats the deleted/extended scene from "The Blessing Way", in which Melissa shows up while Dana is talking to their mother and she and Dana have a conversation/argument, as though it were canon. Pardon me taking this liberty, but this scene always spoke to me and it wormed its way into my personal head canon.

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Chapter 11

Scully felt as though they might never escape the sheriff’s station. The paperwork seemed endless and unproductive. She had to file her reports as an assault victim as well as an officer at the scene. Nate Monroe gave his statement to the local police while Mulder and Scully listened. Then they stayed to observe the questioning of Vera Monroe. Kayla's statement would have to wait until morning, until she could be evaluated by child services and assigned a social worker to advocate for her during questioning. Nothing happened fast in Verdad, New Mexico.

Scully sat shoulder to shoulder with Mulder at a table with uneven legs, looking through one way glass into the interrogation room where Aster sat speaking with Mrs. Monroe. Technically, Mrs. Monroe wasn't accused of anything, only giving a statement, but everyone was treading carefully to make sure the children were safe.

"He's impressively thorough, I'll give him that," Scully said softly as they stared forward through the glass.

Mulder mumbled a tired sound of assent.

But it was true, Aster was meticulously walking Vera through every detail of the days preceding the incident, just as he had with Nate. Scully had secured access to the reports on the last two domestic incidents at the Monroes' house and was dividing her attention between the questioning and the paperwork in front of her.

"Anything?" Mulder prompted for the third time.

Scully exhaled slowly. She was still reading, but it wasn't looking like they would learn anything more than the basic framework from these reports. "Reported shouting and thrown objects, including
some sort of radio antenna off of the roof top. Neighbors got scared and called it in."

"Twice."

"Twice. I'm on the second report. So far no clear evidence of abuse toward the children. Some questionable bruises on Vera but not enough to contradict her story of getting banged up cleaning out their garage. No formal charges were brought."

"And Nate's not accusing his dad of anything physical. Did you believe him when he said his father had never hit his mother?"

Scully wrinkled her nose and made a soft sound at the back of her throat. "I don't know. It was off."

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

Scully returned her attention to the room beyond the glass when she heard Aster begin to ask about what had set off Ed Monroe this morning.

On the far side of the metal table, beneath the sickening yellow lights of the windowless room, Vera Monroe swallowed hard and folded and unfolded her hands. The woman had splashed some water on her face and smoothed down her hair since her arrival at the station, but her eyes were still weary and skittish. "Like I said," Vera began, "Ed hasn't been himself, lately. He was so worried about Nate..."

"Because of Mariela," Aster offered, and Vera nodded with a clear flinch.

Mulder and Scully had been piecing together that part of the puzzle all afternoon in whispers and side glances. Apparently Nate and Mariela had been seeing one another for months, but Ed Monroe had disapproved of the match-up from the start. He had believed the Garcias thought they were too good for this town, that Mariela would go off to college and try to convince Nate to do the same while Ed wanted his son to finish high school then work his way up through the ranks at the auto garage. When the Black-Eyed Children stories had begun and the Garcias had seemed cursed, Ed had put his foot down and forbidden the young couple from seeing one another at all.

"I can only imagine how that felt for Nate and Mariela," Scully said, half thinking out loud. "Having Nate’s father separate them right when her life was falling apart, when Nate would want to support her the most. They're too young to face those kinds of choices."

"I agree. They both seem like good kids. A lot of volatile emotions in the mix, here."

"Ed just can't understand..." Vera said, eyes imploring Sheriff Aster. "They're really still just kids, you know? I didn't see the harm...they have time to figure out their lives. They're good kids."

Aster nodded. "I know. I understand. It's hard to know how much to intervene. So, had Nate and Mariela stopped seeing each other?"

Vera nodded. "Yes. A couple of weeks ago. Ed has had me driving Nate back and forth to school and work...making sure where he is all the time. He even took Nate's phone for a while."

Aster paused in the questioning. He shuffled the papers on the table in front of him and rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. He was no doubt as weary of all of this as they were, but he was doing an admirable job of keeping up the pace. Scully found her gaze settling on the back of Aster's neck. She could make out the slight sheen of the brighter scar tissue in the harsh light.

*Water stains. Cold. Staircase. "Bring her now." Something like rubber on her upper arm, strokes of*
undersea fingers. "Bring her now." Wide black eyes in the far corner. Let me go!

The table screeched on the tile as Scully jerked back to the present.

"Whoa, Scully? You okay?"

Her heart was racing, blood rushing in her ears. She swallowed hard, locking her gaze on the files in front of her, seeing only a meaningless blur. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sorry."

She could feel Mulder's gaze burning into the side of her head, willing her to look up and grant him some kind of connection. She wanted to close her eyes, but she didn't want the unwelcome images to replay.

"Scully?" Mulder's hand moved beneath the table and rested on her thigh. "Hey...."

She shook her head sharply. "I'm fine," she repeated. She forced an intake of air and turned her focus to the room ahead of them. "We should hear this part," she said, just the slightest tremor in the undercurrent of her voice. The quick twitch of Mulder's fingers against her thigh told her he had heard it. But Aster was asking something important, and after a beat of hesitation, Mulder looked away and brought his hands up to rest his elbows on the table, fingers clasp in front of his mouth.

"All right. What about you and Ed?" Aster asserted. "Explain this to me, Vera. What's really been going on between the two of you? How did you end up on the wrong end of a sawed-off shot gun?"

Mrs. Monroe closed her eyes. She hooked an errant strand of her dark hair behind one ear, scratched at her throat. For a moment the woman looked pointedly past Sheriff Aster's shoulder at the mirror in the wall and Scully was certain she was smart enough to realize she was being observed and likely by whom.

"You can't tell the kids about this," she said, turning her gaze on Sheriff Aster with a directness and determination she had yet to demonstrate.

Aster nodded. "Fair enough, there shouldn't be any reason that's necessary."

"You know Ed and I have been together since my last year of high school. Ed had already graduated a couple of years before me. And he was already working and saving up for a place of his own. Well...I still wanted to go to college. He had thought I was going to go to the local community college, but I got a chance to go up to Albuquerque to UNM. I went up to school, and Ed didn't like it but he said he'd wait for me. I only spent one year up there, but...well, I met someone else. I was just...all caught up in the excitement of the whole college scene. This guy was a lit major, wrote poetry about me, you know how it goes. I'm not proud to say it, but...I cheated on Ed. And near the end of the school year, I found out I was pregnant. I came home and I told Ed everything. The guy up at school had disappeared when the next pretty thing in a skirt came along. Ed tried to stick by me. He even said he'd raise the baby, but we never had to face that."

"You never had the baby?" Aster prompted kindly.

Vera shook her head. "No. The doctors couldn't really figure out what happened, though. It was like I was pregnant, and then I just wasn't. They said something about my body reabsorbing the fetus or something...I never really understood. Anyway, eventually Ed forgave me. I moved back home, and a year later, we got married, and then Nate came along."

"So what does this have to do with what's going on now? Why did everything go to hell between you two just recently?"
Mrs. Monroe shifted in her chair, tugged at her clothes and glanced around as though she were afraid she was being watched by more than the law enforcement behind the glass. She lowered her voice and Scully found herself leaning forward to listen. "The thing is, Sheriff...those Black-Eyed Kids? I'd been seeing them back then, too. Back before I lost the baby. Some weird stuff happened during that time, and Ed...I don't know, he started talking about aliens, abductions and the like. It was all the thing back then on the TV shows and in books, you know? That show about the conspiracies... With me losing the baby and all, Ed thought maybe it wasn't...natural. I don't think I ever really believed it. But then a few months ago, some kids showed up at our door late at night. They wanted to be let inside, but I wouldn't do it. It was really late, and those kids wouldn't say who they were or where they were from. I talked to them through the door, I offered to call someone for them, but they just kept asking to come in, said it was important. And they wouldn't give me a phone number. I almost let them in before I could stop myself, but I didn't. I think it brought it all up again for Ed. Made him think I was doing something behind his back or something. I haven't been, I swear. But it's always been there, you know? You forget for a while, but then...there's always a weak spot."

Aster nodded, straightened the papers in front of him on the table. "I understand. I appreciate your honesty."

Scully drew a slow breath. Her pulse had returned to normal, and the cold sick feeling that always accompanied the images was receding. Focus on work had always been her grounding point. "I don't know, Mulder," she said softly. "I'm starting to think there's not much of an X-File, here. Just a lot of messed up and damaged people looking for something to believe."

Mulder nodded. "Maybe. Maybe none of this ties together in the end. I guess the question is did they have help getting this messed up?"

Scully exhaled heavily and tilted her head in acknowledgment. "I think we've all had a little help."

*****

It was past dinnertime when things started to slow down at the station. Scully was flagging and broody and barely responsive to direct questions, and when Mulder said they should call it a night, get some food, and head up to Miller's Clearing to look for UFOs, she actually seemed to welcome his plan. Which was both pleasant and mildly concerning.

Scully asked to stop at their motel and get cleaned up and changed and Mulder couldn't blame her after what she had been through a few short hours ago. He knew her well enough to know that despite her outward cool, she fervently needed to wash Monroe's cruel touches off her skin and rebuild her zone of personal protection. Scully was warm and welcoming and easy to touch for those she loved, but she was very particular over to whom she granted such privilege. Violations took their toll.

Mulder had intuitively understood this very early in their partnership. It had made him want to shoot anyone who touched her without permission. The list of perpetrators had grown far too long over the years, and Mulder was pretty sure he was going to hell purely for the imagined retribution scenarios catalogued in his dreams.

Scully emerged from her room, hair still slightly damp, make-up light and freckles showing, dressed in slacks and a burgundy short-sleeved v-neck. He gave her a soft smile, brushed his fingers for just a moment against her rib cage, following her curves through the fitted cloth. She met his gaze and softened for a breath, returned his smile with tired but sincere eyes. Then she turned toward the car and said something about food. They grabbed a quick dinner at a sub and salad place in Verdad.

The sun had dropped behind the mountains by the time Mulder slowed their car at the edge of
Miller’s Clearing. The radiation zone was cordoned off, but he was able to find a place to park on the rugged ground about 30 yards off the road and just outside of the designated risk borders. Their vantage point seemed to afford a workable view of the rumored area of activity along with a fair amount of shelter from cars on the main road. No other thrill-seekers appeared to be trying their luck this evening; the police tape had no doubt scared them away. So it was just Mulder and Scully, a slightly upgraded rental car, and the desert sky.

The night remained warm enough to be comfortable, so Mulder took his trench coat from the car and spread it over the hood for them to sit on as they waited. The darkness grew thick and pervasive in a way the city could never accommodate, and Mulder turned on a soft "simulated candlelight" app on his phone and plunked it down on the car hood between them. As fatigue settled in, they both found themselves leaned back against the windshield, staring up at the crazy expanse of sky and stars.

"Mulder?" Scully said from her corner of the shadows, and Mulder realized just how long it had been since either of them had spoken.

"Yeah?" He kept his neck tilted back, eyes remaining on the blinking stars.

"When I lost my Mom," Scully continued, "you and I were still in a weird place. But you looked beyond that and you were there for me. Even though I didn't handle the loss all that well, at least professionally."

Mulder lifted his head and turned to face her in the patchy shadows. She kept her eyes on the stars.

"You didn't call me on my professional slips or hold them against me," she said. "You were just there. And that made a huge difference for me. And I was so wrapped up in my own stuff and everything it brought up again about our son, that I don't think I ever really said thank you. So...thank you, Mulder. For being there for me."

"Always." The word rolled off his tongue with a simple ease that belied its strength. There were so few things in the world of which Fox Mulder was truly certain, but being there when Scully needed him was as fundamental to his existence as breathing.

Scully drew a slow breath, then she lifted her head to look off into the black distance of the night. After a stretch of comfortable quiet, she asked, "Do you think the Black-Eyed Children are symbolic? A parable of sorts?"

"How so?"

He watched her elegant profile in the simulated candlelight as she continued to gaze into the patterns of shadow, drawing out her thoughts into words. "If you learn about the darkness, it's more likely to tempt you. It asks for entry into your life. If you let that negative or...dark energy into your life, it permeates and taints everything. It damages your health, your relationships…"

A beat passed and the wind shuffled around them and toyed with the corners of their make-shift blanket. Mulder reached out a gentle hand and touched Scully's cheek with the backs of his fingers, "And you don't want that darkness in your home," he whispered.

Scully caught her breath, surprised or maybe touched by his recitation of her own words. Her gaze locked onto his and Mulder's fingers moved to cradle her cheek, her auburn locks ruffling across his wrist in the breeze. And for a moment she was there with him, and they were them again, and everything was spoken without words and without walls. Then Scully's eyes glazed bright in the sparse light, the reflection on a light sheen of tears, and she blinked and looked away. Mulder let his hand fall with a soft thud to the metal between them.
The quiet held for a long moment before Mulder said, "How would that explain the connection to the sightings of lights in the sky?"

Scully drew a slow breath, responding to the return to logical discussion. "Well, not every BEK encounter is connected to UFO sightings. They don't even always run in batches, do they? Aren't there isolated encounters?"

He nodded. "All true."

"So what's your theory?" Scully challenged, giving a quick glance his direction. The intimacy had been replaced by a slight edge of impatient irritation which Mulder found more reassuring and familiar than grating.

"I don't have a theory, yet," he replied with an easy shrug. "Or I have too many theories. I'm just...staying open-minded for now."

"Well, we're running out of 'now', Mulder. Skinner's not going to let us hang out in Verdad forever."

"Sad, but true."

"You want to stay?"

He gave her a lazy smile. "I'm pretty content right now."

He couldn't read the further implications of her exhale.

*****

No strange lights had appeared in the sky. Only a mesmerizing and almost claustrophobic covering of stars. Mulder and Scully had been quiet long enough that Mulder's eyelids were starting to droop, and he could feel the slight slackening of Scully's normally careful posture. She was curling tighter as the night wind grew colder.

Mulder nudged her boot with his and she turned slightly toward him. He could just make out her questioning eyebrow in the dimness.

"What happened this afternoon?" he asked, voice gentle and soft, appealing to their timeless connection, begging sincerity. "In the observation room. Did you get dizzy?"

He waited a beat to see if her walls would rise or if the shadows and fatigue and gentle air of intimacy would keep her open. He could hear in her breath that she was still letting him in.

Scully shook her head. "No. Well, yes, but...not because there's anything wrong. I'm fine." For once he could hear that she meant it. Physically, at least.

He shifted against the car until he was angled more directly to face her, his attention no longer focused on the relentlessly peaceful sky. He reached out and squeezed her forearm for just a moment before speaking. "So, what happened?"

Her pause stretched with the endlessness of the desert night, gaze on her lap, and he waited calmly for her to get there.

She cleared her throat and tried her words. "I saw something...or...thought I remembered something. It doesn't make any sense, I can't...I don't know."

"Something else from your abduction?"
"Maybe."

"Scully, you know you can tell me. Even if it doesn't make sense. I can shut off my investigative side for this if you need me to. My mad search for the truth. I'll just listen and be your friend."

To his surprise Scully gave something like a scoffing laugh on her exhale and whispered, "Friend."

"Friend. What? Is that a bad thing?"

Scully drew a deep breath. She pushed up from the windshield and sat cross-legged, face to the sky, eyes closed. "No, it's not a bad thing," she said, but the weariness in her tone hurt to hear. "It's not a bad thing," she repeated. "I'm just...tired." She opened her eyes and gazed out at the night that was too dark to confirm a belief in anything beyond the two of them and their dim light and the car beneath them. "There's nothing here, Mulder. Let's go home."

He didn't feel like there was anywhere else he needed to be.

*****

They sit on the log in silence for a long time. She is no longer leaning on his shoulder, but his hand remains on her thigh. She has been letting him do things like this again, lately. The wind off the water has turned colder but Scully has made no move to rise. Mulder wonders if it feels like once she moves from this place, once she completes this final ritual, Margaret will be well and truly gone. He knows she is not ready to let go.

He realizes when Scully finally speaks, that her thoughts have carried her back to their recent case. Back to the monster born of trash and dark thoughts. "Maybe he really did make a monster. Maybe we all did. It seems like...if you feel something strongly enough, or if you want something badly enough, it can create a kind of reality of its own."

"How do you mean?" Mulder prompts softly, watching her pale profile in the fluttering wind. He wants nothing but to be her support right now, her pillar, and he almost feels guilty for taking in how beautiful she is here in the grey and fading light. She seems oblivious to his attentions. "I mean, we all have those moments, those divergent paths, that we've explored a thousand times in our minds." She falls quiet for a long while, gazing across the water. He knows she is not done talking; she is puzzling together her words. He waits. "Like the night I saw Melissa, just a couple of days before she died," she says. And there it is, the curve ball, the wild tangent her brain has traveled on without him and with which he will need to catch up. "When I thought you were dead," she clarifies, "and I'd been suspended, I'd gone to my Mom's for comfort and guidance. And Melissa came over, and she was being her usual self and saying all the things I didn't want to hear or wasn't ready to hear. And I got angry and I pushed her away. And in her own way she was only trying to help, to show me she loved me, that she cared what I was going through. But I saw it as selfishness and disregard for my feelings. And ever since that night...in my head, thousands of times, I've turned around and walked back into that room, and just told her to shut-up, and thrown myself in her arms and told her to just not talk and just be my big sister for a few minutes and make me feel better. And I know she would have. She always would have. She would right now. But if I'd done it then, it would have made me feel better and her feel better, but my stupid pride and close-mindedness kept me from doing that. But I have played out the other version of that night so many times it starts to feel like somewhere, somehow it happened. And like maybe she actually knows that I wanted that. That I wish it had happened."

Mulder nods. "I'm certain she does."
Scully looks at him directly, blue-ice fire in her eyes. "But it didn't happen, Mulder. It's wishful thinking. It's wishful thinking that she should know that. But maybe...maybe if we want something badly enough...we can will it into some kind of alternate existence. Like that trash monster. I don't know. I'm probably not making any sense."

Mulder shakes his head, gives a reassuring squeeze to her thigh. "No, Scully, you are. And you know I'd be the first person to point out if you weren't. But believe me, I, more than most people, can understand wanting to go back and change the essential mistakes in our lives. I understand the power of those emotions. And the complete powerlessness in the face of their invariability. I agree, some things can't be changed. But maybe, in some ways...some can. Like you said with your sister -- I believe she's still connected to you. And I believe she was so in tune with your emotions when she was here, maybe even more than you were at times, that it's not at all beyond possibility that she might still be now that she's in the spiritual plane. So, in effect, she may very well have felt that moment in her afterlife the way you wish she had while she was still here."

Scully looks at him a long time, a whirl of intellect and emotion dancing in her gaze. "I want to believe that," she says at last. "Even if it messes with my head to accept those concepts. I don't know if I do believe it. But...thank you."

"I'm happy to believe it for you until you're ready," he offers with a smile.

The warmth spreads to her lips and for a moment they are Mulder and Scully, quietly connected and holding onto one another, apart from the rest of the world.

"Maybe that's enough," she whispers.

They have walked most of the way back to her car, his arm around her shoulders, sheltering her from the biting wind, when she says, "Can I stay at our house tonight? I mean...just to sleep, I know it's not fair to ask--"

"Shh, shh, shh." He presses his lips to the top of her head. "Of course you can stay. Of course, you can. I wasn't expecting you to be anywhere else. Unless you'd rather I ride the couch at your place, if you want to sleep in your own bed?"

She shakes her head lightly. "Either way."

They slow to a halt beside her car and turn to face one another. He strokes her hair. cradles her cheek. "You stayed with me after I lost my mom. I'll stay with you."

She holds his gaze for a long time, and he feels in the moment that he is in the one place in the universe he knows he is supposed to be.

*****

(End Chapter 11)
"Can you let us inside? It's cold out here."

The clear voice startled her into wakefulness, eyes snapping open in the blackened motel room. The red lights on the nightstand read 3:42am. The simple plea hung in the air like a shimmering specter, something uncertain in its existence between dreamtime and reality. Scully held her breath and strained to listen, waiting as time stood still and she determined the nature of her circumstances.

The sharp knock made her jump. "Please let us in." The voice was unmistakable this time. A young girl. Maybe 12. The inflection was flat, lacking the expected nuance of a child.

Scully slapped her hand onto her nightstand and connected with the comforting solidity of the handle of her Glock.

She slid her legs up beneath her, pushed back the tangle of covers, and gripped her weapon in both hands as she touched her bare feet to the floor.

The room-darkening curtains were drawn, so Scully could see very little inside the room and far less outside. She crept as soundlessly as possible to the door and peered through the peep hole. Near the bottom of the fuzzy field of view, she made out a figure in what seemed to be a black hoodie, but that was all. The voice had said 'us'.

With a quick glance toward Mulder's room, wondering if he was sleeping right through this and wishing she could somehow psychically summon his presence, Scully took a deep breath and called
out, "Who's there?"

"It's just the two of us, Miss. We need your help. It's cold out here. Can we come inside?"

The words should have been innocent; the clarity of the youthful voice should have been reassuring. But there was something unnatural in the simple cadence, something tangible in the air. Something was wrong, askew, and it was shivering across the back of Scully's neck like a cold wind in the stillness.

The last time she checked, it hadn't been all that cold outside.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Scully called out.

"Please. May we come inside?"

Scully moved to the far edge of the window beside the door, keeping her body at a difficult angle for a bullet to come through the window. She kept her weapon raised at her shoulder as she used her free hand to push back the curtain just enough for a glimpse of the walkway beyond the door.

The moment the curtain shifted, the heads of two figures turned sharply her way, and Scully had to force herself not to drop the curtain and retreat.

The second figure was a couple of feet to the side of the first and at least a foot shorter, placing him or her outside of the range of the peephole. Both figures appeared slender, stood unusually erect, and were dressed in dark jeans and black hoodies. Backlit as they were from the parking lot lamps, Scully couldn't make out the children's faces. Their hands were tucked in their pockets.

"Where are your parents?" Scully called out. "Do you need help?"

"We need to call our parents. But we don't have a phone. It's cold out here," the taller figure repeated. Scully felt like they were reciting from a script. Like door-to-door salesmen walking through a practiced scenario in the sales guide book.

Which made it even more unnerving when the thought kept flashing through her mind that she should let these children inside. They needed her help.

"Tell me their phone number," Scully said, her own voice sounding as foreign and eerie to her as that of the child's. She wondered fleetingly if she had never actually woken up. If the dream world had trailed out into the room and spilled into the night. "I can help, I'll call your parents for you."

The tall girl shook her head. "It won't work. They won't answer your call. You need to let us inside. We need to call."

Scully stood in silence for a long moment, attempting to quell her irrational fear and take the necessary actions expected of her as an agent of the FBI. She needed to take charge of the situation, get the names of these children who were out far too late on their own, locate their guardians, get them home. She couldn't shake the overwhelming sense that she was the one in danger.

"What are your names?" Scully called, her tone sharper than she had intended.

"Please," the taller one said again. "We're just kids."

Before Scully could think or reply, the shorter figure moved forward with a speed so smooth and swift it made Scully dizzy. One moment she was beside the taller one, then without time seeming to have passed, she was directly on the other side of the glass with a small hand raised and bare fingers
"You've been with us."

Scully tried to ask 'what do you mean? where?', but all of her energy was consumed with the effort not to raise her hand to match the fingers of the girl.

She realized with a brief wave of panicked adrenaline that she had lowered her weapon and stepped into a more conspicuous line of fire before the window.

"Yes," the younger girl said. "We remember. The little girl who was yours...she found her way to you. Down here. That is rare. You were lucky." The girl's eyes. As she tilted her head, those eyes reflected the light of the parking lot lamp. Black. Every inch of them black. It wasn't possible. "Maybe she remembered you. You got to hold her, didn't you? When she was a baby?"

Scully felt sick to her stomach. Unsteady and confused, she tightened her grip on her weapon to ground her to the present, to the reality of the perceivable threat. Her eyes. Like before.

"Maybe you just forgot," the girl said. "Most of the mothers do."

Scully took a hard step back from the window. "Stay where you are," she said firmly. "I'm calling the sheriff."

As she activated the phone, a flash of light in the darkness, the younger girl stepped away, disappearing from Scully's view.

"It's okay." The voice of the older girl carried through the door and as Scully attempted to scroll through her contact list with trembling fingers, she moved forward to look through the peephole. "I see our parents," the child said. "We'll go now."

"No, stay where you are!" Scully shouted. She moved back to open the door, swung it into the room and raised her weapon as she set one bare foot on the cold concrete across the threshold, practiced routine overriding the fear.

But the children were gone.

Far too fast. And much too far.

"Hello? Are you there?" Scully's own voice fell dull and intrusive on the silent lot. Nothing moved but the dust in the soft night breeze. She stood for a count of ten, scanning the parking lot, weapon still held high. Then with a sigh somewhere between frustration and desperation, Scully dropped her weapon and fell back into the room. She wouldn't even know which direction to give chase if she wanted to.

She slammed and locked her door. A minute later, she was outside Mulder's room, now in her pumps with a suit jacket thrown on over her pajamas.

She knocked on the door, conscious of every shift of shadow around her. She breathed in the uncomfortable stillness for what felt like a full minute, but there was no reply from Mulder.

She knocked again, called out softly, aware of drawing the attention of the other guests now that the immediate crisis had passed. "Mulder? Wake up. It's me."
Nothing. She moved to Mulder's window. The curtains were drawn tight. Scully fished his room key out of her pocket and let herself inside. She slapped on the light.

Mulder's bed covers were still spread neatly over the pillow. Clearly the work of the morning maid. The bathroom stood open and dark. His phone and weapon were gone from their usual place on his bedside table. Only then did Scully even think to look for their car.

She shoved back the curtain. Gone.

Scully punched Mulder's image on the front page of her phone. He answered on the first ring. His tone was mystifyingly casual.

"Hey, Scully, what's up?"

"What's up? Mulder, it's four o'clock in the morning, where the hell are you?" Her tone was blatantly confrontational. She knew the tension and lingering fear were morphing into mildly misdirected anger, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Her heart was still racing and she was still shaking. Mulder was her partner. He was supposed to be here. Not ditch her in the middle of the night.

"Scully, are you okay?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm back out at Miller's Clearing. I couldn't sleep, I knew you were tired, so I just thought I'd go back and give it one more shot, see if anything showed up. I thought I'd be back before you woke up. Scully, what's wrong, what's going on?"

She stood and breathed for a moment, pretended the faint lingering scent of Mulder wasn't the reason she was still standing in his room instead of returning to her own.

"Scully?" Mulder prompted.

"Nothing," she said at last. "It's fine. I'm going back to bed."

"Scully, wait, what--"

"We'll talk in the morning," she said, and she clicked off the phone, certain she heard his voice continuing as she did so.

But she just couldn't talk right now. Her eyes were burning with a light haze of tears she wasn't acknowledging, and she needed to get back to the security of her own room before she succumbed to the temptation to climb under Mulder's covers. To sleep there, where perhaps if the Black-Eyed Children returned they wouldn't know where to find her. Where perhaps Mulder might find her first.

She locked her door behind her when she returned to her own room. Then she pushed a chair up against it. A few minutes later she put the chair back at the small table, because, dammit, she was an FBI agent and they were kids, and she was fine. She fell asleep at the first signs of dawn, weapon tucked beneath the edge of her pillow.

"You got to hold her, didn't you? When she was a baby. Maybe you just forgot."
"Scully? You awake?"

The sun was already a tangible force on Mulder's skin, despite having taken control of the day only a short while ago. The call from Sheriff Aster had woken him from a sound sleep and he had sent a text off to Scully before grabbing a quick shower. Late night alien hunting was a little harder to bounce back from than it had once been.

Now dressed and noticing he was hungry but eager to get to the station, Mulder was standing outside Scully's motel room door, knocking enthusiastically. She hadn't replied to his text and her curtains were still drawn, but it wasn't like her to be asleep after 7am.

"Scully?"

This time he heard a vague mumble that sounded like her voice from inside. Before he could think too much about it, Mulder took Scully's key card from his pocket and let himself into the room.

As the door swung inward, so did the rays of bright sunlight into the cave Scully was still nestled within. He could just make out the mop of red hair on the pillow.

"Mulder...what are you doing here?" she said, voice hoarse and sleep-ridden.

"You still asleep?"

"I was," she said, enunciation a bit clearer, now. "Why are you here?"

"I sent you a text a little while ago. Sheriff Aster needs us at the station. He's made an arrest."

Scully pushed to a seated position in the bed, shoved back her hair and reached for her phone. She cleared her throat. "Arrest for what?"

Mulder stepped to the window and pulled the curtains halfway back, prompting a soft sound of discomfort from Scully. "Last night, a local family reported being stalked by a couple of Black-Eyed Kids. Aster's deputy drove out to the neighborhood of the report, caught a couple of dressed up kids in the act. They're holding them now. We need to get out there."

"What time was the arrest?"

"What *time* was it?" Mulder shook his head, "I...I'm not sure. Late, I think. Near morning, maybe."

Scully stared down at her phone for a long moment, but she didn't seem to be reading anything or scrolling or typing. She reached out to her nightstand and retrieved a glass of water, took a long sip.

"Scully?" he prompted, taking a few steps nearer to the bed. "You okay? What were you doing awake last night?"

Scully took a long moment of over-deliberation to return the water to the nightstand. Then she closed her eyes and let go a weary sigh.

"I'm fine. I just didn't get much sleep. But there's something I need to tell you before we see the sheriff."

As much as the adrenaline was charging through Mulder's restless limbs, as much he wanted to use The Force to compel Scully into the shower and out to the car, he could hear there was something in her voice that needed his attention. He took another step forward and lowered himself gently to sit on
the edge of her bed. "Okay. What's up?"

Scully looked anywhere but at his eyes, swallowed hard, met his gaze for a moment, then said, "I've been seeing them, too."

He shook his head in confusion. "You've been seeing...who?"

Her tongue slid over her sleep-dried lips. He could make out faint blanket imprints in the flesh of her cheek. He knew how her skin smelled in the first moments after waking. The precious warmth and flush to her skin.

"The Black-Eyed Kids," Scully said, tone solid and matter-of-fact, but he could feel the visceral reluctance and tension in her admission.

"What? Scully, what have you seen? Last night, you mean? Is that why you called me?"

She drew a slow breath, shifted her legs beneath the blanket. "Yes. But that wasn't the first time. Just...the most significant one."

His gaze fell on the thin ray of sunlight angling toward the edge of her pillow, and he caught sight of the butt of her weapon. Scully wasn't in the habit of cozying up to her arsenal.

"Were they here? At the motel?"

Scully nodded. "Yes. They knocked on my door last night. Around 3am. Or...closer to 4. Two of them."

"And this wasn't the first time?"

"Not the first time I saw them, no. But it was the first time they knocked or...spoke to me."

His throat felt dry. "They spoke to you?"

"Through the door. They wanted to be let inside."

"I'm assuming you did not let them in?"

"I did not. I tried to call their parents or the local police, but they said their parents had arrived and then they disappeared."

"Define 'disappeared.'"

"Presumably, they ran off."

He stared at her. "Presumably."

"They...," Scully swiped a hand through her tousled hair, drew a deep breath then let her posture sag. "It happened fast. I opened the door and stepped out and tried to find them, but...they were gone. I couldn't track which direction they went."

Mulder sat quietly, processing her words for a stretch of silence. Scully stared down at her hands, nails delicately scratching at the back of the opposite hand.

"And you didn't think this was something you should share?" Mulder said at last. "Something your partner should know?"
"I went to your room last night to tell you. I call--"

But Mulder was shaking his head. "No, Scully, from the beginning. When did you first see them?"

He watched her gaze skip around, her breath lose rhythm for a moment as she inhaled through soft lips. She really didn't want to answer this. "I saw...something...the first night, when we were checking into the motel."

"The first night we were in town. Explain this to me, Scully."

She lifted her eyebrows along with her voice, appealing, meeting his gaze solidly this time. "I didn't know if I was really seeing anything or not! I didn't--"

"Well, you seem pretty damned sure now," he snapped, letting the genuine emotion spill into his tone. "And does that even matter? You don't think we should have been figuring it out together all along?"

Scully swallowed, exhaled through her nose. "Probably. I just..."

Mulder shook his head again and pushed to his feet. "You should get dressed. Aster's waiting."

"Mulder...."

He knew she was looking for eye contact, even from behind his back (he always knew), but he couldn't bring himself to oblige. "I'll meet you at the car."

"Mulder, I..." He heard and felt the defeated sigh. He knew he was turning away like an angry child, stalking out of the room and closing the door with a bit more force than required. But, Goddammit, they were supposed to be past this. They were past this. She could have gotten hurt. Or sick. Fuck.

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Scully was withdrawn and moody on the drive to the station. Mulder used the time to get a message to Aster that Scully might be another witness and let him prepare to add her to those being asked to look at a lineup. Scully's distance remained in place through the paperwork and the tedious wait for the lineup to begin. Mulder knew her well enough to know there was more to this than the admissions he had pried out of her so far.

He wanted to be kind, sympathetic, and gentle the remaining truths from her. She was obviously scared; the gun in her bed alone told him that. And there was more there than fear. But the anger bubbling beneath his skin was too virulent to allow for kindness just yet. He needed time to let his reaction dissipate. They had spent so many years fighting past this behavior, both of them; learning to answer questions the first time. They had lost a lot in recent years, but he had thought they had at least held onto the honesty in their partnership.

The first lineup proved useless. Scully couldn't identify anyone. Aster told them afterward that the other two witnesses had agreed upon a suspect.

Getting the second lineup into place took excruciatingly long as well. (Long enough for Mulder to get into some sort of blood-fueled death match with the soda vending machine). During the second, this one aimed at the younger of the two suspects, Scully took more time studying a couple of the faces, but still she did not speak.

"Are any of those one of the kids you saw?" Mulder prompted, hands on his hips, caffeine from the soda pulsing in his veins.
Scully shook her head, still staring through the glass. "I don't know. I can't be sure."

"You don't know?"

"The height seems...close. On both groups. Like I said, one child was much taller than the other."

"That's all?"

"I told you it was dark. They had hoods. I don't know."

Mulder watched her profile with a stark intensity.

Scully felt his scrutiny, and she turned, lifted her eyebrows, held out a hand, palm up. "What do you want me to say, Mulder? It was probably the same kids everyone else saw. That's all that makes sense."

"But you're not sure."

"No. I'm not sure. Certainly not enough to accuse a child."

They were quiet another moment, and finally Scully said to the local cop in the room, "I'm sorry, I can't identify anyone from this group, either."

"Yes, ma'am." The younger man nodded to Scully, then Mulder, then he left the room, presumably to notify the sheriff.

"Maybe Aster should arrange a voice lineup," Scully said after a moment.

That got Mulder's attention. "You remember their voices?"

"Yeah. They were very distinctive. Kind of...off."

"Off in what way?"

"Lacking intonation." Scully turned and leaned back against a small table against the wall, folded her arms across her chest as she puzzled through the specifics in her head. "Or maybe the intonation didn't match the words. I don't know. But I might recognize it. Then again, if these kids were trying to fit the mythology, they were probably faking the vocal inflections, and they would be smart enough to use their normal speaking voices for a staged lineup."

Mulder nodded. "Maybe. Any other details you've neglected to mention?"

Scully's jaw tensed at his subtly accusatory tone, and her eyelids fell heavy, gaze to the floor. Her armor had risen, he could feel her withdrawing, and he felt a matching pang of regret, knowing he had just hurt her and he was succeeding only in pushing her away. But he still could not bring himself to stop.

Without a word, Scully pushed up from the table and walked past him out of the observation room.

They were standing in the empty lobby of the sheriff's station when Aster emerged from his office to check in before they left.

"Well, we've got two positive IDs on both the kids from last night," Aster said. "All except for yours, Agent Scully."

"Sorry I couldn't be more helpful, Sheriff," Scully said.
Aster shrugged easily, and Mulder noticed in the angled sunlight that this was the first time he had seen this man anything but clean-shaven. The pace of this case (or the random incidents that all might or might not be related to it) had picked up of late. "It seems like there was more light where the others encountered the kids," he said to Scully. "Next up, I'm going to try to get the Garcias in here and probably Vera and Nate Monroe, see if these are the same kids folks have been seeing all along."

Mulder nodded, "Makes sense. It would certainly answer a lot of questions."

"That it would."

"All right, well...we'll be in touch. Let us know if you get any other IDs. I'm just going to--"

Scully's cell phone rang. She snatched it from her pocket and glanced at the display. "It's Donna Garcia. Excuse me, Sheriff. We'll be in touch?"

Aster nodded, and Scully slipped away.

"What about the kids you brought in?" Mulder asked. "Do you know them? Anything about them? Ideas on motive?"

Aster shook his head. "Not much. They're from the local school in Verdad. Not the best students, but no past trouble with the law. Now that they've been ID-ed I'll be talking to their parents in more detail."

Mulder nodded. "Well, keep us posted."

"Will do."

By the time Mulder pushed out into the noonday sun, Scully was standing by their rental car just lowering her phone from her ear.

"So, what's going on with Mrs. Garcia?" he asked as he approached.

"She wants to talk to us," Scully replied. "She knows we were waiting until she could get through the funeral before we pressed her for a proper interview, and she called to let us know she would be willing to meet with us now."

"That's good. Did you set a time?"

Scully nodded. "She's heading over to the hospital to visit her son now. She said we could meet her there."

"Sounds good. Christian still improving?"

"Yeah. Rather miraculously so. He still can't go home, but...Mulder, frankly, I'm a little shocked. Grateful, of course, but...if I were Christian's doctor, I would be scrambling to try to figure out what kind of powerful angels were watching over this boy."

"Maybe the universe is balancing itself out. A family that's had this much unexplained bad luck in a row needs a shot of miracle juice to bring back the status quo."

Scully exhaled softly in agreement. "I guess we've had a few years like that ourselves," she offered softly, tossing him the barest trace of a wistful smile.

The near quarter-century of fighting for their lives and the lives of everyone they loved pulled
between them like a magnet.

"I got my miracle juice when my year of private hell ended with you in spontaneous remission," he said, offering her a tender tone and sincere feeling in his eyes.

"It wasn't my best year, either," Scully replied, her voice slightly hoarse and so much older than that of the comparative girl who had clung to his hand from her hospital bed those last days of darkness.

They held the eye contact, Scully squinting against the sun, her blue eyes beginning to water from the glare. Then Mulder's phone rang, jarring them back to the present. He snatched it out of his pocket, using his free hand to shade the screen in the sun. "Unlisted" showed faintly on the display.

He met Scully's gaze, shook his head slightly. He accepted the call. "Mulder."

"Is this Mr. Fox Mulder?"

"Who is this?"

"I believe you met my son the other day. At the high school."

Mulder lifted his brows in recognition, and Scully mimicked the gesture in question. Mulder waved to her to come closer and leaned down so he could bring the phone to both of their ears.

"We did speak to someone on the high school grounds, yes."

"Yes. That was my son. You're investigating the things that have been going on? Here in Verdad?"

"We came here to look into the recent tragedies that have befallen the Garcia family."

"Right. So you're looking into the sightings of the kids. The Black-Eyed Kids."

Scully's shoulder was pressed close against his arm as she listened. "Those reports are a part of our active investigation," Mulder said. "Do you have some information for us?"

"I might. Can we meet?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Something local. I'm not coming to the Sheriff's station. I won't go on record."

"Do you have a reason to hide?"

The man gave a scoffing chortle. "We should all be off the record. You of all people should know that. They don't need any more information about us than they've already stolen."

"Who are they?"

"The government, man."

"Sir, you realize my partner and I are agents of the FBI, here in an official capacity."

"Yeah, I know. But I know your work, Mr. Mulder. You're not exactly...one to toe the party line and throw the rest of us under the bus, ya know?"

Scully shifted beside him, and he knew she was trying not to react or breathe too loudly, lest their caller suspect someone unauthorized listening in. "I'm only interested in the truth, sir."
"Well, if you want to know what I have to tell you...my son will give you a call from a different phone line in a couple of hours, one more secure than this one, and he'll tell you where and when we can meet. Can you do that?"

"We'll wait for his call."

"All right, Mr. Mulder."

The phone beeped in their ears as the connection was terminated from the mystery caller's end.

"Wow. That is one paranoid man," Scully said as she stepped back. "And we thought his son was bad."

"Maybe he's been on the wrong side of Verdad's bad luck streak for too long without a miracle," Mulder said, tucking his phone back into his pants pocket.

Scully rounded the car to the passenger side, shrugged out of her suit jacket. "Or maybe he's been out in the desert sun too long," she said over the top of the car.

Mulder cracked a tolerant smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Scully tossed her jacket into the car, then dropped in after it.

They proceeded in a more comfortable silence than that which had pervaded their morning drive. Once they were out on the highway toward Las Cruces, Scully leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She really hadn't slept much the night before and Mulder was happy to give her a moment of quiet.

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He knows he really has her when she crawls into his lap on a Thursday evening.

They are still getting used to their new normal, to being an actual (if unadvertised) couple, not just a strange sort of undefined pair of significant others who never speak their deepest feelings yet follow one another like beacons in the night. He has followed her home from work tonight and flopped down in her easy chair in front of her TV. He has followed her partly because they do that now, a lot. Partly because it's been a tough case, particularly for Scully, and he has been staying close on instinct. He is halfway through an episode of the new Outer Limits, when Scully, barefoot now but still dressed in her untucked work blouse and slacks, emerges from the hallway, climbs into his lap, and curls in a ball, tucking her toes around his thigh, wrapping her arms around his neck. She closes her eyes as she burrows into his shoulder.

He smiles at first, charmed by the affection, but she just stays, eyes closed, not moving, and he feels a spark of concern. "Hey, beautiful...," he whispers, "you okay?"

She nods against his shoulder. "I'm fine. I just need this for a little while." Then she looks up, lifts her head as though suddenly registering why he might have asked this, why it might be a problem. "Is this okay?" she asks, with almost painful sincerity in her eyes.

His affectionate chuckle bounces her a little. "Of course this is okay. It's always okay," he says, unable to hide the adoration in his eyes.

She tucks back in. "You can keep watching," she says. "I just want to stay."

He kisses the top of her head. Whispers, "As long as you want."
And she does. He watches his show, and she just stays in a ball and holds on, and he keeps an arm around her, breathes into her hair, feels the rise and fall of her ribcage against his. He pulls a blanket over them both and they forget about dinner for a while.

He realizes she trusts him. Really trusts him, in a way that for all their devotion to one another, she never really has. No one has died, she hasn't been assaulted or injured. It's just been hard, and she is a little vulnerable tonight, and she trusts him enough to come to him, tuck into him, let him keep her safe, let him know she needs this support for a night.

There is an intimacy to this simple act of vulnerability that surpasses all that has come before.

He loves her so much it hurts. He will never let go.

He should have been there when she looked for him last night. She should have told him what was happening. But he should have been there to hear.

She should have slept the rest of the night in his room while he stayed awake and kept watch.

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(end Chapter 12)
"Can Mariela take me?"

Scully couldn't suppress a smile at the pure innocent enthusiasm in Christian's voice. If only adults could bounce back from death's door with such immediate disregard for all that came before.

"Can she?" the boy asked again, brown eyes gazing imploringly over his shoulder at the young nurse's aide behind his wheelchair. The doctors were not yet letting Christian walk more than a few steps, but he was being rolled around the hospital floor at intervals for a healthy change of scene.

The aide grinned down at her hopeful charge and gave a quick glance toward Mariela, who stood nearby. "I think that would be okay," the woman said. She hardly looked more than a couple of years older than Mariela, and Scully wondered once again whether the working world had really been so young in her own youth and she just hadn't noticed. "Just not too fast, and no more than fifteen minutes; he needs to be back for meds."

Mariela nodded and moved into the place the aide had just vacated behind Christian's chair. "I promise, I won't lose him, and no wheelies."

"Wheelies, YES!" Christian countered, voice still hoarse from days of intubation, but no less enthusiastic for it. Mariela tugged on the boy's hair.

"Come on, Weirdo, let's go."

As the two younger Garcias made their way out of the room, the nurse's aide trailing dutifully behind, Mulder turned his focus to their mother, who stood beside the bed with two large duffle bags she had hauled up from the car. "Is Mariela taking some time off from school?" Mulder asked.
Donna huffed out a breath. "We should be so lucky. No, you can't get that one to miss a day of progress, even for the death of her own father. She's far too serious, my girl. Takes the world all upon herself. It's a teacher's conference at the high school today."

Mulder nodded, and Scully stepped up beside Donna Garcia as she took in the meaning of the duffle bags and what the woman had started to do. Scully silently began unpacking and refolding the clean items as Donna pulled her son's laundry from the wardrobe near the foot of the bed.

"So, what is it you want to know about all of this, Mr. Mulder?" Donna asked, glancing toward Mulder as she shoved a pile of Pokemon socks into an empty duffle. "What exactly are you investigating?"

"Well, we were actually hoping you might be able to shine a little light on that question yourself. Tell us in your own words, if you would, Mrs. Garcia--"

"Donna."

"--Donna...what do you think has happened to your family over the past month?"

Donna returned to the bed and began pulling Spiderman underwear from the same bag Scully was working from, folding and adding things to Scully's already established piles. "What is it...," Donna said, glancing briefly toward Scully, "...from those books Christian loves...the one with the Netflix series...'A Series of Unfortunate Events'."

Mulder gave a soft laugh and took a step closer, fingers resting lightly on his hips. "So you don't believe any of the tragedies are connected? That there was no single catalyst?"

"Truthfully..." Donna lingered over a small dinosaur T-shirt, her expression sobering as her gaze turned inward. "I don't honestly know, Agents. Mariela's right, our visit from the Black-Eyed children was...extraordinary. And ominous. I don't know if those kids were supernatural or just kids and it was all completely coincidental. But it felt like things...shifted...that night. And nothing was ever the same. But perhaps that's just my mind trying to justify something I can't seem to cope with."

"Well, you've been given a set of circumstances I doubt the best of us could cope with any better that you already have," Scully offered, and Donna tossed her a brief but appreciative smile. Donna drew a long breath. "My mother-in-law got sick. That happens. My son got sick. And now he's getting better. Mariela's rash seems to be flaring up less than it was. It's fading, and she has no other symptoms. As you said, Agent Scully, that could easily have been a symptom of stress. And my husband..." Donna paused in her work, lowered the jeans in her hands to the top of the open bag in front of her. "My husband...was in a fatal accident."

"Are you all right?" She glanced between them.

"We're fine," Scully was quick to reassure. And to reroute the topic back to the Garcias. "But we do
think it's possible that something in the area has been interfering with vehicle functionality. We don't know if that's the case, but it does seem worth investigating."

"But you think it was random? Not targeted?"

Scully shook her head. "We haven't seen anything to indicate a directed attack of any kind, no. So far, investigation of the cars has come up clean. No signs of tampering."

Donna narrowed her eyes, letting this new information steep. "If it was random, then nothing much changes for me."

"Unless the government was outside of their rights. They may have failed to shield or warn the local population of a potential danger resulting from their activities."

"They may very well have, yes," Donna replied. "And that should be brought to light, to protect others in the future. But focusing our attention," she brought a hand to her chest for emphasis, "us, as a family, on justice or vengeance...those things will not help us to heal or rebuild our lives. Without Joseph."

Scully released a breath with a soft hum in the back of her throat. "I admire your enlightened perspective. I'm not sure I could redirect my focus so easily."

"It's probably different for you. Such things have been part of your drive, your...prime directive, so to speak...for a long time." Donna's tone was easy, and honest, and Scully merely accepted the woman's reply in silence.

"Mrs.--Donna, are you aware there was an arrest made last night?" Mulder asked.

"Arrest of whom? For what?"

"Two local kids who were seen visiting people's houses late at night, dressed up as Black-Eyed Children, asking to be let inside. We've got two positive IDs. Do you think you or Mariela would be willing to take a look at a picture of these kids? See if they could be the same kids who came to your home?"

Donna nodded. "Of course."

Mulder took a step closer, sliding his copy of the mug shots from the inner pocket of his suit coat.

Donna took the paper from Mulder's outstretched hand. Scully took the opportunity to surreptitiously study the photographs once more over Mrs. Garcia's shoulder. Just as before, there was nothing about these kids that made her heart race or her stomach quiver. She saw nothing but ordinary children, desperately sad they had been caught in a prank beyond their innocent years. She had not felt innocence in her early morning visitors.

Beside her, Donna Garcia slowly shook her head. "I don't think I've seen these kids before. As I've said to the police, my memories from the night we let them in the house are...blurry? Clouded. Like when you've been drinking, but I hadn't. Not at all. But I do remember faces. And neither of these children look familiar. And they seem older."

"Older than the kids you saw?" Mulder asked.

"Yes. I felt more...protective. Of the kids we saw."

Mulder waited a moment longer, letting Donna stare down at the pictures. Then she looked up
decisively and held the paper back toward him. "I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you, here."

"It's all right," Mulder said. "Thank you for looking." He tucked the picture back into his jacket. "Do you mind if I show this to Mariela?"

Donna shook her head. "No, not as long as she is okay with it."

As if on cue, Mariela and Christian whizzed by the door, Mariela pushing the wheelchair a bit too fast and spinning her brother to a halt outside his room. Their mother called out to Mariela to go easy, but there was no real anger in her tone, only gentle concern.

Mulder watched the kids for a moment, then he started toward them, gesturing to Christian's shirt. "Hey, is that the El Paso Chihuahuas? You like baseball?" Mulder stooped down to the boy's level when he reached the doorway.

Christian lit up. "My dad took me to a game last year. I'm going out for Little League this spring!"

And Mulder was off being his adorably charming self when it came to kids and baseball. He unbelievably had a baseball card of some kind in his wallet, and when he had passed the treasure into Christian's eager hands and secured the boy's attention on that, he took out the arrest photos to show Mariela.

The girl gave the request the same careful attention her mother had, but her response was a frown and a slight shake of her head. Mulder lifted his gaze and caught Scully's in a conditioned exchange of partner information. Then a second look passed between them when Mulder snatched the card from Christian's hands, made it disappear up his sleeve, then made it reappear behind the boy's ear.

Scully offered him a smile with her eyes, and somewhere in the pit of her stomach it was there, as it always was between them in such moments -- This is what it would have been like with William.

"It's him, isn't it?"

Scully startled out of her reverie, abruptly aware that Donna had been watching her watch her partner.

Scully narrowed her eyes and lifted an eyebrow in question. "I'm sorry?"

"The one you spoke about," Donna continued evenly. "At the funeral. The one...more so than the others."

Scully sniffed and lowered her gaze. She swallowed. She didn't confirm or deny, but she knew her reaction was enough. She scooped up the pile of folded shirts and carried it to the wardrobe. After a moment of quiet, she said to Donna, "You know you remind me of someone."

Donna zipped up the bag of laundry and dropped it to the floor. "Who is that?" she asked.

"My sister," Scully said, and she left it at that, gave no indication of an intent to explain why.

Donna did not ask. "Mariela said you lost your sister."

That surprised Scully on multiple levels. Firstly, that Mariela had shared this small detail with her mother, and secondly, that the girl had interpreted their brief exchange so accurately in the first place. "Yes," she confirmed after a beat. "A long time ago."

Donna said simply, "Time means very little in these things."
You got to hold her, didn't you?

Scully stared at the floor and gave only the smallest sound of response. She was feeling hot and restless and exposed. Tired of the desert, tired of voices calling her in the night, tired of everyone she spoke to seeming to know too much about her. Her neck still hurt and her skin was starting to itch and she just wanted out of this building and out of this town and back on familiar ground. Back where she felt she had some semblance of control.

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Scully almost took the keys from Mulder and insisted upon driving, but she was a little annoyed he hadn't even asked, just assumed she would take the passive role as usual, and she was just childishly pissed enough right now to prefer being silently angry at the wrong target to the more mature route of asserting her position. She was equally aware of the perplexing irony of having only recently apologized for misdirecting her anger toward Mulder.

In contrast, Mulder's mood had been significantly buoyed by seeing Christian well on the road to recovery, and in the bigger picture Scully felt that joy as well. She was just too caught up in her own head to fully process the victory. As far as the case was concerned, they had been information gathering all morning and now felt more at sea than they had when they had begun.

Scully could almost see the investigator's cogs turning in Mulder's head as he drove.

"So, now what do we focus on?" he asked, glancing briefly in her direction. She kept her gaze on the road ahead. Mulder seemed to be driving them back toward the motel. Not that he kept her informed of where they were going. He didn't wait for her reply before continuing to ponder aloud. "Honestly, I was expecting a corroboration in ID from the Garcias, but that was a pretty vague response."

"Actually, I think it was a pretty clear 'no,'" she said. "From both Donna and Mariela."

Mulder wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, you're probably right. So, you think there are more kids out there doing this? You think it's become a trendy prank?"

Scully shrugged. "I don't know. What are you thinking?"

"Maybe. Maybe...we still have no idea who perpetrated the initial encounters, and maybe these kids in custody this morning were just jumping on the bandwagon, making the most of the current climate of fear."

"Maybe."

Mulder glanced at her, twice, frowned, before asking, "Are you saying you agree with me? That there might be actual Black-Eyed Kids, and these are just imitators?"

Mulder turned back to the road as the traffic demanded his attention, and Scully glared at his profile. "How did you get that out of what I said?"

"Well, I just said that--"

"You said that the children the Garcias and possibly the Monroes saw before we arrived out here might be different people from the kids Sheriff Aster arrested last night. Nothing says that any of those encounters were supernatural."

"Well, then what do you think you saw last night? If your visitors weren't these kids we saw this
morning, then who were they?"

"I don't know," she said, making it clear this was all she was going to say on the subject right now.
She locked her gaze on the jagged silhouette of the Organ Mountains. A gathering of turkey vultures
had perched along the nearest peak.

Mulder sighed, changed lanes as he navigated incoming mergers on the expressway. "Okay, then if
there is no such thing as Black-Eyed Children, then what's your working theory? What explains
what's happened to these people?"

Garcia. No single event that happened to them defies logical explanation."

"And what about the Monroes?"

"What about them?"

"How do you explain what's been happening to their family?"

"How do I explain domestic disputes? If Black-Eyed Children are the instigators of every domestic
dispute turned violent in our line of work, those must be some pretty damned busy kids."

Mulder tapped the steering wheel to make his point. "Scully, you were right there for Vera Monroe's
interrogation. You really think the level of fear, the history of the familial relationships, makes linear
sense for a completely terrestrial progression of events?"

Scully stared across at her partner, and he turned to meet her challenging gaze as he maneuvered the
car into the exit lane for Verdad. Scully lifted her eyebrows. "What do you want me to say, Mulder?
Yes. I see nothing out of the ordinary, here."

Mulder offered something like a frustrated groan. Scully turned to look out the passenger window at
the dusty smattering of hollowed-out buildings between Las Cruces and the border of Verdad.
Unincorporated nothingness and the last relics of a lifestyle blowing away on the winds of change.
She felt Mulder fishing something out of the briefcase on the floorboard by her feet, and she chose
not to pay attention or move to help. Some rattling, and a moment later she heard him cracking
sunflower seeds between his teeth. Still his first choice of food for thought after all these years. The
scent of Mulder and roasting sunflower seeds had become synonymous in her head. Somewhere
along the way, certain bakeries she walked past had started making her horny, and it had taken her a
while to figure out why.

"I just feel like we're not getting the whole story," Mulder said around a seed. He slowed the car as
they turned onto Verdad's Main Street.

"How so?"

"It feels like too much of a personality flip. Mrs. Monroe paints the picture of a loyal family man, so
much so that he was willing to overlook his fiancee's indiscretion and take in the child of that liaison
as his own. And then 20 years later we have a man who would turn a gun on his family out of pure
suspicion, when it would appear Mrs. Monroe had done nothing wrong. There's a clear history of
abuse, at least to my eyes. But over what? Is the man merely dissatisfied with his life? Has some
outside force been plaguing them all along? Were they right about their suspicions back then?"

Scully reached over to where Mulder had the bag of seeds propped between his thighs and fished out
a few for herself. She hadn't really eaten breakfast, which was probably making her more discontent.
"I think you're looking too hard, Mulder. I think we have all the information we need to justify this
"The relationship started on rocky ground, and I think it has remained so. They were in different places as far back as college, and resentments have just continued to build."

"Over continuing behavior?" Mulder steered the car, one-handed and with impressive finesse, into a parking place outside their motel. Just because he was territorial about driving didn't mean he wasn't good at it. "You think Ed Monroe had more to be jealous of than Vera has let on?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all."
Mulder sighed. "Well, then what are you saying?" He took one more mouthful of seeds, then stuffed the bag back into the outer pouch of her briefcase. She tugged the briefcase into her lap.

"I'm saying, I think it's perfectly plausible that a twenty-year-old betrayal could be the driving force for a present-day crime of passion," she said.

"Okay. But why now? If not the Black-Eyed Kids, then what was so powerful an instigator?"
Both agents paused their words in practiced custom as they got out of the car, gathered their things, and started walking. "Probably it's as simple as what Vera Monroe said," Scully continued, striding briskly toward the meager shade offered by the bulk of the motel. "The talk of the Black-Eyed Children, their possible new encounter themselves, echoed their experiences at the time of Vera's original affair. It brought it all up again."

"And you think that was impetus enough to push Ed over the edge like this?"
"Accompanied by other stressors. Running a small business in the current economy, facing middle age, seeing his son coming of age and considering the expense of college versus helping with the family business..."

Mulder had fallen a few steps behind. The parking lot was devoid of human activity, as usual, giving them some semblance of privacy as they spoke. "But you're saying you believe this potential for violence was in his character all along? That this wasn't a leap?"

"I'm saying...sometimes, Mulder...," Scully transferred the briefcase strap from one shoulder to the other, "...things just get buried rather than fixed. People move on, but they never face what happened. They think time will just make them forget. But nothing's ever entirely forgotten. Pain lessens, but an open wound will still fester beneath the dressing."

She heard Mulder's steps halt behind her. Then as she continued on her determined course toward the door, Mulder took the few strides of his long legs to catch up and circle her, nearly causing her to smack into him as she walked.

"Okay, now we're having a conversation I'm not quite caught up on," Mulder said, walking lithely backwards, leaning to catch the eye contact she was doing her best not to grant. "Tell me what we're talking about, Scully."

She slowed to a halt, nowhere left to go but past her door. She drew a soft breath, gazed at Mulder's belt buckle. "The Monroes," she said flatly.

Mulder nodded. "Yeah, we were. Now what are we talking about?"
Scully sighed, shifted her weight. She hadn't mean to start this, hadn't meant to be having this conversation, any conversation. She just wanted some food and some iced tea and out of these heels and into the air conditioning, and if he made her talk now she would say something that... "I'm just saying... I'm certainly not defending Ed Monroe's actions, he tried to kill me for God's sake, I'm just saying I understand what it feels like."

"Because...?"

"Because some things still hurt nearly twenty years later. And on the good days, they don't, they fade into the background, and they're almost, almost forgotten. But on other days they still sting. So I can imagine... that Mr. Monroe--"

Mulder nodded, still holding her in his hot gaze, like hands pressing on her shoulders and fuck him, why couldn't this be one of his oblivious and dense days, why had he chosen this afternoon to be his insightful and perceptive and sensitive self? Fuck. "And as an example in your life..." he coaxed.

"It doesn't matter. I was discussing the Monroes' situation."

"By comparing it to your own experience."

"Mulder--" She looked up and met his unfathomable grey eyes. Those eyes. Mulder's eyes. Her Mulder's eyes. Her lover's eyes. UFOs and conspiracies and a thousand stakeouts and cheese fries and gunshots and I don't want you to think you have to hide anything from me, and holding onto her hand for dear life and laughter and Christmas ornaments and rain-soaked streets and movie night and sex on the kitchen floor and--

And just like that, they weren't at work, anymore. They were Fox and Dana in a sunny parking lot in New Mexico, 25 years into the most confusing and beautiful and passionate and painful relationship of her lifetime. "Time can't just disappear!"

"Come on," Mulder said. He took the annoyingly heavy briefcase from her shoulder and leaned it against the outside of the room door. This simple awareness of her minor discomfort, probably of her still sore neck, nearly made her cry. She was just so tired... "You just said it yourself, Scully. Burying things, pretending they never happened, it doesn't work. It leaves an open wound. But isn't that exactly what we're doing right now? We're pretending we weren't standing right here two days ago, saying the stuff we never say, anymore, the real stuff. But we left everything unresolved. That's what we stopped doing, isn't it? We started finishing our sentences, finishing our conversations, not leaving out the stuff that hurts. Or the stuff that we're uncertain about. Like a connection to lights in the sky, or what might have been Black-Eyed Children in the parking lot. That's how we were making it work for a while. So... you really want to go backwards? Because that feels like what we're doing."

Scully stared at him for a long beat, breath rapid and shallow, struggling to find a solid foothold in the rush of emotions flooding her limbs.

"Things that still sting twenty years later... such as..." Mulder leaned in to will her to finish the sentence.

"Such as Diana Fowley." The words left her lips before she heard them in her head.

Mulder's immediate reaction was too close to a laugh, and he was quick to cover with a cough and a breath, but it still felt like being hit in the gut. Even though she knew the response was more about the non sequitur, more akin to incredulous shock than any kind of derision. But it hurt.
"Diana Fowley? What...Scully, where the hell did that come from? What about Diana Fowley?"

"Forget it." She started to turn toward her room, reached into her pocket for her card key, but two long fingers on her wrist stilled her motion.

"Would you stop?" he said, a raw vulnerability and bone-weary fatigue shimmering beneath his annoyance. And that was why she stopped. "Talk to me," he whispered. He let his hand fall away.

Scully turned to face him, held his gaze for a long time as she forced several deep breaths. She took her words one at a time. "I understand how it feels...when the most important person in your life...whom you thought felt at least generally the same as you did...suddenly seems eager to switch partners."

"What?"

"I get how that breaks foundations...and how it takes a long time...to feel secure, again."

Mulder shook his head, asking her with his eyes for more understanding. She could see that he was itching to touch her (and some traitorous part of her was desperate for that, as well), but she knew he was trying to give her her space and he was right, she needed it if she was going to keep talking.

"Scully, honestly, I've never understood what really happened between us back then. Why you were so angry with me."

"I just felt like...you were closed to everything I was trying to share with you. That you wouldn't even consider my side of things as long as Diana was involved. I know you didn't trust her, but I didn't want to hide what was happening from you, Scully. Diana had been a big part of my life, and I still cared for her. You've been in the same place. A couple of years after that, you still had feelings for Daniel, you still had a connection. How was that different?"

Scully gave a broken sound that was a hollow echo of a laugh. "How was that different? For Christ's sake, Mulder, it was different because I didn't turn on you or push you away. I didn't betray you."

"'Betray me.' Because you didn't sleep with him? And you think that I--"

"Oh, my God." Scully whirled on her heel, humming to drown out the rest of his sentence. She fumbled with her keycard. "No, no, no, we're not having that conversation. This is not about that. This is not about jealousy. Except now it was there in her head, the image of Mulder and that...fuck, fuck, fuck. Fucking keycard wouldn't work."

"You weren't jealous?"

Had she grabbed Mulder's card? Dammit... "Of course, I was jealous! But that I could get over." Maybe hers was in her briefcase.

Mulder's voice rose in a frustration echoing her own. "Then what is it about?"


"Did I lie to you?"

"No. You just left me behind."
"I what?"

"You thought everyone outside that building was in danger, but you left me in the car outside. I asked you to trust me, I reached for your hand, for our trust, for that...thing that has always held us together, and you acted like it didn't exist. Like it was meaningless. You let go of the rope." Damn it, her voice was shaking, and she hadn't meant to say any of this, but she hadn't slept and she was scared of what she was remembering and that stupid door wouldn't open, and...

"Scully..."

"And you never apologized. And you never said you were wrong, or that you took it back. So I was left with no other choice but to believe you still did and still do stand by everything you said. Everything that broke us."

The stricken expression on Mulder's face stabbed her with a pang of regret. She was hitting him with decades worth of stored hurt, fueled by a messed-up couple of years and a midnight visit that had shaken the hell out of her, and it wasn't fair, but she couldn't stop the flood. Not once he'd shoved open the gates.


She shook her head, eyes watering in the sun. She had left her sunglasses in the car, that was all it was... "No, Mulder...you didn't. You never got the chance to. Diana died. And once again, I was your only option. And then...you started treating me like one in a million, again. When I filled a role you needed filled in your life. And there was no one else lining up for the job."

And that was when he heard it. The same argument they had been having two days ago. She saw the exact moment the cogs interlocked in his head, and it was exactly what she needed and the last thing on Earth she wanted. She exhaled and sagged, and he looked right at her and into her soul.

"Scully..."

"Don't." She winced, pulled a half step away. She wasn't ready to confront this, they couldn't fix this.

She watched him regroup, give a terse nod. More facts, less sympathy. Logical debate, forever the key to her heart, and dammit he knew all her glitches and secret pathways and she would never win this battle. "Scully... Scully, you're right, I can't tell you without a shadow of a doubt what would have happened between Diana and me if she had lived. But I can tell you that I never would have stopped needing you. Trusting you. Needing you in my life."

She released a scoffing breath, because that simply wasn't how it had happened. Whatever story he told himself. "That's not how I remember it," was all she said.

Mulder drew a slow breath. "Scully, we were going through a rough patch. We were both trying to figure things out, who we were together and who we were as individuals. What our work meant, where we were going, what we wanted the future to be. And, yes, I was as pissed off at you some days during that time as you were at me. Some days you were shoving me away so hard I wondered if you had ever even liked me." He took a step closer and she couldn't make herself move back. His tone was intimate, creeping beneath her skin. "But I never left you. I was never going to choose a life with her that didn't include you."

"We can't know that. You never made a choice."

"Of course, I did."
She shook her head. The wind rose and fluttered her hair across her cheek. "You didn't. And if you did, Mulder, then...honestly? You'd chosen her. And if Diana were to show up here, today, alive, somehow...and you and I...we aren't really working, are we? Right? I don't want to get lost in the work. And maybe she does. Maybe she doesn't fight you on where you want your quest to go. Then..."

"Then I would be glad to see she's alive. I would wish her all the best. I would respect her as an agent, even though I know you don't, and I would still care about her, like you still care about people from your past. But Scully...if you think I could ever replace you, ever for a moment just...move on... You have never stopped being my other half. My Scully. The one I will always need...even on the days I'm too blockheaded to see it. Which, clearly, I was back then. But I was always going to come back to you."

"It didn't feel that way," she whispered. Her tone was petulant, resistant, and she was humiliated and hurting, and he was standing so close.

"Obviously not. And for that...Scully..." Mulder leaned in, tucked two guiding fingers beneath her chin, and gave his words every ounce of the weight the decades required. "I'm sorry."

Oh, God. Scully closed her eyes, exhaled, and tried so hard not to melt it ached in her bones. Damn you, Mulder.

"Have you really still been thinking about this so much? After all we've been through together? Our relationship? Our child? Our home?"

She drew a damp breath. "It crosses my mind."

"Well, then cut it off at the pass, G-woman. And hear this," Mulder grabbed her wrist, and Scully snapped her gaze to meet his at the urgency in his tone. "I have never...EVER...in my whole goddamned life, loved anyone like I love you. I have never needed anyone like I need you. I have never handed off the woman I thought was my sister in exchange for anyone but you. And I never will. Have I taken you for granted sometimes? Of course, I have. Because I'm an asshole. But Dana Katherine Scully...it has always been you. It will always be you. Whether you want me or not. Do you hear me?"

She stood in the building wind, stomach burning and tears blurring her vision. She let Mulder's words soak into her skin like a balm. He was breaking her and fixing her all in one swing. A metaphor for their life together.

Mulder seemed utterly baffled by how badly she had needed to hear his words. "How did you not know this?" he whispered, words more breath than form. He moved in close, and though the physical connection remained tentative, he brought a hand to her shoulder, cradled the other to her cheek and brushed away a tear. A rush of embarrassment made her shift her gaze away, but she leaned her temple into his jaw, rested a hand on his hip and gripped a little. They stood together, breathing in the quiet until their heartbeats synced up.

Until Mulder's cell phone rang.

Scully started to move away, downplaying her need, but Mulder simply said, "Fuck it," and kept his eyes closed, his hand on her cheek.

They stood for a moment longer. The phone kept ringing, and Scully gave a conceding smile, pulled a few inches away as she said, "You can answer it. That could be your contact."
It was romantic and corny and ridiculous as hell, but Scully knew she would remember it for the rest of her life when Mulder reached into his pocket, grabbed his cell phone, and hurled it blindly over a car into the parking lot. She gasped and stared, released an incredulous breath, but Mulder only cradled the back of her neck and guided her to meet his forehead with her own.

He had put her ahead of his work.

Her hands shook.

Mulder dipped his head and kissed the damp place at the top of her cheekbone, said against her forehead, "I'm here." And that was it, that made her cry. Really cry. She reached up an arm and cupped the back of his neck. Then she slipped into his arms, and he held her. Hard. "I'm here," he said again, words getting lost in her hair. She gripped the cloth of his shirt and breathed in the sunflower dust.

She wasn't sure how long they stood like that. But she was the first to move. And she knew he would have stayed until she said it was time, and she kind of wanted to stay with him the rest of her life for that. As she leaned away, still entangled, they held eye contact for a long breath before she said, "Come on. Let's go get your phone before it gets run over."

Mulder nodded, but he took his time. He smoothed back her hair in the wind. He gripped her auburn locks hard as he mouthed, "It's you." And she nodded, swallowed.

When he finally led the way, he grabbed her hand and wouldn't let go. It wasn't exactly FBI protocol, but clearly he no longer cared. And for this moment, neither did she.

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(End Chapter 13)
His fever has risen again as the evening has worn on, and now he is lying in bed, dozing in fits of dreams that tangle in fragments with glimpses of their bedroom and memories of running through a dark street knowing Scully is out there somewhere and he can't find her. But that is not reality. Or it was, he thinks it was, but it is not tonight. Tonight she is safely home, and she has been in to check on him multiple times. That is her cool hand on his forehead, her soft and worried hum in the back of her throat. He knows her doctor's touch from her lover's touch, but sometimes it all blends into one when he is the patient. This was true even before they became lovers. Maybe they have always been lovers.

"Mulder? I need you to wake up for a minute. It's time for more medicine. We need to get this fever down."

"Mmsleep..."

"I know. But you're too warm, and I don't want to have to throw you in a bathtub full of ice, so I need you to swallow some more ibuprofen. Can you open your eyes for me? Come on."

Her tender but insistent hand is cupping the back of his neck, and she guides him to rise onto his elbow. God, his muscles ache like he has run a marathon. This is just the flu, but the news has been saying it is a nasty one this year, and fuck they're right. He is grateful Scully has not yet said 'I told you so' about his refusal to take a flu shot (she is probably waiting until he feels less like death). She took hers two months ago. And he is grateful for that, too, because he doesn't want to watch her go through this.

"Come on. One more..." She is holding the glass of water to his lips, and he is trying to hold onto it himself, but she is steadying it, and that is probably wise.

His throat burns as he forces down the pills. The water is soothing. He is dry as desert sand.

"Good. That's good," she says softly. She sets his glass on the nightstand and helps to settle him back into his nest. "Just rest some more." One hand strokes his hair back from his forehead, and his skin
feels prickly and strange, but her touch is welcome and calming. The fingers of her other hand are subtly counting the pulses in his wrist.

"Couldn't find you," he mumbles into the pillow.

"What? Did you call me before? I was just in the--"

"No. Long time ago. They took you, and I couldn't...I couldn't find you..."

She is quiet for a moment, and he almost falls asleep. He can't quite keep his eyes open, and part of him thinks he might be worrying her, but he can't keep his thoughts sorted.

"You found me, Mulder," she says, "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

He catches hold of her hand. "Don't go anywhere." His voice sounds distant and young.

"I'm not going anywhere," she repeats. He feels her soft lips press to his eyebrow, and the scent of her skin penetrates the fog clogging his senses. "Just sleep, honey. You're okay," she whispers.

"Sleep, sci---slee..."

"Sshh. I'll be right here. I promise."

When he wakes six hours later, his skin is covered in a fine sheen of sweat and his thoughts feel like his own. The fever has finally broken, and he is left with a grateful peace and a desperate fatigue. A thin ray of first light bleeds in the window and onto a splash of red hair -- Scully, asleep on top of the bedspread beside him, slacks and blouse and earrings still on. Her fingers are tangled with his. Still here.

He reaches out and strokes the side of her face. He is gentle, but she startles awake. She has been worried, on watch; the doctor on call. "Mulder? Are you okay?"

"Sshhhh, I'm fine." He keeps stroking her cheek as she scoots up higher on the mattress, brings their faces parallel. "I'm better," he says.

"Yeah?" Her sleepy, fumbling hand goes to his brow, and she just avoids poking him in the eye, but he smiles. "You are cooler," she confirms. "That's good..." She says back into the mattress, briefly closes her eyes. Then she rallies. "Are you hungry? Do you want me to get you something--"

He shakes his head and smooths her disheveled hair. "Food no longer sounds like a tragedy, but it's okay, sleep some more. We'll eat when the sun's all the way up."

"Are you sure? If you're hungry now you should--"

"Hush. I'm fine."

She holds his gaze for a moment. "Drink some water." It's not a request.

"Okay." He manages the glass himself this time, and she is clearly just tired enough to let him try.

Back on his pillow, he gazes at his lover in the early-early light, draws a gentle finger down the hollow of her cheek. "You're pretty," he says.

Scully snorts and looks away. "You're delusional."

But he just shakes his head and keeps touching her. "Nope. It's true."
She draws a breath and lets it go. She doesn't reply, but he knows she's taking it in.

"Thanks for taking care of me," he says.

Scully closes her eyes, hums softly. "Maybe if you'd taken the flu shot like I told you..."

There it is.

"Come here, Dr. Scully." He helps her out of her slacks, unbuttons her blouse so it won't pull, and gets her tucked under the blankets beside him. She presses her back to his chest, not protesting that he hasn't showered in a while. They will clean up together later. She will probably wash all the sheets. She tucks into the position he knows she loves best and falls asleep before he does. He nuzzles his nose into her hair and holds on, because he can. He knows how many times he has almost lost her. Years and years of playing at the edge of the cliffs and nearly paying the price. He replays the crisis points a thousand times in his dreams, holding onto her for dear life as she clings to the edge.

But here they lie, grateful this morning for nothing more than the quiet, the birds outside the window, the relative safety of their home, and the turning of the tide on his simple illness. At the end of his quest there is Scully. Only Scully. And no matter how many times he tells her this, he knows she never quite believes. But he will never stop trying.

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"Mulder, you can't keep using it like that, your finger will get cut on the glass."

"Well, it's not too bad if I--ow!"

"Seriously? What did I just say? Let me see it."

"No, I'm fine."

"Let me see."

"It's fine, I...here..."

"Would you stop? We're up next."

The tech behind the counter of the local electronics warehouse motioned them forward, and Mulder stopped and blinked for a moment as he realized the kid looked exactly like a 20-year-old Melvin Frohike should have looked. "Can I help you?" the kid droned.

Scully bumped him deliberately with her shoulder, and Mulder jarred himself into action. "Yeah, uh..." He held up his phone and Scully took advantage of his moment of distraction to snatch hold of his free hand and inspect the small cut on his index finger. "How fast can you fix a cracked screen?"

"Let me take a look," Frohike Kid said, and Mulder handed over the phone into the tech's outstretched hand.

As Frohike Kid inspected the damage, he asked, "What happened to it?"

"Oh, I just...I dropped it in a parking lot."

The kid looked at Mulder over the top of his glasses, dark hair dribbling onto his forehead. "You dropped it? And it got this smashed?" The disdain was impressive considering just how far up he had to look at Mulder.

"Well...threw it...might be more accurate."
The tech gave a sort of grumphing sound and went back to inspecting the phone. "Everything else working?"

Mulder nodded. "As far as I can tell, yeah." He had managed to see the missed call from their potential informant, managed to return the call and set a time and location for the meeting. But the screen was screwed.

The kid inspected the phone for another moment, then consulted the screen of a tablet lying on the counter. "We're not too busy and our screen guy is here this afternoon, so we could probably get it switched out for you in about an hour."

Mulder nodded. "That would be great, thank you."

"Okay, let me write up your estimate." He turned his focus to the nearby terminal, and Mulder immediately turned to Scully, who was inspecting a case of iPods a few feet away. He tried to surreptitiously direct her attention behind the counter.

Scully frowned, glanced toward the tech, and moved her head a fraction, asking what she was looking for.

Muler took a step closer to her. "You don't see it?" he said under his breath.

"See what?"

"Fro-hik-e," he whispered.

Scully casually studied MiniFrohike as the tech popped off the back of Mulder's phone, presumably looking for identifying numbers for his charge slip. Her eyes narrowed, and she glanced back at Mulder with a small shrug that said, "I guess so."

Mulder was incredulous. "You don't see it?" He let his voice get louder than he had intended.

Before Scully could properly reply, the kid started asking Mulder for name, address, etc., and Scully wandered away while Mulder carried out the busywork.

He had gotten used to this early on in their partnership. Scully was both an observer and a wanderer. If he started talking to a witness, and she did not have an immediate burning question to contribute, she would casually drift off and start taking in the details of a home or an office, touch base with any surrounding persons -- children or coworkers -- who might be hovering in the shadows holding information that could help their case. At first, he had thought her bored or inattentive, but it hadn't taken him long to learn that she was absorbing information like a sponge on steroids and letting her wander and listen and observe could lead to any number of useful factoids he might have missed on his own.

Today, however, she seemed to be more focused on sparkly iPhone cases and updated eReaders, and maybe she was just decompressing after their emotionally taxing afternoon. That was okay, too. When he and Scully had first fallen in love -- or rather when they had finally acknowledged the truth and found their way into one another's arms and intimate lives -- fun had been something that had taken them a long time to learn. Jokes had always been easy between them, little whispers and stolen smiles to balance the prevailing darkness in which they had worked. But fun for fun's sake, taking a Saturday afternoon to go to the park, wandering around a street fair, or renting movies and making popcorn; these things had been removed from their lives for so long, both by necessity and by choice, that it had taken a while for them to understand that carving out time to share the simple pleasures was not only okay but important.
By her own admission, so much of what Scully truly loved had been buried so deeply she had almost stopped recognizing it herself. Even before the X-Files had come into her life, Scully had often spent her nights off working on academic papers or catching up on medical research. They had talked about this more than once in their years living together (trying to get her to answer questions with things other than the likes of "Eleanor Roosevelt"), yet even after so much time, Mulder didn't really understand what had made her withdraw or how far back in her life the tendencies ran. Protecting herself from her brothers? From the comparisons to her sister? Proving herself to her father? At school? To the boys in the advanced science classes? Like the music that had remained hidden on her hard drive for so long, many other aspects of the woman behind the agent had been tucked into corners and private sanctuaries. Scully had been almost embarrassed when Mulder had realized she liked how sundresses felt on her skin, that she enjoyed having her shoulders open to the wind. She was the strongest, smartest, most amazing woman he had ever known, yet she was also perhaps the most afraid to admit she was anything other than the image she had chosen to present to the world. He loved every version of her. Every brave moment speaking her truths before a senate committee. Every panic attack in their kitchen. Every life-saving roundhouse kick and shot fired. Every half-asleep moment crawling into his arms after a painful nightmare. But today had clearly shown him she was still struggling with total acceptance of his truth. He would simply keep standing by her until she believed, if it took the rest of their lives.

This afternoon, he stood beside her as they thumbed through used LPs (and what the fuck, when had his teenaged norm become expensive and retro trendy??), then he sat beside her in the hot car with the doors open as they read over newly filed toxicology reports on the deceased Garcias, until MiniFrohike called Scully's phone to tell them Mulder's phone was ready to go. Just in time to meet their informant.

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"Quite a place you've got here," Mulder said.

The studio was the last thing Scully had been expecting. Of all the dark and shadowed and strange places Mulder had taken her to talk to both credible and utterly incredible informants, this was the first time she had found herself in the sun-filled and sparkling workshop of an artist.

Jarvis Tarten was a master of blown glass and metalworks. The converted garage at the back of his property was a veritable wonderland of light and color. Wind chimes and mobiles hung from the ceiling, sun-catchers dotted the windows. Racks and trays of jewelry lined the tables along the back wall, and a large sign propped in the far corner looked like one that might stand outside a display booth at a convention or a craft fair.

Jarvis sat back against the edge of his work table, arms folded across his chest. He was a large man, near Mulder's height but more filled out with bulkier muscles. Not at all the type one would expect to have such a delicate touch on precise work. But the evidence of that contradiction shimmered all around them. He was dressed in worn and paint-spotted jeans, a loose shirt that made Scully think of hippy yoga, and he wore a pair of thin-framed metal glasses that kept sliding down his nose, making their constant adjustment a tangible part of his movement and character. Scully's childhood Vacation Bible School teacher had worn a pair like that.

"I appreciate you coming out here," Jarvis said. "I'm sure you understand my hesitation in speaking to you. I have followed your work long enough to know you know the dangers that are out there."

Mulder nodded, and Scully tossed her partner a sidewise glance, assessing how much of his manner was sincerity, and how much was playing into the man's paranoia to earn his trust. "Absolutely, Mr. Tarten," Mulder said. "I appreciate you putting yourself out there on our behalf."
The man nodded briefly, but he was drinking in Mulder's confirmation of his natural paranoia, and Scully admired, as always, Mulder's ability to draw people out. She was weaker in that department. She lacked the patience and tolerance and she knew it. She could make connections with witnesses she already believed in, assure them of her trust, break through their defenses. But hiding her skepticism to fish for kernels of evidence in a sea of delusion had never come naturally to her.

"Your son indicated we should speak with Ed Monroe," Mulder said. "We did pay Mr. Monroe a visit, but I have to say, the man wasn't very keen on talking to us."

Jarvis scoffed. "Was that before or after he lost his marbles and tried to shoot his family?"

"So you heard about that?"

Jarvis shrugged. "Small town, people talk."

"Did you have reason to expect something like this from Mr. Monroe?"

"I didn't know him well enough to make that kind of call. We all have a little crazy buried in us. Hard to know someone else's trigger." The answer was reasonable, but even Scully could hear the undertones. There was something Jarvis wasn't saying.

Mulder clearly heard the unspoken as well, but for the moment he chose to move on, return to territory upon which Jarvis seemed more comfortable speaking.

"Are you aware of the Monroes' claims that Vera Monroe was an alien abductee?"

Jarvis nodded, like the question was as ordinary as, 'Were you aware that Vera Monroe was active in the local PTA?' "Yeah, I knew."

"And you believe her?"

"Yeah, I believe her. It makes sense."

"How so?"

"Vera has lived in Verdad most of her life. There is a higher percentage of abductees around here than in most other places. There are...pockets...of heightened activity around the country. Or around the world, in fact. And southern New Mexico is a hot spot."

"And why do you think that is?" Mulder asked.

"I can't say for certain." Jarvis pushed up his glasses, again. "Plenty of secret government activity going on around here. Maybe the aliens are amused by watching our pathetic attempts at innovation. Maybe they're working with us, feeding us technology just as we're ready for it. Who knows? We can only guess what their higher intentions are, patch together the little bits and pieces of information they've scattered on us. The breeding program is the only thing we can be halfway knowledgeable about, and that's only because they need us. And for some reason, their memory wiping technology isn't perfect. Whether that's a flaw in their capabilities or a deliberate choice on their part, I don't know."

Scully lingered a few feet behind Mulder, her focus on Jarvis still intent. The man glanced toward her every now and then as he spoke, and she found herself tensing as she always did when these subjects arose. Like people would see through her. Like they could somehow know about the chip in the back of her neck, the child she had carried, the lingering memories of the light...and the pain.

"What do you mean they need us for their breeding program? Tell me more," Mulder asked.
"Surely you know about this stuff," Jarvis said.

Mulder nodded and leaned in a fraction. "I've heard the theories. Decades worth of theories. But more often than not, the idea is that it's our government running the program, hoping to breed in a type of immunity, protect portions of the human race from colonization or eradication. Not the aliens trying to create a hybrid for their own sake. So tell me your story."

"It's true we don't know their motives. Whether they are doing this for their own needs or as part of a deal with our government; something they're offering the human race. Either way, they're the ones running the show, raising the hybrids. At least the ones they don't plant down here. But that project got shut down a while ago."

This man's conspiracy theories were more elaborate than most. Scully found herself imagining an animated conversation between Jarvis Tarten and Max Fenig. Max would have been older than Jarvis by now. The comparison of the two men irrationally warmed her toward Jarvis.

"Tell me what this has to do with the Garcias and the sightings of the Black-Eyed Children," Mulder said.

Jarvis glanced between them like this answer should have been obvious and they were perhaps suspect for their stupidity. "They're the hybrids. The kids are hybrids. They're coming to learn."

"Learn what?" Scully asked, adding her voice to the interrogation.

"Empathy. Love. How to raise human children and keep them alive. Just like they do on the ships, having us teach the caretakers when the kids are infants. But now they're older, learning for themselves."

"How do you know what they do on their 'ships'?" she prodded. "Where are you getting this information?"

Jarvis uncrossed his arms and shifted his weight where he sat against his work table. "From the abductees. Where else? Like I said, the memory wiping isn't perfect. Most of them remember something at some point. You've interviewed experiencers. Some of them remember a lot. The women who've had their eggs harvested, who've been used to breed...they bring them back after the hybrid babies are born. They have them show the caretakers what the babies need, how to hold them, how to give them the affection and the contact they need to thrive." Scully resisted the urge to say, Yes, I saw that movie, it had Richard Crenna, because she wanted Jarvis to keep talking. And because...somewhere in the pit of her stomach, something like a memory was fighting hard against her determined skepticism and her skin was itching again. "Apparently, their babies don't need that," Jarvis continued. "Makes me sick to think how it went for the first generations of hybrids, before they figured all this out."

Scully briefly closed her eyes.

"I'm still not clear on what you think is happening with the Black-Eyed Children," Mulder said.

Jarvis began speaking more slowly, as though Mulder were a bit dim. "They're hybrids who've grown. And now they're being sent here to help them learn about parent-child relationships. That's why they appeal to people's sympathies, see how they can convince someone to let them in. Have you heard people telling you the kids claimed it was cold? Or they were lost or hurt? Alone in the dark looking for their mommies? If that's not a set-up study of parental caretaking response, I don't know what is."
"So, what does all of this have to do with Ed Monroe?" Scully asked.

"Like we said, his wife's been an abductee. Started back when she was in college, as far as I know."

There it was, the unspoken something more. "Did you know her back then?"

Jarvis nodded. "Yeah, we were friends."

"And did she tell you about the abductions?"

Jarvis shifted his weight, looked a little more uncomfortable than he had talking conspiracy theories. "She told me some. She called me the night she first saw the Black-Eyed Kids."

"Here in Verdad?" Mulder questioned.

"No, no, back when we were in school, up in Albuquerque."

"You were in college with Vera Monroe?" Scully confirmed.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's where we met."

Mulder briefly caught Scully's gaze before he asked, "Are you from Verdad originally?"

"No, no. I grew up in Santa Fe. Moved here after graduation."

"Any particular reason?"

Jarvis hesitated, broke eye contact, then said lamely, "I just like the wind."

Mulder started to ask something else, but Scully took a step forward and touched a finger to his arm. This was her area of interrogative strength. She kept her gaze locked on Jarvis as Mulder fell silent at her signal. "Were you and Vera Monroe lovers?" Scully asked. "Were you the one she got involved with when she was already with her husband-to-be?"

Jarvis blinked at them for a moment, clearly a little blindsided by the insight, but it took only a moment for him to accept the truth for what it was. "I'm not proud of it," he said. "But...yeah."

Mulder's eyes narrowed as he played out the forward and backward of the story with this fresh insight. "Is that why you moved down here after graduation? To be near Vera?"

"If it was, it's not the reason I stayed. I met my late wife a year after I got down here. We built a life, raised a family. Until she got sick. Since then, it's been Jordie and me."

Scully drew a slow breath. "May I ask what happened to your wife?"

"Brain cancer."

The ripple from Mulder's skin to hers was like an invisible current through the air.

"I'm very sorry," Mulder managed. Then he said, "I don't mean to belabor a painful subject, but...Mr. Tarten, did your wife consider herself an abductee?"

Tarten nodded. "She's the one who first told me what happens to the ones chosen to breed."

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"So, what did you think of all that?" Scully asked as they made their way across the scruffs of grass
to the winding gravel path where they had left their car.

Mulder had asked Jarvis a few more questions, but the replies had soon started to circle, and he had recognized when they were no longer learning anything that could help the Garcias.

"I think that was a certain amount of useful information buried in a tangle of overblown conspiracy theories that make it hard to shovel out the truth," Mulder said.

Scully nodded, gaze forward as they walked. "I'll second that. His proximity to the Monroes goes some distance toward explaining the continued tension over Vera's past betrayal."

"It does."

They took a few more steps in silence before Scully said, "For a proponent of such fringe beliefs, Jarvis certainly is closed-minded to the other theories out there. From his reaction when you mentioned that others believe the Black-Eyed Kids could be demon hybrids or dark spirits, you would have thought you suggested child sacrifice was a valid religious practice."

Mulder chuckled. "What, you're not familiar with the hierarchy of disdain amongst conspiracy theorists?"

"Well, you seem to be above that hierarchy, Mulder. I don't think I have yet found an outrageous theoretical explanation you wouldn't be willing to try on for size if there was enough evidence pointing in that direction."

"No, it's true, Scully. Like you, I have always been more interested in uncovering the actual truth than in pushing any personal agenda. I'm just willing to explore a broader field of possibility to find that truth," he finished with a quick, flirty smile.

He was rewarded with a wry grin laced with affection. He knew something in the interview had made her uncomfortable, made her withdraw a little, and he suspected it had something to do with whatever she had yet to tell him about what she had experienced last night. But maybe it had just been the mention of Jarvis's wife's abduction history and her untimely death to brain cancer. The hard truth still danced between them every day, as they lived their lives pretending the shadow wasn't ever-present, never acknowledging that Scully's continued survival on this planet might rest upon a fragile piece of alien technology in her neck. But he knew the possibility still haunted her dreams.

"Hey, Scully," Mulder said as they approached their car.

"Hmmm?"

From his pocket, he withdrew the pair of blown glass earrings he had seen Scully eyeing and had managed to quietly buy off of Jarvis when she had been distracted by a sun-catcher display. He dangled the card toward her with a playful twist of his lips.

Scully blinked, squinted across at him in question. Then she reached out to take the unexpected offering. "Mulder? Did you...?"

"Gotcha a little somethin'."

Scully held the earrings up to see their brilliant sparkle in the midday light. Then she looked at him and smiled. A real, sincere, we're not at work, we're just two people out in the sunlight living our lives kind of Scully smile he hadn't seen in far, far too long.

"They're beautiful. Thank you."
Mulder just nodded, but he was returning that smile. When they had settled in the car, Scully took out her pearl studs and replaced them with the new dangling bits of colored glass. They were not exactly her usual low-key FBI standard, but they were in the middle of the New Mexico desert, and they were going off grid in a lot of ways this trip. As he pulled the highly maneuverable car out onto the street and her long hair blew back in the wind from the open window, for a split second in his peripheral view she was his Dana, the lovely vision in a white sundress and gold bracelets, sitting in a deck chair on the balcony of the beach house they had rented for what they had come to call their "anniversary". No darkness. No conspiracies. No hospitals. Just warm sun, soft touches, and quiet twilights. As he steered the car onto the highway, he reached out blindly and grasped for her hand. She caught his fingers, and he held on. Reassuring himself that she was still here. That he hadn't broken her. That the world he had dragged her into hadn't destroyed her spirit. That the light inside her still burned to illuminate their way, as it had from the first day she had ventured into the depths of the basement, and turned his face toward the sun.

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(End Chapter 14)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Mulder and Scully and the search for the truth all belong to Chris Carter and Co. I'm just borrowing them. I promise to return them in no worse condition than Chris would.

Beta thanks to Annie, without whom I would probably still be sitting in a corner feeling sorry for myself and refusing to post, to Erica who makes me much more presentable to the world, and a much love to dear Miriam, my Water's Edge beta from way back in the day, now back to kick my ass in line once more!

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Please excuse the brief inclusion of Daniel Waterston, but for the old time Edgeheads this is just a little something to let you know you really are reading an Elizabeth Rowandale novel (like it or not).;) I couldn't help myself.

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Chapter 15

She can't remember the last time she slept. Or ate. She knows she is literally running on caffeine and adrenaline through this rough and tangled patch of growth, branches slapping at her face and chest that will probably leave a sprinkling of scratches she won't feel until later. She sends up a silent prayer that her legs will stay strong, just keep carrying her this little bit farther. She will take care of herself later; she will sleep when the girl is safe. Mulder is supposed to be the obsessive one. He is the one she guides away from the Violent Crimes cases, from the serial killers, from the all-consuming drive to get inside the murderer's head, to understand the darkness in a self-defeating attempt to pull someone else out of it while there is still a chance for redemption.

But this time she understands. They have been drinking and breathing nothing for days but the pictures of the dead girls, the stories from the families, the tox screens, the trace evidence under fingernails. Cataloging every step, walking through haunted and silent bedrooms with Backstreet Boys posters and cheerleading ribbons and no blood on the floor, combing through every microscopic detail, desperately trying to see in through the darkness, to find more than shadowy outlines to lead their way. To zoom in on one single detail that will tear down the veil, bring the whole picture into vivid color and allow them to find the missing girl before she is another cold and blue body. Another picture on the wall.

Last night the veil fell. And now they are only a few yards away...

The door of the aging cabin gives with only the second ram of Mulder's shoulder, and a sea of trained bodies spills onto the aging floorboards and spreads out like water. "FBI! Get down on the floor! Down on the floor, now!"

They are in the right place. Purple streamers are hanging everywhere. The killer's trademark. A twisted death party, like a clown with a butcher knife.
To the right is the suspect, and Scully registers that he has surrendered, hands up, then down on the floor, and there are enough agents to secure him, Mulder is one of them -- so she goes to the left. Looking for the girl.

She finds her in the first room they try.

"Get the paramedics in here!" Scully drops to her knees on the uneven floor, only peripherally aware of the law enforcement swimming around her. There is blood splashed everywhere. The finger-shaped bruises on the girl's neck virtually guarantee the expected manner of death. Scully's hand goes to the girl's cheek. Still warm. Her skin is still warm and a little resilient to touch. It hasn't been long. So much blood...tangled in her ash blonde hair...Scully is kneeling in it. Purple streamers spin around her. But she is tunnel- visioned upon her task. She yanks up the girl's torn shirt, scanning for the locations of the knife wounds, making certain she is not pressing anywhere that will only push out more blood. Then she lifts high onto her knees and plants her hands on the girl's chest. 1...2...3...She starts performing CPR on instinct, trusting her body to do what needs to be done.

In her last year of med school, Scully was walking down the street outside her favorite coffee shop, and a middle-aged man simply collapsed on the sidewalk in front of her. The man's wife started screaming for help, and Scully shouted to a random bystander cradling a cappuccino to get into the shop and call 911. Then she dropped to the concrete and started performing CPR without ever deciding to do so. A few minutes later, and the man gasped and coughed his way back into this world. Scully sat back onto her heels, checked his weak but present pulse, mumbled something to the patient's wife about letting him lie still. She heard the sirens in the distance.

When she looked up from the newly breathing man on the pavement, breathless and shaking herself but starting to process her surroundings, her own book bag spilling out on the ground beside her, she found herself locked eye to eye with Daniel, whom she had been meant to meet at the coffee shop. He had stood by and watched her work.

"Why didn't you help me?" she asked as soon as they were alone.

"Because you're a doctor," he said. "And one of the hardest lessons is to learn to trust that. Trust your training. Trust your body to carry you through what needs to be done."

"But I'm not a doctor. Not yet."

"Today you were."

The girl's ribs feel thin and fragile beneath the heels of Scully's hands, and even as she knows in the pit of her stomach that lifeblood will never pulse through this flesh again, that this girl will not get the second chance of that long ago man outside the coffee shop, she is fearful of fracturing those delicate ribs in her effort to save a lost life.

"Come on," she breathes as she counts. "Come on..."

She continues until the paramedics arrive. They take over, move in around her until she is an observer, sitting on her heels with nothing in her hands and no one left to save. She knows they've lost.

The room is blue rotting wood and fresh blood and sweat and pain and she is dizzy and sick and she pushes unsteadily to her feet and moves out of the room as fast as her legs will carry her.

She shoves out the door and keeps walking. Her subconscious registers that the suspect has been cuffed and is being placed in a vehicle. No one left to save, nothing to supervise and make sure it is
executed with speed and precision; the agents behind her will do what has to be done.

She has to walk and keep walking and be somewhere where no one can see her, where she can breathe for a minute, where the nauseating smell of that place won't make her throw up. She has barely slowed to a stop when she lets herself acknowledge that of which she has already been aware -- the familiar footsteps behind her.

"Scully...?"

"Dammit..." She yanks a random branch from a tree above her, hurls it blindly into the brush. She smacks the heel of her hand against a tree trunk, scraping her skin.

"Scully, it's not your fault."

She whirls on him, her hot breath fogging in the chill Oregon air. "Then whose fault is it? Her parents? The killer? The teacher who abused him? The counselor who didn't notice early signs of a psychotic disorder? The company that sent faulty solution for the DNA preservation tube?...God?"

"I wish I knew. I don't. But I know it's not yours."

She releases a breath that's too close to a sob, rests her hands on her hips and looks around the endless wet and green, looking for something, anything to ground the desperate restlessness in her limbs; the need to escape this heavy and relentless reality.

"You did good work," Mulder says. "We caught him. We did what we set out to do."

"We did nothing!" she shouts. "We didn't save any of them."

"We saved the next one." His words are clear and steady and meant to project their truth onto her skin.

It works. This undeniable fact drains the last of the fight from her. She feels her limbs go hollow and shaky, feels small and useless among the towering and ancient trees. Her chin shakes as she says, "Mulder, she was still warm..."

"I know." This time she can feel the controlled pain in him, as well. He has been beside her through all of this. Every driven and obsessive moment. Every sleepless night. He's taking the hit, too, but he's been swallowing it to support her.

She is so exhausted and her blood sugar is low and she burned all her adrenaline with the run, and she tells herself she would be crying at this point if she lost her keys, and maybe that makes it easier to justify completely melting at a crime scene. But here she is, letting him wrap her up and try to make it okay that there's a teenaged girl dead on that dirty floor, and the last days of the girl's life were spent in hell, because their moment of revelation was just one fucking hour too late.

She grips Mulder's white shirt in her bloodstained fingers.

She never gets all the blood out of her own clothes. She has to throw them away. Like everything else that has been lost.

She shoves and buries the voice in her head that keeps telling her there is an end to how long she can survive this job. How long she will want to.

The voice that says Daniel may have been wrong for her, but he was still too fucking right about too many things.
"Isn't that Orion?" Scully said, leaning toward his shoulder and pointing.

"Oh, yeah, I guess so. I was seeing it like it was attached to the one next to it, that bright star. You see it?" Mulder pulled her half-across his lap in the front seat of the car, trying to match their eye lines.

"Yeah..." she said, but it was a little vague whether she was really seeing what he had seen or just going for it. She straightened up into her seat. "It's confusing when there are so many stars. We're too used to the city."

The sun had finally sunk behind the Organ Mountains, and the stars had been sparkling into view over the past half hour. Following an afternoon of paperwork and voicemails and dinner in Las Cruces at a place the sheriff had recommended that served some kind of allegedly wondrous Pecan Amber Ale (and Mulder had to agree, it had been a memorable flavor), they had headed back out for one more night's hopeful observation in Miller's Clearing. Mulder was starting to wonder if these strange light sightings held any validity, or if the phenomenon had simply stopped before their arrival in Verdad. It seemed strange that the Black-Eyed Children stories would have so much circumstantial evidence while the lights were proving a total bust.

"You called the military liaison officer earlier, didn't you?" Mulder asked. "Did he give you anything else on the source of the radiation?" They could still see the crime tape and orange cones in the distance, even in the last bits of fading light. A few concrete barriers had been added to the mix to keep cars away from the quarantine zone.

Scully shook her head. "No. He barely even spoke to me. I think they're done sharing on this one."

"The military less than forthcoming? How unusual."

Scully huffed out a soft sound. "You know, it's strange, Mulder. I grew up on military installations. I held such reverence for all that my father did...for the other officers who lived around us. I still do. It's hard to reconcile the military world I grew up a part of with the immovable and secretive forces we've found ourselves up against in the years since."

Mulder dropped his head back against the headrest and lolled it in Scully's direction. "Well, I feel like we still see both sides of that, Scully. We've struggled against a powerful minority in high level positions seeking to deceive, inveigle, and obfuscate, a sort of shadow government that probably always existed, but we also run into military officers and their families all the time who are in the job for all the right reasons, as much victims to the greed and machinations of the higher-ups as you or I."

Scully's eyes narrowed as she gazed out the windshield. "I guess so...," she said quietly, still obviously wrapped up in her own thoughts on the subject.

They were quiet for a while, then Scully said, "What do you think about what Jarvis was saying today? About the alien-hybrid babies."

Mulder drew a slow breath, pulling up all the proper files in his brain. "Well, we've definitely heard stories like that before. Hybrid programs, the aliens not understanding the human babies' need for touch, physical comforting. A general lack of human empathy is a common theme in abduction stories. Abductees often cite a seeming complete lack of empathy during painful tests."

"Yeah. Penny Northern said that to me."
"What?"

Scully narrowed her eyes, staring intently into the distant darkness, while Mulder gazed intently at her profile, waiting for her to find her words. "When I was in the hospital, undergoing Dr. Scanlon's treatment. Penny was sitting with me, when I was feeling sick after the chemo. And she told me they had let her come stay with me during the tests. In the place. To...comfort me. And that that wasn't normal for them. They didn't usually...care."

Mulder was quiet, letting her words hover in the dimness.

"Do you...do you think that was some kind of experiment as well?" she asked. "That they were observing what Penny might do to comfort me?"

He slowly shook his head. "Maybe. I don't know. Scully, do you remember that?"

She swallowed and lowered her gaze. "No. I mean...I thought...I had a dream...sometimes... They were doing something to me...and I could hear Penny's voice telling me it was going to be okay. I don't know. I had a lot of nightmares during the treatment, and when I was sick. It...like fever dreams, you know? I don't know that any of it meant anything."

"Maybe. But it might have."

She shifted position, tucked one foot up behind her knee. "Penny was always pushing me to remember. I didn't want to."

"Do you want to now?"

She took a long time to reply, staring out into the night, breath quiet but shallow and slightly fast. He learned long ago to read her anxiety levels in the rise and fall of her chest. "I'm not sure, I..." She shook her head. "Now it's all so long ago, it's so fuzzy, it..."

"But it still affects you," he offered gently.

She nodded, gaze on her fingers in her lap. "Probably," she agreed, slowly and quietly. A concession he might once have been denied. There were things he loved about where they had come.

"Why does everyone assume they're evil?" Scully asked.

"What do you mean?"

This time she lifted her gaze, met his eyes directly. He felt the connection like a current that shimmered through his chest. "These...so-called Black-Eyed Children," she said. "Why does everyone assume they're evil?"

"Well, the way Mariela described it, the visits seem to come with an accompanying sense of darkness or dread. Like something is wrong or dangerous."

"Dangerous and evil aren't the same thing. Fire is dangerous, but it's also life-giving."

"True. What are you thinking about, Scully?"

She drew a deliberate breath, exhaled before replying. "Mulder, Emily was a hybrid child. Or...at least a child of a government experiment. And her blood could be toxic to those around her, just like something about these kids, radiation or whatever it is about them that's making people sick after they encounter them. But Mulder, Emily was not manipulative nor lacking in empathy, and she was
certainly not evil or demonic or a curse upon those whom she touched."

"No, she wasn't. But Emily was raised by very human parents. Good parents. They would have
nurtured and brought out the human side of her, rewarded and encouraged all her warmest qualities."

Scully took this in in silence and turned to gaze out the windshield once again.

After a moment, Mulder said, "Scully, let me ask you this -- because so far you're the only one of us
to have encountered them -- do the Black-Eyed Children scare you?"

Her admission came as reluctant but honest. "Yes."

"And is that because of what they are now, or because of what you say you've started to remember?
The feelings their images triggered within you?"

She shifted, visibly discomforted by the subject. "I don't know. I can't pull it apart."

"Okay. That's okay."

"I don't like the lack of control."

That part he believed.

In the silence, the scope of her words replayed in his mind. It had been so long since he had heard
Scully speak Emily's name, the impact came as a gut-punch, realizing how raw those wounds still
were beneath her facade. It nagged at him that in their last years together as lovers, she hadn't felt she
could bring up the subject with him. He had probably been too wrapped up in his own bullshit to see
what she was hiding.

"Do you still think about her a lot?" he asked now, before inertia could settle in and silence once
again prevail. "About Emily? You haven't spoken about her for a long time."

Scully's reply came with surprising ease. "I do," she said. He was still adjusting to this older Scully
who alternated between distance and functional maturity. Their separation had confused things even
further, retracting some areas of their progress, and cementing others into vital forward motion.
"Mulder...do you realize she would be 23? At 23 I was in medical school…"

"That is hard to believe. I can still feel her little arms around my neck."

Scully's quick intake of breath was hard to read, but for a flash she looked at him like she had when
they had been parents. When that additional thread had held them together with a level of selfless
intimacy he had never felt before.

Mulder jumped into the deep end while the door was still swinging.

"Dana, I know you left the x-files because you didn't want the darkness. I know you didn't want to
come back."

She shook her head. "It's okay."

"No, Scully...I know you've said things are different now, that you're here for different reasons, but I
know you're still wrestling with this, too. Do you want out? You said yes to this case because it was
a chance to be in the sun. And now...there's darkness even here in the desert. You were attacked and
injured. Is this what you want to be doing? I mean, really? Are you okay?"

She took a long time to reply. "Right now, I still want to be here. And I'm okay."
He accepted that he should be content with this reply. If he had learned anything in the past 24 years it was that sometimes, it was better to stop digging. "Okay. And when that changes...you'll tell me?"

She didn't speak, but she reached over and squeezed his hand.

Scully had always been better at not talking.

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In the lingering silence Mulder felt Scully tucking in all her raw edges and straightening the covers. She might have learned to share to keep the lines of essential communication open, but he knew she still had her limits before she had to re-center and withdraw.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed before she asked, "How much do you think Mariela Garcia and Nate Monroe have to do with this?"

"How do you mean? Are you asking if I think they were creating the problem? If they were staging the visitations?"

"I wasn't, but do you?"

Mulder shook his head. "No, not at all. Do you?"

"Instinctually, I don't. But we should still consider the possibility."

"What would they have to gain?" Mulder took a sip from his lemonade, nestled in the console between them. The dry air was starting to dry out his sinuses.

"I don't know...enemy of my enemy? If they thought somehow that posing a threat to both families might bring them closer together? Get them to approve of the relationship?"

He swallowed and lowered his drink. "Seriously? You think the local Romeo & Juliet decided that staging visitations from Black-Eyed Children would get their parents to understand their love? It's a pretty non-traditional approach to the problem, to say the least. And I can't imagine those kids having anything to do with Joseph Garcia's death, or the grandmother or brother's illness."

Scully breathed for a moment. Then, "No, they wouldn't have. But actually, my original question was about whether you think the stress of their situation, the friction it created both within and between these families, was an instigator for what all of this has escalated into?"

"Well, I think it's pretty clear in the case of the Monroes. If Ed suspected his wife of betrayal and at the same time thought his son was going to leave and abandon the family business, that's a lot of layers of stress to lead to crazy. But what are you thinking as far as the Garcias? Do you think they disapproved of the Nate? Did Donna say anything to you?"

Scully caught hold of Mulder's lemonade as he was returning it to the cup holder and brought it to her own lips for a quick drink. "No, I haven't seen any indication of that," she said. "Mariela is a driven and serious student. We never saw her interact with her father, of course, but as far as her mother, I don't get the stereotypical micro-managing parent vibe there. If anything, Donna expressed feelings that Mariela takes on too much, tries too hard to take responsibilities for the family that shouldn't be hers at her age. I would imagine she would encourage a positive social relation for her daughter."

"I agree. So what angle were you thinking about?"
"The stress on Mariela. Knowing the conflicts in Nate's family. She clearly takes a lot on her
shoulders, and having someone who potentially might take on a role of taking care of her, making
her a priority, making her feel like she wouldn't be alone in all the stresses of college and career
looming ahead of her...that might carry a lot of weight with a girl like her. And if she thought she
would be losing that. Or if she thought her parents might be disappointed in her for focusing on a
boy instead of her grades... She strikes me as the kind of kid who might over-exaggerate others'
expectations of her since her own run so high."

"Speaking from a little life experience there, Scully?" Mulder said with a hint of an understanding
smile behind the needling.

Scully quirked her lips and gave him a quick affectionately tolerant glance. "Maybe. But the point is,
anxiety spreads. It's contagious. If her stress levels caused concern in her mother, and then they were
the two most directly involved in the supposed visitation from the Black-Eyed Children... then their
symptoms, the rash and the nosebleed, were those most explainable by mental stress... it makes
sense."

"What about the grandmother and father? Car crashes aren't generally a stress symptom."

"Well, they can be. This was a single car accident. Inattention, emotional distraction..."

"And then we had the same accident? I don't think my stress over the Redskins' humiliating
elimination from the playoffs made our brakes stop working."

"And the grandmother died of a virus, a rare one, but it happens. And it's scientifically proven that
stress weakens the immune system, which would increase her chance of contracting such a virus."

"So, you think the Redskins-Chargers game did cause our crash."

She rolled her head his direction with a disapproving smirk. "Mulder..."

"No, I hear you Scully, I do. And I'm sure stress was a factor here, but I feel like it was a contributor
to how the events played out, not the instigator."

Scully considered for a long beat, then said simply. "You're probably right. I just wish I knew what
else was going on here."

And for that he had no concrete reply.

****

She truly was exhausted. She couldn't miss sleep like she used to and not take the time to make it up.
Which was disconcerting for a doctor whose whole mentality had centered around being able to take
whatever grueling shift was thrown at her. Mulder noticed her prevailing fatigue and increasing
silence tonight, which both annoyed her and comforted her, and after an hour of full darkness over
the desert, he reached out an arm and motioned her onto his shoulder.

"Come here, G-woman. You get some rest, I'll take this shift."

Scully hesitated only a moment, then she settled comfortably against his shoulder. She knew where
she fit. She had ridden thousands of miles in this man's arms. Spent a thousand half-sleepless nights
keeping one another going. He spread his suit coat over her and she closed her eyes. "Wake me in a
little while, okay?"

"Hmmm."
She listened to his heartbeat through the familiar pulse point in the hollow of his collarbone and close beneath her ear. She was mostly asleep, unsure what was real and what was a dream in her last moments of thin awareness, but she thought she felt Mulder's lips brush her forehead and heard him whisper, "No more monsters tonight. I promise." *No blood on her clothes this time. No one dead on the floor.*

She slept.

Then, she startled awake to a sharp rap on the window. Scully opened her eyes to find herself alone inside the car, Mulder's suit coat bunched beneath her cheek where his shoulder had been, and a face with large black eyes pressed up to the driver's side window.

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(End of Chapter 15)
Chapter 16

They have been working 16-hour marathons for too many days in a row. But they have finally caught the fucker. What looked like a case of a shape-shifting blood-sucker has turned out to be nothing but a sick human being with a taste for the blood of young boys. But they have him in custody, and the amount of evidence piling up against him shows good promise of an eventual conviction. They are back in Washington and have been tying up loose ends most of the day. When Mulder finally finds his way to their basement office, he finds Scully is already there.

She is seated in the chair that faces his desk, legs crossed, hand shading her eyes. She looks elegant and polished, but also more than a little exhausted. He is already in the doorway, and she doesn't seem to have heard his approach.

"You look like I feel," he says amicably.

She lifts her head with a sharp intake of air through her nose. Her only reply is a soft hum in the back of her throat. Her eyes are a little red, and he puts it down to lack of sleep.

Mulder shrugs out of his suit jacket and hangs it over the back of his desk hair. He takes a moment to look at his partner, really look at her as she stares, unseeing, at some meaningless point on his desk. There is a weariness in the soft skin beneath her eyes that worries him. It's not just the lack of sleep. He has learned her in their six years together, knows her well enough to know the subtle differences in how her body reacts to varied sources of stress. He imagines she knows him just as well.

"It looks like Mahoney is going to agree to testify, in exchange for federal protection," he says. "That's a huge break for us."

"Oh, that is good news," she says. "A jury will really respond to his experience." The words are what they should be, but her tone is lacking attachment to the meaning.

Mulder rounds the desk and sinks to a crouch in front of his partner, close enough to feel her there, not close enough to intrude or push. "Hey," he says softly, and she meets his gaze at the note of
intimacy. "We've done enough here. You should go home. Get some sleep in your own bed."

Scully swallows a little stiffly, but she nods. "I will."

Mulder rests a hand on her knee, only her thin nylons separating their skin. He decides to be brave for them both. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm just tired." The answer is like a reflex, like an autoreply out-of-office email.

Mulder holds her gaze, moves him thumb softly along the bumps and curves of her knee. There's a scar there. From a gravel cut on a case long ago. He draws a long breath, lets it go. "Scully." He softens his tone, wills the tender inflection to worm its way beneath her armor. "I know you've been having a hard time. For a while, now."

She bristles, the tension ripples through her leg, but she is outwardly calm, controlled. "I'm not having a hard time," she says. "I just haven't..." He sees the moment when it gets to her. The closeness, the intensity of his gaze, his lack of armor, the intimacy of his hand on her knee. And for once, she can't quite pull off the lie. Nor can she speak the truth. She exhales heavily and lets the unspoken words ring between them.

Mulder goes on as if she had not contradicted him. "What I don't know is exactly why."

Scully's gaze settles on her own lap, and she breathes slowly, like she is pulling her way through a swamp.

"You know you can talk to me," he whispers.

"I know. I'm okay. I just..."

His thumb continues its gentle circles on her knee. "Tell me."

She takes her time, releases her breath in a defeated sigh, and he ignores the familiar sting when the act of opening up to him seems to equate in her head with failure. "I guess...I'm having a little trouble with...the violence. The cruelty we've had to watch. There have been several cases in a row that just...I'm a little overloaded. It's happened before, I--I can do the work, I'll get it back. I just need..." She fades out, swallows again.

"A break? Sunlight? A bath?" he offers, smiling sadly, letting her know he has been in the place she is currently caught.

This wins him a sad chuckle and a moment of genuine eye contact. "Something like that, yeah."

"Scully, I get it. We all burn out in this job if we don't look out for ourselves."

"Right. And you do that how exactly?"

He nods, purses his lips. "I think this is a 'do as I say, not as I do' kind of situation. But seriously, Scully. If you need it, take some time off."

She shakes her head. "No, I'm...I'm fine. I'll work it out. We have too much going on right now."

"We always have too much going on. The world won't fall down, I promise. I'll hold it together for you. Maybe you should take a vacation. Go sit on the beach for a while."

She lowers her gaze, tries to smile, loses it, and says softly, "Maybe."
He catches something there, but this time he can't quite read between the lines.

Before he can try to draw her out, she continues. "No, I'm..." She reaches up restlessly, rubs and scratches at the back of her neck, soothing the tense muscles there. "Do you want to just get some dinner? Somewhere nicer than we usually end up?"

There is a split second where he almost defaults to sending her home and staying to work -- she is not the only one of them to hide behind routine -- but he catches the slight extra layer of pleading in her eyes, and he says, "I can do that. Let's get some dinner."

They gaze at one another in silence, soaking in the simple fact of their nearness, of the quiet, of the familiarity of their basement nest. Then Mulder pushes to his feet as he says, "Just let me check my email, then we'll take off, okay?" She nods, and before he can stop the impulse, Mulder cups his hand to the back of her neck, leans in, and places a tender kiss on her forehead.

She blinks and turns away. She stands and busies herself in the corner with file folders and her briefcase, and he thinks for only a passing moment that he catches a reflection of tears in her eyes.

*****

The lights were moving as he moved, dancing in the night sky like fireflies chasing the moon.

Mulder had seen the first glimpses of the lights from his post inside the car, uncertain if what he had been seeing had really been the lights the locals had talked about or perhaps just military aircraft over White Sands Missile Range. Couldn't have been commercial aircraft, this whole area was off limits. His first gentle attempt to rouse Scully had proved unsuccessful, so he had settled her on his suit jacket and gotten out of the car to investigate.

Now he was following the path of the lights as they seemed to lead him farther and farther from the car. The brightest spots in the sky moved in a tight group of three, turning and darting in synchrony, but stretching and losing their shape just enough to distinguish them as three separate objects, not lights on three corners of one ship.

Mulder's focus was so intently upward, giving only cursory glances to his terrestrial surroundings, it took him longer than it should have to recognize that the shadowed shapes of cars in the distance were not teenagers trying to sneak a peek at the phenomenon or simply stealing some time away from watchful parental eyes.

They were a barricade of black sedans. And in front of them stood a veritable wall of armed men in suits and uniforms.

Mulder skidded to a halt in the shadow of the encroaching mountains, still a few hundred yards from the intimidating roadblock. The lights overhead flickered and increased their speed as they moved farther away. His attention focused on the men in front of him.

"Agent Mulder. We're going to have to ask you to leave." The words came from the tallest man in the center of the group. He took several steps forward, away from the others. A dark-haired hulk of a man in an expensive suit, wearing sunglasses even in this darkest of night. Faint lights from the cars illuminated the scene.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Mulder called, giving a quick futile glance toward the sky where the lights were darting off into oblivion, one at a time.

The men surrounding the spokesman shifted and moved gradually forward, like a lolling wave at a sandy shoreline. The figures were a mixture of similar black suits and dark glasses and men in what
looked at first glance like military uniform. But upon closer inspection in the glimmers of light, the uniforms seemed to be lacking the insignias of any recognizable branch of US military.

"We work for the United States government, and you are treading on a quarantined area, Mr. Mulder," the spokesman said. "Please retreat to your vehicle at once and depart the area."

"I work for the United States government as well, I'm an agent with the FBI. But I'm guessing you already knew that."

The men in the black suits did not react, but one of the men in camouflage took a step closer and tightened his grasp on his unnecessarily over-the-top firepower.

"What were those lights in the sky?" Mulder asked. "Is that what you're protecting? Are they the source of the radiation in this area? The cause of the accidents?"

The spokesman responded easily, unaffected by Mulder's accusations. "No civilians have been harmed by the work being done here. I believe you heard about the radiation seepage. That is being taken care of as quickly and efficiently as possible. But we can only keep the people of Verdad safe if you remove yourself from this restricted area as we have asked you to do. This is a military operation now, Mr. Mulder."

"You said you worked for the government. Are you military? All of you? What branch?"

"We're going to ask you one more time, Mr. Mulder--"

"Agent Mulder."

"--to go back to your vehicle, take your partner, and clear this area. This area is under military jurisdiction now. You do not have clearance. This is no longer your concern."

Everything within Mulder was telling him this was all wrong. This man was not military, he wasn't telling the truth, none of them were. None of these vehicles had come from White Sands. But he was becoming viscerally aware of just how far out in the middle of nowhere he was and with no immediate backup. Of how many more of them there were than of him and how easy it would be to make him disappear into the night. Or Scully. Who was asleep, temporarily defenseless. And clearly they knew where she was. Returning to their car as fast as possible suddenly seemed like the only right choice.

When two more of the armed "soldiers" took a step closer, weapons catching the light from the cars, Mulder reflexively took a step back and raised his hands. "All right. Okay, my mistake. I was just following up on some information. But I can see you gentleman have everything under control."

"That we do, Agent Mulder," the spokesman droned with an air of superiority and power that made Mulder's skin crawl.

He swallowed the disgust, focused on Scully, and started moving backwards the way he had come. "I'm going," he called out.

"I suggest you do just that. We will give you a chance to leave by the most direct path possible. Do not confuse this with a request. Fail to do so, and we will be required to use force. For the safety of the people."

Something in the flat tone of the words made Mulder's stomach grow cold, and he was suddenly certain he was in more danger than he had been in a long time.
He continued to move in reverse until he was fairly confident no one was going to immediately pursue or shoot him in the back if he turned, then he darted behind a small outcropping of trees and broke into a run.

*****

"Can we come inside? It's so cold."

Scully's trembling breath was too loud in the otherwise silent car.

The taller, closer child's long fingers pressed to the glass, the moonlight falling on her hooded figure from an angle, reflecting on the bottomless pit of her black eyes. "You found her again, didn't you? We learned from you," the child said.

Scully felt herself moving, caught in a dream-like state of disconnect between her conscious intents and her actions. She wondered if she was still dreaming, if she had never awakened at all, if she was still sleeping soundly on Mulder's shoulder.

Her fingers came to the window, meeting the child's hand on the glass, so close, all but touching. "Do you remember?" the girl asked.

"Who are you?" Scully whispered.

For a split second the car and the clearing and the New Mexico moonlight were gone, images and sounds cutting across Scully's reality like stuttered flashes from an intruding broadcast frequency.

Silver walls. Hard benches that hurt her hips. The tall sentry that hovered every time Scully was allowed in this room. It felt like a female, the one who tended to her, but she could not tell male from female among these creatures.

Light that make the world look like an old pale film.

The soft seat of the sporty rental.

The desert sky.

A loud buzz from some kind of electronics close by her ear.

The tiny bundle of warmth being passed into her arms. The soft sigh and pale skin in the unnatural light.

"Scully!"

She jerked upright in the car at the sound of Mulder's voice. Her fingers fell away from the glass as she whipped her head in the direction of the call. Mulder's familiar figure broke out of the shadows at a run, and when Scully turned back, the children outside the car had gone. No trace or whisper of movement across the open expanse that was much too far for them to have run.

The desperation physically hurt.

*****

Mulder hit the car door with a smack and jerked it open. "We gotta get out of here, Scully," he said, jamming the key into the ignition.

Scully had been half across the driver's seat, and she slid back into her corner of the car as he shoved
his way into action. Her movements were a little sluggish; she had probably still been sleeping. "Mulder, what's going on?"

He looked over his shoulder, scanned the clearing as he shifted into reverse. "The military's here. Or something like the military. And they're pissed." Was that movement in the distance? A glow of lights?

He revved the engine and proceeded to execute a sloppy but effective three-point-turn. Beside him, Scully scanned the clearing, the distant outcropping of trees, but somewhere in his periphery he registered that she seemed to be looking for something else, something other than what he had just warned her about.

"Something like the military?" Scully asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain later, but they're armed and they're determined, so I suggest we leave now, theorize later."

Scully didn't protest. But they hadn't driven more than a hundred yards when she whipped her head as if to keep sight of something that had blurred past. "Mulder, stop the car!"

Her words refused to make sense to him. Every cell in his body was driving forward to move them away, get them to safety.

He glanced between Scully and the road. "What?!

"Mulder, stop the car!" She was straining to see over her shoulder, knuckles white on the handle of the door, body coiled for flight.

"Scully, we need to get out of here, we need to get as far as--"

"Mulder--"

"Guns, Scully, really big--"

She whirled on him, all flowing hair and fiery eyes and force. "JUST STOP THE CAR!"

He reacted on instinct. Partner trust overrode all else. He slowed the car as quickly as he could without plunging them both through the windshield.

Scully was out the door before the vehicle had come to a complete halt, and then she was running back up the path from which they had come. Mulder saw her pull her gun from the small of her back as he himself rounded the car to follow.

He took off at a full run. She was far ahead and fast. The woman could show impressive speed for the comparative length of her legs. He wanted to call out to her, but clearly they were not alone in this desert clearing. One group was chasing them, and perhaps Scully was chasing another, and he didn't know friend from foe on this prickly ground. He searched the horizon for the glow of lights.

The darkness was deep and wide. He pushed his pace before he could lose sight of Scully altogether in the blackness.

He slid up beside her when she slowed to a halt in a patch of scraggly trees just off the makeshift road. Scully was squinting into the dimness, scanning the borders of visibility, weapon still drawn but resting at her shoulder. He noted that she wasn't flashing a light around. She had at least registered the reality of the threat from which he had been running.
"Scully...what are we doing?" he asked, a little breathless, still expecting the men in uniform to break into view any moment.

"Did you see them?" She still hadn't made eye contact, she was vibrating with driven energy, pacing a tight pattern, scanning the edges of their visible bubble in the darkness.

"See who? Scully--"

"You didn't see them?"

He shook his head. "Who? The men following us? The pseudo-military? Did you see them?"

But she pushed this off, "No."

"Scully, we need to get out of here."

The wild run when she had been asleep perhaps only minutes ago seemed to catch up with her. She sagged with an exhale that rang too much of defeat and desperation, and for a second she propped her hands on her knees to catch her breath.

Mulder touched a compelling hand to her shoulder blade. "Scully, we've gotta go. These guys gave us a time limit, and I really don't think they're fucking around."

She nodded, took another look around them as she straightened her stance, but he was infinitely grateful when she joined him in a focused jog back toward their car.

Once they reached the highway, the ride to the motel was mercifully uneventful. Mulder kept a watchful eye on the review mirror, changed lanes in erratic patterns that did more to make him feel better than to offer any kind of genuine protection. But they did not seem to have been followed.

"Who do you think you saw?" Scully asked.

Mulder shook his head, eyes on the highway. "I don't know. But they weren't any military that I've ever seen. Certainly not from White Sands. And the guys in suits were wearing sunglasses. I wouldn't be able to see my hand in front of my face out there in sunglasses."

"But you said they knew your name?"

"And yours. They knew who we were, and they knew we were out here. Maybe all night, or even last night as well. Seems they were willing to let it go as long as we didn't come any closer. But apparently I crossed their invisible trigger line."

"Do you think this had anything to do with the lights you saw? That they were hiding whatever was happening tonight?"

Mulder shrugged. "I don't know. But they sure as hell weren't out there just because of a radiation leak."

As they approached their exit, Mulder tried again to ask Scully what she had been running after, but he couldn't get anything more out of her than, "I thought I saw someone. They were by the car before." Which told him nothing, but he focused on the road and getting them back to their rooms in one piece.

Pulling into the parking lot, they found a family with young kids unloading their car into an open room a few doors down. Mulder hoped for this family's sake he and Scully hadn't brought any
danger back with them tonight.

Scully got out of the car the moment they were parked, but she lingered a few steps away, waiting for him to walk in with her.

Mulder gathered his things, closed the car, and moved up beside her. The kids were yelling to one another, something about the air conditioner and who got which side of the bed. The mixture of annoyance and camaraderie in their voices reminded Mulder of himself and Samantha on childhood road trips. He wondered just what the four Scully children had been like in their younger days. Mulder touched his fingers to the small of Scully's back, and her muscles twitched, but she didn't move away. "You want to tell me now what happened back there?" he tried once more.

Her focus settled onto his hand holding his crumpled suit jacket. She shook her head. "I told you I saw someone."

"You did. Mind telling me who? Could it have been one of the men I saw?"

She drew an uneven breath, exhaled in concession and something in him untangled. He continued to be viscerally grateful every time she let him in for a moment. Every time the years of intimate trust between them proved to mean something. "It was the kids," she said. "The Black-Eyed Kids, I guess... Not the kids who were arrested. They were at the car window. And they told me something. Maybe...projected something to me."

"Projected something to you? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. A memory. I saw fragments of it in my head. But I think we got interrupted, and I...I didn't understand."

"You remembered something?"

She shifted, moved a half step away. A flash of light from the security lamps reflected as her hair moved, and he realized she was still wearing the glass earrings. "Not really. Not enough. I just...I really don't want to talk right now. I don't feel well."

That got his attention. "You don't feel well? What's wrong? Did they do something--"

"No, it's not that, I...my stomach hurts."

Mulder let that settle in, weighed the layers, then he said carefully, "Okay. Are you okay? Are you coming down with something?"

She shook her head dismissively. "I'm fine. I just want to get a shower and some sleep."

"Scully--"

"We'll talk in the morning." She finally lifted her gaze to meet his, raised an eyebrow for emphasis. "I promise."

"Scully, just tell me..."

"I'm okay." She offered a reassuring if unconvincing smile and rested her open hand on his chest. He felt it when a deliberate pressure in her touch and a lingering of her gaze reached out to him, to acknowledge the intimacy and significance of what had passed between them earlier today. She was telling him without words that she was still there, that this had nothing to do with that.
He sighed into the night air, pleading with his eyes, but she gave a soft pat to his chest and turned and walked away.

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The moment Scully closed the door to her room, she started to shake. Everything that had happened since she woke in the car seemed surreal. She couldn’t process the sequence of events that had carried her from there to here. She was cataloging case information like a computer, going through the motions, could have recited the order of events with clinical accuracy, but her reality felt suspended somewhere between dark eyes in the desert night and a visceral memory of a lifetime ago.

She slipped out of her suit jacket, dropped her briefcase unceremoniously to the floor, and sank to sit on the edge of her bed. She slipped out of her heeled shoes, then lifted them to pry the goat’s heads from the thin soles. She examined the bottom of her foot where one had poked through and broken the skin during her run. She would clean it up and bandage the punctured flesh after she had had a shower.

She wanted to stand under the warm water for as long as possible, feel the blood in her veins, assure herself of her own grounding to reality. She wanted to wash off the dust and dryness and isolation of this place.

Scully slipped out of her work clothes and fished her lounge wear from her bag, hanging the change of clothes on the towel rack as she let the shower water run and warm the room.

She was rinsing her lemon-scented shampoo from her hair when the tumbling and sticking stones of thoughts in her head broke loose and the chipped shower tiles around her shimmered and vanished, replaced by pulsing metal and a light that made her sick to her stomach.

The lights are too bright. Scully instinctively shades the infant's pale eyes, and after a moment the lights in the room lower to a gentler yellow glow. She thinks the others understood.

The child is fussy, but as Scully slows her own breath, begins to tune in to the bundle of warmth in her arms, identify her as a specific child in need of attention, looking for connection, the baby begins to still. Wide eyes focus on Scully's face and a tiny hand breaks free of the blankets to reach upward.

Scully catches the unfathomably tiny fingers in her own, meets the curious eyes, strokes a cloud-soft cheek. Newborn skin, smooth as silk. And she knows...she understands...this child is hers. She cannot explain, but this bundle of warmth in her arms is hers, her flesh and blood; every cell in her body is telegraphing the connection. Scully lifts her gaze to the silent figure in the corner of the room, the sentry who passed the child into her arms. The creature stares at her then appears to give the slightest affirming nod.

Scully hears the slowed and precise words in her head. The child is hers.

She trembles.

She does not know how long they allow her to remain there on that uncomfortable bench. She loses focus on everything but the brilliant life cradled in her arms. She whispers to the girl, traces the tip of her finger along the lines and curves of the perfect face, caresses the thin ruffle of hair. No whisper of red. Dana's was strawberry blonde when she was born.

As she and the girl sit together, two warm bodies in the bubble of cold and metal, Scully's breasts begin to ache, and she realizes her body is telling her the child needs food. The little girl is burrowing against her, nuzzling a soft mouth against the flesh where the gown in which they have
clothed her has pulled out of place. Scully nestles the child closer, cradles the back of her tender head. It is too cold in this room. They need more blankets.

Before she can see the movement from the sentry, the creature has abandoned the corner and closed the space between them. She is right there, and the child is being taken from Scully's arms.

Scully reaches out. "No! No...no, where are you taking her? Let me hold her. She's mine!"

Foreign, clammy hands on her upper arm, soft and insistent.

"She's cold, she needs me. Let me...she's hungry. Don't take her!"

The door to another chamber opens, and for a moment Scully sees someone else's little one on the floor, playing with yellow and red blocks, turning to look up at her with fathomless dark eyes. Black from corner to corner.

An ominous clang. The child is gone. Scully is alone with the nauseating fingers holding her back. The lights in the room are too bright again. Her eyes sting and she realizes she's been crying, pleading, and she didn't even know. Time skips. Yellow light. A thin and formless voice echoing all around her. "Send her home." A concrete stairwell. A misshapen stain. "Give her back to me! You can't take her!" Blackness.

There were still drops of water on her skin when she reached Mulder's door.

*****

(end Chapter 16)

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