Seasons: Seventh

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Seasons: Seventh

by Beshter

Summary

Time changes everything. As the the nature of both her work and her relationship with Fox Mulder shifts, Dana Scully finds herself questioning her future as she begins to see an end for their search for the truth in the X-files.

Notes

In which Scully makes a life-changing decision
A single choice could change an entire worldview.

Dana Scully made a choice more than six years ago. A forensic pathologist for the FBI eager to get her feet wet in fieldwork, she had been assigned briefly to work with one of the FBI's more eccentric agents. Fox Mulder believed in conspiracies and chased aliens, the unsolved and the paranormal was his domain, far from her field of hard, medical science. They had sent her there to watch him, to hold him accountable. He had thought she was a spy. In a way she was. She was supposed to report on his work. She could have walked into that first case in Bellefleur, Oregon and recorded everything he did, turned it into the higher authorities, and walked back to Quantico and her autopsy lab. She could have left Mulder and his X-files, his conspiracies, and his aliens. Instead, she stayed.

For good and for ill that had made all the difference in Scully's life, she certainly didn't imagine herself in this position when she walked out of the Academy. She had joined this magical, mystery tour as a "doubting Thomas", a skeptic who pointed out that Mulder's photos of UFO's were doctored, that his alien experts dubious, and his sources untrustworthy. With boyish faith and enthusiasm he grabbed her hand and drug her with him down the road of the unknown, through swamps and deserts, Florida to Alaska, finally from Africa to the Antarctic. Through it all Mulder had begged his erstwhile partner to see, to behold the truth he knew in his very being. She finally saw. She finally understood. She know knew Mulder's truth and believed, at least in part, that there was more to this universe than even her science could possibly understand before. Scully now knew what Mulder always had, that the truth was indeed out there, and it was much, much bigger and more incomprehensible than she had ever dreamed. It frightened her, it excited her, but she had to believe it, because Mulder did.

He believed that anything was possible. Who was she, Dana Scully, to question it?

"And these ova belong to you?"

Dr. Parenti was a kindly looking doctor, but Scully supposed in his profession he would have to be. He came highly recommended as one of the top fertility doctors in the Washington DC area, having worked with patients ranging from the highest government officials to average couples just trying to have a baby. Whatever their economic or social standing, the feeling was always the same for those who graced Dr. Parenti's office, the nervous hope of those who have tried every other option afforded them and have come up empty. They came here looking for a miracle.

At least that was what Scully was looking for.

"Yes," she smiled firmly at the gentleman, watching him as he tapped a ballpoint pen lazily against her paperwork. "The story is...complex."

She didn't really want to have to explain to this stranger the truth. How because of her involvement with the X-files and Mulder she had been kidnapped five years ago, subjected to the cruelest of tests, her ova harvested for experiments that she still didn't understand. If it hadn't been for her discovery of one of those experiments, her daughter Emily, Scully would never have known the truth of why her ova were taken, nor would Mulder have discovered the small vial she planned to give Dr. Parenti's for his inspection.

Her reticence in explaining all this to the doctor sitting across from her hardly seemed to faze him. "And you are unsure what condition the ova are in?"
"They were found in a facility, frozen. As I did not authorize their taking and it was years after the fact when they were discovered, I'm not sure if they are even viable." Scully knew the story sounded insane, it would to anyone who hadn't lived through what she did. She had no better explanation for any of this. She had considered simply lying and saying that she had the ova taken before her cancer treatment to preserve them in case she wanted to have children in the future, but that wouldn't explain her fear and worry about what condition the ova were in.

Whether Dr. Parenti found the story outlandish or not, he simply shrugged, gazing at Scully frankly across his large, wooden desk. "So tell me honestly, Dana, why do you want to have a baby?"

The question wasn't surprising, in fact she would have expected it from any fertility doctor, but it still gave Scully pause. How did she answer this? It should be straightforward. She wanted a baby, how simple was that? But it was oh, so much more complex, so fraught with everything she had gone through, everything she had experienced, not the least of which were the trials of the last few weeks, particularly of her partner's strange reaction to an artifact that came from an alien ship she had seen with her own eyes off the Ivory Coast.

She turned her eyes from the twisted tangle of her own fingers in her lap and met the doctor's kindly expression. "Dr. Parenti, I have given years of my life...everything to my work. My job is not an easy one, and yet I've stayed with it because I believed in it, believed that the work I was doing there was right. I don't regret my choice to stay there, because it was necessary, but in doing so I've lost much."

Her entire world had been turned upside down, every truth she had clung to her entire life had been questioned, from her understanding of where humanity came from, to her own belief in God. She had journeyed down this road with Mulder, kicking and screaming most of the way. But now they had come around the corner, near the bend in the road. And she was beginning to see something akin to an end. How many more truths were really left out there for the two of them to discover on this particular path?

Perhaps it was time for another one.

"The truth is," she continued softly. "I have reached a point in my life where I realize what I've given up for my work and I want to shift my focus. It's time to think less about my career and more about other things - home and a family for example."

She was sure this was a theme that was familiar enough to the fertility doctor sitting across from her. How many other young, female professionals, devoted to their work, had approached him for this very thing. Like them, she wanted the chance to be a mother that circumstance had denied her. She wanted the chance that others had taken from her and she prayed this doctor would agree to give her the miracle she had now considered for a long time.

Parenti considered her for long moments. Scully resisted the urge to squirm. The worst he could say was that he couldn't help her, to go look for someone else. She could, but it had taken her so long to even get this far, nearly two years. A fragile part of Scully's hope knew it would be crushed by a rejection, enough so she might put this off again for God knows how long. She held her breath and waited.

"Ms. Scully," he finally drawled, nodding heavily to himself. "Under normal circumstances I would usually advise against this course. Call me old fashioned, but I tend to prefer working with couples, people who have already tried to have children. But given your story, your inability to have children, the unusual find of your ova...I can't say I understand what happened to you, but I can at least look into the situation."
Joy! It was the first good thing to happen to her in so long and Scully's head reeled. She felt the words tripping off her tongue almost without thought. "Thank you, doctor, you have no idea what this would mean…"

"I can't guarantee anything, mind you," he warned, smiling despite the words. "It may turn out that after I examine what you brought to me that the samples are not viable."

"I understand." She half expected that to be the case anyway, but he had given her something infinitely more precious than reassurances at the moment. He had given her hope. "I will have the samples delivered to you then?"

"To the lab I work with, yes," he nodded, reaching for a script pad on his desk and scratching across it in the heavy, spidery writing that many doctors seemed to prefer. "Here's the address. If you can have them sent over, I can take a look and call you within a week with whatever I find, good or bad."

With trembling fingers Scully reached for the paper held out to her. "Thank you," she managed in a voice considerably steadier than she felt inside. "Please…you have my contact information, if there is anything else you need…"

"I will have my office get in touch with you," he assured her with a fatherly smile. "We'll see what we can do about getting you that baby, Ms. Scully."

A baby…her baby. She was really doing this? Even as she shook the hand of the doctor and managed to step somewhat confidently out of his office and into the waiting area she nearly had to pinch herself. She couldn't believe she had even gone this far, to take this step, to follow through with what had been an idyllic thought since the moment Mulder told her he had placed her ova in storage should she ever want to pursue it. Because if Mulder's aliens could be true, so could the idea of her being a mother.

As she stepped from the high end, medical office building and into the late, September afternoon, the light already turning the reddening leaves fire-like in the waning light. It spoke to change, the letting go of the old, and walking into something else, the unknown. She took a deep breath of air and the peculiar autumnal scent of decaying leaves and cool breeze, tinged here and there by wood smoke.

A single moment could change everything, and Scully was about to change her entire life
Scully heard him calling to her as soon as she opened her passenger side door. "What took you so long?"

It was one of the last, fine afternoons of fall. Warm sunshine filtered through reddening leaves in the park as Scully found her heels dragging through drifts of brown and yellow that took flight earlier than the rest. They were already into early October, and the District of Columbia looked like it was on fire, its trees a riot of oranges and reds, the air crisp, but not unbearable, as she set down her burden.

"Have a burger, Mulder." She passed him the Styrofoam container burdened with its double meat patty and extra cheese. If she admitted it to herself, it smelled divine, but she had foregone the delectableness of the burger for the more healthy salad she held in her hand. Mulder eyed her food suspiciously as she settled across the park, picnic table from him.

"Eating a burger wouldn't kill you," he groused, happily sipping from the paper cup she gave him filled with iced tea.

"No, it wouldn't," she admitted. She eyed his still too thin frame as he opened his burger, delight in his wry grin as she analyzed how to attack it. "I figured it would do you some good though."

Mulder only snorted as he grabbed a fry, munching as he still contemplated his beast of a sandwich. "You are starting to sound like your mother."

Perhaps...still, since the daring rescue and his recovery from his mental and physical breakdown two months before, Mulder had yet to come back to full, fighting strength. Whatever had happened to him, whatever physical issues he had suffered through, he had healed quickly at least. Scully's eyes flickered to the still pink line, albeit faint, just under the fringe of hair on his forehead.

"I just want to make sure you're ready for your physical," she shrugged, repressing a smile as he finally managed to wrap long fingers around his mammoth burger and get it into his mouth. "We need you back at the homestead."

"Missing me," he mumbled around a mouthful of messy burger. He looked so pleased with himself in that moment.

"Yes," she admitted. Things had been quiet in the time Mulder had been out. "Skinner's been hesitant to pass anything my way without you there and I think I've sewn up most of the tail ends of the Dr. Merkmallen case."

She picked at the leafy greens in her tray as she considered the details of that particularly difficult situation. It had seemed a simple matter of a murder at a university. It had spiraled into so much more, with Mulder physically and mentally incapacitated, his mind nearly bursting with things that it shouldn't as his body reacted to a virus that Scully had thought was long dormant in him. In
desperation, she had flown to the Ivory Coast, to the sight of Dr. Merkmallen's work, hoping to find a clue. What she had found was an alien spaceship, one that defied everything she understood about the universe. Still, it gave her nothing to help her save Mulder. She was helpless as she watched his mental and physical condition deteriorate, unable to handle the strains of what the invasive virus was doing to him.

Kritschgau had said it was changing him, making him something different, something special - an alien-human hybrid.

Whether that was indeed what had happened to her partner or not, Scully could not say. Before she could do any tests on him, he had been spirited away by CGB Spender, the strange smoking man, and hidden within the bowls of the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. Whatever they did to him, she didn't know. As a doctor, she'd run every test she could think off on him, mental, physical, and genetic. He had patiently suffered through brain scans and blood work. He had not complained even as she had demanded every sort of genetic work up she could think of, outside of joking that this would send his already high health insurance premiums up. Despite all the testing and all the work she could find nothing definitive regarding the truth of Kritschgau's statements. Mulder was just Mulder, just a normal, still as disgustingly fit as he had been before. Even his cholesterol was spot on, which shocked her given his eating habits. Nothing seemed out of place. Whatever happened to Mulder, hybridization with an alien entity didn't seem to be it.

Scully wasn't sure if she was happy about that or not. On the one hand, if she had found something it would have lent credence to a truth Mulder had been trying to tell people about for years. Mulder would be the proof he was searching for. However, there was that selfish part of her that had hoped that it wasn't true, the part of her that simply wanted her partner as just like everyone else That was the part of her that was contemplating asking him the biggest favor she had ever asked of him - of anyone - in her life.

"Earth to Scully!" Mulder's voice cut through her thoughts as she blinked, realizing her partner's hand was waving right in front of her face. It smelled of fried meat and cheese and she shied from it as he laughed at her, his expression quizzical as he glanced at the fork in her hand.

"You know stabbing it to death won't make it taste better."

She frowned down at the wad of greens and dressing at the end of her plastic fork, setting it down. It wasn't any use, she wasn't really hungry anyway, and she had purchased it more to give her something to do. It was Mulder's last week of freedom before he returned to the office, and she had promised him a picnic in the park over a lunch break. The salad had been more something to do with herself while he ate. Frankly, she had been too wound up to eat.

How did one go about asking their best friend and partner to make a baby with them?

Of course, she realized, this would be a totally different conversation if she and Mulder were something more than just FBI partners. She was certain that sort of conversation would go very differently. But this…she was threatening to change the whole dynamic of who they were. For over six years she had worked side-by-side with this man, had fought all of his battles, and had paid the price for many of them. It had brought them together, from wary co-workers on opposite sides of the philosophical divide to the anchor in each other's lives. Scully didn't know what she would have done had she not succeeded two months before in saving Mulder. He was the rock she held on to, her hope that despite all of the darkness that surrounded them, the truth would will out.

And now she was threatening that stability by throwing a baby into the mix? A part of her felt it was selfish to do so, to ask him for this. After all, he had so nearly died just weeks ago, and she still was not sure what had been done to him and if that would have any effect on a child they would create
together. Perhaps going through the anonymous donor route would be kinder on their relationship. Still, she couldn't bring herself to do that. Even if she was unmarried there was that part of her that wanted this child, should she be successful in creating it, to be born out of love, and even if it was put together in a lab and not created out of the act of love, at least the components that made this child would be. She loved and trusted no one in this world more than Mulder and wanted no one else to be the father of her child. At least be genetic father of her child...as for the rest...

"Am I really that unappealing to be around?" There was impatience in Mulder's tone, despite the smile that graced his face. Scully shook herself, blushing as she realized just how rude she'd been. She'd conned him out of his apartment for lunch with the intention of having conversation with him, specifically this conversation. And so far she had managed to simply stab a head of lettuce to death while staring at the trees. In the meantime, Mulder had succeeded in scarfing down his burger and was halfway through the mountain of fries.

"No," Scully's face burned as she sighed, setting down her fork. "No, it's just...I was thinking about the doctor's report."

"My doctor's have pronounced me hale and hearty!" Mulder punctuated this by stabbing a fry at her. "Don't worry about it."


That gave her partner pause. She hadn't meant it to, she hadn't even thought about it, not till she saw the stab of fear that lit his gaze and the worry that began to work at his full mouth. "You're okay, right?"

She knew where Mulder's mind went - cancer. "Me? Yeah, no, I'm fine." Impulsively she reached across the space between them, squeezing his free wrist reassuringly.

"No, I was speaking to a fertility doctor." She dropped that between them quietly.

Scully wasn't sure what sort of response to expect out of Mulder. Really she hadn't given the idea much thought. She had been so wrapped up in her own worry regarding the subject she hadn't really stopped to consider if he'd like it one-way or the other. She had of course hoped he be happy for her pursuing this. In light of the last few weeks, what if he wasn't?

For his part her partner's first response seemed to be politely guarded. "So, what did they say?"

She pulled back her hand and picked at the plastic fork again, more out of nerves than hunger. "Dr. Parenti said that it looks as if the ova are viable."

"That's good, right?"

"It means that it's a high possibility that I could use them to have a baby with, yes." There were no guarantees, of course. She had no idea what happened with her ova once they had been taken from her. Had they been tampered with? Would they produce another Emily, a child sick from birth?

"So now what?" There was cautious curiosity out of Mulder and she couldn't blame him. His mind already was spinning, she could see it. His fries now lay forgotten as he considered the possibilities.

"Well, that's the big question." Nerves twisted at her gut as she poked at the unappetizing salad in front of her. "I could just put them back into storage for another day."

"Scully, it's taken you two years to get this far. Do you really want to wait any longer?"
"I don't know," she admitted. A part of her did, the part of her that kept thinking that if she waited just a bit, the X-files would be over, and she could go on to lead her real life as a doctor, raising a family. It was the same part of her that was terrified that if she did it now, everything would change between her and the man sitting across from her.

Mulder watched her with thoughtful, bright eyes. Did he fear what would happen as much as she did?

"I think you should do it," he said after a long moment.

"Really?" It caught her by surprise, though she supposed it shouldn't. Mulder was always a man of action rather than caution. Not like her.

"Scully, if there is even the slimmest possible chance of you getting back this chance that was taken from you, take it and don't look back."

"Mulder, you realize what you are saying."

"Yeah," he shrugged, reaching for his iced tea and sipping slowly. "I think you'd be a great mom."

A moment between them, years ago, where he had asked her frankly about motherhood came to mind. That was before her cancer, before the truth regarding her barrenness, before Emily. He had always regretted that this too had been taken from her.

"If I do this, Mulder, I don't know how much longer I can remain with the X-files." It was a frank statement. If she should succeed in this, it would no longer be about her. There would be a child - their child - and that would be her priority.

"I know." How much had it cost him to say that? "I've asked enough from you on this journey, Scully, no one knows that better than I. And I...I wouldn't have gotten this far without you, and I don't really relish the thought of continuing it without you. But...that dream...what I saw when I was at that place." He shrugged. Mulder hadn't really spoken much of his experiences, the dream he had while Spender's henchman cut open his beautiful mind. He had referenced it but had spoken little on it. "I know what I've given up to pursue this, Dana, and I know what you have lost as well. If there is even the slightest chance that you might get that opportunity that was taken from you, to hell with the X-files, take it and run. I can't begrudge you that."

She hadn't expected that level of understanding out of him, nor the tears that now gathered in the corner of her eye. She blinked hard against them, smiling brightly at him. "If it works, Mulder, I'll take it, but I won't do it alone."

"Course not," he nodded his head firmly, a goofy grin crossing his face. "I'll be Uncle Mulder. Someone needs to teach this future kid of yours how to throw a baseball."

Uncle Mulder? She nearly snorted at the idea that he still couldn't use his first name, not even for this. "Actually, Uncle Mulder, I had a bit different role in mind for you."

He came down somewhat off of his happy, "Uncle Mulder" balloon. "Hell, Scully, I'll babysit too, but I can't guarantee any child around me would get a square meal with vegetables and milk."

"Not that." She waved her hands, nerves getting the best of her once again. How could she say this?

"If I do this, I need to have a donor, someone who I want to be the father of my child."

Mulder was brilliant, scarily so, and it took him less than a blink of an eye to figure out what she
meant. His face blanched as it dawned on him. "Scully…"

"I know, Mulder, it's a lot…a huge lot to ask," she rushed out, suddenly unable to look him in the eye. "I just…this means a lot to me, Mulder. This child…I want this baby's father to be someone I care for and respect, not some stranger I picked blindly out of a catalog."

It was as close to admitting to him her feelings as she had ever gotten. The blood rushed through her ears.

"I know that since Diana you haven't given a lot of thought towards things like children," she continued in a rush, feeling suddenly foolish and clumsy asking this of him. "And I know that this would complicate things between us. But I want to know that the man who fathered my child was a good man, a man they could admire."

Only when she had finished did she dare a glance up at him. It was rare that she ever saw anything close to humility on her partner's face, but it was there, along with a certain sense of awe.

"You really think that about me? That I'm…admirable?" He said it as if it was the strangest thing he had ever heard.

"Of course, Mulder!" She laughed at him and his stunned amazement. "You are the man who didn't just save me once, not twice, but three times from certain death. You have gone to the ends of the earth to rescue me, and when everyone else had given me up for dead, you believed I would come home. It's your faith and belief that convinced me to stay on this entire, crazy train of a journey, your insistence that there was something more out there, even when I didn't want to listen. At times, that's the only hope I've had."

"Scully…Dana…I'm honored," he finally murmured, still looking dazed, as if a truck had just hit him. "I am…so honored."

Something cold and dreadful slid into her gut. He was going to say no.

"I just," he waved at his now cold pile of fries, at his iced tea, helpless. "I'm a bit overwhelmed at the moment."

"Of course," she nodded, trying not to be disappointed. After all she had just sort of sprung this on him. *Hello, Mulder, would you like to be a father?*

"I just…" He frowned up at the blazing trees above them. "I'm not saying no, I just…need to think about it all. You know. I mean…what with everything recently, it's a lot to take in."

It wasn't yes, but it wasn't no. The ice thawed just a tad, though not completely. "I know it's a lot to ask of you. Take all the time you need."

"Yeah," he nodded absently, reaching for a napkin from off the table between them. "I…just give me till the weekend. Let me think it through."

"Sure," she smiled reassuringly, even if she didn't feel that confident inside. "It's not like those ova are going anywhere."

"Right," he smiled, nervously and hesitantly. What had started as a pleasant, afternoon lunch now felt nervous and brittle, a feeling that wasn't common between the two of them. Whatever appetite Scully might have had was gone now. In a big show, she glanced down at her watch on her slender wrist.
"You know, you may not have work yet, but I need to get back. I have a meeting with Skinner this afternoon." Not totally a lie, but certainly that meeting wasn't so urgent she had to flee. Still, she felt stifled there in the open air next to Mulder.

"Sure," he nodded, beginning to clear up the remains of his meal. "Why don't you just get off. I'll clean up. I can walk home from here."

"Okay," she smiled, closing the lid on her uneaten salad. "Enjoy your last days of freedom while you have them."

Of course, whether or not it was freedom for Mulder was debatable. She knew he'd been itching to get back to the office. Would he be so enthusiastic now with this laying between them?

"I'll be back to annoy you come Monday, whether you like it or not." He shrugged, something of his good nature returning. "Don't mess up anything till I get there."

"By mess up, you mean clean?"

"I have things organized in just the right way."

"Most people would call that clutter," she teased, grateful for the return of friendly banter between them. "Call me if you need anything?"

"Always," he grinned, even if it was a bit tight. She waved at him as she crossed through the dry leaves and browning grass to her car, adrenaline still making her feel shaky as she dug in search of her keys.

Deep down, she hoped he agreed, even if she was still worried about what would happen if he did.
What's In A Name?

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder discuss potential baby names.

They avoided each other's eyes as he moved from the closed off recesses of the clinic, trying to look as casual as possible as he stepped towards the reception desk. The nurse behind the counter smiled cheerily at him as she handed him a few last pages, rattled off some instructions, and had him sign one last form before he turned to regard Scully with as detached an air as he could manage under the circumstances. She returned Mulder's firm gaze with one of her own, gathering her purse from where it sat on the waiting room chair beside her, standing to follow him out of the clinic door. They both moved towards her car in bashful silence, she digging out her keys, and he moving to the passenger side, waiting patiently. They settled into her sedan in the positions they arrived in, Scully pulling out of the crowded parking area carefully, her eyes sliding over Mulder as she turned in her seat to look out of her rear view window. He remained steadfastly staring out of the front window, his twitchy fingers tapping a nervous tattoo on his jean clad thigh.

She managed to get down the block to the first stop sign, before the silence between them finally drove her to the point that her curiosity had not. She wet her lips nervously. "So how did it go?" She really hoped her cheeks were not nearly as crimson as they felt like at that moment.

"Considering that they and I have two vastly different ideas of what classifies as good porn, surprisingly well." Mulder's tone was easy and carefree, though she could hear the embarrassment underneath it all the same. Strange, after all of these years of joking about his porn collection, something like a sperm donation bank was causing them to act like a couple of nervous sixteen-year-olds on prom night. Of course, never before had all that joking been intimate, never before had it really dealt with something they were ever doing. It wasn't ever about something as particularly monumental as the two of them creating a child. She swallowed hard past the nervous lump in her throat.

"Well, Dr. Parenti has me on hormone therapy, then he can attempt the procedure sometime within the next month." She tried to sound as detached and scientific as if she were discussing their latest lab results on their newest case.

"That's good," Mulder murmured distantly. "I know you have wanted this for a while."

She tried to discern what else he was thinking in that brilliant mind of his, but he had pulled away from her into his own little well of thought. Even his body language indicated he was somewhere other than in the car with her. Scully had worried about this and feared it from the moment she had first brought up the subject of sperm donation. He had of course been receptive to the idea when she had approached him, but now? She glanced at him sideways, his dark head resting against the seat, his eyes following the people on the sidewalk outside.

"Mulder, you are still all right with this?"

He turned to her worried frown with surprise. "Yeah!"

He tried to sound reassuring, but there was that shadow that danced across his face, that quick flicker
of his eyes away from her and out towards the road that clued her into the fact he was not being entirely honest, that there was something bothering him. As usual, Scully would have to find a crowbar to pry it out. Glancing up ahead for an open parking spot, she smoothly maneuvered the car into a space between two large SUVs and turned off the engine, all before Mulder could voice the question that she knew was on his lips.

"You need to tell me if this is something you are still willing to go through for me," she breathed out in a rush. "I started this journey because…because you were the one who told me not to give up, to never lose hope. I never realized until…Emily…I hadn't thought about children. I suppose I assumed it would all come in time. I guess the saying is true, you don't realize what you had till you have it taken away from you."

Mulder listened in silence, compassion and concern filling his face as one of his now still hands reached for one of hers on the steering wheel. "I know," he murmured. "And that's why I agreed to it. Hell, it's the closest I'll probably ever have to a real family."

There was something painful and brittle in those words, and an unspoken longing she hadn't expected out of him, of all people.

"I felt honored that you thought of me and asked me before any other option." He paused, an evil smile on his lips. "Of course, if I had turned you down, I don't know how Skinner would have taken that sort of proposition."

Pulling her hand from his, Scully gasped in mock horror and swatted his arm with her open palm. He yelped, but not in serious pain.

"I wouldn't have asked anyone else, Mulder," she pretended to fume.

"What, take your chances then with the poor, frat boy sperm that the donor banks usually get? Maybe you would end up with a child who had your brains and a strong tolerance for Pabst Blue Ribbon."

Scully laughed loudly at the idea, but shook her head. "No, I had thought about it already. I don't think that I would have gone through with it if you had said no. I know a child is a responsibility and a great gift. I don't think I would have wanted to make a baby with anyone else other than you." It took her so much to have those words come out, so much for her to admit to any of it. She felt every nerve in her skin blaze at the idea of what she was saying to him, to this man who had been her partner, her friend, her lifesaver, her light of truth for so many years."

His response was to lean carefully over in his seat, his eyes burning into hers as they sat there, just inches from each other as he regarded her, and every soft touch, tender word, and even every missed opportunity or chaste kiss passed through her mind as she found herself unable to move. Seven years of emotions passed between them in that instant. Would she have reached out then, pulled him closer to her, let her mouth meet his, allowed herself that luxury of obliterating that one, last barrier between them, the line she had dared never, ever cross, not once?

Her normally calm, rational mind had fled long ago just by his sheer proximity. The irrational part that acknowledged to itself it was madly in love with her partner and repeated it loudly at all manner of inconvenient times. That part was currently screaming at her to go for it, to just step over that fence, come what may, and finally just give in to what her heart has known all along. All it would take would be just to meet him half way, to lean in just a little further, a little closer…

"Scully," Mulder's voice was hoarse and soft, and her made her stomach leap just a little to hear it. "How are we going to explain it to everyone if this kid gets my nose?"
The irrational side of her brain howled angrily as the rational side stutter stepped back into her consciousness, causing her to blink in mild confusion. "Excuse me?"

"I'm just saying, I mean I know everyone at work thinks we've been going at it for years. It's the only way that they can rationalize why you've stayed with me all this time. You know that this will make all of that truth in their mind, even if we know it isn't." While his words were teasing, his tone was serious. "Besides, how do we explain to Baby Scully that Uncle Mulder is really 'Daddy'?"

She could see the dawning realization of what the heavy responsibility of this was in his eyes as she finally broke her gaze away. "Well, we will obviously tell him or her the truth, when it comes up. I'm sure it will, and being two grown adults, I'm sure we can make a perfect explanation to him or her."

"And to hell with what our co-workers think?"

"Like you said, they think we've been going at it for years. Why dissuade them of it now? I heard the pool is up to $1000."

"I put in $20 myself."

She snorted at him. "This is of course all hinging on the idea that IVF is successful. We don't know if that will happen."

"True…" He looked pensive for several moments, nodding his head. "But if I am the father, can I ask one thing?"

"I don't see why not, if you are the one who helped in creation."

There was an air of false innocence, suddenly, that put her on guard. "I want to help you pick out the names."

Scully, for a wild moment, realized he just might be serious.

"Really," she squeaked as her eyebrows arched on her forehead.

"Yeah, I mean if I am the child's father, shouldn't I have a vested interest?"

"You can't even pick out your own ties let alone name anything. Lest I remind you of the Rob and Laura Petrie incident?"

"No one caught on," he defended himself.

Scully crossed her arms in front of herself. "No, but that doesn't mean I'm going to get away with letting you name our child something like Ricky, Fred, or any other television character from your childhood."

"I wasn't thinking of a TV character." Mulder genuinely sounded hurt. Scully was still doubtful.

"Really? What then?"

"I was thinking Oswald."

"Oswald?" Scully tried not to choke on the name. "Please, tell me that isn't a long dead uncle."

"Nope! As in Lee Harvey. The Gunmen think it's brilliant."

"Oh dear God." She felt her fingers reach for her temples. "Don't tell me their girl names."
"They were actually very normal, Brooke and Tiffany."

"And what months were they?" Scully's voice felt as dry as sand coming out of her mouth.

"February and June! Frohike's idea." Mulder looked delighted.

"What, he didn't want the baby named Melvin?"

"Only if you didn't like Oswald."

"You know what, Mulder, maybe I'm re-thinking this idea of creating a baby with your genes. I don't know if I could stand twenty-one more years of this."
Chapter Summary

In which Scully is in a foul mood about their next trip.

Chapter Notes

As a note, considering some of the locals used in Seasons: Seventh, both Missouri and Southern California are my stomping grounds (and Virginia too), having lived in all those places at various points of my life. I indulge in my homed area knowledge this season and I'm not even sorry about it.

Hormone therapy was a bitch.

The gray and gloom of November mirrored Scully's mood as she trundled into the office. Another day, another dollar she reminded herself as she took the elevator down to the quiet of her shared office. She knew Mulder would be there waiting. Now back a month, he had spent his weeks trolling through files and cases, reacquainting himself with the work he had missed since his medical leave. On any normal day this would have pleased Scully and made her smile, but today the idea made her want to kick something. She wasn't in a very good mood.

He was behind his computer when she entered, reading glasses perched on his nose as he typed. She felt her stomach flip but ignored the hint of sensual delight she took out of seeing her handsome partner with glasses on. That irritated her too as she shuffled to her desk, unwrapping her overcoat and tossing it on a hook behind her desk, flipping her computer on.

She was out of coffee.

She glared at her empty coffee cup as if it were personally responsible for her utter lack of caffeine at the moment, ignoring the fact she'd had two cups before even hitting the door that morning. Still, she had utterly no desire to go hunt coffee down in one of the upstairs coffee areas and even less desire to trundle into the gray mistiness outside to hit up a Starbucks. Like a bur under a saddle, it scratched at Scully's skin, the idea of no coffee in her cup. She hated no coffee. She also hated the cold and gray, the mass of emails in her inbox, the fact that Mulder's glasses made him look far more attractive than he had any right to be, and that today was a Tuesday. In general, she hated life.

She hated feeling like this. Her emotions were strung tight as a wire, humming at the least disturbance. Her body felt strangely unbalanced, even her skin was sensitive to everything. She couldn't decide on if she wanted to laugh or cry and privately thought both sounded good. Scully hadn't felt this unbalanced since she was thirteen. Back then at least she had Charlie around to punch in the face. The idea of continuing to stew in her private, sulky misery was appealing. She likely would have continued doing just that for the rest of the day had Mulder not spun around just then, considering her over his sexy reading glasses. She tried hard not to glare at him.

"The weather here is crap, Scully, let's go to Costa Mesa."
Well that was unexpected. "As in Costa Mesa, California?"

"Yeah! Southern California, Scully. It's warm there this time of year."

"It's in Orange County." She sniffed, turning back to her computer screen.

"So?" Born and raised on the East Coast, Mulder obviously had no idea what she meant.

"Orange County, Mulder, it's between Los Angeles and San Diego."

"I think I did pass geography in school," he replied acerbically. "Again, I ask, so?"

Scully didn't have a good reason, not really, she just had the perverse need to be contrary. "Costa Mesa is sleepy, bedroom community, it isn't exactly movie stars and resorts."

"That's good, cause that may explain the case I want us on."

Scully rolled her eyes. At least she was facing her screen. "How in the world could there possibly be an X-file in Costa Mesa?" Not that she had lived in the area in twenty years, but her memories of Orange County spoke of well-to-do beach communities, suburban track houses, and Disneyland, nothing that screamed threatening to her. "This better not be another wild animal sighting, Mulder. No Chinese demon dogs, no chupacabras."

"Could be," he offered, causing her to turn and glared across the room at him. "Costa Mesa PD were called into a case this morning, a dead body in the trunk of a car."

"That could be any type of murder."

"Could be, but on closer inspection it looks like the victims skull was drilled open."

Scully winced. Not a pleasant way to die. "While I admit it is unusual, I'm not sure what this has to do with us."

"That's what I wondered, but it seems that upon conferring with the Orange County sheriffs office, who have a broader scope of coverage in the area, there has been a whole rash of murders across the area that resemble this one. Various victims, no rhyme or reason to them, all found with perfectly round holes in their heads."

He pointed to a spot just below the faint, white line on his own head. Scully felt her stomach churn just a bit at the sight.

"Autopsy reports state that further investigation revealed that each of the victims had their brains subsequently removed through the hole."

Mulder looked gleeful at the prospect. Scully felt queasy, not the least of all because Mulder very nearly had a similar thing happen to him just months before. Perhaps that was why he was so interested in this case.

"And the Orange County Sheriff's Department doesn't think it can handle this?"

"I'm sure they could, if they were bothering with it."

Scully had a feeling she now knew where Mulder was coming in. "Don't you think you should let the locals handle it then?"

"They've had this case for ages, Scully, and besides, the Costa Mesa PD want answers and aren't
wanting to wait on the Orange County Sheriffs to get off their asses to do it. They are the ones who reached out to me for help."

Clearly, they had garnered something of a reputation now with law enforcement across the nation for handling the weird stuff. Scully sighed. She didn't want to do this case. She really didn't want to do this. The idea of anything having to do with a serial killer and brains bothered her, especially after recent events with Mulder. She also knew that if Mulder had his heart set on this case there was no talking him out of it, and she didn't think she could get out of it by begging off with "not feeling like it".

"So when do we leave?" She knew he was going to drag her there anyway.

"That's more like it." Mulder fairly bounced in his chair. "Flight leaves for John Wayne Airport in three hours."

"Joy," Scully quietly grumbled as she turned back to her emails. She doubted she could get lucky and have a freak November snowstorm ground them from a plane in that amount of time.

As if sensing her less-than-enthusiastic response, Mulder only laughed from behind her. "Come on, Scully, we haven't been on adventure in months!"

And that was the point, she hadn't been on a plane since the one that brought her home from Africa. "What is wrong with standing still?"

"You know the saying, rolling stone, moss, something about can't get no satisfaction."

She glanced over at his cheeky grin. "Okay, Mick, but if this turns out to be a simple case of a serial murderer or a drug killing, I don't want another out-of-town case till after the holidays."

"Deal!" He agreed to that rather quickly. Mulder obviously was sure of himself. "How often am I ever wrong about these things?"

Scully refused to answer as she snagged her coffee mug. "If we're leaving on a plane soon, I need more coffee."

His laughter followed her out the door and down the hall.
Lucky Boy Restaurants - even the scent of fried, greasy burgers conjured up baseball games and her brothers' wheedling cries, pleading for them to stop at the Lucky Boy near their house in San Diego. It was a rare treat back then, Maggie Scully didn't like feeding her children fast food. Still even she had enjoyed it back then, sharing a large fries with Melissa while Bill and Charlie scarfed down burgers the size of their heads. Now, the odor of hot oil and sizzling beef only made her feel gross and bloated. Honestly, that didn't take much of late, but after three days of driving the entire length and breadth of Orange County checking out Lucky Boy Burger restaurants, Scully would have been happy never to see one ever again. From Brea to San Clemente, Seal Beach to Irvine, and all through Anaheim, Orange and Santa Ana, they had crawled through the county, ending their search in Costa Mesa, where it all began. Scully's theory that the killer had dumped the body there after killing him somewhere else seemed be losing some ground, though she had pointed out to Mulder that their killer could have simply driven from Los Angeles and dumped the body. If she had to go to every Luck Boy in LA County, she had a feeling her partner's body would be the next one found in a reservoir somewhere.

"Hey Scully, check it out!" Mulder eyed the kitchen speculatively. "You know how they say you never want to see the kitchen of any of your favorite restaurants?"

Scully snorted. "I don't think Lucky Boy would make that list." Not even close.

Mulder smirked, knowing her pickiness and food preferences far too well. "My point being that this is a hell of a lot cleaner than all the others, don't you think?"

Scully had to admit she hadn't really thought about it. Frankly, it looked like all the other thirty-some Lucky Boys they had perused, industrial fryers and grills, tiled floors, quick, efficient, and soulless. Sure, perhaps it didn't have a thick coating of grease on every surface, and there were no splatters of ketchup and mayonnaise dotting the landscape, but that could be as much due to a neat and tidy shift manager as to a nefarious plot to cover up a murder.

"I guess," she shrugged, trying not to look at the uncovered bucket of mayonnaise sitting unrefrigerated in the corner. "So what are you saying, Mulder? This place has been scrubbed from top to bottom to cover up evidence?"

"Maybe," he mused evasively. "Maybe I'm thinking this was the crime scene."

If Scully hadn't heard more ridiculous things out of his mouth over the years she would have simply stared at him. The kitchen area of this Lucky Boy was approximately the size of a broom closet. Even then he had no real reason to suspect the restaurant was the scene of the crime, save for a bloodstained button and an unusually clean workspace.

"It had to happen somewhere." Mulder shrugged.

"But next to the shake machine?" The mental image suddenly turned her very off the idea of a
strawberry milk shake. "I think we should be checking out employee lockers and not entertaining the idea that ad hoc surgery was performed here."

"I wouldn't exactly call it surgery. What if this man's brain was eaten?"

The mental image and milk shakes burst full into disgust as she eyed her partner sideways, wondering where in the hell he came up with this stuff.

"It's not sociologically unheard of!" Mulder defended himself with that air of someone who had been reading one too many National Geographic Magazines over his lifetime. "There are certain tribes in New Guinea that consider human brains a delicacy, as you well remember from our little Chaco Chicken excursion."

Lest she forget that incident, one of many that nearly got her killed. "Yeah, but we're in Orange County, the home of very boring, very bland WASPs."

"Yeah, what's your point?"

She merely glared silently at his impish grin.

He was completely unrepentant. "It's just nothing about the way the body was dumped suggests a fetishistic killing. The brain wasn't removed intact. What if this man's brain was eaten right out of his skull?"

"Through an inch-and-a-half opening that looks like it was cut with a hole saw?" Mulder had his moments, but this was disturbing even by his standards. "Well, maybe it was cut, maybe it was punctured. What looks like tool marks to you look to me like something more organic. Like it was made by a…tongue or a proboscis."

Scully wondered just what sort of sci-fi movie marathon he had been watching of late. "The proboscis of what?"

"I don't know." He bent over to stare at a smear of red under a counter. "Oh, hello…look at this. Does that look like blood to you?"

"Yes, it looks like it." Certainly, it was a red, protein substance, as was the goopy matter right beside it.

"What is that?" The horror could not be hidden from Mulder's voice. "Next to it, is that…oh…ugh…is that brain matter there?"

The evil part of Scully wanted to say yes, but it would be far better just to mock him mercilessly.

"No, I'd say that's ground beef."

Disappointment mingled with mild disgust in his expression. "Ground beef?"

"Yeah, though, it could be brains. Nice, curdled, whipped up brains," she mused, completely seriously, letting her finger rise to just the level of Mulder's eyes. "Scrambled by the gnashing teeth of a giant praying mantis, the remnants of which dripped right here on the floor." Her finger dropped suddenly, like a blob of congealed, blood coated brain matter towards the matter under the counter.

"You know a praying mantis doesn't have a proboscis, don't you?" Mulder was clearly not amused. Still, his skin had gone a rather amusing, unhealthy shade of gray.
"Yeah, and I know neither do most of the living creatures big enough to murder a man." She snorted, pushing herself up. "Let's get out of here, Mulder. I never want to see another milkshake again for the rest of my life."

"Let me speak to the manager, I want to get a list of employees who work here and see if we can track down who was here the night the victim was killed."

"What, you seriously think that someone here did it?"

"What it's that or it's Zorak the Praying Mantis."

Scully had no idea what in the hell that meant, and she didn't care. "Fine. get your list, we'll run them through the system. But if we find nothing here, Mulder, let's leave it to the locals and go home."

He mumbled something under his breath. She turned to glare at him.

"Just…commenting on what a shame it would be to leave this lovely weather."

"Sure…fine…whatever." She sniffed, stalking out of the kitchen. "Should have let you think it was brain matter."
The Usual Suspects

Chapter Summary

In which Scully goes down the more prosaic route our investigation.

Scully didn’t deny that it was with quiet satisfaction she shoved the newly faxed paperwork in her hand under Mulder's otherwise occupied nose. He started up, frowning down cross-eyed at the black and white pages as he stirred from the borrowed desk at the Costa Mesa police station.

"What's this?" He tried to back away enough to read the ink on the paper as she waved it in front of his aquiline nose.

"I did what you asked, I ran background checks on all of the employees at that Lucky Boy location. Turns out one of our boys popped up as a match." She whipped the pages away from him, setting them down on top of the other paperwork he had been looking at. "Derwood Spinks, twenty-five years old, has already done five years at Chino State Penitentiary for the attempted murder of his mother's last 'boyfriend'."

"Sounds like a charmer," Mulder muttered, picking up the papers, scanning them quickly. "Tried to use a nail gun through the temple. Impressive use of electric hand tools."

"More important, it might explain the condition the victim was found in." Scully couldn't quite help the triumph that crept into her voice. All these days of searching through every Lucky Boy in Orange County, looking for a creature with a proboscis, and just as she had suspected the entire thing was solved by the simplest of explanations.

"So you think our victim's brains were sucked out by a 9-inch bolt to the head and a wet-dry vac?" Mulder made it sound as if she were the one with the crazy theory.

"A wet–dry vac makes a hell of a lot more sense than a giant, brain-eating insect, which is what your profile so far has conjured up." She seized the papers from him with a jerk, glaring at the file in front of him. "What have you turned up in your deep, penetrative research?"

There was a part of her that realizes she was being unreasonably pissy with Mulder, more so than she normally would have been, but reason had taken a backseat to just not caring. She glared down at her poor, unsuspecting partner, who shrugged in that nonchalant ways of his as he closed the two manila sides together with a snap.

"Nothing important, Scully. You seem to already have the guy red-handed."

Red washed through Scully's vision. Her jaw set, her blood pressure blossomed in that old, aching spot just above her right eye. He was baiting her and she knew it. She couldn't completely say she didn't deserve it. That didn't mean she didn't have to take long moments of breathing in and out, allowing her knuckles to slacken on the crumpled pages in her grasp.

"Mulder," she murmured to his benignly smiling face. "Derwood Spinks has a history of violence and a criminal conviction. Why would he not be the most logical suspect?"

"Why did he do it?"
"That question shouldn't have given her pause, but it did. "Who knows, Mulder? Perhaps we should ask him when we bring him in for questioning."

"And I'm sure that young Derwood will come up with a perfectly passionate explanation as to why he didn't do it and why the cops have it out for him. It's been hard living his life, no one understands. He's been persecuted by the man, which with a name like Derwood Spinks, I can understand how he would feel that way."

"Speaking as a man named Fox?"

"Point," Mulder smirked as he pushed away from the table. "Problem is, Scully, Derwood is too convenient of a suspect. So he went at some guy with a hand tool, he didn't succeed. Speaking as a man who has recently had his brains scrambled, I don't think that Derwood has it in him to necessarily attack a perfect stranger for no reason and perform the ultimate of lobotomies."

"How do you know that the victim was a perfect stranger to Spinks? He did time in Chino. He could have met anyone there, gotten involved with anything. It wasn't as if Spinks was an angel before he went, and judging from the record on his mother, he's been around petty crime ever since he could remember. Who is to say that some connection of his from the old days or even someone he met in prison didn't ask for him to do a job for them?"

"Wouldn't it be easier then to simply track down his victim and put a bullet to his head like every other self-respecting criminal in his place? Why bother sucking his brain out?"

Mulder had a point and Scully hated it. "So who do you have that's a better suspect, then?"

"Rob Roberts?"

The name was so bland Scully struggled to put a face with a name even though she was sure she had run him through the system. "Who?"

"Robert Roberts, perhaps an even more unfortunate name than Derwood Spinks," Mulder handed her the file as he rose. "And don't bother telling me that nothing turned up on his file, because I already know that. The kid is as boring as his name, though it should be noted that Rob has lived in about five different locations in the area in the last three years."

"It's Southern California, Mulder, that's not unusual. He's probably just looking for a cheaper place. With the price of rent around here I'm shocked he can afford a place working at a burger joint."

"As am I, which is why I did some poking around. You know he was the only one working at that Lucky Boy the night of the murder. The manager told me that Rob volunteered to close."

"I suppose I fail to see your point." She fell into step beside him as they both wended their way through the police department.

"The manager told him to throw away thirty-five pounds of ground meat that had expired. When I checked the dumpster it was empty."

"So?" His point still eluded Scully.

"Trash hasn't been picked up yet. It gets picked up once a week. Which means that Rob didn't throw the ground meat into the dumpster."

"So? He's a kid working at Lucky Boy, maybe he just took it home and stuck it in his freezer? Free food he doesn't have to pay for."
"Unless he has a space and time portal in his freezer, there is no way he's fitting that much meat into it."

"Mulder, I don't see what this has to do with anything?"

"I'm thinking that maybe our victim wasn't so much a target as someone who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You think Rob Roberts killed him? All over a batch of ground beef about to meet its expiration date?"

"I think there is more to Rob than he likes to let on."

Why? That was the first question that reverberated through Scully's brain. Why did Mulder have to ignore the perfectly simple, straightforward answer and go for the patently weird one? "Mulder, I would like to point out that you have no more reason or motive for Rob Roberts than I do for Derwood Spinks."

"Think about it, Scully? We've been looking for someone who had a reason to remove a person's brain from their skull."

"And Rob Roberts has a reason?"

"A young man moves repeatedly over the course of a three years. Makes it easy to cover up his trail. He is responsible for tossing out a large order of meat that disappears; its only remnant is a piece left under a counter. And he is the only one there the night that a man shows up to order a cheeseburger and has his brain sucked out for his efforts."

"You think Rob Roberts sucked it out? Why? How?"

"I don't know for sure, but I have some ideas."

Ideas? "Why do I have a feeling whatever it is, it's going to sound insane and weird."

"Why do you assume the worst, Scully?"

"Because, Mulder, it's usually the safest assumption with you."

He laughed as he moved towards the stations front doors. "Stay here and see what else you can dig up on Roberts from before. Where is he from? Who are his parents? Where did he go to school? I want to know who this guy is."

"And if he turns out to be a perfectly normal, hard-working kid you are relentlessly persecuting?"

Mulder shrugged. "Well, I think we will then owe him an apology."

"We? Who is this 'we'?"

"Partners, Scully, remember that?" Mulder cheerfully waved as he walked out the door.

There were days she really hated working with him.
In her years on the X-files there wasn't much that Scully hadn't seen; a stretchable man with a taste for human livers, a man made completely of tumor cells, a bizarre, humanoid fluke creature. Common perception should be that there wasn't much that could shock Scully on her examination table anymore.

Rob Roberts proved her wrong.

"I've never seen anything like him before," Scully admitted with an awed sadness as she studied the lab exams in front of her. She had helped with the autopsy itself in Costa Mesa, had seen with her own eyes the strange abnormalities that Roberts had suffered from, and still, a part of her couldn't believe he had existed.

"If I didn't know better, Mulder, I'd say he was part…shark." She leaned back in her desk chair, pensive as she regarded her partner from across the office. "His teeth grew just like those of a shark, in rows along his jaw. When one set fell out, he'd replace them with another. His eyes were all black, and his feeding mechanism…"

She trailed off. She had no other explanation. None of the autopsy results made any sense.

"His body is being turned over to the University of California, Irvine for study. No one has ever seen anything like this."

Mulder remained thoughtful behind his desk, nodding pensively as he rocked gently in his office chair. He leaned on one elbow, a curled forefinger against his full lip. He stared from behind his reading glasses at a fixed point amongst his pile of papers, only the slight quirk of his dark brows indicated that he had heard a word that she had said.

"I've sent everything I have to the Costa Mesa PD, but I think they are happy just leaving it as an open and shut case of a serial murderer and leave it at that, no questions asked." Scully couldn't blame them. What else could they say to the public? Certainly not the truth, it sounded like fodder for a tabloid news article, not the type of real-life case they saw on their evening news. Hell, Scully wasn't even sure she'd believe it, and she was one of the people there.

Mulder still remained thoughtfully silent.

"Any comment?" It was unusual for Mulder to stay this quiet on a subject like this, especially as he had been the one carrying on about mutant brain eaters the entire case. She had been expecting him to dance up and down, to tell her that he had been right, to have her eating crow for her admittedly cranky pessimism. She hadn't expected him to be so…morose.

He stirred, stretching out his arm as he slid a sharp gaze up towards hers. "Why do you think he did it?"

"Eat people's brains?" Scully shrugged, setting down her notes. "For the same reason I guess Eugene
Tooms ate livers. Likely whatever caused his deformities also created a deficiency that he only could fix through the eating of certain foods. My guess is that there is something about the brain that he craved. I won't know more till the scientists at UCI get back to us.

"I don't mean that," Mulder clarified simply. "I mean, why did he charge at us the way that he did?"

Again she lifted her shoulders, wondering what Mulder was getting at. "I don't know, Mulder. Perhaps he was just too far gone at that point to care that he was attacking federal officers."

"No, Roberts was careful...very careful." Mulder's head shook. She could see things working in his mind, he was spinning the scene over and over again. "He had spent years covering his tracks, of hiding who and what he was from everyone. Why at that moment would he just loose it?"

It clicked for Scully what this was all about. While she, the pathologist, was caught up in the abnormality of Robert Roberts, Mulder, the psychologist, wanted to know what made him tick. While she saw a mutated monster, a freak of human biology, Mulder was trying to get at his humanity, about why he did what he did. Perhaps the profiler in Mulder had seen so many monsters in normal human form it hardly blinked at the idea of a human with a monstrous form.

"I don't know, Mulder." Admittedly in the time since they had shot Roberts in his therapist's office she hadn't really stopped to consider him as another human being.

"That's the thing I can't get over." He rocked back in his chair, eyes turning up to the relatively new ceiling, already peppered with pencil holes. "It was as if he wanted us to shoot him."

"Why?"

"Because...because of what I thought." His chair creaked as he rocked it gently. "I admit, Scully, from the moment I thought of him as a suspect, I didn't think of him as a person. I thought of him as an 'it', an X-file, something to probe at and study. I was excited at the idea that here I might have living proof of a creature that could do things that no human being was supposed to be able to do."

"Your own bat boy?" She thought of the tabloid headlines with the horribly disfigured child and shivered.

"Something like that." Mulder snorted, chewing fretfully at his bottom lip. "Imagine, you are born different, and you know it. All your life you just want to be like everyone else, but you know something is wrong with you. So you try to fit in, to be like everyone else. You wear a wig and fake teeth just to make believe you are the same. You get a job and live in an apartment, the perfectly average life. And then you get a hunger for something that hamburgers won't quench. You know it's wrong, you know that normal society will shun you for it, but you can't help it. You try to take pills to stop it, to block it out psychologically, to prove that you are more than what nature made you to be, but in the end no amount of wigs, or pills, or meat patties are going to hide the truth about what you are, a freak of nature."

"And you suppose that Roberts threw himself at you just so you would shoot him?"

"How would you explain it, Scully?"

She thought on Roberts last words to Mindy Rinehart, how he said he couldn't be something that he wasn't. What was he to begin with? She didn't even know for certain. No one did.

"You think he may have killed himself?"

"Suicide by cop, not the first time someone has done that."
"It's possible." She couldn't deny that if she were in the same sort of circumstances, conflicted between what she truly was and what society expected her to be, she might not do the same thing.

"In many ways, Rob Roberts wasn't that different then the serial killers that I used to hunt down," Mulder mused quietly, fingers tapping on the edge of his desk. "Many of them knew that they were monsters, that they had urges and desires that were not considered normal."

"But unlike Rob, they could make a conscious choice between right and wrong. His physiology didn't allow that."

"Maybe, but he did make conscious choices, Scully, we saw that, he was popping diet pills, going to a therapist. He wanted to be good, and yet he was compelled not to."

"By hunger."

"How is that different than any of the serial killers you've seen? Their brain chemistry, family background, life experiences, they all muddle up and create a person who hungers something that they shouldn't. They know they are monsters and many of them try to hide it, to be coy about it, to deny it, or ignore it. And one day it comes out, it breaks them. No matter how good they try to be, more often than not they give into the hunger."

"But not Rob," Scully pointed out carefully.

"No, not Rob. Rob didn't. He chose to die instead."

Suicide by cop, indeed.

"Perhaps in the end, that's why he wanted to be shot." Mulder flipped his chair forward. "Perhaps he wanted to end it all, to die as the good person Mindy Rinehart believed him to be and not as the monster that he knew he was."

"Does that make him a monster in the end?" Whatever his physical defects may be, Scully wasn't so sure that the person Rob Roberts was had been a monster, and she could tell, neither did Mulder.

He sighed, soft and sad as he glanced over at her. "I think you'll find that Rob Roberts was the most painfully human person you've ever met."
The entire procedure took no more than an hour, that was it. It was longer than the actual physical act of sexual procreation would have taken, but it was far less glamorous. There was no afterglow, no cuddling, no gasped compliments and tangled limbs. It was cold, efficient, and sterile. In the end, as she sat in Dr. Parenti's waiting room, she felt as if she had simply gone in for one of her yearly, gynecological visits, not just made her first attempt at creating a baby.

"Dana?" Dr. Parenti was all smiles as she stood to greet him, entering into his office and taking the proffered seat. She swallowed against the flutter in her chest as he rounded his desk with the air of fatherly grace.

"So, you feeling okay after that? No discomfort?"

"Not yet." She shook her head, twisting nervous, cool fingers in her lap. She didn't want the doctor to see them shaking.

"There might be later tonight or tomorrow. Keep an eye out for bleeding or discharge and let us know right away if you begin to experience extreme cramping or pain."

"Of course." She resisted the urge to point out she was a medical professional too, knowing it was only her raging anxiety at the moment. "So, when do we know…anything?"

"In about a month, usually, just like with any other pregnancy. If things work, you should experience the normal symptoms."

"And if I don't?" That worry gnawed at her mind.

"We will have you come in mid-December, just to check on how things are." His smile was understanding. "Dana, this isn't my first rodeo, you know."

That caused her to laugh and relax finally. "It is mine."

"I know." He nodded sagely as he leaned back. "If this happens, Dana, it will change everything. You know that, correct?"

"I do." She had given it a great deal of thought over the weeks since she had begun this journey.

"Knowing your career path in the FBI, my advice to you is to take it easy from the start. Try to stay off of active duty, stay on desk duty or something closer to home, less strenuous, less fraught with danger, just to be on the safe side."

How was she supposed to explain that to Mulder? "Do you think that it will make the implantation easier?"

"Well, it doesn't hurt." He chuckled as he regarded her, leaning back in his chair. "However, I
should warn you, just like with any attempt at pregnancy, this isn't full proof. Even with the precautions you take, there is always a chance it won't happen, that the implantation will not take, the body rejects it, miscarriage, all those things are still a factor."

Scully knew that. How many times had Bill and Tara tried before Matthew came into the world? "I suppose that just means I would have to try again."

She hadn't thought anything of the idea, she had assumed that if this didn't work she would simply try again. Dr. Parenti became very grave as her hope gave way to sharp misgivings.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't try again, Dana, I'm not, but I will be honest with you, we are taking a long shot with your ova. After the condition you found them in they still might not take, and if that's the case, any other subsequent attempt might meet with the same heartbreak. I can't guarantee that, of course. You never know, a miracle can always happen, but I don't want you to be surprised if things don't work out."

"At all?" Her gut clenched at the thought.

"Possibly. Even with healthy ova we have taken directly from a patient, there is always that possibility. I just want to prepare you. I am not saying that it will happen, just that it could happen."

Scully nodded, words failing her for the moment. She was a trained doctor. She knew that every procedure out there had the possibility of failure, nothing was certain, but oh, how badly she wanted this! And how badly would it hurt if she weren't able to have this child?

"Well, it's too late to go back now." She slapped on as bright of a smile as she could. "The fertilized ova are in there and we will see what happens."

"Yes we will." Parenti's smile was back on his face, encouraging and kind, soothing the doubt that lingered in Scully's brain. "And I hope it works out for the best. You said the donor, he's someone you know?"

"Yes." She hadn't told Parenti who the donor was, that he was her partner. She felt the situation was complicated enough for the poor doctor, and somehow she didn't want to see that speculative look in the man's eye.

"Will you be informing him of the procedure?"

Scully had thought about it. In all fairness he should know, she supposed, but Mulder could be overprotective on the best of days, even without the idea of her carrying his child. Heaven help her the minute it came out she actually was pregnant. He'd be insufferable.

"No, not just yet. I want to wait. Let's see what happens, I wouldn't want to get his hopes up just yet."

There was a truth in that, enough of one that Parenti smiled and shrugged. "Well, should we get good news don't keep it too quiet. Secrets like that won't keep forever."

"No," Scully blushed as she smiled. No they wouldn't. But she wasn't about to spill these secret to anyone just yet, not her mother, her family, and not Mulder. Not till she was certain.

"Well, rest up tonight, drink lots of fluids, and keep an eye out for the things I warned you about. And should anything happen, call my on my pager line immediately."

"Of course." Scully rose, cold fingers meeting his as she shook his hand firmly. "Thank you for
everything, Dr. Parenti." He had no idea what weight those words carried for her.

"Thank me if we get you that baby, Dana."

She simply smiled as she slipped out of his office, her footsteps silent on the carpet as she made her way to the waiting room beyond. She signed the last paperwork at the desk and made an appointment a month from that day. Maybe, just maybe, she would have good news waiting for her on the other end of that appointment.

Her phone buzzed in her purse as she stepped into the cool sunshine outside. She thumbed it on without a glance as she raised it to her ear. "Hey, Mulder."

"Whatcha up to?" It sounded as if he were eating on the other end. Considering it was lunchtime it was a high probability. She smiled.

"Had an appointment to keep, what's up?"

"UC Irvine just called, they have their final report on the Rob Roberts case. They wanted to know if you'd like to fly out for their big presentation, add your two-cents."

"Sure," she shrugged, stepping towards her car. "Do you want to come along?"

"I'll leave the pathology and doctor talk to you." She had a feeling he'd get squeamish at the details in the scientists' report. Chicken.

"All right, I'll give them a call when I get back into the office."

"Thought you would. Everything okay?"

"Sure. Why?" She slipped into the warmth of her car.

"Just…nothing." He left off. Perhaps he suspected what she was up to. "See you at the office soon?"

"Yeah, let me stop for some lunch. You want anything?"

"Healthy? No!"

"A milkshake?"

"Too cold. I'll take a hot coffee though."

"Deal. See you soon." She flipped off the phone as she started her car. Guilt panged her only slightly. Something as momentous as this, something that could change everything between them, she should tell him what she did. And perhaps, soon, given a few days, she might, but for now, right now, she wanted to keep it just to herself, to savor it.

Maybe, just maybe, today she had taken her first step to becoming a mother.
"Hey, Scully, what's your favorite deep-dish pizza place?"

Scully blinked. She had answered the phone because it was Mulder and she had assumed it was important. "I don't know, I haven't eaten the stuff in years."

She set her suitcase down inside the door of her apartment with a sigh. She had just gotten back from Irvine, California where she had been asked to help in the UCI presentation of findings in the Rob Roberts case. She'd been in town long enough to answer some questions, marvel at the strangeness that was the young man she and Mulder had linked to a series of serial murders in Orange County, and have a dinner with Bill, Tara, and Matthew before flying out of John Wayne Airport back to DC. No sooner had she made it to her front door, as if sensing she was home, Mulder's call came in. Now she had a sneaking suspicion she would just have enough time to unpack the overnight things she had taken the day before and throw in a fresh change of clothing before heading out again.

"What's in Chicago?" That was the only place in the world she knew carried good, deep-dish pizza.

"Besides Gino's East? The Organized Crime Division had a case it was running in Chicago, something hinky came up, they gave me a call to come take a look."

"Is 'hinky' a technical term?"

"In this case, yeah, that's exactly the term they used. Something to do with someone they thought was a victim of one of their suspects, but he turned out alive and well."

"And this is an X-file?"

"I think it is for the manner in which the victim was supposed to have expired. I'll know more when I get there."

"You aren't in Chicago yet?"

"Taking the red eye. I waited till your plane landed in DC before calling you."

Scully glanced at the glowing screen of the VCR in her living room. "It's already two AM here, Mulder, if I catch a direct flight in first thing in the mornings I can be there in two or three hours."

"That's fine. How was the conference?"

"Fascinating, but inconclusive." Scully drug her suitcase into her bedroom, setting it on the bed and opening it up. "Rob Roberts was something that nobody has seen before. He exhibited features that can't be explained in a mammal; hairless skin, black eyes, his tongue, the teeth, but he was human all right. He just had extreme mutations. Akin to several others we have seen on the X-files."

"Can they even begin an explanation?"
"No," Scully admitted, throwing dirty clothes into a hamper in her closet and reaching up to grab a fresh set from the clothes hanging above. "The problem is that no one has been able to track down where he's from. There's a string of previous addresses in Orange County, but before that he just disappears. Likely his name wasn't even Rob Roberts. I guess he learned the art of pseudonyms from you."

"Funny," he snorted from the other end of the cell phone line. "They don't have a trace on where he might have been before that?"

"He didn't have fingerprints, so they couldn't trace those. The most they can do is see if there were any reports anywhere of children who displayed the same sort of defects that Roberts had, and that's if he was born somewhere where they would report something like that. If he was born at home, in a rural or poor area, we may never know the truth about him."

"So he's reduced to nothing more than a freakish footnote in a case file?"

"He wouldn't be the first person that's happened to in one of our cases," Scully pointed out, carefully folding blouses and slacks to slip into her suitcase. "I think that sad part of this entire case is that his real story will never be known."

"Except by us," Mulder interjected.

"And what will we do with it?"

"I don't know? Write books? Maybe do one of those cheesy shows that you see late at night discussing wolf men and psychic surgeons?"

"Is it sad that we've had cases on both of those?"

"What can I say, Scully, I like variety." He laughed as she moved about her room, gathering clean pajamas and throwing them in the open case. "We would be set for retirement."

"You would, I don't think I'd admit to my part in any of it."

"What? Who's going to give it all scientific credence?"

"One of your bevy of crazy experts, I suppose. Think Chuck Burk would like to be on TV?"

"You afraid being tied to something like that will hurt your professional credibility?"

"No," Scully clarified, closing her case again and zipping it up, now fully repacked. "I plan to be a simple doctor somewhere, anonymous and unknown, doing my part to help the world and cure its ills."

"How altruistic of you, Scully."

"It's true," she protested mildly, lifting the case to the floor. "Face it, Mulder, after this…what in the hell else could I do in the FBI?"

"You could return to pathology."

"And return to inspecting victims of car bombings and DEA murder suspects?" While she hated to admit it, the idea of returning to what she once did before she was partnered with Mulder no longer held the appeal for her it had. "How can I return to that after Rob Roberts?"

"True," Mulder admitted. "But being a doctor somewhere isn't any more glamorous."
"Clearly you haven't dealt with strep throat, my friend." She began to wearily take off the clothes she had come home in. "Perhaps there are more truths in this life than are found in all of the Rob Roberts and alien conspiracies in all the universe."

"The simple life for Dana Scully? I don't know, wouldn't you get bored with it after a while?" She could hear the cracking sound of a seed shell in his mouth on the other end of the line.

"Mulder, if I never have to come home from a cross-country flight at 2 AM, only to have to turn around and fly out to Chicago at the crack of dawn, I think I would be a happy woman."

"No sense of adventure?" He sniffed, then yawned, a tell tale sign.

"Sense of adventure, Mulder, are you planning on getting some sleep?"

"I can sleep when I'm dead."

"Which with your track record won't be long from now if you keep this up," she snipped, searching for pajamas and trying to slip off her suit coat. "You aren't that far removed from major trauma, Mulder…"

"Don't get all country doctor on me, not till you are one." He clearly was not in the mood for her admonishing his horrible habits, most of which were not that far removed from his college days. "I'll see you in the morning then?"

"Yeah, I'll call you when I land and find out where to meet you."

"Hope you can handle the all meat, deep dish."

"Just as long as there is a vegetable somewhere in there."

"Onion is a vegetable," he shot back. She could hear his impish grin on his face.

"See you in the morning, Mulder." She snapped off the phone at the sound of his soft laughter, tossing it on the bed as she undressed. A few hours sleep and back to the airport she would go to hop on the first flight she could get. She hadn't been lying, there was a part of her that would kill to have a life where she wasn't going and coming all at once. She could just come home, day after day, and not wonder what city she was going to wake up in. She could possibly raise a family. Without thinking her hand slipped to her flat abdomen, wondering, hopeful. Perhaps that was as good a reason as any to settle down and life as a doctor. Raise her child, should her procedure succeed, go to the office everyday and pick up her child every night. The scariest thing in the world would be the monster under the bed and the bully at school. Scully could see herself being very happy in a life like that.

Would Mulder ever settle for that life? Somehow Scully doubted it. The thought pained her somewhat. There was that part of her that secretly wished he would. It was the same part of her that wished he'd settle down with her, and yet, would he even still be the same man she cared for so passionately now if he did choose to leave everything, the X-files, the search for his sister, the adventure of a new case, behind? In all honesty, she didn't know. And frankly at 2 AM, she didn't need to know. Tiredly she slipped on pajamas and tossed her travel-creased clothes in the vague direction of the hamper. She didn't even bother picking them up. Sleep tugged at her as she curled up under her sheets and set her alarm. What she wouldn't give for a life where she could just rest for as long as she wanted all of the time.

Mulder was right, she thought dreamily as sleep tugged her under, she probably would get bored.
"The man has a glass eye!"

Mulder couldn't have been happier if he had found the Holy Grail. He gleefully slid behind his borrowed desk at the Chicago Field Office, typing his log on into the computer. Scully simply smiled with long-suffering patience, watching as he pulled up an Internet search engine page.

"I'm glad you are so easily amused, Mulder, but I fail to see the point in this."

"Well, it helps us narrow down who it is."

"It's Chicago, third largest city in the country. How many people here would have a prosthetic eye?"

"Probably not as many as you would think, and I bet that there are only a handful of ophthalmologists that handle cases of a missing eye, am I correct?" As if to punctuate his point, Mulder held up the glass eyeball. It stared at Scully in a disconcerting way from between Mulder's thumb and forefinger.

"Put it away," she snapped, feeling unreasonably spooked by it. After all, how many real eyeballs had she seen in her time as a pathologist.

"What? Dr. Scully is ooked out by a glass eyeball?"

"No!" She lifted her chin with as much dignified denial as she could. Mulder only blinked at her with amused disbelief. "Maybe just a little."

"I always wanted one of these," he sighed, palming the large, glass orb with fascination. "I had an uncle who served in World War II. He had one. He'd take it out for us kids to play with."

Scully's nose wrinkled with mild horror at the mental image. "He'd just pop it out and pass it around a bunch of snotty, sweaty, slobbering kids."

"Yeah, it would amuse us for hours! Then he'd just drop it in a glass of water, slosh it around, rub it off, and pop it back in."

"That's disgusting."

"Never got an infection even." He rolled their suspects eyeball across the desk, like a marble. "The boys thought it was the most awesome thing ever. Sort of like a peg leg or a hook for a hand."

"What is with you and your determination to maim yourself?"

"It's the romance of it all, Scully!" Mulder stared up at her as if she had to understand. "A lost eye, a missing limb, all signs of great adventure and tales of daring do."

"Or daring don't. I'm sorry, I never wished for a missing body part when I was a child."
"That's cause you were a girl."

"Excuse me?" She found herself blinking down at her partner from her perch on the corner of the desk. He at least had the grace to look mildly abashed. "Are you suggesting that I, who ran around covered in mud and dirt with an air rifle in hand three-fourths of the time, somehow was not 'boy' enough to find a glass eyeball 'cool'?"

"Yes," Mulder dared to nod in response. "I am."

"And why is that, may I ask?"

"Because, while you may be a girl who grew up to become a doctor who takes bodies apart, even now you find the idea of a glass eye as gross and slightly icky."

"I find it gross and slightly icky that you are playing with it as if it were a toy. That's been in someone's head!"

"So have your fingers, but I still hold them from time to time!"

The flush that crept up her face could have lit Chicago on fire for a second time. "I at least used disinfectant soap. If we find the man this even belongs to, he's going to want it back, and it's going to have all the germs from off your hands on it."

"I didn't lick it Scully, gees." Mulder rolled his eyes as he typed into the keyboard in front of him. For several minutes he scanned through Internet searches, all the while passing the ownerless eyeball from hand-to-hand. "Okay, we are turning up only a few doctors in Chicago who do eye replacements for patience."

"How few is few?" Scully leaned over to glance at the screen.

"About twenty centers, but a few quick phone calls, we might be able to find our guy."

"We have no description, no name."

"No, but we do have a suspected victim who is already missing an eye and is likely looking for a replacement."

"That's if there aren't others out there who are trying to replace their...eyeballs." Scully glanced with mildly disgusted fascination at the one Mulder insisted on playing with.

"Yes, but we can whittle it down to eye color and ethnicity. We know our almost victim is white and in his thirties. That should narrow the search somewhat."

"Just don't tell them that you've found his original eyeball and have been playing with it all morning." She longed to take the poor prosthetic and dunk it in rubbing alcohol or something. "Honestly, it's evidence Mulder."

"You are totally creeped out by this, aren't you?" The idea delighted her partner to no end as he deliberately waved it around, the iris pointed out towards her. "Dana Scully, pathologist extraordinaire, bothered by one glass eyeball."

"Stop it," she snatched at it, but he was far too quick, holding it just out of her reach.

"Scully, I've seen you up to your elbows in human entrails. One little eyeball grosses you out?" "It's more the idea that you are playing with it like a toy and it goes in someone's face." If they did
find their man she hoped Mulder cleaned the eyeball off first before giving it to him. "Have you even washed your hands his morning?"

"After I took a leak, but not after I blew my nose."

She couldn't help the shudder of revulsion that shook her slim shoulders. "Just put it down and go wash your hands. Let me disinfect it before it goes anywhere near this person again."

Mulder rolled his own, natural eyes and passed it over to her. She lightly pinched the unnatural looking sphere between her fingers as he stood up, leaning in to murmur just above her ear as he passed.

"You'd make a crappy pirate, Scully."

She glared at him as he sauntered off, unsure of what to do with the prosthetic eyeball in hand. "Yeah, well I'm not the idiot who thinks a peg leg and a hook hand is cool."

Around the open floor of the field office several agents paused to turn and stare at her, a glass eyeball in her hands as she sat on the edge of their borrowed desk.

"Just…stuff for the case." She muttered foolishly as they all turned back to their own work. Carefully as she could she reached from some tissue on a neighboring desk and wrapped the eyeball in it.

"Why do cases with Mulder have to be so weird?" She shoved the unfortunate object in her pocket.
As Fate Would Have It

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder speculates on their fortunes.

It was nice when every so often in their work they had some good news come their way. Scully smiled as she hung up from the office phone and glanced over to Mulder's inquiring gaze.

"That was Maggie Lupone, she says Richie is home from the hospital. Joe Cutrona's liver, whatever else he may have done to it, is working well in the boy and he's expected to make a full recovery."

"Well that's something." Mulder nodded happily as he returned to the UFO magazine he was not-so-seriously glancing through. "Glad to see that despite the life that Joe Cutrona led something good came out of it."

"I am to." It wasn't often that anyone's work in law enforcement had a good ending. They were lucky if you found any sort of justice at all. More often than not endings were ambiguous, with no one taking a complete win off the field.

"It's strange, still, how Cutrona met his end." Scully hadn't quite wrapped her head around the police report or the medical examiners findings. "I mean, the chances of something like that happening to a person would be…"

"Not the kind of odds I'd take in Vegas." Mulder set down his magazine, tossing it lightly on his paper-covered desk. "It was luck, Scully, pure and simple."

"You still think Weems was under some sort of charm?"

"What either of us believes is irrelevant, Scully, you saw the evidence for yourself. How many attempts were made on his life? Four! And all four ended with his unlikely escape."

"Which could be explained by Cutrona's ineptitude."

"It could, except that Cutrona did not get to the place he was at in the organized crime food chain by being inept."

"But luck? Things just don't fall out that way!"

"Chaos theory, Scully." Mulder rocked back in his chair, regarding her as she leaned against his cluttered desk. "Small factors do not make future events predictable. One thing happens to go right and it's the difference between Weems living through an accident and him not."

"But you are postulating that it is predictable, that every time an event occurs to Weems the variables will always be favorable, whereas in chaos theory, that cannot be predicted because the slightest change in the variable will change the outcome."

Mulder waved his hand in the face of her scientific reasoning. "Lady Luck was on his side and I don't care what mathematic variables you throw out there, the odds are in his favor every time. Even mathematics has to admit that it's plausible."
Scully couldn't deny that. "Plausible, but highly unlikely."

"There's always someone out there who has to be the smart ass beating the odds." Mulder shrugged as he idly reached for his basketball. With precision born of long practice, he rolled it on his fingertips and let it fly in a rainbow arc towards his long-suffering trashcan. It hit the rim, bounced off towards the filing cabinets, and clanged across the floor. The trashcan tipped, spilling wadded papers, pencil shavings, and the dregs of a cup of coffee across the floor. Scully's eyes narrowed as she turned her face towards her partner.

He shrugged. "The odds were not in my favor, clearly."

Silently realizing her ire would not dissipate till he did, he got up to clean the mess. She simply shook her head, stepping around him to retrieve his ball from somewhere behind her desk.

"So let's just say you are right, Mulder," she mused as she passed his basketball from hand to hand lazily. "Weems does have a streak of luck a mile wide, for all time! What does he do with it?"

"Well, I think he'd finally got the only thing he really wanted, for Richie to be better." Mulder sopped up the spilled dregs with a few crumpled sheets of paper, tossing the mess in the trashcan. "Remember, his luck comes at a price, for every good thing that happens to him a bad thing happens to someone else. That's a heavy burden for anyone to bear."

"True," Scully admitted thoughtfully, the leather of the ball thumping in her palms. "I couldn't live with the idea of my good fortune coming at the expense of someone else."

"Exactly. I think for Weems he's just happy for Richie. If nothing else lucky ever happens to him he'd be happy for life." He tipped the trashcan back to its original, upright position.

"What about you," Scully wondered aloud, spinning the ball between her hands. "What would Fox Mulder do if he luck was on his side?"

"What would I do?" Mulder smirked at the idea, shrugging as he leaned a hip against his desk. "Who says I need luck?"

Scully silently eyed him and then let her gaze flicker to the pink scar across his forehead before dropping to his eyes again with a small smirk. "How many times have you been in the hospital again?"

"I wasn't the one who got shot by my pretty boy partner?"

Clearly, he would forever bear a grudge against Agent Ritter after the incident in New York. "You know there would be many who would say you are a pretty boy, Mulder."

"Really?" She regretted the instant she said it as a cocky grin lit his face. "And who would those people be?"

Hell! The feeling shifted between them in that moment. There was a new…something in the air, Scully could feel it as the basketball slid suddenly in hands gone very damp. She clutched her nails around it to keep it from sliding away, shrugging as she scrambled for some response.

"Mulder, it's no secret that half the women in this building think you are attractive."

"And all the women in this building think I'm crazy. Well, all save one."

"I wouldn't be so certain of that," she shot back, feeling suddenly very uncomfortable with this
"Still, not sure which half you fall on regarding the attractiveness question."

"Mulder, if you're fishing for compliments, you can stop. I've told you before that you are."

"Oh, that's right!" He feigned a look that said his perfect memory had somehow failed him. "Still, it doesn't hurt to hear it from time-to-time."

"Like your ego needs the boost," she snorted, trying to pry her nails from the nubby leather.

"A man likes to hear he's appreciated." From seemingly out of nowhere his hand shot out, quick as lightening, batting the ball from her surprised hands. It bounced off a well-shod toe and into Mulder's fingers as he spun, backed up, and hooked it. The ball floated past Scully's face, stirring her hair as it sailed and landed with a soft whumph into the can. The metal rim on the bottom didn't even teeter off the floor.

Scully's mouth went very, very dry.

"I think our luck is changing, Scully." Mulder's voice sounded very close to her ear. She turned a fraction to glance up at him through a swath of copper hair, tingling at how close he was standing just now.

"Is it?" She managed without a squeak.

"Hope so," he smiled, reaching to brush the lock of hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. "I think Lady Luck owes us a few by now, don't you?"

A few what? Scully was almost too afraid to ask and perhaps she should have, because in the space that it took for her to scrabble onto her reeling senses, Mulder had moved away, scooped up the basketball and tossed it lightly on a stack of incongruous files behind his desk.

She cleared her throat, hoping to God her cheeks were not as red as they felt. "So, I take it then this case is closed?"

"Done and done," Mulder agreed as if nothing had just passed between them. "So, burgers or Chinese for lunch?"

Too stunned to care overmuch about food, Scully shook her head in a desperate move to clear it. "Whatever, you choose."

That surprised him. He blinked wide eyes at her. "You're letting me choose lunch without even an argument regarding fat content?"

"Perhaps you're right. Lady Luck owes you and today is your lucky day."

Mulder wasn't a man to look this good of a gift horse in the mouth. "Come on, Scully, if you're that generous, I'm buying. I'll even buy something green, just for you."

"Sure," she mumbled as she reached for her heavy coat and bag. Why not? She doubted she would eat it anyway. Somehow she had lost her appetite...well, for food anyway.
Traffic couldn't move any more slowly if it tried. Scully sighed. She'd stopped at a gas station in Richmond an hour before for a pit stop, filled up the tank, refreshed the coffee, and used the restroom, all the while think that she was only an hour away from Pittsfield, a town in Prince George County, Virginia. That was before she had hit major roadwork outside of the Virginia state capital, which caused a five-mile long back up and meant that she was no more than twenty miles from where she had been an hour before. Already her bladder was protesting mildly, regretting the coffee that she had added to her travel mug.

"Just perfect," she muttered as she glared emptily at an orange-vested member of the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Transportation work team. For his part he only mildly yawned, then returned to poking at something underneath the concrete with a long, pointy, metal stick.

"He's got a better job than I've got," she sighed, eyes flipping to the long line of cars in front of her. She had been surprised when Mulder called her just as she got out of her morning shower asking her to drive down to Pittsfield. It wasn't that far of a drive as far commutes they went, two-and-a-half hours. She had agreed without thinking. Now going onto hour number four she was beginning to wonder if she shouldn't demand favors out of Mulder for special trips like this, and this one was a special trip because she frankly wasn't sure why they were even on this case. She glanced at the file in the seat beside her and flipped it open, eyes flickering over the faxed pages briefly as she sat motionless in her vehicle.

It was a sad situation, she'd give him that. Tony Reed, a teenager who was stopped by police for trespassing, lost his head and attacked a sheriff's deputy. Problem was that he obviously didn't know his own strength and he killed the man. The man's face was bashed in by the heavy-duty police flashlight that most law enforcement was issued, all in all a tragic, open-and-shut case. Clearly, Mulder hadn't seen it that way, else he wouldn't have called her first thing in the morning. He hadn't explained why he thought it was an X-file, simply that he felt something was suspicious and she would know when she got there. Typical! Her breath heaved as she let her head fall back against the headrest of the driver's seat. Trust Mulder to con her into a long drive across state with a vague promise and an air of mystery. Who was she fooling? All Mulder had to do anymore was say "please" and she would come running. She glanced in irritation at the crime report beside her, ignoring the technical details of broken mandibles and crushed sinuses and pondered her real problem.

What in the hell did Mulder mean the other day by "their" luck changing?

She had played the scene in the office over and over again in her mind over the last week. It had been just one of their normal, speculative conversations, musing over the nature of Henry Weems and his extraordinary luck, and suddenly, something had changed. What was it? The problem itched at her brain and it made her irritated in ways that she didn't like to contemplate. What had happened in that moment, and what had Mulder meant by that?

Hormones, something in the back of her head told her. It's all just hormones. That had to be it. Since
she began her treatments with Dr. Parenti, Scully had found herself reduced to acting like a teenaged girl again. Her thoughts were scattered, her temper was shorter than usual, and other things...hell, she should just face it, her attraction to her partner was starting to border on obsessive. If she had to stare at Mulder chewing thoughtfully on a pencil as he worked one more time...

Mentally she wanted to scream. Physically she simply pounded her steering wheel in frustration. Outside the window, the DOT worker glanced up at her and gave her a sympathetic, apologetic shrug. Scully contemplated throwing her travel mug at him.

She could ask her mother if this was normal, she supposed, but Scully had kept this plan deathly silent from her mother. To be honest, she wasn't terribly sure how Maggie would take the idea of her only, living daughter having a baby through alternative means. A good Catholic, Scully feared her mother's response would be disappointment that she hadn't at least waited to get married before she tried the procedure. Somehow, facing Maggie's disapproval was just not something Scully felt herself emotionally capable of at the moment, not for something as big as this.

There was Tara of course. Her sister-in-law had gone through this very thing trying to have a baby with Bill. For years her brother and his wife had struggled, and if anyone would know her own private irritations, it would be Tara. But there again, Scully had a hard time bringing herself to tell her sister-in-law what was going on. While she doubted Tara would be nearly as critical, she had a feeling that she would have a hard time explaining the circumstances as to why she felt the need to do this. And heaven help her if Bill found out that the child was Mulder's! No, she couldn't bring herself to ask Tara.

So she was left to suffer in silence. Raging hormones, teenaged longings, and a partner who was giving her mixed signals. What had he meant when he said he hoped luck was finally on their side? Did he perhaps know about the procedure? She wouldn't put it past Mulder. She had yet to tell him but perhaps he suspected. Mulder was far to perceptive and far to polite with her feelings to say anything directly. Perhaps he had meant it as a simple well wish, the hope that indeed this venture of theirs would be fruitful. She blushed at the idea. In the end, all of this wondering could simply be that he hoped that in the end her IVF was successful. Maybe it was just her haywire hormones that had read into it something that he had never intended.

She swore softly as the car in front of her inched along. Perhaps she was making a giant mountain out of a tiny, thoughtful molehill. Perhaps years of pent up frustration and longing, mixed with the hormonal wash of her IVF treatment and anxiety on whether it had worked or not had read into a simple interaction more than what Mulder had ever intended. Slow going indeed, she sighed, throwing her car into park as she glanced the medical files. She could dwell on the complexities of her personal life at the moment, or she could simply do what she did best, and lose herself in her work. For better or worse, Mulder had dug up a case for them. Maybe she could find some loose nugget somewhere to latch her attention on to, to keep her mind off the mess her thoughts were in now.

Scully glanced at the ribbon of cars sitting still in front of her. Somehow she had a feeling she'd be a long time stewing in all of this before she managed to get to where she was supposed to be.
"What in the hell is a 'betty'?

Scully smirked at Mulder's confounded expression, feeling quite empathetic. The term had been lost on her too. "I think we should be more worried about the fact that the murder weapon is now missing, Mulder."

The halls of Adam's High rang around them with the voices of teenagers at lockers, grabbing books, joking, laughing, swearing and taunting each other. The smell of musty gym clothes combined with too much deodorant and clouds of hairspray, reminding her of all the things she once hated about high school.

"It's not that I'm not worried, Scully, but I don't know if I can take an impinging of your honor so lightly."

"Impinging on my honor?" She snorted up at him, eyes dancing. "I dare you to find a single seventeen-year-old in this hallway who knows what that word means."

"I bet I won't, but they can likely explain what a 'betty' is."

"I would guess from the usage of the word in Max Harden's sentence, coupled with the not so subtle once over he gave me, I believe he thought I was once attractive."

"Yeah, 'back in the day'?" Mulder grumbled in mild outrage. "Clearly the kid needs his eyes and his attitude checked."

Torn between delight at his indignation and amusement at the insult he took from it, Scully landed on simply chuckling at him. "You know when we were his age people our age looked ancient to us."

"I'm sorry, if you happened across my scene when I was seventeen, I doubt I would have thought you were a 'has been'."

"Really?" She quirked a speculative eye up at him unable to hide the hint of flirtation that crept up inside of her, bubbling to the surface. "And now that you aren't seventeen?"

That had been the last thing that Mulder had expected out of her. His eyes widened as he nearly stopped in the sea of surging teenagers to stare at her. So, she got to him after all.

"Now that I'm not seventeen I think I can appreciate a good thing when I see it."

There was a challenge there. A small smile tried to break free, but Scully suppressed it, for now at least. She had no idea what the challenge meant. Mulder was an irrepressible flirt, he always had been. This banter could simply be that, nothing more. She really needed to stop reading into every little thing.
Mulder's indignation was not assuaged, however, as he eyed the young people around them. "Honestly, Scully, have taste just fallen that much since we were their age?"

Scully thought about pointing out to him that they had been teenagers twenty years ago. "I don't know, Mulder, you thought Chastity was cute, didn't you?"

That earned a scandalized look. "For a teenage girl, perhaps. Beyond the rebellious 'Adam's High Sux' on her jacket and her habit for picking up angry, snot-nosed boys with no eye for beauty, I think she's perfectly delightful."

"She thinks you're hot, obviously." Scully smirked at the pink that reddened Mulder's ears.

"See what I mean? Perfectly delightful."

Scully laughed as she gazed around the teeming hallway. "I don't think that the taste of the young has fallen off, Mulder, I just think that to their eyes we are old. Look at us! Dressed in suits, whipping out badges, hair a perfectly acceptable color, no nose rings or tattoos."

"Some of us don't have tattoos." His fingers invariably reached for the spot on her back where a tattoo still resided.

It was her turn to flush as his she felt the heat from each fingertip warm through her coat. "My point is, Mulder, we aren't young and pretty anymore."

"I think pretty is a matter of opinion, and I think Max Harden has a crappy notion of what beauty is. Frankly, that's not the only thing he has a crap notion on."

"You mean authority figures?" That had been painfully obvious just seeing the snide disregard Max gave their position. "Besides the blatant dislike of authority most teenagers have, I think it's doubly hard for Max as the sheriff's son. I'm sure he knows exactly where his father's authority lies and where ours begins and isn't in the least bit afraid of anything we might have to bring against him."

"Convenient that he his father neglected to ask his son what Tony was up to."

"Why would he? Friendship does not mean that Max necessarily knew anything about Tony's doings."

"You had teenaged brothers, Scully. How man of their friends weren't involved in their shenanigans?"

He had a point. Both Bill and Charlie usually had at least one or two of their buddies along whenever they got into mischief. "That's not to say Max was even there."

"Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't, but you would think if he and Chastity were friends they would known something of what he was up to."

"Maybe. Who knows?"

"Chastity at least knows Tony didn't do it and I have a feeling she was there. I suspect with the eye that Max Harden gives that girl he wasn't about to allow her to go there alone without him."

Gut instinct alone told her that Mulder's suspicions weren't totally unfounded. "He's the sheriff's son and Harden is already taking this personally enough. That was his man who was killed. He doesn't want us here and he isn't going to like us casting suspicion on his child."
"He might if he can't find his murder weapon. Without that weapon, he has nothing to pin on Tony Reed, his case is blown out of the water. Now which do you think he wants to deal with, an angry family and outraged city or the minor detail of asking his son what his friend has been up to?"

"Neither, Mulder, and you know it." He was about to stir up a hornet's nest, it wasn't hard to see that. "Who do you suspect might have taken it?"

"I don't know, to be honest. Someone who had motive, honestly, and access to the sheriff's office, an access that no one would notice or think twice about."

"That could be anyone in the office, any of his deputies, the office staff…"

Mulder nodded, glancing back towards the classroom that Chastity and Max had come out of. "Did you notice who slipped into class just a little bit before we came up to the door?"

"No." She hadn't really been paying attention.

"Max Harden." Mulder shrugged as he maneuvered past a boy who was easily six inches taller than he was and fifty pounds heavier.

Once he had moved past the landmass of a teenager, Scully blinked at him. "You think Max Harden did it?"

"He had his books with him when he went in. I bet if we check with that teacher he'll tell us Max was missing for a large part of class. He has access to the station, Scully. His father's the sheriff. If he and Chastity were there that night, they likely know what really happened."

"But he's the sheriff's son…"

"Who has a clear issue with authority. Chances are that Max is about as cheerful with Daddy as he is with us and doesn't particularly care one way or the other about the hand of authority. In fact, I'd wager he'd perfectly happy with his father having to give up Tony Reed."

"Why?"

"Cause I think Max knows Tony didn't do it, and I think Max has a good idea who did it."

This was all going to get messy, she surmised. "I think you just want to stick it to him because he insinuated we were old."

"No, he insinuated you were old and not as attractive anymore, and I don't think I can let that stand."

"Whatever, Mulder, just don't cause any more problems with Sheriff Harden than we already have."

"Scully, why do you have to make me promise things you know I'm never going to keep?"

Scully only gave a long-suffering sigh. He was right and she knew it.
"I saw a girl in here, I swear I did." The frantic looking nurse spun to face Scully and Mulder in Max Harden's now empty hospital room. "I saw her on the monitor, pretty blonde thing, unhooking his IV, but when I came in to check on it, she was gone."

"Chastity," Mulder murmured, fingers twitching the bedclothes, now empty of the teenaged boy who had just been there. "And I bet surveillance video is only going to show us a blur."

"I don't understand," the nurse stammered. "He can't just disappear."

Scully looked to Mulder. He seemed to have the answer for it. "He didn't disappear, he just simply moved too fast for you to see."

The poor nurse was too confused to even give Mulder a dark look. Knowing Mulder's relationship to nurses and taking pity on her, Scully reached for her partner's arm and tugged it gently. "We got to go."

"Call the sheriff, tell him his son is out there," Mulder called back to the poor woman. His long steps soon took the lead as Scully matched her stride to keep up.

"I saw his X-rays, Mulder, there's no way Max could have gotten out of here on his own two feet."

"No, but I bet we'll find a wheelchair in the parking lot with its tread worn off." Mulder scanned the floor in front of them quickly. "Chances are we'll find globs like the ones we found off of Max's shoes."

"Is there any point in telling you that's impossible?"

"You could, but you know I'm right."

Scully had a sneaking suspicion that he likely was, somehow. "So how are they doing it?"

"The super speed? I don't know. Drugs, maybe, something Max has gotten his hands on that allows them all to move quickly."

"I saw his blood work up, Mulder. He had unusually high traces of adrenaline, but nothing in his system seemed to indicate anything foreign being the cause of it. He was clean for stimulants."

Mulder pondered quietly as they rounded a corner out of the ward where Max Harden had been. "I don't know, maybe it has to do with that field the deputy was killed in."

"What do you mean?"

"Sheriff Harden's report said Tony was caught trespassing out in a field, that was initially where he was stopped. And that's where they found the deputy's body. What if there's something out there
that's allowing the kids to move faster than the human body should allow them too."

Scully had a feeling she knew where Mulder was leading her. "You think it's alien?"

"Possibly, though to be honest no reports I've ever read have indicated anything like this. Mental powers, incredible healing, yes, but the ability to move that quickly, no."

There was a first for everything, she supposed, including Mulder being stumped. "So the three kids go out there and are what, changed?"

"I think that whatever is out there is enhances their abilities. They are all three young enough and healthy enough, it just took what was naturally theirs by right and made it more. Max is able to do great feats of strength not because he is strong, but because whatever it is out there has added enough speed that he can do more damage, just like a bullet in a gun."

"The increased speed would account for his injuries. Remember, I compared it to race car drivers and NFL athletes, people who go up to high rates of speed and have sudden impacts. It made a scary sort of sense."

"I bet the tears, fractures, and lesions all came from sudden stops and any impact he might have had while in a high rate of speed, say like against a deputy's head." Mulder led them out of the hospital's front doors and out into the front parking area. Sure enough, just to the side, in a garden area filled with neatly trimmed bushes, sat a wheelchair. Mulder wasted no time in crossing over to it.

"Check out the tread." He waved towards the wheel of the chair, its gray tire had been rubbed completely off, the smell of burned rubber lingering in the air. Carefully, Mulder touched a finger to a runny gobbet of congealing gray goo hanging off a metal spoke.

"Melted clean off, just like Max's shoes."

Scully looked behind. On the sidewalk, more blobs of white rubber were evident. "Chastity or Max?"

"Chastity, Max left his shoes behind." Mulder frowned as he straightened, shaking the chair by the handles back and forth. Their was a rattle of joints as it settled an inch lower than it had been. "Ball bearings are shot, bet everything is stripped inside. The chair isn't designed to go as fast as Chastity was pushing it."

"Where is she taking him?"

Mulder's sharp gaze glanced around the parked cars, considering. "Out to the field is my guess. I think Max's little stunt at the school used up whatever reserve he had, that's why he had his collapse. I think he wants to get a fix of whatever it is."

"So you think Max is our killer then?"

"I think Max is the ring leader. I think Chastity and Tony both got caught up in all of this by happenstance."

They were all three so young, just babies in the grand scheme of things. They had their futures and whole lives ahead of them. It hardly seemed right or even possible that they would involve themselves in something like murder, especially not something as vicious as what was executed on both the deputy and the teacher.

"Why would Max do it?" That was the most confusing part to her. "He's the sheriff's son! He should
have a good life."

"Not every angry, recalcitrant child is going to come from some abusive home," Mulder shrugged as he picked out their car from the several there and pulled out car keys. "I did some checking up on Sheriff Harden myself. His wife died when Max was eleven, cancer, from that point on there was a progressive decline in Max's behavior at school, not noticeable at first, but with a sharp turn this last year."

"So what, he decided he hated his father?"

"You said it yourself, these kids are a bundle full of change, raging hormones galore. Just to be rudely blunt, look at your own behavior for the last few weeks." He shot her a dry look over the hood of his car.

She flushed as she climbed inside.

"Combine angst over a dead mother and an authoritarian father with a healthy, teenage disregard for being bossed around, add in a mess of impulsive hormones and whatever is causing him to manifest that speed, it sounds like you have the makings of a killer to me."

Perhaps it did, Scully couldn't ever remember having those sorts of rages when she was a teenager - except for perhaps one memorable time she had nearly killed Charlie with the car, but that was an accident. Still, she knew her own short fuse these last weeks, how the raging hormones in her body had led to her own irritation with her partner. Scully could easily see how that combined with all the other factors Mulder named could easily lead a teenage boy, drunk with his own power, to murder.

"It's just too sad," she murmured, staring out of the window at the high school, full of the promise of hundreds of young people. "He's throwing away a lot by doing this. His entire life." Things like a career, a family, and children of his own, those things you don't realize you want when you are young, things you only want when time has passed enough to make them important to you.

"Youth are near-sighted. It is only the old who are far-sighted." Mulder observed regretfully as he pulled the car out of the parking lot. "Let's hope we can get to Max, Chastity, and Tony before it's too late."

"Right," Scully nodded, reaching for Mulder's notes from the case report in the seat behind her. "Let me see if we can figure out where it is they arrested Tony at originally."

"Whatever is out there, I hope it was worth that man's life."

"I doubt it," Scully replied. She was finding in these cases it rarely ever was.
In which Mulder and Scully feel the heavy, adult issues.

In the end they could not explain the strange happenings in Pittsfield, nor did the grief-stricken Sheriff Harden seem inclined to - not that he had much choice. He was still in the hospital suffering from abdominal injuries inflicted on him by his son. If not for the intervention of Tony Reed, he too would likely be dead. Perhaps, in the end, that was why he had been willing to believe the boy's story regarding Max and Chastity's ultimate fate. Still, for Scully, trying so hard to create her own child, she empathized for the poor man, bereft now of a wife and a son. No matter what Max did or what he had become, no man should have to bury his son. No parent should have to face the heartbreaking of that sort of loss.

That was why she was in a pensive mood the next morning as she walked into work, thoughts fixated on the broken sobs of the sheriff when told of his son's death, on the worry lines that creased Mrs. Reed's brow as she sat by the bedside of Tony. She had felt those emotions too once, with Emily. That was a pain she had never wanted to feel again, and yet, there she was, willing to throw herself into that sort of anguish again. Maybe some things were worth it.

So lost was she in thought it didn't occur to her that Mulder was speaking, at least not until an errant paperclip whizzed past her nose. She startled, staring at him at his desk.

"Earth to Scully? It wasn't that long of a drive back from Pittsfield."

"Not nearly as long as the drive down, no." She set down her things, shooting him an apologetic look. "Sorry, just...thinking."

"I was saying that the Prince George County Sheriff's office called. Harden let Tony Reed go without pressing any charges. The cave has been declared off limits and the whole thing is going to be brushed over, forgotten."

Mulder made it sound like a travesty, the idea of letting it all go. Scully wasn't so sure that forgetting wasn't just the thing that all of those directly involved needed.

"What would digging into the situation further profit anyone, Mulder?"

"Answers as to how it was that those kids were able to do what they did." He thought it was as simple as that, as if human lives hadn't been directly impacted by all of this.

"I don't think this is as simple of a matter as science."

"This coming from the queen of scientific proof, Dana Scully?" Mulder snorted in genuinely surprised disbelief. "My Scully, the one who stood up to me how many times and told me 'that's impossible' just because she once read it in a science book?"

She couldn't help but be slightly nettled with his scoffing attitude. "There's scientific inquiry, Mulder, and there is real feelings and emotions. What good is it going to do for Sheriff Harden, or Chastity's family, or for Tony to keep prodding this with a stick just for the sake of scientific inquiry?"
Clearly he had expected her to at least somewhat be on his side on this one. "Scully, something obviously happened there, something that no one could explain. You said it yourself, it was a possibility that whatever was in that cave affected only the young. You were willing to check it out till I told you we couldn't."

He was right, she had been. "Well, I had some time to think on it on the way home."

Dark eyebrows rose at her statement. "And what made you change your mind?"

What had changed her mind? Was it as simple as empathy for the sheriff or the feelings of grief for the two lost young people? Was it her hopes at motherhood? Was it just a long, lonely car ride back across Virginia?

"I think," she began, quizzing over the question in her own mind. "Perhaps I'm just getting old?"

Whatever he expected, it hadn't been that.

"You aren't taking Max's statement about 'back in the day' seriously, are you?"

Scully snorted. Mulder's outrage at the dead boy's insinuation underlined his question. "No, not really, but I do think he had a point. I'm not a teenager anymore. And neither are you."

"Thanks for pointing that out," Mulder groused unhappily.

"I didn't mean it as an insult. I merely wanted to point out that with age comes a certain amount of circumspection, and I had a long time to be circumspect last night."

"And you decided you were too old to pursue scientific inquiry?"

"No. I had to ask myself about what was the cost."

The cost, that had always been a touchy subject between the two of them. Mulder more than anyone was keenly aware of the cost of things. He'd faced it all of his life. His family had paid the price time over for the ambitions of a few men against a conspiracy that threatened the world. In his efforts to expose that conspiracy Mulder had paid his own personal cost and Scully along with him. It had been the push and pull of their relationship, Mulder alternating between pushing her away to keep her safe but begging her to stay because he needed her insight. Cost was a word that weighed heavily with him.

"You making this personal, Scully?" Sadness crept into his expression. She noticed him twiddle with his tie, nervously.

"Maybe a little." She admitted that. The sobs of the sheriff as he was told his son's fate had gotten to her, reminded her of another hospital and another bedside where she sat grieving. Guiltily she glanced Mulder's way. She had yet to tell him about the procedure, not that there was anything to tell just yet. She still had weeks yet till she would even know for certain.

"Mulder, there's something I have to tell you." Why not just get it out there now, before she lost all nerve. She felt her own gaze skitter away from her partner's, her fingers knotting in front of her as she tried to figure out how to say it. "I...I saw Dr. Parenti, right before the Weems case."

As her guilt didn't already stab her enough in her conscience, Mulder's reaction only turned the dagger deeper. Surprise gave way to hurt and annoyance in an instance. "You did...what?"

"I saw him and had the IVF procedure done..."
He threw himself out of his chair, hands on his hips in the restless gesture he took on when truly upset. "You didn't think to tell me first?"

That stung. But it irritated her as well. "I didn't think I had to, Mulder, after all, this is my body and my pregnancy when last I checked."

Her response only earned a glare and an eye roll out of him. "Don't give me that, Scully, you know that's not why I wanted to know."

She did.

"Mulder, I didn't want it to be a big deal!"

"So you drop it on me when you had it done…two weeks ago?"

"A little over," she admitted, trying to desperately think of ways to circumvent his overprotective streak. "Look, I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure."

"I would have had you stay at home if that was the case, Scully. Out there in the field, anything could happen, and I know more than anyone how important this is to you."

"How would it be any different than if I had gotten pregnant by normal means? I would likely not even be aware of it for another two to three weeks and I would still be out in the field then! There's no more or less inherent risk no matter how you look at it."

"And what if something had happened?"

"Something can always happen, you and I both know that." She sighed, watching him pace the length behind his desk. "I thought about telling you then, you know."

It didn't do a lot to mollify him. His eyes narrowed, but he continued his restless steps up and down the tile.

"I just thought…well, I'd tell you if something happens."

"If something happens? Scully!" He threw up his hands, stopping to face her, expression dark but stoic in his anger. "You act as if I have nothing invested in any of this myself."

His words cut her. She winced as she found the tips of her well-shod feet interesting all the sudden. He was right. She had been acting as if Mulder had nothing invested. And why shouldn't she? She was a single woman, making a personal choice - a personal choice that involved Mulder, and not just his sperm either. This involved his life, his job, everything. She was making a baby - his baby. It would change the dynamic of their entire relationship. He hadn't asked to be included in the process. She hadn't even thought to invite him. Perhaps at least a warning, a heads up, a gesture that she hadn't forgotten that he was a part of this too would have been nice.

"You're right," she sighed, shoulder's slumping as she nodded her heavy head. "You're right, I should have said something to you."

He was silent, standing in front of her for a long moment. She didn't know what else to say. She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts and feelings in all of this, the hope, the expectation, the fear, the worry, it hadn't occurred to her to even think of sharing any of those feelings with him.

"Mulder, when we told Sheriff Harden that his son was dead, I thought about that procedure. I thought that maybe, just maybe, there is child growing in me, one who will be Max or Chastity in
another sixteen years. I don't know what sort of mother I will be, but I do know I'll try my best. I know that it would kill me if I had to sit to witness my child do what Max did, if I had to be told my child was dead. I realized that perhaps some things are just not worth the cost anymore."

More silence, then a long, heavy, drawn sigh as out of the corner of her eye she could see Mulder approach her. He crouched down in front of her, balanced on his toes, fingers reaching out to coax her chin upwards to meet his gaze. He was sad, but there was a ghost of a smile on his face.

"When the hell did we get old, Scully?"

A giggle broke through the oppressiveness left by his anger. "Oh hell, Mulder, were we ever young?"

"I don't know, I was." He ran a hand through his thick, chestnut hair, causing it to stand on end briefly. "I didn't use to care about what my actions did, as long as I got to the truth, remember?"

"You mean you ever stopped?"

"Touché. But I have become a bit more circumspect."

"This is true." There once was a time when he would take off to parts unknown without even a warning to her. "I don't know, do you really want to be young again?"

He shrugged, leaning on his knees. "I don't know. I had a wicked hook shot back in the day and my joints didn't creak as much when I hit the track."

"Yeah, well I was short, all arms and legs and braces, frizzy hair and nerdy." She wrinkled her nose at memories of who she was at fourteen and fifteen. "I think I prefer myself now. Older, but wiser, ready to face the challenges of what lies ahead."

"And just what lies ahead for us, Scully?"

The question was so heavy, so loaded, it nearly ached, and Scully felt her eyes glaze slightly with the thought. "I don't know, but I'm a lot less afraid of it now than I was as a teenager."

"I wish I was nearly as confident." He pushed himself up into a standing position again. Despite himself, Scully could hear the tendons in his knees creak ever so slightly. "Also wish I was seventeen again."

"Do you wish you had the ability to do what Max Harden could do?"

"No," Mulder shook his head. "No…well, maybe. Sometimes, with DC traffic."

"That's true enough!" The traffic in Washington was notoriously bad. "I think though we have the wisdom to use it much wiser than he did."

"And perhaps that is the point, with great power comes great responsibility. Those powers only seem to be given to the young. Maybe you can't have great strength and great wisdom at the same time."

"Maybe with age comes a different type of strength. The strength of experience, of hardship, of heartbreak, that gives us a wisdom that Max and Chastity just did not have."

"If they did, they may not have done what they did." Mulder sighed gravely.

"Maybe," she mused. "Did you just seriously quote Spider-man to me just now?"
"What?" He blinked blankly at her. "Oh that...how do you know I wasn't quoting Voltaire? It was his line."

"Yeah, but I guess you heard it first from Peter Parker's uncle."

"Could be," he admitted with an impish smile. "How do you know about Uncle Ben?"

"I have brothers. Please tell me you aren't quoting comic books in our case reports."

"Read them and find out for yourself," he tossed back lightly, returning to his desk. He cast her one last, speculative look. "So, when will you know about...the...you know." He waved generally at her, his eyes cast somewhere in the vicinity of her middle. His ears glowed red even in the dim light of the office. Fox Mulder, taken apart by the idea of her pregnant.

She chuckled. "I likely will know in a couple more weeks. I have a doctor's appointment."

"That soon?" Mulder's eyebrows rose in sharp worry. "Don't they have to kill a rabbit or something still?"

"No," she snorted. "Nope, just a blood test. You want me to let you know when I go in?"

He at first looked as if he was going to say no. "Yeah...if you could. I mean, I don't know if I need to be there, but, you know, if you want me to come by."

"Sure." She smiled. The idea of Mulder waiting for her, whatever came of her doctor's appointment, warmed her.

"Just...sort of want to know one way or the other right way."

"Of course."

Uncomfortable silence.

"Yeah, so I think I'll work up that report for the Prince George County Sheriff's office." Suddenly papers were picked up and looked at, his computer mouse fiddled with, something to do that had nothing to do with the emotions of that moment. Scully for her part felt the same, noting a sudden urge to throw herself into her own report and not come out for the rest of the day.

"You do that. I think I need to get some observations down." She flipped on her computer. Busy work meant no dealing with uncomfortable implications, like the fact that she was trying to have a child that genetically was half Mulder's. Why did getting old mean life had to get more complicated as well?
Safe Against The Storm

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder holds Scully safe.

From the street she could see her apartment was dark. Mulder was there. She knew because his car was parked just outside. Like as not he was asleep on her couch, waiting to hear the news. He was her rock in stormy seas, just like he had been for the last six years.

This wasn't a sea. This was a hurricane, a tempest, threatening to drown her and everything, to swallow the world whole and leave her empty. Oh, if only it would swallow her along with it, take her up and away, so she would never have to feel this again.

Empty…

Her foots echoed along the sidewalk, damp with late, fall rain. It would officially be winter in a week or so. Somewhere above her one of the other tenants had strung Christmas lights, blinking in reds, golds, and greens. The sparkled against the wetness on the window pain, reminders of a season of joy and happiness for the world, a time when they celebrated a child's birth. That fact cut as she opened the door of the building to go inside. Others were just coming home from their jobs, the sounds of televisions and the smell of food filled the hallway. Coming up to her own door, there was no hint of life, no welcoming Christmas lights, no tantalizing odor, no hum of anything inside, no vitality…barren.

Without a word she turned the handle. She knew it would be unlocked, Mulder had his own key into the place. She stepped inside as saw his jacket thrown carelessly across a chair back, Mulder's reckless messiness.

The very person himself rose from the couch, blinking owlishly at her in the semi-dark, hair in funny angles from where he slept.

"Scully," he mumbled, rubbing at bright eyes. "I must have dozed off. I was waiting for you to get back."

He waited. He had wanted to be there, no matter what the results. She so badly wished she could give him some good news. She didn't have to say a word. He knew.

"It didn't take, did it?"

What could she say? No, it didn't take? Should she describe Dr. Parenti's sad eyes and regretful expression as he told her that it looked as if none of the ova recovered might ever implant? His gentle offer to help her with any future reproductive counseling should she consider that path, a phrase she knew was code for surrogate ova. What should she tell him? That her ova were too damaged, that whatever was done to her meant she would never have children of her own body with him or anybody else?

What came out was much more simple and forthright.

"I guess it was too much to hope for."
He didn't say anything in response. He didn't have to. He simply opened his arms wide. Without another thought she walked into them, burrowing into his chest as she sobbed. Hot, scalding tears course out of her eyes, wetting his shirt instantly. His arms wrapped around her, holding her tight, firm and strong against the tempest raging.

"It was my last chance," she choked brokenly, so many feelings bubbling up with those words. The ova had given her hope when she thought she had none, had given her a second chance after the loss of Emily. Now even that had been taken away from her. No Emily, no ova, no baby, nothing. She was nothing. They had taken all of that away from her.

Mulder simply held her tighter. His arms pressed her close to him as she felt his lips graze the top of her forehead. He loosened his grip enough to bend down close, to press his forehead against hers.

"Never give up on a miracle."

The words of a man who still believed that he would find his long lost sister. Mulder, the man of boundless faith, the one who may not believe in God, but believed miracles could happen. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe because Mulder did. She may ground Mulder in science, but he was who reminded her to have hope, even when it seemed most hopeless. She turned her damp face up to lay a kiss on his cheek, another just below his ear as she nestled her chin in the crook of shoulder. She wrapped arms around his middle, holding on for all she was worth.

"How can you believe, Mulder, when all the evidence out there says otherwise?"

She felt the vibration of his chuckle rumble through her. "Someone else once asked a question similar to that," he murmured softly. "I told him that all the evidence to the contrary wasn't entirely persuasive."

She pulled away, damp eyes blinking up at him gravely. "This evidence is persuasive, Mulder. I… we had hoped the ova were viable."

"And they might still be."

"But do I want to go through with this again?" That was the question Dr. Parenti had posed to her. She could, in theory, and she might get lucky, but she wasn't feeling that luck anymore. And this experience…it had wrung her out, had cut her to the quick. She didn't think she could go through this again, not if this were to be the end result.

Mulder said nothing on the subject. He merely sighed, his chest heaving against her. She burrowed again against it, safe and warm there, taking in the comfort that had always been her partner. Ever since that first case together, when she had run into his room practically naked, convinced that the mosquito bites on her back were something more nefarious, there had been something so safe about Mulder. She luxuriated in it now, held on to it, clung to it and wished she never had to let go.

He didn't appear ready to let her. Gently he moved shifting his feet and her along with him, moving towards the couch he had vacated. With a gentle pressure, he brought her along with him, tumbling to the cushions, shifting enough to allow them both to sit comfortably. Scully easily tucked her legs under her, kicking off her shoes, and buried herself again in Mulder's broad chest. He simply wrapped arms around her and held her. No words were said. No words were needed. They sat, in the growing twilight of oncoming winter, his fingers rubbing gently over arms and shoulders, a thumb occasionally reaching up to wipe at a stray tear that tracked it's way down her face. His shirt was quickly damp with them, soaked by the grief of lost hopes and stolen dreams, but Mulder was an expert at this by now, and he simply waited, knowing at some point she would break and speak again.
When she finally did, it was her family she thought of first. "I didn't tell them. Mom, Bill, Charlie…I had wanted to wait."

He was quiet. Scully continued. "I thought…I'd hoped that if something was positive by Christmas, I would tell them then. Sort of silly, really, but I had it all worked out in my head. I suppose a part of me was half afraid of what they would say. Especially Mom, her only living daughter having a baby out of wedlock!"

He hummed an unintelligible word of encouragement. Perhaps he found it as silly as she did in this moment, the idea of Maggie Scully being angry over something like that. In this moment the only other person Scully wished she could talk to other than Mulder was her mother.

"I wish I had said something. She'd…understand this, I think. I wish I could tell her."

"You could," Mulder murmured into her hair, lips brushing the crown of her head. "I think she'd understand, and I know sometimes there are just things only your parent can make feel better."

"I know." But how could she even bring the conversation up? It seemed ludicrous to call her mother in the middle of the evening and drop this on her. "Perhaps at Christmas…"

"In San Diego?" She felt the tenseness of his chest before she heard the worry in his voice. She lifted her damp cheek to glance up at his troubled expression.

"It's the off year, we usually go to San Diego, and Mom wants to see Matthew."

It hadn't occurred to her why Mulder would be bothered by it until she thought of the last time she had gone to San Diego for the holidays. Fresh tears welled in her eyes as she ducked her face into his shirt again.

"Are you sure you want to go?" His concern rumbled through his chest.

"Because of Emily?" Her lost daughter's name rung hollow from her, echoing behind this latest, crushing blow to her ever being a mother.

"I know it's your family, but they would understand…"

"I've been to San Diego since then."

"After today?" His arms tightened just a bit around her. "I just worry, Dana."

It warmed her somewhat that he was so concerned about her and her feelings.

"I can't hide from Emily any more than I can hide from my family," she said simply. "Perhaps I need it…need them both. I need see my family, to just…I don't know, have them there. And I need to see Emily as well. Perhaps now is the best time. Maybe I can finally find some closure."

Closure to the singular obsession she'd had since Emily had entered into her life two years before. Motherhood was not her destiny, and it was time she accepted it. Unlike Mulder, who seemed to never rest from his quest, she knew when it was time to let go and move on.

"If you need anything, I'm right here." Mulder's words soaked through her private misery and she wrapped tight arms around his middle.

"Thank you." It was all she needed to say, and for what it was worth it meant everything to her in the world right now.
The silence grew, the darkness thickened. And still they sat in the quiet comfort of her apartment. Despite the ghosts and monsters that lurked there, for that moment she was held safe against the storm.
Make The Season Bright

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tells her family the truth.

Matthew was already passed out in a pile of torn, shiny paper, a ribbon stuck to his forehead, one chubby arm clutching a brand, new fire engine. Near his downy, warm brown hair, a giant Naval destroyer rested capsized on its side, while a new Teddy Bear served as a pillow. All in all it had the look of an amazing Christmas morning for at least one of the Scully clan.

"Did you get a picture of it?" Scully leaned over to Charlie, who was winding the disposable camera, preparing it for the next shot.

"Yep. Tara would kill me if I didn't." She heard the mechanism click as her younger brother got another shot of their sleeping nephew. "Totally the picture we can embarrass him in front of his future girlfriend with."

"As if the naked, bathtub pictures from a year ago wouldn't suffice?"

"Are you two planning to traumatize my son?" Bill gently set two coffees down in front of his younger brother and sister, smiling on his only child with fatherly affection.

"Just a little, it's our duty as aunt and uncle." Charlie set down his camera in favor of the delicious smell of caffeine as Scully followed suit. "Where are the cinnamon rolls?"

"Right here." Charlie's wife, Ashley, shoved a plate in front of her husband's nose, much to his pleased delight. She handed one to Scully before settling down on the couch between the two siblings, glancing at their nephew across the way. "Poor thing looks tuckered out."

"It's cause Mom insists we wake up at eight to open presents," Bill grumbled.

"I heard that, William." Maggie Scully bustled out of her son's kitchen with his wife Tara in tow, both carrying the rest of the breakfast items to the dining room. "Are you four going to eat at the table like grown adults?"

"Clearly, Mom's missed the memo in which I haven't ever eaten at a table as a grown adult," Charlie muttered. His two siblings chuckled as they obediently made their way to the table laden with rolls and fruit.

"Think Matty is okay there, Bill?" Tara glanced with a mother's worry to her son, conked out as he was on the floor.

"He's fine. He'll wake up in an hour fussing." Bill didn't seem overly concerned, in the way that most parents seemed to shrug off the bad tempers of their toddlers. "The terrible twos hit early with Matty."

"Hard to believe he turns two next week." Tara shook her blonde head, a fond gaze turned towards her sleeping child. "It's all happened so fast."
Two years? Scully blinked as she thought about it. It had only been two years since she found Emily, the daughter she never knew existed. Two years since she held the frail little girl in her arms. Two years since she made the startling discovery of just what her ova had been used for and why. Two years since she watched the only child she would ever have die of a disease she couldn't even begin to understand let alone stop. The cinnamon roll that she had swallowed now stuck horribly in her throat as she gulped at her coffee, hoping to dislodge it.

"Any plans on giving Matthew a brother or sister?" Charlie eyed his brother and sister-in-law speculatively, earning blushes from them both and a wry grin from his brother.

"Eventually, when Matty is out of his 'no, it's mine', stage. One screaming child at a time!"

"I managed four of you together well enough," Maggie teased. "And what about you, Charles? Nothing from you and Ashley?"

"Wait till I'm done with my master's degree, then we'll talk," Ashley laughed, comfortable with the banter. Only Scully sat on the outside of it all, watching with a sad smile as talk turned to future plans for babies and parenthood, something she would never know. She had suspected, of course, talk would turn to babies and children. It was only natural. With her siblings married now, Maggie was eager to play the roll of grandmother, but it still stung, salt against an open and bleeding wound, and Mulder's words of caution and worry now came back to her. Maybe she should have listened.

"Earth to Dana!" Maggie's exclamation finally caught Scully's attention. She blinked at her mother, who frowned lightly at her daughter. "Are you all right?"

"Fine!" Her mantra against the slightly worried gazes of her family, the word that she tossed out even when inside she was screaming. To prove it, she took a bite of cinnamon roll. "You out did yourself, Mom."

Maggie wasn't about to buy her daughter's casual brush off. "What's wrong?"

That was not the question Scully wanted her to ask. To answer it would be to sound petty and small, to be the rain on the parade that her siblings had in their happiness. "Nothings wrong, Mom, it's Christmas."

Of course now the attention was turned on her as five pairs of eyes zeroed in on her, gazes ranging from curious to worried. Scully squirmed in her seat, reaching for the fruit bowl to occupy herself with, not that she could have swallowed one of the luscious looking berries anyway. How unfair that California could get these berries all year long when she couldn't produce anything…well, no where around where she lived in Washington could produce anything.

She set down the cut, glass bowl with a heavy sigh.

"I tried this last fall to have a baby."

Her words fell out into the silence of her family like a box of tipped-over marbles. They all blinked at her in bemused confusion as they tried to make sense of it. It wasn't any secret to them what had happened to her during her abduction years ago. Perhaps that was why they were so stunned now as they all sat and looked at her as if she had just announced she had grown a second head.

It was Maggie who recovered first. Her mouth worked for a moment before she managed a slightly choked, "Dana…how…"

She sighed. This was going to be far too complicated to explain, but if she didn't they would all think she was delusional. "Two years ago, with Emily, Mulder admitted to me he found a place that had
vials containing my ova, that was taken from me when I was missing. I have had it ever since, just waiting for a good time, I suppose, a time I was ready to give it a try."

Her cheeks burned as she tried not to meet the gazes of Bill, Tara, Charlie, and Ashley. "I've thought about it ever since, about wanting that chance to be a mother. This last summer I finally decided to go through with it."

"And you didn't say anything to any of us about it?" Maggie's hurt wasn't totally unexpected. Still, Scully's conscious stung as she picked absently at the roll on her plate.

"What was I supposed to say, Mom? Really, I didn't know if it would even work! I was running on a hope and a prayer anyway, and if it did, I thought it would be a happy surprise for you all."

It was Bill who finally cut in. "But it didn't, did it?"

"No," she admitted, blinking against tears she had hoped would not creep up. "It didn't."

Sighs of sympathy emanated from both Tara and Ashley, as Charlie rose slowly from his chair and rounded the table to hug his elder sister. As his arms wrapped around her shoulders, she found herself clinging to them, willing herself not to sob all over her kid brother. Just over his shoulder she could see her mother, eyes shiny with maternal heartbreak for her daughter.

"I didn't want to say anything unless it was positive," she snuffled, pulling from Charlie's arms. "I wanted to have good news." She didn't add the part where she had also been unsure what her very Catholic family might have to say about it.

"I hear that," Bill murmured from across the table, compassion and understanding for once from her elder brother. His eyes flickered to Tara in deep understanding. "I think we went through that ourselves a time or two."

Tara nodded with a deep sigh as she glanced once again to little Matthew asleep on the living room floor. "And we can't fault you for keeping it to yourself, Dana."

Her sister-in-laws words were an unexpected balm to Scully's aching heart. She had feared her family would be angry with her for keeping yet another thing like this secret from them. After all, she had hidden so many other things from them, often with devastating consequences. It was a relief not to see judgmental faces or hear angry recriminations. Still, that wasn't to say there wasn't disappointment. An air of wistfulness crossed, fleeting, across her mother's face, so brief, Scully nearly missed it. She knew what it was. For Maggie, it was wonderful that her sons were married and having children, and there was no doubt that Maggie Scully adored her grandson. But there was something different with a daughter, knowing that she would be sharing in the right of passage many women passed through in their lives, knowing that neither of her daughters would ever get that chance was painful to her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Scully offered, her voice watery and heavy with a regret she couldn't really name.

"Dana," Maggie sighed, reaching across the table to grasp her daughter's hand. "I'm not angry. And none of this is your fault. I just...wish you didn't have to go through this at all."

Scully cringed, waiting for Bill to chime in with some angry recrimination against Mulder and his work being the cause of this grief. Instead, he voiced a question that Scully had expected would be coming, but had rather hoped would not.

"So, if you went through the procedure, did you use a donor?"
Well…crap….

"Errr…yes." Whatever remaining tears she had dried up as her face flamed.

"Bill!" Maggie swatted at her eldest son, but he only shrugged, pleased he had at least embarrassed his sister a little.

"I'm just saying, Mom, I know how this works, and who knows what sort of genetics Dana's kid could have ended up with."

A joking comment like that should have hurt. Surprisingly it didn't. "I wasn't silly enough to just go with anyone, Bill."

"Not an anonymous one then?" He raised thoughtful eyes, thinking. When it hit him, he looked as if he'd been slapped in the face. "No!"

By this point Scully was sure her face was brighter than the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree. Charlie frowned, turning his auburn head between his brother and sister, trying to unravel the mystery.

"You seriously didn't…"

"Yes," she said calmly, suddenly very interested now in her lukewarm coffee.

"Do what?" Charlie demanded. He looked to his mother for support, but she only shrugged mildly. Clearly she had come to the same conclusion that Bill had and hardly seem perturbed.

"Mulder?" She couldn't decide if Bill sounded disgusted or amazed that she had chosen Mulder as her sperm donor.

"Why not?"

Charlie blinked, as did Tara and Ashley, slightly confused by the tableau in front of them. "You mean, your partner, Mulder?" Charlie cocked his head, a slow smile forming. "You asked him to do it?"

"Why wouldn't I? He's as good as anyone, and he's a hell of a lot better than some stranger I don't know."

"No one is questioning Fox's character, Dana." Maggie saw a storm brewing and was heading it off at the pass before it could come up as yet another Christmas Day argument. She shot a warning glare at her eldest, who shook his dark head.

"I wasn't starting anything Mom. I never said he wasn't good. Frankly, I'm just shocked he did it."

"Why?" Scully knew she was being a tad unreasonable, pushing her brother like that, but in the wake of her own emotional roller coaster that morning she didn't particularly care.

"Just…well, I don't know, Mulder just seems like a confirmed bachelor to me." Bill for once looked seriously, not condescending, when speaking of Mulder. "A kid, even just donating to make one, it's a big decision, Dana. You go through your entire life knowing that half of you is running around out there in the world. It just says a lot that he was willing to do that for you, because I don't know how I would feel if I was in that situation."

Was Bill actually saying something nice about Mulder? Even her mother and brother looked stunned
by this display of understanding out of the most recalcitrant of the Scullys. Bill only shrugged mildly as he glanced towards his son, then his wife, who only smiled proudly at her husband.

"Look, I know how I felt with Tara going through this, and we were married. I know how the guy feels. That was a big thing you asked of him, Dana, and I'm just saying that it says a lot to me that he was willing to do that for you, and you won't hear me saying many good things about him, but you're right. He's a good man, even if he is still nuttier than the fruit cake that's under my tree at the moment."

Ahh, and there was the insult! And suddenly everything was right with the world again. Laughs sounded from Charlie and Ashley, as Maggie and Tara simply rolled their eyes. As for Scully, she simply shook her head and smiled.

"I won't tell him you said anything nice about him, Bill, don't worry."

"Good, I've got a reputation to keep up." He smiled as he rose, grabbing the coffee pot and rounding the table to his sister, wrapping an arm around her neck and kissing the top of her bright head. "Love you, sis."

"Love you, too." She planted a kiss on his sleeve before he moved off to the kitchen to refill the caffeine on the table.

"Ahh, a Christmas miracle," Charlie quipped. "The first time in years you two haven't fought over your partner."

"Well, you know, 'peace on earth and good will towards men' and all that." Suddenly finding herself hungry for food again, Scully popped a berry into her mouth.

"Finally, a holiday where I don't have to referee between my children, the best Christmas present I could ask for." Maggie intoned dryly. "Now, if I could just convince you all to do the dishes for me after dinner."

"You've already gotten one miracle out of us, Mom, don't ask for the impossible," Charlie snorted.

"One can always have hope," Maggie sighed.

Hope. Right after "trust" that was Mulder's favorite word. Scully smiled as she rolled it over in her mind. He had hope, always did, and even in this he still believed that someday, somehow, she would have her miracle. Scully wasn't so sure that she would. But for the moment, she had the love of her family and Mulder's belief, and that perhaps could get her through even this.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully visits Emily.

The spot where the Sims family was buried was a lovely place. It was nestled into a rolling hillside of San Diego, lush and green and overlooking in the far distance the Pacific Ocean. It hadn't been hard to find the graves again. Their markers were flat in the thick grass, one for each of them; Roberta, the first victim, her death made to look like she'd slit her wrists, Marshall, the second, killed in his jail cell, all because she had suspected foul play, and finally, Emily, the little girl who should never have existed and the only child from her body that Scully would ever know.

She bent carefully over each of the graves. It was clear they had not been attended over the two years since they were laid to rest, no flowers or ribbons or little mementos. She laid simple flowers on the first two; an offering of guilt and apology to a couple that had thought that adoption would be the answer for their lack of children. Had Roberta or Marshall even understood what they were getting into with Emily? Perhaps all they saw was a sickly little girl who would need extra love and attention and thought they would be the perfect family to give her just that. She couldn't resent them for the first three years of Emily's life, they had been good parents to her. They had just not realized the true extent of what they were getting into.

On Emily's grave she paused. Fresh tears welled to her eyes but they stood, shimmering in the late December sunshine as she studied the headstone. She had left it simple, just her name and her date of birth and death. Emily's body had been cremated, the ashes tuck in a coffin far too large for the tiny box she had fit in. There was something of the fairy about the child who had entered her life so suddenly. She laid the white lilies carefully across her daughter's grave.

"Hello, Emily...its mom." She surprisingly didn't choke on the term as she rose. "I'm sorry I haven't been by to see you. I should have, but...I made excuses, I suppose." She shrugged, glancing across the cemetery, the warm, Southern California breeze tugging at the jeans and comfortable shirt she wore.

"It's a nice spot here, at least." She could imagine, had Emily lived, coming here with her to visit the first parents she knew. She could see Emily gravely studying the headstones to Roberta and Marshall before letting loose with the impatience of a five-year-old and running off in the distance, far too pleased with the new toy given to her for Christmas, too young to remember the parents who had died because of what she was. Perhaps, if Scully had been lucky, she could have had a little brother or sister on the way to play with, someone equally as miraculous, a companion in her youthful adventures, a sister who could have kept her secrets or a brother who would pester her and protect her in equal measure. Like she and her siblings, they could have shared the same stories of mishaps committed, of childish pranks and fights, of events they never told their mother but thought they had kept silent, never realizing she suspected all along. They could have had holidays spent with cousins, screaming and yelling in someone's back yard, coming in sunburned and filthy earning despairing eye rolls from her as they trekked mud across pristine floors.

She had imagined Emily and a sibling growing up. Of Emily going to high school, on dates and to proms while the younger sibling grumbled and wondered why they had to wait to grow up and do
those things. Of seeing first one, then the other walking across a strange in cap and gown, through college and the first troubles of life out on ones own. Through a career, through a relationship, a marriage…all those things that Maggie shared with her children, Scully had seen and longed for in children of her own. Things she would now never have and never experience. Emily was dead, nothing more than ash and dust beneath the green sward around her. And as for a sibling, that would never happen now. She could try again, but now that she had some space and time since the failure of the first procedure, Scully doubted she would. The trouble, the anxiety, the pain of loss…it was hard enough the first time. A second time of failure would only cut deeper. And she couldn't keep trying again and again, not with the same, heartbreaking result. At some point she had to cut her losses, had to recognize that there would be no children from her body out there. Not now, not ever.

Tears that had shimmered on the edges finally gave way, tumbling down her cheeks as she blinked down at Emily's grave. Perhaps, if she could ever bring herself to do it one day, she could think of other options. There were those out there for her. But today, for right now, she simply couldn't consider them. The pain was too fresh regarding the possibilities stolen from her by men who used her as their personal science experiment. CGB Spender's face floated to mind, and a part of her very much wished to punch it, to hurt him, to break him in just the same way he had broken her. The idea that he was Mulder's genetic father still seemed so horribly wrong. To equate the man she loved and cared for so much to the monster who had so casually allowed her to be taken and then returning her on nothing more than a whim, broken and half-alive, was galling and cruel in her mind. He had taken so much away from her; her sister, her health and now even her ability to have children. For what? His grand conspiracy? She still didn't even understand what that was all about, the genetic games that he and Bill Mulder played. All she knew was that they had wrought a horrible price, the life of many, including Melissa and Emily.

When her hopes had been high, Scully thought her pregnancy would be the chance to live the quiet life she had longed for, to leave the X-files and all the mystery and heartache behind. She admitted it would be a chance for her to take that step out of the door into a different life. That was not the fate that seemed meant for her, not at the moment. The question of Samantha Mulder's true fate still hung out there somewhere, and Mulder would never rest until he discovered it, and that cigarette-sucking bastard still existed, no matter if his plans had fallen into dust. Perhaps she could remain for now, long enough to seem an end to this, a final end, for her and for Mulder. That way they could both move on with their lives. And she for once could find closure for all of this, for Melissa, for Emily, and for what might have been.

She sighed, looking down at Emily's headstone. Carefully she knelt beside it, placing a kiss on her fingertips before laying it against the sun-warmed, polished granite.

"Mommy loves you, Emily." The words burned in her throat as she said them. "I always will."

She rose amongst the flat headstones and strode across the green grass. The mild warmth of the Southern California sun did nothing to cheer her as she wended towards where her brother's car was parked, wiping at unbidden tears absently as she went.
A Very Merry Christmas

Chapter Summary

In which Scully returns from San Diego to an assignment.

It bothered her that Mulder had remained silent all through the holidays. Scully couldn't tell if it was because he was being respectful of her time with her family or if he was simply giving her space enough to deal with the grief she had been feeling every since her failed IVF effort. Whatever the case, it worried her enough to leave him several messages over the week while she was visiting her brother. He'd been kind enough to at least return one with a curt message telling her all was well and that he was having a quiet holiday at home. She had a feeling that meant one of Mulder's infamous Christmas traditions with a bottle of Scotch and egg nog, watching *A Christmas Carol* on repeat. Perhaps that was why she was so surprised to see the light of her answering machine blinking when she walked into her musty smelling apartment, glowing in the pre-dawn darkness. She set her bag down by the door and immediately clicked the play button, knowing instinctively who it was. Mulder's voice sounded cheerful enough through her apartment as she grabbed her bag, already calculating what she would need to pack and repack again.

"Hey, Scully, it's me. Hope your trip home is safe. As soon as you get this, call me, we have a case in Tallahassee. Skinner wants us on it personally. Hope you are ready for some more winter sunshine!"

Scully glanced out at the sleety drizzle outside of her apartment window and welcomed the return to a warm climate. She scooped up the phone on her way towards her bedroom, hitting Mulder's number on speed dial. The phone rang twice before Mulder's voice sounded on the other end.

"I just walked in my door. What's up?"

"Merry Christmas! How was your flight from sunny, SoCal?"

"Fine, I got in last night and stayed in Baltimore with Mom. Why didn't you call me there?"

"Didn't want to interrupt." It wasn't the whole truth, she suspected, but enough of it she wasn't willing to argue. "So we have a case in Florida."

"So you said. Tallahassee?"

"One of our own, former FBI agent who shot and killed himself three weeks ago."

Three weeks ago? And now it was a case? "So it was a suicide. Not unheard of from the ranks of former FBI."

"That's not the weird part."

Scully had a sad, sinking feeling she knew what the weird part was.

"Sometime last night the agent's grave was desecrated, the lid torn off the hinges, the body missing."

"His body missing?" She thought of Emily's grave and shivered. "Someone stole it?"
"Some might say that."

He was going to go there after all. "Don't tell me you think it was a zombie."

"I am open to all sorts of possibilities, Scully. No one is sure what is going on here. All we know is that a retired agent took his life. His widow still can't explain it. He left no note explaining why he did it, and now, two days before the turn of a new millennium, his grave is vandalized and his body taken."

Scully blinked mildly, frowning at the clock by her bed. It was almost a new millennium. She of course knew that, who hadn't heard about Y2K? The way the media and certain parts of the FBI acted the sky would fall at the stroke of midnight in a days time. Amazingly, Mulder wasn't one of those who bought into the Y2K madness. That wasn't to say there wasn't some other whole turn-of-the-century craziness he wasn't espousing.

"So what do you think it was?"

"Could be an apocalyptic cult. Could be a bunch of teenagers who have too much time on their hands. Won't know till I see things for myself."

"Are you in Florida yet?"

"Yeah, got in to town, if you catch a flight to Atlanta there's a regular shuttle to the local, regional airport, takes you about an hour."

Scully noted that as she went to her closet in search of a suit to change into from her comfortable jeans. "What are the local saying?"

"Not much. The only reason they called the FBI in was because it was one of our own, and then only because the widow threw such a fit. I don't blame her. If this is desecration we are looking at she's not the only one who will be up in arms."

"What a way to start a new century," she sighed. "Okay, give me some time to get myself together and I'll meet you down there as soon as I can get a flight to Atlanta."

"Sure!" He paused. "How was the family?"

She knew what he wasn't asking. He wanted to know if she had told them about the IVF. "They were fine. They were…supportive."

"Good…that's good." Uncharacteristic nerves underscored his response. "Everything else okay?"

"Fine," she responded, though underneath it all she knew it wasn't. It likely wouldn't be for a long time. There a part of her that wanted to confess that and cry all over her partner's shoulder, but she had done enough of that for a while and it felt good to focus on a case for once.

"Think you can get a medical history of our victim, including whatever psychological records we have on him from the FBI? I am curious as to why he may have killed himself, see if that leads us anywhere."

"Already on it," Mulder replied, clearly already thinking the same way she was. "I also am seeing if the locals have anything on any pranks involving cemeteries of late, any strange behavior in the wake of the New Year."

"Why does the change of a calendar date bring all the crazies out?" Scully could never understand
"The crazies are always there, Scully, but it's the New Year. Who doesn't need an excuse to party?"

"If my year 2000 is anything like my year 1999, I'd rather just forget it and go to bed."

That earned a soft chuff at the other end of the line. "Something tells me it won't be as bad as you think."

"What, Fox Mulder the optimist?"

"I have my moments. See you down here then?"

"Right," she confirmed. With a muttered goodbye, she hung up, tossing the phone on the bed as she began to strip her t-shirt and jeans off in favor of her professional suit. Back to the grind and so soon, clearly there was no rest for the wicked, and thus there would be no rest for her either. For her part, she really hoped this was just a bunch of millennium freaks that pulled a prank and nothing worse.
In which Scully considers drunken choices.

The Millennium Group, so this was why Skinner had called them in on the matter?

"What do you know about them?" Scully studied the file Skinner had passed to them as they walked back from their superior's office.

"Mostly hearsay and speculation, which you and I know is as good as God's own truth around the FBI rumor mill." Mulder smirked as he punched the elevator button with a knuckle. "They were rumored to be a cult more than anything, fixated on apocalyptic visions of the end of the world, anything more than that is speculation. I've heard of the them mostly as myth and rumor."

"I'm surprised you didn't chase after them." The doors opened and Scully followed Mulder inside.

"Some other myths and rumors were much more interesting to me than a bunch of religious nuts hastening the end of the world."

"No, just a bunch of shady conspirators chasing after the end of the world." Her pointed look wasn't lost on him and he shrugged, grinning.

"The truth is I couldn't ever get a beat on the Millennium Group. I did try to poke under rocks about them. There are traces of them through the X–files. Hell, I heard about them before I ever heard of an X-file. They were sort of the boogey man that everyone had heard of but no one seriously thought existed."

"You thought it was crap?" That was shocking. Somehow, Scully had just assumed he would believe it like everything else.

"I don't believe everything totally wholesale, you know." He sounded understandably nettled. The elevator settled on their floor and the doors opened. "Besides, I have a healthy skepticism for religion, you know that. The Millennium Group sounded like nothing more than a few retired, FBI agents with too much time on their hands, trying to do something worthwhile with their lives."

"That doesn't seem to be what Skinner was intimating." Scully settled into step beside him as she closed the file. "From what he has here, there isn't anything conclusive, but there are shady rumors, suspicions."

"Just like there are shady rumors about us," Mulder paused at the door, waggling a suggestive eyebrow. "Just what does go on behind that locked door in the basement?"

She rolled her eyes. For as long as she had worked with Mulder there had been speculation, none of it even close to being fulfilled. "Difference between us and this Millennium Group, Mulder, is we aren't accused of illegal activities."

"Well, I don't know, there was Dallas and all," He loped behind his desk, taking off his suit coat and tossing it over the back of his chair. Scully followed suit, taking up residence at her desk, flipping
open the folder again, curious at this mysterious group that seemed to have eluded even her notice all these years in the FBI.

"So if they're into all this 'end of the world' business, what's with the necromancy?" She flipped open the file again, leafing through pages.

Mulder answered by digging through a stack of impossibly tall papers behind his desk. Scully had eyed the pile from time-to-time since they had taken the space back over from Diana Fowley and Jeffrey Spender, but had been too afraid of it to do anything about it. To her surprise, Mulder produced a thick stack of stapled copies, glanced it over with a satisfied nod, and tossed it on her desk. She leaned across the space to snag it.

"Necromancy is the ancient, alchemical art of death magic. It's not just about bringing back the dead, it's also about harnessing the spirits of the dead, of using their energies and passions to fuel magical power."

"So we aren't talking voodoo here?" Scully couldn't believe she said that with a straight face. She flipped through the pages, glancing through paragraphs till she stopped on a picture, a copy of a medieval woodcarving that looked eerily similar to their crime scene.

"Yes and no,' Mulder continued, flopping into his chair. "While voodoo has its roots in West African traditions and ancient spirit worship, necromancy seeks to use spirits as a tool by which to fuel or focus magic. Likely our grave robber thinks he's bonding Raymond Crouch's spirit to do something."

"Like bringing about the end of the world?" Scully couldn't help the arched eyebrow and dripping sarcasm. Mulder only smiled and shrugged.

"Sure beats the hell out of computer viruses and satellites falling out of the sky, doesn't it?"

"I suppose." She sighed, glancing at the scattered paperwork on her desk. Her eyes fell on the symbol Skinner showed them earlier. It was a symbol she was painfully familiar with, especially whenever she turned just right in the mirror. Her lower back itched at the memory and she rubbed at it absently.

"The ouroborus, you said it represents all of existence?"

"In a manner of speaking. Alchemists believed it did. It really represents a cycle, the way that existence is always coming back in on itself. For the alchemist, it represents how their work always comes back in on itself."

"The circle of life?" Scully's nails itched at the skin just under her suit coat.

Mulder snorted. "If we want to use Disney analogies, sure." His sharp eyes flickered to her right arm where it moved behind her back. "I always thought it was interesting that was the tattoo you got."

Her fingers flew away from her back and onto her lap as her head snapped over to glare at him. "How do you know that?"

He didn't even bat an eye. "Scully, it's not like I haven't seen you unclothed in the last year."

Oh…yes…well…there was that unfortunate business at the CDC with Diana Fowley.

"Right." Her jaw snapped hard against the heat in her cheeks. "I don't know why I got it really. I think at the time it sort of represented where I was at in life."
"Contemplating the cyclical nature of existence?"

"No…trapped." She blinked down at the page recalling a drunken night long ago when she had been angry with Mulder and wanted to do anything to escape his authority in her life. She had thought she was doing something new and daring, hooking up with a practical stranger. It turned out he was also homicidal. Far from freeing herself, the tattoo underscored how Scully had simply repeated the cycle of her own self-destruction that night. She ran from an authority figure into a dangerous situation. This time it hadn't been smoking in the backyard or running out to the woods to make out with Marcus. It had been something that had nearly gotten her killed, and it seriously damaged her relationship with Mulder at a point where she could ill afford it. Ironically, if not for her illness shortly after, she couldn't tell what other destruction the two of them would have reeked on one another.

"Do you feel trapped now?" It was Mulder's question, called from across the room. She could hear the worry underneath it, the self-conscious fear that she would believe she was and blame him for it. Mulder, who carried the guilt of her many wounds with him, he often tipped between letting her go for her own protection and keeping her there because he couldn't seem to work without her. Likewise, she couldn't make up her mind about wanting to stay and see this work through and wanting to leave for a better life. It was the cyclical nature of their relationship and had been since the beginning, but even cycles must come to their end, or at least end up back at the beginning. What sort of end would the two of them have - or beginning?

"No, I don't feel trapped," she responded, finally meeting his questioning eyes. "Just wishing I hadn't been so stupid in my past."

Mulder's shoulder's relaxed ever so slightly. "Don't we all? I certainly have moments like that myself."

"You didn't get an embarrassing tattoo!"

"True, but I got a rash in an embarrassing spot. That's what I get for desecrating graves of famous, British authors."

Her eye roll nearly gave her a headache. "Well, I will take an embarrassing rash from a gravestone than an ugly tattoo any day."

"I don't know, Scully. I think your tattoo is rather cute."

Cute? She glared at him. "I don't think that was the look I was going for."

Mulder hardly looked sorry. "I don't know if you wanted bad ass, you might have gotten some flames or a skull and crossbones or something."

Skull and crossbones? "I'm not discussing this any more with you."

"Maybe something written in Gothic script?"

He wasn't helping his case.

"You know what, Mulder, if the world ends in some Millennium Group, Y2K apocalypse, I hope a satellite falls on your head."

"You take the fun out of everything, Scully." He laughed at her, clearly pleased in himself that he had at least accomplished one mission, to annoy her into something else other than brooding, just like he normally did when he sensed she was becoming to bogged down in her own circular thoughts.
Perhaps some cycles were not so bad.
A Raging Fanboy

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is a fanboy.

Nothing hurt worse than having your fanboy crush burst your bubble. Scully empathized with the crestfallen Mulder as they made their way out of the Hartwell Psychiatric Hospital, his jaw working hard against the disappointment she knew he felt.

"So much for your hero, eh?" She tried to be gentle. In the many years she had known Mulder she had rarely heard him speak with awe about anyone who wasn't a baseball player. Frank Black's dismissiveness cut him, whether he wanted to admit it or not. The man had obviously been something of a hero to Mulder.

Mulder's long strides ate up the tile floor towards the door. "He obviously has no interest in helping us."

"Interest? He out right ignored us! He paid more attention to the football game." Not unfamiliar behavior from the men folk in her life, but it nettled Scully all the same that Black did it.

"Not that close attention, he didn't know that Notre Dame was on a third and long." Mulder's hand punched at the long, metal handle across the door out of the hospital, allowing it to swing open. "He was paying attention, he just chose to ignore our questions."

"Why?" That was the part that had confounded Scully.

"Because whatever the Millennium Group was, he is scared of it." Mulder's long, wool overcoat flapped in the cold, Virginia air. "Because he knows what is happening and doesn't want a part of it."

"If he had experience with the Millennium Group, then you would think he would want to out it before something bad happens."

"What if it already has?" Mulder stopped mid stride, turning to face her. His frown flickered back to the cold, gray building, chilly and institutional in the Mid-Atlantic winter. "Think about it, he checked himself into a thirty day stint in this place. He's retired. Something had to have happened to him."

"What? Who was this Frank Black, and why would he hold out on us?"

Mulder sucked in his bottom lip, chewing it thoughtfully while stuffing his hands in his pockets as a cold breeze whipped by. "Frank Black was everything I said he was. He was a legend before I even came on board. Bill Patterson used to hold him up as some genius, and from everything I could tell, he was. Like I said, the greatest criminal profiler that ever came out of Quantico."

A descriptive she had heard used to describe someone else. "You mean, outside of you."

Mulder shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the comparison. "I don't know, likely better than me. He had this talent, he could put himself in the criminals mind. Patterson used to say that he could
imagine himself as the killer. It's why Patterson loved him so much, he was completely by Patterson's book."

"And I thought you disagreed on Patterson on that way of profiling." Scully well remembered that was part of the reason that Patterson and Mulder had their falling out, even if Patterson praised Mulder behind his back.

"We disagreed because it wasn't how I operated, it wasn't me. I feared what that sort of thinking could do. Case in point, look at what happened to Patterson."

Scully couldn't disagree with that. She shivered slightly in the cold, remembering all too well the parable of Bill Patterson and what had become of him when he lost himself in trying to profile a criminal. He had become the monster himself.

"What made Black different was that he didn't have that problem. He could step into the mind of the killer, could nearly become him, but he could always step away. He never lost himself in that mind. He never forgot who he was, that he was Frank Black. That was what made him so...amazing."

"What if it started getting to him, though? Face it, Mulder, the man just checked himself into an asylum, voluntarily." She wasn't so sure Mulder at times shouldn't be in one.

Mulder shrugged, turning sadly to glance up at one of the windows into the building. "I don't know, maybe something happened to him once he left. He was gone by the time I was in on the unit and he had retired completely before I even took the X-files. Something could have occurred."

"Possibly with the Millennium Group?" For all of his seeming ambivalence, she had noticed the look in his eye when she had passed him the pictures. "He admitted to knowing the men who killed themselves, Mulder, but it was more than that. He knows what the Millennium Group is up to."

"I noticed that." Mulder looked thoughtful for a long moment. "Look, the Millennium Group has been little more than an FBI spook story. But just like the X-files, there's often a kernel of truth in every tall tale. Obviously there's enough of one here that it makes the FBI higher ups nervous. What if Black found out the truth about the Millennium Group? What if he discovered what they were really trying to do, and he got caught up in it, only something happened, something that pushed him over the edge?"

"You said it yourself, what made him amazing was that he got into the killer's heads. What if he got into these people's heads and found something he didn't like." Scully wondered what that could be. Frankly, if it involved raising the dead and necromantic magic's, she likely didn't want to know.

"Which would explain his surly attitude right now. He doesn't want to discuss it because he is afraid of going there, afraid because he knows how they think and what they have done." Mulder dug in his pocket for his car keys. "And if that's the case, I need to know exactly what our perpetrator is up to."

"How? Black gave us nothing on the group."

"I'm not without resources of my own, and at its heart the Millennium Group is an apocalyptic, whack job cloaked in Judeo-Christian ideas of the end of the world." He glanced casually at his watch. "We have two days till that's supposed to be happening, so I suggest we hop to it and see if I can throw on my profiler cap."

"What in the world are they even plotting?" They still knew next to nothing on this group.

"I don't know, Scully, it's the end of the world," Mulder mused speculatively, leading the way to his
car. "Could be anything, rain of frogs, a cloud that brings plague…oooh, a zombie apocalypse would be interesting."

"Maybe to you," she snorted, marveling about Mulder's ideas of what an interesting end of the world might be. "I would just settle for them being a bunch of crazies digging up graves that don't amount to much and leave it at that."

"How many times in all of our cases has it ever been that simple, Scully?"

She had to admit, he was right. It was never that simple.
In which Frank Black sizes up Fox Mulder.

Well, Mulder got his zombie apocalypse, though Scully for one thought it was far from interesting. “Hold still,” she muttered at her partner as the ambulance pulled up. Frank Black sat nearby, winded and bruised, but looking relatively unharmed despite his near brush with death-by-zombie. Mulder, on the other hand, was a mess. Bite marks covered his neck, right shoulder and arm, which he favored and held close to ruined shirt.

"I'm fine, Scully, nothing more than a few scratches, and ahhhh..." He hissed as she tried to gently move his arm. She grimaced back at him.

"You have a nasty sprain there, Mulder, though I don't think you dislocated it, you shouldn't move your arm for a while."

"I wouldn't have if you hadn't poked it," he grumbled as the paramedics came up to them. "And I suppose you'll make me go with them."

A long veteran of Mulder's petulance in regards to all things medical, Scully only nodded firmly. "The bite marks alone will need to be looked at, and you'll need shots for them to prevent infection."

"I never had this much trouble with hickies," he groused, earning the bemusement of the paramedics and a soft chuckle from Frank Black.

"I have to wonder what sort of women you date, Mulder," Black called from his sitting position, watching the proceeding with dry humor.

"You don't want to know." Scully sighed, shaking her head and leaving Mulder to the tender ministrations of the emergency staff. She wandered to Black sitting on the front step of Johnson's home. In the distance she observed the sheriff's deputies handling Johnson, carefully leading the bemused suspect to the back of one of their cars. He looked forlornly at Black as he allowed them to gently push his head down and guide him inside of the vehicle.

Black watched, guiltily ducking his head from Johnson's sorrowful gaze. "They will take him to seventy-two hour and I'm going to ask they put him on suicide watch. He isn't going to take any of this well."

"You foiled his plan."

He nodded simply.

Scully settled on the concrete step beside him, waiting for the tell tale sounds of the county sheriff sirens in the distance. "That wasn't a profile you handed us, was it? When you told us who to look for?"

Black's worn, long-suffering face regarded her for long, quiet moments. He smiled sadly, the many
lines drawing deeper as he sighed. "Johnson had been calling me for weeks."

"Because of your involvement with the Millennium Group?"

"I was never involved." His graying head shook. "No, they were...a very serious complication in my life for a very long time. I thought I could learn their secrets and I became obsessed with it."

"Did you ever believe them?"

"I don't know." His answer was honest. "I know I wanted to try and stop them."

She couldn't help it. Scully turned to regard her partner as he was being checked over by emergency services. Black's story sounded very much like Mulder's and she suddenly found herself feeling very sad indeed for the man beside her.

"You know, you two are far too much alike." She smiled, glancing sideways at Black's lean profile.

"Mulder?" He frowned, regarding the other man in surprise.

"Yeah!" Her laughter was part amusement, part grief as she eyed the man she had followed to hell and back all of these years. "You have no idea."

Black followed her gaze, watching the still complaining Mulder with a hint of bemusement and perhaps familiarity.

"It's hard to remember I was ever as idealistic as he is. Perhaps I never was."

Scully had a hard time believing anyone was ever as idealistic as Mulder was. "He said you were the best profiler that Quantico ever produced."

Black barked at that, a coughing laugh that growled in his chest. "Did he say that?"

Scully shrugged. "He doesn't give compliments like that lightly."

"I don't imagine he does."

As if sensing the tone of their conversation, Mulder's piercing voice called out over the cold, clear air. "Scully, are you going to seriously let them take me in for this?"

She had expected him to start complaining well before now.

"Yes," she called back, rising off the porch to march over to her glowering partner. She was hardly moved by his three-year-old petulance. "Those are human bite marks and God knows what you could be carrying because of it."

"I've had worse," he grumbled loudly, as if trying to prove a point to the paramedics, who hardly seem to be listening.

"And I've made you go to the hospital then, haven't I?" She glanced at Frank Black, who finally sauntered up to them, hands in pockets. His expression was sober, even if the look in his eye wasn't.

"You should listen to your partner, Mulder. You're lucky you have her."

Mulder at least seemed to grant that to the other man. "That I am."

"So does that mean you'll do as I ask," she insisted.
Mulder shot the paramedics a dark glare over his shoulder. "Guess I don't have a choice."

"Good!"

Behind them the sheriff's vehicles drove around them. All three of them paused to watch the shaded windows go by.

"Do you think he would have actually brought on the end of the world?" Mulder wondered aloud.

Scully wanted to dismiss him, but Black was much more circumspect.

"He thought he was, and that was what was important to him. He thought he was doing God's work."

With zombies? Scully couldn't deny that part of the story and she didn't know how she was supposed to even begin explaining that. "We would have never stopped Johnson without you."

"I don't know." Black shrugged, watching Mulder. "He likely would have come to the same conclusions I did."

"Not in the same time you did," Mulder replied. "You came to it faster. I'd have been at it for days and by then who knows what he could have caused."

Mulder didn't know what Scully did, that Black had always known who their suspect was, but it wasn't her place to tell him that. As for Black, he merely sighed, squinting briefly into the distant woods that surrounded Johnson's house.

"You know, I heard a lot about you coming out of the Academy, Mulder." Black nodded in that vague way that most people had when discussing Mulder's glory days. "That Props monograph was some of the most amazing stuff anyone had seen in a while."

"Still, I wasn't as good as they said you were."

"No, you weren't as good as I was," Black agreed. "You were better."

If Black's ambivalence when they first met him had upset and hurt Mulder, his praise took him clearly by surprise. It certainly did Scully, who turned wide eyes to the craggy, worn man beside her. He seemed hardly perturbed by either her or Mulder's shock.

"I heard what happened to Bill Patterson. They said you were the one to figure it all out."

"Yeah." The fall of his former boss and somewhat mentor was not something that Mulder was exactly comfortable with discussing.

"It was a damn shame." Black heaved a deep, dark sigh that seemed to speak to a wealth of understanding. "I worked with Patterson when I first got out of the Academy. He was a damn good profiler. Wrote the book on it. Taught me a lot."

"Yes sir." Mulder wasn't about to dispute that, even if Scully saw him itching to. Clearly Black could see it too.

"Doesn't mean Patterson wasn't a horse's ass when he wanted to be." He coughed another laugh, a rare, broad smile cracking his face. Mulder's smile spread to match, and he chuckled as he nodded in agreement.

"Patterson's biggest problem was that he thought his way was the only way, the best way. It's why
he liked me so much. I had a talent for thinking like the killers did, to see things how they saw them, to almost become them." Black's gaze darkened, his smile faltering. "The problem with that, and I think you know this well, is that it's hard to separate yourself from who you are as a person and who the killer is. Sometimes you go in so deep, you almost forget to come back out again. You forget who you are, and you forget about those who are most important to you."

His words carried in the cold air, hitting both Scully and Mulder as they both studied him soberly. Scully only knew a little, about his dead wife, the conflict with his in-laws, and the potential loss of his daughter, all of which seemed to center on his work regarding the Millennium Group. That was why he had checked himself into psychiatric care, but she hadn't really understood how he got there, how his work had led him to this point.

"You have a capability none of the rest of us in Patterson's unit ever had." Black sounded almost envious now. "You could do what I did without ever once having to lose yourself. You could keep yourself apart. You could see what they did, what they were going to do, your mind was flexible enough and open enough to see those things without ever losing who you are. Patterson couldn't and it cost him. I couldn't and it's nearly cost me."

That admission of weakness on Black's part didn't surprise Scully, not after what he told her earlier, but for Mulder it was a much harder pill to swallow.

"How in the world am I any better?" He snorted, disbelief evident as he shook his dark head. "I threw my career away to chase after conspiracies. There isn't a folk tale, legend, or supernatural creature I haven't investigated, all in the hope of finding out the truth about my sister, who disappeared decades ago. If I was so much better than you, Frank Black, than why am I the one sitting here covered in zombie bites, screaming to a deaf world that the sky is falling?"

From where Mulder sat, and admittedly Scully too, the similarities were all too obvious. Two men who were brilliant at what they did who got lost in the mysteries that they both were obsessed with. Both had devoted everything to them and both had lost nearly everything because of them.

"You are better." Black insisted softly. "You have the one thing I didn't have. You have the courage to speak to your convictions. You don't fear doing what is right. You say you are screaming to the deaf that the sky is falling, but at least you are trying. You aren't hiding away in a psych ward, hoping that somehow people will forget."

What had the Millennium Group been up to, Scully wondered quietly as she watched the interplay between the two men. What was it that had captivated Black so much and had wounded him so badly? As curious as she was about that, she was equally just as glad she didn't know. She and Mulder had enough mysteries in their lives without adding one so dark and painful it had driven Frank Black out of the FBI and nearly out of his mind.

"I nearly gave up everything for my work." The words sounded heavy, as if they cost Black a lot to say them. "My wife died because of my work. My daughter lost her mother. She's nearly lost me. The best things I've had in my life ever were those two. I can't get back what I've lost."

Carefully, the tall man leaned down to make himself level to Mulder's sitting form. His dark eyes shined as he met her partner's steady gaze. "Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't sacrifice personal happiness or what is important for your need to know the truth. Don't sacrifice those who love you or that you love because of your obsessions."

Before Mulder could make a reply he stood again and gave Scully a hard, pointed look.

"Ma'am, we're ready to transport him." One of the paramedics, a big, burly man with a beard that
frankly frightened Scully cut into their conversation, clipboard in hand. "Do you want to travel with him?"

"He's not dying, so no." She declined, earning a dirty look from Mulder. "I will ride over in my own car." She nodded towards Black. "You should go get checked out too, just for precautions sake."

He looked ready to say something, but thought better of it. "I can drive myself."

"So we'll meet you at the hospital?" The paramedic was already gently helping Mulder, stiff and yelping, to his feet.

"Yeah." She eyed Mulder's favored arm. "You won't give them too much trouble till I get there, right?"

"Oh, only the usual amount of Mulder charm."

Scully only sighed patiently and shook her head by way of response. She watched in silence as they helped Mulder step into the back of the emergency vehicle. Black stood quietly beside her.

"Thank you," she murmured as they closed the doors on Mulder and rounded to the front of the vehicle. "For what you said. He needed to hear it."

"I know. And he may get it soon."

Somehow Scully doubted that.

"Besides, I would hate to see someone as brilliant as he is make the same dumbass mistakes I did." His gloominess seemed to lift slightly. "So can I at least drive myself to the hospital?"

"As long as I see you there and trust you to get checked out."

"Well, far be it from me to cross a lovely lady who saved my life today fighting off zombies."

He was teasing her. That took her by surprise. "You've impressed me this far, Mr. Black. I trust you won't let me down."

He only smiled as he nodded and made his way to his own car. Scully watched him till he made it in before reaching for her own car keys. One zombie apocalypse averted, he partner did not die from it, and a man she had not initially been impressed with managed to show her more integrity than she thought was possible. Nothing else today could possibly get better than that.
The End of the World

Chapter Summary

In which the world doesn't end for Scully.

She had thought nothing else could improve upon her day. How wrong had she been?

Scully watched the retreating figures of Frank Black and his daughter Jordan, as on the television over her head someone turned the sound up. Dick Clark's familiar voice excitedly called out the time remaining in the 20th century. Thirty seconds till the end of the world, or the start of a new one. It was the circular nature of time, the snake eating itself. And while she didn't think that satellites were preparing to fall out of the sky any minute, and clearly she and Mulder had just stopped the zombie apocalypse, in a few seconds the world would be different. They would be in not just a new century but also a new millennium. In the thousand years since the Middle Ages the entire world had changed from small villages and horse drawn carriages to giant cities and high-speed, horseless transport. What would the next thousand years bring them?

On the screen above her shots of New York City and Times Square, filled the scene, smiling people, couples with eyes glued to the giant, electronic light board counting down the minutes, waiting for that moment when they would happily kiss in the New Year. Scully couldn't help but envy them. When was the last time she had someone to kiss at midnight on New Years Eve? Ethan? He was the last person she had any long-term relationship with. That had been seven years ago. Seven years was a long time to be alone. A new year, a new century, a new millennium, a time for changes. Did she really have to be alone anymore?

High above Time Square in New York, the giant, glowing ball of light raised high over the frigid, winter, midnight sky, sinking slowly down. Just as it reached it's bottom the light board beneath exploded in color as "Happy New Year" raced across it. The crowd below let off a deafening cheer as the sky was filled in a veritable blizzard of confetti paper, metallic and glittering in the bright lights of Time Square. The familiar tune of Bobby Burns "Auld Lang Syne" played as people hugged, danced, laughed, and kissed. The world became one, giant celebration. She turned to Mulder, the wish of "Happy New Year" on her lips, soon to be followed with a friendly hug and an admonishment to go home.

Instead he swooped in, pressing his mouth to hers, and time in that very moment stopped.

Her world froze to a moment of perfect clarity, where everything was razor sharp and keenly bright in her mind; the feel of Mulder's lips against hers, soft and warm. There was no demand, no hunger, nor desire, just a gentle caress as she eased against it. He hadn't shaved since the morning, and there was a slight rasp against her skin, and he smelled vaguely of antiseptic and dirt, but underneath it all was the familiar scent that spoke of safety after near death experiences, of bored moments lying on too small beds in beat up hotels, of leaning in close while cramped together in some other airplane going to some other case. She could have happily died in this moment, allowed the world to go to hell in some technological failure or zombie fueled disaster, if she could simply be there and hold on to this one moment for all of eternity.

The second hand ticked once, twice, three times, and before she could really respond he had moved away, his warmth fleeing her in the sterile, hospital waiting room. She stood, swaying, finding
herself suddenly bereft. Her heart seemed to stutter to life again as her eyelids fluttered open.

What had just happened?

She knew there was a bemused smile on her face, a shy look that struggled to meet the equally shy and bemused expression on Mulder's face. She found her smile widening.

"The world didn't end!" Mulder's eyes flickered around, dancing as they lit on her.

Perhaps that was true for him. The sky hadn't fallen, the world hadn't exploded, and no aliens were taking over the planet, but for Scully the entire world had just come crashing on her head. With one, simple, relatively friendly and innocent kiss, everything she had known about the most stable relationship she had in her life was now ended.

"No," she agreed, somewhat sad and wistful. "It didn't."

Mulder had just kissed her, not in the way of a man desperately in love with her, as Diana Fowley would have suggested. There was nothing passionate, or hungry, or lustful in that kiss. It was sweet and simple, chaste even, a simple expression of the desire to be close and to share a moment as unique as this one was.

What in the hell did it all mean?

"Happy New Year, Scully."

A new year, a new millennium, and a new, uncharted territory in her relationship with this man. "Happy New Year, Mulder."

With a grin he slung his good arm around her shoulder, wrapping her tightly against him as they walked side-by-side out of the waiting room doors. Outside, the air was crisp cold, the stars twinkled distantly in the January sky, and in the distance Scully thought she could hear some raucous party, revelers still cheering in the coming of a new time for all of them.

She thought of her tattoo, the ouroboros. It was an end and a beginning.

"So, Scully." Mulder paused at the parking lot, turning to look around the scant cars there, finding hers parked nearby. "We seem to have a bit of a dilemma."

She figured he would get to that. "Yes, your car is still at Johnson's house."

"And how do I get it?" He sounded quiet dismayed by this.

"Mulder, you're in no shape to drive."

"I've got one working arm!" As if to emphasis he hugged her closer to his warm body. Scully fought the desire to snuggle into him.

"Yes, and you technically need two to drive, and besides, I know they put you on pain meds. No driving for you."

"No fair! You cheated and looked at my chart."

"Always do, Mulder, that's why they pay me the big bucks." With fingers chilled with cold, she dug into her overcoat pocket, finding her keys. "How about for tonight, I drive you home. I'll make sure you are safe and sound and no zombies will come for second helpings, and then when the drugs wear of in the morning, you call me and I can drive you out for your vehicle."
He considered that, looked ready to argue for a moment, but gave in. "I don't need you to check under my bed."

"No, but you do need a friend to make sure you get home safe." Slowly, she led him to her car, relishing the feel of his arm around her and loathe for it to go away. "Besides, I have no plans for tomorrow outside of watching the Rose Parade. If you want, I can come over early, bring some breakfast, we can make fun of floats and bands, then run to get your car and be home before kick off of the Rose Bowl to whatever bowl game you want to watch."

That seemed to intrigue him. "French toast?"

"Want me to buy or cook them?"

Dark eyebrows knitted over this conundrum. "You can make them?"

"I can cook, Mulder, yes. Do you have a pan that isn't used to make soup?"

"I think so. Honestly, I haven't used a pan in my kitchen in years."

That she could believe. "I'll cook. And we can celebrate the holiday together."

"I think I would like that." He stopped at her car, smiling as he unwrapped himself from around her shoulders. She shivered slightly in the cold as he moved to the passenger's side. She took her place at the driver's, opening the car and climbing in as he maneuvered more carefully beside her. He yawned as he settled in and she started the car.

"I hope this is a good year for us, Scully," he muttered sleepily beside her, his head lolling slightly as she backed the car out slowly.

"I hope so too." She smiled as she turned the car towards his home. Whatever this new age would bring for them, whatever that kiss brought, she hoped it was good, for both of them.
Dinner and a Movie

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder just hang out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dinner was home made vegetable lasagna with roasted portabello mushrooms mixed into the ricotta cheese. The movie was a compromise, *Star Wars*. The evening was an oddity in the long partnership Scully had with Mulder. There had been many evenings where dinners were shared over piles of paperwork. There had been the occasional, bad, B horror films together in a hotel room, Mulder stretched across the entire length of the small, cardboard bed while Scully attempted to find comfort in one of the creaking, musty smelling chairs. These events were more often than not the side effects of whatever case they happened to be on.

It had taken her by surprise that first Friday night in January when, after a long week of filing and pretending that the kiss on New Years had never happened, Mulder looked at her with curiosity and said, "What are you doing tonight?"

Scully had barely looked up from the medical journal she had been perusing, eyes bleary behind her glasses. "I don't know, mindless television, maybe call it a night early."

"Sounds boring," he sighed dramatically.

"I'm a boring person, Mulder." To be honest it sounded heavenly to her. Sleep had not been as forthcoming with the memory of Mulder's lips pressed against hers just days ago.

He was silent for several long beats as she continued to let her eyes scan through a case regarding a rare brain condition cropping up amongst perfectly healthy, young adults. She thought he had dropped the subject, until he cleared his throat, nervousness in the rasp.

"How about I come over tonight? We have some pizza, maybe a movie?"

That caught her attention. Her eyes flicked up over the edge of the journal, glancing at his shy expression behind his desk. "You want to come over just to hang out?"

"Sure! I've done it before! Haven't I?"

The doubt on his part wasn't feigned. In six-and-a-half years she was sure he might have, maybe, not that Scully could remember well. Well, she could not remember a moment when it was Mulder as Mulder. Someone else wearing his face, sure, but not him at her apartment just...there.

"I'm just surprised is all." Usually when the mindless hanging out occurred it always seemed to be at his house. "I mean…sure, I'd love it."

Mulder was coming over her house and it wasn't for work. It wasn't to pick her up for a case. It wasn't to make sure she was alive, and it wasn't to save her from something trying to kill her. The oddity of him just coming to "hang out" made her rush quickly through her mental catalog of her
home. It was in a state for him to come over, right? Who was she kidding? It was so meticulous, it hurt to be there! She didn't even leave her bras over the chairs.

"So, pizza okay?" Mulder was twiddling a pencil between long fingers, a dark eyebrow arched speculatively. Scully could almost groan. Mulder had only one sort of food group, and that was junk food.

"How about I make lasagna?"

"You cook?" He was only half-joking. She glared at him.

"Unlike some people, I don't live off my mother's cooking."

"You're mother is a damn good cook."

Scully rolled her eyes, slipping off her glasses. "I made some lasagna a month ago, I have the rest in the freezer. I can bake that, make a salad, we can have a home cooked meal for once."

That seemed intriguing to Mulder, the idea of food not made in a fryer. "I can bring a bottle of wine."

That was an unusual call for Mulder. "Wine? Not beer?"

"I can be a man of refined taste."

"I know! Sometimes I see you drink a Belgian beer."

He merely made a face at her. She laughed.

"So, how about this," he muttered despite her smirk. "We head out now, you go fire up the oven or whatever you do, I'll buy the vino, and I'll meet you at your place say...7:30?"

She couldn't believe she was even agreeing to this. "Sure, why not?"

So it was that she was sitting on her couch with Mulder on a Friday night, the remains of their lasagna dinner littering her coffee table as Luke confronted Han about his decision to take the money and run. The bottle of wine was long demolished and a second bottle started, and all but one piece of the lasagna had been consumed, mostly by Mulder. He now sat comfortably at the end of her couch, slouched, rubbing his very full stomach. All in all a perfect evening, if she did say so. And that was what worried her.

"I always thought it was such a horrible bait and switch, what they did with Han and Leia." Mulder yawned somewhat, food and drink making him drowsy.

"I agree," Scully replied, settling into the cushions, her feet curled under her. "But then again, no offense, Luke compared to Han? Who do you think the ladies would take?"

"But see, that's the point. Luke was the hero, he should get the girl!"

"Sometimes the hero has a higher destiny than chasing the girl. And face it, Han was way hotter."

Mulder seemed disgusted by her cheapening the argument with her observations. "I still say it was wrong."

"So you'd rather that Luke and Leia have ended up together rather than figure out that they were twins and siblings?"
"That makes that scene in The Empire Strikes Back just so icky?" He shuddered and Scully laughed, prodding him with a bare toe.

"I don't know, I just thought it was always sweet that in the end they figure out they are siblings. It makes it less of a wound that she goes off with the hotter guy."

"Well, she would kind of have to at that point, cause I don't imagine incest is any more accepted in a galaxy far, far away than here."

"Good point." She sipped at her wine glass, enjoying the warmth of it on her tongue as she relaxed. The fireplace was on in the corner, the light of it flickering along with the television in her dimly lit room. For a moment it made her think of another occasion years ago, when someone she thought was Mulder had been sharing this couch with her. She had nearly kissed that man. She had very much wanted to, to give into forbidden desires that she had ignored for years, and then she discovered that indeed it wasn't the man she had longed for, but someone else.

That wasn't the case this night.

They had not said anything all week about the kiss, and in fact they had both acted as if it had never happened. After spending the day together on New Years curled up at Mulder's watching the parade and football, she had driven him to pick up his car before coming home to her own, lonely apartment. The next day she had gotten up, gone to work, and greeted him like she did every morning. The moment of shared intimacy was lost in the drudgery of their everyday life - well as much of a drudgery as their lives ever got. She had figured he had decided to forget it and hoped that she would too. So she had, sort of. Except when she lay in bed at night….or brushed her teeth in the mornings…or sipped at her morning coffee…or sat across from him in the office, watching him nibble on a pencil…

She certainly hadn't suspected tonight, not anything as normal as dinner and a movie over at her house. It wasn't anything particularly outstanding, but there was a certain intimacy in the act that was unusual between them. It certainly wasn't the norm for them, where she retired to her apartment and Georgetown and he to his in Virginia and where they would perhaps speak over the phone, maybe.

"You're thinking too loud." Mulder's gaze slid from the X-wing fighters taking flight towards the Death Star to Scully's distracted frown somewhere in the vicinity of her fireplace. "What's eating you?"

He was concerned, at least mildly so. She shrugged and smiled. "Nothing…just…change is in the air."

"The rebel cause is about to land a blow on the empire and you are worried about change in the air?"

Scully laughed. She had to admit it was silly, brooding when she was having such a nice evening.

"I don't know. I guess new year, new century, new millennium, I have been feeling sort of unsettled."

"The year isn't old enough for you to feel unsettled." He reached for the remote lying between them, holding it up to pause the movie. "What's up?"

"Nothing!" She shrugged, holding up her glass of wine. "Too much, I guess, makes me maudlin."

"No it doesn't," he scoffed, setting down the remote and crossing his arms over his still slouched body. "So it's a new year? How's it different from any other new year?"
She wanted to scream the obvious, but she didn't. "I don't know, Mulder. Things are just...different. Everything is shifting."

"Times and things change." He obviously wasn't understanding and Scully wasn't sure she could explain. It wasn't just the two of them. Something was shifting in everything, their work, the X-files, each other. It was exciting and it was terrifying. Everything changes. She wasn't even sure she was ready for it.

Mulder watched her from the other end of the couch, eyes bright in the fire's glow. "You know, Scully, at moments like these I rely on wisdom from one of the most veritable sages that I have ever heard."

"What?"

He stared at her with quiet certitude. "The Force will be with you, now and always."

Scully resisted the urge to toss her wine at him.

"I'm serious," he laughed when she opted for a pillow instead. "Scully, for all the crap we've been through, in the end you are still here, everything is okay. You believe in God. Your mother is always telling you to have faith, to trust that he will guide and protect you."

Her mother didn't say it nearly as often as her priest did, but she nodded. "Yeah."

"Look at the last year. This time last year, we were working in the bullpen. I hated life. You were getting shot at by idiots they shouldn't have given guns to, and we survived. We are back on the X-files. You weren't killed by newbs, I didn't have my brains scrambled. In the end it all worked out."

He sounded so sure. "You weren't this confident a year ago when you were contemplating leaving all of this."

He shrugged. "A year changes things. Many years change many things. Change is inevitable. All I knows is that for right here, right now, I'm here, you're here, and we are alive and employed. That counts for something. What tomorrow brings, I don't know. I'm just glad I have a friend along for this crazy ride."

A friend. Her heart lurched. She didn't know what to make of that.

"And I have a second bottle of wine!" He reached across his lanky legs to the table where is own glass rested. "And I had some kick ass lasagna, even if it had all veggies in it. And yeah, I noticed."

She smiled at his mild jibe against the lack of meat in the lasagna, a complaint that fell flat considering how much of it he wolfed down.

"And, Scully, I have Star Wars, and while I may not have seen it five billion times, or enough to score an intergalactic hook up with a man who has a tail, I think it is still one of the most formative movies ever in my life."

"Oh God, Eddie!" Scully snorted, wine going up her nose as she coughed a little. "I was just thinking about him earlier."

"Really? Why?" That surprised him. She blushed, realizing her mistake, and trying to hide it behind her wine glass.

"Just the movie. It made me think of it."
"I wonder how he's doing," Mulder mused.

"You wonder how Eddie Van Blundht is doing? He called you a loser!"

"Yeah, well I do wonder about some of our old cases. Don't you?"

Scully considered some of their former arrests. So many of the ones they did manage to catch were ones she never liked thinking off, especially as more than a few of them had tried to kill her. "I would just like to think of them in jail and leave it at that."

"Fine." Mulder chuffed as he reached for the remote and started the movie again. John William's trumpets blared back to life in the living room.

"So, you think that Han is better looking than Luke?"

"Way better," Scully confirmed, glancing sideways at him. "I go for the tall, dark, and handsome type."

If he got the hint, he was playing it very cool.

"How about you? Leia hot?"

"Have you watched *The Return of the Jedi?* Metal bikini?"

Scully rolled her eyes. "I guess there was a marked lack of other eligible females in the Star Wars universe."

"Well, there was that Twi'lek chick, the other girl dancer at Jabba's palace."

"The one with the two tentacles coming out of her head?"

"She was totally hot in an exotic sort of way."

"Mulder, I'm beginning to wonder about what you find attractive."

"She had green skin and tentacles, you weren't already wondering what I'm thinking."

"Shut up." She was laughing absurdly at the idea. At least he had succeeded in getting her to think on something else. "I am beginning to regret letting you over here."

"You will never look at that movie the same."

"No, Mulder! No, I won't!"

As the movie played, things settled into silence between the two of them once more. Perhaps, Scully mused drowsily as food and wine began to set in, she could get very used to lazy, Friday evenings just like this.

Chapter End Notes

I am a huge Game of Thrones fan and reading this reminded me of my theory that the Cersei and Jamie relationship always felt to me to be George R.R. Martin's answer to this conversation about Luke, Leia and Han. Twincest!
Devils Inside My Head

Chapter Summary

In which Scully must face again an old demon.

She had no idea how the window opened.

It was January in DC, not exactly the warmest time of year, but then again the heating in her apartment was old, and it could get stuffy quite quickly. In her sleep she supposed anything could happen. She could have opened it, wanting to cool down a room too warm. She wouldn't have noticed save for the rustle of papers that woke her, the rippling sound of a book, it's leaves fluttering in the breeze. Startled by the noise, she blinked in the pre-dawn darkness, searching for the source. With feet cold on her carpet, she rushed to the billowing drapes slamming shut the window as she turned, bleary eyed to the damage done.

Papers strewn across the floor, her Bible, still left out from the previous morning's mass, fluttered open. She gathered what was strewn and set it by the scriptures, sleepily stumbling to her bed. The large, red numbers on her alarm clock blinked at her. A power outage? She reached for it, prepared to set it right.

The numbers read "666".

Shock hit her, sleep-confused eyes widening as she shook her head. But even as she blinked, the clock flashed, going dark and then coming back again as 6:06 AM.

The light at her bedside flashed into brilliance.

The muzziness left her as Scully sank to her mattress, staring first at the clock, then the window, then the light on beside her. There must have been a storm in the night that was all. Power was knocked out briefly, but now it was back on. Had the clock really read "666"? Before she could even decide that the whole episode was simply a trick of her sleepy imagination, the phone at the side of her bed rang. Heart in throat, she set the clock down next to it, grabbing the phone off it's cradle.

"Hello?"

"Scully," Mulder's voice on the other end was already tense. Alarms sounded in the back of Scully's mind.

"What is it?"

"Did I wake you?"

"No?" She ran a hand across her face. "Did you have the power go out too?"

"Power?" He sounded confused.

"Never mind." Clearly whatever happened to her must not have hit him in Virginia. "What's up?"

"I just got a phone call from Skinner. There was a break out from the federal penitentiary at Marion,
"Illinois last night."

"Yeah?" That was usually part of the US Marshal's purview, not the FBI.

"Scully." Mulder paused, hesitancy stirring something fearful in her still waking brain.

"What is it?" Irritation mixed with worry as she ran a hand through her sleep-tousled hair.

"Donnie Pfaster was the one who escaped.

That hadn't been what she expected.

"You're sure?" Her room felt very cold.

"When US Marshals realized who it was they called Skinner immediately."

"Why?" She hoped her voice sounded steadier than she felt. Somewhere in the back of her mind a vision of a demon's face stared out at her from the darkness. She tried not to shiver.

"They want us out on the case. They know we were the ones who caught him last time and hope that we can give them insight into catching him."

Insight…yes. Flashes of a closet, of Donnie Pfaster's hot breath, of his voice, lilting and gravelly all at the same time, purring in her ear. Five years and still she could remember the horror of that incident, the memory of the way his fingers ran through her hair, admiring it...

"Scully?"

"I'm here." She snapped out of her reverie.

"I was saying you don't have to go on this case. Skinner even suggested it. I agree that I can handle the marshals. I have the profile, and it's not something I haven't done before."

Irritation immediately flared, overriding whatever half-remember terror she might have been feeling.

"Mulder, I'm fine. I can be ready in an hour and I can head with you to Illinois."

"Scully!" Clearly Mulder wasn't happy with this plan.

"Mulder, I'm not staying behind just because you worry I can't handle this."

"I didn't say you couldn't handle it," Mulder replied. "What I worry about is that you believe you can."

"I'm sorry?" Perhaps he wanted to pick a fight in the hopes she would just chose to stay home out of sheer anger.

"Scully, we both know that you would rather eat nails than back out of something, and I'm telling you it's okay this time."

"I didn't realize I needed your permission," she snapped. At her bedside she glanced at the bedside clock.

"I'm not saying that, I'm merely saying that I know how this guy affected you, and I remember better than anyone what he did to you."

Her mouth dried. If it hadn't been for Mulder, his intuition and insight, she would have been dead
long before. He had burst in at the last minute just when Donnie Pfaster had gained the advantage.

"Mulder, if I shied away from every situation we run across just because someone had done something bad to me in the past, I'd have no job." She had been kidnapped by others over the years of their work together, from CGB Spender to other killers and it had become a regrettable theme in her life for a while. "I can do this."

He was silent on the other end. She knew he was debating the wisdom of waiting for her versus leaving her behind. If Mulder could have his way at moments like this he would simply wrap her in bubble wrap and leave her someplace safe, and he knew she hated it.

"I promise I'll be okay," she murmured, rising from the bed, heading towards her closet. "It's just a case, Mulder. If we can chase after every child snatcher in the country out there with you being okay, I can handle this."

She knew he would hate that comparison, but she also knew it was an argument that would cause him to give in. The heavy sigh at the end of the phone told her that she had won her argument.

"I'll let Skinner know. He's not going to like this and I don't either."

"It's just a case, Mulder. I'm paid to do this, and I can do my job."

"I know. I'll be by in an hour to pick you up."

"Right. I'll be ready." With that she clicked her phone off, setting it lightly on her dresser as she pulled out undergarments and contemplated this situation. She wasn't going to deny it, deep in her gut the idea of confronting Donnie Pfaster again gnawed at her insides, turning them to liquid. No one had disturbed her the way he had, no other case had bothered her. She was a pathologist, she had seen so much in the world of crime and had never even bat an eyelash, and yet something about Donnie Pfaster had unnerved her. It startled her, that feeling of powerlessness. She wasn't about to let him do that to her again.

She tossed clothing onto the bed as she wandered into the bath, turning on her shower. Her pajamas were quickly removed and tossed aside as steam rose from the porcelain tub. She glanced in the mirror over her sink, staring at her reflection before she stepped inside the hot water. Her eyes flickered to the gold at the base of her throat, her cross. Her fingers reached for it briefly. She had thought she had seen a demon that day. Of course, it was likely just her imagination, the fear and stress combined with the darkness of the closet she was in, all combined to allow her mind and eyes play tricks on her. Still, that night, she had wondered…

No, she wouldn't allow Donnie Pfaster and his evil to play these sorts of tricks on her and make her into a fool. She could do this and handle this with the professionalism she always showed, and she would show both Mulder and Skinner that those things that haunted her past were not necessarily things that would prevent her from doing her job. And perhaps if she said it enough times before Mulder arrived that gnawing feeling in her gut would go away as well.
The song hummed in her mind as they drove away from the prison. It was like an ear bug, stuck in there, playing and replaying. She hadn't heard it in twenty years, more even, and now it wouldn't go away. Why that song?

Beside her, Mulder was musing out loud. "I don't know, Scully, if you ask me the prison chaplain has something to do with this."

"Hmmm?" She glanced sideways at him. She hadn't been listening and had no idea how long he had even been speaking.

"The chaplain, Orison." Mulder seemed unperturbed as he repeated himself. "I know you think that hypnosis is a side show, but what if Orison thinks he's doing some good by it?"

"Helping deranged psychopaths to escape?" What sort of good would that do for the world?

"People have had stranger ideas. Remember just last week we were dealing with a case of a man who thought he could use zombies to bring about God's apocalypse on the world."

Somehow zombies seemed a world away from Donnie Pfaster right at the moment. "I would think that a man of God would know better than to let someone so dark out into the world."

Mulder shrugged at the wheel. "Chances are that our good Reverend Orison is not exactly a seminary trained theologian here. His records at the prison state he's not affiliated with any major denomination, yet he claims he's ordained. He's either connected loosely to a non-denominational group or just someone who's had a 'born again' experience and has become a preacher to share his faith experience with others."

"So why would he then use the opportunity to allow prisoners to escape?" Scully turned to stare at the winter blasted landscape of Indiana. The grass was brown and withered around them, the trees stark black claws against a white-gray sky. It was cold, but too warm yet for snow, cold sleet was beginning to fall, spattering their windows.

"I don't know." Mulder muttered in that way of his that indicated that he was dwelling on it though. His profilers mind was twisting and turning it, working it over. "It could be that he thinks he's reformed these men, is letting them go and have a chance in society. It could be that he believes whatever sob stories they have to tell and thinks he's doing right by them."

"Sob stories? Donnie Pfaster has one?"
Mulder glanced sideways at her appalled expression. "I didn't say he did, but Reverend Orison might think differently."

How a man who claimed he served God could think that was beyond Scully's comprehension. They lapsed into silence as Mulder continued to mull the mystery. Scully's thoughts wandered once again to the song that had filtered down the vent, a song that she hadn't heard in years. Why that song? It had been a favorite of Melissa's and it had sort of grown on her as a teenager. She had been listening to it a lot in San Diego that year before her family moved. She had been coming into her own as a teenager then, transitioning into listening to more popular tunes, things that were on the radio. It was just one of the myriad of songs that had littered her life as a youngster, but this one always stood out in her mind.

That was the song she always connected to Jaime's death.

Scully had known death in a vague sense before. One of her grandmothers and a distant uncle had all died when she was young, and she recalled the funerals in a detached sort of way. And of course, with a father in the military, she had known lots of kids who had received the sad news that their fathers were not going to come home from Vietnam. She had been sympathetic, of course, but death had never really seeped in for her, had never really clicked. She hadn't felt it in the visceral way others had. Outside of the rabbit she had accidentally killed, she really didn't understand the grief it brought, and she certainly had never known anyone who had been murdered, at least not in the sense of a cold-blooded act. Not until Jaime.

Scully had adored Jaime Hernandez, many of the teenagers at her church had. He had run the youth ministries for their Catholic congregation, a group made up of an odd combination of middle class Navy and Marine brats like herself and the children of Hispanic immigrants, mostly Mexican, who mingled uncomfortably with the military kids. Jaime had ignored the social and linguistic barriers that had separated the children. He had tried to draw them together in their Sunday school lessons, in their youth events, to show them that no matter the color of their skin or the language that they spoke, they were all children of God.

Scully remembered Jaime's energy, his tireless work, and the boundless love he showed for all of them. How many times had he gone without question to pick Melissa up from somewhere in San Diego where she'd been stranded by some friend or the other, not even asking questions about what she had been up to? How many long conversations had he had with Bill when he contemplated following in their father's footsteps and enter Annapolis? How many other children had she seen Jaime selflessly serve? When Tommy Williams, whose Marine father died in the last year of the Vietnam War, attempted to commit suicide in his pain, confusion, and grief, Jaime had sat by his bed in the hospital, holding his hand and reminding him that he was loved. When the Jimenez boys were left suddenly orphaned after a car accident killed their parents, it was Jaime who took them in until a caring member of the congregation fostered them in their own home.

With all that he gave to everyone, Scully had never thought he would have enough time to pay attention to her, but he had a special place in his heart for even young Dana. Knocked kneed, bookish, tomboyish, and shy, Scully had despaired at ever being able to fit in with the other kids, let alone being the poplar beauty Melissa was. Jaime had been the first one to tell her that there was value in being exactly who she was. She had loved him for it. He had taken to calling her Scout, because he said the nickname suited her. When she had asked why, he had handed her a well-worn copy of the book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She had taken it home and devoured it, even the sections regarding the trial. She had been so angry at the outcome, the blatant racism and class discrimination and the sad fate of Tom Robinson who was falsely accused of rape. Like Scout, she felt sympathy towards the awkward, misunderstood Boo Radley, the outsider who everyone thought was strange. When she expressed all of this to Jaime, he nodded in understanding. He told her that was why he
did the work he did, he wanted to stop the awful things that human beings did to one another. Scully wore the nickname of Scout proudly after that.

No one was surprised when Jaime announced to the congregation that he was entering seminary. The fact that he would become a priest one day seemed to be de facto. Scully had been sad he would be leaving for his studies, but was very proud of this man who seemed to embody everything that it meant to live a Christian life. That was perhaps why it had come as a shock that day when her mother had told her what had happened to him. She had been listening to her radio, the same as she normally did on Saturday afternoons. Ostensibly, she was studying, but instead she’d been reading a novel. She couldn't remember what. Melissa and Bill were both out with friends. Charlie had been recruited to help their mother with groceries. She had hidden upstairs, well away from her father's baseball game on TV. She had heard the door slam downstairs and voices. She rushed downstairs to help with groceries. Her mother's face when she burst into the kitchen stopped her. Charlie looked sad as well, shooting furtive eyes towards Scully as Maggie explained to her what had happened. He’d been found in his front yard, shot through the chest. It was too shocking to be believed. No one was certain what had happened. It had broken Scully's very young, teenaged heart.

In the weeks that followed the truth of the event came out. Jaime's big heart and a desperate young criminal engaging in armed robbery meant the loss of someone dearly beloved by all of them. Scully, who could hardly understand it at the time, realized finally that there were indeed bad people in this world, that there were human beings out there who would kill just because, without a second thought, and had no remorse about it. The young man who shot Jaime to death on his front lawn had no care or consideration this was a human being he was shooting in cold blood. He hadn't killed Jaime out of a sense of self-defense or preservation, only because he had wanted to. It was the first time she understood that people could be evil.

Within the year her father had been reassigned to Washington. Bill had made it into Annapolis and was going to start in the fall. The family moved to Baltimore and had started a new life in a new church, the one where Maggie still attended. But Scully had never forgotten Jaime. Perhaps, if she admitted it, he was a huge reason she went on to become an FBI agent. The idea of fighting for the injustices of the world, instilled in her by him, had been a huge reason she had decided to join when things with Daniel had fallen apart. She had wanted to make a difference in the world, just like Jaime had.

For all the good he had wanted to do, evil had still claimed Jaime and evil had nearly taken her several times. She had survived where Jaime hadn't.

Don't look any further...

How strange that song would be the one she was hearing. Was she not supposed to look any further for Donnie Pfaster? Or was it just simply a strange coincidence of fate?

Mulder's cell phone cut across her thoughts then as he reached one hand to snag it from the console. Without taking his eyes off the road, he flipped it on to answer it. "Mulder."

There were several seconds of silence as he listened on the other end. Finally he responded with, "Where?"

Scully's attention perked up. It sounded like a lead. Judging from Mulder's granite expression, it was. "Where is Harrisburgh?"

Silence and then Mulder's firm affirmation that they would be there soon. She glanced curiously at him as he hung up the phone.
"That was Daddo, he says they thought they had Pfaster at a diner in Harrisburgh, just up the road."

"Thought?"

Mulder's dark expression grew heavier. "Yeah, he wasn't clear on it, says that they swore it was Pfaster but something happened. We'll know more when we get there."

Hope gave way to a moment's despair. If only they had caught him, she thought, bitterly. Then she could be free of him.

Chapter End Notes

The song "Don't Look Any Further" actually came out in 1984, when Scully would have been 20. She would have been 13 in 1977. This is what happens when the writers don't pay attention to continuity! I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to do about this, so I'm going to go with the erroneous idea that it came out earlier and just state here that in fact this song is not quite as old as the writers thought it was. I have to remember they didn't have Wikipedia at their fingertips years ago.
An Existential Crises

Chapter Summary

In which Scully has debate's the nature of God and faith with Mulder.

They flew out of Louisville in a somber mood. Mulder spent much of their waiting time writing down as many notes as he could on a notepad while Scully watched the planes flying in and out solemnly. Every so often he would look up at her, reach out a hand and squeeze her own. She couldn't even muster up a smile.

They called their flight and boarded without comment. Scully tried to drift to sleep for the hour or so it took to make it back to DC. Mulder had urged her to do it, but she found that she couldn't. Reverend Orison's body in the cold, muddy ground floated to mind. Mulder had said that when you got down to it, there wasn't much mystery to murder. She thought of Jaime then. No, there wasn't. Dead was dead. Orison had died doing what he thought was just, passing judgment on those who justice somehow forgot. Scully couldn't help but feel just the slightest bit sorry for him, after all, he had simply been trying to do what she hadn't the courage to do years ago. She had taken compassion on Pfaster then, had asked the court to simply jail him rather then send him to his death. Because he had kidnapped and attacked a federal officer he was sentenced to federal prison, she thought that was the end of it, but it wasn't.

"They'll find him, Scully." Mulder knew what she was thinking, knew the private worry she had. "They are US Marshals, they do this every day. He won't hurt anyone else again."

She hoped for some poor woman's sake they would.

When they touched down in DC, they both gathered their luggage and made their way to Mulder's car. For once she was glad that he had parked there, the cold wind off the Potomac cutting as she bundled inside. He turned up the heat and set off towards Georgetown. She knew he was casting her worried looks.

It was when they rounded a corner in her neighborhood, near a small, Jesuit church she visited at times, that she finally spoke up. "God isn't just a spectator, you know."

Mulder winced visibly as stopped at the red light. "Scully, I didn't mean to offend your faith. I was shooting my mouth off as usual."

"But you don't believe." It was less a challenge than a statement of fact. Mulder sighed. This wasn't new territory between them. As the light changed he continued.

"You know why I have issues with God."

"And yet you can believe aliens took your sister?"

He winced again.

"Mulder, I've spent years having to accept those things in this world which you blindly believe and for which I have no explanation. Why is it that you can so flippantly dismiss what I believe?"
"It's not that, Scully…"

"What is it then?"

He turned onto her street, pulling up it slowly. "I spoke out of turn, Dana, I was angry that the girl died and Orison was to blame, and he tried to excuse it all by saying it was God's will. I said something I shouldn't have and I'm sorry."

She watched the lights in the buildings around her. Hers was up the street. "You are so quick to believe intuition and never believe that God might work through someone."

"Are you willing to believe that Orison was doing God's work?"

She paused. How honest did she want to be with him on this?

"A part of me does, yes." She shifted uncomfortably in the seat. "I wanted to believe that his whole purpose was to bring justice to Donnie Pfaster."

Mulder had no response. She hadn't expected to stun him to silence.

"There's something I never told you about that night that Pfaster took me." For the life of her now she couldn't imagine why, after all these years, she hadn't said anything. "I guess I wanted to brush it off then as something from a fever dream, stress and anxiety coupled with being kept in the dark. But I saw something."

She paused. She felt foolish now saying it. "Pfaster at one point…his face turned almost demonic."

She had expected Mulder to scoff at this. Instead he remained quiet as he pulled up in front of her apartment building. She wasn't sure what she expected him to say to that, so she continued. "For years I thought it was my imagination, Mulder. And for years I ignored it. But now…what if it wasn't?"

"Do you think that Donnie Pfaster is a demon?"

She shrugged in the darkness. "I don't know, Mulder. I'm not a theologian. I'm a scientist. Most in my profession believe that people seeing these things are simply manifestations of overactive imaginations."

"What do you believe?"

That was the thing. She wasn't sure. "I believe humans are capable of great evil all on there own without a demon there to help. I believe there are people, like the one who killed my Sunday school teacher, who have no moral center to them, who lose that sense of humanity and kill because it doesn't occur to them not to."

"And Donnie Pfaster isn't one of those?" She knew Mulder was struggling to understand.

"No, I think he's something more." It was the only way she could explain it. "He was once just a creepy guy who had a complex about his mother and it manifested in a love of hair and nails. How did he go from that to a killer?"

"You want to say it was demon possession?"

"Mulder, you believe in witchcraft. How far of a leap is it between the two?"

She had a point and at least he had grace enough to admit it. "I'm not saying it wasn't, just
questioning that you of all people want to buy into demon possession?"

Scully sighed. She wasn't sure. "All I know is that there is evil in this world. I believe in my heart and soul that there is something out there that tries to stand against it. Perhaps Reverend Orison was chosen by God to do just that. God has chosen imperfect vessels before. Perhaps there was a purpose for what Orison was doing."

She knew he didn't want to believe it. Mulder couldn't bring himself to believe in the things she did. But he smiled and reached for her hand again, lacing long fingers through it. "For your sake, I'm sorry then that he didn't succeed."

He would never understand, but at least he wasn't being condescending. She squeezed his hand briefly before disentangling her fingers from his. "I need to head up."

"I'll call you if anything comes up on Pfaster."

"Right," she murmured, grabbing her suitcase and briefcase before opening the door.

"They have every man in the country on the look out for him," he tried to assure her again. She merely nodded as she crawled out of the car.

"When he's back in prison, Mulder, then I will sleep easy."

He smiled. "Night, Scully."

"Same to you," she called back, slamming the door closed as she turned towards her apartment. The air was cold, her breath steaming as she made her way along the path. Warm pajamas and a nice, hot drink were in order, then bed. She felt as if she could sleep for a million years.
Vengeance Is Mine

Chapter Summary

In which Scully must come to grips with her own actions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scully didn't think she was going to sleep for a very long time to come.

She finally did, though, a fretful sleep filled with the faces of demons and hell, all locked in her tiny closet. She jerked awake to the feeling of damnation and dread, her mouth dry despite being drenched with sweat. The bedroom was not her own. It took her several long, blinking moments to recall that she was in Mulder's bedroom. The bed was empty, save her, and it had every sign it had only been her all night. She frowned at the ceiling. Hadn't their once been a canopy on top of this? Had Mulder removed it? Why was she here?

Donnie Pfaster. Her heart lodged in her throat and she had the deep desire to wretch violently. The swaying of the warm, water-filled bladder beneath her didn't help the feeling, and she clung to the edge of the frame, willing the nausea to go away. Instead, it only seemed to bring on tears. She had killed a man. She had done it in cold blood. Not that Donnie Pfaster was the first man she had shot and killed, that had been Dupree years ago, the man who had shot and killed Jack Willis. That had been in the line of duty, in the defense of a fellow officer. She had done what she was supposed to do. This was different. This had been the single-minded destruction of one-man…one, evil man.

Whether he was evil or not, he was still a human, one subject to human law and human justice and punishment. Vengeance was not the purview of the FBI. Mulder had burst into the situation, he had it in hand, she should have stood down and allowed him to handle Pfaster. She could have. But in that moment, she didn't hear Mulder's voice, she didn't see Mulder's warning, she simply marched out, blazing with horror, fear and fury took aim and fired. Donnie Pfaster lay dead at her feet. The monster from her nightmares was now gone and she had done it without batting an eye. What did that say about her?

Beyond the mysterious door that for so long had locked the rest of Mulder's apartment off from this room, she could hear her partner moving about. He had slept on the couch, solicitous as he had gently saw to her last night. It had been Mulder who had helped her pack a bag to bring with her, who had finished up with the CSI team from Metro and the FBI. He had spoken to her worried building super, who always seemed so understanding about the strange happenings at her apartment. It was Mulder who guided her out of the mess and taken her to his house, forced her to shower and change and go to bed, as if she were a child.

She hadn't minded last night really. In the bright light of a January morning, she was more collected and she knew she would need to eventually leave his bedroom and go talk to him. She swung heavy feet out from under the warm blankets and heaved herself off the rocking bed and onto the floor. She slipped her toes into her still stained fuzzy slippers and wandered out into the familiar environs of Mulder's living room.

He was up and about, already in jeans and a sweater, typing at his computer while eating a bowl of
corn flakes. His glasses were perched on his nose as he worked, fingers flying across his keyboard furiously.

"There's coffee in the kitchen if you want," he called, not even stopping to look at her. "I even got up early to get fresh beans from the market."

Coffee was about the only reliably fresh and hand made thing Scully could imagine coming from Mulder's kitchen. "Thanks!"

"Got creamer and sugar too, just for you. They are by the pot." He waved in the general direction of his kitchen and Scully shuffled in there, greeted by the smell of fresh brewed nirvana. She found a relatively clean mug on the washboard, poured a cup and added the non-dairy creamer and sugar before wandering back out to the living room area where Mulder sat.

"I'm afraid I don't have much for breakfast. Corn flakes are good though and I got some fresh milk."

"Thanks, I am good for now." She didn't think she could swallow anything beyond coffee at the moment, let alone keep it down. She curled onto his leather couch, pulling her feet up as she wrapped herself in a horse blanket he'd brought back from New Mexico. Idly, she studied his fish in the tank on the other end of the room.

"You took the day off?" She watched Mulder's goldfish swim lazily, floating around a scuba diving figure at the bottom of the tank on the gravel.

"Skinner told me to," he mumbled back, clearly lost in whatever he was typing. That was a surprise. Mulder didn't take a day off unless he was medically induced to, and since he never naturally got sick that was usually because he had injured himself in some way. Under normal circumstances he would fight the day off, which meant that he had agreed to it because of her.

"I don't need a babysitter," she complained mildly.

"Does it look like I'm babysitting?" He stopped typing to write on a notepad before starting again.

"No," she admitted, watching him for long minutes as he worked. "What are you doing?"

"Drafting a report on the case."

That was his compromise. Work from home. She nodded, wrapping cold fingers around the mug as she snuggled under the wool of the blanket. It smelled of Mulder, his aftershave and a hint of musky sweat. She rubbed it against a cheek still raw and abraded from the night before. As usual, Mulder had come to save her in the nick of time.

"How did you know?" She asked quietly into the stillness, broken only by his keystrokes. He paused then, half turning to glance at her over his right shoulder.

"I didn't." His gaze was sober behind his glasses.

"So it was luck?"

"That or better angels watching out for you."

"You don't believe in angels."

"Scully, enough time around you I might end up believing in angels and God too, for all the ability you have to evade death."
He sounded as if he couldn't decide if he wanted to be perturbed with her or terrified and ended up with flippant. She had always thought it was an irony that a man with such boundless faith as Mulder had no faith in the one thing that everyone found easy to believe. He had proven that with this case. He had laughed at her when she said she believed that Orison might have been sent to extol God's vengeance. Maybe he had a right to. She, a God fearing woman, had raised a gun in anger, had murdered a man without so much as a thought and had taken justice into her own hands. How in the hell did that make her any better than Orison?

"What does your report say?" Her voice was raspy as she asked, holding back the grief she didn't have words to express yet.

He was quiet for a long moment, reading through it perhaps? When he spoke, it was clipped and professional, unusual for Mulder. "I said that like many serial killers, Donnie fixated on the failures. After his failure with you, he fixated on that while in prison till it became a manic obsession. What had started as a mild fetish had morphed into a full on neurosis with a fixation on red hair. He wanted to reenact your capture with other red haired women, and he would keep doing it again and again until he found the object of his desire."

"Me?" She had meant to sound confident. Instead she sounded so small and scared. Mulder finally relented, turning fully in his chair to face her, eyes infinitely sad as he regarded her over the rims of his glasses.

"He was a sick man, Scully. Yeah."

"He was a monster." She wanted to call a spade a spade. "He was a demon in human form."

"You can say that about many serial killers. Believe me, I know."

"Don't give me the Frank Black line. I know what I saw." She snapped upwards on the couch, pushing black the blanket in agitation. "And he wouldn't have stopped at me. He would have kept going and going until he was dead. No prison could hold him, you just saw that, he would have killed and killed…"

"No one is questioning why he's dead, Scully. I don't think anyone cares."

"I care!" She didn't really understand why she was shouting at him, only that she was and that the awful weight of it hurt horribly. "What did you put in your report?"

"That it was self-defense." Mulder didn't seem to be the least bit apologetic with that lie.

"And Skinner's going to allow that?"

"Skinner is the one who told me to put it in there."

"It wasn't self-defense, Mulder. You had him at that point. I saw it. I knew it and I did it anyway."

"Not the way I saw it."

"Then you saw it wrong."

"Scully, does it matter?"

"Yes," she fairly shouted, her voice ringing through the quiet of the apartment. "It does matter, because there is a man dead at my hands and I did it. I had to do it."
"Had to do it?" An eyebrow quirked, questioning her as he leaned his chin on the back of his chair. "You've killed others."

"That was part of my job!"

"And this is different because you had to?"

"Yes!" She shot back, miserable in her guilt now. "I had to do it, Mulder. I had to."

"Are you more disturbed because you don't know if it's God's will or yours behind that shot."

That was the crux of the issue. And it hurt. It drew her to silence as an ache filled her stomach, tears glazing her eyes. She only nodded mutely as she once again pulled her knees upwards, resting her arms and chin on them.

"What he did to me...what he was going to do to me...he was evil and I couldn't allow that to stand."

"I know." His sigh pulled out of somewhere deep within him. "And I wish I had an answer for you."

Disappointment bloomed within her, though she hated to admit it. A part of her had rather hoped that Mulder, with all of his brilliance, would have something, a way for her guilt to be assuaged. It was childish, of course, the desire to have someone kiss the boo boo and make it better, to return to the moment before she pulled that trigger. For all that she believed she was right, she also knew that she was wrong.

"Do you know what the name Michael means?" It was a non sequitur, Mulder posing a question from out of left field. She was sure it likely made sense in his head.

"It has something to do with the archangel?" She shrugged. She was sure she likely learned it in Catholic school years ago.

"His name is Beshter in Persian, Mi-ka-el in Hebrew. Roughly translated it means 'who is like God'."

That knowledge coming out of Mulder surprised Scully. "When did you read up on angel lore?"

"Got interested briefly after that case with the quadruplet girls." He shrugged, continuing. "I was intrigued by Michael, personally. You know he's always portrayed as carrying a flaming sword, clad in armor."

"He's the general of God's armies or something like that." What had Sister Spooky said about it years ago?

Mulder nodded. "He's also the keeper of God's justice, the one responsible for putting an end to fear in the world."

Scully blinked back at him.

"My point is, Scully, your own faith, which venerates Michael as a saint, holds a place for God and for justice. Michael was like God, he carries God's sword and dispels fear from this world."

"You are using my own faith to try and justify this?"

"I am trying to draw attention to something you are choosing to ignore, Scully. You feel guilty for taking justice into your own hands, and I'm not going to sit here and say everyone should be a vigilante. What I am going to say is that less than vengeance, perhaps you should be see it as an act of removing fear from the world. Even God has room for that."
Scully had no response to that. Even if she did dare to get into a theological discussion with Mulder, for which she felt they were both supremely unqualified, she didn't think any of it would be effective in helping her come to grips with this. His story did at least somewhat lesson the clawing ache in her chest. The rest, that would be up to her to come to terms with.

"Perhaps I should give Father McCue a call."

"I think that's a good idea," Mulder agreed, reaching for his phone and passing it to her. "And I can run you up to your Mom's if you want to talk to him. Take as much time as you need."

"Thank you." She wasn't sure what for, the fact that he was the one talking sense to her, or perhaps it was for the fact that he let her come to his house, crashing there rather than in the crime scene that was her apartment, again. More than anything, it was the fact that like always he was the one coming out of nowhere to save her from the monster. He seemed to be rather good at that.

"No thanks needed, Scully." He shrugged in that off handed way he had, clearly uncomfortable with the gratitude. "By this point, I think both of us are past that. It's just what we do for each other."

She supposed he was right. Still, one thing nagged at her. Everything happened so quickly the night before. She had stepped into her bedroom and realized what was going on. She had no way of letting him know, she hadn't even been able to scream for help. And there he was. She supposed with Mulder's brilliance, something had clued him in.

"What was it that made you run over to my house?"

He frowned, studying the coffee table for long moments, teeth working at his bottom lip. When he spoke finally, it was hesitating. "I don't know for sure. I heard that song, the one you kept hearing. It kept bugging me. I tried calling, but you didn't answer."

"I could have been sleeping."

"Yeah," he conceded. "But something just wasn't right."

"Your famous intuition?" She tried to smile. He didn't smile back.

"Maybe. I admit I'm not one whose much for signs from God. But that song...I don't know, I kept thinking about what you said."

That was a revelation. Scully blinked at him. "You think that hearing that song was a sign from God that you needed to come save me?"

"Maybe? I won't rule out the possibility."

Mulder always did keep his options open, even to a God he didn't believe in. "I like to believe that it was."

Mulder nodded, a faint, ghost of a smile rising on his face. "If there is a God, he, she, or it must have a very special place in their heart for you, Dana Scully, because they are obviously determined that you are not going to die anytime soon."

That did make her laugh. "I seem to be the proverbial cat, don't I?"

"Just don't use up all of your lives too soon on me, okay?"

She smiled, an honest one. "I can't guarantee it, but I'll try."
"Good." He shifted, turning back to his computer. "I'll get this out to Skinner. Then I can drive you to Baltimore if you want, home if you'd rather go yourself."

"I think for right now I am just happy here." That much was true. Mulder was safe. "I will call Father McCue though."

He nodded as she rose with the phone and her coffee, taking her leave to the bedroom. Carefully, she curled up on the rocking mattress of Mulder's bed, dialing the number for her mother's parish priest. "Hello? Father McCue? Dana Scully, I was wondering if you had a minute to talk."

Chapter End Notes

In which you learn where I get my handle. *smite*
Dropping Everything

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder convinces Scully to go to Santa Monica.

The condition the Metro police, US Marshalls, and FBI left her beloved apartment was less than desirable. Beyond the broken glass everywhere, the shattered door to her closet, and the broken light fixture, her carpet was stained with blood, again. Her super offered to replace it, free of charge, again. He was all smiles and understanding as she apologized all over to him, waving it off as just part of her job as an FBI agent. She didn't have the heart to tell him that other FBI agents didn't have to deal with this. At least the blood that stained her carpet this time wasn't her sister's.

The time and effort it took to fix her apartment did not completely remove the stain of Donnie Pfaster from her life, but it went a long way to helping her deal with the complex feelings she still struggled to understand. Coming home again made her life feel like her own. Her first Saturday back was a lazy one, filled with plans to stock her kitchen, to shop for a new mirror, all the little things that it took to make her house feel like her home again. To both her pleasure and annoyance Mulder called.

"What's up?" She was cataloguing her pantry and refrigerator, making a meticulous grocery list."

"Feel like going to the pier?"

Scully paused in her perusal of her vegetable drawer to frown vaguely at the milk carton in confusion. "What pier, Mulder?"

"You don't know what a pier is?"

"I do know what a pier is, I just didn't know we had one in Washington DC."

"I'm referring to the one in Santa Monica. You know, the famous one they show on Jay Leno, with the Ferris wheel and roller coaster, out over the Pacific."

"Yeah, I know the one," she shot back, perhaps a bit snottier than was necessary. "I've been there."

"Ever see a magic show there?"

It was an odd enough question that it made Scully pause. "I might have. I don't know, the pier usually has street performers of all sorts all year long, concerts. I may have seen a magic show. Why?"

"Ever hear of the Amazing Maleeni?"

"Is he anything like the Stupendous Yappi?"

"Not quite that annoying."

Scully snickered, recalling the infamous, Twin City psychic. "So, who is the Amazing Maleeni?"

"Who was the Amazing Maleeni is the proper question. I got a call for the Santa Monica PD. Turns
out that Maleeni was performing some sort of magic trick at some two-bit performance at the pier. No one thought anything of it till he got back to his van. When the promoter went to pay him, he found him dead."

"A heart attack, maybe?"

"Not unless heart attacks cause you to suddenly lose your head. When the promoter went to shake him, thinking he was asleep, his head fell right off his neck."

"Eeeewwww." Scully wrinkled her nose as she studied a plastic container with a growth on it that she was sure wouldn't make penicillin. "What happened?"

"No one knows. SMPD has some camera footage but nothing of him in the van. The promoter said he was gone a few minutes, not long enough for someone to have come and cut the head off. Besides, the crime scene was clean. No blood spatter, no signs of struggle, the flesh wasn't torn by a cutting blade. It was as if his head simply popped off, like a Barbie dolls."

"Please tell me you never did that to a Barbie."

"Samantha pissed me off. What can I say?"

Images of the boy Fox tormenting his sister by stealing her dolls came to mind. Having seen her brothers do that with Melissa, Scully empathized. "So, some magician ends up with his head popping off. Maybe it was some magic trick gone wrong?"

"That's what the witnesses say happened."

"Really?" Scully closed her fridge and opened her freezer. Cold air fogged into her kitchen as ice cracked and hissed. She glanced over the frozen wasteland and noted, with a critical eye, that she was all out of ice cream. This was an alarming fact that had to be remedied. She quickly wrote it down on the list.

"According to the promoter, this Maleeni character managed a feet that he had never seen before."

"Get an audience?"

"Better yet, turn his head around completely on his neck."

The words "Mulder, that's anatomically impossible" popped into Scully's brain, almost made it to Scully's lips, and died there when they realizes they were discussing a magic trick. "You realize that the nature of a trick is to make people believe that something that didn't happen indeed did."

"I know that, and you know that, but this promoter isn't the sharpest pencil in the box. That's not to say I don't think a trick wasn't going on here, but how did it end up with a dead man with his head popped off and no visible evidence?"

Interesting question indeed, and she needed coffee. Scully poked the cellophane bag in the door of her freezer. "This is all well and good, Mulder. What does this have to do with us again?"

She should have known what he was going to ask before he even said it. "You feeling up for a trip to the West Side, Scully."

"No," she replied succinctly, closing her freezer.

"Not even for some popcorn and cotton candy?"
"Mulder, I just got back from San Diego!"

"That's not Santa Monica!"

"Believe me, there is nothing spectacular about Santa Monica. It's tourists, and crummy beaches, and lots of homeless people."

"A bit insensitive of you."

"Mulder! I have things to do!"

"Like what?" He wasn't going to let this go, was he?

"Groceries!" She waved the list in her hand towards the unseeing phone.

"Food will still be on the shelves when you get back."

She sighed. There was no winning the argument when he was like this. "Fine. When do we need to be out there?"

"I booked us a flight that leaves in two hours."

Another cross-country trip. Brilliant! "Let me pack. I'll meet you at the airport."

"Don't be like that, Scully! I want to see if this magician really does have a white rabbit in his hat!"

Mulder could have his rabbit and his hat, and he could stuff both of them too. "Go jump off the pier, Mulder."

She clicked off the phone before he could have the satisfaction of laughing at her.
Mozart and Salieri

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder shows himself a music history nerd to Scully.

She was vindicated in one thing, the Amazing Maleeni hadn’t died because of his head twisting off, but she couldn't say that the poor man's unexplained death wasn't something of a magic trick. Frankly, the real magic was in how it was all pulled off.

"All right, I'm stumped." Latex snapped as she pulled the bloody gloves off her hands, earning a nose wrinkle out of Mulder. "And I think I'm supposed to be."

Mulder cocked an eyebrow in curiosity. "What do you think?"

"Well, first of all, and sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Maleeni's head did not just magically fall off." She caught the dejection in Mulder's expression and smirked. "It was very carefully sawed, very slow and exacting work, probably with a fine-tooth meat saw. And check out this little detail!"

She fingered the neck of the victim carefully, picking at a yellowish, gummy substance on the skin. "Spirit gum, Mulder. It held the head to the body. Just barely, of course."

"So he was murdered?"

This of course was the most logical of explanations and normally Scully, not Mulder, would have suggested it, but she shook her head. "Well, no, as far as I can tell this man died of advanced coronary disease."

Mulder looked as puzzled as she felt. "Natural causes?"

"Yeah." Scully had no better explanation for it than that.

"So, basically he died of a heart attack, somebody crept up behind him, sawed his head off and then glued it back on all in the space of thirty seconds?" Even to Mulder this sounded absurd, and Scully couldn't blame him when he began to laugh. "Does that make sense to you?"

"No, which makes it even stranger still, because as far as I can tell this body has been dead for over a month. I see signs of refrigeration."

"And yet he performed yesterday. What a trooper!"

"Well, somebody performed yesterday."

"The question was who," Mulder murmured thoughtfully. "Who is the Salieri to LaBonge's Mozart?"

"You are assuming then that LaBonge would be the Mozart in that analogy?"

"Well, it fits, the younger, more talented interloper on the territory of the older, more experienced traditionalist."
"If you say so," Scully shrugged, carefully pulling a sheet back over the sutured remains of the once Great Maleeni. "That's what makes this entire situation strange, though." Mulder's pensiveness only seemed to deepen. "What, that there would be that much rivalry between a bunch of two-bit magic performers?"

"Well that, but that LaBonge would compare himself and Maleeni to Mozart and Salieri."

He was obviously seeing something Scully wasn't. "I don't know, Mulder, it's just a comparison, like the idea that I'm the skeptic and you're the believer. LaBonge wants to think he's the genius and Maleeni is the washed up, has been."

"Oh, to the casual observer that may be what he was saying." Mulder wagged a knowing finger in her face. "What else could they have been saying?" It seemed pretty obvious to her.

"How much do you know about classical music, Scully?" Mischief gleamed in Mulder's eyes. "Not much," she admitted as she began pushing the body of Maleeni into cold storage. "But I have a feeling you are going to school me up on some of it?"

"It's classical music, Scully, this is useful information."

"Is this sort of like that course on Hapsburg history you took once just to impress a girl?"

Mulder looked pleased that she remembered that little tidbit of his history. "I sat a lecture series on classical music, not to impress a girl, but many girls. Women at Oxford expected you to be cultured."

She should have known. "So, you were learning about classical music to impress the ladies, and this relates to our case how?"

"As you mentioned the Hapsburg's, you do know they ruled the Holy Roman Empire till Napoleon decided to play field hockey on their country, right?"

"Maybe?" Scully's understanding of European history was tentative at best. "Their capital at Vienna was a center of art and culture, and all the best composers in Europe wanted to work for the Holy Roman Emperor."

"I saw the movie. Jeffrey Jones' character. I get it."

He ignored her as he continued. "Composers would flock to Vienna and show off their best stuff. It was sort of like the New York art scene twenty years ago, everyone had their camps, everyone flocked to different artists, but there was this solidarity in the work. They were all artists, trying to catch the eye of the Emperor, to gain patrons amongst the noble elite, to have their work sponsored and put out there."

"Again, what does this have to do with spirit gum, heart disease, and a dead guy showing up on the Santa Monica pier with his head cut off?"

"Salieri was the leader of a faction of composers that had a very different way of composing than Mozart did. That group saw Mozart - young, brash, colorful - as being an upstart. They panned his style, they were critical of it, and like all artists they poked fun at it. Mozart for his part poked back."
Now, that little tidbit through history has gotten turned into some sort of rivalry, a deadly hatred of two artists, and once it got through a book and a movie, suddenly we have this comparison that LaBonge gives us of Mozart and Salieri.

Scully tried to wrap her head around what he was suggesting and wasn't terribly sure she could. "So what are you saying, that Mozart and Salieri weren't rivals?"

Mulder grinned as she finally put it all together. "While the two might have been rivals for jobs and attention, historical record shows that not only were they not rivals in that sense, they actually respected each other greatly. Salieri frequently used Mozart's work with choirs he conducted while Mozart took Salieri's advice regarding which pieces to perform. When Mozart died, Salieri was one of several of his acquaintances who took up educating his young sons."

"All these years and Hollywood lied to me?" Sarcasm lit her words like the Fourth of July.

"Not just Hollywood, just years after Salieri's death people were writing about this great rivalry."

"Salieri is a victim of nothing more than bad press?"

"That and history."

"Mulder, this music appreciation lesson was enlightening, but I have to wonder what this has to do with the apparent non-murder of a two-bit magic show performer."

There was the mysterious look, the waggle of an eyebrow as he smiled slyly. "A magician never tells his secrets."

Her arms crossed in front of her functional scrubs. "No, but an FBI agent tells his partner if he doesn't want a pair of bloody gloves in his face."

Her irritation only apparently served to amuse him. "LaBonge was talking style and flair, but what I'm hearing is that he knows Salieri and hangs out with him, and he knows a lot more than he's letting on."

He finally started to click what Mulder, in his roundabout way, was getting at. "You think that LaBonge might have known that the death was fake."

"I think he knows that someone, likely Maleeni, was up to something."

"What could that be?"

"I don't know, but I would bet dimes to donuts his brother would."

That was information he hadn't divulged yet and he was looking mighty smug about it. "Maleeni's got a brother?"

"Pinchbeck has a brother, yes. His real name was Herman and he has a twin brother named Albert who he has listed as a next-of-kin. And get this, guess who used to have a magic act with his twin brother?"

Hence why the history lesson on Viennese, classical music, "You think that the twin is our Salieri?"

"And I think he and LaBonge have been comrades in art, watching each others work."

It did make a certain amount of sense, she guessed. "But what is the point, Mulder? So, they go in together to con an audience into thinking that Herman turned his head around. It wasn't as if there
was a ton of money to be had in this."

Clearly, that was the part of the equation Mulder hadn't gotten to just yet. "That I don't know. But, Albert works as a loan officer at a local branch of Cradock Marine, and I would be curious to know where he was the other day when his brother was found with his head missing on the Santa Monica pier."

Scully agreed, glancing down at her scrubs. "Let me go get changed and let's see what Salieri can tell us about his brother's work."

"Told you a classical music education would do you good," he grinned, cheekily.
Cissy Alvarez protested his innocence all the way back to the LAPD squad car. He shouted it to anyone who would listen amongst the onlookers in the East LA neighborhood, most of whom were trying to look as innocuous as possible to the local police. Scully had a feeling that more than a few of them knew exactly who Cissy Alvarez was and didn't exactly want to be linked, especially if they weren't exactly legally in the US.

"Well, Alvarez knows how to put on quite a show," Mulder drawled lazily as officers began to gather up the stolen bags of money and take them into custody.

"That he does," she agreed as he continued to protest his innocence even after being shoved in the back of an LAPD black and white. "The sad thing is, I think he might be right."

"Me too," Mulder agreed as the other members of Alvarez's gang were given the same treatment as their leader.

"So why are we letting them take him into custody?"

"Because we can't prove it wasn't him." Mulder glanced back into the seedy pool hall, lazy cigarette smoke still hazing across the green felt tables. "I think that Alvarez just got caught up in perhaps one of the greatest magic tricks of all time."

"Magic trick?" Scully arched an eyebrow up at her partner. "Seems more of a con to me."

"That's the thing with magic tricks, how much of it is really mystical forces and how much of it is someone playing into your confidence and making you believe it is something it isn't? The good ones can con you into believing enough to at least go along with the trick, but the great ones can make you really believe that what is happening is completely real. In effect, they are some of the greatest con artists alive."

"So Pinchbeck and LaBonge have everyone fooled into believing that Alvarez stole that money from the vault."

"Well, because he did. But it's a bit more complicated than that."

Mulder jerked his head inside the pool hall, directing her to follow him as he step inside the dim coolness. It smelled of stale beer, tobacco, and mold, but Scully followed him to the spot in the ceiling where the money had been hidden.

"So the art of magic is all misdirection, correct?"

Scully nodded, frowning up at the stained and shifted ceiling tile, then back down to Mulder as he leaned against the pool table still covered in brightly colored balls from Alvarez's unfinished game.

"This entire case begins with what we all suspected was a murder, one jealous magician against another. The Santa Monica police are focused on what appears to be a strange and violent death
caused by a magic trick."

"Except that it turns out that it wasn't a magic trick, it was heart disease, and it wasn't Herman Pinchbeck, but his twin brother, Albert."

"Ahh," Mulder held up his right hand, closing it into a fist as he whispered, low and mysterious. "Is the coin really in my right hand?"

Her confusion only deepened as she stared at it. "Herman admitted to us at the bank he wasn't his brother. He told us he found his brother dead when he went to ask him for a loan and used the opportunity to create a new life for himself. Herman becomes Albert and he can leave his old life behind."

"So Herman takes up Albert's life, trying to escape from his debts to Alvarez. All a very harmless con, one in the long run that hurts no one."

Scully stared at Mulder's clenched knuckles, considering. "Except it's convenient that he is taking up his brother's place as the loan officer at the very bank that Cissy Alvarez is accused of robbing."

Mulder grinned as he unclenched his hand, wagging long fingers, as he brought up his left fist beside it. "And as we are paying attention to what is in his right hand, Herman Pinchbeck is setting up Cissy Alvarez with his left."

"So he can get out of his gambling debts." Now the whole thing made sense. "He fakes his death at the Santa Monica pier, a very public place so that everyone can see that he died. He then takes on the persona of his brother. For extra measure, he entraps the man he owes outrageous money to just to get him out of the way in case he still remains a threat."

"And that, Scully, would be your straightforward con. But Pinchbeck, he's something of an artist."

"The Salieri to LaBonge's Mozart, I know." She rolled her eyes at her remembered history lesson."

"And that's just it, Scully." Mulder opened his left fist, letting the fingers splay in front of her nose. "What if Salieri was trying to leave the stage and give Mozart a little bit of help while doing it? Show the youngster that the old dog could still do tricks."

"By robbing he bank and framing Alvarez for it?"

"And making off with $1.8 million to boot." Mulder's eyes flickered to the ceiling above them. "And if I hadn't found the money, they might have just gotten away with it."

"So LaBonge is in on it?"

"In on it, I think it was initially his idea, at least the framing Alvarez part."

It had struck Scully as passing strange that Alvarez would know LaBonge by name. "What does LaBonge have against Alvarez? It's Pinchbeck that owes him the money."

"Oh, Pinchbeck owes him money, but that's not what started this. Remember our work up of Billy LaBonge. Has a bit of a record in petty thievery."

"Sure."

"Eight years ago he happened to be doing time in the very same cell block as Cissy Alvarez."

That knowledge tugged at something in Scully's memory, something that Pinchbeck had said.
"When we confronted Pinchbeck he called Alvarez a 'tattooed psychopath', said he did horrible things to fellow inmates."

"Remember, you were the one who called Pinchbeck out on his card playing with Alvarez. His stint as Maleeni isn't making him money, but obviously he's got to eat somehow, my guess it's at the card tables using his own bag of tricks. He could have easily won that game against Alvarez if he wanted to, instead he lost big."

"He deliberately lost it."

"High standards and common decency be damned." Mulder shoved both open hands into his pockets. "So here's what my theory is on all of this. LaBonge meets Pinchbeck on the circuit. The two have artistic differences, but LaBonge is the up and comer while Maleeni is the old hand. They get to swapping stories about careers, life, and they agree to do some work together. Problem is, neither of them has enough money to do that. When Herman goes to Albert to borrow the money, it's just as he said, his twin brother is dead. But Herman, never one to let sentiment get in the way, thought on his feet and decided to make the best out of the situation."

"He took on his brother's life to try and steal the money."

"But, LaBonge had an even better idea, and he shares it with Pinchbeck. Having a bank employee stealing the money and cutting and running would be too obvious. LaBonge thinks it would be so much better to instead frame someone else, and conveniently, he has that very person in mind."

"Cissy Alvarez, the man who made LaBonge's life a living hell in prison."

"So, Pinchbeck creates an elaborate scheme, with the help of LaBonge, to kill three birds with one well, placed stone. He loses in the card game, creating an alibi for why he would be killed by Alvarez. Then he places his brother's corpse at the pier, so that investigators would think that Herman was dead and finger Alvarez for it."

"Except when I did the autopsy, it was obvious that it wasn't a murder."

"Right," Mulder confirmed, shifting against the pool table he leaned against. "He wasn't seriously expecting you to believe that it was murder. Arthur's body was a red herring, something designed as a distraction, to get us there and get us interested enough to want to know what was going on, but not so interested we would notice what he was doing behind the scenes."

And that was the part that was confusing Scully. "Just what were they doing behind the scenes?"

"Did you ever read up on what Herman and Albert's magic show in Vegas was all about?"

Scully hadn't, but she could tell by the delighted, know-it-all grin on Mulder's face he had. "I'm taking it they didn't make the Statue of Liberty disappear?"

"They had a Houdini, escape like act. They would play it up like as if the trick was they were twins and while one was locked up the other would come out, but in reality both were quite talented escape artists."

"It's a wonder that show ever made it to Vegas," Scully replied dryly.

"It's likely why Arthur ended up in banking. Convenient that he did, because Herman was able to impersonate him and use his knowledge of security breaking to his advantage."

"But he didn't steal the money. He couldn't have. We checked everything before we took him to jail,
it was there, but it disappeared overnight. And we had Pinchbeck in jail. Where we already had LaBonge for possession of a weapon after he said he went to confront Alvarez." The logistics were starting to hurt Scully's brain.

"So they are both in jail. Convenient alibi for a bank robbery, isn't it?"

"So what did they do, escape the jail, steal the money, come here and hide it in the ceiling, and sneak back to jail."

Mulder's grin was nearly as wide as his face. "One of the best, magic tricks I know of."

Of all the crazy things Mulder believed in, this was one of the crazier ones, and Scully was damned if it also wasn't likely the absolute right answer.

"LaBonge sets up the armor truck heist to have people think that Alvarez tried to do it, given information by Pinchbeck on the movement of the truck so that he can cover his debts. That sets up Alvarez as a likely suspect. LaBonge creates a scene, gets arrested, he's in jail. Pinchbeck conveniently gets 'discovered', he is sent to jail, but not before we link him to the attempted Alvarez truck heist. So they are both sitting there, ignored, believed to be in custody while Alvarez is still free out there, and $1.8 million mysteriously goes missing. And there they are still, waiting for Alvarez to be brought into custody. LaBonge's fake gun charge will clear, Pinchbeck will clear when it comes out he had nothing to do with Alvarez's so called robbery, and not only will LaBonge's enemy go back to jail for a very long time, the two of them will also walk off with a good deal of money."

"And no one will suspect that they were had by two of the greatest con artists of all time?" Scully had to admit she was impressed.

"Not con artists, magicians," Mulder corrected her.

"And you figured this out all from the money in the ceiling?" Scully blinked at her partner in wonder, not for the first time in their long career. Somehow, he still never ceased to amaze her.

"Well, besides Spooky Mulder, I've also been called 'The Great Muldini' in my time." Mulder smirked, pushing off from the pool table.

"The Great Muldini? How old were you again when that happened?"

"Nine and I made my Mom believe I had made the family dog disappear. Of course, the jig was up when the blanket started to move."

"You know what they say, Mulder, never work with kids or animals."

"Thus went my short-lived career as a magician. Somehow, I think that Pinchbeck and LaBonge might have a long career ahead of them yet."

He had a point. All of this was flimsy evidence and nothing tied the two directly to the robbery itself. "So they get away with it all then?"

"Well, they don't get the money, that will be returned to the bank once the case on Alvarez is closed. But yeah, we got nothing to hold them on."

Scully sighed, pursing her mouth as she followed Mulder out of the dingy hall. "So they really are great magicians. They manage to disappear out of the justice system."

"I don't know. You got to give them something for trying." Mulder shrugged as they stepped back
out into the Los Angeles sunshine.

Scully glanced sideways at him, surprised. "You admire them for this?"

"Got to admit, it takes some cajones to pull off something this big. They nearly had us fooled."

"I suppose they didn't know what they were getting into with Fox Mulder on the case." Scully smirked at him as they watched the last of the LAPD officers combing the scene. "So we just let them go?"

"What can we do? The federal district attorney will be far more interested in busting Alvarez then a couple of petty con artists."

"Magicians," Scully shot back, earning a chuckle from Mulder.

"I think that these two are smart enough to lay low for a while and let their greatest feet ever speak for itself."

"Somehow, I don't think it will rate them a Vegas show."

"I don't know, Scully, I might go and see them if they did it."
"Seriously, how did you do that?"

If it had been the second or perhaps even fifth time he'd asked that since leaving the holding cell in Hollywood where Pinchbeck and LaBonge had been released, Scully might have simply smiled and ignored him. Since this was now the twentieth time, and they were somewhere mid-flight over Arkansas with another two hours to go, her patience had run completely thin.

"Magic, Mulder, now shut up and eat your peanuts."

In irritation, a long finger dug into the tiny, foil packet, snagged a salt and honey crusted one, and shoved it into his mouth. "Okay, I've eaten one, why won't you tell me?"

She had no idea why this conversation was continuing. Perhaps it was because she had taunted him with her display of presdigitation. Perhaps it was because he was bored on a long flight. More likely, she had simply annoyed him by not telling him.

"Mulder, you know the rules, a magician doesn't tell his secrets."

"Or hers, for that matter, but you, Dana Scully, are no magician."

Her answer was to simply stare at him mysteriously before returning imperiously to the novel that she was obviously not ever meant to finish on this flight.

"Don't give me that line about your uncle being an amateur magician again."

"He was," she replied simply, feeling she had at least read the page sufficiently to get the gist, even if Mulder was making that exceedingly difficult.

"Everyone has an uncle who was an amateur magician. Usually, he just picked up some stupid trick or two as a kid and used it to try and not creep out the nieces and nephews at birthday parties."

"Mine was a real magician," she insisted, refusing to put down her book.

"He the one who taught you how to fake eating bugs?"

What in the hell was he talking about? She turned, finally relenting on the book, placing a finger between the dry pages. "Eating a bug?"

"You remember, Florida? The town populated by circus freaks?"

Oh yes, the case of the conjoined twins where one of them could actually leave the other. "I had hoped I'd forget that case."

"You remember the freak."
"Vaguely." She remembered a guy who could shove nails up his nose.

"He offered you a jar of bugs and you pretended to eat one of them."

Oh, now she remembered. That had been years ago! It brought a bright laugh to her lips. "Oh, that! That was Dr. Blockhead. He said that nature abhors normal like you and likes to produce mutants."

That nettled Mulder, who looked affronted he would be called anything akin to normal. "In any case, you said you had an amateur magician for an uncle."

"I did, Mom's older brother, named Charles. He's who my brother is named for. He worked as an English teacher in Baltimore for years, but he had this side gig doing amateur hours and talent shows. He seemed to enjoy it."

"And he's the one who taught you how to turn your arm like that?"

"Yep." This was bugging the hell out of him and Scully couldn't say she wasn't enjoying teasing him so thoroughly.

"So how do you do it?"

"You aren't going to let this go till I tell you."

"Sculllyyyyy!" His tone turned high, nasal, and supremely annoying, sounding right in her ear and clearly irritating to the person in the seat on the other side of Scully. The woman glared sideways at her from behind her book, silently disapproving of her partner's antics.

"Stop it," she hissed, earning an unrepentant smirk from him as he leaned in close, his breath stirring the hair against her neck.

"What will it take from me to get you to tell me?"

She swallowed so hard her throat hurt and eyes misted as she tried to repress the shiver that ran full length down her spine. "Stop it, Mulder." If he didn't, she'd be a puddle of goo and all hope for self-control and self-respect would be lost.

He straightened. Did he have any idea that effect he had on her at times? "I shared with you how LaBonge and Pinchbeck did it."

"Of course, you had to, it's part of our investigation."

"It's how these things work. I show you mine, if you show me yours."

Now he was just being mean. "Seriously, Mulder, it's a stupid magic trick, one that my uncle used to do for us kids when we were little. Why does it matter?"

"'Cause I want to know!"

He was worse than a four-year-old. Scully sighed, heavily. "Fine, I'll tell you. The secret is…I'm double jointed."

Her response only earned a narrowed gaze as his bottom lip poked out slowly in a pout. He needed not to do that. She watched his full, bottom lip quiver as her stomach did funny things she did not appreciate.

"I'm not telling!"
He finally seemed to give up. Away went the bottom lip as he rolled his eyes dramatically upward. "Fine, if you won't tell me, I'll stop asking."

"Finally," she muttered as she turned back to the book she had been attempting to read before he began bugging her.

"Think your mother will tell me?"

"No," she responded without looking up.

"But she likes me!"

"She does, Mulder, but she won't tell you. It's a family secret."

"Your mother loves me!"

"But you aren't family, Mulder, she will keep that secret to the grace."

Mulder clearly didn't like this turn of events. "Not even if I complement her pumpkin pie."

"Not even if you eat twenty of her rhubarb ones."

A long suffering sigh sounded before he threw himself back in his seat, finally defeated. "Who knew you Scullys would be so clannish?"

She rolled her eyes, trying not to snort into her book. "Who knew you would be so obsessed over a little magic trick?"

"Fine." He leaned back, closing his eyes briefly, the subject seemingly dropped at last. With a sigh of relief, Scully hoped she could return to the book she was attempting to read.

"Still, Scully, you could give a guy a hint. I mean, I did solve the case and all…"

She was so going to regret this entire flight home.
It never ceased to surprise Scully the number of people who wandered into the gleaming white pillars of Holy Trinity first thing in the morning. The austere, marbled Jesuit church was one of the oldest parishes in the city, and every politician and power broker who felt any need to confess usually made their way through the sacred space at some point. This perhaps explained the numbers that wandered through in the morning, waiting for their turn to sit in the confessional. The Jesuit fathers seemed to have an endless amount of patience for the good and the great that came in, from the highest-ranking politico to the sleepy-eyed, frumpy student from the nearby, Jesuit-run, Georgetown University. Scully watched in respectful silence as first one, then another quiet attendee filed out of the closed doors of confession into the bright and airy sanctuary, off to the business of their mornings.

She rose from her prayers, the rosary she had since her confirmation in hand. Carefully she slipped it in her pocket as she stepped inside the quiet comfort of the confessional booth, waiting for the confessor on the other side. A deep breath, a silent prayer, the familiar sign of the crucifix, and then well remembered formula to the sacrament of confession.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned." Her words hung in the incense-scented air for a moment. "It's been a month since my last confession."

The voice on the other side was low, warm, comforting, and younger than she would have expected. "What do you seek to confess, my child?"

She sighed, breathing heavily as she tried to begin where to start. "I am troubled, father."

"By what?"

"Change," she responded. It was so simple a word and carried with it such a deep meaning.

"Change is inevitable in everyone's life. The universe never stays the same."

"I know." Scully replied, folding her hands in her lap, worrying at one thumb nail as she stared down at them. "For years I've worked at the FBI, as an agent, with a man who many say is crazy."

"Do you believe he is?"

Scully paused for a minute, her mouth lifting into a hint of a smile. "Sometimes...he's dedicated to his work. He believes in what he is doing. I suppose that I believe in it because he does."

"Not because you do?"

"Not in the same way." She never had. Scully had always believed in the goal of the X-files, to find the truth, to understand what was really going on. But Mulder didn't just believe in the X-files, he believed in more than the X-files. He believed in the stories, the theories, the possibilities. Scully still wasn't sure she did, but she believed in them because he did.
"Our work has led us down a very dangerous path," she murmured into the semi-dark. "It has cost us both much; family, careers, almost our lives. It's asked a heavy price of us and I don't know if I can pay that price anymore."

Fingers twisted tightly into the fabric of her jacket. She released the crumpled fabric and attempted to smooth it out. What was she trying to confess here? Confusion? Fear? Anger?

She found her voice again, trying to work out what to even say. "My mother always said to trust in God and his beneficence in moments like these, that wherever I'm being led, God's providence will take care of me. I have to admit, over these last seven years, I've not seen much in the way of His providence, and now, things are shifting, changing, and I don't think I trust God much at the moment."

The faceless voice on the other side was compassionate. "Everyone has doubts like that, my child. It's natural, as humans, to have doubt, even in God."

Logically, Scully knew this, but a small, angry part of her couldn't help the words that blurted out of her, almost against her will. "Where was God when I was kidnapped? Where was God when some other insane killer or person with some other agenda wanted to make off with me for whatever reason they had? Where was God when my daughter lay dying in the hospital, my sister, all from things other people did to them? Where was God when I lay dying?"

Tears welled up in her eyes, unbidden, and for the first time Scully could ever remember she found herself crying in the confessional. Never before had she ever been this raw. Open, yes, doubting, of course, but emotional, never. Not even when speaking to Father McCue after Donnie Pfaster had she showed this much anger.

"I recently killed a man." She threw it out there so casually, as if Donnie Pfaster had been nothing more than a routine aspect of her day. "He was a serial killer escaped from prison after he had murdered at least one woman and had captured me several years ago. Over time, he fixated on me, to the point that he tracked me down upon his escape and surprised me in my apartment."

This brought a long silence from the man on the other side. When he replied, it was somewhat stunned. "You must have been terrified."

"Yes," she said simply. She had been, utterly so. "More than anything I was just angry. I raged with the injustice of it all, that a man this evil could live when so many others haven't. I knew that if I died then, he would just be free to kill again and again, and I knew in that moment that the justice system had failed. I wanted to kill him."

Again, silence.

"I've sought absolution for that and received it," Scully hurriedly added, feeling that somehow she had just shocked the priest more than he could possibly stand. "My partner, my parish priest, they agreed I was working in the name of justice."

"Do you believe that," he finally asked in a soft voice.

Scully paused, circumspect. "I don't know. I know that I want to."

"And you can't bring yourself to believe it?"

How could she even delve into the depths of her confusion on any of this? "Father, I've wondered for so long if God was even there, even listening, how can I believe he was there in that one moment of anger?"
"Why would you believe God wasn't there?"

That was the heart of all of this. "I haven't been a perfect woman, father. I have done things. I revel in the pride of my intellect and on the ability I have to understand the world through my own intelligence and reasoning. But I've failed so utterly at it so many times. I fell in love with a man once. I believed he loved me, but he was married. I committed a sin without even realizing it. I agreed to take a position at the FBI, I thought I was doing the right thing, and my family has had to suffer through that. And now this."

Here life seemed to be a string of events that started as good intentions and ended in misery. Though she knew it was erroneous to think it, Scully had to ask herself in moments like this if everything she had seen, had been fighting against, had struggled with was really as a result of God's displeasure. Perhaps she had not seen God because he had chosen to ignore her, had not forgiven her for the sin of Daniel, of the sin of her own pride, of the sin of her anger. She hated to admit it, but there it was, that niggling doubt in her brain, the secret fear that drove her to this moment.

"You think God has abandoned you because you have sinned so greatly that you are unworthy of his love?"

"Yes." It hurt to admit it. The word fell into the stillness and sank. Shame spread quietly as she realized how awful that single syllable sounded.

"Is that how you justify to yourself what has happened?"

"How else can I justify it?" Scully wanted to laugh despite the tears. "I was taught that God loves those who try to live without sin."

"If that were the case, my child, do you really think that the act of Christ's death and resurrection would be necessary? God loves the sinner. It is why God has moved in the world as he has. Even in when Judah was sent into exile, punished for their wrongdoings, God loved them still. He didn't abandon them."

What was the old lament she had to learn as a child? By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...

She remembered her Zion and she wept bitterly for it.

The priest seemed to sense the depth of her grief. "Remember what the exiles said as they mourned for their city? 'For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.'"

She didn't know the verse, but its words, the tender way he spoke, did bring some small measure of comfort as she rolled them over in her mind. "Even in the midst of their grief and belief that God had punished them for their wickedness, his people knew that he had not left them, that he would have compassion on them, and that eventually their suffering will end. Soon, your suffering too will end, my child, I believe that. God hasn't left you, if anything, he's waiting for you to remember he is there and to release the burdens you carry so heavily with you."

Release her burdens? Could she ever really do that? Could she let go of the weight of the things that had happened to her and of the things she clung to? "What if I can't?"

"Do you want to suffer forever?"

"There's a place for suffering in our faith."
"For our faith, child, not in spite of it. I will not deny that there isn't self-awareness and insight that comes from suffering. But are you gaining anything from it?"

The burden of loss, the burden of fear, the burden of grief, those things she clung on to because she had half afraid that without them, she wouldn't know what to do with herself. What would she do if she were no longer Special Agent Dana Scully, running into a conspiracy that had taken so much from her and her family? Who would she be if she weren't Scully, Fox Mulder's intrepid partner, who survived kidappings and attempted murder at the hands of serial killers to drag Mulder out of military prisons and hospitals and put him back on the road of finding his truth? Who would she be? Would she even recognize herself? If she just let go of that entire burden, could she bear it?

"You wouldn't be alone," the priest murmured in answer to her unspoken question. "God is always with us."

In automatic response her fingers crept towards the cross that nestled at the base of her throat, the warm gold feather light against her skin. Her mother had given it to her years ago, had said something of the same thing. God would always be there with her. She hadn't understood it then, but now, perhaps she did. She wouldn't be alone.

If she could ever bring herself to let go…

"I confess then the sin of anger and of pride, father." Anger toward God and pride that she believed she could do this alone.

"We all suffer from those sins from time to time, my child. Pray and consider, this is your penance."

As the priest prayed the words of absolution over her, Scully closed her eyes, whispered words racing through her mind but dying at her lips. How could she simply just let herself and everything she was going so easily? Was God really still there? Was God really listening to her?

"May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your stings, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life."

"Amen," Scully breathed upon the priest's blessing. Her fingers unknotted in her lap as she slowly rose to go.

"Go in peace, my child," the priest gave as a final benediction. Scully murmured a thank you as she made her way out of the confessional. The sunlight was dazzling on the white walls, and she stopped on her way out to blink at a shrine to St. Ignatius in one of the chapels, the founder of the Society of Jesus, the order the church was beholden to. The patron saint of soldiers and all those who sought to search for the enlightening flame of truth. She quietly lit a candle at the altar and whispered a quick, silent prayer. In one fluid motion she rose from the kneeler, crossing herself as she made her way out of the church. Her thoughts whirling, she barely registered her vibrating in her pocket as she made her way to her car. She snagged it before it went to voice mail.

"Scully," she breathed as she dug for her car keys.

"Was checking to see if you were all right."

She should have known it was Mulder. "Yeah, stopped by Holy Trinity near me. What's up?" She knew Mulder wouldn't think twice about her stopping by church on her way in and admired his restraint in making a comment on it.

"Speaking of churches, we've got a case."
"Having to do with churches?" The last time they had something to do with a church they had to deal with Skinner's buddy making a movie about their lives. What was his name again? Wayne?

"Yep, though that isn't the weird thing about this case. You afraid of snakes?"

She paused in her key search to frown in worry at that statement. "No more than the average person. Why?"

"As far as you know, are they very active this time of year?"

"Winter? I don't think so. What sort of case is this?"

"I'll surprise you when you get in, I need to put a call into a zoologist real quick. I'll fill you in soon."

He hung up with those parting words, leaving Scully to contemplate her cell phone blankly. At least with Mulder life was always interesting. Perhaps in addition to forgiveness and protection, she should have prayed for patience as well.
Snake Church

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully discuss some old-time religion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Why did all the cases involving weird revivals and fundamentalist Christianity have to happen in Tennessee?

"Smell that, Scully?" Mulder rolled down the window in the February chill, breathing deeply as they drove past a shack with a rusted tin roof and a sign that featured a fat pig slathered in barbecue sauce. "That is the smell of heaven right there."

"I would have thought that was the scent of hell, but I suppose we all have our opinions." She smirked cheekily at him as he wrinkled his nose.

"We are getting barbecue while we are down here. Remember our great barbecue adventure all those years ago?"

Scully remembered. Early on in their work, Mulder had dragged her to every major barbecue capital in the country on one case or the other, and to every run down joint he could find in search of the perfect, smoked meat slathered in tangy sauce. She had complained at the time regarding his disregard for anything resembling healthy food, now she could look back on it all with fondness.

"I'd say something Mulder, but after all these years I've learned it won't do me any good."

"Disliking barbecue is un-American, Scully!"

"I like it well enough. Remember, I ate those beef ribs with you in Wisconsin. I just don't think it should be a steady part of my diet."

"Come on, when was the last time we were anywhere near a good barbecue joint."

Admittedly, that had been a while. Somehow, their work had been taking them mostly to the West and not so much to the small, remote, backwoods towns they had once frequented. Towns like Blessing, which was where they were headed now, a small, remote community in the Smokey Mountains of east Tennessee.

"So the sheriff called this in to you because he suspected that this has something to do with one of the religious groups in the community?" Scully had to admit, she was vaguely intrigued with this case. The idea of snakes as a weapon had a powerful connotation to most Abrahamic religions, especially due to the symbolic relationship of the snake to Satan and the fall of man through original sin. Still, it was one thing to debate on symbolism in the hallowed halls of theological academia, it was another to find a kid killed by snakes.

"The sheriff has a good reason to wonder. The type of species that killed Jared Chirp shouldn't even be up and awake let alone in those sort of numbers this time of year."
"So how does the sheriff think the snakes got in there?"

"He's not sure and frankly I think he was afraid to speculate."

"Why?"

"What do you know about snake handling churches, Scully?" As usual with Mulder, he dropped it into the conversation, a seeming non sequitur that made sense to him.

"Very little. I've seen pictures of them in the National Geographic magazines."

"You do know about the added ending to the Gospel of Mark, right?"

When did this case become a pop quiz on her theological knowledge? "I guess?"

Mulder glanced sideways at her in surprise as his eyes flickered from her back to the road. "So how does the Gospel of Mark end?"

Scully had to think for a moment. While she had read her Bible from cover-to-cover and had to learn great parts of it as a child for school, she couldn't say that reliably she could tell her gospels apart. "Is that the one with the Great Commission?"

"Nope, wrong "M", that would be Matthew."

"Mulder, you are the atheist of the pair of us. How do you remember it?"

"Photographic memory. Mark is the one that ends with the women going to the cave where Christ is buried only to find that the body isn't there. They run off in terror. That's where the book ends, but at some point in later centuries, some disgruntled person wanted to change the ending to something more exciting and thrilling and thus wrote a new set of verses that wrapped up the gospel a little more neatly."

Scully seemed to recall this from the depths of her Catholic school education. "So what does this have to do with snake churches?"

"Protestant churches, as you know, long ago embraced the authority of scripture over that of any ecclesiastical authority, such as a pope. As a consequence, these churches looked to the scripture alone for the establishment of their denominations. This works fine, I suppose, when your church body is educated enough to have read the Bible in its original Greek and Hebrew, but what if your church body is made up of back woods farmers who can barely read?"

"You somehow end up with a snake church?" Scully was guessing that ultimately this was where it was all going to lead.

"Precisely. America's Christian roots sprung up from a desire for religious freedom, but at the cost of any vestige of organized authority. Consequently, you had all sorts of homegrown preachers springing up, all feeling they were inspired by God to carry out his message to reform the church, many of them only understood the Bible as it was transmitted to them by whatever un-educated, revival Bible-thumper that converted them. That's where the Gospel of Mark comes in."

"How is that?"

"The alternate ending to the Gospel of Mark has a short version and a long version. The longer version speaks of Jesus commissioning his disciples to carry out the gospel, and states that there will be signs that accompany those who believe, including the ability to pick up snakes in their hands and
to drink deadly things without being hurt."

Scully could very easily see how in the hands of a homegrown preacher without an education to explain the development of scripture this could very easily turn into a snake church. "So these churches grew up out of what was essentially a piece of Biblical alternate endings?"

"Everybody has to have an angle to work, Scully. Luther wanted to piss and moan on indulgences, Calvin argued that only the elect could go to heaven, everyone has their own interpretations and run with it."

"But a snake church? These people allow themselves to be poisoned because of their faith, and it turns out their entire theology is based on something that essentially was an add on at a later date."

"Now you know how the Jews feel about Christians."

Scully only smirked at him as he chuckled to himself. "What happens if they are bitten and don't survive?"

"They lacked the faith to protect them, I suppose. In some ways these snake churches are just a backwoods Calvinism, they difference being they really test this idea of if a person is elect, if they are faithful enough."

"It's barbaric," Scully retorted. The image of Jared Chirp came to mind, swollen with poison from hundreds of snakes.

"Says the woman who believes that the bread and wine is the real body and blood of Christ."

"My church doesn't believe in poisoning itself in order to prove its faith."

"No, but the occasional burning at the stake or inquisition is more acceptable?"

Red flushed her cheeks, but Scully bit her tongue. Mulder was baiting her and she knew it. "No religion is perfect and I never claimed mine was."

"My point, exactly," Mulder replied. "What you consider barbaric, they consider a point of faith."

"Because they are following the scriptures faithfully? I seem to recall in Genesis that God said that there would be enmity between the woman and her children and the snake, not that they would get chummy in church together."

"That parts true. But I have to wonder if this whole thing doesn't have something to do with that. As you pointed out, the snake is the symbol of evil for the Abrahamic religions, often it is associated with evil, but also it is associated with women."

"I hope you aren't suggesting those two ideas go together," Scully muttered. Mulder only snorted and shook his head.

"I know better than that and value my life too much. What little the sheriff told me about the victim was that he was young, unmarried, but he'd been seen around town with a young woman who is expecting."

"Unmarried and pregnant." That might give some angry father some motive. "Let me guess, one or both of them has ties to one of these snake churches?"

"That was the indication the sheriff gave, but we'll know more when we get into town."
This case was starting a bit more sense to Scully. "Well, if we are dealing with a fundamentalist church with a strict interpretation of scripture, an unwed couple expecting a baby would not be something that anyone would be happy about."

Mulder nodded. "And for those who are willing to wage sin their punishment should be to die by their sin."

"So we are talking about some sort of good, old-fashioned, Old Testament justice?"

"Beats an angry father with a shotgun, doesn't it."

Scully had to agree, it was certainly much more creative than she would have suspected. "They had to know that someone would suspect, especially when snakes should be in hibernation this time of year."

"I won't deny that, and I won't deny this whole thing is as squirmy as a bag full of rattlers, which is why I wanted to go and speak to the pastor of the church in town first. His name is Reverend Mackey, he's been the one seeing to all of Jared Chirp's funeral arrangements."

"Not his family?"

"Maybe they disowned him. Maybe they are in on it."

The idea of it saddened Scully. To never escape your sins, even in death. She thought of her confession that morning, of how she herself had trouble letting go of her sins and burdens. She felt a sudden rush of sympathy for the young man. Killed because he was a kid in love with a girl and doing what most kids in the rest of society did.

"It's a shame he was killed for it," she sighed, frowning at the seen outside.

"We don't know why he was killed," Mulder reminded her. "But it's a start."

Scully frowned at the roadside sign that announced they were pulling into the town of Blessing. Snakes, angry parents, a dead boy, and a pregnant girl, it was all he makings for one of those small-town sagas that she usually didn't understand. How could the sins of one pair of kids mean more than the life of one of them?

But then, a niggling voice asked her, how is your sin so precious you refuse to let it go?

Scully already heartily wished this case was over.

Chapter End Notes

I would like it noted, I really hate snakes. I have an honest to goodness phobia. Just...nooo....
Old Time Religion

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is angry over a father abandoning his daughter.

Gracie O'Connor, scared and alone, barred from her community by a father who wouldn't forgive her. That idea rang uncomfortably close to Scully and her own faith struggles of late, the idea of an unforgiving father who would punish a daughter for her transgressions. In Gracie's case, however, it really was an unfairly cruel punishment.

"The sheriff's office said O'Connor was in Kentucky when Jared Chirp was killed." She and Mulder moved back towards their rental parked outside of Blessing Community Church, set on returning back out to the country where the Church of Signs and Wonders was located.

"Doesn't mean he couldn't have gotten one of his congregation to do it," Mulder instantly replied, unlocking the doors as they both made to get inside. "And chances are he's charismatic enough to have convinced someone to do the work for him."

"I just don't understand." Scully shook her head as she locked the seatbelt into place. "His own daughter, he would treat her this way?"

"Perhaps that's why he would treat her this way. It's worse for a man of God when it is his own daughter because they are expected to know better."

It was true. There was that cliché about the preachers' daughters, that they were the ones who were always the most wild. "So Gracie acted out. She's a young girl, it's what they do. That doesn't justify murdering her boyfriend."

"I don't know, Scully, what would have your father done if you or your sister had gone to him as teenagers claiming to be pregnant."

"He wouldn't have murdered them!"

"I wouldn't have put it past a man in the military, but you're right, your father wouldn't have. But then again, your father didn't live by the strict scriptural interpretation of Enoch O'Connor either."

"So he hoped to use his snakes to cover up the crime?"

"It's convenient, you have to admit that. It's hard to make the idea of murder stick to something like that, especially if Chirp had a place in the church before. How can we prove that he didn't willingly test himself?"

"You said it yourself, Mulder, he was going somewhere. There was a suitcase packed. I think testing himself was the last thing he had in mind."

"I agree, which is why I want to know what it was he was so afraid of. What is Enoch O'Connor up to?"

He pulled the car out of the church's parking lot and onto the main road that led out of town and into
the back hills above Blessing, the hills where the Church of Signs and Wonders was located. It was beautiful country, Scully had to grant that, the gently rolling foothills that lead up to the mountains that divided Tennessee from North Carolina. It was a country filled with people whose families had settled in the area two centuries ago, forming remote communities to work the land and mine the hills. They were clannish, set in their ways, isolated for a long time with only their traditions and beliefs, most of those ideas were strange and foreign to the more urbane, highly educated Scully.

"I don't understand, Mulder." She finally sighed as they passed the edges of the Blessing city limits. "How can any of this be justified under a loving God?"

"You assume that they see God as loving." Mulder shrugged as he drove, his face thoughtful. "Liberal thought in the West has given Christianity a new understanding of the relationship of mankind to the divine. However, there are still corners of the world where a more authoritarian understanding of the divine reigns, where God is seen as someone to be loved out of fear and obeisance. If one loves God, they trust him implicitly."

"Even to do harm against his creation?" Even in saying that, Scully heard herself just the day before, confessing to her belief God had abandoned her because of her sins. Was her own belief so very far removed from that of Enoch O'Connor?

"It makes a certain sense if you understand it from an older perspective of the divine." Mulder spoke with the academic acumen of a scholar, not the empathy of a man who had been raised up and struggled with the faith. "The Old Testament is filled with instances of fathers sacrificing their children for the love of God to prove their righteousness."

"So O'Connor takes one or two stories from the Bible and turns that into an excuse to kick out his teenage daughter and kill her boyfriend and declare it all right with God?"

"He's a man who leads a legalistically devout church, who sees the permissive culture around him, who doesn't think twice about teenage girls getting pregnant outside of marriage and who doesn't seem to care about God and his law anymore. It's logical he would want to act out in the name of God's vengeance."

"Logical?" Scully felt her voice pitch somewhere to the ceiling as she stared at the side of her partner's head. "This is the same backwards thinking around here that produced that one cult down in Chattanooga, the one where everyone committed suicide. The same erroneous understanding of scripture, the same boneheaded interpretation, and it ended up with everyone dead."

She should have known she had crossed a line the minute she saw Mulder's jaw twitch, but she ignored it, even as his knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Something long pent up in her bubbled to the surface and loosed itself in frustration on her unsuspecting partner.

"You were so caught up in that girl, Melissa, you paid no attention to the mind games that were being played on her by someone who thought he was interpreting scripture in the name of God. Who knows how that man played with her broken mind, and then you let her get under your skin and carried on about soul mates and kindred spirits. And in the end the girl died because one man really believed that the end times were coming and that we were the harbingers of it."

Mulder was deadly silent in the seat beside her. They hadn't discussed Melissa Riedel once in three years. Scully didn't think they'd been to Tennessee since. Mulder had swept that pain under the rug, like so many other ones save Samantha, and Scully likewise had ignored it the bitter, aching resentment that woman brought to mind. He had been so willing to believe that she was his perfect mate through all of space and time, and in the meantime a madman with a Bible and an imperfect understanding of eschatology had killed forty-five innocent people. She didn't really realize till how
much she blamed Mulder for that moment. She blamed him less for Vernon Ephesian and more for Melissa Riedel. Still, it wasn't fair, she recognized that.

"Wow," Mulder finally murmured after several long minutes of silence between them. "I had no idea you felt that way."

"Mulder…" She paused. She was honest at least.

"Melissa Riedel? You really hold her against me?"

Her cheeks flushed crimson as she realized shamefully how petty it all must seem. "It was a bad case from start to finish."

"Melissa Riedel had nothing to do with what Ephesian did, and she had nothing to do with the cult he twisted around those people."

"I know that," Scully snapped, feeling more foolish by the minute. "I don't know, Mulder, I shouldn't have spoken ill of the dead. I apologize for that."

Mulder shrugged, a sad gesture as he stared at the winding road ahead of them. "You have a right to your feelings, Scully. I had no idea that she still bothered you so much."

To be honest, Scully hadn't either.

"Perhaps I should have realized it sooner," he sighed softly.

She had hurt him and she hadn't meant to. "She was a victim, Mulder, just like Jared Chirp and Gracie O'Connor. They were caught up in the beliefs of men who have twisted and perverted everything I believe in."

"Perverted or maybe just distorted?" Mulder raised a curious eyebrow at her. "You can't tell me, Scully, you too don't believe in a God of justice. I was there with you that night."

She didn't need to ask which night he was speaking off. She shuddered in her seat and pulled down into it, the memory of Donnie Pfaster to fresh and painful. She supposed he had a right to that one, if she had brought up Melissa Riedel.

"I shouldn't have said that," he apologized. Scully shook her head.

"You're right." He was. He had no idea how right he was. It was almost as if he had been sitting in the confessional, listening to her agonized words to the priest. Perhaps Mulder knew in that way that Mulder always knew.

"Doesn't mean we get to tear each other apart over it." He was calling for a truce. She nodded by way of response, tried to pull up a wobbly smile, but failed.

"Let's just get this man and throw the book at him, Mulder, before he can use the Bible to justify any other crimes under God."
In the end Mulder would survive. Despite the numerous snakebites and real fears that he would go down to poison, he pulled through the experience. Now days on his wounds were starting to itch and he was already complaining about the food, a sure sign he was feeling better. Scully wandered into his hospital room, perching at the end of his bed. Once again she had been close to losing him. She supposed this was becoming a habit with Fox Mulder. He got right to business, however, raising dark eyebrows in his still pink face.

"Mackey?"

"Still no trace, even though every law enforcement agency in Tennessee's out looking for him." She highly doubted that Mackey was anywhere still in the state. He could be in Kentucky or North Carolina by now.

"People won't find him." Mulder echoed her own thoughts. "People think the devil has horns and a tail. They're not used to looking for some kindly man who tells you what you want to hear."

Scully didn't know about that. She could think of one man who loved to tell people what they wanted to hear, problem was his cigarette smoke was a dead give away he was Satan. "He's just a man, just like O'Connor."

"Not like O'Connor," he replied mournfully. "If this was some kind of test, looks like I failed."

Scully wasn't sure about spiritual tests as much as pure, plain stubbornness on Mulder's part. "I'd say if it was, you passed with flying colors. You're alive, aren't you?"

Something sad crept into his expression before he chased it away, smiling broadly up at her. "Proud and fancy-free."

Scully couldn't help but smile back. For all of his scrapes, Mulder always managed to come back in one piece.

Neither one of them heard the footsteps outside of the door. It was only the rap of knuckles against the doorframe that caught their attention as Mulder lifted his gaze to his visitor. Scully spun around in the bed, surprised to see Gracie O'Connor standing there, shyly holding flowers in her hands.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," she asked softly, her accent drawling slightly as she held up the vase. "Thought you might like some cheering up."

"Thanks," Mulder offered with a smile as she set the simple glass filled with pansies and daisies. It was cheerful and friendly, much like Gracie's expression. Scully noted the girl's now lithe form, no longer burgeoning under the simple cotton skirt and sweater she had on.

"You feeling any better?" She frowned with worry at the red, puckered fang wounds on Mulder's face.
"I guess it takes more than a snake to get me down."

"That wasn't just you, Mr. Mulder, that was the Good Lord watching out for you." Gracie's expression became serious as she regarded him. "It was your faith that saved you."

All smiles went out of Mulder's face as he stared at her in puzzlement. "Gracie, I'm not a believer."

His declaration didn't seem to bother her. "Maybe God sees you're a man of faith. Maybe he's just showing you that you are and reminding you he's still there, waiting for you to notice him."

Gracie's words were almost the same ones that the priest had told Scully just days ago. She blinked at the girl, all sweetness and smiles, wondering just whom her message was for, Mulder or herself.

Mulder for his part deemed it more appropriate to change the subject. "We haven't caught the Reverend Mackey yet, Gracie. I'm sorry."

This news didn't surprise her. "I don't think your going to. Like any snake, he's slipped off into the night, but he'll be back again, harassing some other poor innocent." There was a wealth of sadness and bitterness in those words. Curiosity peaked Scully regarding the story behind the pastor of the respectable town church and the daughter of the spurious fundamentalist pastor.

"What did Reverend Mackey do to you, Gracie?"

The girl's pale cheeks flushed, her eyes dropping to her practical tennis shoes as she dug one toe into the tile floor. "I was foolish to even listen to him."

"Better people have been fooled by him," Mulder reminded her gently. "Think of Iris Finster."

"Poor Iris," Gracie sniffed, looking up finally. Scully sensed this would be a long explanation and slipped off the bed to get Gracie a chair, pushing it near the girl who accepted it gladly.

"Iris was just trying to help." Gracie sighed as she settled her skirts around her bare knees. "Jared and me, we knew her from school. She used to be the secretary over there. She'd been at Blessing Community Church forever. She seemed real trustworthy, a nice woman. We thought she would be someone reliable to go to."

"To go to about what," Scully prompted as she settled back on the bed next to Mulder.

Gracie sucked her lower lip between her teeth, clearly uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. "Jared and me...we wanted to run away together."

"And your father wouldn't allow it?"

"Daddy wanted Jared to go through with the snakes. He wanted to see if he was a God-fearing man enough to be my husband. Jared was scared, so was I. I remembered." She stopped, staring at her hands in her lap quietly.

"You remember what happened to your mother," Mulder prodded gently. Gracie looked up, surprised, tears pooling in her eyes.

"Momma didn't have the sort of faith she needed. She died."

Scully wanted to retort that none of it had anything to do with faith but found she couldn't bring herself to do it when she stared at Gracie's woebegone expression. It was so unfair, the idea of letting this girl believe her mother died because she lacked the faith to handle the snake poison and that her
mother's soul was forever in peril. And yet, Scully knew her own church had their very own set of beliefs on those sorts of matters. Did she really have room to talk?

"I didn't want that happening to Jared," Gracie continued. "And he didn't either. We had both...well, we'd given into temptation, you see." Her face was now a fiery red. "We didn't think that if he tried it he'd survive. So we ran away. Iris was the only person we could think to run to. She took us in and brought us to see Reverend Mackey the next day."

"You thought he'd help you," Scully offered, knowing full well what happened next and feeling utterly disgusted by it.

"At first he did. He spoke to us about how his church was accepting of people of all ideas and how we wouldn't be persecuted just because we made one mistake. When Daddy showed up the next day, demanding that they send Jared and me back, the Reverend he stood up to him. I ain't never seen anyone stand up to Daddy like that. Daddy...he just backed down. He grew all angry at me, told me and Jared we were siding with the devil and that we'd be cast out of the grace of God if we did. He said he'd turn his back on us."

A father's rejection, a pain Scully knew so well. She knew something of it when her father had reacted so negatively to her plans to join the FBI, a plan she had hoped would make him proud. It had hurt her for years, especially when he had died, and she could see that wound had profoundly affected Gracie as well.

"Anyway, Jared and I, we thought we were doing the right thing. We were going to do things our way. We didn't see anything wrong with it."

"But that's now how it all worked out, was it?" Mulder was the one who pressed her. Scully found that she couldn't.

Gracie shook her head, tears that had been pooling now finally tracking down her face. "When I was pregnant, I honestly thought it was Jared's. We were so happy. We even talked to Reverend Mackey. He was disapproving, as he was supposed to be, but he said that he would never turn out a young woman in need. He encouraged us to come see him for counseling, maybe lead us to marriage."

"Did you even suspect anything was wrong with your pregnancy?" That was the part Scully couldn't comprehend, but Gracie shook her head.

"We didn't have money for the doctor, so I didn't go. Reverend Mackey, he offered, but I didn't want to take his money, Jared neither. So we figured we'd just hope and pray."

"When did you figure out that something wasn't right with all of this?" Mulder couldn't help but be curious. He leaned forward in his bed, and Scully resisted the urge to push him back into the pillows and tell him to rest.

"Not at first. I should have." Gracie wiped at the tears with the back of her hand, looking ashamed as she continued. "I'd had dreams, you know, the sort of dreams you know are real. I'd had dreams of snakes, of them doing things to me. Dreams I was ashamed to think of. I thought it was just all my imagination, guilt for running away from Daddy and everything I knew. I told Jared about them. He got scared. So we went to see the Reverend. He said it was only natural I should have those reactions to everything, he said I was...traumatized."

"But something must have tipped Jared off," Scully pointed out. "We saw the receipt in his room for the fertility clinic."
"I didn't know about that," Gracie admitted. "Not till he told me at least. He came tearing into the church. I was there with Iris, helping get bulletins together for Sunday. He said that he got checked out and he knew he couldn't be the baby's father cause he can't have kids. He accused me of cheating on him, and he said he knew with who, and that my soul was in danger. I thought he was talking crazy. He wanted me to leave with him, to go to Kentucky. He had some family there. I was scared. I didn't want to go, not with him like that, and after all Iris and the reverend had done, I didn't want to leave them neither. So I said no. He said he had to go, he wasn't going to let his soul be damned anymore, and he left."

Gracie stopped, aching sadness etching her young face. "That was the last time I talked to him. He was dead that night. The snakes… I guess in the end he didn't have enough faith after all."

It hurt Scully to hear those words from a girl so young. "Gracie, what happened that night in the church? What happened to your baby?"

At this, the girl shifted in her chair, hands gripping the fabric over her knees. "I was cleansed of my sin, Ms. Scully. I let it go, let go of the burden of it, and God took that sin away from me."

"But what about the baby?"

Gracie looked down at her knees, either unwilling or unable to answer.

"There was never a baby, was there?" It was Mulder who finally spoke. Scully turned to stare at him as if he were crazy. "The snakes… you had snakes in your womb, a symbol of the sin that you were carrying inside of you."

"I was sinning every time I was with Jared, and Reverend Mackey was telling us it was okay to sin cause Christians do not turn away people."

"You carried that sin and guilt, the guilt of you and Jared's actions."

"The guilt of trusting Mackey," Gracie replied, eyes flashing as she spoke of the other reverend. "I don't know how he did it, but he did."

"He played upon your own guilt, Gracie, to use you and drag you down further."

"He tried," Gracie shot back, chin lifting. "But my Daddy, he saved me that night, him and his congregation. They are the ones who brought me back from sin and into the light. It's their prayers that freed me of that burden."

Something in Scully ached to hear that, even if her logical mind wanted to tell her that it wasn't possible. "So there was no baby is what you are trying to tell us?"

"Nothing but the sin I carried, Ms. Scully," Gracie replied. She smiled slowly, a warm, beatific smile. "And it was amazing to be free of it. I got rid of that sin and for the first time I knew what love really meant, what forgiveness really meant. My Daddy, he's forgiven me, you know that. He's taken me back with open arms, and I now understands what he means when he says he loves me."

The prodigals return. A story that now had a totally new meaning for Scully as she blinked back against a hazy film that had risen over her own eyes. "I'm glad for you, Gracie, that you've worked things out."

"Me too," she murmured, her smile still angelic and inviting. Her gaze met Scully's then, holding it as she nodded encouragingly. "It feels good to get all of that off your chest, that burden, to let go of that sin, to let go of the past, that shame of what you done. It feels good, because even though you know
you can't change the past or fix what you done, you know that now you've let it go, you can move on into your future. You can move on to better things. You can let people love you who are standing there, waiting for you to let them do that. It's an amazing feeling."

In that moment, she wasn't sure how, Scully understood that Gracie knew the most secret sins of her heart. Her words weren't a testament, they were a message, a revelation to Scully personally. It was time to let go, to move on and be free.

"Mr. Mulder, I hope you heal up from those snakes." Gracie was moving from the chair, smoothing her skirts as she stood to exit. Scully shook herself as she too rose to see the girl out.

"I think I'll be up and on my feet soon enough, Gracie." Mulder shot her a smile of gratitude. "You take care of your father. Try to listen to him for once."

"I will." She nodded towards Scully as she turned towards the door, the rubber of her tennis shoes squeaking on the clean tiles as she made her way down the hall. Scully watched her as she left and stood, listening to her footsteps as they disappeared in the distance.

"She's a girl of great faith," Mulder finally said into the silence. "She sort of makes me wish I could believe like she does."

"Yeah," Scully sighed as she turned back to her injured partner. "She makes me wish the same thing as well."
"Two weeks, Mulder." It was already one day into Mulder's forced medical leave and he was harasing her at the office, bored out of his mind. "They only just released you yesterday. Skinner told you that it's two weeks of medical leave and he's not to see you in this office."

"I didn't say I'd work in the office, Scully!" He was petulant on the other end of the line, and she could hear his couch creaking underneath of him, the leather protesting whatever he was doing.

"What in the hell else would you do here?" Scully eyed his empty desk, the piles of papers, the stacks of magazines, and the forest of pencils already jammed in the brand new ceiling tiles.

"I don't know. Bug you?"

"Yeah, because that's exactly what I want in my workday," she muttered, frowning at the half-written email he had interrupted. "I'm in the middle of putting together my report for Skinner regarding the events in Tennessee."

"How far have you gotten on it?"

"Mulder!"

"What? I'm not working, I'm simply asking?"

"You should be resting!"

"I am resting, I just want to hear what you put into your report."

He was like this every time he was on medical leave, even the one he was on only six months before after his impromptu brain surgery. He wasn't going to stop pestering her until she agreed to tell him.

"I simply stated that as far as we could tell that Jared Chip was likely killed by the Reverend Mackey, who used snakes he purloined somehow to attack the boy so that it would look like Enoch O'Connor was responsible for the killing."

"That's it?" He didn't sound impressed.

"I'm not going to put in there that you suspect that Mackey is the devil, Mulder."

"You suspect it too, Scully. Admit it!"

She wasn't going to do that either, even if the idea of the man and the ordeal that Gracie went through sent cold shivers up her spine. The memory of Donnie Pfaster was far too fresh for her. "I did mention that the whereabouts of Mackey are unknown and that all efforts are being made to find him. Otherwise the case now is in the hands of the local authorities."

"So case closed?" He didn't sound too confident that it should be.
"We don't have a lot of a choice, Mulder. There is really no further reason for us to be involved, we
discovered the reason for the weirdness, the suspect is missing, the case is solved/ I don't know what
more you want out of it."

"I don't know," Mulder admittedly with a long-suffering sigh. "I hate glossing over the truth just
because it's so weird that no one will believe it."

"We aren't lying," she reminded him gently. In truth, it bothered her as well, this selective inclusion
that went into all of their reports. But it made their lives on the X-files much easier in the long run.

"Just remember, Mulder, we did good down there in Tennessee. Gracie O'Connor is reunited with
her father. We discovered the real culprit behind the deaths of Jared Chirp and Iris Finster. At the end
of the day the good guys won."

"I don't think every case is about winning and losing, Scully."

"No, but for me right now, I am happy to take that sort of ending." She felt they had too few of those
in their cases together. It was nice to feel that some sort of resolution was reached, even if it was
incomplete. "So, Mulder, no new work, no open cases. I suggest you look at the next two weeks as
vacation time."

His groan at the other end of the line clearly indicated that he was in no mood for vacations. "I feel
fine, Scully. Really, I do."

"The amount of snake venom that was pumped into your body nearly killed you, Mulder. It will take
your system at least that long to readjust, and at the rate you tend to find trouble, you will likely be
injured as soon as your back. So just humor me and stay at home and behave yourself, so I don't
have to put you back together again for a while."

"Tired of playing doctor with me, Scully?"

"The medical kind, yes." She knew the suggestion that evoked, and left it hanging in the air. Mulder
was quiet for the longest of moments. Scully couldn't decide if she was embarrassed that she said it
or if she was hopelessly amused by his stunned silence on the other end of the line.

"Well, if you want to show up at my house in nothing but a doctor's coat and a stethoscope, I'm
game."

He'd recovered his bearings quickly enough. What would happen if she said yes? As tempting as it
was to toss it out there and see what would come of it, Scully knew better than to tempt fate. That
was playing a dangerous game she wasn't sure she was ready to commit herself to yet let alone see
what the outcome would be.

"How about you just listen to my doctor's advice and stay at home and rest?"

"I can't," he replied, earning her ire. "At least not for tomorrow night."

"Why not?" Was she seriously going to have to tie him to his couch and order him to stay there
unless otherwise commanded?

"Have you not paid attention to what tomorrow is?"

Scully hated to admit that she hadn't, but lazily glanced at the date at the bottom of her computer
screen. "The twenty-third…oh!"
It was her birthday.

"So what do you want to do?"

He sounded far too cheerful about this. "We don't have to do anything, Mulder."

"Come on, Scully! I actually remembered it for a change, give me some credit."

"It's nice that you did, Mulder, but I haven't been home in a week, my house is a mess."

"You live by yourself. How can your house be a mess?"

She glared at his desk, wishing he were there to be at the receiving end of her ire. "You should be resting."

"How strenuous is a dinner out? Well, unless you really do want to take me up on that offer regarding the stethoscope?"

That brought up images to mind that she didn't think she should be considering. "All right, dinner. Someplace nice. With cloth napkins and real plates."

"For your birthday, Scully, anything." He seemed gleeful that she was at least allowing him this much respite. "I'm just glad I get to have dinner out with a woman I'm not related to for once."

"It would look awkward sitting through dinner with your phone up to your ear on one of those 900 numbers you like to call."

"Hey, now, be nice! I'm planning on a fancy dinner!"

"A fancy one, well." She flushed. How long had it been since she had been to a nice restaurant with any man? Years?

"With more than just cloth napkins and real plates, waiters in matching outfits even, and food in languages where you don't pronounce half the word."

"You don't have to go to great lengths, Mulder, just a step up from pizza would be nice."

"Ehhh, what am I going to spend my money on, Scully, paying off my 900 number phone bills?"

She supposed, if that was how he wished to treat her for her birthday, she couldn't argue. "Let me know the time and place."

"I'll make the reservations," he confirmed somewhat smugly. He had gotten his way in the end.

"But, outside of that, I want you at home. I don't even want you jogging, or going to the gym, or running at the track, or out hitting baseballs..."

"Yes, Nurse Ratched, I will behave myself."

"Thank you." It was all she could ask of him, really.

"Of course, I likely just won't tell you what I'm doing, so you won't yell at me."

Sully sighed. Mulder was indeed the worst patient ever. She quietly wondered just how long it would take for Mulder to get himself in trouble in some other mess simply out of sheer boredom.
Scully should have suspected something when she had gone for a whole day without hearing from Mulder. Mulder's forced vacation had, up to this point, almost been too good to be true. Her birthday dinner had been astonishingly pleasant, considering how her birthday was usually an afterthought in Mulder's eidetic memory. The food was excellent and the setting lovely even if their conversation never strayed beyond the bounds of work. Mulder was starving for it and she humored him. He had called every day after that, mostly it seemed because he was terminally bored, even with his old standby of All My Children. Scully had suffered through his idyll conversation. It was familiar enough territory with him. How many times before had he been stuck at home, forced there by injury, calling because the loneliness of his apartment started to drive even him crazy?

But then he went quiet.

It didn't take long for Scully to suspect a reason why. The news that morning had been filled with the sad account of Amber Lynn LaPierre, a girl who mysteriously disappeared from her own bedroom in Sacramento. Already comparisons were being drawn to other famous, missing children cases, all with similar profiles to this one, little girls who went missing from safe homes, taken into the night and not ever seen again. Scully could think of one case in particular, not so well known, that had dominated her life for the last seven years. Immediately she had dialed Mulder's home phone. It went to his answering machine. She then tried his cell. It went to his voice mail. Frustrated and worried, she left a message for him on the latter, asking him to call her back. She prepared for her day, hoping that either he had missed the report all together or was simply just out of town, away from the televisions blaring Amber Lynn's brilliant smile and curly pig tails.

When Skinner called her into his office, she had a feeling that Mulder already knew and was clearly in the thick of all of this.

Her superior was frowning heavily at his own folded hands steepled in front of him as Arlene showed her into his office. He looked up briefly over his knuckles, dark eyes clearly worried and upset behind his wireless glasses. He nodded towards one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"Have a seat," he muttered, voice gruff as she perched onto one of the chairs. She waited patiently as he remained quiet until Arlene had closed the door firmly behind her retreating figure.

"I'm sorry to have to call you in on this, Agent Scully."

She didn't feel like beating around the bush. "Is Mulder in Sacramento?"

Skinner flushed guiltily, his mouth pursing in anger. "He was supposed to check in two hours ago."

"Perhaps he's delayed?"

"Have you tried calling his cell phone?" The question was rhetorical one. Skinner knew that she had.

"Sir," Scully began carefully. "Why is he there?"
Skinner's frown deepened, his granite jaw tightening hard. "He came to me as the case was breaking. I don't know how he heard about it. We were already planning logistics, he wanted a first crack at it."

"No offense, sir, but these sort of cases and Mulder…"

"I know." Skinner grated. "I knew and let him go out there. He seemed to have an inkling of what was happening. This case, Scully, it's a spotlight on us."

"I am aware of that, sir."

"With recent, high profile child cases, not to mention a host of other bad PR after Dallas, we can't afford to screw this one up."

"Are you afraid that Mulder is going to do that?"

Skinner was at least honest enough to admit it. "You and I both know how he is, and you and I both know this isn't just about that missing little girl."

Yes, indeed she did know it wasn't just about Amber Lynn LaPierre. It was about another little girl who had left a hole in his life from the moment she disappeared when he was twelve-years-old.

"It's been almost thirty years, Scully. I know a thing or two about carrying that sort of guilt for thirty years, and I know it's time to let go."

The burden of guilt was something she considered heavily of late. "Sir, for Mulder it isn't that simple. He believes still that his sister is out there, somewhere, hidden from him, waiting to be found."

"Taken by aliens?" There was no sneering or condescension in Skinner's tone, just sadness.

"He wants to believe that, yes. But honestly, I think he believes that because it gives him hope. It allows him to think that somehow she will come home someday." It was the one thing that kept Mulder going at this point, the one reason he fought so hard, the desire to find out the truth about his sister.

"And what if she isn't out there, Scully? What if he discovers that she's dead?"

That was a possibility that had lingered even in Scully's mind all these years. The truth was, no sign of Samantha Mulder had been seen since the night she was taken. In all likelihood, if she were somewhere out there, she might not be alive.

"I don't know, sir,' she admitted softly. "But I think he at least has the right to discover if she is, one way or the other."

Skinner sighed, dropping his hands as his heavy gaze considered the desk in front of him. "I can't have an agent out there who is using this case as an excuse to exorcise his own personal demons."

"I know, sir." She also knew what this meant. "Do you want me to go to Sacramento and get him?"

Skinner's affirmation was curt. "Arlene's already made travel arrangements. There's a flight to San Francisco in two hours and a connection to Sacramento. When you find your partner, bring him home, Scully. I don't care what progress he's made on this case, I've got to turn it over to the professionals now. I don't have a choice."

"What if he refuses to come?" That was always a strong possibility with Mulder.
"Tell him his job is done if he isn't here tomorrow morning."

"That doesn't usually seem to bother him much, sir."

Skinner knew that truth all too well. "Just get him back, Scully. Bring his report with him, I want to see if there's anything he's found, because you know damn well that the media already is suspecting the parents and frankly so are the other agents, and I can't stop them from doing their investigation."

"I know, sir." Scully rose as Skinner gave her a dismissive nod. She turned her steps to the door out of his office, but he called, stopping her as she made it to the door.

"Do you think that this will ever be a wound that will heal for Mulder?"

Scully turned and regarded her superior sadly. "Not until he reaches some sort of closure. Till then, it's just going to fester and break open over and over again."

Skinner's sad pensiveness took her by surprise. "I would think that a friend, someone who cared for him, might help him come to terms with it. Bring it to an end."

His point wasn't lost on Scully. "Honestly, sir, I don't know if it's my place to do that. I don't know if I should."

"If not you, who else, Agent Scully?"

In that, he was right. "I will consider it, sir."

"Please do. Call me when you get to him."

"I will," she replied, slipping out the door and closing it softly behind her. Arlene quietly passed her paperwork with her travel arrangements.

"It's a shame about that little girl. So young to have something like this happen to her!"

Scully nodded absently as she looked everything through. "Yes, it is."

"Do you think that the family will ever recover from it?"

Scully thought of the Mulders, of the toll that Samantha's disappearance and the tie it had to Bill Mulder's work had on all of their lives.

"I hope so," Scully murmured sadly. "For their sakes, I hope that they can get past this."
"Mulder, this is irresponsible and you know it."

"Then why did you come along," he shot back to her as he pulled into the driveway of the Idaho State Women's Facility in Pocatello. It was about the fifth time she had said it since their plane flight from DC, and yet she was still there, repeating it.

"I was hoping I could talk you out of this craziness," she replied, earning little more than a snort from him.

"You've known me how long and you think I could be talked out of this?"

"No," she sighed, realizing she was foolish in thinking that. "I had hoped you would listen to reason."

"What reason? That you believe I'm personalizing this?"

"Mulder, you shouldn't even be on this case."

"I'm just trying to find a girl, nothing more and nothing less."

"A girl who disappeared in a way eerily similar to your sister."

He glowered out of the car window but didn't deny her charge. "This is more than just me seeking out some sort of redemption."

"I know you want to find Amber Lynne, Mulder, but who do you want to find her for?"

In annoyance, he slammed the emergency break on the rental, yanking up the file he had stashed away on the back seat of the sedan. "This, Scully. Did you see that note?"

"I did, Mulder."

"These are the same words, the same phrasing as was used on a note ten years ago, a couple of hundred miles away from Sacramento."

She couldn't ignore that the coincidence left her unsettled. "The mother in the first case confessed to it."

"And she's sitting here, rotting in this prison, for a crime she didn't commit."

"She was convicted in a court of law."

"Courts of law are human, they make mistakes."

"The note they found was in her handwriting."
"And using the same exact words and phrases as were found in the note Mrs. LaPierre claims was left behind. Why the same words?"

She didn't have an answer for that.

"Mulder, you are grasping at straws, here."

"Straws? Scully, did you not see what she said?"

"I did, but it could be anything. Perhaps the LaPierre's heard of that case. Perhaps she only remembered them from before."

"Well enough to write them exactly?"

"You can find anything on the internet." Scully wasn't convinced. She didn't want to believe the LaPierre's were responsible for their daughter's disappearance, but she didn't believe that Mulder's conjecture was any stronger.

"Do you want to believe that a mother and father willingly killed their child?"

"No, but it happens."

"I don't deny that, but I think in this case and in Kathy Lee Trencate's case, they didn't."

Scully sighed. There was no getting him off this. "What is it between the two that you think proves this?"

"Ten years ago, Kathy Lee Trencate's son disappears from his room at night. The only clue is the note with the words 'no one shoots Santa Claus' written on it. There were no signs of forced entry. They lived in a quiet neighborhood where everybody was familiar with them. No one saw any evidence of a stranger."

Just like the LaPierre case.

"The difference is, Mulder, they found a body eventually. Kathy Trencate's son's body was found."

"Only after years in prison."

"So, she finally confessed to it."

"I think she was only confessing to the crime after she realized no one was going to believe the truth."

"And what is the truth, Mulder?"

"That her son disappeared. That she witnessed a supernatural event. That her child was spirited away, just like Amber Lynn LaPierre was."

"Really? Is that what you want to believe?" Her patience with this was wearing thin.

"It's the only logical answer, Scully."

"No, Mulder, it isn't." Her temper flared even though she knew she shouldn't let it. "Occam's Razor states that one should proceed with simpler theories until simplicity can be traded for greater explanatory power. The hypothesis with the fewest assumptions should be the one selected."
"And you think that assuming that the LaPierres and Kathy Lee Trencate killed their children is the possibility with the fewest assumptions?"

"It at least doesn't assume that a supernatural power exists that makes off with children in the middle of the night, possesses their mothers, and leaves creepy messages." Scully fumed in annoyed frustration. "Face it, Mulder, you are clinging on to this theory not because you believe it is the simplest one, it's because deep down inside you want to believe that this is what happened to Samantha."

She might as well have struck him for all the reaction she got. Eyes wide, his lips thinned as he snapped the file shut. "If that is what you believe, Scully, you aren't any use here. Go home."

He flung himself out of the car with those words.

"Mulder," she called in irritation, opening the door to her side and scrambling after him. "I can't go home, you idiot, you have the car."

Automatically he tossed the keys at her head. With dexterity she didn't know she had she grabbed them, but chose to chase after his long strides instead.

"Mulder, this is all a fairy tale, a fantasy."

"You've made that abundantly clear, Scully."

She didn't stop, nor did she slow down. "Think, Mulder, think!" She grabbed his arm, forcing him to turn and look at her. "What are you doing here? You are potentially taking the word of a woman convicted of murdering her own son and using that as an excuse to potentially let the people who may know where Amber Lynn is go. If you do this, it could blow this case to kingdom come. It will call into question everything about the note. And if they had anything to do with it, anything at all, they will be able to cover their tracks, and we may never find out the truth about what happened to that little girl."

"You are so certain they had something to do with it?" Mulder glared down his nose at her. She didn't back down, but she knew he was right. She wasn't certain they had anything to do with it.

"I'd rather risk the chance that I'm wrong on that, Mulder, than prove that you are right."

"Everyone's entitled to their opinion." He shook off her arm and began to move again.

"It's not an opinion, Mulder. Are you willing to take the responsibility for all of this if they walk because of you decided there is some supernatural angel to the case? Are you willing to take the hell that will be raised when it comes out that you think there is a supernatural angle to the case?"

"The evidence is there in front of us, Scully. Do you mean to tell me you would willingly ignore it just because you want to have your precious, simple answer?" Mulder spun on her, anger spitting from his gaze. "You want to cling to your logic on this one, never thinking that for once, the more complex explanation just might be the right one. You've done that the entire time I've known you, and you still cling to it, even after everything you've seen, despite all the evidence I've shown you. Why?"

His words stung. They hurt her far more deeply than she had expected, but she held her ground, crossing her arms as she met his ire evenly. "Because, Mulder, someone has to be the one to remind you that sometimes even William of Occam got it right. That's what I do, remember?"

He deflated slightly at that, the fire banking as he suddenly looked very tired. "I think Kathy Lee
Trencate knows far more than we've given her credit for. Let's at least hear her explanation. I would rather her help an innocent couple go free, for the truth to be known, and damn the consequences."

"Are you so sure you are ready for the truth, Mulder?" Scully wasn't really talking about the LaPierres and he knew that.

"I have to be," he replied, turning towards the correctional facility doors.
And Then There Was One

Chapter Summary

In which Scully must be there to hold up Mulder.

It was quite possibly the hardest thing Scully had ever had to tell Mulder, harder even than the horrible moment three years before when she told him she had inoperable cancer. The words were too hard, too shocking, and too cruel for her to believe. But when it came to it, they fell out simply.

"Mulder, your mom is dead."

The reaction had been immediate. Skinner had been in full tirade against Mulder, and perhaps justifiably so, instantly deflated, shifting from anger to concern in the blink of an eye. Mulder, who had been facing the brunt of the argument, had simply stared at her.

It wasn't how she wanted the words to come out. She had wanted something more gentle, to somehow soften the blow, but there they were, and Mulder, too stunned to even breath as Skinner offered him a chair that he sort of fell into as Skinner reassured him that he could take time, he was free to go right then if he needed to.

Scully ached just watching him.

Teena’s housekeeper had called the police, a woman who had been coming in every other day since her stroke several years before. She had found Mulder's mother in the kitchen, the oven open as she lay crumpled beside it. They had collected her body and would be sending a forensics crew in a few hours. Scully had told them they would be there. She hadn't thought twice about going with Mulder.

The plane flight to Greenwich was barely an hour, the waiting took longer as they sat at National, Scully ensuring that Mulder would be all right enough that she could fetch coffee. He hardly seemed to notice he was even sitting at the airport. She supposed he would be fine for the moments it would take her to run to Starbucks and fetch something to at least warm him in the shock. It would give her a chance to wrap her head around this herself. It had only been months ago when she last saw Teena Mulder. She had confronted her in her hotel room as her son, then missing, was having his head opened for reasons Scully still didn't understand. She had asked her about her part in Mulder's disappearance and in turn had learned more about the sordid triangle that was Mulder's family history than she had ever wanted to. She had never told Mulder that she knew the truth about who his father was or that it was Teena who told it to her. She had never felt the need. Frankly, she had rather hoped that Teena would do it herself, confess to Mulder the sins of which she, Bill Mulder, and Spender had all been guilty.

Months went by without any word. Perhaps that was what she had been trying to do when she called him. Perhaps the weight of guilt had been too much for her. Perhaps the site of yet another child, disappearing into the ether was one child too much for Teena Mulder to take. Whatever the case was, she now was dead, and it appeared to be by her own hand, and whatever secrets lay in her heart, she had taken them with her. She had left her son alone, orphaned now twice over, without even the comfort of the truth.

It was that alone aspect that struck Scully as she quietly ordered two regular coffees, sliding over...
cash before taking the paper cups, warm in her hands, to the sidebar for sugar and cream. Mulder liked his with one sugar, just enough to take the edge off the bitterness of the coffee. She alone was left now to know how Mulder liked his coffee, or what day his birthday was on, or that his favorite baseball team was the Yankees. But even then, she was just his partner, Scully, the woman he worked with everyday. She wasn't the woman who tucked him in at night or kissed away his nightmares. She wasn't the person who had comforted him when his pain of loss grew too much for his twelve-year-old self to bear. She wasn't his mother.

For as long as Scully had known Mulder, he had acted as he was alone in this world, without kith or kin to hold him down, but that had been a ruse, a careful cover he threw up to those who were watching, to show them that inside he wasn't a child still mourning the loss of his broken family. The truth was he had parents, a family who he at least could call his own despite their flaws. Despite the weight of sin and guilt that had weighed down Bill Mulder and had formed the icy expanse between himself and the man he believed was his own son, he had loved Fox dearly. He had hope and pride in him, and an unshakable belief that Fox would be the one to atone for the sins of Bill's past, to make right that which Bill saw most wrong. Before Bill could ever confess his sins to his only, remaining child, however, he was ruthlessly taken, killed by Alex Krycek to silence his confessions forever, leaving Mulder to carry the guilt of the man who had been his father.

That left him with only Teena, the mother who had coddled him and sheltered him in the aftermath of his family drama. Teena, who had adored her son, who had patiently put up with his antics and hoped for great things. How crushing must it have been to see her son sucked into the very same mire that had sucked in her and Bill, which had destroyed their marriage and taken one of their children? Teena had known so many things, so many secrets, and had kept them all, hiding from them, ignoring them, and hoping they would go away. Had she hoped to protect her son from them? Or had she merely hoped that she could forget? Now she too was gone, with no more confession from her than there had been from her former husband, and no one else who would give him answers…save for the smoking, son-of-a-bitch, and Scully highly doubted that Spender would come out of the woodwork to explain Mulder's story to him. Now everyone was gone, Samantha, his father, his mother.

He was well and truly alone.

"Excuse me?" A pretty, pert young woman reached across Scully for the creamer, apologizing as she did. Scully shook her head to indicate it was all right, put the plastic lids back on each paper cup, and carefully gathered them up. She stepped around the line of customers and threaded her way through the rows of steel and vinyl seats, dodging carry on bags as she made her way to her partner.

He hadn't moved an inch since she last saw him. His wide, green eyes still stared out, silent and shocked, onto the black concourse. Storm clouds threatened in Washington, a spring rain was coming, dark and forbidding. She sighed as she nudged him gently.

"I brought some coffee. At least drink something to help your system."

He blinked down at the cup in front of his nose, at first seemingly confused as to its presence there. He then wordlessly took it, sipped from it, and nodded, she guessed in approval for the way she fixed it.

"Any further word from Greenwich PD?"

Mulder barely moved his dark head. "No," he intoned.

What else was there to say? She sighed, settling next to him, wanting to do something, wrap an arm around him, hug him, hold his hand, and let him know that he wasn't alone after all, that she was still
there. But right then, in that moment, he seemed far too fragile, as if a single compassionate brush of a hand, any sign of affection, might cause him to fall to pieces right there, and he needed to be together, at least to deal with this. Then, after seeing what happened, he could fall to pieces.

"Let me know what you need, Mulder." It was a statement, not a request. He heard it, or seemed to. He at least nodded.

"Right now, I just want to get there and find out what happened. That's what I want, Scully."

What happened? That Scully was obvious, but Mulder knew his mother far better than she did, and perhaps her death would be just as mysterious as her life. Scully hoped for his sake it wasn't.

"We'll see when we get there." She replied, sorrowfully watching the planes take off into the slowly darkening sky.
The Mystery of Teena

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates the mystery of Mulder's mother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She hadn't wanted to do this, but Scully had - for him.

Teena Mulder's body was washed and sewn back up, the Y incision a puckered, pink line against the blue-gray of her skin in death. Scully had done as neat of a job as she ever had. She felt she had to for Mulder's sake, she didn't want his mother's body to be put back together haphazardly. Surgery had never bothered Scully. Unlike so many of her fellow medical students in their first years of school, she had never experienced the squeamishness that had come with seeing their first human cadavers. She had been keenly interested in the understanding of how the human body was put together, how it worked, the mechanics of how hearts pumped blood through veins, how intestines extracted nutrients and discarded the rest as waste, how neurons fired and caused muscles to move in just the precise way needed to hold a scalpel in one's hand. She knew within her first year her interest would likely end up in surgery, and of course with Daniel's influence, it had been in cardiology.

But like anyone fascinated with a subject at large, Scully had learned how all the little parts of the human body worked in harmony. This put her in good stead as she switched to pathology. Her inquisitiveness made her a quick study in the science of understanding how people died, her interest in knowing how all the little steps led to the end result made her a good investigator. Her unflinching practicality in the matter of death and her strong stomach in the face of the human body in its most raw state had made her a good pathologist. Those qualities didn't help her in the least bit when she was faced with the autopsy of a woman whose house she had been to, whose fears she had calmed, whose son she loved. That final bit was what made this all the harder, for as much as Scully could have begged off and should have because of her personal connections, she couldn't say no for love of Mulder. She had to do this, for him, so he could know the truth.

It was the hardest autopsy she had ever had to do. From the moment she stared at Teena's lifeless face, features smoothed in death, she'd had to steel herself. She couldn't think of the fact that the breast she so carefully cut across had once suckled a boy who was out there searching for answers he might never find. Don't consider the fact that the uterus just there, amidst the intestines and bladder, had once carried him and nurtured him to term, just as it had his long-lost sister. Don't wonder about the heart, so still in the chest cavity, and all the love it bore for a man who would forever carry the scars of a night so long ago, nor the brain in it's skull which still held all of the secrets that she had never shared with him.

Even in death, Teena Mulder still carried the air of weighty regret.

Scully couldn't claim she knew Mulder's mother well. The few times she had ever met her had been mostly in regards to one thing or the other having to do with Fox. The longest she had ever stayed in her presence was those days after her stroke, when Mulder had cared for his mother so tenderly. She had come to learn some about her through stories and photographs, anecdotes shared through her time knowing Mulder. She knew that Teena wasn't her real name, but a nickname that had been
given to her by her Dutch grandfather. She had a sister who lived in North Carolina. She knew that though the family had some Jewish heritage, neither daughter had claimed it, with both marrying men who were nominally Protestant. She had been smart, had graduated top of her class at Bryn Mawr, but had chosen the life of a housewife. She had married Bill Mulder out of love once, but bored and lonely, had sought solace in the arms of Spender. Though the children she bore were genetically one man's, it was the other who raised them, loved them, and who gave them his name. Teena had allowed the lie to continue till Bill's death, and likely she wouldn't have admitted the truth to anyone at all had Scully not confronted her about the truth just months ago. Even then, she had a feeling that Spender at least knew, and Mulder certainly suspected.

What Teena knew about Bill's work with Spender remained unclear. She certainly never spoke of it to anyone, least of all her son. When confronted, she claimed not to remember, to not want to dredge up memories she would rather forget about, and perhaps she did. After all, it was this work that led to the disappearance of Samantha so long ago. How much of the genetic experiments and alien deals that she understood, she never admitted to, only that she knew something. In the end, what little Scully knew about this woman added up to one thing. Teena Mulder was a sad figure in so many ways, a tragic one, a woman of so much promise and hope who was caught in forces she didn't understand. It had cost her the love of the man she had given herself to, the children she had so ardently protected, and the happiness that should have been hers. And now, as she lay on the cold, metal table in front of Scully, the ultimate injustice for a woman whose life seemed full of them.

No wonder she had taken her own life.

The reason for that at least Scully could be certain of regarding Teena. The facts in her medical report didn't lie. Death was by an overdose, Diazepam, rather than the gas she had turned on in her house. Teena likely didn't realize the natural gas wouldn't kill her, but had at least thought well enough in advance to take the drugs. Her heart had slowed and she died. That hadn't surprised Scully, frankly, she had expected this, though she had done as Mulder diligently requested and checked for needle punctures. There hadn't been any. Her death was, by every indication, self-inflicted. What had surprised her was why. That was the part that left her shaken, but it was what had convinced Scully that Teena had indeed been the agent of her own death. She had noticed it as she had made her Y-incision, a scaly patch around her right areola, with other areas scattered across both of her breasts. Curious, she had called up Teena's medical records from her doctor in Greenwich. She had not been surprised but certainly had been deeply saddened by the revelation she found. Paget's carcinoma, a kind of cancer that forms in the ducts of the breast and spreads to the skin, rare enough but invasive enough that it would have required a mastectomy at the least, and that was if it hadn't spread through the rest of her body.

Scully thought of the terror she had felt when she heard that she had cancer and could only imagine what Teena must have gone through. Unlike Scully's, Teena's was treatable. Surgery, aggressive chemotherapy, and radiation treatment might have gone a long way to help her fight the disease. Her records indicated that her diagnosis was recent enough that there perhaps could have been hope she could fight it successfully. Clearly, for whatever reason Teena had, she had decided that was just a fight that she wasn't willing to make. Scully didn't think she could blame her. She recalled her own days in the wake of her cancer diagnosis, how the despair threatened to overwhelm her. She had fought back, however, had decided that for however long she had left she would be damned if she would let Spender or his ilk win. But for poor Teena, who had lost so much in her life already, clearly the fight had gone out of her. Perhaps it was the idea of living a life disfigured, perhaps it was the fear of the treatment itself and the toll it would take on a body that had already suffered from one stroke in recent years, or maybe it was just the decision of a body that was too tired of everything in life and wanted to end it before it could feel any further pain.

Whatever the case was, it was Teena's decision to do this. No one had held her down, no one had
drugged her, and no foul play was involved. It as simple as a woman who had fought the battles and
lost one too many times, and though Scully's faith told her that suicide was a sin, her heart couldn't
blame Teena. She had reached the end of a figurative rope. Cancer was simply one more thing she
couldn't fight. She had wanted to walk away from it all on her own terms.

How was she going to make Mulder understand that?

"Agent Scully?" She turned to the sound of the head medical examiner peeking her head around the
corner of the morgue. "I wanted to check in on things here. Do you have the results? The police are
asking."

"Yes," she sighed, turning from Teena's still form. "Death is suicide, overdose of her sleeping
medication."

"Nothing unusual, like her son suggested?" There was a hint of flippancy with the woman, a casual
callousness that many in the pathology field tended to employ. It helped keep them sane, cutting up
the bodies of the dead all day. Still, Scully cringed, knowing she was discussing Mulder.

"No, but I'd appreciate it if you tell the police to hold off on announcing that. I want to break it to
him myself."

Her companion looked appropriately apologetic as she nodded. "She's the mother of your friend."

"Yeah," she replied, glancing back at Teena's body, now neatly covered in a sheet. "If you can hold
on to Mrs. Mulder for a few days, we are working an investigation on top of all of this and it may
take her son a while to get time to go through the process of claiming the body."

"Of course," the other woman nodded, perhaps readily agreeing out of embarrassment for being so
callous. "We'll hold her remains until he gives us a call."

"Thank you," Scully murmured. As much as she would rather Mulder take the time away from the
LaPierre case to grieve, she had a feeling that it would serve as his distraction until he reached some
sort of closure with all of it.

"I'll leave you to finish up," the medical examiner called, exiting as quietly as she entered. Scully
quietly took a moment to regard the woman who, in so many ways, remained a mystery to her.

"I'm sorry, Teena," she breathed, smoothing the silver hair that fell away from her face. "I'll try to
take care of him for you."

With that she silently reached for the sheet to cover the woman's face and wheeled her into the
holding bay until one of the interns could place her into a refrigeration drawer. Heavy hearted, she
turned and left her partner's mother behind. Now she had to figure out how to break this all to
Mulder.

Chapter End Notes

I just got back from Avengers: Endgame.

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So I edited this. All the feels, and everything hurts, and oh lord, Game of Thrones this
Sunday, and your gentle author is not okay at all.
Scully should have known before she heard Teena Mulder's ghostly voice float out of the door that he was already obsessing. He had let her in and now he huddled by the answering machine playing the final message, the final words his mother ever spoke to him. She could sense the manic need to understand, the way in which his brilliant mind was attempting to piece together the very thing he couldn't deal with. He didn't want to believe his mother, his loving, caring mother, was dead. He had to rationalize how something like this could be, and so he sat there, plots spinning out of his profiler's mind, attempting to tie her death with the events happening in Sacramento, with the loss of a little girl so similar to the disappearance of a child so very long ago.

Scully wished she didn't have to break that fantasy, at the very least she wished that it wasn't her responsibility to do it, but there was no one else. Her heart ached as she approached him. "Mulder…"

He barely saw her as he glanced in her direction. "Scully, these parents who…who've lost their children, they've had visions of their sons and daughters in scenarios that never happened, but which they describe in notes that came through them as automatic writing and words that came through them psychically from old souls protecting the children."

His voice was raw and broken as he spoke, words spilling from him as he frantically continued. "My mother must have written a note like that herself, describing the details of my sister's disappearance, of her…of her abduction by aliens. Don't you see, Scully?"

Fever bright eyes shined up at her from his worn face. "It never happened, all these visions that I've had have just been….they've just been to help me cope with the loss but I've been looking for my sister in the wrong place. That's what my mother was trying to tell me! That's what she was trying to warn me about. That's why they killed her."

Scully's heart ached as she took a seat facing him. Mulder's rambling sounded in part fantasy, in part realization, but none of it was really all that true. Yes, his visions were ways he coped with his sister's disappearance, but old souls, dreams of things that never happened, his mother's death at the hands of others, these weren't the truth, and she had to be the one who spoke the truth to him, whether he wanted to hear it or not.

"Your mother killed herself, Mulder," she stated quietly, but bluntly. He stopped his ranting enough to stare at her, disbelief clear on his face. "I conducted the autopsy. She was dying of an incurable disease, an untreatable and horribly disfiguring form of Paget's Carcinoma."

He stared blankly at her, as if he couldn't even comprehend her words at that moment. Scully pushed on. "She knew it. There were doctor's records. She didn't want to live."
It was brutal, it was harsh, and it was quick. Despite knowing it was the right thing, her stomach turned as she watched every rational in Mulder's mind crumble right before her eyes. He buried his face in his hands, soaking in her words. Scully sat, at a loss of what to do now, what to even say now. Without warning he rose, anger in his action as she towered above her for the briefest of seconds. She thought he would reach out for her, or maybe storm from the apartment, but instead he grabbed the edge of the desk, pulling it up with strong fingers and shaking it violently. Papers and books scattered, the picture of Samantha that always sat there tipped and fell, pens and pencils rolled to the floor. Startled by the violence of it, she reached a hand to his arm, trying to get him to stop, to calm down before he woke up the neighbors, but he simply pulled away, stopping the motion at least.

"Mulder?" Tears she didn't expect choked his name in her throat as she watched this man who normally was so strong fall to pieces right in front of her.

"She was trying to tell me something. She was...trying to tell me something." His voice broke, his face crumpled into tears as agony nearly bent him over.

He collapsed in front of her, too broken for words anymore.

What could she say to make any of this better?

"Mulder, she was trying to tell you to stop, to stop looking for your sister. She was trying to take away your pain." The last, desperate plea of a mother who wanted her son to stop pursuing his demons and to live and not to be trapped by the same forces that had held her captive for so long. Whether he believed her or not, she couldn't tell. Wordlessly he reached for her, pulling her around the waist towards him, burying his face against her middle and began to sob. She wrapped her arms around his dark head, leaning to place a soft kiss on his neck and murmur that she was there and she wasn't going anywhere. Ever so gently she rocked him, holding him safe as the storm broke and his grief tore through, leaving anguish in its wake.

How many tears did he have to cry? Thirty years worth, she supposed. Tears for a sister long gone, for a father who was stolen from him, for a mother who had tried to tell him too late the truths she had held for so long. They were tears for a wife who had betrayed him, and a job that had failed him, and a search that had been nothing but bitter, dead ends and no real answers. They were tears for all the regrets Fox Mulder had in all of his life, but for now the biggest regret was that he hadn't taken that phone call from his mother, had not spent those extra days and moments with her, that he hadn't listened when she asked him to call her back.

She rubbed slow circles across the heaving muscles of his back, her fingernails tracing through his t-shirt until he slowly started to quiet and to still. She dropped a light kiss on the top of his hair, lips brushing the dark strands as he sat, unmoving and silent, a cheek pressed to her tear, dampened blouse.

When he finally did move, he pulled away from her, his face swollen and puffy, his voice clogged with tears. "It's late, Dana. You need to go home, get some rest."

She shifted, stretched muscles frozen from holding him, plucking at the shirt now tear stained against her skin. "I'm staying here," she replied quietly.

He seemed too drained to even argue. He pulled himself together enough to stand, but stared blankly at the desk, dislodged as it was, as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. Quietly she rose, muscles protesting as she stiffly stood, taking his elbow as she pulled him away from the answering machine with his mother's words.
"Let's get you to bed," she murmured, pulling him gently towards the bedroom. He willingly went with her, looking lost as she stepped carefully around discarded running shoes and a pile of clothing by his bathroom door. She gently pulled him into the room he so little used, leading him to the bed where he sat on the padded edge, frowning in confusion as if he couldn't figure out what to do next.

"Take off your shoes," she ordered softly, watching as he removed them with his toes while she fluffed up his pillows. Once that action was done, she carefully pulled him down on the mattress. He followed without resistance, arms wrapping around the pillows as he drew his knees up to curl like a child in on himself. No further tears came, but his whole being radiated pain and anguish. Without thinking, Scully hummed comfortingly to him as she ran fingers through his hair, trying to soothe the ache she knew filled him at that moment.

She hoped he would fall asleep like this. How many days had he been pushing himself? Likely since the case broke, and even then he had been on leave from his snake attack just weeks ago. Exhaustion had to draw him down at some point, and she sat, perched on the edge of his bed, calmly soothing and humming, like a mother with a little one. She waited for his breathing to calm, for the tension to ease, for sleep to come to him, but she could feel it, under the fingertips that danced across his scalp, the whirring of his mind, the questions unanswered, the confusion and hurt that fed into the pain that he was feeling at that moment. Perhaps, she sighed, she'd leave him in peace, to let him grieve and wear himself down enough so that he could rest. Quietly, she rose to go, smoothing his hair down as she went, making for the door of his room, but his voice, cracked and broken, rang through the darkness.

"Don't go."

She paused, turning towards the bed and the still form on it. "I'm not. I'm just going out here." She waved towards the living room, unsure if he could even see her gesture. "I'll be right here, Mulder, you can call me if you need me."

"Don't go, please?" His voice was pleading, soft and afraid. "I…don't leave me. I'm all alone."

That begging, his heartbroken observation nearly dissolved Scully into tears. Without a word she returned to the bed, sitting on its edge. The mattress shifted and swayed as Mulder moved, making room for her to fit beside him. Without thinking about the ramifications or anything else, she kicked off her shoes to settle on the floor next to Mulder's and lay onto the bed next to him. Without a word, she wrapped arms around his shoulders as he curled himself into her embrace, head resting on her shoulder as arms wrapped themselves around her possessively. It was perhaps the most intimate of gestures ever displayed between the two of them, the kind that only ever seem to come out of their moments of deepest fear and grief, like those horrible days when she lay dying in the hospital. This too was born out of a deep-seated need for human comfort and contact, that reassurance that they were not alone. She quietly held him as he shivered, unshed tears still brimming beneath the surface, his body slowly relaxing as she simply embraced him, nothing more.

It seemed like hours before he spoke, perhaps it had been. She herself had nearly drifted off, the emotional toll and utter exhaustion wearing her out completely, but she jerked awake as Mulder spoke, soft words that broke into the darkness.

"Did you know that my mother had a gift for acting?"

Scully could have guessed, given the secrets that she kept all of her life, but she quietly shook her head, murmuring "no" into the softness of his hair.

"When she was in college, she used to do performances there. She liked Shakespeare's tragedies the best. She said they were so full of the human experience. She loved to dress up, to pretend. We did,
sometimes, she and Samantha were a lot like that." He shuddered, mentioning his sister's name.

"She was an amazing mother back then. She could cook for an army. She knew how to make my sandwiches. She loved parties, loved to laugh. She knew how to find clams on the beach, even though she grew up in Ohio. She could throw a wicked spitball when she wanted to, though not as good as Dad, and she never put up with my smart mouth."

Scully listened, saying nothing as he continued quietly, her heart full as she conjured up pictures of a young woman and her children, of a boy who was as much of a trial as he was his mother's pride.

"When we were little, she'd take us out to the beach and we'd roast marshmallows of an evening. She'd always wait for us at the school bus, no matter if it were raining or not. She loved Christmas. She'd find the biggest tree for all of the ornaments she had. No one could put on a dinner for Dad's work guests like Mom could."

They were little things, the first things that popped to mind in the heart of a man who remembered being a boy in happier, simpler times. Scully didn't know these stories. Most of what she knew about the Mulder family had to do with the time after Samantha, when all the memories ended, when all the happiness faded. That was the larger part of Mulder's memories of his mother, she knew that. But beyond those, there were other stories, of long summers and longer winters, of two small children being raised nearly single-handedly by their loving and protective mother, who wished to keep them safe from the secrets that kept their father away for long periods in Washington.

"I think that part of her died when Samantha disappeared." Mulder gave voice to the same suspicion Scully had regarding the woman 'Teena had been and the woman Scully knew. "I think in the end it was all too much for her. The parties stopped. Christmas stopped. She didn't come out to the bus stop any more. She made something of an effort, as I grew older, for my sake if nothing else. She went to ball games and stuff, especially when Dad stopped. She was the one who wrote every week while I was in England. Hell, she did that for a long time when I moved here. She tried, but...we just grew apart. She wanted to forget everything and I never wanted to let go."

That statement seemed to embody the great tragedy that was Mulder's family. The three survivors had handled everything so differently. Bill had pulled away, had distanced himself, and had coldly lashed out at everyone out of his own guilt and shame. Teena had tried to forget, even as she tried to move on, had chosen to ignore it, to not speak of it, to swallow the pain whole and never, ever remember. Only Fox alone had ever confronted it but by doing so had allowed his entire life to be controlled by the singular obsession of the mystery regarding his younger sister. Now he was the only one left to carry Samantha's memory. And unless he learned how to deal with it, every other Amber Lynn LaPierre who came across their desk would drag him down into the depths of that personal tragedy again and again until one day it would swallow him whole, just like his parents.

Scully never wanted to see that for her partner. And she knew Teena never wanted that for her son.

"Scully...do you think my mother saw the same thing that the LaPierres and Kathy Lee Trenicata saw?"

Scully had no answer for that. Frankly, she didn't understand anything regarding Samantha's loss, only the broken memories of a boy plagued by the guilt of it.

"I don't know," she answered honestly, wrapping and arm tightly around him. "But we can figure that out tomorrow, Mulder. For now, just try to rest. Sleep! Let your mind ease."

He sighed in such a manner that indicated he highly doubted that would happen, but she silently held him, fingers trailing along the back of his head as slowly, he relaxed in her arms, and gently, his breathing slowed. As it deepened, the first, tell tale snore indicated that at last he had given in to
exhaustion, and with a smile of relief, Scully realized that he was asleep. She could, if she wanted to, move from this position she supposed, but Mulder at this point was so tangled with her, long legs wrapping possessively around her smaller ones, his arms holding her around the middle tightly. She considered, but felt the tremor in his body as she tried to shift, and thought better of it. Let him rest while he could. She doubted that he would sleep for very long, even for tonight, and God knew when he would allow himself to sleep again, for now, this would suit. She quietly made herself as comfortable as possible, turning just enough, even as Mulder held her even more possessively. With a heart full of sadness and a head aching from the horrible anguish of the day, Scully fell into a fitful sleep of her own, one plagued with the strangeness of sharing a bed with someone and the memory of the sound of Mulder's broken tears.

Chapter End Notes

Game of Thrones fans, I didn't plan that title on purpose, but it is funny how that worked out.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully, Mulder and Skinner discover a horrific truth.

Skinner's stunned expression she knew mirrored her own. They blinked at each other, both shocked by the futility in Mulder's voice, the lack of hope, and the demand to be taken off the case and allowed time off. The last item was perhaps what stunned Scully the most, Mulder notoriously never asked for time unless he was forced to it. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of what it meant.

She trailed behind her partner and Skinner to the car, quietly getting in as her boss started the long drive back to San Francisco and a flight back to Washington. Mulder slumped in the back seat, his expression guarded, without a word to either of them as they pulled out of the city. He had never before sounded so hopeless or lost. Not even in the depths of her illness had Mulder looked so broken. It was to be expected, she supposed, with the loss of his mother and the guilt he felt and all of that tied up with the night so long ago. She reviewed their conversation from the night before. He hadn't displayed this futility then, but given the broad light of day and the cold hard facts, something had changed, something essential was broken in Fox Mulder. It hurt Scully to see it.

The roads outside of Sacramento wound through foothills that lead to the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the East and the Coastal Mountain Range to the West. It had been years since Scully had been this way, during one of the many so-called "family vacations" that she and her siblings had been forced on by her parents when her father came back from the sea. She thought of her father then, the man who she adored, as she considered her conversation with the LaPierres. She never spoke of it, unsure of what to make of it, but she remembered still that moment right before her mother's fateful phone call. She remembered waking to the image of her father sitting in one of her armchair, talking to her in words she couldn't hear, words that she wished that she could. Had it been something akin to what Amber Lynn's mother had experienced? Did the number seventy-four have any meaning, or was it simply the wishful thinking of a mind overwrought with grief and longing for a child who could be very well dead as Mulder suggested?

As if by magic, they passed a California road sign with the number 74 marked on it. Scully paused. Had she only noticed it because she was thinking about it? Likely, one of those weird coincidences in life that happened from time to time, like when you are thinking of a person or event and they come up randomly in conversation later that day. She nearly decided to ignore it. But there was something, deep inside, something that told her not to ignore it. She wasn't one to listen to intuition over common sense, yet, for years, her sister and Mulder had urged her to listen to that gut instinct, and hell, she had nothing to lose seeing what Route 74 was all about.

She reached for glove box and the paper map that the rental company included in there. Skinner shot her a questioning look as she unfolded it on her lap, ignoring him as she located Sacramento easily enough. She found the line that was marked as "Rt. 74", and followed it to its end, to Santa's North Pole Village.

Her blood ran cold, little hairs rising on the back of her neck as she stared out the window. It all made a weird sort of sense, the note. "Santa Claus!"

From behind her, Mulder stirred. "What?"
Scully shook her head, turning to her boss. "Stop. Turn around."

Skinner, to his credit, didn't even question it. He simply turned the car around, heading back the mile or so that they just came.

"What is it, Scully?" His dark eyes slid over to her as he focused on the road.

"Route 74," Scully pointed to the map, lifting it up for both Skinner and Mulder to see. "Mrs. LaPierre said she thought Amber was mouthing the number 74."

"Scully," Mulder began, tiredly drawing out her name.

"Mulder," Scully turned to glare at him around the headrest of her seat. "Route 74 leads to a place called Santa's North Pole Village."

He paused as it clicked with him as well. "No one shoots Santa Claus."

"What if you were right this whole time, Mulder? The note was the clue, only none of us were listening to it."

"You think that Amber Lynn is at this village?" Skinner's jaw tightened. He wasn't an idiot, and neither was Scully. She knew where Skinner's thoughts were heading, and he didn't like the end result. "Scully, I want you on the phone with the Sacramento field office. Tell them to get a team ready to get out there, maybe an ambulance if we find her."

"Right," she murmured, reaching for her phone.

By the time she was off the call, they were already well on their way up Route 74. Signs littered it at intervals, advertising Santa's Village, with reindeer and decorations. It was the sort of place she imagined would be popular during the holidays but likely had to scrabble to keep business during the long, warm summer months. Did anyone go up there during the off-season? How secluded was it? A place like that would be the perfect one for someone with pedophilic tendencies to scope out prey during the holidays and potentially kidnap them and bring them back to keep. She shivered at what they might just find there. She could feel Mulder shifting warily in the seat behind her.

The property itself looked deserted as they pulled up. Now well into spring, muddy pits filled a yard that looked as if a Christmas light show had exploded all over it. Decorations hung strangely along the buildings, and the outbuildings looked as if they house various livestock and creatures. Scully carefully stepped out of the vehicle, already reaching for her weapon as Mulder strode towards the house. Skinner, for his part, went towards the outbuildings. Scully followed Mulder into the sparkling house covered with cheap tinsel and glass bulb ornaments.

No one appeared to be near the property.

The building itself seemed to be nothing more than a single room, perhaps an office during the season. A security set up was in place, with a camera station and video set up. Lining the wall were stacks of videotapes, looking like innocent security footage. Scully felt bile rise in her mouth as she considered just what might be on those tapes.

"Some of these tapes go back to the 60's," Mulder sighed, pulling at one of the tapes on top.

She knew what he was hinting at. Had he and his family ever even come close to California when he was a child? Had they even ever been here?

"I think I know what we are going to find here," he murmured sadly. "It's what my mother was
afraid of. My sister."

How he reasoned that out, why he even assumed that Samantha could be among the children on these videos, Scully couldn't guess. She never got the chance to ask. As the screen came to life, there was the laughing, smiling image of Amber Lynn with a group of other children, feeding the reindeer.

"It's Amber Lynn LaPierre! The video is dated two days before she was taken."

Before she could move to inform Skinner, the door to the room slammed shut, a lock rasping on the other side. On one of the security monitors, Scully could see a large, paunchy man fleeing from the door, even as Mulder swore loudly and pulled on it.

"Have to break it down." Without losing a beat, he began to throw his shoulder into the process. The wood was old and dried out, and creaked under the pressure of Mulder's tall frame against it. On the monitors, Scully could see the man being noticed by Skinner, who gave chase through the forest that surrounded the property.

"Skinner's on him," she murmured, as the ancient wood gave way to Mulder's force, allowing the two of them to escape and follow in the pursuit. Guns at the ready, they ran in the direction that Skinner took off in, pausing briefly as they heard a gunshot ring through the air.

"Come on," Mulder muttered, racing to where Skinner stood, cornering their suspect in a field. The man kneeled, hands in the air as Scully ran towards him, ensuring that he didn't have a weapon he could turn on either of them.

"What's your name," she gasped as she pulled out her handcuffs, wrapping one end around one of his upheld wrists.

"Ed…Truelove."

At least it wasn't Kris Kringle, she thought morbidly, as she reached for the other wrist. "You have the right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak with an attorney and you have the right to have the attorney present during questioning. If you so desire…"

"Scully!" Mulder cut off her reading of Truelove's Miranda Rights in a voice that sounded too horrified for words.

She stopped, looking up at him questioningly, only to allow her gaze to wander in the direction he gazed, staring all around them in the field where they had Ed Truelove cornered, a field that was filled with tiny mounds of dirt, mounds just big enough to appear as if they might just cover a child. Eyes wide, she turned first to Mulder, then to Skinner, who both looked at her in stunned anguish. They all three looked down at Ed Truelove who wouldn't meet any of their expressions. He simply looked resigned, defeated, perhaps a bit relieved.

"What have you done," Skinner growled, dark eyes finally blazing as the initial shock wore off.

Truelove didn't answer.

Mulder wandered to the nearest grave, looking as if it couldn't be that old. "Sir, we found video tapes up in the house," he told him absently as he prodded some of the dirt gently with the toe of his leather loafer. He glanced back at Skinner. "One of the videos had Amber Lynn LaPierre on it."

Skinner's scowl turned thunderous. "What did you do to her, you sick, son-of-a-bitch."
Truelove only whimpered, backing away as best he could on his knees as Scully grabbed her boss by the arm.

"Sir, I've read him his rights. We need to get him out of here, we need…" She paused, mouth dry as tears threatened to sting her eyes. "We need to get a forensic team up here."

Her words served to calm Skinner down enough that he could nod, his jaw so hard she thought it would shatter.

"I'll take our suspect." He spat the word out as he made clear just what he thought of Truelove cowering there on the ground. "I will keep him in the car till back up gets here. I'll call in for a full forensics team. In the meantime, start recording what you can of the scene for them when they get here."

"Yes, sir," they both murmured into the stillness as Skinner grabbed the suspect by the collar of his shirt and drug him past the tiny graves, carefully avoiding them as he went.

"Mulder," Scully breathed when they had walked far enough away. Her mind couldn't comprehend what they were seeing here.

"I know," Mulder whispered beside her. "Those videos…I will bet that every one of them has the face of a child that's buried out here."

"Including Amber Lynn." She turned in the field, as if expecting to find the little girl waiting for them.

"Maybe…likely." Mulder's voice caught as he admitted that. "Whatever the case, Scully, I don't think she's ever coming home."

Scully didn't think her heart could break anymore, not after the events of yesterday, but now she felt it shatter as she wrapped arms around herself.

"I don't think I understand this world, Mulder." Tears misted her eyes as in the distance the sound of sirens broke through the air, still far away.

"Believe me, Scully, there are days I don't understand it either," he replied, a hand at her elbow as he led her sadly away from the graves.
Children Lost

Chapter Summary

In which Scully oversees the grim work.

Twenty-four small bodies were dug up from the field outside of Ed Truelove's shack. The oldest, an eleven year old girl, still wore her dark hair in a ponytail, though the body had decomposed to nothing more than bone. The youngest was a child of around four or five, perhaps a girl, perhaps a boy, the remains of a pair Osh Kosh B'Gosh overalls still visible among the remains. Scully stood over the sight, watching as the forensic team worked. Like archaeologists, they dug with hand trowels and brushes, sweeping away dirt as they carefully indexed every bit of bone, every hair, every remaining fiber of clothing. Some of the bodies were so old that there was little left outside of skeletal fragments. Others were newer, the bodies decomposing, causing minor outcries of horror and disgust even from the most seasoned veterans.

Scully watched with dry eyes and tried not to think of a tiny grave in San Diego and her daughter lying in it. Though others brought on Emily's death, she had at least died in a place where she was being cared for, with someone there to hold her hand and whisper words of love and comfort to her. These children had died at the hands of a ruthless killer. Had they been scared when they died? Had they been hurt? Did Ed Truelove even care about their cries as he did these things, violating their trust? Did he ever once consider the broken families left behind, waiting for their little son or daughter to come home? Somehow, she doubted it.

Ed Truelove's confession had been swift once he was in custody, he almost seemed to be relieved to be getting it out there. Perhaps in a twisted way he was, after carrying his secret for so long he spilled out the entire truth. He had been a shy, young teenager with an affinity for children. It was why he worked at the elementary school where he was asked to be the Santa Claus. He hadn't expected to feel what he had, to be aroused as he had by the experience, especially by the loving trust in the eyes of one young lady of nine who had asked him so earnestly for ballet shoes. He had of course promised her everything she wanted for Christmas. It hadn't been hard to find her address in the school files as he was cleaning that night. She had been the first of his victims. He had taken her to a secluded area he knew in the woods beyond the city. That was where she had died. Her body wasn't here, not in this field. Already other forensic teams were out there looking for her.

In the years that followed he created his village outside of town, had billed it as one part petting zoo, one part kitschy holiday attraction. Some years he had entire groups of children come up in the weeks before Christmas, piled in church vans and school buses, there to take pictures with Santa and pet reindeer. He videotaped all of them and picked his victims carefully. He would use the addresses he collected from sales slips to track down his victims and kidnap them, sometimes from home, sometimes from school. He had ranged as far out as Oregon, Las Vegas, and San Diego. Included in one of those sales slips was Kathy Lee Tren cate's address in Idaho. He admitted to that murder, in a way at least, he said he found the boy dead before he even got out of town, perhaps dead from the act of kidnapping. He had simply dumped the body before he left, in the exact area that Kathy Lee had told investigators to find it. Her case in Idaho was now being re-opened.

For all the murders he did admit to, the one he hadn't admitted to was Amber Lynn LaPierre's. He did own to thinking about it, had even planned on going to the LaPierres that night, but when he got...
to the neighborhood he found that the police cars were already there. He claimed he abandoned his plan and returned home. So far, no sign of Amber Lynn's remains had been found amongst the twenty-four bodies. No sign of Samantha Mulder's remains were to be found there either, though Scully hadn't expected it. There was no logical reason for it. The Mulders hadn't ventured to California at all when their children were young and there was no reason to suspect that Truelove would be so daring as to make off with a child from three thousand miles away. Still, she had the rather insane hope that by some miracle they would have found her, a little girl in a nightdress, her long, dark hair still pinned back. She had wished that amongst those dead lay the one child that she suspected they would never find. As macabre as it sounded, she wanted to find Samantha, if for no other reason to give Mulder closure on the tragedy that was his family story.

In all honesty, she had hoped it would also bring closure for herself. Since that night so long ago in Bellefleur she had known the story of Samantha Mulder, of her disappearance at the hands of aliens, or so her brother thought. So much of her life in the last seven years had been defined by that loss. Mulder's search for Samantha had lead them into a heart of a conspiracy that had involved his family. It had had dragged Scully into it's depths, and she still wasn't sure she understood why. Now, after all of these years and all of the things she had seen and answers she had found, the one lingering question that had yet to be resolved was the truth regarding the whereabouts of Samantha.

For the longest time she had wanted to find out for Mulder's sake, to end his suffering. But now she realized, as she stood amongst the tiny graves, she wanted to find out the truth for herself as well. Scully wanted to believe that everything that she had suffered, everything that she had lost was worth something. If they could at last find out the truth, provide some resolution to the biggest question that they ever asked, perhaps she could feel that after all these years everything was worth it. Finally, Mulder would have his answer. Yet, Scully wasn't terribly sure that an answer would ever come.

"Agent Scully!" One of the forensic team called to her, approaching in soiled jeans and an FBI windbreaker, gloved hands covered in mud. "I think we have almost wrapped up here with the bodies. They're being taken to the UC Davis Medical Center. We have a team there already in place to start forensic analysis. We should have the preliminary information in a day or two."

"Thanks," she replied, glancing around the open graves, now empty for the most part of their occupants. "The videos in the shed? Has someone collected them?"

"Agent Mulder had the Sacramento Police come and help him collect them for review. We're hoping we can put faces and names together, inform the families when this is all done."

"Please do," she replied. "There are parents who are longing to know what happened to their children. They just want some sense of closure."

The man beside her nodded grimly. "I'm glad at least I'll be able to do that, bring some good out of this whole, grizzly mess."

"You'll be doing more good than you will ever know," Scully smiled softly. "Call me if you need anything. I'll head to the hospital and see what I can do on that end."

She turned her back on the tiny graveyard, walking to her car in the distance. As she did she whispered a Hail Mary for those souls now departed and prayed that wherever they were, God had taken them to a far better place than the world that they left.
What We Want To Hear

Chapter Summary

I which Scully investigates the biggest X-files.

Scully had rather hoped Mulder would come with her, but she hadn't been surprised when he hadn't. Still, her entire flight home to Washington she worried about him. He was in a vulnerable place now, Teena's death, all his feelings regarding Samantha and the still missing Amber Lynn LaPierre. Whoever this Harold Pillar was she had a feeling he had swooped in on her partner at just the right time, telling him things that he wanted to hear, and she wasn't happy about it at all.

Though it had been days since she had been home, she took a cab back from National to Mulder's apartment. She knew there was a videotape in his collection, one that was set apart from the others. She let herself inside his home, untouched from the day they left to go to California with Skinner. Pausing only long enough to feed his much neglected fish, Scully snagged the tape and turned on the TV, popping it into the VCR. She waited as the tape whirred to life, as on the screen a black and white video image of a much younger Mulder came to life. He didn't seem himself in the video. If anything he seemed out of it, perhaps under the effects of hypnosis. The other person in the video was unseen, but the voice and the story that Mulder was relating was painfully familiar. How many times had she listened to the audiocassette of this very story? How much was it ingrained into her brain?

She rewound the video and ejected it, turning off the television as she slipped it into her bag. She made her way out of his apartment, locking it up as she made her way to her car. An idea was forming in her head, but she wasn't sure how much of it would be useful. Her car was still parked downstairs from where she left it and once in she made her way across the river to the Hoover Building. She was going to find an end for this, and she wasn't going to allow Harold Pillar to play with her partner's already overwrought emotions.

Scully had not really had that much to do with Behavioral Sciences, that had been Mulder's playground for the most part. Until she had been assigned to the X-files she had been stuck primarily at Quantico and pathology. Still, when she made her way to the unit and explained how she wanted someone to review a video of victim who had witnessed a kidnapping long ago, she was pointed in the direction of Agent Schoniger. He was an older agent, on the high end of middle aged, in an office that looked more like a college professor's than an FBI agent's. It was filled with books of psychology, shelves and shelves, with a television and VCR set up in one corner. She knocked gently on his wooden door, earning a curious smile from the man behind the desk.

"Hi, I was looking for Agent Schoniger?"

He rose with an outstretched hand. "You found me, Agent…"

"Scully, Dana Scully. I work with the X-files division."

"X-files? Really?" Far from sneering, he merely looked curious. "I used to know an agent who worked with those when I first got started here. Arthur Dales?"

"Yes, retired now. I've met him a few times."
"Strange man, but I heard he was a good agent. How can I help you?"

Scully pulled out the video from her bag, holding it out to the other gentleman. "I am in need of your expertise."

"Mine?" He eyed it curiously, taking it from her. "What about?"

"I asked around out front. They said you are good at psychological trauma in victims of violent crimes."

He shrugged good-naturedly. "I've had a lot of experience, but there are many agents here who can help you."

"What about a person who witnessed a violent crime thirty years ago?"

Schoniger glanced at the video in his hands. "Is this for a case?"

"In a manner of speaking. It's regarding Agent Mulder."

"Mulder…Fox Mulder?" His eyebrows rose at the name.

"You know him?"

"Well his reputation, certainly, he was the bright and shining star on Bill Patterson's crew for years. I never worked with him, but I knew of him long before that." He nodded knowingly as he stared at the black, plastic cassette. "I was one of the agents assigned to his sister's case."

Scully stared at him in mild surprise. She hadn't expected that. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah, it was a big case then, probably bigger than he realizes it was. I was new, a greenhorn, but I kept tabs on it for several years till it was closed. I heard he reopened it again, hoped he would have better luck with it than we ever did." He frowned up at her. "What does the tape have to do with it?"

"It's a tape of a session Mulder had recorded ten years ago. He was meeting with the psychoanalyst, Dr. Werber. Do you know him?"

The way Schoniger wrinkled his nose indicated that clearly he must have. "By reputation only. Do you mind if…" He held up the tape and nodded towards the television.

"Go ahead," Scully waved her hand. "It's why I brought it here."

"Thank you," he smiled, rising to round his desk and turn on the television. "What do you hope I find, Agent Scully?"

To be honest, she wasn't sure. "I don't know, sir. I just know that for over twenty-five years he's carried this weight with him. I know his mother just recently died, and this case we are on…it's bringing up a lot for him. I'm afraid that there is someone trying to take advantage of him in a vulnerable state."

"And you want to challenge that state by undermining what he believes happened that night?" Schoniger sounded dubious with her plan.

"I want Mulder to finally see reason," she clarified. "I want him to see sense."

"Maybe your sense and his sense are two different things, Agent Scully."
He started the video and she frowned as she watched it through, saddened at the image of this man she cared for so much reliving what had to be one of the most horrible moments of his life. They watched the entire video in silence, with Schoniger humming and nodding quietly to himself, occasionally making a note or two on a legal pad before turning his attention back to the video.

Scully was dying to know what he thought.

When it ended, he quietly rewound the video in the machine, thinking to himself as he did so. He said nothing as the video hit the end again, and he pressed play one more time. The black and white image floated to the screen again, and Scully glanced at the other man curiously.

"So what do you think?"

He shrugged, watching as Dr. Werber sent Mulder into a hypnotic state; taking him back to the place he was when Samantha disappeared. "By what I can tell from the tape he seems to be in a legitimate, hypnotic state."

As Mulder began to talk about the events regarding the actual taking of Samantha, he frowned warily. "Here I became suspicious."

That surprised Scully. "Suspicious of what?"

Schoniger sighed, turning off the video in the middle of Mulder's explanation. "In thirty years with the FBI, you'd think you've seen it all. I sometimes think I have, but this is just your garden variety, compensatory-abduction fantasy."

"Compensatory for what?"

"His guilt, his fear." Schoniger smiled sadly. "Everything that is preventing Agent Mulder from remembering the truth about what really happened that night."

What really happened? Scully had never once considered that anything other than Samantha's disappearance. Her stomach turned at the idea that perhaps something else occurred that the young Fox was subjected to. "You mean his sister wasn't really abducted?"

"No, the sister definitely went missing in 1973. That's not in dispute. Agent Mulder, however, wasn't regressed until 1989. See, his delusion is playing into his unconscious hope that his sister is still alive. And if you think about it, it's his delusions that has the effect of giving a reason to pursue her."

The hope that somewhere, out there, Samantha was still alive had driven Mulder all these years. To think that so much of it was based on a lie he told himself, just so he could manage the pain that he had suffered since he was twelve-years-old was beyond heartbreaking to think on. "But why alien abduction?"

"Close Encounters, E.T., who knows?" Schoniger shrugged. "But there was probably a lot of imagery collecting in his head in those sixteen years and then he comes down here and he finds the X-files."

Scully recalled the story that the Lone Gunmen told her about how they had all met, how normal Mulder had seemed until that moment when he was doused with Suzanne's aerosol. If that event just right before Mulder met with Dr. Werber had the effect of creating Mulder's delusion?

"So what do you think happened to his sister?" If Schoniger had been on the case, perhaps he had a theory from his experiences in the investigation.
"Well, in 1973, we were pretty damn unsophisticated about violent, predatory crime. My guess is she was kidnapped in the house, her body was disposed of, never found."

Scully flinched. "You think his sister is dead?"

Without a word, he rose, rounding his desk to a filing cabinet. She was unsurprised when he pulled out a file nearly as big and fat as the one that Mulder had in their filing cabinets downstairs. He hefted it over to her, laying it down in front of her.

"Have you seen this file? There was an extraordinary amount of effort put into finding his sister, even the Treasury Department got involved. His father worked at a high level of government. They found nothing."

Nothing. With all the resources of the Secret Service even, they still found nothing. What hope did she have to find anything more than they did?

"Why, Agent Scully," Schoniger asked gently, as if sensing her silent purpose. "Why do you want to bring all this back up now?"

The answer was simple, really. "Someone owes it to Mulder."

He didn't look as if he agreed with her. "Word of advice, me to you - let it be. You know, there's wounds that are just too painful ever to be reopened."

Scully sighed sadly as she picked up the case file. "Well, this particular wound has never healed. And Mulder deserves closure, just like anyone."

Schoniger apparently didn't have an argument against that. "I hope, for his sake, you know what you're doing."

"I hope I do as well," she replied. "Do you mind if I take this. You may have things he hasn't had access to. I'll return it when I'm done."

"Be my guest." He popped the tape out of the VCR and handed it back to her. "Take this with you. And Agent Scully…just know that what you may find, it may not be the answer he wants to hear."

"I think at this point, Agent Schoniger. He will take any answer as long as it is finally an answer."

She turned from his office, file and tape in hand. She wasn't sure what she would find in these files, what bits of information might come out, but whatever it was, it had to be better than this awful not knowing that Mulder resided in now. Perhaps there would never be a body in a lonely field dressed in a nightgown, but maybe there would be answers. And that was all she wanted.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to make sense of incongruities.

It was the age on the file that Agent Schoniger handed her that caught her attention. The last missing persons report in the stack of papers was complete with all the information that Scully already knew regarding Samantha Mulder, except the age given was fourteen-years-old. Scully blinked and double-checked the date of the file. The last given date on the report was December of 1979. Why would a new missing persons report be filed in 1979?

A phone call to Schoniger had turned up nothing much on the angle. He merely stated that the case had been reopened briefly by the Treasury Department, but closed again without much more information. He wished he could be of further help, but by that time much of Samantha's case had been relegated to the X-files, forgotten by most in the FBI, kicked under the rug. It had taken more than a few phone calls to get into someone at the Treasury Department who could help her, an old, Secret Service investigator who had booted up the chain of command and who vaguely remembered the Mulder case. He asked for an hour to do some investigation before calling her over to the Treasury Building to meet with her regarding the information.

"Agent Pratt." Scully shook the tall, large, middle-aged gentleman's hand as he waved her to a seat, holding up the file in his hand.

"Agent Scully, you caused hell for me today finding this. Took three interns to track it down, and even then it was on a clearance level only I could use to get it out."

"I'm sorry, sir, I hadn't thought it would be so much trouble." She should have suspected it might be, however. Still, he seemed to be good-natured about it, passing it over to her without much fanfare.

"I didn't work the case myself, frankly, I'm a bit confused why the Treasury Department was involved in a missing persons case. Isn't that your sort of purview over at the Bureau?"

"Yes," Scully nodded, trying to figure how best to explain it. "Samantha Mulder was the daughter of an important official over at State. When she disappeared, I suppose there were security concerns, the middle of the Cold War and all."

"Hell, I can imagine," he swore with a hint of a Texas accent. "As far as I could tell from the files, she hasn't been seen in twenty years."

Scully nodded as she scanned the documents. The top most one was identical to the one that Schoniger handed to her, a missing persons report from 1979. "Did you know that Samantha Mulder disappeared in 1973 not 1979?"

"No, I didn't."

"Do you know why the Treasury Department signed off on a case file in 1979, six years after the fact?"

Agent Pratt shook his silver head as he rolled it over carefully. "It could be anything. I wasn't in the
"I don't know." She flipped to the back of the paperwork, eyes landing on a formal looking document. She frowned reading it, recognizing it was some sort of documentation formally calling off the search for Samantha Mulder. That surprised her. The FBI had never formally given up on the search, and in fact Scully had assumed that most had just let the case go cold, but the Treasury Department had, citing their suspicion that after all these years, Samantha was likely dead. Had this been why Agent Schoniger assumed as much?

"It says here that the Treasury Department ended the investigation because they felt that Samantha Mulder was dead."

"There you go," Agent Pratt sighed sadly. "Perhaps they discovered what happened to her."

"No body was found," she murmured, scanning through the information on the document. "How could they make that sort of categorical decision without any evidence that she was?"

"Perhaps for the family?" Pratt offered by way of explanation. She glanced up at him as he further explained. "In certain cases, when a family is seeking to declare their loved one as deceased, if the investigator thinks there is no hope, they would declare the investigation closed."

Scully was familiar with the process, she had done it more than a few times on the X-files, but to do that it would mean that either Bill or Teena had requested it. She checked the signatures on the back of the form. There on the top line was the signature of Elizabeth Mulder, Teena's real name, and underneath it the initials "CGBS".

She should have suspected he had something to do with this.

"This is a copy," she realized, when it occurred to her that the signatures were not in ink. She frowned up at Agent Pratt, holding up the file. "Where is the original?"

That surprised him. "Must have been a mix up at the time it was done. The original is usually placed in the file. My guess is that someone gave the family the wrong one."

She held up the piece of paper. "Is it possible for me to keep this one for now. I can return it to you when my investigations complete."

"It's a copy, that's fine. If you find the original, we'd like them both back."

"Thank you," she murmured, tucking the copy into her bag. He had been kind enough to help her out, a gesture he didn't need to do, and Scully hardly got the vibe off the cheerful, bear of a man that he was lying to her about anything. She quietly closed the file and passed it back over to him with a small smile. "Thank you, Agent Pratt, you've helped a great deal in my investigation."

"So you are trying to figure out what happened to this girl?" Pratt eyed her speculatively with that doubt that everyone seemed to have when it came to finding the true fate of Samantha Mulder. Scully nodded, squaring her shoulders.

"I have to. Her brother…he's my partner, and I owe it to him to put this to bed."

Pratt studied for a long moment before nodding. "If you need anything else out of us, let me know."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, seeing herself out of his office.
Teena Mulder had her daughter's investigation called off years ago. She knew about it all of this time and had said nothing to her son. Why? The question roiled as she made her way back out to her car, pondering her situation as she climbed inside. Clearly, she knew something but had chosen to keep it to herself. In 1979, Fox would have been eighteen, a senior in high school, perhaps already accepting a place in Oxford for the next year. Perhaps she had simply kept it to herself in the desire not to upset her son further as he spent the last year of his childhood. If that was the case, why hadn't she told him the truth after that? Why not after he got home from Oxford, or when he joined the FBI, or when he stood on her front door, accusing her of the affair that she also never admitted to him? Why had she kept this particular fact above all the others she hid from Mulder?

Without further thought, she directed her car to the airport.

She caught the first shuttle she could up to Greenwich. The city, just outside of the New York City Metropolitan area, was affluent and wealthy, and it bespoke to the status that Teena had enjoyed even in her retirement. The police had locked up her town house after they left, and only her housekeeper and Mulder had a key. Conveniently, Scully had picked up a thing or two from Mulder's fast and loose interpretation of private property and had brought a lock pick with her. The door popped open as she let herself in and closed the door behind her, wandering through the house to see what, if anything, might give her some clue as to what Teena had known about her own daughter's disappearance.

The kitchen was still taped off, though the crime scene had been lifted days ago. The living room was decided ruffled from the influx of police. Scully scanned the wall of photos. Most of the ones she recalled were there, Mulder from his prom, her wedding photo with Bill, and pictures of her children at various ages. One key one wasn't present, however, the one that was familiar to her, a picture of Fox and Samantha standing together one fall day in 1973. What had happened to it?

Little made itself openly visible to Scully on the ground floor. To be honest, she didn't think Teena would have kept anything vital down there and if she had, Mulder would have seen it the other day. No one had bothered to go upstairs during the investigation. There had been no need to. Teena's body had been found in the kitchen. Carefully ascending the steps, Scully made her way up to Teena's bedroom, wandering in. The bed was still indented from where she and Mulder had sat on it just the other day. The picture frames he said were normally on her bedside table were indeed empty, the frames missing the photographs of the children she had once cherished. Where had they gone?

Scully opened her dresser drawers, hoping to find something. Her clothes and a few mementos scattered, but nothing that indicated an official file. She straightened, her eyes falling on the wastebasket just by the drawers. The inside was ashy, something had burned in it, that much was clear. The house had reeked of gas the other day when they were here, it was no wonder they hadn't noticed the smoke. She picked it up carefully, examining the contents. There wasn't much left in the ash, but a few things; he corner of a photograph, a curled edge of paper, and most of an official looking document she had just seen hours ago in Agent Pratt's office.

Scully pulled it out carefully and held up the remains to see what she could. Much of the top half had burned, but the bottom half with Teena's signature of legal name in ink along with the initials of Spender was clear as day. She had it all these years, and never had said a word. Why? There were only two people who could answer that question, one was dead, the other she doubted she could ever talk to, not that she would want to. Why was it that smoking bastard seem to have all the answers to everything?

She gingerly set the brittle paper on the top of the dresser, laying it next to the copy she retrieved from her bag. Reaching for her cell phone in her pocket. She thumbed the one key, the one that quick dialed Mulder's cell. She waited for an answer.
"Mulder." His voice was gruff on the other end of the line.

"Mulder, it's me. I found something and I'm standing here not quite believing what it is."

"What is it?"

"I don't know if you know this, but there was a special Treasury Department investigation into Samantha's disappearance.

"In 1973, I know all about that."

That surprised her. How had he not said anything? "Well, I'm in your mother's house and I found a piece of a document that she burned, a document that matches one I found in the treasury investigation files. But she had the original, Mulder."

"I don't see where you are going with this, Scully." He sounded defensive and annoyed.

"It's a document that effectively calls off the search for your sister, Mulder. And it's signed with the initials 'CGBS'." Carefully, she laid the burned document on top of the copy she had from Agent Pratt's file.

"CGB Spender," she clarified when he remained silent on the other end of the line. "The smoking man? He was involved with this back in '73."

"Well, that's not exactly a revelation, Scully. He was a friend of my father's."

He was more than that to Teena, though she had never admitted it or anything else to her son. "Mulder, you told me you believe that he's the man that killed your father, that he's the man who's done nothing but confound your work, whose come close to killing you, and here he's ordering people to stop looking for your sister."

"I don't see what you think this proves or how you think it's going to help me find her now," he replied defensively, much to her surprise.

"You don't want to press him," she pushed, surprised he wouldn't take this opportunity to find out something of the truth.

"It's a dead end," he snapped impatiently. "He's never been of any help and he's not going to be of any help now."

Scully blinked at the document in front of her, wondering what in the hell was bringing this on.

"Look," Mulder continued, clearly done with the conversation, "I'm pursuing this my own way, all right. I got to go."

Hurt, she stared at the phone as he hung up, unsure of what to think. Here was solid evidence of someone knowing something about his sister's final fate, and he dismissed it out of hand. What was he chasing out there? Whatever it was, she had a feeling Harold Pillar had something to do with it.

Angrily, she glared down at the initials at the bottom of the page. She knew the smoking, son-of-a-bitch had something to do with this. What and how, she didn't know, and she wouldn't know until she confronted him. That, she wasn't sure how to manage, as he was as elusive as the haze of smoke that surrounded him and twice as hard to reach. Still, she knew of one person who may have a way of somehow reaching him.
Her phone rang again, this time it was Skinner whose voice answered at the other end. "Agent Scully, is Mulder all right."

It was touching that his first thought would be for his erstwhile agent, but she had no time for sentiment. "He's fine for the moment, Sir, I have a favor to ask you. I'm not sure you can even manage it, but I am desperate."

"What is it," he asked cautiously.

She pressed her lips hard, considering how to approach this. "I have found a document from the Treasury Department that ended its own investigation into Samantha Mulder's disappearance. It is initialed by CGB Spender." She paused as she waited for that to sink in to Skinner. "You and I both know who that is."

Skinner soon recovered from his momentary surprise. "I'm listening, Agent Scully."

"I need to get a hold of him," she replied shortly. "I need to find out what this is all about. I don't know if you have avenues that are open anymore to him or if he has crawled off to hide in some sewer, but if you can manage it, I would be grateful."

Another pause, one punctuated by a heavy sigh from Skinner. "Does this have anything to do with Amber Lynn LaPierre, Scully?"

"Likely not, but it may have everything to do with why Mulder's mother killed herself the minute she saw that case on the news." Skinner wasn't happy with this, she knew it, and she knew she would owe him for this. "Sir, if I had any other way, I would take it."

"It's fine, Scully," he replied absently. "If I am able to manage anything, I will let you know, but my contacts in that arena, most of them are gone now. Everything went to hell after El Rico, and frankly I've been content to never have the scent of cigarettes around me again."

"I understand, sir. Please, keep me informed."

"Of course." He didn't sound pleased at all, and she couldn't blame him. This could be costly for both of them.

"I hope your partner isn't doing something we will both regret, Scully." It was Skinner's eternal mantra.

"Me too, sir," she sighed, glancing at the initials on the faded, half-burned document. "Me too."
Give Him Hope

Chapter Summary

In which Scully ruminates on a chat with the devil...

...allow him this kindness, Agent Scully. It's what gives him hope....

The cigarette smoke lingered on the air as Scully stood, regarding the door that Spender walked out of. She really needed to get better locks on it, but wondered if there was a point. Spender would likely simply slither in under the crack. This wasn't the first time she had walked into her living room to find him there, and the fact he felt he had a right in doing it angered her. She glared at the place where he had been sitting before stalking into the kitchen for air freshener. There wasn't enough of the cinnamon scent in the world to remove the trace of him from her apartment. She wished desperately she could remove the traces of him from her life as well.

It was her fault, she had been the one to call the man. However Skinner got the message through, it had been effective. What hadn't been were his answers regarding why his initials were on the document. As enigmatic as always, he had neatly sidestepped those answers, choosing instead to chastise her and tell her that all this secrecy was simply a kindness to him. She might believe it, if she hadn't known that this man had toyed with Mulder's entire life practically from his conception to this very moment. His own flesh and blood and he chose to lie to him, to lead him on, to deceive him, all under the guise of hope.

Disgust curdled in Scully as she tossed the bottle of air freshener onto the couch and flopped next to it. Whoever Spender was, whatever his genetic relationship to Mulder was, she knew in her heart of hearts that his purposes were far from altruistic or caring. He had admitted as much when he said he had kept it secret to protect his program, the project that he and Bill Mulder was so intimately involved with. Now, with that destroyed, there seemed to be no more purpose for lies, and yet he still felt justified in doing it. Why the secrecy after all these years?

Spender had said he did it to allow Mulder to keep his hope? Wouldn't it be kinder? How it would be kinder, Scully didn't know. She thought of all the times when Melissa wandered off without a word, her mother anxiously waiting for a phone call, sleepless as she wondered if her older daughter was all right, if she was well, if she was even alive. The relief that her mother felt when Melissa finally remembered to call was so palatable, she nearly forgot her anger with her daughter in the joy of knowing that she was alive. The agony always appeared to happen in the not knowing. She considered the many bodies pulled from that field outside of Sacramento. Twenty-four children, twenty-four families, all pained at the final knowledge that indeed their children were never coming home. Some families had waited decades with the dim hope that someone somewhere would see and recognize their son or daughter and return them home.

Now, with the excavation complete and the bodies being slowly identified by forensic experts, there would be no more hope to be found. They would have the final answer regarding their children, and it wouldn't be a happy one. Could Mulder stand it if, in the end, that was the answer that he was given regarding his sister? The truth was she wasn't sure he could, not so close on the heels of his mother's death. What if it came out that Spender was right, that Samantha had died? Then Mulder would be truly alone, the last of the Mulder family, and all the hope that had carried him through all
of these years and all of this work would vanish. It could very well break the spirit of a man she loved more than life.

She could just not tell him.

That thought fled as soon as it popped into her mind. From the moment she set foot into the basement office seven years before, Scully had been unflinchingly honest with Mulder and consequently had earned his respect. To do anything less now would be a dishonor to everything their relationship had gone through and become. Could she in all faithfulness keep this from him like his mother and like Spender had? What sort of kindness would that be to him, to allow him to believe in a lie for the rest of his life, to allow that lie to drive him continually, until he destroyed his life with it.

That in the end was really why Scully couldn't do anything but tell him the truth, whether he wanted to hear it or not. Samantha had been the driving force behind her partner for decades. It had been what had pushed him into the FBI, into profiling, and into the X-files, his undimmed faith that someday, somehow, he would find the truth about Samantha's disappearance had driven him to help uncover the very conspiracy that had taken her from his family and in the process had destroyed it. But it had also caused him to be attracted to every case like Amber Lynn LaPierre's, to every little girl who went missing under mysterious circumstances, and for every one of those little girls that he wasn't able to save, Mulder relieved the horror of his own experience again and again and again.

It was time for that to stop. It was time to bring Mulder's personal angst to an end, not only for his sake, but hers as well. It was Scully who had been with him through a large part of this journey. It was she who had stood by his side despite it all, who had suffered kidnapping and testing, illness, and the loss of those she loved because of Mulder's quest to find the truth. And while she didn't really regret that decision in the end, she did know one thing, neither she nor Mulder could ever move on with their lives, could ever do anything different, until Mulder had some sort of conclusion regarding this. There would never be an end to this journey until he learned the truth of what happened to his sister, and Scully didn't want to move on till he found it. She wanted Mulder to realize the very thing that Teena realized long ago, that it was okay to stop looking.

Her phone rang, a jarring sound. She rose to pick it up, hoping it was whoever called her earlier. "Hello?"

"Scully?" It was Mulder, breathless and excited on the other end of the line.

"Mulder, what is it?"

"I've fond something."

"About Amber Lynn?"

"No," he paused, catching his breath. "Samantha."

Her heart caught in her throat. "Do you want me out there?"

"Hop on the first flight you can get to Ontario International Airport in California."

"Ontario? That's out in San Bernardino County. What are you doing there?"

"I've found something. Get out here to April Air Force Base. Meet me here in the morning. You have to see it."

'See what, Mulder?' Already, the thought of her bed in the next room was enticing her, despite the plea in his voice.
"You have to see it, Scully," he replied cryptically. "Come as soon as you can?"

"Right," she acquiesced, knowing she would. As heartily sick of airplanes as she was, she would go out there. "I'll book the first flight I can get into airports in L.A."

"Thank you, Scully." He clicked off without any further explanations. She sighed as she set down her phone, contemplating the receiver in her hand. She needed sleep, she knew that, but she also needed to see this through.

"There has got to be an end, Mulder," she whispered sadly as she set the phone down again in his cradle, turning to change and pack her bag once more.
The Diary of a Young Girl

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder reads to Scully the diary of a young girl.

The restaurant was a hole in the wall diner somewhere in the desert of San Bernardino County, not far from the base or from the motel that Mulder had chosen to camp out at. It was quiet there, only populated at this time of night by long-haul truck drivers stopping on their way too or from the greater Los Angeles area. Few of them paid any attention to the couple in the corner booth, solemnly eyeing the worn, faded journal on the table in front of them.

"Just coffee," Scully murmured to the waitress who wandered by. The woman smiled and nodded as she flipped the well-worn cups over, filling each from a pot in her hand. She told them to let her know if they needed anything and moved on to a bearded man at the counter who she seemed to know, leaving them to their peace.

"Do you really think it's hers?" Scully couldn't help but wonder. After all, it could be any child's, a memento left long ago by an army brat who hadn't wanted to be forgotten.

"Who else could it belong to?" Mulder's long fingers touched the cover gently as if it were a holy relic.

"There are many families who could have been back and forth on that base, Mulder, and perhaps other families had a daughter named Samantha."

"Other families who had a son named Jeffrey? It's too much of a coincidence."

She knew that and she wanted to believe it was his sister's journal. In the end, she was really just more afraid that it was the long-lost girl's journal than it wasn't. "Are you ready for what's inside there, Mulder? Do you really want to know what happened?"

Mulder turned fathomless eyes to her, filled with all the aching longing of nearly thirty years. "I need to know, Scully, more than anything. I need to know what happened."

No more secrets, no more lies, just the truth. Scully sighed, nodding as he carefully opened the cover. Just inside, in blue ink, was scrawled the name, "Samantha."

"Is it her handwriting?"

Mulder shook his head, unsure. "I wouldn't know. She was eight when she disappeared, her handwriting was just like any little kids." He brushed a finger over the name, something unreadable passing across his face. "The first entry is dated from her birthday, 1977."

That would have been three years after her initial disappearance. She watched Mulder as he began to scan the handwritten pages hungrily, the swirls of blue ink in a looping hand of a pre-teen girl flowing across the page. She didn't read the words, feeling that they were too sacred for her to partake of them, but Mulder, after a long minute of staring at them with tear-misted eyes, began to read out loud.
C has given me this journal for my birthday. She says it is so I can always write down those things that I don't want to forget. I think I want to forget, but she tells me it is important. I suppose she understands. She knows too. My name is Samantha. I am twelve-years-old. I have been very sick for a very long time, or at least it feels that way. I am always in the hospital, being poked, prodded, having things done to me, having people ask me about them. I don't like it. I want it to stop. They say I'm a very sick girl, and that I need the testing to make me better. They never tell me what's wrong with me.

D says it has to do with the accident. I don't remember an accident. He says I was too young to remember. I can't tell if that is true or not. I don't remember much before the hospital and being sick. I sometimes remember pieces, like dreams. I know there was a place with a beach, and an ocean, and grass and leaves, and lots of trees. It's not like this place, this base in a desert. I lived in a big house once. I had a tree swing there. I had a room with stars in it. I had a mother who loved me, and a father who loved me, and I think I had a brother too. I don't really remember.

I asked D about it once. He said that I was remembering the time before the accident. I asked him if it they were still alive. He said that he didn't think I could ever see them again. He didn't say they were dead. He won't say what happened to them either. He only says I can't ever see them. I don't know why.

That's why I think he lies. He says that he and my mother stopped speaking right before I was born, but if I remember a different father, where was he? He never explains. He only tells me to stop asking questions. He's not very nice at times. Sometimes he can be kind, and likes to give me hugs and treats. But I think he does it because he lets them take me to the hospital for more tests. If he loved me, why doesn't he make it stop?

He has a wife. He says she's my step-mother. C is nice, not like D. She is sweet, but sad, and I think she's a bit afraid. She sometimes goes to the hospital too. D says she is sick, just like I am. She always tries to be nice, but she doesn't tell me any more about my other family either. She says that I am with them now and should be happy. I think she's scared of D.

They have a boy. He's a year younger than me. He is okay. He isn't mean, like some of the other kids on the base. He isn't tested, he gets to stay here all of the time. I wish I was like him. D says it's because he's not sick like I am. He's scared of D too, just like C, just like me, too. We sometimes talk of running away. I tell him about my real family. He thinks I'm crazy for thinking about them. I will show him they exist for real, someday.

Mulder stopped at the end of the entry, his voice cracking as he blinked at the faded pages.

Scully stared at him, considering the words written by a long-lost little girl. "She was raised by Spender?"

"You know she's his daughter, just like I'm his son."

Scully startled at this. She hadn't told Mulder Teena's secret and she doubted Teena herself had said anything, but Mulder only blinked mildly at her astonishment.

"I've suspected it for years, Scully. It only makes sense. Why he would have such an interest in us? Why he would raise Samantha as his own?"

"But Jeffrey knew about it." That was the part that both stunned and angered Scully. "He worked right there by you for years and didn't say a word about her."

"He may or may not have remembered," Mulder replied simply, glancing at the pages. "The Jeffrey
Spender you and I met was a very angry young man who didn't exactly like to advertise who his father was. Samantha says he that he was scared of him. My guess is that Jeffrey chose to selectively block out parts of his life he didn't want to deal with, just as I did with Samantha's disappearance.

"Why?" Scully thought of the still missing young man, the disillusioned agent who had realized that the entire house of cards he had built his identity on had crumbled around him in the aftermath of El Rico.

"Because he had to watch what his own father did to his mother and half-sister." Mulder was sad as he re-read Samantha's words. "She says it here, he didn't have to go through the testing they did, but he had to watch it, to live with the guilt that he was held apart because his father chose it to be that way. Of course he would want to forget that, to claim his mother made up those memories, to deny his father and anything having to do with him and never to admit to me that not only did he know that my sister was alive years after the fact, but that he was my own half-brother."

Mulder wasn't angry, merely sad. It was depressing to think about a man so scared that when he came to the FBI the last person he wanted to deal with was Fox Mulder, the embodiment of all those painful memories. It went a long way to explain Jeffrey's instant antagonism to Mulder, and it made Scully wonder just where the long-missing Jeffrey was.

Mulder continued to read, skipping through pages to somewhere closer to the middle. This one was dated in September of 1977 and it was written frenetically in large, looping script. Angry, slashing words cutting across the yellowed pages.

Testing again today. I hurt, but it doesn't seem to matter anymore. They thought I wasn't listening when they put me under this time, but they didn't give me enough, so I could hear. They said something about specimens, said that I was okay, but really the boy would have been better. I thought they meant J, because they said that he was being protected, cause he was special. But then later they said it was because D made a deal with my real Mom and Dad, they got to keep the boy in MA and they got to take the girl. I don't remember what else was said, I fell asleep after that. When I woke up, D was there. I asked him if there was an accident after all. He said that there was, but he wouldn't look at me when he said it. I know he's lying to me. If he's lying to me, is it true? Did my real Mom and Dad give me to him? Did they sell me to him so I could be a lab rat? Why me and not the other one? What did I do wrong?

At that, Mulder's voice broke.

Scully could only reach out to him, fingers wrapping around his arm as silent tears coursed down his cheeks. The words of a girl who had no idea that somewhere back in Massachusetts was a boy who would have given anything in the world to have switched places with her, just to have her come back home. She had no idea that she had been taken from a family who had no choice in the matter. She didn't know that she was simply just a part of a global plot that had surrounded her young life from the moment that she was even born.

It took some time for Mulder to gain his composure enough to continue. He stemmed the tears with a cheap, paper napkin and gulped at the now lukewarm coffee, choking it down as he picked up the weathered journal again. This time he flipped forward, now well into 1978. Samantha was now thirteen, a time Scully remembered as being a transition in her own life. She suddenly started noticing things like boys and clothes, had started to want to listen to popular music and be more accepted at school. Samantha's voice at this age, however, had none of the young, teenage optimism that had marked Scully's years of early-adolescence.

They sent J away yesterday. C insisted on it and D finally gave in. They argued so much about it. She didn't want him to see these things anymore, to have to wonder if his Mom was coming home. I
can't blame her for wanting to send him away. I wish they would send me away. She said she agreed
to take his place. He should have the right to live his life away from it. I am jealous of J. I didn't
know he was supposed to be tested too. Now he gets to live a life. He went to his grandparents'
house, C's family, somewhere out east. He said goodbye to me, gave me a hug. I'm sad he's gone.
He wasn't my real brother, but he was sort of like my brother. He's not the brother I remember in my
dreams. I wonder if he will get to meet him someday. I wish I could. I'm trapped here, all alone. C
spends her days crying anymore, when she's not being taken in to be tested. She gets different ones
than I do. Sometimes I won't see her for days afterwards. She never talks about it. I wish I could help
her, make it better, but I can't even help myself.

I hope J remembers me. I hope he thinks to tell somebody I'm here. Maybe my real family doesn't
know it. Maybe, if they knew, they would come find me and get me. I have dreams sometimes where
they do. I keep hoping someday they'll come.

The entry ended with that wishful thought. Many weeks went by before there was another entry, and
that one a short one to simply state that she had been in for extra long testing, and that she couldn't
write anything. She hurt, she wanted it all to end, she wanted to go home, to her real family. The
plaintive cry of a girl who was already done with life even before it had begun.

There were hints that she remembered some of her real family, but not much, and there was no
indication that Spender told her the truth of anything. As 1978 turned into 1979, it was clear that
Samantha was getting fed up. Talk turned more frequently to running away, but she spoke of fear
doing it, the fear that they would come after her, they would find her, and they would lock her away
forever. She mentions that fate for others, people she knows of. With age seemed to come more
testing, more indifference, more hardships. With age came awareness as well, and Samantha was all
too aware of just what sort of situation she was in and how this was all going to end for her.

They did more tests today, but not the horrible kind. I was awake and they made me lay still while
they shined lights in my eyes. They asked me questions, but I always lie now and tell them what they
want to hear, just to make them stop. I hate them and I hate the way they treat me, like I'm an old
suitcase they can just drag around and open up whenever they want to. They know I hate them, but
they don't even care.

"This is 1979. She's fourteen-years-old here. Fourteen-years old!" Much older than the eight-year-old
he remembered and far more traumatized, but she had been alive that long, at least. He was eighteen
at this time, a senior in high school, just about ready to travel to England, to leave the tragedy of her
disappearance behind. Had he even suspected this, there was no doubt in Scully's mind he would
have tried to save her.

Mulder quietly turned the last page where writing appeared. The words were scrawled frantically, in
a hurry, as if she rushed to get them out before she hid the journal behind the bookshelf. The words
and sentiment were decisive, though.

No more. No more tests. No more questions. I'm getting out of here and not turning back. Tonight
I'm going to run far, far away. I can't let them catch me. They'll kill me if they do. Running for my
life, for the rest of my life!

"And then she...uh...talks of running away. She wants to run away so they stop doing the tests, and
then it stops." Mulder sighed, deeply and heavily as he looked up at Scully. Tears filled her eyes as
she reached over to hold his hand. After all these years, he at least knew what had happened to her.
Perhaps not where she was at, but what she had been, and that she at least lived past the horrible
night in November of 1973. She hadn't died in a field like Ed Truelove's victims had. Scully wasn't
so sure, however, that her fate had been any better.
"Let's get out of here," she whispered, gently tugging at his hand. She rose, pulling money from her pocket to cover the coffee as Mulder unfolded himself from the booth and wandered outside. She tipped the waitress extra for her troubles, knowing that the coffee was cheap and the hours for the woman were hard. Quietly, she slipped across the tired linoleum of the diner, out of the doors to where Mulder stood, gazing up into the star-spangled sky.

"You know," he breathed quietly. "I never stop to think that the light is billions of years old by the time we see it. From the beginning of time right past us into the future, nothing is as ancient in the universe."

He glanced over at her, speculative. "But maybe they are souls, Scully. Traveling through time as starlight, looking for homes. I wonder what my mother saw, and I wonder what she was trying to tell me."

Exhaustion fairly radiated off of Mulder, that and the painful knowledge that despite all of his doubts in recent days, his sister had been alive for a time at least. Perhaps, somewhere, she still was.

"Go to sleep, Mulder," she admonished gently, earning a sad smile as he bent in tired acceptance. He straightened, sighing in agreement.

"All right," he replied, jerking his head to the car.

The short ride to the motel was silent. Mulder was clearly too tired to talk further. The day had been emotionally draining enough for a thousand lifetimes, and as they parked, Scully thought she might sleep forever.

"Night, Mulder," she murmured as they parted ways at their respective room doors. On impulse, she reached out for him, hugging him tightly around his middle, imparting what comfort and love she could. For his part, he wrapped his arms around her, laying his chin on the top of her head.

"Thank you for always being there," he whispered before letting go. Without another word he dug out his key card and went into his room.

Scully thought she would fall asleep as soon as her head hit the well-bleached pillow on the hard as rock bed, but to her surprise she found herself awake, lying in the darkened room, flipping through television channels. Her mind was on the journal, on Samantha's words, her experiences, the thoughts and feelings of a girl only a year younger than Scully. For so long, Samantha Mulder had been an abstract, the image of a little girl from a worn photograph, the vague memories of her brother, the source of a family tragedy that had shaped not only their lives but Scully's as well. It had never occurred to her that Samantha had a voice of her own. That there was somewhere a recording of her, of a child on the brink of womanhood, who didn't understand what was happening to her, who knew only pain, and terror, and lies, but who remembered the ghost of a dream, of a family she once had, and longed for a day when she could gain her freedom and find them. In so many ways, Samantha's voice reminded Scully of Fox. She wasn't just a memory, she had been real, and tonight, for the first time in seven years, Scully had gotten to see her, the real Samantha. She had been a bright, brilliant girl, with her brother's wit and stubbornness, but a spark that seemed to be all of her own. She was compassionate and fearless, and she was someone Scully wished very much she could have gotten to know.

Samantha had been a fourteen-year-old girl in 1979. She had been alive at least till then, and one fateful night she ran away and disappeared. Was she still alive, somewhere, out there in the world? Had she survived the tests and escaped Spender? Could she have gotten away finally? Was she out there, looking, searching for her brother just as he was searching for her? Maybe, just maybe, if she had run away, someone might have found her and protected her. It was a slim chance, records of a
lost teenager running around San Bernardino County might be hard to find, and that was if she was found there. She might have been able to hitchhike into Los Angeles proper, or maybe even somewhere else, Las Vegas, or Phoenix, or San Diego. Still, if she had run, a fourteen-year-old girl without anything but the clothes on her back, maybe someone might have noticed her. It was the type of scenario that Scully had always thought of with Melissa when she was young and often running away with friends somewhere.

"Samantha," she breathed into the still darkness as she tried to drift off into sleep. "Wherever you are, I hope you left a trail for me to find you."

The flash of silver in the corner of her eye reminded her the television was still on and she quickly turned it off, rolling over in the bed to drift off to sleep.
Arbutus Ray

Chapter Summary

In which Scully finally discovers truth of Samantha's fate.

She exhaled tightly as she walked up the creaking wood steps, up to the front porch, Harold Pillar beside her. She could feel Mulder's eyes on her as she knocked on the screen door. It shook in its frame as a voice from inside called. It all ends here, Scully thought to herself. Whatever the truth was, whatever Samantha's ultimate fate was, Arbutus Ray would give Mulder the answer he had spend nearly thirty years searching for. Her heart ached as shuffling footsteps sounded across a hardwood floor, and a thin, older looking woman opened the door.

"I thought someone was out here." She smiled, bemused at the sight of two people on her front step this time of evening. Scully couldn't blame her.

"Arbutus Ray?" She held up her badge in the dim light so that the woman could see it.

"Yes," she confirmed, eyes wide at Scully.

"Are you the same Arbutus Ray that worked as a nurse at the Dominic Savio Memorial Hospital in 1979?"

The woman nodded her gray head. "Yes, I'm she."

"I'd like to ask you about a patient you treated, a fourteen-year-old girl." She reached to open the screen door just enough to hand the woman the file, then allowed the door to close again. She took it, frowning in confusion until she saw the description on the intake log she signed years before.

"I remember, yes." She frowned in distant memory, thinking. "She was such a pretty, young girl, you couldn't forget someone like her or how frightened she was. Scared for her sweet life. Deputy brought her in, she was shaking like a leaf. Wouldn't let anyone touch her but me."

She looked up from the files, brows creasing, vaguely troubled. "Then the strangest thing happened."

Beside Scully, Harold Pillar cut in knowingly. "You had a vision of her dead, like the parents of Amber Lynn LaPierre."

Annoyed, Scully shot Pillar a warning look, one he ignored. To her surprise, Arbutus Ray lit up with amazement.

"No one believed me," she gasped, stunned that he knew it without her bringing it up. "Honestly, you're the first person who…"

Scully hadn't been prepared for this. "You saw her dead?" Dread clenched her gut at those words. She had hoped against hope they would find her alive.

Arbutus shook her head, clarifying. "That night, in her bed, she was glowing. I blinked and it was gone. She was sleeping as sound as could be. I don't know why, but it made some kind of strange sense."
"What do you mean," Scully prompted.

"There were men." Arbutus looked troubled. "They came to pick her up late that night. I assumed the one was her father, but he gave me such a chill when he looked at me when I asked him would he please put out his cigarette."

Spender! Scully could almost smell the smoke Arbutus mentioned as she realized what that meant. "So they took her?"

But the older woman shook her head. "They meant to, but when I went to her room she was gone. Disappeared out of a locked room." Her eyes were wide as she regarded Scully gravely. "Just vanished."

Scully turned to Pillar, then to Mulder, but he wasn't behind her, standing at the parked car. He had wandered off. She hadn't even heard him go.

"That man who was standing back there, where did he go?" Scully searched in the darkness, but saw no sign of him.

"He wandered down the gully to the trail over there, I imagine." Arbutus nodded to the area across the road from her house. "Is he with you?"

"He's...he's my partner." She worried that Arbutus' story was too much for Mulder, the truth too painful. "He also is that girl's brother."

"Really?" Arbutus looked out into the darkness keenly before turning towards Scully again. "Would you all care to come in, just for a bit?"

Scully wanted to say no, but Pillar took the initiative and stepped inside before Scully could beg off to find her partner. Hoping that Mulder would be all right and would return soon, she stepped inside the tidy, craftsman house, following Arbutus into the living room, where she turned off a television that was playing the nightly news.

"Can I get something for you to drink?"

Pillar accepted, while Scully declined. She already felt uncomfortable enough, taking up this woman's time. She quietly looked around the living room filled with comfortable furniture and shelves of books. Beside standard, nursing texts sat romance novels and tomes of great literature, nothing that screamed interest in the paranormal. No UFO's were on the wall, no crystals hanging from the light fixtures. The pictures scattered about showed a woman with a husband, children, and grandchildren, not a woman who believed in things like girl's vanishing from locked hospital rooms, and yet, she said that it had happened. Arbutus Ray so far didn't strike her as a woman who took to those sorts of ideas without there being evidence.

"Here you go," she smiled as she passed Pillar a cold glass of water, settling into one of her comfortable armchairs. "It's so quiet here all by myself. My husband passed a few years ago, and so it's usually just me at nights. I had no idea that anyone would come out, let alone ask me about that girl."

"We've been tracking down her case," Scully explained. "Her files been closed for years, but... recently her mother died, and her brother wanted some sort of resolution."

"Her mother died?" Arbutus sighed in sympathy. "Did she ever know the truth?"

"Perhaps?" It was hard to know what Teena Mulder had and hadn't known.
Clearly the woman was curious, however, and how could she not be? If this one case was memorable enough to recall all these years later, she must have wondered who the mysterious girl was and what about her story. "Can you tell me more about her," she asked, glancing out of the open door in the direction that Mulder had disappeared to.

"Her name was Samantha," Scully supplied. "Samantha Mulder. She was originally from Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard. She disappeared from her family's house in 1973, right in front of her brother's eyes."

"Oh….oh no!" Arbutus gasped at the very idea, horrified. "That young man out there with you, he saw…"

"He thinks he saw, yes." Scully wasn't sure anymore exactly what Mulder saw that night, and she didn't think Mulder was either. "He's been searching for her for years."

"And he just tracked her down to here." Arbutus shook her head so sadly, sympathy pouring out of her heartbroken expression.

"We were working the Amber Lynn LaPierre case in Sacramento."

"I heard about them. They were on the news!" Of course it would have been even bigger news in California than anywhere else in the country. "They said they saw a vision too, that they saw their little girl glowing."

"Just like you saw Samantha," Pillar pointed out. Arbutus nodded slowly, clearly unsure even after all these years of what she saw.

"That poor girl. When they brought her in, we all thought she was crazy. She kept insisting that someone was trying to kill her, that they were holding her hostage and she had just escaped. And you know, for all the evidence we had, I could believe it. You said she was kidnapped?"

"From her home in Massachusetts, yes, when she was eight."

"That explains so much." Arbutus shook her head. "I signed her in, but the doctor was already saying she was a psychiatric case, that we'd have to likely call the county in on it. He thought that she was schizophrenic, but I thought then it might be abuse. I wanted to call the county Protective Services, but then the detective showed up from the county sheriff's office, said that he'd found an APB for her and had called her parents to come and get her. At least we all thought they were her parents."

One of them was at least, but not in the same way Bill Mulder had been to her. "So you said men came to get her, a smoking man in particular?"

"Yeah, he didn't say a thing." She shivered slightly even in memory of him, and Scully found she couldn't blame her, she often felt that way about Spender. "They said she was a runaway from a mental health facility, and that he was her father, there to take her back. I didn't think it was right. You know, you get that feeling in your gut. Something was so…evil about him."

"I know what you mean," Scully murmured under her breath. Arbutus clearly didn't hear her or didn't understand.

"I went to check on her, but she wasn't there. So I checked down the hallway. Nothing there, nothing on any of the floors, and none of the security saw her. When I told the gentlemen she had escaped, the smoking man had of course insisted on seeing for himself. Then he sent his men out to find her. I never saw her again."
The story was far too bizarre for anyone to make up, and Scully highly doubted Arbutus Ray would take the trouble with something this obscure from so many years ago. "Did you ever see that smoking man again?"

"No," she shook her head, thinking. "I never did. I assumed that he was her father and that the men were from the mental institution. I thought about reporting it to the county, but I didn't know what to say to them. I didn't even know her name until tonight."

"She disappeared," Pillar murmured quietly, smilingly dreamily at Arbutus. "Into the starlight, because wherever she ran from, wherever they were taking her to, it was so much worse."

"I don't know about starlight," Arbutus puzzled, clearly not certain she could believe Pillar's claim. "But I do know what I saw, and I do know that it was like what those LaPierres up in Sacramento said. She… she disappeared, and we never could find a trace of her, almost as if she never existed in the first place. I don't know if she went to a better place or not, but I do know that if she was running from that man, it was for a reason. I think the biggest crime in the world was when Detective Floyd called in the authorities on her."

It was a wealth of regret she sighed, glancing out the door once more. "I think about her sometimes. Who she was and I wonder what happened to her. I liked to tell myself she just simply got away, but…I have a feeling she might not have."

"She might not," Scully admitted with aching sadness. If Arbutus' story was true, then Samantha, like Amber Lynn, might well be vanished into thin air. Perhaps she was recaptured, but something in her gut told her that she wasn't. Spender would have taunted them with that information if she were really alive. What was far more likely was that the girl, broken and frightened, was no longer in this world.

Scully only prayed that Mulder could hear this and be okay with the end of the road.

"We need to go," Scully murmured quietly, looking at Pillar.

He set down his glass, taking Arbutus' hand as he rose. "Just know that you aren't alone in what you saw."

This seemed to comfort the older woman. "Thank you." She turned to gaze up at Scully. "Thank you, too, for telling me about her. All these years, I wondered. You said her name was Samantha Mulder?"

"That's right," Scully replied, wishing for the life of her she had a picture of the eight-year-old to show her. "Samantha was a well loved little girl. She was missed very much."

This comforted the older woman as she rose to see them out. "Tell her brother…tell him that at least with me, she was safe."

"I will," Scully assured her as she lead Pillar down the steps and out to the car.

From down the road, she could hear the crunch of gravel underneath feet and saw the tall form of Mulder coming towards them. She didn't think she had ever seen him look so peaceful before in all the time she had known him. In that moment, Scully realized that he knew the truth, and that somehow, for Fox Mulder, that was all right, because his journey had finally, at last, come to an end.
In which Scully closes a case.

The case of Amber Lynn LaPierre remains outstanding. While it is believed that Edward Truelove had at least planned on kidnapping Amber Lynn, the lack of any evidence of such kidnapping, in addition to no known location for her body, means that no charges can reliably be brought against him. However, Edward Truelove still stands charged with twenty-four known counts of kidnapping and murder over thirty years, and more cases are being brought to the authorities attention everyday, all of which he is suspected in. Amber Lynn's fate may never fully be known. It is her parents' belief that they have seen Amber Lynn and that she has moved on to heaven. Perhaps, in the end, this is a comfort and a kindness for them. They will be able to move on in the knowledge that she is not suffering. We do not get that comfort in law enforcement, and so, for now, her case remains open until the LaPierres move for its closure.

In the case of Samantha Mulder, details have emerged after twenty-seven years that seem to indicate that Samantha lived well past her abduction in November 1973. A diary was discovered attributed to her dated from the years of 1977-1979. It described testing at the hands of unknown assailants, and it describes living with CGB Spender. He was a family friend of the Mulders and father of the still missing Jeffrey Spender. He is wanted for connection in that disappearance. The likelihood of finding Spender for questioning is slim. It is known that in 1979, Samantha Mulder, age fourteen, did attempt to escape from April Air Force Base in San Bernardino County, CA. She was found not far away, outside the city of Victorville, where she was treated at Dominic Savio Memorial Hospital. The hospital called the proper authorities, who alerted those at the base looking for her. Efforts were made to collect Samantha Mulder, but she was gone by the time of their arrival. A Treasury Department case request dated shortly after Samantha's disappearance from that hospital states that it is believed that she is dead and the case was officially closed shortly thereafter. The original of this document was discovered in Teena Mulder's possession after she died. It is Agent Mulder's belief, and mine as well, that Samantha Mulder died at some point after her disappearance from Dominic Savio Memorial, and that her case should be finally closed.

The last word of Scully's report blinked with a finality as she saved her document. It was there, in stark black-and-white on her screen, the official word that would shut the door on Samantha Mulder forever. She didn't know how she felt about that. How should she feel? Sad? Happy? Elated? Angry? She wasn't even related to the long missing girl, but so much of Scully's life had been defined by they search for the truth behind her abduction that she felt personally invested in it now. How was she supposed to feel?

If she were honest with herself, this wasn't the ending that Scully had wanted for Samantha's story. Like anyone, she had wanted to secretly find the girl alive. She had hoped that one day they would happen upon a woman who looked like one of the Samantha clones, that she would turn out to be the real Samantha, safe and whole, living in obscurity somewhere. She had almost been sure that would be the case when she had dug up the police blotter with Samantha's description on it. She had hopped for a joyful reunion, of a brother and sister connected again, of old wounds healed finally after decades. That Samantha had disappeared, spared a fate worse than death, was a disappointment.
That she was no longer suffering was a blessing. But that she was completely gone had crushed the
dream of the closure Scully had wanted, and so she stared at the final word on her report and
wondered if she felt comfortable with that word, "closed".

"If you stare at the computer screen too long, it will make you go blind." Mulder's voice floated
across the space. She blinked, looking up at him from behind her desk, surprised to see him leaning
against the doorway.

"What are you doing here," she asked, noting his jeans and sweater. He at least wasn't in a suit,
which meant he wasn't here on an official capacity.

"Filling out paperwork for my time off. You'd think that in this day and age they would have that on
the Internet or something."

"You would think," she smiled as he wandered into the room. He looked so strange in the space he
so often frequented now. The Mulder standing before her was loose, well rested, and peaceful as he
sauntered over to his desk and checked the pile of phone messages there. Most of them were from
the Lone Gunman, specifically Frohike.

"Why don't they call me at home," he wondered, flipping through Scully's handwritten notes.

"I think Frohike uses it as an excuse to speak to me." Mulder grinned at this, nodding. "When and if they call back, tell them thanks for the condolences
and that I'm fine."

"I will." She watched him carefully as he settled into his much abused, office chair. He looked so
damned sublime. She felt as if she were staring at a sacred painting, an aura of peace seem to hang
about Mulder. It was strange and she found herself blinking away.

"I was finishing up my report for Skinner," she offered, waiving at her screen.

"And," he prompted curiously.

"I simply said that the case for Amber Lynn remains open, pending conclusive evidence that Ed
Truelove is responsible for her disappearance."

"Which he isn't?" He pointed out mildly.

"But he's not completely innocent in that matter, either. We know he was intending to. And the DA
is hoping that with his confession that he was intending to, he can get the courts to at least
acknowledge that Amber Lynn is likely dead and closes the case. I think for the LaPierre's sake they
would like that. As far as they are concerned she is gone."

Mulder nodded sadly, leaning his dark head back to stare at the many pencils in his ceiling. "What
about the rest of it?"

Scully knew he meant his sister. "I am giving Skinner a full account of what we discovered,
including the diary, and I am telling him that it, along with the Treasury Department document that
your mother had seem to confirm that Samantha is no longer with us, and that the case is closed."

Mulder nodded, satisfied with that. "I think Skinner will take anything as long as it says closed on it."

"How about you?" She arched an inquisitive eyebrow at him. Mulder had handled all of this much
better than she had, and for whatever reason, that worried her.
He simply shrugged, frowning in thought as he considered words. "I think that I'm all right with it now. I don't think we will ever find out the truth of what happened to Samantha or to Amber Lynn. I can't tell you if it was a transcendental moment for the soul, or if it was the universe's way of saying 'no' to an unspeakable crime, or if it was God simply carrying away the suffering to a place far better than this. It could be all three of those things at the same time. All I know is that Samantha is gone. She has been for a long time. And it's okay now for me to let her go."

"And you are okay with this?" She couldn't help but fret. Mulder seemed far too calm with this entire scenario, and it unnerved her to see him that way.

"Yeah," he responded with a small smile. "I am."

That was what amazed Scully. Mulder, the man of boundless belief, accepting the most obvious answer, to give into Occam's Razor at last. "Why the sudden change, Mulder? Two weeks ago, you would have insisted that aliens took your sister and that she was out there somewhere. Now, you are happy accepting that she is dead."

"Aliens didn't take my sister, Scully. Spender did. She was tested, horribly so." Darkness clouded his otherwise calm demeanor. "I think in the end. I had to let go of my schoolboy notions, my childhood understanding of something I couldn't explain. I don't know, perhaps it was that stupid aerosol that Byers' girlfriend developed, but the minute I went under with Dr. Werber, I was convinced that aliens took Samantha."

"Dr. Werber also treated Cassandra." It was a point she hadn't missed in all of these years, and she wondered if this supposed psychiatrist wasn't perhaps in on the plot that seemed to surround CGB Spender.

"It's possible he was implanting those ideas, or at least playing up things that my mind could easily latch on to. Whatever the case, it was all lies, Scully, a fiction to explain away the truth that my mother already knew for years. My sister was gone. I just wasn't ready to accept that."

All these years, all of his work, would he have gone down the path that he had if it hadn't been for that pain and anguish? She thought of Spender in her apartment, of his admonishment to her to let Mulder keep his hope. "Mulder, I can't help thinking, if it wasn't for your ardent belief regarding your sister, you would never have pursued the X-files. If you hadn't confessed to Diana all those years ago, she wouldn't have introduced you to Dr. Werber. She wouldn't have shown you the files. Have considered if maybe...just maybe, that all of this was engineered, just like Kristchgaug suggested? That you haven't been set up by Spender for some purpose?"

"I have," he admitted readily. "And I've known since you got sick, Scully, that I've been used and played for a pawn in a greater game than I could possibly understand. I won't deny that I likely was played for years by Spender as a fall guy and patsy to hide the truth of whatever he was up to, but then again, in the end I won, didn't I? That night, at El Rico, there were questions they couldn't deny. And that's how you and I ended up back here."

"Is this really about winners and losers," she asked.

"I think for those men it was," Mulder frowned gravely at the file cabinets lining the far wall. "For fifty years, they played with the lives of so many people, Scully. They ruined families just like mine. They took children like my sister and experimented on them, hoping to find a hybrid or a cure for whatever is coming. They lied to all of us, they played us all off each other and called it good. And who paid the price? My sister was one. Cassandra was another. Those women in Allentown, Pennsylvania, your friend Penny...ultimately you."
Scully squirmed slightly as he brought her up. "There's no ultimately for me."

"I don't know, for me it's ultimately. You were an innocent in all of this, Scully, someone here doing there job. You were taken and tested, like my sister, and what were the consequences? You nearly died on me. And I can never get back for you the children you've lost."

His sincerity made Scully smile sadly. "I wouldn't ask you to."

"I would, if I could, Scully." He looked down at his hands, picking at the lint on his sweater. "I won't deny that all those years ago, when I decided to use the FBI's resources to find the truth about my sister, I was a damned fool. I had no idea the cost or what it would require, and I didn't care. And I can't sit here and say that there isn't a part of me that doesn't feel like an idiot, knowing that the truth was under my nose the entire time if only I bothered to let go enough to accept it. It would have saved a whole lot of people a great deal of heartache, you especially. But I do know that without the work we've done, so many other things would have gone unnoticed, unsolved, other people's lives would be affected. And I can't say I'm sorry that I dug up the X-files, Scully, or that I have helped the people I have, or that I've helped to bring down the conspiracy I did. I think in the end that was why I was saved while Samantha was taken. I have to believe that. I was saved to do this, to find the truth. And I would give anything to have the situation reversed. But I am not sorry that I did the good I have."

It was as honest an answer as she had ever heard from Mulder.

"So where do we go from here?" She had to ask. It was the single question that had bothered her since the truth of Samantha's fate was discovered. Where does their work go now that the one, overriding thing driving it was no longer there? What other questions did they have to answer?

"I've been thinking about that," he admitted slowly. "There are still cases out there, Scully, strange ones, weird ones, ones that no other office would take seriously."

"Like snake churches and magician's whose heads pop off?"

He laughed at her bland expression. "Yeah. But there are other things too. We still don't know the truth about what was happening to Samantha, and I don't know what my father was doing exactly or Spender for that matter. There is something they were planning, some invasion they were afraid of, and until I can prove that there is something out there that's coming, our work isn't done."

Somehow, she knew that would be his answer. She stared long and hard at the metal filing cabinets. "You think that this alien threat is real?"

"I don't think they took my sister, Scully, but I do think they are real and they are out there. I know it. I know what I saw in Antarctica. I know what I've seen many times over. And I know the reason Samantha and Cassandra were taken had to do with them. There has been a plot for fifty years to hide the truth of it. And I know I can't rest until I find out what it is and expose what our government has done to our people under the guise of 'protection'."

The vehemence, the passion was still there, despite the peace. Mulder's burden of guilt was gone, but his purpose clearly wasn't. Which meant that for now, at least, their work would continue. How long it would continue, that wasn't clear.

"So will there ever be an end, Mulder?" She had thought, perhaps, Samantha might be it. Perhaps she hoped it would.

"I would like to think so," he admitted. "I would like there to be a point where we both feel we've
done as much as we could and could leave this behind."

It was a confession that took Scully aback. She hadn't ever heard Mulder admit as much, not once. Her surprise clearly amused him as he laughed before unfolding himself from his chair.

"I think I finally got what my mother was trying to tell me, Scully. I understand now that sometimes you finally have to let go if you ever hope to finally see the truth that is sitting there right in front of you."

"What truth is that?"

A slow, mysterious smile crept across his full mouth. "Maybe when you let go of your own burdens, Scully, you'll see that truth yourself."

What was that supposed to mean?

Before she could even open her mouth to ask that question, Mulder was already sweeping out of the room towards the door. "I'm heading out. Call me later and tell me what Skinner says."

"Mulder," she called as he rounded the corner from the door. She rushed up to follow; discontent with the answer he gave her. But by the time she even made it round her desk, the elevator had opened, and he was already on it, the doors closing around him.

"Damn it," she muttered, glaring in the general direction of the elevator. What the hell had he meant by that? What truth that was sitting right in front of him? Right in front of her? What was he talking about?

"Give him the one answer he's been searching for all these years and he turns into Buddha," she grumbled, realizing that she wasn't going to be able to get the answer out of Mulder anytime soon.
Packing up the pieces

Chapter Summary

In which Scully helps Mulder pack up his mother's life.

Packing up the pieces of a life that neither them understood was a challenge that Scully hadn't anticipated being so extensive or so emotionally difficult. Teena Mulder's Greenwich townhouse had been her home for over twenty years. Like any house that had been lived in for so long, memories and everyday things jumbled together in a collision of sentimentality and practicality. Old, family pictures had to be gone through, but so did the stack of used paperbacks by the reading chair, the family dishes packed alongside the collection of plastic cups gathered from various events. Slowly, hour-by-hour, the contents that had belonged to the life of Mulder's mother were packed away either to be given to family members or to Goodwill.

None of the answers either of them sought happened to lie amongst the flotsam and jetsam of her life. Scully had half expected to find somewhere a picture, a love note, a letter, a diary, but nothing. Whatever evidence Teena might have of her relationship with Spender or what she really knew about her husband's work and Samantha's role in it seemed to have died with her. Teena had kept her secrets well for forty years. Scully shouldn't have expected her to be any different in death than she had been in life.

That wasn't to say that there weren't those rare treasures she ran across, the small hints of the sentimentality that Teena displayed, at least with her own children. A small, satin baggie, filled with tiny, pearl like baby teeth and two swaths of baby-fine, dark chestnut hair, each tied with different ribbons with no clue as to which one had once belonged to Fox and which to Samantha. A tiny plate with a child's chubby hands on it in paint and the practiced hand of an adult writing on its border, "I love you, Mom." The finishing touch was the childish scrawl of "Fox" at the bottom, surprisingly not very different from the more adult version of the same signature. There was a small rag doll, clearly a treasure, that looked as if it had been passed through the family from somewhere, a hand colored picture of a house with a family and an arrow pointing to a dark-haired stick-person labeled "Samantha". There were school art projects from long ago, a handmade birthday card from both the children, pictures of them from Christmas productions with Mulder as a shepherd, his sister as a sheep.

But then the mementos stopped. Well, perhaps not so much stopped as drifted away, petering out after Samantha's disappearance. There were a few store bought cards with Mulder's name scrawled in them, pictures of him from high school, medals from athletic events, a tassel from his high-school graduation. One corner of Teena's desk turned up a bundle of letters, all marked from England, all in the spidery hand of her partner, assuring her that he was warm enough, fed enough, resting enough, that he was studying hard and wasn't going out to pubs and getting shit-faced every night. They discussed the things he was learning, the people he was friends with, and here and there the hints of Phoebe Green's presence in his life. But even those letters stop after he returned to America. Perhaps then phone calls were easier. There were still the occasional cards she found, shoved in a drawer, lacking the charm of the homemade kind that Teena used to get. But seemingly, from the moment her only son reached adulthood all things stopped. Then there were only nick knacks from trips she took and postcards from her sister in North Carolina. There were occasional photographs from vacations, but even those stopped.
It only occurred to Scully later that in the end, Teena must have been a very lonely person. Her life, her good memories seemed to peter out as her son left the home. As he became embroiled in the X-files and the search for his sister, his presence in her world became smaller and smaller. He wasn't even really on speaking terms with her at the time she died, not regularly at least. He had brushed her off, returned to his investigation, only finding out too late how serious his mother's need to speak to him was. It was a regret Mulder would have for the rest of his life. More so, it broke Scully's heart to think of Teena, dying alone, without having finally found resolution with her son.

It was late in the day when Scully noticed the silence in growing darkness of the evening. She set aside the photo album she had been perusing, filled with childhood pictures of Mulder, and wandered up the steps to find her partner. He had stumped up there hours before, stating he would tackle the job of going through his mother's spare room. The junk room he had called it, a room that had really just a spare bed for when he would come to visit and boxes of things from their house in Chilmark that she had never touched. She had left him to it, but noticed that had been hours ago. Quietly she called his name into the dimming light, wondering briefly if he had simply just fallen asleep.

The door to the spare room was open. She could see Mulder's shoes from outside, sprawled across the carpet. She peeked her head in to see her lanky partner stretched out on his back, head pillowed on a stuffed animal, eyes glued to the ceiling. Curious, Scully's gaze drifted upwards to see what had caught his eye. The ceiling was covered in stars. They were the cheap, glow-in-the-dark kind, the sort that one could get at a party store for a buck or two, but they glowed in the darkness with an eerie, pale green light. Scully settled on the carpet beside him to stare up at the myriad that covered the plain, white ceiling.

"Did you do this?"

"No," he admitted, half in amazement, half in awe. "I just found them."

"They haven't always been here?"

"Not since the last time I was up here." He blinked up at the ceiling. "That's been a while.

Three years, if Scully's timing was correct.

"Why would your mother do something like this?" It wasn't something that struck her as being particularly a Teena-ish action, covering a ceiling with stars.

"Because they reminded her of Samantha." He smiled as he regarded the ghostly glow. "For her last birthday before she disappeared, Mom and I stuck these kind of stars all over her ceiling because she wanted to be an astronaut someday. Took us the whole weekend. She stayed at my grandparents till we were done. She was so excited, by day, her room was disgustingly girlie, but at night, it was a field of stars."

Scully smiled up at the spangled ceiling, imagining how this must have looked to an eight-year-old girl. "She must have loved them."

"She did," Mulder sighed. "Still doesn't explain why she put them up in here, though."

Scully mused on that. It was a mystery, for certain, but she was beginning to find out that Mulder's mother was full of those questions that didn't seem to have easy answers. "I think, Mulder, you will find that the question of why your mother did anything will never be simple."

"That's true." He seemed as resigned to it at this point as Scully was. "My mother was complex at
best."

That was a nice way of putting it. There was no doubt that Teena loved her children, that they were the center of her entire world. Perhaps they had to be, everything else in it was too chaotic, too terrifying to think about. All those years of denial, of secrecy, Scully found herself unable to blame the other woman. How would she have reacted if she were put in the position Teena was?

"I found all sorts of things that you would rather she didn't keep," she teased, stretching out on the floor beside him. "Naked baby photos, hand-drawn cards, your letters from Oxford."

"I am not sorry for those baby photos. I had the cutest little baby ass this side of Boston."

"No one is denying that," she chuckled, glancing up at the starry ceiling. "There wasn't much else she kept, though, just stuff that was from you and Samantha."

"You mean hints of what my father was up to or evidence about the relationship between her and Spender."

Scully tensed. She glanced sideways at him, meeting his steady gaze in the graying light.

"I had suspected for years," Mulder offered quietly in answer to her unspoken question. "I mean, years ago I confronted her on it. I had wondered."

"Why?" There was very little resemblance between the demon who had pulled the strings of their lives so efficiently and the man who lay beside her, staring up at a room full of fake stars.

"I always wondered why he took such an interest in my career, and he was always around those sorts of parties, in all the old photographs of my Dad. The weekend I had those memories, out at the Rhode Island vacation home, I remembered some sort of argument. But I didn't know for certain till a few months ago."

He had never said a thing about it.

"Mom told you, didn't she?" He wasn't accusing, merely sad. Perhaps he was disappointed she had trusted Scully but not her own son with the truth.

"Yes," Scully admitted. "She told me. You and Samantha."

"That must have been the deal, then." Mulder turned his face back upwards. "He got to take Samantha, they got to keep me. I wonder why. Why am I so special?"

"I don't know," she admitted. The entire story was just far too sad to contemplate.

He was silent for long moments. The shadows grew longer in the room, the stars brighter, the memory of a girl long dead, whose ghost still hung over her family in everything they did.

"Mom must have known, all those years ago." Mulder spoke finally into the growing darkness. "About Samantha, that Treasury Department file you found, you said it was dated 1979. She must have known then that Samantha was never coming home."

"She must have." That would explain why she requested for the investigation to stop. "Perhaps Spender told her what had happened."

"She never even mentioned it, not once."

Scully had thought about that in the days since Teena's death. "Maybe, she had hoped that by
keeping it from you, you wouldn’t dwell on it. That you would go out and move on, lead a normal life.”

"Yeah, smart move on Mom's part, let's see how well I've done with my life." Sarcasm dripped from Mulder's words. "I have a failed marriage. I live alone. I am obsessed with the very conspiracy that tore my family apart, and carried on in the hope that my sister was still alive out there, somewhere, if only I could find her."

He wasn't wrong in that assessment. His life had not gone anywhere close to the normal that Teena likely desired for her son. And it perhaps so much could have been different if she had simply been honest with him. But after all the years of secrets, of keeping up appearance, perhaps Teena simply couldn’t be honest with anyone.

"I know my Mom always wanted me to settle down,” he sighed quietly beside her in the darkness. "Find a nice girl, get married, give her grandchildren."

Scully couldn't help the wince, the memory of their efforts still raw. If she had been able to conceive, Teena would have had her grandchild, someone to dote on. Would that have made any difference to her, having someone to live for?

As if sensing her thoughts, Mulder reached a hand over for hers in the darkness, wrapping warm fingers around her palm. "If anything, the fault is mine. I wanted to find my sister for her. She wanted to move on. I wasn't listening to her. And I'm the one who let her down in the end."

"I don't think you let her down." Scully couldn't believe that, not in a million years. "I think, for all of her faults, she was proud of you, Mulder. She was proud of the man you had become. I think, like any mother, she wanted something better for you. Whatever it was your father and Spender were into, she wanted you far away from that, but I don't think she was ever disappointed in you."

She didn't know if he believed her not that. Perhaps he never would. In the end there was too much left unsaid to ever really put his mind at ease and with the small bonfire that Teena had set in her wastebasket, any evidence that might have cleared up anything was now gone.

"I wonder why she could never just tell me," Mulder finally spoke, voicing Scully's silent question. "About everything; Dad, Spender, Samantha. Why couldn't she just be honest about it?"

Scully had pondered that as well, long and hard, these last few weeks. "Maybe, in the end, it was just too hard. You think about it, all the secrets she had to keep, the lies she had to tell, the pretenses she had to keep up just to have a normal life. At the end of the day, I don't think your mother knew how to be honest about those things with you. She just…hoped you'd stop looking."

His fingers tightened around her own. She knew that her words couldn’t make up for the hurt left behind by Teena. In the end she was just as much a victim of this tragedy as anyone, so afraid of what the truth that she couldn't even face it, and it destroyed her.

"It's time to go home, Mulder." Scully finally whispered.

"I know." He stirred, slightly, on the carpet beside her. "Time to move on."

Move on to what? That part, Scully didn't know yet. She wasn't even certain Mulder knew. "The movers can take care of the rest."

"Yep." With a heavy sigh, he sat up, pulling her along up with him. On impulse, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to his side in an impromptu hug. Scully chuckled, wrapping both her arms around his middle, burying her head into his shoulder, appreciating the warmth, and
scent, and life that was Mulder.

"No more dwelling on ghosts," he promised, letting her go. "Dana, I don't think I have words to express what your presence here these last few days - what you, by my side through this entire search for Samantha - what that has meant to me all this time. I don't think I could have done any of this without you."

His unexpected expression of honest emotion caught her off guard. She was glad it was dark in the room. "You've been there for me as well, Mulder. I am just glad that I could help you find the truth."

If he planned to say or do more, she couldn't tell. The shadows were too thick, and the stars above them not strong enough to cut through. But she felt him stand and she scrambled up beside him, dusting her jeans off as she followed him out into the hallway.

"It's hard to believe," he murmured as they took the stairs. "I'm the last of the Mulders. Technically, I'm not even one of those, but I don't think my father's lawyers in charge of my inheritance are looking at DNA too hard." He at least could laugh at that.

"It is sad," she agreed heavily, following behind him. "But Mulder, you're never alone. As long as I'm around, you won't ever be."

He smiled up at her then, gratefully. "Thank you."

"Always, Mulder." She assured him as they stepped into the light in the living room downstairs. "Let's lock up and get out of here."
Werewolves of Willow Park

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder convinces Scully to hunt werewolves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After weeks of quiet in the wake of his mother's death, Scully should have suspected that it was all far too good to last with her partner. So it wasn't that much of a surprise when by Wednesday of his first week back he had a new, strange case for them to investigate, and she could hardly contain her enthusiasm.

"Werewolves?" Her eyebrows arched over the article printed from one of those shady websites online that claimed to cover things that no one else in the media would. "So there are werewolves in LA?"

"Willow Park, to be precise." Mulder had clearly become very bored and was eager to throw himself into something else strange and ridiculous.

"This isn't like your rabid, Chinese, folk-dog case in LA last year, is it?" That had admittedly been strange enough. Now werewolves?

"Six sightings in the last two months, all in this one neighborhood in Willow Park."

"The article says that police have been called repeatedly to one address." She held up the website print out. "Did you consider that perhaps the person living there was suffering from some sort of mental or psychological problems? Drugs?"

"That address isn't the only one." Mulder waved her off without an answer. "Others in the neighborhood have described being chased by monster creature with glowing eyes, growling."

"Frankly, that's as good of an description as my nephew could come up with and he's two." Scully was hardly impressed. "Has anyone given a better description than that?"

Mulder, behind his desk, merely ducked his head. "Someone said they think they saw a big, furry, gray, beast thing."

"A beast thing?"

Mulder nodded, not quite meeting her eye.

"From that scant tidbit of information you extrapolated werewolves?"

"Well, it seems logical, a large, gray, furry, growling thing."

"Mulder, you do realize that the Los Angeles metro area is prone to all sorts of wildlife, correct? Coyotes, mountain lions, bears, they all can come down from the hills and wander the streets searching for food. That's not to mention the dogs that people let wander free in neighborhoods like
Willow Park. For all we know, it could be just someone's stray poodle."

"Come on, Scully, does Willow Park strike you as the type of place where a poodle will live?"

She shrugged, tossing the print out on his desk. "My point is we are likely just dealing with a wild or feral animal and not some sort of mythic, half-man, half-beast creature."

"Would a feral animal terrify you as much as the people in this article?" He brandished the article she tossed at him.

Scully rolled her eyes. "It's Los Angeles, Mulder. Don't you think they would be able to notice something as weird as a werewolf?"

"I don't know, a place where they make movie magic, likely no one thought it was a werewolf."

He was determined to see this case through no matter how much reason and common sense she tried to talk into him. "Have the locals called for our help?"

'This is purely a scientific exploration, Scully!"

Scientific her eyeball! "Right, a scientific exploration." She smiled sweetly, leaning against his desk. "And how are we going to explain this 'scientific exploration' to Skinner when he sees we will be heading out to Los Angeles for fourth time in six months?"

"He has that friend of his in LA, he shouldn't be surprised by the weirdness going on there."

"Mulder, we just got back from the LA area. What is this sudden fascination with it?"

"Perhaps I like the sunny weather," he offered with a roguish smile. "There's always the beach, Scully."

"We went to Santa Monica pier. We've been to the beach."

"I didn't see you in a bikini." He affected a pout that made Scully's stomach flip. She ignored it and plastered on the most severe expression she could manage.

"I wouldn't be caught dead putting my toes in the water at that place. Do you know how disgusting it is?"

"Take the fun out of everything, Scully."

She glowered at him, arms crossing firmly across her chest. "Mulder, we shouldn't be in this for fun. And I'm not comfortable condoning your 'scientific exploration' if all this is about is a way for the FBI to pay for some vacation time for you to go to LA and chase your crazy theories for a week." He was in hot water enough as it was after the Amber Lynn LaPierre affair. She didn't want him pushing his luck.

But Mulder wasn't about to give up on the idea, no matter how pointless she considered it to be. "Look, all right, I will concede there isn't a real need for an FBI presence in the area. But let's just consider this an exploratory mission. We will go for a day or two, stake out the neighborhood, see if there is anything to be seen."

"Like a giant, gray, werewolf rushing off for In-n-Out," Scully grumbled. He ignored her.

"We will see if there is anything worth taking a closer look, and if not, we will fly back home and you can say 'I told you so' for the next week."
She glared down at his boyish, expectant face. He really expected her to give in, and the worst part was that she was likely going to. "Will you bring me Jake's coffee for the next week?"

"Deal," he agreed promptly.

"And will you not take any other case in Los Angeles for a year?"

He looked far less certain about that. "I don't know about that…"

"And will you let me remind you of this frequently and repeatedly for however long we know each other next time you have an idea that I think is stupid?"

He sighed, rolling his eyes towards the ceiling. "I don't think I can stop you from doing that."

"Okay," she smiled sweetly at him. "Then I am in."

He blinked mildly. "You are?"

Scully shrugged. "Mulder, wasn't that the entire point, you talking me into this entire, idiotic venture?"

"Yeah, but…I guess I thought you’d put up more of a fight." He seemed vaguely disappointed that she didn't.

"I don't know, Mulder, perhaps the idea of amazing coffee for a week and lording this over you for all of time was just too enticing of a deal."

Mulder looked less than thrilled with that idea. "Maybe I will have to reconsider this bargain."

"What, and forgo scientific exploration, Mulder? Where is your sense of adventure?"

He sighed, finally. "I think I just gave it away to a vindictive red-head who plans to lead me around by it."

Scully only laughed at him as she returned to her desk. "It could be worse, Mulder. Only you and I have to know that."

He muttered something under his breath, but didn't dare say anything further out loud.

Chapter End Notes

There is no Willow Park in LA, FYI. I've based it, more or less, off Echo Park.
Jake's coffee really was the best brew in DC, there was no denying it. Scully sipped it contentedly as Mulder toiled away at his desk, fingers jamming hard at the keys of his computer. She smiled, watching, secretly pleasuring in the sight of him hunched over his keyboard, reading glasses perched on his long nose, full lip stuck out as he concentrated on whatever he was writing on the monitor. She had always found him dead sexy in those glasses. She wished he would wear them more often. Still, she could enjoy the view for now, and the coffee, and the chocolate covered almonds from the gift basket that Steve and Edy had sent them. It currently sat on her desk, a thank you to the pair of them. Edy had thanked them for all their kindness. Scully wasn't sure whether it was because Mulder had been nice to the hysterical Edy or they had been embarrassed to have a lover's spat in their underwear in front of two FBI agents, a camera crew, and however many million people would watch the show. Scully didn't know, but damn the almonds were good.

"Are you eating all the goodies in the gift basket?" Mulder turned to suspiciously glare at the small pile of chocolate covered nuts in front of her.

Scully coolly lifted an eyebrow, shrugging as she popped another one in her mouth. "Trader Joe's, Mulder, we can't even get this stuff out here."

"So that gives you the right to hog it all?"

"Hey, it's on my desk." She grabbed the bag, studying its contents carefully. "Got peanut-butter filled pretzels here with your name on them?"

Mulder didn't need a second invitation to come and snag them. He rose, wearily rubbing at his eyes as he grabbed the cellophane bag hungrily. "All of this for sitting with them and making sure they were okay?"

"Well and stopping Edy from slashing Steve with a kitchen knife."

"The things I learned that night I never wanted to," Mulder whistled as he tossed back a couple of pretzels, crunching thoughtfully as he poked through the basket. "Hey, what's the white things?"

"Yogurt covered blueberries. Pretty tasty."

Mulder wrinkled his nose, obviously lost at the mention of yogurt. "Keep those. Who wants healthy junk food?"

"I know, the scandal, right?" She teased him as she sipped at her coffee. "How's the report going?"

Mulder's only response was to groan. She laughed at him, shaking her head. "There's a reason I'm making you write it."
"Outside of the fact that you blame me for being embarrassed on national television?"

"When that episode airs, Mulder, my brothers will call me so fast, laughing at me after years of trying to legitimize my work to the pair of them. For that you get to write the report."

His dramatic sigh earned no sympathy out of her. "Scully, all Skinner will have to do is watch the film."

"That's what I'm afraid of! We have an entire neighborhood and how many LA County Sheriffs on tape, loosing their mind over nothing, and that doesn't include the coroner."

She frowned grimly at that memory. "That woman literally scared herself to death! And I have no medical explanation for it. Her blood work showed no signs of the hanta virus, and yet there she was, hemorrhaging on the floor."

"Fear does strange things to the mind," Mulder replied, crunching on pretzels dolefully. "Edy nearly attacks Steve because he's afraid of him leaving, Wetzel believed he was being attacked by a wasp creature his brother told him about as a kid. They all were reacting out of some primal sense of fear. Fear is one of the most primitive, basic human instincts. It is part of our survival mechanism, every human feels it. We are hard wired to react to certain stimuli that way. If our brain is confused, if it reacts to the fear stimulus in a strong enough manner, then we are bound to act in ways that are strange, even deadly."

"But I was standing in the room with that woman, Mulder, there was nothing there to scare her, nothing to frighten her. I just mention your word 'contagion' and there she goes, terrified of something infecting her."

"The power of suggestion," Mulder shrugged, saddened but unsure what else to say about it. "We are all scared of something and whatever was out there was obviously playing on the deepest fears of those it was attacking."

"What was out there?" That was the part that Scully couldn't figure out and Mulder hadn't explained to her satisfaction. "At the end of the day, what are we going to put into the report? That there was a full moon out and it made everyone loco? That there was some sort of swamp gas in the air causing people to see things that weren't there? Something in the water?"

"Wish I had that good of an answer." Mulder sighed, setting down the half-eaten bag of peanut butter filled pretzels. "Cultures for centuries thought that the full moon lead to strange behavior, werewolves, ghosts, lunacy."

"All the above. Take your pick, we have it in this report." She frowned at Mulder's distant monitor. "I don't know, Mulder, I know what we saw, and God knows what the producers at FOX are going to slap together and put on TV. Telling Skinner it was a full moon doesn't sound like a very good way to end a case."

"Wait till he sees the episode, I doubt he's going to have much good to say about this case at all."

She chuckled in agreement, shaking her head. "If he doesn't kill us for this, I'll be shocked."

"Hell, I think he owes us one for that stupid movie his buddy is making,' Mulder sniffed, poking through the gift basket again. "Oooh, chili-lime cashews!"

"Perhaps Wayne just proves our point, Mulder. LA is full of crazies." Clearly Willow Park was full of them, even the wonderfully colorful Steve and Edy had a level of eccentricity about them…well, at least Edy did. Poor Steve seemed to simply be long suffering."
"You know, thinking about Steve and Edy, their fear was so simple compared to everyone else's. Chantal feared the spirit of her ex-pimp. The coroner feared infectious disease. Even Deputy Wetzel was afraid of a childhood boogy man. But Edy, he was simply afraid of one thing, that Steve would stop loving him."

"Fear doesn't have to be complicated." Mulder was already into the bag of cashews, clearly pleased with what he found.

"I know that, but it did make me think about the things we fear. What sort of fears do the average people have? Would it be enough to terrify me to death?"

"Would they?" Mulder asked around a mouthful of nuts.

Scully considered. She knew her biggest fear, bigger than any childhood monster, or half-remembered nightmare from her kidnapping, even than Donnie Pfaster returning from the dead. The one thing that left her cold inside more than anything else was the idea of something deadly happening to the man standing beside her desk. Mulder had his fair share of brushes with death, but they had all been situations that she could save him from. Her real fear, the one thing that kept her up at night, was the idea that one day Mulder would get himself involved with something she couldn't save him from. Then he would be lost to her forever.

The very idea left her sick inside.

"No," she choked, reaching quickly for her coffee to try and swallow hard against the bile rising in her throat. "No, I don't think my fear would kill me, no."

One dark eyebrow rose in inquiry. "Care to share yours with the class."

Panicked eyes widened as she choked down coffee hard. "No," she croaked, shaking her head vehemently. "No, just…it isn't anything." Nothing she would ever share with him. The idea itself terrified her too much to even speak about it.

He seemed to sense that, shrugging off her discomfort. "I would say that my fear of fire would be enough to kill me, but you know, it could quite possibly be the idea of seeing Frohike naked that might do me in."

That was so not an image she needed to think of, and she found herself bursting into peals of horrified laughter. "What the…Mulder!"

His impish grin did not look the least bit sorry. "Well, got you to stop thinking of what you are afraid of, didn't it?"

"Guh! Now I'm going to have to be afraid of that image!"

"As well you should be, Scully, as well you should be."

Scully swatted at him, unable to reach him as he danced back over to his desk, flopping in his chair, cashews still in hand. "I'll leave you with that lovely image as I return to this report."

Scully groaned, grumbling as she shoved an almond in her mouth and glared at him. He had succeeded in shifting her train of thought, even if it was in a bad way. But he hadn't succeeded in easing the fear in the back of her mind. One day, if Mulder wasn't careful, she would not be able to save him, she might lose him. For years he had danced along that edge of darkness, and she was the only one holding him back from going over. One day, she might just lose her grip. His search for Samantha was done. He had discovered the truth behind her disappearance, behind his family's
darkest secret, behind why Scully herself was taken. They had discovered so many truths. Perhaps, she wondered, they could slow down now? Think about how much further they wanted to take this? Maybe she could convince him not to chase after every werewolf sighting, every space ship, and every haunted house. Maybe she could convince him to finally bring all of this to an end.

Maybe…

She glanced over at him, hunched once again over his computer, typing furiously, the bag of cashews by his keyboard. It was a fight they would have to have soon, but it wasn't a fight she felt in the mood for today. Today, she would drink her coffee, eat her chocolate-covered almonds, and try not to think of Frohike sans clothing.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just saying, Trader Joe's corporate offices are five minutes from me, and my store is a block away. I get all the good TJ stuff.
All Is Not How It Appears

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder talks Scully into staking out a strip club.

For years, Scully had turned a blind, yet slightly bemused, eye on Mulder's particular addiction. She had said nothing about the collection of magazines in the lower drawer of his desk, or the stack of videos behind the piles of paper on his cabinet. She had ignored the occasional voice mail from some smoky-throated, sultry caller offering Mulder a low, per-minute deal if he decided to call back their service. Outside of the teasing ribbing she gave him, she usually simply shrugged off the worst of it. She had grown up with boys, the male fascination with objectifying women's bodies was something that was no surprise to her, and while she didn't approve, she left Mulder to his own devices. Scully had drawn very few lines with regarding the subject.

But she did draw the line at staking out a strip club.

"I will not sit out of a sleazy, strip club, Mulder, I won't do it!"

"I'm not asking you to go into the strip club! I'm merely asking you to watch it."

Scully scowled, clearly not impressed with the semantics of Mulder's argument. "In all of our years together, Mulder, I've not heard of a bigger stretch of a case than this one. You seriously are asking me to believe there is a serial killer with the ability to disappear, and you are using this as an excuse to sit out in of strip club in the southeast part of town, holed up in some crack den?"

"It's not a crack den, it's a hotel. I've booked it for several nights."

"How much does it cost an hour," she snapped, crossing her arms as she leaned against his desk. The file in front of him was filled with snapshots of women, all wearing more make up than Scully would wear in a year and considerably less clothing.

"I'm not just pulling this out of my ass, Scully," Mulder defended himself, annoyed as he looked up at her, clearly not appreciating her assumption. "This case came to me from DC Vice. They've been following it off and on for a year. Six women have turned up missing and all last seen with this one."

He held up a photograph of a skinny, bleached blonde woman dressed in clothing that should be illegal in forty-nine states. "No one knows who she is, no one knows where she came from, but they do know that she goes into these clubs, meets up with other women, leaves with them, and they are never seen in the neighborhood again."

"And they think that she's a serial killer? On what evidence?"

"The ID and clothing of one of the women was found a mile away, in a dumpster. The bag of another one of them was recovered from a rain culvert six blocks away. Now, I've been around you long enough to know a woman wouldn't be caught dead without her ID, bag, or clothes, no matter her profession."

It was a generalization Scully wasn't about to deny.
"Still, we have no bodies for any of these suspected victims whatsoever and it seems to me Metro PD is jumping at shadows here." She glanced at the photographs of the missing women. Sadly, Scully realized, they weren't women that normally would be noticed twice by the Metro police on a normal day. "Why in the world are they jumping to the idea it is serial murder? It could be as simple as a case of one prostitute going out and recruiting others for her pimp. Perhaps our real crime here is a sex one, not a murder."

Mulder nodded thoughtfully at her suggestion, at least considering it. "I won't deny that the idea hadn't crossed my mind as well. A female serial killer is a very rare thing, most are men. I'm not saying that perhaps she isn't a front for someone else who is up to something nefarious, but I will say this, twice the Metro police have tried to go in after her, and twice she's disappeared into thin air."

Scully arched an eyebrow high up at Mulder's curious delight. "You think that we are dealing with someone who has some sort of, what? Power of invisibility?"

"It would explain how she's giving the cops the slip."

"Yeah, in a comic book. What, does she have a special ring or is she the product of a lab experiment gone horribly wrong? Which have you and the Metro PD decided?"

Mulder was far from amused. "Look, do you want to quibble about how legitimate a case is when there are women out there who could be losing their lives?"

His disapproval stung and Scully sobered, realizing he was right, now matter how much she disliked the idea. "No, I don't." She frowned, properly chastened. "But, Mulder, invisibility? Why do I feel like this is just an excuse for you to ogle scantily clad women for a week on the FBI's dime?"

Mulder snorted derisively. "Scully, if I wanted to watch scantily clad women on the FBI's dime, I could do it I the comfort of my own office without pulling all nighters in a roach motel."

"I don't even want to know," she sighed, pushing off his desk. "Fine, you're right, if women's lives are in danger we need to do everything we can to figure out what's going on, even if it means having to stay at a hotel of questionable nature with paid sex likely going on in the next room over from us."

"Is it worse because it's paid?" Mulder mused as she rounded her desk.

"Yes, because of exploitation and because it's the seedy side of town and I will have to make sure I have my badge and gun on me at all times," she groused, frowning despondently at her computer. "How long will this take again?"

"Don't know, but Metro thinks she does the rounds of the local clubs. Dirty Dames is the one they think she will hit up next."

"Dirty Dames?" The images that name even conjured up made her want to take a shower. "Really, Mulder? I went on national television chasing after werewolves with you! Now you're making me stake out a strip club?"

"Remember, Scully, we are saving lives here!"

"That's what they told me in medical school right before I had to pull a two-day shift." Somehow, she doubted that this would be any more pleasant of an experience.
Dirty Dames

Chapter Summary

In which Scully witnesses a stunning transformation.

There was no one in this universe that Scully hated more in that moment than Fox Mulder. The fact that he left her on this case, by herself, when it was his idea in the first place, wasn't the only reason she had to hate him, it was but one of a whole list of reasons she had to hate him in that moment. She could start with the fact that she hadn't properly slept in days, move on to the lack of any proper food in her diet in the last week, add in the broken furnace which made the chilly, early spring nights downright cold in the miserable hell hole Mulder had set up base camp in, and top all off with the fact that she had seen breasts in this one week alone than in her entire residency as a doctor, including her rotation with the OB/GYNs. She had also seen many other things she was certain she hadn't seen in her time with the OB/GYN doctors and she was fairly certain there wasn't enough bleach in the world to scrub that out of her mind. As if all that wasn't enough, she knew Mulder was somewhere, on some case, living the high life and enjoying every minute of it.

The bastard…

This entire thing had been his idea in the first placed, she groused as she sat by her place at the window in a room she was fairly certain hadn't been cleaned anytime in the last half-a-century. The wallpaper, what was left of it, was a faded gray, at least where it wasn't missing in giant sheets. The plaster crumbled and Scully was fairly certain something creepy and crawly was living in the walls. The carpet smelled as if something had died on it and she wasn't about to investigate the funny, wet patch in the corner. The furniture looked to be on its last legs and she was not about to put one inch of skin on either the couch or the lumpy, gray thing on a frame that was euphemistically called "a mattress".

The view from the telescope wasn't particularly better than in the room. Dirty Dames was the sort of divvy place you only imagined existed in a movie; sleazy, smoky, and somewhat slimy. even looking at it made Scully want to take a shower for a week. The music pounding out of the place was enough to keep everyone for blocks around awake, and despite the lofty statement that Dirty Dames was a gentleman's club, the clientele she saw going in and out of there was about as far from her definition of the term as she could possibly imagine. The only thing that seemed even somewhat wholesome in this den of iniquity was the dirty, beat up van that perpetually sat outside of the curb with the words "Jesus Saves" sprayed on it, but even that murky little glimmer wasn't even in sight tonight. The curb was empty next to squalid, neon-covered building filled with prospective clients and drunken frat boys, tumbling out of their beat up car like wiggly, giggly little puppies. She made a mental note that if she ever had to hear the words "dude", "bro", "horny", or "slam" ever again in the same sentence, it would be way, way too soon.

Scully glared at her cell phone, contemplating annoying Mulder just for the sheer spite of it, to spew her venom at him and beg off this detail once and for all. A solid week she'd been here with no relief. The Metro PD wouldn't even take up this watch and thought she was nuts for doing it. A solid week of looking for a horribly made up, bleach blonde, with enough eye make-up to make Tammy Fay Bakker jealous and no sign ever of their suspect. She had seen many other things that she couldn't unsee, but not their mysterious serial killer. Maybe she really was invisible, so invisible that Scully
would never find her, and she would be stuck there, watching this tableau of fornication from now
 till the end of time. When Mulder finally pulled himself away from his case to come find her, he'd see
 nothing but Scully, hunched over a telescope, clawing at her eyes, starved and frozen to death, all
 because of him.

Yeah….that sounded like a fitting guilt trip.

Her cell phone was in her fingers before she could think twice and Mulder's phone was ringing as
she desolately glared at the building across the way. He picked up and she began her tirade without
even a preamble.

"Mulder, when you find me dead, my desiccated corpse propped up staring lifelessly through the
 telescope at drunken frat boys peeing and vomiting into the gutter just know that my last thoughts
 were of you and how I'd like to kill you."

He paused for a long moment. "I'm sorry, who is this?"

If he was mocking her, so help her God. "It's a freak show, Mulder!" She exploded, whining into the
phone. "It's a nonstop parade of every lowlife imaginable."

"Well, the view may not be too different here," he muttered in what he obviously thought was
solidarity. "It's dressed up a little nicer, but underneath the surface, it's the same seamy underbelly."

Did he honestly believe that?

"It's not the same," she snorted derisively. "Trust me."

His chuckle on the other end of the line only served to annoy her.

"You know, Scully," he began, clearly shifting gears. "This case has turned out to be a little more
interesting than I thought and I could use your help."

Help? He could use her help? Help sounded hopeful, like being somewhere, anywhere that wasn't
here. "Are you talking about a reprieve for me?"

Idly she glanced out of the telescope, hoping against hope that Mulder would save her from this
perdition and take her away to someplace where the most hopeful thing wasn't the rusty van of some
street preacher sitting outside of a strip club.

Street preacher…rusty van….Scully blinked at the side of the "Jesus Saves" van that hadn't been
parked there just a minute ago. It was the only consistent thing there every single night.

Mulder rambled in her ear. "Well, there's a murder victim I'd like you to autopsy for me. What do
you think?"

She ignored him, thinking. Every night she had been there, so had the van, and she could bet that the
van had been other places in the area too. Who would think to question a van with the words "Jesus
Saves" on it? Probably most in this area, including the police, ignored it, too intent on the other
sleaze going on.

"The van is back," she murmured, more to herself than Mulder on the other end of the line.

"What did you say," he queried, and she realized she hadn't really heard a word he said.

"Nothing! Mulder, I'll talk to you later, okay?"
She snapped her phone shut, staring out of the telescope, focusing it on the rear end of the ratty van. Brain spinning, she dialed again, this time the Metro PD. The operator on the other end answered with a mechanic greeting.

"Yes, this is Special Agent Dana Scully with the FBI, badge number JTO331613. I need a run on some plates, District of Columbia, DZ-1555. Car is a white van, I can't get a make or model on it."

She could hear clicking on the other end of the line as fingers typed into keys. "We have that registered to a Mark Scott Egbert, has an Anacostia address."

Right...he lives near there. "Thanks." She clicked off, thinking. So, a man, possibly a preacher? She returned to the telescope, watching the van, wondering just what a man with "Jesus Saves" on the side would be up to?

As if reading her mind, the passenger door opened. Out stepped a tall, skinny man, white, unassuming, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He glanced at the strippers, hookers, and interested parties wandering outside of the club, as if ensuring that no one was paying any attention to what he was doing. Most of the people outside in fact didn't seem to notice. Casually, he wandered around to the back of his van, opened it up, and climbed inside.

Interesting, Scully wondered. She watched, waited, curious to see if he came out again. For nearly half-an-hour there was nothing as her fingers froze and her breath fogged the air near the window. But finally, the doors opened, and out stepped there mysterious blonde.

Scully gaped. The dorky, unremarkable man who climbed into the back came out looking like one of the women walking the corner, from shiny, red pleather to knee-high, leopard skin boots. He even had a cleavage that Scully would kill for.

"That is...amazing." She murmured to no one but herself, stunned at the transformation. Horrified too, as it could be all too possible their killer was trying to pass himself off as a hooker or stripper himself in order to ingratiate himself into the population there.

Another phone call, this time the exchange at the FBI. "Hi, this is Special Agent Dana Scully, I need you guys to run a trace on a Mark Scott Egbert, address is Anacostia, District of Columbia. Get me all the information you can get and call me back at this number."

Well this made things certainly more interesting than they had been in days, and quite possibly she had the break she had longed for. Soon, oh so soon, perhaps she could be in her shower and eat a real meal with green vegetables, and sleep in a bed...oh, God, her bed! She would soak in hot water till the grime and stench of this place came off, she would crawl into her bed and not come out for months, and when she did, she would make Mulder make up for this week. How? That she didn't know.
Her cocoon of blankets and pillows on the couch was snug and warm. The television was on the one thing that was the furthest from sex she could find, a science documentary on the creation of the universe. She had a pot of hot tea in front of her and was dozing lightly after a shower that had nearly scalded the skin from her flesh. Warm, drowsy, and content, life for Scully at that moment was very, very good.

And then the doorbell rang.

Scully groaned, thinking to simply ignore it, but it rang again. Perhaps she should just feign sleeping? She wasn't expecting anyone in particular and had absolutely no plan to get out of her pajamas unless hell froze over. If she were lucky, maybe whoever it was would just simply go away.

When the knocking started, Scully realized that it was probably Mulder.

With a muttered oath and a resigned sigh she threw back the comforter, stuck her feet into her slippers, and shuffled to the door just as she heard Mulder's key scrape against the lock. With a smirk, she tugged the door open, meeting Mulder's wide-eyed surprise.

"What do you want?" She crossed her arms over her silken pajamas and glared at him.

"Just coming to check on you, that's all." He held up his key, looking sheepish. "I tried to call, but you didn't answer."

"I turned my phone off."

"Both of them?" He acted as if that was a travesty.

"Mulder, you aren't high on my list of people I'm happy with at the moment. What do you want?"

He held up a paper bag he had in his left hand, presenting it like an offering. "Hot soup and my grateful apologies for leaving you out there by yourself."

Scully frowned at the bag, considering. "What kind of soup?"

"Chicken noodle. What else?"

"You could have gotten tomato soup," she replied, taking the bag from his fingers.

"Yeah, but then we'd need grilled cheese and that gets soggy in delivery." He blinked at her, giving her his most puppy dog look. "Can't you see a man is trying to make up to you here, Scully?"

She could and it was appreciated as an all too rare occurrence from him. "Yeah, get in here." She held the door open for him to come inside.

"Beers in the fridge," she waved towards the kitchen, taking the soup to the coffee table. She
crawled back into her nest of warmth while she listened to Mulder digging around first her fridge, then her drawers on the search for a bottle opener. He wandered back in, pulling deeply from the bottle before settling on the end of the couch where her nest didn't reach.

"That's the stuff a man needs," he sighed contentedly. "A good beer and a good woman there to keep him company."

Scully snorted at his declaration, choosing to busy herself with the soup he had brought her. "If that's all that men needed, I wouldn't have spent the last week watching them staring at tits and ass while picking up cheap hookers."

That earned a chuckle out of Mulder, who coughed discretely around his mouthful of beer.

"Honestly, Mulder, I don't get it." She continued, stirring the noodles and chicken in the soup idly before taking a bit. She swallowed, shaking her head. "I saw things in the last week that I never hoped to see. I saw women being looked at as things, objectified in the worst way, then used, and they were okay with this! And people didn't care that it was the worst of neighbors, with drugs one corner and gangs on the other, grimy and disgusting. There was nothing sexy about it, nothing beautiful, nothing romantic."

"I don't think men go to those type of venues looking for romance, Scully."

"True," she conceded after another bite. "But it's like porn. I've overlooked you and your collection for years, but I can't say I understand it."

That earned another cough out of him, less discreet than the first. "It's complicated."

"I suppose if I were to corner one of those men at that strip club they would say the same thing to."

"Maybe," Mulder replied, looking decidedly uncomfortable with the analogy. "It's not as simple as just wanting to stare at naked women. It's...I don't know, a fantasy."

One eyebrow rose pointedly to the ceiling. "A fantasy?"

"Sure. Just like you and your Jane Austen books."

"My Jane Austen books are nothing like strip clubs, prostitutes, and porn," she countered in mild outrage.

"But aren't they?" His eyes glittered as he knew he now had the advantage in this argument. "How many women out there read these books, secretly hoping their Darcy or whoever will show up, a man who has a horrible reputation, one they secretly hope they can win over with their manners and good heart?"

That hit a bit too close to home for her comfort. "I can honestly say I've never gone about trying to win a man like that?"

"Haven't you?" Now he shot her the arched eyebrow, a challenging smirk forcing her to look very busy with her chicken soup. "It's all a fantasy, Scully, we all do it. The men at that strip club or picking up those hookers want to believe that for a time they could be with that type of woman who is sexy and erotic and willing to do whatever they want. It's human nature. We all have out fantasies. For some of us, we cling to them, trying to live them out, to our own detriment at times."

Scully had the sudden feeling he wasn't just speaking about strip clubs and Jane Austen anymore. "Like finding your sister?"
"Yeah, that." He nodded, that slowly healing wound still too tender for her to prod just yet. "But I was thinking more about the case I was on."

"The one where you were eating amazing food while I was living on cold pizza?"

Mulder chuckled, patting her knee under the blankets. "It was damn good food I won't deny it. But it did come at a price."

"So what was up with this mysterious case Skinner had you on anyway?"

Mulder sighed, looking infinitely sad as he pulled again at his beer. "The daughter of a US District judge went missing from her home two weeks ago. Police hadn't turned up any leads, and they called me on there because the woman's daughter swore she had been attacked by ravens earlier in the day and heard them in the house when her mother disappeared."

"Sounds a bit Edgar Allen Poe," Scully quipped, slurping at a noodle as she listened.

"Wish it was that romantic. But it turns out it was simply just the dark side of small town life, the sort of stuff that gets rumors started, but no one ever talks about."

"Like a soap opera?" Now Scully was curious.

"Sheriff Adderly called in assistance because he was stumped on Martha's whereabouts. We found her body and the suspect was thought to be Jenny Upton, a woman from the wrong side of the tracks who had a grudge against Martha, but then she turned up dead herself."

"Something targeted both of them? Why?"

"Because they were sleeping with the same man," Mulder replied, shaking his head dolefully. "Sheriff Adderly."

Scully could guess where this was going. "Did he happen to be married?"

"To an absolutely lovely woman named Ellen." He looked disgusted by the thought. "Nice woman who would do anything for him, a good home, a beautiful child. Frankly, Scully, his life was absolutely perfect."

"How perfect was it if he was stepping out on her?" That was the first thought that came to Scully's mind.

"Perfect enough even I was jealous," Mulder admitted. That surprised her. Mulder had never been much of a fan of anything domestic, outside of her mother's cooking. "She was the fantasy that any man would want. She cooked, she kept a lovely house, did all of his laundry, made it something he would want to come home to, everyday."

Scully had to admit the very idea of ever being that type of wife had never even crossed her mind. "She sounds like an ideal." She ignored the twinge of jealousy she felt.

"She was. And at the same time, in the end, she too was a fantasy. She created a fantasy. She was living it." He picked at the label on the front of his bottle. "Just like those women at Dirty Dames, Scully, Ellen was trying to create an illusion of what she was. She was making a fantasy for her husband, just like those women at the strip club, except she wasn't aiming to be the perfect lover, she was aiming to be the perfect wife, the type that a good man like the sheriff would need and never, ever want to leave."
Now Scully saw the sadness to this entire story. "Except that he had not just one, but two lovers."

"Ellen had her own family issues growing up. She wanted her family to be different, to be the ideal. Her husband felt stifled by it. When Ellen found out, she couldn't deal with it. So she suppressed it, ignored it, until she couldn't any more. All that rage and anger fractured her, broke her in a way she couldn't control, and a part of her decided to act out."

"A part of her?" Scully stopped sipping her soup to frown at him.

"The ravens that original woman's daughter saw. I don't know, somehow it was connected to Ellen, but not really Ellen. She somehow…split her own personality."

"Disassociated herself, just like Sybil."

"Right, except the personality that came out was angry, vengeful, the opposite of Ellen. And I'm not convinced it was all together human."

Scully knew there had to be an X-file angle in there somewhere. "So she was a vengeful raven? Nevermore and all of that?"

"Kind of." Mulder hardly batted an eye at the concept, but he rarely ever did. "In Greek myth there is the story of the chimera, a creature born of Typhon, part lion, part goat, part snake. It sort of comes to symbolize all sorts of fantastical creatures out there. I think for Ellen, this personality is her sort of chimera, part Ellen, part something else, fantastical, which could take all of her rage and anger and strike out against those she saw as threatening her perfect world. The real Ellen, sweet, kind, loving, motherly, couldn't possibly act in those ways. But this…chimera part of her soul, this part human, part raven, part goddess, could.

"So she made up a fantastical creature as an alternate personality?" It was strange, but Scully supposed she could see it. "And did she even realize she was doing it."

"No, not till the end at least, but by then two women were dead and her entire life was ruined."

That struck Scully as infinitely depressing.

"So what will happen to her?" She found herself huddling down further into her blankets, as if the warmth would take away the gloomy thoughts.

"Well, she's in a psychiatric hospital for now. It's up to the DA whether or not she will stand trial, though I think Martha Crittendon's father, the judge, would rather just have Ellen declared legally insane to avoid a prolonged trial for everyone. He may use his influence to sway things."

"And what about her husband, the sheriff?" He had a part to play in this, Scully scowled darkly. His thoughtlessness and inability to keep things in his pants led to this.

"He's likely not going to stay sheriff very long. Two murders linked to his indiscretion and a wife driven to do it out of grief. He's going to have to deal with his own fall out from it, which is sad as he's all his daughter has at the moment."

"Sad for the daughter, yes." She sniffed, thinking of the johns and frat kids outside of the Dirty Dames. "Why can't you men just take a cold shower?"

Mulder snorted at her outburst, amused. "Cause our brains are hardwired for sex differently, and believe me when I say that it is a relief from stress, which is what I am sure Adderly was up to, and those men at the strip club, and hell, even myself at times."
"At times?" She snickered into her soup, reaching a toe out to curl into his side. He only reddened in response. "I think your collection tells a different story."

"Ehhh, well, I'm a man with a lot of stress in my life." He only sipped at his beer, seemingly unapologetic.

"You could say that again." Scully laughed. She was full of soup and set it aside on the coffee table as she yawned. "At least you are good at making up to me for the horrible stake out you left me on."

"Well, I did leave you to the vagaries of a flop motel with nothing but pizza and rats to keep you company."

"Ugh," she groaned, throwing herself deeper into her pillowed nest. "Don't remind me! I don't think I could sleep through another skittering noise ever again."

Mulder simply laughed, rubbing her toes still curled in his side, absently staring at the television. It was a comfortable scene. Not one they had very often, from time to time, yes. Scully wished they had more moments like these, little ones with the two of them sitting comfortably, with no bad guys to chase, no reports to write, no strip clubs to stake out.

"Are you starting to snore," Mulder prodded the bottom of her foot.

"Maybe a little," she admitted playfully. "Am warm and comfortable now."

"I'm glad," he admitted, making no sign of moving. He finished off the beer and leaned over just enough to set it on the coffee table before setting back into the couch, grabbing her feet long enough to set them on his lap.

Scully said nothing. She might as well go with it while it lasted.

"You know," Mulder murmured in a lazy drawl. "Ellen Adderly did cook a really mean breakfast."

"Course she did. She was crazy," Scully replied simply.

"Still. It was nice. Does make me want to punch her husband for treating her the way he did."

"Why? Because you secretly want a woman to do that for you?"

"Ehhh, not so much." He turned his head to look at her. "She asked me if I had a significant other. I told her I didn't, at least not in the most widely understood definition of the term."

Scully giggled. "Yeah, I don't think your 900 numbers count as a significant other."

"No, they don't." He smiled lazily. "But it wasn't what I was getting at either."

Flutters started to go off in Scully's stomach, swirling her chicken soup at an alarming rate. Before she could think of a word to squeak out in response, Mulder was slowly slipping out from under her feet and up off the couch.

"But you are tired, and I interrupted you," he apologized, gathering his beer bottle.

"No, no, you didn't, that's okay." She wanted him to stay and continue this conversation. But before she could manage to untangle herself from her swath of blanket and pillows, he was already heading to the kitchen to deposit the bottle in the trash.

"I still have to write up the report. Skinner wants it pretty immediately. Since the judge pulled strings
on it, there needs to be some sort of accountability."

"Oh…right." Of course, she reasoned, standing foolishly with her silken pajamas now askew. What could she say to that?

"Well, thanks for stopping by?" She hoped it didn't sound as forlorn as she felt in that moment.

"I owed you. Besides, you did good work. Me, I'd have been looking for something spectacular and weird. Of course, a preacher who cross-dresses to share the word of the Lord…that is pretty weird."

"You're telling me," she chuffed. "I can't get the image of him in leopard skin out of my head."

"And on that note," Mulder reached for the door, letting himself out. "I'll see you on Monday?"

"Yeah," she replied, wishing he didn't have to go. "You can call before then if you need."

"Right." He nodded, opened his mouth to say something else, then paused. Instead he shook his head, shot her a departing grin, then left.

Hell, Scully sighed, running fingers through her already tangled hair. What in the hell had that entire conversation been about? Fantasies, realities, significant others? She felt as if they had been on the cusp of something and then, inexplicably, it had all fallen apart. What had caused that?

"Hell," she muttered to herself, turning back towards her couch. "I think I will need to have a visit to the strip club soon to get rid of the stress in my life."

She burrowed back into her covers, snuggling in them, pulling them over the top of her head.
"You promised me, no more cases in L.A." Scully couldn't believe he was talking her into this... again!

"It's not a case, it's a favor," Mulder pointed out gently on the phone as Scully grabbed clothing from her closet. "It isn't on the FBI's dime at all."

"Doesn't make it better," Scully groused, picking out a suit to wear all the same.

"We can't say we don't owe it to them," Mulder tried to point out diplomatically. Scully wasn't in the mood as she pulled out her suitcase.

"Owe it to the boys?" He was serious?

"How many times have they come through for us on cases?"

"Two words for you, Mulder, 'Las Vegas'. They still haven't made up for that yet."

His laughter at the other end of the line did nothing to improve her mood.

"Every time those three want a favor we end up doing something potentially dangerous and or embarrassing. You get hit with some spray and believe that there are aliens. I end up playing Holly Golightly in a casino. What will it be this time?"

"Never fear, Scully, this time it has to do with video games."

She paused in her rant, frowning as she sorted through underwear in her drawer. "Video games? What about them?"

"Ever hear of a design studio called FPS?"

"Have you even known me to play video games," she shot back, giving her practical under things an "are you serious" sort of glare, the kind she'd give Mulder if he were standing there.

"You didn't even play Pong as a teenager?"

"Maybe a few times. Charlie was the bigger video game nerd, had a Nintendo, used to waste hours in front of the TV." That was about as far as Scully's video game knowledge went. "I've never known you to touch a video game much. First time I saw you touch so much as an arcade game was that case in Oklahoma years ago."

"I don't know, I played a pretty mean Mrs. Pac-man back in the day," Mulder drawled. "But I admit, I'm not exactly well versed in the nuances of the gamer culture, which is why I think the boys called us in on this."

"Because we are idiots at things with buttons and joysticks?" She slammed shut the drawer, tossing
clothing onto the bed to be neatly packed away.

"Perhaps it gives fresh perspective to what is going on."

"Just what is going on, Mulder, you haven't said. If I'm dragging my ass to LA on a four hour flight again for something that is technically not a case, I want to know why."

"So FPS stands for 'first person shooter'."

"First person shooter?" It wasn't a term she was familiar with.

"It's a type of game, sort of like a first person in a story, where you are playing the character who is raining down the death and destruction."

"Lovely. So they make violent video games I take it?" She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the idea that teenaged boys felt the need to cause death and mayhem on the television screen.

"From what the boys told me mostly military stuff; war games, spy games, that sort of thing. Apparently they are developing a new game, their most advanced game to date. None of them gave me any details, but they sounded excited about it."

"This is the Gunmen, Mulder, they get excited by news episodes of whatever Star Trek show is on the air."

"Touché," Mulder snickered on the other end. "Still, I trust their word in this. Langley practically walks around with a joystick in his hand."

"Images I never needed to think of, Mulder," she sighed, sinking on the bed to begin putting things in a suitcase. "So what in the world is going on at FPS that they believe they need to call us in on?"

"The new game. Frohike says it's developed a bug."

"A bug? Like a virus?"

"If it is, its one hell of a virus," Mulder muttered dryly. "The game itself is a simulation, I don't know details beyond that. All that the boys told me is that there was some sort of industrial accident, very serious, but they wouldn't tell me what."

That caught Scully's attention. "In a video game simulation? What sort of accident?"

"Don't know, but they want it hush-hush, no local police involved."

"Did FPS bother calling the police?"

"From what Frohike said, they don't want San Bernardino police in because they don't know what happened."

"Can't or won't?" Scully knew that often with companies and secretly developed products cooperation with authorities was often on the bottom of their priority list.

"I think that's where we come in," Mulder explained. "Can't or won't, FPS is in an awkward position, if word leaks out their new, highly anticipated game has major, dangerous problems, the press it would generate would be huge, and none of it good. Video games are already under fire enough from many corners for promoting violence. If it got out that it could actually hurt someone or something, it could sink the game and the company."
"I don't see how that's our problem," Scully offered bluntly.

"That's why this is a favor."

Now they were getting to the heart of this. "How are the Gunmen involved?"

"They have stock in FPS."

Scully rolled her eyes heavenward, a sigh dragging itself from the depths of her being. "Of course."

"Langley has something to do with the business, I'm not sure what, and if you ask me, the three of them likely invested, though they won't own up to it."

"How deep are they sunk into it?" Scully was almost afraid to know.

"Enough that if this thing went south, they'll lose the paper."

"And that's a bad thing?" She blinked.

"Scully, be nice," he chastised gently. That didn't mean she couldn't hear the laughter in his voice.

"You thought it too and don't say you didn't," she snickered, flopping backwards on the bed. "So what do they want out of us in this? We can't cover up something from the local police just to help their bottom line."

"I think what they want out of us is simply someone to go in and look for the type of things that the locals might miss out on."

"Kind of hard for us to find that out if we don't know anything about the game," she pointed out sagely.

"I have a feeling that FPS will be much more open with us, especially when we make it clear we aren't out to ruin their profit margin."

"We can't guarantee that, Mulder! If a legitimate murder happened, our job is to solve it, damn the profit margin."

"I know, but if we go in their as badass FBI, we aren't going to get anything done."

He had a point. "Fine, but after this, they owe us, and I mean bigger than giving us the location of Bigfoot."

"Agreed. They will be grateful for this, Scully."

"They better be," she grumbled, sitting up to stare at her suitcase. "It's the Inland Empire, even, not even a good part of Southern California."

"Buck up, Scully! If you're a good girl, I'll take you to Disneyland!"

"Shut up, Mulder," she snarled, hanging up on him with a satisfied click.
The detective understandably was less than pleased that the FBI was on this case before he was.

"Agent Scully," he asked, frowning at the bodies first, then up at her. "Not to get into a jurisdictional pissing match, but can I ask how three bodies have been dead for several hours without so much as a phone call to the San Bernardino Police Department first?"

Scully shot sideways, death glares at Frohike, Langley, and Byers hovering nearby. All three men ducked their heads and quickly looked for somewhere else to be that wasn't within Scully's immediate vicinity.

"I can't tell you that for sure," Scully admitted frankly. Detective Lacouer was a man who was just trying to do his job. She got that. He was like so many of the other locals they met in their investigations, a regular cop who had a very cut and dry understanding of his position and what he was supposed to be doing. His rulebook said clearly that if there was a murder in the area, he was to be called, so she couldn't really blame him for being irritated that the FBI was called in before the local police could be looped into the situation.

"Look, Detective, as soon as Agent Mulder and I were made aware of the situation, we called your team in. At no time did the FBI intentionally try to one-up the locals in this investigation."

"Right." He wasn't buying it, no matter how nicely Scully tried to put it. "You may not of, but I can't say that FPS has had such noble intentions." He glared at the three young, dead gamers as forensics teams studied the bodies littered across the game room floor. Scully was about to dissuade him on the point but he knew he was spot on.

"I admit, we were brought here because of connections certain share holders have with us, but we had no idea there were dead bodies involved."

Lacouer simply glared. "What, you just hopped on a plane, came on out here because you were told something weird happened, and just stumbled on the bodies?"

Scully knew it sounded stupid in her head. It sounded worse coming out of him. "Pretty much."

The poor detective looked as if his brain was about to explode.

"Agent Scully," he muttered in obvious irritation. "I know that for the FBI things might be different. But here in San Bernardino, we have real, big city problems. I deal with drug deals gone wrong, gang murders, rape, domestic violence, you name it. San Bernardino is an ugly place. Yesterday, I had to break it to some poor Mexican grandmother that her fourteen-year-old granddaughter wasn't going to be coming home because some gang bangers happened to decide that the sidewalk she was walking down was a good place to have a turf war. Last week, I had to go out to the local Cal State and investigate a frat kid found dead after he got a hold of some sort of bad crack that someone was selling in the area. I know these aren't glamorous cases like you deal with in the FBI, but it's my job..."
"to solve them."

"Not to be rude, but what is your point, Detective?"

"My point is that with all the murders I deal with on an everyday basis, I know how a murder investigation is run and what we need to do to find a killer. I don't know about what they do in the FBI, but here in San Bernardino we would ask a few more questions about so called 'industrial accidents' to find the answers out and report a god damn murder a hell of a lot sooner than this so we could begin a real investigation into this case."

His waved a hand to the bodies that were being worked over. "Let's just say that they called you and your partner in Washington right away on this. It takes you what, an hour or two to get a flight booked out here. Then it's another four hours in the air. Where did you fly in, Ontario?"

"Yes," Scully admitted, already feeling admittedly chastised in the face of the detective's justifiable ire.

"So that is another twenty, thirty minutes out here to FPS. Then once you get past this ridiculous security, you find the bodies. So how long is that? Six, maybe seven hours? And in the meantime I'm called in after the fact, told there is are dead bodies, and given the run around as to why they are even here."

Scully could feel a headache coming on. "You are completely right, Detective Lacouer, proper procedure wasn't followed by FPS or anyone in this situation. Agent Mulder and I came out on minimal information under their assumption on the part of FPS that we would be able to help them out without getting their names in the newspaper. When we realized what was really going on, I called the murders in. Neither Agent Mulder nor I are interested in impeding any investigation that your office wants to conduct."

Why was she the one left to deal with the angry cop while Mulder was…where the hell was Mulder?

The detective at least seemed mollified that Scully wasn't trying to step on his toes or horn into what was essentially his case. "Fine! As long as we all know where we stand. So tell me, what do you have on this case."

Ahhh, that. She frowned. She didn't have much, and wasn't even sure how to explain it to him. "We were called in and told there was an accident. What we found is what we saw. Three men, all of whom the game developers claim were testing the simulation in these suits, none of it involved real weapons. All of them ended up dead."

"No real weapons?" He looked at her as if she had said that aliens were the culprits for these murders. "You did see the condition these bodies were in, right?"

"I am a forensic pathologist, Detective, with years of experience in the field, I think I can figure out a thing or two about a dead body," she snapped. She could understand the man being frustrated, but condescension she wouldn't put up with. "But all I have to tell you is what the developers have shared with us."

"And you think they are telling you the whole story?"

No, she didn't and she certainly hoped that was what Mulder was about right at the moment. "I don't know, Detective, I doubt it."

The other man sighed. She somehow thought he would rather be working on his gang murders and busted drug deals right at that moment. "Right. So why don't I talk to my team and see what they do
know, and maybe, if you and your partner ever get your act together, you can tell me what the FBI thinks is going on."

With that, he turned to stalk off in the direction of the forensic team, just then finishing up with their bodies enough to allow the medical examiners to take them to the morgue. Scully watched him go, exhaling in utter frustration. This was supposed to be a favor? She’d been told it would be one, small thing for the Gunmen, nothing more. After all, we owe them, Mulder said. She somehow felt that the boys’ Vegas tab was going to be growing even longer before this case was finished.
"So what was her best feature, her boobs or her ass?"

It was a simple enough question, but Mulder only blinked at her dreamily from the driver's seat of their rental car. "Hmmm…"

Scully snorted, rolling her eyes at the traffic along the darkened 405 Freeway heading south out of the San Fernando Valley. "She hit you that hard, huh?"

"I'm sorry, Scully, were you speaking to me?"

She decided to punch him in the shoulder, just because. He grunted and chuckled, earning a dark scowl from her. This entire mess was bad enough, but to have…that! Ms. Afterglow, as she called herself, was everything that her digital counterpart was, tall, shapely, with legs that lasted forever and curves you could drive a stock car around. She was every man's fantasy in real life, certainly Mulders. Well, Mulder's type at least, the tall, feminine brunette. Scully wasn't sure about devastating intelligence, but she certainly did have no small amount of wit and enough smarts to know just how to use her looks to manipulate those in front of her. Of course, all she had to do was to flash the fact she was wearing no underwear to Mulder and he started drooling all over himself. Well, at least she was well waxed, Scully reasoned, trying hard not to feel that niggling hint of jealousy in the back of her mind. After all, what did Jade Blue Afterglow have that all of Mulder's magazines didn't.

Well…perhaps they didn't have their own video game character.

"I can't believe you, Mulder," she muttered before amending herself. "No, I can believe you. I've seen your collection."

"None of it looks that good," he whistled, earning another death glare from Scully. "I mean you have to admit, if you wanted a model for a hot, female video game character, that's the way to go."

"Depends on your definition of hot," she replied coolly. "I suppose, however, for a certain type of woman, she's attractive."

"A certain type of woman?" Mulder's dark eyebrows crawled upwards. "Do I detect a hint of cattiness from the ever-cool Agent Scully?"

"Cattiness? Why in the world should I behave as anything less than a professional? I wasn't the one falling all over myself like a school boy like you, the detective, and nearly ever other LA County Sheriff's Deputy in that precinct."

"So this is because you thought I wasn't professional?"

"Thought, Mulder? If you stared under her skirt any longer, I think you might have face-planted into the floor."
"So you are jealous?" He sounded triumphant. Clearly, he also missed the point.

"I don't know what I have to be jealous about," she shot back airily.

"Good," Mulder nodded as he drove. "Cause you don't have anything to be jealous of."

Easy for him to say.

"You are right," Scully sighed, frowning at the long line of red lights in front of them. "I mean, after all, I'm smart, intelligent, have a good job. She's beautiful, alluring, sexy, all the things that make men want to throw dollar bills at her feet."

"You mean put them in her thong," Mulder amended.

"Whatever," she snapped, clearly not in the mood for playful banter. "What is it about you…men?"

"Us?" Mulder acted as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

"Yes, you. If it isn't Dirty Dames and other strip clubs, it's magazines, or Jade Blue Afterglow, or scantily clad video game girls, or those half-naked women in chain mail underwear you see in those Conan movies."

"You've seen Conan movies?" Mulder sounded stunned. Scully scowled.

"You were the one telling me last week this is all some part of a fantasy, but more than anything it strikes me as a silly, schoolboy game, the male effort to live out their pubescent wet dreams through…staring at naked women with guns in their hands."

"Pubescent? That's still my fantasy!"

Scully sighed.

"In the meantime, what message are we sending to girls out there? That they have to be six feet of legs and curves, dressed scantily, and allow themselves to be objectified for men to take them seriously."

"You honestly think that men would take them seriously then?" Mulder snorted. "The whole fantasy, Scully, is just that, a fantasy. None of those women, Jade Blue Afterglow included, are real. They are as flimsy, stuff of desires, of dreams, Walter Mitty-esque fluff that feed into our deepest, biological memories."

"Your biological memories include stiletto heels and Lycra?"

"No," he admitted with a laugh. "But the human male from early on was the hunter, the one part of the pair who went out with the weapons and killed things and brought back meat, and he wanted a woman who was strong and capable, like him, beautiful, and who would welcome him home with open arms, pleased with his kill."

"So you're telling me that violent video games and comics with scantily clad women prancing about with weapons all feed some sort of genetic memory of our hunter-gather ancestors?" Somehow, Scully could smell bullshit in this theory.

"Well, no, personally I think that the violence has to do with our hunter-gatherer ancestors, the scantily clad women with weapons has to do with it just being hot."

"I give up!" Scully bemoaned to Mulder's laughter.
"Face it, Scully, men are simple creatures, we like killing things and we like pretty girls, and since it isn't socially acceptable to start hacking at things with a sword anymore, we take it out in comics, movies, and video games. It feeds something psychologically for us, like your fluffy romances do for you."

"My fluffy romances? When do I have time to read those when I'm busy trying to solve cases for your stupid, gamer friends, who I might add are just as guilty of their violent, sex-romp video games as anyone."

"Yeah, well think about it, how much sex are the three of them getting anyway?"

"How much are you getting again, Mulder?"

"Touché," he acknowledged good-naturedly. "I'm just saying, give the guys some slack. Everyone needs their vice, and theirs are ultra-violent video games with hot, sexy women."

She supposed in the grand scheme of things, liking a violent video game, which wasn't real, was marginally better, if only, then hanging about a place like Dirty Dames - hough Scully wouldn't put it past Frohike to have done that very thing. "I don't know, Mulder, seeing grown men acting like junior high schoolers back there, it doesn't give me a ton of hope for the future of the human race."

"Don't worry, Scully, we may go all stupid for a fantasy, but in reality there isn't a one of us who would ever have a chance with Jade Blue Afterglow and we know it. I think for some of us, however enticing and amusing the fantasy is, we have our sights set on something a little bit better and closer to home."

"Perhaps," she replied, unconvinced. "Still, I think I will believe that when your collection mysteriously disappears one day."

"You never know. I'm hitting forty soon. Maybe my mid-life crises will be to stop chasing the impossible and look for something a bit more grounded in reality."

"Mulder, if you ever do that, I think I would faint of shock and start wondering if you've been replaced with a pod person."

"Stranger things could happen. The possibility is always out there."

"You and your endless optimism," she muttered dryly. "I'll believe all of that when I see it, Mulder."

"Scully, if you did any less, I think I would be disappointed in you."
Maitreya

Chapter Summary

In which Scully commiserates on the patriarchy.

Ivan's stunned confusion gave way to Phoebe's tears as the young woman ran from the room. Scully suddenly had a feeling that Jade Blue Afterglows involvement in this game wasn't because of Ivan after all. Leaving the money-grubbing developer to the situation at hand, she rushed after Phoebe, who had run despondently into the next room.

"Hey, Phoebe," she called after her as the girl turned.

"I don't know how it happened," she insisted, looking helplessly at Scully.

"You knew about her?"

Phoebe nodded, rubbing at her tearful face.

"Then it was you. You scanned that woman's body?"

"Into my computer," Phoebe explained, waving at the machine at the desk behind her. "She was my creation. She was...mine." She sounded so heartbroken in that moment. What confused Scully was what the purpose for her was.

"But why?" She was curious how this girl, the opposite of the nerdy men around her, would create something like this.

"You don't know what it's like," she wailed, glaring in mild frustration in the general direction of Ivan in the other room. "Day in and day out, choking in a haze of rampant testosterone."

Wouldn't know what it was like? If only Phoebe could see the FBI, let alone Mulder's office. "I wouldn't be so sure."

The girl carried on as if she hadn't heard her. "I mean, she was all I had to keep me sane, my only way to strike back as a woman! She was my goddess, everything I can never be!"

Her goddess? The words struck Scully then. Phoebe's creation, far from being the product of hormonal masculine fantasies and unrealized, pubescent dreams, was in fact one woman's response to the objectification she saw all around her everyday, the type of amazing woman that she didn't feel like. This character was the beautiful female who was strong, gorgeous, and deadly, and she was currently in a computer game, running rampant against very real human beings.

"But, Phoebe, she's a killer," Scully pointed out. "I can't explain it, but she is, and you put her in that game."

"No, I didn't," the programmer insisted firmly. "I was creating my own game in my own computer. It was totally secret. I never told anyone, but somehow she jumped programs and she's feeding off the male aggression. It's making her stronger and stronger."
Her eyes brightened suddenly as she thought. "I need your help. You're the only one who can understand!"

Why? Because she was a woman? "You've got to destroy her, Phoebe."

"I don't know how," she admitted fearfully.

Scully had no more idea either, and it disheartened her that the games creator had nothing. "Well, there's got to be some way. There's got to be some vulnerability or a weakness somewhere."

"She has no weaknesses anymore," Phoebe replied.

Now Scully was worried.

"Okay," she replied slowly, trying to think. "Tell me about this character, what she was."

Phoebe blinked at her slowly, puzzled.

"You're her creator, you had a video game, a story for her in mind. Who is she?"

"She's Maitreya," Phoebe replied simply.

"And, where does she come from? What does she do?" It was the basics of investigation; learn who your suspect is, where they come from, what their life is, what motivates them. Sure, this was a artificial intelligence, but it was an intelligence all the same, and like any intelligence it reacted to certain stimuli.

"She doesn't come from anywhere," Phoebe shrugged, looking miserable. "She's more than anything just the expression of my own creative frustration. She's everything I can't express or say because if I do I will just be laughed at."

A computer game character that was born out of someone's own feelings of inadequacy. Wonderful!

"Phoebe, what is Maitreya's purpose?"

Phoebe's laugh was hard and bitter as she shook her head. "To kick ass and take names, especially if they are male."

Well, that was straightforward enough. "That's it?"

Phoebe threw up her hands, looking at Scully sheepishly. "Since I was a kid, I wanted to make video games. I grew up with a Nintendo controller in my hand. I used to play Zelda or Mario and think of all the ways I would do the game differently. When I got into high school, I wanted to take courses in programming. You know what all the teachers told me? I'd be great in the computer industry, but there was no place in video games for a woman like me."

That sounded like a familiar admonishment to Scully. She winced, thinking of similar statements made to her and other, earlier women when they joined the FBI. It was only in the last thirty years that the Bureau had started welcoming women into its ranks, and even then there were still certain corners of law enforcement where old guard males looked down their noses at her in a position as investigator.

"I graduated from the best design school in the country, and I applied at all the big name companies; Activision, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, you name it. And you know where I end up? This two-bit operation with Ivan!" She glared at the ceiling apparently forgetting this "two-bit" operation was a
high tech, state of the art facility. "I was relegated to doing minor coding for their backwater titles, computer games, no console work. I only ended up on this project because I was willing to work cheap enough for it."

"And so you wanted to make your own game to show you could do it?" Scully was beginning to understand better.

"Yeah," Phoebe sighed, tearfully staring at her computer. "I wanted to make a game with a woman who was everything that I wasn't, everything that I wished the world would see about me. Beautiful, creative, intelligent, cunning, she would be the perfect heroine. She didn't need men to tell her what to do or to give her meaning because she was independent of them, free of them, able to defeat them at their own game. She would come out on top because she was better than they were."

Defeat them at their own game. That phrase caught and snagged at Scully's brain, as it picked up the idea and played with it. "Phoebe, you say you don't know how Maitreya got in the game. Do you happen to know when it was?"

"It had to be sometime before the test run. That's when we first noticed her."

"And you ran the test simulation with all men, right?"

"Because they were people Ivan knew. Mostly guys." She snorted. "Why?"

"You said Maitreya feeds off of male aggression. Is she programmed to do that?"

"I guess." Phoebe clearly didn't like admitting to that. "I wanted her to turn male aggression away from her and towards them, give them a taste of their own medicine."

"And that might be the very thing that will stop her in the end," Scully grinned, an idea popping into her head. "Maitreya doesn't respond well to male aggression, but she won't know what she will do when she's faced with another woman, now will she?"

Phoebe realized in an instant what it was she meant to do. "You can't go in there. You'll be killed!"

"Phoebe, I'm a trained FBI agent, same as Mulder, and like hell I'm leaving my friends in that stupid game to die," Scully was already on her feet, determined to step inside the game. "Besides, Maitreya is used to dealing with men who use their guns as an extension of their male aggression. Me, I'm using it as a weapon to get things done and get out of there."

The other woman bit her lips, unsure. "It might work. Maitreya has never had to face women before. I don't know, I suppose I assumed that the only people who would ever care about a game like that would be guys anyway."

"Well, let's see how she fairs when she has to deal with one pissed off woman who isn't about to let her friends die in there." Scully arched a cool eyebrow towards the door. "I think I can take her."

"Maybe." Phoebe still didn't sound certain. "You ready to do this."

Scully nodded. She was about as certain as she could be, facing a digital enemy. "Let's go kick your goddess's ass, shall we?"
In which Scully gives the locals her final report.

"So your report is that the deaths are due to a video game character?" Lacoeur's skepticism dripped like the coffee from the maker on the counter beside them. Scully merely shrugged, shooting Mulder an "I told you so" look.

"Well, perhaps more of a video game glitch," Scully tried to explain as Mulder frowned in dissatisfaction at her explanation. "The character was developed for a different game, and the code I guess migrated?"

She couldn't have felt more stupid if she tried.

"Migrated?" Lacoeur eyed her over the file she handed him.

"The character AI insinuated itself into the program uninvited," Mulder cut in, finally stepping in to help as Scully blinked at him awkwardly. "The best we can tell is that it was all due to a programming error."

"A programming error?" Lacoeur didn't look any happier to hear that than Scully's suggestion of migration. "So you mean to tell me that four people end up dead and I got the CIA breathing down my neck all because of a programming error?"

Scully looked at Mulder, who shrugged as he looked back at her. What else was there to say? "Pretty much," he replied, meeting Lacoeur's skepticism frankly.

The detective's mouth closed into a grim line as he tossed the file on the counter. He reached for a very dirty, completely stained coffee mug beside him, one that looked as if it hadn't seen a sponge in more years than Scully cared to think about. The fresh pot in the coffee maker was used to refill it, and without even so much as cream or sugar he sipped from it carelessly, glaring at the files again. Scully tried to repress a shudder at how many germs that mug likely contained.

"Son-of-a-bitch," the detective swore, glaring at them both. "What the hell am I supposed to put in the case file on this one? That our victims were killed by Laura Croft?"

"Oh, I don't know, Maitreya is way hotter than Laura Croft," Mulder grinned. The detective was not as amused.

"I don't care if she was buck naked riding a nuclear missile, I can't seriously write a report that says that our killer was a video game character gone rogue." He scowled so hard, he looked as if his coffee was sour. Judging from the coffee mug, it just might be. "Where you come from in DC, maybe they are okay with science fiction endings to cases, but here in San Bernardino, we do real police work."

"Funny, I've heard that from our boss a time or two," Mulder acknowledge, as Scully decided now would be a very good time to step in before Mulder managed to further antagonize the local police.
"As far as we can tell, the death these men suffered came from a reaction to the stimuli from the video game."

"Except the autopsy you performed yourself, Agent Scully, shows they died of weapons that were all too real," the detective pointed out. "As I recall you have one victim with a hole in his chest big enough to drive a MAC truck through and the CIA's baby was sliced up like a salami."

"Yes," Scully admitted. "And I can't believe I'm saying this, but I have to say that I have no idea as to how it happened, only that it did."

"Because...you two experienced it?"

"We went into the game simulation, yes."

"And in this simulation you both experienced some sort of physical fight with this female psycho?"

"She kicked my ass up and down the street. Scully took her on quiet handily, however, and it was amazing," Mulder offered up gleefully.

A headache was beginning to form in that old familiar spot, just above her right eye. Scully wanted to groan. The detective simply stared at the pair of them as if he heartily wished neither one of them had ever stepped foot into his city. At this moment, Scully was wishing much the same thing.

"Look, Detective," Scully cut in. "I know this is all strange and hard-to-believe, and frankly it's hard to explain. But if you want our opinion on all of this, I would simply write it up as an industrial accident."

"Accidents happen all the time in workplaces," she countered mildly.

"Besides, Detective, do you really want to waste man hours from your team, man hours that could be used to solve real cases, or just call it what it is, an unforeseen accident at a computer game design studio?" Mulder knew where to hit Lacoeur, and it worked. The other man scowled darkly, gritting his teeth hard enough that Scully thought she could hear enamel cracking. Finally, he nodded his head, relenting.

"If I can't get a straight answer out of the two of you, it's far too crazy for me to try and get my head around. I'll do what you suggest, but if it comes out that FPS has influenced this investigation in any way..."

"Are you accusing to fellow public servants of being on the take?" Mulder sounded nonchalant, but Scully could hear the quiet warning in his voice. The detective could hear it too.

"Nope." He roughly grabbed the file, tucking it under an arm. "I think you two have done all the 'helping' I will need around here. I'll make a note in my report of your work." He didn't sound like it would be a complimentary one. With that, he nodded curtly and rounded on them, heading out of the coffee room and back into the crowded bullpen of detectives in the office. Scully watched him go, holding her breath against the plentitude of things she wanted to say in that moment. Mulder, however, had no such inhibitions.

"I think that man needs to suit up in Kevlar and go get his ya-ya's out."

"I can think of a thing or two he can do with his ya-ya's," Scully muttered as Mulder snickered
beside her. "We hand him the case wrapped up for him and he's pissed."

"Got to admit, it's sort of like getting underwear at Christmas. You unwrap it knowing you are going to hate it, but can't deny you need it."

"I suppose." Scully disgruntled wandered out of the precinct break room and towards the lobby, more than ready to get on the first plane out of Ontario and back to DC. "I'm just glad that the case didn't end up with Phoebe as the primary suspect."

"She had a lot to do with it," Mulder admonished, much to Scully's discomfort.

"She didn't mean to! She was just giving voice to creative frustration, trying to exorcise her anger and dissatisfaction with the male dominated, testosterone bath she is always in."

"I thought that was why you go out and get manicures," he teased. She glared up at him as he held the door open for her.

"Mulder, this is serious."

"And I am taking it seriously, Scully. I get it. I've worked alongside you for seven years, and before that I worked with Diana. I've seen what women have had to go through in the Bureau, the shit they've had to deal with. It isn't easy, and I can't say I blame Phoebe for what she did. How was she supposed to know that her creation would be such a manifestation of her anger and frustration with male aggression in her life?"

"She didn't." Scully sighed sadly as they wandered to their rental car. "She just wanted to make something that was everything she wasn't."

"I don't know," Mulder replied, blinking in the sunshine as he hit the automatic lock on the keychain. "I think Maitreya speaks less to what Phoebe isn't and more to what she is, a smart, capable woman who doesn't put up with men's crap. Sort of like another woman that I know."

Scully couldn't help the slight smile that pulled up her lips. "I've had long years of practice."

"True." He climbed inside their car with her close behind.

"You know," he mused as he started the engine. "For as much as men play these games to enact sexual and violent tendencies of their own, I think that for some women it's a way of living out their fantasies as well. Working off their own ya-ya's."

"In killing men that annoy us?" The thought had crossed Scully's mind more than once with Mulder.

"Well, yes, but more specifically, in facing up to male domination. If you think about it, that's what Maitreya is, a woman who stands up to those efforts by men to push her down, to tell her no, to shut her up and shove her back in the kitchen."

"Could you honestly see Maitreya or her human counterpart in the kitchen?"

"You haven't seen some of the movies I have," he replied suggestively. Scully rolled her eyes. He continued.

"What I'm saying is that Maitreya speaks to the female fantasy as well, that desire to be seen, to be respected, to be heard and not to be told to shut up or back down and there is something to respect in that, even if she did nearly crack my jaw open." He gingerly reached up to his chin, prodding it with his forefinger.
"Poor, Mulder, did you get your ass handed to you by a girl?"

"Yeah, but I can't say I didn't like it." He replied, unperturbed. "That was one hell of a game."

"You still want it for your birthday?"

"Well, you could just come over and kick my ass for my birthday, I think the effect would be just the same."

"Don't tempt me, Mulder," she replied with more than a bit of wicked deviltry at the idea of teasing him so. "I might just give you exactly what you hope for."

Mulder's only response was a long pause, before, "A man can always dream."

Scully only laughed at him as he pulled into traffic.
Wine Country

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder suggests a trip to wine country.

"Do you happen to know of Robert Wieder?" Mulder threw the question at her as she walked into the office, barely allowing her a chance to set her things down.

"The Bay area physician," she replied, frowning across her desk at him. "Why?"

"That's the one, famous I guess for starting programs for helping the homeless and migrant populations of San Francisco."

Scully freed herself from her baggage and wandered to Mulder's cluttered desk. "I'd heard of him when I was in Palo Alto. He was pretty well known, even during my med school days. Why?"

"Any reason people may not like him?"

Scully tried to pry back through her memory to whatever she may have heard regarding Robert Wieder. "Not that I recall, but then medicine can be competitive at times. I know that there were some who thought he was too goody-goody. They thought the humanitarian shtick was an act to get more funding for his hospital."

"Would anyone be jealous enough to try and hurt his reputation, perhaps make a personal threat against him?"

Scully shrugged, shaking her head. "Mulder, I've been out of the medical community for a long time, and even longer from the Bay area medical community. It's a possibility, but honestly, I couldn't tell you if it was. Why?"

"Marin County sheriff's office has put a call in regarding the case, and I'm thinking of taking it."

"California again? We just got back!"

"You grew up out there, Scully. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is, Mulder, we've been out there more times in the last six months than I've been out in the previous ten years."

"It's Marin County, we've not been there before!"

His enthusiasm didn't mollify her. "What's so exciting about it when we have to fly out there to take a look?"

"Marin County? That's where Skywalker Ranch is." He was being deliberately obtuse.

"You know what I mean, Mulder," she muttered, crossing her arms at his impish laugh.

"The case has a certain weirdness to it that the locals think we might be able to help them out with."
"Weirdness?" That was deliberately vague. "Anything more to go on?"

"I'm not sure. The sheriff's office called saying that there was a murder at the home under suspicious circumstances. They think ritualistic materials might have been used. Being that this is San Francisco and all sorts of ex-hippies and alternative lifestyle folks live just across the bridge from there, chances are high it could be anything weird and slightly occultish."

"And you are content with them giving you the description of 'weird' and go running?" She shouldn't be surprised, this was Fox Mulder, yet for whatever reason she was, especially give the total lack of further information on the subject.

"Well, I figure it's been a while since we did San Francisco. You could take me to eat some of those chicken feet again!"

He earned the disappointed sigh he was going for. "It was dim sum, Mulder, and Marin County is not San Francisco."

"No, but close enough. Besides, it's near Napa Valley, maybe we could make a weekend of it." His voice dropped down half an octave, rumbling softly in a way Scully really wished he wouldn't do. "You know, maybe we can find a nice bed and breakfast up there somewhere. Do some wine tours, cut some cheese…"

Scully simply arched a cold eyebrow up at him.

"You have to give me some credit for going a long way for a childish joke." He looked particularly delighted he got it past her.

Scully merely shook her head and wondered why it was she bothered coming in to work in the mornings some days. "I'm shocked it took you that long to come up with it."

"I'm getting slow in my old age," he explained, leaning back. "Still, FBI dime, we could maybe pick up a good cabernet sauvignon or chardonnay while out there, bring back a case for Skinner."

"And you think that will gloss over the recent travel expenditures to California?" Somehow she doubted that. She still wasn't sure how their outrageously ballooning travel budget was getting past FBI channels.

"Well, I find booze goes a long way to oil the gears of bureaucracy and you can't say we don't owe Skinner many, many bottles."

"True, but I hardly think that the FBI would want to justify it."

"Which is why we need to take the case," Mulder reasoned simply.

"Oh, yes, taking the case that is 'weird'." She framed her sarcasm with air quotes, turning to her desk. "Of course, the fact that there is a doctor out there who may be having to deal with a tragic event in his life is secondary."

"I'm not saying it isn't the primary reason for going out there," Mulder defended. "Our primary reason is to go out there and solve a case and find the truth about what happened in this doctor's house."

"To figure out the 'weird'?" Scully replied, admittedly feeling disgruntled with the choice of terms. "Mulder, when did we get to be the 'weird' police?"
"Since you started working on the X-files, Scully, or did you miss that memo?" He frowned at her curiously. "I've called you out on cases with much less explanation than this."

That much was true. She didn't have a good reason for him, only that she had barely had a moment of late to take a breath, and now off they were again, back to California. "I would just hope that there would be something more substantial for us to work on than a strange murder the locals don't think they can get on their own."

"And the allure of dim sum and wine doesn't make you want to traipse through your old stomping grounds?"

"Why do I have a feeling we will be following half-baked leads on subjects that I had no plan on being knowledgeable on when I graduated from Stanford Medical?"

"You know what they say, always keep expanding your horizons," he offered cheerfully.

"Yeah, hadn't expected them to expand this much," she muttered, picking up her things. "So, if we get out there, you're buying dim sum."

"Deal," Mulder agreed, gathering his suit coat and briefcase. "And you're buying the case of wine to pay Skinner off with."

"I so hope he never hears you suggest such a thing," she replied, following him out the office door.
Grave Robber

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder and Scully dig up a grave.

The small, pathetic grave in a no-name cemetery in Oakland was now crawling with police. A fine mist spangled the yellow tape ringing the grave that had once belonged to Jane Doe 6149, otherwise known to her grief stricken father as Lynette Peattie. Scully supervised their work, but knew there was going to be little they found.

"He took the body of his own daughter just to make his back hills magic powerful?"

"Back hills magic is nothing to sneeze at," Mulder murmured beside her as he looked on. "The Appalachian Mountains are full of the descendants of Scots who were fleeing persecution after the Jacobite conflicts and Irish who were fleeing because of their own conflicts with the British crown. Both nations had been nominally Christian for centuries, but the old ways still cling in bits and pockets here and there. Celtic magic, things like poppets, curses, the evil eye, these all have antecedents that go back for centuries in Gaelic culture."

Scully was still trying to wrap her head around the situation at hand, however. "How is this different than say voodoo magic?"

Mulder glanced appreciatively at her. Clearly, he surprised she wasn't trying to talk him out of his suppositions. "The theory is similar, the ideas are different. Voodoo is really combination of spirit worship from West Africa and Catholicism. The worker is doing magic that calls upon the spiritual gods, often convoluted with the saints of the Catholic faith, which in essence isn't that far of a leap, and combines that with charms, curses, et cetera. In this magic here, it is based much more in what we think of as witchcraft in our Western sense, blood magic, earth magic, using physical things to impart spiritual destruction."

"So it's like my Irish aunt throwing salt over her shoulder every time she spilled it."

"Something like that," Mulder replied, smiling faintly. "Problem is here that Peattie isn't just superstitious, he's an angry father out to get his revenge, and he's got his daughter's body now to do it."

That was the part that bothered Scully. "How could one man come out here in the middle of Oakland of all places and make off with a body without anyone knowing about it?"

"It's Oakland, Scully, think that they are going to care what one creepy guy from West Virginia is up to?" Indeed, this wasn't exactly a part of Oakland that cared very much what anyone did, as long as people minded their business and didn't involve them.

"So he dug up Lynette to improve his magic, and now he's killing off the family of a man who did nothing but try to do the best damn job he could as a doctor. " Scully found that she couldn't pull up a lot of sympathy for Peattie at the moment, dead daughter or no. "And now his daughter doesn't have the peace of a final resting place."
"I think the idea was that when he was done, he would take her home to West Virginia."

"After he had taken everything from Weidner? What for? He did his job. He did the job any of us would have done in that situation."

"I'm not saying he was wrong in what he did to Lynette Peattie, Scully, but think of this from Peattie's point of view." Mulder was thoughtful as he considered the other man in this, the grieving father. "All your life you've raised this little girl, she's the light of your life. You've protected her from every outside influence that you could think of, even refused to have her inoculated for fear of outside science and the first time she is out and on her own she gets into a bus accident and dies at the hands of the very medicine you've protected her from all of these years. How would you think he would react to something like that?"

Scully mouth pulled taught as she glared up into the gray, drizzling sky. "I'm not saying I don't understand that, but it doesn't carry weight in a court of law. What he's doing is terrorizing and murdering a family who had nothing to do with this, all to get at a man who thought he was helping a dying young girl."

"Maybe he felt he could have done something, had he been here," Mulder sighed thoughtfully.

"But he wasn't. He was three thousand miles away in West Virginia, and that's the way the world works. We send out children out into the great, wide world, hoping against hope that they will be okay from whatever is out there. That we don't get a phone call in the middle of the night from the military, or the police, or the hospital saying they died at the end of a gun or because of a drunk driver in an intersection."

"And yet, when they do die at the hands of someone else, don't we take them to a court of law to seek our justice?"

"Yes," Scully could see her argument wavering.

"Like you said, Scully, had you been in Weidner's shoes, you'd have made the same call, and likely any other emergency room doctor they had called up as professional witness would have said the same thing. In a triage situation like that, you only have so many supplies. You try to make the lives of the dying as comfortable as possible. So what court of law would convict Weidner of what he did? What would he get? Maybe a slap on the wrist from the California medical board if that? What justice would there be for Lynette Peattie?"

"She wasn't murdered, Mulder!" That was the part that made her very angry with Orlan Peattie at the moment, the part that couldn't understand his blind rage and anger against a good man and his family.

"Try telling that to people who say Jack Kevorkian is a killer. For some people, you keep fighting for life until that last breath is taken, and I think that Peattie feels his daughter's chance at fighting was taken away from her and his chance to help her was taken away from him."

Scully swore lightly under her breath. "It's this sort of 'eye-for-an-eye' thinking that lead to the Hatfields and McCoys."

Mulder didn't deny this, smiling sadly as he nodded in agreement. "Blame your Celtic heritage, Scully, all that clannishness makes you all bad tempered."

"I don't think it's my Irish heritage that makes me bad-tempered," she tossed back, but his teasing did make her feel better. "So now what?"
"I want to call Weidner and get a police detail out to his house, have someone watching the place, maybe even get him a place elsewhere, just to confuse Peattie. Then we hope that Peattie will show up soon and we can catch that son-of-a-bitch."

Scully hoped it was that easy. Since they had gotten on this case, Peattie had been a step ahead and somehow she knew for all of his back hills magic, Peattie wasn't a total idiot. "I hope we catch him too. Weidner has been through enough."
"Pretty impressive work for a blind woman." Mulder stood at Peattie's closed door, staring through the window. "Two shots, clustered together, missed his heart."

"I was able to see by the time I aimed," Scully smirked, still earning an appreciative look from Mulder. "Still, it was kind of good."

"I learned long ago not to mess with you and a gun, Scully." He reached for the doorknob, pulling it gently as he entered into the quiet room. It was dim inside, the only sound coming from the machines next to Peattie's bed. For a man who distrusted modern medicine it at least was serving it's purpose in keeping him alive, like it couldn't his daughter.

"Lynette Peattie's body is on its way back to Indiola, West Virginia." Mulder stood by Peattie's bed and she wondered if that tidbit of information was for her or for the man intubated and unconscious on the bed.

"She's going to her people after all," Scully murmured. It was fitting. The poor girl had been a nobody here, buried as a nameless body in a forgotten cemetery in a bad neighborhood of urban Oakland, far away from her country home. "You know, Mulder, I would've made the same call as a doctor if I was certain that I couldn't save her life and she was in that much pain. I would've done what Weidner did."

Mulder hummed, nodding sadly. "It seems pretty clear cut."

"Except, maybe it's not?" Scully had heard Peattie's words. She knew he thought he could have saved her. And maybe he could have, had he been there with her. If Weidner had been able to find a way after all to keep her alive and pain free till her father could be sent for. But how was Weidner supposed to know that, or Peattie to understand the compassion of Weidner's act?"

"You're wondering if Peattie couldn't have saved her life?"

She glanced up at him and realized in that very Mulder-ish sort of way that he had always had that he had read her thoughts exactly.

She turned on her heel to leave the room then, Mulder muttering something low behind her. She waited for him to follow as she closed the door, glancing back at Peattie sadly.

"I don't know, Mulder, that blindness, it was real enough. I couldn't see." She swallowed hard against the uncomfortable stone of fear that lodged in her throat. She had blinked one minute and her eyesight was gone. It was the most terrifying experience of her life. "I can't explain how he did it with just hair and a picture, but he did, and I felt it."

"And if he's able to do that, do those things to Weidner's family, he might be able to save his daughter from death?"
"Maybe not from death itself, but perhaps he could have found a way to heal her, to make her better in a manner that medicine, with all of its knowledge, could not. I mean, Weidner made the call he did with the best medical knowledge he had available to him at the time."

"Except, now you are questioning if it would be the right one?"

Scully sighed, trying to find the words to explain this to her partner, the man who believed in almost everything. "Mulder, in seven years, I have seen things, crazy things, things I wouldn't have imagined possible before working with you. I myself recovered from a cancer that was killing me with just a chip in my neck."

She had never forgotten the little device, lodged just under the skin.

"I've seen crazier things than magic cure people of disease. I have seen people who should have been dead come back to life and now I've been made blind by a little doll made from sacking, dirt, and my photograph. I've seen things Weidner hasn't been made privy to, and when Peattie says he could have saved his daughter had she been there, I don't know, I have to believe maybe he could have."

If her words were a surprise to herself, the eternal skeptic, they were a revelation to Mulder. He stopped in his tracks to stare at her, eyes wide and brilliant as she turned to face him. There were only a few times in Mulder's life he had ever been rendered speechless, clearly, this was one of them.

"Mulder, come on, it's not that big of a revelation." Her cheeks flamed as he continued to gape at her, making her feel uncomfortable standing in the lobby of the hospital. "I mean, you hang around with Spooky Mulder after a while, you begin to see and believe a few things."

His only response was to wrap an arm around her and hug her tightly. She was startled by the gesture, as it wasn't exactly the one she had been expecting. Perhaps him shouting triumphantly, punching the air or crowing that he had finally won, but not a pleased embraced in the middle of a crowded lobby.

"Errr…Mulder, I think you're squishing me."

He chuckled as he let her go, ducking his head as she stumbled bemusedly backwards. Where those suspicious tears filming the green of his eyes?

"You do keep me guessing, Scully." He shook himself as he shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. "That wasn't something I expected."

It wasn't something that she expected, either, that raw emotion at her response. She blinked as Mulder began to lope towards the exit, trying to keep step behind him as he moved into the all-too-rare sunshine in San Francisco. She tugged at his sleeve, but he didn't stop really, just spun around, glancing at the city around them.

"You all right," she asked quietly, knowing that he wasn't, but not really sure why.

"Fine," he replied, perhaps a shade too quickly and brightly. When she frowned up at him dubiously, he smiled, reassuringly.

"Its just nice, Scully, to know that after all this time, I don't have to be alone anymore."

Was that all? She smiled widely, shaking her head as she wrapped an arm around his. "You never had to be, you idiot. I'm here for the long haul, God help me." She aped a grimace that made him smile.
"Thank you," he replied simply, tightening his arm, pressing hers towards his side. "So, let's go check on Weidner and Lucy and then catch the first flight out of here and back to DC, shall we?"

"Agreed," she replied, falling into step beside him. "But what about that wine for Skinner?"

"We'll get him something from the airport," Mulder replied airily. "Think he's a sauvignon or a chardonnay sort of guy?"

"Scotch," Scully replied, smiling as they made their way to their rental car. She was heartily ready to go home herself. She was glad that Lynette Peattie was going home as well.
The *Goochland Guardian* wasn't exactly the *Washington Post*. Scully frowned at the interloper in front of her apartment door. She had grabbed her paper much earlier in the morning and had perused it while sipping at her first and second cups of coffee, grumbling over the lack of anything useful being done in the city either by its own local government or the larger, federal one which dominated the city's life. Ignoring the political backstabbing and schoolyard politics, she had set the paper aside to prepare for her day, curious as to what sort of strange thing Mulder was going to pull out on her first thing this morning.

She had been a slight bit late getting ready, of course. After months of being in and out of her own home, she had relished the chance to simply stand in her own bath to take a shower, to take just as long as she wanted to munch on her own toast, to get slightly lost watching entertainment news on the goofy, DC morning shows. Still, she had finally gotten herself put together and ready for the day when she found the strange paper laying on her doorstep. Glancing up and down the hallway of her apartment building, no one else seemed to have one. Interesting, the *Goochland Guardian* wasn't a paper she was familiar with, and she picked it up, curious as who had left it there and why. Over the years she had many strange and somewhat nefarious people leave things under her door, but this seemed relatively innocuous enough. It was a paper, just that, from the town of Goochland, Virginia. Scully couldn't say she had heard of it before, but she imagined it was like many other towns just south of DC in Virginia, small, sleepy, where everyone knew everyone else. Perhaps that's why the front headline screamed so loudly from the newsprint in her fingers, stating in bold, black letters, "Miracle Ends Controversy." Even more intriguing was the note that was taped to the top of it, reading "You are the God who performs miracles. You display your power among the peoples. Psalm 77:14".

Scully peeled off the note as she closed her door, considering it. Why that verse? And who would know to use it on her? She glanced at the unfamiliar handwriting. It wasn't Mulder's, and even if it was, he'd have knocked wanting to discuss it. So who? Someone who thought she might appreciate the message? Maybe a religious fanatic, simply targeting her out for reasons she didn't understand?

Confused, she scanned through the front page of the article quickly, opening the paper to continue reading where it left off. A boy, Jason McPeck of Goochland, had been diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. It could be a death sentence for near anyone, but for an eleven-year-old whose deeply religious parents did not believe in medical aid to prolong life, he was doomed to a long and painful death. It had sparked a firestorm of controversy in the small community outside of Richmond and protests had been raging outside of the family's home from both those who sought to protect the family's right to choose their son's course of treatment and those who said that the McPeck's were in effect murdering their son. The matter seemed to take care of itself, however, when one night the boy was woken from a deep sleep to four angelic beings coming into his room, at least that was what the boy claimed. His parents, across the hall, saw nothing. All Jason recalled was a bright flash of light, the four figures, and someone assuring him that all would be well, that his faith had saved him. When his parents heard Jason's amazing tale the next morning, they had the boy checked out to see if there prayers had been answered. To their shock and surprise the cancer that had been killing their little
boy was now in complete remission. The family attributed it to God, and the medical community was flummoxed. The article now left open the question, was it faith or fluke that had cured this boy from his death sentence?

Whatever it was, it hit far too close to home for Scully as she set down the paper. Her skin itched as she reached up to rub at her neck, the old scar still there, the nub of flesh that had just healed over the chip she knew was underneath it. In all these years since her own experience, she hadn't touched it, hadn't wanted to, fearful of what it might mean. She too had been dying once, lying in a hospital with an inoperable form of cancer, and just as miraculously she had been cured of her illness, not by angels or by prayer, but by a science she little understood. Now, all these years later, she still didn't care to understand it. She was healthy enough. The men who had kidnapped her, who had taken away her health and her ability to have children, were now either dead or their programs destroyed. Whatever games they were playing were over. She didn't think they had anything to do with this boy in Goochland.

Did they?

She set down the paper, frowning out of the window, unsettled as to what all of this meant. She was a woman of faith. She had seen enough strange things and experienced enough religious moments that she couldn't explain. For all of her own crises of faith, she felt in her soul that it was possible that what this boy thought happened was true. Perhaps angels really did come down that night and grant the answer to his parents' prayers, but as much as Scully wanted to believe that, something told her that this could be more than just a simple matter of faith, and she knew of at least one survivor of that night in El Rico still wandering in the world, a haze of cigarette smoke trailing him wherever he went.

She stood, grabbing her things, along with the newspaper, and headed towards the door. She if Mulder had heard of this yet. If not, should she even bring it to his attention? Much more curiously, who was it that brought it to her and left the scriptural note written on the front of it and why did they want her to see it?
Running With The Devil

Chapter Summary

In which Scully decides to pay the devil a visit.

The card was printed on good paper stock. It wasn't cheaply made to hand out casually. Still, with the flippancy it was left on her car seat, Scully would have wondered. It had no name on it, only a phone number. She frowned at the numbers. They could be anywhere in the city and she wasn't willing to speak to him on a line that could be traced. Hell, she wasn't sure she was willing to speak to him at all. From the moment she had stepped onto the X-files, this man, Spender, whatever he called himself, had been there. He had been the silent, smoking presence in the room, with his piercing, gimlet eyes and rational reasons for everything. He had stood in Scott Blevin's office that first day, watching her with thoughtful impassivity. Had he know then she would not only take the assignment but stay with it? Had he planned for that? Had all of this been some sort of great game to him? Scully had to wonder.

The amount of information she actually had on the man was next to nothing. Short of some rambling story that Frohike had fed her and Mulder years ago, what little she did know was hazy at best. Supposedly his name was Spender, though she had not been ever able to trace down what his initials meant. She had searched and found no record of that name being used before his marriage to Cassandra in the mid-60's. He had been a friend with Bill Mulder, and that they had worked together with a consortium of men on some project that was somehow manipulating alien technologies and biology, and that they were playing around with a virus called "Purity". He had some sort of power in that group and had been willing to sacrifice his own wife to the program's goals. She knew that he must not have loved Cassandra very much, for not only did he allow her to be subject to the same tests that other abductees faced, he had allowed her to become their ultimate end goal, a hybrid. He had an affair with Teena Mulder, whom he seemed to care for more. She knew that the three products of those relationships, Fox, Samantha, and Jeffrey were nothing more to him than pawns in his greater games. One was dead, one was missing, and the other had been his puppet and plaything for years. In sum, all she understood about Spender was that he was a hard, cruel, calculating bastard, who cared nothing for blood relationship or affection and saw people as pieces to a greater end game.

Now he wanted to convince her that he was some great humanitarian?

Scully snorted to the empty office, highly doubting that. She sat alone behind her desk, Mulder having left hours before. For once she was by herself with the X-files, staring at the card left on her car seat as if it were a live thing. How many times had Spender approached Mulder this way, offered him the key to all manner of secret knowledge? How many times had he turned him down? Scully understood how Eve felt in this moment, being offered the tree of knowledge, the possibility of knowing and understanding. Would she bite this fruit or not?

Before she could think better on it, she picked up the phone, dialing the main desk. "Yes, I need a trace on a DC area phone number. I need an address."

She rattled the number off to the woman at the other end who promised to call her back with the information in a moment. She hung up, biting her bottom lip, worrying what she had just done. She
was attempting to find the lion's den and step right into it, to see what she could see. And why not? Had Mulder dared to do that yet? She had no idea, but she did know that out there was a boy who had been dying till days ago. He had been healed by the same, mysterious technology that was in her body right at that moment, the same technology that had saved her, and she didn't understand a thing about it. She didn't understand a thing about anything. Seven years on a magical, mystery tour that this man had placed her on and she still didn't understand why or for what purpose. Scully wasn't fool enough to believe that he would give her every single one of her answers, but after all she had been through and everything she had lost, she felt he damn well deserved to give her at least one of them.

The phone rang back. Scully jumped in her own skin as she reached trembling fingers for the receiver. "This is Scully."

"Agent Scully, the address is in Dupont Circle, off of Massachusetts." She rattled off an address that Scully frantically tried to remember as she scrambled for a pen and piece of paper.

"Thank you!" She hung up, staring at the paper and the card. If she did this by herself, there was no telling where it could lead. She had yet to know of Spender ever playing straight with her. For all she knew he could fill her full of crap about these devices, tell her that they are the great savior of civilization, then leave her with nothing at the end of all this, only to come to find out it was merely a way to wind Mulder up. He had been known to pull similar stunts before. A part of her desperately wanted to ignore Spender's edict and call Mulder, but she had no doubt that if she did that he would rescind his offer as he promised and she would never know the truth about the chip in her neck, what was done to her, or what he even wanted. Even Mulder at his most stealthy would likely get caught. It was best not to say anything, not to chance or risk it. She doubted he would even go along with this. Besides, if she did approach Spender, if she did find out something useful, Mulder would be the only person she could trust with this information and the only person she could think of who deserved it.

Besides, she reasoned to that part of her conscience that wasn't liking any of this one bit, Mulder had found his truth. He had learned about the fate of Samantha. It was time for Scully to learn hers, to find out what it was that was inside of her, what had been done to her, and why it was so many people, including her own sister, had to die for it. She needed her truth as well to move on, she needed to find her own end and perhaps confronting Spender was the only option she had left open to her now.

She reached for her keys, grabbed her things, and made her way out of the office, locking it up for the night. She didn't bother to look back as she did it. She was on her own on this one. And she really hoped to hell she knew what she was doing.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully is on a road trip.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She had no idea where they were going or when they were stopping, but like hell was she going to let the man drive the Bureau car. Scully watched as he began to pull a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket.

"There's no smoking in my car, please." She shot him a sharp gaze and a tight smile. He paused in the act of tapping the unopened pack on his palm, frowned, but then nodded, putting them away.

"As you wish," he replied simply, nodding towards the miles of open road in the darkness. "We will be on here for a while. You've had a long day, are you sure you can drive?"

"You are the one who says he's dying," she shot back. Something akin to respect flitted across his weathered face.

"I will concede the point, then." He fell silent beside her. An hour into this car ride with Satan and she was already antsy and anxious. She had no idea where they were going or how long it would take. Worse yet, she had lied to Mulder, deliberately so. That rankled hard, gnawing at her gut as she squirmed, the wire to the microphone she had hidden itching against her breast.

"So, I have to ask you something." She began it as a way to break the eerie silence of the road, the sound of the air passing the car in the night. Also, if she admitted it to herself, she was curious. If she was going to be in a car with this man for who knows how long, she might as well try to make it somewhat pleasant.

"If I feel I can answer it, I will." He replied, cagily as ever. Scully frowned at the road ahead, wondering where to start.

"Spender? Is that your real name?"

She clearly caught him by surprise. He coughed a chuckle, smiling faintly in the dark. "So you've ferreted that out?"

"Wasn't hard." She shrugged. "Is it your name?"

"I've been called that by many."

"You aren't answering my question."

"I did say if I feel I could answer it, I would."

"You don't feel you can give me a straight yes or no on your name?" She was nearly shouting now, already frustrated with his double-speak. "If you are going to play this game with me, this trip will
end pretty fast. You were the one coming to me about honesty, or was that all just more lies and bullshit from you?"

He was silent beside her, watching her with an undecipherable gaze for the longest of moments. What he was thinking, she couldn't say. She never had been able to read this man. It was part of what unnerved her about him.

He finally spoke, his smoker's voice gravely as it rumbled out. "No, it's not."

Well, that was one questioned answered. "And the CGB?"

"Parts of my real name, yes." He didn't look as if he planed to clarify and Scully wasn't going to ask.

"And Jeffrey, he's your son?"

"Yes," he replied simply. No further statement than that.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No," he replied, as calmly as he had the question before. Perhaps he had ice water running through his veins.

"I was just curious. I know that after the incident at El Rico, he was shot in the X-files office. He was taken to the hospital, but no one has seen him since. He disappeared. I wondered if perhaps you knew where he got off to."

"Jeffrey and I haven't exactly been on speaking terms for a great majority of his life." He threw it out there as if he were talking about the weather or a particularly interesting bit of the nightly news. "It is unfortunate, a man should know his son better, but I wasn't exactly the best of husbands to his mother or the best of fathers to him. I suppose these things happen in a life such as I've led."

The best of fathers to Jeffrey, he hadn't exactly been a father to Mulder either. Perhaps that was just simple one thing on the list of many sins that he had wish to atone for. Something told Scully that it was best not to push him on that particular subject, however, and she let it slide without comment.

"So you've said your entire life you've been a destroyer? Why?" She had to ask, though she was afraid to. She was almost worried to know what he had destroyed. How many of Frohike's stories were true?

"Why did you become an FBI agent?"

"I wasn't asking about me," she snapped.

"No, but the answer isn't so different. I wanted to change the world, to do something powerful in it. You joined the FBI in order to make a positive difference."

"And you hoped to change the world by joining a conspiracy full of secrets and lies that ruined people's lives and changed them forever?"

He sighed at her outburst, perhaps expecting it. "You of course would react that way, Agent Scully, it's understandable. After all, it's the only side of all of this you have seen.

"Is there a different side?"

"That's what I'm trying to show you on this trip."
Her lips pursed and thinned as she glared at the road ahead of her. "So this is all your effort to be a humanitarian?"

"Yes and no."

"Can you give me a straight answer, for the love of God?"

Perhaps this was all just part of his game, throwing her off balance by dancing around the truth. He didn't seem to think it was a game, though. His fingers twitched, as if searching for a cigarette he didn't have. Finally, he curled them into his trousers.

"I was asked to be what I ultimately became. They needed someone to do the work that they were unwilling to do; the heavy, the gopher, the man that could get his hands dirty because there were no consequences for him. I was the man who made the hard decisions no one else could, all in the name of protecting humanity. And my hope, the one saving grace afforded to me in all of this, was that at the end of the day, for all the lives I had taken and all the blood on my hands, something good would come of all of this, that everything we were doing, everything that we were sacrificing for was for the greater purpose of human kind, that in the end it would save us."

"So it is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong is what you are trying to tell me?" It was the sort of justification she had expected out of him, the kind he had been giving for years.

"You don't believe in the nobility of a cause like that?" He was testing her. She scowled.

"Is that what you told yourself when Samantha Mulder disappeared?"

She surprised him. Scully knew she would. She doubted that he would have considered that they might have discovered the truth. But his shock was momentary at best, smoothly covered over as he shrugged beside her.

"So Mulder has discovered the truth about that."

"He knows his sister isn't here anymore, yes. You would have kept it from him."

"I felt it was for the best. It was what his mother wanted."

There was always some noble reason, wasn't there? "Was what Samantha endured, what your wife endured, worth the cost?"

He was silent for a very long time beside her. When he spoke, he sounded uncharacteristically sad.

"One day, Agent Scully, you might be faced with such a choice yourself, the choice between the many and the few. It's a hard place to be. I hope that when you are in that situation, deciding between the fate of the world and those you hold dearest, you choose more wisely than I did."

He sounded so sincere she wanted to believe him.

"Is that why you are doing this now? Because you couldn't save them?"

"Perhaps." Again, he was noncommittal. "It would be a travesty not to, don't you think, after giving up so much? For all that others have suffered because of me, shouldn't I use what we've gained from that to do some sort of good? If not, what good did their sacrifice serve?"

Scully found she didn't have anything to say to that.
"At the next interstate you will want to go south," he directed mildly. She bit her cheek tightly and nodded. She would go where he wanted, she would see what he had to see, and she would record it as best as she could for Mulder, and then she would go home and hope whatever she discovered was worth this.

Chapter End Notes

At one point Scully is paraphrasing Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher, regarding the nature of the needs of the many against the needs of the few. It was a lot less cheesy than quoting Spock.
The Choice Is Still Yours

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is given a choice.

The sunshine filtering into her room caused her to blink awake.

Confusion set in almost immediately. The rustic setting was not the familiar comfortableness of home. The soft bed she curled in, the pillow she rested again were not her own, it smelled stale and unused. She sat up, trying to recall where she was. A case? Somewhere with Mulder?

She rose, stumbling out of the bed, towards the closet on the far side. Inside was her bag. The one she had packed…was it yesterday morning? No, night, she had left with Spender at night. Spender! Remembering, she stared down at her clothing, immediately reaching for her bra underneath the silken pajamas she had on. The bra was still firmly in place. So was the wire.

At least he had been a gentleman about that.

That didn’t stop the anger that rose immediately as her sleep-addled mind tried to fit everything into place. She had left with Spender, he had promised to show her the truth, to take her to someone who could give her the answers. They had driven all night. She had met a woman he claimed was 118-years-old. She stopped at a gas station with him. He had taken over the wheel then. She slipped into the passengers seat, and she remembered nothing.

How could she remember nothing?

Panic filled her mouth with a sour taste as she tried to think. Had there been something he'd slipped her? They had eaten at Marjory Butters, sandwiches on fresh bread, iced tea, and homemade cookies. Scully had barely eaten a mouthful, but Spender had eaten heartily, chatting with Marjory. She highly doubted that he could have done something then, Marjory would have seen, if not Scully. Later, they had stopped. He'd offered her a breath mint. She hadn't taken one…had she? She didn't remember taking one. But it was shortly after that her memories started to blur and fade.

There had to be something, she reasoned. After all, she didn't recall being brought to her room or taking off her clothes to slip into her pajamas. A cold thought slinked its way down her spine as she considered the possibility of just how she got into the room and into her pajamas. She turned, wide-eyed, to stare at the closed door.

Without a second thought she ripped off her satin clothing and pulled on the first items in her bag she could find. She jammed her dirty things from the day before and her pajamas into the bag without bothering to fold them and zipped it tight. She was out of the door, bag in hand, too angry to even notice the delicious scent of good coffee wafting through the air.

Spender was at a table, pouring a cup from an ornate, silver coffee service. He smiled when he saw her, holding up the cup. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Unadulterated, thank you," she snapped, stalking across the room to grab it from his hands. Without even trying it she moved to the window and tossed it out.
"You drugged me," she accused, meeting his bemused surprise with angry scorn.

"I did nothing of the sort," he laughed, mocking her.

"How the hell did I get out of my clothes and into bed?"

"I carried you," he said simply. "You'd been up for over thirty hours. You were delirious. I only wanted to make you comfortable."

He shrugged as if it were normal for someone like him to carry in younger women and undress them, as if she were his granddaughter simply being tucked into bed for the night. She tried not to shiver as he sipped his coffee so nonchalantly, tried not to think of the idea of him stripping her and putting her to bed.

"Where are we," she demanded, her words accusing.

"Milford, Pennsylvania."

She didn't even know where the hell that was. "Well, that wasn't part of the deal. I don't know what you are up to." The deal had been that he would take her to meet someone who would show her the truth, who would tell her what this was all about, not for him to bring her to his cabin in the woods and undress her against her will. Already she was playing a dangerous game with him, and she wasn't about to allow him any further advantage. She turned on her heels, intent to walk out of the door and drive back to DC and pretend that none of this ever happened.

She didn't get far. He followed her to the deck. She half-expected him to talk her out of it, like Mulder would, but instead called, half in disappointment. "The keys are in the ignition. You're free to go, of course. The choice is still yours."

She paused then. Just like Mulder, Spender knew what to say to get her. It must be genetic. She turned, glaring at him as he stood, expectantly. He knew what she wanted. She wanted answers, she wanted the truth, and he knew that if she walked away now any such hope that she might have at obtaining any of that would be lost.

With leaden feet she turned back to the house. Like a sulking child she dragged to the house, stopping when she got to where he stood. "What is it you want to show me? No more games."

His smile was open. "No more games. Now, come in and have breakfast, and we will discuss like two adults."

Adults? She bit back a retort and followed him into the house. She set down her bag again by the door, at least agreeing in principle to stay. He seemed pleased by this.

"Do you like the cabin?"

It wasn't the tangent that Scully hoped they would be taking, but she decided to humor him as he bustled back towards the kitchen table. "It's lovely," she replied flatly. "Is it yours?"

"One of my properties. It's where I come to get away from things."

She wanted to make a comment about the great many things he felt he needed to get away from, but chose to be diplomatic. She instead studied the cabin carefully. It was rustic in that way that vacation cabins were, with wood-log walls and paneling over everything. It spoke of manly get aways for the well-to-do, the sort of place where gentleman who planned world domination might come to smoke, drink, and fish without the women folk around to hear them talk about aliens and genetic
"Did you ever bring Bill Mulder up here," she asked, more on a whim. It seemed like the sort of place he might have.

"Once or twice," Spender replied. "He liked it, said he should bring Fox over sometime."

Scully refused to think on just how awkward that would have been.

"May I make you a cup of coffee after all?"

She turned to glance at him, thinking just how incongruous he looked, dressed in flannel, standing in the middle of a nicely appointed vacation cabin. "Two creams, one sugar."

He dutifully poured, preparing her coffee just how she wanted. She took the offered cup on its saucer, this time not pouring it out but savoring the rich taste. She nearly groaned. How long had she gone without the elixir of life? It occurred to her then that she had been up for quite some time before she blacked out. Over thirty hours…she had probably been pushing forty-eight, a feat she hadn't tried really since her rotations in medical school, not including her whirlwind trip to Africa just the fall before. Again, something else Spender had been involved in.

"We have all sorts of breakfast items." Spender was busy, playing host. "Cereal, fruit, toast, bagel…"

"Toast, please. Maybe fruit." She snagged a little of each from a tray sitting on the table, taking a proffered plate from him. She watched carefully as he helped himself to a bagel.

"Last fall," she began, without preamble. "Mulder was sick. Your people took him and did something to his brain. What?"

Spender didn't even flinch as he spread cream cheese neatly over the sliced halves of bagel. "Mulder was suffering from a unique condition, brought on by his exposure to a virus, one I think you've run across in your work?"

"Purity?"

"The same." He paused to bite from his food, chewing thoughtfully before answering more fully. "The technology we used to save your life and to extend Marjory's is the same technology we used to save Mulder's."

"What is it?" That was her whole point in this exercise. He sipped from his coffee and regarded her.

"Are you really ready to hear the truth about this?"

She swallowed against her temper, pushing it hard inside of her. "Would I be here if I didn't?"

He merely shrugged, biting from his bagel again before continuing. "There is a man. He has been working on projects for us for years. He's highly reclusive. His identity getting out would endanger so much of our work. But he's agreed to a meeting between you and him, to discuss this technology with you."

Scully didn't miss a beat. "Why me?"

"Because I've spoken to him about you!" He said that as if it were obvious.

"That's nice, but why me?"
Spender sighed, looking regretful. "Because I tried to share it with Mulder and he wouldn't listen."

"And I would?"

"Because you are a woman of science."

"And somehow that makes me more qualified for this?"

Spender smiled slowly. "That's a very good question. And the truth is, it doesn't, but you have something that Mulder does not have. Mulder simply wants his truth. You want answers, real ones."

"And this contact is willing to share them with me? Why?"

"Because he has to share them with someone."

"His answers? Why doesn't he come out and say it?"

"Like I said, his identity being known would endanger so much of our work."

Scully didn't buy it, but she knew he wasn't going to give her a straight answer no matter how much she raised hell over it. "So he wants to share his medical secrets with me? With no one else?"

Spender hardly seemed bothered by her skepticism. "Do you know the story of Robert Goddard?"

Of course she did! What school child didn't? "He was the man who invented rocket flight."

"Precisely. Goddard had written an article, a small, scholarly work regarding fuel-powered rockets that the New York Times panned. Angry that someone scoffed at his work, he quietly went into his garden to prove them wrong. So he built a rocket using fuel, and it worked. It got height, acceleration, and scared the hell out of his neighbors in his Massachusetts's hometown when it landed over a hundred miles away in a cabbage patch. So, he moved his operations from his hometown to Roswell, New Mexico. He created rocket after rocket. And his work was noticed. He was flattered when German scientists and enthusiasts called him, curious about his work. He openly shared his secrets with them, thinking nothing of it, until war came, and it was only then that Goddard considered why those Germans were asking him about his funny little rockets in the desert. He warned Roosevelt, but he never took him seriously, and in the end, thousands died as Germans unleashed rockets onto their enemies, particularly in Britain."

Scully's mouth thinned at his little morality tale. "So he's afraid that if he shares it with anyone else, that it will be used for great evil?"

"Imagine if I gave this to Mulder, Dana." He leaned in across the table. "You know how he is. There would be investigations, he would drag it in front of the FBI, the CIA, Senate sub-committees, and whichever academic or research scientist he could get his hands on. The truth would be out there, and he would shout it to the skies for any and all to hear, even those who don't deserve to hear it. He doesn't care about answers. He cares about the truth."

"And you think I don't?"

Spender merely smiled, slowly, as he leaned back. "I think you care much more about results, about justice. You want to know that everything happens for a purpose, and that the suffering we endure now is for the better. Am I wrong in that assessment?"

He wasn't. She glared darkly at the china cup of coffee.
"So this person, he wants to give me the answers that he isn't willing to give Mulder?"

"He wants the truth to be known, to share it with someone else who would appreciate it."

Scully worked this over in her mind. The entire story was about as plausible as tissue paper, and yet she had no reason to call it an outright lie. All she had was her suspicion regarding Sender and his motives. And even then, he could have done so many worse things to her by now. After all, she had been asleep for who knew how long before they stopped, and he hadn't left her abandoned, done anything nefarious, or taken advantage of her trust.

"So when do I meet him?"

Spender shot her a brief, tight smile, pleased that she agreed. "He will be meeting with us tonight. I expect to hear from him sometime today with the details. Till then, feel free to relax, enjoy yourself." He glanced around the cabin. "It has nice amenities here. The lake is lovely. Perhaps a bit of fishing?"

"I think I will go to my room. Yesterday was obviously long." She didn't want to have to be in Spender's presence any more than was necessary.

"Of course," he replied, hardly put out by the firm distance she put between herself and him. "I'll let you know when he's made contact?"

"Thank you," she murmured, finishing her coffee, pushing aside her uneaten toast and fruit. Without a word, she stood from the table and grabbed her bag, returning quietly to her room.

Once the door was shut, she reached inside of her shirt, feeling for the wire there. The tape was off. She rewound the cassette to its starting point, and then turned it on to record. Carefully she pulled the microphone up to her mouth, staring at the door nervously.

"Mulder, when you get this, I hope you know what I'm doing. Right now, at the moment, I don't think I am so sure."
In which Scully has dinner.

Of all the many scenarios Scully had envisioned for a nice dinner out, in a lovely dress, with a considerate gentleman, she had never imagined Spender being the one sitting across the table from her. The restaurant was lovely enough, the ambiance excellent, the wine was amazing, and judging from the food at the other tables, that looked to be of the highest order. Little of it registered with Scully as she considered why they were there. This wasn't romance, it wasn't even business really. It was her worst enemy was promising her the key to everything, and she was willing to believe him.

"How is your food?" Spender glanced at her mostly uneaten plate, local trout, prepared in a way that Scully was sure was lovely. She had barely eaten a bite.

"It's, delicious," she lied, picking at the white meat and roasted vegetables nearby before setting down her fork. "Yours?" He had ordered something with seafood in it but honestly hadn't been paying attention.

"Wonderful. This restaurant is a favorite of mine. I'm glad you enjoy it."

Scully smiled tightly. There was no word on this so-called "Cobra" or when he would arrive. She tried not to glance at the watch on her wrist.

"Patience, Dana, we haven't even gotten to dessert yet." He read her mind. Scully didn't like that.

"This seems all a bit cloak-and-dagger, don't you think? Meeting at a restaurant, secret message, a stranger offering to give us the secrets of the universe?"

"Welcome to my world!" He chuckled, laying down his fork. "Cloak and dagger seems to be the only way I know how to operate."

"I hadn't noticed," she replied dryly, picking up her wine glass.

He watched her,thoughtfully, considering. "You don't like secrets very much, do you?"

She would have thought that much was obvious. "No."

"It's part of why you became a scientist, you don't like not knowing."

His character study was beginning to annoy her. "Did you get into the secrets game because you like hiding things from others?"

He didn't seem upset with her barb. "It was necessity. In the end, I really simply got into it because I wanted to do good. That was all I ever wanted."

Scully tried to resist the urge to snort dubiously at him.

"It was all we ever wanted, all of us, Bill Mulder included." He said it so sincerely if she had been
anyone else she might have believed him.

"Pardon me if from this side of the table I find that hard to believe."

"I can't blame you," he replied. She thought she detected a hint of regret from him as he said it.

"Really?" She tried to ignore the flash of irritation that swelled within her. How dare he look as if he were sorry for anything? "And why is that?"

"Well, with what you've been through, everything I've put you through, I wouldn't believe a word that came out of my mouth either."

That hadn't been the response she had expected.

"Really?" She choked on the word, clearing her throat. What was she supposed to say? Was she supposed to ignore it? Perhaps leave it lying there in the middle of the table, the elephant that stood in the room between them? Scully hadn't wanted to discuss it, hadn't wanted to confront it. She simply wanted to do this, to get it over with, to get the information and move on, but now, Spender opened the can and let every dark, hurting feeling out to squirm in her middle, turning her stomach to lead.

Only one word burst out of the confusion. "Why?"

Spender sighed, deeply, cocking his head slowly as he studied his wine glass with deliberate thought. "Mulder had to be slowed down. He was getting too close to truths he wasn't ready to handle."

The words were a cold slap even if they were expected. They abraded Scully as she bit hard against the anger that rose furiously within her. "So I was a pawn, a tool, something to throw at him. Look, Mulder, see the shiny, go after it!" The image of a dog with a chew toy came to mind and she didn't like the association.

"You were more than that. I wouldn't have recommended you to Blevins if I thought less of you."

That stunned her. "You chose me to work with Mulder."

"Yes," he replied calmly. "I felt your unique gift of scientific inquiry would slow him down, perhaps even stop him. I wasn't prepared for you to actually be a benefit to his work."

"Clearly," she snapped, unsure what to make of this latest revelation. "Is this why you had me kidnapped then?"

"Amongst…several reasons, yes."

Did she detect a hint of regret from him as he said that? "You had me taken?"

"It was a joint decision," he replied simply. "You were meant to be a detriment to Mulder, not an asset. The hope was that your removal would break him."

"Break him," she echoed faintly, something catching in her throat. "My life…my body, everything I wanted in this world, and you just tossed it away to simply destroy one man?"

"A man who threatened everything we were working for. The needs of the many and the few, Dana, remember that. We were facing a potential threat that could have killed millions and we needed secrecy to do what needed doing, and Mulder's persistence put that all in jeopardy."

"So that's how you justify what was done to me?" Her voice was sharp and high, cutting through the quiet of the restaurant as several turned to stare. She turned bright eyes downward, trying to cool the
flush on her cheeks, to breath and gain control of herself again.

"Do you even think once about what you have done to me," she whispered harshly, the words spitting out as she studied the smooth silverware. "I came back nearly dead. I have no memory of what was done to me, save snatches of half-remembered pain and your wife holding my hand as I cried. My life was taken away from me. You stuck that chip in my neck and left me to fend for myself. You gave me cancer! You took away my ability to have children, using my own ova to create a child that should never have existed, just for your sick experiments. And as if what you've done to me wasn't enough, my family has had to suffer. My mother has had to bury one daughter at your hands, she's nearly had to bury two."

Tears shimmered as she blinked up at him. "Tell me you didn't have a part in my sister's death?"

He was grave as he met her gaze evenly. "I can't and I won't. I will say I never meant for her to die."

That was small comfort to Scully.

"For what it is worth, Dana, I am sorry." He heaved an apologetic sigh, looking for the first time since she met him truly regretful. "For your sister and your illness…and the children. Perhaps, in my single mindedness, it never occurred to me that a career woman such as yourself would have cared so much."

"Cared?" She stared at him in disbelief. "It was my choice, I should have been able to decide, but that was even taken away from me."

"I see that." Remorse seemed to make him look smaller. "And that was callous of me. You are a caring and nurturing person, Dana. I think you would have made a good mother."

His regret and the sentiment cooled her anger somewhat, if only just. "You never know that you want something till it's taken away from you, and now I will never get the chance to know if I would have been a good mother or not."

"I am not a totally uncaring monster, Dana. I didn't do this because I had a vendetta against you personally."

"That's hard to hear from this side of the table," she reiterated quietly.

Spender bowed his gray head, acknowledging that. "It is true. The decisions I made, while not fair to you, were never personal. As a matter of fact, I've always had the utmost respect for you. I found you intelligent, caring, loyal, all the things that made Fox Mulder a better person. You are…a fantastic woman, Dana. You remind me in a lot of ways of someone else I cared for a very long time ago."

Scully didn't have to ask to know whom he was speaking of. She thought of Teena and the broken woman she had become. She had been the victim of those same, pragmatic choices herself. But for all of those hard decisions, perhaps, in some tiny corner of Spender's cold, black heart, he had loved Teena after all.

He continued. "It was why I had you returned to Mulder all those years ago."

She had never heard that part of the story. "You had me returned?"

"Yes," he replied, picking nervously at the napkin on his lap. "I had you brought back to Mulder. I was the one who asked them to put a chip in your neck when they let you go."
Her neck itched, but she refused to rub the skin. "Why?"

"Because I knew one thing that Fox Mulder didn't."

"And what was that," she queried, curious.

"I knew that Mulder was in love with you."

It wasn't the first time she had heard that statement. Her brother had said as much, even Diana Fowley had as well, but Spender saying it, of all the people in the world, gave her pause. She stared at him, processing the words as it occurred to her just how long ago that was.

"But…that was…five years ago?" She shook her head, frowning at him in lost confusion.

"You've never caught on to how Mulder feels about you?" This seemed to genuinely surprise him, or amuse him, she wasn't sure.

"He's my friend, yes." She was blathering and she knew it.

"Would a friend break himself utterly searching for you," he challenged calmly.

"That was because my disappearance reminded him of his sister."

"Yes, but how about your cancer? He nearly sold his soul to get that chip in your neck."

"He felt responsible," she began, but he cut her off with a shake of his head.

"He was the one that saved you from Antarctica. I know."

Somehow, Scully had no doubt in her mind that he did.

"Dana, he's loved you practically from the moment you stepped into his office. Perhaps not consciously, certainly not openly, but you are the single most important thing in his entire bleak life."

Others had said it, but she hadn't believed it. Why was he so convincing?

"You planned for that? Didn't you?"

He didn't deny it. In fact, he looked pleased that she had deduced that.

"Mulder is one of the most brilliant men I know, and he's one of the most broken. Give him something good and pure in his life and he will cling to it like a drowning man. You, Dana, have just been too terrified to see it."

Scully couldn't decide if she was disgusted with his blatant manipulation or thrilled with the acceptance of something that she had feared to acknowledge for so many long years. "Why are you telling me this?"

Spender pretended to consider for long moments. "Because you know what I told you is true. You are afraid of Mulder. Your afraid of any man with power. You are devoted to him utterly, but refuse to take that next step, choosing to be alone rather than take a chance at what is right in front of you."

"So what if I do," she cut in, dismayed at how easily he read the situation and disgruntled at how close he was hitting. "That is my decision."

"It is." He didn't deny this. He instead met her anger steadily. "But take it from a man who is facing
death, realizing the total sum of his life has been filled with nothing but destruction, staring at his
own mortality alone. When you have the love of someone, Dana, take it. Don't turn your back on it.
In the end, it may be the one thing that saves you from the madness."

Words of wisdom from the one man in all the universe that Scully hated. She tried to wrap her mind
around it and couldn't. Why this? Why now? Why did he want to show her this sort of concern? Out
of a dying wish? Out of a non-existent father's guilt to a son who never knew him? Out of his own
blame for the part he had played in her life? Or was this all some sort of lie as well, some clever
game he was playing that only he understood, and just what was he up to by all of this?

The possibilities had her grasping for her drinking glass, even as the waiter politely wandered over to
check on their meal.

"I think we are done," Spender replied. "Could you perhaps send over dessert? Cheesecake?" He
 glanced at Scully for a confirmation. She nodded, to frazzled to say no. She had no intention of
eating any of it.

When the waiter left, glanced with growing worry at his watch. "There's no sign of our friend yet, I
see." He shot a look around the room.

"If you excuse me, I need to step out." He apologetically patted the package of cigarettes she knew
were in his suit pocket. She said nothing as he rose and wandered out of the dining area.

She took the opportunity to down the last of her glass, letting the light, crisp liquid cut through the
dryness of her mouth. She didn't trust him and she didn't trust this. She certainly didn't believe one
crocodile tear that he shed to her. But she knew that Spender knew truths, certainly he knew her and
he knew Mulder. Why would he tell her what he did? To what purpose? And was it really as
magnanimous as he tried to tell her it was? If not, why play that game of all games with her?

"Madam," the waiter returned, a piece of cheesecake placed before her. She glanced at it, but didn't
touch it. She didn't think she could. Whoever this Cobra is, he obviously wasn't appearing tonight.
Something had spooked him. Perhaps the conversation between herself and Spender? Whatever it
was, all she wanted to do now was go home. She suddenly didn't care about him or any of his so-
called truths.

Perhaps this was a bad idea after all.
Scully had never seen Mulder so angry with her in all of their long partnership together. She had seen him angry enough to kill before, but that anger was never at her, annoyed to the point of shouting, or screaming, or sulking even, yes, but never like this. It was never to the point of the utter silence, the icy thick, frozen wall that sat between them as she perched on the edge of his couch, nor had it ever become the careful avoidance of hazel-green eyes, so pinpoint hard in an expression, dark and unmoving. That he would be angry with her, she had no doubt, but this? Hadn't he understood what she was doing? After all of the times he had run off, half-cocked, on schemes of his own, how could he possibly be this angry with her?

The boys all gathered around Mulder's computer, the keyboard clacking as the hard drive whirled and strained to meet their demands. Those were the only sounds in the apartment as Mulder stared at their backs and Scully studied Mulder. He hadn't looked at her, hadn't so much as hugged her. Hell, he hadn't even yelled at her. He had said precisely nothing.

"There's nothing on this," Frohike spoke finally, breaking the winter's chill in the room. Scully stirred, confused. What did he mean nothing?

"It's empty," Langley confirmed, glancing back at the pair of them.

"Completely," echoed Byers, sounding frustrated.

"No," she insisted, standing to look over their shoulders as they met her desperation with guilty eyes. "It can't be! It can't be! It's got to be on there!"

Sure enough, the window they had opened showed precisely that. Nothing.

She didn't want to face Mulder then. She didn't want to see disappointment on top of the blisteringly frigid anger, but she couldn't help herself as she turned to face him, distress ringing through her. To her surprise, he finally looked back at her. He at least looked sympathetic.

"I…I took it from this man's hands, just before they shot him!"

"Do you know if that is the same disk that you were given by Cobra," Mulder finally asked, cool distance still keeping him detached from her. She flinched, but considered.

"I took it from his hand. Someone fired. He fell over dead. They kept firing. I made a run for it. When I got back to Spender, he was there. I gave him the disk but he gave it back to me. He told me I should keep it."

"Are you sure he handed you the same disk?"

"Yes," she insisted. "I'm fairly sure."

"Fairly isn't good enough, Scully. Remember, your uncle is a magician, he could pull a thing or two
out of his sleeve."

That was insulting and she knew he meant it to be. "That's not fair, Mulder."

"But you have to admit, you can't be sure that it's the right one."

"No, I can't be sure," she admitted.

"Then it looks like you did all of this for nothing," Mulder shot back, turning on them all as he stalked off into the kitchen. Scully watched him go, hurt mixing with disappointment, disgust, and self-recrimination. She had the disk. She had the evidence of the technology that was used in her. She had the truth! And once again it was all taken away.

"I had it!" She turned back to the three blinking pairs of eyes watching her warily. "I did. This man, this Cobra, he gave it to me."

"It may not be what you thought you had," Frohike said gently.

She should have known.

Defeated, she collapsed on the couch again, the leather groaning as she buried her face in her hands. She had thought, perhaps hoped, this time would be different.

"Scully," Byers voice sounded somewhere above her as she felt him settle on the leather cushion beside her. "This man has played many people before."

"Yeah, and I know that." She dropped her hands miserably, staring at the coffee table littered with the remains of fast food. "I know that better than anyone and I still fell into the trap, and now a man is dead because of it."

Mulder was beyond angry with her. She stared at the direction he went. He hadn't come out of the kitchen. She didn't even know what he was doing in there.

Frohike knew where her thoughts were at and she glanced up at him. "You scared the hell out of him, you know."

"Scared the hell out of all of us," Langley muttered, frowning at the empty data on the screen. He shook his blonde head. "It effing sucks that it was all for nothing."

"But the cassette tape I mailed, it explained everything. I recorded our entire conversation. I dropped it in the mail that day. It should have gotten here by now."

"I don't think Mulder would be so upset if it had," Byers replied, smiling sympathetically to Scully's helpless look. "He didn't know where you were. Your messages were cryptic, and he couldn't find you."

"He was climbing the walls till you walked back in the door," Frohike offered with more than a hint of disappointment. "You shouldn't have done what you did, Dana."

She knew that now. Why had she expected that this time would be so different, that Spender would be any different?

"I need to fix this," she muttered, though at the moment, she didn't know how. "I know what I saw, I know what Spender was telling me about the chip, about the research. Cobra had some sort of technology, something that would heal every disease."
"If he did, he didn't put it on this disk," Langley pointed out sadly.

"No." She didn't have the disk after all. She had no proof that what she said happened, that what Spender had asked of her happened, that she had gone there to get the truth, not to conspire with Spender. But she did have a story, and there were things to back it up. She could start from the beginning, and she could begin with the office in DuPont Circle.

"Mulder," she called, standing up and rounding the cluttered coffee table, marching into the kitchen. Mulder was standing at a counter, stirring a cup of coffee endlessly but not bothering to drink from it.

"He has an office," she blurted, stopping in the doorway. Mulder stopped stirring, but didn't look up at her.

"Spender?" He picked up the mug and sipped from it.

"Yes, in DuPont Circle, that's where I first went to speak to him."

Mulder nodded. "And you want to find it to…what?"

Scully sighed in impatience. "To prove to you that I really did go to meet with him about this technology. I wasn't out for some joyride with him, Mulder, I wasn't out there risking everything just to come back with an empty disk."

"I didn't say you were," he replied evenly. It stung.

"You didn't have to," she murmured. "All the same, I want to go there, maybe there is a way of contacting that son-of-a-bitch again."

He looked as if he wanted to scoff at her, but thought better of it. "Fine, let's go."

"Really?" She had expected more of an argument.

"If it will make you happy, why not?" He didn't seem to think it would prove anything. Scully bit the inside of her lip and nodded.

"You want to drive," he offered, reaching for a jacket. She silently agreed, grabbing her purse, leading the way down to the fleet sedan she still had requisitioned.

The drive to DuPont Circle was silent. The tenseness of the quiet made Scully want to scream, but she remained stoic as they pulled up to the non-descript brick building. Without comment he followed her, up the darkened stairs, up to the third floor where the office stood.

Except it wasn't there anymore.

The security guard who had greeted her was not present. The reception desk, the paintings, even the potted plants were gone. The space was empty, smooth, as if no people had ever been there. When she rushed into the area she knew had been Spender's personal office, she found that it too was completely empty and barren, just as the computer disk had been.

"He was here," she insisted, turning to Mulder. "These were his offices."

She stared at the barren room which days before had been filled with the detritus of a working office. "What the hell is this?"

"He used you," Mulder said simply.
Scully shook her head, unwilling to believe that all of this was just some elaborate lie. "Mulder, he laid it all out for me. I recorded it! I mailed you the tape."

Mulder nodded noncommittally.

"This old woman, Marjory Butters, I met her. I saw her pictures, her birth certificate…"

"You saw what you needed to see in order to make you believe," he replied quietly.

Not this time…not this again. Scully felt anger surge with insistence as she clung to the bits and pieces of what was quickly turning into a castle in the sky. "Well, then, what about the boy? This boy with cancer? You can't deny that! That's undeniable proof!"

For once, it was Mulder who was the grounded one, quietly shooting down her belief. "Even if we could convince his parents to let us march him out, how long before the chip in his neck mysteriously disappears? This was the perfectly executed con, Scully. The only thing I can't figure out is why you're still alive."

The memory of bullets whizzing past her head felt oddly cold, turning in her gut as she met Mulder's in frustration. "Mulder, I looked into his eyes. I swear what he told me was true."

Mulder only shook his head firmly in response. "He did it all for himself, to get the science on that disk. His sincerity was a mask, Scully. The man's motives never changed."

Scully couldn't decide whether she wanted to hit something, to cry, or to get sick, perhaps all of the above. These last few days, the terror she put Mulder through, the risking of her own life and her relationship with him, all for what? Just to advance this man's agenda. Worse, she knew better and still she trusted him.

"You think he used me to save himself at the expense of the human race?"

"No," Mulder said, shrugging. "He knows what that science is worth, how powerful it is. He'd let nothing stand in his way."

For Spender, knowledge was power. He had never intended to use this to save the world. He had only wanted to use her to get it from Cobra, to take it and control it. And she, Dana Scully, the great skeptic, had been duped.

"You may be right." She felt defeated them and suddenly so small. "But for a moment, I saw something else in him. A longing for something more than power. Maybe for something he could never have."

"What was that?" Mulder didn't sound as if he thought it was possible.

"I don't know," she sighed, thinking of the man she had spent all of these years hating and whom she had spent all of these days getting to know at least a little better. "Perhaps to be you."

Mulder simply stared at her.

"Think about it, Mulder. What would you do if you had the knowledge that he had?"

"I wouldn't have done half of the things he did."

"Precisely," she pointed out, staring down at her feet. "I think there is a part of him that perhaps regrets the life he lived."
"And clearly it hasn't stopped him from being a lying, two-faced, cancerous son-of-a-bitch, now has it?"

"No," she admitted, finally looking up to blink around the room with misty eyes. "I was a fool for believing him."

"He's fooled many people, including my family."

"I know," she sniffed, wrapping her arms tightly across her chest. "I have never trusted him. I know better to. And he knew exactly how to just...seduce me."

"Probably because he's thought about doing it a time or two."

Scully stared at him in mild horror, but Mulder looked dead serious. "You don't think he was trying to...I mean, not really?"

"Even an evil man can long for beauty. And he managed to seduce my mother, didn't he?"

"But he was younger then, and that was different."

"Like you said, perhaps he's an old man, dying, full of regret." Mulder hunched his shoulders in. His hands jammed into his jean pockets. "And he sees in you what he could have had with my mother."

Scully shivered at the very idea and squeezed her arms even tighter. "Never in a million years."

"I don't know, Scully, you spent seven years hating this man, and after four days you were willing to tell me he had changed. Something tells me he managed to seduce you after all."

She simply stared at his impassive face as he turned on his heels, marching out of the quiet office. "Come on, before security for this joint begins to wonder what we are doing here."

She stood in the cold, dark room, screwing her eyes against the anger and betrayal she felt. There were no words for how badly she had messed up, and there wasn't enough guilt to cover what she was feeling right now. She had been the world's biggest idiot, plain and simple.

"You coming?" His voice was distant and short down the hallway, calling for her.

"Yeah," she replied, rubbing at her face, following him out. Her footsteps seemed to mock her as she made her way to the stairs.
The Light Bringer

Chapter Summary

In which Scully believes she's ruined everything.

In the days following her return, conversation had been reduced to nothing between them. The office was utter silence, unless there was a direct question to be asked or a request to be made. Mulder showed up before she did every morning, ignored her until he had something to say, and left after she did every evening. Though he was as polite as could be expected in the office, he didn't bother to look at her, and any friendly overture she made seemed to be glossed over, or worse, outright ignored. Despite the warmth of spring outside, Scully felt as if it were the Arctic in the basement. The temperature plummeted to below freezing the minute she walked in and didn't warm up until she walked out. Skinner hadn't been any help. He roundly chastised her for the use of an FBI vehicle for personal excursions, then read her the riot act for leaving her partner in that state while going off with a man who was known to be dangerous. Still, at least her boss had some sort of compassion when she explained herself. That didn't mean Skinner didn't think she hadn't made a horse's ass of herself. But, he had admitted, it was at least a first for her. For Mulder, it was a regular occurrence.

And so it went for four days. Scully came in, she did her work and she cursed herself for the utter fool that she was. Mulder, if he noticed, didn't seem to have much in terms of comfort for her. And why should he, she realized, she had been the one to betray him. By lunchtime on the fifth day, the silent treatment had broken her. Muttering something about going out for a long lunch, she hadn't bothered to tell Mulder where she was going or when she was coming back, she simply grabbed her bag and walked out, praying she kept herself together enough to get out of the building and into the busy bustle of the DC streets before she burst into tears. No one questioned her as she stepped into the mildly cloudy sunshine, her steps turning in the direction of Pennsylvania Avenue and the White House.

There was a park just up the street, a small one, named for General John J. Pershing, a hero from World War I that her father admired, but honestly, Scully had no more idea who the man was. In that moment it didn't matter, she simply wandered into the green, growing space and found the fountain coolly pattering as water tripped down the stepped sides and into a pool, where ducks swam lazily by. It was warm, pleasant, and tranquil, everything Scully's life had not been in the last week.

"Hello," she smiled softly to one of the birds, which waddled out from the pool to investigate the newcomer. "Sorry, I don't have anything."

The duck, clearly disgusted with her lack of tribute, wandered off to a couple enjoying lunch on the other side of the pool, tossing bits of sandwiches and French fries on the ground for the swarming ducks to gather. Scully watched them briefly, before turning to her own thoughts, swirling like the waters into the pool. No matter how she looked at it, she had screwed up. she knew that. For years she and Mulder had built a relationship between them that was defined by trust. It was a word, a concept that had great power between them, more powerful than the obvious respect and care they had for each other. It was such a fragile idea, a concept that could very easily crack if not handled well, and in one fell swoop Scully had crushed it carelessly, heedless of the damage she was creating until it was too late.
She had been so sure of herself, so absolutely positive she knew what she was doing. She had thought she was being careful, had tried to be clever, to beat Spender at his own game. Practical, scientific, logical Scully, who never believed anything until she had seen it with her own two eyes, until she had scientific proof, data, and numbers, she had believed there was nothing Spender could trick her with, nothing he could do to lead her by the nose like he could Mulder. She hadn't bet on Spender's ability to read her, to know her like an open book, to use her own vanity and hubris against her and by doing so get what he wanted and make a fool of her.

And worse, he had now hurt Mulder, yet again, and perhaps had forever broken the relationship between them. Perhaps that was why he did what he did. Merely to prove to Mulder that he could. At the crook of a finger, Scully would run off with him, would believe him, would swallow his lies hook, line, and sinker. Mulder had to fight tooth and nail with her to get her to believe him. How badly did that hurt him, she wondered, to know the man who had spun Mulder's world out of fragments and lies could take her away from him so easily, by kidnapping, by disease, by a simple apple of temptation. How many times had she yelled at Mulder over the years for doing exactly what she just did? How angry had she gotten when he would take off for Puerto Rico or Alaska without saying a word and nearly get himself killed? She had proved no better in this situation. Had he sat at home, wondering if she were alive or dead, pushing the Lone Gunmen to find any trace of her? She had lied, she had been an idiot, and she had scared the piss out of him. If Mulder ever spoke to her again, she would be shocked.

She had completely and utterly ruined everything.

"You keep crying like that, Scully, you'll drown the ducks out of the fountain."

She turned to stare at Mulder, standing over her, holding out a tissue in a gentlemanly sort of fashion. She took the proffered object, trying to surreptitiously wipe at tears she knew he already had seen and feeling even more idiotic for doing it. He didn't comment as he settled beside her, stretching long legs in front of him as he adjusted his sunglasses and pulled out a bag of sunflower seeds from his pocket.

"Think ducks eat these things?" Experimentally he tossed a couple on the ground, gaining the sharp gaze of a green-headed mallard in the pool. Immediately, the duck came paddling up, waddling out to investigate the offered treat.

"I don't think they care," Scully replied, smiling slightly at the duck greedily ate the seed and came waddling up for more.

"Here you go! Keep busy with that for a while." Mulder tossed a handful towards his left, ducks flocking to the scattered seed shells, quacking and honking as they did so. They sat companionably watching as Scully collected herself, feeling unsure as to what to say now.

"I suppose saying 'I'm sorry' isn't a quite good enough statement." She at least opened with an apology.

"I think it's just right," Mulder replied, never looking up from the birds as he tossed out another handful of seeds. "It's a start."

Scully nodded mutely. After all these days of silence, now that she had the opportunity to speak, she didn't know what to say. Words failed her as she twisted the paper tissue in her hand around a finger. Mulder simply kept watching the ducks, tossing seeds in their direction, chuckling at the fights that broke out. When it was clear she didn't have much else to add, he leaned back, glancing up at the sunshine in the sky behind his dark glasses.
"You know what I kept thinking when I was sitting in that apartment, waiting to hear word from you? That this must be how you felt all those times that I'd run off without a word to you. And if you felt a tenth of what I felt then, Scully, I must be the biggest asshole alive for having done that too you as many times as I have."

That statement alone broke the ice. Scully snorted, chuckling wetly as she nodded her head. "Yeah, Mulder, I can't say you've got a great track record there."

"Duly noted," he replied, shoving the seed package back into his coat pocket. The ducks quacked and foraged and didn't seem to notice.

"I am sorry for that, Mulder, I never meant for you to worry."

"You said you're sorry, Scully, that's enough." He frowned across the water, watching it fall. "Besides, I can't say I haven't been a dick the last few days myself."

"You had a right," she sniffed, rubbing at her nose with the crumpled tissue. "I betrayed your trust by doing what I did."

"I don't know. I think you had a hell of a lot more trust in me doing what you did than I did in you, apparently." He sounded regretful at that. "You believed you would come back with evidence and I'd still be here."

"And you didn't think I'd come back?"

"No," he admitted carefully. "Best case scenario, I thought he'd talk you into whatever he had schemed. Worst case scenario, I thought you would be dead."

"You thought I'd be so easily swayed by him?"

Mulder shrugged, squirming uncomfortably, leaning forward, elbows on knees. "When you were dying, he came to me. He offered me that chip in your neck, but for a price. He wanted me to leave the X-files, leave you, leave the search for Samantha, everything. He wanted me to join him. And you know what, Scully, in that moment, I would have done it, I was going to do it. But he got shot and disappeared, and he's never called that debt due."

Scully blinked, her breath lost for the longest of moments. She had of course suspected something very like this when Mulder first brought the chip to her, but he had never spoken much of it. All she knew was that whatever the agreement was, they had both thought Spender dead, and thus the deal itself was pointless. But to hear him, to know how close he had been to turning his back on everything, just for her. That was perhaps the most powerful thing that Mulder had ever said.

Mulder's thought were clearly not where Scully's were. He huffed as he continued. "I kept thinking of all the times over the years he's taken you from me. The time you were kidnapped, your cancer, Antarctica, over and over again he's attempted to steal you away, like you were some object or thing he could take and seal away, not a living person with a life and a heart and a soul. And yeah, Scully, I feel hurt and betrayed. You were the one person on this planet I thought would know better, who would see through his bullshit, and you fell for his lies. And all I could think of in those days with you gone was either he'd convince you to leave me to go join whatever cockamamie scheme he has now concocted out of some misguided sense of purpose or he would simply use you to get the technology he needed and then kill you to hide the evidence."

"Mulder, I never intended on leaving you…us…our work, just to side with him." It sounded so silly to her, but could she blame him for thinking that when he himself had been so close once.
"While your loyalty is admirable, Scully, it wouldn't have stopped a bullet had he decided on putting one in you. And I don't think your chip would have stopped that."

She couldn't say Mulder was wrong in that. Someone had tried to kill her and they had failed.

"Do you know what it would have done to me if you hadn't have come home?" His words were low and ragged, still filled with terror that even days later was very real to him. "I had no way to find you, no way of getting to you, and no way of saving you even if I could."

She ignored the spike of irritation within her that said she didn't need him to take care of her. Frankly, she knew she didn't and likely he knew that too. For Mulder, that wasn't the point. For him, everything he had ever cared for in his life had disappeared, had been taken from him in one way or the other at the hands of the very man she went traipsing off with in the night. If Mulder loved it, Spender took it. Something key Spender said to her hit her then. He had told her that Mulder loved her, had always loved her. She hadn't known what to make of it then, why he had told her that, but it clicked into place then, as she sat beside this man she was devoted to, but had been so afraid to open up to. He loved her.

Elation mixed with dread at the very idea, and she found herself shaken. Mulder loved her, he always had, it was obvious, and yet she had somehow ignored it, unable to face what the reality of that meant. She, the woman who depended on empirical evidence had been blind to the one fact most obvious to everyone else. It was clear enough to Spender that he had used her as a weapon in the grand game he played with Mulder's life. Mulder's harsh words in the office, about Spender trying to seduce her away, finally made a disturbing sort of sense. Spender took whatever Mulder loved most. And right now, the one thing he loved most was her.

Diana had tried to tell her, hell both Bill and Missy had tried to tell her, everyone must have seen it. And she was too much of an idiot to recognize that the man she had been privately pining over for two whole years was just as much in love with her as she was with him. How could she have possibly missed something like this?

While her entire world was turning upside down in that very instant, Mulder was somewhere else, oblivious to the knowledge that was finally revealed to his very woebegone partner. "Scully, I didn't know what to do. You'd run off with the devil, and for all I knew he could have dragged you down to hell and I would never be able to get you back."

Scully blinked at him, momentarily at a pause, still trying to wrap her head around the truth that she now knew. "I don't know, Mulder. For all that Spender can be Satan incarnate, I think this time perhaps he was really just Lucifer, an angel in disguise."

Lucifer the Light Bringer. A light had certainly gone off for her in Spender's wake. It was the light of knowledge indeed, a knowledge that should have occurred to her years before. Now what in the hell was she possibly going to do with it?

"Spender, an angel?" Mulder sounded outraged by the idea, sitting up to stare at her through darkened glasses. "You still want to believe there's some good in him? Like he's Darth Vader and your Luke Skywalker?"

She shrugged, managing a wobbly grin. "Technically, you're Luke Skywalker in this scenario."

"Yeah, the version of Star Wars where I told him to be the one to take a flying leap! Scully, he used you!"

"And he also showed me a great deal I didn't know about myself, Mulder. And I can't say that that
was a bad thing."

He didn't look convinced. "Just promise me you'll never do something like this again, please?"

"I promise," she replied sincerely, knowing she never would again, not if she could help it. She would see Spender rot in hell first, where he belonged. "And I'm sorry for doing it in the first place."

"That's the third time you've said it, and I've already forgiven you." He waved it off, huffing at her apologies. "Let's just...call it a wash and move on. After all the times I've scared the hell out of you, I think you are given a pass."

"I would hope so," she replied, smiling somewhat, feeling lighter and considerably happier than when she had wandered over to the park. Mulder had forgiven her and he loved her. Now what in the hell was she supposed to do about that?

"So, I don't know about you, but it's a lovely spring day, and I don't feel like going back into the office."

That hadn't been the response she expected out of him. "Who are you and what have you done with Fox Mulder?"

"He's busy with his head up his ass somewhere. How about I take you out to lunch, my treat."

"Let me guess, there's a good hotdog stand somewhere nearby?"

"You insult me, Scully! It's a taco truck, and it's one of the only ones I know of in DC!"

Tacos...not what she would have thought of for lunch, but it was peace, and she would go along with it.

"Thank you," she said, before she forgot to do so.

"Always, Scully," he smiled, reaching over to take one of her hands in his own.

He stood, pulling her to her feet and leading her through the throng of ducks still foraging for seeds. Fingers laced firmly in hers, he wandered towards the White House and the tourists gathered along the enclosed street, muttering something about carne asada and flour tortillas and some salsa that made Frohike cry once. Scully couldn't have cared. All was right in the world again. and in the end, Spender had lost. Wherever he was, she thought to herself, squeezing Mulder's hand, she hoped Spender was pleased with the life he had chosen. She knew one thing for certain, it couldn't compare with hers at the moment.
In Flux

Chapter Summary

In which Scully contemplates her epiphany and how it changes her world.

Scully's world was in flux and she wasn't sure if she liked it.

Stability had not been something she had known as a child. Her father's career had, by necessity, forced her family to be somewhat nomadic. Early on in life Scully had learned the painful lesson that homes were transitory, friends were fleeting, and the only sure thing she could count on in her life was the love of her family and her own capabilities. It wasn't until she was in high school that she managed to stay in one place long enough to feel build stability. Roots were something Scully longed for, even if she couldn't seem to figure out how to grow them. At thirty-six, she had not managed the family, stable career, or white-picket fence that so many of her peers had. What few small things she had managed - her work and her partnership with Mulder - were her only sense of stability in a world that all too often for Scully tilted dangerously out of control. When everything else was going to hell in a hand basket, she could at least rely on those things to get her through. Now, everything was shifting, turning, and Scully felt her grasp on those two constants slipping.

Life was never a stable thing, she fundamentally understood that. How many times had hers been turned upside down by events beyond her control? This time, it was different. She had made the life choices that had taken her down this path. So many years ago, she had a choice, return to her pathology career in Quantico and turn her back on Fox Mulder, or stand by his side and continue on with the X-files. She chose to stay, to take what had been a promising career up to that point and sideline it working with a man that many warned her would ruin her future. She chose to ignore them. Ten years from now she doubted she would make a different choice. For all the heartache and sorrow that working with the X-files had brought her, she maintained still just what she had told Mulder years ago, she wouldn't change a thing about their time together.

Sadly, loyalty did not breed security. Now, years later, she stood, seeing so much of what they had fought and hoped for coming to something of an end. The enduring question of all their work, the fate of Samantha Mulder, had finally been discovered. The tragedy that was Mulder's family had finally been brought to rest. The conspiracy that had torn them apart, that Mulder was driven to discover and expose, was dead, destroyed, with CGB Spender being its sole remnant, and even then, Scully didn't know how much power the old man really, actually wielded any more. Short of finding an alien spaceship, Mulder had no more proof available to him to uncover. By default, perhaps, that investigation too was at an end.

So Scully had to ask herself what they were still doing? Mulder insisted that he was still looking for truths, but how many more actually existed for him to find? Could they really justify any longer their work if it meant that they were simply chasing down clever con artists in LA or using the FBI resources to help friends out of tight jams? She somehow doubted that Skinner of the FBI would turn a blind eye forever on Mulder's alarming use of his travel budget of late. Still, she supposed in the end the work for Mulder had never just been about his sister. It had been the search for the answers to questions that nobody dared to ask, to look for the infinite possibilities of what things could be.

It was the possibilities that scared Scully at the moment - especially the possibility of him. Spender
hadn't been wrong in his observation of her. Scully was attracted to powerful men, she always had been. From her father on down to Jack Willis, the men in her life had been possessed of a singular sense of self, even Mulder. But she didn't trust them, hadn't dared to, not with her heart. Her reasons were various, but really boiled down to the fear she had, the terror of waking up one day to realize she had given her love to someone who could and would let her down and break her heart in the worst ways. Even her father had done it. His disapproval of her chosen career path had cut her deeply, putting a wedge between father and daughter that lasted until his death. Certainly others had, Jack had done so inadvertently when his obsession with his work became more important to him that she was. And then there was Daniel, the lingering stain on her life. The anger she harbored was only equaled by the shame she felt and carried with her and the knowledge that she had been duped by a man she had believed and trusted.

Spender had no idea how close to the mark he had hit with her. She squirmed at the very idea of it. He had read her well, the woman who was drawn to those with authority, to those who believed they could change lives, with a hint of danger about them. He had played her much as Daniel had years before, earning her trust and letting her see just what he wanted her to see, to begin to trust him enough that she would agree to anything. And just like before, she'd been duped, falling for it so easily she nearly risked everything out of her stupidity. Clearly, Spender had read her well. Her ignorance had nearly cost her the one possibility she had been deliberately willing herself to be blind to…Mulder. It was as obvious as the nose on his face what his feelings where and had been for years, and yet Scully had ignored it, hid behind her façade of the work, of the quest, of their friendship, and willed herself not to believe it. Skepticism suited her well, especially when she chose to be blind. It hadn't helped that there had been distractions, Diana Fowley for example, which had muddled the waters and confounded the situation at hand, but it seemed silly and pointless to deny it now. Mulder loved her. She loved him.

What in the hell were they supposed to do about any of it?

The painful lessons of Daniel still echoed down all these years, reinforced by other office romances that had failed. She had learned the dangerous lesson of falling for a man so powerful that he could alter your entire future. She could have very easily lost herself and everything she was to Daniel had she not discovered the truth. She had, in many ways, lost much of herself to Mulder over the years. Certainly, she had given up her security, her career, her health, and her future. If she were to give him her heart completely and willingly on top of everything else, what would there be left of her in the end?

Worse yet, what would happen if she didn't take that risk and make that gamble? When the X-files were gone and the work was finished, where would Fox Mulder fit in? And could she manage a life alone without him in it?

Her phone rang. Scully blinked eyes into the darkness, rolling over in a bed that was warm and soft, to slam a hand towards the phone at the side of it, cursing as she picked up the receiver. "Someone better be dead, Mulder."

"Possibly," she retorted, trying to sit up, realizing she hadn't really been asleep anyway in her drowsy, midnight musings. "What's up?"

"Report on the wire about some kids in the woods outside of town being attacked by ghosts. One of them is dead. Her friends say she was attacked by a ghost who suffocated her to death. Reports from the scene do indicate that there was a green slime covering her nose and mouth, but I thought you..."
could take a look at the body for me to let me know what's going on."

Scully stared up at the ceiling above her. What was that about loving this man again? She couldn't have possibly thought that! That was crazy talk! No, she loathed this man! She hated him!

"Mulder, it is 2 AM. I was already having trouble sleeping."

"So, trouble sleeping, means you can get out there and do it, right?"

"Why," she demanded, irritation growing by the second.

"If this is a case of phantasmic attack, it's important to note that, Scully."

"Again, I come back to the same question," she groused, having a sinking feeling he was just going to badger her till she did what he wanted.

"Because it's what we do, Scully, we find the truth of these cases. It's what our work is all about."

That's what their work was all about? She sighed. "So who is our perpetrator? Slimer?"

"We won't know until you do the lab work on that ectoplasm, now will we? I let the medical examiner know you would be on your way to examine the body."

"Great," she growled, fighting her way out of the blankets, staring red eyed at the clock by her bed. "If this turns out to be nothing, Mulder, I will kill you."

"Yeah, thanks, Scully!" He clicked off without so much as a goodbye. She stared at her now quiet receiver. Perhaps there were some risks she just wasn't willing to take…not for ectoplasmic attacks at God-awful hours of the morning, at least.
Can't We Just Stop

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to slow down.

"Look, we're always running, we're always chasing the next big thing. Why don't you ever just stay still?"

He didn't miss a beat to her exasperated, pleading question. "I wouldn't know what I would be missing."

And with that, Mulder was out the door in a whirl of his jacket and disappointment, leaving his half-eaten sandwich on the top of the slide projector. Scully watched as it fell to the floor, tossed by the advancing carousel, the sound of it clicking as images of crop circles in the idyllic, English countryside flickered across the wall. She sighed, staring at the pictures, setting her uneaten and decidedly less appetizing salad aside. What was this all about anyway? Last night he's waking her up in the middle of the night to do an autopsy on a kid who clearly had died as a tragic result of teenage stupidity. It was so important she had to butt into an examination that clearly she had no business being in, and in the blink of an eye he tossed the case to go chasing after crop art in a foreign country? For what? What was the purpose of all this?

Perhaps the crops weren't the only things getting run around in circles here.

Irritated, she went to pick up the discarded sandwich, glaring at it as she tossed it in the trashcan. She turned off the slide projector, Mulder's old dinosaur, and scooped up the fallen advanced report on the autopsy from beside it. Hurricane Mulder had fled and in his wake was left Scully muddling over what all this meant. He was afraid of missing something, was he? Maybe he was missing something right in front of his own, big nose!

Crop circles? Really? In England? It had nothing to do with the FBI. For all she knew, Mulder simply wanted an excuse to relive his glory years in merry, old England, connect with old university buddies and relieve harrowing tales of Phoebe Green, which was all the more reason not to go. She would be forced to trudge through muddy fields on some poor farmer's property, have to explain why American law enforcement were looking at his ruined crops, and then spend the next five hours hearing about Mulder's exploits on tombstones of famous, British, mystery novelists. Why couldn't he just….stop? How hard would it have been to just sit, to eat his sandwich, to enjoy a Saturday with her and not chase after ectoplasmic murderers and crop circles in foreign countries? They could have sat, conversed, perhaps contemplated the questions they never had time to ask themselves. Where were they going? What were they doing on the X-files? What was the purpose of all of this if the truth behind his father's work and his sister's disappearance had been discovered, what was Mulder's ultimate end game to all of this? Did he see an ending at all? Did he see a future without the X-files? What did it look like and did it have her in it?

This had been her life for the past seven years, the work, the chase, the adventure. Mulder calling her at all times and at all hours, off to do an autopsy on someone or something, to fly across the country in order to trample through a woods or a crop field, then to drag him out of some military prison only to be shoved in the hospital when something strange infected them. She couldn't complain, really, she had in many ways loved the work, but now, whether she liked to admit it or not, the work was
changing. How could she justify to herself waking up at 2 AM to perform an autopsy on a drunken kid just because Mulder wanted to play Ghostbusters? Would he ever stop? And did she want to keep following him like this?

The answer, quite simply, was no. She wanted him to stop, to consider everything that he had been through in the last year, everything they both had been through. From Antarctica, to Africa, from his illness, to his mother's death, to Samantha, she wanted him to just stop, think about what this all meant. She wanted him to think about what their future was now that everything had changed. Was Mulder even capable of something like that?

And that was the biggest, unanswered question of them all, lying in the middle of the crossroads of their relationship. Could Mulder just ever stop and have a normal relationship? Scully wasn't so sure he could. No matter their feelings that didn't necessarily mean that the two of them would work. This mornings antics seemed to prove a point, one that had niggled at her even in her contemplations the night before. If she were to push things past the point they were now, they would upset their careful balance, and if Mulder couldn't handle what that meant, they would ruin their relationship forever. She wasn't so sure she wanted that.

Fluffy romantic notions and sweeping, passionate gestures were all well and good for the cheap sort of romance novels one picked up at the grocery store, but this was Scully's life, and in the real world affairs of the heart were much more messy and complex. For all that she loved Mulder, she wasn't about to jeopardize her entire life and everything in it for the love of one man, only to have him fail her utterly in the end. She had done that once before and it had changed the entire course of her life. She wasn't sure she wanted to do that ever again. Not even for Mulder, a man she loved more than anyone else, especially if he couldn't stop long enough to eat the sandwich she had purchased him.

Tired, frustrated, and longing for her bath, she grabbed the scattered advanced files. She might as well go to the hospital and get the final results and write up the report. Her Saturday was shot anyway, get this done, go home, soak in her bath and get some sleep. At least with Mulder in England for the next several days she wouldn't be called to perform any more autopsies involving tequila and margarita mix.
In Memory Of Things Past

Chapter Summary

In which Scully looks back on her life.

In all the places, in all the world she could have run into Daniel Waterston again, the same hospital she was doing an autopsy in was not one of them.

Doctor Kopekian had assured her he would keep her up to date on Daniel's condition, perhaps eager to simply talk shop with her, but Scully had waved him off saying she had business, and fled the hospital as quickly as she could. It seemed so weirdly odd, so strange to find Daniel there, on that day of all days, when she was already contemplating a crossroads, to find the man that had set her on this path standing right there.

Why did she have to run into him and why the hell was he even there?

It had been ten years since she last saw Daniel Waterston. In ten years she had never once thought of seeing him again, though he had always been in the back of her mind, lurking. How could one forget their first, true love or their biggest regret? The sin of that romance had weighed her down, had damaged her in ways she had never really come to terms with or let go of. He was the big "what if" in her life she didn't like thinking about or dealing with.

She first met the enigmatic, charming, brilliant surgeon before she had ever even gotten into Stanford. It was on a whim, and at Melissa's urging, she had gone on a tour of several medical schools that she wanted to consider as her top prospects for their programs. Medical school was difficult to get into for even the most brilliant students, but with Scully's grades and undergraduate work, Stanford Medical School had been more than willing to allow her a visit to their campus. They had courted her and at twenty-two she had been more than a bit overwhelmed, touring a major research facility and being introduced to doctors who were the leaders in their field.

Dr. Waterston, as she had known him then, was one of just the many she had been thrown at that day. She would love to say that there had been an immediate connection, but in truth the world-famous heart-surgeon had no time for her. He had a surgery he was performing later that afternoon, and had been curt and bluff with her. Still, young and naïve and hopelessly impressed, and she hadn't held it against him.

She didn't meet Daniel again until partway through her first year of her program. By that point she had been through all the basics, was starting on more of her core, program classes, and had showed an aptitude for surgery that had thrown her in with all the other surgical hopefuls doing their rotations with the different specialists. As amazing as neurology had been, she had been particularly interested with cardiology. Though, perhaps in hindsight, that interest was likely mostly Daniel. From the moment she entered into his sphere she was sucked into his passion. She wanted to learn all she could about the affairs of the heart. Her diligence caught his eye. As they began to face the decisions of specialization in their second year, Daniel had told her he wanted her on his team. There had been no question about it.

Hard work and study were required when one was Dr. Waterston's pupil. He was all the worse when it was someone he held up as special. More was expected of Scully than most every other student he
had. He rode her failures, he chastised her in front of students and patients alike, and she meekly took it until the one day when he overstepped himself in front of a board member observing a diagnosis. When she lost her temper and pointed out that it was Daniel, not herself, who had made the mistake and that she had caught it and was attempting to fix it, she thought for sure her career with the famous heart-surgeon was over. Instead, he asked her out for drinks.

That was the start of what would be their long affair. With hindsight Scully could look back on it and see all the signs of impending doom, but as a girl who was drawn to this powerful man and eager to please, she simply didn't have the capacity to see beyond the obvious. Drinks led to dinner, where he told her that his marriage with his wife had been on the rocks for years. They were in the process of divorcing, that it was rough on his daughter, Maggie, then only a teenage girl not much younger than Scully was herself. He had given her the sob story of how horrible he'd been as a husband, focused on his career, long nights, longer days, conferences away, and how in the end it wasn't his wife's fault, he had not been fair to her. She wasn't a doctor and she didn't understand the demands of the job.

Young, full of herself, and feeling so special because she did "understand", she had fallen for the story without question. When things moved beyond the simple to the physical, she hadn't hesitated to let him into her bed...well, more like his, at his plush apartment near the university campus. He was hardly her first sexual relationship, but it was the first one she'd had where it was more than just the quickie in the backseat or dorm room, leaving one sticky and unfulfilled. Older, handsome, and much more worldly, he had made her feel sophisticated in matters of love, and certainly more confident.

And then he told her he loved her.

She had, of course, been in love with him for ages, at least in the idea of Daniel Waterston. She had been spellbound by the handsome, dashing doctor who saved lives, who made her a better doctor, who took her to conferences with him to show her the world and connect her with those who could take her to very high places indeed for her own career. And at each of those trips he would promise her everything; marriage, family, a good life. As soon as things worked out with his soon-to-be ex, they could marry, he promised. She should have caught on that "soon-to-be" was an abnormally long time. The first year had turned into two, then into her residency, and she had not bothered to question it. In fairness, she had of course been in the middle of one of the most grueling programs in the country, with weeks of sleepless nights. When she got into rotations it was worse, with shifts that often went for two whole days before she got to sleep. The little signs that all was not well escaped her in the rush of patients, blood, fears, and worry she saw everyday.

But even in those moments, when sleep was about the furthest thing from her mind, she caught on to little things. How he had always promised to have her meet Maggie, but never came through with it. How she had never actually been to his large, expensive house in the hills above the city. How he only ever seemed to see her at his apartment that he kept near the hospital. The social events they attended where never in the city, and never around the people that he interacted with on a daily basis. In fact, he never showed her off to anyone who wasn't a professional client, and even then it was always as his "student", with strict proprieties being observed.

As brilliant as she was, even she hadn't caught on, and perhaps that explained some of the guilt that she felt now, years after the fact. It was stupid not to have. She should have known when someone mentioned his wife still being in the picture that this situations wasn't all she believed it to be. But she was a woman in love, and worse, she was a woman who was also very distracted by life circumstances, namely medical school. So she hadn't probed too deeply, hadn't asked too many questions. Perhaps, if she admitted it to herself, it was because in the end she was just simply too afraid to.
Scully couldn't ignore the facts, however, when in her second year of residency she had gone to Daniel's office to take a nap and finish paperwork. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence. She had used this place to work often enough, a quiet space where she could think and relax. He had never objected, and she had let herself in innocently enough. She had decided to tackle the giant mountain of paperwork, or at least part of it, crashing on his sofa for a few hours respite before going back into the trenches again, when his phone began to ring. She had no idea why, that day, sleep addled as she was, she picked up that receiver and answered it. The woman on the other end was surprised, but didn't seemed bothered by the stranger answering the phone. She merely introduced herself as Dr. Waterston's wife, and that she wanted to leave a message reminding him of the charity event they were attending that evening, she had his tux ready, so please just come straight home so they wouldn't be late. And she left an extra note to remind him to pick up Maggie on the way home from her dance practice. It was prosaic, simple really, the sort of thing one expected of a wife.

Except he was supposedly leaving her...at least that's what he told Scully.

She had dutifully written it all down, had politely stammered something about being an intern helping out at the office, and had hung up, mind reeling. With trembling hands, she had written out a note, and ended it with the simple request to never see her again. Without a word, she grabbed her paperwork and left, sliding the key under his door as she walked away.

Of course, he had not reacted well to the news. She was in a dead sleep in her apartment, after having cried her eyes out in own bed, when Daniel had come over, pounding on the door and begging for her to answer. Scully had crawled out to confront him and ask if he was still married. He didn't deny it. But he had tried to circumvent it, telling her that he had been trying to leave his wife for years, that he didn't love her, that he loved Dana, and that he wanted to be with her. He was just looking for the right time to do it, the right time to split up the home, to upset Maggie's life. Scully, for her part, had listened patiently, and then had quietly asked him to leave. He had, but not without begging her to reconsider. She hadn't, even when he flooded her tiny apartment with flowers and had come to her at the hospital, promising he would do what she wanted, just give him some time.

It had never sunk in the true magnitude of why she was angry with him. The deeply Catholic part of her soul was horrified she was wrapped up in an extra-marital affair at all, ashamed at being the so-called "other woman". But wasn't so much that she was upset about the sin of it all that upset her, it was much more the fact that he had lied to her, in the worst way. He had taken her faith and trust in him and used it to his advantage, playing a game that could ruin everyone involved, and he didn't seem to care. He shamelessly still courted her, knowing he was married, knowing he had a daughter who would be crushed by his actions, and still he wanted to somehow "fix this." It was then that Scully realized that as far as Daniel was concerned, it wasn't so much about building a relationship as it was having and keeping her, even at the expense of his family, and it felt deeply and fundamentally wrong.

She knew then she had to make changes in her life. Cardiology put her in far too close proximity to Daniel. Since before her time with him, she had also been eying the pathology team, those doctors who worked in the study of the diagnoses of disease and other ailments. She had found their work interesting, a puzzle to solve and far less a situation to fix. When she asked to be transferred to that team, they had been of course surprised. It was no secret she was Daniel Waterston's pupil. What no one realized was why she did it and that was perfect, as far as Scully was concerned. She took to her new position, diligently putting in the extra hours it took to become qualified, taking to it with an aplomb that surprised even the head of the department. It was that quick study, that diligence, and that skill that drew the FBI when she was referred to them, and when they came to her about a position at Quantico, Scully had agreed without even a second thought.

Daniel had been less than pleased. He was angered when she left, feeling she was being
unreasonable, but had said nothing out loud, not wishing to draw attention to himself. Privately, he had been outraged at the idea of her working as nothing more than body hacker when she could be saving people. Scully had patiently pointed out that her work would be saving people and if nothing else would help them catch criminals and take them off the streets. She pompously had told him it was a noble calling. He said it was cheap. They argued. She told him to never speak to her again.

She would like to say that was the last time she had seen Daniel Waterston until today. But there was one other. Her graduation. She had gone to see him after the ceremony. Still in her gown and hood, her parents and siblings waiting downstairs, she had swung by his office to say goodbye. He had of course been at the ceremony and had things been different he would have had the honor of placing the hood over her head, but she had ignored his piercing gaze as she walked across the stage to her family's cheering. Still, she had come by, at least to say one last goodbye. It hadn't been a pleasant scene. He had been smug. She was annoyed. He said she was ruining her life. She said that it was funny hearing that from a man who had kept her as his mistress for so long. He had begged her to reconsider, and she told him that she couldn't. In pompous resignation, he had assured her that she would be back, when the FBI had used her up and tossed her out, he would wait for her, and he'd welcome her back with open arms when she finally grew up and realized she needed and loved him. She walked away from him then and didn't look back.

That had been ten years ago. She hadn't seen him since. She had heard through the grapevine that he and his wife finally had divorced, but she had studiously not called him or had any contact with him. She had no idea where he was or what he was even up to. She went about her life, she did well at the FBI, and then she met Mulder. All of that was history now.

How odd, at this moment of all moments, that Daniel Waterston would appear, out of nowhere. The strangeness of it almost hurt. He had been everything to her once upon a time. She had, as a younger woman, thought of a future with this man, of children, of a life together, saving the world. She had let go of that dream long ago. Now it seemed like such a moot point. She couldn't have children anymore, not after what was done to her, and she felt she had saved the world now more times than she cared to think of, and she had done it all without Daniel Waterston at her side. She was alone, a woman who had given everything for the cause of truth. She had wanted more out of life once. She had wanted it with him. She had, once, contemplated a life much more different than the one she had now, one on a slow path, one filled with a home and family and promise. He had shattered that and she had run from the consequences ever since, never letting them go so much as a second. She was alone by choice. Alone meant never having to face Daniel again.

The elevator sounded, the doors opened, and she stood on the third floor of Washington National Hospital. She stepped out in the lobby area, staring down the hallway where she knew Daniel was. After all these years, she would face the one man who had, next to CGB Spender, shaped so much of her life. Inexplicably. She thought of Gracie O'Connor then, the young woman from Tennessee, how she had been so joyful after letting go her own burdens, the relief and release. What would that feel like? Would she be so happy or would she simply regret the path that she had not chosen, and stand, like in a Robert Frost poem, contemplating what might have been?

She took her first step backwards on the road and held her breath.
Facing What Was Left Behind

Chapter Summary

In which Scully learns the value of facing what one walks away from.

For half a moment, Scully considered it. It would be so easy, so simple. There was Daniel, the man she had loved once, and free to her in the way he never was before. She could simply step into this, into a life with him again, to have someone who understood her, someone who had moved his entire life just for her, who gave up everything for her, who stopped…who blessedly stopped.

For half a moment, she considered it.

And then his heart stopped.

It was a strange thing how life worked, she realized. Those little decisions that you make along the way. How going right instead of left can change an entire universe. Had she not decided that day so long ago to rest in Daniel's office, she would never have found out the truth. She would not have left him that day, would never have moved on to pathology. Her anger would not have fueled her to move on and past him, to join the FBI. Had she never done that she would not have been where she was now. So many little things that make up ones life, little decisions, it was truly amazing how any one of them could spin a life into something completely different. Had she not joined the X-files, she would never have seen the things she had seen, she would have never learned to expand herself beyond the walls of her reason, would not have had to push herself into different avenues of consideration. While she saw herself still grounded firmly in science, it was only at this moment, in hindsight, that she understood just how very much her time with Mulder had changed her. She saw the world differently; she thought of the world differently, her life experiences had shaped her into a different person than the one Daniel had known. If she hadn't become that person, would she possibly be even considering this?

Colleen Azar hardly looked perturbed to see her standing at her door for the third time in as many days. In fact, she looked as if she expected it.

"Dana, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," Scully muttered breathlessly, stepping into the cool dimness on the other side of the door. "I just…"

She paused. In the distance chimes fluttered, musical and light on the wind. So very, very free…

"I had a sister once." She had no idea why she opened up with that gambit. "Melissa…Missy was what we called her for short. You remind me of her."

"Do I?" Colleen smiled serenely. Perhaps she was pleased? "Do you want to come and sit?"

Scully followed her down the same path through the foyer to the living area where they sat before. The fountain burbled. It felt soothing as she tried to pull up scattered thoughts.

"Melissa was into all of this…stuff." She waved aimlessly, encompassing the Eastern influence in the décor, but really just meaning everything that Colleen's life clearly stood for. "She was the one who
had crystals and believed in chakras, who took off to parts unknown on a whim. She simply…let life be."

"And you didn't?" Colleen could tell she didn't. Scully knew Colleen saw in her the same type of woman she herself once was.

"I had a promising career in medicine. I walked away from it years ago because of a man I was once involved with. The hurt and shame of that drove me down a different path, one that has changed my life in ways both good and bad. I've suffered a lot because of the decision I made, but I also gained much as well."

"Do you think it was the right one?"

It was a simple question, but in Scully's mind it was so loaded, so fraught with peril. "I always have believed that. Yet, recently, I have to admit, things are changing. Things are in flux. My life…everything about it is shifting. It scares me. I keep trying to hold on to something, anything, just to stay afloat."

"Like those things with which you burden your life?"

Scully blinked at the other woman, surprised though she knew she shouldn't be. Colleen only laughed. "Remember, Dana, I was you, once. I know the pattern. I was running in circles, in a job that had taken everything out of me and to which I didn't feel connected to. I was hiding the secret that I was a lesbian from everyone, fearing the repercussions to my career and with my family. Those are some very big burdens to carry."

Scully chuckled sadly. "Yes, they are."

"Your friend isn't the only one who is carrying burdens, is he?"

Scully thought of Daniel, of the vision she had, of the black, beating heart, looking so dark and broken in his body.

"Years ago, he and I had an affair." She admitted with more ease than she thought she would. "He was the love of my life once and it was all a lie. He ruined his marriage over it. I…I ran from it. I ran to a life that I am leading now."

"Do you regret that run?"

"Sometimes," she replied, smiling softly as she thought of Mulder. "Not really."

"But you regret him? This friend?"

"Yes." There was so much about Daniel she regretted. "I destroyed a family and I didn't even stay to do anything right. His daughter has had to shoulder the burden of a man who abandoned her for me, and I just moved on with my life, with other things. I left destruction in my wake, and for what?"

"Because you were once a woman in love. It happens to the best of us." Colleen smiled so philosophically about this. Again, Scully thought of Melissa.

"He's the one who is dying." Scully sighed, frowning. "He's carrying that guilt, all that pain, and he's not letting his heart heal."

"No, he's not letting it heal." Colleen agreed. "But he's not the only one."
Scully only nodded mutely.

Colleen sighed, leaning forward to take Scully's hand, her peaceful face earnest as she inched in close. "Dana, I don't know you, you don't know me, but I do know this. Until you let go that which is holding you back, you can never, ever move forward. Your body and spirit will simply be in conflict. You will never be able to just…stop. You will never find peace with where you are at until you come to terms with where you have been."

To come to terms with where she had come from. She did indeed need to face that, and soon, but Daniel at the moment came first. She glanced at the woman beside her, inspiration hitting her.

"Do you know of any healers?"

Colleen was clearly surprised by that question coming out of Scully the scientist. "I have a friend who is a healer. He uses Hindu-healing techniques in his practice. Do you want him for your friend?"

"If his daughter will let me use him." Scully wondered if Maggie would think she was crazy for it. "I think you are right, Colleen, we can't find peace until we've come to terms with where we've been."

Colleen clearly approved. "Let me go get his card for you." She rose, fluid-like off the couch. Scully watched her leave, closing her eyes as she listened to the chimes in the distance. What would it like to be so very free?
A Time For Healing

Chapter Summary

In which Scully lets go of the burdens she's been carrying.

Scully knew which burden she had to face first.

Maggie Waterston sat in the Starbucks across the street from the hospital. She looked up at Scully as she entered and offered her a small, tight smile. At least that was encouraging. She had no food or drink in front of her, and Scully decided to confront her rather than put off the inevitable with coffee.

"Maggie," Scully nodded as she slipped into a seat across from her. The coffee shop was bustling, but not so much so that they couldn't chat. "How is your father?"

"He's better, so much better." There was awe in the other woman's voice. "I don't know how you did it. I didn't think it would work."

"I wasn't sure it would, myself," Scully admitted. "It wasn't my work. That...that's your father's decision."

Maggie's expression looked somewhat skeptical. "Dad hasn't decided to be here and now for years."

The words stung, but then the truth sometimes did. "Maybe this is what this entire episode is all about. Maybe this is your father's wake up call."

Maggie stared at her, eyes hard at the very idea. "You think my father's heart gave out just to prove a point?"

Scully shook her head patiently. "No, I think your father carries with him the guilt and pain of what he's done and the only way his body has physically found of expressing that is in illness. That is a scientific fact, Maggie, that stress affects the body's health. Daniel has carried around a lot. And perhaps it's time he started to face those things he's done in his past. Including, and especially, me."

Maggie was quiet for a long moment, studying her. She was a very attractive woman, slightly younger than Scully. Her life had been shaped by the actions that her father had taken too, in ways that were markedly less good than Scully's. She was, Scully decided, a good girl caught in the crossfire of a father's bad decision, and that was unfortunate.

"You aren't what I expected," Maggie finally said, somewhat begrudgingly.

"No, I don't think I am," Scully admitted, finding something in that horribly amusing. She smiled. "I'm not here to ruin your life, Maggie. I never was, and I'm certainly not here to step back into your father's life."

That took Maggie aback. Clearly, that was exactly what she thought Scully was there for. "Then why are you here?"

"Absolution," she replied, thinking of the confessional months ago. "And to help your father find closure."
Maggie considered this. When she spoke, she sounded hurt by the idea. "He's spent years pining for
you. Even now, he's up in that hospital room thinking you are going to return to him."

"Your father always had a horrible time realizing that he has to confront the truth sooner or later."

She thought Maggie would be upset in hearing that. Instead, she earned a sad, understanding laugh
out of the other woman. "You're telling me."

"Maggie," Scully began, wondering even how to broach this. "I never intended to break up your
family. That's why I ended it with your father. In fact, I never knew that things were they way they
were. When Daniel and I met, he led me to believe that he and Barbara were no longer together."

Had Maggie heard that part of the story? She wasn't sure. She glanced at the other woman, looking
studiously at the wooden tabletop. "I was very much in love with your father once. He was a
powerful man, charming, brilliant, and I found that very attractive. I won't lie to you and say I didn't
suspect. In many big and small ways I did, but I was in medical school. I had ways of distracting
myself from the truth, of ignoring the obvious because I was afraid. I feared what it would mean if it
turned out that it was all lies. And when it came out, I ended it the. I was a young woman in love,
who thought that the man she cared for was telling her the truth and I'm sorry for what happened
after, I honestly had no idea about any of that. I had moved on by then, had gone into a different
field. I had no way of knowing."

She ended her explanation helplessly. It all sounded so lame and feeble in the open world outside of
her own jumbled thoughts. She glanced at Maggie, hoping that the woman wouldn't hate her or
blame her forever. Instead of anger, however, she was surprised to see sympathy and even
understanding.

"He honestly didn't tell you anything?"

"No," she murmured, remembering that long ago day when she walked out of his life for good.
"Until I was at the hospital the other day I hadn't seen your father in over a decade."

Maggie simply nodded, tears glittering in the corners of her eyes. "I knew he hadn't seen you, I
just…when he left, we thought it was for you. He just abandoned everything. He didn't care the mess
he left behind, he just walked away from us and all I could remember was hating you for it."

The raw anger on the woman's face hurt, but Scully wasn't so sure that it was directed at her
specifically. "If I had known, Maggie…"

"Would you have sent him back?" Maggie shot her a skeptical look. "Would you have told him to
live up to his responsibilities as a husband and father?"

Back then? Scully didn't know. Ten-years-ago was a long time, well before she had met Mulder. "I
did try to send him back, Maggie. I guess it didn't work."

Maggie laughed bitterly. "No, it didn't." Her sigh was watery and deep, and it spoke of years of
unexpressed resentment and anger. "Overnight for us, things fell apart, but it had been coming for
years, honestly. Dad had the apartment near Stanford. He wouldn't come home for days. Mom had
suspected affairs of course, but nothing she could prove. He always assured he that he loved only
her. We believed him."

She rubbed at her eyes fitfully as she continued. "When it did happen, I was in college at Berkley. I
was still living at home, but you know how college is, especially there. I was practically living in the
library, and when I came home, Mom would pretend nothing was wrong. I didn't see the cracks until
Dad announced calmly over dinner to my mother that he was leaving her, that he had fallen in love with another woman and that he had been thinking about this for a long time. Right there, right over the meat loaf and potatoes.

All Scully could do was listen and feel anguish for the wife and daughter that Daniel had so wronged with his careless decision. They hadn't done anything to deserve this. Then again in how many of these situations across so many broken homes was this the case? She thought of Mulder and his childhood and her heart ached for Maggie.

"He left everything behind. He took up a position in DC. He gave up the Stanford job. It was less prestigious and for far less pay, but he didn't seem to care. He left us high and dry in Palo Alto, our lives falling apart. Mom suddenly had to figure out how to be a single woman again, what to do with everything, the entire life they built, their friends. He walked away from all of it. He at least felt bad enough that he settled her with enough money to take care of her for the rest of her life, paid off my college, but money doesn't make up for what he did. He just…left, without a word. When we heard he was going to DC, my mother started asking around. She wanted to know who and why. Someone at the hospital remembered you, mentioned that you had gone to join the FBI. It didn't take Mom long to put two and two together. Dad went off the radar, we didn't hear from him, didn't even know he was alive except through his lawyer. We just assumed that he was with you."

All these years. She had walked away from him, had thought that was the end of it and the role she had played in this family tragedy, but it hadn't been. Now she understood why Maggie resented her. How would she have felt if the tables had been turned on her? "When did she discover I wasn't in the picture?"

"I came to see him after grad school. I wanted to confront him. I tracked him down and I found out he hadn't been with you." She looked at Scully regretfully, hurt so very visible just beneath the surface. "I hated you then. I hated the fact that he left us for you and you didn't even have the decency to give him what he wanted. What was the point in leaving us?"

Was it even worth reminding Maggie again that she had no idea? "I am sorry, Maggie. Truly, I am."

Maggie quietly nodded, though the pain was still there. "All I have to ask is why? Did you ever once think about him?"

"Yes," Scully admitted quietly. "A lot, though, I can't say I ever thought about returning to him. He hurt me, Maggie, a great deal. He lied to me in the worst way, led me to believe something that wasn't going to happen…at least I didn't think it was. That idea…that trust, that's important to me. Trust is more vital to me than romance. Trust is the difference between a man staying by you all of your life and a man making promises he has no intention of keeping. Your father broke that trust with me. He broke that trust with your mother, and I couldn't be with him. Do you understand?"

Clearly, there was something, understanding maybe, at least Scully hoped. She desperately wanted the other woman to see that it wasn't because she wanted to spite Maggie or her mother. It was because she and Daniel were never meant to be.

"Dad thinks that you two will be getting back together. What do you plan on telling him?"

Scully considered. "What he never told me, the truth."

"And just what is that?" Maggie was curious. Scully could hardly blame her. She had been the "other woman" in the Waterston family drama for years. It was the first opportunity the woman had of finally getting to know her.
"The truth is, Maggie, I am not the person he fell in love with years ago." She wished, in some ways, she was. "I thought, for an instant, that I could be. I wanted such a different life once, when I was with your father. I wanted the security of family, a life, and a career, all the things that you and your mother had with him."

That hurt her, but at least she wasn't angry about Scully's honesty. "And you don't want that now?"

"I do, but things are different." How could she encapsulate what these last seven years have been to her? "Your father chooses to believe that the FBI isn't my passion, and in a way, he's right. It isn't the passion for me that medicine was. But, the work I do, that is a passion, and I have seen things, Maggie, and have experienced things that your father could never understand. What I have been through…"

She trailed off, wondering what to even say.

"Maggie, I can't give your father the dream that he wants, to go back to what we were before. He wants the eager young ingénue and I'm not. To try and recapture something that doesn't exist anymore would be unfair and honestly, I think that it's time for your father to recognize that, to move on, and face his own actions and the wrong that he has done to you and your mother."

Her words hit home. Maggie, at one point so defensive, now relaxed. "You plan on telling him this?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I hope that he listens."

"Good," Maggie nodded. Her gaze turned wistful almost. "I'm almost sad I hated you for so long. You aren't who I thought you were."

"I suppose that's often the case in situations like this." Scully couldn't help but think that, had things had been different, and Daniel had been honest with everyone, she and Maggie might have come to something of an understanding. Now, Scully hoped simply that Daniel could rebuild his fractured relationship with his daughter before it was too late.

"I'll go over and speak to him," she smiled, rising finally to begin her next task of unloading burdens. "I can't promise he will listen at first, but keep on him. It's important, Maggie. I know. I lost my Dad and we left so many things unsaid. Don't make the same mistake I did."

"I'll try not to," she assured Scully. "Thank you…for talking."

"You're welcome." With a quiet smile, she left Maggie at the table. She made her way out of the door and to the hospital across the way. As she did, her shoulders lifted, her steps slightly lighter. She now understood what Gracie O'Connor meant, that unburdening of ones self. Letting go felt amazing! She hoped that she could make Daniel understand the same thing.
What I Would Have Missed

Chapter Summary

In which Scully chooses which road to take.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Perhaps Mulder was right, if you stopped along the way you could easily miss something important. For example, Scully knew that if she had not seen the mysterious blonde woman from the last few days, she wouldn't have run into Mulder outside of the hospital, and if she hadn't, she would not have gone to his place for tea and she would not be there, safe and comfortable, wrapped in his Navajo horse blanket, drowsing to the sound of the bubbles in his fish tank and of the shower in the bathroom. How long had she been out? She wasn't sure. Long enough that Mulder had bundled her up on the couch. Still, she made no move to shift or to get up. She was far too comfortable at the moment. She was enjoying the luxury of just...being. Was this what happened to you when you reached enlightenment? Did nirvana feel like this, that moment of ecstasy, when everything in the world seemed to make a weirdly, wonderful sense? Maybe this is what Saint Teresa experienced so long ago, pierced by the golden arrow, that sense of knowing, of being, of finally understanding what it was all about.

Perhaps, she sleepily laughed at herself, this is what happens when one finally releases those things they've held on to for so long and just...lets it happen. How long had she held that guilt regarding Daniel? Far too long. She clung to the hurt of his betrayal, the shame of what she had done, and the anger at herself for allowing it, but more than that, she had also had held on to the regret, the pain of what she might have had with this man, and the reality of the path she chose instead. For as much as she told Mulder that she wouldn't change a thing about their time together, there was that small part of her that did regret the decisions that she had made. If she had just not been so quick to lose her temper with Daniel, to at least try to work it out, things might have been different. She could have had that life that now the X-files had taken away from her.

Hindsight was always twenty-twenty. Now, with time and understanding, she knew that regret, like Daniel's hope, was nothing more than smoke and mirrors, a pipe dream of what-ifs that she hung her own pain on for years. She had clung to the "what-if's" as things in her life were taken from her. If she had not made that decision to leave Daniel and go into pathology, she would never have caught the eye of the FBI. If she had not been such a promising scientist she would never have come to Blevins' attention, or Spender's as it turned out, and never would have been assigned to work with Mulder. If Samantha Mulder hadn't been taken, then Mulder wouldn't have been on his quest, and she wouldn't have been drawn in and faced all the things she did in her work, her kidnapping, her cancer, her sister, Emily, her loss of her fertility. If she had chosen a different path all of those years ago, perhaps, just maybe, she would have the happiness that she had dreamed of so long ago with Daniel.

But the "what-if's" never looked at the other side of the coin. They never looked at what it would have meant if she had stayed. Perhaps things would have been wonderful, but Scully also knew that chances were high that they wouldn't have been. What would the scandal have been had she stayed and made Daniel choose? If she had forced a decision rather than walked away, who was to say he
would have chosen her? What would have happened to her reputation and career after something like that? Could she even live with herself, knowing what she did?

"What-ifs" were such funny, completely useless things. She could spend a lifetime prodding them, thinking about them, brooding over them, but it would accomplish nothing. In the process of thinking about what she might have had or what she had lost, she paid no attention whatsoever to what she had gained. "What-ifs" blinded her to all the good she might have missed had she not taken the path that she did. For example, if Scully hadn't taken the path to the X-files, she would have never had Mulder constantly challenging her suppositions, she would have never been introduced to the possibilities of new ideas, and she wouldn't have even considered the usefulness of alternative medicine towards helping Daniel with his condition. Thus, if she hadn't left Daniel all those years ago, she would never have discovered the means by which to save him in the future.

Perhaps she had missed out on some things by not choosing Daniel, but if she had stayed she would have never have known what it was like to stand on her own two feet away from him. She would never have been able to say she forged her own career. She would never have tried barbecue in every state famous for it and a few that weren't. She would have never spent a lonely, Christmas Eve at a haunted mansion and scared herself silly with it. She would never have gotten to know a little girl named Emily, or have met two wonderful women named Penny and Cassandra. She wouldn't have learned that underneath Frohike's creepy exterior he had a heart of gold that was fiercely protective of her, or that Langley was such a sensitive soul hiding behind the façade of anarchist gamer, or that Byers was such a hopeless romantic and far more normal than he ever let on to anyone. Most of all she would have never have met the likes of anyone like Fox Mulder.

What would her life had been like if he had never come into it? Perhaps, it would be considerably safer, but did she regret it? Scully couldn't bring herself to, not one moment. For all that her life since she had joined the X-files had brought heartache and sorrow, it had brought her something else, a man that she could care for, respect, and trust. As she told Maggie that word meant everything to her. When she thought of the word, rolled it around her mind, the image she always conjured was that of Mulder. He was the man who had driven like a bat out of hell from Baltimore to DC in order to save her from a liver-eating mutant, who had included her in his clandestine investigations even when it was against his better judgment. It was Mulder who raised hell during her disappearance, and when everyone else had given up on her, he insisted that they would find her. He had been the one who had saved her when she was dying of cancer, bringing in the mysterious chip. He had been the one to find and keep the ova that they had used to make Emily, and he had been the one to hold her when she mourned the loss of the only child she would ever have from her own body. Mulder had been the only man she had considered when she had the chance to try and have a baby.

In all the ways, big and small that mattered in her life, it was Mulder that she trusted. If she had made a different choice in her life, had walked the other path she would have never been given the chance to know him and to have him in her life. She could have missed so much. Perhaps, in the end, running into Daniel wasn't about the other roads she could have taken, it was about understanding and appreciating the road she had. Those were roads that were obviously not meant for her, she just hadn't seen that at the time. This was the one that was, and she needed to see it out to its end.

The gentle spray of shower stopped. Scully's eyes popped wide open. She could hear in the bathroom the faint noises of Mulder moving about, the sound of the shower door in its groove, rattling as he opened it, the faucet as it turned on, the scrape of a brush over teeth. They were prosaic noises, but ones that alerted her that he was emerging soon, maybe to go to his own bed. It was a chance, an opportunity, a signal to approach the very thing she had been ignoring for so long. Her burdens were behind her…mostly. There was one burden left for her to tackle, one last thing she needed to confront. If she didn't do it now, she may not ever have the courage again to face it.
Daniel had been wrong. This thing was right.

She rose, stumbling on unsteady feet, blinking in the light of the bedroom as she shuffled to the restroom door. What should she do? Should she knock? Yell out that she needed to talk to him? Simply stand there and wait and blurt it all out? What in the world would he say? What if she messed it up? Dear God, what if she said something completely stupid? Was this even a good idea?

Something inside of her in that moment said yes.

Before she could dither and speculate any further, the door swung open in a whoosh of soap-scented steam. Mulder exited in its wake in pajama pants and nothing else. Coherent thought, what little she had in her sleepy brain, fled her in that moment as she stared stupidly at him.

"You okay?" Concern immediately writ itself on his face, hair still dripping down into it. "Sorry, was just getting ready for bed. Is there something you need?"

Need...yes, need, she needed to tell him something very important. She blinked.

"You really were worn out," he chuckled, tossing his used clothing into a heap by the bedroom door. "Look, if you want, take the bed, I'll take the couch, I can get you something comfortable to wear."

"Mulder!" She found her voice suddenly, forcing it out between lips that didn't seem to be able to focus. He stopped, just as he was about to wander off to settle her in, frowning curiously at her. "I..."

She started, stopping, as words seemed to escape her in that moment. God, why couldn't she get this straight? "I'm sorry for not going to England with you."

A faint smile lifted his full mouth as he shrugged and waived it off. "You were right in the end, there wasn't anything there. Besides, you were needed here, obviously."

"For Daniel, yes." She wasn't getting her point across and damn it if she couldn't figure it out. "It's just that...I wanted so desperately for you to stop and just listen, talk, just...be."

He chuckled, eyeing her with a look of amused self-deprecation. "Scully, I have a hard time doing that when I'm not drugged out."

"I know, but...I needed it."

"And you got your weekend without me, and you had your epiphany."

"I did, and it was good. I realized things I never thought I would before."

"See, I'm rubbing off on you. If you hadn't caught onto that, you'd never have saved his life."

"Yes, but not just that." She ran nervous fingers through her hair, conscious of how strange all of this was. "Mulder, seeing Daniel, I thought a lot of the road I didn't take, but I thought also of the road I did take. If I hadn't have taken that, I wouldn't have been able to save him. I also would never have met you."

He looked mildly flattered. "Scully, thank you, for what it's worth. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing."

"That's just it, Mulder. It's more than a good thing. It's the thing that's kept me going for all these years. You are the thing that's kept me going." Suddenly she found her words, the ones that had
eluded her, and they tumbled out almost faster than she could manage. "You are the thing that's given me hope all these years. Your unshakeable belief has given me courage to face those things I never could before, to be willing to ask the questions that never would have occurred to me. So many things have happened, so many things I regret, but the one thing I can't regret in all of this over the last seven years is you. You are…everything in my life."

It was as honest of a declaration as she had ever made to him. It was powerful, and truthful, and she couldn't even look him in the eye at the moment. She was too afraid of what she would see if she did.

"Ten years ago, Mulder, I would have given anything to be with Daniel Waterston, to have that life, but now, at this moment, I couldn't imagine my life without you in it, without telling you how I feel and having you understand…"

She didn't know if she could call this love. She didn't want to. She was too afraid to.

"I realize that all other roads, Mulder, were wrong for me. This one is the right one, this one…with you and I want to explore just what that might mean, this relationship with you, not just as partners or as friends. I want to see where we might come out on the other side."

There, she said it. Well, perhaps not as directly as she might have liked, but it was out there between them now and there was no taking it back.

So she waited.

Silence.

The shower head in the bathroom dripped, a hard spatter against the tile. It broke harshly into the quiet that followed her declaration, a counterpoint to the lack of words from Mulder. She stood before him, emotionally naked if not physically, willing him to do something, to have some sort of reaction to the fact that she had just put her heart out there for him, the one man she trusted, and please, dear God, don't ignore it.

She didn't dare look up at him. If she did, she would likely see the very rejection that she was starting to sense already from him. It was so much better not to confirm it in that moment, not to see how her gamble had failed. She had been so sure when she had stumbled up, been so positive when she reasoned it out in her dazed state. She had been certain and now she realized, she perhaps had just made the greatest blunder she ever had with him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, not knowing what else to say. "I crossed a line, I know, and I'm sorry, I just…needed to tell you."

What else was there to say? There was no apologizing for this. He just stood there, stock still, dripping all over his carpet, saying nothing. With flaming cheeks and tears in her heavy eyes, she turned from him, prepared to grab her coat and shoes and simply make a run for it downstairs. She turned away, shame filling her.

Before she could manage her frantic flight, his fingers reached for her, clamped on her elbow, and without any further preamble pulled her roughly towards him. Shock was the first sensation, even before she registered the warmth of his mouth on hers, the hungry desire as he crushed her up against wet, naked skin. When she could finally wrap her head around what exactly was going on, he let her go, pulling back enough to stare down at her, stars in his diamond-bright eyes.

"Jesus, I was wondering when you would finally get around to the same idea," he grinned, a laugh
welling up inside of him, just under Scully's grasping fingertips as she found it transferring through to her, pooling inside of her along with happiness and desire.

"You were wondering? Just how long have you…"

"Forever," he murmured, leaning down for a repeat performance, one in which Scully found herself a much more willing participant. Her fingers tangled through wet hair as his fumbled with clothing to find smooth skin. All thought of embarrassment or rejection were forgotten with soft moans and pleading whimpers, as they made their way over discarded clothing to the bed.

It was hours later when Scully woke with a start. She blinked, fuzzy brained and confused, realizing that the bed that shifted underneath her was not her own. Where was she again? It took a second to realize that she was in Mulder's bed and another second to realize she wasn't alone. It was slightly after that she realized she was naked. When events finally did come rushing back to her, she smiled. In the darkness, she leaned over to study his face, what she could see of it, relaxed in sleep, as it never was in the waking hours. Perhaps it was the exhaustion of a cross-Atlantic flight, or perhaps it was the way she had made him moan her given name last night. Funny how she had gone from "Scully" to "Dana" when caught in something so intimate.

Her clothes were scattered in a heap on one side of the bed, and she quietly gathered them to take them to the bathroom. As she dressed, she studied herself, the woman she was that morning, fresh from Mulder's bed. Clandestine, yes, it broke several FBI rules of conduct. But wrong? No, no this felt right. For the first time in a very, very long time, this decision in her life felt right. It felt like the right path, all the others were wrong.

She stepped out and contemplated her partner, now in every sense of that word, as he lay in his bed. If she didn't leave now, she wouldn't be able to make it home in time to change before the busy rush hour. Still, it was so inviting, just to return to that bed and the comfort of his body so close to hers. There would be other days for that, and other nights. After all, this was simply just the first step along the path, they had all the time in the world to wander it and see where they might end up.

Chapter End Notes

The genesis of this chapter was born out of commentary and insight into this episode and another one by Chris Carter and Frank Spotnitz. In fact, it is that commentary more than anything that spurred this entire series, the building of this complex relationship between these two. This was the only scene I had mapped out from the beginning and it was very fun to put it to paper.
Moving On

Chapter Summary

In which Scully learns to move on.

Daniel dozed lightly as she knocked on his hospital room door. His eyes jerked open, but he smiled when he saw her.

"I didn't think you would come," he murmured drowsily, stirring to wakefulness.

"I felt I should." Scully smiled as she reached to help him sit up further in his bed. "Maggie called, said you would be discharged in the morning."

"Yeah, they are kicking me out of the place. Well, at least as a patient, when I get back on my feet I'll return as an advisor."

"That's good," Scully replied. She was glad to hear he would at least keep up with his work.

"Yeah, seems you caused quite a stir with your stunt, Dana. Now Kopeikan wants to investigate more about this and don't think I won't drag you in here to speak on this 'alternative healing' business."

"I wouldn't be a good resource, Daniel. I'm not sure how much of it I understand or believe myself." She settled into the chair beside his bed comfortably. "I could find someone else that could help you, though."

"Don't believe in it?" He shot her a skeptical look. "Then why did you do it?"

She shrugged mildly. "Wasn't it you who told me that in treating a patient, sometimes you have to go with your gut instinct?"

"I didn't mean regarding cults and witchdoctors."

"It worked, didn't it?" She raised an eyebrow up at him challengingly.

He didn't back down. "That needs to be tested and verified before I agree to it working."

A typical scientists answer and one she would have made once upon a time not so long ago.

"I suppose then that I've expanded my horizons a bit more," she stated.

"Yes, that you have." He watched her thoughtfully. "And I do have to thank you for my life."

"There is that," she teased good-naturedly.

"And also for Maggie. I don't know what you said to her, but…it's been better the last week. Perhaps me almost dying brought us to an understanding. I know for me…you were right, Dana. I nearly died and I would have left so much left unsaid to her."

"I'm glad."

Scully truly was, for Maggie's sake. "I know that when my father passed I had to deal
with what was left behind between us. Don't make that mistake yourself."

"I'm trying," he admitted, looking sheepish. "I know I've done wrong by her and by Barbara. Perhaps you are right, this is a chance to correct what I did wrong."

"Don't throw away those opportunities when they come your way," Scully cautioned him gently. "Each one of them is a gift."

"I know." He looked at her, expectantly. She knew what he wanted her to say.

"Maggie wants me to give up the position here," he continued, prodding her. "Move with her back to the West Coast. Stanford would take me back in a heartbeat. If not, there is Berkley, UCLA, USC, all close enough to visit, I guess."

"There all really fine schools," she assured him evasively.

"Yes, they are. But they aren't close to here, are they?"

"Daniel," she sighed, half irritated, half sorry at his blatant effort to get her to agree. "I have expressed my thoughts on this."

"You've told me what you thought, Dana, and I know you. You can rationalize the sun out of the sky if you chose to. What I haven't heard from you is what you feel." He reached across the bed to her, his hand feeling frail in her own. "I've waited for so long for you, Dana. Ten years!"

"That's just it, Daniel. You waited ten years and you knew where I was the whole time." She blinked at his hopeful expression, wondering why he didn't see that. "Why didn't you ever once come to me in that time, tell me you were here?"

He looked abashed. "Because...I don't know, Dana. When you left on the terms you did, I realized that you were too angry with me to really properly think things through."

"Too angry?" She scoffed at his condescension. Angry wasn't the word she would use. "I don't know, Daniel, I think the reason you never did was because you were afraid I would still tell you no."

"Dana," he sighed, but she cut him off gently, squeezing his hand.

"Daniel, I thought through things then. I've thought them through every day for ten years. I wasn't a child then, I'm certainly not one now, and I know that you are not my future."

He didn't want to hear that. She had hurt him and for that she felt badly, but it was the truth, and he needed to come to grips with it.

"Dana, I know I broke your trust then, but I gave it all up for you."

"Is that really the truth?" She didn't suspect it was. "Daniel, you weren't happy with Barbara for years. You and I wouldn't have happened if you were. Perhaps you should stop and consider that and realize that your life is for you and for Maggie. It isn't for me."

He frowned stubbornly, shaking his head. "You doubt that I love you?"

"I don't doubt that you are in love with me," Scully replied carefully. "Or at least you are in love with an aspect of me. You are in love with a girl who is twenty-two-years-old, who adored you, who worshipped the ground you walked on. You are in love with a girl who believed you and wanted to
please you. But Daniel, I'm not that girl anymore. I don't know if I ever really was. We had a
wonderful time when we were together, I won't deny that, or that I loved you, once. But that was a
long time ago. And I've moved on. Perhaps you should think of doing that yourself."

Sometimes the truth was painful. It ached to tell Daniel that. She knew it pained him even more. He
stared at her, expression tight as she watched the hope fade. Daniel could be stubborn, but he wasn't
foolish. "There is someone else, isn't there?"

He hit uncomfortably close. She wanted to shrug, to look down and wave it off. Instead, she met his
accusing gaze and nodded. "There is."

Scully had never crushed a dream before. It wasn't something she relished doing, seeing that light die
in Daniel's eyes. Ten years he had held on to the memory of a woman he had cared for. But like all
burdens, it was time for him to let it go.

"When?" He managed after long moments, his voice faltering and cracking.

"Does it matter?"

His shoulders drooped. "No, I guess it doesn't."

What else could she say?

"Daniel, when I saw you last week, I…was at a crossroads and I couldn't decide which path to take.
I could cling to the memories of what was, and keep carrying all the weight I had been for years or I
could choose to release it. I think you coming into my life again needed to happen so I could
understand that, just as I think I needed to enter into yours, both to save your life, but also to help you
let go."

He didn't look as if he believed her. And that saddened her. She had hoped that she could leave
Daniel on a good note and cherish the memory of a man she had once loved. Sensing that whether
she liked it or not this was how things were going to end, she carefully detached herself from
Daniel's hand, rising from her seat and leaning in to brush her lips against his cheek. He flinched but
didn't stop her.

"I did love you once, very much. Thank you for that, Daniel." She stood, trying to smile brightly
despite the heartache written all over the other man's face.

He only nodded with eyes turned towards the blanket over him. "Is this man you are in love with…is
it your partner? That man you are always with?"

"His name is Mulder." She didn't confirm or deny whether or not he was the new love in her life, but
she didn't need to. Daniel clearly knew.

"Dana, can that man possibly make you happy?"

He said it as if it was clearly impossible for Mulder to ever make anyone happy. She tried not to let
her anger get the best of her in this situation. Instead, she simply spoke what was in her heart. "I have
to try, Daniel."

It was an honest answer, perhaps not romantic, but then again her romance with Mulder wasn't
exactly the typical, bodice-ripper kind. Whether Daniel approved of him or not was inconsequential.
Perhaps he realized that too.

"I hope he makes you happy, Dana."
"I think he will. He's the one man I trust more than life itself. I think I just finally had to wake up to what that really meant."

Scully just wished she didn't have to hurt Daniel in the process.

The knock at the door sounded, and Scully turned to find Maggie there, watching the scene carefully. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah," she replied, perhaps a little too brightly. "I have to go get some autopsy information from downstairs anyway. I will leave you two to plan your escape."

Scully turned a grateful smile on her former lover. "Let me know when you get settled in."

"Sure," he replied softly. She didn't know if he would. Somehow, instinct told Scully she may never hear from Daniel again. A chance encounter in her life that had changed everything. Sometimes that was all it took.

With one last, hopeful look to Maggie, she left her past behind. She made her way to the elevator and to the one person who seemed to be her future. He happened to be standing at the nurse's station, pretending to be poring over a file in front of him, but clearly had half an eye on the elevator. The minute she alighted, his long legs strode over to her.

"So, all settled," Mulder asked, quirking a dark eyebrow as he glanced randomly somewhere above him.

"I made it clear to him that there was no future for us, if that's what you are asking." She smirked at him as he pretended to be coolly nonchalant.

"Pity you had to break his heart no sooner than they get it fixed." He didn't sound too terribly sorry about it.

"Mulder, Daniel is a good man, at the end of the day, he just made shitty life choices. Which one of us hasn't?"

"Would a good man lie to you, Scully?" He was quickly turning defensive. His insecurity was showing badly. She tried not to laugh, knowing it would only injure his ego further.

"Yes, he lied to me, and yes, we broke up over it. That man upstairs just spent ten years of his life living on the dream of hope only to have it crushed by me just now, and I think that you of all people can appreciate how truly awful that feels for him at this moment."

He groaned, rolling his eyes. "Fine! You are right, I do. You can't even let me hate your ex properly, Scully?"

"No, and stop being jealous." As childish as it was, she wasn't about to tell him that a small part of her appreciated it greatly.

"Fine, then we have a case on those drunk teens after all. There was another death, same spot, this time a man in his twenties who was sober as Skinner in a budget meeting."

Scully listened to him ramble, carrying on about some sort of weird coincidences between drunken teens, a tea totaling Mormon missionary, and a woods that was supposedly affected by ancient, slave magic. Mulder was back on the road again, running pell mell into the unknown. She could have chosen a different life, one that didn't involve trundling into the woods outside of town on a spring day that looked as if it threatened rain. But then, she didn't think she would want any other life than
this one, with this man by her side. Wherever their new relationship led them, at least he would always be just Mulder.

She was quite happy with it, all in all.

"Scully, you paying attention?"

"Yeah, voodoo rites, chicken blood, bats spleen, I think I got it."

He only rolled his eyes clearly irritated she wasn't listening, stalking off in single-minded concentration on their newest case. She watched him retreat with a goofy grin. At least this part of their relationship would never, ever change.
Wake Up Call

Chapter Summary

In which Scully receives yet another early morning call.

For once the intrusive phone call at 4 AM was not from Mulder.

While they didn't spend every night together, they happened to the night before. He had come over to finish paperwork with the hope that with diligent work other things would come later, but he'd only been at it an hour when, complaining of a headache, they had retired to her bed and not for the activity Mulder had hoped for. When the phone rang, Scully reached for it, trying to dig herself out from under Mulder's possessive grasp.

"Scully," she grunted, hoping that it sounded like English.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Agent Scully. This is Skinner."

That had her wide-awake. Heart in her throat, she wondered for half a wild second if he suspected that Mulder was in her bed right at that moment.

"Sir," she croaked, trying to sit up, Mulder's heavy arm making it difficult.

"I need you to find Mulder and get the both of you on a plane to Winston-Salem as soon as you can?"

"Why?" She ran a hand across her sleep-swollen face, willing Mulder not to snore or moan. Clearly, Skinner didn't know where he was, which lead him to calling her instead. She glanced at Mulder's silent cell phone on the top of her dresser. Thank goodness her boss couldn't trace it.

"A federal witness died a few hours ago under mysterious circumstances."

That usually wasn't a good thing. Scully grimaced as she stretched. "Any more details, sir?"

"I'll have more when you get here. This thing is moving fast and I don't have all the details, just get your asses down here as soon as you can."

"Of course, sir," she replied immediately, hanging up at the sound of the ring tone on the other end of the line. Skinner rarely went out in the field and even less frequently demanded them to be anywhere so quickly. Judging by the fact that it was a federal witness dead, Scully had a feeling that whatever this was, it was huge.

"Mulder," she murmured into the darkness, prodding his side gently. He hadn't been feeling well when they went to sleep and she hated waking him. How much sleep had he gotten in the last months?

He grunted. She prodded again, a little more forcefully this time. "Mulder!"

"Hmm," he hummed, blinking dazed eyes up at her from out of a nest of pillows. She tried not to grin sloppily at the sight.
"Skinner was on the phone. He wants us in North Carolina."

That statement only earned a snort of irritation. "North Carolina means a plane, doesn't it?"

"Yep," Scully affirmed, making to get out of her warm, shared bed, but his arm tightened around her, pinning her under the blankets. "Mulder, it's important. There's a dead, federal witness."

"If they are dead, means they aren't going anywhere anytime soon, right?"

She smirked, swatting his arm. "Duty calls, Mulder."

"So do other things." His hand wandered to caress her right breast underneath her satin nightshirt, earning an involuntary moan and a look of annoyance from Scully. "You sure our stiff can't wait?"

"I'm sure yours has to," she retorted, torn between desire and duty as his incorrigible hand moved under the clothing and began wandering across bare skin. "We can't play this game, you know that."

"We didn't play it last night. Where's my do over?" He now had pulled up from the pillows to nuzzle the skin of her neck just below her left ear. There was one, particularly sensitive spot he had already zeroed in on and if he just flicked his tongue right...there.

"Mulder," she squealed, pulling away, managing to leverage herself from out of his grasp and laughing. "Come on, we can play games later."

"How much later?" He growled in her ear as she wisely leapt off the bed and away from his grabbing arms.

"After we've done the case, or at least when we've settled into the hotel." She wandered into the bathroom, flipping on the shower as Mulder sulked in her bed. He shouldn't sulk. It just made him far too inviting and they had work.

She paused as she wandered towards her closet to shoot him a pointed look. "I promise, I'll make it worth your while."

"Tempting," he called as she rummaged for clothing. "And should I decide to remain here in protest?"

"Then I will go to Winston-Salem and you can explain to Skinner why you are in my bed in nothing but your underwear."

"Somehow, I think Skinner would side with me on this argument," he muttered, finally rousting himself from the covers, clearly prepared for something other than going down to North Carolina for a case. Scully let her eyes flicker downwards, then up again to his less-than-pleased expression.

"The sooner we go on this case, the sooner we get back, and I can think of a thing or two that would perhaps make up for this morning?"

Dark eyebrows quirked in tempted curiosity. "Really?"

"Sure," she smiled slowly, reaching to loosen one single button on her pajama top, just at the top of her cleavage. "But after the case is solved."

His eyes were riveted to the décolletage she displayed just then, his tongue licking his lips. "You sure we have to wait till after?"

"Yep," she replied, not feeling the least bit sorry in teasing him horribly.
"But, Scully, seven years! You had me waiting seven years!"

"I had you? I didn't see you making a lot of declarative statements, Mulder." She snorted, eyeing him sternly. "Home, now, get ready! I'll be by in an hour to pick you up."

He huffed as he reached for jeans, gingerly pulling them on. "You are a cruel mistress, Dana Scully."

"Talk like that and I'll have to show you how cruel I can be."

"Promises, promises," he grumbled, clearly unhappy and not pleased with her throaty laughter at his expense. Giving in somewhat, she sauntered over as he pulled on his shirt. As soon as his head was free she pulled him down to her lips, just to remind him what sort of tantalizing things he could expect later. When he pulled away, dazed, she smiled brightly.

"That shut you up. Off with you, I'll see you in an hour."

"Sure," he muttered, clearly still too muddled with other thoughts to argue any further. She snickered, wandering to her waiting shower.

"Don't forget to feed your fish," she called, hearing him wander through the apartment and closing the door, muttering something incoherent in response. She laughed outright as she slipped out of her clothes and into the shower. If she had only known Mulder was so easy to boss around like this, she might have just slept with him years ago.
Whatever had killed Jim Scobie, it had done a number on him like Scully had never seen. Everything from his mouth and nose to his trachea and lungs were eaten away, turning what was left to hamburger. It was not one of the more gruesome cases she’d seen, but certainly not the highlight of her morning. Whatever had done this was ravenous, but seemed limited only to the respiratory system. Already she was running blood work for a flesh eating virus but knew that wasn't the answer. The damage was too localized and the process was far from necrotic. She had found no evidence of acids or any other chemicals to burn away the flesh. So what in the hell was it?

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em," Mulder called cheerily, Skinner in tow. Scully looked up from the body at her boss who clearly wanted answers.

"What have you found," he asked immediately.

"Well, the tissue damage on Dr. Scobie's mouth goes all the way down his trachea into his lungs. His alveoli look like corned beef." She displayed said lung matter to the pair of them. Skinner looked sick. Mulder merely blinked. She must have desensitized him after all these years.

"What about this being the result of some corrosive agent?"

"No, that's not the case, there were no acids present, no caustics. This damage isn't the result of any kind of chemical reaction. His airways have more or less just been reamed out. I can tell you what killed him, though, strictly speaking."


"Hypoxemia, the inability to transfer oxygen from the lungs to the bloodstream."

Both men eyed the destroyed lungs as if that had to be obvious.

"He choked to death," Skinner frowned, slightly horrified at the thought. Scully nodded grimly.

"I mean…this damage?" Her boss was clearly having a hard time wrapping his mind around it. "However it was accomplished, someone did this to him?"

"Well, not necessarily," Mulder offered thoughtfully. "There weren't any signs of struggle in the room. Maybe no one was ever there."

"Where are you going with this," Skinner asked, perhaps half afraid of what Mulder might suggest.

"Well, that it isn't a homicide," he replied matter-of-factly. "You examined the body, Scully. Did you find any of these?"

Between his two fingers he held up a bug. It looked like some sort of roach or beetle. Scully wrinkled her nose and stared at him.
"A bug?"

"Well, it's a tobacco beetle, yeah."

Scully laughed, and then glanced at Skinner. If Mulder had to have a crazy theory to throw out there, why did he have to do it in front of their boss?

"I didn't find anything like that, Mulder," she replied firmly. "Were you expecting me to?"

He only shrugged in response.

This was clearly not the sort of factual, scientific response that Skinner was hoping for. "Killer bugs? This is what I'm supposed to tell the Director?"

Mulder hardly seemed bothered by Skinner's lack of enthusiasm for the idea. "I don't know, but judging from Dr. Voss's reaction to this I think it's the thing we should investigate."

Skinner's only response was to stare at him. Scully sighed deeply. Skinner had never been as exposed to Mulder's more outlandish theories as she had been. He had no experience with the Mulder habit of dropping crazy theories in the middle of conversations that somehow made sense in his own mind, if nowhere else.

"Mulder, I can honestly say that I've never seen an insect who actually gnawed away at human flesh and even if there were one that could eat human flesh, in no way would it be as localized as this."

"But you and I have both seen aggressive insects before. Remember cockroaches up in Massachusetts?"

Her eyes narrowed as she did indeed recall just the cockroaches he was mentioning. "Cockroaches, Dr. Bambi's suggested imported cockroaches." Her voiced dripped with sarcasm.

Mulder nearly choked, coughing mildly. Skinner, if possible, looked even more confused.

"Errr, yes, Dr. Berenbaum's suggested cockroaches. The point is they were aggressive, alien insects. They didn't belong in that area and no one had seen that behavior before."

"The difference here is that if this is a tobacco beetle, chances are it is native to this area. There are thousands of acres of tobacco fields out here and no one else has died like this around here."

"Maybe it's not something in the tobacco fields, Scully, but in a particular tobacco field. Morley is working on something, something Voss has lawyered up for. Maybe whatever they are working on has some sort of genetic effect on these bugs."

He wasn't totally off base. Skinner glanced at her as if to reassure him that Mulder wasn't nearly as crazy as he sounded and did have some shred of scientific evidence to back up his plan. She humored him. "There are truck loads of studies done that show that genetically modified plants do have an adverse effect on those that consume them, including insects. It is possible, in theory, that should a tobacco plant be altered to improve it for market use that an insect that consumes it would have some sort of genetic alterations."

"So in theory we could have killer bugs, correct?" Mulder's hint of a smile was ever so triumphant.

"In theory," she replied carefully, glancing sideways at Skinner. "I'd have to test that theory, however."
"Do it," he ordered with a snap. His dark eyes flickered between the pair of them, half in wonder, half in mild amusement. "Are the two of you always like this?"

Scully blinked, glancing at Mulder cautiously. Her partner's eyes went wide in innocent confusion, a state she knew he was feigning. "Like what, sir?"

"This…patter? Back and forth?" He waved a blunt finger between the two of them, frowning over his rimless glasses. "It's just…is this how you work?"

For a sudden, horrifying second, Scully wondered if Skinner knew.

"Seven years is a long time to work with anyone, sir," Mulder cut in smoothly before panic could get the better of Scully. "And I think that Agent Scully and I have developed a sort of repartee. Helps us work more efficiently."

Skinner only stared at him. "It certainly explains a lot," he murmured, jerking his bald head towards the door. "Mulder, you're with me, I want to see what we can find out on this project of Voss's. Scully, find out what you can on the insects. Keep me posted."

With that, he turned on his well-shined shoes and marched out. Scully watched him leave, biting back the nervous laugh that bubbled to the surface as she glanced at Mulder.

"He knows," she whispered, completely sure of it.

"He knows nothing," he shot back, smirking. "Skinner has suspected for years, but doesn't know anything."

"Mulder, if he finds out?"

"As if half the FBI hasn't suspected I've been shtupping you since you walked in the door?" His voice dropped and he smiled lazily as he gave her the brief, once over. "Have I ever told you how dead sexy you are when you are cutting up bodies."

That earned a snort out of her and a swat on his shoulder. "Shut up and get out there before he finally does suspect that there is something."

"Always had a thing for doctors, you know."

"Liar," she called, turning from his ringing laughter as she frowned at the body of one Jim Scobie. Killer bugs? It was possible. But if they were eating their way in, the damage would be more general than this and Scobie would have died of blood loss well before he would have smothered to death. With a sigh, she found her cell phone and began putting in calls. She needed to figure out who in the region would specialize in tobacco beetles. She certainly hoped that whoever they were, their name wasn't Bambi.
Buying Time

Chapter Summary

In which Scully tries to buy Mulder a little time.

The ventilator rose and fell, giving the impression of breathing, while Mulder lay so very still and quiet on his bed on the other side of the glass. It wasn't the first time Scully had sat watching her partner in the hospital, but it was the first time since they had become lovers, and in this one moment Scully almost wished she hadn't crossed that invisible line between them. This was hell, sitting here, watching him fight to breathe.

"Doctor Scully?" The voice at her shoulder caught her attention, the physician assigned to her partner handing her a chart. "We've got him stabilized on ECMO for the moment, but we're not going to be able to maintain him on it for long."

He pulled out the flimsy X-rays for her to examine with a concerned expression. "Of course, you see why."

She glanced at the milky images on the dark plastic and felt her stomach plummet. "There's more than there were six hours ago!" Inside Mulder's lungs were the ghostly images of larvae, tiny, white grubs, all squirming inside of the passages where his vital oxygen needed to go.

"They're beginning to block the flow of blood." Without blood flowing to the lungs there was no oxygen getting to it. His body would begin to die.

"Our best bet is to go back in there," the doctor continued. "I think this time we have to crack the chest."

Surgery? Scully glanced to the feeble body of her partner, starved of needed oxygen. "No, no, he's too weak for thoracic surgery. He'd...he'd die on the table!"

Images swirled to mind of Mulder's chest flayed wide open, the very one she had curled up against just that morning, the ribs cracked, the lungs cut open, as she stood by and watched his life ebb away in front of her. Panic and fear warred with her doctor's reason as she fought back tears that threatened. This couldn't be happening now. Not like this. It just wasn't fair!

The doctor seemed to understand. He looked helpless as well while he glanced at Mulder's still form, lost as to what to do. "I don't know what our other options are."

Her nose burned as she willed herself not to fall to pieces, not here. "I'd say," she finally managed through a throat clogged with tears. "For the time being, we just wait."

The doctor didn't look convinced. "That'll definitely kill him sooner or later."

His words were a caution, spoken part in worry, part in frustration that there was nothing he could do, but Scully felt them like a punch to the gut, a knifing pain as she turned eyes back to the man on the other side of the window. She knew how the physician felt. It pissed her off that there was nothing she could do either. How many times had she stood right here with Mulder, watching him fail from one infection or the other? It was just last summer when she had to stand by and watch his
beautiful mind deteriorate before her eyes. Then she at least tried to do something. She had hopped a plane, flown to Africa, had stretched the limits of her own belief to figure out some way of bringing Mulder back from whatever it was that had threatened his life. It was habit with her, to do anything to save him, born from that first, awful moment so long ago in nearby Raleigh when he'd been shot in the leg on a case. He was her partner. It was her duty to save him.

Except now, everything was different. Back then, he had simply been the man she worked with, the fellow who her father had scorned as being a crackpot and her brother had hated as being a threat to her safety. She and Mulder had been through so much together in those seven years between then and now. They had traveled down the narrow, dangerous rode of trust, from partnership, to friendship, to best friends, to now lovers. Just as they had finally come to the very realization that so many around them had seen for years, it was all coming apart. Standing here, watching him, it had been so much simpler back before she had invited Mulder into her bed. Perhaps, back then, she could lie to herself and pretend that the invisible barrier she kept between them really meant something, that despite it all, it wasn't as if they were anything more than friends. Logic and reason told her now that had been all a convenient story she told herself, but it had served its purpose. She had willed herself to put that distance between her and Mulder, to allow it not to hurt as much when he lay so still in that hospital bed.

Now she had the memory of his touch against her skin, his lips against her mouth, the taste of him on her tongue, and the scent of him on her hair as she woke up to his groggy smile on the pillow next to her. What would she do now without the annoying way he snored into her ear as he slept? Who else would leave her toilet seat up in the middle of the night? Mostly, she suspected, on purpose. Who else would wake her up in the morning with insistent hands and gentle kisses and smile in smug delight as she whimpered the first name he hated so much?

Scully scrubbed at her face, pushing back both tears and fatigue. How in the hell did this happen so fast? Insects in his lungs? The only thing they had to go on was the now missing Darrel Weaver, the test subject whose smoke had the most direct contact with Mulder. Until they could get a hold of him and his cigarettes they would have no idea how the beetles were mutated to spread so rapidly, let alone how to kill them off in time to save his life. Until then, she had to hope that the mass of larvae would not distress him further or cut off the supply of blood to his lungs. She was taking a gamble doing this, and not just with anyone's life. It was Mulder's. Just when she had finally opened herself up to him? This just couldn't be happening!

"I'm not letting you go yet," she whispered against the glass, thinking of the doctor and damning his words. "The hell I'm letting this take you away from me."

The only response she got back from him was the gentle rise and fall of his chest as the respirators hummed in the silent room.
Mulder was acting with his usual aplomb in the hospital, which was to say, of course, that he was annoying every doctor and whining loudly about not being allowed to go home. Sadly, he had met his match with the one doctor in the house who mattered.

"Scully!" His whining took on that pleading, nasal tone, scratched and rasped by the suctioning in his throat just days before. "I feel better! Come on!"

"Mmmm." She ignored him, studying his charts through her reading glasses, her lips pursed as she attempted to ignore the puppy dog eyes boring a hole through the clipboard.

"I haven't coughed up a bug in days! You said if I didn't cough up a bug, I could go home!"

Honestly, he was worse than a five-year-old, only with a memory that would put the most wheedling child to shame. She merely arched a warning eyebrow as she continued to study the paperwork. His oxygen levels were returning to normal, but there was still extensive lung damage. Enough that he would be out for a while…again. Human resources would love to hear that. She sighed as she shook her head.

"Mulder, no sooner do I get you patched up than you are on leave yet again."

He shrugged at her dark scowl, smiling boyishly. "I'm just lucky?"

"I wouldn't call this luck." She glared, rolling her eyes as she returned to his charts. "You're lungs are healing, though there will be traces of larvae there for some time, so they'll put you on a some expectorant for a while."

"Lovely! Coughing up worms!" He made a face deliberately to try and make her laugh. Scully's mouth twitched but she schooled her features, cutting her eyes at him. Mulder hardly looked repentant.

"Also, your blood pressure levels are elevated, likely from the stress and infection. We'll keep an eye on that." She noticed his fingers, inching towards her as she leaned against his bed, and neatly stepped aside without so much as a glance. "If you have any rapid heart rate, fatigue, headaches, let me know. You experienced serious respiratory capillary damage."

"Right, right, if my toe aches or I sneeze, call you." He was becoming more disgruntled with her distance and detachment by the minute. "Of course, I could think of one painful spot you could take care of rather nicely if you would simply come over here."

Scully simply arched an eyebrow, using all of her willpower not to laugh outright. Instead, she busied herself with his blood work. His white blood cell count was high, but that was to be expected with an infection of the lungs.

"Scully," he whined. She ignored it. He sighed dramatically and threw himself against his thin pillow
and raised mattress.

"You, Doctor, have crappy bedside manners."

"If by bedside manners you mean you are upset that I won't let you feel me up in a public hospital room, I think you might have to change your perception of what I do."

"Do you know how long I've fantasized about you in a little, white lab coat and a stethoscope at my hospital bedside."

"I think that's more a testament to how many times you've been in the hospital and not to your raging libido." She snickered, finally giving in enough to step in and plant a light kiss on his pouting lips. "Besides, till those lungs heal up, no extraneous physical exertion. No running, no basketball, no gym, and sadly, no sex."

He looked utterly crestfallen at this.

"What do you mean, 'no sex', like, you and I can't…"

He trailed off, looking hopeful at her, perhaps imagining she would be willing to bargain.

"Nope, can't do that either, not till I can trust that you won't stop breathing or have a heart attack in the middle."

"Scully, I had that happen even before I sucked in beetle larvae in my lungs, the things you can do with your…"

"Nevertheless," she cut him off, gently slapping his arm as he grinned in wicked unrepentance. "You need to rest and get back on your feet. The doctor said you should be here another couple of days and he will send you back to DC."

"Send me back to DC?" Confusion clouded the lust that had been on Mulder's face before then. "Why? Aren't you going to be here?"

"Nope," she returned, snapping his chart shut and slipping it into the crook of her arm. It pained her to say it, especially when he gave her that wounded, puppy look.

"But who else will nurse me to health?" He acted as if he hadn't had other doctors and nurses he had groused at over the many, long years.

"I'm sure that the staff here will do fine," she assured him, smirking at his displeasure. "I have to get back. The federal prosecutor is already hot on this and he wants my scientific findings as soon as possible. If it comes our that Morley Cigarettes knew about these beetle larvae in their crop and allowed test groups to continue smoking their product even after the fact it will only pile onto the charges that the government is bringing against them."

"Oh, that! Silly federal cases." Mulder rolled his eyes, his raspy voice petulant as he sank further into the bed. "You'd think people were dying or something."

He was teasing, joking, and she knew it, but it still stung as she pulled slightly from him, trying desperately to mask the tears pricking at the corner of her eyes. Honestly, getting emotional like this when he was alive and right in front of her!

Mulder, for all that he was still in recovery, didn't miss a beat. "Hey, Scully?" He reached for her as she turned, attempting to busy herself with gathering her things. His fingers wrapped around her
elbow, holding her firm as the burning sensation blistered down her nose and she felt her lip tremble. She bit it hard.

"Dana," he whispered in his ghostly voice, still raw from what he had just experienced, and the last of her reserve evaporated as large tears welled up and down the bridge of her nose. She tried to pull from him again, but even in his sick bed he was strong enough to pull her towards him, practically toppling her to the mattress beside him as she sniffed loudly into his shoulder

"Dana, honey, I'm sorry," he muttered as best as he could, softly, voice squeaking as she sobbed quietly into his hospital gown. "I was being a smart-ass. I wasn't thinking."

"You were dying, Mulder…again!" She choked slightly as she recalled that horrible moment as his vitals dropped and she realized there was nothing she could do. "I was standing there and I couldn't think of a thing to save you."

"Shhh, don't cry, please." He hugged her tighter, his stubbled cheek against the top of her head. "I wasn't thinking. Shit!"

God, how many times had she sat by his bedside after close encounters? Never before had she lost her composure like this. It was as if all those years of pent up frustration and anxiety released themselves in this one moment and it made her feel mildly embarrassed.

"No, I'm sorry, Mulder, going to pieces like this. You'd think I'd never had to do that before, standing at your bedside and hope to God you'd make it."

"Yeah, maybe one too many times." He sighed, reaching the one arm not pinned to the bed to tilt her tear stained face upwards. "God, I really am the world's biggest asshole."

She wanted to assure him he wasn't. But something perverse and impish broke through her grief and woe as she laughed sadly. "Yeah, Mulder, you kind of are."

He feigned hurt as a thumb wiped at her tears. "Well, you didn't have to agree with me."

"How often do I agree with you on anything, Mulder? Take it while you can."

"I think I will," he replied in as low of a growl as he could manage with a voice already only a whisper. He leaned in, nipping at her tear-stained lips, soft, but hungry. His free hand roamed down the side of her suit coat, resting invitingly on the curve of her hip and he waggled a suggestive eyebrow at her.

How she wished they were at home right now…

"Tell you what, Mulder," she murmured, trying to sound as sexy as possible with a tear-stopped nose. "You let me go and do my report to the federal prosecutors, you stay here and get better. When you are back home in a day or two, I'll show you what sort of doctoring I can do."

The sheer possibilities in that statement was enough to make Mulder's eyes gleam in his shadowed face. "Promise?"

"I might even have a white lab coat from Quantico still squirreled away somewhere."

He sighed heavily as he released her. "Fine!"

"Good!" She leaned in to place a soft peck on his lips before scrambling off the hospital bed. "And I need that voice of yours back, Mulder. I plan to wear it out all over again when I get my hands on
you."

The look of anticipation on his face was well worth the suggestion. Scully laughed as she gathered her things, giving him one last kiss before heading out of the hospital door. As she did, a beleaguered looking nurse in pink scrubs wandered past, and Scully almost felt sorry for the poor woman, after all, she was the one who would have to attend a physically confined and sexually frustrated Mulder.
Patchiness

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder is unhappy with Scully's treatment methods.

True to her word, she made it up to Mulder, much to his delight. The lost opportunity from the morning of Skinner's call was more than made up for and she had indeed managed to find an old autopsy lab coat from Quantico. In the end, Mulder hadn't minded his convalescence nearly as much as he had suspected he would. The nicotine withdrawals, however, were another matter.

"I haven't smoked since before I was married to Diana," he groused as he settled on her couch comfortably, glaring at nothing in particular. He had been grumpy throughout the workday ever since she had made him throw away the pack of cigarettes he had purchased on his way to work that morning.

"Why did you ever get started?" Scully wandered to the kitchen where dinner was being prepared.

"To piss my parents off," he replied lightly. "Though, they were ones to talk. The two of them smoked like chimney stacks when we were kids."

"Yeah, but that was the thing to do, both of mine did as well." Scully had understood her father's cigar habit in a way. It seemed to go with her image of her father, the sea captain who liked his Irish whiskey, poker games, and occasional football. It was her mother who had always confounded her. Prim and proper Maggie, perfect Irish Catholic mother, educated by nuns, nothing about her said that she would be the one to take up cigarettes. So it was much to Scully's surprise as a child when she happened upon her mother out in back of the house one night, smoking a cigarette secretly and crying to herself. It had been her mother's stress relief on those long voyages her father took. Scully had kept her mother's secret dutifully, even though most of the family knew about it.

"I can't imagine your mother smoking," Mulder muttered, as if reading her thoughts.

"Yeah, well she was the reason Missy took up the habit for a while in her teens. Hell, even I used to sneak out a cigarette or two to try when I was young."

"Dana Scully, you rebel!" Mulder sounded exceedingly pleased by the notion. Scully poked her head out of her kitchen to smirk at him.

"Yeah, I tried it and hated it. But I thought it was so grown up!"

"I did too," Mulder reminisced pleasantly as Scully returned to the kitchen, pulling out pasta from the cabinet and frozen sauce from the freezer. "I only did it occasionally in high school, being an athlete, we were banned from doing it while in season. It got bad in Oxford. God, everyone in England smokes like a fiend. My university days were spent with a cig in one hand and a pint in the other."

"And Phoebe in the middle?" She couldn't help herself.

"Sometimes," Mulder evaded, not being baited as Scully snickered in impish delight.

"Ah, the college life!"
"Yeah, well Diana made me quit when we moved in together."

Well, that was one good thing that Mulder's ex had managed to do. Scully instantly felt guilty for that stray thought. She shouldn't think ill of the dead, no matter what Diana Fowley did in life.

"And now?" Scully wandered to the doorway again, regarding Mulder as she opened a box of linguini. "You going to take up smoking on the sly just to get your nicotine fix?"

"Nah," Mulder replied, sitting up to unbutton the long sleeve of his shirt. He rolled it up enough to show a small, flesh-colored, plastic patch on the hairless side of his arm. "Figured I'd not earn your wrath and try this instead."

"Good," Scully nodded, though admittedly she wasn't terribly sure she was any more pleased with the patch than with a cigarette. "Perhaps in a week or two you'll be over it."

"Hey, you are the one who shot me full of nicotine."

"Only to save your life," she pointed out mildly, giving him a look that said she was having second thoughts.

He grinned by way of response. "You do that a lot, you know."

"Do what?" She was already becoming distracted again by the thought of dinner as she meandered slowly back to the kitchen.

"Save my life."

She paused, shrugging as she turned to regard him with a smile. "It's what we do for each other. I save your life, you save mine. Antarctica, Africa, it all works out in the end."

"Wish it didn't have to be that way," Mulder's uncharacteristic sigh gave Scully pause as she frowned at him. What had gotten him so melancholy?

"We would have to stop being FBI agents for that to end," she pointed out good-naturedly, trying to earn a smile out of him. "People shoot at you less when you don't have a badge."

"How many times have we been shot in the line of duty?"

"I think more often than the average person gets shot, I'd warrant," she snickered, returning to the couch to muse down at his pensive face. "I don't know, you got shot in North Carolina when we first started working together, and then again that time when I was stung by the bee."

He grimaced at that memory. "Feels like more than that." He paused, blinking hard as he thought, a small smile forming at the corners of his mouth. "Didn't you shoot me once?"

Hell, he had to bring that time up.

"You nearly killed Krycek," she protested instantly.

"And this would have been a bad thing because..."

Even if privately she did agree with him in principle, she'd never admit it out loud. "Mulder, you'd have had two murders they would have tried to pin you for, and only one of them would you actually have committed, but it wouldn't have mattered as the only person to give evidence would have been dead."
"True. Still, you didn't have to shoot me over it." He blinked wounded eyes as he prodded at the shoulder she hit so long ago. Scully ignored his crocodile tears, even if the scar that still resided there made her wince in guilt every time she brushed her fingers against it.

"I was so terrified when you went down," she laughed, memory winning over dinner as she sank into one of the armchairs nearest to Mulder. "You were bleeding everywhere, Krycek had run, and I was trying to carry you to the car while your neighbors were in a panic. I finally got one of them to help me carry you there, promising I was a federal agent and was going to take you to a hospital."

The madness of the entire scene sounded funny to her now. At the time she had been terrified. Mulder had seemingly lost his mind, his father had just been killed, the DAT tape that had first revealed the true nature of just what his father and Spender had been up to had gone missing, and all she knew was that the only person who could help her translate the information off of it was some Navajo code talker in New Mexico. That all seemed so long ago now, so much had happened since then, and she had nearly lost Mulder several times over in the intervening five years.

"I don't know, Mulder," she sighed, finally, a thumb picking at the top of the pasta box. "It's never easy seeing you go down like that."

"You think it's easy for me the other way?" He cocked a dark eyebrow at her dubiously. "I nearly killed Ritter after he shot you."

The darkness to his scowl reminded her all too well of the near fate suffered by Agent Ritter in New York. Mulder wasn't the only one who was surprised that Ritter managed to survive the incident, let alone walk away without a broken jaw.

"When they called me, Scully, I swear I nearly puked in the trash right there." The despair and relief sounded as fresh then as it had over a year ago when it happened.

She smiled softly at him. "I didn't die then."

"God knows how," he muttered, shaking his head in true wonder. "Perhaps I should take this religion thing up. Obviously there's an angel watching over you."

"Don't joke like that," she mildly admonished him, knowing too well his propensity for heretical humor. But he met her frown with a steady certitude.

"I mean it, Scully. The number of times you've nearly died since I've known you is staggering. Between kidnappings, cancer, whatever that smoking son-of-a-bitch is up to, it's a miracle you are even breathing."

She could say the same for Mulder. He had his fair share of gunshots and close calls, not to mention whatever alien virus had ravaged his system and nearly killed him just months ago. Their lives over seven years had been filled with the sort of danger that should make more sane people think about getting into a different profession.

She considered that as she regarded him, sprawled out on her couch, his long legs draped over the edge. "You know," she began carefully, unsure of how to even broach this idea. "What I said earlier, about leaving the FBI. Have you thought about it?"

Bright eyes turned up to her, wondering in surprise. "Leaving the X-files?"

"Yeah," she queried, busying herself with the ragged edges of the pasta box she had partially opened. "I mean, you know the truth about your sister now. You've discovered the plot that your father was involved in and you helped to end the conspiracy. You've done a lot, Mulder."
"Do you think I should leave?" His question was part accusation, part honest curiosity. Scully bit back the automatic need to defend herself.

"I'm not saying what I think one way or the other, but I do have to wonder what is next."

She didn't just mean with their work, and she knew he understood that.

"There are still things I would like to see through," he said honestly. "Still questions I want to see answered."

He'd said that before, after they had discovered Samantha's fate, after the death of his mother. "What sort of questions?"

"I want to know what it was exactly my father and Spender where up to. If there was a colonization plan like I was told, what happened to it?"

"That was foiled long ago, at El Rico, when Cassandra died."

"Do you honestly believe it's as simple as that?" Mulder clearly didn't. He blinked mildly at her. "And do you think Spender would be up to his same old tricks, luring you out in the middle of nowhere if it were as simple as that?"

She knew he was right. That didn't stop Scully from wishing it were as simple as that, of wishing they could just stop now, to walk away from this, to figure out what this new, tentative relationship between the two of them was.

"Will there ever be an end?" Her question came out sounding far more morose than she intended.

"I'd like to think that there would be. I have hope at least." He smiled, reaching a long arm across the way to her. She grabbed his outstretched fingers with her own and squeezed.

"No more dying on me for a while, okay?" She knew it was an impossible request to make of him, but she couldn't help herself.

"Same to you," he replied, a slow smile spreading across his face. He tugged gently on her fingers, attempting to pull her towards him, but she slipped her hand out of his with a cheeky smirk.

"If you want to eat dinner anytime soon, you aren't getting me over there."

"Who says I'm hungry for dinner at the moment?"

The wolfish grin only earned a snort out of her. "Food first, other things later."

"This is like that annoying desert rule, isn't it?"

Scully only laughed as she wandered back into the kitchen. "Meal first, desert afterwards." She shot him a suggestive look as she returned to preparing their meal.

"Who needs a bullet or bugs to kill me? I think you are doing just fine on your own." Mulder's disgruntled complaint sounded from the living room, frustrated and annoyed. Scully wasn't the least bit sorry.
A First Date

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder attempts to do something charming.

"Do you like French food?"

The questioned was tossed out across their shared office as if he were asking her about the weather or where the case files went. Scully looked up from the article she was reading, glancing over the top of her glasses at him. Judging from the horribly affected look of innocence on Mulder's face, he was up to something.

"I do like French, why?"

"No reason." He turned back to his computer, crunching on a sunflower seed and ignoring her patently curious stare.

She had returned to her work after several minutes, figuring it was better not to ask Mulder what he was up to because there was a high probability that it would involve either a flight somewhere or her cutting up a dead body. She returned to her article and thought nothing more of it, at least, not until she prepared to gather her things at the end of the day.

"So, will I see you then tonight?" They didn't spend every night together, but it had been three days, a long stretch for them. Mulder's response was to shoot her a sly grin.

"How about I pick you up in, oh…about two hours?" He glanced at the heavy watch on his wrist. "Wear something sexy."

She paused, surprised. He usually wasn't this open about their relationship at the office. "Like, private time sexy or me being presentable in public sexy?"

He chuckled. "Both, if you like. But dress to go out in public. I think I'd not want to explain to the fine Metro Police why an agent of the law was out in her lingerie at night."

Not to mention the furor it would start in the office. "Can I ask where we are going?"

"You know French and that's good enough."

It all added up in Scully's mind quickly. Mulder's idea of good food certainly did not involve anything foreign unless it was a taco or pizza. He was willingly taking her someplace nice, a place where she had to dress nicely for it. Understanding took root as she arched an eyebrow at him speculatively.

"Is this a date?"

Mulder only shot her an unfathomable smile. "What? It could be dinner between two partners."

"Yeah, you're idea of dinner with me is Chinese take out."
"Well, things have changed of late." He shrugged, glancing at his watch pointedly. "And if I want to take you out in a devastating outfit, you better hop to it. Reservations are at eight."

Reservations? The place even had those? Becoming more intrigued by the minute, Scully shot him a wide smile and hustled out of the door, mentally cataloguing what in the world she possibly had in her closet that could be deemed "sexy". When was the last time she had ever had to dress sexy for anyone?

Nearly seven years ago, she recalled…

The next hour was spent driving frantically home only to tear through her closet, hoping against hope she could piece together an outfit that didn't look like it had fallen off of the set of a bad, 80's nighttime drama. As much as she hated to do it, she settled on the dress she had worn to dinner with Spender, vowing she would never tell Mulder about the last time she had used it, making up for it by wearing at least something a little sexier underneath it. At 7:30 her doorbell rang. Scully rolled her eyes at herself as she slipped her earrings in and took one last look at her make up in the mirror. In stocking feet she rushed to the door, wondering why it was that Mulder didn't simply let himself in, as he was wont to do on any other occasion.

On the other side of the door, a giant spray of flowers met her gaze.

"Errr…Mulder?" She laughed as she dug past the roses and lilies to see him looking smug on the other side. "Is that you in there?"

"What? Don't like them?"

"No, they are lovely," she protested instantly, grinning as she took the entire, frothy concoction of blooms from him. "It's just…you've never shown up at my door with flowers before."

"I've given you flowers," he protested mildly.

"When I was in the hospital," she teased, taking the vase to her kitchen table, setting it in the middle. She had to admit, they were lovely, if over the top.

"Well, perhaps I wanted to give you something when you weren't dying on me," he murmured behind her, leaning in low to let his lips wander just at the shell of her ear. She shivered, reaching for one of his hands to wrap around her middle.

"We could just stay in and enjoy them, you know. Forget the French food. You don't like snails anyway."

"Nope," he replied, spinning her around to peck a light kiss on her forehead before pulling away. "I'm taking you out."

"So this is a date?"

"Thought the roses were a dead giveaway," Mulder replied mildly, glancing back at them. "Maybe too much? It's been a while since I was in this whole dating game."

Dating? She stopped, studying him in surprise. "Is that what we are, now, Mulder? Dating?"

Her shock at the statement clearly gave him pause. "Why? Is that not what we are doing?"

Scully shifted on her toes, realizing she had now just made what was supposed to be a nice evening hopelessly uncomfortable. "Errr…yeah, I guess. I mean…I hadn't thought about it."
Flustered, she ducked her head, wishing she hadn't put her foot in her mouth teasing him. She just had been caught by surprise. That was all. Dating…she wasn't sure what they were. They had fallen into this situation more or less by accident, giving into the truth they had known for ages, but neither had talked about what this new relationship actually was. And now Mulder had labeled it…dating?

"I'll go find my shoes," she muttered, seeking to rush around him, but he snagged her before she could head around him, turning her to face him gently.

"Are you uncomfortable with this?" There was worry in his tone. She hadn't meant to cause that. Scully swore mentally to herself, trying to meet his fearful gaze with a haphazard shrug.

"Mulder, I'm not, really."

"You sure?"

"I am," she nodded. "It's unexpected, all of this. But…it's cute!"

"Cute?" The word fell between them hard and Scully wished she hadn't have used it. How patronizing was that?

"Mulder, I wasn't expecting wine and roses, that's all."

"Why not?"

It was an honest enough question, and Scully found she didn't have a good answer to it. "I don't know. I guess, I haven't ever thought of us as dating."

Really, this was all so new still, only six weeks, and in that time he had nearly died once. She hadn't really processed what they were yet. Partners, yes, and lovers, obviously, dating was just as a level of emotional commitment that she was surprised by. Not that she was opposed, not by any means, she loved him, but they hadn't seriously considered the consequences.

"What, did you expect we'd become simply 'friends with benefits'?" His tone was half teasing, half a sneer, and Scully felt herself wincing.

"You aren't a booty call, Mulder," she shot back in mild exasperation. "Nothing like that, it's just…I don't know, you've never been the romantic type. The pervy, sexually repressed type, but never the 'sweep the girl off her feet' type."

"How do you know?" It was an honest question, tinged with more than a bit of hurt. Scully blinked, realizing she didn't.

"I don't," she conceded, wondering how this conversation had spun out of control so fast. "It's just…Mulder, every day for seven years, we worked side by side. We've seen the worst of the worst together, we've sat at each other's hospital beds, we've met each other's families. All those intimate, relationship things that happen when people are dating, we've done already, as friends, and now you are doing the wine and roses and….wooing."

"Did you seriously just use the word 'wooing'?"

She ignored his snort of laughter. "My point is, Mulder, that…what are we?"

He frowned slightly, glancing at the flowers in the kitchen. "I would figure by now you'd have caught on to that."
"Not really." She realized they hadn't defined what it was between them. They had acknowledged certain obvious facts. They had crossed invisible lines and broken down barriers, but at the end of the day they were still just what they had always been, Mulder and Scully, FBI partners. Now they were just lovers on top of it all.

"What, do you want a signed and notarized contract or something?" Mulder teasing stung.

"Wouldn't hurt," she coolly threw back at him.

He clearly didn't like hearing that. "Scully, I was just trying to...you know, be nice, be gentlemanly, take you out to a nice dinner, do the first date thing. We haven't done that, you and me. I wanted to show you that you're not just a warm body to fill my bed."

"I know that!" She did. So why did the frills bother her so?

"Do you? Because right now, I'm getting the vibe that you think that this is all very silly."

He was right, she was acting as if this was all a lark and not a chance for Mulder to show her a softer side, a more vulnerable side, a side that wished to take her out, to treat her as something more than his work partner and booty call, and to show her how much he cared. She was the one making a mountain out of a molehill.

Perhaps it was because she hadn't considered what came next in the road they were now embarking on. She hadn't thought any further than admitting to Mulder how she felt for him...well, more or less. The word "love" had yet to ever be brought up between them. Still, she had as much as implied it, or at least she hoped she had. She wasn't sure she was ready to say the word yet, to give over that last bit of control. In a way, Scully wasn't ready to admit to herself or anyone else that she and Mulder were in a romantic relationship. How in the hell was that supposed to work?

"Scully," he called, drawing her attention, concern written in his worried gaze. "Look, I know this is sudden, but if you aren't into this dating thing, we don't have to do anything. I'm not going to force you into something that you aren't comfortable with."

He was starting to babble, ashamed, and guilt stabbed at her as she realized she had made him feel that way. "Mulder, no, it's not that, it's just..."

She turned to glance at the giant spray of flowers on her table. "This is big, very big, what we are doing here, and really, I don't have a problem with calling it dating, or hanging out, or if there is wine and flowers, or just Chinese food by the television. I just want to be with you, and right now, I don't know if I want to define or label that. I don't know if I'm there yet. But...I want to be."

It had taken a lot to admit that. Her heart raced in her throat as she watched Mulder carefully, fearful he would take her words the wrong way, that he wouldn't understand. Yet, he proved to take her statement with more grace than fortitude than she had suspected, as he smiled in soft understanding."

"Perhaps the roses were a bit too much?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," she mused, smiling cheekily.

"So we are just...together. No labels?"

"Well, besides the ones we already have?" She shrugged. "Why put more pressure on ourselves than we already have."

"True," he replied, nodding as he meandered to her, snaking an arm around her to pull her gently
towards him. "But I'd still like to take you out on dates."

"Okay," she breathed as he leaned down to place a soft kiss on the top of her head.

"And if I'm willing to eat at a place that serves frogs' legs, Scully, you better be willing to go with me."

"Sure," she laughed, pulling away to smile up at him. "Do I get a soufflé if I'm good?"

"I can think of many things you can get if you're good." His grin was wicked as he pulled her tightly against him, with just a promise of things to come. "But it's nearly eight and reservations."

"Yeah, yeah," she sighed, pulling away to finally find her shoes. "I can't believe you are taking me to a place with reservations, you know."

"It's got china plates and real silverware. You should be impressed with me."

"I am," she called back, slipping into her tall, elegant, strappy shoes. "Keep this up and I might even get you trained enough to do the dishes."

"Bite your tongue, woman," he barked in mock horror as she wandered back into the living room.

"Maybe someday you might even learn to cook?" She couldn't help herself now. The idea of Mulder anywhere near a kitchen making something edible seemed as farfetched to her as aliens once did.

"Things to aspire to, Scully. That's why I like you, you're a girl with ambition."

"I thought it was because of that wonderful thing I can do with my…"

"That too," he leaned down to plant a sound kiss on her unrepentant smile. Straightening he held out an arm to her. "Let's do this thing."

"So romantic," she giggled as they made their way out of the door. Truly, she thought, as she laughed on Mulder's arm, it was romantic in their weird sort of way. She didn't need flowers or fancy food to know she wanted Mulder. She was simply happy spending this time right now with him and for now, that was enough.
Spring was giving way to a sticky, thick heat that blanketed the rolling prairie lands, sucking the silvery dew off the tender green grass and turning it into a sauna. Scully balked as they stepped up to their rental car outside of Kansas City International Airport and eyed the bright shell of blue sky above them, disgruntled.

"Why does Kansas have to be so frickin' hot?" Already her neatly coiffed hair had melted to the sides of her face, and all she wanted was to be inside the car with all the air vents blasting as hard as they could.

"Missouri," Mulder replied, unlocking their vehicle, allowing her to slip inside the baking interior.

"What?" She blinked, still preoccupied with why he hadn't gotten the keys in the ignition yet and turned on the blessed air conditioner.

"We aren't in Kansas, Toto, we are in Missouri. Kansas is about thirty minutes that way." He pointed in a vague direction beyond their car that could be any direction as far as Scully was concerned. She assumed he thought it meant west.

"Kansas, Missouri, I don't care, it's pissin' hot. Turn on the air!"

"Yes ma'am." Mulder did as she asked, turning the engine over as he flipped on vents and pointed them in Scully's face. Cool air began to pour out onto her sticky face, slowly beginning to unglue her suit jacket from her clammy skin.

"Better," he murmured somewhere near her ear? She grinned, cutting a sideways mock-glare at him.

"We are on a case," she reminded him primly. Their agreed rule, all extra-curricular activities would take a backseat to their work. That was the way it had to be for now. It didn't mean that Mulder didn't try his best to bend the rules when he thought he could get away with it.

"I was simply looking after your temperature. You were the one who was hot and all."

He uttered "hot" with that double-entendre that made her roll her eyes even as she smiled. "Kansas, Missouri, obviously you still don't know how to give a good pick up line."

"Worked with you, didn't it?" A dark eyebrow quirked up as he grinned, unashamedly, pulling the car out of the spot it was parked in. Returning to their previous topic of conversation, he nodded to a sign in the distance that read "Welcome to Kansas City, Missouri."

"Despite popular misconception, the main part of the city of Kansas City is in fact in Missouri. It was named for the fact it sat on the Kansas River where it feeds into the Missouri River."
Scully sighed, realizing she was going to get a geography lesson whether she liked it or not. "Does it really matter what side of the state line we are on?"

"I suppose it does to Betty Templeton. She's moved to seventeen of them in the last two years."

Scully nodded, recalling the details of the case. Two agents, investigating potential hate crimes against a couple of Mormon kids out on their missionary work, nearly kill each other on Betty Templeton's doorstep. "And a string of similar incidents across every state. So if we are going with my doppelganger theory…"

"Your doppelganger theory?" He looked mildly scandalized she had claimed it.

"Yes, mine," she teased back, punching him lightly in the shoulder. "Doppelgangers are sources of dark, angry energy. There must be then a doppelganger of Betty Templeton around here somewhere."

"Maybe she's on the Kansas side," Mulder quipped.

"Or vice versa," Scully replied, glancing at the tracks of newly built homes over what had been, until recently, cow fields. Had any of this been here the first time they flew in? That had been years ago. It was strange to think, seven years was such a very long time.

"Seven years is a while to work together," Scully mused, thinking of the two wounded agents laid up in the hospital.

"We've done all right?" There was a hint of speculative worry in Mulder's voice, there despite the turn in their relationship of late. Did he really have any doubt? Somehow, Scully found that hopelessly endearing.

"We are perfect," she assured him, patting a comforting hand against his right thigh. "I just am thinking of those two agents. Seven years together, you and I know better than anyone, you develop a bond. What in the world could break it so completely that you nearly kill the person you work with?"

"The nature of the doppelganger is that it feeds into its twin's dark desires. Perhaps Betty Templeton's dark desires are so powerful that they bleed onto everyone else in the general vicinity, and suddenly, all those petty conflicts, all those tiny slights, the things that drove you crazy over the years, they become blindingly annoying, to the point of making you want to kill someone."

"Betty Templeton is thus working as a hate magnet, but for that to work, her doppelganger would have to be close by."

"Won't know until we talk to her, now will we?"

Somehow, Scully wasn't so sure she wanted to. "I don't know, Mulder. If two, seasoned veterans of the FBI nearly murder each other on the street, it makes me worry about getting anywhere near her."

"Oh, come on," Mulder chided, glancing at her with dubious amusement. "Scully, the great skeptic, is worried about a cute little red-head who wears bows in her hair?"

"Being a cute, little red-head, yes. We are mean." She had seen the list of the two agents injuries. "Those two were partners for seven years, Mulder. How can you turn on someone like that?"

"Not everyone is us, Scully."
"And that's my point. If it could happen to them, what would happen to us?" She hated admitting it out loud, because it sounded so silly and foolish when she did. "I mean, you said it yourself, those things that drive you the most crazy suddenly turn into a murderous rage, and there are lots of things about you, Mulder, that drive me crazy."

"Really?" He sounded as if he hadn't ever considered the idea.

"Well, yeah." She blinked back at him, wondering why he hadn't known that. "Seven years, Mulder, and that's before I started sleeping with you. There were many things that made me nuts."

"Like what?" Now he was just curious. Scully couldn't believe he hadn't caught on.

"Let's start with the generally terrifying state of your apartment and end with the collection of coffee cups on your desk and forest of pencils in the ceiling."

"The pencils help me think," he shot back, looking slightly wounded. "You really dislike the state of my apartment?"

"I nearly killed myself on your running shoes the other night."

"Oh," he replied, looking somewhat hurt. "You never said anything."

"Yeah, well, it's not that big of a deal, Mulder. You've been a slob for as long as I've known you and I accept that about you."

"Gee, so magnanimous," he muttered somewhat sourly, making Scully laugh.

"I know there are things about me that drive you crazy."

"Yeah," he admitted thoughtfully, considering for the briefest of moments. "The way you catalogue your canned goods in your cupboard."

"You've looked at my canned goods?"

"It's about the only food item I don't burn, give me some credit," he replied to her laughter. "The funny way you fold your towels in your bathroom."

"You mean not balling them up in a corner?"

"The fact that your desk at the end of the day looks like no one has been there."

"It's called being neat."

"Yeah, but I'd like to think that you had been there, all day, watching me quietly over those cute glasses of yours."

Scully was indignant at that. "I don't watch you all day."

The look he gave her was pointed. She blushed.

"Not all day, all right."

"I'm flattered, Agent Scully."

"Shut up," she laughed, slapping his shoulder again for good measure. "And you can't tell me you didn't do the same thing."
He smiled smugly. "I was much sneakier than you. You never noticed."

Scully refrained from laughing outright. Since the shift in their relationship everything had changed. The pained efforts they once took to keep proprieties had relaxed. Their smiles were more common, lighthearted moments more frequent. She realized in that moment that she was happy, perhaps the happiest she had been in a long time...maybe ever.

"You know what, Mulder," she mused leaning into the seats, finally cool enough to feel comfortable once again. "I don't think that you and I could ever be like those agents."

"What, the couple who beat the hell out of one another? Why?"

'Because," she shrugged, trying to find words to express a feeling she hadn't given words to. "We've been through so much together. We've gone through hell and back. And no matter how crazy you've driven me, or I've driven you, we always come back to the fact that we can't ever really function without the other."

He considered briefly before nodding in agreement. "It's true."

A memory, long forgotten, of a creature wearing Mulder's face, trying to strangle her, rose to mind. She had known in that moment that it wasn't Mulder, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt that Mulder, no matter what was going on, would never, ever hurt her.

"I trust you," she said simply, as one might mention love. It was a true statement. It felt good to say and it earned a soft smile from the man beside her.

"I trust you, too," he replied, reaching a hand for hers briefly, squeezing it, before returning his fingers to the steering wheel.

It was perhaps as close as either of them was ever going to get to saying the word "love". For now it was enough.

"So," Mulder began after several long moments of silence driving along the Missouri highways, "we are in Kansas City and this is the home of some of the best barbeque in the country."

She knew where he was going with this. "I thought that you said Texas was."

"Well, Texas is amazing, don't get me wrong, I'd say it's a tie with Kansas City, different types of flavor, different specialties. Remember those burnt ends we had?"

Somehow, Scully had a feeling Mulder was going to use this opportunity to talk her into yet another trip for food he shouldn't be eating. "If you die of high cholesterol, Mulder, don't say I didn't warn you."

"When I die, Scully, it won't be from high cholesterol," Mulder waived her off. "Besides, live while you are young enough to enjoy it."

"And our case?"

"Betty Templeton can wait for us to get a sandwich, right?"

Scully only smiled, realizing that there was no way she was ever going to win this argument.

Chapter End Notes
For all that I've lived in Los Angeles for 20 years, I spent my teen years living not far from Kansas City. This particular geographic conversation is one I've had a lot living in SoCal and it's also a pet peeve of mine, along with how people pronounce Norfolk, VA. We all got our quirks.
Only One Original

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is the one musing on a crazy theory.

Was it some karmic balance the universe was trying to strike? Was it really the idea that the universe really hated similarity so much that it worked to keep things too alike away from each other? Was it as simple as psychology, that people who are biologically the same, or at least shared many of the same personality traits, could not actually been in the same place at the same time? Perhaps it was as simple as the laws of physics, things that are alike automatically repel each other. Whatever the hell it was, Scully was never, ever doing it again. It hurt too much.

"How's the head?" Scully gingerly touched Mulder's rock-solid jaw, the one she knew wasn't that way because of any natural means. He moaned and shrugged his shoulder in a sling, looking up at her pitifully, the fingers on his good hand stilling on the keyboard as he typed. If she had the wherewithal, she would have made him stay home from the office. But he had insisted, wanting to see Saperstein and try to put some sort of meaning to one of the stranger cases they had ever seen.

"I don't like that it hurts you like that," she sighed, running fingers through his dark hair but relenting as she leaned an aching and battered hip against his desk. She hadn't walked away from this incident fairing too well herself. She had a bruise on her chin that no amount of foundation could hide, a nasty contusion on her shoulder that meant she couldn't lift her left arm above her head, and a scrape across one of her knees. By comparison to Mulder, however, she had come out a winner. They had been standing in the middle of a maelstrom, the entire arena in Kansas City breaking out into a riot, fists and bottles flying, as angry fingers snatched at clothes, hair, and skin. And in the middle of it all, Betty and Lulu and Bert and his doppelganger grappled and argued, and all Mulder could do was stand over Scully and attempt to protect her from the worst. Truth be told, she felt a bit guilty on that. With his jaw wired shut and his face bruised and battered, he looked as if he'd been on the wrong end of a NFL lineman out for blood. He had been her savior, especially as it had been their own foolish fault the entire thing started.

"So I've been trying to figure out what to say to put in the report." She eyed the screen carefully as it blinked in black and white up at her. "I mean, how do we tell Justice that the string of fights, a couple of battered Mormon missionaries, and two nearly broken agents stem from some sort of cosmic joke?"

Mulder's only response, or at least the only one he was capable of at the moment, was to blink at her unhappily. She was on her own on this and she found herself grinning slightly at him, trying to channel Mulder in a moment when he couldn't say a word.

"Well, we could tell them that it was some sort of cosmic effort to prevent two identical copies from being far too close together?"

He nodded thoughtfully, and she could tell he liked the response, but she also knew that the likelihood of the Justice Department buying that one was slim to none. "Or we could simply tell them that we had a case of two women, genetically sisters, who were so alike their personalities clashed to the point they ignited anger wherever they went, leading ultimately to the riot you and I barely got out of."
Mulder's dark eyebrows rose over a deeply skeptical gaze.

"And perhaps there was a lot of beer drinking involved." She sighed as she frowned at the report, knowing that it wasn't a good answer, but it was better than nothing for those higher up in the chain of command. "Beer drinking sounds good. Don't people get piss drunk and do stupid things at sporting events?"

Again, Mulder didn't like the answer, but nodded gingerly, his good hand picking at the keys. Frankly neither did she. But sometimes in their work there were things that were just too weird to explain to people who didn't witness it, and this case was one of those things. How were they supposed to explain the idea of people who, despite being born from different mothers, were so genetically alike that it was akin to clones? If Scully didn't know better, she'd wonder about some of Spender's experiments, and even then, she couldn't say she wasn't suspicious.

"Do you think that somewhere out there, Mulder, there are copies of us running around, living lives, completely unaware that a doppelganger of them even exists."

Mulder glanced up at her, eyebrows quirking in consternation and surprise. If he hadn't expected her to come up with doppelgangers as an answer for their case, he clearly hadn't thought that she would muse on the possibility of one for her. She smiled down at him, laughing.

"I don't know I used to hear it all the time when I was younger. People would say I looked like someone they knew, or they would swear that they saw someone just like me in some remote place. I used to think it was because of the red hair, it's so unique, they just assumed that they looked like me. But what if it was? What if there's another petite, red haird woman with my face out there, who perhaps is a doctor instead of an FBI agent, who lives a normal, humdrum life, free of mutants and aliens? I mean, in theory, it could be possible, a woman out there who is just like me."

The look on Mulder's wired face was priceless. For once, he was the one staring at her with the look she was sure she gave him on a regular basis, as if she had suddenly turned purple and had sprouted green spots. He frowned at her, shaking his head, turning from the computer to reach for his legal notepad.

His good hand scribbled across the page in his spidery writing, his pen tapping on the paper when he was done. Scully glanced down at the words and felt a bright smile spread across her face.

"I'm the 'only one original', huh?" She chuckled as he smirked up at her, nodding slowly.

"N Immm glah," he managed to force out between his teeth, tossing the pen aside as he reached for her. Despite her aches, pains, and mild protests, he toppled her easily onto his lap, pressing his mouth against her shoulder.

"And I'm glad there is only one Fox Mulder." She replied, leaning her head against his. "Because having one in my life is more than any one person should be cursed with."

"Smarmass," he snorted, gently shoving her back up again. Scully willingly went, snickering as she rose and glanced at the slowly written report. If they waited for Mulder to do it with his single hand, they would be at it all night.

"How about this," she offered with a coy glance his way. "I will finish this report for us and perhaps I can take you home, get you settled, and show you how thankful that I am that you were my knight in shining armor when everyone decides to loose their mind and beat each other up?"

Clearly, that sounded appealing to him. His eyes sparkled as he pushed himself away from his
computer, holding his good hand out towards the monitor. He rose and allowed her to take his seat as she settled behind the keyboard, frowning at the words he typed across the screen.

"I'm not sure that's how you spell 'serendipitous'."

"Mmmm," he grunted, grabbing his basketball to play with.

"And I don't think that duck has an "I" in it."

Mulder only shrugged good-naturedly, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, but of course said nothing.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully goes with Mulder to a baseball game.

The crack the bat in the clear, hot summer afternoon, the roar of the crowd as the white speck rose, higher, faster, longer, clearing the outfield wall, the cheers that filled the bright, robin egg blue summer sky, these were all the markings of a day out at the ball park. It was not the typical haunt Scully found herself on an August afternoon with Mulder. Usually, if they were outside of the office, it was up to their elbows in some sort of viscous fluid, chasing down some sort of paranormal anomaly. But today he had surprised her as she walked in the office with two baseball tickets and a promise for lunch on him.

"As long as you like hotdogs and peanuts," he clarified, of course, grabbing her arm and dragging her out of the door.

"Why the sudden interest in playing hooky," she wondered suspiciously as he lead the way to the elevators, grinning like a schoolboy as he unknotted his tie.

"What? Haven't you yelled at me for years to get a life?"

"Yeah, but I meant one that didn't involve drunken, beer swilling fat men with body paint on their bellies."

"Scully, the wire is off, I can chew food normally once again, and the Orioles are playing my beloved Yankees in Camden Yards. Sounds like a celebration to me!"

And so they had driven to Baltimore to catch the game, Mulder gleefully donning his Yankees hat in order to earn boos and hisses as they wandered into the ballpark. Scully could only snicker at him as he cheerfully tried to manage an armload of junk food, enough to feed an army with, and finally settled down with him to beers and garlic fries and listened quietly as Mulder attempted to break down the events on the field for her in a way she assumed he thought was explanatory.

"So Jeter, he plays short stop. Do you know what that is?"

"Something you do at a crosswalk when the light suddenly turns red?" She blinked at him innocently as she crunched on a handful of roasted peanuts. She only managed to earn an exasperated sigh out of her partner as he pointed between second and third base.

"No, he covers the gap right there because most batters are right handed. Balls have a tendency of going out towards left field rather than right."

"I see," she nodded solemnly, stifling a giggle at his exasperation.

"Anyway, so he covers that gap, tries to prevent the plays that go out that way."

"And I assume he's good at it?"

Another exasperated sigh. "Scully, Jeter's won three World Series, perhaps a fourth this year! What
do you think?"

"That's sort of like the Super Bowl, right?"

Now he knew she was doing it on purpose. "I should take that beer away from you."

"What? You were having so much fun being a know it all man and explaining it all to me, the ignorant woman." She giggled as he glowered at the field. "Besides, how would I know what a catcher does if you didn't tell me?"

His scowl only deepened. She laughed out loud, leaning over to place a quick kiss on his cheek. "You're too easy, Mulder."

"Here I am trying to share something I treasure with you…"

"And you are doing a good job," she replied happily.

"And you are mocking me."

"Well, yeah," she admitted, unapologetic as she watched the action on the field. "But you are such a… guy!"

That earned a deep and amused snort from her partner. "I'd have hoped at this juncture in our relationship you would have caught onto that, Scully."

She returned his sarcasm with a slap on his knee.

"Not what I meant, Mulder," she rolled her eyes at him. "I mean that this is a guy thing. Sitting at the ball game, listing off statistics, debating on who is better, Jeter or Rivera."

"Well, Rivera is a pitcher…"

"See, that's what I mean!" Scully held up an accusing finger. "I didn't know that! I just saw his name on a jersey. You know it, though."

"Lots of people know that."

"Yeah, lots of people who are guys!"

"What do you want out of me, Scully, I am male, I like beer and baseball. Not that unusual to find men in America who like those things."

He was right, and that was why it was so strange for Mulder. "I guess it's the first time I've gotten to see this side of you."

"No it isn't," he replied, eyes flickering to the game as a bat cracked hard, sending a baseball into the outfield, where it was neatly plucked out of the air, earning a small cheer out of him.

"Mulder, what is a Reticulan?"

"A what?" He blinked, green eyes unfocused as he turned to frown at her. She smiled in triumph.

"I mention aliens and you are too preoccupied by a ball game to notice?"

"You know I love baseball. How many times have you complained because I had the game on and, 'Mulder, why aren't you paying attention to my autopsy notes'?" His voice pitched up in a very non-
flattering way, earning yet another slap.

"Funny. This coming from a man who lived, ate, and breathed nothing but paranormal cases for the last ten years of his life."

"Well, who says that was all of my life?"

"You did," she pointed out, earning a mildly abashed look. "Mulder, if I didn't know better, I would have said you were a cave troll. All you ever did was work. Remember how I begged you to take a day, just one, to live the slow life?"

"Yeah," he nodded, slouching in his seat as he turned to gaze over the lush, green field of Camden Yards. She felt him stiffen beside her, clearly uncomfortable as he avoided her pointed comment.

"What? No comment on why all the sudden you have the urge to play hooky?"

"A man can't celebrate having his jaw unwired?"

"I suppose he could," she conceded. "It's just…strange for you. Seeing you, being normal, enjoying a ball game, for no reason at all."

He was quiet a long moment, before a deep sighed pulled from him. "There are reasons."

Really? She had only been speaking philosophically, surprised he sounded so pensive. "I was joking, Mulder."

"I know," he replied, somewhat wistfully. "I just think…you know, you had a point, all those times you yelled at me for not taking time, for not slowing down and seeing what I was missing."

"What brought this on?" She glanced down at the beer in his hand and wondered just how much he had been drinking to make him this maudlin.

"Nothing," he replied, shoulders lifting as he adjusted the Yankees cap on his head. "Just, thinking about the what-ifs, I guess."

Strange thing to be thinking about when watching his favorite pastime, she thought. "Maybe you should lay off the beer?"

He smiled, reaching a hand to lace through her fingers. "Sorry, it's a lovely day. I'm with a beautiful woman, and I'm at a baseball game. Got no right to be sad."

Maybe. She returned his smile, but couldn't help but wonder what had brought this all on. "I'm glad you are finally deciding to live life a little, Mulder."

"Yeah, well, I guess you have to pick up the habit sometime."

"I'd like to think it was my influence on you that got you to see reason," she replied smugly.

"Me too," he nodded, fingers tightening on hers. Whatever had been bothering him, she left well enough alone. It was a good day. And she didn't want to mess that up.

"So tell me, what's the difference between a screw ball and a spit ball?"

"One's legal and one's not. He didn't miss a beat, eyes on the game. "Screw ball just is a ball that breaks in the opposite direction that the pitcher's arm is in, right breaks left, left breaks right. A spit bawl is a bawl that's been tampered with, usually with spit, hence the name. Sometimes its Vaseline,
hair gel, snot…"

"Lovely!" Scully scrunched her nose in mild disgust.

"It changes the trajectory and speed. It's a bitch to hit and usually nasty, so they banned them because the substances are considered an unfair advantage. Now, that doesn't mean you can't tamper with the ball 'on accident', let it get a bit wet with sweat you wipe off, or maybe you let your hands get damp and it sort of changes the way things get thrown."

And thus was Mulder off on one of his glorious rabbit trails, explaining to Scully the entire history of pitches and pitchers, and names like Christy Mathewson, Carl Hubbell, Fernando Valenzuela, and Tug McGraw. Scully only mildly listened, remembering her father and brothers waxing poetically about baseball in a similar fashion. Mulder was happy just talking, sharing with her something that was so special to him, and Scully for the moment was simply happy to be enjoying something so normal with him, the act of just being like everyone else, out enjoying a baseball game.
Morning, Sunshine

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder decides to go back to the Show-Me State.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The normalcy, sadly, was not to last.

"What are you doing?"

Scully had barely gotten the first cup of coffee in her, eyes heavy as she scanned the copy of the *Washington Post* she had spread across her kitchen table. "Reading the paper. You?" Her phone was up to her ear, couched in the crook of her neck as she leafed through the pages idly.

"Missing the fact that you weren't in my bed for seven whole days."

She smirked, sipping at her coffee, shifting as she moved to hold the phone. "How was North Carolina?"

"Good," he replied vaguely. She wasn't surprised. It was his first visit there since the death of his mother. He had told Scully he wanted to settle affairs there with her grave, see her sister and his family, and finish handling the last bits of her estate. Not an easy task and she had offered to go with him, if nothing else to give moral support. Mulder had said little since Teena's death and it worried her he had yet to really speak of the loss. He had waved her off, insisted that meeting the extended Kuiper clan would only convince her that she had made a horrible decision in pursuing a relationship with him and run for the hills in fear and madness. Scully had laughingly agreed to stay home, but she had to second Mulder's sentiment, she had missed him, not just in bed, but in the office, in her home, leaving his shoes in places where she could kill herself, stealing her paper before she got a chance to read it, taking the last of her favorite cookies because it never occurred to him to ask. Seven days was a long time indeed.

"Life has been quiet without you around," she replied honestly, noting a story about a young father who went missing unexpectedly from nearby Fairfax, Virginia before flipping the page. "More time to finish up the paperwork from the haunted schoolhouse you said we had to investigate."

"Don't sound so condescending! A woman dressed in black, haunting the school gym, appears to three separate kids, all of who die horrible deaths. How could we not investigate it?"

She quietly rolled her eyes and flipped a page. "Besides the fact that the one, verified witness we had was also a kid strung out on meth and insisting he could hear voices through his television set? I do know I did attribute the strange coincidences to the towns alarming lack of parental supervision on their children's activities and alcohol intake."

"Even the football coach saw the ghost, Scully."

"You are talking about a man who was struck by lightning in the middle of one of his own practices, right?" She stifled a yawn, folding up the section she had been reading. "Mulder, between you and
me, I don't care whether you want to investigate Bigfoot, but we spent four days in a small town we
had no business in, hanging out and poking around the boys' locker room."

"Nothing like the smell of sweat and mildew after a good game." He sighed in clear reminiscence.

"Be that as it may, what are we doing here?" It was the question she brought up periodically,
especially in the months since Teena's death and she never did ever get a good, satisfactory answer.
"You tell me you have truths you still want to find and yet we are messing around in small town
America following urban legends."

"Technically is a rural legend, Scully, and it was legitimate. Three kids died."

"But not from seeing a ghost," she reiterated patiently. "One died in a car crash, the other drowned in
a lake, and the third was an unfortunate farm accident."

"But like crows, snakes, and black cats and dogs in certain cultures, this is a legend that speaks to
death omens."

"Which is great for a cultural anthropologist with a Goth streak, but why are we investigating it?" He
was dancing around the question and it was starting to annoy her. "It is one thing to be called on a
case where someone truly can't understand what has happened, a law enforcement official or a
victim, but chasing fairy stories just for the fun of it will draw the sort of attention we have struggled
for too long to avoid."

If Mulder was hurt or bothered by her lecture, he seemed to take it all in stride, "Well, Scully, you are
in luck. I was calling to tell you we have a case waiting for us when we get in."

"A real case?" She arched an eyebrow at the "Arts and Entertainment" section.

"Well, a victim who thinks he's been wronged somehow. Apparently he had badgered the St. Louis
authorities enough that they sent him our way."

"A victim of what?"

"Don't know yet, he didn't say, but I'm going in now to chat with him. Catch us up when you deign
to set down your coffee and paper."

She smirked, setting the latter aside and picking up the former. "I'll get dressed and be there in an
hour. I hope this is more interesting than death omens in boys' locker rooms."

"Be careful what you wish for, Scully," Mulder warned playfully on the other end.

"Don't worry, Mulder, I have made plenty of wishes and since I don't have my yacht and cute, Italian
cabana boy, I think I have little to worry about."

"Cute, Italian…what?"

Scully hung up the phone on Mulder's outraged squawk with and downed her coffee.

Chapter End Notes

The town they are talking about is my hometown of Milan, Missouri and they have had
the legend of the "Lady in Black" for years, and like many small town ghosts, there are those who swear that it is true. My high school counselor/head football coach SWORE he saw her more than once (and yes, he was struck by lightning during football practice in the late 70s). What wasn't true is that no one I know connected any deaths to the Lady in Black. The three Mulder mentions were just kids I went to high school with who tragically died. The meth head is sadly true as is the alarming amount of lack of parental oversight and alcohol consumption. That was my hometown in the 90s.

No, I never saw the Lady in Black, but I also never went through the gym without the lights on either, because superstition. I do believe you can find the story online, but I don't know much about it either way.
Show Me State

Chapter Summary

In which Mulder reminisces on previous cases in Missouri

It was their first serious case since the incident in Kansas City that had landed Mulder with a broken jaw. As fate would have it, they were back in the state of Missouri.

"It is St. Louis," Scully tried to reason as they gathered their luggage and made for the rental counter. Mulder didn't look reassured.

"They call it the Show Me State for a reason. Crazy things seem to happen here."

"I don't know, Mulder, sounds like your kind of place," she teased lightly, earning a dark glare. She only laughed. "Honestly, of all the places we've been to over all the years, we've only been to Missouri a handful of times."

"We had to have been here more than that."

Mulder's eidetic memory clearly was stuttering today, a rarity for him to ever have it falter. "No, we've been here three times, once, years ago, we had a cold case involving that female cop who was the descendant of a serial killer."

"BJ," Mulder recalled, a hint of a lecherous smile leaping to life despite Scully's disapproving frown. "How could I forget her?"

"I don't know," she remarked blandly, continuing. "We had the case in Kansas City with Betty and Lulu, and then the small town with the haunted gym. That's it."

"You sure it wasn't more?"

"Positive." She directed him towards the rental car counter, pulling out her badge from her things.

"What about the chicken plant?"

"Arkansas."

"And the strange, mad scientist?"

"Same?"

"What about the guy who could control the weather with his emotions?"

"Which one, the teenager video game player or the weatherman?"

"Both."

"One was in Oklahoma, the other in Kansas," she replied, passing her badge across the counter to the smiling woman. After pleasantries regarding flights and assurances that they would enjoy their time in St. Louis, a fact Scully highly doubted, she had them both sign paperwork before directing
them to wait for a shuttle in front of the terminal. Scully moved to do as she was bid, waiting for Mulder who lingered, frowning quizzically.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," he muttered vaguely, waving off her concern. "It's just…surprising you remember all that."

"Surprising you don't with your memory," she teased. She only earned a pained smile out of him. "All the small towns and strange things we have seen, I suppose they all meld together."

"I guess," he sighed, shoving hands into his pockets as he loped beside her. "I feel we've been everywhere."

"We've not made it to Hawaii yet. I'm still waiting for one of those cases."

"You and me both."

"Why aren't their cases from Hawaii? I mean, we have them from so many other places."

Mulder only shrugged, sliding sunglasses on as they stepped into the bright sunlight. "I think Hawaiians are a lot more accepting of the strange things that happen there, unlike the rest of us who think we can conquer everything and find out we are mere peons when it comes to important shit in the universe."

Scully snorted, unsure if Mulder was serious or merely talking out of his ass. She plucked at the jacket that clung to her sticky skin. "I don't know about spirits of the land and white guilt have less to do with the fact that it isn't here."

"Well, yes, last I checked Hawaii was in the middle of the Pacific. A+ for geography."

She rolled her eyes at his attitude. "I meant not here, Mulder, not St. Louis."

She could almost see his eyes blink behind the darkened lenses. "You know, maybe I woke up slow this morning, but I'm still not following this train."

"Think about it, all the cases we've ever worked, we weren't in big cities often and never exotic locals. We were in small towns and suburbs. We were in those hidden corners of civilization, where people think they are quiet and safe, close knit towns where anything new or different is something to be feared."

"You saying that because you dislike small towns?"

That much was true, she wasn't a fan of the small town mindset. She never had been. "I'm saying it because it makes sense, Mulder. Think of it, all the places we've been, small town Pennsylvania, the middle of nowhere in Idaho, a church in Tennessee, a logging community in Oregon, these are places where folk tales and legends come to life."

"What, because they are bored, ignorant, or backwards?" There was no masking the defensiveness in Mulder's tone. Scully knew she was stepping on sacred cows and walked very carefully as she considered what to say next.

"I don't know, I think it's more because they are normal, slow, change happens less quickly there so something out of the ordinary sticks out. Think about it, would an alien necessarily stick out in a place like New York or Los Angeles where weird things happen everyday?"
"How very postmodern of you," Mulder teased, a slow smile creeping lazily, finally over his face. "I fear I've had a bad effect on you."

Scully returned his grin with one of her own. "Do you deny it?"

"No," he drawled thoughtfully, fingers searching a pocket for one of his ever-present packet of sunflower seeds. "I think that there is something intrinsic to the small community that breeds fear of change, of the unknown. The clannishness, the skepticism of the outside world, it makes them afraid of those things that they don't understand. Yet, those same things, when viewed from the perspective of someone who is less fearful of the strange, the different, the outside, can be seen as moments of awe, even wonder, with the potential of hope."

"And so we come back to why we are in the Show Me State." She circled back to the point of this conversation in the first place. "We have a strange crime, a weird happenstance, something that people in a small town don't understand, and yet we investigate it because it is weird, strange, and promises something we haven't seen before with our jaded eyes."

"A state full of skeptics and we come to find and X-file. There is a certain delicious irony to that."

"Enough to make you forgive them for a broken jaw?"

Mulder hummed thoughtfully around the sunflower seed poised carefully between his teeth. "My jaw still hurts when it rains, you know."

"You are such a baby," she muttered in mild disgust.

"Yeah, but if I whine enough you take pity on me, don't you?"

His eyebrows waggled suggestively over his sunglasses and she knew he was right. Mulder had her wrapped around his fingers and there was no help for it.

"So, Mulder, in a state full of skeptics, you think we can find whatever it is that made that man's face look like he tried to kiss a meat grinder?"

"Not sure, but I'd like to know how a slacker loser could possibly make a man's skin grow up over his mouth like that."

Scully could have replied that it was medically impossible to do without surgery. She could have suggested instead a medical condition or perhaps a chemical interaction that could have produced those results. Instead, she pulled a face as she pretended to consider the various, sane possibilities.

"I think it was some weird shit, Mulder," she nodded with an authoritative air.

"See, there's a reason a kept you around all these years," he laughed as the rental company shuttle pulled slowly to their curb. "That's my kind of talk."

"Perhaps you're right, Mulder, you have rubbed off on me."

"More than you know, Scully," he chuckled as the van pulled to a stop. "More than you know."
The Invisible Man

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is having far too much fun.

When she was a little girl, Scully had been fascinated with the paint-with-water books. She had loved them so much she could spend hours on long, summer afternoons, patiently applying water to paper as colors magically appeared on the page. Despite the fact that she knew, even as a child, that the process was chemically induced, that it was a simple reaction, she couldn't help that small part of her that thought that it was magic. There were few experiences in Scully's life since that really compared to that feeling…except for this one, in the lab she occupied, with an invisible body on her autopsy table. It shouldn't be possible, it certainly didn't make sense, but there it was, an invisible man, a man that no human eye could see. This…this was magic, this was fantasy, this was…

"This is really, really weird." Mulder stared at the half powdered body in clear consternation.

"Mulder, you are seriously trying to tell me this is the weirdest thing you've seen while working on the X-files?"

"An invisible man, no. You giggling over an invisible man, yes."

She smirked at him, returning to brushing the man's skin with yellow powder with the care and precision she would give a crime scene. He didn't understand, not really. An invisible man, a real one! Not just the hokey, film version with a guy wrapped up like a mummy, but a real man she couldn't see. Hard evidence of something that shouldn't exist and she was the one who got to do the autopsy. Would he be just as invisible on the inside? Would his organs still be there? How would she see them? She doubted the powder would be helpful once bodily fluids were involved, she would have to think of something else…

"Scully?"

What if his fluids weren't invisible? What if it was just his skin, but his insides were still completely visible? How strange would that be, cutting open thin air to have organs and fluids, raw gore, peeking out of invisible skin, like a movie prop gone horribly wrong. She laughed at the thought. Imagine a person's lungs just hanging in mid-air?

"Scully?"

Or maybe his brain! Was it something in the brain doing this, some sort of chemical release that he could control? Maybe some strange enzyme that reflected light in such a way his skin only looked invisible. Perhaps that's how he was able to convince his boss he wasn't there? Perhaps that's how he planned his attack? The idea was so mad, so ludicrous, so….

"SCULLY!"

She stopped, blinking as she was attempting to brush powder up the victim's nose. Mulder was leaning on the autopsy table, his face nearly at her own, eyes wide as he stared at her bemused expression.
"You okay?"

"Fine," she grinned, teeth flashing wide in her face. "Why?"

"What's in this powder?" He frowned down at the yellow substance in her jar and honestly Scully wasn't sure. Frankly, she wasn't going to tell him that either.

"Mulder, don't you know how big this is? This is…bigger than big? This is….huge!"

"A degree from the University of Maryland and another from Stanford and that's all you can manage? Huge?"

"What, I put up with your alien autopsies and black oil virus, the least you could do is humor me on an invisible man." She rolled her eyes and returned to her work.

Mulder merely stared.

"So…uh….who is it?"

"Don't know," she muttered, running the brush over what she discovered were lips. Lips! She giggled again.

Mulder's teeth ground slowly together.

"So where was he found and how did he end up with you?"

"Well best anyone can tell is that some kid was riding his bike and hit the body in the middle of a crosswalk. Scared the hell out of the kid, who called the police. When the morgue heard there was an 'invisible body' they called me…for obvious reasons."

"Obviously," Mulder muttered.

"Of course, I didn't believe it till they laid it down here. This is utterly fascinating, Mulder, nothing in medical science is like this!"

"Scully, I would like to point out to you that you have witnessed aliens and spaceships."

"This is different." She shook her head, swiping at the man's chin. He was starting to have definition now, and he was starting to look familiar.

"Different how? Because you can't deny an invisible man staring you in the face?" The petulance from Mulder was clear.

"Well…yes." She shrugged, grinning up at his clearly less than thrilled expression. "Say, this young, somewhat attractive, and a bit vapid profile, does it look familiar to you?" It was starting to for Scully, and it was making the strangeness of this body even more confusing.

Mulder leaned in, hands on knees as he frowned at the nose. "Well with a proboscis like that he's a lucky son-of-a-bitch." He absently rubbed his own. "But I would say that he bears a striking resemblance to Anson Stokes."

"Why is Anson Stokes invisible?" She frowned down at the yellow stubble now appearing on his cheeks."

"I think the bigger question is why he's naked."
"Well, because he's invisible!"

"Of course," Mulder muttered, straightening. "Can you make a positive ID, make sure this is Stokes?"

"Sure," she replied, frowning at the rest of his as-yet still invisible body. "If I can find a part of him to ID."

"Good," Mulder replied. He shook his head, marveling in a manner Scully didn't think she had ever seen from the man who had seen everything from liver-eating mutants, to fluke men, to aliens. "Scully, would you think less of me if I said this was the weirdest thing I've seen in a long time?"

"Coming from you?"

"No, seriously, I mean, the man with the skin over his mouth, now this. It's like...I don't know, something from a fairy tale."

"Which is pretty much every case you work on."

"No, it's something more with this case." He frowned in thought down at Anson's now yellow face. "And I think that the woman we met over there may have more to do with it than we thought."

"Besides having a bad attitude?" She shrugged, dusting Anson's chin as if she were applying makeup. "I don't see what she has to do with anything."

"Scully, now is the time I should point out to you that you are giddy over a dead, invisible man."

Her eyes flickered up to his in half-annoyance. "Well, if you want to be sanctimonious about it, go find your mystery woman."

"You'll just stay here and giggle over Anson's dead body?"

"It's invisible, Mulder!"

He turned, waving a hand at her. "Scully, you amaze even me sometimes."

"You just are jealous you didn't find the weird stuff first this time," she called after him, sniffing mildly as she returned to her work. "When he finds Elvis' alien baby, it's amazing. When I have incontrovertible evidence of an indivisible body, it's weird."
Chapter Summary

In which Scully is acutely embarrassed.

As the middle child of four, Scully had faced many embarrassing indignities in her life. There had been the time in church when Charlie had flipped her dress up in front of literally God and everyone, showing off the pink heart underwear she had been wearing. There was the awful moment when she realized that the first boy she ever kissed really did it just to get Melissa's attention and favor. There was the time in high school when she slipped at the top of a set of stairs, falling flat on her face in front of the most popular guy in school. Those all had been particularly traumatic moments, ones that even to this day, decades later, left her cheeks burning and her wishing she could have turned back time just at that moment, but in the grand comparison of moments, nothing could top the one she felt right now. Staring at an empty body cabinet, her cheeks a flaming red, her gut churning with shame and annoyance, with the realization she would never be able to show her face at a pathology convention again, and somehow none of this was Mulder's fault. Which didn't mean she didn't have the strong desire to kick him at this moment.

"If he's invisible, how do you know if he's gone?"

The glare she tossed at him could have melted stone, but he hardly seemed bothered as he meandered to investigate the drawer. Scully threw up her hands and left him to investigate, throwing herself instead on a lab chair and burying her head in her arms. What a blistering fool she had been! She had been so sure, so giddy at her incontrovertible evidence! She had rushed to place phone calls to get experts in the field to fly there to St. Louis to see her wondrous miracle, like some carny barker hawking a real, live mermaid. Come see the invisible man! She had staked her professional reputation on it and now she was left holding the bag, her invisible man now, well, invisible, even to her.

"I should just shoot myself," she moaned, considering going for her service weapon in the locker room downstairs and getting it over with so someone could clean it up and she'd be done with her mortification. "I was happy. I was so excited. What was I thinking, an invisible man?"

"You saw it, it was real." Mulder, the man who had been in this very position more time than she could count, tried to reassure her.

"I don't know what I saw, Mulder," she bemoaned, raising her head to stare glumly at the drawer. "I do know having that kind of proof in my hands it was just too good to be true."

How many times had the pair of them been in a situation just like this, only to have the evidence evaporate or be destroyed just at the last moment? In those situations, it was usually Mulder's thin and frayed reputation on the line, not hers. This one stung just a little bit more than those.

Mulder at least was far more pragmatic than her own defeatist angst. "I don't think that is why the body disappeared."

"Why did it disappear?" At all, she wondered to herself, but primarily from her autopsy lab.
"I think it was a result of having a wish granted."

She blinked up at him, trying to summon the energy to scoff at his theory, but realizing that it made about as much sense as an invisible man did. "A wish? Whose wish?"

Mulder shrugged, considering. "Well, who would want Anson Stoke back? I mean, really, really back?"

The answer was obvious. Few people on this planet would care about a loser such as Anson Stokes, except for one.

"His brother, Leslie," she replied.

Mulder nodded slowly, a slow smile growing on his face as she could sense he was laying out the mystery for her. "So, let's just say in hypothetical, that these two losers happened upon a genie, a real djinn, trapped in a storage shed for all these years. They release it. Now, neither of them has the sense enough to plug in a light without shocking themselves, but they are just smart enough to know what a genie is. Might have watch *Aladdin* one too many times. So Anson uses up his wishes, makes himself invisible, but he dies, which means that the genie is free to be claimed by a new master. Conveniently, Leslie happens to be standing - er, well, sitting - right there and he has a few wishes he wants to make himself."

In the grand scheme of mad Mulder musings, Scully realized this wasn't even close to the craziest she'd ever heard, but still, she couldn't help her re-kindled skepticism as she blinked up at him. "Genies, Mulder? Are you sure you aren't the one who watched *Aladdin* one too many times?"

"It makes sense, Scully! That storage space hadn't seen the light of day in almost thirty years, and in there were pictures of the same woman we saw at the Stokes boys' place, not looking a day older. Not even a gray hair. She should easily be what, your mother's age?"

"Are you sure it is even the same woman?"

"I'm sure and I believe she's a djinn, a desert demon, trapped in some artifact from that storage facility that Anson made off with."

"Artifact? Like what, a bong?" Clearly, Mulder would have had to be toking one of those to come up with this theory.

"I thought that, but no." He didn't even break his stride. "Traditionally the stories have had djinn in lamps, the oil kind, you rub it and out they come, but it could be anything, a tin or a box. Barbara Eden was in a bottle."

"I knew she had to come into this, somehow." She had been laying bets as to when *I Dream of Jeannie* would come into the conversation.

"Do you know how much I loved that show?" Mulder sighd with a goofy smile on his face.

"You and every other pre-pubescent boy on the planet," Scully muttered caustically. "So what, Anson rubs some old, dusty decanter, and out pops this woman purring 'master'."

"I don't think this woman has that kind of attitude. Judging by the rise and fall of some of her previous clients. I think she does what they want, exactly what they want, black and white."

"So?"
Mulder glared at her impatiently. "You have to be careful what you wish for."

That old adage clicked as Scully considered Anson Stokes' predicament. "So, let's say in theory, that Anson decided it would be awesome to wish for invisibility."

"But knowing Anson, he wasn't smart enough to ask for his clothes to be invisible."

"Which explains why he's naked." She couldn't believe she was actually listening to this. "So why did he disappear?"

"Well, if you were his brother, and you weren't too bright, and you wanted him back and a genie at hand to grant any wish, what would you ask for?"

"I would wish for my brother back."

"Precisely," Mulder snapped his fingers under her nose, grinning. "So I say we should look for our missing body at the Stokes brothers' bachelor pad."

"You would think that someone would have noticed a yellow man wandering around a morgue."

"Remember, Scully, genie. Leslie wished for his brother back, then he would just appear."

"Safe and sound and whole again?"

"I didn't say that," Mulder grimaced, glancing at her scrubs. "Get changed, I have a feeling Anson is getting ripe and someone's going to notice a yellow corpse sooner or later."

Genies? Walking corpses? Invisible men? "Mulder, I would say this is all ridiculous, but this is you and I have given up bothering."

"Good! Go get changed." He pulled her up and pushed her towards the door. "In all our years on the X-files, we've not had a genie."

"The fact that you just made that statement as if it was a good thing is what is the most disturbing to me," Scully sighed, shuffling off to do as he bid.
"Mulder, you can't be serious!"

"As a heartbeat, Scully." Mulder's stupid grin spread across his face. Scully resisted the urge to slap it off. Instead, she chose to glare over his shoulder at the woman, dressed in black, currently studying her options at the Starbucks menu.

"Mulder, she's not a suspect in...whatever it is that's been going on. She's free to do whatever she wants."

"And she wants to go with whoever unrolled the rug," he replied, leaning back into the vinyl seats at the Lambert-St. Louis airport, nonchalantly cracking a seed between his teeth and completely impervious to the death glare from his partner sitting across from him. "You think the it will be okay in baggage?"

"I think the rug will be fine. You, I'm not so sure," Scully snapped hotly, glancing at the woman, who clearly was taking her time choosing what sort of venti, mocha, cafe, kakaka she wanted to drink. That or she was wisely giving the two FBI agents space as Scully vented all over her partner. "What are you going to do with her? We can't put her up at a hotel. Skinner would never approve of it without going through official channels."

"I thought she could bunk at my place. I'm the one with the rug."

Scully met his wide, eyed expression with a look so withering, even he finally cottoned on.

"Scully, let's ignore what it is and isn't like. Let's really look at what you are proposing here." Her legs and arms crossed tightly as she began to tick off facts carefully. "One, we have a man who claims to have been cursed into having his mouth removed. Two, we have an idiot of a former employee who ends up with a yacht in his yard. Three, that employee ends up invisible and dead. Four, he then walks off by his own power to his trailer park, where he and his handicapped brother are found dead in an explosion. Five, the only common denominator in all of this is a woman you claim is a genie, wrapped up in a rug."

Mulder blinked slowly, nodding his head as he crunched on another sunflower seed. "You summed it up nicely there. Maybe you should write the report."

"This is all insanity," she burst out angrily, earning the attention of several of the sleepy-eyed passengers waiting for flights around her and a passing glance from the woman in question in the distance. Clearing her throat, she lowered her voice in a hiss. "Mulder, this is ridiculous and you know it. Genies? Magic lamps?"

"Carpets, Scully. She uses a rather nice oriental area rug."

"I don't care if it's a fuzzy, pink bath mat this is all a fairy tale!"

"So, you can believe a man, perfectly normal except for a really serious pot addiction, can just make himself invisible spontaneously?"

Scully stung under Mulder's smirk, the raw wound of embarrassment and humiliation still open and painful, and he was pouring salt into it. "I don't know what I saw, Mulder. For all I know, maybe I
was making it up."

Miserably she slumped into her seat, realizing that no matter what she said, this was an argument she wasn't going to win, no matter how reasonable she tried to sound. "Mulder, I've gone along with you on all manner of crazy quests; monsters in lakes, alien autopsies, hours hanging out with the Lone Gunmen. I've put up with a lot."

Mulder watched her, gaze narrowing over a disbelieving snort. "Scully, you are seriously upset I'm bringing Jenn with us?"

"Gee, Mulder, why would I be upset that you are bringing a tall, beautiful, exotic looking brunette supposedly from France home with you," she groused petulantly. Her annoyance seemed to serve to only amuse him further.

"You are jealous of the genie!"

She winced as he barked in laughter at her. "I am simply disturbed that you would so willingly buy into all of this!"

"Scully, we've been partners for how long again?"

"Long enough for me to know that you at least use a shred more common sense when you go through your crazy schemes."

"Not much more, no." He was hopelessly amused by this entire scenario and something about that deeply offended Scully. "I just have to say, Dana, green is such a lovely color on you."

He dropped his voice to a purr, her given name rumbling in that soft, sexy way of his, causing her spine to tingle and her stomach to turn to goo. Normally, it would have been a turn on, that teasing, but in the middle of an airport in the Midwest with another woman he was planning on taking home standing nearby, it only added gasoline to the flames. "Don't think you can seduce your way out of this one, Mulder."

"I can't find your jealousy attractive?"

"Not unless you want a bullet in your foot, no," she snapped, watching as Jenn finally made her choice, wondering why it took anyone twenty minutes to order coffee.

"Oooh, BDSM, now there's something different."

Her stony gaze could have cut glass, but it only served to make Mulder snicker.

"If you ever - ever - want to to find that or anything else in the bedroom ever again, Fox Mulder, you will resolve this and quickly," she murmured, her voice low and burning. "I don't care if you have to wish for world peace and a million sparkly unicorns, I'm not playing into your Barbara Eden fantasies."

That sobered him quickly enough.

"Scully, three wishes and I'm done."

"I mean it, Mulder," she warned.

Behind him the black-clad figure of Jenn, complete with her sunglasses, wandered over. "You know, you could have made you three wishes by now and have been done with it. Didn't need to pay extra
to bring me along."

Mulder cleared his throat and guiltily glanced at Scully. Scully's response to simply smile at Jenn sweetly.

"Oh, that's all right. It gives Mulder some time to ponder what he'd like to do with those three wishes."

The venom in her words wasn't lost on either of them. Mulder cringed. Jenn cleared her throat.

"Good," said the woman, patting Mulder on the shoulder. "That way you won't choose unwisely, in theory."

"You clearly haven't known Fox Mulder long enough," Scully intoned, deciding to busy herself with a medical journal in her bag. "If there is any way to make an unwise decision, he will find it."

It was going to be a very long flight back to Washington.
"Admit it, Scully, it's a classic!"

"I admit nothing." Three beers and a bowl of popcorn into their evening, and she was relaxed and sprawled lazily on his couch, her feet in his lap as he kneaded one arch with a knuckle. She shivered as he hit a sweet spot, a knot of nerves just below the ball of her big toe, and felt the muscles in her calves relax.

"I keep this up, I can get you to admit that Caddyshack was the greatest movie ever made," Mulder teased as the credits rolled on the screen.

"I don't think there's enough foot massages and beer in the world for that." She laughed, her head lolling on the leather. "I can't believe you talked me into watching it."

"You have to admit, the gopher makes the movie."

"If the most redeeming quality a movie has is the really awesome, fake gopher, your movie has a problem."

"You just don't get it, Scully, 'cause you are a girl."

"Quite possibly," she admitted vaguely as a wandering hand moved up her jean clad leg. "Just you don't get Steel Magnolias because you have never enjoyed the bond of sisterhood between women."

"And I hope to never have to experience that bond of sisterhood." His long, lithe fingers now pressed the spot just below the back of her knee, the one where all the pressure from her ridiculously high shoes hit every day. "Now, other types of bonds we can discuss."

"You just want me to take you down and cuff you, don't you?" She smiled wickedly at him, earning an appreciative nod and a waggle of his dark eyebrows.

"Well, I'm just a man who can't say no."

Scully only managed to snort, snickering as she scooted further into the leather cushions. "Why won't you tell me what you wished for in your final wish?"

Mulder didn't stop his ministrations, thank goodness, but she could feel him mentally pause. She glanced towards him as he focused on the muscles of her calf, ruminating.

"Come on, we both know you didn't wish for the world's most unexplainable case of priapism."

"That would be too awkward explaining in the ER," he admitted dryly.

"And you aren't rich...that I know of."

"I must say I didn't do too badly for myself with my inheritance. My parents left me very comfortable
for life, so no, I didn't wish for that."

Scully hummed. She could think of one things Mulder could have wished for, possibly, but she doubted they even occurred to him. His sister, his father, his mother, the family he had lost returned to him, hale, healthy, and whole, with fulfilling lives. But life had moved on, and so had Mulder, and for that Scully was eternally grateful.

"You could have wished for a cleaner," she teased, eyeing the bottle caps that scattered the floor near his trash can.

"Or I could have wished for something other than a shit hole to live in."

"Well, yeah, but you can move somewhere on your own if you wanted."

"True," he nodded, glancing around his dark, gloomy, cramped little home. "But I think this place has character."

"For a conspiracy theorist, yes."

"And luckily enough, guess what I am!"

Scully drew out a long sigh, using her toes to poke gently into his side. "Tell me what you wished for."

Mulder simply cleared his throat, delicately, the skin of his ears turning a pale shade of pink.

"Did you wish for something insane?"

"No," he muttered, not quite meeting her eyes.

"Then what was it?"

He scrubbed at his face, looking heartily as if he wished she would drop it. "If I tell you, you are just going to be annoyed and make a big deal out of it."

"Annoyed?" An eyebrow arched up dangerously at him, her feet twitching on his lap. "Should I point out to you that I have a heel dangerously close to your groin right now?"

He involuntarily twitched as he burst out in a long rush of air and words. "I granted her wish and let her go free."

"What?" She blinked at the side of his head.

He grimaced, meeting her confusion with embarrassment. "I granted her wish. I let her go free."

Scully was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her tone was dry. "You thought I'd be annoyed by that."

"You weren't exactly a fan of her coming out here."

"Mulder, I wasn't a fan of her coming out here to stay with you playing 'Yes, Master' until you got done playing Aladdin."

"See, but that's the thing, remembered in Aladdin the last wish that he made."

It took Scully a long moment to process what he was saying. "You've seen the movie Aladdin?"
Mulder looked mildly affronted by her disbelief. "I have seen a Disney movie or two. Just so happens that Frohike and Byers rented it during one of Langley's D&D nights."

That image confounded Scully for a long moment. "Okay, moving beyond the Lone Gunman and Disney movies, so you wished for Jenn's freedom?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "Why not?"

"I don't know...I just..." She stopped, thinking. She wasn't sure if she bought this entire load of Persian folk tales, but after all these years and all the strange, weird, and wonderful things she had seen with Fox Mulder, she couldn't exactly call him out on this. Instead, she smiled, nodding slowly in approval. "That's a good thing."

He stared at her in mild surprise. "You aren't angry with me?"

"Mulder, if it means she isn't hanging around you all the time and sleeping on your couch, of course I am a fan of it." She scrunched in further into the couch, enough so her legs were completely across his lap now, and she could reach his sleeve to pull him closer. "Only I get that right."

His grin was slow, soft, and sexy. "Well, if you insist, I will make sure that no more genies invade your private space."

"No more genies, rugs, or rubbing magic lamps."

"I got a magic lamp you could rub," he muttered filthily, earning an eye roll and smack from Scully. He yelped, but she pulled him down to her all the same.

Much later, nestled comfortably in his waterbed, his snores breathing softly beside her, Scully studied this strange man she had fallen so completely for. It never occurred to him to wish for riches, or power, or fame, or money. Here he was, wishing for world peace, and yes, perhaps he did muck it up, but he tried. In the end, he did perhaps the most altruistic thing he could, setting someone else free. Mulder, who thought himself so broken by life, yet he still had enough humanity to look for goodness and grace, even through all the darkness that surrounded him. Perhaps that was why, in the end, she had fallen so in love with him, because despite it all, he still held onto hope for the good. Others could have their empty riches and vain dreams, Scully thought sleepily, as she snuggled against Mulder's gently rising chest. She would take this dream for however long it lasted. Tonight, for this moment, Scully was the happiest woman in the world, and that was all that mattered.
In which Skinner has a surprise for Mulder and Scully.

Quiet reigned in the office for weeks; no more genies or outburst in the middle of assistant director meetings, no more trips to Missouri to investigate strange happenings. It was a blessed peacefulness, a restful respite, and Scully had a sad, sinking feeling it was all going to end soon.

"Skinner wants us in his office." Mulder greeted her as she wandered in the door, coffees in hand, still setting down her own things.

"What did you do?" Scully couldn't help the words as they burst out of her mouth. Mulder had been called off to family business again, but she knew how he was. A trip to Massachusetts or North Carolina could lead to an angry sheriff and a host of phone calls to Skinner regarding a wayward agent sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

"Why do you assume I did anything?" He took the proffered coffee from her, glaring at her, perturbed.

"Well, you've been gone for the last four days, the office has been quiet, and we've not had an X-file in weeks. Usually that's the makings for Mulder mischief."

Mulder's dignity looked affronted as he stood and snagged his suit jacket off the back of his chair. "I'll pretend you didn't make a gross generalization about me and continue with my general, pleasant self."

"It's not a generalization, Mulder, if it's a fact about you." Scully fell into step beside him back towards the elevator, knowing she was perhaps teasing a bit too harshly, but feeling put out by the silence on his most recent trip to handle his family effects. Not that she had begrudged him, she had even offered to help, but he had turned her away. That had stung more than she had cared to let on, but she agreed.

"I'm not a child who can't be left alone. I manage quite well as an adult." He stabbed a the button calling the elevator, the doors opening automatically to allow them access inside.

Mulder was clearly determined to be petulant this morning, even with the coffee peace offering she had made. "Okay, fine, so maybe you don't get in trouble all of the time. What do you think the meeting is about?"

"Don't know," he shrugged, sipping at the cup in hand. "Could have a new case for us."

"That would be a relief," she muttered to herself, watching as the elevator stopped at the number of Skinner's floor. The doors opened to the bustle of the bullpen, a place Scully was glad to have left behind, as she and Mulder made their way to Arlene's outer office. She glanced up at them both, paused, then gave them a tight, almost apologetic smile.

"I'll let him know you are here," she assured them, rounding her desk to poke her head around their boss's door.
"What's that about," Mulder whispered sideways at her. Scully shook her head. Perhaps Skinner was angry with them? Had they done something to upset him?

"You can go on in." Arlene opened the door fully, still wearing the nervous smile as they wandered past, filing into their supervisor's large office. They took their customary seats across from Skinner, who continued to read whatever memo was on his desk, noting places within the document quickly before turning dark, beady eyes to stare at the pair of the evenly. For half a wild moment, Scully wondered if he knew, if somehow their boss had discovered the truth about the shift in their relationship. Was this why Arlene looked so guilty outside? Did she know that this would be their official reprimand and sanction? Another in a long list of them, to be honest, but would it be enough to cost them their jobs?

Mulder sipped his coffee beside her and looked casually bored.

"Agents," Skinner opened, glancing between the pair of them over his rimless glasses. "What are you doing next week?"

Scully looked to Mulder, who shrugged blandly, before she answered. "We have no major caseload at the moment, sir. Is there something you want us working on?"

"No," he rushed, waving a hand as he leaned back into his soft, leather desk chair. "I just...well, that is to say, I happen to have procured…"

It was only as their boss sat stuttering and fumbling in front of them that Scully realized that their stoic, ex-Marine Assistant Director was looking decidedly flushed and a bit embarrassed. She shot a sideways glance at her partner, who was doing the same, a similar confusion alight in each others eyes. Skinner rasped his throat, finally straightening himself as if pronouncing some dire punishment for some misdoings on their part.

"I have been told that the producers of the new movie, The Lazarus Bowl, wish to invite the pair of you out to the Hollywood premiere next week. Your airfare and accommodations have been paid for, and you have tickets to the red-carpet event, followed by a black tie after party. Wayne asked me to make sure that the two of you were made available, just in case the press wanted to meet the inspiration for the film."

He paused, staring at the two of them. They both simply stared back. Silence rang. Perhaps a pin dropped, perhaps it didn't. Scully was sure it was the last shreds of her dignity falling to the floor.

"They seriously went through with that movie, sir?"

"Well, yes, why not?" Skinner couldn't quite meet her eye. "You know how Hollywood is, anything for a buck."

"But sir...how does the Director feel about this...or PR?" Scully glanced towards Mulder, who still looked as if he had just been hit by a truck and was confused as to how it got into Skinner's office.

"That's all been cleared. Wayne is hopeful it will be a hit."

"Hopeful?" Scully didn't like the sound of that word, and she wasn't fond of Skinner's nervous shrug after it either.

"Sir," Mulder finally found his voice. "I have to ask again, are we being punished?"

Skinner only responded by scowling darkly. "Punished with a free trip to Los Angeles, a five star hotel, and Hollywood movie stars? I only wish to be so punished!"
Mulder didn't look as if the idea excited him in the least. "Is there a way to politely decline?"

"Not if you don't want to insult your boss, there isn't."

Mulder chose to wisely return to stunned silence. Scully was left to try and muddle through this alone, and she found herself grasping futilely at anything to avoid this. "But sir, caseloads, paperwork."

"You just said you have nothing coming up."

"That could be changed," Mulder muttered quietly, not completely out of Skinner's range of hearing.

"Do you want me to make it an order, Mulder?"

"No, sir," he replied instantly with a tight, "whatever you say" smile.

"Good." His dark eyes flickered between them both before jerking his head towards his outer office. "Get out of here. I'll see you in Los Angeles. Arlene will contact you with the paperwork."

They couldn't remove themselves from the presence of their supervisor quickly enough. Mulder was down the hall already as Scully hurriedly gathered the file from Arlene, promising to read it through, trailing after him at a more sedate pace. He at least waited till they were in the relative quiet of the elevator, alone, before he burst out with the thoughts he had swallowed in front of Skinner.

"What sort of crap do you think they threw up on the screen?"

Scully worried at an elbow with her fingers, her arms crossed in front of her as she stared at the brushed metal doors. She wanted to hope for the best, but someone had a sad, sinking feeling that there was no use. "Maybe it's not so bad, Mulder?"

"Not so bad?" He turned with panic and mild disgust. "Do you really think that Skinner's old college buddy, Wayne, is capable of anything that would be mildly coherent?"

"Well," Scully hedged helplessly. "I mean, like you say, anything is possible."

The doors opened back to their office floor. Mulder stalked out first, moodily flinging open the door as he rounded his desk, his fingers on his keyboard before Scully could even make it into the door. He furiously typed, pounding into the plastic keys, taking out his frustration on the search engine in front of him.

"The Lazarus Bowl, scheduled for late-September, just in time for the Halloween season."

"What, so it's a horror movie?" She moved behind him to lean against the back of his office chair.

"Or a satirical comedy, I haven't decided." He scrolled down whatever page he clicked on. Scully scrambled to scan through it with him. "It says, 'the director, Wayne Federman, has created a black humor horror flick, worthy of some of the recent great masters of the genre.'"

"Is that what the critics say?"

"No, that's the studio dreck, I haven't gotten to any critics yet." Mulder groaned as he leaned back into his chair. "I had rather hoped Hollywood would get the idea this was crap and mercifully kill it all before it ever saw the light of day."

"I so hope my brothers don't go and see this," Scully worried, knowing she'd never hear the end of it if Bill or Charlie got wind of it. "I've got to warn my mother."
"Don't tell her, maybe she'll just ignore it. Hopefully everyone will."

They both stared at the promotional website despondently, as if wishful thinking could simply make it disappear.

"I wonder if Skinner really would fire me if I just didn't go," Mulder mused quietly. "Maybe I can give a medical reason?"

"He'd catch on. Unless you were on death's doorstep, he'd make you go."

"I could arrange it, you know. I have a gun, a bottle of Scotch…"

"Don't even joke, Mulder," she mildly chided, too horrified by the idea to do anything but laugh at it. "Besides, it's a free vacation, a trip to Hollywood, you and me, to go to a premier!"

"You seriously want to go through with this?" He craned his head up to stare at her doubtfully, as if she were the crazy one suggesting death over a movie.

Scully shrugged mildly, a slow, teasing smile lifting her mouth. "All these years, Mulder, you've taken me to California and you've never taken me to see the movie stars. Now here's your chance."

He pouted. "You just want to see if you can dump me for Brad Pitt."

That was enough to earn a laugh out of Scully. "Mulder, if I were dump you for a better looking version, I'd go Richard Gere."

"Well, that makes it all the better, I think he's playing Skinner, maybe you can say hi."

She swatted his ear, just to make him howl, pushing off his chair to wander to his desk. "Mulder, the movie is crap. Let's enjoy it a little."

"You know, that's what my mother used to say about my grandmother's visits. I may have gotten twenty bucks, but the embarrassment never went away."

"And now we see why you've become the well adjusted adult we see today," she breathed, settling behind her desk and grabbing her neglected coffee, leaving Mulder to sulk at his movie reviews.
The Red Carpet

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder go to a movie premier.

The dress had cost her a months pay, the shoes two weeks, but her hair was done just so, her make up was neat and much more glamorous than what she normally wore. She even cracked out the lacy lingerie, now with an excuse to wear it, and examined herself in the full length mirror of her deluxe hotel room.

Would Mulder think she was pretty?

The question seemed like a rather moot point now, considering he'd see her naked many times, yet Scully's feminine pride had to wonder. Mulder had never really seen her...well, dressed up. Yes, he'd seen her in her authoritarian suits, her high heels and professional armor, that was what he normally saw her in. He'd seen her in casual dresses, in jeans and flannel shirts, and in her pajamas more times than she cared to admit. Hell, he'd seen her covered in manure, but rarely had he seen her like this. Yes, they'd had a date or two, nice evenings out with her in a cocktail dress, but nothing this formal or fancy. After all, this was Hollywood, and Tea Leoni would be there. She was pretty enough to catch even Mulder's eye. While in a million years she could never imagine Mulder preferring the pretty, tall, blonde actress to herself, it still gave her pause. Who was she, Dana Scully, compared to a zillion Hollywood starlets strolling the red carpet? She'd look like a dumpy country bumpkin compared to that glamour.

Frankly, Scully didn't know what was more disturbing at that moment, the fact that she was worried if her partner thought her attractive or that she was concerned because she was going to a Hollywood premiere. Both seemed vaguely surreal to consider and yet there she was, primping for what felt like the hundredth time, pushing that one annoying hair behind her ear, checking to see if the back was still on her earring, adjusting that irritating hanger strap that wouldn't stay where it was put. At her hotel room door, a light, lazy rap indicated Mulder was dressed and waiting for her outside. Were those really butterflies in her stomach? Rolling her eyes at her own idiocy, she gathered her scant things, a wrap, a clutch, lipstick, and her VIP tickets, turning around the luxurious room to make sure she hadn't forgotten what little brains she had left. She opened the door, fully prepared to laugh at her own idiocy, and stopped.

She had forgotten how truly delicious Mulder looked in a tux. Granted, it had been years since Scully had seen him in one, and that was when he was in the arms of the infamous Phoebe Green. She had been more concerned with getting him out of it, not for an illicit tryst, but to make sure he wasn't going to die of smoke inhalation. For obvious reasons she had tried to forget that memory and the laughing mockery of Phoebe once she got over the shock of Scully trying to undress her dance partner. It occurred to her, perhaps a beat too late, that she was staring, open-mouthed, at her partner. For his part he looked more than a bit dazed himself. Clearing her throat and ignoring the flame rushing across her cheeks, she merely grinned up him. "Hello!"

Mulder blinked in an uncharacteristic stupor, then his brain caught up with the rest of her greeting. "Hi," he replied, soft and low, as if just finding his voice again. His gaze wandered from head to toe. "You clean up nice."
"So do you," she teased, tugging at the lapel of his tux. "Rental?"

"This old thing? Nah, it's the one I keep around for weddings and funerals."

"Right," she snickered, allowing the door to close behind her as she took Mulder's proffered arm. It was sweet, an old, gentlemanly thing to do, the sort of classy thing she often forgot Mulder was capable of. "You ready for this?"

"Well, as ready as I'll ever be for a train wreck on the silver screen." She could feel him tense beneath her fingers. His eyes cut down towards hers as they made their way down the hall and towards the opulent lobby. "Pity they gave us separate rooms, though."

That had been the first thing Mulder had noted with dismay in their travel arrangements. "Yeah, well thankfully they are across the hall from one another, so you can sneak across and use the secret knock."

"You going to leave a towel on the door to tip me when to make my escape?"

"I was thinking coded message and carrier pigeon, see how long it took you to get the idea."

"With you in that dress, I may not need to sneak over." She could feel his gaze travel over her shoulders to the completely open and bare back, revealing everything, including the top of her ouroboros tattoo. "Of course, if Skinner got wind of that fancy tattoo there, it may raise eyebrows."

"Do you want to think of Skinner looking anywhere near that area, Mulder?"

She tried not to grin in abject delight as he tugged her just a little closer to his side in a rare streak of possessiveness. "Not if I still want to have a job in the morning, 'cause I'd have to punch him in the face."

"And then explain it all afterwards?" She chuckled, half-hoping their boss would discover the truth. What would Skinner say if he found out that they were now lovers? Would he even be surprised?

"So, I take it you like the dress," Scully wondered pointedly, feigning ignorance but not the hint of insecurity.

"I think I'd like you better out of it."

"That's sort of missing the point."

"No it isn't. If you are trying to look sexy, and you do, I get it. You are beautiful, so stop worrying."

"Who says I'm worried," she replied, tossing her chin and knowing he saw right through that.

"Cause you are a woman and you read those goofy magazines with toothpicks on the front, and don't tell me you don't, because I know you keep them there right next to the medical journals in your desk."

"Rifling through my drawers, now?"

"Oh, the images that conjures, Scully," he breathed, earning a hard slap on the shoulder and peels of laughter out of his partner.

He hardly looked sorry for it. "See, now you will be thinking of that all night and not those stunningly fake plastic actresses, won't you?"
Trust Mulder to set the right mood for a fancy, public event. "Perhaps, until the movie starts. Then I have a feeling there aren't enough drawers full of my underwear to distract either one of us."

"Don't remind me," he muttered as they came into sight of the marbled entrance. Already, she could see Skinner waiting for them, looking uncharacteristically gleeful as he stood by a long, black limousine.

"Is that Skinner smiling," Mulder murmured softly, sounding more than a bit disturbed by the idea.

"Maybe he hit the champagne upstairs," Scully offered, slapping on a welcoming grin as the moved to greet their boss. "Sir, I'm glad to see you so...chipper?"

"I think I just saw Cameron Diaz walk past me and wave," he responded without preamble.

"As if this night couldn't get any more ridiculous," Mulder muttered. Whether or not Skinner heard him, he rounded to shake Mulder's hand heartily.

"This should be fun!" Skinner enthused. Scully had never seen her boss so laid back or so jovial. Neither had Mulder, who was beginning to look rather alarmed.

"If you say so, sir," Mulder replied with the automatic agreement that Mulder had never, ever displayed in front of their superior before.

"I'm sure it will be...unique," Scully stepped in, trying to smooth Mulder's rapidly raveling mood before it truly annoyed Skinner. "It should be interesting seeing what they producers came up with."

Here, Skinner's ebullience faltered, hitching his smile just a tad. "Yes, well, remember they've taken some liberties. You know how Hollywood is, they always have to punch up truth a bit. So it may not be literally, fact-for-fact, everything that happened with that case."

Mulder's expression said he doubted it had anything to do with the bounds of reality, period. "Outside of the Lazarus Bowl, sir, does it really have anything at all to do with the case?"

"It mentions a Lazarus Bowl, doesn't it," Skinner offered hastily, gesturing to the waiting car. "Better get going for your red carpet debut, eh?"

Trying to be the graceful voice of reason, Scully tugged gently at Mulder's arm. "Hey, it's Hollywood! The red carpet should be fun!"

Mulder looked like he'd rather set any red carpet he saw on fire.

"Sure," he muttered, climbing into the soft leather of the luxuriant limo behind Scully. "Fine, whatever!"

Scully hoped, privately, they would have booze at this event...a lot of it.
Alive And Relatively Young

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder celebrate on Skinner's dime.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In all honesty, Scully didn't think there was enough booze to make up for the movie. Nothing could erase the nightmare of it from her mind. She couldn't decide which was worse, the laughter ringing around her at her and Mulder's expense or the mockery of their lives thrown up on the screen. Like some gross caricatures, the story unfolded into a half-realized mess of bits and pieces of their cases, mixed with the sort of B-movie junk that would have entertained Mulder for hours had it been an Ed Wood movie. But it wasn't and as she stared at the screen in front of them, her heart broke for the man beside her, whose entire life's mission had been reduce to a cruel mockery, a cheap joke made to line the pockets of a man who had only heard a tenth of the story.

And where had Wayne Federman gotten the idea that she remotely thought that Walter Skinner was attractive?

Mulder fled shortly after that revelation and she had left him to it, too overcome with her own horror to really say anything to him. As the movie ended, she sat in her velvet lined seat, in her glamourous dress, watching the elite of this very fake city file their way out without a spare glance for her. Of course, Dana Scully looked like Tea Leoni to them, not some petite, startled red head, staring in horror at the screen. At least Skinner, perhaps in his glee, or maybe out of mortification for what was presented, silently handed her one of his FBI credit cards, telling her to find Mulder and cheer him up. Scully took it without a word, too embarrassed to say no.

The buzzing from her purse was what caught her attention. She checked her cell phone inside, a phone call from the Washington desk. She waited till the last attendees had already filed up the red carpeting before returning the call. Somehow she found it sadly ironic that Micah Hoffman would end up dead on this night of all nights, and at the hands of Cardinal O'Fallon. She felt sad then, for the man who pushed limits so far, perhaps out of his curiosity, perhaps out of his perversity, perhaps just because he could. She felt sadder still for the priest who had his faith so shattered because of it. Worse, she felt disgusted that this entire story would be nothing more than a footnote, a laughing joke to those who would watch this ridiculous movie and never truly understand the deeper happenings underneath it all.

The after party glittered and swirled outside of the theater, but Scully ignored the studio bigwigs with their pomp and circumstance and meandered past the common area to the studio sets nearby. She had a feeling she'd find Mulder there, in the one they had visited when last they were there, and sure enough, he sat in the fake cemetery from the film, hunched over himself and a Lazarus Bowl full of popcorn. On a whim she flipped the nearby, industrial fan at him, creating a breeze that caught his morose attention.

"Been looking all over for you," she called, letting go of the fan and wandering to the plastic grass hill where he sat.
He sighed, sadly, as she settled beside him. "They got it so wrong, Scully."

She reached across to the bowl in his lap, grabbing a handful of popcorn and munching it thoughtfully. "I got a page from the Washington Bureau. Micah Hoffman was murdered tonight. Murdered in his own home by Cardinal O'Fallon, who then hanged himself. A murder-suicide."

Mulder's nod was pensive. "It's Jesus and Judas, Scully."

Perhaps, in its own weird way, it was. Certainly, it was just as tragic.

"Wow," she murmured, staring out across the fake graveyard, with it's plaster stones and simulated atmosphere. "It's all over now."

"No," Mulder replied in vague disgust. "No, it's just beginning. Hoffman and O'Fallon are these complicated, flawed, beautiful people, and now they'll be remembered as jokes because of this movie. The character based on O'Fallon is listed in the credits as "Cigarette-Smoking Pontiff". How silly is that?"

"Pretty silly," Scully agreed.

"Yeah, what about us? How are we going to be remembered 'cause of this movie?"

A hapless idiot and an oversexed vixen, caught in a love triangle with their dashingly handsome boss, making out in a coffin? Dear Lord, she hoped that wasn't how they would be remembered.

"Well, hopefully, the movie will tank," she offered as her one consolation, with the silent prayer that it do so badly it wouldn't even make it to video.

Beside her Mulder snorted, staring at the fake headstones beyond them. "What about all the dead people who are forever silent and can't tell their stories? They're all going to have to rely on Hollywood to show the future how we lived, and it all becomes oversimplified and trivialized and Cigarette-Smoking Pontificized and becomes as plastic and meaningless as this stupid Lazarus Bowl."

In distaste he picked up the cheap, movie giveaway, which looked nothing like the bowl she and Mulder found in Washington the year before. It was a gaudy, fabricated, tacky symbol of what the movie was, of what the story of Micah Hoffman and Cardinal O'Fallon had become. At least those two men were not going to be able to complain about it much.

"I think the dead are beyond caring what people think about them." Scully at least hoped so, because she didn't want to waste one more thought on it, not tonight, when they were there, the two of them, in Hollywood, a land of fairy dust and golden dreams built on nothing more than cheap plastic sets and celluloid tape. "Hopefully we can adopt the same attitude."

She grinned at him, giggling softly as he scowled dourly at the graves beyond. "You do know that there aren't real dead people out there, right? That this is a movie set?"

"The dead are everywhere, Scully" he mournfully intoned.

"Well, we're alive," she offered cheerfully. "And we are relatively young. And Skinner was so tickled by the movie…"

"I bet he was," Mulder cut in dryly, snorting into his popcorn.

Scully continued. "That he has given us a Bureau credit card to use for the evening."
She held up one shiny, plastic Visa card, grinning madly as she did. Mulder eyed it half in surprise, half in doubt.

"Come on!" She pulled him by the arm, helping him up. They stumbled down the tiny, fake hill, Scully snickering as they reached the bottom. "Mulder, I have something to confess."

"What's that?"

"I'm in love with Associate Producer Skinner."

He snorted, loudly, joining her in childish giggles, at last letting go of his morose mood.

"Ahh….me too," he sighed, dumping his plastic bowl of popcorn on the nearest gravestone and taking her hand. He pulled her, laughing past the fake backdrop of a glowing, full moon, out into the cool darkness outside of the back lot.

"What do we do with a company credit card," Mulder wondered, glancing towards the sights and sounds of the after party, where Scully was sure champagne and expensive hor-d'oeuvres flowed like milk and honey.

"We could go back to the hotel and order pizza," she joked. Mulder looked half tempted. "Or we could steal one of the fancy limousines out front, take it for a joyride somewhere, get something outrageous to eat?"

"I don't know about outrageous," Mulder murmured as Scully took his hand, pulling him along to follow behind her. "What were you thinking?"

"I don't know," she temporized, unsure what in the world would even be open this time of night in Los Angeles and how exotic it actually would be. "I think, after that train wreck, we deserve at least a bottle of champagne...maybe three."

"Living the high life, then?" Mulder sounded quietly amused as she spun to grin wildly up at him.

"An FBI credit card and Skinner to answer for it? Let's do what we haven't done ever, you and I, Mulder. Let's live a little, and for once not talk about aliens and conspiracies or eat dinner out of a drive in or take out box! Let's just be...Dana and Fox for just one night."

He didn't seem opposed to the idea as he pulled her close. "And just what would Dana and Fox do on an evening out?"

She considered, glancing at the nearest limo with it's bored looking driver sitting beside it, smoking. "I don't know? Let's ask him!"

As it turned out, Jorge knew a lot about LA and the finer things to be found there. An hour and a half later, after trips to three of the finest restaurants in the area, a side adventure to a Whole Foods market, and after a quick phone call to a friend of Jorge's, they found themselves sitting on picnic blanket in front of the famous Griffith Observatory in the hills above Los Angeles. Below them spread a sea of stars, glittering on the ground clear to the Pacific Ocean, above them in the darkness only a few were visible in the glare of the city. Behind them the magnificent Art Deco jewel that was the observatory sat, glowing in the night. The air was sweet with the scent of eucalyptus, and jazz played out of the speakers of Jorge's limousine.

"You are right," Mulder murmured from his corner of the blanket, stretched out from one end to the other, sipping at a plastic glass of champagne. "This is way better than the after party."
Scully hummed, her head pillowed on his stomach as she lay the other way, munching on caviar and toast and contemplating a spread of tiny sandwiches. "Who says we don't know how to live it up?"

He laughed at that, a soft rumble under Scully's head. "Certainly good eats." He took one of the offered toasts she held up to him, crunching it thoughtfully.

"Who knew Jorge would have the connections?" She glanced over towards their limo driver, who was happily gnoshing himself on some of their fair, smoking and chatting amiably on his cell phone in Spanish. She hummed softly to the Gershwin number floating from behind where Jorge sat, her voice slightly out of tune to that of Billie Holiday as she sang coquettishly about the memories of her lover that they couldn't take away from her. This was a memory, Scully mused, that she hoped would never get taken away.

"Well," Mulder sighed contentedly, trailing fingers through her now messy hair. "We have had food, we've had wine, we've spent exorbitant amounts of money on our corporate credit card, and we have some pretty fine tunes blaring from a very expensive limo service."

Scully giggled, humming in acknowledgement.

"So," he continued, sitting up to glance down at her in the darkness in soft speculation. "Care for a dance?"

Was that her heart in her throat? Scully couldn't tell as she sat up, allowing Mulder to rise from the blanket with a careful, athletic grace. His tuxedo jacket long gone, he stood in the dim glow of the city beyond, shirtsleeves rolled up, his tie undone, a cocky smile on his face as he held out his hand to her, silently asking her to follow along one more time. Without hesitation she wrapped her cool fingers around his, as he pulled her up against him, holding one hand as his other rested gently on the curve of her hip under the dress. He could carry a tune no better than she, but he attempted to as he pulled her closer, tucking the crown of her head under his chin. She liked this spot, this niche against his body, where she could feel the warmth of him under his cotton shirt and smell of his aftershave mixed with the scent that was just Mulder, spicy and musky and comforting.

She pressed her cheek to his chest, closing her eyes as she allowed him to sway, not really dancing so much as moving in rhythm to the swing of trumpets and clarinets, and the deep, lulling brassiness of Billie Holiday's voice. They said nothing as they stood there, keeping time, reveling in a rare, quiet moment with no case, no mysteries, no secrets, just the two of them, together like normal people. Just Dana and Fox.

"Can we do this forever," she sighed, contented for the first time in so many years, she had forgotten what it was like.

"Sure," he rumbled beneath her cheek, causing her to pull away to look up at wistful smile. "I can't say I would mind."

Oh, if only she could believe that statement.

Perhaps he too knew that it was a pretty lie, spun out of too much wine and good food and the romance of standing on top of a mountain overlooking a sea of stars. His gaze swept out to the basin of Los Angeles below, a deep sigh pulling up from the depths of him. "The scenery is so gorgeous."

Scully glanced over her shoulder, nodding. "That it is." There was no denying the beauty of Los Angeles at night.

"Course, I was talking about you," he teased, jerking her closer, till she snorted with laughter.
"Thank you," she acknowledge, grinning as she gave up all pretense of dancing and simply wrapped his long arms around her slight frame. "You aren't so bad yourself."

"Well, I do clean up nicely when I bother," he replied airily, despite the fact Scully knew he secretly took his appearance very seriously and always had. It was how he had always drawn the attention of every interested female across his path, whether she be a Senate junior staffer or a detective in another precinct, and yet all these years, all that time, none of them had turned his attention from his overriding quest. None of them had stood by his side in the journey either. Perhaps that was what had made the difference with Scully.

"You're thinking too much," he murmured, voice low and gravelly against the shell of her ear. She shivered, her pulse picking up an extra beat in its tempo as she snuggled further into him.

"Can't help it," she muttered into the muffle of his shirt.

"I can think of a thing or two to run that train of thought off the tracks."

She chuckled, pulling away enough to look up at his eyes shining in the dark. As much as she'd like to indulge him in distraction, the question swirling darkly through the warm and contented fuzz persisted. She couldn't help it as her wonder burst out in the space between them. "Why me?"

He paused in their gentle swaying, a frown creasing contentment on his face. "Huh?"

Not one of Mulder's more eloquent responses. "Why me, Mulder? All these years, all this time together, all these women across your path. Why me?"

She couldn't tell if she confused him, overwhelmed him, or both. He simply stared at her, emotions playing in the darkness, unclear to her in the dim light, for once unable to read his thoughts. She didn't want to listen to the panic and the fear whispering in the back of her brain, the one that asked her repeatedly what this new aspect of her and Mulder's relationship was. Nothing had been said of love or futures, they had simply tumbled into one anothers orbits at last, that long simmering tension finally snapping between them. But no explanation had been given as to why, at least not on his part.

"Dana." Her name was soft and raspy as it left him, and she thought it would never cease to make her melt, just a little, hearing it. "Because of everyone across my life, you were the only one who believed me, really believed. You didn't just nod and smile to placate me, or play me for an angle, or use me for their own ends. On a night a long time ago in Oregon, you ran half-naked in my room, trusted me enough to strip down in front of me, and then listened to some crazy story about aliens taking my sister. You could have walked away, and God knows you probably should have, but you didn't. Why you? Why the hell not you?"

She had never really considered the "why not". Tears misted her eyes, though she refused to give in to the impulse to cry all over his shirt. "This is so dangerous, Mulder. If the Bureau were to find out?"

"Well, they find out. Wouldn't be the first time partners were caught fraternizing." He hardly looked concerned. In fact, he looked vaguely amused by the thought of them being found out. "And besides, wouldn't surprise any of them."

"They've never needed an excuse to shut you down, Mulder, not in the past, and you would be handing them one with me."

"Who was the one who threw herself at me all those months ago, in my bedroom no less, defenseless and half-naked from the shower?"
Scully flushed, remembering that night all too well. "Yes, but…"

"But what," he defended, arms tightening around her. "Scully, just as you said earlier, the dead are beyond caring what anyone else thinks and frankly, so am I."

His mouth punctuated his words, meeting hers with tender insistence, attempting to reassure her where his words had not. His effort was successful, she found herself melting beneath it, arms wrapping around his neck as she held on for dear life, forgetting whatever silly worries she had as her head became dizzy with desire.

When he pulled away, he looked more than a little pleased with himself. "Do you care what anyone things?"

Her eyes fluttered as she tried to wrap her tongue around a cognizant thought. "Well," she sighed breathlessly. "After that movie tonight, I suppose I'm beyond caring."

"Good answer," he chuckled, leaning in again, this time for a quick press of lips, gentle and promising, before straightening again. "As romantic as this is, I've eaten enough fish egg to deplete the population of sturgeon in the Caspian Sea and I couldn't help but notice that you had a rather large and comfy bed in your room."

"I do," she grinned coyly. "And so do you, I might add."

"Yeah, but yours looks...softer." He was busy running a hand down the bare back of her dress, long fingers running across her spine as she squirmed, tracing patterns only he knew as his warm palm came to rest at the very base. Scully tried to remember how to breath.

"Care to test it out?" Two could play at his game and she deliberately pressed herself closer against the growing evidence that this was exactly what he wanted to do with the rest of the evening. She tried not to laugh in wicked delight at the way his Adam's apple bobbed on reflex or at the quick intake of breath.

"Think Jorge will get us there quickly if we pay him extra?"

"I think Jorge will politely close the window in the middle and ignore us for everything we've hooked him up with tonight."

With a low growl, Mulder pulled away and began gathering food, carelessly placing it back in wrappers and boxes, not heeding particularly what went in what. Scully could only laugh at his haste, ignoring her usual need for order, for once, more focused on the greater need for the man busily wondering what to do with a half-empty bottle of champagne, and looking a tad frantic.

"Cork it, lets go," she insisted, finding the spongy wooden top amongst the folds of the blanket, allowing Mulder to shove it in as she gathered cartons, bags, and blanket. Laughing and tripping in the darkness across the wide expanse of lawn, they wandered to the car, where Jorge waited, opening the door for them.

Chapter End Notes

I will let Scully opinions of LA be her own. I live her and don't find it fake at all. While she did grow up as a child in SoCal, she spent a lot of it in San Diego and then in places
outside and Los Angeles has a rep to those who don't live in it, even in San Diego (where I just was last weekend). So...yeah...I just hate people assume it's a fake city here. It's lovely, actually, and I love it.
Morning found them both in a tangle of limbs and goose down pillows, Mulder snoring softly behind her, his arms wrapped tightly around her middle. Scully yawned, eyes opening, groaning slightly at the golden light filtering through barely shaded windows and the blooming headache in her head. How much champagne had they drunk the night before? How late had they kept each other up?

That thought at least brought a soft smile to her lips as she stretched muscles sore from the previous nights activities. She turned gently in her partner's arms, craning to study him as he snorted and snuffled in sleep, dark eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks, resisting the urge to plant a small kiss on the end of his prominent nose. He looked so peaceful in those moments, in perfect rest, something he so rarely got when his brilliant mind was spinning and churning out possibilities and probabilities. It was in those nights together he did the one thing she didn't think she had ever seen Mulder do once in their seven years together...relax.

"Do you know how creepy it is to stare at me while I'm sleeping?" His voice rasped groggily, though his eyes didn't open, causing Scully to jump ever so slightly before snuggling further into his embrace, chuckling.

"Don't think I don't know that you've done it a time or two yourself." She had woken more than one morning to find diamond bright eyes watching her with the same passionate intensity that Mulder brought to most everything in life. It had been unnerving, at first, now she simply relished it.

"You are much cuter when you sleep," he defended with a sniff, cracking one heavy eyelid.

"Right," she snorted, rolling completely over to face him, delighting in naked skin brushing against naked skin. "So, now you are awake, got any thoughts in your head?"

Her lascivious smile only seemed to amuse him as his brows drew together in mild alarm. "Woman, you're insatiable. It's only been…."

"Five hours, good enough time for you to recover yourself."

"I can't believe you timed it," he groaned, burying his face further into the pillows. "Other human beings aren't alive yet."

"The angry honking I heard outside not so long ago would tell you otherwise."

"It lies," he insisted, though he noticed his hand roving lazily along her hip. Clearly he wasn't as exhausted as he said he was.

"You know," she teased, fingers burrowing through covers to trace along the firm muscles of his abdomen, earning a jerk and quiver for her efforts, "We could just stay in bed all morning. Check out isn't till two."

"Don't think Skinner will come looking for us." Mulder grunted as her fingers traced lower down the
thin trail of hair leading past his navel.

"I saw his date, she was pretty hot." Her teeth sank into the tender flesh of her bottom lip at Mulder's wandering hands. He had realized two could play at the game she was initiating.

The Skinner comment got Mulder's attention, though. His head jerked up from the pillows in mild alarm. "You don't think he…"

"He's free, male, and over the age of twenty-one, not married, and I really don't want to know what goes on in his personal life. Who cares?"

Mulder thought about it for only the briefest of moments before a broad, lecherous grin spread across his still sleep-puffy face. "Way to go, Skinman!"

"Dare you to say that to his face," Scully snorted, privately rolling her eyes at the male habit of treating sexual encounters like conquests. Of course, the irony of her noting that in their current situation wasn't totally lost on her.

"What and have him ask what the two of us were up to all night? Nope!" His goofy smile melted somewhat wistfully. "Good for Skinner, though. I mean...with his ex-wife and all, and nearly dying on us, twice, think the man deserves a little bit of a good time."

That wasn't the turn of conversation Scully had expected. Her playful touches stopped, her hand lowering in the blankets as she considered Mulder thoughtfully. "You really think that?"

"Why not?" He shrugged, frowning carefully as he suddenly became very interested in a strand of her coppery hair laying across the pillows between them. "Skinner is ex-Marine, you know them all too well. His life has been service, whether it was Vietnam or the FBI, and he's never really allowed himself to ever step out of that. And I don't blame him, he's had to hold both sides against the middle, us and those who are working against us. And it's a lonely, thankless position. He's given up a lot, I guess, for not taking sides."

Scully, honestly, had never thought of it that way. Well, she had of course understood Skinner's position, that careful dance he performed, the shield he tried to balance alongside his FBI loyalty. But it had never occurred to her the personal toll it took on him.

"Perhaps this job just takes that toll on everyone," she offered quietly, all thoughts of teasing and trysts gone now in Mulder's suddenly contemplative mood.

"Not everyone, just us." His bright eyes flickered to hers pointedly. She squirmed, choosing to study the scar on his shoulder instead; the raised, white pad of flesh where once her bullet had torn through him.

"You saying that there isn't a normal for us?" She tried to keep her voice cool and self-assured, teasing, ignoring the churning in her gut or the disappointment as last night's fairy tale seemed to melt like vapor in the brightening, Southern California sunshine.

"Do you want normal for us?"

Scully didn't dare look up at him. Instead she reached up through the blankets, her wandering fingers now coming to rest on the scar that she was studying, feeling the rough, puckered edges and the smooth, thick middle. They had never spoken of this, the future. What they were, what they were becoming. That had been taboo. They'd both simply ignored it, preferring to live in the now, in the ecstasy of giving into long held desires. But that had been months ago, many less-lonely nights ago. Now what?
"I don't think you and I could ever come close to the definition of 'normal', not really."

"Then what do you want?" His question was so simple and earnest. In a million years could Mulder ever give it to her?

"I want...a future for us."

It was the vaguest possible response, she knew it, and yet she didn't know what to say. She had no idea what he even wanted, let alone what she wanted. Somehow, the traditional vision of the white picket fence didn't seem to fit Mulder very well. Not to mention the fact that there could never be the 2.5 kids, not with her. Perhaps a dog. Her vague understanding of what a normal relationship could be was built on the images she had of her parents and brothers, in their loving marriages with their regular lives, and none of that described her and Mulder at all.

Mulder's thoughts seemed to echo her own. "What in the world does that mean for the two of us?"

"I don't know," she admitted, more than a bit sharply, turning from him to lay on her back, staring at the ceiling, wrapping arms against her aching middle. "Something like this, maybe? A future that isn't wrapped up in conspiracies and spaceships, where we don't have to worry what is coming at us out of the dark anymore. Where we finally know the truth about why any of this has happened and stop this endless cycle of lies and deceit and all the people who die for it. Where we can walk away from this, Mulder, and just be...regular people."

And that was the crux of it. Scully wanted to bring it all to an end.

"Do you believe that we can just...stop this? Finish it all, for good?" There was doubt in his question and Scully found herself turning her face sharply towards him in surprise.

"You don't?"

He prevaricated, choosing instead to toy with her hair than to answer straight away. "The X-files don't work like that, you know. There are always unasked questions, always answers that make no sense."

"But is there an end, Mulder? For you, for me, for this quest?"

He sighed, rubbing a strand of silken hair between thumb and forefinger. "I want to believe so, yeah."

Her lips pressed hard together against the stinging in her eyes. She found her voice again, finally, as it croaked through a throat now suddenly tight. "What do you want, Mulder?"

He continued to play with her hair, frowning at it rather than meeting her earnest gaze. "I haven't had much chance to consider, Scully."

It was a heartbreakingly evasive answer, and she tried to ignore the uncertain pang it caused in her chest. "Seven years wasn't long enough?"

"Yes and no." A ghost of a smile quirked his full lips. "I suppose I never gave myself the luxury of time and space to consider it. Hell, I'm shocked I made it this long to even be having this discussion."

She'd almost find that statement funny if it wasn't the truth. "Now you have had the luxury, what do you want?"

He let go over her hair, pulling his hand away slowly, regarding her finally, if not a bit sadly. "I don't
want to make promises to you, Dana, that I won't be able to keep."

Scully had no idea what he meant by that.

"Mulder," she began thickly, ignoring the clawing panic in her brain. "I don't want to push you into…"

"You aren't," he quickly cut in with quiet reassurance. She paused, frowning in confusion, wondering what he meant by his statement.

"I want to see an end too," he replied, that old, manic energy of his appearing for the briefest of seconds. "I want to see this out, to finish it, to get the answers we've fought so hard for for so long. I want to know what it is that my father sacrificed his entire life and all of us for, and I want justice for those we've lost along the way. I want to bring the truth of all of this to light, once and for all. For all these years, Dana, I've fought and fought, this crazy man with nothing to lose and I didn't care what it cost me to get any of that, and now...now I have everything to lose."

Gentle fingers rose to wipe at tears she didn't even know were running down her face. His thumb traced the line of one down her cheekbone to her ear, before his palm cupped her jaw, turning her to fully look at him. "I don't want to lose this, but I can't promise you anything, not till I see this through, not till I get these answers, and not till I fix...everything that they have done wrong."

It wasn't what Scully wanted to hear, but it wasn't exactly a surprise to her either. She tried not to let her disappointment show, and knew she was failing miserably. "You would choose your truth over us?"

"I would chose the truth because of us." He replied firmly, leaning in to place a feather light kiss on her brow. "Because I have this mad, insane, fragile hope that I can give you what you want and be what you need, and I can't give you any of that until I find a way to get these answers."

He was right. In her heart she knew he was right, and selfishly she didn't want to admit it. This was a journey she had invited herself onto so many years ago, and like him, she wanted to see it through, if not for herself, for Pendrell, Penny, Cassandra, Melissa, Emily, and the long-lost Samantha, the innocents in this entire, sordid affair. If that meant, for now, she had to put her own desires to the side, she could do that, and hope that soon they would find their end.

"I just need you, Mulder," she sighed, reaching hands to pull him down to her, ending their hurtful conversation with a pained, needy kiss. He responded in kind, gentle and undemanding, trying to give comfort physically where clearly his words could not. With gentle caresses and warm assurances, with tongue and touch, he tried to assure her that he was there, now, whatever uncertain futures held for them. Their lovemaking this time was unlike the playful teasing of the night before, not rough and needy, but slow and rhythmic, drawn out reverently and with care, until she left shattered, crying at its power and poignancy. She clung to Mulder as he shivered in release, his face buried in her shoulder, his arms holding her so tightly she wondered if he would ever let go. She silently prayed that he never would, that this moment, this perfect union between them would never end, and they could stay cocooned like this, joined together against all the darkness in the world.

But everything ends, even idyllic moments. Her cell phone rang by the bed. Mulder lay with his head pressed between her breasts, right by her heart, his body curled around hers, unwilling to move or to even let go. She stretched as far as her limited reach could go, managing to tip the phone into her fingers and answer it before it went to voice mail. It was Skinner, cheerily asking if they wanted to go with him to lunch before their plane flight back home...back to Washington...back to reality.

Scully asked for an hour to get ready and hung up, already heartbroken that it was all coming to an
end. The nightmare of the ridiculous movie had given way to such a lovely dream, of her and Mulder living as two normal people, doing normal things like wine and dancing. The X-files were their reality and they called.

"Mulder," she sighed, running manicured nails through his hair lightly. He was slow to look up at her, peeling his sticky cheek from her skin, looking as disappointed as she. "We'll have to go."

"Yeah," he replied, not moving immediately to rise off her. He simply stared at her, eyes dark and heavy with thoughts he didn't see fit to express.

"What are you thinking?" It was so rare she asked him. She usually knew, but in this moment, the spinning in his mind was private, closed off. It unnerved her.

"Nothing," he lied casually in that offhanded way that most people did. He then reconsidered. A sigh, long, sad, perhaps wistful breathed across her chest. "I just wish that we had more time. That's what I wish."

Perhaps Mulder was a romantic after all.

"We'll finish this, Mulder," Scully replied confidently, cupping his face gently. "And then we will have all the time in the world."

"I would like to believe that," he said, as if for some reason the man who could believe in aliens couldn't believe in that. Before Scully could press him on it, he was up, untangling himself from her quickly, gathering scattered clothes and reaching for one of the hotel provided robes in the closet. The moment was lost now. It was back to being Mulder and Scully.

"I'll go to my room, shower, and pack up." He tied the robe off, leaning to kiss her lightly as she sat up in bed, the blankets held up now in front of her as if he hadn't just been sprawled all over her naked body a moment before. "Come over and knock when you are ready to go downstairs."

"All right," she sighed, watching him go. For long moments she stared at the closed door. She had a mad desire to run after him and demand why it was that he doubted their future, to make him tell her, to make him walk away from all of this. But even as she did, the cool, rational part of her merely shrugged, reminded her that Mulder always doubted himself in relationships, and perhaps wanted to make no promises till he felt he could. She didn't like it, but that was how it was.

Despite the sunshine streaming fully through her hotel room window, Scully realized she now felt suddenly cold.
Today Is Your Birthday

Chapter Summary

In which Scully take Mulder to see the Yankees.

Nothing further was said, either of the movie or the uncertainty of their future.

Skinner signed off the the credit card expense without comment and refused to discuss the movie further. Scully did note, with more relief than she cared to admit, that the film tanked, horribly. Within a month it was gone from the theaters, and she had to admit she did take a vicious delight in the way the movie was skewered by critics, who claimed universally that if *The Lazarus Bowl* was remembered at all, it would be in the same vein as *Troll 2* or any number of Ed Wood movies, hilarious in its absurd awfulness. That didn't make Mulder feel better, but he at least grumbled quietly to himself.

In truth, his mood had been gloomy since their return from Los Angeles. Any and all questions on Scully's part regarding whether he felt all right or not were meant with flat responses of "fine" and an irritated roll of his eyes. Since Mulder considered modern medicine only a step above medieval torture, Scully left it, but watched with worry and wondered if their discussion that last morning in LA had perhaps left him as unsettled as she.

As September slid quietly and uneventfully into October, Mulder's mood improved somewhat. His beloved Yankees were in the playoffs and their few evenings together were marked by Mulder's eyes being glued to the television set whenever they were on. As his birthday approached, Scully made a few discreet inquiries to old friends of her father's, ex-Navy officers who remembered well Admiral Scully's little girl and were happy to provide her with last minute tickets near home plate. The twelve-year-old glee on Mulder's face as she passed them over to him at dinner on his birthday was worth the mild teasing of old men who despaired that their old captain's daughter was all grown up.

They took the train up from DC to New York, more slow, but less stress. Scully watched the red-and-gold leaves whiz past the window, houses and cars a blur as the train barrelled through Maryland and Pennsylvania, leaving her slightly green around the gills. In truth, much to her chagrin, she hadn't been feeling well that day, waking feeling unsettled and nervous, the begins of a mild headache marring what should have been a blissful, fun event, a rare "normal" activity for them. Even Mulder had noticed.

"Feeling okay?" He watched her with mild worry, cool fingers reaching under her hair to passage the pressure points on the back of her skull. Scully groaned, humming as she felt the muscles in her neck and shoulders relax, the ringing feeling in her sinuses lessening.

"Mmmm, better now," she sighed, leaning into his touch as he worked. "I should be the one spoiling you."

"What, home plate tickets to a Yankee's playoff game isn't spoiling me?"

"It's your birthday," she offered weakly, but didn't stop him in his ministrations.

"Funny, I have one of those every year," he chuckled, causing her to smirk, despite the fact her eyes
were closed.

"You know what I mean, Mulder. How often do I get to do something nice for you?"

"I don't know, last night you were pretty nice," he purred above her ear. She shivered but still manage to sigh in mild annoyance.

"Is that all you think about?"

"Well, I am male and alive, yeah."

Scully had long ago given up on Mulder and his tendency to use sexual innuendo as a deflection tool and decided simply to find a new trajectory of attack. "People who care for each other make big deals out of their birthdays."

"I am not disputing this." He released her neck, allowing her to twist and turn it as vertebrae popped pleasurably. Now free, she chose to slide into his side then, his arm wrapping around her shoulder as she snuggled into leather jacket.

"Why don't you want me doing something nice for you," she pressed when she was settled, feeling the deep seated need to keep pushing the issue.

"I didn't say I didn't."

"But it makes you feel uncomfortable."

"Scully, I usually try to pretend my birthday doesn't exist."

This was true. Their first year together as partners he had managed to evade it completely. It was only at her persistence that it ever got celebrated at all.

"I know," she sighed, saddened by the idea he never like to commemorate something as momentous as his existence. "I wish you would."

He squeezed her shoulder appreciatively. "Thank you for caring."

They fell into silence then, the hum and clack of the train on the rails the only sound. Why it was so important for Scully that Mulder recognize his importance, she wasn't sure. Perhaps it was "what ifs" still racing through her brain, the questions regarding their own future, of where they were going, of when their work would come to its end, if it would come to an end, and when. She had that deep seated need to reassure him that she was there, that she appreciated him, that at the end of all this, he mattered to her.

"You know," he murmured into the stillness. "I have to admit I wasn't so thrilled with turning 39."

She smiled softly at that. "Worried you're turning into an old man?"

He snorted. "Watch who you call old man."

"Oh, don't worry, I'm well aware of your virility and vitality."

He snorted again, but didn't respond. Scully waited him out, listening to the faint beat of his heart in his chest through the layers of leather and cotton. She too had played this game over several birthdays, as irrational as it was, that regret that another year had passed and what was there to show for it.
"I guess I had hoped that I'd be further along in life than I am," he admitted quietly as the train slowed at another station. She could feel his head turn to look out of the window. "You look at your life and realize everything is passing you by and you ask what you have accomplished."

Normally, she would laugh off his maudlin thoughts, point out the ways in which he had succeeded, big and small, in his time in the X-files, for all that the truth still remained elusively out of their grasp. But she said nothing now. Mulder had never been one to slow down, to stop and consider life, preferring to focus on the far off an ephemeral future where everything would be answered and all truths were known. For years she had asked him to stop. For once, he actually seemed to be, and a nugget of hope that perhaps, maybe, he really was considering just what an end for him, for all of this, would look like.

"Thirty-nine-years-old," he muttered, as if he couldn't believe it. "My professional life is a bust, has been for years. My family is all gone now. I'm alone. I've left nothing in my wake, no lasting legacy, just a basement room filled with cases no one cares about and would rather I would forget, and a list of government officials who would like to nail my ass to their wall as a trophy. My name is a laughing stock in the bureau and when it does come up it's used as a watchword for the dangers of rising too far too fast. I've wasted so much of my life. On what? Just to find out the truth I had been searching for all these years was that my entire existence was a web of lies, spun by others who wanted to use me for whatever agenda they had, and that the one thing I wanted most of all was gone before I even began looking for it. In the end, I am left asking myself, what the hell have you done? And now…"

He drifted, his arm tightening around her as she turned her cheek up to look at him, to see the sadness and regret that etched his face with grief. He had lost so much. She sometimes forgot that, the true depth of everything that was taken away from him. But there was one thing he had always possessed, had an abundance of, even when she didn't.

"You've always had hope," she murmured, causing him to look down at her, his expression quizzical and guarded. "When things were at their bleakest, you always had hope that the truth would win out."

"I did," he admitted, nodding, but taking no comfort in her words. "But what good is hope when it's time that is working against you?"

"Time?" She laughed, wondering what brought on this fit of dramatics. "Mulder, thirty-nine isn't the end of the world. You aren't even technically in middle age. You have decades yet, if you don't get yourself blown up, shot, or infected with yet another alien virus."

As his unofficial physician she was being flippant, knowing all too well his lengthy medical history. She had been the one to nurse him through years of medical visits and job-related threats to his life. It was a joke now between them, but he didn't seem to be laughing.

"You planning on doing any of those things?" She prodded his middle playfully. He blinked, wiggling slightly from her assaulting digit, but at least he graced her with something of a smile.

"No, I don't plan to die of any of those things."

"Well, then, I think you are being far too fatalistic." She flashed him a brilliant grin as she attempted to sit up. "And it's your birthday, Mulder. You're alive, you're here, and you are going to see your Yankees crush...whoever it is they are playing."

This did earn an honest to goodness laugh out of him. "You don't even know who they are playing?"
"Of course I do, another baseball team," she sniffed, stretching as she did. The action was simple
enough, but the train lurched as it began to leave it's station, picking up speed again, and she swayed
with the motion, her head swimming unpleasantly, causing the world outside their window to spin in
a way she was certain it wasn't supposed to. She closed her eyes as they began to cross.

"Ugh," she muttered, collapsing against Mulder again, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "I've not had
motion sickness like this since I was a kid."

"I never knew you got motion sickness." Mulder was sympathetic as he reached up to stroke her
head.

"Oh, only when I tried to read in the car or when we drove through someplace with a lot of curves." She
shuddered, the hint of nausea that threatened finally passing. "Seriously, though, I thought I'd
outgrown that once I'd gotten proper glasses."

"Trains can mess you up, all the stopping and starting." He shifted behind her, twisting his torso
enough to allow her to lean properly against him, wrapping both arms around her as he nestled her
close. "Lay back and get a bit of a nap. I'll wake you up when we get to Grand Central Station."

"Okay," she acquiesced without opening her eyes, happy to just be curled with him on a lazy, quiet
afternoon in October, off to watch a baseball game.
Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder have to deal with budgets.

Everything had to come to an end.

"No one said he was coming," Mulder privately fumed all the way to Skinner's office. Their quiet morning had been invaded by Chesterton "Chesty" Short, who politely walked into their office, stood between their desks, and stated he was there to discuss their budget spending with them.

"I think that was the point," Scully murmured as they rounded the corner to where Arlene sat, already expecting them. "Internal affairs never wants you to know an investigation is coming."

"Seriously, I haven't bought a big screen television on the company dime of late. I don't know what their complaint is."

Scully thought of their trip to LA the month before, their idyl in the observatory, and flushed, but chose to not bring that up. "Things have been too quiet with us of late. Must have made someone nervous."

Before Mulder could reply, Arlene escorted them both into Skinner's office. Already their supervisor was on the defensive. "I knew nothing about this in advance."

"That they were targeting us?" Mulder was stormy with disbelief, throwing himself into a chair in front of Skinner's desk. Scully, more sedate, settled next to him.

"They aren't targeting anyone, Agent Mulder, the news came from on high yesterday." Skinner snagged a memo from his file drawer, passing it across the table. "The recent budget deals on the Hill mean that Justice is having to go through everything with a fine tooth comb. Federal lawyers, US Marshals, us too. OEOB is asking for a full audit of all of our accounts immediately."

"Nothing in the government ever moves that fast," Mulder scowled dubiously at the paper. Privately, Scully agreed with him.

"Does when money talks," Skinner muttered darkly, clearly not happy with any of this. "You think you two have been the only ones who have had the business office stop in on you? I've had a dozen department heads and budget managers storming in my office today wanting to know what the deal is and you two would just be the latest."

"So what are they doing? Looking for areas to trim down?" Scully of course had heard this spiel before, many times over with her father, who often complained about similar tactics in the Navy budget. "It's not like we ask for $100 ballpoint pens and $1000 toilet seats."

"'Cause if they had $1000 toilet seats available, I would have ordered one by now," Mulder offered unhelpfully.

Skinner chose to ignore Mulder's flippancy. "No, but wasteful spending doesn't have to be ostentatious and you know that. Let's start with your travel spending, which admittedly is extravagant
for a department your size, and end with the fact that there are those who would perhaps loudly proclaim that a separate department doing the work you do isn't an efficient way of using the taxpayers money."

And there it was, the old, familiar argument, now packaged in a new threat. Scully wished she could feel surprised, but the only thing that shocked her was that no one had suggested this tactic years ago. Nothing was more effective at killing something that no one wanted around than bureaucratic red tape.

"So they will use this to close us down," Mulder intoned finally, speaking out loud the very thought in Scully's head.

Skinner's only response was to grimace darkly.

"Does this Chesterton Short really have the ability to shut us down?" Scully couldn't believe the small, pugnacious fellow with his weak, insipid smile could really have that much authority.

"Not immediately, no, but his suggestions will be referred to me and to all the Assistant Directors as we go through budgets." Skinner spoke of the process like most people would speak of seeing the dentist. "There will be a push to cut out all extraneous spending."

There was no need to read between the lines on that statement. Scully could see it clearly and she knew Mulder could too. He scowled darkly at the memo sitting in front of them. "So this is it?"

Scully's heart ached at the finality of that statement. Everything that Mulder had spent the last decade of his life on was wrapped up in those files, all the truths he was seeking were tied to those files, and without them she knew he could find no peace, no end. Where would that leave them if the X-files were to close, just like that?

Skinner could only offer cold comfort to them. "The process is going fast, but the ADs are dragging their heels. Most of them don't want to be caught up in this and there are projects being funded at the moment that could be impacted. It could be months before anything definitive would be decided."

"And in the meantime we'd have to just sit on pins and needles and hope that they don't shut us down and do what, reassign us back to the bullpen?" Mulder sneered with disgust towards Skinner's office door, remembering all too well their stint in there. "No thanks."

"No one is saying you'll be shut down tomorrow, Mulder. Talk to Short, perhaps you can convince him to keep your work open."

Scully's eyes cut sideways to Mulder in silent agreement. Both of them knew that wasn't going to happen. If anything, Short would be all to happy to recommend the X-files be closed for good. Who needed to solve unsolvable cases when there were other, more useful ways of spending money?

"Right," Mulder finally muttered, rising without bothering to be dismissed. "Let's go do what we can to save Uncle Sam a dime, shall we, Scully?"

She paused, even as he sauntered towards the reception area, glancing at Skinner seriously. "This could be bad for us, right?"

Skinner at least didn't sugar coat it. "It's going to be bad for a lot of people. Believe me, the X-files is small compared to some of the waste around here."

"Yeah, but they aren't as annoying and are far more redeemable." That was the fact, and they both knew it. "If they close us down again they won't ever open it back up, not this time. Where will that
"That depends on what you want to do, I suppose."

It was the diplomat's answer. It told her Skinner would fight to keep them on, but he couldn't guarantee they would like the options open to them. "I could go back to Quantico."

"You could," he agreed. "But there's no place for Mulder there."

"No," she agreed. Mulder didn't play well with anyone, really, except her.

"You both are overthinking this for now, Scully. There are options."

Scully wasn't so sure she wanted options. Whether she said it out loud or not, there was a tiny part of her that thought that perhaps, just maybe, the closing of the X-files wasn't completely a bad idea, and she felt guilty for even thinking it.

"You'll let us know what Short's findings are," she asked.

"As soon as I know, yeah." Skinner didn't look pleased with the notion. He glanced towards the door Mulder had wandered out of. "Do me a favor, I know your partner has a tendency to be a smart ass. Try to help him curb that tendency. Short doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

"Does any accountant," Scully quipped, rising. "I'll try, sir, but you know how he is."

"Yeah, that's the problem."

With that dismissal and the bleak prospect of her professional future, Scully wandered in search of her partner.
In which Mulder and Scully return to where it all began.

She had never believed in *deja vu*, at least not in the way Mulder did, but even Scully had to admit it was unnerving, all these years later, to be driving through the very same forest on the way to Bellefleur, Oregon, just as they X-files were threatened with extinction. The same drive from Portland, the same road that wound through the tall, ancient forest, the same radio station with it's fuzzy static as it played classic rock, it all seemed to work a strange counterpoint to the predicament they currently found themselves in.

"You feeling okay?" Mulder glanced at her as she stared out of the front and it only occurred to her then just how silent she had been on the trip so far.

"Yeah," she admitted, ignoring the slight vertigo the tall trees on the hairpin turns were causing. She didn't want to tell him she got sick on the plane. She hadn't had that sort of motion sickness since she was little and it was disturbing it was returning now of a sudden, at least in the last week or so. "I was just...thinking."

She didn't need to elaborate. Mulder knew. "It's weird being back here now, isn't it?"

"Back to where it all began," she admitted. "Our first case together."

"You were so young!"

"And you were such a jerk," she shot back, though Mulder only laughed at the memory. "Do you remember the stupid chemical formula you slapped on the wall, as if I hadn't had more chemistry than I could shake a stick at?"

"I was testing you to see if you were good at anything other than being little Miss Perfect."

"I see. And what were the mutilated cows about?"

"Just trying to gross you out," he admitted, far from apologetically.

"Right, clearly you hadn't paid attention to the fact that I was a pathologist."

"Never said it was a well thought out plan," he replied cheerfully. "I did make it through your physics paper, give me some credit."

"I can't believe you dug that thing up," she laughed, considering who they were then, such a long time ago. She had been little more than a bright-eyed ingenue, having spent three years in Quantico teaching and doing autopsies and never laying a finger to the actual field work she craved. Mulder had been the recently fallen Golden Boy, the cautionary tale amongst the recruits, brilliant but mad, reclusive, and more than a bit angry with the world that had at once lauded him and just as suddenly turned. She had been as straight-laced as he had been rebellious, he had suspected her a spy, she had merely just struggled to wonder what in the hell was going on. Looking back now it was a wonder the pair of them made it through that first case together.
"I remember thinking you were so crazy," she admitted slowly, smiling at the thought. "Though, honestly, I still think you are, but I was convinced you were a card short of a full deck. Aliens and conspiracies, and implants, and kids being taken at drunken parties, it was all sorts of insanity. The kind that you expect coming from some weird, unwashed man with a tin foil hat, living out of an Airstream trailer and listening to Art Bell on continuous loop."

Mulder seemed more amused than insulted by the image. "Sounds like my idea of retirement! What changed your mind?"

She smiled softly. "When you laughed at me over the bug bites. When you held me while I was the one being hysterical and didn't judge me. Then you told me about Samantha. I think then I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That you weren't crazy at all," she turned to him, his eyes still on the winding road. "That you were just someone looking for answers, just like all of us who end up in this business are."

Mulder mused in silence on her words for long moments. When he spoke, it was in sadness. "I didn't quite get the answers I was looking for, did I?"

"No," she acknowledged, following the line of impossibly tall trees that enveloped them. "But it was an answer, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." He sighed, gnawing on his bottom lip. "You know, Chesty Shorty, or whatever his name is, suggested it was time to walk away."

"He was doing it because he's looking out for a bottom line, just like every government accountant."

"Yeah, but you agree with him, don't you?"

Mulder's words stung more than she cared to admit. "I want an end to all of this as much you do."

"I know, but you want other things too, right?" His eyes flickered towards her briefly and Scully tried not to look too guilty. "You want a life outside of the X-files. You want something more than just chasing one dead end after another, hoping to find some scrap of something."

He had her dead to rights, they both knew it. "I want a future, Mulder. I'd like that future with you."

"I know, but that future would mean us both walking away."

"Yeah," she murmured quietly.

"If Shorty Chest gets his way, I may not get a choice."

"Would it be so bad?" She blurted the question out, unthinking, and then wished she hadn't. It was begging for answers she wasn't sure she wanted just yet.

Mulder, at least, was more circumspect than she was. "I'd like to make the decision myself. But I won't deny, he's got a point. I got into this for Samantha. I know what happened to her."

"And the rest? The work your father did, the conspiracy, what they were up to, the Purity virus? Why did it all matter?"

"That's what I want to know, Scully, and I can't leave this till I do."

In her heart, she knew he was right. All the discussions about futures and ends of late, she knew that
for him it was never just about Samantha, it was always about the bigger, more ephemeral question of "why".

"Mulder," she replied with the smallest of sighs. "I know you can't leave this behind, you've said that. What I'm worried about is that you won't want to."

And there it was...the true fear she had.

"Yeah," Mulder heaved, not even bothering to deny it. "I worry about that too."

They continued the rest of their drive into Bellefleur in silence.
Honored Mother

Chapter Summary

In which Scully and Mulder contemplate what they can't have.

Teresa Hoese had a baby. That thought alone was enough to shock Scully. Hadn't it just been yesterday that she was little more than a teenage kid, meeting them at a burger joint, swearing something was going on, something no one talked about. She'd gotten a nose bleed, Scully remembered, before her father and Billy's dad had come to take her away, turning their eyes away from what was happening to their own children. Now there was a whole new generation being caught up in this and it occurred to Scully just how old she was getting.

"You were good in there." Mulder's lazy drawl broke her thoughts out of their swirling revery.

"Hmmm?" Scully frowned up at his soft, goofy smile, thinking back to what he meant. "Oh, the baby?"

"Yeah," he replied as they crossed Teresa's lawn to their rental car. Between the two of them they had three, fat manila files, all the medical records of Ray and Teresa Hoese. Far too big for a couple of young, relatively healthy people, Scully noted with disquiet. Just what had happened to the pair of them?

"I haven't seen you with kids that often," Mulder continued, digging in his pocket for his car keys. "I mean, with your nephew, yeah, and then, you know, Emily." He cleared his throat as he unlocked the passengers side door for her.

Scully only shrugged. He was right, there hadn't been that many occasions he had seen her around kids. She had been around them quite a bit, of course, between her godson and her own nephew, not to mention cousins growing up and the younger siblings of neighbor kids, she'd had her fair share.

"I know how to handle a baby, Mulder." She laughed, trying to ease his discomfort. "They don't break."

"I'm not so sure of that," he replied, setting the files he carried in the backseat before slipping inside. Scully followed suit, settling her files on her lap. "I've been around my cousins' kids and someone usually is spitting up on something, drooling on your tie, that type of thing."

"Occupational hazard," she admitted, watching in the distance as Teresa stood on her front porch, waving goodbye, her daughter in her arms. It had felt good, that one instant, to hold that little girl, to imagine, just for the briefest of moments what it would have been like. But that wasn't a dream that would ever be afforded her. The same people who had taken Teresa's husband away from her also had taken away Scully's ability to have children. The utter unfairness of it was overwhelming for both of them. It was hard, in a moment like this, not to be consumed with anger at the injustice of it, not just against herself, but people like Ray and Teresa and all of those she had met over the years who had been caught up in all of this.

"I wanted that for you." Mulder admitted quietly beside her.
Scully blinked, surprised. "What?"

"The baby." He nodded towards Teresa as he turned the engine on. "I wanted that for you. Last year, when we tried, I wanted that for you so much."

A year already? That gave her pause. It wasn't as if she hadn't thought about it, but in recent months, with everything, with the changes in her partnership with Mulder, her grief and loss had been gently pushed aside for something else new, happier, more promising. But that old hurt surfaced, raw and aching out of nowhere and it took her breath away. A year? Had it been that long?

Mulder continued beside her, sadly. "I wanted it for me too, when I admit it. Only chance I will have at a child."

He had never said as much, not in so many words. Scully had always wondered. She had been so caught up in her own grief at the loss it hadn't occurred to her to ask him and she suddenly felt guilty with it. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" He pulled the car out of the Hoese's driveway.

"For forgetting to ask how you felt about it, the failed attempt."

Mulder only laughed bitterly at that. "Scully, I think you had more than enough on your plate at that moment. Really, it's fine. I just...wanted it for you is all. You came to this case years ago, thinking it would be as simple as writing a report. You had no idea that you would lose everything that you had because of it."

"No," she admitted honestly. "But it was where I needed to be, Mulder. Every choice comes with consequences."

He glared darkly at the road ahead of them. "Sometimes the price we pay for that choice is too high. I wanted that for you. I'm sorry I couldn't give it."

Scully wasn't sure what to say in response. She could shrug and brush it off with a "that's okay", as if it were a present that didn't quite work out, but it had been so much more. She had placed so much hope on that IVF, willing herself to believe it would work, that all the hormonal imbalance and financial investment in one of the best doctors in Washington would create for her the long awaited child she desired. It was the most crushing of blows when it failed. It was Mulder who had convinced her not to give up hope.

"If I'm meant to be a mother, Mulder, it will work out." It wasn't necessarily a belief that she espoused, but it was at least a comforting thought, much better than waving off his apology. "There's always adoption, foster care, even egg donation. There are options for me."

"Yeah," he agreed.

"And who knows where we will be in a year, two years," she continued, as if talking could make the aching regret in her heart go away. "Hell, we may go back to Washington after this and both be out of a job. Maybe then I can think about what I might want to do."

"Sure," he smiled softly, reaching a hand for hers across the console between them. "Whatever you want."

Scully's small fingers laced between his long ones, squeezing tightly. He made no promises about himself and she knew he wouldn't, but she also knew he'd support whatever decision she made. Her private hope was that whatever she chose to do, he might be interested in sharing it with her.
"So, you believe that Ray Hoese was an abductee?" She was deflecting. Right now the idea of discussing alien abductions was far less painful than her barrenness and it was never difficult to shift Mulder to that subject.

"We have no reason to believe he wasn't. I'll look through his file tonight. He's not a part of the original group taken, but perhaps if he has a history, this case could be bigger than even Billy Miles thinks." With that, Mulder was off and speculating, and Scully quietly let him. Deep fatigue settled into her bones as she leaned her head against the seat and listened to him, trying hard not to think of how nice it was to hold that baby on her lap or the deep ache it left inside her.
Chapter Summary

In which Mulder seeks to put an end to Scully's search for the truth.

Not even the heaters blowing full tilt into the damp room could warm up Scully's bones as she shivered beneath the polyester comforter, her clothes still fully on. Her clammy skin puckered in gooseflesh as she willed the room to stop spinning sometime soon, for the love of all that was holy. She had been perfectly fine not half-an-hour before, exhausted perhaps as she bid Mulder goodnight and left him to Ray Hoese's file. While the idea of the pizza he had ordered had left her quietly gagging, she had been well enough to go through the more lurid details of Teresa's husband's file without blinking. They had engrossed Mulder enough that he hadn't even lodged a complaint as she had announced she was going to her separate room to get some sleep, leaving him to work in peace.

Scully had barely made it as far as her bathroom when what little was in her stomach came back up in a violent spew, jerking her insides and leaving her gasping into the white toilet, her hands gripping the side sink as frustration and worry began to set in. She hadn't been sick in years, not since her cancer, not like this. That of course set a niggling thought spinning through her brain as she struggled to swish her mouth out from the faucet, cupping cold water in her trembling fingers. It couldn't be cancer, she assured herself with no confidence. She had her check just months ago and was free. Shivering violently, she tumbled into her bed, pulling the blankets over her head and willing her lurching stomach to quiescence. It was the flu, like as not, a bug that she had perhaps caught even before she had gone to the baseball game with Mulder. And of course it would hit full force in the middle of a case, what could likely be their last if Chesty Short had his way. In irritation, she pulled her knees to her chest and shivered harder. It wasn't as if they weren't under close scrutiny as it was, now she would be pale and puking everywhere. On the other side of the wall she could hear a soft thump, Mulder shifting on the bed more than likely, and as much as she hated to admit it, she wanted to crawl back over there, hang Chesty Short and his inquisitiveness, and curl up beside him as he worked. She was whining and she knew it, but didn't care. She was miserable and he would make it better, or at least in her sickly mind at the moment he would, and that was all that mattered. Groaning, Scully pulled herself out of the meager warmth of her lonely bed and stumbled out of the door and back towards Mulder's room.

Her knock sounded feeble in her ears, but Mulder clearly heard it. He called out from the other side. "Who is it?"

"It's me," she replied, hoping she didn't sound as miserable as she felt.

He opened the door, clearly perplexed, but that shifted to worry in an instant as he took her in, huddled and shivering on his doorstep.

"What's wrong, Scully? You look sick."

Score points for the obvious, she wanted to snark, but couldn't seem to find the energy. She went for pitiful instead. "I don't know what's wrong."

"Come in," he sighed, pulling her in gently as she stumbled over to his bed, Ray Hoese's file
scattered across it.

"I...I was starting to get ready for bed and I started to feel dizzy-vertigo or something-and then I just started to get chills" She didn't tell him about puking her guts up in the bathroom. Somehow that felt far scarier to tell him.

That didn't stop him from eyeing her with worry as he pulled down the blankets and sheets. "You want me to call a doctor?"

She wanted to tease she was a doctor, but instead she shook her head, teeth chattering. "No, I just...just want to get warm."

She climbed into the bed, still warm from Mulder's earlier presence, burrowing into the pillows as if they were heat rocks. Pulling the covers up near to her head, she allowed Mulder to tuck her in and was pleased that he crawled up beside her, spooning up close to her as he wrapped an arm to pull her closer to his bodies heat. Almost immediately the shaking in her muscles began to stop, the tightness in her shoulders began to ease, and the swimming in her brain began to lessen. Even the uncomfortable lurching in her already sore stomach began to feel better as she cuddled closer, Mulder's warm chest heating her, his breath soft against her hair.

"Thank you," she sighed, already feeling safe, content, and drowsy in his embrace.

The only response he gave was a brief tightening of his arm around her middle.

They lay that way for several long moments, neither speaking, the temptation to simply fall asleep like this so very enticing. It was Mulder who finally broke the silence first. He sighed behind her sadly. "It's not worth it, Scully."

She had been drifting and not even thinking, but even then she couldn't wrap her head around what Mulder could possibly mean by that statement. "What?"

"I want you to go home," he said softly, sounding as if it cost him to say that. Scully frowned, stopping short of snorting at him outright. Honestly, it was just a case of the flu, nothing more, and while she was sure she'd be whiney and pukey for the next few days, it wasn't as if she was dying of anything that she knew of.

She ignored that quiet little whisper in the back of her brain.

"Oh, Mulder, I'll be fine," she replied, half in exasperation.

"No, I've been thinking about it," he insisted, and it occurred to her finally that perhaps this wasn't just about one feverish and miserable partner. "Looking at you tonight, holding that baby, knowing everything that's been taken away from you, a chance for motherhood, your health, and that baby. I think that...I don't know, maybe they're right."

Scully really didn't want to have this argument now, not feeling like this. "Who's right?"

"The FBI," he replied, and by that she had a feeling he really meant Chesty Short. "Maybe what they say is true, though for all the wrong reasons. It's the personal costs that are too high."

The cost to her? But what about him? Tears from deep in the well of grief she carried rose to the surface, fallen unbidden down her cheeks, as something horribly final began to settle in. For so many years it had been she who had called the shots on her involvement. From their first case here in Bellefleur until now, Scully had willingly put herself into this position, despite the threats to her health and the personal losses she suffered. There were times that were less willing than others, yes,
but she had always known in the back of her mind that she had the ability to say no, if she chose to step away. She had never exercised it, but now, she wasn't being given a choice, Mulder was making it for her. She should be angry. She should be pissed as hell and giving him an earful. He had done this so many times before for more reason, but this...this was different, and she knew why. They had never said the word, not the crucial word "love", but then again, she supposed, they never had to. She knew and so did he.

"There's so much more you need to do with your life," he whispered into her ear, a hand coming up to stroke the side of her cheek. "There's so much more than this. There has to be an end, Scully."

What if she didn't want it?

His lips brushed across her cheek, and she reached up for his fingers, pressing a soft kiss to them as he leaned his head against her shoulder. She wanted to tell him no, that she had as much invested in this as he did, and it was precisely because of everything she lost that she should stay. But something told her she wouldn't win that argument. There was a truth there, a truth she had suspected since Chesterton Short had appeared in their office. If she was really honest with herself, it was a truth she had known since Mulder had left an empty field in Victorville, California claiming to have found out the truth about Samantha. It had taken her this long to admit it to herself. There had to be an end, sometime, and end to the searching, to the loss, to the fear. She would likely never get all of her answers, certainly not the ones regarding why her sister had to die, or Emily, nor would she get any justice. But she had fought the good fight, and Mulder was right, there were so many things left for her to do with her life, things beyond the X-files. She just didn't want to do those things alone.

"Come with me," she murmured against his knuckles, ignoring the hot tears coursing down her face. "Walk away, Mulder. There has to be an end for you as well. You've given everything for this. You've found Samantha. You've done what you've set out to do. Come back to Washington with me."

It was begging, she didn't care. Scully couldn't imagine a future without him in it and she feared if she walked away from him and left him alone, he might never come back to her on his own. There would always be one more quest, one more search, and she would be forgotten.

"Don't think I haven't considered it, Scully," he murmured against her shoulder, curling his body closer. "The idea of just leaving, of doing something else...of giving you what you want. I don't know if I can."

His admission hurt more than she was willing even to express, but at least it was honest. "You could try."

She could feel his soft huff of laughter, dry and ironic, rumble through her back. "Dana, I would give you everything if I could. I'm just...afraid I can't do anything else. For so many years, all of my life, since before I was born, my destiny has been molded and shaped by those who were playing their own games, ones I wasn't even a part of. I've been used as a chess piece between two powerful men trying to shape the world as they saw fit, each thinking he could stop Armageddon from happening, each trying to appease an invading force that neither understood. I didn't choose this, they did. They've stolen my entire life and my ability to live it."

Anger flared briefly inside of her as she turned ever so slightly to regard the top of his dark head. "No, you didn't choose this. But you can choose now, to walk away from their games. Your father's dead, Fox. The man who has pulled your strings for so long may be dead by now, hopefully, if not soon. They're all dead, all of those men who did all of this, their conspiracy is ended, there's nothing left."
"Not everything they did died with them. There's still one thing left." He sighed quietly, turning just enough so his diamond bright green eyes regarded hers. "There is the truth."

His elusive truth, still hiding somewhere, out there, just beyond his grasp. "What if you never find it?"

"Then at least I will have tried, right? Isn't that what they tell us in Little League?" He tried to make light of it, but she couldn't laugh, not at this.

"The truth has nearly killed you. What if you don't come back?"

"I suppose that has to happen to all of us, sooner or later."

"And you would rather it happen at all?"

"I didn't say that," he tried to soothe her, but she looked away, pressing her lips hard against the sob that threatened to escape. "I didn't choose any of this. It is what it is, and I can't walk away from it. That is a luxury that wasn't given to me."

"But it is for me?"

"Yeah," he whispered, voice hoarse. "I can't let you go down the same rabbit hole any further. Go home, Alice, and leave Wonderland behind."

Her shoulders shook again, no longer with feverish shivering, but with silent crying, as Mulder wrapped her even closer, trying to murmur soothing whispers in her ear. She was too tired to fight and too exhausted to argue, and underneath it all she knew it would be useless. Her head ached with the thought of leaving him, but she had no desire to hasten it by fleeing to her own room to cry out her misery.

"You're sick, Dana, sleep," Mulder ordered gently, smoothing her hair out of her hot face. "Let the FBI be damned, stay with me tonight. Just rest."

In all honesty, in this at least, she could agree with him. To hell with the FBI and Chesty Short's nosiness. She did as her partner ordered, letting swollen eyes slide shut as he stroked her hair gently, and quietly drifted off to sleep.
"Are you sure you're okay?"

Scully sipped at her coffee irritably and glared at her fretful partner over the lid of her cup. "Don't make me shoot you."

Mulder was far from amused. "You feel better since we've gotten here?"

Scully knew what he was getting at and she didn't want to admit that he was right. Sitting there in the pedestrian, concrete and vinyl world of the Portland airport, she felt worlds better than she had in Bellefleur hours before. "I'm fine, Mulder."

Something like relief crossed his face. "Good...that's good."

"You think that whatever is going on out there it's why I feel like hell?"

"They aren't taking new people, anymore, Scully, they are taking abductees. They are covering their tracks."

Scully glanced to the bored looking family sitting down the way, the mother trying to entertain her young children with a story book and failing miserably as they began to whine. She didn't think they had noticed Mulder's conversation and worried what they would think if they did. "Keep it down a little, not everyone is used to you on your full on alien conspiracy train."

He only glared at her in mild annoyance, but at least dropped his volume by half. "Look at who they were taking, Ray and Teresa, people who have a history, and I'd bet that kid who went missing was an abductee too. And Billy, he's likely gone."

"What for?"

"I don't know," he admitted darkly, passing a thumb over the opening of his own Starbuck's cup. "But I don't think it is just in Bellefleur."

Scully ignored the growing headache blossoming behind her eyes, not even daring to speculate whether it was aliens or Mulder causing it. "There haven't been reports of any other people going missing."

"That we know of. Many times repeat abductees' presences will go unnoticed by authorities. Most don't believe that they were taken in the first place, that they just ran off. When they disappear again, their families, even the authorities, just assume they've run off somewhere else."

"You would think, then, that if there were spaceships swooping in and taking others, that there at least would be a bump in reports on lights in the night sky or something."

"Maybe," Mulder didn't sound as convinced. "But they don't want to be noticed, Scully. They are
covering their tracks, hiding the fact that they've even been here."

"And what makes you think there have been others?" The thought left her feeling cold, despite herself, and she pulled from her coffee in the hopes of staving the chill.

"Because you saw a ship in West Africa." His gaze was pointed as he regarded her, knowing she couldn't deny it. "The ship off the African coast, just laying around for anyone to see."

"That was part of an archaeological dig. Who knows how long it had been there."

"Maybe it had, maybe it hadn't, but that still doesn't change the fact that abductees are being taken."

"But why!" She didn't want to think that, was afraid of what it could mean. "For what purpose?"

"Maybe the colonization."

Scully blinked, her heart thumping uncomfortably in her chest. "You think that's still happening?"

"I don't see why it wouldn't." He pulled from his own paper cup in dark thought, glaring out the windows to the jets outside. "What incentive would they have for stopping it now? The conspiracy, the work my father and Spender did, that was supposed to to stop it, to slow it, and that went to hell when Cassandra died. We don't know what's been happening since."

It was an utterly terrifying thought, one Scully hadn't even dared consider. "Jeffrey said something about a war, a rebellion, others trying to stop something."

"Which might explain why they are cleaning shop now." Mulder considered her, his face grim. "Perhaps a different faction is in place and is now taking over, a whole new factor no one has accounted for. Fifty years, Scully, those men were playing this game for fifty years, and they left one hell of a vacuum when they left. It's been two years since El Rico, and we don't know who has been running anything since then."

And that thought scared the hell out of Scully at that moment.

"They are trying to hide then?"

Mulder's jaw worked as he fiddled with his coffee cup. "If someone new has stepped in, I think they believe that their predecessors were sloppy. They want to clean up the operation, want to hide it better, cover up any of the old links and get a new handle on all of it, gather up all the loose ends and make a new go of it."

The ever plaguing nausea crept up her throat, bringing with it the coffee she had been clinging too, but she forced it down, her skin prickling as she felt herself pale, sweat beading. If Mulder was right, and this was what was going on, she knew who else was an abductee. Could she hide from something like this? Once, long ago, she had followed that eerie feeling towards a bridge with Cassandra in tow. She had barely made it out with her life. She didn't even understand why she had done it. Would this be like that time? Or would it be a whole new, different set of circumstances? Would she simply just disappear from her home, from the office, on her way to work or to the grocery store.

She hadn't realized how hard she was gripping her coffee cup until Mulder pried it out of her fingers. His hand was warm in her now icy grasp, and she turned to look at him, realizing there were tears in her eyes.

"I won't let anything happen to you, you know that, right? Not this time." He spoke with quiet
"You don't know that, Mulder." On the back of her neck, her skin prickled, right along the spot where the minute microchip lay. "I still have one of those chips in my neck. We don't know what is going on. Maybe...maybe all this sickness is it trying to get my attention, to get me to go somewhere, to follow something? Maybe I will go out into the woods and be snatched up too, like Ray and Teresa, like Billy. Maybe they'll just give me cancer again, do it right this time, kill me off so no one will know, like Penny…"

"Stop it," he hissed, desperately jerking her to get her to stop the torrent of fear. "Nothing like that will happen, you know it won't."

She couldn't help the trickle of tears that coursed down her face, even as she knew one of the nearby children was now starting to stare. "I don't, Mulder. That's just the thing, I don't know any of that."

She knew he wanted to say something, but words failed him as his expression became pleading. "Believe me, I won't let anything happen, okay?"

She wanted to believe him. "How can you stop them if that's what they want?"

He didn't have an answer for that. Instead, he sighed, pulling her gently towards his shoulder, allowing her the comfort of a few, private tears, his arm wrapping around her trembling shoulders. She snuffled in the twill of his jacket, her throat burning against sobs she didn't dare release in public as he murmur nonsense into her hair.

"I'm not going to risk you, Dana, I won't." His voice was husky as he whispered and she could feel his arm tighten around her possessively. "If I have to have the boys watch you day and night, I won't let anything happen to you."

That was hardly a more comforting thought, but it did earn a mild snort and a wet chuckle. "That of course would make it all better, having those three living in my apartment."

"At least Frohike remembers to put the toilet seat down...sometimes."

Scully laughed again, the amusement enough to give her equilibrium once again. She pulled away, discreetly wiping at damp eyes with her napkin and feeling suddenly foolish for working herself up yet again over what likely was nothing. "I want this over with, Mulder. I'm so tired of things like this, of fearing the shadows and what lay in the dark. For once I just want to not have to look over my shoulder, or what's up in the sky in this case."

"I know," he murmured, and for the first time looking as if he truly wished that too.

Over the loudspeaker their connecting flight to Denver was called. The family nearby began to gather scattered books and toys and Scully finished off her coffee, gathering her own bags, crumpling her now sodden napkin in her hand. As she did, she felt Mulder's fingers wrap around her fist, holding it tightly.

"No matter what, Scully, you'll always have me here. Remember that."

She nodded mutely and silently prayed that would be enough.
You're Not Going Alone

Chapter Summary

In which Scully is left behind.

The entire room fell silent as Mulder announced Scully was remaining behind, even Alex Krycek. His gaze glittered as it flickered between Mulder and Scully, standing so close beside him, something unreadable on his face. Scully simply stared at him. So much of what had happened to her and her family could be traced back to him. Frankly, the two-faced son-of-a-bitch was lucky she had called Mulder off from killing him that day so long ago. She vaguely wished she had done it herself, then Mulder wouldn't be heading into that forest alone.

Skinner's thought echoed her own, and thankfully he spoke up before she could even ask. "If Scully's staying, I'm going. The hell I'm letting one of my agents into an area where people have gone missing."

"Sir," Mulder began, but Scully reached out and grabbed his arm. He paused, turning to her, frustration and fear bright in his eyes. Mulder always wanted to take on the burdens alone, to carry the weight on his shoulders, but she wasn't going to let him do this by himself.

"Someone is going to need to requisition the equipment. You're in enough hot water, Mulder, they aren't going to let you take it."

Skinner saw her lead and ran with it, jumping in before Mulder could protest further. "I can cut through the red tape, Mulder, get us what we need and on the next plane back to Portland." He glanced at the Lone Gunman, huddled quietly around his conference room table. "With something like that, what do we want to take with us?"

The trio glanced between them, faces grim as they silently considered. It was Langley who spoke first. He jerked his chin hard at Krycek without so much as looking at him. "If this thing is cloaked in any way like he said, then you'll need night vision equipment, infrared, anything that will be able to see energy frequencies, like heat."

"It will be invisible," Krycek clarified darkly, scowling at the three before glancing back towards where Marita Covarrubias hugged herself, looking vaguely sick. "You may get a heat signature. You'll likely want something else, something that would be disrupted and scattered, something involving light."

"Like a laser pointer," Byers offered, holding up his own keychain with the cheap, two-dollar kind one could get at any gas station.

"More like the industrial kind, the sort they use for survey work and construction."

"We have some of those in our forensics lab. We use them at crime scenes." Skinner glanced to Krycek. "How many?"

"A dozen, maybe two." The other man shrugged, a strange gesture with his heavy, fake left arm weighing him down.
"And a camera, maybe two, something to record with." Mulder moved towards the table, grabbing paper and pen to make a checklist. "Microphones for sound, flashlights because it's dark as hell there. A root can trip and kill you."

Scully moved towards the nearest chair in Skinner's office and sat, watching the proceedings in quiet contemplation. She noted how odd it was, to sit outside this circle, watching the proceedings, displaced, detached, knowing Mulder was going out there by himself, without her. It felt so wrong, as if she were cutting off a part of herself and letting it go. She couldn't help it as she let her gaze flickered to Krycek's arm. He sat by, watching her with a measured look. She met his gaze evenly, but when he didn't back down, she let hers flicker away. She owed nothing to this man. He owed her far more than he could ever pay. And she was tired...so tired. She only felt it then, sitting in her prim, pale blue linen suit, crisp and professional. Her joints ached, her head felt heavy, and she could oh so happily go to sleep and ignore all of this, and yet she didn't, because she was sending Mulder into those woods by himself. Since the moment she had first gone with him to Belleville so many years ago, she had stood by his side in nearly everything, even at her most ill. It killed her that she had to stay behind for this.

She wondered vaguely if this was how her mother felt every time she had to see her father off to sea. If it was, Scully realized she had a newfound respect for Maggie. To send her husband and the father of her children off on a ship where he may or may not come back, the uncertainty of that act. Mulder wasn't her husband, nor would there ever be children, and this was hardly a life or death situation. No war, no guns, and he'd be home within a day, either triumphantly producing his long awaited and desired evidence, or despondent at yet another dead end. Yet, there she was, panicking because he was going out without her there to babysit him. She would have laughed at her own ridiculousness if she didn't feel so tired. It was whatever bug she had, it had to be, making her irrational and overreact.

Krycek kept watching her and it unnerved her, unsettled her in that way that silly portents of doom in old, horror movies did. As if something was coming, and with Krycek, it could be anything. He had his own agenda, had always had one, and had been more than happy to let Mulder rot in Siberia, infected with a virus that could have killed him and should have. Had Krycek known then about Mulder's so-called immunity or had he not even cared? Either way, it made her question all of this. Mulder had long been a dispensable pawn in the long game Krycek played and she wasn't so sure she liked the calculating way he was watching her.

"Scully," Mulder's voice caught her attention, turning her back to the activity at the table. "We're going to go down to the forensic lab, see what we can get there. You think you can babysit this bunch?"

The Lone Gunman looked highly insulted by Mulder's claims, but Scully knew that wasn't who he was referring to. "Yeah, they'll be fine."

"Be right back." Turning for the door, Mulder absently folded the list in his hand, Skinner trailing behind. Scully watched in silence, her heart in her throat, dread pooling at the base of her spine, torn between exasperation with herself for being overdramatic and the desire to break into tears. Ignoring the others, she flew up to follow, wrenching open the heavy, double doors that opened out from Skinner's office to the outer hallway.

"Mulder!" Her voice rang louder than she meant it to in the now dark hallway. The rest of the floor had long since left, it was already nearing seven. Mulder and Skinner paused, turning to stare at her as the foolish feeling reared again, flaming her face as she realized just how silly she looked. Honestly, she was five-years-old again, crying because Bill wouldn't take her with him to the playground and made her stay and play dolls with Melissa.
Mulder seemed to understand all the same. Without saying a word he moved back towards her, wrapping arms around her, not seeming to care that their boss stood watching the silent tableau. She felt tears prickle and wondered what in the hell had gotten into her.

"Seriously, Scully, it's just Oregon and back. I'll be back to pack my desk in a day or two." He was joking, she knew it, but she could hear the concern and worry. He didn't understand this reaction in her, and frankly neither did she. It wasn't as if they hadn't had separate cases before. Hell, he'd run off on her more times than she cared to think about. There she was, crying because he was taking Skinner and leaving her behind.

"I don't know," she admitted, more than a bit tearfully. "I just...I'm scared."

His arms tightened. "You'll be fine here. I told you, I won't let anything happen to you. The guys will keep an eye on you."

"And Krycek?" Her voice wavered at that. She could feel him stiffen, almost sensing the anger just under his skin. Krycek was who had been instrumental in her disappearance the first time.

"Even he's not that stupid." Mulder's words were more confident than he sounded. "If anything happens to you and he's anywhere in the vicinity, I'll kill him, and he knows it."

It wasn't a jest. Something told Scully that Mulder meant it.

"Mulder, we don't have much time." Skinner wasn't unfeeling but he was firm as Scully pulled away, feeling ashamed for such a display in front of their boss no less. She let him go, but not before he snagged her fingers and brought them to his lips, a brief, chaste kiss before he turned to follow Skinner.

She didn't want him going without her.

"Wait!" She stopped him one last time, a whimsical, mad idea hitting her. Fingers flying to her neck, she reached for the clasp of the gold cross at her throat. It had been her talisman since she was fifteen, a gift from her mother to her, a gift she had tried to pass to Emily. It wasn't much, there was nothing magical about it, but for whatever reason it made sense. It was something to give him, to have with him while he was out there.

Mulder was polite enough to only look mildly confused, a bemused smile on his face as she took the necklace off and held it out to his outstretched fingers. "What's it for?"

"Luck," she said, trying to smile but feeling it wobble as it fell. "Nothing about this feels safe."

"It's the least crazy adventure I've had ever. I'm out with Skinner in the middle of the woods. No glaciers, no trains, no gulags in Siberia."

"I know," she muttered, closing his fingers around the delicate gold strand. "Just...humor me on this. Call it my Irish intuition."

"You don't believe in intuition," he teased, but slid the chain into the front pocket of his shirt. "Don't get worked up. Keep an eye on Krycek. It will all be okay."

"Okay," she murmured, watching as he turned for good this time. She waited till he and Skinner rounded the corner to the elevators, then quietly went back into the office. The boys were engrossed in the maps and data in front of them. Krycek sat apart, however, Marita curled quietly next to him watching the others work. He, however, had was watching her.
"Something got your eye, Alex?" She spat out the words more harshly than she had meant. She really had wanted to be dismissive. But he only laughed, his cold, blue eyes for a moment softening to compassion.

"If he finds this, it will change everything. You know that."

"If he finds it," she shot back, wrapping arms around herself and wishing that a dark hole would open up and swallow Krycek and take him back where he belonged. "You told him it is out there."

"If he gets to it in time and if he can get the proof." Krycek nodded towards the table. "It's out there. I know it is."

"Any reason you couldn't go out and snag it yourself?"

"And do what with it? Wave it around? Leak it to CNN? I'm a wanted man, Scully. There's still a warrant out for my arrest, you know."

"Yeah, for abducting me and killing my sister," she growled, catching Marita's attention. The blonde woman turned, pale eyes solemn and sad as she regarded Scully.

"This isn't just about you, you know that. What they've done…" Marita trailed off, turning in on herself in that way that Scully knew all too well from others. Penny, Cassandra, she'd experienced it. They'd done something to her. "They are hiding the truth of what they've done, the evidence of everything that's happened. Mulder is the only one who can get it out there. That's why him."

"And what do you get out of this?" Krycek never worked without an angle, she knew that about him.

He shrugged mildly. "Freedom. I get to be my own man. I think maybe you can relate to that, can't you?"

The idea of relating to Alex Krycek on anything made her skin crawl and her already touchy stomach lurch violently. "I am nothing like you."

"Aren't you?" He laughed ruefully, and for a moment looked as if he truly regretted the course of his life. "I wasn't always two-faced bastard, Scully. Like you, I got drawn into something much bigger than myself. Unlike you, I wasn't given the nobler choice."

Anger flared red hot within her, the image of her sister, comatose in the hospital fueling the flames into a storm. "You murdered my sister, you destroyed her life, you had them take me, to use me, to take away my choices, and you can sit there and tell me I'm anything like you?"

Even the Lone Gunman stopped to stare, eyes wide at the scene in front of them. But Krycek didn't flinch, taking the blast of her fury as evenly as he regarded her in that long moment.

"You may find, Scully, that you have been blessed in ways I haven't. You've been given second chances that I'll never have. What I did was unforgivable, there's no denying that, but at the end of the day you get to walk away with your head held high, off to go be a doctor and live a normal life. There is no white picket fence for me, not for what I've done. All I get is revenge, to see the truth exposed and to pay back that cancerous son-of-a-bitch in kind for every wrong committed, to hold him and all of them accountable for what has happened and expose it. Stop it in a way they were too coward to do. Maybe then I can begin atoning for the tiniest bit of my crimes. When this is all said and done, you get to sleep at night with the knowledge you have a soul. I still have to make amends for the fact they stole mine."
Whatever Scully had expected to hear out of Alex Krycek, that wasn't it. The rage that simmered within banked and she felt herself drain of indignation and energy, too tired to even contemplate what he was already suggesting.

"Krycek," she sighed, wishing she could do nothing more than go home and curl into a ball and never, ever come out again. "If anything happens to Mulder because of this, I will make sure that I find you and that they lock you up and they never, ever find the key again."

Krycek only smirked. "I've been locked up in worse places. Yeah, if anything happens to Mulder, you can be the first in line to kick my ass, okay?"

"I'll be second," piped up Frohike, glaring in pugnacious anger at the far-from-impressed Krycek. "Nothing about this smells right. It's too perfect."

"Believe what you want, but I'm not here to trick you. No gimmicks."

Scully could only turn away, too disgusted and doubtful to believe a further word out of him. "I hope for your sake there isn't any."
Joy and Sorrow

Chapter Summary

In which Scully gets two shocking bits of news.

For all of the comfortable and rational ideas that Scully had about the world that Mulder had gleefully destroyed, for all of the sacred, doctrinal canons of science that she had finally admitted were not so sacred or canonical, for all the ways in which Scully had been forced to admit that the world did not fit into her neatly labeled and well categorized boxes, at her heart Scully always would be a skeptic, clinging to her desire and need for hard, testable, reproducible proof. The natural scientist in her would always be that way, could never see the fuzziness of Mulder more social scientist brain, could not acceptable outlying variables and impossibilities blithely. No matter how much she knew the world didn't work that neatly, there was that part of her which would always believed that it did. This was why when the slim, boyish looking doctor, with black plastic glasses too large for his thin nose to hold up, stood in her hospital room and cheerfully announced to her the results of her blood work, she couldn't believe him.

"You're results are mistaken." There was no amazement, no confusion, only the dull, aching hurt, mixed with a hint of betrayal, that nestled in her heart. A simple but cruel mix up, certainly, one woman's papers mixed with her own.

"I'm not." The boy doctor, named Elliot Goldman, grinned under a mop of unruly, brown curls, adding to the absurdity of this situation. He barely looked old enough to have graduated medical school, to know what he was talking about, and he dared to come in and tell her the impossible.

"You have to be, I can't..."

"I ran the test three times." He waved the results in their manila folder in front of her. "I wanted to be thorough, you have a history of cancer, and of course with your symptoms there's the obvious fears. But, there was no indication of anything, nothing in your blood work that would suggest your cancers return. However, the blood work did tell us something else."

Goldman held out the folder to her. He knew she was a doctor, she'd said as much when he walked in the first time and rattled off her entire medical history to him, including her cancer and her infertility treatments. Still, she stared at it for a long moment, half afraid to look. What if it was the horrible mistake she thought it all was? Could she handle that disappointment?

What if it wasn't?

She snapped the folder from his hand, almost angrily laying it open across the scratchy, acrylic blanket covering her thin, hospital gown. She scanned the results with a physician's eye, as if she was looking at some other woman's results, looking for the inaccuracies, the details that might tell her this was a hoax at worst, a careless oversight at best. There weren't any, and the blood work was conclusive. Scully stared at the black ink on the white paper, her fingers trembling as her heart flipped, caught between abject joy and utter confusion. It was true, completely true.

She was pregnant.
"How?" She couldn't turn her eyes from the results on the page. "I don't understand, I can't..."

"It happens," Goldman replied, leaning against the bed casually. "I've seen couples who were told they could never have kids, then five years later, bam, she's pregnant. Sometimes it's as simple as hormones changing. You get older, your body begins producing things differently. With you, I'd say it was the therapy you were on for your IVF, it triggered something that just set everything in motion at the right time."

"But...I don't understand. My ovaries were harvested." She pulled her gaze up to his, realizing in doing so her eyes were glazed with tears. "I wasn't supposed to be able to."

For all that he was impossibly young, he also was compassionate. She could see that as he took her hand, still holding the results, and squeezed gently. "The human body is an amazingly regenerative thing, and you haven't exactly led a sedentary life. Who knows how these things work? You and I both spent long years and a lot of money in medical school, and in the end, sometimes we both had to admit there were things that even we couldn't understand, even with all of our science."

But a child against all hope and possibility? She held out the paperwork to him, wiping at her eyes as she tried to even wrap her head around it. Pregnant! She was having a baby.

This changed...everything.

"Look, I know this is a lot to take," Goldman began carefully, gathering the folder and shooting her as firm of a look as an adult who still looked like he was twelve could manage. "You are dehydrated from the last few days. I'm asking you stay here for observation, get your fluids up, and I'll write a prescription for a morning sickness medication for you. That should help, at least for a few weeks till things settle."

Morning sickness? Lord, how could she have missed the signs? The fatigue, the nausea, the mood swings, and she thought it was cancer. Flushing in embarrassment, she nodded as he shot her another reassuring smile and left her to her own stunned silence. She was having a baby.

Mulder's baby...

Stunned surprise melted into pleased disbelief as she considered what this meant. They had tried a year ago and failed with the scientific method. One year later the good, old fashioned way, and she was pregnant with his child. So much for the wonders of modern medicine! What would he say? Would he be pleased?

Had they gotten him back from Oregon?

Despite the joy of sudden and unexplained happiness came the memory of what exactly landed her there. She had discovered it wasn't the fact that Ray, Teresa, and Billy were all abductees that was the common thread that wound them together in their sudden disappearance, it was the encephalitis they had all experienced, the same condition that Mulder had suffered from. Frohike had pieced it together even as the world faded to black and it was he who had assured her as she was loaded into the ambulance complaining loudly that he would work to get Mulder back before anything happened. That had been hours before. Mulder should have landed in Portland by now, perhaps was already in Bellefleur, and there had been no word from anyone on whether or not they were able to stop him.

*Please, dear Lord,* she prayed, wishing she still had her cross to clutch, *let him come home safely to me...to us.*
As if silently including the new, still forming life inside her womb in that prayer, she rested her hand on her still flat abdomen, screwing her eyes shut like she did as a child and prayed kneeling at her bedside beside Melissa. The earnest, fearful, terrified prayer of a woman who shouldn't be pregnant but suddenly was, who had no idea what her future was and if the man she loved would even be able to stay with her.

*Hail Mary, full of grace, The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women...*

The knock on her door sounded, jarring her out of a sleep she hadn't realized that she had fallen into. Curled on her side, she blinked in the thin sunlight from outside to see the worried and quizzical looks of Langley and Byers peeking around the corner of her doorway.

"Hey," she called, stretching muscles, cramped from curling in on themselves wrong. "How did they let you up here?"

"The hospital called," Byers offered helpfully. He was still in the same suit he had worn the day before, Langley in the same jeans and t-shirt. "I gave them my number as a point of contact."

"He may have told them he was your husband," Langley clarified with a smirk, earning a glare from the other. "Besides, they'd buy that more than they would buy me saying it."

"Or Frohike, but he was willing to argue the point," Byers grinned.

"I bet he was." Scully rolled her eyes, sitting up. "Where is he?"

"On the phone, trying to reach Mulder or Skinner."

"You haven't found them yet?" Alarms rang as Scully looked to the clock on the bedside table. Seven in the morning already, which would be four in Oregon. They should have been there by now, at least well within cell phone range.

"Couldn't get either of them to answer. Likely had their cells off for the flight." Langley nestled at the corner of her bed, despite Byers disapproving frown as he took the lone chair in the room. "We poured over the data Krycek gave us. There's something out there and chances are they found it and Mulder's been too busy to bother checking in. You know how he is, like a kid in a candy store."

"Like as not, if they're in the woods, cell signal isn't great anyway, and if there is a vessel there, it's disrupting whatever signal they do have," Byers added.

They both sounded so confident and blaise about this, but Scully wasn't an idiot. She could see the tension, the worry, the effort to cover apprehension with reasonable explanation and she had a good idea that it was because of the fact that she was sitting in a hospital as they spoke.

"The doctor did a complete battery of tests on me," she offered, tossing it in the conversation to see where it landed. Both men tensed, assuring smiles tightening somewhat, but not faltering all together. No, neither let it slip. They had gotten good at this over the long years, trying to protect her, but she could see the worry and at least decided to take some pity on them. "It's not cancer."

Langley's shoulders slumped by half an inch as he released a breath she doubted he knew he was holding.

Byers didn't look so assured, however. "Did they check for anything more abnormal, more...out of this world?"

"There was nothing abnormal about anything," she assured them both, wondering how to even break
the truth to them. She wanted to hold it, still, for Mulder first, but the worry from both of them made her realize they would assume the worst until she cleared it with them.

"You said you were sick in Oregon, the incident in the woods, you said they didn't want you…"

"I'm perfectly healthy," Scully replied, a small smile finally pulling at her mouth, her truth begging to be let out. "Everything is normal. I'm just...pregnant."

On the long list of alien viruses, brain infections, and invading, germinating life forms she could have had wrong with her body, clearly a perfectly normal, human pregnancy was not high on the list of possible conditions either Langley or Byers would have suspected. Until a few hours before, neither would Scully.

"Pregnant, as in...you're knocked up?" Langley's face scrunched behind his thick frames, as if human procreation baffled him.

Byers was hardly any better. "And you're sure it's...normal?"

Scully's mouth twitched, but she did manage to contain the snort and eye roll that normally would follow such pronouncements from the Lone Gunmen. "When a man and a woman initiate sexual reproduction…"

"Guh, I know how babies are made," Langley held up hands in protest. "It's just...I thought you couldn't...you know, percolate them."

"You make her sound like a coffee pot," Byers muttered in mild disgust. "Scully, he's right, you said you couldn't."

"I don't know!" She threw up her hands helplessly, wishing desperately that her science wasn't failing her. "It's insane, I wasn't supposed to be able to, but…"

She trailed off. What could she say? She didn't know, didn't understand.

"Damn," Langley breathed reverently. "Mulder's got super sperm!"

Eyes wide and cheeks ablaze, Scully stared at the man sitting on the end of her bed, torn between abject and utter embarrassment in that moment and awe that Langley even knew. Her mouth worked, but no words could come out as she glanced at Byers mildly horrified and apologetic expression and realized in that moment he knew too.

"How...I mean, why do you think…"

Byers shrugged. "Come on, Scully, we aren't exactly idiots...well, most of us." He glared at Langley, who seemed to wonder what the problem was. Before either of them could humiliate her further, however, Scully noticed Frohike's short figure come into the door, and she knew in that moment what had happened.

"Hey, Frohike, Scully's not dying, she's just pregnant," Langley offered gleefully, as if he had anything to do with the joyous happenstance. It took him a moment to catch that his friend wasn't as excited as he was. "What's wrong?"

"Did you get a hold of Mulder," Byers was up in a moment, fearfully glancing back at Scully.

"I got Skinner." Frohike replied, clearing his throat, his pug-ish face grim as he regarded the cell phone in his gloved hand. "They found the site, just were Ratboy said it was. He said everything was
fine, but…"

Scully felt the bottom fall out of her world.

"Dana!" Tears thickened Frohike's gruff voice, welling behind his Coke-bottle lenses. "I'm sorry. We tried."

Outside, golden light filtered through white blinds. People stirred, the world moved on, but in that tiny room at George Washington Memorial, with Frohike, Byers, and Langley, her word stopped. Everything came to pinpoint focus, the sound of the air through the vents, the mechanical white noise of the IV machine by her bed, the murmur of voices down the hall, and in the midst of it all, her own heartbeat, steady in her chest, as its rhythm pumping not just for her, but a tiny, speck life in her womb, even as it it cracked and threatened to shatter. The moment of her greatest joy, her dearest held desire finally fulfilled, was now also the moment of her greatest sorrow.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, indeed.

"We have to find him," she whispered, wet eyes flickering to Frohike's anguished face. "I can't...we can't let them have him. I can't let him disappear like Samantha. There's too much for him here. And I need him. We need him."

She didn't need to clarify the we. They all knew.

"Well get him back, Dana." Frohike didn't sound as confident as his words, but he glanced between his two compatriots. "Let's go see what we can turn up before Skinner gets here."

With murmurs of agreement and admonishments to Scully to rest, they shuffled out, Langley even uncharacteristically stopping to hug her before leaving her to her room and to her thoughts. Leaning into her pillow, she laid her hands across her abdomen, eyes focused on the sunlight outside.

"We will find him," she whispered out loud to a child who couldn't hear her. "I will find him for us. I promise."
For I Will Bless Her And Give Her A Son

Chapter Summary

In which Scully grapples with joy and loss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skinner's appearance that afternoon was in many ways anti-climactic on Scully's part.

He understandably hadn't expected her to say she was pregnant. He had known she was barren. She'd had to explain to him about San Diego and Emily, her involvement in the case. The first word out of his mouth was the very first question everyone asked. "How?"

What do you say when "I don't know" isn't enough?

Tears ran past the wobbly smile and she found herself wrapping arms around the dull, unending ache in her middle. "I am honestly at a loss myself, sir."

He nodded, faintly, pressing lips in a hard line, looking like a man who had simply had too much thrown at him too fast and was unable to cope. How could he? He'd seen evidence of the truth he'd always read about for years but secretly didn't believe in, he'd lost the one agent who could explain it all in the process, and now he was presented with a miraculous conception. Somewhere under the heartache and loss lay a kernel of sympathy for Skinner, the man who had carefully kept himself neutral and outside of it all for so long. Now he was involved. Like Scully, he couldn't deny the uncomfortable truth.

Skinner sighed, a long stream of frustration and grief as he contemplated the end of the bed she lay in. "Did he know," he asked quietly.

Fresh tears, hot and painful, welled in eyes she would have long since thought dry, the physical evidence of the shattering within her. "No," she managed on a grieving, aching sob, the utter injustice of it all clawing at her. This was to have been a moment she shared with him, their miracle, longed hoped for. And he was the one person who didn't know now, and it wasn't fair.

"He didn't know," she finally managed after long moments, trying desperately to pull herself together, to maintain some dignity. "I...I just found out. All my symptoms, they had nothing to do with the spacecraft. I was just...pregnant, nd it never occurred to me that I could be, because...well..."

She trailed off, twisting her fingers in the ugly, scratchy blanket. Her admission perhaps revealed more than she had ever intended about the nature of her personal life to Skinner. He was at least a gentleman enough to not ask the questions she knew he wanted to. Perhaps he already knew the answers or at least suspected.

Skinner moved to the chair on the other side. He settled in slowly, and it occurred how exhausted he looked. Had he been out all night? Had he even slept on the plane? She doubted he had even gone home, like as not had come straight there. She knew that there would be questions, many of them, and uncomfortable answers. Skinner, the man who had a career to think of, putting his entire
reputation on the line for a couple of misfits like the pair of them.

"You said your symptoms had nothing to do with the spacecraft," Skinner leaned back, weariness in his dark eyes. "Why did you think they did?"

"Because of what was done to me." It took Scully a moment to remember that Skinner, unlike Mulder, didn't know all the complex threads that wove through the long history they had in the X-files, the many pieces of information that seemed so unrelated and only now began to make a pattern. "I was exposed twice to a virus known as Purity. Some say it's alien in nature, I don't know much about it except that it appears to not be terrestrial and it mutates quickly. I've seen it most often appear as a black, oily substance. It infects a host and can either lie dormant or take over functions, causing a patient to enter into a comatose state. But then, in Dallas, something changed."

"The bomb." Skinner remembered and well he should. They'd been kicked off the X-files again after that one.

"The bomb was to hide the evidence of bodies, ones that had been infected with a virulent strain of the Purity virus, a strain that was using the human body as a host to reproduce."

"Into more of the virus?"

"No," Scully whispered. Skinner's expression tightened as he realized what she meant.

"You said you were exposed to this virus?"

"Yes," Scully admitted, absently picking at her blanket, wishing she understood all of this more, that she could feel less a fool in trying to explain.

"And how did you survive?"

"As far as I know the first time, just luck. Perhaps the virus was weak enough, perhaps they inoculated me while I was gone, I don't know. The second time, Mulder was given a anti-virus. It managed to stop the spread, I guess. It makes sense, something about what we are dealing with has to do with a virus. I don't understand it, I can't wrap my head around it, but there it is."

"So everything, all these secrets, lies...all over a virus?" For Skinner, the ex-Marine, the man of action, this all had to sound outlandish, science fiction. These backroom deals and agreements, men in dark, smoke filled rooms, redacted files and classified information, all of this for a type of organism that could also cause the common cold?

"You think about it sir, the deadliest weapon anyone can have in their arsenal isn't a bullet or a bomb, it's a disease. Expose a few people to it, and it can spread like wildfire. What else would you need to conquer a civilization...or a world."

The pieces fell into place for Skinner then. It finally all became as painfully clear for him as it had for Mulder and herself already. "This isn't about simple experiments."

"Not if that cigarette smoking man we both know is to be believed, no." She wondered vaguely if Krycek already knew Mulder's fate and had told Spender and if this had all been a set up by the old bastard to finally rid himself of the son who could never be his. "That's why he told Krycek to find that ship. He hoped to have access to it, to hold it as ransom and threaten to expose the truth, so he could have a chip to play in the game again. Spender knew that ship was out there, cleaning up the evidence of what had been happening, hiding the truth of all the experiments over the years. If Spender had that, he could restore the program, to try and revive the efforts. Krycek simply used Mulder in the hopes of exposing it before Spender got the chance."
Skinner snorted in mild disgust, scrubbing at his face, tipping his rimless glasses onto the top of his bald head. "All these games and what was it all for?"

"Honestly?" Scully shrugged, realizing she'd asked herself that same question now for years with no clear answer. "Perhaps the best of intentions? Perhaps not? I don't know."

It was cold comfort to Skinner, she knew that. "Why take Mulder?"

Cold bile threatened to rise up her throat. She couldn't tell if it was morning sickness or despair causing it. "Mulder had believed that they were taking abductees, hiding the evidence of their experiments. And they are, but not the ones he was thinking of. What Mulder didn't know, and what I only found out after looking at the medical files of the victims, is that they all had suffered from acute encephalitis in the last year. They had all been exposed to the same virus I had, even Mulder. For whatever reason in him it was dormant until he was exposed to that artifact from the ship in West Africa."

"His brain was going haywire," Skinner recalled, remembering his own desperate action to save Mulder's life.

"When we first met Billy Miles, the boy in Bellefleur, he too was in a similar, vegetative state." It was only now Scully was making the connections to that case so long ago. "Like Mulder, he couldn't communicate. He perhaps was suffering the same thing then, only no one understood it. He only came out of it after being exposed to another UFO incident. I think that whatever they did to Billy Miles, that's what happened to Mulder as well, and now they are collecting everyone that had that reaction."

"For what purpose?"

Skinner voiced the very question Scully herself was asking. "I wish I knew, sir. If I did, we could find him."

Her voice sounded so small saying that. As if it lacked the conviction she wanted to feel in that moment. Mulder...gone. It hadn't been her they had wanted, it had been him. For what purpose? And would they give him back?

Skinner was quiet for long, painful moments, processing everything she had literally just dumped into his lap. When he spoke, it was low and grave. "There are going to be questions, Scully. An agent missing to a UFO, I don't know many who are going to buy that. There will be some who may think something tragic happened to Mulder, most are going to likely assume he's probably finally lost it and has run off and is a threat. My guess is that the higher ups will cultivate that idea because it's convenient towards getting rid of a problem."

If they couldn't shut them down, Scully reasoned bitterly, they could make Mulder into something he wasn't...a traitor.

"And what will you tell them?"

"The truth," he said simply, pushing his smudged glasses back onto his face. "While out on an investigation in Oregon, Agent Mulder disappeared, and I witnessed what I believe to be an unidentified flying object rise into the sky above the spot I last saw him."

"You know they'll never believe you." It was a statement of fact. God knew, Scully had been there enough times herself.

"I know." Skinner replied honestly. "But it never stopped Mulder, did it?"
No, it never did.

Without preamble, Skinner rose, just as slow to get up as to sit down, straightening with effort. He shoved hands into his pockets, suddenly looking at a loss as to what to say. Inexplicably, Scully felt the need to comfort him in this moment.

"It will be okay, sir. We'll find him." She spoke with more confidence than she felt at the moment.

"You really believe that?"

What a funny question to ask the skeptic. "I have to sir. We have to."

He didn't need to ask the we. Automatically his gaze flickered to her middle, then back up, nodding resolutely.

"We do," he agreed, something pained flickering to life. "Scully...Dana. I am happy for you. I know how much this has meant to you, and Mulder would be thrilled if he were here."

Scully hoped he would be. Perhaps terrified would be a better word. "Thank you, sir."

He shuffled, looking strangely uncomfortable, a look she rarely saw on her composed supervisor. "I know that...well, I know how close you two were, and I know that in many ways I've been the hard ass, standing outside, holding you both accountable. It's not because I didn't believe in your work. I wouldn't have worked so hard to keep you where you were if I didn't. I'm not Mulder, but..."

He fumbled, and something of a flush turned his ears ruddy and his high cheekbones pink. He cleared his throat, hunching his shoulders like a schoolboy talking to a girl he liked. "Damn it, Scully, Mulder was lost on my watch. Let's be honest with ourselves, my guess is that however this pregnancy happened, it's all mixed up with all of this, UFOs, aliens, viruses, everything. And if Mulder were here, he would bust his ass trying to ensure that you were safe. I was the one who let him get away. Till he gets back, I'm the one who will watch your back, make sure you are safe...and that baby is safe."

It was such an unexpected declaration, Scully honestly didn't know what to say. A part of her wanted to deny it and say it wasn't necessary, that her partner was coming back. But she knew that would be foolish. It if were just her, perhaps, but now it was different. A motherly instinct she hadn't felt since Emily came roaring to the fore. She had a child to protect. She couldn't and shouldn't allow her pride to get in the way of that.

"Thank you, sir." She felt silly blushing at the gentlemanly gesture. For all that she and Mulder joked about Skinner having a crush on her, it was such a sweet and kind thing to do, one uncharacteristic in her often distance boss. It was an honorable side of him that she had only ever seen glimpses of before. And at this moment, bereft of the man she loved and the one person she trusted above all others, she needed more friends like these.

Skinner's nodded curtly, already out of his depth in all of this. "The hospital said you'll be released soon?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Do you need a ride?"

"I can take a cab."

That earned a severe frown. "Call me, Scully. I'll come and get you. I'll bring your car from the
office and drop you off at home."

"Sir, I can get home..."

"Orders, Scully!" His tone was gruff, but there as compassion there as well. "You don't get a choice."

She sighed. He was going to take this role of protector seriously. "Yes, sir."

"Fine." Satisfied, he made to go. But he paused, looking uncomfortably at her lying her bed, pulling at a large hand to wrap one of her smaller ones.

"You aren't alone in this," he murmured, before pulling away. Scully didn't get to formulate a response before he was whipping out the door, his footsteps fading quickly down the hallway.

Despite Skinner's words, Scully realized, as she settled into her pillow drowsily, hand on her belly, she may not be alone. But at this moment, she certainly felt like it.

Chapter End Notes

This is it. This is the end. I am so sad we've arrived here.

Wow, guys, I can't say "thank you" enough. The response to these stories has been amazing. I so appreciate each and every one of you who has read through these stories. These were a labor of love for me, a raging fan, who wanted to dive into the series more, and that I shared them was a big feet. Your response is the icing on the cake. You all made this possible.

As for today there are NO new Seasons stories out and I don't have plans to continue, but never say never! Who knows what my brain may cook up. For now, I've moved on to other projects. If you like my work I have stuff written for Dr. Who and Star Wars and for the Marvel fans I've currently been posting some one shots about the amazing Agent Peggy Carter that you are free to read. And on Monday I'll start my series called "Interstitals", stories from between "Avengers" Infinity War" and "Avengers: Endgame". So feel free to check out my other stuff.

Much love to all of you and thank you again. I'm around here or on Twitter as Beshter and I love chatting with people.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!