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**Seasons: Fifth**

by **Beshter**

**Summary**

Dana Scully has been given a second chance to find the truth. But not all of the answers they uncover are easy to understand as things change for the X-files and for Scully's relationship with Mulder.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully has some unexpected visitors.

It was good to be home.

Dana Scully was alive against all the odds that said she should be dead. Whether it was her mother's miracle, her partner Fox Mulder's mysteriously obtained chip laying in her neck, or just plain luck, she couldn't say, and perhaps in the long run it wasn't important. She was alive when so many others were not. She had been given a second chance. The question now was now what was she going to do with it?

Currently, she was going to drink her cup of coffee.

Hot, pungent liquid filled her chipped, Navy coffee mug, the faded, gold lettering warming against her skin. Her own coffee! It had been weeks since she had it, standing in the comfort of her own kitchen. The worn comfortableness of her old jeans, loose on her slightly thinner frame felt good after the scratchiness of her hospital gown. After days of lying listless, her energy spent on the disease ravaging her body, she stood barefoot in her neat, tidy kitchen, home finally. Her life was her own again.

Or it would be once she was allowed anywhere near FBI Headquarters.

Scully frowned petulantly at her coffee as she topped off her mug with creamer and sugar. The order had come from Skinner ostensibly. Scully was on medical leave until she received full clearance from her doctors regarding her health. And perhaps that was standard operating procedure; Skinner had done the same thing after her return from her abduction two years before. But Scully had returned within weeks, and her doctors were already saying it might take a month or more before they were certain that whatever miraculous changes had occurred with her cancer were permanent. Skinner wasn't about to budge this time. While Mulder was playing extremely cagey on his involvement in all of this, the whole thing had his hyper-protective fingerprints all over it.

What was worse no amount of cajoling or prying, even outright whining seemed to convince her partner to even share a little bit of what he was working on with her. His lone comments? "Stay home, get some rest, get better, I'll overwork you all over again soon enough."

Scully already felt better, she sulked privately to herself, as she rummaged vaguely through her fridge for some sort of breakfast product. She felt better, she felt rested, and she felt she had the sort of energy she hadn't felt in years. But she also felt restless, bored. Scully hated to admit it, but as much as she railed against her life being swallowed by Mulder's quest, the truth was she liked it just as much. Hell, it wasn't as if she had anything else at the moment, no significant other, no family, and no pet. Just herself, her coffee, and an empty fridge, and a whole, long, empty day to do…what exactly?

The ringing of her doorbell sounded counterpoint to that depressing note. Scully glanced at the time on her microwave and frowned. Who in the world would be at her apartment at this hour?
Certainly not Mulder. He'd already called twice from work that morning, mostly she suspected out of his own case of boredom. Curious, her bare feet padded across tile to carpet as she moved towards the door, leaning on tiptoe to the peephole to see who would bother to visit her this time of the morning.

A large, bug eye behind thick, Coke-bottle glasses returned her gaze, blinking with beady intensity back at her.

"Maybe she's still asleep?"

"It's 10:30, who's asleep then?"

"No one with you ringing the doorbell, genius!"

Brilliant!

Scully sighed with her eyes rolling heavenward as the sound of the bickering rose noticeably outside of her door. Quickly, her fingers reached for the locks, undoing the chain and swinging it open on the motley trio standing on her doorstep. They all three blinked and smiled at her in mild surprise, as if they hadn't expected her to actually answer the door, let alone be home. Arms crossing in mild exasperation, Scully allowed her dry gaze to fall on the easiest victim, Frohike, standing right in front of her.

"Did Mulder send you over here?"

Frohike at least tried to have the grace to look affronted by her line of questioning. His pug like face turned down in mild hurt at her words, his round shoulders squaring around his barrel body. "What, we can't come here to see a friend?"

If it were Frohike alone, perhaps Scully would buy it. The weird little man with in his strange, stalker-ish sort of way had always had a crush on her and Scully had found him endearing in his oddness. Frohike she knew would move the moon for her. Her eyes drifted towards tall and lanky Langley, proudly wearing an Incredible Hulk t-shirt under his mop of long, stringy blonde hair, before sliding over to Byers. He looked vaguely out of place in comparison to the other two in his neat suit and trimmed beard. One could nearly confuse him for someone she worked with at the FBI if it weren't for his other two companions, standing out like matching sore thumbs in her tidy apartment building.

"I've never had all three of you show up at my apartment before." That was what made Scully so suspicious. Frohike once, yes, in a drunken stupor, but not all three. They all stared at her vaguely as if they weren't sure how to answer her pointed observation.

"We just happened to be in the neighborhood…"

"And Frohike mentioned you lived near here…"

"Yeah, and after everything, we thought we would stop by."

The three of them must have temporarily forgotten she was an FBI agent. Her tongue dug for a long moment into her cheek as she blinked mildly at the three far-too-innocent looks. This smelled of Mulder putting them up to it, but she couldn't prove it. All she had was a sense, a gut feeling. Byers couldn't quite meet her eyes, and Langley was grinning from ear-to-ear in one of those unnerving, trying-too-hard ways. And then there was Frohike.

"We come bearing gifts!" His smile was winning. Scully's eyes narrowed.
"If this is another alien autopsy video, you aren't getting past the door."

"No autopsy! I was thinking something much more classic." Smoothly the little man produced a VHS tape, holding it up in front of Scully's nose. Her eyes nearly crossed reading it. "Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Morocco, World War II, 'We'll always have Paris.'"

"Casablanca?" Scully breathed in true delight and surprise, grasping the video and chuckling in bemusement at the three of them. "Not something I'd expect out of you."

"I am a man of some taste in refinement," Frohike protested mildly, shooting a furtive look over his shoulder at Langley as if to indicate that he obviously had a step up on some other people.

Not to be so insulted alone, Langley snorted at Frohike's implications "Yeah, Frohike always did have a thing for chick flicks. He likes crying at the end."

"You wouldn't know sensitivity if it bit you in the ass!" The other man snarled, spinning on him as immediately Byers stepped into the fray with well practiced ease.

"We all agreed that it was a classic," he intoned firmly, glancing between petulant Langley and glowering Frohike. "Besides, we all said she wouldn't want to hear our running commentary on Oliver Stones JFK."

Thank God for small blessings, Scully breathed, as the three of them nodded and turned apologetically back towards her.

"Look, we just wanted to stop by and check in on you, see that you were feeling all right," Frohike murmured, still shooting daggers sideways at the smirking Langley. "You gave us all a good scare there."

Scully bet she did. The three hadn't come to see her in the hospital, though judging from the size of the bouquet of flowers she had received they had been well informed of her condition from Mulder. And from what little he had told her about the chip that was used to save her life, she knew the three of them were responsible for figuring out it was there and helping Mulder get it to her. In a way they were just as much of a reason why she was standing there as Mulder was.

Slowly she opened the door wide, standing aside to let them in. "Come on in. Kitchen's to your left, make yourself at home."

"I call dibs on the armchair," Frohike called, moving inside as the other two followed. She wasn't sure what she was allowing into her home, but frankly it was better than sitting there all afternoon twiddling her thumbs. Besides, the Lone Gunmen were harmless enough for the most part. And really they were all three very sweet…when you got around the raging, conspiracy, computer-hacking nerd part of it.

"Nice digs!" Langley eyed her neat and trim surroundings with a sort of bemused approval, immediately reaching for a nick knack on a table to study and nearly dropping it in the process. Scully thought of their own cramped, closed offices and immediately winced.

"Yeah, just…try to not break anything," she murmured, wandering behind the trio as she moved to the living room and her television. "I assume you all know how to work a VCR?"

Three sets of identical, blank stares met her sarcastic words, as if trying to figure out if she were serious or not.

"It was a joke…computer hackers…VCR…never mind." She flopped onto her couch and watch the
three, unintended guests roam her home. Not that it was bad having Mulder's friends here. Maybe…

"What model television is that?" Langley crouched in front of the one she had, wiping at the film of dust on the glass that had collected during her weeks in the hospital. Scully tried not to bristle as she tucked her feet underneath her.

"I don't know, whatever it says on the front. I got it years ago when I moved back here from California."

"Looks to be a Korean brand, but not as great of a resolution quality as some of the high end ones from Sony." Langley sounded as serious as if she had a termite problem in her house. He turned to her, blinking behind his thick, black-rimmed glasses. "You know, give us an hour or so, we can run down and pick up a new one for you, something with a crisper picture."

Scully stared back at the perfectly serious man, mouth hanging. "What?"

"Yeah, check that VCR as well, what's the make on that?" Frohike sat up in the armchair he'd claimed looking intrigued by Langley's suggestion. "Probably one of those $30 jobs you can get that eats through magnetic tape like it was Jell-O."

"You aren't buying me a new television," Scully protested before the conversation took on any more speed. She glanced up helplessly at Byers, the most logical looking one for help. "What I have is fine."

Besides, she thought quietly, looking between the two disappointed computer geeks. It wasn't as if they had the sort of money to throw around randomly buying her television equipment she hardly used anyway.

"Mulder said the same thing when we went to his house," Langley grumbled disconsolately as he turned on the television and set up the video.

"Yeah, have you seen the ancient tube he attempts to entertain himself with? I think my grandmother's television is newer." Frohike looked relatively appalled.

"I don't think Mulder needs much to watch the type of movies you lend him." Langley snorted without bothering to look up from her VCR.

"And how would you know, Blondie," Frohike snapped, growling at the other man. "It's not like look at my movies either. All you do is moon over your imaginary, large-breasted elf-goddess."

Whatever Langley was fiddling with was forgotten as he spun at Frohike's insult. "Titengail is not an elf-goddess, she is a highly skilled and very dangerous warrior, known for taking on Dark Lord of Morgath single handedly."

"She's an imaginary, pointy-eared, large-breasted, dork magnet."

"And that makes your porn collection any better?"

"Hey, at least the women on there are real!"

"Parts of them are real," Langley sneered, triumphantly.

As Scully watched the interplay between the two snapping back and forth with eyes wide, beside her Byers settled on the couch with a sort or resolute sigh. "See what I have to put up with?"
"Are they always like this?"

"Well...sometimes." Byers grimaced, scratching distractedly at his beard.

"I will have you know that Ms. March is an *au natural* sort of girl." Frohike uttered his retort as if he was speaking about the *Mona Lisa*.

This wasn't the sort of conversation Scully imagined herself being privy to today.

"Byers," she murmured softly, glancing sideways at him. "How in the world did the three of you ever get together?"

Her question seemed to give him pause. "What do you mean?"

"You three; Frohike, Langley, you. The only time I ever see you getting along is when you are up to your eyeballs in some conspiracy, usually with Mulder. Otherwise, if you didn't have that going for you, would you three even speak to one another?"

"I would like to think so," Byers offered mildly, nodding at the other two.

"At least my elf-goddess has talent and class, unlike some of your San Fernando Valley, plasticized rejects."

"Plasticized? Whose the one with a twenty-four inch, full scale model of your elf goddess he caresses every night before he goes to bed."

Dear Lord! Scully closed her eyes tight against the mental image that Frohike just imparted as her palm came to slap up square against the spot her tumor so recently rested. Her head ached slightly with the impact.

"On second thought," Byers sighed heavily beside her, "I don't know if I'd have anything to do with either of them really."

He sounded rather aggrieved by all of this.

Scully had always wondered how it was that Frohike, Langley, and Byers had come together as the Lone Gunmen. She didn't know their back-story. She had asked Mulder on several occasions, and he had always brushed it off, stating that he had found them completely by accident. She hadn't been given a chance to get to know them beyond their connection to Mulder enough to know who they were before they met each other or Mulder and why it was they had given up everything to take to their seedy offices where they undermined the government's informational systems looking for evidence of the same truths Mulder searched for.

"How did the three of you meet anyway?"

"Meet?" Byers looked surprised and startled by her question, his fingers nervously plucking at the nicely patterned tie hanging against his white shirt. "You mean Mulder never told you that story?"

"No, he never did." Was there something strange about it? Byers' eyes flickered to his sniping friends both of who seemed to finally let go of their need to insult each other's sexual preferences and had caught the third's wary glance.

"Mulder never told you what?" Frohike glowered, still shooting Langley dark looks over his thick glasses.
"How we all got to know each other," Byers replied, suddenly becoming very interested in cuff of one of his suit coat sleeves.

"Mulder never to you that?" Langley looked surprised. "I figured he'd have at least explained it before you met us.

Scully shook her head, shrugging her shoulders under her comfortable t-shirt. "No, he always seemed to brush it off."

"He would!" Frohike snorted cheerfully as Langley agreed, laughing. A knowing look passed between all three of them a secret hint of information on Scully's partner that peeked her interest.

"Really, it wasn't his fault." Byers finally looked up from worrying the fabric of his cuffs, looking slightly ashamed.

"No, but it doesn't make it any less funny, does it?" Langley asked cheerfully, sinking to the floor and settling cross-legged on the carpet.

"His fault for what?"

All three of them paused for a long, measured moment, glancing between one another. Scully's curiosity, already stifled by two weeks of boredom being stuck at home, ramped up to ten as Frohike shrugged and Langley chortled, grinning madly at Byers.

"We might as well tell her. Someone has to."

"Tell me what?" She cut her eyes at Byers, who pulled fractiously at his jacket, glanced one last time between his two encouragers, and sank unhappily into her couch cushions, looking none-too-pleased with where their conversation had turned.

"That Mulder once spent a week on a mental health ward detoxing from an extremely dangerous and highly effective hallucinogenic substance."

A mental health ward? Detox? What? Mulder had never once mentioned anything about this. "When was this?"

"Eight years ago," Byers sighed.

"Has it been that long?" Frohike asked, thoughtfully surprised at that.

"Sometimes it feels longer," Langley smarted back, but neither man seemed inclined to pick up their squabbling once again.

Scully frowned, mentally flipping though Mulder's health charts, not even recalling it being listed in the thick file he had amassed in his nearly ten years with the Bureau. Nowhere had she seen any time in any mentally health treatment facility, much less for anything drug related. "I've never seen it in his files."

"I don't think the FBI wanted it there. It was sort of an accident."

"Not to mention the fact he was found naked as a jay-bird and screaming about aliens," Frohike supplied.

Naked and gibbering? What in the hell?

"Mulder doesn't usually make a habit of this sort of behavior."

Not to Scully's knowledge at least.

"No and Baltimore PD wasn't too happy about it either."

"Baltimore PD?" Now this was starting to turn strangely weird. "Why was Baltimore PD involved?"

"Because we broke into a warehouse." Byers sighed morosely.

"And Mulder was high as a kite shooting his gun." Langley added.

"And it probably didn't help having all those government agents swarming in. I bet they called the cops in on us to remove us from the equation." Frohike slouched in his seat, glaring at Byers. "None of this would have happened if it wasn't for your girlfriend."

"She wasn't my girlfriend," Byers replied evenly.

"No, but you moon after her like Langley does his elf-goddess."

"Shut up about that, already!"

"Children!" Scully brought the bickering to order, to interested in whatever the hell it was this story was to have it sidetracked by another round of schoolyard fighting. "Focus! From the beginning! How did you all meet each other? Why did Mulder end up naked, gibbering, and in detox, and… who is this girlfriend?"

She looked to Byers.

"A 'girlfriend' would connote we were dating."

"Which you weren't?"

"I only just met her that day," Byers protested.

"Her name was Suzanne Modeski." Frohike grunted as Byers drug out his protests. "She was a chemist who worked for the Department of Defense."

"Except that she was being hunted down by them because she wanted to leave," Langley added.

"So they told the FBI she was a dangerous psychotic who murdered the people she worked with."

Scully shifted on the couch and looked to the quiet Byers. "And this is the woman you…errr…"

"Moon over," Frohike supplied.

Scully glared at him, eyebrows raised as he cowered away from her annoyance.

"Suzanne came to me for help," Byers replied slowly, sadly, as if this was the sort of memory he didn't like thinking about anymore. "I thought she needed me to rescue her."

"From what?" Scully felt her irritation with the three of them melt under Byers moroseness.

"From the men who control all of this, who do all of this!" Byers' still arms flailed suddenly in a giant, all encompassing gesture, as if taking in the world in them. "The men who run our government, who drive these conspiracies, who nearly killed you."
His sudden vehemence surprised her. Uncharacteristically for Byers there was anger in his words, even when speaking of her illness, touching her as she watched him run agitated fingers through his hair in frustration. Surprisingly, both Frohike and Langley watched their friend in sympathetic silence, quiet at the story she knew they both probably knew as equally well as Byers did.

"We were all at a computer show in Baltimore," Byers continued. "I was there on behalf of the FCC, my employer at the time."

"He was a nark," Langley supplied, trying to sound helpful.

"I was a public affairs officer," Byers corrected loftily, earning eye rolls out of the other two. "I was once like you, Agent Scully, a respected member of the government out to do my job and stop crimes against our country from happening."

"Yeah, before he wised up and came to the dark side," Frohike mumbled from the depths of the armchair.

"Anyway," Byers ignored Frohike's dour look. "It was before I realized what the government I worked for I used to go to these events to try and foster an open policy between the FCC and those interested in information technologies."

Open policy? Scully looked towards Frohike with his balding hair pulled back into a nub of a ponytail and Langley who screamed comic book geek. They didn't look like they were the type who appreciated communicating regularly with anyone who worked for an agency that went by a three-letter acronym. But then, they did speak to both her and Mulder.

Byers continued. "This beautiful woman came up to my booth. Suzanne..."

He paused, a brief, distant smile lighting his face for an instant.

"She was hot," Frohike qualified.

"More than that," Byers insisted, "She was scared. She needed help. And out of all the people there that day, out of all the men who would have fallen all over themselves to help her, she came to me."

"'Cause you were the only one who screamed 'nark' standing there," Langley snorted derisively, obviously not as impressed by this fact as Byers was.

"You didn't see her, you and Frohike were too busy squabbling over your stupid TV splitters."

"Langley Vision," the blonde man corrected him. "I wasn't there peddling cheap crap, I was offering free television for the masses, not trying to control it like some people."

Before yet another snark fest could ensue, Scully grabbed the reins of the runaway wagon and pulled it back on track. "Suzanne Modeski, in trouble, go on."

"She was in trouble, she told me that. She told me that her ex-boyfriend had taken their daughter and that she was trying to get her back, but without the boyfriend knowing."

"She's looking for assistance in getting back her daughter at a computer fair?" Something about that didn't sound right to Scully. "Why didn't she go to the police?"

"She told me they couldn't help? Besides, she needed someone to look up something for her, something she knew had to do with computers."
"What Romeo genius over here didn't know was that she was wanting him to hack into the Department of Defense and find out information on an advanced research project." Frohike jumped in, cutting off any response Byers had. "And being the gallant white, nark knight that he was, he wouldn't hack into the DoD database, but he knew someone who could."

"Theoretically," Langley grumbled from the carpet.

"What we didn't know was that hacking into it would cause the military to actually notice." Byers took up the thread of the narrative again. "But what we did find out that what Suzanne told us wasn't exactly the truth."

"We were played," Frohike groused, looking insulted.

"More like lover man was played, I was doing my thing, DMing my Lord of the Rings game."

"I saw how hard it was for you to resist trying to hack the DoD for fun." Frohike replied, shutting down Langley's protests. "We get Lord Manhammer over here in on the hack, start looking up the man she claims is the psycho ex-boyfriend that took their kid. Turns out he's not her boyfriend, he's not even psycho."

"Well, he's not psycho much," Langley clarified.

"Instead, he's a commondated Fibbie with a psych degree from Oxford with the VCU."

"Mulder," Scully murmured as his place in the entire story finally became clear. "But why would she say that?"

"The Defense Department was claiming she blew up one of the labs at a facility in White Mountain, New Mexico where she was working. They said she killed four people as she tried to escape." Byers spoke with the conviction that this mysterious Suzanne Modeski didn't do what she was accused of. "She was being set up though. She just wanted out, they wouldn't let her."

"How do you know?" It was the first question that came to mind for her, the logical question that was the most obvious. "This woman shows up out of nowhere, accuses an FBI agent of being something he isn't, then convinces the three of you to willingly hack into DoD files without explanation? How do you know she was innocent as you believe her to be?"

"The tooth," Byers replied promptly, looking suddenly ill, his face paling under his beard.

"There was a tracking device in the filling of one of her teeth," Langley explained, pointing to his own jaw for emphasis. "She yanked it right out of her own head."

"And there was the gas," Frohike added.

"That too," Byers agreed.

"Gas?" The story was becoming increasingly more complicated as Scully struggled to follow the broken narrative.

Byers explained. "Suzanne worked at the White Mountain facility on a type of histamine gas, one that they packaged in an aerosol inhaler, just like asthma medication. It was a drug that induced paranoia in its subjects, the government planned on testing it on people here in DC and Baltimore. Suzanne was tracing down the shipment."

"Testing a histamine on people?" The eerie similarity to her own situation with the strange alien
virus, her cancer, and the chip caused Scully to shiver in revulsion slightly at the idea of another, unsanctioned test. "How did she know?"

"She found out, she tried to quit, and they framed her to remove her before she could blow the whistle on them."

"So how is Mulder involved in all of this," she asked Byers, who looked to Frohike.

"The DoD made Modeski out to be a crazy and got the FBI to look for her. Mulder was there because she was considered violent and a killer. Who better to go after crazy murderers than Mulder?"

"Except that Suzanne wasn't crazy and he didn't know any of this." Byers stepped back in. "Anyway, so Suzanne found out about the shipment and she wanted to go get proof of what was going on, so we went with her."

"Only we didn't know that Mulder was following us." Frohike supplied.

"So when we got to the warehouse, he stopped us and tried to arrest Suzanne. And that's when things started getting a little…weird."

"Weird?" As if it wasn't already a strange enough story?

"These guys show up and try to cover the whole thing up," Frohike replied in obvious disgust. "Guns shooting, we hide. Mulder gets caught behind the spray of the punctured aerosol cans and he's screaming like a loon. Some weird guy in black shows up, threatens our lives, Byers' chickadee runs for the hills, leaving us holding the frickin' bag and who looks like idiots with egg on their faces when the cops show up?"

"Never trust women, man, they will break you heart," Langley solemnly intoned from his seat on the floor, giving Scully a knowing nod. Perhaps he forgot for the moment she was a woman?

"So we were arrested and Mulder was taken to the hospital screaming about aliens. We had to explain ourselves to the police." Byers held up his hands at the end of his tail, glancing between the two men he hadn't known till that day and now were the only people she ever saw him associate with. "And we finally learned the truth about our government. They watch everything; hotel bibles, your fillings, even your medication."

"And they will stop at nothing to cover it up," Langley nodded, "Even to the point of knowingly gassing one of their own FBI agents."

Langley's words rang disturbingly true for Scully. What had Michael Kritschgau said when he had confessed to her the whole secret plan behind Mulder? He'd been manipulated from the beginning.

"The truth is," Byers murmured quietly. "You can't trust anyone, not even the entities that you think you should be able to trust."

Scully's finger's trailed up to her neck, to the tiny lump she felt there, the one thing that she suspected kept her from a certain death from cancer. "No, you can't trust them, can you?"

A pensive silence fell on the room as all four of them sat quietly, considering Byers' words. Frohike finally broke the quiet, sighing solemnly. "But Suzanne was really hot!"

His words shattered the moody spell. Langley snorted loudly, rising from the carpet. "Hey, Scully,
you got anything to eat?"

"Classy there," Frohike intoned.

"What?"

"Just in the kitchen, guys. Help yourselves." Scully waved Langley off in the general direction of her fridge. "There's coffee, tea, I think Mulder left beer in there somewhere."

"Coffee!" Frohike leapt up at the sound of that, moving to follow Langley into raiding her stores for sustenance.

"Mugs are over the coffee machine," she called as they disappeared, murmuring and squabbling into the other room. She and Byers watched them go, Byers shaking his dark head softly as they went.

"They aren't so bad to be around I suppose," Scully offered, sensing the gloominess hadn't left Byers as readily as it left his companions.

"Not so bad," he replied vaguely.

"But they aren't Suzanne, are they?" For all of teasing from Langley and Frohike, she sensed they were hitting a sensitive spot with the most quiet of the three Gunmen. Byers turned to her, shrugging in that way all men had when you hit a sore spot. It was almost like a physical response to something they had no words to vocalize.

"She was taken, right off the street, from right in front of us." He shook his head, even years later not understanding. "I've spent years looking for her, searching. She's never turned up."

The hidden depths of John Byers. Scully realized that she hardly knew him or any of the Lone Gunmen, really. "I'm sure she's fine."

"They would have killed you to get to Mulder. What makes you think they wouldn't have killed a troublesome chemist?"

He made a good point and Scully couldn't deny it. "I'm not dead yet, you know, thanks to you guys. If you could save me, I'm sure you'll find her."

"We didn't save you. Mulder did. All we did was study the chip."

"But you helped him figure out what it did and without that he might have never convinced me to use it."

"Perhaps." Byers wasn't immediately willing to concede on that argument. "I don't know, I just keep thinking that if I had just grabbed her hand, tried a little harder, stopped at nothing to find her, maybe we'd be together today."

Scully felt her heart ache for the man sitting beside her, a man hopelessly in love with a woman he only knew for hours and had mourned for eight years. "I'm sure you did the best you could."

"You didn't see Mulder when you were sick, Dana."

Byers' use of her first name surprised Scully as she blinked at him. She didn't think he had ever uttered it in her presence before.

"I mean, yeah, it's Mulder, he's an FBI agent, he's a hero, he's come back from the dead at least
twice. But you just knew, you had this feeling he would stop at nothing to do something to keep you from dying. He wouldn't allow it. It wasn't in Mulder's worldview. And here you are, alive and whole. If you were taken to the ends of the earth, he would come and find you. That's who Mulder is. Me? Even if I found Suzanne, I let her go for this long. What's to say she would even want more or remember me? Maybe she never felt for me what I felt for her all those years ago."

Byers obviously attributed a lot more to the relationship she had with Mulder than Scully did. There was something of the hopeless romantic about him, which was endearing and also so very fragile. In many ways, Byers was much like Mulder, a man who just wanted to do his job but couldn't let go of his memories. Slowly, she reached out to him, resting her hand against his shoulder, fingers tightening in a gesture of comfort.

"Maybe she did, John, and maybe she's still out there and thinking of you as well."

Her words seemed to cheer him somewhat. "Perhaps she is. And that's why I'm still looking. I keep hoping I'll be given a second chance."

Second chances. Scully had been given one. She hoped that Byers could find one as well and perhaps get a chance to tell his Suzanne exactly how he felt.

"So, tell me the truth, Byers," she murmured, leaning back into her seat, eyeing him with over exaggerated suspicion. "Did you three come up with this or was this all Mulder's doing?"

Of the three Lone Gunmen, he was the one the worst at lying to her. His ears reddened under her pointed gaze. "He might have said something about you wanting company."

"I knew it!"

"The movie was Frohike's idea though, however, I was the one who convinced him on Casablanca. Really, their running commentary on Oliver Stone, after the third of fourth time it's tiresome."

"Good choice on your part." From out of the kitchen there was an ominous clatter, the sound of smashing glass, and a loud epithet from the mouth of Frohike, followed by verbal berating from Langley. Byers looked on with worry.

"Perhaps I should go and….see…"

He rose, rushing to see what destruction his friends had wrought on her house. Scully was tempted to follow, but figured that Byers was at least adult enough to get whatever mess there was cleaned up and the two children hustled out into the living room unscathed. Though if she had to put up with an afternoon of continued arguing between the two she might kick the lot of them out of her house and sick them on Mulder for good measure. An afternoon with the Lone Gunmen, good company, and a story to bug Mulder with when next she saw him, perhaps the day wasn't a total waste after all. And besides, the three conspiracy theorists were starting to strangely grow on her. It could be, in the words of Louis in Casablanca, the start to a beautiful friendship.
Barrenness

Chapter Summary

In which Scully comes to terms with the fact she can't have children.

With every test Scully had waited for, she held her breath, expecting for the other shoe to drop. With every vial of blood, every sample, every doctor's office consultation she felt her nerves twist in her gut. The doctor in her told her to be reasonable, this was standard procedure, but the new scar on her neck would itch, and the memory of Mulder's broken sobs at her bedside would gnaw at her as she sat in front of another doctor's stern gaze. Something must be wrong, something they had missed. Her recovery might not be a miraculous as she thought, the cancer spreading elsewhere while receding in her nasal passages. She could wake up tomorrow and this could be all a horrible lie.

The grim, closed-lipped expression on her OB/GYN's face slid like a knife into Scully's heart as she sat, back ramrod straight against one of the specialists firm chairs, knees crossed, face composed. She coolly watched her Dr. Owens from across his desk, the balding man studying his notes before he looked up at her over his thick, half-moon glasses.

"You've been through a lot, Dana."

That was the understatement of the year. She would have laughed if her fingers weren't trying so hard to tie themselves together in knots. Scully threw on what she hoped was a polite smile at her long time gynecologist. "A lot, but I'm still here, and I'm hoping to get back to work, to my life. This is my one last hurdle."

Owens nodded quietly, frowning down at his notes, leaning his sturdy body back into his leather chair. "It's not the first serious health scare we've been through with you. I'm glad though that this one didn't have the horrific outcome we all feared."

What wasn't this man telling her? Scully bit back the urge to scream as she politely went through the motions with him. "Dr. Hamedi and Dr. Zuckerman, my oncologists, both wanted me to ensure that everything was one hundred present before they gave me a clean bill of health so that I could return to the FBI."

Skinner refused to allow her into the building without one.

Scully's gaze flickered pointedly to the notes lying in between them. "I was hoping you had found something one way or the other.

A long, pained sigh, a thoughtful look, as if he was choosing words. Scully's throat closed hard around whimper that threatened as Dr. Owens reached carefully forward and pulled his paperwork towards him. He eyed it through his semi-circular lenses before finally dragging out an answer.

"The blood work for cancer appears to be clean, Dana. Your Pap smear came up fine, your pelvic exam showed nothing that looks pre-cancerous or troublesome for your oncologist."

That statement didn't remove the clear lines of worry from the man's expression, nor did it do a
thing to relieve the screaming anxiety that hovered over Scully's otherwise calm demeanor. "But there is something?"

She was a doctor, she knew. She could tell by the small frown between his bushy, dark eyebrows, the way his round, middle aged face never relaxed into the pleasant, reassuring expression all gynecologists seemed to adopt before prodding regions only lovers knew about. Mulder always yelled at her to trust her intuition, and for once she was doing that, and she seemed to be right as her gynecologists eyes flickered to his chicken-scratch handwriting, lingering there as if he were gather thoughts, or wisdom, or both.

"There were some...abnormalities in your pelvic exam, Dana, things I noticed. I ordered up some extra tests just to see, just to make sure that they had nothing to do with your cancer or the treatments."

"What sort of abnormalities?" Were they life threatening? Could she return to work?

"Strange cysts on your ovaries, scarification along your fallopian tubes and parts of your uterus. They are so high up I hadn't ever noticed them during your regular yearly exams, but we were being so much more thorough this time for your oncologists. I didn't want to say anything till I did some testing. You've had your period regularly since your abduction two years ago, correct?"

One of the first things Scully had done when she was back on her feet from her earlier trauma was have a full exam with her gynecologist. She had no memory of what had happened, the nightmare that someone could have done something to her without her consent was a real one then. "I've been on the pill since my early twenties, everything has been as regular as clockwork. I'm sorry, if there was something wrong why, didn't we find this years ago when I was abducted?"

"Like I said, I wasn't looking." The apology was clear from Dr. Owens' guilty expression. "I was more concerned for evidence of rape, Dana, of abuse or molestation."

In all fairness that had been her overriding concern as well, the one she hadn't wanted to bring up to her mother, or Melissa, and especially not Mulder. "But there wasn't any?"

"No, but now...do you remember what happened to you during that time at all?" Scully had never discussed her remembered experiences with anyone outside of Penny and Mulder, certainly not the specialist she saw once a year most of the time. She couldn't spell out for him the entire story she now knew. That she had been part of a government experiment involving an engineered virus. That men had taken her in trains to use her, to run tests on her and infect her body with a strange disease made from the chimerical cells of oil-like creature, changed and altered to create a biological weapon with which they could win the game of global-one-upmanship. Scully couldn't tell her doctor about the geologist who died as his brain was infested, nor could she tell him about the so-called alien body Mulder had found in Canada.

"No, I don't remember." She lied, though not totally so. She didn't remember much of it and even what she did recall was sketchy at best, certainly not enough to explain the sort of cysts and scarification he was discussing now.

"I was hoping you could." The gynecologist sighed, scratching at what little hair remained on his head. "The truth is, Dana, if I didn't know better I'd have thought you were being used as an ova harvester."

"Ova? What do you mean?"

"On closer inspection, it looks as if your system had at some point in time been sent into overdrive
producing ova, just like when women donate their eggs. The process is simple, but can be
dangerous, filling you with hormones to trick your ovaries into ovulation. If not done right, it can
lead to dangerous complications, including swelling and fluid build up in your abdominal cavity."

Hadin't she been strangely swollen when she had been returned? Scully had been horribly self-
conscious about the weight she'd somehow gained while she had been gone. Her doctors at the
time had waved it off as effects of the strange virus they had found invading her system. "Ovary
harvesting…I don't recall….I didn't agree…"

"I didn't think you had, Dana, because this was an extreme case." Dr. Owens' became sorrowfully
understanding again, and Scully didn't like the sound of it, not this soon after surviving cancer.
"The truth is, Dana, that whoever did this to you wanted to try and get as much as they could out of
you. In so doing they stole perhaps hundreds of your reproductive cells."

Scully listened to the doctor's words, but somehow she couldn't quite grasp what he was saying.
"So what does this mean? Did…did they take all of my ova?"

What else had they done to her? The now familiar cold sense of violation crept up her spine,
lodging in her chest. She had been down this road before. They had done horrible things to her
before, and she had survived. But her ova…her ability to reproduce…

"No, they didn't, not from what I can tell, but the effects of what they did do are such that I don't
think that you can ever use what you have, Dana. The cystic scarring, I don't think we would even
be able to coax the ovaries to produce another egg for IVF purposes."

"So what do I have remaining to me is…useless?" The meaning of everything the doctor said was
starting to finally hit home for Scully. He was saying that she couldn't have children.

"It means you are likely not going to be able to conceive through normal means, Dana." There was
the hint of sympathy, the quiet sorrow that she had suspected from the beginning. Dr. Owens
watched her with sympathy as she tried to process all of what he just told her. Barren…no
children…not even the possibility of them.

"I…"

She paused, staring blankly at the top of the doctor's wide desk. The truth was up until this very
moment Scully hadn't even thought about children. She knew vaguely that she wanted them. She
had felt those stirrings in her heart when her brother Bill and Tara announced they were going to
see someone about getting pregnant. Her biological clock had of course leapt at the idea of kids as
Scully looked at the calendar and her age and wondered if this was something she shouldn't stop to
think about and consider. But then her cancer got in the way and she hadn't been so certain she
would live for another year, let alone long enough to produce a child. That had seemed a distant
afterthought. Now her life was her own again, but that ability was stolen from her. Scully shouldn't
be surprised. Hadn't Penny said they were all barren as well. It still felt like some horrible, cruel
joke. She was thirty-three, still young, now wonderfully alive and yet she didn't even have the
potential to be a mother. It was as if fate stood laughing at her, telling her that she could have her
own life, yes, but at the expense of being able to create one.

The truth was, Scully realized sadly, she hadn't until this moment even considered the idea of even
wanting a child. The old saying was certainly true, you don't know what your missing until it was
gone. A baby hadn't even been in the cards for her even a year ago, before she had discovered her
cancer. It seemed a far off, distance "maybe someday". Now, it wasn't even a choice that was given
to her. They had taken that away from her, like they seemed to take everything else.
She cleared her throat through suddenly misty eyes. Scully had thought the worst was over, that now that her cancer was in remission she wouldn't find any further secrets her body was hiding. "There's no chance?"

Compassion filled her doctor's eyes as he sighed. "I can't say there isn't any chance, Dana, I've seen stranger things happen. Women who were told years ago they would never be able to conceive finding themselves pregnant. And who knows, by the time you do decide to settle down and have children, we don't know what the technology will be like. With the right combination of therapy, we may be able to circumvent all of this."

"Right," Scully replied numbly, still trying to wrap her head around the word "barren." What would her mother say? No, she couldn't tell Maggie. It was one of her dearest hopes to see her remaining daughter settle down to marriage and motherhood, and she had so nearly lost that opportunity with Scully's near-brush with death. Maggie had been through enough personal shocks to date, and so soon after her illness and so close to Charlie and Ashley's wedding; Scully didn't wish to take away from that. Besides, with Bill and Tara expecting soon, Maggie would soon have her hands full with at least one grandchild. No need to tell her that she wouldn't be having as many as she expected someday.

"Dana, I know this is a blow for you after everything you've been through." Dr. Owens' soft baritone cut through her jumbled thoughts. "The truth is you look to be cancer free from every possible angle, you survived something that perhaps would have killed anyone else. I know that this isn't news you expected to hear, but...well give this some time to sink in. Perhaps speak to someone, a therapist, someone you trust."

Someone she trusted? Mulder, that was the only person she trusted implicitly. But could she tell him something like this. Strange, Scully mused softly. She had been able to tell him she was suffering from cancer, she had allowed him to share that fear and pain with her. Without him she doubted she would have ever been able to have the emotional strength to pull through it, and it was his perseverance that saved her in the end. And yet something held her back at the thought of telling him this. This was almost too private, too personal. The idea that she couldn't have children, that was a pain she couldn't even process now. It was so sudden and too close to her illness. Mulder would react in righteous indignation, and Scully didn't believe she could handle that right now. She needed down time, some normalcy and some peace.

"I might consider that," she nodded vaguely at her doctor's advice. "Is there anything else?"

If the doctor was concerned over her blasé reaction, he didn't voice it. "No, everything looks good. I would ask you come back in two months time for a check up, just to make sure that everything remains clear, and after that we are back to our regular yearly check-ups."

Regular...yes, the sort of lives other people had. Scully nodded gratefully, rising as took the doctor's hand. Head high she made her way out of his office to the receptionist, making an appointment for two months away. Just to prove she was cancer free, even if now she knew she couldn't have the children that she had always planned on having. What else would these men take from her, she wondered vaguely as she wandered out to her parked car. They took her career, her reputation, her health, nearly her life. Now they stole away her dreams. What else did she have to give them?

Scully's cell phone sounded from the depths of her handbag, she reached for it absently, flipping it open without looking. "Hello?"

"So what's the good word?" Mulder sounded cheerful on the other end, his good mood jarring hard against the harsh news she received. She had told him she was going to hear the results of her last
check up today. He was expecting positive news.

"Oh…I'm clean, Dr. Owens will let my oncologist know, and if all is well, I'll be back at work on Monday." Mulder wasn't standing there to see the fake, pleasant smile she plastered on, nor to see the tears as she forced a lightness in her voice she by no means felt. "No cancerous cells. I'm one hundred percent and can come back to babysit you like always."

"Babysit?" Mulder snorted contemptuously. "I will have you know that in the last month I've run the office just fine without you here."

"How messy is it?" She hadn't even been allowed inside to see the destruction her partner had wrought in their shared workspace.

"Why do you assume I made a mess of things?"

"Mulder, you bored and alone is always a dangerous thing." And he had been bored. She knew that, she could tell by the endless calls he would place to her discussing everything and nothing while she was supposed to be home "convalescing."

"You know I did manage without you once just fine."

"And it took the first six months of our partnership for me to organize your files enough for me to find anything." That at least earned a true smile out of her. Four years together and some things hadn't changed. Mulder's inability to be organized was one of them. Perhaps she couldn't rely on her own body, but she could rely on Mulder.

"So you want to meet up for lunch to celebrate? I'm buying, a rare opportunity out of me."

Mulder wanted company, Scully realized, but he also wanted to finally cheer the fact that something for them had gone right for a change. After a year of bickering and arguing, of jealousy over hurt feelings and affairs of the heart, after her illness and the revelations about his past, Mulder just wanted to feel good about something, to share and have fun with Scully, his best friend. And perhaps, if Scully hadn't received the news that she had that day, she would have gone alone with it.

"I'm sorry, Mulder I'm…"

She was what? Tired? That would only alarm him, clue him into something being wrong. No, her mother, she could fall back on that. "I promised Mom I would go and see her tonight, let her reassure herself that I'm not dying on her yet."

Scully hated using her mother like this but she also knew Mulder would likely never question it.

"Oh," he murmured, vaguely disappointed. "Well, maybe over the weekend, before you come back to work, go out for some drinks, you know, live that real life you are always talking about?"

Perhaps by then she would be able to bury the painful truth about her infertility, swallow it and hide it under the pain of her cancer. By then she maybe could look Mulder in the eye and pretend she wasn't reeling from yet another revelation of what was done to her. She could have a beer with the man who had come to be her best friend, discuss silly and oddball things, and not think about the future she would never have, the children that would never be hers.

"Scully?" Mulder's voice worried on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, this weekend would be fine. Give me a call, we'll set it up." She plastered back the smile he
couldn't see, anything to waylay the anxiety she heard on the other end. "I'm sure there's a baseball game or something you'll want to see."

"It must have been a near death experience for you to bring up sports." If Mulder was bothered, his humor covered it well.

"I'll talk to you this weekend, Mulder," she replied, rolling her eyes as she clicked off. She stood by her sedan, staring at her cell phone. She could just tell him. She probably should. After all, this was Mulder, it wasn't like he was a lover or a husband, and this wouldn't devastate him if he found out. But she couldn't bring herself to say it, to utter the word "barren." Like "dying" month before, it felt as if she vocalized the word it would all come horribly true.

Would her life ever be truly hers again?
"He's doing this to spite us." Fox Mulder was adamant, growling as he hurled himself into the X-files office, lanky limbs looking for his office chair to throw themselves in. It was promising to be one of Mulder's petulant afternoons.

"Skinner isn't trying to spite us, Mulder, he said so himself." Scully responded to her partner's petulance with rationality and reason as she trailed behind him to her table. She was met with scornful disdain from the overdramatic side of the office. "After the last two months for both of us, what's wrong with a little paid vacation?"

"This isn't paid vacation, Scully, this is systematic punishment and torture." Mulder's eyes rolled skyward as he tipped his head back in futile annoyance. "Do you know what these team seminars even are?"

"Since I haven't been to one, I can't say that I do." Scully shrugged, settling primly behind her table as she began sorting through stacks of reports, news clippings, and half finished files, the collected detritus of Mulder's solo excursion while she was out on medical leave. Barely a week into her return and she was already thinking that time away from the office again wasn't such a bad idea.

"I had to go to a team building seminar with Jerry once when we were rookie newbs, too green and stupid to know better." Mulder leaned back and propped his long legs up on the corner of his desk, hands folding over another example of his amazingly poor taste in neckwear. "The entire episode was nothing more than eight hours of psycho-babble, huggy, feely crap punctuated by free food and occasional booze to keep our flagging spirits up."

"So are you speaking as a psychologist or as a man who hates to get in touch with his emotions?" Scully frowned down at a mess of random newspaper clippings all having to do with random sights of swarms of killer bees.

"I'm speaking as an FBI agent who has real field work to do rather than sitting at the Tampa Bay Hilton making small talk with Jim-Bob Field Office agent who is just excited to get out of following up leads on kids taking out rural post boxes with baseball bats."

"Wouldn't that technically be the postal services purview?" Scully didn't have to look up to feel the glare of annoyance shot at her general direction. "Besides it isn't a Hilton, it's a wilderness lodge in northern Florida. Frankly, it doesn't sound so bad, nice cabins, pools, the great outdoors…"

"You actually want to go on this pointless excursion, don't you?" Mulder made it sound as if he was accusing her of wanting to hang out with the loser squares of the Bureau, as if this were high school and they were the token cool yet intelligent outsiders, staying aloof in their disdain for conformity.

If that were the case, call Scully a conformist nerd.
"Look, Mulder, what does it hurt to talk to other FBI agents, to real people? When was the last time you even did that?"

"Willingly or because I got assigned to a case?"

Scully wasn't amused. "Think about it, it's just the two of us, all the time, everyday. We go off to Pennsylvania, or the Midwest, or Timbuktu, and we hardly ever see other people within our fields except when we are consulting with them."

"Other people don't like the X-files, Scully, they don't get it."

"How can they get it when you don't let them understand it?"

"What, so people can take potshots at Spooky Mulder? No thanks." Mulder threw up his hands defiantly, even after all these years still preferring to be the distant, weird, basement dwelling malcontent to the rest of the Bureau's assimilation. "Besides, this entire exercise in group dynamics is meant to be a partnership building seminar. Partners...as in you and me."

Scully looked up from the stack of paperwork, meeting Mulder's pointed frown. "I understood that part. Is there a problem with that?"

"No, but this is you and me, Scully. You've lasted as my partner three times longer than anyone else in this place ever has, and that includes Jerry. Do you think we really need to work on our partner communications skills to improve our team dynamic?"

"Considering that in the last year we have spent our time bickering back and forth with each other over what we want out of this partnership, coupled with the fact that we've both suffered major personal blows with our families and health, and not to mention that we were both responsible for the fall of a Section Chief who we unveiled as being corrupt, I would say that perhaps having a chance to work out what all of that means in terms of our work relationship would be a good thing."

"But that's just it, Scully, we persevered despite all of that!" Mulder waved his hands excitedly at her as if she had made his point for him. "If we didn't have the communication and trust between each other that we do, we would never have gotten through any of that."

Trust! Scully sighed. He was half-right. There was no person in the world Scully trusted more than Mulder. And yet how many of their arguments and petty squabbles had been born out of her fear of relying on him, out of her worry of what his cause would do to her. And rather than discuss like rational human beings, she had turned to passive aggressive behavior and baiting him before exploding on him in a fury of her own personal neurosis. Poor Mulder had put up with a lot out of her last year, not just her cancer, but her trust issues, her crises over her future, her jealousy over Melissa Riedel, and hell, even the Ed Jerse mess.

"I'm just saying it can't hurt." She knew her more reasonable response would win out with Mulder in the end. Already she could see him pouting over it as he was beginning to realize he couldn't win this argument. "Think about it, a weekend in Florida, we can do the conference thing, and if we get bored, maybe we can hit up a bar, or the beach, or something. Celebrate the fact that we are both still here."

That idea Scully knew would mollify Mulder. She could see him turning it over in his amazingly quick mind. "Will there be skimpy pool wear involved in this weekend adventure in the woods?"

"Perhaps for some of the agents, not me." Scully snorted, earning a long suffering sigh from Mulder who finally seemed willing to at least go along with the idea. "And will you at least try to
be on your best behavior while playing with others?"

"If you mean being deceptively petulant rather than outright rude, I might be able to manage that."

Honestly, Mulder was a man-child at times. "All I ask is that at least attempt to smile and take it. Besides, you never know, you might actually have fun doing it."

"My level of fun is directly proportional to the amount of alcohol consumed to cover the bullshit that I have to listen to."

Scully sighed, closing her eyes and counting, slowly, to ten. Perhaps, Mulder was right after all. This was a punishment from Skinner, for her at least, ensuring Mulder didn't make a total ass of himself.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder wanders off the reservation.

Scully watched Mulder's blue shirt disappear into the small crowed of gathered police and she could hear his dry, cracking monotone over the various voices. She should go pull him from all of this, she reasoned. Like any respectable partner she should apologize to the local law enforcement, take Mulder by the arm, drag him back to the car and instruct Kinsley to find some other route through this roadblock and get as far away from the trouble Mulder was going to insert himself into as possible. That's what a reasonable, responsible partner would due. Scully had to admit that she tossed both of those adjectives regarding herself out of the window years ago as far as Mulder was concerned.

"Where's Mulder going?" Kinsley shaded his eyes from the midday sun as he watched Mulder begin to wander off with a group of brown uniformed law enforcement members. Obviously it didn't occur to regular FBI agents that one could just ditch Bureau paid engagements to traipse through the woods, horning in on local investigations. It was strange that thought didn't occur to Mulder more often.

"He's not going to make it to the teamwork seminar." Scully hoped that her words didn't sound as lame and apologetic coming out as they did in her head.

"Not…going?" Stonecypher, the pretty, perky, blonde partner to Kinsley blinked her wide blue eyes at Scully as if she had just suggested Mulder had finally found the Fountain of Youth in the Florida woods. "What does he mean not going? Can he just do that?"

That was a good question, Scully admitted, and one that she had to believe probably never really crossed Mulder's mind. "Mulder sometimes does things his own…unique way."

"Unique?" Stonecypher uttered the word as if she had never heard of the word before. "But we are a team, we are going off to a team building conference. The point is that we aren't supposed to be unique."

Right...a team. They had been together all of four hours? Long enough to catch a flight down together from DC, get a rental car, and drive in the middle of nowhere looking for some retreat that they were all forced to attend? In the middle of Nowhere, Florida, no less, lost in the woods.

"Yeah, look, if you haven't noticed, Mulder isn't precisely a team player." Might as well shoot for being frank, Scully decided, beating around the bush only seemed to puzzle these two more. "And he thinks that perhaps he has some insight that might be helpful to this case and the investigation they are running here."

"Aliens?" Kinsley perked up at that. His almost plastic smile turned up high as he nodded in seeming comprehension on the subject of extra-terrestrials and their criminal habits. "I mean, I know that's Mulder's thing, and these woods...you know, I could see this being a place aliens hang out at."
The sad part of this entire conversation was that Scully couldn't tell if he was one of the many who poked fun at her partner's beliefs or if Kinsley at this moment was being deadly serious. "Right... well Agent Mulder hasn't really developed a theory, he is just offering his insight and services to local law enforcement."

Whether local law enforcement wanted the help or not was another matter.

"But the conference," Stonecypher repeated fractiously, as if worried that Scully and Kinsley had forgotten. Her hands fluttered in quick agitation at Mulder's departure. "There's going to be cheese and wine and a mixer tonight. We'll totally miss out!"

"Oh, yes, mixer! I'm sure Mulder will be sad to not make that." Even the idea of sitting on Mulder in any sort of highly active social situation involving more than two adults outside of a conference room frightened Scully. Perhaps, in consideration, this entire idea of Mulder charging into the woods heedlessly had some merit.

"Look, I don't want this to be a situation where the two of you miss out. Why don't you check to see when the roadblock will be lifted and then head out to the conference without us!" Because God knows Scully was beginning to think the idea of spending another hour in the car with Kinsley and his plastic smile and Stonecypher with the threatening edge of hysteria in her voice was going to make her wish she had run into the woods after Mulder in a minute.

"But..." Stonecypher paused, contemplating this for long moments, allowing the suggestion to roll around her head. "We are a team, Agent Scully, we came in as a team and we go together as a team. We can't just leave two of you behind!"

She came back from the grips of cancer for this?

Scully resisted the urge to grit her jaws until her molars cracked. Instead she pulled a bright smile from somewhere. "Well, I'm sure you and Agent Kinsley can manage as a team just fine without the two of us. Besides, Agent Mulder and I have been partners for four years and have been through a lot. I'm sure that we can survive a lost weekend without building leaning towers out of office equipment."

"The leaning tower was one of the best parts of last years conference," Kinsley admitted a trifle defensively. "Agent Scully, no offense, but protocol! What will Assistant Director Skinner say?"

"To say that Assistant Director Skinner will be less-than-shocked is an understatement." In fact, Scully surmised, he would be more stunned that Mulder made it as far as Florida before bolting like a hyperactive beagle. "Look, let me handle the details here. I'm sure I can explain it to Skinner, you two can have your bonding, partner time, and I can assist Mulder in his investigation here."

It sounded like a reasonable enough suggestion, or at least it did to Scully, and she prayed the other two would take it. She half feared they would suggest that they stay there with her to wait for Mulder, to see what they could do to help or lend insight into all of this. For all Scully knew there would be some strange, weird twist on all of this, Mulder discovering a lost Indian tribe, a tree-dwelling monster, or glow-in-the-dark, man eating moss. She would be the one left trying to explain how any of this was even possible to two gibbering and completely clueless agents as Mulder shredded what little reputation he had left.

"Look, I'm not totally comfortable leaving the two of you alone on this," Kinsley replied obdurately, glancing over at the skeptical Stonecypher. "How about we call this in?"
Calling it in? No, that was the last thing they needed.

"Look," Scully sighed, feeling her patience stretch to the thin edge of politeness. "This is Agent Mulder's specialty. We handle cases like this all the time. We should be just fine, I promise. And really I know that the two of you look forward to this sort of thing."

In fact they looked more forward to their team building session that Scully thought was seemly for two FBI partners. And people gossiped about her and Mulder behind their backs! Their interaction seemed mundane by comparison.

"She's right you know, Kinsley." Stonecypher nudged her partner.

Clearly the pretty agent was more interested in the wine and cheese mixer than sticking around in the woods. Scully couldn't blame her, a part of her wished she could be in a place with grown ups and not standing in the middle of the Florida woods as well.

"Look, we can go to the conference and check back with Scully and Mulder on our way back." She glanced speculatively towards Scully. "Is that okay, us swing by and pick you up? And if you need assistance then, we can offer it."

"And perhaps bring you some of our insight from the conference, too!" Kinsley enthused positively.

"Yeah…err…that sounds like a good plan." Whatever made them happy at this point. "Look, why don't you two run me into town. I'll check into a motel and by that time the road should be clear and you can be on your way."

Stonecypher seemed pleased with this plan, but Kinsley didn't seem completely convinced. He frowned in the direction Mulder went. "You sure you and Mulder will be okay with this?"

Stonecypher moved so quickly, Scully nearly didn't see her elbow connect sharply with Kinsley's ribs as the other man winced loudly.

"Agent Scully seems to have it handled, Kinsley." She shot her partner a look so pointed it could have taken out his eye. "Besides, we don't want to be late. I heard they might even break out the karaoke machine later tonight, and we've been practicing our Sonny and Cher."

And people called she and Mulder's relationship strange. Kinsley's face flushed as he reached for Stonecypher's elbow, furtively avoiding Scully's eye. "Yeah, would hate to miss that."

Tugging his partner towards the car, whatever futile resolve he had to be a good FBI agent and see this one out dissolved. "You coming, Scully? We'll run you into town."

Scully glanced towards Mulder who was already wandering off into the tall grass of the woods, one of the female sheriffs at his side, as he pointed towards something in the soft dirt below. "Yeah, I'll go with you, get us set up." She might as well, she sighed. She had a feeling she and Mulder were going to need a place to set up base camp for the night.

How in the world did he always find these things?
An Act of Avoidance

Chapter Summary

In which Scully wakes up in Mulder's bed after a party all her own.

Sunlight dappled the bright leaves overhead as Scully curled into the cocoon of rope netting that made the hammock she napped in. The breeze swung her gently between two oak trees as she sighed and turned, enjoying the feeling of peace, of quiet, of the utter joy of just being. There were no mysteries here that need solving, no conspiracies or monsters, just the warm, summer sunshine and the whisper of branches above. She lazily turned her face towards the warmth of the golden rays above her, as something caressed her cheek softly, and on the wind Scully thought she could hear her name ever so faintly.

"Scully! Dana! Dana! Sleeping Beauty, you're drooling on my pillow!"

Scully turned, eyes fluttering open to intensely amused gaze studying her above the wry smile on the face of her partner. She rubbed at her cheeks as she attempted to grasp her surroundings. She realized only that she was in a motel bed somewhere and that she was fairly certain it wasn't the bed she had checked out for herself, and Mulder was sitting fully clothed on the other side of it.

"And Baby Bear said, 'somebody's sleeping in my bed.'" Mulder held up small, empty bottle of wine and waggling it suggestively in front of her nose. "You're an alarming light-weight if this is all that it took to knock you down for the count."

Scully snorted as she struggled to sit up against the headboard and snatch the tiny glass bottle from Mulder's outstretched fingers. "I was waiting for you to get back from your vague destination, researching your even more vague hunch in the hopes of understanding, vaguely, what in the hell we are doing here?"

The digital clock beside Mulder's bed read 1 AM. "And why did it take you till the wee hours of the morning to do it?"

"I was sitting outside the old witches gingerbread house seeing what she was up to." Mulder flopped unceremoniously onto the pillows beside where she lay smelling of damp and earth. She eyed his shoes on the bedspread with the sort of askance her mother took. It bothered her more at the moment that he was leaving soft marks on the nylon bedspread than it did that they were both sprawled across the hard as rock mattress in a manner Scully was fairly uncertain would be considered unseemly by the organizers of their FBI teamwork seminar.

"Sitting outside of the witches house?" She wasn't cognizant enough for Mulder's fairy tale analogies. "You were gone for six hours, Mulder. I waited for you wondering what was going on. I had to eat all the cheese without you."

Somewhere in the room was a sadly empty plate, the disgraceful remains of her dairy product gorging.

"Woman, I can't trust you for a few hours?" Mulder drawled good-naturedly, grunting softly as she reached over to slap an open palm against his chest and glare at him. "See, you say I need to work
on my communications skills. I'm fairly certain they don't teach you to bodily abuse your partner at these teamwork seminars. Well, unless they like that sort of thing."

Scully ignored Mulder's implications as she scowled. "I wouldn't know, Mulder, I've never got to go to one." Perhaps she was a bit bitter on that. As much as the presence of Kinsley and Stonecyper had made her teeth ache with disbelief, she at least had been open to the idea of stupid, teamwork building exercises.

"Believe me, Scully, you'd have been running screaming for the woods the first second they asked you to stand on a table and fall back into the waiting arms of others." He shifted onto his side on the mattress, shoes still tracking wood detritus all over the place as he propped himself up on one elbow. He leered suggestively, a teasing smile curving his full mouth. "You know, I wouldn't mind catching you if it came down to it."

Did that playful sparkle in his eyes really have to set her heart beating the way it did? Scully inched carefully over to the edge of the mattress, clearing her throat as color tried to creep up into her face. "I'm merely saying that we could have perhaps used something like this, the two of us... as partners. Maybe you and I could have used a weekend of stupid games like building furniture towers and falling into each other's arms."

"I've tried to convince you to fall into my arms for years, but..."

Mulder ceased his inappropriate comment with one icy glare from Scully, at least having the grace to look a bit shamefaced about it.

It wasn't his comments alone that sent her scooting to the edge of the bed, scrambling to put distance. There had been a shift in the dynamic of their partnership and friendship in the last few years. "Work partners" was starting to have less and less of a meaning for the two of them. They were best friends, in each other's pockets almost. Days were spent on the road with each other, and when they were home more often than not there were phone calls and visits to each other's homes. Scully's old friends, such as Ellen, fell to the wayside now, and her family often took a second place to Mulder in her life. When his mother was sick, Scully was whom he turned to first. When she became ill she told Mulder before she told even her own mother. Scully had done it without a second thought. Mulder was the person trusted most in the entire world.

And closeness, that trust was starting to have consequences. Lying in the hospital, dying of the tumor that had been eating her alive had given Scully a great deal of time to reflect on her life, on her relationships, especially with her brilliant and driven partner. There was no denying one truth that she had to face with painful honesty, that she was hopelessly attracted to Mulder. She'd tried not to be for years. She had rationalized it all away by reminding herself forcefully she was his partner and his friend, by trying to fall into the clinical detachment she had as a doctor towards anyone who she had to deal with professionally, be they attractive or otherwise. Scully had been able to keep that lie going for a while.

Van Blundht had blown that out of the water with a little Al Green and a bottle of wine. She had been forced to face it. Scully would have easily gone to bed with the man who she thought was her partner. She hadn't allowed herself to analyze what that meant in the months since it happened. Things had become so desperate after that, first Mulder's attempts to resurrect memories of his sister, then Scully's worsening cancer. But it lingered in the back of her mind as she lay in the hospital. Every time Mulder came to her bedside and pressed a kiss to her cheek, whenever he curled up beside her and just held her, Scully would feel that quiet desire and longing well up within her. Illness had forced her to push it aside for the time being, but it was still there, as clearly evidenced by her racing heart and flushed cheeks at the moment. Even Mulder rumpled and filthy
from whatever he had been up to in the woods still made things fairly uncomfortable as she tried to
snatch at whatever dignity she had left to her.

"Mulder," she began slowly, carefully trying to navigate how to broach this lightly. "I know that
you have never taken advantage of the proximity of our partnership, but even you have to
recognize that things have…changed in the last few years."

If she had expected her partner to immediately flush and demure away, Scully was sorely mistaken.
If anything the normally lightening quick Mulder seemed to be uncharacteristically slow and
obdurate. "Changed? Well, yeah…your illness. I know you've been going through a lot…"

"That's not what I meant, Mulder." She waved him off as she frowned up at her in mild confusion.
"I mean that…well…"

What did she mean?

"Things have been moving in a different…direction for a while now…at least since before I got so
sick."

She might as well have been speaking Latin to him. Mulder was not getting her meaning in the
least bit. "Our work has changed, Scully, the entire nature of it has changed, but I don't understand
what that has to do with…"

"Mulder!" She snapped, cutting him off irritably as she suddenly remembered she was dealing with
a trained psychologist with the emotional range of a scarred and broken twelve-year-old boy. "I'm
not speaking to the work, I'm speaking to you and me as partners…as friends."

"Okay?" This caught Mulder's attention as he drawled out the word, he too sensing something
deeper was occurring with this conversation and that he wasn't terribly comfortable with it. He
edged carefully back, just slightly, his dark eyebrows meeting together over his suddenly worried
expression.

God, was she reading far too much into this situation? Was Mulder just normally this way with
anyone he was close to in his life? Scully couldn't tell, because frankly she didn't know if Mulder
had ever been as close to anyone in his life as he had been her. Perhaps he really was just as
oblivious to all of this as he was acting at this moment. "I don't know, Mulder, this last year has
been painful for both of us I ways we haven't even begun to broach yet. And it isn't just my illness,
but what about all the arguing last year, the things we said, the things I said."

She fully admitted that she had not been on her best behavior at all, alternately berating and
ignoring the man she was closest to in the world. She had been working through her own issues,
hers own commitments to the X-files, to their work. And those feelings had never been resolved
between the two of them, not for the work, not for Melissa Riedel, not for Ed Jerse…hell not for
Eddie Van Blundht either. There were things lying there between them, unspoken, ones they kept
avoiding neatly as the world got in the way.

"The things we said." Mulder repeated slowly, his hooded gaze flickering away from her as he
dropped his head back to the pillow and flopped over to stare at the ceiling. "Scully, we don't need
a teamwork conference to go through that."

"Maybe we do, Mulder. Everything has changed, whether you want to admit it or not. You berate
me for not trusting you, and yet you don't want to deal with whatever is going on here."

Perhaps she shouldn't have phrased it quite like that. Mulder's eyes narrowed suspiciously up at
Did that statement amuse him or not? Scully's heart raced as she considered dropping this entire conversation and running for her own room. She chose to sigh and fall into frustration instead. "Mulder... look, we are grown ups here. We've left the bounds of professionalism long ago. You are my friend, my very best friend. I don't want to make more of that than it is, but you are seriously the only person on the planet I trust so implicitly. God... you saved my life, more than once."

Tears misted her vision briefly as she angrily blinked them away. "You had me believe I would get better even when I wanted to give up and die. You wouldn't let me. And a part of me wants to understand why that is, what is it that wouldn't let you give up on me."

Had she potentially crossed a line that her partner had dared not to cross? Scully didn't know. She held her breath, staring fixedly at her manicured nails, wondering in the growing silence on Mulder's part if she could feasible get out of this entire conversation while saving any grace whatsoever. Why had she even thought to enter into it anyway? The late hour, the wine, maybe the cheese? Perhaps the fact this was their first case back since her return? What was she thinking?

Just as Scully's resolve firmed enough to move her feet down from the bed and out of the door with as much dignity as she could muster, Mulder's hand shot out in the space between them and reached for her fingers on her lap, swallowing them in his own. "Because you are my friend, Dana, and because you are the only one I trust as well. I couldn't allow them to punish you because of me."

His sense of justice? Of course. It should have been a comfort to her, the idea that Mulder could not stomach Scully being targeted for him. Mulder's keen sense of right and wrong would not allow for innocents to be targeted. But Scully felt a sense of disappointment as well, cutting across the practicality. She didn't want to listen to that voice in her head that told her that she wished Mulder had said something different. She knew was dangerous thinking indeed.

That thought if nothing else was her final motivation to move. Carefully she slipped her fingers from his as she reached stiff legs to the ground and stood. She stretched as she did so, covering over discomfort with exhaustion. That much was at least honest. "It's late, Mulder, and remember that rule about consorting with agents and all that. I need to sleep in my bed."

"Sleep.... yeah!" Mulder stared vaguely at the clock, frowning for the briefest of moments before rising to follow Scully to the door. "I was going to tell you about the woods."

"Later! Morning!" She waved him off, wanting nothing else more at the moment than to get out of there, to get to her room and put her own scrambled thoughts in order. "I'm sure the forest isn't going anywhere."

"Right!" he sighed, coming up behind her as she reached for the door. Scully turned to smile up at him. She was very aware at the moment on just how tall Mulder was next to her own petite height. Tall and strong enough to easily catch her in one of those stupid exercises he was talking about. Her pulse danced at the thought.

"Goodnight, Sleeping Beauty. Get out of here before I drag you out to the woods where the dwarves live."

"I thought it was some primitive, forest creature we are dealing with?"

"I've seen Snow White, don't contradict my Disney indoctrination."
She snorted. "Night, Mulder."

"Night, Scully." The playful, boyish gleam she hadn't seen in months slid across his face as he watched her till she got into her room. Closing the door, Scully leaned against it briefly, hearing Mulder's own door click closed in the silence of the motel hallway. She felt unexpectedly defeated for reasons she couldn't quit name, and couldn't understand why she felt that way in the first place.

Perhaps it was best they hadn't gone to the teamwork seminar after all.
In which Scully doubts Mulder's wilderness survival abilities.

Animal tracks! Weight distribution! Indian Guide her ass!

Scully scowled as Mulder chatted up Michelle, the friendly local sheriff, and privately wondered if this woman actually bought a single thing that Mulder said about any of this. Really, a creature that walked like an animal but had the intelligence of a man? And he got all this because he earned some merit badges as a boy?

It didn't help that the sheriff was sort of attractive in that tree hugging, woman-of-the-woods sort of way. But then again, perhaps she was just local law enforcement official desperate to find a missing man and figure out what it is that was terrorizing his family so much. Mulder didn't have to look quite so enthusiastic about Michelle the Sheriff listening to him. After all, Scully quietly reasoned, she listened to his outlandish theories all the time. He never looked pleased when she did it, he merely expected it.

Scully leaned against the car as she watched Mulder spin with a determined air, immediately falling into the deep sort of far away look he had when his interest was piqued and his brain went into overdrive. Scully knew that look intimately well. It meant that more than likely they were heading out into the woods, looking for some sort of strange humanoid creature who walked on the balls of his feet and had strange hunting practices. If the word "Bigfoot" was mentioned, she swore to God she was ditching Mulder to Michelle, his latent tracking abilities, and the north Florida woods and she was hiking her way to Kinsley and Stonecypher wherever they were.

"So what do we got," Scully called as he loped across Asekoff's front lawn, pulling his bottom lip in the distracted fashion he had. He glanced up at her briefly before returning to his contemplations, pulling his car keys from his pocket as he walked past.

"Sheriff is willing to take us out into the woods, out to where Mr. Asekoff was hunting with his son. I'm thinking that there is something there or someone there who was watching them."

"And what, came back to get at the boy?" Scully waited till the passenger door lock clicked before she attempted trying it. "Mulder we are talking about the imagination of a ten-year-old boy whose father just disappeared in the woods. Any kids imagination would be going crazy right about now, especially his. Don't you think it's just as likely that his fear and worry got the better of him? For all we know it could have been a raccoon he saw."

"Raccoons don't leave those sorts of footprints." Mulder slid in behind the driver's seat.

"Oh, yes!" She rolled eyes towards the forest beyond as Michelle the Sheriff made her way to her squad car. "You were the Indian Guide, the expert."

"Not an expert, but I knew enough I wouldn't get lost in the woods." Mulder hardly noticed her sarcasm as he started the car. "Unlikely some people I know who can barely survive anyplace if there isn't running water and a toilet, I happened to have been quite good at scouting."
Scully smarted at his return barb, glaring at the side of his head. "Mulder we've only ever worked a handful of cases in the woods, each under extreme conditions. You don't know that given different parameters I wouldn't behave differently when out in the wild?"

"You've never been a fan of them when we do."

That much was true, and she knew he had a point, but hated conceding it. "As I recall, you were the one who gave away the much needed gas required for our generator when we were trapped in the woods of the Pacific Northwest when green, flesh eating bugs were coming for us and the only hope we had of survival was the light. And let's not forget Daniel Trepkos and you leaving me alone with a highly contagious spore while you went traipsing through some volcano with a mad geologist?"

"And I will admit you behaved admirably during each of those situations, but I so much as suggest anything that requires jeans and hiking boots and you get that look."

"What look?" Scully didn't appreciate the implication that she had a "look".

"The one that says you would rather sleep on a bed of nails than anywhere on the ground."

"So what if I prefer sleeping on a real bed, Mulder, many human beings would say the same thing."

"Is that why you are jealous of the Sheriff?"

"What!" She spluttered, caught blindsided as the smallest of smirks lighted her partner's face. "What in the world gave you that idea?"

"Perhaps it was the daggers being glared at the back of my head, or the way you ever so professionally stalked back to the car without even listening to the rest of the discussion. But personally I think the dead give away was the fact that it irritated the hell out of you that she actually listened to my theory rather than dismiss it out of hand as you had expected."

He honestly believed that? "You have to admit most law enforcement take the tact of incredulity when it comes to you and your plans, Mulder."

"Most, but not all, and this sheriff is different. She's lived in this area all her life, she's heard the stories of the woods, and she's desperate to find a man who has a family, one who is also being threatened by whatever this is. I don't think that the sheriff necessarily believes me any more than you do, Scully, nor do I think she really wants to see me involved. But she wants to find the Asekoff and she is willing to put up with a crazy, FBI agent with his minimalistic Indian Guide skills to do it."

Mulder' words chastised Scully, but she wasn't about to admit it. "That there is an animal who thinks like a man in these woods?"

"That there is something in these woods no one has ever seen before, Scully, something that has probably existed here since well before the Spanish came to this area looking for Fountains of Youth." There was the thrill of adventure at the thought in Mulder's voice, the note of childish curiosity at an old legend come to life. "No one quite knows what Ponce de Leon saw or ran into down here. What if there things that never went away, that didn't die out with Spanish or American conquest?"

"I would then ask why this is a matter for an FBI agent to be investigating, Mulder, and not an anthropologist or natural scientist. We should be at this retreat, not playing Indian Guides with the local sheriff."
"Afraid she'll show you up as a woman in the great outdoors?"

Scully set her jaw mutinously, glaring at the ribbon of asphalt in front of them. "When you admit this whole exercise is really just an excuse for you to play at being your ten-year-old self tracking down the campfire fantasies from your youth." She heard the awe and expectation as he spoke of it. This was an exercise in mental masturbation for him, chasing after some story under the vague rubric of the X-files. He got off on the idea of roughing it, like some Spanish explorer, wandering the woods in search of hidden, mysterious treasure. This wasn't how Scully had envisioned their weekend. It wasn't even how she envisioned her first case back.

"Is this really just a front for you to play Indian Guide again?" Scully dug at Mulder verbally, at this point irritated with him just to be irritated.

"No. but it does bring back memories." Sad pensiveness flickered to life, cutting at Scully's sense of annoyance as guilt flooded in where righteous indignation once had been. "It was one of the things Dad and I used to do together when I was a kid. He'd been one when he was a kid. It was one of the things he liked to do when he wasn't in DC. We'd pack a backpack, go up to Mt. Washington or somewhere in the New Hampshire woods and wander around that part of the Appalachian trail, pretended we were in some Hawthorne novel."

He said "dad". Scully noted the use of the word as she listened, feeling herself deflate slowly at Mulder's reminiscence. There was no doubt he was referring to Bill Mulder as he spoke about his childhood. Despite the recent questions, memories his mother Teena refused to indulge, or the blood spattered picture of him and his sister found at the scene of the smoking man's demise, Mulder still thought of Bill as his father. And perhaps he should, she reasoned quietly. No matter what the truth was on the matter, Bill was the man who raised Fox, and who had obviously adored him at one point in time in Fox's life, at least till the disappearance of Samantha. It seemed fitting that if anyone should be thought of as "father" in Mulder's life it should be the man who had played such a larger-than-life role in it.

"I guess I never saw your father as much of an outdoorsman," Scully admitted, though to be sure she didn't know Bill Mulder well. Only the one conversation with the man in the Alaska hospital after a near brush with death on Mulder's part that was it. Everything else she had pieced together on him was merely born out of the fragmented memories of Teena, who wished to forget, and Fox whose perfect recollection was shattered forever by his sister's disappearance. Bill could have very well been an outdoorsman, a man who loved sport and adventure as a boy every bit as much as his son did.

"It's one of the best memories I have about him. He missed out on a lot of our childhood, working in DC, but Dad and I camping and Dad at my baseball games as a kid, those were good memories." Mulder shrugged. "At least I know how to recognize a raccoon's tracks from a humans."

He had her, and Scully knew it. "Fine, fine you know your tracks, if it isn't animal, it isn't." But why did they have to be the ones tracking it through the woods again. "I just figured that barely two months after nearly dying I wouldn't have to start roughing it with bears and mosquito's just yet."

If she thought she would earn some sympathy out of Mulder, she was mistaken. "Don't tell me you left your sense of adventure in the hospital, too."

"Did I ever have a sense of adventure?"

"I promise, after this I'll take you to get real fancy wine and cheese and make up for plucking you out of stupid games with insipid people hanging out over appetizer plates."
"That's if I don't get eaten by a bear first, Mulder."

"Yeah, Scully, you sure make wilderness adventures tons of fun!"
Three Dog Night

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is forced to sing.

Mulder couldn't say she hadn't warned him.

The first song that popped into her head was an old Three Dog Night song that her father used to sing around the house when she was a child, always in the same lilting, off key that she had. "Jeremiah was a bullfrog…he was a good friend of mine…never understood a single word he said…but I helped him drink his wine."

In her lap she could feel the suppressed snort as Mulder grinned against her thigh.

"Chorus," he demanded happily as he snuggled further against her, relaxing into childish delight.

He wasn't serious? "Joy to the world…all the boys and girls…joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea…joy to you and me."

Scully trailed off briefly as she realized she didn't remember all of the words to the song. Something about "king of the hill" maybe, and then a line of "making sweet love to you."

Probably not the sort of thought she needed to have with Mulder's head lying in her lap.

"I'd give you a standing ovation, Scully, but that requires getting up." He sounded reluctant to do that as exhaustion and cold finally crept through Mulder's voice. Scully snorted softly in the dark, as she ran her own chilled fingers softly through his dark hair, running the silky strands over her knuckles.

"I was never accused of being an opera singer," she chuckled, recalling well her elementary music classes. "God granted me a good mind, a steady hand and the occasional ability to sing some Ozzy in the car when no one is listening."

"Dana Scully, you rebel!" Mulder yawned, his head heavy as he shifted beside her to a slightly more comfortable position. He was settling, finally, much to her relief. Perhaps when he was out she could inspect the wound on his shoulder again, just to see how it was doing.

"Yeah, well I always heard it called the devil's music, had to see what that was all about." She wrapped her arms tighter around her partner's body, offering what little heat she could. To be honest the temperature wasn't that unreasonable for northern Florida, but fall could be coming soon, and even in this part of the south the nights could get chill. Around them the deep of a forest evening set in as above the moon had raised high, frosting the world with silver. If Scully wasn't worried about being hopelessly lost in the wilderness with an injured partner she might have found it all exceedingly lovely. After all just months ago she didn't know if she would live to even get to see something like this ever again.

The struggle to give life meaning, that was what she had just told Mulder had run through her head as she was dying. She wanted to know why these men had done this to her, what justice was there in it for her. Scully had wrestled with that question, of what her death meant in the grand scheme of
machiinations that surrounded her partner, of how insignificant she felt knowing she had been little
more than a pawn in all of this. They had discussed little of that in the weeks since her recovery.
Now that she was back Mulder seemed to prefer to ignore what Kritschgau had to say about her
role in his work and the reason for her cancer. She couldn't blame him, really. He had her back,
safe and whole, the plans of the shady men responsible for all of this foiled for now at least. Would
they try again with her, she wondered? Would she be used once again as another object lesson for
Mulder? She hoped not. Scully didn't think she could take that anymore and she knew Mulder
couldn't. This had been bad enough on the two of them, on their partnership and their friendship.
Hadn't breaking his faith been enough for them?

A gentle snore from beside her knee broke her out of her quiet reverie as she glanced down at
Mulder's finally sleeping form. His weariness finally overcame his stubbornness, and she smiled,
shaking her head in resignation at her brilliant but often childish partner. Mulder hated being sick
or injured nearly as much as he hated being lied to or thwarted, if for nothing else because illness
and injury tended to slow him down. He was a creature of perpetual energy, her partner, prone to
weeks of little sleep and lots of coffee, especially when working a difficult case. And then
suddenly, he would drop, giving into rest for a few hours at least before coming back up again.
Scully had always marveled and worried over his habit, knowing it was mostly just his inability to
shut his brain down enough just to give in when his body demanded it.
Not even Mulder's sleep was normal. It mirrored so much else in his life; his family, his
relationships, his work. Was there anything in his life that hadn't been planned out, set up, or
arranged to suit someone else's purpose? That had been the most heartbreaking revelation of
Kritschgau's, the fact that practically nothing in Fox Mulder's life was his own, what was more his
life, his career, even the vague, shattered memories of his sister were nothing more than cleverly
manipulated lies used to ensure that Mulder would keep up a clever lie. Even her illness had been
nothing more than set dressing to make him believe and to pull his strings at just the right time to
ensure that the plans of others would be carried through. It was cruel and unjust, just as her cancer
had been. And she didn't think Mulder understood it anymore than Scully understood why she was
sent to work with him in the first place.

Poor Mulder, she mused, gently stroking his temple with her knuckles. The action did little to rouse
him. When was the last time he had slept like this, she wondered? Had it been at all since her
recovery? Perhaps? She studied the side of his face, the slack expression in the pale glow of
moonlight. His normally soulful eyes were closed, but she could still read much of Mulder's
emotional journey the last few months clearly. There were new, faint lines around his eyes, too
much worrying, too much fear creasing the skin there, more than there ever had been before. Even
in rest there was a certain fretfulness in his expression, as if even his dreams were marked by the
heaviness of his every-growing burden. Perhaps, with his perfect memory, it was.

How much of her cancer had Mulder carried with him, she wondered? Of course she knew he was
upset, that he was frightened and scared. That went without saying. How heavy had the weight
been for him? Scully admitted with a certain sense of guilt that she hadn't paid as close attention to
Mulder's emotional well being as she perhaps should have. She'd been too wrapped up in herself,
and understandably so. It was only right that she should have focused inward, towards the tumor
that had been eating her alive. But it hadn't occurred to her till the night she awoke to Mulder
crying, brokenhearted at her bedside just what all of this had done to him as well. Scully had been
so worried about what he would say or think of her for leaving him behind with the work not yet
finished, she had been worried about letting him down. It never occurred to her that Mulder would
feel that same sense of failure for not having saved her.

"What a pair we make," Scully breathed softly. The two of them kept carrying the weights of the
other, and neither one able to speak to it, as grown adults should. Scully thought of the stupid
teamwork seminar they were missing at the moment. As partners, Mulder and Scully, they worked flawlessly together, anticipating the other's actions, practically reading each other's minds, but as the friends Fox and Dana, they were abysmal. Scully could only guess what Karen Kosseff, the FBI therapist, would have to say about that. So what if Scully did love her partner, even in the platonic sense. The two of them were too much of a mess to even begin understanding what the implications of that even were.

Full darkness had settled in and Mulder stirred lightly but didn't wake as she trailed her hand down his jaw to the shoulder that was injured by their mysterious creature earlier. She should check it, but given the scant light and Mulder final drop into sleep, she didn't want to risk rousing him. Besides, it looked as if it would keep till morning and they could find a way out of there. Let him rest, it was the best thing for now. Rest from all the worries the months had brought on for him. This time she would be the one watching over him as he slept and keeping the monsters from the shadows at bay. For now she would keep Mulder safe, just as he did her when she was so ill for all those months. Gently she wrapped her arm back around him, staring quietly into the trees around them, humming the familiar song under her breath as she leaned against the moss and molding wood behind her.

"Joy to the world...all the boys and girls….joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea…joy to you and me..."
To Teamwork

Chapter Summary

In which Scully considers teamwork with her partner.

The sooner they got out of Northern Florida the better.

Scully toed off tennis shoes as she stepped into her motel room, wrinkling her nose at the smell of dirt and grime on her skin. Let Mulder run the search and rescue back at the woods, she wanted a shower, to put clean clothes on, to pack her things and get the hell out of there. She was done with the great outdoors for a while, with the cold and the dirt, with no bathrooms or warm fires, and certainly she was done with anymore of Mulder's strange, predatory creatures. So much for Skinner's idea of giving his two most problematic agents a few days off, Scully sighed, reaching for clean clothes out of her meticulously packed suitcase lying on her rented bed and making a beeline for the tiny, plastic shower in the bathroom beyond. She hardly bothered with closing the door behind her as she turned the heated water on scalding and stripped clothes off to bare skin, frowning at herself in the small mirror over the sink as she took off her top. Pale, pinched skin was marred by smudges of filthy, her blue eyes surrounded by purple from a long night of watching every twitch and flutter in the tree line beyond where they camped. The sight made Scully wince, a reminder to her of where she had been just a few, scant weeks ago, of what she had nearly not come back from.

But she was healthy now, despite Mulder's best efforts the night before, and as she climbed beneath the lava hot spray she groaned in relief as aching muscles gave way under the needle-like onslaught. This was supposed to be a relaxing weekend, she sighed, reaching for motel shampoo to lather the leaves out of her hair. She was supposed to be building towers out of office furniture and falling off of tables into Mulder's arms. How those activities were designed to build trust between them she wasn't sure. After four years and saving each other's lives innumerable times, including her recent bout with cancer, they already had that trust thing sorted out. It was the rest of it that they still needed work on.

Scully had sat awake all night, cradling Mulder's weary form as he rested, watching him quietly as she fought her own exhaustion. She had yet to confront him on that night he sat by her hospital bedside, a man broken under the weight of all the horrible truth he had discovered. She had yet to prod him about the picture found on the scene of the smoking man's supposed demise, of what it could possibly mean about himself and his sister. Scully wanted to know what it was that Mulder had promised the man to get the chip that had saved her life. What had he been willing to give up to save her life, and why? When he could have exposed the truth for all that it was, why was he willing to let all of that go for her? How had he had the wherewithal to play the dangerous game with Blevins and come out correct in the end?

Scully shut off the water, now a nice lobster pink as she reached for one of the minuscule, terry cloth towels, smelling of bleach and too much laundry soap. She toweled herself dry, her skin prickling under the roughness as she slipped on clothes quickly and toweled off sopping hair. Through the steam she glanced at the clock in the other room. Mulder should be back with Kinsley and Stonecypher soon and she wanted out of there before Mulder got it in his head to actually join the search and rescue efforts to find these creatures. Leave nature to itself, she privately muttered,
she was no Indian Guide like he was tracking down animals and sleeping under the stars. She wanted to get back to DC with her soft bed, her television, and not look at another forest for a long, long, long time.

Her hair dryer roared to life as she began to throw things into her suitcase, repacking the clothing she had ideally brought for the conference. It was a shame, she sighed as she looked through all of the more casual clothes and the things she had brought for actual downtime during the conference. She had been rather looking forward to having real social time with agents that didn't involve discussing aliens, conspiracies, weird creatures, or ancient legends. Did Mulder even know how to act in those social situations? What would it be like for the two of them just hanging out with other normal adults, having real conversations about stupid, silly things? What side of Mulder would she see then? Did Mulder even have a side that could discuss fluffy small talk? Was his life so narrowly focused and his tolerance for other human beings so low he couldn't have a conversation on anything that didn't come from a tabloid magazine? Wait, he could discuss sports! That would at least keep him going for a good hour in polite society as long as another agent was around to talk shop about the Yankees.

Oh Mulder, Scully sighed, flipping off her hair dryer and running a brush through fluffy, coppery hair. The two of them really were a pair, weren't they? She couldn't seem to figure out how to have a real life, he didn't even know what a real life was, and now there was this growing shift in their relationship, one that she was struggling with trying to understand. Had Mulder even sensed it? Did he even care?

Her things were packed as she wheeled her case out behind her, searching for the extra room key she had stashed in her pocket. Out of habit anymore she always ordered extras for their respective rooms, experience having taught her that one could never be too prepared should something happen to one partner or the other in the solitude of their lonely motel rooms. She firmly opened up Mulder's room, still disarray from the moments before he took off into the Florida woods with her. Still, her partner was nothing if not predictable. She easily located his suitcase in the closet, half filled with his clothing, and wandered into his bathroom to gather his things there. Clothes lay in a pile in the corner, shucked off before a shower. His suit coat lay crumpled under the linen of his dress shirt. His tie was tossed over the towel rack crookedly. Honestly, did men just not care what damage they did to clothes?

She plucked up the errant articles, smoothing them out and folding them neatly, silently bemoaning Mulder's bachelor tendencies. He had expensive taste in suits, he always dressed impeccably, if one excused his ties and yet like most of the things in Mulder's life they were tossed aside in the face of one of his cases, his life narrowly focused on whatever work was at hand. Scully wished desperately she could get him to live a little, to see beyond the narrow confines of his basement office and his monster cases. at least choose some different ties, Scully sighed, wrinkling her nose at the scrap of silk as she snagged it and folded it neatly. He may be slightly colorblind, but she was and she had much better taste in neckwear. Quickly, she took the discarded clothing and stowed them in one corner of his suitcase, turning to the closet to gather the rest. It occurred to her, briefly, that perhaps Kinsley and Stonecypher would find these actions odd, Scully packing up Mulder's things for him as if she had some sort of right. Perhaps it would fuel those speculations that always seemed to swirl around regarding the two of them, that she and Mulder were more than friends. Then again, perhaps the speculation after all of this time wasn't so far off. They were certainly more than just work colleagues, if considerably less than lovers. They were something… different, and she doubted any partnership conference anywhere could easily categorize what she and Mulder had become for one another.

She barely registered the sound of shrieking tires outside of the motel as she snagged Mulder's shaving kit out of the bathroom and tossed it into his bag, zipping it up and giving the room a once
over to make sure she grabbed everything. Not that Mulder had much, as a guy his existence was much more Spartan than her own, lacking the feminine detritus of earrings and make-up. She'd just made it to the door when she heard the pounding on her room next door and Mulder's familiar bellow ringing close behind it.

What in the…

Scully frowned as she opened the door and leaned out to Mulder's frantic cry, wondering what in the world could possibly be wrong now. "Mulder, what's going on?"

He looked relieved as he rushed over to her, grabbing both his suitcase and hers, fearful eyes glancing behind her. "Let's get out of here."

That was a first.

"Okay," she puzzled, following him out as he slammed the hotel room shut behind her.

"You pack everything?" He didn't bother looking at his suitcase to check, choosing instead to grab her arm and lead her towards the car.

"Yeah," she frowned up at him, trailing behind as she glanced back at their motel room doors. "Mulder, what in the hell has gotten into you?"

"Nothing." Not that Scully believed that muffled reply for a minute, not when he busied himself with tossing the suitcases in the trunk next to the ones belonging to the missing Kinsley and Stonecypher. "Just know the other two want to get on the road."

Mulder was a horrible liar. "And what about the room keys?"

"We'll mail them, official FBI business and all that. Let's go." He busily shuffled her into the car, practically tossing her in as she squawked in mild protest. He ignored her as he climbed into the driver's side, gunning the engine and squealing off out of the parking lot, peeling down the road.

"Do I want to know what this is all about?"

"Probably not," he admitted as he watched the motel disappear in the rearview mirror. "But we are a team, Scully! Don't you trust me?"

The sadder part about all of this was that she did. "There are some days, Mulder, when I just decide it is better not to know."
Taking a Roadtrip

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder follows up on fan mail.

The month that followed was quiet, eerily so. Scully fretted as she went into work everyday, quietly going about her business. This wasn't anything close to usual for herself and Mulder. The months since her illness and recovery were marked by a surprising amount of calm from the man who usually reveled in all things strange and weird. Since their return from Florida, Mulder had seemed fairly content to stay close to DC. He cleaned off his desk. He filed reports. He consulted on a case for Violent Crimes and was even polite about it. Things couldn't have been any smoother for them.

Which was why Scully was so worried.

So it was that when Scully wandered in one innocuous seeming Monday morning, Mulder's eager grin and confident swagger caught her by surprise as she entered their shared office.

"So you feel much up to Arkansas today?"

"Does anyone feel up to Arkansas?" Scully grimaced as she tried to sip her large coffee.

Mulder waved plane tickets in her face. "Scully, I've been good for an entire month!"

"I should have brought you a cookie." Her eyes crossed as she focused on the words "Little Rock" printed on the cards in front of her. "What is in Arkansas?"

"Shaineh Berkowitz, mother to Izzy, now eighteen, product of an unplanned pregnancy." Mulder fairly bounced on his toes, his eyes gleaming bright as Scully tried with all of her might not to meet his enthusiasm with an eye roll.

"I didn't know you were well versed in obstetrics, Mulder."

"I've found my way around a female pelvis or two," he smirked, delighted at her snort of disgust as she set down her briefcase. "Besides, what interests me more is not who conceived Izzy, but how."

Scully couldn't resist. "You know when a Mommy and a Daddy love each other so much…"

"Yeah, well I've seen more than enough test tube creations since we've begun working on the X-files to at least give my suspicion some credence." There was more than a hint of dark sarcasm in Mulder's humor as he reached across for her briefcase. "And I will grant you that Shaineh Berkowitz isn't exactly the world's most well-written or well-spoken person to come forward, but that doesn't mean her case is any less valid."

"Well-written?" Scully frowned as Mulder snagged up her briefcase and moved towards the door, clearly in the belief that she would follow.

"She sent me a letter. I got it in the mail yesterday."
"A letter?" Odd, they rarely got letters from random people unless it was one of Mulder's informants playing their strange cloak and dagger games. "How would a person off the street know about you?"

"You say that as if no one has ever heard of me."

"I was under the impression that no one ever had."

Mulder looked injured as he punched the elevator button and spun on her. "I've been known to offer my services to a people and my expertise has been asked for on a variety of different outlets, including radio and television."

Expertise? "You've been on television?"

Mulder frowned even more at the deep, dry dubiousness in her voice. "Yes, television."

"I can only imagine one of those stupid daytime gossip rags would want you, like Rikki Lake or Maury Povich." As the doors opened, she laughed, the very idea was ludicrous. Mulder wouldn't sink that low, not to the land of DNA paternity tests and surprise, on air confessions of infidelity. Except he wasn't laughing as he followed behind her. In fact he was looking even further put out. "It was Jerry Springer."

The elevator stopped at the floor of their parking garage as Scully spun up to stare at Mulder's suddenly beat-red face. "What?" She squawked as the sound of her stunned outrage ringing off the metallic walls and down the drywall hallway, carrying the sound of her protest. Several random agents office workers on the floor turned to stare at her as Mulder's fingers wrapped around her elbow and propelled her to the parking area doors.

"Just announce it to the whole world, Scully," he hissed, glancing at the bemused, speculative looks that followed them out of the door.

"You are the one who threw it out on Jerry Springer of all places. You don't think that people don't know already?" The very idea astounded her. Granted Mulder would likely use any outlet he deemed necessary for his work, but Springer? The show was the worst of the worst, the lowest of the lowest. People watched the show as a guilty pleasure they didn't talk about. It fed the public desire to watch train wrecks in action, the women who had no idea who fathered their five children, men who slept with teenaged girls and their mothers, and the type of people that Scully usually associated with the trailer parks of society. Jerry Springer was a show one watched to make one's self feel better about their position in society. It wasn't exactly the sort of reputable place Scully would expect for a man who was trying desperately to prove the legitimacy of his research and work.

"Look, they wanted to have a scientific explanation for the topic they were discussing, I think you would appreciate the stance I took on the show."

"Mulder, I'm more disturbed that they even knew to call you in the first place."

He glowered darkly as he led them first to her car to gather her emergency suitcase. "Your prejudice is showing, Scully. It wasn't a tabloid, slug fest if that's what you are thinking it was."

"Mulder, right now, I'm still just reeling that you did something like this at all." Truthfully, she was even more surprised he admitted it. She yanked her luggage out and turned to him. "You've worked
so hard for credibility over the years, to go on a show like that, it hardly does it any justice."

"Well it doesn't matter if I did the work justice or not because I don't know if I believe a single word I said on that show at the time anyway." Mulder's disgruntlement quickly turned dark as Scully realized she had just stumbled clumsily into the one sore spot that Mulder had been avoiding for months now. "They wanted an expert on alien abductions, and as we both know that had less to do with aliens and more to do with lies we both were led to believe."

His gaze darkened, fingers flexing in brief agitation as he snagged her case out of her fingers, silently taking it from her and moving towards his own car a row over. Scully said nothing as he took the initiative, biting back her brief irritation in the face of the hornet's nest she stirred.

She paused, watching him as he unlocked his trunk and placed her bag inside studying his determined resolve as he rounded his car to the driver's side. "If you really believe that, Mulder, then why are we doing this? Why are you still here, running off to some other hapless case somewhere?"

Her challenged stopped him briefly. He paused hand on the door of his sedan, as he turned to her, thoughtful. "This is what I do, Scully, this is who I am. And no matter what the truth is about my sister or all of that, there are other truths out there and Shaineh Berkowitz needs my help. Who else is going to listen to her?"

Flippantly, Scully wanted to tell him that perhaps Jerry Springer or some tabloid rag sheet would likely listen to her, but she held her tongue. Mulder had a need and desire to take this case no matter what her personal opinions on the matter were. In defeat, she gulped the last of her now lukewarm coffee and moved to the car, climbing into the passenger's side as Mulder started it up.

"I still think this is a mistake, Mulder, probably nothing more than this woman's need for attention. Perhaps it's a way for her to explain away a bad night eighteen years ago that her son is wanting some explanations for."

"Maybe it is, but we won't know until we go there and find out, will we?" Mulder had that determined look, the kind that promised she would be dragged there whether she liked it or not.

"You know I hate Arkansas," she grumbled in defeat.

"You've been there once in your life?"

"Twice, both with you, the first time we ended up playing super-spies tracking a semi-tractor trailer, the second time I nearly got eaten by cannibals."

"All the fun stuff happens to you, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I wish it would happen to you for a change," she grumbled, jamming her empty coffee cup into one of his cup holders.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully go on a snipe hunt.

Scully had to admit she was impressed, she didn't think Izzy Berkowitz could possibly run that fast. In the gloom of the copse of trees she could barely make out the boys large, round form as he and his friends shouted and scrambled through the underbrush, laughing with teenaged nerves as they shot wary glances over their shoulders. She couldn't blame the boys for fleeing into the night from the grizzled man and his pet pig glaring moodily after them. Frankly, she wasn't terribly sure why she and Mulder weren't right behind them.

As for that, she turned towards her partner, who stood resolute, frowning down at the rumbling hog pulling on its tether, grunting and snuffling in the underbrush, ignored by its master who continued to glare at the pair of them. "Do pigs make good pets?"

"Don't know, never had one as a pet,' the man snapped, beady eyes glinting diamond hard in the moonlight. "Ain't you ever heard of a trufflin' pig before?"

"Truffles, in Arkansas, at night?" Scully couldn't help but be dubious as she watched the animal snort and root at the base of one of the gnarled, silvery trees, nosing at fallen leaves and tufts of dried grass. "I'm sorry, but that does sound very suspicious, Mister...."

"Pollidori is the name and why the hell is it suspicious what I'm doing on my land?" His angry rumble was punctuated by a sharp jerk on the nylon leash, causing the pig to yelp and return to his recalcitrant master. "These part of the woods are known for good mushrooming. Tiny here is how I hunt them down?"

"Tiny?" Mulder's voice cracked as he stared in flabbergast amusement at porcine figure that Scully would describe as anything but small. "I suppose it's a better name than Bacon."

Pollidori clearly wasn't amused. "What the hell is this all about, looking for a monster?"

Before the old farmer could start screaming about warrants and rights, Scully decided the wiser move would be to step in and hope to make this sound as rational as she possibly could, considering this was one of Mulder's cases. "We received a complaint about some sort of attacks in town, someone claimed it was a particularly monstrous looking being that Izzy Berkowitz said he saw out here."

"Izzy Berkowitz is about three bricks shy of a full load and none of his friends are much better." Pollidori sniffed, growling in menace as he tightened the leash to his pig and turned to wander out of the woods and out into the open clearing beyond. "I've known that boy since he was born. Never was right."

"But you claimed there was a monster out here," Mulder insisted, immediately following the farmer's trail, Scully coming up behind him.

"I didn't say there was a monster, all I said was that I could show you the monster you are looking
for. Can't you understand English?"

Mulder looked suitably chastised as he turned to Scully for support. He never was very good with
the locals.

"Mr. Pollidori," she stepped in smoothly. "Why would Shaine Berkowitz claim there was a
monster who attacked her and impregnated her?"

Perhaps she imagined the slight hitch in the old man's step, the pause he gave as he reached the
clearing. Whatever it was, Pollidori seemed to regard Shaine with as much disdain as he regarded
her son. "Probably cause about the only way Sheinah could possibly get herself knocked up again
is if it was some sort of freak of nature she'd conned into it. No one accused that one of being
anything close to pretty."

Scully ignored Mulder's choking chuckle as she pressed the man further. "Be that as it may,
Shaine claims to have had a tubal ligation years ago. She shouldn't be able to get pregnant."

"How the hell should I know, then, I'm not the doctor." He turned on Scully in annoyance. "If you
want to know that sort of thing, why don't you go and speak to the boy genius? He knows a thing
or two about this science stuff."

"Boy genius?" Scully glanced to Mulder in confusion, but the old man had lost his patience,
growling and stomping off, dragging the pig behind him as he stalked across the silvery expanse of
grass towards a truck sitting quietly in the distance.

"My so-called son," he snapped back as Scully and Mulder followed. "He fancies himself a
scientist now, has a lab set up not far away from here. Sometimes teaches at the local universities.
You can't miss him. He's got an ego the size of Texas and not enough God given sense to know
what to do with it."

It wasn't everyday in a small farming community you ran across a research scientist. "What does
your son work on?"

"Genetics." The man barked the word as he pulled up to his truck, throwing open the back end with
a rough clang, the metal groaning. He whistled as he lowered a ramp for the pig. The animal
shuffled and grunted its way automatically up the wooden platform, prodded none-to-gently by
Pollidori's annoyed impatience.

"Animal husbandry?" It was a logical leap for Mulder. This was a farming area and that type of
scientific work was a major, agricultural industry.

"That's how he got started when he was a kid. Liked to understand why it was when you bred two
animals together you got different features, larger size, more stamina, things like that." Pollidori
fussed with getting his animal into the back, closing it inside the truck bed. "He was normal
enough back then, just wanted to know things. He didn't want to…mess with the way God made
the world."

"Mess with it how, sir?" Mulder's gaze thinned curiously as he watched the pig wander in its new
confines thoughtfully.

"Doing things that just weren't right, that's how. Wanted to figure out how to turn bugs into
monsters and give people extra limbs. You know, mad scientist stuff, like from the movies."

Mad scientist stuff? Scully bit hard on her tongue, as she nearly drew blood. She cut a knowing
look at Mulder. How many times had she and Mulder run across things she thought were straight
out of mad scientist movies that turned into horrific, real life research? So many fields were moving so fast, it was easy to assume that what was happening in the lab was indeed something fantastical, straight out of one of the black and white horror films, with bubbling flasks and electrified Jacob's Ladders.

"Do you know precisely what sort of work that your son is working on?" Mulder's quest was diplomatic enough, but it still unsettled the man. He rubbed at his neck in obvious agitation, scowling at the ground as if it had something to do with whatever falling out he had with his scientist son.

"I don't know anything. He's off doing his thing. We had a falling out. We don't talk much, not even when his mother passed. Only reason he even came back here was 'cause the local university offered him his own lab to do with what he wanted. Some trouble he got into wherever he was at last, they didn't like what he was doing."

"And you suspect he's making monsters?" Mulder looked absolutely fascinated with the idea.

"I think he's meddling in things he ought not to. You can't just go around messing with what makes people up and expect that it will all be okay. Accidents happen, and he acts like he's God or something, like he's better than God, and treats everyone like that as well. You'll see. You go over there and talk to him. If you can stomach five minutes with him, I'll be surprised."

A Jerry Springer level family feud turned into an X-file. This was a new one. Perhaps she should call the show to get the Pollidori's on, father and son, and let them have at each other on national television. "We're sorry for trespassing on your land, sir, I think its time Agent Mulder and I go and perhaps speak to your son then."

"You can try. Don't know if it will do you any good." The old man didn't sound like he thought it would. "You two agents might just be wasting your time on this one."

"Don't worry, sir, we are with the government. We excel at that!" Scully reached out to snag Mulder's elbow and drag him with her as she turned heel away from Pollidori and his pig. "Come on, Mulder."

Mulder paused only briefly before following behind her shorter steps across the expanse of cow pasture towards where their rental sedan was parked. There was no sign of Izzy Berkowitz or his buddies and Scully guessed they had run off down the road, preferring to walk home rather than wait for the agents to return from their forest encounter.

"You know, perhaps Pollidori's right, his son is into something that could be lurking in these woods." Predictably, Mulder was intrigued by the idea.

"Mulder, this isn't a case of monsters knocking up random women, that is an argument between a father and son, nothing more. It's no different or better than any of those stupid, daytime talk shows. The father doesn't like how his son is living his life, and the son is unapologetic about it. Throw in a trailer and a trashy girlfriend and I say you got a pretty good episode."

"Do you regularly watch those sorts of shows, Scully? You seem so well versed?"

"I was at home for two months while you made me get every test under the sun before coming back to work. I was very bored." She ignored his gleeful amusement as he dug for their car keys, rounding their sedan to the passenger's side. "The truth is this isn't a X-file, Mulder, this is a Thanksgiving family argument. and I'm still not even sure why we are here."
"You don't want to know if the Great Mutato exists?"

"I don't care if he exists, Mulder, I think that's the real answer. And I'm not sure why you care either."

"Because it's there! Isn't that what drives all great quests? That need to know, to explore. That's what scientists do, they ask questions because they want to know 'why'."

"I know 'why', Mulder. I still don't know how any of this is an X-file and why we are spending government money on it."

"Hence why we are going to go speak to Dr. Pollidori." Mulder unlocked the car. "Perhaps he can tell us why a Cher-loving, peanut-butter eating creature with two mouths wants to make sweet-sweet love to Sheinah Berkowitz."

It was stupid, it was ridiculous, but what choice did she have. She was here with Mulder and she had agreed to it. "Fine. But don't be disappointed if you find that Dr. Pollidori is nothing more than a misunderstood egghead in his lab who never got along with his simple, farmer father."

"You take the fun out of everything, Scully, you know that."

She didn't deign to give him a response as he started the car and turned on the headlights into the darkness.
Even the very act of breathing hurt, sending shockwaves of pain through Scully's skull as she forcibly resisted the urge to vomit all over the cheap, nylon carpeting of her motel room. She shuffled into her musty smelling space, groaning as she tumbled to the bed, rumpled, chemical smelling clothes and all, clutching at the thin, well worn comforter with both hands to avoid the sensation of sudden sea-sickness that washed over her as she came to a rest on her back. She hadn't felt this bad since…well ever. Hell, even when she was dying just months ago she didn't feel this bad. Cancer didn't feel like this. Treatment didn't feel like this. This felt like torture, like a Dante level of purgatory, as whatever she had eaten three days ago - had she eaten three days ago - churned painfully in her throat. Her one consolation in life…at least Mulder felt just a bad as she did.

He had stumbled behind her, head in his trembling hands, eyes screwed tightly against the sunlight filtering in through her open motel room door. "Light…is bad…laser beams in my eyes!"

Sympathy was in short supply for Scully at that moment. "Shut the damn door then." Did common sense flee from Mulder the minute felt a little ill?

There was a grunt as the walls shook with the force of the slamming of the thin door, which seemed to sap all the energy Mulder had left in him for the moment. He crumpled, all lanky limbs and pitiful whimpers, into the single chair in the room, tucked beside a table with a lamp. That was where his head came to rest, his cheek pressed tightly against the cool laminate of the particleboard surface.

"I blame you for this," Scully growled lowly, her throat feeling as if she'd gargled with rough diamonds.

"Me!" He yelped or at least tried to. It came out more as a cracked sort of squeak, a broken nasal tone that caused him to wince. "How am I to blame?"

"You ran into a tented house without thinking that it was being fumigated."

"You were the one that followed."

Scully wasn't in the mood to listen to his valid point.

"You are the one who got us into all of this to start with?" She attempted to roll to her side so that she could better glare at him, but decided extraneous movement was completely out of the question. "Monsters and Cher? You don't honestly believe that some peanut-butter loving creature impregnated Elizabeth Pollidori?"

"Why else would she…we have been drugged for the last two days!" Mulder mumbled against the table. "You saw the frying pan."

"Mulder…"
"And what about the jar of peanut butter? Izzy said Mutato loves peanut butter."

"Do you even hear yourself?" She reached for a pillow with which to cover her eyes. "You are doing exactly what they want."

"You still believe this is some elaborate set up, designed to get our attention?"

"We've seen even more elaborate set ups designed to suck you in," she snapped crossly, knowing it was a low blow but unleashing the slinging barb all the same. "They contacted you, Mulder, because they know you believe in this stuff. You heard Shaineh, she saw you on Jerry Springer. This is what these people want! This is what gives their lives meaning! You heard those people in the dinner, they were thrilled at the idea of being on a cheap, daytime talk show."

"Do you honestly have so little faith in humanity you can't believe for an instant that to these people this idea of the Great Mutato is real?" Mulder angrily jerked up to glare at her, and realizing his mistake stopped short, grunting in pain as his face dropped to the table again with a thud. It took long moments before he spoke again. "What do you want to bet that an examination of Elizabeth Pollidori verifies she's pregnant?"

"By some monster? Couldn't it be as simple of an explanation as her husband?"

"You've met Dr. Pollidori, does he look like the type of man who would go about making a baby the good, old fashioned way when he could just whip one up in his lab? Maybe even give it an extra arm to scratch that one annoying place on the back."

"You want to believe it's a monster. They want to believe it, too, because if it is they can go on television and show the world their weird, monster babies, tell their story, be gawked at like members of a circus sideshow, and then be talked about for weeks as they get their five minutes in the spotlight." Scully's head spun sickeningly as her voice raised, ringing in her hollow head. "In the meantime I've lost days of my life now chasing after small town fears and suspicions and I'm emblazoned all over their one page rag sheet."

FBI agents missing indeed, passed out cold in someone else's house. Dead God, how were either of them supposed to explain that to Skinner?

"You can at least take comfort in the fact it wasn't Jerry Springer," Mulder offered lamely. If Mulder wanted to call it comfort.

"What I want is to go home." She at least managed to raise her head off the pillow enough to try and glare at him. "Face it, this is no different than those guys who took pictures of the Loch Ness Monster, or that stupid picture you have in your office that is supposed to be Big Foot. This is someone's idea to stir up trouble, to get people talking, to get put on the television show circuit with you as a commentator and get people to notice them. This isn't an X-file."

"Except that Shaineh Berkowitz is still pregnant and there was something in that frying pan."

"Fine," she sighed, allowing her head to drop softly with a slight sob. "I'll see if I can't get the residue on the pan analyzed at the local university tomorrow, first thing."

Not now, not for hours at least. God, she didn't think she could move out of this bed ever again. "Mulder…I need to sleep, maybe. Perhaps kill myself. Whatever it is I don't need you here for it."

"I don't think I can move." He sounded pitiful from where he slumped, boneless against the table.
"You can't stay there, you'll hurt yourself."

"Unf!" It was his single note reply. Frankly Scully didn't have the energy or wherewithal to bother protesting any further, nor did she have the strength to try and force her partner, who was nearly a foot taller than herself and would probably just remain limp on her chair besides.

"Fine," she yawned, kicking off her high-heeled shoes and curling up tightly in the middle of her hard-as-rock mattress. "Suit yourself. Don't snore."

"I don't snore," he muttered, or at least she thought he did. He was already losing the battle for consciousness against the table.

Right, she thought tiredly as she burrowed into her pillows, and he wouldn't drool over the fake wood, either.
Smoke still lingered in the damp air, filling it with ash and cinder, swirling around the red and blue lights that danced in the window of their rental sedan. Scully stood beside it watching as the county sheriffs officers spoke to Mulder, all looking about as confused as she felt. How in the hell were they even going to begin prosecuting a case like this?

Quietly Scully looked in the back of their car, towards the huddled, snoozing figure, his ruined face pressed against the light-spangled glass. Mutato - or whatever his real name was - lay fast asleep, curled in a ball of weary grief as he waited what his fate would be. He'd dropped off despite the fascinated gazes and pointing fingers of the local towns people who all wandered by to gawk and stare as they were herded from the Pollidori farm. Even the sheriff's deputies had taken turns, before meeting Scully's icy glare and turning back to the matter of Dr. Francis Pollidori and his dead father.

What a mess.

There was much gesticulation and hand waving and a sworn epithet or three from the local men as finally some decision was made. They turned from Mulder to their own black and white where Pollidori sat, watching the proceedings with a proud, disdainful air that bespoke the fact that he still didn't believe he had done anything particularly wrong. Scully had seen that look many times in her career, especially from scientists. She would never deny the hubris that existed in the research community, the belief that through sheer human reason and ability they could create all that God had wrought. How many had looked at the cross at her throat with that slightly upturned eyebrow and the patronizing look in their eye? Pollidori was one of many who thought they could beat God at his own game. Poor Mutato happened to be a sad byproduct of such backwards thinking.

Mulder loped across the grass as in the distance fire engines worked on the charred remains of the elder Pollidori's destroyed barn. He looked grim and sad, soot smudging one cheek as he wandered up. Scully resisted the urge to reach up and wipe it away for him.

"Well the sheriff's office has Pollidori at least for the murder of his father." Mulder glanced back at the squad car where the scientist sat. "They aren't sure what to make of the rest of it, the work he was doing or Mutato."

He paused, grimacing. "Does he even have a real name other than that?"

"None that he's given." Scully sighed, cringing at the title Izzy Berkowitz coined for the poor, deformed man in their car. "Just looking at him, Mulder! It's heartbreaking. You see deformities like this only occasionally in nature, when embryonic division doesn't finish completely. It's almost as if Pollidori was trying to force monozygotic twins and failed, creating an incomplete, conjoined twin instead."

"But even conjoined twins look more normal than that." Mulder looked pained as his eyes flickered
to the sleeping figure in the car beside them.

"We won't know until they can run some tests on him, see what it was Pollidori was doing with his genetics in the first place and determine how he ended up this way." The testing alone could take years and that wasn't speaking to the more immediate concerns of what to do with Mutato. All his life he had been hidden, secluded on his adopted father's farm. He had next to no human contact, no skills for living in the real world, the one constant in his life was now dead and his only home was nearly destroyed. What was to become of him now?

As always Mulder seemed to presage her thoughts. "The DA will want to have him for investigative purposes, but the sheriff believes that they will want an evaluation of him before that to make sure his story even checks out, let alone fit to serve as witness." This idea clearly didn't please him. "Kid's been through enough in his life already, now he has to be drug through that?"

"And it's only going to get worse, you know. He's got no means, Mulder, unless the elder Pollidori left him the farm. There will be people knocking on his door wanting to test him and study him to see what the doctor did to him to make him that way."

"The rest of his life as a test rat." Mulder grimaced in clear distaste, watching the sleeping form quietly. "It's not right, Scully, he didn't ask to come into this world, to exist. He's been ripped from the comfort and safety of his existence and now we are booting him into a cold world full of more scientists, more experiments, more questions? No matter how he got here or why he looks this way, he's human. Science always seems to have forgotten that."

"I know." Scully agreed, her heart aching for the unfortunate soul as well. "What about Shaine Berkowitz and Elizabeth Pollidori? Any thoughts and their attacks?"

"My guess is that it was old man Pollidori the whole time," Mulder nodded towards the smoking mess that had been the Pollidori barn. "Remember when we ran into him in the woods and he brought up his son's work. I asked him if it was animal husbandry. Judging from his own livestock, I would say it wasn't totally unfamiliar to the old man himself. I think he just wasn't as well versed in it as his son, he knew the basics to produce a pig that hunts mushrooms, or a large, healthy cow, but not enough to create the same sort of creature that his son made and discarded. But I think he was trying."

"But he was a farmer! Where did he get the ova and sperm to even begin producing those types of experiments? And who is the father of Izzy or these new babies?"

"Scully, you know I respect you as a scientist, I appreciate you as an investigator, but I have to say there are some questions you ask that I really just don't care to know the answers to." Mulder's pained expression spoke to the fact that this was one of those rare occasions where her partner couldn't even begin to wrap his head around the idea and a part of him didn't even want to. "There are so many questions I ask and want to know about, but you know, this really isn't one of them."

Scully wisely decided to let the idea lie for now. Perhaps, if she admitted it to herself, she didn't want to know the answers any more than he did.

"So where do we take him for tonight?" Scully looked to the immediate problem at hand. "All his things were in that barn from what best I can tell, his belongings, his clothes. He's lost everything."

"We can't take him into town, not with the uproar that will ensue there if he shows his face." Mulder pulled thoughtfully on his bottom lip before sucking it between his teeth and looking to the farmhouse, ablaze in the darkness, untouched by the mob-set fire that had destroyed the barn. "We could just shack him up here. I can stay out here with him so he's in some sort of police custody till
the DA in the morning, make sure no one else comes out here to bother him tonight."

"Leave you alone on some farmstead with crazy townsfolk about? They've already showed up here with pitchforks once tonight, wait till they get more beer in them!" No, Scully didn't like the idea of Mulder being out there alone and she really hated the idea of going back into town the face the curious looks of the already nosy townsfolk, recording every move she made to provide fodder for their small-minded gossip. "How about this, you get him inside, I'll run into town for our things. We'll just stay with him for the next few days to get him processed with the locals, and then head back to DC."

"You are willing to face the wrath of Skinner on this one, wasting government resources on babysitting a suspect on a local case?" The idea that Scully was suggesting for once that they ignore protocol for the good of someone else surprised and amused Mulder.

"Yeah, don't gloat, for once I'm making you call it in and explain it to him." How many times had she been the one stuck in that position? "Besides, like you said, I think the poor kid has been through enough. It's the least we can do, coming in here and upsetting his whole world."

In a way they were just as responsible for the losses Mutato had suffered. If Mulder had never responded to Shaineh's letter, perhaps his father would still be alive today.

"Right." The consequences of their work weren't lost on Mulder, who watched the sleeping Mutato thoughtfully for long moments. His mind was racing again. He had the ever-so-familiar, distant look in his eye, the one that either meant something brilliant was soon to occur, or something that Scully was going to heartily regret.

"Mulder," she cautioned suspiciously as he continued his speculation, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

"No, you run into town, I can handle things here with him," he replied, not even hearing the warning question in her tone.

"Do I even want to know?" She shook her head, suspecting that the answer to that was probably in the negative.
In which Mulder performs a feet of magic.

There were moments when Scully thought her partner operated on a whole different plain than the rest of humanity, and there were times, especially recently, when he proved her right in that assumption. Scully didn't know how Mulder did it - force of will, personality, sheer stubbornness - but she was beginning to think that there wasn't a thing on this planet that could stop him if he put his mind to something, including taking a poor, neglected and disfigured young man to a Cher concert.

"In all fairness it's a Cher impersonator and not the real deal herself."

"I don't think he cares about the difference." Scully felt her smile broaden into an indulgent grin at the ruined yet adoring face across from her. Mutato - or Rocky as he now preferred to be called - bounced in time to the warm up act, his one good eye round with amazement, staring at everything in the dimly lit, satin lined nightclub. It wasn't the sort of place one expected in the bare bones, smoky, neon lit, satin lined nightclub. It wasn't the sort of place one expected in the bare bones, smoky, neon lit blues joints of Beal Street, with its tribute to WC Handy and its memories of Elvis. It certainly wasn't the type of place where Scully imagined Mulder would find a front table set before an intimate stage. And certainly it wasn't a place that Scully expected that she would see a man who had spent all of his life alone and rejected, labeled a monster.

"Mulder," she breathed, leaning in close enough so he could hear her over the din of the loudspeakers in front of them. "You really would go to the ends of the earth to perform a miracle, wouldn't you?"

His eyes sparkled with dark smugness over the glowing light of the singular candle on the table, a slow, cocky smile spreading cheerfully. "I seemed to be filled with them of late."

The collar of Scully's suit tugged at the scar on her neck, the one where her chip was inserted, and she grinned back. Yes, she could believe in this moment Mulder could do anything, walk on water, heal the sick, and do right by the oppressed. There was a reason she followed Mulder when all common sense and her elder brother told her not to, the man not only believed in the impossible, he did it.

"She's on, she's next!" Rocky spun on them, glee contorting his ruined but ecstatic face as he bounced in his seat. "Oh my God, she will be here, really here!"

"Yep, and she's singing right to you." Mulder slapped the young man's hunched shoulders soundly, enjoying seeing true, amazed joy. "Someone might have told her that you were her biggest fan."

"R-r-really?" Rocky stuttered, tongue tripping across crooked teeth. The pleasure and excitement dimmed somewhat as a twisted hand came up to touch his dual-sided face, patting face that perhaps would have belonged to his conjoined twin if it had ever been allowed to develop. He had earned his fair share of stares and whispers since entering earlier, but till this moment had seemed nearly oblivious to them. But in the face of meeting his idol, doubt and fear understandably crept in and took control, his joy fleeing in the face of it.
"Don't worry about it," Mulder read his anxiety before he could even vocalize it, sounding more confident about it than Scully felt. She had watched all night as other attendees had settled at the tables around them. Some were sympathetic; others obviously disgusted, all were curious about the person sitting near them who looked so different, so inhuman. The part of Scully that never grew up past her seven-year-old, self-righteous self had a mad desire stand up and dare anyone to laugh at him, but she refrained as she squeezed Rocky's good hand reassuringly.

"I just..." Rocky paused, overcome for the briefest of moments, and understandably so. His entire life in a few days had been turned upside down, his father gone, his home uncertain, and the eyes of the world now turned upon him like they never were before. But tonight, this one night, Rocky Pollidori was having the night he dearly wished for himself. "It's all just so...overwhelming."

"I know," Mulder admitted in total empathy. "But it is time something right happened for you, Rocky. You aren't a mistake, and you're not a monster, and you deserve this."

The music from the stage swelled and grew, and an emcee took the mike, greeting the crowd as all the attention in the room came to a focal point towards the spotlight centered in the stage. Whatever misgivings Rocky had melted quickly as his excitement returned triple-fold, and he quickly turned his chair around to face the action in the front. Scully wished her own concern evaporated so easily, as she shot Mulder the speculative look that Rocky could not.

"You so sure that sitting in the front row was a good idea?" She had wondered when Mulder led them to the front and center and had worried that Rocky's unorthodox visage might cause problems with the management. But so far, no one had said a thing, and Mulder seemed hardly to have thought about it.

He shot her the devil's own grin, pleased with himself. "I happened to know out entertainer tonight. She's a personal friend of mine, met her on my first trip out here to commune with the King."

Oh yes, Scully recalled, Mulder's personal spiritual guide was Elvis.

"You met Cher while going to Graceland?"

"Technically I met Tricia Gusto as a waitress at the IHOP not far from Graceland. She was trying to make it singing blues in the clubs and happened to know all the best ghost stories in town and I was an easy mark."

"A friendship built out of your own, personal gullibility, not often I hear that out of you."

"Yeah, well she gave up on blues a while ago, took up this gig here. I remembered her and gave her a call about Rocky and she told me to bring him by." Mulder shrugged, fiddling with the straw in his tame glass of Coke idyll. "You know, Skinner's likely going to give us hell for all of this, and I'll take the heat. I don't know, the kid's been through so much, this case, losing his father, hell, his existence. And we sort of came in here, the two of us, and ruined everything for him."

"You mean 'you' ruined everything for him, I tried talking you out of this," Scully replied, eyebrows shooting up coolly at him. He didn't choose to argue the point.

"If you and I hadn't wandered into this kid's life, his father would still be alive. He wouldn't be alone in this world."

"But his father could still be out there trying to inseminate women with babies hoping to make another one like him." Scully pointed out sagely.

"Perhaps," Mulder shrugged, watching Rocky as he bounced in utter excitement in his seat as the
music began. On the stage the spotlight shifted to the sheer curtain, a silhouette of a tall, thin woman earned screams of approval from the floor.

"Besides," Mulder continued over the roar of the crowd, "I think a little flack from our boss is worth it for this."

Maybe he was right, she silently conceded.

Excitement and anticipation swelled, the curtain rose, and the opening piano chimed a melody distantly, almost like a half-recalled memory as the deep alto rolled across the audience, holding them transfixed for the briefest of seconds. In front of them Rocky sat absolutely still as he stared up at the stage in utter and fixated fascination at the woman who for all the world to Scully look disturbingly like the very singer that Rocky loved so much.

Underneath the table, Mulder's foot nudged her as he smirked pridefully. Yes, he had done well this time. She imagined she would hear about this from him for a while.

"If you think this is getting you out of writing up the report on this, you are sorely mistaken," she replied, as on the stage "Cher" moved to the chorus.

_I was walking in Memphis, I was walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale. Walking in Memphis, but do you really feel the way I feel?_ 

"It's really her," Rocky fairly squealed, breathless as he turned to look at them both. "I can't believe it!"

Okay, so perhaps a small amount of deceiving was involved in Mulder's so-called miracle. She could overlook that for the greater good. Rocky began to dance in his seat to the time of the music as all around people stood and cheered, some singing along with the music, others dancing nearly as wildly as Rocky did in his static chair.

_I saw the ghost of Elvis, on Union Avenue, followed him up the gates of Graceland, and I watched him walk right through._

From the top of the steps their supposed Cher sang, carefully stepping down into the cheering throng, onto the floor where the tables gathered. Around the appreciative crowd surged and cheered, reached for her, but her eyes zeroed in on the one figure in the entire room who would worship at her feet if he could. Rocky was so still in that moment, Scully wondered if he had forgotten how to breathe. His own face went nearly as still as the misshapen one at the side of his head. Obviously torn between bolting or slipping right out of his chair onto the dance floor, it obviously hadn't occurred to him that this beautiful woman who looked every inch like his beloved Cher would actually step right up to him. Without fear, without even a flinch or hesitation, she extended her hand free of the mic and held it out in front of the hideously deformed face.

Scully didn't think that Rocky would take it. Terror mixed with awe for the briefest of moments on his twisted visage. But his goddess and idol wouldn't give up, reaching down for good hand to pull him up as from behind him Mulder propelled him forward, forcing the young man on his feet to follow her. Still the music continued as their Cher sang and Rocky danced, for the first time in his life not caring about the deformity that his creation left him with or about the stares from those around him. He danced and swayed and sang along, as Scully watched, finding herself grinning from ear to ear at the sight. For once, in a year that had been filled with unfairness and trials, someone was getting something they desperately deserved, something for someone was going right.
Mulder had even suggested it, Scully had immediately balked at the idea. The DA had cleared their charge of wrongdoing, but he was still a witness in a criminal investigation, his future uncertain, his prospects limited. Rocky wasn't even his real name, but rather the name he had chosen for himself from the Cher movie he had come to love so much. He had no legal name, no legal status, no one was even sure how he was born or created. The only persons who had those answers were the dead elder Pollidori and the arrested and defiant younger one. He was a person, not a monster, but what future lay in store for him outside of testing and probing beyond the confines of carnivals or sideshows. It was that idea, more than anything, that had stirred this half-baked scheme in Mulder, speaking deeply to his innate sense of justice. She hadn't been thrilled with the idea of taking Rocky across state lines to see a Cher impersonator on FBI time. But as she sat there watching the creature that the world and fate had ignored for so long dancing and enjoying himself, she couldn't deny that this was quite possibly the best cave-in to one of Mulder's whim's she had ever had. Scully didn't know how Mulder performed miracles, somehow he just did. And that was perhaps one of the reasons she so willingly followed him when her brother told her it was foolish, even when common sense told her not to. Each and every time she took his hand down the rabbit hole, despite all that she had suffered for it, precisely because of moments like this when he showed his heart, his compassion, and his brilliance.

Beside her Mulder grinned, watching the sight of Rocky dancing euphorically. There was a wicked glimmer in his eye as he smoothly rose from his chair, wandering to the dance floor. Before Scully could even question it or wonder if Mulder even knew how to dance he held his hand before her. Much as Rocky did before her, Scully stared at the familiar long fingers for the briefest of seconds, the inviting gesture, the one that called her out to play. Just like always, Scully took it.

Lightly he pulled her from her seat, straight onto the dance floor, spinning her gently towards him and into his arms. Breathless she felt herself pressed close against this man she had worked with for years now, her best friend, her savior, her partner. One hand rested lightly on her waist, the other still holding her fingers as he swayed slightly the music, rocking her on her feet briefly. It wasn't an overtly intimate gesture, no more than any other dance she had shared with a man, but Scully felt her cheeks blossom as she looked up at his beaming face, seeing something she hadn't seen in months from him. Happiness…pure, unadulterated happiness.

Scully found herself smiling back.

"You didn't think I could dance, did you," he rumbled as he spun her slightly, earning a peal of laughter out of her, his gravely monotone warbling the chorus.

"No," she laughed, her free hand clinging desperately to one broad shoulder as she giggled. "And you certainly can't sing."

"The lady mocks me!" he affected being wounded, but his eyes glowed brightly as he grinned broadly, keeping time to the music as they swayed.

"I mock, but I'm a little in awe as well," Scully replied honestly. "Is there anything you can't do if you set your mind to it?"

"I've yet to beat a Rubik's Cube in less than a minute."

"I'm serious," she snorted at his flippancy. "You made Rocky's lifetime, just by something as simple as bringing him to a concert."
"That wasn't difficult to do, Scully. Well besides convincing you to go along with it."

"But you did it, for nothing more than because you wanted to do the right thing." She would have let it go, left the young man to his fate and mourned the injustice of it all. But the idea of taking a little time to show him something special, that hadn't even occurred to her. "You just amaze me at times, you know."

Her words made him briefly thoughtful. "After four years and all we've been through, I call in a favor and I'm a hero? 'Cause I can hit up Danny for some great concert tickets if you really want…"

"I think there are a few other things that have earned you hero status in my eyes, you know." She mollified him somewhat as he spun them around briefly, light on his feet for all that he couldn't really dance and with the grace that came from being an athlete. Scully held on tight, trusting he'd keep her from stumbling and making a spectacular fool of herself, hlaughing in delight. Mulder kept her from falling, like he had at other times in their partnership, times when she was frightened, times when she was broken, times when she thought the world was falling apart, such as recently, and now he held her while they simply danced and laughed and for once enjoyed the world instead of fought it.

It felt amazingly safe, standing there in his arms like that, and the implications of that sense of well being were not ones Scully even wanted to think about at the moment, not when they were enjoying themselves, the world was at peace, and the story for once had a happy ending.

"Scully?"

"Hmmm," she hummed, the notes of the song slowing as they came to their soft, thoughtful ending.

"What are you thinking?"

His question whispered just above her ear, his breath brushing against her cheek.

"I was thinking what a very perfect night this was."

The truth was that it was nearly as perfect a night as she could remember in a very, very long time.
Another Year Older

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is pulled into someone's game.

Mulder was late. He was never late.

Scully perched on the edge of his large desk, pretending to busy herself with a file, but in reality she was watching the ticking of the clock in the corner. It was eight o'clock. Mulder was usually there before seven and well into some sort of strange file by the time she rolled in a half-hour later. He'd usually already had his morning cup of coffee, three or four pages of outlined notes, and a strange hypothesis or three to throw at her all before she had managed to set her briefcase down.

This morning of all mornings, he wasn't behind his surprisingly neat and tidy desk. He wasn't waiting, long legs propped on the corner as he leaned back in his chair, aquiline nose buried in a newspaper or thick file, agile mind wondering at why it was that some woman in Rochester saw the image of Jesus on a piece of toast. Perhaps any other day she would have shrugged it off, noted that Mulder was just late today for any number of personal reasons and gone about her business, waiting for him to show up.

But it wasn't a normal Monday morning in their office. Today was October thirteenth, a day that Mulder usually hardly tried to forget and for once Scully wasn't going to allow him to slide through the day and try and ignore it. She was going to force Mulder to enjoy his own birthday. It had become her private obsession and mission over the last few years, her own small effort to point out to her woe-begotten partner there were those who cared for him. Her first year working with Mulder she had missed his birthday completely, having never even thought to look for it in the files, assuming he would say something about it. Mulder had conveniently neglected to bring it up, however, and it was only months after the fact, when she was checking him into a hospital for a gunshot wound to the leg, that she had even discovered the date.

Scully had chastised him of course, to no avail. He had glibly replied he hated his birthday and preferred to ignore it. So she had planned to make it up the next year to him. That was before they had been separated and the X-files shut down. That was before she had been abducted by Duane Berry and had her memories and ova stolen from her, the chip left beneath her skin that controlled the disease that so nearly killed her. When she finally had returned the stress of the events had driven all thoughts of his birthday clean out of both of their minds. They had spent that birthday in quarantine in Washington State after their failed mission to find out what happened to Daniel Trepkos and his Cal Tech team. He'd said nothing then either.

The following year he'd been as equally evasive on the subject. They had been out covering the strange case of soldiers trying to commit suicide and failing, all claiming to be driven to it by a strange entity. They'd been so busy with the case that she had allowed herself to forget the occasion all together, determinedly waking him up bright and early that Saturday with his favorite coffee and donuts, refusing to allow him to mark the day unnoted. For all her fluster on happening on her barely clad partner that morning, she'd been thrilled that he seemed appreciative that she had made the sort of effort few others would bother with for his birthday.

Last year had been considerably less warm. Things had been strained between the two of them,
perhaps the most trying period on their partnership to date. The tension between herself and Mulder had been thick, her jealousy over his reaction to Melissa Riedel and her own growing dissatisfaction with her life and her place on the X-files had driven a wedge between them that at the time she doubted would ever be bridged again. They'd spent the evening being regaled by the Lone Gunmen with stories about the mysterious, cigarette smoking figure who seemed to thread his way through the weave of their lives, as Scully tried to pull up the courage to set aside her pride and ask him out for a drink. It had been a small step in the right direction between the two of them. She only regretted that things would become so much worse before they got better.

This year things couldn't be more different in their relationship. Through arguments, hurt, illness, and betrayal the two of them were still together, still friends. The hurt of a year ago was replaced by a stronger partnership, a new resolve between them, and something else. Scully's thoughts flickered briefly to the dance shared just weeks ago while in Memphis, the way Mulder had held her hand out to her, the feeling she had in his arms as they swayed in time to the music. Try as she might in those days since, she couldn't quite put out the fluttering feeling that rose unbidden inside of her, the flush she felt, or the smile that crept into place the minute she wasn't looking. What that meant she didn't know, nor did she understand, and unlike Karen Kosseff, she didn't want to prod it too thoroughly either, but she did know one thing, Mulder turned thirty-six today and she wasn't about to allow him to get away with ignoring or neglecting the anniversary of his birth, not even by being conspicuously late. She was resolved on this! The minute he got in, she had planned to take him out again, play a bit of workday hooky, getting out of their stuffy basement office and into the bright colors and brisk air of fall. If there was nothing that her recent illness taught it, she had learned that life was far too short to be constantly stuck inside, chasing after the threads and ghosts of supposed supernatural activity. And for once she was going to convince Mulder of that as well.

If she could find out where he was?

The clock face ticked to 8:15, the phone was silent, and in confusion Scully slid to the floor, crossing to her table and glancing at her own cell phone. No word, no call, no message. Where was he? Had he snuck out of town over the weekend? He wouldn't, he was under long standing orders to always tell her if he was going out, if nothing else so she could feed his fish. Had something come up with him? His mother?

The elevator doors down the hallway rumbled and clanged open, and the scrape of Mulder's shoes against tile nearly made her sigh in open relief. She turned to the door with a welcome smile as he turned the corner, slouching in, papers in hand. He hardly looked up at her greeting.

"Hey there, birthday boy, I was about to..." She paused as he shambled to his desk, hardly seeming to hear her. "Where have you been? I was getting worried."

"Skinner's office," he replied, distractedly rifling through a stack before moving towards the wall of files behind their desks. He scanned the tags for the briefest of seconds, diving at one drawer and jerking it open, absorption bending his head as he pulled out the file he was seeking.

"What's up?" Immediately Scully went on alert, sensing this wasn't just another call up on the carpet for one action of Mulder's.

"We're heading to Lorton Penitentiary," he replied vaguely, flipping through the pages. There was something he wasn't speaking too, she could tell that. His jaw ticked as he worked it, dark eyebrows drawn so tightly together she couldn't tell if he was angry or worried.

"What's at Lorton?"
"Robert Modell." He said it so calmly, as if this were anyone else, just a regular guy they had met on a case. But the name fell like a hard lump in Scully's gut, churning it.

"Pusher? Why?"

"He's escaped." The tense calm about her partner was too perfect, too controlled. Pusher had been one of the most dangerous criminals they had ever encountered and perhaps one of the smartest. No one could explain how it was the man could make his way into people's minds, making them do and act in ways they didn't wish to. Perhaps it was hypnosis, suggestion, hell Scully could almost believe in some latent psychic ability associated with the man's brain tumor. She had seen what he had done to other fully cognizant people. She'd seen a man drop dead at the mere suggestion of a heart attack. She had stood there, unable to stop her partner as he turned his weapon first on himself and then on her in a sick game of Russian roulette. Mulder had shot Modell through the head instead. Scully had never believed the man would ever recover. Somehow he must have, enough to make it out of a hospital.

"Did he walk out on his own?"

"No one knows. No one remembers." Mulder's full lips pressed hard together as he flipped through their report. "He wasn't noticed till early this morning during the regular guard shift change. All the guard on duty could tell anyone was that 'he had to go'. Sound familiar?"

Mulder finally looked up at her, his wry humor not reaching his hard, flat eyes. "Skinner wants us over there immediately."

"Mulder," Scully cautioned. She knew she had to, someone did. "This isn't just anyone, this is Pusher. This man played mind games on you like I have never seen done not even in some of our earliest cases together."

"No one knows Modell better than I do, Scully." There was no cockiness in that sentiment, it was only the truth, few in the FBI were as good as Mulder in getting into the minds and actions of other people, and no one could play Modell's games better.

"But he also knows you as well, Mulder, and chances are he's expecting you and he knows all your weaknesses."

"So what are we supposed to do, let him run around and kill more people because we're too afraid to deal with him?" Impatience finally broke through the tense reserve. "We sent other agents after Modell and he destroyed them."

Mulder was the only one he hadn't. Scully knew his statement was true, she had watched Modell in action. That wasn't the point. She didn't want it to have to be Mulder as the defacto answer. "When do we go to Lourton?"

"Now," he replied, reaching for his overcoat, grimly snapping shut the file. "He's already got at least a ten hour head start on us."

"Right." She grabbed her things as well, mentally cursing Modell as she followed behind Mulder's lengthy strides. That man always did have a knack for ruining their birthdays, the last time it had been hers. She only prayed that this time his effect would not be nearly as devastating.
Do You Want To Play A Game

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to talk Mulder out of falling into Pusher's games.

"Should you be heading this investigation?" Scully threw out the question that no one else seemed to be thinking of as they threw Mulder in the line of fire of the one criminal that had nearly broken him. Perhaps Skinner feared to bring it up, but she did not, and she stopped Mulder in his tracks as he glared at her impatiently.

"As opposed to what? What's your point?"

"That it's exactly what he wants!" She lifted her chin defiantly at Mulder's annoyance. "Once again you're playing his game."

"I think you are give Modell too much credit in plotting against me." Mulder growled, pacing away from her as she stubbornly followed behind. He was angry with her, agitated that she would question his fitness on this case. But somehow Scully doubted that much of his agitation was really because of her. How much of it was his outrage that a man he had thought he had eliminated had somehow made it free to continue his games at all?

"I'm not questioning this simply because of what happened, Mulder, this is dangerous."

"You don't think I don't understand those consequences?" He flipped his words over his shoulder, hardly stopping. "I seem to recall I was the one that received the taunting phone calls, the open challenge."

"Than why are you doing this?" She reached out to grab his coattail and pull him to something of a stop, to make him face her. "Don't tell me because no one else can do it, that isn't a good enough excuse."

"So tell me who else is going to catch him?" Mulder was hardly tolerant of her concern. "You acknowledged it, I'm the only one who can play his game."

"You don't have to play it! He's doing this to bait you!"

"Maybe," he replied cryptically, pulling away from her fingers and down the hallway of the Lorton Penitentiary.

"What do you mean 'maybe'?"

Mulder whipped around the corner before he could satisfy her question, forcing her to scramble after. "Mulder?"

Whether he liked it or not she was going to continue pestering him for what she wanted. He slowed to answer her, facing her in classic Mulder challenge pose, hands at waist, jaw ticking in annoyance. "Modell left no message."

"What?" She slowed in front of him, confused as to what he meant.
"Messages. Modell always left a message for people to follow, a calling card. He wanted to get caught. But not this time." It was a key aspect of Modell's profile that obviously was bothering Mulder, his teeth gnawing on the inside of his lip, working it over in his mind. "If Modell was baiting me into a game, he'd have left some calling card, some clue for me to trace and follow after him. But he doesn't want to be found."

"Not for the moment," Scully countered, "But that could be for any reason. He could simply be using it as an excuse to bide his time and figure out what his plan of action is going to be."

"It could be," Mulder conceded slowly but he was obviously still unconvinced. "The only message he left with the guard was that 'he had to go'. Where?"

"His apartment is gone now and he was a foster child. He had no family that we know of." There was no indication Modell had anywhere to go to.

"He saw himself as ronin, no friends, no relations, nothing to tie him down, no master." Mulder absorbed this information, his mind turning it over rapidly, focusing inward as he processed it, pouring through ideas and possibilities that Scully couldn't possibly see yet. "What if there was someone who did make a connection to him?"

"Someone he controlled?"

"Maybe or maybe not. You said he had a physical therapist, right?"

"Yeah, someone contracted through the prison. She came in three times a week to work with him on his motor skills."

"She said he couldn't walk though, right?"

"Well as far as she or any of the guards saw he couldn't walk." Scully shrugged, unsure of where Mulder was going with all of this.

"Did he talk to any of them?"

"I suppose he could have. I don't know, I never got a full report on the extent of the damage your bullet caused, but it's highly possible that if there was any damage to the areas governing speech they could have healed as rapidly as the ones that left him incapacitated in the first place."

Frankly, Modell was a wonder of neurological science to begin with. Ignoring his ability to get into and control the minds of others, there was the large tumor in his frontal lobe, the one that should have been killing him. Now he had miraculously survived a bullet that also should have killed him, not only living, but somehow recovering to the point he was now free.

"Is there therapist in today?" Mulder spun suddenly, loping down the hall once again, target already set on who he wanted to confront next.

"She is but they questioned her already this morning. She had no idea that Modell could even get out of bed, let alone out of his cell. Besides which she was home last night, she has an alibi. Her husband verified it for the prison staff this morning."

"She didn't have anything to do with it, but she might know if someone else did." Mulder shook his dark head stubbornly. "There had to be someone he convinced, someone who he made feel sorry for his plight."

"Someone who had access to him other than the guards and his therapist." Scully thought quickly
back to her days working the wards as an intern and resident. "With critically ill patients there were always volunteer groups that came in, volunteers mostly. Local groups, candy stripers, Girl Scout troops, athletes, always there to do a good deed."

"You think there were groups like that who would visit a prison hospital ward?"

"Perhaps some," Scully drawled vaguely. "I'd have to see the visitor list, but that would likely be your best bet in finding someone sympathetic to Modell's plight."

"All it takes with him is one little in," Mulder muttered darkly, turning towards the medical wing of the prison.
Chapter Summary

In which the gauntlet is tossed at Mulder.

The forensic team remained behind as Skinner and the marshals' team made for the door of the Bowman residence, already planning their route to the Falls Church property where Linda Bowman waited. The only one to not jump to action was Mulder. He stood, stock still in the middle of the once pristine living room, staring at the bright, blue kanji scrawled across the white walls.

Fox hunt.

"Mulder!" Scully tugged at his coat sleeve, trying to draw his attention. He blinked, but didn't turn, eyes narrowing on the symbols before him.

"This is too blatant, Scully, it's too obvious for Modell."

"Mulder, he's done things like this before, left messages like this." Scully glanced towards the sedans spinning out on the road, knowing their boss would want to know why they did not follow.

"Not like this, never like this." Mulder paced fractiously, carefully stepping around the forensic team, studying first the wall before glancing at the body of Nathan Bowman, head covered in cerulean blue. "Modell's messages are always clever, carefully laid out, not blatant. That isn't Modell's style. He likes to tease, to puzzle, he enjoys the hunt much more than he enjoys the entrapment. It's all a game."

He paused thoughtfully at the blue footprints on the white carpet.

"Why would he leave tracks?"

"Obviously he stepped in the paint, likely he was checking his handiwork."

"Modell never needed to do that before. He could stand from a distance and do what he had to do. He never needs to get his hands dirty." Mulder spoke almost more to himself than her, puzzling out the inconsistency apparently only he could see. "Modell wouldn't have bothered approaching the body unless he wanted to make sure that Nathan Bowman was dead."

"Considering that this is the man who prosecuted him, Mulder, perhaps he wanted to make sure his handiwork took. You saw what he did to Frank Burst. He killed him without even a thought. He gloated over it."

"But he didn't go to Burst's body to make sure he was dead. He wasn't seen around any of the bodies, there was no evidence linking him, remember?" Mulder's eyes flickered around the room again. "There wasn't a hair fiber, a fingerprint, not a thing that could connect him to the bodies of those he killed except his own word when he admitted to it only after the fact. It was why Bowman couldn't convict him the first time. So why would he start leaving clues now?"

He was over-thinking this. Scully wasn't surprised. She knew he would, had suspected that this would be how it would devolve, that he would become this invested the minute it became personal.
for him. "Mulder, he's sick, he's weak, and he's clumsy. It could be as simple as him not caring."

"That's the point, he doesn't care and that's what isn't right."

Scully had never understood the ability Mulder had to get inside of the mind of those they pursued. As brilliant in her own way as she was, the twisted reasoning of the human mind was not always as clear-cut for her as it was for him. She could understand logic, science, reason, but it was when you went beyond those borders that her understanding began to falter. Mulder thrived in those areas, seeing things that others didn't, understanding much that few others could see, pulling at the threads, plucking them out of the barest of facts and following them to their conclusion. More often than not he was usually right. But this time, Scully wondered, was he looking too hard, trying too hard? Modell had played him and frustrated him like few others had done before. Mulder hadn't said it, he didn't need to, but a part of him was terrified of this man and what he could do. She knew that in his mind's eye he was still reliving that horrifying moment when he had turned his weapon on her, remembering the silky voice wrapping itself around his brain, urging him to shoot her, calling her a spy. That scene still figured in her nightmares along with the plethora of others she had gathered in her time on the X-files.

"Mulder, we need to get going. We need to get the Linda Bowman before Modell does."

"He killed her husband, what does he want with her?"

"Whatever he wants with her, Mulder, her life is in danger and we need to get over there."

"Kitsunegari," he sighed, shaking his head at the kanji once again.

"Fox hunt." Scully wished he wouldn't for once just listen to what was in front of him. "If that wasn't a bigger clue to you that this is Modell and that he wants you…"

"He didn't write this."

"No," Scully agreed quietly, "Nathan Bowman did." She pointed to the paintbrush still in the dead attorney's blue hands. "My guess is he forced him to do it."

"He was forced, but it doesn't seem right." Mulder couldn't put his finger on why. He wouldn't let this go until he could. "Modell was well versed in Japanese culture, it was part of who he was, following bushido, living the code. You'd expect that even if he were controlling someone to do it, he'd at least take better care with his message, with the lettering, to ensure that his message got across."

"Mulder, we have to go!" Scully couldn't wait any longer, her voice ringing with authority she rarely used with him. He turned to her, eyes distant. "Linda Bowman is waiting and chances are Modell is there and we can ask him these questions when we see him."

It wasn't what Mulder wanted to hear, but it was enough to force him to agree to come along. "I'm telling you, Scully, we are on the wrong track here."

"Whether we are or aren't, our job is to catch a dangerous convict who is on the run. We'll worry about why when we get him." Scully didn't want to know why, frankly. She'd have rather Modell had never woken from his coma, had never managed to escape.

Mulder reluctantly followed behind her, but she knew that didn't end his questions. She could practically hear them in the silence between them as they moved to their own car, filing past the busy forensic team.
Walking Too Close

Chapter Summary

In which Scully worries that Mulder is too close to this case.

"Okay, look, you do me a favor, Scully, you give me a call when you think I've come to my senses, all right?" Mulder's angry retort slapped Scully in the face as he turned on her, storming out of the safe house. She watched him, stunned. She didn't call after him or try to stop him. She couldn't blame him for the anger, not completely. She just had openly questioned the one skill Mulder had always had as an investigator, knowing his own mind from that of the person he was profiling. Scully might as well have told him that his mind wasn't his own. It was pretty much what she was implying. She was telling him she didn't believe him, that she wasn't going to go with his instinct on this one that she didn't trust him. She wasn't, at least she didn't believe she was, under normal circumstances she wouldn't. But these weren't normal circumstances and Robert Modell could very well be playing Mulder for all he was worth.

Could be being the operative phrase. What if he wasn't?

"Did Mulder head home?" Skinner was standing at the top of the stairs at the safe house, looking grimly up at her, rock hard jaw set firmly in a scowl she doubted he would lose until Robert Modell was either safely back in jail or dead. Not that she could blame her supervisor, not after the carnage Modell had wrecked on Skinner personally through tiny Holly's size seven shoes.

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I think he's heading to Modell's hospital room to be there when he wakes up, to question him."

That predictably did not go over well. "Scully, I told him to stay out of this. Modell already has a bad enough effect on him."

"With all due respect, sir, Mulder is effected less by him than most any other person is, even yourself." Scully stood straight in the face of Skinner's annoyance, unfazed by the dark eyes that cut angrily at her through his thick, rimless glasses. "And you were the one who just shot an unarmed man in the hallway."

She was playing with fire and she knew it. Skinner's grew stormy immediately. "Agent Scully, if you are making suggestions…"

"Sir, I'm making no suggestions, certainly not ones to OPR. I believe that you saw what you thought was a gun in the suspect's hand and I believe you reacted accordingly. But perhaps Mulder wasn't wrong in what he was suggesting. After all, you've had an up close and personal encounter with what Modell could do yourself."

And clearly Skinner didn't appreciate being reminded of it. "Your partner is treading a thin line, Scully, and we both know it. Modell would stop at nothing to play his mind games with Mulder, including using you. And no offense, but I was there while he was at your bedside just months ago. I saw him while he was out there busting his ass to save your life. What do you think it would do to him if Modell tried to play that game with him again?"
Scully had been thinking of that, all day as a matter of fact, from the moment that Robert Modell’s name was mentioned that morning. "Mulder is just as aware of that sir. Short of taking his badge away from him, how are you going to stop him from seeing Modell? Besides, what if he's right?"

It was the nagging feeling, the one that warned Scully that Mulder had been right so many times before, even with Modell. Strange, it made her consider just who Modell was really playing in all of this, Mulder, or perhaps herself.

"Do you honestly buy that Linda Bowman is involved in all of this?" Skinner's question came from that same place of doubt she had within herself. They had both rushed to the defense of this woman, the wife of a victim, even as Mulder was questioning everything about how her husband died. It had been so easy for them to fall into expectations. Linda Bowman, the realtor, the grieving and confused wife of the district attorney who had prosecuted Modell. She had nothing to do with the case personally, had never seen Modell, and didn't even know the man. And yet she was being targeted by the man and being protected from him. When he showed up on their doorstep she hadn't reacted out of fear. She was standing right next to him as he supposedly drew a gun upon an armed FBI agent.

Just who was playing whom?

The pieces were beginning to fall into place for Scully, as she was sure they had fallen for Mulder hours ago. "Sir," she murmured fretfully. "What if Mulder is right?"

"That a woman would kill her own husband?"

"Linda Bowman admitted she and her husband were only married for two months. A whirlwind courtship, a sudden marriage, this is a man who was district attorney in a heavily populated city in Virginia. Does this sound like an impetuous man to you?"

"Modell has no family, his records show that."

"But he was a foster child from birth with no record of his parents or any other siblings." And none of them save Mulder had thought to check. "It could be she is exactly who he claims her to be."

"It could be?" Skinner ground the words out as if he were chewing on powdered glass. "How about you make sure that it is or isn't, Agent Scully, and get out there and find your partner before he does something very stupid. Because either he is about to get us all in a load of trouble or he's the only one on this case who has been speaking any sense and is about to get himself killed for his troubles."

"Yes, sir!" Scully didn't need to be ordered twice as she rushed past her supervisor, down the stairs, already pulling her cell phone from her pocket. She prayed her badge number would be enough to get into the Virginia Department of Child Services and get this information before Mulder ended up caught in Linda Bowman's game this time.
In which Mulder finds himself in the same story all over again

One of these days Scully would learn that if Mulder insisted that something was going on, she had better listen to him.

Her car tires screeched as she pulled up to the directions left on the badge by Modell's bedside. She had no doubt that Linda left it there for Mulder, the "nurse" scrawled on the front could only pass for a hospital badge if you had the same, strange ability as her brother. Scully followed as quickly as she could, praying that she would walk into another situation like the last, Mulder in a battle of wills between himself and Linda, pleading for her to run.

Her was mouth dry she clambered out of her vehicle, reaching for her weapon in its holster. This time she would not go in there unprepared. She thumbed off the safety as she carefully stepped inside, the cold, fall air burning in her aching lungs as she held her breath and listened. In the distance she thought she could hear voices, pleading. And then there was the horrible sound of Mulder's horrified, distraught screaming.

Scully moved, stepping as silently as possible on the cool concrete, her weapon ready as she stealthily moved around boxes and crates and towards the sounds she heard. She turned her face enough so her eyes could focus just along the corner's edge. Mulder crouched bent over the ground, distraught over the crumpled body of Linda Bowman. The blonde woman lay motionless, save for her mouth, which murmured soft and low up at her overwrought partner.

Smoothly Scully brought her weapon up, rounding the corner steadily as her aim landed on Linda Bowman. Bowman's eyes flickered from where Mulder kneeled to Scully, though she never stopped her constant murmuring. In fact she hardly showed emotion at all as at her feet, Mulder scrabbled for a gun laying on the ground and rose. Rage twisted across his face as the muzzle of his weapon came to rest on Scully.

She stopped, heart in mouth. This was not the first time she'd been at this point. But it was the first time she had seen that expression on Mulder's face directed at her. Horrifying grief, loss, and pain pooled together to form murder in his eyes as she followed the gun right to the middle of her chest. Mulder could be very deadly with a gun. She'd seen the damage he caused several times, and Scully knew that he could kill her if he chose.

Why did he want to kill her was the question? Did he not realize that she was Scully?

"I'm going to kill you!" He seethed, deadly wrath blazing from him as Scully steeled herself. Behind him she could hear Linda Bowman, eyes focused on Mulder's back.

"You see Linda Bowman coming to you, a gun turned on you. She's going to kill you Mulder."

"Don't listen to her, Mulder," Scully countered, refusing to flinch at his violent anger, praying her words made it past the raw fury, to the man who was her friend, who trusted her implicitly. Apparently, something did. He stared at her in momentary confusion.
"What?"

"It's me!" She desperately to steady her weapon on Bowman lying behind her partner. The woman was clever, she positioned herself on the floor, at a spot that made it too dangerous for Scully to fire and not hit her partner, and so covered that it would force Scully to move to take the shot. And with Mulder aiming a weapon straight at her thinking she was Linda Bowman, she didn't want to take the chance of antagonizing him.

"You were right about her," Scully continued, hoping her admission would talk some sense into Mulder. Did he really think that she wasn't Dana Scully? "Linda Bowman is pushing you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He snarled, the point of his weapon never even wavering. Scully watched it for a long second, swallowing against the bitter taste of adrenaline in her throat.

"I'm Scully," she insisted firmly, as if talking to a child. "Linda's right behind you. She's telling you I'm her."

"No she's not, Mulder. Scully's dead, right there at your feet." Bowman's voice was silky soft, like her brother's, with the same sort of confidence that Modell had, the same self-assuredness. But there was something different here, something Modell didn't have. For Pusher, this had all been a game, something to do to prove his worth. Linda Bowman was out for revenge, she wanted to make Mulder hurt. Bowman would know that Mulder had one weakness that her brother failed to capitalize on.

"She's lying in a pool of her own blood, Mulder. Scully is dead and the woman who killed her is standing right in front of you."

Mulder turned back up to Scully, and she could only imagine the image that Bowman had playing in his mind. "You killed her!"

"Mulder, I'm Scully," she replied, her voice catching though her aim was steady, waiting for either Mulder or Bowman to shift, just enough to give her a chance to have a clear shot at her, to stop her talking. "I'm not dead. She wants you to shoot me. She knows you'll never forgive yourself."

"Shut up!" His entire body vibrated with the force of his pain and bewilderment. He saw Scully as Linda Bowman, a pusher, every word was poison. His reason told him that. But Mulder wasn't a creature of pure reason, it was his greatest strength, and she had to get at that heart, that instinct of his, the aspect of Mulder that believed rather than just accepted what was in front of his face.

"Your mother is Teena," Scully continued, "Your sister is Samantha."

"Shut up," he repeated, but with far less conviction this time

"Modell warned you," Scully reminded him, hoping if nothing else that this would get through to him. "Don't play her game."

Had Linda Bowman even realized that her brother had said that, how he had tried to thwart her efforts? Perhaps she hadn't, or perhaps she feared that Scully's words would actually get through to Mulder, breaking her entrancement on him. Carefully she rose from the concrete where she lay, standing behind Mulder, glaring directly at Scully.

In doing so she had given Scully the open shot she needed.

She didn't blink as she squeezed the trigger, feeling her weapon jerk roughly in her hands as she aimed for the woman's left shoulder. Mulder's eyes widened, jumping at the bullet flew past him
and felled Bowman, who crumpled soundlessly to the ground. It was only then that Mulder turned to the figure behind him, almost fearfully.

She couldn't tell if it was in terror or relief that he looked back up at her, realizing that she was indeed Scully and she was indeed alive.

"Mulder," she managed, throat tightening as he dropped his weapon by his side, staring at it, sickened. Slowly, she stepped towards him, footsteps sounding hollow against the floor as she reached for his arm, trying to reassure him she was indeed his partner.

Linda Bowman watched them both, her blue eyes slits of pain in a face gone gray with it. Very little blood appeared from her wounds, and if Scully was a judge she would bet that the bullet hadn't gone straight through but had shattered the woman's shoulder blade, leave her in considerable pain. She would live, for the moment. Scully couldn't say she was happy about that. But perhaps it was better for her to live with the anguish of a lost brother and broken body than to die and have it over with.

Scully could have her revenge as well.

The woman smiled crookedly up at Scully, the same sort of lost smile her brother had. "You think you can hold me?"

Whether it was a taunt or a plea, Scully couldn't tell nor did she care. Her oath as a doctor and a law enforcement agent forced her to at least seek treatment for the woman. She reached into her coat pocket, pulling out her cell phone.

"I'd like an ambulance to 214 Channel Avenue," she murmured after dialing, giving emergency response her name and badge number. They would be there in minutes. Linda Bowman would be taken in and made as right as rain again. But Mulder…

He stood apart, watching the proceedings as if he were somehow outside of them, beyond them. His gun still hung loosely in his fingers, and he watched Scully as she tended the fallen woman, at least stopping what bleeding there was and making her as comfortable as she could till help arrived. He said nothing, even as the sirens sounded and the lights of the ambulance filtered red through the open doorway, followed closely by the pounding feet of the attending staff.

Mulder stood quietly to the side as they went about their work. Only then did Scully finally reach out to him, reaching for the gun still dangling in his fingers.

"Mulder," she sighed, removing it easily enough. She slipped on the safety and slid it into her pocket. He didn't look at her.

"Don't do this Mulder, not again," she murmured, pleading. The first time with Modell he had been near catatonic, too stunned to respond to anyone, even her, for several long moments. But Modell had pushed Mulder to shoot her and kill her out of paranoia and rage. His sister had told Mulder she was dead. Had he seen her lying there where Bowman had?

"Mulder, please, it's me." Scully tugged at him gently, before reaching for his chin, forcing him to look at her. "You didn't play her game, Mulder. You did what Modell told you to do."

He blinked. His eyes were dark with horrified pain and anguish. "I nearly killed you."

"Yeah, they seem to like to make a habit of that," she replied lightly, but it didn't feel like laughter, falling heavily between them.
"I saw you…"

He paused, throat working as he turned towards where the EMT workers crouched, shaking his dark head in disbelief. "I saw you take a gun and shoot yourself. God, Dana, you were dead! I saw it, there was blood!"

His worst fears realized. All those months ago she had lain awake while he sobbed over her bedside, mourning her and her imminent death. It had come so close to breaking him. Linda Bowman had forced him to live it all over in horrific detail, to stand helpless and watch as she died and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

"I'm alive, Mulder," she reminded him, gently, as tears formed and fell down his ashen face.

"Fox," she breathed, reaching up and brushing away the trail as it dribbled towards his chin. "She was lying to you. I'm here."

But that wasn't what haunted him and she knew it. What terrified him was the fact that she had nearly died at all and this time at his hands. The image of her lying in a pool of her own blood would be forever emblazoned on his perfect memory, linked to the guilt of his own finger pulling the trigger. It was a horrifying form of revenge, meticulously thought out and calculated, created to cause the largest amount of damage possible, to inflict a personal hell. It was devious and calculated, and Linda Bowman had nearly pulled it off. Pity she hadn't listened to her twin brother's advice. Modell alone knew how dangerous playing that game with Mulder could be, and he had tried to stop her. For everything evil he had done, Modell at least had tried to save his long-lost twin sister. Perhaps there was some humanity in him after all.

If her words were not a comfort, at least they were something Mulder could latch onto. He steadied considerably under her reassurance.

"We'll need to tell Skinner." Mulder's gaze didn't leave the men at work, his voice a low, crushed rumble. "We need to let her husband's boss know as well to build a case on her."

The medics raised the gurney they had finally managed to the injured woman on, moving her towards the ambulance. Her eyes were closed now and she was still, but she would live. Scully wasn't so sure that was a good thing at the moment. "She was Modell's long lost twin. She wanted revenge on all those who took her brother away from her."

"And she very nearly had it," Mulder whispered, quietly watching as Linda Bowman was wheeled away.
Easier To Just Swim Down

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is trapped in a strange state of grief.

How does one begin to get over the death of someone who hasn't died?

Scully waited in Skinner's outer office with Kim as Mulder spoke to their supervisor. Their report had been perfunctory and exact, a rarity for the two of them, but it was enough to hand over to the Falls Church police and the Fairfax County District Attorney's office. She figured that the latter would be keenly interested after the loss of one of their own to Linda Bowman. Scully doubted that they would be particularly lenient or understanding of her, not after Nathan's death. The damage the woman wished to inflict was already done.

Mulder had been in their office at the right time that morning, despite her exhortations the night before that he should stay home and away from the office. Distant and surly, he had buried himself in their report all morning until their meeting with Skinner regarding it. He'd hardly waited for her to join him for the elevator ride to Skinner's office, and conversation had been non-existent. Classic Mulder behavior; when frightened retreat and wall out the rest of the world including her. Especially her.

Mulder finally filed out of Skinner's office, head bowed as he slipped past Kim's sympathetic smile. Scully quietly fell into step beside him, following as he threaded his way through passing agents, both silent as they reached the elevator. He looked as if he had every intention of carrying on his silent self-recrimination, slouching into the opening metal doors, looking up only long enough to punch the button for their office. Did he really expect to mope from now until she got sick of it?

"You know," she finally murmured into the stillness. "It just occurred to me I had yet to tell you happy birthday."

"Hmmm?" Mulder grunted, not even looking up from his well-shined shoes. His hands dug further into his trouser pockets, as he appeared to melt further into himself.

"Yesterday was your birthday," Scully continued, pretending as if yesterday they hadn't chased down Robert Modell, as if they hadn't faced off in warehouse, and as if Mulder hadn't nearly killed her, believing her to be Linda Bowman.

When he didn't say anything, she continued. "I know you hate acknowledging it, but still, I wanted to do something."

"Scully," Mulder began, heaving a sigh that pulled from the depths of his soul. "Don't."

It was a simple word, a single request, and it carried with it a depth of pain and guilt as he drug himself from against the elevator wall and through the opening metal doors to their office.

"Mulder, you can't let what happened ruin your birthday." Scully felt idiotic saying it as she trailed behind him. What was she thinking? This wasn't a simple suspect, some murderer they ran into
everyday. This was someone who had violated Mulder's greatest asset, his mind. She had used it horribly to force him to confront his greatest nightmare. What would she have said or done if she were in the role, staring at the fallen body of Mulder, his dark hair matted in a pool of his own blood, forced to blow away his precious mind by another's hand?

Mulder said nothing as he opened the office and slouched inside, ignoring her steady gaze as he flopped into his desk chair. He busied himself with random files as she settled in front of his workspace, refusing to be ignored.

'Do you plan on shutting me out forever or just until you get over your snit?''

His jaw worked darkly but he refused to rise to her bait. "I'm not in a snit, Scully, I'm having what most people would call a bad day."

A bad day…right. "Mulder, why did you come in today?"

"To report to Skinner," he replied promptly.

"I could have done that."

He shrugged, shuffling papers with seemingly no real purpose.

"Did you even sleep last night?"

"Scully, what is this, the inquisition?" He finally dared to look up at her. It was the first eye contact she had voluntarily received from him since the warehouse, his hazel eyes flashing with annoyance.

"No, it's concern over my partner. Aren't I allowed to have that?" She didn't quell under his irritation, standing her ground as he returned to shuffling papers. "Skinner would have understood."

"I'm not on the verge of an emotional collapse. You don't need to mother me."

"Funny, that's not the way it looks from here," she replied, simultaneously irritated and sympathetic to her partner's plight. "Mulder, I know what you saw, what Linda Bowman made you see. After everything that's happened this year, I can only imagine…"

"Can you imagine, Scully?" He slapped the stack of random papers hard against the top of his desk, tone cutting her off harshly. "Can you really imagine what it's like to have someone invade your mind, convincing you of your worst nightmares?"

He pushed himself roughly away from his desk, throwing himself up out of his chair, glowering down at her as he stood. "Can you imagine watching me put a gun up to my head against my will, begging you to stop me and to help as I pulled the trigger? Can you imagine watching me die right in front of you?"

Mulder spun to pace the length of their office, caged between the X-files and her table. She watched patiently as he pivoted, restlessly glaring at nothing in particular. Scully weighed her options. She could allow him his petulance, allow him to sulk, and come back at this another day or she could wrestle the bull by the horns. Earlier in their relationship, when she was newer and less sure of herself, perhaps Scully would have left him to his moodiness and his demons and run off to make herself scarce doing something else. Now she met her partner's ire, sighing patiently as he turned to make another angry circuit of their workspace.

"I have been in this spot, Mulder," she murmured quietly. "Do you remember New Mexico? I
remember standing on the edge of that canyon watching that boxcar belch with black smoke, convinced that you were dead. How about Alaska? If I'd been five minutes slower that alien virus would have completely clogged your veins and you'd be dead now."

She paused, still horrified at the memory of it nearly three years later. "I was watching you die, Mulder, and the only thing I could possibly do was pray that I was taking the right course of action to save you."

He stopped, finally, turning slowly to face her as his anger and frustration drained little by little. Had he really forgotten all of the times she too had watched and waited, helpless in the knowledge that she could do nothing to save him?

"Should I continue?" She arched a quiet eyebrow up at his slightly shamed expression. "How about we start with when you were shot in the leg and nearly died? How about Puerto Rico, or Iowa, or any other time you've been arrested and thrown into military prison? I think I know something of it, Mulder."

Perhaps she hadn't physically seen Mulder die in any of those scenarios, but the effect was no less painful to her.

She had a point, at least he appeared to concede that. "I know, Scully."

How many times had the argued? How many times had she yelled at him for leaving her behind on one of those stupid outings?

"But," she prompted, sensing it coming in his argument.

"Those were my own damn fault," he replied, leaning a shoulder heavily against one of the creaking, metal filing cabinets. "If Linda Bowman had been successful, Scully, what would I have possibly have said to your mother? Your brothers? After your abduction, your cancer, after watching you dying in that hospital, how would I explain being responsible months later for your death? My bullet, Scully, my weapon, I would have killed you, and there is no way of explaining that away or trying to make reparations. Do you think Bill would believe I was hypnotized into doing it?"

"Mulder, you are dwelling on 'what ifs' and 'what-might-have-beens'. I didn't die. I'm fine."

"Only by a hair's breadth," Mulder murmured, fingers flexing as if he still had his gun in hand. "Scully in that moment I didn't care about regulations or my job or anything. All I cared about was that you were dead, that I had failed again. I could have killed her...you."

"But you didn't," Scully repeated, wondering at this point if her words were even getting through. "You know why it is that you were so effective playing their games?"

He didn't answer her for long moments, spiraling into moroseness again.

"Because, Mulder, unlike the rest of the world, you do not live by reason and logic." How many times had it galled her that Mulder never looked to the obvious answer first, always to the most esoteric, the most unlikely? "How many others fallen prey to Robert Modell? Nathan Bowman, a highly reasonable man, fell under Linda's sway. They followed what their eyes told them, what they thought their senses told them, and they are all dead. You aren't a creature of base sensory input. You are a man of instinct. If you weren't, I don't know if I could have talked you off that ledge. You believed me, even when your eyes told you otherwise."

"Only because she faltered," he insisted.
"She faltered because you believed in me. And if you hadn't, I would never have gotten the shot off to down her." It was the same story with them every time. "Linda Bowman made the same exact mistake that her brother did. She didn't understand that even if we are each other's greatest weakness, we are each other's greatest strength as well. She may have shattered you by forcing you to kill me, but she'd have had to get through me first."

"Get through you?" That idea brought something of a small smile to Mulder. "Considering the shattered arm she will be suffering from for a while, I don't think that Linda Bowman will make that mistake twice."

"I doubt she'll get out of jail long enough to reconsider. That tumor will likely kill her within the year." Scully felt her own head twinge in painful reminder of her own cancer. "Whatever happens, she likely won't be bothering either of us ever again."

Mulder didn't look particularly relieved at that idea. "That doesn't mean I won't remember."

Damn him and his eidetic memory. "Maybe you will, but you don't have to dwell on it."

She expected his derisive snort, his teenager-like eye roll as he pushed off from where he leaned to stalk back to his desk. "I wouldn't dwell on it if you didn't pester me."

There was a hint of a smile somewhere and Scully latched on to it and refused to let go. "Grab your coat."

He paused before sitting down, incredulous. "Why?"

"We are going out." She rose, moving towards her things at her table.

"Scully, if this is about my birthday, I'm not in the mood…"

"Whether you are or aren't, I'm not spending the next month in this office with you pouting at your desk." She slipped into her overcoat, ignoring his outraged grumbling. "We are going out."

"To do what?"

"Play hooky, of course." She grinned brightly over at his surprised look, reaching for her purse. "You know, do that thing in the middle of the work week where we do anything but work."

"That sounds like a vaguely familiar concept." Had Mulder played hooky a day in his life? He slipped into his overcoat as well, realizing the futility of arguing with her. "Do I get to blame you when we get caught."

"Somehow I don't think anyone will notice that we are gone." Skinner might even thank her for getting his morose agent out of the office for the day. "And besides, I need to take you somewhere to properly embarrass you for your birthday."

"No, really, you don't," he insisted as she forced him out of the office door.
In which Scully contemplates Mulder's cautious mood.

The cold rain and oppressive fog of fall mirrored the attitude of the X-files office. Scully fretted quietly in the weeks after Linda Bowman's failed attempt at revenge. Mulder only slowly seemed to come back to himself, wallowing in self-applied guilt till even Scully lost patience with him. Her threats of bodily harm and a word with Karen Kosseff finally brought him around enough that she no longer wished to ban him from the building until his attitude improved.

However their workload did not. Scully had conspicuously said little as Mulder placed one drab case file after another before her table; a woman in Atlanta who swore that her house was inhabited by the ghost of some Confederate soldier, a farmer in Vermont who believed that an old Indian legend had come to life and was making off with his pumpkin crop. They were hardly cases that should be brought before any authority, let alone the FBI, and Scully had pointed that out directly to Mulder. He didn't try too hard to argue back. Most were filed away in Mulder's drawer of unusual cases and he would return to perusing his magazines and newspapers.

It had been a month with no real casework. Even Scully was beginning to become agitated with the stasis, hiring herself out to Quantico for random autopsies when she could and reorganizing the plethora of old case files when she couldn't. She had filtered through hundreds already, many well before she and Mulder's time, most little more than random, strange, or unexplained cases that no one in previous decades knew what to do with. Many of them could perhaps stand a little further prodding now with the increased technology and different approaches applied with modern methods. She brought the idea up to Mulder. He'd grunted by way of response, but had offered little insight beyond that.

Scully didn't dare drop the "alien" word. The one and only time she had brought it up had earned a black look from her partner and a rapid change of the subject. He stated he didn't know if he believed that any more. For Mulder to state that was nearly as shocking to Scully as if she were to come in one day and announce that she no longer believed in the Virgin Birth. It troubled her to hear it out of him, to see him question the belief that was so intrinsic to who he was, to who she had come to know. Privately she cursed Kritschgau and his truth, even if it did uncover many of the secrets she and Mulder had fought so hard to learn, including why she had contracted cancer. But in the process it had destroyed a part of the man she so admired and now Scully wondered how in the world she could get him back.

"What are you doing?" Mulder wandered through the office door, watching her in vague bemusement as she dug through stacks of files from sometime circa 1970, all signed off on by an agent named "Dales".

"Trying to organize what you euphemistically call files." She blew dust and cobwebs from her hair as she rose from where she had sat, cross-legged on the floor. "It makes me wonder what used to pass for record keeping around this place."

"Yeah, well not everyone is as anal retentive as you are." He smirked, offering her a hand up as she dusted off her clothing. "Though I won't say I haven't appreciated the woman's touch, does it have
"Keep it up, Mulder, and I'll show you what a woman's touch can do."

"Talk like that and I may not tell you about our new case!" He waived a new, open case file in front of her nose enticingly. She made a grab for it, but he swiped it away and held it above her slight height, long arms taunting her as she scowled up at him.

"And here I had a nice autopsy for you and everything!" He wandered blithely back over to his desk.

"Oh, an autopsy!" She snorted, wondering why he had even bothered pulling her away from her organizing. "Mulder, I have been doing nothing but autopsies for the last month."

"Not anything like this," he offered, kicking back in his office chair and propping his long legs on the corner of his desk. Clearly whatever it was that Mulder stumbled upon had improved his mood greatly. He waggled his dark eyebrows in suggestive glee.

"Oh really," she sighed, crossing her arms doubtfully as she thought of the other gems Mulder had tried to pass off to her in the last weeks. "Another farmer thinks a monster lives out in his pumpkin patch and it turns out to be nothing more than a cow with a stomach ache?"

"More like a man went out into an orchard and ended up swallowed into the earth." Mulder let that settle for a long moment with a speculative air.

"All right," Scully sighed, realizing that she had nothing better to do at the moment but listen to him. "I'll bite."

"Coats Grove, town outside of Grand Rapids, known mostly for its orchards. The sheriffs office calls here a bit perplexed. A local farmer was found dead, buried like I said, and the only witness and likely suspect is his teenaged stepson."

"And why would the locals call you in on this?" This was sounding suspiciously like many of the other cases Mulder had tried tossing her way of late.

"The fact that they had to use heavy equipment to get his body out." Mulder flipped open the file, glancing at the particulars. "According to police he and his stepson had been arguing right before the incident."

That sounded open and shut. "Alright then, the stepson killed his father, that sounds direct enough. What is the X-file in all of this?"

"According to the sheriff's description, the stepson couldn't win a fight against a wet spaghetti noodle." "Such technical terminology from trained law enforcement."

"Well, technical or not, he asked us to come and take a look."

"Mulder, this doesn't seem like a case hardly worth the forms to open it up."

"Would you rather sit around and reorganize files, cause if that is so much more exciting…"

"No," she snapped, earning a satisfied grin from her partner. "I just would have hoped that if you were opening a case up…” She paused. Did she really want to tell him she would have hoped it
would be more strange, unexplained, weird?

"You hoped it would be what? More related to aliens?" Ever perceptive, Mulder hit the nail on the head.

"Maybe not aliens. I don't know, more in line with our work."

"This is still our work, Scully, and it always was just as much a part of our work, just like anything else was." Mulder spoke as if he was trying to convince himself more than her. "And besides, all this could be is a quick consult. We'll head out there, help out the locals, and you can be back here in time to collate and alphabetize." He waved expansively at her mess of files on the floor at her feet.

"Right, any hope we can stretch it out to a week?" If she was in this so far, she might as well go the whole way.

"Talk like that, Scully, and you may just turn into a rebel."

"I think I qualify just by hanging out with you," she replied dryly as Mulder began to make travel arrangements.
Karen Matthews stood on her front porch, watching them walk across the icy ground to their rental car with a look that said she wasn't that horribly sad to see the two FBI agents go.

"Mulder, you basically accused that woman of lying to us." Scully glanced over her shoulder towards the school psychologist, who wrapped her arms around her middle against the cold wind.

"That's because she was," Mulder replied simply, digging in his pockets for keys, the car alarm of their sedan sounding once as he shivered. "Gees, it's cold."

"She lied," Scully prodded when he didn't elaborate further. "Why do you assume that? She has no reason to lie."

"I don't think she consciously realized she was doing it." Mulder spoke as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, and perhaps it was to him.

"Sorry if I slept in on that day in my 'Intro to Psych' class," Scully groused, clambering into their chilly car as Mulder blessedly started it and turned the heaters on full blast. Fog was descending, cold and dank as evening began to draw near.

"You know, they have a special hell for those who sleep through psychology classes."

"And how many did you sleep through?"

"Lectures are different in Oxford," he replied, glancing out of the rearview mirror as Karen Matthews retreated into her house. "Her response was vague in the extreme, unwilling to state exactly the details of what Bobby's abuse and issue was and more than willing to apologize for a crime that none of us have proof that the boy even did."

"She's not an investigator, Mulder, she's a psychologist."

"So am I and I would at least think that I would know my patient well enough to know if he did or didn't do it, and if so, share pertinent information rather than make vague generalities."

"I still don't see where you get the idea that she is lying," Scully qualified as they pulled off down the muddy, gravel road and on to the closest, blacktop highway.

"She immediately spoke to Bobby's violent tendencies, his issues at school. She then quickly shifted the blame to the stepfather, a man who as far as we know had at one point in time been close to Bobby."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't abusive. You know how well some parents hide these things. We have no idea what was going on inside the home."

"She could give us no concrete explanations on any aspect of Bobby's behavior. Note what she did,
she jumped to his defense, she immediately painted for us a picture of a loner, a misfit, a kid abused by his stepfather for nothing more than spilling a glass of milk. But did she once tell us of Bobby threatening to hurt anyone, of attempts he made in the past? There is no pattern of behavior here that would indicate that Bobby was capable of doing this and Karen Matthews was unable to give us any."

"That still doesn't make her out to be a liar." Scully couldn't see where he was going with the accusation, though she knew he had a purpose behind it. "She could simply not want to incriminate her client."

"If she wanted to do that she wouldn't have implied that he did it." Mulder shook his head and Scully had to admit he was right. "Besides, it wasn't just what she did or didn't say, it was what was on her shoes."

"You looked at her shoes?"

"Mud, coated her shoes. You walked across that lawn, it was starting to harden up and cold is setting in."

"It's been damp out."

"But she's a school psychologist, what reason would she have to muck around in the mud?"

"What, are you suggesting she had something to do with it?" Scully glanced at him incredulously, eyebrows arched dubiously as she regarded him. "Mulder…"

"I'm saying that Karen Matthews has a lot more to hide here than whether her patient did or didn't kill that boy." Mulder tapped the steering wheel thoughtfully with his fingers as he drove. "The truth is, Scully, you have to ask yourself why she is a psychologist."

"What did that have to do with anything? Why are you a psychologist?"

"Simple! I'm broken." Mulder shrugged as if this was a matter of course. "Most people who go into the psychology field either go into it because they dealt a lot with mental issues growing up, such as a parent, or perhaps being around those who suffered, or because they themselves have painful issues and psychosis they are dealing with."

"And you assume then that Karen Mathews thus does as well."

"Notice how she immediately identified with Bobby. The phrase she used, she said that 'there are some crimes where there are only victims.' She's not a social worker, Scully, she isn't attached to child services, she is a small town high school psychologist. How much victimization could she have seen in her time here?"

"Unless she was a victim herself?" It was a possibility, but she didn't see what it had to do with this case. "Perhaps she was a child abuse victim herself. Perhaps that's why she's in this field, to use her experience to help other kids like her, try to help them get the assistance they need."

"And that is a good and noble cause, Scully, and I would appreciate it if that's what is going on here, but I think Karen Matthews knows more about Bobby and his father's murder than she's wanting to let on." Mulder chewed at his bottom lip absentely before reaching into the console between then, a packet of sunflower seeds lying inside there. "What if she knows what killed Mr. Rich?"

"You mean 'who' killed Mr. Rich, right?"
"Maybe," he muttered vaguely, slipping a sunflower seed between his teeth, sucking it softly. "I think Karen knows what happened out there in those woods. I don't know why and I don't know what, but I think she has an idea and she's willing to allow Bobby to take the blame for this than to admit to what she knows."

"Mulder," Scully breathed, air hissing between her teeth. "Really, we can't go about casting accusations without hard evidence. And frankly I'm not so sure I follow your thread here."

"Am I ever wrong with these?"

After their last case, she wasn't about to tell him yes. He was right so often it was frightening.

"I'll trust you on this, Mulder," she hemmed, sinking into her seat. "I'd be stupid not to."
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder shows off to Scully.

He wasn't going to really climb a tree in the middle of the night, was he? Mulder hitched up the leg of his slacks as one fine, leather wingtip sought purchase on the slick, dark bark of the tree he was attempting to scale. "Excuse me, it's been a few years."

Fox Mulder climbing trees. He was going to break his neck. "What, you think that Bobby climbed this tree to pull Lisa's father out of that window?" Rather bold for a teenaged boy who hardly looked as if he could win a lunchroom brawl.

"Kind of begs the question, doesn't it?" He grunted slightly as he hefted himself up to one thick branch, long legs scrambling up the side.

"Hey, Scully," he called cheerfully, hazarding a boyish grin down to her on the ground below. "Is this demonstration of boyish agility turning you on at all?"

Fire flushed on Scully's cheeks but she set her face firmly into a frown. Frankly, it terrified her as she waited for Mulder to make a misstep in the dark. She feared him tumbling to the ground and the broken bone that would result from it. The fall had killed Lisa Baiocchi's father, what would it do to him? Even if it was amusing to see her partner scrambling around like a twelve-year-old. She didn't see the old man coming at her until it was already too late. His movement crept up in the corner of her eye, the sharp edge of his axe catching the faint light and causing her to turn, jumping on him as her fingers nearly grabbed for her gun. Her gasp caught Mulder's attention above as he paused in his scrabbling.

"Who are you," she demanded to the grave, gnarled old man, his face as twisted and wrinkled as the tree Mulder was perched on.

"I take care of the trees," he responded gravely, a thick accent garbling his words.

"Scully," Mulder called, worried.

Scully gave the man a small smile. "I didn't expect you to be standing right there behind me." Certainly not with a razor sharp axe in hand. "You were watching us the other day in the orchard."

If this alarmed the man he didn't show it. He shrugged, glancing at the gnarled branch Mulder perched on. "The trees are dying."

He sounded sad, apologetic as his withered face crumpled somewhat. In truth he looked about as much a part of the tree as the branch above did, gnarled and twisted and as windswept as it appeared.

"Scully," Mulder called again, sounding slightly more frantic.
"Maybe you should come down here, Mulder." She held out the splinter of wood that Mulder had found out to the old man. "You know what kind of tree this came from?"

The man glanced at it, sniffing briefly. "The same as this tree." He waved at the trunk as Mulder jumped down, lithely landing on his feet as he stood up beside her and dusting off dirt from his impact off his fingertips.

"You said these trees were dying," Scully continued. "This splinter is live wood."

The man regarded it for a long, silent moment, before hefting his axe in hand. Before either she or Mulder could act, he swung it up in one, long continuous arc above his head, and let it drop, the blade biting deeply into the very tree Mulder had just climbed. Scully jumped backwards into Mulder's shoulder, as out of the fresh wound in the trees flesh red sap poured, streaming gorily down the trunk.

"Twenty years ago, this happens," the man murmured dolefully.

"What causes this?" Mulder eyes widened at the stickiness that covered the man's axe.

"A very bad man," he said simply, reaching to pry the metal head from the soft wood of the tree.

"Who?" Scully insisted, pulling away from Mulder's protective clutching as she went after the slowly retreating man. His axe dripped sap on the grass as he toddled back to the forest."

"I come here to work for him many years ago." The man's grizzly eyebrows knitted together, thick tufts of white over troubled, beady eyes. "He did bad things...horrible things."

"Who was he?" Mulder watched the man intently as he scanned the forest, creaking and groaning all around them.

"He had a girl. She was young. She was scared. She hide in the trees." He nodded in reminiscence into the deep, dark woods. "I'd find her there. She was so small."

"What happened to her," Mulder pressed softly.

"One day she hide out in the woods. I find her. She was crying. I hear her father come, and I stand up. I was going to help her. But he never got there."

"Where did he go?"

The man shrugged in his thick coat, letting his axe head fall to the ground as he leaned on the handle. "He scream. I run to where I heard it. All I saw was his hand sticking out of the earth." He held up his own hand as if in demonstration, pale and ghostly in the cold air. "The little girl, she came up. She didn't even cry. I always think she knew it would happen. But the blight, it stopped. The trees, they were good again. Until now."

Scully felt chills run across her skin as her eyes turned invariably towards the knotty gathering in front of them. "Who was the man, sir?"

"Matthews," the old man muttered quietly into the cold air. "The little girl, she still there in the house and I think so is the bad man."

"But you said he died," Scully objected. The old man's hardly seemed to think this was an issue.

"He was a bad man," he insisted, turning between the two of them as he lifted his axe once again,
raising it to rest on his shoulder. "Bad doesn't die."

Quietly he turned from them, Mulder giving the man and his axe head a wide birth as she stumped off again into the mist and darkness from whence he came, disappearing soon enough into the gray fog as Scully watched him go, unease settling in the pit of her stomach.

"Did that guy just walk out of a creepy ghost story or what?" Mulder intoned, awe on his face as he turned to look down at her, eyes shining. Trust Mulder to find this all fascinatingly cool. Perhaps he really still was a twelve-year-old.

"Do you believe a word he said?" Scully wasn't sure if she could or not.

"That Karen Matthews was an abused child, yes. The part about the trees, I don't know, but I do know that abuse of any kind is a vicious cycle, with the victims forced to live with the memories of what was done to them years after the abuse has long stopped. It often leads to trouble in relationships, ongoing mental problems, even recreating the cycle of their own abuse again out of a sense of frustration or a seeking of power."

"You think she's responsible for the murders, then?"

"I think that she has projected her own abuse at the hands of her father onto the kids she's had as patients." Mulder's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I don't think Bobby or Lisa ever really suffered from abuse until they met Karen Matthews. She's perpetuated her own psychosis through these children."

"Causing them to act out?"

"No, I don't think that they were the ones responsible at all. I think she was." Mulder spun then, his heels digging into the earth as he moved towards their car, Scully moving after him. "I think that Karen was there at every occasion, The trees, they respond to her somehow. They know Karen."

"What?"

"The trees. In every case the victims have been near trees when they died. They react to Karen, to the little girl who was scared and frightened by her father, who wanted to see him dead." Mulder skidded to a dead stop, spinning on Scully in frantic understanding. "Karen sees herself in these children. She projects her own years of pain and abuse, and because of that she sees her father in each of their fathers. The trees are reacting to the child in Karen's psyche."

"Trees don't react to people, Mulder." Scully wondered why she even bothered insisting things like this, because he would just prove her wrong in the end.

"Plants react to people all the time, Scully, whether it be by environment, treatment, or just by the affection shared by someone who cares for them." He watched the tree line in the distance. "These farmers live as close to the land and their crops as anyone. Karen Matthews grew up in these orchards. Who is to say she doesn't know them as well as anyone working these fields?"

There was a certain sense to his madness, Scully couldn't deny that, "Do you know how crazy this all sounds."

"You got to admit I'm the only who would suggest it and actually believe it." Up flashed his boyish grin, the sort she used to remember from their earliest cases together.

"I hope you are able to explain this in the report." She replied, following him as he led the way to their car.
"Mulder!" Scully screamed as she followed behind Patti Rich, both frantically tearing through the orchard, roots tripping them as they slipped through the tightly packed trees. In the distance they could hear shouting. Then suddenly there was silence.

"Bobby!" Patti gasped, pulling to a halt as her eyes went frighteningly wide in her rapidly paling face. Scully skidded to a stop beside her, ear bent towards the direction the sound had come from.

"I think they are still all right," she murmured, hearing Mulder grunt and struggle. Her fingers plucked at the woman's jacket as, dragging her along behind her. In the distance between the bare, overhanging branches she could just make out two heads poking out of overturned earth, one arm looped around the shoulders of the other as if trying to keep him afloat.

"They're all right!" Scully gasped back to Patti as the two raced over, Patti nearly crying in relief as she rushed to her son's tearful cries.

"Mom!" Bobby sobbed, working one hand free from its death grip on Mulder's forearm to take Patti's outstretched hand. Scully likewise moved to her partner, who was already beginning to force himself out of the mire, letting Bobby go to his mother as he tried to find leverage on firmer ground behind him.

"Here, let me." Scully moved behind to reach beneath both arms and tug him, even as Patti worked to draw out Bobby. Both of the trapped prisoners grunted and pushed, feet working the mud as they attempted to find purchase to get themselves out of what had gone from hard, frosted earth to quick sand.

"Mulder, how did you get in this?" Scully groaned, her feet slipping as she dug in her heels, threatening to fall on her own backside as she tried to tug on Mulder's weight.

"Don't ask, just keep pulling," he growled by way of reply as Bobby finally made his way out of the muck, an audible sucking sound releasing him as he rolled onto the firmer earth on his stomach, coughing and sniffing as his mother immediately swooped down on him. She wrapped her only child in her arms.

"Bobby, I was so worried. I was afraid of what she would do to you."

"I'm all right, Mom," he gulped, sniffing into his mother's sleeve, too relieved to care that he was openly weeping like a small child. "I'm so sorry, Mom, I didn't tell you, I was too scared."

"It's all right, baby," she whispered, smoothing back dirt streaked hair from his pale forehead. "You're alive, it's all right."

Mulder soon followed Bobby, giving a mightily lunge backwards that toppled Scully beneath him, pinning her to the ground as she barely caught her partner before skidding underneath his body. She groaned and coughed as his heavy weight landed on her legs and abdomen, and he
immediately rolled off of her.

"You okay," he gasped, reaching immediately for one bruised knee, as if afraid he'd caused real damage to her.

"Maybe you should lay off the cheeseburgers and pizza for a while," she groused, earning a low, relieved chuckle out of a man with so much perpetual energy she couldn't imagine him standing still long enough to gain weight. For this moment, though, he did flop to the ground, burying his head into his arms as he breathed deeply from the physical exertion of breaking himself from his earthen prison.

"Mulder," Scully gasped above him as she prodded his shoulder. "Where is Karen?"

Bobby quieted in Patti's arms, looking fearfully over to Mulder. Between them the dirt shifted and settled as the trees around them groaned audibly.

"Mulder," Scully repeated, almost fearful to know the truth now as Mulder raised up enough to glance at the hole he and Bobby had so nearly been consumed by.

"She's dead," Mulder replied simply, looking over at Bobby's tear streaked face. "She nearly killed the both of us."

"How?" Scully scanned the drab, foggy clearing for a body that didn't seem to exist.

"The old man," Bobby gasped, clutching at Patti's sweater. "The guy who takes care of the trees, he...he had his axe." The boy's eyes squeezed tightly against whatever he saw. Scully could well imagine what it was the old man did and just what they witnessed.

"Her body is down there." Mulder nodded to another patch of overturned earth across the clearing from them. "Scully, it was as if the trees came alive and grabbed her and sucked her down into the earth."

"That's what happened to Dad," Bobby whispered softly. It was the first time Scully had heard the boy refer to his stepfather as anything other than his first name. Patti hugged her son tighter, tears tracking down her cheeks into his soft, dark hair. "I tried to help him, I tried to pull him out, but I couldn't."

"It's okay, Bobby, I know you tried to save him." Patti shivered. A cold wind began to stir the branches above them, their skeletal, black fingers waving and clacking together, dry and brittle in the fall breeze.

"Mulder, we'll need to call the sheriff, get a search team out here for the body, and we'll need to tell him about the old man."

"I don't think it will do any good, Scully," Mulder replied, heaving himself over to sit up slowly, his legs and shoes covered in thick mud.

"But Mulder, there was a murder here."

"Karen Matthews was dead long before the old man arrived." Mulder began to futilely brush the filth from his clothing. "Her demons finally took her over. What we encountered wasn't Karen the grown, capable woman, nor even Karen the scared little girl. She had become that thing which tormented her most in her life, her father."

"Even so, Mulder, she's dead. Someone will have to account for that." She watched him mull this
over as he slowly rose to his feet, reaching a hand down to help her up to hers.

"Scully, I know you will never believe this coming out of me. But for once I don't know what I saw. And I think I'll stick to that story when our official report is made."

"Don't know what you saw?" Scully couldn't believe she heard the words come from Mulder as he crossed to help Patti and Bobby to their feet, the shaking teenager grateful for once for the assistance. She said nothing as she dug in her pocket for her cell phone, watching as Mulder aided the mother and son away down the line of trees, back to the safety of the farm beyond.
The Holiday Traveler

Chapter Summary

In which Scully visits Mulder before her Christmas traveling.

The elevator to the fourth floor groaned tiredly as Scully disembarked. Somewhere down the hallway someone was baking sugar cookies, the sweet scent giving a nearly festive feeling to Mulder's normally dreary apartment building. One doorway was lined in twinkling lights, another was festooned with a gaudy looking tinsel wreath. All around signs of holiday cheer glittered warmly, except predictably at one door.

The numbers four and two hung drunkenly on the peeling wood as Scully knocked, her knuckles wrapping hard against the wood. Inside she could hear the sound of his television being muted, as large, bare feet slapped against the hardwood heavily. There was a stumble and a yelp, and Scully tried not to smile as she surmised he had tripped over his own running shoes, perpetually in the way by the door.

It took several moments of metal scraping before the door finally cracked open and Mulder peeked blearily out, surprised to see Scully standing on his front doorstep. "Hey, I thought you would be halfway to Baltimore by now."

"I'm procrastinating," she admitted with a grin. "Traffic is abysmal and my flight with Mom doesn't leave until noon tomorrow." She held up a brightly colored gift bag under his aquiline nose.

"A present?" Mulder looked delighted, but she snatched it back before his hands could reach.

"The polite thing would be to let me in, don't you think?"

"Oh yeah." Remembering the niceties of human contact, he shuffled away from the door to allow Scully entrance, shamefacedly waving a hand around his apartment. "I wasn't expecting visitors, you know, so the mess…"

"It's excused," she smirked, noting how he was still clad in his work trousers, but his cotton dress shirt was missing. He was wearing only in his plain, white undershirt. Clearly he was in for the night. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Bad time," he wondered quizzically. "No, no…the time is fine." He waived her into the living room of the apartment, where the TV glowed, the soul source of light in the darkness. "Just watching some television."

"Something I would be embarrassed by?" She couldn't help teasing him as she perched on the edge of his well-worn, leather couch, still warm from his body heat lying across its length.

Mulder snorted with mild outrage, settling in his one armchair by the couch's corner. "Unless you consider Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer's relationship with Hermy hot and scandalous."

"Somehow I always thought he was more into Yukon Cornelius."

"Yeah, well if you were a man who wandered around the North Pole with nothing for dogs for
company, I bet a cute little elf would look mighty inviting." Unerringly Mulder's eyes flickered to the bag sitting at Scully's feet, clearly curious and speculative. "So, Agent Scully, have I been a good boy this year?"

"I don't know, you had some rotten moments." His attitude after the Ed Jerse affair came to mind, though perhaps in a way she had been asking for that one. However the weight of that argument perhaps was mightily overpowered by the sheer force of will he had displayed when she lay dying, and the lengths he pushed himself to in order to save her, even if in some ways she wished he hadn't.

"Hey, I finished all my reports for the last six months, thank you, I would like to point that out." His eyes crinkled at the corners with teasing laughter as he relaxed into the seat cushions, dark hair tousled comfortably. It was rare that Scully ever got to see him outside of work situations, to see Mulder as being comfortable in his own skin. She found that she wished she could see it more often.

"Well, I suppose for all the paperwork I really should give you a little something." Threading her fingers into the string, she snagged up the bag to pass over to his eagerly grasping fingers. "It's not much, I know you aren't big on Christmas presents to begin with."

"I'm not big on them until I get one put right in front of me," he rejoinder happily, pulling out colored tissue paper and ribbon, reaching for the box inside. In typical Mulder fashion he shook it smartly without bothering to open it.

"Watch it! How do you know it won't break?"

"No sounds of shattered glass yet," he replied, intrigued by the rattling he did hear. "Jimi Hendrix's greatest hits?"

"If you had said that you wanted it, you might have got it," she replied, rolling her eyes as he tugged off the tape and slipped off the lid. His exuberance drained somewhat, however, as he carefully pulled out the photograph inside.

"How did you…"

"I found it at the office." Nervously Scully fingered the worn edge of one of the seat cushions, her manicured nails picking at leather. She had taken a risk in doing what she did. "It was laying in a stack of papers, I recognized it because you used to have it on your desk."

Her eyes slid to Mulder's home workspace, smaller and more cramped than his work one. There had been one photograph that had sat there, one she recognized from Teena Mulder's home, a picture of a young Fox standing back to back with a young Samantha.

"Anyway, I knew a guy who works with photographs," Scully rushed on over Mulder's conspicuous silence. "A friend of that guy I dated years ago, Ethan. I thought it might be ruined with the bullet hole and the blood. And he was able to fix it up, though. I thought he did an amazing job."

Her voice trailed off faintly under the painful stillness of the man beside her as he sat blinking at the glass-covered frame, holding it as if it were a ticking time bomb. In the six months since the mysterious disappearance and supposed death of the strange, smoking man Mulder had said next to nothing about him or the offer he had made regarding Scully's life. She hadn't asked for any further details. But she had run across the scratched, bloodstained photograph, the only evidence they had that the man was indeed human and possibly dead. Why he had the photograph and what it meant,
Scully didn't venture to guess. Did it mean that Teena Mulder knew more about her daughter's disappearance than she lead them to believe? What was the relationship of that man to her children? And how did it all play out in this family tragedy? She didn't know. But she did know one thing, Mulder couldn't stop asking these questions, he couldn't stop searching for the girl in that photograph. She didn't want him to stop searching for her.

"Perhaps I overstepped myself, Mulder," she murmured at his long, stunned silence. "I'm sorry, I just…"

"Scully…no." Mulder finally spoke, voice choked as he shook his head briefly as if shaking himself of the pain and the angst of twenty-five years of heartache. "No, you…yeah, no, thank you."

A ghost of a grateful smile slid on his face, not quite reaching the sadness in his eyes. "Thank you for this. I was thinking of just throwing it out."

A treasured photograph of his sister? Scully doubted it. But the strange, twisted memories associated with it, perhaps she could see him wanting to hide from those for the time being. "I know it's not the ideal gift, but if you look in the box underneath it was a gift card to spend frivolously on anything you wanted. You know, just in case this gift sucked."

At least this earned a chuckle out of him, a slight one, as he gently set the restored photograph down on the coffee table and pulled out the Visa gift card she had tucked away inside. "Ahh, thank you." He glanced at it with mild appreciation. "I shall have to take it and the one you gave me last year and treat myself to a par-tayh."

"The one from last year? You actually found that?" Scully remembered vaguely being put out that Mulder was going to see his mother, why she couldn't really remember except that she was just pissed off in general with him on everything the year before. "I tossed that somewhere on that minefield you call a desk at work, I didn't think you would ever find it."

"I didn't, at first. I found it months later when I was bored alone in the office while you were recovering."

And that would explain why she hadn't heard about it since. "See what happens when you don't clean up your desk? You miss the good stuff Santa brings you."

"My mother tried the same tactic on me when I was five and it didn't work then."

"Yeah, well perhaps I shouldn't have been so childish as to hide it on there," she admitted, thinking back to some of the worst behavior between the two of them the year before. "I was just so put out with you, and for all things just because you wanted to see your mother instead of hanging out with my family for Christmas."

"Well, for what it's worth, if you all had been in Baltimore this year I might have considered it."

His words confirmed Scully's suspicions that Mulder had no intention of seeing his mother this holiday. He'd not seen her at Thanksgiving either. The idea saddened her, but with everything that currently lay between mother and son she couldn't say she was terribly surprised. "Well, I still had no right to be angry with you, Mulder. Your mother had just suffered a stroke, and I was being…"

Silly? Irrational?

"Bitchy," he supplied helpfully.
Her eyes narrowed. "I was going to say uncooperative."

"Same difference," he shrugged.

"You weren't being much help," she snapped back, sinking into the couch to glare at him petulantly. "If you only knew how angry I was with you after…"

She paused, color rushing to her face as the word "Chattanooga" nearly fell from her lips.

She didn't have to say it, he knew already. "You mean after Melissa Riedel?"

Her gut twang slightly as he let loose her dirty secret, the one she hadn't realized he knew. She should have guessed he would figure it out. "You believed the stories of a sick woman so easily." She felt lame even admitting to that. It wasn't just about Mulder's fascination with Melissa or even his theory of past lives. It was the painful, agonized hope that Melissa was a part of a past history with him, an intertwined story, a long lost love. That had upset her far more than she had been even comfortable admitting.

"Scully," Mulder drug out her name low and soft, a sigh that encompassed both understanding and chastisement. "I don't know if we'll ever know the complete story of Melissa. She was sad and broken, and I can relate to that."

"Do you think she was your one true soul mate?" She shouldn't ask questions she didn't want answered, but she couldn't help herself. Mulder seemed surprised she even asked. He contemplated her words, sitting up in his chair to lean heavily against his knees, staring at the photograph of himself and Samantha before him.

"I wanted to believe I wasn't alone," he said, reaching one finger out to run across the lacquered edge of the photo's new frame. "I wanted to believe that for all the struggles in this life that it wasn't always destined to be this way, that there was something to hold on to."

"I see." His words churned painfully within her, but Scully nodded, her expression implacable as she watched him lazily trace the picture of his sister. She didn't want to hear that, to hear that Mulder felt so alone he sought comfort in the wishful words of a sick woman. But she had asked for it and what could she say?

"I guess what I wasn't seeing at the time was that I had something to hold on to. That I wasn't alone."

If his last words had stirred bitterly in her heart, these words caused it to stop all together. Scully's eyes widened as she stared back at Mulder's downcast face. What did he mean by that? Blood pounded vaguely in her ears, but Scully shied away from all the implied meanings that raced to mind as he continued.

"When you were ill, I kept coming back to that. I kept trying to imagine my world, my work without you in it, knowing that you had died because I was a failure." His voice cracked on the last word, the grave monotone shattering for an instant. "The truth is, Scully, whatever Melissa Riedel represented to me, she's not the person who is at the office everyday yelling at me about expense reports and questioning me at every turn. And she isn't the person who has pulled my ass out of the fire more times than I can remember. That's you. And as Linda Bowman so recently highlighted, I can't live with the idea of you not being there and knowing it is my fault."

The euphoria that so briefly had bubbled to life in Scully's veins dimmed somewhat at Mulder's words. Guilt? She wasn't sure if that was a better emotion for him to have regarding her presence in
his life. It stung that it was the word most associated with her. "Mulder, you shouldn't feel guilty. Look, what happened could have happened to anyone who was your partner."

"I doubt anyone would have been quite like you, Scully." There was ruefulness to his soft chuckle as she finally looked up at her. "You are certainly one-of-a-kind. And you are most definitely not what anyone would expect."

"I choose to take that as a compliment." Whether it was or not she met his acquiescing nod with a broad smile. "And I guess you'll have to get used to having me for a long time."

Relief seemed to melt Mulder into his armchair, but in usual Mulder fashion he spun it into a smirk and dry remark. "You know they should start marketing those chips, make a fortune off everything from high cholesterol to erectile dysfunction."

"I don't know how effective this would be on a man's ability to perform," Scully teased, hiding the brief ache that flared to life within her. She had double-checked on the bareness issue, just to be sure. She had made such a remarkable recovery up to this point that she had rather hoped, perhaps foolishly, that maybe, just maybe the chip underneath her skin had changed other things. She was sorely disappointed. "Anyway, I'm fine and healthy and will be around to annoy you for years to come."

"Good, because someone has to do it." Mulder looked rather pleased with the idea. Scully's heart tightened, and she found herself restless as she bounced up from his couch, looking for her purse where she set it.

"Look, I've wasted enough time and Mom and I are going out to dinner tonight before dealing with the wonders or holiday air travel tomorrow."

Mulder rose, perhaps a tad regretfully as she gathered her things. "You just saw all your family at your brother's wedding, you'd think that would be good enough." He was kidding, she knew, but Scully sometimes had to wonder what Mulder made of the Scully clan's propensity for coming together at various times over the year for nothing more than the sheer pleasure of seeing one another and spending time in each other's company. She doubted the Mulders had done anything of the sort since Samantha's loss.

"Yeah, well wedding or no wedding, Mom spends holidays at least with some of her kids. And besides, Bill's wife Tara is due any day now." Again the pang rose within her, the ache of lost opportunities, ones Tara was now finally experiencing. "Mom is beside herself, the first grandbaby. She's so distracted by that she's even forgiving Charlie and Ashley for going to her parents for their first Christmas as a married couple."

"Ahh, well babies tend to make up for a lot of things." Mulder nodded with vague sort of comprehension, clearly feeling that this was the right sort of thing to say. Had he ever seen a baby, she wondered in vague amusement.

"If Tara has her way that baby will be out while we are there. And Mom can be occupied and won't notice when I slip home to DC early." As much as Scully loved her family, and she did, the truth was between her illness, Charlie's wedding, and now Bill's child, she had enough of her siblings to last for a while. "I hope I'll be back before the New Year, depending on how long it takes the newest Scully to arrive."

"Considering it is Bill's child, you may be waiting a while out of sheer obstinacy," Mulder muttered, earning a sour look from Scully that he returned with exaggerated innocence. "What, Bill's the one who hates me! I ruined your life or something."
She couldn't fault him for thinking that since it was what her brother said. "Bill doesn't hate you, Mulder, he was speaking out of a very hurt, angry place."

"Which in and of itself defines hate, so there you have it."

"I'm sure given the time since my recovery things have changed."

"You've never been a big brother, have you Scully?"

Honestly, men! Scully scooped up her bag, rolling her eyes at Mulder as she moved towards his apartment door. "Do me a favor, Mulder, try not to spend your entire holiday watching cheesy Christmas specials and living on Chinese take-out."

"What, and ruin a Mulder family tradition?" He followed behind, lazily reaching around her for the door. "How else can I possibly pass the time?"

"Go hang out with the Gunmen for the holiday. I hear Frohike makes a wicked ham."

"I think you mean evil ham, you don't know what it does to your insides. It's sort of an alien demon sort of feeling." He rubbed at his stomach in vague discomfort.

"Alright, well at least don't stay around here moping by yourself."

"I'll consider it." It was as close as she was going to get to Mulder agreeing, but she would take it. "Thank you for the gift. It means a lot."

"You're welcome." She turned to look up at him, mere inches away from where she stood. They had been this close together when they danced, his hand at her waist as they had swayed to the music. They hadn't touched beyond that, though she could feel the warmth of his body, the contact goose bumps racing across her skin. Mulder had never had a sense of private space, even now he didn't bother moving.

Half mad thoughts came to mind, none very well formed, but all of which involved dangerous territory for her to be in as a professional, FBI agent. She swallowed hard as she pulled away from the warmth of Mulder's presence, reaching fingers out to squeeze his hand briefly. "Merry Christmas, Mulder."

"You, too. Safe travels." His fingers were hard and warm in hers, holding tightly before breaking off, pulled behind his back. "If the family gets too crazy, you can always give me a call."

"I'll remember that." If she didn't leave now, she'd never get on the road to Baltimore. "I'll see you next week?"

"Unless I eat Frohike's ham, yes you will."

She had to go, she told herself, she couldn't stand here in the hallway, basking in the companionship of her partner. "See you soon, Mulder."

God help her, that winsome smile, the laughter in his deep, soulful eyes. He waved as she turned from him back down the hallway, leaning against the doorframe as he watched her go. She steeled her spine, forced herself to turn around and face the metal doors. She couldn't show weakness, not in this.

Though sometimes, when she admitted it to herself, she really wished she could.
Talking to Ghosts

Chapter Summary

In which Scully finds herself speaking to her past.

"Oh my God, it's so warm!" Maggie Scully turned her face to the sun, slipping out of her winter coat and happily handing it to her son. "God, I miss this weather!"

"Makes me wonder why you stay in Baltimore, Mom, when you could come back to live out here." Bill Scully took his mother's bag as well, making a beeline through the San Diego airport parking lot to his waiting car. "You can actually enjoy living here this time, rather than fret over your children getting in trouble."

"I'll always do that. How else am I supposed to earn these gray hairs?" She cheerful ran her fingers through her still dark hair, peppered here and there with the occasional silver. "And I know you've been campaigning for my return, Bill."

"Rather loudly," Scully added markedly from behind, trailing along with her own sturdy and well-used travel case. This had been the ongoing argument since Charlie's wedding. Bill had lamented openly about Maggie being so far away with the impending birth of her first grandchild, while Charlie had pointed out that he and Ashley of course would be having children one day and would love to have Maggie so close to them. Scully had wisely stayed out of the argument. The news of her barrenness had been so new at the time and fresh on the heels of her own bout with cancer. It was a new wound she didn't want to probe too deeply, nor did she want to inflict it on her family. So she kept her mouth shut while the brothers argued.

"I'm just saying." Bill shrugged as if he hadn't been "just saying" for three months. "You always said you had your best memories are out here."

"It's because it's the one city we lived in as a family the longest." By now the argument was so familiar to Maggie she entered into her counter-arguments by rote. "Besides, I've told you, I have no desire to leave Baltimore just yet. My friends are there, my church is there, and that was the first house your father ever bought for me. I'd like a chance to properly grow old in it before I shuttle off to some child's house to help raise my grandchildren."

Scully smirked at her brother over her mother's shoulder, delighted at his consternation. She honestly hoped this wasn't an ongoing discussion over their Christmas holiday, or that at least Bill's impending progeny would make an appearance soon to distract them all from it. Frankly, she was not keen on the idea of her mother moving back to San Diego either. Like Charlie, she relished the idea of her mother's close proximity, especially considering how far flung the rest of her family was. Besides, Baltimore and Maryland were as much Scully's home as anywhere else in her life was. She had spent her teenage years there, went to high school, had her first group of steady friends, gone to college at the state university. She had ties there, for what it was worth. Maggie was the tie that bound her to her past, her mother, her confidant, her closest, female friend. What would she do without her mother there to call, to visit, to cry to when life was rough?

"I suppose you have no intention of involving yourself in this argument," Bill groused, as he stowed their luggage into his sedan, though not seriously. He always knew when to pick and chose
his fights with their mother, and Scully suspected he was planning to lay low on this one.

"Nope!" She smiled cheerfully, handing him her bag with a giant grin, the sort she would have given to exasperate him when they were kids.

"Some help you are," he snorted as their mother chuckled. Still his disappointment didn't last long. He softened as he closed the trunk and wrapped an arm around his youngest sister.

"Damn, you look good, Dana." He hugged her extra tight, as if he hadn't just seen her not that long ago. Bill had been the one Scully sibling that had seen her at her worst during the cancer, had been by her bedside as she lay dying, had held their mother as she faced the possibility of losing her remaining daughter. Bill the oldest, the protector, and the man-of-the-family. It had been hard on him, heartbreaking in ways Scully didn't understand. So she didn't complain as he held her longer than perhaps he would have.

"You know," he rumbled lowly, leaning his chin on the top of her head. "From this angle I have a great vantage point to give you the world's best noogy."

"Watch it, I'm still armed." She snorted into his chest, pulling away and glaring up at her tall brother. "Don't think I won't consider it."

"You do and I'll tell Mom to take your toys away from you." Bill grinned in his superior, brotherly fashion, waving them all into the car.

"Must I separate you two for the whole trip?" Maggie's long-suffering sigh was hardly convincing. Both Scully children knew she secretly enjoyed the banter between the two, often-confrontational siblings.

"Only if he takes all the peas at dinner," Scully replied cheekily. Bill's only response was to silently pull out of the parking lot and begin the short drive to his base home.

San Diego practically sat on top of the Pacific Ocean. The city was a gorgeous, smaller than the major metropolis of Los Angeles just to the north and nearly on the border of Mexico to the south. To the east rolled hills and canyons, filled with homes and businesses, all centering on the downtown center that overlooked the bay to the west, a grayish blue at this time of year in Southern California. During the summer it was often nearly blue-green and filled ships of all shapes and sizes, not to mention the large, impressive naval ships that claimed San Diego as their port of call. With Camp Pendleton Marine Base only twenty minutes north of the city in between Oceanside and Orange County, San Diego was the home to many sailors and Marines stationed in the Pacific fleet. It had been the only home Scully had known until her entire family moved to Baltimore, and she still had fond memories of the long, hot, scorching summers and balmy, rainy winters.

"Did you really, seriously get our old house?" Scully lazily watched traffic speed by on the 5 Freeway, the main artery through town.

"Well close, it is the same exact layout as the last house we lived in, even down to the rooms." Bill had spent most of high school in that house. For him the old place was filled with memories of friends, first dates, and football. "I refer to all the rooms by who they belonged to in our old house. Tara and I stay in what was me and Charlie's room."

"You know how creepy that sounds, right?" Scully couldn't help but tease her brother.

"Yeah, well it was nearly as big as the master, and besides I keep that as sort of an office for when
"I'm home. It's the guest room now, that's where you can camp out for now, Mom. And if you don't mind, Dana, you can crash in the nursery for now till the baby gets here."

"If it gets here before I go home." Tara was already reaching the end of her ninth month of pregnancy and Scully knew each and every one of those four weeks had taken a toll on her big brother, especially considering how hard it had been for he and his wife to even conceive in the first place. There Scully could empathize. Coupled with the stress of her illness earlier in the year and then Charlie's wedding, Scully could imagine Bill was more than a little excited and ready to greet his child and see it safely into the world.

"Well Tara's OB/GYN says to give her another week. And if she doesn't go into labor on her own then they will induce."

"Babies like to take their own sweet time," Maggie assured him with the wisdom of a woman who had given birth to four of them herself. "And each of you were different. You and Dana were right on time, Melissa was predictably late and Charlie was early."

Bill shook his head. "Sneaky bastard, and he's never stopped being sneaky, even from the womb." As the baby, Charlie was often the butt of the worst Scully sibling teasing, especially as his presence was so infrequent with the family.

"So do we know if I'm getting a niece or a nephew yet?" Scully had been dying to know for weeks and both her brother and her sister-in-law were being particularly cagey about it.

"I'm not telling," Bill chanted in a sing-song voice. "But if it is a boy he is being named Matthew for Tara's grandfather. Sorry, but I couldn't stomach another William Scully." He glanced apologetically to his mother.

"No need to apologize to me, dear, your father wasn't keen on the junior either," Maggie had gotten her way in naming most of the children however. "What about a girl's name?"

"We are still debating it, she likes Madeleine, but I'm pushing for Melissa." He sounded almost ashamed admitting that. "I don't know, Missy would probably say it was stupid, but…"

"I think Missy would have liked it," Maggie whispered, reaching out to reassure her son. There were tears in her eyes, but she smiled brightly. "And if she were here she'd have spoiled your children rotten, you know that."

"I'd be pulling healing crystals out of their mouth and Buddhist prayer beads out of their nose." Bill sounded regretful that he wouldn't get a chance to do it after all. He had loved their flighty, whimsical sister dearly, for many of the same reasons Scully had loved her. Melissa had softened the hard edges that made up Bill and Dana, opened them up to ways of thinking that they tended not to see at first. Scully at least had Mulder to fall back on when Melissa died, but Bill had felt the ache of her loss keenly.

"Home again, home again." Bill had pulled off the freeway and into a quiet, plain suburban neighborhood, lawns decked out in light covered palm trees and gaudy, plastic decorations. It was the type of base housing Scully remembered, cheaply and quickly made but sturdy after decades of use by hundreds of families. Bill's house was indeed just as she remembered their last, base house being when she was younger, down to the sidewalk cracked and broken by various earthquakes and tree roots and the ugly, sky-blue paint on the outside.

"Oh my God, Bill," she breathed, grinning as a flood of memories returned to her of the tiny house that had housed the Scully children their father's last years as an active, naval captain. "If you had a
giant hole under the front window where Charlie and I attempted to dig a hole to China, you would have our old house."

"Yeah, I nearly dug one for sentimentalities sake, but Tara wouldn't let me." Bill rushed to get their bags out of the trunk, handing Scully her own bag before taking his mother's. "She's inside, she can't wait to see you all."

Literally walking down memory lane as Scully moved towards the front door, she called inside as she let herself in. "Hello? Merry Christmas!"

Her sister-in-law, blonde, pretty, and very heavy with child, waddled into view from the living room beyond, grinning in delight as she met her mother and sister-in-law at the door. Maggie squealed in delight as she rushed to try and embrace Tara, clumsily trying to manage around the other woman's rounded belly.

"Oh my God, look at you!" Maggie looked Tara up and down as if she had to make sure for herself how pregnant the woman was.

"Can you believe it?" Tara grinned, half thrilled, but also half exhausted.

"How am I going to get my arms around you?" Maggie tried at least. Scully couldn't help but join in, grinning in delight at the obvious sign of her impending aunt hood.

"You're huge!" She laughed, hugging Tara tightly.

"Oh, I know," she good-naturedly lamented. "Welcome, welcome." She paused long enough to kiss her husband as he dove in quickly. "Oh hi, sweetie."

"Let's get you two settled." Bill was already leading the way towards the back of the house. "Sorry about the digs, Mom, I know you hoped like hell you didn't have to spend another night in base housing."

Maggie didn't seem bothered. "Are you kidding, this is wonderful." Scully could tell that her mother, like Scully, was reliving several years of happy memories as she followed after her son as he briefly took her through the kitchen and dining room on the bottom floor.

Scully wandered into the living room towards Bill and Tara's Christmas tree. That was always the highlight of her holiday, the family tree, sparkling and decorated wherever the Scully clan gathered for Christmas. In the years since her father's death Scully had neglected to put one up herself, but had always delighted in the ones that her family put up. And just like herself, they usually left it up far longer than Ahab ever liked the trees to be, nearly to the point of ridiculous.

The startling likeness to their childhood home was astonishing as Scully glanced around the living room. "This is the exact same layout as our old house," she told Tara, who had wandered back in to where Scully meandered.

"That's the Navy for you," Bill offered cheerfully as he wandered back through, Maggie in tow as he searched for her luggage.

"Bill tells me, Mom, that you'll be staying in your old room. And the nursery is going to be in Dana and Melissa's room." Tara had missed out on their earlier conversation, but seemed pleased that there was that thin tie between the new family she and Bill were creating and the family that he was obviously so very devoted to.

"That's right," Bill chirped up, grabbing Maggie's large case and Scully's smaller one and trying to
wrestle them both upstairs at the same time. Only men would seem to consider this a wise idea, as his pregnant wife came to relieve him of the smaller one before he managed to hurt himself.

"I got it, Bill," she chided.

"Thanks," he offered as the two of them made their way up, obviously thrilled to have family there for the holidays, sharing this moment in their lives. Scully watched them briefly, happy for them as she watched, but inexplicably sad as well. They looked so comfortable there, so well matched together. So...right. At one point in time Scully had doubted there would ever be a woman that would fit her particular brother. Who would have the patience to put up with him? But Tara had come out of nowhere to prove Scully wrong. In the six years they had been married Tara had proven to be a life mate to her often-prickly brother, a compliment, to his brusque nature, a friend, and now the mother of his child.

Scully couldn't help but envy that. Thirty-three and alone, she had not had a serious relationship in years and the closest she got to that sort of companionship was with Mulder, her work partner. And as attracted as she was to him, and as much as she obviously cared about him, she wasn't about to compromise that work relationship in any way, shape, or form. And she could never be a mother to his children or anyone else's.

She wasn't the only one dwelling on her own sad thoughts, though.

Maggie had not followed her children upstairs, but had followed Scully's suit and wandered into the living room. She stood watching the twinkling lights on the tree, a wistful smile on her face as Scully came up beside her.

"Mom, you okay?" It was rare that Maggie ever was depressed at Christmas. It was always her favorite holiday.

"Oh...yeah." Maggie smiled reassuringly. "I was just thinking about your Dad and Melissa, and how much I miss them." She sighed, reaching out to finger one ornament on the tree, one that had belonged to Melissa growing up. Scully watched, heart aching briefly over her lost father and sister, wishing as well that they were still alive to be there with the family, to see Bill's child come into the world.

Quietly Maggie patted her daughter's shoulder as she made to follow Bill and Tara upstairs. Scully watched her go, glancing back at the tree. It had been five years since Ahab's death, and nearly three since Melissa's. It hardly seemed like any time had passed since either had gone. In this house, so close to the one from her childhood, she could almost hear them there. If she closed her eyes she could imagine her father walking in the door from work, bombarded by her and Charlie. She could almost hear Melissa's voice from upstairs, pleading with their mother to allow her to go out with her friends on some escapade her mother felt Melissa was far to young to be out on.

What would Mulder say, she wondered, her standing there talking to ghosts.

The phone in Bill's hallway rang, breaking Scully's thoughts. Scully glanced upstairs briefly, wondering if her brother would grab the extension up there. "Bill?"

The phone rang again, but no one seemed to rush to it. Unsure if she should answer for him or not, she rushed to grab it, answering it just as she would have answered it when she was younger. "Scully residence."

"Dana?"
Scully started in surprise at her name being spoken, wondering for the briefest of moments if it was Tara on the extension upstairs. But it didn't sound like Tara. "I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Dana, she needs your help."

Scully's throat tightened. Who needed her help?

"She needs you, Dana. Go to her."

"Who?" Scully gasped finally. "Who is this?"

The line went dead ringing in her ear. The voice had not given her name, either to the "who" or to her own identity. It had been frighteningly familiar, though, as familiar as the voice that had woken her up every morning for years. It was the voice she had last heard on an ill-fated phone call that had set up the untimely death of one of the people Scully loved most. It had sounded like Melissa on the other end of that line, and Scully knew that was impossible.

She hung up the phone briefly, but picked it back up, dialing the number for the local FBI field office. Given her frequent visits, she had used it often enough for business.

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation." The operator on the end of the line was cool and professional and sounded nothing like the ghostly voice Scully had just heard.

"This is Special Agent Dana Scully. My badge number is 2317616. Can you transfer me to your sound agent, please? I would like to trace the last number that was dialed into this phone."

She couldn't really be talking to ghosts….could she?
"Could you pass the peas?" Bill nudged Scully's elbow, breaking her dark thoughts with a curious look and concerned smile.

"Uh, sure." She reached the bowl in front of her, passing it to her brother's outstretched hand. He didn't press. She was grateful for that as the chatter around the table flowed between her brother, her sister-in-law, and her mother, discussion of Christmas presents and old friends, of their missing sibling, of Tara's family, of holiday traditions between the two families.

Who had called her on the phone? It sounded so much like Melissa. She could have sworn her life on it. Why was she led to the house of a dead woman? Was she supposed to help the woman? Or was she supposed to help the little girl, the one who had Melissa's clear, piercing gaze? Could she have been hearing things? No, the phone call had been real. She'd had it traced. But why would someone from that house call her? Mrs. Sim had been dead long before she'd picked up the phone, probably before Scully had even touched down in San Diego. Who would know to call her?

"You feeling alright, Dana?" Maggie, always sharp-eyed to the moods of her children, watched her daughter pick at her plate in grave concern.

"Yeah…just…thinking." Scully didn't dare look at her brother. She didn't want to see the flicker of worry. She'd admitted to Bill she thought it was Melissa calling her earlier that day. He'd of course shaken his head, told her she had to be mistaken. But she knew the idea had rattled him as well. Neither had said anything to their mother about it.

"About that suicide?" They had at least told Maggie and Tara about the sad and unfortunate death. "My heart breaks for that family. Right before the holidays too, and that poor little girl having to see it."

"The holidays are hard for people sometimes," Bill offered, busying himself with his plate, uncomfortable the conversation had turned to this. "The police seem to be handling it just fine though, it looks fairly cut and dry."

Scully glanced sharply at her brother, but he buttered a roll, ignoring her. His point had been made though. She should leave this alone. She couldn't say Bill was wrong in believing that. After all it was the holidays, it was a suicide, and it was a local matter. But the telephone call still lingered, as did the little girl's haunting gaze. This was madness. She couldn't have possibly heard what she thought she did, and even if she did there had to be an explanation, and there was only one person she knew of who would have it.

Scully glanced at her watch, pushing herself away from the table. "Excuse me," she murmured to her family as she rose, quietly slipping away from the conversation to the phone in the hallway.

Mulder would of course be up as he was a notorious insomniac and it wasn't that late on the East Coast three time zones away. But surprisingly his phone rang and rang, and it was just as Scully
was about to give up on it that Mulder's breathless voice came on the line, as if he had rushed in from somewhere.

"Hello?" She knew he didn't recognize the number, but she didn't speak. She suddenly felt foolish doing so. What was she going to tell him? The voice of her dead sister called her and sent her to the house of a suicidal woman? He'd of course be interested, rattle of theories to her, perhaps even become intrigued enough to want to be involved. That was the last thing she needed over her holidays.

"Hello," he repeated, but Scully hung up the phone, feeling suddenly foolish. Honestly, this was a situation she shouldn't be involved in and she certainly shouldn't bother Mulder with it. She was here, she was with her family, and she should be focusing on them, on Bill and Tara's baby's impending arrival.

Quietly she slipped backed to the dinning room, smiling tightly at Bill who watched her as she settled back in her place. "Everything okay," he asked, passing her a roll.

"Oh!" Tara gasped from her place, grimacing in pained amusement as her hands went immediately to her stomach.

"Is he kicking?" Bill smirked as the top of Tara's rounded belly bounced ever so slightly.

"Oh, he's kicking." Tara glared at her far-too pleased husband. "Kickboxing!" She rubbed at the spot, as if willing her child to settle down at least till she got her meal eaten. "You had both boys and girls, Maggie, which ones kicked more."

"Oh, I had some pretty tough little girls." Maggie replied, shooting Scully a prideful look. Scully couldn't deny it. She and Melissa both had been able to stand toe-to-toe with their brothers and Scully still would take Bill on, though she doubted he would agree to it. She suspected he worried he'd get his butt handed to him.

"You know what," Tara mused, a beatific look lighting her face. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, as big and fat as I am right now, I can't wait to have more. This is our baby. It kind of gives everything new meaning. I can't help but think that life before now was somehow…less. Just a prelude."

Just a prelude? Scully tried to force herself to smile at Tara's speech, at the obvious joy and pride her sister-in-law felt at this moment. After years of trying to have a baby she and Bill had succeeded in creating a new life, a product of their love for one another. Tara now had joined that most elite and special of sororities among women, that small group who had long desired children and had finally been given that gift, the joy that only a small child could bring.

That was a joy Scully herself would never, ever know. Tara's glowing words, her eagerness to have other children, to make Maggie a grandmother many times over, that unintentionally cut at Scully. She had chosen not to focus on the news her doctor gave her. She was happy just to have her health, to be alive. She had already lost so much. She hadn't wanted to think about how they had taken that from her as well.

But seeing Tara and the glow of expectation around her, to sense her mother's excitement at grandchildren, it gave Scully pause. She had always thought of having children, she and Melissa both had. As girls they used to dream of the men they would marry and the kids they would have, even going so far as to pick names for them. But Melissa had never been able to settle to anything in life for too long, let alone settle with someone. And as for Scully, she'd been the exact opposite. Focused, driven, she had devoted herself to her work. Both Scully women had put off such things
as children and family for things that were more important to them at the time, and it wasn't wrong of them to do so. Scully wouldn't have exchanged her work for the world, and she doubted Melissa would have exchanged the experiences. But now all chance was lost to either of them. Melissa was gone and Scully's chances had been taken away, all by men who thought they could play their own games with Scully's life.

"Dana, you want to help with coffee?" Her mother shook her shoulder gently, causing Scully to turn. Dinner had passed. She didn't think she had but three bites of it, and to be honest she wasn't particularly hungry. Desert passed much the same as dinner had. Her mother and sister-in-law chattered, her brother joining in, but always with the sideways look at his younger sister. And Scully managed to make a smashed mess of a perfectly delectable slice of cheesecake, choking down only the coffee as she idly listened to her family around her.

"Your sister and I will clean up." Maggie tugged gently at Scully's sleeve as she shooed Bill and the very cumbersome Tara out of the dining room, gathering plates and cups as she rose. Scully found herself stumbling behind, haphazardly gathering her own plates, still full of uneaten food, and one coffee cup, completely empty.

"Not hungry," Maggie asked with that air of false casualness only her mother could ever manage. Scully knew she was fishing, but was being polite enough not to say anything.

"Just a lot on my mind." She tried to smile reassuringly, but somehow it came out more as a pained smirk. She set her things down and returned to the dining room table for the others.

"That poor woman got to you, didn't she?" Maggie scrapped off the plates into the trash, as a sink full of hot, soapy water began to fill.

"Mrs. Sim? A little." Though not for all of the reasons that her mother probably suspected, nor because of Scully's own near-death experience. "It was sad seeing her family. She had a little girl, a daughter, probably three."

The girl had looked disturbingly like her sister as a little girl, or at least the photographs she remembered from when Melissa was small. That coupled with the eerie voice on the end of the phone, a voice that seemed to come from nowhere, it had all served to unsettle Scully. "I don't know, I realize that depression is a serious problem, and that often we don't understand the reasons for things such as suicide, but she seemed to have so much to live for."

The whole situation struck her as strange and wrong. The woman dead three hours, no explanation as to why she killed herself, the grieving husband, the bewildered daughter, and then there was the strange voice on the phone, telling Scully to protect her. Who? Mrs. Sim? The daughter, Emily? Did the voice have anything to do with the dead woman and her daughter?

"You sure that this is the only thing bothering you?" Maggie began soaping and rinsing their dinner plates, handing each to Scully who dried them carefully.

"Mmm…yes." Scully shrugged in what she hoped was a positive manner, knowing her mother wouldn't buy it for a second. "I guess it's always tough with family at holidays."

As if she didn't spend every holiday with her family.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

Maggie paused in washing to glare at her, causing Scully to flush guiltily. She didn't want to have
to admit this, didn't want to bring up the truth during what should be a joyous time for her family.

"Mom, I'm very happy for Bill and Tara."

"You don't seem to be." Maggie benignly rinsed off the plate she held, waiting expectantly as Scully fiddled with the dishtowel in hand. She had no choice here. Her mother had pinned her in this corner and she would have to explain to her just what was going on if she had any hope in making Maggie understand she didn't resent her brother and his wife this joy in their life. If anything, she envied it.

"Mom," she sighed, not even knowing how to explain. "Several months ago, I learned that as a result of my abduction, of what they did to me, that I can not conceive a child."

Whatever Maggie expected to hear, it wasn't that. Scully felt her heart sink as Maggie stilled in shock. She knew her mother had long hoped for grandchildren from all of her kids. But there was something about sharing that moment with your own daughter, knowing that she would enter into that same rite of motherhood. She knew Maggie looked forward to it. With Melissa gone, Dana was all she had left, and now there wouldn't even be that. Tears welled into her eyes as she felt the desire to beg her mother's forgiveness for something that she had absolutely no control over.

"Dana," Maggie breathed, drying her hands on a dishtowel before enfolding her daughter in her arms. "I'm so sorry."

Scully had never cried over her loss, but she had also never told anyone about it. The sudden release of it, the sharing of her private pain with her mother brought to the fore all the emotions she had been swallowing regarding this latest blow. "It's okay," she tried reassuring her mother, though in no way did she feel okay about it. "I just never realized how much I wanted it until I couldn't have it."

"Oh, honey," Maggie whispered pulling away enough to wipe at the silent tears streaming down her daughter's crestfallen face. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't know," Scully admitted, realizing in a second how foolish it now seemed her keeping this away from everyone. "After my illness, I just wanted to forget the whole thing for a while. They already took so much away from me, Mom."

The list was growing longer and longer with every passing year it seemed.

"And then there was Charlie's wedding, and now the baby, and...I didn't want to take away from any of those things. I wanted us to have some good news as a family for a while, not another tragedy befalling me."

"Dana," Maggie only shook her head in maternal exasperation. "Why won't you learn that it's okay not to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders?"

"I think you are yelling at a brick wall, Mom. Don't know if that is going to happen." She laughed in a hiccupping sort of way, rubbing at her tearful eyes.

"Have you told Fox about any of this?"

"No," Scully responded quickly, vaguely horrified by the thought. "Mom, he blames himself for every wrong done to me. It's better he not know. This is mine to deal with."

Maggie didn't look as if this was a positive course of action, but she didn't argue. "Dana, you know I'm here for you, not matter how bad it is. I wish you had told me, if nothing else, perhaps I could
have been a shoulder to cry on."

"You still are," Scully reassured her, hugging her mother again tightly. "This has been such a weird, strange, off putting day."

"Holidays tend to be that way," Maggie replied with the air of a veteran of several. "But at least we have each other, Dana, don't forget that."

"I won't," she murmured, already suspecting she wouldn't be able to keep that promise.
Getting to the Bottom

Chapter Summary

In which Scully involves herself in a case she shouldn't.

_She needs your help. Go to her._

This was insanity, Scully knew it, but she couldn't stop herself as she returned to Bill's car parked in front of the Sim's house, dialing her cell phone in the dim glow of the dome light. In the house beyond she could see lights turn off as Mr. Sim shut down the house again after Scully's impromptu, three AM visit. On her phone she could hear it ring as someone finally picked up at the other end.

"This is Special Agent Dana Scully with the FBI, I need to reach Detective Kresge."

The woman at the other end of the line was silent for half a moment in surprise. "Detective Kresge is off duty at the moment."

"I know and I'm asking you to get a hold of him," she replied patiently, allowing the woman to figure that one out. "It is regarding a case of his. Please connect me to him if you could."

"Err…one moment." Scully doubted that the San Diego police department dealt with the FBI in the middle of the night very often. The line went quiet as she was put on hold. She flipped off the dome light in her brother's car, returning to the chill dark, shivering slightly. San Diego was not freezing like it was further east, but it was still winter, the evenings were cold, and in her rush to get out the door she'd neglected to bring her jacket. All she had in mind was the strange phone call she'd received, the demand to go to "her", whoever who was. This was insane, all of this. What was she doing here, sitting in front of this house in the dead of night? Sim had to think that she was crazy, this strange woman who came to the scene of his wife's death on nothing more than a strange phone call. Now she was appearing at his doorstep with crazed accusations about phantom phone calls. It all smacked of something that would happen to Mulder on one of his holidays, not something that would happen to her.

"Agent Scully?" The woman cut through again. "I have Detective Kresge on the line."

"Thanks." She waited as the line clicked to the detective's groggy greeting.

"Agent Scully, can I help you?" He clearly wasn't thrilled with being woken so early.

"I'm sorry for the early hour, Detective, but I had to go with my gut here." Look at her, Scully thought, listening to instincts, to intuition. Mulder always preached at her about it. In fact so had Melissa. She swallowed hard as she continued.

"I received another of those phone calls, this time to my cell phone."

The detective was quiet for a long moment. Scully couldn't tell if it was out of irritation or surprise.

"Agent Scully," he finally sighed, drawing her name out on a breath of exhaustion.
"Look, Detective, I can assure you that I'm not exactly the type of person who randomly makes up strange phenomenon and tries to gain local attention." No matter what her record working with Mulder said. "And you can't tell me that two strange phone calls from the same house and number to two different phone lines I happened to be at was a mere coincidence."

"I admit it's strange, Agent Scully, but it's three in the morning and it's nearly Christmas, and I will be in the office in the morning..."

"Can you be at the office now?"

"Now? Why?"

Because the blasted intuition Melissa always preached to her about was begging her to listen to it. She couldn't tell him that, however, and opted instead for vagueness. "Because I think that there is something more to all of this than crank phone calls, that's why. No one connected to the Sim family has any reason to know me or any of my family in the area and has no knowledge of my numbers and no reason to call me. Once perhaps is a fluke, but twice? And once in the middle of the night?"

It sounded just reasonable and rational enough,didn't it?

The detective groaned and swore under his breath softly. "Look, I'll be there in twenty minutes. I'm in the office on G Street."

"Right." Scully remembered downtown enough to feel confident getting there this late at night. She let the detective go, starting Bill's car and pulling slowly away from the curb, watching the Sim house as she went. All was dark, save for one light burning somewhere in the back. She wondered if Emily's father was sleeping at all.

With the little girl's sad face in mind, Scully made her way to Kresge's office. Downtown San Diego was a grid of one-way streets surrounding old, early 20th century storefronts and tall, glass encased high rises. Anyone not used to the area could easily get confused as to how to get around, especially the Gaslamp Quarter, as nearly all the streets were one way, and it made trying to directly get anywhere frustrating in the extreme. But at such an ungodly hour few people were actually out in the city, especially not right before the holidays. Scully herself should have been one of those at home, snug in a bed. What was she doing chasing ghosts? She should drop and leave this, return to her brother's and figure out a damn good reason why she was making off with his car in the middle of the night.

Instead Scully parked and walked into the police station, flashing her badge at the front desk and explaining she was meeting Detective Kresge. The front desk officer looked surprised but not particularly concerned as he had her sign in and escorted her to an empty conference room. FBI in San Diego were not uncommon, not this close to the Mexican border. But she doubted few of them were particularly interested in the cases of suspected suicide victims, working on nothing more than a hunch and a gut feeling. If only she could figure out why she was receiving these strange phone calls and for what purpose? Had Roberta Sim really killed her herself? Was there something about her death that Scully was being led to unravel? And why her? Why not the cop that was in charge of all of this? What was so special about all of it that meant she had to be directly involved?

Perhaps her mother was right, Scully mused. She should have spoke to Mulder about all of this.
Blood Relatives

Chapter Summary

In which Scully starts having suspicions on Emily's origins.

Something here was wrong.

Scully flipped through Kresge's case file, her brain feverish as it processed the data before her. Was this how Mulder felt as he pondered a case, she mused, studying the crime scene photos and comparing them to the autopsy report. Mulder was a creature of instinct, not that he didn't use logic, but his reason was always backed up by what his gut told him, by the leaps and jumps that formed from his insane perception and eye for detail. Scully had always envied him that ability.

She stuck doggedly to what she understood in her science and her observations, quietly explaining away anomalies such as this. Her rational brain was screaming at her that this was all foolishness. This could easily be explained away by mixed up telephone signals, by her lack of sleep the night before as she helped her mother prepare to fly out, to the stress of the holidays making her miss her sister, to her own long and emotionally taxing year.

But she ignored the logical rational as she turned through the autopsy report and studied the photograph in front of her. Burning eyes and a head heavy with exhaustion did not dissuade her as she held up the glassy, color photographs, studying the limp and bleeding wrist of Roberta Sim. The cut was deep, slicing into flesh and tendon, cutting the major vein, and sending blood gushing down her fingers, across her palm, dribbling to the floor. This had been the final cut, across her left arm. It had to be. She doubted the woman could have held the razor to slice the other wrist after that. Her right wrist, the lesser of the two wounds was no less devastating. It didn't cut as deep, but it was just as effective. It looked right if someone was going to commit suicide. After all if Roberta Sim were right handed rather than left, that wrist would not be cut as effectively. But if she were right handed, why would she cut the right first and not the left. And why so cleanly the first time, she wondered. One clean cut across each wrist, no hesitation. Often suicide victims made shallow first cuts, unsure or afraid of cutting too deep the first time. There were none she could see on Roberta Sim's wrist. Had she been so certain? Perhaps there was another factor? The influence of the drugs she was on for her migraines?

Scully puzzled through the autopsy report, the niggling feeling that something was wrong eating at her. Why would Roberta Sim kill herself? It didn't make sense there was no reason for it. The migraine medication perhaps could explain it away, but she had been under its influence for years. There would need to be blood work done, toxicology tests run to see how much was in her system, a discussion with her personal physician to know how much she had taken or what the side effects were. But was there enough to even begin opening that door and question the initial findings? Kresge wouldn't care if she didn't present him with evidence that conclusively gave him a reason and purpose to ask these questions. Unlike she and Mulder on the X-files, the San Diego police needed more than just gut instinct on this.

In frustration she set down the files, rubbing aching eyes briefly. When she opened them again they fell on the photo album she had sitting on the table. Bill had snagged their mother's album of their childhood photographs after he and Tara married. Scully had said little on it, she had figured less in the photographs than Bill had. She picked it up, flipping to the picture of Melissa at three
again. Scully didn't remember much of their time in Japan at all, her father had served a brief, two-year stint in Okinawa when she was still just a baby and toddler. Charlie had not even in existence yet. The picture of Melissa was familiar to her, not from the event, but because she had seen it so many times growing up, had heard the stories of their mother's adventures trying to wrestle three small children in a foreign country in the sixties, all while pregnant with the fourth. This photo had been taken of her sister while out at a farmer's market. Held beside the small photograph of Emily Sim from her third birthday the resemblance was striking, frighteningly so. The voice had told her to go to her, she needed help, but had never said who the "her" was. Scully had presumed that the voice had wanted her to help Roberta Sim, to find out why she died. But what if that wasn't it at all? A creeping dread crawled into her heart. It sounded ridiculous, the idea of her older sister reaching out from beyond the grave to help a strange girl she had no reason to know, unless she did. What if Melissa did know this girl, intimately so? It was a horrible thought, one that flittered to life and one Scully almost immediately wished she had quashed. Her sister wouldn't have….she'd have said something if she had…

As much as she didn't want to listen to the idea that had danced to life, now that it was there Scully couldn't ignore it. It began to spin together a picture that was disturbing in the extreme, but whether she liked it or not she had to consider every possibility. She booted up her laptop, searching for some point to plug it in to connect to the Internet. Settling on the hallway phone, she settled to work again at the kitchen table, calling up the FBI records database and typed in Emily Sim's name.

Only a handful of records matched her query, and of those one of them was an adoption record. The name of Emily's parents was signed at the bottom with a date of late 1994. There was no birth record on file. Not unusual, if she was a child given up for adoption, her birth certificate might not reflect her given name. But the timing could be just right. If she were born in early 1994, perhaps spring or early summer, it could go a great deal to explain certain aspects of Emily's life and perhaps Melissa's.

Before she could allow her reason and guilt to talk her out of it she snagged up her cell phone dialing Mulder's favorite contact at the Bureau, Danny. With three hours between DC and San Diego, she suspected he would be up and at work already.

"Danny, it's me, Dana."

"Hey, Merry Christmas to you! How's the SoCal sunshine?"

Funny as she had always thought Danny was Jewish. "Yeah, Merry Christmas to you, too. And it's amazing out here, as always."

"Enjoy, everyone needs a break from Mulder and his theories every now and again. What's up?"

"I'm wondering if you could do me a favor. I need the complete case files on my sister, Melissa Scully."

If it surprised him, he didn't indicate it. "The full files? Everything?"

She could hear the hesitancy in his voice. "Yeah, crime scene and autopsy photos along with the PCR we ran. I need you to send them to the San Diego field office as soon as possible."

"Sure thing. Just pick me up a nice wine while you are out there, we will call it even."

"Thanks, Danny."
She hung up, slipping her glasses off her face and rubbing at her eyes, thinking. Melissa had disappeared for a year in '93 and '94. There was no reason given, no explanation. She had simply said she needed to get out of town, to see friends, to shake the moss off and get away for a while. Neither her parents nor Scully had said anything about it. It was hardly the first time Melissa had done anything like that. Still her departure had been so swift and sudden that it now begged the question why? Why had Melissa taken off so suddenly with hardly an explanation to her family on the subject? Did Emily have anything to do with it?

Ideas spun to life, causing Scully's head to ache. She rested it tiredly on the pillow of her arms on Bill and Tara's kitchen table. Could Melissa have carried a far greater secret than any of them suspected? A simple look through her autopsy file could tell Scully if she'd ever carried a child to term. Perhaps while she was out here in California she could have given birth, given the child up, and returned to DC with no one the wiser as to what she had done. It certainly wasn't outside of the realm of believability for her elder sister Melissa to have made such a serious life choice. What was hard to believe was that she would tell no one about it, even her younger sister. Could this be, then, why the strange phone calls were happening? Emily was Melissa's daughter? Could her long dead sister be reaching out from beyond the grave to protect the little girl she gave away years ago? And why? What was it about Roberta Sim's death that posed any danger to Emily?

Sleep, long pulling at the edges of consciousness, finally claimed her, sucking Scully down through the swirl of unanswered questions into the sweet oblivion of the abyss.
The Night Before Christmas

Chapter Summary

In which Scully lays awake in front of the Christmas tree.

If Melissa's message to Scully was for her to protect her sister's daughter, Scully was doing an obviously horrible job at it. Marshall Sim was dead now, just like his wife the day before, and likely killed for the same reason. Someone at the pharmaceutical company was hiding something, of that she was certain. Just what Emily's condition was and what they were doing was uncertain, but she had tangled with enough similar companies with her work with Mulder to suspect that there was something horribly wrong here and she couldn't guarantee it wasn't the same exact sort of work that Michael Kritschgau warned her about months ago. And now she couldn't even get custody of the girl to ensure that she would be safe from those who threatened to harm her.

The lights on Bill and Tara's tree twinkled in the dark, adding glowing warmth to the living room that Scully didn't quite feel. She wrapped herself tighter in the afghan from off of the back of the couch, hugging it around herself. In the tradition of her family, the tree would remain on all night, shining brightly till Christmas morning in anticipation for the family gathering around it bright and early. Bill, like their father, didn't know what sleeping in meant, even on a holiday. Upstairs Scully knew her family curled snuggly in their beds, anticipating the fun and companionship of the morning. But Scully couldn't find sleep, the image of Emily's large, blue eyes watching her so gravely as she helped her into the social workers car haunted her, the small smile she gave when Scully looped her own cross around the girl's neck. Everything within her told her that no matter what Bill said, the girl was family and she needed their help.

She wondered what the lost, orphaned little girl was doing that night in foster care. No matter if she was her niece or not, Scully's heart broke for the girl. Days ago she was looking forward to a normal Christmas with her parents; a tree, presents, all the trappings of the holidays that every other child had. Now those were gone and she was in a strange place, alone with strange children, looking forward to the most magic of holidays without anything, even her father. Scully had tried to gain custody of the girl in time to bring her to Bill's, to give her something of a normal Christmas. She knew it had been a long shot, but still she had hoped…

"You know sitting up won't make Santa come any faster," Bill rumbled from the vicinity of the kitchen, shuffling into view in a bathrobe and slippers. In his hands he held two mugs, the steam wafting up smelled of hot chocolate.

"You know Mom said that a couple of Christmases ago when I was sitting up at your old place." Scully made room for her elder brother on the couch, smiling as he sat down carefully, passing a mug on to her. "I can't believe I didn't hear you in the kitchen."

"You didn't look as if you were paying attention to much of anything." He grabbed a corner of the blanket she was wrapped in and threw it over his lap. "Tara kicked me out of bed again."

Scully patted her brother's arm in sympathy. "She's restless?"

"Yeah. With the baby being this far along, it's hard for her to find a comfortable spot." He yawned and sipped from his mug. "I figured you would be sleepless as well."
"What makes you say that?" She was horrible at lying, but she did it anyway as she stared into her mug of hot chocolate.

"I figured that the meeting with the social worker didn't go well." He hadn't mentioned it when Scully had finally arrived at the neighbor's house, nor had he brought it up at dinner. "You were trying to get custody of that girl, weren't you?"

"Bill, she has no one for the holidays," Scully explained, sensing her brother's disapproval. "Her parents are dead, her world has turned upside down…"

"And you still believe she's our blood relation?" Bill cut in, shooting her the type of doubtful look Scully knew she had given Mulder many times and one she knew drove her partner crazy.

"Bill, the DNA test is leaning that way." She had ordered further ones done in order to help her case with the San Diego County Children's Services.

"Mom said it wasn't conclusive."

"But it's enough to beg the question, Bill, and as much as we don't want to think that this is true, how well did we really know Melissa as an adult?"

Her question gave her brother pause. "You would really wonder such a thing?"

"Think about it, Missy was always out and about. She'd live for a few years with me, spend some time with you, hold down a job for a year or two, then take off again to parts unknown." It was Melissa's way, and no one had really questioned it until now.

"You think she would just go off and have a child and not tell us?"

"No, but Melissa would go and donate her ova without telling us. And let's face it she was never exactly good with money. The going rate for donated eggs is extremely lucrative."

Bill wasn't convinced. "Let's just say that Melissa did do such a thing, that doesn't mean this girl is a product of that. You said she was adopted."

"We don't know what the circumstances of that adoption were." Scully had tried and failed to get the files opened before the holidays. "The truth is everything about this girl's plight is a mystery. She suffers from a disease that is so rare her parents were being paid to keep her in the program. Her doctor works for a pharmaceutical company who could very well be at the center of all of this. And the only thing we know of for sure is that there is a little girl sitting in foster care tonight, on a night she should be at home in her bed, dreaming of a tree like this tomorrow morning."

"I agree it's tragic, Dana, but you have no evidence that she's your tragedy to worry about."

"But we have a possibility, Bill, and that alone should have us trying everything to make sure this little girl is safe."

"Possibility." The word made Bill chuckle in a way Scully wasn't completely comfortable with. He sipped from his mug, shaking his head ruefully. "That's a word your partner likes to drop a lot, 'possibility."

Again Scully felt herself on the defensive. "Mulder doesn't blindly take the world at face value, Bill."

"And perhaps that makes him a good investigator, Dana, but sometimes in the real world a horse is
just a horse. You've been following him so long you're starting to see conspiracies and secrets in everything yourself."

"I didn't say this was a conspiracy, Bill, only that it was a weird confluence of events."

"You believe this company might have something to do with her parents' death."

"That's hardly a conspiracy," she snapped, setting down her mug of cocoa petulantly. Why did she even bother with her brother sometimes?

"Whether it is a conspiracy or not, this isn't your concern. This is a matter for the local police. And I think that Mulder, with all of his crazy talk about conspiracies and plots, would say the same thing."

Scully couldn't believe she was hearing her own brother was giving her partner the benefit of the doubt. "Mulder would want justice for this little girl."

"But even he would concede that you are too close to this, Dana. You haven't been thinking rationally about any of this since the moment you got here. Up all hours of the night, calling social workers. Even he would say that you need to step away from this."

The sad truth was Bill was right, Mulder would say that very thing. And Scully knew she was too close to it. She hadn't had a decent nights sleep in days and her dreams were populated by half-remembered memories and visions of Emily, watching her with her sad, soulful eyes, as piercing and insightful as Melissa's.

"I won't pretend to understand what you've been through these last months, Dana. But as your brother I can worry about you and just try to be there."

He meant well, she knew that. "I just want to make sure that if this is our blood relation, Bill, our sister's daughter, that we've done everything possible to do right by her."

"I understand. But I don't want to see you make this girl out to be something she isn't. Consider what you are doing to her and yourself before you pursue this. Because as hard as you are trying to believe that she is our niece, what if it turns out that she isn't?"

Bill rose slowly, long legs pulling him off the cushions as he finished off his mug of warm milk and chocolate. "I better see if Tara has settled, see if I can get some sleep." He stood, stretching tall and yawning sleepily. "I better get it while I can, once Junior's here sleep will be a rare commodity in this household."

"Right," she smiled tightly, trying not to feel vaguely jealous over the sleepless nights and other inconveniences of having a child in his life. Just how would her life have changed if she had managed to get Emily into it? What decisions would she have to make if she had a daughter to consider?

"Get to sleep, Dana, so Santa can bring us our loot."

"Loots under the tree already, you dork." She yawned.

Bill grinned and shuffled to the kitchen. "Good night."

"Night," she called back softly, curling up under the blanket and watching the tree again quietly.
In which Scully learns a shattering truth about Emily.

This couldn't possibly be right.

Her family all stared at her dumbly, mutely waiting for an explanation she couldn't possibly give. Scully looked at the results, laid the clear films with the PCR results one on top of the other. The matching lines made her mouth dry and her heart ache, her head swimming with the impossibility of it all.

"Dana?" Her mother's voice quavered in the stillness. "What does this mean? How…"

Scully didn't answer for long minutes, her eyes roving the numbers and percentages on the page. There was little doubt she was Emily's mother, the match was 99%. What the test did not answer was how any of this could even be. She had no child. She'd never had a child. She'd never been so much as pregnant in all of her life, and yet she was genetically linked to this little girl. DNA didn't lie.

"Dana?" Bill urged again, watching her fearfully as she turned back to her family, the evidence burning in her fingertips. How could she even explain this?

"I…I don't know." It was all the answer she could give them, her voice weak and failing her, as she held up the paperwork in silent supplication. Bill reached out for it, glancing through the numbers himself. Did he even understand what they all meant?

"Dana, you've never been pregnant." Her mother echoed the truth Scully herself knew.

"No, not to my knowledge I haven't." But her knowledge was admittedly limited. There were things, many things she knew happened to her that she didn't understand, things inside of the silver box cars that traveled silently across the country, things done to Penny Northern and Betsy Hagopian, things that were covered up by men who tried to kill her for it.

"To your knowledge, Dana? Either you were or you weren't." Bill snapped at her harder than he meant to, more a reaction to his own confusion than hers. Christmas morning and they had this thrown at them.

"Bill, I figure I would have known something like this," she shot back, rubbing at the stinging in her eyes. "I was told I couldn't have children at all."

"But how?" Maggie couldn't seem to wrap her head around that one unanswered question.

Scully could think of a possibility how, one that made perfect sense considering the nature of hr infertility. Her knees wobbled slightly as she stumbled to the couch, collapsing into the spot she so recently vacated beside her flabbergasted mother. "Mom…I told you I was barren because of what they did to me."

Maggie nodded, eyes filmed with tears despite the fearful calm on her still face.
"My doctors found evidence of ovarian failure due to overstimulation of the ovaries at some point."
Across the room Scully heard Tara gasp in sympathy as she moved to settle in a chair. Her sister-in-law knew exactly the process. She and Bill had been through it in order to get pregnant.
"Whatever they did to me damaged what is left."

"So the men who took you stole your ova?" Bill's fingers tightening hard over the papers in his hand. Scully thought about prying them loose but chose instead to say nothing.

"For what purpose?" Tara looked visibly pale as her hands wrapped protectively around her rounded belly. Scully considered. How much should she tell her family about all of this, about the truth that she and Mulder knew?

"For experimentation. Not just from myself, but other women."
She might as well have said she'd been to the moon and back. Scully had never gone into detail on the nature of her work with Mulder. She knew her mother guessed a lot, she knew Bill had some inkling, and perhaps Tara understood some from Bill, but otherwise they were completely lost. Dropping the word "experiment" on them was like suddenly speaking Chinese, they little understood and she could sense that they little wanted to understand.

"Dana..." Bill had that "let's be reasonable" tone to his voice. "Look, I know that this is a shock, but..."

"Bill, I'm not lying and this isn't one of Mulder's crazy stories. It's on record with the Bureau."
Anger snapped her from her stunned malaise. She glared up at her elder brother who blinked blindly in the face of her annoyance. "Pharmaceutical companies have been doing this sort of thing for years, decades. It's a part of the Cold War no one wants to see or acknowledge."

She hadn't, not till Kritschgau had happened into she and Mulder's life.

"You are starting to sound as crazy as he does," Bill retorted hotly.

"Maybe because I'm the one who has had to live with this, not you!" Scully didn't care if it was Christmas morning and she was making a scene. "My body was violated in the worst of ways, not through violence, but through lies and sedition. I've had to live with the vague memories, the illness and the cancer. I've had my memories stolen, weeks of my life stolen, and my ability to have children. You can sit here, safe with Tara, happy with your baby on the way and castigate Mulder and me and sneer at what we find. But you aren't the one living this everyday. You aren't the one who randomly finds your name in some file somewhere, who wakes up one day and finds everything in your life changed. I have, and others like me have, and if you want to choose to believe its craziness, fine. But you aren't the one who has to explain that."

She flung a hand towards the evidence in Bill's fingers. "How I have a child that was being raised by a family who is now dead, a child I had no knowledge of, who I didn't even know existed."

Her child! Emily Sim was hers. The heady thought broke through the confusion and anger as she felt herself shake suddenly with the enormity of it. She was a mother. Just when she felt she couldn't be, she was. The little girl who had so captivated her was her blood. Had this been what Melissa meant all along? Was this why she had sent her message in the first place? Her family stared at her, silent as the truth finally hit Scully. She was a mother. This changed everything.

"Excuse me," Scully murmured softly, leaving her stunned family surrounding their unopened presents, turning for the stairs and the nursery bedroom she had been sleeping in. She stumbled in blindly, collapsing on the bed as tears fell. What did all of this mean, any of this? Her family was
below, their joyous holiday now ruined by her announcement, a small girl was waking up alone just days after the death of the only parents she had ever known, and Scully discovered she was hers. How could any of this have happened? Why? Who would be so cruel as to not only steal this opportunity from her, but to create a little girl who now suffered through this? What had they done to Emily, and why?

Below she could hear the front door opening and closing as Bill's car started and pulled out of the drive. There was a murmur of voices and sounds from the kitchen. The scent of coffee wafted up the staircase soon after as did the smell of cinnamon rolls in the oven. If she closed her eyes and pretended Scully could almost convince herself that her entire world hadn't just changed in the span of an hour.

There was a knock at her door and it opened. Scully had expected her mother to be the one to breech the quiet solitude of her daughter's angst, but she was surprised to see Tara lumbering in, cautiously worried as she peeked around the corner at Scully. "How you doing?"

Scully shrugged disconsolately. "As well as can be expected for someone who was just told that they have a child they had never planned."

Tara was sympathetic as she settled into the rocking chair set in the corner of what would be her child's nursery. "You are handling it better than I would, that's for certain, and I'm expecting one." She rubbed her belly absently.

"Thank you." Scully didn't know what else to say to that. She didn't know if she was handling it well or not. "Did Bill go out?"

"Just for a drive. It's his way when he's stressed." She didn't seem overly concerned. In many ways Tara knew Bill better than Scully did, and she had grown up with him. "He will likely just drive randomly around for a bit. He'll be back before too long."

Great, she sighed. "I'm sorry I ruined Christmas morning with all of this."

"I wouldn't say ruined," Tara protested. "You at least found out some good news. I'm an aunt and my baby has a cousin we never knew about."

"I suppose that's the bright side to it," Scully replied, staring up at the ceiling briefly. "The other side is my brother is angry, my mother is devastated, my entire world has shifted, and none of it was my choosing."

"There is that," Tara acknowledged slowly. Scully turned her face to regard the woman who was married to her brother but whom she knew so little about. Tara had always seemed quiet and shy compared to the rest of the Scully clan. She could see now why Bill loved her so much. The quietness hid a center of calm when the world was going to hell. The shyness really was the reserve she had before action. Tara was a grounded, capable woman, just as one had to be when married into the navy. She reminded Scully in many ways of her mother and of Melissa. Perhaps that is why Bill loved her so much.

"Is it true what you told Bill about the experiments?" Tara sounded more fearfully curious than dismissive. Scully wasn't sure why she was surprised by that.

"Yes," Scully sighed, rolling over to face her sister-in-law. "There were women...women I got to know. They all had the same experiments run on them. They all died."

"I'm sorry."
Scully didn't know what to say to that. "The truth is I should have been dead as well. I'm lucky that I am not."

Tara had never heard this from Scully personally. Her entire information on the subject had been filtered to her from her husband. How strange this must all sound to her now, talk of experiments, of abductions, of a strange little girl who randomly turned out to be Scully's daughter. What must her sister-in-law be thinking?

"Dana," Tara murmured, rocking back and forth slowly, hands folded across her belly. "I don't presume to know you or to even understand your work. I can't even begin to imagine the things you've been through and seen. But I do know this, your mother was right. Her girls are tough. You're a strong person, one of the strongest I've ever met. That's why your brother adores you so much."

"I think Bill would say I'm too stubborn and pig headed for my own good."

"Well yes, he would say that too." Tara acknowledged with a small smile. "Bill has always wanted to protect you. It drives him crazy that you won't let him."

"I can do fine by myself," Scully replied, not knowing why she argued with her sister-in-law on the matter.

"Helps that you have a partner who backs you up." Tara pointed out. "And despite what you may think, Bill supports you in more ways than he admits, and there is your mother, and Charlie, and Ashley and I. We are your family, and we are here for you, even for this."

"This?" Scully rubbed at the tears that filmed her eyes. "I don't even know what this is? I woke up on Christmas morning and suddenly I'm a mother to a child I never had."

"At the expense of being very cheesy right now, it could be worse. Another woman a few centuries ago woke on a morning like this to a baby she couldn't explain."

Scully snorted through her weeping, giving Tara a wobbly smile. "That was pretty cheesy."

"Well, you know, the day and all." She scooted forward in an attempt to rise slowly from the rocking chair. "One that is sorely lacking in Christmas presents and I'm dying to see what Bill got me."

Guilt washed over Scully anew. Their happy, family moment had been ruined by her need to know, her desire to get to the truth behind the strange voice and the message it left behind. Her persistence, her insistence on knowing had led to this. She didn't know if she wanted to know the truth now or not.

"Tara! Dana!" Maggie's voice could be heard, cautious and careful on the stairwell. "There coffee and cinnamon rolls. I made some tea, Tara."

"My world for coffee!" Tara heaved herself upwards with a soft look for her sister-in-law. "You want to come down with us, perhaps have something to eat? I'm sure Bill will be home soon. He's never gone long."

Could she really get away with hiding forever in her room on this holiday?

"Sure!" Scully wiped at her brimming eyes and sodden eyelashes. "Thank you, Tara."

She stopped at the door. "For?"
"For being a sister," she smiled, rising to follow her down to face her family.
In which Scully finally confesses to Mulder what's been going on.

She waited a five days before even calling Mulder. Scully somehow just couldn't find the wherewithal to do it. What was she supposed to say to him? How could she explain this to her partner any better than she was able to explain it to her own family?

"If anyone would understand it, Dana, its Fox," Maggie admonished while making breakfast that morning. They stood in Bill and Tara's kitchen, Scully sipping at coffee, her arms wrapped around herself as she tried to pluck up the courage to call the one person in the world she trusted implicitly. Why couldn't she seem to trust him with this?

"I know, Mom, but…I don't know. What am I supposed to tell him? By the way I have a daughter I didn't know about."

"You can't tell me that's the strangest thing Fox Mulder has ever heard in his life?" Maggie sliced through half a melon, dicing it into bite size pieces. In the days since the discovery of the truth of Emily's parentage, Maggie had warmed, albeit slowly, to the small girl who had suddenly become a large fixture in her daughter's life. "You'll need his help, Dana, if you have any hope to convince Children's Services that you are that little girl's biological mother."

At least Maggie's tongue didn't trip over the idea now like it once had. On Christmas Day when everything had broke Maggie could hardly speak of it. It was crushing to Maggie the idea that her daughter could have had something so precious not only stolen from her but also given to someone else. But as Scully's resolve about the girl intensified, so had Maggie's acceptance. "You are Emily's mother, Dana, you need to get her, to bring her to the family she rightly belongs to. And if anyone can do the impossible to prove this little girl belongs with us, it's Fox."

Scully smiled at her mother's resolution. In Maggie's mind now Mulder could seemingly walk on water and move mountains. "I just don't want to burden him with this, Mom."

"Have you ever mentioned to that man that he can't carry the burden of other people's sins on his shoulders, only his own."

"Spoken like a true Catholic," Scully teased, setting down her coffee as she snagged a piece of fruit from the bowl her mother was preparing. "I don't know why I've balked so much at it. I just don't want him to think that every time I have a major crises in my life I need to run to him to come and fix it for me."

"He's your partner and your friend, Dana, that's part of what he's there for, support." Her mother shook her dark head as if she were trying to explain the most basic of relationship lessons to her daughter. "Besides, when will you learn you can't do this all on your own?"

"Never," Scully replied, impishly, perhaps the first ghost of a smile she had felt in days. "Look, I'm going to the children's home this afternoon to spend some time with Emily. I'll give him a call then." She hesitated, studying her mother carefully. "You're more than welcome to come, you
know. Get to know Emily?"

There was the sticking place. Margaret Scully was a woman whose compassion knew no bounds, but here, with a miracle child she little understood, she found her heart stumbling just a little. Her smile tightened as she began chopping apples with perhaps a little more force than was necessary. "Not today, Dana, Tara is so close to delivery, I want to be here if she and Bill need me."

Translation, she wanted to be with the grandchild she understood, the one who was here under normal circumstances, rather than getting to know the grandchild she may not ever have a chance to welcome into the family. Scully couldn't blame her. The entire situation was strange enough and there was only the slimmest of chances at the moment that Scully would get the courts to agree to allow her to take her own daughter. She couldn't blame her mother for being so hesitant at the moment. Why attach your heart to a girl who might leave their lives just as quickly as she had entered them.

"Right," Scully sighed, not pressing her. She had put her family through so much this year, her illness, now this, she didn't want to press her luck any further than she needed to. "Look, I'll go call Mulder. I'll lure him out with promises of your cooking."

Scully took her cell phone into the nursery that she was still claiming as her bedroom. Quietly, she closed the door and dialed the office first, hoping to find Mulder at work. Surprisingly the phone rang to the voice mail but didn't pick up. Odd, she would have laid even money Mulder would have been at work. She tried his house next. She was met with much of the same response. Trying not to be concerned by the surprising lack of communication with her normally responsive partner, she called his cell phone, praying he would pick up.

It took three rings but he finally answered. "Mulder."

"It's me," Scully answered, relieved she had reached him, wondering where on earth he could possibly be in the middle of the day on a weekday if he wasn't in his office. Wherever it was sounded loud. Was that music she was hearing?

"Just a second," Mulder muttered, and she could hear him excusing himself as the background noises faded somewhat. "How is sunny Southern California?"

"Raining at the moment," she replied, glancing out at the mist outside of the window. "Do I want to know what you were doing?"

Awkward silence rang on the other end of the line. "Probably not," he muttered, sounding somewhat ashamed.

"Anyway," Scully rolled her eyes heavenward. "I needed to call you because something has come up."

Perhaps it wasn't the most tactful way of putting things. Mulder immediately went on the alert. She could hear the vague panic edging his words. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is fine," she replied, only half lying. "Listen, I ran into something odd while I was here."

God, she wasn't making this any better, was she?

"I'm listening," he prompted impatiently.

"When I got out here last week, I received a strange phone call. How else could she begin to
explain this? "It was some woman, she said 'Go to her, she needs you."

"Nice and vague, isn't it?"

"Mulder, she sounded just like Melissa."

Mulder's sudden silent on the other end spoke volumes. She paused, waiting for him to come back with some sort of insight or explanation, some witty load of information that he dug up in some half-baked, pseudo-scientific journal somewhere, something to make her feel that she wasn't an idiot in her presuppositions.

"Scully," he finally murmured, drawing her name out in a long, sad sigh. "Look, with your family and all the emotions of seeing them…"

Oh no, he wasn't going to rationalize this too, not Fox Mulder. "I had the number traced. It went back to an address where there was an apparent suicide. There was a woman dead, wrists slit in her bathtub. She'd been dead for hours before I got the phone call." She hoped that was spooky enough for him.

"Was there anyone in the house to make the call?"

"No, the police found it off the hook, which was strange considering someone called 911 to the house. The emergency team was already there when I arrived."

"But why would anyone call you about it? I mean, who knew you were there? And why would they call about this woman?" Mulder was already puzzling out the questions that had plagued Scully for days.

"Mulder, Roberta Sim wasn't a suicide. She was murdered. So was her husband the next day. They were both killed and I think it has something to do with their daughter, Emily." She was surprised she didn't choke as she said that. Even now she had a hard time grappling with the idea that Emily was not really the Sim's biological daughter.

"What about her?"

"She's supposedly suffering from a rare form of anemia. She's involved in clinical trials with a pharmaceutical company, Transgen, based out of Chula Vista. The Sim family had enrolled Emily there on some radical treatments for her case, but Roberta apparently got cold feet about it. She wanted to take Emily out, but her husband Marshall refused."

"So you think that Roberta was killed because she suspected something was wrong with what Transgen was doing?" Mulder was piecing the picture together. He couldn't seem to help himself. "You said her husband died as well?"

"Killed in his jail cell." Scully winced with guilt over that death, knowing she had an inadvertent hand in it. "When we figured out Roberta was killed and that someone had it made to look like a suicide, Marshall was the obvious choice for suspect. However someone had him killed before he admitted or confessed to anything. He was found hanging in his jail cell after his so-called lawyers came to visit."

She paused briefly in her telling. "Mulder, you and I have both seen this before. Pharmaceutical companies, testing, secrets, people dying, we saw it first with Pinck, then with Rausch. And you remember what Kritschgau said, about the programs out there."

"You believe that the Sim's daughter was part of one of those programs?" Mulder sounded
doubtful, even hesitant at the idea. It had been his modus operandi ever since the truth about Kritschgau and the entire mess came out months ago. He'd avoided it, sidestepped it, he hadn't wanted to touch it.

"I don't just believe that their daughter was a part of one of the programs, Mulder, I know she was." Her heart caught briefly in her throat as she searched for words to continue. "I never would have gotten involved in this case, Mulder, if it wasn't for the voice I thought was Melissa. She led me to Emily. I didn't understand at first why this little girl was so important. But she looked so much like my sister at that age, it was just amazing. I thought…"

Her voice broke as she realized now how strange and remarkable this all sounded when spoken out loud.

"You thought it was your sister trying to lead you to her daughter," he sighed quietly. She could imagine his eyes softening sympathetically as he searched for words of reason and comfort for her.

"Melissa was gone for over a year, Mulder, we didn't know why she went or where. It seemed to make sense."

Mulder seemed to understand her logic. "Is she Melissa's?" He knew Scully would test that the first opportunity she got.

"No." Though God, how she wished that were true now. "She's mine, Mulder."

Her words, softly spoken, seemed to carry the force of thunder. The quiet that followed practically rang with the reverberation of their effect. She had expected stunned silence, soon followed by a barrage of puzzled, half-formed questions. But the stillness lengthened and thickened, drawing out over the static phone signal between San Diego and Washington DC an entire continent away.

When he finally spoke, his gravel monotone cracked and splintered as he forced himself to the sort of calm her family had little managed when she had dropped this on them. "You are sure?"

"I had the Bureau run the PCR tests, it's a match." She wished she could hold out the incriminating slips of film to him, to show him her proof. "Mulder, I don't know how…I mean, I have an idea, but even then the timing of all of this is impossible." She'd calculated and recalculated. Even if Emily had been conceived immediately after the harvest of Scully's ova and then put into a surrogate womb, she was still far too early for normal human gestation. "She just turned three years old."

"Do you have any other information on her origin?" Mulder hardly blinked at Scully's explanation, and for the first time in days Scully felt the tiny coil of tension within her begin to lessen some, to ease as she realized Mulder didn't find any of this strange, unreal, or unnatural. He took it at face value and ran with it, and God she needed that from someone.

"I know that she was adopted by the Sim family in late fall of 1994."

"You were taken in summer."

"I know." She hadn't wrapped her brain around the impossibility of that, she just wanted to pass it to Mulder, to let him figure it out. Her head was too tired, her brain was too full, and her heart too heavy with all of this to think.

"Mulder, I'm trying to get custody of Emily." Before he could begin to formulate a protest she pressed onward. "Her adopted family is gone, her parents are dead, and there are no other blood relatives on either side. I'm her biological mother, she's my daughter, and I need to prove that to get
the judge to grant me custody over her."

"Scully," he began, but she cut him off before he could lodge a protest.

"She's sick, Mulder, with a rare form of anemia. If she is tossed into the system a foster family might not have the resources needed for her. If the pharmaceutical company is responsible for this and they petition to get custody of her she will be nothing more than a lab rat for the rest of her life, experimented on. But if she is my biological daughter, she has a family, one that will love her, and one that will care for her physical and emotional well being. I'm a doctor, I know how to deal with serious medical conditions."

"Dana," Mulder sighed, his use of her first name quieting her verbal rant. "Dana, look, I know this is a shock to you. Hell, it's a shock to me. You go away for the holidays and suddenly you have a child. Listen to yourself, here. As your friend, truly listen. You are throwing yourself into a commitment that could change your entire life, and you don't know the first thing about this girl, how she came to be, why or how they made her from you. You know what these companies are capable of, the things that they are doing and have done. What you are opening yourself up to here? Are you sure you want to do this?"

For once Mulder was using logic on her; reason that she actually didn't want to listen to. She knew this, knew everything he was telling her had merit. But at a children's home not far away was a little girl, her flesh and blood, and one who was left with no one but her now to protect her. It was what Melissa had told her to do.

"Mulder, please," she whispered. "You have been my friend through all of this, and you are the one person I can trust with this. I need to find out where Emily came from and how she came to be. I need to be able to prove to the judge how it is I'm her mother and you are the only person I can go to on this."

He knew that, it was why she was asking him and Scully knew he would do as she asked. She didn't think there was a thing Mulder would deny her on. "What were the parents' names again?"

"Roberta and Marshall Sim, the daughter is Emily. They live in San Diego."

"Right." There was distraction on the other end of the line as Mulder presumably scribbled the information down. "I'll take this to the boys, I'll see what I can dig up."

"One more thing." Scully hesitated, realizing she was already asking a great deal of him. "There is a hearing in two days. The judge wants character witnesses, and as my partner…"

"Good thing I have frequent flier miles, eh?" Mulder hardly questioned it as he agreed. She could hear that charming, reassuring smile of his on the other end of the line.

"I wouldn't ask you about this, Mulder, but…"

"I know," her reassured her. "I'll be there, Scully, don't worry."

Scully felt herself relax and melt somewhat, all the stress and fear and worry of the last five days lessening somewhat in the knowledge that there was finally someone else to turn to with part of this burden. Her mother was right. She should have called Mulder much sooner. "Thank you for this."

"Don't mention it. I'll add this to your growing tally of things you owe me for. There better be a giant hamburger at the other end of this."
"You like In-N-Out?" She smiled, half in relief, half in teasing.

"Wouldn't say no. I'll call you later when I have more information on my flight details." She could tell he was already busying himself with the questions she had dropped at his feet. "Hang in there, Scully. I'll get there as soon as I can."

"I will," she murmured, hanging up slowly.
"Fox, there's more meatloaf in the kitchen. Eat something!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Scully, I can't." Mulder looked slightly green at the thought of more food. Scully snickered quietly as he looked towards her mother pleadingly.

"I hear what you normally eat, take the chance for good cooking while you can." Maggie was regularly appalled at the litany of food choices Mulder and her daughter made while on the road. "And there is dessert still in there as well."

"Don't be fooled, Mulder, she only cooks this way for holidays and guests." Bill teased his mother good-naturedly. "This is still my home, right?"

"Cracks like that and there's no pie for you tonight, and it's cherry, your favorite." Maggie had little sympathy for her eldest who hardly looked threatened or distraught about her threat. He was in fact in an easy-going mood, all things considered. Scully had cringed when her mother suggested having Mulder over for dinner, fearing the fireworks that would explode the minute Bill heard about it. Surprisingly, Bill had said nothing and that worried her nearly as much as the idea of having Mulder over for dinner did.

"How was Emily today, Dana?" Tara always asked about Emily. Unlike the hesitation of Scully's mother and brother, Tara had been eager to embrace Scully's unlikely daughter into the family.

"All right. She seemed to like Mulder." That had surprised Scully. Emily for the most part was a grave, shy little girl. Years of illness and testing and the recent loss of the only parents she had ever known had of course contributed to that. But the minute Mulder had walked into the room she had lit up, smiling and laughing at his funny faces. Mulder seemed to have that effect on Scully women, apparently.

"Well, I'm an easy guy to like," Mulder shrugged, rubbing at his very full belly as he pushed his plate away. Perhaps this was his signal of surrender to her mother.

"I'm surprised you haven't settled down with kids and a family yourself, Mr. Mulder," Tara offered. Scully cringed. Tara was pushing...and did she just call him "mister"?

He had the grace to only blush and smile politely. "It's Mulder, just Mulder."

He glanced sideways at Maggie, the lone person that Scully knew Mulder let get away with calling him "Fox" who wasn't related to him. "And no, no kids, not yet. Been a bit too busy for that."

Bill cleared his throat, but covered it with his glass of wine, trying perhaps a little too hard to look nonchalant. At least he was trying, Scully conceded. Not once had he cracked out the awkward comment or the double-edged question. He hadn't met Mulder at the door with a gun, like she half expected him to. He had been on rather good behavior for Bill. Which was why she was sitting on pins and needles at the moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop with her notoriously over-
protective brother. Bill had never been good with any man Scully brought into her life. It did her no
good that her brother was at the service Academy in Annapolis, a mere hop, skip, and jump from
where she spent her high school years. He would come home on rare leave from school to terrorize
her boyfriends. He'd been less than impressed with the few boys she dated in college while at
Maryland, and the one and only time he'd me Jack he'd openly complained about his little sister
dating a man ten years her senior. It was a good thing that Bill never knew about Daniel. That
likely would have been ugly.

Bill's opinion on her partner had been little different than his opinion on her boyfriends. Sadly,
Scully realized, Ahab's suspicion of Mulder and of her job at the FBI had given her elder brother
carte blanche to assume the worst of Mulder, hearing rumors from friends linked to the FBI and
jumping to conclusions. Scully's subsequent abduction, Melissa's death, and then her cancer had
done nothing to help Mulder's reputation with her elder brother. As far as Bill was concerned
Mulder meant trouble.

So why was he all right with Mulder sitting at his dinner table?

"What time is your hearing tomorrow?" Bill moved conversation past his wife's curious prodding
of their guest and to the immediate business at hand.

"It's at two. You will be speaking to the judge. It's informal, in his chambers." The Child Services
representative handling Emily's case had briefed Scully on what to expect. "Most of it will be about
me, my fitness to take her in, but I'm sure they will want to try and understand my connection to
Emily."

"I'd like to understand that a bit more myself," Bill muttered under his breath. Scully bristled
slightly as her brother continued to pick at his plate but said nothing. Reasonable, practical Bill
who didn't believe in conspiracies and evil government plans accepted the idea of Emily being
hers, even though the DNA didn't lie. Like their mother, Bill had a hard time accepting Emily
herself. More than the little girl, he had a hard time accepting what Emily meant, of what she
represented.

"I don't think they will expect all those answers out of you, Bill," Scully replied calmly, lifting her
chin quietly as she picked at the remains of her meal. "The courts want to simply know I can
provide for her and give her a real home where she will be cared for."

"Don't you think that they might possibly be wondering how it is that Emily is biologically yours?
How you randomly found her?"

"Its documented Emily is adopted. It's also documented that I've undergone procedures for ovarian
harvest. It's not hard to put that together."

"Except he's going to want to know how that ovarian harvest occurred, Dana." With the same
coolly reasonable tone she adopted with Mulder, Bill countered her argument, glancing over to
Mulder who sat quiet during the sibling discussion. "That's why you brought him here, isn't it?"

In part, though she wasn't about to admit it. "Mulder is my partner, he knows what my work is like.
And he knows the most about the particulars of all of this."

"And he knows how dangerous your job is, Dana." There was the hint of accusation there, subtle
under Bill's mild tone, the suggestion that of course Mulder knew because Mulder got her into most
of the danger she found herself in.

"I'm not hiding that, Bill."
"But you will have to speak to it. They wouldn't give you Emily in the first place because of your job, about the risks that come from it. The girl's already lost the only parents she's ever known. Do you think they will risk her losing her only biological parent as well?"

"What are you suggesting, Bill?"

"I'm suggesting you think about what you are getting yourself into, Dana." Tension laced every word despite Bill's placid demeanor. Beside her, Scully could feel Mulder shift in his chair uncomfortably as both Tara and her mother exchanged meaningful looks across the dinner table. Why did this have to be family discussion, she thought irritably, setting her fork down on her plate, all pretense of appetite gone.

"I have thought, Bill, ever since Christmas. I've thought about it watching you and Tara together, waiting expectantly for your child. This is my daughter, Bill, one that was stolen from me. Should I not consider taking her in, giving her a good life?"

"Have you thought of what that good life will mean," Bill insisted. "Five years of trying to have a baby has given me a lot of perspective of what I will have to give up to raise this child."

"You don't think I won't put Emily first in my life?"

"You don't put your other family first, Dana, how can you put a daughter first?"

Just as Scully felt her jaw clench so hard her teeth cracked, she felt Mulder's fingers gently reach up to graze the tip of her elbow. "He's right, Scully."

"What?" She whipped towards him, unsure she had even heard him correctly.

"Bill's right." Mulder's gravel voice seemed to grate just admitting to that. "Emily isn't a normal child and these aren't normal circumstances. You'd be taking on a responsibility that would change your entire life, how you live...what you do."

He was so very grave, even sad. It hit her what he meant. "Mulder, our work can still continue, we still have questions. Emily is a product of those questions. We need answers."

"Emily will need you," he insisted gently.

"Mulder, I haven't even had time to think about this."

"And I think that's perhaps what Bill is trying to tell you. " He glanced across the table at her brother. She could sense a moment of understanding passing between them and she didn't like it.

"Listen to the both of you. Emily isn't even mine yet." Scully pushed away from the table not even bothering to excuse herself. She gathered her plate roughly, silverware clattering against the ceramic plates her brother and sister-in-law used. "When you two are both done discussing my life for me, maybe you can tell me how to wash the dishes and put myself to bed."

"Scully," Mulder began, but she ignored him as she stalked into the kitchen, heels a staccato pitch against the tile floors. How dare they, either one of them, sit there and dictate to her about this. This was her daughter and this was her life. People had taken away her ability to have children and they were cautioning her against this? They were two of the people she would have assumed would support her the strongest.

"Dana?" Her mother stood in the doorway, watching. She should have known that Maggie would try to smooth ruffled feathers, but Scully was in no mood to be soothed or coddled.
"Leave it, Mom," she sighed, rinsing her dishes in the sink. "I'm too tired to discuss it."
"I feel like a beached whale," Tara whimpered as Maggie took one arm, Scully another, and they both worked to heave her on the rather tall mattress.

"Why in the world did you buy a bed so high," Scully complained lightly as Tara managed to scoot up enough on the edge to flop backwards and swing her legs up onto the pillowed top and under the blankets. She wiggled the thick, heavy rest of her behind, shifting and tossing till she managed to get into a spot that didn't leave her child-heavy stomach hanging off the bed.

"It seemed a good idea at the time. Bill is so tall." Tara huffed and groaned as finally she twisted herself where she wanted to be and looked imploringly at her mother-in-law. "Please tell me I won't be doing this forever!"

"Well let's hope not," Maggie chuckled indulgently, fluffing pillows to go under Tara's head and back as Scully helped settle the now disarranged comforter around her. "The doctor says any day."

"I think this baby is staying put just to be obstinate."

"It is Bill's child," Scully quipped, earning a grin from Tara and an eye roll from her mother. Best change the subject. "Need water, a book, anything I can get you?"

"You're handy with a scalpel, how about a C-section?"

"Yeah, I don't love you that much." Scully laughed, snagging a magazine she knew Tara had been reading and setting it on the nightstand by her side of the wide bed she shared with her husband. "I'm afraid you'll have to tough it out like everyone else."

"You all are so mean to me," Tara mockingly wailed, before finally sinking into the pillows behind her. "I think I'm good though."

"Good!" Maggie smiled, smoothing Tara's hair briefly. "Call us if you need anything."

"I will," she yawned sleepily, reaching for the magazine that Scully left but looking already as if she wouldn't last out her husband making it upstairs. With shared, knowing smiles, both of the other Scully women turned, leaving Tara to drowse as Scully gently closed the door behind her. Tara exhausted easily these days and with the hearing earlier that day it had nearly worn her out. It had exhausted all of them, the least of which was Scully. The judge's confusion and skepticism had surprised her, even in the face of medical evidence, but Scully hadn't been prepared for the truth that Mulder had thrown down before her. He'd known about her bareness for months, even before the doctors told her, and had not said a thing to her about it.

What happened to truth and honesty between them?

"I think I'm going to follow Tara's suit, Dana, head to bed early." Maggie wrapped an arm around her daughter's shoulder, kissing the top of her bright head lightly. "You going to bed soon?"
"Yeah, I just wanted to see Mulder out. I left him downstairs with Bill and I'm afraid of what I might find when I get down there."

"I'm sure things aren't as bad as you suppose," Maggie sighed reassuringly before turning to her room. "Get some rest."

"Sure," she murmured as she turned towards the stairs warily. Below, her partner sat with her older brother, alone, unprotected, without her to fend off Bill's infamous big mouth. Scully hadn't thought about it till after she had agreed to help Tara into bed and then had regretted her eagerness to assist. The last time Bill and Mulder had been left together, Bill had practically accused her partner of being the one responsible for her illness. Her brother could be devastating in the extreme when he wanted to be, and Scully had no strength of will to put her partner back together again emotionally, especially not after today's revelations. Resolving herself to whatever damage she might find down below, Scully paused at the top of the stairs as her brother's voice floated up from down below. Far from sounding confrontational or accusative, what stopped her was the fact it sounded…friendly. Cautiously welcoming, she admitted, but coming from her elder brother that sounded, well, shocking.

"Much of a football fan," Bill asked conversationally as Scully heard the television down below set on the one channel she knew reliably most men would gravitate to unerringly - ESPN.

"Some," Mulder admitted slowly. He was being unfailingly polite, Mulder tried to be around her family at least, but she could sense the unease, the wary expectation in his words. She only knew something of the conflict between Mulder and Bill during her illness. She knew her brother had lashed out angrily at her partner, perhaps unfairly. Mulder refused to discuss it. Bill had grudgingly stopped only on her request. But she was no longer dying, she was healthy, and Bill had other things to focus his obsessive worry on at the moment.

"I grew up a Charger fan. Not a good time to be in the division with the Chiefs and Broncos. Elway seems to keep creaming our ass."

"They say he's taking it all this year," Mulder drawled conversationally but guardedly. Few and far between were the people Mulder wasn't that way around out of habit.

"Yeah, well we'll see, I wouldn't hold Brett Favre out of that hunt. He's a gun slinger, but he's damn exciting to watch."

Sports seemed to be an opening gambit with men, a safe topic, a way of feeling one another out. So far it seemed to be tame enough. Mulder hadn't gone in immediately trying to piss her brother off and Bill had yet to stoop to the rumors and threats angle of conversation yet. Should she go down and break up the party now before it got ugly? Should she even be standing at the top of the stairs listening in on them?

"I want to thank you, Mulder." Bill sounded as if that was the last thing he wanted to do but felt he couldn't help himself. "For coming out here for Dana. She hadn't wanted to call you in on this."

Did Bill mean that as a low jab or merely as a statement? Scully couldn't tell, and she knew that Mulder would play this carefully as well. "I'm glad she finally did. I'd do anything to help your sister, be there for her anytime, anywhere."

The sincerity in Mulder's statement warmed Scully as she sank down on the steps, settling in for what promised to be a lengthy conversation. She felt only slightly bad so blatantly ignoring the privacy of their discussion, but if there were two men in the world she didn't trust alone together more it was these two. Well…perhaps Alex Krycek and the smoking man, but as both could be
dead at the moment, she was left with this.

Bill seemed to ruminate Mulder's words for long moments before speaking. "You know, I perhaps should apologize for the hospital. For the things I said and the way I acted there. It wasn't called for."

"You don't have to." Mulder was far more generous and forgiving than she would have been. "If the tables were turned, I can't say I wouldn't have been the same way."

Again silence. Scully felt the hairs along her arm prickle as the air in the house circulated and somewhere upstairs there was a creak and groan of random floorboards. The tension below felt as delicate as butterfly wings and just as easily crushed, one false move, one broken moment and the cold war between two of the most important men in her life would continue unabated.

"I never trusted you with my sister," Bill confessed succinctly, tossing it between them as a known variable, as if he had been discussing football stats. "But then I'll be honest, I didn't like the idea of Dana getting into the FBI either."

"Your sister is a damn fine agent. Blows me out of the water."

"Don't you think I don't know that?" Bill shot back a trifle defensively, though without heat. "Dana was always tagging behind me when we were kids, always wanted to do the things we were doing. I couldn't talk her into not doing it. All Dad wanted for her was that she should settle down as a surgeon somewhere and give him and Mom a pack of grandkids to spoil rotten. Looking back, maybe it was unfair to expect. But Dana was always his favorite. She's the most like him."

Scully bit her lip, saddened by the dull ache she could hear in her brother's voice, the same one that resided in her heart when thinking of Ahab, despite being five years gone. Bill was more like her father than he knew, just as Charlie was, but Charlie had never had to live with the weight of expectation that the eldest Scully did.

"Don't think for a minute that our father wasn't proud of Dana, or that I'm not. But when you are in a position like mine, like my father had, you go out to sea, you do your missions, and whether its peacetime or war, you never know if you'll get back all right. One rogue storm, one fluke of machinery, some terrorists get a wild hair up their ass, and I could be leaving Tara a widow, my child without a father. Dad faced that, and he was in a war. He got to come home, but he knew a lot of guys, especially Marines, who didn't. All you want to know while you are out there is that back home everything is safe and okay. You want to know that your kid sisters are all right, and that your mother isn't having to bury them without you."

Again silence, the click of glass against wood, likely Bill's beer bottle. Mulder made no sound as if to speak, and Scully surmised that the psychologist in him was simply allowing her brother a chance to get out his worry, his grief, and his concern. Mulder could be an amazing listener when he chose to be. "I just got back into port when Mom called about Melissa. It was my worst nightmare, coming home to find out about my sister dying. I'd missed out on Dad, I'd been out then and couldn't get back in time. Now this…and then Dana was missing on top of it. Out with you, doing God knows what. Mom was worried sick. All anyone could tell me was that someone had broken into Dana's home again and shot our sister."

Scully had never spoken of those horrible days with her brother. He'd brushed them aside, even at Melissa's funeral. None of the pain she knew he felt came up until her dark days in the hospital, ill and dying, watching her brother angrily last out against the world. She had resented him for turning the entire situation into one about him instead of respecting her wishes. Looking back, how unfair had she been to her brother's pain?
"Dana is kidnapped, then Melissa is killed. I've screwed up twice already, and our father hadn't been dead but a few years. Dana getting sick seemed like the final failure. And all I could think at the time was that the only key factor in all of them was you. The minute you entered my sister's life everything changed."

Bill's statement wasn't totally fair, but it wasn't very different from things she had heard Mulder say over the years, similar statements he had made regarding their partnership. Her first instinct was to jump to Mulder's defense like she always did, but for once she stopped herself. Mulder had to work this out with her brother himself and she couldn't intervene. God knows Scully wanted to.

"I didn't like you from the first. I have some friends with the Bureau. I had some people ask around. I heard about your theories, about aliens and conspiracies. They said you were a nutcase, a whack job who hid in the basement. They had my sister working with you because they needed to contain you somehow. Instead, she's being drug off in the middle of the night by the sort of psychos that you two investigate, or used by the men that you say are running a conspiracy. Now there's a child out there that is my sister's that she never gave birth to. Before she met you she never had this. She had a normal life, a normal job. She would come home for dinners on weeknights. Now my mother's lucky to see her once a month, if she's not out of town with you chasing after ET. And I find myself asking, Mulder is all of this worth it? Is it worth dragging Dana with you seeing what's been done to her already?"

Her brother didn't honestly believe Mulder was dragging her anywhere, did he? Annoyance warred with common sense as she held herself from flying down the stairs in that second to berate her presumptuous brother. She chose to be with Mulder, she wasn't drug along, she knew the consequences as surely as he did and had chosen to follow this path. Hadn't she been the one to chose to return after her abduction? Hadn't she begged and pleaded with Mulder to let her come back quickly after her illness?

"Your sister makes her own choices about the work, Bill," Mulder reminded him mildly. "No one is keeping her at the X-files. And you won't hear me disagree with you on a single point. You're right. Your sister's life was a lot safer and a lot easier before I entered into the picture. I'm sorry about that, you will never know how sorry I am about that. But Dana's decision to stay or go is her own."

Bill snorted doubtfully at Mulder's sincerity. "Mulder I know no one else will have you. You know that if this case with that girl goes through everything changes. You said it yourself last night. Dana will have another priority in her life, and for once it won't be you. She won't ever get a chance to raise another child that's biologically hers. Would you let her go for this chance, free her from your crusade so she can raise her daughter without fearing that men somewhere are going to take either one of them?"

It suddenly became ominously still downstairs and Scully realized she was holding her own breath waiting for Mulder to answer. But he didn't. She could hear her brother rise from the couch and pace the length of the living room, his footsteps scuffing against the carpet on the floor.

"Mulder, look, I don't question for a moment that you didn't wish any of this on Dana. I don't know what you are into, I don't want to know, and if you want to pursue it, it's your business. But Dana, she needs to start thinking seriously about this, and if she won't listen to me, perhaps she will listen to you."

"Is this solely based on your concerns for that little girl, Bill, or because you're going to be a father any day now?" Always astute, Mulder cut to the heart of the matter for Bill, stilling the footsteps for a moment.
"Perhaps being a father is giving me insight my sister doesn't have yet. I've had eight months to get used to the idea, she's had eight days."

"And perhaps you should give Dana a bit more time. She's an insanely astute woman, much more so than you give her credit for at times." Mulder was dancing on the edge of very dangerous territory with her brother. "And as you know better than anyone else you can't force her to do anything she isn't completely prepared to do. Believe me, do you know how many times I've tried?"

Another long pause and finally a snort of dry laughter from her brother, laced with more than a hint of understanding sympathy. "She not only ignores you but spits in your eye to prove the point." He sighed, long and wearily, pacing again.

"I just want to make sure she's safe, that she's doing the right thing and not…well, you know."

"Throwing herself into danger with a madman who chases after ET?" Mulder's replied glibly, perfectly aware of her brother's opinion of him.

"Look, Mulder, I know you know what this is like. Dana's told me something of what happened to you with your sister. If you were in this position, what would you do?"

With everything in her Scully wished her brother hadn't gone down the Samantha route, it was such a tender territory for Mulder and so few people understood it. Even today, nearly five years into their partnership, it was sacred ground for Scully, one that she knew was volatile at best with him. With all things considered, Mulder's calm response surprised her.

"Because I was in your position, Bill, that's why I'm running after ET now." Mulder wasn't angry at her brother's point, only sad. "I understand perhaps better than you think I do. It kills me that your sister is in the position, that there are men who put her there. But I'm not the one you need to speak to about this. It's Dana's decision alone and no one else's."

Scully wished she could see the look on her brother's face in that moment, gauge whether he was angry, annoyed, understanding. No member of the Scully clan liked being told what to do, but Bill wasn't an idiot and he knew what battles he could win and lose. The question was would he listen to Mulder despite the dislike he had for the man he considered a threat to his sister.

"You knew about Dana's inability to have children, didn't you?" That was the bomb that Mulder had dropped in the judges chambers, the fact that he knew the truth long before she had ever told him, before she even knew. It wrangled inside, knowing that he had kept this most intimate of truths from her.

"I found out about it when she learned about her cancer," Mulder admitted slowly. "I wanted to understand the truth about it. I owed that to her, an explanation on why all of this happened to her. I found out her ova had been harvested. I couldn't tell her, not then anyway. With everything else going on in her life, all the things she had to face, I didn't want to lay this at her feet as well. They had already taken so much from her."

Oh Mulder, Scully sighed, wrapping her arms around her middle tightly as if against the dull throbbing in her chest. Anger with him over his secrecy fled her but the hurt remained. He should have told her the truth, he shouldn't have let her find out the way she did. But could she blame him? She was a doctor, how many times had she had to face those sorts of decisions on what information to give a patient? And could she say she really could have handled hearing the truth when she was already fighting so hard for just the ability to live?
"You know she'll kick your ass for not telling her," Bill finally rumbled. "I won't say you were wrong, but Dana won't see it that way."

"I know."

A heavy drawn out sigh, another pause. Scully almost wished they were discussing football once again. "I don't get you and I won't pretend that I like what you do or what you drag my sister into. But I know you care about her at least. I guess for what it's worth she's as safe with you as anybody. Though frankly, I wish she wasn't with you at all." Bill felt the need to add the last codicil to his argument.

"That you have to take up with her." Mulder knew better than to take that bull by the horns by now.

"Right," Bill didn't sound exactly thrilled with the idea himself. "I never did get around to thanking you for what you did for her last June. You saved her life. I don't know how you did it, but you did."

"All I did was talk to an old man. I don't know how she went into remission."

"Well, whatever you did, she's here. And I may be an ass, as my sister puts it, but I'm not a raging asshole. Just make sure I don't have to bury another sister on your watch, okay."

"I'll do my best," Mulder assured softly as Scully heard Bill shuffle and clear his throat, looking for ways to end the conversation. She rose soundlessly, making her way from the top of the stairs, backing off so that she wasn't seen immediately. It was bad enough she'd been eavesdropping, she didn't need the two of them to know about it.

There was murmuring about Mulder's hotel and an offer for him to crash on the couch if he needed, though she knew Mulder would decline. Between the tiny couch and a full sized bed in the privacy of his own thoughts, Scully knew Mulder would rather slink away from her brother's watchful eye. There were mild pleasantries as she made a show of coming down the stairs just as her brother wandered towards the bottom, spying her as she descended.

"Tara finally settled?"

"Yeah, has been for a bit, she's likely asleep by now." Scully gave him a reassuring hug. "Any day now and it will be just you two in the bed again."

"Yeah and no sleep for anyone." Bill didn't look as if he minded. He glanced to the living room where Mulder waited. "I played nice if that's what you are worried about." There was a knowing look lurking in the corner of her brother's eye, one that said he knew perfectly well she had been listening.

"I hope so," she smiled cryptically up at him, pulling away to where Mulder waited. "He's a good man, Bill."

"I know, Dana. That's not the part I worry about." Bill moved wearily upstairs.
Green Blooded Alien

Chapter Summary

In which Emily gets progressively worse.

Emily had been fine just earlier that day. Why was this happening? How could this be happening? She had been healthy just hours ago?

Through the glass between Emily's hospital room and the hallway, Scully watched. Two doctors hovered over her daughter as the tiny girl lay so very still against the sheets, face pale and covered in sheen of feverish perspiration. She hardly seemed to understand what was going on with her. Or perhaps she did, perhaps this was just familiar territory for a little girl who had been sick all of her young existence.

Behind her she could hear Mulder clicked off his cell phone, clearly exasperated and worried. "I spoke to the social worker. She hasn't been able to reach Emily's doctor."

Scully didn't even have time to process why it was that Emily's most important regular care doctor was unavailable at such a crucial time when the attending doctor came out, with a gravely reassuring look for the both of them.

"Well, we've put her on a saline drip to rehydrate her. She's running a fever of about 102. It's a good thing you got her here when you did."

Scully pushed aside the clinical recitation in her mind of what could have happened to Emily had she been any later in getting her medical attention. "Do you know what's causing it?"

"Some kind of infection, probably related to the cyst on her neck."

"Do you know what that is?" Mulder frowned in worry into the room where the other attending doctor was preparing to turn Emily ever so gently.

"No, I'm having it biopsied." That was the standard procedure for anything unusual like that in the hopes of better understanding what it was. "I'll get it off to the lab right away. Now, are you two the parents?"

Mulder looked vaguely startled by the suggestion and even Scully paused. She had no legal rights over the girl yet, but she was biologically her mother, and there was no one else available to see to her care. "I'm her mother."

Mulder's quick eyes flickered nervously towards her but he said nothing to refute it. Instead he quietly turned back to the biopsy in the other room, watching Emily as she turned painfully over on the mattress.

"Can you give me any history that might help?"

History? She'd only known the girl was her daughter for the last week. Emily's medical history was as mysterious to her as it was to this doctor and likely to Emily's adoptive parents as well. The only person who had any clear idea was Dr. Calderon, conveniently absent from the proceedings so far.
"I know that she was being treated for anemia."

"You know what type," the doctor pressed. Scully felt her mind race, hoping that her answer had something, anything to do with what was wrong with Emily.

"I was told it was some kind of auto immune hemolytic anemia. Her treatment was experimental." That was all she knew, she hadn't spoken to Calderon since Emily's parents' deaths. How could she be stupid enough not to even speak with him? She should have at least demanded that the social service workers be given a copy of her medical files for the time being just so someone could be aware in case of emergency. What had she been thinking?

Mulder watched the doctor work over Emily with quiet intensity. He didn't like hospitals, especially when he was in one, but certainly not when anyone else was in one either, and Scully could well imagine he had his fill of them in the last year given everything that had happened to her. She should send him home, but she knew he wouldn't go, and in the end she was grateful he was there. She felt so out of sorts at the moment, so lost. Strange, she was a doctor herself, she knew situations like these intimately and had sat through more than a few of these sessions with Mulder. She had been calm, cool, collected. But this was different. This was her daughter.

"Who was her doctor?" Scully's attention shifted back to the man who was standing in front of her, needing answers to help her treat her little girl.

"Err…Dr. Calderon."

The doctor shook his head, not recognizing the name. "I don't know him."

Scully wasn't surprised, research scientists were rarely well known unless they made a specific breakthrough in a particular field. Just as she was preparing to say so Mulder's jerked beside her, surprising both Scully and the doctor as his palm slammed in a panic against the plate glass.

"Wait, stop!" His voice rose, panicked as he banged on the window, ignored by the doctor inside who continued the biopsy procedure without even bothering to look up at the commotion. Scully watched, wondering if she was doing something to Emily that Mulder was afraid of, seeing the tiny girl twitch and flinch as needle broke the skin of the cyst.

"Move away from her, get away from her!" Mulder continued to yell and bang before turning to rush for the door. Scully reached to stop him, but the doctor was quicker, shaking off his surprise enough to try and wrap arms around her lanky partner before he took off into the heavily sanitized room. What in the hell was Mulder thinking?

The small cry stopped them all cold. Scully looked up in time to see the doctor who had been working on Emily rear back, clutching at her face before dropping to the floor heavily. Her counterpart, out in the hallway with them, let go of Mulder as he stared in shock, calling out his colleague's name. "Laura?"

The man moved to now be the run to rush inside, but Mulder snagged him this time. Unlike the moment before when the doctor could barely wrestle her taller, more athletic partner, Mulder easily snagged him and held him fast, refusing to allow the man into the room with the dangerous toxin floating about. "You can't! You'll end up just like her."

The woman didn't twitch. But Scully could see the woman's face, as she lay quiescent on the floor, the telltale red swelling around her streaming eyes, the irritation around her nose. Her face was covered in green spray, and it smoked and steamed in the air briefly. Scully knew that reaction well, even if the doctor didn't. In horror her gaze turned from the still woman on the floor to Emily,
grave and confused, watching the scene absently, as if not understanding what to make of it.

"Mulder," Scully breathed, turning fearful eyes towards him. "How did you…"

"Call it a hunch," he responded back, disentangling from the suddenly limp doctor who stared, wild-eyed between the two of them.

"You know what this is?" He sounded on the verge of hysterics, glaring accusingly at Scully.

"We had no idea this was what it was," Mulder replied defensively, unwilling to let the doctor attack her for their shared lack of insight. "You all have emergency procedures for a critical, dangerous infection, correct?"

"Of course," he snapped impatiently, panic giving way quickly to anger. "Every hospital does."

"Call it, get people in HAZMAT suits down here quickly. That green fluid contains a synthetic virus, a disease that can kill that woman if we don't get her treatment." Mulder turned to Scully as she stood, shell-shocked, her mind blanking as to what was going on or even what to do. "Scully, you've treated this in me before, you remember what you did, the cold treatment."

Cold treatment? She blinked up at his intense gaze, frustration flashing. She usually was so cool during these situations, so collected. Now she felt her self-possession slipping through her fingers. It took her longer than usual to recall Alaska, her desperate flight there, only to find her partner clinging to the edge of life as she fought to try and save him from the very virus that had somehow inhabited her daughter.

"Cold, yes," Scully nodded, finally grasping onto her memories and turning to the confused physician. "She needs an ice bath, we need to keep her temperature low. The virus stimulates production of red blood cells, thickening the blood, cutting down on oxygen, restricting blood flow, and eventually stops the heart. The cold seems to inhibit the virus enough that it can respond to a standard course of anti-virals."

"Virus?" The man was an infectious disease expert, but the word seemed to have no meaning for him all of the sudden. He looked torn between believing the two agents standing before him or saying this was all insane and calling in security.

"Do it now, she doesn't have much time," Mulder barked, grabbing the man and propelling him down the hall. The doctor stumbled on his sneakered feet before seemingly grabbing his wits about him and reaching for the nearest hospital phone hanging on the industrial white colored walls.

"Mulder," Scully murmured as she watched the man stammer about codes and emergency procedures. "How did you know?"

"They can't get a hold of Calderon," he muttered, glancing towards Emily who had now curled onto the bed quietly, watching the two of them with glazed eyes and flushed cheeks. "What doctor would not try to keep tabs on his most important patient even if she was in foster care?"

"You think he did this?" Scully's heart ached at the prospect, her fingers reaching up to the glass as if to touch her daughter huddled on top of the bed sheets. She looked tiny and frail, too sick to understand what was going on, calmly waiting for someone to make her better. It was the life she had known for years. So much pain to have suffered for a girl so young, it wasn't fair, not when Scully had just found her. And now this? Why did she have the alien virus in her? How was she not affected by it? What did Calderon have to do with any of this?
"Scully," Mulder hovered just over her shoulder. "I need to call the boys on this, I'm going to have them dig up everything they can find on Transgen and this Calderon. Chances are they may be the link to why Emily even exists."

"Right," she sighed, her aching heart sinking inside of her at the truth she already suspected. She'd wondered about Transgen's role since the death of Roberta Sim. That was before she found out that the little girl at the heart of this all was her own daughter.

"We'll find out the truth, Dana," he insisted gently. But Scully didn't turn to look up at him.

"Do what you have to, Mulder," she whispered as footsteps pounded down the tiled hallway towards Emily's hospital room. "I've got to be here to take care of her."
Chapter 35

Emily slept finally.

She seemed quiet for the moment, Scully observed with exhausted gratefulness. They had sedated her after the tests, but she almost didn't need it. The virus that was eating away at her brain had drained her and she was almost asleep before her head hit the pillow. Scully had sat with her, smoothing her light, reddish brown hair off her head, before finally withdrawing to the out room to remove her mask and breath. Was her life ever normal? Six months after she nearly died of cancer she has to stand by and watch a daughter she never knew she had die before her eyes. What was the justice in that?

"She sleeps like Charlie." Scully spun, heart in her mouth as she turned on the soft alto of her mother. Maggie Scully stood nearly unseen by the window of the hospital room that Emily lay in. "He used to curl his hand up under his chin like that when he slept. But she has that habit of sticking her foot over the bed like Melissa had, like she was halfway out the door even in sleep."

"Usually, she was." Scully sighed, trying to regain her composer as she moved to stand beside her mother. "What are you doing here?"

"Fox came by and told us what had happened."

"Mom, that was hours ago." Scully glanced at her watch and felt immediately guilty. "I should have called."

"It's all right. You wouldn't have reached us. Fox barely did. Tara went into labor last night. She and Bill are at the hospital right now."

"Hospital?" Scully's eyes widened at her mother's stoic reaction. "Mom, you should be there…I should be there."

She paused in consternation, turning to the sleeping girl in the next room. "But I can't leave Emily."

"Tara told me to come." Maggie reassured her sadly with a pained expression as she continued to study the granddaughter she had never touched, never held. "She thought you needed to be here and Bill agreed. After all, what good are you going to do with Tara and Bill? They'll let us know if anything exciting has happened."

She should have been there, Scully chided herself, despite her mother's reassurances. "Mom, it's your first grandchild. You should be there."

"Technically, she is my first grandchild, Dana," Maggie replied firmly, nodding at Emily's sleeping form. "And I've experienced more than a few childbirths. And I'll have a lifetime to get to know Bill and Tara's baby."

Her firm assurance on that matter underlined what wasn't being said, that she might never get to know granddaughter lying so sick in the room beyond. "How bad is it, Dana?"

Scully's first instinct was to lessen the blow, to hide the worst of the truths. How could she make her mother understand it all? But she had learned her lesson the summer before with her own illness. You couldn't lie to Margaret Scully, she didn't take it well, and Scully wasn't about to tempt fate again.
"It's serious…dire." Scully felt her breath catch as she said it. "Emily's condition is more than rare, it's unique. There is nothing that anyone has ever seen like it and we don't even know how to go about treating it."

"Do they know what caused it?" Maggie finally, slowly broke her gaze from the bed beyond to her daughter, searching for answers that Scully wasn't sure she had.

"There are theories," Scully replied lamely, feeling foolish in even saying it. Theories that she could neither give full credence to nor could she deny. The scientist in her recoiled from the suggestions that she knew was embodied in the child with half of her DNA residing in her.

"Does this have something to do with the work you and Fox do?" Maggie was grasping to understand this, to reason out why any of this was happening to her family. Scully wished she could just give her a concrete reason and be done with it.

"Some of it does, yes." Her shoulder's slumped, as if she was admitting to something she had denied for years. Perhaps in a way she had.

Rather than flaring into anger, as Bill would have, Maggie simply nodded with the weight of too many years of similar stories, of similar heartaches. She turned quietly towards one of the chairs sitting in the area just beyond Emily's window, sinking into it, clutching her purse in front of her like a shield against a world she didn't understand.

"Dana, I never once said anything against your decision to join the FBI. I never objected when you took on pathology, I didn't fret when you were assigned to work with Fox. Your father and brother howled and carried on about your safety, but I tried to assure them both that you were smart, you were tough, you could handle this job." She paused, laughing bitterly as if at some distant memory. "I accused them both of being sexist, that they wouldn't have this discussion if it were Charlie joining the Bureau. Heaven knows, I didn't want him anywhere near the Navy, but he joined to follow the two of them."

Scully had never heard her mother speak ill of the military once in all the long years of marriage to her father. It shocked her that Maggie did so now, even as a sideways comment. She stood still, listening as her mother groped briefly for words.

"A mother never wants to see her child in pain, Dana." Maggie turned tear-glazed eyes up to her, with a depth of anguish that rooted Scully to the spot and tore into her tender heart. It spoke of lonely bedside vigils and fretful doctor visits, of sleepless nights waiting for phone calls for missing children, and the heartache of burying them far too young. It was a pain Scully was only just now experiencing, the sort of deep, abiding hurt that only mothers ever understood. Scully had been through a crash course in that emotion that day.

Maggie continued, searching through her purse for a tissue, producing it to dab at her eyes. "When they took you, I was terrified. All I could do was go to church everyday and pray that they brought you home again to me safe and sound. And when you came home, in a coma, I had to face the idea that you may die and there was nothing I could do about. I couldn't kiss it and make it better, I couldn't hand you an aspirin and send you to bed, or give you chicken soup. You would live or die depended on God's hands not mine. And I was…so angry about that."

She shuddered, as if confessing to the most heinous of sins. And for her very pious mother perhaps that was akin to it. Maggie had always relied on her faith, even when the rest of the world was falling apart. "I was so angry at the FBI for not protecting you, angry at the man who did it. He was dead by then. I was angry that no one except Fox seemed to care enough to do anything about it."
"Then there was Melissa." Maggie had a longer story of troubles with her wayward oldest daughter. She shook her head regretfully as she thought of them. "How many years did I worry and cry when Missy took off and didn't tell anyone? How many arguments did she and I have about it? She would wander about and come home as if nothing had happened, expecting us all to be all right with it? She missed your father's funeral because we couldn't find her. I never quite understood that part of her like he did. I was so happy just to get her home again, even for a little while. That last time she actually sounded as if she was ready to come home for good, to settle down, maybe do the things that the rest of you did that she gave up, like college. I was thrilled, Missy was finally finding roots…and then…"

She didn't need to continue. Scully still saw her sister's blood at her door despite the fact it had been cleaned up long ago. It was the huge, empty pain everyone in the family shared; Bill, herself, even Charlie so far removed from it all. But it was Maggie who more the special, unique wound of a mother forced to bury her own child.

"I never wanted you, or Bill, or Charlie even to face what I did with Melissa, not ever." Her mother's soft, low voice cracked with anger and grief and all Scully could do was stand helpless to watch.

"As hard as it was to watch you so sick, Dana, it was twice as hard to sit at the funeral of my daughter knowing I could do nothing to stop it. It was senseless, it was random, the act of faceless men who were too cowardly even to claim they did it. And I don't know what is worse, knowing that these were the same men who took you, who created that little girl in there who should be with us right now, with her family, or believing this was all a random act of violence carried out for no discernable reason. I can't tell. I've prayed for patience, for guidance, for understanding, for forgiveness of these men. But I can't do it. I can't make myself do it. And I sit here, angry at them, angry at God even for doing this to us again and again. What did we ever do as a family to be put through this, to watch as people we love suffer and die? I'd blame the FBI if I could, but it's too easy, it's like blaming the Navy for taking your father away from me time and time again. I would blame Fox for getting you into danger, like Bill does, and don't think I haven't at times. But he's just as much a victim as you are. So where do I turn Dana? Who do I blame for this? Where do I get to turn my anger over all this injustice?"

"Mom…I don't know." They were the only words she had. Scully stared at her mother, at the vehemence pouring out of the woman she so admired all of her life for her calm and command over her little family, even in the face of adversity. How much of this had she kept to herself, swallowed, bottled up over the long years of Scully's work? Had she drove her mother to this moment, to the grieving woman who sat here, angry at the world?

Silence. What else was there to say? Scully hugged herself, arms wrapping so tightly around her aching middle that she felt as if she were trying to hold her breaking heart together by the pressure. Helplessness…she had felt it many times over many situations, but nothing like this. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Her mother was crushed, her daughter was dying, and she was alone in all of this. Not even Mulder could quite understand how it felt to be in this moment. All he could do was search for the truths behind all of this. It was what he was best at after all, that search.

Everything broke as behind Scully a nurse shuffled into Emily's room, fully masked, clipboard in hand as she went in to check on her daughter's vital stats. Scully's focus shifted immediately towards the window, edging near it to watch the mundane tasks of the woman as she checked Emily's temperature and watched the machines she was hooked up to. Scully felt her hands press hard against the glass, the fingertips turning white as she did it. She didn't hear her mother come up behind her.
"No one understands a mother's pain, watching your child and not knowing what to do, feeling helpless. And as angry as I am now, I understand. I've been there. I wish to God you didn't have to be, too."

Wordlessly Scully turned to her mother, always her comfort even in childhood. Quietly she buried her face in her mother's shoulder and wept, her mother's tears following suit, trickling softly into her daughter's coppery hair.
"His name is Matthew." Even subdued, Bill was obviously proud and overwhelmed with the tiny person held tightly in his large arms. Scully couldn't help but smile at her older brother, at the awe that suffused him as he gently rocked his son. Bill was a tall man, large and commanding, but with the newborn tucked to his chest he seemed to melt almost, totally enraptured with the sleeping infant who yawned and nuzzled into the soft blankets he was wrapped in.

Scully's heart warmed and ached as she watched thrilled at the joy that Matthew brought to his mother and father and saddened by the fact that somewhere in the hospital beyond the lobby his little cousin was dying. Emily wouldn't be able to ever get to know the little boy who was brought into the world not so differently from her. By contrast, where Matthew had been part of a long process for her brother and sister-in-law, a labor of love between them, Emily had been anything but. Matthew was brought into the world with happiness and expectation. Emily had been brought in with cold efficiency and necessity, and just as coldly and cruelly she was leaving it.

"You didn't have to stop by here." Scully had already protested the visit, knowing how eager Bill and Tara's friends were to see the new baby. Her sister-in-law had already gone home to get ready for the onslaught of guests and visitors but had acquiesced with much hesitation to be parted from her baby for long enough that Bill could introduce him to his aunt sitting at Emily's bedside.

"Tara wanted me to." Bill carefully folded himself into one of the hospitals vinyl seats, holding Matthew as if he were carrying a precious Ming vase. "She wanted me to check in with you, make sure you were okay…and Emily."

Scully winced, but smiled gratefully as she settled beside her older brother, perched carefully on the edge so she could get a better vantage point of her nephew. "He has Tara's smile. But the chin is all Scully."

"Yeah, well he's certainly got the Scully lungs on him," Bill chuckled, glancing carefully sideways at her. "You could hold him if you wanted."

Something inside of Scully quelled at that. "Oh, Bill, no…"

"What? You're a doctor, you won't drop him."

"No, it's not that!" She began to protest, thinking of her daughter upstairs, but Bill ignored her, leaning over to promptly force her to take his child unless she wanted the infant to tumble to the floor. Matthew shifted grumpily during the exchange, tiny face scrunching fitfully before relaxing as Scully settled him against herself, his tiny head and neck propped up on her upper arm. He felt soft and warm, with the sweet scent of powder and baby.

Scully wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

"He's hungry like a horse. I hope that doesn't last forever." Bill beamed down at his progeny.
proudly, reaching up one long finger to stroke the downy head where the baby's tiny cap had come off. "You know, I thought I knew what love was, Dana, but I was wrong. I didn't know what it was till I held this little guy in my arms for the first time. In that moment, I knew I would die for him, kill anyone to protect him, do anything to make sure that he was safe."

Oh, she understood. Scully understood all too well. Tears burned in her eyes as she tried to blink them back, unwilling to weep all over her brand-new nephew. "He's so beautiful, Bill." Beautiful and perfect and the dream that she would never posses, the one thing that she would never have.

"Dana," Bill sighed, wrapping an arm around her suddenly quivering shoulders, cradling her and his son. "I'm so sorry about Emily. God, you don't even know. I would do anything to make this right for you, you know that."

"I know," she sniffled, pulling together her composer as Matthew sighed quietly in her arms. "I know you would, I know Mom would, Mulder is God knows where trying to make this right." She hadn't heard from her partner since the day before and she had been too preoccupied with Emily's rapidly declining health to try and track down him down.

"The truth is, Bill, that Emily, no matter how much I love her and want her, she wasn't meant for this." She blinked down at her nephew, reaching up to adjust the cap on his head. "Emily wasn't made to be raised by a family who loved her. She was born to be an experiment, to be tested on and used for research. They didn't care about her. It didn't matter if she had skinned knees or attended piano recitals. It didn't matter if she dreamed of being a cheerleader or an astronaut, because she was never going to grow up and be any of those things."

A lab rat, that was all her ova had gone into making, an experiment, an attempt to use the virus that she and Mulder had long been aware of in a child. For what purpose, Scully didn't know. It seemed horrific, a nightmare to perform on anyone, let alone an innocent girl, but that didn't seem to matter. Much like Scully herself, Emily was created to fulfill an agenda, someone else's purpose. Her humanity seemed to be secondary. The fact that she was a real little girl had no bearing. Was this why Roberta Sim had wanted to stop the treatment? Had she sickened of the disdain that Calderon and the other scientists held for her adopted daughter? Had she just wanted to give Emily the one thing that no one else cared to give her, a normal life?

"What's the prognosis," Bill asked gently.

"She's slipped into a coma a couple of hours ago." She sounded so clinical now, so detached. It was the only way she could cope with this. "The virus has infected her system and is shutting down everything as it goes. She'll likely enter into septic shock before long and after that…"

After that would be the inevitable.

"Dana," Bill sighed, planting a soft kiss on the top of her head, the comfort of a big brother to his younger sister. "I'm so sorry…after all of this…"

"I know," she murmured, reaching up to brush angrily at the tears that brimmed at the corner of her eyes. She couldn't cry now, not yet. There would be a time for tears later. "But I think I'm at peace with this, Bill. Emily was never supposed to exist. Not like this. No one is supposed to exist like this."

They sat together in silence the two siblings. They were quiet in mutual comfort as between them Matthew snored softly in infant oblivion. At least he was there, sweet and new, a ray of bright hope in the dark clouds of suffering and loss that surrounded Scully's family these last few years. Matthew was certainly a gift from God.
"Do you plan on staying here then?" Bill pulled away finally, glancing at the time on the clock on the far wall. Tara would be eager to see her son soon and Scully would have to get back up to her vigil at Emily's bedside.

"Till we reach an end, yes," Scully replied solemnly. Death didn't frighten her, not as a doctor, but watching the soulful little girl she had come to love fade before her eyes, that hurt Scully more than she ever imagined she ever could hurt.

"Alright," he rose, reaching for his slumbering son carefully. Scully gave up the tiny bundle regretfully, watching fondly as Bill ever so gently placed the infant in the carrier he had come in with. Matthew hardly stirred, being born was hard enough business.

"If you need anything, let us know. I'll be right over, no matter what is going on." Bill straightened, gathering the few things he had brought into the lobby with him. "And call us, Dana. Please, you'll need your family."

"I know," she acknowledged. She would, eventually. But for now, she needed to be with her daughter, to let Emily know that even in these final moments she was not alone.
Lilies

Chapter Summary

In which Scully says goodbye to her daughter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As mysteriously as Emily had entered Scully's life, within three weeks she had left it. It was as if she blinked and suddenly the girl was gone.

In the end there was no body to even bury. The nature of her disease, the mystery behind what it was and what it did to her meant the hospital had procedures to follow. Her body was cremated in the end, a small baggie of ash, fairy dust, all Scully had of the daughter she hadn't known existed, but whose loss she now mourned.

She hadn't even known what to do about a funeral. Emily hadn't been raised in any particular religious tradition. Scully didn't know anyone locally to walk her through the steps. She knew no funeral home or religious figure, and the Sim family had no friends or connections to even turn to. Her parents had been buried quietly weeks before, a distant family member of Roberta's handling the arrangements. It was all Scully had to go on as the hospital administration handed her the remains of Emily in a tiny box.

It was Mulder and her mother who handled much of the arrangements. Scully willingly passed the details to them, too lost to figure it out. She agreed to a funeral with a casket, a tiny, child-sized, white and innocent. The kindly funeral director had understood, they filled the casket to give it weight, so it didn't swim with the ashes of a little girl the world would forget. They would have a lovely service, despite the fact that only Scully, her family, and the social worker for Emily's case would be there. At least there was someone to mourn her.

If anyone thought it was strange that Scully paid for the funeral of a girl she had hardly known, no one said anything. A prayer was said over the tiny casket, a few words of comfort uttered to a life that should never have existed. Maggie sat by her daughter's side, holding her hand tightly, with the sort of empathy only she would have. After all she had buried a daughter too.

It was over before she knew it.

She was alone in the chapel. Above her, the Madonna watched sadly. There was an ache in that smile that Scully knew well as the Blessed Virgin cuddled the Son who would one day meet just as incomprehensible a death. She too would never know another child, another little hand holding hers as it nursed, as it slept at her breast. There would never be another wide-eyed child who would look up at her innocently, proud over their scribbled, crayon picture, offering up the incomprehensible work as if it were fine art. Never…never…never…

Scully rose, moving towards the small casket, standing by it for long moments, wondering if it would make her feel any better if there were indeed a body in it. She dealt in the physical side of death. It was a comfort to her. Perhaps if she had Emily there to see, to touch, to cry over it wouldn't feel like so much of a dream. Had this been what Melissa wanted for her to do? To find a
little girl that had no other destiny but to die? Why?

Tears fell fast down her face, unchecked finally as she tried to wrap her mind around all of this. It hardly seemed right or fair, any of this. Why did these men do these things to her, to her family, to Mulder? What had any of them done except exist? What had Emily done? She had never deserved this, any of this, the life of tests and pain and illness, to lose everything so quickly. She deserved to be loved and cared for by her mother, by her. Scully would have loved her.

She didn't turn at the footsteps behind her. She knew the sound of them as well as she knew her own heartbeat by now. Mulder had slipped out sometime during the service and had returned. He came up beside her, the ever familiar fingers pressing into the small of her back, a support as he reached over to lay a bouquet of perfect, white lilies on the small coffin. Scully blinked at them through her tears, her broken heart swelling at the action. It was the one thing she had forgotten, flowers. Mulder would think of them, the small little gesture that spoke to his caring and understanding.

She just wished he could make sense of this all and somehow explain it to her.

"Who are the men who would create a life whose only hope was to die?"

Ignore the philosophical fact that was all their fates someday, this made no sense. Everyone else had the chance to live, to have experiences, to have a life. That was never what Emily was meant for and it hurt Scully deeply to know that. The reason for it was wrong to her, it made no sense.

"I don't know," Mulder murmured gravely. "But the fact that you found her and had a chance to love her, then maybe she was meant for that too."

Maybe. Melissa's ghostly voice had been the call that had drawn her to Emily. Had it been her sister, or God, or fate? Or had it just been a little girl whose soulful gaze spoke to her from the ruin of her adopted mother's death?

"She found me."

"So you could save her," Mulder insisted. Scully didn't refute him.

"How is Detective Kresge?" She had heard of Mulder's adventure and of the downed detective. He was currently being administered a course of anti-virals the same as Emily's doctor.

"He's doing better. He's already out of the ICU."

The poor man, all he had done was try to help her and Emily and for his troubles he was infected with their synthetic virus. "And the men who did this to him?"

"They've already cleaned up the nursing home. All the women have been placed in new homes. There's no evidence that anyone at Transgen Corporation knew of Calderon's work." Scully looked up at the quiet anger and frustration in Mulder. He had wanted to find them, to have his proof, not just for their work, for her, and for Emily. She was grateful to him for trying.

"There is evidence of what they did," she replied, turning back to the coffin and opening it wide. Her daughter was gone, but she didn't have the body destroyed without samples being preserved. All the tests, the X-rays, the blood work, even samples all resided with Scully now. They were her personal X-file, the remains of a child that should never have existed, a little girl whose existence she would explain somehow, whose death she would make relevant in some way. She would find the truth on why this happened, to her, to Emily. It was all she really had left of her.
Nestled inside of the coffin, on top of the fine sand within, lay the cross her mother gave her that Christmas nearly twenty years before. It had been the symbol of her mother's love, a constant that gave Mulder hope even in the time she was gone. And it had been the one thing she could give her daughter in her darkest moments. Scully didn't know how she felt about the sentiment behind it, the cross, God, faith, all of that right now. All she had left of Emily was a memory and this.

Quietly she closed the lid, turning to Mulder. Without a word he fell into step beside her, following her down the narrow aisle of the chapel and out into the impossibly bright, Southern California sun outside. It shouldn't be so bright on a day like this. Usually it rained in San Diego all through the first of the year. But perversely it was sunny and bright. Not even Emily's funeral could be stereotypical.

In silence, she and Mulder pulled away from the chapel. There would be no graveside service, but the coffin would be buried next to the parents who had raised her and loved her and tried to give her a normal life for all that Transgen would let them. Scully mourned their loss as well. An entire family wiped out for the plans and machinations of others.

"Scully…Dana." Mulder fell on her first name awkwardly. He'd used it more in the last few days than she had ever heard him use it in their entire partnership. "You know how sorry I am about all of this."

"I know," she murmured, watching the passing cars and businesses on the drive back to her brother's house. She knew Mulder's sorrow and guilt without him having to say a word.

"I would have told you about all of that, the ova, what I knew, if I felt I could."

"I know." What else could she say to that?

Mulder was quiet for several heartbeats, fingers drumming against the steering wheel. He was nervous, fretful, the energy making him twitchy. He finally spoke again, eyes sliding sideways towards her. "I found some of your ova."

She stopped still. Her ova? What did he mean he found it? Was it lying around somewhere? Had he had it all this time? Where was it? What was he doing with it?

"I found it when I discovered they took it. I…I took it, to show you, but…I never had the heart."

"Where are they, Mulder?" She had to ask. He had them all this time and said nothing?

"In a private facility, under an assumed name. I can get them for you at any time."

He had them. "Is it all of them?"

"No, I don't think so."

That meant there could still be other Emilys, other little girls or boys out there with half of her genetics being used for what? She didn't know. She didn't want to know. It made Scully's head ache thinking about it.

"I'll want them sometime, Mulder. Not today." Today, she wanted to mourn and grieve and she would have to think and consider, understand what had happened to her and come to grips with what was done both to herself and to Emily. But in the future…perhaps. Maybe there was a ray of light in all of this after all.

"Anything you want, Scully," Mulder assured her softly, reaching across the space between them,
fingers groping for hers briefly. "I'll do whatever I can."

Chapter End Notes

As someone on pointed out, Per Manum has a very different spin on how this all went down with the ova and her finding out. But as Emily aired first and was in my canon, and frankly most of Season Eight is not, I'm going with this. Besides, Scully is under duress in that episode, missing Mulder, you know how memories are! That's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder tells Scully a story for her birthday.

Time seemed to slow down after Emily's death.

As always, Scully did what came naturally to her in the face of grief, she threw herself into her work, not that there was much at the moment. The lull that had been precipitating even before the holidays deepened. Much as Scully had suspected for a long time, Mulder's enthusiasm seemed to have hit rock bottom. Even the mystery of Emily's death only seemed to reinforce the blasé ennui Mulder appeared to have now, and it unsettled Scully. She had always admired Mulder for his passion and fire, his determined drive even in the face of all that stood against them. And now that fire seemed to have faded, dissipated, snuffed out by Kritschgau and his truths, and further enforced by her own illness and later Emily's. It was as if the two events underscored in his mind that he had been a dupe, a fool all along, used and played for the machinations of powerful men who saw in him a useful foil.

Scully didn't know whether she should pity him or kick him squarely in the ass.

For the moment, she busied herself with the mundane tasks Mulder seemed to be throwing himself into. She combed through every strange magazine known to man looking for everything from Bigfoot to sightings of ancient dinosaurs. She felt she had newsprint perpetually under her fingernails of a night, and everything from the New York Times to the Des Moines Register was starting to run together in her mind as she looked for anything that struck her as something Mulder would classify as "unusual, strange, or just really cool."

And so the winter seemed to go for the most part. She hardly seemed to blink before it was February 23, her thirty-fourth birthday. When it occurred to her finally that morning as she sipped her coffee over a copy of a Wiccan publication, it struck her as such an odd thing. Had it really been a year ago she had been diagnosed with cancer? She hadn't believed she would be alive to see this birthday, to sit there in their cramped little office with Mulder, sipping her fourth cup of coffee of the day and reading ridiculous magazines. This day a year ago Mulder had actually remembered her birthday, had taken her out to that ridiculous pub, the one where Pendrell was shot just days later. Scully's heart still ached thinking of the loss of her friend. She hadn't been back to the pub since.

Now she wondered if Mulder knew where his calendar was in the morass of papers and clippings that covered his desk. He'd said nothing, which of course led her to conclude he had forgot, as was his usual wont, until such time as she discreetly said something. To be honest, she wasn't particularly feeling in a party sort of mood. She'd had her traditional dinner with her mother the day before, just as subdued as it seemed to be last year. Emily's death had affected Maggie much more than she was willing to admit. Otherwise, the entire day could have gone un-passed and unmarked for all Scully cared. She didn't have it in her to celebrate.

That's perhaps why it surprised her at 7:30 that night, already home and changed into comfortable clothes, her doorbell rang. Confused, Scully tore her eyes from the mindless news program she had been half-watching to the door, raising to peek through the peephole to see who was on the other
"Thought you could get through the day without something from me, birthday girl?" Mulder grinned proudly as she opened her apartment door, holding up a single cupcake.

"Is that all I get?" She crossed in mock disapproval.

"You let a guy in the door and he might be able to shower you with the gifts you deserve," he snorted as she moved, bringing with him the smell of one of his staples, Chinese food, and a box of what look suspiciously like eleven other cupcakes where the first had come from.

"You know you didn't have to, Mulder."

He traipsed into her kitchen, dumping his load on the well-scrubbed table and presenting the singular cake to her once again. "I promise I didn't lick it, though, I did have to wrestle a four-year-old for it."

"Beating up children, again?"

"Well, you know, they can get rather vicious when sugar is in the vicinity." Unerringly, he turned from her to her cupboard, looking for plates. "I thought about wine but you know after the last time someone showed up at your door with the stuff, I thought perhaps beer was more in order."

Scully felt her face turn bright scarlet. She hadn't thought of that moment in months, Eddie Van Blundht as Mulder on her couch, chatting with her and making her feel special, important. She had nearly considered the impossible that night, of crossing that delicate line between friendship and something else. All the forbidden and secret visions she denied herself came to the surface, as she Scully found herself heartily glad Mulder was preoccupied digging around her refrigerator, setting bottles of beer inside, glass clinking as he worked.

Lord, she sighed, settling into one of the chairs by her table, swallowing hard to reinforce her normally cold reserve. It didn't help that Mulder moved about her kitchen with familiarity, his eidetic memory remembering even where she kept her beer bottle opener. She sometimes forgot she owned one of those. He placed one cold bottle in front of Scully, another at one of the empty chairs at her table, and began unpacking cartons of food. She could already tell that her favorites were in the mix, kung pao shrimp, Mongolian beef, and that eggplant dish she always liked so much.

"I can't believe you willingly got the eggplant."

"I decided it's your birthday, I would humor you with a potentially poisonous vegetable."

"Eggplant isn't poisonous, even if it is in the nightshade family. So is the potato and the tomato and you eat enough of those to not have keeled over yet."

"You know I was reading up on these legends regarding nightshade. There are some professed Wiccan and pagan groups in Great Britain who say that imbibing small amounts of deadly nightshade can lead them to ecstatic visions in which they can see the entire spectrum of their life, even past lives, potentially ancestors as well."

"Mulder, I'm hungry, I want eggplant, and I'm tired of hearing about Wiccans, visions, or anything else." She reached for the eggplant and began dishing it out on her plate, ignoring Mulder's smirk. "Honestly, any more of this and I might start going back to doing autopsies again just for variety."

"Well, sorry things have been quiet." In actuality Mulder sounded rather non-committal on it all.
Was he really sorry or was he just afraid of digging up anymore unwanted truths? "I figured after everything in the last year, we needed a bit of a break. You know, finally get that life you were always preaching to me about."

"And look what we are doing right now!" She added kung pao shrimp to the mix on her plate. "We are eating take-out Chinese again."

"On your birthday."

"True." Secretly she was pleased he remembered her birthday. As much as she didn't feel in the spirit, she was glad that he had noticed. "It's sad, last year I complained we never had time to do anything, chasing after one X-file after the other, now I'm complaining that we aren't doing it enough."

What was wrong with her?

"It gets in your blood, you know that." He tucked into his own plate heaped with food with gusto. "I remember my first case, it was so strange. It was just a random one off the crap pile, too, something having to do with strange lights being seen somewhere in the Adirondacks. But from then on..." He waved a chopstick in the air expansively. "I became the man you see today."

"Oh that's an encouraging thought," she teased, swigging beer at his nettled look. "How did you find the X-files anyway?"

Mulder paused in chewing, thoughtful for long moments. She couldn't tell if he was considering what parts to tell her or where to begin. He returned to his meal, snagging a large piece of broccoli before answering.

"Someone I knew tipped me off about them not long after the John Lee Roche case." He crunched on the broccoli carefully before continuing. "That case wasn't good for me in a lot of ways, you know that. Anyway, I wanted some time to think, to break away from the serial killers, from the darkness."

Scully had seen the effect Roche had on Mulder even years later. She could imagine the dark places he had been at when he covered serial killers all the time instead of just occasionally.

"Anyway, I was seeing Dr. Werber by his time anyway, and that had brought up the memories of my sister. So out of curiosity I started doing research, looking into events like mine, and when my friend tipped me off on the X-files, I thought I'd hit the treasure trove."

"You didn't even think it was a little crazy?" Was there ever a time, Scully wondered, that Mulder was not the wide-eyed believer he was now?

"Well, yeah," he admitted carefully. "I don't believe everything that comes across our desk even now. I carefully weigh it and try to decide how much of it is fact and how much of it is fiction. And in those early days most of it was just crap. The place had been used for years just to dump stuff in, no one had cared, and it took a lot of weeding out."

"How did the X-files even come into existence?" Scully had never heard the whole story. She knew that there had always been X-files, paranormal and unexplained cases, and she knew Mulder had been working on them ever when she had joined the Academy. No one else really knew how they even came into being.

"I'd like to claim the existence of them, but I didn't open them up, at least not the first time."
"They've been open before?"

"Yep," Mulder nodded, shoveling rice off of his plate. "Man named Arthur Dales was the first agent on the X-files, some forty years ago."


"Not surprised, seeing as the FBI was probably no fonder of discussing him than they are of me." Mulder was rather cheerful regarding his whole black sheep of the Bureau status. "I ran across Dales after a case came off the blotter from Wisconsin. Someone had sent it along to me just because of the strangeness of it, a routine eviction of a tenant lead to the discovering of a body and the near murder of a county sheriff, and it ended in the death of the tenant, one Edward Skur."

"Sounds like a straightforward murder to me." Scully knew there had to be more to it than that.

"Well, it sounds like it, but the victim had all of his soft tissue removed. As Skur as he lay dying on the stairs, he kept repeating one name over and over and over again."

"What?"

"Mulder." His eyebrows arched in dramatic delight as he sipped from his beer impishly. He knew he had her hooked and was pleased he did.

"Mulder?" That would be mystifying. "Did he know you?"

"I can honestly say that despite my reputation of hanging out with pathologists, I don't know other people who take out the soft tissue of their victims on a regular basis."

"Well, is Mulder a terribly common, Dutch name? Maybe he just knew other people with the name."

"Not terribly common, but it was a possibility, so I looked into it out of curiosity. I looked up Skur in the database and found an old X-file on him. Sadly, most of the file had been redacted long ago."

"For what purpose?"

"I didn't know, but I decided to ask the agent of note, which happened to be Arthur Dales. He'd retired twenty years before, but still had a DC address. So I showed up to see if he could give me any further information, an insight into what lay behind the lines with the Sharpie through them."

Something about Mulder's tone seemed to indicate Arthur Dales was less than pleased with this development. "So how helpful was he?"

"Before or after he slammed the door in my face?"

Scully snickered, plucking up shrimp from her plate. "So I take it that you didn't learn much off of him."

"Oh, I learned a lot, like why it was this man kept repeating 'Mulder' over and over again."

"Why?"

"He knew my father." There wasn't even the slightest hitch as he said it, no hesitation as he claimed Bill Mulder as his father. Scully was pleased to hear that, even if she too shared the same questions regarding his true parentage. "Edward Skur once worked in the State Department along with my father."
"I'm sure a lot of people did but none of them died with your last name on their lips. And what about working in the State Department would make any of this an X-file?" Scully was curious now.

"You and I both full well know what my father and the State Department were up to that makes this an X-file." Mulder muttered grimly.

"So how did Arthur Dales get mixed into all of this?" She could hardly believe that the men who had kidnapped her, who had created Emily, were any more keen in the 1950's to have the FBI involved in their work than they were now.

"See that's the thing, Dales and his partner worked straight, regular Bureau cases. You have to remember that this is the days of J. Edgar and right smack in the middle of the Committee on Un-American Activities business. Suspicion was rampant, average Americans were being spied on and brought before the Senate for nothing more than having worked with someone who happened to have attended a Communist party meeting once. Dales was just one of the many agents whose sole duty it was at the time to track down those suspected of un-American activities and arrest them."

"And Skur was somehow mixed up in all of this?"

Mulder nodded, leaning back in his chair as well, dredging up the facts from his perfect memory. "The story was, as best as Dale's remembered, that Skur was implicated as having been involved in Communist activities. At the time the committee was trying to weed out anyone and everyone within the government who even had the hint of being Red, and the State Department in particular. Skur was a mid-level employee, no one particularly important."

"And yet he was a Communist?"

"He was arrested for failing to appear before the committee, but was found with a card on him."

"Strange thing for a man who works for the State Department during that period to be carrying."

"Yeah, I thought so." Mulder reached for his beer. "Anyway, it seemed pointless as Skur apparently killed himself that night, hung himself in his jail cell."

Visions of Emily's father came to mind, but Scully brushed them aside. "We can assume that was staged. Obviously it had to be, Skur was found in Wisconsin decades later."

"Oh, but it gets better," Mulder replied. "Dales was the one who broke the news to the man's wife. He drives out there, calls on the family, and as he's leaving he swears he sees Skur running off into the darkness."

"It seems logical. The first place the man would want to go back to is his family."

"Except no one else believed him and Justice immediately rushed to cover the whole thing up."

That sounded all too familiar. "So Dales got suspicious."

"As any good follower of the truth would. As it turns out the next day he gets called out to a strange case out in Maryland. A body turned up, a famous German doctor who had made a home in the US. He was found in his house dead."

"Any connection to Skur?"

"Dales said he wasn't sure until he was called by my father."
Now they were getting to the heart of the matter. "What did he have to do with all of this?"

"Dales said Dad was the one who told him about a program, one that engaged in using Nazi research on innocent people. Something about grafting animal and human characteristics together, putting a monster inside of a human. Skur had undergone a surgery that put some sort of thing inside of him that was attacking and killing innocent people."

"Mulder!" Scully choked on rice as she coughed and spluttered, eyes streaming she reached for her beer to try and calm the convulsions. The image alone sounded like something straight out of Mulder's B movies. "Something inside of him?"

"That's how Dales described it. But hell, Scully, it could have been anything. You know better than anyone the games that these men play, that they continue to play." Mulder glared stormily at his pate. "Anyway, Dales, said that Skur disappeared, vanished. He hadn't heard a thing about him until I showed up at his door nearly 40 years later."

"And they don't know where he got to or how?"

"No," Mulder shook his head. "I thought about broaching the subject with Dad, but I never could bring myself to do it. We weren't speaking much by then and when we were together I was busy trying to keep the peace." He prodded at his plate with a chopstick disconsolately.

"Dales always suspected that someone let him loose again, but when, it is hard to say. They could have experimented on him more and let him go, he could have escaped from them. Someone could have taken pity on him, maybe even my father, I don't know." Mulder worked at his bottom lip, sucking it in between his teeth. Scully remembered Bill Mulder doing that the one time she met him. She wondered if Mulder even knew that was where he got it?

"Wow, was that story a downer for your birthday or what?" Mulder sighed good-naturedly, downing the rest of his beer and rising for another. "You want anymore?"

"Still working on this one." She held up her now lukewarm beer, thinking over Mulder's story as he rummaged in the fridge to replenish. "So what happened to Dales?"

"Well, what you might expect," Mulder replied, opening his beer and returning to the table. "He began asking questions, no one wanted to answer for him, least of all my father, and he started getting nosey. In his spare time between regular casework he began poking around some of these unexplained files. Soon they got into his blood as well."

"And he started the X-files, then?"

"Well more or less. He didn't have the luxury of working on them full time like I do. And you think the crap we put up with is bad, try doing these investigations in J. Edgar Hoover's Bureau of the 50's and 60's. No, Dales was a pioneer in a lot of ways. But he got his fair share of crap for it too. His career was ruined. He was pretty much forced to retire in the end. And after he left they files were boxed up, shoved in a storage room we now euphemistically like to call an office, and were forgotten till I dredged them up eight years ago."

"Ah, how history repeats itself!"

"Yeah, well I have one thing that Dales didn't have?"

"Certainly not your sanity."

Mulder snickered. "No, that's what I have a partner for."
Scully warmed at the soft smile and intense sincerity in his eyes. For all of Mulder's many faults, his heart and emotions were always honest, and she always appreciated that about him. "Not that it's helped you out much more than Dales."

"Oh, I think it has. You never fear speaking truth to me, Scully, and you always keep an eye to the work, which is more than I can say about myself at times."

"Even when we aren't doing much work?" She arched an eyebrow pointedly at him. He chose to ignore it, reaching instead for a Chinese food carton.

"Something will come along." He hardly seemed worried. He was evading this, she knew he was. For all of his talk of the X-files being in the blood, Mulder's faith had been horribly shaken. Why was he still in this if it wasn't for his beliefs?

"So about this cupcake." Mulder eyed the lone cupcake Scully had set on top of the box containing it's fellows. "You want me to stick a candle in it or something?"

"I don't own birthday candles."

"Why is it still sitting there, uneaten and alone?"

"Because we are eating dinner," she replied primly, much to Mulder's undisguised disgust.

"You are one of those people who only eats desert after they've had dinner."

"Grow up in a strict, Catholic household and you develop good manners, too."

"It's not good manners, it's indoctrination." Mulder reached across the table for the singular cupcake, plucking it up.

"Hey," Scully protested as he began peeling the paper off the cake itself.

"You aren't eating it."

"It's my birthday cake."

"There's a whole box," he protested before her suddenly sulky gaze.

"That's the one you gave me specifically."

He paused, looking down his aquiline nose at her. "You try that look on all the men in your life?"

"What, this 'you-just-kicked-my-puppy' look?" Scully tried not to sound too innocent as she deepened her unhappy frown and stared sadly at the cupcake in his hand.

"Yeah, that one." He grimaced.

"On most of the men, I have to admit," she replied with a long-suffering sigh.

"And did it work?"

"Almost always."

"Damn it," he growled, handing over the prize she took with a triumphant smirk. "It's a good thing it's your birthday."
"You would just be a cold hearted bastard to me the rest of the year?"

"Why break up a good pattern," he shrugged cheerfully, reaching for another cupcake in the box. Snagging what looked like a chocolate one he held it aloft, briefly. "Happy birthday, Dana Scully. Already this one is looking much more promising than the last one."

"Particularly since there is no cancer, no downed plane, and no one getting shot," she replied with a dry smile as he took a huge bite of frosting and cake, nearly swallowing the thing whole. Scully snorted, returning to her food, shaking her head as he finished off the pastry in another bite.

"Really, you have the table manners of an animal. You ever learn how to eat properly?"

"I grew up in a proper, New England family, what do you think?"

"You are such a rebel, Mulder."

"I do try." He wiped fluffy frosting from off his chin. "But you're the one who has put up with me for nearly five years."

"I suppose we have to wonder about my sanity as well." Scully smirked, finding that for the first time in many months, perhaps a year, she felt truly content. It was her birthday and she was surprisingly happy, despite everything that had happened to her in the last year.

"Thank you, Mulder."

"For?" He topped off his cupcake with another bite of kung pao, and that couldn't possibly taste appealing.

"For making what had been a rather quiet, crappy birthday into a good one. For being my friend enough to show up with Chinese and cupcakes. For being with me with Emily, this last year. For just being here." To be honest Scully wasn't so sure how she would have managed without him there, even if he did steal her cupcake.

He was quiet for some time, chewing thoughtfully. "Just don't make things like this a habit, Scully. I can't be a superhero all of the time."

"And here I was thinking of getting you a cape."

"Just don't make me wear it in my underwear, I think I'm cool."

"I know so many women who will be disappointed by that."

She couldn't tell if Mulder was pleased or horrified with that idea. "Tell you what, let's just enjoy your birthday as it is, like you said free of drama, free of angst, and me remembering it for once."

"I know, two years in a row, a girl gets spoiled like this."

"Don't get your hopes up, Scully, this may not happen again."

"Shut up, Mulder." She reached for her partially unwrapped cupcake. "It's my birthday!"
The Beginning of a Bad Joke

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully are given a case that is weird, even for them.

"I promise I didn't do it."

Scully glared blearily up at Mulder's professed innocents as she met him in stride walking down the hallway towards their supervisor's office. Skinner's call had come in just as she had been preparing for bed and her first instinct had been to panic over what Mulder might have gotten himself into now. After all he had been quiet for months now; no midnight runs to military facilities, no days missing without a word to Scully about his whereabouts. His fish had to be fat and lazy by this point, surprised at their owners amazing staying power in the old homestead these days. He'd been quiet - too quiet - and that was what had worried Scully as she raced back to the Hoover Building and up to her boss' office.

"If you didn't do it, Mulder, than why are we here at eleven o'clock at night?" She couldn't help her skepticism, past experience had given her much ground for precedent.

"I am disturbed that you just assume the worst out of me."

"Have you ever given me cause for there to be otherwise?"

Skinner's outer office was empty and dark, and the his personal door was wide open, shining out over his assistant's neat and tidy desk. Before they could even move to the door to knock Skinner's voice called from inside. "Come in, Agents."

Skinner barely looked up as they entered, waving them to seats in front of his desk as he shuffled through papers, his phone couched between his ear and one massive shoulder. He was writing notes furiously, dark scrrolls across his legal pad, eyebrows thunderous behind his thick glasses as his jaw worked hard enough to crush glass. Whatever it was their boss was calling them in for, it wasn't good. Scully shot Mulder a wary look, but he only shrugged, looking as mystified as she felt.

"Right, I'll have my agents on it," Skinner growled before removing the receiver and dropping it lightly into the cradle. His pen dropped with a dull thunk as he took off his glasses and dug his palms into his eyes with exasperation.

"Have either of you heard one of those jokes about the rabbi, the priest, and the minister walking into a bar?" It was a nonsequitur that Scully wasn't expecting out of Skinner as she blinked at him vaguely.

"Yeah, it sounds like one of my family reunions," Mulder replied glibly. "Sir, if I might ask?"

"There was a shooting at a diner here in the district. Metro PD were called in on it an hour ago, something that looked right out of a Robert Rodriguez film. It's the sort of strange confluence of events that not even you could imagine, Mulder." Skinner slipped on his glasses again, rising from his desk to pace the area behind. "I just got off the phone with representatives of the US Marshalls' office, the DEA, ATF, and every other agency under the Justice Department that isn't us, not to
mention the NSA. Everyone is screaming bloody murder over interference into each other's cases, wanting to know who leaked what, if this was planned, and who was to blame."

"I'm sorry sir?" Scully could hardly follow where Skinner was going with this as he reached across the oak desktop to spin several photographs to face the two agents. Mulder leaned forward to study them quietly as their boss continued.

"For whatever reason, several key suspects in several federal investigations were found murdered tonight at a no name diner."

"Was it a hit," Mulder asked immediately, eyes roving the pictures as he committed them to memory.

"No, it looked very much as if they just all showed up at one spot and began firing on one another."

"Did they have a reason to start firing at one another?" Mulder looked up, confused.

"No," Skinner stopped, staring down at the photographs. "But two US Marshalls also happened to be there as well and that perhaps stirred things up."

That would do it.

"What were the Marshalls doing there," Scully asked, trying to make sense of the tangle that had been laid before them.

"They radioed in they were going to pick up a suspect. That was the last anyone heard of them. Next thing anyone knows the place explodes in a hail of bullets and everyone is calling the FBI."

"Why us?" Mulder plucked up one of the photographs to study more closely.

"We are the only federal, investigative unit who didn't have anything vested in this, so when it hits the fan, agents, guess who they turn to."

"So why us?" Mulder raised an eyebrow over the photo in his hand.

Scully had been wondering that herself as she studied the kaleidoscope of low-level thuggery across Skinner's desk. They were on the X-files, ostensibly they investigated very specific sorts of cases, ones in which the strange or unusual occurred. Other than this being a bungled case of cross-departmental proportions, she wasn't particularly sure what they were being asked to do.

"You two are not attached to any major investigations involving any of these cases."

"So is a lot of the FBI, sir," Mulder replied, pressing further.

Skinner's eyes narrowed, hard and dark behind his glasses. "Because no one can explain why these particular people were in this place at this time, and if there is anyone in this Bureau who can piece together weird coincidences that shouldn't happen, Mulder, it's you." Skinner hated admitting it, Scully knew that, but at least he was honest about it. "The truth is no one can tell if this was a massive hit to remove all of these people all at once and send a message, if it there is a gang war going on no one knows about, or hell, if it was simply a strange confluence of the sun and stars and it really was just as accidental as everyone believes it to be."

Accidental? Somehow Scully couldn't quite buy that and she doubted that anyone else in the Justice Department could either, which was why they were being called in. "Sir, I can't say either
one of us has a lot of professional experience with drugs."

"Speak for yourself, Scully," Mulder murmured softly as he picked up another photograph.

Scully resisted the urge to kick him. "I don't know how helpful either one of us could be on this case."

"Scully, I don't need someone who's well versed in the drug wars, I need someone who is well versed in strange crap happening, and that fits you and Agent Mulder to a tee." Skinner's gazed snapped between the two of them. "I told Metro PD to expect you there in the next half an hour, keep me informed on what you find."

With that they were both dismissed. Mulder collected the information Skinner had, studying it as they made their way out of the door, Scully just behind.

"Mulder," she muttered as they got out of earshot of Skinner's office. "We've been too quiet for too long, this is busy work. I warned you if we didn't start doing something more substantive soon they would find ways of making us busy."

"I don't know about that," Mulder murmured distractedly, studying Skinner's scrawled notes.

"You are serious about this!" She stared up at him, surprised. Any other case like this and Mulder would have been screaming bloody murder they were being sent in for clean up work by the Bureau. "Mulder, it was a bungled job, it could be anything and we are way out of our depth when it comes to drug dealers."

"I seem to remember working White Collar crime for a stint there. Who is out of their depth?"

"Mulder," she warned as he paused at the elevator.

"Don't you find it strange that a group of men who have really no reason to meet, but all very much have a reason to hate each other, all somehow accidentally end up at the same place, at the same time, and go at each other likes it's Tombstone?"

"Mulder I can imagine that this happens more often than anyone is comfortable with admitting. It just so happens that this has messed up a lot of important people's lives and work, and we are being asked to play clean up crew on it. You hate these cases."

The doors slid open as Mulder grunted in something sounding like assent as Scully followed. He was really going to do this without even so much as a complaint.

"Mulder...if I told you I was preparing to dance a naked hula on the steps of the Capitol right this moment, would you come and watch?"

"Hmmm, knock yourself out, Scully."

That was it! Ignoring the foot he had on her own height, she stood on tiptoes, reaching up for Mulder's forehead under the slight fringe of hair. He reared back, glaring at her as her fingers brushed against cool skin. "I was checking to see if you had a fever."

"What?"

"Are you sure you are you and not one of those things that tends to like looking like you?"

"Scully," he growled as the doors opened up to where they parked their vehicles.
"I'm just saying this is all odd behavior out of you."

"You're car or mine?"

"Yours…if you really are Mulder."

"I'm not dignifying that with an answer," he sniffed, leading the way into the darkened parking structure.
In which Scully suffers through the Lone Gunman nerding.

Ignoring the stale, greasy Frito smell of the place, Scully had to admit that the Lone Gunman's dungeon could be quite cozy.

"I can't believe Donald Gelman is dead," Langley breathed as his fingers flew across his keyboard. It had been the repeated phrase of the moment, falling from all three of the strange computer nerd's lips several times over the last fifteen minutes. Scully wondered if she should offer to take them down to the morgue so they could see their hacking idol's body and confirm for them that he was dead. Somehow she didn't think the three of them could handle that well.

"What I'm more interested in is why." Mulder sat hunched around the console with the other three, eyes glued to Langley's screen. They all basked in the glow of his monitor as if looking for the Holy Grail. Seriously, it was a CD that played a song that was from before even her parents' time. What that had to do, if anything, with the case at hand, Scully didn't know, but if anyone could pick out the thread of the strange from seemingly innocuous circumstances, it was Mulder. Knowing that, she realized this could take a while. Quietly, she snagged one of the Gunmen's latest literary offerings - was it the newest edition - and settled back to flip through it.

Infrared Technology? What in the world was strange about that?

"Gelman was my idol for years." Frohike shook his head dolefully, his pug-like face solemn. "You know we'd hear legends of him when I was in A/V in high school, about the things he was doing with computers. I heard he once hacked into the CIA and had all of the computers play 'Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead' when the last director went out of office."

"A bit amateur for a genius, don't you think?" Mulder, much like Scully, seemed hardly impressed.

"He had a perverse sense of humor." Frohike looked slightly affronted. Clearly, he thought it was funny.

"Gelman didn't want to take down the system, he wanted to change it, evolve it," Byers defended loftily. He always was the most serious of the three. "When he created viruses, it wasn't just to show off or to prove he could do it, it was to force people to see their weaknesses, to change, to adapt. He believed that in the future information would evolve and adapt, just like life does, that computers would become self aware."

"I'm glad to know Mulder isn't the only one who watches and believes those type of movies." Scully sighed, flipping through the paper. She could feel four sets of eyes turning to her through the thin pages, but she didn't bother looking up. Instead she dryly paged to the next story. Really? Sewer slime monsters born out of industrial dumping? Did they not really have something better to write about?

"I wonder what he was doing that got him killed." Frohike, like the others, had immediately assumed that this had been the object of the entire exercise at the diner. Drug dealers, kingpins, and
two US Marshalls, all to kill one, lonely computer programmer in a diner with a CD that played a classic oldie? Why couldn't it be as simple as just…well, strange confluence of people who had no business being in a room together?

Yeah, but that was a possibility the Gunmen even considered? No! It had to be a conspiracy! Of course, it had to be! Scully yawned slightly as she sank into the cushions, watching the three men with Mulder pick through code and blinking lights with the intensity of someone looking for hidden treasure. Perhaps it was hidden treasure for them.

To be honest even after getting to know the three strange characters over all of these years Scully couldn't say she really knew them, not well, and she had always assumed they preferred that. Byers she knew still nursed the broken heart he had for Suzanne Modeski. Frohike had harbored a crush on her for years, but she knew next to nothing about him. And Langley was an even bigger mystery, save for a mutual shared love of the Ramones and the fact that she knew he was a sucker for comic books and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Otherwise, everything she knew about the men who constituted Mulder's social life was contained in a tiny industrial office, well hidden on the edges of the District proper. None of them seemed to have homes beyond this place, none of them seemed to have jobs, and everything they lived, slept, and breathed seemed to be contained in this one area.

And it was sad, really, and perhaps a tad disturbing.

Didn't they ever wish to get out into the real world, to turn their noses away from the computers glare and into the land of the living? There were so many things to do there, talk to real people on the street, breath fresh air, allow the sunshine to touch their skin. It baffled Scully that three grown, adult men could hole themselves up like moles, windows shuttered, doors locked tight, protected with the sort of high security cameras that made the CIA flush with envy. For all of Mulder's anti-social tendencies, at least he got out and exercised, mingled in the real world from time-to-time, even was known to go out to bars, have drinks. Did they ever go grocery shopping or did they only ever order in food?

*Heavenly shades of night are falling...its twilight time...*

"You know, my sister exists because of this song," Frohike mused with vague nostalgia.

"You have a sister," Mulder yelped, as both he and Scully stared at the little man in surprise.

"Sure I do. Margy always was a cute kid."

"She hot?" Mulder flipped dryly without losing a beat.

"Don't make me get primeval on my ass. Keep your hands off my kid sister."

"She looks like Frohike, Mulder. Last I heard she had become a nun cause no one would have her." Langley muttered as he continued to type. He barely winced as Frohike reached up to smack the back of his blonde head.

"My sister takes her religious vows seriously."

"And you know nothing is more attractive in a woman than a black veil and a love for Jesus," Mulder rumbled seductively with a perfectly straight face.

Scully very quietly buried her face in the Gunmen's paper and tried not to snort too loudly.
Technobabble

Chapter Summary

In which Scully complains about taking on Invisigoth.

Scully wanted to say she couldn't believe Mulder was buying into this, but the truth is she knew he was buying into this and it was pissing her off.

"I'm stopping for gas," Mulder announced to no one in particular as ahead a gas station sign came into view. Scully glared at it absently, then at Mulder, before glancing back to Esther Nairn dozing in the seat behind her. In what was turning into a supremely crappy morning, so far she had been drug to the middle of no where, nearly blown out of existence in a shipping container, told a load of crap that would make even the tripe the Lone Gunmen came up with sound plausible, and she hadn't even seen a hint of her warm, comfortable bed, not to mention she was saddled with a suspect who was a raging bitch. That was putting it politely. Scully almost wished that it were aliens and conspiracies, at least she would feel it was less of a pointless exercise.

"I'll fill up," Mulder muttered as he came to a stop at the pump, climbing out with a small smile, leaving Scully alone with the napping Esther in the back. She had dropped off an hour before after complaining in dire tones that they were all going to die and staring ominously out of the back window. Even now in fitful sleep the woman managed to look petulant and angry, her dark eye make up smudging down her face slightly as she turned her face against the upholstery of Mulder's car. Really, did she need to cake her face in the stuff? Everything about the girl spoke of annoyed and irate, childish and proud. Her paranoia and righteous indignation made even the Lone Gunmen look reasonable by comparison.

How did Mulder find these people?

Popping open her door, Scully climbed out of the cabin, glaring across the top of her partner's sedan as he patiently began filling the car's gas tank. Did he even realize what they had sunk to? Months without a single effort to find anything on the men who had so nearly killed her, who had succeeded in killing her sister and her daughter, and now they were chasing cybernetic fairy tales? Rounding the car, Scully pulled up to him, crossing her arms against the early morning chill.

"Mulder, why are we doing this again?"

"Doing what?" He didn't turn his dark head from watching the digital numbers flash on the gas pump read out.

"This!" Scully waved haphazardly at the woman in the car who continued to sleep on. "We have no idea if half of that story she just told us is even true."

"Well, judging from the heat blisters in my paint job, Scully, I think that explosion we witnessed was pretty real."

"We don't know how that happened or why that happened," Scully shot back snappishly as Mulder shrugged in mild response. "At the very least she is guilty of how many FCC violations?"
"Considering the number of violators we know, should we really cast any stones?"

"This is different and you know it." Scully was in no mood for this. "What are we really doing with her?"

"You heard what she had to say, there is a sentient being out there on the web, one that was able to kill how many men? All just to destroy its creator?"

"You honestly believe every word she had to say?" Scully stared up at his suddenly impassive face. "You bought that line of science fiction crap and ran with it."

"Scully," Mulder began to admonish her.

"No, this isn't Blade Runner or one of those stupid movies about a computerized future, and you are catering this woman's story rather than finding out the truth about what is going on here."

"Do you have a better lead?"

"What?"

"Do you have a better lead, 'cause believe me I'm not convinced this isn't a load of crap." It was so rare that Mulder ever admitted to doubting any story that it caught Scully off guard. The pump went off and he snagged the handle out angrily, slamming it onto its catch. "This is all we got that makes remote sense."

"Mulder," Scully began, but he cut her off in annoyance.

"A dead computer hacker, one that's notorious for hiding underground, found in a cross drug land hatchet job that should never have happened? The only lead we have there is living in a shipping container that gets blown up, and the only reason you don't want to believe her story is she gave you a little attitude when we went to question her?"

It wasn't the only reason, but perhaps it was part of it. Scully set her chin, her teeth grinding slowly as she glared up at his not unfair suspicions. "We haven't had a real case in weeks...months. You are chasing tree spirits or stories from Jerry Springer and now you are chasing hypothetical, digital life."

"Programmers have discussed the possibilities of an AI being created for decades. Go schmooze with any expert from MIT or Cal Tech and they will tell you the same thing that girl just told you. The possibility isn't just out there, scientists have said that it's feasible within years as the pace of our digital world increases."

"And how do we know that this has anything to do with an AI and isn't some elaborate prank from a techno anarchist who is playing you with her sob story and winning personality?"

"Why is it you get jealous every time there's a pretty face involved with a case?" Mulder leaned in smugly, a wicked grin she could cheerfully smack off on his leering face.

"What am I jealous of? A woman who looks like she trowled on her mother's black eye shadow with a garden shovel? And you still haven't answered my question." She snapped her head back, bringing the entire conversation to point. "Why are we taking on cases like this when there are real questions out there to answer?"

He didn't like that question. He shied from it, backing down as he turned to put the gas cap of the car back on. "This is real work, Scully. Skinner assigned us."
"It's not the work we used to do and it's certainly not the work you used to stand for us doing."

Before he could make an answer, though, Esther the Wonder Goth stepped out of the other side, bleary eyed - or at least Scully assumed so under the inch of black make up - and glared at the two of them. "Does the prisoner have a right to take a piss?"

Mulder turned to Scully, pointedly throwing it her direction. "I think this might be your department, Scully, or is it too beneath your investigative capabilities?"

Scully eyes cut so fast to him she was surprised they didn't slice into ribbons. "Sure, Mulder, I'll escort our guest to the rest room."

She turned to the pouting blonde. "Though the handcuffs aren't coming off."

Esther snorted in disdainful outrage. "How in the world am I supposed to pee then?"

"I don't know. You're the genius from MIT. Figure it out!" Scully stalked past the woman as she led the way into the gas station.
Son of a....

Chapter Summary

In which the day only gets better for Scully.

And the day was only getting better!

"You realize that holding a gun on a federal officer gets you a considerable amount of jail time?" Scully didn't feel the need to be terribly polite when the gun in question happened to be her own, and it was pointed right at the side of her head.

"It's not the only thing I've done that would get me jail time," Esther grinned, her teeth white and bright at the implication. Great, Scully breathed, not only was she petulant, but she was also slightly deranged. Brilliant!

"Esther, I don't know what you think you are doing, but it won't work. Agent Mulder and I put a lot on the line to help you."

"You can't help me with this." She shrugged, the leather of her boots creaking as she shifted in the passengers seat of Byers' car. Scully watched her weapon waiver dangerously as the girl's finger shifted on the trigger, but kept her fingers firmly on the steering wheel as she drove. There was no need to do something rash and stupid that would get them both killed.

"I thought all you needed was to run the kill switch," Scully snapped, now wondering if all of this had been nothing more than a game for Esther, a way of getting into the system to play the sort of practical joke that idiots like the Lone Gunmen would find amusing.

"I do need to run the kill switch, but not before I find David." Esther's manic smile returned. "So tell me, Agent Scully, is it often you let suspects get the slip on you."

Mulder was gullible enough to have this happen on more than one occasion, but Scully....she couldn't deny her pride stung as Esther smirked at her. "I didn't know they taught lock picking at MIT."

"I guess I'm full of surprises." Esther was enjoying the position she was currently in. She had turned sideways in the passenger seat, back against the door, gun between her knees as she directed Scully down the winding, backcountry roads through northern Virginia. She seemed to know where she was going at least, for all that Scully didn't.

"Can you at least tell me where we are going?"

"To find David."

Scully frowned, combing for the reference in her memory. "I thought he was working on this project with you and Gelmen."

"He was." Esther's cheer fled as her gaze hardened. "I have to find him before we kill it."

"Are you afraid that some government satellite will blow him to kingdom come as well?"
Esther met her mocking with angry gravity. "That thing found me in yard full of shipping containers and for all I know could be tracking down this car this very second."

"What makes you believe this thing wants you dead?" She might as well humor the woman. After all she was the one with the upper hand on Scully at the moment. Her mouth went dry as she regarded the muzzle of her weapon quietly.

"It killed Donald, didn't it?" That seemed to prove her point to Esther. "They said you are a doctor, right?"

"I have a medical degree, yes," Scully quantified quietly.

"So you know about animal behavior, right?"

"Somewhat," Scully hedged. Ironically, Mulder would likely be the greater expert in this arena, but he was God knew where looking for a T3 line that led to nowhere.

"An animal's first response to any sort of danger is fight or flight, either it runs or it fights off its attackers. It's primal, deep within us, when faced with someone who does us harm we either run away from it or try to overpower them."

Scully quietly glanced towards her weapon in Esther's fingers. "Theoretically, that's the idea, yes."

"The thing that sets higher orders of animal apart, especially humans, is our reasoning. We can, if we choose, manipulate that response in ourselves. We can use our wits and cunning to not simply react out of instinct, but to utterly destroy the other. Rather than lashing out, we can plan and pinpoint the areas that are most dangerous to us and neutralize them to ensure our own safety."

"So whatever it is you, Gelman, and this David created, you scared it, and now it's lashing out at the three of you so it can live in some digital meadow, frolicking in the wild?"

Esther scowled at Scully's disdain. "I didn't think you would understand."

"Is that why you kidnapped me rather than my partner?"

"No, I kidnapped you because you were there and stupid enough to be asleep. You're partner was stupid enough to go out hunting for it."

"Esther, I hold a medical degree from Stanford, my partner has a psychology degree from Oxford, and last I checked both of those institutions could more than hold their own against your vaunted MIT, so before you start throwing the 'stupid' pejorative out there you might want to consider that you are the one relying on the two of us to get this done for you. Thus, if we are stupid, what in the hell does that make you?"

This quieted Esther for the briefest of moments. Her jaw worked as she studied Scully, her black eye shadow swallowing all but the slit of her cutting eyes. "Stanford's not a bad school."

"I'm so glad you approve," Scully muttered acidly. "Now what I want to know is why you all thought it would be a brilliant idea to release a program that was self aware out onto the internet? Whose brilliant idea was that one?"

Esther looked mutinous for a brief moment. "Donald's."

"To do what? Roam free, evolve?"
"To do what any other self-aware entity does, learn from its environment. You all see computers, programs, and technology as tools, no different than a hammer or a screwdriver. You use your computers to send emails, or look up porn, or spy on one another. But we've created machines that think, that do the same things our brains do. There are robots that can do everything from put a car together to make you breakfast. They are nothing more than bits of silicon and metal with commands programmed into them to do these actions, the same as our own brains."

"So Gelman wanted to recreate the human thought process in a program?"

"No, Donald wanted to create life in a program, to show that it can be done. Science says that the most basic form of life on this planet is that of the virus, a living entity that replicates, mutates, and evolves. That is what Donald did, he took the living example and recreated it." Esther gave that strange, manic smile again. "Donald was playing at being God."

"Clearly," Scully was unable to quite wrap her head around the ethical nature of just what Gelman and his associates were doing. "And it never occurred to either one of you that what Gelman was doing could get seriously out of hand?"

"Donald was a revolutionary. Besides, we never expected it to get loose like it did, let alone react the way it did to us."

"I suppose God felt the same way at the Garden of Eden," Scully replied blithely. She could have very easily gotten shot for that, she supposed, if she hadn't had the good fortune of having her cell phone go off just then. Esther scrabbled in the console for it, delighted as she read the ID.

"It's your partner, perhaps he found something."

"Perhaps you better answer it, before he gets suspicious," Scully warned as the phone continued to ring in Esther's hand. "Mulder tends to panic if he can't easily get a hold of me."

"I don't think I'm the person he needs to talk to then." Esther snickered cheerfully, clicking on the talk button and passed it to Scully. "I wouldn't tell him where we are if I were you."

"Right," Scully muttered as she heard her partner calling her name on the other end of the line. "Yep?"

"Yeah, I've found something down in Fairfax County. A derelict chicken farm with a T3 connection, paid for by Aleph Industries, Palo Alto, of which there's no other record anywhere."

Great….
Chapter Summary

In which Scully feels some sympathy for Esther.

Scully fully acknowledged that outward signs of sympathy had never been one of her particular strong suits as a doctor. It had been one of her key reasons for choosing pathology over other more patient-intensive lines of surgery. Even with that acknowledged deficiency she still had no way of knowing how to even begin broaching the tearful girl in the seat beside her, holding Scully's weapon as she sobbed, broken. Did Esther mean to shoot Scully, herself, or just to rage against the world? For what?

Scully glanced towards the ruined remains in the field beyond. It could have been a house at one time, a small farmhouse like one occasionally found still in Northern Virginia. Esther had come here looking for David, the third in this strange little, techno-anarchy triumvirate. If he had been there he clearly couldn't be now, very little of anything was left there in the charred destruction. Scully thought of the explosion that had chased them out of the yard where Esther's shipping container had sat and grimaced. If David had been in the house she doubted he had been fast enough to get away.

Esther's continued to keen, heartbroken as Scully ever so gently pried the gun from her loose fingers and reached for the woman's heaving shoulder. She didn't pull away, at least, as she buried her face in her hands, curling in on herself against the pain of surprise and loss. Whoever David was, he was more than just a fellow computer hacker and programmer, more than just someone else caught up in this same strange situation. Scully had seen that look before, had felt that pain and knew that Esther had very much been in love with this David and she hadn't expected to come to this place and find it gone and her heart along with it.

"Esther," Scully murmured softly under the sobs of the girl. "Esther, what happened here?"

Esther didn't answer, only cried harder.

"Esther," she breathed, doing the only thing she could think of doing. She gently ran a hand across the top of Esther's tightly pulled, blonde hair. She didn't pull away, at least, as she buried her face in her hands, curling in on herself against the pain of surprise and loss. Whoever David was, he was more than just a fellow computer hacker and programmer, more than just someone else caught up in this same strange situation. Scully had seen that look before, had felt that pain and knew that Esther had very much been in love with this David and she hadn't expected to come to this place and find it gone and her heart along with it.

"Here you go," she murmured, as slowly Esther peeked out from behind her tightly clenched fingers. Her face was red and blotchy, the layer of thick eye shadow now washed away and smeared down her cheeks and dripping with residual tears down her nose. She mumbled a thank you as she took the proffered tissue and Scully snagged another, knowing the first would be hopeless in holding up to the task of mopping up.
Esther quietly rubbed at her face, flipping down the mirror on the passenger's side, fingers rubbing off what the flimsy paper could not. She still looked a mess, but she at least looked less like a circus reject, her matted eyes turning downwards towards the fingers shredding the tissue in her lap.

"I thought he would get out of this. I thought...I thought he was smarter than this."

"What happened, Esther," Scully repeated, glancing at the utter destruction around them.

"It could be anything." She replied without sarcasm for once. "The program could have blasted him from a satellite above or it could have manipulated gas pressure meters in the area to cause an explosion."

"And you are sure this...program did this?" Scully forwent the condescension, looking for honesty for once. Esther nodded, her gaze flickering to the destruction around them. Without a word she reached for the handle of the door again and was climbing out and back into the field, back towards the remains. She stood still for long moments, simply looking.

Scully slowly climbed out of the passenger's side to follow her. The wind was biting for early March, but spring was already on its way. The grass had greened up in the last few weeks, and it was soft under Scully's pumps as she strolled to where Esther stood. Whatever had caused the destruction it had happened days ago, perhaps before even Gelman died. And there seemed to be no evidence that this David was to be found anywhere in the pile, no scavengers nested there, no odor came from the scattered rubble.

"He could have gotten out, Esther."

"No, he was here. He was hiding, he was trying to..." She trailed off, full mouth working painfully against the ache inside of her.

"I lied to you," she admitted softly, her voice raw. "I wasn't working with Donald. I mean...I was, and then he found out about us."

"About you and who," Scully prompted gently, knowing full well whom the girl meant.

"David," she sniffed, rubbing a hand under her nose. "About our plans."

"What pans did he find out?"

"Uploading," she replied. "Transfer of memory, of consciousness to the distributed system maintained by the AI." Her woebegone expression turned dreamy for the briefest of moments. "Imagine being mingled so completely with one another you no longer need your physical self. You're one."

It wasn't anything Scully could imagine, nothing she could picture, but she understood the sentiment behind it plainly enough. She had read that same sentiment in countless romance novels, had heard it from the hearts of countless friends who were hopelessly in love. It was the desire to be lost in one another, to be connected to that person that you yearned for so passionately, in heart, body, mind, and soul. It was something poets spoke of with yearning, but no one she knew of could conceive of a way to reach that very plain outside of the throws of sexual ecstasy or in the loving arms of religious fervor. Scully certainly had never found herself feeling that way about anything, a man or God.

"So you were going to..."
"Enter the AI. Give up our inefficient bodies so that our consciousness could live together forever."

It sounded vaguely like a suicidal lovers pact. "And Gelman forbade it?" She could understand why he would.

"He was afraid of his creation," Esther sighed, as if she just realized that her mentor could have very well been right in his paranoia. "He was afraid of what would happen if other people followed us."

Quietly, the girl spied something in the rubble and pulled it out. It was a half-burned photograph of Esther and an older man. Her face softened as she studied it. "I loved him so much."

Scully had nothing against a May-December romance, not after her own relationship with Daniel. She had loved him when they dated, had trusted him, had been willing to do anything to please him. But she had never felt for Daniel the emotion that Esther claimed to have for the man in the photograph. She had never wanted to lose herself so completely in him, to leave the safety of herself and who she was to join with him forever. Scully had seen herself married to him, yes, having a successful career alongside his, but never tying herself so totally to him that she couldn't find where he ended and she began. What must that be like, she wondered, as she search for words to comfort Esther with.

"Well," she began slowly, drawing out the first word. "Maybe he wasn't here when this happened. Maybe he's somewhere else?" Perhaps he had gotten wind, as Esther had, and ran for it before anything could happen.

A small, hopeful smile crossed Esther's face as she turned to Scully. "Perhaps." She picked her way through the rubble, turning around in it, hands on slim hips.

"Do you think it is wrong of me to love David so completely?" It was a surprising question and it sounded so small coming out of the confrontational, blustering Esther.

"Wrong? In what way?" Scully wrapped her arms around herself against a sudden gust of cool wind.

"I don't know," she admitted honestly, turning to look at Scully. "David was older, much older, old enough to be my father at least."

"I dated an older man…a couple actually." Scully remembered wondering what was wrong with her at the time, trying to find the character flaw that drew her to these older, overprotective types. "Sometimes the heart can't help what the heart wants."

Esther nodded, perhaps taking some solace in Scully's words. "What I felt for David was more than just sexual lust or romantic love. I can't explain it. Really, I just was drawn to him. He was so brilliant, and so thoughtful, caring…wonderful. He was Donald's best friend for years. We kept it secret because we didn't believe he would have approved."

"And you wanted to join your consciousnesses to the AI to escape the judgment of those around you who wouldn't understand that relationship?"

Esther nodded as she dug a black, leather-clad toe through the rubble. "Who could really understand us, what we felt? There at least we could be together, be free of society and all of its judgments, of all the trappings of these physical bodies." She waved a hand at her very, very perfect body, one Scully knew Frohike had been eyeing lasciviously from the moment Esther had stepped into the Lone Gunmen's lair.
"All my life people have seen this figure and my pretty face, but never the brain that was inside of it. I graduated top of my class at MIT, but all they see is a hot chick that likes computers. David didn't see that. He saw who I really was."

For the first time since Scully had met the odd, rather abrasive woman, she had finally felt a moment of connection with her. Empathy sparked to life as she glanced at the hard knob of hair on the back of Esther's head and the remains of powdered eye shadow on her cheeks.

"I completely understand," she replied, thinking of all the men who looked at her with raised eyebrows when she flashed her badge or pulled out a scalpel. "I'm a female FBI agent with a medical degree. It's a well-trodden path for me."

Esther turned to her, red-rimmed eyes suddenly sympathetic. "It's hard enough fitting in when you are smart. David was the first one that made me feel like something other than a nerd, other than a sexual object. He saw me as being...me. And I loved him, so very much."

Tears thickened her words again, leaking down her cheeks to blaze new trails through the remaining eye make up. "Have you ever loved someone so much? Have you ever had someone love you so much that you couldn't imagine taking your next breath in this world without them?"

Scully felt her gut twist uncomfortably at this discussion. "I've been in love, Esther, very deeply in love."

"But like this? Love so pure and raw and honest, one that would rather leave this world and spend eternity with them than live a single other day without them on it?"

Scully found herself unable to meet the woman's desperate gaze, turning to stare at a melted plastic cup instead, one entire side of the pale, blue vessel curled in on itself. She had never, ever felt that about anyone, not once. Not Daniel, certainly, the great tragic love of her adult life. She had loved what he had represented, the security of his position, the approval from him, and the attention. But when it came down to it how well had she known Daniel? Certainly not well enough to realize that he was still very much married.

Scully found herself at a loss for words, a dull ache forming uncomfortably in her chest. She had loved deeply; her family, her now lost daughter. But to love that totally, that was something she had never once experienced. The idea of it terrified her, frankly, of losing herself in someone else. Scully was her own person. She had worked hard all these years to be her own person without need or dependence on anyone. What Esther was suggesting required such a loss of herself, of destroying the carefully constructed person she had become over the years. It seemed unthinkable. And yet, Scully realized, her heart jerking painfully, how much had she thrown away from the quest she was currently on. Her career was near in shambles, her health had been jeopardized more times than she cared to think about, she'd been kidnapped so much that Mulder nearly panicked if she didn't answer her phone while in the bath. She had lost a sister and a daughter to this. Common sense told her she should leave. Any intelligent woman would and get out of this madness before it consumed her whole. But here she remained, by Mulder's side even when he had seemingly forgotten their quest. Why was she still here even when she had questioned it and thought twice about it so many times?

Unbidden the memory of Mulder sobbing by her bedside as she lay in the hospital came to mind. Byers had said he had willed her survival, had stopped at nothing to ensure it. While Scully wouldn't go so far as to say that Mulder willed it, she would say that Mulder stopped at nothing for her, on several occasions. He was the one who kept the search for her alive well after everyone else had lost hope. He had agreed to terms he still wouldn't tell Scully about to find the chip that
had saved her life. And when she told him about Emily, he dropped everything to fly to California, to deal with her older brother even, just to aid her when she needed him most. Mulder's devotion was commendable and expected, partnership in the FBI was always a close relationship, one built on trust and shared dangerous experience. But Mulder went beyond the call even for her. And he had sat by her bedside, quietly sobbing as if his heart were breaking at the very idea of her leaving this world without him, of her dying and leaving him alone, and it being all of his fault.

Just what did Mulder feel about her? The question dropped like an explosion in Scully's brain, her eyes widening as her head jerked up to stare across the field of destruction. She had never considered that question, not once asked herself why it was her partner tried so hard, risked so much for her. When she had met Mulder she had never seen a person more focused, more driven than the man who was her partner. Nothing would turn him from his quest to seek the truth. Now he seemed broken, disillusioned, but still he stayed with her, aiding her with the questions she sought. Why did he do that? Why did he feel the need to stand by Scully's cause when he could just as easily walk away from this?

Did she want to know the answer to that question? At the moment Scully found she didn't. What she wanted to do was to find him, to figure out what was going on and to stop this...thing, whatever it was. She wanted to put the kill switch in, end this, go back to DC and write their report. She didn't want to consider the new question now floating to the surface, the questions about the look in Mulder's eye whenever he thought she wasn't looking, the reason for why he moved heaven and earth for her. Perhaps someday, but not now.

"Esther!" She called to the woman, standing still, lost in thought. "We need to find Mulder and end this. Perhaps David is there."

"Right," she called back, but she didn't turn. She stood for long moments still as Scully made her way to the car. She stopped to watch Esther quietly, the belligerent woman who made herself so unlikeable. Who would have ever thought that under the make up and leather and the pissy attitude could have been a fragile heart, easily broken.

Perhaps Scully could have.
"Stop picking at it!" Scully swatted at Mulder's probing fingers as for the umpteenth time she pried them from each of his arms.

"They itch!" He wiggled fretfully on his couch, the leather creaking as he bemoaned his dire state. Three days after being scorched and drugged up in the lonely trailer somewhere in Fairfax County, he was resting comfortably at home, save for the bandages that wrapped around the biceps of each arm and peeked out from under his heather gray athletic shirt.

"Of course they itch, they are healing, and if you don't leave them alone you'll pry the scabs off." She spoke as if he was a five-year-old prodding a skinned knee, and in many ways Scully felt like he was just that. It was Saturday. She could be at home doing laundry and organizing her sock drawer. Instead, she was sitting at Mulder's, pretending to read through a case file while he flipped between NBA and college basketball.

"You know I really did believe my arms were cut off," he muttered petulantly for no reason in particular. Scully had already heard the horror show of Mulder's vivid nightmares while under the influence of whatever drugs the AI was using, including something involving her knowing kung fu.

"It was the drugs, Mulder, relax." If she hadn't been through this routine so many times with him in the hospital she might be worried. But Mulder was merely bored, he hated injury, and she hadn't cleared him to run, play basketball, or any of the other innumerable things he did to burn off excess energy. Scully was beginning to feel for poor Teena as a young mother. Despite what secrets she kept and treacheries she might have been a party to, keeping an eye on child Fox must have been a complete job unto itself.

"What are you reading?" He finally reached for his basketball sitting on the floor by the couch, spinning it lazily in his fingers.

"The police report from Fairfax County Sheriffs. They said that they found Esther's body and a body they've identified as David Mann. I'm guessing that is the David that Esther was looking for."

"He was in the other system. I'm supposing he went there to do what Esther did." Mulder tossed the ball from one hand to the other, lithe fingers gripping it before it could roll away. "Did they say what caused the explosion?"

"They say that the fire marshal had yet to determine it." Scully doubted that they would be able to find any evidence in the twisted computer equipment that remained from the jarred metal of the trailer. It seemed so strange to her that pretty, angry Esther was dead now, nothing more than a burned skeletal remain to be passed on to her next of kin. It felt wrong. For all that she didn't get along with the woman, Esther at least had presence, and there was something infinitely tragic about something that vibrant in the world being so completely snuffed out.

"Do you think that Esther had any family that would claim the body?" Scully hadn't checked out
where Esther's body went or who had been notified of her demise.

"Esther started getting to you, didn't she?" Mulder smiled knowingly from behind his basketball, twirling it in the air before catching it in his hands.

"A little," Scully admitted slowly, flushing slightly as she thought of how completely she had disliked the woman. "I think on a level she and I came to understand one another."

"You and Invisagoth came to an understanding?" Mulder chuckled dryly at the idea, glancing at her everyday looking jeans and her rather pedestrian looking top. Scully looked more Gap than Goth.

"I'm serious. I was standing right next to her when she found David's house." Scully would never forget that look of utter devastation in Esther's eyes. "Everyone saw a leather clad, tough-as-nails, punk computer programmer, but in the end she was an idealist and a romantic. She was brilliant and hopeful and she was in love with a man she was willing to do anything to be with."

Mulder nodded, thoughtful as he took in Scully's words. He had been pondering Esther's fate in the days since, contemplating what she had tried to do. "You still don't want to think that she uploaded herself into the AI to be with David forever?"

Scully wasn't sure what she wanted to believe. "Perhaps in an ideal world, Mulder, she did." It was the most she was willing to concede the point.

"What if she was able to upload herself? She and David could be together now, without the trappings of this mortal coil. She could have what she wanted, to be loosed of all the pre-conceptions of this world, to just be free." Mulder paused in his ball spinning to stare up at the ceiling of his apartment, momentarily transfixed in thought. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"You are a hopeless romantic, Mulder." Scully rolled her eyes and returning to the files. Secretly, and she wouldn't admit this to Mulder, she hoped he was right. She hoped that somewhere on the World Wide Web now was Esther, her consciousness roaming wild, doing whatever she wished. She hoped that she was happy.

"After all, Scully, all the girl needed was love." Mulder tossed the ball to his side, tucking it under one arm and leaning against it as he turned to her. "Love is the one thing we all need and crave in this universe. It drives so much of what we do. We want to be loved, we love others, people have started wars over love, have done great feats in the name of love…"

"Have written really bad poetry in the name of love," Scully couldn't help but add, pulling down Mulder's rosy-eyed vision. He wasn't to be deterred though.

"Esther loved David enough to leave this mortal life behind on the off chance she might be able to spend eternity with him on another plane. That was a chance she was willing to take."

"Mulder, she had believed him dead up till that point!"

"And grief drives us to do things we normally wouldn't. Do you think that Esther would have seriously gone through with that if she didn't believe David already dead?"

"She and David had already been planning that for some time, probably."

"But she did it in hopes of seeing him again." Mulder was insistent on this, pulling himself up to lean forward on against his knees. "Admit it, Scully, love makes people do crazy things; walk through fire, crawl through deserts, go to the ends of the earth for people."
Scully stared at him, her mouth suddenly becoming very dry. What had Mulder given up to keep her alive? And what did it mean that he was so willing to do it?

"I mean, seriously Scully," he continued, oblivious to her quietude beside him. "Haven't you ever been that in love with someone before?"

"No," she replied in a voice far smaller than she intended. Suddenly she couldn't tear her eyes away from the stark, black letters on the page in front of her as Mulder shifted uncomfortably on the couch near the chair where she sat.

"Not even with...you know." He paused, watching her as she continued to read in silence. "That married guy you nearly shacked up with?"

"You make it sound so romantic." She jerked the paper in front of her face.

"Well, no offense, but the guy did neglect to tell you he was still married."

Scully chewed on her tongue and ignored the creeping flush of red along her skin.

"Wow, never been that in love with someone." Mulder spoke as if everyone in the world had. It annoyed her enough to make her set down the file she had been using as a visual roadblock and glare at his thoughtful expression.

"I'm sure a lot of people haven't experienced that. Have you?" She shouldn't bait him, but he'd hit a particularly sensitive spot at the moment. Though heaven help her she wasn't sure why she was so sensitive to it.

"I thought I was once. But it turned out that she didn't want me climbing mountains for her." Something sad flickered briefly across Mulder's expression before he shrugged, reaching for the basketball again. "I suppose it happens."

Mulder had his heart broken. Scully hadn't realized. She blinked at him, shocked by this new revelation. She supposed she should have caught on years ago judging from his behavior with the women he dated, and she used that term loosely. Hadn't Tom Colton said something about a woman breaking his heart?

"Was it Phoebe?" She was curious now. She doubted it. Mulder seemed more afraid of Phoebe Green than heartsick.

"God, no, I was glad to leave the she-wolf behind when I came back to the hallowed ground of my birth. No, someone else. But it doesn't matter, she's been long gone." Mulder spoke with the dismissive way that said he didn't wish to speak of these matters any further. It was rather unfair, she thought, she told him about Daniel. Couldn't he fess up to his long, lost love affair?

"Think you'll ever find that one, Scully?" Mulder had turned his gaze back towards the television. A Georgetown University game was on and the sound of thousands of fans cheering was white noise from Mulder's set.

"I don't know, Mulder," she replied, fingers fidgeting with the papers in hand. "Honestly, I haven't thought about it much."

"You should. You're an amazing woman, Scully, and you deserve someone who can give you all the things in life you deserve."

"Deserving and wanting are two different things, Mulder." Scully eyed the bandages on his
forearms and thought of the taste of fear in her mouth when she saw him in that trailer, of the pang of raw terror when she believed for just half a second he might be dead. She never wanted to feel that again, ever. And as much as she wanted to believe that it was concern for her partner, she wondered vaguely if it wasn't just that. The longer she stayed around Fox Mulder, the more muddied her feelings started to become. It wasn't as simple as friendship anymore, nor as easily ignored as sexual attraction. There was something deeper and hell if she wasn't terrified of just what the implications of that were.

This couldn't be happening…it just couldn't.

"Scully, you want a pizza?"

Whatever deep thoughts she had, Mulder obviously didn't share them. Feeling vaguely embarrassed for no real reason at all she nodded. "I could eat. You want me to order?"

"Not too many veggies on it, okay. Those things will kill you."

Scully ignored him as she rose, grateful for the excuse to get away from him and order. At least she could always count on the reliability of Mulder forever being a man-child to throw cold water on whatever silly and foolish contemplations she might have.
This Is All Your Fault

Chapter Summary

In which Scully believes her FBI career is over.

Scully watched her entire FBI career flash before her eyes. The sad part was that there wasn't much of it to be commended for.

"This is all your fault," she hissed out of the side of her mouth as Mulder fidgeted beside her. They looked neither left nor right as they shambled down the hallway towards Skinner's office, the inevitable censure to come looking like a dark cloud over the floor where other agents milled about, completely unaware. Mulder's hands dug so hard into his trouser pockets Scully was convinced they would pop out the seams.

How did this happen?

She should have stood her ground with Mulder when he mentioned vampires and strange deaths. How many of these cases had they taken over recent months? Stupid, insignificant cases that had nothing to do with getting to the bottom of what Kirtschrgau had shared with them months ago. For months now they had chased phantoms and ghost stories and now this. Had Mulder lost his mind?

Correction, he never had it to begin with.

"Scully," Mulder tried to sound reasonable around gritted teeth. "Whatever happened to standing together on these things?"

He was right of course. They had always stood together as partners, even when he had done something stupid, like stalking Tooms when he was told not to, or chasing off into the Wisconsin wilds looking for a spaceship without saying a word to anyone. "I'm not saying I'm not standing with you, Mulder. I'm your partner, and this is partly my responsibility."

"Partly?" He stopped as he looked down at her. "Which parts? The ones that make us look reasonable for taking on this case?"

"I don't know if any of those parts exist." She met his challenge evenly, her arms crossing defiantly in front of her. "What in the world possessed you to go after him with a broken chair leg?"

"I don't know the fangs and the glowing, green eyes were a dead give away."

"Is that what you are going to tell Skinner in a few minutes?"

"Well, I suppose I have to tell him something since you were out busy romancing Sheriff Bucky for all I know and were nowhere near the scene when I was attacked."

"Sheriff Hartwell was nowhere near the morgue you sent me to so I could do yet another autopsy for you. And you ate all my pizza."

"Good thing I did, else the vampire would have gotten you first."
"Perhaps, if it had, I wouldn't be facing the end of my career and a prison sentence at the moment, now would I?"

It was only in that moment that Scully realized just how loud their voices had suddenly become. What had started as hissing whispers suddenly rang clearly down the gray-carpeted hallway as agents at their desks and cubbyholes across the floor turned to stare at the pair of them with surprised and curious faces. Here and there was a smirk, a titter, and Scully felt her face flush as crimson as her hair.

Whatever semblance of dignity Scully had melted as she felt herself turn on her heels and stalk towards Skinner's door. Mulder rushed to follow, muttering something about a crazy case, but wisely choosing not to elaborate to the curious onlookers who silently watched them walk away. Scully could almost hear the bee-like buzz of whispers that arose in the wake of their passage.

"Great," she growled just under her breath as Mulder skulked beside her. "As if they didn't already suspect that we were crazy."

"I doubt we've done any further damage to what little reputation we have," Mulder offered with dry hopefulness.

Scully was not amused. "Mulder, do you realize what we've come to? A joke, a parody, we aren't much better than those old TV shows where there's the crazy, old guy in the rumpled trench coat, with the bottle of whiskey in his pocket. He claims to anyone that will listen that there are ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night, and they write him off as insane, and in the meantime he becomes a sad, pathetic figure. He alone claims he knows the truth, but no one really cares."

"No offense, Scully, but what those people do or don't care about at the moment means very little to me when I'm staring at a murder charge, let alone $446 million."

"You act as if your in that boat alone," she snapped, torn between screaming and crying at the moment.

"Well, as you put it, I was the one who staked him." Mulder too sounded frustrated, and angry, and scared to death. Scully sighed. She wanted to assure him, to tell him it was an innocent enough mistake, that he was under the influence of drugs, he obviously wasn't thinking clearly. But the truth was they both had managed to muck this one up but good. In the end it didn't matter whether she wanted to take the case and he didn't, or that she was stuck doing his stupid autopsies while he ate her pizza. What mattered was that a kid was dead because of them and they would both have to face the music on it.

"Mulder," she sighed, staring at the open door to Skinner's outer office. Inside she could see that their boss' door remained resolutely closed. "We both have a lot to explain for ourselves in all of this."

"You'll back me up, right?" Mulder asked nervously, staring at the office they had been in hundreds of times as if it might be a torture chamber.

"As best I can I will." She didn't know what good it would do him. In fact, she was half afraid it would only make him look worse. "I'll try to be as honest and helpful about what I remember as I can."

Mulder looked no more comforted by that thought. "For the record I didn't not sing the theme song from Shaft."
"Sure, whatever!" She huffed, leading the way into Skinner's reception area.

"I think I'm going to puke,‘ Mulder sighed, following just behind her.
"I'm not talking to you," Scully snapped, yanking her still unpacked suitcase from her car as Mulder smirked beside her.

"You aren't talking to me because I nearly got us fired from the FBI, or are you not talking to me because I was right?"

Damn him and his smugness.

"I'm not talking to you, because if I do you will try to make your case that Ronnie Strickland was indeed a vampire and that you were vindicated in staking him…which in no way justifies your actions, I might add." She stalked over to his car, the wheels of her suitcase rumbling across the uneven concrete of the parking structure under the Hoover Building. "I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this."

"Like a vampire," Mulder offered in cheerful helpfulness.

Scully considered kneecapping him just for the hell of it. She spun on him, her nose nearly bumping square into the silk tie that he wore. Frowning, she glared up at his expectant expression. "Mulder, just because you slept with a woman who claimed she was a vampire doesn't suddenly make you an expert."

She hadn't quite hit him where it hurt, but it had the same effect. Mulder winced painfully, his eyes squinting as she turned neatly back around to his car and marched to it. Her heels clicked in time as she made her way to the passenger's side and watched him expectantly.

Her low blow only waylaid him briefly. He hit the remote on his keychain unlocking the doors, the jauntiness returning to his step as she got herself settled inside. "You just don't want to have to admit I'm right in this."

"Mulder, there is no such there as a vampire. Ronnie Strickland likely lived with the delusion he was a vampire, but that doesn't make him one."

"Except that somehow he was able to survive two feet of cheap white pine being shoved through his chest, then pounded on with a rock for good measure."

Scully winced at Mulder's graphic description, imagining the sharp pain lancing through her lungs as he started the car. "Stranger things have happened, Mulder. People have survived all sorts of things that lanced through the body cavity, pipes, dowels, swords, curtain rods…"

"Curtain rods?" Mulder's face twisted as he tried to picture mentally how something like that could possibly happen to someone.

"You see many strange things in the ER when you are doing your residency. The point is that it's possibly for someone to survive that sort of trauma, even for hours. If the object isn't removed it
stems the bleeding for the most part. It's usually the act of removal that causes the most damage."

"Yeah, slight problem with that theory, Dr. Scully. You declared the boy dead at the scene, remember?"

She had and she did remember. She had been the one to look at Mulder in horror as she felt for a pulse that wasn't there, right before she removed the fangs that weren't real. "I did, but even I've been known to make mistakes."

"Make mistakes? Lucky thing you aren't practicing right now, 'cause I'd hate to see what your malpractice insurance would be."

"You're one to talk! You're the one who jammed the stake in his chest in the first place." She glared at him as he pulled through DC traffic towards the airport. "I didn't even want to do this case and there you were, dragging me off to nowhere Texas to chase after ghost stories."

"You sure didn't let that stop you from complaining, did it?" If she was going to turn to petulance, he was too, and for Mulder petulance was akin to breathing. It came naturally to him. "From the moment we stepped foot in Chaney you had your head in the clouds somewhere else, and anytime I tried to get a word in edgewise you would bitch at me like a harpy, dismiss my ideas, pout over the simple task of doing an autopsy, which is your area of expertise, not mine, and when you weren't acting like a perfect shrew in heat you were making moon eyes at the backwater, gomer sheriff and tittering like a twelve-year-old schoolgirl."

"I wasn't tittering," she snorted, but Mulder ignored her.

"And now we are given a break and this has turned into a real X-file and you want to dismiss this as medical miracle and supernatural psychosis!"

"I think before we rush off to flights of fancy, we need to think about what really could have happened." Why was this so difficult for him? "May I remind you that your insistence on this being all about vampires is what got us into this mess in the first place. And instead of listening to you and your fairy tales for once, let's listen to my rationality and reason for a bit. Maybe, just maybe, Ronnie Strickland wasn't dead. Maybe both the me and the coroner got that one wrong. Maybe he's alive out there, injured, still under the delusion he is a vampire. In which case, we have a teenager in need of medical care, a family that is still going to be pissed as hell at us and will still likely lay a law suit on the federal government's doorstep, not to mention our jobs still being on the line."

Perhaps she should remind him of that last tidbit.

Mulder pondered her words thoughtfully for all of two seconds. "Is it so hard for you to admit that I was right?"

"When have you ever been right?" She realized the futility in arguing this with him any further. He was bound and determined to believe that in the end this was about vampires and that he was correct in his assumptions.

"I say we get back down to Chaney and check out where Ronnie the 'not-so' vampire might be."

Scully smiled sweetly at him. "Maybe we should stop somewhere and stock up on stakes and holy water before we do."

If Mulder kept grinding his jaw like that, she thought with some satisfaction, he would need to get his teeth replaced soon.
Sheriff Bucky

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder flashes a bit green over Sheriff Hartwell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scully squirmed slightly under Walter Skinner's dark gaze, like two pins behind his thick glasses staking her to the soft leather cushions of the arm chair she was sitting in. Her fingers twisted as she read perfectly clearly the message in that granite expression. You are the reasonable one, what the hell is going on here?

Dear God, she wished she could explain any of this. The staked kid, the sheriff's glowing eyes, waking up to find everyone gone and Mulder's shoes tied together. None of it made sense. Scully's eyes flickered over nervously to Mulder. He obviously had no comfort. Instead he stared down at his pursed lips, as if to think up of something else quick that might appease their boss.

"So, that's it?" Doubt and disbelief dripped acidly from Skinner's words as his gazed passed between the two agents, both busy studying anything but him. "They simply disappeared without a trace? And that's exactly the way it happened from start to finish?"

Desperation crept through Scully's brain. She had to say something. Settling for the old standby she desperately blurted out her stock answer. "Well, I can neither confirm nor deny Agent Mulder's version of events which occurred outside my presence."

That answer seemed good to her partner as he leapt on it happily. "And I can neither confirm nor deny Agent Scully's version of events, but…" Mulder trailed off, helpless, turning to her pleadingly.

"Anyway," Scully cut in with her last ditch plea. "I was drugged!"

She could hear Mulder audibly swallow beside her. He stopped just short of spluttering as his voice cracked over his words. "That is essentially, exactly the way it happened."

"Essentially," Scully added with a vague sort of confidence she didn't feel.

Skinner's silence rang for a long heartbeat in the office as he blinked at the pair of them.

"Except for the part about the buck teeth!" Mulder's attempt at humor fell flat as a muscle in Skinner's jaw twitched and Scully's fingers immediately went to fretfully rub at the bridge between her eyes. Slowly the leather of Mulder's chair creaked as he sank into it. His long legs splaying as he wilted in defeat.

There was no way they were getting out of this situation, either they were about to be fired or suspended for gross incompetence. Scully could see the OPR board now, of the questioning looks as she tried to explain how it was Mulder could stake a person who didn't die, of how an entire town of people could just vanish in a few hours while they slept. Even she couldn't think of a rational excuse to explain this away, and that was what she had gotten good at over all these years.
"Agents," Skinner began with the sort of gravitas that bespoke a public execution. "I can't even begin really to understand a thing about this case. I don't know why it is in your hands, why you felt this was a case worthy of the Bureau's time, let alone how you two could muck this up so completely that we are sitting in this room right now seriously going through this report." With a flick of his square fingers he tossed the papers across his desk, where they landed and splayed, fanning out from the corner they were stapled at. Scully thought she could see "vampire" emblazoned on the bottom left corner of one of the pages.

"You two very nearly cost the federal government millions. That alone would have cost you your jobs. But as we have no body, no family, no witnesses, and your story is convoluted at best, I think it's safe to tell everyone at the DOJ not to worry." Skinner didn't sound as if that relieved him.

"Now, I give you both a lot of leeway around here, perhaps too much. I've been very understanding of you both in the last year, but your production has slipped, your solve rate has dropped, and I can think of much better ways to occupy my agents time than chasing after ghost stories."

His last words snapped across the space between them and landed directly on Mulder, who shrugged against them as if he were a child being called to task before his father. "This needs to stop, agents. You two walk a thin line with this organization to begin with, and there is no room for these sorts of amateur hour screw-ups. Now, we will pretend that this entire Chaney incident was a gross misunderstanding. I expect a report that reflects that very thing on my desk before the end of the day today. You will both sign it, I will sign it, and we will shoot it to Justice so that they don't have to worry about a lawsuit. And then we will go about our business as professionals."

As if she were sitting in Ahab's study once more being castigated for punching her brother, Scully felt her head nod in silent assent. Beside her Mulder murmured something that possibly could have been an affirmative. They didn't look at one another, didn't dare too. Skinner glowered mutely for long moments, before jerking his baldhead towards the office door.

They didn't need any further prompting. Silently the rose and as quickly as possible they moved through the office door, neither bothering to speak to each other or Kim as they hustled into the hallway, heads bowed against the curious looks of agents and office workers who moved about them.

They were in the elevator and halfway down to the basement before Mulder finally dared to speak. "Well, that went better than I expected."

Red filmed her eyes as she turned towards Mulder's smirking relief, rage making her inarticulate for long moments. She noted with some dark satisfaction that Mulder's smile faded somewhat under the melting heat of her gaze, his hands shoving themselves quickly into his pockets.

"How in the world was that better than you expected?"

"I thought we'd be down here with security and a box."

In all honesty, Scully wasn't sure how they weren't in that very situation. She felt herself relax somewhat, though her anger didn't abate. "Skinner is right, we can't mess around with things like this."

"I was taking this case seriously." The elevator alighted on their floor, and Mulder waited for Scully to file out, frowning petulantly as she arched an eyebrow up at him in her passing. "You were the one who raised hell about not wanting to do this case."
"Because I thought it wasn't worth our time and talents," she snapped, waiting for him to pull his keys from his pocket to unlock the door. "We have real questions to answer and you want to chase after suppositions. I thought we were past that stage, Mulder."

"I never gave up that stage," he growled, throwing up the door and allowing her to go in first. "What makes this case any less legitimate than any other we've worked on?"

She wanted to say because it had nothing to do with his sister, her abduction and illness, the deaths of so many people around them. There was a real case out there and he was ignoring it. "Looking into the paranormal, I will grant you, has always been a part of our work, but only in cases where something truly strange was going on."

"And something truly strange did happen! An entire town of vampires disappeared." Mulder didn't flinch under her doubtful glare. "Yes, vampires, you don't want to admit it, but I know the folklore, I know what I saw. Just because you were entranced by some hotty, redneck sheriff doesn't mean it didn't happen."

And back Mulder came to Sheriff Hartwell. "Why are you so fixated on him," she challenged in annoyance, finally sick of his snide comments on the matter.

"I'm not fixated."

"You are too." She stepped right up to Mulder's personal space, an area she seldom went into of her own volition. She often forgot how short she was in comparison to him. Even in heels she only came up to just under his chin, and had to tilt her head back to even look up at his aquiline nose. "You didn't like that for once there was a local police officer who was flirting with me for a change."

Her words were immediately met with the full force of Mulder's scorn. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Yes you do," Scully insisted, seeing the quickly hidden surprise that he smothered with condescension. "You carried on about him having bucked teeth."

"Okay, so perhaps they were only slightly off."

"His teeth were fine, Mulder."

"How do you know, you were to busy staring dreamily into his eyes." For added effect he batted his own thick, dark lashes over his hazel eyes, rolling them in mild disgust. "The man turned on that southern accent and a bit of charm and you turned into a puddle at his feet."

"When have I ever been less than a professional?"

"Philadelphia a year ago ring a bell?"

Scully reared back, her hand twitching at her side, as her first impulse was to slap the smugness off his damned face. "That wasn't a suspect! Hell, that wasn't even a man related to the case. Ed Jerse was my life and my free time. And I was nothing but appropriate with Sheriff Hartwell, which is better than I can say for you on some of our cases. Bambie, Detective White, what was that vampire girl's name again?"

"Three words for you, Scully, Eddie Van Blundht."

"I didn't sleep with him!" Horror flushed her face. She knew exactly where Mulder was taking this
argument.

"No, but you two seemed awful cozy on your couch. Tell me, Scully, was it just because he was playing a nice guy, paying you a compliment, priming you with a bit of wine?"

How dare he suggest that! Her temper blazed, but more than that was the realization that he really didn't get the reason that she nearly had made a disastrous mistake that night a year before with Eddie Van Blundht. It hadn't been the wine, the talking, or the compliments. It had been because she had thought it was Mulder. Her anger cooled in the face of that and she found she couldn't be in that same physical space anymore, couldn't look him in the eye.

"No," she muttered quietly, finding the tip of one of her pumps very interesting as she pulled away towards her table, just to put some distance between herself and him. "Mulder you know that isn't true."

Did he know? She wasn't sure that he did, and even so, she wasn't terribly certain she would want him knowing that about her. No, the last thing she wanted was for Mulder to catch on how sometimes, every so often, she wondered what would have happened if I had really been him on that couch with her that evening, and what could have happened by her fireplace after that bottle of wine was gone. She seriously…seriously could not think about this.

Her sudden reticent also gave Mulder pause. The heat went out of him as he too pulled away, back to his desk, shuffling steps pacing towards his chair. "Look, I'm sorry, Scully. I was out of line. You are always a professional, and hell...so what, a guy pays you a compliment. God knows you need more men in your life doing that."

It was a backhanded apology and compliment, but Scully would take it. She smiled ever so slightly as he fiddled sheepishly with a pen from his desk. "Thank you."

"Of course, I can't fault you for being swayed by his charm, as likely he was using his vampire powers of seduction on you."

Well there went any feelings of warm, fuzzy reconciliation. "Oh, brother," she sighed, as she rounded her workspace.

"It's been well documented that vampires use sex to lull their victims into a false sense of security in order to trick them, manipulate them, or feed off them."

"Well, considering I don't have the world's most unexplainable hickey, I think we are safe." Scully sat at her desk and turned to her computer. "Now, are you going to let me write this report for Skinner, because God knows I can't trust you with it."

Chapter End Notes

Having just finished all the MCU films, the idea of "Sheriff Bucky" has a whole new resonance for me and makes me wonder what Scully would have done with that? Cause...yeah...hmmm...
Easter Sunday

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is approached by her spiritual advisor.

"Charlie and Ashley should be at the house already." Maggie was gathering things and eyeing the door as other parishioners stirred slowly in their seats. Easter Sunday usually brought a host of the tired eyed to church, those who hadn't seen a pew or taken communion since Christmas. Like with other Christian denominations, Scully's own suffered from the growing tendency of believers to only show up for holiday, and Scully admitted she fell completely into that camp.

"Convenient, they show up just in time to miss mass," Scully grumbled with a slight yawn, straightening her pale suit, bright as the many pastel colored dresses she saw scattered about for the holiday. "Why am I the one you managed to drag to this thing?"

"Because you live closer than they do, Dana, and because you're silly enough to fall for it." Maggie smirked at her daughter's sour face. "Don't think a good Catholic mother doesn't know how to play that guilt card."

"See, but now I know your secret and can get around it." Scully smiled as her mother rushed out of the pew. "I'll see you at the house?"

Maggie's fingers fluttered as she made her way out ahead of the crowd of other parishioners, stopping only briefly to say something to Father McCue and rush off. There was a time not so long ago when Maggie had drug all four of the Scully children with her to Easter Mass, pressed and dressed in their finest. Bill and Melissa would always look so nice and proper, but inevitably Dana and Charlie would be the scandal of the family, Charlie with patches of dust on his knees, Dana with her dress hiked indecently short and usually askew, covered in dirt from chasing after her younger brother in his vain attempts to climb under the pews during the homily. Maggie would reach the door with pleading looks towards the priest, as if to ask why God had blessed her with two such as these? How much things had changed. She looked down at her finally tailored suit, trim on her slender figure, neat and appropriate, almost severe. Long ago were the days when she would return to her mother with scraped knees and twigs in her hair. However, Maggie was still chasing after Charlie.

Perhaps things hadn't changed as much as Scully thought.

The church was quickly emptying of families, all rushing home to their Easter meals and egg hunts, and an afternoon filled with hyperactive children drunk on too much sugar and excitement. Scully thought of little Matthew, her nephew, far away in San Diego. He was far too little yet to hunt eggs or gorge on jellybeans, but soon he would be toddling around his front yard, plastic basket in hand, while Bill proudly followed with a video camera.

Emily could have been one of those children.

This realization gave her pause, her steps faltering in the press of those gathering to exit the church. With some guilt she admitted to herself it had been a while since she thought of Emily with an aching heart. In the first days and weeks after her daughter's death little things had reminded her of
the little girl who she had known so briefly and tried so hard to save. But it was now April, and the
pain had faded somewhat. Not every small, wide-eyed girl on the street made her think of Emily's
trustling little face. She felt some sorrow at that. Her own child and she hadn't even considered that
she should be there that day, sitting in church with all of the impatient of any other three-year-old,
ignoring the mysteries of the faith in favor of brightly colored eggs and chocolate candies nestled in
shredded green cellophane. Emily should have been there today of all days.

"Excuse me." A murmured request at her shoulder broke Scully of her reverie, a smiling but
slightly impatient father with an equally anxious son tugging at his hand tried to pull around her to
slip out of the door. Scully apologized to the back of the man's suit coat but he hardly seemed to
notice. He had a family to get to and so did she.

The dim of the church gave way to the bright, spring sunshine of Baltimore and Scully blinked as
she stepped up to Father McCue, resplendent in his surplice. Patiently she filed in line to shake his
hand, the least she could do for the man who had been such a support for her family in recent
years. She wasn't a frequent attendee at church though in the months since Emily she had made
more of an effort to come, if nothing else to find spiritual guidance of everything that had happened
to her. Still, seeing her priest always made her squirm like she had in Catholic school years before
when one of the nuns glared down at her for getting in yet another fight with some boy on the
playground. But she slapped on a pleasant smile and warmly took the priest's hand, as she filed
past, intending to make her greetings and move on as quickly as possible.

Before her slim fingers could move out of Father McCue's, however, his hand clamped around
them softly, eyes pleading as she turned to look at him quizzically. "Dana, do you have a moment?
I'd like to speak with you in private?"

Scully hesitated, wanting to beg off. Really, did she want to have a discussion with her mother's
priest about how she was doing? She was certain that her mother had likely spoken to Father
McCue on some of what had happened in the last year. After all, he was her spiritual advisor and
perhaps Maggie Scully's one confidant. But it was Easter, her younger brother and sister-in-law
were in town, and the last thing she wanted to do was to discuss her health or Emily.

"Please, Dana, just for a moment?"

Could you really say no to a priest? "Only a minute, Father, my mother's already at the house with
my family. We're having lunch."

"I know, it won't take long. I wouldn't ask, except you were the one person who had the experience
and background for this."

Experience and background? Intrigued, Scully nodded, pulling away politely as the last of the
morning mass attendees straggled out behind her, making their goodbye's to their priest, some with
compliments on his homily, before wandering off. Soon she and Father McCue were alone.

"Come on back to my office." He motioned her to follow him back through the church, back to the
area she knew led to the study and offices for the parish administration. She waited as he opened
his office, the musty smell of leather bindings assaulting her nose as she politely followed him
inside.

"Have a seat, Dana." He waved towards one of the chairs in front of his desk as he busily took off
his robes, carelessly setting them aside as he replaced them with his suit jacket. There was always a
certain air of mystery and awe that went around the priests of the Catholic Church that spoke of a
tradition thousands of years in the making and it was a little sad to see it all stripped away in the
very usual act of the changing of one's clothes.
"I'm sorry for keeping you, but I didn't know when I would be able to catch you next." Father McCue rounded his desk, settling himself behind it, giving Scully a kindly smile. "I know your job is unpredictable at best."

"Well the last year or so my partner has worked hard to make sure I have a little more time than I used to." Scully didn't add that it was mostly because Mulder was floundering himself. She doubted there was much her priest could do to help that.

"I must say, Dana, it's been nice seeing you at mass again. I've almost started getting used to it." Her priest was teasing, but Scully still could feel the gentle chastisement.

"I've been trying to make an effort to come more often," she offered by way of a sheepish explanation.

"I don't mean to take advantage of your attendance," Father McCue hurriedly explained. "But I've become involved in a difficult situation with a couple that are also members here. Do you know the Kernofs?"

Scully scanned her admittedly meager memory on church members and came up empty. "No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Recently they lost their daughter, Dara. You may have heard of the situation?"

Scully felt her stomach lurch in painful sympathy and growing understanding. "No, I didn't."

"The circumstances of the girl's death were sudden and I'm afraid the police haven't been able to tell them much."

A mysterious death that the police couldn't explain? What had Maggie told her priest about her daughter's work? "Are you asking for my help?"

"The Kernofs are devout, but their faith is giving them little comfort. I thought, with your background, your word might carry a certain weight. Can I tell them you'll be visiting?"

She was being pushed into a corner with this and Scully knew it. "Father, I'm not a member of the local police department. I probably can't tell them much more than what the police have."

"I know, Dana, and I know that you likely can't tell them anything different. But I know you are an FBI agent, and your mother mentioned you are a pathologist. Perhaps you can talk to people, find an explanation that might satisfy them." He paused, frowning slightly. "Your mother told me something of what happened in San Diego over Christmas. You have to believe I am sorry."

Scully didn't know if she should resent her mother's openness and the priest's intrusion or not. "Father," she began, but he waved a hand, cutting her off.

"Dana, I'm not here to ask you how these things happen. I'm a priest, I've heard of much, much stranger things. I just know that you have perspective on this perhaps the police do not. You have seen strange things. You have unexplained questions of your own. And you too have lost a daughter to circumstances you couldn't explain. I don't expect you to have all the answers, but just to call upon that empathy to help them. They are hurting, Dana, as you are, and perhaps you better than anyone can understand that pain."

Scully's knee-jerk reaction was to politely say no, to leave this. Emily was a wound she didn't want to examine just yet. It was too raw and fresh for her. But he was right. She was an FBI agent, it opened a lot of doors that otherwise would be closed to the Kernofs. And she was someone who
could empathize with their plight. More than anything she knew something of strange circumstances. She would not be likely to laugh in the face of the Kernofs when she heard their story, and she wouldn't be quick to dismiss it.

"Can I tell them you will see them, Dana?" Father McCue prompted her out of her thoughts gently

"Yes," she finally said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. "Yes, I'll see them. Perhaps, tomorrow?"

"I'll let them know," he nodded with obvious relief. "I thank you for this, Dana, I haven't known how to comfort them. This will mean a great deal to them."

"I hope so," Scully murmured rising, not so sure it was any comfort to her. She wasn't so certain that she wasn't making a mistake agreeing to this.
A Question of Faith

Chapter Summary

In which Scully explores her own crises of faith.

He'll never understand how God could forsake the life of an innocent girl...

Scully's fingers pulled at the cross around her neck, twisting it around, up and down the slender gold chain it rested on. Traffic back from Baltimore to DC was practically stopped on the highway between the two and what was normally a forty-five minute jaunt between the two major metropolitan areas was turning into an hour at least, promising to be more.

What was worse, a spring shower was threatening in the sky above, gray, ominous clouds from off the Chesapeake Bay rolling into the Eastern seaboard. Wonderful! A Monday afternoon, stuck in her car in solid traffic, rain threatening, and Scully was alone with her thoughts. The glared gloomily at the bumper in front of her, thinking not of the fact the late model sedan needed a bath, but of the devastation in the eyes of Lance Kernof. The instant she saw it, she knew, had felt that pain intimately, felt that connection of loss, of wondering why this happened.

She'd had to look away from the man. For his part he must have seen it in her eyes. He spent the better part of the interview staring out the window of his living room, unable even to look at the picture of the adopted daughter he had so adored. Dara Kernof wasn't a girl that many prospective parents perhaps would have wanted. Her spinal deformities severely limited her and her mother had mentioned that she had learning and speech limitations. But despite all the things wrong with her in this world, her parents loved her with everything in them, and now their hearts had been broken, shattered, and they were trying to comprehend the meaning behind it all.

The similarities to Emily could have made her weep if she wasn't too tired for tears. Scully had wanted to reach out for the Kernof's hands, to smile and tell them that she too had been there once with a little girl. She wanted to tell them about her Emily, about how she had been a sick little girl, one whose disease would have made it impossible for others to take care of her. But Scully had loved her, and wanted her more than anything. She couldn't give them that sort of comfort. She couldn't answer their questions about how God could forsake the life of someone so innocent because she had been asking that same question herself for months. It was the one prayer on her lips as she knelt in church with her mother and thus far God had remained ominously silent on the subject. She didn't understand why God would allow something like this to happen to Dara or to Emily.

Traffic inched along the highway and fat, watery drops fell from the sky, landing on Scully's windshield with plopping irregularity. She flicked on the windshield wipers carelessly, watching them swish by as she sat, foot on the brakes, staring into the red lights of the car ahead of her. Her heart ached as she thought of Lance Kernof, of the wall of pain that surrounded him. She had felt that in the days following Emily's death. She had felt so numb. She had stood by while Mulder and her mother made all of the arrangements, for once not taking charge like she normally did. She remembered that same hurt, the inability to even talk about Emily. She had been angry in those days, angry with God, angry with the men who had caused all of this, angry with herself for all her medical knowledge being unable to cure her own daughter.
If she were honest with herself, she was still angry. She had never stopped being angry. She had done what she always had done, internalized her anger, focused it to her work. Except now there was no work. Mulder was floundering, that she knew, and it left her without even him to rely on in getting through this. And still that hurt and anger simmered, the rage against heaven for what had happened to her little girl, the only child of her body she would ever know.

Scully knew all too well how Lance Kernof felt. Why had God done this to Emily? What had God done this to her? Why had he allowed these people to do this to all of them, to all the people she had lost over the years? It hardly seemed that a justice, loving, caring, omnipotent deity would allow such horrendous things to happen to good people? And yet Scully couldn't begin to fathom the answers to those questions. She was not a theologian. Her thoughts did not go to those of God or his workings. She was a scientist, a creature of facts. Her faith for much of her life had been simple; there was a God, he loved her, he sent his Son to die for her and her sins, and through the sacraments she received the grace that provided for the atonement of her sins. It was simple enough. Before her work with Mulder she had never had to question the why of God. She had never had to wonder about things like this. Now she was left at a loss. Her simple faith failed her and all she had at hand was her scientific belief that everything happens for a reason.

Everything happens for a reason.

She couldn't give the Kernofs the comfort of faith and doctrine, that was what Father McCue was good for, but she could give them the comfort of reason. Her thoughts turned that fact over, twisting it in her mind as she considered. Scully could give no insight into why God did this. She didn't have that answer herself. But could find out why the girl had died and how, and perhaps through her science she could give explanation to a death that was otherwise meaningless. And while it perhaps would give them Kernof's any measure of reassurance with God, it would at least give them a starting point to understanding how it happened. Perhaps there the Kernofs could begin to find a place to start healing.

If only it were that simple for Scully.

Reaching for her cell phone she dialed up Danny, she and Mulder's most reliable resource at the Bureau. Despite the growing lateness of the hour she wasn't surprised to hear him pick up at the other end and wondered not for the first time if the man had a life away from the FBI. "Hi, Danny, it's Scully."

"What's Mulder got you doing now?"

She smiled. He always assumed it was for Mulder, as more often than not it was. "No, this time it's for me again. I have another personal favor to ask."

"You keep this up, Scully, you'll owe me as big as Mulder does."

"I doubt I'll ever owe you that big." Scully could only guess at how many Washington Redskin tickets Mulder owed to the man. "I'm doing a favor for some friends of my mother here in Baltimore. They had a daughter die recently, strange circumstances, name is Dara Kernof. Do you think you can get all the information you can on her, including the autopsy report on her body?"

"Sure, shouldn't be a problem. You want me to have it ready for you in the morning?"

"Yeah, I'll come by and get it from you."

"Don't want Mulder turning this into an X-file, screaming about vampires again?"
Scully winced. Word had gotten around about Mulder and Chaney, Texas. "Yeah, I don't think that this is an X-file, Danny, just grieving parents who want to know why their daughter died."

Danny made a sympathetic noise over the phone line. "I'll get it done before I head out."

"Thanks, Danny. I owe you."

"I'll just add it to Mulder's growing tab," he replied cheerfully, before wishing her a good evening and hanging up. Scully stared at her phone thoughtfully, a thumbnail poised to press the speed dial for Mulder's number. Out of habit she wanted to call him and bounce ideas and gain his perspective, even if it was crazy. Danny had sensed it right. She didn't want Mulder trampling into something that wasn't even really an X-file. She hesitated having him come in and begin making suppositions on what had happened to Dara Kernof, to turn this into one of his cases when in reality it was about people in pain, who wanted answers, just like she did. Just like he did, too, when it got down to it.

Scully wondered if Mulder thought about Samantha and her disappearance much anymore.

Tucking her cell back into her bag, Scully pursed her lips as traffic inched forward slowly on the highway in the steady downpour around her. This wasn't just a case for she and Mulder to hash out, this was personal for Scully and for now she would keep it that way. If she needed Mulder down the line she would reach out to him, but for now she was just searching for facts, for answers, that was all. She doubted that any of this was anything more nefarious than a horrible, horrible accident. After all, why else would such a young, innocent life be taken if it weren't a horrible accident? God wouldn't allow this on purpose...would he?

Scully reached for the cross on it's chain once again and absently lost herself in the play of the traffic lights in the raindrops on her car windshield.
Finding Some Purpose

Chapter Summary

In which Scully searches for some purpose.

It was an autopsy, just like any other she had done in her years as a pathologist. It was a body, made up of the same composite parts that any other human body was, tissue and muscle, flesh and bone, and yet Scully stood by the gurney holding Paula Koklos’ body and paused, her fingers wrapped around the blue linen sheet hesitantly. What about this one made her so wary? Not even her first human dissection bothered her this much. She had been one of the few in that long ago class at Stanford who didn't turn green as the surgeon made their Y incision and had stared with fascination at the inner workings of the body. The entire process was a miracle to her, believer that she was. How had God created a being so intricate, so complex, and endowed it with the heart and soul that lay in humanity? She hadn't been afraid. She had in fact been comforted, certain in the fact that this was her purpose in life and that the God she believed in was leading her towards something.

Now she stood over the body of a dead girl and wondered if God was leading her anywhere at all. Out of habit she rebelled against that thought. She could hear her Sunday School teacher from childhood reminding her that God had a purpose for everything, that God in his omnipotence and omniscience knew and understood in ways that humanity could not why it was that things happened the way they did. Scully had blithely accepted that, her childhood happiness obscuring the questions that plagued so many, including her sister. How could a God who knew all and loved all allow bad things to happen to good people?

Scully didn't ask that question till after her Sunday School teacher died. She was thirteen when it happened. Her mother told her that it was the act of one evil man, and for all the love of God, for all the power of God, sometimes even he could not stop the evil of humanity. Unwittingly, for Maggie, it was a watershed moment she created for her daughter with that response. Years of believing in an omnipotent, omniscient deity were shattered in the face of the revelation that God could not stop the evil of the world. What did this mean, then, she wondered as she faithfully attended mass and communion. How could she explain away the death of a classmate in a tragic car accident in high school? How could she understand the terrible things going on in the world in the name of God? How about the people who came to the hospital during her residency, those who suffered for no reason she could fathom? How did it explain why a twelve-year-old boy in Massachusetts lost his entire family and set himself on the path that Scully now found herself on, facing men whose evil extended so far and wide.

She had yet to find an answer to those questions, but still she attended mass with her mother. She took communion. She wore her cross as an outward sign of an inward faith she no longer could say she was fully committed to. It wasn't that she didn't believe in God or hold on to her beliefs, if anything she clung to them in these dark days, trying to find solace in them and find some meaning and purpose to everything that had happened. And yet at some moments, like now when she was reaching out to the Kernofs, to help them grapple with why they had lost, she found that she failed miserably. Rather than turning to faith, she was turning to her abilities, her science, to explain to these grieving parents why it was their daughter had to meet the end that she did. In reality Scully
knew that her skills with a scalpel, her knowledge of the physical side of death was woefully inadequate. Why these girls died had nothing to do with the physiology of their passing, it had to do with a motivation somewhere, a sense of evil. And who could explain that in the face of an omnipotent God?

The sheet whispered across Paula Koklos' twisted body, her bluish skin pale in the bright light of the operating lamp. Scully studied her for long moments, taking in the girl's dark hair and placid features, the charred sockets where the eyes should once have been. For all the agony that should have been, Paula, like Dara, had been found in a position of prayer, kneeling on the floor in a way that she shouldn't have been able to, not with the condition of her spine and legs. And yet she too had died the same mysterious death. Why?

Slowly she picked up her voice recorder, beginning her external examination of the body. Thumbing it on, she moved around the table, studying Paula's most obvious wounds. "The victim is Paula Koklos, age sixteen, cause of death unknown. I'll begin with the external examination. Victim has signs of congenital physical defects including four supernumerary digits." She glanced towards the still fingers laying on the table and the odd, twisted sixth finger that jutted out strangely, noting that it had a mate on Paula's other hand as well as two extra toes on each foot. Not that polydactylysm was that unusual, but it was strange to see it on both of the girls and on all of their extremities. Moving on she turned to the girl's eyes again, studying them briefly.

"The only indications of external trauma are the burning, by means unknown, of both globes of the eyes." Slowly she reached down the girl's shoulder to better study the eye sockets, and felt just under the skin a hard mass along the back edge of her clavicle. "I'm noting something on the shoulder, a bony process of some kind, possibly a tumorous mass. No indication of a surgical procedure."

Curious, she turned to the X-rays she had commissioned before the autopsy, holding them to the light and frowning at the area on either side of Paula's neck. "The mass appears on both the right and left clavicle." It was perhaps another side effect of her congenital birth defects? Had Dara had the same sort of feature?

Scully turned back to the table, expecting to find Paula lying there in repose, preparing to examine her knew findings further, but stopped short as her eyes flickered not to Paula, but a quiet, still little girl, with soulful eyes that stared up at her quietly. Scully stopped dead as she stared at Emily, lying as peacefully on the table as the last time she had seen her daughter alive.

Her first instinct was to blink, to screw her eyes tightly and shut out the image, to reboot her brain before opening her vision again. Her heart in her throat, Scully blinked, gaze flickering across the metal where Paula lay now in repose, just as still as when Scully had turned to study the X-rays. There was no Emily. She had imagined it, just as she expected.

"Oh God," she breathed, her voice breaking as she turned away, her eyes stinging as she realized her mind was playing tricks on her. She identified with the Kernofs, yes. She too had suffered the mysterious loss of a very ill child. But that didn't make Paula her Emily. Feeling her professional distance slipping ever so slightly, Scully squared her shoulders, preparing to turn back towards the body and begin her work.

"Mommy," Emily's soft, childish lisp called, pulling Scully around to face her. There she lay, serene and quiet under the blue sheet, as Scully's scalpel clattered to the floor.

She couldn't be seeing this. She couldn't do this. Ignoring the gloves on her hands she pressed her fingers to her lips, trying to seal in the sob that welled up inside of her as tears spilled down her face. She turned, unable to stare into the quiet gaze of Emily, so filled with the wisdom beyond her
years and the pleading for something that Scully couldn't understand. This wasn't real, she tried desperately to remind herself, her throat aching as she swallowed her tears. This wasn't real, this wasn't possible, Emily was dead, Dara was dead, and Paula was dead. Scully had to know why.

It took her long moments to pull herself together, to turn and face the table again, and even then she feared to see her daughter staring up so trustingly once again. But instead, she turned to Paula, her eyes burned, her body still in death, and Scully felt herself both relax in relief and sob in disappointment. Wordlessly she flipped off the recorder and snapped off her gloves, throwing them blindly somewhere as she rushed from the autopsy room, into the bright, clinical light of the outer room beyond.

She was too close to this case. Scully knew she was too close. This was just like at Christmas, the mysterious phone calls at Bill's, the voice of Melissa on the other end. She had a purpose then, to find Emily, to solve her parents' murder, to be the one who rescued Emily from death as nothing more than an experiment. Perhaps she failed at saving her daughter's life, but she had succeeded in giving the little girl's life some purpose. What was Scully's purpose here?

Slumping into a plastic chair, she rubbed at her eyes, willing the image of Emily out of her brain. Scully personally didn't believe in apparitions or signs, but enough of her Irish relatives did. She couldn't bring herself to believe in voices from the dead guiding a person, but it had happened to her before, first her father the night he died, then her sister, now her daughter. What did it mean? Her reason chastised her and told her it meant nothing more than electrical impulses in her brain trying to make sense of an emotionally stressful situation. Mulder would tell her that she was too close to this and needed to step away.

Slowly Scully rose again, wrapping her arms around the green medical scrubs, pressing against the ache in her chest. She stared through the glass in the swinging metal doors to the table where Paula Koklos still lay, still, her dark hair fanning around her misshapen shoulders. Who was she? Why were her and her sister so afflicted? What did Father Gregory want with the girls, and was it as nefarious as Mulder made it out to be?

The Messengers…

She wasn't certain she understood what Father Gregory meant by "the messengers". Scully knew little about eschatology and what little she knew about the apocrypha and legend came from the ancient musings of Sister Spooky long ago. Nothing in her memory brought up anything about messengers, and yet she felt like she should know something. There was a reason for her being asked to do this, a purpose, else she wouldn't feel so drawn to this case. She wouldn't have seen Emily's face in that of the little girl. What was it?

Her pocket vibrated, breaking the reverie as Scully swore softly, scrambling for the humming phone, her heart fluttering in her throat. "Scully?"

"How's the autopsy going?" Mulder sounded relieved he wasn't there to witness it.

"Busy. You?"

"Trying to track down the other two sisters. I have Social Services combing through what they have on file by way of adoption records for Dara Kernof and Paula Kuklos, hopefully that will lead us to the mother and a possibility of where the other girls are at."

Scully pressed her lips thinly together as she listened, staring at poor Paula's ruined eyes. "And you really think the priest had something to do with it?"
"I'm heading back to the office to do some digging on our Father Gregory and his church, but I think it's a good bet he was up to something. You heard him yourself this morning, religious warfare, good and evil, an apocalyptic war of the ages. Sounds like he's trying to take advantage of these girls for his own pseudo-theological reasons."

"Are you sure about that?" For once she was the one to hesitate while Mulder was the one with the practical explanation.

"How else would you explain it?" Mulder found it so easy to believe in fairy tales the minute an alien was involved, but not when God was. How strange he was, Scully thought, as she searched for words that didn't make her sound like an idiot.

"Look, Mulder, I just think that perhaps there is more to this than Father Gregory running a cult. Perhaps we should look into him before we go claiming that he's the prime suspect in murders that I've yet to even begin to explain."

Did she sound as rational as she hoped she did?

Mulder hemmed briefly on the other end of the line. "Scully…"

"I'm just saying that if this were anyone else we would at least give them the benefit of looking through their background to see if they warranted that sort of scrutiny."

"A rebel priest trying to adopt a helpless sixteen-year-old isn't suspicious?"

"Not every priest is a child molester, Mulder," she snapped, slightly insulted at what he was insinuating. "Just, let's be circumspect about this. There is a family I promised to help who wants to know why this happened to their daughter. I don't want to make this a witch hunt."

Mulder seemed to consider this for long moments. "Fine, no torches and pitchforks yet, but I lay even money that he's where we need to start looking."

"Fine," she replied, realizing that Mulder's mind was already made up. "Just let me get through the autopsy. I'll meet you over there to see what we turn up."

"See you then," he replied, cutting her off. Scully stared at her phone quietly before sliding it back into her pocket.

Mulder was convinced their bad guy was the priest. It was an easy and convenient answer for Mulder, the believer who had no faith in God. Scully couldn't make herself believe that the answer was so simple. Father Gregory was trying to tell her something about messengers. Were the girls messengers? Were they special? What did it all mean?

All Scully knew was that somehow, someway she was meant to be here, at this place, trying to unlock this mystery, perhaps to save the remaining sisters in the way she couldn't save Emily. She didn't know. But she had to do something and for right now the first thing she had to do was to find out what had killed the first two sisters. Then hopefully she could reach the other two before they met a similar fate.
The Messengers

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder worries about how this case is hitting Scully.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The halls were dark by the time Scully stumbled to the basement office, fully dressed again but smelling of chemicals and heavy-duty soap. Her skin felt raw from the scrubbing she gave it after Paula Koklos' autopsy. How many of these had she done over her seven years and none of them had disturbed her the way this teenaged girl had. She rubbed absently at the bridge of her nose as she noted that under the door of the office a light could be seen, and she could hear the clicking of fingers against the keyboard.

Somehow Mulder being there hardly surprised her in the least. She hadn't asked him to stay on the case, but Scully secretly was grateful he was there. She had wanted to keep this personal, away from the FBI, much as she had Emily months before. But Scully didn't think she could maintain the distant perspective she needed to keep this up, not after this afternoon. Mulder at least could ask the question that emotionally she couldn't bring herself to at the moment.

He barely looked up as she pushed open the door and shuffled in, noting the time on her watch was nearly ten o'clock. "So how did the autopsy go?"

"It was difficult." She answered honestly, shuffling to the chair in front of his desk rather than her table to the side. She fell onto it more than sat, her aching feet giving way beneath her.
"Quadruplets are nearly impossible to conceive without the means of drugs and I'm not sure what went into the conception of these girls, but the two I did see both suffered from severe congenital defects. I'm running tests overnight and will go back to the lab in the morning to see what they turn up on everything that went wrong."

"Well, you've seen worse in your time with me," Mulder offered with grim cheerfulness and she knew that he too was thinking of the Peacock baby in Pennsylvania. She had considered briefly the possibility that incest what had created the four girls, especially if they all suffered from the same physical problems, but something about that theory didn't ring true for her. Father Gregory called them messengers and she wasn't sure what he meant by that.

"I've been doing some digging on your Father Gregory." Mulder tossed a file across his desk towards her, as absently Scully picked it up. "Did you know that according to legend St. Peter was crucified on an upside down cross?"

It was one of the oldest legends Scully had heard in Catholic school. "Everyone knows that. St. Peter was in Rome and was condemned to be crucified, but Peter said he couldn't bear to be killed as his Lord had been as he was but a poor sinner, so the Romans obliged him by crucifying him upside down so that he wouldn't mock the death of Jesus."

"Because only the Catholics would care about how someone died rather than the fact that someone died at all," Mulder quipped, rolling his eyes as he waved at the folder in her hands. "Gregory
Workowski, aka Father Gregory, grew up in Chicago, ended up going to Notre Dame for his undergraduate work and seminary. By all accounts he seemed to be what everyone expected of a good, Catholic boy; earnest, hard working, eager to take up holy orders."

"And you believe something changed?" Scully glanced through what information Mulder had dug up on the heretic priest, unsure of what it was he was seeing that she didn't.

"It all changed sixteen years ago. He was assigned here in Baltimore to his first parish, on the south side of town. It was one of the oldest parishes in the country but it wasn't a big parish, made up mostly of poor families, the homeless. My guess is that the girls' mother likely was one of the latter group, perhaps a teenage runaway, perhaps just a random homeless woman."

"Pregnant with quadruplets and moving around?" Scully frowned up at him, doubtful. "Multiple human births are rare in nature for humans. Twins are the most common, anything after that would be long odds, and then there is the idea that she carried all four to term without serious medical help."

"How else would you explain the fact that the mother died without anyone taking note and that the girls were dumped into the Maryland foster system?" He had a point. So far no one had found out the identity of who the girls' mother was. "In any case, it is around this time that Father Gregory starts having problems. I couldn't get my hands on any disciplinary actions, the church wouldn't turn those over to me, but the representative from the archbishop's office I did speak to said that Father Gregory began to become very interested in esoteric texts, especially those dealing with the last days." Fumbling through his stack of papers, he pulled out what looked to be a pamphlet, crudely typed and printed on normal eight by eleven paper stock.

"Gregory began asking questions that fell beyond the normal purview of the church. His sermons began to deal more with the coming war between good and evil, the fight for all souls as he put it the other day. The church began to call him out for his eschatological homilies, but he refused to back down, calling them liars and hypocrites who were determined to lead God's sheep down the road to hell with false hopes and shallow promises. It was about that time that the archbishop suggested he take a leave of absence. Gregory decided to leave all together and formed his own church, St. Peter the Sinner. Apparently, it was meant as a slap in the face to Rome, where they gloried in St. Peter as the leader of the church. His church was a reminder that St. Peter was a man, like any other, less than Jesus, who fought for the souls of those he preached to."

The story had all the markings of Mulder's theory of religious extremism all over it, but Scully couldn't bring herself to believe that it was as simple as that. "The history of the Catholic Church is littered with priests who disagreed with the church on one issue or the other. That's why there are Protestants today, because they left the church to start their own."

"And while I would love to discuss the finer points of how well that experiment may or may not have worked out, I don't see your average, everyday Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Baptist carrying on about the war between all souls and urging the homeless and mental ill to stand as warriors with the angels on the street." Mulder leaned back into his chair, full mouth quirked in cynical bemusement. "It's like a comic book come to life, Gregory trying to mobilize his own army against the powers of evil."

"Perhaps you read too many comic books," Scully offered dryly, scanning Father Gregory's pamphlet through swollen eyes. Indeed it very much looked as if Mulder had a point. The language was extremely eschatological, discussing the last days and the war for the souls of human kind. Gregory seemed to pull from many sources, not just Biblical ones, in his arguments; the apocrypha, texts that Scully had never heard of before, even Gnostic ones. She wasn't sure what a Gnostic text
would have to do with Gregory's dualistic theories of good against evil. But it wasn't the scripture used that ultimately caught Scully's eye, it was the strange symbols in one paragraph that did. Like a magnet Scully's eyes were drawn to them, as she reached far back into the memories of her Catholic school upbringing, teasing out information from there that she hadn't needed to think about in a long time.

"Angelos," she breathed, rereading the strange symbols again.

"What?" Mulder frowned at her and it was only then she realized he had been in mid-sentence when she had interrupted his thought.

"Here!" She pointed towards the middle of the page. "It states here that the sign unto us that the War is coming to us is the arrival of the αγγελος."

Mulder frowned at the page she held in front of his nose and the strange symbols there. "Sorry, Scully, it's all Greek to me." He grinned, pleased he could aptly apply the oldest of jokes.

"It's angelos! Angels, Mulder."

"So what, he discusses angels, demons, ancient beasts eating the sun, what about it?" Mulder hardly seem perturbed by it all, but memories of sitting in Sister Spooky's classes long ago rose unbidden to mind.

"Angels aren't just creatures with wings and flowing dresses, they are messengers, the messengers! That was what Gregory called the girls."

All joking slipped out of Mulder's face as he frowned, dark eyebrows knitting worriedly as he regarded the paper in Scully's hand. "So you think he believes these girls then are a sign of his coming apocalypse?"

"Maybe." Scully found herself suddenly circumspect. She didn't know enough about her own religious myths let alone her own religious heresies to say one way or the other. "I don't believe he's out to kill these girls."

"Based on what?"

What would Fox Mulder say if she told him it was based on nothing more than a gut feeling, on visions of her dead daughter? "Based on the fact we have no evidence that he did a thing to them."

"Scully, you've read the literature, he thinks these girls are harbingers of the coming end of the world."

"But we don't know what he means by that," she argued, unsure of why she was defending the man. He wasn't an orthodox priest, he was a heretic expounding a gospel not approved by the Church.

"We know that he is interested in the girls. We know that he was in the room with Paula Koklos before she died and very well could have been with Dara Kernof, and I don't need to read between the lines here or make scary leaps of logic to start seeing a trend. Gregory thinks he's fighting God's battle and he's tied up in all of this. Whether he killed the girls or not, he thinks they have a key roll to play and he could very well be the one causing their death, even if it is unwittingly. How do we know one of the crank jobs he preaches to isn't behind all of this, following his every move?"

Mulder was right, they didn't. Father Gregory could very well be leading someone to each of these
girls, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps on purpose. Scully couldn't bring herself to believe it was malicious, but then she had no idea why she was trying to defend the man. All she knew was that morning in the church he seemed so sincere, he seemed to know there was something special about the girls, that he wanted to protect them, just as Scully wanted to protect them.

"This case is hitting you hard, isn't it?" Mulder's eyes narrowed in perceptive sympathy, worry pursing his mouth. Scully nodded vaguely, shrugging as she shifted in the chair.

"It was a favor for someone in my mother's church, that's all."

"But it's someone who lost a daughter." His point was made without having to say Emily's name. Mulder was no idiot when it came to reading her and her emotions. "If this were a standard case, I'd tell you to back the hell away from this one. Between the girl and everything you've been through, and knowing how cases involving the church bother you…"

"They don't bother me!"

"They make you less objective, and it's to be expected. This is your faith, just like I get stupid whenever an abductee and a space ship come into the conversation." There was a sense of bitterness in Mulder's words, a self-recrimination that spoke to the continued disillusionment he had been under the last year. "And I'm not questioning your faith, Scully, what I'm saying is that this man, this Father Gregory is likely not what you expect him to be and we need to keep that thought in mind if we have any hope in hell of finding the other two girls alive and saving them before someone else gets to them."

Saving them? Scully nodded. That was her purpose here and Mulder was right. Her first priority should be to save the girls. "I'll have the autopsy results on Paula Koklos tomorrow. I'll go over to study them and let you know what they mean."

"Good, by then I'm hoping children's services will have dug up where the third sister might be and we'll see if we can find her before Gregory does." Mulder watched as Scully slowly rose, her feet aching from hours at the autopsy table. "Go home, get some sleep. We'll figure this out in the morning."

"Right," she breathed, knowing full well there would be no sleep for her tonight, not while the image of her daughter's face on the cold, steel table haunted her dreams.

Chapter End Notes

In which the author is a big religious studies nerd.

I should point out I wrote most of the Seasons Series while in seminary, so I have an excuse.
Seraphim

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to make sense of her own vision.

A half-remembered story from her childhood, that was all.

Scully kneeled in front of the rows of votive candles, carefully lighting one with a taper, the memories of her father, sister, and daughter top of mind as she crossed herself quickly. The flames danced and twisted before her eyes, carrying the prayers of the supplicants to heaven. Her faith taught her to believe in so many things, in the ability of saints to intercede with God on behalf of those that prayed to them. It taught her that the bones in the reliquary across the way were blessed and carried with them the same power that was imbued into the saint who they once supposedly belonged to. It taught her that despite all the scientific odds a virgin girl gave birth to a child who was both divine and human. There were so many strange and fantastical things her faith asked her to take on face value, and so rarely was it ever questioned.

The Seraphim were sent to earth to bring back the souls of the Nephilim, the offspring of angels and women. Angelic souls trapped in human bodies ill equipped to hold them. They were truly prisoners, caught between divine and human, not a part of either world and yet were prized by both. It was Father Gregory's war for all souls in microcosm, the battle for four divine children who should never, ever have existed. Fairy tales, Father McCue had said, stories from the earliest days of the church, where old legends met with new Christian faith and mingled into an amalgamation of stories involving divine beings and good and evil. The Church later discredited many, but they still lived on in the stories that were passed around by some like Sister Spooky, the nun in her Catholic elementary school. Most were legends, fantastical stories that even as a child Scully had found hard to swallow. But in a church who believed in virgin births and magical saints, how much more extreme was it to believe that angels came to earth and created children who were now the focus of a war between good and evil? Logic told her that her priest was right. The stress of the week brought on with her association with the case produced yet another vision, similar to that of Emily on the autopsy table. But Scully knew what she saw last night, knew the creature she stared at, a creature of impossible light, with four faces, and clearly not human. It hadn't appeared to be an apparition of a figment of her imagination. All of her life it had been Scully's senses, those things she could perceive with her own mind and ability that had helped her makes sense of the insanity around her, and those senses had seen the impossible vision, had felt the heat of the light that surrounded it. Story or not, she had seen a seraph, an angel of God.

What did it all mean?

Smoke stung her eyes as she stared at the sea of fire. She had been taught to pray at an early age. In Catholic school it was a form of punishment. She and Melissa had sat side-by-side often, later followed by Charlie. Scully had of course dutifully performed what the nuns said, the number of times she picked fights with other boys she felt were bullies guaranteed she had the form and formula of prayer down to an art. Melissa had never been so patient. She would kneel in the punishment pew of the school's little chapel, say a prayer once, then spend the rest of her time glaring at the nun in charge or making up horrible, inappropriate prayers just to try and make her younger sister laugh. Melissa had stopped believing in all of this at an early age. Even as a young
girl she told her sister that she couldn't believe that this was it, that their religion was nothing more
than the same stories she read about in other religions. Perhaps in the end that was why Melissa
became a believer in everything and faithful to none, she had been a seeker and found truths in
every story. If her faith told her that a virgin gave birth to a child, than she could also believe that
an angel appeared to a man in the desert, and that a prince in India gained enlightenment through
insight and suffering. After all, why couldn't they all be true?

Melissa had never clung to one truth as the ultimate truth. Scully always had. The minute she
walked into that X-files office five years before she had known what she believed and what she
didn't. She believed in sciences ability to explain everything in the world, she didn't believe that
aliens, conspiracies or things that went bump in the night existed. Even in matters of faith Scully
had her formulaic answer to every question, born out of the ancient creeds of her faith, the simple
formulas of doctrine that had ruled her church for fifteen hundred years. Everything could fit inside
of its neat little frame, easily categorized, labeled, and filed away. That was before she met Fox
Mulder. That was before Skyland Mountain, or New Mexico, or the visit with her family in San
Diego. That was before she had a daughter she couldn't explain and recovered from a cancer she
didn't understand how she survived.

Five years ago, if Father McCue had told her it was merely visions of a half-remembered story
from her childhood, Scully would have been quick to agree, to dismiss what she saw last night and
move on. But dismissal wasn't coming. Something within her, be it experience, skepticism, or hell
perhaps it was even God himself was telling her what she saw last night wasn't a mere illusion
created by the stress of the mind coupled with a story from her youth. She had seen a vision of
God, and it had a purpose. She had some reason for fighting this fight. God had a reason for her to
save these girls, from something, and she needed to get to that last girl before it was too late. Why
else would the seraphim come to her, allow her to see its visage, if not to ask for her assistance in
this?

Did that sound as crazy as it did when she considered it?

Heart fluttering, she rose, eyes flickering towards the icon of St. James, the patron of the church
she was praying in. What was with this saint, James - San Diego - that put her in such close
proximity with girls like these? Was this what God wished of her, to save these girls as she couldn't
save her own daughter? She would find this girl and she would save her before anything else got to
her. She would do this because she was asked to, because she was chosen to. She would do this for
Emily, for the girl that she couldn't save, and somehow, someway she would put all of this right.
Scully simply hoped that she was doing the right thing.
Life After Death

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the meaning of loss.

Scully wasn't surprised that Mulder so easily found her.

Spring was coming to Maryland. The trees were budding, and the sunshine was warm in the small prayer garden kept by the church, an ancient looking fountain trickling around the feet of a statue of the Blessed Virgin. Scully watched the stream as it ran over her naked marble toes, her gracious smile fixed forever as she stared into the swirls of clear water in brick. It was a place of quiet contemplation, though Scully's thoughts were anything but quiet. She felt as if they were screaming inside of her skull.

"Penny for your thoughts," Mulder murmured, his dry, gravely monotone chuckling slightly as she turned to see the penny in between his long fingers.

"I don't know if they are even worth a penny," she replied as he settled on the cool brick edge of the fountain, careful not to let his gray suit coat drag in the water below.

"Think Mary would be pissed if I dropped a penny in her fountain?"

"It's not that sort of fountain. I think the gardener would be pissed." She smiled slightly as he shrugged and slipped the copper coin into his pocket again, watching the water bubble with quiet thoughtfulness.

"You know the last time I was willingly in a church was a cousin's wedding. It was one of those old fashioned, North Carolina Baptist churches, lots of stained glass but no icons, no paintings on the walls, no candles. I had to admit it was always a little cold and sad to me." Mulder's eyes flickered to the gray stone and ivy of St. James. "But then we Protestants always had this thing against you damn Papists and your pictures."

"You say we Protestants as if you actually attended church more than a handful of times in your life." Scully chuckled, knowing Mulder's religious upbringing was spotty at best. The son of indifferent Protestants and lapsed Jews, Mulder had never had the religious center in his life she had. Perhaps that was why he found it so easy to believe in the supernatural while she did not, he longed to have the faith in his life that welled up naturally in her.

"It's weird, my father's family is such a mish mash of churches. They started Dutch Reformed, I think there are some ministers in there and then someone converted Presbyterian. The branch I came from only ended up attending the Methodist church because of some family argument and they didn't want to have to see each other on Sundays."

"Really, the depth of faith in your family just astounds me."

"I know, doesn't it? Between Mom's family ditching Judaism the minute they hit Ellis Island and Dad's family using church as a way to network socially, it's small wonder that I worry that stepping onto holy ground might bring a lightening bold straight on my head."
"If I toss holy water on you, will you burn?" Scully teased him by dipping her fingers into the fountain and flicking them towards his face. Short of yelping and patting her fingers away, nothing much happened from the effect.

"What if I had burned? What would you do then?"

Scully shrugged, smiling for the first time since Father McCue came to her Easter Sunday. "I don't know, perhaps clean off your desk and take it over."

"I've seen you eyeing it. Hands off, woman!"

Scully laughed, light and airy as she wrapped her arms around herself, a chill breeze rising up in the early spring afternoon, cooling her skin and reminding her briefly of just why she was here. "I'm sorry I left you to make the report alone."

"It's all right." It was Mulder who made the usual rounds of talking to the police, the social service workers, of trying to untangle the mess that surrounded the deaths of the four girls as well as Father Gregory. He had gone with the story that it was likely the work of a religious fanatic, one who targeted the heretic priest and used his words as an excuse to murder the sisters. So far no one questioned Mulder's assessment. Scully suspected the local police were only too happy to go with whatever the FBI told them was going on.

"Have you figured out what you are going to tell the Kernofs?"

Scully shook her head quietly, rubbing her elbows in absent thought. "No, I had hoped to come here today looking for insight. I don't know, perhaps I will tell them what you told the police. It was the work of a religious fanatic who targeted the girls, an evil act of an equally evil man."

"But you don't believe that."

"No." The syllable came out in a breath of frustration and sadness. "I know what I saw, Mulder."

"I know." For once he didn't argue the point with her. "Did you speak to the confessor about it?"

"I did."

"And," he queried, curious.

"I don't know." She had gone in looking for nothing more than to bare her soul to someone, to have them tell her that it was all right. Instead she walked away with more thoughts, more questions. "I can't even begin to explain what it was that happened, only that I allowed it to happen. I held Roberta's hand as I took her into that church, towards that light, and I heard...Emily."

She choked at her daughter's name, tears rising in her eyes. "I heard her, Mulder, begging me to let her go."

Quietly across the space between them Mulder reached out and without asking for her leave wrapped an arm around her slight shoulders and pulled her to him. Scully followed, laying her bright head against his chest, sniffing as tears spilled and dampened his ugly silk tie. Professional boundaries crumbled as she gave in to the comfort of Mulder's fingers stroking her hair, saying nothing for long moments as she sobbed quietly against him.

He spoke again when she finally stilled. "You know you could have talked to be about this at any time."
"I didn't know I needed to." She sniffed, reaching up to wipe at watery eyes. "Emily was so strange and raw, and I didn't know how to begin quantifying her and what she meant in my life. I thought I was handling it fine."

"Dana Scully, the queen of compartmentalization." He chuckled, the sound of it a low rumble against her cheek.

Scully felt her tear-swollen face pull up in the slightest of smiles. "I will never have children of my own body, Mulder. Emily was something of a mystery and a miracle, just as I was. I survived that cancer when so many other women didn't and I wanted to believe that Emily could make it too, because I wanted to love her. And when she didn't."

She paused, her throat thickening with the words burning in her heart.

"When she didn't, you began to wonder why it was God took something so good away from you again. Why was it God allowed an innocent girl to die and what purpose was in it?"

For a man whose faith didn't extend into the realm of God and the church his perception was astute. Perhaps, Scully realized, that was because it was the same question he asked when he was a twelve-year-old boy, trying to make sense of why his sister disappeared. "I knew the very questions the Kernofs were asking because I had asked them too."

"And you hoped to find your answers with this case?"

"Perhaps. If not, find closure, maybe. Acceptance."

"Or perhaps forgiveness?" Mulder squeezed her slightly as she nodded. "You did everything you could with Emily."

"But it wasn't enough," she sobbed as tears threatened again. "All the medical knowledge afforded me and it wasn't enough."

"That's because she didn't belong, Dana." He was soft and sad, and spoke from a wealth of his own painful experience as he held her. "Emily didn't belong anymore than those girls did. If your legend is right, those girls were a product that were never supposed to be, a cosmic mistake."

"Does that justify their deaths or Emily's?"

"I don't know." It was an honest answer. "I don't know if there is a justification for loss, Scully, but it happens and sometimes it's for reasons that none of us can understand."

"You've spent your life looking for reasons."

"And look where it's gotten me?" There was more than a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I've lost my career, my family, I've cost you so much. Perhaps it would have been better for me to accept Samantha's loss, to move on and believe that there was a purpose behind all of it, but it takes a certain level of faith I guess I don't have."

His words stuck Scully. She had never considered that before, the idea that Mulder the believer was a man who did so because he lacked a faith in the rightness of everything in this world. In his black and white sense of justice, in his incessant need for the truth lay a kernel of deep doubt that there was a purpose for good in any of this. And she supposed she could see that, what sense did Samantha Mulder's disappearance make? Mulder's life was defined on asking that question.

"No, Mulder." Scully pulled up and away from him to meet his sorrowful expression. "I don't think
that you should stop asking those questions. I don't think you should accept Samantha's loss, not yet, not till you know for sure that this woman you met is your sister and, if not, what became of her. Till you know what the truth is, don't give up. Because in the end that makes everything we've both suffered…that makes even Emily pointless."

She didn't want this all to be pointless. She wanted that there was some purpose to it all, even if there wasn't a thing she could do to fix any of it. "But you are right, there is a certain sense of faith in accepting loss. I have to believe with those girls and with Emily that they are in a better place, free from the pain of this existence, in situations much happier and safer than any I could have given them here. I have to have faith in that. As for Samantha, I have to have faith that no matter what truth you find about her, good or ill, it all had a purpose."

"A purpose," he sighed, as if he wasn't sure what that word meant anymore. Nodding, he reached carefully for a tear that was attempting to dribble off the edge of her jaw, his thumb brushing it away as he gave her a sad sort of smile. "Perhaps, for now, you can have faith for both of us?"

"For now," she murmured, blinking away the last of the tears as Mulder rose from the uncomfortable perch.

"So what say you, Scully, you want to go find some grub, or do you think I can pester your mother for some eats." He stretched and patted his taught stomach under his now damp tie.

"My mother is going to believe the only reason you ever see her is to mooch food."

"I had her meatloaf in San Diego, I've been dreaming of it ever since." Mulder chuckled offering her a hand. She accepted it, rising as she brushed the grime off her slacks and fell into step beside him.

"You realize that San Diego is St. James in English?" She pointed it out for no real reason other than it was top of mind for her. She glanced at the graying façade that took that man as their patron saint. "James and his brother John were on the seashore when Jesus came to them and said, 'Follow me' and so they did." Just as Scully had followed Melissa's phone call, and Emily's vision, and now she was following Mulder…always following Mulder.

"So they were just on the seashore, minding their own business, and Jesus shows up and says, 'hey, come on', and they went along with it?"

"So the Bible says."

"You Catholics believe the craziest things."

"I don't know, Mulder," she replied as he held open a gate for her to exit. "I think we are just more honest with ourselves about the mysteries of the universe than everyone else."
The Long Weekend

Chapter Summary

In which Scully takes a little "me" time.

Scully decided it was best just to announce it first off, to get it out of the way. "So, I'm going to Maine this weekend?"

Mulder paused, coffee still at his lips, briefcase hanging halfway between him and his desk, and it occurred to Scully she probably could have allowed him a chance to put his things down first.

"You mean you are going to Maine on purpose?" He choked on his coffee, frowning at the effort as he continued with setting himself up for the morning.

"Well, yeah. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, if you like lobster as big as your head and creepy, Stephen King movies."

Scully rolled her eyes and wondered how much of this was a Vineyard raised boy's disdain for the often forgotten New England state. "How many times have you been to Maine in your life?"

"Precisely twice, once because my father forced me in a fit of father/son bonding time and the other on a serial killer case when I first got out of the Academy. I would like to note that both experiences left me wanting to stab someone in the eye."

"Mulder," Scully snorted as he settled behind his desk. "I've always wanted to visit. There is this little fishing village I'm going to. It's nice! It's quaint!"

"All the fishing villages in Maine are quaint, that's how they breed serial killers."

"Maine doesn't breed serial killers." Outside of the one Mulder just mentioned, Scully couldn't honestly think of one from Maine.

"No, then where does Stephen King get his inspiration?"

"You are impossible." She threw her hands up, admitting defeat. Mulder was in a truculent mood and determined to rain on her parade. "I take my first vacation that didn't involve sickness or death in how long and you want to bring up serial killers?"

"Of course, cause you know how vacations work, Scully. You go there, planning on relaxation and fun, and next thing you know the man with a hook for a hand is knocking on your door."

"This coming from a man whose highest form of cultural experience is going to find Elvis' ghost at Graceland?"

Mulder shrugged, flipping on his computer. "Scully, I'm all for you taking some time off, God knows you need it. But why Maine? I mean...your mother is nearby."

Scully rolled her eyes heavenward, as it occurred to her finally that it wasn't necessarily her going
to Maine that was Mulder's problem. "So what, you can have me close by in case you dig up Bigfoot in the middle of the woods somewhere?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"Mulder," she snapped, looking for something to toss across the room at him. "It has been months since I've been away from DC, from work, from you! I haven't had a vacation alone in…look, I don't know if I've ever had a vacation alone, certainly not since working with you. In the last year I've had cancer, I've nearly been shot at by you, and I lost a daughter I didn't know I had and discovered that I can't have children. And let's not forget the list of other crap that's occurred just in the time I've known you. I've had one weekend in five years where I was out of town without a family member or you in tow and all I got out of it was an embarrassing tattoo and a one night stand I'd rather forget."

"You know you still haven't let me see that tattoo." Up went the suggestive eye waggle. Scully's gaze narrowed.

"And at this rate, Mulder, you never will." An acid sweet smile graced her mouth as he laughed at her.

"I didn't say you shouldn't go on a vacation. I agree with you on all of those counts."

"But you don't want me going to Maine?"

"I'm just saying…you know…"

He waved a hand pathetically as Scully realized that no, she didn't know what in the world he was talking about. "You are saying I can't go now?"

"Well I wouldn't say that."

'What are we doing right now? Are there any cases that demand my immediate attention? Am I needed to dissect something strange and potentially gross because the secrets of a global conspiracy ride on it?"

"No," he admitted slowly, guiltily staring down at his coffee cup. One of his long fingers tapped idyll against it as if he were stalling for a reason, any reason to say no to this idea.

"You really don't like the idea of me going on vacation alone, do you?"

"I didn't say I was against the idea."

"But you what? Wants me to stay here and play in the basement with you?"

"What, you don't have fun here?" He glanced around the office as if confused by the idea that anyone wouldn't want to live down there twenty-four seven. Scully bit her tongue and counted to ten before answering.

"Don't take this personally when I say it, but you drive me crazy and I'm sick of looking at you."

"I don't know how a man's not supposed to take that personally."

"You are my friend, I think the world of you. I can't imagine my life without you in it, yadda, yadda, yadda, but I really need to not look at your face for about four days, maybe five. And Maine is about as far away from that as I can imagine. I will eat clam chowder, take bubble baths, and
read a book that has nothing to do with anything vaguely paranormal. I will sleep in as long as I want, and so help me God, if I have to see a pair of latex gloves of another form in that time I will take my gun out and shoot someone."

"You'd seriously take your weapon on vacation with you?"

Scully glared at Mulder's bemused expression. "No. I'm trying to make a point. I don't want to have to take my weapon. I don't want to look at a case file, a dead body, anything. I just want to relax."

"I think you made your point five minutes ago, actually, when you announced you were going on vacation."

His cheeky grin only made her annoyance more profound. "And so you what, annoyed me into yelling at you, baited me into carrying on for your own personal amusement?"

"So you know how easy you are to wind up. I get you going and you can just run for hours."

Scully bit her tongue so hard she nearly saw stars. "I hate you sometimes, I really do."

"I know." He didn't sound particularly sorry about any of it.

If the man's only source of amusement in his day was keying her up to argue at him, Mulder had serious issues. Scully watched him as he nonchalantly flipped through a paper, sipping at his coffee. Did he plan on doing this all weekend while she was gone, hang out in this office, doing nothing while she went up and enjoyed some time away?

"Mulder, you should take a vacation as well."

"A what?" He didn't look up from the sport section as he busied himself with the daily baseball box scores. Perhaps "vacation" was a foreign word to Mulder, but Scully was determined to remind him of it.

"You know, it's that thing you do when you get away from the office, get away from the city, and do nothing that remotely looks like an X-file for a few days."

"I had a vacation recently."

"Two years ago, when you were forced to take time off, and you spent a day in Graceland."

"See, I know how to live."

He really was quite hopeless about all of this. "Mulder, at least promise me you'll take the weekend off and stay out of the office. Bum around your apartment if you must, shoot some hoops somewhere, go up to a Yankee game."

"They are on a road trip to Cleveland this week."

"All the better, check out Cleveland and buy a hot dog."

"The only thing to check out in Cleveland, as you remember, was a crappy city and a fat-sucking vampire."

"I don't care if you are checking out three-headed fish, get out. You live in this place, you never see the light of day, and after the year we've had you need to live a little."

Mulder looked as if he was living just fine the way he was, thank you. "Fine, fine, I'll do
something. Will you stop harping?"

Triumphant, Scully grinned. "Yes."

With a snap and a rustle of newsprint he put up a barrier between the two of them, clearly done with this conversation. "Leave a man in peace to his sports page."

His disgruntlement earned a soft snort from Scully, but she gave in, allowing him to hide behind his paper while she turned to her own computer. It would be good getting away from each other, to enjoy some time not in each other's company. No X-files, no strangeness, just a normal vacation, doing things normal people did when they were on their own. This would be good for them both. Really…it would be.

Just how many Stephen King serial killer novels were set in Maine again?
A Marriage Proposal

Chapter Summary

In which Scully receives a marriage proposal.

_Scully, marry me…._

It wasn't exactly the first time Mulder had said something flippant and inappropriate in front of her, but it was the first time she had gotten a marriage proposal out of it. Scully felt her cheeks flame briefly at the very thought. Jesus, one off handed, Mulder cheeky statement and she was blushing like a teenager. She could have been reciting from the _Malleus Maleficarum_ and gotten the same result. And why was Mulder in the office? They had agreed to simultaneously go on vacation.

"So that your partner?" Captain Bonsaint was watching her curiously as Scully quietly studied the fallen body of Dave, the butcher. His meat knife was shoved through his right eyes, sticking out at a disturbing angle to the rest of his face.

"Partner?" Scully had only been half listening, lost more in her thoughts of Mulder's words than the body that lay on the cold, grocery store floor.

"Well, you are FBI. I know you have a partner. Was that them on the phone?"

"Agent Mulder, yes, he and I work together." Work being the operative word. He worked more than she apparently. Honestly, did she need to hold his hand even through vacations?

"Just curious, not many FBI agents I know who can sit there and discuss things such as witches with a straight face." The police captain's thick, New England accent glided lazily over his word. Perhaps growing up in these parts had inured him to tales of women riding broomsticks.

"Agent Mulder and I work on strange cases usually involving some element of the unexplained. Often our work means we have to deal with such things as the occult." She smiled tightly as she glanced down at the unfortunate man on the floor. "Do you know if they were using any chemicals in the store that could have caused mass hysteria? Cleaning agents, perhaps something that got into the ventilation system?"

"I hadn't thought of that, but I can have my men look into it. You said you were on vacation, Agent Scully?" Far from having the look of a territorial, local law enforcement officer, Captain Bonsaint was eyeing her with a disturbing amount of speculation.

"I'm here on vacation, Captain, the first one I've had in many years, and I'd like to keep it that way." She smiled tightly, but politely, at the police officer, wishing to make it perfectly clear that there was a boundary to what she was willing to do. Honestly, she had just driven up to gather some supplies to take with her to the hotel. She hadn't realized there was an issue till she stepped inside to find people with angry, red, bleeding claw marks on their face, crying and sobbing on the floor.

"Right, of course Agent Scully. I wouldn't want to disturb your vacation." The man didn't sound like he had a problem with disturbing her vacation. He shifted, the thick uniform belt with his gun
and badge on it creaked and he looked a trifle uncomfortable as he studied the fallen butcher's body. "It's just that, well, we don't get many situations like this around these parts."

What had Mulder said about Stephen King and serial killers? "I can't imagine you do."

She was here on vacation and she was here minding her own business. She happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. It was sad and unfortunate this happened, but in reality it was none of Scully's business. The local tiffs between the town butcher and one of the women didn't bother her. All she wanted was to walk on the beach, eat a cup of clam chowder, and pretend that in the last year she hadn't suffered from a major illness and lost a daughter. For a few brief, shining days she wanted her life to be normal.

Without her partner spontaneously proposing marriage to her, she noted with dry amusement.

The police captain seemed to ignore her silent please to be left alone. "Look, Agent Scully, I'm not trying to pressure you into anything, but..." Bonsaint paused, looking embarrassed as he ran a hand across his graying hair. "Look, our town, we fish for lobster and cod here. We have eight people on the police force, most of them just hang around looking for people to give speeding tickets to. It's not everyday we have something like this happen and really this isn't the first strange occurrence with Melissa Turner there's been."

"You said you didn't believe in witchcraft, Captain Bonsaint." Scully pulled away from the dead body as around the corner paramedics and a man with a coroner's jacket came upon the grim scene. One of the young medical workers paused as he saw the large, wicked looking blades protruding out of the butcher's face. Scully could honestly say that even with all the myriad of fishing accidents she was sure the local medical teams saw, she doubted many saw a body look quite like this.

"I don't believe in it, Agent Scully," Bonsaint defended himself quickly, moving out of coroner teams way. "But this isn't the first time with Melissa and I know there will be trouble over it."

"Just because she was sleeping with, what, the only available man in town?" Scully's face frowned in deep disapproval. "No offence, Captain, but this is the late twentieth century, women can date who they like and it's no one's business."

"I know that, you know that, but this town...you know how it is."

Sadly, Scully did. For all that she had lived in major, metropolitan areas all her life, Mulder had drug her to enough of these small towns, especially New England ones to know how mass hysteria like this started. There was the town in New Hampshire years ago where everyone was convinced that it was an attack of a Satanic cult. Then there was the town in Massachusetts with its cockroaches and Dr. Bambi. Somehow the idea of the talk and suspicion of a small town didn't surprise her in the least.

"Most of the people in this town have roots that go back clear to colonial times and they carry those old superstitions with them. Course, no one wants to admit it, but you know strange things happen in some of the woods and places up here. There's this town up north, they have all sorts of crazy stories coming out of there about supernaturals and vampires."

"Any of them true?" Perhaps that was what Mulder was thinking of when he warned her to stay away.

"I'm not one to comment on the eccentric tendencies of my neighbors, Agent Scully, but I'm just saying people have crazy ideas up here, most of them not true. I don't want this to turn into one of
those situations."

"I see,' she murmured, and indeed she did see. He wanted to mooch off her skill and talent while she was here and frankly Scully was of a mind to take her rented convertible, screw this town, and move up the coast to the next one, but it was the principle of the thing. She had paid for a hotel here. She had her heart set on staying here. So what if she helped the captain for a couple of hours this afternoon. She would give him some insight, help him out with a few lines of questioning, then she would go to her hotel room, crawl into a hot bath, and ignore any phone calls that came her way.

"Look, Captain Bonsaint, I'll at least go with you to check with Melissa Turner. I'll help you chat with her and then I'm going to my hotel. I'm here on vacation and nothing more. And if you want to chat with an expert in strange phenomenon, I can give you my partner's number down in DC. I'm sure he would love to talk your ear off about it."

It seemed to mollify the officer somewhat. "I don't need your help for all of this, just to assure people that nothing crazy is happening."

"I understand," Scully muttered, watching as the body of Dave was carefully placed into a body bag and lifted to the gurney. The blade made it impossible to zip the plastic covering all the way, and it stuck out weirdly from the rest of the zipped nylon. She could offer to look at the body, but she wasn't going to do it. This was her vacation and damn it she was sticking by that.

Mulder was going to give her that smug look and tell her he told her so, she just knew it.

"Anyway, if you can go with me to check out how Melissa is doing?" There was real worry in Bonsaint's eyes.

"Sure," Scully sighed, turning her back on the gruesome scene of Dave. Why did these things always seem to follow her? Why couldn't she just have a nice, normal vacation, just for once?

"I hope you like your stay while you are with us," the captain offered conversationally.

"So far it's turning out to be a dandy," Scully grumbled, trying not to think of Dave with the knife sticking out of his eye.
A Bubble Bath

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates life in a bubble bath.

Personally she was more of a Chopin fan, but Debussy was nice in a pinch.

Her bath was a froth of foam, frost white as she soaked and scented of lavender. Her was head coach against a folded washcloth. By the bath lay a book, bookmarked and unread. She lacked the candles she would normally have in her bath, and she didn't have a good glass of wine, but for what it was worth a nice long soak in a tub was precisely what the doctor ordered.

Good thing she had that fancy, Stanford medical degree to order herself to do such things.

When was the last vacation she had that didn't involve a family event? Scully couldn't remember one. Had it been since she joined the FBI? She took one trip with Jack once right after she went to work at Quantico, the two of them spending their shared birthday weekend in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. It had snowed fourteen inches that weekend and she had spent most of it shivering under a blanket with him, with occasional bouts of languid lovemaking in somewhat successful attempts to keep each other warm. But Jack was dead now and it had been a long time since she had a weekend that allowed her to stay in bed naked with anyone, let alone soak in a bath.

Seven years without a vacation was a long time.

Scully wanted to feel guilty about the fact. She hated to admit it, but a small part of her brain did feel badly that she had taken off for a long weekend away. It was the sick, strange part of her that felt it was necessary to dance attendance on her phone and wait for Mulder to call her from wherever he was with whatever strange information or half-brained theory that came to mind. Even now she considered grabbing her cell phone just to keep it near, just in case.

No…no, she wouldn't do this. She wouldn't give in to the Catholic part of her soul, chastising her for not giving away even this. How many weekends had she given the man, how many sleepless nights had she had while he knocked at her door, dragging her off to Timbuktu? No, she could have this weekend; she would give herself this weekend, even if it killed her.

Why did it take her nearly dying to convince herself to take any time off? Perhaps she should look into that with Karen next time she had a therapy session? Seven years since her last vacation, and all it took was her nearly losing her battle with cancer and the death of a daughter she didn't know she had to convince her that the time was right for a little R&R by herself. There was a reason she chose Maine. It was close enough for her to drive to, and yet far enough away she couldn't talk herself out of it. She needed this after everything, after all the lies and half-truths, after suffering yet more devastating losses. She needed to do this.

And yet she was still rationalizing this to herself. What in the world was wrong with her?

Exasperated, Scully lifted one toe towards the faucet, flipping on the hot water to heat the cooling suds around her, determined to think of something other than work or Mulder. That was hard. She was the one who decided to pick her partner's home area to vacation in, filled to the gills with the
sort of strange, weird, crazy people and stories that set Mulder's imagination going. No wonder he believed in aliens when he grew up in an area where people believed that towns up the coast were inhabited by vampires and neighbors assumed that eligible, young, attractive women were witches. Scully snorted as she sank deeper into the suds. What if she mentioned she was a doctor and an FBI agent? Perhaps they would pull the stakes out and light the barbecue? It was an unfair assessment to be certain, and she chided herself at the cynicism of the thought. But honestly, no sooner had she driven into town than an X-file smacked her square in the face. All she wanted was some provisions for her room, nothing more, and she stumbled onto crying people and a man with a knife in his face.

If Scully didn't know better, she would have said Mulder planted it. He had been the one to warn her about the strangeness of Maine. It had seemed so bucolic on the website, so nice, so relaxing and inviting. It was as far away from the traffic, noise, and hectic pace of Washington as she could imagine. She had come there with the idea that for four days she would have no paperwork, no frantic phone calls, no dead bodies, no strange mysteries that defied any logic laid before her. She still did, if she chose. She wasn't on this case, she wasn't even consulting, and Scully had done what she could the day before with the sheriff. She had answered his questions, consulted with Mulder, bid him farewell, and had spent a pleasant evening dining alone at a small, intimate restaurant. And today she was going to soak. And when she was done with that, she was going to dress in clothes that nowhere close to resembled one of her business like suits. And then she was going to take a walk along the beach, perhaps take her book, find a nice place for lunch, and settle with a sandwich and iced tea and while away the afternoon hours doing nothing at all. She would leave her cell phone and she would pointedly ignore any overture made by any man in a black and white vehicle concerning any strange case of hysteria at a local grocery store. She was going to enjoy this vacation if it killed her.

As if the world could sense her determination in enforcing her own relaxation, in the outer room she could hear fate mocking her. The hotel phone by her bed began to clang with shrill rings, with the sort of insistence that bespoke of a bored partner somewhere down in Washington, curious as to what her brand new sheriff friend had turned up on the "case" the two of them were on. It would likely be followed by a casual discussion on ideas he had pondered sometime during the night while watching busty women do things that she was certain Mulder hadn't done in years, and then a nonchalant suggestion that he come up there on the next flight to help her out.

No…she wasn't going to do this and she certainly wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

From out of the mountain of bubbles Scully raised one foot and with as much firmness as her small toes could manage slammed the bathroom door on the insistent ring. Feeling satisfied, she smiled and hummed as she drifted back into the warmth. She was going to enjoy this vacation, she was going to like it, and she was going to do it come hell or high water.

Why was there a little voice in her head laughing at her right now?
Chapter Summary

In which bored Mulder is annoying.

Bonsaint smirked at her knowingly from under his hat. "Okay, but aren't you on vacation?"

At this point, Scully conceded, any pretext she was on a vacation had officially gone out the window.

"Captain Bonsaint - Jack - I'm at your disposal here if you would like my help on the case." Scully tried not to allow her shoulders to slump in defeat as she thought longingly of her lovely bubble bath. She had tried, God how she had tried.

Her words pleased the man. He clapped a hand to her arm as if afraid she'd try to dodge out of her promise now it was made. "So what you said, keeping our minds open to extreme possibilities?"

If he brought up the word "witches" she might back out of this deal. "I'm saying that perhaps the circumstances of what is going on here are not easily explained."

"Is that what your partner says?" Bonsaint's keen eyes flickered to the cell phone in her pocket. Scully frowned, pulling her arm gently from his fingers.

"My partner has a lot of theories, that's what he does." How in the world could she begin explaining the strangeness that was Fox Mulder to a small town police officer? "That doesn't mean I'm calling him up here from Washington, away from his busy schedule, to help you with this case."

"Does he have a busy schedule if he's calling you with theories?"

The captain's sharp smile irritated Scully, especially because she knew he was right. "Agent Mulder has a vested interest in cases that are unique."

"Obviously if he jumps to conclusions about witches."

"That or ancient, medieval superstition." St. Vitus' Dance? What ancient, decrepit, old tome had he pulled that one out of? "Look, Jack this is your investigation, and I like to keep it that way. Calling Agent Mulder in would mean that the FBI is officially looking into it, and frankly this isn't an FBI matter. You have me here, I'm on vacation, I can consult in an unofficial capacity if you wish."

Some vacation. The captain clearly seemed to think so as he snorted, opening the passenger's side of his patrol car for her. "Agent Scully - should I keep calling you that?"

"Dana is fine." It felt strange having a law enforcement official she didn't know personally call her by her first name. Mulder didn't even call her by her first name. Bonsaint seemed to sense her discomfort with this and grimaced sympathetically.

"How about we stick to Agent Scully. You can call me Jack." He closed the door behind her as she got in and rounded to his own side. "I was thinking, have you had lunch?"
"No," she admitted. She wanted to say she wasn't hungry, get on this case and get it over with. But her stomach betrayed her in that moment, growling hopefully at the mention of food.

"Well, if I have you shanghaied into a case, I might as well be nice enough to buy you lobster while you are here."

"Captain - Jack - that isn't necessary."

"It's Maine, you can't come here and not have lobster. Besides, I know this place, have lobster as big as small children! Go there all the time." He waved her off as he pulled away from the crime scene, ignoring Scully's discomfort. "Now, your partner said something about some saint's dance?"

"St. Vitus' Dance, after St. Vitus or Vito, a Sicilian saint and martyr. In some countries where he was venerated dancing was connected to the celebration of his festival, and soon a spasmodic, neurological disease named 'chorea' was named after him. St. Vitus' Dance, it's a disorder that causes muscles spasms that look like dancing."

"And your partner thinks that has something to do with this case?" Bonsaint was mystified by her description and how it related to the details they both knew. Scully couldn't blame him.

"There is no evidence those shoppers suffered from chorea and Agent Mulder was trying to find an explanation for the situation going on what little I could tell him about it."

"Does he always come up with the most obscure solutions for these types of things?"

Bonsaint had no idea. "Agent Mulder is known for tending to think outside of the box. It's what makes him so good at what he does?"

"And what do you two do, exactly?"

"I told you, we work on unexplained cases. This is fairly standard fair for us." In many ways a case like this was normal, boring, and average. What a sad statement that was about their work.

"Do they teach you about this St. Vitus in Quantico?"

Fair point, Scully conceded. "I know about it because I'm Catholic. Mulder just likes things that are odd. He grew up in these parts, down in Martha's Vineyard, I guess it just goes with the territory of being a New Englander."

"Agent Scully, I grew up all my life in Maine, and I haven't believed a ghost story in my life till now."

"But you are the one who told me everyone suspected it was witches."

"I'm sure your partner can tell you that people up here love stories and I know them. But I've known Melissa Turner for a long time. I knew her husband before he passed, and there are a ton rumors when he died. I never believed them much, Melissa seemed nice enough, but now with all of this…I have to believe something is going on, Agent Scully, even if it isn't witches. And if your partner has some crazy theory about dead saints or witches, I'm all ears at this point. Because I have no idea why these murders are happening."

He was frustrated, and Scully couldn't blame him. Even Mulder's outrageous ideas probably sounded plausible at this moment. "You said Melissa Turner's husband died."

"Uh…yeah," he affirmed, with the strange, Maine coastal inflection that Scully assumed was an
affirmative. "Boating accident."

"Right," Scully drawled, adding that to the information at hand. Why was it that men in Melissa Turner's life seemed to die off at such an alarming rate?

"So, if you don't mind me asking, Agent Scully, if you are on vacation, why is your partner calling you?"

"Hmmm," she blinked over at the police captain, pulled from her thoughts.

"I say, if you are on vacation, why is it that your partner is calling you? I mean, it's a bit strange, you would think, he'd leave you alone for a few days."

He obviously did not understand that Mulder didn't know how to spell vacation. "I don't know, Jack. I guess he is bored."

"What kind of partner do you have anyway? Witches, saints, getting bored when he's left alone for a few days."

"Trust me, Jack, Fox Mulder is one of the most unique individuals you will ever hear about." And that was saying a lot for a man who was chasing after a potential witch.
"His name is Jack?" Mulder's gravely monotone cracked on the name, and Scully couldn't help but smile at the mild outrageous in his voice. She slowly stopped at the light, her car rolling to a halt as she searched M Street for the tiny shop Mulder had told her about.

"Well I got to call him Jack because I wasn't really working a case," she replied breezily, cell phone pressed to her ear. She thought she could hear the smack of leather against tile and guessed Mulder was bouncing her ever-present basketball again.

"You are a horrible liar, Dana Scully."

"I wasn't working a case. Did you see one form filled out?" He was practically dancing with anticipation regarding her adventure in Maine. Scully wasn't particularly sure what happened during her long weekend away from the office, thought judging by the pile of paper wads overflowing from her trashcan and the long, perfectly sharpened pencils stuck into the ceiling panels Mulder hadn't engaged in anything much. What happened to the days when she would leave for a few hours and suddenly he was hopping trains to chase down alien engine parts?

"So what were you and Jack doing all weekend?" Mulder was horrible at trying to sound not obvious when clearly he was, and Scully found herself grinning as the light changed and she took off through the intersection.

"I don't know, a girl doesn't kiss and tell on her vacation."

That statement disquieted him for several long moments. "So you are saying there was kissing involved."

The wicked part of Scully's soul wanted to say yes just to see what he would say, but the image of Captain Bonsaint with his giant, child-sized lobster, gnawing on a huge claw stopped her. She snorted at Mulder's aching discomfort with impish delight.

"Mulder, the man was old enough to be my father and he was a professional. What do you think I do on these vacations anyway?"

"I don't know, the last time I left you alone in a strange city you were sleeping with some random guy you picked up at a bar."

Really, Mulder was impossible. She giggled as she spotted the place Mulder referred to and began looking for a parking spot. "In the five years you've known me, Mulder, have you known me to make a regular habit of picking up men whenever I'm alone."

"No, but you're an attractive woman, Scully, and it was a vacation. Hell, don't people our age do that on vacations?"

"Some, but many just go to get away from being at work."
"Yeah," he sighed in a vague sort of way. Mulder really was clueless when it came to things like taking time off.

"You really have no idea what people do on vacations, do you?"

"Scully, it's not that I don't have a clue, it's that I don't have experience."

"Mulder, I swear I will sedate you one day, put you in an airplane to some warm island somewhere and tie you to a beach chair with a mojito in your hand and make you like it."

"I don't know about the illegal drugging, but you pretty much had me at the tying up."

She shouldn't have been surprised Mulder would gravitate to the lowest, common denominator in that sentence. She pulled her car into an open space, biting her tongue at Mulder's insinuation and the image of him sitting on a beach of any kind. "How bored were you really this weekend?"

"What? The pencils in the ceiling not a dead giveaway? You're losing your touch, Agent Scully."

"Then why didn't you do something with yourself? Get out of town, go somewhere, just…not be here for a while."

"And what, twiddle my thumbs and shoot paper wads at tourists. No, I was fine in the office, doing things."

"I can see how much you got done," Scully drawled dryly, gathering her purse and stepping out into the April sunshine. "Mulder…"

She paused, heart sinking slightly as she groped for words to say. What could she tell him? That she was worried about him like this, that he seemed to be floundering, lost in a sea of apathy and indifference. She thought of the Mulder she had come to know, the Mulder she first met five years ago, the man who looked up at her indolently over his reading glasses, fire and brimstone in his eyes. That man had been a man that intrigued her, that had drawn her interest like a moth to a flame. He believed in the crazy, the impossible, and she had resisted him on every step, at every turn. With every argument that was at her fingertips to throw at him she had resisted him. But she had stayed, even when reason told her otherwise. And slowly, surely, over the many years and many things they had seen, she had come to see something of the world that he saw. Except now he didn't see it. Now he doubted it and everything about it. Now Scully was the one wanting to believe that this was true, that there was some purpose for all of this. Much like Jack Bonsaint, she wanted to believe that there was an explanation for all of it, no matter how crazy it sounded or strange it might be. She wanted to believe that all of this was far bigger than the evil machinations of a few, deliberate men, because in the end she wanted to believe - no, she needed to believe - that Mulder was right.

And right now he didn't even believe that anymore.

"You still there?" His question cut across her stream of thought and Scully nodded, as if he were standing there in front of her, frowning with polite concern.

"Yeah, I was just thinking." She sighed. "Mulder, how long will you continue on like this?"

"Like what?" He seemed truly confused by what she meant.

"Like this. Chasing after empty cases, spending your weekends leafing through case files you already know by heart. You know, a few years ago if I would have taken off for a weekend alone, I could have expected to find you in Alaska, or Puerto Rico, or in the middle of the New Mexico
desert trying to do something that was usually many, many levels of illegal. And now I can't even convince you to go to a baseball game."

He was silent on the other end as she continued, leaning against her car as she spoke. "I know what Kritschgau told the both of us. But that's not all of the answers, you know it isn't. Ever since you've…I don't know, you've lost your focus. And I'm worried that this isn't simply about a weekend without me to pester you or about the fact we have been having a slow period, but that you have lost something."

She knew she hit her target when she could hear Mulder's breath across the telephone receiver, harsh and exasperated at her words. "Do you seriously want to pull me out of burning boxcars, half dead, and sit by my bedside worried sick?"

"No, but I think I would prefer that to watching you sit in our office shooting pencils into the ceiling."

He didn't have an immediate answer to that.

"Anyway, I am here. I want to run in and get this poster for the police captain. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Where else am I going to be," Mulder replied petulantly, clicking off the line before she even had a chance to say a proper goodbye. Scully sighed, staring down at the cell phone in her hand, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. She didn't know if there was anything she could do for Mulder at the moment and she wasn't so sure she should try.

Quietly she slipped her cell phone in her pocket and made her way inside.
"You know the deal with the fish." Mulder tossed a can of fish flakes at Scully's head as he distractedly gathered things around him. A small pile of folders slid into his briefcase, while somehow he had scooped up his running shoes and had them dangling from their laces off of his long fingers. Mulder was not usually one for last minute packing, but he had drug his feet with this particular trip and was still cramming his things together even with only three hours till his flight.

"Fish, fish...those are the things I'm supposed to feed, right?" She smirked brightly at him as he paused in his whirlwind of action to frown down his aquiline nose before shaking his head and returning to his flurry of work. "This isn't like you. Why did you wait so long to pack?"

"Because I was trying to get out of this whole farce but got stuck with it anyway." Mulder jammed his shoes into the suitcase sitting open on the couch next to Scully, already filled with much of Mulder's wardrobe for his weekend flight to Boston. "Someone penciled me in as a guest lecturer at this MIT forum and I said yes to it a year ago."

"And you changed your mind?"

"Not exactly." Mulder grimaced as he zipped his suitcase shut. "I changed my mind on my views of all of it and somehow neglected to tell them before they could get a new guest speaker."

"In other words you forgot." Not something Mulder did very often, Scully had to admit. His eidetic memory was legendary, except when it came to important dates in his life.

"Yeah, well I can beg off by saying some things came up in the last year that sort of overwhelmed me a bit. In any case I tried to get out of it, but the program was already set."

"Speaking at MIT. You know that's sort of big time. This isn't your run of the mill NICAP convention here, no gathering of Lone Gunmen-esque computer hackers, these are serious and considerate scientists." Scully couldn't help but be a bit on the envious side. There had been a point in her life when she would have dreamed of being asked to present an argument before a panel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mulder's casual exasperation with the entire event boggled her mind, considering the prestige of the institution and the serious, scientific minds that convened there.

"As hallowed as you want to see your beloved MIT, these serious scientists are only a step up from Langley and Frohike and perhaps a half step up from Byers." Mulder wandered to his desk, riffling it for more items to toss into his briefcase. "This is merely the same Friday night conversations I used to have with the three of them, dressed up in the conventions of scientific inquiry, panels of people with three letters behind their last name who gather together to hem and haw and theorize on the possibility of life in the universe and how it came to be. Don't be fooled! Throw in a plate of nacho chips and a few boxes of pizza and you could hardly tell the place from any other den of nerdy, hacker iniquity."
Mulder's dismissiveness, especially towards his own friends, caught Scully off guard. In the last year he had remained relatively silent on the matter of aliens and conspiracies and in fact had gone to great lengths to get out of discussion of either openly, not even hinting at a case that would bring them anywhere nearer to the story of Kritschgau's statements. And while Scully remained patiently silent, she found herself despairing as the truths about the conspiracy that surrounded her and Mulder languished with no further answers and no new insights.

"So what are you going to speak about?" She tried to keep the question light and conversational, but even she could hear the nervous edge there, the true worry about what Mulder really did think about all of this. Her mouth dried as she fumbled with the plastic container of fish food in her fingers, suddenly wishing she hadn't asked the question.

"Well I'll do relatively little of the speaking." Mulder shut the clasp of his briefcase firmly, glancing around himself as if searching for something he forgot. "It's a panel mostly, specialists in the field. There is a woman speaking, says she has had an intimate encounter with alien beings and they want us to speak to the factuality of her experiences."

Considering how well Scully knew Mulder and the dark cloud of doubt and pessimism he had been under since Michael Kritschgau entered their lives, she could foresee this going very wrong, very quickly. "And do you believe that she had an intimate encounter?"

"You know, I don't bother asking other people about their intimate encounters, usually isn't any of my business anyway."

He was stalling on an answer and she knew it. "Mulder, you know what I mean."

"Do I believe this woman had an abduction experience? Yes, I believe she experienced something."

"Something, but not an alien encounter."

"Scully!" Mulder drawled her name out, a warning look in his eyes as he ran agitated fingers through his dark hair.

"What? This is what the conference is about is it not? You don't believe she had an encounter with aliens?"

"No," he replied flatly, eyes flickering to anywhere but Scully's quietly shocked face.

"Any reason why not?"

"Several." Looking for some way of breaking the flow of the conversation he turned to his desk again, shuffling papers and picking things up to twiddle nervously. Scully waited quietly for him to be forthcoming on his reasons and was surprised they weren't readily thrown at her as defense for his uncharacteristic stance. None came.

"I'm a bit surprised, Mulder," she murmured after long moments with only the hum of the fish tank compressor between them. "It's not like you to be so dismissive of hard evidence put before you."

"How easy are the memories of people to fake?" He shot a pointed look over his shoulder at her and Scully felt the skin on the back of her neck itch. "This woman, Cassandra Spender, she claims to have been held for extended periods of time with alien beings who showed her great wonders. They told her they were doing great work to help people. I don't know about you, Scully, but I smell CIA all over that, or DOD, or whoever the hell is into the brainwashing business these days. Here, let us poke you and prod you and do horrible medical testing for the sake of saving the world and bringing peace. And it's not too far of a stretch to make it believable."
Those were words she would never have expected out of Mulder just a year ago. But she couldn't say she was shocked or even stunned, because the words had the echo of a dispirited Mulder, broken at her hospital bedside, the revelation of Kritschgau's still achingly fresh as he contemplate the entire truth of their work together.

"Do you really believe that this has all been a lie?"

"Isn't that what we were told?" He shrugged in defeat, busying himself with a rubber band, stretching it taut, his knuckles white, before it snapped back against his skin. It had been what they were told, Scully admitted that. They had been given all the proof they needed for Kritschgau's words in the failing of Scully's own body. But even then, even as she lay there knowing that she might never see another day, there was a part of Scully, a defiant, angry part of her that didn't want to admit that it had all been a lie, a part of her stubbornly wanted to believe that there was a purpose behind this, a real one beyond petty politics and national armament pissing matches. She wanted to believe that there had been a real reason for all the pain and suffering she went through, she needed to believe that. Because if there hadn't been a reason for it all, what purpose was there to anything she had suffered? She couldn't believe it was as simple as being a disposable commodity in a complicated game of cloak and dagger. She couldn't be the only one of the two of them that believed that?

The very thought of it terrified and saddened Scully. Mulder had always been the believer, always been the light by which she had guided her path. How often had she complained of being the one standing on the edge, holding him back from the abyss? And now he was terrified of that darkness, scared of what lay in the void beyond, and he was running from it as fast as he could. Except Scully still stood on its edge, staring dangerously down, knowing that no matter how far they tried to get away whatever was hiding in the depths still waited for him. Couldn't he see that? Didn't he care?

Mulder took her long silence as an ideal opportunity to change the subject he was obviously uncomfortable with. "Anyway, I'm gone until Monday, I'll catch the first shuttle down in the morning and get a cab to the office. Think you can manage the children alone while I'm gone?" He waved at the goldfish swimming blissfully ignorant in the pale light of this aquarium.

"I think I can manage," Scully smiled tightly, but couldn't make herself feel the humor behind her words. She was bothered by the idea of Mulder going to this conference and denouncing all of his years of work and everything he stood for. A part of her wished desperately that he wouldn't. "Try not to piss too many people off up in Cambridge."

"I'm afraid that is the inevitable outcome of anything I have to say, but then again I figure this a position I should be used to by now."

Mulder truly did delight in pissing off the world. "As long as they don't come after you in Harvard Square with pitchforks and tar. I'm afraid I can't help you there."

"Don't worry, I run fast." He grinned, a boyish self-confidence tugging his mouth into a smile.

"You running is what I'm afraid of." She watched him gather his things to go.
Scully had to give it to Jeffrey Spender, the man had *cajones* to come up to her and demand that she do something about Fox Mulder pesterling his mother. Even more than that, she had to give it to him for thinking that there was anything she could to stop Mulder if he so chose to do exactly what he wanted. It was just a pity that Spender was wrong in assuming that Mulder would have any plan on embarrassing young Jeffrey or encouraging his mother's ideas. That bothered Scully more than she liked to admit.

She thoughtfully watched the younger man wander back down the hall he came. Scully couldn't imagine an agent alive in the FBI would want to be associated with Fox Mulder and his insane quest beyond herself and that small part of her understood exactly why Spender had come to her. He was an up and coming agent, and like all new agents, knew that politics and perception played just as much of a role in your FBI career as your own hard work. But there was still a small part of Scully that bristled under the suggestion that Mulder, who just happened to be invited to a convention with this man's mother, might cause this Agent Spender any personal harm.

Uptight prick!

She growled quietly to herself as she turned back down the hallway to the elevators, frowning as she punched the call button. She didn't know this Jeffrey Spender from Adam. And she was fairly certain that if she were to drop the name to Mulder he would know him even less, even with his eidetic memory. She had never seen the younger man on any casework they were handed, in no investigative teams that she had been a part of, and frankly she wasn't even certain what department he worked in, and yet he knew enough about Mulder and his work that he made judgment calls about the effect that Mulder might have by speaking to his mother, information that may or may not ever get out in the capacity of Spender's work.

The doors to the elevator opened and she slipped inside, glaring at nothing in particular.

For certain Mulder's reputation preceded him. She knew about his work when she was in the academy eight years ago and Scully highly doubted that the situation had changed overmuch in the years since. If anything, she suspected that Mulder's escapades since she had come on to the X-files with him perhaps had earned him more infamy with the rank and file. Scully could only guess at what it is that Spender probably heard about the two of them over the years, the unpredictable agent and his steadfast partner who could hardly keep a reign on him. Mr. and Mrs. Spooky out chasing ghosts and goblins and little green men in flying saucers.

Except they hadn't been chasing any flying saucers in the last year and Scully wasn't so terribly sure she was comfortable with that.

The office was quiet when she entered, Mulder had yet to return from Boston. She considered briefly calling him, if nothing else to tell him about this Spender and to see what sort of conversation Mulder was having with his mother. Hadn't Mulder said that she was a purported abductee? To hear Spender speak, she sounded more as if she were a person with emotional issues,
and Scully surmised Mulder had perhaps already picked up on this before flying to Boston this weekend. Did Spender really believe that Mulder was the type to use that sort of information to damage a fellow agent's career? If Mulder played that sort of politic in the bureau he certainly wouldn't be sitting in the basement at the moment, considered as little more than a laughingstock and joke.

What was up with this Spender and his mother and why in the world should she care?

Curiosity got the better of Scully as she rounded her table to her computer, flipping on the monitor and pulling up the FBI database systems. She likely couldn't pull his most private records, not unless she had an open case on him, but as a government employee Jeffrey Spender would be almost an open book to her. A few keystrokes and she had his entire life history scrolling across her screen. On first glance there wasn't anything particularly interesting or significant about Jeffrey Frank Spender. He grew up in California, had studied at UCLA, and had all the makings of a rather boring, rather mundane FBI agent, except for the notations on his file. The notes were innocuous. One highlighted that he had been placed for a time in foster care after the age of twelve for a brief period. Another note stated that his single mother had been hospitalized on several occasions for depression and other issues, and special attention had been paid to Jeffrey's psych evaluation because of it. There was a hint of minor juvenile problems, nothing specific and none seemingly major, all of which were expunged the minute he hit eighteen anyway. After that Spender seemed to have become a hard driven, model of a citizen, committed to his course work and to pushing his career forward. All in all there was a lot to respect in a background like that, a man who had to overcome a certain stigma to rise where he was now. Scully could understand why he would feel so threatened by Mulder and whatever conversation he was having with Spender's mother.

She could also see a bit of Mulder in Spender as well, a child who had a rough childhood, a broken home, who puts himself together and puts himself through a topnotch education. Perhaps Spender wasn't quite as brilliant as Mulder, but he had that drive, at least in what she could tell with his background thus far. And perhaps he didn't have the nose-thumbing penchant for gleefully doing things he knew would upset his superiors, it still took a lot of gumption for him to dare to try calling Mulder to leave his mother alone, let alone coming down and trying to convince Scully. It was a pity Spender was more concerned about his reputation than the truth about what happened to his mother, else Scully might have actually found herself liking the man.

She clicked out of the information on her screen, considering how to approach this with Mulder. It was already a sticky subject, this Cassandra Spender and her experience, and she didn't want to exacerbate it further by adding the new element of her son sticking his nose into something that he didn't understand. Mulder would likely enter into a pissing contest just for the hell of it and she knew Spender would lose that one. Frankly, they didn't need any more enemies. They had plenty enough that they weren't dealing with at the moment.

Life couldn't ever be easy, she sighed to herself, not even when things were quiet.
Skyland Mountain

Chapter Summary

In which Scully kidnaps Cassandra Spender.

Skyland Mountain, it couldn't be a coincidence.

It didn't take much to find where Cassandra Spender's care facility was, Jeffrey had it listed in his paperwork when asked for "next-of-kin". Perhaps she had violated the younger agent's privacy by looking into his personnel records, but he had asked that Mulder not speak to his mother, not Scully. She had no wish to further the delusions that her son and Mulder both swore she had. All Scully wanted to understand was what Cassandra remembered from Skyland Mountain, if anything. She hadn't thought about Skyland Mountain for a long time and now it seemed like an imperative for her to know.

Her nerves were taught, nearly screaming as she drove into the visitor parking for the facility, reaching for her credentials and considering briefly what she was doing. She hadn't told Mulder where she was going. His petulance earlier even in the face of the disturbing similarities between herself and Cassandra had surprised her. An earlier Mulder, the Mulder she used to know, would have been the one dragging her along, demanding for Cassandra to remember what happened to her on the top of the ski resort. That was before Michael Kritschgau had wandered in and destroyed all of Mulder's beliefs about himself and his work. The problem was that even if Mulder didn't believe anymore, Scully still knew something happened to her, something that left her barren and gave her cancer, and she still needed answers for Emily, Pendrell, and all of those women in Allentown who died before she could find the truth. Let him sulk in his own disillusionment, she needed the truth. For now, for this moment, this was her quest, with or without him.

She flashed her badge at the visitor's station, signing into the log and following the directions down the dimly lit, white-tiled halls towards the room that housed Cassandra. She opened the door without a knock, peeking in to see a frail looking woman, huddled by her darkened window, watching the night sky beyond. "Cassandra?"

The woman didn't seem to hear her at first. "Ms. Spender?"

The woman turned to her, a vague smile on her lined face and Scully felt her spine shiver and vibrate, a chill of something - she couldn't say what - shake her as just at the base of her neck, making the skin that covered her life-saving chip began to itch. Something hit her, déjà vu Mulder would call it, but less than that. A feeling, a sense of unease, more like a half-remembered memory, the woman's short gray hair and large, pale blue eyes, her kindly smile, they all struck a chord somewhere deep in Scully, one that danced in her consciousness to the face of Penny Northern. Why did Cassandra make her think of Penny?

"Oh!" Cassandra frowned, something akin to recognition hitting her as well as brow puckered questioningly at Scully. "Do I know you? Of course I do?"

She couldn't know Scully. As far as she knew this was the first time they had met. "I don't think so."
"No? I'm sure of it." Cassandra waved Scully's doubts away, certain of her own memory. "Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, but not a practicing one."

"No?" Cassandra looked less certain now, her gaze turning inward as she pondered that answer.

"My name is Dana Scully. I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Questions about what?"

Scully paused. How could she begin explaining her experience and what she now knew to this woman, who according to Mulder so thoroughly believed in her own alien abduction experience? How could she walk in here and destroy the woman's illusions by explaining it off as government experiments, leftover programs from a bygone era, the remnants of a Cold War that people wanted to think was already over.

"May I?" She pointed to one of the facility chairs, settling in it as Cassandra watched her. "I think you should know that I learned about you from your son."

"Jeffrey?" Cassandra spoke her child's name with a mixture of confusion and apprehension.

"Yes, I'm an FBI agent and he asked that I protect against your story getting out." She might as well be honest with the woman. Judging from the knowing, hurt look that crossed Cassandra's face as her mouth pulled into a tight smile this wasn't the first time she had heard of her son's doubts regarding the veracity of his mother's experiences.

"Oh," she sighed, her fingers twisting on her blanket covered lap. She sank somewhat into the wheelchair she sat in. Scully found herself feeling for the poor woman, looking ashamedly at her useless legs, stuck in a convalescent home, shoved aside and explained away by a son who was ashamed of her. She couldn't imagine doing that to her own mother, no matter what story Maggie might have to tell.

"I guess I'm betraying that by coming here," Scully continued, knowing that what she was doing would upset Jeffrey and finding herself suddenly not caring. "But I'm here for more personal reasons, actually. I took the liberty of reading your medical files."

Cassandra hardly seemed bothered by the invasion of privacy. In fact she looked surprised, but not at what Scully had to say. Something else had caught the woman's attention as a light of some sort of understanding lit on her pale, kindly face.

"You're feeling it, too, aren't you?"

Quietly, Cassandra raised her hand, reaching for the back of Scully's neck. Even before the woman's cold fingertips brushed her skin, Scully could feel it flair and itch just above her scar, and something inside her mind flashed to another moment, like out of a dream. There had been some other time, some other memory of this woman touching her, stroking her hair out of her face and off her neck. But where it was, or when even, Scully couldn't tell. As soon as the image coalesced it slipped through her fingers again, slithering like quicksilver into forgetfulness.

Cassandra's fingers pressed just at the scar on Scully's neck, as if she knew exactly where the newly placed chip was. "Here," she whispered softly. "You wake up at night knowing you need to be somewhere, but you don't know where it is, like you forgot an appointment you didn't know you had."
No quite, Scully thought, but her nerves grated again. She had been feeling that same edginess all day, since reading the article with Cassandra's story and seeing the words "Skyland Mountain". It was a crawling feeling along her spine, just at her neck, and the feeling of expectancy, perhaps dread. She had thought it had something to do with the idea of that place, the one she had been drug to by Duane Barry, and the memory of the light and her screams.

"That's not why I'm here," she croaked, her throat closing around the words.

"Oh?" Cassandra arched a silvered eyebrow, a look of knowing glittering in the pale gaze.

Scully's cheeks flushed as she felt herself suddenly stammering, feeling foolish now for coming to see this woman in the first place. "I'm here because I...because...I wanted to tell you that you should...you should not remove the thing that you have in your neck. Not without possible consequences. I...I became very ill."

Cassandra smiled in a way that said the thought hadn't even crossed her mind. "I'd never dream of removing it. I want to go, wherever it is." Her smiled beamed brighter, her face becoming radiant. "Oh, they have so much to teach us. You being a doctor would want to know their great healers. Maybe that's why you were chosen."

Oh if that were only the truth, Scully thought bitterly in the face of Cassandra's almost childlike belief. How could she tell the woman the truth? That she was taken by men who intended to use her to make her partner believe, to use him in a game that would ensure the survival of their own, dark plans. How could she tell Cassandra, who believed so completely in the beneficence of an alien being that the only truth that Scully knew was that this woman was part of the same, sick, twisted plans that Scully was. And for whatever reason they were using Cassandra much as they had planned to use Mulder.

"Jeffrey doesn't understand, you know." Cassandra's smile fell, her shoulder's slumping as the happiness that filled her with her visions of these alien healers faded in the glare of her son's disapproval. "He thinks it's all nonsense, stuff put into my head by my friends."

"Friends?" Scully asked, wondering briefly if Jeffrey wasn't half right about his mother's state of mind.

"Other abductees like me, and like you. Jeffrey doesn't remember any of it, of course, he was too young, and then later he was deemed unfit for what they had in mind."

"But they took you instead?"

"Well, I was open minded to it, but there were others. I remember so many others. I think I remember you." She cocked her head sideways as she studied Scully for long, uncomfortable moments. "I remember you as being very scared. I remember you crying, and I would try to reassure you that really everything was all right, that you were safe. Sometimes the others would."

Like Penny? Tears formed in Scully's eyes, burning as the scar on her neck fairly vibrated and the edginess broke across her, snapping as she stood bolt upright. She nearly startled the handicapped woman as she shoved her fists into her pockets, clenching her well-manicured nails into her palms.

"Cassandra, I don't remember anything. I don't remember that." She didn't, not really, not in the way that Penny did, or clearly Cassandra. She didn't remember any benevolent aliens, only white lights, and fear, and pain, and the face of Japanese doctors bending over her in the confined space of a silver, train car lab.
"I'm sorry," Scully whispered as she screwed her eyes against the burning. Even her hair stood on end as the urge to run, to move, to go anywhere but here overwhelmed her. This had all been a mistake. "Look, I came here because of Skyland Mountain. You said that was where you had been taken from."

"Yes," Cassandra replied quietly. Scully nodded, sucking in deep breaths through her nostrils, willing her pounding heart to slow.

"I was there, that was where I disappeared from, I don't know what happened to me, and I never have. But…friends, my sister, they have died because of that. My health has been compromised. I lost a daughter that I didn't know I had. And I have to know Cassandra what all of this was for. What was the purpose?"

She stood there long moments, heart racing in her ears as she willed herself to open her eyes and unclench her fingers, but she couldn't. The unease went from the base of her neck to the pit of her stomach and settled there, like the hollow ache that she used to have before major tests in school. It roiled and churned and she felt as if she dared to take a step away she might explode from it.

The cool fingers of Cassandra Spender closed, and as if by magic a sense of peace and release formed there, flowing across Scully's arms and muscles, as her fingers loosened and her eyes opened. But far from being any mystic power or alien ability, it was simply the understanding, sympathetic touch of a woman who sat in a wheelchair in front of her, watching her with heartfelt compassion.

"Dana, I can't tell you what happened. But I'm sorry that you remember it the way that you do. I wish…I wish I could make it better for you. I don't know what happened to you, I know my experiences, I know the wisdom that I've been told and the wonders I've seen. Perhaps, maybe, one day you'll remember those things too."

Scully knew in that moment she couldn't ever tell this woman the truth. It would crush Cassandra, who had built up this web of stories as a way to deal with whatever had happened to her in her times away. Who knows, perhaps there were men who suggested the story to her, feeding it into her mind enough that she believed it. Kritschgau certainly seemed to imply it.

"I have to go, Cassandra." Gently, Scully pried her wrist away from the woman, trying to smile at her and failing. "Please don't tell your son I stopped by, I'm afraid he wouldn't be very happy about it."

"Of course not. Jeffrey thinks he's protecting me." Cassandra clucked with a motherish sort of exasperation. "Don't judge him too harshly, Dana. He's not had an easy life of it, what with his father leaving us, and then my disappearances. Jeffrey's had to deal with a lot in his life and I'm afraid he always has felt that he could never quite ever make either of us happy."

She sounded truly sorry about that.

"I'll try to remember that," Scully assured the woman, her feet already directing themselves towards the door. "If I think of anything, I'll get in touch, or you can always call me."

"I will, Dana," she called as Scully whipped out of the door, rubbing the nail-scored heels of her palms in her eyes. As quickly as she could, Scully made her way back down the tile hallway, her stomach churning as panic pulled at the edges of her awareness. Cassandra was right, she did feel the pull, the same one Scully remember Duane Barry complaining of. Now she understood why the poor, broken man had been so frantic and why he had carried her off on that rainy night nearly four years before. She sensed that this feeling could drive her mad as well.
She wasn't going to go back to Skyland Mountain again.
In which Scully knows Mulder is wrong.

For the first time ever in their long partnership Scully didn't just believe Mulder was wrong, she that as fact. It scared the hell out of her.

He hardly noticed as she spun on her heels, he was too distracted by whoever was on the other end of line. He already had his mind made up, this was all another lie, another scam, a ruse pulled over a poor, old woman that the government was using to cover up the truth about their secret tests and undisclosed programs. It was a nice, logical, safe answer based upon the evidence at hand. It was the sort of answer that Scully perhaps would have produced four or five years ago, a neat and tidy explanation for all of the deaths, tied up in a package complete with a neat, little bow. They could present it to their superiors, who would nod, compare it to the situation with Section Chief Blevins, compliment them for a job well done, and send them on their way, sweeping it all under the rug. It was a convenient answer, one that fit around all of the information nicely.

But it wasn't the right answer. Scully couldn't explain why she knew that, but she did. The skin at the back of her neck itched as she walked towards the end of the hallway, towards the water fountain, trying to allay the feeling of discomfort and vague discontent that she had descended on her since the moment Cassandra Spender touched the chip that lay just below the surface in her neck. Her nerves tingled as she thought of it, and of Skyland Mountain. In her gut she knew this wasn't about a government cover up, that this wasn't an attempt to hide the truth about their crimes. If it were, they could have easily shut off the chip there, allowed her cancer to return, watched her die and written it off as a sad tragedy. It would have been so easy to explain that way, without the confusion and drama of a graphic, horrific body count all over the news. This wasn't about a cover up, this was something else, something much more frightening. She knew that as surely as she felt the piece of silicon and metal under her skin.

Mulder should know that too. He should have been the first one to see it. She should have been the one lagging behind, telling him that he was crazy, looking to the safe, comfortable answer. Mulder should have been on this from the moment the first bodies appeared. Instead he was spinning in circles, tracking the thread that Michael Kritschgau left for them, following the bodies and implants and ignoring anything Cassandra Spender had to say, dismissing it as merely false memories implanted in an elaborate cover up. Scully couldn't fault him for that line of reasoning, it was the most reasonable one, but when in their five years together as partners had Mulder ever once been reasonable?

She was the believer in this situation, he was the skeptic, and Scully hated it.

All of their work together, all of the years of theoretical arguments, back and forth, through long car rides and even longer plane flights, it had always been Mulder chasing after the most ludicrous, the most obscure answers. If the restaurant they were eating at didn't have the type of sandwich she wanted he would create an elaborate conspiracy as to why that sandwich wasn't there and what the kids in the back of the kitchen were doing to the food they were being served. Mulder's by nature liked to color outside of the lines, to see what lay on the other side of the fence and go for that. In a
million years Scully would never think of him playing it safe and being reasonable.

Except now that was exactly what he was doing. He was broken and he was frightened.

As that insight sunk in past her screaming nerves and into her spinning brain Scully stopped, frozen in the hallway as she considered the impact of those words. For months now she had ignored Mulder's reticent and skittish behavior, waited patiently as she went about the routine of digging through old files and filling out paperwork, wondering when he would snap out of it and return to chasing after spaceships. She had held her breath, expecting him to burst into the office with a newspaper in hand, a red circle around an obscure article, and two tickets to South Dakota or somewhere else equally remote, off to chase some ancient myth. She had put up with weird and strange cases, ones that she hardly thought were worth their time and energy, thinking the other show would drop sometime and the old Mulder, the one that had exasperated and infuriated her so much would return. He hadn't. It had never occurred to her that he might never make an appearance again.

Once upon a time, before she had gotten so sick, Scully had railed at Mulder for chasing his damned spaceships at the expense of anything resembling real life. She had despaired that he would ever stop running into the darkness while she held on desperately, trying to prevent him from being consumed. They had argued bitterly over it, she had chastised him for throwing away everything on his quest. She had asked him then if his truth was worth the high price they were both paying to find it. Then Michael Kritschgau came and told them that everything the two of them had learned, everything that they had believed or thought they believed for the last four years were lies, fabrications made to use them both on behalf of a greater government agenda. Under any normal circumstances Scully could see that information crushing Mulder, but having it as she lay dying from a cancer that Kritschgau's superiors had engineered, specifically to force Mulder to act in the ways they wished, that had shattered him. She should have recognized it at the time, she should have seen it in that broken moment by her bedside. Mulder hadn't just lost his faith. He didn't know what was true and what was not anymore. He didn't trust himself, his memories, or his own intuition. How could be so certain that his perception wasn't just as carefully engineered as Cassandra Spender's experiences? Since Kritschgau entered into their lives Mulder could trust no one, least of all himself.

It was that last thought that left Scully feeling cold, her unease turning into near panic. Five years before, when Scott Blevins assigned Scully to the basement office all she had to go on was Mulder and his utter faith in the truth of his quest. She had come into this work skeptical, convinced that she could logically explain away anything that Fox Mulder with all of his brilliance threw her way. She had believed that idea until the moment he drug her off to Bellefleur, Oregon, and in a grungy motel room lit only by candles he poured his heart out to her, a near perfect stranger. He had confessed his belief in Samantha's abduction that night. He told her that she had been taken by aliens right in front of his eyes, and while she hadn't believed it at the time, and in truth perhaps did not quite believe it now, she believed in the fact that he believed it, that he trusted in himself and his memories, and that he knew something had happened, something that wasn't right, and that it led a much bigger truth that tied all of this together. For five years she had clung to his faith, using that as the rational for staying by his side as her career, her reputation, and her health were stripped from her. It was the reason she stayed even when common sense told her she shouldn't.

If he didn't trust even in the fitness of his quest, why was she still there risking so much?

The questioned burned in her as she returned, intent on confronting Mulder about all of this finally, to make him see reason with Cassandra Spender. But the office was empty as she rounded the doorway, Mulder's overcoat gone with no indication of where he went. The swell of frustration and irritation flattened as words she was prepared to challenge him with died in her mouth. The
inability to state them annoyed her nearly as much as the fact that he had once again wandered away without a note to her about where he was and what he was doing.

Now what?

Agitated, wandered to his desk in a vain hope of a clue to his whereabouts, picking up the files that he had been perusing when she came in earlier. The autopsies all showed the bits of metal so similar to the one that Scully currently could feel so acutely in her own body. Idly she raised a finger to rub at it fretfully as she studied the x-rays. Mulder had mentioned the victims had all displayed depressive disorders characterized by anxiety and paranoia. Strange, she had an implant herself and had displayed none of those symptoms of late…well, at least not until she had spoken to Cassandra.

She paused, hand at her neck, thinking. She had not had any of those symptoms until she had met with Cassandra. Cassandra had known about them, Cassandra had also known exactly where her implant was. Whatever her story was, whether it was true or not, Cassandra understood the truth of what was happening and at the moment she was the only person Scully knew of that was at all sure of herself and her story, and somewhere in there had to lie the answers to why these people were dying, and perhaps to who these men were who had done this to them and to Scully.

Mulder perhaps didn't trust Cassandra's memories, but for the moment Scully did. For now, Scully would have to be the one believing for the both of them.
Cassandra

Chapter Summary

In which Scully stages a break out.

Cassandra's face threatened to split it in two from the grin spread across it, her eyes shining in the reflection from the gas station lights. "I can't believe you actually sprung me out of that place!"

Scully, for her part, couldn't believe she had managed the feet either. Heart lurching, she unbuckled her seatbelt and tried to put a calm smile on the face of things. "It wasn't that difficult. I showed them my badge, told them I was with your son and had been requested to check you out for him."

"And they bought the story?" Cassandra's gaze was wide in the darkness. She clearly was as stunned about that fact as Scully had been when she pulled it off. "If I had known that I would have befriended someone at the FBI years ago to get me out of there."

"Yeah, well let's just hope that Jeffrey doesn't find out what I did or it could be my job."

Scully ignored the reckless panic that pounded in her brain as she climbed out of her car, moving to the pump to fill up. It was a long drive to Ruskin Dam in Pennsylvania and she didn't know when she would be able to fill up again. How the hell she and Cassandra knew to go to Ruskin Dam was another mystery. Fetching Cassandra had been unexpected and foolhardy. On the drive from the office to see her it had hit her that Cassandra knew what was going on and she knew where the next event would be. Scully knew there would be another event, she could feel it itching in her mind, dancing along her taunt nerves, but she had no idea where it would be or when. She wasn't even terribly sure she even wanted to go, considering the horrors found at Skyland Mountain.

Metal clanged on metal as the pump purred and liquid flowed into her vehicle. Scully gazed at the numbers flashing on the digital face, considering what it was she had just done. She had used her authority as a federal officer of the law to take out a patient from a medical facility to which she was consigned, without the permission of her doctors of her family, and made of with her in the night. What was more she was taking a woman who was an invalid, a crippled one at that, to a place that neither of them had been to before based only on the feelings that Cassandra had about where they were supposed to go. It had not been any more complicated than that, Scully had spread a map on the woman's lap, and it was Cassandra who had pointed out where they were supposed to go. What in the hell was she doing?

The pump clicked, she put it back on its hook, feeling somewhat dazed as she did. Dana Scully didn't do these sorts of things, not normally. To take off in the middle of the night, with no idea of where she was going or what she would find once she got there, without even a word to her partner, all on top of an illicit hospital break. This was all madness, perhaps the single most foolish thing she had ever done in her life. But her nerves screamed at her as she crawled back into the car. She had to do this. She needed to if she ever hoped to understand what it was that was done to her and why.

"Ready to go?" She glanced at Cassandra, who nodded enthusiastically, seemingly thrilled to be on this adventure, perhaps more so than Scully was. Of course she would be, she believed that this all had to do with alien benefactors. In Cassandra's mind this was a way of returning to the people
who she saw as heroes and saviors. Scully wished she could be as certain of that truth.

"I can't believe we are doing this!" Cassandra fairly giggled as Scully pulled onto the highway in the darkness. "I mean this is the maddest thing I've done, oh hell, since before I married Jeffrey's father, unless of course you consider marrying his father the maddest thing I ever did."

Scully only knew that her former husband had left the family at some point, and that Cassandra had raised Jeffrey alone. "Cassandra, are you certain you are up for this? I mean, I don't know what we will find when we are out there." The lingering doubt pulled at her, despite her anxiety, cautioning her despite the fact that she was ignoring the impulse to turn her car right around and go home.

"Nonsense! There is nothing to fear, Dana, you'll see."

Perhaps she would. A fleeting image of burnt bodies, twisted and charred came to mind and Scully wondered if she could be terribly certain of all of that. What if Mulder was right, what if this was all an elaborate stunt to hide the truth?

"What you said before, Cassandra, about remembering me?" Scully's fingers tightened on the steering wheel as she sped into the Maryland night. "Do you really remember me from before, from when I was taken?"

Cassandra shifted in the seat beside her, quite for long moments. When she answered it was as if she were trying to remember something from a long ago dream. "I remember your face, and I remember you being sad and frightened. I remember trying to reassure you that all would be well. Really, you had never been there before, I don't think you even knew what to expect."

Was that a true memory, Scully wondered, or the false one that Mulder suspected. "Why was I there?"

"Why are any of us taken by them?" Cassandra said this in the same manner Scully's priest might make such a pronouncement. "They have their reasons. You are a doctor and you work with Fox Mulder. Perhaps they wanted you to understand what they do so you can explain it to him and share it with him."

"But I don't remember anything, Cassandra. All I remember are fleeting things, and of those, very few of them are pleasant." Certainly there was nothing about alien benefactors or wonderful, new technologies to help those in need. She remembered bright lights and strange faces, and then there was the daughter she didn't even know she had.

"They have their reasons for their secrets." Cassandra seemed hardly perplexed by Scully's lack of memory. "Many of us who are taken don't remember. I've always wondered if it was for our own good or to ensure that when we do remember we will be prepared for it."

"Are you certain that what they are doing is for our benefit?"

"Why, yes, Dana! These beings aren't here to take over our world or to destroy us."

"Then why are they taking people in the dead of night, keeping them, and then returning them with know knowledge or memory of what happened to them?"

"Think of them as protectors, like we do for animals in preserves. We take care of the wildlife, ensure they are healthy, that they are taken care of, and that no outsider injures them. In much the same way they do the same for us.

It was hardly reassuring to think of herself as nothing better than a zoo animal, any more than it
was thinking of herself as a lab rat. "Are you so certain that what these protectors of yours are doing is good? I mean, are you certain that they are doing it for our benefit?"

Cassandra was one again silent beside her, far longer this time than before. "Dana, all I have to go on is my memory and their word. What else do you want from me?"

Answers, Scully wanted to say. But she knew Cassandra did not have them, any more than she and Mulder did. Which again made her beg the question of herself, why was she doing this?

"You'll see, Dana, when you met them. You'll see the same things I have."

Scully only hoped Cassandra was right.
In which Scully wakes up not knowing what has happened.

The flash of light, brighter than the sun...Cassandra's hand slipping from hers...screaming and then...darkness....

Wherever she was, Scully crawled from there slowly, her eyes fluttering against the grit that seemed to glue them down. Her throat was as dry as a desert, her mouth tasted like cotton, and every bone in her body ached. What had happened to her? Where was she? Realization of her surroundings dripped into her consciousness; the feeling of rough linen against abraded skin, the smell of chemical antiseptic, and the steady beep of machinery nearby.

She was in a hospital, but why? She had left that place months ago. Why in the world was she there now? For a moment fingers itched to fly to her forehead, but instead another hand, warm and infinitely gentle reached out to push the hair from her face, stroking the skin of her cheek. Her eyes finally pried themselves open enough to look up at Mulder's face, grim with quiet worry.

"Mmmmm," she groaned, frowning as she looked immediately for her clock and found it not there. "What time is it?"

"What time is it?" Mulder snorted, a cross between amazement and relief as he laughed, teeth shining as if she had uttered a private joke. "It's time to thank your lucky stars."

"Why are you laughing?" There was nothing funning in any of this, she thought irritably, surprised to find an IV stuck into her hand and not liking it one bit.

"I'm not laughing at you." Mulder immediately sobered, and it was then that she glimpsed the look of stark terror in his bright eyes. What had happened?

"I'm just very happy to be standing here talking to you, that's all." His fingers reached for hers on the bed, lacing into them without permission or by your leave. And inexplicably Scully didn't seem to care. There was a tremble she sensed just under the surface, and strangely she thought she could feel his heart racing just at the fingertips, despite his best efforts at a placid, reassuring demeanor.

Just what had happened that scared him so badly? Fox Mulder could try as he might to fool her, but he had been terrified of something. What had happened that landed her here?

"Mulder, what am I doing here?"

Her question took him aback slightly, his gaze widening as he studied her. "You were airlifted here in vasogenic shock." He uttered the condition with the mechanical nature of someone who had been told that but didn't quite know what it meant. Scully frowned. Vasogenic shock could be anything from anaphylactic shock to septic shock. It wasn't a particularly descriptive diagnosis.

"From what," she pressed, trying to cull through her suddenly fuzzy memory to find why it was she would have been near anything that would have caused her body to enter shock. She wasn't allergic to bees. She hadn't been injected with anything.
Mulder blinked, confused by her question. "You've got some first-degree burns and scorching on your hands and face."

Scorching? Her fingers flew up to her face, and it was then she realized that her skin tingled with a sort of sandpaper, rug burn sort of feel. What in the hell had happened? "From what?"

Again her question was met with quiet blankness. Her heart raced in sudden fear as Mulder's quite surprise turned into concerned worry. "You don't remember?"

"Mulder," she snapped, prepared to drag out of him exactly why it was she had been in a fire and how it was he got them into it, but her eyes caught the television in the corner. She hadn't realized it was on. The volume was muted, but the picture flickered on a local news station. A helicopter hovered over the scene of a damn, emergency crews swarming all over it. The closed captioning had been turned on so that one could read the text of what was happening. A second cult suicide, southwest Pennsylvania, 50 deaths, bizarre event….

Flashes of something try to rise to the surface, but disappeared just as quickly. Mulder turned to her, expectant, as if he thought she knew something about this.

"Is any of this coming back to you?"

Scully's stomach knotted as on the screen she could see white strips of tarp laying in a neat row. Bodies, her brain realized dispassionately. Were they as burned as the ones found at Skyland Mountain? With a horrifying, sickening jolt it occurred to her what she had been doing there in the middle of Nowhere, Pennsylvania. Her neck itched, but she refused to reach back to the bit of metal under the skin.

"I was there?" Her voice was disbelieving and small, but she already knew she had been. She could smell the stink of burning human flesh in her hair.

"I was hoping you were going to answer that question for me."

Scully wanted to tell Mulder she didn't have any sort of answer for him, not on this, but from the doorway a nurse bustled in, eyeing her and Mulder with deep disapproval. "You shouldn't be elevated, Miss Scully, not until we get your blood pressure back." Her admonishing glare turned on Mulder, who met it with only the most mild of shrugs. "She really needs her rest."

He nodded, standing. "I'll come back."

He usually never took a nurse's orders that seriously. "Mulder?"

He turned and flashed her a thumbs up, his lopsided grin his farewell as he turned down the hallway. She watched the space he left with deep frustration, wanting to demand his immediate presence back, to explain what the hell was going on. She was in a hospital, she had no recollection of how she got there, and he had no answers either. This was ludicrous!

The back of her hand itched and she rubbed at it fretfully as she realized her skin was bright pink and shiny with minor burns. Burns she didn't remember getting. Her lungs felt heavy, as if she had been stuck in a smoky lounge all night, her eyes felt red and raw. She glanced back to the television, to the horrific scene at Ruskin Dam, at the blackened patch of concrete. What was she doing there? How did she get there, and why?

Screaming and the bitter taste of fear in her mouth….

No memories of faces or events came to mind. There was no purpose for anything. She didn't even
remember how the fire had started or why she survived. It had to be horrific though, judging from the scenes on the television and the naked terror in her partner's eyes. He had thought she was dead, like Skyland Mountain. He had come to Pennsylvania believing that this time he really would have to bury his partner. She couldn't even tell him why she had come there.

The nurse had continued to fuss, even after Mulder's departure, setting Scully's bed to rights and fluffing up the pillow she lay on with a maternal sort of noise. "There, you all settled?"

Scully nodded, distracted as she watched the news unfold across the screen. If the nurse worried about the television's effects, she said nothing, leaving it as she moved out of the room. Scully lay quietly under the thin, hospital blankets, staring at the carnage, wishing she could remember what in the hell she had been doing.
In which Scully tells Mulder she won't follow him.

Outside of telling Mulder about her cancer, telling him she wouldn't follow him until she understood what happened to her was perhaps one of the single hardest things Scully had ever had to say to her partner. She wasn't going to throw herself out there again until she had the truth about why these things were happening to her, the real truth and not what Mulder believed was going on. It killed her to see the crushed expression on her partner's normally stoic face.

Mulder stood restlessly, long legs paced to the window of her hospital room. She couldn't tell if he wanted to punch something or simply walk out, but he chose to stare out into the mild gray skies, the gentle spring rain outside turning the grass impossibly green. He seemed so certain in his new beliefs, ones that perhaps a year earlier Scully would have been thrilled to hear coming out of Mulder's mouth. That was before her cancer, before Emily, before she felt the pull to a dam in the middle of Pennsylvania that had nearly gotten her killed. He stood there and told her that he didn't trust those memories of his sister, the ones that he had shared with her long ago in a darkened motel room in Oregon. But it was those memories that had brought her here. They were the reason she had stayed beyond those first, manic cases. If she hadn't, would she be standing in this hospital room? And now he was telling her it was all a lie? Had she really, honestly nearly died, yet again, for something as simple as a clean up job? Scully couldn't make herself believe that, not after everything and she sure as hell couldn't accept Mulder giving up and taking the easy answer, not after everything else.

"If I could give you those memories?" His voice was like broken glass on gravel, cracking and catching in his throat. "If I could prove that I'm right and that what I believed for so long was wrong?" He turned to her, eyes dull in is grave expression. When first she had met Mulder, glowing with the secret knowledge of the truth that Mulder felt he knew and the passion of his beliefs that burned through everything he did. Now they were as lifeless as Scully felt their work was, their mission was. Did he honestly want what he just spoke of? Did he really want to believe that all of this was a lie and he was little better than a fool? Did he really want to believe that at the end of the day he was a patsy and that all of their work was nothing but a farce?

"Is that what you really want," she asked outright, lifting her chin in challenge. Did he really believe want to believe that his sister was lost to him, that all of this had been nothing more than an elaborate lie, that his whole life was nothing?

Mulder waivered for the briefest of moments, a hint of longing hiding in his depths before being ruthlessly subsided. "Scully, I am doing what you always wanted me to do, looking to the most obvious answer for a change."

"And what if that answer is the wrong one?"

Confusion warred with irritation as long fingers ran in agitation through his dark hair. "Scully, how many times have you begged me to look at this rationally? All these months, everything we've seen, everything Michael Kritschgau told us as you lay dying, everything points to a cover up of US
biochemical warfare product for the Cold War and its testing on the citizens of this country, no aliens, no flying saucers. How many times have you argued reason out of me on these cases? And I went tearing off after phantoms and shadows while you pulled my ass out of yet another hospital I managed to get myself into. And for once I'm listening, I'm agreeing with you. And now you are arguing the opposite?"

He had a right to be frustrated with her. It was as contrary a position from that she normally held as there could possibly be. The irony wasn't lost on Scully, and the truth was she couldn't explain why she held it. A very different Scully would have stood at opposite ends of a very different battle with Mulder. He was right. She should have been thrilled that he was so determined in this course. But he was wrong. She knew he was wrong, and while she had no proof of it, she could feel it in the confused memories and deep, nerve-jangling edge that still thrilled inside of her, the one she had felt since she first went to see Cassandra.

"Mulder, how many times have you preached at me to think outside of the box, to go with my intuition?" How many times had he chided her about not seeing the whole story, about not listening to what her gut had to tell her over her head? "The thing that has always made you an amazing investigator has never been your attention to detail but always your attention to what stood just outside of the obvious. You have never once feared to stand by those things others would dismiss, and they have always led you right when you did. Now you are choosing to ignore those very instincts? You have to ask yourself, Mulder, why is that? Is it because it's the right thing to do, or because they made you question them, and if so, why did they do that to you? Was it really to tell you the truth, or was it simply just another way to obfuscate the truth?"

"I don't have time for this!" Mulder waved a hand dismissively, but not before she could see the conflict raging with her words. She had hit home, his brain spinning furiously, and he didn't like it, didn't appreciate the implications. Good, perhaps this would finally kick him in the ass.

"You say the truth is in me, Mulder, is in that damned chip. But that is only part of the story. Perhaps instead of asking what the chip has to do with the deaths of these people, perhaps you need to ask why they needed to die in the first place. If killing them was as easy as taking the chip away and allowing them to die a painful but perfectly explainable death, why in the hell would these men, men who love their secrets and silence, want to do something as elaborate and poorly constructed as this. Why mask this as a cult? I don't think you see what is going on here, Mulder. Someone is trying to kill us, to hide what happened, but I don't think it's the men you assume it to be. And my question now is why? What in the world is going on that someone is willing to kill me for it?"

She had to say "me" to make this personal for him. This wasn't as simple as random cases with nameless people, this was happening to her. This was her life. For Mulder this was his quest, for her it was what she was living with. She did not have the luxury of picking it up and throwing it away whenever it suited her, not with a dead sister, and a dead daughter, and dead friends.

"I need to know the truth of what happened to me, Mulder, what happened out there on the dam. You know someone who helped you with your memories of Samantha?"

He winced, his full lips becoming grim as he nodded, thinking quietly for long moments. "Dr. Werber, he's in Silver Springs."

"He worked with Cassandra, right?"

Mulder again nodded, staring fixedly at his well-polished shoes.

"Then take me to him, let me at least try this. It may yield nothing, but it may also tell us what
happened there, and it will end this debate once and for all. And perhaps, maybe, we can find real answers."

If she had just told him the moon was made of green cheese, she didn't think Mulder could be more surprised. His head shot up as he blinked at her in mild wonder, as if asking who was this strange woman masquerading as his partner, and where was the woman named Dana Scully. His Scully never would ask about Dr. Werber or hypnotherapy. "I'll give him a call right now, see if he has some time this afternoon. We can stop there on the way back."

"All right," Scully agreed, her stomach fluttering at the idea of what she was doing. This had better work. She needed to prove to Mulder this wasn't as simple as he assumed it was. "And will you believe whatever we find out there?"

"I will seriously consider whatever we find out there."

"Good," she breathed, reaching for her things. If her trying something she normally never believed in would break her partner out of this mind block, she was willing to try it. "When this is all said and done, Mulder, I would like you to thank me for being so open minded as to do this for you."

He said nothing as she moved to get ready. He didn't look thrilled by the idea.
Scully never believed she would hear Walter Skinner ever say that he thought extraterrestrial phenomena was a more plausible explanation than a cover-up of a military project. More disturbing than that statement was the fact that she found herself agreeing with her superior's sentiment, the two usually most skeptical people in the room believing that aliens took Cassandra Spender and killed all those people rather than the government. They both watched the back of Fox Mulder as he stormed out of Skinner's office, quiet worry following in the wake of Mulder's irritated ambivalence.

Scully could feel Skinner's dark-eyed gaze move to her, demanding answers.

"I wish I could explain, sir." She murmured, slowly turning to him to somehow come up with a convenient excuse for it all, but found she couldn't. "It's been a hard year, with everything…"

She trailed off, wishing her words didn't sound as pathetic as they did after she had spoken them.

Skinner's jaw worked stonily, fingers reaching blindly for the notes scribbled on the yellow legal pad on his painfully tidy desk. "Agent Scully, I have Agent Spender prepared to raise all sorts of hell for his mother's disappearance, one that can only be blamed on you, and that's not including the families of these victims that want answers. And I have nothing to give them except theories about a military aircraft, all of which I'm fairly certain would be denied categorically by the DOD if I even dared to bring it up to them, followed soon by a very public denouncement of me for bringing it up to them. Then conveniently all these deaths and Cassandra Spender get swept under a rug of controversy as the FBI is embarrassed once again." One thick finger stabbed at the spider-like writing on the paper, his irritation taken out on the inky words.

"Sir, if I could remember even a little of this, I would tell you, but all I have to go on is on that tape, and even then I don't remember it." Frustration mingled with anger at herself as she searched for any explanation that would help. Damn Mulder in this moment. "Mulder could be right on this, you know."

"Do you honestly believe that, Scully?" Skinner's gaze glittered behind his thick glasses.

Scully swallowed slowly. "No, sir, I don't."

Sighing, Skinner pushed himself back from his large desk, scowling as he rose to pace behind it. Scully had spent her childhood growing up around men like her boss, Marines with their hard-as-rock demeanors and dogged outlook on life. Skinner had been out of the service for decades, but he still struck her as a solid rock of control, a man who was practical, no nonsense, who looked for the most reasonable action and went with it. That sort of thinking made a great soldier, but not a good investigator, and Skinner was a very good one. Underneath the reason was a man who had seen horrors Scully would shudder to think about and had lived experiences she would never ask about. And it was that part of Skinner, the eighteen-year-old boy who had gone off too far too young to a land far too far away, that listened to Mulder and his talk of aliens, even when Skinner didn't want to.
Skinner didn't want to believe, the Marine in him wanted to call it all crap and be done with it. But the boy who went to Vietnam knew that there was a possibility, however small, that Mulder's previous theories were right. And it was that knowledge that kept Skinner sitting on the fence for them all these years, trying to navigate the stormy waters that surrounded their work in the X-files. He had risked a lot allowing Mulder the leeway that he did. He had done it because he wanted to believe in Mulder's work. How could he not? Like herself, Skinner had been sucked in by the sheer, incandescent passion her partner displayed towards his convictions. Mulder believed with all of the fervor of a martyr, knowing it was foolish but believing that there was a holy truth to the foolishness. And Scully had found herself believing in him if for nothing else because Mulder believed in it, and Skinner had as well. He had put his ass on the line for them, and Mulder daring to tell them it was all a lie, to suddenly losing his faith in his own preaching so suddenly…it was rather like having St. Peter not only betraying the Lord on the night of his crucifixion, but then telling everyone in the crowd that Jesus was a two-bit con artist.

"What happened, Scully?" Skinner paused at his window, looking out over the rapidly greening, springtime Washington landscape. "Do you realize it has been months without a single case request? I've managed to hold off putting the two of you on general detail, but I won't be able to do that forever. I have superiors who will want to know why it is I have a division handling specialized cases if the two agents I have assigned to it aren't doing any work."

"I know, sir, I've brought it up to Agent Mulder." He had hardly seemed to care when she did, but Scully had brought up the point for what it was worth.

Skinner turned to look at her. "Scully, Scott Blevins was only the tip of the iceberg, I hope you both know that. He was taken because he was expendable. It could have been me, and hell it probably was supposed to have been me. I'm not saying Mulder isn't wrong, that there isn't a government conspiracy behind all of this, what I'm saying is that it isn't about Cold War weapons or spy games. I know these men, and Skyland Mountain, Ruskin Dam, this isn't what they do."

Scully knew that too. "The problem is, sir, we don't know for sure what is happening."

"Are you comfortable with putting in the report the fact that this is a military conspiracy to cover up illegal weapons testing on the public? Because after what I heard on that tape, Scully, I'm not so sure that is what we are dealing with here."

Vague images of burning men and Cassandra rising in the air came to mind. "No, sir, I don't think that is what we are dealing with at all."

At least the two of them could agree on that.

"Scully, no one is believing for a minute this was a cult. They think that these people were targeted, but unless I can prove to them why and for what purpose, I will have to tell them something that both of us believe is patently untrue. Those families will never know why it is their loved ones truly died, and I find that unacceptable. And considering that you were nearly one of them, I would hope you would find that unacceptable as well."

His words cut her as Scully recalled the raw panic in Mulder's face as she woke at the hospital, and she knew that Skinner was right. "I'll see what I can do, sir."

"Right," he nodded, eyes flickering towards his door by way of dismissal. Scully took her cue, rising gracefully from the chair in front of his desk and marched out. Scully realized as she stepped out of the office and into the flow of people in the hallway that she had no earthly idea how she was supposed to meet Skinner's request.
How do you give faith back to a man who has lost it?
What They Have Taken

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has to be the strong one.

Scully could smell the coffee from across the building, like burnt plastic mixed with roasted chocolate, but her mouth salivated at the idea of it all the same. Out of the corner of her eye she could see a young man in military fatigues carrying two Styrofoam cups, steam rolling off them in the cool air of the military office, his stern face softening somewhat as he presented them both to Scully.

"Left them black, but brought some cream and sugar packets." He handed her the cups first, then pulled the wad of paper condiments out of his pocket, setting it on the desk beside her. "Colonel Mason says he'll be out here shortly.

"Thank you," Scully murmured gratefully, even as the young private shot worried eyes towards the man slumped over in one of the office chairs in front of Scully, legs splayed and face covered, his overcoat hanging haphazardly over the arms of the rickety seat he had taken. It was as if someone had picked up a Fox Mulder doll and dropped him unceremoniously in this position. Scully cleared her throat sharply and the private reddened, nodding shortly to her as he made his exit. The coffee was acrid and sharp to her nose, and she picked through the pile to search for sugar, dumping in a packet in one cup before setting it in the general vicinity of her partner. He hardly acknowledged it. In fact he had hardly moved in twenty minutes.

"Mulder, drink something." She poured three packs of creamer and two of sugar into her own cup and watched as the lump of yellowish creamer tried and failed to dissolve in the scalding liquid. Her stomach roiled at the thought of drinking it, but she sipped at it anyway, trying not to wrinkle her nose in disgust. There was no response from the corner. Scully could hear Mulder's twisted and racing thoughts, chasing one after the other, and her heart ached in silent sympathy. Whatever Mulder saw on that truck out there it had made all of this so much worse. She had seen him shattered so many times over the years, but never quite like this.

"I'm sure that Skinner is speaking to the colonel now." That wasn't the issue, but it was something to say. She was surprised they weren't both sitting in the military brig at the moment, charged with trespassing and attempting to steal military property. Mulder had taken off without warning into the truck that had pulled off the base, only to be found dazed, crushed and tossed unceremoniously into the back of the MP vehicle Scully had been shoved into. She had spent the entire trip back to the base comforting him as he had stared wonderingly into the darkness, silent tears tracking down his still face.

Whatever happened, they weren't put into jail and Mulder hadn't said a word about what he had seen, not yet at least. The temperature of the military police thawed considerably as they reached the FBI, and Scully imagined that this Colonel Mason was getting an earful from Skinner at the moment about a high profile FBI investigation with no time to go through the red tape of proper inter-cabinet department channels, and was the US military really obstructing the investigation of the FBI when so many innocent lives were lost? Not that she thought it would go much of anywhere. Skinner would likely get a firm but polite setting down for his crossing of inter-
departmental pissing lines, but it would buy them both the leeway they needed to get out of this mess.

"Mulder," she murmured, her voice gentle as she attempted to reach across to him, fingers plucking gently at the fabric of his coat. "What happened out there?"

Before when she asked he said he didn't know. Now he sighed, shuddered, lowering his hands from his face, hazel green eyes now bright as he stared sightlessly in front of him. "I don't know, Scully, I honestly don't understand." For Mulder saying he didn't understand, it was like saying DaVinci couldn't make heads or tails of his own inventions. This was what he lived and breathed and no one else knew about any of this than Mulder.

Scully suddenly found herself at a loss.

"I was there, there's a round missing in my gun, but as to what happened?" He blinked, hard, as if forcing his brain to reboot and recover the memories missing. That was unnerved him the most, she knew, the lost memories. Mulder's recall was everything to him once, the perfect remembrance of an event that defined his entire life. Now that faith in what was one of his most unique talents was shattered and suddenly he couldn't even remember the last hour of his life.

Scully understood the terror of that feeling all too painfully well.

"Mulder, please drink your coffee." It wasn't an order, more a plea, Scully would have begged if it had done her any good. It unnerved her seeing him like this, the man who would chase after lights in the sky now reduced to this. She wanted to blame Kritschgau, Blevins, the dead smoking man, someone. How could they do this to him? It broke her heart to see this man she had come to so admire and respect unravel like this.

Mulder at least reached for the coffee in front of him, raising it to his lips and grimacing at the smell and taste. He downed it anyway, like medicine, in one large gulp before tossing the cup into the trash. In days gone by he'd have shot a joke about hair on the chest and laughed about it. There was no laughter coming from him now, no wry jokes or dry observations. The answers were just outside of his grasp once again, leaving him spinning madly and unable to find his bearings.

"I failed you, Scully," he finally murmured, watching the trashcan absently. "I failed you, I failed Cassandra and her son, and I failed those people who died. I was so certain that I was right in this, that this was all a cover-up by the government. I was so certain I'd find the truth and come out of this full of holy brimstone and righteous indignation. And now I've come out looking like an ass, again, which is precisely what they wanted I'm sure."

Perhaps, though Scully wasn't so certain of that. Something about this, about the fact they weren't in jail spoke to the idea that there were things going on that they didn't understand, piecing being played. "Mulder, you once told me I was the only person you could trust. Is that still true?"

The question had the effect of a livewire being placed against his skin. In an instant he went from maudlin to fervent, eyes flashing with fear and worry as they flew up to her curious expression.

"Why wouldn't it be true, Scully? In a million years you don't think…"

"I don't doubt that, Mulder, but I need you to remember that." She sipped again at the nearly undrinkable mixture in front of her, more to steady herself, to be the one to be strong in this situation for once. "I need you understand that in all of this that you can trust me and I will be here, I will stand by your side through this, I will keep you grounded and I will keep you honest, because right now you aren't even capable of doing that. They've taken that from you."
This was the real tragedy of what these men had done to her partner, this man who she had followed to hell and back. They couldn't destroy him by taking her away from him. They couldn't destroy him by taking the X-files away from him. They couldn't destroy him by taking his father, or his mother, or his own life. But they could destroy him utterly by taking away the very thing that drove Fox Mulder's entire life, his faith in himself and his mission, his unerring trust in his own memory and understanding of what was going on. Make him question himself and he had nothing.

Except her, he still had Scully. She was not a believer. She didn't have the memories of a broken childhood. In fact she didn't have the memories of her own abductions. She had no certain idea of what happened to her. She did know, however, that she believed in Mulder, even if he didn't believe in himself at the moment. She knew that there was no one else in this world she could imagine having the insight and capability to understand any of this the way that he did, no one else who could possibly help her find the answers she sought. There was no one else she wanted to work with or to go on this quest with, because she knew that she couldn't do this alone. She needed him with her on this and he needed her to be the strong one and believer, if just for a little while, till he found himself again. What had Byers said? Mulder would move heaven and earth for her, something to that effect? This was the least she could do for a man who had stopped at nothing to save her life. She could be there for him and she would. Failure to do so was not an option. Scully could never see herself failing this man.

"Agents?" The young private had wandered back to their corner, but the stern look had returned. Clearly the colonel had finished his argument with their superior and arrangements were being made for their release. Scully gathered herself, holding a hand out to Mulder as he sat up.

"Come on, let's get out of here so I can get you a real cup of coffee."

Mulder slowly wrapped his fingers around hers, holding on as he pulled himself up. Quietly, the two of them nodded to one another as they wended their way to the commanding officers office, their fingers interlaced until they reached the man's door.
Life, the Universe, and Everything

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the meaning of life and getting Mulder back.

Douglas Adams once said that the answer to life, the universe, and everything was forty-two.

Scully only wished that she understood the question. She stared at the two lopsided numbers as she knocked on Mulder's door, the two hanging drunkenly from some spree long ago when Mulder took it off. She couldn't even remember now for what. Her feet ached as did her back, but in her hands was a bag of Italian she had picked up on the way back to DC and she had the desperate need for company tonight. Which wasn't totally the truth, Scully probably would have been fine by herself. But she'd had the nagging urge to see her wayward partner all day.

Things had been eerily quiet since Cassandra Spender's disappearance. Mulder had opened a case file on her, but that was about it. Nothing was said to Jeffrey. In fact, Mulder had more or less thrown it at Skinner to explain it to the younger agent and assure him it didn't reflect on him personally. Scully hadn't approved, but Mulder reassured her it was best this way. Scully guessed it was because Mulder didn't want to deal with the guilt he felt about not knowing what happened to the woman and having no answers for her angry son.

After that Mulder had gone silent again. The case of the strange deaths at Skyland Mountain and Ruskin Dam was written off as weird cult activity, the excuse a lie but it at least mollified the families. Mulder had turned inwards again. There were no new cases, no leads or investigations, just a pensive, lost quietude that worried the hell out of Scully.

She'd taken a call that day out in Wilmington, Delaware, more to get the hell out of the office and occupy her than anything else. Wilmington PD had a dead drug dealer on their hands under strange circumstances and wanted the FBI opinion on the autopsy. She'd run over for the day, inspected the autopsy findings, spoke to Detective Pennock, the lead investigator on the case, and thrilled at the opportunity it presented. A blind girl, the only suspect to a murder that would take a level of precision no one believed her capable of with her handicap, and yet she made no defense for herself. The police and DA were at a loss.

Not their usual fair, but at this point Scully was willing to take anything at this point to break stillness. Besides a blind, young, misunderstood female suspect, it was a case right up Mulder's alley.

The footsteps on the other side of the door stopped as the chain unlocked and Mulder frowned in lazy confusion. "So, I'm fairly certain it's not my birthday, and you are so not wearing something cute and sexy."

Scully tugged on her functional suit coat and snorted. "Didn't realize either was a requirement for paying you a visit, Mulder." She held up the bag in hand. "Domenico's okay by you?"

"Eggplant Parmesan?" Dark eyebrows raised speculatively as his full mouth spread into a delighted grin. "Scully, you know me so well."
"Yeah, well it's not something cute and sexy, but I figured it would do." She stepped past him into the perpetual dimness of his apartment and wandered into the kitchen. The sink was littered with a sea of coffee cups, but no plates or dishes, nothing to indicate that Mulder had been living on anything but take out and pizza. "Besides, I'm getting you to eat eggplant. You know, a vegetable or two in your diet doesn't hurt."

"If this is a nefarious plot to get me to eat salads, Scully, it won't work." He snorted from the doorway, watching as she pulled out cartons and reached for plates. "I do eat vegetable."

"In Chinese take out."

"Still, it's better than nothing." Mulder smiled winningly as he perused his nearly bare refrigerator for what she assumed was something to drink. "The usual, soda, beer, juice, water."

"Is the soda diet?"

"Those chemicals will give you cancer."

"Already had it, Mulder, I don't think I'm worried about that anymore." She smiled sweetly as he handed her a bottle of water instead. "And what's with this chemicals business, have you seen what you eat?"

"If this is another lecture on what they put in ground beef I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Suit yourself." She shrugged, passing him a plate with breaded eggplant smothered in cheese and sauce.

"So what gives, a beautiful woman shows up at my apartment bearing gifts of food? Have I been good lately?" One of Mulder's dark eyebrows waggled with teasing suggestion, but she knew he could sense the tension. This wasn't going to be a conversation about how well things have been going.

"I did an autopsy up in Wilmington today." She was sidestepping the subject, at least for now as she fixed her own plate of food. "They needed a consult on a dead drug dealer."

"Drug dealer, couldn't they get anyone over at Quantico to do that one for them?"

"Yeah, that wasn't why they wanted me." She licked sauce off her finger as she grabbed her plate and tried to herd her curious partner out into his living room. "The main suspect in the killing is blind."

"Really?" Mulder perked up considerably at that. "So how did she manage that?"

"Detective Pennock is putting a file for us together, he'll be down here tomorrow to see if we can give him any insight." The leather of Mulder's beat up couch creaked as Scully kicked off her shoes and curled into one corner of it. "It's a consult, really, but I thought it might be something that you could lend your expertise to."

"A dead drug dealer and a blind girl?" Mulder snorted thoughtfully as he dug into his plate. "Sounds like the beginnings of a bad joke."

"I don't know, Mulder, I thought it was a case that was better than nothing at the moment." She shrugged, chewing thoughtfully on breaded eggplant and cheese. "It has the makings of an X-file; a blind woman caught at the scene of a crime she couldn't possibly have committed."
"It has the makings of a case of the local PD getting the wrong suspect, nothing unusual or an X-file about that." He stabbed resolutely at his place from where he sat beside her.

"Maybe," she conceded, knowing he had a point. "But it is better than you moping around the office, isn't it?"

"I'm not moping," he defended mildly.

"You could have fooled me." Scully frowned down at her food suddenly feeling less hungry than she had when the idea of dinner struck her on her return from Delaware. "Mulder, what are we doing here?"

He blinked at her in feigned obtuseness. "We are eating a really fine dinner I must say."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." Cheese and sauce coated her mouth in a sticky sort of way as she set her plate aside. "What is going on with you? I've been silent for months, and now since Cassandra Spender's disappearance it has only gotten worse."

He stabbed at his food in irritation as Scully continued, obviously just as unhappy with the tenor of this conversation as she was. "Mulder, I meant what I said in the hospital. I think of how much we've both sacrificed in all of this, and I see you now, and I ask myself why is it we are still here, still chasing after shadows if you are too afraid to pursue the questions we both know you are still asking."

Mulder's plate came to rest with a soft rattle on his coffee table, his food too now seemingly forgotten as the palm of his hands scrubbed at his face. "Scully, did you come over here to pick a fight?"

"No, I came over here to finish one." She was tired of the pussyfooting around this, the avoidance. Scully realized that she was just as responsible for the situation they found themselves in as he was, it was her job as his partner to keep him accountable. As his friend, she was supposed to be the one who reminded him what all of this work was truly for and she had said nothing, hoping he would come around, that he would face the changes going on not only between the two of them but with their work as well.

"Mulder, I feel I need to apologize." She might as well begin by saying she was sorry for this. It obviously wasn't what he expected.

"Apologize for what?"

"For not calling you out on this earlier, for sitting in silence. You've been wandering with your head in a fog since I returned from my illness and I hoped that you would somehow break yourself of it. And I have to ask myself now if that was the right thing, if perhaps I shouldn't have said something earlier."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do, Mulder." Anger snapped from her as he sank into the leather cushions, petulant. "You've been lost, adrift, ever since Kritschgau came into our lives."

"It's not easy being told you've been a dupe for years, Scully, a joke, nothing more than a fucking excuse to justify a means. My entire life has been nothing more than a lie for who knows how long."

"And you have used that as your excuse to stop looking?"
"Maybe there is nothing to look for." Mulder shot up, restless at last, propelling himself off the couch and across the room to stalk over to his desk and the window beside it. He stopped at the picture of himself and Samantha, the one she had reframed for him last Christmas. Fingers reached for it, picking it up, studying it with a painful graveness. "What if Mom was right after all, that there was nothing to search for. What if the same men who have perpetuated these lies for decades and who are responsible for everything that's happened took Samantha simply to keep my father's compliance? What if that's my answer, Scully, the one I've spent half my life searching for?"

Their dinner formed a hard ball in her stomach as she listened to his words. They were logical, well reasoned, based on all the information they had at hand. They were the sorts of answer that would have satisfied Scully at one point in time. But they weren't the right answers. They weren't the ones that satisfied her. "Mulder, in your heart do you really believe that this is the truth you've been searching for all these years?"

His gaze lingered on the smiling face of the sister he hadn't seen in twenty-five years. "I want to believe there is still hope, Scully."

"I want to believe that as well. But more than anything, I want to believe that we can find the truth and get it out there, that these people who did all of these great wrongs can and will be brought to justice. I can't do that, Mulder, without you there with me to do it. I can't believe enough for the two of us."

Especially not when he had been the center of her belief for so very long. She needed Mulder on this. She needed his passion, his drive, and his focus. Perhaps she resented the hell out of him chasing after shadows and running where angels feared to tread, but without him doing that how in the world could she ever hope to find resolution for everything that she had been through.

"This case that we are getting tomorrow, maybe it is a cut and dry case of a drug deal gone wrong. But what if it is a blind girl who was just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Isn't it worth it to help her at least?"

Carefully Mulder set the photograph back down, almost reverentially. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

They stared at one another, their dinner forgotten between them. Scully didn't realize until this very moment how very much she needed her partner in this quest, how dependent she was on Mulder and his vision, his passion, and his drive. It wasn't till she realized how lost he was that she began to understand how much she missed that about him and how much she was drawn to it. All she wanted was to get Mulder - her Mulder - back.
The Angry Blind Girl

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder relates to Marty.

Scully recognized the brooding look when she walked into the office door. In a way she welcomed it. It was the first sign of engagement she had seen out of her partner in months. He sat kicked back, long legs stretched towards the corner of his desk, chair tilted just enough so he could stair at the pencils that strangely still hung in the ceiling after her Maine adventure. Scully had chosen to ignore them for the time being.

"Delivered the gloves to the lab upstairs myself. They said they should have results in a few hours, business is light up there at the moment." Scully wandered up, file in hand as she studied her partner's aquiline features. Mulder vaguely nodded but his eyes remained fixed on the yellow writing implements hanging overhead, stuck in the ceiling tiles, his teeth working at the inside of his bottom lip. She recognized the signs. His brain was in overdrive, trying to piece together what he knew of Marty Glenn, of her personality, and put that together with a person who was cold blooded enough and capable enough to commit the murders that Pennock wanted to pin her for. Scully had to admit it was an ill-fitting match. But evidence was evidence. Well it would be when they got it, and Scully was fairly certain that all it would take is a matter of time.

"You still want to believe that Marty had nothing to do with this." She settled one hip against the edge of his desk. "You pity her too much."

"I don't pity her at all," he responded evenly, still staring straight above him. "Marty Glenn is an amazing woman, one who has built a life her disability. I think that's something to be celebrated."

"Except she possibly murdered a man."

"But she didn't."

"You are certain of this?" She knew he wasn't. But in all honesty she couldn't help but feel some relief at the statement. How long had it been since Mulder made one of his infuriatingly confident statements based on nothing but his gut alone?

"I saw the polygraph, Scully, she saw something and she knows who did do it."

"Saw? Mulder, listen to yourself, you aren't willing to believe that she killed a man, but you are more than willing to believe that a blind girl witnessed it."

"You said it yourself it was a possibility, "

"But she was tested, she can't see a thing. Optical stimuli have no effect on her."

"Except there was something stimulating her eyes to react."

"It could have been anything, an emotional response to her environment, something she was thinking about. She is blind, it doesn't mean that her eyes don't have some sort of biological response."
He wasn't satisfied. His legs swung down in a lazy arc, hitting the floor as he flipped his chair up. "I just can't believe that Marty would be so scared and frightened if she didn't know something about who is really doing them. Come on, Scully, she's blind, she can't have the precision required for those sorts of injuries, woman can't even sign her name. But she can have witnessed those events somehow. Perhaps she has some sort of psychic connection to the killer, perhaps she sees what he does, or feels the same emotions.

"Psychic connection?" Scully rolled her eyes but didn't come down much further on his theory. "What is it about this girl that has you so worked up? When I took this case for Pennock, you said it was hardly worth an X-file."

"Well I was a jackass, wasn't I?"

"Yes," she nodded, more than willing to concede that. "This isn't about her being a helpless, damsel in distress is it? Because I hardly think that will win you any favors with her. Maybe her cane up your ass."

Mulder chuckled at the image of an irate Marty. "No, it's not about damsels in distress. I just know how she feels."

"To be blind?"

"No, to be angry at the world, to know that there are people staring at you, whispering about you behind your back, many pitying you. I know what it's like to hate that sort of behavior. All you want is for people to look at you as normal, not as someone who had something tragic happen to them."

While Scully knew better than anyone how much the events of Samantha Mulder's disappearance affected her brother, it wasn't often she thought about the aftermath of those events on him as a boy. She knew of course that his parents' marriage dissolved, that his father became a distant, broken figure in his life, taking to his bottle as soon as the ink on his retirement papers was dry. She knew that Teena to this day couldn't and wouldn't face the truth of what happened to her daughter that long ago, November night. But she had never considered what sort of social effects the disappearance had on the family. Of course, it would have been an event. The local police were involved, and likely as not the whole of the Vineyard knew about it. All their friends and neighbors would have been well aware of it, perhaps noting it as the tiny family went about their daily business in the small community. Scully could well imagine the whispers, the sideways looks. Had Mulder still been in the local community school then? Perhaps it was this event that had prompted his family to send him to a private school on the mainland.

"When I was a kid, I hated my name because it was different." Mulder picked up a paper clip floating somewhere on his messy desk, flipping it between his fingers absently as he spoke. "You know how kids are with something weird, they thought 'Fox' was a strange name so I got hell because of it. But you know I grew up to be a smart ass to sort of counteract that. But how do you counteract a sister who disappeared? Most people were sorry for me, I guess. They felt bad, tried to be nice. There was the asshole or two who made snide remarks and they were the ones who always made the worst insinuations. Things like they had heard from their parents that Samantha had run away because my Dad was doing bad things to her or that I was, that I had done something to her and was covering it up, or that one of my parents did. And who knows if their parents did or didn't say it, maybe, but in the end who cares? People who don't know the truth say shit like that. But when you are a twelve-year-old, all you know is that you just wish you could go back to the days when the worst thing you had to worry about was people making fun of you for your first name."

No wonder Mulder walked around with the perpetual chip on his shoulder. Try as he might to blow
off the whispers of "Spooky" and the slings tossed at him by snide fellow agents like Tom Colton, there was a part of Mulder that remembered being a child and having the same looks cast his way, the same whispers as he passed by. He perhaps was more hardened to it now, but not much more. And he delighted in annoying and aggravating people because it was a way to deflect them from focusing on how he was different, just like Marty Glenn did.

"Is that why you hate going by Fox?" Scully smiled, trying to lighten the mood somewhat. "The kids made fun of you for it when you were little?"

"Some of it," he shrugged broad shoulder's lifting indifferently. "Most of it is because that's the last thing I remember hearing Samantha scream as she was carried off.

It took Scully a long, horrible moment to realize what he was saying, her gut twisting at the impact of the statement. "Oh, Mulder, I had no idea! I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Truth was I wasn't fond of it much before we lost Samantha, but you know I put up with it from my mom and from your mom. Don't have the heart to explain to them why I hate it." He honestly didn't look as if he minded overly much that they both did.

"Anyway," he continued lazily. "Perhaps I do identify with Marty. She's not been given a fair shake in life either. I don't think that makes her a murderer."

"Well, I'll have the PCR test, we'll see what the results are." Though without a murder weapon it would be thin at best for the Wilmington DA to build a case on even that. She watched her partner thoughtfully for a long moment, not seeing the Fox Mulder she knew, the tall, brooding, intelligent man who she had come to know but the boy from the photographs she had seen in Teena's home, the boy who had once spent endless summers playing baseball and shooting hoops. How different would the man in front of her have been if his sister hadn't disappeared so long ago? What if he had grown up with a normal life, gone off to college, had done all the things he eventually did without the baggage he carried now? Would he have been the same Fox Mulder? Would she have even met him? Would he still have the chip on his shoulder, or would he be a much more carefree person?

"Thinking deep thoughts, Scully?" Mulder didn't turn up to her thoughtful stare, but she knew he could sense her watching him.

"Just wondering how you would have been different if things hadn't happened they way they did."

"You are wondering if I would still have my charming personality."

"Among other things," she admitted with a hint of guilt. "You know you were quite the ass when I first met you."

"I was, wasn't I?" He grinned, delighted, letting it slide across his face. "God, did I really throw chemical compounds on you the first day."

"That and mutilated cows." She snorted, recalling all too well Mulder's slide show. "I think you thought it would scare me off."

"Pity I didn't catch on to how stubborn you were. I suppose like Marty I reacted that way to get the unpleasantness of your snide responses and scientific skepticism over with so you would go back to Quantico and I could have my basement in peace."

"Sorry to disappoint you," she snorted.

"Yeah, well perhaps I was wrong," he admitted somewhat apologetically. "After all, you've proven
not to be as snotty as I suspected you would be and you may have gotten me out of a scrape or two."

"Or two?" Eyebrows shot to her hairline at his cheeky smirk.

"I think the one of late, where you tried to pull my head out of my ass, was a valiant effort."

"I'm hoping for it to be a successful one, Mulder." She slid off the corner of his desk, turning to her table. "I'm trying to keep you honest, Mulder, just like you are trying to keep Marty honest in this."

"I know," he murmured softly as she rounded her workspace and settled at her computer. "That's why I need you around, Scully."

She said nothing as she flipped on her monitor and typed in her password.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder empathizes with not understanding what he is seeing.

It was strange how you could tell Mulder's mood by the sound of his fingers flying over his keyboard. When he was angry, they stabbed at it with hard punctuations, a flurry of plastic clicks as his thoughts spilled out onto a virtual document. A more mellow mood would produce less of a steady rhythm, usually he would lazily pick and hunt and then pause, attention caught by whatever article he was quoting or the handwritten notes on his desk. Occasionally he would reach for something to fiddle with, a pen, a paperclip, the basketball on his desk, his eyes behind his reading glasses glued to his screen as he read through what he wrote. Today was somewhere in between. Scully could hear him working as she stepped off the elevator. She paused to listen just outside of the open office door. Today had been Marty Glenn's sentencing. Mulder hadn't been pleased about it. But there wasn't any vitriol, as he worked, no irate recriminations, merely a sort of thoughtful plodding as fingertips met keys. This case had gotten to him in ways very little else had in the past year or so.

"You still here?" She glanced at her watch. It was well past ten o'clock, pushing eleven, and he looked as if he planned on being there even longer. He didn't seem surprised that she was standing there, watching him, though his head turned slightly to her as he glanced over his shoulder, his glasses catching the reflected light off his computer monitor.

"Yeah, just wanted to write this up." He waved obliquely at the screen, glancing down at his legal notepad briefly. "What are you still doing here? I thought you headed home hours ago."

"I did, but got stopped on my way out of the door, consult on another case." She yawned and meandered into the office, over to the chair in front of his desk. It creaked as she flopped in, as she realized just how tired she was. "How was Marty?"

He didn't need to tell her he had gone to see her after the hearing, she knew he had. Mulder's full mouth pursed slightly, his jaw biting back the grimace of displeasure she knew was fighting to get free. "She's got five years, can get out in two to three with good behavior. Truth is they could only pin her for the one murder, the others they are fairly certain her victim committed. Turns out he was well known in certain circles because he was a clean and efficient hit man, but what no one realized was that was because he was a serial killer who targeted women like Marty's mother."

It was a sad punctuation on an already unfortunate life, Scully wouldn't deny that. "And you think she saw what this man saw?"

"Imagine it, Scully, everyday for all of your life you saw nothing but the inside of a prison. Suddenly, all you could see was murder, after murder, after murder. It would piss you off too, don't you think?"

If Mulder were right it would be a horrific existence. "Can't you at least convince her to allow you to speak to a judge?"

"Already tried that but I think she's happy with this for now. She's safe, she's taken care of, and she
doesn't have to worry about people staring at her. I think in a strange way her sitting in a prison all 
day is familiar. It's home. It's all that she can remember seeing."

With a long sigh he reached his packet of sunflower seeds, tipping several into his palm. "I went 
and saw her tonight and it was so strange. She had spent so much time and energy being the angry, 
blind girl, the one giving a finger to the world as she trudged through life, hating the seeing world 
for being able to function while she made due as she could, always seeing the vision of a madman. 
But now it is different. There's a certain sort of peace about all of this for her, as if now, finally, she 
can accept the hand life dealt her. She's wrestled with her demon and won."

Perhaps because her demon was now dead and couldn't torment her any further, unlike the demons 
Mulder dealt with. Scully could hear the longing in his voice, the thoughtful regret as he cracked 
on of his sunflower seeds, working it around his mouth. If only it were so simple for him to find 
that same sense of calm that Marty had.

"You think that you will ever find that resolution in your life?" It was the private question Scully 
had long wondered about her partner. What if at the end of the day they did find all of the answers 
the two of them had so long been seeking. What sort of peace lay at the end of the road for Fox 
Mulder? Would he ever be able to find any, or would he simply be forever asking questions, 
demanding answers and justification from the gods as to why the strange things of the world 
happened. Would there ever be a moment where Mulder would be satisfied enough to live that 
small town life he claimed he wanted so much?

"I would like to think that it's possibly I can find it." He removed the spent shell, tossing it in the 
trash. "Look, I know of late, with everything…"

Words failed him as he looked up at her in apology and pleading. "Scully, I don't know what to 
think about anything right now. All I know is that I've been lied to in the worst way and I have no 
idea where the lies begin and the truth begins. Like Marty I'm sitting here helpless while someone 
else gets to pull the strings and it pisses me off."

"I know." If there was some way Scully could make any of this for him, she would. "Mulder, there 
is nothing more I would love than for you to find that certainty once again. I just hope that your life 
 isn't spent like Marty's, angry and resentful, hating the world and everything in it till you find 
yourself trapped in their visions with no way of escape."

Her words were met with silence, broken only by the cracking of a sunflower seed between 
Mulder's teeth.

"Anyway," Scully smiled tightly, feeling her presence was now more of a hindrance than a help to 
him. "I need to head home if you expect to see me in here in the morning."

"Right," he nodded, waving her away as he turned back to his work. "Get some rest. Come in a bit 
later. I'll see you when you get in."

"Try to get some sleep yourself," she admonished as she moved towards the door, knowing it was 
useless to tell him that. She had a feeling she would find Mulder behind his desk when she got 
there in the morning, in the same position he was in now.
The Distance Between

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder becomes even more distant.

If Scully had expected Mulder's encounter with Marty Glenn to finally wake him up to the spiral he was in, she was clearly sorely mistaken. She had hoped that Marty's example would speak to him at least, remind him of what was important, but rather than shake him from the broken melancholy that had marked their last year together it seemed to only make it worse. Scully had never seen Mulder ever quite so moody or so distant, not even in his most self-destructive and self-willed moments.

A week passed and she said nothing. When two weeks of this cool, self-absorbed behavior continued, she held her temper and her tongue. The logical part of her reminded her that Mulder was sorting through a plethora of things that Scully, despite all that had been done to her personally, couldn't really understand. While she had her own cross to bear, in the end this was Mulder's life. Everything he had believed, everything he had done had been a lie engineered by someone else for a specific purpose. That thought more than any other checked her from grabbing him and shaking him loose from his ambivalence. But as a third week approached with no signs of a thaw, Scully found her patience reaching a breaking point.

"Mulder, you free for lunch today?" It was her opening greeting as she stepped into the office, finding her partner buried in paperwork yet again, ignoring her as she settled her things. This was his normal modus operandi of late, hardly speaking to her unless he had to. Considering the fact that their caseload was next to nothing of late, she wondered where it was he found all of these volumes of files to be busy with.

"No, not today," he replied blandly, frowning at what he was reading over the top of his glasses. "And neither are you."

Scully had been about to protest him getting out of a free lunch, but stopped short at his corollary. "Neither am I! What am I doing?"

"Meeting with Skinner in about five minutes. We have a case we are working on."

That sounded promising, especially considering he wasn't sneering at it or dismissing it out of hand. "An X-file?"

"Not quite, it's a cross departmental sort of thing." He waved his hands vaguely as he gathered up files and notes. Cross-departmental sort of thing? Those sorts of cases didn't tend to be greeted by Mulder with any sort of acceptance, usually he railed against them. Mulder hardly worked well with others in the FBI, let alone any other part of the Executive Branch of the United States government. Why was he so complacent about this case?

"Who are we working with?" Scully riffled through her briefcase, gathering notepad and pen, and hoping she would at least get to glance through the case notes before they stepped into Skinner's office. Mulder, however, didn't look like he was sharing.
"Central Intelligence," he mumbled, eyes carefully averted to his desk with casual calmness belied by sudden way his jaw clenched over the words. Scully felt herself involuntarily jerk.

"CIA," she burst out, as if he had muttered a four-letter word. "What in the world would they want out of us?"

Almost on instinct her gaze flickered to the wall of aging filing cabinets with their plethora of accusations against the government intelligence agency and she found herself ridiculously wondering. Mulder read exactly where her thoughts went.

"No, nothing to do with the X-files." He bit out the words, but softened them with a half-hearted, goofy smile. "Though I think the fact that the idea ran through your head just turned me on."

Scully flushed, pressing her lips together against the smirk that threatened. "So what is this about?" And why was he being evasive? He was trying not to be, she could tell that much. Normally, the files would be shoved into her hands first off if not waiting on her table and Mulder would be spewing off observations like a firehouse, expecting instant input.

"They asked my opinion on a domestic terrorism situation that came up."

Scully grimaced and thought immediately of Melissa Riedel. Why was it Mulder was the go to man when domestic terror was involved? "It's domestic, why isn't NSA involved?"

"The man is named Jacob Haley, and he's not just mixed up in domestic rabble rousing. He came across the CIA radar first, mostly because he's been known to frequent ex-Soviet circles, and there is a fear of some underworld trading of a quite nasty nature."

"What, that he's trying to get arms from Russia?"

"Amongst other things." Mulder shepherded her out of their office and towards the elevators, fingers pressing at her elbow as he guided her along. "NSA and the FBI heard some chatter, but it was the CIA who made the connection, hence why we are working with them."

"And how did you get roped into this?"

There was the telltale twitch again. Mulder's jaw flexed for the briefest of seconds, but the lie tumbled out of his mouth with the ease of someone who did it all of the time. "They wanted me to work up a profile on this Haley. He's elusive at best, even for the Spooks, and the information they have on him is minimal. They aren't sure Haley is even his real name. I was brought on board, as always, to get into his head."

"And so why am I being brought on board?" The elevator doors opened, admitting them both, though Scully managed to disentangle herself from Mulder's grasp, frowning up at him in irritation.

"They need all hands on deck for this one. Hell, they are bringing me in on this." Mulder hardly seemed to notice the glare she shot him or the fact he practically railroaded her down the hallway. He instead watched the electronic readout of the floors in distant preoccupation. "They've been at this a few weeks. They are planning an operation tomorrow morning to snag Haley, joint CIA and FBI, and they want us all to play nice together and get along like good boys and girls."

That part seemed honest enough. What was he lying about and why? "So they want us help in the take down?"

"I've seen what you can do with a gun, Scully. I'd be afraid of you." He was kidding, even trying hard at it, his blank expression turning into a sly, teasing smile in an instant. But it, like the humor,
was forced, the playfulness gone as the doors slid open and he waited for her to exit first. "Guess we have to be on our best behavior for a bit, huh?"

"I'm sure we can manage." She fell into step beside him with unease. There was something about all of this that struck her wrong. Mulder lied to her, she knew he had. In all of their long partnership he had never lied. Perhaps he kept the truth from her, her missing ova came to mind, but to tell her an actual lie to her face was something he never did. What was he doing that would cause him not to trust her of all people? Was it the CIA?

"Mulder," she murmured quietly as they approached Skinner's office. "You've told me everything, right? There's no surprises waiting for me once the CIA get their hands in this and drag us in. No secret conspiracies or alien bodies that you are trying to liberate?"

He winced visibly as she dropped "alien bodies" but shook his head. "You are the one person on this planet I trust. If I can't be honest with you, who can I be honest with?"

"I don't know, Mulder, that's what I would like to know," she replied quietly as he held open the door for her. Why couldn't he be honest with her now?
Under Surveillance

Chapter Summary

In which Scully follows Mulder to see just what he's gotten himself into.

Scully didn't want to believe that it was true.

Fox Mulder was many things; he was stubborn, angry, occasionally a raging ass, but a traitor, that was something that he wasn't capable of being. In her heart of hearts she knew that he would never turn on his country and his ideals to truck with a terrorist, no matter what Mulder's frustration with the government might be, he wouldn't stay if he didn't believe in doing what was right. He wouldn't do anything like this. So why was she following her partner, a man she trusted with her very life, through the back roads of Maryland towards the Delaware border?

Mulder had avoided her after the meeting on the Haley debacle. It had taken Scully nearly twenty minutes to figure out he'd left the building all together. A search of his work area turned up nothing, and suspicious she had gone straight to his apartment. She just did catch him as his car had pulled away down his street. Reaching for her phone, she nearly had his number pressed on speed dial before she stopped herself. More on impulse than anything else she followed him, carefully slipping behind him and darting through DC traffic, weaving around cars as she kept sight of him onto the highway and into Maryland.

She should feel guilty about this. After all this was a man that just a year ago saved her life as she lay dying in a hospital from cancer. Mulder would walk through fire for her. He always had her back and no matter what had been unfailingly honest with her. At least he had been until this case. Scully knew what she saw on that video, she knew that it appeared like Mulder allowed a suspected terrorist to get away and now a man was dead because of it.

He lied to her. The Mulder she knew would never, ever lie to her. At least the Mulder she thought she knew would never lie to her. As she watched the taillights of his sedan in the distance ahead, she considered the events of the last year between them, all the truths that came to light during her illness, the deceit used to give her cancer and lure him into believing the story about aliens and conspiracies, all to cover the truth of the governments all too real human testing on its own population. Mulder had struggled with that truth, all the while deliberately avoiding any and all attempts to dig into the validity of Kritschgau and his story. Not even Emily's death had prompted him into the sort of action she once knew out of Mulder. Their quest and work had floundered. Whatever lead Kritschgau had given them, it was cold, those who were responsible for her illness, for Emily's death, for Melissa, those men still sat out there, never knowing justice for their crimes.

Perhaps that was why she was following him now through the backwoods of Maryland, because she feared that this was the only way he could find that could get justice done. It was a horrible thought, but a thought that made sense nonetheless. For months, Mulder had been growing more and more disenchanted, certainly more so since Emily's death. The recent mystery surrounding the still missing Cassandra Spender only seemed to make him worse. And perhaps, as much as she hated to even contemplate the very idea that had driven this man who she cared for and admired over an edge, these were men who tore apart his family, manipulated his life, and hurt everyone he ever cared for all in order to use him as a convenient tool, a patsy they could play in order to create
a convenient and believable denial by which to hide behind. It was conceivable in his raw anger at the unfairness of it Mulder could have taken that step she didn't believe him capable of doing.

Scully didn't want to believe it was true. That was why she was following him beyond all common sense. She couldn't make herself think that Mulder would betray every ideal he ever had to align himself with terrorists. Fox Mulder was a good man, and honest man, she had told her brother that just months ago. Bill wanted to believe that Mulder was dangerous, but Scully couldn't. She stood up for him, to her family, to her superiors, to her friends who called him "spooky". He wouldn't betray all of that now, would he?

Delaware was not a large state and Mulder would eventually run out of road before hitting the Atlantic Ocean. Scully's eyes burned with strain and exhaustion as they passed a road sign that welcomed them to Angola-by-the-Bay. The town was tiny by any stretch of the imagination, but it did have a small motel, its light blinking in the darkness as Mulder's car pulled in.

All these miles and he didn't even notice her. So much for Mulder's infamous sense of paranoia! She had been careful but had thought for certain he would have noticed something. She slowed, waiting for several long moments before finally pulling into the driveway of the motel, turning off her lights as she coasted in and parked far enough away to watch as her partner unfolded his lanky frame from his car. He stretched after hours behind the wheel, but there was a sense of wary alertness around him. Scully ducked low in her seat as his gaze flickered for the briefest of instants towards the area where she sat. There appeared to be no recognition, however, as he finally went into the shabby looking front office.

It was by far not the first time Mulder had tried the elude her. It had taken her years and much brow beating before she could convince him to even warn her of one of his escapades. She had hoped never to hear of him running off to secret meetings without her again. Now she almost wished he were being carted off by military police to the brig, at least then she would know what side he was really on. Any other man at a clandestine meeting at a hotel like this, and Scully would have said it was a woman. She wasn't so sure she wouldn't have preferred that as Mulder exited the office, key in hand. Without returning to his car for any luggage he moved to a room at the far end, quickly letting himself in without a backwards glance. The door shuddered behind him as he closed it, a light flickering on at the window, her partner nothing more than a shadow against the shades.

"Mulder," she whispered, watching in silence from the safety of her car, "just what have you gotten yourself into now?"
Putting Him in Danger

Chapter Summary

In which Scully fears the case is putting Mulder in danger.

Gables Corner, Ohio hardly looked big enough for a movie theater, let alone an act of domestic terrorism. Perhaps that was why it was so confusing to people as to why the FBI and CIA were now converging on the sight, as curious, small town onlookers watched with undisguised worry as government black sedans rolled through the idyllic looking streets. Small town America didn't know hate crimes. That happened in big cities, where the seats of power and largest populations where, where CNN cameras could catch and blast the carnage across millions of television screens across the country. Gables Corner was so tiny they got lost on the way from the airport just trying to find the place.

"The movie theater sits in the town's main shopping district. There are three thousand people here, so word has probably spread quickly that something has happened." Skinner grimaced out of the tinted windows, the early morning sunlight reflecting against his thick glasses. In his mind he was thinking already of causality reports and carefully worded speeches to the local news outlets that doubtless had gathered on the sleepy area to report something other than farm subsidies. It was his job to perform damage control. But Scully's thoughts were elsewhere, in Delaware, to Mulder, and how in the hell he was mixed up in all of this.

"Sir, do you think that Mulder is all right?" She had yet to voice her concern to her superior, not since the news about Gables Corner broke, and she had quietly simmered on it since Skinner demanded her presence with him to find out what had happened in the movie theater. How could he have agreed to send Mulder into a situation like this? How could Mulder have agreed to do it?

"Scully, you've seen Mulder get himself involved with worse men than this bunch, and you are asking me if he will be all right?" Skinner turned to her, both surprised and chastising, distracted from the thoughts at hand. "You're the one person who knows him best and you think that I can confirm that information for you?"

Scully felt stung at his words, but acknowledged he had a point. "Sir, these are domestic terrorists, they are ruthless in their aims, and they could draw Mulder down a path he might not be able to get out of. I know that he was aware of this going in, but the CIA, the Justice Department, they are throwing him out there like a sacrificial lamb to these people, who just willingly murdered fourteen people in a small town. For what?" She glanced at the neat little houses in their trim yards, lush with spring grass and leaves. "This wasn't a terror target, sir. This was something else."

"I know." Skinner bit out the words in frustration. "But putting personal feeling aside, Agent Scully, Fox Mulder is as well trained an agent out there as anyone, including yourself, with about five years on you in terms of active field work. I think he was well aware of what he was getting into when he agreed to take this assignment. Perhaps you should trust in your partner that he knows what he is doing."

He was rebuking her. Scully knew it. Skinner was right. Mulder was as aware of the situation as anyone, perhaps more so than most, and she was acting as if he were a green rookie out there on his first assignment. But it rankled, it galled her that he knew about this the entire time and didn't
tell her, didn't even hint about it all these weeks, just shut her out and cut her off, as he used to do back in the early days. And so what if it was on Skinner's orders? She was his partner, damn it, his best friend. She always had his back no matter what. Despite the hardships and rough sailing of recent years, she was always there and now, she wasn't.

This wasn't any different from any other case where he hared off by himself, to Alaska or Russia, while she covered details at her end, but for some reason this was different. How or why, she couldn't put her finger on. Perhaps it was because it wasn't as simple as Mulder ditching her to chase a lead, it was Mulder willingly putting himself in a dangerous situation, one where he could very easily fail and end up dead in a car on the side of some lonely highway, one that the FBI and CIA would call an unfortunate accident in the line of duty. There was radio silence from him now, if things went horribly wrong there was no way that she or anyone else could get to him and get him out without compromising the entire integrity of the mission. She goddamn hated it.

"Scully," Skinner cut into her black thoughts, his brusqueness now mollified somewhat with understanding. "For what it's worth, I wasn't crazy about this idea either. It's dangerous as hell for any agent. But Mulder is the one they approached and frankly we had no chance of slipping anyone else in believably. He's known in that community, his recent statements have made it quite clear he has no love for certain aspects of the governments behavior." Whether Skinner approved of Mulder's opinions or not was hard for Scully to gauge. Skinner as always never seemed to comment one way or the other on the sanity or rightness of Mulder's righteous indignation.

"Mulder has been angry since Michael Kirtschgau stepped forward last year," she replied more as an explanation for Mulder's statements than anything else. Why she felt she needed to explain it, she didn't know. "He has been used for years, played by these men who have perpetuated this lie on the public and I can't say that this isn't the reason these people reached out to Mulder."

"And Mulder may have his own agenda, but in his heart he's trying to do the right thing. He doesn't want to see any other people hurt by this, even if this Haley thinks he's out to serve a perverted justice."

As if Scully didn't realize this about Mulder's actions. "Sir, what in the hell is really going on here? The CIA is involved in this, there is first talk of arms deals, now fourteen people in a meaningless little town are dead and for no good reason? What has Mulder really gotten himself into here?"

She had her boss cornered and she knew it. Skinner had already drug her this far, likely as not because he realized that he couldn't stop her from finding out the truth anyway. He might as well explain this, else she would raise hell until she was sure that what was going on here wasn't going to end up with her having to make a phone call to Teena Mulder she never wanted to make.

"Haley has been on the FBI and NSA radar for years, mostly as a low level agitator and nothing more. After Oklahoma City more attention was given to him and alarms starting going off when he left the country for an extended period of time a year ago. The CIA has been following his movements overseas. They were more than a bit surprised when out of the blue this man contacted Mulder, wanting to meet with him."

"So not even the CIA knows why he's here and reaching out to the FBI?" Brilliant, so much for their government intelligence.

"They suspect, as do we, that Haley wants the inside mole and thinks that Mulder may be what he is looking for. Mulder has made comments that align with those of Haley, and he's an outsider in the Bureau. Few people, if any, pay that much attention to his actions unless they are well over the top. And short of that vampire incident in Texas, you and I both know that Mulder for the last year has been abnormally well-behaved." Skinner sounded as if he couldn't decide if that was a good or
bad thing. "The truth is that Mulder is so far below the radar now that he would be ideal for anyone in Haley's shoes."

Mulder was easy bait, ideal for Haley's purposes enough that he would want to take him. And worse, what Skinner didn't mention, was that he was expendable to the FBI. Should Haley catch wind of what was really going on, his loss would be mourned, considered unfortunate, but at the end of the day what had they really lost? An agent who was a pain in their ass anyway? The X-files and all that went into it, Mulder's work, the truth about the experiments performed on countless thousands, the justice Scully so desperately craved for herself and those she cared for, that would all be lost. How could she be so sure this wasn't as much of a set up as anything else?

"Sir, are you worried about him out there?"

Skinner was, as always, immutable. It was rare that she could ever read what her superior ever truly thought about a situation unless he wanted her to. But for once he let his guard slip, just a fraction, worry flickering in his dark eyes briefly before his face tightened and the walls slammed shut again.

"Agent Mulder will be fine, Scully, I assure you that."

The car pulled up to a crowd of local police, county sheriffs, and state patrol outside of the theater, as white clad HAZMAT teams stumbled inside in their clumsy outfits. A bevy of local news cameras stood across the street and Scully could already see Skinner looking to them.

"We better go reassure the public before we see just what the hell this chemical agent is they are using on people."

Scully stumbled out behind Skinner to the flash of light bulbs from across the street and shouted, frightened questions. Let him handle the press, she would handle the science behind the contagion used. And somewhere, she prayed, Mulder was handling the rest. All she wanted was Mulder back in once piece.
Bacterium

Chapter Summary

In which Scully studies the terrorist weapon.

Streptococcus, in the grand scheme of bacterium, was such an innocuous contagion. As a family, the bacteria could range from as innocent as those that went into making Swiss cheese to as annoying as the kind that gave a person irritating cases of strep throat. It was one of the first families of bacterium Scully had learned about in her infectious disease classes, all twenty-seven of the different main kinds and their variants, including necrotizing fasciitis, the so-called "flesh eating" kind. Nothing she had seen moved with the rapidity or lethality of this.

In the darkness just beyond her car, Scully sat, lost in thought, watching the motel where Mulder waited for the others. She hated this, hated waiting in the silence and the dark as he roamed his motel room until a signal from Haley and his men came, but there was little she could do about it. If they knew she was there, he would be dead. Frankly, Mulder wasn't thrilled she was there either, but couldn't argue her out of it.

"This is insanity, Scully," he had snapped, jaw set as he confronted her in his apartment earlier that evening. "I'm not letting you go!"

"What? Will you take my keys and hide them?" She stood at his door, arms crossed, chin lifted in challenge knowing he wouldn't do it. Though, for the briefest of moments, her self-assurance waivered, as anger and determination flamed and for a second Scully nearly believed that he might just do that. With his foot of height on her he could wrestle them off her. But instead he threw up his hands, spinning away from her to stalk back the other direction.

"These men wouldn't think twice about killing you if they saw you there, and they certainly wouldn't shed a tear over killing me."

"You didn't notice me following you the other night," she retorted with just a hint of pride. Mulder's dark scowl indicated that he wasn't impressed.

"Scully, this isn't something to play around with. These men are out to kill hundreds, maybe thousands, and your presence alone can jeopardize weeks of work."

"Work that you might have understood better if you had let me in." She tossed the files in her hand at his general direction. With surprising grace and alacrity he snagged them before they could fly across his entry hall, trying to reorder them from where they slipped from their manila folder.

"The people in Gables Corner died from the same sort of bacteria that was used to infect the man at the park the other day." Scully snapped her words between them as Mulder scanned through her findings with his normal expediunce. "It's a particularly virulent strain on streptococcus."

"From Russia?"

"No, from here." She waited till his face turned up in surprise to grace him with a tiny, tight smile. "This variant comes from a facility in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I did the cross checking with the CDC
myself. This isn't some Russian bio-weapon that Haley got his hands on, he got this from us."

"You're sure?"

"I didn't mention this to anyone, Mulder, not even Skinner yet." Their supervisor was her next call, but she wanted Mulder to see the files before he insisted on continuing with this crazy mission. "Someone got Haley that bacteria from Pine Bluff, not from Russia."

"Another mole within the military?"

"Maybe," Scully acknowledged, though she didn't believe that. And she could tell by the edge on Mulder's question he didn't either. "It could be the same sort of story we've been dealing with all along. It could be another excuse for a test, another bio-weapon being used unwittingly on the American public, disguised as crazies in the woodwork. Except instead of aliens, now it is domestic terrorists, out to destroy the government."

"Well what's one wacko from another, eh?" Mulder closed the files, handing them back to her. "Haley and his men were nowhere near Ohio that night. I know, I was there."

"But that doesn't mean there weren't other operatives there, Mulder, ones who are conducting these tests."

"How are they getting the bacteria out there?"

That part Scully hadn't managed to piece together. "It has to be something they were handling, the food, the tickets, I don't know yet. That will take some time."

"Well time isn't what I got," Mulder shot back, reaching for his leather jacket and slipping it over his long arms. Scully said nothing as he gathered his things, but gripped the keys in her pocket tighter. At least Mulder made no move to try and take them from her.

"Scully, would it do me any good to ask you not to follow me?"

"Do you really need to ask that question? I'm your partner. I have your back."

He looked as if he couldn't decide if he wanted to be pissed or grateful. "Stay well away. You know where I'm going, don't tail so close. Stay in the shadows and if they take me somewhere by God, don't follow. Just go back to DC and keep your eyes and ears out. Chances are that if this is an inside job something will be a dead giveaway. What I need to know is how they are transmitting the stuff. That will clue me into Haley's next move."

"I'll work on it," she assured him as she followed him out of his apartment door. She had done what he had asked. She had stayed well behind him, giving him a three-minute start before setting out to Delaware. Just as before, he parked and entered room 130. Scully turned off her lights, far away from the prying eyes of anyone going into or out of the dingy, worn motel, and waited.

It was only moments. In the darkness she could see the door open, and men file out, one with a black hood over his head. She didn't need to see the cast on his hand to know it was Mulder. Teeth biting into the skin of her lip, she ignored the bitter taste of adrenaline on her tongue as Mulder was maneuvered into a van. "Maneuvering" was a nice term, pushed was more appropriate, but there didn't seem to be any harm done to him as the doors were closed and the engine started. Scully ducked low in her seat, watching as the lumbering body pulled out and onto the two lane highway, resisting the urge to ignore every injunction Mulder gave her and follow him. She desperately hoped that she hadn't just seen her partner off on a death trap. If she had, there would be hell to pay with the Justice Department, and Scully doubted even Skinner could stop her if what she suspected
was the truth.
The Two of Us

Chapter Summary

In which Scully reminds Mulder she there till the end of the line.

"Ahh, Jesus! What are you doing, yanking it off my hand?"

"If you'd hold still this process would go much easier." Scully firmly held Mulder's hand in place as she worked, ignoring his yelps and protests. You would have thought she really was trying to tear the digit from off his body. In reality she was merely trying to re-wrap the splint that he had carelessly let come loose. "Keep this up, Mulder, and you'll never play piano again."

"Good thing I never played it in the first place." He grumbled, wincing as she carefully replaced the metal splint and taped, deftly resetting the finger to stiff stillness once more. "Think I will make it, Doc?" They stood in his kitchen while she worked, using the countertop as an impromptu medical stand.

"Sadly, I think you'll live another day." She smiled as she taped the last edge of tape, checking over her handiwork once more before relinquishing his hand to him once again. "Honestly, I should drag you to the hospital to have it looked at."

"What and not have you practice those skills your parents paid so highly for? I'm doing you a favor!"

"I think you are doing an ER nurse somewhere a favor and I'm obliging the poor soul from having to deal with you." She smirked as she reached up to tousle his soft, dark hair. "You behaved yourself as best you could, I suppose. I'd give you a lollipop if I had one."

"I can think of things that would make up for it?" The knowing leer appeared with the childish delight as she graced him with the appropriate rolling of the eyes. Mulder knew how to kill a moment.

"Do you really want another finger broken?"

"No, I hear you G-women are rough on hardened terrorists, like me. Besides, I think I've allowed you to torture me enough for one day."

"And judging from the contents of your video collection I thought you liked that sort of thing." Tongue firmly in cheek, Scully enjoyed seeing the look of impressed surprise rise on Mulder's face, as she cheekily began to gather her medical things from where they lay scattered across his counter.

"Dana Scully, you coming on to me?"

"In your wildest dreams, Mulder," she shot back, ducking her head as her cheeks pinked ever so slightly. What in the world had possessed her to meet his bratty flirtation? Mulder commonly tossed out inappropriate comments if for nothing else to see the rise he could get out of her for it. Rarely did she ever meet him equally on the playing field.
"So be careful with that when showering, you know the deal." Scully glanced at his bandaged finger, hoping this time the bandage would last. Granted, she hadn't bargained for Mulder being involved in a bank heist the last time she had wrapped it. "With any luck it should be fine in about six weeks."

"When can I take this off?"

"I did say six weeks."

"Good, so I can maybe manage it off in what? Two? Three?"

She tried to shoot him a look that said he was impossible but he ignored it as he turned to his fridge, perusing it for something to drink. He pulled out soda for himself, water for her, cracking his can open as he watched her pack her things. His mood was deceptively light and had been since they had finally finished their debriefing earlier that evening. Haley had been found hours after Mulder last saw him, the bacteria having eaten away much of the body. Any sign of the man who had let Mulder go was gone and no man fitting that description was seen anywhere.

"Do you think he got away," she asked as she repacked the last of her things in her medical bag. She didn't have to explain who she meant, Mulder guessed easily enough.

"I don't know. I suppose he did. If he was CIA, he probably is back underground and there will be no finding him." Mulder shrugged indifferently, but she could hear the anger all the same. They had been played yet again.

"Perhaps because he was CIA that was why he let you go." Scully had wondered that since Mulder had debriefed them on the events after the robbery. "Why else would he do it?"

"Why would the CIA create an elaborate set up like this? To test some flesh eating bacteria on innocent people."

"Or to set up Haley to remove a perceived threat from the scene." That question had bothered Scully as well, since the moment she realized that the strain of bacteria they were dealing with came from the US Army's own labs. "It doesn't make sense otherwise. It's easy enough to trace that bacteria to its source, the only reason they wouldn't care if we traced it is if they had deliberately been setting Haley up to be captured."

"And yet no one batted an eye when a group of teenagers and old people died in Ohio. What are they, acceptable casualties in a greater war?" The rest of the soda was swallowed in on gulp, the can crushed in frustration as Mulder tossed it towards his trash. "The kid handling the money was sixteen! what sort of terrorist threat did she pose?"

"She didn't," Scully admitted, feeling in her hear the same injustice in it all that Mulder did. "The CIA knew exactly how virulent that strain was, it's been well documented. They had no reason to test it."

"And did that stop them from using it on innocent people?" Mulder scowled darkly, the lightness finally giving way to the true and deeply abiding anger he felt. "We were played, just as surely as every other time in these last five years, longer even. I'm so God damned tired of being used."

The violent kick he sent at his refrigerator door sent a loud clatter of bottles and cans, startling the hell out of Scully. At least, she rationalized, it wasn't his hand, but it clearly did little to make Mulder feel better. He stalked out of his kitchen, back into the living room, angry recrimination following in his wake. From the other room she could hear the sound of his basketball being
palmed in his hand before slapping the hardwood floor. At least it wasn't his dominate hand that had the broken finger on it.

She followed him inside, watching as he stood aimlessly at his desk, the ball bouncing up and down by habit, as he stared quietly out of the windowpane, the one still marred by a bullet hole that nearly killed her and sticky with the residue of a masking tape "X". The mysterious man who had responded to that summons had been dead for two years, his predecessor for even longer. So many people had died pulling Mulder's strings, even the mysterious smoking man. Was it really worth all of that, she wondered? Was it worth ruining this man's life? Was it worth dying for?

"We are here again, aren't we?" He was pissed off, but he was sad as well. How many times had they been in this very same position, finding out that all that they believed was true was a lie, and that they were but little more than pawns in someone else's scheme? "Every damn time I think that we aren't, they it is, pulling the rug out from under us. You'd think the joke was getting old by now."

"This is Washington, Mulder, everyone is out to use everyone else." It was a cynical way of looking at things, but it was one of the first things she had learned about the city, even as a teenager living in nearby, working-class Baltimore. "The intern or page is here to hopefully become a senate staffer, maybe an elected official, someone who sits on a powerful committee. The DOD, DOJ, they all spend time messing around in each other's business, holding pissing contests over jurisdiction and appropriations funds. It's the way that things work around here."

"And that gives people living in the shadows leave to hurt and kill innocents?" He slammed the ball hard against the floor, causing it to bounce away from him and clatter noisily into his desk. "You nearly died, Scully, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. You had a daughter you never knew about, and she died, and there wasn't a damn thing that could be done. How many other people over the years, should we keep naming them? Your sister, my father, Pendrell, the list keeps getting bigger and bigger. Both of our apartments should be zoned off as morgues with the body count that keeps rising in them, and no one ever seems to care. The CIA comes in here, hands a virus to a man who could easily kill millions in the hopes of framing him and playing with their new toy, and we are supposed to what, accept that that's the cost of doing business in this place, have a nice day?"

It was the most outrage she had seen out of her partner in a year and Scully stood stunned by it. "No, Mulder, we shouldn't."

"Jesus, Scully, if these are the methods we employ to keep the peace, you have to ask yourself what sort of peace is it?" He threw himself despondently on his couch, the leather groaning as his long body fell comfortably into the cushions. "And notice who the first person they think of for this sort of dirty work is."

"I had noticed," she admitted uncomfortably. "I had noticed and I told Skinner so."

"And what could he do?" Mulder punched lightly at one of the pillows, stuffing it behind his head. "I've been a pain in Skinner's ass for years now. Look, Spooky Mulder has been contained. Give him the shit detail! Let him take the fall for this, no one would think twice if he got mixed up with crazies out to destroy the US government. He's an acceptable loss should the shit go down, it's not as if he's doing anything important at the moment."

"You know, they have half a point," Scully replied before he could get too far into his self-pitying tirade. "Mulder you've been hiding in the basement for a year, and people are asking why it's so important for you to have the X-files open when you aren't doing anything with them. And let's just say your recent comments, coupled with those you've made previously, make you an easy fall man
for situations likes this."

"I didn't want you to agree with them," he snapped acidly.

"I didn't say I did, I simply said that there is a point, you recognize it yourself. You've lost your way, Mulder. I've said it for months, and I feel like I keep beating my head against a wall." In frustration she perched on the edge of his armchair. "You've let the trail go cold. You've lost your faith, and I've tried to keep us both afloat, but I need to trust in something too, and I feel I've lost that."

He silently blinked up at his cracked and yellowed ceiling. "You didn't trust me after the park incident, when I let Haley go."

"I was right in not trusting you at that moment. Well, perhaps I was right in being suspicious." She truly felt sorry now she hadn't trusted him, had believed the worst of him. "I should have known better, Mulder, that you would never betray your ideals, no matter how angry you were."

"You really believed that?" He was hurt and he had a right to be. It was foolish of her to believe that of him.

"I think for half-a-moment I did," she admitted, staring at her fingers twisting on her lap, feeling ashamed now for having believed that even for a second. "I think I feared because of everything you've said, because of Kritschgau and what he told you, because of all the anger you felt, that you might have…"

"That's what we wanted you to think," Mulder replied solemnly. "But I had kind of hoped you wouldn't."

"I didn't, not really, it was why I was following you." Now, looking back, it did seem rather dangerous and foolish. Despite that, Mulder smiled softly, his irritation abating somewhat.

"My Scully, always out to get your evidence. Good thing you didn't get us killed."

"You could have told me. You could have trusted me."

"I could have. I should have," He sighed sadly, shaking his head at nothing in particular. "Scully, we are the only two people in the world who can trust each other. I only have you, you only have me, and we are the only two who know what is going on."

Scully wanted to retort she had her family, and yet, she knew she didn't. She trusted them beyond all measure, but with all of this, they hardly understood. Bill didn't. Charlie didn't. Her mother tried. Only Mulder understood what this mean to her, what all of this meant to her. And Mulder knew the dangers and pitfalls in all of this so much more clearly than anyone. She couldn't imagine any of this without him there.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," she admitted softly.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth when I should have." He turned his face towards her. "We squared away."

"As always," she replied with a reassuring, sad smile. "I told you I was in this for the long haul, Mulder."

"Good, because I need someone pulling my head out of my ass. And I need someone who has my back, even when I don't think I need it."
"That's what partner's do."

"I know." He held up his broken hand, examining the splint and bandage. "Sometimes they patch you up when you need it as well."

"I'm hoping one day I get to do less of that." Judging from Mulder's propensity for getting himself into trouble she highly doubted that. "What do you think happened to that bacterium?"

"It's probably safe in Pine Bluff again. Any knowledge of its disappearance will be hidden under the Army veil of intelligence, and you and I will be politely told to keep our noses out of it. We got our bad guy; it's no longer our jurisdiction. And I'll be sent back to the basement like a good boy, patted on the head, and given a crap assignment to keep me occupied. The FBI has their kicking boy. I imagine this won't be the first or the last time."

"You sort of asked for it, Mulder."

"Yeah," he sighed, drawing it out as he let his hand fall to his flat stomach. "I suppose I did. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

"No, it doesn't." she agreed. They fell to quietness, the pair of the, each lost in their own thoughts for long moments. The weight of their journey seemed particularly heavy that night. Five years, it was a long time for anyone to be together in one common purpose, particularly a work partnership. And despite the years, experience, and secrets they had discovered, they were still there, back at square one in so many ways. Why did it always come back down to this? And just how much longer could they find keep finding themselves there again?
Threat Assessment

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is headed off once again.

It took Mulder three rings to pick up, but at least he finally did.

"The tape is still on my finger, I packed clean underwear, and I promise I won't kick any puppies in my irritation along the way." Mulder's lack of greeting underscored the petulance in his flippant greeting.

Scully grimaced. "I wanted to check in with you before your caught your flight. At least Skinner is sending you to Chicago in summer."

"You know, cause that's great, considering there is a whole field office that sits in Chicago. You know they are rather famous, Elliot Ness and all that." She could hear the background noises of the airport as Mulder waited for his flight, a bland, droning masculine voice warned passengers to keep an eye on all of their belongings. Scully could imagine him, his tall, lean frame slumped in an uncomfortable, vinyl chair, long legs splayed in front of him like an intemperate three-year-old, a bag of sunflower seeds in his lap as he glared at the screen above him streaming CNN. Petulant, pissy Mulder in all of his untamed, childish glory. Suddenly, she was very glad she wasn't on this trip.

"Mulder, I offered to come with you on this."

"Why? This is the sort of job they hand a rooky anyway, well, except for the spooky, monster part."

"No offense, but you are the one who pushed the entire paranormal, monster angle years ago by even fighting for the X-files." Scully let her eyes wander from where she perched on Mulder's desk to the wall of battered filing cabinets, the entire sum of her partner's life's work. "Now you are pissed they are sending you on a case with a certain overtone to it?"

"I can do other things, you know."

"Yeah, you were once a scarily amazing profiler as I recall, till the job nearly drove you further into insanity and you decided you wanted to chase Bigfoot and little gray men." What in the world was he getting at? "Mulder, I'm afraid I don't get the attitude here. You wanted the X-files, you fought for them, and people have called you 'spooky' for years. I knew about you for your work in the paranormal far before I met you. It's what you've gone out of the way to define yourself as. And now you are angry about that?"

"I'm pissed as hell when it's used by people to jerk me around," he responded mulishly. Just as Scully suspected, this had less to do with this case being beneath Mulder and his talents and more to do with Mulder's disillusionment. The recent CIA case had pissed him off greatly, had lit a fire in him she hadn't expected to see, and yet it also had made him even more bitter, more churlish. Rather than inspire him, he'd become more aggrieved, more morose, and worse yet, less inclined to further their quest. Scully had now officially reached her wits end with him.
"I'm not the poster boy for the weird, Scully," he insisted, and she could hear a seed clatter in between his teeth. "The X-files has always been a serious business, this wasn't some joke to me."

"Strange, because you've been pretty flippant about it for the last year."

The seed crunched on the other end of the line and she wondered if it had ground to shards at her response. There was silence for a moment as Mulder worked out the shell before responding. "Scully, this isn't about busy work, it's about being the joke of the Bureau. You know why the CIA thought they could come in and use me? Because I was the crackpot in the basement that these type of assholes who want to blow up buildings look for. Send the weird shit over to Spooky, he doesn't mind. And hey, why not send a case of someone being a paranoid freak threatening to shoot up his co-workers at him, too. I hear he's a huge fan of Bigfoot. After all, he's an idiot who believes that aliens came and took his sister and that the government is covering up Area 51. I'm sure that asshole will believe anything."

Scully listened, counting quietly as Mulder ranted, tapping one of her well-shod toes against the side of his desk as he continued to whine on the other end of the line. She waited patiently till his harangue died. "Are you done?"

Another seed slipped into his mouth with a soft, sucking sound. "No, but I'm sure you have a nice chastisement waiting on your lips."

"I do," she admitted, hardly sorry about it. "Mulder, what else can you expect? You are angry about a situation you created and you are acting like an idiot."

"Is that all you can do, Scully?"

It was all she could manage over a telephone. Her fingers squeezed hard around the plastic and she wished for a moment that it were his neck. "Mulder, what are you really pissed off about? You think this case is beneath you, but you haven't stirred a finger to do any real work in months. And the minute the FBI noticed you weren't particularly busy, they gave you the spook detail and now you are pissed. Frankly, you get no room to be angry when you could have done something about this long ago. Or hell, if you didn't want to do it, you could have just handed the case off to me and I would have done it, since I tend to pick up your messes anyway."

If he wanted childish and nitpicky, she could show him that, let her remind him of the many times she warned him of this and the many times he ignored her. Honestly, he was complaining about something he had created and now…

On the other end of the line she could hear him laugh, a low, throaty chuckle, gravelly as she imagined the lazy, boyish smile that probably lit up his face at the moment. "Did anyone ever tell you just how attractive you are when you are pissed off?"

Mulder diversion tactic number one, Scully thought with mild irritation, but sadly it always worked. The anger fled as she sighed, shaking her head at the fact that her partner would never change. "Go do your job, Mulder, if you need anything call me. And stop being a baby about this."

"I think we both know that will be next to impossible."

"Well try anyway."

"Give me a call when you get into Chicago."

"I'll keep you up-to-date on all the wacky happenings in Oak Brook. I'm sure it's a riot."

Scully hung up the phone, rubbing forehead fretfully as she did. How in the hell did Mulder
manage to give her a headache even from a distance?
The first three drawers of old case files weren't so bad, it was the fourth onward that made Scully wonder why the hell Mulder had never got with it in the digital age. It was one thing to have everything in hard copy, quite another to be living technologically somewhere around the time that J. Edgar Hoover was still in diapers. With a groan and sigh she tackled her last large stack of dusty, cumbersome case files, each carefully collated and put together, and carried it over to it's open drawer, letting the whole thing drop to the tiled floor with an audible thump. This pile had covered XF-BM through XF-CA, and she had thus far read up on two headed goats in West Virginia, a sighting of a giant, super ape somewhere in the wilds of Central California, a woman in Nebraska who insisted that a primitive planting god had taken up residence in her tractor shed, and dozens of reports of alien sightings ranging from the ridiculous to the unlikely. In none of them did the phrase; "hiding in the light" appear. Yet, somewhere in one, dated God knows how long ago, Mulder was certain that someone had used it. How the hell did he remember that?

She forgot, with his eidetic memory, Mulder was his own walking database.

Well, she scowled as she knelt on the floor, beginning the process of replacing the last stack of files for the next, he may be a freak of nature who could remember thirty years of sports statistics without blinking an eye and pull key catch phrases out of ancient reports, but the rest of humanity didn't operate like that. It was a small wonder the FBI stared in bemusement at Fox Mulder. He railed and raged that they didn't take him or his work serious, that they sent him chasing after imaginary monsters when he was about the earnest business of chasing after real ones.

She sighed mentally as she gathered her next stack of files. What the hell did he honestly expect? Even when Scully had entered into the Academy, Mulder's reputation had preceded him. A brilliant psychologist and profiler who had tragically gone off the deep end, chasing Bigfoot and little green men rather than serial killers. That didn't mean that the Bureau didn't make Mulder's work required reading when it came to monographs and profiling, but Scully could remember Tom Colton and her peers snickering as they read through it. Despite his brilliance, all they saw was the lunacy, a cautionary tale of what happened when your star shown to brightly and burned out too quickly. Even back then, Scully had found him intriguing. Far from a joke, she had seen in Mulder's work a clarity of focus, a disturbing level of insight, and a passion and assuredness that Tom Colton and her friends had lacked as they began to plot their way up the FBI political ladder. Even then she had a sense that Mulder wasn't into the FBI for a cushy job and a steady, government paycheck. He was a truth seeker and she respected that in him, before she had met him.

Lord, when she had met him! Scully whistled lowly as she scooped up files and carried them over to Mulder's expansive desk, kicking the drawer shut as she passed. She had walked into his office straight from Scott Blevins' assignment, all confidence and youthful expectation, hardly expecting the man she found hunched over his ever-present slides. She had heard he was hard to work with on the best of days, but hadn't expected the outright skepticism and hostility from him as he tossed a devastating smirk over his shoulder, barely looking at her over the rims of his reading glasses. He'd grilled her before she had a chance to even look at the file, throwing data at her, asking her if...
she believed in extra-terrestrials, pushing her to laugh at him, to scoff at him and to roll her eyes and run for the hills. How shocked had he been that day when she stood toe-to-toe with him, refusing to back down from the laughter on his lips and the challenge in his eye.

Cocky, brilliant, attractive, son-of-a-bitch, she snorted, thumbing through files, scanning them quickly. Mulder could be quite the asshole at times, especially back then when he wore the "FBI's most unwanted" title as a badge of honor. He would frequently piss off section chiefs and even Skinner by running off to do what he wanted, certain that the risk would be worth the reward, and thumbing his nose at the authority that tried to stop him and make him play by the rules. But there was also the Mulder who could be quite charming, sweet at times too. That side of Mulder she rarely got to see in those early days, he usually reserved it for the string of women he had calling the office, pissed as hell at him for some cancelled lunch date, dinner date, booty call. Scully had been vaguely repulsed by that behavior on his part, only knowing it came from a sense of frustration, even loss. Mulder had yet to speak of the event that precipitated that behavior out of him, only rumors of a romance that went south. She had never asked him about it. Scully figured for all that they lived in each other's pockets, there were still things Mulder had a right to keep private.

She would be lying of course if she said she hadn't wondered about the mysterious woman who had so crushed her partner's heart. He could deny it all he wanted, but Scully suspected that this was part of the reason he threw himself so heartily into his work. Granted he was driven all on his own accord, but not once in five years had there ever been a serious consideration of a female in his life outside of his partnership with her. Granted, Scully couldn't imagine another female being terribly patient with any of Mulder's crap, from his trips to Puerto Rico unannounced, to his tendency to storm military bases without bothering to ask for permission. In the end, perhaps part of it was Mulder's realization that the work he was doing now was not conducive to any sort of steady, long-term relationship.

Whether Scully liked to admit it or not, she was somewhat happy about that. Really, considering her own lack of a productive love life in recent years, perhaps it was just as well, less for her to envy. Besides, it would be awkward, really, being Mulder's partner and his best friend, trying to explain her role in Mulder's life. She doubted seriously that any woman Mulder dated would be terribly understanding of the late nights and long weeks he spent out of town with her, nor with the presence each had in the others life. Yes, they were work partners, but there was so much more to their relationship, that of best friends, of two people who trusted each other implicitly. Scully did things for Mulder she wouldn't consider doing for anyone else. She had covered for him, she had lied for him, and she had risked her own job for him. She had trusted him with her own life innumerable times. If push came to shove, she would take a bullet for her partner, protecting him from whatever came, even his own anger and apathy if need be. How in the world could she explain that to anyone else?

Perhaps, if she admitted it to herself, that was the reason why she stayed alone. Mulder and the X-files were too difficult to explain and Scully was willing to give up neither for the moment. This was their work, this was their quest, and Mulder was her friend, the very idea of leaving his side at the moment seemed anathema to her, and until she could feel free to walk away from all they had done and worked towards, there could be no one else. After all, who in the hell would understand her dedication to picking through musty files, looking for a catch phrase for a man who was busy pouting that no one took his search for monsters seriously? More than that, who would understand why she was secretly happy to do it for Mulder again and again, even if the task set before her did aggravate her.

Hell, Scully realized, she wasn't particularly sure why it was she was so happy doing it, only that she was…and the hell she was going to let Mulder know that.
Two-thirds of the way through the stack she found it. Scully wasn't particularly sure why this case file, marked XF-CD was filed under the letter "C", but had long ago given up on any hope of understanding Mulder's filing system. It was in reading the police report that the phrase caught her attention, "hiding in the light." A Gerald Resnick, a deacon at his local parish church, who had opened fire on his fellow churchgoers one Sunday morning, had uttered it. It had caught the FBI's attention at first, mostly as any crimes in churches were given serious attention, but when it was determined by the local authorities the man suffered from serious emotional problems, it was left to the police in Lakeland, Florida to handle. This was a mistake, clearly, as the man was found dead a week later in his cell. A sad story to be sure, but Scully wasn't terribly sure why Mulder had it in his files or what connection it had to his threat assessment in Chicago. Worse yet, how the hell did he even remember this case was in there and why in the world did he think it was important?

Mulder really should consider a database program for all of this information, she decided, as she reached for the phone. Heaven help them if he ever left the X-files, no one would know how any of these cases made sense with one another. Perhaps, someday soon, she would convince him into doing it. After all, it wasn't as if he was throwing himself into chasing after aliens anymore.
The Stand Off

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has to put up with another agent's attitude on Mulder.

All he was supposed to be doing was a threat assessment.

"You can't blame Agent Mulder." Agent Rice was huddled with Scully around the schematics of the VinylRight offices, spread across the hood of one of the FBI cars on scene. The mugginess of the late spring heat rumpled his otherwise neat suit. "Hell, it happened so quickly I doubt he even realized what was going on."

That was what worried Scully, Mulder was rarely in that position.

"So your partner was here doing a threat assessment?" Rice was still trying to put together the particulars and it annoyed her.

"Per the request out of someone in your office." It should have been a standard case and they didn't even know what it was that he had been doing? Who the hell was running this joint? "Agent Mulder called me earlier today, he thought he had made some headway in the threat, he wanted my assistance, and he called me in. I heard about this the minute my plane landed."

"Yeah, well clearly whatever insight your partner had didn't come quick enough, because the threat was real." Rice countered casually, as if it spoke somehow to Mulder's abilities. Scully refrained from bristling. "The best we can tell is that one of the employees showed up with a gun, rounded up everyone, including your partner, and is now holding them hostage in the break room."

Rice waved towards a series of ventilation units that ran through the map like tunnels, opening out into various large rooms. "This is the cafeteria. I think I can get some Chicago SWAT in there with a camera to let us know what is going on." He turned to glare, squinting in the sun towards the low, boring industrial building, surrounded by police cars. "This would be easier if we could call Mulder and figure out what is going on, perhaps talk to this employee."

"Agent Rice, no one knows Mulder is an FBI agent." Scully would have thought this was obvious, but clearly this agent had missed something vital in his Quantico training on hostage negotiations. "Agent Mulder is armed, that puts him in danger at the very least, and may give this man more ammunition to overreact."

Rice didn't look like he was terribly sure about that. "How many hostage situations have you been in, Agent Scully?"

"Several with Agent Mulder," she countered, wondering if this man really wanted to get into a pissing contest with her on this one. Visions of Duane Berry and Robert Modell swam to mind, and Scully swallowed hard against them, refusing to give into the vague sense of panic that hovered on the edges of her perception. Mulder had handled this before, he was a professional and so was she. She doubted she would have to worry about her partner directing his weapon at her or a crazy man carrying her off in the night. Not every armed and mentally unstable person the FBI ran into was out to get her personally. Right now she was more terrified that the man might be out to get her
partner should Rice be stupid enough to put Mulder in danger.

"Agent Mulder is a trained psychologist, Rice, and while his area of expertise isn't hostage negotiation, he has some experience. Rest assured he will do everything he can to try and make sure as many of those people inside make it out alive."

It wasn't that Rice didn't look like he believed her, but he wasn't completely reassured either. "Why the hell is he in there and you are just arriving from DC? Why didn't you come with him?"

Well, that was a valid point, though Scully hardly thought this the good time to complain about her partner being a petulant jerk. "Agent Mulder suspected something about the threats being called in. He had me in DC looking through old files seeing if I could connect the dots."

"Old X-files," Rice shot back, bluntly, his tone just shy of acerbic, his look was just short of bemused. Scully held tightly to the urge to bristle up at him, her annoyance fueling instead icy calm as she felt one eyebrow arch it's way up her forehead at the taller agent.

"That is the division Agent Mulder and I work on, yes, and he was called out by your office from Washington to do this threat assessment because of the unusual nature of the case."

"You seem keen on reminding me, Agent Scully, it was my office that called him out, as if I had something to do with it." Rice sounded as if the last thing he ever planned on doing was asking Spooky Mulder for help on anything, but at least faked polite well. "I just find it unusual that Fox Mulder of all people is in this sort of situation, given his reputation."

Scully only wished she could say she found that unusual for her partner. "If you think that my partner's reputation somehow compromises your negotiations, Agent Rice, I'm sure I can speak to AD Skinner to have him clarify the nature of the assignment we were on."

"I didn't say that he compromised my negotiations!" Amazing how dropping the name of an Assistant Director smacked the condescension out of his tone as he growled across the car at her, slightly nettled. "I'm only saying that it would help me immensely knowing what the hell you two were working on so I can gauge what sort of situation I'm sending men into and what sort of person this is holing up in there with a bunch of innocent people, including your partner."

He did have a point, as much as Scully found his attitude that of a raging ass. She bit her tongue for a long moment, staring up at the other agent, before relenting reluctantly. "Agent Mulder was called in because someone believe that there was a creature of some sorts, a monster if you will, threatening the employees of VinylRight. Mulder was sent in to determine what it was that was causing the man to make these claims and how dangerous this person really potentially was."

"Monster?" Rice snorted, though not without a certain dry, dark sense of irony. "I've heard my boss called many things, but monsters a new one on me. Did Mulder find anything?"

Scully hesitated. Beyond the phrase "hiding in the light" and the case in Florida years ago she didn't know. Mulder had yet to tell her before she arrived on the scene with the hostage situation in progress. "I think he had started to formulate a pattern with another case with a similar MO, but had yet to develop a theory behind what was really going on before this situation deteriorated."

"Right," Rice nodded, glaring grimly at the building. "Look, Scully, I don't worry about your man in there handling himself, whatever you think. But my first concern is getting people out alive, and the more information I have, the better. If you think it makes me sound like an asshole, so be it. I don't care about monsters, or little green men, or things that go bump in the night. What I understand, Mulder used to be a fine agent, and I don't know him personally, so I can only assume
he'll be fine in there. But I need you working with me on this, and hell, if I decide to break your partner's precious cover to get this taken care of, I will."

Negotiation at any price, even Mulder's well being? Scully hated the idea, her gut churning at the thought, but she wasn't the agent in charge on this. "Fine, I'll be sure to quote you in my report when asked for my recollection of events."

Rice nodded, hardly noticing the veiled threat in her words. "Let's find out what the hell is up with that SWAT team and where these people are. I need to get them out before shots start getting fired."

Scully glanced towards the building, the hot sun overhead beating down on her fair scalp. She hoped that Mulder really did know what he was doing in there, because right now she wasn't so sure that Rice wouldn't just end up nearly getting him killed for his efforts. But then again, it wasn't as if this was the first time her partner had gotten himself holed up somewhere in a small place with a crazy man and a gun. Scully heartily wished it was the last.
Mulder was silent as they boarded their plane for home. Scully watched him surreptitiously through their long flight from Chicago, her physician's eye looking for tiny signs of stress and fatigue, for little things that spoke to the trauma he went through just hours before. He was exhausted, she could see that, the tension of the stand off at VinylRight had worn him out. He fell asleep somewhere over Ohio, his lanky body trying to stretch out as best it could in the limited space offered by the cramped seats. In the end, Scully had gently pulled his head over the space between them, offering her own slight shoulder as a pillow to give him a bit more leeway. It wasn't terribly more comfortable, being slouched in the seat, but he took it, and he soon was snoring lightly in her ear. The sound curled along her spine, but she remained still as he slumbered, flipping quietly through a medical journal she could hardly concentrate on. She didn't want to think on how pleasant the situation was, despite the circumstances.

If it was a problem, the attendants said nothing. Scully at least let him sleep till preparations were being made to land. Mulder didn't look any better. His split lip was still swollen, matching his still wrapped, broken finger. Soon he would look like a hapless victim of a street fight. With eyes far too bright with fatigue in a face that still looked disturbingly gray, he blinked owlishly at Scully as their flight began its descent on Reagan National Airport.

"Did I sleep the whole time?"

"Mulder, you needed it." Scully ignored his irritated grimace as she calmly put the journal she had been reading back into her briefcase. "If I could have convinced you and the FBI of it, I would have made you stay overnight in Chicago, if nothing else just to get some rest." He had been the one to insist they take the next flight back home to DC.

"What time is it?"

"Eleven local time." Did he honestly believe she was letting him do anything other than going home? "Mulder, if you believe I'm letting you go back to the office."

"Scully, I don't need a babysitter."

"Says you," she retorted half threateningly, but softened her tone with a gentle smile. "Mulder, today was a lot for anyone to go through."

"I'm fine, Scully, it isn't exactly the first hostage situation I've been in."

"Nor is it the first man you've seen shot down, I know that, but I still wish you would have rested." It was like trying to beat her head against a brick wall, and Scully knew it. Mulder had that grim set to his jaw, the one that said he heard her but was only mildly considering her advice.

"I'll go home at least, Scully." Whether he would sleep once he got there was a different question. She supposed she would have to settle for that.
"At least consider taking tomorrow off?"

"You found the phrase, 'hiding in the light'? He swerved, avoiding her question. "What else did you find out about that phrase or that case?"

"Nothing," Scully frowned, grasping as Mulder made his quick turn in logic. "Gerald Resnick was talking about a demon, a creature that was hiding in the light instead of the shadows, sucking the souls of those around him and claiming them for his own. He was convinced even his priest had been effected, consequently he was one of the first ones shot when Resnick opened fire in his church."

"A demon," Mulder nodded, his glittering gaze staring distantly as he considered. "Perhaps he thought he saw something, a creature no one else could see but had made itself clear to him?"

"Perhaps," Scully murmured, curious at her partner's distant expression. "Mulder, what happened in there today?"

The distance evaporated, replaced by haggard tiredness. He lifted his shoulders mildly, waving her off. "Nothing, Scully, like you said, not the first time I've found myself in that situation."

If only she could believe that was the whole truth behind his sudden fixation. "But there is something linking what happened in there today to Gerald Resnick, isn't there?"

"Maybe," he replied with maddening evasiveness. The plane beneath them jerked and bucked as the tires screeched and engines whined. The entire vehicle slowed to a screeching crawl on the pavement below, as outside of their window the lights of Washington DC now came level with the horizon instead of below it. Scully felt her heart flutter momentarily, shaking against the sudden change in velocity. An experienced flyer, she was by no means a calm one, and the rough landing momentarily distracted her from Mulder's odd behavior. What did Gerald Resnick's insistence on demons hiding in the light have to do with Gary Lambert and VinylRight?

"Lambert swore he saw something, didn't he?" It clicked as the plane started to taxi slowly to their gate. "He said he saw something stealing the souls of his co-workers?"

Mulder's carefully neutral face belied the worry that leapt to life briefly before being reduced to nothing more than a facial tick. It was the studious look he always took when scared and nervous, and Scully didn't buy it for a second. The plane came to a rest at the gate, stopping as the lights overhead went off, but Mulder couldn't evade her, not even by jumping up to gather his things.

"Mulder, what did happen in there?"

The cabin was busy with people gathering luggage stowed overhead, and Mulder conveniently fell in line with everyone else, avoiding Scully's curiosity. "I told everyone what happened, Scully. If you don't remember, read the report."

Why was he being so damned evasive? "You thought you saw something too?"

"Scully, you are right, it was a long day. I was in a hostage situation. I saw a man killed. I think I just need some sleep."

Mulder acted as if he had just another bad day at the office with a grumpy boss and missed deadlines. A woman behind him stopped in the act of removing a duffle bag from the overhead bin and stared up at him, eyes wide, and Scully honestly hoped that she hadn't noticed the gun holstered on Mulder's hip. Resisting the urge to whip out her badge, she chose instead to glare up at him, despite the painstaking way he tried to ignore her.
"Mulder, maybe you should go see someone. I know today was traumatic. You can always speak to Karen Kosseff, just to have someone hear you out."

"Last therapist I spoke to convinced me my sister was kidnapped by aliens from right in front of me. I don't think therapy will do my already cracked brain very much good."

The woman behind Mulder nearly smacked herself in the face with her bag. Scully sighed.

"At least consider it. And take tomorrow off, I'm not joking. I'll get Skinner to make it mandatory otherwise."

"Scully, I'm fine. You don't have to mother me." The line of passengers began to move, taking him away from her, along with his irritation. But it was a ruse, she could see that, he was honestly bothered by something that occurred that day and was processing it, and the last thing he wanted was for her to prod it out of him while he was still trying to understand it.

Scully fell into place behind the completely baffled woman, who shot her a skittish look, and watched Mulder's dark head as it bobbed ahead and out of the cabin door. This clearly was a rare occasion when Mulder didn't want her input, and it made her worry all the more. Those were usually instances that ended up with her partner in a headlock at the hands of Skinner, or lying nearly comatose on the top of some iceberg in Alaska. Mulder hadn't done anything quite so foolish in a very long time, and he was well passed overdue. If she wasn't careful, he would run off half-cocked with a crazed notion in his head, and she wouldn't be able to stop him before he nearly got himself killed.

Scully cleared the cabin and into the airport boarding gate, she tailed Mulder's longer strides into the terminal, not sure if she was relieved by this latest development as a sign of life or dreading it. It depended, she supposed, on the outcome of Mulder's insanity this time. Hopefully, she wasn't standing on the edge of the cliff, holding him from the abyss once again.

But even that would be a start.
When Skinner made the call to her in Washington, Scully's first reaction was that she was surprised she hadn't received a call like this years earlier. It didn't stop her from hopping the first shuttle she could to Chicago after her boss' apologies and assurances that for the moment this was simply a precaution, placing Mulder into a psychiatric evaluation ward. Scully had met his regret with tired fatalism. As if Mulder being put under seventy-two hour surveillance wasn't going to damage his career any further.

Perhaps it would, perhaps it wouldn't.

Despite her boss being in Chicago to oversee the last of the VinylRight affair and smooth things over in the field office, Skinner wasn't at the airport to meet her when she landed. Instead, she managed a rental and drove to the hospital where Mulder was checked into. Despite the lateness of the hour and the nature of the ward, Scully was shown right to her partner's room, as usual using her credentials as his personal physician. The nurse gave her twenty minutes and left her to stare at the cotton curtain that closed Mulder off from the rest of the sleeping ward.

Scully had promised to follow her partner to hell and back. She hadn't really expected that he would go crazy in the process. His brilliant mind, his keen intellect, they always had pushed him to the point most people would consider mad, but it had never occurred to Scully she could actually see him in that situation. Something ached horribly in Scully's heart at the idea, and she wanted to rage at Skinner for putting him there and at Mulder for running straight off the edge of the abyss yet again. And yet, she reasoned, she would have rather have seen this, Mulder defiant and in a hospital ward, than Mulder huddled behind his desk, clipping newspapers and pouting that no one took his work seriously. Would they even bother taking his work seriously after this?

She could hear him shift in the bed beyond, long legs moving restlessly, and she wondered if he could sense her out there. Likely as not, and she should go in and see him. He would want to know about the autopsy she performed on the victim from the hostage situation, and what could she tell him? Her findings were inconclusive? Nothing about the man suggested that he'd had his soul sucked out or that he was a zombie? Was there any wonder that Mulder ended up in this place with talk like that? There was little she could do to fix this and get him out, short of convincing Skinner that Mulder was actually quite sane in all of this, and so far she didn't have a single drop of evidence to exonerate him. Somewhere, there must be something to explain it all. She couldn't leave him in here like this. She refused to leave him like this, not after everything he had done for her.

She sucked her breath in hard into her lungs, held it, and reached for the flimsy cotton to push it aside.

He looked comfortable enough, save for the straps that tied down both of his wrists, binding them to the metal frame bed. Mulder looked up at her with the sort of half-apologetic, half-sheepish expression he had perfected in the many brigs and jails she had bailed him out of over the years,
glancing first at his bound arms, then up at her through thick, dark eyelashes.

"Five years together, Scully, you must have seen this one coming." He laughed in dark irony, at least finding some humor in this entire mess. "Did you examine Backus' body? What did you find?"

"More or less what we thought we'd find," she admitted hesitantly, slipping her fingers around his and squeezing tightly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

It mean she wasn't going to be breaking him out of this situation anytime soon. "The body shows signs of decomposition beyond what we expected to find, which in and of itself means nothing, really. Time of death is notoriously hard to identify."

"Or that Lambert was telling the truth and that man was dead before he was gunned down," Mulder insisted, his gaze feverishly insistent.

A part of Scully wished she could prove that, just to get him out of here and out of these restraints. "No, Mulder..."

"Scully," he continued, ignoring the gentle remonstration from her. "When that monster, Pincus, whatever the hell you want to call it, when he attacked that woman last night, he did something to the back of her neck. He bit her there or he injected something in there. That's got to be evidence of that. You got to check for that."

Like always, Mulder was pushing to the bitter end, looking for some desperate angle to prove his theory, but this time there was nothing to support it. How many times had his wild, out of the box thinking been correct? Why did this time have to be the one case where he got it wrong? "Mulder, it's over. There is no more evidence to be gathered."

She had run every tox screen known to man and everything had come up clean. She had even looked for things that she normally would never run, if for no other reason than to see if there was a medical way of proving Mulder's theory that these people were already dead, or at least in a state of slow deterioration before they succumbed. But there was nothing, only the ravings of a man who was now dead and her partner who now lay strapped in his hospital bed.

"There's only my hope that you'll be able to see past this delusion."

"Delusion" was a word she had refrained from saying up till now. She had hoped, perhaps vainly, that if she didn't say it that it wouldn't have any real meaning. But there was no way around it, hearing Mulder insist on toxins and this man, Pincus, biting this woman's neck. She hated saying it, she hated thinking it, it felt in a weird way like a betrayal of all the trust and faith she had put in Mulder. She had called him crazy many times over the years, had accused him of irrational behavior, had called his ideas insane, even thought him misguided. But never once had she believed that Mulder was ever deluded, ever truly insane. But now, it hurt to say it. She felt as wounded as he looked as the words tumbled from her lips.

"You have to be willing to see," he urged her, begging her. It only succeeded in making Scully's heart sink further. She wanted to believe him in this, more than anything, because the last place she wanted to see this man she cared for so much was tied to a bed, raving about zombies and monsters. But there was no evidence to support his claims, and without it, he was little more than a crazed lunatic, howling at the moon. Except this man wasn't crazed or a lunatic, and she more than anyone believed that, and he more than anyone believed in her and her ability to prove that his
theories were sound. It was what made them tick as partners, the synergy of their relationship over five years. He had never given up on her even when she was at her most intractable and unbending. Even as she lay dying in a hospital just a year ago, he had not given up on her. And yet, here she was, resigning him to a word as simple as "delusions".

This wasn't right! To hell with her tox screens, her lab tests, her reason. The evidence did nothing to support it, but was there ever once in five years Mulder was ever wrong on these things? He trusted her, he believed in her, he gave her everything, and she was failing him utterly in this one moment, when he needed her most. She felt his fingers tighten around hers, his lack of ability to move making his skin cold against hers.

"I wish it were that simple," she replied, failure creeping up in her as tears pricked at her eyes. How many times had he made that simple request of her over the years, just to be able to see the world as he did, to understand the things that only he seemed to understand? And how many times had she fought him on this, laughed it off, and scoffed at it. He was asking her to see the things he did, and she couldn't, no matter how hard she tried. And because of it she was letting him down, leaving him here to this.

"Scully," he rasped, tugging her hand desperately. "You have to believe me. Nobody else on this whole damn planet does or ever will. You're my one in…five billion!"

She stared down at him and his declaration, feeling helpless. His one in five billion? How sad was it that she, a scientist, a skeptic, a woman who had hounded his steps every minute since the day she walked into his office five years ago was the one person on the planet he could turn to, rely on, and trust? All Scully had ever done in their time together was push his ideas and question his theories, like she was doing now. How many times had she rolled her eyes in disbelief as he brought up one outlandish theory after another, whipped out her scientific explanation with its neat facts and figures, and stood back while he spun his web of the unexplainable as she found that whatever rational idea she had dissolved in the face of his improbable correctness? How could he turn to her now with eyes so trusting, so pleading, and really think she was the only one on the planet who believed him when she was usually the first one in line to tell him otherwise?

How could she still be by his side all these years later, standing there on a mental ward, holding his hand and seriously contemplating telling him she would check one last time, just to be sure, if she really didn't believe a single word of his explanation?

Because, her reason whispered quietly in her brain, she did believe him, she wanted to believe him and she always had wanted to believe him. She enjoyed the challenge of it, she enjoyed when he's persevered to prove her wrong. She enjoyed every mad explanation and hair-brained adventure, and despite the reservations, misgivings, and periods of angst and doubt, she always returned to him even when he was at his most irritating and dangerous. Despite herself she always followed Fox Mulder, always took his hand and held on tight, and always believed that whatever crazy idea he had, there was something inside of it that carried with it some ounce of truth.

She wanted to believe in him, because she was his partner and he always had her back, because she was his friend, and he always was there for her, because when she lay dying, he didn't give up on finding a way to save her life, because she liked him, admired him, protected him, worried about him, cared about him...

Because she loved him.

The last thought gave her pause. She rolled it over briefly in her mind again, feeling it out, the idea of the word "love" connected to Mulder. She half expected panic to fill her in a moment of blinding, fear-filled clarity, like a lightening bolt hitting her, but it didn't. It was just a realization,
like any other, one that fit easily into her picture of her partner and their relationship, clicking into place like a previously unknown variable in one of her scientific tests. She loved Mulder. That seemed right. It was hardly shocking to realize it. Karen Kosseff had said as much a year ago and Scully had balked at it then in the face of her then inevitable death. But now, it was simply admitting a truth she had been too afraid to look at till this very moment, an idea she had privately considered far too mad, far too strange, far too dangerous to even contemplate.

She loved her partner completely and she could think of nothing else that attested to that more than the fact that there she was, standing by his bedside in a hospital mental ward, holding his hand, and seriously considering to ignore all the evidence and try and prove his theory correct. He was right, no one else on this planet would believe him or even care to try except for her. For all of the insanity, she loved him, loved how he took her out of her safe place, loved how he pushed her back, and questioned her, and broke down all of her careful, safe little barriers. She loved what he made her see.

What in the world would she do now?

"Scully?" Mulder's nails dug fearfully into the tender, white skin of her hand. "Please don't give up on me on this."

A soft, somewhat hysterical gurgle rose in her, only barely smothered as she pulled up a reassuring smile from somewhere. "Mulder, I can't walk away from you. You know that."

It was all he needed to hear. Despite the situation he was in, he smiled brilliantly up at her, relieved for the first time since she walked in. "I'm not making this up, Scully."

"I know," she reassured him. She always knew, she supposed, it was just too frightening to admit it. Just as it was too frightening to admit what she felt for him. And somehow, she reasoned, the world didn't end with the understanding. Gently, she disentangled her fingers from his, rubbing the indents from his nails, reaching up to ruffle his soft, dark hair lightly.

"I'll head back to the lab, take a look before they ship him off." Another plane flight to DC, another three hours in the skies, but it was worth it. She hoped that the FBI felt it was when she turned in her expense report. "Get some rest, Mulder, for me at least. Just try to relax. I'll do what you ask and I'll find something. I'll get you out of here."

"Okay," he murmured, visibly relaxing as his shining eyes followed her out of his room. Scully tried to smile softly as she closed the curtain, waiting till he couldn't see her to allow her shoulder's to drop, her guard to fall, and to rub at eyes suddenly too tired and a head suddenly too heavy. She had promised to get Mulder out of this, but how? What if she found nothing on Backus' corpse when she got there? And what would she do? She had to get him out of this, there was no choice, and she had to make Skinner see he wasn't lying about any of this. She had to do this for him, somehow. Because, she thought heavily as her steps drug her out of Mulder's room, she could do no less than that. She couldn't allow this to happen to him.

Lord help her, she really did love him.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully presents the truth as she knows it.

Scully had made her recommendation. Now she had to defend it. Judging by the look on Skinner's face, she was going to have a time doing that.

"Agent Scully," he began, drawling her name over lips that hardly seemed to move in his granite face. "I have to say I'm at a bit of a loss here. Do I infer correctly from this that you believe there's some merit to Agent Mulder's claims?"

He said it as if he wasn't starting to wonder if he shouldn't have put her in the mental health ward herself.

"I believe that Agent Mulder is mentally sound and fit for duty," Scully quantified, squaring her shoulder and lifting her chin to give herself the confidence she wasn't quite feeling in front of her superior. "Aside from that I can only present to you the few hard facts that I've been able to gather. That, as per Agent Mulder's assertions a toxin has been found to have been injected into the spine of the shooting victim, Mark Backus. As of yet, we've been unable to identify it. Furthermore, Gregory Pincus has apparently disappeared without a trace along with a dozen other key witnesses integral to this investigation, among them Agent Mulder's nurse a the hospital and several VinylRight employees."

Even if it didn't prove that Mulder was right, it did prove that something strange was going on, something that Mulder had stumbled onto and that his logic wasn't all together wrong…even if it was unorthodox. Still, she could see Skinner's skepticism as he squinted at her over his rimless glasses. "Men and women described by Mulder as zombies."

Yes, he did say zombies didn't he? "I can personally vouch for the fact that there was an intruder in Agent Mulder's hospital room." Skinner would have to at least take her claim seriously.

"Describe this intruder," he challenged.

Damn it!

"It was dark," she replied somewhat lamely, her confidence deflating somewhat as she suddenly found Skinner's desktop extremely interesting to study.

"You must have gotten a glimpse," he pressed, dark eyes boring across the space between them. Scully felt her mouth dry as she reached desperately for some answer, any answer to give him that didn't sound…well crazy. "What did you see?"

"Well…a figure in his room."

Skinner was not pleased with her answer. His jaw ticked twice, before but he said nothing. Scully could sense his disapproval as she continued to frown unhappily at the plaque on the front bearing his full name, Walter Skinner. How come she didn't have a plaque with her name on it, even for her tiny workspace?
"It happened so quickly, sir. I don't know if I can give a valid description to you, only that someone was indeed there, and that I saw him escape out of the window."

"The window of a secure hospital building...in a mental ward." He sounded as if she were asking him to believe it was an alien. Scully almost wished she were.

"Sir, I understand that, but I would like to remind you that I have made no claims saying that I believe that Gregory Pincus is a creature that sucks the souls out of people, nor have I claimed that there is such a thing as zombies. In fact, I would like to point out that on the whole, given my track record, I usually am not the agent who claims those sorts of outrageous things."

Skinner absorbed that briefly before replying. "I will grant you, Scully, that psychotic breaks are usually not your style, but I do recall an episode two years ago where you yourself nearly shot your own partner at a motel in Maryland, before escaping to your mother's house in a near panic, believing he was a spy responsible for your abduction."

There was that.

"Yes, sir, I remember."

"So what you are trying to tell me, Agent Scully, is that you perhaps saw this creature that Agent Mulder saw?"

"Perhaps, sir," she murmured, the words choking and tripping on the way out as her skin burned nearly as bright as her hair. This was not going as well as expected. "Perhaps, it is...what agent Mulder calls a folie a deux, a madness shared by two."

Not even her trite French phrase uttered in her most reasonable tone seemed to sway her superior. For a long, breathless moment she could feel him stare at her, before he finally reached for his glasses and removed them, tossing them on a stack of folders before rubbing fretfully at a headache she suspected was rising to the fore. She knew that pain well.

"Agent Scully, can we be honest here, between the two of us, off the record."

What choice did she have to say but yes? "Of course, sir."

Skinner threw himself backwards in his chair, leaning away from her as he quietly formulated his next words. "You and Agent Mulder have been partners for five years now, is that correct?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"I recognize that working with anyone for that long, certain bonds form, and considering the type of work that you and Mulder do together, the types of situations you've found yourself in, and the fact that very few others in the Bureau understand the danger the two of you have faced, I have been and am very forgiving of a certain amount of...closeness between the two of you."

Closeness? He rolled the word around with all the ambiguity of stating that the sky was a certain shade of a color. What the hell was that supposed to mean, "closeness"? Scully frowned as she jerked her gaze up to the cryptic expression on his face, torn between insult and panic. What exactly was he saying here? Was he implying that she was making this argument based on some sort of loyalty to Mulder born on some sort of base, inappropriate relationship? Did he see, as she finally did just the other day, how truly deep her feelings for Mulder went? That brought a cold sweat to her skin, the thought that perhaps it wasn't just herself who knew the truth about her feelings for her partner, but the man who held their careers in balance. Obviously Skinner knew them better than anyone, and he understood the dynamic of their relationship. Clearly, he
understood it better than she did if he could come to this "closeness", if that was what he was getting at. What did she tell him? Could she tell him anything? He was their boss, and while nothing inappropriate had ever happened between them, this sort of relationship could be seen as compromising from an outsiders perspective, even as a convenient weakness by which to attack them.

What the hell should she say?

"Sir, if you are suggesting that anything untoward has occurred between Agent Mulder and I..." Scully turned to righteous indignation, it was easy enough to fall back on, and she allowed her flush to turn into mild insult easily enough.

"I didn't say that the two of you had, Agent Scully." Skinner was hardly ruffled by her display of annoyance. "I won't say that there haven't been suggestions, as I'm sure you are well aware. But what two agents do when they aren't in the office and no one is looking is hardly my concern, and I can show you many examples from across the Bureau that no one wants to talk about too loudly. I doubt anyone would care if the two of you had. I know I don't."

Scully wasn't sure if she was insulted by that or not.

"What I am concerned about, Agent Scully, is the space between your personal and professional feelings here. You know as well as I do what sort of distance we need to keep to maintain our objectivity and do our jobs. I've given up on Mulder long ago, but you were the stable one in this relationship. Mulder could lose his mind all he wanted the minute you were hurt or sick, but you were the one I had to rein him in. If you can't do that, Scully, you are no good to me as his partner. Hell, you are no good to him as his partner, because that's what he needs, and you both know it."

She found herself with absolutely nothing to say, stunned into quietude as briefly she thought that perhaps this would have been something she would have found out if she and Mulder had bothered to attend the partners conference last summer that Skinner had sent them on. Perhaps that's why he did it. It wasn't that she didn't know this was her role, but to have Skinner throw it out so openly it suddenly put the last five years and her newly understood feelings into a whole new light. Whatever her feelings for Mulder, she was here to do a job. How in the hell had she forgotten that?

"Look," Skinner breathed, his impenetrable demeanor softening somewhat with empathy. "Dana, I know that no one else in this entire damn place knows what you and Mulder know, or has experienced what you two have. And no one else gets him like you do, and I mean no one. I know your devotion to one another. I am not speaking against it. I am not here to punish you for it, but I am saying those personal feelings aside, someone needs to be the strong one here. If you say that there was someone in that room, I will believe you, because you are the agent that is the most rational in these situations. But if you are telling me that simply because you can't stand the thought of Mulder being in that position, if you don't allow him to face whatever demons he has, you are doing him no service. Speaking as someone who has put his neck out for you both, you aren't doing me one either."

Never before had Skinner been so blunt about things. Scully saw exactly his point. She was the one who kept Mulder grounded despite his own brilliance. Her role had always been to keep him in check. Personal feelings or not, she couldn't allow that role to be compromised. In fact, knowing what she did now, knowing how she felt about him, she especially could not allow that to happen. She couldn't fail her partner like that.

"I will sign Mulder's reinstatement, and I expect the two of you to get some real work done for a while. Tell Mulder to get his head out of his ass, before I start sending him on more threat assessments." Skinner scowled as he reached for his discarded glasses, sliding them on his face.
"Go find him and tell him he's off the hook for now, but he's burning up his chances, and he's had a hell a lot of them already."

"Yes, sir," Scully replied breathlessly, rising to scurry out of the office, her heels whispering across the carpet as she made her way through the reception area and down the hallway to where Mulder waited, trying to look coolly unobtrusive by the elevators.

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth, as well as I understand it."

Mulder looked as if he was half afraid to know how she understood the entire mess he found himself in. "Which is?"

"Folie a deux, a madness shared by two," she responded, as the doors opened. She stepped in, Mulder following close behind.

"I suppose then one has to ask if it is still madness if another person sees it as well." He punched the button for their basement, shrugging to a corner opposite of her as he watched the numbers tick by lazily. "After all, we define madness as some sort of belief that exists out of the norms of society. And yet, if more than one person believes an idea, no matter how mad, it gives credence to the idea, institutionalizes it in a way that can't happen with one person alone.

"Mulder," she sighed, feeling her own headache form at the spot where a year ago a deadly tumor had lain. "Really, I am in no mood for your existential, mental masturbation."

Perhaps it was the word "masturbation" that caught his attention and drug it straight downward. "What, it doesn't turn you on anymore Scully?"

No, it did. She bit back the thrill that rose to the fore as images she had long ignored rose to mind, pushed back by the harsh words of Skinner's criticism. "I think that given your most recent escapades, you should perhaps focus on work for a while."

"Where is your sense of adventure, Scully?" Mulder grinned as the door opened and he sauntered out, shooting a playful glance at her as she followed.

"Somewhere back here, firmly trying to keep your sense of adventure from doing something stupid."
"Agent Scully, do you have a minute?"

Scully turned, surprised to see Jeffrey Spender loping down the hallway to her, his perpetually sour expression fixed without even the grace of welcoming smile.

"Agent Spender," she acknowledged, realizing it had now been nearly two months since the disappearance of his mother and no word had come regarding Cassandra Spender's whereabouts. "I'm sorry we haven't been in contact with you, but we've had no word on your mother."

Spender's dour frown tightened perceptibly. "Thank you, Agent Scully. I've been keeping tabs with the local authorities in Pennsylvania."

Whether he meant it as a dismissal or an insult was hard to say with him. Scully hardly knew Spender. She didn't want to think ill of him, but at the same time the younger man was doing himself no favors. Still, she supposed she couldn't blame him, after all she was in many ways responsible for his mother's disappearance.

"Can I help you?" She tried at least to sound positive, curious as to why it was he had tracked her down in the hallways of the Hoover building.

"I was looking for you, actually," he replied, sounding at least a little less officious as he motioned her to an empty side office, a quite place he obviously felt he could talk to her. "Are you busy with a case at the moment?"

"Not at the moment, no. Is there something I can help you with?"

"I just received a case." He held up a file in hand, passing it to her. "I was wondering if I could get your expertise on it?"

"Do you need an autopsy done?" Usually that was why any agent came to her outside of the normal X-files channels. Scully had a bit of a reputation of being a willing participant on an autopsy when Quantico was running too slow for the taste of the agent of note.

"No, that was already done over the weekend. Actually, I am looking for your experience on the X-files."

"My experience?" She frowned up at Spender, incredulous as she flipped open the file.

"I don't know how closely you follow competitive chess, Agent Scully, but if you are like the rest of us, you likely don't at all. There was a match this weekend in Vancouver, British Columbia, and exhibition between a Russian national chess master and a twelve-year-old child prodigy."

"Why would this come across the FBI desk?" What sort of international incident could possibly happen with chess nerds in Canada that would draw Spender's eye, or for that matter anyone in the
"Someone shot and killed the Russian chess master just as the boy put him in checkmate." Spender waved a finger at the still unread file in her hands. "A sniper was found not far away. He was arrested by Vancouver police. It turns out the gun he used was registered to US intelligence."

"CIA?" It was the first guess Scully would have made, but Spender snorted in that way that told her that he had already gotten the typical Spook runaround when trying to pin them down.

"No, NSA, though they deny everything at the moment. The case was sent to us because of the nature of the weapon. Vancouver police, the Canadian government, and the State Department want to ensure that this wasn't a US hit on what seems to be a seemingly innocent target. If it is, why did it happen?"

Was it ever that simple, Scully wondered with mild cynicism. "So, why do you need my expertise, Agent Spender. I'm afraid I'm not following you."

He paused a bit, studying her, perhaps sizing her up, Scully couldn't tell. "You recently worked a case with Agent Mulder involving the CIA, correct?"

"Yes," Scully replied carefully, unsure how much of that case had been made public knowledge for the FBI. "There were fears of domestic terrorism."

"And you've had experience working with military intelligence, right?"

"I wouldn't call it experience, Agent Spender. In fact I wouldn't say that any intelligence group with the US government is exactly happy to see me coming around." Usually this meant Mulder had done something reckless and stupid again.

"I'm looking to put together a team of those with experience handling the intelligence community," Spender continued, ignoring her reticence as he pushed on. "As you can imagine it isn't exactly a skill many in the FBI have and they aren't exactly going to make this case easy for us."

"Have you bothered to run a background check on the Russian before calling this whole thing together?" It seemed a lot of hard work for young Spender to be throwing himself at if it turned out that indeed the chess master was an intelligence target. Not a very effective way of proving himself in the world, no matter how profile the case might be.

"State already got us a confidential file from Moscow, there's nothing on the man. He was exactly what he appeared to be, according to his KGB traveling papers; a boring, rather quiet, chess nerd whose only mistake was going to Canada and getting shot by a US sniper." Something of a wry smile attempted to light itself on Spender's face and failed.

"Look, Agent Scully, there are several angry parties here, Russia wants to know why the National Security Agency felt the need to kill one of their citizens on foreign soil, Canada wants to know the same thing, and if the State Department can't figure out why and for what purpose, even if it is nothing more than to prove this sniper as a rogue, than it's going to go into a Senate hearing pretty quickly, in which case it will be all over the media, not to mention the outcry from the international community. With every other intelligence muck up of late, that is the last thing that anyone wants, and that's why they came to us. And I'm looking to find people who know how to get around their BS and figure out what exactly was going on."

In other words, someone was looking to cover this entire mess up as quickly and painlessly as possible, and they laid the entire pile of crap right in Spender's lap. If he succeeded, if would be
quite the impressive bullet point on his resume. Perhaps it would land him a rung or two higher on the FBI pecking order, it would certainly remove him somewhat from the stigma of having an X-file open on his mother and his name tied to Spooky Mulder. But if he failed, he was young enough to take a fall like this without it upsetting too many people or tragically ruining his career. It was a perfect set up, one that obviously someone, somewhere in the higher echelons of the FBI had thought out carefully.

"Quite the feather in your cap if this works out, isn't it?" Scully decided to call a spade a spade. "But I'm not so sure I'm the one that you want on this. I've had some experience, yes, but limited at best."

She was calling his bluff. There were whole departments of agents who worked counter-terrorism with the intelligence community. He wanted something else.

Spender knew he was caught. "I need your way of thinking, Agent Scully. I need your out of the box approach on this on. Most everyone on this team will have had a more straightforward experience with handling the NSA, but you know the back ways in. I need someone who is going to be able to work around the system rather than through it."

"Then you are asking for the wrong person, Agent Spender." She closed the file with a snap, beginning to piece together what was going on here. "Agent Mulder is the person you want to talk to about this."

"I don't need or want Agent Mulder," Spender fired back quickly, pausing his outburst at Scully's suddenly cool surprise. "This isn't the type of case Mulder would interest himself in."

"You mean because there are no aliens or strange monsters?" Scully met Spender's abashed look evenly, preparing to hand him back the file. "I think you have a very limited view on the type of work that Agent Mulder can do."

"Perhaps I do, Agent Scully, but you can't deny that Agent Mulder doesn't tend to work well with others even at the best of times. This case is far too delicate for me to deal with his crazy theories or mollify whoever he has pissed off with his outlandish line of questioning. Some of us are better at handling that from him than others."

"I see. Do you see me as an over glorified babysitter, Agent Spender?"

The younger agent was digging himself into a hole and he knew it. "Agent Scully, I see you as an immensely qualified agent in your own right. That's why I'm asking you on this case and not Mulder. How long has it been where you worked a case without him, using your own skills and merits alone?"

His point caught her off guard as she tried to think about it. Too long. The case of the quadruplets over Easter perhaps was the last time she tried something on her own, but it wasn't really an FBI case. There was the strange disease that had been attacking African American males in Philadelphia, but even then, in the end, Mulder had joined her and nearly gotten killed for his efforts. It was rare that Scully alone was ever called up to work on a case without him. It felt strange to contemplate even doing it. A part of her, if she wanted to admit it, was gratified that Spender asked her. She was hardly ever recognized for her own talents standing in the shadow of her brilliant partner. But it felt like a betrayal even thinking that. She was devoted to Mulder and to his work, the idea of working a case without him seemed foreign and strange.

"You don't have to agree, Agent Scully, but I would ask that you not mention anything to Agent Mulder."
"Not mention it to him? Do you want me to lie to my partner?"

He at least looked abashed at the suggestion of deceit. "I'm not saying that! I'm only saying that you know your partner, and you know what he can be like. It would make my job much more difficult if he decided he wanted to involve himself in this, You know that he would."

Yes, that he would, Scully admitted grudgingly. Mulder would almost gleefully do it, if nothing else because he was curious about why Spender asked her and not him. "All right. I will review the file and see what sort of observations I can make. When is your task force meeting?"

"Tomorrow at 9." Spender nearly smiled, vaguely relieved. "I will go over the details of the case with everyone and then we'll see what we find."

"Right." Scully took back the proffered file, feeling a bit like Judas with his thirty pieces of silver. "I will try not to involve Agent Mulder, but I will warn you, Agent Spender, when he gets it into his head to look into something, not even I can stop him."

"I understand," he replied as she turned to go, feeling vaguely dirty by doing so. Scully only hoped Mulder didn't hold it against her that she was agreeing to this. After all, it wasn't as if she worked on tasks forces without him very often, right? Somehow that didn't do much to assuage her growing sense of regret, she realized, as she made her way to the elevators.
Strange Vibes

Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets strange vibes between Mulder and Diana Fowley.

Melissa had always told Scully to listen to her intuition. She had scoffed at her sister for it, the scientist in her refusing to believe that anyone could understand anything by instinct. But there were rare times in the years since her sister's death that Scully listened to Melissa's advice, and right now her intuition was screaming at her as she watched the silent conversation occurring between her partner and Diana Fowley. The two walked ahead of her, as far apart as was possible in the confines of the hallway, but even Scully could see some link that pulled them together. Every so often one of them would look to the other with the sort of glance that spoke volumes.

Did Mulder ever look at her like that? Scully swallowed the bile that coated her throat at the thought. Obviously, Mulder knew this Agent Fowley, had some history with her. Why not? Mulder had been in the FBI a full five years before Scully even met him, the same amount of time as the two of them had been partners. Scully's head swam with the amount of people and things that had happened just in the long span working with Mulder. He had also been a full field agent right from the start, unlike Scully who had started as a teacher and pathologist at Quantico. He obviously had worked with a variety of different people in his time before Scully happened into his life.

Yes, she couldn't remember there ever being a connection like this with Jerry Lamana, and he was the only figure from Mulder's past, outside of Bill Patterson and Reggie Purdue, whom she had ever met. None of them had been women. Did that make a difference? And why did she care, she thought moodily. After all, it wasn't as if Mulder didn't know females before meeting Scully. She certainly used to answer the phone for enough of them in the early days of their partnership. Diana Fowley was certainly his type, or at least from what Scully understood his type to be. She was tall, not exactly beautiful, but pleasant and elegant enough, with a keen intellect and a way of thinking that seemed to complement his. Like Phoebe Green had, she noted. Perhaps there had been something there once, like there had been with any innumerable women in the office pool at one point in Mulder's dating career. Agent Fowley was likely not the first or last FBI agent that he had charmed with his lopsided grin and soulful eyes.

Was Scully the only woman Mulder hadn't managed to sleep with?

"Mulder," she murmured with some asperity, thinking back on her conversation with Spender the day before. "What are you doing here?"

She might as well have been speaking in Greek for all the sense she apparently made to the pair in front of her. They stopped in their mutual, silent conversation, turning to frown at Scully as if she had asked them if the sky was falling. She swallowed her irritation as she met Mulder's bemusement evenly.

"Thought I would give Agent Spender a little help on his case." There was mischief in his shrug and smile, and the same look he shot her many times over the years when he was knowingly doing things he knew would piss someone off. It rarely worked on her. Scully met his childish charm with a raised eyebrow and crossed arms.
Diana Fowley wisely remained silent, watching the proceedings from her side of the hallway with vague interest.

"So I got a tip from Skinner on Spender's big case." Mulder lazily shrugged, just managing not to sneer at the idea of Spender and his team. "I thought I would at least take a look into it."

"He doesn't want you here, Mulder. In case you don't remember, you aren't one of his favorite people, and his mother is still missing."

"And I'm still searching for her, but in the meantime, I thought I could add a little insight to this. You have to admit, I'm asking all of the questions no one else is asking in there."

"I'm not so sure your questions are ones that need asking."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Agent Scully." Agent Fowley spoke up with a practiced sort of diplomacy that said she had the sort of intelligence experience that Spender had been looking for on this case. "You saw the video, the boy obviously sensed someone was there before the shooter struck."

Again, there was that intuitive tug at Scully's gut as she realized that Diana Fowley all too easily seemed to fall into step with Mulder's theory. "We don't know what the boy was looking for. It could have been anything, something in the crowd that caught his attention."

"It could have been, but it wasn't." Mulder waved the file he had in hand under Scully's nose. "I tracked this tidbit down before crashing the party. The boy is named Gibson Praise. He is the son of American missionaries who live in the Philippines. He began playing chess as a six-year-old and his father encouraged him to take it up competitively."

"None of which sounds particularly threatening to anyone in the NSA." Scully ignored the other woman watching them as she challenged Mulder directly. "He's just a boy who has a gift, he's hardly the first."

"He has a gift alright, but I don't think Gibson is any Bobby Fisher. The boy is currently being held at a psychiatric ward in Gaithersburg, supposedly on a request of the US State Department while the FBI conducts its investigation. They are saying they feared for a child who was an up close and personal witness to a brutal killing right in front of him."

"But you suspect differently?"

"I think the boy sensed that the shooter was up there and chose that moment to put his opponent into checkmate in order to avoid getting killed, and I think the State Department knows that." He turned to Agent Fowley, still quiet outside of their conversation. "What do you think, Diana?"

Diana? Scully only just did manage not to stare at Mulder in abject surprise. She could count only a handful of times Mulder ever called her "Dana". She was always Scully. Obviously, the two of them were friendly at one point in their past for him to slip into such familiar terms around her.

"I think you have a point," she replied, deepening Scully's shock as she hardly batted an eye at Mulder's idea. "Why keep the boy in that sort of place if there wasn't a fear that he was something more than what he seemed, perhaps something that someone in the intelligence community deemed dangerous."

"A twelve-year-old," Scully insisted with all of the politeness she could manage. After all, Agent Fowley was new and had done nothing to her thus far to earn Scully's cynicism, even if she wasn't comfortable with the way this woman seemed to fall into line so easily with her partner's wild way
of thinking.

"That's part of my point, Scully." Mulder pushed back with perhaps the most excitement she had seen out of him in months. "How in the world is a twelve-year-old any threat? And yet, he's of enough concern he's being put under medical evaluation. I think there are questions to ask there, even if Spender doesn't want to see it. What harm does it do to look into them?"

She wanted to say it was a huge waste of time, but something about their visitor standing there, watching them argue, caused Scully to refrain. It was clear that she was interested, even if Scully felt it was foolish. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask him what he saw that night."

"And perhaps we can figure out why it is he's of such interest to people involved in this case," Mulder waved his file again, as if reminding her of his supposition. "You interested in coming along, Diana?"

Scully tried not to wince as Agent Fowley shot Scully a circumspect look before nodding slowly. "I can come with, see if there is any observations I notice."

"Great!" Mulder spun, leading the way down the hall as the two women exchanged looks, Agent Fowley watching Scully with a non-descript sort of way. Scully couldn't tell if she was apologetic or not. Rather than fall in beside Mulder, as she had before, she waited for Scully to move beside her, perhaps as a friendly gesture. Whatever her relationship to Mulder in the past, Scully didn't know the woman enough to be able to tell who she was and what she was doing there, or even why she took to Mulder's theories so readily.

"I didn't mean to cause an argument between the two of you." She sounded at least mildly sorry.

"It's fine. That wasn't an argument." Scully wished she could explain exactly what it was. That was a regular discussion for the two of them, and as usual, Mulder got his way, or at least Scully couldn't figure out a handy counter to it this time. "It's the nature of how we work together."

"And how long have you and Agent Mulder been partners?" Agent Fowley was quick to use Mulder's appropriate title, rather than his first name. Perhaps whatever happened in the past had ended badly between them.

"Five years," Scully affirmed, watching him ahead of them and momentarily feeling her heart squeeze ever so tightly for the briefest of seconds. So much had happened in those five years, it was hard to believe it had really been that long. "I was brought onto the X-file to help Agent Mulder with his work."

"The X-files," Fowley nodded, clearly well aware of the type of cases they took. "I take it then you believe in the work he does?"

"More or less. I can't say that I am the believer he is, but I think that he has certainly opened up my eyes to the possibilities out there." It was a nice, cautious answer, but a truthful one. She didn't know this woman, and she wasn't about to trust her or let her in when her motives were unclear.

"So you have a background in field work then?"

"Pathology," Scully clarified, wondering why this woman was so curious. "I was working in Quantico at the time they assigned me to him."

"A pathologist? That's different." She uttered "different" with a sort of curious wonder, as if it would never occur to her that a scientist could work on these sorts of cases. "I can imagine working with Agent Mulder has been difficult?"
Why would she assume that? "At times, just as it would be with any other field agent. But we work well together, despite the differences of opinion."

"I would have thought that someone with the propensity to be so skeptical would have held back his work. I'm glad to hear that's not the case." Something about Fowley's statement cut at Scully, and she stung at the harsh thought that her point of view in any way, shape, or form held back Mulder's work. If anything, she had always assumed it had enhanced it, refined it. But Fowley obviously didn't understand the details, nor had she seen Mulder or his work in years. The woman likely didn't mean anything intentional by it.

Maybe…

"Well, I certainly look forward to working with the both of you, Agent Scully. It will be interesting to see where this experience takes me."

Interesting indeed, Scully thought as she and the other agent fell into a troubled silence. Who Diana Fowley was in the past to Mulder and why she was so suddenly eager to follow his theory, Scully didn't know, but every instinct she had been trained to ignore over the years fired inside of her, saying something was going on here, that there was more to this woman than she presented. And yet she seemed friendly enough, polite, and interested in their work, which was a far cry from most FBI agents.

Perhaps that was it, so few actually took their work seriously that Agent Fowley's interest set Scully's alarms off, wondering what the woman wanted. She could just be genuinely interested in the work. If that were the case, why was Missy's voice going off in Scully's mind, reminding her to listen to her instincts that something very wrong was going on here? If everything in Scully told her something was wrong, especially when it so rarely said anything of the sort, shouldn't she listen to it? What if she did, and it proved that she was just simply overreacting because a pretty agent from Mulder's past had arrived, and her newfound feelings, still tender and raw, had reacted in jealousy to a different woman catching Mulder's eye?

This was ridiculous she scolded herself, flushing at the thought. She was a professional, an agent who didn't allow her feelings to compromise her work. Skinner had just lectured her on the very thing. If an old flame of Mulder's happened on the scene, so be it. Scully perhaps cared for her partner in a deeply, fundamental way, but she wasn't involved in a romantic relationship with him, nor was she sleeping with him. Jealousy was petty, especially over Diana Fowley. They had bigger things to worry about.

"Scully, you coming?" Mulder had reached the elevators and was waiting impatiently. Diana Fowley had already moved ahead to meet him, and Scully found she had trailed behind, bogged down in the mire of her own thoughts.

"Coming," she nodded vaguely, watching the two of them together. She found she didn't like the picture of the two of them side-by-side at all, not one little bit.
A Little Bit of History

Chapter Summary

In which Scully seeks out the answer to who Diana Fowley is.

She needed answers and there was only one place Scully could think to find them.

The alley was dark, as always, but beyond the shuttered windows she had a feeling someone was up. She pounded on the heavy iron door, glaring up at the camera that pointed down at her from overhead as if daring one of the occupants inside to ignore her summons. She could hear the gears turning as the camera focused in on her further and the rustle of something beyond the heavily protected doors.

It took nearly a minute, but finally all the locks opened up to reveal Frohike, blinking owlishly at her behind his Coke-bottle glasses in the dimness. Obviously, it was late. She caught him in his pajamas and…a Kevlar vest. Really? Did he expect her to shoot him?

He motioned her inside, closing and locking the door behind her as he pulled sheepishly at his nightclothes. "You caught me getting ready for bed. Come in, come in." He waved towards the warren the Lone Gunmen apparently called a home.

"Thank you," she breathed, suddenly feeling rather ashamed for the lateness of the hour and the reason for rousing her friends from their rest.

Frohike hardly looked as if he minded. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this late night hour?"

"I need your help." This caught Frohike's attention immediately, his eyes lighting with purpose. From down the hallway it clearly caught the attention of the other two as well. Langley shuffled in, toothbrush in mouth, Byers not far behind him.

"With what?" Langley mumbled around toothpaste and brush as Scully held up a packet of neurological scan results, cleverly purloined out of the door as she left Diana Fowley behind.

"These!" She flipped on a light board on one of their desks, shoving flimsy film with black and white images onto the bright background. "You've all heard of Gibson Praise, the chess wunderkind?" She assumed they had at least, they usually had heard about everything weird in the world out there. "These are a series of scans and neural electric outputs of his brain processes. There seems to be some suspicious that he is a fraud."

The three men huddled in closely to study the photos and the brain activity, the unusual occurrences in areas that the human brain normally never saw activity in.

"Dorf on chess?" Byers asked, though Scully had no idea what he meant by the reference.

"Well, apparently he wins by reading his opponents' minds." Did she really just admit to the possibility that Gibson Praise could have psychic abilities? All three of the Gunmen stared at her in amazement, before Frohike grinned in abject delight.

"I love that!" he grinned gleefully, rubbing his hands together.
"And you want us to do what?" Langley still clearly didn't believe Scully was considering the possibility the boy might have any extra-sensory perception, and frankly she wasn't so sure she believed it.

"Analyze the data," she replied, nearly choking on the next statement, "With an eye to the parapsychological."

They all three blinked blankly at her.

"Oooh, a walk on the wild side," Frohike intoned, vaguely excited by this new side of Dana Scully. But she shut him down quickly enough. She reached across, snapping off light board, ready to demand her price for their personal fun.

"First, I want you guys to tell me who Diana Fowley is."

It was a name that obviously had some meaning for all three of them. Eyebrows rose immediately and surreptitious looks were exchanged. The instinctive distrust that had been gnawing at Scully all day roared to life again, alarm bells sounding off at the hesitation they all three displayed.

"Diana Fowley," Byers croaked. "Geez, we haven't heard that name in a while."

"Then you know her?"

"Well, yeah." Byers hedged, looking to the other two to begin explanations.

Frohike cut to the chase, in his true fashion. "She was Mulder's chickadee when he just out of the Academy. Good looking."

Chickadee? Scully swallowed around the term, thinking vaguely that Diana Fowley hardly seemed Frohike's type. But then again, was he particularly choosy? "Well she claims to have worked closely with him for a while."

"She was there when he discovered the X-files," Langley offered. "She has a background in para-science. She got a legat appointment a while back, in Berlin. I always wondered why they split up."

Broke up? Clearly then their relationship wasn't a one time fling once Mulder got out of the Academy. He discovered the X-files four years into his career, which indicated some sort of long-term connection between the two, a relationship with someone he had worked with closely, a partner of sorts, one that had so much time and through so many similar interest between the two of them. It might have devastated him when it ended. Scully had always suspected that there was a woman who had crushed Mulder's heart horribly in his past, and now she had a name and a face to put with the person who had wounded him and driven him to becoming the belligerent basement hermit he was when she met him, the man who only came out to occasionally score a new sexual conquest.

So that was the thread that connected them together, Diana was his one time love, the one that got away. Why had he not ever told her? Quietly, she flipped the viewer on, unable to look at the three of them as light flooded the images once again. "Why don't you boys see what you can find?"

There was quiet discomfort for a long moment as the three men looked between each other, wondering what to do. Langley came to life first, moving to his computer and firing it up, as Byers began to seriously study the images she laid out for them. Scully decided to leave them to it, searching for the couch she normally perched on as they worked, hoping if anything she could hide and digest the information they had just laid at her feet.
To her surprise, Frohike was at her elbow, gently pulling her away to her preferred spot, hidden under a pile of opened boxes, plastic wrapping and computer cable. "Let me clear this off for you."

"Thanks," she muttered as he swept things haphazardly off the worn upholstery, trying to make a more hospitable place for her to settle. She eased down as gracefully as she could manage with a grateful smile.

"I'm surprised Mulder never told you about Diana," Frohike admitted, conversationally, as he tried to tidy some of the mess he had just made. Scully watched him with as neutral of an expression as she could manage, despite the same question raging through her own mind.

"Mulder is entitled to his own private life, Frohike. Why would he feel obligated to tell me?"

"You told him about that asshat doctor you dated once."

Scully's expression to jerk up at him in shock.

"How did you hear about that," she ejected, stunned he even knew about Daniel, though she guessed the source for their knowledge was clear. Poor Frohike hemmed and hawed, realizing in an instant his mistake, as he tried to ring the life out of a handful of connectors, tossing them aside with exasperation at what he just admitted to.

"Look, Mulder wanted us to look into the guy one night, a while ago, so we dug him up."

A dull pain throbbed to life above her right eyebrow and Scully found herself rubbing it fretfully, her manicured nails worrying the spot. "Look, I don't want to know. I'm sure there is a lot about my private life you all have looked up and I'm not in the mood to feel violated anymore today."

Gibson Praise's candid comments were enough to unnerve her that day, let alone Diana Fowley's sudden reappearance in Mulder's life.

"For what it's worth, I could give you some of he 411 on Diana Fowley," he offered sorrowfully, as if hoping this would make up for his complete disregard for Scully's private life.

"Whatever she is, and who ever she was to Mulder, that's not any of my concern."

"Bullshit," Frohike replied glibly, earning another raised eyebrow out of Scully, but ignoring it. "I know I would be dying to know. I mean, seriously, Mulder has told you about everything else other than this woman?"

"I assume he has a reason for keeping that part of him private."

"Yeah, like she's the one who walked away from him and dumped his ass." Frohike scowled, his pug-like face scrunching behind his thick glasses. "He went on a week long bender and showed up here, drunk off his ass, and took a day to sleep it off. After that, he picked himself up, dusted himself off, and went to work in that basement of yours and came out only to bug us."

So her suspicion had been right about Diana and the relationship he had with her at one time. "Why did she leave him?"

"Her career, I guess." Frohike had the philosophical air of someone who expected women to do strange and unpredictable things to ruin the hearts of men. "She ditched him for a more respectable job than digging through the X-files. Weird, because it was all right up her alley. She had the background in para-science. I'm guessing the Berlin job was a sweeter deal, would help her climb up the ladder."
That explained so much about Mulder expectations of her when she first came on board. He had come on with the full spook factor, expecting her to run for the safety of Quantico and the promise of her career there. After all, that was what his previous partners had done, most especially Diana Fowley.

"What is she doing back here, then," Scully wondered aloud, recalling Diana's admission that she had requested a transfer back to the US. "She was vague. She said there were things at home she decided she wanted to get back to." Could she have meant Mulder?

"I can take a look if you want," Frohike offered, eager to prove himself after his earlier admission of snooping. "I'll see what I can dig up on her and her time in Berlin."

It was wrong of her to do, Scully told herself. She shouldn't be digging into this woman's private life just because of her connection to Mulder. But her instinct ignored her initial reaction and ran to the extreme that only Mulder would appreciate. Trust no one, he had told her on their first case together, and so she was following his edict, even down to the woman whom he had once trusted with his heart.

"See what you can dig up on her," Scully replied, not even blinking an eye. "Take a note of anything she's done in the para-sciences of late and see if there is a note as to why it is she requested her transfer state side.

"Your wish is my command, milady!" Frohike bowed obsequiously, before shooting her a wink and a grin as he wandered to his own station, tugging ridiculously at his bulletproof vest.

She watched him go thoughtfully. Just what would they turn up on Diana Fowley? It could be nothing. But what if it wasn't? How would she tell Mulder about it? And would he believe her? He said that Scully was the only person he trusted completely. Would he trust her in this when a woman he had once loved so much was involved? And what about her own heart? Could she handle the truth if she realized that despite all these years and all they had experienced, Mulder would still believe a woman who had once left him broken rather than the woman who had stood by his side through so much?

Why did Diana Fowley have to wander back into his life now?
That's How It Is

Chapter Summary

In which Scully realizes that there is more going on between Mulder and Diana Fowley than she suspected.

File in hand, Scully's heels clipped against the chipped and faded tile of the psychiatric hospital, clicking hollowly down the cavernous hallways. She wasn't fond of psychiatric hospitals, she freely admitted that. She had been to a few in her time with Mulder, but her most recent excursion, with him under observation in a ward in Chicago had underscored once again how much such places crawled under her skin in a quiet, pervasive way. She had wanted nothing more than to get Mulder out of there, to get him out of his restraints and take him someplace to clear his head. She couldn't imagine any fathomable reason why anyone would keep a pre-pubescent child there, whatever he could do.

What Gibson Praise could do wasn't just unusual, it was unheard of. Short of Jesus Christ, Scully didn't think she had ever heard of any living human being doing what he could do. Still, if there was an explanation to be found regarding why Gibson could do what he did, she had a feeling science had found something to at least give it context. She had spent hours with the Lone Gunmen, analyzing data and pouring through legitimate, neurophysical journals. While the trio had been bemused to be looking through mundane, medical authorities for explanations of what they saw on Gibson's charts, it had no less amazed them when they found that there was, indeed, a scientific explanation to Gibson's unique abilities.

Everyone had the capacity to do what Gibson did. The so-called "God nodule" was common in every human brain. It allowed every person to process the idea of a divine being, of spirituality, of those things beyond human experience. Given certain stimuli, the God nodule allowed people to accept the idea of a high power. But Gibson's brain did what no other human had, at least not in any study Scully had dredged up. Where normal people only used a part of that response, Gibson's brain lit up with activity, running rampant in a way that Scully couldn't begin to understand. She didn't know what it was doing or what neurological responses it was triggering, that would need further testing, but she knew one thing, if Mulder needed proof for Gibson and his abilities, she had the scientific evidence in hand, the truth that what he believed was possible.

What they did with it now, that Scully wasn't so certain on. If this were true, it lent credence to Mulder's suspicion about the boy being the primary target and not the Russian chess master. After all, a child who displayed the potential that Gibson did could be seen as gold mine to any researcher, and perhaps be seen as a threat by some. Scully couldn't help but think of Michael Kirtschgau and his words and wonder just how Gibson was able to access those parts of his brain others couldn't, and just why his parents were in the Philippines in the first place. Was it really as innocent as a missionary trip? Their next steps would be to look into this child's background, where he came from, the circumstances of his birth. Perhaps, she thought with satisfaction and relief, this would be the case that would get them back on track, that would lead Mulder back down the path he had abandoned since Scully's illness. Perhaps he would finally return to asking those questions, now with the evidence of Gibson in hand.

How did he exist and what about that fact was enough to drive the NSA to want to kill him?
The nurse on station, a tall, gray haired woman, acknowledged Scully with the arch of steely eyebrows, pointing in the direction of the television room. Of course, Gibson had been glued to it since they had met him, typical for a twelve-year-old. Perhaps it was a way for him to quiet his brain, to lessen the activity that exploded across the films in Scully's hand. Rather like Mulder and his magazines, she snorted softly, it was something base, requiring little thought or effort, a sensory input that didn't overload the mind with anything more heavy than mental cotton candy.

Scully could hear the sounds of some television cartoon and the quiet murmur of Mulder and Agent Fowley. She ignored the knotting that formed in her stomach as she thought of what the Lone Gunmen had told her, chastising herself for the mere hint of disgruntlement. Honestly, it wasn't as if she hadn't known that Mulder had a life before she entered it, or that he hadn't been with someone. He had hinted at it. Hell, even Tom Colton had mentioned it once to her long ago. Scully could hardly speak on that score, hadn't she had ex-lovers appear in their work? She hadn't seen Mulder work himself up over Jack Willis or Tom Colton. Whatever Mulder's past was with Diana Fowley, they were professionals, as was she, and whatever it was, it was none of her business.

She turned into the observation room that overlooked the television area, knowing that Mulder and Fowley were there, but stopped just short of the door as her brain registered what her eyes saw. The two of them stood so close, hand in hand, a gesture far too intimate for two people who had not seen each other much in seven years. The knotting in her gut tightened painfully at the soft look on her partner's face, wistful and tender, and totally unguarded, a rarity even for him. It spoke of memories of better, happier times, where he wasn't the obsessed, driven man that she had always known. Times when he had allowed someone to call him "Fox" for a change and not mind it, and had once had a life that stretched far beyond the confines of his basement office. It was a time before the X-files, before his relentless search, before Scully. It was a time that Diana Fowley had inhabited with him.

It suddenly occurred to Scully just what Fowley represented to him. Why hadn't it before? After all, she had recognized Diana as being the woman who broke his heart, who had left him to pursue a career in Berlin, but she was also the woman he had loved enough for his heart to get broken, enough to drive him into being the man she knew now. Obviously, she meant more to him than just a random, former relationship that had screwed him and ditched him. Why hadn't it occurred to her when the boys had said something? Why did it bother her so much realizing it now?

Gibson's test results felt like a weight in her fingers as she turned on her heel, walking past the door, her skin feverish as she swallowed hard against the ache forming in her chest. What to do? She could interrupt, but felt that she didn't want to, that she had no desire to interject herself into a situation that so obviously didn't involve her. She was an outsider.

Without thinking she turned tail and returned to her car. She felt numb as her steps wandered back past the charge nurse, down out of the building to the parking structure beyond. Mechanically, she reached for her keys, let herself into her sedan, and sat, staring ahead of her. What should she do now? She needed Mulder to see what she had found, but didn't want to interject herself into that, and for whatever reason didn't want Diana Fowley there, quietly raising eyebrows at the work that Scully did. Whatever Agent Fowley's background in Mulder's work or life was, it was Scully who had been with him for the last five years, who had sacrificed her life and integrity for him, who had lost so much for him and she deserved to be treated with the respect she had earned while that woman was notching service points for herself in Berlin.

Her cell phone surprisingly had service in the concrete of the structure. She dialed Mulder's number inside. She doubted he had even noticed Scully standing there, so wrapped up was he in Agent Fowley. The sting of that thought ached as Mulder answered at the end of the line.
"Mulder."

"Mulder, it's me."

"Where are you?" There was a hint of exasperation from him. Annoyance managed to tamp down the hurt for the moment as she thought of the work she had been out doing for him.

"I'm on my way to work," she lied deftly, finding it surprisingly easy to do to this man she had never lied to. "I was hoping I could show you something, something about the boy."

"Well, I'm at the psych facility with him right now. Why don't you come by and show me?"

"Uh, no." Her composure slipped as for a moment she wondered if he had really seen her after all and was calling her out on her story. "I'd prefer to show you at work, if that's okay?"

"Okay, what is it?" He sounded reluctant to leave Gibson - or Diana.

"I think you'll be surprised, very surprised." She hoped he was at least. Something within Scully desperately hoped for that very thing.

"I'm on my way," he muttered, signing off. Scully could already hear him making apologies to Diana Fowley, rushing out in a whirl of trench coat and leather shoes. At least for that she could still get Mulder to come running, when she had a hot lead or information to support his work. But then, she realized sadly, she had never tried to be anything else other than his friend, his supporter, and the person who pushed him to be better. Clearly, whatever her feelings for him, they were not enough.

She only had minutes, she realized, turning on her engine and pulling out of the structure. She wanted to see Skinner before she presented her findings to Mulder, to loop him in as well and have a calm, level head in all of this. If these findings meant what Scully thought they did then they would need to rethink every aspect of this case, and they would need their superior's support.

They were risking everything on this boy, she realized. She hoped Mulder was ready for those sorts of consequences.
Scully perched on the edge of rough fabric in the most uncomfortable chair in the cramped, motel room. The television was blaring some evening cartoon about a family in Texas. Huddled in front of it was Gibson, glazed eyed and slack-jawed, his eyes fixed through his thick lenses at the screen, barely even reacting to what Scully presumed was a funny scene. Like many other twelve-year-olds, he was oblivious the minute the screen lit up, ignoring anyone and everyone around him. Would this be her nephew Matthew in eleven years? She hoped not. Bill and Tara had sensible heads on their shoulders when it came to their infant son. She had a feeling that Bill, much like their father, would drag his child off into the canyons of Southern California on hikes and off onto the boats to fish, and would only allow the television on for a certain number of hours in a day. She would hate to think of Matthew turning into a zombie, mindlessly watching colored pixels, trying to shut out the world.

"I'm not a zombie," Gibson muttered, startling Scully into shamefulness as she jerked, blinking at the back of the boy's head. Her pulse raced at the idea he had heard her thoughts, a snaking sense of a loss of privacy creeping through her mind. It was unsettling, having him call her out when she hadn't even said a word.

"I'm sorry," Scully replied not even bothering to think of an excuse. He would know she was lying. "I was just thinking of you watching that show."

Gibson's only response was to shrug, clearly little caring what her opinion on his TV watching habits was. Scully had forgotten how careful she needed to be around him. Working with Mulder was one thing, the man could read her like an open book, but he couldn't really see into her mind. Perhaps that was a good thing, she reasoned. Her thoughts regarding him and Diana Fowley weren't good ones.

"He knows you don't like her."

Scully blinked, again unnerved as she watched the back of Gibson's unflinching head. "Are you trying to read my thoughts?" She couldn't help but feel slightly angry at the idea, annoyed that even her own, private inner dialogue was overheard by anyone, even a child.

"No, but your are kind of loud." Gibson finally turned to look at her, eyes baleful in the glow of the television. "I'm sorry if it upsets you. Most people get creeped out by it."

Guilt and shame gnawed at her as she sighed, immediately chiding herself. This was a kid, a boy with a talent they barely understood and she was treating him exactly how she imagined he feared...as a freak.

"Gibson, it's not you." That much was true, it wasn't him. The boy couldn't help who he was. "I suppose I'm just not used to someone being able to know what I'm thinking."

"I know." He shrugged, turning back to the cartoon on television. "You feel sorry for me, but you
shouldn't."

"I do feel sorry for you," she replied, "I can't imagine what it is like, just hearing everything."

"I wouldn't know the difference." He was glued back to the television again. Scully could feel his attention pulled in, sucked into a vacuum of inner silence as his attention focused on anything other than the world around him. What sort of life must it be, hearing every thought that comes in, never knowing for sure which is your own?

"You said that he knows I don't like her," Scully ventured, curious as the show went into a commercial break. "You mean Agent Mulder knows I don't like Agent Fowley?" She might as well be honest with the boy. It wasn't as if she could hide her feelings on the matter.

"He knows, but he doesn't know why." Gibson's focused lessened somewhat as commercials ran past regarding some breaking news story that would be on the eleven o'clock news. "He doesn't know how you feel about him."

"No, he doesn't." Scully's heart skipped painfully against her lungs, but she held on to her fraying composer.

"Why do adults always do that? It makes my head hurt." He sighed, as if it was the simplest thing in the world, affairs of the human heart. "How is he supposed to know why you don't like her if you don't tell him."

If only life were that simple, Scully smiled, wishing for a moment she were twelve again and able to rationalize the gray areas of life like that. "Gibson, when you get to be an adult, you'll realize it isn't that simple. Agent Mulder is my partner and friend. Sometimes it is better just to leave things unsaid."

"I thought you would say something like that." He snorted, already perfecting the teenaged eye roll and smirk, instantly indicating what he thought of her adult sensibilities. "Don't worry though, he isn't happy that the other lady is here either."

Really? That scene in the hospital could have fooled Scully. Mulder holding Diana's hand, laughing, he looked pretty pleased to see her. "Why do you say that?"

"He's confused by her and why she's here. She hasn't spoken to him in a long time and now she's here. He doesn't know why and he wonders what you think about her."

Scully wanted to desperately ask why it is Mulder was worried, but held her tongue. There was only so much prying she was willing to do into her partner's brain. If it was important, she would rather Mulder tell her, and not used a psychic pre-teen to ferret it out.

"When we were in the room, Gibson, and you said that one of us was thinking about him, why didn't Mulder want you to say?"

A ghost of a smile rose on the boy's childish face. "Maybe you should ask him. He was thinking about you."

In what context was that? "Was he worried I wouldn't believe any of this?"

"He was worried you wouldn't believe him, but I don't think about me." Gibson was being maddeningly evasive. To her luck, his show returned, immediately snapping his attention towards the television and away from the conversation they were having at hand. Scully sighed in mild frustration. Conversations with teenagers at best were vague and with a twelve-year-old who could
read minds and loved cartoons, clearly it was worse.

"Gibson?" She wanted to ask him how he could do it? She wanted to ask him why it is he could hear her thoughts, or Mulder's. She wanted to know why it was Mulder was so worried she of all people wouldn't believe him.

"This is a great show," he murmured, distracted. "I wish we got this where I live." Again the characters, bickering over something on screen, absorbed his attention.

"How do you do it?"

She didn't need to explain what she meant. She knew he understood, "I just hear you thinking, like on a radio. And sometimes there are lots of radios and I want to shut them off and watch some TV."

It must be exhausting to live like that, everyone's minds crowding in on him all at once. "Is that why you like chess, because it's just one thought that you hear?"

"Yeah, but that's not why I like it all the time."

"Why else do you like it?"

Again there was the ghost of a smile. "Because there's no talking. Just thinking. It's nothing like real life, where people think one thing but they say something else."

"Is that what people do," she wondered, curious.

"They're so worried about what other people are thinking, when the people they're worrying about are worried about the same thing. It makes me laugh."

Scully winced. Wasn't this the same conversation she just had with him about Mulder? "Why," she wondered allowed, curious as to why he was so amused by it.

"They make up all this stuff to believe but it's all made up. Some people try to be good people, but some people just don't care...like you."

Like her? That statement was bewildering. Scully always believed she was trying to be a good person, looking out for the best in people. After all, she had put up with Mulder for five years and she was dedicated to her job as a law enforcement officer. What did he mean she didn't care? "You think I don't care?"

"No, you don't care what people think," Gibson clarified, eyes far older than they should be on a child turning to gaze up at her. "Except for her, the other one."

Diana Fowley, she realized. Why did Scully care what she thought?

As if by magic, there was a knock at the door and Agent Fowley entered, calmly professional as she glanced at Gibson's indifference, then over at Scully. "I'm here to relieve you."

A bit early for that, Scully thought, but accepted it as she smiled down at Gibson. On impulse she reached out for him, squeezing his shoulder as she rose. "Well, we'll talk about this later, okay?"

She nodded towards Agent Fowley, preparing to take her leave for the night when Gibson's voice stopped her at the door. "They want to kill me, you know."

He said it with such sad certainty, the fear of a child underlying the understanding that this was
coming and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The idea chilled her as she turned to look at him, realizing that he was totally serious. For a moment Scully had the impulse to stay, to rush over to him and hug him and hold him close, assure him nothing of the kind would happen. A fleeting image of her doing the same to Emily as she lay dying came to mind and she tamped down on the urge to mother him, instead calling on all of the authority and reassurance she could as a seasoned field agent.

"Nobody's going to do anything to you, Gibson, I promise." She would try her damnedest to ensure nothing did at least.

Gibson hardly seemed relaxed by that. For the briefest of moments she saw his eyes flutter towards Diana Fowley, unchecked by the other agent, then fix themselves firmly on Scully again "I know you do."

Scully closed the door behind her, feeling unsettled as she walked away from the strange child inside. In the parking lot she could see the US Marshalls watching in unmarked cars, and she resisted the urge to wave to them as she made her way to her own sedan. A boy who could read minds would be of powerful interest to any group within any government. But at the end of the day he was still just a boy who wanted to watch television and not have to worry about the thoughts and expectations of the world. It seemed cruel that nature had created him and forced him into this role. He shouldn't have to exist like this, just as Emily shouldn't have had to exist the way she did.

How long had it been since she had really thought about her lost daughter, she wondered, as she started her car. She had forced herself to not think on Emily, to ignore the aching, raw wound that still existed beneath the surface. It had been a couple of months, since Easter at least, and yet something about Gibson reminded her of her daughter, the same disturbing calmness in the face of things that they couldn't control, the same vulnerability in the face of danger, the same need for someone to protect them. Was it such a wise idea for Scully to leave Gibson to Agent Fowley up there, alone?

That was foolishness she chided herself as she pulled from the parking lot. Diana Fowley was more seasoned that she was, and perfectly capable of guarding one boy. Whatever Scully's feelings about the woman and worries concerning her were, in the end she had to go with the fact that Mulder trusted her and if he did, she couldn't speak against that, not until Frohike turned up something to prove that she was otherwise, if he turned it up. For now, she had to believe that Gibson was in good hands, and that Mulder wasn't gambling their entire work away with the safeguarding of this boy.

Why was Mulder so worried about what Scully thought about all of this anyway? She pondered Gibson's puzzle as she returned to Washington. Mulder was afraid of Scully not believing him? When had she not ever believed him when it was truly important? Even more curious, why did Gibson find the entire situation so amusing? It was a long drive back to DC and Scully had many miles to consider these ideas before she could tumble into her bed and sleep.
In which Mulder and Scully take their chance and lose.

They had rolled the dice on this and lost.

Mulder let her into his apartment, the "42" on his door wobbling drunkenly as it swung inwards. Scully stepped in, smoothing nervous hands over her jeans and following her partner into the dim light of his living room, noting how amazingly clutter free it was at the moment. No files piled high on the coffee table. No Chinese take-out boxes with half-dried remains littered the floor. The paper was folded neatly, as if it hadn't been read that day yet.

"You hungry," he asked, more as conversation than a true interest in eating. Scully shook her head, settling carefully into the armchair while Mulder flopped unceremoniously on his couch. The battered leather creaked as long, lanky limbs stretched out and fit comfortably into familiar spots in the cushions. Scully had always wondered why it was he insisted on sleeping on the thing. She assumed the apartment had a bedroom. There was an unopened and unmarked door leading off his living room. But she had never actually been in it. She had never thought to ask him why that was. She wondered vaguely if Diana Fowley had ever spent any time in this apartment.

"Well, well, well!" Mulder stared up at the ceiling, gnawing at his bottom lip absently as he did so. "You know what's going on at the Bureau right now, don't you?" Scully had guessed the minute Skinner had sent them home from the office after Mulder's confrontation with Spender. "The State Department as well as the governments of Russia and Canada are going to want to have answers as to why we can't explain the death of a Russian national on Canadian soil at the hands of one of our own NSA agents. The Justice Department will want to know why two US Marshalls were killed and an FBI agent injured, and how a suspect in an international hit ended up murdered. And they will want to know why it had to do with a twelve-year-old little boy and how it is he ended up missing. They'll want to know who to blame for this and you know who Jeffrey Spender is going to point to."

"And here I thought he had sort of grown to like me," Mulder sarcastically opined, smirking at the ceiling tiles above him.

"This is serious, Mulder." Did he not get that? All day Scully's gut had twisted and turned as she remembered similar hearings four years ago. A dead senior government official on a lonely bridge, his blood on Scully's hands as her partner suffered from the strange effects of an alien virus. They had shut them down that time, the Justice Department having no patience for Fox Mulder and his wild theories. This was so much worse. An international incident, dead marshals, an agent clinging to life, and one man who had sworn that it was all worth it to protect this one boy, because he was special.

"Was it all worth it, Mulder?" Scully felt so uncertain, sitting beside him, watching her career hang in the balance. Eight years of hard work in the FBI, five of them with Mulder, all the things she had given up. Her sister, her daughter, her friends, her health, all suffered for his cause. Would it now be gone because he had rolled the dice and lost? Had Gibson really been worth all of this in the
"I have to believe that Gibson Praise holds the keys to all the answers we've ever sought, Scully." He sounded uncharacteristically desperate, his normal fervent calm ragged, barely holding on. How hard had she pushed him in this last year to return to their work, only to watch him retreat, his broken faith shattered in the face of Michael Kirtschogau. Gibson had promised to return that which was broken to him, proof positive of someone who had the very abilities Mulder had been preaching about for years, the evidence that while he may be a fool, he wasn't crazy, and now even that was taken from him.

Jeffrey Spender was likely painting a portrait of a rogue agent, out waving his gun and screaming to the sky and anyone who would listen that there were things in the world science and reason couldn't explain. Damn Jeffrey Spender and damn the rest of the world! Scully believed in Mulder. Perhaps she always had. She may not believe in aliens, or psychics, or ghosts, or demons, or witches, or any of the rest of it. But she did believe in him, in his belief, in his faith. They were destroying that in him. For what purpose? To save face? To prevent embarrassment? Time and time again they had used him, twisted him, lead him down the wrong path to serve their own ends, leaving him little more than a laughing stock, a court gesture in the land where the law of "normalcy at any cost" was king. Lies, deceptions, half-truths, they were all fair game to keep the public complacent while men in the shadows spun their webs and played their games with real lives - with their lives! And Mulder was little more than a plaything to them, pushed and prodded to give a desired effect, and then torn down when his usefulness was over.

Scully would rage at the injustice of it if she had any energy to do so. At the moment, she was torn between crying and collapsing in on herself, the bitter taste of defeat in her mouth. They had lost this one. They had lost everything, all on one gamble. Melissa and Emily's faces floated to mind and Scully felt herself sinking lower into the chair. They had failed.

"Scully," Mulder rumbled from the depths of the seat cushions, a hint of pleading hanging between them. "You are the one person who has never given up on me through any of this. Through everything, you are the person who has been there. Please don't give up on me now."

All these months of pushing him, begging him to return to their work, and it all came to this? A part of Scully wanted to angrily tell him that she wasn't sure how much more she had left to give. She had stood by while he had allowed the trail to go cold, and now when they had a chance to pick it back up they had lost it. She wanted to be angry with him. Yet, she stood by Mulder even when common sense told her otherwise. She loved him too well not to. To abandon him now would be admitting defeat and that was something Dana Scully would not do.

"What about Agent Fowley," she asked quietly, almost wincing as she did it. Did she even want to probe that question now? "Diana?" He sounded surprised she had brought her up. He stared fixedly at the ceiling, though, and didn't dare look at her. "She is complicated, Scully, in ways I wish I could even explain to you right now. Perhaps, if she gets out of this, I will explain it all. Right now, I'm just praying I didn't get her killed over my own hubris."

Despite her feelings on the woman, Scully hoped for the same thing as well. Too much other guilt weighed on her partner, and whatever this woman was to him, she didn't deserve to die for the machinations of others. Still, Scully's gut turned at Mulder's description of "complicated". Was she still a complication in his life? And why did Scully care so badly? After all, it wasn't as if Mulder wasn't free to have a relationship with anyone, whatever Scully's feelings for him might be. She could almost see Gibson rolling his eyes. God, Scully hoped wherever he was that he was safe.
Her worries were shattered by the shriek of Mulder's phone ringing in the stillness. They both jumped, glancing towards it fearfully. Mulder stilled, eyes wide as they flickered to Scully. It was likely Skinner. He had promised to keep them informed on what was being decided. And yet, Mulder couldn't do it, couldn't listen to the hatchet job she was sure Jeffrey Spender was doing on them both.

She rose, feet stumbling as she snatched up the receiver and sank into the chair at Mulder's desk. She might as well be the one to hear the news they both knew was coming. He needed her right now, needed her to be strong, and it was the least she could do for him.

She held her breath and closed her eyes. "Hello?"
The End

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully face the end of the X-files.

It had taken her two showers to get the smell of smoke and charred plastic out of her hair. Scully had scrubbed at it, her ends frizzed from all of the oils stripped out of it, but the smell had lingered. She couldn't tell if it was really smoke or just the image of five years of work blacked, ruined, and destroyed. Well, five years of work for her, for Mulder it was his entire life.

It had all seemed so surreal, standing there in the middle of the basement, seeing the damage done. Mulder's desk, the only one in the entire damn office, was gone. The files and paperwork on it were little more than ash. Even his beloved basketball had scorched, the leather peeling and crisping, the rubber inside melted and deflated. The wall of ancient steel filing cabinets had all been blackened, many of the files burnt with only a few making it out of the carnage intact. It was utter ruin wherever they had looked, from Mulder's "I Want To Believe" poster, to the plethora of pictures and articles that had covered the walls behind his desk.

Everything that Mulder had spent eight years building was destroyed in a matter of minutes, with no explanation as to why. Initial reports that said it was an electrical fire were quickly dismissed, but no cause of the blaze had been determined. Scully had a feeling no one would be looking too hard to explain it. The entire sorry incident would be labeled with a "cause still under investigation", slapped in a file somewhere, and forgotten. No one really wanted to know why the X-files office burned. If anything there was probably rejoicing in the ranks that it had finally happened. It made the Justice Department's decree all the easier. They had closed the division down, pending further investigation into the disappearance of Gibson Praise and the death of the NSA shooter. They were more than shut down, they were destroyed, and there wasn't a damn thing either of them could do about it.

The "administrative leave" they were both put on was a blessing after all of the events surrounding the closing of the X-files and the fire that destroyed them. Skinner had mentioned high level discussions and continued talk of reassignment, but Scully had barely listened. She had only wanted to get Mulder out of there, away from the carnage. It had taken her three hours to pull him away from the crumbling files, covered in soot, his jeans and t-shirt looking as if he had fallen accidentally into someone's hearth. She and Skinner had coaxed him out, Skinner ordering her to take him home and keep him there. She had done as she was asked, seeing him to his apartment. He was in near catatonia as she forced him on the couch, bundled him up despite the muggy heat of June outside, and sat with him till he fell into an exhausted sleep. Only when she was sure his soft snores were genuine did she manage to slip out herself, drained, depressed, and defeated.

She had failed him. She should have seen what was coming the moment that Mulder pushed for protection for Gibson Praise, the moment he suggested they go to the Attorney General. Nothing was ever that simple, that easy, not with the X-files and certainly not with these men. It was her job to pull Mulder in when he overreached himself, to remind him of just what was at stake with their work. But she too had been excited by the possibility of what Gibson Praise represented, of what he could mean, and she had allowed herself to be swept up into it. They had pushed too hard and pressed their luck, and now everything was lost.
What was left of the night and well into the following day was spent in sleeplessness. By evening whatever hope of rest was gone, and the idea of spending another minute alone in her apartment, replaying the last three days over and over, was enough to drive her rushing from it, not bothering to call ahead to see if Mulder was awake or wanting to see her. She knew he would be home, and she had a key to his apartment. It wasn't as if he could avoid her.

The super barely noticed anymore as she let herself into the front door of his apartment, waiving cheerfully as Scully made her way to the elevator. She tried to manage her bag of sandwiches and two drinks in one hand while tugging at her summery dress with the other. Her reflection in the shiny, brushed metal looked about as worn as she felt, her flyaway hair caught up in a clip in a vain attempt to control it, her face haggard and expressionless as the doors opened. Perhaps she should try to put on a bit more of a brave face for Mulder, she thought, as the creaking, old cables lifted her up to the fourth floor. But she found herself strangely lacking anything resembling bravery at the moment.

Televisions sounded up and down the hallway, people watching the news while dinners cooked, and Scully's stomach rumbled at the idea. She hadn't eaten all day, and she knew Mulder wouldn't have. She would be surprised if he had managed to inch off the couch. Given the condition she had left him in, he might not have even woken up. Balancing food in one hand, Scully slipped her copy of his little used apartment key into the lock. Normally she would knock, but she had a feeling he would only ignore her. There was little protest as the tumbler moved, and the door swung open, allowing Scully to enter the perpetual dimness of her partner's home.

"Mulder," she called, not really expecting a response as she wandered towards the living room where last she had left him. To her surprise, he at least was sitting up, appearing to have showered, and was currently staring blankly at his television, lost in thought as the evening news droned mildly in front of him. He turned to look at her, blinking at her as he took in first the food in her hand and then her face.

"I suppose telling you I'm not hungry does me no good?" He shrugged as he shifted on his couch, pulling off the Navajo blanket he normally used to make room for her slight figure to perch.

"When was the last time you ate?" She arched an imperious eyebrow at him, deftly ignored as his reddened gaze turned back to the television. Scully suppressed a sigh and set down her goods, setting a cup in front of him and pulling out one of the sandwiches. "Eat, Mulder, if nothing else because I will pester you until you do!"

His sagging shoulder's slumped a fraction further in defeat as he grudgingly reach for the paper covered bread and meat, automatically unwrapping it and eating without any acknowledgement of what sort of sandwich it was. Scully couldn't even tell if he enjoyed it. He was doing as he was asked, though, and she supposed she couldn't ask for more than that.

Silence reigned as they ate, the television a low hum as they both stared at it. Scully groped for words between bites of sandwich and sips of soda and found she had none. Not even a pleasant joke or a smart remark to lighten the mood. Just yesterday she sat here with him, worrying about their careers and how they would get the X-files back, now there was nothing to go back to. What would become of their years of work or their careers? Would there be any answers to any of the questions that plagued them both? Would there be no justice for any of this?

It was Mulder who cut the silence first, his voice raspy from smoke and disuse, catching as it tripped out brokenly. "So this neighbor of mine, he and his wife were looking at a new vacuum cleaner at the store. The sales guy was desperate to show it off, so he threw some tacks on the floor and had the vacuum pick them up. My neighbor wasn't impressed, so the sales guy tries pennies
instead. Still wasn't good enough, so the sales guy, he goes in the back and raids his boss' golf bag. He comes back out, sets down one white sphere, and sure enough, the vacuum sucks it right up and down the tube. My neighbor was impressed, he turned to his wife and said, 'Look, honey, this thing sucks balls!'

It was a long way to go for a really crass joke, but it did earn a ghost of a chuckle from Scully as her eyes rolled heaven wards. "You had to work for that one."

"Yeah, well if something is worth it you have to make it last." Mulder pulled at his straw, swallowing soda before sinking backwards into couch cushions. His food consumed, he crumpled the paper and tossed it unceremoniously on the table. "We made our work last, despite it all."

"You made it last," Scully replied. The X-files had been his work, his passion for all of these years. Every ounce of Mulder had gone into those files. It devastated her to see them gone like that.

"By the skin of my teeth, but nearly your life." Mulder punched moodily at the leather beneath his hand. "Scully, I was so stupid with this. From the minute Skinner showed up telling me about Spender, all I could think of was trying to prove I was right. My pride blinded me and now it has destroyed everything."

"Pride blinded you, yes, but Mulder you said it yourself, this was planned from the beginning, meticulously, to gain access to Gibson Praise and to close down your work. This isn't the first time these people have done it, nor even the second, and you've spent an entire year hiding from them. They played that to their advantage. Give Fox Mulder something he can't turn his nose up at, give him the truth he so desperately wants, and pull the rug out from under him. God, Mulder, the story is so old you'd think they would come up with a different one by now."

"Why change something so classic when it works," he dryly observed.

"All your work, Mulder!" She practically sobbed, finding she had no stomach for what was left of her meal. She wrapped it and set it on the table, staring at it sullenly. "What will you do?"

"I don't know." His answer was honest if vague and lost. "Right now, Scully, I'm doing good just sitting up. I'm amazed I managed to shower today. I might not have if the stink of smoke didn't make me want to wretch. I am taking each breath and hoping to find some reason for this, some purpose. And all I got is that I can go to work, pick up a paycheck, and call it a new day."

"So that's it?" His response left her stunned. All of this, everything they had both suffered over the years, and that was all the response he could muster?

"Do you think they are going to let me within a hundred yards of those files, Scully? First, they are evidence in a fire on federal property. Second, the Attorney General made it pretty clear she doesn't want me anywhere near anything smelling paranormal. This couldn't have been better orchestrated if they tried."

He was right. If total destruction was what was called for, she couldn't think of a better way of doing it. "So we are finished then?"

"Maybe," he replied. "But then again there is always hope that you'll get carted off again and they'll open them up. Seemed to work last time."

It took Scully a full heartbeat to realize he was teasing, a glimmer of laughter hiding in his green eyes. "What, you love playing the hero, coming to rescue me?"

"I have to admit to enjoying saving the damsel in distress once in a while, considering she's not in
distress too often. Besides, how many times have you saved my ass? I think fair is fair."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Shebsniffed, wrapping arms around her middle. Her thin, cotton dress felt exposing after her swath of dark suits in heavy fabrics. Was it really worth putting on those uniforms everyday, playing the part of the FBI agent when she wouldn't be allowed to find the answers she had risked so much for? Would it be worth it to be stuck in Quantico again, far away from Mulder, not being with him everyday, putting up with his petulance and childishness that she was sure any reassignment would bring out of him.

"What if they separate us again, Mulder?" It was a valid fear. She had worried about it since Skinner had mentioned reassignment.

"Did that stop us before? I seem to recall you bludgeoning me into accepting your help, even when I told you it was dangerous."

"Do you think they'll let us get away with that now? Mulder, I've given everything to this. I gave up a career in medicine to serve my country working for the FBI, and in that time I've been through more than I imagined possible. For them to casually push me aside for doing nothing more than what I was asked to do would make all of that meaningless."

"It wasn't meaningless, Dana." Mulder spoke with a vehemence she didn't think possible out of him considering his apathy earlier. "It wasn't meaningless, and neither are you. You are a damn fine agent, you are an asset to the Bureau, far more than my sorry ass is. I could be drummed out of here and no one would care. You have talents that will still carry you far beyond me, if necessary. I know I can't manage without them."

"But you might have to," Scully insisted. Unlike the last time, this time she needed to face facts. "Let's face it, it wasn't as if I was sent to you as an asset." Diana Fowley's words stung her, about how she had worked with Mulder, helped him in his work. Why had he never told her about his relationship with Diana?

"But you've become one," he insisted.

"But I don't believe as you do," she pointed out, giving him pause. "I believe that you believe. I believe that there is some purpose for all of this. I have to believe it, or else everything we've both been through these years has been for nothing."

"Scully, I don't even know what I believe anymore."

"Diana Fowley seems to think she knows what you believe." Less of an accusation, it was more of a point in fact. Diana Fowley had much of what Scully did not with Mulder, a past with him, and one he obviously cherished. She had status within the FBI, and respect amongst their superiors. And she believed in the work Mulder did, completely believed it, could further it rather than hold it back with rationality and skepticism. She could be the champion for Mulder's work that Scully never could be, the one to help him literally pick it up from the ashes.

He knew where her thoughts were leading. Across the space between them he reached out for her, fingers resting lightly on her bare arm, electric against her skin. "Scully, remember what I said. You are the one person who has never given up on me. And I still need you on this, now more than ever. Whatever they do, however they separate us or whatever shit work they make us do, stick this out with me. You've risked so much and I can't allow that to go without giving you something, not after Melissa and Emily."

It was the first time in months she heard him mention her daughter's name. "I don't know if there is
such a thing as justice for these people anymore. I think that they will always find some way to win."

"Not if we don't let them," he replied fervently, something of the old Mulder, the man she had first met years ago, returning to him. If their situation weren't so dire, she'd almost thrill at it. "You said you believe in me, Scully, trust me in this?"

What else could she do? "But you said you don't know what you believe in anymore?"

"But I do believe that the truth is still out there. That has never changed. My truth, your truth, to all of this, and it's obvious someone's gone to great pains to hide it. I've been sitting around for a year with my head up my ass, letting everything go to shit. And whatever is going on, we still have answers to find, right? And I can only do it with you here."

She wanted to ask him why he believed that, even for a second. But she let it slide, exhaling deeply as the evening news switched to some entertainment show she cared little about. "Everything changes for us from now on, Mulder. I don't know what that means for us." In so many ways she couldn't even admit to him yet, she silently added. Nor would she, not when it was clear to her that his feelings were not the same as her own.

"Dana, please? You've come this far."

She couldn't look at the pleading in his face, the pain and fear in his eyes, not if she wanted to keep any semblance of composure about this. She was his friend, his partner, and his most trusted ally. She could be none of those things if she allowed herself to be swayed by sentimentality, whatever her feelings for him were. She had to be strong for him right now.

"I'm here as always, Mulder." Stiff upper lip and all. Ever her father's daughter, Dana Scully did not leave her post. For now at least, until the FBI told her otherwise, she would remain by Mulder's side. The question was, what if they did tell her otherwise, then what would she do? Could she commit to continue this madness shunned and ignored like he was? Or would she have to face facts, admit to herself that they had won, and walk away from this?

Just what was going to happen to them?

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