Another Man's Child

by Amorfati32

Summary

When Fox Mulder is assigned a new partner on the X Files, the last thing he expected to do was fall in love with her. Or her daughter.

(Originally posted to fanfiction.net. Will try and post the whole story in the next few days.)

Notes

Just be warned, I started writing this story two years ago. It is in no way perfect and most chapters could probably do with a rewrite, as you'll no doubt see.
Chapter 1

Fox Mulder suppressed a sigh as he heard footsteps approaching his office. He knew who his visitor was, and he was half tempted to abandon his slides, get up and close the door before she arrived, but he knew it would be no use. His superiors had already called him into a meeting just a few days ago to inform him that he was being assigned a new partner on the X Files, and he wasn’t happy about it to say the least. He was much better working on his own; he’d told the Director in charge, though he knew his words were falling on deaf ears – they were no doubt assigning him a partner to rein him in and keep him under control. He’d had a few days to look into his new partner’s background and discovered she was no doubt a self-assured, practical, no-nonsense individual – after all, she tried to re-write Einstein as a young student. They wouldn’t get along, he told himself. They were far too different.

As he heard the knock at the door, Mulder prepared to meet the new woman in his life. “Sorry, nobody down here but the FBI’s most unwanted.”

The door opened, and his new partner entered the office and walked over towards him. “Agent Mulder, I’m Dana Scully. I’ve been assigned to work with you.”

Forgetting his slides for just a moment, Mulder reached out and shook Agent Scully’s hand. She looked young, like a little girl dressed up in her mother’s oversized old-fashioned suit, but she was deadly serious in her expression. “Oh, isn’t it nice to be suddenly so highly regarded?” he replied sarcastically. “So, who did you tick off to get stuck with this detail, Scully?” Deep down he knew he was being harsh towards her, but he wasn’t there to make friends, particularly with someone who was no doubt reporting back to their superiors on everything he said and did.

“Actually, I’m looking forward to working with you.” Scully wasn’t fazed by his attitude, and Mulder had to give her credit for it. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Oh really? I was under the impression that you were sent to spy on me.”

“If you have any doubt about my qualifications or credentials, th –”

Standing up, Mulder retrieved a paper from his desk. “You’re a medical doctor, you teach at the Academy. You did your undergraduate degree in Physics.” Removing his glasses, he looked down at the paper and began to read. “Einstein's Twin Paradox, A New Interpretation. Dana Scully Senior Thesis.” Now that's a credential, rewriting Einstein.”

“Did you bother to read it?”

“I did. I liked it.” He loaded up the slide projector. “It’s just that in most of my work, the laws of physics rarely seem to apply.” Walking past her, Mulder switched off the lights, but not before he saw Scully glare at him. “Maybe I can get your medical opinion on this, though.” He then proceeded to start his presentation, showing his new partner photographs of what was to be their first case together, before asking her if she believed in the existence of extra-terrestrials. He wasn’t surprised when Scully replied in the negative. “See you tomorrow morning Scully, bright and early.”, he added after he’d finished the slide show. “We leave for the very plausible state of Oregon at eight a.m.” Returning to his desk, Mulder sat back down intending to return to his files as Scully left the room, no doubt wondering what the hell she’d gotten herself into.

xxxx
Scully was hiding something; Mulder realised not long into their first case. She’d arrived at the airport with barely a moment to spare, looking uncharacteristically flustered, and no sooner had she met her partner at the departure gate she wandered off out of earshot to make a quick phone call. As the case progressed he caught her on her cell phone when she thought he wasn’t looking, though he couldn’t be sure of whom she was speaking too. He was willing to place a bet that she was calling their superiors, reporting back on his run in with the locals and his insistence that something other-worldly was responsible for the abductions. But still, he was intrigued by Scully and so, one evening after they’d returned to their motel, he decided to see if he could spend some time with her, to see if he could figure her out.

“Who is it?” Scully called as she heard the knock.

“Steven Spielberg,” he quipped, before the door opened. Clad in leggings and an oversized t-shirt, Scully looked barely half her age, let alone a professional FBI agent. She almost looked pleased to see him. “I’m way too wired. I’m going for a run, you want to come?”

“Pass. I’m waiting for a phone call.”

“A phone call?” As she’d offered up the information, Mulder began to wonder if she was reporting back, or if in fact she’d been talking to a man this whole time. It looked as though he wasn’t about to find out anytime soon.

“Yeah, so I’ll pass tonight, thanks.”

“Ok. You figure out what that little thing up Ray Soames’ nose is yet?”

“No”. Scully let out an impressive yawn. “And I’m not losing any sleep over it. Good night.” With that she shut the door on him, leaving Mulder to wonder just exactly what is was she didn’t want him to know.

xxxx

It was late the next evening when Mulder heard the knock at the door of his motel room. He knew before answering that it was Scully; the power had gone out just minutes before thanks to the storm. Carrying a candle, Mulder opened the door, surprised to see his partner stood just in her bathrobe, visibly worried about something. “Hi.”

“I want you to look at something.”

Tempted to fire an innuendo at her, Mulder realised it wasn’t the time for jokes. “Come on in.” By the time he’d closed the door and turned to face her, Scully had slipped off her robe, revealing her underwear. For a moment he wondered if his partner was propositioning him, but the look on her face revealed fear rather than desire. Following her gaze, Mulder’s eyes came to rest on two bumps on Scully’s lower back.

“What are they?” She asked uncertainly. As Mulder smiled, her patience wore thin. “Mulder, what are they?”

“Mosquito bites,” he finally replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I got eaten up a lot myself out there.” Sighing in relief, Scully adjusted her robe to cover herself, before flinging her arms around Mulder, who startled in surprise. “You ok?”
“Yes.” As though realising she’d overstepped boundaries, Scully pulled away.

“You’re shaking.”

“I need to sit down.”

“Take your time,” Mulder commented, as they both took a seat. The storm raged on and as Scully attempted to calm down, he realised it was a good opportunity to find out more about his new partner.

xxxxx

Somehow as they were talking, Scully migrated to the bed, while Mulder shifted to the floor beside it. Scully had spoken of her childhood, growing up with her sister and brothers and travelling the world with her Navy Captain father, but that was as much as she’d told him before directing the conversation to Mulder’s own childhood. And he surprised himself as much as Scully by telling her the truth. “…I was twelve when it happened. My sister was eight. She just disappeared out of her bed one night. Just gone, vanished. No note, no phone calls, no evidence of anything.”

“You never found her.”

Scully listened with interest as Mulder told her of his sister’s abduction, not once laughing as he explained his work with the paranormal and his theories of a government conspiracy, and for that he was thankful. “I’ve been able to go into my own repressed memories to the night my sister disappeared,” he began, as he knelt towards the bed. “I can recall a bright light outside and a presence in the room. I was paralysed, unable to respond to my sister’s calls for help.” He was animated now. “Listen to me Scully, this thing exists.”

She wasn’t quite convinced, though he didn’t expect her to be. “But how do you know?”

“The government knows about it, and I got to know what they’re protecting. Nothing else matters to me, and this is as close as I’ve ever gotten to it.” Suddenly Mulder realised how he must have sounded to his new partner. Not wanting to overwhelm her, he decided to change the topic of conversation. “So Scully, I’ve told you my secrets, what about yours?”

The ringing of the telephone startled the two of them. Mulder reached out to pick it up. “Hello? What? Who is this? Who is this? Hanging up, he addressed his partner and informed her of a death. He didn’t need to be an investigator to tell that Scully was relieved their conversation had been interrupted.

xxxxx

Their journey back to Washington DC was thankfully not quite as eventful as the way out; a relatively calm flight in comparison. Scully spent the journey writing down notes ready to type up once she got home, whilst Mulder studied her from afar. She was definitely hiding something, he’d told himself, as the plane landed and they made their way out of the airport. No sooner had Mulder joined the queue for car hire, his partner walked off, dialling on her cell phone as she went. By the time she returned, he was waiting impatiently for her. “Have I been keeping you from something Scully?”

She looked up at him, confused. “I’m sorry?”

“You’ve been surgically attached to that phone since we got here. Now I don’t know if you’re reporting back on me or whether you’re simply talking to your boyfriend, but you’re supposed to be focused on the case you’re working.”
“I am focused on the case Mulder,” Scully snapped, glaring at him. “I was by your side every time you clicked your fingers and told me to heel, and I went out there with you with barely a day’s notice. I was not reporting back on you and I was certainly not organising my social life. Not that that’s any of your business,” she added. “If you’re that desperate to know, I was trying to sort out a family problem. Now I’m sorry I didn’t give you my full attention 24/7, but it was urgent, and it won’t happen again.”

Her explanation made Mulder feel worse. “I’m sorry,” he managed after a few moments of silence. “If you’re questioning my professionalism –”

“I’m not, I’m not.” And he wasn’t. Scully was right – she had been by his side throughout the case. Many other agents would have – and had, in the past – warned him to give them some space, but not her. “Shall we go?”

Hesitating only momentarily, Scully nodded, before following her partner out to the car. It wasn’t until Mulder was heading in the direction of her apartment that she spoke. “I have a daughter.”

Of all the things he expected her to say, that wasn’t it. “A daughter?”

“Yes.” She almost seemed surprised that he didn’t already know. “You mean your background check didn’t uncover that information?”

“I didn’t do a background check.”

“Liar”. Scully smiled, almost in spite of herself. “She’s three.”

“She?”

“Ashley.”

“Cute name.”

She nodded. “You’re right Mulder, I haven’t been completely professional these past few days, it’s just…Ashley’s been sick the past week, and I’ve had to leave her with my mother. I just wanted to check up on her.”

“Of course.” Mulder daren’t mention the little girl’s father, and he had a feeling Scully wasn’t about to either. “Is she ok?”

“She’s fine, just a bout of tonsillitis, but I just felt bad for leaving her.”

“You didn’t have to come Scully. Not if your daughter needed you.”

“She’s been fine with my mom. Besides, I wasn’t about to give you the satisfaction of not going with you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” It was his turn to smile.

“Of course you don’t,” Scully answered dryly. “It won’t happen again.”

“You’ve missed her.” It was a statement rather than a question, and out of the corner of his eye Mulder saw his partner nod in agreement.

“Yes I have, but from what I hear she’s been spoilt rotten by her grandma.”
As Mulder turned the vehicle into Scully’s road, she pointed out her apartment. “I appreciate you telling me Scully.”

“I don’t want you calling my professionalism into question. It's hard enough as it is already.” She smiled, signalling she was joking. “Besides,” she added, sobering. “After what you shared with me last night, it was the least I could do.”

Nodding, Mulder brought the car to a standstill. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Scully got out of the car and grabbed her bag from the back. “I’m afraid you will”. With that, she walked off, leaving Mulder to contemplate life with his new partner.

xxxx

Scully laid in bed, unable to sleep despite the late hour. Her brain was replaying the events of the past few days – what they had experienced in Oregon, everything Mulder had confessed to her, even the mortifying memory of dropping her bathrobe in front of her new partner. She was far too wired to even think about sleep. The shrill ring of the telephone broke her free from her thoughts, and she rushed to answer before the noise woke her sleeping daughter. “Hello?”

“Scully? It’s me.” She’d barely met him a few days ago, but already she recognised the voice at the end of the line. “I haven’t been able to sleep. I talked to the D.A.’s office in Raymon County, Oregon. There’s no case file on Billy Miles. The paperwork we filed is gone. We need to talk, Scully.”

“Yes,” she replied dazed. “Tomorrow.”

“Of course.” As though remembering his manners, Mulder spoke again. “How’s Ashley?”

“She’s good, thank you.”

“Good…well I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight –” Before she could even finish her sentence, Mulder had hung up. Scully settled back into bed, wondering what else was in store for her and her new partner.
“Ashley! Ashley, hurry up!” Scully walked into her daughter’s bedroom, frowning when she realised it was empty. “Ashley?” Turning on her heel, she headed back out into the hallway, towards the living room where she could hear the sound of television droning in the background. Sure enough, she found her three-year-old daughter in front of the set, dancing along to a video of Barney and Friends. She also noticed, with some dismay, that Ashley was only half dressed; the denim skirt she’d been wearing barely ten minutes before now discarded somewhere in the apartment, and her blonde hair, previously scooped up into a short ponytail, now hanging loose as the little girl bounced around the room. It was the last thing Scully wanted to see – she was already running late, and still needed to drop her daughter off at her parent’s house while she and Mulder travelled to Baltimore to investigate Eugene Tooms, a suspect in a murder case she’d been asked to consult on. She didn’t want Mulder to think she wasn’t focused on their work, which is why she couldn’t afford to be late - it was still early days in their partnership, and he was still weary of her. “Ashley!” Locating the remote on the coffee table, Scully picked it up and switched off the television; the move instantly upsetting her daughter.

“Nooo!” Ashley cried, spinning round to face her partner. “I wanna watch Barney!”

“And I need to go to work,” Scully replied, finally spying her daughter’s skirt on the sofa. She reached for it with one hand; the other taking hold of Ashley, and attempted to re-dress the little girl. Ashley didn’t make it easy for her mother, trying to wriggle out of her grasp, but to no avail. “Stay still.”

“I don’t want to go to work!”

Scully bit back a smile. “Well it’s a good job you don’t have to. I get to go to work while you can have a fun day with grandma and grandpa. It’ll be fun.”

“Nooooo!”

Despite her protests, Scully noticed that her daughter wasn’t even close to crying, and no doubt just grumpy because she was tired. “There,” she, announced, as the skirt was finally back in place. “Maybe if you ask grandpa nicely he’ll let you watch Barney at his house.”

Ashley’s blue eyes narrowed as she considered her mother’s proposal, and at that moment Scully had no doubt whose genes she’d inherited. “And Aladdin?”

“If you’re a good girl and let me do your hair again.”

“Ok,” the little girl replied, sighing dramatically.

“You have to be quick though, else I’ll be late for work and I’ll be in trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Uh huh, Mulder will shout at me.”

“Who’s Mulder?”

“Mulder’s the man I work with, and if I’m late he’ll shout at me, so we’d better get moving, alright?”
Nodding, Ashley moved as though to go in search of her hairbrush, before turning back to her 
mother and throwing her arms around her. “I love you mommy. Don’t let Mulder shout at you.”

Stifling a laugh, Scully rubbed her daughter’s back. “He won’t, as long as you get moving.”

With that Ashley ran off, suddenly eager to get going.

xxxx

“This is Fox Mulder. I’m not here, leave a message.”

“Mulder,” Scully began, pacing her living room whilst trying not to wake Ashley, who’d not been asleep long. After they’d been given the night off, Scully had gone to her parents’ house to collect her daughter, but ended up staying for dinner. It had been late by the time they finally got home, and Ashley had passed out as soon as her little head had hit the pillow. The last thing Scully wanted was to wake her, else she’d be faced with an ill-tempered little girl the next day. “You must have gone out since Colton gave us the night off. I say we file a complaint against him, I am furious. Call me when you get in, ok, bye.”

Hanging up, she headed towards the bathroom, intending to spend time soaking in the tub – she needed something to relax after their tough day. Letting the water run, Scully checked on Ashley once more, before returning to the bathroom and switching off the taps. She lifted a bottle of bubble bath from her shelf, and as she moved to open it, she saw something hit her hand. Bile. Her heart racing, she glanced up at the ceiling and noticed the substance in the corner of the vent in the ceiling. Eugene Tooms was in the house. Fearing for her daughter’s safety, Scully set about finding her gun, determined to do whatever it took to protect Ashley. She had intended to find Tooms before he found her, but it wasn’t to be. As she turned, her gun poised, she suddenly heard a crash from behind her and felt a hand encircle her ankle. Falling to the floor, Scully tried hard to escape the monster’s clutches, managing to cling onto a door frame and pull herself away from his reach. She backed off into the bathroom, dismayed when he followed her in and pounced on her, restricting her movement. Still she managed to punch him, but to no avail – he was much stronger than her. As she reached up, pressing her thumbs into ‘Tooms’ eyes, he was able to grab hold of her arms, pushing them to the floor above her head. Scully noticed with horror that her abdomen was now exposed, and prepared herself for what was to come, but then she heard a crash, before a familiar voice sounded out.

“Scully!”

Hearing Mulder’s voice, Tooms jumped up off of Scully and raced to the window, smashing the glass. Moments later Mulder appeared in the doorway, his gun trained at the intruder. Scully stood and tried to grab hold of Tooms before he could escape but he was too quick for her, turning and clutching at her throat as he tried to choke her. Before he could do some serious damage, Mulder was right behind him, snapping on cuffs to one of his wrists. As Tooms knocked her partner to the ground, Scully moved quickly, and soon attached the handcuffs to the bathtub, restraining him.

“You alright?” Mulder asked, now back on his feet with the gun aimed once again at Tooms.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, still trying to catch her breath. She couldn’t quite believe what had just happened – one moment she was looking forward to a relaxing evening, and the next she had a murderer chained to her bathtub.

“He’s not gonna get his quota this year.”

“Mommy?” A little voice rang out from along the hallway, and instantly Mulder saw his partner
stiffen. He knew what she was thinking; at how Tooms may have attacked her daughter had Scully not apprehended him.

“You go.” He nodded towards their prisoner. “I’ve got him.”

Scully rushed out into the hallway before her daughter could reach the bathroom, and noticed the little girl rubbing her eyes. “Hey baby,” she whispered, her heart still racing as she picked Ashley up and carrying her back towards her bedroom. If the little girl had been awake any earlier, she would have seen everything. “Are you ok?”

“I heard noise,” her daughter replied wearily.

“I know, but everything’s ok. Let’s get you back into bed.”

“Is it a monster?”

Scully stopped abruptly, tensing. “What? No, no,” she quickly answered. “There are no such thing as monsters, remember?” She shuddered inwardly, grateful that her daughter hadn’t set eyes on the monster currently handcuffed to their bathtub. Thankfully Ashley seemed half asleep, and was in no state to argue. Scully placed her little girl back into bed and pulled up the comforter, tucking her in tightly. “Now go back to sleep sweetheart, ok?” The little girl’s eyes were already drooping, and Scully hoped that she’d be sound asleep within minutes. “There’s nothing to worry about; it’s just a bad dream.” Pressing a kiss to Ashley’s forehead, she straightened up and headed back out of the bedroom, pulling the door to behind her. When she walked back into the bathroom, she was grateful to Mulder for not mentioning Ashley; not wanting him to draw attention to her in front of Tooms.

xxxxx

It wasn’t long before the two of them heard the sound of sirens approaching, and Tooms was taken away, and after a late-night phone call, Scully’s door was fitted with a new lock. Mulder stayed by his partner’s side throughout, keen to check she was ok following her unannounced visitor that evening. In return, once the two of them were finally alone, she made him coffee.

“You alright?” Mulder asked, as he watched his partner potter about the kitchen, busying herself.

“I’m fine,” Scully replied, clearing her throat. She wouldn’t meet his eye. “How did you know that he’d be here?”

“I found his trophies,” Mulder replied, reaching into his pocket to retrieve Scully’s necklace. ”And I found this.” He held out the cross, eyeing Scully as she took it from his grasp.

“Thank you. And thank you for coming here.”

“I wasn’t about to let him get his quota. Besides,” he smiled, attempting to lighten the mood. “I wasn’t going to let you get away from me that easily.”

Thankfully Scully chuckled. “I’m not that desperate to get away from you.”

“Well that’s good to hear.”

“Really? I thought you believed that I’m here to spy on you.” He at least had the decency to look embarrassed. “Relax,” she added. “I’m just winding you up.”

“Don’t get me wrong Scully, I have no doubt that you were assigned to me to keep me under
control, but I quite like having someone around second guessing me and calling me spooky.”

“Well spooky or not, you saved my life tonight. I don’t want to think about what might have

happened if –“

“Then don’t.” He knew she was thinking about Ashley, and what would have happened if Tooms

had set his sights on her daughter. “Tooms will get what he deserves, and you can put it out of your

mind. He’s not worth losing any sleep over.”

As Scully handed Mulder his cup of coffee and he turned to walk out of the kitchen, he stopped

short as he was met by a short individual, two and a half feet tall, with curling blonde hair and

bright green eyes. She blinked up at him, clutching a yellow blanket towards her and sucking her

thumb. “Hello,” he smiled down at the little girl. “You must be Ashley.” She was the spitting

image of her mother, giving him the same quizzical expression.

She nodded, eyeing him wearily. “Who are you?” she asked through her fingers.

Scully stepped next to her partner. “This is Mulder, Ashley. Say hello.”

Her daughter took her thumb out of her mouth. “Are you here to shout at my mommy?”

“Mulder’s not going to shout at me,” Scully interrupted, her face reddening.

“But you said –“

“Why aren’t you sleeping sweetheart?” She hoped Mulder hadn’t heard Ashley, but from the smirk

on his face, he had.

“The monster’s back.”


Placing his cup back onto the counter, Mulder crouched down so he was at the little girl’s eye

level. “It just so happens that it’s my job to chase monsters away from little girls’ rooms.”

“Really?” Ashley’s eyes widened; her initial reservations about Mulder now clearly forgotten.

“Uh huh.” Reaching into his jacket pocket, Mulder pulled out a flashlight. “It’s a well-known fact

that monsters are scared of the light, so if I shine this in your room, it’ll chase them away. You

want me to do that?” She nodded enthusiastically, and Mulder bit back a smile. “Ok then. Did you

want to come with me?” Ashley surprised him by nodding and then she took hold of his hand. He

glanced back at Scully to check she was ok with him leading her daughter on a monster hunt,

relieved when she grinned back. “Ok then.” He let the little girl lead him out of the kitchen and in

the direction of her bedroom. As they reached her room, he switched on the flashlight before

pushing the door open. Ashley shrunk back. “Stay behind me, ok? If there’s anything here, I’ll

protect you. Now, where did you see the monster?” Out of the corner of his eye, Mulder saw

Ashley point to the left, towards her wardrobe. “Ok.” Letting go of her hand momentarily, Mulder

quickly opened the wardrobe door and shined the flashlight in. Besides an abundance of clothes

and a series of tiny shoes, the wardrobe was empty. “You see,” he called out, sensing Ashley come

and stand in front of him. “There’s nothing here. We’ve scared it off forever.”

“Forever?”

“Yup, it’ll never come back now. Were there any more?” Without saying a word, Ashley held his

hand once again and pulled him over towards her bed.
“Under here.”

“Ok, I just need you to lift your comforter up. Can you do that?” She looked nervous. “It’s ok, I won’t let anything hurt you.” Nodding, she did as he asked, stepping back as he shone the light underneath the bed. “There’s nothing under here either.” But Ashley wasn’t easily dismissed, and the little girl led him around her room, making him check behind her bed, underneath her dressing table and out of the window. By the time Mulder had finished, she was much brighter and more talkative, and finally allowed him to switch off the flashlight. Turning on the pale yellow lamp by Ashley’s bedside table, Mulder pulled back the matching covers. “The monsters are all gone, and they won’t come back any more. If you think they’re back, you call me ok?”

“Ok.”

“Well I think your mom will want you to go to bed now.”

Surprisingly she didn’t protest. “Can you read me a story?”

“A story?”

Nodding, Ashley retrieved a book and handed it to him. Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. *Great* he thought. “Mommy does the voices too.”

“I’ll go get your mom and she can read it.”

“You read it Mulder.”

“Really?”

“And do the voices.”

“Right.” Wondering just how his evening changed from chasing after Eugene Tooms to reading bedtime stories, Mulder sat down on the floor next to Ashley’s bed and waited for the little girl to get underneath the covers, before he started reading.

xxxx

And that was how Scully found him barely ten minutes later, engrossed in the tale of Snow White. “Mulder,” she whispered from the doorway, unable to keep the smirk off of her face.

“Mmm?” He looked up, startled at the interruption.

“ She’s asleep.” Scully nodded towards her daughter. “You can stop now if you’d like. Or if you want to find out how the story ends, I’ll come back in a little while.”

“Ha-ha.” Getting to his feet, Mulder grimaced as he stretched out, before placing the book back on the side. He smiled down at Ashley, now sound asleep, as he headed towards the door. “Cute kid you got there Scully.”

Following his gaze, Scully nodded. “She has her moments. I just hope tonight hasn’t affected her too much,” she added, as she led Mulder out of the room.

“Most kids swear they’ve got a monster under the bed Scully.”

“Tonight there was a monster in the bathroom.”

“And he’s gone now.”
“Thanks for doing this Mulder. I know that babysitting wasn’t exactly involved in your plans for this evening.”

He grinned as he followed Scully back towards the living room, before taking a seat next to her on the sofa. “Snow White was Samantha’s favourite story as a kid too. Back then though I wouldn’t have been seen dead reading it to her. I’ll make an exception for Ashley though.”

“Well I’m sure I speak on behalf of Ashley when I say thank you.”

“You said she’s three?”

“Yup. Almost four, going on twenty four.”

“She’s an intelligent kid.”

“She takes after me,” she joked. “Thankfully.” Frowning, she continued. “Her father doesn’t have a lot to do with her.”

Mulder found it hard to believe – though he’d barely spent twenty minutes with her, he was already taken with the little girl. “I’m sorry Scully. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“I want to. Just a short while ago you told me about your sister and asked whether or not I had any secrets. Well this is my secret.” He nodded at her to continue.

“I was in a relationship and it didn’t work out. Just as we ended things, I found out I was pregnant.”

“Did you tell him?”

She nodded. “Yes, but by that time it was too late to save what we had. He umm…he agreed to support me with whatever decision I made but it was purely a financial gesture. He’s seen Ashley a handful of times in her life, and I doubt she’d be able to pick him out of the crowd now. She’s spent more time of you in one evening than she was with her father in over three years.”

“But why? I mean…” Hesitating, Mulder knew it was none of his business, but he had to know.

“She’s a cute kid Scully.”

“You know that and I know that but Jack…he said right from the start that he didn’t want children, and at the time I went along with it. Ashley wasn’t exactly planned, but I knew the instant I discovered I was pregnant that I’d keep her. I thought he might feel different once he found out about her.”

“And he didn’t.”

Scully shook her head sadly. “It’s ok though, I mean Ashley and I are fine; we’re happy but I…” she broke off, as though realising she was sharing too much. They were work colleagues, nothing more, she told herself, and this would overstep the boundaries. “Would you like another drink?”

Mulder understood that the conversation was now at a close. “I’d better be heading off now; it’s late. Thanks for the coffee.” He stood, retrieving his jacket from the back of the sofa and slipping it on.

Scully also got to her feet. “It was the least I could do after tonight. Apprehending murderers and reading my daughter fairy tales trumps a measly cup of coffee.”

“I think you underestimate your coffee.” He smiled. “Try and get some sleep tonight, and I’ll see you tomorrow. If you want to take some time off or come in late – “
“I’ll see you at the usual time.” With that Scully watched as her partner left her apartment, closing the door firmly behind him, before she let out a shaky sigh. Somehow she knew she wouldn’t be getting a lot of sleep that night.
Chapter 3

As the weeks passed, Scully was beginning to settle into a routine with Mulder. He certainly kept her on her toes, and his outlandish theories often led to her having to explain them to their superiors, but she was actually enjoying her work. Certainly every day was different, and as time went on, Mulder saw her as less of a threat and more of an equal; though she knew he didn’t always appreciate her take on his ideas. It was no different when the two of them travelled to Atlantic City to investigate a cannibalistic murder. Mulder was convinced it was the work of the Jersey Devil, though Scully maintained that it was simply a myth.

“Hey,” Mulder called over towards his partner; stood on the opposite side of the car, having just been told by a local cop that they weren’t welcome on the case. “What say you, we grab a hotel, take in a floor show, drop a few quarters in the slot, do a little digging on this case.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“Ok, we can skip the floor show.”

“Mulder, I have to be back in D.C.”

“Right, Ashley.”

“Well that too.”

“What, you got a date?”

“No, I have my godson’s birthday party at six thirty.” She paused as Mulder threw the keys across the top of the car towards her. “What are you doing?” she asked as she caught them.

“A little poking around, maybe make a weekend out of it.” With that he walked off, leaving her alone.

“Mulder it’s a three hour drive back by myself…” She bit back a sigh as he waved in her direction. “…in Friday night traffic. Ugh.” Realising she was now on her own, Scully unlocked the car and prepared for the long drive home by herself.

Scully was exhausted, and the party had only been in full swing for barely thirty minutes. Her friend Ellen’s house was inundated with very excitable seven year old boys including birthday boy Trent, and Ashley, who’d already eaten far too much sugar, was more than happy to run around with the other children. But the little girl, who was chasing after a boy wearing a gorilla mask, wasn’t looking where she was going, and ran smack into a wall, falling over. Upon hearing her daughter’s cries, Scully came running. “Oh sweetie, it’s ok,” she murmured, lifting her daughter up into her arms. “It’s ok, what happened? Did you bump your head?” Ashley nodded tearfully as Scully carried her into the kitchen.

“What?” Ellen asked, as she saw her friend carrying her distressed daughter. “What happened?”

“Jungle warfare.”

“I’m gonna kill that dog.”
“If the hit squad doesn’t get to him before you do.”

“T’m so glad you’re here Dana,” Ellen laughed, before she heard the sound of glass breaking. She hurried out of the kitchen, leaving Scully and Ashley alone.

“Are you ok sweetheart?” Ashley nodded sadly as her mother sat her on the counter. “Would you like a cold compress for your head?”

“Mommy, can you kiss it better?”

“Of course I can.” Sweeping her daughter’s hair back, Scully pressed her lips to her temple. “Is that better?”

“Yeah.” Ashley pushed at her mother. “I’ll go play now mommy.” Her tears were now forgotten.

“Already? You’re all better?”

“Yup, alllllll better.”

Chuckling, Scully kissed her daughter once more before lifting her and setting her on the floor. “Kids,” she murmured to Ellen, who re-entered the kitchen carrying the remains of what was a vase.

“Tell me about it.”

xxxx

“You’re amazing,” Scully remarked as she saw her friend doing the dishes. The children were all seated and finishing their food somewhat quietly and Ashley’s earlier tears were a thing of the past.

“What?”

“You’re such a natural at all this. I can barely cope with one child but you…I don’t know how you keep it all together.”

“Mommy radar.”

“Mmm, I think I missed out on that. I just don’t know how you cope with two, let alone a room full of screaming kids. I dread to think what Ashley’s parties will be like in a few years’ time. I don’t think I’m cut out for this El.”

“Nonsense, Dana, you’re a great mom. Besides, you went through the FBI Academy; what better training could there be for more kids? Seriously, you’re a great mom and you’re great with kids, what are you talking about?”

“When am I supposed to find the time?”

“Well first you have to get a life.”

“Oooh.”

“And of course, it helps if you can find a man.”

“Know of any?”

“Yeah, they’re disappearing faster than the Brazilian rainforest. What about that guy you work
“Mulder?”

“Yeah, I thought you said he was cute.”

“He’s a jerk. He’s not a jerk, he’s umm…he’s obsessed with his work.”

“Well Ashley was speaking highly of him earlier.”

“He’s – wait…” Ellen’s words finally sunk in. “What did Ashley tell you?”

“Just that he’s good at reading bedtime stories.” Scully frowned as her friend smirked. “He comes around at bedtime does he?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking so you can wipe that smug smile off of your face.”

“What?”

“A little while ago, Ashley was having trouble sleeping, so Mulder, who was at my apartment for work purposes,” she stressed. “…got roped into reading her a story. You know what she’s like.”

“Well I can’t say I’m not disappointed Dana; it’s about time you found yourself a hot guy, it’s been too long.”

“Right now I’m focusing on raising my daughter and settling into my job. A man can wait.”

“What ever happened to Ethan?”

“Ethan was over before it even started. He didn’t even meet Ashley.”

“But Mulder has.”

“I hate to burst your bubble El, but there’s nothing going on with Mulder and I. There never has and there never will.”

“If you say so,” Ellen eventually conceded. Before she could say anything more, she was interrupted by the doorbell.

“I’ll get it.” Scully moved before her friend could even register her words; no doubt eager to get away from the conversation. She heard the phone ring as she walked through the hallway, but left it for Ellen. A man stood on the opposite side of the door. A good looking man, Scully registered, and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Hi.” He grinned back at her.

“Hi.”

“I’m Rob, I’m Scott’s dad.”

“Ok.” She stood to one side. “Come in.”

“Thanks.” Rob greeted his son as he ran out into the hallway. “Hey Tiger, how are you doing? Are you having a good time?” Scully studied the man, smiling as she watched him interact with his son. Ellen, who was on the phone, whispered quietly to her friend. “Divorced.” As Scully turned back to Rob, he glanced up at her and grinned. Suddenly Ashley ran out into the hall and launched
herself into her mother’s arms. She’d never been so glad to see her daughter.

xxxx

Scully was expecting a quiet day at work when she entered the office, but she hadn’t even had chance to sit down before she received a call from Mulder explaining that he was in police custody after spending a night out on the street. Just minutes after hanging up, she then got a message from her babysitter, explaining that another child she cared for had fallen ill, and asking her to pick Ashley up early. Sighing to herself, and wondering what else was in store for her that day, Scully then made her excuses with her colleagues, and set about collecting her daughter from the sitter before making her way back to Atlantic City. There she found Mulder, looking a little worse for wear.

“Well, it’s not hard to see why they mistook you for a vagrant,” she commented, eying his dirty clothes in distaste. She was holding Ashley’s hand, obviously unimpressed at having to bring her daughter out on a case.

“You gonna rag on me or you gonna take me to get something to eat?” He glanced down at Ashley. “Or do you need to get back?”

“Am I buying or did you manage to pan-handle some spare change while you were at it?” That answered his question.

They found a local diner not far from where Scully had parked the car. Mulder ordered breakfast, while Scully opted for a coffee and juice for Ashley, who seemed delighted to see her mother’s partner once again.

“Mommy?” The little girl began as Mulder’s food was delivered to the table. “Can I have some toast?”

“No sweetie, you’ve already had breakfast today.”

“But Mulder has some.”

“Yes but Mulder hasn’t eaten.”

“Can I have some bacon?”

Mulder couldn’t help but smile at the little girl’s pout. “Here, you can have my toast Ashley. If it’s ok with your mom,” he added, as he noticed his partner glare at him.


“Thank you Mulder,” Ashley answered sweetly.

“You’re welcome.”

“So.” Scully sighed. “What did you see?”

“It moved like a cat, quick and graceful. There’s no way a human would have got up on the roof that fast.”

“Mulder.”

“What?”
“What’s going to happen when word of this gets back to the bureau?”

“They dropped the charges. That guy, Thompson, he ran me through the system just to spite me.”

“I’m talking about this Jersey Devil thing.”

“What’s a Jersey Devil?” Ashley spoke up, silencing the conversation between the two adults.

“It’s nothing Ashley. Eat your toast,” said Scully.

Once Mulder was satisfied the little girl was no longer listening to their conversation, he spoke again; quieter this time. “I saw it, it’s exactly the way the ranger described it’ the way it moved, the way it sniffed the air. It’s come out of the woods, probably in search of food.”

“Yeah I’ll say.”

“It was peeking through the garbage Scully. It is was a man-eater, why didn’t it come after me? Probably felt threatened in some way.”

“Mulder, listen to yourself.” Scully took care not to raise her voice; not wanting Ashley to listen in once again. “You’re already ascribing it a motive and an alibi. This thing, chewing somebody’s arm off is not exactly a defensive posture.”

“But you do believe that I saw something, don’t you?”

“You saw something, I’ll give you that, but I’m not about to go in and sell it. Not when it’s nothing more than a sighting in a dark alley.”

“I’ve still got a hotel room I’m paying for.”

“And I have a three year old I need to get home by 7.30, so –“

“Another birthday party?”

“No. I have a D-A-T-E,” she spelt out, conscious of the fact her daughter was within earshot.

Mulder glared at her. “Can you cancel?” From the look Scully gave him, it clearly wasn’t the right question.

“Unlike you Mulder, I would like to have a life.”

“I have a life.” He wasn’t fooling his partner, but before she could speak, Ashley interrupted.

“Mommy, can we go soon? I’m bored.”

Mulder laughed, while Scully blushed with embarrassment. “Ashley, don’t be rude.” She looked over at her partner. “C’mon, I have somebody I want you to meet on the way home.”

His mouth full, Mulder grunted in consent. Though he didn’t want to go home, it was the least he could do; knowing full well that he’d had to drag Scully and her daughter away from DC. Plus his mind was no longer fully on the Jersey Devil, but rather the man Scully would be spending the evening with.

xxxxx

Once they finally got back to DC and Scully dropped Mulder off at his apartment, she fed Ashley
before taking her to her sister, Melissa’s apartment. Then, rushing back home, she prepared for her date. Rob had ended up staying at the party for a while after turning up to pick up his son and Ellen had conveniently given him and Scully some time alone to get acquainted. Before he left he asked for Scully’s number, and later that evening he’d called and asked her to dinner. He had chosen an upmarket restaurant in Georgetown, not too far from Scully’s apartment. He wore a suit while Scully dressed up for what felt like the first time in years. She’d been on the occasional date since she and Jack had split up, but there hadn’t been anyone serious. She and Rob made small talk as they ordered, before conversation turned to relationships.

“Well the hard thing was when my wife remarried I…Suddenly I felt very competitive for my son’s attention. It was weird.”

“I’m sure.”

“I became a Superdad on the weekends with Scott; I had this unconscious fear of being replaced. I actually had dreams where I was running over his step-father with my car. Well, I’m sure you understand; having kids changes everything.”

“It certainly does,” she answered politely. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Rob, but Scully was looking forward to a night out, to forget about her life as a single mother and to enjoy adult conversation. Her companion had other ideas.

“What about you and your ex-husband?”

Feeling her face flush, Scully took another sip of her drink. “We umm…we were never…It just didn’t work out.” While Rob was content to talk about his private life, Scully wasn’t quite so keen.

“Does Ashley see her father much?”

“Only when he finds the time.”

“I’m sorry.”

She dismissed her companion’s comments with a wave of her hand. “You don’t have to apologise. Ashley and I are more than fine the way things are. She’s happy, and that’s all that matters.”

“Maybe some weekend, if you’re up for it, we could take the kids out to the beach for the day.” He was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter, who’d brought across their meals.

“Yeah,” she answered non-committedly.

“Great.” After thanking the waiter, Rob then continued their conversation. “So, can I ask about the case you’re on, or can’t you say?”

Scully looked over at him, watching as he cut up the pork on his plate. “I don’t think it’s a case we should discuss over dinner.” Not to mention that she wanted to enjoy an evening without thinking about work.

“I don’t suppose you wanna hear about the finer points of state planning and taxation?”

She smiled politely, realising it was going to be a long evening.

xxxx

Scully’s salvation came just as she and Rob had been served their coffees. After Rob had finished
talking about his job, the conversation turned back towards their children. It wasn’t that Scully didn’t like her dinner companion – he was a friendly, interesting guy – but he wasn’t someone she’d chose to date. She was half wondering how to tell him that she wasn’t interested in any further romantic dinners when she heard her beeper. “Sorry.” Opening her handbag, Scully checked the message, before rising from her seat. “Excuse me.”

“Is it your daughter?”

“It’s work I’m afraid. I’ll be right back.”

“Certainly.”

After locating a telephone in the restaurant, Scully dialled the familiar number; for once glad that Mulder interrupted her plans.

A week later and the case was finally over, though Mulder was still interested in what he thought they’d found. He was just on his way to a meeting at the Smithsonian when the phone rang in the office.

“Mulder? Yeah, just a second.” He glanced over at Scully. “It’s for you.”

As Scully took the phone from her partner, she saw him rush out of the office on his way to request a car. “Hello?”

“Hi Dana, it’s Rob.”

“Oh hi.”

“Sorry to call you at work, it’s just I have Scott for the night and er, we have two extra tickets for the Cirque Du Soleil. We thought you and Ashley might like to join us.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you –“

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“I’m sorry. Things are really busy at work right now and –“

“It’s ok Dana. You can be honest with me. If you don’t want to go out again, that’s fine.”

“It’s not that, it’s just…right now I’m happy as I am, and I don’t think I’m ready for another relationship right now.”

Rob didn’t sound too surprised. “Of course not. But if you’d like to hang out as friends, I’d be happy to do that.”

“That sounds great.” And it did. Not only would it give Scully an opportunity for adult conversation, without Rob expecting anything in return, but Ashley and Scott got on well together.

“So tonight?”

“Tonight I really do have to work. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Another time maybe.”
“Definitely.”

“I’d better let you get on.”

“Thanks. I’ll speak to you later.”

Hanging up, Scully rushed out of the office, eager to catch up with her partner. “Who was that on the phone?” Mulder asked as he filled out a request for a pool car.

“A guy.”

He tried not to sound too interested. “A guy. Same guy as the guy you had dinner with the other night?”

“Same guy.”

“You gonna have dinner with him again?”

“I don’t think so.”

“No interest?” He finished completing the form and passed it back across the counter.

She resisted the urge to laugh at his questions, wondering just why he was so eager to discuss her personal life. “Not at this time.”

Picking up the car keys, Mulder headed towards the door, surprised when his partner followed him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going with you to the Smithsonian.”

“Don’t you have a life Scully?”

“Keep that up Mulder and I’ll hurt you like that beast-woman.” She moved ahead, stopping as she reached the door.

“Eight million years out of Africa.”

Scully opened the door. “And look who’s holding the door.” With that she followed her partner out of the building.
Chapter 4

“Are you going to leave that up all year?”

Scully looked over at her father, who was referring to her Christmas tree. “Yup. All year,” she replied, piling up the plates on the kitchen table. “Since you always made us take the Christmas tree down the day after Christmas, I’m making up for last time. Plus it pleases the little person in this family.” She was referring to Ashley, who was in her grandfather’s arms. Scully and her daughter had spent Christmas Day with her parents, and now it was her turn to host them. Ashley had been in her element all day, and she loved spending time with her grandparents, who in turn both adored her.

“If your idea of a good time is picking up dried pine needles, please yourself.”

“As if he’s an authority on having a good time,” Maggie Scully commented, eliciting a giggle from her granddaughter, even though Ashley didn’t quite understand the joke. As Maggie reached for the pile of plates, Scully spoke.

“That’s ok Mom, I got that.”

“Ok.”

“Ok Maggie.” William Scully bent down and placed Ashley back onto the floor. “Let’s shove off.”

“Oh, ok.” Putting the plates back onto the table, Maggie walked over to her daughter, hugging her tightly. “Well thank you for having us. Dinner was delicious as usual.”

“Thanks mom.” As Maggie scooped Ashley up into her arms, Scully approached her father and saluted. “Good sailing Ahab.” She went willingly into his arms.

“Goodnight Starbuck.” She felt him tense against her, and then he spoke. “How’s work? Good?”

It was no secret that her father wasn’t exactly keen on her joining the FBI, but Scully appreciated his question. “Yup, it’s good.” She didn’t elaborate any further, figuring he didn’t really want to know about the cases she investigated. Thankfully Ashley hadn’t mentioned Mulder to her parents, though her little girl hadn’t been quite so shy around Scully’s friends.

“Well.” Releasing his hold on his daughter, Bill then took Ashley from his wife. “You be good for your mother, you hear me?”

“Yes Grandpa,” Ashley replied sweetly, before letting out an impressive yawn. She kissed her grandfather’s cheek before he passed her to her own mother. “See you tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow sweetie,” Scully answered. “Hopefully this weekend.”


“Well drive carefully.” Unlocking the door, Scully kissed her mother goodbye. “Goodnight. Goodnight Daddy.” She watched her parents leave before closing the door and kissing her daughter. “Ok young lady, bed time.”

Ashley shook her head. “I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Tough young lady. It’s already way past your bed time.”
“I’m not tired.”

“Well then you can just go to bed and rest your eyes.” Despite Ashley’s protests, Scully knew her daughter would be out for the count within minutes of putting her to bed. And she was right.

xxxxx

After putting Ashley to bed, Scully retired to the sofa and ended up falling asleep whilst watching an old movie on television. When she woke she realised it was almost 2am. What she didn’t expect to see was her father sat in a chair opposite her. She noticed his mouth moving, though she didn’t hear him speak. “Dad? I thought you guys left?” She’d seen him leave but he must have returned later, she mused, still half-asleep. “Where’s mom?” Before she could speak again, the phone rang, startling her. She glanced across to the phone before returning her attention to her father, only to find that the chair was empty. She blinked hard, trying to focus and wondering whether she’d imagined her father’s presence. Getting to her feet, Scully approached the phone and answered it. “Hello?” There was no reply at the other end of the line, but she could detect the sound of somebody crying. “Hello?”

“Dana?”

Scully felt herself go cold as she recognised her mother’s voice. Something was wrong, it had to be. Not only was Maggie crying, she was also calling at 2am – usually she’d been in bed for hours. “Mom? What’s the matter?”

She had to struggle to hear her mother’s response, but as soon as she heard the words she knew she’d never forget them. “We um…we lost your dad. He had a…a massive coronary…about an hour ago. He…he’s gone.”

Scully looked back towards the chair where her father sat. It was still empty. *Gone?* she wanted to ask. *Where has he gone?* But from her mother’s sobs at the end of the line, she knew exactly what she meant. He was dead. Her father, her hero, the man she idolised was dead. She’d seen him barely hours ago and now she’d never see him again – at least not alive. Before she knew it she found herself shaking uncontrollably as she tried to process her mother’s words. A coronary. It would have been quick, she tried to tell herself, and with any luck he didn’t know what was happening. Scully was brought back to the moment by the sound of her mother’s sobs at the other end of the phone. There would be an autopsy, Maggie informed her daughter, to confirm the way he died. Scully tried not to imagine her father on the cold, hard mortuary slab or the way the pathologist would slice into his body. A feeling of nausea almost threatened to overwhelm her, and instead Scully focused on her mother. “I’ll be…I’ll be right over,” she began, already plotting to wake her sleeping daughter and take her over to her mother’s house. But then she wondered exactly what to tell Ashley. It would be the little girl’s first bereavement and Scully wasn’t sure how she would take it. Maggie refused her daughter’s offer, insisting that there was nothing she could do until the morning. Besides, she argued, it was far too late to wake Ashley. After insisting that her mother call her if she changed her mind, Scully hung up, made her way back to the sofa and sat, staring at the chair where just moments before she’d seen her father. Or at least she thought she’d seen him. She must have been dreaming, Scully told herself. It was a figment of her imagination. She was tired and her father had been on her mind that evening – it was perfectly understandable.

“Mommy?” Scully looked up to see Ashley walking towards her, the little girl dragging her yellow blanket behind her as she let out an impressive yawn.

“What is it sweetheart?” She panicked, wondering just how she was going to break the news to her daughter. She’d hoped to have some time to think about it, but now Ashley stood in front of her.
“I heard you talking.”

“Did you?”

“Is it time to get up?”

“No sweetie, it’s late. You should be in bed.” Ashley climbed onto her lap. “Did the phone wake you?”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m sorry baby.” Wrapping her arms around the little girl, Scully pulled Ashley in towards her, hugging her tightly. “Grandma called.”

“Grandma’s up late,” Ashley commented innocently, her focus now on the television still playing in the background.

“Sweetie, I have some bad news,” she began, “Your grandpa, he umm…he died tonight.” The words felt foreign as she spoke them, and Scully willed herself not to cry. She had to be strong for her daughter.

“Why did he die?” The little girl asked, still engrossed in the television.

“Sometimes, when people get older and get sick, they die. Your grandpa was very sick, but we didn’t know it.”

“Does he have a cold?”

Her innocence made Scully want to weep, but instead she just hugged her daughter even tighter. “No baby, he was very sick.”

“Is he in the hospital?”

“No.”

“Can I see him tomorrow?”

“Ashley sweetie…” As though sensing that her mother was trying to tell her something important, Ashley turned to face her, the television now forgotten.

“Sometimes when people are very old they get very sick. Your Grandpa was sick, but the doctors couldn’t save him, and so his body stopped working and he died. He really didn’t want to die, but it means we can’t see him again. Not for a long long time.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s dead sweetheart. He won’t be coming back.”

“But I don’t want grandpa to die.”

“I know.”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know it’s not fair honey, I know.” This time she couldn’t stop the tears as they began to fall. Ashley was right, it wasn’t fair. Her father was still relatively young and had never shown any
signs of being ill. He and her mother were happy together, and he still had things he wanted to do. He was the closest person Ashley had to a father figure, and he’d never see her grow up into a beautiful young woman, to see her first day at school, her first date, her graduation, her wedding day. As her tears fell in earnest, Scully felt a little hand on her arm. “Don’t cry mommy,” Ashley whispered softly, concern etched across her face. “We’ll be ok.” Scully only hoped her daughter was right.

Mulder looked up as Scully entered the office; Ashley following closely behind. “Scully?” She was the last person he’d expected to see that morning, especially after he’d received the early morning phone call just a few days ago from her advising him of her father’s death. He’d told her there and then to take as much time off as she needed, realising that she needed some time to grieve, and no doubt help her mother with funeral arrangements, but it seemed she was determined to work.

“Hi.” She wouldn’t quite meet his eye, and he could see she was trying her best to keep it together. “I’m sorry about this. My mother will collect Ashley in a little while, but she’s just got to sort some last minute things.”

“Sure. It’s no problem.” Realising his partner wasn’t in the mood to talk; Mulder focused his attention on her daughter. “Hey Ashley, you ok?”

Smiling, Ashley nodded, but made no move to step away from her mom; instead clinging to Scully’s leg. “I’ve come to work with mommy today.”

“So I see. You’ve come to help have you?” She nodded. “Do you wanna help me with my work, or would you prefer a tour of the building?”

“Mulder.” Scully clearly wasn’t impressed with his ideas. “I don’t want her disrupting people.”

“Oh, well I can give her a quick tour of this office?”

“No horror stories Mulder. I have enough trouble trying to get her to sleep at the moment as it is.”

“Are you still not sleeping well?”

Ashley shook her head. “Uh uh.”

“Can you just keep an eye on her for two seconds?” Scully asked. “I need the ladies’ room.” In actual fact she needed a moment to herself, not realising just how hard it was to face people following her father’s death. Luckily Mulder seemed to understand.

“Sure.”

“You be good for Mulder,” Scully warned her daughter, who looked nothing less than angelic.

No sooner had his partner left the room, Mulder approached the little girl. “So Ashley, what would you like to do first? We can take a tour of the office?” She shook her head. “Ok, well you can help me pin up some photographs, or…” he gestured to his chair, suddenly out of ideas. “You can take a seat and I’ll spin you.”

Her blue eyes lit up. “Spin please.” Removing her purple duffel coat, Ashley handed the jacket to Mulder, before he lifted her up into his chair. Like her mother she was dressed head to toe in black. “Hang on tight.” Her hands obediently gripped the arm rests, and as Mulder gently spun the chair around, she let out a delighted squeal, giggling as it finally came to a stop. “Again!” she cried,
laughing as Mulder obeyed her wishes. The second time the chair slowed, Ashley put her hand on
his arm. “My grandpa died,” she said, suddenly serious.

Mulder’s own smile faded. “I know.”

“My mommym cried.”

“Your mom’s upset,” he replied, his heart breaking for the little girl. “And I bet you are too, but
that’s only normal.”

“Do you think grandma will take me to the park today?”

“I’m not sure. I think your grandma’s a little sad right now too.”

“Are you going to die?”

Deep questions coming from a three year old, Mulder thought, though if she was anything like her
mother, she was wise beyond her years. “Not for a long long time.” Now wasn’t the time to get into
the subject of death.

Thankfully Ashley seemed satisfied with his answer. “Do you spin mommym in this chair?”

Laughing, Mulder shook his head, before spinning her once again. “No I don’t. Maybe one day.”

“Maybe one day what?” He startled as he heard the voice behind him, and turned to see Scully re-
entering the room. She rolled her eyes as she saw what her daughter was up to, though a thin smile
played at her lips. “Are you distracting Mulder from his work?”

“No mommym. I was helping,” Ashley replied, the innocent grin back on her face.

“Don’t be fooled Mulder; she may look cute but she can be trouble sometimes.”

“She’s no bother.”

“Again Mulder!”

Scully gave him a look as if to say ‘I told you so’. “Don’t blame me if you still haven’t gotten your
work done by the end of the day. What was it you were reading before we interrupted you? The
last time I saw you that engrossed, it turned out you were reading the Adult Video News.”

Mulder spun the chair once more before turning his attention to his partner. “I didn’t think you’d be
in today. How are you Dana?”

His use of her first name wasn’t lost on Scully. “Dana,” she repeated softly. “I’m fine, thank you.
What are you working on?”

Mulder stepped away from Ashley as he began telling his partner about their new case – the recent
kidnapping of a couple at university. He informed her of prisoner Luther Lee Boggs, who claimed
to have information related to the kidnapping, obtained through psychic transmission. What
surprised Scully was that her partner seemed to doubt the prisoner’s claims – usually he believed in
that type of thing, but instead he believed Boggs was orchestrating the kidnapping from the inside.
“And they’ve requested you speak with them?” Scully asked, wondering just how Mulder got
involved with the case if he was so sceptical.

“Actually, he’s requested to speak to me.”
“Why you?”

“He read my profile on him and believes I’m the only one who truly understands what he is. Anyway, I leave for Raleigh this afternoon.”

“I’ll go with you.” Mulder looked doubtful. “The funeral’s at noon. My mom has volunteered to look after Ashley, and I’m sure she’d appreciate the company.”

“I think you should take some time.”

“I need to work,” was all she could reply. She was determined not to cry in front of him.

“I’m sorry about your father.” Mulder gently cupped Scully’s cheek in a move which brought tears to her eyes. She nodded, looking away from him. “I’ll see you later.”

“Ok.”

He turned back to Ashley. “Can I trust you to be in charge of this office while I’m gone Ashley?”

The little girl nodded eagerly from her chair. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to a place called Raleigh.” He retrieved his jacket and slipped it on.

“Can I come?”

“Not this time I’m afraid.” Mulder couldn’t help but smile as the little girl pouted. “But I’m sure if you ask nicely your mom will spin the chair for you.” With that he walked out of the office, leaving Scully counting down the hours to her father’s funeral.

xxxxxx

In the end, Scully’s father was given a simple, quiet send-off; his ashes scattered at sea. It was a short service, attended by close members of the family; Scully, her mother, her older brother Bill, younger brother Charlie and his two sons. Her older sister, Melissa, was out of the country travelling, but Scully knew she felt awful for not being there for their father’s funeral. Scully stood next to her mother, with Ashley close by her side. Though the little girl didn’t fully understand what was going on, she was aware something important was happening, remaining quiet throughout the service and holding her mother’s hand tightly. “As a captain, he was entitled to burial at Arlington with full ceremony.” Scully felt her father deserved more of a send-off, but she respected her mother’s wishes.

“This is exactly how he wanted it,” Maggie replied, not once taking her eyes off of the scene in front of her. “Just the family.” They stood and watched as the remaining ashes were scattered. The familiar tune of Beyond the Sea rang out, and Scully’s mother continued tearfully. “This song was playing when his ship returned from the Cuban Blockade. He marched right off up to me…and he proposed.”

“I know that you and dad were…disappointed that I chose the path I’m on instead of medicine, and I know my pregnancy wasn’t planned, but I need to know…was he at all proud of me?” It was something that had been on Scully’s mind for some time; more so since her father’s death. She’d always been a daddy’s girl, and deep down she knew she was his favourite, so his approval was important to her. But now it was too late.

“He was your father,” her mother simply replied. Scully nodded, swallowing her tears, and pulled Ashley in towards her, wanting to keep her daughter close.
It was turning out to be a fortnight to remember, Scully mused, though all for the wrong reasons. Not only did she have to contend with her father’s death and subsequent funeral, she also had to cope with Mulder’s shooting and hospitalisation. Once she heard he was stable, she had no choice but to bring Ashley to the hospital with her - Maggie needed space to grieve and besides, Ashley was eager to see Mulder once again.

“Mulder!” Ashley came running into Mulder’s hospital room, her mom close behind her.

“Ashley, I told you to be quiet when we were in the hospital, otherwise the doctors will tell you off.”

Ignoring her mother, Ashley attempted to lift herself up onto the bed. Eventually Mulder had to give her a helping hand, taking care not to jostle his leg as he sat her next to him on the mattress. Scully took a seat at the foot of the bed. “Hey you. This is a nice surprise; I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

“It appears you’ve got a fan in my daughter. As soon as she heard you were up for visitors she wanted to see you.”

“Well isn’t that nice.”

“You said you wouldn’t die,” Ashley spoke up, glancing down at Mulder’s leg with concern.

Scully frowned. “Hey.” Mulder lifted the little girl’s chin so he was looking her in the eye. “I’m fine Ashley. It’s just a little wound, but I’m going to be fine, ok? I’m not going to die.”

His words seem to satisfy the youngster. “Does it hurt?”

“Only a little bit, but I’ll be home soon.”

She nodded uncertainly. “I hope so, cos I think there was a monster in my bed last night.”

“Oh no!” He looked over at Scully who sighed wearily.

“Her sleeping has been a little erratic since my father passed.”

Mulder nodded in understanding. “It’s ok, because you know what? As soon as I get out of here, I’ll come and chase the monsters away again.”

“You won’t be chasing anything for a while Mulder.”

It was then he noticed that his partner looked preoccupied. “Are you ok Scully?”

“I was considering Boggs. If he knew that I was your partner, he could have found out everything he knew about me. About my father…”

“Scully.”

She got up and moved so she was standing next to the bed. “Beyond the Sea was playing at my parents’ wedding. Visions of deceased loved ones are a common psychological phenomena. If he knew that my father had – “

“Dana.” Once again Mulder’s use of her Christian name got Scully’s attention. “After all you’ve seen, after all the evidence, why can’t you believe?”
Sighing, Scully perched on the edge of the bed next to her daughter. “I’m afraid,” she replied honestly. “I’m afraid to believe.”

“You couldn’t face that fear? Even if it meant never knowing what your father wanted to tell you?”

“But I do know.”

“How?”

“He was my father.” Scully had been considering her mother’s words all week, and she came to realise that Maggie was right. Of course her father had been proud of her. Despite her unexpected career change and the fact she’d single-handedly raised a child out of wedlock, he was proud of what she’d achieved with her life. He loved her, and Ashley, and there was no doubting that. Tears welled in her eyes, and Mulder nodded in understanding. He gently placed his hand on her shoulder, attempting to comfort her, but the tears eventually fell. Without hesitation Mulder pulled her into her arms. Moments later Ashley, determined not to be left out, joined them in the embrace.
Weeks passed since Mulder’s shooting and he made a speedy recovery, soon going back to work after his return to DC. He kept a close eye on Scully following her father’s death, but after her outburst at the hospital, she kept her emotions in check, as though realising she crossed the line when she broke down in front of them. It was soon business as usual; the two of them back working on the X Files, investigating the mysterious disappearance of group of teenagers just outside of Washington DC. Mulder suspected they’d been abducted, though Scully firmly believed there was a more plausible explanation – teenagers often ran away after all. But then a body of one of the kids had been found, and Scully had been tasked with carrying out the autopsy. Mulder had accompanied her, wanting to find out as soon as possible what the cause of death was. Once she’d scrubbed up, Mulder noticed his partner glance nervously at the clock on the wall. “Is everything ok?”

“I have to pick Ashley up from the babysitter’s just past five. My mom can’t take her tonight and my sister’s still out of town.”

“You wanna go and get her?”

“And do what with her? I can’t exactly bring her back here. I’ve heard of taking your children to work with you Mulder, but I’m not bringing letting her observe an autopsy.”

“I’m not suggesting that Scully. What I meant was that you can do this tomorrow. It’ll wait.” His tone suggested that he wasn’t being entirely truthful, and Scully looked hard at her partner.

“No it won’t,” she admitted.

“No.” Mulder thought for a moment. “I could get her for you….What? Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?” Scully asked innocently, her grin giving her away.

“That look of disbelief; the one that suggests you think I’ll lose her or something.”

“I’m not giving you any look.” Realising she’d been found out, Scully laughed. “I don’t think you’ll lose her, but I just…you’re seriously volunteering to look after my daughter?”

“I’d rather do that than finish your autopsy.”

“You won’t be saying that in an hour or two.”

“Try me. She is potty trained, right?”

“Of course she is; she’s nearly four.”

“Well then, what’s the problem?”

Scully’s smile faded as she sized up her partner. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him, but babysitting certainly wasn’t in his remit. However, she realised, knowing full well that the autopsy couldn’t wait, he was her only option. “Ok,” she relented. “On one condition.”

“Hit me.”

“No junk food.”
“What? Are you serious? Ah come on Scully, you’re no fun.”

“I mean it – too much sugar and she turns into a little monster. I shouldn’t be longer than a few hours, but if for some reason I’m late, she goes to bed just after eight; her pjs are already out but you’ll need to remind her to brush her teeth and wash her face.”

“Yes mom.”

“I’ll call the babysitter and let you know that you’re picking Ashley up,” Scully continued, ignoring her partner. “You remember where she lives?”

“I do.” He’d dropped Scully off there the previous week when she was without a car.

“And I’ll make a note of some numbers to call if there’s an –”

“Scully, I know your number, and I know how to dial 911. I also know a little bit of first aid, but I’m hoping I don’t have to use it.” Noting that she didn’t look too impressed, Mulder tried reassuring her. “Relax, we’ll be fine. Granted, I haven’t looked after any young people lately, but as you tell me I act like a child sometimes, so I’m sure I can think of some things for us to do.”

“Ok.” She didn’t look so sure.

“Now go on Scully, make those calls and I’ll be on my way. That body won’t wait all day.” With that he turned and headed out of the door, wondering how hard it could possibly be.

xxxxxx

Very hard, he realised barely an hour later. It wasn’t that Ashley was a bad kid, but she had an endless supply of energy. From the moment he’d picked her up from the babysitter’s, she had been a bundle of excitement; shrieking the instant she set eyes on him. It appeared he had a fan. Once they’d arrived back at Scully’s apartment, Mulder set about the kitchen, looking for inspiration for dinner. “Hey Ash,” he called, turning just in time to see the little girl bounce into the kitchen. “What would you like for dinner?” He looked on, amused, as she continued jumping on the spot.

“Are you a kangaroo?”

She shook her head. “I’m Tigger!”

“Tigger?”

“From Winnie The Pooh silly!”

“Of course, Winnie The Pooh,” he murmured to himself. “What do you want to eat?”

“Strawberries!”

“Strawberries? Umm, I don’t think your mom has any of those.” He made a quick trip to the refrigerator which confirmed his suspicions. “You want pasta?” She scrunched her nose up.

“Rice?” This time she added a shake of her head. “Toast?” Again, his suggestion was met with disdain. “Chicken?” Mulder was reaching the limit of his culinary expertise. “Pizza?”

Finally she stopped bouncing. “I like pizza.”

“That’s good.”

“Mommy said no pizza.”
“She did? Well…” Ashley was hungry and he was desperate. “Mommy’s not here right now. I won’t tell if you won’t.”

The little girl paused momentarily, deep in thought. “Ok!” She went back to bouncing. “Can I have cheese?”

“Of course you can.”

“You’re cool Mulder!” She bounced back out of the kitchen in a whirlwind, with Mulder already feeling exhausted.

xxxxx

Thankfully the delivery time was reasonably quick and Ashley stopped bouncing long enough to eat her dinner. Once the pizza was all gone and Mulder had hidden the box should Scully arrive home unexpectedly, he was faced with a three year old, eager to play. No sooner had he returned from the kitchen carrying a drink for the little girl, Ashley had already made herself at home in the living room. What must have been her entire collection of dolls and teddy bears sat in a circle on the floor with a tea set in the centre, while her duvet was hastily thrown over the sofa. “Ashley?” If Scully came home at that moment, she’d kill him, he knew she would. “What are you doing?”

“Can you build me a fort? Mommy builds me a fort sometimes.”

“With what?”

She pointed to the duvet. “I’ll make the tea while you make the fort! Oh oh oh!” She suddenly shrieked excitedly, making Mulder laugh. “We can have tea in the fort!”

While Mulder set about hunting for something strong enough to hold up the comforter, Ashley wandered amongst her toys, pretending to pour them all drinks. By the time he had finished, the little girl had retreated to her bedroom in search of something. He flopped down on the sofa, closing his eyes as he savoured the few moments of peace. When he opened them again, Ashley was stood in front of him. “Jeez,” he startled. “You scared me.” The little girl smiled sweetly, and then revealed what she was hiding behind her back. A bottle of dark purple nail polish. Mulder eyed it suspiciously. “Whatcha doing?”

“Will you paint my nails?”

“I don’t think your mom would approve.”

“Mommy’s not here right now,” she replied, repeating his earlier words.

“What about your dolls?”

“They’re having their tea. And mommy doesn’t like me painting their nails. I could do yours!” She added, excitement creeping back in.

“How about you put the nail polish down and have a drink with your little friends.”

Before he even realised it, he felt something wet brush across his nail. Looking down, Mulder noted with horror that it was now coated in purple polish. “Hey!” Before a giggling Ashley could attack him once more, he took the bottle off of her and put the lid back on, before standing and placing it on the mantelpiece, way out of her reach. “Ok, back to the tea party.” He let Ashley lead him back to the sofa and took a seat once more. She brought him a cup and saucer, which he accepted gratefully. “This is nice,” he commented, meaning the pretend drink, though the little girl
took it to mean the cup.

“My daddy brought it for me.” She hoisted herself up onto the sofa, making herself comfortable next to him. “Do you know my daddy?”

Mulder nodded. “I’ve met him a couple of times.” He’d heard of Jack Willis during his time at the Bureau, and it was only recently that Scully confirmed he was Ashley’s father.

“Me too,” Ashley replied, while Mulder’s heart broke for the little girl. “He brings me presents.”

“Presents can be good.” She needed more than presents though, he realised.

“Do you think he’ll take me to the zoo on my birthday?”

“I don’t know. He might.” From what Scully had told him though, he doubted it.

“He works a lot.”

“He is a busy man,” Mulder agreed. “I’m sure your mom will take you if not.” He almost volunteered himself, before he realised that Scully probably wouldn’t approve. She was a private person; he’d come to realise over the few months that they’d been working together. Though she’d told him about Jack; it was merely the basics, and he knew she wanted to keep her personal and public lives separate. “When is your birthday Ashley?”

Her eyes suddenly lit up. “It’s soon, it’s this year.”

Once again Mulder laughed. “You get a birthday every year.”

“I do?”

“Yup you do.”

“Cool.” Ashley processed this fact. “My birthday isn’t tomorrow.”

“Ok.”

“Or the next day. Or the next day.”

Mulder realised it could be the start of a long list. “But soon, he asked?”

She nodded excitedly. “Soon!”

Xxxxx

At just past eight, Scully walked through the front door to find Mulder hastily picking up discarded teddy bears. She’d called barely thirty minutes before telling him both the probable cause of death and that she was about to head for home, which led to Mulder embarking on a quick cleaning spree of her apartment. The fort had been cleared away and he’d attempted to straighten out the rest of the living room before his partner returned, but to no avail.

“Hey.”

Mulder put a finger to his lips. “Ssh she’s out like a light.” Ashley was sprawled out on the sofa, dead to the world. “Sorry, she put her pjs on but before I could get her to brush her teeth she zonked out on me.”
“That’s ok.” Kicking off her shoes, Scully placed her briefcase on the floor before removing her jacket and hanging it up. “You wore her out. Has everything been ok?” Making her way round to the front of the sofa, Scully smiled at her sleeping daughter.

“Everything’s been fine. And she wore herself out Scully, I played no part.”

She looked over at her partner as he gathered the remaining toys. “Is that nail polish?” She asked, pointing at his right hand and failing to conceal a smirk as Mulder blushed.

“Ok, so I might have played a little part.” He flashed her a grin. “I’ll go put these back.”

As he walked out of the room, Scully bent and lifted her daughter into her arms. Ashley stirred.

“Mommy?”

“Hey honey. Are you ok?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you had fun with Mulder?”

“Uh huh. We had pizza,” Ashley mumbled, just as Mulder walked out of her bedroom. He smiled sheepishly as his partner raised her eyebrows.

“Did you?”

“Yeah, but Mulder said not to tell you.” Within seconds she was fast asleep once more.


“Don’t apologise, I’m sure if she has it once in a while it won’t kill her.”

“There are some leftovers if you’d like?” He followed her back into Ashley’s bedroom, looking on as Scully placed the little girl into the bed and tucked her in, before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Leftovers?” She asked, clearly interested, as she led him out of the room, pausing briefly to switch off the light.

“With your name on.” They both headed towards the kitchen, and Mulder lifted up his jacket to reveal the pizza box.

“You were hiding it under your jacket?”

“It was supposed to be a secret.”

Scully watched as he slipped the jacket on. “You can stay for a while if you like?”

“It’s ok, I’ll leave you to it. Besides,” he added. “Ashley wore me out.”

“She does that. For such a little thing she’s got a lot of energy.”

“How do you do this every day?”

“Some days it’s easier than others,” she admitted with a smile.

“I admire you Scully, I really do.” And he meant it.

“Thank you. And thank you for tonight.”
“Any time. Well,” he checked himself. “Any time you don’t mind your daughter eating junk food.”

“And you don’t mind having your nails painted.”

“That stays between you and me.”

“Of course. As long as you sort out the paperwork for this case.”

“What? Scully it’s your turn?”

“If you like I’ll happily tell everyone at the office how Spooky Mulder has a secret love for purple nail polish.”

“You’re sneaky.”

“Of course, where do you think Ashley gets it from?”

“G’night Scully.”

“Goodnight.” And after saying goodbye, Mulder made his way out of the apartment, eager to get home for a rest.
Of all the cases she could have been assigned to, Scully mused, as she entered Maryland Marine Bank. It had to be one where she was paired with her ex-boyfriend, with Ashley’s father. It wasn’t that she and Jack couldn’t be in the same room together – they were adults after all, and could be civil towards one another – but whenever she saw him, she couldn’t help but feel angry over all that Ashley was missing out on. Though Jack had made it clear from the very start of their relationship that he didn’t want children, Scully had always hoped deep down that he’d pay an interest in his daughter after she was born. Ashley was a fun, intelligent and inquisitive child, and deserved a normal upbringing – she deserved a father who loved her. Scully’s own dad had acted like a father figure to the little girl, but now that he had passed, there was no one.

Approaching a counter, Scully sat her briefcase on top, and took out a deposit form. Moments later she felt the presence of Jack as he impatiently paced the floor near to where he stood. They’d received a tip-off that a suspect Jack had been chasing for almost a year was due to rob the bank, and so they were ready and waiting for him. Scully noticed Jack scour the room once again. “Relax,” she whispered quietly, noticing how agitated Jack looked. More than four years since they’d split and she could still read him like a book. “They’ll be there.”

“How’s Ashley?”

Scully couldn’t help but look surprised at the change of conversation, not to mention the fact he was asking about their daughter. “She’s good,” she replied.

“How’s Ashley?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Looking forward to her birthday.”

“Right.”

Scully resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “The 17th.”

“Of course…Listen, I was hoping I could pop round one day before then and drop off her presents?”

“Sure.” She wanted to add that Ashley deserved more than just gifts. “She’s been talking about you lately.”
“Oh?” It was Jack’s turn to look surprised.

“She asked me if I thought you’d take her to the zoo for her birthday.”

“The zoo?”

“You know, that big place full of animals,” she remarked dryly. Despite the fact she was used to Jack making excuses and not spending time with Ashley, it still frustrated her that her daughter was missing out on a father.

“I could do next Saturday if that’s ok with you?”

It certainly wasn’t the answer Scully was expecting, and she couldn’t help but raise her eyebrows in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“You’re always telling me to spend more time with her and you’re right. I’d like to hang out with her more often, if that’s ok with you?”

“Of course it’s fine – you’re her father; you don’t need to ask.”

“Message received Agent Scully, loud and clear.” Personal chat was now over; it was time to get down to business.

Moments later their suspect burst into the bank wearing a hockey mask and armed with a rifle. Though Scully had been expecting him, his entrance still startled her. “Get down! Get down on the ground! I want everyone on the ground now! NOW! Get down!” He pointed at Scully, who slowly lowered herself towards the floor. “You too – on the floor! On the floor! I’ll execute every one of you!” Naturally the bank was in chaos – terrified customers screaming as they attempted to flee the path of the gunman, who approached the counter. “Put the money in the bag now!” he ordered the bank teller. “Move! Shut up and do it!”

“Dupree!” Jack yelled to the man’s left, pointing his gun at him. Scully got to her feet too, also training her weapon on the masked man. “Drop the gun! FBI! Drop the gun, NOW!” There was a moment of silence as Dupree slowly lowered his gun, and Scully moved into focus, preparing herself to apprehend him. But before she or Jack could react, Dupree lifted his gun quickly and aimed it at Jack, shooting him square in the chest. As the masked man turned to face Scully, she quickly fired three rounds into him, watching as he fell to the floor, before she rushed across to try and save the father of her child.

Xxxxxx

She’d nearly lost him. Jack had almost died, flatlining on the hospital gurney. The doctor had even told Scully that he was dead, but she refused to give up. She wasn’t about to let him die – he had a young daughter who loved him, despite the fact she hardly knew him, and Ashley deserved to grow up with her father around. To her relief, Jack fought back, though it was clear to Scully that he’d been affected by both the case he was investigating and his shooting. Just days after the failed bank robbery, she and Mulder received word that there had been an incident at the morgue. Three of Dupre’s fingers had been severed. And Jack Willis had gone missing from the hospital.

“Any word from Willis?” Scully asked as Mulder joined her in the morgue.

“Still missing. He hasn’t been home or checked in with the office. I heard something on the way down about a mutilation?”

“Yeah. Three fingers on Dupre’s left hand were severed by surgical shears. We lifted prints.
They’re Willis’. She was trying to think hard as to why Jack would do such a thing – in all the years she’d known him, he’d never demonstrated any hint of violence. He was her child’s father; not a criminal.

“You said he was chasing this guy for almost a year?”

“Yeah, he lived the case. It was all he thought about, talked about.” Scully tried not to sound too bitter, though she was well aware that over the past year, Jack had thought more of Dupree than he had his own daughter.

“What are you thinking?” Mulder asked.

She didn’t want to tell him exactly what she was thinking; that she couldn’t believe Jack would be responsible for something like this; that the last thing she wanted was for Ashley’s father to have become a madman. “That maybe this is some kind of post-trauma psychosis. Like the way soldiers sometimes mutilate the body of a dead enemy.” She only hoped she was right.

Mulder was convinced that Willis wasn’t himself; that Jack had died at the hospital and Dupree was the one who had been brought back. His suspicions were aroused further, as he’d explained to Scully, when he discovered that whoever had removed Dupree’s fingers was left handed, whereas Willis was right-handed. Scully had admitted that the EKG’s records looked as though there had been two heartbeats, but she knew it wasn’t possible. Jack was Jack, she told herself. He was just experiencing post-traumatic stress following his shooting. “It’s still my best guess Jack’s appearance can be explained in psychological, not supernatural, terms,” she said.

“For instance?”

“The stress of the case, the trauma of being shot…Jack’s personality.”

“How well do you know him now…?” At Scully’s confused expression, he continued. “I mean…I know you hadn’t seen him of late, but –“

“We dated as you know…for almost a year. He was my instructor at the Academy. We even had the same birthday. We used to celebrate in some dive in Stratford that had a slanting pool table. But it was always so hard for Jack to relax. It was impossible for him really. He was always so intense, so relentlessly determined. Just not when it comes to his daughter,” she added sadly.

“Do you believe he’s predisposed to this type of psychotic episode?”

“I believe it’s a long way from saying Jack had a near-death experience to saying his body’s been inhabited by Warren Dupree.” She walked off ahead of him, glancing back over her shoulder. “A long way.”

It wasn’t until the following day that Scully set eyes on Jack again, when he turned up unexpectedly at the scene where Thomas Phillips, Lula’s brother, had been shot. After he admitted that he didn’t know where he’d been, and hadn’t been himself, Scully insisted on taking him to the hospital, but he’d refused outright, and maintained he was the best person to be working on the case – after all, he knew Dupree all too well. Scully had relented – albeit reluctantly – but she didn’t fail to notice that Mulder didn’t look too impressed at Jack’s return. He was still suspicious of him, something that was made evident when he walked into their office and tossed a card onto
her desk. “Happy Birthday Scully,” he announced proudly.

Scully looked up, clearly confused. “You’re two months early.”

“It’s from Willis. I thought you two had the same birthday.”

“We do.”

“Well that’s news to him. I asked him to sign it. And he signed it with his left hand.”

“You mean you tested him.”

“Yeah.” Mulder took a seat. “After I found out that the evidence from the Phillips murder is missing.”

“What evidence?”

“The print we lifted. Our best lead is gone. Someone stole it before the lab had a chance to take a look at it.”

She knew exactly where Mulder was going with this. “And you think Willis is responsible?”

“I’m not sure Willis is Willis.” Scully couldn’t help but sigh and roll her eyes, only frustrating her partner further. “Can you at least accept the possibility that during his near-death experience some kind of psychic transference occurred?”

“Can’t you just accept the possibility that this isn’t an X File? Aside from the expected level of post-trauma stress, Jack passed both of his evaluations – physical and psychological. Anyway, just because someone forgets a birthday doesn’t mean that he’s been possessed. When I was studying for my medical boards, I forgot my birthday too.” She didn’t mention the fact that Jack hadn’t remembered – or at least acknowledged – her birthday in over three years. And just a few days ago he’d had trouble recalling Ashley’s birthday, despite it being the week before Christmas.

“Did you forget how to sign your name? This is a copy of the automobile requisition form Willis filed the day before he was shot. Compare the signatures.”

The two signatures couldn’t have been any further apart. “Like I said Mulder,” Scully replied defensively. “Stress, all right? We both know it can significantly affect someone’s cursive standard. I’m afraid this doesn’t prove a thing.” She wasn’t about to give up on Jack just yet.

Xxxxxxx

Despite Jack getting annoyed at Scully for implying he was responsible for the missing print, he still allowed her to accompany him to Boyle Heights, after he’d received a tip off regarding the whereabouts of Lula. First they interviewed her landlord, who sent them in the direction of Apartment 207. On their way, Jack caught sight of the wanted woman at the end of the hall, holding a basket of laundry. “Look. Hey, that’s her,” Jack announced, just as Lula flung the basket to the floor and ran back down the stairs. They followed her down to the basement, losing track of her almost immediately. “Where is she? Where did she go?”

“I’ll check back here,” replied Scully, and she set off in search of Lula. Moments later, and she suddenly saw Lula racing towards her with a baseball bat, poised to hit her. Scully reacted instantly, tackling Lula, and within minutes had her face down on a mattress. “Face down! Face down! Hands behind your back! Now!” She quickly handcuffed her, before turning to face Jack, who was approaching the two of them. “She’s all yours, Jack.”
“Yeah, like a dog on a leash.”

He tossed a pair of handcuffs onto the mattress next to Scully. “I already cuffed her,” Scully replied cautiously.

“They’re for you Scully. Put them on.”

“What’s going on Jack?” It was then she saw him raise his gun and point it in her direction. Suddenly she wished she’d have listened to Mulder. “Jack…”

“Shut up!” He yelled. “Put them on.”

Scully did as he said, and watched as he then approached Lula and touched her face tenderly. “Come on baby. Come on, get up baby. I want to look at you. Your face is all dirty.” Scully remembered that voice all too well. It was his concerned voice, his caring tone, the one he used on her before their relationship turned sour. Just hearing it at that moment made Scully feel nauseous.

Lula seemed just as confused as Scully. “Keep your stinking hands off me!”

“Baby, you ain’t going to believe where I been.”

And it was then Scully knew she was in trouble.

TO BE CONTINUED.
Chapter 7

Twelve hours later and there was still no news from either Scully or Jack. Mulder was concerned, and so he and Agent Bruskin paid a trip to the apartment complex where Jack and Scully were last headed.

"Now I'm worried," Bruskin admitted, as they exited the apartment of Lula's landlord. "12 hours with no word. I don't get it. Why's there car still sitting out front? Why didn't Willis call for backup?"

"Because it wasn't Willis who answered the hotline."

"What are you talking about? You heard the recording. It was Willis' voice."f

"Forget it Bruskin," Mulder replied tersely, not in the mood to explain. He had too much on his mind. Not only was he worried about Scully, but he'd also had to spend time sorting out Ashley. He'd managed to call her babysitter, Emma, who agreed that the little girl could stay there overnight, and that she would take her to pre-school the following day. He knew deep down that he should have called Scully's mother, but the last thing he wanted to do was worry her. Though, Mulder realised, if he didn't find his partner soon, Mrs Scully would have to be told before the media was involved.

"Plus which…" Bruskin continued. "The manager just ID'd him and Scully."

"I said forget it Bruskin."

"This isn't one of your X File theories, is it?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," he answered. "We're still after the same thing." Mulder was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone, and he rushed to answer it, hoping it was Scully. "Mulder."

A strange voice rang out. "FBI Centrex Operator. Please hold."

"Yeah." He tried not to get too disappointed, well aware it could still be his partner on the line. But it wasn't.

"Guess who, Ace?"

"Willis?"

"That depends on who you ask, don't it?"

"Where's Scully?" He needed to know she was ok.

"You're the FBI. You figure it out."

"Let me talk to her."

"Yeah, sure." Mulder heard rustling before Scully's voice came through.

"Mulder?"

"Dana, are you ok?"
"Tell Ashley – " Before Scully could continue, Willis took the phone away from her.

"Dana?"

"Ok," Jack answered. "That's it. Goodbye." With that he hung up, leaving Mulder with more questions than answers.

Xxxxxxx

"It's not going to work, Jack," Scully advised the man opposite her. Since they'd arrived at the home of Lula and Dupree he'd chained her to the radiator, meaning escape was impossible. She was concerned about the way he was behaving, worried for his sanity as well as her own safety, and she tried not to think about Ashley, who by now was no doubt wondering where her mother was.

"You don't think so?"

"Bureau policy prohibits negotiating with kidnappers. But you already know that, don't you Jack?"

"Stop calling me that!" he yelled, clearly agitated.

"Your name is Jack Willis. You were born February 23, 1957. You have a daughter, a –"

"My name is Warren James Dupre…" Scully tried not to frown. "And I was born in Klamath Falls, Oregon in the Year of the Rat. I don't have a daughter."

"We spent a weekend up at Pine Barrens. You taught me how to fish through the ice. It was your parents' cabin Jack, try to remember. We drove up in a snowstorm. It was a few months before we conceived Ashley. Come on, Jack."

"Don't think I didn't see what you did. I was like a little slip of paper up there on that hospital ceiling. I saw everything."

"What did you see?"

"You left me to die on that table while you tried to save your friend!"

"You are my friend."

"Too bad he was gone already. I watched him go. I just saw him slip away down that long, black tunnel."

It was stress, Scully repeated to herself. Jack had been through a lot recently, and it was only natural. There was only so much a person could take without cracking. "No. We brought you back."

"You shot me dead! And then you let me die."

"No. You won't kill me Jack."

He pushed his gun into Scully's side, as though trying to prove her wrong. "You call me that one more time, I'll make you stone cold."

Before Scully could answer him back, Lula entered the room. "Easy baby, easy. Not yet. Remember, she's our ticket."
Taking a can of soda from Lula, Willis moved to drink it, noting it was empty. "Got any more of this soda?"

"You just drank the last of it."

It was then Scully realised exactly what Jack had been doing. "Soda," she repeated. "How much of that have you had?"

"What's it to you?"

"Jack Willis is diabetic. Which means you're diabetic." She barely registered that she was talking to the man in front of her as though he wasn't her friend, or the man she once loved. "Too much sugar in the system could lead to hyperglycaemia."

"Maybe that's why your stomach's hurting so bad," Lula commented.

"Abdominal pain is the first sign of impending diabetic coma. You need insulin." Scully wondered exactly how much worse her day could get.


There had finally been a breakthrough in the search for Scully. Reports had filtered in from Katensville PD, reporting a break in at a drugstore. Insulin and a box of syringes were taken, which gave Mulder the clue he needed – after all, he knew Jack was diabetic. And then, shortly after, came another phone call. "Mulder."

"Listen carefully." This time a woman's voice appeared on the end of the line, but not the right woman. Lula.

"Where's Willis?"

"Oh, he's lying around here somewhere."

There was something about Lula's words that concerned Mulder. His thoughts immediately went to his partner. "Let me talk to Scully."

"Not this time."

"We don't deal unless we know Scully is alive." She had to be, he told himself.

"She's alive. She's not happy, but she's alive."

Mulder heard the threat in Lula's voice. For now, she meant. "You listen to me. You lay one hand on Scully, and so help me God –"

"If I were you," Lula interrupted. "I'd stop talking and start passing around the collection hat, cause if you ever want to see Scully again it's going to cost you a million dollars. Have it by this time tomorrow. I'll tell you when and where." With that she hung up. There was a moment of hope as the call was traced, until Mulder realised Lula had been using Scully's cell phone. It was back to square one.


There was some hope though. They'd managed to record Lula's phone call, and with the help of a technician, Mulder had determined the sound of a small plane in the background whilst Lula had been talking, and they'd finally been able to determine her likely location.
"Ok…” Mulder began, as he briefed the other agents in the room. "From our last phone contact we've identified what sounds like light aircraft taking off. Now, Washington County Regional Airport happens to fall within our area, just south of the state line. Since take-offs are north to south it's a fair bet that our target area lies along this flight path. For those of you who remember ninth-grade math that gives us an area of just over three square miles to cover - roughly 1000 households. With 100 law enforcement officials at our disposal at about 30 households per man per hour we should be able to canvass the entire area in about three hours. Agent Bruskin will grid the target area and divide it among the teams.”

Once he'd finished his briefing, the other agents in the room got to their feet noisily. Mulder spoke once again, his voice unsteady. "And for those of you who don't know already, this one's important to me. So uh…let's do it right. Thanks.” He needed them to realise that they needed to find Scully safe and well. There was a little girl back in Georgetown who was relying on Mulder to bring her mother home. Mulder had called Emma once more, who'd told him that Ashley was fast asleep, but she was looking forward to seeing her mom once she'd returned home from their case. There was a lot on the line here, Mulder knew.

Scully came awake as she realised she was being called. As she opened her eyes, she saw Jack lying opposite her. "Hmm? Huh?"

"Was there snow?"

She realised he was asking about their trip to the cabin. It was her Jack talking to her. "Yes Jack. There was lots of snow.”

"I can't…” He looked pained at the fact he couldn't remember.

"It was December. It was the weekend after Thanksgiving." 

"I remember….a red stove.”

It was progress, she realised. "Yeah, that's right. There was a wood-burning stove right in the middle of the room.”

"Cold.”

"Yeah.”

"Ashley…”

Scully nodded in encouragement. "She's your daughter Jack.”

"She's beautiful.”

"Yes she is.”

"I haven't been good to her. She hates me.”

"No, she doesn't hate you Jack. You're her father. She loves you.”

"She's a good girl.”

"Yes she is, and she can't wait to spend more time with you.”
"Good. I'm glad. I want to spend more time with her too." No sooner had he spoken the words, Jack suddenly slumped to the side.

"No!" Scully cried. "Jack, don't close your eyes. Come on, keep talking Jack, keep talking. Come on."

When Jack spoke again, it was like he was a different person once more. "I'm gonna execute every one of you!"

"No," Scully moaned, disheartened. "No." She barely even registered the knock at the door; her focus was solely on Jack. He couldn't leave her, not now, and he certainly couldn't leave their daughter.

Moments later, Lula entered the room. "Well, I guess it's time to make that call."

"He's dead. It's all on you now. He's dead because of you." Scully could barely watch as Lula knelt down in front of Jack, no emotion on her face.

"Well… guess it's over. Whoever you are." Before she could react, Jack suddenly moved, grabbing the gun she held and turning it on her.

"Don't move."

"Jack!" Scully called, not wanting him to do anything rash.

"Shut up!"

Aware her life was in danger, Lula changed her tone. "I love you. Don't you know? You're why I came back. I kept a bottle of medicine in the other room. I'll go get it. What do you say, huh?" She edged closed towards him and stroked his face. "I'll get it for you. Look, look, look. I love you. I love you baby."

"No."

"Listen, listen, listen. We still have her. We can get away with this."

"I don't think so baby. Not this time."

"Jack," Scully warned. "Put the gun down."

Put her paid her no attention, instead holding Lula in towards him. "You remember that light I talked about? It's beautiful. There's nothing to be afraid of." And as he moved to kiss her, he pulled the trigger, shooting her in the stomach.

"No!" Scully pulled against her handcuffs, to no avail. Seconds later she heard the sound of the front door crashing in, before a familiar voice rang out. "All right, FBI! FBI! FBI!"

"Jack!"

Agent Bruskin entered the room, immediately checking Jack for any signs of life, while Mulder followed close behind, making his way towards his partner. "Scully, are you ok?"

She paid him no attention. "Jack?!" It was then she saw Agent Bruskin shake his head and step away from Jack's body. He was gone.

Xxxxxxx
Ashley had just finished lunch and had settled down to watch cartoons when Scully heard a gentle tap at the front door. When she'd arrived home the previous evening after giving her statement and being checked out at the hospital, she'd collected Ashley from the babysitter's before putting her daughter straight to bed. She'd taken the day off to spend time with her little girl, though she'd yet to broach the subject of Jack's death, and she wasn't quite sure how to break the news to Ashley. As she opened the door, she was surprised to see Mulder standing in front of her. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Do you want to come in?"

Mulder shook his head. "I don't want to intrude, I umm…I got this from the morgue along with the rest of Jack's personal effects. I thought you might want it." He held out a watch, which Scully took from him, and read the inscription.

"Happy 35th, Love D." I got it for him four years ago. It was just a few months before we split up. Before Ashley."

"How is she doing?"

"I haven't told her yet. I guess…I just…I don't know what to say to her. How do I tell a four year old that her father died? She's barely getting over my father's death and now… What am I going to tell her when she's older?"

"There's the official story."

"Which is?"

"Fugitive Lula Phillips died yesterday in a shoot-out with federal agents, which also resulted in the death of Special Agent Jack Willis – killed in the line of duty."

"I just can't get our last conversations out of my head. He told me that he wanted to spend more time with Ashley."

"Well then tell her that," Mulder answered earnestly. "Tell her the truth; tell her that her father asked about her, that he was hoping to spend time with her and that deep down he loved her. That's not a lie Scully; you said it yourself. You know," he added, sensing Scully's reluctance to broach the subject with her daughter. "You don't have to do it today."

"Yes I do. I can't keep this from her."

"Do you want me to stay?"

She shook her head thoughtfully. "No, I think I need to do this alone. Thank you though. And thanks for this." She glanced back down at the watch in her hands; grateful that she had something to pass on to Ashley, grateful that her daughter had at least one memento of her father. "It's not working. It stopped. At 6.47."

"The exact time that Jack went into cardiac arrest at the hospital."

"What does that mean?"

"It means…it means whatever you want it to mean. I'll see you later Scully. Take some time before coming back to work." She watched as Mulder let himself out of her apartment, closing the door behind him, before she turned towards where her daughter sat on the sofa, still engrossed in the
cartoon. Taking a deep breath, Scully made her way across to the couch, taking a seat next to the little girl. She watched as Ashley giggled enthusiastically at the television, and waited until the show was over.

"That was funny,” Ashley remarked, smiling up at her mother. "A little silly though.”

"That's what's fun about cartoons,” Scully answered, and Ashley nodded. She caught sight of Jack's watch in her hands.

"What's that mommy?"

"It's your daddy's watch.”

"Why doesn't daddy have it?" She sat up in her seat. "Is daddy here?!"

It hurt Scully to hear how excited Ashley was at the prospect of seeing her father. Despite the fact she'd hardly seen Jack during her life, the little girl always greeted him with enthusiasm, and she still firmly believed he loved her. "Honey, something's happened.” Scully swallowed hard, trying to compose herself. She needed to stay strong for her daughter.

"Are we going to the zoo today?"

"Not today.”

Ashley's excitement waned. "Is daddy busy?"

"Sweetie…there was an incident yesterday. Your daddy…he died honey.” She wrapped her arms around Ashley, who frowned in confusion. "How did he die?"

"Well…” She paused, wondering exactly what to say. Maybe she should have taken Mulder up on his offer to stay, she realised. "People die for lots of different reasons. Sometimes they get very very sick.”

"Like grandpa?"

"Just like grandpa.”

"Was daddy sick?"

"Your daddy was…he was looking for a very very nasty man and he found him. And during that time he got very sick.”

"Did he gave medicine? When I'm sick you give me medicine and it makes me better.”

"He took some medicine, but he was just too sick. He was a lot sicker than you or I ever get.” One day she'd tell Ashley the whole story – if her daughter asked – but not today.

"So daddy won't take me to the zoo?"

"No honey. He died, remember? He's with grandpa now.”

"But I don't want daddy to die.” Ashley's eyes filled with tears, and her mother hugged her tightly.

"I know. I don't either,” Scully replied sadly. "But you know, your daddy wanted you to know that though he may not have shown it all the time, he loved you a lot, and he always will. I just want you to remember that, ok?" Scully rocked her daughter gently. "Don't you ever forget that.” She
was determined that Ashley would never forget it.

Scully glanced at the clock for the second time in as many minutes, frowning as she realised she was far from sleepy. The events of the past few days kept replaying in her mind, and she couldn't forget her last conversation with Jack; how he finally came back to her, and admitted he wanted to spend more time with Ashley. And now he was gone, meaning Ashley was now fatherless and Scully was now completely alone in raising her daughter. The thought alone was enough to make her want to cry again, but before the tears could fall she heard the door to her bedroom open.

"Mommy?"

Rolling onto her side, Scully flicked on the lamp in time to see Ashley approaching the bed, tears streaming down her cheeks. She'd been crying on and off all day, but had gone off to sleep without any trouble just a few hours before. "Oh honey." She held out her arms as her daughter climbed into the bed, and then pulled her in close. "Sssh you're ok."

"I don't want my daddy to die," Ashley announced through her tears.

"I know, I know you don't." Scully kissed her daughter, running her hands through Ashley's hair. "You have to remember that daddy loves you, and that he's not in pain anymore."

"Like Grandpa?"

"Just like Grandpa," Scully replied after a brief hesitation. "Both daddy and grandpa love you, and they'll always be looking down on you."

"Always?"

"Always."

"Even when I go to the bathroom?"

Scully couldn't help but chuckle. "Well…not then, but most of the time. And they'll look out for you and keep you safe."

"You won't die, will you mommy?"

Scully hugged her tightly. "Not for a long long time."

"What about Mulder?"

"Mulder?"

"Will he die?"

"Sweetheart, we're not going to leave you; you're not going to be alone, ok?"

"I wanted daddy to take me to the zoo," Ashley announced tearfully.

"Daddy wanted to take you to the zoo too honey," Scully replied sadly. "Maybe we can go on your birthday next weekend. Would you like that?"

Ashley nodded, and Scully kissed her forehead once more. "And daddy will watch us?"
"Of course he will. Daddy would want you to have fun on your birthday."

"I miss him.” Her words only deepened Scully's pain – after all, she thought, how could Ashley miss a man she hardly knew? Ashley's tears started up again, and she settled down into her mother's embrace. Scully hushed and comforted her daughter until finally the little girl drifted off to sleep. It wasn't until then that Scully let her own tears fall.
Chapter 8

“Any plans for the weekend Scully?”

Scully nodded as she slipped into her jacket and picked up her briefcase. It had been a long and hard week for her, still dealing with the death of Jack barely a week ago, and helping Ashley come to terms with her father’s death. The funeral had been on Wednesday and Mulder had surprised her by turning up to the service. Though he didn't approach her or Ashley until after the service was over, it was comforting to have him in attendance, along with her mother and sister. Then it was back to work as usual, although the two of them had a relatively quiet week, catching up on case reports and expenses. She knew it was Mulder’s idea, knowing full well that she didn’t want to head out into the field and leave Ashley at this crucial time, and she was grateful to him. “You could say that. It’s Ashley’s birthday tomorrow, so we have a visit to the zoo and a little party at home to celebrate.”

“Party?”

“Yup. Seven of her friends from pre-school and my friend Ellen’s two sons.”

Mulder grimaced. “Can your apartment handle that many kids?”

“My apartment probably can. I’m not sure I can though.”

“Sounds fun. Good luck with that.”

“Ellen will be there too, so she can help me deal with the over-excited children.”

“Is Ashley looking forward to her birthday?”

“I think so.”

“It’ll be good for her after everything that’s happened.”


“You’re going to work this weekend, aren’t you?”

“As if, I –“

“Mulder.”

“Ok, so I might go over a few possible cases,” he relented, smiling at how well she knew him already. “But only if I get the chance with my busy schedule.”

Shaking her head, Scully glanced down at her watch. “Well, I guess I’d better go and pick the birthday girl up before she wears her poor babysitter out.”

“Tell her I said Happy Birthday.”

“I will do, thank you.” Scully turned and headed towards the door, pausing briefly. “Mulder?”
“Yup?”

“Go out and have a life.” With that she walked out of the office, and headed home to prepare for Ashley’s party.

xxxxxxx

Barely two hours after she arrived home from work, Scully was surrounded by a room full of energetic and hyperactive children. Ashley had put the past week’s upset out of her mind and had just finished opening a mountain of presents in the living room. She, her fellow classmates at preschool and Ellen’s’s two sons were now settling down to eat dinner, allowing Scully and Ellen to escape into the kitchen.

“So Ashley seems pretty excited about the zoo tomorrow,” Ellen commented as Scully placed a cup of coffee in front of her before taking a seat opposite.

“Tell me about it.”

“She told me when I arrived that Mulder was coming with you.”

Scully shook her head as she took a sip of coffee. “He is not coming with us. He’s my partner Ellen. Ashley and I have our day out planned and we’re going to have fun. Just the two of us.”

“It’s great he’s showing an interest in her. I mean –“

Knowing full well where the conversation was leading, Scully interrupted. “I don’t want to disrespect Jack in front of her. At the end of the day he was her father, and she’s entitled to form her own opinion of him. I don’t want her to resent me one day for badmouthing him.”

“Fair point,” Ellen conceded. “How’s she doing?”

“Honestly? I really don’t know. One moment she’s ok and her usual hyperactive self and the next she’s waking up from nightmares and crawling into my bed in tears. She’s slept in her own bed three times this week, and wet it each night.”

“It’s still early days Dana. The poor kid’s been through a lot. So have you,” Ellen added, reaching out to clasp her friend’s hand. “How do you feel?”

“Even more confused than Ashley I think,” Scully admitted. “On the one hand I’m angry that Jack didn’t spend time with his own daughter, and that he’s left her. I hate him for the fact she’ll grow up hardly knowing the man who was supposed to be her dad. But…” She let out a shaky sigh. “I loved him El, and I will always love him for giving me Ashley. Once upon a time he made me happy.”

“Oh Dana.” Ellen scooted across in her chair and reached out, pulling Scully into a hug as her tears fell. “It’s understandable that you feel this way. Jack was a loveable bastard.”

Scully laughed through her tears. “That’s one way to put it. I just don’t know how I’m going to cope alone. I mean, it’s not like Jack helped out, but he was there –“

“You’re not alone Dana, you have me, and your mom and your family. You’re strong, and you can get through this. Anytime you need anyone or anything, I’m here for you.”

“I know you are. Thank you.”
Scully pulled away as she heard a knock at the front door to her apartment, and quickly brushed her tears away. Sniffling, she walked out of the kitchen, pausing briefly in the hallway to check her reflection, noting with relief that her makeup hadn’t smudged, before approaching the door. She certainly wasn’t expecting to see Mulder, instead thinking it was a parent of one of Ashley’s friends come to collect them. “Hi,” she said uncertainly.

“Hey Scully.” Mulder’s smile faded as he realised he was intruding on Ashley’s birthday. “I’m sorry, I –“

“Mulder Mulder Mulder!!! It’s my birthday!”

Mulder had to take a step back as Ashley came bounding towards him. There was no mistaking who the birthday girl was – she was glad in a light blue dress with a giant badge proclaiming “I am 4” pinned to the front, and in her light blonde hair she wore a silver tiara. Two other little girls followed her to the door, though they hung back once they saw the stranger in front of them.

“So I see. Happy Birthday.” He saw Ashley eye him suspiciously as she noticed that both of his hands were behind his back.

“Have you got me a present?”

Mulder laughed at the little girl’s bluntness, while Scully looked mortified. “Ashley! Don’t be rude. Mulder didn’t get you a present.”

“Actually I did. Well…” he added. “I’ve got something here for a four year old girl, but I thought you were three.”

“Nooo!” she cried excitedly. Mulder could have sworn she was on springs, bouncing up and down, and he wondered just how much sugar she’d had. “I’m four! I’m four!!”

“Tomorrow,” her mother corrected.

“Well in that case…” Bringing his hands round to the front, Mulder held out a gift, wrapped in pink paper, which he’d hastily bought after leaving the office that evening. The assistant at the store had gift-wrapped it for him, which had led to some awkward questioning over how old his daughter was. Ashley reached out with eager hands and grabbed the present, but not before Scully interrupted her. “What do you say to Mulder?”

“Thank you Mulder,” the little girl answered sweetly. “I love it.”

He chuckled once more. “You might want to open it before commenting.” The little girl and her two followers ran back to the rest of their friends, and Ashley immediately set about opening her gift. Mulder and Scully watched on from the front door.

“Thank you Mulder. There was no need to get her a gift.”

“I wanted to.”

“It’s very generous of you.”

“I’m sorry to intrude. I thought the party was tomorrow.”

“I thought I was being clever by having it tonight. I thought Ashley would be tired after school, but I was wrong. We have the zoo tomorrow.”
“Of course.”

“Mommy Mommy Mommy!” Ashley came running back over to them, clutching a cuddly Tigger, which was almost as big as she was. “Look what Mulder got me Mommy!”

“Oh wow, isn’t that great?” Scully turned back to her partner. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Thank you Mulder, I love it.”

“It reminded me of you.”

“Tigger bounces a lot,” Ashley conceded. “I love him!” With that she ran off once more.

“Dana, have you got any more paper pla – hi.” Ellen exited the kitchen and headed into the living room, stopping short as she realised they had a visitor.

“Ellen,” Scully began, almost shyly. “This is my partner, Fox Mulder. We work together,” she added, before her friend could jump to any conclusions. “Mulder, this is my friend Ellen.”

“Nice to meet you Mulder,” Ellen approached him and held out her hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” She smirked, ignoring the warning looks her friend was giving her.

“Good to meet you,” Mulder replied politely. “I just popped round to give the birthday girl her present.”

“That was very nice of you Mulder, isn’t it Dana?” Scully merely glared at her. “Can I get you something to drink? A coffee or a beer or –“

“Mulder was just going actually.”

Realising he was outstaying his welcome, Mulder nodded. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re not intruding,” Ellen answered, before Scully could get a word in.

“It’s fine, thank you.” Mulder glanced back at his partner. I’ll see you Monday Scully, have a good weekend.”

“See you then.” She turned to call to her daughter. “Ashley, Mulder’s leaving now. What do you say?”

Abandoning her friends and her new gift, Ashley ran up to Mulder and wrapped her arms around his leg. “Thank you Mulder, I love it.”

“You’re welcome. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

With that, he turned and walked out of the apartment. Scully closed the door behind him, pausing before she turned to face her friend, well aware that Ellen was still smiling knowingly.

xxxxxx

“Come on now little lady, time for bed.” Scully entered her daughter’s bedroom, frowning as she saw Ashley lying flat out on the floor, playing with the Tigger that Mulder had brought her earlier in the day. The party had ended and the last guest had left more than an hour ago, and Scully had then set about returning her apartment to normal, before getting Ashley ready for bed. She thought
that her daughter might be worn out after all the excitement, but it appeared the little girl was resisting the urge to sleep.

“I don’t want to go to bed mommy,” she replied adamantly, not moving in the slightest.

“You need to go to bed now; else you won’t be up in time to go to the zoo in the morning.”

The little girl considered her mother’s words. Scully knew from the look of her daughter that she was tired, and would be grumpy for their outing the next day if she didn’t soon get to bed. “Is Mulder coming to the zoo?”

“No honey, he’s not.”

“Why?” Tigger now forgotten, Ashley looked up at her mother with pleading eyes. “I want Mulder to come.”

“Sweetheart, I work with Mulder and that’s all. Mulder has other things to do tomorrow.”

“But I want him to come.”

“Sorry honey, it’s just you and me.”

“Noooo!” Ashley whined, sitting up on the floor. “I want Mulder to come.”

“Ashley, how many more times? Mulder isn’t coming with us.”

“I want Mulder to come,” she repeated, more insistently this time.

“I’m not arguing Ashley, I’m telling you, he isn’t coming. Now…” Scully walked over to the bed, pulling the covers back. “Get into bed young lady. It’s past your bedtime and you’re already turning into a grumpy little girl.”

“I want Mulder, I want Mulder.”

“Ashley!” She could feel her patience wearing thin; aware that the little girl was tired and testing the boundaries.

“I want my daddy.”

Her words threw Scully, who froze on the spot. “Ashley.”

Her daughter promptly burst into tears. “I don’t want you, I want my daddy, I want my daddy now.”

“Well I’m sorry but you can’t. Your daddy isn’t here anymore.”

“But I want my daddy!”

“Damn it Ashley, he’s not here.” Without warning Scully turned and stormed out of the bedroom, slaming the door shut behind her. Heading out into the hallway, she collapsed against the door, her own tears falling as she sank to the floor. She was angry; angry at Jack for dying, angry at him for putting himself in danger, angry at him for missing out on watching his daughter grow, angry at him for leaving her right when she needed him, and angry at herself for failing Ashley. When she first fell pregnant, Scully had hoped that Jack would eventually take an interest in their child, and just barely a week ago, when he’d asked to spend more time with Ashley, she dared to dream that he may be changing his ways. She certainly didn’t imagine being a single mom, watching the
father of her daughter die right in front of her. She wasn’t entirely sure she was cut out for parenthood; whether she was strong enough to get through this. How her mother had coped with four children while her husband was at sea, Scully would never know. Suddenly she became aware of Ashley’s cries escalating through the door, and she realised just how scared her little girl must be. After all, within the space of a few months Ashley had lost her grandfather and then her own father – the only male figures in her life, besides Scully’s two brothers who made the occasional visit, and Mulder. And now here was Scully, telling her little girl that she wasn’t allowed to see Mulder and that she’d never see her dad again. Ashley must have been as scared and confused as hell. Getting to her feet, Scully wiped her eyes before opening the door. Ashley was stood by the bed, sobbing uncontrollably, with the odd hiccup escaping as tears trailed down her bright red cheeks. As Scully took in the scene, she noticed that her little girl had made herself sick through crying.

“Mommy,” Ashley whimpered, as Scully rushed to her side and enveloped her into a hug; the little girl grasping at her mother’s jumper.

“It’s ok baby, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. You’re ok.”

“I was sick mommy.”

“I know, but you’re ok.”

“I don’t want my daddy to die.”

“I know you don’t, and I don’t either, but it’s going to be ok; we’ll be ok.” Lifting her daughter up into her arms, Scully pressed kisses to the top of Ashley’s head, trying to soothe her. “Let’s get you cleaned up ok? Then maybe we can give Mulder a call, and see if he wants to go to the zoo.” Though Scully knew deep down that she shouldn’t give into her daughter, she knew that Ashley had been through a lot in recent months. She had no doubt that she’d owe Mulder big time if he agreed to go with them, but Ashley’s happiness came first.

Xxxxxx

“Mulder.”

“Hi Mulder.”

For a moment he was quiet as he listened to the unfamiliar voice on the end of the line, trying to determine who the caller was. She sounded young, far too young to be Scully, and yet…

“Ashley?”

“Hello!” She giggled down the phone.

Mulder’s mind immediately went into overdrive. “Ashley, is everything ok? Where’s your mom?”

“She’s here; she told me I could call you.”

“She did?”

“Will you come to the zoo for my birthday?”

Again he paused, wondering if he’d heard correctly. “Are you sure your mom knows you’re calling me?”
“Uh huh. I was sick and so she said I could ask you.”

“Can I talk to her for just a second?”

“Will you come with us?”

“Just let me talk to your mom.”

He heard rustling on the other end of the line, before Scully’s voice rang out down the phone. “Mulder?”

“Hey Scully.”

There was a moment of silence as Scully hesitated. “Mulder, Ashley would like you to come with us to the zoo tomorrow. I know that it’s short notice, and I know it’s an unusual request, but she’s been pretty insistent and —“

“Sure.”

“Are you serious?”

“I mean, only if it’s ok with you?”

“Of course. I mean…that’s what she wants, and she got pretty upset earlier over her F-A-T-H-E-R…,” she spelt out. “…because he’s not here to take her. And it’s her birthday, and I wouldn’t normally ask you this but…are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure Scully.” He was touched that Ashley had asked for him and, well aware that she was still upset following Jack’s death, as was her mother. The least he could do for the two of them was be there for them.

“Ok, great.” Scully almost sounded surprised that he’d said yes. “Do you want to meet us there, or -?”

“I can pick you up if you’d like?”

“Sure.”

“How does 10 sound?”

“Sounds great, thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me Scully. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Ok…Ashley, do you want to say goodnight to Mulder?” Seconds later the phone was passed back to the little girl.

“Mommy says I have to go to bed now.”

“In that case I think you should do what your mom says.”

“Ok,” she sighed. “G’night Mulder. I’m so glad you’re coming.”

“Me too. G’night little lady.”

And with that Ashley hung up, leaving Mulder to think about the little girl and her mum, who were
slowly insinuating themselves into his life.
Little Ashley hadn't had much reason to smile lately. But a small grin couldn't help but make its way across her sullen cheeks when she, her mother, and Mulder passed through the opening gates to the zoo the next day. The two adults involved had been especially grateful for that moment. The shock of her father's death, though they had been estranged, had hit Ashley hard. Not only for the fact that she knew the father whose attention she so desperately craved was gone forever, but just knowing that people could be gone forever in general... she had never fathomed that before Jack Willis died. Not when her grandfather died, not when the elderly woman across the hall who used to give her cookies on Sundays died, not when her pet goldfish Swimmy died. Death was now real to Ashley Elizabeth Scully, and there was no way her mother or Mulder could take that from her. It was now a part of her forever.

"What do you want to see first, Pumpkin?" Scully asked her daughter, straightening the panda baseball cap with the sticking out ears that Mulder had shown up with that afternoon on her head.

"I...I don't know." She had been quite reserved since her outburst the previous evening.

"We have the apes, the lions, oh... I know you love tigers," Scully tried her hand at helping Ashley to make a decision.

Just then, a train passed them with a bunch of children and their parents riding on it. Ashley observed and asked with her eyes a question that her mother could not refuse. Perhaps on a normal day, but not that day.

"Do you want to ride on that?" Scully asked her softly, bending down to her level and being intimate with her child in a way that Ashley's hyperactivity often prevented. Ashley nodded, and Mulder let her ride on his shoulders to the next stop.

"Sorry sir, there's no more room," the conductor told Mulder as he searched for a car close to Ashley and Scully.

"Well come on Ash, we'll ride the train some other day," Scully told her little girl, but Mulder held up his hand.

"Don't even think about it. I'll meet you at the elephants, okay?"

They nodded to each other in a partnerly way and Mulder waved to the girls as they chugged off.

"Are you having fun today sweetheart?" Scully asked Ashley midway through the train ride.

"Yeah, but..." the little girl stopped.

"But what?"
Ashley took a deep breath before continuing. “Daddy was supposed to take me here.”

Scully's heart broke when she heard those words come out of her little girl's mouth. In one instant, she went from feeling sad that her ex died to being absolutely disgusted with him. Why had he pushed away his daughter, his own flesh and blood, to work endlessly on a case that had ultimately killed him? Why did he buy her love with money and presents instead of with time and affection? Why did he make promises but never fulfil them, leaving his own child craving his attention and always, always disappointed? She wished he were alive for just one more moment, so that she could chew his ass out for being such an awful parent and hurting her baby. The rage was so much that tears sprang to her eyes that moment, right in the middle of the zoo, in the middle of a train ride. But she could not cry. Instead she wrapped her arms tightly around Ashley. "I know. I know Daddy said a lot of things that he never did. He wanted to Ash, he just never got the chance," Scully took the high road even though all she wanted to do was badmouth Jack to her daughter.

"I know Daddy was busy," Ashley stated what she'd heard her whole life as fact.

"But Daddy loved you. For every kiss I've given you, I've given you one for your Daddy too. He wasn't good at showing it sometimes, but Daddy loved you and Daddy's going to continue to love you and watch over you from Heaven."

"Is Daddy my angel?"

"Daddy is most certainly you angel. He's always going to be standing right next to you, protecting his little girl."

A huge sigh of relief was emitted by the four-year-old, like the thought had been weighing on her mind. Like she thought that anybody who met her could not love her.

"Mommy, I have two angels. I have Grandpa and Daddy."

Scully nodded in agreement. "You're very lucky. Most people don't have that many angels watching over them."

"You're right, Mommy. I am lucky. Can we go see the snakes?"

That was a shock to Scully, who knew that Ashley had been afraid of snakes since she almost stepped on one as a child. "I thought you didn't like them."

"It's okay, I have my angels protecting me now Mommy."

And that was all it took.

Xxxxx

For the rest of the day, Mulder and Scully had their work cut out for them. Ashley was exuberant, chattering and jumping and running around the zoo whenever she could get away with it. Her spirit had come back to her. And it stayed there even after the sun went down and her tired little legs gave out. In Mulder's arms, just as they were about to exit through the gates, she muttered something.

"I want to see the butterflies."

"Ash, the butterfly house is closed. The zoo is going to shut down for the night."

"Mulder, I really need to see the butterflies. I really do."
He couldn't help himself. Even with Scully calling after him in the background, he turned around and walked Ashley over to the butterfly house, where a "closed" sign was being chained around the door.

"I'm sorry, we're all done for the day," the man running the operation had to inform them.

"Please... she lost her father last week. Can you let us in for just a few quick moments?"

The man's face and heart softened to them and he nodded. "Only for a few minutes. The zoo is closing."

Scully caught up to them just as Mulder was setting Ashley on the ground. The butterflies weren't very active, but one did fly past her face, and she went running after it.

"Thanks for coming with me. Thanks for doing what Jack didn't," she finally had the opportunity to tell her partner as her daughter explored the enclosure.

"I'll always be here for you. Both of you," he emphasized, catching her eye quickly. Scully's cheeks were noticeably blushed.

"Do you think I'm handling this well?" she had to ask.

"I think you're doing the best that you can. She's on the mend, Scully. She's tough like you."

“I don’t know how to do this”.

“You’re doing a great job. You love her and you’re there for her. That’s all she needs.”

"Mommy, Mulder! Look!" Ashley called over to them from where her hand was poised over a branch where many of the winged insects had perched. Scully was about to tell her daughter not to hit the branch, to be gentle, but thought against it. When Ashley started to run, her hand dragged across the tiny branches that constituted the butterflies' homes, and they began to fly away, leaving a trail of butterflies as Ashley ran. Then she stopped, and they swirled around her. It was the happiest she had ever looked.

XXX

Scully had to wake Mulder up from his impromptu nap on the car ride home. Ashley fell asleep as well, but that was expected after her big day. Grunting, he offered to take the little girl up to the apartment, where he tucked her into her with a kiss that made her eyes flutter open.

"Daddy?" she asked, confused.

"No honey, it's Mulder," He quickly explained, feeling slightly embarrassed at how much he loved the sound of Ashley calling him "Daddy."

"Oh yeah," Ashley murmured. “Thank you for taking me to the zoo”, she added and went back to sleep. She had no idea how much she had warmed the should-have-been completely disconnected man's heart. Yes, he felt like her father, even after only a few months. Yes, he loved her with all his heart. Yes, he would so anything to keep her safe. Quietly, he bowed his head and sent a message up to Jack. Like his partner, he had spent much of his time since the man's death angry with him for leaving Ashley behind with hardly any memories. But that night, he felt sorry for the man who had lived his life separately from his beautiful child. And he had to make sure that he knew.

"I love her like she's my own. Nothing's going to hurt her. Not while I'm around," he assured Jack,
who he thought that, in death, would need some confirmation that his baby was safe, now that he could properly see how amazing she was.
Mulder glanced across to the passenger seat, noting his partner’s pale complexion. “You ok Scully?” She’d been quiet ever since they’d began their journey home from Quantico, having spent the morning there, and Mulder was sure he’d done nothing wrong to deserve the silent treatment.

“I’m fine,” she answered. “My stomach just feels a little off.”

“Do you want me to pull over?”

She shook her head, though Mulder could tell that she immediately regretted the action. “I’ll be fine. Ashley was complaining of the same this morn…” she trailed off, before putting her hand on the dashboard, bracing herself. “Mulder, can you…?” Before she could even finish her sentence, Mulder had pulled off of the road and parked the car. Scully instantly unbuckled her seatbelt, opened the door and ran from the car towards the hedge. Mulder turned away, giving his partner some privacy as she became reacquainted with her breakfast.

Minutes later she walked back to the car and got back inside, her previously pale cheeks now flushed red. “Sorry about that,” she murmured weakly, running a shaky hand through her hair. She closed the car door and put on her seatbelt.

Mulder looked over at her, concerned. “Do you want to rest for a while or…?”

“I’m ok, I think I just need to get home.”

“Of course.” Putting the car into drive, Mulder pulled out onto the road to continue their journey. “Just let me know if I need to pull over again, else we may need to pay for dry-cleaning.”

“Don’t make me laugh Mulder,” Scully answered, placing her hands on her stomach.

“Sorry. So you think it’s a bug?”

“I think it might be. Ashley said she felt ill this morning, but I thought it was a ploy to get a day off from pre-school.”

“She doesn’t like pre-school?”

“She does most of the time, but every now and then she tries it on.”

“Is she getting on ok?” Scully nodded slowly, mindful of her movement. “Her reports have been pretty good on the whole, although her teacher always comments that she talks a lot.”

“Never.” Mulder smiled. A was full of energy, and seemed to talk non-stop whenever he saw her. He always felt as though he needed a lie-down after spending time with her, and had no idea how Scully coped with a lively four year old and a full-time job.

“She did get in trouble last week though. During her lunch break she decided to stop playing in the sandpit and tip a bucket of sand down a little boy’s back.” Mulder couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s not funny Mulder.” He noticed a small smile grace Scully’s lips. “I have no idea where she gets it from.”

“I bet. What’s the worst thing you ever did as a kid Scully?”
She shook her head, and at first Mulder thought she was refusing to answer his question. It wasn’t until he saw her eyes widen that he realised, and once again he slowed the car to pull over.

They made it to Georgetown 30 minutes later, only stopping once more en route, and Mulder insisted on carrying Scully’s briefcase up for her. No sooner had they stepped through the door then Scully’s cell phone rang. Mulder waited patiently while she answered the call, making her way unsteadily to the sofa and taking a seat as she listened. “I’ll be right there,” she answered moments later, before hanging up. Mulder looked over at her quizzically. “That was Ashley’s preschool. She’s just been sick and needs to come home.”

“I’ll get her,” Mulder volunteered. Before Scully could argue he continued. “Scully, you can barely hold yourself up right now, let alone go and pick her up.”

“I can call my mom.”

“Your mom is all the way in Baltimore. It makes sense for me to go get her and then I’ll bring her back here. Why don’t you go and lie down?”

Shaking her head, Scully opened her mouth to speak, but her partner interrupted. “Go take a nap Scully. I’ll collect Ashley and I’ll put her to bed when we get home. I’ll wake you if I need anything.”

After considering his proposal and realising she had no other choice in the matter, Scully nodded reluctantly, realising he was right, and it was then that Mulder realised just how ill she must have been feeling – usually she had no problem in arguing with him. As Scully slumped off to bed, defeated, Mulder made his way out of the apartment and towards Ashley.

“I want mommy,” Ashley said wearily, as Mulder opened the door and ushered her into the apartment.

“I know, but mommy’s sick just like you and she’s sleeping. Do you wanna take a nap too?” Ashley shook her head, standing by patiently as Mulder removed her jacket and placed it over the back of the sofa. “Lie on the couch?” Again she declined. Mulder crouched down so he was at eye level with the little girl, and reached out to feel her forehead. He was pretty sure she was burning up, though her complexion was deathly pale. “Do you want something to eat?” A look of horror flashed across Ashley’s face, and before Mulder could react, she leaned forward and vomited down his shirt. Horrified, she promptly burst into tears.

“Hey.” Mulder quickly and calmly peeled off his dress shirt, thankful that his undershirt hadn’t been soiled, and in his free hand reached out and pulled Ashley in for a hug, trying to soothe her. “It’s ok, you’re ok.” He lifted her into his arms, noting that she’d managed to avoid her own clothes, and headed in towards the bathroom. Discarding the shirt in the bathtub, he felt Ashley hug him tighter. “Do you still feel sick sweetie?” She shook her head against him. “Ok, let’s get you settled on the sofa and I’ll get you a drink.”

“I don’t want to be sick Mulder,” Ashley replied weakly.

“I know you don’t Ash, but if you’ve got a sickness bug it’s got to come up.”

“I don’t want a bug. I don’t like bugs.”

“It’s not a real bug. We’ll get you some fluids and see what happens. We can watch cartoons if you
like?” Despite her illness, the little girl seemed to perk up a little at his suggestion.

“Can we watch Bugs Bunny?”

“Let’s get you a drink and then we’ll see what we can do.”

Carrying Ashley out of the bathroom, Mulder headed towards the kitchen to fetch her a glass of water, well aware that she had to keep hydrated. He moved to stand her back onto the floor, but she clung on to him tightly, letting out a whimper as he did so. “Noooo!”

“Oh, ok, I won’t put you down.” With his free hand he retrieved a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. “Let’s go and sit down.” Continuing to the living room, Mulder took a seat on the sofa, Ashley still stuck to him like glue. After he helped her shift so she was seated more comfortably on his lap, Mulder gave her a sip of water, before picking up the remote switching on the television. “Ok, Bugs Bunny, Bugs Bunny, Bugs Bunny…” he flicked through the channels, finally coming to rest on a cartoon with Tom and Jerry instead. “How about this?” Ashley nodded against him. “Just tell me if you need anything sweetie, ok? And let me know if you want to be sick again.”

“I don’t want to be sick again,” she whimpered against him, clutching him tightly.

Mulder said nothing, not wanting to upset her any more. Instead he held her as they watched cartoons and she finally fell asleep.

Xxxxx

Mulder woke up with a start as he heard the door to the bathroom slam shut. Looking down, he noticed that Ashley was still fast asleep and so he shifted her in his arms, lifting her off his lap and on to the sofa next to him. Thankfully the little girl didn’t stir. He rose from the couch, stretching to relieve the ache in his body from being sat in the same position for – he noted, checking his watch – well over an hour. Heading into the kitchen, Mulder retrieved a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water, before continuing in the direction of the bathroom.

“Scully?” He tapped gently against the door, grimacing as he heard sounds of retching coming from the room. “Are you ok?”

There was a cough before she answered weakly. “Go away Mulder.” Another cough.

“I’ve got a drink if you’d like-“ Mulder was cut off as Scully responded with more retching. Finally, when he heard the toilet flush, he moved to open the door.

“Mulder…” Scully was slumped back against the bathtub, exhausted. Clad in her rumpled pjs, she looked at him through tired eyes. “Mulder, please –“

He entered the bathroom, pausing to hand Scully the glass of water, before he continued over to the sink, wetting a washcloth. “I’d ask how you’re feeling, but I think I just heard the answer.” He handed her the cloth, which she accepted gratefully, and then took a seat next to her on the floor.

“The last time I was sick was when I was suffering from morning sickness with Ashley. I think today I’m making up for lost time.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.” She took a tentative sip of her water. “Thank you for this.”
“You’re welcome.”

“How’s Ashley?”

“She’s dead to the world on the sofa.”

“Has she been ill any more?”

“You could say that.” When Ashley had first fallen asleep earlier that afternoon, Mulder had hoped that the sickness was over and so moved her to her bedroom. It turned out she was only just getting started. No sooner had he tucked her up into her own bed then the little girl woke suddenly and promptly vomiting once more. This time she managed to avoid Mulder, though her bedspread was a write-off. After cleaning her up, Mulder moved a distraught Ashley back to the sofa, before clearing her bed and putting the soiled comforter and sheets into the washing machine. He salvaged an old cleaning bucket from Scully’s kitchen cupboard and took it back out into the living room, placing it by the sofa just in case Ashley decided to be sick again. And she did. How one little girl could bring up that much, he would never know. But eventually she fell asleep once again, with Mulder following suit shortly after.

“I’m sorry. I should call my mom.”

“There’s no need, I’m here.”

Scully frowned. “You didn’t sign up to this Mulder, it’s not fair…” she paused, taking in his dress. “What happened to your shirt?”

He gestured to the tub behind him. “I’m currently soaking it.”

“Ashley?”

Nodding, Mulder smiled. “Your kid’s got good aim Scully.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising. It wasn’t her fault and it’s not yours. Can I get you anything else?”

Scully shook her head against the tub. “No thank you. You can head off if you like.”

“Come off it Scully. I’m not leaving the two of you alone. You can barely hold yourself up right now, let alone take care of your sick child.”

“I’m her mother.”

“And moms are allowed to get sick from time to time. You know…” Mulder realised just why Scully seemed so adamant that she could look after her daughter. “You are allowed to rely on other people Scully. You’re not Superwoman.”

“Ashley’s my daughter.”

“Yes she is, and you’re doing a great job. But it doesn’t make you a bad parent to ask someone else for help. No one expects you do all of this alone.” He paused as Scully took another sip of water, clearly thinking over his words. “Now, why don’t you head back to bed for a while. I’ll see to Ashley.” Scully looked as though she was about to argue, but then thought better of it. “Only if you’re sure?”

“Of course I am. I’ll send you my bill for my services once you’re feeling better.”
“Please do. I owe you big time Mulder.”

Getting to his feet, Mulder held out his hand and pulled Scully up into a standing position. “Ok?” She nodded. Then, not breaking the contact, he led her out of the bathroom and back into her darkened room. Taking the glass of water from her, he placed it onto her bedside table whilst she got into bed. Once she was settled, Mulder pulled the comforter up over her. “You ok?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“No worries. Sleep well. If you need me, just shout.”

He made out Scully’s smile in the darkness. “I will.” No sooner had the words left her mouth, she closed her eyes and drifted back off to sleep. Mulder made his way out of the room and back to Ashley, who stirred awake as he approached. “Mulder?”

“Hey trouble, how are you feeling?”

She blinked, before frowning. “Where’s mommy?”

“Mommy’s sleeping.”

“I want my mommy.”

“Ok, let’s go.” He lifted her up into his arms, pressing a kiss to her forehead, noting she was still warm. Carrying her into Scully’s bedroom, he pulled back his partner’s comforter and placed her daughter into her bed. Ashley immediately shifted closer to her mother, curling up against her side and promptly fell back to sleep. Mulder smiled down at the pair of them, the two so similar in profile. They’d been in his life less than a year, but already they’d gotten under his skin, particularly Ashley. She was so adorable, so fun and intelligent and inquisitive, and she’d already experienced so much loss in her short life. He was determined to be there for her – and for Scully too, who seemed hesitant to ask anyone else for help. Whether it was taking the little girl to the zoo, or looking after her and her mother when they were sick, he really didn’t mind. Not even the following day, when he himself came down with the sickness bug.
“Ashley, stand still please.” Satisfied that her daughter wasn’t about to move, Scully resumed brushing the little girl’s hair. As usual, there was a fine line between them leaving the house on time that morning and being late to pre-school and work. Though Ashley was a morning person and up at the crack of dawn, she was also a little too relaxed, not seeing any need to get ready in a hurry, unlike her mother, who was a stickler for punctuality.

“Mommy?”

“Yes sweetie.”

“Am I seeing – ouch!” she yelled dramatically as Scully found a tangle in her hair.

“Sorry, I’ve nearly got it.”

“Am I seeing Mulder today?”

Scully paused momentarily. “Not today.” It was a question Ashley had been asking her for weeks now. Since the X Files had been closed down, Mulder and Scully’s contact had been limited for fear that they were being watched. The last thing either of them wanted was for their enemies to realise just how important Ashley was to Mulder. Notsurprisingly, the little girl was missing him, which only made her mother feel guilty – guilty that the only father figure in Ashley’s life was no longer safe to be around her.

“Why?” It was another of Ashley’s favourite questions; one that Scully had tired of many months before.

“We’ve been through this Ashley. Mulder has work to do. And you have to get to pre-school too,” she added as she tied her daughter’s hair up into a ponytail.

“Can I see him tonight?”

“Not tonight.”

“Tomorrow?”

“You’ll see him soon.”

“You keep saying soon.”

Scully wondered just when her daughter became so argumentative. “And I mean soon. But not today. Now…” She placed the hairbrush onto the bed and tapped Ashley on the shoulders. “Go wash your face please and get your bag. We’re leaving in five minutes.”

Rather than run off towards the bathroom, Ashley turned to face her mother, her expression solemn. Scully frowned in concern. “What’s the matter baby? Don’t you like your hair?”

Ashley shrugged. “I miss Mulder.”

Scully pulled her daughter in for a hug. “I know you do, and Mulder misses you too, but he’s busy.”

“Has he forgotten about me?”
“No, not at all. He’s just got a lot of work to do at the moment. Listen…” Sighing, Scully squeezed her little girl tightly. “Maybe if you’re a good girl at school today we can call Mulder tonight.”

Pulling back, Ashley looked up at her mother, grinning widely. “Can we go see him?”

“We can phone him. Then we’ll see him soon.” Ashley didn’t protest, no doubt realising that a phone call was better than nothing. Her previous sad mood was forgotten, and she started bouncing excitedly on the spot.

“I can tell him about my new teacher and my tooth and my boyfriend and – “

“Your boyfriend?” It was Scully’s turn to smile.

“Uh huh. Thomas.”

“I thought Jamie was your boyfriend?”

“He is Mommy, but Thomas wants to marry me.”

“Oh he does? Well then…” Scully got to her feet. “I guess we’d better get you to school to I can meet this new man of yours.” For once, Ashley didn’t argue.

Scully paced up and down in the parking lot. She knew she was taking a risk by contacting Mulder– after all, they had been trying their hardest not to spend too much time together – but she needed to make sure he was ok. She’d seen him earlier that day and he hadn’t even acknowledged her, which is why she’d requested their meeting. They needed to talk.

Scully turned to see Mulder walking towards her. “Four dollars for the first hour of parking is criminal. What you got better be worth at least 45 minutes.”

At least his sense of humour was still intact, Scully mused as she smiled up at him, relieved to see him. “You know, Mulder, from…from back there, you look like him.”

“Him?”

“Deep Throat.”

“He’s dead Scully,” Mulder answered matter-of-factly. “I attended his funeral at Arlington through eight-power binoculars from a thousand yards away. Now, the picture frame was turned down, you wanted to talk. What have you found?”

“I wanted to talk but I haven’t found anything.”

He wasn’t impressed by her words, scouring the area to make sure they were still alone. A car started up in the parking lot, and Mulder stepped in closer to his former partner. “It’s dangerous for us just to have a little chat Scully. We must assume we’re being watched.”

“Mulder, I haven’t seen any indication – “

“No, no, of course not. These people are the best.”

“I’ve taken all of the necessary precautions. I have doubled back over my tracks to make sure that I haven’t been followed and no one has ever followed me. The X Files have been terminated Mulder. We have been reassigned. I mean, what makes you think they care about us anymore
“anyway?”

“So why have you bothered to come here covertly?”

“Because I realised it was the only way that you would see me.”

She had a point and they both knew it. “So what do you want?”

“To know that you’re all right. Mulder, you passed me today within a foot, but you were miles away.”

“I’m fine.” Even Mulder didn’t sound convinced.

“I also wanted to check it would be ok with you if Ashley called you later.”

At the mention of the little girl’s name he seemed to perk up. “Of course. How is she?”

“She misses you,” Scully replied, almost reluctantly. “I think she got so used to spending time with you that she’s finding things a little tough.”

Mulder nodded in understanding. “I’ll see what I can do. Tell her I miss her too.”

“How are things?”

He sobered. “They’ve got me on electronic surveillance. White-bread cases, bank fraud, insurance fraud, health care swindles.” He sounded so dejected, as though he’d given up, and so Scully decided to call him on it. He was no longer the enthusiastic individual she’d met when she’d first walked into his office all those months ago, and despite him telling Scully that he wouldn’t give up – even after the closure of the X Files – he appeared to have done so. He even told her as much, comparing himself to astronomer George Ellery Hale, who one night had been given the idea for a telescope from an elf.

“And you’re worried that all your life, you’ve been seeing elves?”

He slumped against the wall, crouching down. “In my case, little green men.”

“But Mulder, during your time with the X Files, you’ve seen so much.”

“That’s just the point. Seeing is not enough. I should have something to hold onto. Some solid evidence. I learned that from you.” He stared hard at Scully.

Scully crouched down so she was at eye level with him. “Your sister’s abduction, you’ve held onto that.”

Mulder looked away. “I’m beginning to wonder if…if that even happened.”

“Mulder, even if George Hale only saw elves in his mind, the telescope still got built. Don’t give up. And next time…” Sighing, she got to her feet. “We meet out in the open.” With that she walked away, leaving Mulder alone in the parking lot, realising just how much he missed his ex-partner and her little girl.

Scully checked her watch one more time and sighed, her eyes trained firmly on the classroom door in front of her. Ashley was late, though this was by no means a first. Though the little girl was never in a rush to get to school, she was always reluctant to leave too, often staying behind to talk
to her fellow classmates or teacher. It made Scully regret leaving Quantico quite so early to pick her daughter up. Just then the door opened, and Ashley stepped out into the hallway. The little girl looked up, her eyes wide and an excited grin on her face, and she suddenly broke out into a run. However her mother noticed in horror that Ashley wasn’t running in her direction. “Ashley!” Scully herself prepared to chase after her daughter, before she spotted the person she was running towards. Mulder. As the little girl reached him, Mulder bent down and lifted her and swung her around once, before he settled her into his arms. Ashley gave him a tight hug, and as he began to walk towards Scully, she began filling him in on all aspects of her life that he’d missed.

“Mulder, what are you doing here?” Scully asked as he approached her. He was the last person she’d expected to see, particularly after their earlier meeting at the parking lot when he’d seemed reluctant to speak, afraid they were being watched.

“Well, I thought it was about time that I caught up with my favourite four year old.” He looked around, purposely ignoring Ashley. “Now I just need to find her. Can you see any four year olds around here?”

“Me Mulder! I’m four!”

Mulder looked at Ashley in surprise. “Where did you come from?”

Ashley shook her head, giggling. “You’re silly.”

“That’s what your mom tells me a lot too.” He turned his attention back to Scully; his expression suddenly uncertain. “I’m sorry, if this isn’t ok, I can –”

“No, no it’s fine.” More than fine, Scully thought, if Ashley’s expression was anything to go by. She hadn’t seen her daughter that excited for quite a while.

“Do you guys have any plans now?”

She shook her head. “We were just going to go home and relax for dinner.”

“Can I interest you in a trip to the park? We could grab some dinner afterwards?”

“Yes!” Ashley answered enthusiastically. “Please say yes mommy!”

Scully couldn’t help but smile at the two expectant faces in front of her. “Well, as you said please, I guess we could.”

“Really?!” Ashley shrieked.

“Sssh!” Her mother laughed. “Yes, but you have to be a good girl, else we’ll go straight home.”

“I promise mommy, I’ll be the bestest girl ever.”

It was Mulder’s turn to chuckle. “Now this I can’t wait to see.” He glanced over at Scully. “Are you ready?”

She nodded. “Let’s go.” Letting Mulder take the lead, Scully followed him and Ashley out of the building, grateful to him for making her daughter’s day.

Xxxxxxxx

They travelled out of town to a playground just over 30 minutes from Washington DC, both in separate cars. Mulder let Scully drive on ahead, no doubt checking that they weren’t being
followed, before joining his ex-partner and her child minutes after they arrived. Ashley had talked non-stop during the journey, visibly excited that she was allowed to spend the evening with Mulder. Though Scully knew her daughter shouldn’t get too close to him – after all, he had no responsibility towards her – she was relieved that he was currently someone Ashley could look up to. Plus she seemed to have fun when he was around, and after the loss of her father and grandfather, she deserved to smile.

“What do you want to go on first Ash?” Mulder called as he led them into the playground. Ashley came to a stop, surveying the park ahead of her.

“The slide,” she commented, before skipping off ahead.

“Be careful,” Scully called after her, noting that her daughter paid her no attention.

“Come on Mulder.” He knew better than to ignore the little girl and so followed her over to the slide, whilst Scully took a seat on a nearby bench. “Come on!” She began climbing up the steps to the top of the slide. “Come on!”

“What? Ashley I’m too big to go on this.”

She turned to frown at him, and at that moment looked so much like her mother that Mulder had to stifle a laugh. “No you’re not. Come on, it’ll be fun!”

“I’m too big and too old for this. I tell you what…” Mulder pointed to his left. “I’ll watch you come down instead, ok?”

Ashley thought over his offer, before nodding reluctantly. “Ok.” She continued to the top. “Watch me!” Without warning she launched herself down the slide face first. Luckily she came to a stop before she fell off the edge. Without even turning around to look at his partner, Mulder knew that Scully was likely on the edge of her seat, praying that her daughter wouldn’t injure herself. “I did it Mulder,” Ashley announced proudly moments later as he lifted her up from the slide and placed her firmly back onto the ground.

“You did! Go careful next time though, ok?”

“Sure.” With that she raced off ready to take on the slide once more. Mulder watched patiently as she went on the slide time and time again, each time calling out encouragement to her. He’d never tire of hearing her giggle, he realised. She was like a ray of sunshine in his life, and he knew at that moment that he’d made the right decision in deciding to meet her from school.

“Mulder” Ashley yelled, grabbing his attention. “I wanna go on the swings!”

“What do you say?” Scully called from behind them.

“I wanna go on the swings please.”

It wasn’t quite the answer that her mother was looking for, but Mulder laughed and nodded all the same. “Sure, let’s go.” As Ashley ran off, Mulder turned to his ex-partner. “Come on Scully, I’ll give you a push?”

Raising her eyebrows, Scully shook her head adamantly. “I think I’ll pass, thank you.”

“Come on! You’re not scared are you?”

She could see the challenge in his eyes. “Not at all.”
“Well then, get over here.” For a moment Mulder expected her to argue once more, and so he was
surprised when she got to her feet and headed in his direction. Smirking, he fell into stride with her
as they followed Ashley over to the swings. “Here you go Scully,” he said, gesturing to a swing
before lifting Ashley up and settling her into the neighbouring one. He moved to stand behind the
little girl and began to push her gently.

“Isn’t this fun mommy?” Ashley remarked.

“It certainly is.” She couldn’t help but smile at her daughter’s enthusiasm.

“So how’s school going little lady? Mulder asked as he gently pushed Ashley on the swing.

“Good, she replied,” beaming up at him.

“Are you behaving yourself?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well that’s good. Made lots of new friends?”

“Thomas is my new boyfriend,” she replied seriously. “We’re getting married.”

“You are?” After smirking at Scully, Mulder reached out and grabbed hold of the chains, halting
the swing. “Hold on a second, don’t you think I should meet him before the two of you get
married?”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “That’s what mommy said.”

“Quite right too,” Scully commented.

“Have you set a date for the wedding?” Letting go of the chains, Mulder resumed pushing the little
girl back and forth.

“Maybe tomorrow, but Eleanor and me and Caitlin are playing with our dolls, so I don’t know if
we’ll have time.”

“Well you have to get your priorities straight,” Mulder replied, trying not to laugh, though he saw
Scully chuckle out of the corner of his eye. “You can’t dump your girlfriends just because you’re
getting married.”

“Are you going to marry my mommy?”

“What?” Mulder quickly glanced over at Scully, noting her horrified expression as she took in her
daughter’s question.

“Higher Mulder. Push me higher!”

“Your mom and I aren’t going to get married Ash, we just work together.”

“Everyone gets married someday.”

“Well not everyone, but…Ashley…. ”

“Honey, would you like a go on the seesaw?” Mulder smiled gratefully at Scully, relieved that
she’d changed the subject, though he noted she wouldn’t quite meet his eye.
“Yes please mommy.” The little girl glanced up at Mulder. “Is that ok?”

Mulder stepped back and waited for the swing to gradually slow down. “It sure is.”

Thank you for this Mulder,” Scully spoke, keeping her eyes trained firmly on her daughter, who was entertaining herself once again on the slide. “Thanks for coming today.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Yes it is. I know the reasons for you keeping your distance lately, and I appreciate what it must have took to come here this afternoon. I know you don’t have any obligations when it comes to Ashley but –“

“Scully –“

“We appreciate you being here.”

“Scully,” Mulder tried again, more insistently this time. “I know I’m not responsible for Ashley, but I think a lot of her. She’s been through a lot lately, and I don’t think I realised how me staying away from you guys would affect her.”

“Over the past year she’s lost the only father figures she’s ever known. I mean, I know I have Bill and Charlie, but she hardly sees them and it’s not the same. I just apologise that it somehow fell to you, I mean –“

“I’m not complaining Scully, not at all. Ashley is a great girl, and she makes life a little more interesting.”

Scully chuckled. “She certainly does.”

“You’ve got yourself a great little girl Scully. I don’t know how you manage to juggle a demanding job with being a full-time mom, but I’m in awe of you. You’re doing a great job.”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“What?” After watching Ashley come hurtling down the slide on her stomach, Mulder turned to look at the woman next to him.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ve done the right thing. I mean, I couldn’t live without her, but sometimes I wonder whether I brought unnecessary pain into her life. I knew that Jack didn’t want anything to do with her and yet I still brought her into this world. I still let him waltz in and out of her life every once in a while and give her hope that someday he might change. Maybe if I hadn’t done that she wouldn’t have taken his death so hard.”

“Scully.” Reaching out, Mulder placed his hand lightly on Scully’s own, squeezing it gently. “I know things have been tough for her lately. And you too,” he added. “But at least she met her dad. In years to come you can tell her that, and I know Jack wasn’t the greatest of fathers, but you guys have some good memories together, and you can tell her about them. She can’t hate you for trying to do what’s best for her.”

“She can when she’s a teenager,” Scully replied, smiling.

“Well yes, but then she’ll hate everyone else too at that age.”
“That’s true,” Scully was cut off by a shriek ahead of them, and she looked up to see Ashley come racing down the slide. The little girl didn’t manage to stop herself in time, went crashing onto the ground face down. Mulder and Scully both got to their feet and raced towards her, Mulder reaching her first. He lifted her up off the ground, noticing immediately that she’d cut her face, hands and knees. Ashley was crying hard, and finding it tough to breathe, no doubt in shock Mulder realised. “It’s okay, you’re okay,” he murmured soothingly.

“Mommy,” she cried, reaching out to Scully, who took her from Mulder’s grasp.

“You’re okay baby, it’s just a few scratches.”

“I fell off the slide.”

“I know you did, I saw. You should need to be more careful. Now where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

Ashley nodded tearfully, before holding up a hand. “Kiss it better mommy.”

“Okay,” Scully did as her daughter asked, before rummaging around in her pocket for a tissue. “I’ve got a first aid kit in the car, so we’ll go and get you cleaned up, ok?”

“Okay. Mulder,” Ashley turned her attention to the man stood next to her. “Kiss it better Mulder.”

Mulder leaned across and pressed his lips to the palm of the little girl’s hand. “Now,” he said as he pulled back. “I’d say as you’re being such a brave girl, you deserve some ice cream. What do you think?”

Suddenly Ashley’s injuries were forgotten.

Scully held open the door for Mulder while he carried a now sleeping Ashley into the apartment. As he headed straight for the little girl’s bedroom, Scully closed the door behind her and followed him through the building. After eating practically her own body weight in ice cream, Ashley had requested that Mulder drive her home, before promptly falling asleep the instant he had fastened her seatbelt.

“Do you want to get her changed?” Mulder glanced back at his ex-partner, who shook her head.

“It’s okay; I’ll just take off her shoes for now. She’ll probably wake up in a bit.” Scully stepped forward and removed the little girl’s sneakers; then moved to pull back the comforter. Mulder carefully transferred Ashley into the bed, relieved when she didn’t stir. “She sleeps through more or less anything,” Scully commented, as though reading his thoughts. “A bomb could go off next to her and she still wouldn’t wake.”

“Just like her mom then,” Mulder remarked dryly, following Scully back out into the hallway; switching off Ashley’s light as he went.

“Did you want a coffee or something?”

He shook his head. “I’d better head off.”

“Right.” For a moment he wondered whether there was a tinge of disappointment behind her
words, but he realised he must have imagined it. “Thank you again for tonight. I think you made Ashley’s month.”

“It was my pleasure. I’ll try not to leave it too long next time. I’ll see you around Scully,” he added, as he reached the front door, not wanting to say more just in case they were being watched.

“See you.” Once Mulder had left, Scully returned to her daughter’s bedroom, just as Ashley began to stir.

“Mommy?”

“Hey sleepyhead. Let’s get you ready for bed, ok?” Scully directed her drowsy daughter to the bathroom, before helping her out of her clothes and into her pjs.

“Where’s Mulder?”

“He’s gone home. He said to say goodnight though.”

“I like Mulder,” Ashley commented as she got back into bed, her eyes fluttering shut.

“I know you do.” Realising her daughter had drifted off once more, Scully pressed her lips to Ashley’s forehead before switching out the light and closing the door behind her, leaving her daughter to sleep.
"Mommy?" Scully stopped walking and turned around, sighing heavily. Ashley stood in front of her, a chocolate bar in her outstretched hand. "Can I have this?"

"Can you have this, what?" Scully prompted.

Ashley thought for a moment before replying. "Can I have this pleeeeeease?"

"Not tonight." As she turned and continued down the aisle, Scully heard the whine in her daughter's voice.

"But mommy, I want some chocolate."

"Ashley, put the candy bar down, you're not having it." Her mommy radar told Scully that her daughter was no doubt still stood in place, pouting.

"Why?"

"Because you were a naughty girl at pre-school today," she called back over her shoulder. "Mrs Coulson told me you hit Katie this morning. You're not having candy for a long time young lady. You need to learn your lesson."

"But mommyyyyyy!" Ashley ran to catch up with her mother, and grabbed hold of her sleeve. "Katie pushed me first."

"It doesn't matter what happened. You shouldn't hit someone Ashley, it's naughty. And don't think I won't tell Grandma what you've been up to either."

"Nooooo!"

"Just be glad you're getting to spend the night with Grandma. Naughty girls would normally be grounded. Next time think about that before hitting someone, ok?" Scully led her daughter towards the cashier. "Now come on, else we're going to be late." The truth was Scully was eager to get Ashley to her grandmother's house, because she had work to do back home. She had just returned from Virginia where Mulder had been involved in hostage negotiations with former FBI agent, Duane Barry, who also claimed to be an alien abductee. At first she wasn't involved in the case until Barry shot one of the hostages, and Mulder posed as a medic in order to gain access to the scene. It was then that Barry traded the injured hostage for Mulder. When Scully heard the news she immediately flew from Washington to Virginia, armed with the knowledge that Duane Barry had a history of irrational and violent behaviour. Thankfully Barry was captured before anyone of the other hostages were injured, and taken to hospital, where doctors discovered metal implants in his body. Scully had them checked out by ballistics, who were unable to determine what the implants were. It wasn't until she and Ashley reached the checkout line that she remembered she still had a vial in her coat pocket. She waited while the cashier totalled up her groceries, including a tub of ice cream she was planning to start once she'd dropped Ashley off at her mother's. As Scully moved to collect her shopping, the cashier was called away by another customer, leaving her alone. Making sure the woman was out of the way, Scully removed the implant from her pocket and ran it across the scanner. She looked on in horror as the machine immediately went crazy, beeping loudly as it rang up various digits.

"Mommy, what happened?" Ashley spoke as the cashier walked back over to them.
"What happened? Did you touch something?"

"Uh, I don't know what happened." With that she took hold of her shopping and, grabbing Ashley's hand, briskly walked out of the shop, wondering what the hell it was she was carrying in her pocket.

Scully sighed as she heard her partner's familiar voice ring out as the answerphone kicked in. She'd been hoping to talk to him, needing answers about the implant she was holding in her hand. "Hello, this is Fox Mulder. Leave a message please."

She waited for the beep before she spoke. "Mulder, it's me. I just got back from dropping Ashley at my mom's, and I just had something incredibly strange happen. This piece of metal that they took out of Duane Barry, it has some kind of code on it. I ran it through a scanner and some kind of a serial number came up. What the hell is this thing, Mulder? It's almost as if..." she hesitated, not quite wanting to say the words. "it's almost as if somebody was using it to catalogue him." Scully broke off as she heard a noise outside. For a second she almost put it down to the storm raging outside, but then curiosity got the better of her. She moved across to the window, still carrying the phone, and raised the blinds, not expecting to see a person outside staring back at her. Duane Barry. Scully gasped, and before she had time to react, Barry hit out, punching through the glass, sending her to the floor; the phone sliding out of her grasp. Knocking down the glass, Barry climbed in through the window and headed towards Scully, who was on her hands and knees, crawling towards the coffee table and her gun. "Mulder!" she called, wishing somehow that her partner was nearby, that he would burst into her apartment and save her from the crazed man approaching her.

"Come on lady," Barry called in response, grabbing hold of her foot.

"I need your help!" Reaching up, Scully attempted to grab hold of her gun, smashing the glass with her wrist. "Mulder!" Barry noticed the phone the same time she did, and quickly stamped on it, breaking it instantly. And it was then that Scully lost hope, realising no one was going to save her. Her final thought before Barry closed in on her was that she might never get to see her daughter ever again.
Chapter 13

It just almost midnight when Mulder pulled up outside of Scully’s apartment, noting that police were already on the scene. He’d returned to his own place barely 20 minutes before and immediately noticed the flashing of his answering machine. Playing Scully’s message back, he listened in horror as she told him of her suspicions about the chip they’d found inside of Duane Barry, before he heard the smashing of a window, Barry’s voice ring out, and Scully cry for help. And suddenly the message ended abruptly, leaving Mulder immediately scrambling for his keys and running out of the door towards his partner’s apartment.

After flashing his badge to an attending cop, Mulder entered the building, continuing to Scully’s apartment. On his way he noticed the broken glass, the blood on the wall, the phone smashed to pieces, and he couldn’t help but imagine the fight that occurred in here just a few short hours ago. He should have been there for her, he told himself. If only he’d have realised just what the chip was – a tracking device – he’d never have let Scully take it. She’d still be there, alive and well, attempting to disprove his theories and scolding Ashley for her endless energy. Ashley. When Mulder first heard Scully’s message, he’d missed the part where she mentioned dropping the little girl at her grandmother’s, and he’d instantly worried that she’d been there during the ordeal; that she’d witnessed Duane Barry take her mother. He gave silent thanks that she’d been out of the way; that she was safe. Now he had to make sure he found Scully and returned her to her daughter safe and well.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but you can’t disturb a crime scene.”

Mulder broke free from his thoughts to see Mrs Scully trying to enter the apartment, a sleeping Ashley in her arms. He’d met her once in passing when he’d stopped by Scully’s to drop off some files. It was in much happier times though.

“But this is my daughter’s apartment. Let me go, I have to get through. I have to get in!”

Before the cop could deny her entry, Mulder approached then. “Mrs Scully?” He moved to place his hand on her shoulder reassuringly, but then caught sight of the blood on it. Scully’s blood. “She’s not in there.”

“Where is she?” Mrs Scully asked, though Mulder made no move to reply. “Where is she?”

As the cops continued with their investigation, Mulder led Mrs Scully into the next room, giving her a brief outline of what had happened. He noticed she didn’t seem too shocked to hear that her daughter had been abducted – more resigned to the fact. “I knew it would happen this way,” she told him, still holding Ashley tightly against her. “I had this dream about Dana being taken away. I…uh…I was going to call her but I was afraid I was going to scare her.” She took a seat on the sofa and shifted Ashley onto her lap. Mulder sat opposite, wondering exactly how Maggie would break the news to Ashley; how the little girl would cope with her mother’s disappearance just a short time after her father and grandfather’s deaths. “She would have laughed at me anyway. She doesn’t believe in that kind of thing you know.”

Mulder nodded. He knew exactly what she meant. He was just about to answer her when he noticed Ashley begin to stir. Thankfully she simply adjusted herself on her grandmother’s lap and fell back to sleep, to the relief of the two adults in the room. “What are you going to tell her?” Mulder asked, nodding at the little girl.

Maggie shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to wait to find out what happens…” She
sighed heavily. “For now though, I’ll think of something.”

Mulder nodded in agreement. The last thing Ashley needed to know was that her mother had been kidnapped; that there was so much bad in the world. She was already scared of monsters – of the fictional kind – and the last thing she needed was to find out they really did exist. “I’ll find her Mrs Scully.”

Maggie stared hard at Mulder, as though trying to read him fully, before she nodded. “I know.”

Just a short time later came the lead that they were hoping for – Scully had been sighted. Footage from a patrol officer’s surveillance had captured the image of his partner in the trunk of Duane Barry’s car and had shown she was still alive. Meanwhile Mulder spent his time listening to the recording of Barry during the hostage crisis, hoping to read more into the man’s mind to get a clue of where he could have possibly taken Scully. And that’s when he discovered the lead – Skyland Mountain. Along with his current partner, Alex Krycek, he headed there; the cable guy operator confirming that Barry had been there just a short while before, though there had been no sign of Scully. Still in the boot of the trunk Mulder surmised – or at least he hoped. Realising he was running out of time, Mulder hopped into the cable car and, leaving Krycek behind, ascended the mountain, though that wasn’t without its drama – the tram stopping midway, and Mulder almost plunging to his death. But finally he arrived at the top, reaching Duane Barry’s car, where the only trace of Scully was the cross she wore still in the trunk. Pocketing it, Mulder then saw a brilliant light overhead, before he heard the sound of Barry laughing manically. Scully was gone.

Mulder looked up as he heard his name being called, and a familiar face came into view, running towards him. He rose from the bench just as Ashley flung herself into his arms, and he lifted her so they were face to face. “Hey trouble. You ok?”

She nodded enthusiastically as she hugged him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” He turned to face Mrs Scully as she approached the two of them, a thin smile on her tired-looking face. It had been a long few days for her too; the disappearance of her daughter and unexplained death of the man who abducted her no doubt taking its toll on her too. “Hello Mrs Scully.”

“Hello Fox.”

“Have you spoken to my mommy today?”

Mulder gave Maggie a questioning glance. “I’ve explained how Dana has had to go away urgently for work.” Maggie’s uncertain look gave Mulder the impression that she didn’t know what else to tell the little girl. After all, Mulder thought to himself, how do you explain to a four year old that her mother has been abducted, and may or may not be dead? He nodded towards Maggie before returning his attention to Ashley. “Not today I haven’t. Not yet.”

“I miss her.”

“She misses you too. A lot.”

“Thank you for calling me Agent Mulder,” Mrs Scully spoke up.
“I’m sorry I don’t have better news.” Placing Ashley back down onto the ground, he watched as she skipped off ahead of them.

“Do you know something? Is Dana ok?”

“We don’t know anything more about her,” he replied sadly.

“I know you’re doing all you can.” Motioning for Maggie to sit, Mulder then took his place next to her, and waited for her to speak. “I had that dream again last night. About Dana being taken away? I can’t tell you how it scares me.”

“It’s probably scarier when you stop having the dream. Don’t you think?” Tears clouded Maggie’s eyes and Mulder looked away, his eyes tracking Ashley as she ran across the grass, chasing a small dog. She had no idea just how much her life was changing – the one constant in her life had now disappeared.

“I found this.” He retrieved Scully’s necklace from his pocket and placed it into Maggie’s hand. As she took in the sight of the cross, her eyes welled with tears. “It’s something I... I never considered about her. If she was... if she was such a skeptic, why did she wear that?”

“I gave it to her on her 15th birthday.” She placed the cross back into Mulder’s hand, to his confusion.

“Don’t you want to keep it?”

She closed his hand, giving him the answer he needed. “When you find it, you give it to her.”

He nodded, determined to do whatever it took to bring back his partner.

xxxxx

It was late when Mulder’s phone rang, but he was far from asleep. Sleep had been a rarity since Scully had disappeared, and he refused to rest, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to until she’d been found. Evenings had been spent calling endless hospitals and local police stations, just in case there had been any sightings of his partner, and he was in constant contact with the Gunmen while they scoured the radar unofficially for any unexplained phenomena. Mulder immediately rushed over to the phone, answering it on the second ring, praying it was good news about his partner. “Mulder.”

He was instantly greeted by the sound of crying in the background before a woman finally spoke. “Mr Mulder, it’s Maggie Scully.”

It was bad news, he told himself, realising that the person crying was Ashley. It had to be bad news. “Mrs Scully, has something happened?” He waited for her to confirm his suspicions, and instead was surprised by her next words.

“I’m sorry to bother you. I know it’s late, but I was wondering if you could possibly pop over?”

“I…I can do that,” he replied, puzzled as to why she was calling.

“Ashley’s calling for you,” she replied, as though hearing his unspoken question. “She refuses to settle and I was hoping you might be able to calm her. I just can’t get her to stop crying. You’re my last hope.” Maggie sounded as though she’d reached the end of her tether. Though she’d had four children of her own, this was her first experience with a child whose grandfather, father and mother had been taken from her in recent months. It was no wonder Ashley was so upset. “You told me to call you if –“
“I’ll be right over,” he replied instantly, already scouring his apartment for his car keys.

“Thank you.” He couldn’t help but notice the relief in her voice.

After taking down her address, Mulder hung up, before rushing to get his coat and shoes. Ashley needed him, and he wasn’t about to let her down.

By the time Mulder pulled into Mrs Scully’s driveway, all of the lights were on inside the house. It was an impressive house; homely; a good place to bring up a loving family. From the outside, you would never have sensed the heartache currently being experienced within the four walls. Maggie met him at the door, looking tired and worried. He could hear Ashley still crying in earnest from somewhere inside the house. “Thank you for coming,” said Mrs Scully, gratefully.

“Has something happened? She seemed fine yesterday.”

As he entered the house, Maggie closed the door behind him. “I’m afraid Ashley caught sight of the evening news tonight and saw the picture of Duane Barry. Since then she’s been crying over the fact that a bad man had taken her mommy.” Mrs Scully seemed close to tears herself. “She got upset, crying for Dana, and now she refuses to settle and is convinced someone’s in her bedroom. That’s when she started calling for you.”

“She had trouble sleeping months ago,” Mulder explained. “She told me there were monsters in her room so I checked under the bed and in her wardrobe to try and calm her down. Back then the monsters didn’t have a face though.”

Maggie nodded sadly, before pointing him in the direction of the living room. Ashley was already waiting for him, sat on the sofa in her pale blue Cinderella pyjamas, tears streaming down her flustered face. She took one look at her visitor before launching herself off of the couch and into Mulder’s arms. “Mulder,” she cried, her tears falling faster as he lifted her up, hugging her tightly.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

“The bad man took my mommy,” she answered in between sobs. “He’s in my bedroom waiting to get me.”

“No he’s not Ash, he’s not here. He’s not going to hurt you. No one’s going to hurt you, ok? I’m not going to let that happen.”

“I want my mommy.”

“I know you do.” Mulder glanced back at Maggie, who was trying hard to keep herself composed. “But listen, your mom wouldn’t want to see you upset would she?” Ashley shook her head against him. “And if she were here now she’d tell you to go to bed.”

“I don’t want to go to bed, I don’t want the bad man to hurt me.”

“No one’s going to hurt you sweetheart, I’ll make sure of it. How about we go and check your room?”

“Ok,” she answered in a small voice. Maggie led them upstairs to the room serving as Ashley’s bedroom for the foreseeable future, flicking on the light. The bed was still made, and Mulder realised that the little girl had been resisting sleep for quite a few hours. No wonder Maggie looked so exhausted. Ashley clutched Mulder tightly, not releasing her grasp on his neck as he entered the
“There’s no one here Ash. Shall we check under the bed?”

“Uh huh.” She buried her face into his neck as he lifted up the cover and crouched down to look underneath.

“Nothing. Did you want to check for yourself?” Cautiously Ashley turned her head and looked underneath the bed. “See, nothing there.”

“He’s in the wardrobe,” she replied. From behind him, Mulder heard Maggie sigh dejectedly. It was only natural that Ashley was scared – after all, she’d been through a lot lately. Her mom had been the only constant in her life, and now she wasn’t here.

“Ok.” Getting to his feet, Mulder approached the wardrobe and opened it. He pushed aside Ashley’s clothes to check the back of the cupboard. “See, nobody’s here.” Still the little girl wasn’t convinced, and she directed Mulder around her bedroom, scouring anything and everything in sight, even the bed once again. By the time he’d checked the neighbouring bathroom, her tears had dried, and sleepiness had set in. Mulder returned to the bedroom still carrying her, and headed towards the bed. “Ok, time for bed little lady.”

“I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Ashley, sweetheart,” Maggie spoke. “There’s nobody here.”

“I want a story. I want Mulder to read me a story.”

“It’s late Ashley; Mulder has to go home to bed.”

“It’s ok,” Mulder spoke up. “I can do a story if she wants.”

Maggie smiled gratefully. “Only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. Now,” Pulling back the covers, Mulder placed Ashley in the bed, before taking a seat on the floor next to her bed and grabbing a book from the side. Sleeping Beauty. He tried not to laugh at the irony.

After kissing her granddaughter goodnight, Maggie walked out of the room, leaving them to it. When she returned barely twenty minutes later, she found Ashley fast asleep, with Mulder by her side, keeping a close eye on her as he ran a hand tenderly through her fair hair. She couldn’t help but smile at the image. Dana had told her in recent months just how much Ashley had warmed to her partner. Though she didn’t know the man who sat in front of her, Maggie was glad that her granddaughter had someone else looking out for her. Mulder startled as he noticed Maggie enter the room, and immediately sat back. “Hi,” he whispered, embarrassed. “She’s out like a light, finally.”

“Thank you for calming her down.”

He shrugged. “It’s the least I could do.”

She sensed he felt guilty over Dana’s abduction. “I’ve made some tea if you’d like to join me.”

“I’d better head off soon, I have things to do.”

“Things to do at this late hour?”
Getting to his feet, Mulder grimaced as he stretched out his sore muscles. “I’m going to find her Mrs Scully.”

Maggie nodded. “I know you are. But you need to rest. You’re not going to be any good for Dana or her little girl if you’re exhausted. Have some tea, and if you like, I can make up a bed for you tonight.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine, thank you.” He was lying and they both knew it.

“Well you can have the couch then. You’re exhausted and I’m not letting you drive back to Washington in this state. Now,” she added as they exited the bedroom, Mulder turning off the light after he’d checked on Ashley one final time. “The tea’s ready.”

Xxxxxx

By the time Mulder had finished his tea, Maggie had already made up a bed for him on the sofa, determined for him to stay and rest. They’d chatted briefly over their drinks, mainly about Ashley and how the little girl had been coping up till now in the wake of her mother’s disappearance. It wasn’t until Maggie let out an impressive yawn that Mulder realised that her granddaughter’s tantrum had worn her out. “I should let you get to bed.”

“Thank you for being here Fox. I appreciate it, Ashley does, and I’m sure Dana would too.”

He repeated his words from earlier that evening. “I’m going to find her.”

Nodding, she reached out and took hold of his hand, squeezing it gently. “In the meantime, you’re more than welcome here anytime. I know Ashley would love to see you, and my couch is always here for you.” Pulling away, Maggie got to her feet, Mulder following suit. “Sleep well Fox.”

Walking out of the kitchen, she headed upstairs, leaving Mulder to get ready for bed. He settled himself on the sofa, before he slowly drifted off to sleep, his partner the last thing on his mind.
The weeks passed and still there was no sign of Scully. For other people, life went on, but for Mulder he was stuck in limbo until his partner returned. He turned up to work every day of course, and when he wasn’t working he was doing his best to search for any leads in her disappearance, but that was all. He was there in body, but not spirit. Since the night that Maggie Scully had called him and asked him to help calm Ashley down, he’d been a frequent visitor there. As a result, Mulder now had a key to Mrs Scully’s house, and often spent his nights searching for monsters in Ashley’s bedroom, before reading her fairy tales until she eventually succumbed to sleep. More often than not he was woken up, still sat next to the bed, by Maggie, who directed him to the sofa where he spent the rest of the night. He’d developed a crick in his neck, was living out of an overnight bag and in some ways he missed the privacy of his own apartment, but Ashley needed him and he wasn’t about to disappoint her.

He’d returned earlier that evening from investigating a case out in LA. A case he just wanted to forget. He’d originally headed out to California to give himself a break, thinking that he needed something to take his mind off of his failure to find Scully. If he could get to the bottom of the ritualistic murders and actually solve a case, it would mean that he hadn’t lost his touch, and perhaps spur him on to find out the truth about his partner’s disappearance. His superiors were already questioning his ability to do his job, and Mulder knew that Scully would have wanted him to keep working. And so he’d travelled out to the Sunshine State to investigate what he discovered – to his surprise - to be vampiric serial killings. It was there that he met Kristen, a member of a local vampire club, with links to the previous killings. There was something about her, Mulder realised – maybe it was the way she seemed to know he was hurting, that he was looking for someone – or maybe it was that she was a lost soul, just as he was – and he couldn’t help but be drawn towards her. He’d wanted to help her, to ward her away from the world of drinking blood and save her. But instead he slept with her. The instant it was over he regretted it. He’d never done that before – never gotten involved with someone on a case. He knew it wasn’t professional, flouting the rules, but there had been a moment when Kristen was shaving him that Mulder just wanted to lose himself in her – to forget everything that was happening back home. And he’d done so, until the moment it was over, and he realised that sleeping with her had been a huge mistake. His first thought had been of Scully, of how she was out there somewhere, alone, frightened, confused and possibly hurt. Next his thoughts turned to Ashley, to the little girl back home, who missed her mom terribly and still couldn’t sleep at night for fear of monsters in the dark. He should be out there looking for her mom, he told himself, instead of satisfying his pathetic urges on the bathroom floor of a woman he barely knew. He’d let Scully down, he’d let Ashley down, and then later he let Kristen down, as he looked on while she blew up the house, sacrificing herself to kill the other vampires in her group. Mulder was well and truly alone – Kristen was dead and Scully was missing – which is why he immediately went to see Ashley upon his return.

He needed to see her, to beg her for forgiveness and to promise her that he’d never let her down again.

xxxx

Mulder entered the house, taking care not to make any noise at this late hour. The last thing he wanted to do was wake Maggie or let her think someone was breaking in. He didn’t even need to be here – Maggie wasn’t even aware he was back from LA so she wouldn’t have called him even if Ashley had asked for him – but he just needed to see the little girl. Entering her bedroom, he noticed that she was fast asleep, the glow from her recently installed nightlight (she’d developed a fear of the dark over recent weeks) illuminating her peaceful expression. For someone who was so
active when she was awake. Ashley slept like the dead at night – barely moving from the time she drifted off to the moment her eyelids fluttered awake. He carefully flicked on the lamp by her bedside before crouching down beside the bed. He’d stay for just a minute, he told himself, just to make sure she was ok. Reassured by her deep, measured breaths, he ran a hand through her hair, his fingers separating the blonde tendrils.

Mulder hesitated when he felt Ashley stir underneath his hand. Seconds later her eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him, puzzled. “Mulder?”

“Hey,” he whispered, a lump forming in his throat as tears sprung to his eyes. He was an idiot; a complete and utter fool. Ashley needed him, and yet he’d been across the country, making one of the biggest mistakes of his life. “Go back to sleep sweetheart.”

“You look sad.”

Shaking his head, Mulder couldn’t help but let the tears fall. “I’m ok,” he said, trying – and failing – to smile reassuringly. “I’ve done something stupid Ashley. Something bad. And I’m not sure that you or your mom are going to forgive me when you find out. It was a moment of weakness and I just…I wanted to forget, just for a second. But I’ve let you down.”

Ashley blinked up at him, both sleepy and confused. “You upset mommy?”

He nodded. “She’s going to be mad at me.”

After taking a moment to consider his words, Ashley sat up in the bed, before reaching out and wrapping her arms around his neck. “Don’t cry Mulder. Mommy won’t be mad for long. She usually shouts at me, but when I tell her I’m sorry she stops yelling. You just need to say sorry.”

Mulder couldn’t help but chuckle at her words. She was so young, so innocent, and despite the trauma she’d already experienced in her short life, she still had a positive outlook on everything. “I’ll remember that,” he replied, hugging her back. As he pulled away and dried his tears, Ashley caught sight of the strand of gold around his neck. “That’s mommy’s necklace.”

“Yes it is.”

“Is she coming home soon?”

“I hope so,” he replied honestly.

“Me too. Will you and mommy take me to the zoo again when she’s home?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged. But…” he added, noting the late hour. “Only if you’re a good girl and go to sleep now.”

For a moment Ashley looked as though she was about to protest, but then thought better of it. “Will you stay?”

“I’ll be downstairs on the sofa.” He hoped to be up and out before Mrs Scully woke – she’d only worry if she knew he’d crept into the house in the dead of night. “So don’t worry, I’ll be here if you need me.”

“Will you read me a story?”

Shaking his head, Mulder gestured for Ashley to lay back down. “It’s late missy, and you need to sleep.”
“I’m not tired.”

“Yes you are,” he countered as she let out a yawn. “Sleep now and if you’re good, I’ll come by tomorrow night and read you a story.”

Ashley seemed happy with his offer, and eagerly burrowed her head back down into her pillows. “G’night Mulder.”

“Goodnight. Sweet dreams.” With that he pressed his lips to her forehead and sat back and watched as the little girl closed her eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep. Once he was satisfied that she was out for the count, he rose to his feet, switched off the lamp and headed out of the room and downstairs. He quickly made up the sofa, stripped down to his boxers and undershirt and used the bathroom. No sooner had he settled on the couch, he heard movement coming down the stairs. It was someone on a mission, he could tell by the speed of the footsteps, and he surmised it must be Ashley. Sure enough, as he pushed himself into a seated position, the little girl walked into view. “Ashley?” he whispered, the sound of his voice startling her. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t sleep.” Without warning, she clambered up onto his lap. “Can I stay down here with you?”

“I don’t know Ash, I —“

“Please?”

Sighing, Mulder nodded against her. “Alright.” He figured he’d simply wait until she fell back to sleep before taking her upstairs to her own bed. “But only if you go to sleep straight away.”

“Is mommy coming home tomorrow?”

He clutch her tightly. “I’m not sure.”

She seemed to accept his answer. “I love you Mulder.”

Her words took Mulder by surprise. “I love you too,” he replied moments later, realising it was true. This little girl had wangled her way underneath his skin, and he knew he’d do anything for her. He may not have been able to protect Scully or even Samantha, but he would do everything in his power to make sure that Ashley was safe, that he knew. Ashley rested her head on Mulder’s shoulder, and as he rubbed her back soothingly she fell back into a peaceful sleep. Unwilling to move for the moment, not wanting to disturb the little girl on his lap, Mulder rested his head against the back of the sofa. Moments later he joined Ashley in a deep sleep.
Chapter 15

It was barely a week after Mulder returned from California that Maggie asked him if he’d look after Ashley overnight one evening. Her sister had just been released from hospital following a nasty fall, and so Mrs Scully had volunteered to take care of her on her first night home. Scully’s sister Melissa wasn’t available to babysit, and so Mulder was the only other option. Though he’d wanted to try and talk Maggie out of it, not quite sure how Ashley would settle if she was at his apartment overnight, he knew she wouldn’t have asked if she hadn’t been desperate, plus he’d already volunteered to do anything to help. So it was settled. Ashley arrived at his just after dinner that Friday evening, armed with a small Winnie the Pooh overnight bag and a bundle of energy. She hadn’t even batted an eyelid when Maggie said her goodbyes and left the two of them alone. Mulder had taken a day’s leave, and had spent the majority of his time trying to make his apartment suitable for a four year old; clearing up the clutter in his bedroom, hiding inappropriate videos, washing the sheets on the bed, cleaning every space she could possibly reach. He’d made a quick trip to the video store to pick up a few films suitable for her age group, before purchasing some popcorn, candy and sugary drinks that Scully would have no doubt frowned upon, but would keep the little girl amused throughout the night. Sure enough Ashley was content to spend the evening sat in front of the television with Mulder, sitting quietly as they watched The Little Mermaid, Snow White and Beauty and the Beast. Eventually her yawns betrayed her tiredness, and so Mulder got her ready for bed, reading her Sleeping Beauty – yet again – before she finally succumbed to slumber. He then went back out into the living room, and after clearing up after the little girl, fell asleep on the sofa. Babysitting was tough work.

xxx

“Mulder…Mulder?” As he woke, Mulder became aware of a small hand gently shaking his arm. He opened his eyes to find Ashley stood to his side, and he reached out to flick on the lamp on the table next to him. The light brought the little girl into focus, and Mulder could tell that she’d been crying; her cheeks damp and a look of horror on her face.

“ASHLEY? What’s wrong?”

“I…want…my…mommy…” she revealed, in between hitching sobs.

He sat up quickly, suddenly wide awake. “Oh sweetie, come here.” He reached out to draw Ashley into his arms, but she backed away out of his reach. “It’s ok, I’m not going to hurt you. It’s me, remember? You’re safe.”

“I wet the bed.”

No wonder she looked so horrified, Mulder thought to himself, realising that she was also embarrassed. “It’s ok.” It wasn’t unusual. Children often had a similar reaction when they were experiencing stressful situations. And Ashley’s had been more stressful than most.

“I’m sorry.”

“ASHLEY, you have nothing to be sorry for. It’s ok, you’re ok.” Shifting on the sofa, he got to his feet, smiling reassuringly. “Let’s get you cleaned up, ok?” There was a pause before Ashley nodded hesitantly and reached out, lacing her tiny fingers with Mulder’s own. He led her into the bedroom, flicking on the light. “Now,” he looked between the bed and the little girl beside him. “Let’s get you sorted first. Shall we run you a bath?” Again she nodded, and Mulder let out a sigh of relief. He had no idea how to deal with a child; it was a learning curve for him.
“Mommy gives me a bath when I’m sick,” Ashley spoke up in a timid voice.

“Ok, that’s good.” Leading her into the en suite, Mulder crouched down and attempted to let go of her hand to run the bath, but to no avail. She was stuck to him like glue. “You wanna pass me that bottle?” He nodded in the direction of the bath gel to her left. She’d end up smelling like a man, he mused, but it was better than the alternative. Maggie hadn’t packed Ashley any toiletries, informing Mulder that her granddaughter had already been bathed that evening. If he’d have known, he’d have stocked up on a few items while he was at the store.

Ashley did as he asked and within minutes the tub was full of water. Mulder tested the temperature, before glancing at the little girl, realising there was a problem. “Hey Ash, you wanna test the temperature?” He let go of her hand. “I’m going to go get you a towel, and then I’ll be right back.” Trusting her not to get into the bath without him there, Mulder quickly rushed into his bedroom, pulling a towel and a t-shirt out of his chest of drawers, and then ran back into her. “Ok.” He held out the t-shirt. “If you take off your pjs, you can get changed into this.” The little girl gave him a questioning glance. It was awkward; he was a grown man with a small child who he had no claim over other than the fact she was his partner’s daughter. There were no guidelines to tell him how to act if such a situation occurred, and he certainly didn’t feel comfortable about washing her. They would have to improvise, he realised, hence the t-shirt. Mulder averted his eyes as Ashley removed her pjs and slipped into the t-shirt, the garment drowning her tiny frame. She giggled as she looked down at her toes, which were now covered. “It’s like a dress.”

“It is, it’s a giant t-shirt on you.” Mulder held out his hand and helped her into the tub. As Ashley adjusted to the temperature, he prepared a washcloth with soap and handed it to her. “Here you go.” He reached out and smoothed down her hair. “I know you miss your mom Ash. So do I. But you’ll be ok, and we’ll find her soon.”

“That’s not what grandma’s friend says,” she spoke. “She told grandma yesterday that mommy’s dead. I don’t want mommy to die.”

Some friend, Mulder thought bitterly. “Hey. Don’t listen to her, ok? Your mom isn’t dead.”

“She’ll be home soon?”

Mulder nodded. “I hope so. But in the meantime, you shouldn’t be so sad. Your mom would want you to be happy, wouldn’t she?”

Ashley nodded. “She would want you to be happy too Mulder.”

Her words took him by surprise. “I know,” he answered casually. “I’m happy as long as you’re happy.”

“But you were crying the other night.”

“I know I was, but I’m ok now.” Embarrassed at the fact she’d remembered his breakdown, Mulder held open the towel and helped Ashley out of the tub.

Wrapping the towel around her, he helped her dry before finding her a fresh t-shirt to sleep in. “Ok little lady. Let’s get you back to bed.” Taking her hand once again, he led her out of the bathroom and into his bedroom, pausing momentarily to take in the sight of the bed. “Actually…why don’t you take a seat on the sofa while I quickly change the sheets.” He could sense her hesitation. “Go on, it’s ok.”

Letting go of Mulder’s hand, Ashley walked out of the bedroom, leaving him to remake the bed.
The soiled sheets were thrown into the tub to soak along with her discarded pjs, and fresh sheets were placed on the bed. By the time he was done, Ashley was laid out on the sofa, tucked up underneath the comforter. From the look of it, she appeared fast asleep, but as Mulder neared her, she let out a giggle. “Alright cheeky,” he said. “Up you get. It’s time for bed, and yours is in the other room.”

Her smile faded, and she opened her eyes. “Noooo! I want to sleep here!”

“A bed would be a lot more comfortable. Besides, you’re sleeping in my bed.”

“I want to stay here. With you.”

“Ashley.” She was as stubborn as her mom, though he kept that observation to himself. “Go to bed please.”

Pouting, Ashley took hold of Mulder’s hand and pulled. Reluctantly he took a seat next to her. “Please Mulder, please can I sleep here?” Without waiting for an answer, she shifted herself onto his lap and rested her head on his shoulder. “Let’s go to sleep Mulder.”

Chuckling, Mulder brought his legs up onto the couch and stretched out, with Ashley still in his arms. Within minutes the two of them were sound asleep.

Xxxxxxxx

“Mulder, what are you doing?”

Mulder paused, the razor poised next to his chin, as the little girl wandered into the bathroom, eying him cautiously. “Why aren’t you eating your breakfast?”

“I’ve finished. What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to shave,” he replied.

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t, I’ll end up like a hairy gorilla.”

Ashley giggled, coming to stand by his side. “You’re not a gorilla.”

“I would be though if I didn’t shave.” He resumed shaving, willing himself not to get too distracted with the little girl observing his every move.

“Can I have a go?”

“Umm, not really no.” He’d spent the best part of a week trying to put his regretful night with Kristen behind him, and the last thing he wanted was to fall apart again in front of Ashley. Not to mention the fact he didn’t exactly trust a four year old to hold a razor close to his throat.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“Can we go to the park?”

Sometimes he struggled to keep up with conversations with Ashley. “I’m not sure. Your grandma said she was going to come by and collect you this morning.”
“Can we get bacon?”

“Are you allowed bacon?” Realising he was dismissing all of her suggestions, he softened, then wiped his freshly shaven face on a towel. “Hey Ash, come here.” Lifting her up, he perched her on the edge of the sink. Retrieving his can of shaving cream, he squeezed some gel into the palm of his hand, and then wiped it across Ashley’s chin, smiling as she squealed once she felt the cool cream against her skin. Wetting the wash cloth, Mulder gently ran it down the side of the little girl’s face. “This is what you have to do,” he explained, wetting it once again and repeating the process.

“Who taught you to shave?”

Mulder thought for a moment. “I guess it was my dad.”

“Do you love your dad?” He nodded, realising it was best to keep things simple around her. “My daddy’s dead.” Her words broke his heart.

“I know Ash.” Using the cloth, he wiped another strip of gel away from her face.

“Sometimes I miss my daddy. But I miss my mommy more. Is that bad?”

“No, not at all. Your mom is your mom, and you guys are close. It’s only natural you miss her a lot.”

“But you’re going to find her.”

“Yes I am.” Wiping away an errant strand of shaving cream, Mulder threw the towel into the sink and tapped the little girl’s leg. “All done little lady.”

“So now I won’t be a hairy gorilla?”

Laughing, Mulder shook his head. “No you won’t.”

“That’s good.”

“That’s very good. The kids at school might find it a bit strange if you turn up one day looking like a gorilla.”

At the mention of school, Ashley’s smile faded, her mood shifting. “Do I have to go to school today?”

“Not unless you want to. It’s Saturday though, so you’d be the only one there.”

Suddenly her cheeky grin returned. “Awesome. That’s the best news I’ve ever heard.”

“Somebody’s easily pleased,” Mulder replied, clearly amused.

“So can we go to the park?” Before he could argue, Ashley interrupted. “Grandma could come! Grandma likes the park! Please Mulder? Pleeeeeeease?”

One look into her piercing blue eyes and Mulder knew she’d won the battle. It was going to be a long day.
“Once, when she was a girl... a very little girl... Dana was in the woods. It was autumn. She had always been a tomboy, unlike her sister Melissa. For her birthday, Dana’s brothers had given her a B.B. gun and were showing her how to use it. Their father had told them only to shoot cans, but in a patch of grass, Bill Jr. found a garter snake, and they began shooting. Wanting to fit in with her brothers, Dana also shot at the snake. It squirmed wildly, desperately fighting for life but as the boys continued to shoot the snake began to bleed. When she realized what she had done, Dana began to cry with irreparable guilt. Through her tears, she was saying that something was missing from the snake. She had taken something that was not hers to take. And although deathly afraid of snakes, Dana held the animal as if sheer human will could keep it alive. The snake, its blood on her hands, died. There was nothing she could do to bring it back.”

“It’s too soon Mrs Scully,” Mulder replied, sitting with a somewhat subdued Ashley on his lap. The little girl was tired, having had a series of nightmares the evening before, which had resulted in Mulder being called out to try and soothe her back to sleep. Not only that, but she was restless too, wanting to go to the park instead of head into town with her grandma and Mulder. Not that Mulder could blame her – he’d have much rather been anywhere else too.

“That day in the woods,” Maggie continued. “I felt for my daughter. But at this moment, I know how my daughter felt.”

The door suddenly opened and Mrs Scully got to her feet. Mulder watched as she headed over to the counter and looked as the man standing in front of her revealed the tombstone she’d ordered. Dana Katherine Scully, it read. 1964-1994. Loving Mother, Daughter & Friend. Scully wasn’t dead, she couldn’t be. He didn’t understand why her mother seemed to be giving up on her; not now. There was nothing to suggest she was dead. He’d spent well over half his life searching for Samantha, and he’d do the same for his partner if he had to. Taking one look at the headstone, Mulder turned away, but not before the little girl he was holding spoke up. “Mulder? What’s that?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Is that mommy’s name?”

Mulder was forgetting just whose child Ashley was. She was intelligent, just like her mom. “Let’s go wait in the car, shall we? Maybe we can get ice cream on the way home.”

Ashley pulled back to look at him, her frown now replaced with a wide grin. “Yay! Ice cream!” All thoughts of her mother were now at the back of her mind, to Mulder’s relief.

Xxxxxx

Mulder ran down the hall, further into the hospital. A nurse grabbed hold of his hand, trying to stop him in his tracks. “Sir…sir you can’t go in there!”

Ignoring her, he broke free from her grasp and continued through a door marked Authorized Personnel Only.” It was then that he saw her, that he realised it was true. Scully was back. Maggie sat by the bedside, staring at her daughter, who was hooked up to what seemed like an endless amount of machines; the respirator reminding those in the room that it was the only thing keeping her alive at that moment. “Who….Who brought her here? How did she get here?”

“Sir,” the nurse interrupted. “Will you please –“
“How did she yet here?” He yelled, demanding answers. He needed to know who brought her to the hospital, hoping for clues as to who was behind her abduction.

“Ms Scully was in this condition when I arrived for the evening shift. If you’ll step outside, perhaps Dr Daly –”

“Is that Daly?” Mulder asked, pointing at a man nearby. He walked over towards him. “Are you Dr Daly?” The doctor nodded in confirmation. “What’s going on? How the hell did she get here?”

“Would you settle down?”

Mulder knew he was causing a disturbance, but he didn’t care. “Was it…was it paramedics, FBI, military? Answer me right now?”

But the medical staff had no answers for him, and nor did Mrs Scully, who was still concentrating on her daughter, relieved that she was no longer missing, but concerned about her poor state of health. “I –“ Dr Daly began.

“What, you’re telling me she just appeared?”

“Sir –“

“Who did this to her?!” He needed to know. He wanted to hunt down whoever was responsible for his partner’s abduction and current condition, and he wanted to make them pay for what they’d done. Realising he wasn’t going to get any answers from the man standing opposite him, Mulder approached the nurse’s station and started rifling through the papers, desperate now. “I want to see her admission forms. Who did this to her? I want to see what tests have been done!” As Dr Daly approached him and struggled with him for the papers, security guards arrived on the scene, grabbing hold of Mulder and dragging him away. But he wasn’t going to give up. “Listen, if you’re hiding anything, I swear, I will do anything, whatever it takes….I will find out what they did to her!”

Xxxx

Eventually Mulder calmed down and, once Dr Daly was satisfied he wasn’t about to cause another scene, took both he and Maggie to his office for an update on Scully’s health. The prognosis didn’t look good.

“Presently, we have Dana listed under critical condition, comatose. There is complete unawareness of self or environment. There is no evidence of language comprehension, no evidence of voluntary responses to external stimuli.” He looked over at Mulder sheepishly. “My apologies but… no one here can determine how Dana arrived at the hospital, administered and how she was attended to in such critical condition.” Not that Mulder was surprised. “Um… because of the absence of Dana’s recent medical history, I am at a loss for prognosis. I can’t determine with certainty how long she’s been in this state.”

Mrs Scully spoke up from her chair. “You haven’t told us why she’s like this.”

“We just don’t know, Mrs. Scully,” Dr Daly replied. “There are no indications of acute injuries, traumatic or non-traumatic, I can’t find any signs of degenerative or metabolic disorders. We have conducted every test possible.”

“I’d like her examined for trace evidence.”

“She has been bathed and cleaned since her admittance,” he answered, dashing Mulder’s hopes in
the process. “Also, there is a situation which I don’t know if you’re aware of. The F.B.I. has notified us of the terms of Dana’s living will.”

“What is it, what did she say?” Maggie asked. Perched on the arm of her chair, Mulder froze, realising just what the doctor was about to say.

“Well, Dana is a doctor. Her criteria for terminating life support is quite specific. She states that, um... if her Glasgow outcome scale lists her...”

“She doesn’t want to live in this condition,” Mulder translated for Maggie. He’d known that Scully hadn’t wanted to be kept alive solely by machines, but he had no idea she’d be in that condition at such a young age.

Dr Daly turned to address Mulder. “You signed the will as her witness.”

He’d effectively signed her death warrant.

xxxxx

Time continued and still Scully’s condition showed no sign of improving. Her sister Melissa also spent a lot of time at her bedside, and she and Maggie divided their time equally between the hospital and looking after Ashley. The little girl hadn’t been told of her mother’s reappearance - at least not yet. Maggie explained to Mulder that Ashley would want to visit her mom, and that she would get upset seeing her in such a bad state. Though Mulder couldn’t disagree – the sight of Scully hooked up to machines keeping her alive was almost too much for him to take – he believed that if his partner was indeed going to die, that Ashley needed a chance to say goodbye. He only hoped it didn’t come to that, although a meeting with the Gunmen, where Byers revealed that Scully’s immune system was virtually non-existent, did nothing to lessen his fears. Along with Maggie and her older daughter, Mulder also spent time at the hospital, hoping to see at least some change in his partner, but it didn’t happen, though he wasn’t going to give up. Even after his informant told him at the hospital, once he’d caught Mulder chasing a mystery man who’d run off with Scully’s blood, that Scully was going to die, Mulder didn’t believe it. He couldn’t lose her now and neither could Ashley. The little girl had already experienced so much loss in her short life, and her mother was her hero. Scully needed to live; a fact he tried to get across to Maggie and Melissa during another meeting with Dr Daly. Thankfully Ashley was at school and wasn’t subjected to the talk over whether or not her mom should live or die.

“Is she below the criteria established in her will?” Melissa asked the doctor.

“It’s possible branched DNA can be treated with designer antibiotics.” Ever since the Gunmen had informed Mulder of their findings following Scully’s abduction, he’d had them working on potential solutions.

“Agent Mulder, I don’t know where you developed this bizarre diagnosis, but I do believe you’re in no position to continue your – “

“You’ve never provided an answer as to why she’s here or what’s wrong with her. We need to study her.”

“She’s not a piece of evidence,” Melissa spoke up defensively.

“She’s here because of unnatural circumstances,” Mulder countered.

“She’s dying. That’s perfectly natural. We hide people in these rooms because we don’t want to look at death. We have machines prolong a life that should, that should end. That’s a much more
unnatural circumstance than any cause of her death.”

“That’s very politically correct.”

“That’s very human. I love her. This is right.”

Finally Maggie spoke, interrupting their argument. “Dana has made our decision.” Mulder tried not to groan in frustration. He’d hoped Maggie might have sided with him, but it wasn’t to be. “Fox... you and Dana had a friendship built on respect. Now,” she added, rising from her seat. “In the last year, I have lost my husband. And God knows I don’t want to lose my baby girl. But like you, I have always respected her.” Heading towards the door, Maggie turned back to look at the broken man opposite her. “Fox, this is a moment for the family. But you can join us if you want.”

He shook his head. Not only did he not want to say goodbye to his partner, but he knew, that no matter what he felt about Scully and her daughter, that he didn’t fit into her family. To them he was just a work friend, a colleague who occasionally popped round to calm Ashley from her nightmares, tucked her in and read her a bedtime story. That was it.

xxxx

Things got worse for Mulder following the meeting with Dr Daly. After submitting his resignation and having it rejected by Skinner, he was then informed by his source that the men who took Scully were going to break into his apartment in an attempt to find information they believed he had on his partner’s abduction. It was, his informant told him, the perfect opportunity to get answers. And that’s why, at 7.30 that evening, he was home alone in his darkened apartment, his gun in front of him on the coffee table….waiting…waiting to take revenge for what had happened to Scully. But what he didn’t expect was a knock on the door barely half an hour before the men were due to appear. He waited, and when the person knocked again, he got up to answer the door, surprised to find Melissa Scully on the other side. “Mulder.” He looked out into the hallway to make sure they were alone. “Sorry I came by. You weren’t answering and your machine wasn’t on. Can I come in? For a second,” she added, noting his hesitation. “Mulder.”

Relenting, Mulder led her into his apartment, closing the door behind them and locking it. “Why is it so dark in here?” Melissa asked, clearly not impressed.

“Because the lights aren’t on.” He wasn’t in the mood for small talk – he needed her to leave before they had company, and wasn’t about to drag her into this sorry mess.

“Ok. I just came from the hospital. Dr. Daly says... she’s weakening. It could be anytime. So I figured you’d want to come down and see her.”

He tried not to flinch at her words. “No I can’t.”

“Well I’d think that you would.”

“Yeah, I would. I can’t, not right now.” Though he knew Melissa was angry at his words, he couldn’t explain to her the reason for not being able to visit Scully. Maybe, he thought, if he could get answers from the men responsible for her abduction, he could help save her.

Melissa walked up to him, angry. “Listen. I don’t have to be psychic to see that you’re in a very dark place, much darker than where my sister is. Willingly walking deeper into darkness cannot help her at all. Only the light –“

Mulder interrupted, not wanting to hear any more. “Enough with the harmonic convergence crap, okay? You’re not saying anything to me.”
“Why don’t you just drop your cynicism and your paranoia and your defeat. You know, just because it’s positive and good doesn’t make it silly or trite. Why is it so much easier for you to run around trying to get even than just expressing to her how you feel? I expect more from you. Dana expects more.” Melissa had had enough and turned to unlock the door. “Even if it doesn’t bring her back, at least she’ll know. And so will you.”

With that she walked out of the apartment, leaving Mulder alone once again. He sat back down on the sofa; her words still replaying in his mind. She was right, he owed it to Scully to be with her. He owed it to Ashley too. He was walking a dark path, and even if he did catch the men expected to search his apartment that night, there was no guarantee that they wouldn’t try and kill him. The last thing Scully’s daughter needed was another person to mourn.

Getting to his feet, Mulder went in search of his jacket and keys, before making his way back to the hospital. Scully was alone; Mrs Scully and Melissa nowhere to be seen. Probably putting Ashley to bed and trying to soothe the little girl of nightmares, he thought sadly. As he pulled up a chair to Scully’s bedside, he stared hard at his partner, noting how peaceful she looked. But it was too soon, he said to himself once again. She couldn’t die. “I feel, Scully...” he began, taking hold of her hand. “That you believe...you’re not ready to go. And you’ve always had the strength of your beliefs. I don’t know if my being here... will help bring you back. But I’m here.” And that’s where he stayed.

Xxxxx

By the time Mulder walked back into his apartment the next morning, the entire place had been wrecked. No corner had been left untouched, and his belongings were scattered everywhere. Not that he cared, he realised. It all paled in comparison to the thought of losing his partner; the woman who over the past year had become an ally, a friend. Noting the disarray and damage, Mulder sank to his knees, finally breaking down after everything that had happened. It was a few hours later when the phone rang, and he had a brief moment of panic when Melissa’s voice appeared on the other end of the line. For once though, she had good news. Scully was awake. She was going to be fine.

xxxxx

Mulder entered the hospital room, taking in the scene before him. Maggie sat in a chair next to her daughter’s bedside, while Melissa perched on the edge of the mattress. A clearly delighted Ashley was sprawled out on the bed clinging tightly to her mother who, aside from appearing exhausted, looked to be absolutely fine. As the women caught sight of him, Melissa rose from the bed, making room, while Ashley’s grin widened.

“Hello Fox,” Maggie said in greeting.


He grinned widely. It was such a relief to see her looking so well; to hear her speak and argue with her mother. She was still the same Scully that he remembered, and he was so grateful to have her back. “How are you feeling?”

“Mulder,” she answered, her smile fading. “I don’t remember anything after Duane Barry...”

“Doesn’t...doesn’t matter,” he replied. And it didn’t. What mattered was that she recovered. Everything else could wait a while. He held up a blue plastic bag that he’d been carrying. “Brought you a present.” Even Ashley seemed interested as he reached into the bag and pulled out a video. “Superstars of the SuperBowl.”
“I knew there was a reason to live,” Scully remarked dryly. Mulder smiled, realising just how much he’d missed her sense of humour.

“I know you want to get some rest, I…just came by to see how you were doing and say hi.” He took hold of her hand before turning to leave.

“Mulder?” Turning to face Scully, he waited for her to continue. “I had the strength of your beliefs.”

It was then Mulder remembered what he’d placed in his pocket just before he left for the hospital. He took out her cross and handed it to her. “I was holding this for you.”

Scully stared at the necklace in her hand, before glancing at her mother who smiled. Maggie had told Mulder to keep hold of the necklace until her daughter returned, and he’d done so. “Thanks,” she replied. “And thank you for taking care of Ashley while I was…” She looked uncomfortable. “Thank you.”

“Mulder read me bedtime stories,” Ashley piped up, still holding on to her mom, no doubt to try and stop her from disappearing once more. “And he taught me to shave.”

Scully looked at her partner, clearly puzzled. “It’s a long story,” he simply said.

“You’ll have to tell me sometime.”

“I’ll do that.”

“But thank you Mulder. From what Ashley’s been telling me, I owe you a lot.”

“You owe me nothing. Just take care of yourself and come home soon.”

Scully nodded as Mulder smiled at her mother, daughter and sister before making his way out of the room, relieved to finally have her back in his life.
Within the week, Scully was back at home, having been given a clean bill of health – at least on the outside – from her doctors. She’d been given an additional few days to recover from her ordeal, which meant that Mulder hadn’t seen a great deal of her. He’d called round a few times to check on her, but it seemed that Scully was determined to regain her independence, and so politely declined his offers of help. Ashley was overjoyed to have her mom back safe and sound, though she was understandably clingy around her; unwilling to leave her side for any amount of time. And so life went back to normal for Mulder – at least as normal as it was before Scully’s disappearance. That was until he got a phone call one evening shortly after her return home.

His evening plans of heading out for a run were scuppered the instant he heard the faint rumbling of thunder in the distance. Barely ten minutes later and the rain began started up, falling relentlessly and soaking everything in sight. Instead he decided on a night at home in front of his television, armed with a bottle or two of beer and a pizza. It was just past ten when he phone rung. Without taking his eyes off of the film in front of him, Mulder reached out for his cell phone and pressed the call button. “Mulder –” The caller’s reply was drowned out by the loud crash of thunder. “Hello?”

Suddenly a familiar voice rang out down the phone. “Mulder?”

Recognising the voice, Mulder frowned. “Ashley?” He looked at his watch, realising it was way past her bedtime. “Are you ok? Where’s your mom?” She’d discovered how to use speed dial just before Scully was abducted, and Mulder often had to field off calls from her when her mom wasn’t looking.

“Mulder…” she answered, her voice small and shaking.

“Ashley sweetie, does your mom know you’re calling me?”

“No.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“No, she’s not…Mulder, mommy needs your help.”

Alarm bells rang out as Mulder took in the little girl’s words. He’d thought since Scully’s abduction that she’d safe now, but she’d barely been home a week and already appeared to be in trouble. “What’s wrong? Tell me what’s happened?” He flicked off the TV and then stood and rushed across to his desk in search of his keys. He had to get to Scully, and fast.

By the time he reached Scully’s apartment the storm was in full force, blinding flashes of lightning followed by heavy crashes of thunder. Without knocking he pulled out his key and entered the dark apartment, his gun at the ready. “Scully?” he called, stopping to switch on the light to no avail. A power cut, he realised, caused by the storm. “Scully? Are you there?” Closing the door behind him, he moved further into the apartment, removing the flashlight from his pocket and flicking it on. Scouring the living room, he saw there were no signs of life. “Scully? Ashley?” Suddenly a small figure came running out into the hallway. “Mulder!” Ashley cried, flinging herself into his arms.

“Hey.” Holding her tightly, Mulder attempted to soothe the little girl as well as find out what
happened. “Ash, where’s your mom?” He almost dreaded her answer. It had been a stormy night the evening Scully had been abducted just a few short months ago, and Mulder knew that none of them could go through that again.

“In the bedroom,” she answered in between sobs.

Mulder let out a sigh of relief, before his mind began to wander. If Scully was still in the apartment but needed his help – and wasn’t responding to his calls – something was still wrong. “Can you tell me what happened?”

The little girl shook her head against him. “She’s frightened.”

“Frightened? By what?”

“By the storm.”

Confused, Mulder continued down the hallway towards the bedroom. The door was pulled to and he pushed it open almost hesitantly, wondering exactly what he would walk into. With Ashley still clutching him tightly, he shone his flashlight into the room. “Scully?” As the light caught a corner of the room, he suddenly became aware of the woman in question curled up in a ball; her gun trained on the door, tears trailing down her flustered cheeks. “Scully, it’s me. It’s Mulder.”

“Mulder?” Both her voice and hand shook as she pointed the gun at him, unwilling to put it down.

“I’m here Scully.” He quickly flashed the light onto himself to prove to her who he was. “You’re ok.”

“No,” she shook her head. “He’s coming Mulder.”

“Nobody’s coming Scully.”

“But the light –”

He realised that the storm must have triggered her memories of the night she was abducted. No wonder she was in such a state. “It’s just a storm Scully. It’s just lightning.” Mulder walked further into the bedroom, taking care not to move too fast. The last thing he wanted was for Scully to shoot him or Ashley. “You’re safe. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

As he approached her, Scully looked up, suddenly realising that her daughter was also in the room. “Ashley?”

“Mommy.” The little girl wriggled and so Mulder set her down on the floor, keeping an eye on her as she walked over towards the mom. As soon as she reached her, Scully pulled Ashley into her arms and together they cried.

Mulder got down onto his knees beside the two of them. “It’s ok, he repeated to the both of them. “You’re safe, it’s just a storm.”

“He broke in Mulder,” Scully whispered unsteadily, and it was then he realised that she was having flashbacks to the night Duane Barry took her. “He smashed through the window and he came into the house.”

“I know he did,” he replied calmly, trying to keep it together for Ashley’s sake. The little girl said nothing, still crying against her mom.
“I tried to run but he was too quick. I tried calling you but –“

“I wasn’t there. Scully I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you –“

“But he smashed the phone and I…all I could think about was the fact I’d never see Ashley again.”

At the mention of her daughter, she hugged her tighter. “He grabbed me Mulder.”

“He’s gone Scully, he won’t hurt you again.”

“But –“

“He’s dead. You’re safe.”

A loud clap of thunder startled all three of them. “I don’t like this mommy,” Ashley spoke up. “I don’t like the thunder.” She whimpered as a flash of lightning lit up the room and burrowed further into her mother’s embrace. “I don’t like ittttt.”

Realising that both mother and daughter were distressed, Mulder considered his options. “What can I do?” he asked, at a loss. “Do you want to go to my place? I might have power.”

Scully shook her head, still in a daze. “We’re ok.”

They were anything but. “Ashley,” he tried again. “What can I do to make you feel better sweetie? What do you usually do when there’s a storm?”

The little girl stopped crying momentarily and thought. “Mommy builds me a fort to sleep in.”

“A fort?” He could do that; he’d built her one before. If she wanted to be sheltered from the storm outside, he could do that for her. He just wished he could do something for Scully to make her feel better too.

Ashley nodded and so Mulder got to his feet. “I’ll be right back.” Through the beam of the flashlight, he could have sworn he saw a look of pure terror cross Scully’s face. “You’re safe Scully,” he repeated reassuringly, wishing he could take away her pain. After building the fort, Mulder retrieved the duvet and pillows from Ashley’s bed and placed them inside before heading back to Scully’s bedroom to find out how the two of them were. Both Scully and Ashley looked up cautiously as he entered the room. “It’s me,” he announced, well aware that Scully’s gun still sat by her side. “Are you ready?” He held out his hand, not realising he was holding his breath until Scully took hold of it and pulled herself up to a standing position. Ashley followed, with a death grip on her mom, and Mulder led them out into the living room. As lightning illuminated the room, Ashley let go of her mom and raced into her fort, with Scully in close pursuit. By the time Mulder arrived, the little girl was tucked up in her comforter, with her mom’s arms wrapped tightly around her.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Scully repeated, and it was then that Mulder realised his ex-partner was crying once again; her body shaking as she sobbed. “Scully.” He climbed in underneath the fort and settled himself on his side, wrapping an arm around the two of them without even thinking. “You’re ok. You’re both ok.”

“I shouldn’t have let him take me.”

“There was nothing you could have done to fight him off.” He wasn’t sure this conversation was appropriate for Ashley’s little ears. “Hey Ashley,” he whispered.

“The storm’s passing now. It’ll be gone soon. How about you close your eyes and go to sleep?”
“What if the man comes and gets me?” Scully tensed beside him.

“Nobody’s going to get you. I’m here. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Will you stay Mulder?”

“Of course I’ll stay.” He felt Scully begin to relax, and realised she must have been hoping he’d say that. “If it’s ok with your mom?”

“Can Mulder stay?”

Scully nodded, brushing her daughter’s fair hair up out of her eyes. “He can stay.” She pressed her lips to Ashley’s forehead. “Now close your eyes.”

There was another flash of lightning. “Just ignore it,” Mulder encouraged the little girl. “It’s just some light. It’s not going to hurt you.” Both he and Scully murmured words of reassurance to her, and soon she was fast asleep. But still Scully couldn’t relax.

“I’m the reason she’s like this,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Scully, it’s just a storm –“

“She’s never been this bad before, I shouldn’t have got upset.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” was all he replied.

“I should have had my gun on me when Barry was here.”

“You weren’t to know what was going to happen.”

“I shouldn’t have let him take me.”

“Scully, you can keep going through it in your mind, but it won’t change what happened. I wish it could. I wish I could take away what happened to you.”

“I can’t remember anything after,” Scully wiped away fresh tears. “I was away for three months and I don’t remember anything. I don’t even remember missing Ashley.” Swallowing hard, she continued. “I was away from my baby girl for three months Mulder. I should have missed her but I don’t remember. Anything could have happened to her and I wouldn’t have known. What kind of mother does that make me? If,” she continued, not waiting for him to answer. “If it hadn’t been for you and Mel and my mom, I don’t know what would have happened.”

“You weren’t to blame Scully. You did everything you could. I’m not going to say that Ashley didn’t miss you while you were gone because she did. We all did,” he admitted. “But we’re all just glad you’re back, and I know things are scary now, but you and Ashley are going to be fine. No one’s going to hurt you again. You’re both going to get over this. You’re strong Scully, and this little girl of yours is just like you.”

She nodded silently, not willing herself to speak. She knew he was right, but she was still so angry; angry at what had happened to her, and angry at missing out on three months of her daughter’s life.

“Now why don’t you close your eyes too. You must be exhausted.” When Scully opened her mouth as though to speak, Mulder interrupted her. “I’ll be here. Nothing’s going to happen.” She did as he said, but it was a long time before she began to relax. Eventually, as the storm passed, Scully finally drifted asleep, with Mulder following close behind.
When Mulder woke the next morning, he noticed that Scully was gone from his side. Ashley slept on peacefully and didn’t stir as he sat up, rubbing the tension in his neck. He’d been sleeping on his sofa for as long as he could remember with no problem, but it appeared that the hard floor was too much for him. Carefully extricating himself from the fort, he heard sounds coming from the kitchen, and headed towards them. Scully was busy making coffee, with no idea she was being watched. She startled as he spoke. “Morning.”

She spun around, her hand resting over her heart. “Mulder, you scared me.” Rather than meet his eye she turned back towards the now boiling kettle.

“Sorry.” He rubbed his neck once again and tried to make conversation. “I think I’m getting old. When I was at college I spent many a night passed out on the floor without any injuries.”

She didn’t return his smile. “Scully, how are you doing this morning?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, focusing on pouring herself a cup of coffee. Mulder noted she didn’t offer him one.

“That’s good.”

“Listen Mulder…” This time she turned to face him, clearly uncomfortable. “I want to apologise.”

“Apologise?” Now he was confused.

“Thank you for coming over last night. I appreciate it…” He sensed a “but” coming, and sure enough it soon followed. “…but it was completely unprofessional of me. I should never have reacted like that, and I shouldn’t have let you stay.”

“Scully, you were scared –“

“I’m not a child.”

“No, you’re not, but you’ve been through a lot and –“

“And it won’t happen again,” she said matter-of-factly. “I would very much like it if we could put this behind us and forget about it. Go back to how things were.”

How things were, Mulder repeated to himself. Pretend the last twelve hours hadn’t happened; go back to his apartment and stay out of her life – that’s what she meant. “Ok,” he answered uncertainly.

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologise.”

“I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fooling anyone. “Of course you are. But if you’re not…maybe you should talk to someone.” Before she could argue, he continued. “You’ve been through a lot lately Scully, and it’s more than a lot of people could handle. No one would blame you if you needed someone to confide in. I’m just saying there are avenues available to you, both in and out of the Bureau, if you wish.”
Nodding, Scully swallowed hard. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Well…” Realising he’d outstayed his welcome, Mulder dug around in his pocket for his keys. “I’d better head off.”

“Right.”

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you. I do appreciate it Mulder.”

“I know.” He smiled, before raising his hand in a wave. “I’ll see you soon.” With that he turned and headed out of the kitchen, pausing briefly to check on Ashley once more, before he headed out of the apartment and back out of Scully’s life.
No sooner had Scully returned to work; she and Mulder were out in the field, this time investigating the desecration of a body in a local cemetery in Minneapolis. Mulder had initially been hesitant at his partner coming back to work following her abduction, but Scully had been adamant that she was fine and eager to get back out in the field. However he noticed, as they stood by the graveside looking at the body, that she seemed to be having difficulty with what she was seeing.

“You ok Scully?” He asked, as the two of them left local Agent Bocks by the graveside and headed back towards their car.

“Yeah,” she answered uncertainly. “I’ve read about cases of desecrating the dead, but this is the first time I’ve seen one.”

“Nothing can prepare you for it. It’s almost impossible to imagine.”

“Why do they do it?”

“Some people collect salt and pepper shakers. The fetishist collects dead things. Hair, fingernails… no one quite knows why, though I’ve never quite understood salt and pepper shakers myself.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that Scully couldn’t help but be somewhat shocked. “Sometimes you surprise me Mulder.”

“Why?” After opening the passenger door for his partner, Scully let himself in the vehicle.

“How that didn’t shock you back there.”

“I’ve prepared myself for it before we left Washington.”

This was news to her. “You knew it wasn’t UFO related from the start?”

“I suspected as much.”

“Mulder, we flew three hours to get here. Our plane doesn’t leave until tomorrow night, I’ve got Ashley staying at my sister’s this evening and I worry they’ll kill one another. If you suspected, why -?”

She stopped speaking as Mulder reached into his pocket and removed two tickets. “Vikings versus Redskins in the Metrodome. Forty yard line Scully, you and me.”

She should have known he had an ulterior motive.

XXXXXXXX

But the game wasn’t to be, and instead of spending an evening kicking back and relaxing (at least for Mulder), the two of them were called into the police station, where Agent Bocks informed them that they’d discovered more bodies. Mulder looked longingly at Bocks’ muted television, taking in scenes of the game, while he listened to his partner speak to the cop.

“Did you get your forensics report on this one?” Scully asked.

Bocks nodded. “Someone was down there in the grave alright. Cut the hair with a pair of pinking
shears. Gotta wonder about this guy.”

“How many bodies does this make?” Mulder queried, his focus now on the case.

“Three in the last two days.”

“What else can you tell me about the analysis of the corpses?”

“The hair was cut from the heads of two of the bodies. From the third one, the fingernails were pulled out with what looks like a pair of needlenose pliers.”

While the two men discussed the discovery, Scully flicked through the file, taking in the photos in front of her. Mulder saw how she paled as she looked at one of the snaps, before she placed the file back on the desk in front of her and left the room. Not that he could blame her of course, the pictures weren’t easy to stomach. He found his partner sat out in the hallway alone, clearly disturbed by what she’d seen. She startled as he opened the door, but made no effort to meet his gaze. “I’m going to cancel our flight,” he told her. “We’ve got some work to do here. You might want to check your sister is ok to keep Ashley. Scully…Scully?”

“I’ll be right there,” she replied, gazing off into the distance. Mulder headed back into the office, but he couldn’t help but realise his partner wasn’t her usual self.

xxxxx

Another body; this time a working girl found in an alleyway. It was the same culprit according to Bocks, with her hair and fingernails removed along with some fingers. Again Mulder realised his partner was having trouble with the case, when she told him she needed a minute away from the crime scene. He didn’t question her, instead trusting her judgement. Shortly after, she pronounced herself fine and happy to conduct the autopsy the following day. But she wasn’t ok, imagining herself on the autopsy table as the killer’s next victim, and having nightmares to the same effect. She was roused from her bad dreams by Mulder, who informed her that a suspect had been apprehended. After getting dressed, she and Mulder met Bocks at the jail to view the man in question, only for her partner to quash Bocks’ suspicions. She noticed another of the inmates staring at her, and tried not to visibly shudder. “Mulder?” She said to her partner as they turned to leave. “Can I have a minute with you?

“Yeah.”

Scully eyed Bocks, hoping he’d take the hint. “I’ll be out front,” he remarked. Once he’d left, Scully shared her idea with Mulder. It was something she’d been thinking about ever since she’d woken from her nightmare. “I think I might better drive this investigation if I focused on the evidence.”

He looked confused. “What are you suggesting?”

“That I take the body back to Washington. I’d like to run it through the fingerprint lab there. You know those guys, they can pull a print –“

“If you’re having trouble with this case Scully, I want you to tell me.”

“I’m not having trouble Mulder.” She was fooling no one.

“I’d understand Scully. This isn’t exactly easy to stomach.”

“I’m fine with it, really. I just think we’re a long way from catching this guy. If we could get a
print, we’d have something to go on. Right now we’re at a standstill.” Plus she desperately wanted to get home to her daughter.

“I think it’s a good idea.” Mulder answered, aware his partner was trying to put on a brave face. He placed his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “I just don’t want you to think you have to hide anything from me Scully. I’ve seen agents with twenty years in the field fall apart on cases like this.”

Scully hated that he could see right through her. The last thing she wanted was for him to think her weak. “I’m fine Mulder. I can handle it.” She stepped back out of his reach.

“Of course,” he replied, realising that the subject was now closed. “I daresay Ashley will be pleased to see her mom again.” With that the two of them left the jail; neither of them realising that the real killer had been in front of them the whole time.

Karen Kosseff was a woman Scully met not long after her return from her abduction. It was Scully’s conversation with Mulder the morning after her late night panic that prompted her to get help, and she took up the Bureau’s offer of the Employee Assistance Program. She felt better talking to Karen; a woman who listened intently to her without making judgements, and helped her gain confidence following her abduction. Once Scully returned to Washington from Minneapolis, she arranged an appointment with Karen, eager to talk to someone about her feelings on the case.

“You think you find a way to deal with these things. In med school, you develop a clinical detachment to death. In your FBI training, you are confronted with cases, the most terrible and violent cases. You think you can look into the face of pure evil. And then you find yourself paralysed by it.”

“Are you aware you’ve been talking about yourself in the second person?” Karen asked.

“No, was I?”

“Do you know why?”

“Probably as another way of trying to detach myself from it.”

“You’re a strong person. You’ve probably always felt you can handle any problem yourself. But you feel vulnerable now. Do you know why that is?”

“No.”

“Is it your partner? Is there a problem with trust?”

“No,” she answered firmly. “I trust him as much as anyone. I trust him with my daughter, and I trust him with my life.”

“Can you talk to him about the way you’re feeling?”

“No.” Scully didn’t want to confide in Mulder, even though he already suspected just how much this case was bothering her. “I know it sounds crazy but I don’t want him to know how much this is bothering me. I don’t want him to think he has to protect me.” She didn’t need anyone, Scully told herself. She could manage.

“I know you lost your father last year, not to mention the father of your daughter. And I read in
your file that you were very ill recently. That your life was threatened. Exposures like these can leave you extremely vulnerable.”

Tears stung Scully’s eyes but she willed herself not to cry. Karen was an expert, but Scully still didn’t want to break down in front of her. “I know these things. I’m conscious of them. I know the world is full of predators, just as it has always been. And I know it’s my job to protect my daughter and others from them. And I’ve counted on that fact to give me faith in my ability to do what I do. I want that faith back. I need that faith back.”

She only hoped it returned to her soon.

Following Scully’s meeting with Karen, she returned to the fingerprinting lab where she was told the good news – they finally had a print from the murderer. She immediately called Mulder and told him the news, before announcing she would soon be on her way back to Minneapolis. She just needed to sort a babysitter for Ashley first.

She arrived in Minneapolis later that night after hurriedly dropping Ashley off at her sister’s apartment, with strict instructions to behave. After hiring a rental car, she set off in the direction of the police station. She didn’t see the other car until it was right behind her; its headlights blinding her. Before Scully could react, the car rammed into the back of her vehicle. She managed to retain control of the car until it was rammed once again, forcing her off the road. And then everything went black.

Mulder looked at his watch, clearly worried now. “She should have been here.”

“She was on the flight,” Bocks replied. “And it arrived three hours ago.”

But still there had been no word of Scully. Before Mulder could speak, he was interrupted by a fellow agent entering the room; this time with bad news. “We found Agent Scully’s car.”

Scully was forced off of the road, Mulder realised the instant he set eyes on her abandoned vehicle. Thankfully the suspect’s car had left its mark, and Mulder detected its white paintwork, hopefully giving them the lead they needed to find his partner before it was too late. Though they had a suspect already – Donnie Pfaster – they had no clues as to his whereabouts.

“Nothing?” He asked the manager of the rental agency Scully had visited just hours before. “No one saw her leave the rental agency? There was no attendant in the area?” When the manager answered in the negative, he hung up in frustration. “People videotape police beatings on dark streets,” he commented to Bocks.

“They see Elvis in three cities across America every day. But no one saw a pretty woman being run off the road in her rental car.”

Bocks moved to respond, but he was cut off by the ringing of Mulder’s cell phone. “Mulder?” He answered immediately, hoping it was news of Scully.

“Mulder?”

“Ashley?” The little girl was the last person he wanted to speak to. He didn’t want Scully’s family
to find out about her disappearance – at least not yet. It was too soon after her abduction and the wounds were still too fresh for everyone involved – himself included. He didn’t want them to worry unnecessarily.

“Is mommy there?”

“Umm…she’s busy at the moment…why?” He was suddenly suspicious that perhaps Scully had somehow raised the alarm back home with her family.

“She said she’d call me to say goodnight, but she hasn’t.”

“I’m sorry Ash, but your mom’s been working hard ever since she got here. But…” He stepped away from Bocks who was giving him pointed looks. “But I’m looking at her right now and she’s waving to you. She says to go to bed like a good girl and sleep well. She’ll see you soon. Now she’s blowing you a kiss.” He hated lying to her, but the last thing he wanted to do was upset Ashley once more. She’d been through enough in her short life.

Thankfully Ashley seemed happy with his response. “Tell mommy I said ‘I love you.”

“I will,” he replied sadly. “She says she loves you right back, ok?”

“Ok.” There was a pause before Mulder heard Ashley talking to someone in the background. “Aunt Missy says I have to get my butt to bed now.”

Mulder chuckled. “Your mom says that you shouldn’t use the word “butt,” and that she hopes you sleep tight –"

“Don’t let the bed bugs bite,” Ashley finished for him. “Goodnight Mulder.”

“Goodnight sweetie.” He hung up before making his way back to Bocks, determined now more than ever to find Scully and get her back home to the little girl she loved.

Xxxxxx

When Scully woke, it took her a few moments to remember what had happened; pain shooting through her head the instant she realised. She was bound tightly, and gagged too, she noticed, the instant she tried to raise the alarm. She had no idea where she was or how long she’d been there, only that she was shut in some kind of small room or closet, and she only hoped that Mulder had raised the alarm. Her worst fears had been realised, she thought, and it was only a matter of time – barring any miracles – until she became Donnie Pfaster’s next victim. Her thoughts turned to Ashley, and how the little girl’s world would be shattered once again – she’d only just got her mother back and now she could possibly lose her again – this time for good. But Scully was going to do everything in her power to make sure it didn’t happen.

Suddenly, Scully head movement on the other side of the door before it opened and Donnie Pfaster stood before her. She was in a closet, she realised, and before she could react, he’d taken hold of her hands and was inspecting her fingernails. It was then she recalled what Mulder had told her; how Pfaster liked to remove the nails of his victims. And she would be next. Pfaster then reached out and, using a sharp knife, cut the rope that had bound her feet.

“Get the hell away from me,” she spat through the gag. She tried to block out the images running through her head, of Pfaster’s face morphing into that of a demon’s.

“Don’t be afraid,” he replied, and Scully realised that, should by some miracle she survive this, she’d be hearing his voice in her nightmares for a long time to come. He pulled her to her feet and
led her into the bathroom, where she saw he’d been busy filling the tub. He left her momentarily to check through the numerous bottles of shampoo he had ready for her. “Would you say your hair is normal or dry?” He turned around to see Scully backing out of the door. “Now where are you going?” He moved towards her and reached out to grab her but Scully was too quick for him. With all the energy she could muster she pushed him back into the tub before rushing out of the room. She raced towards the front door, and held back a cry of desperation as she realised it was locked.

She was back to square one.

Xxxxxxx

“There’s no way out girlie girl,” Scully heard Pfaster’s voice sing out. “I know this house girlie girl. There’s nowhere to hide.”

She heard him getting closer and closer to her hiding place and then took the chance she’d been waiting for – as he opened the door she jumped forward, a spray bottle in her now unbound hands. She sprayed him directly in his eyes and as he fell backwards she ran towards the stairs. But Pfaster bounced back quicker than she anticipated and caught her, sending the two of them tumbling down the stairs. Before Scully could even register the fresh pain shooting through her body, she noticed that the gun he’d been holding had fallen from his grasp and so she set after it. Realising what she was doing, Pfaster leapt on top of her, but not before Scully took hold of the gun. She aimed it at the madman in front of her but hesitated as her mind played tricks on her once more and his face took the shape of the demon from her nightmares. Her hesitation gave Pfaster the opportunity to grab the gun from her hands. Scully braced herself for the inevitable shot that was coming, until the front door burst open and she saw the familiar faces of Mulder and Bocks, with backup in tow.

“Federal Agents!” Mulder shouted, his gun pointed at Pfaster. “Hands in the air.”

Scully watched from the floor as Pfaster slowly raised his hands in surrender while the cops restrained him. Mulder knelt down to face her, taking in her dazed appearance and the nasty-looking bruises covering her face. “Let’s get the paramedics in here,” he shouted.

“I’m ok,” she protested weakly, but he paid no attention.

“Just stay there Scully.”

She insisted on getting to her feet, and Mulder reached out to help her up. She tried not to wince as she felt the pain shoot through her body. “I’m fine. Just help me get my wrists undone.” She needed to get rid of the rope, to get away from the house, to go home, lock the door, curl up with her daughter and forget all about this case and the evil Donnie Pfaster. Sadly though, she knew it wouldn’t be that easy. Scully watched as Mulder removed the ropes that had previously bound her wrists. “How did you find me?”

“His mother used to own the house, willed it to the sisters. I played a hunch. A patrolman spotted the car out front.”

Her wrists now free, Scully rubbed at them as she glanced over at Pfaster who had now been apprehended. It was hard to believe he even had a mother; that he didn’t just crawl out from underneath a rock.

“Why don’t you sit down until someone can take a look at you?”

“Mulder, I’m fine,” she answered softly, still unwilling to meet his gaze, not wanting him to see just how close she was to breaking down. But Mulder could see through her lie, and he gently
lifted her chin to make eye contact. It was Scully’s undoing and tears instantly filled her eyes, her bottom lip trembling. Finally the tears began to fall. Mulder pulled her into his arms, frowning as she resisted at first, before eventually letting him comfort her. He held her as she sobbed, ignoring the cops around them; ignoring the monster who just minutes before had been preparing to kill his partner. “You’re ok Scully,” he murmured into her ear. “You’re safe. You’re ok.”

He only hoped he was right.
Chapter 19

Mulder had no sooner closed his eyes for a quick nap when the sound of a knock at the door startled him awake. He jolted upright and quickly rose from the sofa, racing to the front door without a thought to who might be on the other side. He certainly didn't expect to find Scully and Ashley stood before him; his partner's smile wavering as she took in his dishevelled appearance.

“Hi Mulder,” Ashley spoke up, beating her mom to it.” “Merry Christmas,” she added sweetly.

Running a hand through his hair, Mulder smiled. “Merry Christmas.” He’d seen his partner earlier that day in the office but she’d made no mention of the fact she was going to pop round.

“I hope we’re not interrupting anything,” Scully added.

“Not at all. I was just taking a pre-Christmas nap.”

“We just popped round to give you this.” Scully nudged her daughter. “Go on Ashley.”

The little girl held out a carefully wrapped parcel. “Merry Christmas Mulder!”

“Wow.” Embarrassed, Mulder reached out and took hold of the package. “Thank you, but you really didn’t have to.”

“We just wanted to say thank you for all of your help this year,” Scully explained. “You’ve done a lot for us, especially for Ashley when I was away and we both really appreciated it.”

“Open it Mulder!” Ashley exclaimed excitedly.

“It’s not Christmas Day until tomorrow,” Scully replied, her words halting Mulder who had moved to open his gift.

“It’s a tie,” Ashley said to Mulder, who laughed as the surprise was ruined. “Cos Mommy said your ties are hi…hi….hi…”

“Hideous?” Mulder supplied, as his partner’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “No secret is safe around kids Scully.”

“I didn’t use the word hideous,” she answered, smirking.

“Yes you did Mommy.”

“Kids eh?” He laughed again. “Well thank you anyway. I’m sure I’ll love it. And I got you something too.” Mulder gestured behind him. “Do you want to come in?”

Ashley stepped forward but Scully placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders, stopping her in her tracks. “Thank you, but we’re due at my mom’s shortly.”

“Of course. Are you all set for Christmas?”

She nodded. “It’ll just be a quiet family Christmas after everything that’s happened.” The first Christmas following the death of her father, not to mention Jack.

“Do you want to come too Mulder?” Ashley asked. “Grandma always makes too much food, so there’s enough for you, even though you eat a lot. And you can sleep on the couch again like you
did when Mommy was away.” Scully raised an eyebrow but didn’t interrupt. “But you have to go to sleep early else Santa won’t bring your presents.”

Mulder grinned. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m spending Christmas with my mom.”

“You have a mom?” Ashley said, clearly impressed by this new piece of information. “

“I do.”

As Ashley processed that fact, Mulder retreated into his apartment to collect their gifts. “Santa left these for me to pass on.” He handed Scully a small parcel, while he set Ashley’s gift, which was bigger than she was, down on the ground.

“What do you say Ashley?” Scully prompted her daughter.

“Can I open it?”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant.”

“Thank you Mulder. Can I open it?”

“Why don’t you wait for tomorrow?” Mulder asked, but Ashley didn’t look too impressed at his answer.

“Pleeeeeease?”

“Oh go on then,” Scully answered wearily. She and Mulder watched as the little girl immediately tore into the packaging and within seconds revealed an easel.

“Wow Mulder, I love it!”

“I thought it might stop you from drawing on your mom’s walls if you have this.”

Scully laughed. “That’s very thoughtful of you Mulder. Thank you, but you really shouldn’t spoil her. Your gift for her birthday was more than enough. What do you say Ashley?”

“This is the best present ever!”

Scully laughed. “Does that mean that Santa doesn’t need to visit you tonight?”

Ashley shook her head. “I’ve been a reaaaaalllly good girl this year Mommy.”

“Well that’s debatable. Now how about you be a good girl and thank Mulder again before we head off to Grandma’s.”

“Thank you Mulder.” She flung herself into Mulder’s arms. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas Ashley,” he replied, lifting her to kiss her temple. “Merry Christmas Scully.”

His partner gave him a knowing glance. “Merry Christmas. And thank you for our gifts.”

“Open it now Mommy.”

“We need to get going baby, or else Grandma will wonder where we are.”

“Ok.” Mulder placed Ashley back onto the ground. “Thanks for my tie. Have a great Holiday.”
“You too.” Ashley watched as Scully carefully lifted up the easel, balancing it with her own gift. “Have fun with your mommy, Mulder.”

“I will.” But his face told another story, and as Scully led her daughter away, she couldn’t help but wonder whether her partner would in fact be spending the Holidays alone.

xxxxxxx

Mulder glanced up from his desk just in time to see Scully look at her watch; the third time in as many minutes. He frowned. Paperwork wasn’t exactly the highlight of his day either, but it had to be done. “You have somewhere you need to be Scully?”

She startled, clearly not realising that her partner had caught her in the act, and as her face flushed, Mulder half wondered whether she had a date. Not that it was any of his concern if she was seeing someone. She was young after all; intelligent and attractive, and he didn’t blame her for living her life. He just hoped she didn’t settle for anything but the best – after all, it was what she and Ashley deserved.

“As a matter of fact I do,” she replied, almost hesitantly.

“Oh?” He realised then that he didn’t want to know if she did have a date. He really didn’t. “Anywhere exciting?”

“I’m expecting my brother this evening.”

“Your brother?” It wasn’t the answer he was expecting, and he tried not to read too much into the relief he felt.

“Mmhmm,” she nodded. “My older brother, Bill. He’s on shore leave at the moment and has just arrived in town. He spent Christmas with his fiancé but he’s staying with my mom for New Year. He’s eager to see Ashley again, and Ashley is eager to see her uncle in the hope he brought her presents, despite the fact she already maxed out for her birthday and Christmas.”

Mulder laughed. “You don’t talk about your brothers much.” What he meant, but didn’t tell her, was that in the months she’d been missing, he hadn’t seen them once.

“They’re away a lot of the time,” Scully explained. “So I don’t see them that much.”

“Are you close?”

“As any brother or sister is I guess.” She paused, realising her mistake. “I’m sorry –“

“I know what you meant,” Mulder replied, remembering all the times he’d teased Samantha over the years, and how he’d give anything to see her again, even if she did try and embarrass him in front of his childhood crush, and tear down his Star Wars poster in a fit of rage.

“Bill didn’t exactly agree with some of the decisions I made in the past.”

He frowned, considering her words. “You don’t mean Ashley?”

“Not her as such. Bill thought I should have stayed with Jack and tried to make it work. He didn’t exactly agree with me being a single mom at the time. But…” she added. “…he loves Ashley.”

“Who doesn’t?” Mulder grinned.

“And Ashley loves anyone who brings her gifts, as well as being the center of attention, so she’s
happy to see him.”

“Well in that case, why don’t you head off now?” As Scully looked at her watch, Mulder continued. “There’s only an hour to go, and I’m sure I’m more than capable of finishing up here.” Scully gave him the eyebrow and he chuckled. “You can trust me.” Another look of disbelief. “How about if I promise not to hand anything to Skinner without you reading it first?”

This time she waivered. “Only if you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Go, see your brother, tell Ashley to hold out for ice cream as well as gifts, and I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Scully wasn’t about to argue, he noted, already packing up her papers and retrieving her jacket. “Thanks Mulder, I owe you. Have a good evening.” With that she walked out of the office, leaving Mulder alone with memories of his family.

Xxxxxxxxx

“Dana.” Bill Scully stepped into his sister’s outstretched arms and enveloped her in a tight hug. “How are you doing squirt?”

“I was doing good until you turned up here flinging insults at me.” As Bill pulled away, Scully smiled up at her brother. “You look good. Sea life must agree with you.”

“Or shore leave.”

“Mmm.” She smirked. “How is Tara?”

Laughing, Bill walked into the apartment, while his sister closed the door behind them. “She’s fine, she sends her love to you and Ashley. Speaking of which, am I missing someone, or has she gone out?”

“Ashley,” Scully called. “She’s in her room,” she explained to her brother. “No doubt plotting more trouble.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s good.”

“Really?” He seemed surprised at her answer.

“Well, she’s had her moments but –“

“Uncle Bill!” Ashley interrupted the two of them, racing into the living room like a whirlwind. Bill’s smile faded, and he eyed the youngster wearily. “Who are you?”

Frowning, she replied. “I’m Ashley.”

“You’re not Ashley. The Ashley I know is a little girl; you’re practically a grown up now.”

“Noooo, it’s me. I’m Ashley.”

“The last time I saw Ashley, she was a shy, quiet little thing.”

“I’m Ashley, I’m Ashley,” the little girl cried, practically jumping up and down, clearly bewildered
as to why her uncle didn’t recognise her.

“You are?” Bill winked over at Scully, who was bemused at the interaction.

Ashley nodded.

“Well I guess in that case you should come and give me a hug.” Her smile returning, Ashley threw herself into her uncle’s arms. “What happened to that quiet little girl I saw last year?”

“She went to school and developed an attitude,” Scully supplied.

“How are you doing Tigger?” Bill asked Ashley.

“Mulder calls me Tigger too.”

“Who’s Mulder?”

“Can I get you a drink?” Scully interrupted, not wanting to discuss work. Bill had been in agreement with their father when he expressed his disappointment at Scully joining the Bureau, and so she carefully avoided mentioning work in front of him. It was easier that way.

“Coffee would be great.”

“Ok Ashley, while I make drinks, why don’t you say thank you to Uncle Bill for your birthday and Christmas presents?” With that, Mulder was long forgotten.

Xxxxxxxx

“How are you doing Dana?” Bill eyed his sister over the top of his cup of coffee. “And don’t give me any bullshi —“

“Bill,” Scully warned, glancing over at her daughter, relieved to see Ashley was focused on drawing on her easel instead of their conversation.

“Sorry.”

“When you have kids I’ll get my own back.”

“What I meant was that you’ve been through a lot lately. It couldn’t have been easy.”

She shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“You vanished Dana.”

“And now I’m back.”

“And you’re ok?”

She nodded. Besides the nightmares, the occasional flashbacks of Duane Barry breaking into her house and the fear that it could happen again, she was absolutely fine.

“How did Ashley cope? I’m sorry I couldn’t have been here Dana, but I was away —“

“There’s nothing you could have done. Mom and Missy took good care of Ashley. She was clingy at first but as you can see now she’s fine.”

“And after Jack?”
She stiffened. “She was upset, naturally, but she’s doing ok. She talks about him a lot, which is good.”

“She’s been through a lot. You both have.”

“We’ll survive. We always do.”

“I spoke to Mom last night to see if she’s changed her mind about moving out to us in San Diego. You know my offer still extends to you.”

“Thank you,” Scully replied politely. “But we’re happy here. If Mom wants to go, that’s her decision.”

“It’ll do you both good to get away from here.”

“I like it here. Ashley and I have made a life here. Her school is here. My job is here.”

“It sounds to me as though you’d be better off out of that place.”

“Bill –”

“Weren’t you investigating the guy who ended up kidnapping you?”

“That is enough,” Scully warned, a little too loudly. Even Ashley turned to look at her mom. Forcing a smile at her daughter, Scully turned to her brother and hissed: “I don’t want to discuss this right now. I am NOT moving to California. This is my home.”

“Fine.”

Sensing the mood in the room had shifted, Ashley stood up and walked over to her mom. “Mulder wouldn’t want us to move Mommy.”

“How did you hear that?” Ashley had been so engrossed in her coloring that Scully didn’t even realise she’d been listening in.

Bill repeated his earlier question. “Who’s Mulder?”

“He’s Mommy’s partner.”

“Work partner,” Scully stressed.

“Mulder got me this for Christmas.” Ashley added, pointing to the easel.

“Mommy’s partner is very generous,” Bill remarked dryly as his sister blushed.

“And he reads me bedtime stories.”

“Ashley,” Scully interrupted, trying to avoid her brother’s knowing look. “Why don’t you show Uncle Bill your new scooter?”

The little girl nodded and skipped off in the direction of her bedroom, unaware of how her words had aroused her uncle’s suspicions.

“Before you say anything,” Scully said, glaring at her brother. “Mulder is just a colleague.”

“A colleague who reads your daughter bedtime stories?”
“He was here one night when she had a nightmare.” Bill raised an eyebrow. “He was here for work, nothing else. It’s complicated,” she added, immediately regretting her words.

“Just like Jack was complicated?” Bill had hit a nerve and he knew it. He’d always been able to do that.

“How dare you.” Scully jumped up from the sofa and headed towards the front door. “I think you should go.”

“I’m sorry Dana, I didn’t mean it.” At least he had the decency to look sorry.

“Yes you did.”

“I just meant…I hope you know you know what you’re doing Dana. You have a little girl to think about now.”

“Don’t you think I know that? And I do know what I’m doing Bill. Mulder is a friend –“

“So now he’s a “friend” too?”

“And a colleague.” Scully’s eyes bore into her brother, who had also risen from the sofa. “And so what if he reads my daughter bedtime stories? He’s good to her, she likes him and she’s been through a hell of a lot lately. We’re not doing anything wrong – not that it’s any of your business if we were. So just quit being so overprotective and-“

“Look at my scooter Uncle Bill!” Ashley cried as she sailed into the living room on her new present. She’d already been warned about riding it indoors, but for once her mother didn’t seem to mind. Both adults stood back and forced a smile at the little girl, who stopped in her tracks when she saw her mom standing by the door. “Is Uncle Bill going?”

There was a long pause before Scully answered. “No sweetie,” she replied, eyeing her brother as though daring him to disagree. “He’s not going yet.”

The argument was over. At least for now.
“Ashley!” Scully called after her daughter. “Slow down.”

“Come on mommy!”

“Don’t run! You’ll slip and fall over.” But the little girl paid no attention to her mother, eager to get to the pool. Ever since Scully had told her that morning that they’d be going swimming, Ashley had been on a high. Like Scully, she loved the water, and she was looking forward to spending the day with her mom, who was going to teach her to swim.

“Hurry mommy!”

“Ashley!” Holding her towel firmly in place around her, Scully hurried after her daughter and looked on as Ashley ran straight into a man by the poolside. And then she realised with horror, that the man was in fact her partner.

“Mulder?”

“Hey Scully.” Mulder looked surprised to see the two of them, but he smiled as Ashley suddenly recognised him. “Hey Ash.”

“Hi Mulder. We’re going swimming.”

“I can see that,” he laughed, his eyes flicking over towards Scully, who subconsciously pulled her towel tightly around herself. If she’d have known they were going to bump into her partner, she would have worn a t-shirt over her swimsuit to protect her modesty. She couldn’t help but glance over at her partner, taking in his lean form, his toned abs and his tight red speedos, and she willed herself not to blush as his eyes caught hers.

“Are you swimming too Mulder?” Ashley asked, breaking through Scully’s thoughts. “Mommy’s gonna teach me to swim.”

“Going to,” Scully corrected, turning her attention back to Mulder. “She’s starting swimming lessons in a few weeks, so I thought we’d spend some time at the pool beforehand to get her used to it.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“We’ll try not to get in your way.”

Mulder dismissed her words with a shake of the head. “You’re fine.”

“Can I swim with you Mulder?”

“Sweetheart, Mulder’s not here to swim with you.”

Ashley paid her mother no attention. “Will you teach me to swim?”

“Am I not good enough for you now?”

The little girl looked over at her mom and shook her head. “Mulder’s a better swimmer than you,” she said in all seriousness.
Mulder laughed. “I don’t know about that.”

“Ashley, let’s leave Mulder to get on with his swim, ok? We’ll see him later.”

“But I want to swim with Mulder.”

“Ashley.”

“Listen,” Mulder interrupted. “Maybe we can swim for a little bit, but only if your mom says it’s ok.”

“Mulder,” Scully warned. “You shouldn’t keep giving into her. She has to learn that she’s not going to get her own way all of the time.”

“C’mon Scully, just this once.”

“Yeah c’mon Scully,” Ashley parroted, smiling cheekily up at her mother. Mulder couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey, that’s mommy to you.”

“Please mommy…pleeeeeease?”

Just one look into her daughter’s bright blue eyes and Scully knew she’d lost the battle.

Xxxxx

“Ok now hold on tight and kick. Kick your legs nice and strong.”

With a look of pure determination on her face, Ashley grabbed hold of the ledge and stretched out her legs, before kicking hard. She glanced over to her right, where Scully was treading water, watching on proudly as her daughter enjoyed her swimming lesson with Mulder. When her partner agreed to let Ashley swim with him, Scully had been tempted to get changed back into her day clothes and watch from the side, but her daughter had wanted her in the pool with her.

“That’s it,” Mulder encouraged. “See if you can splash your mom as you kick.”

“Hey,” Scully laughed.

“What? I’m just saying she needs to kick hard to stay afloat.”

“I don’t believe you –“

“Mommy look!” Ashley interrupted. “I’m swimming, I’m swim-“ Without warning, Ashley let go of the side and started to slip underwater. Thankfully her floaties kept her from sinking. Mulder was by her side in an instant, lifting her up into his arms, laughing. “One step at a time little lady.”

Ashley said nothing, still coughing after swallowing some of the water.

“Easy, easy.” Mulder patted her on the back. “There’s no need to swallow the whole pool. You ok?”

Just as Scully moved to check on her daughter, Ashley nodded. “I fell under.”

“You did. But you’ll get there soon. Here…” He placed her back into the water and encouraged her on to his back. “Hold onto my shoulders and don’t let do.” She did as he suggested, and after
making sure she was holding on tightly, Mulder set off through the water. Ashley squealed in delight as he began to swim up and down the pool. “Race you Scully,” Mulder called back to his partner.

“Yeah race you mommy.”

Scully thought for a moment before setting off after them, relieved that after all of the pain she’d suffered, Ashley finally had a smile back on her face.

Xxxxx

They sat in a diner not far from the pool after Ashley complained she was hungry following her swim. Before Scully could argue, Mulder offered to buy them dinner, to her daughter’s delight.

“Can I get a burger mommy?” Ashley asked, peering at the menu over her mom’s shoulder. She pointed at a picture of a juice cheeseburger on the page.

“It’s big sweetie. Are you sure you can eat it? What about nuggets? You like them, don’t you?”

Ashley shook her head. “I don’t like nuggets.”

“Really? Since when?” Scully ran her hand through Ashley’s hair, trying to smooth out the curls that had formed since her swim lesson.

“Since forever.”

“I’m not quite sure that’s right.”

“Mulder let me have burgers when you were away.”

“He did?”

“Uh huh.” Mulder blushed as Scully caught his eye. “He took me for burgers when Grandma needed a rest.”

“Ashley –“ Mulder tried to interrupt but Scully beat him to it.

“Well that was very nice of Mulder to do that for you and Grandma.” Mulder knew his partner still felt guilty at being away from her daughter for those months, though of course it wasn’t her fault.

“And he came to Grandma’s for dinner.”

“You were a lucky girl if Mulder spent so much time with you.”

“Oh huh.” She nodded enthusiastically. “And he slept on Grandma’s sofa.”

“He did?” This time Scully lowered her menu and looked at Mulder for an answer.

“Ashley had nightmares a few times. Your mom called me over when she wouldn’t settle and sometimes it was late, so your mom offered me her sofa.”

Scully swallowed hard. “Well thank you Mulder. From the sounds of it, I owe you a lot for everything you did for her.”

“Mulder and I had a sleepover.”
Before Scully could question her daughter, their waitress arrived to take their order. Scully waited until she was out of earshot before speaking. “A sleepover?”

“At Mulder’s house.”

Mulder laughed sheepishly, now clearly embarrassed. “What she means is that I looked after her one night. I umm…your mom was desperate but I mean…we survived and –“

“Mulder.” Scully reached out and put her hand on his, stilling him. As though realising what she’d done, she quickly retreated. “You don’t need to explain. I just…I guess I didn’t realise how much you did for Ashley while I was away.” She paused as she waitress delivered their drinks, and Ashley reached eagerly for her milkshake. “I don’t know what I can do to thank you.”

“You don’t need to do anything. I’m glad I was able to do something to help. I’m just…I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you.” He meant that night at her apartment; the night Duane Barry took her. Mulder saw Scully’s eyes cloud with tears, and he immediately cursed himself for upsetting her. “I’m sorry.”

Scully shook her head. “You have nothing to apologise for.”

“Don’t be sad again Mulder,” Ashley said mimicking her mom’s earlier move by taking hold of his hand. Mulder thought back to the night he’d woken Ashley up when Scully was away; the night he’d returned from California after his encounter with Kristen. The last thing he wanted was for Ashley to tell her mom about the state he’d been in that night. It had been a moment of weakness that he still regretted – he should have been searching for his missing partner instead of sleeping with troubled strangers.

“I’m not sad,” he replied. “I’m excited about my burger. And my dessert too.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. “Dessert too?” she asked, clearly amazed.

“Only if you eat your main.”

“If she’s sick,” Scully warned. “I’m calling you to come round and clean up after her.”

Mulder smiled. “Deal.” Any excuse to spend more time with the two people slowly winning over his heart.
Mulder pulled up outside the apartment building and killed the engine, glancing nervously at the woman next him. “We’re here Scully.”

“Right.” The words didn’t seem to register with her. Not that he could blame her; she’d lost her sister just hours before. It was the end of a nightmare few days for both Mulder and Scully, beginning with the drugging of Mulder’s water, the murder of his father and culminating in the shooting and subsequent death of Melissa. Mulder had stopped by the hospital to check in on Scully and her sister, but he ended up holding his partner after she’d informed him of Melissa’s death, before breaking down in front of him. Finally, her tears spent, Scully declared that she wanted to collect Ashley from the babysitter’s and head home. And that was when Mulder realised there was a problem. “Umm Scully?” he’d began, wondering exactly how to broach the subject.

She’d looked up at him as he stood. “You can’t go back to your apartment. At least not yet. It’s a –”

“A crime scene,” she answered, her face crumbling, but no tears fell.

“We can go to my place,” Mulder suggested, immediately regretting it. It wasn’t as though his apartment was any better – after all, just days before his water supply had been tampered with. “Or get a motel,” he added.

“Whatever,” Scully replied non-committedly. “Just get me out of here.”

And so he’d done as she’d asked.

“Do you want me to go up and collect Ashley?” Mulder asked once they’d arrived at the babysitter’s. His partner looked as though she was about to cry again.

“What am I going to tell her Mulder? She’s five years old and she’s already lost too many people. I can’t keep doing this.”

“You can’t keep this from her Scully, she’s going to find out soon enough. Tell her…”

“The truth? That someone tried to kill me but Melissa got in the way?”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Mulder replied, gritting his teeth. It was his fault Melissa was dead, he told himself. His fault that Scully was targeted in the first place. If she hadn’t been working with him, her sister would still be alive.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

*I should be the one apologising to you*, Mulder thought to himself sadly. “I’m just saying she’s a smart kid.”

“I know. I just don’t know if I can do this.”

“I’ll be here Scully, if you need me that is.”

Scully turned to face him, and after a moment she nodded, forcing a smile. “Thank you.”

With that Mulder turned and got out of the car, already dreading having to break Ashley’s heart once again.
In the end Mulder opted for a motel; stopping off briefly at Walmart for Scully to pick up some essentials for her and Ashley. He paid for two rooms without even checking with his partner, and followed her and her daughter into their room for the night. Scully hadn’t mentioned anything about Melissa to Ashley so far, instead half listening to the little girl’s tales of what she’d been up to at school earlier that day. Ashley didn’t even seem fazed by the fact they weren’t anywhere near her home; instead excited over the adventure of staying somewhere new. As soon as they entered the room, and Mulder closed the door, Scully sat her daughter down on the bed.

“Ashley baby, we have something to tell you.” She crouched down in front of the little girl and Mulder followed suit, placing his hand at the small of Scully’s back for reassurance. “Your…Aunt Missy…she…she died this afternoon.”

Ashley frowned. “What do you mean Mommy?”

“Melissa died. Remember how Grandpa and –“

“But I don’t want her to die,” she replied adamantly. Mulder could feel his partner’s control slipping. “Why did she die Mommy?”

“Because…” Scully took a deep breath, her voice shaking. “Because there was a bad man. And he did something very very bad.”

“Is he in trouble?” The little girl asked.

Scully nodded. “Yes he is.”

“Did he hurt Aunt Missy?” Her mom said nothing. “Will he hurt me?”

“No, no he won’t.” Scully got up and sat on the bed, pulling her daughter onto her lap as Ashley burst into tears. “Nobody’s going to hurt you baby. I promise you.” Realising his partner was close to tears, Mulder took a seat next to his partner and wrapped his arms around her, determined to keep the two of them safe.

It had taken Mulder and Scully some time to settle Ashley after they’d broken the news of Melissa’s death to her. Finally her tears had dried and she’d drifted off to sleep in her mom’s arms. But it wasn’t Ashley that Mulder was worried about, as he sat on the sofa watching his partner stretched out on the bed, holding her daughter. Scully had been worryingly quiet since they’d arrived at the motel, and had yet to break down again. She’s been through a lot in such a short space of time – as had her daughter – and she needed to let it all out.

He looked up as Scully shifted on the bed, grimacing. “You ok?”

“Mmm. I think I’ve got set.”

“Is she out?”

Scully nodded. “Like a light.” She carefully extracted herself out from under Ashley, but made no effort to move from the little girl’s side. Instead, propping her head up on her elbow, she watched as her daughter slept, tenderly brushing her hand through tendrils of blonde hair. “How many more times am I going to have to do this Mulder?” He didn’t answer. “Life isn’t meant to be this hard; not for a child. I can’t keep breaking her heart. When she was born I promised her I was going to
make her happy. All I’ve done lately is bring her misery.”

“None of what’s happened is your fault Scully.” Mulder rose from the sofa and made his way over to the bed, perching on the edge of the mattress. He wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her everything would be ok, but he knew his touch wouldn’t be welcome.

“Melissa died because of me. If she hadn’t been at my apartment – “

“Then it would have been you. Or Ashley.”

She nodded sadly and Mulder suddenly wondered whether she was going to leave him. It was her involvement with him and the X Files that resulted in her sister being killed after all. She was better off – and safer – without him in her life. She could get a transfer, take Ashley and move away and finally be happy. “It’s my fault,” he answered sadly. “I’m to blame, and I understand if you want to leave, I-“

“I’m not leaving Mulder,” she replied adamantly, tiredness evident in her voice. “I can’t leave now. I’m going to find the bastard who murdered my sister, and the man who killed your father, and I’m going to make them pay.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m going to find the people behind my abduction and I’m going to make sure that my little girl can go to sleep at night and dream of fairies and princesses rather than monsters and murderers.” Her tears began to fall. “I don’t want Melissa to have died in vain.”

“She won’t.” This time Mulder did reach out and he rested his hand reassuringly on her arm. “We’ll find him Scully and we’ll get justice for Melissa. And Ashley will be happy. You’ve both been through a hell of a lot, but I know you Scully; you’re strong. And you don’t have to do it alone.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“The last thing you should do is thank me.”

“You’ve lost your father.”

“And you lost yours. Not to mention Jack and your sister.”

“I just wish I could have said more to her,” Scully said, almost to herself. “Just given her one last hug or something. She always looked out for me, even as a kid, and she was there for me when Jack wasn’t.” Scully glanced down at her daughter. “I just wish things weren’t quite so hard.”

“I know, and if there’s anything I can do for you Scully, anything at all, you know where I am.”

“I know.”

Reaching down to squeeze her hand, Mulder moved to stand up, deciding to give his partner and Ashley some time alone and head to his room.

“Mulder?” Scully’s eyes met his as she rolled over to face him.

“Yes?”

“Will you stay tonight?”

He thought for a moment before nodding. Removing his shoes, he sat back down on the bed, and shifted so he lay out next to Scully, mirroring her position. Without warning he put his arm around her and pulled her into his embrace, holding her tightly as her tears fell until finally she succumbed
Mulder startled awake, taking a moment to find his bearings. He hadn’t intended to fall asleep; he’d merely sat down on the sofa and watched Ashley sleep while Scully took a shower, but after a night without much sleep, he was feeling the effects of the past few days. He sat forward, rubbing his eyes, before he became aware of a presence in front of him. “Hey Ash.” The little girl looked up at him with sad eyes. She’d clearly just woken up too, her hair matted and eyes puffy. She let out an impressive yawn before speaking. “Mulder?”

“Yeah?”

“Did your daddy die?”

His breath caught in his throat at her question, and suddenly he was wide awake. “Yes he did.”

She nodded sadly. “My daddy died too.”

“I know he did sweetheart.”

“Did you love your daddy?”

“Yes.” It was easier to tell her what she wanted to hear rather than go into the complicated tale of his family.

“Your daddy is watching over you now like my daddy is me.”

Tears clouded his eyes, and Mulder nodded. He reached forward and pulled Ash onto his lap, embracing her in a tight hug. “What would I do without you Ash, huh?”

She shrugged against him. “You wouldn’t help me learn how to swim.”

He laughed. “That’s true. Good job you’re around then.”

“Mommy seems sad.”

“Yes she does. She’s sad about your Aunt, like I’m sure you are too.”

Ashley nodded. “I miss Aunt Missy.”

“So does your mom, but you’ll both be ok. I know you’ve already been through a lot, but things will get better. And I’m going to make sure that nothing bad happens to you again, ok?”

“Ok,” she whispered, shifting on his lap to snuggle up against him. And that’s where Scully found the two of them minutes later, both fast asleep.
Chapter 22

Just over a week after Melissa’s death came the day of her funeral. Scully had insisted in the meantime that she was fine to work; that she wanted to work and keep busy, but she took the actual day of the funeral off. Mulder also took the afternoon off, but without telling his partner. It had been something he’d been considering ever since Scully had told him details of the service. Though he knew – at least in the eyes of some of Scully’s relatives – that he wouldn’t exactly be welcome at the funeral, he wanted to be there for his partner and Ashley. Since the night of Melissa’s death, when Mulder and Scully shared a hotel room, she’d retreated a little, no doubt wanting to keep her professional distance, as well as allow herself time to grieve, and he respected that. He was simply going to Melissa’s funeral to pay his respects to a young woman he’d gotten to know during Scully’s abduction, and then he’d leave without even appearing on his partner’s radar. At least that was the plan.

xxxxxx

The service was short and simple, no doubt what Melissa would have wanted rather than a traditional ceremony. Mulder sat at the back of the church, his eyes trained on Scully and Ashley as he listened to the priest celebrate the life of ‘free spirit’ Melissa. Scully kept her gaze firmly ahead during the service, clinging to Ashley like a lifesaver as the little girl cried. Though she was too young to fully understand what was happening, she was an intelligent child and she’d already experienced more than her fair share of loss. She knew she wouldn’t be seeing Melissa again anytime soon.

When the service came to a close, Mulder watched as the Scully family followed the coffin out of the church towards the burial plot. As they passed him, Ashley suddenly caught his eye, and her face lit up. “Mulder!”

Both Scully and Maggie looked over at him, and he smiled sheepishly. “Hi,” he mouthed towards them, embarrassed he’d been spotted. Unable to stop to speak, Scully pulled on her daughter’s hand and led her away. Mulder hung back as the congregation followed the family out towards the burial plot. It was a private, family moment and he wasn’t entitled to be there. Instead he headed back to his car and got inside, but made no move to start the engine. He simply waited, just in case his partner needed him.

Barely twenty minutes later he spotted Ashley and Scully in the distance heading towards the area where he was parked. The little girl was clad in a navy dress, her usually unruly hair pulled back into a French braid. She held on to her mom, who was wearing a black dress and matching jacket; the classic mourning dress. He got out of the car and perched on the edge of the bonnet while he waited for them. As they neared him, Ashley let go of her mom’s hand and ran towards Mulder, launching herself into his arms and burying her face in the crook of his neck.

“Hey sweetheart. Are you ok?”

She nodded against him and then spoke, her words muffled. “We just buried Aunt Melissa, but it’s ok, because mommy said it wasn’t really her cos she’s already gone to heaven.”

Unsure of how to reply, Mulder lifted his hand and smoothed down her braid. “This is pretty.”

Ashley pulled away slightly and nodded once more. “Mommy did it for me. I asked if I could braid her hair too but she said no.”
“Is that right?” Mulder smiled as Scully finally reached them. “Hey Scully.”

“Thank you for coming Mulder,” she said quietly.

“It was the least I could do. It was a nice service.”

Scully nodded in agreement, though they both knew the funeral should never have happened. Melissa should not have been killed.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m fine.” He didn’t quite believe her. “Are you headed back to the office?”

Mulder shook his head, though it had been his original intention. There was something in his partner’s voice that made him wonder if she was about to ask him a favour. “I wasn’t planning to.”

“In that case, can you get us out of here?”

“Really?”

“I need to get away from here. I need to get Ashley away from here, and I promised her we’d do something fun this afternoon. Well,” she added. “Something more fun than this. I don’t want her to be in this environment any longer.”

“Of course. Where do you want to go?”


And so he did.

Xxxxxxx

Mulder drove them to a park just outside of town at Ashley’s request. The little girl had asked to play on the swings and slides and Mulder was only too happy to oblige. Originally he hadn’t been too sure as to whether he was included in Scully’s plans with her daughter, but as he drove them out of town he realised he’d be spending the afternoon with the two of them. Not that he minded – he was just relieved that Scully seemed to be letting him in.

Once they arrived at the playground, Ashley immediately headed towards the swings. The last time Mulder had taken her to the park, she’d insisted that he pushed her on the swings, but now she told him she could do it herself. She was becoming an independent and competent little girl. Mulder took himself over to the bench where Scully sat, and seated himself down next to her. “Looks like she doesn’t need me,” he commented.

Scully nodded. “Join the club. Ever since she started school she’s been insisting on doing everything for herself.”

“How’s that panning out?”

“It’s fine, although she can’t quite master the art of tying her shoelaces or braiding her hair.”

“Ah so that’s why you didn’t let her do your hair this morning.”

“I figured it wasn’t a good look for a funeral.”

Mulder’s smile faded. “I’m sorry Scully, I-“
“Why do people keep saying that? Mulder, you have nothing to be sorry about. You did not pull the trigger, and neither did the others who keep telling me that they’re sorry and asking what they can do to help, when the only thing I need right now is for my sister to be here and not buried six feet under.” She sighed heavily. “I guess I’m the one who should apologise now.”

“No Scully, you –“

“It’s just been a long day. A long week actually. Ashley hasn’t been sleeping much and when she has, she’s either been waking up screaming that the bad man’s going to get her, or she’s wetting the bed.”

“She’s been through a lot. Maybe she should talk with someone.”

“She has an appointment next week.” Scully laughed bitterly. “Five years old and my daughter is in therapy. That’s great parenting.”

“Hey.” Mulder reached down and took hold of her hand. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing a great job. You’re a good mom.”

“I just hate seeing her so upset.”

“She’s not upset now.” Scully followed his gaze to Ashley, who had abandoned the swing and was running towards the slide, a smile on her face as she waved over to them. “Just keep doing this. Keep spending time with her and having fun, and the good times will start outweighing the bad.”

“I’ve been thinking about taking her away for a few days.”

“That might be a good idea. It’d do you both good to get away.” He couldn’t blame Scully; barely a week ago her sister had been shot dead in the apartment where she and Ashley lived. “You could go to Disneyland,” he suggested, and Scully chuckled.

“I don’t think my nerves are up for it just yet. You’ve seen how excited Ashley gets at the best of times.” Mulder laughed. “Maybe in a year or two when her energy has run down a little.

“Do you think that’ll happen?”

“Mommy, watch this!” As both Mulder and Scully looked up, Ashley launched herself down the slide on her stomach.

“Very good baby.”

“Watch me again!” Getting up onto her feet, Ashley raced back towards the steps to the slide.

“Somehow I doubt she’ll ever run out of energy.”

Mulder nodded. “And how are you doing?”

She sobered. “I’m fine.”

“Fine?”

Shrugging, Scully kept her eyes on her daughter as she sailed down the slide once more. “As fine as I can be after burying my sister.” She didn’t intend her words to hurt; she was merely stating fact. “I just feel like I’m trapped in a nightmare that I can’t wake up from. I can’t stop worrying about Ashley, I can’t stop wondering what else is going to happen, and I can’t stop wishing that Missy would just walk through the door and tell me it’s all been a bad dream.” She let go of
Mulder’s hand to wipe away the tears that had suddenly fell. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” Mulder wrapped his arm around her, relieved when she leaned into his touch rather than push him away. “Don’t apologise for saying how you feel.”

“You lost your father Mulder, and your sister disappeared. I’m not the only one suffering.”

“Scully, I have to believe that my sister is out there somewhere and my father…my father and I were never what you’d call close. Right now I’m more concerned about you and –”

“Mommy?” Mulder looked to see Ashley approaching them, her face full of concern as she realised her mom was upset. “Why are you crying mommy?” Though Mulder was glad Scully was finally letting down her guard, he hated seeing her and Ashley so upset. If he could find the man responsible for Melissa’s death or – better yet – bring her back, he’d do it in a heartbeat. “Are you crying about Aunt Melissa mommy?”

Scully reached out and pulled her daughter onto her lap. “Yes baby, I am.”

“But Aunt Melissa wouldn’t want you to cry mommy. She wouldn’t want you to be sad.” Mulder had heard Scully say exactly the same thing to Ashley the night she told her of Melissa’s death.

“I know.”

“It’s ok to cry though,” Mulder said, feeling two pairs of bright blue eyes turn to look at him.

“Like you cried Mulder?” Ashley asked. Her mom looked confused.

He nodded. “Just like that. It’s ok to be sad sometimes.”

“Is it ok to be happy too? Would Aunt Missy mind me going to the park today?”

“Not at all,” Scully answered quickly, sniffing hard as she pulled her daughter in closer. “I bet she’s looking down at you right now wishing she could be here with you having fun.”

“I wish she was here,” Ashley said sadly.

“Me too.”

“You know,” Mulder said. “I bet if Melissa was here, she’d want us to get ice cream later. What do you say?”

“Yay!” Ashley exclaimed, making her mom laugh. “I think so too.”

“What do you say Scully?”

Drying her eyes, Scully nodded. “I can do ice cream,” Scully nodded. She squeezed Mulder’s hand, hoping he realised just how grateful she was that he was there for her and Ashley during this awful time. As though reading her thoughts, Mulder squeezed back.

“Let’s go.”
“Scully.”

Mulder barely registered his partner picking up the phone in the office until he heard her sigh. “I’ll be right up.” Thinking it was Skinner, he set down his pen and looked up just as Scully got to her feet.

“What does he want this time?”

“Hmm?” Scully reached behind her and grabbed her jacket, slipping it on over her rose coloured blouse.

“Skinner?”


Before he could question her further, Scully walked out of the office, leaving him alone. Barely five minutes later she was back, but she wasn’t alone. “Mulder!” Ashley came running into the office and up to his desk, throwing her arms around him.

“Ashley? To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Scully looked embarrassed. “Emma’s daughter is sick today, so she asked if she could drop Ashley off here instead of risking her picking up the bug. I’m sorry Mulder, but it looks like I’m going to have to leave early.”

“That’s fine Scully.”

“Can’t I stay and help Mulder?” Ashley asked.

“We’d better get you home before you trash the place.” She looked over at Mulder. “Can you just keep an eye on her while I go and get my things from upstairs?”

“Sure.”

As Scully left the office, Ashley jumped up onto Mulder’s lap, taking him by surprise. “Hey Ash.”

“Hi.” She pointed to a piece of blank paper sat on his desk. “Can I do some writing?”

“Of course.” He handed her the paper and a pen and watched as she set to work. “How was school?”

Ashley shrugged. “Ok.”

“Just ok?”

“Oh huh.”

“What did you get up to today?”

“I can’t remember.”

“You can’t remember?” Mulder asked, laughing. “You’ve just come from school. How can you
She ignored him. “Look Mulder.” He looked down at the paper in front of her and saw she’d written her name – Ashley Elizabeth Scully – in full.

“Wow,” he exclaimed, clearly impressed. “That’s great, well done you.” Not that he was surprised; Ashley was intelligent just like her mom, and was already advanced for her age.

She grabbed hold of another sheet of paper and began to draw this time. Pausing, she turned to speak to Mulder, but her attention was caught by a poster on the wall behind him. “What’s what Mulder?” she asked, pointing.

He turned them both in his chair, and realised she was talking about his I Want To Believe poster. “That?” Ashley nodded as he pointed to the UFO. “It’s a UFO.”

“What’s a UFO?”

“It’s an unidentified flying object.”

“What’s that?” Her eyes narrowed. “Do monsters live there?”

“Not monsters.” He paused, wondering whether to continue. “Aliens.” Scully would kill him if Ashley suddenly developed a fear of aliens and UFOs.

“Aliens?”

“Yeah.”

“Like E.T?”

“Kinda.”

“I love E.T.” She turned back to face him. “Have you met E.T?”

“Has who met E.T?” Scully asked as she breezed back into the office.

“Mulder has a picture of E.T’s home on the wall.”

“Oh.” She looked over at the poster with disinterest. “So he does.”

Mulder lifted Ashley up and rose from his chair, seating the little girl back down at the desk. “I have a case to discuss with you tomorrow Scully. I think it warrants further investigation.”

“Sure, just let me –“

“Agents Scully, Mulder –“ Assistant Director Skinner entered the office without knocking. “Can I have a –“

“Who’s that mommy?” Ashley paused in her drawing and pointed at the strange man ahead of her. When no one answered immediately she asked him herself, to her mom’s embarrassment. “Who are you?”

“Ashley –“

Thankfully Skinner laughed. “I’m Walter Skinner. And who may I ask are you?”
“I’m Ashley Elizabeth Scully,” she answered confidently. “And this is my mommy and this is my Mulder.”

Scully cleared her throat, her blush deepening. “I’m sorry sir; there’s been a babysitting emergency. Agent Mulder has agreed for me to take the rest of the afternoon off.” Mulder knew that Scully hated to ask; she hated being seen as weak; as a woman she already struggled against the stereotypes of working in a man’s world.

“Of course,” Skinner replied. “Will we see you back here tomorrow or –?”

“Yes sir.”

“Will I see you tomorrow Mr Walter Skinner sir?” Ashley piped up. Mulder couldn’t conceal his grin, while Scully looked as though she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her.

“Maybe not tomorrow,” Skinner replied, walking further into the office towards Mulder’s desk. “What are you drawing?”

Ashley held up her masterpiece and Mulder could detect four figures on the page, though who they were supposed to be he didn’t know. Thankfully Ashley didn’t make them guess. “This is me and my mommy and Mulder and this,” she pointed to the figure on the right. “Is E.T.”

Even Skinner couldn’t help but laugh. “E.T.” he murmured, shaking his head.

“Right little lady,” Scully spoke up, eager to get her daughter out of the office before she said or did anything else to embarrass her. “We need to get going. Say goodbye to Mulder and Mr Skinner.”

Ashley jumped up from the desk and ran over to Mulder, wrapping her arms around his legs. “Bye Mulder.”

“Bye Ashley. Don’t forget your drawing.”

“I drew it for you Mulder.”

“Thank you.” He watched as the little girl then approached Assistant Director Skinner and held out of her hand. “Goodbye Mr Skinner.”

Skinner took hold of her hand and shook it; his own hand dwarfing hers. “Nice to meet you Ashley.”

“Nice to meet you. Ready mommy?”

Nodding, Scully said goodbye to her colleagues before leading Ashley out of the office, leaving Mulder and Skinner to it. Skinner looked over at Mulder. “Cute kid.”

“Yes she is.”

“You know her well?”

Mulder shrugged, wondering exactly what his boss was getting at. “I’ve seen her from time to time.”

Skinner gestured towards the piece of paper sat on Mulder’s desk. “She drew you a picture.”

“She’s a kid. Kids draw pictures all the time. She was just killing while Scully got her things
together,” he answered defensively. “Listen sir, I’m not sure whether you’re insinuating anything, but you don’t need to worry. Scully and I are partners. I’ve met her daughter a few times and that’s it. Now if you don’t mind, I have a case I need to look into before I head home. Sir.”

Skinner nodded, realising the conversation was now over. “Just don’t do anything stupid Mulder.”

As he left the office, Mulder plonked himself down at his desk, thinking over the AD’s words. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he’d said, meaning don’t get involved. The trouble was, Mulder thought, it was already too late.
Mulder frowned as he glanced in the rear view mirror. “Scully, are you sure you don’t need me to pull over?”

His partner turned to look towards the back seat. “It’s fine, we’re almost home.”

“Your new dog seems like he’s looking for a place to squat and do his business.” In the back of the rental car, Queequeg was pacing up and down, his tail wagging enthusiastically. Next to him sat a new bed along with supplies Scully had stopped to pick up on their way back from Georgia.

“We stopped barely twenty minutes ago. Besides,” she added, as Mulder indicated left. “A minute or two and we’ll be there.”

She was right. Moments later Mulder pulled into her road, noticing – as usual – there was limited space to park, and so he set about finding somewhere to pull over. “So Ashley’s home already?”

“Yes. My mom’s brought her back to mine so they’ll be waiting for me.”

“She's going to be excited.”

Scully smiled. “Tell me about it. That’s why I haven’t told her yet. I figured I’d wait until we got home so she didn’t make my mom’s life unbearable.”

“Has she always wanted a dog?”

Nodding, Scully directed her partner to a vacant spot. “A dog, cat, pony, unicorn, you name it. She had goldfish for a while, but she soon got bored. Now that she’s a little older, I’m hoping she’ll appreciate Queequeg.”

“I’m sure she’ll love him.” Mulder himself wasn’t too keen on the new addition to the Scully household after Queequeg had snapped at him when he’d lifted the dog into the car.

“She’d better,” Scully answered as Mulder parked the car and removed his seatbelt. “Because she’s not having a unicorn.”

“Umm Scully?” Mulder was staring into the back of the car. Scully followed his gaze to find the small present Queequeg had left on the seat next to him. “There goes the deposit,” he quipped, already hating the damn dog.

Xxxxxxxx

“Ok, are your eyes closed?”

Ashley stood opposite her mom in the kitchen, bouncing up and down excitedly as she shut her eyes. Scully had entered the apartment alone, leaving Mulder out in the hallway with Queequeg, while she said goodbye to her mom and informed Ashley that she had a surprise for her. “They’re closed mommy, I promise.”

“Ok, well keep them closed.” Satisfied that her daughter wasn’t about to peep, Scully ran out to the front door and opened it, ushering Mulder and the dog inside. They followed her back into the kitchen, and Mulder grinned when he saw how the little girl couldn’t keep still. “Now…open them.”
As Ashley opened her eyes, Mulder let go of Queequeg’s leash and the canine raced towards his young new owner. Ashley shrieked excitedly as Queequeg jumped up her legs. “Oh mommy it’s a dog! You got me a dog!”

Queequeg covered her face with ‘kisses’, making her giggle uncontrollably. Her mom couldn’t help but laugh too; seeing Ashley’s eyes light up the instant she set eyes on the dog was worth it, particularly after all of the upset the youngster had experienced of late.

“Look Mulder,” Ashley exclaimed. “I got a dog!”

“You’re a lucky girl.”

“Uh huh.” She ran into her mom’s arms. “Thank you mommy. I love her already.”

Mulder grinned.

“Umm, sweetheart,” Scully began. “The dog is a he.”

“Oh…” Ashley didn’t seem to mind. “I love him. He’s the best dog ever.”

“Well I’m glad you like him.” Scully bent down so she was at eye level with her daughter. “But you have to remember that you must take good care of him. Dogs are hard work and he’ll need feeding and walking and bathing.”

“I’ll bathe him mommy.”

“And clean up his poop,” Mulder added, chuckling as Ashley scrunched up her nose in disgust.

“We can work on that,” Scully answered, caught off guard when Queequeg totted up and licked her face.

“He loves you too mommy.”

“Yes he does.”

“And Mulder.”

“I’m not sure about that.” After Queequeg had done his business in the rental car, Mulder wasn’t entirely sure the dog liked him.

“Does he have a name mommy?”

“Well, how would you feel about Queequeg? We could change it if you want?”


“Well that’s good.”

“Hi Queequeg.” Ashley patted the dog, who turned to lick her hand. It was official, he was the new member of the Scully family.
Chapter 25

“Sit…sit…sit down please Queequeg.” Ashley frowned as, rather than obey her command, Queequeg sniffed around the floor in front of him. “Sit please.”

“Baby, did you show him the treat you’re holding?” Scully asked from where she sat by her computer, busy typing up notes from the Clyde Bruckman case. “Show it to Queequeg like I showed you earlier, and then he’ll do as you ask.”

“Sit please,” Ashley ordered, holding out her left hand which held the treat. She didn’t have a firm grasp on the food and Queequeg seized his opportunity, snatching the biscuit from her without even thinking of obeying her command.

“Noooo!” At her daughter’s cry of disappointment, Scully turned around in her chair.

“No Ashley, you don’t give him the treat until he does what you’ve said. Just show him first.”

“I did, but he took it from me.”

“Well that was very naughty of him. Why don’t you try again?” Getting to her feet, Scully retrieved the bag of treats and handed another biscuit to her daughter. “Here you go.”

“Queequeg, sit.” This time Ashley held the biscuit in closer towards her. Queequeg seemed to consider his options for a moment before reluctantly parking his butt down on the floor. “Yay mommy, he did it! He did it!”

“He did.” Scully smiled. “Now you have to give him his treat and –“ She was interrupted by a knock at the door. Turning her back on her daughter, leaving her to keep training Queequeg, Scully headed over to the front door and opened it. She was surprised to see Mulder standing before her. “Hi.”

“Hey. Sorry to interrupt.”

“That’s ok. I was just finishing up my report.”

“Great. I found this in the back of the car.” Mulder held out a soft toy rabbit that Scully had picked up at the pet store.

“Thank you.” She took hold of the rabbit just as Ashley caught sight of their visitor.

“Hi Mulder.”

“Hey trouble.”

Abandoning her game, Ashley ran up to Mulder, who lifted her up into his arms and kissed her forehead. “I’ve been training Queequeg to sit.”

“You have?”

“Uh huh.”

As though realising that the humans were talking about him, Queequeg approached Mulder, growling as he realised they had a visitor.
“Queequeg,” Scully warned, but he ignored her, letting out a bark. “Queequeg! Sorry,” she apologised to Mulder, who smiled uncertainly.

“It’s ok, I get the hint.” He placed Ashley back down onto the ground and she immediately ran off with the dog. “I just popped round to bring this back for you.”

“Did you take the car back ok?”

“It’s all taken care of.”

“What about the deposit?”

“All fine.”

“Really?”

“I just cleaned it up and used a lot of aftershave. I don’t think they even noticed.”

“Good work.”

“How’s the new addition settling in?”

“He was up a few times in the night, but otherwise it’s all good. Ashley is now keen to get him trained, and has spent the past few…” She trailed off as she caught a glimpse of her daughter sneaking something into her mouth. “Ashley, no! They’re dog biscuits.”

“But Queequeg likes them,” she protested, pouting as she put the placed the pack of dog biscuits back onto the table.

“Yes but Queequeg is a dog. You’re not. At least I hope you’re not.”

“She does display some canine tendencies,” Mulder quipped.

“Dog food is for dogs honey.”

“But Queequeg ate my food last night and that’s not dog food.”

“That’s because you deliberately dropped some of your dinner onto the floor. I’ve already told you not to do that.”

“Listen,” Mulder interrupted. “I’d better head off. Though he loved hearing Ashley and Scully disagree with one another (Scully had found her match with her three foot tall miniature,” he didn’t want to intrude on any plans they had.

“You’re welcome to stay and have a coffee if you like?”

“It’s ok, I –“

“Can we take Queequeg for a walk Mulder?” Ashley asked, seemingly unaware that he couldn’t say no to her.

“Only if your mom agrees,” he replied after considering her question.

Ok.” It seemed like Scully was eager for adult conversation. “Grab your boots little lady. Let’s go.”
Mulder watched as Ashley raced on ahead. Though she’d started out as being the one who held Queequeg’s leash, she soon tired of her job and relinquished control to Mulder. Thankfully Queequeg didn’t seem to mind, and hadn’t even attempted to snap at Mulder since he’d taken over.

“Back it up a little Ashley,” Scully called, relieved when her daughter finally came to a standstill. “Don’t run off.”

“How did she end up there anyway?” Mulder asked. “One second she was trailing behind with the dog, and the next thing you know, I’ve got him. How does that work?”

“It happens when you’re too polite to say no to my daughter. You know that you don’t have to keep agreeing to anything she asks.”

“I know, I know. I had some spare time though and –“ A thought suddenly entered his mind. “I’m sorry Scully, have I interrupted your day?”

“No, of course you haven’t. Ashley loves having you around.” He wondered whether the little girl was the only one who felt that way. “We just don’t want to keep you from anything.”

“I didn’t have much else on the agenda this weekend.” He didn’t dare say he was bored; relieved when he’d found Queequeg’s soft toy in the back of the car.

“Well thank you for appeasing my daughter. Just remember that you don’t have to.”

“How’s she been doing lately?”

“Good,” Scully replied thoughtfully. “Better I think. Her teacher has mentioned that she’s been a little quiet lately, but her work is good and she hasn’t fallen behind in her class.”

“That’s great.”

“It’s a relief in a way. I just worry about her being withdrawn.”

“It’s still early days Scully. It wasn’t that long ago since Melissa died. Ashley’s been through a lot and it’s only natural that she’s retreated into herself.”

“C’mon Mulder!” Ashley called, clearly impatient at having to wait for the adults. “C’mon mom.”

“She’s not quite so quiet at home,” Scully remarked dryly.

“If she was, that’s when I’d start to worry.”

“I know, I just want her to be happy.”

“It looks like the dog is making her happy.”

“He is. Plus she has two friends from school coming over tomorrow, so hopefully that’ll please her too.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Thanks.” She grinned. “That’s nothing compared to next weekend.”

“Oh?” Scully had scheduled some vacation time, though Mulder had yet to discover her plans.
“Yeah. Turns out I’m a sucker for punishment. We’re heading to California.”

“California?” Realisation dawned on Mulder. “You’re not…?”

“Yup.”

“Disneyland?”

“It’s what Ashley asked for. And if it keeps her smiling, I’m sure I’ll survive. Just. Plus my mom and Bill and his wife will be there too, so it won’t all be bad.”

“Well good luck Scully.”

“You think I’m an idiot?”

“Not at all.” In reality, he thought it was a great idea – it would do the two of them good to get away. “But Scully?”

“Hmm?”

“If your mom’s going, who’s looking after Queequeg?”

Scully cleared her throat nervously. “Umm…actually Mulder?” she began as they finally caught up to her daughter. “Ashley has something to ask you.”
It was Scully’s fault for bringing the stupid mutt with them on the case, Mulder thought to himself. Her mother was out of town for the weekend, the dog sitters were all booked up and Ashley’s babysitter’s son was allergic to animal hair, so she had no choice but to bring Queequeg with her. Mulder wasn’t a huge fan of dogs at the best of times, but particularly not since he’d taken care of Queequeg a few months prior, while Scully and Ashley went out to California. The dog didn’t take too well to its temporary owner, while Mulder had numerous scratches from where the canine had turned on him whenever he’d attempted to touch its food bowl. Still, Ashley and Scully were fond of the dog, so he’d managed not to kill Queequeg, and when they returned, he’d pretended everything was absolutely fine. After all, they’d both had a great time at Disneyland, and Ashley seemed happier than he’d seen her in a long time. Queequeg was just territorial, he’d told himself repeatedly. It didn’t matter, as long as he didn’t have to spend any more time with the dog. That was until Scully had called him just before they were due to travel to Georgia for their latest case investigating reports of people disappearing close to a lake. Mulder was convinced “Big Blue,” a lake monster, was responsible, but Scully, as usual, wasn’t convinced. What Mulder didn’t expect was for Queequeg to be the latest victim of Big Blue. Scully had turned up on the doorstep of his motel room earlier that evening armed with a dog leash and the tale of how she’d lost Queequeg in the woods just minutes before. Despite her search for the canine, he was nowhere to be found. Scully’s run of bad luck didn’t end there though, and later, as she accompanied Mulder on his search for Big Blue, their boat ran into trouble and capsized.

“Poor Queequeg,” Scully said to herself as she and Mulder sat on a rock they’d found shortly after escaping the boat. She was cold, wet and tired, and all she wanted to do was go home, hug her daughter and go to bed. Mulder, stretched out next to her, was shivering from the cold too.

“Why did you name your dog Queequeg?”

“It was the name of the Harpoonist in Moby Dick. My father used to read to me from Moby Dick when I was a little girl, and then to Ashley. I called him Ahab and he called me Starbuck. So I named my dog Queequeg.”

“Your dog? I thought he was Ashley’s,” Mulder grinned.

“Well,” she replied, returning his smile. “He was at first, but somehow he’s become mine. I think he just runs to me when Ashley tries to dress him up in her doll’s clothes.”

Laughing, Mulder shook his head. “Is she still doing that?”

“From time to time.” Scully thought for a moment, before changing the subject. “It’s funny, I just realised something.”

“It’s a bizarre name for a dog, huh?”

“No.” Mulder’s joke went unnoticed. “How much you’re like Ahab. You’re so consumed by your personal vengeance against life, whether it be its inherent cruelties or mysteries, everything takes on a warped significance to fit your megalomaniacal cosmology.”

“Scully, are you coming on to me?” Again Mulder’s quip fell on deaf ears.

“It’s the truth or a white whale. What difference does it make? I mean, both obsessions are impossible to capture, and trying to do so will only leave you dead along with everyone else you
bring with you. You know Mulder, you are Ahab.”

“You know it’s interesting you should say that, because I’ve always wanted a peg leg. It’s a boyhood thing I never grew out of. I’m not being flippant,” he added as he noticed Scully’s disapproving look. I’ve given this a lot of thought. I mean if you have a peg leg or hooks for hands then maybe it’s enough to simply keep on living. You know, braving facing life with your disability. But without those things you’re actually meant to make something of your life, achieve something, earn a raise, wear a necktie. So if anything I’m actually the antithesis of Ahab, because if I did have a peg leg I’d quite possibly be more happy and more content not to be chasing after these creatures of the unknown.”

“And that’s not flippant?”

“No, flippant is my favorite line from Moby Dick. ‘Hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple dumpling’.” He grinned, trying to get Scully back onside. “Why did you decide to keep Queequeg?”

“Other than the fact he was bequeathed to me?”

“Yep.”

“I always loved dogs. We had a few when I was growing up, though it was hard because we moved around so much. I always told myself that if I ever had kids, I’d get them a dog. Plus I hoped it would cheer Ashley up after everything.” Her smile faded. “Oh god Mulder. Ashley’s going to be so distraughted. She was finally back to her old self.” It was true; Ashley had been happier in recent months; full of beans since her return from Disneyland. Her recent report from school indicated that her confidence was returning, and she was growing up into a bright and bubbly little lady. Queequeg’s death was likely to come as a big setback for the youngster.

“She’ll be upset certainly, but don’t underestimate her Scully. She’s strong, and she’ll bounce back. Maybe in time you can get her another pet. One that doesn’t bite me. What about fish? Fish are good.”

“Mulder, your fish die all the time.”

“Yes, but they’re easily replaced, and Ashley would never know.”

“That’s cruel.”

“Bet you’re already considering getting some, right?”

“Maybe. In time like you said. First I have to get off of this damn rock and go home to tell my daughter the bad news.”

Before Mulder could respond, they were interrupted by Dr Farraday, who led them off the rock and back onto dry land. For Scully though, it meant she was one step closer to getting home and breaking her daughter’s heart.

Xxxx

“Ready Scully?” Mulder called over to his partner as she opened the door to her motel room, her overnight bag clutched in her right hand.

“All set.”
Mulder opened the trunk to the car and waited while his partner made her way over to him and threw in the bag. He looked at her, puzzled when she placed Queequeg’s leash on top.

“Don’t give me that look. I thought Ashley might want something of Queequeg’s to bury. Hopefully it’ll help her come to terms with what happened.”

Nodding, Mulder closed the trunk. “I think it’s a good idea. Shall we go?”

Without waiting for an answer, he moved to the passenger side and opened the door for his partner. “Wanna stop for a greasy burger on the way home?”

“You buying?”

“Well you drive a hard bargain but –“

“What was that?” Scully asked, her body tensing as she struggled to listen out.

“What was what?”

“That.”

This time Mulder heard it. “It sounds like –“

“Queequeg.” Without warning Scully pushed past her partner and raced off to their left. Mulder’s eyes followed her as she ran up to a small, familiar shape on the ground, its tail wagging furiously as it recognised its owner. The dog barked excitedly.

Queequeg was alive.

And, despite the fact Mulder wasn’t a fan of the temperamental canine, he was relieved Ashley was spared from further pain.
Chapter 27

It was no secret that Scully preferred taking cases close to home – it meant she could go back to her apartment each night and tuck her daughter up in bed. But on the latest case in Maryland, that wasn’t possible, and so Mulder noticed early on that she didn’t seem overjoyed to be there, not amused at the fact she’d had to leave Ashley at her mom’s. She was convinced that she and Mulder were being set up, and so she’d told her partner of this as he informed her of the latest case – two attacks seemingly linked after the people responsible seemingly suffered hallucinations. One murdered five people thinking they were all the same person, whilst the other attacked two children thinking they were wolves. Scully was suspicious as to why Mulder’s source had informed him about the case, and she couldn’t help but think they were being used for some unknown reason.

It was Scully herself who found a possible lead on the case as they were searching the house of Joseph Patnik. She discovered hundreds of videos of news shows, similar to what Patnik was watching at the hospital, and it was that discovery that led to her and Mulder to spend the rest of that evening watching the tapes in their respective hotel rooms. As another videotape ended, Mulder went to Scully’s room to find out how she was doing. It was then she’d told him of her findings; that the dates of the tapes she’d watched each corresponded with a night Patnik murdered somebody. As far as she was concerned, the violence and atrocities he’d witnessed on television influenced him to kill. Mulder didn’t agree, though he didn’t yet have a theory himself. As he stood to move back to his room, Scully questioned him. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get some sleep. Looks like you could use some too.” She looked exhausted.

“No, I’m going to watch the rest of these tapes. Just out of curiosity.”

“You have fun,” he replied, before walking out of the room, leaving his partner to continue her viewing alone, unaware that he was putting her life in danger.

Xxxxxx

It was much later when Scully heard the phone ring in Mulder’s room. She was surprised when he answered it so quickly – she hadn’t heard a peep out of him before that, so presumed he was sleeping. “Yes I understand,” he heard him answer. “All right. I’ve just been watching the tapes. I’ll come outside. Right. Ok. No she doesn’t. No. Goodbye.”

Pausing the tape she was watching, Scully prepared herself for Mulder to appear back at her door, but he didn’t. He’d mentioned her in his conversation with the unknown caller, therefore she’d presumed he was talking to somebody about the investigation – AD Skinner perhaps. Obviously she thought wrong. Deciding to take a break from watching the videos, Scully grabbed the ice bucket and headed outside to the vending machine. As she inserted some quarters into the machine, she suddenly caught sight of Mulder sitting in the car. But what she certainly didn’t expect to see was the Cigarette Smoking Man sitting next to him, or for Mulder to hand him a videotape before the two of them drove off together. The man she thought she could trust was working with the devil. He’d betrayed her.

Xxxxx

Something was definitely wrong with Scully, Mulder realised during a telephone call with his partner on his way back to the motel. First she’d been quiet with him almost ever since they’d started work on this case, and then she’d questioned him on his whereabouts when he was
supposed to have been taking the transmitter he’d found outside the latest crime scene to Agent Pendrell. She seemed on edge, he’d thought to himself. Paranoid and distrusting, and he couldn’t understand why. His worries only intensified when she claimed to have heard a noise during their call, before the phone instantly went dead. Mulder immediately thought back to the night when he’d returned home and listened to his answering machine, hearing Scully’s desperate cries to him as Duane Barry attacked her. Heading towards her room, Mulder realised that once again his partner was in trouble. She needed his help.

Xxxx

After Scully abruptly hung up on him, Mulder immediately rushed to call her back, concerned for her behaviour. When there was no response, he decided to get the motel manager to let him in to her room, wanting to see for himself that she was ok. “Here, she’s in here,” he said to the manager as they stood outside Scully’s room. “Ready?” He watched as the manager unlocked the door.

“Ready. On the count –“

Just then Mulder heard his partner on the other side move to slide the lock across. “Wait…” He banged on the door, then waited as the proprietor tried to open it, halted by the chain lock. Before Mulder could call out to his partner he was horrified as she began firing her gun in their direction. As soon as she paused in her shooting he stepped forward and kicked down the door. “Get back, call the police,” he ordered the manager, as he looked around his partner’s ransacked room. “Scully! Scully!” It was worse than he thought. He took in the broken phone, the scattered videotapes, skewed picture frames and the turned over tables, before moving across the room, kicking in another door to find that the back door was already open. Scully was long gone.

Xxxxx

Mulder was shaking; he couldn’t stop shaking, not since he received the call at the Gunmen’s to identify Scully’s body. Only it wasn’t Scully; it was some poor Jane Doe who wouldn’t be returning to her family that evening. But Mulder couldn’t help but be relieved as the blinds were opened and he set eyes on the red-headed stranger. It meant that – for the moment, anyway – Ashley still had a mom and Maggie Scully still had a daughter. He just needed to find her. And just as he was leaving the morgue, the coroner gave Mulder the lead he’d been waiting for – that he’d been trying to reach Maggie but hadn’t been able to. Mulder knew that Maggie would have been waiting by the phone ever since he’d first contacted her to inform her of Scully’s disappearance. Unless she knew something, unless she’d heard from her daughter. It made sense – if Scully was afraid for her safety, she would of course want to protect Ashley, who was at her grandma’s. And so, after rushing out of the morgue, Mulder made his way to Baltimore in record time and ran straight up to the front door, knocking loudly. No response. Convinced that Maggie was home, that Scully was really there, he peered in through the window, before knocking again, louder this time. Finally Maggie answered opened the door, just barely.

“Mrs Scully, is she here?”

“Uh no,” she replied unconvincingly.

“You haven’t been answering your phone.”

“Well when I hear from her, I’ll call you, ok?” Maggie moved to close the door but Mulder was too quick, holding it open.

“I need to see her.”
“Fox, please, go away.” For once he wasn’t about to take note of Mrs Scully, and he pushed past her. “Go away!”

“Sorry.” Entering the house, Mulder walked down the hallway and looked into the living room. He turned to face Maggie, who had closed the door behind her and followed him. “Where is she?” It was then that Scully stepped out behind him, training her gun on him. As Mulder turned to face her, Maggie spoke out.

“Dana, put down the gun!”

“I’m here to help you Scully.”

“I told you mom,” Scully spoke. “He’s here to kill me.”

“I’m on your side, you know that,” Mulder replied reassuringly, though his words fell on deaf ears.

“Put it down Dana.”

“Scully, listen to me very carefully. You don’t know it, but you’re sick with the same thing that drove those other people to murder…and whatever you think may be happening –” He took a step forward, instantly regretting it when Scully cocked the gun.

“Just step back.”

“Mommy?” Mulder held his breath as a sleepy Ashley walked into the living room, rubbing her eyes as she moved towards her mom. “What are you doing?” She looked between Mulder and her mom, noting the gun in Scully’s hand.

“Ashley,” Mulder spoke up. “Go back to bed honey.”

“Don’t you dare tell my daughter what to do!” Scully snapped, before turning her attention to Ashley, not daring to loosen her grip on the gun. “Baby, please go back to bed.”

Realizing her mom was training a gun on her partner, Ashley’s face scrunched up and she hurried over to Mulder. “What’s happening Mulder?” She held up her arms and Mulder reluctantly lifted her up. Scully wasn’t herself, there was no telling what could happen, and the last thing he wanted was for Ashley to get caught up in it all, or even worse, get injured.

“Nothing Ash, everything’s fine.” *Everything wasn’t fine* “Be a good girl and go back to bed, ok?”

The little girl turned to face her mom. “Mommy, why do you have a gun?”

“Ashley, Mulder isn’t who you think it is.”

“Dana,” Maggie spoke up. “Don’t do this, not in front of your daughter.”

“Why is Mulder here mommy?”

“Dana,” Maggie began softly. “You’re not yourself. He’s telling you the truth.”

“It’s not the truth mom. He’s lied to me from the beginning.” Mulder shook his head, willing his partner to believe him. He clutchsed Ashley tightly as he noticed the little girl begin to cry. “He’s never trusted me.”

“Scully,” Mulder stressed. “You are the only one I trust.”
“You’re in on it.” Tears sprang to Scully’s eyes as she spoke. “You’re one of them. You’re one of the people who abducted me. You put that thing in my neck. You killed my sister! You want my daughter dead!”

“That’s not true Dana,” Maggie jumped to Mulder’s defence. It is. To her daughter’s surprise, she stepped in front of Mulder, facing Scully. “I just want you to listen to me.”

“Mom, get out of the way. Take Ashley and get out of the way!”

“You trust me, don’t you?” Her gun now trained on her mom, Scully blinked back tears. “You know that I would never hurt you. That I would never let anybody hurt you or Ashley. That’s why you came here, isn’t it? You’re safe here. Put the gun down Dana.” Clearly distraught, Scully stared hard at the people standing in front of her. She watched as Maggie edged towards her. “Put it down, put the gun down Dana. Put it down.”

Finally, as Maggie reached her, Scully pointed the gun away and pressed her forehead against her mother’s. She collapsed into Maggie’s outstretched arms and sobbed as they sank to their knees. Realising that the crisis had been averted, Mulder headed out of the room, knowing full well that Ashley didn’t need to see her mom any more distraught than she already was. “You’re ok,” he whispered. “Everything’s ok.”

“What’s wrong with mommy?” She asked, her tears subsiding.

“She’s sick sweetheart, but she’s going to be ok.”

“She shouted at you.”

“She didn’t mean it.” He carried her up the stairs towards her bedroom, his memory flashing back to the times he did the exact same thing when Scully had been missing. Both his partner and her daughter had been through so much in the few years they’d known him. They deserved better.

“She has a gun.” Mulder paused as he reached the doorway to her room. He looked down at the little girl, who was staring up at him, her eyes reflecting the worry she felt. “Ash, do you trust me?” She nodded enthusiastically. “You know I wouldn’t hurt you.” Another nod. “Well then trust me when I tell you that your mom didn’t mean it. She’s upset and she’s not very well, but she’s going to get better real soon.”

“Does she need a doctor?” Mulder smiled sadly. “Yes she does.” He planned to get Scully to hospital as soon as he’d put Ashley back to bed. “She said some things she didn’t mean, but she’s going to be ok. Don’t worry.” He knew how much Ashley took things to heart. She’d been doing well lately after everything she’d been through, and he only hoped this wouldn’t be a setback for her. Heading into the bedroom, Mulder walked over to the bed and lowered Ashley onto the mattress. “Now it’s late and you need to sleep, because it is way past your bedtime. Do you want a story?” She shook her head as he pulled up the comforter. “In that case close your eyes and go back to sleep little lady.”

“But mommy –“

“Your mom’s going to be absolutely fine, ok?” He bent down to kiss Ashley’s forehead. “Sweet dreams. Maybe tomorrow we can go get ice cream.” At the mention of ice cream, Ashley’s face lit up. “But only if you go to sleep now.”

“I’m asleep,” she answered, immediately closing her eyes.

Chuckling, Mulder reached out and ruffled her hair. “Goodnight trouble.”
“Night night Mulder.” Satisfied that Ashley was now settled, Mulder made his way out of the room, pulling the door to as he left. Now he just had Scully to sort out.

Xxxxx

“Mommy!” Ashley ran into the hospital room ahead of Mulder and scrambled to get up onto the bed. Scully helped her daughter up before enveloping her tightly in her arms, smiling over gratefully at her partner who stood awkwardly by the bedside.

“Hey baby. This is a nice surprise.”

“I promised I’d take Ashley off of your mom’s hands for a few hours. And someone was very eager to see you.”

“Well thank you.” Pressing her lips to Ashley’s forehead, Scully looked down at her daughter. “Are you behaving yourself for Mulder?”

“Of course mommy,” Ashley replied innocently. “I always behave myself.”

“I’m not quite sure about that. So what have you guys been up to?”

“Me and Mulder took Queequeg for a walk.”

“Mulder and I,” Scully corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Ashley answered matter-of-factly, as both Mulder and Scully laughed.

“Of course you did. Silly me.”

“And then we took Queequeg home and now we’re here and then we’re going for ice cream, but Mulder told me not to tell you that.”

Mulder grinned sheepishly as Scully shot him a look. “They weren’t my exact words. I think what I said was we’d go as long as it was ok with your mom.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Mulder, you should know by now never to trust a child with a secret. Particularly this child.”

“I know that now.”

“So you took Queequeg for a walk?” She directed her question at Mulder, who nodded.

“We did.”

“You two are friends now?”

Ashley spoke up before he could reply. “Queequeg bit Mulder’s hand and drew blood and Mulder said shi-”

“Woah there little lady,” Mulder interrupted, as he switched off the television set and sat down next to his partner and her daughter. “Mommy doesn’t need to hear that.” He turned his attention back to Scully. “How are you feeling?”

“Ashamed. I was so sure Mulder. I saw things and I heard things and it was just like the world was turned upside down. Everybody was out to get me.”
“Now you know how I feel most of the time,” he quipped.

“I thought you were going to kill me.” She was clearly ashamed at her actions the previous evening.

“I’m not surprised,” Mulder answered to his partner’s confusion. “I did some checking. Joseph Patnik thought he was murdering a Bosnian war criminal, a man the media described as a modern day Hitler. It turns out both Patnik’s parents were Holocaust survivors.”

Scully looked confused. “I’m not following.”

“Helen Riddock was scared her husband was going to be unfaithful to her. You see a pattern developing here? What if this, this video signal somehow turned these people’s anxieties into some kind of dementia? Yeah, a virtual reality of their own worst nightmares?”

“Like me thinking that you’d betray me,” Scully agreed, and Mulder tried not to read too much into her agreeing that one of her biggest nightmares concerned him betraying her. “I was so far gone Mulder, I thought you had gone to the other side.”

“What do you mean?”

“That Cancer Man, the man who smokes all those cigarettes, I was sure that I saw the two of you sitting in your car in the motel parking lot. You were reporting to him, you handed him a videotape. I’m... it was crazy.”

“Ah, maybe not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well somebody’s behind this, we just don’t know who.”

“You think it could be him?”

“I don’t know.”

As Scully processed her partner’s words, Mulder spoke again. “Why don’t you try and get some rest? Someone here has to eat her own body weight in ice cream before the day is out.”

Ashley smiled up at her mom. “Shall I save you some ice cream mommy?”

“Thank you for the offer, but your ice cream will melt before you get it back here. You can eat it for me. Just not too much.” She gave a knowing look to Mulder who grinned.

“Ok Ash, let’s go. Say goodbye to your mom.”

“Bye mommy.” Ashley threw her arms around Scully’s neck.

“Bye baby.” Kissing her forehead, Scully added. “Be good for Mulder, and I’ll hopefully see you tomorrow.” She turned her attention to her partner. “Thank you for bringing her here.”

“Anytime.” He smiled. “Rest up and I’ll see you soon.” With that her partner got to his feet, lifted Ashley up off the bed and tickled her as he carried her to the door. Scully was fine; everything was going to be fine. For now.
Chapter 28

Scully threw open the door without even pausing to look through the spyhole. She wasn’t expecting anyone, which meant that the knock at the door could only be one person. Sure enough, Mulder stood on the other side of the door, a sheepish smile on his face. “Hey Scully.”

“Mulder.” She resisted the urge to sigh. Ever since she’d returned home from the hospital he’d been making excuses to check up on her, whether it be by phone or by popping round armed with paperwork or occasionally the odd present for Ashley. She knew exactly what he was doing – he was checking up on her, making sure she was ok after her recent hospitalisation. She was fine, completely back to normal, just still a little embarrassed over the fact she’d pulled a gun on her partner. Again. Only this time, thankfully, she didn’t pull the trigger. Ashley on the other hand wasn’t completely back to normal, still somewhat hesitant around her mom, and Scully wished she could turn back the clock and protect her daughter from what she saw. They just needed time, time to recover and to forget about recent horrors.

“Is now a bad time?”

Yes. “No, of course not. Come in.” As he walked into her apartment, Scully glanced down and sure enough, he held a case file in his hand. “What’s up?”

He turned to face her, embarrassed, as though he knew she’d figured out why he was really there. “I was wondering if I could get your opinion on something?”

“What is it -?”

“Mulder!” Ashley walked in to the living room, dressed in pale blue Cinderella pyjamas, her normally tousled hair recently brushed out. Her face lit up as she realised they had a visitor. Mulder had barely enough time to pass Scully the file he was holding before the little girl threw herself into his arms.

“Hey you. Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“We were just getting to that,” Scully replied. “We’re having another “I don’t want to go to bed” episode, aren’t we Ashley?” Since Scully had returned home from the hospital, she’d noticed her daughter had once again been reluctant to sleep, still insisting that the monsters were residing in her bedroom.

“You should go to bed Ash, only naughty girls stay up this late,” Mulder advised.

Ashley took his advice under consideration. “I’m not a naughty girl.”

“Well you should go to bed then.”

“Will you read me a bedtime story?”

“Ashley, Mulder can’t stay –“

“I want Mulder to read me a story.”

Feeling out of place, Mulder tried to reason with the stubborn child. “Why don’t you ask your mom to read to you? I have to go soon.”
Ashley shook her head furiously. “I want you.”

Scully tried not to let her daughter’s words hurt her but it was hard. “It’s ok Mulder,” she insisted, as she saw look of uncertainty.

“Ok then little lady,” he relented, feeling bad for his partner. “Off we go.” He carried her out of the living room and towards her bedroom. When he entered Ashley’s room he placed the little girl back down onto the floor and followed her over to her bed. He lifted the covers up while she climbed in, then once she was settled he tucked her in, before sitting on the edge of the mattress, his finger lightly tracing her bright pink.

“Will you tell me a story Mulder?”

“Of course. What do you want tonight? Snow White? Sleeping Beauty?” Ashley was a Disney fan, though Mulder couldn’t say the same after having to read her the same stories over and over again. Thankfully the little girl lying next to him decided to give me a reprieve, and shook her head. “No? A new book?”

Again, she shook her head. “Tell me a story.”

“I will as soon as you tell me what you want me to read.”

“Nooo,” Ashley frowned. He clearly wasn’t understanding. “Tell me a story please Mulder. Tell me a story about you and me.”

“Oh.” Mulder thought for a moment. “Ok…umm…what do you want to know?”

“Tell me how we met.”

“You know how we met silly. I met you when I was round your house one night visiting your mom, you remember?”

She nodded, grinning. “How did you meet my mommy?”

“Your mom? We work together, you know that.”

“Tell me the story of you and mommy.”

“There’s no story to tell Ash, we work together.” He half wished she’d have chosen Sleeping Beauty once again instead of quizzing him.

“When did you first meet?”

“You want to hear that story?” Nodding once again, Ashley slipped her thumb into her mouth and shifted in the bed, making herself comfortable. “Ok, well…one day, when I was –“

“Once upon a time,” Ashley prompted. Some fairy tale, Mulder thought. Scully had had nothing but bad luck since she’d met him, and must have been cursing the day she’d ever agreed to join the X Files.

“Once upon a time there was….your mom…”

“Scully.”

He grinned. “She will not appreciate you calling her that.”
Ashley frowned. “Tell me the story Mulder!”

“Ok so once upon a time your mom took a job at the FBI. She was new and enthusiastic and –“

“Pretty,” the little girl supplied.

Mulder nodded. “She was. She had really bad taste in suits though. I mean this one was gray I think, but you know, she hasn’t worn it since.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well she walked into my office all eager and enthusiastic and –“

“What did she do?”

“Hey,” he joked. “Who’s telling this story, you or me?”

Ashley giggled. “You are Mulder.”

“Thank you.” Smiling to let her know he was joking, Mulder continued. “At the time I didn’t want a partner; I was happy working by myself, and so I wasn’t exactly welcoming to your mom. I was an ass–” He caught himself before cussing in front of the youngster. “I was an idiot, but thankfully your mom didn’t take any notice. And so she came with me to Oregon and –“

“Where’s Oregon?”

“It’s the other side of the country.”

“Near Uncle Bill?”

“Not quite.”

“Then what happened?”

“Your mom flew out with me, and while we were working together I realised she was ok. She was someone I could count on. And then, not long after we got home, I met you.” And his whole world got turned upside down, he thought to himself.

“My mommy pointed a gun at you,” Ashley suddenly announced.

His story now forgotten, Mulder took hold of the little girl’s hand. With his free hand he brushed her hair away from her eyes. “Ash, I know you were scared, but your mom wouldn’t have shot me.” Thankfully the little girl was unaware that not too long ago Scully had done just that. “There are only two people in this world that I trust, you know that?” She shook her head. “I trust you, and I trust your mom. Just you two.”

“But mommy had a gun.”

“Your mom was sick. She was scared and she was protecting you and your grandma.” Mulder sensed movement behind him and sure enough a glance out of the corner of his eye told him Scully was stood in the doorway. “Your love your mom, right?” Ashley nodded. “And you know she loves you?” Another nod in confirmation. “And you trust your mom? And me?”

“Yes,” the little girl answered in a small voice.

“Then trust me when I say your mom would never hurt me. Or you,” he added. “We love you.”

“Then trust me when I say your mom would never hurt me. Or you,” he added. “We love you.”
“Do you love my mommy?” The little girl’s question rendered Mulder speechless.

“Ummm –“

“Can I come in?” Scully’s interruption came at the best possible time, and Mulder knew she’d done it on purpose, wanting to save him from embarrassment.

“Sure,” he answered. Even Ashley looked pleased to see her mom.

“I thought I’d come in and say goodnight.”

Mulder nodded as she walked into the room, coming to stand between him and her daughter. “Ashley was just asking me how we met.”

“So I heard. I quite liked that gray suit.” She tried – and failed – to look annoyed.

“Mommy, did you love Mulder when you met him?”

Her cheeks pinking, Scully thought for a moment. “I didn’t love his ties.”

“My ties? What’s wrong with my ties?” He looked between mother and daughter. Ashley giggled. “Really?”

“They’re bad,” the little girl admitted.

“Well then, the next time I go shopping, I’ll have to take you both with me.” Wondering whether he’d overstepped the mark, Mulder sobered and decided to change the subject. “I guess you’d better sleep now little lady.”

“Yes you should,” Scully agreed. “It’s way past your bedtime Ashley.”

The little girl surprised both Mulder and Scully when, instead of arguing, she sat up in bed and wrapped her arms around her mom’s legs. “I love you mommy.”

Scully squeezed her daughter back. “I love you too baby. Sleep well.”

As she released her hold on Ashley, the little girl turned to hug the man standing before her. “Night night Mulder.”

“Night little lady.” He ruffled her hair. “Don’t let the bed bug’s bite.”

Mulder then left Scully to finish putting her daughter to bed, wanting to give the two of them some time alone. He was glad that, finally, everything was back to normal.
“Mommy?”

Scully woke to find her daughter stood by her bed, a look of concern on her face, tear tracks lining her cheeks. “Ashley?” Rubbing her eyes wearily, Scully sat up in bed and flicked on the lamp, the comforter pooling around her waist as she took in her daughter’s appearance. “Are you ok?”

Her daughter shook her head, fresh tears beginning to fall. “I wet the bed. I’m sorry mommy.”

“Oh baby, it’s ok.” Reaching out, Scully pulled the little girl into her arms, hugging her tightly. Ashley hadn’t wet the bed in months; she’d been feeling a lot happier recently, once she’d finally recovered from the shock of her mom’s outburst towards Mulder. Scully couldn’t help but wonder what her daughter was worried about now. “Is something on your mind?” Ashley shook her head against her. Not wanting to push the matter and upset her further, Scully sprang into action. “Let’s get you cleaned up, ok?”

“I’m sorry mom.”

“Don’t apologise sweetheart. These things happen.”

After taking Ashley to the bathroom, Scully left her daughter to clean herself up whilst she went and stripped her bed, replacing the soiled sheets with fresh linen. Ashley came out of the bathroom minutes later, wrapped in an oversized navy blue towel, shivering. “Come on, let’s get you into some clean clothes.” Within seconds Scully had helped Ashley dry herself and had dressed her in a pair of clean pjs. “Would you like to sleep in my bed tonight?” The little girl nodded before wrapping herself around her mom. Getting to her feet, Scully lifted her daughter into her arms, groaning. “I think you’ll have to carry me in future sweetie.” She carried the little girl into her bedroom, before placing her in the king size bed and climbing in after her. Switching off the light, she gathered her daughter into her arms. “Are you sure there’s nothing bothering you? Is everything ok at school?”

“I like school,” Ashley replied in a small voice.

“Are you happy there?”

“Uh huh.”

“And everything’s ok with your friends?”

“Uh huh,” she repeated.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, don’t you?”

Ashley nodded. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Oh,” Scully wasn’t entirely convinced. Something was up, but she was prepared to give Ashley some time rather than press her for details.

“Mommy?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I have some water please?”
Not entirely sure it was a good idea, Scully finally relented. “Sure baby. I’ll be back in a second.”
With that she got back out of bed, wondering exactly what was wrong with her little girl.

xxxxx

It was a case that Scully knew would live with her for a long time. She and Mulder were called to Home, Pennsylvania, to investigate after the corpse of a deformed baby was found. During their inquiries, the pair were informed that a family of brothers living close by the crime scene were prone to inbreeding, and it was during an examination of the baby’s body that Scully realised it had been buried alive. She felt as though she was in the middle of a bad dream; one that she couldn’t wake up from.

“Imagine all a woman’s hopes and dreams for her child, and then nature turns so cruel. What must a mother go through?” Scully asked as she and Mulder walked outside following the inspection of the child’s body.

“Apparently not much in this case if she just threw it out with the trash.” The two of them took a seat on a bench outside of the police station.

“I…I guess I was just projecting on myself.”

“Why, is there a history of genetic abnormalities in your family?”

“No.”

“Well, just find yourself a man with a spotless genetic makeup and a really high tolerance for being second-guessed and start pumping out more of the little Uber-Scullies.”

Scully smiled. “I guess I just thought that parents want their child to be healthy. I mean it’s bad enough seeing Ashley when she’s sick or has the flu, but something like this…” She didn’t have to finish her sentence.

“How’s mini Scully feeling now?” Scully had spent a day at home with her daughter earlier that week after Ashley claimed she was sick. Her mother wasn’t entirely sure; half wondering whether something bigger was awry in her daughter’s life. The bedwetting was back in earnest, so much so that Scully had booked Ashley in to see the doctor as soon as she got back from this case. Something was wrong.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “From the way she’s acting I get the impression she’s worried about something, because she’s up in the middle of the night and wetting the bed again, but she insists there’s nothing wrong at school.”

“Are things with her friends ok?”

“I think so, she hasn’t said anything about them falling out. I spoke to her teacher on Monday and she said she’s not aware of any bullying, but she’ll keep an eye out.”

“Health wise?”

“Health wise she’s fine. Besides her bed-wetting, she seems to be absolutely fine, if a little quiet.”

“She was a bit subdued when I picked you up yesterday,” Mulder agreed. “But it was a school day, so if something was going on there, it would make sense.”

“Yeah,” she didn’t sound too sure.
“Listen Scully, Ashley will be fine. That child…that child we just saw inside? That’s a tragedy. Some young parents, probably scared kids, disposed of an unwanted birth... in a very certain sense, infanticide is involved, but this is not an F.B.I. matter.”

“But from what I know from about genetic defects, Mulder, it's unlikely that child is a result of a single polygenic mating.”

“We should let local authorities investigate that.”

“Those defects, Mulder, are autosomal dominant disorders, and from the degree, I'd say, mutations that go back many generations.”

“Scully… Sheriff Taylor, uh, implied that the boys in that family were not really the type that could easily get dates.”

“But he also implied that they practice inbreeding. Now we all have a natural instinct to propagate…”

“Do we?”

“There are theories which pose that our bodies are, are simply vehicles for genes needing to replicate.”

“Yeah, yeah, but there's no sister. The mother's been dead for ten years.”

“But if the instinct and the need is strong enough, they will answer it any way that they can. Now a woman gave birth to that child, Mulder, and my guess is, against her will.”

“And kidnapping is a bureau matter.”

As Scully stood up, Mulder called to her. “Hey Scully?” She turned to face him. “I never saw you as a mother before.”

“What?” She was clearly confused, not that he could blame her.

“I mean, you’re a mom, I know that, but seeing you these past few days…” he shrugged. “I don’t know. You always try so hard to be Agent Scully when we’re at work, I get that, and you’re an amazing agent, but just recently I’ve seen the other side of you, the mom side. That’s not a bad thing,” he added hastily. “It’s good to see.” He grinned. “Am I just digging myself into a hole?”

“A little bit,” she replied, smiling back at him as she headed for the car. As always he moved to follow her.

It was as Mulder and Scully were waiting for their luggage that Scully received the phone call from Ashley’s school. She left Mulder to collect her case as she took the call, rushing back to him as soon as she’d hung up. “Mulder I have to go.”

He looked up, having just rescued her bag from the belt, and nodded. “Sure, my bag is just coming.” Taking in her worried expression, he narrowed his eyebrows. “Everything ok?”

“That was the school. Ashley’s been taken to hospital.” Scully knew the moment Mulder took in her words – he sprang into action and pushed past some of their fellow passengers in search of his case. Seconds later he was back, and led Scully out of the building and towards the parking lot.
“What’s happened?”

“Apparently she hasn’t seemed herself all morning. Then at lunch time she was playing with some friends and she fainted. I knew something wasn’t right Mulder, I shouldn’t have left her.”

“Relax Scully,” Mulder tried to reassure her. “She’s a fighter, she’s strong. She’ll be ok.” He only hoped he was right.

xxxxxx

After breaking all kinds of speed limits, Mulder pulled up outside the hospital in record time, letting Scully out of the car while he parked, then followed her inside. By the time he’d reached her, she was at the nurse’s station, speaking to one of the doctors. The gentleman who stood before Scully stopped when Mulder approached them. “Sorry Mr Scully, I –“

“Mulder,” Scully corrected.

“Mr Mulder, I was just telling your wife that your daughter –“

“Uh she’s not my daughter.”

The doctor looked at Scully who nodded. “It’s ok, he’s a friend.”

He continued. “I was just saying, we’re running some tests on Ashley at the moment. She’s asking for you, so I’ll take you through in a second.”

“Do you know what the problem is?” Mulder asked.

“I was just telling Mrs Scully that we have our suspicions, but the tests will tell us shortly. In the meantime, would you like to see her?”

“Yes,” Scully answered, before her partner could ask any more questions. All she wanted to do was to give her baby a hug. For once, Mulder didn’t argue.

xxxxx

Mulder entered the hospital room, closing the door gently behind him. Ashley was fast asleep in bed, whilst Scully sat slumped in a chair to her side, also snoozing. Her eyes shot open no sooner had he entered the room, and she sat up quickly, ironing out the kinks in her neck. “Hi.”

“Hey. I got your stuff.” When Scully had tried to send him home earlier that evening he’d initially refused, before relenting on one condition – that he’d return later with a change of clothes for Scully, along with Ashley’s pyjamas and her favourite teddy bear to keep her company during her hospital visit. “Here you go, fresh clothes for the two of you, and I managed not to get too distracted by your underwear drawer.”

Scully smiled wearily as she stood and took the bag from him. “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“And,” he said, holding out his hand. “At first I thought about bringing you coffee, but then I figured you need your rest, so I’ve gone for hot chocolate. Did you eat while I was gone?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That wasn’t what I asked. You need to eat Scully. And sleep too.” She looked dead on her feet. He looked behind her and saw that a bed had been set up next to Ashley’s. “Why don’t you rest?”
“I’ll rest later.”

“Scully, Ashley is fine, she’s in the best place, and I’ll be here to keep an eye on her.” Before his partner could argue, Mulder took a seat in the chair. “Sleep Scully. I’ll stay.”

Realising she’d lost the battle, Scully nodded reluctantly, then headed towards the door. “I’ll just go and freshen up if that’s ok?”

“It’s fine. Take your time.” Watching while his partner as she left the room, Mulder then turned his attention to the little girl asleep next to him, and prayed she got better soon.

Xxxxx

Scully jolted awake, rousing herself from a dream where Ashley was falling, and she couldn’t quite catch her in time. Shaking the nightmare from her head, she sat up, squinting over towards Ashley; half wondering whether she was still dreaming when she saw her daughter curled up in her bed against Mulder, who was stretched out on top of the covers; her teddy bear wrapped in his right arm. As she sat up, she noticed Mulder shift on the bed and slowly come awake. He blinked twice before he registered that Scully was also awake. “Morning,” he whispered, his voice croaky with sleep.

“Morning.” Scully stifled a yawn.

Before she could ask him why he was on the bed, Mulder rushed to explain. “Ashley woke up a few hours ago and wouldn’t settle. I didn’t want to wake you.” He was surprised Ashley’s sobs hadn’t woken her mom; the little girl had woken Mulder up with a start as he dozed in the chair. As he’d moved to comfort her, Ashley had wrapped herself around him, and had refused to let go until he’d joined her on the bed and told her a story. Finally she’d drifted off, and before Mulder had chance to get up off the bed and go back to his chair, he’d fallen asleep next to her.

“Thank you, she replied. “Was she ok?”

“She wanted to go home. I think she was just a little disorientated and scared. She settled in no time. How did you sleep?”

“Ok. This bed is surprisingly comfortable.” Removing himself from Ashley’s arms, Mulder sat up, discarded the teddy bear sheepishly, stretched, and got up from the bed, letting out an impressive yawn. “Thank you for staying Mulder. I appreciate it.”

He grinned. “It beats sleeping on my sofa.”

Huffing out a laugh, Scully nodded, feeling tears spring to her eyes. “I appreciate everything you do for Ashley; for us. Sometimes I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

Their eyes meeting, Mulder felt his own throat tighten. “You don’t need to thank me Scully. I’m here because I want to be.”

Before Scully could answer, Ashley’s doctor entered the room, unaware of the moment he’d just interrupted.

xxxxxxx

Diabetes. As soon as Scully took in the doctor’s confirmation of his earlier suspicions, she felt a feeling of dread in her stomach. Like her father, Ashley would be dependent upon insulin for the rest of her life. After going through Ashley’s treatment with her mother, the doctor discharged the
little girl; deeming her healthy enough to leave the hospital, though giving her strict instructions to take it easy over the weekend. Mulder drove the two of them home, his partner silent during the journey, while Ashley slept soundly in the backseat. He knew exactly why Scully had taken the news so badly – Jack’s condition after all was part of what killed him, even though he wasn’t exactly himself at the time, and the last thing she wanted was for Ashley to be ill. Her daughter on the other hand seemed excited to finally be released from the hospital, along with being allowed another day off school, and had been talking non-stop the moment she set foot outside, right up until the moment they got caught in morning traffic and she’d finally zonked out. She’d woken the instant Mulder had pulled up outside their apartment, though she still allowed him to carry her indoors, content to have Mulder close by for longer. But when Scully moved to administer her daughter’s injection an hour later, Ashley’s mood soon soured. “Nooo,” she cried, her bottom lip trembling the instant Scully had told her it was time. Her mother hadn’t even touched her and already Ashley was practically hysterical. “I don’t want to.”

“Ashley,” her mother spoke soothingly, not wanting to upset her further. “It’ll make you feel better.”

“No it won’t. I don’t want a stupid injection!”

“You don’t want to end up back in the hospital, do you?”

Not bothering with an answer, Ashley shrugged. “I don’t want it mommy.”

“I know you don’t, but it won’t hurt,” she lied.

“Yes it will.”

Realising his partner was losing a battle of wills, Mulder decided to intervene. “Hey Ash,” he spoke from where he sat in the armchair opposite them on the sofa, and both women turned round to face him. Tears streamed down the youngster’s face, and she looked over at Mulder pleadingly, hoping he would be the one to rescue her from the dreaded injection. “You’re a brave girl, aren’t you?” After a brief moment of hesitation, she finally nodded. “I mean when you fell over last weekend, you didn’t cry, did you?” This time a shake of the head. “I promise you the thought of an injection is worse than it actually is. It’ll hurt less than when you skinned your knees.”

“It hurt at the hospital,” she argued weakly.

“But this time it’s your mom giving you the injection, and moms are gentler than doctors. Now you’re a big, strong girl, and I know you can do this. You don’t want to spend the night back in the hospital do you?” Another negative. “And if you do this, not just today but every day, maybe your mom and I can treat you to something.” He smiled apologetically in the direction of Scully who seemed surprised at his bribe.

“Like ice cream?” Ashley asked, suddenly interested.

“Well…maybe something better. Maybe like a trip to the zoo or something? Would you like that? Her tears now a thing of the past, Ashley nodded enthusiastically. “Will you come with us Mulder?”

“If you want me to.” *And your mom too*, he said to himself. “But only if you’re a good girl for your mom,” he added. “Now do you think you can do this?”

“Ok,” she answered in a small voice. Smiling gratefully, Scully took Ashley into her arms and prepared the needle. She was just about to pierce the skin of her abdomen when the little girl
suddenly tensed and shrieked. “No no no no no mommy, no!”

“Hey hey hey.” Getting up off the sofa, Mulder rushed over to the little girl, crouching down before her. “It’s for your own good sweetheart, it’s just a little prick and then it’ll be over. Be strong and then it’ll be –“

While he was talking, Scully went ahead and injected her daughter; the little girl barely registering that the needle had gone in. “All done,” Scully announced as she pulled the needle out, gently rubbing the area she’d pierced.

“Already?” Eyes wide, Ashley seemed genuinely shocked.

“Yep, see, we said you could do it. You’re a brave girl baby, I’m so proud of you,” Scully enthused.

“It didn’t hurt at all,” the little girl exclaimed.

“I told you so,” Mulder answered. “Now you just have to do that every day, do you think you can do that?”

After pondering his question, Ashley spoke. “Will you still take me to the zoo?”

Mulder nodded. “I promised I would.”

“Then I can do it!” And with that, Mulder realised she had been playing him. And the truth was, he didn’t really mind, not if it meant spending more time with the little girl and her mom.
Chapter 30

Scully knocked on the door to the office and stepped inside, Ashley following close behind. As soon as the little girl saw Mulder sat at the desk, her face immediately lit up, and she ran forward. “Hi Mulder.”

Mulder, his partner noticed, barely registered the little girl, though he did accept her hug. He looked tired, Scully realised, and it was no wonder. His sleep had been disturbed what with his dreams of a young girl’s corpse, which led to the discovery of her body. Their investigation led them to serial John Lee Roche, whom Mulder had helped put in prison with his profile years before. The killer wasn’t prepared to give them information without playing with Mulder, taunting him with information about his sister, insinuating that he had murdered Samantha during a visit to Martha’s Vineyard. Only Mulder wasn’t able to find out the truth to Roche’s claim, having been forced to shoot the murderer when he took another little girl hostage. It was yet another dead end in the hunt for his sister.

“Hey you. How was school?” he asked the little girl, only half paying attention to her response.

“It was good, but Jake Douglas bit me.”

“He did?” Scully interrupted, concerned. “You didn’t tell me that on the way here. Why did he bite you?” Ashley shrugged, saying nothing. “Was that all that happened?”

“Uh huh.”

Her mother wasn’t entirely convinced. “And if I were to go in tomorrow and speak to Mrs Palmer, would she tell me the same?”

“I accidentally kicked Jake,” mumbled Ashley.

“How do you accidentally kick someone?”

Another shrug. “I kicked my leg and he got in the way.”

Even Mulder laughed, the first time he’d done so since his dreams had been plagued by the corpse of Addie Sparks.

“What have I told you about fighting with the other boys and girls?”

“It was his fault,” Ashley protested, her face scrunching up just like her mom’s when Scully was arguing Mulder’s theories. “He shouldn’t have got in the way.”

Realising she wasn’t going to win the battle, Scully decided to get down to business, aware that Mulder probably didn’t want her or her daughter hanging around. He no doubt had a lot on his mind. She placed a pile of papers in front of Mulder on his desk. “I thought I’d just pop in to tell you that I got back some lab results. The dye analysis determined that the fabric of the last heart was manufactured between 1969 and 1974, but beyond that, there’s nothing more they can tell us. Mulder, it's not Samantha... and whoever that little girl really is, we'll find her.”

“How?” Mulder asked, skeptically.

“I don’t know, but I do know you.”
"Who's Samantha?" Ashley piped up to her mom's embarrassment.

"Ashley!"

Mulder dismissed his partner's embarrassment with a wave of his hand. "It's ok," he mouthed to his partner, before turning his attention to the youngster, as though registering her for the first time. "Samantha is my sister," he replied sadly.

"You have a sister?" Ashley’s excitement was evident in her voice. "I didn't know you have a sister! I want a sister too!"

"Don't start young lady," Scully warned, all too used to Ashley’s protests that she wanted a baby sister.

"Can I meet your sister Mulder?"

"Maybe one day," he answered.

"Why not now?"

"Because I don't know where she is." He decided to be truthful, at least to some extent. Ashley wasn't a fool; she was an intelligent child. "When Samantha was a little child she went missing."

Ashley frowned, her excitement now a thing of the past. She knew that whatever Mulder was telling her, it was serious. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know."

"Did she speak to strangers? Mommy tells me not to speak to strangers in case I go missing."

"Your mom's right, you shouldn’t."

"Where did she go?"

"We don't know where Samantha went."

"How old was she?"

"She was...she was eight."

Ashley’s eyes widened. “That’s my age!”

“I know.” It was something that Mulder had thought of a lot; how Ashley was now the same age his sister had been when she’d disappeared. His only saving grace was that Roche was no longer around to hurt any more girls; that Ashley would be safe from the man who quite possibly killed Samantha. Now he just had to protect her from every other monster out there in the big bad world.

"Do you miss her?"

"Every day."

Ashley nodded sadly, as though she fully understood his pain. Which in a way, he realised was true. She had lost people in her own life who she no doubt missed. "I'm sure you'll see her again soon."

Mulder smiled, suddenly feeling a lump in his throat. He willed himself not to break down; not in
front of Scully or her daughter. "I hope so."

As though sensing his dismay, Scully decided to put her partner out of his misery. "Ok now little lady, Mulder has work to do, so we'd better leave him to it. Now say goodbye." She watched as Ashley stepped into Mulder's arms, then spoke to her partner. "I'll see you tomorrow. Why don't you go on home and get some sleep."

Laughing, Mulder leaned into his partner as she wrapped an arm around him and stroked her hand through his hair wordlessly. After Ashley said goodbye to Mulder her mother took her by the hand and led her out of the office. The little girl skipped alongside her mom as they walked along the corridor. As Scully walked, she noticed the little girl looking contemplative. "You ok sweetie?"

Ashley let out a deep breath. "Mulder looks sad," she commented.

"He's ok. He's Mulder, he'll be fine."

"But he looks sad."

"Well, I guess he might be a little sad."

Ashley nodded up at her mom solemnly. "Should I go back and cheer him up?"

"Baby, Mulder's working, and we need to get to the grocery store before it closes. Besides, I think he might want to be alone."

"But you said I cheer you up when you're sad."

"You do sweetheart."

"And Mulder's sad."

"Yes but -"

"I could cheer him up."

Scully stopped short, thinking over her daughter's words. Mulder was upset, and she could fully understand why. For a moment he'd thought he'd found his sister and, though the outcome wouldn't have been good, it would have meant closure for him. But it wasn't meant to be. "Ok, come on." Turning around, she pulled her daughter back in the direction of the office. As soon as Ashley realised where they were headed, she perked up and enthusiastically followed her mom. Opening the door, Scully craned her head around the corner. "Mulder?"

Unaware of her presence until that moment, Mulder startled. "Hey Scully." He turned in his chair to face her. "Did you forget something?"

"No," she answered, and then changed her mind. "Yes actually. Mulder, Ashley and I would like it very much if you joined us for dinner this evening." He looked surprised at her invitation, his eyebrows raised, but before he could argue she continued. "Come on over at six thirty. I'm not taking no for an answer by the way."

"Say yes Mulder!" Ashley slipped past her mom to speak to him.

It seemed a long time before he answered. "Well, if you're sure." Mulder searched his partner's eyes and seemed relieved she when she nodded.

"Of course we're sure, we wouldn't ask otherwise. Now go home, take a nap and we'll see you
tonight.” And with that she led her daughter back out of the office, glad that her partner wouldn’t be alone.
Chapter 31

Scully said six thirty, but Mulder appeared on her doorstep at twenty past, not wanting to be late. He was surprised to see his partner in regular clothes, black jeans and a casual grey sweater. For a long time now, even outside of work or back at the numerous motels they’d stayed in, she was still professionally dressed, as though she was Agent Scully at all times. It was nice to see her relaxed. She greeted him eagerly, inviting him to make himself at home in the living room while she finished up with dinner. Of course, when she said to make himself at home, she meant sit on the sofa and listen to Ashley as she told him all about her day; how she was learning her times tables and had – not surprisingly – come top of her class in a spelling test that morning. Mrs Palmer, her teacher, had been pleased with her, right up until the moment where she kicked a little boy in her class. He deserved it, she whispered conspiratorially to Mulder, though the look on her face was nothing but angelic. At that moment she’d reminded him of Samantha, how his sister would creep up to him when she was little and bite him, so hard that she almost drew blood, and yet by the time his parents had arrived on the scene she was back to her innocent self. He missed her more than anything at that moment.

Before he could become too morose, Scully entered the room and announced that dinner was ready; chicken and rice, a simple dish but Ashley’s favourite – at least out of the food that didn’t come from a diner. “It’s great,” Mulder insisted after Scully apologised. “It’s better than I do for myself.” He didn’t tell her that he wasn’t hungry; that the thought of eating made him nauseous; that all he wanted was to know whether that last heart belonged to his sister. Instead he accepted the plate of food gratefully, and played with his food as he listened to mother and daughter interact, all the while trying to ignore the worried glances Scully shot his way.

“Did you manage to take a nap?” Scully asked once she’d observed Ashley cutting up her chicken. Despite the fact she was now older, Ashley still liked to put on a show in front of guests, especially Mulder, even if it meant she ended up wearing more food than she ate.

“No, I couldn’t sleep.” He wouldn’t quite meet her eye, well aware that Doctor Scully was about to make an appearance. Sure enough she didn’t argue, no doubt aware he was already losing his patience.

“If you’d like I can give you something to help you tonight?”

“Like hot chocolate?” Ashley supplied, but her mom ignored her.

“Scully, right now I don’t think I dare sleep.”

This time, thankfully, she didn’t argue, no doubt aware he was already losing his patience.

“Will Samantha come to dinner with us soon Mulder?” Ashley asked innocently as she chewed on a spoonful of rice, unaware of how much her words hurt. As much as he loved the little girl, the last thing Mulder wanted was for Ashley to keep questioning him about his sister. It was too raw.

Her mom gently tapped her on the arm. “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she warned.

“Sorry.” Mulder noted with a smile that Ashley was still chewing whilst talking.

“And stop quizzing Mulder. He’s our guest and he came here for a nice quiet meal; you’re not supposed to make him feel uncomfortable.”

“It’s ok Scully.” Though he didn’t want to talk about Samantha, he realised that she could never say no to Ashley. “One day, if I find Samantha, I’d love to bring her to dinner.
Scully couldn’t help but feel disheartened at his words; he sounded so defeated, almost convinced that he’d never find his sister – or at least find out the truth about what had happened to her. It made her want to get up and go give him a hug, to tell him that everything would be ok in the end. But she stayed where she was, and said nothing.

“When did she go missing?” Ashley asked, proving herself to be as good at questioning people as her mom.

“Twenty three years ago.”

Clearly not expecting that answer, Ashley’s eyes widened. “That was before my mom was born.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence Ashley, but I was born,” Scully replied.

“It was a long time ago,” Mulder agreed with the little girl. “Definitely before you were born Ash.”

“You’ll find her Mulder,” Ashley answered, her eyes brimming with sympathy. “I’m sure you will.”

Realising her daughter’s words had choked her partner, Scully interrupted. “Ok people, your dinner is getting cold. Now let’s eat.”

“Ok young lady,” Scully spoke up once her daughter and Mulder had finished their dinner. She noticed with some sadness that Mulder had barely touched his dinner, his mind obviously elsewhere. Usually he barely took the time to chew his food, but that wasn’t the case that evening. “Time for a shower before bedtime.”

“I don’t want to go to bed.” Ashley slumped dramatically onto the dining table, pushing her plate out of the way as she did so. Her mother looked unimpressed, but Mulder couldn’t help but huff out a laugh.

“If you go now you can have some time to read before bed.”

“I don’t want to read. Reading is stupid. I want to stay up with Mulder.”

“I thought you’d grown out of your “I want” stage?” Getting to her feet, Scully started collecting up the dishes, waving off help from her partner.

“But Mulder doesn’t want to sleep and he’s allowed to stay awake.”

“Mulder’s an adult.”

“And I want to sleep, I just can’t,” he said in Scully’s defence.

“But I don’t want to.”

“Ashley, go take a shower now and then get ready for bed.” Though Scully remained calm, Mulder could hear the hint of a threat in her voice. *Do it, or else there’ll be trouble*.

“But –“

“You have school bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“I hate school.”
“No you don’t,” Mulder piped up once again, even though he knew it was none of his business. “You like school.”

“Besides,” Scully added. “You need to go to bed soon or else you’ll be too tired to go to Leah’s birthday party on Saturday.”

At this, Ashley sat back up straight in her chair. Scully had hit a nerve. “Or maybe you don’t want to go to Leah’s party; maybe you’d rather stay at home and keep me company?”

“I want to go to the party,” Ashley admitted.

“Well then,” Scully replied, winking across the table at her partner. “You’d best get in that bathroom pronto.”

Round one to Scully.


Mulder stayed to help Scully with the dishes and by the time they were done Ashley had showered and was ready for bed. When her mother announced it was time for bed, Ashley asked Mulder to read her a story, and as usual he didn’t say no. He followed her into her bedroom, helping her up into bed and pulling up the comforter while the little girl got comfortable, snuggling into her pillow. He smiled sadly as he perched on the mattress, thinking about not only how quickly she was growing up, but also at the same time how small she was. She was still so young, afraid of monsters (and rightly so, he thought with a pang), spiders and clowns. He tried desperately not to think about how Samantha was also scared of clowns; at how petrified she must have been the night she was taken away from her family. And how scared she must be now, if she was still alive. After what he’d seen and heard over the past few days, he wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure about anything anymore, except for the little girl in front of him, and her mom out in the kitchen making coffee.

As if reading his thoughts, Ashley reached out a hand and placed it on top of his own. “Have I made you sad Mulder?”

He looked up, frowning, and shook his head. “Of course you haven’t. What makes you say that?”

She shrugged, the comforter rising with her movements. “You seem sad.”

“I am a little sad,” he admitted.

“Do you miss your sister?” He nodded. “I miss my grandpa.”

“That’s understandable. You loved your grandpa.”

“And Aunt Missy.”

“Her too.”

“I miss my daddy too,” she added after a pause. “But my mom always tells me it’s ok to miss somebody. So it’s ok for you to miss Samantha.”

Taking a deep breath, Mulder squeezed the little girl’s hand gently. “I know. And it’s ok for you to miss your family too.”

“Sometimes I don’t remember my dad.” Ashley whispered her revelation, as though it was a big
secret she was announcing. Mulder was hardly surprised by her news – she was only four years old when Jack died.

“That’s ok.” Letting go of her hand, Mulder shifted on the bed, bringing his legs up onto the mattress. Instantly Ashley rolled onto her side and wrapped her arm around him, snuggling into his body. “Your mom is always around to tell you about him. All you have to remember is that he loved you, and that he’d be very proud of you now.”

“Samantha loves you too,” she replied, bringing a lump to Mulder’s throat.

“Yeah.”

“I love you Mulder, so Samantha must reaaaallllllly love you.”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm, and hugged her tightly. “Love you right back. Now close your eyes and go to sleep.”

“Only if you do too.”

As she looked up at him, Mulder clamped his eyes shut. “Ok, I’m sleeping.”

“No you’re –“

“Sssh, I’m sleeping.”

Giggling, Ashley closed her own eyes. “I’m sleeping too.”

“Good. Goodnight little lady.”

“Goodnight Mulder.”

Though Mulder had only intended to stay with Ashley until she fell asleep, he couldn’t bring himself to move, not wanting to leave her straight away. And when, barely ten minutes later, Scully poked her head around the door, she saw with some relief that Mulder was fast asleep too. He needed the rest, to try and shut out everything that had happened to him of late. He needed to speak to someone, she mused, though she knew he wouldn’t talk to her. He was pulling away from her, she realised. And little did she know how much their relationship would change in weeks to come.
Sometimes, for Dana Scully, it was hard to be a mom. She had known that would be the case when her store-bought pregnancy test confirmed her worst fears one April night. Her heart had still been mourning her ill-fated relationship with Jack Willis, who she had always known was a man too intense and on edge to really build a life with. Was that really what she had wanted? To build a white picket fence with her instructor? Well, it could have very well been on its way. The wind was loud and whining when she’d called Missy, but she couldn’t hear it over the sound of her heart pounding. Scully had tried to keep her composure on the phone, but broke down the second she heard her sister’s understanding voice on the end of the line. This woman that she used to share a room with. For some reason, she thought that Missy should have been the one to make this mistake, not her. Certainly the many boys her sister had dated in high school in college while Dana pushed her glasses up farther on her nose and delved deeper into her textbooks were a testament to that.

“If you don’t tell him tonight, you’ll never tell him,” Missy had said. She was right. Briefly, she and Jack had had a conversation about families. He’d said that he would feel selfish bringing another being into a world where there were so many horrors. Jack was always focused on the horrors of the world. To find out that because of a broken condom or a lapse in birth control or the run-of-the-mill bad decision that he was now going to be a father… it would be better for her to just tell him right away than keep it from him. Let him make his own decision. She had a fear at the time that she already knew what that might be.

That phone call was the hardest she’d ever had to make in her life. But it bestowed upon her the strength to face any rejection that would come after. And besides a little girl, Scully guessed that was the best thing Jack Willis could have ever given her.

Sometimes, it was hard for Dana Scully to be a mom. But there were no times quite so hard as when she remembered that Ashley had never seen her father on Christmas, and she never would.

“Mommy!” she heard from next to her. She’d spaced out while waiting in line for the mall Santa. “It’s our turn,” Ashley informed her, tugging on her hand gently. The poor man from the Santa seat looked at them with solemn eyes, and Scully suddenly felt bad for allowing her child to sit on his lap, though conceded it was probably the last year Ashley would do so. Santa was probably some hard-pressed guy trying to make extra money so his kids would have a decent Christmas. Because if he didn’t, then they would come to distrust the very man he was impersonating, which would lead to a whole host of problems. Scully knew his pain. She had had some rough times, especially before being assigned to the X-files. Hopefully, she prayed, this man had a family as wonderful as hers to help her get through the tough times. As Ashley smiled and received her candy cane from the elf assistant, Scully sent an undistinguishable nod of encouragement toward the Santa. Things would get better.
“What did you tell him you wanted?” Scully asked her daughter once they were reunited.

“I can’t tell you, mom. Then I won’t get it.”

“That’s birthday wishes, honey.”

“Oh,” Ashley accepted whatever her mother said as fact. “I asked him to bring me another doll, a bicycle, a cat, a bracelet making kit, and…” she trailed off secretly.

“And?” Scully inquired, trying to decide whether or not she should brave Williamson-Sonoma or pick up a few books for her mother at the bookstore where she was getting Ashley’s babysitter’s gift.

“I don’t want to say.”

“Why don’t you want to say?”

“Because you might not have wanted me to ask for this.”

“Well you have to remember, Ash, Santa does the best he can. Sometimes, though, you don’t always get what you ask for,” she had always made sure her daughter realized.

“It wasn’t for me. I asked him for Mulder to come to Grandma’s for Christmas.”

Strangely enough, Scully’s first reaction to hearing that was amazement that her daughter thought Santa Claus had so much power, especially as that year would likely be the last that Ashley believed in him. Then she sighed.

“Ashley, Mulder has his own family to spend Christmas with. I tell you that every year. His mom, remember?” Actually, she told her own mother that every year. Mulder was aware of his standing invitation to the Scully family household for Christmas Eve and Day, but Scully had the sneaking suspicion that he would feel like he was imposing if he accepted it. That, or very pathetic.

“But I want to see Mulder on Christmas. It’s not as special if I give him his present before.”

“Well, you’ll have to take that up with Mulder.”

She hoped that would end the conversation, but her daughter’s face was scrunched up in thought.

“Maybe if we get him something really good this year, he won’t want to wait for it,” Ashley reasoned.

“What should we get Mulder this year? Every year we’ve gotten him a tie, and I don’t want to do that again.”

Although that would be pushing… something. Every year since they’d been partners, she and Ashley had gotten him a tie for Christmas, and he got her something sensible in return. A video. A scarf. A book. Of course, he’d often get Ashley something, or somethings, that she wanted, but the agreement between them was strict and unspoken.

And she wanted to break it.

“What does he want?” Ashley asked. There were a hell of a lot of things Mulder wanted, but none of them Scully could wrap up in a box with nice paper. She’d still give them to him just the same, if she could.
“I don’t know. He seems to have everything he needs.”

“He doesn’t have a picture of me!”

Scully was about to tell her daughter how it was rude to give someone a picture of herself for Christmas, but it sparked a brilliant idea in her. Ashley was telling the truth, Mulder didn’t have any pictures of her. Being a mom and usually having a camera on hand when at the park or zoo or wherever, Scully had snapped numerous pictures of Ashley and Mulder together over the three years he’d been in their lives. There were even a few of the three of them, and she looked at them often.

There wasn’t much time to duck into the craft store with the rest of the people on her list still needing to be bought for. But as soon as she’d thought of it, Scully knew there was nothing else she would get her partner for Christmas.

XXX

“Emma should be bringing Ashley by soon,” Scully told Mulder a few days later. It was December 22, and they were working hard to get their expense reports in before the holiday. Scully asked Ashley’s babysitter if she could bring Ashley by the office instead of having to have her mom drive all the way down from Baltimore to watch her for a few hours.

“Great, I have her present here for her.”

“You know you don’t have to get her anything,” Scully’s words fell on deaf ears.

“It’s just a little something for Christmas,” was his usual response.

Scully’s cell rang a few minutes later, and shortly after that a springy just-turned-eight-year-old bounded through the door and into Mulder’s lap. Her arms went around his neck tightly.

“Hey trouble,” he said against the side of her face, then kissed her there.

“Hey,” Ashley was out of breath.

“How was school?”

“We had our holiday party today. I got candy.”

“Just what you need.”

“Ash, there are coloring books in the corner. Mulder and I have work to do.”

“You can get out of here, Scully, I’ll finish up,” Mulder offered.

“No. No way am I letting you stay here by yourself to fill out our expense reports three days before Christmas. If we work together, we can get out of here for the holiday tonight, so let’s go,” Scully vehemently opposed.

“Then let’s at least take a break. Do you want to go grab dinner?”

“I want to!” Ashley made herself known.

“That makes two of us. Come on, Scully, I’ll drive.”

Thirty minutes later, they were being served dinner at a small café less than ten minutes from the
Hoover building. Ashley was swinging her legs eagerly and making her way quickly through her macaroni and cheese. Scully wanted to say something to her daughter, but in the public atmosphere, she could sit back and really see how cute she was. And Mulder was definitely looking at her fondly. He never expressed anything less than adoration for Ashley.

“Well now that I’ve got you guys satisfied, I think I have some gifts to give out,” Mulder announced when Scully set her fork down next to her salad. Ashley sprouted up in her seat and the most excited smile popped on her face. He’d spend any amount of money to see that smile.

Scully tried to object, but she knew how much her partner loved to spoil her daughter. Of course, she let Ashley open her gift in front of him; it was only fair that Mulder got to see her reaction.

“A jewelry box!” the eight-year-old screeched with delight. Ashley, in contrast with her rough and tough mother, was a proper, frilly, dress-up-loving, pink-wearing little lady who had coaxed Mulder into more than one game of tea party. Her room just didn’t seem right without the yellow and pink flowered jewelry box. Or the matching bracelet, necklace, and clip-on earrings inside, which made Ashley squeal louder.

“Thank you thank you thank you Mulder!” Ashley ran over to him and threw her arms around him, already wearing her new items.

“Now it’s your mom’s turn,” he pulled out a smaller box at the same time Scully was pulling out her package.

“We’ll go at the same time,” Scully compromised, exchanging presents with Mulder. He let Ashley help rip the wrapping paper.

“Oh my God. Oh my God, Mulder,” Scully had revealed a maritime-themed music box that, when opened, began to play ‘Beyond the Sea.’ It was definitely an old music box, not just something you could buy at any store. Hearing the familiar tune brought tears to Scully’s eyes. It was exactly the type of thing her father would have gotten her mother while he was alive. It was the best present she’d ever received.

“Well this is certainly the most interesting tie I’ve ever seen,” Mulder commented, trying to hold back his own feelings as he flipped through the scrapbook complete with trinkets from the park, the zoo, some of Ashley’s drawings, and of course, several pictures of them. Before that moment, he’d only held one photo album dear—the one full of pictures from before Samantha was taken. But the gift had immediately received sacred status. He now had two things he would save in a fire.

Nothing was said for a very long time. For two people that had been expecting a book and a tie, the abundantly thoughtful gifts were overwhelming.

“Mulder… Ashley and I would really like it if you would come to my mom’s for Christmas,” Scully couldn’t help but blurt out.

“Yeah, Mulder, please come!”

The look on his face was mixed. He was incredibly touched by the gift and the love he shared for Ashley and Scully was influencing him in one way. Yet, it seemed intrusive for him to barge in on their Christmas. He took Scully away from her daughter on the weekends sometimes, he kept her out late a lot… Mulder felt he should leave them alone on bank holidays.

But he wanted to go. Oh he wanted to go.

“I think I can make an appearance,” he answered, earning him an armful of happy little Ashley.
Scully glanced at the clock for about the thirtieth time that day, then her watch. They were both telling her that Mulder had yet to show up. Her wine began to taste sour and her nerves were getting the better of her. What if he’d been in a car accident? What if he’d been mugged? What if…

She took a deep breath. He was just late.

“Has Fox given you any clue as to when he’s going to be here?” her mom asked, giving a loving glance to her grandchildren playing on the floor. Ashley had two cousins, her Uncle Charlie’s children. There was David, who was ten, and Chris, a seven-year-old. Even with three grandchildren, it was sometimes a handful when they got together, and Scully’s brother Bill and sister-in-law Tara, who were spending Christmas with Tara’s family this year, were also trying for a baby. Not many long stretches of time passed without some parental scolding or warning being made. But Maggie Scully reveled in it.

“No, he hasn’t,” Dana answered, hoping that her mother didn’t notice how annoyed she sounded.

“Well I hope he arrives soon, otherwise I think Ashley might explode,” Maggie quipped, and Scully wasn’t sure if she was actually disguising a comment about herself. She decided just to smile and try to enjoy her day regardless.

“Mom, I think I see Mulder’s car,” Ashley came up to the window and said. She’d been saying that all day, though.

“Ash, he’s not here yet.”

“No, he’s here! Look!” Ashley pointed. And sure enough, sitting in a running car outside on the street was Mulder. Scully had to grab Ashley before she ran out the door in her pajamas while trying to casually slip on her boots. And her mind was full of questions again. Why hadn’t he just come in the house? How long had he been sitting there?

“Hey,” she greeted him, letting him roll down his car window for her.

“Merry Christmas Scully.”

“Merry Christmas. What are you doing out here?”

“Oh, nothing… just called my mom.”

“Okay. Well come inside, there’s a little girl who has spent her whole Christmas looking out the window for you.”

What Scully didn’t know, what nobody needed to know, was that Mulder had been sitting outside for almost fifteen minutes. And the truth was that he had called his mom, but he hadn’t gotten ahold of her. On Christmas, Mulder often found himself suffering through past memories. About the Christmases before Sam was taken. And the Christmases after. And now, here he was, aged 35, and the only communication he would have with his mother on the most important holiday of the year was a message left on her answering machine.

But then Scully had come outside, and the warm home welcomed him like an old friend. Ashley characteristically flung herself into his arms, and he was finally able to take a deep breath.

This was his family.
Chapter 33

“You have something I need.”

The words of Leonard Betts played on repeat in Scully’s mind as she sat in the car in Philadelphia. The case Mulder had given her – forced on her, she thought bitterly – was the last thing she wanted to do, though a small part of her was glad she had a little time to herself away from home. Since her encounter with Betts, Scully had been increasingly worried about her health – headaches and the odd feelings of nausea, not to mention the occasional nosebleed. She knew she should get herself checked out at the doctors, but at the same time she wasn’t entirely sure she could handle any more bad news. And if her health was in question, it would mean yet more upheaval for Ashley. The little girl had returned to her happy and confident self, and had recently celebrated both her eighth birthday and also Christmas with Mulder joining them. She was doing well at school, had made lots of friends and adored Queequeg, not to mention her mom’s partner at work. Mulder. Things between Mulder and Scully had been tense of late, ever since her encounter with Betts, and she knew she’d been pushing her partner away. It felt to her that of late Mulder had been taking her for granted – a point proven when he expected her to drop everything and go to Philadelphia, without him even sparing any thought to her having to sort out childcare for Ashley. But thankfully Maggie was on hand to stay with her granddaughter and Queequeg until Scully returned. She only hoped she’d get home soon.

XXXXXXXX

A sighting of Mulder’s suspect finally got Scully out of the car and she followed him into a tattoo parlour across the street. A disagreement was already in full swing by the time she entered the studio, as the tattoo artist argued with a man who clearly wasn’t happy with his new body art; desperate to have it covered up.

“Miss…Miss.” Scully drew her attention away from an eye-catching design she’d spotted, to find both men staring at her. “You like this on his arm?”

Moving in closer, Scully’s eyes rested on the other man’s tattoo; a woman with blood red lips, the words Never Again inscribed below. “Wow,” she commented, clearly impressed with the design. “The uhh…the color…the red on the lips. It’s extraordinary.”

The tattoo artist explained how he achieved the coloring, before he was called out back by Mulder’s suspect, leaving Scully alone with the unhappy customer.

“Mind some advice from a stranger?” he asked. “Make sure you’ve thought it over before you get it done.”

She eyed up the man in front of her. “What, you didn’t get the tattoo you deserve?”

“Mine was too impulsive.”

“Never say Never,” she read. “Yeah sometimes I wish I were that impulsive.”

“Careful what you wish for. There’s more fashionable places in the city. How did you end up here?”

The lie came easily to her. “I’m in town visiting my aunt in the neighborhood. How about you?”

“There’s a real crummy bar across the street. It’s good for when you’re feeling down. I was kind of
down last week and –“

That explained why he wasn’t happy with his tattoo. Now that he’d sobered up he clearly regretted it. “So it wasn’t so much impulsive as it was hammered?”

“Have you umm…seen much of Philadelphia?”

“No.” Suddenly Scully wasn’t so sure whether there was meaning behind his question.

Sure enough she was right. “There’s a couple of really nice restaurants by the river, if you’re interested?”

“I’d like that but umm…I’m leaving tonight.” Secretly she was flattered – the man in front of her was young, athletic, attractive, and clearly wanted to get to know her better – at least in his eyes she was still attractive, and it had been a long time since she’d been out with a guy. But Scully had a life back home to think about – she had Ashley and there was Mulder and…and it was just too damn complicated.

Though the stranger looked disappointed, he took it well. “Uh,” he muttered, handing her a business card. Ed, his name was Ed. “If you’re ever in town again, that’s my home number. I work there mainly.” Without saying goodbye, Ed walked out of the tattoo parlour, while Scully pocketed his card. Just in case.

She wasn’t going to call him; at least that’s what Scully originally told herself. But then Mulder contacted her, and after she informed him that she’d turned the case over to the local bureau, he’d more or less insinuated that he didn’t think she was capable of working on the case alone. And then he’d made some quip about her having a date, so Scully reached for Ed’s card. She’d offered to pick him up after accepting his offer of a date, and as she stepped inside his apartment, she saw the sorry slate of Ed’s life. She picked up a photograph of him with two children – his kids she presumed – a boy and a girl, but she noticed with sadness that his own face had been burnt out, as though he wanted to erase his existence. It was then that she suggested they check out the crummy bar he’d mentioned instead of a fancy restaurant; it was more suited to their respective moods. He didn’t want to exist, whereas there was a possibility that Scully may cease to exist if her health was under threat. So barely fifteen minutes later she found herself sat next to Ed in the dimly lit bar, nursing her vodka and soda. “So what makes this place a good place to go when you’re feeling down?”

“Oh it’s kind of…Everyone here looks like their problems are worse than mine. Makes me feel good about myself.”

Scully stirred her drink thoughtfully. “Yeah, but you can’t tell what’s going on in somebody’s head just by looking at them. I mean, they’re probably thinking that we’re the ones that are screwed up.”

And in a way they were – Ed obviously had family issues, not to mention a very low opinion of himself, while Scully was a single mom with a potentially serious health problem. They suited one another.

“Are we?”

“Who knows? I mean sometimes I uh…I’ve always gone around in this…uh…circle. It usually starts when an authoritative or controlling figure comes into my life. And part of me likes it, needs it, wants the approval. But then at a certain point along the way, I just…you know.” From the confused look on Ed’s face, he didn’t seem to fully understand. “Ok,” she said, trying a different route. “Umm my father was a Navy captain. I worshipped…worship…the sea that he sailed on.
And when I was 13 or so I went through this thing where I would sneak out of my parent’s house and smoke my mother’s cigarettes. And I did it because I knew that if he found out, he would kill me. I uhh…I got pregnant unexpectedly, and despite everyone – including the father – telling me it was a bad idea, I went ahead with it, not just because I couldn’t give up my baby, but because part of me wanted to rebel.”

“You have a child?”

She nodded. “She was eight in December. And during my life, along the way, there have been other…fathers.”

“Sounds a little like your time has come around again,” Ed commented. “I want things more like a straight line, and I don’t ever want to go backwards. That’s why I got the tattoo I deserve. Marked the moment, the feeling…memorial of something that I never want to have happen again.”

“I want to see it,” Scully announced boldly.

“You know Dana, just cos I marked the moment, wanting to go forward, doesn’t mean that it worked.”

But she wasn’t going to be deterred, and she reached out towards him. “I want to see it.”

He stopped her. “Come on, it’s all scabbed up.”

“It’s ok.”

In a move that surprised her, Ed grabbed hold of Scully’s hands tightly, making her gasp. “You’re so curious,” he taunted. “Get your own.”

And so, in another act of rebellion, Scully did.

Xxxxxxx

When Scully first arrived in Philadelphia, she’d anticipated an easy case that she’d wrap up quickly and be back in DC almost immediately. But the last thing Scully expected was to meet Ed, to go on a date with him; a date that ended with her getting a tattoo before falling into bed with a relative stranger. Neither did she imagine that he’d try and kill her the next morning, or that he was responsible for the murder of his neighbor. Once again her life had been put in danger whilst on a case, only this time she only had herself to blame. And this time, when Mulder visited her in hospital, he’d seemed angry with her rather than concerned, barely looking her in the eye. Thankfully he hadn’t brought Ashley with him, and the little girl was unaware that her mom had been in hospital yet again. Scully answered his questions, along with those of the local PD’s, and once she was given the go-ahead, she discharged herself from hospital and travelled back to DC. Alone. And there she was, walking back into the office to face her partner and whatever snidy comments he had to fling at her. He didn’t disappoint.

“Welcome back You look a lot better than you did at the hospital.” Scully doubted that was true, she was still battered and bruised from where Jerse had attacked her, and she hadn’t slept properly for days. “And congratulations for making a personal appearance in the X Files for a second time,” he added sarcastically as he retrieved a file from the cabinet. “It’s a world record.” If he was looking for a reaction, Scully thought, she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. He tried a different approach. “Ed Jerse is in custody at the St John’s Burn Facility in Philadelphia. Traces of ergot were found in his bloodstream as in yours, but not to the degree that should cause hallucinogenic ergotism.” Instead of replying, Scully took a seat opposite her partner, only half
listening to his words. “He’ll undergo psychiatric evaluation after recovering from burn trauma. Comrade Svo has been shut down, he was under investigation for having connections to my friend Pudovkin.” Realising Scully wasn’t going to respond, Mulder tried again. “Case closed on Boris Badenov, which is really a shame because I was thinking of having an ‘NY’ tattooed on my ass to commemorate the Yankees’ World Series Victory. Better late than never huh?”

The tension in the room now at a record high, Scully picked up a rose petal from the desk – Mulder’s desk, she reminded herself bitterly. Her partner rose from his chair and headed back to the filing cabinet. “The uh…the field office in Dallas is uh…receiving reports of the image of a missing child appearing on a blank billboard outside of Arlington.” He sat back at the desk with the new file. “So.” He couldn’t take Scully’s silence any longer. “So…all this because I didn’t get you a desk?”

This time Scully looked up at him, and she resisted the urge to scoff at his words. “Not everything is about you Mulder. This is my life.”

“Yes but it’s m-“ He paused before finishing his sentence, while Scully glared at him, daring him to continue. Mulder opened his mouth as though to speak again but changed his mind, and the two of them sat in an uncomfortable silence.

“Come on Mulder,” Scully said, moments later. “It’s clear you have something you still want to say to me, so you might as well just say it.” He said nothing. “Or maybe I should just save you the trouble. No, I did not suspect Ed Jerse was violent. Yes, we –“

“Jesus Scully,” interrupted Mulder, clearly annoyed now. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What was I thinking?”

“You put your life in danger for what? A quick fu-“

“That’s enough,” Scully yelled, well aware that their conversation wasn’t suitable for the office, but quite frankly she didn’t care. “I am not discussing this here, I’m –“

“Running away from your problems again Scully? You’re getting good at that. First Philadelphia and now this.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it,” he replied, dismissing her.

“No, you tell me what you mean by that.”

“Listen Scully, if it’s ok with you, I’d like us to get back to work. We’ve already missed out on valuable time thanks to your antics in Philadelphia.”

Resisting the urge to get up and slap her partner, Scully instead grabbed the file from the desk, well aware that their argument was far from over.
Mulder and Scully managed to get through the rest of the working day without killing one another, though the atmosphere in the office was tense to say the least. At just past six, Scully put on her coat and walked out of the office without even saying goodbye. After picking Ashley up from her friend’s house, she took her daughter home, listened to her tales of her day at school, made her dinner, ran her a bath and put her to bed, before pouring herself a glass of wine. A large one. She needed to relax, to try and put the events of the past few days out of her mind. She wanted to forget all about Ed Jerse, her trip to Philadelphia, that one regretful night and her earlier argument with Mulder. It was working too, the wine helping to clear her mind, until she heard a knock at the door. Instantly she knew it was Mulder, and though she wanted to ignore him, she knew he’d persist until she answered, and the last thing she wanted was for Ashley to wake up. So abandoning her drink and turning down the volume on her CD player, Scully rose from the sofa and wandered over to open the door. “What do you want Mulder?” she asked, not even bothering with polite formalities. “It’s late and the last thing I want to do is talk work.”

“It won’t take long,” he answered, stepping into the apartment without her inviting him in. Just another example of him thinking he could take advantage of her, she thought bitterly. She could smell the alcohol on his breath and knew that the night would end badly.

“If this is about earlier, I don’t want to talk about it.” She slammed the door shut behind him. Though she didn’t want him to stay, she didn’t want her neighbors overhearing their no doubt impending argument.

“Of course you don’t, you just –“

“It’s over Mulder. Jerse is in custody and I –“

“Got yourself a nice tattoo.”

“That’s none of your business.”

He ignored her. “I guess what I can’t understand is why you’d do it. Why you’d put yourself in danger and risk your own life for five minutes of fun with some stranger.”

Scully’s eyes flamed. “How dare you.”

“Apologies, maybe it was ten. Maybe I’m underestimating the stud, though I doubt it. Tell me Scully, did he have any problems in bed. Was he able to get –“

“What the hell is your problem Mulder? Besides being drunk. Oh wait, I get it.” Scully could feel herself shaking with anger. She told herself to get a grip and clenched her fists by her side to prevent herself from hitting him. “It’s ok for you to sleep with anyone and everyone because you’re a guy. A “stud.” But because I’m a woman who happened to have a one night stand, I’m a slut. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s not it at all.”

“Bullshit.”

“What I don’t get Scully is why you’d do this. You have a little girl asleep in the next room, and she came close to losing you. You should have at least spared a thought for Ashley before you jumped into bed with the first guy that came along.” They were both shouting now, and Scully
only hoped her daughter was in a deep sleep for once.

“How dare you. How dare you imply I’m a bad mom. Ashley is the only person I think about and –“

“Oh really? The tires on your car must have barely cooled before you jumped into bed with him.”

“Get out!” She yelled, refusing to be spoken to like that. “Get out of this apartment before I throw you out. And don’t you even think about coming back.”

“Scully –“

“You stay the hell away from my daughter.”

“Scully.” Mulder realised he’d overstepped the mark and instantly sobered, trying to backtrack.

“Get –“

“Mommy?”

Both adults turned to see Ashley standing at the entrance to the living room. Clad in her bright red Minnie the Mouse pjs, the little girl was clutching her cuddly Tigger – the same Tigger that Mulder had given to her for her fifth birthday. And from the shocked expression on her face and the way her bottom lip trembled, she’d heard every word of their argument.

Scully forced a smile, so fake it hurt. “Ashley, what are you doing up sweetie?”

“I heard you shouting. Why were you shouting?” Ashley ran over to Mulder and threw her arms around him. Mulder settled his hand awkwardly on the top of her head, sweeping her hair back. “I don’t want Mulder to go. Don’t make Mulder go Mommy.”

Mulder looked over at his partner, as though daring her to argue with her daughter, while Scully herself felt like screaming. Even her own flesh and blood was siding with Mulder. “Baby,” she began, ignoring Ashley’s pleas. “You should be in bed.”

“But –“

“Go to bed please Ashley.”

The little girl made no attempt to move. “I want Mulder to put me to bed,” she replied defiantly.

“Ashley –“

“I want Mulder.”

Scully hesitated momentarily before nodding reluctantly. She gave her partner a warning look. “Mulder can put you to bed but then he has to go home. It’s late.”

Before Ashley could argue, Mulder took her by the hand and led her back to her bedroom. Frustrated, Scully took a seat on the sofa and wondered exactly how her life got so damn complicated.

Xxxxxxxxx

Mulder waited for Ashley to climb into bed before pulling the comforter up over her body. “Mulder?” she asked sleepily.
“Hmm?”

“Why did mommy shout at you?”

“What?” Honesty was the best policy, that he knew, but Ashley was far too young to understand exactly what had happened.

“You were arguing.”

“We had a disagreement.”

“What?”

“Grown up stuff.” He hoped his vague reply was enough to satisfy Ashley, but like her mom she needed a full explanation.

“Like what?” Sighing, Mulder reached out to brush the little girl’s bangs away from her eyes. “I said some mean things to your mom and it upset her.”

“Was that why she shouted?”

He nodded. “I deserved it.”

“What did you say?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Did you say sorry?”

“Not yet. But I will do.”

“If you say sorry my mom will forgive you. I do it all the time.”

Mulder wasn’t quite so sure about that. He’d said some spiteful things to Scully, hitting out at her because once again he’d nearly lost her, and he couldn’t blame her for getting angry. “You need to go to sleep young lady.”

“Mommy said you had to stay away from me.” She looked as though she was close to tears once again.

“Ashley –”

“I don’t want you to go away.”

“Sweetheart, I’m just going home. I’ll see you again soon.”

She didn’t look convinced, and he couldn’t blame her. “Do you promise?”

“I promise,” he answered, immediately regretting his words. “As long as you close your eyes and go to sleep, ok?”

Ashley nodded and quickly closed her eyes. Smiling sadly, Mulder leant forward and kissed her warm temple. “You smell bad Mulder.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’ll take a shower as soon as I get home. G’night little lady.”

“Goodnight Mulder. I love you.”
“I love you too.”

Satisfied that she would soon drift off to sleep, Mulder got to his feet and walked out of her bedroom, switching off the light as he went. He hesitated as he headed back towards the living room, seeing his partner sat on the sofa with her head in her hands. She no doubt hated him.

“Scully?” She looked up and Mulder was relieved to see she wasn’t crying. He wasn’t sure he could handle seeing her upset. “I umm…I owe you a huge apology. What I said was completely out of line and I had no right to talk to you like that.” Still she didn’t respond; her eyes boring into him. “I feel terrible and the last thing I want to do is push you away. Or Ashley.” He’d made a promise to himself not long after getting to know the little girl, when she insinuated herself into his heart, that he would be there for her whenever she needed him. He was determined not to be shut out of her life, and he’d do anything to hang around. He was the closest thing she had to a father, and she couldn’t deal with any more loss.

“It’s my life Mulder,” Scully replied wearily. She looked tired; the stresses of late finally catching up with hr. “You didn’t want to listen when I told you that earlier, but I’m telling you now. It’s my life and it’s up to me what I do with it. Yes I made a mistake getting…” she hesitated. “…involved with Ed, but it was my mistake to make and the last thing I need is for you to tell me that I fucked up, because I’m well aware of what I’ve done.” Mulder made a move to speak but paused, realising she had more to say. “And I may not be the best mom in the world, but I try. Ashley is the most important person in the world to me. I love her and would do anything for her. The last thing I need is for you to turn on me.”

“I’m so sorry Scully,” he finally spoke, daring to take a seat on the sofa next to her. He was relieved when she didn’t move away. “You’re not a bad mom at all. I know you love Ashley and that you’d do anything for her. I just…I got angry and scared. I panicked.”

“You panicked?”

“At first, when I couldn’t get hold of you in Philadelphia I thought you were just ignoring me, but then I got the call from the hospital and my mind went blank. All I could think was that yet again I hadn’t been around to stop something from happening to you.”

“You’re not my bodyguard Mulder.”

“I know that. But I thought I’d lost you, and I over-reacted. The last thing I wanted to do was upset you, or Ashley.” He didn’t want to be shut out of their lives; he knew he owed it to the little girl in the next room to apologise.

“It’s my life Mulder,” Scully repeated. “Yes I made a stupid decision, but it was my decision to make, and I’m not having you or anyone else tell me how to run my life.”

“I know,” replied Mulder. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re a slut. You’re entitled to live your life.”

Scully nodded, taking his words onboard. Her earlier anger at him seemed to have disappeared. “Yes I am.” She sighed heavily. “And you need to stop seeing me as weak or inferior to you. What happened with Duane Barry happened, but I am still a capable person able to look after myself. You need to start treating me as your equal, otherwise this partnership will never survive.”

Her words made him hopeful – at least she was speaking as though they still had a future working together. “I will Scully, I –“
“And you will never EVER talk about me like that with my daughter in earshot. She’s been through enough and the last thing I want to do is upset her further.” She swallowed hard. “But I shouldn’t have said what I said either. Ashley idolises you and the last thing I want to do is keep you away from her. Unless you want to,” she added uncertainly.

Mulder shook his head. “I don’t want to walk away. The last thing I want is to lose you guys.” He stopped, worried he’d gone too far. “I –“

“It’s late Mulder,” Scully answered, though she gave him a thin smile which in turn gave him hope.

He nodded, swallowing hard. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” repeated his partner, and instantly Mulder felt as though a weight had been lifted.

“I look forward to it.” Mulder got to his feet, with Scully following suit. “Hey Scully.” He waited for her to turn to face him. As she did so he leant in towards her and pressed his lips to hers, well aware he was still borderline drunk and taking a gamble, but at the same time wanting her to know how he felt, that he had hit out because she was so important to him and he’d nearly lost her. Instantly he sensed Scully tense against him, though she made no move to push him away. As Mulder finally pulled back he saw his partner look up at him in shock. He braced himself for a slap but it never came, but neither did a smile. An awkward silence rang out, and he knew it was his cue to leave. “I don’t see you as inferior,” he murmured. “You’re the strongest person I know.” And with that he walked out of the apartment, leaving his partner rooted to the spot.
Chapter 35

A few weeks later Mulder got a call from his partner that he was certainly not expecting; a call that instantly had him worried. Scully had asked him to meet her at the hospital, but when he’d asked her what was wrong, she didn’t respond. But then she’d told him the department he needed, and her words almost brought him crashing to his knees. Oncology. Cancer. She was fine she told him. Yes, she hadn’t been herself lately, ever since her encounter with Ed Jerse, but Mulder presumed she was stressed, not to mention still dealing with her feelings following yet another near death experience, coupled with those over the murder of her sister. And then there had been Mulder’s kiss those fateful few weeks ago. They hadn’t mentioned what had happened; not that Mulder expected them to. Scully knew he’d been drinking that night after all, and so she no doubt put his kiss down to that. She seemed happy enough to forget all about that night, including their almighty argument, so Mulder went along with it, though he doubted he’d ever forget the taste of his partner’s kiss.

En route to the hospital he stopped to pick up some flowers, wanting Scully to know he was thinking of her, and also as a silent apology for their argument. After being directed to the Oncology department, he found his partner looking over an x-ray. Her x-ray. “Scully?” She turned to look at him, taking in the flowers he was holding. “I uh…I stole these from some guy with a broken leg down the hall. He uh…won’t be able to catch me.” He knew it wasn’t the time to joke, but he was nervous. “How ya doing?”

“I guess that’s the question, she replied thoughtfully. “Actually I feel fine.”

*Fine* She was anything but, Mulder thought. “What uh…what exactly are we looking at here?”

“It’s what’s called a nasopharengeal mass. It’s a small growth between the superior conchea and the sinoidal sinus.”

“A growth?”

“A tumor. You’re the only one I’ve called.”

She still trusted him, he thought. Despite everything they’d been through in the past few weeks, she still turned to him when she needed it. “Is it operable?”

“No.”

“But it’s treatable.” It had to be.

“The truth is that the type and placement of the tumor make it difficult, to the extreme.”

He couldn’t quite comprehend what she was telling him. She was dying… “I refuse to believe that, I -“

It seemed that Scully had had time for her news to sink in. She was calm as she spoke, whereas Mulder felt anything but. “For all times I have said that to you I am certain of this as you have ever been. I have cancer. It is a mass on the wall between my sinus and cerebrum. If it pushes into my brain statistically there is about zero chance of survival.”

“I don’t accept that.” He couldn’t lose her, not now. She was his partner, his friend. She had a daughter, and Ashley couldn’t lose yet another member of her family. “Th…there must be some people who have received treatment for this. We can…”
“Yes there are.”

Her words gave him hope. Little did he know.

After heading to Allentown to visit Betsy Hagopian, who had been suffering from similar symptoms to Scully, the two of them discovered that the woman had died from her illness. During their visit they met fellow MUFON member Kurt Crawford, who revealed that all bar one MUFON member had died of cancer. Scully took his announcement as confirmation of her worst fears, but Mulder refused to give up – there had to be some cure out there for his partner. Kurt claimed that Scully’s cancer was a result of her abduction and part of a government conspiracy and while Mulder was inclined to agree, his partner refused to believe. Scully visited Penny Northern, the last only surviving member of MUFON, and having discussed the woman’s condition, decided to begin chemotherapy straight away with Penny’s physician, Doctor Scanlon. Mulder supported her decision and vowed to support her, even if that meant calling her mom on behalf of her and explaining the situation. Scully knew that Maggie would be upset that she didn’t call her herself, and she wasn’t surprised when her mom turned up at the hospital shortly after her admission.

“Dana.”

Scully paused in her conversation with Doctor Scanlon, who had just told her that during her treatment she’ll feel like she’s dying, as her mom walked into the room. “Hi mom.”

“Hi.”

“This is uh…this is Doctor Scanlon.”

“Hi.” The man smiled over at Margaret, seemingly unaware of the tension between mother and daughter.

“Hi.” Maggie shook the doctor’s hand. “I uh…I drove. I was going to take the shuttle, but it’s only an hour more by car. Can you imagine?” She was nervous and it showed.

“Mom, I’m fine. I’m going to be fine. I’m just here for treatment.”

“I’m going to go,” Doctor Scanlon said, deciding to give the two of them the space to talk. “I’ve ordered some additional blood work and I’d like to start this afternoon.”

“Thank you.” Scully waited for him to leave the room before addressing Maggie. “Mom, I know what you gonna say, but I don’t have any experience being sick. I promise you, I feel fine, I feel –“

“I don’t know why you didn’t tell me.” Maggie was visibly angry. “I don’t know why you didn’t tell me immediately.”

“Mom –“

“Don’t you think I had a right to know as your mother, instead of having to hear it from Fox?”

“I asked him –“

“Was I the last to know? I thought you’d at least want me around to take care of Ashley.” She paused. “Where is she?”

“She’s with Emma.”
“So you told your babysitter about your condition before you did your own mother?”

“No, mom….” Scully sighed heavily. “I didn’t want to bother you with Ashley.”

“Bother me? She’s my grandchild Dana!”

“I told Emma I was working. She was fine about taking Ashley for a little while until I’d spoken to you.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t tell me immediately,” Maggie repeated.

“I wanted to get all the answers first.”

“And you found them here?”

“I have found some clarity, and maybe a way to fight back.”

“I don’t want to be kept in the dark.”

“You’ll know mom.” And this time she meant it.

Maggie stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her daughter. “You have always been the strong one, but you are my only daughter now.”

“I know mom.” As Maggie began to cry, Scully held her mom, feeling her own tears fall. She had to get through this, she told herself. There was too much to live for. She had to survive.

Xxxxxxxxxx

It had been a rough few days for both Mulder and Scully. As Scully checked herself into hospital to begin her chemotherapy, Mulder sneaked into a fertility clinic, where a number of the abductees were treated despite them being childless. During his investigation he happened upon clones of Kurt Crawford whom, it emerged, were working alongside Doctor Scanlon. Inside the facility they showed him Scully’s ova, harvested during her abduction. He’d pocketed a few vials without their knowledge, though he had no idea how to tell his partner what had happened to her. As soon as he discovered the news about Scanlon, Mulder entrusted Byers to pass the news onto Scully and ensure she put a stop to her treatment. Then he made his way to the Medical Center to check in on his partner, who was keeping a bedside vigil by a dying Penny’s side. He was there for Scully when she emerged from Penny’s room; loss written all over her pale complexion.

“She gone?” Scully nodded in confirmation, her face crumpling. “I’m sorry. I know what she meant to you. When I came to find you, you weren’t in your room and I got scared that something had happened…and I read some of what you wrote.” Scully’s journal, of her thoughts that she’d been compiling since she’d been admitted to hospital. How he shouldn’t blame himself if the worst should happen; how her treatment was weakening her spirit; how she needed him by her side if she was to beat the cancer. It was a rare insight into his partner’s mind, and he felt guilty for reading it.

Sighing, Scully stepped in closer. “I didn’t want you to read that. I had decided to throw it out. I decided tonight that umm…that I’m not going to let this thing beat me. I came into this hospital able to work, and that’s how I’m leaving.”

“Byers tell you about Doctor Scanlon?”

“Yes.”
“He may very well have killed those women.” And tried to kill you, he added silently.

“That will have to be proven, if we find him.”

“When we find him,” Mulder stressed. Scully something was done to you, something that you’re just beginning to remember. You can’t quite figure it out but it can be explained and it will be explained. And no matter what you think as a scientist or a doctor, there is a way, and you will find it, to save yourself.”

“Mulder, I can’t kid myself. People live with cancer. They carry on, and so will I. You know, I’ve got things to finish, to prove to myself, to my family, but for my own reasons. And I have a daughter to live for.”

Smiling, she stepped into his embrace. “Come on back,” Mulder replied. “The truth will save you Scully. I think it’ll save both of us.” He kissed her on the forehead and watched as she pulled away and headed back down the hall towards her room. As she disappeared from view, he pulled one of the vials out of his pocket and stared hard at it. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Scully what had happened to her just yet; she was still reeling over the shock of her cancer. Soon, he told himself. Soon he’d tell her and he’d be there to pick up the pieces. After giving her a few minutes of privacy, Mulder headed towards Scully’s room, noticing when he entered that she was dressed in her day clothes and packing her remaining belongings into her overnight bag. “Hey.”

“Hey.” She smiled. “I’m almost done.”

“Take your time. Did you want to pick up Ashley on the way home?” She nodded hesitantly. “What have you told her? Does she know you’re here?”

Scully looked away, unwilling to meet his gaze. “I told her I was away for work,” she replied quietly.

Mulder couldn’t help but groan, throwing his head back as he looked up towards the ceiling in frustration. “Jeez Scully—“

“I know, I know. I know I should tell her but I can’t. Not yet.”

“She deserves to know.”

“Don’t lecture me on how to be a parent Mulder,” she snapped, her patience wearing thin. “I’m well aware she needs to know, but right now I can’t bring myself to break her heart, I…” Sighing hard, Scully rubbed her eyes wearily. She was tired Mulder realised, and he cursed himself for not seeing it sooner. All the signs had been there right in front of him, but he’d been too busy pushing her away, criticising her, being angry at her for her actions in Philadelphia. He hated himself more than anything at that moment. “She’s been through so much. I just want to give her a little more time before I turn her world upside down. I will tell her, but I need to accept the news myself before sharing it.” He wanted to ask her how long she’d wait; whether she even had time to wait, but he didn’t – he didn’t want to know the answer himself. Instead he nodded, appreciating her reasons, walked further into her room and drew her into his arms once again, unwilling to let her go.

Mulder pulled up outside of Ashley’s babysitter’s house, where the little girl had been spending the night. He looked over at Scully in the passenger seat, sensing her worry. “You want me to go up and get her?”
After a moment she nodded, letting out a deep breath before forcing a smile. “Thank you.”

Though he hated to leave her alone, Mulder got out of the car and quickly rushed up to Emma’s door, making small talk with the familiar woman whilst Ashley ran around the house packing up her things; though, Mulder noted with some amusement, she did attempt to leave her homework there. Mulder carried her bag down to the car while the little girl enthusiastically told him about her night and told him how excited she was to see her mom. Mulder’s heart hurt as he realised that pretty soon her world was going to be turned upside down. Again.

Less than twenty minutes later, Scully was letting the three of them into her apartment. She waited for Ashley to put her bag in her bedroom, before she called her daughter back into the living room. “Do you want me to go?” Mulder asked, already sensing what Scully’s answer would be. Sure enough, she shook her head.

“Would you mind staying?” She needed his support, now more than ever, and she knew that if he stayed, she would keep calm rather than breaking down in front of her daughter. She needed to be strong for Ashley.

“Of course I don’t mind.” In a show of solidarity Mulder reached out and squeezed her hand, letting go the moment he saw Ashley walk into the living room. He let Scully take a seat next to her daughter on the sofa, before seating himself on the other side of his partner. “Ashley,” Scully began. “I have something to talk to you about.”

The little girl’s eyes narrowed as she studied her mother. “I didn’t do it.”

Scully looked puzzled. “Do what?”

“I didn’t call Mrs Palmer a naughty word.”

“What naughty word?”

Ashley shrugged. “I don’t know, but it wasn’t me, I promise.”

Scully thought about pressing her daughter more on the subject, but decided against it. “We’ll talk about it later,” she replied. “I have something important to tell you.”

“What mom?”

“I’ve uh…I’ve been having some tests done at the hospital.”

Instantly Ashley paled. “Are you sick?”

“I am…” She paused, taking a deep breath as though to draw strength into her body. Mulder squeezed her knee reassuringly. “I have cancer.”

“What does that mean mommy?”

“It means…it means that I have a tumor growing inside of me. And it means that I may get sick but...”

“Are you going to die?” Ashley’s voice was barely there, and for a moment Mulder didn’t see the young girl in front of him but the little child he first met; a child who was frightened she was going to lose her mom. He couldn’t blame her; he was scared too. He waited with bated breath for his partner to answer. Scully said nothing at first, instead wrapping her arms around her daughter and pulling her in close.
“I’m going to get treatment and I’m going to fight this hard.” Mulder noted that she didn’t answer Ashley, neither confirming her terminal illness or denying it. It was probably for the best, he thought sadly. It wouldn’t give her daughter false hope.

“Because I don’t want you to die,” the little girl added before promptly bursting into tears, summing up the thoughts of everyone in the room.

“Me either baby,” Scully murmured. “Me either.”
“Mommy?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s wrong with Mulder?”

Scully finished dishing up a plate of vegetables before placing the saucepan in the sink. “What do you mean?” Putting on a pair of oven gloves that she’d picked up off of the counter, she retrieved the chicken from the oven, trying hard to concentrate on the matter at hand instead of her daughter who was hovering beside her. Since she’d revealed the news about her cancer to Ashley just over a month before, the little girl seemed reluctant to let her mum out of her sight for long, as though she was scared she’d disappear while her back was turned. Scully meanwhile felt fine in herself. Though the cancer was never far from her mind, thanks to the recurring headaches and nosebleeds she had to endure, she kept herself busy with work and family life. Things were ok. She was ok. For now.

“Mulder’s ok.”

“He’s acting weird.”

Smiling, Scully began cutting up the chicken before transferring it to the plates. “He’s Mulder; he’s always weird.”

“But he’s acting realllllllly weird.” Ashley had just finished up talking to Mulder on the phone. It had been a few days since she’d seen him, so Scully had allowed her daughter to give him a quick call. Obviously Ashley wasn’t too impressed.

“What did he say this time? If he mentioned the Flukeworm again just ignore him. You had nightmares for weeks the last time he told you that story.”

“Nooo he didn’t tell me a story.”

“Well what did he do?”

“I said it was me calling and he said ‘Ashley who’ and he didn’t know who I was.”

“He was joking honey.”

“But he sounded like he meant it. He sounded confused.”

“It’s Mulder; he always messes with you.”

“What if he’s forgotten me?”

“I wouldn’t worry; you’re pretty unforgettable.”

“Can I invite him to dinner?”

“What? No, not tonight. Sweetie can you grab some cutlery please?”

The little girl did as her mom asked. “He sounded like he didn’t want to talk to me,” she replied dejectedly. Scully paused in her task to put an arm around her daughter and pull her close.
“Don’t be silly. Mulder loves you. He was probably just busy, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t want to speak to you. I happen to know that he thinks you’re pretty awesome.” She thought back to their recent argument; at the look of horror on Mulder’s face when she ordered him to stay away from her daughter. Ashley meant the world to Mulder, and Scully knew it.

“I am awesome,” Ashley agreed.

Scully couldn’t help but laugh. “And you’re so modest too.” Picking up the two plates in front of her, Scully followed her daughter over to the dining table and set them down. “Give him a call tomorrow and I’m sure he’ll be back to his normal self.”

“Was he ok at work?”

“He was fine.” He had been acting a little weird, Scully thought to herself, thinking back to their earlier meeting with Skinner, but then that was nothing new. “Now,” she said, taking a seat next to her daughter and brushing Ashley’s bangs out of her eyes. “Don’t worry about Mulder. Eat your dinner before it gets cold and maybe we can watch a movie before bedtime.”

Ashley’s eyes lit up. “Can we watch Toy Story?”

“Again? Don’t you ever get sick of that movie?”

“Oh uh,” Ashley shook her head enthusiastically, taking a bite of chicken.

“Alright then.” Scully concentrated on her dinner and prepared herself for an evening with Buzz and Woody.

xxxx

As it happened, Scully didn’t need to worry. The film had barely started when Scully looked down to see that Ashley had passed out in her arms. Rather than instantly wake her and put her to bed, Scully instead took the time to study her daughter. Ashley was turning into a miniature version of her mom – at least in terms of her appearance. Her wavy blonde hair had grown a lot in recent months and more often than not she had it clipped up in a ponytail. Her eyes, nose and height could all be attributed to Scully, but she had his mouth, and his diabetes, she thought sadly. Thankfully Ashley was coping with her illness remarkably well and had taken to her daily insulin injections like a pro. But besides Jack’s mouth and Scully’s features, Scully saw a lot of her partner’s attributes in her daughter. Yes Ashley had inherited her mom’s stubborn streak, but she had Mulder’s cheekiness and a knack of having Scully wrapped around her little finger. Scully could hardly believe how much her daughter had changed over the years, but in some ways she was still the same little girl who used to cry whenever she saw Scully’s older brother Bill and who refused to go to sleep without her favorite teddy bear, blanket and a kiss from her mom. And Scully realised with a pang that soon there would come a time when she wouldn’t be around to tuck her daughter up in bed. She still found it hard to believe that her body was a ticking time bomb; that in months, weeks or even days she could die and leave her daughter alone. But she wasn’t going to give up without a damn good fight.

“Hey sleepyhead,” she said softly to her daughter, who shifted in her arms but didn’t stir. “Wakey wakey baby girl; time for bed.”

Ashley slowly came awake, stretching as she let out an impressive yawn. “Hmm?”

“Time for bed.”

“I don’t want to go to bed,” she protested weakly, though she allowed her mom to pull her up off
the couch. Scully led her to the bathroom and guided her through brushing her teeth before helping her into her pjs and into bed. No sooner had she pulled the covers up, she noticed that her daughter was fast asleep once again.

Satisfied that Ashley was out for the count, Scully returned to the living room, switching off the television in favor of going through details of the case she and Mulder were working on. She certainly wasn’t expecting the knock at the door that came barely ten minutes later. Not expecting her partner, she peered through the spyhole, surprised to find Mulder smiling back at her. There was nothing about the case they had to discuss and he knew that Ashley had to be in bed – something must have been wrong. “Mulder?” She opened the door. “What’s up?”

“Scully? Is this a bad time?”

He wasn’t bleeding, she noticed, and he didn’t appear to be in any distress. Maybe it wasn’t an emergency. “No. No uh come on in. Did Ashley invite you?” She thought back to her daughter’s earlier suggestion of having Mulder over.

“Ashley? No.” As he moved past her into the apartment, Scully noticed he was carrying a bottle of wine. “Who’s that for?”

“Uh…us.”

She stared at him, wondering what on earth was going on inside his head, but then she realised it was Mulder. She’d been working with him for over four years and still she didn’t know how his mind worked. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. “Ok.” She accepted the bottle from him. “Have a seat. Try not to make too much noise; Ashley hasn’t been asleep for long.” Heading out into the kitchen, she realised that Ashley was right. Mulder was weird.

After opening the bottle of wine and retrieving two glasses from the kitchen cupboard, Scully returned to the living room and took a seat on the sofa next to her partner. She eyed him cautiously as she poured him a glass of wine. “So seriously Mulder, what’s going on? You ok?” Handing him his drink, she then poured a glass for herself.

“Mmm. I was just kinda knocking around and was…” he paused to clink his glass against Scully’s. “just thinking.” He coughed as he took a sip of wine. “Uh good. We never really uh…talk much…do we?”

“What do you mean like…really talk?” Scully half wondered whether she was imagining this entire conversation. “No, no we don’t Mulder.” Yes they saw each other outside of work, but it was largely due to Ashley, and all conversations revolved around the little girl.

“Well what’s stopping us?”

When she couldn’t think of a good enough reason, Scully sighed and sat back, preparing herself for the long night ahead.

Scully didn’t object when, after finishing his glass of wine, Mulder rose from the sofa and started rifling through her CD collection. Neither did she protest when he lit a fire – she was a little cold after all. The next thing she knew he was pouring the last remaining drops of wine into her glass,
and her head was a little woozy. She was also telling Mulder things she’d never told him before. Her sober self would have been mortified. “So there we are at two o clock in the morning; me and my moire taffeta dress and Marcus in whatever the hell it was he was wearing…” She paused as Mulder finished pouring her drink. “Thank you very much. It had a umm…a Kelly green cummerbund on it. Anyway, so I know that Marcus is thinking that it’s now or never and I’m thinking…”

“What are you thinking?” Mulder prompted.

“I’m thinking, ‘what is that siren I hear getting louder?’

“No way! Who called the cops?”

“It wasn’t the cops, it was the fire department. My friend Sylvia and her idiot prom date –“

“Berwood?”

“Had built this campfire that went totally out of control and so we all had to ride back on the umm…what do you call it? The umm the pumper truck. Yeah. Marcus was the twelfth grade love of my life.” Chuckling to herself, Scully took a sip of wine. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

“I don’t believe you haven’t told me before.”

“Now I’m seeing a whole new side of you Mulder.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“I like it.” She caught his eye, her face flushing. She did like it too. It felt good to connect with Mulder on a personal level; particularly after everything they’d been through recently. She was glad that their recent argument was now a thing of the past, though she couldn’t help but think back to Mulder’s kiss. It had surprised her at the time, particularly after the way he’d spoken to her earlier that evening, but it hadn’t been unwelcome. Not entirely anyway.

“Do you ever wish things were different?”

“What do you mean?”

“The person you wanted to be when you grew up, when you were in high school. How far off from that did you end up?”

“I never expected to be a single mom if that’s what you’re asking. And career wise? Miles off target.”

“No no, not just that. Do you ever wish…that you could go back and do it all differently?”

“Do you?”

When she saw Mulder nod in affirmation, Scully then realised he must have been thinking about their recent kiss. Her eyes widened as he scooted across the sofa next to her, and her lips parted as she anticipated his touch once again. She wasn’t going to push him away, she decided in the moment. She was going to let him try again, and it would be different this time. She could feel his breath against her lips; practically taste him, and just as he moved to close the remaining distance between them, the front door burst open. Scully, in horror, saw her partner standing in the doorway and looked back to the man who was practically on top of her. And then she realised. Pushing him back, she got to her feet and looked on in a mixture of amazement and disgust as he slowly became
Eddie Van Blundht. She’d almost kissed this man, she realised with revulsion; she’d let this man into her home where her daughter slept soundly in the next room, and she almost let him take advantage of her. Mulder meanwhile also looked pretty dismayed at what he had seen; taking in the empty wine bottle, the roaring fire, the seductive music filling the room. He knew exactly what had almost happened, and he wasn’t particularly happy about it. As he closed the door and moved to apprehend Van Blundht, Scully quickly set about restoring her living room to normal – putting out the fire, turning off the music and clearing away the wine glasses. She was just returning from the kitchen when she heard the door to Ashley’s bedroom open, and saw the little girl walk out.

“Mom?”

“Go back to bed sweetie.” She tried to intercept Ashley on the way to the living room, but the little girl beat her there.

“Hi Mulder.” It was then Ashley saw the strange man sat on the sofa. “Who are you?”

“He’s nobody Ash; get back to bed,” Mulder answered, a look of satisfaction overcoming him as he saw Van Blundht grimace at his choice of words. He was a nobody, but a nobody who had almost kissed Scully. Deep down Mulder wanted to know why Scully had done it, why she was willing to let Van Blundht kiss her. Was it the alcohol? After all, Mulder had seen the empty bottle of wine residing on the coffee table. Or was there a part of her that believed he really was Mulder; that she was willing to let him kiss her once again? Still, he thought to himself, Scully knew him better than anyone; she should have known that Van Blundht was an imposter.

“Are you ok Mulder?”

He looked over at the little girl who seemed as though she was still half asleep, and nodded. “I’m fine. We’ll talk tomorrow, ok?”

“Are you feeling better?”

“Better?” Now he was confused.

“You sounded weird on the phone earlier.”

“I did?” Suddenly it clicked. Not only did Eddie get in to Scully’s house, but he’d also impersonated Mulder on the phone to the little girl. “So your eight year old knew something was up Scully,” he remarked dryly to her. She at least had the decency to blush. Rather than face her partner’s jibes, Scully instead took hold of her daughter’s hand and pulled her in the direction of her bedroom. “Say goodnight to Mulder. You can speak to him tomorrow,” Scully promised, though she would make sure it would be over the phone rather than in person. She needed some time before she could face him after her actions that evening.

“Night Mulder.”

“Night Ash.” As both Scully and her daughter disappeared from view, Mulder read Van Blundht his rights and cuffed him. “You’re coming with me.”

“You’ve got a good thing going here,” Eddie remarked, and Mulder resisted the urge to punch him. He’d just made an awkward situation a damn sight more complicated. “She thought I was you, and she was going to kiss me back.”

Mulder paused before dragging Van Blundht to his feet. Maybe there was a chance for he and Scully after all.
Scully smiled as her daughter came awake, her eyelids fluttering open as she slowly came to. Ashley stretched, throwing her arms over her head, and yawned.

“Morning baby.”

“Morning Mommy.” Scully loved it when Ashley was half asleep – she was still her little girl then, still willing to curl up to her mom when she wasn’t quite awake.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I did. I dreamt that you got me a cat for my birthday and Queequeg chased it up a tree and it wouldn’t come down.”

“Queequeg doesn’t like cats,” her mom agreed.

“Can I have a cat for my birthday?”

“No baby. You already have a dog. Besides, your birthday is months away and by that time you’ll already have moved onto something else.”

“Did you sleep well?” Ashley asked, realising her mom was right.

“I did.” Actually she hadn’t. Scully had woken up just past four to find her pillow caked in blood. By the time she’d stripped and remade her bed, she was wide awake, and so she’d spent the past hour and a half simply watching her daughter sleep; taking in Ashley’s peaceful and innocent expression; savouring the moment. She knew there would come a time when she wasn’t around and so she wanted to pocket as many memories as she could. “So,” she began, grinning conspiratorially at her daughter. “I was thinking that today we could do whatever you wanted.”

“Anything?” Ashley was fully awake now; her eyes wide.

“Within reason. It would have to be within driving distance for us and you do have to be back at school on Monday. But it can be whatever you want – the zoo, the park, shopping or –”

“Can we have pancakes?”

“Pancakes?”

“Can you make us pancakes?”

“I can do that.” Her little girl grinned. “What would you like to do after pancakes?”

Ashley thought long and hard before answering. “Can we have a girls day?”

“Of course.”

“You can braid my hair and we can make cookies and watch Toy Story.”

Scully resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “One day you’re doing to wear out that video of yours.”

Ashley shrugged. “Then I’ll just ask Santa to bring me a new one.” Scully couldn’t argue with that logic. “Can we order pizza for dinner?”
Pressing a kiss to her daughter’s forehead, Scully nodded. “Today baby, we can do whatever you want.”

“Can Mulder come over?”

“Umm… I thought you wanted to have a girls day?”

“I do.”

“Mulder isn’t a girl.”

“But…” Ashley frowned, realising the problem. “Can’t he pretend to be a girl?”

Scully bit back a laugh at the image that popped into her head. “Why don’t we enjoy our day and then maybe later you can give Mulder a call?” It wasn’t that Scully didn’t want Ashley to see Mulder, but she still felt awkward around him after her near miss – well, near kiss – with Eddie Van Blundhht. She knew Mulder wanted to know exactly what had happened that night at her apartment but, bar a few jokes directed at her, he’d said nothing, and that was more than fine with her.

“Ok,” the little girl answered eagerly, clearly happy with the compromise.

“That’s sorted then.” Now, why don’t you go and check on Queequeg and I’ll make a start on those pancakes.” Kissing her daughter once more, Scully got to her feet and prepared to spend precious time with the most important person in her life.

xxxxxx

Scully and Ashley sat side by side curled up on the sofa, thoroughly engrossed in 101 Dalmatians. A sea of blankets and duvets covered them, and Ashley was snuggled up against her mom. The little girl’s hair had been pulled back into a tight braid while her finger and toenails were coated in a bright pink polish. Scully’s own had been painted light purple, and she’d allowed her daughter to give her a ‘makeover’. Sadly Ashley had yet to discover that ‘less was more’ and had applied a thick coating of sky blue eye shadow to her mom’s lids, and a deep red gloss to her lips. She looked like a hooker, Scully thought to herself as Ashley held up the mirror for her to admire her new style, though of course she said nothing of the kind to her daughter. And each time Ashley looked away, Scully attempted to brush off at least some of the makeup. But the whole process had made the little girl happy which was, after all, the purpose of the day. Now it was movie time and the two of them set up camp in the living room with a bowl full of popcorn (buttered, as it was a special occasion), a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a stack of Disney films. It was perfect.

The movie had barely been playing twenty minutes when Scully felt the familiar trickle of blood from her nose, along with the onset of a migraine. Releasing her grasp of Ashley, she quickly clamped her hand over her nose and got to her feet, rushing towards the bathroom. But she wasn’t quite quick enough and Ashley looked on in horror as she realised what was going on. “Mommy?” She hurried off in search of her mom. “Mommy, you’re bleeding.”

As much as Scully wanted to comfort her daughter, she knew she had to get her nosebleed under control first. This was turning out to be a particularly bad one and already she felt lightheaded. Ashley grabbed a bunch of tissues and handed them to her mom, then watched as Scully tried to stop the bleeding. As Scully sank to her knees, clinging onto the side of the bathtub to steady herself, Ashley ran over to her and wrapped her arms around her neck. “Please don’t die.”

Scully couldn’t speak, though she desperately wanted to soothe the little girl; to tell her that the
nosebleeds were a part of her immediate future, but that she’d do everything she could to stay alive for as long as possible. “I’ll call Mulder.”

“No.” But despite Scully’s plea, Ashley ran out of the room to call for help. From then on things were a blur for Scully; she had vague recollections of Ashley returning to her side and wrapping a blanket around her, of Mulder rushing into the bathroom, a look of pure terror on his face as he took in her blood-soaked pyjamas, him lifting her up and carrying her into the bedroom, helping her into clean clothes with Ashley’s assistance and putting her to bed. She’d managed to tell him that she didn’t need to go to hospital; that this had happened before, and thankfully he trusted her to do as she wished, though he wasn’t too keen on the idea. As soon as she was settled in bed, with Mulder and Ashley sat by her side, Scully closed her eyes and finally felt the pain float away.

When Scully woke, she was vaguely aware of Ashley deep in conversation with someone. “So I think I prefer Mr Potato Head, but Buzz is my favorite.”

“I like Woody; he’s cool.” It was Mulder. Scully opened her eyes and could have sworn she was dreaming when she saw Ashley stretched out next to her in bed and Mulder lying on top of the comforter on the other side of her daughter. The two of them were sharing the bowl of popcorn whilst debating their favorite Toy Story characters. Then she noticed with confusion that the movie was playing on the television on top of her chest of drawers in her bedroom. Only she didn’t have a television in her bedroom. “You moved the TV?” she asked weakly, both Mulder and Ashley turning to look at her as they heard her voice. She noticed guilty their expressions; a combination of fear and relief. Once again she had scared the life out of them.

“Mommy!” Ashley shifted closer towards her and kissed her warm cheek. “Are you ok? We were worried!”

“I’m fine.” She couldn’t help but notice Mulder shake his head, unimpressed with her answer. “I’m sorry for scaring you baby, but I feel a lot better now.” Well her head still hurt, but at least her nosebleed was thankfully a thing of the past.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t get checked out at the hospital?” Mulder asked.

Scully shook her head, immediately regretting the action. “I’m fine. So who moved the TV?”

“Mulder did.”

He smiled sheepishly. “I thought Ashley might want a distraction from everything but she didn’t want to leave your side, so we compromised. I’ll put it back before I go.”

“Thank you. And thank you for coming over.”

“I still think that –“

“Mulder, I’m ok.”

“But –“

“I told Mulder that we were having a girl’s day but he said I could paint his toenails even though he’s a boy, as long as I keep it a secret.” Sure enough, as Scully’s eyes travelled the length of her partner’s body, she saw his toenails were now a navy blue color. She huffed out a laugh, more grateful than ever to her partner for everything he’d done for her and her daughter.
“I only did it because Ash told me you had nail polish remover.”

“Ah, didn’t she tell you that I ran out of that last week? I haven’t got round to buying any more yet.”

Mulder’s panic face returned and Scully couldn’t help but smile. “Top drawer on the right.”

“Thank you.”

“Mulder and me –“

“Mulder and I.”

Ashley frowned. “Mulder and I watched Mrs Doubtfire and Sleeping Beauty while you were asleep. And we ordered pizza.”

“Ashley said you’d told her she could have pizza tonight.” Mulder seemed relieved when his partner nodded, as though he’d half expected her to say that Ashley had been telling lies again. “It’ll be here soon if you feel like eating? Or I can make you some toast?”

“Maybe later. Thank you.”

“Scully –“

“Mulder, it was a nosebleed. Yes it was a bad one but I feel better now and right now I don’t want to move from this –“

“Look Mulder, it’s my favorite part.”

As Ashley shrieked, Mulder noticed his partner grimace and realized the little girl needed to quieten down a little. “Listen Ash, why don’t we take the TV back out into the living room and give your mom some peace?”

But she wasn’t prepared to leave her mom’s side. “But it’s our girls day Mulder.”

“She’s ok,” Scully insisted, though she didn’t seem too convinced. “But maybe we could watch the rest of the movie whilst being quiet?”

“Ok mom.” Ashley snuggled up close to her mom and suddenly Mulder wondered whether he was outstaying his welcome. “If you want me to take off…?”

“Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

“Well…no, but I don’t want to intrude on your day.”

“You’re not intruding. You saved the day,” Scully smiled. “Besides, I presume you ordered extra mushrooms on at least half of the pizza, so the least you can do is stick around to help us eat it.”

“If you’re sure?”

“I’m sure I speak on behalf of Ashley too when I say we’d like you to stay.”

“Yes! Please stay Mulder.”

So he stayed.
Chapter 38

Scully made her way out of her bedroom, yawning as she walked. She ran a hand through her tousled hair; the only thing on her mind was coffee. She’d woken up in the night with a migraine and it had taken her a few good hours to get back to sleep. Thankfully it was Sunday and she was looking forward to a relaxing day with Ashley camped out on the sofa.

“Morning Mom.” As she stepped into the kitchen, Scully was surprised to see her daughter sat up the dining table already dressed and set for the day. But what shocked her most was that Mulder sat opposite Ashley, nursing a cup of coffee. Scully pulled her robe together, wishing she’d taken the time to get dressed before stepping out of her bedroom.

“Mulder? What’s happened?” There had to be a reason why he was sat in her kitchen at 9am. She was even more confused when he grinned over at Ashley and winked.

“What? Oh, thank you.” She’d actually forgotten what day it was when she woke, though she remembered having ordered her own mother a bouquet of flowers earlier in the week. Maggie had already made plans for the day, but Scully had promised to take her out for lunch another weekend when they were both free.

“I got you a present,” Ashley announced proudly, and Scully looked between her daughter and her partner.

“You got me Mulder?” She was still half asleep; her brain unable to function without her morning coffee.

The man in question raised an eyebrow and was about to come out with some kind of innuendo, but thankfully Ashley interrupted. “No silly! Close your eyes!” Scully reluctantly did so and immediately heard the sound of chairs scraping across the floor and people rushing around.

“Annnddd…..open them!”

Scully did as her daughter commanded; her eyes opening to see Ashley holding a huge bouquet of daisies in her hand. “Here you go mom.”

“Wow, thank you baby. They’re beautiful!”

“They’re your favorite.”

“Yes they are.”

“Mulder helped me buy them for you.”

After hugging her daughter and accepting the flowers, Scully turned her attention to her partner. “Thank you Mulder.”

“There’s more.” His words were directed at Ashley.

“Mulder’s come over to make you breakfast!”

“He has?”
Ashley nodded at her mom. “I said I wanted to make you pancakes but Mulder said you didn’t want to call out the fire service this early in the day.”

Though Scully laughed, she knew Mulder was right. Barely a fortnight previously Ashley had set off the smoke detectors in the apartment when she’d attempted to make her mom breakfast in bed. She’d switched the toaster on just as the phone rang and got carried away talking to her Uncle Charlie. Scully ended up getting a rude awakening and having to buy a new toaster. “You’ve come to make me breakfast?”

“Just a light snack. You guys have reservations at noon for lunch.”

“Reservations?” This was too much. “Mulder, you’re not taking me to lunch —”

“No it’s ok, I’m not coming.” That wasn’t what she meant and he knew it. “But you and Ashley are going out to lunch today and I’m not accepting any arguments. It’s already booked.”

“Happy Mother’s Day!” Ashley exclaimed once again as Scully smiled gratefully at her partner. He’d done a good job so far.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder had surpassed himself, Scully realized as he dropped her and Ashley outside of the restaurant. The Italian place had only been open a matter of weeks, and Scully recalled speaking to him about how she planned to take her daughter here someday. Obviously her partner had been paying more attention to her than she realized at the time.

"Well here you go. If you call, me when you guys are done I can come and pick you up'.

Scully looked confused. 'You sure you aren't joining us?'

'It's Mother's Day, I figured I'd I've you ladies some time alone. Besides...' he added, looking in the rear view mirror at Ashley. 'There's another part to your surprise, right Ash?'

'Grandma's coming too!' She revealed, to the surprise of her mom.

'What? But my mother's away this weekend.'

'So she told you', Mulder replied, grinning.

'How long have you guys been planning this?'

'Just a few weeks'. What Mulder didn't tell his partner was that he'd been planning some form of surprise for her ever since her cancer was diagnosed. She'd been through a lot since he’d met her and so he wanted to do something for her. A Mother's Day surprise also gave her the chance to spend some valuable time with both Ashley and Maggie. And, judging from the grin on her face, she appreciated his efforts. A lot.

'I can't believe you guys did this!'

'It was Mulder's idea mom', Ashley volunteered, to the embarrassment of the man sat in front of her.

'Well thank you Mulder'. She seemed genuinely touched by his thoughtfulness.

'Don't thank me, just get in that restaurant and have a great afternoon. I'll be back whenever you're ready to go home.'
'We'll only go in if you come with us.'

'No Scul-

'Please Mulder!' Ashley piped up from the back seat. 'Come to lunch with us'.

'Mulder', Scully began before he could interrupt. 'We would like it very much if you joined us this afternoon. Besides, I'm sure my mother would love the chance to catch up with you. She's always talking about you'.

'You see more than enough of me during the week Scully', he protested weakly.

'I insist Mulder. Ashley and I would like you to join us for lunch. And we're not taking no for an answer, so don't even think about arguing'.

So he didn't.

Lunch was a resounding success, Mulder thought to himself as he took a sip of his soda. The meal itself was delicious and worth every single cent, and all four of them cleared their plates, including Ashley who was sometimes known for being fussy. Scully's appetite tended to come and go depending on how she felt each day, but even she tucked in to her main and shared a dessert with her mom. It was good to see her look so happy, and Mulder knew his idea had been a good one. Maggie echoed his thoughts as she turned to speak to him the instant Scully and Ashley excused themselves to go to the bathroom. 'It was a lovely meal'.

'Yes it was'.

'Thank you for suggesting it Fox. I'm so glad Dana convinced you to join us'.

'It was Ashley's idea. I mean she was the one who reminded me it was Mother's Day'. Thankfully in enough time for him to order flowers and send them to his own mom. He also made a mental note to call her later that evening once he was home.

'Yes but you arranged today. Dana looks like she's enjoying herself'.

'It's hard not to enjoy yourself when Ashley is around'.

Maggie smiled in agreement. 'That's true. Ashley thinks the world of you'.

'She's a good kid', was all he replied.

"Yes she is. Dana has been telling me about everything you've been doing for them lately. We have a lot to thank you for'.

Like Scully's cancer, Mulder said inwardly. Scully owed him absolutely nothing; if anything he owed her for everything she'd had to endure because of him. 'I'm glad to help'.

'Ashley talks about you all the time. I'm glad she has you, particularly after everything that happened with Jack. She thinks the world of you'.

'The feeling is mutual Mrs Scully -'

'Maggie'. 
'Maggie', he echoed. 'I love her; she certainly makes my life a lot more interesting'.

'Dana is very fond of you too'.

So that was what she was getting at. 'I don't know how she does it. I mean I can barely take care of myself but Scu...Dana, she has a full time job and yet she's raising such a great kid'. He knew he was evading Maggie's observations, but the last thing he wanted to discuss was his feelings for Scully. If he was honest with himself, he knew he felt more for Scully than he should bearing in mind they were partners. But he knew he wouldn't act on them - he couldn't - Scully had more than enough on her mind what with her health worries, and she didn't need to deal with her partner's infatuation with her. At least that's all he told himself it was.

'She's an incredibly strong and independent young woman', Maggie agreed. 'But I know she's very grateful to have you in her life'.

'I am too'.

Before Maggie could quiz him further, Ashley came running back towards the table, with her mother following close behind. 'Everything OK?'

"Yes', Mulder replied, smiling. 'Everything's fine'.

xxxxxxx

'Is she out?' Mulder looked up as Scully walked back into the room, stifling a yawn. Their lunch date had stretched long into the afternoon, and by the time he dropped Scully and her daughter back home, they'd invited him to stay for dinner. Then, after a movie, Ashley announced she was tired and took herself off to bed, Scully following a little while later to tuck her in and say goodnight.

'Like a light'.

'I'm not surprised. She was up at the crack of dawn this morning'.

Scully shook her head as she took a seat next to her partner, letting out a sigh as she put her feet up onto the coffee table. 'I still can't believe you guys planned all of this'.

'Surprised?'

'Are you kidding? I was expecting a homemade card at the most'. Not that she expected anything more - she loved the cards that Ashley had made for her over the years. Jack had never bothered giving her anything for Mother's Day, despite the fact she always had Ashley make him a card and buy him a gift for Father's Day. 'This has been the best Mother's Day ever'. He gave her a look of surprise. 'I mean it Mulder. Today has been great and I can't thank you enough'.

'Don't thank me; thank Ashley'.

'Believe me, she doesn't get enough pocket money to afford today's lunch'.

Mulder shrugged, smiling. 'You'd be surprised'.

'Please let me give you something towards the meal'.

'No'.

'Or at least at for my mom's meal?'
'Scully, today was my treat; I've told you that already'.

'You don't have to'.

'I know, but I want to. You spend so much time and energy looking after Ashley that she wanted to do something to thank you. We both do'.

Scully swallowed hard, and Mulder realized she was welling up. The last thing he wanted was to make her cry, especially on Mother's Day of all days. 'This year has more than surpassed my expectations. It's been the best Mother's Day I've ever experienced'.

'So far'. When Scully didn't answer he panicked. 'Scully?'

'Hmm?'

'You mean so far, right?'

'Mulder -'

'Has something happened? Did you see your doctor?'

'Mulder -'

He was terrified now. 'Because you're sounding as though you're thinking it's your last Mother's Day'.

'Mulder', she tried again, more insistently this time. 'We both know that my tumor is inoperable. I promised both you and Ashley that I would fight this cancer, and I stand by that, but I have to be realistic. There is a chance - a high chance - that I will not survive this, and I have to prepare for that'.

'Scully, please, I don't want to talk about this -'

'I know you don't. I don't either, but it has to be said. One day I may die, and I need to make sure that my affairs are in order. I need to make sure Ashley will be OK when I'm gone'.

'She will'. He was lying of course; Ashley would be absolutely devastated if she lost her mom, and they both knew it.

'I want you to be there for her Mulder'.

'I will be' he replied, wishing he could change the subject. He didn't want to think about life without Scully, though she was right, of course, it was an eventuality. He was just determined to find a cure for her cancer before it was too late. He couldn't lose her; he needed her in his life. Scully meant the world to him, and he couldn't live without her. 'I promise I'll be there for you both'. It was then that Mulder realized the true extent to his feelings for his partner, and he knew he'd do anything to keep her alive. Anything.
Scully walked past Ashley’s bedroom, carrying a pile of recently ironed laundry, when she heard her daughter’s words filter out underneath the door. As a rewards for promising school reports along with dealing with her insulin jabs, not to mention guilt on Scully’s part for not being entirely truthful with her about her cancer, she’d agreed to let two of Ashley’s friends, Megan and Erin, stay the night. The girls had quickly retreated to Ashley’s bedroom not long after lunch, and they were waiting for the girls’ moms to come and collect them when Scully overhead them.

“I do too,” she heard Ashley answer defensively and Scully wondered what they’d asked her this time. Just over a week ago the little girl had arrived home from school asking her mom what a blow job was, which had led to an embarrassing conversation for Scully, who hadn’t been planning to have the talk with her daughter for a few more years. She only hoped that the girls weren’t filling Ashley’s head with other sexual terms.

“No you don’t,” one of the girls – Erin – replied matter-of-factly. “My mom said you don’t have a dad.” There was no malice in her words; she was merely stating a fact, but Scully couldn’t help but feel for her daughter.

“I do have a dad.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“It doesn’t count if he’s dead.”

“What?”

“My mom,” Megan piped up. “Said your dad died.”

“He wasn’t my dad.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Scully noted her daughter replied hesitantly.

“Well then who’s your dad?”

This time there was no hesitation as Ashley answered. “Mulder.”

Scully could barely suppress a groan and she rubbed wearily at her eyes as she absorbed her daughter’s lie. Yes Mulder was like a dad to Ashley, but Jack was her real father and the little girl knew it. It wasn’t right for her to be telling lies, though Scully appreciated that she was only doing it so that she didn’t feel left out amongst her friends.

“Mulder isn’t your dad,” Megan argued, though there was a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

“Yes he is.”

“He just works with your mom.”

“But he’s my dad too.”
“Why didn’t you tell us before?”

“Because you didn’t ask.”

“What did you get him for Father’s Day?” Erin asked.

“Some ties and a photo album with pictures of us.” That wasn’t technically a lie, Scully thought. She had given Mulder those gifts, but for Christmas rather than Father’s Day.

“Well why doesn’t Mulder live here with you?”

Scully peered through the gap in the doorway and saw her daughter, who was sitting on the bed, shrug. “He stays here a lot. He loves my mom though and my mom loves him.” Feeling her cheeks pink, Scully debated what to do. On the one hand she knew Ashley was blatantly lying, and she needed to put a stop to it, but she didn’t want to humiliate her daughter in front of her friends. She’d have a word with her once her friends had left, Scully told herself. Ashley needed to realise that Mulder was nothing but a friend.

xxxxxx

Megan and Erin were collected by their respective parents mid-afternoon, leaving Scully and Ashly alone to talk. After fetching them both a glass of soda, Scully took a seat beside her daughter on the sofa. “Sweetie,” she began. “I heard you talking to Erin and Megan earlier about Mulder.”

“Oh,” the little girl replied sheepishly, as though she was aware of what was coming, though she didn’t take her eyes off of the TV screen.

“Baby, why did you tell them Mulder was your father?”

After a few moments, Ashley replied. “They wanted to know what I got my dad for Father’s Day last weekend.”

“But sweetie, your dad died.”

The youngster frowned at her mom’s words. “I know,” she replied quietly.

“So you shouldn’t lie. It’s wrong.”

“But why can’t Mulder be my dad?”

“Because…” Scully let out a deep breath. “Because it doesn’t work like that. You already have a dad, and I’m sorry he’s not here anymore, but he did love you. And Mulder…Mulder is my partner, he just works with me and –”

“And he loves me too,” argued Ashley.

“I know he does.” Scully couldn’t refute that. “And I know he’s like a father to you, but that’s all he is baby. Mulder won’t be your dad, because you already have one.”

“But I don’t want my dad to be dead.” Ashley was getting upset now, her face flushing as her eyes filled with tears. She was about to go into full blown tantrum mode any second now, Scully realized. “I love Mulder. I want him to be my dad.”

“I know you do, but Mulder is not your father Ashley, and you shouldn’t lie to your friends. It’s wrong and it’s naughty.”
“It’s not fair,” the little girl pouted. “I want him to be.”

“I know, but –“

“But what if you two get married? Will Mulder be my dad then?”

Her question temporarily rendered Scully speechless. “That’s not going to happen,” her mother replied, blushing. “Mulder and I are not getting married; not now and not ever, so you can forget about it.”

“But –“

“Mulder is a friend; he’s your friend too and that’s it. You need to understand that, because if I find out you’ve been lying to your friends again, there’s going to be big trouble young lady, do you understand?”

Jumping up off of the sofa, Ashley turned to face her mom, her hands on her hips. At that moment she reminded Scully of Melissa when she was a teenager, trying to stand up to her parents when they refused to extend her curfew, ground her for smoking at school and for sneaking out to meet her boyfriend late at night. “I hate you!” Ashley shouted, before running off in the direction of her bedroom. Though Scully knew that her daughter was upset, her words still cut through her like a knife. It was the first time that Ashley had ever answered her back, though Scully knew it would no doubt the first of many confrontations. They were too similar; clashes were inevitable, plus Ashley had been through a hell of a lot – she was bound to get upset from time to time. She’d experienced so much suffering and loss in her short life that it must have been confusing and frustrating for her. Scully thought about running after her daughter but realized it would do no good – Ashley needed a little time to calm down. Instead she got up from the sofa, headed to her own bedroom and after shutting herself inside, promptly burst into tears, once again cursing Jack for leaving his daughter.

Barely ten minutes later, Scully finally emerged from her bedroom, her tears now dried. She headed straight to Ashley’s room, determined to calm her daughter down and fully explain why Mulder wouldn’t be her dad. She tapped lightly on the youngster’s door, giving her warning before heading on inside. “Ashley…Ashley…” She knocked again, harder this time, and listened for signs of movement. “I’m sorry baby, can we talk about it -?” Opening the door, Scully walked into the room, half expecting to find Ashley passed out on the bed, but she stopped short when she noticed the room was empty. There was no sign of Ashley. Unsure as to whether the youngster was hiding from her; Scully opened the wardrobe before checking underneath the bed and the desk, but to no avail. Ashley was gone.

Mulder turned the corner into his street, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead as he ran. It had been a slow Saturday for him, after spending the morning in the office hunting for potential new cases, he returned home to do his laundry and make lunch before decided to go out for a quick jog. Five miles later and he took in the familiar sights of his apartment building. Slowing down to a walk, he took a sip from his water bottle and prepared to stretch his legs, when a cab pulled up alongside him. Normally he paid no attention to passing vehicles on his street, but something caught his eye and he turned just in time to see Ashley emerge from the back of the cab. Alone. And Mulder immediately noticed that she wasn’t happy; her bottom lip was trembling and her face was sporting a look of worry and uncertainty. He looked on helplessly as she suddenly recognised him and burst into tears. His first thought was that something had happened to Scully – why else would an eight year old travel across town in a cab?
“Ash?” He headed over towards her, concerned. ‘What’s happened? Where’s your mom?’

“We had…we had a fight,” she murmured, her tears now falling in earnest.

“Hey man,” the cab driver called out, looking for money.

“Right, right.” Realising he had no money on him, Mulder had no other choice. “I’m just going to run inside and get some cash.” Ashley looked panicked, as though he was going to leave her. “Come on Ash. I’ll be right back.” He thought again. “And what the hell were you thinking taking a kid across town?” Before his anger got the better of him, Mulder escorted Ashley into his apartment, ran down to pay the cab driver (and lecture him once again on his stupidity), and ran back up to the little girl, who was still crying.

“How did you get the cab Ash?”

“It was in my street,” she hiccupped.

'So are you going to tell me what's happened, or am I going to have to guess?' He waited patiently for Ashley to stop crying long enough to speak.

'We....we had an...an argument', she uttered between sobs.

'OK...what did you argue about?’

'Mom said...' she paused as fresh tears fell. Mulder retrieved a box of tissues from his desk and handed them to her. 'She...thank you...she said you're not my dad'.

It took a moment for her words to sink in, and even then he was confused. 'But Ash, I'm not your dad', he answered carefully, crouching down so he was looking her in the eye. 'You know that'.

'But...but I want you to be my dad'.

Mulder reached out and drew the little girl into his arms. 'Hey, hey don't cry now, it’s OK'.

'No its not'. Her tears were soaking through Mulder's shirt but he didn't care. All he wanted to do was take away Ashley's pain. 'I want you to be my dad'.

'What's brought this on? Has something happened?' She nodded against him. 'You know you can tell me anything don't you?'

'Megan and Erin laughed at me because I...because I didn't buy my dad anything for Father's Day because he's dead'.

Her words sliced through him like a knife. Kids could be so cruel. 'Well then Megan and Erin are cruel little girls'.

'So I told them that I did have a dad and that you were my dad and mom heard me say it and she shouted and said you weren't my dad and so I ran away. She barely took a breath as she spoke and Mulder was barely able to keep up with her.

'Oh Ash'. He hugged her tightly , wishing he could take away her pain. 'Your mom's right'.

'But -'

'I'm not your dad sweetie. You already have a dad'.
'But he's dead'.

'I know he is. But he's still your dad; that doesn't change. Whatever happens in life, he'll still be your dad'. He pulled back to look at her. 'My dad died too, remember?' She nodded. 'But he's still my dad and that will never change'.

'Were your friends mean to you?'

'Ash, people can be mean sometimes, but your friends are just confused. They haven't lost someone like you have. But just because your dad isn't here anymore, it doesn't mean you have to be ashamed'.

'But why aren't you my dad?' she whined.

Mulder sighed, wondering how he would make her feel better. 'Because it doesn't work like that sweetie. But think about it, would you really want me as your dad?' She nodded, which made Mulder laugh. 'No you wouldn't. I mean I'm messy, I smell bad. Smell me, you see what I mean?' Ashley wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'See? You'd hate for me to be your dad'.

'No I wouldn't'.

'And if I was your dad I'd embarrass you when you were older, and I'd have to shout at you when you were naughty. Remember when you spat at Dylan at school last month?' Another nod. 'I'd have had to ground you if I was your dad'.

'But what about when my mom dies?'

'What?' It was a good job he was already crouching down, Mulder thought, because her words would have otherwise brought him to his knees.

'What about when my mom dies? I won't have a mom and I won't have a dad'.

'Who said anything about your mom dying?' He knew for a fact that Scully still hadn't told her daughter that her cancer was terminal.

'She has a tumor and Megan told me that people who have tumors die'.

Mulder was really starting to hate Ashley's friends. 'Sweetie -'

'Whats going to happen to me when my mom dies? Will I be alone?'

'No, no not at all. If... he stressed. '...anything happens to your mom, then of course you won't be alone. You have your grandma and your family and me'.

'But you're not my dad'.

'Ash, just because I'm your dad it doesn't mean I don't love you. It doesn't mean that I'm not going to be there for you whenever you need me, because I will be. No matter what happens, I'll be here for you. And your mom', he added, not willing to give up on his partner just yet.

'Really?'

'Of course. And I know you want me to be your dad, but I like this arrangement, don't you? We have fun, we see each other all the time and I get to laugh when you do something bad rather than punish you. That's cool right?'
'I guess so.'

'And if you ever need me, you know where I am OK? But next time just call me, don't run away. Your mom must be worried sick'. Kissing the top of Ashley's head, Mulder got to his feet, wincing as he felt the effects of his run. 'I'd better call her'.

'Noooo!' Ashley's tears were now forgotten as panic set in. 'Don't call her'.

'I have to Ash, she'll be wondering where you are'.

“She hates me.”

“No she doesn’t.”

'She's going to be mad'.

'Possibly, but you did run away; it's bound to have upset her. Just remember that she's your mom and even if she is mad at you, she still loves you. She's just worried. It'll be OK'. Before she could argue, he walked over to his desk and picked up the phone, dialling the familiar number. Scully answered on the first ring. 'Scully? It's me...Yeah she's here, she's OK...she got a cab...I know, I know but she's OK. You want me to bring her home?...Are you sure?...OK, we'll see you soon'. With that he hung up. 'Well', he said to the young girl. 'She's relieved to know you're ok. She's going to come here and collect you, so she'll be here soon. Would you like a drink while you wait?' Ashley shook her head. 'What do you need Ash?' He couldn't resist when she held her arms out for a hug. A father figure, she just needed a father figure. He could do that.

xxxxxxxxx

 Barely twenty minutes later there was a knock at the door, startling both Mulder and Ashley who were sitting side by side. Removing his arm from around the little girl, he got to his feet and headed towards the door, noting Ashley's worried expression. He'd put money on Scully sporting an identical look on her face on the other side of the door. As he opened the door, Scully flashed him a grateful smile and rushed into the apartment and to her daughter. 'Oh sweetheart'. The little girl prepared herself for a telling off which never came. 'I was worried sick'. Scully pulled her daughter off of the sofa and into her arms, hugging her tightly as though if she let go Ashley would be gone again. 'I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to yell and I certainly didn't mean for this to happen'.

'I'm so sorry mommy'.

'Promise me you'll never do this again'.

'I'm sorry for making you mad'.

Mulder, feeling as though he was intruding on a private moment, moved to step out of the living room, but Scully turned to face him, still clutching her daughter to her. 'Thank you for calling me'.

'No worries'.

'I'm sorry for this'.

'Don't apologise'. He knew she wasn't just talking about Ashley intruding on his Saturday afternoon, but for the fact he was essentially the topic of their argument.

'Is everything OK now baby?'
Ashley nodded against her mom. 'Mulder said I wouldn't want him to be my dad because he smells bad'.

Both adults couldn't help but laugh. 'I did say some other profound words in addition to that', said Mulder. 'But that was what made up her mind'.

'So you're feeling better?'

Ashley nodded. 'Mulder said my dad is still my dad even though he's dead'.

'That's right. Just like your grandpa is still my dad'.

'And he told me that even though he's not really my dad he'll still take care of me'.

'That's...that's very thoughtful of Mulder', Scully replied, clearly choked at the promise her partner had made to her daughter.

Embarrassed, Mulder grinned sheepishly. 'I think she's overselling it somewhat. I just told her that sometimes people who don't understand situations can hit out, but that they don't necessarily mean to upset'.

'Right'. Scully looked her daughter over once more. 'Are you sure you're OK? The cab driver didn't hurt you?'

'No mom'.

'How did you get a cab anyway?'

Ashley shrugged, clearly waiting for her mom to start shouting. “There was one on the street and I told him...” she bit her lip nervously. “I told him you said it was ok and that I had money.”

“How did you pay for the cab?” asked Scully, frowning.

“Mulder did.”

“Oh Mulder.” Scully let go of her daughter briefly to hunt for her wallet. “Let me give you the money.”

He shook his head. “It's on me.”

“No please let me –“

“Think of it as my treat. Although you’d better not make a habit of this young lady.” His words were directed at Ashley.

“Well thanks Mulder, I appreciate it. We both do. Now...I think we’d better make a move. Poor Mulder needs to get on with his day off.”

“Ohhhh.” Ashley started to complain but then thought better of it, realizing she’d already frustrated her mom enough that day.

“I mean, I don’t have any other plans,” replied Mulder. “Aside from a shower in my near future.”

“Please can we stay mom?”

“Sweetie, Mulder needs a shower –“
“Oh but—“

“But maybe, if he’s free later, he could come over for dinner?”

Ashley’s face lit up, and Mulder knew that even if he’d had plans, he’d cancel them in an instant if it made the little girl happy. “Yes please Mulder.”

“I’d like that.”

“Great.” Scully smiled gratefully at him. “Say seven?”

“Seven’s great with me.”

“Ok then, well we’d better let you get ready. Say goodbye to—“ Before she’d even finished her sentence, Ashley had leapt up off the sofa and hurried over to Mulder, throwing her arms around him. “Thank you Mulder. See you later.”

“See you later trouble. Don’t go running off again.”

“I won’t.”

After saying goodbye to Scully, Mulder saw both his partner and her daughter out of the apartment, relieved that at least one drama in his life was over.
“I need your help.”

Mulder looked up in surprise at his partner who stood across the desk from him, smoothing down her pale blue shirt. She looked nervous, which made him uneasy, and she’d been quiet all afternoon, as though unsure of how to talk to him. Scully never asked for anything, particularly his help, and Mulder could only surmise that something was wrong. She was too proud to ask for help normally; too used to doing things herself. “Ok…” he replied hesitantly. “Hit me.”

Taking a seat opposite him, Scully began to speak. “I want to arrange a party for Ashley. For this weekend.” Before he could ask why she needed his help, she continued hurriedly. “My mom is out of town and Ellen is busy, and so I was wondering if you could give me a hand with it all. If you don’t have plans that is?”

“Scully,” he smiled, relieved that it wasn’t anything serious. “When have you ever known me to have plans at the weekend?”

Returning his smile, Scully nodded. “Thank you. It'll just be a small group of friends, maybe eight max.”

“That’s fine.” A thought crossed his mind. “Is it a special occasion?”

“Sorry?”

“The party? Is there any reason you’re throwing Ashley a party?” He noticed Scully’s brief pause before replying, as though she was reluctant to answer him.

“It’s a birthday party,” she said finally.

“A birthday party? For who?”

“For Ashley.”

“Her birthday’s in December Scully.”

“I’m well aware of when my daughter’s birthday is Mulder, thank you.”

“You still have six months Scully.” He was still confused over why she’d brought forward her daughter’s birthday.

“Ashley has six months Mulder,” Scully replied, gently but firm. She didn’t finish her sentence, but she didn’t need to; her meaning was clear. Ashley had six months to wait. Scully wasn’t sure she’d still be around to see her daughter’s birthday.

“Ashley,” Mulder spoke, his voice wavering. “Has something happened? Has your cancer –“

“No, no it hasn’t, not yet. But,” Scully focussed on a paper clip perched on the edge of her partner’s desk. She picked it up, running it through her fingers absentmindedly. Mulder wanted to take the damn thing from her grasp and throw it in the trash, forcing her attention back on him. “But you just never know. I want to see my baby celebrate her birthday. I mean, she just thinks she’s having a bunch of friends round. But,” she added. “She’s been through so much lately, it’ll do her good to have an afternoon of fun.”
“Of course,” Mulder replied, still stunned at his partner’s words. Though Scully had told him right from the start that there was no cure for her illness, he’d refused to believe there was a possibility that she could die. But now, now he realised it could happen, and it could potentially happen soon.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No, no of course not. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun?” She grinned. “You might change your mind after a few hours with a room full of excitable kids.”

“Are you kidding? I’m a kid myself, it’ll be nice hanging out with people on my level. And you too of course,” he added, smiling to himself as he saw her cheeks pink.

“Thanks Mulder, I owe you for this.”

“Anytime,” he replied. And he meant it.

Scully was right, Mulder thought to himself as he poured one of Ashley’s friends – Jennifer? Jade? Jenna? He couldn’t remember – another glass of soda. Part of him wondered whether the child needed more sugar – the room full of girls had been bouncing around for most of the afternoon – but he hoped that by the time the sugar rush kicked in, she’d be well on her way home.

“Thank you Mr Mulder,” the little girl replied sweetly, before running off with her drink, inadvertently spilling a few drops of pink lemonade on Scully’s carpet.

Groaning inwardly, Mulder immediately retreated to the kitchen to fetch a washcloth ready to clean up the stain. “Another spillage Scully. The way things are going you’re going to need a new carpet –”

He stopped short as he saw his partner stood by the counter, tears streaming down her face as she looked off into the distance. “Scully?” She turned her attention to him and immediately wiped her eyes, trying – and failing – to remove evidence of her crying. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she replied, her voice breaking.

“Don’t give me that.” All thoughts of the washcloth now forgotten, Mulder crossed the room and pulled his partner into his arms. “Has something happened?” She shook her head against him, and he could feel the fresh tears soaking into his new shirt. “What is it?” He asked gently, rubbing her back soothingly in a bid to console her. It took Scully a while to reply; her tears making it difficult to speak.

“I don’t want to leave her Mulder. I don’t want to miss seeing her grow up.” Her words made Mulder’s own eyes cloud with tears, and he willed himself not to cry. Scully needed him to be strong for her; the last thing she needed was to see him break down too.

“You won’t Scully.”

“How do you know?” She murmured into his chest.

“Because I believe, I believe in you and I believe that you won’t give up. You have so much to live for, and you have a little girl out in the next room who needs her mom. I’ve told you time and time again over the years that Ashley is a fighter, but she gets that from you. Plus,” he added. “You
know I’m not going to give you up without a fight. I mean who else would listen to my theories on aliens and liver-eating mutants and flukeworms?” That at least got a laugh from her, as he felt her huff against him. “Don’t give up Scully, just promise me that.”

“Mommy?” Mulder felt his partner pull back as Ashley walked into the kitchen, a look of concern on her face. “Are you ok?” She asked, walking towards her mother, taking in her tears.

Forcing a smile, Scully nodded. “I’m fine baby.” She held out an arm, wrapping it around her daughter and drawing her in for a hug between herself and Mulder. Mulder embraced the two girls tightly, wishing he never had to let go, that he could keep them safe forever.

His family.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“So did you have a good afternoon?” Mulder tucked a sleepy Ashley into bed, having volunteered for the duty while Scully set about trying to retain a sense of order in the living room. Ashley’s party had been a resounding success, though after numerous spillages and a popcorn fight, Scully’s apartment had taken a battering. Mulder had volunteered for bed duty as opposed to the clean-up operation, and so, after allowing Ashley to skip her bath, he tucked her in and offered to read her a bedtime story, confused when she declined. Maybe she was getting too old for it, he surmised, but she surprised him with her reply.

“I don’t want mommy to die,” she suddenly announced, a look of worry on her face. Mulder frowned.

“Hey, where’s this coming from?” He shifted so he was lying on top of the comforter next to her, and propped himself up on his elbow, his free hand moving to brush the little girl’s hair away from her forehead. It was growing so long, he mused, and she still refused to have it cut. Ashley was a typical little girl, obsessed with pinks, princesses, dolls and Barbies; so much like her mom, but on the other hand so different. As her piercing blue eyes met his, Ashley shrugged.

“Mom’s ill. She has cancer and people who have cancer die.” She’d said the same the previous weekend at Mulder’s apartment. It had clearly been on her mind all week.

“Some people do,” Mulder admitted. “But not everybody does. Your mom’s strong, and she has you to live for.”

“She’s ill though.”

“Yes she is, but some people who are ill get better, don’t they?”

She nodded eagerly. “I had a cold last week and I got better.”

“You see!” Mulder forced a smile, his eyes sad. She was too young to be going through yet more heartache. “And people do get better sometimes, even when others think the worst. Now,” he said, hoping to change the subject. “Your mom certainly wouldn’t want you getting upset over this. And she’d probably also say that you should be asleep by now. Did you kiss her goodnight?” Ashley nodded, her earlier worries now a thing of the past. “Want me to go get her?”

This time a shake of her head. “You can kiss her for me,” she answered, with a cheeky grin etched on her face, and Mulder couldn’t help but laugh.

“Nice try Monkey. Now how about you close your eyes and go to sleep. I’ll see you soon.”
“Tomorrow?”

“We’ll see.” He’d spend every day with her if he could.

Ashley seemed to accept his answer. “G’night Mulder, I love you.”

“Goodnight trouble. I love you too.” And as Mulder watched Ashley close her eyes and drift off to sleep, he realised it was true. He loved her as though she was his own child. He’d move heaven and earth for her, and he’d kill anyone who dared to hurt her, of that he had no doubt. It was strange, he thought to himself, how he couldn’t imagine life without Ashley and Scully in it. When he’d first met his partner he thought she was an arrogant rookie sent to spy on him, but pretty soon – and thanks in part to her adorable daughter – she’d insinuated herself into his life.

Moments later he looked up to see Scully standing in the doorway, tears falling down her cheeks. It was the second time in less than a few hours that he’d seen her crying. He quickly got up off of the bed and headed to the door, switching out the light as he went. Closing the door to Ashley’s room, he turned to his partner. “Scully? What’s wrong?”

Rather than answering immediately, she instead turned and headed back out into the living room; her partner following close behind. When she turned back to face him, Mulder was dismayed to find she was still crying. “Scully?”

“You’re so good to Ashley.”

“What?” He wasn’t quite sure why this fact would upset her.

“You’re so good to her Mulder, and yet we never asked you to be.”

“Scully –“

“We just walked straight into your life and planted ourselves there without even asking you. And now… now you’re the closest thing she has to a father. And I feel bad that we never even asked you if you wanted this.”

“Scully.” Finally she allowed him to speak. “I love Ashley.” *And you too*, he supplied inwardly. “And I’m incredibly grateful to you for letting her in my life.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“I’m sorry that I never asked you. I’m sorry for expecting you to do this –“ Scully glanced down at the floor, unwilling to meet his eye.

“You’re not expecting me to do anything. I’m doing this because I want to. Because I want to be here for you both.” Stepping in closer to her, Mulder reached out and tilted Scully’s chin up, wanting her to meet his eye. He needed her to know that he wanted this; he wanted to be a part of their lives, and that he did it out of love rather than obligation.

“I told Ashley last weekend that you weren’t her father; that you’d never be her father,” she admitted guiltily. “That was why she ran off. But the truth is, I lied. You’ve been there for her more than Jack ever was, even before he died. She loves you and she idolizes you and I know there’s nothing I can do to thank you for being here for her.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I should be thanking you for coming into my life.” He was relieved
when Scully stepped into his arms for a hug. “It’s certainly a lot more exciting with Ashley around.”

She huffed against him. “Tell me about it.” Sniffing hard, she pulled back slightly to look at him. “I just want you to know how grateful I am, to know that you’re here for her.”

“Always.” And he meant it too. No matter what happened between them, they were still a part of his life, and he’d always be around for Ashley. And her mom. “You won’t get rid of me you know.” He pretended to think. “Is that why you’re crying? Because you’re not going to be shot of me?”

This time when she laughed it was genuine. “I didn’t think it was that obvious.”

Mulder chuckled, and moved to rest his forehead against hers, not once losing eye contact. “No more tears Scully, certainly not over this. I love Ashley and I love…I love being with you guys, and it’s certainly not out of some sense of duty.”

“Thank you,” she repeated. “And thank you for your help today. You were a hit with the kids.”

“Like I said already, I’m a big kid myself so it helps sometimes.”

“I owe you big time.”

“You owe me nothing. Well, maybe a pizza and a beer sometime.” He paused as Scully let out an impressive yawn. “But not tonight. Right now you look as though you need to go to bed.”

“Will you stay?” It wasn’t the first time she’d asked, but still Mulder felt a shiver run through him at her words. “To sleep, nothing else,” she clarified, smiling, though he knew the rules. Just a few weeks prior he’d spent the night after Scully had been sick for most of the evening. She’d called him and asked him to take care of Ashley, and once the little girl was tucked up in bed he’d turned his attention to her mom, asking Scully if there was anything she needed. She shook her head, unable to speak for fear of being sick once more, and instead took hold of his hand and pulled him down onto the bed. He’d wrapped himself around her – purely to comfort her – and she’d soon drifted off, with him following close behind.

“I can stay.”

“Thank you.”

“Scully, you don’t have to keep thanking me.”

But, as she took hold of his hand and led him to her bedroom, Scully began to think about ways that she and Ashley could thank Mulder for everything he’d done for them of late. And then a plan began to formulate in her mind.
Chapter 41

Mulder woke with a start, sitting up straight on the sofa. His eyes were barely open as he ran a hand through his hair, which was sticking up in all directions thanks to his tossing and turning throughout the night. As he came awake he could have sworn he heard murmured voices coming from the kitchen, and decided to investigate. Silently, he peeled back the duvet, got to his feet and grabbed his gun from the coffee table, just in case. Though it was unlikely any marksmen had paused in their mission to make themselves a cup of coffee, he couldn’t be too careful. Mulder made his way to the kitchen, his gun poised, and as he turned the corner he nearly had a heart attack as he came face to face with his partner.

“Jesus Scully.”

On instinct she put her hands up in surrender. “Mulder? What the hell?”

Lowering the weapon, he placed a hand to his chest, willing his heart to stop racing. “What are you doing here?”

“Hi Mulder.” Ashley’s voice rang out from behind her mom, and as she stepped forward, Mulder quickly hid his weapon behind his back. There was no need to scare the little girl unnecessarily.

“Hey Trouble. What are you doing here? It’s…” he looked at his watch and did a double take. “Jeez, it’s 5.15 am.”

“We’re making you breakfast,” Ashley answered as she wrapped her arms around a not-yet awake Mulder.

“At 5.15am?”

“Sorry about the early hour. We’re on a schedule,” said Scully.

“Schedule?”

“Speaking of which, you’d better jump in the shower or else we’ll be late.”

“Late?” Though Mulder was awake now, he still didn’t have a clue what his partner was talking about. “Late for what?”

“Tell him sweetie.”

The little girl looked up at him, her blue eyes twinkling with excitement. “Happy Mulder Weekend!”

He was even more confused now. “What?”

“Happy Mulder Weekend!”

Despite hearing it a second time, he still didn’t quite get it. “I don’t understand.”

Ashley’s smile faded, but thankfully Scully stepped in to explain. “Well, after last weekend, Ashley and I had a little talk and she decided she wanted to do something for you. We both did, to thank you for everything you do for us.”

“And because your birthday isn’t for aaaaaaages,” Ashley piped up. “We decided to make a day
just for you. Mulder Day.” She thought for a moment. “But your present lasts longer than a day, so it’s Mulder Weekend.”

“Wow.” He wasn’t quite sure he deserved a day dedicated to him, let alone a weekend, but he certainly appreciated the sentiment.

“Before my blabbermouth daughter gives the surprise away,” said Scully, giving Ashley a warning look. “We have something to give you.”

“I’ll get it!” The youngster volunteered.

“It’s in my bag,” Scully turned and headed back into the kitchen. “I’ll finish up breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” Suddenly remembering the early hour, Mulder followed after his partner, stopping short in surprise when he saw what she was up to. She had eggs and bacon on the go, and he noted a stack of pancakes already sat on a plate in the middle of the table. “Scully, what -?” He was interrupted as two rounds of toast popped up out of the toaster, a little overdone. “It’s 5am.”

“I know. We would have been here earlier, but some little madam was refusing to leave the house until she found her lucky tee shirt.”

“Lucky -?”

“Mulder.” She paused to look up at him. “Are you going to stand there all morning, or are you going to get into the shower? We can’t be late.”

“Late for what? Where are we going?”

“The airport,” answered Ashley as she skipped into the kitchen, holding an envelope out towards him. “Happy Mulder Weekend! Open it! Open it now!”

Though Mulder didn’t have a great deal of experience with Ashley first thing in the morning, he was surprised that someone so small could have so much energy at such an ungodly hour. Still, he accepted the envelope gratefully and tore it open to reveal ticket. It took him two tries of reading the front before it finally sunk in. “Yankees tickets?!” He looked between his partner and her daughter; their wide grins indicating that no, he wasn’t dreaming. “Are you serious?”

“You need to read them carefully,” advised Scully, realising it was a worthwhile gift the instant she saw Mulder’s face light up. The idea of doing something special for him had come to her the previous weekend after Ashley’s party, as he was sleeping in bed next to her. He deserved something special, she’d decided, particularly after everything he’d done for them – giving up his free time to help with the party, organising her Mother’s Day surprise, taking care of Ashley when she ran off. When she’d mentioned the idea of a gift for Mulder to her daughter, Ashley had been incredibly enthusiastic, and she was the one who’d mentioned baseball. A quick call to her younger brother Charlie, asking him for his help and they were sorted – flights and a hotel in New York and two tickets to the baseball game. Well three actually. Charlie’s childhood friend Max had sorted her with free tickets thanks to his job working with the Yankees, but Scully was willing to let Mulder and Ashley spend some time together, and didn’t want to intrude.

“Today?”

“That’s why we’re here so early, and why you need to get in the shower. We have a flight to catch.” She realised it was a lot for Mulder to take in bearing in mind he’d only been awake for less than ten minutes. “That’s if you don’t have any other plans this weekend?” She knew he didn’t; she’d been quizzing him all week about his plans. “We’re due to fly back tomorrow afternoon, so
we’ll be back in time for work. And school,” she added, and Ashley pouted.

Mulder shook his head. “No, no plans.” Even if he had, he’d have cancelled them.

“Mulder, is this ok?”

Seeing the uncertainty in Scully’s eyes, he gave her a grin that threatened to melt her insides. “This is more than ok Scully.”

It was perfect.

XXXXXXXXXX

They landed in New York mid-morning, Ashley practically bursting with excitement at flying in an aeroplane coupled with visiting New York for the very first time. Mulder still wondered whether he was dreaming. After he’d showered earlier that morning, he’d sat down to breakfast with Scully and Ashley and the two of them had gone into more detail about his surprise – an overnight visit to New York. Mulder and Ashley would enjoy the baseball game – the Yankees versus the Chicago Cubs – while Scully checked them into their mid-town hotel for the evening and did a little shopping. He had to say he was a little disappointed that she wouldn’t be joining them for the game, but he was more than grateful for his surprise, and was willing to offer up one of his kidneys in thanks to Charlie’s friend. After the game, they’d all meet up for dinner before overnighting in their hotel. The following morning would allow for a little sightseeing – Ashley was desperate to visit the Empire State Building – before their flight back to DC after lunch. It was perfect; it offered the chance for him to spend time with his favorite people without interruptions from the outside world. For once they could act like regular people – a family, almost. Mulder had to bite back a smile when the lady at the check-in counter back in DC confused Ashley for his daughter. Thankfully Scully was too busy rooting around in her purse for her passport to notice and so he was able to politely correct her.

“Ok,” said Scully as she glanced at her watch and realised it was almost time for Mulder and Ashley to leave for the stadium. The three of them had just finished eating in a nearby diner. “Call me when you’re done and I can meet you for dinner. Sweetie, do you need to go to the bathroom before you leave?” Ashley nodded. “Go –“

“It’s a shame you’re not coming too Scully,” interrupted Mulder. “Are you sure you don’t want me to see if there are any tickets left?”

“She has a ticket,” Ashley answered, before hurrying off in the direction of the toilets. To say she was excited about her first baseball game was an understatement. She’d been talking about it all week, and the entire plane trip she and Mulder had been discussing the teams that were playing that afternoon. Initially Ashley had decided she wanted to support the Cubs, but as soon as Mulder admitted the Yankees were his team, she immediately jumped ship. Mulder was the youngster’s idol; it was inevitable that she’d like whatever he did.

Mulder shot his partner a questioning look, as he crunched some leftover ice from his glass of coke. “You have a ticket?” he asked.

Scully hesitated before nodding.

“Then why aren’t you coming with us?”

“I thought you and Ashley might want to go together,” was her answer. “Besides, I don’t know the first thing about baseball.” That was a lie of course. She grew up with two brothers – of course she
knew about the game – but Mulder seemed to accept her answer as truth.

“Well then, now’s the best time to learn. I can teach you all about the game as we’re watching it.” She didn’t look particularly convinced. “C’mon Scully, it’ll be fun. You can go shopping anytime. Besides, I’m probably doing your credit card a favor by keeping you away from Bloomingdales.” When she didn’t answer immediately, he tried again. “Today is supposed to be my day, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Well then, I want you to come, so you have to.” He paused as Ashley made her way back over to them, and scooted back into the booth on the opposite side of her mom. “Ash, do you think your mom should come to the game with us?”

The little girl nodded enthusiastically, strands of wavy blonde hair falling in front of her eyes. Wordlessly, Mulder reached across and tucked them back behind her ear. Sometimes it almost hurt Scully to see just how fatherly he was to the youngster. He was a good man, she thought. He deserved this special weekend.

“Please Mom,” said Ashley, interrupting her mother’s thoughts. “It’ll be fun.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” she argued.

“You’re not intruding Scully. We want you there.”

“Mulder says we can get hotdogs.”

Scully raised her eyebrows. “Oh he did, did he?”

“Only if she promised to eat all of her dinner,” answered Mulder, relaxing when he saw his partner smile across the table at him. “The same goes for you,” he added, smirking.

“Please come Mom!”

“Go on Scully.”

They knew her well enough now that if they ganged up on her, she’d relent. Sure enough, after taking a final sip of her coffee, she nodded. “Take me out to the ballgame.”

It was a date.

Xxxxxxxxxxxx

Scully’s gift was a hit. The three of them spent the afternoon watching the Yankees thrash the Cubs. Mulder kept one eye on the game and the other on the females by his side, spending time teaching Ashley and her mom the rules of baseball, though Scully couldn’t help but notice the glint in his eye as he looked over at her and explained the three bases, along with a home run. Thankfully, they got to see a lot of home runs, and Mulder was able to witness his team win convincingly, while Ashley was able to stand and cheer many times with the crowd, getting caught up in the atmosphere. Before the game had started, Mulder had left the two of them to visit the merchandise store, and had emerged ten minutes later carrying two bags. One held three jerseys – one for each of them, to Scully’s embarrassment – and the other baseball caps for Ashley and her mom. The little girl seemed reluctant to wear the jersey, having spent so much time hunting for her lucky tee that morning, but when Mulder suggested she wear the jersey over it, she soon perked up, and moments later looked like a hardcore Yankees fan. Scully took the afternoon in good spirit, and sat modelling Mulder’s purchases during the game, though he knew it would have been a
different story if there was a risk of her running into someone she knew. When he treated them to hotdogs mid-way through, Scully protested at the amount he had already spent on them, until Mulder countered that she was the one who’d paid for their weekend away. It was worth it though, she thought to herself. The three of them were having a great day, Ashley hadn’t stopped grinning since she’d woken up that morning, and Scully herself had forgotten about the ticking time bomb nestled behind her nasal cavity. Sadly though, she couldn’t ignore it for long.
“So what’s your favorite part of New York so far?”

Ashley put down the spoon she was holding; her chocolate cake now at the back of her mind as she considered his question. “Hmmm,” she said dramatically, scrunching up her forehead in thought. Mulder grinned, noticing yet again the similarity between the little girl and her mother who was sitting by her side, waiting for her answer. “I think I like…I like everything!”

“What Mulder’s asking…” Scully explained, picking up her napkin and using it to wipe errant traces of chocolate from the edges of her daughter’s mouth. “Was if you had a favorite part of your day.”

“I liked the baseball. I liked the fact we won.”

“That was cool,” Mulder admitted, amused at the fact Ashley had already adopted the Yankees as her team. She still wore the jersey and baseball cap he’d bought her earlier that afternoon. Scully had kept her own jersey on, but she’d removed the hat as soon as the game had finished; self-consciousness getting the better of her.

“And I like our hotel.” Just a basic, well-located hotel with a room featuring two more than spacious king-sized beds (Scully and Ashley would be sharing one, Mulder had been informed, while he took the other). “But I’m excited to go up the tower tomorrow!”

“You mean the Empire State Building?” her mother asked.

“That’s what I said.”

“Of course you did.” Picking up her spoon, Ashley continued to make a dent in her dessert, Scully looking on with a mixture of admiration and concern. “If you’re feeling full, don’t finish that sweetie. You don’t want to make yourself sick.”

“I won’t be sick.”

“Famous last words,” Mulder murmured, and his partner nodded in agreement.

“You won’t be able to sleep on a full stomach either.”

“I’m not tired.”

That wasn’t exactly true, thought Scully. Her daughter was tiring fast, unable to stifle yawns as they waited for their table at the diner. It had been Ashley’s choice to eat there, mainly because she wanted a chocolate milkshake, and of course Mulder let her; he often gave into her requests. Scully would be surprised if the youngster made it back to the hotel before succumbing to sleep. “Well just don’t force yourself, that’s all I’m saying. You’ve already had a chocolate milkshake tonight.”

Considering her mom’s words, Ashley looked back down at her cake, before glancing up at the man opposite her. “Would you like some Mulder?”

“Only if you can’t manage it.”

Though she looked as though she was regretting her offer to share her dessert, Ashley reluctantly pushed the plate across to Mulder, who politely accepted it.
“You want some Scully?” he asked as he picked up his fork and set to work on the cake.

“I couldn’t eat another thing.” She lifted her arm to wrap it around her daughter, who had snuggled up against her.

Mulder paused in his eating to look over at Ashley, noticing her heavy eyelids. “Looks like we’d better make a move soon.”

Scully followed his gaze. “I guess so. It’s been a long day for her. For all of us,” she added.

“What time were you guys up this morning?”

“Ashley woke me just before 4 this morning.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s ok, I’m used to it. Queequeg usually wakes me around that time to go out.”

“Where is the little mutt today?” Mulder smiled to suggest he was joking, though there was still an element of seriousness in his words. Queequeg and Mulder just about tolerated one another, though Mulder had to move slowly around the canine or risk a bite to his ankles. Still, he’d managed not to kill the dog, so that must have been a positive thing.

“I took him to my mom’s last night. She’s going to bring him back on Monday when she picks Ashley up from school.” She saw Mulder’s questioning look. “Emma’s in Jamaica this week.”

“Ah of course.” She had told him before, but he’d forgotten. “Lucky her. Though,” he added. “I can’t really complain. I’m very glad we’re here.”

Scully flashed a smile at him, and nodded in agreement. “Me too.”

Within minutes of Mulder finishing Ashley’s leftover chocolate cake, the youngsters was fast asleep in her mother’s arms. Though Scully wanted to wake up her daughter for the walk back to their hotel, Mulder refused, and insisted he’d carry her back. The last thing he wanted was to have a grumpy little girl on his hands – Ashley was very rarely in a bad mood, but when she was, she was almost unbearable. And so, once he’d paid for dinner (at his insistence), he lifted Ashley into his arms and followed his partner back to their hotel. While Scully got her still-sleeping daughter ready for bed and tucked her in, he quickly used the bathroom, changing into a grey t-shirt and black sweatpants, and then it was Scully’s turn.

As she stepped out of the bathroom with minty fresh breath and now wearing pale blue silk pajamas, she stopped short as she caught sight of Ashley, now lying in the middle of the bed, her arms and legs spread out like a starfish. She was dead to the world, her mom noticed, and she didn’t have the heart to wake her up to move her. That was when she realised there was a problem.

She wasn’t the only one who realized.

“It’s ok Scully,” Mulder whispered, not wanting to wake Ashley. He wasn’t surprised she was fast asleep so early – it had been a long and eventful day after all, and after her excitement over the flight to New York followed by the game, it was inevitable she would eventually burn out. “You can take this bed.”

“Thank you.” She padded barefoot over to where Mulder stood next to the other bed in the room.
“I’ll take the couch.” He moved to walk past his partner but she put an arm out to still him.

“Mulder, no.” Gesturing to the bed, Scully continued. “There’s plenty of room.”

“Are you sure?”

She grinned up at him. “We’ve shared a bed before and we’re two responsible adults…” Mulder coughed. “Well, one of us is a responsible adult. Get into bed.” His eyebrows nearly hit the roof. “Ashley will roll over soon and I’ll get back in with her.”

“It’s ok Scully,” Mulder moved to climb into the bed and shifted over to make room for her. “I can be good.”

Getting into the bed next to him, Scully rolled over onto her right side to switch out the lamp, plunging the room into almost darkness – the only light coming from the bathroom, for Ashley if she needed to get up in the night. Moments later she felt the bed dip as Mulder edged closer towards her.

“I love how she just fell asleep at the drop of a hat,” he commented, his breath on her neck sending a shiver down Scully’s spine. “It’s good to see.” He was talking about the struggle Ashley sometimes had at bedtimes to drift off to sleep.

“You wore her out today.”

“Me? This was your idea Scully.” Shifting so he was pressed against her back, Mulder tentatively placed a hand on Scully’s hip; his touch burning through her pjs as he gently caressed the patch of cloth. “A very good idea I might add. I can’t thank you guys enough for today.”

His touch was maddening; his voice teasing her skin. It would be so easy, Scully thought, to roll over and close the distance between them, to press her body against his as their lips met. Instead she remained still, her eyes still trained on her daughter, though her mind was elsewhere. “You’re welcome,” she replied somewhat shakily. He’d got to her and he knew it. “Ashley wanted to do something for you, hence the surprise.”

“It’s the best surprise I’ve ever had.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We had a good day.”

“You know…I can’t believe Ashley’s still the same little girl I met that night Tooms broke into your apartment. She’s grown so much.”

“I try not to think about that night,” Scully admitted. “Remember when she used to make you search her room top to bottom with a flashlight before she’d even crawl into bed?” She felt him smile against her; his cheek now pressing against hers.

“I do. How about that time when she was six and she insisted on wearing your make-up and high heels around the house?”

“She’d still be doing that if I hadn’t told her it was illegal for girls under 16 to wear make-up,” Scully replied, and they both laughed.

“She’ll never need make-up,” Mulder replied, sobering. “She’s growing up to be such a beautiful young lady. And every day she looks more and more like you.”

The tension in the room was at an all-time high as Scully rolled onto her back, looking up at her
partner. Though it was dark in the room, she could still see the look in his eyes. It was the same
look he gave her that night at her apartment after they’d argued; the night he’d kissed her for the
first time. He wanted her, she realised with a shiver. He was going to kiss her again, and this time it
had nothing to do with any arguments or near-death experiences. He was going to kiss her purely
because he wanted to, and she wasn’t going to push him away. It was hard to say who moved first,
Mulder leant down as Scully reached up for him and their lips met tenderly. It was so familiar,
Scully thought, and yet so strange at the same time. She thought she knew almost everything there
was to know about Fox Mulder, but she was still learning the taste of him, the feel of his tongue
against her lips, seeking entrance, his hands caressing her hips as they deepened their kiss. Mulder
settled himself in the vee of her thighs as Scully wound her arms around his neck, pulling him in
closer towards her. He was hot and hard against her and while part of Scully’s mind registered that
Ashley was sleeping just meters away, the other part didn’t want to stop. She couldn’t stop. As he
broke away to catch his breath, Mulder turned his attention to his partner’s neck, trailing kisses up
towards her jaw. And that was when she felt it; the familiar trickle of blood. As soon as she
realized exactly what was happening. Scully pushed Mulder off of her and scrambled to get out of
bed to race to the bathroom. Confused, Mulder sat up and flicked on the lamp, and that was when
he spotted it. Two specks of blood had soiled the white comforter. A nosebleed. He got to his feet
and followed Scully to the bathroom, trying the door; relieved to find it unlocked. She wasn’t
completely shutting him out. As he opened the door he noticed his partner by the sink, washing her
face. The nosebleed seemed to have stopped, thankfully, Mulder noticed. The last thing he wanted
was for her to pass out again like she did that time at her apartment. “Are you ok?” He asked,
meeting her gaze in the mirror.
Scully nodded gently, her eyes full of regret. Washing her face one more time, she turned off the
taps and grabbed a hand towel to her right, pressing it just underneath her nose. “Sorry,” was her
response.
“There’s no need to apologise. Are you sure you’re ok?”
“I’m fine.” She smiled a reassuring smile back at him, before turning to face him. “It was just a
nosebleed Mulder. It’s ok.”
It wasn’t ok, thought Mulder, but he said nothing, instead watching as she smoothed down her pjs
nervously. He knew exactly what she was going to say; he’d been expecting it ever since he kissed
her just minutes ago. Of course she didn’t want to take things further with him; he was an idiot to
even attempt the thought. He’d caused her nothing but pain in the time he’d known her; a fact that
had been reinforced just now when she’d pushed him away to deal with her nosebleed. Her
nosebleed caused by her cancer which was given to her because of him. On top of all that, there
was the fact that her daughter was sleeping yards away from where they’d been playing tonsil
hockey – now wasn’t the time. “I should apologise for my actions Scully.” For a moment he
thought he saw a flash of disappointment cross her face, but he knew he must have imagined it.
Just wishful thinking, he told himself.
“No you shouldn’t Mulder -”
“I overstepped the mark. I shouldn’t have done that, I mean, Ashley –“
“I know,” she replied, glancing down at her bare feet. She tried not to let her regret show. Of
course he didn’t want her, she thought. She was dying – damaged goods. She was too skinny, too
pale, her hair too coarse; she felt ugly. He wasn’t responding to her because he was attracted to her;
it was just a normal reaction to being in close proximity to a woman. The last thing Mulder wanted
was to get involved with her now – it would be too complicated after all; she could be dead in a
matter of months. “Listen Mulder, I’m tired,” she added, hoping she sounded convincing. “Let’s
get some sleep.” As she moved past him and headed back out into the bedroom, she was relieved to see that Ashley had shifted over in the bed. Wordlessly she pulled back the comforter and climbed in.

“Scully,” said Mulder regretfully, pulling the door to the bathroom to. She didn’t want him; she didn’t even seem to want to look at him, and now she was distancing herself from him. He’d ruined everything between them. He shouldn’t have kissed her. As though reading his thoughts, Scully reached out and took his hand in hers, squeezing it firmly. “It’s ok Mulder.” He could see the outline of her smile in the darkness, and this time it was genuine. “We’re going to be ok.”

For once he believed her.
Scully pulled up the car outside of her mother’s house, and hesitated before killing the engine. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face her daughter in the passenger seat, and noticed that Ashley looked tired, not to mention scared. Not that she could blame her. Barely an hour before, Scully had woken the youngster from a deep sleep, dressed her in her dressing gown, coat and shoes and escorted her out to the car, where she’d informed her that she was going to stay with her Grandma for a few days. Something had come up at work, she’d told Ashley, and it wasn’t a complete lie. Earlier that evening, after tucking Ashley into bed, Scully had retired to her own bedroom to find Mulder sitting in the darkness. It was then he’d informed her there was a dead man in his apartment; a man who’d worked for the military and had been watching him. Mulder had a plan, he’d told her; it was a lie to find the truth. And the truth could give them the answers they were looking for; answers about Scully’s cancer. For that reason, she had to say yes.

And so, realising what she was going to have to do the next morning, Scully decided to take Ashley to her mom’s, wanting her out of the way when the news came of Mulder’s apparent suicide. The last thing the little girl needed was to think that her hero was dead – there was no way Scully could put Ashley through that.

“I don’t want to stay at Grandma’s,” Ashley sulked, narrowing her eyes at her mom. She was tired, having been rudely awoken, and so it was understandable that she was in a bad mood. Scully just wished she was a bit more co-operative.

“It’s just for a few days,” answered Scully, unbuckling her seatbelt, before leaning over to do the same for Ashley. I’ll be back to collect you in no time.”

“I want to come with you.”

“But you and Grandma always have fun together.”

“I want you,” Ashley pleaded, making Scully feel like the worst parent ever.

“Uncle Bill and Aunt Tara are in town too. That’ll be fun. You like spending time with them.”

“I hate them.”

“No you don’t. And don’t use the word “hate” Ashley, especially when you don’t mean it.”

“Uncle Bill sucks.”

“And don’t,” Scully stressed. “Use that word please.”

“Please can I come with you?”

“Sweetheart, I wish you could, but I have important work I need to do.” She felt awful for essentially dumping her daughter on her mom, but Scully couldn’t risk Ashley getting caught up in this lie she and Mulder were planning. “You love Aunt Tara.”

“No I don’t.”

“Ashley…” Scully took a deep breath, willing herself not to get angry. The last thing she wanted was to part with her daughter on bad terms. “Baby, please can you do this for me? I promise that as soon as I come back for you, I’ll make it up to you. We can do whatever you like, I promise. Just…”
just be a good girl for Grandma over the next few days. Please?"

The little girl sniffed, and nodded reluctantly. “Ok, but can you hurry back?”

Huffing out a laugh, Scully nodded, then pulled her daughter in for a hug. “Of course I can.” She embraced Ashley tightly, kissing the top of her head. “I love you sweetheart, so very very much.”

“I love you too. Hurry back.”

“I will. I’ll see you very soon.” Little did Scully know that the next time they’d see one another, she’d be fighting for her life.

Ashley wandered out of the bedroom that she had when she stayed at her grandma’s and headed towards the stairs. Since she’d gotten back from school that afternoon she’d spent time doing her reading homework and learning her times tables; pausing for dinner in between. There was just a little spelling to go before bedtime, but she was confident she was already prepared enough. Her new teacher, Mr Harris, had already told her mom that she was top of her class for spelling, so there was no need to worry. Still, she told herself, her mom would want her to keep practicing, and she would do anything to make her mom happy. So as she began descending the stairs in search of her grandma, she stopped short as she heard Maggie talking with Bill. He’d been granted leave and so was in town with his wife Tara, who at that very moment was catching up with an old school friend who lived not far from Baltimore. Ashley loved her Uncle Bill and enjoyed spending time with him the few times she saw him each year, but she couldn’t help but miss her mom. She’d even tried calling Scully earlier that evening; leaving a message on her cell, and had also dialled Mulder’s number, just wanting to hear a voice of reassurance. But he didn’t pick up; his cell immediately going to voicemail, and so Ashley hung up and willed herself not to cry. She thought back to the previous night when her mom had dropped her off at her grandma’s house. Scully had given her a huge hug right before she left, assuring her that whatever happened, she loved her and would see her soon. Though Ashley didn’t quite understand what her mom meant, she had felt safe within her arms, and wished Scully was around to give her a hug at that moment.

“…She doesn’t say. You know what Dana’s like.”

As Ashley heard the mention of her mom’s name, she took a seat on the step and listened. Now wasn’t the time to interrupt their conversation.

“But surely she’s said something to you. I mean she’s not getting any better mom.”

Ashley flinched. She knew her mom was dying; she’d known it ever since Megan had told her that people with tumors die. Her mom hadn’t said anything directly, but she could see it in her eye and in the way she hugged her goodbye each time, as though she would never see her again. Still, Ashley’s friend Dylan’s aunt had been told she was dying well over a year ago, and she was alive. That gave Ashley hope that her mom would still be around for years to come.

“She’s spoken about it a little bit, but more about what happens after rather than how she’s feeling.”

“Yeah…” Bill let out a deep breath. “Tara and I were very surprised to get that phone call from Dana.”

“It makes sense,” replied Maggie. “You and Tara have always said you wanted children, and I know Dana liked the idea of Ashley growing up surrounded a big family. She trusts you, and you
both love Ashley. You were her obvious choice.”

“It’ll be tough at first.”

“Of course it will. Ashley will have just lost her mother.”

Frowning, Ashley scooted down a step, trying to bring herself closer to the voices without being noticed. She had no idea what they were talking about, or what would be tough.

“At least she’s been to San Diego a few times; she’s used to Tara and I.”

“She’s a bubbly girl; she’ll make friends easily.”

“And what about you mom?”

There was a pause before Maggie answered. “What about me?”

“Will you stay here after...after it happens? You know you’re more than welcome to come out to California with us.”

“I haven’t quite made my mind up. This is my home, my life...but...” she sighed, her voice breaking. “It’s going to be tough enough for Ashley to lose her mother, let alone leaving her friends moving to the other side of the country. And to be honest, I don’t want to miss out on seeing my granddaughter.”

Ashley sat rooted to the spot, letting her grandma’s words sink in. She was going to have to go and live with Uncle Bill once her mom died, she realized. She would have to move schools, leave her friends and move across the country. Plus, Bill hadn’t mentioned Queequeg. Was she going to lose her dog too? She thought that if her mom ever died, she’d live with Mulder; after all, she loved him and he loved her, and he’d promised to look out for her. Obviously it wasn’t the case. Feeling her eyes sting with tears, Ashley got to her feet and ran back upstairs, not caring whether her grandma noticed. She hated her at that very moment. She hated everyone – Uncle Bill for living in stupid San Diego, her grandma for letting him take her away, and especially her mom for dying. It was all her fault. Racing into her bedroom, she grabbed hold of her school bag, tipped out her books and the apple she’d forgotten to eat at lunch time, and started cramming in the few clothes she kept at grandma’s. She was going to run away; they couldn’t make her live with Uncle Bill. And as Ashley sat down to put on her shoes, the phone rang; a call that was about to change her life and take her a step closer to California.
Chapter 44

Mulder burst through the door, storming along the corridor looking for someone – anyone – who could help him find his partner. He’d received word that she’d been rushed to the hospital the night before; that she’d fainted during her important meeting, and so he’d immediately risen from the dead to be by her side. Since the Gunmen had told him that the vial he’d found was no more than ionized water, he realized that this could be it; that he’d lose his partner for ever. And then, just a short while later, after Byers told him that they’d discovered Scully had been admitted to Trinity Hospital, it looked as though he was going to lose her sooner rather than later.

“Can you help me?” he asked a passing nurse. “I’m looking for a woman…” Clearly busy, the nurse paid him no attention and walked away, so he continued towards the desk. “Excuse me, I’m looking for a Dana Scully who was brought into…” This time the lady in front of him, busy on the phone, held her hand up for him to be quiet. He wanted to smash the phone to pieces, but he knew that wouldn’t get him anywhere. Frustrated, Mulder headed towards another station.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a patient…” The nurse took no notice. “Is there an admitting nurse here?” When he didn’t get an answer, Mulder raised his voice. “Look! Can someone help me here?”

Thankfully he saw an intern walking towards him. Finally he might get answers.

“Look, sir,” the man began. “You’re going to have to calm down.”

“I will calm down when someone gives me a reason to calm down. Now I’m looking for a patient who was admitted to the ER!”

“Dana Scully.” It appeared Mulder hadn’t been as quiet as he first thought.

“Yes.”

“I heard you the first time.”

He didn’t have time for this. “Well, where is she?”

“I have her in the ICU.”

“Where is that?”

“You have to tell me who you are first.”

“Where – “

“Agent Mulder.”

AD Skinner. Mulder turned to face his superior who was being trailed by two other men as he headed towards him. He hadn’t come from the entrance, so Mulder knew he’d had to have come from the ICU. He walked past his boss, who turned to walk with him. “Where are you going?”

“ICU.”

“You’re looking pretty good for a dead man.”

“I’m only half dead.” It was true, the other part of him was hoping and wishing that somehow
Scully would get through this. Without her in his life, he didn’t know how he’d cope.

“You have a lot to answer for Agent Mulder!” Skinner called in his wake as Mulder headed through the door towards the ICU. He didn’t care about Skinner or the amount of trouble he was in. The only thing he worried about was the person fighting for her life in the ICU. Skinner followed him, though Mulder noticed he’d left his goons behind, and as he walked along the corridor, he suddenly caught sight of a familiar face. Scully. It reminded him of the time when she was returned from her abduction; how she was attached to all kinds of monitors which were helping to keep her alive. It was tough enough seeing it then but now…after everything they’d been through over the past few years…after the things they’d seen and done and shared….it was unbearable. The sight of her clinging onto life by a thread was enough to stop Mulder in his tracks and take his breath away, nearly sending him crashing to his knees. He double over, wishing he could wake up from this awful nightmare.

“What happened to her?”

“She went into hypovolemic shock.”

“Due to what?” Skinner didn’t answer, and Mulder was getting sick and tired of people ignoring him. “Due to what?!”

“She’s dying! Let’s go.” As Skinner reached to grab hold of Mulder’s arm, he shook him off.

“Let go of me!”

“There’s nothing you can do!”

Unwilling to leave his partner, Mulder punched at his superior as they struggled. “Get the hell off of me!” Skinner dodged his punch and grabbed hold of his jacket by the lapels.

“Don’t do this! Don’t!”

And suddenly Mulder realized that Skinner was right. There was nothing he could do; not anymore. He was losing Scully. Fast.

Once Mulder got it through his head that punching his boss in the face would only make a bad situation worse, dragging him out of the ICU was relatively easy. He knew Skinner was going to have some harsh words for him, and he was fully prepared to take them with the knowledge that he was doing everything he could to fight for the woman who could quite possibly give her life for his cause. But just as Skinner was about to turn to him and tear him a new one, a small cry came from around the corner. For Mulder, it was a familiar cry, and nothing could keep him from going to it. There sat Ashley on a small couch outside of the unit, hair messy and her eyes puffy and red. She was crying harder than Mulder had ever seen her cry before. And she was all alone.

“Ashley?” he knew she knew who was talking to her at that moment. The little girl threw her hands in front of her face and started to sob even more heavily, tears escaping from the edges of her fingers.

Even though just a moment before, they had been at each other’s’ throats, Skinner understood when Mulder looked at him with pleading eyes. The older man nodded his head toward the lobby, indicating he would be waiting there, and that there was no way they weren’t going to deal with his actions. And Mulder was willing to agree to anything; to face anything, even the Devil himself, if it meant being able to be there for Ashley right at that moment. Skinner turned on his heel and left.
“Ash,” Mulder said softly, sitting down on the couch next to her and putting his arm around her heaving shoulder. At first she stiffened, but she was crying too much to resist as Mulder pulled her in closer. Eventually, he held her in his lap, cradling her, rocking back and forth almost imperceptibly and whispering into her ear as he brushed back the hair from her face. Her tears and snot got on the front of his shirt, but it was a small price to pay.

“Where’s Grandma?” Mulder wanted to know how Ashley even got there in the first place, not to mention why she was completely alone not 30 yards where everyone believed her mother lay dying. He didn’t even realize Maggie was at the hospital, but she must have been speaking to Scully’s doctor or something.

It took a few minutes for the youngster to find her voice, and when she did, she answered in amongst hiccups, “I snuck away.”

“Ash, we’ve told you about that before.”

“I d-don’t care. I don’t want to see Grandma anymore.”

“Why baby? What happened?” he was sure there was more to the story.

“I don’t want to live with Uncle Bill and Aunt Tara!”

Her words had the effect of shutting Mulder’s body down. His heart stopped, his hands stopped, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think… it was more than feeling like a bullet was ripping through him, Mulder believed his body was truly preparing him to die. Scully’s bastard brother wanted to take Ashley away from him and everything she had ever known. And right after Mulder was shocked, he was angry. “Who said anything about living with Uncle Bill?” Mulder wanted to make sure he had as many of the facts as he could ascertain from an almost nine year-old.

“When I was supposed to be doing homework last night, I heard Grandma and Uncle Bill talking about how I am gonna have to live with him when Mommy dies.”

Mulder was officially seeing red. He couldn’t do that. Scully would never allow it. Once he had held out hope that Maggie would be a voice of reason on the family side of things, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen if she would let Bill rip Ashley away from everything and take her 2,000 miles away. And for what? Bill didn’t have any children of his own. Yes, he was married, but he and his wife had absolutely no idea how to raise a child. They didn’t even know Ashley, he convinced himself. He knew for a fact that Bill saw Ashley a handful of times a year at the most, and he had a busy job in the Navy. Bill and his wife were the last people that needed to take Ashley…

“I don’t want Mommy to die,” Mulder’s inner rage was interrupted by Ashley’s cries escalating once more. Not only was she on the verge of hyperventilating, she was clutching his shirt like it was the only thing keeping her with him. Like he was the only thing keeping her from living with her uncle in California. In that moment, Mulder felt so selfish. He had been focused on what Ashley being taken away would mean to him. He’d only thought about how his life would go on with no Scully and no Ashley. Right before him, though, a scared little girl had, in the past 24 hours, learned that not only was her mother dying, once she did die she was going to lose the only life she’d ever known. And that she would have to face the rest of her life, a life she had no control over, without her mom. Her mommy. Mulder knew he could never comprehend the full extent of the bond Ashley and Scully shared. Scully was all that Ashley ever had. And Ashley was the sun that shone in Scully’s sky. No matter what losing either or both of them was going to do to Mulder,
he could never feel what his two girls were feeling right then.

So he stopped trying.

“I know sweetheart. I know,” he cooed to Ashley, clutching her tight to his chest. There were no words for what she was going through. And despite his years of professional training, there was nothing Mulder could say that he felt would be appropriate right then. He and Ashley sat on that couch for no less than ten minutes together before out of the corner of his eye, Mulder saw a relieved Mrs. Scully emerge from behind the doors separating the ICU from the corridor, the doors he had just been dragged out of. They gave each other a silent nod, and Mrs. Scully disappeared once again without Ashley ever knowing she was there. Five minutes after that, Ashley started sputtering like a car running out of gas. The little whimpers she had been making turned into coughs and more hiccups. It was obvious she was having a problem breathing, so Mulder reluctantly pulled her away and turned her to face him.

“Try taking a deep breath,” he instructed her. She tried, but it just resulted in more coughing. Mulder diligently brushed the endless tears that were coming from the corners of her eyes away with his thumbs, waiting for her to regain control.

“It’s okay to be sad,” Mulder stated once he felt she was ready. “Look at me, I’m sad too.” He was. It was hard to hold Ashley while she was crying and think about all that was happening to her and her mom without losing it. Ashley just nodded and continued to deep breathe. It was all she could do. “But, little lady, I promise you that no matter what happens… we will always be connected,” he intertwined their fingers. “I will always be a part of your life.”

“I want to live with you,” Ashley stated so seriously that it almost made Mulder laugh. He’d do anything to have her. But things didn’t work like that. Not in real life.

“You can’t honey. I’m sorry.”

Ashley burst into tears once more. And once more, Mulder gathered her against him, resting her head on his shoulder. A few minutes later, Mulder started, “You know, your mommy is still fighting really really hard to get better. And your uncles and Grandma and I are all fighting along with her. We have to have hope Ash.”

“Emma told me that if I imagine Mommy getting better, she would feel better.”

A smile formed on Mulder’s lips. He’d always liked Ashley’s babysitter. “Emma is absolutely right. And you know what? Maybe you could teach Mommy to imagine that too,” Mulder told her. It was obvious Scully had started to give up hope for her own recovery, like pretty much every member of her family. It hurt Mulder to see that happening because he wasn’t, and Ashley certainly wasn’t, giving up hope. This thing couldn’t kill her. Not when she had so much to live for.

“Can I see Mommy now? Earlier, the people behind those doors told me I needed to stay out of the room.”

What a wonderful way to handle a child, Mulder thought to himself, shaking his head. Still, though, from what he had seen, Scully was in pretty bad shape, and letting Ashley see her in that state may do more harm than good.

“I don’t think now is a good time. Grandma will come out and let us know when we can see her.”

Ashley settled her cheek back down on Mulder’s shoulder, and it was as if Mulder could feel her
close her eyes. She was still his little girl at that moment. The one who first made him read Snow White all those years ago after Eugene Tooms had decided to wake everybody up.

“Go to sleep baby. Just a quick nap.”

“Love you Mulder.”

He almost began crying again at that moment thinking of a world where he would never hear those words again.

“Love you pumpkin.”
Mulder entered Scully’s room, relieved to find her looking better than the last time he’d seen her, though not by much. At least she was conscious, he thought to himself, as her eyes opened wide in horror. “Mulder, what are you doing here?” It was no wonder she was surprised; he was supposed to be playing dead.

“I heard you were being moved out of the ICU, that you were feeling better.” Better for a dying woman anyway.

“Mulder,” answered Scully, clearly more concerned for her partner’s safety than her own health. “Somebody’s going to see you here.”

“It’s ok.” Taking hold of Scully’s hand, Mulder leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. He just needed to reassure himself that for now she was ok; that she was still alive. “I’m officially among the undead.”

“What happened?”

“I did not come here to talk about that.” It was the last thing he cared about. The most important thing to him was the health of his partner, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“Mulder, don’t try and protect me. I need to know.”

Relenting somewhat, Mulder answered. “Well there’s not much to talk about anyway. I’m going to testify to everything I know in front of the FBI Assembly. The conspiracy, the men behind it, what I believe is its purpose.”

“Did you find out who in the FBI is involved?”

“No, but that doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes it does.” And that was why he loved her. Even when she was staring death straight in the eye, she was still more concerned about him.

“Hey Scully, how about those Yankees, huh?”

She ignored him. “Mulder, Skinner has evidence against you. He knows that you killed the man they found in your apartment.”

“Yeah, Skinner’s withholding it.”

“Mulder, Skinner’s dirty. He’s not your friend. I’m almost certain that he’s the man inside on this.”

Mulder wasn’t quite sure how she reached that decision, but she was adamant. “I don’t believe that.”

“If you testify, he will use it to ruin you.”

Cupping her face in a bid to reassure her, Mulder replied. “No, not Skinner.”

“He’s been in a position to know everything from the beginning; everything that we’ve done over the past four years.”
“But if I don’t testify now, they’ll start to bury the truth.”

“Well then, you have to lay it on me. You have to tell them that I was the one who killed that man.”

That was his Scully – utterly selfless. She’d once told him that she wouldn’t put herself on the line for anybody but him, and she meant it. Smiling and resisting the urge to kiss her, he shook his head. “I can… I can’t do that.”

“Yes you can Mulder. If I can save you, let me. Let me at least give some meaning to what’s happened to me.”

Before he could argue, the door to Scully’s room opened and in walked Maggie Scully, followed by a younger man. Instantly recognizing Scully’s coloring, Mulder realized that he was Bill Scully, the man who was going to take Ashley away from him if – when – the worst finally happened. For that reason only, Mulder took an instant dislike to the man, but managed not to show it. He needed to stay on the right side of Bill to try and keep in contact with Ashley in the future, and he was determined to do anything to see her – he’d promised her that just a few hours ago. He was somewhat disappointed not to see Ashley arriving with them, but considering her lack of sleep the previous night, she was no doubt resting at Emma’s.

“Dana?” Maggie called, wondering whether they’d interrupted something.

“Hi Mom.”

“Hi Mrs Scully,” Mulder added politely.

“I hope I’m not interrupting…”

It was only right that Scully had her family around her in her time of need. “No, I was just on my way out.” Kissing Scully on the cheek, Mulder rose from the bed and headed out of the door, pausing to greet Bill while Maggie moved to be beside her daughter. “Hi, I’m Fox Mulder, I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

“Bill Scully.”

The shook hands politely, and Mulder tried not to flinch when Bill squeezed a little too tightly. He could handle him. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

“Mr Mulder?”

“Yeah?”

“I know something about you.” Bill spoke in a low voice, out of the earshot of his mom and sister. “About what Dana and Ashley have been through with you, so let’s leave the work away from here ok? Let her die with dignity.”

Too stunned to answer, Mulder continued out of Scully’s room, aware that his promise to Ashley was likely to be one he couldn’t keep.

Xxxxxxx

Mulder sat out in the corridor, almost keeping guard on Scully’s room, but the truth was, he didn’t feel welcome in her room. She was with her family; with Bill, Maggie and Ashley, who’d finished school for the day, and he didn’t think he was Mr Popular after persuading Scully to go ahead and
insert the microchip into her body. He knew Bill and Maggie thought it was a crazy idea, but if there was just a slight chance that it could help save her, then it was worth doing. As the door opened and Bill stepped out into the corridor, Mulder braced himself for another jibe about the chip. He thought he was safe as Bill passed him, but then the man paused as though he’d forgotten something, before turning to face him. “You really believe this crap don’t you?”

“Yes I do,” replied Mulder.

“You see,” Bill retreated to stand in front of Mulder. “She’s your big defender, but I think the truth is, she just doesn’t want to disappoint you.”

“If it works, I don’t care what you think she thinks.”

Bill sneered at him. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that Mr Mulder?”

“Why is that, because I don’t think the way you think? Because I won’t just sit passively back and watch the family tragedy unfold?”

“You’re the reason for it.” His words burned. It was the truth after all. And I’ve already lost one sister to this quest you’re on, now I’m losing another. Ashley is losing her mother.” Bill paused as he swallowed back tears. “Has it been worth it? To you, I mean, have you found what you’ve been looking for?”

“No,” Mulder replied sadly.

“No.” Bill repeated, nodding to himself. “You know how that makes me feel?”

“In a way, I think I do. I lost someone very close to me. I lost a sister, I lost my father, all because of this thing I’m looking for.”

“What’s that? Little green aliens?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Little green aliens.”

Bill sneered at him. “You’re nothing but bad news for my sister and her little girl. When Dana’s gone, things will be different.” Mulder eyed Bill defiantly, refusing to back down, though the man’s words had cut him deep. It seemed he had already given up on Scully, but Mulder hadn’t. He couldn’t; he needed her to survive.

“Scully’s a fighter, and with this chip –“

“She’s dying and you know it. Nothing can help her now, not even that damned chip of yours. Now the main thing is for the family to pull together to help Ashley. And you’re not family.”

*I’m more than family to Ashley*, Mulder thought, but he said nothing, instead taking the blows that Bill dealt.

“The sooner that little girl gets away from you, the better.”

“Are you really going to pull her away from everything she’s ever known? Separate her from her Grandma, from –“

“This was Dana’s choice Mr Mulder. It’s what she wants. So if you’re asking me whether or not I’m taking her away from you, then yes I am, because that’s what Dana wants. You’ve brought nothing but heartache to this family, and I’m going to make sure you’re not around to kill of any
more of the people that I love. You’re one sorry son of a bitch. Not a whole lot more to say.” With that he walked off, his words twisting into Mulder’s heart like a knife.

Mulder crept into Scully’s room, careful not to make a sound. It was late and his partner was fast asleep, but he needed to see her, needed to check she was breathing, to reassure himself. The chip had yet to make any impact on her health, and it seemed like it wasn’t going to either. He was going to lose her and it was his fault. If she hadn’t gotten involved with his quest to find his sister – his sister who didn’t want anything to do with him – she’d have been living a happy life with Ashley far away from him. Maybe she’d even be married and have a few more kids. And she’d be healthy. Coming to stand next to Scully, Mulder felt his legs buckle and he knelt down on the floor as he felt the tears begin to fall. He couldn’t lose her, but then again it was no longer down to him. Gently touching Scully’s arm, he rested his head on the bed and wept.

“Mulder?”

Mulder’s head shot up as he heard his partner’s voice. She was supposed to be asleep. “Hey.” He forced a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes, though his tear tracks gave him away.

“What’s wrong?” Scully looked horrified to find her partner by her bedside in tears. “Mulder, has something happened?” He shook his head. “Is it Ashley?”

“No, no Ashley’s fine,” he answered hurriedly, annoyed at himself for worrying her. “Everything’s fine. I didn’t mean to wake you.” Before he could react, Scully rolled over onto her side and reached out, lifting her hand to gently wipe away his tears.

“Why are you crying Mulder?” The tenderness in her voice made him tear up once more.

“I’m not crying. I’ve got something in my eye,” he tried joking but Scully shook her head.

“Don’t Mulder. Tell me what’s wrong.”

He shrugged. “I just –“

“Mulder –“

Aware he wasn’t going to be able to evade her questioning, Mulder realised he had no choice but to tell his partner the truth. “I’ve failed Scully.”

“What?”

“I’ve failed you. I can’t help you and I just…I don’t want you to die.” At his admission, fresh tears began to fall and Mulder realised with horror that Scully was now crying too.

“Oh Mulder, you haven’t failed me,” she replied sadly. “You’ve helped me so much –“

Mulder shook his head. “A cure, I –“

“What will be will be.” Reaching out, Scully took hold of his hand and tugged, ushering him up off of the floor and onto the bed. Mulder went willingly and before he knew it, she had enveloped him in her arms, drawing him down so he was stretched out beside her, his head resting on her chest. He took comfort in the fact her heartbeat was strong. She was alive. For now. And as Scully gently ran her hand through Mulder’s hair, comforting him, he closed his eyes in regret. She was the one lying in a hospital bed, he should have been the one looking after her. After all, if it wasn’t for him,
she’d be living a happy and healthy life rather than facing her imminent death. Ashley wouldn’t be about to lose her mom and face life as an orphan living on the other side of the country. “Sssh,” she soothed him. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“If you hadn’t joined the X Files –“

“My life would have been much duller,” she replied, smiling. “Mulder, I told you once that I wouldn’t change a day and I stand by that. I wouldn’t. I’m so grateful to you for everything you’ve done for me and for Ashley.” She squeezed him tightly as her voice broke, emotion creeping in. “You’ve been so good to us.”

“Scully –“

“Promise me something. Please.”

Lifting his head up from her chest, Mulder looked Scully straight in the eye. Whatever she was about to say, she was deadly serious. He nodded. “Promise me that when I’m gone –“

“Scully –“ The last thing Mulder wanted was to think about life without his partner. Life without Scully also meant life without Ashley. He was going to lose the two people his life revolved around. His family.

“Promise me,” she continued, more firmly this time. “That when I’m gone, you’ll be there for Ashley. She’s already been through so much, and she thinks the world of you. I know it’s a lot to ask of you, but I don’t know what she’ll do if she loses you.” But she was going to lose him, Mulder thought sadly. There was no way Bill would let him see her; he’d already made that clear. “She’s going to live with my brother,” Scully continued. “It was the only option. But she still needs you Mulder. She needs you to be there for her and build forts with her and take her to the Yankees games and…” she let out a sob. “You need to make sure she brushes her teeth twice a day, because sometimes she says she’s done it and she hasn’t, and the last thing she’ll want when she’s a teenager is a brace.” Mulder pressed his lips to his partner’s cheek, kissing away her tears, as he made a silent promise to her that he’d do anything he could to watch Ashley grow up. He’d move heaven and earth for his partner and her daughter – he could take on Bill Scully. “I just don’t want her to lose you.”

“She won’t lose me Scully,” Mulder replied as his partner’s tears soon developed into sobs. He couldn’t help but cry along with her. “I promise I’ll be there for her. She won’t ever want for anything.” Except for her mom, he wanted to add. His hope for Ashley was that Bill and Tara would give her the life she deserved. “But you have to promise me something.”

“What?” She looked scared almost, as though she was fearful of what he might have to say. Nodding, Scully waited for him to speak.

“Promise me that you won’t give up.” He swallowed hard. “I need you to keep fighting this. I can’t do this without you.” Scully opened her mouth to interrupt, but Mulder silenced her with a chaste kiss to her temple. “Promise me you won’t give up.”

“I promise,” Scully answered shakily. Of course Mulder knew she wouldn’t give up without a fight – she had one good reason to keep fighting, and that reason was back at Maggie’s house, hopefully sleeping peacefully.

“We’ll get through this Scully,” Mulder whispered to his partner, hoping he sounded more believable than he felt. As he pulled her tightly into his embrace, he pressed his lips to Scully’s forehead once more, determined to do everything in his power to save her.
Mulder sat outside of Scully’s waiting room, processing the information. It had been a long and emotional few days, and now it was finally coming to an end. Scully was in remission. The chip or Scully’s prayers had worked, and she was going to be ok. Ashley wasn’t going to go and live with Bill, and she was going to be able to enjoy life with her mom once again. Everything was ok. Except here he was, separated from his partner and her daughter as they celebrated her new lease of life with their family. He wasn’t welcome there, that he knew, not as long as Bill Scully was around. Bill didn’t want him in his sister’s life, and he had a valid reason, Mulder supposed. He was bad news, for her and for Ashley, and the two of them had suffered unduly because of him. But yet he still couldn’t bring himself to leave; he loved the two of them too much.

Just as he was wallowing in his own pity, Mulder noticed Skinner walking down the corridor towards him. His superior took a seat next to him and then spoke. “The Smoking Man’s dead.”

“How?”

“Shot through his window.” Skinner pulled out a familiar photo to Mulder – one of him and Samantha before she was taken. The picture was streaked in blood. “Forensics found it at the scene. We’re assuming it’s his blood.”

“Assuming?”

“Well, no body was found but there was too much blood loss for anyone to have survived.” Mulder wasn’t quite so sure. “This afternoon when you named Blevins…how did you know?”

“I didn’t. I just guessed.”

“Well it was a hell of a guess,” Skinner replied, clearly impressed. “Blevins had been on payroll for four years to a biotechnology company called Roush, which is somehow connected to all this.”

“I’m sure whatever connections there were, they’re being erased right now.”

“They’re cleaning up, taking everything away.”

“Not everything.” Mulder grinned. “Scully’s cancer’s gone into remission.”

“That’s unbelievable news.”

“It’s the best news I could have ever heard.” He still couldn’t believe it. Scully was fine, she was ok. Her cancer was now a thing of the past. Ashley still had a mom and wouldn’t be forced to move to San Diego.

“What turned it around?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think we’ll ever know.” The important thing was that she was alive.

“Can I see her?”

“Yeah, she’s in there with her family right now, but I’m sure she’d love to see you.” As Skinner headed off to visit Scully, Mulder looked down at the photo he held, tears threatening his eyes. Now that the Smoking Man was dead, he’d never get answers, and the likelihood was he’d never see his sister again. Scully was alive but no doubt if Bill had anything to do with it, she’d pack up and move as far away from Mulder as possible. Feeling the tears spill over, Mulder startled in his seat as he heard the familiar voice.
“Mulder!”

The man in question looked up just as Ashley ran out of her mom’s hospital room. Immediately he lifted his free hand and wiped away his tears, which didn’t go unnoticed by the youngster. “What are you doing out here Ash?” he asked, clearly embarrassed at being caught crying.

“Mom wanted me to find you.” Coming to stand in front of him, Ashley looked down as her eyes caught sight of the photograph he was holding. “Who’s that?”

Following her gaze, Mulder hesitated before answering. “That’s me.”

Ashley’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? Can I see?”

Quickly wiping away the remnants of blood from the photograph, Mulder handed it over.

“Wow.” Her curious blue eyes looked between the photograph and the man sitting in front of her. “You were young.”

Mulder chuckled despite himself. “What do you mean? I’m still young.”

Ashley shook her head. “You’re older than me.”

“Everyone’s older than you Ash. You’re a baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” she answered defiantly, pouting. “I’m almost nine.” She thought for a moment. “You’re older than my mom too.”

“Maybe I am old then,” he relented.

Nodding in agreement, Ashley reached out and placed her hand on Mulder’s arm. “Why were you crying Mulder?” He knew she wouldn’t believe him if he tried to deny it – Ashley was no longer a baby, but an intelligent little girl and she could easily recognise bullshit. “Are you crying for her?” she asked, pointing to Samantha in the photograph.

“A little bit,” admitted Mulder.

“Who is she?”

“She’s my sister,” he answered. “That’s Samantha.”

“That’s Samantha?”

“It is.”

“She’s pretty. Has she come home?” she asked, remembering the conversation they’d had just over a year ago, when Mulder told her about his missing sister.

“Not yet.”

Ashley looked as though she was going to quiz him more, but thought better of it as she handed him back the photograph. “One day soon.”

“I hope so,” Mulder replied honestly. It was hard to believe that Ashley was now the same age that Samantha had been when she was abducted. Already she’d been through so much, and now that Scully’s cancer was in remission, Mulder was determined that nothing else was going to happen to Ashley or her mom. “You should go back in and see your mom.”
Ashley shook her head. “She sent me here to get you.”

Somehow Mulder doubted he’d be welcome in her hospital room with her family inside. “I’ll pop by and visit her later.”

“Is it because of Uncle Bill?”

“No, what makes you say that?”

She shrugged. “He argued with my mom earlier. I don’t know what a son of a bitch is, but mom told him to shut his damn mouth and so he did.” While part of Mulder felt guilty at causing an argument between brother and sister, he half wished he’d been a fly on the wall. As if reading his mind, Ashley smiled conspiratorially. “I’m glad I don’t have to live with him and Aunt Tara. Aunt Tara says that candy rots your teeth but mom says Aunt Tara needs to live a little.”

This time Mulder laughed genuinely. He loved this little girl stood before him more than anything. “Your mom has a good point. And speaking of your mom, I think she’s busy with lots of visitors right now, but I promise I’ll come back later and see her.”

“Are you going home?”

“I am.”

“Can I come with you?”

As much as he loved spending time with Ashley, he knew that Scully’s family would rather she stayed with them. Bill would have had a coronary at the thought of him taking care of the little girl. “Not today. Maybe another day.”

“Can I sit here with you instead? Please Mulder? I miss you.”

Relenting, Mulder nodded, smiling as he sat back in his chair. “Of course you can.” As Ashley took a seat next to him, Mulder wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her in towards him. “You ok Ash?”

She nodded. “I’m glad my mom’s feeling better.”

“Me too,” Mulder agreed. Glad was an understatement. “Me too.”
“You have to keep your eyes closed mom!” Ashley led Scully down the corridor towards their apartment, with Mulder following close behind, carrying his partner’s overnight bag. Scully had asked him if he’d mind picking her up from the hospital, wanting a break from her family, and Mulder had readily agreed, willing to do anything his partner asked of him. She’d insisted she wanted as little fuss as possible, and knew if Maggie dropped her back at her apartment, she’d probably end up staying for days on end, just to keep an eye on her daughter. Not that Mulder could blame Maggie, even if found it hard to believe that Scully had made a full recovery, and he was the one who believed in all kinds of extreme possibilities.

“No peeking,” Ashley added as they approached the door.

“I’m not peeking.” True to her word, Scully had her eyes firmly closed and waited patiently while Mulder rushed past them to unlock the door. He then stood back as Ashley, still clinging onto her mom’s hand like a lifesaver, took her inside. “Aaannnnnddd…open them….NOW!”

Scully opened her eyes as soon as she stepped into her apartment, and immediately caught sight of a giant banner hung up in the living room. “Wow!” The words “Welcome Home Mommy” had been painted on in pink and purple in Ashley’s familiar and careful scrawl, while flowers, little pink hearts and a giant sunshine decorated the canvas.

“I painted that.” Mulder announced proudly after closing the door behind him and pointing to the sunshine. “Ashley did the rest this morning.”

“It’s so pretty baby,” Scully kissed her daughter, who seemed reluctant to let go of her. “Thank you, I love it.”

“She wanted to do something special for you because –“

“Because I missed you,” Ashley interrupted. “And I was going to draw you a picture but Mulder said I could paint you something instead.”

“She painted me too.” Mulder held out the palm of his hand, still covered in faint blotches of pink paint. “Turns out that no matter how old she gets, she still likes to paint me when she gets bored.”

“Mulder got me first. He painted my face.”

“Well you painted my hair.” Sure enough the back of his head was sporting a similar color to his hand.

“Honestly, you guys are as bad as one another. Sometimes I don’t know who’s the adult and who’s the child.” Scully was smiling, trying to savor the moment. There had been so many times in recent months where she feared she’d never get to see this again, would never hear Mulder goading Ashley, or see her daughter smile again. Now she didn’t think she’d ever tire of it.

“Mulder’s the child mom.”

“Hey!” Mulder poked his tongue out at Ashley, who giggled.

“See what I mean?” Scully asked dryly as she reached for her overnight back. Mulder however didn’t relent.
“It’s ok Scully, I got this.”

“It’s fine Mulder.”

“I’ll put it in your room Scully.”

“Mulder, I’m not an invalid anymore. I can do things by myself. I’m not dying anymore.” Sobering, Mulder practically threw the bag at her. Realizing her words had hurt him, Scully rushed to apologize. “I’m sorry Mulder, I –”

“I know you’re fine Scully, I just wanted to –“

“Mom, we got you some presents too.” Clearly unaware of the tension in the room, Ashley interrupted. Breaking Mulder’s gaze, Scully turned her attention to her daughter.

“You did?”

The little girl nodded enthusiastically. “Uh huh.” She ran out into the kitchen, before returning carrying a vase – a heavy vase from the looks of it – filled with a huge bouquet of lilies. “I got you these! Well Mulder paid but he said it’s ok for me to say I got them.”

Softening, Scully gave Mulder an apologetic smile before kissing her daughter once more. “Thank you baby, that’s so sweet.” She rescued the vase from Ashley before the little girl could drop it, and placed it on the coffee table. “Thank you Mulder.”

“Mulder cooked for you too.”

“He cooked?”

At Scully’s surprised tone, Mulder chuckled. “Don’t sound so surprised, I have cooked for you before.”

“I know you have.”

“It’s ok though, you’re safe. Your mom sent round what seems to be a year’s supply of meals for your freezer.” Scully rolled her eyes. “She’s your mom Scully, she’s allowed to worry about you.” Particularly after all she’d been through in recent years, he thought, though he didn’t say it out loud. Scully had been through just as much – if not more so – and she even had to deal with members of her own family giving up on her when she was in hospital. Thankfully Bill had now returned to California, which meant Mulder was free to hang out with his partner without constantly looking over his shoulder. As long as she wanted him to of course.

“I know, that’s what moms do I guess.”

“Are you guys hungry now? I can heat something up before I head off?” The last thing he wanted to do was outstay his welcome, and he knew that Scully and Ashley needed some time alone.

Scully thought for a moment before shaking her head. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll heat up some food and you stay for dinner.” Before he could protest, Scully continued. “I insist. Actually we insist don’t we Ashley?”

“Yes!” the little girl exclaimed. “Please Mulder? Please stay.”

He was left with no choice but to accept Scully’s invitation. Not that he would have said no – he loved spending time with the two of them with the best of times, let alone when Scully had just
recovered from a life-threatening battle with cancer. It was almost too good to be true, and Mulder was determined to be on hand just to make sure she was ok.

“If you insist, how can I possibly argue?”

“Alright then, I’ll go unpack and make a start on dinner, while you keep this little monkey entertained.” Pressing a kiss to the top of Ashley’s head, Scully then took her overnight bag from Mulder and headed towards her bedroom. No sooner had she left, Ashley looked up at Mulder hopefully.

“Mulder, do you want to play Barbies?”

It was then he realized that Scully had the much better deal.

Well, she’s finally out.” Scully commented as she re-entered the living room, having just tucked Ashley up in bed. She noted that while she had been gone Mulder had poured her a glass of wine and grabbed himself a beer from the fridge, and she instantly put Eddie Van Blundht out of her mind. “It took her a while though, I think she didn’t want to give in and sleep in case she woke up and I was gone.”

Mulder could sympathize with Ashley; ever since Scully had returned from her abduction, he’d been afraid to look away for too long in case she disappeared again. Now she’d come back from the brink of death, he didn’t want to leave her side, though deep down he knew that it was because of him that she’d been made to suffer.

“She’s probably excited to have you home. She’s been looking forward to today.” *We both have* he added silently.

“So I can see,” Scully gestured to her welcome home banner as she took a seat next to him on the sofa and picked up her wine. “Thank you for doing this. For everything actually. You’ve gone above and beyond what a partner should do and I… I don’t think I’ll ever be able to tell you how grateful I am to you.”

“Scully…” Mulder took hold of her free hand and squeezed it. “…I think you know by now that it’s more than that. You’re more than just my partner.”

She nodded as she took a sip of wine. “I just…I want to thank you for sticking by me. I know that my family disagreed with you about the chip and I know they were willing to…willing to let me go but you fought for me and I’ll always be grateful to you for that. I may not always act like it, but I’m grateful for having you in my life.”

Finding it hard to speak, Mulder squeezed her hand once again. He should have been the one thanking her for coming into his life, for saving him countless times and for still speaking to him despite everything she’d been through. Before he could find the words to tell her his, Scully leaned over and pressed her lips to his in a tender kiss, which seemed to shock the both of them. Her shaking right hand lifted to frame his face, while his left hand sneaked out to rest on her hip. Just when Mulder thought about deepening the kiss, Scully pulled away, and he frowned when he realized she wasn’t smiling. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be sorry Scully, don’t ever be sorry.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for this.”
Mulder shook his head. “Don’t apologize. Besides, there’s no rush.” He was relieved when she smiled shyly. “Do you want me to go?”

“Will you stay?” She ducked her head, a blush forming on her cheeks. “I mean. I don’t mean…I can’t —”

“To sleep?” Mulder offered, resisting the urge to smile at her awkwardness.

Relieved, Scully nodded. “To sleep. I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“I can do that.” If he was honest with himself, he didn’t want to be alone either.

“Unless it’s too much?”

“It’s not too much.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Are you tired?”

“Honestly? Yes. All I seemed to be doing in hospital was sleeping and yet I’m still tired.”

“You need to build your strength up again. It’ll take a while.”

“I’m coming back to work,” she announced firmly. Realizing Mulder was going to protest, she cut him off. “I told you before that I needed to work and I stand by that. My place is beside you working on the X Files, now more than ever. I need to find out what happened to me, and I need to find those bastards who did this. Don’t try to talk me out of this.”

“As if I would,” Mulder commented, clearly bemused as he finished off his beer. He knew it was no use to argue with her, and in a way he was still glad that Scully had some fight left in her. “Just do me a favor, ok? Take some time. Spend some time with Ashley before you come back. Just don’t rush. The X Files can wait. Your little girl can’t.”

Scully nodded as she repeated her partner’s earlier words. “I can do that.”

“Then,” he answered, smiling. “Welcome back.”
Scully stirred as she felt the bed dip and a small body scoot closer towards her. Moments later she grinned sleepily as a kiss was pressed to the tip of her nose, and she opened her eyes to find a pair of crystal blues looking back at her. “Morning Mommy,” said Ashley, beaming at her mom.

Reaching out, Scully brushed strands of her daughter’s recently chopped hair out of her eyes. Ashley had come home from school earlier that week and asked if she could get her hair cut. She had tired of her long locks, she’d told her mom, and it wasn’t until Scully dropped her off at school the next morning that she realized Ashley’s best friend Megan had adopted a similar style.

“Good morning sunshine. And…” she added. “Happy birthday!”

“I can’t believe I’m nine whole years old,” commented Ashley, as though she was ninety rather than nine.

“I know. My baby’s growing up.”

“But I’m still your baby?”

“You’ll always be my baby.” Scully kissed her daughter’s warm forehead as Ashley snuggled up against her, throwing a small arm over Scully’s abdomen. It was the day that Scully never thought she’d see – her daughter’s ninth birthday. She’d even thrown Ashley a birthday party earlier in the year, thinking she wouldn’t be around to celebrate it on the actual day. But here she was, with her daughter in her arms, wishing they could stay in their little cocoon forever. “Are you ready for your gifts before school?”

Ashley sighed, considering the question. “Can we stay here a while?

“Of course,” Scully answered, glancing at the clock to make sure they still had plenty of time. “We don’t want to be late though, not with your big day ahead. Are you all ready for your Christmas program this evening?”

“Oh huh. Is Mulder still coming?”

“He said yesterday he couldn’t wait to hear you sing.”

“I can’t wait to sing for him.” Scully smiled to herself, She could have sworn that everything Ashley did, she did to impress Mulder. “Is Mulder coming over today?”

“He’s coming over this evening with your gifts before we head off to school.”

“Good. Mom?”

“Mmm?”

“Was Mulder there the day I was born?”

“No sweetheart, and you know he wasn’t. Do you remember meeting him for the first time?”

Ashley nodded. “He saved us from the bad man.”

“Yes he did.” Scully supressed a shiver as she was reminded of Tooms. At least that was one less monster on the streets.
“Was my dad there when I was born?”

Her mother hesitated before answering. Ashley was an inquisitive child and it was only a matter of time before she started asking questions about Jack. Taking a deep breath, she finally answered. “No, he wasn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because…baby, your dad was always scared of having a family.”

“Why?”

“Babies are hard work and your whole life changes. Your dad wasn’t quite ready for that at first, and it took him a little while to come round, but he loved you.”

“Did you love me?” There was a hint of uncertainty to her voice, and Scully immediately hugged her daughter tightly.

“Of course I did. When I found I was having you it was the best surprise I’ve ever had.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“Even better than your Mother’s Day Surprise?”

Chuckling, Scully nodded. “Even better than that. You’re the best decision I’ve ever made in my life. I love you more than anything in the entire world. And your dad loved you too, don’t you ever doubt that.”

“And Mulder loves me.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Of course he does. Now…” Scully tickled her daughter, eliciting giggles from her daughter. “There are several wrapped gifts in the living room just waiting to be opened. Why don’t we get your birthday started, and then I’ll cook us breakfast?”

“Can I get eggs?”

“You can have whatever you like. Within reason,” she added, mindful of her daughter’s blood sugar levels.

“Then let’s go!” Pushing back the covers, Ashley jumped up out of bed. Race you!” And with that she ran out of the room, her mom not too far behind her.

Ashley threw open the door and launched herself into Mulder’s arms, causing him to drop the gift bag he was holding. “Easy birthday girl!”

Scully wandered out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a navy blue towel. Queequeg was hot on her heels, his hackles rising as he recognized the visitor. Sneezing twice, he then turned and trotted back towards the kitchen, having decided that Mulder wasn’t worth the effort. “Ashley, did you check who it was before you opened the door?” She was normally cautious about letting her daughter open the door – after all, her years on the X Files had led her to realize that you never quite knew who could be on the other side.
“I knew it was Mulder.” Ashley released her grasp on Mulder long enough for him to pick up the bag and head on into the apartment.

“That’s not the point, what if –“

“Happy Birthday!” Mulder knew from experience that Ashley and Scully were as stubborn as one another, and the last thing he wanted was to referee World War Three – he’d done that on many occasions over the years. He handed over the bag to Ashley, who turned to race off into the living room to open her gifts. “Before you go…” his words stopped her in her tracks. “There might be another present for you out in the hallway.”

“Another?” Ashley looked over at her mom who nodded in confirmation. Mulder had run his idea for a main gift for the youngster by Scully, who had agreed he could get it for her, though she was concerned that he would be spending too much money on her daughter. It was to be a combination of a birthday and Christmas present, he’d argued, as he wouldn’t be seeing Ashley over Christmas.

Racing out into the hallway, Ashley’s exclamations were proof that she liked her gift. “Mom! Mom! Mulder got me a bike! Come see! Come see! Thank you Mulder!” Smiling, Scully followed her partner over to the door to watch Ashley as she proudly showed off her new bike – a purple model with a pink seat and matching spokes on the wheels. She’d spotted a similar one in the bike store a few months ago, and as she was quickly outgrowing her current bike, Mulder had offered to replace it. And it was worth every single cent to see the beaming smile on her face.

“You’re welcome,” he answered, opening his arms as she ran into them and hugged him tightly. “Happy birthday.” He looked over at Scully who smiled wistfully, before mouthing “thank you” to him. Yes, the bike was definitely worth the money.

“Can we take it out now?”

Scully looked at her watch before shaking her head. “Not tonight sweetheart, we’d better make a move soon else you’ll be late.”

“Oh…” Ashley thought about protesting, but knew it was no good. Besides, she had a song to sing for Mulder. “What about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s good with me if it’s ok with your mom?”

Scully nodded. “If you’re sure?”

“Of course. Now, are you ready to give us your winning performance?”

Ashley grinned. “I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“Are you sure you’re ok to drive Mulder? I mean we can take my car too and then you don’t have to go out of your way tonight?”

“No it’s fine, I’m happy to drive. Besides, I think I promised a certain birthday girl that we could go get milkshakes. Is that still ok?” he added almost hesitantly. He felt bad at suggesting these things – Ashley wasn’t his daughter and technically he had no say in her life.

“Of course,” Scully answered, and he noticed she seemed quite happy with his suggestion. “I know Ashley wants to see you properly before we head out to San Diego.”

“Sure.” San Diego. Scully and Ashley were spending Christmas with Bill and Tara out in California as they awaited the birth of their first child. While Mulder was pleased they were
spending time with their family, he almost feared what Bill would say about him in his absence. Plus he’d miss the two of them while they were gone.

“I wish you were coming to San Diego Mulder,” said Ashley, reluctantly resting her new bike up against the wall. Little did she know her wish would come true.

Mulder sat by his partner, listening proudly as Ashley’s class sang their way through festive songs. Scully had asked him a few weeks prior if he’d be free to go to Ashley’s Christmas program; her daughter had been eager for him to see her sing, and of course he’d readily agreed. He was pleased she even wanted him there.

As the class finished their rendition of Jingle Bells and the audience applauded, Mulder nudged Scully’s shoulder as he noticed Ashley step off the front bleacher, with two of her fellow classmates, and walk to the front. He raised his eyebrows at his partner, as if to ask her if she knew what was going on, but Scully shrugged, apparently as clueless as he was. She leaned over to whisper in his ear. “I know she said there would be a surprise, but she didn’t say what it was.”

“I guess we’re about to find out,” he replied. The music started up, and Mulder recognized the tune instantly. Silent Night. He felt Scully tense beside him, but he couldn’t take his eyes away from the stage as Ashley opened her mouth and began to sing. As the song continued, Mulder was engrossed as she belted out the words, hitting every note, giving him goosebumps. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Scully lift her hand to her face, and as he turned to glance at her he noticed she was crying, both with pride and something else. It was then he realized. She was crying with relief, with happiness at being alive to see her daughter sing. After all, just a few months ago, she wasn’t even sure she’d live to see another Christmas, let alone Ashley’s birthday. Now here she was, fighting fit and looking forward to the years ahead with her daughter. The thought of everything they’d been through that year was enough to make Mulder cry too, but instead he reached across and took her hand in his. She smiled gratefully and together they listened as Ashley’s classmates joined in with her and brought the song to a close. “Wow,” Mulder exclaimed as they clapped along with the rest of the audience. “Sounds like you can retire early and live off of the earnings from Ash’s songs.” He gave the little girl a thumbs up and she beamed, sneaking him and her mom a little wave.

“That’s what I’m planning.” Scully turned to Mulder. “That wasn’t just me? She was good right?”

“She was great. I think that was at least milkshake worthy. Maybe even dessert too.” The next song began, this time a class effort.

“To think I almost missed this,” Scully murmured as the piano started up.

“You’re here Scully, that’s the main thing,” replied Mulder. Squeezing his hand, Scully nodded, and sat back to listen to the rest of the performance.
“Hello? Merry Christmas!”

Scully followed her mom into her brother’s house, with Bill and Ashley trailing just behind her. Her sister in law Tara was there to greet them.

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

“Oh my god,” exclaimed Maggie, taking in Tara’s abdomen, which looked fit to burst. She and Bill were expecting their first child any day now, and from the look of her, she could have been carrying at least a few more babies in there. “Look at you.”

As Maggie stepped forward to hug her daughter in law, Scully looked down at her daughter who stood by her side. “You ok sweetie?” Ashley said nothing, instead nodding, but before Scully could question her further, Tara had approached her and held out her arms. “Hey sweetie. Look how much you’ve grown.”

“Hi Aunt Tara,” Ashley said solemnly.

“You’re huge,” interrupted Scully, wrapping her arms around her sister in law. Something was up with Ashley, and she’d find out what it was soon enough.

“Oh I know,” laughed Tara. “Welcome, welcome. Oh hi sweetie.” She paused to greet Bill.

“Let’s get you three settled. Sorry about the digs, Mom. I know you hoped like hell you didn’t have to spend another night in base housing.”

“Are you kidding? This is wonderful.”

“This is the exact same layout as our old house,” explained Scully as she followed Ashley into the living room.

“That’s the navy for you,” Bill replied.

“Yeah, Bill tells me mom, that you’ll be staying in your old room. And the nursery is going to be in Dana and Melissa’s room.”

“That’s right.”

Scully tried not to flinch at the mention of her sister’s name. Her death was still so new, so raw, and she missed her so much, especially at Christmas. Melissa loved the Holidays, always getting into the spirit of things, and her absence was felt even more at this time of the year.

As Bill and Tara headed upstairs with the suitcases, Scully looked over at her mom, noticing she was quiet. “Mom, you ok?”

“Oh year. I was just thinking about your dad…and Melissa. And how much I miss them.” She then wandered out of the living room and up the stairs, leaving Scully and Ashley alone.

“Ok little lady,” said Scully, letting out a deep breath. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”
“Ashley, honey, I know you. Something’s bothering you.”

“I miss Mulder,” the little girl said sadly.

“Baby, you saw Mulder just this morning when he dropped us at the airport. You’ll see him in a few days.”

“Can I call him?”

“Not now, we’ve only just arrived. Besides, Mulder’s busy with his mom this week.”

“No he’s not. He’s home alone, like he always is.”

Sometimes her daughter was too intuitive. “I’m sure Mulder has plans this Christmas, so let’s just give him some space, ok? Don’t bother him today. Besides, you have plenty of things to be doing this week, and it’s only a few days until Santa comes.”

“Santa doesn’t exist.” Ashley was sulking now, her bottom lip stuck out in a full blown pout. Sometimes Scully could have sworn her daughter was still experiencing her terrible twos, despite now being nine. “Erin told me. And I saw you put my presents in your suitcase last night. So can I ring Mulder now?”

“No you cannot.” Scully was stopped in her tracks by the sound of the phone ringing, and was grateful for the interruption. “Now please go help your Grandma unpack, and I’ll get the phone.”

Ashley stormed off, stomping up the stairs, while Scully sighed heavily, wondering if the two of them could get through the Holidays without killing one another. After calling Bill’s name, she picked up the phone, realizing he was probably busy showing Maggie around. “Scully residence.”

“Dana?”

Scully blinked, wondering whether she was imagining things. The woman on the end of the phone sounded just like Melissa. But it couldn’t be. She was tired, she told herself. She was imagining it. “Yes, sorry, who is this?”

“Dana, she needs your help. She needs you Dana. Go to her.”

Again, a voice similar to Melissa’s spoke out. “Who…who is this?” And how did she know her name? Scully wondered. Before she could ask, the caller had hung up; the dial tone ringing out. Scully quickly dialled out, determined to get to the bottom of things – who the caller was, and who needed her help. So with the help of the San Diego branch of the Bureau, Scully traced the call.

xxxxxxx

Ashley glanced over at the little girl sitting next to her, narrowing her eyes as her mom reached out and pointed at whatever it was Emily was coloring. Ashley was past caring. She was bored and wanted to go back to her Uncle Bill’s house, even if it meant listening to him tell her grandma that she and her mom should move back to San Diego, and Aunt Tara talking about how her baby was going to be a kickboxer when he grew up. Ideally Ashley wanted to go back to Washington and see Mulder – she missed him. It was the first Christmas in a long time that she hadn’t seen him, and though her mom had allowed her to call him on Christmas Day, she wasn’t allowed to talk for very long, well aware she was running up her uncle’s phone bill. She knew Uncle Bill hated Mulder for some reason, and the last thing she wanted to do was listen to him explain how he was bad for her and her mom, that they needed to get away from him.
She supposed it was her own fault that she ended up having to spend the day with Emily and share her coloring books. Earlier that morning over breakfast, Ashley had watched as her mom got ready to go out – again – without her. She’d hardly seen her mom over the holidays; Ashley had been left with her grandma, uncle and aunt while her mom had important work to do. She didn’t know what was so important that caused her mom to spend so much time away from her family, but she knew it was connected to a little girl named Emily. So, Ashley had asked to accompany her mom that morning – she wanted to meet Emily, she’d said, although secretly she didn’t care about her; all she wanted to do was spend some quality time with her mom. World War 3 had threatened to break out when her mom had originally said no, but finally she’d relented and agreed that Ashley could meet Emily. During the journey, her mom had explained that Emily was a special girl who’d recently lost her mom and dad. Ashley immediately felt sorry for the other little girl – she’d only lost her dad, and sometimes that still hurt a lot. She didn’t even want to consider the thought of ever losing her mom again – it had been bad enough when she’d been sick with cancer earlier that year. So Ashley followed her mom into the children’s center, to Emily’s room, and watched as a little girl she’d never met before ran forward and wrapped her arms around her mom’s legs. Feeling uneasy, Ashley narrowed her eyes as her mom hugged Emily back. She never did that to any of Ashley’s friends, not even Megan, and Megan and Ashley had been best friends forever. What was so special about Emily?

“Ashley sweetie,” her mom said, turning round to smile at her. “Come and say hello to Emily.”

Ashley did as her mom said, stepping forward to get a better look at the little girl. They had similar eyes, Ashley realized, and the same colored hair, though, she noticed with some satisfaction, that hers was styled better than Emily’s. Almost immediately she regretted thinking that – Emily had just lost her mom and dad, it wasn’t her fault that her bangs were too thick. “Hello Emily,” she said politely. “I’m Ashley.” She noticed that Emily was wearing a cross similar to the one her mom had given her for Christmas just the previous day. Had her mom bought one for Emily too? Why did Emily get a necklace when Ashley was her mom’s daughter? It didn’t make sense.

She frowned as Emily didn’t respond, instead stepping in closer to her mom, who laughed. “It’s ok sweetie. Ashley is my little girl.”

*Sweetie* That was her name, Ashley thought, sulking.

“Emily’s a little shy Ashley. Why don’t you show her what we’ve brought for her?”

“Ok,” Ashley sighed, reaching into the bag she was holding and retrieving a coloring book. Her coloring book. Her mom had asked if she’d mind Emily having it, and of course Ashley couldn’t argue. ‘Emily’s parents were dead’, she kept repeating to herself. “This is for you.” She dug out some crayons too. “These are mine, but I said you could share them as long as you give them back.”

“Or Emily can keep them if she wants. You have plenty of crayons at home.” Ashley reluctantly handed over the gift set to Emily, who’d stepped forward to take them, though she didn’t say thank you. Ashley was about to lecture her on the importance of manners when her mom interrupted. “Shall we do some coloring?”

Wordlessly, Emily nodded, while Ashley sighed heavily. She should have stayed with grandma.

Xxxxxxxxxx

Ashley stared hard at her picture, trying to determine what color to make Mulder’s shirt. The last time she’d seen him, when he’d dropped her and her mom off at the airport, he’d been wearing red, so she went in search of the red crayon only to find that Emily had beaten her to it. Emily had
everything, Ashley thought bitterly. Her mom’s attention this Christmas, her coloring books and now the red crayon. Why did she need a red crayon anyway? Ashley wondered. All she was doing was coloring a big fat blob, although from the way her mom was encouraging Emily, you’d have thought it was a masterpiece. Before Ashley could say anything though, the door opened and in walked – “Mulder!”

All thoughts of crayons went out of the window the moment Ashley set eyes on him, and she stood up and ran straight into his outstretched arms. “What are you doing here?” He certainly wasn’t who Ashley was expecting to see, but she certainly wasn’t complaining. Her Christmas wish had come true, even if it was a day late.

“I thought I’d surprise you.” Ashley didn’t see the look that passed between Mulder and her mom – she was too busy clinging onto him for dear life, unwilling to let go. When he pulled back, he said something that Ashley really wasn’t expecting. “Ash, your mom and I just need a few minutes to talk alone, ok? Why don’t you go sit back down next to Emily.” Even Mulder knew who Emily was, Ashley thought to herself, though she didn’t know why.

“You can help Emily with her picture,” her mom agreed, appearing at Ashley’s side and running a hand through her hair.

She didn’t want to help stupid Emily with her stupid picture, but rather than argue, Ashley made her way back over to the other little girl dejectedly. Emily made no effort to speak. She was so rude, Ashley thought. She didn’t get why her mom liked her so much, or why they had to spend the day visiting her. “What are you drawing?” she asked, feigning interest just in case Mulder and her mom were listening.

“My mom,” Emily replied quietly, and for a moment Ashley felt bad. That was until she saw Mulder and her mom look over at Emily, and instantly she knew that she was the only reason Mulder had flown over to San Diego. She leant forward to look at the picture. It looked nothing like any mom she’d ever met. “It looks more like a potato,” she said spitefully.

Emily didn’t answer, swallowing hard. Ashley was sorry for her loss, but she wanted to go home. She’d hardly seen her mom that Christmas because of her, and the likelihood was that Mulder would spend him time with the little girl too. Ashley didn’t matter anymore.

Minutes later, Mulder and her mom walked back over to where Ashley and Emily were sat.

“My mom,” Emily replied quietly, and for a moment Ashley felt bad. That was until she saw Mulder and her mom look over at Emily, and instantly she knew that she was the only reason Mulder had flown over to San Diego. She leant forward to look at the picture. It looked nothing like any mom she’d ever met. “It looks more like a potato,” she said spitefully.

Emily didn’t answer, swallowing hard. Ashley was sorry for her loss, but she wanted to go home. She’d hardly seen her mom that Christmas because of her, and the likelihood was that Mulder would spend him time with the little girl too. Ashley didn’t matter anymore.

Minutes later, Mulder and her mom walked back over to where Ashley and Emily were sat.

“Emily, I’d like you to meet a friend of ours. His name is Mulder. Remember, I told you about him?”

Ashley looked up in time to see Mulder wave at Emily, but the other little girl barely registered his presence before going back to her coloring.

“She’s a little shy,” said her mom, but it didn’t deter Mulder.

“What are you coloring?”

“A potato,” answered Emily, while Ashley scowled. “She’s lying!” she wanted to exclaim, but she knew her mom would disapprove of her calling Emily a liar.

“Have you ever seen Mr Potato Head?” asked Mulder. “He looks like this.” He scrunched his face up into his best Mr Potato Head impression – the one he’d reserved for Ashley, and crossed his eyes, eliciting a laugh from Emily, while Ashley felt tears spring to her eyes. She was the one who’d told Emily her drawing looked like a potato, but Emily was the one who had Mulder’s full
attention. She’d already stolen her mom from her, and now the same was happening with Mulder. It wasn’t fair, Ashley told herself for what felt like the hundredth time that day. Emily didn’t belong there with them. The sooner she found a new family, the better.

As far as Holidays went, Mulder thought to himself, this had to be down there amongst the worst. There were a lot less tears than the Christmas after Samantha disappeared, granted, although there was just as much pain going on around him. What was supposed to be a quiet Christmas for Scully and Ashley with their family was turning out to be a nightmare, following the appearance of Emily, Scully’s youngest daughter. Only she wasn’t really Scully’s child – she was an experiment, a creation during the months that Scully had been missing; a reminder that his partner was no longer able to have children. What with her arrival coming so soon after Scully’s abduction, Mulder could have sworn that someone was trying to break his partner. It wasn’t helped by Scully’s discovery that her ova had been harvested, along with her application to adopt Emily being denied. She’d known for a while now that she couldn’t have children, but Mulder hadn’t told her about how her ova had been harvested. He couldn’t, not at the time, when she was fighting cancer and worrying that she was going to die. And then, when she discovered she was in remission, there was just no opportunity to tell her – at least that’s what Mulder told himself. He just felt bad that Scully had to learn it whilst sat in front of a judge during an adoption battle. And now Emily was dying – she was laid out in a hospital bed barely clinging to life, while Scully spent the little girl’s last hours by her bedside. Mulder had popped back to Bill Scully’s house to update Maggie on the situation. Tara had gone into labor that morning, and was then at the hospital with Bill, leaving her mother-in-law to take care of Ashley. As Mulder prepared to go back to the hospital and check in with Scully, Ashley decided that she’d had enough of being left out.

“Can I come with you Mulder?”

He looked uncomfortable at her suggestion. The hospital wasn’t a good place for a nine-year-old, especially when Emily was clinging onto life by a thread. “I’m just going to the hospital Ash, you might prefer to stay with your grandma.”

“Is mom at the hospital?” He nodded. “Can I come with you?”

“I don’t know if you’ll be allowed in to see Emily,” Maggie interrupted. “She’s very sick and only a few people are allowed in.”


“Well I don’t mind if your family doesn’t mind, but like your grandma said, don’t be disappointed if you’re not allowed in to Emily’s room.” He doubted she would be. He’d merely pop in to touch base with Scully, he thought, and then he’d get Ashley out of there.

“I just want to see my mom.”

Mulder looked at the little girl searchingly, before nodding. “Ok then.” It was clear to him that Ashley was jealous of Emily; after all Emily had only been in their lives for a matter of days and Scully had spent a lot of time with her. Rightly so, Mulder thought, considering that the little girl was dying, and Scully wanted to spend as much time with her youngest daughter as she possibly could. But still, Ashley felt pushed aside, which was only natural.

“Only if you’re sure Fox?” Maggie asked.

“Of course, I’m happy to take her.”
“Make sure you behave yourself Ashley,” her grandmother warned.

“She’ll be fine. Do you wanna go get your coat and we’ll head off?” No sooner had he spoke, Ashley ran out of the room to get ready.

“It’s a strange time for her, commented Maggie to her daughter’s colleague. “For everyone.”

“I’m sure,” Mulder replied. “She’ll be fine though, and Scully too.”

Maggie nodded in agreement. “They have you Fox, of course they’ll be fine.”

Before he could read anything more into her words, Ashley bounced back into the room, no doubt more enthusiastic at the thought of seeing her mom. “Right trouble,” he said, taking his keys out of his pocket. “Let’s go.”

xxxxxxxxx

Ashley’s enthusiasm quickly wore off the moment they entered the hospital and approached Emily’s room. She looked through the glass, chewing her lip nervously as she watched her mom gently brush a hand through Emily’s hair. It must have been tough for her to see Scully with another child, Mulder thought. Ashley wasn’t used to sharing. “Can I go in and see her?” Ashley asked.

“Not right now sweetie.”

“Will mom come outside and see us?”

“Hopefully in a bit.”

“Can’t you call her now?”

“Ash…” Taking hold of her hand, Mulder led her to a nearby chair and sat her down, crouching down in front of her. “Emily’s very sick right now, and she needs somebody with her.”

“But why can’t someone else be there?”

“You know her mom and dad died.” At this, Ashley quietened, her cheeks reddening. “You know how upset you were when your dad died?” She nodded. “Well Emily feels the same, and she needs someone with her because she’s so ill.”

“Is she going to die?”

He knew there was no sense in pretending. “I think she is.”

“So she needs my mom?”

“She does. You can spare your mom for a little bit can’t you?”

Though she nodded, something was clearly worrying her. “What if she gets better? Will she come home with us?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to see what happens. But for now your mom just has to concentrate on Emily. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you or that she thinks more of Emily than she does you ok?”

“Ok.”
“And meanwhile you have me here with you to help. You think we can get through this together?”

Ashley’s lips turned up into a smile. “I think we can.”

“Good.” Squeezing her hand, Mulder got to his feet. “We’ll get through this Ash, I promise.” At least, he wanted to believe they would.

Sadly it wasn’t meant to be, and later that night, when Mulder took Ashley away from the hospital and out to dinner, Emily passed away. Scully called him just as Ashley was tucking into her chicken nuggets, and so he’d volunteered to pass on the information to her daughter, to save Scully from having to break the news. Ashley took the announcement well, though Mulder was aware she’d been kept in the dark about the situation – though she knew Emily, she had no idea that she was her sister, and Scully wanted it to stay that way. He was also aware that Ashley had been jealous of Emily and the amount of time her mom had spent with her, so she was bound to get confused. By the time he took Ashley back to her Uncle Bill’s, Scully had returned and was maintaining a brave face, unwilling to let her guard down. But Mulder knew she was hurting in more ways than one – not only mourning her lost daughter, but her lost ova too. It would take a long time for her to get over this latest blow. But she carried on, taking an interest in Matthew, Bill and Tara’s newborn son, and arranging Emily’s funeral. The service itself was short but simple; a sad affair even if the majority of attendees hadn’t met young Emily. Mulder sat in the front pew alongside Scully and her other daughter, and held on to Ashley during the service. She was quiet, reflective, though she didn’t cry – not that Mulder had expected her to. She’d barely known Emily, and she was trying to be strong for her mom, who was in turn trying to be strong for her. Scully herself was stone-faced while the vicar spoke of the tragic loss of life, and Mulder knew she was angry at whoever had created the little girl purely to let her die. When the main service was over and Scully’s family left her, Ashley insisted on staying with her mom and Mulder, unwilling to be away from them for any time. Mulder watched as his partner approached Emily’s coffin, and suddenly he just had a feeling about what she was going to do. He turned Ashley round to face him, so her back was to her mom, and he crouched down in front of her. “You ok?”

She nodded solemnly. “Can we go now?”

“In a few minutes, your mom is just saying goodbye to Emily.”

“But Emily’s dead,” she protested, and Mulder’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes she is, but your mom still wants to say goodbye.”

“She’s my mom,” stressed Ashley. “Not Emily’s.”

“Ashley,” Mulder warned, his patience wearing thin. If only she knew. “Your mom thought a lot of Emily and she’s upset that she passed away. Just give her a few minutes to say goodbye.”

“Well I’m glad she’s dead,” she replied defiantly, folding her arms in front of her. “I want my mom back.”

“Listen,” Mulder hissed, trying so hard not to raise his voice in the church, when all he wanted to do was shake some sense into her. “Your attitude is not welcome today, ok? Your mom has been through a horrible time lately, and the last thing she wants is you acting like a spoilt brat, especially today of all days. Now you might not have been a fan of Emily but your mom was, and she’s upset that she’s died. So I suggest you keep your unhelpful comments to yourself. Your mom doesn’t need this, not today.”
Bewildered, Ashley’s eyes filled with tears as she listened to Mulder’s warning. He’d never raised his voice at her – never – and so she wasn’t used to him being angry at her. Mulder tried not to feel bad as he saw her struggling with her tears. She’d been acting up ever since she’d left for San Diego, according to her mom, and her tantrum was the last thing Scully needed to deal with on the day she mourned her youngest daughter. Ashley wasn’t used to sharing her mom, so it was only natural for her to have felt some jealousy towards Emily. But to say she was glad she was dead was taking things too far. Scully didn’t need to hear this.

“Now let’s forget this and get on with the day, and be supportive of your mom.” Mulder got to his feet just as Scully approached them, and he could read in her eyes just what she’d found when she’d looked inside the coffin.

“Oh, I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?”

She swallowed hard. “I’ve done what I needed to do.” Mulder didn’t ask her to elaborate, but he noticed with a pang of sadness that she was wearing her cross once again; the same cross she’d given Emily. And, as Ashley was wearing her own necklace, Mulder realised that Scully had to have found it in the coffin. It was a reminder of her now deceased daughter, a reminder of all that she had lost in her life since she’d joined the X Files.

“Ok then, let’s go.”

The day passed quietly, with the Scully family returning to Bill and Tara’s after the service. Maggie invited Mulder along, and though he wanted to decline the invitation, he knew Scully needed him and so politely accepted. Bill was on his best behaviour, having no doubt been warned by his family to play nice, while Ashley was unusually quiet. While Scully presumed she was upset at having to attend another funeral at such a young age, Mulder knew she was still sulking after his earlier lecture. Yet she still wouldn’t let him out of her eyesight, as though she thought he was going to leave her. Scully tried to act normal, taking an interest in Matthew, joining in with family conversation, but Mulder knew it was tough for her to keep it together, to be happy for her brother when her own world had been torn apart.

It was barely past eight that evening when Scully saw her daughter, already dressed in her pjs, fail to suppress a yawn. “Ok young lady, I think it’s time you went to bed. You had an early start this morning.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. “I’m not tired. I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Tough luck kiddo. Go brush your teeth and then I’ll come and say goodnight.”

“What about Mulder?”

All eyes in the room turned to the man in question. “I have to head off soon.”

“No! Don’t leave Mulder.”

“Ash…” Though he smiled reassuringly, he was concerned at how worried she seemed at him leaving. “It’s getting late, I have to go.”

“Don’t leave me Mulder.” The little girl promptly burst into tears, shocking all of the adults in the room. As Mulder stood, she got up and jumped up into his arms.
“Hey, hey, what’s this about?” Shifting her on his hip, Mulder rubbed her back in a bid to soothe her. “It’s ok.”

“Don’t go Mulder, please don’t go.” Her sobs disturbed a sleeping Matthew, who woke up and immediately started to fuss. Not wanting to disturb him further and incur the wrath of Bill, Mulder carried her out into the hallway, with a concerned Scully not far behind.

“It’s ok, you’re ok,” he murmured soothingly, but still Ashley sobbed, clinging onto him like a lifesaver.

“Please don’t go.”

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Scully came up alongside Mulder and ran her hand through her daughter’s hair. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I… I don’t want Mulder to… I don’t want him to leave me.”

“It’s bedtime Ash, I have to go.”

“But you won’t come back.”

Scully gestured to the stairs, and after nodding, Mulder carried Ashley up towards the bedroom she was sharing with Scully. When she wouldn’t release her grip on him, he sat down on the bed, shifting her so she sat on his lap. Scully took a seat next to them, her own eyes filled with tears. “Who said I won’t come back? I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry Mulder, I’m sorry I was bad, please don’t leave me.” So it was about that afternoon, he realized.

“It’s ok, don’t worry about that now, I’d already forgotten it.” Scully looked as though she was about to interrupt to ask what had happened, but Mulder shook his head, signalling that he’d tell her later. “We’re ok, we’ll see each other tomorrow, and in the meantime you’re going to go to sleep and dream good dreams, ok?”

“Can you stay?” Ashley asked, her tears finally beginning to subside.

“Not tonight sweetie.” He knew he wouldn’t be welcome, not in Bill’s house. It wasn’t the answer Ashley wanted to hear.

“Please?”

“There’s no room Ash.”

“You can sleep in the bed with mom like you do at home.”

Mulder was very grateful Bill wasn’t in earshot – the last thing he wanted was a bullet through his other shoulder. “Not tonight.”

“Sleep on the sofa? Please, please?” She was getting agitated again, getting ready to cry. “I’m sure Uncle Bill won’t mind if you wanted to sleep on the sofa. Please Mulder?”

He looked between his partner and her daughter. As if reading his mind, Scully stood up. “I’ll check with him.”

As she left the room, Mulder pressed his lips to Ashley’s tear tracked cheeks. “We’re ok aren’t we?”
“I’m sorry I was mean about Emily.”

“Apology accepted. I’m sorry I shouted at you earlier. But it doesn’t mean that I’m going to leave you.”

“My dad did,” she sniffed against him.

Suddenly her earlier hysterics made sense. “Oh Ash. Your dad didn’t leave because of you. He loved you. I’m certainly not going anywhere, ok?”

“But I was naughty.”

“Well…yes you were, but you’ve apologized for it, and like I said, we’re ok. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here for you and your mom for as long as you need me.”

“Forever?” She sounded so hopeful.

“If you need me forever, I’ll be here.” And he meant it too.

Mulder stretched out on the couch, his feet dangling over the edge. He was too damn tall for this thing, it was no wonder Bill had agreed to him staying over – Mulder would have put money on Bill hoping he had a bad night’s sleep. Not that he thought he’d sleep anyway, too much had happened over the past few days for him to just switch off. He wondered whether Scully was asleep upstairs; whether she had accepted her mom’s suggestion and taken some sleeping pills, or if she was tossing and turning like him. He half debated whether to switch on the television to take his mind off of little dead girls that looked like Ashley, but the last thing he wanted to do was disturb any of the family. Moments later, he heard the creak of a floorboard at the top of the stairs and braced himself for company. He wasn’t entirely sure if it would be Scully having trouble sleeping, or maybe Ashley just convincing herself that he hadn’t left. Or it could have even been Bill, he thought, coming to remind him just how much pain he’d put his sister through. It turned out he was right with his first guess. Scully.

“Mulder?”

He barely heard her whisper as she reached the bottom of the stairs. “Are you awake?”

“Hey Scully.” He sat up, making room for her on the sofa, and watched as she passed by him to take a seat next to him. He reached out to switch on a lamp but Scully stopped him. “Can we leave it off?”

“Sure.”

“I like the dark.” Suddenly Mulder’s mind was cast back to a conversation he’d had with Melissa when Scully lay in hospital fighting for her life following her abduction. She’d said he was in a dark place at the time, and the same could be said for Scully now. She was hurting, anyone could see that, and Emily was just the latest in a long line of blows for her. This one cut deep.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

“Too many thoughts running through my head.”

“That’s understandable. How’s Ashley?”
“Out like a light.”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to shout at her.”

He felt the sofa shift beneath him as Scully tucked one leg beneath her, making herself more comfortable. “What did she do?” she asked, before answering her own question. “It was about Emily, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I know she felt somewhat excluded over the past few days. She’s used to having me to herself, and I did spend a lot of time with Emily. I guess she doesn’t need to worry any more.”

“Scully –“

“I didn’t mean that. I mean…I thought it would be easier if I didn’t tell her who Emily really was. I could barely comprehend it myself, let alone a nine year old. I thought if I was allowed to adopt Emily, then Ashley would learn to accept her as her sister but…” She swallowed hard, and Mulder realized his partner was fighting back tears. “…that didn’t happen.”

“No,” he answered sadly.

“God,” his partner scoffed, leaning forward to rest her head in her hands. “I’m not fit to be a mom.”

Mulder shifted closer towards her, but made no move to touch her, not wanting her to pull away from him. “Scully, that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? They wouldn’t let me adopt Emily, Mulder. What does that say about my parenting? About how I look after Ashley?”

“You are a great mom Scully, and you know it. Ashley is lucky to have you.”

“She said that my work wasn’t conducive to having a child, that I wasn’t in a position to adopt, that basically I’m a fool to live the life I do with a child.”

Mulder knew she was talking about work. “She told you that?”

“That’s how she made me feel. Everything I do, I do for Ashley. I just want to give her the best life that I can.”

“I know you do, and that’s what makes you a great mom. For what it’s worth Scully, Emily was lucky enough to have had you in her life for those few days.”

His words were greeted with silence, and for a moment Mulder feared he’d made her cry. “Scully?”

“Maybe I don’t think of Ashley enough. I mean I’m away sometimes without any notice, and I ship her off to Emma’s or my mom’s without a thought. There’s no way I could have done that with Emily too. And then there’s all the worry and pain I’ve put Ashley through too.”

“Scully.” Feeling his partner begin to shake next to him, Mulder spread out the duvet so it was covering the two of them. “You are a good mom. Ashley is a great kid and that’s because of you. You’ve helped her to overcome all of the bad things she’s gone through, and you adore her. You were there for Emily when she needed you, and you loved her from the moment you met her. If that’s not being a good mom, then I don’t know what is. I’m just sorry Emily wasn’t meant to be.”

She came willingly into his arms. “Me too.”
He felt so helpless. “What can I do?”

“Can you get me out of here?”

“Now?”

“No.” She shook her head against him. “Tomorrow. I…I need some space.”

“I can do that.”

“And can I stay down here with you tonight?”

“Of course.” He didn’t want to know what Bill would do if he caught the two of them sleeping on the couch together, but he didn’t care. Scully was one of the most important people in his life, and he’d do anything she asked. Anything.

They left Bill’s early the following morning. Maggie didn’t seem surprised that her daughter wanted to leave, while Bill didn’t look too happy, though for once he kept quiet. After promising her mom that she’d pick her up from the airport (Maggie was flying back a few days later), Scully kissed her family goodbye and led Ashley out to join Mulder in the car. Ashley seemed excited about their little road trip, though Mulder sensed she was relieved that he’d kept his promise and stayed. She’d been through so much upheaval in her life that it was no wonder she was anxious about people leaving her. He drove them up to Los Angeles ready for their flight, having delayed his own until that evening, and after stopping off for breakfast, he then took them to the nearest beach at Scully’s request. They walked along the sand quietly, Ashley hanging back next to Mulder, as though sensing her mom needed some space. They both watched as Scully approached the waves, deep in reflection as the waves drifted over her bare feet, her pumps dangling from her right hand. For a moment Mulder feared that his partner was going to run into the sea and let it consume her but thankfully she stood still, just thinking, thinking of the people she’d lost, of the battle she’d fought.

“Is mom sad because of Emily?”

Mulder looked down at the little girl standing beside him. She’d been quiet that morning, still tiptoeing around the adults, but at least she was willing to let Mulder out of the room without dissolving into tears. She looked so young, so innocent. “Yeah, she is.” Nodding to herself, Ashley walked over towards her mom and wrapped her arms around her middle. Mulder watched as Scully pulled Ashley in towards her and hugged her tightly, tears spilling down her cheeks. She looked over at Mulder and it was then that he realized she needed him too. Closing the gap between them, he held enveloped the two of them into a hug, feeling Scully’s tears soak his sweater as she cried against him.

“I’m sorry I was mean to Emily, mom,” said Ashley.

Scully pulled back to look at her, unwilling to release her daughter to wipe her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I said bad things about her yesterday. But I didn’t mean them, I didn’t mean to make you upset. I didn’t know she was my sister.”

“What?” Mulder asked, just as Scully spoke.

“Who told you that?”
“I heard Grandma talking to Aunt Tara this morning. She said that she was your daughter, which means she was my sister.” The youngster’s bottom lip trembled. “I didn’t know.”

“Emily was…she was your half-sister,” Scully replied carefully, not quite sure how to explain the situation. “And I’m sorry we didn’t get to know her better.”

“But she was sick?” Ashley asked.

“She was very sick, and the doctors couldn’t make her any better, so she died.”

“You’ll be ok mom,” she said suddenly.

“I know, we’ll get through this. We always do,” Scully replied, no doubt wondering what else was going to be thrown her way.

“And we have Mulder, he said he’s here for us forever.”

Scully huffed against him, squeezing him tighter. “That’s good to know.” The three of them stood in their embrace for some time, ignoring the chilling winds and the cold water that was soaking through Mulder’s sneakers. Finally, Scully pulled back and smiled at him, letting him know just how grateful she was that he was there for them. “Let’s go home.”
Chapter 49

Scully padded into the living room in bare feet, a glass of red wine in her hand. As she took a seat on the sofa, she took a hearty sip, wincing as the wine burnt the back of her throat. She took another. Picking up the remote control, she flicked on the television and surfed through the seemingly endless number of channels, eager to fill the silence in the apartment. Ashley was staying at Megan’s house for the night to celebrate her best friend’s birthday, and Scully missed her. When she was at home, Ashley kept Scully focused; she stopped her mind from wandering, from thinking about everything that had happened in recent months – her cancer, memories of her abduction, her ‘calling’ to Ruskim Dam, Emily…..The little girl had been on Scully’s mind ever since Christmas, but more so in recent days when Emily had appeared to her in visions. And now she was all that Scully could think about, along with her inability to have children. She’d known for a while now that she was unable to conceive. Since her abduction her periods had been irregular, but it wasn’t until one night when Scully started bleeding heavily and suffering from crippling cramps that she realized something was up. Leaving a tired and confused Ashley with their neighbour, Scully took herself off to the hospital, where tests later revealed that she was infertile. But then along came her cancer, and so Scully hadn’t really had the time to process the news. Until Emily, when Scully learned that not only did Mulder known, and had known for a while, he hadn’t mentioned anything to her. He knew that she would never have a child, that her body just kept failing her. Life was unfair, thought Scully as she finished her glass of wine, half wondering whether she should slow down. But then again, she had nothing better to do that evening, and maybe the alcohol could help her forget. Finding nothing to watch on the television, Scully switched it off, throwing the remote onto the sofa next to her in disgust. Silence filled the room once again, and she closed her eyes, trying to hold back the tears. When she opened them, she gasped as she saw the little girl in front of her, her youngest daughter, with Ashley’s coloring and eyes. “Mommy, what’s wrong?”

“No…” Scully uttered in horror. “No, no no!” Before she could even register what she was doing, Scully threw her now empty glass in the direction of the little girl. But Emily had disappeared, and the glass sailed straight into the wall, smashing into tiny pieces. The adrenaline made Scully feel momentarily better – finally she was letting out her grief. The remote control followed next, the back cover shattering and batteries springing free on impact, and suddenly Scully needed more. It was as though something inside her had snapped, and her anger had suddenly boiled to the surface. Jumping up from the sofa, she ran over to her desk, reaching out for a photo frame, which she then threw at the wall. That one was for her inability to have children. Another followed, for Emily this time, and then another, for all the pain that Ashley had endured, and Scully dimly registered a piece of glass rebounding and slicing into her cheek. But still she kept on going, tears now streaming down her cheeks as she finally felt release. The fourth frame smashed against the wall – this one was for Mulder for everything he’d lost – when Scully registered that there was a knock at the door. Moments later her partner’s familiar voice called out. “Scully? Scully?”

She thought about ignoring him, but Mulder was persistent. She knew that if she didn’t answer, he’d let himself in anyway or – if he’d heard the smashing of glass – he’d probably kick the door in. Walking over to the door, Scully opened it, and realized just what Mulder faced as he stood in front of her – an overly emotional partner in an apartment that looked as though it had been ransacked.

“No…” Scully uttered in horror. “No, no no!” Before she could even register what she was doing, Scully threw her now empty glass in the direction of the little girl. But Emily had disappeared, and the glass sailed straight into the wall, smashing into tiny pieces. The adrenaline made Scully feel momentarily better – finally she was letting out her grief. The remote control followed next, the back cover shattering and batteries springing free on impact, and suddenly Scully needed more. It was as though something inside her had snapped, and her anger had suddenly boiled to the surface. Jumping up from the sofa, she ran over to her desk, reaching out for a photo frame, which she then threw at the wall. That one was for her inability to have children. Another followed, for Emily this time, and then another, for all the pain that Ashley had endured, and Scully dimly registered a piece of glass rebounding and slicing into her cheek. But still she kept on going, tears now streaming down her cheeks as she finally felt release. The fourth frame smashed against the wall – this one was for Mulder for everything he’d lost – when Scully registered that there was a knock at the door. Moments later her partner’s familiar voice called out. “Scully? Scully?”

“Scully?”

Unwilling to meet his eye, Scully shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. Mulder took in the scene before him – his partner stood in the doorway in black sweatpants and a white t-shirt, her
feet bare. Tears trailed down her cheeks and blood trickled from a wound to her face. Behind her, he noticed shards of glass scattered all over the floor; cuts on her feet confirming that she’d walked across it all to get to the door. She’d finally broken down – after all she’d been through he wasn’t surprised. It had been on the cards for a while, and Mulder had sensed her low mood earlier that day following their latest case. He’d known that Ashley was staying at her friend’s that evening, and that Scully was going to be alone, so he’d collected takeout and headed over to her apartment, determined to be there for her. “Oh Scully,” he murmured, stepping into her apartment.

She shook her head, willing him not to push her too hard – the last thing she wanted to do was to for him to think that she was weak. They worked together after all, and she didn’t want Mulder to feel bad for her – they were supposed to be equals. But if Mulder thought she was inferior, he didn’t show it, instead nodding, as though he understood that she didn’t want to talk about her anger, and placed the bag he was holding on the floor. Turning to close the door, he then faced Scully once more and took her into his arms. She resisted initially before wrapping her arms around his waist, unable to stop the tears from continuing as she clung to him. Mulder held her silently, just letting her cry, wishing he could take away her pain. She’d suffered so much and had always maintained a strong exterior. Yes she may have shed a few tears, but she’d yet to break down completely. Until now. Finally, when it seemed that her tears were slowly drying up, he pressed his lips to her forehead and pulled back. “Let’s get you cleaned up Scully.”

She shook her head, and Mulder was pained to see that her eyes had filled with tears once again. “I’m ok,” she protested weakly.

“I know you are, but let me do this Scully, please.” Before she could refuse, he took hold of her hand and led her to the bathroom. She followed reluctantly, in a similar way to Ashley when her mother dragged her to the dentist, but she didn’t decline anymore. If Mulder hadn’t already been worried about her, that would have set the alarm bells ringing. The strong Scully he faced 99 percent of the time would have insisted she didn’t need his help, that she could take care of herself. But not that night. Entering the bathroom, Mulder turned to find his partner stood behind him, staring down at her feet, her breath hitching as the tears fell. Placing his hands on her hips, he guided her to stand in front of him, facing him as he hitched her up onto the counter. Coming to stand in between her legs, he turned on the tap and took hold of a washcloth from the side, holding it underneath the running water. As Scully continued to cry, he gently pressed the wet cloth to her cheek, frowning as she winced. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he murmured soothingly, wishing he could wash away her pain like he could the blood. Thankfully no glass seemed to be embedded in the wound, and pretty soon the bleeding had stopped. Rinsing out the washcloth, he placed it back on the side of the sink. He moved to lift Scully back onto the floor, but she surprised him when rather than hop down, she clung to him, hiding her face in the crook of his neck and sobbing. He held her until finally her tears subsided, until finally she could cry no more.

“I wish I could take away your pain Scully,” he whispered into her hair, tracing light circles across her back. “I wish I could make it better for you.”

“I just keep wondering if there are any others out there,” she finally replied, her voice hoarse from sobbing. “Like Emily. If every now and then they’ll show up just as I’m getting my life back on track. I feel like someone’s trying to break me.” Mulder said nothing at first, though he had wondered exactly the same. “And sometimes I wonder just how much I can take. How much more Ashley can take.”

“You don’t know how strong you are Scully,” he finally replied. “You might not feel it right now, but you are. I see it. I see you. I’ve seen you get knocked down and come back stronger than before. I saw you fight back from the death with your cancer, and I swear you survived from sheer determination alone. I’ve seen you fight to raise Ashley by yourself. You said to me once how hard it was, how you weren’t sure you could do it, but you did. You’re doing it; you’re raising the most
amazing child and I have so much respect for you for doing it. I can’t even imagine what you’ve been going through now, with Emily, but I know that you’ll get through this. This won’t beat you.”

She nodded against him, and Mulder was dismayed to find she was crying once more. He pulled her in towards him.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured against the crook of his neck.

“Don’t apologize Scully. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I thought I was ok with everything. And then this past week, seeing Emily everywhere I went. I guess I’m not ok.”

“You just needed to let it all out. After Emily died you dusted yourself off and carried on, but deep down you just needed to mourn, to get angry.”

“I am angry,” Scully admitted. “Not just over everything that happened with Emily, although that is a big part of it.” She willed herself not to cry again. “Sometimes I wonder just how much more I can take. I mean these people abducted me, they took away my memory for those three months, they killed my sister and gave me cancer, but left me barren. And you Mulder, everything they’ve put you through…they need to pay for what they’ve done.”

“That’s why I carry on fighting,” replied Mulder. “Because one day they’re going to give me answers and we’re going to get the truth, about your abduction, about Melissa, Emily and Samantha. And I’m not going to give up until we have these answers.”

“I know you won’t.” She gave him a watery smile. “That’s why I’m here with you. Because I want answers too. Because we both deserve them.”

“You know Scully…” He was almost reluctant to continue. “…if you ever want to stop…”

“No,” she replied firmly. “I can’t say I’ve never thought about it, especially with Ashley, but I need to do this. My place is here with you. We’re in this together.”

Her words brought a lump to Mulder’s throat. He didn’t deserve this woman; he knew that. Not after everything he’d put her through, and certainly not after what he had to tell her. Her ova. He still had a vial and he’d been meaning to tell her, but then there was her cancer and Emily and he just hadn’t found the right moment. But he needed to tell her.

“Scully,” he began, feeling his heart race. She’d be upset, he knew she would be, but she needed to know. “I have something to tell you, I –“

“Mulder?” his partner interrupted, and he frowned. Having finally plucked up the courage to tell her the truth, it appeared she didn’t want to hear it. Not today.

“Yeah?”

“Not now, please. Tonight I just want to try and forget about everything.”

“Ok,” he forced a smile. “Well I have Chinese and selection of mind-numbing DVDs, so I’m sure we can do that.”

“Thank you.” And before he could reply, Scully jumped down from the counter, their conversation over. For now.
Scully eyed the man opposite her, frowning as he took another gulp of whiskey. She sat across from him in the booth, taking small sips of iced tea, waiting for him to speak. It seemed though that he wasn’t in a chatty mood. Not that she could blame him – she’d received a call from him earlier that morning telling her that they’d been a fire in their office, that their work over the past five years was now reduced to piles of ash. She’d finally dragged him out of the wreck that had once been his office and into her car, intending to drive him home. But as they’d passed a nearby bar, Mulder had insisted she pull over. Not willing to leave him alone just yet, Scully followed him into the bar and watched him slowly get drunk. “I think you’ve had enough,” she commented, as he slammed the now empty glass onto the table.

“I think I need another,” Mulder replied defiantly. Things had been tense between them for a few days now, ever since Mulder had introduced her to Diana Fowley. She wasn’t entirely sure who this woman was, but already she was making her feel like an outsider. She was Mulder’s partner after all, she hadn’t walked away from him like Diana had. But now wasn’t the time to bring that up. “Mulder, it’s 2pm.”

“It’s happy hour somewhere I’m sure. Besides,” he added bitterly. “Time doesn’t matter when you have no job to go to.”

“I have to pick Ashley up shortly.”

“Well don’t let me stop you.”

“Mulder,” Scully warned. “This is not my fault, so stop acting like it is.”

“I know.” Mulder slammed his fist on the table, startling Scully and the waitress who was passing by. Scully smiled reassuringly at the woman, indicating all was fine, when in reality it was anything but. “God damn it I know that Scully. But it’s alright for you, you can walk away from this, go get yourself a better life. Everything we’ve worked towards has been my life, and now I’ve got nothing.”

“We can rebuild it.”

He waved off her comments dismissively. “I’ll rebuild it.”

“Listen Mulder, you’re not the only one who’s sacrificed a lot for the X-Files and you know it. It’s as much a part of my life as it is yours, so don’t you dare try to shut me out now.” She’d already felt like a spare part since the arrival of Diana Fowley, and wasn’t going to let Mulder ditch her yet again.

“You should get away from me Scully. I’m bad news.”

“Don’t even start Mulder, it’s the alcohol talking.” It wasn’t and they both knew it. “We’re a team. I’m staying and that’s the end of it. We’ll get the X Files back. Together.”

“Together,” Mulder repeated. If only he meant it.

A weary Mulder opened the door to his apartment, scowling as he recognised his partner and her daughter. He ran a hand through his already dishevelled hair. “Not now Scully,” he pleaded, but
still stood back as the two of them entered his apartment. Closing the door behind him, he turned and watched as Scully took a grocery bag into the kitchen, while Ashley stood before him, eying him sadly. Not up for much conversation, Mulder padded on over to the couch and flopped down, rubbing his face. He was tired and already could feel a hangover forming - he wanted to go to sleep, wake up and pretend none of it had happened, but he knew that wouldn’t be the case. When he looked up, Ashley stood in front of him, chewing her lip nervously. “I’m sorry your office was on fire Mulder,” she said, placing her hand on his arm. He looked down at where she was touching him, and he swallowed hard. “But I’m glad you didn’t get hurt. I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt.” Her compassion was Mulder’s undoing, and his hard exterior crumbled. Pulling her in towards him, Mulder wrapped his arms around Ashley, so grateful to have her in his life. She went willingly into his arms, moving to sit next to him.

“I’m ok,” he replied against her, touched by her compassion. “How about you? How was school today?” Any excuse to change the subject, to try and draw his mind away from the destruction in his office.

“It was good,” she answered, still wrapped in his arms. I got top marks on my spelling test.”

“You did?”

“Uh huh. And I got invited to Ryan’s birthday party next week.”

“Ryan huh? Mulder replied in a teasing tone, pulling back to smile down at her. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“He might be.”

“Do I need to have words with him? Talk to him man to man?”

“Mulder,” Ashley scolded, giggling. “Don’t be silly.”

“Ok, well you just tell this Ryan to treat you like a princess or else there’ll be trouble.”

“Ok.” They both looked up as they realized Scully was in the room, listening into their conversation. She smiled thoughtfully, silently proud at her daughter for trying to make Mulder feel better. She knew Ashley thought the world of Mulder and dreaded the thought of him getting hurt or even being upset. It was a good idea of her daughter’s to cheer him up, she thought to herself. “Ash and I thought you might be a bit sick of takeout, so I’ve decided to cook for you. Is pasta ok? I figured you might need sustenance after earlier.”

“Pasta’s great,” Mulder replied gratefully. “Do you need any help?”

“No thank you, the position of Assistant Chef has already been filled.”

“I’m helping mom tonight,” Ashley spoke up.

“I thought you were telling me about your day?”

“I did.”

“That’s all that happened?”

“Well no, but I’ll tell you at dinner.”

“I’m sure I can handle dinner by myself if you want to stay with Mulder?”
“Mulder needs a shower,” replied Ashley adamantly. “He stinks.”

“I stink?” Mulder hadn’t even thought about his appearance that day; he’d had much more pressing matters on his mind. Looking down at himself, he realized, he was still wearing the same clothes from that morning, that if he concentrated he could still smell smoke mixed in with stale whiskey. He was a mess. “You’re right, I stink. If you girls can cope without me for ten minutes, I’ll go freshen up.”

“We’ve got this,” Scully smiled. “You go.”

He showered and changed in no time, feeling better for freshening up. By the time he headed back out into the kitchen, Scully had almost finished with dinner. Her Assistant Chef had apparently quit barely minutes into her task, and was now sat on the sofa watching cartoons. “Do you need a hand?” Mulder asked, his stomach rumbling as he caught a whiff of the pasta sauce simmering on the stove.

“Do you want to grab us some drinks? Ashley set the table before she got distracted.”

“Sure.” Grabbing some glasses from the cupboard, Mulder headed over to the sink and began filling them up with water. “Thanks for this Scully.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“No,” he said, placing the glass he was holding onto the counter and turning to cup her cheek. “It is a big deal, and I’m grateful.”

Before Scully could respond, or even register the butterflies floating through her stomach, they were interrupted by the shrill ringing of the telephone, before Ashley’s voice rang out. “Mulder! It’s the phone.”

Mulder grinned. “Glad to hear her observation skills are still on top form.”

Returning his smile, Scully turned her attention back onto the food in front of her. “Don’t be too long. I’ll be serving up in less than two minutes.” No sooner had Mulder left the room, Scully retrieved plates from the cupboard and began serving up their dinner, leaving the used saucepans in the sink to soak. As she turned to carry two of the plates out in the direction of the dining table, she startled when Mulder appeared in the doorway. One look at his face and she knew her evening plans had been ruined. “That was the hospital,” he explained nervously. “Diana’s come round and she’s asking for me.”

*Of course she is*, Scully wanted to reply, but instead she forced a smile. “Right.”

“I’m sorry Scully, but visiting hours finish soon.”

“Of course. Go Mulder.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Ashley and I will clean up after ourselves and go home. I’ll leave you some leftovers.”

“Thanks.” Mulder hesitated momentarily, as though debating whether to change his mind and stay. Scully hoped he was going to change his mind and stay. But then, after smiling apologetically, he turned on his heel and headed back out into the living room to grab his jacket, ditching his partner and her daughter. And it wouldn’t be the last time.
Scully was exhausted; there was no other word for it. She wanted to go home and sleep for a week, she wanted a long hot bubble bath, she wanted to hug her daughter and never let go, but most of all she wanted to pretend that the past few days had never happened. Actually, make that the past few weeks. She should have known not to answer the door when Mulder showed up at her apartment smelling like cheap booze the previous night. But instead of turning him away, she'd followed him, just like she always did, to Maryland to check on the bodies of supposed victims of the bomb blast in Dallas. That then led them on a journey to Texas, to them pursuing unmarked tanker trucks during an investigation into a supposed extra-terrestrial virus – at least according to Mulder. It was then they came across two large domes sitting in a cornfield, which, during their investigation, turned out to house bees. After a helicopter chase the two of them finally escaped unharmed, leaving Scully to return just in time for her hearing. And now here she was, on the threshold of his apartment, telling him she'd been reassigned. To Salt Lake Fucking City. That had been her initial reaction at least, but on her way over to Mulder's apartment she'd tried to put a positive spin on it. It would be a fresh start for both herself and Ashley. They had a chance to escape from the bad memories that still lingered in DC. Yes Ashley had some good friends there, but Scully knew she'd adapt and make new ones. Maybe she could see the likes of Megan during the holidays when Scully visited her mom. Maggie was always suggesting to her that she get away – this was her chance.

Mulder however didn't seem to share her thoughts, and Scully looked on as his expression switched from disbelief to horror as she told him of her reassignment. And then he just looked angry. "You can't quit now Scully."

"I can Mulder. I debated whether or not to even tell you in person but –"

"We are close to something here." Mulder turned to look at her, hurt at her words. Was she really suggesting that she was just going to call him and tell him she'd quit? That she wasn't even going to tell him face to face? "We're on the verge."

"You're on the verge Mulder. Please don't do this to me."

But he paid her no attention and got to his feet, closing the gap between them. "After what you saw last night, after all you've seen, you can just walk away?"

"I have,” she replied wearily. "I did, it's done."

"I need you on this Scully."

"You don't need me Mulder. You never have. I've just held you back.” She knew that now, the arrival of Diana Fowley confirming it. Mulder needed someone on his side who believed in the paranormal rather than argued with him at every turn. "I gotta go,” she said, turning on her heel and walking out of the apartment, down the corridor on the way to the elevator. After a moment, Mulder followed her out into the hallway.

"You wanna tell yourself that so you can quit with a clear conscience you can, but you're wrong."

Stopping in her tracks, Scully turned to face him. "Why did they assign me to you in the first place Mulder? To debunk your work, to rein you in, to shut you down."

"What about Ashley?" he asked, trying a new line of argument. "Are you going to take her away
from everything she's ever known? From me?"

"Ashley will adapt –"

"Really? You didn't see her when she thought she was going to have to live with Bill. You can't leave Scully, you can't take her away from me." Mulder knew he had no rights – Scully could take Ashley wherever she damn well pleased, but he wasn't going to give up without a fight. The two of them meant the world to him, and the last thing he wanted was to lose them.

"Please don't make this harder than it already is," Scully pleaded, tears springing to her eyes. "You're better off without me."

"You saved me Scully!" Mulder argued. "As difficult and as frustrating as its been sometimes, your goddamned strict rationalism and science have saved me a thousand times over. You've kept me honest…you made me a whole person. I owe you everything, Scully, and you owe me nothing."

Scully was visibly shocked at his words; he'd never said anything like this to her before. Suddenly, she realized, he was no longer talking about their work. "I don't know if I wanna do this alone. I don't even know if I can. And if I quit now…they win."

Unable to stop the tears from spilling over, Scully leaned in towards her partner, who wrapped his arms around her. She rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes as the tears slowly fell. She didn't want to leave him, but she couldn't see that she had any choice. Pulling back, Scully pressed her lips to Mulder's forehead before resting her own against his. Mulder glanced up at her, looking her in the eye, and slowly he began to move in towards her. *Oh my god," thought Scully, as she saw him near her. He was going to kiss her, she realized. He was going to kiss her and she wasn't going to stop him. There was nothing holding them back now; the X-Files were over now, they were no longer working together – there were no rules against this. It was finally going to happen. With fresh tears falling, Scully smiled, letting Mulder know that she was ok with it, that she wanted him to kiss her. And then he closed the gap slowly – too damn slowly, thought Scully as she prepared herself for his kiss; to feel the warmth of his lips again. And just as his breath caressed her lips, Scully felt a sharp pain in the back of her neck. She jolted, her hand flying to the back of her neck as she tried to determine just what had happened. "Ow."

Mulder's face fell and he cursed himself for trying to push her. "I'm sorry."

"Something stung me."

Mulder grabbed the bee and held it within his fingers. "Must've gotten in your shirt."

And then Scully realized in horror that she didn't feel good. At all. "Mulder…something's wrong"

"What?"

"I'm having lacinating pain in –"

"What?"

"…My chest."

"Scully."

"My motor functions are being affected."

Without warning Scully's knees gave way and she fell. Thankfully Mulder was there to hold her and lower her gently to the floor. "My pulse is thread…a funny taste in the back of my throat."
"I think you're going into anaphylactic shock."

"No...I have no allergy."

The last thing Scully registered was Mulder's look of concern as he laid her out on the floor, before her world suddenly went dark.

It was a nightmare, it had to be, Mulder thought, urging his partner further forward through the vent. At least that's what he had to tell himself, because the reality was much much worse. The reality was that he'd travelled to Antarctica to rescue his partner, to inject her with a vaccine to the alien virus she'd been infected with following her encounter with the bee in his hallway. The reality was that when he'd injected the vaccine into his partner it had set off a warning system inside the ship. The reality was there really was an alien racing towards them. The reality was that if they didn't find a way out soon, they were both going to die. He wasn't even certain their bodies would ever be found – the creature hot on their heels didn't give him the impression it would be gentle with them.

"'C'mon Scully." He wasn't quite sure how his partner was still conscious, let alone able to move, especially since he'd already had to give her the kiss of life, but he was grateful that she could. He was grateful for a lot of things, namely the vaccine that had worked on her, but he just needed his luck to continue so they could get the hell out of there and go home. "Keep moving Scully," he called as Scully pulled herself up into the vent. The creature that had been after them had hold of his leg, but he'd managed to kick it away and follow his partner through the tunnel. "Go! Go! Come on!" He could see the light at the end of the tunnel – literally – and both he and Scully scurried towards it. "Almost there, keep going!"

Finally they'd managed to get free, and Scully immediately collapsed onto the snow, clearly exhausted. Mulder wanted nothing more than to copy her but then he heard the sound of the ice cracking underneath their feet. Taking hold of his partner, he lifted her, supporting her as they began to run away. But they weren't quite quick enough and the ice began to crack and fall away into a massive crater. Mulder and Scully were caught up with it and fell into the crater, falling into a huge heap of snow. And suddenly they were lifted high into the air as the ship rose, before they fell off of it back into the snow. "Scully, you gotta see this! Scully!" Mulder could barely believe his eyes as he saw the UFO rise up above them, and he willed Scully to look up and see it. She was barely conscious but she had her eyes fixed on him, as though she was waiting for him to tell her she'd been imagining everything that had happened. He didn't.

"Scully -" Mulder began to feel his eyes droop and the darkness threaten to overcome him, and he willed himself to stay alert. He needed to stay alert to get them out of there. Scully shifted towards him and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close. Body heat; that was what they needed. Then he felt her breath against his ear as she whispered encouragement to him, trying to stop him from drifting off. "C'mon Mulder, stay with me. You've got to stay awake." He groaned in response. "You can't give up now Mulder, we have to get out of here and get home."

"Scully -"

"Ashley will be expecting us. So you need to stay with me so we can get back to her. She loves you and she needs you to be ok." Scully settled herself against him, her own breathing slowing as she felt the exhaustion crept back in. "I need you to be ok Mulder because I lo -" She stopped as she looked down at her partner. Mulder had lost consciousness. Moments later, she did too.
Scully found Mulder sitting by the reflecting pool, engrossed in a newspaper. As she reached him he handed her the paper, clearly unimpressed. "There's an interesting work of fiction on page 24. Mysteriously our names have been omitted. They're burying this thing Scully. They're just going to dig a new hole and cover it up."

"I told the OPR everything I know," Scully replied. "What I experienced, the virus, how it's spread by the bees from pollen in transgenic crops." She could hardly believe what she was saying, let alone what she'd experienced in recent days.

Getting up from the bench, Mulder began to walk away, with Scully hot on his heels. "You're wasting your time Scully. They'll never believe you, not unless your story can be programmed, categorized or easily referenced."

"Well then, we'll go over their heads."

Stopping in his tracks, Mulder turned to face her. "No. No. How many times have we been here before Scully? Right here. So close to the truth and now with what we've seen and what we know, to be right back at the beginning with nothing."

"This is different Mulder," she protested.

"No, it isn't. You were right to want to quit! You were right to want to leave me. You and Ashley should get as far away from me as you can. I'm not going to watch you die Scully, I'm not going to lose you or Ashley because of some hollow personal cause of mine. Go be a doctor. Go be a doctor while you still can, and live a happy life with Ashley."

"I can't. I won't. I'll be a doctor, and I'll be happy with Ashley but my work is here with you. We belong here with you. That virus that I was exposed to; whatever it is, it has a cure. You held it in your hand. How many other lives can we save? Look…" Scully took hold of his hand, squeezing it tightly, and Mulder didn't think he could love her any more than he already did. "If I quit now, they win."

She repeated the words he'd spoken to her in the hallway, right before the bee stung her. She wanted him to know that she remembered exactly what had happened; the exact words that he'd spoken to her, and the fact he was going to kiss her. It was the least she could do considering he'd gone all the way to Antarctica to rescue her. They left the reflecting pool together still hand in hand, not quite wanting to relinquish their grasp on one another. "I don't want to lose you Scully," Mulder repeated as they walked away from the reflecting pool. "You deserve better."

"My place is here with you," she answered reassuringly. "After everything we've seen, and after everything that's happened to me, I can't just walk away. I'm happy here. And so is Ashley," she replied grinning. "You were right Mulder; I couldn't have taken her away from you."

"I'm glad." He turned as he realized that Scully had stopped still, looking up at him with a curious expression on her face. An expression he'd seen just a short while ago in his hallway, right before he moved to kiss her. For a second he thought he was going to get another chance, that she was going to close the gap between them and press her lips to his, but the shrill ringing of his cellphone stopped her in her tracks. "Sorry," he apologized, retrieving the mobile from his jacket pocket. It was Diana, the caller display informed him, and he knew from the way that Scully stiffened that she'd noticed it too. He was about to cancel the call when Scully let go of his hand and stepped back. "I'll let you get that," she said somewhat disappointedly. "I need to collect Ashley soon."

Before Mulder could argue, she'd walked off, not even bothering to wait for him as once again their kiss was rudely interrupted.
Chapter 52

If Mulder hadn’t been looking like he’d gone through the wars, Scully would have killed him, she thought to herself. He’d disappeared without telling her – yet again, and this time he’d been trying to find a ship, the Queen Anne, in the Bermuda Triangle, after hearing reports that it had resurfaced after disappearing more than sixty years ago. With the help of the Gunmen and Skinner (Scully tried not to think about the kiss she’d planted on her superior’s lips when he’d helped her out in her hour of need), she’d finally found her partner, albeit worse for wear. Now he was in hospital recovering, and Scully, along with Ashley, who’d travelled down with her mom after her babysitter let them down, had gone to visit.

“Mulder? Mulder?” Scully looked on as her partner’s eyes fluttered open and he slowly came awake. “It’s me.”

“Where am I?” He tried to sit up, but Scully urged him to stay where he was.

“You’re in hospital.”

“Ohhh,” he groaned, clearly in discomfort.

“Lie still.”

“I feel…like hell.” He looked it too.

“I don’t blame you,” Scully replied matter-of-factly. “You’ve been through the wringer, I’d say.”

“What happened to me?”

“You did something incredibly stupid.”

He didn’t look too surprised. “What did I do?”

“You went looking for a ship Mulder. In the Bermuda Triangle.”

“Say that again?”

Before Scully could repeat her words, the Gunmen entered the room. “Gilligan awakes,” Frohike commented.

“You were there Scully. And Ash…” Mulder glanced over at the little girl. “Ash you were there too.”

Ashley grinned, clearly bemused by Mulder’s statement.

“He’s delirious,” Langley commented as Skinner walked into the hospital room.

“And he was there too.”

Clearly not impressed, Skinner approached the bed and dumped a bouquet of flowers on the nightstand next to it. “Right, me and my dog Toto.”
“No, you were there with the Nazis.”


“Not that he takes orders,” remarked Skinner dryly.

“You saved the world Scully.” Reaching out, Mulder rested the back of his hand against his partner’s waist.

“Yeah, you’re right. I did.” Scully was smirking at her partner, bemused at his words. It was the drugs, she told herself, and she made a mental note to remind him of everything he said once the medication had worn off.

“What kind of drugs is he on?” asked Frohike.

“I want some,” Langley added.

“No no no…” Mulder protested. “The Queen Anne. I found it. You were there with Thor’s Hammer. I told you to turn the ship around and then I jumped overboard.”

Scully clearly wasn’t buying it. “Yeah I bet you did. The boat that you were on was busted into a million pieces. And as for the Queen Anne…it was nothing more than a ghost ship.”

He wasn’t having any of it. “No no no, you and I were on that ship Scully. With Ashley. In 1939.”

“Get some rest Mulder,” said Skinner, not wanting to listen to anymore of his agent’s tales. “…Cause when you get out of here I’m going to kick your butt but good.” With that he left the room, with the Gunmen hot on his heels, leaving Mulder alone with Scully and Ashley.

“I would’ve never seen you again,” Mulder said seriously, looking between his partner and her daughter. “But you believed me.”

“In your dreams.” Slowly and carefully, she continued speaking in a tone she hadn’t used since Ashley was a baby. “Mulder, I want you to close your eyes and I want you to think to think to yourself “there’s no place like home.” As Mulder laughed, Scully moved to leave the room, and was about to tell Ashley it was time to go when he propped himself up on his elbow.

“Hey Scully?”

Returning to his bedside, she leaned in. “Yes?”

There was a pause before he spoke. “I love you.”

Scully rolled her eyes at his words, while Ashley’s face lit up, though she said nothing, instead looking between the adults, waiting for them to speak. She was surprised though by her mom’s words. “Oh brother.” Taking hold of Ashley’s hand, Scully stepped away from Mulder’s bedside. “C’mon young lady, let’s get you back to the motel.”

“Mom!” Ashley protested, though she knew it wasn’t going to work.

“Mulder needs to rest.”

Sighing dramatically, Ashley moved in towards Mulder and lifted herself up onto tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Bye Mulder.”

“Bye Ash.”
“See you tomorrow.”

Mulder nodded as Scully led her daughter away, heading out into the hospital corridor. “Mom…” began Ashley as they walked towards the exit.

“Hmm?”

“Mulder just said he loved you.”

Scully didn’t even hesitate before replying. “He’s on pain medication sweetie. It’s making him say silly things. Remember when he had his tooth out and he swore your care bear was talking to him?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well that was the pain medication. Just like today.”

“But he said he loves you!” Scully could hear the excitement in her daughter’s voice.

“He didn’t mean it in the way you think he did.”

“But when somebody tells you they love you, shouldn’t you say I love you back?”

“Ashley, don’t take Mulder seriously today. The doctors have given him a lot of medicine to keep him out of pain and as a result he’s not quite with it. He’ll say a lot of things that he won’t mean today.”

“When Mulder tells me he loves me, I always take him seriously, and I always say it back.”

“And so you should,” replied Scully as they stepped outside and headed towards her car. “But it’s a different kind of love.”

“Mom,” Ashley said matter-of-factly. “I think it’s the same love.”

“Ok sweetheart, whatever you say.” As they reached the car, Scully unlocked it and let Ashley into the passenger side, before getting into the car herself. She started the engine, putting the car into drive, and suddenly realized that her daughter hadn’t quite finished her questioning. “Mom, how many people have told you that they love you?”

Scully resisted the urge to roll her eyes, not wanting the conversation to continue. “Lots of people.”

“Like who?”

“Like you, your grandma and grandpa, Uncle Bill – “

“Did my dad tell you he loved you?”

“Yes he did.”

“Like the guys do in the movies?”

“Well…” Not really, thought Scully. Jack was hardly a romantic. “I guess so.”

“But –“

“Sweetheart, if this is about Mulder –“
“But he said he loves you mom! And he said it like they do in the movies –”

“Enough Ashley,” Scully warned sternly. “Just drop it. Mulder is drugged, he’s saying a lot of things he doesn’t mean, so let’s just leave it at that.”

“But –”

“No buts. Now, what do you want for dinner?”

Realizing the conversation was now over, Ashley shrugged as she sat back in her seat. She didn’t care about dinner, she was too busy wishing her mom had believed Mulder’s declaration.

xxxxxxx

When Ashley ran into Mulder’s hospital room the following morning, he was sat up in bed, dressed in denim jeans and a black sweater. He grinned as he recognized his visitor. “Hey Ash.”

“Hey Mulder!” She hurried up to him, throwing her arms around him. “Are you feeling better?”

“Much better thank you, especially for seeing you. Where’s your mom?”

“She’s talking to your doctor.”

“Checking it’s ok for me to leave this joint?”

Ashley nodded, hoisting herself up onto the bed next to him. “Are you still drugged today?”

Mulder huffed out a laugh. “Not today, the drugs have worn off.”

“So do you still love my mom today?”

He looked at her carefully before answering. “What do you mean?”

“Yesterday you told my mom you loved her, but she said you didn’t mean it like they do in the movies because you were drugged. So now that you’re not drugged do you still love her? You should tell her if you do.”

“Ashley…” Mulder began carefully. Her smile immediately faded.

“Don’t you love my mom?”

“I do but –”

“Did you mean what you said yesterday?”

“Yes –”

“Well then you should tell her!” she replied excitedly.

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“Why?”

“Well…” It was difficult to explain their complicated relationship to a ten year old, especially a ten year old who still adored fairy tales and happy endings. “Your mom isn’t at the same place as I am right now.”
“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean… I love your mom and I’m sure of it, but your mom… she needs some time right now to think about what she wants.”

“But mom wants you.”

Mulder smiled, wishing it was that easy. “A lot has happened to your mom lately, she’s had a lot on her plate, so she needs to take time before she makes any big decisions.”

“So you’re not going to tell her you love her again?”

“Not just yet. Like I said, your mom’s not in that place just yet.”

“But…but what if she’s never in that place? What if you don’t tell her again?”

Mulder wrapped his arm around the worried youngster’s shoulder. “Whatever happens between me and your mom, I’m always going to love you. Both of you. I’m going to be there for the two of you, and none of that will ever change.”

“You tell me that all the time.”

“That’s because I mean it. You and your mom are the most important people in my life, and no matter what happens, that’s not going to change.”

“Are you always going to love my mom too?”

“I am,” he replied honestly.

“You should tell her that. She might tell you that she loves you too if you do.”

“I don’t want to rush your mom. She knows how I feel, and now she just needs some time.”

“Should I talk to her?”

“No,” Mulder replied firmly. “Let’s just keep it our secret for now. Can you do that?”

“But why?”

“Because….” He realized there was no sense in lying to the youngster. “Because I don’t want to scare your mom. She needs to figure out what she wants by herself, without me influencing her. I think it would be best if we don’t talk to her about it for a while. Can you promise me that?”

Ashley looked up at him, clearly not impressed with what he’d just told her, but understanding that she had to do as he asked. “I promise. It’s our secret.”

“What’s your secret?” Asked Scully as she entered the room, smirking as both Mulder and Ashley startled.

“Umm –“

“Ash was just telling me what she’d got you for Christmas. Right?”

To Mulder’s relief, Ashley nodded. “Uh huh. But we can’t tell you.”

Scully didn’t look too convinced, but thankfully didn’t press them any further. “If you say so. You
“Ready to get out of here?” she asked Mulder, who jumped up from the bed.

“I sure am. Let’s go.”

Before he could reach it, Scully took hold of his overnight bag and turned on her heel, heading towards the exit. Pressing his finger to his lips in a gesture to Ashley, Mulder then lifted her off the bed, took hold of her hand and followed his partner out of the room, hoping that one day, he could make her daughter’s hopes come true.
“Two miles to go…”

Scully glanced across the car at her partner as he drove them along the desert road. “I’m all a-tingle,” she replied dryly, clearly not impressed at being dragged away from home once again. “So Mulder, this supposed clandestine source who’s contacted you, how do we know that he’s not just another crackpot whose encyclopaedic knowledge of extra-terrestrial life isn’t derived exclusively from reruns of Star Trek?”

“Because of where this particular crackpot works. Groom Lake, Area 51…where the military has conducted –“

“For the past fifty years, classified experiments involving extra-terrestrial technology.”

“It’s all our questions. The proof that we’ve suspected but never been able to hold in our hands. That…that proof is here.”

“Mulder, it’s the dim hope of finding that proof that’s kept us in this car, or one very much like it for more nights than I care to remember. Driving hundreds if not thousands of miles through neighborhoods and cities and towns where people are raising families and buying homes and playing with their kids and their dogs and…in short, living their lives. While we…we…we just keep driving, and Ashley keeps being passed from pillar to post –“

“What is your point?” Mulder asked, just wondering exactly what Scully was getting at. He hoped she didn’t mean that she wanted to leave him, though he couldn’t blame her if she did.

“Don’t you ever just want to stop? Get out of the damn car? Settle down and live something approaching a normal life?”

Mulder wanted to reach across and shake her. Of course he wanted that, it was the reason he tried to spend as much time with her and Ashley as possible – it was the reason he’d tried to tell Scully just recently that he loved her. “This is a normal life,” he simply replied, realizing that it wasn’t the time to tell his partner how he felt. Not that night.

Scully smiled at his words, but their conversation was cut off when they both noticed headlights quickly approaching their vehicle. Moments later they came to a standstill, unaware of how much their lives would change in just a short space of time.

xxxxxxx

Mulder looked on in horror as the man opposite him – wearing his clothes, looking exactly like him, got into the car with Scully and drove away from Area 51.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” he shouted after them, realizing that his voice sounded unfamiliar. He looked down at himself, noticing he was now wearing a black suit rather than the casual clothes he’d had on as he and Scully drove there just a short while ago. They were on their way to meet a source, but something had happened – as he and Scully had been apprehended by the men in black, he’d felt a ripple pass over them. And now here he was, watching a man who looked like him but wasn’t him, drive away with his partner.

“Sir?” A soldier next to him raised his rifle, aiming it at Scully’s car. “Open fire?”
“No! No. Let them go. Let them go.” The last thing he wanted was for Scully to get hurt.

“Sir?”

Mulder stared at the soldier, wondering what the hell he wanted.

“Your orders sir?”

He didn’t have a clue. “I want to get out of here.” Thankfully nobody questioned him, and another soldier held open the door to a car – Mulder supposed it was his car. As he got into the vehicle, he saw two other men, similarly dressed, sitting in the back seat.

“Morris?” One of them asked. “Morris?” Mulder suddenly realized he was talking to him. “What do you think you’re doing?” He gave them his best confused look. “Why’d you let them go?”

“They don’t know anything,” Mulder replied. They weren’t the only ones. He didn’t have a clue what had happened, just that he needed to do whatever it took to get back to himself.

XXXXXXXXXXX

Mulder pulled up to the gas station and killed the engine. When he didn’t move, Scully turned to look at him. “Are you alright Mulder?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked defensively.

“Well you haven’t said anything since we left those men on the highway. Is something wrong?”

“I’m fine. Gas cap’s on your side.”

Her eyebrow’s raised, Scully moved to get out of the car, resisting the urge to tell him where he could shove the gas gap. “Ok, if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Stepping out of the vehicle, she began filling the car up with gas, when she heard the sound of her cell phone ringing inside of the car. She called through the window to her partner, worried it might be Ashley trying to get hold of her. “Mulder? Mulder?” But he paid no attention to her, engrossed in the radio. Finally she opened the door and picked up her phone, struggling to hear the caller thanks to Mulder having turned up the radio full blast. “Hello?” She reached out and turned down the volume. “Hello?!” But the caller had already gone. Frustrated, Scully got back out of the car to finish up.

“Oh Dana?” Mulder’s words stopped her in her tracks. He rarely called her Dana, unless something terrible was wrong. Clearly he wasn’t himself after their trip was a wasted one.

“What is it Mulder? I can’t stop, I need to get back so I can call Ashley.”

He sneered at her. “Well I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your love life.”

“My what?” But before she could quiz him, he’d continued.

“Want to pick me up a pack of Morleys please?”

Scully glared at him. “Since when do you smoke? Now she was confused.

“Well…you’re not going to be a Nazi about it, are you?”

Dumbfounded, Scully closed the door and walked off. Mulder always kept her guessing.
When they landed back in DC, it took them a while to get back home, with Scully having to take over the driving as Mulder took a few wrong turns along the way. She didn’t know why he’d volunteered to drive her home anyway – it wasn’t as if he lived close by, but she was tired and so didn’t argue. Mulder had claimed he was exhausted himself as he took yet another wrong way, but Scully suspected he was too busy contemplating their uneventful trip. As she pulled up outside of her apartment, she switched off the engine and turned to face her partner. “Are you going to be alright getting home, or do you need directions?” she joked.

“Very funny,” replied Mulder, clearly not amused.

“Well in that case, I’d better go. I have to get Ashley ready for school.” For a second she though she saw a look of recognition cross her partner’s face.

“Aah,” he replied moments later. “Of course. Well tell him I said to have a good day.”

“Mulder…” Scully frowned. “I think you need to get home to bed. Go get some sleep. I’ll see you in the office shortly.” With that, she tossed him the keys and got out of the car, wondering exactly what had got into her partner.

“Mom?”

“Yes sweetie?” Scully rinsed off the final dish as her daughter bounced into the kitchen.

“Can I call Mulder?”

“Mulder?”

“Yeah. I haven’t spoken to him in aaaaaaages.”

Scully bit back a grin. More like a day or two, she thought, but she knew her daughter missed him. “Alright, but don’t be long. You’ve still got some homework to do.”

“I’ve done it already.”

“Already?” As she turned to face Ashley, she noticed the little girl was unwilling to meet her eye. “Give Mulder a quick call and then finish your homework please.”

Sighing dramatically, Ashley hurried into the living room, picking up the phone and dialling the familiar number. Mulder usually answered quite quickly, as though he knew she was impatient to speak to him, but tonight he took his time in picking up. “Fox Mulder?” the voice greeted Ashley as she made herself comfortable on the sofa.

“Hi Mulder.”

“Hello?”

“It’s me Mulder.”

“Me?”

Ashley giggled. Sometimes Mulder liked to tease her and play dumb. Tonight was obviously one of those nights. “It’s Ashley.”
There was a pause before he spoke again. “Ashley…”

“Ashley Scully stupid!”

“Oh.” Finally a hint of recognition in his voice. “Listen little guy, I’m not sure if your mom knows you’re on the phone to me, but maybe you should hang up, ok? Besides…” Ashley could have sworn she heard a woman’s laugh in the background. “I’m a little busy here at the moment.”

“Mulder?”

“What?” he asked impatiently, and Ashley’s smile faded. He didn’t sound like her Mulder at all – the Mulder she knew was always happy to hear from her, no matter how busy he was.

“I was just wondering…” she began quietly, wishing he’d never have called her. “If we’re still on for the game on Saturday?”

“The game?”

“The –“

“Maybe another time ok? Now run along before your mom gets angry.” And without warning, he hung up, leaving Ashley to wonder why she bothered. Moments later Scully wandered into the living room, noticing her daughter was no longer speaking. “Was Mulder not in sweetheart?”

“He was in,” Ashley replied quietly.

“What’s the matter?” Suddenly concerned, Scully took a seat next to her daughter, running a hand through her hair.

Ashley shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s being weird.”

“Mulder’s always weird.”

“I know, but….he said we’re not on for the game now.”

“Why did he say that?” Her daughter had been looking forward to it for ages.

“I don’t know, he said he was busy.” Ashley wasn’t about to tell her mom about the woman at Mulder’s apartment – the last thing she wanted to do was upset her.

“Well…” sighing heavily, Scully smiled sadly. “Maybe he is busy. Maybe we could do something instead? We could watch the game?”

After a moment, Ashley reached out and hugged her mom. “Thanks mom, but it’s not the same. I love you for asking though.”

Scully couldn’t help but chuckle. “Are you ok sweetie?”

Her daughter nodded. “Maybe Mulder will change his mind tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” answered Scully, as she hugged the little girl back. She had no idea what had gotten into her partner over the past day or so, but she only hoped he’d get back to normal soon. Little did she know.

xxxxxxxxxxx
Mulder was in hell; he had to be. There was no other explanation for the fact he was stuck in another man’s body, living with another man’s bitch of a wife and two spiteful children, Terry and Chris, though he’d still yet to remember who was who. Those two kids were worse than Ashley was on a bad day, when she was throwing temper tantrums because Scully wouldn’t let her go to the movies alone with her friends, or when she wasn’t allowed the latest must-have toy. God how he missed Ashley, and Scully too. He’d tried calling his partner, telling her what had happened, that somehow he and Morris Fletcher swapped bodies once the UFO passed over them, but he knew she didn’t believe him. Hell, it was Scully, of course she didn’t believe him – she rarely did. So for now, he was stuck in this sorry excuse of a life, a man hated by his wife, kids and colleagues. It was hell.

“This is not a marriage, it’s a farce.”

Morris’s wife greeted Mulder as he opened his eyes, having fallen asleep in the armchair once again. Hell, there was no way he was going to share a bed with her.

“What?” Couldn’t she just leave him alone?

“You’re not attracted to me anymore. I disgust you, don’t I?”

Mulder thought for a moment. The last thing he wanted to do was wreck this other guy’s marriage, plus as far as Joanne was concerned, he was her husband. “No, no. It’s not….it’s not that you’re disgusting. I…I….It’s just that –“

“It’s just that you don’t want to ever make love to me ever again, that’s all.” Mulder tried not to flinch. “That and you mumble something about Scully in your sleep. Who is Scully, Morris? Is it another woman?”

You could say that, thought Mulder. “Does Scully sound like a woman’s name to you?” he tried.

“What is Scully? Tell me.”

“Oh Joanne, I’m sure I’ve told you many times in the past that there are things about my work that unfortunately I have to keep a secret.”

Unfortunately his attempt at evading the question didn’t quite work. “Oh no buster. That’s not going to fly this time.”

“My point is,” he continued regardless. “…that there are lots of things you don’t know about me. And…I’ve just…I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. I mean, up is down and black is white. I don’t know where I stand anymore. I don’t even know…who I am really anymore. I just…I know for sure that I am not the man you married.” THAT was an understatement. “I’m just not. And I’m sorry, I’m truly sorry.”

“Oh god Morris,” Joanne answered sympathetically, her anger now gone. “I didn’t know. They have that pill now.” Mulder chuckled awkwardly. “We can work this out. There are other ways to be intimate.” She stepped in closer and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him in for a hug.

Thankfully, they were saved by the doorbell. “I think that was the doorbell,” Mulder prompted, wanting her to let go of him. It felt awkward, holding another man’s wife. He tried not to think about the other man holding Scully or being a father-figure to Ashley.

“We can make this work.” Thankfully Joanne let go of him and wandered off to answer the door. He heard Joanne speak before another woman’s voice rang out, and he tried to tell himself that the person didn’t sound like Scully. “MORRIS!”
As Joanne summoned him, Mulder headed towards the front door, his lips curving up into a smile as he realized that it was indeed his partner stood before him. Before he could speak to her though, Joanne raised her arm and slapped him hard. “You son of a bitch!” she cursed, before storming back into the house.

Scully looked uncomfortable at the display. “I’m sorry. Uh, Morris Fletcher?”

“Scully, it’s me. It’s Mulder.”

Closing the front door, Mulder took hold of his partner’s arm and led her into the driveway, out of the earshot of Joanne. Scully looked up at him nervously. “You’re uh…you’re the man from the other night. From Area 51?”

Joanne’s voice rang out from inside the house as she watched the two of them. “Liar!”

“You phoned me,” Scully continued, clearly uncomfortable. “Would you mind telling me what this is about?”

“I’m Mulder. I’m really Mulder. I switched bodies, places, identities with this man Morris Fletcher – the man that you think is Mulder, but he’s not…” Mulder caught sight of his reflection in the car window, and realized exactly what Scully was seeing. “Of course you don’t believe me. Why was I expecting anything different?” He thought for a moment, understanding that his partner needed proof – as always. “Your full name is Dana Katherine Scully. Your badge number is…Hell! I don’t know your badge number. Your mother’s name is Margaret, your daughter’s name is Ashley and your brother’s name is Bill Junior. He’s in the Navy and he hates me…” Scully was giving him nothing. “Lately, for lunch, you’ve been having this six ounce cup of yogurt, plain yogurt, into which you stir bee pollen because you’re on a bee pollen kick, even though I tell you you’re a scientist and should know better.”

Once again Joanne interrupted, this time opening the door and throwing his – well Morris’s – suits onto the ground. “Cheater!”

“Look,” Scully replied awkwardly. “Any of that information could have been gathered by anyone.”

“Even the yogurt thing?” protested Mulder. “That is so you. That is so Scully. Well it’s good to know you haven’t changed. That’s somewhat encouraging.”

“I don’t know what the point of all of this is.”

“I’ll prove it to you.”

“No you won’t, but I wouldn’t mind if you came clean with me.”

“Scientific proof about what happened to us on the road two nights ago. Fair enough?” He knew she couldn’t argue with that. Joanne’s voice called out from behind him. “I am calling the police!”

“Goodbye Mr Fletcher,” said Scully, walking away from him.

“I will prove it to you Scully,” insisted Mulder. “Tonight, I’ll prove everything, ok?” He watched helplessly as her partner got into her car and drove off, leaving him to Morris’s sorry state of a life.

To be continued…
Chapter 54

Something was definitely up with Mulder, Scully realized after their meeting with AD Kersh. Not only did her partner get lost – inside the very building he’d worked in for years - he was somewhat forthcoming with their superior, even saying he’d have given him the name of their source if he’d had it. Plus, Scully recalled, he’d apologized for their actions. Mulder never apologized. And then there was the way he’d been acting with Kersh’s secretary, flirting with her right in front of Scully’s face, inviting her back to his apartment for an “extended lunch break.” Couple that with the strange phone call Scully had received from a Morris Fletcher, claiming to be Mulder, and she was right to be suspicious. She’d even visited this Fletcher guy at his own home, listening to him as he stated various facts about her life, while his crazy wife called her all sorts of names. Facts that Mulder knew, though, like she’d said at the time, facts that anyone could have found out. Except for the yogurt. But it wasn’t until Morris had been caught at the gas station with the flight recorder in hand that Scully did actually begin to wonder if he was telling the truth. He was adamant as he was dragged away that Mulder wasn’t Mulder, and it was true that Mulder hadn’t been himself. Far from it actually. He’d even gone behind her back to Kersh, ratting her out – something that the Mulder she knew and cared for would never do. “It’s the new me,” he’d simply uttered after he’d apologized to her, and Scully couldn’t help but wonder about the meaning behind his words. But she’d gotten into the car with him and let him drive her back to DC, where she was put in her place after a dressing down from AD Kersh. And then, as she’d packed up her desk to begin two week’s suspension without pay , she’d accepted an offer from him to cook her dinner that night. Ashley was at her grandma’s that evening, meaning Scully was only going to spend the evening wallowing in self-pity and drowning her sorrows in a glass of wine. Mulder could supply the wine, she thought, plus it would give her chance to see him outside of work – to see if he really wasn’t himself.

She got her answer moments after knocking at the door to Mulder’s apartment. He greeted her wearing an apron with the words “something smells good” adorned on the front, and as she stepped inside, she noticed his clean apartment. “Perfect timing. Welcome.”

“Wow. Mulder.” She couldn’t get over the state of his apartment. Mulder wasn’t exactly the tidiest person in the world, yet clearly he’d gone to a lot of trouble to clean up for her.

“You like huh?” He asked, after taking her coat. Mulder never took her coat. “Yeah, I thought it was time I stopped living like a frat boy. Come on and see the rest of the place. Over there.” Before she could argue, he’d led her to his bedroom.

“I didn’t even know you had a bedroom,” Scully commented as she took in the four-poster bed covered in a leopard print comforter. The Mulder she knew didn’t have a bedroom – at least not an accessible one. That was why he slept on the couch – at least that’s what he told her.

“Oh yeah. Yeah, got to have someplace to lounge around and read the Sunday New York Times, you know?” He patted the bottom of the bed, silently asking her to take a seat.

“Uh no, that’s ok. Thanks,” she replied awkwardly.

“Seriously, just check it out. Seriously.” Reaching out, Mulder pulled her to the bed, and reluctantly Scully sat down, wobbling slightly as she realized it was a waterbed. He sat down beside her, the movement causing them both to fall back on the bed, and it was then that Scully saw the mirror on his ceiling. “Mulder....” was all she could say looked up. This wasn’t the Mulder she knew – at least she hoped it wasn’t.
“Maybe I like to read the New York Times backwards.” After a moment he turned to face her. “Do you hate it?”

Scully paused before answering. “No, I don’t hate it.” She just didn’t understand it.

“Well alright then. Don’t go away.”

With that he got up from the bed and rushed out to the kitchen, leaving Scully alone with her thoughts. She glanced back and forth between the mirror and the doorway, trying to imagine her partner actually purchasing something like that. It just seemed so cheap and nasty and Mulder – or whoever he was – was blatantly trying to lure her into bed. The Mulder she knew was almost hesitant around her – they’d done nothing more than simply kiss, and even then it had been a while since they’d done that. To go from just a chaste kiss to trying to seduce her with a waterbed, creepy mirror and – god damn it, she thought, as he re-entered the room – champagne, just seemed so unlike him. Too unlike him, she realized as it suddenly hit her. He wasn’t Mulder. The other man had been telling the truth – he was Mulder, while this man impersonating her partner was Morris Fletcher. And something had to be done to get Mulder back.

As Mulder – Morris – passed her a glass, she looked up at him shyly, a plan formulating in her mind. “Do you know what would really be fun?”

“What?”

Scully dangled a pair of handcuffs in front of him, and sure enough he took the bait. It wasn’t Mulder – the real Mulder would have fallen off the bed before checking her for head trauma.

“Oh yeah. Me first?”

“You first.”

Eagerly he accepted the handcuffs, putting one on his wrist and turning to place the other around the bedpost. “First time. Now what?”

Scully got to her feet and pointed her gun at him. As the man turned back to face her his expression turned to one of alarm. “You’re not Mulder,” she stated.

“What?” He was momentarily distracted as the champagne cork popped. “Baby.”

“Baby me and you’ll be peeing through a catheter.” She was so tempted to shoot, but she needed the real Mulder back – and soon. “Your name is Morris Fletcher. It was Mulder who was arrested in the desert. He was telling the truth about you. Now, how do we get things back to normal?”

“How should I know?” he replied, having tired of keeping up the pretence. “I wouldn’t do it even if I could. You saw my wife. Do you think I want to go back to that? Two kids who’d probably kill me in my sleep for the insurance money. A $400,000 mortgage on a house that just appraised at $226,000. And my job – yee-gods. You think being a man in black is all voodoo mind control. I can see the paperwork.”

“Are you through?” she was tired of him talking.

“As far as I’m concerned, this thing is a gift from heaven. Besides, no one is ever going to believe you so you might as well just get used to me being here.”

That wasn’t going to happen. “Or I just shoot you…baby.”
“I’m telling you, I have no idea how to change things back.”

“What about Mulder’s source? The man he was supposed to meet him in the desert? What about him? Do you know how to get in touch with him?”

“I don’t know anything about that. Sorry. You’re out of luck.”

Before Scully could argue – or shoot him – the phone rang. Neither of them moved, instead waiting for the machine to pick up. Moments later Mulder’s voice rang out, but it was far from the message Scully was used to hearing. “Hello hello. I’m very busy entertaining a special guest. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you.” At least Morris had the decency to look embarrassed, while Scully had to fight the urge to pull the trigger.

“Agent Mulder…” began the man on the answer machine. “I’m trying you one last time. Are you or are you not interested in the classified information I have to give you. Please pick up the phone if you’re there.”

Finally, Scully thought, as she indicated for Fletcher to pick up the phone. It was a step closer to getting rid of this guy and getting her partner back.

xxxxxxxxxx

It was one step forward, two steps back, thought Scully as they drove to meet Mulder – the real Mulder. She’d discovered that Morris Fletcher was impersonating her partner, and finally thought she had a chance at getting the real Mulder back, but apparently it wasn’t going to be the case.

As they pulled up alongside Mulder’s car following their visit to the Gunmen, Scully got out of the vehicle, leaving Morris to do whatever the hell he wanted. She just wanted her old partner back and for things to go back to normal. Spotting Mulder ahead, she walked over towards him. He looked up as he saw her approaching.

“You don’t look too happy. Don’t tell me I’m going to have to put two of the most irritating and spoilt kids through school?”

Scully couldn’t quite believe it. He sounded like her partner, but he looked anything but Mulder. “That is you in there Mulder, isn’t it?” He nodded. “I uh…I just got off the phone with Frohike. They were able to download and analyze the crash data and yes, there was an anomalous even that night.”

“And how do I get it back?”

“Well…” she began. “That’s just it. It’s all about random moments in time, about a series of variables approaching an event horizon. And even if we could recreate that moment…if we could sabotage another craft…Mulder if we were…if we were off….if the event were off by even one millisecond.”

He got where she was going with this. “I might wind up with my head in a rock.”

“Something like that, yeah,” she answered sadly.

“How’s Ash?” Mulder asked, suddenly missing the youngster more than anything. He hated the fact he couldn’t see her or even speak to her, and that Morris Fletcher was now spending time with her.

“She’s good. She misses you. Well, the real you I mean. She doesn’t understand why Mulder
doesn’t spend much time with her, or why he cancelled their baseball evening because he had a date –“

“He cancelled on her?” Mulder asked, trying hard not to think about Fletcher posing as him on dates. God, he thought. Who on earth had he been dating? “What an asshole.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Scully agreed.

“I miss Ash too. Try and tell her that, won’t you? Tell her I’m sorry for being an ass, and that I love her.”

“I will do.” Smiling sadly, Scully reached over and squeezed his hand.

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve managed to piss his family off too.”

Her smile widened. “What did you do?”

“Well for starters his wife thinks I’m having an affair, and then there’s his two bratty kids who think I’m the most embarrassing dad ever.” He paused. “I’m not an embarrassment, am I?”

Scully shook her head, still amused. “No, I know of at least one little girl who thinks you’re the coolest person ever.” She sobered. “I miss you. He…” she trailed off, leaving Mulder to wonder exactly what was happening in his absence.

“What about him?” he asked. “I mean me. Whatever. Whoever he is.”

“Agent Mulder has become AD Kersh’s new golden boy. He’s been tasked with returning the flight data recorder that he and I stole. The son of a bitch confesses to Kersh even more than I do to my priest. I’m just tagging along for the ride.”

This got Mulder’s attention. “What do you mean, ‘just tagging along?’”

“I’m out of the Bureau. I’ve been censured and relieved of my position.”

“No,” said Mulder firmly. “You can explain it to them like you explained it to me. You have the data. You can make them understand. You can get your job back.”

Scully looked up at him fondly. “I’d kiss you if you weren’t so damn ugly.”

He wished she’d kiss him anyway. He missed her, and the thought of not kissing Scully again was too much to bear. Somehow he had to get back to himself, to Scully and Ashley. “I love you Scully.” He spoke without thinking, and the words were a surprise to both he and his partner. However he didn’t regret saying them, only that he wasn’t in his own body when he did so.

Once the shock had faded, Scully smiled. “You know you made Ashley very happy the last time you said that.”

“I didn’t say this for Ashley. I was hoping to make you happy.”

“Mulder –“

“Listen Scully, I – “ Before he could continue, the car horn blasted out, startling both he and Scully. Fletcher sat in the car, his head out of the window as he shouted over to them. “Take a picture, it’ll last longer.”

“Not a bee this time,” Scully murmured under her breath, while Mulder spoke through clenched
teeth, clearly not amused.

“If I shoot him, is it murder or suicide?”

“Neither if I do it first.” He was half tempted to let her too, but he knew he would never get back to Scully if she did. His partner squeezed his arm and then began to walk towards the car.

“Hey Scully,” he called, stopping her in her tracks. She looked scared, as though worried he was going to tell her he loved her again. But, though he wanted to, he didn’t, instead holding out his hand to her. She held out her palm and watched as he dropped a handful of sunflower seeds into it, before snatching one back and eating it. With a heavy heart, Mulder then looked on as his partner walked away from him and back to his former life.

xxxxxxxx

“Hey mom?” As Ashley tucked into her cereal, Scully hurried into the kitchen in search of her keys.

“Hmm?”

“What time’s Mulder coming over?”

“He’ll be here any second,” replied Scully, frowning as she glanced at her watch. “So we’ll need to hurry.” Her meaning was clear – Ashley needed to hurry. Mulder and Scully were having to carpool after her car gave up the ghost the following evening. Mulder had volunteered to drop Ashley off at school on the way to the office.

“Is Mulder going to be normal today?”

“What do you mean?”

Ashley shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I had a dream that Mulder didn’t know who I was and thought I was a boy –“

“It was definitely a dream sweetie. Mulder would never forget who you were.” But something about Ashley’s words made Scully stop and think. She could have almost sworn she heard Mulder refer to Ashley as “he,” yet somehow she knew it wasn’t true.

“That’s what I thought too,” answered Ashley. “But it just felt real.” Finishing her cereal, Ashley rose from her chair and carried her bowl over towards the counter.

“Don’t worry about the dishes now Ash, we don’t have time,” said Scully as she heard a knock at the door. Of all the days Mulder had to be early, she thought to herself. “Quick sweetheart, go grab your bag and let’s go. Don’t forget your jacket,” she added, retrieving her own and throwing open the door to reveal her partner. Mulder yawned before muttering a “good morning” and stepped inside the apartment.

“Late night?” Scully asked dryly.

“You don’t want to know. Let’s just say the Gunmen played the ultimate trick on me and my apartment.”

“Ok…” Taking his word for it, Scully slipped on her jacket and placed her keys inside the pocket. She paused as she felt something else inside the pocket, and withdrew her hand to reveal half a dozen sunflower seeds. She looked up, confused, at her partner, who grinned at her. “You been
sneaking some of my seeds?”

He swiped one out of her hand and put it in his mouth.

Scully eyed him suspiciously. “Mulder, I didn’t put those in there.”

“Well don’t look at me.”

“Who else would it be?”

“What about Ashley?”

“Scully?”

“Scully doesn’t have sunflower seeds. Not after she almost choked to death last time.” Scully paused, deep in thought as a vision came to mind – of her and Mulder out in the desert; he was Mulder and yet he wasn’t – it was him and yet he had the face of another man. He was telling her that he loved her and Ashley. And then, as she was walking away from him, he handed her the sunflower seeds, telling her it was something to remember him by.

“Scully?”

Coming back to herself, Scully registered her partner calling her, clearly bemused. “Sorry?”

“Earth to Scully? Where did you go?”

“Nowhere.” She shook her head, clearing the vision from her mind. It was just a dream, even if it did feel somewhat real.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.” And with that, Scully forgot all about the sunflower seeds and everything that had happened with Morris Fletcher.
Mulder was surprised when, once they’d exchanged Christmas gifts, Scully kicked off her shoes and sat back on the sofa, as though she intended to stay for a while. Not that he minded – far from it – but he thought she would have been in a hurry to get back to her mom’s in time for their early start. Apparently not.


“I’d better not. I have to drive.”

“It’s getting late. Are you sure you want to drive in that?” He gestured towards the window where he could just make out the snow falling in earnest now. “You could stay here?” Scully glanced over at him and he felt his cheeks redden. “I’ll wake you well in time to get back to your mom’s.”

“I’m not sleeping on the sofa Mulder.”

“I know. I’ll sleep on the sofa. You can take the bed.”

Scully raised her eyebrows. “You have a bed? Since when?”

“The point is, if you want to stay you can. Don’t drive if you don’t feel up to it, you’ve had a long day.” No thanks to him and his haunted house idea. He didn’t want to get into the topic of his bed, particularly as he had no idea where it had come from, though he had a feeling it had something to do with Frohike.

“You know, you could come to my mom’s if you wanted. I know Ashley would love to have you there. My mom would too.”

“Will Bill be there?” After a moment Scully nodded, smiling sheepishly. “I think I’ll pass then.”

“He and Tara wanted to join us this year so we could celebrate Matthew’s birthday.”

“Of course.” And Matthew’s birthday also meant the first anniversary of Emily’s death. It was no wonder Scully wasn’t in any hurry to get back to her family – it just brought back memories of a little girl with Ashley’s eyes and smile, who wasn’t meant to be. “How are they doing?”

“They’re good.”

“And you?”

“I’m fine.” She regretted the words as soon as she uttered them. Mulder’s expression told her that he didn’t believe her either. “It’s hard to explain,” she admitted. “She was mine but she wasn’t. I think I miss what might have been. I just wish I could have known her better. She was so smart and inquisitive –“

“She reminded me a lot of Ashley,” supplied Mulder and Scully nodded in agreement.

“She was just like her at that age. Maybe Emily was a little quieter, but then she didn’t really know me. I wasn’t anyone to her.”

“You were Scully. She may not have known who you were exactly, but she knew you were there and that you cared for her.”
“She just wasn’t meant to be,” his partner added sadly, and Mulder reached over and took hold of her hand.

“I know it’s not much of a consolation, but at least you knew her. You knew her and you loved her and you made her feel safe during her last hours. And…” he cast his mind back to the vial containing Scully’s ova that he’d discovered, that he’d yet to tell his partner about. “I–” Before he could go any further, he was cut off by the shrill ringing of Scully’s cell phone.

Smiling apologetically, she quickly answered it, and Mulder sat back with a sigh, realizing he’d missed his chance to tell her of his discovery. “Hello?” A pause. “Aren’t you supposed to be asleep? Does Grandma even know you’ve stolen her phone?”  *Ashley,” Scully mouthed over to Mulder, as though he didn’t know. “I’ve had some work to do, but I’ll be back there by the time you’ve woken up tomorrow…I’m not sure…I’ll ask him. Ok, well you’d better get some sleep or else Santa won’t visit you.” There was a pause before Scully laughed. “He might exist. Oh really? Well I guess you’ll have to wait until the morning to see if you have any presents….ok then…now go to sleep…I love you too sweetheart…” As Scully glanced over at him, Mulder realized that Ashley was now talking about him. “I will do. Yes he loves his presents and said thank you to you…I might have something here with your name on, but you’ll have to wait until tomorrow….ok, I will…I’m sure he’ll say that he loves you too.” Smiling, Mulder nodded. “See you in the morning baby. Goodnight.” Hanging up, Scully returned her cell to her pocket. “That was Ashley, in case you didn’t guess.”

“Is she ok?”

She nodded. “She just wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to miss Christmas. Well…” she corrected herself. “She wanted to make sure I’m there so she can get her gifts in the morning. Threats of Santa not delivering her presents don’t quite cut it anymore.”

“She’s all grown up.”

“I know,” Scully replied somewhat sadly. “Sometimes I miss baby Ashley, but then again she’s an amazing kid now. I am biased though.”

“She is a great kid Scully,” Mulder agreed. “You’ve done a great job with her.” She was a great mom, he thought to himself, remembering her ova once again.

“I’ve had a lot of help,” she admitted in the midst of an impressive yawn. “I’d better go.” Her body language told a different story though, and she looked as though she was having difficulty keeping her eyes open.

“Stay Scully.” Mulder repeated his earlier offer. “You need to sleep. Set an alarm and drive back in the morning.”

She shifted against him, and moments later Mulder felt Scully rest her head against his shoulder. “Just for a little while,” she murmured sleepily against him.

“Ok.”

“Mmm set the alarm.”

“I will.” Instead he lifted his arm and wrapped it around his partner, feeling her snuggle up against him. He watched as slowly she fell into a deep sleep, and it wasn’t long before he joined her.
Scully just wanted to go to sleep, wake up and realize it was all a dream – the case, the town, the people, the self-proclaimed “Rain King.” And on top of it, the flying cow that burst through her partner’s hotel room the previous day, meaning that for the remainder of their time in Kroner, they had to share a room. It wasn’t as though it was the first time they’d shared a motel room – or even a bed – but a lot had happened since then. First there’d been the near kiss in Mulder’s hallway, right before Scully was stung by a bee and woke up again in Antarctica, and then there was the appearance of Diana Fowley. She and Mulder had dated in the past; Scully knew that, but it was Mulder’s attitude when he was in the presence of Diana, that annoyed her. She might as well not have existed when Diana was around. During the previous night, things hadn’t been too awkward between the two of them – after they’d finished arguing over Mulder’s theory that Holman was the one “controlling the weather,” they’d both showered and retired for the evening, Scully had fallen asleep more or less straight away. But that was last night. Tonight her senses were on edge following the school reunion and her chat in the bathroom with Sheila. She’d spoken to the other woman about friendships and relationships, and only then did she realize she was speaking about her and Mulder. “The best relationships,” she’d confided to the other woman, “are frequently the ones rooted in friendship. You know, one day you look at the person and you see something more than the night before.” It was true. Her view of Mulder had shifted over the years – he’d slowly inserted himself into her and Ashley’s lives, and he was slowly getting under her skin. She knew how he felt about her – at least before Diana fully inserted herself back into his life. Sheila had asked her outright if they’d ever kissed, and after hesitating, Scully shook her head. It was none of Sheila’s business after all, plus it wasn’t as if anything had come from those kisses. Their relationship hadn’t gone any further, and if anything, since the arrival of Diana, they’d taken a step back away from one another.

Once Holman had declared his love for Sheila and the storm had passed, Mulder surprised his partner when he held out a hand to her, silently asking her to dance. She’d presumed that since their job was now over, he’d be eager to get back to the motel and start typing up his theories, but it wasn’t the case. “C’mon Scully.”

“Mulder –“

“What?”

“This isn’t professional –“

He grinned. “Since when have we been professional? It’s only a dance. Besides,” he said, glancing around. “It’s not like anyone is paying any attention to us anyway.” It was true, Holman and Sheila still only had eyes for one another, and Daryl and Cindy were attached at the lips.

Relenting, Scully took hold of her partner’s hand and let him lead her to the dance floor. Mulder let go of her hand and turned to face her. Stepping in closer, he slipped his arms around her waist, pulling her in towards him, while Scully’s arms slid around his neck as they swayed slowly in time with the music.

“Did you go to your school reunion Scully?” Mulder asked, glancing around the room.

“I didn’t.”

“Really?”
She looked up at him. “That surprises you?”

“Well no, I just thought…I’d have thought you’d have had a lot of friends from school.”

“I did. I do,” she corrected herself, but Mulder had already caught her words. “I mean I still see a few people from school, but a reunion wasn’t really my thing. That and I couldn’t get a decent babysitter,” she admitted. “Ashley was pretty young and I felt bad about leaving her at the time. I still do.”

Mulder squeezed her gently. “I’m sorry to keep dragging you away from her.”

“You’re not dragging me away from anyone. I’m here because I choose to be. Ashley understands that.”

“I miss her,” he admitted, and Scully hummed in agreement.

“She misses you too.”

“I haven’t seen her lately.”

“No, you haven’t.” And there was a reason for that, Scully thought. And the reason was Diana. Mulder seemed to spend most of his time chasing her around than with Ashley. She said nothing though, not willing to bring up the other woman and cause an argument.

The song finished but Mulder didn’t relinquish his hold, hoping for another slow song to give him and his partner some time to chat. His hopes were answered when ‘My Girl’ started up. “Ah,” he said, moving in even closer. “This is my favorite.”

“Really?” Scully looked surprised.

“That surprises you?”

“Nothing you do ever surprises me Mulder.”

He wasn’t quite sure if she was kidding or not, but let it go. “I’ve got sunshineeee,” he crooned. “On a cloudy day.” He pulled back as he felt Scully huff against him, and sure enough she was laughing. “Oh god Mulder, please stop.”

“Stop? You don’t like my singing?”

“Funnily enough no, I don’t. Plus people are giving us weird looks right now.”

“Who cares Scully? And does it really bother you what the people here think?”

He had a point. “Well no…”

“There we go then.”

“I never pegged you as a fan of the Temptations.”

“I wouldn’t call myself a fan. I did used to love this song though. I used to sing it all the time but it really annoyed Di –“ He tried to stop himself but it was too late. He felt Scully tense in his arms, and moments later she was pushing him back and stepping out of his grasp.

“We should go,” she said simply. “We’re on a case.” The last thing she wanted to do was get into a conversation about Diana Fowley. The woman had been the elephant in the room ever since she’d
arrived in DC, coming between Mulder and Scully with every opportunity she got. Mulder wasn’t the same when she was around, Scully had noticed, and so had Ashley. Her daughter had even gone to bed in tears a few night’s previously, thinking that Mulder had had enough of her. It was tough to explain to a ten year old that Mulder technically didn’t have any ties to her, and that his free time was now being taken up by his ex-partner, in more than one sense of the world. So Scully didn’t, instead comforting her daughter, claiming that Mulder was just busy and would call her soon, until Ashley fell asleep. Needless to say, Diana wasn’t her favorite person right now, and Mulder wasn’t exactly top of her list either.

“The case is over Scully.”

“And I want to get my notes written up before we fly home. We should go,” she repeated, and that’s when Mulder knew he’d ruined things. Again.

By the time Mulder and Scully left the school reunion, the rain had stopped, and Scully could have almost sworn she saw a rainbow in the night sky – if that was at all possible. As soon as they got back to the motel she shut herself in the bathroom taking the longest shower possible – anything to delay having to share a bed with her partner and force conversation with him. Leaving Mulder just enough hot water for his own shower, she then slipped on her pjs and headed back out into the room, sighing in frustration when she saw him stretched out on his side of the bed, flicking through the television channels.

“It’s all yours.”

“Thanks,” he replied, making no effort to move. Scully rounded the bed and pulled back the comforter on her side, glaring at him pointedly. “Are you going to watch that all night? I’m tired.”

In response, Mulder turned the television off and got out of bed, sulking. Biting back a retort, he headed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. As soon as he was out of sight, Scully let out the breath she was holding. They’d barely spoken since they’d left the reunion, the tension between them at an all-time high. Slipping into bed, Scully switched out the light on her side, rolling over until she’d found a comfortable spot on her back near to the edge of the mattress. The last thing she wanted was to get to close to Mulder during the night. How she wished that damn cow had never fallen through the roof to his hotel room – she could have done with some space between them that night. Closing her eyes, she willed herself to fall asleep but to no avail. Her mind was too busy, she couldn’t get thoughts of Diana out of her head, not to mention her reaction to her. All Mulder had done was merely mention her name – or at least part of it – and Scully had pushed him away. She was tired, she was missing Ashley, she was sad her daughter was learning the tough lessons in life, and she was missing the partner she thought she knew.

Before she could drift off, Scully heard the click of the bathroom door open, and moments later Mulder entered the room. He paused to place his discarded clothes on top of his suitcase, before pulling back the comforter and getting into bed next to her. She glanced over at him, noting he was wearing dark sweats and a light grey tee, and his hair was damp from the shower. Wordlessly he reached out and switched off the light, plunging the room into darkness, and Scully heard him shift restlessly before finally coming to a stop. For a moment she thought she might be lucky and that he might fall asleep straight away, but then he spoke.

“What’s up Scully?”

She swallowed hard, licking her lips before replying. “Nothing’s up. I’m fine.”
“Something is bothering you, I can tell.”

“Maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.” It was a low blow and she knew it.

“Or maybe I do,” he answered sternly. “Listen I know I stepped on your feet a couple of times, but I didn’t think I was that bad of a dancer.” When she didn’t respond, he tried again. “You know this bed is bigger than you think. There’s no need for you to be hanging off the edge like that.”

Damn him, she thought. “I’m fine.” She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of replying.

“Alright Scully, enough’s enough. Something is up with you, and I think I know what that is.”

“Oh do you?”

“It’s Diana, isn’t it?” Silence. “I thought so. You get all weird every time I mention her.”

“I do not.”

“Oh really? Like at the reunion, when you pushed me away? You obviously have a problem with her –”

“I do not have a problem with her.”

“Well clearly you have a problem with something.” More silence. “Oh c’mon Scully.”

“You don’t see it, do you?” she said, suddenly sitting upright and flicking the lamp back on. Mulder squinted up at her. “You don’t see how you act around her.”

“And how do I act?”

“As though she’s the only one around. God damn it Mulder, I’m supposed to be working alongside you and yet I may as well be invisible. You just can’t wait to leave Ashley and me to go running after her. What is it about her Mulder?” She sounded like a jealous, scored lover, but quite frankly she didn’t care.

“I trust her Scully.”

“So you don’t trust me?”

“That’s not what I meant. I trust you too, you know that but…I know you think she’s up to something, but I disagree. I know her.”

“Just how well do you think you know her Mulder?” she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer, and moments later, she realized she was right.

“I was married to her.”

Scully wasn’t quite expecting that. She knew they’d been close and that Diana was his “chickadee” as Frohike had called it, but marriage? She didn’t think Mulder was ever the marrying type. Turns out she was wrong. “Married?” She wanted to get back out of bed, get changed and leave. Sleeping in the same bed as her married partner no longer seemed a viable option.

“Yeah.” If his expression was anything to go by, he certainly hadn’t anticipated the two of them having that particular conversation that evening. He looked as though he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. “Married.”
“What happened?” Scully didn’t want to know, but yet she did; she couldn’t stop herself.

“It didn’t work out. The idea of marriage turned out to be more appealing than the reality. I wasn’t exactly the best husband either.” Scully didn’t dare interrupt, but her eyes questioned him. “I was obsessed with my work.” He grinned momentarily, his smile fading when he realized Scully wasn’t returning it. “Some things never change, right? Diana shared my passion for the work to start with and then…”

“Then?”

“Then she found other ways to occupy her time. With other people.”

His meaning was more than clear. “Oh.”

“It wasn’t her fault. Neither of us put enough effort into the marriage. Then one day she was offered a job abroad, and then that was the last I saw of her. Until now.”

Scully tried to determine whether Mulder sounded regretful or not. “Are you still married?” God she felt sick. She couldn’t face him if he was still married to Diana – the original Mr and Mrs Spooky. God, did everyone else at the Bureau know? Was that why they were laughing at her? She felt sick. And then there was the matter of her sharing a bed with a married man, of kissing him, on more than one occasion. She’d always told herself that she’d steer clear of married men – she’d already learned from that mistake, and wasn’t about to repeat it.

“About fourteen months after we married, we got divorced.”

Thank god. Scully let out the breath she’d been holding. “I’m sorry.” She wasn’t, not really. At least not about the relationship. She was sorry she’d ever considered that she and Mulder could be more than friends. She was sorry that a stupid cow had trashed her partner’s room and forced the two of them to share a bed. She was sorry about a lot of things.

“Yeah.” Mulder was quiet momentarily. “You should give her a chance Scully. She’s not the enemy.”

That was a matter of opinion, thought Scully. “I’m tired Mulder. I need to get some sleep.”

“You know you can tell me anything, don’t you Scully? If there’s something on your mind just say. I know you don’t like Diana, and you’ve never exactly kept it secret.”

“Diana may not be the enemy to you Mulder, but neither am I, and neither is Ashley. I’d appreciate it if you’d stopped treating us as though we were.”

“I don’t.”

“Ashley hasn’t seen you in weeks. She thinks she’s done something wrong.”

At least Mulder had the decency to look ashamed. “I’m sorry, I’ve just been busy.”

“With Diana.”

“Jesus Scully, will you just drop it? You’re acting like –“

“Like what?” She dared him.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”
“Fine.” Shifting onto her side, Scully suddenly flicked out the light.

“Oh come on Scully.”

“I’m tired. You can do what you like, but I’m going to sleep.”

“Whatever.”

Scully heard Mulder roll over and thump his pillow, and half wondered whether he was pretending it was something – or someone – else. She closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep, wishing she’d never heard of the name Diana Fowley.
Chapter 57

Ashley ran into the hospital room, stopping short as she took in the sight of her mom. Propped up in bed, Scully was wired up to a series of machines, a morphine drip providing welcome relief from the excruciating pain in her stomach. "Mom?" Ashley whispered, her eyes brimming with tears. She failed to see Scully break out into the first genuine smile since she was first rushed into the hospital just a few days prior.

"Hey baby," Scully replied softly, trying not to let it show that even speaking was requiring more effort than she felt she could give. "What are you doing here?"

What Scully wasn't expecting was for her daughter to burst into tears. "Oh sweetheart, come here." She moved to hold open her arms but thought twice, wincing as she felt a slight pull on her abdomen. Ashley got the hint though and ran across to her bedside. "Grandma told me you....you got shot." Her tears came in full flow now, and Scully's own eyes brimmed with tears.

"It's ok..." She said soothingly. "I'm fine, see? It's just a bit of a scratch but it's nothing. Come here." Patting the mattress, Scully watched as Ashley stretched out on the bed next to her and wrapped her arm around her, careful not to touch her stomach.

"She...she said you almost died."

"Grandma said that to you?"

"She called Mrs Browning to ask her to look after Tabytha."

Her mother should be more careful when it came to arranging a cat-sitter with eavesdropping grandchildren around, thought Scully. "Ashley sweetheart, I'm fine." "Does it hurt?"

"A little," she admitted. "Remember when you had your operation to remove your tonsils?" Ashley nodded against her chest, her tears soaking through her hospital gown. "Well it hurts a bit like that."

"Will ice cream help like it did me?"

"I wish it could baby, but I won’t be having ice cream for a while." Scully could have sworn her daughter was more upset about that than anything else. "Where’s Grandma?" she asked sleepily, her pain meds making her drowsy.

"She’s speaking to the doctor."

"I am a doctor. She could have just spoken to me." "She said you’re a bad patient and that you won’t tell her everything," Ashley replied matter-of-factly. "Where’s Mulder?"

He’d flown out to New York the day of the shooting of course, and had been by Scully’s bedside as she regained consciousness following her operation. Maggie and Ashley had also wanted to fly out immediately but he’d managed to deter them for a day, reminding Maggie that Scully was going to be in no condition to greet her daughter for a while. Not wanting to upset Ashley further, Maggie had agreed, on the condition that Mulder keep them updated practically hourly. Now, unable to
wait any longer, they were in New York and had rushed straight to the hospital.

“He’s gone back to the hotel to take a shower. He’ll be back soon.”

“I don’t want you to die mom,” Ashley said suddenly, burying her head in the crook of Scully’s neck. Scully only wished she had enough energy to hug her daughter tightly and reassure her that everything would be fine.

“I’m not going to die sweetheart, not for a long long time.” She tried not to think about Fellig, about what it seemed that he did for her. “This was just an accident, and I’m ok.”

“Please don’t leave me mom.”

“I’m not going to leave you sweetheart. I’m going to be ok, we’re going to be ok.” And before she could stop herself, Scully closed her eyes and drifted off, leaving Ashley clinging onto her for dear life.

Scully looked up and smiled as Mulder and Ashley walked into the room, Ashley swinging a carrier bag in her left hand. “Hey guys,” she said, placing the gossip magazine she was half-reading to one side. She’d already flicked through it twice, and even then she hadn’t paid much attention to the content. She wasn’t one for celebrity gossip, but Ashley had brought it for her, and she didn’t want to appear ungrateful. She was just bored, so damn bored. It had now been a week and a half since she’d been shot, and she was slowly going out of her mind. She was sick and tired of the same four walls of her hospital room, and just wanted to get home. That wasn’t possible just yet, but the previous afternoon Mulder had sweet-talked one of the nurses into providing them with a wheelchair so that he and Ashley could take Scully out for a quick walk. It was all too brief, and Scully’s muscles suffered from it afterwards, but it was great to get some fresh air. It made Mulder feel helpful too. He and Maggie had been taking it in shifts to be by Scully’s bedside, while Ashley had been reluctant to leave her mom for too long. Mulder knew she didn’t want to let her out of her sight, just in case something happened to her. Ashley had already been in tears a few nights before bedtime while Mulder was looking after her, scared that if she fell asleep, something would happen to Scully in the meantime. Thankfully though, as the days wore on, she was getting better at leaving her mom to go have lunch with her grandma or Mulder, or to go back to the motel to do her homework. Maggie had spoken to her class teacher, informing her of the situation and explaining that Ashley would be in New York for a few days more, until her mom was transferred back to DC. Her teacher was of course understanding, but emailed across some work for Ashley to do, to her dismay. She wasn’t quite sure what excuse Mulder had given to Skinner, but like Ashley he seemed unwilling to leave her side too. She suspected that guilt played a big part too, given that he no doubt blamed himself for not being there when she was shot, as well as lingering guilt following their recent arguments over Diana. Still for now, the two of them had been on better terms since her hospitalization, and Scully only hoped it continued.

“Hey mom.”

“Have you had a fun morning?” Scully asked her daughter as she walked around to the bed and gave her a kiss. Perching on the edge of the mattress, Ashley nodded. “Uh huh. It was cool.”

“What did you guys get up to?” It had been Mulder’s idea to lure Ashley away from the hospital to give her a break, not to mention let Scully have some peace.

“We went to the Yankees store.”
“Now there’s a surprise,” her mom remarked dryly, eyeing the carrier bag her daughter was carrying. “What did Mulder buy you?”

“Not much,” the man in question replied as he took a seat next to the bed. Scully knew he was lying.

“Oh really? C’mon, show me.”

Ashley opened up the bag and removed a shirt. “He got me this…”

“Because you need another jersey.”

“I do.”

“You can never have enough Yankees jerseys Scully,” Mulder piped up, and she grinned.

“So I see.”

“And we got you some presents too mom.” Without relinquishing the bag, Ashley pulled out a variety of clothing, and passed it across to her mom.

“Another jersey for me too?” Scully looked over at her partner. “Mulder, this must have cost you a fortune.”

“I was just thinking that as you’re going to be at home for a while, you need more loungewear.”

“Pjs Mulder?” Scully held up a set, before wincing, realizing she’d overdone it.

“Are you ok?” Ashley immediately asked, and her mom nodded.

“I’m fine, I just moved too quick. Thank you for my presents baby,” Scully added, eager to deter the conversation. She knew Ashley was extremely worried about her, and the last thing she wanted to do was give her more cause for concern. “And thank you Mulder.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m ready to go home.”


“You sound like you’re a doctor Mulder. You’re a terrible liar too.”

“The doctors say you’re making a great recovery. You’ll be home in no time. And…” he added somewhat nervously. “We need to talk about what happens when you’re back in DC.”

“What do you mean?” Scully was suspicious, he could see it in her eye.

“Well you won’t be able to be alone for a while. You’re still recovering.”

“I won’t be alone,” she replied, her eyes darting across to Ashley.

“You know what I mean Scully. You’re recovering from a serious injury. You’ll need some help, at least at first.”

“I’m sure my mom can pop in from time to time.”

“Scully —“
“I just don’t want my mom coming to live with us.”

“Why not mom?” asked Ashley, and Scully sighed, looking up to the ceiling as though for inspiration.

“Because sweetie, your grandma…she…it’s not fair on her, plus she’s got Tabytha.”

“Tabytha?” enquired Mulder.

“Her cat.”

“She got a cat?”

“My brother got it for her a few weeks ago. He figured it would be good company for her.

“Tabytha….a tabby?”

Scully shook her head, smiling. “No.”

“Oh.” He looked adorably confused. “Am I missing something?”

“No. That’s what you get when you let Ashley name your pets.”

“Well I’m glad she didn’t name my fish.”

“Your fish don’t last long enough to name Mulder.”

“Touche.” He grinned before his expression turned to one of concern as Scully tried – and failed – to stifle a yawn. “Are you tired?”

“A little bit,” Scully admitted.

“Well we’ll leave you to it in a second. We’ve got big plans this afternoon.”

Ashley nodded in agreement.

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“We’re going up the Empire State Building,” her daughter answered excitedly, and Scully made a mental note to thank her partner for cheering up Ashley. “And then we’re going shopping.”

“Shopping?” Mulder nodded, though Scully noticed he’d lost some of his enthusiasm. “I think we’re going to owe Mulder a lot of money by the time this is all over.”

He dismissed her comments with a wave of his hand. “You don’t owe me anything. I’m happy to help. Scully…” he tried again. “When you get back to DC you’re going to need someone around. Let me help out for a while.”

“Mulder, no—“

“If don’t want your mom then at least let me come and stay. Just for a few days?”

“Yes!” Ashley exclaimed, clearly believing it was the best idea ever. “Please let Mulder come and stay mom!”

“Mulder, we’ll be fine. I can cope.”
“You’re going to need to rest for a while Scully. Resting means relaxing and doing nothing. Now I
know you’ve got Ash and she can help out a little, but you’re going to need someone else around.”

“Mulder –“

“You know that if I don’t do it, your mom will, don’t you?”

She did know that. And though Scully loved her mom, the last thing she wanted was to live with her again. Those days were over. “But –“

“Please mom!” Ashley repeated.

“You know it makes sense Scully.”

Scully sighed, shaking her head. She knew when she was outnumbered. “I’ll think about it.”

XXXXXXXXXX

“I can’t wait for you to come and live with us Mulder,” Ashley said excitedly as they exited the hospital and headed across the parking lot. “It’s going to be so much fun.”

“Your mom hasn’t said yes yet Ash.”

“I know, but she will.”

“We’ll see.”

“Queequeg will have to sleep in my room for a while in case he bites you.”

At that Mulder couldn’t help but laugh. It was no big secret that the dog and Mulder had taken an instant dislike to one another. “That’s probably a good idea.”

“Can we look for mom’s birthday present later?”

“We sure can.”

“Because I was thinking that we could get her a –“ Ashley was cut off as a car backfired just behind them. Out of the corner of his eye, Mulder saw her startle, and he was mortified as she let out a scream.

“Ashley?”

“Mommy!” Before he could grab her, she’d taken off, running back towards the hospital entrance. Mulder was by her side in an instance, pulling her back into his arms. “Hey, hey Ashley, it’s ok.”

“But mom –“

“Your mom’s fine.” He noticed with horror that she was shaking violently, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“There was a gun.”

“No, no there was no gun. It was just a car, just a car sweetheart. You see?” He pointed into the distance at a car heading out of the parking lot. “There’s no gun.”

“Mom –“
“Your mom’s safe. You wanna go back and check?” After a moment, Ashley nodded, her tears not letting up. “Ok, let’s go.” Taking hold of her hand, Mulder led her back into the hospital and down the corridor towards Scully’s room. He ignored the curious glances he got from the people they passed, focusing only on stopping Ashley from crying. As they reached Scully’s room, he knocked gently, shooting his partner an apologetic look before opening the door. Ashley ran instantly up to her mom, who looked concerned. “What’s happened?”

Burrowing her head into Scully’s neck, Ashley tried to speak but her sobs overcame her. Mulder chose to translate. “There was a car out in the parking lot. It backfired and Ash thought it sounded like a gun. She was worried about you.”

Shifting in the bed, Scully pulled her daughter in towards her, ignoring her pain and enveloping her in her arms. “It’s ok baby. I’m ok. It was just a car.”

“I thought you got shot again.”

“I know. But I’m fine.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“I won’t…I’m ok. You need to stop crying sweetheart, or else you and Mulder are going to be late for the Empire State.”

“I want you to come.”

“Ashley, you know I can’t.”

“I want to go home. I want you to come home. I want you to come home now.”

“I’ll be home shortly, I promise. I just need to get better first.” And Scully knew she’d do all she could to fulfil that promise. “And we’ll both go home and forget all about this, and everything will be ok.”

“And can Mulder come and stay with us?”

If Scully hadn’t known better, she’d have sworn that it was all a ploy just to get her to say yes, but she knew by Mulder’s concern and the state of Ashley that it was genuine. And she also knew she could never say no to her daughter. “I guess we might need a little help,” she conceded. “Alright. But just for a few days.”

She wondered what the hell she’d gotten herself into.
Chapter 58

“How are things going Dana?”

Scully smiled politely as her mom placed the cup of tea in front of her. She’d wanted to make the drinks herself, but Maggie had insisted that she take it easy. It was all anyone ever insisted. Two days out of the hospital and she was going out of her mind. She thought that once she was released things would go back to normal, and that she would finally be able to start taking care of herself once again, but she’d underestimated Mulder. He was relentless, constantly there for her whenever she wanted him, and even when she didn’t. She appreciated him being there for her, she really did, but she also just wanted some time away from him. So she’d sent him off to the grocery store with a huge list, hoping to keep him out of the house for at least an hour or so to give her some time alone with Ashley. And her plan had worked too, until there was a knock at the door barely ten minutes after Mulder had left. Scully had debated ignoring it, but curiosity got the better of her. It was her mother; of course it was her mother.

“They’re fine. I feel good.” That wasn’t entirely the truth. Scully felt a lot better than she had done recently, but she didn’t exactly feel good. She ached all over and it felt like a knife was twisting in her stomach each time she moved. But still, as she kept telling herself, even when Mulder was getting under her feet 24/7, at least it was better than being in the hospital.

“That wasn’t entirely what I meant.” Scully looked at her mother. “I meant how are things with Fox living here?” Her mother’s eyes twinkled, and Scully resisted the urge to roll her own. Maggie was in her element at the fact Mulder had temporarily moved in, and was convinced there was something going on between him and her daughter. Fat chance, thought Scully.

“They’re fine.” Everything was just fine.

“Ashley seems to love having him around.”

“She does.” Ashley had been virtually back to her normal self since they’d been home; glad she had her mom back, and particularly happy at having a new housemate. Just like Mulder had hardly left Scully’s side, Ashley had been stuck to him like glue, insisting that he drive her to school rather than her get the bus, and trying to avoid bedtimes by camping out with him on the couch at night.

“And you?”

“What about me?”

Maggie took a sip of tea, smiling knowingly. “How are you coping with Fox being around?”

“I’m used to spending time with him.” Scully glared at her mom. “We work together remember?”

“I think it’s more than that Dana.”

Sighing inwardly, Scully shook her head. “No mom, it’s not. Mulder and I are friends. He’ll be going home in a few days’ time.”

“Dana, I see the way Fox looks at you. He was distraught when he first heard about your incident. I think it’s more than just friendship.”

“A few months ago I might have agreed with you,” Scully admitted. “But it’s complicated.”
“Isn’t everything?”

“Yes but…” She knew her mom would demand an explanation. “Things have been…difficult… lately.”

“I thought things between the two of you were good?”

“So did I. But…there’s a woman. Another agent.”

“Oh.” It seemed that Maggie had already come to her own conclusion, her smile quickly fading.

“Since she’s been on the scene, mine and Mulder’s partnership has been a little strained. He’s been different.”

“Who is this woman?”

“She’s Mulder’s ex-wife.”

Whatever Maggie was expecting her to say, it wasn’t that. “Fox was married?” she asked, visibly shocked.

“Yes.”

“I’d never have guessed.”

“Me either. I knew they’d had a relationship in the past, but he told me the truth just recently.”

“Are they getting back together?”

“I don’t know,” she answered abruptly. It was something she’d considered ever since he’d confessed to her. She wasn’t sure she even wanted to think about it – Mulder hadn’t been himself since Diana had arrived on the scene. Yes she and Ashley had seen more of him over the past few weeks than she had in recent months, but she had to get shot for it to happen. Scully wasn’t sure what would happen if Diana stayed around in the long term, but she knew it wouldn’t turn out well between her and Mulder. “It’s not something we talk about.”

“Well maybe you should,” her mother replied sincerely. “I may not know Fox particularly well, but I know that he loves you, and Ashley. I’ve known that for a very long time. I hope the two of you are able to sort out your differences soon.”

“Me too mom,” Scully agreed. “Me too.”

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Shit!”

Mulder rushed across to the kitchen counter, catching the toast as it popped up from the toaster. Well, if you could call it toast. It was practically cremated, and not even Mulder would eat it, and he’d eaten a lot of crap in his lifetime. Hastily he opened up the cupboard and threw the offending toast into the trash, burning his fingers in the process. “Shit!” A simple round of toast and he’d managed to ruin that. He wasn’t cut out for housework, he realized. He’d spent the past four days living with Ashley and Scully, and already he’d managed to disappoint both of them. First of all he’d purchased full fat milk by mistake, to Scully’s dismay, and then he’d got the wrong type of orange juice for Ashley. Apparently she only liked the smooth variety, but she’d neglected to tell him that at the store. Scully was suffering from severe cabin fever, and was frustrated at how little
she could do. Mulder knew she hated relying on him, but at that moment she didn’t have any other choice. Right at that moment, she was in the shower, no doubt trying to get some time away from him. Ashley had gone over to her friend’s house for the night at Scully’s encouragement – she was worried about her daughter and wanted her to get back to normal life as soon as possible. Thankfully Ashley was slowly starting to recover after her mom’s incident – she’d had a few nightmares since they’d all been back in DC, but she was now willing to leave Scully’s side, at least for a while.

Grabbing two more pieces of bread, Mulder turned back to the toaster, before catching sight of his watch. He noted the time, realizing that Scully had been in the shower for a long time. Forgetting dinner for the moment, he discarded the bread, left the kitchen and walked towards the bathroom, listening for signs of life. Though the water was still running in the shower, he didn’t hear any signs of life, and alarm bells began to ring.

“Scully?” When he heard no response, he moved closer towards the door. “Scully?” Again nothing. This time he knocked and called out a little louder. “Scully? Are you ok?”

“I’m fine.”

Though his initial panic was over, Mulder could hear the lie in her voice. She wasn’t fine. “Scully…is something wrong?”

A pause, before: “No.”

She was crying, he realized. “Scully, let me in, please.”

“No.”

“Please Scully.” He was worried now, wondering what on earth could be wrong. “I’ll kick the door in if I have to.” He hoped he didn’t have to.

“I’m just…I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not fine Scully and we both know it. Just tell me what’s wrong.” There was no reply, and initially Mulder thought she was ignoring him. That was until he heard the lock turn, before the door opened just slightly, enough for him to see his partner’s eyes looking back at him. “What’s —“

“I’m ok Mulder, I’m just…” her eyes darted away. “It’s just taking a while.”

“Is there anything I can help with?” Mulder’s face flushed as he realized how his words could be interpreted. “I mean…what’s up Scully?”

Scully looked up at the ceiling before stepping back from the door, opening it wider. She’d hastily wrapped a white towel around her body, attempting to conceal her modesty, and her damp hair was dripping water onto her shoulders. He noticed with some sadness that she still wouldn’t meet his eye. “I wanted to wash my hair,” she began quietly. “But whenever I move it pulls on my stomach. It’s ok, I’ll get Ashley to help me tomorrow.”

“So you’re just going to leave the shampoo in your hair?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I can help you,” suggested Mulder, his face now burning.

“No Mulder,” she answered immediately. “Thank you, but no.”
“I don’t mind. I mean…” he stuttered. “All those times you’ve taken care of me Scully, this is my chance to take care of you.”

“No, it’s ok, I can do it.”

“You just said yourself that you can’t.”

“It can wait.”

“You have shampoo in your hair Scully!”

“I just…” Mulder realized in horror that she was tearing up once again, her body beginning to shake, whether it was from the cold or. “I can cope.”

“I’m not saying you can’t cope, not in the slightest.” I’m just saying if you need me, I’m here, and I’m willing to help you.” Though he knew he was fighting a losing battle, he could also see that Scully was considering her options.

“I’m just not used to feeling so helpless,” she finally admitted.

“You’re not helpless –“

“I can’t even wash my own damn hair Mulder!”

“Scully, you’re the strongest person I know. Jesus Scully, you got shot just a few weeks ago! You nearly died, and your body just needs time to recover from its ordeal.” He sighed. “Listen, I’m sorry, I was just offering to help, but if you want me to go and leave you in peace, then I will.”

“I’m just not used to this.” Her tears finally fell over, and she sniffed hard, trying to compose herself.

“I know you’re not. You’re independent and you’re strong, and you’re used to doing everything yourself. I know things haven’t been great for us lately, and I’m sorry, I really am. But I’m here Scully, I really am.”

She nodded through her tears. It was clear to Mulder she was embarrassed, and he couldn’t blame her. He just wished it wasn’t the case, that she could still feel comfortable around him. Just months ago the two of them were sharing kisses and things were looking as though they were developing between them and now…now Scully could barely look him in the eye.

“Ok. How do you want to do this?” They were actually going to do this. Mulder found himself suddenly nervous, wanting Scully to trust him like she used to. He wished he could rewind the past few months, back to when he and Scully were ok.

Without speaking, Scully turned and stepped into the still-running shower, leaving her towel on the edge of the sink. Taking a deep breath, Mulder quickly stripped down to his boxers, not wanting to scare her further, and followed her into the shower. Scully stood under the spray facing him, her eyes firmly closed, and he realized she was shaking. Making an effort not to lower his gaze below her face, Mulder closed the gap between them. He reached up, running a hand through Scully’s hair, trying not to take it personally when she flinched.

“It’s ok,” he said, trying to reassure her. “It’s just me.” He wasn’t sure his words of reassurance made her feel better or worse. Aware that Scully no doubt wanted her ordeal to be over as soon as possible, he made quick work of rinsing out the shampoo and massaging the conditioner into her hair. As she turned to rinse, he allowed himself to glance down, catching sight of the ring of her
tattoo. He’d never seen it before – at least not in the flesh. It was a reminder – at least to him – of the time he’d nearly lost his partner; when she was disillusioned with the X Files, when she suspected she had cancer but said nothing; when she was nearly killed at the hands of her one night stand. But they’d managed to get through that rough time. He just hoped they’d managed to get through this.

When Scully finally turned back to face him, she had her eyes open and seemed surprised – and relieved – to see he was still clothed. Mulder reached out and pulled her into a hug, grateful when she didn’t pull away. “I know things aren’t great right now Scully,” he murmured. “And things have been awkward. But it’ll get better, I promise I’ll make it better.”

Leaning against him, Scully nodded, hoping it was true.

Little did they know things were going to get worse.
Scully followed her daughter into the open plan office, resisting the urge to groan out loud when she saw that Mulder wasn’t alone at his desk. She’d dropped into the office after picking Ashley up from Emma’s, wanting to take pick up a file she’d been working on earlier that day. She hoped Mulder would have gone home by now, but apparently not. Since the night they’d argued with one another in Kroner, things had been tense between them to say the least, and Mulder seemed to withdraw even further. He still called Ashley from time to time, but it wasn’t the same, and her daughter missed him, hell so did she. When they were at work they got on with the job and were civil to one another, but Scully missed seeing her partner outside of work. She missed the old Mulder.

Scully was so engrossed in the scene before her that she didn’t notice Ashley coming to a standstill at the sight of the stranger, and so walked straight into her daughter, who yelped. Her exclaims caught the attention of Mulder and Diana, who looked up from Mulder’s computer. “Hey,” Mulder grinned as he recognized his visitors.

Ashley however didn’t return his smile. “Who are you?” she asked Diana abruptly. She often came to the Hoover building and knew most of her mom’s colleagues, at least by sight. This was the first time she’d met Diana – Scully had tried to keep her daughter away from her since she’d arrived on the scene.

Diana forced a smile at the little girl, though it was clear she wasn’t too impressed at being interrupted. Scully noticed with a roll of her eyes that she edged closer to Mulder. “Hello,” she answered stiffly. “I’m Agent Fowley. And who are you?” Her eyes flitted between Ashley and Scully.

“This is Scully’s daughter,” interrupted Mulder, before Ashley could answer for herself.

“Oh.” Scully wasn’t sure Diana’s face could ever register an expression other than disgust, but she was wrong. Diana couldn’t have looked more shocked if she’d tried. “I wasn’t aware you had a daughter Agent Scully.”

“I’m Ashley,” announced the little girl in question, extending her hand politely. Rather than shake it, Diana turned back to Mulder. “Fox, I really needed your opinion on this case.”

“I miss you Mulder,” Ashley said suddenly, the adults in the room looking over at her. Mulder smiled sadly, but Diana, eager to keep his attention, suddenly addressed the little girl. “I’m sorry, we have important work to do. The FBI is no place for a little girl like you,” she said, smiling down at Ashley. “Perhaps your mom should take you to the park instead.” Whilst Scully’s jaw dropped, Mulder’s concentration was captured by his phone ringing. He answered it straight away, leaving Diana and Scully to square off.

“Was there something you wanted Agent Scully.” Scully nodded, marching over to her desk and retrieving the file.

“We just came to see Mulder,” Ashley said quietly.

“We’re just going,” added Scully. “We’ll see Mulder another time.” Before Ashley could argue, Scully took hold of her hand and led her away. She needed to get them both out of the office before she said something to Diana that she might later regret. Or rather Diana might regret. She was livid, both at how Diana had spoken to Ashley, and also how Mulder had apparently ignored the entire
exchange.

“Who was that lady mom?” asked Ashley as her mom led her towards the elevator. She pressed the button and waiting for the cart to arrive.

“That was Agent Fowley.”

“Does she work with you?”

*Or against me* Scully thought wryly. “She works for the FBI too.”

“She’s not very nice.”

“No she’s not.” If anything, “not very nice” was an understatement. “But you mustn’t let her upset you. She’s not worth it.”

“Do you like her mom?”

Stepping into the empty elevator, Scully waited for Ashley to press the button for the ground floor, before shaking her head. “You know what? No, I don’t.”

“But Mulder does.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Mulder does.”

“I wanted to see Mulder today.”

“I know you did baby, but he’s busy.” He was always busy lately. Even though it was Diana and Spender who were working on the X-Files now, she was always sniffing around Mulder, who was only too happy with the attention. He didn’t realize how much his actions were hurting others. “Maybe you can see him another day.” If Mulder wasn’t still being an asshole, she thought, before realizing that while Diana was on the scene, he probably would be.

“Can we call him later?” The hope in Ashley’s voice only served to anger Scully even further. Her daughter idolized Mulder, and she didn’t deserved to be treated this way.

“We could…” Scully didn’t want Ashley to get her hopes up, especially as it seemed as though Mulder was going to be working late into the night with Diana. “Or…you know what? We could go to the movies instead?”

“Really?”

“Do you have homework to do tonight?”

Ashley shook her head, all thoughts of Mulder now at the back of her mind.

“Well then, let’s go.”

xxxxxxxxx

There had been times over the years when Scully felt like killing her partner – when he’d promised to do their expense reports and failed, when he’d run off and ditched her to investigate a case without her knowing, when he’d admitted he’d been married to Diana Fowley – but never had she felt it so strongly than now. Fair enough it wasn’t his fault – at least not to start with it wasn’t. He’d been summoned – or requested – by Jeffrey Spender, whose mother Cassandra had turned up in a train car, after being operated on by a group of doctors. The doctors subsequently burned alive,
but Cassandra was alive and well, and asking to speak to Mulder. Scully herself had even talked him into going to see her, reminding him that Cassandra could hold the key to finding out who had abducted her, causing her to lose three months of her and Ashley’s life. Originally he’d declined, thinking he’d been set up, but then he and Scully set a plan, and went to visit her at the hospital. Cassandra had told Mulder and Scully her theory – that rebel aliens had killed the doctors who had operated on her. She also told them that the Cigarette Smoking Man was her husband – and Jeffrey’s father. Scully later found that CGB Spender – Smokie’s real identity – and Mulder’s father worked together at the State Department, and that Cassandra was first abducted on the same night as Samantha. They also discovered that the project was still continuing, and that Cassandra’s life was in danger. Scully had returned home that evening, collecting Ashley from Emma’s and taking her back to their apartment. No sooner had they finished eating dinner, Mulder called, asking her to come over, that he had something important to tell her. With Emma not answering her phone and Maggie out for the evening, Scully had no choice but to take Ashley with her. Mulder revealed that he’d also asked Skinner to come over, wanting to keep his superior updated on the situation. Ashley sat engrossed in a book while her mom and Mulder informed Skinner that Cassandra was in danger. Skinner agreed to go to the hospital to help Cassandra, and not long after he left, there was a pounding at the door of Mulder’s apartment. Mulder headed off to answer the door, shooting Scully a look after he looked through the peephole. He opened the door, ushering a frantic Cassandra into his apartment.

“Cassandra?”

“I can’t believe I found you.”

“How did you find us?” Scully asked. “Cassandra?”

“Who’s this?” the woman asked, her attention momentarily diverted by Ashley, who glanced up from her book. “Is this your daughter Agent Scully?”

“I’m Ashley,” the little girl in question answered.

“Ashley, what a beautiful name.”

“How did you get here?” asked Mulder, trying to steer the conversation back on topic. “How did you get out of your room?”

“How did you get your clothes?”

There was another knock at the door.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“Nothing sweetie, everything’s ok.”

“Oh Agent Scully, Agent Mulder, you cannot let them find me.” Cassandra looked petrified as the knocking on the door only intensified. “You cannot let them have me!” Quickly she moved to grab Mulder’s gun and the two of them struggled over it.

“Let go!” Mulder urged, as Ashley put down her book, her story now long forgotten.

“You have got to kill me now!”

“Mom?! ”

“Ashley, I want you to go into Mulder’s room and stay there, ok?” Scully needed her daughter out
of the way. With Mulder and Cassandra fighting over his weapon, the last thing Scully wanted was for her daughter to get caught in the crossfire. “I’ll come and get you shortly. Now please,” she said firmly, and Ashley did as she said, looking somewhat terrified. Not that her mother could blame her, she was scared too.

“If you don’t kill me,” Cassandra warned, practically hysterical now. “It all starts. There won’t be any stopping it. I am the one. You have to shoot me, please!”

As their visitors knocked once again, Mulder unholstered his gun, lifting it and pointing it at Cassandra.

“Mulder, what are you doing?” Scully was horrified. He couldn’t honesty be thinking about shooting Sandra, could he? Ashley was in the next room and there was goodness knows who outside the front door – if he shot her, he’d be ruined.

“Stand away Scully.”

The hell she would. “Mulder! Mulder we have to protect her.”

But he didn’t seem to be listening, instead aiming the gun at Cassandra’s head.

“Shoot me now, before it’s too late!” Sandra pleaded, and Scully tried again.

“Mulder?”

“Shoot!”

But before he could shoot her – or alternatively put down the gun – the front door burst open and in rushed several people, all clad in biohazard suits.

“Who are you?” Mulder cried as the suited figures barged in, blasting them with god knows what.

“Get down! Get down!”

“Who are you?”

The man wouldn’t answer. “Down! Down! On the floor!”

“What’s going on?”

“Get on the ground! Get on the ground!”

All Scully could think about was Ashley in the next room, no doubt scared out of her mind, wondering what was happening to her mom. She wanted to make sure she was ok, but the last thing she wanted was these suited strangers knowing that her daughter was in the apartment – who knew what they’d do to her.

“Who are you?”

“Drop down!” Drop drop!”

Mulder, Scully and Cassandra moved to do as he said, well aware that it was the only way they’d potentially get out of this situation. Out of the corner of Scully’s eye she saw another of the men nailing the door shut.

Mulder tried again. “Who are you?”
“We’re with the Centers for Disease Control. Remain calm and where you are for your own good. You’re gonna be transported to a quarantine facility as soon as we can secure the environment.”

*Secure the environment* They were going to find Ashley, Scully realized. “Quarantine for what?” she asked.

She couldn’t contain her disgust when a familiar figure in a white biohazard suit came walking towards them. “A contagion,” the person said. “A contagion of unknown origin.” They turned to the man next to them. “Get the girl.”

And Scully had to stop herself from launching at the person in front of her. Diana Fucking Fowley.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

This chapter was written by DearPearlie

Scully held on to her daughter’s hand tightly as they were led down to the corridor towards the showers. In front of her walked Mulder and Diana Fowley, still clad in her biohazard suit. The whole evening was rushing by in a blur, all Scully knew was that they were being taken to a decontamination unit. Ashley had been silent since they’d all been forced out of Mulder’s apartment, and Scully knew that her daughter was scared. She was scared too, so she could only imagine what poor Ashley was going through since the strange men had stormed into Mulder’s bedroom and led the little girl out into the living room and into her mom’s arms. Scully was trying to remain calm for the sake of her daughter, but it was proving incredibly difficult, especially as Diana seemed to be behind their containment.

“What are we doing here mom?” Ashley asked in a small voice, but loud enough for Mulder to hear.

“I’m not sure baby”.

“Can we go home soon?”

“I hope so”.

“Why is the nasty lady with us?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Scully saw Mulder huff out a laugh. Diana however, kept her focus straight ahead of her, though Scully suspected she’d heard every word. “I’m not sure. But you trust me, don’t you?” Ashley nodded. “Well trust me when I say that I won’t let anything happen to you. We just need to do what she says, and then we can go home soon”.

At least she hoped so.

As if the whole situation hadn’t been bad enough, they had to endure the embarrassment of showering together too. They were separated by a stall; Ashley and Scully in one shower, and Mulder in another. Thankfully he’d had the decency to turn his back as Scully and Ashley walked in, and he turned away while Ashley took her shower. When it was Scully’s turn a while later, he slowly turned and caught her eye. Scully stepped in front of her daughter, shielding her from him. She glared at Mulder, hating him, hating this whole damn thing. He glanced back, raising his eyebrows as though he was about to come out with one of his innuendos, but then he thought better of it. She knew what he was thinking, that this was the second time in weeks that the two of them had shared a shower. She dared him to look at her like he no doubt wanted to, but he didn’t. Maybe he thought better of it, or maybe he could hear her thoughts and knew that she’d kill him if he even uttered a word.

As soon as Scully’s shower was over, she turned to face her now-shivering daughter, who was
wrapped in a towel. Scully grabbed her own and quickly wrapped it around her, wanting her humiliation over and done with. She turned to see Mulder still looking over at her, and as his eyes caught hers he immediately looked guilty, whether it was at being caught sneaking a peek or at the situation, she didn’t know. “Your scar’s healing nicely”, was all he said, reminding Scully of the shower they shared back at her apartment when he took her in his arms and told her they were going to be ok. Only he lied, things were definitely not ok. But before she could reply, Ashley interrupted.

“What happens now mom?”

“I don’t know sweetheart”, Scully replied honestly, pulling her daughter in for a brief but reassuring hug. “I don’t know”.

Once their showers were over, they were given medical scrubs to wear, Ashley’s set so big they were almost drowning her. They obviously hadn’t much experience with children at the base, something that had been evident from the moment they’d found the little girl at Mulder’s apartment. They were led to another room, where they were checked by yet more strangers for radioactivity; yet more strangers poking and prodding at them.

“There must be some kind of mistake”, commented Mulder as a gentleman checked him over. “I signed up for the aromatherapy treatment”.

The man said nothing, though he didn’t look too impressed with Mulder’s idea of a joke.

“Are we going to be able to talk to somebody who can tell us what this is all about?”

Still there was no answer, and the technicians turned and left.

“Where the hell do you think we are?” asked Mulder.

“I think, based on our travel time, probably Fort Marlene. High risk decontamination and quarantine”.

“I want to go home mom”, moaned Ashley, and Scully wished she could give her daughter what she wanted. Before she could reply though, the door opened and in walked three technicians, one male and two female. The male walked over to Mulder, while the women approached Scully and Ashley, and began checking them over. Ashley wriggled uncomfortably one of the woman took her temperature. Diana Fowley also entered the room, clearly satisfied they weren’t going to pose any threat to her, now wearing her work suit as opposed to her biohazard outfit. Scully wanted to wipe her smug smile off of her face.

“I’m going to beg for your understanding and forgiveness and offer my humblest apologies for the way this went down”, she began. “I didn’t have a lot of choices. I owe your neighbors apologies as well. It’s going to be some time before they get back in the building. We’re still acting on a CDC Level Four quarantine protocol”.

“Based on what information?” asked Scully, clearly not believing a word.

“That Cassandra Spender had contracted a highly contagious vectoring organism, which produces a spontaneous cellular breakdown and combustion”.

“What?”
“She was and remains the only surviving victim of an unspecified medical experiment that killed seven doctors with violent and unexplained burning”.

“Who called you?” asked Mulder.

“Agent Spender”.

“Where’s Cassandra?”

“She’s isolated…pending full and satisfactory medical evaluation”.

Scully wasn’t impressed with her answers. “Cassandra Spender was in a general hospital environment for days. We met with her, and yet on a whim you call in the third battalion. It’s unjustified and highly suspicious as to motive”.

“Scully –” Mulder warned.

“What motives are you suspecting?”

“Your isolation of Cassandra?”

“She’s Patient Zero”.

“No one is sick or infected here. I mean, I assume that based on you walking in here dressed to the nines offering apologies masquerading as explanations”.

“Scully”. Mulder tried again, firmer this time. He hated it when she was like this, trying to do battle with his ex-wife.

“Mulder, I want to see Cassandra”.

“I told you”, Diana replied, her patience also wearing thin. “She’s isolated”.

“Yes, and I am a medical doctor”.

“Who is suspended indefinitely from her position at the FBI”.

“C’mon sweetheart”, said Scully to her daughter, as she angrily tore the blood pressure cuff off of her arm. “Let’s go”. With that, she took hold of her Ashley’s hand and pulled her out of the room, not willing to spend a moment longer with Mulder and Diana.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Scully swallowed hard as she heard the buzzer. Frohike smiled grimly at her before walking off to answer the door. She knew who it was; they all did. Mulder. She’d called him just a short while before, asking him to meet her there, telling him it was urgent. She could hear him and Frohike exchanging whatever passed as “pleasantries” between the two, and figured she had just enough time to make sure that Ashley was out of earshot. A lot of stress had been placed on the little girl’s shoulders recently, and she had gone through things no child should have to even imagine. And though lately, those things had been happening to her little girl as she stood directly by her side, Scully still adamantly refused to leave her with anyone. Cassandra popping back into their lives, Agents Fowley and Spender, doctors burned alive, biohazard suits... everything was spinning out of control and everything was pointing to something big. A huge change or shift. Five years ago just before the X-Files were closed for the very first time, Mulder had pointed out a chrysalis to her and said exactly that, and he’d been right. Not that she was beginning to accept his theories, far from it.
But she could feel in her bones a sense of dread, and Scully would sooner die than get caught in a situation where she couldn’t protect her daughter. She already felt like enough of a bad mother.

“Ash, think you’ve had enough of that?” Scully asked, referring to the video game she was playing. The Gunmen’s lair was teeming with them, which was why Ash liked being there so much.

“Not really,” the ten-year-old retorted, not looking away from the TV screen. She’d been really quiet since the quarantine, so Scully had been giving her her space, but her attitude still wasn’t acceptable.

“Well, that’s tough, because you need to find something else to do while I talk to Mulder,” Scully explained while switching off the TV, enraging her daughter.

“Why do I have to go? Why do I have to do anything you tell me to?” Ashley uncharacteristically flipped out.

“Because I’m your mother, that’s why. And I suggest you drop the tone otherwise you can kiss your allowance goodbye.”

“Who cares? That stupid lady said you got fired, so I probably wasn’t going to get an allowance anyway.”

Ashley had certainly talked back before, she was a regular child and had picked up on Mulder’s stubborn steak to boot (in Scully’s opinion), but it may have been the absolute worst time for her to assert herself against her mom. The most awful part about it was she had every reason to be upset. Scully herself was stressed and angry about everything that had been going on lately, she couldn’t imagine what her little girl was feeling.

“My job is none of your business, young lady. Now, you get up off that couch, and you march yourself into – ”

“Mulder!” despite Scully’s best efforts to get her daughter to move, Mulder showing up did exactly the trick and she immediately flung herself into his arms.

“Mulder! ” despite Scully’s best efforts to get her daughter to move, Mulder showing up did exactly the trick and she immediately flung herself into his arms.

“Mulder, where have you been? We waited for you outside after we got dressed,” Ashley admitted, making her mom’s face flush red and causing her to look down at her feet. A car and driver had been assigned to them once they were considered “all clear,” but since Scully hadn’t seen hide nor hair of her partner since after their stint with the decontamination unit, she’d made them wait. And wait. And wait. Even after she knew she should just take her daughter and go, she waited. For nothing. Mulder never showed, and it was only after Ashley began complaining of hunger that Scully decided he wasn’t coming.

“They gave me the wrong shoes,” Mulder didn’t lie, though he omitted the part of the story where he found a sick and scared Marita Covarrubius hiding in a storage room.

“Ashley,” Scully tried once more, “Mulder and I have a lot to talk about, so you need to go into the other room.”

“Don’t make me go, Mulder. She’s always making me go into the other room while bad things happen and I don’t want anything bad to happen anymore.”

Scully’s heart was breaking. She’d already exposed her little girl to too much, and it was having a profound effect on her. And now she was turning Mulder against her.
“Nothing bad is going to happen, okay? I’ll make sure of it. But you have to listen to your mom,” thankfully, Mulder wasn’t going to betray her in this aspect of her life. Yet.

“Come on, kiddo,” Langly piped up, “there’s a pint of Chubby Hubby in the freezer and we have to eat it before Frohike does.”

Ashley gradually let go of Mulder, very interested in Langly’s offer. Once they got her in the kitchen, it would be easy enough to distract her with cartoons that were constantly available thanks to a small black and white TV sat next to the sink and stolen cable. But Scully felt like her daughter’s worst enemy once again as she walked over to a side table where she had dropped off her purse earlier and pulled out a small black bag from within it.

“Make sure you check your sugars first.”

Rolling her eyes, Ashley made the familiar trip to the Gunmen’s kitchen.

“So what is it, Scully? What did you need me to come all the way down here for?”

There was that tone again. The tone that made her feel like she and Ashley were nothing more than annoyances to him.

“I’ll ask you to hear me out before you launch any objections. Mulder, I asked them to pull up everything they could on Diana Fowley.”

Mulder rolled his eyes in frustration. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Mulder, she’s playing you for a fool,” Scully felt like crying. Did Mulder really place such little value on her judgement that he would think she was doing all of this purely out of jealousy or cattiness?

Dismissively, Mulder defended his ex-wife. “I know her, Scully. You don’t.”

“You knew her, Mulder. You don’t anymore. I think we can prove that to you.”

Knowing the emotions between the partners could create a barrier of understanding, Byers tried to explain what he felt Scully could not. “She took a position in the FBI’s Foreign Counterterrorism Unit in 1991. Seven years in Europe.”

“Yet there isn’t a single piece of information available on her activities in the FBI files,” Scully added.

In another attempt to condescend, Mulder feigned shock by gasping. “I hope you’ve got something more than that to indict her with.”

Fine. If he wanted to fight that way, Scully could hold her own. Stepping over to one of the Gunmen’s many computers, she tapped in some information and pulled up a familiar screen.

“Travel records. Pulled from airline manifests that have been purged from her FBI records. Extensive movement throughout Western Europe. Almost weekly trips to and from Tunisia.”

“For the purpose of what?”

“Well that’s what we couldn’t figure,” Langly said, returning from the kitchen Ashley-less. “Until we took a flare and found this,” Scully moved out of his way as he accessed more information on
the computer.

Mulder knew what they were before Frohike stated the obvious, “Mutual UFO Network logs.”

“MUFON,” he mumbled.

Scully thought maybe, maybe something was clicking inside of him. Maybe she was getting him to understand that this was about more than just defending her territory. “Special Agent Diana Fowley of the FBI was visiting every European chapter, collecting data on female abductees.”

But with his very next breath, Mulder shattered all hope. “So she’s collecting data? Big deal.”

“Or hiding it.”

“Scully, you’re reaching,” he accused.

“Mulder, when I was abducted, a chip was put in my neck. Then I happened upon a MUFON group filled with women who had the same experience,” she was searching for something, anything in his face that told her that he remembered how hard that part of her life had been. She hadn’t known how to feel when she woke up in a Bethesda hospital, no memories after being kidnapped from her home and thrown in the back of a trunk, then being told it was three months later. And because she knew Mulder relied on her, she’d gone back to work right away, telling herself that it was exactly the therapy she needed to stave off the nightmares and occasional flashback. Just when she felt that she had really overcome the ordeal, she found the group of women in Allentown and the chip. Fast forward a year and all of those women were dead of the same cancer Scully had discovered within herself. While she was sick she faced denial, the heartbreak of turning her daughter’s world upside down, weakness, hellish treatments, her own mortality... and through it all, there had been Mulder. Everybody thought she was so strong, but now that there was an empty space where Mulder’s support used to be, Dana Scully realized just how fragile she was.

“So you’re suggesting that Diana is monitoring these abductees? Monitoring these tests?”

Scully had tried to keep it cool, but her frustration was becoming visible. “You tell me that Cassandra Spender is the critical test subject. The one who could prove everything. And yet, who is watching over her? Mulder, I can prove what you’re saying or I can disprove it. But not when Diana Fowley is even keeping us from seeing her. Mulder, ask yourself why there is no information whatsoever on Special Agent Diana Fowley. Why she would suddenly happen into your life when you are closer than ever to the truth. I mean, you ask me to trust no one and yet you trust her on simple faith.”

“Because you’ve given me no reason here to do otherwise.”

Everyone in the room was shocked at Mulder’s wilful ignorance. “Well then I can’t help you anymore,” Scully spat at him, and then moved to collect her things and get herself and Ashley out of there as quickly as she could.

But because he was Mulder, and because he was currently the biggest asshole Scully had ever had the misfortune to know, and because he knew exactly what to say to make her vulnerable, he had the nerve to say, “Scully, you’re making this personal.”

How could it not be personal? She was the one who had suffered the most at the expense of their work. It had been her kidnapping and her cancer and her daughter’s tears and her other daughter’s death... Scully’s only regret was that it was more than work. But she couldn’t escape it.

“That’s because it is personal, Mulder. Because without the FBI, personal interest is all that I have.
And if you take that away, there is no reason for me to continue.”

She didn’t dare look back as she resumed her exit, finally coming upon Ashley with a spoon and a carton of ice cream, no bowl.

“My sugars were low,” Ash blurted out, knowing exactly what her mother thought of her eating ice cream like that.

“Well we’ll stop on the way home and get something.”

“We’re going?”

“Yes, right now.”

“But I don’t want to!”

“Ashley, please don’t argue with me.”

It took some shuffling, but eventually Scully had her reluctant child up and out the door. She was almost to her car when a voice compelled her to turn around. Not the voice she wanted, but a welcome one nevertheless.

“Scully, I know what you must be thinking of him,” Byers confronted her.

“You don’t want to know what I think of him,” Scully growled, mindful that her daughter was standing right there, otherwise she may have had more to say.

“You just have to know... we were there when he discovered what she’d done and that she was leaving. It did a number on him. It screwed with his mind.

“If you ask me, John, she never stopped screwing with his mind. I’m sorry, but we have to go.”

Scully made her way back to the sanctuary of her home as quickly as she could, knowing that her silent, intelligent little girl was in the back putting two and two together about Mulder and the “stupid woman” she’d had the unfortunate luck of meeting more than once.

Xxxxxxxx

Mulder sat in the dark apartment, not worried about being found, not worried about the whereabouts of the man he’d missed too many opportunities to kill. All he could think about was his sister and the events that had started him on his quest for the truth. For so many years, he’d felt that he was just within an arm’s reach of Samantha. It was what kept him going when times got their toughest. But even those times when he thought he’d finally gotten her back, he had known that it wasn’t the end of the road. What CGB had just told him, it was proof that this was ending. Not just his quest or the conspiracy... everything was ending. And there was nothing he could do about it – hadn’t been from the start. The fate of the world had been decided at a West Virginia Air Force Base in 1973. It was hard for Mulder to admit to himself that since he’d started his work, he had only been moving laterally. God, how was he going to tell Scully? How was he going to tell her that it wasn’t worth it? All that she’d been through...

The doorknob jiggled, and after the initial shock of the noise, Mulder decided that he didn’t care. It didn’t matter whether or not Diana was in on anything, or whether Scully was right. There was nothing anybody could do.

“There comes a time when you just have to accept that the only way those you love are going to
survive is if you give up,” he told the woman who used to be his wife. As she leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips, the first one they’d shared in almost ten years, Mulder took time to think about who it was that he loved. Who he needed to protect. Of course Ashley and Scully popped into his mind first. Even though he knew Scully was understandably having doubts about their relationship as of late, her status in his life hadn’t changed one bit. But he knew that if he came to her with what he just learned from the Smoking Man, she’d either outright deny that there was any plausibility to his accounts, or she’d accuse him of believing the man because it was easier than thinking Diana had anything to do with the conspiracy they now faced. It only took him a few seconds, though, to realize that he needed to at least try to make her understand. He could give up on trying to stop the conspiracy, and he could give up on pursuing the justice that the men who set it in motion so obviously deserved. But he could not give up on his partner and her little girl.

As he and Diana exited her apartment together, Mulder had made up his mind to call Scully. In the true fashion of their partnership, though, she had already been dialling his number and was on her way to get him. There was some back and forth as to where they were going to go, but finally Mulder decided that Scully wasn’t going to back down on her plans, especially if the alternative involved her having to put some faith in Diana. So he told Diana to go on ahead to El Rico.

“Scully,” Mulder resumed speaking to her as Diana was making her way down the hallway.

“Yes?”

“Where is Ashley? Where is she right now?”

“She’s at swim team and my mom is going to pick her up afterwards. Why?”

“Okay, you need to get her. You need to call your mom and tell her that you’re picking Ashley up.”

“No Mulder, I’m not bringing her with us to the train yard. She’s been through enough.”

“Listen to me Scully, you need to get her and have her with you, because you may not be able to very soon. Nobody is safe.”

“Mulder, what are you not telling me?”

“I can’t tell you on the phone. But I need you to trust me, Scully. I will do whatever I can, whatever it takes, to protect you and Ashley and make sure that you don’t regret this decision. What I’m saying is that something major is about to happen and the only way Ash is going to have a chance is if she’s with us.”

Scully was not inclined in any way to put her daughter in danger. Under normal circumstances, nothing Mulder could have said would have convinced her to pick up her daughter from the relatively safe activity of team swimming and bring her to a train yard after dark to possibly apprehend men suspected of kidnapping a woman. But that feeling of change and dread washed over Scully like a wave as she heard Mulder plead with her to get Ashley.

“I’ll meet you there,” she sighed, turning her car around.

Xxxxxxxx

Ashley’s hair was still dripping wet when they got to the train yard, and Scully couldn’t tell if she was shivering because of it or because her mom was driving incredibly fast right alongside a moving train while Mulder shouted from the front seat to turn around. Had the little girl not been wearing a seatbelt, she would have gone flying to the other end of the back seat when Scully made an abrupt U-turn.
“Mommy?” she whimpered, though there were no tears. She was too scared to cry.

“Don’t think about it, Ash. Don’t think about anything. Just close your eyes and don’t think about anything,” was all Scully could offer her. It was useless, though. How could she tell an 11-year-old to not pay attention to what was going on around her?

The only way to balance keeping her daughter safe and protecting the entire world was to park the car on the train tracks. When she went to throw open the back door and tell Ashley to run, Scully realized that Mulder had already done that. So she began shooting at the train, all problems with Mulder at the back of her mind as she implicitly trusted him with her only child’s life.

“Run Ashley!” Mulder commanded, spotting a stack of wooden pallets where she would be safe from any possible ricochet. He knew she was going as fast as she possibly could, but it wasn’t fast enough, and he had to get back to Scully to make sure that at the end of all of this, Ashley still had a mom. He took ahold of her arm and, in a move he would never forgive himself for, flung her to the ground so that she could crawl the rest of the way to the pallets. The last thing Mulder saw before he turned around was Ashley’s face, illuminated by the lights from the oncoming train; her eyes bigger than saucers with terror, her skin deathly white from the cold and shock, and her dripping blond hair. He had the sickest feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was hatred. For himself. He couldn’t believe what he was putting her through. Mulder hoped that she knew he would never intentionally cause her any pain, but he could understand if she didn’t. As tough as it had been sometimes, Scully had done a good job of sheltering her daughter from their work. Now, though, she was getting a taste of it, and Mulder’s biggest regret is that he knew she would never ever forget the night that he threw her to the ground before running off and leaving her alone to fire a gun at a train with her mom.

The screeching sound of metal as the train hit their car temporarily drowned out Ashley’s terrified screams.

Xxxxxxx

“Mom?” Ashley called out once most of the noise had stopped. She was curled up in a ball behind the pallets, not able to see anything that was going on and instinctively knowing that she didn’t want to. No response. She was about to call out again, but the rustling of some type of rodent in the pile of wood sheltering her scared her into silence. Even at eleven, Ashley couldn’t believe what he was putting her through. Mulder hoped that she knew he would never intentionally cause her any pain, but he could understand if she didn’t. As tough as it had been sometimes, Scully had done a good job of sheltering her daughter from their work. Now, though, she was getting a taste of it, and Mulder’s biggest regret is that he knew she would never ever forget the night that he threw her to the ground before running off and leaving her alone to fire a gun at a train with her mom.

The weight of the cross she felt hanging around her neck spurred a memory in Ashley from two Christmases ago. After she’d finished opening up her presents that morning, her mom had surprised her by tapping her on the shoulder and presenting her with another box. Both she and her grandma had watched lovingly as Ashley opened the gift. Inside was the necklace, identical to the one her mom wore every day.

“Mommy, now I’m just like you!” Ashley had smiled, not noticing that her mother’s necklace was missing and adorning another blond-haired girl.

“Do you know why I wear mine?” Scully asked. Ash shook her head. “It keeps me safe and
protects me. It reminds me that God always loves me, and that I can always turn to Him for help.”

“God?” she uttered, hoping He was listening. “Please keep my mommy and Mulder safe. Please don’t let them get shot or anything. Please let them be okay. I’ll never argue with Mommy again about taking Queequeg out or cleaning my room or doing my homework. I’ll never talk back like I did yesterday. I’ll say my prayers every night and never complain about getting up to go to mass on Sunday. And I’ll never make mean jokes about other kids at school. It’s okay if I never ever get anything for my birthday or for Christmas ever again, just please let my mommy and Mulder be okay, pleeeeeease.”

She was chanting variations of those words to herself when later (she couldn’t tell how long), heavy footsteps came toward her and a flashlight was shone on her face. The footsteps weren’t her mom’s or Mulder’s, she knew, so she immediately started screaming.

“Ashley? Ashley, Ashley... it’s okay. It’s okay, it’s me. Mr. Skinner. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The little girl still flinched when he came closer, but he could tell she recognized him.

“Where’s my mommy?” Ashley wailed.

“I’m on my way right now to her. And Mulder. What are you doing here?” he asked, picking her up gently and loading her into his car. She looked as healthy as was expected, the only problem Skinner could ascertain from his observations was that she was chilled and she had a few scrapes on her knees. Also, her hair was pretty wet.

“Mommy was driving and she parked the car in front of the train and, and... there were guns and Mulder pushed me down and then he ran away to shoot the train.”

She was becoming increasingly emotional while recounting the story, so Skinner remained silent. He’d often commended Scully on being a wonderful parent. She didn’t let what happened on the X-Files affect the way she raised her child, and Ashley was certainly well protected from the details of her mother’s work. He knew that for Scully to take her daughter with her while she knew she would be facing this... something had to be incredibly wrong. But he wasn’t going to get any more out of Ashley, as she had started crying uncontrollably just after she finished recounting the events of the night.

“There’s your mom,” Skinner informed Ashley as they pulled up closer to the train. He could tell from the car that she was shouting at Mulder, ready to run off into the darkness of the train yard.

“I’ve got her, Agent Scully,” was the first thing he said when he pulled up, and within seconds, the back door was flung open and mother and daughter were tearfully reunited. Both were screaming and crying so hard that they didn’t notice the train that had previously been stopped start up and pull away.

To be continued.
When Scully heard the knock at the door, she debated ignoring it. After all, she knew who it was, and the last person she wanted to face right now was Mulder. But then she knew he’d be insistent, and was also aware that if Ashley, who was currently in her bedroom getting ready for bed, realized he was at the door, she’d demand that her mom let him in. Cursing under her breath, Scully got up from the sofa and padded over to the door, smoothing down her shirt as she prepared to no doubt do battle with her partner. Again. She opened the door to reveal Mulder – no surprise there – poised as though about to knock again. He lowered his arm. “Hey”.

“How?”. She made no move to let him in, something Mulder noticed immediately.

“Can I come in?”

“It’s late Mulder”. It wasn’t that late, just past nine. He’d called much later in the past and she’d let him in. “I won’t be a minute, I promise. Please?”

After a moment, Scully stepped to the side, admitting defeat. Mulder stepped into the apartment, waiting for her to close the door before he spoke. Scully turned to look at him, folding her arms in front of her chest. “Where’s Ash?”

“She’s getting ready for bed. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t disturb her tonight”. It was the first time Mulder had ever been denied permission to see the little girl.

“How’s she doing?” Mulder asked, feeling the sting of Scully’s words.

She laughed bitterly. “How do you think she’s feeling, Mulder? She’s been held against her will, poked and prodded by strangers, and shot at. She’s terrified.”

“That’s understandable –”

“And it’s damn right inexcusable,” Scully walked past him and headed toward the kitchen. Mulder followed, confused.

“You sound like you’re blaming me, Scully.”

“Well who else is there to blame?”

“I didn’t ask you to bring Ash with you to my apartment the other night...”

“No, you didn’t, but you didn’t tell me anything. You let me think you just needed to talk. If I’d have known Diana and the gang, I’d have left Ash with someone.”

“If I’d have known you were thinking of bringing her... I didn’t know she was with you –”

“She’s my daughter! Why wouldn’t she be with me? She’s always with me, that is, when I’m not
running off to investigate who knows what with you. But of course, I don’t care about the work. Or at least I shouldn’t, isn’t that what you said? That I’m making it personal?”

Mulder sighed. He’d known right when he said that that it was the wrong thing to tell her. But she was a doctor, for god sakes, she was smart enough to figure out what he was talking about. “Of course I believe you care about the work, Scully.”

“That’s a pretty pathetic thing to say, Mulder, considering that you could still say those words to me after everything I’ve been through with you. Tell me, Mulder, who was kidnapped and missing for three months, only to show up in a hospital almost dead?”

Her partner was silent, staring holes into the wall to his right.

“And who got cancer? Cancer that I thought was going to fucking kill me and take me away from my daughter forever.”

Again, nothing from him.

“Don’t make it personal. What the fuck did you think I would think when you said that? Did you think I would forget about a few days ago, when your good friend Agent Fowley decided to basically tell my daughter to get lost and you said nothing? That hurt her a lot, Mulder, and you acted like it didn’t even happen. You’ve been so inconsiderate of her lately. Is it too much for you? Is it too much to ask that you treat her well and you don’t screw around with her emotions like you’ve done mine?”

“Scully, you know –”

But she wasn’t finished.

“You know how I feel about the relationship you have with Ashley. I’m sorry that it’s happened the way it has, and I know you don’t have any obligation to my daughter, so I’m going to give you the option to get out. You leave, Mulder, or we’ll leave, and we can be done with each other and you never have to even give my daughter a passing glance ever again.”

Scully didn’t know if she meant what she was saying – if it would even be possible for her – but the words were coming out of her mouth before she could stop them. They were less than noble, she wasn’t saying them with the sole purpose of protecting her daughter’s heart. But they were more than just hateful words spat out in a time of tribulation. She couldn’t make Ashley important to Mulder, or make him feel something for her that he didn’t. Things had been incredibly tough for them, and if Mulder’s feelings for her had changed, it was certainly possible that his feelings for her daughter had as well. But he needed to know that if that was the case, nothing would ever be the same again. She was feeling so certain that it was a mistake to entwine her life so intimately with a man who owed her nothing. It had happened slowly, and so effortlessly that neither of them had barely noticed until things were too messy to undo. Until now.

Mulder envisioned himself as a bottle of soda, and Scully’s words as hands violently shaking him toward his bursting point. She’d reached it. “‘Who’s the one screwing with people’s emotions?’ his voice boomed with anger. “What kind of favor do you think you’d be doing me if you left? Why don’t you stop acting like a coward and come out and say it? You don’t want me in Ashley’s life! You’re still feeling burned by Jack and so you’re making sure that neither you nor her ever get close to anyone ever again!”

Mentioning her ex was where Scully lost it completely. He didn’t know the first thing about her relationship with Ashley’s father, and even if he did, he wasn’t the one who’d had to raise a child
on his own.

“You have no right to assume anything about my love life! What happened with Jack has nothing to do with you!”

“I have a hard time believing that. You want everyone to think you’re Independent Dana Scully, but you’re really just a coward and a cold, unloving woman who is teaching her daughter that that’s okay.”

Tears did well up in her eyes when she heard those words. It was every insecurity and vulnerability that she possessed within her all laid out on a silver platter of “fuck you.” “I don’t want you in my daughter’s life because you’re a selfish bastard. Now get the fuck out of my house.”

Mulder was going to obey her wishes. Without giving a second thought as to what was going to happen once he did, Mulder was prepared to walk out of Scully’s apartment.

But Ashley’s bedroom door was open. And she always slept with it shut.

Without even giving Scully’s demands a second thought, he ran toward the bedroom, praying that it was just a mistake. Ideally, Ash had been able to fall asleep, but she could have been up and crying in her bed as long as she hadn’t done what both Mulder and Scully knew Ashley was prone to do.

The room was dark, but felt empty. Flicking on the light confirmed Mulder’s greatest fears, there was no tiny Ashley body in bed. Frantically, he flung open her closet and yanked on the light, remembering how much Ashley liked to hide in there during games of hide-and-seek when she was smaller. Nothing. By that time, Scully had caught on, and was panicking as well.

“Ashley?” Scully rushed towards the door of her apartment while Mulder stayed in Ashley’s bedroom searching. He returned moments later, clearly panicked.

“She’s not there”.

“Shit”. Grabbing her keys from the desk next to her, Scully slipped on her sneakers and threw open the door, running out into the hallway. Mulder was right behind her, taking care to close the door behind him so Queequeg didn’t get out. The last thing they needed was a dog hunt on top of looking for Ashley. Wordlessly they ran for the stairs, both realizing they would waste valuable time waiting for the elevator.

“She couldn’t have gone far”, Mulder tried to console Scully, but she was having none of it.

“That’s what I told myself last time, and she ended up at your place”.

“Shit”. Scully was right, Ashley was a smart kid. If she wanted to hide from them, she could.

Reaching the ground floor, the two of them ran outside. There was no one around and the dark night made it difficult to look for any signs of the youngster. Mulder noticed Scully shiver in the cool night air, and he wished he’d brought her a jacket. He wondered whether Ashley had thought to take a jumper with her. She’d certainly need it, especially if they didn’t find her soon.

“Ashley!” Scully called out, the worry evident in her voice. She spun around slowly, looking out for any clues of which way her daughter went.

“I’ll go left, you go right?” Mulder suggested, and after a moment, Scully nodded.
“God Mulder, what if –“

He wasn’t going to let her finish that thought. Reaching out, Mulder cupped her cheek. “We’ll find her Scully”.

Their earlier argument now an unavoidable truce, the two of them split up, running off in opposite directions. Scully’s apartment was still in sight when Mulder heard a scream followed by a thud, his heart practically pounding right out of his chest as he recognized the yell. “Ashley?” he called, before shouting for Scully. He cursed himself for not having his gun on him, hoping he wouldn’t need it. Still, he would kill with his own bare hands to protect Ashley. “Ashley?!” he headed up a darkened alleyway, close to the garbage bins belonging to Scully and her neighbors, and it was there he saw her. Curled up on the ground next to a dumpster sat Ashley, sobbing her little heart out. Mulder noticed with horror that she’d torn her pink pjs, her hands and knees were grazed, and she had a cut to her lip too. She looked up at him, her crying intensifying as she recognized him. “Oh Ashley. What happened?”

“I…fell…over”, she managed to utter in between hefty sobs. Her whole body shook, whether it was from the cold or fear Mulder didn’t know. He wasted no time in removing his jacket and wrapping it around her, enveloping her in his arms as he called for Scully, louder this time. Jeez, he thought to himself. Ashley wasn’t even wearing any shoes. “You’re ok”, he said soothingly, both relieved he’d found her and worried about the state she was in.

Scully echoed his thoughts as she ran over to them moments later, concern written all over her face as she took in Ashley’s cuts and scrapes. “Oh baby”.

“She fell over”, Mulder explained as Scully crouched down in front of them, her hand immediately brushing Ashley’s tousled hair from her eyes as she assessed the damage. “Sweetheart, why did you run off like that?”

“Don’t send….” Ashley hiccuped. “Please…please don’t send Mulder away”.

“Sweetheart –“

“I’m not going anywhere”, answered Mulder, and Scully nodded in agreement. “Let’s get you inside in the warm”. Both he and Scully moved to help Ashley to her feet, but as soon as she stood she yelped in pain, collapsing in Mulder’s arms.

“Where does it hurt sweetheart?” asked Scully, her eyes immediately following her daughter’s hand as she pointed to her right ankle.

“Hold on”, said Mulder, lifting the little girl into his arms effortlessly, as though she weighed no more than a bag of sugar. He then followed Scully as she led them back to her apartment, with Ashley clinging onto him like a lifesaver. She didn’t let up crying, not even when they re-entered her apartment and Queequeg came to greet them.

“Where shall I put her?” Mulder asked Scully, before she scurried off to the bathroom to retrieve her first aid kit.

“Can you sit her out in the kitchen?”

Nodding, Mulder entered the kitchen still carrying the little girl. He headed first to sit her in a dining chair, doing his best to avoid Queequeg who was clearly confused over all the commotion, before realizing that the kitchen counter would be best given that Scully would no doubt be eager to cast her doctor’s eye over Ashley’s ankle. Her daughter wouldn’t let Mulder go though, her arms
and legs wrapped around him in a bear hug. Mulder’s shirt was now sodden with her tears, but he barely noticed; too worried about the fact she was still crying.

“Ashley, you’re going to make yourself sick if you don’t stop crying soon”, Scully commented as she entered the kitchen carrying a bowl of water and her medical bag. Mulder could see the concern in her eyes. “Tell me what’s wrong baby”. Both she and Mulder already knew what was wrong – Ashley had been through a hell of a lot lately, what with the shock of the quarantine and shootout in the train yard, and now this latest argument between her mom and her hero. Life seemed to be a sea of never-ending pain for her.

“Mulder said…Mulder said he was going away….and you…you told him to leave”.

“Mulder didn’t mean it”, Scully replied reassuringly, peeling her daughter away from her partner to try and clean up the cuts to her face and hands. “And neither did I”.

“Of course I didn’t. I’m not going anywhere”. As Mulder stepped away from the counter, Ashley grabbed her mom and pulled her in for a hug. Scully forgot all about band-aids for a second. “Sometimes people say things they don’t mean”, she explained, realizing that she’d said some things that were uncalled for earlier that evening. “Now how bad is your ankle? You need to tell me if this hurts”. Pulling back slightly, Scully put pressure on and around Ashley’s ankle, with Mulder looking on helplessly.

“Ow!” Ashley cried as her mom touched a particular spot.

“How bad does it hurt baby? On a scale of one to ten?”

Ashley thought for a moment, her body still shaking. “Maybe a seven”.

“Ok”. Scully pressed again, relieved when this time Ashley didn’t yell out. “There doesn’t appear to be any broken bones. I think it’s just a sprain. Baby, you need to tell me if the pain gets any worse tonight”. She turned to address Mulder, realizing that all of her earlier anger towards him had disappeared. “I’ll put her in with me tonight”.

“Please…please…don’t…don’t send Mulder away”, Ashley sobbed.

“I’m not sending anyone away”, replied her worried mom, tenderly brushing Ashley’s matted hair away from her eyes. “Now, let’s get you cleaned up”.

Ashley didn’t let up crying, even after her mom had cleaned up her cuts and bandaged her ankle. “What do you want Ash?” Mulder asked helplessly as Scully set about getting her daughter a glass of water in a bid to calm her down. The youngster was so worked up, bordering on hysterical, and neither adult knew quite what to do to help her.

“I want…I want…I want you to stay…”

That was a big ask, he thought as he caught Scully’s eye. Barely half an hour ago she was kicking him out of her apartment – there was no way she was going to let him stay. Or was she? He was surprised when, moments later, Scully looked over at him and nodded. “If Mulder wants to stay, he can stay”. Of course he was going to stay, there was no way he could leave Ashley like this. Not to mention he needed to speak to Scully, to apologize for taking things too far. “Sure I’ll stay”, he said, relieved when Ashley was able to stop hyperventilating long enough to take a sip of water. “Now please stop crying sweetheart. Everything’s going to be ok”. He hoped so anyway.
Mulder stretched out on top of the comforter next to Ashley, Scully curling up on the other side of her daughter, running a hand through her hair. Ashley’s tears had subsided somewhat, long enough for Scully to help her into clean pjs, but she had yet to stop crying fully. Mulder had never seen her in this state before, not even when her dad passed away, or when she’d fallen down the stairs the previous year. From the worried look on Scully’s face, she hadn’t either. As soon as he settled himself on the bed, Ashley was immediately in his arms clutching at him. “It’s ok”, he soothed. “You’re ok”.

“Please don’t leave us”.

“I’m not going anywhere”.

“But”, she hiccupped as she looked up at him. “But you said…you told my mom that you were leaving…I don’t want…you to leave like my dad did”.

So there was the problem.

“Baby”, Scully began, pulling her daughter close. “Sometimes people say things they don’t mean”.

“He sounded like he meant it”.

“I don’t Ash. I was just angry at the time”.

“With me?”

“No”, he assured her. “Never with you”.

“But you were angry with my mom”.

“People get angry sometimes”, explained Scully. “Mulder and I argue sometimes, and I’m sorry you had to hear it tonight. But no one’s going anywhere”. She looked over at Mulder, relieved when he nodded in agreement. He planted a kiss on Ashley’s forehead. “I’ve been an ass lately and your mom just called me out on it, and rightly so. But just because we argue, it doesn’t mean I don’t want to be around you guys. How could I not want to be here with you? You two are my favorite people in the whole world”.

Ashley didn’t look convinced, though he noticed her tears had stopped. “But you said –“

“I said a lot of things I didn’t mean, and I’m sorry for that”.

“I’m sorry too”, added Scully. “We didn’t mean to upset you”.

“I’m sorry for running away mom”, Ashley said quietly.

“I know baby. But please don’t do it again, Mulder and I were so worried about you”.

“I won’t, I promise”. Ashley tried and failed to suppress a yawn.

“Why don’t you try and get some sleep sweetheart?”

The little girl looked up at Mulder hesitantly, and he grasped her tighter. “It’s ok. You’re ok. And I’m not going anywhere. Ever”.

“Even if I’m naughty?”
“Even if you’re naughty. Try not to be though”, he added, finally allowing himself to smile. She was ok, she was safe, and he and Scully were going to be ok.

“Will you still be here when I wake up?” There was still so much uncertainty in Ashley’s voice. She really had no idea what she meant to him.

“If you want me to”.

"I do”.

“I will then. No matter what happens, I’m going to be here for you”.

“And mom too?”

“Of course. Both of you. Even when you’re old and grey and wrinkly and smelly – “

Finally – finally – Ashley’s frown gave way to a sweet smile. “I’ll never smell”.

“Oh yeah? Says who?”

“Says me”.

“Well we’ll have to see about that”. He sobered. “I may not be your dad Ash, but I’m going to be there for you. And if there’s ever anything you or your mom need, you just need to tell me, ok?”

She nodded, while Scully’s eyes glistened with tears. “And there will probably be times in the future when your mom and I argue, and maybe when you and I argue too, but it doesn’t change how I feel about you guys”.

“I love you Mulder”, mumbled Ashley, her earlier spate of crying clearly wearing her out. She rested her head back down on his chest and closed her eyes. “Love you mom”.

“Love you too. Now get some sleep”.

It didn’t take Ashley long to drift off, but neither Mulder or Scully dared to move, not wanting to disturb her.

“What a night”, said Scully, her head flopping onto the pillow. She looked down at Ashley with such love that it brought tears to Mulder’s eyes. His actions over the past few days – hell, weeks even – had nearly cost him all of this. How could he have been so stupid?

“I’m sorry Scully”, he murmured, careful not to wake Ashley. “I’ve said some things that I’m not proud of. Things that were completely out of line. I had no reason not to trust you. You were right Scully. Diana, she…” he hesitated, not wanting the mention of Diana’s name to cause yet another argument between them. Thankfully, Scully simply listened, though he saw her edge closer to Ashley, as though she needed her daughter for strength. “You were right, she was completely out of line with Ashley, and I should have said something. I don’t want to argue”.

“I don’t either”, she admitted, to his relief. Finally, something they agreed on. “And I owe you an apology too. I know my behaviour hasn’t been particularly professional lately –“

“Scully, I think – “

“Damn it Mulder, you hurt me”, she hissed, her voice thick with emotion. “You wouldn’t listen to me, and then you said I was making it personal. Well yes, I am making it personal. It’s been personal to me ever since you came into our lives. It’s been personal ever since you became a
father figure to my daughter. God damn it, I hate myself for needing you, for letting Ashley need you. I should be able to do this myself”.

“No one said you have to. You have nothing to prove, you’re already a great mom. And you’ve never asked me to do anything I haven’t been willing to do. I’m here because I want to be”. Scully smiled, remembering a time not so long ago when she said a similar thing to him about working on the X Files. “And you can call me an ass all you want, because more often than not, I deserve it, but please don’t push me away. I don’t want to be without you guys in my life”.

“You won’t. We just don’t want to be a burden on you”.

“You’re definitely not a burden. You make life interesting”.

Chuckling, Scully rested her hand on Ashley’s back, feeling the calm rhythm of her daughter’s steady breathing. “Ashley makes everything more interesting”.

“You know, I had Diana checked out”.

Scully looked up at him in surprise. “And?”

“And so far nothing”. Of course. “But I’ll keep checking. I trust you Scully. I choose you, I choose you and Ashley every time”. Deep down, she knew that. “And that will never change”.

“I know”. Scully willed herself not to cry; there had already been enough tears that evening. “Get some sleep Mulder”, she said smiling. It was a damn sight better than “Get out of my house Mulder”.

Sneaking under the covers, careful not to jostle Ashley, Mulder closed his eyes, allowing himself to smile as he felt Scully reach over and take hold of his hand. Things were going to be ok.
Chapter 62

Scully let out a sigh as the people in the line in front of her moved forward at a snail’s pace. It was just typical, she thought, that on a day where she was already running late, there would be a queue for coffee. She knew she should abandon all hopes for decent caffeine and head straight to the office, but she was having a bad day and it was quickly getting worse. She’d slept through her alarm and, once she’d woken, she found getting Ashley up and ready was almost impossible. Her daughter seemed in no hurry — whether it was just the thought of Monday or general moodiness, Scully wasn’t sure, but they’d had two arguments before she finally got the two of them out of the door. Since the events of El Rico and her subsequent argument with Mulder, Ashley had been a little cooler towards her mom, more prone to sulking when she got home from school instead of spending time with her. Scully hoped she’d snap out of it soon, but it seemed that Ashley had hit her teenage years a little early.

Then, of course, as they were late, they got caught in traffic. Scully finally dropped Ashley off at school with just seconds to spare before her classes started, but that meant that by the time she got back across town towards the Bureau, she was late. And now she was stuck in a never-ending line.

More than five minutes passed before Scully found herself almost at the front of the line, behind some guy who’d decided to pay for his order in one cent pieces. Finally he was done and as he turned to walk off, he bumped straight into Scully, his coffee spilling out over her crisp white shirt.

“Oh!”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry”, the gentleman exclaimed. “I had no idea you were so close and…” he paused. “Dana?”

At the mention of her name, Scully’s gaze lifted from her stained blouse, instead focusing on the man in front of her. She looked up into those familiar eyes; eyes she hadn’t seen for a few years now, but instantly she recognised him. “Ethan?”

“Hi!”

“Hi”. Scully glanced up at her ex-boyfriend. Of all the people in all the world, she thought to herself. As he smiled back at her, she took in his appearance. He looked good, very good. Almost seven years had passed, and aside from a few extra laughter lines around his eyes, one or two grey hairs and a few extra pounds, Ethan hadn’t changed one bit.

“I’m so sorry”, he said, gesturing towards her blouse. “I should have been paying more attention”.

“It’s ok”, Scully replied, breaking the conversation briefly to give her order in to the barista. “I’m having one of those days anyway”.

“I’ll pay to have it dry-cleaned for you”.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it”.

“Aside from clumsy idiots throwing coffee over you, how are you doing?”

“I’m good”, she answered, handing over the money. “And you?”

“Same. You look great by the way”, he exclaimed, brushing his free hand through his hair. His eyes quickly raked her up and down. “I like your hair. The short style suits you”.
“Thank you”. She stepped to the side to let another customer give their order. “What are you up to nowadays?”

“I’m still at the network”.

“Really?”

“Yeah, every time I think about leaving, I get offered a promotion I can’t refuse”.

“Good for you”.

“And you? Still working with Ol Spooky?”

Gritting her teeth, Scully forced a smile and nodded. “I am. It’s a great challenge actually”. A challenge was putting it mildly sometimes, particularly all they’d been through in recent weeks.

Ethan nodded, thankfully not interested in pursuing the conversation about Mulder, to Scully’s relief. “And your little girl…?”

“Ashley?” Scully supplied, as she reached for her coffee, and he nodded again. “She’s not so little now. She’s ten”.

“Ten? Wow! Where has the time gone?”

“Tell me about it. She’s hit the terrible teens a few years early though, which isn’t quite so fun”.

“Uh oh, I pity you”.

“What about you? Do you have any kids?” Though she never let Ethan meet Ashley, not wanting to introduce him to her until she was sure about their relationship, she knew he’d make a good dad. At least he’d expressed an interest in having children, unlike Jack.

“A son. Dylan. He’s three”.

“Congratulations”.

“Thanks”.

Scully’s eyes darted down to his left hand, searching for…no…no ring on his finger. Ethan must have followed her gaze. “Divorced, six months ago. I see Dylan every Wednesday and every other weekend”.

“I’m sorry”.

“Believe me, it’s better this way”.

Scully nodded in understanding.

“Excuse me”. They broke apart, allowing another customer to move past them. Scully glanced at her watch. “Oh”, she said, noting the time. It was later than she thought. “I’d better go”.

Ethan followed Scully towards the door. “Maybe if you’re not doing anything one night this week, we could go for dinner and catch up?”

“That sounds great”, replied Scully, and she meant it. It would be good to catch up after all this time. “But my babysitting options are limited for the next few weeks”. Maggie had gone out to
“OK”. She noticed that Ethan looked disappointed.

“But…if you like basic home-cooked food and don’t mind spending time with a sulky ten year old and a dog that doesn’t play well with male strangers, you’re more than welcome to come to mine for dinner”. She had to admit, she was looking forward to the possibility of enjoying some adult conversation about things other than the paranormal.

“I’d love that”, Ethan replied without hesitating.

“How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s great”.

“Good”. She smiled. It was a date.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Who’s Ethan?” Ashley asked, watching her mom as she stirred the pot full of pasta. She’d just been told they had company for dinner, and didn’t seem too happy about the prospect.

“He’s an old friend of mine”.

“How come I’ve never met him before?”

Shrugging, Scully removed the pan from the heat and padded over to the sink, preparing to drain the water. “I knew him when you were very little”, was all she replied.

“Does Mulder know him?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not very well anyway”.

“Why’s he coming round tonight?”

“Because…it’s been a while since I’ve seen him, and I thought it would be nice to catch up”. She was starting to wish she’d left Ashley at Emma’s and gone out to a restaurant with Ethan instead.

“Like a date?”

“No!” her mom quickly answered. “Not a date. Ethan is just my friend”.

“Like Mulder is your friend?”

“Don’t you have homework to do?”

“I’ve done it already”.

“Ok”.

“How –“ Before Ashley could ask her any more questions, there was a knock at the door. Scully glanced at her watch, cursing under her breath as she realized he was early. She should have known; Ethan was always early. “Do you wanna get that for me?”

“Do I have to?”
Rolling her eyes, Scully turned to face her daughter. “In that case you drain the pasta, and I’ll get the door”. Sighing, Ashley stomped over towards the sink. “Thank you”.

“Do I have to stay for dinner? Can’t I go to Megan’s instead?”

Pausing at the doorway, Scully turned to her daughter. “No, you cannot. Now please, can you at least pretend to be civil tonight? Ethan’s a friend, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t scare him away”. She stared hard at her daughter. “Please?”

“Oh”, Ashley agreed, though she didn’t look too happy at the prospect.

Taking her word for it, Scully headed off to answer the door, hoping the rest of the evening went smoothly.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Ashley chased a strand of spaghetti around her plate, her eyes on the man opposite her, watching him cautiously. Ethan must have felt her eyes on him, because he glanced up and smiled awkwardly. “How’s school Ashley?”

“Ok”.

“What grade are you in now?”

“Fifth”.

“That’s great”. He was trying way too hard, thought Ashley, but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of replying. She took her final mouthful of spaghetti.

“What are your favorite subjects?”

“Mom, can I be excused please?”

Scully glared at her daughter. “No you cannot. There’s still dessert”. As Ashley sighed in her seat, Scully answered Ethan on her daughter’s behalf. “Ashley wants to be a veterinarian when she’s older”.

“That sounds fun”, said Ethan, addressing Ashley once again. “What’s your favorite animal?”

The younger shrugged as Scully got to her feet and began collecting the now empty plates. “All of them”.

“I hope you’re still hungry”, interrupted Scully, clearly not amused at her daughter’s attitude. “I’ll get dessert ready”.

“Dana, I’d forgotten how good your cooking was”. Ashley immediately gave him a questioning look, that neither adult noticed.

“That’s only because you haven’t had any home-cooked food for a while. It’s the same for every guy”.

“Speaking of guys, I meant to ask you earlier. How’s Spooky Mulder doing?”

“Spooky?” Ashley asked.

“It’s a guy your mom works with”, Ethan explained, as though Ashley had never met her mom’s
partner.

“I know Mulder”. Scully continued out into the kitchen, leaving them to it. “Why do you call him Spooky?” Ashley was clearly unimpressed. If Ethan was hoping to win her over, he thought wrong.

“He’s a little out there from what I’ve heard at work”.

“I think he’s great”, she replied defensively.

Ethan’s eyes darted to the kitchen door and, once he was sure Scully wasn’t about to walk back in, leaned across the table to whisper to the youngster. “So is it just you and your mom here?”

“What do you mean?” asked Ashley, knowing very well what he meant.

“Is your mom seeing anyone?”

“I –“

“Because if she’s not, I was thinking about asking her out on a date if you didn’t mind. You know, a nice meal, a fancy restaurants and flowers. What flowers does she like?”

Frowning, Ashley turned to make sure her mom wasn’t in earshot before replying. “My mom has someone. And he loves her”. It wasn’t a lie. Mulder did love her mom.

“And it’s serious?” Ethan asked, somewhat deflated.

“Uh huh”.

“Ok, I hope you’re both hungry!” Scully interrupted, walking back into the room. Ashley sat back in her seat, secretly pleased with herself. Now all she needed was for Ethan to leave her mom alone.

Xxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder stepped into his apartment, immediately kicking off his sneakers as he tried to catch his breath. A quick jog had turned into four miles which had turned into six, and he’d had to speed up on the way home to try and avoid the rain clouds that were gathering.

He’d just removed his sweaty t-shirt when his cell began to ring. A quick glance at it told him Scully was calling, which came as a surprise. He hadn’t heard from her much outside of work since before their recent showdown. They were on better terms now, at least in the office, but he knew they’d both said some things that hurt and would take a while to forget.

“Hey Scully”, he said cheerfully as he answered the phone. He was surprised to hear a different voice at the end of the line.

“Mulder?”

“Ash?” He couldn’t hear her mom in the background. “Is everything ok?”

“There’s a man in our apartment.”

“What?”

“There’s a guy here. And he won’t leave”.

Xxxxxxxxxxx
Alarm bells began to ring in Mulder’s ear. Visions of Duane Barry breaking into his partner’s apartment and kidnapping her sprang to mind. “Ashley, where are you?”

“I’m hiding in my room”. She sounded so close to tears.

“And where’s your mom?”

“He’s with her. He won’t leave Mulder”.

“Ok, I’ll be right there”.

“Please hurry”.

Hanging up, Mulder hurried to put his shirt and sneakers back on, his heart pounding. Racing out of the door, his only thought was to get to Ashley and her mom before it was too late.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

“Oh God Dana, I’m so sorry”. Ethan sat his glass of wine down on the coffee table, his drink now forgotten. “I had no idea”.

“It’s ok”, replied Scully. “I mean, it was hard, and it still is, but Ashley and I cope. I have a lot of help from my mom and Mulder”.

“You trust Mulder with your child?” Ethan joked, though Scully didn’t quite see the funny side. “I’m sorry, it’s just some of the stories I’ve heard over the years –“

“Are just stories”, Scully finished for him. “Mulder’s a good guy actually, and he has an unfair reputation. He’s not crazy in the slightest, and I think if people just made the effort then –“ She paused. For a second she could have sworn she heard Mulder call her name over the sound of her CD player. She must have been imagining it. “I mean if –“

“Scully –“

No, she definitely wasn’t imagining it. She flashed Ethan an apologetic smile. Outside her apartment, Mulder called again, and before his partner could answer he’d burst through the door, his gun poised as though to shoot.

“Scully –“

“Mulder, what the hell?”

Lowering his gun, Mulder glanced between Scully and the man next to her on the sofa who, he noted with amusement, had raised his hands up in surrender. His amusement was soon replaced by mortification. Scully wasn’t in danger at all, she was fine. More than fine by the looks of it, sitting cosily on the sofa with a strange man and a bottle of wine. Jeez, it was just like Eddie Van Blundt, he thought, except this guy didn’t look like him. “Oh my god”, he uttered.

“What on earth is going on?” Scully jumped up from the sofa.

“You’re ok”.

“Of course I’m ok. What are you doing here?” She glanced down at the gun. “And what do you think you’re doing?”

“I got a call saying you were in danger”.
“What? Who from?”

Realization dawned on Mulder. He suddenly felt very very stupid. “Ashley”.

“Ashley? But Ashley’s in her…” Scully ran a hand through her hair. “Oh god”.

“Listen”, said Ethan, also getting to his feet. “I think I should leave you guys alone for now”.

Mulder was surprised to see Scully nod, thinking she was going to kick him out instead. But she didn’t. “I’m sorry”.

“I’m sorry”, Mulder echoed. “I didn’t mean to interrupt”.

Ethan looked as though he didn’t quite believe him, but said nothing, instead turning to Scully. “I’ll call you Dana”.

Nodding, Scully watched him leave her apartment, trying to take in what had just happened. Not only had she been insisting Mulder wasn’t crazy, just moments before he burst through her door holding a gun, but her daughter had been in the next room making up lies.

Mulder looked between Scully and the now battered door that Ethan had just walked out of. He was mortified at his own actions – he should have used his key, he berated himself. But then Ashley had told him her mom was in danger. What else was he to do? As if reading his mind, Scully suddenly walked towards her daughter’s bedroom. “Ashley! Ashley, get out here”. Mulder waited for the ‘please’ but it never arrived. “Now”.

Something in her mom’s tone must have told Ashley that she wasn’t to be messed with, because she soon came scurrying into the living room, her eyes downcast. She knew she was in trouble, and didn’t even attempt to glance in Mulder’s direction.

“Ashley”, Scully began, surprisingly calmly. Mulder knew it wouldn’t last. “Would you care to explain exactly what you said to Mulder tonight?”

Figuring that honesty was the best policy, Ashley replied. “I told him there was a strange man here. And that he wouldn’t leave”.

“And why did you lie to him?”

The youngster shrugged and muttered something unintelligible.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that”.

“I don’t know”.

“You don’t know?”

Ashley shook her head.

“Well”, Scully said after a few minutes. Mulder could see his partner was almost at breaking point. “I think that while you take the time to think about why you’ve been so irresponsible, you can consider yourself grounded. For two weeks”.

Her daughter’s eyes widened. “But Mom! It’s Holly’s sleepover next Saturday!”

Scully knew full well it was. “You should have thought about that before you told lies”.

“Mom!”

“You’re also going to help pay for a new front door, and first thing tomorrow you’re going to call Ethan and apologize”.

Ashley nodded, her eyes filling with tears. Though Mulder hated to see her upset, he also knew he couldn’t interrupt.

“For now though, I suggest you say sorry to Mulder, and then get to bed. No television tonight for you either. You need to think about what you’ve done”.

Pouting, Ashley walked over towards Mulder. At first she looked as though she was going to throw her arms around him, but at the last moment she stopped herself. “I’m so sorry Mulder”, she whispered, her tears spilling over. “I didn’t mean for this to happen”.

Whether she meant the whole situation or simply getting caught out, Mulder wasn’t sure, but he pulled her in for a hug regardless. She wasn’t a bad kid after all, and he could probably count the number of times he’d heard Scully yell at her on one hand.

“It’s ok”, he murmured, before crouching down to whisper in her ear. “We’ll sort something out”. He certainly wasn’t going to let her pay for the door; he was the one who’d over-reacted in the first place.

“Goodnight Mulder”.

“Night sweetheart”.

As a defeated Ashley stepped out of his arms and headed to her room, Scully let out a deep sigh.

“What am I going to do with her?”

Mulder chuckled. “She’s just a kid Scully. Didn’t you ever do stupid things as a child? I know I did”.

“I know, but I thought I’d still have a few more years of angelic Ashley before all of this. She’s been a nightmare lately”.

“She’s been though a lot. And tonight I think she’s learnt her lesson. Are you really making her miss Holly’s sleepover?”

Grinning conspiratorially, Scully shook her head. “She’s been looking forward to it for weeks. But I figure if she thinks there’s a chance she won’t go, it means she’ll be on her best behavior for the next two weeks”.

“Cunning. I like it”.

“I just don’t understand what happened tonight. She was a little quiet over dinner, but I just thought that was general moodiness. Then she told me she had homework to do, but she was actually calling you. I thought she was getting along fine with Ethan”.

Mulder wasn’t sure he wanted to hear about Scully’s date. “I’ll talk to her. Maybe she’ll tell me what’s going on with her”. He walked off in the direction of Ashley’s bedroom. He too was intrigued as to why she’d done it. Ashley had never once lied to him, so it was strange for her to start now.
Ashley’s door was closed, so Mulder tapped on it twice before opening and stepping into the room. She wasn’t asleep – far from it, her lamp still switched on, and though she was in bed, her eyes were wide open as she cried quietly. Spotting Mulder, she quickly brushed her tears away, but it was too late, he’d already seen. “I came to see how you were, but you’ve answered my question”, he said, as he pushed the door to and approached the bed. “What’s the matter Ash? Things can’t be that bad, can they?” Ashley rolled over to face him, her bottom lip trembling. “It’s only a door. I’ll get it fixed for your mom”.

“I’m so….I’m sorry for lying Mulder”, she whimpered, fresh tears falling. She looked so small, so young, and Mulder instantly sat down next to her, pulling her in for a hug. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. I’m sorry”.

“I know you are. It was a stupid thing to do, but I think you know that now”. She nodded against him, her tears soaking through his shirt. It seemed that all she ever done lately was cry, and Mulder made a mental note to do something soon to cheer her up, to get her back to her normal, smiling, cheeky self. “Why did you do it Ash? Your mom said you were having a fun night”.

“I didn’t…I didn’t want Ethan to…to stay”.

“Ethan? Why not? Did he say something?” It was a good job Ethan had already gone, thought Mulder, because if Ashley said yes, he’d kill him.

“No”.

Thank god. “Then what?”

“He wanted to know what…what flowers mom liked because…cos he wanted to take her out on a date”.

Oh. “And?”

“And…” she was hiccupping now, unable to stop. “I don’t want her to…to date him. I want her to date you”.

Mulder couldn’t help but smile sadly. She was too sweet, always thinking of him. He hugged her even tighter, both amused and touched over her reasons for putting a stop to her mom’s date. “Ash, while I more than appreciate the thought tonight, you can’t stop your mom from dating other guys. That’s if it even was a date. Your mom is entitled to see whoever she wants”.

“But you love her”.

After a moment, he nodded. “I do”.

“And she loves you”.

If only things were that easy. “You can’t tell your mom what to do Ash, or who to see”.

“But I don’t want her dating someone else”.

“Well, neither do I”, he admitted. “But it’s not up to us. And if the time comes and your mom does date someone else, we’ll have to be grown up about it and support her”.

She sighed. “I guess so”.

“Now”, said Mulder. “I want you to stop worrying about this. And stop crying, you’ve got nothing
to worry about”.

“I’ve got to miss Holly’s party”.

“Yeah”. Pulling back, Mulder ruffled her hair. “Your mom wants you to learn your lesson. I tell you what though, if you promise to be on your best behavior from now on, and promise not to tell any more lies, I’ll put in a good word with your mom, deal?”

Ashley grinned for the first time that evening. “Deal”.

Mulder waited until Ashley fell asleep before tucking her in once more and switching off her light. He pulled her door to and headed towards the living room, finding Scully sat on the sofa, half concentrating on some documentary on TV. Two cups of coffee sat on the table in front of her; one for her obviously, but Mulder wasn’t sure whether the other was for him or if it was Ethan’s from earlier. Maybe Ethan was coming back, he thought to himself. He certainly wasn’t going to hang around if he was.

“Hey”. Scully looked over and smiled as he entered the room. She didn’t look mad, so Mulder presumed she wasn’t going to throw him out.

“Hey”.

“Is she ok?”

Mulder nodded. “Very remorseful, especially as now she thinks she’s going to miss the party”.

“Lesson learned”.

“Uh huh. And so’s mine. Next time I should knock before kicking the door in”. He glanced over at the door in question. “I’ll pay to replace it”.

“You’ll do no such thing. It was my daughter who started this whole damn thing”.

“What are you doing to do?” he asked smiling. “Make her pay you back?”

“With the amount of pocket money she receives, plus taking into account interest, I’m thinking she’ll have paid off her debt by 2050”.

“As early as that?”

They shared a grin before Scully gestured towards the coffee table. “I made you coffee”. That answered his question and he quickly took a seat before she changed her mind. “Did she tell you why she did it?”

“She did”, he lied. “But I don’t think she thought it would end up like this either”.

“That makes two of us. I’m sorry she interrupted your evening Mulder”.

“Don’t even think about apologizing. I’m sure my night in front of mind-numbing television can wait until tomorrow. Besides, I’m the one who ruined your date. I should be apologizing to you and Ethan instead”.

“Oh god”. Scully huffed out a laugh. “Please don’t be sorry. It wasn’t a date”, she replied, to Mulder’s surprise. “Is that what Ashley thought?” He nodded. “So that’s why she called you then”.
“It wasn’t a date then?” Mulder tried not to sound too hopeful.

“No, no not at all. He…Ethan and I once dated years ago, right before I came to work with you, but it was a long time ago”.

“You’ve kept in touch all this time?”

“No actually. I bumped into him yesterday in a coffee shop and we got talking. I invited him round to dinner thinking it would be good to catch up as old friends. Nothing more than that”. Her smile widened as she took a sip of coffee. “You did me a favor bursting in actually”.

Now he was confused. “I did?”

“Ethan’s a great guy, but I realized tonight why we broke up. I was hoping he wouldn’t want to stay much longer and then you –“

“Barged in?”

“Something like that. It came at the best possible time. Honestly”, she said, shaking her head. “I thought you were obsessed with your work but Ethan just doesn’t stop talking about it!”

“Hey”. Mulder jabbed her lightly in the ribs. “I am not obsessed with my work. Ok ok…” he reconsidered after a pointed look from his partner. “Maybe a little”.

“Maybe a lot”.

Mulder was just glad the two of them could share a joke now. Just weeks ago he thought he’d lost Scully and Ashley forever. Now he was just grateful they were still in his life. “So I’m all forgiven for interrupting tonight then?”

“This time”, she answered seriously. “But if you ruin my date with George Clooney next week, I’ll have to reconsider”.

Laughing, Mulder settled back on the sofa with his coffee. “So I um…I heard about our next assignment this afternoon”.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah…” He knew she wouldn’t like it. “Scully?”

“Mmm?”

“Will you marry me?”
“You’ve got to love those dolphins…although they’re pretty tasty too.”

Resisting the urge to kick her partner underneath the table, Scully instead forced a laugh for her new neighbors. She was going to kill Mulder for this. For all of this. Ever since he’d pretended to propose to her back at her apartment, rendering her speechless until he laughed and told her about their new case, a case that forced them undercover, she had felt like killing him. They were to pose as a married couple, moving to The Falls at Arcadia as new homebuyers. They’d certainly fought like a married couple, at least in recent months, and Scully wasn’t sure they’d be able to last here without killing one another. They’d lived together before – albeit temporarily – when Mulder moved into Scully’s apartment after she was shot, but at least then they’d had Ashley to distract them. This time though, she was safe at her grandmother’s house. It was far more intimate for Mulder and Scully this time too – they were having to pretend to be married. And Mulder was doing a good job – a very good job – at pretending; throwing his arm around Scully’s shoulders whenever a neighbour was even remotely in sight, touching her at every opportunity, asking her about making honeymoon videos, and now, talking to the Shroeder’s who’d invited them both for dinner. They’d been asking questions about their relationship, and Mulder had been only too happy to answer.

“So,” Win asked. “Where’d you two meet?”

Scully was about to speak when Mulder interrupted. “Actually, it was at a UFO conference.” She almost choked on her dinner.

“Flying saucers? Interesting. Wouldn’t have thought you folks would have been into that.”

Mulder put his arm around Scully, who resisted the urge to stab him with her fork. “Well it’s not me so much as Laura. She’s quite the New-Ager. I mean, she’s into those magnetic bracelets and crystals and mood rings, what have you. I mean, god bless her, she’s a sucker for all that stuff.”

“Well,” Cami replied. “I wouldn’t have guessed that, would you?”

“No kidding,” Scully remarked dryly.

“How long have you been together?”

“About six years,” Mulder answered again. “We’ve been married for just over two.” Scully cast her mind back. Two years ago she’d just discovered she had cancer, and had experienced a date she’d rather forget with Ed Jerse. It was also the first time Mulder had kissed her, her mind supplied, and she half wondered whether he’d realized that when he’d answered Win.

“No sign of any children yet?” The man asked. Scully opened her mouth to speak, wanting to answer at least one question, but again her partner beat her to it.

“Not yet, but soon I hope.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. She let him. “I always imagine us having a girl though. Ashley.”

Relaxing, Scully smiled.

“She’ll have blond hair, her mom’s nose and the clearest blue eyes you’ve ever seen. She’ll be the smartest kid in class but that won’t stop her from being a social butterfly. She’ll cut off her hair one day and will immediately want to grow it again, she’ll demand we read all the Disney Princess
stories to her at least a million times even though she can recite them word for word herself, and her favorite place will be the zoo.”

Suddenly aware he was rambling, Mulder stopped. Scully’s eyes welled with tears as she listened. She knew Mulder adored Ashley, she could see it in the way he looked at her daughter, and the fact that he’d do anything for her, but it was always nice to hear him say it.

“Wow,” Win commented. “You’ve thought about this a lot.”

Mulder chuckled in agreement. “I can’t wait to see her.”

Scully couldn’t agree more.

Scully glanced at herself in the mirror as she washed off her face mask. Sometimes, she thought to herself, she didn’t recognize the person staring back at her. She often wondered what had happened to the young, fresh-faced enthusiastic Dana Scully, who once thought that the world was her oyster. That was before she found herself pregnant and alone, lost three months of her life, got cancer and lost a sister, a father and Jack. Hell, she thought. It was no wonder she’d changed over the years. Every time she picked herself up and dusted herself off, she got pushed down again. Like in recent weeks. She and Mulder finally seemed to be putting the events of El Rico behind them, and they’d been on better terms since he’d interrupted her catch-up with Ethan. But Ashley still hadn’t seemed to recover. She’d been cold with her mom lately, and seemed more excited to stay at her grandma’s than upset at the thought that Scully was going away again. It also meant hat Scully would be spending her birthday away from her family. With Mulder. Mulder, who’d been treating this case like a joke right from the moment they’d been given it. She’d half wondered if that’s how he’d acted when he was married to Diana, but the thought sickened her. She hated to think of Mulder married to that woman, but she didn’t say anything, instead refusing to indulge him. Earlier that evening she’d turfed him out of her room after he’d been spread out on her bed, joking about them being married and making honeymoon videos. Now he was downstairs, no doubt falling asleep to the sounds of the television, while she was upstairs thinking about recent events, her arguments with Mulder, arguments with Ashley, being just a short drive from Emily. She felt as though she was losing control of her life, that she was losing everything – and everyone – close to her. Though she didn’t want to be there at The Falls, pretending to be married and sharing close quarters with her partner, she wasn’t exactly sure she wanted to be at home with her daughter who seemed to hate her either.

Sighing to herself, Scully discarded her washcloth and padded back out into the bedroom, hunting for her laptop. She had some notes she had to get down before she fell asleep and forgot about them. As she searched her room, she cursed as she realized that her laptop was no longer in sight. Mulder must have come upstairs to borrow it while she was in the bathroom. She thought about leaving it, going to bed and writing up her notes in the morning, but then she also knew she was wired, and unable to sleep just yet. It was decided. Reluctantly she headed out of the bedroom and down the stairs, this time taking care not to step on the squeaky stair that had been driving her mad all night. As she rounded the corner and headed into the living room, she stopped short as she saw Mulder spread out on the couch, the computer on his lap, the curtains wide open.

“Jesus Mulder,” she exclaimed as she realized the whole world could see into their house. “Are you trying to give our neighbors something to talk about?”

He sat up, running a hand through his hair. “What?”

She gestured to the open window. “We’re supposed to be married. What are they going to think if
“They see that you’re sleeping on the couch?”

“They’ll think we’re a typical married couple.” As Scully walked over to the window, Mulder shut down the laptop and placed it on the coffee table, before getting to his feet. “What’s up Scully? I thought you’d be getting your beauty sleep.” He thought for a moment before correcting himself. “Not that you need it of course.”

Ignoring him, Scully gestured to the computer. “I needed to type up some notes.”

“Do you ever stop working?”

Scully glared at him before turning back to the window and preparing to shut the curtains. “Unlike you Mulder, I’m taking this case seriously.”

“You need to loosen up. Relax a little bit.”

“We’re trying to catch a killer,” she reminded him as she felt him near her. Still she didn’t turn to face him.

“I know, and we will,” replied Mulder confidently. “Hey,” he added as he approached her, trying to lighten the mood. “You want to give our neighbors something else to talk about?” She felt his hands move to her shoulders, gently massaging her back, and she knew she should stop him. She didn’t stop him.

“Mulder,” she said, finally allowing herself to smile. “You wouldn’t know what to do if I ever said yes.”

And before either of them registered what was happening, she’d turned and Mulder had stepped in closer towards her, capturing her lips for a kiss. It had been so long, too long in fact, since they’d last kissed, memories of Ethan and Diana and bad arguments now out of their mind. Mulder’s hands immediately went to her hips as he held her in place, unwilling to let her go, relieved when she didn’t push him away. Moments later Scully relaxed into the kiss, deepening the embrace, her tongue darting out and seeking entrance. As Mulder’s lips parted he heard himself groan. The last time they’d kissed with this intensity, this level of passion, had been during their weekend away in New York with Ashley, when Scully’s nosebleed had put a stop to their embrace. But now there was no cancer, no Ashley sleeping in the next bed, and no interruptions whatsoever. This was going to happen. They wanted this to happen. Hell, Mulder had been hard against Scully’s stomach since the moment she stepped into his arms, while Scully…Scully’s touch was maddening, her fingers now tracing the hairs at the back of his neck. Without breaking the kiss, Mulder managed to turn them and back Scully up towards the couch, needing to get them horizontal before he embarrassed himself – after all, it had been a while. Within seconds Scully was beneath him on the sofa, spreading her legs so he could settle himself in between her thighs. Jesus, they were wearing too many clothes. Someone moaned, Mulder wasn’t sure who. Maybe it was him, but his brain cells were focused further south at that moment. His hand slipped underneath Scully’s pyjama top and he moved to cup her breast. Another moan – this time it was definitely her. Breaking the kiss to catch his breath, Mulder nipped at her neck, her chin and her ear, grinning as he whispered to her. “Let’s get it on Laura.”

It was clearly the wrong thing to say. Scully’s hands moved to Mulder’s chest as she pushed him away from her, and instantly he knew their chance had passed. “Mulder, get off me.”

“What?”

“Get off me.”
She pushed him again and Mulder jumped to his feet. “What the fuck?”

“Don’t what the fuck me. I can’t believe you.” Scully stood up, pulling her top back down to cover herself. “Actually, you know what? I can believe you. After the way you’ve been treating me lately, I can believe you’d find this whole thing funny. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

“It was just a joke Scully.”

“Well it’s not a joke to me.”

“Jeez –“

“It’s not. I take this whole this seriously. I take us seriously. I’d worked damn hard in my life to get to where I was before I met you, and since then I’ve stood by you because I believe in you and I trusted you with all my heart. Do you know how it makes me feel to have you treat our partnership – our entire relationship for that matter – as a joke?”

“Scully –“

“I get that other women will just fall into bed with you, but I’m not them. It took a lot for me to do this, and to have you make fun of me is like a slap in the face.

“Scully, please listen.” As she moved to walk away, Mulder stepped in front of her, wanting her to stop and listen. He wanted to tell her that he wasn’t joking about her, that she was the person he was most serious about, but he knew she wouldn’t listen.

“Forget it,” she snapped, reaching out to grab the laptop from the coffee table.

“Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Nothing happened.” And with that she stormed out of the room, the conversation now over.

“Hey sweetheart,” Scully spoke into her phone, breaking the silence in the car. She and Mulder were on their way to the airport, having finally been given clearance to leave Arcadia. Although they’d managed to end the case on speaking terms, once it was over, they retreated into themselves, both still hurting from their argument. Scully felt stupid for throwing herself at Mulder, for almost letting him in, while Mulder was still cursing himself at managing to ruin things between them yet again. The sooner they got home and back to their own lives – lives that didn’t involve living together in the same house, the better.

“Sorry? You want to go where?” Mulder grinned to himself. He couldn’t hear the other end of the conversation but he knew it was Ashley, and no doubt she needed her mom’s permission for something. “Tonight?” Scully shook her head before replying. “Honey no, it’s a school night…yes I know Megan’s mom is letting her, but that’s up to Megan’s mom. I’m your mom and I’m saying no.” A longer silence this time as Ashley no doubt protested. “I said no. Ashley, you are more than welcome to sleep over on a weekend, but not tonight. Ashley,” she repeated, firmer this time. “You will stay with your grandma tonight, and I mean it. I’m sorry?” As she held the phone away from her ear, Mulder could hear Ashley’s whines in the background. He supressed a smile, not wanting to get dragged into yet another argument between mother and daughter. He knew from experience not to get involved. “Well I’m glad to know I’m a horrible mom, thank you for telling me that –“ Scully looked at the phone, shaking her head once again as she realized that Ashley had hung up.
“Problems?” Mulder asked, even though he knew the answer.

“You could say that.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“No.” She sighed heavily. “Ashley wanted to sleep round Megan’s tonight. Apparently their other friend Leah is going too, so she’s worried she’ll be missing out.”

“And you said no.” It wasn’t a question; he’d heard her conversation.

“I did.” She noticed he didn’t seem to agree with her. “Mulder, it’s a weeknight! The girls have school tomorrow, and knowing them they won’t sleep a wink tonight. I’m not having Ashley grumpy tomorrow because of it.”

“She’s young Scully, what harm is one night gonna do?”

“Whose side are you on Mulder?” she asked, her eyes boring holes into him. “I’m Ashley’s mom, and if I tell her she can’t go somewhere, she can’t go.”

“Alright, fine,” he replied, not wanting to get into another argument. Too late, his mind supplied. Instead he reached out and flicked on the radio, trying to get rid of the tension. Turning her head to look out of the window, Scully was silent. “Mulder,” she asked suddenly, her previous anger now seemingly forgotten.

“Hmm?”

“Can we make a quick detour?”

Xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder glanced at the clock, frowning. He looked up once again at the entrance to the cemetery. Still no sign of Scully. She’d asked him if they could stop briefly at the churchyard, and it was then that Mulder realized partly why Scully was so upset to be out here. She was so close to her daughter’s grave; California no doubt brought back memories of that Christmas and Emily. He’d offered to go to the grave with her but she’d politely declined, wanting to be alone. But five minutes had turned into ten which had turned into twenty, and still she hadn’t returned. He was worried about her.

Giving her a few more minutes, Mulder then killed the radio, before getting out of the car and going in search of his partner. It didn’t take him long to find her; though it had been a while since Emily’s funeral, he could still find her grave instantly. Sure enough Scully stood before it, her head bowed. Mulder wondered whether to interrupt, not wanting to anger her yet again, but something told him she needed him. And as he approached, he realized he was right. She was crying, he realized. Not outright sobbing, but crying all the same, her shoulders shaking as her tears fell. He wanted to take her into his arms, to comfort her, but he knew she wouldn’t appreciate it. Not right then. Instead, he simply stood next to her and waited. It wasn’t long before she spoke.

“Go away Mulder.” They weren’t the words he was expecting. “Please.”

“No,” he replied firmly.

“Mulder, I –“

“I’m not going anywhere Scully.”
“I just want to be alone.”

“I know you do, but I’m not going. Not when you’re like this.”

“I’m fine.” She was anything but fine. “Please, I’ve already argued with Ashley today, and the last thing I want is another argument with you.”

“I’m not here to argue,” he insisted. “I just want to be here for you.”

She was silent, letting his words sink in. When she spoke again, her words crushed him. “I feel like I’m losing everything Mulder.”

Mulder looked across at her, noticing that she kept her gaze firmly ahead on her daughter’s grave. “What do you mean?”

“Everything I touch seems to fall apart. I’ve no idea how to keep everything together any more.” He let her continue. “You know, when I was Ashley’s age, I used to dream about the future like all little girl’s did. But now it’s more like a nightmare and I just can’t stop it. I just keep losing the people that I love. My father, Melissa, Emily.”

“I know you’ve lost people Scully, and I know it must hurt like hell, but you’re not alone. You still have your family –“

“I’m a disappointment to them. I always have been. They’ve always had great expectations of me, and I continue to let them down.”

“You haven’t let anybody down. And whatever happens, you’ll always have Ashley.”

Scully wiped away a tear, sniffing hard. “Ashley hates me right now. Just recently she’s had such an attitude, and I really don’t know what to do with her.”

“Ashley is probably just testing boundaries. You must have been the same at that age.” When Scully continued to cry, Mulder braved it and stepped closer, reaching out and pulling her into his arms. Thankfully she didn’t put up a fight, instead going willingly. “Ashley adores you Scully. She’s just a young girl, probably going through some changes, and she’s trying to find her place in the world. I’ll talk to her. You’re a great mom, you’re doing everything right,” he murmured against her. “You’re not losing everyone. You will always have Ashley, and you’ll always have me.”

“Last night –“

“Last night I was out of line.”

“No,” she pushed him back. “I shouldn’t have behaved like that.”

“I was a jackass,” he admitted. “And I’m sorry.” He realized it wasn’t the type of conversation they should have in front of her daughter’s grave. “I would never make fun of you Scully. Or us. And I’m sorry for everything I’ve done lately, for taking Ashley’s side, for making you feel uncomfortable around Diana, for my behavior over the past few days. All of it.”

“I hate how much you have the power to hurt me if you want to.”

“I’m supposed to protect you from anyone who will hurt you, and I will,” he promised. “I’m here for you, you and Ashley, and I’m not leaving.” He was relieved when, finally, Scully hugged him back, nodding against him. She believed him. He held her until her tears eventually subsided and
she pulled away from him.

“Vous ok?” he asked. She nodded.

“Let’s go home.”
“Thanks for babysitting tonight,” Scully said absent-mindedly, though the sincerity was there, as she looked in the hall mirror and fluffed her hair. Then, when she looked away and caught his eye, she got shy again and ran a hand over it to smooth it. It was adorable to Mulder. She and Ellen had a girls’ night out on the town planned, and he was fighting his primitive, selfish, territoriality tooth and nail. “I wish you’d let me pay you.”

“Nonsense, Scully. There’s nothing I would rather do than hang out with my favorite girl.”

“At least this ‘favorite girl’ doesn’t charge you $10 an hour on the phone,” Scully quipped. Mulder gave a silent laugh and a nod of his head, giving her that one.

“Where is the little squirt?”

“She’s in her bedroom. As usual. We had another ‘I don’t have to eat dinner, I’ll just sneak Oreos from the pantry when mom’s not looking’ kind of night. Though the second I leave she’ll probably come out and be a perfect angel for you.”

“As with any other wild animal, Scully, you have to have the right type of bait,” Mulder said as he grabbed the package of Oreos that were still sitting on the edge of her kitchen table. Then, he made himself comfortable on her couch, putting his feet up on the coffee table and switching on the TV. Scully just shook her head, knowing full well by now that there was no changing Mulder. And maybe she and Ashley needed him to be that way.

“Do I look alright Mulder?” she blurted out, surprising herself in the process. It had been a long time since she’d gone out out to a bar with a girlfriend, and she was worried she was desperately behind the times.

Mulder was shocked by his partner’s question, and it showed on his face. Scully decided some damage-control was needed. “No, don’t answer that,” she was unsure of what she wanted to hear from him after their incident in Arcadia. “What I mean is… I don’t look stupid, do I?”

“Of course you don’t look stupid, Scully,” Mulder answered honestly. He, for one, was immensely enjoying her tight top and her peep-toed shoes.

“I don’t go out, Mulder. Ever. I have no idea what people wear.”

“Well, despite my many letters to Congress suggesting bills otherwise, young women still wear clothes whilst in public with each other. It’s quite a shame, really.”

“Ugh. That’s what I get for asking you,” Scully huffed, stomping into the kitchen. Mulder stood up and followed.

“Scully?”
She offered him nothing from the sink where Queequeg was patiently waiting for a refill on his water dish, but that didn’t stop him.

“Scully, what you’re wearing is beautiful. You look very pretty tonight,” he offered, putting his hand on her bare upper arm. Mulder’s touch, which had so very recently been electricity, assuaged Scully, letting her know he was there for her.

“Thank you,” she breathed out.

“What’s got you so nervous? You’re not planning on getting hitched tonight, are you?” Mulder was uneasy as he faced the reality that it may be time for him to learn what Scully really wanted. To find out what Ethan, her objections to him in California… all meant.

“No, not at all, I just –” Scully was interrupted by a knock at her door. Ellen. Just like that, their conversation was abandoned.

Mulder went to find Ashley as Scully answered the door. There was music playing from her bedroom and a new sign on the door read “No Trespassing” in big purple letters. He had a badge, he figured, and opened up.

“Ash?” Mulder asked, wondering how the kid could stand to think with her boom box blaring so outrageously loud. But she was faced away from him on her bed, drawing or writing in a notebook.

“Ash!” Mulder tried again. This time, he got a response. Ashley whipped her head around and moved to turn down the music.

“Hey Mulder!” she yelled, even though the music was now bearable.

“Hey. Come on, your mom’s about to leave.”

“Okay,” Ash turned back around and moved to turn the music up again. Thankfully, Mulder was there and he caught her hand.

“Which means you have to come out and say goodbye to her.” Ashley groaned, but followed him out to the living room anyway. Ellen greeted them both.

“You guys are going to be okay tonight?” Scully asked, grabbing her purse.

“Ash knows the drill. Snitches get stitches,” Mulder joked, earning a smile even from the youngster.

“Be good for Mulder please Ashley,” Scully meant as a loving reminder, but Ashley took as a stern warning and was immediately annoyed.

“I’m not a baby, Mom. I’m not going to color on the walls.”

“But I may,” Mulder tried to diffuse the situation. Scully was already hurt, though – wondering what she was doing wrong as a parent to make her daughter dislike her so much.

“Bye honey, I love you,” Scully tried again, only to be received stiffly by Ash, who then immediately ran back to be in her bedroom. After watching the whole exchange, Mulder grabbed Scully’s hand as she turned away.

“I’ll talk to her,” he said, and she nodded, not wanting anyone to know how close she was to tears.

Xxxxxxxx
“Ash?” Mulder asked from outside her room half an hour later. He’d had experience dealing with moody Scully women, and he knew he needed to have something to offer if he was going to get out of this alive. That was why he had two slices of extra cheese pizza with him.

“Come in!” she called, once again baffling Mulder as to how she heard him over her loud pop music.

“Can you turn that down?” Mulder had to shout.

“What?”

“Can you turn that – ” he found himself yelling unnecessarily when Ashley switched the music off.

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. It’s nice of you to make sure that the neighbors can hear Mariah Carey’s new album if they haven’t bought it for themselves yet.”

Ashley just rolled her eyes at him.

“I brought you some pizza.”

“Did Mom say we could get pizza?”

“We don’t need to tell Mom.”

It was something of a tradition for them.

“Thanks,” Ashley said when Mulder made room for the plate on her nightstand. But then he sat down next to her on her bed instead of leaving like she expected he would.

“Mom asked you to talk to me,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Nope. She didn’t ask me to do anything.”

“Then what’s the matter?”

“Well, I was hoping you could tell me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ash, I saw how you treated your mom right before she left tonight. And how you’ve been treating her for weeks now. You’re hurting her a lot.”

“She’s hurting me too,” Ashley mumbled to herself, though Mulder caught it.

“Talk to me, Ash. If you’re having a hard time talking to your mom, talk to me.”

“I can’t talk to you,” tears were forming in her eyes.

“You can always talk to me.”

“No I can’t. Because you’re going to go back and tell Mom everything I’ve said.”

Mulder sighed heavily. If Ashley didn’t want him to tell her mom what she was struggling with, he’d have to respect that. But it would be hard to keep it from Scully. “If you want me to keep a secret, I can do that. You’ve kept my secret,” he was referring to the hospital bed declaration of
love Scully knew and didn’t know he’d made.

“It’s not a secret. It’s just,” Ashley huffed in frustration, wondering how best to express herself, “I can’t talk to her anymore. She’s not like how she used to be. We used to have fun and laugh and do things together but now the only time she talks to me is when she’s telling me to do something. Or she’s yelling at me not to do something. She makes me feel sad and angry every time I talk to her.

‘Ashley, you can’t have your snack until you’ve checked your sugars! Ashley, you can’t go to Megan’s house this weekend because I have to go out of town on a case! Ashley, you can’t walk to the ice cream shop with your friends after school because you might get stolen!’” Ashley did a bad impersonation of her mom.

“I know you’re getting older, kiddo, and that’s really hard for me and your mom both. You want to do more and more things and have more independence and we just want to keep you safe.”

“But you can’t keep me safe!” finally, the youngster’s tears started to flow as she remembered a night not too long ago when she witnessed a shootout in train yard. “Because if you could, we wouldn’t have had to go to the… whatever that place was with those people in the white suits. And you left me alone when you and my mom had to shoot at the train because it wasn’t safe. All the time now when my mom goes to work, I’m scared she’s doing that and you are going to get hurt, but I can’t tell her I’m scared because she’s mad at me all the time!”

Ashley desperately needed a hug, and Mulder wasted no time gathering her into his arms. The psychologist in him knew it was healthy for her to get her emotions about their recent ordeals out in the open, but the paternal part of him was hurting for her. She had no idea. She shouldn’t have to know. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, Ash,” Mulder cupped her cheek and moved her to look him in the eye, “None of this, not a single bit of it, is your fault. Nobody’s mad at you.”

“Then why is Mom so angry all the time?” she sniffled.

Mulder felt horrible. Scully was obviously having a hard time handling everything that was going on in her life right now, and Mulder blamed himself for putting most of it on her shoulders. He shuddered just thinking of all that she’d been through in the past year alone, let alone overall. Thinking of how many things he could have prevented from happening to her and her daughter sometimes kept him up at night.

“Your mom is…” he struggled with the right words, “upset. Not with you. A lot of stressful things have taken place in her life lately and it would be a struggle for anyone to go through.”

“Like what things?” Ashley asked. It was the one question Mulder knew she would have and also dreaded answering. It required the truth, and the truth was just too much for a little girl.

“Like when she was hurt in New York. And I know… I know Agent Fowley upset her. For a while there, we weren’t on the X Files anymore and we were both misplaced. It was just a year ago that she lost Emily. Honestly, Ash, everything that’s been weighing on her mind and stressing her out has been my fault. So if you’re going to give anyone attitude, it should be me. Not your mom.”

Ashley had temporarily stopped crying and was looking at Mulder quizzically. She just couldn’t understand why those things were his fault.

“I made a promise to myself that I would protect you and your mom, not only because I’m her partner, but because I love you both so much. You two are the best family I’ve ever had. But I haven’t been doing a good job.”

“You’ve been doing a good job, Mulder.”
He smiled at the little girl’s ultimate faith in him. But it was undeserved.

“Sweetie, just please take it easy on your mom. She’s been through so much lately.”

“I’m not mad at my mom. I just… sometimes when I’m trying to go to sleep I think I can hear the train and the gunshots, or I feel like I’m back in that place with all the doctors and I get scared. But I can’t tell Mommy.”

“You can tell your mommy,” Mulder rubbed her back soothingly, feeling absolutely horrible for the little girl, “And she’ll be able to help you. That’s all she wants, baby, is to be able to help you. There is no reason you should have to worry about the grownup things your mom and I have to deal with. Your job is to be happy and have fun because you’re a kid.”

Ashley seemed to be digesting that information as well as anyone in her situation would have. At least the tears had stopped rolling down her cheeks and she was calming down.

“And if you ever, ever feel scared or lost or anything, you can call me. Any time of the day or night. I promise not to break the door down again,” he tried his hand at a joke, and thankfully Ash gave him a small smile before snuggling further into his embrace.

“I love you Mulder,” she said, and Mulder could physically feel her relaxing.

“I love you too, pumpkin.”

“I’m sorry for being mean to my mom.”

“I know you are. But you should probably tell her that. It would make her really happy.”

“What if we did something special for her?”

“Like what?”

“Like… you could take her on a date!” Ash giggled.

“Oh yeah?” Mulder asked playfully.

“Yeah!” Ash responded.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, do you think your mom would like to go out with this?” Mulder rolled Ashley backward on her bed and shove her face into his armpit. He’d showered before coming over and was pretty sure he didn’t smell, but Ash was still squirming to get out.

“Mulder!!! You smell like dirty socks!!!”

“What’s the password?”

“I don’t know!”

“I’m not letting you up until you give me the password.”

“Mulder is the best!” Ashley blurted out as a last-ditch effort. It was good enough for Mulder, and he rolled off.
“And don’t you forget it,” he said, kissing her forehead.

His little girl was coming back. And he’d die before he ever lost her again.

XXXXXXXXX

“What about that one?”

“Ellen, would you stop?”

“Well Dana, you said you were tired of being alone.”

“I don’t think I’m going to meet the man I’m going to spend the rest of my life with in this bar,” Scully said, looking around with a scrutinizing eye. There was nothing wrong with the bar. Sure, it wasn’t the most expensive establishment in the DC area, but it wasn’t a hole-in-the-wall type of place either. She was just grumpy. And probably a thousand times more sexually frustrated than the average woman, considering she still had to work with Mulder after their stint as a married couple.

“You don’t have to meet the man you’re going to spend the rest of your life with. Just the rest of your night with,” Ellen informed her, but the thought of going home with some random stranger made Scully shudder. The last time that had happened, it had been Ed, and it was still hard for her to allow herself to think of that night – particularly since she’d done some inquiring recently and realized it would cost her upwards of $1,500 to erase the only permanent reminder of that night from her body.

“I’m not looking for that type of thing,” Scully told her friend. She loved Ellen, she really did. But she wished she hadn’t told her over the phone the other day how sick she was of being alone. As much as he probably wouldn’t believe her if she told him, that night that Scully pushed Mulder off of her just as they were about to succumb to their urges had agitated her as much as it had him. She just turned 35-years-old, and as juvenile as it sounded in her mind, she was sick of sleeping alone. And she was sick of thinking about Mulder and Diana and she was sick of seeing her friends getting married and having multiple children and God, was it so wrong to just want to meet a man who could satisfy every part of her? Of course she was strong and independent and of course she knew her value as a person without a man by her side, but Scully couldn’t help but feel lonely sometimes. More often than not lately. That was what she’d told Ellen, and their “night on the town” was her remedy for that. Unfortunately, they had different ideas about what should happen there.

“Dana, in my opinion, you don’t even know what you’re looking for.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, El, but I’m 100% sure it’s not a night of mindless screwing.”

“We’re here, though, so the least we can do is have a good time. And that guy three tables over has been trying to catch your eye for the past couple minutes.”

A handsome blond named Alan, she would soon learn, sent over two drinks. And then two more. And then Ellen invited him over to sit and chat with them. He was a 39-year-old divorced software engineer with two sons and no signs of gray hair. He was charming and funny and he didn’t seem like he believed in aliens. He put his arm around Scully and seemed genuinely interested in everything she had to say. Oh, you’re a forensic pathologist? Disgusting? No, fascinating. You work for the FBI? Intimidating? No, intriguing. You have a ten-year-old daughter? Deal-breaker? No, does she have your eyes? The drinks kept coming and Alan covered all of them, which meant Scully was losing track of her alcohol intake as well as the time. When the lights went up
unexpectedly and she checked her watch, she was shocked to learn it was almost two in the morning.

“Whoa,” she said woozily when she stood up from their table, gripping on to Alan’s shoulder for stability. He placed his hands on her elbows, steadying her.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Scully said, trying to shake the floating feeling she always used to get while drinking as a young woman right before the alcohol made her silly.

“Did you guys drive here?” he asked Ellen, who was faring much better than her friend.

“We took a cab.”

“Good. I’ll help you flag down another,” Alan once again wrapped an arm around Scully and helped her outside. He was a good man, she resigned to herself. But her heart felt sick. She knew another good man. A man who she knew loved her and had already won the heart of her daughter. Was it really a question anymore, whether or not she would one day give that last part of herself to Mulder? No matter what her answer was, Alan was out of the running.

Before she got in the cab he had acquisitioned for Ellen and herself, Alan turned Scully around in his arms.

“I had a really good time tonight Dana.”

“I had a good time too.”

“I’d love to get to know you better.”

Scully smiled without it reaching her eyes, but Alan had already looked away to pull a business card out of his wallet.

“Here’s my number. Give me a call sometime, okay? Day or night.”

“Sure,” she answered, stuffing the card deep in her purse. And before she knew it, Alan was kissing her cheek.

“Thank you Alan. I’ll see you later,” she said quickly, and then got into the cab behind a confused Ellen.

“Dana Katherine Scully, I do not understand you.”

“What?” she knew what.

“That man has everything. And I can tell, he’s not even on your radar.”

“He’s a nice guy, Ellen. Don’t bite my head off for not wanting to take advantage of him.”

“You don’t have to take advantage of him! Why not just give him a chance?”

“He has a chance…” Scully lied.

“Bullshit, Dana.”

“Ellen,” Scully took a deep breath, “I’m drunk. And I really just want to go home and go to bed and
forget about the fact that there are tons and tons of people in this city who get to go home to someone tonight, and I’m not one of them.”

The pain her friend was experiencing was finally apparent to Ellen. It wasn’t just about feeling young and carefree for a night. This was actual anguish for her. In a move neither of them had done since college, Ellen gently brought Scully’s head down to her lap and started brushing her hair back with her fingers.

“Everything’s going to be okay Dana. You don’t have to find anyone tonight. You have your whole life ahead of you,” she consoled her.

“I’m 35, El. I don’t have my whole life ahead of me,” Scully laughed to herself, “I’m thinking about just jumping into bed with someone and seeing where it goes from there. At least I’ll be getting some sex out of the deal.”

“Well if that’s the case, why not just go to bed with Mulder? You like him, you trust him, and he’s not bad looking.”

Scully shook her head. Ellen didn’t know she and Mulder had come very close to doing just that in California and she didn’t know that he hadn’t left her mind all night.

“Mulder could never be just a one-night-stand,” Scully said truthfully, then closed her eyes and tried to ignore the motion of the car as they made their way back to her apartment.
“Hey sweetheart,” Scully said as Ashley opened the door to the car and slipped inside.

“Hi.” Scully glanced in the rear view mirror, noting that her daughter wasn’t her usual bubbly self, instead sitting quietly in the backseat, clutching her school bag against her chest. “How was your day?”

“It was ok.” Silence. It wasn’t like Ashley, not just recently anyway. Since Scully had left Ashley in Mulder’s capable hands while she and Ellen painted the town red, her daughter had been back to her normal self, opening up to her mom once again and behaving just like she used to. But not today.

“Mulder let me head out early so I could collect you, I thought we could maybe get takeout tonight and watch a video? Have a girl’s night?”

“Maybe.”

“Are you ok baby?”

“I’m fine.” She sounded as convincing as Scully herself was whenever she used that lie.

“Ok,” Scully replied, not willing to push her daughter too far just yet. “Well if you need to talk to me about anything, I’m here, ok?”

“Ok,” Ashley answered. Their conversation was over. For now.

As soon as they returned home, Ashley immediately headed off to her bedroom, dumping her bag on the sofa. Scully let her, knowing that she’d come out of her sulk soon enough. In the meantime she’d just wait, and get the takeout menus ready for later. Picking up Ashley’s bag, Scully unzipped it in a bid to find her daughter’s lunchbox and get it all washed up for the following day. Her eyes however caught sight of a letter sitting on top of the box, and her eyes furrowed as she read it. It was a note from school, she realized, inviting Ashley and her dad to the annual Father Daughter Dance. No wonder Ashley was in a contemplative mood, Scully thought. It was just another reminder to her that her father had passed away. Ashley had managed to avoid invitations in the past and her friends didn’t always attend the events themselves, but now they were a little older, Scully knew it would be on their calendars. And Ashley wouldn’t be able to go.

Placing the letter back into the bag, Scully retrieved her daughter’s lunchbox and took it out to the kitchen. She then continued towards Ashley’s room, pausing to knock on the door before entering. “Can I come in?” She asked as she opened the door slightly, noticing that Ashley had changed out of her uniform and was sitting on her bed, leafing through a magazine absentmindedly as she listened to music. She said nothing as her mom entered and sat down beside her. “Why didn’t you tell me sweetheart?”

“Tell you what?”

“I was looking for your lunchbox and found your letter from school.”

Her face reddening, Ashley shrugged. “It’s just a stupid dance.”
Scully’s heart broke for her daughter. Again. “Are your friends going this year?”

“I think so.”

“I’m sorry baby.” Wrapping her arms around Ashley, Scully pulled her in towards her for a hug. “I tell you what, do you want me to call the school and see if I can come?”

Ashley shook her head against her. “No thanks, it’ll look weird.”

“Or maybe Megan’s dad can take you too?”

“I don’t want to go anyway,” Ashley replied adamantly. “It’s just a stupid dance,” she repeated.

But Scully knew her daughter didn’t mean it, that she was just putting on a brave face so that she didn’t worry about her. “Ok,” she conceded. “Well in that case, I’ll take that afternoon off that day and we’ll do something fun. Maybe we can go away for the weekend. Does that sound good to you?”

“Uh huh,” answered her daughter, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“In the meantime,” Scully added. “Let’s go eat junk food and watch videos.” She hugged her daughter tighter, wishing she could take away her pain.

“Ok. Oh.” Mulder immediately understood the problem.

“My daughter just got an invite to the Father Daughter dance at school.”

“Yeah. Oh.” Mulder immediately understood the problem.

“Yeah. Oh.”

“‘Well she says she doesn’t, but her face tells me a different story. I think this year her friends are going and she’s feeling a little left out. I asked her if she wants me to take her, but apparently she’d die of embarrassment if I showed my face. I said I’d take her away for the weekend, but last night she just wasn’t herself.”

Mulder thought for a moment. He’d do anything for Ashley, he knew that, and the little girl he adored was having a bad time. There was only one solution. “You know, if you thought it could
help, I could…”

“Mulder,” Scully interrupted, having reached that conclusion at the same time as him. “I couldn’t ask that of you. It’s not fair on you.”

“I don’t mind Scully, I wouldn’t have offered if I did. I just don’t like the thought of Ashley being upset.”

“Neither do I…” she admitted.

“So if I can help in any way, I’d be more than happy to. Unless you don’t want me to?” He didn’t want Scully to think he was interfering.

“No of course not but…it’s just a lot to ask.”

“It’s a dance right? I just have to show up and manage not to embarrass her.” He grinned. “I know that could be hard for me, but I’m sure I can be on my best behavior.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

Scully smiled gratefully, and Mulder knew he’d made the right decision in volunteering. “Thank you.”

“When is it?”

“Two weeks on Friday.”

“Ok, I’ll make sure I clear my diary for that night.” He thought for a moment. “Do you want me to ask her tonight, or shall we make it a surprise? If you got her ready for the dance, I could turn up unannounced. Do you think she’d go with that?”

“She’s Ashley,” replied Scully, matter-of-factly. “She loves surprises.” It was sorted.

Scully led her daughter into the clothes shop, stopping short to look at a dress that hung on the rail in front of her. She turned to Ashley, noting that the youngster looked as though she’d rather be anywhere else but there. Not that Scully could blame her. As far as Ashley knew, they were just out for a regular shopping trip on a busy Saturday morning. The reality was they were out on a shopping trip for her dress to wear to the Father Daughter Dance the following Friday.

“Do you like this?”

Ashley shrugged. “It’s ok. Can we get ice cream?”

“Maybe later,” answered her mom. “Why don’t you take a look around and see if there’s anything you like? It can be your treat.”

“Why?” She looked up inquisitively at her mom, clearly suspicious. “It’s not my birthday.”

“Are you saying that I only buy you things when it’s your birthday?”

“No…” Ashley replied quickly.
“Good.” Scully smiled. “I thought it would be nice. Besides, you’ve been doing so well at school lately I thought I’d treat you today. So go on, take a look.”

Somewhat placated, Ashley moved on ahead of her mom, pausing every now and then to finger a dress. “You can take a few to try on if you like,” Scully called to her, making a mental note of all the ones that Ashley seemed pleased with. She stopped to look at a lilac dress with a glittery bodice. “That one’s pretty.” Her mom’s words seemed to snap Ashley out of the thoughts and she moved on. Scully meanwhile, picked out the dress in her daughter’s size, before carrying on after her.

“I don’t have any parties to wear it to,” Ashley replied solemnly.

“You never know.”

The youngster however, didn’t appear to share her mom’s enthusiasm. “Mom!”

“What? Just keep on looking, there’s no harm in just trying it on. Go on, go find some more.” Within a few minutes, Ashley had returned to her mom’s side carrying three more dresses and was sighing impatiently. She’d clearly had enough and wanted to go, but Scully wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. “Ready to try these on?”

“I’m bored.”

“Ashley,” Scully said sternly. “Just do this for me and then we’ll go.”

“Ok.” Scully wondered whether her daughter was hitting her teens a few years early – she’d got sighing down to an art.

Leading Ashley to the changing rooms, Scully sat outside and waited for her daughter to model the outfits. Each time she emerged out of the changing room, Ashley looked as though she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. Scully suspected that she wasn’t bored – just feeling out of sorts at the fact she wasn’t going to get to wear her dress to the dance. Or so she thought. Finally, the little girl stepped out of the cubicle wearing the last dress she’d picked up, a navy knee length, embellished number, and this time she wasn’t quite scowling.

“I think this one’s my favorite,” said Scully. “It looks very pretty. Do you like it?”

After a moment, Ashley nodded, and Scully could see from her daughter’s face that though she was pretending not to, she liked it too.

“Would you like me to get this one for you?”

“Why?” Her daughter countered. “I don’t need a stupid dress, I don’t have anywhere to wear it.”

“As far as you know.”

“I’m not going to any stupid party and I’m not wearing a stupid dress.”

With that Ashley turned on her heel and headed back into the cubicle in a temper, no longer willing to play along.

xxxxxxxxxxx

At just past five the following Friday evening, there was a knock on the door of Scully’s apartment. Discarding the remote control she held in her hand, Scully pressed a kiss to her
daughter’s recently curled hair, and headed to answer it. She’d made a point of finishing work early and had collected Ashley from school, before taking her home for their “girls night in.” At least that was what she’d told her daughter. After an early dinner, Scully had sat her daughter down and curled her hair, before painting her nails a deep blue color. Keeping up the pretence, she’d let Ashley do her own nails too. Now they were sat in front of the television, watching Shrek. Or at least they were, until they were interrupted, and Scully was pretty sure she knew who was on the other side of the door. He was early, but she knew he would be, well aware that Ashley would need time to get ready.

She threw open the door, smiling when she saw that Mulder had dressed up for the occasion, clad in a black suit with a navy tie to match Ashley’s dress. “Hi Mulder.”

“Hi.” As Scully stepped aside to let him into the apartment, he noticed that Ashley was sat on the sofa, her hair curled but still wearing her jeans and a light tee.

“Hey Ash.”

“Hey Mulder.” Her eyes raked him up and down as she took in his appearance. “You look smart.”

“Thanks. I have somewhere important to be.”

“Oh really?”

Now that he had her attention, he nodded. “Yeah. I have to take an important person out this evening.”

After thinking for a moment, Ashley looked between her mom and Mulder. “Are you taking mom out on a date?”

Both adults laughed, their cheeks pinking. “Not quite,” he answered, somewhat embarrassed. “What’s happening then?”

“I’m here to take you to your school dance.”

Ashley didn’t return his smile. “What?”

“I’m here to take you to the dance. That’s if you’d like to go with me.” Mulder paused. “What I mean to say is that, if you don’t have any plans this evening, I would very much for you to accompany me to a dance at school tonight.”

She looked over at her mom who nodded, smiling.

“Are you for real?”

“I am very much for real.”

“But…” She didn’t quite know what to say. “But I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Now that’s not technically true,” replied Scully. “I happen to know you have the perfect new dress in your wardrobe.”

“No I don’t.”

“Oh yes you do,” Scully grinned smugly, recalling the way she’d managed to purchase the navy dress without Ashley even realizing.
Suddenly it clicked for Ashley. “Did you plan this?”

After glancing over at her partner, Scully nodded. “Mulder heard about your dance and really wanted to go.”

“That’s if you do?” Mulder asked. After a moment she nodded.

“Well then,” said Scully, clapping her hands. “Let’s get you ready!”

Xxxxxx

Mulder knew he’d made the right decision to take Ashley to the dance when he saw her face as Scully told her about the surprise. Not that he had any regrets; he’d do anything for the youngster, and for her mom too. It was also another chance for him to make up for the fact he’d been an ass to them both when Diana was around. He’d spend the rest of his life trying to make it up to them if he could.

In the care on the way to the dance, Ashley barely let up talking to breathe; she was far too excited about attending her first Father Daughter Dance. All of her friends would be there, she told Mulder, and he realized just how left out she’d have felt if she hadn’t gone. He’d spent a lot of his own life feeling left out, and the last thing he wanted was for Ashley to suffer the same. When they arrived at her school, Mulder couldn’t contain his smile as Ashley led him up to her friends and their fathers, and introduced him as “her Mulder,” even though they all knew who he was, having met him at various birthday celebrations and play dates over the years. He was just so glad to see she was enjoying herself. Later, when the band started up, Ashley watched as her friends and their dads headed up onto the dance floor, and tried not to look too disappointed. Noticing her reaction, Mulder took hold of her hand and pulled her up behind them – it was then he thought she might just burst with excitement. To say he was incredibly proud of her was an understatement.

“Are you having fun?” he asked, as they swayed in time with the music. He couldn’t recall the name of the song, though he dimly remembered hearing it sound out of Ashley’s bedroom not too long ago.

“I’m having the best time ever!” she exclaimed, clearly happy to be spending time with her Mulder. “Thank you so much for coming with me Mulder!”

“I should be thanking you for coming with me.” Ashley shook her head, her expression thoughtful. “Are you ok?”

“I know my mom asked you to come tonight.”

“She –“

“But thanks for giving up your evening.”

“Ashley, your mom didn’t ask me.”

“You don’t have to lie. She felt sorry for me because I don’t have a dad, so she asked you.”

“No, she didn’t. I heard about tonight and I wanted to come.”

“Because you felt sorry for me,” Ashley supplied, and this time it was Mulder’s turn to shake his head.

“No, not at all. When your mom told me about tonight, I decided to ask you. Not because I felt
“Sorry for you, but because I wanted to. I wanted to make you happy, and I wanted to spend time with you. You know how much I love spending time with you, I love you.”

“You love me?” She sounded so uncertain, even though Mulder had told her on numerous occasions just how much she meant to him.

“Of course I do.” So of course I wanted to come here tonight.”

Their dance now forgotten, Ashley closed the gap between them and wrapped her arms around Mulder’s waist, hanging onto him for dear life.

Xxxxxxxxx

By the time the two of them returned to Scully’s apartment, it had just turned 10pm. Though Ashley was clearly tired, she was still awake, determined to tell her mom everything that had happened at the dance. As Scully had finished folding her laundry, the front door opened and in walked her partner, followed by her daughter, who was beaming widely. “Hey mom.”

“Hi sweetie. Did you guys have a good time?”

“Uh huh.” Ashley nodded eagerly. “It was so much fun.” She looked over at Mulder for confirmation, relieved when he nodded in agreement. “It was good.”

“We danced forever,” Ashley continued. “And I only stood on Mulder’s toes twice, but the second time he let me. And Mulder won me an art set in the auction.”

“Did you say thank you to Mulder?”

“She did,” he agreed.

“And Ryan said I looked pretty in my dress, so Mulder said he’d run a background check on him for me.” Scully bit back a laugh. God help any of Ashley’s future boyfriends. “And Mrs Charleston had a glass of wine and told Mulder he was very handsome.”

At least Mulder had the decency to blush, Scully thought, especially as the teacher in question was old enough to be his mother. “Well it sounds like you had a great time.”

“We did.” Ashley stepped forward and hugged her mom. “Thanks for letting me go.” Scully savoured the embrace, glad to finally have her daughter back.

“It’s Mulder you should thank.”

Nodding, Ashley let go of her mom and headed over to the man in question. “Thanks Mulder, you’re awesome.”

He grinned as Ashley hugged him tightly. “Same time next year?”

“Yes!”

“But first young lady,” interrupted Scully. “You’d best get some sleep.”

“Oh but –“

“No buts. It’s already late, and if you want to go shopping tomorrow, you’d better get some sleep.

Ashley looked as though she was thinking about arguing, but remembered that she really did want
to go shopping. Her mom had a point. “Ok,” she sighed heavily. “Goodnight Mulder.”

“Goodnight little lady.” Mulder kissed the top of her head. “Want me to tuck you in?”

She shook her head. “Not tonight thank you. See you soon.”

Leaving Mulder surprised at her dismissal, Ashley kissed her mom goodnight and padded off to her bedroom. Scully chuckled at her partner’s expression. “She’s growing up. She doesn’t need us as much now.”

“God.” Mulder shook his head. “Where did that little girl go who used to be scared of monsters beneath her bed?”

“She grew up. And went to her first Father Daughter Dance,” she added with a grateful smile.

“You should have seen her tonight Scully. She was so confident and bubbly. It was so great to see.”

“That was thanks to you Mulder. I don’t think we’ll ever be able to thank you enough for tonight. I know it was a chore –“

“It was fun actually. I mean apart from Ashley stepping on my toes. But she did insist on dancing all night, and who am I to argue?”

“Who knew you could move so well?”

Mulder detected a hint of skepticism. “You doubt me? Can’t you remember the night we danced together?”

“To Cher?”

Not answering, Mulder reached out for Scully’s hand and pulled her in towards him, swaying her gently from side to side to the invisible music. Her cheeks reddening, Scully pressed her hands against Mulder’s chest as though to push him away, but he didn’t relinquish his hold. Finally, she settled into his arms.

“What are you doing Mulder?”

“I’m demonstrating my dancing ability.”

“Well I’m very impressed,” she said, smiling up at him. “But not as impressed as Mrs Charleston evidently.

He grinned. “It’s ok, I turned down her advances. I told her I only had eyes for someone else.” Scully was about to ask him what he meant, but the look he was giving her gave her her answer. Before she could react, he’d closed the remaining gap between them and pressed his mouth to hers. It felt good, thought Scully, to be kissing him again. They were kissing because they wanted to, not because they were hurt or angry or because they had something to prove. She loved the taste of him, the way his hands rested tentatively on her hips, his touch burning right through her pants. She was glad Alan hadn’t kissed her that night she was out with Ellen. It would have just been a disappointment. Nothing could compare to this.

“Mulder?” The two of them sprang apart as Ashley’s voice rang out. Seconds later she appeared at the entrance to the living room, now ready for bed.

“Umm yeah?” He seemed a little flustered, shooting Scully a look of regret. She wasn’t quite sure
if it was regret at kissing her or at being interrupted.

“I’ve changed my mind. Can you tuck me in?”

After a moment, he nodded. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Scully watched as he headed on over to her daughter and followed her towards her bedroom, leaving Scully to regret Ashley’s poor sense of timing.
Chapter 66

Scully had had her fair share of admirers over the years; she wasn’t completely oblivious to members of the opposite sex taking a shine to her. But none had made her feel quite so uncomfortable and yet so intrigued as Phillip Padgett, Mulder’s new neighbor. He’d cornered her while she was at church, telling her things about her own life that made her uncomfortable. He knew so much about her – too much about her – from the route she took when she went running, to the reason she was visiting the church, and even the age of her daughter. Scully had always tried to protect Ashley, and to discover that this man knew so much about her daughter and their lives was just damn frightening. He’d even sent Scully a milagro charm whilst she was at work. But she was intrigued, she realized, as she stood at the door of Padgett’s door, returning the charm to him. She wanted to know why he was so interested in her, why he’d moved into Mulder’s apartment building just to be closer to her. It was then he told her he was writing about her, though he didn’t let her read it at the time. She read parts of it later, once Padgett had been arrested in connection to a series of murders, and so did Mulder. He was the one who informed her that in the book, she’d been getting up close and personal with a stranger on a fourth floor apartment, and he’d even goaded her, asking her if it was true. They had no evidence to prove that Padgett was linked to the murders, but, unconvinced, they kept surveillance on him from Mulder’s flat. And when Padgett left his apartment, Mulder went off in pursuit. Just as Scully was about to follow, she opened the door only to be attacked by a strange man, bearing a resemblance to the murderer in Padgett’s story. She tried in vain to shoot at him but no avail, and she felt tremendous pain in her chest as he grabbed at her. And then it all went black.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder was stunned when Scully threw her arms around his neck and sobbed hysterically; her tears soaking the front of his sweater. It had been a long time since he’d seen her as bad as this; not since her abduction after she’d freaked out during the bad storm, then following her encounter with Donnie Pfaster. It as a Scully he didn’t get to see very often, thankfully, he thought to himself as she clutched at him, her nails raking down his back. She was petrified. So was he, wondering exactly what the hell had happened inside his apartment while he’d been in the basement. The last thing he’d expected to find was his partner out cold on the floor caked in blood. Blood.

“Scully,” he murmured as she finally relaxed her grasp on him. She still didn’t let go though, but that was ok with Mulder. He wasn’t in any hurry to let go of her either. “You’re bleeding. We need to get you to a hospital.”

“No” her voice was raspy, strained from her racking sobs.

“You can’t –“

“I’m not hurt.”

This time he did pull back, glancing down at her chest. Her once white blouse was now deep red and sticky with blood. “But you’re –“ he paused as, with shaking hands, Scully undone the first few buttons of her shirt.

“It’s my blood,” she uttered, fresh tears threatening to fall. “But I’m not hurt.”

Mulder tried to process everything, but it was tough, even for him. “What happened?”

“I…I opened the door,” she explained shakily. “And I thought it was you but it wasn’t. There was a
guy and he...he...he grabbed me and I just...I felt so much pain.” She paused to swipe at her tears. “And then I came round, and you were there.” Mulder nodded. “Did you find Padgett?”

He’d almost forgotten about Padgett; he’d been too worried about Scully to even spare a thought for the writer. “He’s dead Scully.”

“How?”

“From the looks of it, he ripped out his own heart.”

Scully frowned. “What?”

“I’ll explain later. I need to call this in, and we need to get you looked at.”

“No,” Scully repeated firmly as she sat up. Mulder held out a hand to help steady her if she needed it, but she didn’t. “Mulder, please,” she pleaded. She never pleaded with him. “I’m ok.” She was anything but, he wanted to say, but he kept quiet. “How could I explain this to the paramedics? I can’t even explain it to myself. Please,” she repeated. “I just want to go home.”

Though deep down, Mulder wanted to get Scully looked over, he knew how stubborn she could be, and knew she wouldn’t be convinced otherwise. And if Scully wanted to go home, he’d take her home. Nodding reluctantly, he got to his feet and headed for the phone, preparing to call in Padgett’s death.

Mulder perched on the edge of the wall as he waited for Ashley to finish with school. He’d left Scully back at her apartment, having finally given a brief statement over what he’d found in the basement of his own place. He’d offered to drop Ashley off at Emma’s, allowing Scully the evening to herself, but she’d declined, insisting that she was fine as she prepared to take a shower. She suspected Ashley would provide her mom with a welcome distraction, so she wouldn’t have to think about what happened earlier that day. Scully was even prepared to pick Ashley up from school herself, but Mulder had refused, unwilling to let Scully get behind the wheel of her car until she’d had the chance to recover from her ordeal. After all, it was her blood that stained her shirt. Mulder himself still hadn’t quite recovered after seeing her passed out cold on his apartment floor. For a moment he’d thought he was dead. He couldn’t explain just how relieved he was when he realized she was still breathing.

The door to the school building opened and Mulder was distracted by a rush of students filling out into the playground. Ashley was towards the back, deep in conversation with a boy Mulder didn’t recognize, when she saw him. She quickly said her goodbyes and then ran over, a wide grin on her face. She was finally back to her old self, young and carefree, worrying about whether she had the latest fashion brands or her favorite boyband splitting up rather than monsters and murderers, cancer and god damn decontamination units. She was – at last – back to behaving like a normal ten year old.

“Hey Mulder,” she greeted him as she approached, her eyes darting round in search of her mom. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d surprise you.” He got to his feet, brushing off the back of his pants, and held out a hand to take Ashley’s school bag as she held it out. He grinned to himself. He was under the thumb but he didn’t care. “oof,” he exclaimed. “What have you got in here? Bricks?”

“Books,” she answered matter-of-factly. She was a bookworm just like Scully. “Where’s mom?”
He couldn’t do it; he couldn’t tell her the truth, that her mom had yet another near death experience. “She’s at home. She’s not feeling too good so I’m here to collect you.” It was the wrong thing to say, he realized, as Ashley’s face fell.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s just a little under the weather.”

“Is she sick?”

Ok, maybe she was still worried about cancer. Mulder placed a hand on Ashley’s shoulder reassuringly. “She’s fine, she just…there was a bad case at work and your mom is just feeling a little shaky, that’s all. She’ll be fine.”

Thankfully Ashley seemed to accept that. “Did you catch the bad guys?”

“Yeah,” he replied after a moment. “Yeah we did.” Well, Padgett had taken himself out of the game, but Ashley didn’t need to know that.

“Is mom going to be ok?”

“She’ll be fine,” he answered. “Just give her some time and she’ll be absolutely fine.”

But Scully wasn’t fine, Mulder realized as he and Ashley arrived back at her apartment. Scully was still in the shower, which was when he knew something was wrong. He’d been gone almost 45 minutes, and there was still no sign of her.

“Hey Ash, why don’t you go get changed and then make a start on your homework? I’ll make us some snacks soon and maybe we can hire a video later.”

“Ok.” She headed off to her bedroom, for once without question, leaving Mulder to focus on her mom. Removing his jacket, he approached Scully’s bedroom. He could hear the sounds of the shower running but no signs of movement behind the closed door. After a moment, Mulder tapped on the door. “Scully?”

No answer.

“Scully? It’s me.” Turning the doorknob, he realized she’d left it unlocked. “I’m coming in, ok?”

When she didn’t protest, Mulder knew she must be in a bad way. The shower curtain was closed, but Mulder couldn’t detect any movement. His eyes caught sight of Scully’s bloodied blouse. From the looks of it, she’d ripped it to pieces. From the looks of it, she’d ripped it to pieces. Next to it lay the rest of her clothing; a bloodied bra on top. Jeez, he thought. So much blood.

“Scully.” After a moment of hesitation, Mulder pulled on the curtain, opening it to reveal a very naked Scully. She stood beneath the shower spray, shivering as the water hit her. At the bottom of the bathtub he could make out the remnants of pink suds from the blood she’d washed off. “Ok, I think you’re done in here.” Glancing around him, Mulder caught sight of a towel hanging off the back of the door and grabbed it, before turning back to his partner. “C’mon Scully.” He reached out to switch off the shower, flinching as he realized the water was stone cold, and no doubt had been for some time. “God Scully, no wonder you’re shivering.” Keeping his eyes on hers, he took hold of her hand and pulled her in towards him, before wrapping the towel around her. “Let’s get you into some warm clothes.” Wordlessly he helped her out of the shower, and was surprised when
suddenly Scully laced her arms around his waist, pulling him in towards her. She was cold against him, but he wasn’t about to push her away.

“You’re ok,” he whispered against her dampened hair. “You’re ok.”

“Can you stay?” she finally asked with a shaky voice.

As if she had to ask. “Of course, I’ll stay as long as you like.”

Scully nodded against him and, after taking a deep breath, pulled away. “Thank you. Is Ashley home?”

“She’s in her room doing her homework. Which I suspect is code word for reading magazines and listening to music.”

Scully either ignored his humor or it didn’t register with her. “I’ll be out shortly.”

“Ok.”

She just needed time, he knew that. And he also knew he’d be there for when she needed him.

Scully was quiet for the rest of the evening, curling up with a blanket on the sofa in a world of her own. She was dressed in some yoga pants and a sweater of Mulder’s that he didn’t even realize she had and yet still he could make out that she was shaking. She was in shock, he knew that, but she’d insisted that she didn’t want medical treatment. So instead he’d made her soup that she didn’t eat, and tea that she cradled but barely drank. Ashley meanwhile kept an eye on her mom at all times, well aware that she wasn’t herself. She hardly spoke, instead lost in her own thoughts as Ashley tried to entertain her with stories of her day. She didn’t even notice when her daughter’s bedtime came and went, but Mulder did. Thankfully Ashley must have known it wasn’t the time to argue, instead packing up her text books and retreating to her bedroom to get changed, before emerging in her pjs minutes later. “Night mom,” she said softly, approaching the couch where Scully still sat. She perched down next to her and wrapped her arms around her. “I love you.”

This got Scully’s attention, and she snaked her arms around her daughter, pulling her in towards her. “Night night baby. I love you too.”

“I hope you feel better tomorrow.”

“I will do.” After Scully kissed Ashley’s cheek, she watched as her daughter got up, hugged Mulder and then headed off to bed without any fuss. She caught Mulder’s eye and gave him a small smile.

“All it took was me freaking out and she’s an angel. Maybe I should try it more often.” Mulder couldn’t quite meet her smile. The last thing he wanted was a repeat of their day.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I need to go to bed.”

Nodding, Mulder watched as she got to her feet. He wasn’t sure if she still meant for him to stay or if she wanted to be alone. He didn’t want to leave her alone, not with the way she was. She’d barely spoken about what had happened earlier that day and he knew she needed to get it out of her system. “I’ll get the cups,” he said, standing and collecting Scully’s half empty cup of tea.
“It’s ok,” Scully replied. “They’ll wait until tomorrow.”

“Ok.” He didn’t relinquish them. “So umm…I’d better…"

“Is it ok…I mean, if you have things to do I more than understand, but if you don’t – “

“I can stay,” he quickly answered. They were still so uncertain about one another, and Mulder wondered whether they would ever get past the embarrassment.

“Thank you.” She gestured behind her. “I’ll go clean up.”

“Right.” After she walked away, Mulder headed out into the kitchen, pausing to wash the cups, before switching out the lights in the apartment and making his way to the bedroom. By the time he got there, Scully was already in bed, lying on her side watching the door. He quickly used the bathroom, freshening up, and stripped down to his boxers and a white tee before padding back out into the bedroom. Leaving his folded clothes on a chair, he made his way to the bed, suddenly nervous as he climbed in next to his partner. It wasn’t the first time they’d slept in the same bed together, but still. Scully’s face gave nothing away, at least not until he pulled the comforter up and then turned to face her. Within seconds her face crumpled and tears pooled in her eyes.

“Oh Scully.” Without hesitation, Mulder reached out and pulled her in towards him, wrapping his arms around her as she sobbed into his chest. “You’re ok, you’re ok.”

“I can’t believe I let him get to me,” she uttered against him. “He got under my skin Mulder. He knew everything about me. And Ashley.” Mulder thought back to the moment just recently when Padgett had declared that Agent Scully was already in love. “I didn’t even know who he was yet he…he knew everything. I shouldn’t have let it happen.”

“You didn’t know it was happening Scully. Hell, the man moved in next door to me to be close to you, and I didn’t even realize what was happening.”

“I shouldn’t have even spoken to him.”

“He intrigued you, that’s no surprise. But please don’t let him get to you anymore. He’s gone. You’re safe.”

“Those things he wrote – “

“They were just fantasy,” he finished for her, still recalling the passages he’d read about the writer and Scully. “I know they didn’t happen.” He trusted her. “It’s no wonder he got under your skin.”

“He knew about Ashley.”

“I know.” Padgett knew almost everything about Scully, it was no wonder he knew she had a daughter.

“What if he’d hurt her?”

“I wouldn’t let him. Scully,” Mulder lifted her chin so she was eye to eye with him. “I won’t let anyone hurt you, or Ashley. I promise you that.”

She nodded. He was telling the truth, she knew he’d do anything for her.

“And you know Scully, you’ve been through a lot lately. Maybe you should make an appointment to see Karen sometime.”
“Are you saying I need help?” she asked, her tears on hold for the moment.

“No, I’m saying that you’ve been under a lot of stress lately. And I know you don’t always talk to me, even though you know you can tell me anything. It might just do you some good to talk to someone else.”

“I’ll think about it,” replied Scully, genuinely.

“And in the meantime,” continued Mulder. “I’ll be here for the both of you, even if you find me annoying because I drink straight from the milk carton and leave the toilet seat up and hate your dog.” This finally elicited a smile. “Sleep Scully.” Leaning forward he pressed his lips against her hairline. “You’re safe.” And as he watched her close her eyes and shuffle closer towards him, Mulder vowed to help cheer his partner up.
“So uh, I get this message marked ‘urgent’ on my answering service from one Fox Mantle telling me that not only has he kidnapped my daughter for the evening for, and I quote, a “surprise,” but I have to come down to the park for a very special very early or very late birthday present. And guys, I don’t see any nicely wrapped presents lying around, so what gives?”

Taking a break from their batting practice, Mulder and Ashley turned to face her as she moved closer. Mulder shrugged, clearly bemused, while Ashley giggled uncontrollably, dropping the bat she was holding. “Surprise Mom!”

It had been something Mulder and Ashley had planned after the events with Padgett. They were both determined to do something to cheer Scully up, plus Ashley wanted to apologize to her mom for her recent temper tantrums, so they hatched up a plan. And so, finishing work early that afternoon, Mulder had picked Ashley up from Emma’s, having already let her into the secret, and after picking up supplies from the store, they’d headed to the batting field to wait for Scully to turn up. And of course she didn’t let them down.

“You’ve never hit a baseball, have you Scully?”

“No, I guess I have uh, found more necessary things to do with my time than…slap a piece of horsehide with a stick.”

“Get over here Scully.” Holding out the bat, Mulder watched as she approached him, and took it from him, while Ashley ran off to the batting machine, eager to do her job. As she got into position, Mulder stepped behind his partner, wrapping his arms around her to also take hold of the bat, his hands either side of hers. It had been so long since he’d touched her that he was grateful to feel the warmth of her pressing against him – he was glad she was still in his life after the way he’d behaved recently.

“This my birthday present Mulder? You shouldn’t have,” she remarked dryly.

“This ain’t cheap.” He nodded towards Ashley standing in front of them, grinning widely. “I’m paying your daughter ten bucks an hour to shag balls. Hey…” he smiled, glancing at the bat. “It’s not a bad piece of ash, huh?” Scully raised her eyebrows. “The bat, talking about the bat.”

Used to his innuendos by now, Scully turned her attention back in front of her. “Now,” said Mulder, instructing her. “Don’t strangle it. You just want to shake hands with it. "Hello, Mr. Bat. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance." "Oh, no, no, Ms. Scully. The pleasure’s all mine."” His grin widened as he heard his partner laugh. He loved to hear Scully laugh. “Okay, now, we want to… we want to go hips before hands, okay?” As he spoke he moved his hands close to her hips. “We want to stride forward and turn. That’s all we’re thinking about. So, we go hips… before hands, all right?” Relieved that she wasn’t pushing him away, Mulder’s hands came to rest on Scully’s hips and pressed himself against her, turning her the correctly. He heard her breath hitch in her throat as she simply replied “ok,” and he knew she was thinking back to that night in New York, and the way he caressed her hip. Hell, it was all he could think about, and he willed himself to get a grip. “One more time.” He turned her once more. “Hips…before hands, all right?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”
“Hips before hands,” she replied.

Leaning forward, Mulder spoke right into her ear, his breath caressing her cheek. He noticed with a smile that she shivered. He still had an effect on her, even if she’d recently wanted to kill him for his behaviour around Diana. “Right. We’re going to wait on the pitch. We’re going to keep our eye on the ball. Then, we’re just going to make contact. We’re not going to think. We’re just going to let it fly, Scully, okay?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Ready?” There was a moment where the two of them battled to adjust their grips on the bat, both grinning as they did so. ‘I’m in the middle’, Scully murmured, reminding him of Ashley when she wanted something.

“All right, fire away Ash.”

Ashley ran forward to do her job. “Ok it’s coming. Just do your best mom!”

Mulder laughed, while Scully looked offended. “Are you saying I’m not going to be good at – ooh!” The first ball came sailing towards them and they swung the bat, connecting with it. “Ooh, that’s good,” commented Mulder. All right, what you may find is you concentrate on hitting that little ball... The rest of the world just fades away-- all your everyday, nagging concerns.” The second ball came towards them. “The ticking of your biological clock…..” Another hit. “How you probably couldn't afford that nice, new suede coat on a G-Woman's salary, especially with a daughter with expensive taste.” And another. “How you threw away a promising career in medicine to hunt aliens with a crackpot, albeit brilliant, partner.” He chuckled to himself as Scully turned to give him a look of disbelief. “Getting into the heart of a global conspiracy. Your obscenely overdue triple-X bill. Oh, I... I'm sorry, Scully. Those last two problems are mine, not yours.”

“Shut up Mulder,” Scully replied, having the time of her life. “I’m playing baseball.”

Xxxxxxx

They played long into the night, Scully relinquishing the bat briefly to let Ashley get her own batting lesson from Mulder, though she noticed with some amusement, that her partner kept a respectable distance from her daughter. Then the two Scullys took up the bat when it was Mulder’s turn to field. Scully had to hand it to Mulder, his idea had been a good one. She hadn’t laughed like that in ages, and she knew Ashley had had a lot of fun – her daughter hadn’t stopped giggling all night. It had been good to spend time outside of work with Mulder too. They hadn’t really seen one another outside of the office (field work aside) since Diana had come on the scene. Now Diana was no longer around, no doubt haven’t crawled back under the rock she came from (not that Scully would ever say that to Mulder), and things were finally returning to normal. She’d missed having him around. When they’d finally had enough of baseball – or rather Ashley had announced she was hungry – the game was abandoned and the evening was over. At least that’s what Scully had thought. Apparently not though.

“We have one more surprise for you,” Mulder announced during the walk back to the parking lot. “I hope you don’t have anywhere you need to be.”

“I’ve got time,” replied Scully. “Though that’s if Ashley can make it.”

“I can make it.”
“Really?” Scully turned to her daughter who was trailing behind the two of them. “I thought if you didn’t eat something as soon as possible you were going to waste away?”

“Well,” replied Mulder, as they reached his car. “I think I have something for that.”

“It’s part of your surprise,” Ashley added. Mulder popped the trunk to reveal a picnic hamper, and pulled out two big blankets.

“A picnic?”

Mulder nodded uncertainly. “We thought it might make a change.”

“We went to the deli on the way here, and the grocery store too,” said Ashley, her eyes lighting up. “And we’ve got chocolate AND ice cream.”

“Ice cream?”

“Real ice cream this time Scully. None of that non-fat crap you like.”

Before she could even pretend to argue, her belly gave out an impatient grumble. “Sounds great,” she replied, taking the blankets from Mulder as he dived in for the picnic basket.

xxxxx

“How long had you guys been planning this?” Scully stretched out next to her partner, Ashley fast asleep on the other side of her. Her daughter had passed out not long after dinner, her long day of school and baseball having caught up with her, not to mention her helping of chocolate cake. As soon as he noticed she was asleep, Mulder wondered whether it was time to pack up and go home, but thankfully Scully didn’t seem in a hurry to leave. He had to admit, he wasn’t ready for the evening to end. Making sure Ashley was comfortable on one of the blankets, the two of them stretched out on their backs on the remaining one, looking up at the stars.

“A while,” Mulder answered, grinning over at his partner. “Ashley wanted to do something to apologize for the other week and I thought we could surprise you.”

She was touched, after the way things had been with him lately she wasn’t sure they’d ever be comfortable around one another again.

“Although the fatty foods for the picnic were completely my idea,” Mulder added, and Scully smiled.

“Even the cake?”

“Well, Ashley may have threatened my life if I didn’t buy that.” He looked over at Ashley, feeling his heart pull. “She’s just like you, you know, you can fall asleep anywhere.”

Scully returned his grin. “It’s because we spend so much time listening to you. You exhaust us.”

“I bet I do.” Sobering, Mulder looked back up at the sky, and out of the corner of his eye saw Scully do the same. “It’s such a clear night,” he murmured.

“It is,” Scully agreed. “You know, when I was dying, I told Ashley that I’d be up in the stars, that if ever she needed me, all she needed to do was look up and I’d be there. It feels like a lifetime ago now.”

“It does,” he agreed. “It’s a nice thing for her to have thought though, I mean to know that you’d
“always be there.”

“I’d have said the same to you if I thought you believed it.”

Mulder’s lips curved up into a sad smile. “I’d have known you’d have been watching me Scully, I’d have heard your voice behind me in the office, lecturing me. “Mulder, you’re crazy. Mulder, don’t you dare file your expense reports in the trash.”

Scully chuckled. “You know me too well.”

“Were you scared?” He asked her, grateful that he wasn’t searching up at the stars for signs of her, that she was there in the flesh by his side.

“I was petrified,” she admitted. “I wasn’t ready to go and I had too much to lose. I didn’t want to leave Ashley and… I didn’t want her to be uprooted. I know that Bill was the only option I had, but I knew that she’d have been so upset to leave her home and to leave you.”

Mulder suddenly felt Scully reach over and take hold of his hand. He squeezed it gently before answering. “I’d have done everything I could to see her Scully.”

She gave him a shaky smile. “I know you would have. You’re Mulder, I know you.”

“Well,” he said, swallowing the lump in his throat. “I’m very glad you’re still here.”

Unsure of whether he meant something deeper, that she was still with him after everything that had happened in recent weeks, Scully nodded to herself, still not relinquishing hold of his hand. “Me too.”

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

When it was time to leave, Mulder volunteered to drive Ashley home. That way he could carry her up and put her to bed without waking her, he’d argued. Anything to spend more time with his favorite people, he thought to himself. Once he’d pulled up just a short walk from Scully’s apartment, just behind his partner’s own vehicle, he got out of the car and walked round to the passenger side, opened the door and lifted Ashley up into his arms. She didn’t even stir.

Scully approached her partner and retrieved Ashley’s school bags from the back seat. “If you want to head off I can take her up?”

Mulder shook his head. “It’s ok, I’ll bring her. Unless you have plans?”

Smiling, Scully shook her head. “I’ll make some coffee.” Relieving him of his keys, she locked up his car before leading him into the building and her apartment.

Flicking on the light, she checked her answerphone messages, making a mental note not to delete Mulder’s earlier message about her birthday present, as the man himself carried Ashley into her bedroom. He managed to pull back the comforter, put her into bed and remove her jacket and sneakers without Ashley even waking. It wasn’t until he tucked her in and kissed her forehead that he felt her stir against him. “Go to sleep sweetheart,” he murmured against her, crouching down beside her. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Mmm…” Her eyelids fluttered open, though Mulder could tell she wasn’t quite awake. “Thank you for baseball Mulder.”

“You’re more than welcome. I’ll see you soon, ok?”
“Ok. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Mulder, I wish you were my dad.” It had been a while since she’d said that, not since the time she’d run away from home after her argument with Scully.

Smiling, Mulder looked down as Ashley closed her eyes once more, falling back to sleep within seconds. “Me too Ash. Me too.”

He kissed her cheek before standing and turning back to the door. Scully stood in the doorway, her eyes filled with tears. She’d clearly heard every word and instantly Mulder felt self-conscious.

He moved to apologize, but Scully spoke first. “I just came to check she was ok,” she said, her voice shaky. Before he could respond, she’d turned on her heel and headed back out into the living room.

Switching out Ashley’s light, he followed his partner and prepared for her to tell him to leave. He’d clearly overstepped the mark. He should have kept his mouth shut. As he reached Scully, she turned to face him, and it was then he realized her tears had now spilled over. “Scully, I’m sorry –“

She shook her head. “Don’t apologize. I should apologize. And I should thank you.” Now he was confused. “Not just for tonight but for everything. You…you’re so good to Ashley. You treat her like a daughter and…you treat her so much better than Jack ever did. As far as she’s concerned you are her father and I…I know I got angry with her before, but it’s true, you are.”

“Scully –“

“I think last time I was more angry at Jack than I was at Ashley for suggesting it. He had the chance to be a father to her and he didn’t take it, and then he left her. He never got to see how amazing she is.” She huffed, wiping her tears away. “Although I am biased.”

“She is pretty awesome.” Closing the gap between them, Mulder took his partner in his arms in a bid to comfort her.

“Sometimes I hate him,” murmured Scully against his chest, slipping her arms around his waist.

“I can understand that,” he replied. “Jack just…I guess he just really didn’t want to be a father. I’m guessing it’s a pretty scary prospect, although it must have been the same for you.”

“I was terrified,” his partner admitted. “I guess I should have expected his reaction. He never wanted to be a father and when it happened I…it was so unexpected, and I think he thought I’d done it to trap him, but I really hadn’t. I… I thought he might change his mind. I thought when he saw her he’d fall in love with her like I did.”

“You just have to remember Scully that the way he behaved wasn’t your fault, and it certainly wasn’t Ashley’s. At the end of the day, he’s the one who missed out on seeing her grow up. And…” he took a deep breath. “While I obviously wish Ashley got to see more of her dad, the selfish part of me is grateful that I’m getting to see her grow up. I mean do you know how proud I was of her tonight when she hit that home run?”

Scully gave him a tearful smile. “I think you helped her with that.”

“Hey, believe me, that was all her. You know Scully,” he said sobering. “I wish Ashley had her dad around, I wish that she and you didn’t have to go through so much suffering.”
“We can’t change what’s happened Mulder.”

“I know, I know. But what I’m saying is that I know things get tough for you guys, but I’m always around. It may not have felt like that recently.” He was grateful Scully didn’t mention Diana. “And I know I’ve been an asshole with you.”

“Yes you have,” she answered, though he noticed she was smiling.

“But I am here for you. Both of you. Always.”

“Thank you.” She leant in, pressing her forehead to his. “And thank you for tonight. I wouldn’t say it’d been top of my gift list before tonight, but I loved it, and I know Ashley had a great time.”

“I still can’t believe you’ve never hit a baseball before Scully.” For a second he could have sworn he saw her eyes light up with amusement, but he must have been seeing things, he told himself.

“There’s a first time for everything,” she replied, and for a moment Mulder wondered if she was still talking about baseball.

“Yes there is,” he agreed, and half wondered whether he could get away with kissing her. He missed kissing her.

“You still want some coffee?” Asked Scully, and Mulder realized the moment had passed. Besides, they’d already had a great evening, and things seemed to be going well for them. The last thing he wanted to do was upset his partner.

“I’d love some,” he replied, and reluctantly let her out of his grasp as she headed towards the kitchen. At least, he mused, the evening wasn’t over yet.
“Is it done yet mom?”

Scully peered down into the bowl her daughter was stirring. “Hmm not yet, it needs to be a smooth dough.”

Ashley followed her mom’s gaze, and Scully noticed with a smile that she had flour on her nose. She looked adorable, like she was still just a little child. “It looks pretty smooth to me.”

“Do you want me to take over?”

After a moment, Ashley nodded, relinquishing the bowl and wooden spoon to her mom, who began stirring like a pro. The two of them finally had an evening to themselves, what with Ashley spending the previous weekend at her friend’s sleepover, and Scully being busy in recent days investigating a new case with Mulder; the discovery of an artefact in Africa, and the death of the scientist involved. The same artefact, or at least a rubbing of the artefact, had left Mulder feeling worse for wear, and so Scully had ordered him home to bed that evening.

“Mom?” Ashley asked, watching Scully as she paused to check the mixture.

“How come you don’t like peanut butter cookies?”

Handing the bowl back to her daughter, Scully reached for a baking tray next to her. “It’s not that I don’t like them, I just haven’t had them in a long time.”

“Since when?”

“Ok honey, you need to break off parts of the dough and roll them into small balls.” Ashley began to do as her mom said, and after a moment, Scully joined in.

“You know, your dad used to eat these all the time. I think the last time I had these cookies myself was when I was with him.”

“Dad used to like them?”

“They were his favorite. Just like they are yours.” Well, she thought. They were Ashley’s favorite at the moment, ever since she’d returned from the sleepover with a recipe card and a desire to get baking.

“I didn’t know that.”

Scully watched her daughter carefully. “I guess there’s a lot you don’t know about your father. But you know, if you have any questions, all you have to do is ask.”

Nodding, Ashley concentrated on the dough in front of her. After a moment, she spoke. “I don’t like to talk about him in case it upsets you,” she admitted.

The cookies now forgotten, Scully brushed her hands against her trousers and reached for her daughter, pulling her in towards her. “Oh sweetheart. If ever you want to talk about your dad, I’m here for you. You don’t need to worry about me.”
“Sometimes I find it hard to remember him.”

Scully nodded, pressing her lips to her daughter’s head. “You were very young when he passed, that’s not surprising. But if there’s anything you want to know about him, please just ask me.”

“Do you think he’d like Queequeg?”

It wasn’t the question Scully was expecting. “You know, I’m not sure. Your dad was never a big dog fan. He was like Mulder in that respect.”

“Mulder pretends not to like Queequeg, but when he thinks we’re not looking, he feeds him scraps of his dinner.”

“I think your dad would have been the same.”

“Did you love him at first sight?” Ashley asked, looking up at her mom. “My dad that is.”

Smiling, Scully shook her head. “Not straight away. I liked him though, he was smart and kind and intriguing. We were friends to start with, and then I fell in love with him.”

“Where was your first date?”

“It was a restaurant near to where your dad lived.”

“What did you have to eat?”

Scully cast her mind back, trying to think. “You know, I don’t think I remember that. It was an Italian restaurant though, and your dad didn’t like Italian food.”

“He didn’t?”

“Uh uh,” she shook her head.

“Why did you go there?”

“Because he’d heard me saying I wanted to try it.”

Ashley processed that snippet of information. “Did you kiss him?”

“That night?” Ashley nodded. “Just a goodbye peck, that was all.”

“Did he buy you flowers?”

“Not that time.”

“Why not?”

“Because at the time we were just friends. And besides, your dad wasn’t the kinda guy to get a girl flowers.”

“But didn’t you want flowers?” As a child brought up watching Disney movies, Ashley was all for romance.

“Sometimes,” Scully admitted, as she reached for the dough once again. “But mostly I just wanted to spend time with your father.”

“Did he have any brothers or sisters?”
Scully shook her head. “No he didn’t. And your grandparents died when he was in college.”

“Was he sad?”

“I didn’t know him then, but I think he was sad he didn’t get to know them. Like you didn’t have a chance to know your dad.”

“Mom,” Ashley began, busying herself by placing the balls of dough onto the baking tray. “Why didn’t my dad want to spend time with me?”

There, Scully thought. The question she’d been waiting for; the question Ashley had asked her repeatedly over the years; the question that never got easier to answer. And, as she got older, Ashley deserved to know the truth, to some extent. “Your dad was a great guy but…he always said he didn’t want children; that his job was too dangerous, and took up too much of his life for him to start a family. You were…you were a surprise, the best surprise I’ve ever had in my life, and I thought it might be enough to change your dad’s mind. We’d already split up before I found out I was carrying you – “

“Why?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did you split up?”

“We both wanted different things at the time. We still loved one another, but we were better off apart.”

“What did dad say when you told him you were having me?”

There were some truths, that were best not knowing, Scully told herself, as she thought back to the argument she and Jack had; him accusing her first of being unfaithful and then of trying to trap him. Finally he’d accepted the truth, but he’d reiterated that he’d never wanted children, that he couldn’t be a father to their baby. He’d support her financially of course, he’d told her, but that was all. “He was surprised, we both were. Like I said, you were the best surprise I’ve ever had in my life, and I will never ever regret having you.” Ashley smiled thinly up at her mom. She knew Scully was trying her best, but her mom realized that she’d wanted more from her father. “And remember, your dad loved you. The last conversation I ever had with him was about you, and him wanting to take you to the zoo that day.”

With tears in her eyes, Ashley went to her mom and hugged her. “Do you think I’m like my dad?”

Scully studied her daughter hard. “You look like me mostly, but I see some of your dad in you.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “You have his determination, and his intelligence. And…” she smiled. “You know what?”

“What?”

“I see Mulder in you too.”

“You do?” Ashley’s sullen mood was now a thing of the past. She idolized Mulder, and Scully knew that being compared to him was the ultimate compliment.
“I do. You have Mulder’s humor, his disregard for the rules…” Her daughter grinned. “And you have his compassion too.”

“Can we take Mulder some cookies later?”

“I think we can manage that. We’ll call him first to make sure he’s feeling better, and then –“ Before she could finish, she was interrupted by the sound of the phone. “I’ll get it,” she said as she brushed her hands clean once again. Leaving Ashley to continue with the cookies, Scully headed into the living room and picked up her cell. “Hello.”

“Scully. It’s Skinner. Where are you?”

“I’m at home with Ashley. Where are you?”

“A hospital in Georgetown. I’m calling with some bad news. Mulder’s in a serious condition here.”

“What happened to him?”

“Nobody knows Agent Scully. You should do whatever you can to get here as soon as possible.” And with that he hung up, leaving Scully wondering how on earth she was going to go back out into the kitchen, and break her daughter’s heart once again.

Scully marched down the hospital corridor, Ashley close behind, worried as she approached AD Skinner. After she’d got the call from him telling her Mulder was in hospital she’d panicked and, with no babysitter available, decided to take Ashley with her, knowing that her daughter would worry otherwise. Ashley took the news that Mulder was in hospital surprisingly well, though Scully knew she was no doubt in shock. As if knowing her mom didn’t have the answers, Ashley didn’t ask many questions, and instead quickly forgot all about peanut butter cookies as she raced to get her sneakers on. But what neither Scully or Ashley expected was to find Mulder in the psychiatric unit of the hospital – when she’d heard from Skinner that Mulder was in hospital, she’d presumed his headaches had become too much. She certainly hadn’t anticipated this.

“They just told me he’s in the special psychiatric unit,” she said to Skinner as he stood, mindful that Ashley was nearby.

“I told you on the phone –“

“No, you said that there was bad news. You didn’t tell me what was wrong. Look, I’m sorry,” she relented. “We got stuck in traffic. And I wish my daughter didn’t have to see this.”

Skinner nodded in understanding. “I don’t know what to do Dana. No one else does, either. I knew you’d want to be here to see him, to talk to the doctors.” When he took hold of her hand, Scully knew instantly that something was wrong.

“What? What is it?”

He led her to another room, leaving Ashley out in the corridor, and Scully caught sight of Diana Fowley stood in front of several monitors, each focusing on patients in psychiatric cells. Her attention was caught by one of the monitors in particular, showing Mulder, pacing his room.

“Thank you for coming,” Diana said politely. “He was asking for you last night.”

Scully tried not to let her words affect her. She’d thought Mulder was alone the previous evening,
but obviously she was wrong. Before she could question Diana, the door opened, and a doctor stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Scully ignored him. “What’s wrong with him?” She pointed to the monitor. “This man right here, Fox Mulder?” She was momentarily distracted as Mulder began yelling to the camera.

“We don’t know what’s wrong with him and we don’t know what to do for him. He’s got extremely abnormal brain function but there is no signs of stroke. We’re waiting to run more tests.”

“Waiting for what?”

“He’s extremely violent. With what we’ve given him he should be in a barbiturate coma but there’s brain activity in areas we’ve never seen before.”

“I want to talk to him.”

“No, he’s a danger to anyone.”

“Not to me,” Scully answered defiantly. Mulder would never hurt her.

“Can we speak in the hall?”

“About what?”

“Agent Scully,” Skinner warned.

“SCULLLLLLLY!!” Mulder’s voice rang out. “ASHLEEEYYYY!!”

Before Scully could stop her, Ashley ran into the room, having clearly just heard her name. She looked from her mom to the monitor in front of her, her eyes wide in horror. “Mom? What’s happened to Mulder?”

“ASHLEY!!”

“What’s wrong with him?” Sensing her daughter’s fear, Scully pulled Ashley into her arms, trying to shield her from the monitor.

“It’s ok baby,” she murmured. “Mulder’s not very well right now, but I’m going to help him. I promise I’m going to help him.” Glaring at Skinner and Fowley, Scully was determined she wouldn’t break that promise, that she was going to help Mulder and bring him back to her and Ashley.
‘I came in search of something I did not believe existed’ wrote Scully. ‘I've stayed on now, in spite of myself and Ashley. In spite of everything I've ever held to be true. I will continue here as long as I can… as long as you are beset by the haunting illness which I saw consume your beautiful mind. What is this discovery I've made? How can I reconcile what I see with what I know? I feel this was meant not for me to find but for you... to make sense of - make the connections which can't be ignored... connections which, for me, deny all logic and reason. What is this source of power I hold in my hand - this rubbing - a simple impression taken from the surface of the craft? I watched this rubbing take its undeniable hold on you, saw you succumb to its spiraling effect. Now I must work to uncover what your illness prevents you from finding. In the source of every illness lies its cure.

xxxxxxxx

Maggie Scully rarely refused her granddaughter anything. Little Ashley had been through so much heartache during her short life, and yet had still come out fighting – and smiling. She was her first granddaughter, and Maggie was so unbelievably proud of her. So when Ashley approached her tearfully asking – pleading in fact – to visit Mulder in hospital, Maggie couldn’t help but say yes. After all, Ashley was worried about him, and so was Dana, who’d even flown to Africa to try and help poor Fox. Maggie thought that seeing Fox might help Ashley to settle and sleep better at night, but it wasn’t until they reached the hospital that she realized she may have been wrong.

Assistant Director Skinner was there to greet them, his initial surprise at seeing her soon giving way to concern as he realized Ashley was in tow. “Mrs Scully, what are you doing here?” he asked, catching her before she could open the door to Mulder’s hospital room.

“We’ve come to visit Mulder, Mr Skinner,” Ashley said excitedly, but he didn’t return her smile.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Both Maggie and her granddaughter asked.

“What’s happened?” Mrs Scully asked.

“Is Mulder ok?”

Skinner turned to address Ashley. “Mulder isn’t himself right now. I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to see him like this.”

“I want to see him,” she insisted, before glancing up at Maggie. “Please can I see him?”

Realizing he was no doubt going to lose the battle, Skinner sighed in resignation. “I just want you to remember that he’s not himself. He might not know who you are. He’s restrained too.”

“Restrained?” Maggie exclaimed in horror.

Skinner nodded. “He had an outburst earlier. He’s sick.”

“And my mom’s going to make him better,” Ashley replied defiantly, stepping round him to let herself in to Mulder’s room.

Xxxxxxxxx
Voices, there were so many voices, Mulder thought, wishing they would all just shut up and leave him in peace. Thoughts, secrets, hopes, wishes – he could hear them all, and they were enough to drive him mad, if he wasn’t already in a psych ward.

It was then he heard it, a familiar voice, louder than all the rest. As he looked up, Mulder saw the door to his room open and suddenly Ashley came into view. She looked so uncertain, so vulnerable and small as she stepped into the room alone. As soon as she saw him, her eyes filled with tears and her bottom lip trembled as her thoughts filled Mulder’s head.

*Oh god Mulder, what’s happened to you? What’s wrong?*

He tried to calm her, to tell her he was fine, but no sound came out.

“Mulder?” She walked towards him slowly, coming to a stop by his bedside. Hesitantly she reached out and took hold of his hand, her eyes taking stock of the cuffs that bound him in place. *Why have they tied you up? Why won’t you talk to me? Please talk to me Mulder. Tell me you’re ok*

He wanted to. Damn it he wanted to.

“Ashley?”

Maggie entered the room behind her granddaughter, a look of horror crossing her features as she took in Mulder’s situation. He tried hard to focus on Ashley’s thoughts, wishing he could do something to take away her pain.

“Grandma? What’s happened to Mulder?” *Please don’t die Mulder. Don’t die. I don’t want you to die like my other dad. Please get better soon. I love you -*

“Fox isn’t very well,” Maggie explained. “And he’s unable to talk right now. The doctors are doing everything they can to help him.”

“And so is my mom. That’s why she’s in Africa.”

“That’s right sweetheart. Of course she is. Now,” Maggie added, smiling sadly over at Mulder. “I think we’d better leave the doctors to do their job.”

“But –” *I want to stay with you Mulder, you look scared. Please don’t make me leave*

“We’ll come and see him again tomorrow after school.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” And Maggie meant it too, Mulder knew.

Ashley looked back at Mulder, and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “See you tomorrow Mulder,” she said. “I love you.” And then, just loud enough for him to hear, she whispered. “Don’t worry Mulder, my mom will help you. I promise.”

He only hoped Scully could.

Before Ashley and Maggie returned, Mulder had another visitor, though this one wasn’t quite so welcome. Diana stood by his bed, talking to him, and despite the fact he wanted to tell her to go to hell, that he wanted Scully, that he wanted to tear his restraints off and get the hell out of the
hospital, he couldn’t. He couldn’t do anything but sit there and listen to his ex-wife.

“I know what’s happened to you. I know what you’re suffering from. I’ve been sitting back and watching. I know you know. I know you know about me, that my loyalties aren’t just to you but to a man you’ve grown to despise.” That was putting it mildly, thought Mulder. Scully had been right about Diana all along; his partner had never trusted his ex-wife, and it turned out she’d had good reason not to. “You have your reasons but, as you look inside me now you know that I have mine.” Diana reached over and touched his cheek with the back of her hand, but still he didn’t look at her. He couldn’t look at her. “Fox…Fox I love you. I’ve loved you for so long. You know that too. And I won’t let you die to prove what you are, to prove what’s inside you. There’s no need to prove it. It’s been known for so long. Now we can be together.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Diana move in closer, before he felt the press of her lips against his forehead. It had been so long since she’d kissed him, and it felt alien, it felt wrong. He missed Scully, he thought, as Diana finally left him alone. He needed Scully.

xxxxxxxx

Finally Mulder got his wish. Amongst the hundreds of voices he could hear whirring around in his head, Mulder finally heard that of his partner’s, as she pleaded with the doctor to let her in to Mulder’s room. At first he thought it might be a dream, that he was imagining the whole thing, especially since he’d heard Ashley’s thoughts about her mom having gone away, but then her voice got clearer and clearer and he knew she was really there, outside of his room. It was too bad he wasn’t able to speak, else he’d have begged the doctor to let her in too, but finally the staff relented and there she was, standing by his bedside. As soon as she saw him, tears clouded her eyes. She’d only been gone a matter of days and already he had deteriorated. When she’d left he’d been pacing his room, yelling for her, yelling for Ashley, but now…now it was as though he wasn’t even there in his body. She knew better though.

“Mulder,” she began softly. “It’s me. I know that you can hear me. If you can just give me some sign.” Mulder tried, but he couldn’t move. He couldn’t give her the signal that he could hear her. “I want you to know where I’ve been…what I found. I think that if you know, that you could find a way to hold on.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I need you to hold on. I found a key…the key…to every question that has ever been asked. It’s a puzzle, but the pieces are there for us to put together, and I know that they can save you if you just hold on.” Her voice broke, and she took hold of his hand, gripping it tightly. Mulder only wished he had the strength to squeeze her back. “Mulder please…hold on. Hold on for me…Hold on for Ashley. Please.”

He was certainly going to try. For her, and for Ashley.

xxxxxxxx

Mulder had had so many visitors, he really shouldn’t have been surprised at his last. Diana, Scully, Ashley and his mom had all come and gone, but when he opened his eyes, he was faced with the Cigarette Smoking Man. What surprised him most though, was that Cancer Man didn’t speak, at least not out loud. He spoke with his mind.

“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes….” He turned to face Mulder. “Ah but your mummy will still love you. All a mother wants is to shield her boy from pain and danger. Safe in the world as he was once in the womb. But maybe we think a father demands more than mere survival. Maybe we’re afraid a father demands worldly adulation, success….heroism…” he moved in closer. “I know you can hear me.”

Mulder looked at him. “I could always hear you. Even when my mind is jammed with a thousand
voices, I can hear you like a snake hissing underneath. How the hell did you get in here?”

He watched with horror as the Cigarette Smoking Man filled a syringe. “How does anything I do surprise you now? Aren’t you expecting me to sprout vampire fangs?”

“You’ve come to kill me.”

“It would be better than living like a zombie, wouldn’t it?”

He inserted the needle into Mulder’s temple, injecting him with some unknown substance that made Mulder gasp in pain. When he could focus once again, Cancer Man spoke, out loud this time.

“I’m giving you a choice.”

“What choice?” He was finally able to speak.

“Life or death. Your account is squared – with me, with God, with the IRS, with the FBI. Rise out of your bed and come with me.”

“I’m dying you idiot. If I could get up, I’d kick your ass.” He wished he could kick his ass. Then he’d find Scully and Ashley and live his final days with them.

Cancer Man was undeterred. “Don’t be so dramatic. Only part of you is dying. The part that played the hero. You’ve suffered enough - for the X-Files, for your partner, for her daughter, for the world. You’re not Christ. You’re not Prince Hamlet. You’re not even Ralph Nader. You can walk out of this hospital and the world will forget you. Arise.” As he lifted his hands, Mulder slowly sat up in bed.

“Wh…what….what the hell are you doing to me?”

“I’m showing you how to take the road not taken. Take my hand.”

“Why should I take your hand?”

“You can’t read my mind?”

After a moment, Mulder sighed in relief. Suddenly everything was quiet. “No, I can’t,” he answered, clearly relieved. “All the voices are gone.”

“Take my hand Fox. You have to take the first step. Take my hand,” he added. “I am your father.”

And with that he led Mulder out of is room, out of the hospital, and away from Scully.

To be continued.
Mulder glanced out of the window as the Cigarette Smoking Man brought his car to a standstill outside a suburban house. A nice house by the looks of it, similar to what he and Scully stayed in during their undercover case at Arcadia Falls. *Scully*. Mulder’s heart panged at the realization he wasn’t allowed to have any contact with her or Ashley – at least not for the moment. Cancer Man had told him that getting in contact with the two of them would put their lives in danger. Mulder just hoped they were safe, that they weren’t too worried about him. He’d remembered little Ashley’s look of concern the day she’d visited him in hospital and the desperation in Scully’s voice as she willed him to hold on. He was holding on.

“Where are we?”

“Home,” Cancer Man responded. “This is your new life.” He held out a key, and after a moment, Mulder reached out and took it from him.

“I don’t understand.” He watched as the other man got out of the car, leaning back in to speak. He pointed to the keys which were still in the ignition.

“You can drive away right now. Drive back to Scully and her daughter and your X-Files and imminent death and I wouldn’t be surprised if you did, but I think you should take a look around. I mean, why leave something behind until you…until you know what it is you’re leaving.” With that he walked off, leaving Mulder alone to ponder his decision. He wanted to get back to Scully and Ashley, but he also recalled Cancer Man’s warning – that if he went back straight away, he’d put them in danger. Removing the keys from the ignition, Mulder took a deep breath and got out of the car.

Mulder strolled along the beach, the sand sifting through his toes as he approached a little boy in front of him. The child was building a sandcastle, so intent on what he was doing that he didn’t notice the wave come crashing over, flattening the sand.

“Oh…,” said Mulder, realizing that the little boy was now upset. “That’s ok, you can build it again. Just start again, ok?” He reached out to brush the tears off of the little boy’s face and looked into his eyes. They were his eyes, he realized, though the child’s face looked distinctly familiar. Similar to Ashley, Mulder thought, feeling a pang as he remembered the little girl he’d left behind. But right now the little boy needed him, and so Mulder comforted him as he began to rebuild the sand.

As Mulder heard the bedroom door open, he immediately got up out of bed to see who his latest visitor was. He’d already met with Deep Throat, who’d told him he lived just down the street, and assured Mulder that he wasn’t to feel guilty for the deaths that had occurred in his life. “Who’s there? Who are you?” He wondered whether Deep Throat was back, or even Cancer Man to take him back home to Scully, but as he squinted, he saw it was his ex-wife. Diana. She walked towards him, and it was then he noticed she was wearing a black negligee. He was only wearing boxers himself, and yet he didn’t recall changing out of his clothes. He was still wearing handcuffs after all.

“Hundreds of little joys,” Diana began as she walked towards him. “To open a door and have a
woman beckon you in, to have her make a fire and lay the table for you and when it’s late, to feel her take you into her arms.”

When she’d closed the gap between them, Diana held up a key, before unlocking Mulder’s handcuffs. She ran her hands up his bare chest, and Mulder felt alarm bells ringing in his head. He didn’t want this, not with Diana. She was in the past, she was the wrong woman for him. But before he could voice his protests or push her away, she leaned in and kissed him, and Mulder couldn’t help but kiss her back.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

The next morning, Mulder wandered down the driveway to collect the newspaper. As he turned, he saw Diana step out of the door holding a mug of coffee. He smiled at her shyly, but something didn’t feel right.

“Morning.”

“What’s wrong Fox?”

It felt wrong to be stood here with her, without Scully and Ashley. Diana was in the past, he told himself, and it had been so long since the two of them had been together. He’d moved on. That was why it felt wrong. “There’s nothing wrong,” he lied. “Perfect. It’s all perfect. What the hell am I doing here?”

“You just need some coffee.”

“No I’m serious. I have commitments – to the X-Files, to Scully and Ashley, to my sister –“

Diana sighed, clearly not impressed. “You think you know what that means – commitment. It’s all just childish Fox.”

“Childish?”

“Yes. You’ve been a child, with only the responsibility of a child to your own dreams and fantasies but you won’t know the true joy of responsibility until you plant your feet in the world and become a father.”

“But I am a father. Ashley –“

“Ashley is not your child. I mean a father to a child of your own.” She smiled knowingly.

“Wow.” Mulder chuckled nervously. If this was a dream, he wanted to wake up. “Diana, if you lay all this on me after I sleep with you for the first time in years, what’s it going to be like tomorrow?”

“You have to let it go Fox.”

“Just like that? I’m supposed to slip into domestic bliss even after I was dropped off here by a man I have every reason to believe left here to carry on his dirty work.”

“Hey,” replied Diana, trying to calm him down. “He lives the next block over. We’ll go visit after breakfast.”

And as Mulder was soon to discover, Cancer Man and Deep Throat weren’t the only people living here. Samantha was too.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Time was passing Mulder by too quickly, he realized as he looked down at himself, noting the black tuxedo he was wearing. It felt like only yesterday that Cancer Man had sprung him from the hospital, and yet months seemed to have passed here in his new life. He turned to see Diana stood behind him, wearing a wedding gown. It was almost identical to the one she’d worn the first time, and he wondered why she’d kept it for so long. And then it hit him – they were going to get married again. “Diana?” He approached her, lifting up her veil, and then suddenly her voice sounded out from behind him. Confused, Mulder turned, watching as she entered the bedroom, no longer in her wedding dress but instead very much pregnant. She smiled as she approached him. “Fox? It’s time honey?”

He didn’t even know she was pregnant, and before he could process it, he turned and another door opened. Two little boys rushed in, yelling as they ran over to Diana. Mulder moved to grab one of the boys playfully, but then he caught sight of himself in the mirror. He’d aged dramatically, he noticed with horror. His previously brown hair was now completely gray, and wrinkles had gathered on his face. He wanted to know how long he’d been here, how Scully and Ashley were… and whether they still remembered him.

The little boy was still on the beach as Mulder approached, still building a sandcastle. His little tongue peeked out of his mouth as he concentrated, just like Ashley’s used to when she was engrossed in a magazine, or Scully as she attempted to sort out their expenses ready to show Skinner. Mulder knelt down next to the boy, watching him as he patted down the sand in front of him. “What’s your name?” he asked. The little boy shrugged.

“Are you here alone?”

He shook his head, briefly looking up to point in front of him. Mulder squinted, barely able to make out the figures in front of him, slowly walking towards them. But then as the sun highlighted the woman’s hair, he realized he’d know her anywhere. Scully. And Ashley. He waited for them to reach him, but it seemed to take forever. They were edging closer though, with every passing moment. They were coming to get him.

Scully jolted awake as she heard something – or someone at the door. Coming to, she noticed she’d fallen asleep on the floor, in the same place where she and Albert Hosteen had prayed the night before. Sitting up, she glanced around her apartment, her eyes falling on an unmarked envelope just inside the door.

Getting to her feet, she ignored the aches in her back and neck and retrieved the envelope, immediately opening it to reveal a keycard for a door in the Department of Defense. There was no note with it, no hint of who had sent it to her, but Scully knew. She recalled her earlier conversation with Diana Fowley, how the other woman had looked on sheepishly as Scully urged her to think about her ex-husband and how he’d do anything to save her. She pleaded with her to do the same, and now it looked as though Diana had done as she’d asked. She’d sent the key, Scully was willing to put money on it. And, as she rushed out of her door, she knew it was her key to getting Mulder back.

Mulder grinned as Scully walked into his bedroom and approached his bed. With unsteady hands, he reached out and took hold of her arm. He had aged he knew, and Scully was the only person he had left in the world. Glancing behind her, he saw Ashley stood in the doorway glaring at him.
Whereas Mulder now had the body of an old man, Ashley looked to be the same age. His smile faded though when he realized that Ashley didn’t look too happy at seeing him. Come to think of it, neither did Scully.

“Oh Scully, I knew you’d come. They told me you were dead.”

“And you believed them.” She didn’t look that impressed. “Traitor.”

“What?”

“Deserter. Coward.”

“Scully, don’t,” Mulder answered, hurt at her words. She was supposed to be glad to see him, they were all back together again. “I’m dying.”

“You’re not supposed to die Mulder, not here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not in a comfortable bed with the devil outside.”

“No you don’t understand. He’s taking care of me.”

“No Mulder, he’s lulled you to sleep. He’s made you trade your true mission for creature comforts.”

“There was no mission. There were no aliens.”

“No aliens. Have you looked outside Mulder?”

“Look outside Mulder,” urged Ashley.

“I can’t,” he replied pathetically. “I’m too tired.”

“No Mulder, you must get up. You must get up and fight. Especially you. This isn’t your place. Get up Mulder. Get up and fight the fight.”

“Get up Mulder,” Ashley repeated, watching as her mom stepped out of Mulder’s grip. Before he could respond fully, the two of them had walked out of his room.

“Scully…where’s Scully? Ashley? Scully?!”

But there was no one. He was alone once more.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

At first Scully wondered whether the keycard was a trap, whether whoever had given it to her – and she had a fair inkling as to who that was – wanted her to get caught. But as she swiped the card and the door opened, she knew that Diana had meant for her to save Mulder. She entered the room, her heart catching in her throat as she saw Mulder on the table in front of her, his arms outstretched. She rushed over to him, taking in his undressed state, the bandage on his head.

“Mulder, Mulder you’ve got to wake up. I’ve got to get you out of here. Mulder, can you understand me?” She noticed with relief that his eyes flickered – he was slowly coming round. He cried out, and his pain brought tears to Scully’s own eyes. “Mulder, you’ve got to get up. I don’t know how much time we have. You’ve got to get up Mulder.” She couldn’t carry him, not by
herself, and she wished she’d brought the Gunmen for backup. “No one can do it but you Mulder. Mulder, help me. Please Mulder.” Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she rested her head on his shoulder, willing him to wake up and help her. If they didn’t go soon they would be caught, she knew, and she couldn’t let them get to Mulder again. As she pulled away, she saw that Mulder’s eyes were now open, and he was staring up at her. “You…help…me…” he whispered weakly. To Scully’s relief, he then wrapped his arms around her neck and let her help him off of the table and lead him to safety.

Xxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder was halfway through getting ready for work when he heard the knock at the door. He knew who it was, Scully had been checking up on him since he’d been released from hospital following his check-up., but he peeked through the spyhole regardless before opening the door. “Scully, what are you doing here? Actually I was just getting dressed to come see you but I…I couldn’t find a tie to go with my victory cap.”

Scully didn’t return his smile, instead looking concerned as she reached up to remove his Yankees cap from his head. She had an identical one at home, he remembered with a small smile, a souvenir from his last trip to a baseball match with Ashley. “Mulder, no work. You have to go back to bed.” She started to pull his tie from around his neck, but he grabbed it back, grinning.

“Oh wait. Tie goes to the runner.”

Finally she smiled, looking down at her feet. Mulder’s gaze also drifted towards the floor as he prepared to give her the bad news. “Scully, I um…” He took a deep breath. “I was coming down… to work to tell you that Albert Hosteen is dead. He died last night in New Mexico. He’d been in a coma for two weeks. There was no way he could have been in your apartment.”

“He was there, we prayed together,” she replied insistently, emotion creeping into her voice. “Mulder, I don’t believe that. I… don’t believe it. It’s impossible.”

“Is it any more impossible than what you saw in Africa… or what you saw in me?”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” she answered softly, defeated. He stepped in closer towards her. “Mulder, I was so determined to find a cure to save you that I could deny what it was that I saw…” her voice broke as she began to cry. “…and now I don’t even know... I don't know... I don't know what the truth is ... I don't know who to listen to. I don't know who to trust.” It was her turn to deliver the bad news. “Diana Fowley was found murdered this morning.” Mulder stared hard at her, stunned. His ex-wife was dead, had been murdered no doubt for helping to save him. “I never trusted her... but she helped save your life just as much as I did.” He was determined not to cry. Not now. “She gave me that book. It was her key that led me to you. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I know she was your friend.” Scully stepped in closer, wrapping her arms around Mulder’s shoulders. It was a moment before he could speak.

“Scully, I was like you once,” he began as he held her. “I didn't know who to trust. Then I... I chose another path... another life, another fate, where I found my sister. The end of my world was unrecognizable and upside down. There was one thing that remained the same.” He pulled back to look at her, his hands cupping her face. “You... were my friend, and you told me the truth.” Scully smiled back at him as she reached to hold his wrist. “Even when the world was falling apart, you were my constant... my touchstone.”

“And you are mine.” They moved in towards one another, with Scully pressing her lips on Mulder’s forehead, resting them there, right against the point where Cancer Man had tried to invade his mind. Her kiss told Mulder all he needed to know, that deep down Scully loved him just
like he loved her. He closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her kiss long after she’d pulled away. He
didn’t open them until he felt something on his head, and he realized she was putting his cap back
on. Her hands moved to frame his face this time, her fingers moving to lightly touch his lips.
Without another word, she turned and walked off down the corridor, leaving Mulder alone, her
touch a promise of things to come.
Chapter 71

*Over and under and through the loop* Mulder repeated to himself as he knotted his tie. He pulled it tighter, glancing at his reflection in the mirror. He had to admit, he looked a little better today, at least better than he had a few days before. Today the Yankees baseball cap was forgotten, just leaving the bandage covering his wound from his recent encounter with Cancer Man. The last thing Mulder wanted was more sympathy, well aware that he would already be on the receiving end of a lot of it today of all days. Diana’s funeral. Though their marriage had ended many years ago, Mulder still felt as though he needed to attend the service. He may not have been able to trust his ex-wife all the time, but it was Diana who helped Scully to save his life. And Diana had paid for her actions with her own. Yet another person dead because of him. His throat thickening, Mulder quickly removed the bandage on his head. The less attention he drew to himself, the better. As he turned back towards the bed to retrieve his jacket, Mulder heard a soft tap at the door. Moments later there was a louder, more assertive knock. He wasn’t expecting any visitors; Scully was at work and the Gunmen were banned from leading him astray until his doctor – in this instance Scully – said so, and that wasn’t going to be anytime soon. Mulder walked out of his bedroom and headed towards the door. He quickly peeked through the spyhole, checking that the Cigarette Smoking Man wasn’t standing outside, ready for round two. It wasn’t him though, but Mulder was surprised to see who his visitor was.

“Scully?” He threw open the door, wondering what his partner was doing there. She was supposed to be at the office, not checking up on him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She smiled up at him, wincing involuntarily as she noticed his wound. He could tell the doctor in her wanted to reach up and check him over.

“What are you doing here? I promise you I’m following your orders and not getting up to anything I shouldn’t.”

“I know,” she answered softly. “I was just wondering whether you wanted some company this afternoon.”

“Uh Scully,” he said awkwardly, wondering how to broach the subject. “I can’t this afternoon. It’s Diana’s funeral.” He knew Diana wasn’t his partner’s favorite person, although Scully had admitted herself that his ex-wife helped to save him.

“I know,” she replied, not even fazed. “That’s what I meant.”

It was then that Mulder took in her appearance; a jet black dress that fell just below her knees, framed by a matching blazer. He was dressed for a funeral he realized, and the thought brought tears to his eyes. “Scully, you don’t have to.”

“I know. And I know that Diana and I didn’t see eye to eye –” “That was an understatement.

“Then why –“

“Because she was important to you, and you’re important to me. And she saved you. I have to thank her for that.” She reached out and took hold of his hand. “If you want to go alone I’ll more than understand, but if you’d like company, I’m here for you.” She was always there for him, even when he didn’t deserve it. God he loved her.

With that he rushed back to his bedroom and slipped on his jacket. Grabbing his keys, he headed back out towards his partner, then followed her out of the door, preparing to say goodbye to his ex-wife.

Diana’s funeral went without any problems; just a small gathering and a short, fitting service. Afterwards, Scully dropped Mulder back at his apartment to go pick Ashley up from the babysitters, and he thought that would be the last he saw of her that day. But when he heard a series of knocks at the door just past six that evening, he realized he was wrong. Smiling to himself, he muted the television and rose from the couch, heading over to the door, this time throwing it open without even checking the spyhole. As predicted, Scully stood opposite him, having swapped her black dress for indigo jeans and a cream sweater. Mulder hadn’t even changed out of his mourning suit, just removed the jacket and loosened his tie. In front of Scully stood Ashley beaming up at him, a heavy-looking takeout bag in her hand. Chinese from the smell of it.

“We come in peace and we bring you good food,” said the youngster, stepping forward to kiss Mulder, before heading into his apartment as though she lived there. She had no trouble making herself at home there – it was like her second home.

“Hope you haven’t eaten yet,” added Scully, following her daughter inside and relieving her of the food.

“No, you’re just in time.”

“I won’t keep you waiting then.” Scully headed on into the kitchen, leaving Mulder and Ashley alone. Ashley immediately stepped into his arms, surprising him.

“Hey trouble. You ok?”

She nodded against him before leaning back to look him in the eye. “I’m so sorry about Diana. Mom told me she passed away.”

“Yeah.” He was struck by her compassion, and remembered how even at a young age, she’d tried to comfort him following the death of his father. “She did.”

“It was her funeral today wasn’t it?”

“It was.”

“Are you ok?”

Mulder reached out, brushing Ashley’s fair hair back behind her ears. She was growing it – again – and the ends had begun to curl, just like Scully’s did when she got it wet. Ashley was her mother’s daughter through and through. “I’m fine. I had your mom to look after me.”

“She’s good like that,” commented Ashley, and Mulder smiled at her.

“She’s very good like that.”

“And Diana was your wife?”

“Once upon a time. How did you know that?”

“Because I know everything,” she replied cheekily.
“Of course.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Ash, you’re far from it.” He kissed her forehead, thinking how lucky he was to have her in his life, and how she was growing into a mature, beautiful young lady.

Ashley stepped out of his arms and walked over to the sofa, flopping down and tucking her legs underneath her, while Mulder headed out into the kitchen. Scully was spooning some of the takeout onto a plate and looked up as he entered. “I know you don’t appreciate the extra washing up, but I have an accident-prone daughter out there who’s wearing white. I’m not taking any chances.”

Smiling, Mulder headed over to the cupboard, retrieving three glasses. “I won’t argue. Your daughter might though. She takes after me with her slobbish ways.”

Scully didn’t disagree. As Mulder filled the glasses with water, she eyed him carefully. “How are you doing?” She reached out, taking hold of the bottom of his tie and pulled him in towards her. The drinks now forgotten, he went willingly.

“Better now you guys are here.” It was true. He didn’t want to be alone, not tonight of all nights. The last thing he wanted was to be cooped up alone with thoughts of Diana and everyone who’d suffered because of him. Once again Scully knew what he wanted without him asking.

“I think Ashley wants to challenge you on Mario something or other tonight. I’ve told her not to distract you for long, so feel free to feign a headache if you want to get out of it.” As Mulder placed his now free hands on her hips, she frowned at him. “You don’t have a headache, do you? How are you feeling?”

“I feel fine Scully. I haven’t had a headache for a few days now, and I would love to let Ashley beat me once again.” The console he’d gotten Ashley for Christmas the year before but still resided at his apartment.

“You keep letting her win, what do you expect?”

“That’s the thing though, I don’t. But don’t let her know that.” Chuckling, Scully shook her head, muttering something Mulder couldn’t quite detect, but he had a feeling she was calling him a child. “Listen Scully…” Sobering, Mulder reached up, brushing a strand of her hair back behind her ears, just as he’d done to Ashley minutes before. “I just wanted to thank you…for today. It couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t easy for you either.”

“No,” he admitted. “But having you next to me helped. It always does. Scully, I –“

“Mom!” Ashley’s voice rang out, interrupting whatever Mulder was about to say. Both adults sighed, letting out the breath they’d been holding, and they both stepped back, pulling away from one another.

“Yes?” Scully called back moments later.

“Where’s the food? I’m starved.”

“C’mon,” said Mulder, picking the glasses back up. “Let’s go feed the troublemaker.”
Scully glanced over her shoulder at her sleeping daughter, stretched out on the couch. Despite being a small thing, Ashley took up a lot of room, and as she’d fallen asleep on the sofa, her mom and Mulder had been relegated to the floor instead.

“She’s such a couch hog,” commented Mulder with a grin on his face. He took another handful of popcorn and popped it into his mouth, before returning his attention to the film. “Every single time she kicks me off the sofa.”

“I’m sorry.” Scully looked at her watch. “We’d better make a move soon, it’s getting late. I’ll wake her up and we’ll get going.”

“No, you can’t wake her up. Look at her Scully.” Two pairs of eyes focused on the sleeping girl. “She looks too comfy to wake.” It was true. Her head resting on a cushion, Ashley was covered with Mulder’s blanket and looked dead to the world. It would be a shame to wake her, thought Scully.

“We can’t stay here,” she protested weakly.

“Why not?”

“There’s no room for starters.”

“I have a bed.” Mulder sensed her hesitancy. “I can sleep on the floor.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“So I’ll sleep with you then.” Both blushed at his words. “I didn’t mean it like that.” Scully bit back a smile. “You should be resting Mulder. You don’t need me stealing the covers.”

“That is true,” he admitted. “You like stealing my covers as much as your daughter likes stealing my sofa. But…” continued Mulder. “…I think I can handle it for one night.”

“We don’t want to intrude.” She chuckled. “Although I think it’s too late for that.”

“You’re not intruding. You brought food. Besides, I was grateful for the company.” Scully seemed to understand, and reached across to squeeze his hand.

“Ok, you got yourself a deal. Can I borrow some clothes?”

“Clothes?” He feigned confusion, though Scully didn’t realize.

“To sleep in. I don’t really feel like sleeping in jeans.”

“You could sleep naked.”

“And you could sleep alone.”

Grinning Mulder got to his feet, before holding his hand out for Scully to take. He pulled her up into a standing position, then gestured to her to go on through to the bedroom. “I’ll be there shortly. I’ll just take these out.” He picked up the empty Chinese containers, as well as Ashley’s empty plate. “There’s a spare toothbrush in the cupboard. Ashley’s is out all ready for the morning. I’ll get you some clothes in a second.”
“Thanks.” With that Scully kissed her daughter goodnight and headed off to the bedroom, with Mulder not far behind.

By the time Scully had brushed her teeth and freshened up in the bathroom, Mulder had finished up in the kitchen and found her some clothes to wear. He left her to get changed as he took his turn in the bathroom, and by the time he’d emerged once again, Scully was stood by the bed, clad in a navy t-shirt of his, which fell midway down her thigh. The shorts he’d left out had been folded up and placed on a chair in the corner, and as she saw Mulder’s raised eyebrow she explained. “I’m hot.”

He bit back the urge to respond. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her off. “I’ll turn on the air-con.” A few moments later, cool air was blowing in the bedroom and as Mulder turned, he saw Scully reach into her shirt and pull her bra out through her sleeve. “Neat trick Scully.”

“Thanks.” She padded barefoot over to the bed, slipping in beneath the covers. After switching out the light, Mulder joined her, meeting her in the middle. “Umm Mulder?” He heard her ask in the darkness, somewhat uncertain.

“Hmm?”

“Is that a mirror over your bed?”

Of course, he thought. It was the first time she’d slept over since the mysterious waterbed and canopy had appeared. “Yes?” He licked his lips. “It was uh…a gift from the Gunmen.”

“Right.” She didn’t sound too sure.

“I keep meaning to take it down.”

“Of course.”

“It’s tacky.”

“Yes it is.” After a moment, she giggled.

“What?”

“You know, Ashley told me a while ago there was a mirror on the ceiling, but I thought she was joking.”

“Yeah, that took some explaining.”

“I bet.” He felt the bed dip and moments later noticed that Scully had rolled on her side to face him. He turned to mirror her position. “Whatever floats your boat.”

“It was a gift.” He was laughing now, they both were.

“That’s your story and you’re sticking to it.”

“Of course.” Reaching out, Mulder rested his hand on Scully’s hip. “Thank you.”

“For noticing your mirror?”

“For making me laugh. For keeping me company. For coming to Diana’s funeral.”
“Mulder,” she said after a moment, the laughter now gone from her voice. “You don’t have to thank me. I wanted to be there for you.”

“After the way I’ve treated you lately, I’m surprised by that.”

“Well…things haven’t been easy,” she admitted. “But I didn’t exactly treat you that well in return, and I’m sorry.”

“You know, I don’t think I thanked you for saving me. For getting me out of the DoD.”

“I didn’t think I was going to be able to. You were a dead weight to begin with.”

“I saw you…in my visions. You were there. Ashley too.”

“What happened?”

“I was given the perfect life. Well,” he added. “The life he thought I wanted. My sister lived down the street, I was married…we had kids…”

“Kids?”

He tried not to flinch. “Yeah. Two boys.”

“Oh.”

“But it didn’t feel right. I wasn’t happy. The whole thing was just…odd…and the whole time, all I could think about was you and Ash.” Scully said nothing, instead listening intently. “I was told not to contact you because it would put you in danger but then you came to me.”

“We did?”

He nodded against the pillow. “You were both there. Ordering me to get up and get out of bed. You told me not to die…and then when I woke up, you were telling me to get up and follow you. You saved me. You save me time and time again. You and Ashley.”

“Mulder –“ He pressed his finger to her lips, silencing her.

“I don’t deserve you guys, but I’m grateful that you’re still here.”

“We’ll always be here.” Scully sniffed, and Mulder realized with horror that she was crying. She’d cried too much over him lately. “And you saved us too. I don’t know what we’d do without you. I mean Ashley loves you so very much and I…” she paused, and Mulder held his breath as he waited for her to say the words. But she said nothing. Moments later, Mulder felt her breath on his lips, before she kissed him. A simple kiss, yet it contained so much more than words. It was a promise for the future. Neither made any attempt to deepen the embrace, knowing it wasn’t the time, but that the time was coming soon.

“Night Scully,” Mulder whispered, kissing her cheek, her nose and finally her forehead.

“Goodnight.” Rather than roll over, she instead snuggled up against him, resting her head on his chest. Content, they both quickly drifted into a peaceful sleep.
“Mulder, I have something to ask you. Something important. This isn’t easy for me, and I don’t know how to say this but…but…” Sighing heavily, Scully frowned at her reflection in the mirror, realizing how pathetic she was. *Why did it have to be so damn difficult?* she asked herself. *Why did life keep throwing her these curveballs?* *Why didn’t he tell her before?*

“Mulder –“

“Mom?“

As Scully heard her daughter’s voice, she quickly smoothed down her sweater and turned to face the door, her rehearsal now on hold. When Ashley appeared at the entrance to her room, Scully grinned and walked over to her daughter. “Happy Birthday sweetheart!” She dropped a kiss on Ashley’s forehead, her hands moving to frame her daughter’s face. “Eleven years old! How did that happen?”

“I grew up.”

“You most certainly did.” Gone was her baby girl and in her place was a beautiful, intelligent and sometimes grumpy young lady. Inquisitive too.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Hmm? When?”

“Just now. I heard you say Mulder’s name. Did he call already?”

“Not yet. It’s a little early for Mulder. You’ll see him after school though.” After school when Mulder would be helping Scully out by taking Ashley and seven of her friends to the movies, followed by dinner, desserts and no doubt hyperactivity, particularly when Ashley opened the present he’d got her. Horse-riding lessons, something he’d been thinking about for a long time. Ashley’s love for animals hadn’t faltered over the years, and horses were her favorite. She was going to love it, Scully knew.

“Why were you saying his name then?”

“Oh, I must have been talking to myself, reminding myself to ask him something when I get to work later.” But Ashley didn’t look too convinced, no doubt thinking Scully and Mulder were plotting something connected to her birthday, which was better than the truth, Scully thought. She didn’t want Ashley to know anything about what she was planning to ask Mulder – not yet anyway. Besides, first she needed to pluck up the courage to actually ask him.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

The birthday party was a success; all eight girls loved Toy Story 2 and had enough sugar to power a small town for a week. Ashley was sensible though, well aware of her limits with her diabetes but still had – in her words – the “best birthday ever.” She loved her horse-riding lessons from Mulder, and all of the gifts from her mom – a riding helmet, CD player and more than enough clothes to fill her wardrobe twice over, and after thanking them several times throughout the evening, she finally passed out just before 10pm. No sooner was Ashley in bed, Scully stepped out of the kitchen armed with two glasses and a bottle of red.
Mulder raised an eyebrow. “You trying to get me drunk?”

She shrugged. “If you don’t want wine, I can always drink yours.” Smiling, Scully watched as Mulder held his hand out for the glass. “Just what I thought.”

Settling herself on the sofa next to him, Scully quickly filled the glasses and took a hearty sip of wine almost immediately. She reached out, placing the bottle on the coffee table before settling back in her seat, letting out a deep breath.

“You ok?”

“Mmm.” She nodded, almost uncertainly, and Mulder wondered whether she had something on her mind. She’d been quiet with him during the evening, though he knew they were both distracted by eight hyperactive ten and eleven year olds. “Thank you for Ashley’s present by the way. You shouldn’t have.”

“I know, but I wanted to.” It was the same conversation they had every year – Scully always chastised Mulder for spending too much on her daughter, while he maintained she was worth every cent.

“I know you did. Once she’s booked her lessons you’ll have to come and watch her. If you’re free that is.”

“Just tell me when and I’ll be there.”

Scully gave him a shaky smile, taking another sip of wine. Mulder hadn’t even touched his glass yet, but she’d almost downed hers. Something was definitely up. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’d say I’m lucky to have her too, but I think I’m exhausted after this evening. Those girls know how to party.”

“I think Ashley was dead to the world before her head even hit the pillow. I’m not sure I’ll be able to wake her up for the flight.”

“At least she can sleep on the plane.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

Mulder raised his eyebrows, giving Scully a look of disgust. “To your brother’s? Thanks, but I think I’ll pass.” She’d already invited him weeks back when she announced her plans to accompany her mom to San Diego for Christmas, though she knew straight away that he’d say no. She knew he didn’t get on well with her brother, and as much as he wanted to spend the Holidays with Ashley, he wouldn’t feel comfortable being around Bill. To be honest, Scully wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to be around her brother either, but she owed it to Ashley to let her spend time with her family. Even if she would miss Mulder.

“Ok, but you have to promise me you’ll actually eat something on Christmas Day besides toast.”

“I’ll probably go to my mom’s.” They both knew it was a lie.

“Well whatever you do, eat something substantial. And don’t do any work, I forbid you.” Scully sat forward, helping herself to another glass of wine. “Do you want a top up?”

“I’m good.” He held up his still full glass to prove his point, and wondered exactly why his partner was drinking like a fish. “Are you ok Scully?”
“I’m fine.”

He wasn’t convinced, watching as she took another swig of wine. “You’re hitting it kinda hard tonight Scully,” he said, gesturing to the wine. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“I just…” She let out a pursed breath. “I can’t believe I’m the mom of an eleven year old. It just feels weird.”

“Weird?”

“I’m old.”

“You’re not old Scully.”

“She’s growing up too fast,” she said, ignoring him.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about just yet. She’s still our little girl as of right now.” Scully smiled at his use of “our,” but then she realized what she had to ask him, and wondered whether he’d still feel the same. “Talk to me in a few years’ time though when she starts driving. Or god forbid drinking. Can you imagine a drunk Ashley?” He frowned as Scully took yet another drink. Never mind a drunk Ashley, he thought to himself. Any minute now he’d be contending with a drunk Scully.

“I just miss baby Ashley too, you know? Don’t get me wrong, I adore her now, but when she was a baby she was just adorable.” Mulder couldn’t help but share her smile. “When she used to rest her little head in the crook of my neck and snuggle up. I just miss her needing me. She’s always been independent, right from the moment she was potty trained.”

“I can imagine that.”

“And I miss carrying her, and the middle of the night when I’d feed her, and she’d squeeze my finger and look up at me like I was the only person in her world.” She took another sip. “God, I think I even miss changing her diapers. And how when she started walking, she’d pull her diaper off and run around, wanting me to catch her.” Her smile faded. “I miss that.”

“I’m sorry you can’t have that again,” replied Mulder, taking the first drink of his own wine. “You’ve no idea how sorry I am that you can’t experience that again.”

“But I can.”

“What?” Scully had his full attention, as if she hadn’t had it already. Mulder had told her just a short while ago about her missing ova and how they weren’t viable. She’d told him at the time that she wanted a second opinion, but then he’d heard nothing, and Scully hadn’t broached the subject again. Until now. Suddenly the wine made sense.

“I had my ova tested after you spoke with me. The results show that it is viable, that there is a chance I can conceive.”

It wasn’t the news he was expecting, but he was delighted to hear that she had options, that there was a possibility she could have another child. "That's great news Scully. I'm happy for you.” And he was, genuinely. Scully however seemed a little uncertain. “That is great, isn't it?"

"It is,” she finally agreed, chewing her lip thoughtfully. "Doctor Parenti said we can get moving with it as soon as possible. The sooner the better.”
“Of course.”

“I just need to find a donor.”

Donor. As dumb as it sounded, though Mulder always wanted for his partner to be able to have a child, he never even considered this child's father. Of course he knew it took two people to make a baby, he wasn't completely stupid. "And have you thought about that?"

“A lot.” Scully glanced up at the ceiling as though looking for inspiration from a higher power. When she looked at him once again, he suddenly saw the answer in her eyes. Good god. “Mulder,” she began, and for a moment he thought about bolting for the door. This was not happening. It wasn’t. Scully wasn’t honestly going to ask him of all people – Fox Mulder, a man who struggled to keep a tank of fish alive for more than a week – to father her child. Of course she was. “I would like for you to be the donor.”

The donor. Just the donor, he wanted to ask, or something more? But before he could comment or ask her what the hell she was thinking, or even pour himself another glass of wine, Scully laughed at herself, moving to refill her glass yet again. “Oh god,” she exclaimed. “What am I doing?”

Mulder reached out, grabbing the wine glass out of her hand and settling it firmly on the coffee table, along with his own. “Talk to me Scully,” he urged, taking hold of her hand as he saw tears cloud her eyes. He’d seen her cry too much in recent years. “What’s happening?”

“Oh god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to ask you like this,” she said, her voice breaking. “I’ve been trying to pluck up the courage for the past few days and I just haven’t known how to do it.”

“So you thought you’d get drunk?”

“I’m sorry. Please, just forget I said anything.”

As if that was likely. “Scully.” He squeezed her hand. “Be honest with me. Did you mean it?”

After a moment, she nodded, her bottom lip trembling, the tears spilling over. “I could choose from any number of donors, but I don’t know them, it would be completely anonymous. I don’t want that, I want to do this with someone I know, with someone I trust. And I want that person to be you. I know it’s a lot to ask, and the last thing I want to do is ruin what we have, but –“

“Scully, it won’t ruin what we have.”

“I’m asking a lot of you. Too much.”

“No, never too much.” After everything she’d been through, the fact that she trusted him to help meant a lot to Mulder, a hell of a lot.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize Scully, you have nothing to be sorry for. I umm…I think –“

“Don’t.” Scully lifted a hand up to silence him. “Please don’t answer me now. I need you to think about this, because I know you, I know you’ll say yes just because it’s me and you want to help me, but please don’t. I want you to take the time to think about it, and if you say yes, I want you to do it because you want to, and if you don’t want to do it, I want you to be honest with me.”

“Ok.” The truth was, he needed time to process Scully’s request. “I’ll think about it.”
“Thank you.” She sniffed. “We can talk about it when I’m back from San Diego?”

“Sure.” Mulder’s mind was still reeling, and he was half tempted to lean over and polish off the bottle of wine.

“I’m sorry; I know this wasn’t the evening you had planned.”

Mulder huffed out a laugh. “You could say that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m…I’m flattered you even thought to ask me, I really am. And I promise you I’ll give it a lot of thought.”

“Thank you.” It was Scully’s turn to chuckle. “I didn’t mean to dump this all on you and then run off to San Diego.”

“It’s ok.” He could do with the time to think anyway. “Are you still ok for me to drop you guys off at the airport?”

“If you don’t mind?” she asked, nodding. “I know Ashley would love to see you before we go.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” Finishing his wine, Mulder glanced at his watch. “It’s an early start in the morning. Is Ash going to be up in time?”

“Oh, I’ll make sure she will be. I’ll just pay for it later with a grumpy daughter.” She watched as Mulder tried – and failed – to stifle a yawn. “It’s getting late.”

“It is.” Not that he thought he could sleep. He had a big decision to make and knew he’d be thinking about it for a long time. Scully was right, his first real thought had been to agree outright – after all, it was rare she ever asked him for anything, and he knew he’d do anything for her. But conceiving a child was a big decision, particularly for a man hadn’t had a decent father figure of his own. Still, he told himself, Scully had lost a lot thanks to their partnership with him. This was his chance to give something back to her.

Thinking he was going to be kicked out, Mulder stood up, with his glass in hand, and carried it out to the kitchen. Scully wasn’t far behind, and left her own glass and the now empty bottle on the counter. Wordlessly, she reached out and took hold of his hand, and tugged gently. He raised his eyebrows at her. “We’ve got an early start,” she commented, and he nodded in understanding. “I don’t think I want to be alone tonight.”

“I can stay,” he murmured, already following her towards the bedroom. Sleeping in the same bed as Scully required no pause for thought at all. Fathering her child, however, did. Curled up around Scully later in bed, Mulder held her until she fell into a peaceful slumber. It was a long time before he got to sleep that night.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder pulled up the car into short-term parking and killed the engine. He glanced into the rear-view mirror, smiling as he registered that Ashley had fallen back to sleep. Scully had woken her earlier that morning and she wasn’t particularly happy about it. From the looks of it, she’d been out for a while, no doubt having drifted off the instant Mulder had started up the car – he thought she’d been quiet. Scully herself had been unusually quiet too, and he knew it was because of their conversation the previous night. She was nervous, he could feel the tension radiating from her, but he’d simply reached over and taken her hand. The last thing he wanted was for their relationship to
be strained, particularly as he’d told her the previous night that it wouldn’t change a thing. The moment the car came to a standstill, Scully let go of his hand, and followed his gaze into the back seat. “Ashley,” she called, frowning when her daughter remained asleep.

Mulder shook his head at her before she could call again. “I’ll get her.”

“Mulder, she’s eleven year’s old. You can’t carry her onto the plane.”

“No, but I can give her a few more minutes of sleep.” Unbuckling his seatbelt, he got out of the car and opened the back car. With ease, he reached in, freed Ashley from her seatbelt and lifted her out of the car without waking her. She was getting too old for him to do this, thought Scully as she headed to the trunk to collect their luggage, but he lifted her daughter as though she weighed no more than a bag of sugar. When they finally made it to the terminal building and Ashley could sleep no more, Mulder pressed his lips to her warm forehead to try and rouse her. “Ash honey, time to wake up.”

She stirred, her head moving to the crook of Mulder’s neck, and he thought back to what Scully had told him the previous night, about how she used to do the very same thing as a baby. He wished he knew her at that age, he thought to himself. “Wakey wakey sleepyhead. Time to wake up and get on the plane.”

“Don’t want to get up,” she replied grumpily, her eyes opening in spite of her words. “I don’t want to go.”

Thankfully Scully didn’t hear her protests. “Yes you do. You’ll have a great time and I’ll see you when you get back.”

Satisfied Ashley was now awake, Mulder settled her on the floor, steadying her with a hand. She went straight into his arms. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too buddy. Have a great Christmas.”

“I’ll call you on Christmas morning.” She turned to look at her mom for permission. “Can I call Mulder on Christmas morning?”

Scully smiled. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“Can we spend New Year’s Eve with him?”

Mulder shrugged, looking over at his partner. The ball was in her court. As though reading his mind, Scully nodded. “If Mulder isn’t doing anything, I’m sure we can see him at some point.”

“Thanks mom.” Ashley gave Mulder one more hug before pulling away reluctantly. “I need the bathroom.” Before her mom could stop her, she’d run off in the direction of the toilets.

“Hurry up!” urged Scully, her eyes following her daughter to make sure she was indeed going to the bathroom and not the gift shop. She then turned her attention to Mulder. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Anytime. If you change your mind about me picking you up when you get back, just let me know.”

“Thanks.” She smiled shyly, and it was then that Mulder realized she was nervous. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel uneasy around him.

“Scully, I –“
“Mulder, please.” She shook her head. “Not today.”

“I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for trusting me and asking me to do this. I promise you I’ll give it some decent thought.”

“Thank you.” Scully stepped in closer towards him. “Like I said, please don’t say yes just because it’s me. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll completely understand and it won’t ruin things. Just the fact that you’re even thinking about this means more to me than you’ll ever know,” she sniffed hard, the tears clouding her eyes. Biting her lip hard, she shook her head once more, no doubt urging herself not to cry. Wordlessly Mulder held out his arms and she stepped into them.

“I’ll think about it, I swear. Now don’t worry about anything. You and Ash go and have a great Christmas, and tell big brother Bill that I send my regards.” She huffed against him. “I’ll see you in time for New Year.”

“You’re a good man Fox Mulder,” she commented, pulling away. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

Scully suddenly leaned in, and for a moment he thought she was about to kiss him. His heart quickened in anticipation.

“C’mom Mom!” called Ashley, walking back from the bathroom. “They’re calling our flight.”

“Right,” she said to herself, standing back up straight and, after picking up her suitcase, turned to face her daughter. “Come on then little lady. Bye Mulder.”

“Bye.”

And with that he stood and watched as his two girls walked off into the distance.
“Mulder, it’s me.”

Mulder sat up straighter on the sofa, the remote control immediately falling onto the floor. He bent to retrieve it, settling it on the coffee table. “Hey Scully, what’s up?” He flinched. He sounded almost too casual.

“I was just wondering if you were busy this evening?”

As if she had to ask. Fox Mulder had no life, and Scully knew it. “Not at all.”

“Would you mind if Ashley and I came over?”

“Of course not, you’re more than welcome.” Definitely too casual. Nervous almost. “Aren’t you at your mom’s today?”

“We’ve just got back.”

“Where is the little squirt?”

“She’s in her room.”

“Oh oh?” He hoped they hadn’t been arguing again. From time to time Ashley’s attitude still made an appearance, and so she and her mom clashed. They were just too similar, and when they fought, Mulder hated to get in the way. “What’s she done now?”

“Nothing actually. She’s tidying her room. I said if she hadn’t cleared away her gifts from Christmas by the time we finished this phone call, I was going to let her go stay with Bill for the next holiday.”

Mulder smiled. “You’re such a cruel mom.”

“You sound like Ashley.”

There was a pause, an awkward silence, and Mulder cleared his throat nervously. They never had awkward silences, not unless they were angry at one another, and as far as Mulder was aware, they weren’t angry. Or at least he wasn’t. If anything he was apprehensive, wondering whether he’d gone too far the previous night. He’d kissed her. Sure he’d kissed her before, many times, and she’d even kissed him back, but last night had been different. Last night he’d kissed her in public. In a hospital waiting room actually, just as the clock struck midnight and a new year began. It was a simple, chaste kiss, and he hadn’t really been thinking at the time, except about the fact that he wanted Scully to be the first person he kissed that year. And the last too. As he’d pulled away, he’d murmured about the world not ending, and he noticed that his partner didn’t seem too happy at his public display of affection. He put his arm around her and led her out of the hospital, before Scully drove him back to his apartment; his zombie injury putting him out of the driver’s seat for a while. Typically they didn’t discuss the kiss, merely wishing one another a Happy New Year before each going their separate ways. And that was the last Mulder thought he’d see of his partner, at least until they returned to the office. Thankfully though, she and Ashley had other ideas.

“Can we interest you in takeout tonight?” She was playing it safe, sticking to normal conversation.

“You can always interest me in takeout Scully.”
“We’ll be round about seven?”

“I look forward to it.”

They hung up without saying goodbye, just like normal, and Mulder let out a deep sigh, wondering whether his kiss had changed everything, or nothing at all.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Scully and Ashley were early, as normal, knocking on Mulder’s door ten minutes before seven. Scully struggled in with two large pizza boxes and a couple of bottles of diet coke, while Ashley immediately turned her attention to Mulder. “Is it true you were attacked by zombies?” she asked, clearly impressed, her gaze going to Mulder’s arm, which was no longer in his sling. He knew Scully would comment, but it was just too uncomfortable.

“Your mom told you I was attacked by zombies?”

“I did not!” Scully exclaimed, returning from the kitchen having dumped her heavy load on the counter.

“She didn’t,” agreed Ashley. “But she said you said it was zombies, and she also said they didn’t really exist. So did you?”

“Uh huh.” Mulder lifted the sleeve of his t-shirt, showing Ashley the bandage that covered his wound. Her eyes widened.

“That is so cool! I can’t wait to tell Aiden when I get back to school. He’ll never believe me.”

“Who’s Aiden?”

Ashley shrugged. “Just a guy in my class. When I told him I was going to San Diego for the Holidays, he said it was boring. Zombie bites are so cool.” She looked over at her mom. “And scratches too.”

Mulder followed her gaze. The marks on Scully’s neck had more or less faded now. She blushed as she registered both her partner and daughter were staring straight at her. “What?”

“Nothing.” Mulder looked at her expectantly. “Did I spy pizza boxes?”

“You certainly did.”

“We got you one to yourself because mom says you’re a greedy guts”

Mulder chuckled. “That I am. You guys stay here and I’ll go get dinner.” As he headed out in the kitchen, he saw Ashley make herself comfortable on the couch, picking up the remote to try and find something on television. Scully however followed him out into the kitchen. “It’s ok Scully, I got this.”

“You’re supposed to be resting your arm. I’ll help.”

“It’s ok, I can do it.”

“With one hand?”

“You’ll be surprised at just what I can do with one hand.” He caught himself too late and blushed. “I didn’t mean it like that.”
“Of course not.” Thankfully, Scully was smirking.

“Thanks for getting this, I’ll give you the money.”

“Don’t be silly.” Scully retrieved three glasses from the cupboards, and opened the coke, pouring it into the containers. “Consider it an apology for last night. I know I said I’d cook for you but well…”

“Yeah…”

“And I was going to cook tonight and invite you over, but we were late back from my mom’s, and the apartment looked like an Ashley-shaped bomb had hit it, so we were delayed and then—“ Before Scully could finish her sentence, Mulder had closed the gap between them and pressed his lips to hers. Once again he’d managed to surprise the hell out of her. After a moment, Scully relaxed into the kiss, her eyes slipping shut and her hands moving to rest on his torso. All too soon she pulled away slowly. As she opened her eyes, her cheeks pinked. Her lips twitched. “What was that for?”

Mulder shrugged, leaning back against the counter. “I just felt like it.”

“What would Skinner say?”

“Do you really care what Skinner says?” Her expression told him she didn’t. “Well he might not appreciate it, but I know of one person who’d be happy to find us like this.”

Scully’s smile faded. “Mulder,” she whispered, taking care not to raise her voice. “If…I don’t want Ashley to know about this thing between us.”

His eyes furrowing into a frown, Mulder folded his arms in front of him. “This thing?”

His partner sighed. “Our…relationship seems to be changing.”

“And you don’t want that?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want it.” He relaxed somewhat. “But Ashley can’t find out. Not yet.”

“Why not? She’d be fine with it.”

“I know she would, but she’s young. First of all she’s likely to get ahead of herself and marry us off and also…Mulder she loves you so much. If things didn’t work out between us, she’ll be devastated. I can’t do that to her.”

“Well I’m glad to see you’ve written us off already.” Suddenly he wasn’t so hungry any more.

“I’m not writing anyone off.” Before he could turn and walk out of the kitchen, Scully grabbed hold of his arm, her thumb tracing maddening circles against his skin. “I just want to keep this between us. For now at least.” With that she stood on tiptoe and pecked him on the lips, before carefully lifting the glasses and carrying them out into the living room.

At Ashley’s request they watched a movie as they ate their pizza; Mulder and Scully sat together on the couch, while Ashley sprawled out on the floor. Mulder’s mind however wasn’t really on the movie, more on what Scully had said to him out in the kitchen. The two of them had been drifting closer, particularly in recent months and after the death of Diana. When Mulder had told Scully the
truth about her ova, he’d worried that he’d ruined things between them by not telling her straight away. But then, just a matter of days ago, she’d asked him to father her child. She didn’t hate him as much as he thought. And then last night and earlier that evening, he’d kissed her and she hadn’t pushed him away. But then she’d surprised him by speaking about if something was to go wrong, if their relationship was to go sour. Maybe he’d overestimated how Scully felt, he thought, or maybe he’d spooked her. After all, just a few days before he’d told her he’d think about donating his sperm and now he was rendering her speechless by kissing her out in the kitchen. Maybe he was pushing her too far.

As if reading his mind, Scully glanced across him, meeting his eye. She smiled shyly, leaning forward over Ashley to place her now-empty glass on the coffee table. As she settled back on the sofa, she reached out, taking hold of Mulder’s hand and taking him by surprise. He raised his eyebrows and Scully lifted her free hand, her finger pressing against her lips. Grinning, Mulder squeezed her hand and relaxed, feeling the tension leave his body. They were going to be just fine.

“Thanks for having us Mulder,” said Ashley through weary eyes, before letting out a mighty yawn. She’d insisted just a few minutes before when Scully had announced it was time to leave, that she wasn’t tired, but her yawns betrayed her.

“You’re more than welcome. Any time.”

“Happy New Year.” She stepped forward into his outstretched arms for a hug, and Mulder dropped a kiss onto her head.

“Happy New Year Squirt. Sorry we didn’t get to hang out last night.”

“S’ok.” Scully knew that this night had more than made up for it in Ashley’s eyes. “Maybe we can hang out next New Year instead.”

“I’d like that.” A year’s time. So much could happen in a year, thought Mulder. There could even be a new baby, or Scully might at least be pregnant. He tried not to think about that. Scully hadn’t pressured him for an answer that night, but he knew he’d tell her soon. Very soon. “Goodnight.”

As Ashley stepped out of his embrace and opened the front door, Mulder turned his attention to Scully. She glanced up at him shyly. “Night Mulder,” she said, moving to follow Ashley out of the door.

“Night. Thanks for the pizza.” He wanted to kiss her again, so bad, but he knew he couldn’t, not with Ashley in sight. Scully seemed to understand though, and she gently brushed his arm as she moved past him and out of the door. He watched as the two of them made their way down the hallway before closing the door with a contented sigh. He was just about to head to the kitchen to clean up when there was a short tap at the door. He opened it immediately, wondering who had forgotten what. Scully stood opposite him, alone, and without speaking she entered his apartment, immediately turning to face him. Before he could question her she stepped in closer towards him and kissed him soundly. His hands immediately went to her hips to steady himself as he felt her arms snake around his waist, pulling him in towards her. Any doubts he’d had about their developing relationship vanished straight away as kissed him. Neither partner made any move to deepen the embrace and all to soon Scully pulled back, smiling cheekily. It was Mulder’s turn to struggle for words. “That was…” he huffed out a laugh. “I umm…Where’s Ashley?”

“She’s calling the elevator.”
“Right.” He grinned.

“I forgot my keys.”

“You did? Mulder glanced towards the living room, squinting as he tried to make out her keys, until he felt Scully lift a hand and cup his cheek, bringing his attention back to her.

“No Mulder, I didn’t.” She moved in again to kiss him once, twice and then a third time before pulling back reluctantly. “I just wanted to say goodnight.”

As she stepped away, Mulder immediately missed her warmth. He couldn’t wait to kiss her again. “Goodnight.”

“Happy New Year Mulder.”

This time when she left, she left for good, heading after an impatient Ashley who was holding the elevator. Mulder headed back in to his apartment and prepared to make the biggest decision of his life.
Chapter 74

Scully let out a deep breath as she heard the familiar knock on the door. It could only be one person, and she knew exactly why he was there. Rising from the sofa, she wiped her hands on her pants, suddenly nervous. Ever since she’d asked Mulder to be the donor for the IVF treatment she wanted, she felt as though she’d been walking on eggshells. Thankfully she and Ashley had spent the Holidays in San Diego, away from Mulder so she didn’t have to face him. Though, of course, California reminded her of her other daughter, Emily, and her inability to conceive children. And then, when she and Ashley returned to DC, Mulder had surprised the hell out of her on New Year’s Eve by kissing her in the hospital waiting room – in public. That was followed by another kiss at his apartment the following evening. Scully had seen how hurt he’d seemed when she mentioned keeping their blossoming relationship a secret from Ashley, and so she’d popped back to his apartment as they were leaving to assure him that she wasn’t writing their relationship off. But, as she drove home, she realised she still didn’t have an answer from him about the IVF. She wasn’t sure whether his kiss meant he was seriously considering it, whether he would answer in the affirmative, or whether he wanted to establish their relationship before declining her request. Finally, she thought to herself as she opened the door, she was about to find out for sure.

Mulder stood opposite her, smiling nervously.

“Hi.” Suddenly she was nervous. Very nervous.

“Hi.”

“Come on in.”

“Thanks.” As he stepped inside the apartment, Scully closed the door behind him. There was no kiss, she noted, no recognition of what had happened between them lately.

“Can I take your coat?” Inwardly she groaned, cursing herself for being so damn formal. It was Mulder, the same Mulder who’d known her for years and cleaned up her vomit and slept in her bed. She never offered to take his coat before.

“No, I can’t stay. I gotta get back to the office for a while.”

“Ok.”

“Where’s Ash?”

“She’s in her room on the phone to Megan. They haven’t seen one another in at least an hour, plus Ashley has a homework question. Or at least that’s what she told me.”

“Right.”

It was bad news, it had to be, she thought. That was why he couldn’t quite meet her eye. He was going to turn her down and get the hell out of her apartment.

“Obviously you’ve had some time to think about my request,” she said, just wanting to get down to business.

“Um it’s…it’s not something that I get asked to do every day,” Mulder replied, and suddenly Scully found it hard to meet his eye. She closed her eyes briefly, willing herself not to get upset. “Um but I am absolutely flattered. Honestly.”
“Look, if you’re trying to politely say ‘no’, it’s ok, I…I understand.”

“See as weird as it sounds…and this sounds really weird I know, but I…I just wouldn’t want this to come between us.”

Of course it was a no. She was asking too much of him, she knew it the moment she considered him to be the donor. “Yeah I know, I understand,” she said, her gaze falling to the ground. She was not going to cry, she was not going to make Mulder feel bad. “I do.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mulder reach out and she looked up to see him smile.

“The answer is yes.”

Yes. He said yes. Certainly not the answer she was thinking, but definitely the answer she wanted. Tears clouded her eyes as Scully smiled, and after a moment she stepped in towards him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She hugged him tightly, wishing she could put in to words how she felt, but the truth was she was too stunned. She’d honestly thought he would say no. “Well,” she said as they pulled apart, her head still spinning. “I’ll call Dr Parenti and I assume that he’ll want to meet you and go through the…uh…donation procedure.”

Mulder grinned. “At that part I’m a pro.”

Finally Scully managed a smile as they shared a joke, and she watched as Mulder headed back towards the door, obviously intending to give her some space and get back to the office. “Mulder?” she called, and he turned back to face her.

“What made you say yes?”

He considered his words before answering. “I just kept thinking about Ashley. She’s such a great kid, and I know she’s not exactly mine, but she feels like it, you know?” Scully nodded. “And I kept thinking that if we could make a kid just half as awesome as she is, it would be great. I want to help you do that.”

Scully’s eyes filled with tears, and she walked over and squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re a great mom Scully. You deserve to at least try for another child. I want us to give it a try.” Quickly dropping a kiss to her forehead, Mulder continued out of the door, leaving Scully full of hope.
“You’re going to have a baby?” Ashley looked between her mom and Mulder, clearly confused. Mulder turned to Scully for help and, as she shifted awkwardly on the sofa next to him, realized she wasn’t quite sure what to say either.

"Not exactly honey,” she finally replied. “Not yet anyway. Like I said, we’re going to try, but there’s a chance it won’t work.”

Ashley had listened intently after Mulder and Scully had called her away from her homework to talk about the IVF treatment they were about to start. Scully hadn’t been keen to tell her daughter what was happening, not wanting to get her hopes up, but Mulder had assured her it was for the best. Ashley wasn’t stupid, he’d told his partner, and she’d soon realize that something was up once the treatment started. It was best that she be told rather than worry about her mom’s health again.

Ashley nodded thoughtfully. “Where will the baby live?”

“If the process works,” stressed Scully. “It’ll live here with us.”

“Where will Mulder live?”

“Nothing’s going to change Ash,” he insisted. “I’ve still got my apartment, but I’ll come visit all the time. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” he joked, frowning when he noticed that Ashley didn’t smile.

“But you’ll be the baby’s dad?”

Mulder wasn’t quite sure what he’d be to the baby; he and Scully hadn’t yet broached that topic of conversation, but he knew what he wanted. He just had to make sure that he and Scully were on the same page.

“Nothing will change between you and Mulder sweetheart,” Scully reassured her. “Or you and me. You’ll still be my baby girl.” Ashley smiled thinly. “And didn’t you always say you wanted a brother or sister?”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound too sure. Before Mulder could speak, Ashley suddenly sat up. “Can I be excused?”

“Sorry?”

“Can I be excused please? I need to finish my math homework.”

“I thought you’d done that already?” Scully asked skeptically, raising her eyebrows as Ashley shook her head. “Ok then. But –“ she added as her daughter jumped up from the sofa. “Are you sure you’re ok with this sweetheart?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have any more questions or concerns?”

“No.” And, knowing that her mom was all out of questions, Ashley scurried out of the room.

“Well that went well,” Scully remarked dryly, running a hand through her hair.
“Is she ok?”

She sighed. “She’ll be fine. I think she’s just got a little attack of the green-eyed monster.”

“You think?”

“She’s just found out that one day in the future, she might have to share her Mulder. She’s had you all to herself all this time.” She smiled. “She’ll be fine. She just needs some time to get her head around it. Besides…” Gradually her smile faded. “At the moment it’s just talk. It might not even happen.”

“Scully –” Reaching out, Mulder took hold of his partner’s hand, relieved when she didn’t pull away. He knew how she felt about displays of affection when Ashley was just in the next room. “What happened to staying positive?”

“I’m just being realistic,” she argued. “We only have a small chance of success.”

“But we still have a chance. Let’s just take it as it comes ok?” A thought springing to mind, Mulder suddenly leaned forward in his seat, his free hand going to the back of his pants. Moments later he pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Scully. “I’ve been meaning to give you this.”

Letting go of Mulder’s hand, Scully took the paper from him and unfolded it. She frowned as she realized that it wasn’t a piece of paper but in fact a check. A very large check. “Mulder,” she gasped. “What is this?”

“It’s for you.”

“I can see that. But…what is it for?”

“I wanted you to have it, to help towards the IVF.”

“Help? It’ll cover the whole thing.”

“I know it’s not cheap, and I didn’t want you to do this alone.”

“Mulder,” she began, folding up the check. “I’m flattered, I really am, but I can’t accept this.”

“Why not?” He looked disappointed, no doubt believing she’d accept his offer.

“Because it’s too much. This was my decision and –“

“And you asked me to help.”

It was clearly the wrong thing to say. Throwing the check at him, Scully got to her feet and walked out of the living room and into the kitchen. Wondering exactly what was wrong, Mulder followed her, just waiting for her to yell at him. But she didn’t yell. Instead she sounded defeated as she spoke. “Mulder, I asked you to help with the conception. I don’t need your money, I don’t need anything else from you.”

“Scully –“

“I coped fine when I had Ashley by myself and I can do it again. If you think you can pay me off like Jack then –“

“Whoa Scu-“
“I can do this myself.”

“Scully,” Mulder said sternly, and something in his voice must have told his partner not to interrupt. “I am not Jack.” She didn’t say anything. “I’m not here to pay you off and walk away.”

“I don’t need your money.”

“I’m not saying you do. But this is expensive Scully, and I want to give you something towards it.”

“It’s too much.”

“Well then,” he smiled. “Put it towards Ashley’s college education. Or some new shoes or purses. Please Scully.” He noticed she didn’t look convinced. “I’m not paying you off,” he repeated. “Do you really think I could do this and then walk away and leave you to it?” After a moment, Scully shook her head. “Because I can’t. You know how I feel about Ashley don’t you?” Another nod. “I love her, and I wasn’t involved in her conception. I can’t agree to father a child with you and then ignore the kid while I take Ashley to the Yankees games, or get her a Christmas present and leave out the baby. I want…If you want me to…” he corrected himself. “I want to be there for this child too. I want to be there for all of you. But that all depends on what you want.”

For a moment he wondered if she was going to reply. She stood so still, saying nothing, instead her eyes glistening with tears. Finally, after swallowing hard, she finally found her voice. “I want my child to know its father,” she replied, to his relief. “I want my child to know that he or she is wanted, by both of us.”

“I want that too.”

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed. “I guess I’m just nervous about tomorrow.”

“I know. It’ll be ok though.”

“Will it?” She looked so uncertain, so doubtful that Mulder pulled her into his arms, relieved when she went willingly. “You deserve some happiness in your life Scully. We have to believe this will work.”

“I hope so.”

“Me too.” And he did, too. Agreeing to the IVF had been the hardest decision he’d ever made, but ever since he’d reached his decision, he didn’t regret it for an instant. He wanted this baby; he wanted it for Scully, for Ashley, and if he was honest, for himself too, even if he had been doubting his abilities as a father. Now he just needed luck to be on their side – for once.

Pulling away, Scully sniffed hard. “I’d better go talk to Ashley.”

“Want me to come with you? Or I mean, if you want to talk alone you, I can go.”

“No, this affects all of us.”

Nodding, Mulder got to his feet and held his hand out for Scully. Taking it, she stood and led him in the direction of Ashley’s bedroom. Predictably the door to her room was closed. Scully tapped once and entered, not in the least bit surprised to find her daughter stretched out on her bed instead of doing her homework like she’d insisted she was going to do. As soon as she caught sight of her mom and Mulder, she sat up.

“How’s the homework going?” Mulder asked. At least Ashley looked guilty at being caught out.
“Ash honey, are you ok?”

“I’m fine.”

Like mother like daughter, thought Mulder.

“Do you have any problems with us going ahead with the IVF?” Scully asked.

Ashley shrugged.

“You know, nothing is going to change.”

“Yes it is.”

“In what way?”

Another shrug before she answered. “Mulder’s going to be the baby’s dad.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to stop seeing you,” he said gently.

“You might.”

Approaching the bed, Mulder took a seat next to Ashley, and Scully moved to her other side. “I won’t. I promise you that.”

“You say that now.”

“And I mean it. Listen, I know things must have been a little confusing for you in your life, but I do love you, and nothing or no one is going to change that. Even if your mom and I had a hundred babies together, I wouldn’t love you any less. You’re still my Ash, and like your mom said, you’ll still be our baby.” Mulder felt Scully reach around the back of her daughter and squeeze his arm. As he looked up, he saw her swallow hard, her eyes glistening with tears. “It just means that hopefully, in a few years’ time, we’ll have another Yankees fan to come with us to the game, and you can help me teach the rules of baseball to your brother or sister. Deal?”

After a moment, Ashley looked up at him, her bottom lip trembling. She instantly moved into his arms, nodding against his chest as he clutched her to him. “Deal.”

Mulder pressed his lips to Ashley’s crown and noticed Scully out of the corner of his eye. He glanced up at her, returning her watery smile, and he held out a hand to her, inviting her into the hug. She went willingly, also moving to kiss her daughter. “Are we ok?” she whispered.

“We’re ok,” answered Ashley, content to stay in Mulder’s arms for as long as possible. All too soon though, he pulled back, a plan forming.

“Have you done your homework?” Ashley sat back and nodded sheepishly, her eyes darting down to her lap. “Well in that case I was going to suggest we went out for dinner. My treat. What do you say?”

Ashley perked up and nodded enthusiastically, while Scully pulled away, frowning.

“On one condition though,” he added.

“Ok.” Ashley didn’t sound quite so sure.

“Please don’t ever tell lies to us again,” said Mulder, referring to her earlier claim that she had
homework to do.

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Good.”

“Why don’t you get cleaned up sweetheart, and then we’ll make a move?” suggested Scully, and as Ashley got up off the bed, she also got to her feet, Mulder following suit. She let her daughter head off to the bathroom before turning to face her partner, surprising him by leaning in and pecking him on the cheek. “You’re a good father Mulder,” she whispered softly, then padded out of the room. Mulder just hoped he could prove her right, by being there for Ashley and possibly a new baby. Now they just needed the IVF to work.
Mulder exited the building and headed straight for Scully’s car. She’d offered to wait for him inside but he’d flat out refused; it would have been far too awkward doing what he’d been doing knowing full well she was leafing through the latest magazines in the waiting room. Hell, it was awkward enough as it was. He noticed her cheeks pink as he opened the door to the passenger side of the vehicle and got in. “Hey.”

“Hey.” She wouldn’t quite meet his eye. She was embarrassed just as much as he was, it seemed.

“We’re good to go. In both respects,” he added.

“It didn’t take long,” Scully replied, a look of horror flashing across her face as she realized just what she’d said. “Oh god, I didn’t mean that, I meant –“

“Relax Scully.” Mulder reached out to take hold of her hand, then laughed as he noticed her look of disgust. “It’s ok, I’ve washed my hands.”

Scully allowed herself a small chuckle. “I’m sorry, I guess I’m just nervous.” She smiled as finally he squeezed her hand. “I know you are. I am too, but you know what?” She shook her head, looking blank. “We’re a step closer to having a baby.”

This time her smile was genuine, and she tightened her grip on his hand. “Yes we are.”

“So what say we grab some takeout, go collect Ash and spend the evening just taking it easy?”

“I can cook if you’d like?”

“You need to take it easy.”

Scully rolled her eyes. “You’re a bit early for that Mulder. Rest comes after the next step.”

“Well then get the practice in now. I’ll pay for the takeout.”

She thought about his offer before nodding and, after squeezing his hand once more, released her grasp and started up the car. Mulder immediately missed her warmth. “Hey Scully?” She looked over at him quizzically. “Have you got a cigarette” He barely had time to grin before he felt Scully’s hand connect with his arm with a gentle slap. “Hey! I was joking!”

“Shut up Mulder and buy me dinner.”

So he did.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder headed back into the living room armed with Scully’s comforter and pillow. He frowned as he saw his partner perched on the edge of the sofa, leafing through a stack of mail. "Aren't you supposed to be taking it easy?” Before she could argue, he'd put the pillow against the arm of the sofa and pointed to it.

Sighing, Scully stretched out on the couch before her partner covered her body with the comforter. "You know, I am allowed to sit up.”

"The doctor said bed rest.”
"That just means I have to take it easy tonight."

"Well you can take it easy lying on the sofa." He smiled. "It's true you know."

"What is?"

"Doctors really do make the worst patients."

"Why thanks."

Running his fingers through her hair, Mulder dropped to his knees beside her and pressed his lips to her forehead. He figured he was allowed to kiss her now that egg had met sperm and she would hopefully soon be pregnant with his child. "How are you feeling?"

"A little sore."

Immediately he looked concerned. "Is there anything I can do?"

"It's weird," she continued, ignoring his question. "It's almost a good sore, like hopefully something is happening."

Nodding, Mulder took hold of her hand. "Just take it easy for now. If you need anything, just shout. When Ash gets back, she and I will be your personal slaves for the evening. I can stay tonight too. If you want that is," he added, his cheeks reddening. "I mean I can sleep on the sofa and take Ash to school in the morning. Your doctor said you needed to rest, so that's what you're gonna do. You're carrying precious cargo in there." He placed his free hand over Scully's atop of her stomach and she grinned. Before he could lean in and kiss her, a quick knock at the door interrupted them. "I'll get it," he said, jumping up from the floor and walking over to the front door, immediately opening it to find Ashley waiting on the other side. "Hey Squirt."

"Hey Mulder."

"Where's Holly's mom?" He asked, referring to Ashley's friend who'd invited her round for dinner after school that evening.

"She left. She made sure I got in ok though before she drove off. Hi mom," she said, catching a glimpse of Scully on the sofa. She walked over towards her, perching on the edge of the couch.

"Hi sweetheart, did you have fun?"

"It was cool."

"How was school?"

Ashley frowned. "It was ok. I got an A in my English test."

"You did? Well done!"

"And I have a lunchtime detention too." She said it quickly, clearly hoping that Scully wouldn't quite hear it. Her plan failed.

"What did you do?"

"It wasn't my fault." Mulder hid a grin, as he sat himself in the armchair. Though Ashley had inherited her mom's intelligence, she also liked to rebel every now and then, so she was often on the receiving end of class detentions. Her teachers couldn't really complain though, her grades were
consistently good and besides her inability to keep quiet, she was a model pupil.

"What did you do?" Scully repeated.

"Dylan was constantly kicking my chair and then he fired spitballs at me, so I called him an asshole. Did you go to the hospital today?"

Scully nodded. "You know I did. Ashley you need to watch your language or-"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. It won't happen again." They'd heard that before. "How's your stomach mom?"

This time Scully let her get away with the change of conversation. "It's fine."

"How long until we know if it worked?"

"Not too long," Scully replied, relieved that her daughter seemed to be taking an interest in the treatments after her initial disinterest. Maybe it was because in the time since they'd first told her, Mulder had spent a lot of time with her, taking her to a Yankees game at the weekend, and reassuring her that their relationship wouldn't change even if the IVF was successful. Finally she seemed to believe him.

"Your mom just has to rest for a while."

Ashley got to her feet. "Can I get you a drink or something mom?"

"I'd love a glass of water if you wouldn't mind." Scully grinned over at Mulder who raised his eyebrows. He'd asked his partner just minutes ago if she needed anything and she'd declined.

As Ashley ran off towards the kitchen, Mulder leaned in towards his partner. "My water not good enough for you?"

"I'm not thirsty," she admitted. "But that'll teach her to cuss in class."

"You're mean," said Mulder, his sly grin betraying him.

"I know. But it's a free slave we have for the evening."

"You never know," said Mulder, pointing to her stomach. "One day soon we might have another slave in the making."

Scully flashed him a nervous smile. "I hope so."

"Me too."

He really did.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX

“Whatcha up to trouble?” Mulder peered round the corner to Ashley’s room, noticing that the youngster was engrossed in a book on her lap. Scully had her doctor’s appointment, and was currently in the process of finding out if their first round of IVF had worked. Mulder had wanted to be there with her, but they’d been able to find a babysitter for Ashley; Emma had fallen sick with the flu, while Maggie was out in California visiting Bill, Tara and Matthew. So Mulder was tasked with taking care of Ashley while Scully found out the news. He wasn’t quite sure how his partner was feeling, but Mulder himself was nervous, wanting so bad for it to have worked. For now
though, he concentrated on taking his mind off of everything, and finding out what Ashley was up to. As he entered her bedroom, he realized it wasn’t a book she was looking at, but in fact a photo album.

“Just looking through this.” She flipped the page, smiling as she saw another of her baby pictures. “Mom got it out earlier to show me.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you wanna look?”

“Sure.” Mulder padded over to the bed, making himself comfortable next to Ashley, who handed him the album. “What am I looking at?”

“My baby pictures. I asked mom if I could see them because we were talking about the new baby.”

“You were?”

“Mmmhmm…” She looked up at him knowingly. “Mom said we shouldn’t get our hopes up.”

“There is a chance it might not work.”

“But there’s a chance it will.”

Ashley the optimist. Smiling, Mulder nodded. “Of course there is.” He turned the page, his grin widening as he saw baby Ashley, no more than a year old, covered in chocolate, her previously white dress an impressive chocolatey brown, with identical strands through her short fair hair. “I see your eating habits haven’t improved much over the years.”

“Ha ha,” she deadpanned. “You’re funny.”

He flicked backwards towards the start of the album. On the front page was a heavily pregnant Scully, looking like she was about to drop, posing somewhat reluctantly for the camera.

“Mom said Grandma made her pose for that picture in case I ever asked to see what she was like pregnant.”

“She looks so young,” commented Mulder. Young, pretty and glowing. Yet Mulder could still see the fear behind his partner’s eyes, no doubt worrying about impending single parenthood.

“I was born a week later,” Ashley announced proudly.

Ever since Mulder had agreed to the IVF, he’d wondered what Scully would be like pregnant; whether she’d get morning sickness or cravings for something other than bee pollen yogurt; how her swollen stomach would feel underneath his hands, when she’d first feel the baby kick. Seeing this picture of her made him want the IVF to work even more.

Flicking over the page, Mulder saw another photograph of Scully; this time red-faced and teary-eyed as she held a wrinkled little Ashley in her arms, no doubt just having given birth. He wished he’d have been there, to see Ashley’s entrance into the world, to be there for both her and her mom right from the word go. On the opposite side of the page was an image of Jack, looking awkward and uncomfortable as he held his blanketed daughter for the first time. Mulder glanced over at Ashley, noticing that her smile had now faded. She looked sad, he realized, and he moved to wrap his free arm around her. “Look at you. You were so tiny.”
“Yeah.” Ashley sniffed and waited for Mulder to turn the page, but he didn’t.

“It’s nice that you have this to remember your dad by.”

“I suppose.” She didn’t sound too sure.

“You don’t talk about your dad much.”

This time she shrugged. “I don’t really remember him much.”

“That’s not surprising. You were only little when he died.”

“Does it make me a horrible person?” She sounded so unsure, so sad, that Mulder couldn’t help but pull her in towards him.

“Of course it doesn’t sweetheart. It just makes you human.”

“I can’t be a very nice human though if I can’t remember my own dad.”

“Ashley, you were barely five years old, it’s not surprising. You know, I was twelve when my sister disappeared, and I find it hard to remember her sometimes too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And it makes me feel guilty as hell, as I’m sure you feel for not always remembering your dad. But you shouldn’t feel guilty Ash. It doesn’t make you a bad person. You love your dad, and your dad loved you. That’s all that matters.”

“Sometimes I think that my dad wasn’t a very nice person,” she whispered in reply, her eyes filling with tears.

“What makes you say that?” Mulder didn’t particularly think too highly of Jack, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Ashley.

“If he was a nice person, maybe he and my mom would have stayed together.”

“Your parents didn’t split up because your dad was horrible,” he reassured her. “Sometimes couples just drift apart. I mean, look at some of your friends’ parents; they’re not all together, but that doesn’t make them horrible people.”

“You and my mom are still together.”

“We’re not a couple though; we’re just friends.”

Ashley’s near-tears gave way to a cheeky grin. “But you love her though.”

Shaking his head, Mulder grinned. “What are you like?”

Before she could reply, she was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. Instantly Mulder’s heart raced as he wondered what the verdict would be. Was he going to be a father? Or would they have to wait for another round for it to happen? Realizing he couldn’t wait any longer, Mulder quickly kissed Ashley’s forehead before closing the photo album and placing it on the mattress to his left. Getting to his feet, he held out his hand and helped Ashley up into a standing position too, before the two of them headed out into the living room. Scully was removing her outdoor jacket by the time they entered, and as she turned to face them, Mulder realized that for once he couldn’t actually read his partner; her expression was closed off. He wasn’t sure if that
was a good thing or a bad.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

Ashley got straight to the point. “How did your appointment go. Are you pregnant?”

After a moment, Scully shook her head and Mulder felt his heart sink. “Not this time.” As she took a measured breath, Mulder realized she was just about holding herself together, no doubt for the sake of her daughter. Whether or not Ashley knew this herself he didn’t know, but she stepped forward anyway and gave Scully a hug. “I’m sorry mom.”

“Me too baby.” Scully looked over at Mulder, her bottom lip trembling. He reached her side in an instant, pulling both her and Ashley into his arms.

“It’s ok,” he soothed them. “There’s still next time. We have another chance.”

But, he realized with sadness, their chances were fast running out.
Mulder entered Scully’s bedroom, spotting her by her chest of drawers. She’d discarded the shawl she’d used to wrap around herself, the one he’d insisted she wear earlier while they were waiting for the police to arrive. Now the police were on the scene and the barely cold body of Donnie Pfaster had finally been taken away. Now they could get back to normal. If only, Mulder thought dryly. He doubted Scully would be able to get back to normal after the psychopath had come after her yet again, nearly succeeding in his quest to murder her. She’d gotten there first though – thankfully – having escaped his clutches and found her gun in time to pump a handful of bullets into him. It was no great loss to the world, but Mulder knew that the day’s events would stay with his partner for a long, long time.

“If you want to pack some things, we can get out of here,” he said, walking into the room.

“Yeah.” Sounding uncertain, Scully opened a drawer, pulling out her copy of the Bible. She looked pointedly at Mulder.

“You can’t judge yourself.”

“Maybe I don’t have to,” she replied, sitting down on the bed.

“The Bible allows for vengeance.”

“But the law doesn’t.”

“The way I see it,” he said reassuringly. “He didn’t give you a choice. And my report will reflect that, in case you’re worried.” As if there was any doubt. “Donnie Pfaster would’ve surely killed again if given the chance.”

“He was evil Mulder,” Scully agreed. I’m sure about that, without a doubt. But there’s one thing that I’m not sure of.”

“What’s that?”

“Who was at work in me. Or what…made me….what made me pull the trigger.”

“You mean, if it was God?”

“I mean what if it wasn’t?”

He didn’t answer immediately. He knew exactly what she was suggesting. “You did what you had to do. Anyone else would have done the same.”

“Would you?”

Mulder didn’t even hesitate before replying. “If I thought for one second he was going to hurt you or Ashley, then I wouldn’t have thought twice about pulling the trigger.”

Biting her lip, Scully nodded, her eyes downcast as she picked a piece of lint off her pants. “I’ll see if we can stay at my mom’s for a few days.”

“There’s no need. I mean unless you want to. You’re welcome to stay with me.”

“Both of us?”
“I know it’s a squeeze, but we’ve managed before.” Scully looked doubtful, but Mulder could tell she didn’t particularly want to go and stay with her mom, no doubt dreading explaining to Maggie the real reason why her partner was out of bounds. “Look, why don’t you stay at mine tonight and I’ll call your mom and get her to keep Ashley until tomorrow? You can decide then what you want to do.”

“Ok.” She answered in a small voice. Mulder just wanted to go to her and take her into his arms and tell her everything was going to be ok. She’d suffered so much lately. Too much. But he knew she wouldn’t appreciate his offer of comfort, not even with the door closed, away from the prying eyes of the investigators out in her living room.

“I’ll grab Ash some clothes while you get dressed. I’ll meet you back here.” As Scully nodded, he headed out into the bedroom, eager to get his partner out of the apartment and away from thoughts of Donnie Pfaster.

Xxxxxxxxx

It didn’t take Mulder long to pack Ashley a bag, and by the time he made it back to Scully’s bedroom, he saw that she hadn’t moved far in his absence. Her pajama top had been discarded and was crumpled on the floor. She stood by her chest of drawers, her back to Mulder, naked from the waist up. He noticed with horror that her back was scratched and bruises were already beginning to form. “Jeez Scully,” he exclaimed, watching as she started at his voice. He moved in towards her, slowly, not wanting to frighten her any more. “Your back. Are you ok?”

“It’s fine,” she answered on auto-pilot.

It wasn’t fine, Mulder thought. It was anything but fine. “We should get you to the hospital to get checked out.”

“No.”

“Sc-“

“No hospital. Please. I just want to get out of here.” She sounded so small, so fragile, that he couldn’t help but agree, even though he wanted her to get checked out. “Ok,” he relented. “Ok.”

Coming to a standstill behind her, Mulder reached out and gently placed his hands on either side of Scully’s hips, relieved when she didn’t pull away. “It’s all clear out front if you want to make a move.” As he saw her nod, he also noticed that she was now shaking. “It’s ok,” he whispered. “I’ll be with you.”

With that, Scully turned and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him in towards her.

“You’re ok,” he said soothingly, as his hands moved to her lower back. “You’re ok.” He hoped she would be anyway.

Xxxxxxxxxxx

Finally they arrived at Mulder’s apartment, after he’d managed to steer Scully through the living room, past the fresh blood stain that Pfaster’s body had left behind, and out of the door. The drive back to his place was silent, Scully’s gaze was trained out of the window as she deliberately tried to avoid conversation with him, and he certainly didn’t want to force her.

When they got to his apartment, he let them inside, before heading off to the bedroom to dump Scully and Ashley’s overnight bags. When he returned to the living room, he found Scully still
stood in the doorway, lingering as she stared off into space. “Scully?” Jolting out of her daydream, she looked up at him, puzzled. “Can I get you something to eat?

“I’m not hungry.”

“Scully, you need to eat.”

“Please Mulder,” she pleaded. “I don’t think I can right now.”

“Ok,” he relented, trying not to force her too much. “Just shout if you need anything.”

“I think I’ll take a shower.”

“Ok. I’ll get you a fresh towel.”

After finally locating a clean towel, Mulder placed it in the bathroom just as Scully entered, holding a change of clothes. “I’ll leave you to it,” he murmured, closing the door behind him. He waited for the shower to start up before he headed back out towards the kitchen, preparing to find something for dinner. Scully may not have been hungry, but she hadn’t eaten all day, and she needed to keep her strength up. Locating some thankfully still in date soup, Mulder retrieved it from the cupboard along with some bread. It would have to do. Boiling the kettle, he listened out for signs of life in the other room, but he heard nothing. When he’d finally made the tea and still there was no sign of Scully, he wandered back into his bathroom, walking over towards the door and leaning up against it. Though he could still hear the water running, he couldn’t detect any movement. And then he heard it. Faintly, what with the water running, but it was still there. A sob. Moments later, another one. Mulder thought about leaving her alone, but he couldn’t do it, not when she needed him. Scully was a pro at retreating into herself, and it was the last thing Mulder wanted for her. He tapped against the door gently.

“Scully?” Another knock, louder this time. “Scully, I’m coming in.” He tried the door, relieved to find it wasn’t locked, and stepped into the small bathroom. The shower curtain was closed; steam billowing out.

Scully’s voice rang out shakily from behind. “Mulder, I’m ok, I’m –” Her voice broke and she paused, sniffing hard.

“You’re not ok Scully. I just…” Mulder opened the shower curtain, keeping his eyes trained on Scully, though he couldn’t help but notice the red blotches on her skin; no doubt she’d turned the water temperature up high. Her eyes were red and he noticed tears streaming down her face as she looked down at her feet, her entire body shaking. She looked as though she’d just started the shower and stood underneath the spray rather than actually wash. “Come on Scully,” he urged, turning round to grab the towel from the sink. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“I need to wash my hair.”

“You can do it later.”

“I need to wash my hair,” she repeated firmly.

“Ok. I’ll help.” Mulder quickly slipped off his tee-shirt and made a move to unbuckle his jeans. As he moved to step forward, Scully put a hand out to stop him.

“Don’t Mulder.”

“Scully –“
“I said don’t.” Her voice was panicked now, and before he could ask her what was wrong, her hands connected with his chest. “Get away from me!” she cried, hitting him once again. “Stay the hell away from me!” She hit him again and again, pushing him back with each blow. He was surprised she managed to stay upright in the shower with the effort she was putting in to keeping him back. “Get away from me!”

Turning, Mulder grabbed his shirt and ran out of the bathroom, his heart racing. He was an idiot, he shouldn’t have done that, he shouldn’t have tried to push her. They’d shared a shower together before, back when Scully was recovering from being shot, and she was fine. He’d presumed everything would be ok, but then he’d obviously underestimated the effect Donnie Pfaster could have with a person. He was supposed to be a fucking psychologist. And now he’d ruined things between them. Re-dressing, he thought about waiting for Scully to come out of the bathroom so he could explain, but he figured that he should give her some space. He retreated into the kitchen, grabbing himself a glass of water before making a start on the soup. Though, he realized, it was probably a waste of time. Scully had maintained she wasn’t hungry, and he’d lost his appetite now too.

He jolted as he felt hands snake around his waist, coming to rest on his stomach. Scully pressed herself against his back, resting her head against him. Mulder could feel her tears dampening the back of his shirt. He wanted so desperately to turn and take her in his arms, but he knew now that they had to go at her speed. "He tied me up," she said calmly, her voice steady. "He went to run me a bath..."

Once again Mulder cursed his actions earlier when she was in the shower. Scully had wanted to clean Pfaster's touch off of her, and Mulder had invaded her privacy. It was no wonder she pushed him away. "He was going to give me a bath, and wash my hair, and kill me. And then he was going to-"

"Scully." He didn't want to hear it. It was too close. Yet again he'd almost lost her. If she hadn't got free...if she hadn't found her gun...if he hadn't arrived and disturbed Pfaster... He didn't want to even think about it.

"I didn't mean to push you away," Scully continued, her nails pressing in to Mulder's stomach. "I trust you. You're the only one I trust.” As her voice broke, Mulder turned, slipping his arms around her, relieved when she didn't pull away, but instead began to cry in his arms. He held her while she cried, the soup long forgotten.

xxxxx

Mulder exited the bathroom, flicking off the light on his way out. Scully was asleep in the bed – or at least he thought she was, and as he padded past her, he jumped as her voice rang out. “Mulder?”

“Hmm?” Heading over to the bed, he perched on the edge of the mattress, his hand finding Scully’s. “You ok?”

She nodded against the pillow. “Thank you.” Her voice was scratchy, no doubt from her sobs earlier. “I see you got rid of your mirror.” Finally some humor.

“I figured with Ashley sleeping over sometimes, it was the best thing to do. You know how she likes her questions.”

“Could be awkward.”

“Mmm.” He smiled thinly. “I’m going to let you sleep, you –“ He paused as Scully tugged on his
hand, pulling him closer towards her. He took the hint and crawled over her, slipping underneath
the covers and settling on the other side of the bed. Scully immediately rolled into his arms,
snuggling up against him. His hand found her hip, and he gently rubbed it, feeling the warmth of
her skin beneath her pj top. “I’m sorry about earlier,” she murmured, her head coming to rest on his
chest.

“There’s no need to apologise.”

“I still can’t believe I did it. But on the other hand, I can,” she added.

“I would have done the same.” Mulder repeated his words from earlier that day.

“I know you would,” replied Scully. “When I got free I just thought…I kept thinking about how
even if he was rearrested, he could get out again. And then he’d come after me yet again.”

“He would have,” he agreed. “He would have fixated on you even more.”

“He might not have stopped with me either. If he knew about Ashley he would have…” her words
were left unspoken, but her meaning was clear.

“Yes he would. You did the right thing. Thanks to you there’s one less monster in the world.” He
shifted in the bed as Scully rested her hand next to her head, her nails lightly scratching his chest.

“You know,” she said casually. “It’s a good thing the IVF didn’t work.”

“What?” Lifting his head, Mulder looked down at his partner, trying to read her. Her eyes were
closed though, as though she didn’t quite trust herself to meet his gaze.

“If I’d have been pregnant and today still happened I…I could have lost the baby.” And then he
would have been the one pulling the trigger, Mulder thought to himself. “You know, I can’t believe
we even entertained the idea of bringing another child into this world.”

Ok, now he was worried, especially considering they were soon due another round of IVF. “Scu –“

“I mean, what were we thinking? All of the monsters and murderers and criminals in this world…
we’ve struggled enough to keep Ash safe and happy over the years, let alone another child. I mean
–“

“Scully, stop.”

“I’m not even responsible enough to look after the child I do have. Look what happened when I
tried to adopt Emily – I was told my job wasn’t conducive to bringing up a child. I should have
listened rather than fooled myself into thinking that this time it would be different.”

“Scully.” Mulder shifted on the bed, surprising his partner by bringing himself eye to eye with her.
As she opened her eyes in surprise, her eyes immediately fell to his chest. “You are a good mother.
You know that, and I know that. You are a great mom to Ashley, and I’ve no doubt that you’d have
been a great mom to Emily – you already were in those few days you spent with her. And I have no
doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that you’d be a good mom to our baby.” *Our baby*. He’d already
begun to think in terms of their baby, having a child with Scully. “It is going to be different this
time.”

“I don’t think if there’s going to be a this time.”

“What do you mean?”
“I don’t know if I want to keep trying,” she admitted, biting her lip nervously.

“What?”

“I don’t know if I can do it, if I can live with the hurt each time it fails or the fear of something happening to this child.”

“Don’t give up Scully,” pleaded Mulder. “You can’t think like that. Think about other things, like how it felt to go through everything you did having Ashley and then to hold her in your arms and watch her grow up into a great kid. I know things aren’t easy right now, but if this works, then one day soon you’ll be holding that little baby, thinking about how all the fear and worry was worth it just for that moment. I know that’s how I’ll feel when it happens,” he added with complete certainty. Scully must have believed him, because she lifted her gaze, looking him in the eye as she gave him a watery smile. “Don’t give up,” he repeated. “I may not be the most ideal father figure, but I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to keep our kids safe. And if anyone tries to come near them or you, it’ll be me who pulls the trigger next time. No question. Please, don’t give up on this because of Pfaster. Don’t let him ruin your life.”

“What if I did want to give up on it?”

“If you do,” he replied careful moments later. “I’ll support you. I’ll support you whatever you decide to do.”

Scully nodded, as though she’d already predicted his answer.

“Do you want to give up?”

After a moment, she shook her head. “No,” she said shakily. “No, I want to hold that baby in my arms and realize that it’s all been worth it.”

“Then we both want the same thing.”

“Thank you.”

Smiling, Mulder froze as Scully closed the gap between them and pecked at his lips, once, then twice, before rolling onto her back and closing her eyes. He followed her, shifting onto his side and resting his head lightly on her chest this time.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m listening to your heart beat.” Proof that she was still alive, that he hadn’t lost her. He moved as though to lift his head, but Scully laced her arms over his shoulders, holding him in place. Relaxing, Mulder listened to his partner’s heart rate until she slowly drifted off to sleep, and he followed soon after.
Mulder entered Scully’s apartment, trying to place his keys back into the pocket of his pants whilst juggling a bunch of case files along with a six pack of diet cokes. He would have brought wine – at least for himself and Scully – but they’d recently undertaken their second round of IVF. Now they were just playing the waiting game. As he closed the door behind him, he was surprised to see Ashley sat alone on the sofa, engrossed in watching a video.

“Hey Mulder,” she spoke without taking her eyes off of the screen.

“Hey. How’s it going?”

“Ok.”

“How was school this afternoon?”

A shrug. He saw her pop a square of chocolate into her mouth, and wondered whether Scully knew her daughter was sneaking junk food when she wasn’t looking. “It was ok,” she said, her mouth full. “I didn’t get in trouble today.”

“Go you.” He grinned, before glancing around the room. “Where’s your mom?” He couldn’t hear any signs of Scully in the kitchen, but he knew she was around somewhere.

Ashley shifted on the sofa to face him. “She’s in her room. She’s been in there a while,” she added, before turning her attention back to the television. She sounded concerned, though not worried enough to get up off the couch, he noted with some amusement.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Mulder made his way through his partner’s apartment, noticing that her bedroom door was firmly closed. “Scully?” He tapped on the door before opening it, giving her the chance to call out if she wasn’t decent. She didn’t call out. As he stepped inside, Mulder noticed his partner sat on the floor with her back to her bed, her gaze fixed firmly on the floor in front of her. “Scully?” Worried, he closed the door behind him and walked further into the room. She was fine when she’d left the office earlier that afternoon, but now she appeared to be anything but. “Scully?”

Finally she looked up at him, her eyes swamped with tears. “What are you doing here?”

“You invited me for dinner, remember?” From the look on her face it was clear she didn’t. “What’s happened?”

She shrugged, sniffing hard. “Nothing, I –“

“Don’t tell me nothing’s happened Scully, you’ve shut yourself in your bedroom to cry. Something’s up.” Mulder took a seat on the floor next to her, resting his hand on her leg. “Tell me what’s wrong Scully, he said softly, frowning when she burst into tears.

“It’s nothing,” she began through her sobs. “I’m just being stupid.” When Mulder didn’t reply she continued. “I left early today to stop by the store and pick up a pregnancy test.”

“Oh?” Mulder’s head spun. He already thought he knew where her story was headed, but he had to hear her say it. “And?”

“I was a little late, which is why I wanted a test.” He nodded, wanting her to get to the point. “So I
went to the store to get one…”

“And?” He didn’t need to know the details, he just needed to know the outcome.

“And when I got there, I discovered I got my period too.” She scoffed tearfully, gesturing towards a small carrier bag on the floor next to her, which held the unopened pregnancy test. “I was stupid to even entertain the thought.”

“No, no you weren’t stupid Scully,” Mulder reassured her, placing his arms around her shoulders and pulling her in towards him. “You were just hopeful.”

“I should have known after last time that it wouldn’t work. I’m a doctor, I know the chances are slim.”

“It’s definitely your period? I mean, there are stories sometimes of women spotting during pregnancy.”

Scully shook her head. “It’s not spotting Mulder.” He wondered at what point in their relationship they moved from talking about crop circles to talking about Scully’s period. “I’m so sorry I failed us.”

“Hey, hey, you didn’t fail us. Positive thinking, remember?” He kissed the crown of her head. “We’re not going to let it beat us. We still have one more chance.”

“I’m being stupid, I shouldn’t keep putting myself and you and Ashley through this each time, I should be grateful for what I already have.”

“You are grateful Scully. You have a beautiful daughter and you know it, but there’s no harm in wanting more. So why don’t you call Doctor Parenti soon and arrange another appointment.”

Scully wrapped her arm around his middle and squeezed. “Thank you. Thank you for doing this with me. I know it was a lot to ask but—”

“But I’m happy to do it.” As Scully looked up at him in surprise, Mulder took the opportunity to wipe away her tears. “I’ll admit it Scully, I never used to want children, but I want this. I want to do this for you and give you back something that’s rightfully yours.”

“What changed your mind?” She gave him a small smile.

He grinned. “That little girl sat out in the living room. She got under my skin, and if we can make a kid half as amazing as she is, then it’s all good.” Fresh tears threatened to fall, and Mulder leanened in to capture them with his lips. “Ssh, no more tears. We still have one more try, and at the end of the day there’s still that little girl out there in the living room, who’s watching videos and probably getting ready to raid the kitchen cupboards once again, before she starves to death. You wanna freshen up while I rescue her?”

Scully nodded, wiping her eyes. “Raiding the kitchen cupboards once again?” She repeated his words back to him.

“Uuh forget I said anything.”

“Chocolate?”

“How did you guess?”
Finally smiling, Scully leaned in and pecking Mulder on the lips. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For being you.” It was Mulder’s turn to smile. “If you put the oven on, I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“I can make a start on dinner if you like?” Noticing Scully grin, Mulder mock frowned. “Hey my cooking isn’t that bad. Well,” he conceded. “I promise not to burn the place down.” Getting to his feet, Mulder held out his hand and helped Scully up off the floor before leaving her to freshen up, hoping for a change in their luck.

Xxxxxxxxxxxx

As Mulder headed back out into the living room, he noticed that Ashley had now finished watching her movie – or at least, the television was switched off. Her chocolate also appeared to have been long forgotten. Ashley sat staring straight ahead, clearly deep in her own thoughts as he approached her. “How was the movie?”

As she turned to face him, Mulder noticed tears welling up in her eyes.

“What’s up? Was it a sad film?”

She shook her head. “Mom isn’t pregnant?”

The smile instantly vanished from his face. “How did you know that?”

“I heard you talking.”

Of course she did. She was smart and intrigued and no doubt wondering why her mom had spent the evening locked up in her room.

Letting out a deep breath, Mulder took a seat next to the youngster on the couch. “No, she’s not pregnant. She thought she might have been, but it was a false alarm.”

“Oh.” Ashley looked down at her lap.

“We still have another chance though.”

“Do you think it’s my fault?”

“I’m sorry?” This got Mulder’s attention. Reaching out, he tilted her chin up so he could make eye contact. “How is this your fault?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t want the baby to start with.”

“Ash, honey…” Wrapping his arm around her, Mulder pulled her in towards him. “This is not your fault.”

“But I do want the baby now,” she added, sniffing hard as her tears began to fall.

“I know you do. We all do. This…none of this is your fault. It’s just one of those things. We knew when we started these treatments that the odds weren’t exactly in our favor. As I said though, we still have one more chance, and it could still happen.”

“Is mom really upset?”
“A little bit,” he admitted. “She’s disappointed. But we’re both hopeful for next time.”

“You said the odds aren’t in our favor though.”

“They’re not,” he admitted. “But that doesn’t mean it definitely won’t happen. It means there’s still a chance.”

“I hope it works Mulder.”

“Me too sweetheart. Me too. And you know what?” Ashley shook her head. “If it works next time, I hope the baby is just like you.”

“Really?” Her tears were momentarily forgotten as she smiled proudly.

“Except for your habit of stocking up on candy right before dinner.”

Her cheeks pinked. “I’m still hungry though,” she argued.

“Well, that’s good, because I’m about to make a start on dinner. You can give me a hand if you like?” He half expected her to say no. Unless it was baking, Ashley usually had no interest in helping out in the kitchen.

“Sure.” With that she got to her feet eagerly and the two of them headed off to the kitchen to make dinner, hoping to take Scully’s mind off of her latest heartache.
“Aaaa-shley. Aaaa-shley,” Scully cooed gently, waving a cloth rattle out of her daughter’s line of sight. Like always, she whipped her head around and gave her a gummy smile. After she was once again assured that her baby girl’s hearing was fine, Scully tipped Ashley over on her back, tickling the inside of her feet to test her reflexes. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t be this way – wouldn’t be the stereotypical overprotective first-time mom. And she had been getting better. Now that her daughter was six-months-old and seeming less and less fragile every day, Scully had been feeling her anxiety levels going down substantially. But there was still the occasional panicked late-night call to her mother worrying if she should wake Ashley up once she’d developed hiccups in her sleep, or if a green diaper meant liver disease. She couldn’t help it. Scully already felt like she was failing her daughter by being a single parent; there was no way she was going to let any possible medical maladies slip pass her unnoticed.

Thankfully, her baby girl was very understanding.

“Who’s mama’s buddy?” she asked, watching as Ashley’s eyes got wide with excitement. She may have been biased, but she knew she’d never seen a more beautiful baby in her entire life. Her own father’s animated eyes stared back at her, and Ashley’s chubby cheeks made her look like the jolliest living thing on the whole planet. She looked happy. She sounded happy. What Scully had found out the second she became a mother was that there was nothing she wouldn’t do to make sure that Ashley stayed that way forever.

Popping her lips had become one of Ashley’s favorite pastimes, and soon both girls were communicating via pops and the occasional spit gurgle. “Is Ashley mama’s buddy? Is she?”

Still on her back, Ashley started flailing her arms and legs – almost like she was trying to fly away – and making grunting noises.“Muhh. Guh.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Muhhh.”Ashley’s movements and concentration increased, and Scully thought she’d soon have another green diaper on her hands when her daughter surprised the heck out of her and blurted out, “Muhmuhmuh.”

Tears sprang to Scully’s eyes. She prayed that it wasn’t a fluke.

“Mama. Mama,” she said, desperately hoping Ashley would repeat herself.

“Amamama,” Ashley said, more concisely this time. Scully scooped her up immediately and pressed her to her chest.

“That’s good enough for me, baby. That’s perfect.”

“I know it wasn’t the real thing. But it just felt so real that day. She had been trying and trying and I had never expected that she would be able to say it so young.”
“It sounds like it was real to me.”

“No. She had no idea at the time. About a month later was when she really started babbling with purpose, but that day still sticks out to me as the day she said her first word. And it was ‘mama.’”

Nobody said anything for a few moments, Mulder and Scully both just gazing at the little girl in question, sleeping in a hospital bed hooked up to a fluid drip. She’d been complaining of fatigue and back aches since just after her mom and Mulder got back from Redding, California after a case involving magicians. Scully had suspected a kidney infection – just one of the nasty side-effects of childhood diabetes. What she hadn’t suspected would happen was for her daughter to wake up two days after starting antibiotics wailing in extreme pain. Thus the hospital. Thus the IV full of fluids. Thus the Mulder, who had been protectively hovering over her little girl since he’d gotten to the hospital over six hours before.

“Tell me another one,” Mulder finally spoke up, his eyes closed, though he was still clutching Ashley’s hand.

“You’ve heard them all. Multiple times.”

“That’s never mattered before.”

“Now you’re sounding like her,” Scully tried to admonish Mulder for his stubbornness, but in reality she couldn’t imagine their lives if he weren’t.

“Just talk to me. Tell me another story or make one up, just talk to me so I don’t have to think about where we are,” Mulder, who had been having a hard time concealing his feelings since Scully called him telling him to come to the hospital, finally cracked and threw himself forward in his seat, burying his head in his hands. Even his partner’s normally calming touch had no effect on his frazzled nerves. It was easy for Mulder to forget during his everyday life that Ashley wasn’t a perfectly healthy kid. He had no idea how Scully dealt with that knowledge every day, especially being a doctor herself.

“Mulder, she’s going to be fine. This type of thing could happen to any child.”

“Well she’s not any child, okay? She’s a beautiful little girl who doesn’t deserve to go through all of this shit. God, I knew I shouldn’t have dragged you out to California.”

“I don’t have the patience or energy to deal with your self-pity right now,” Scully sighed. It wasn’t the reaction Mulder was fishing for, but he caught himself before he started to pout. The two partners, the two something-mores, sat in silence for several minutes after that, the beeping of Ashley’s monitored pulse only serving to make things more awkward. “You know Mulder, I don’t hate you nearly as much as you seem to want me to.” She said so much with that little sentence.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I think you know what a pathetic mess I’d be if you hated me.”

“Bullshit. You know exactly what I’m talking about. Every time something happens to either one of us, whether it’s getting put in the hospital or getting a paper cut, you go on a guilt trip and take everyone with you. It’s exhausting.”

Mulder had nothing to say to that. Partly because they’d had this conversation before – very recently, actually, in regards to Donnie Pfaster – and partly because he knew she was right. But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t help feeling that every ill-fate Scully and Ashley encountered could have been prevented if only he weren’t so selfish.
“Do you want me to leave?” he asked, desperately hoping that she wouldn’t. His hand once again found Ashley’s, clutching to it for dear life.

“Do you think I want you to leave?” she retorted with. Mulder trained his gaze on Ashley’s small fingers between his own, not breathing.

“Look… it’s up to you.”

“You’re damn right it’s up to me. A lot of things are. Can you imagine for one second that I chose to go out to California with you? Of my own free will? Because I wanted to?”

Mulder was completely silent. He had never understood before that always blaming himself for her misfortunes was the same as not giving her any credit for her aptitude to make decisions for herself. As a scalpel-wielding, gun-toting, chase-you-down-in-heels woman who had been through both medical school and the FBI academy and raised a child completely on her own for eleven years, that was one of the worst things he could have done to her.

“I guess it just surprises me that anyone would go anywhere with me of their own free will, much less you,” She could see the realization spread across his face.

“What do you mean ‘much less me’?”

“Scully,” Mulder chuckled, not believing for a second that she didn’t know how incredible she was, “It’s not like you couldn’t find anything else to do.”

“I’m not going to lie and say that every moment I’ve ever spent with you has been bliss,” they gave each other a knowing look, “but, you do make me happy.”

As romantically as he could, Mulder scooted himself closer to Scully’s and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Even though the side of the cold plastic chair was uncomfortably digging into her side, Scully rested her head against his neck, her forehead meeting the prickly stubble that he hadn’t taken care of since they got back from their case. She didn’t care. It had been a long time since she’d felt so comforted in a man’s arms, and it was worth a few jabs in the side.

“Wow. Fox Mulder makes someone happy. Can you do me a favor and come with me to my old high school really fast? There are a few people I want to flaunt you in front of.”

Scully chuckled against him, and the feeling was almost as good as when their lips met.

“You know Scully… you make me really happy too.” Mulder was unsure of how to express how he felt. How every time she walked into a room, his mood got instantly better. How her hand on his was enough to bring him out of his darkest despair. How he loved her daughter more than life itself and he wished every day that she had his nose and his mouth.

Thankfully, Scully seemed to know. She snuggled against him tighter and pressed a small kiss to his pulse. Which lead to a kiss underneath his earlobe and to his chin and just as she was about to reach his lips…

Ashley whimpered and shifted in the bed, rousing the agents from their moment. Scully smiled at the way Mulder moved right back to her side. She knew she would never find someone as devoted to Ashley as Mulder was.

xxxxxxx

“Alrighty… the pony’s ready to reach the stable,” Mulder joked around late the next morning as
Scully unlocked the door to her apartment. Ashley had been released from the hospital, but Mulder was making it his personal mission to never let her feet touch the ground. So, even though Ashley hadn’t asked for a piggy-back ride in a couple years, she was currently being carried around by Mulder like a wiggly knapsack.

“Where should I dump this?” Mulder asked Scully, intentionally ignoring Ashley.

“Oh, I don’t know. The trash should be fine. I don’t think little girls are recyclable, are they?”

“Nope. To the trash it is,” he backed up to the garbage can and tilted Ashley toward it until she was shrieking and clawing at Mulder’s back for all she was worth.

“Ehh, I think we’ll keep her. She may be worth some money someday,” Scully lovingly brushed her little girl’s hair behind her ear. Ashley’s energy level was far lower than usual, but in her mother’s opinion, she didn’t need to be up and running around so soon after getting out of the hospital.

“Can we move the TV into my room?” Ashley asked.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem,” Mulder told her, not able to deny her anything.

“But you have to promise that you’ll rest. No getting in and out of bed or anything, okay?” Scully stipulated.

Ashley yawned and nodded, her mom already knowing that she’d be out like a light before the movie, Toy Story no doubt, was over.

Once she was all settled in with her blankets and a few dolls (Ashley had given up sleeping with things for the most part, but still liked some toys around her when she wasn’t feeling well) and Queequeg had accepted his invitation to jump up on the bed, Mulder surprised her with a new copy of Toy Story 2 on VHS and popped it in. Almost miraculously, both adults managed to squeeze into bed alongside Ashley and all of her various items by the time Buzz appeared on screen. Mulder sighed comfortably. He felt his world changing. Suddenly, there was nothing he wanted more than to have the two people sitting next to him happy and healthy and in his life forever. Even if they had to bring their grumpy dog along.

By the time Ashley fell asleep, Mulder was deep in thought about the baby he was trying to make with Scully. The IVF procedure had already failed twice, yes, but Mulder was very optimistic about their chances going forward. He felt so sure in that moment that they would get their miracle that he even allowed his mind to wander. Scully would look so beautiful pregnant. He’d seen pictures of her when she was pregnant with Ashley, after Ashley showed him her baby photo album, and she’d seemed so happy and glowing. He wanted to see that again. He imagined Scully gripping his hand in pain as she pushed their child into the world – the way he would feel holding that baby in his arms for the first time. Scully and Ashley would do nothing but smile and he’d get to show off his happy family to the whole world. In his mind, there was never any doubt of what he wanted to be to this baby. Dad. Somebody would call him “dad.” Somebody would call him “dad” and Scully “mom.” And he’d have stories of first words and first steps.

“Scully?” he asked, taking her hand. She was so engrossed in the movie that it took her a second to peel her eyes away from the screen.

“Hmm?”

“I hope our baby calls me ‘dad.’”
She froze. They hadn’t discussed their attempts since their last fail, but he still thought that she’d be pleased that he wanted to be there for him in every way he could. Scully’s silence told Mulder that she was trying to politely find a way to tell him that it was her baby, not their baby, when he saw tears cloud her eyes and start to trail down her cheeks. She wasn’t as optimistic as he was.

“I’m sorry,” was all Mulder could think to say.

“No, don’t be,” Scully sniffled, “I think that’d be the best thing.”

“I’m just… I know we’re gonna get it, Scully. I’m so sure we’re gonna get what we deserve. We still have one more chance”

Scully took a deep breath and squeezed his hand. The math rolled through her head. She was a barren, stressed out, anxious soon-to-be thirty-six-year-old woman with a less than stellar medical history. She had a less than 30% chance of conceiving was what Dr. Parenti had told her – told them both. But she saw the sincerity in her partner’s eyes, and she could tell that he already loved their baby, even though he or she was just a few cells in a Petri dish at the moment. He had so much faith that her body would be able to do what it was supposed to and give them the opportunity to have a child together…

Maybe she could have a little faith that his optimism would be the secret ingredient to getting their miracle. She squeezed his hand back and moved her head to rest on his shoulder. It felt good to put her trust in Mulder. It was natural – instinctual. It gave her the peace of mind to close her eyes and drift off into a calm sleep.
Chapter 80

Mulder jolted awake as he heard the sound of the key in the lock. Moments later the door opened and in walked Scully, her eyes downcast as she closed the door behind her and entered the room. “Scully? I must have dozed off. I was waiting for you to get back,” he said as he sat up, his eyes searching her for an answer. This was it, the moment of truth, the day they were going to find out whether their last round of IVF had been successful. Scully had insisted she’d be fine to go to her appointment alone, wanting some time to herself should the results not be what they wanted, and so Mulder had camped out in her apartment, waiting…wishing…hoping.

“How did it go?”

Scully’s eyes rose to meet his and her bottom lip trembled.

“It didn’t take, did it?” He answered for her, feeling disappointment set in. She’d wanted this so bad, hell, so had he, and now their last chance had failed. Or had it?

Scully moved in closer towards him slowly, her lips turning up into a smile. “Congratulations dad,” she whispered, her throat clogging with emotion as she burst into tears.

“What?” Mulder could hardly believe it; he’d been so convinced by her expression that it had failed.

“I’m pregnant,” she managed to say, between the sobs.

“Are you kidding?” Emotion getting the better of him, Mulder pulled his partner into his arms, hugging her tightly. “That’s great news.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“It’s the best news I’ve ever heard. Wow Scully…” He couldn’t even think straight; his head was spinning. After all the heartache they’d dealt with lately, finally some good news. Scully was going to get the baby she desperately wanted, and Ashley was finally going to be a big sister. “A baby!”

“I know. I couldn’t believe it when I was given the news. I still can’t believe it now.”

“I can’t wait to tell Ash.”

“Me either.” Scully pulled away slightly, wiping her eyes as she beamed up at him.

Unable to resist temptation, Mulder closed the gap between them and kissed her soundly on the lips. “I love you,” he uttered as he pulled back. “I love you both…”

Mulder jolted awake as he heard the sound of the key in the lock. He’d been dreaming, something about the IVF, something good about the IVF, but the dream was fast leaving his mind. Moments later the door opened and in walked Scully, her eyes downcast as she closed the door behind her and entered the room.

“Scully? I must have dozed off. I was waiting for you to get back,” he said as he sat up, his eyes searching her for an answer. This was it, the moment of truth, the day they were going to find out whether their last round of IVF had been successful. Scully had insisted she’d be fine to go to her appointment alone, wanting some time to herself should the results not be what they wanted, and so Mulder had camped out in her apartment, waiting…wishing…hoping. As he jumped up from the
sofa, he took one look at her face and it told him all he needed to know. “It didn’t take did it?”

Scully shook her head, tears already springing to her eyes. “I guess it was too much to hope for.”

Her words broke his heart – he could hear the disappointment in her voice. Opening his arms, Mulder looked on helplessly as Scully walked into his embrace, bursting into tears. “It was my last chance,” she sobbed. Mulder held her as she cried against him, wishing he could join her. She’d wanted it so much – hell, he had too – and he’d wanted this to work for her. For them. Holding her tightly, Mulder pressed his lips to her forehead, before pressing his own against hers, wishing he could take away her pain. “Never give up on a miracle,” he murmured, realizing he meant it. He’d seen miracles happen, they both had – hell, the fact Scully was standing in front of him, having survived cancer was a miracle in itself. He held her as she sobbed, wanting to cry himself for the disappointment he felt, not just for him but for his partner. But it wasn’t meant to be. Though they both knew there was a high chance of failure, they’d both been hopefully that it would be third time lucky with the IVF; after all, they’d both achieved a lot over the years against the odds. Eventually her tears subsided, though Scully made no move to let go of her partner, wanting to keep him close. In return Mulder pressed his lips to her forehead, her eyelids and her damp cheeks. “I’m so sorry Scully,” he murmured, repeating his kisses.

“I had a good feeling this time,” she replied, her breath hitching; her voice hoarse from crying. “I thought luck might be on our side for once.”

“Me too,” he answered sadly.

She gripped him tighter. “I always knew there was just a slim chance for me to conceive, but I don’t think I ever fully considered the disappointment I’d feel when it didn’t work. The first few times weren’t quite so bad because in my head I knew we had another chance. Now we have nothing.” Scully’s voice broke as she began to cry once more.

“That’s not true Scully, we have so much. You have your family and a great kid.”

“I know I shouldn’t be selfish.”

“I know. You wanted this, we both did.” He sighed. “What can I do Scully? What can I do to help?”

She pulled back slightly, looking up into his eyes. “Will you stay?”

“Of course.” It was certainly no hardship. He certainly had nowhere to be, and Scully needed him. He wasn’t about to leave her. “What about Ashley? What time is she due home?”

“She’s staying round Megan’s tonight. I know it’s a school night but I thought it might be a good idea.”

“I think you’re right.” Ashley didn’t need to see her mom so upset. “I can pick her up in the morning.”

“Thank you.”

“D’ya want me to make some dinner?”

Scully shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat.”
“I don’t feel up to it. Not right now.”

He eyed her carefully. “Tea? Coffee?”

Scully thought for a moment before stepping back out of his reach and wiping her eyes. “I’ll get us drinks, you stay here.” Before he could argue she walked away in the direction of the kitchen. Minutes later she returned armed with a bottle of red wine and two glasses. Though Mulder wasn’t exactly sure alcohol was the answer, it was what Scully wanted. She poured them both a glass of wine before sitting next to him on the sofa, relaxing up against him as he wrapped an arm around her. “To what might have been,” she remarked sorrowfully before taking a hearty sip. Mulder joined her in a toast for their baby that wasn’t meant to be.

Scully made quick work of her glass of wine, pausing from time to time to cry a little more, and she quickly agreed to a refill when Mulder offered. After refreshing her glass, he set the bottle back down on the coffee table and once again moved to wrap his arm around her. “What are we going to tell Ashley?”

“Ashley?” Scully looked at him.

“She knows we were trying for a baby. Are we going to tell her the truth?”

“We can’t lie to her Mulder, she’ll know. She knows I had a doctor’s appointment today.”

Mulder nodded. “When she's back from Megan's, we can tell her together.”

“You’re so good to us Mulder, you really are.” She sniffed. “I can’t thank you enough for trying to help me with the in-vitro. I’m just sorry I failed –“

“You didn’t fail anything Scully. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

“No…” she agreed sadly. “It wasn’t.”

“I just wish I could have helped. You know I’d give you anything Scully, don’t you?”

She pulled back to look at him, clearly thinking about something as she sat her wine glass down on the coffee table. “Anything?” she finally asked.

He nodded. “Anything. Just tell me what you need.”

Pausing momentarily, Scully licked her lips before replying. “I need you to make me forget,” she whispered almost hesitantly. “Make me forget I can’t have a baby.” She leaned in closer, her breath caressing Mulder’s lips.

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. Before he could ask her what she meant, he felt her lips peck at his own before she retreated. “Are you sure about this?” The last thing Mulder wanted was to ruin things between them. Their relationship had been progressing in recent months, but they hadn’t yet taken the next step. He didn’t want Scully to regret this.

She nodded. “I want this. Please. I want to feel normal, just for one night.”

She didn’t have to beg, Mulder thought to himself as he leant forward to kiss her. Like he’d already said, he’d do anything for her – he loved her more than anything. Scully responded immediately to the kiss, snaking her arms around his shoulders, holding him in place. In response Mulder lifted his
left hand to cup her cheek, caressing it gently as he deepened the embrace, gliding his tongue along Scully’s lips. Scully granted his tongue entrance, groaning as he explored her mouth, discovering her taste once again; the essence of Scully combined with wine and just the hint of minty toothpaste. Finally, the need for air becoming too much, they broke apart breathlessly. Mulder noted that Scully’s lips were swollen from the kiss, that she had a wild look in her eye that he’d never seen before. Before Mulder even had the chance to wonder whether she’d been drinking wine for Dutch courage to seduce him, her lips were on his once again; her tongue possessing his mouth as her hands darted down to the back of his shirt. She slipped them underneath the material, warming his skin as she touched him with shaking hands. Mulder reached out tentatively and cupped her breasts through her shirt, his pants tightening as she arched into his touch. “Bedroom,” Scully whispered as she pulled back, and this time it was his turn to moan. They were really going to do this, he thought to himself as Scully rose from the sofa and took hold of his hand, pulling him to his feet. This was further than they’d ever gone before; they’d simply shared heated kisses since New Year when they’d decided to take their relationship further. This time they were heading to her bedroom to make love. There was no turning back now, though from the determined way Scully was leading him through her apartment towards her bedroom, she certainly didn’t want to stop. Finally they were there, inside her room, and for once neither party was injured or drugged. Scully turned and gave him a shy smile before cupping him through his pants, and Mulder lost all thought. His brain eventually engaging, he gently prised her hands away from him. “Just slow down a second Scully.” It was the first time he’d spoken since he’d asked her if she wanted this, and his voice was thick with arousal. God he wanted her so bad. Scully whimpered in frustration, pressing her forehead against his chest, and he moved to reassure her. “I want to make this last,” he said as he kissed her crown, and she nodded in understanding. He wanted this just as much as she did, despite the circumstances. Pulling away, Mulder’s hands moved down to the bottom of Scully’s shirt. His eyes searched hers for confirmation and she nodded, giving him permission to continue. Within seconds he’d lifted her shirt up and over her head, discarding it on the floor to their left. “Want me to hang it up?” he joked, and Scully surprised him by letting out a chuckle, the first time she’d laughed in what felt like days.

“No,” she whispered almost conspiratorially. “I want you to make love to me.” Her words were almost Mulder’s undoing, and before he knew it they were kissing once again. Their hands explored each other, touching, caressing, cupping, divesting one another of their clothes, and when Mulder finally regained the power of thought, Scully was stretched out on the bed next to him, naked and ready for him. He kissed her lips, realizing he would never tire of her taste, that she was the only woman for him – he never wanted to kiss another woman again. Trailing down her body, he rained kisses on her chin, the crook of her neck and her shoulders before directing his attention to her breasts, suckling her until Scully groaned and slid her fingers through his hair as she spread her legs; Mulder settling into the vee of her thighs. Descending further, Mulder paused as he reached Scully’s abdomen, then pressed his lips to the skin there. “I wish I could give you a baby Scully,” he said, cursing himself for getting emotional. His partner’s grip on his hair tightened, and Mulder resisted the urge to yelp. Instead he looked up at her, his eyes meeting hers, and at that moment he had no doubt over how she felt about him.

“Sssh,” she murmured. “Tonight we can.”

Tonight they could pretend that everything was fine; that Scully wasn’t barren, that their final attempt at conceiving a child hadn’t failed. Tonight they were just a normal couple trying for a baby.

Mulder moved to continue his path down her body but Scully shook her head. “Just you Mulder. I just need you.” And then, before he knew it, Mulder had shifted and positioned himself and with Scully’s help he’d guided himself inside of her. Inside Scully. Mulder didn’t think he could love her any more at that moment, staring up at him with a look of awe; a look of love as he began to
move inside her. It was almost too much for him. Mulder closed his eyes, wanting to capture the moment forever, and he swooped down to kiss Scully, his tongue immediately delving into her mouth as though it belonged there. He wished he could stay inside her forever; never had he felt so connected to another human being. But then Scully clutched at his back, her thighs shaking around him as pleasure overcame her, and in what felt like seconds later Mulder followed her into the abyss. Coming down from his high, Mulder moved to roll off of his partner, but she murmured her disapproval, not letting up on her grasp of him. “Stay,” she murmured sleepily.

“Forever?”

She smiled. Scully smiled. Just an hour or so earlier, Mulder wasn’t sure he’d ever see her smile again. “Maybe not forever. We’d need to eat at some point.”

“I guess,” he grinned.

“And shower.”

“We can conserve water.”

“And at some point Ashley will be home.”

“You’re right. That could be awkward,” conceded Mulder as he leaned down to kiss Scully on the lips. He half wondered if, after a little recovery period, she would want to make love once again, but she answered for him as she broke off the kiss to let out an impressive yawn. “Sorry,” she said finally. “It’s been a long day.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and for a horrible moment Mulder thought she was going to cry again. The last thing he wanted was for her to regret what happened. Pulling out of her, Mulder rolled onto his back, relieved when Scully moved with him and threw her arm across his torso, moulding herself to him. “You should sleep. I should go.”

“Go where?”

“I umm… I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to take off?”

To his relief, Scully wanted company. “Would you stay? Please?” she asked shyly, like a girl asking her teen crush for a date to the prom.

“Sure Scully.” With his partner still clutching him, Mulder reached for the comforter than had been kicked to the bottom of the bed, and pulled it up over them. “Now sleep.”

To his relief, she did.

Xxxxxxxx

When Mulder first woke, he thought nothing strange of the situation. He was spooned up behind Scully, his left arm wrapped around her, his hand resting on her abdomen. That was nothing unusual. They’d often spent the night together in the same bed, and more recently as their relationship developed, they often ended up in one another’s arms. But then they had been fully clothed. This morning however, that was not the case. Suddenly memories of the previous night came flooding back – of their failed attempt at IVF, at Scully breaking down in his arms, before turning to him and leading him to her bed. He’d imagined their first time on a number of occasions, but none like that, with Scully ending up in tears in his arms. But still, she’d insisted that he stayed – at least she hadn’t pushed him away. It gave him hope.
Moments later Mulder felt Scully shift in his arms as she slowly came awake. He sensed her tense as she registered that he was wrapped up behind her. “Morning,” he whispered croakily, leaning forward to press his lips to the back of her neck. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine.” It was then he knew that she really wasn’t. Mulder shifted backwards, allowing his partner the room to turn over to face him. Her expression reflected the loss they’d suffered the previous day, her eyes filled with tears as her bottom lip trembled. His initial happiness at waking up with her in his arms instantly vanished.

“Oh Scully.”

“I’m sorry.” Her tears spilled over, trailing down her face, and Mulder instantly lifted his hand to wipe them away.

“You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Wordlessly she shifted so she was lying in his arms, her tears dampening his chest. “I thought I’d be ok for this, I’d prepared myself for this to fail, but still there was a part of me that hoped. I wanted a baby so much.”

“I hoped too,” Mulder admitted.

“Really?” She pulled back to look up at him, her eyes still damp.

“Really.”

“What did you hope for?”

“Honestly?” She nodded against him as she rested her head back down on his chest, lightly tracing her fingers cross his abdomen. “When I imagined it working, I saw us having a little girl.”

“A girl?” Scully asked, her voice breaking.

“I know boy or girl we’d have been happy, but I saw a little girl, just like Ashley, although maybe she’d be a little quieter. My coloring, your eyes and nose – obviously – and chin. A thoughtful child but with a hint of mischief about her.”

“She’d get that from you,” said Scully, though Mulder could hear the smile in her voice. “Our little rule breaker.”

His heart broke at her words. It wasn’t meant to be. “And she’d have us wrapped around her little finger, especially Ash.”

“Ashley would act like she was her mom.”

“Oh I don’t doubt that, but she’d help with her.”

“Not so much with the diapers though.”

“Yeah, Ash doesn’t like getting too dirty.” Mulder continued. “She’d have your intelligence and patience, but also your stubbornness.”

“My stubbornness?”

“Well Ashley must get it from somewhere.”
“She gets it from you,” Scully chuckled, and Mulder instantly felt better. At least she was smiling now, even if it did hurt. “I wish we could have that,” she replied.

“We can. Someday Scully, it could happen. There are options. Just don’t give up hope.”

As Scully caught his eye, Mulder swooped down to press his lips against hers. She relaxed into the kiss momentarily before tensing and pushing him away. “Mulder,” she started, and instantly he knew it was going to be bad news. She didn’t want him, she didn’t want this. Last night was just a moment of relief that she was regretting.

“It’s ok Scully.” He tried to force a smile. They’d been doing so well in recent months – their relationship had been developing into something more, and now he’d gone and ruined it. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do,” said Scully, propping herself up on her elbow, the sheet concealing her modesty. “Mulder,” she began. “I don’t regret last night. At all.” That was news to him, and his face must have revealed his thoughts. “I wanted it to happen but…” There it was. A ‘but’. “But I think I just need a little time to get my head around this. Not just about us but what’s happened in the past few days. That doesn’t mean I don’t want this, and it doesn’t mean that I don’t want to be around you, but I just don’t want to rush into anything right now.”

Mulder wanted to tell her that seven years was hardly rushing anything, but he knew it wasn’t the time, that he shouldn’t be making jokes while she was busy pouring her heart out to him. “Take all the time you need,” he replied. “I’ll wait.”

“I know you will.” As Mulder rolled onto his side and kissed Scully’s forehead, they were interrupted by the shrill ringing of the telephone. “That’ll be Ashley,” Scully murmured, turning over to reach out and pick up the phone. She was right. Mulder listened as she spoke to her daughter, who’d obviously called to say she was ready to be collected from Megan’s house. Scully told Ashley that she’d be there soon, before hanging up the phone. “I need to go,” she spoke almost apologetically.

“I’ll tell you what Scully, I’ll pick Ash up, you stay here. Go back to sleep or take a shower or something.”

“Are you saying I stink?” She asked, her eyes gleaming.

“Maybe just a little,” Mulder replied, rolling over to get out of bed, narrowly missing being slapped by his partner. He was glad they could do this, that after everything they’d been through they were still together. Getting to his feet, Mulder then began following the trail of clothes, picking up what was his and slipping them back on, aware that Scully was following his every move. When he was fully dressed, he then picked up Scully’s discarded clothing and placed them on the chair by her bed, noting her smile. “I’ll see you later.” As he moved to walk past, Scully reached out and took hold of his hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Thank you,” she whispered, smiling sadly up at him, her eyes glistening. He could get lost in her eyes, he realized. He wanted to give her a child – hell, children plural – with those eyes, just like Ashley. But it wasn’t meant to be, not this time. Pressing a kiss to her hand, Mulder continued out of the room, willing emotion not to get the better of him.

xxxxxx

When Mulder returned to Scully’s apartment 45 minutes later, he was surprised to see her up and about, standing at the entrance to the kitchen, clad in denim jeans and a loose black sweater. Her
hair, freshly washed, was wrapped up in a towel. “Hey mom,” said Ashley, heading towards her mom for a quick hug.

“Did you have a good time sweetie?”

Her daughter nodded. “It was fun. We didn’t fall asleep until after 2am and Megan’s dad shouted at us twice for giggling.”

“Are you tired?”

“Not yet. But I’m gonna take a shower because I smell.”

“Ok,” Scully replied, chuckling. “There should be some hot water left. Do you want to do something today when you’re done?”

“Like what?”

“We could get brunch if you’re hungry?”

“I’m always hungry.”

“Then we could go to the movies or a museum or the zoo? Whatever you like.”

“Can we go to the zoo?” Some things never changed, thought Mulder. Ashley was an animal enthusiast, and never passed down an opportunity to go to the zoo. He suspected she’d live there if she could.

“Of course we can.”

“Ok, I’ll be quick!” Suddenly Ashley was more alert, and she scurried off towards the bathroom.

Mulder held out her overnight bag to her mom. “Don’t forget this.”

“Great, more laundry.”

“Well I’d better leave you guys to it.” The last thing he wanted to do was intrude – after all, Ashley and Scully had a girl’s day planned. He noticed Scully seemed surprised at his move to leave.

“Oh, you’re going?”

“I don’t want to hold you guys up.”

“You’re more than welcome to join us?”

“I wasn’t sure if you needed some space.”

Closing the gap between them, Scully looked up at him fondly. “Mulder,” she began, almost hesitantly. “I know I said I wanted to take things slow, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want you around. On the contrary actually. I…I made a decision while you were gone. What happened, happened, and while I’ll always regret that the IVF didn’t work, I need to concentrate on the things that I do have. I may not be able to have any more children, but I have a daughter who needs me, and I need to concentrate on my family.”

“That’s understandable.”

“And you,” she added, slipping her arms around his waist. “Are our family too. So, if it’s not too
much and you have some time today, I’d like for you to join us. If you want to.”

“I do.” And he meant it too.

“Good, well, we just have to wait for Little Miss Trouble to get ready, and then we’re good to go.”

“I might just pop home and get changed.” Scully nodded. “I can be back here in an hour?”

“Sounds good.”

“Ok good. I’ll see you soon.” Mulder pulled away, but not before his partner kissed him tenderly on the lips.

“Bye.”

Reluctant to let her go, he turned on his heel and headed back towards the front door, relieved that things were going to be ok between them.
Chapter 81

The visit to the zoo was a success; Ashley enjoyed herself as always and even Scully managed to smile as they wandered around, pausing so her daughter could take snaps of the animals. She’d been quite quiet that morning, at least with Mulder, and he couldn’t help but wonder whether she was regretting her actions of the previous night, even though she’d insisted she didn’t. After they’d just spent time observing the giraffes, Ashley declared she was hungry and so the three of them decided to pause for lunch. They sat at a picnic bench as they tucked into their lunch. After a while, Ashley spoke up, breaking the somewhat uncomfortable silence.

“Are you ok mom?” She asked, glancing up at Scully who was picking at a sandwich.

“I’m fine,” Scully answered automatically, her cheeks pinking as she made eye contact with Mulder. Her sandwich now forgotten, she placed it back on her plate before clearing her throat. “Ashley honey,” she began uncertainly. “We have some news. Yesterday I had a doctor’s appointment.”

“About the in-vitro results?” Her daughter asked.

“Yes.”

Suddenly Ash’s eyes lit up and she glanced between her mom and Mulder. “Are you pregnant?”

Mulder noticed his partner flinch, and he wished he could have warned Ashley before she asked her question. “No sweetheart, unfortunately it didn’t work.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means there won’t be any baby,” Scully replied sadly.

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” her mom continued. “I know it’s disappointing, and I know I certainly didn’t mean to get your hopes up.”

Brushing the crumbs of her sandwich on her jeans, Ashley scooted across the bench and gave her mom a tight hug. “I’m sorry mom. I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

“Me too baby. But…” Taking a deep breath, Scully brushed her hand through Ash’s hair. “Although I’m very sad about it, it’s given me a lot to think about and a different perspective. As I said to Mulder earlier though, it’s given me a new perspective on life and what’s really important. And you are the most important person in my life.”

“And Mulder too.”

Scully grinned, and the man in question relaxed somewhat. “And Mulder too. And I know that I haven’t always been around for you because I’ve had to go away for work –”

“It’s ok mom,” Ashley reassured her. “I know that you love your job.”

“But I love you more though. So much more. And I’m going to prove it to you. I’m going to take it easier at work and spend more time with you.” Scully looked over at Mulder, hoping that he understood her reasons for wanting to cut down a little. Of course he did, she realized as he gave
her a brief nod. He was Mulder.

“We both will,” he added, to Scully’s surprise. “I’ll make sure we concentrate on cases closer to home so we can spend more time with you.” Scully always knew how much Mulder loved her daughter, but she’d never thought about him turning his back on the X Files for her – or for anything. He really would do anything for her and her family. She smiled tearfully, half temped to reach across the table and kiss him. She didn’t.

“Does that mean we can go to more baseball games?” Ashley – ever the optimist – asked cheekily.

“That all depends on your behaviour at school and your grades,” answered Mulder. He was such a good dad, Scully thought to herself, not for the first time. He loved Ashley just like she was his own, and he would have been an amazing father to their baby, the baby that wasn’t meant to be. She quickly took a sip of her coffee, not wanting to dwell on what might have been. She had more important things to worry about now.

“Mulder’s right,” she agreed. “If you work hard at school and try not to get into too much trouble, we can maybe do more things.”

“Can we go away?”

“On vacation?”

Ashley nodded thoughtfully. “It would be fun.”

“It would be good to get away for a while,” Scully thought. “We can look into that.”

“Mulder could come too.”

“Who’s going to look after Queequeg?” he asked, not wanting Scully to be too uncomfortable with her daughter’s question.

“Grandma.”

“What about me?”

“You hate Queequeg.”

“I do not.”

“And Queequeg doesn’t like you.”

“Queequeg loves me.”

“Don’t you want to come away with us?”

Of course he did, and they all knew it.

“Ashley,” interrupted Scully. “Why don’t we talk about this later, and once we’ve decided where to go, Mulder can think about whether or not he’d like to come with us. He might not want to go to Disneyland.”

“I don’t want to go to Disneyland either,” Ashley announced suddenly.

“Why not?”
“Because Disneyland is for babies. I’m not a baby.”

“You’ll always be my baby,” said Scully, suddenly realizing with sadness how true her words were, how she’d never have another baby of her own.

Well she was out like a light before I’d even made it out of her room,” Mulder commented as he wandered into the kitchen. Scully was busy doing the dishes from dinner earlier that evening, and peered over her shoulder to look at him.

“I get the impression she got barely any sleep at Megan’s last night. You know what they’re like.”

“I do.” Mulder smiled and shifted awkwardly, as though wanting to speak but unsure of how to start. After a moment he seemed to think better of it and sighed. “I’d better make a move.”

“Oh. Ok,” Scully tried not to let her disappointment show, but it was too late.

“Thanks for inviting me out today. I had fun. I’ll see you on Monday.” As Mulder turned to walk away, Scully called after him, unable to stop herself.

“Mulder, have I ruined things between us?”

“What?” He turned to face her once again.

“I mean what I said and did, this morning and last night? I’m sorry, the last thing I wanted to do was push you away and ruin things and –“

“No, no you haven’t ruined anything. Not at all.” He smiled shyly as he came to the conclusion that they’d both been worrying about the same thing. “I thought I’d ruined things last night by pushing you into something you didn’t want.”

“You didn’t push me, I was the one who dragged you to bed.”

“You certainly didn’t drag me anywhere Scully.” Reaching out, Mulder brushed a strand of her hair back behind her ear, his hand lingering. “I wanted it to happen, but I just didn’t want to force you into anything.”

“You didn’t.”

“You could never ruin things between us Scully, never. Unless you shot me again,” he quipped. “And aimed better this time.”

“My aim was spot on last time,” she said, returning his grin. “And it will be next time too.”

Chuckling, Mulder sighed contentedly, relieved that they both seemed to be ok. “It’s umm…it’s late.”

“I want you to stay,” Scully murmured, closing the gap between them. “But I think you should go.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Slowly.”

“Slowly.”

“I’ll see you Monday?”
“See you then.”

He didn’t want to go, but he wanted to respect Scully’s wishes. “Call me if you need me.”

Scully smiled. “I will. You know…” she began almost hesitantly. “I was thinking about taking Ashley away somewhere like she suggested. Not right now, but soon. If you’d like to come with us… I mean I don’t want to force you if you don’t want to but –“

“Scully,” he interrupted. “I’d like that.”

“Ok good.”

“Why don’t you girls think up places you want to go and then let me know.”

“You don’t have a preference?”

“I haven’t had a proper vacation in years.” Aside from his homage to Graceland, he thought, but that didn’t count. “Anywhere you want to go is fine with me.”

“Ok, well we’ll let you know.”

“Good.”

“Yes.”

“Ok, well I’m going to go. Goodnight Scully.” Figuring he wasn’t pushing her with a goodnight kiss, Mulder leaned in and pressed his lips to hers gently. Before he was tempted to deepen the embrace, he pulled back and, after flashing his partner with a smile, turned on his heel and made his way out of the kitchen, and out of her apartment.

Mulder started as the shrill ringing of the phone interrupted his thoughts. He was stretched out on the couch, engrossed in an old black and white movie, not in the slightest bit tired even though it was past 1am. He picked it up on the third ring, aware of who was calling, but wondering why.

“Hello?”

“Did I wake you?”

He smiled as sure enough, Scully’s voice sounded out during the phone. “I wasn’t sleeping.” With his free hand, Mulder lifted the remote control and muted the television. “Can’t you sleep?”

“Not really.”

“Want me to read you a bedtime story?”

Scully huffed down the phone. “I’ll pass thanks.”

“Seriously though, is there anything I can help with?”

“Can you come over?” She asked in a small voice.

“Of course, is everything ok?”

“It’s fine. I was just thinking to myself, and my bed just felt a bit big tonight. It’s weird without you
Here. It’s fine,” she repeated. “You don’t have to come over, I was just being stupid.”

“No Scully, it’s ok, I –“

“I’m ok Mulder, you don’t need to come over. But can we just talk a while longer?”

“Of course we can.” And with that Mulder shifted on the sofa to make himself comfortable, settling himself in for the long haul.

XXXXXXXXX

The sound of her bedroom door opening jolted Scully awake. She blinked twice, sitting up in bed as she tried to rouse herself. “Ashley honey, what’s wrong?”

But it wasn’t her daughter who replied. “It’s me.”

“Mulder? What are you doing here?” Scully could barely make out her partner as he neared her, and heard the rustling of his clothes as he began to strip down to his boxers and tee.

“You asked me to come over.”

“But, that…Mulder I said not to worry.”

“I couldn’t sleep anyway. Besides, your bed is comfier than mine.” Pulling back the comforter, Mulder slipped into bed.

Scully immediately drifted closer to him, snuggling up against him. “You’re hot.”

“Why thanks.”

“I mean you’re warm,” she corrected herself, smiling.

Seconds later Mulder shifted and arched up, groaning. “Ouch, what is this?” From behind his back he pulled out what turned out to be a book, and placed it carefully onto the floor.


“Harry Potter?”

“It’s a book I’m reading with Ashley.”

“Ashley isn’t old enough to read her own books?”

He could imagine Scully rolling her eyes at him in the dark. “She was telling me how good it was, so I thought I’d give it a go.”

“You’re reading a kids’ book?”

“It’s not a kids’ book. It’s for adults too.”

“What’s it about?”

There was a pause before Scully answered. “A wizard.”

She could hear the amusement in Mulder’s voice. “You’re reading a book about wizards?”

“And witches.”
“Witches? You’ll read this crap but you won’t listen when I talk to you about witches?”

“I listen to you Mulder, I just don’t believe you. It’s fiction, just like this book.”

“This kids’ book.”

“Shut up Mulder,” she said with a smile. “I guarantee you’ll be hooked when you read it.”

“I’m not going to read it.”

“Bet you ten dollars you do.”

“Shut up Scully, I’m trying to sleep.”

Chuckling, Scully pulled the comforter up a little higher, and pecked him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he answered, relieved that after everything that had happened over the past 36 hours, she was still with him, happy to have him in her bed. “Goodnight Scully.” When she didn’t reply, Mulder realised she was already asleep, and it wasn’t long before he followed.
“Married, divorced or single?”

Scully followed Ellen’s gaze to the bar, her eyes coming to rest on a tall blond guy sipping on a beer. Easy on the eye but definitely not her type. She rolled her eyes. “Do we have to play this game every time we go out? I was hoping for some adult conversation.”

“Oh honey, I can give you adult conversation,” Ellen remarked dryly, eliciting a grin from her friend. “What do you think though?”

After an exaggerated sigh, Scully returned her attention to the mysterious guy, studying him hard. “Married,” she said moments later. “Notice the tan line from the wedding ring he no doubt removed before coming in here.”

“Bastard.”

“I’ll drink to that.” And so she did, noticing that her glass appeared to be running out of wine. She’d have to remedy that soon.

“So would you be interested if he wasn’t married? Of course you wouldn’t,” Ellen added moments later. “He’s not tall enough, dark enough or answers to the name of Mulder.”

“Do we have to do this every time?” It was getting warm in the bar, and Scully wasn’t entirely sure if it was the alcohol.

“I’m just wondering whether Mulder is ok with babysitting your temperamental daughter while you pick up guys.”

“Oh first of all, I’m not here to pick up guys. And secondly, Mulder loves spending time with Ashley. He’s the one who suggested I call you and we go on a night out.”

Ellen took an impressive sip of wine, draining her glass. She picked up the bottle, frowning as she saw it was empty, and signalled to a passing waiter to bring them a new one. “Dana, that guy is too good to be true. I’m starting to think that if you don’t sleep with him soon, I will.” She saw her friend’s cheeks pink. “Dana Scully, you didn’t?!” Scully said nothing, her silence giving her away. “You little sneak! When?” Ellen halted her questioning as the waiter reappeared with a new bottle of wine, pouring them fresh drinks and leaving the newly-opened bottle with them. “Tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“You and Mulder slept together. The world didn’t end. Of course there’s something to tell.”

“Sshh!” Scully immediately checked to see if anyone sat nearby was listening to them. They weren’t.

“Tell me! When did it happen? More importantly what happened? Was it good? Oh who am I kidding, it’s Mulder, of course it was good.”

Taking another sip of wine for courage, Scully explained. “It was a few weeks ago.”

“And you’re only just telling me?”
Scully ignored her friend’s protests. “It was after the results of our final round of in-vitro.” Ellen knew about Mulder agreeing to help Scully conceive a child, and she wasn’t too surprised either. She knew he’d do anything for her friend, and was just sad for them both that their attempts had failed. “I was upset and Mulder was there for me.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“So how was it?”

After a moment, Scully smiled. “It was nice.”

“Nice? Nice? Just nice?”

“More than nice. It was good. Very good actually.”

“Aaaaand have there been any repeat performances?”

“No,” she shook her head firmly. “We’ve agreed to take it slow.”

“Slow? Dana honey it’s been years! Snails move faster than you and Mulder.”

“I just need some time to get my head around this.”

“Dana –“

“Ellen, Mulder is one of my best friends. He’s the closest thing Ashley has ever had to a real father. I can’t risk that right now. That’s why I need some time”>

Ellen nodded in understanding. Her friend had been hurt in the past by men. She didn’t blame her for being hesitant, especially as Mulder was so close to both her and Ashley. “Dana Scully, you got laid,” she said with a grin. “I’m so proud.”

Scully took another drink. It was going to be a long night.

xxxxxxx

Mulder heard Scully approach her apartment long before she fumbled with the key in the lock. Her cackles of laughter rang out in the hallway, followed by lots of shushing. She wasn’t alone, he soon realized, as moments later he detected Ellen’s laughter too. It sounded like the two of them had had a good time. A very good time, he thought, smiling to himself. After everything Scully had been through lately, she deserved to have some fun. That was why he’d suggested her night out, volunteering to look after Ashley. Scully had eventually agreed and so she’d left her daughter in his capable hands. The two of them ordered in pizza and spent a couple of hours playing video games before Ashley finally passed out almost an hour and a half past her bedtime. Now it was almost 2am and if Scully wasn’t careful, she was going to wake her daughter.

Getting up from the sofa, Mulder padded over to the front door and opened it, grinning as he saw both women still rooting around in Scully’s purse for her keys.

“Good evening ladies,” he greeted them, clearly bemused. “Or should I say ‘good morning?’”

“Mulder!” They both exclaimed in unison. Ellen stepped forward to embrace him, taking him – and Scully by the looks of it – by surprise. Ellen was usually friendly towards Mulder, but apparently even more so after alcohol.
“Did you ladies have fun?” he asked, once Ellen had released him and Scully had relaxed.

“We did,” his partner answered. “We had a few drinks – she collapsed into giggles as Ellen elbowed her.

“A few bottles.”

“Right. I’ll be right back. I need to use the little girl’s room.”

“Call me tomorrow Dana,” Ellen called out as her friend made her way through her apartment on unsteady legs. Once she was out of earshot, Ellen grinned up at Mulder. For a second he thought she was leaning in to kiss him, but then he realized with amusement that she was swaying due to the alcohol. “Dana’s a very lucky woman.”

“She is?”

“I told her tonight,” she continued, ignoring him. “That you’re a keeper, that’s for sure.”

“Thanks.” He wondered exactly what they’d been talking about over drinks.

“She’s been hurt in the past, that’s why she’s still…” she was also slurring her words, he noticed. “…she’s still hesitant. Because of that bastard Jack. But she’ll come round soon. She’s not a complete idiot.” Her grin widened. “And she thinks you’re hot.”

“Really.” His cheeks pinked.

“And I hear you’re not too bad in the sack too –“

Before Mulder could quiz Ellen on what else Scully had said about him – or their relationship – she headed back towards the front door. “G’night Mulder. You kids be good.”

“You’re not driving home are you?” He could smell the alcohol on her, she was way over the limit.

Ellen shook her head. “Cab’s out front. Tell Dana I love her.” With that she turned and opened the door, and headed out of Scully’s apartment. Moments later Scully totted into the room, looking adorably confused. “Where’s Ellen?”

“She’s just left.”

“Oh.” She headed on into the kitchen where Mulder head the sounds of cupboards opening and closing, and the clinking of glasses. She reappeared armed with a bottle of red and two glasses, her invitation clear. Mulder hesitated just for a second. The last time they’d shared a bottle of wine, they’d ended up sharing a bed too, and he didn’t want a repeat of that. At least not that night. Scully was clearly drunk, and he wasn’t about to take advantage of her.

“I should go.”

“Mulder, it’s late. You should stay.”

She made a very convincing argument. Leading him over to the sofa, Scully poured them both a glass of wine, narrowly avoiding spilling it on the floor. Mulder took a seat as she handed him a glass and then she sat next to him, pressed against his side. He liked Drunk Scully.

“So what did you and Ellen get up to this evening?”

“We went for dinner and to a bar.” She chuckled. “We had a few drinks.”
“Just a few?”

Another giggle. “We ended up doing karaoke.”

“Karaoke?” He couldn’t imagine his partner standing up in front of a crowd and singing, but he wished he’d been there to witness it.

“Mmmhmmm.”

“What did you sing?”

She ignored him. “A guy at the bar gave me his number.”

“Really?” Mulder felt a blow to his stomach. He thought things were changing between them – they were getting closer, they’d kissed, tried to make a baby and hell, they’d even slept together once. He wasn’t stupid though; Scully was an attractive woman and looked particularly beautiful that evening. She was bound to get offers.

“Yes.” Draining her glass, Scully sat forward to place it on the coffee table before turning to face her partner. Before he could even register what was happening, she had reached down the front of her dress and retrieved a scrap piece of paper from her bra.

“That’s a handy place to store things.”

She opened up the piece of paper, squinting down to try and make out the words. “Jason,” she said. “His name was Jason.”

If she was trying to make him jealous, she was certainly succeeding. Then, in a move which surprised him, she tore the paper up into small pieces, and threw it towards the coffee table, missing it by miles.

“Don’t you want to keep that?” Mulder asked her.

“I told him I was already in a relationship.”

“Oh really?” He tried – and failed – to sound casual. The truth was, he was relieved as hell.

“It’s true,” she said, pouring herself yet another glass of wine. “You and I, we’re…we’re doomed for one another.” She was smiling, but Mulder felt bad that she felt that way.

“Doomed?”

“You…you are a father to my daughter, and I can’t even think about another man acting in that way. I don’t want to think about that,” she corrected herself. “You’re always there for her and for me and I don’t think any other man would ever do that. Not like you. Jesus Mulder,” she said with a chuckle. “You went to Antarctica for me, you helped me try for a baby and you gave me two orgasms…” Mulder’s eyebrows nearly hit the roof. “And you know how I like my coffee, even though I don’t think I’ve ever told you…there’s…there’s no one else out there who would do that for me. And I know that when the day comes when you bring another woman around, well…well she’s gonna have a real hard time.”

“There won’t be another woman Scully, not ever.”

Nodding, she took another drink. “You know.” A giggle escaped her, and Mulder realized with a sad smile that she probably wouldn’t remember their conversation when she woke up. “We might
as well get married now, because there’ll never be anyone else for us.”

It’s a good job he was sitting down, Mulder thought to himself. God, he hoped it wasn’t just the drink talking. “I love you Scully.”

“I know you do.” She smiled. “I can see it in your eyes.” After a moment, tears filled her own eyes. “God I wanted a baby with those eyes so badly.”

Mulder reached out, tenderly cupping her cheek, his eyes darting down as Scully licked her lips. She inched towards him, closing the gap between them, and before Mulder could process what was happening, she’d kissed him. She tasted of wine and a hint of something stronger – whisky perhaps – it was no wonder she was buzzed. Mulder knew he should stop her; he knew she wasn’t thinking straight and that she’d regret it in the morning, but with Scully’s tongue in his mouth and her hand rubbing up and down his leg, he was finding it damn hard to think. Breaking the kiss, he took her wine glass from her and placed it along with his own back on the coffee table, before returning his attention to his partner. He kissed her back soundly, one arm snaking around her waist to pull her towards him, the other cupping her breast. Things escalated quickly and as Scully shifted so she was straddling his lap, alarm bells began to sound in his head.

“Scully –” He let out a groan as she reached behind her, squeezing him through his pants. “Scully –”

“Hmm?” She kissed him again, and it was with great difficulty that he pulled away.

“Scully. You’re drunk.”

“I want you.”

“I don’t want you to regret this in the morning.”

“I won’t. Now shut up and take off your pants.”

That was definitely Drunk Scully speaking. “What happened to taking things slowly?” He took a deep breath as she began nipping at his earlobe.

“I changed my mind.”

He was fast running out of arguments. He wanted to – god he wanted to – but he remembered Scully just weeks ago wanting to slow things down, and he also knew she was buzzed. He wanted her to at least remember their second time and the way things stood at that moment, he doubted she would.

“Scully.”

“What?” She sighed heavily and Mulder suppressed a smile. This was a Scully he hadn’t seen before. Flirty Scully…Impatient Scully…Horny Scully.

“Not tonight.” He kissed one cheek. Then the other. Then the corner of her mouth. “I want it to be special, when we’re both in possession of our faculties.”

“Mulder, I’m not drunk.” Her serious expression soon gave way to giggles. “Ok, I might be a liiittle bit drunk.” She pouted. “Don’t you want me?”

Mulder thrust up at her, and Scully whimpered in response. “Does it feel like I don’t want you?”
Placing her hands on Mulder’s chest, Scully surprised him by lifting herself off of him and getting to her feet. Confused, he watched through hooded eyes as Scully reached behind her and unzipped her dress, letting it fall to the floor. His eyes darted down to admire her midnight blue bra and matching panties, and inwardly he cursed himself for being a gentleman. Scully knew she had him, the tease. But before he could even think about changing his mind and carrying Scully off to bed, he heard a sound coming from the next room. Ashley.

“Mom?” she called out, her voice thick with sleep and edging closer. Queequeg came running out into the living room, and Mulder knew Ashley would be right behind him. Without hesitating, he got up off the sofa and rushed past a completely oblivious Scully, adjusting his pants as he went. He managed to catch Ashley just as she was coming out of her bedroom.

“I thought I heard mom,” she explained through a yawn. “Is she home?”

“She is, but she’s almost asleep. She says she’ll see you in the morning.”

“Did she have fun with Aunt Ellen?”

Too much fun, thought Mulder, and he hoped Scully didn’t hear them talking and decide to investigate. He wasn’t quite sure how he’d explain her state of undress to her daughter. “They did. What are you doing up?”

“I need the bathroom.”

“Ok, go use the bathroom and then get back to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Are you staying over?”

He nodded. “It’s late.” Not to mention Scully had consumed enough alcohol to sedate a small elephant. He didn’t want to leave her, just in case she was ill.

Ashley grinned. “It’s not what you’re thinking young lady,” he said, well aware that she wanted him and her mom to get together. “Now hurry up and get back to bed please.”

Thankfully, for once Ashley didn’t argue and did as she was told. A few minutes later, her bedroom was firmly shut and she was fast asleep. As Mulder headed back into the living room, he found Scully sat on the sofa, half asleep herself. He smiled. “C’mon Scully, let’s get you into bed.” He tugged on her hand, pulling her up into a standing position and, after picking up her discarded dress, led her to the bedroom. He removed his sweatshirt first, bemused when Scully immediately held her hand out for it and slipped it on, the jumper falling to just above her knees. She kicked off her shoes and climbed into bed, and after removing his pants and tee, Mulder joined her. Scully immediately wrapped an arm around his torso, laying her head on his chest. “Raincheck?” she murmured.

“Raincheck.”

They slept.

xxxxxxxx

Mulder stirred but didn’t fully wake as he felt the bed dip and heard footsteps scurrying out of the bedroom. Minutes later, the sounds of retching and coughing were enough to rouse him. “Scully?”

Rubbing his eyes, he rolled over, expecting to find his partner still sleeping by his side, but her side of the bed was empty. He looked over at the alarm clock, noting that barely two hours had passed
since they’d gone to bed, but he was soon distracted by yet more coughing. Realization dawning, he quickly got out of bed and rushed towards the bathroom in search of Scully.

Though the bathroom light wasn’t on, he could make out the shadow of his partner, kneeling on the floor as she became reacquainted with all the alcohol she’d recently consumed. Wordlessly he continued to the kitchen, flicking on the light and grabbing a glass from the cupboard, pouring Scully some water. He took a quick sip himself, wanting to clear his dry throat, before refilling it and heading back to the bathroom. As he heard the toilet flush, he knocked gently on the door before stepping inside. “You ok?”

He moved to turn on the light and then thought better of it, realizing Scully might not appreciate the brightness. Instead he fumbled around in the dark until he’d managed to sit himself down on the floor by the bathtub. Scully answered him by dry heaving. “I got you some water.”

“I’m never drinking again” came a weak – and pretty pathetic – voice, so different to the one demanding he get naked barely hours before.

“I don’t think drinking water was your problem Scully,” Mulder replied, trying – and failing – to keep the humor out of his voice. “I think it was everything else that was the problem.”

There was a pause. “Mulder, did you bring me water or not?”

Smiling in the darkness, Mulder handed over the glass, making sure Scully had a firm grip before relinquishing hold of it. No sooner had she taken a swig of it though and she was sick yet again. This time though, Mulder was there for her, to hold her hair back and take care of her.

“Easy Scully,” he murmured finally as she collapsed onto him, spent. “You’re ok.”

“Mom?”

Without warning the bathroom light came on and both Mulder and Scully flinched, momentarily blinded. When Mulder could finally see properly, he noticed a concerned Ashley standing in the doorway, her hair tousled and pajamas rumpled, pillow marks tattooed on her face. “What’s wrong?” she asked, looking between the two adults. They must have looked a sorry state, thought Mulder. Scully was half naked wearing his sweater, her eyeliner smudged from where her eyes had watered as she’d retched. He was just wearing boxers, his arm wrapped around his partner, rubbing her back. So much for keeping their blossoming relationship a secret, he mused.

“Your mom’s ok sweetie.”

“Why are you sick mom?” Ashley obviously wanted Scully’s confirmation that she was ok.

“I’m fine sweetie,” her mom finally answered, taking measured sips of water.

“Your mom just had too much to drink earlier,” said Mulder, ignoring the death glare that Scully sent his way. Ashley however, didn’t seem to register his words, her gaze instead focused on his lips.

“Mulder?” she asked, stifling a yawn.

“Hmm?”

“Why are you wearing lipstick?”

Feeling his cheeks burn, Mulder lifted his hand to his lips and wiped them. Sure enough, his palm
was now the same faded redish color as Scully’s lips. “I’m not,” he lied, and in a move that reminded him so much of her mom, Ashley raised her eyebrows in disbelief. She wasn’t going to fall for it; she was past the bullshitting stage. “Your mom is fine. I got her. Go back to sleep.”

Scully nodded in agreement, immediately regretting the action as the room started spinning. “Mulder’s right, I’ll be ok. Go to sleep sweetheart.”

For a moment, Ashley looked as though she was about to argue, but then seemed to think better of it. “Night,” she replied and reluctantly sulked off back to her room. As Mulder heard her door close firmly, he turned his attention back to her mom.

“You ok?”

It took her a moment to reply and for a second he wondered whether she was going to be sick again. Thankfully not. “I think I need to lie down.”

“Are you sure?”

A long pause. “Yeah.”

Standing up, Mulder held out his hands and helped his partner to her feet. After she brushed her teeth on shaky legs, he took the glass from her and wrapped his arm around her, leading her back out into the bedroom. Once he’d placed the water on her bedside table, he helped her into bed before getting back in on his side. He was surprised when Scully immediately snuggled up to him, wrapping an arm around him. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound too sure. “Mulder?”

“Yeah?”

“Did we umm…did we sleep together?”

“Sleep together?” They’d slept in the same bed on a number of occasions, so he knew that wasn’t what she meant.

“Last night. Or this morning. Did we?

“You don’t remember?”

Silence. For a moment, Mulder thought about messing with her and telling her that they did.

“Mulder…?”

“No Scully.” He felt her relax against him. “You wanted to. You were pretty buzzed when you got home and you gave me a damn good strip show. You got naked quicker than I can say “I believe in UFOs. Was that how you paid for medical school?”

Even in her fragile state, Scully was still able to dish out a sharp jab to the ribs. “I did not!”

“Ouch!” he chuckled, rubbing his side. “Truth hurts Scully.”

“But we didn’t…?”

“No.”

“Good,” she murmured, so quietly he almost thought he’d imagined it.
“Is it?” he tried not to sound too offended.

“Mmm.” Scully burrowed her head into the crook of his neck. “If we had, I’d have wanted to remember it. Sex with you is always memorable Mulder.”

“I certainly try.”

“Mulder honey?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you make the room stop spinning?”

He smiled. “I’ll try.”

Scully let out a contented sigh and within seconds Mulder felt her grasp on him loosen as her breath evened out and she drifted off. It wasn’t long before he joined her in a peaceful sleep.

xxxxxxx

When Mulder woke a few hours later at a more reasonable time, Scully was still dead to the world. She hadn’t woken any more during the night – at least not as far as he knew – so he was glad she was finally able to rest. Taking care not to disturb her, he got out of bed, pulled on the tee he must have discarded during the night, and headed to the bathroom. After relieving himself and washing his face, he continued to the kitchen. He was joined barely ten minutes later by Ashley, who looked like he felt.

“Morning sunshine.”

“Hey.” She shuffled over to the counter, sniffing.

“You ok?”

“I’m tired.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“Is mom feeling better?”

“She’s still sleeping. But she wasn’t sick anymore so that’s a good sign.”

“Why did she drink so much?”

“She went out with Ellen. That’s what people do sometimes, and sometimes they get sick. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Can I get bacon?”

“Do you have bacon?”

“Mom got some at the store on Tuesday.”

“Bacon it is then.”

“And eggs?”

“Ok.”
“And toast. Oh and mushrooms too? Please,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

“One Mulder Special coming right up.” As he started work on breakfast, he realized Ashley was still focused on her mom.

“I’m never drinking that much.”

“Good for you.”

“Have you ever been sick?”

“From alcohol? Would you like juice?”

“Yes please. Yes, from alcohol.”

“A long long time ago when I was at college. It happens a lot at college.”

“I’m going to college.”

“I know you are. But don’t touch the alcohol. Be sensible,” he said, pouring Ashley a glass of orange juice before returning his attention to the food he was preparing.

“I will. I don’t want to be sick.”

Scully suddenly came padding out into the kitchen, interrupting the conversation. “Hey,” she said weakly.

“How are you feeling mom?”

“Ok.” She didn’t look ok, she looked pale and fragile, as though the slightest movement could send her running back towards the bathroom. She plonked herself down at the kitchen table, running a shaky hand through her hair. Within moments Mulder had placed a glass of water next to her. She sat up to take a tentative sip. “Thank you.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Ashamed?”

He laughed. “You shouldn’t be.”

“Did I really do…” Glancing over at Ashley, she corrected herself. “What you said I did?”

Mulder grinned smugly and nodded. “Oh yeah. And did you called me honey.”

“I did not!”

“You did. That actually surprised me more than the other things you did actually. Even the thing you did on the couch.”

“What did I do on the couch?”

“I can’t tell you right now.”

“You’re making this all up.”

“I’m not, I swear.”
“Can you really not remember mom?” Asked Ashley.

“Not everything.”

“You were wearing Mulder’s sweater, and he was wearing your lipstick.” She looked between the two adults. “I am never drinking alcohol.”

“Good girl. Learn from your mom’s mistakes.”

“Breakfast is served.” Mulder carried the two plates across to the kitchen table, placing them in front of the two girls. Scully immediately turned her nose up, her eyes widening. Mulder realized that she probably wouldn’t be having food for a while. “Hey Scully?” She tore her eyes away from the plate to look up at him. “I’ll take Ash today, why don’t you go back to bed?” And without answering, she turned and ran off in the direction of the bathroom.

“Well kiddo,” he said, taking Scully’s seat at the table and picking up a knife and fork. “Looks like it’s just you and me today.”
Mulder rewound the answerphone machine, letting the message play once again. His mom’s voice rang out in the otherwise silent room. “Fox, it’s your mother. I’d hoped you’d call upon your return but I haven’t heard from you. I’m sure you’re busy. There are…so many emotions in me, I wouldn’t know where to start. So much that I’ve left unsaid, for reasons I hope one day you’ll understand.” As the message ran out, Mulder hit the rewind button, leaning in towards the machine, trying to figure out if he could detect any background noises during his mom’s message. His mom’s last message, at least to him. She was dead. Suicide, or at least that’s what it was made to look like; Mulder wasn’t too sure himself. He was convinced his mom had been trying to tell him something in his last message, and so he rewound the message and listened again. Before he could play it yet again, he was interrupted by a knock at the door. There was only one person it could be. He rushed over to the door and opened it, revealing a weary-looking Scully, no doubt there to reveal the results of his mom’s autopsy. He’d felt bad for demanding that she do it, but he also wanted to know the truth – and Scully was the only one he trusted.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he began, not even bothering with a hello before making his way back into the living room. “My mother was trying to tell me something. I think I figured it out. It’s something about my sister that she was never able to tell me.” He played the message once more and listened to his mom’s voice. It hurt him to think that he’d never hear her again.

“So much that I’ve left unsaid for reasons I hope one day you’ll understand.”

“She knew what I’d find with this case out in California.”

“How could she know that Mulder?”

“A child disappearing without trace…without evidence…in defiance of all logical explanation? She knew because of what’s driven me – what I’ve always believed.”

“Mulder –” Scully closed the gap between them, and Mulder felt a lump form in his throat.

“Scully, these parents who’ve lost…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. My mother must have written a note like that herself. Describing the scenario of my sister’s disappearance, of her…of her abduction by aliens. Don’t you see Scully? It never happened. All of those visions that I’ve had just been…they’ve just been to help me cope, to help me deal with 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.”

He looked over at his partner, who’d taken a seat opposite him. “Your mother killed herself Mulder. I conducted the autopsy. She was dying of an incurable disease; an untreatable and horribly disfiguring disease called Paget’s Carcinoma.” Scully knew she had to be honest; it was the only way Mulder would listen to her. “She knew it. There were doctor’s records. She didn’t want to live.” It hurt her to tell him, to see his face fall as reality set in and he realized she was telling him the truth. Suddenly, Mulder stood and turned, grabbing hold of his desk and shaking it violently. His belongings crashed around, his computer almost falling to the floor, and Scully instantly stood up and approached him, placing a hand on his arm to try and get him to stop before he trashed his whole apartment. As soon as he felt her touch, Mulder pulled away, breaking down.
“Mulder –“

“She was trying to tell me something. She was…trying to tell me something.” He broke down, the tears finally coming. It wasn’t fair. His mom wasn’t supposed to die.

“Mulder,” replied Scully, her own voice breaking as the emotion threatened to overcome her too. “She was trying to tell you to stop. To stop looking for your sister. She was just trying to take away your pain.”

Thankfully Mulder abandoned his desk and turned his attention towards Scully, grabbing hold of her as he sobbed. She held him tightly, pressing her lips to his neck, just like she did her daughter when she was upset. She wished she could take away his pain. He had always told her that she and Ashley had suffered unnecessarily over the years, and while that was true, Mulder had also suffered. He’d lost his father and now his mom, and of course Samantha was still missing. He’d lost everything. Except for her and her daughter, Scully told herself. And she promised him silently that they’d be there for him whenever he needed them.

He was their family.

xxxxxxxxx

Scully wasn’t sure how long she held him for, but she was beginning to feel herself set in position. Not that she cared though; she daren’t move in case Mulder thought she was pulling away. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered softly, moving to kiss his cheeks, tasting his salty tears, feeling her own fall too. “I’m so so sorry Mulder.”

“I just wish…” he began, pausing as wracking sobs overcame his body.


“Well did she do this?”

“Because she was sick,” she replied, closing her eyes and seeing the body of Teena Mulder still in front of her. Scully knew she wouldn’t sleep that night; she couldn’t put the image of Mulder’s mom out of her mind. “Because she didn’t want to live like that. And she didn’t want you to live with it either. She thought it would be kinder to the both of you.” Finally Scully shifted, and she winced as she felt her leg begin to cramp. “Mulder I need to move. Let’s go sit down.” She practically lifted him up and guided him to the sofa, where she sat down, pulling him down next to her. Mulder automatically drifted back into her arms as though he belonged there. Maybe he did, she thought.

“What about Ashley?”

“Ashley’s fine. I called my mom earlier and asked her to pick her up from school.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“I shouldn’t have made you do the autopsy.”

“I understand why you did.” She was the only one he trusted, and he knew she would be the only one who’d tell him the truth about what happened. Hence his outburst when she explained how his mom died; why she chose to end her own life.
“Thank you.” Mulder relaxed his grip on her long enough to rub his eyes wearily. “Did she suffer?”

It was the one thing everyone wanted to know. “She would have suffered in the long run, Mulder, I can’t imagine how you’re feeling right now, but in the long run you need to take comfort in that.”

“I’m just so tired Scully.”

“I know.” She ran a hand through his hair, wishing that she could go to back to bed and pretend the day had never happened. She was willing to put money on Mulder feeling the same way. “Why don’t you go to bed?”

Mulder huffed out a laugh. “I don’t think I’ll be sleeping tonight.”

“Let’s go lay down.”

“You need to get home to Ash.”

“Ashley’s fine Mulder,” she repeated firmly. There was no way in hell she was going to leave him alone, not in that state. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’ll stay?” He sounded so pathetic that Scully couldn’t help but draw him in for another hug. “Of course. I’m not going to leave you.”

“I should have called her back. She called me the other day and I…I was busy and I said I’d ring her when I got home, but I didn’t.” The two of them were stretched out beneath the covers of Mulder’s bed, still both fully clothed. Scully had removed her shoes and coat before getting into bed, and though his tears had dried, Mulder had immediately gone back into her arms, needing the comfort.

“You were busy Mulder, and she knew that.”

“It doesn’t make it ok though.”

“You can beat yourself up about this for the rest of your life, but it won’t bring your mom back. Mulder, even if you’d have called her back, this would have still happened. There was nothing you could have done. Her mind was made up.”

Mulder sighed heavily, feeling a fresh lump form in his throat. “I just keep seeing her.”

“Me too,” she replied sadly. Teena Mulder’s body, stretched out on the gurney; slicing her open, removing her organs…she’d never forget that autopsy.

“I just wish I could switch my brain off.”

“What can I do?” Scully asked, looking down at her partner. “I can give you something to sleep.”

“No drugs Scully.” Mulder had never handled sleeping tablets too well, in all the time that Scully had known him. He’d rather have a night of no sleep rather than drug-induced slumber.

“No drugs,” she repeated, pressing her lips to his forehead. “Just close your eyes,” she whispered. “Close your eyes and sleep will come.”

He did as she ordered, but rather than let sleep overcome him, Mulder instead shifted up so he was
face to face with his partner. He kissed her soundly, the move surprising her so much that she was too stunned to push him away. His hand moved down to grasp against her waist as he pulled her in closer towards him, attempting to deepen the kiss by running his tongue along her lips.

“Mulder –“ she gasped, her words cut away as he kissed her again.

“Please Scully.” Though he finally broke for air, Mulder couldn’t bear to be away from his partner for long; raining kisses down her jaw and into the crook of her neck. “I just want to forget.”

She couldn’t deny him. Not when he needed her. Nodding, Scully pulled him back up to eye level and kissed him, their tongues duelling as Mulder settled himself on top of her fully; evidence of his arousal pressing against her stomach. Her arms slipped around his waist, her hands running up and down underneath his shirt; her nails raking his skin. Mulder groaned, slowly gyrating against her, and suddenly there were too many barriers between them. He sat up, quickly removing her shirt and pants so fast that for a moment she thought he’d torn the buttons off. Her bra quickly followed, with her panties close behind. Mulder himself rushed to catch up, discarding his clothes in a hurry, throwing them on the floor without a care. And before Scully knew it, he was pushing himself inside of her. It was too much too soon and her breath caught as she felt him stretch her. “Mulder –“ she gasped as he began to move.

“Yeah.” His eyes were closed now as he set about reaching his goal. His hands clamped around her wrists as he held her in place, and suddenly it was all too much. She whimpered in pain.

“Mulder, stop –“ Scully finally uttered. “You’re hurting me.”

The light went from green to red in an instant, as Scully’s words stopped him in his tracks. “I’m sorry.” Without warning, he jumped off of her and, after grabbing his boxers, ran off towards the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. Scully quickly sat up, slipped into her panties and put on her shirt and got out of bed, running after him. “Mulder, dammit open up!” She knocked again. “Please Mulder.”

“Go home Scully,” came Mulder’s voice from behind the door.

“Not until you open this door.”

“I can’t.”

Slumping against the door, Scully rested her head against it. “Why?”

“Because I’ll hurt you. I hurt everyone.”

Resolved, Scully knocked once again, determined that he would face her. “Mulder, if you don’t open this door now I’ll shoot it open.”

A pause. “You don’t have your gun.”

“I know where you keep yours.” Silence. She smiled to herself; she had him there and they both knew it. Scully heard rustling from inside the bathroom and moments later heard Mulder unlock the door. She opened it, seeing her partner sat up against the bathtub, not meeting her eye. Wordlessly she crossed the room and took a seat next to him, not quite touching, but almost.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, running a hand wearily through his hair. “The last thing I wanted to do is hurt you.”
“You didn’t hurt me,” she answered, resting a hand on his bare leg. “Not much anyway, I just… you just took me by surprise, that’s all.” Leaning into him, she nudge his shoulder. “Foreplay Mulder, it’s a girl’s best friend.” When he didn’t seem to share the joke, Scully sobered. “You don’t hurt everyone in your life. You make a lot of people happy.”

“I bring pain to people’s lives.”

“The only person you give pain to is yourself. You’re so hard on yourself Mulder, and there’s no need. You are not responsible for the pain in everyone’s life.”

“How can you say that? After everything you’ve been through?”

“Because it’s true! Did you shoot my sister? No. Did you give me cancer? No. Are you responsible for Jack or my father dying? No, you’re not Mulder, yet you take responsibility for it all. And now this. You are not responsible for your mom dying Mulder.”

“My mom killed herself,” was his answer. “She killed herself and she didn’t say goodbye.”

“And that wasn’t your fault.”

“Why didn’t she say anything Scully? I mean that message, I –“

“Maybe she thought that if she told you everything, you’d try and stop her. She was determined, and that was nothing to do with you and everything to do with her condition. She was protecting you.”

“She shouldn’t have protected me.”

“Really? What about when I had cancer? I didn’t tell Ashley straight away because I wanted to protect her. If I could have gotten away with it, I wouldn’t have told her at all, because I knew she’d worry. I wanted her to enjoy our last moments together, not keep looking at me with those sad eyes as though it was the last time she’d ever see me. I can understand your mom,” she added softly. “Although it kills me to see what it’s done to you.”

“I should have called her,” Mulder repeated his words from earlier. “I should have visited more often.”

“And I should have told my dad and Missy that I loved them more often too. And I should have either forced Jack to have more contact with Ashley, or never let her see him at all. Life is all about regrets. Your mom loved you and you loved her. She knew that too. Come on,” she said, nudging him again and then getting to her feet. She held out her hand towards him. “Unless you’re about to kick me out on the streets in this state of undress, let’s go back to bed.” After a moment, Mulder accepted her offer and took hold of her hand as he stood. Wordlessly Scully led him back to bed, slipping beneath the covers.

“You know, I told my mom about her,” said Mulder following her into bed and settling himself on his back. This time it was Scully who made the first move, rolling over to wrap an arm around his waist, settling her head against his chest.

“Who?”

“Ashley.”

“Yeah? What did you tell her?”
“I remember telling her about Ashley just after I met her. When I had to go check her room for
monsters that night. You remember?”

Scully nodded against him. It was so hard to believe how many years had passed since that night.
Ashley had been four years old then; now she was fast on her way to becoming a young lady.

Mulder chuckled to himself. “She told me to be careful; not to get too involved.”

“Well,” replied Scully. “Us single moms can be scary people.”

“Then as the years went on, I mentioned you and Ash from time to time. I told her the time I got
Ash that bike for her birthday and…”

“And?”

“She told me I’d make a good father someday.” His voice broke, but Mulder struggled to keep it
together. He’d cried enough tears that night.

“You would make a good father Mulder,” Scully reassured him, still regretful that the IVF didn’t
work. “You do make a good father. You make my daughter very happy, and for that I can’t thank
you enough. And you make me pretty happy too.”

“Except for when I hurt you.”

“Mulder –“

“Why did you do that tonight Scully? Why did you let me near you?”

“Because you needed me. Just like I need you sometimes. And because I want to be here,” she
added, feeling Mulder relax beneath her.

“And I’m more grateful for that than you’ll ever know.”

“It’s no different to any of the times you’ve been there for me or for Ashley.”

“I made you do my mom’s autopsy. That was unforgiveable.”

“I understand why you did it. You needed to know the truth.” Propping herself up on her elbow,
Scully ran her hand through Mulder’s hair once more, noticing just how weary he looked. He was
fighting sleep; that she knew, no doubt afraid of the nightmares that would eventually come. She
couldn’t blame him – after all, she was afraid of what she’d see when she closed her eyes too.
“Sleep Mulder,” she whispered.

“I don’t think I can.”

She kept raking her hand through his hair, hoping that the move would comfort him, just like it did
Ashley when she was upset or had nightmares. “I’m sorry your mom did this Mulder,” she said
softly. “But you’re going to be ok. You going to get through this. Ashley and I will make sure of
it.”

And with that thought to comfort him, and the feel of Scully beside him, Mulder eventually fell
into a dreamless sleep.
“Mulder? What happened? Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” Mulder answered automatically. *Are you alright?* That was the big question, he thought, as he looked up to the sky. He’d just seen his sister; had just hugged Samantha for the first time in years and yet…and yet he knew it wasn’t her, that the truth was, Samantha was dead, and had been for many years. His long and painful search was now over. After a moment he smiled. “I’m free.”

Though the truth may not have revealed the answer that Mulder desperately wanted, he could stop. He could rest, while Samantha could now rest in peace. He’d seen her, he’d said his goodbyes to her, and she was beautiful, so so beautiful, and happy too. He could remember that ; it could give him comfort in life. He was free.

They both got into the car, aware that Harold Pillar wasn’t going to join them, and Scully took the driver’s seat. As she started up the car, Mulder reached out and took hold of her hand, squeezing it. “I saw her Scully,” he said, unable to keep the wonder out of his voice.

“Samantha?”

He nodded. “She was there.”

There wasn’t even a hint of skepticism in her voice as she replied, and for that he was grateful. “So you know that -“

“She’s dead Scully. I know she is. She died a long time ago. But she’s not suffering anymore. She’s free, and so am I.”

“Mulder…” He felt her squeeze his hand right back.

“It’s ok Scully. I saw her. She was happy and smiling and carefree and we said out goodbyes.”

“Are you alright?” She repeated her earlier question as she put the car into drive.

“I think…” He sighed. “I think I will be.” And he meant it too.

Scully pulled the car up outside their motel rooms, and they both got out into the cool night. Before Mulder could even think about what was going to happen next, whether they would say their goodnights and go their separate ways, Scully took hold of his hand and tugged. “Let’s go to my room,” she said. “I don’t think either of us is ready to sleep yet.”

Mulder agreed with that. He was too wired to even contemplate sleeping, but somehow he felt lighter, despite the fact he’d had the week from hell. In just a matter of days he’d lost his mom, and also discovered that his sister was dead. Part of him was convinced it was a very weird and surreal dream.

He let Scully lead him into her room, following her inside as she flicked on the light and kicked off her shoes, removing her jacket and placing it over the back of the chair by the desk. “I’ll be back shortly,” she said, walking towards the bathroom, pausing briefly to retrieve her pjs from the bed. As she closed the bathroom door, Mulder stood and listened to the sounds of her pottering about,
going about her nightly routine, running water and going through her washbag for those lotions that all women seemed to use, but Mulder would never understand why.

A few minutes later, Mulder removed his jacket and placed it atop Scully’s. His n hers, he thought, smiling to himself. She was still there with him, after all this time, and he thanked his lucky stars for that. After a moment, he slipped off his shoes too, figuring that Scully intended for him to stay for a little while at least, even if she didn’t want him to spend the night. He’d take anything though, as long as it meant spending some time with her. Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, Mulder waited until his partner to emerge from the bathroom, her make up removed and face freshly scrubbed, wearing black shorts and a grey t-shirt. No bra, he noticed, trying to keep eye contact with her.

“Hey,” he said as she walked towards him, coming to stand in between his legs. His arms immediately snaked around her waist, and he rested his forehead against her flat, toned stomach, that would never again be swollen with pregnancy. He kissed her there, once again wishing he could give her the baby she wanted. The baby that wasn’t meant to be. As though reading his mind, Scully raked her hands through his hair before resting them on the back of his neck.

“Hey. How are you doing?”

“I don’t know right now,” he admitted.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Huffing out a laugh, Mulder kissed her abdomen once more, his hands travelling down to the back of her legs. He positioned her so she was on her knees straddling him, and then he shifted back up to the head of the bed, lying out fully on his back, with Scully on top of him.

“Mulder…” she warned, but went along with him anyway.

“I don’t want to have sex with you Scully,” he responded with a smile. “Can we just stay like this for a bit?”

She grinned against him. “We can do that.”

“Thank you.” Mulder let out a smile. “You didn’t sound surprised earlier. When I told you about Samantha.”

“About seeing her?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not.” There was a pause, as though she was hesitating, before she finally spoke. “I think I saw my dad shortly before I found out he passed,” she reminded him. “I think sometimes the dead appear to those who need it.”

“Agent Scully, are you admitting the existence of –“

“I’m merely admitting that I don’t think you’re crazy for what you saw earlier.” Especially seeing how he seemed relieved in some ways. He’d missed his sister for sure, and had no doubt wanted to find her alive someday, but finally he could rest.

“There’s just me now,” he said a little while later.

“Sorry?”
“I’m the last Mulder standing. There’s just me.”

Scully lifted herself up to look Mulder in the eye. “There’s not just you Mulder. You might be the last Mulder, but you’re not alone. You have me, and you have Ashley. We are your family too, and we’ll always be here for you, whenever you need us.” She got a tight squeeze as a thank you; Mulder seemed too choked up to speak.

“Speaking of Ash,” he began, when the lump in his throat finally disappeared. “You know, Samantha reminded me of her a little bit.”

“She did?”

“Not in terms of looks, but just in herself. She had that little gleam of mischief in her eye that Ash does. Samantha looked like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, but you know it wasn’t always the case. She was beautiful Scully, just like Ash is now and will be in the future. I just wish I could have seen her grow up.”

“I know,” Scully replied sadly. “I wish you could have too. But you know what happened to her now and that she’s not in any pain. Ad she remembered you Mulder. She still remembered you despite everything that she went through. There’s comfort in that. I know you won’t see Samantha grow up, but you will Ashley. She’ll keep plaguing you for the rest of your life, whether you like it or not.”

“I’d like that,” he said, smiling once again.

“Me too. And Mulder? Ashley and I will always be around. You will get through this, I promise. It just takes time.”

“You sound so certain.”

“You told me something similar when Missy died, and I did get through it, with your help. Now I’m here to help you.”

“There’s so much I have to sort.”

“Not tonight Mulder,” said Scully firmly. “Tomorrow we’ll go home, and we can do it then.”

*We*. Her words gave him hope, that she’d carry on being by his side.

“But tonight, let’s just sleep. If you can.”

Mulder felt wired, millions of thoughts running through his head. “You sleep Scully.”

“You’re not tired?”

As she studied him hard, Mulder shook his head, then leaned forward and kissed her soundly on the lips. “I’m not tired,” he whispered against her, sending a shiver down her spine.

“Mulder…” He knew that tone, she was warning him, yet she wasn’t pushing him away.

“Please Scully.”

“I thought you weren’t interested in that tonight.”

“I can’t sleep. I can’t stop thinking.” He knew he was asking a lot of her, but she wasn’t pushing him away. Instead she looked him in the eye.
"Are you sure?"

He answered her with a kiss. Pretty soon the kiss heated and as Scully moved down his body, Mulder was finally able to clear his head for the first time in days.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

When Mulder woke the next morning, he could have sworn he was dreaming. Scully stood by the edge of the bed clad only in a small white towel that barely covered her modesty. Her skin was damp and her hair dripping wet as Mulder quickly looked her up and down, certain she hadn't even registered that he was awake. Then she dropped the towel; a move that convinced him that he really was dreaming. A really really good dream that he never wanted to end. Yes she was wearing panties, but it was still more flesh than Mulder had seen since the night of the failed IVF. Last night he'd been given the opportunity to see Scully naked once again, but he'd fallen asleep, himself satisfied but leaving Scully hanging. He was determined to make it up to her if she gave him the chance.

"Morning."

As his eyes reluctantly left Scully's body, he noticed her smirk as she slipped into a plain white bra. Tease. "Morning." He tried not to look embarrassed.

"How are you feeling?" Both of them blushed at her words. "I mean..." He knew what she meant, but before he could respond, he was interrupted by the sound of Scully's cell phone ringing. "Damn!" She was struggling with the button on her pants, so Mulder took the opportunity to go in search of her phone, pausing to slip his boxers on before getting out of bed. "I'll get it." He approached the bureau and retrieved Scully's cell from her jacket pocket. "Hello?"

"Hey Mulder."

Ashley. "Hey trouble." Scully visibly relaxed as she realized it wasn't anything to do with work. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good. Is my mom there?"

"Just a sec." Mulder watched his partner slip into a navy shirt.

"I'm so sorry about your mom Mulder," Ashley said sadly, breaking Mulder's heart into a thousand pieces. She was always so sincere, so genuine. She understood the pain he was going through.

"Thank you."

"When you get home I'm going to give you a great big hug."

He smiled. "I'll hug you right back." As he looked up, he noticed that Scully had now finished dressing and was waiting patiently for her turn talking to her daughter. "Here's your mom."

"Ok. I love you Mulder."

"Love you too. Take care of yourself, be good and I'll see you real soon."

He handed the phone over to Scully who smiled her thanks. "Hey baby, how are you? Are you being good for Grandma?...what do you mean "kinda?."" At that, Mulder grinned. Typical Ashley. "We're ok. Don't change the subject. Did you get into trouble at school?...What happened?...He's doing ok." Mulder felt her eyes on him, and he knew he was now their topic of
conversation. "I'll do that for you..." She said, stepping in closer towards him and then wrapping her free arm around his waist. Mulder's arms drifted down, his hands cupping her waist. "I'm doing it...ok I'll do that later. We'll be home this afternoon...ok...be good at school. Have you done your homework? Ashley!" Obviously she hadn't. "Well you'd better do it now quickly...I'll pick you up later this afternoon...I love you too....Bye bye." Hanging up the phone, Scully suddenly raised herself up onto tiptoes and kissed Mulder's cheek.

"What was that for?" He murmured, not minding in the slightest that she'd kissed him.

"It's from Ashley."

"She's a good kid":

"For the most part," she agreed somewhat reluctantly. "Except when she doesn't complete her homework on time."

"There is that."

"How are you doing?"

"Well...apart from feeling guilty that I passed out early last night..." He couldn't resist a smile as Scully blushed. She was adorable when she was embarrassed. "I think I should make it up to you."

"Not right now," dismissed Scully. "It's ok."

"It's..." He realized she didn't want to talk about it at that moment. "Apart from that I'm ok." And he was, or at least he would be. The enormity of what had happened the past few days would probably hit him soon, but he'd get through it.

"Good. Are you ready to go home?"

After a moment, he nodded. "Go get packed." Home. Where he'd have his mom's funeral to sort, but where an eleven year old girl and her mother would help to take his mind off of everything. "Let's go home."
Mulder knocked on the door to Scully’s apartment and waited patiently for her to answer. He heard the sound of muffled conversation coming from her apartment, which surprised him. Ashley was supposed to be at school, and Maggie wasn’t due at her daughter’s until after the school run later that afternoon. He didn’t have long to wait before discovering who she was talking to, as seconds later the door opened and revealed Ashley, dressed not in her school uniform, but jeans and a sweater, her normally loose hair tied back in a tight bun. She smiled at her visitor. “Hi Mulder.”

“Hey.” He embraced the youngster before stepping into the apartment. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Not today.”

“Are you sick?”

“Nope.” Her smile widened as Scully entered the room.

“Why aren’t you at school?” He was pretty certain it wasn’t a holiday, and Scully hadn’t mentioned her daughter’s school being closed.

“Because I’m coming with you.”

“What?” Mulder looked over at his partner, who nodded in confirmation.

“I’m coming with you. To Raleigh.” Raleigh. Today was the day that Mulder had been dreading; his mom’s funeral. Scully had immediately offered to accompany him once the instant he’d finalized the funeral plans, and for once he didn’t turn down her offer. He wasn’t quite sure he was ready to say goodbye to his mom. Though they weren’t incredibly close, there had been too many goodbyes, too many deaths; not just for Mulder but Scully and Ashley also.

“Ash, that’s very sweet of you, but it’s a funeral.”

“I know that” she replied matter-of-factly. “But I wanted to come and mom said I could.”

“She wanted to be there for you,” Scully added. “And she knows you’re going to be upset, and she knows it’s going to be a tough day. But she wanted to come, and I think she’ll be ok.”

“I wanted to take care of you like you do me,” Ashley admitted, shrugging her shoulders as though asking what the big deal was. Her admission just made Mulder want to hug her, and so he did.

“Thank you sweetheart, if you’re sure you want to come, I’m –“

“I’m sure.”

“Thank you.”

“Grandma’s still coming over later to take care of Queequeg. We figured you didn’t want to deal with him today too.”

Smiling for the first time in what felt like weeks, Mulder nodded. “You probably figured right.”

“Ok, Queequeg is all fed and watered, and we’re both ready. Shall we go?” Scully asked, almost hesitantly. Mulder knew she didn’t want to rush him, but he also knew they had to make a move.
“Sure.” Taking a deep breath, he steeled himself for one of the hardest days of his life.

“As you ok Mulder?”

As the three of them walked away from the cemetery and towards their hire car, Ashley took hold of Mulder’s hand and squeezed it firmly. Mulder himself was quite proud at how he’d managed to keep himself together during the service, which Scully assured him was a fitting ceremony and would have done his mom proud, even though very few people actually attended. Still, he thought to himself, it was more people than he’d have attending his own funeral; then there’d only be Scully and Ashley - if they were still around and hadn’t finally seen sense and left – the Gunmen and possibly the Cigarette Smoking Man to admire his handiwork.

“I’m ok,” he replied, seeing Scully’s worried glances out of the corner of his eye. He knew she thought he should let his emotions out, but the truth was he just felt numb. So much had happened in the past week that he was struggling to take it all in. All he knew was that he’d now lost his mother, father and sister, and that now the only things he had keeping him sane were the two girls stood either side of him. “How are you doing?” She’d been so brave, sitting by his side during the service, slipping her small hand into his larger one and holding it throughout. She’d cried a little, he’d heard her sniffing next to him, had seen Scully wrap her arm around her daughter to comfort her. He’d wished yet again that his mom had met the little girl who’d won over his heart, and that she’d seen that he’d finally done something in his life that he was proud of; how he’d helped take care of such an amazing young girl.

“I’m ok. I’m sad for you,” she admitted, and as he absorbed her words, Mulder felt Scully reach out and take hold of his other hand. He wasn’t going to cry damn it.

“I’m ok.”

“You will be,” she said, offering advice he’d expect to receive from someone his own age rather than an eleven year old. “That’s what you always say to me and my mom, and you’re right.”

“You know, you’re pretty wise sometimes smart-ass,” he replied in an attempt to lighten the mood. Just because he didn’t feel like a ray of sunshine, didn’t mean Ashley had to suffer too.

“I’m wise all the time,” she answered with a mischievous grin. “Especially when I say that your mom will always love you Mulder. And so will we.”

Mulder stopped in his tracks, letting go of both Scully and Ashley’s hands. They turned to face him, confused. “Mulder?” Scully asked, concerned, and when she saw the tears in his eyes, she understood. “C’mon baby,” she said to her daughter. “Let’s give Mulder a few minutes alone.”

“Why?” Ashley glanced back a her mom.

“Ashley, please –“

“It’s ok Mulder,” the youngster said, stepping forward into Mulder’s arms, squeezing him so tight he could have sworn she was rearranging his internal organs. “It’s ok to be upset.”

Feeling the tears begin to fall, Mulder said nothing, moments later feeling Scully join the hug, wrapping her arms around both him and her daughter. He kissed her crown, grateful that she was there with him. The last thing he wanted was to break down in front of them, not wanting them to worry about him, but once he started crying, he found it difficult to stop. It had been a long, hard week.
“When this is all over,” Scully murmured soothingly. “We’ll get away from it all. Go away somewhere. I think it’ll do us all good.”

“I’d like that,” Mulder whispered back, realizing he’d like nothing more. “What would I do with you guys, huh?”

“Your life would be pretty dull,” Ashley replied, her answer muffled against Mulder’s shirt. “And you wouldn’t have anyone around to kick your ass at Mar-“

“Ashley!” Scully warned.

“Sorry.” She didn’t look particularly sorry, and the conspiratorial wink she gave Mulder finally elicited a laugh from him. It was then he knew he’d be ok. Scully and Ashley would make sure of it.
“Oh man, this is awesome!” Ashley said, getting out of the car and, after helping Queequeg down onto the sidewalk, went running in the direction of the beach.

“Hey wait up Ashley!” Scully called from inside the car, unbuckling her seatbelt and shaking her head. “Anyone would think she’d never seen the beach before,” she murmured, and Mulder huffed out a laugh.

“Well she’s never seen this beach.” The three of them had just arrived at Martha’s Vineyard. It had been Ashley’s request; the youngster had wanted to find out more about where Mulder lived as a child. Scully wasn’t quite so sure, not wanting to stir up bad memories for her partner, particularly as the deaths of his mom and sister were still fresh in his mind. Mulder however, had never been able to turn down a request from Ashley, and so he’d agreed, thinking it might be a good opportunity to make new memories. Good memories this time.

As Mulder moved to get out of the car, Scully stopped him by placing her hand on his arm. She looked at him, a concerned expression etched on her features. “Are you ok Mulder?” She knew how hard it was for him to come back here.

“I’m good,” he responded, meaning every word. He was spending the next few days with the people he loved most, so he couldn't complain. “C’mon,” he said, not wanting to waste another moment. “We’d better go before she gets impatient.” As Scully nodded, Mulder got out of the car, breathing in the fresh air. It had been a long time since he’d taken a vacation that was purely for relaxation. Memphis didn't count. He looked out onto the beach, his eyes falling on Ashley who was running along the sand, with Queequeg close behind, barking at her. She looked happy to be there, which was good enough for Mulder. He headed on down to the sand, approaching the youngster, who picked up a large pebble and threw it for the dog, who remained on the spot, disinterested. “Fetch Queequeg,” she urged him, to no avail. She sighed over at Mulder. “He’s very stubborn,” she said, throwing another one. Still the dog didn't move, and began sniffing around the sand.

“I wonder where he gets that from,” Mulder remarked dryly.

“Did you used to come here with Samantha?” Ashley asked, and Mulder felt his chest tighten. He should get used to her questions, he told himself. She knew he and Samantha spent a lot of time on the Vineyard, and she wanted to know as much about his life as she could.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “I used to come here with my friends and go swimming. Samantha always used to try and tag along with us, but she used to spend most of her time on the beach, building sandcastles, trampling over ours...” He trailed off, smiling. “I got into so much trouble one time. I told her to lie down on the beach, and I buried her in the sand.”

“All of her?” Ashley asked, half concerned and half impressed.

“Well not her head, just the rest of her. It took forever. My dad caught me though and grounded me for two weeks.”

“Wow.” Now she was impressed. She looked down at the sand and then back up to Mulder, giving him a sly smile as a plan formulated. Fortunately Mulder seemed as adept at reading her mind as he did her mom's from time to time. “Oh no,” he said, glancing over at Scully who had caught up with them “I don’t think so.”
“It'll be fun.”

“You know what'll be really fun?” He countered, approaching Ashley ever so slowly, so slowly that she didn't even realise.

“What?” She'd fallen for it.

Suddenly Mulder looked in the distance behind her. “What's that?”

As Ashley turned to see what exactly had attracted Mulder's attention, he was by her side, bending to throw her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. She screamed the instant her feet left the ground. “Put me down Mulder!” She exclaimed between belly laughs.

“What's the magic word?”

“Please!”

“Sorry that's not my magic word” he said, walking towards the sea. “I think you need a bath.”

“Put me....put me down.” She was giggling hard now, and Mulder couldn't help but join her. Scully was watching, bemused, with Queequeg now by her side.

“It'll be fun.” Reaching the water, Mulder stopped, then gradually lowered Ashley until the ends of her hair were almost touching the water. Had it been later in the day, after the sun had been out a while, he'd have put her in the water, but it was too cold. Another day maybe, before they went back home.

“Noooo Mulder, noooo put me down, please!” He lowered her ever so slightly and she shrieked again.

“Just say the words and I'll put you down.”

“Mulder....Mulder is the best!”

“Right answer.” And with that Mulder lifted her up and set her back on sandy ground, feet first this time. “Now, do you wanna grab some lunch?”

Xxxxxxxxxxx

They'd stopped for lunch in a sandwich shop, before checking into their hotel, one of the only ones in the area to allow animals. When Ashley had looked worried at leaving Queequeg for a few days, Mulder looked long and hard for a hotel that allowed dogs and finally he’d found one. He was determined to give her anything she asked for, despite Scully warning him not to spoil her daughter. Once they were unpacked, Scully and Ashley in one room, Mulder in the other, they set about exploring the area, Mulder giving them a tour, at least from what he remembered. When it came to dinner later that night, they found a restaurant not far from their hotel. Mulder and Scully sat opposite Ashley, who had talked nonstop since they'd arrived. To say she was happy about the three of them being on vacation was putting it mildly. She could barely sit still.

.”...and then I'll get Megan and Holly a postcard. Maybe a keyring too', she said, discussing her plans for the rest of their time at the Vineyard. She paused as the waitress brought over their drinks, and moved to take a drink of her diet coke. ’And I need to find a birthday present for Jamie.”

"Jamie? Is this another boy I don't know about?"
Both Ashley and her mom shared a smile at Mulder's protectiveness. "He's in my class and I got invited to his birthday. We're all going ice skating."

"I think I need to meet him first."

"God forbid when she actually starts dating," Scully murmured, and Mulder shook his head.

"I'm not going to let that happen."

Letting out a giggle, Ashley accidentally caught her glass with her hand. Before Mulder or Scully could reach out and help, the glass falling onto the table, its contents immediately soaking Ashley and her white tee. She gasped as the coke fell onto her, her cheeks flushing as she realized people seated at nearby tables had turned to stare.

"It's ok," said Scully, instantly picking up her napkins and reaching over to try and wipe her daughter's shirt.

Ashley didn't seem to agree. Though she liked being the center of attention at home and at school, she didn't like the idea of strangers watching her. "I want to go," she said suddenly, tears clouding her eyes.

"Sweetheart, we've ordered our food. It'll be here any minute."

"I don't care, I want to go."

"Hey, it's ok," said Mulder, trying to reassure her. When her tears spilled over, he picked up his own glass of regular coke and tipped it down his own tee.

"Mulder!" Scully admonished, not quite sure what had got into her partner. But then she looked as he reached over and took hold of Ashley's hand. "See now we're both clumsy. We both stick out." She saw Ashley's grateful expression as she laughed through her tears. "Mulder you're an idiot," she exclaimed, sniffing hard.

Before he could respond, the waitress appeared armed with extra napkins, having witnessed Ashley's incident with her coke. As she handed the paper towels to the youngster, she caught sight of Mulder's soiled shirt.

"I had a similar accident," he said with a grin.

Ashley giggled and the waitress glanced over at Scully, before returning her attention to the youngster. "Honey, your dad is crazy," she remarked dryly.

Without even hesitating, Ashley nodded enthusiastically. "He sure is."

Mulder waited for some kind of awkwardness to follow, but there was nothing. Just as he reached out to accept the napkins to clean himself up, he felt Scully's hand take his own underneath the table. "Thank you," she mouthed over to him, squeezing his hand, before they set about cleaning up the table.

xxxxxxxxxx

"Little Miss ‘I’m not going to bed, I don’t feel even the slightest bit tired,’ is now dead to the world,” announced Scully, walking into the living room of their hotel suite.

“I knew it. She can’t fool us.”
“She likes to think she can.” Padding over to the sofa, Scully flopped down beside her partner, noticing the family sized bag of chips he held in his hand. “Where did you get those from?” Mulder smiled as her eyes widened, clearly tempted by what she saw. So was he. After tucking Ashley in, she’d swapped her jeans and sweater for pjs; a silk navy button down shirt and matching pants. She’d scrubbed her face and removed what little makeup she’d been wearing, but she didn’t seem ready to call it a night. Far from it.

“I raised the vending machine on the third floor.”

“Did you have enough change?”

“No, I flashed my badge at it, then when it didn’t cooperate, I shot it.”

“If you shot at it, I presume you missed,” Scully said with a smirk, leaning over to steal a handful of chips. “What flavor are they anyway?”

“Sour cream.”

“So bad,” she said, sneaking one into her mouth. “But so good.”

“Sssh. Don’t wake Ash. She’ll steal them all.”

“Good point. You know…” she said, crunching the chips. “It’s good to see you smile at last. How are you feeling being back here.”

“I’m –“

“Don’t tell me what I want to hear. Tell me the truth.”

“I don’t know,” Mulder admitted. “It’s a little strange being back here, I gotta admit that, but it helps having you guys here. Ash is very good at distracting me. I’m glad you’re here,” he admitted.

“Me too.” They shared a smile, and some more chips.

“It still doesn’t seem real. Everything that’s happened lately.”

“I don’t know if it ever feels real,” Scully replied honestly. “It’s been years since my father and Jack passed, and yet I still don’t feel as though it really happened. I still expect my dad to answer when I call home sometimes. I still wait for apologies from Jack when Ashley’s birthday passes and she doesn’t have a card from her dad.” With her free hand, she reached out, resting it on Mulder’s knee. “You’ll never forget your mom or Samantha, but that feeling of missing them will never go away.”

“My mom and I weren’t even close.”

“It doesn’t matter. She was still your mom, and I think that whatever happens in life, there’s always a connection between mother and child. Ashley could disown me and I’d still spend the rest of my life loving her. Your mother loved you Mulder, I have no doubt about that. You’re not as unlovable as you might think.”

Mulder let out a shaky breath, absorbing his partner’s words. He tried not to read too much into what she was saying. Scully meanwhile, took advantage of his silence to sneak some more chips.

“Did I say you could have them?” he asked, a smile forming.
“What are you going to do about it?” Scully asked, popping them into her mouth. “You want them back?”

Quick as a flash, Mulder reached out and grabbed hold of his partner’s wrist, pulling her towards him. She was now sat on the bag of chips, but quite frankly neither of them cared. The kiss, when it happened, was passionate right from the very start, and Scully was quickly straddling Mulder’s lap, pressing herself against him. He tried to tell her without words that he was sure about this, that he wanted this; that when he was with her he could finally relax and stop thinking. She made him feel better. Hell, she made everything better. He tried to go slowly this time, well aware of the night his mom had died, when he’d ended up hurting his partner. Never again. He wasn’t going to hurt her ever again.

“Mulder,” she murmured breathlessly against his lips. “Are you sure?”

“Please Scully.” He was practically begging her, and she couldn’t deny him. She got to her feet, switching off the TV, taking him by the hand and leading him to his bedroom. The last thing either of them wanted was to wake Ashley. As she closed the door and turned to face him, Mulder was immediately upon her, devouring her instantly. Clothes were shed quickly as they made their way over to the bed, and Scully pulled him down on top of her, wanting him badly. Before either of them really registered what was happening, Mulder was inside of her, and this time there was no pain or discomfort. Just pleasure. Mulder groaned, as he began to move, his mind focusing on release. It didn’t take long. No more than a dozen strokes later and he was flying, grateful for the release, the other part guilty that Scully hadn’t gone with him. He realized he’d practically pinned her down on the bed and so instantly lifted himself off of her, his fingers darting down to try and help her towards release. It didn’t take long, and as Scully arched her back off the bed, Mulder kissed her soundly before collapsing onto his back. “Thank you,” he whispered as she came back down from her high. “I’m sorry,” he added, his hand gently rubbing at Scully’s red wrist. “I just…I needed you.”

“I know you did,” she replied, smiling thinly. “I always said I was here for you.”

“I’m pretty sure you didn’t quite mean it like that.”

“I mean it whatever way. Mulder, I’m here for you. You’ve been through a hell of a lot these past few weeks. No one can blame you for wanting to clear your head.”

“This trip is helping me do that.”

“I’m glad.”

“No thanks to you and Ash.” He pecked at her lips. “Do you think we should tell her?” He rolled onto his side, noticing that Scully had yet to cover herself with the comforter. He made a difficult yet conscious effort to keep his eyes trained on her face.

“Ashley?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell her what?”

“About us.”

“What about us?” Suddenly Mulder didn’t like where this conversation was headed. “Mulder, I told you, I needed time.”
“And then you jumped into bed with me.” It was the wrong thing to say, he thought, as he watched Scully sit up and hunt around for her pjs. “I thought you –“

“Just because I was here for you, doesn’t mean I’m ready to tell Ashley that we’re a couple, and I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I am. In fact, I’m just sorry about the whole damn thing, period.” Slipping into her clothes, Scully rushed towards the door.

“Scully –“ Mulder called, a little too loudly, and Scully turned to glare at him.

“Sssh,” she hissed, throwing him a poisonous glare. “Don’t you dare wake my daughter.”

*My daughter* She had closed herself off from him already.

“Please –“

“Goodnight Mulder,” she said firmly, and in an instant, she was gone, leaving Mulder alone with his regrets.
Mulder knew that Scully was avoiding him the next morning when he walked into the living room and found Ashley sitting alone watching TV. Queequeg was sat by the radiator, chewing quietly on a plastic pig. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He glanced in the direction of her bedroom. “Where’s your mom?”

“In our room.”

“Is she still asleep?”

The youngster shook her head. “She’s awake.”

“Oh.”

“She’s just getting ready.”

“Right.” It didn’t usually take Scully long to get ready, so he suspected she was just keeping out of his way following their argument the previous evening.

“Did you guys have an argument?” She stopped watching TV long enough to give Mulder an accusatory glance as he took a seat next to her.

“No,” he answered quickly – a little too quickly. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “I just wondered. Are we going out for breakfast?”

“I guess it depends on what your mom wants to do. What do you want for breakfast? Where do you want to go?”

“Somewhere that does pancakes.”

Mulder allowed himself a smile. At least Ashley was around to make him feel better. “Are you allowed pancakes?”

“Yes,” she sighed dramatically. “My sugars are fine, and mom said pancakes are fine once in a while.”

“Your mom said that, or you did?” She giggled in response. “Let’s see what your mom says.”

“What I say about what?” asked Scully, fixing her earring as she entered the room. Mulder noticed that she wouldn’t meet his eye.

“Whether I’m allowed pancakes this morning. My sugars are ok,” she added quickly, clearly anticipating her mom’s argument. “And we are on vacation,” she whined. Behind her, Queequeg sneezed in agreement.

“I don’t know…” began Scully, but her daughter cut her off before she could finish her sentence.

“What did you do to your arm?”

All eyes went to Scully’s left arm. An angry-looking purple bruise adorned the inside of her wrist.
“Oh that,” said Scully, somewhat awkwardly Mulder realized. “I hit my wrist on the door yesterday.”

Ashley reached out for her other arm as she approached. “You have a bruise here too.”

Mulder felt his face redden as it suddenly hit him just how the bruises got there. He’d done it. He was so eager to get her into bed that he didn’t even stop to think, and instead just pinned her down. Jesus, he was like an animal. It was no wonder she wouldn’t even look at him.

“It’s ok Ashley, I’m fine sweetheart. Now did you want pancakes?”

“Can I?” Thankfully, Ashley was easily distracted.

“Well we are on vacation,” Scully parroted back to her.

*Some vacation* Mulder thought. At least for Scully. He’d practically attacked her and now she wouldn’t meet his eye. He wouldn’t exactly call that a good vacation.

“Great!” suddenly excited, Ashley jumped up from the sofa. Queequeg, realizing that something exciting was about to happen, forgot all about his toy, and trotted over to his owner, his tail wagging. “I’ll go get my sneakers. Can we go to the beach afterwards?”

“Sounds good,” said Mulder, immediately wishing he hadn’t said anything as Scully glared at him. He suddenly wondered whether he was welcome at breakfast, let alone the rest of the vacation. After a moment though, Scully softened and nodded gently. “We can do the beach. Go get ready sweetheart, then we’ll make a move.”

Letting out the breath he was holding, Mulder stood up, trying to figure out how to win Scully over.

After breakfast, during which Ashley had put away an impressive pile of pancakes, while Scully had nibbled on a slice of wholemeal toast, before insisting she was full, the three of them – plus Queequeg – headed to the beach. As soon as they were onto the sand, Ashley ran off along the sand, Queequeg trotting alongside her quite happily as though he knew they were headed off on an adventure.

“Don’t go too far!” Scully yelled after her daughter, but Ashley was already out of earshot.

“She’ll be ok,” said Mulder. “There aren’t too many people around today.” He sat down on the sand, wrapping his arms around his knees in front of him as he looked out to sea. Realizing she had no choice but to join him, Scully sat down next to him and mirrored his pose. “It’s beautiful here,” she remarked, wishing this tension between them would fade away. Thankfully, Mulder felt the same.

“I feel like I owe you an apology Scully. For this morning and especially last night. And for the other times too,” he added, speaking of the other nights they’d spent together. “I guess I thought that things were changing between us, that you were ready to take the next step. I shouldn’t have forced you.”

“You didn’t force me Mulder.”

“Really? Why did you sleep with me Scully? I mean, the night after my mom died, after Samantha...”
“Because you needed me,” she replied honestly. “Just like I needed you after the IVF.”

“Is that what we are now Scully?” She could hear the bitterness creeping into his voice. “Fuck buddies?”

She flinched at his choice of words. “Is that what you want us to be?”

“Scully,” Mulder replied firmly. “I think you know by now what I want.” Her cheeks flushed. “But I don’t know what you want. I thought I did but now…Jeez Scully, you’ve spent most of this morning looking like you’re about to burst into tears. Last night you were absolutely fine. It’s certainly not the reaction I was hoping for. And so, I admit, I’m a little confused here. I guess I just want to know what’s going on.”

“I’m not sure,” she replied quietly, after contemplating his question.

“You’re not sure. Of what? Of me?” Mulder shook his head, clearly frustrated. “How can you not be sure? After everything we’ve been through Scully, do you really doubt me?”

“I don’t doubt you Mulder,” she answered, bravely reaching out and taking hold of his hand, feeling him tense, but not pull away. “I just…I guess I just doubt myself.”

“You yourself?”

She nodded. “I want this to work so badly but…I think I’ve started to realize that everything that happened between Jack and I has had an effect on me and my emotions. Our breakup wasn’t great.” She huffed out a laugh. “I guess what breakup is? But after we broke up and I found out I was pregnant…he…I don’t think anyone has ever made he feel that way before. He was convinced I’d somehow tricked him; that I’d used him to get pregnant and he wanted me to have an abortion.”

Mulder tensed. He knew Jack had been far from supportive of Scully during her pregnancy. He couldn’t bear to think of anyone not wanting Ashley in their lives. “I loved him and I worshipped the ground he walked on, and that’s how he treated me in return. And so, I told myself that I’ve never do that again; that I’d never lose myself in someone who had the power to hurt me. Mulder,” she added sadly. “You are a wonderful, wonderful man and yes, I know how you feel about me, but I meant what I said about needing a little time. You have the power to hurt me and my daughter. Ashley idolizes you, and I know she’d be devastated if things didn’t work out between us.”

“How do you know they won’t work out?”

“I just need time,” Scully repeated. “Time to come to terms with everything, and time to trust myself and my heart.”

He could accept that. “You may not believe in yourself Scully, but I do. I’ll wait.”

“I know you will.” Smiling, she squeezed his hand. “You’re so sure about us.”

“Because it’s you. I’m certain of you.” She gave him a sweet, sad smile that told him someday, everything would be ok between them. They would get their happy ending. One day. “I’m sorry for trying to push you.”

“You haven’t pushed me Mulder. Each time I’ve wanted it –“

“I hurt you.” Mulder turned over Scully’s hand, her bruise facing up at them.

“I have sensitive skin. You didn’t hurt me. I wanted it and I still do but I…I just need to sort my
“I’ll give you that Scully,” he said as his partner shifted closer towards him. He wrapped an arm around her, feeling a lot better than he had done in a long time.

Finally, they were on the same page.

“God, I hate Jack so much sometimes,” Scully said suddenly, resting her head in the crook of Mulder’s neck; the same move that Ashley used to do when she was tired. “I hated the way he made me feel.”

“I know, but Jack gave you Ashley, and for that I’m grateful, because she brought me closer to you. My life would be a lot more boring without you guys in it.”

“I know,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t change Ashley for the world, but sometimes I just wish things were different.”

“I know.” He did too. He wished he knew Ashley as a baby. He wished he was there to hear her first words and see her take her first steps. He wished he’d been there to see Scully pregnant, and to hold her hair back when she was suffering from morning sickness, and as she breathed her way through contractions. He wished a lot of things.

“Thank you,” Scully murmured, turning to press her lips to Mulder’s neck. “For being so patient.”

Mulder kissed her crown, and then her forehead. “You’re worth it.” Looking up, Scully give him another smile. “Can I kiss you?” he asked, unable to stop himself.

He didn’t want to force her, but he just wanted to touch her. Thankfully, Scully seemed to be on his wavelength, and after checking that Ashley wasn’t looking back at them, she nodded. “You don’t have to ask, Mulder,” she reassured him, after letting out a chuckle.

Letting out the breath he’d been holding, Mulder leaned in for a short but oh so sweet kiss. He made no move to deepen the embrace, simply wanting Scully to know that he understood, and that he was willing to wait. After all, she was the only woman for him; he’d known that for a long time now, ever since she’d told him she was dying but that the cancer wasn’t going to win. He’d waited years for her already, he could wait a few more, if that’s what it took.

As they both pulled away, grinning shyly at one another, Mulder heard a familiar voice from behind him. “Mom!” Both adults pulled away in a hurry to see Ashley running along the sand towards them, Queequeg hot on her heels. They relaxed as they realized she didn’t appear to be in any immediate danger. “Mom!” Ashley came to a stop right in front of them, out of breath. Queequeg started barking, clearly not ready for their game of ‘Chase’ to be over just yet.

“What’s up honey?”

“Can we get lunch?” the youngster asked, her question eliciting laughter from the adults. “I’m starving.”

“Well we can’t have you starve now,” Mulder replied with amusement. He got to his feet, brushing the sand from the back of his pants, and then held out a hand to help Scully up. “I happen to know of a pretty good diner just a few minutes’ walk away, and I know for a fact it used to do awesome burgers.”

“Can we go there?” asked Ashley.
“Come on then,” said Scully, following Mulder as he led them off the beach.

“Mom?” her daughter asked, almost hesitantly. “Did you just kiss Mulder?”

The man in question stumbled as he glanced round to look at his partner. Though her cheeks had reddened, she’d managed to hold it together. “No sweetheart.”

“It looked like you did. You were awfully close.”

“I had something in my eye.”

“Oh. Ok.”

And, grinning to himself, Mulder led his girls towards the restaurant to continue their vacation.
Scully flicked over the page of her medical journal, quickly scanning for any articles that would interest her. She sat cross legged on the floor in front of the television, the journal in front of her on the coffee table, next to a notepad and pen and a glass of red wine that had barely been touched. She was still in relaxation mode, having only returned from the Vineyard earlier that day. Mulder had dropped her and Ashley home and declined their offer of dinner, insisting to them that they were sick of his company. On the contrary. Scully was surprised at just how well they’d got on during their vacation, after they’d cleared the air following their little disagreement. It had been an enjoyable week, and all three of them seemed to be well-rested. Ashley of course had had a great time with the two of them, while Mulder was his usual self, and had spent the week spoiling Ashley rotten, and giving Scully looks that made her want to forget all about taking their relationship slow.

She turned to see her daughter padding into the living room, tying her purple fluffy bathrobe, having just recently showered. She yawned as she approached her mom and placed a small bottle of dark purple nail polish on the table next to her. She then took a seat behind her on the sofa, tucking her legs up underneath her.

"I thought you were going to bed?"

"I was, but I'm not tired yet. Can you paint my nails please?"

"You were ready to collapse by the time we got home earlier."

"I know, but I think my shower woke me up.” She sniffed and leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse at what her mom was reading. "Is that one of your gross books?"

"It is,” replied Scully, closing the magazine in question. The last thing Ashley needed to see right before bedtime were pictures from her medical journals. Scully stood up and after picking up the bottle of polish, she backed up to the couch, taking a seat next to her daughter, who turned to look longingly at the phone.

"Do you think we should call Mulder?"

"Why? We just saw him a few hours ago.”

Shrugging, Ashley shifted on the couch, until her feet were pressing into Scully's side. "I just thought he might be missing us.” Her words elicited a grin from her mom. "It's the first night in over a week that he's been by himself.”

"I'm sure he's doing just fine,” replied a bemused Scully, opening the bottle and lifting Ashley’s feet up onto her lap. She began to carefully paint her nails, keeping one eye on her daughter. "You can call him tomorrow if you like. It's late, and I'm pretty sure he's enjoying the peace and quiet. Not to mention a dog free zone.” Scully peered over her shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. "Speaking of which, where's Queequeg?"

"In my room.”

"I hope he's not asleep on your bed. Your sheets are fresh and Queequeg needs a bath.”

"He's not,” Ashley replied, her expression suggesting that she wasn't quite telling the truth. She then grinned up at her mom. Scully narrowed her eyes. “What?”
“What?”

“You’re giving me that look. What are you smiling at?”

Ashley giggled. “You kissed Mulder.”

“No I did not!” Scully exclaimed, feeling her face flush. Damn her daughter, she thought, for being so observant.

“Yes you did!”

“When?”

“On the beach last week. I saw you. You were hugging Mulder and then he kissed you. And you kissed him back,” she added, matter-of-factly. “So you didn’t have something in your eye. You were just kissing Mulder.” She’d clearly been mulling over this for the past few days. “And Mulder almost kissed you yesterday too.” Before she burst into the living room area of their hotel suite, unannounced that was.

Scully sighed, not wanting to have this conversation with her daughter just yet. “Ashley –“ she began, but her daughter cut her off.

“Do you love Mulder?”

“Sweetheart –“

“Do you love him?”

After a moment, Scully nodded, albeit reluctantly. “Hear me out though. Mulder is one of my best friends. He’s been there when we’ve needed him and he adores you…of course I love him.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “I don’t mean like that mom, I mean like really love.”

“Listen.” Scully reached down and squeezed her daughter’s feet, signalling that she was done. “Ashley, you…” she tried again. “I know you grew up listening to fairy tales and dreaming of happy endings, but…life is more complicated than that sometimes. Mulder and I work together. We’re not going to get married and have a house full of babies. We’re just friends.”

“You were trying to have a baby together though.” Sitting up, Ashley gestured to her mom to hand her the nail polish, deciding to return the favour by painting her toenails.

“As friends,” Scully stressed. “Mulder agreed to help me. I’m sorry baby” she said, meaning it. “I know that you desperately want Mulder and I to get married and live happily ever after, but it’s not going to happen.” She watched as Ashley began to paint her nails, biting her lip as she took in her mom’s words.

“I just want you to be happy,” Ashley said honestly, and for a moment Scully forgot all about her nails, and sat forward to take her daughter into her arms.

“I know you do baby,” she said, pressing her lips against Ashley’s cheek. “And I love you for that. I am happy. As long as I have you and –“

“Mulder?” Her daughter suggested cheekily, and Scully laughed.

“And Mulder,” she agreed. “I’m happy.”
“Is it ok if I still want you and Mulder to be together though?” asked Ashley.

Scully chuckled again. “I guess so.”

Ashley thought for a moment, as though debating her question, before she spoke. “Did you love my dad? I mean really love him?”

“Of course I did sweetheart. I still do,” Scully admitted. “He gave me you.”

“But did you love him before I came along?”

“Of course I did.” Her nails now finished, Scully brought her feet onto the floor, and wrapped her arm around her daughter. “I was with your father a long time, and I loved him very much.”

“Why didn’t you get married?”

“Because your dad didn’t ask. Marriage wasn’t for him. Not every couple who fall in love get married. At the end of the day, marriage doesn’t change anything between you, it just makes everything legal.”

“Why didn’t my dad want to get married?” Ashley sounded so awkward talking about her father, and Scully realized it was because they never really spoke about Jack. She made a mental note to mention him more.

“Your dad was never really one for settling down. We were happy though, and I thought he might change his mind.”

“But then I came along.”

“What?” Scully looked down at her daughter, confused. “What do you mean?”

“My dad didn’t want me, so you split up,” Ashley answered sadly. Her bright blue eyes clouded with tears, and Scully rushed to reassure her.

“No sweetheart, that’s not true at all.” She hugged her daughter tightly. “We didn’t split up because of you. Your dad and I had split up a few weeks before I even found out I was having you.”

“You did? Honestly?” This was clearly news to Ashley.

“Honestly, we did. We’d been having problems for a while. Your dad was…he was a brilliant man, but he was also hard to deal with sometimes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well…he loved his job a lot.”

“Like Mulder?”

“Sort of like Mulder, but Mulder also pays attention to the people around him. Your dad…” she sighed, not wanting to taint her daughter’s perception of her father. “He often got engrossed in his work. And if I was upset or frustrated then he wouldn’t always be there for me. I think we both wanted different things from life and it became more apparent the longer we were together. So we both agreed that while we loved one another, it was better for us to be apart. We were happier like that. It had nothing to do with you at all,” she reassured her daughter. “At all. I know you don’t really remember your dad, and that’s not surprising given how old you were when everything
happened. But just know that he loved you in his own way. He spoke about you just before he passed, and I have no doubt that he would be incredibly proud of the young lady that you are today.”

“Do you think he’d be mad at me?”

“Mad? Why?”

“Because I love Mulder.”

“Not at all,” Scully answered firmly. I think he’d be grateful to know you have such an important person in your life. Mulder’s a great father figure for you, and your dad would know that.” Particularly as Jack himself wasn’t exactly the world’s best dad, she said to herself. “And I think he’d be glad to see you happy.”

“I didn’t know him very well,” Ashley admitted. “But I miss him.”

“I know you do. I do too. Just don’t ever feel guilty Ashley. You were not responsible for anything that happened between your dad and I, and you’re allowed to be happy.”

“So are you,” replied Ashley, snuggling up against her mom. “And you’re allowed to kiss Mulder too,” she added with a sly grin. “Is he a good kisser?”

“Ok,” Scully said suddenly, releasing her daughter and sitting up. “Time for bed.” Where had her baby gone?

“Aw Mom!”

“It’s late,” Scully replied, blushing.

“Does that mean he is?” Ashley was persistent; she had to give her that.

“Ashley,” Scully warned as she laughed. “Go to bed please!” She stood up and after retrieving her wine glass from the coffee table, headed out to the kitchen, taking a hearty swig as she walked, especially when she realized Ashley had followed her.

“He is a good kisser; I can see it on your face!”

“Ok.” Finally she broke. “He’s a good kisser.”

“I knew it!” Ashley exclaimed, practically bouncing up and down on the spot.

“Now please, it’s way past your bedtime.”

“Are you going to kiss him again?”

“Ash –“

“Mom and Mulder sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N –“

“BED!”

Giggling to herself, Ashley ran over to her mom and kissed her. “Night mom. Sweet dreams of kissing Mulder!” And before Scully could chastise her daughter once again, Ashley ran out of the kitchen and off to bed.
Mulder knocked on the door and instantly turned away, preparing to leave. He shouldn't be there, he told himself. It was a mistake. He was still angry and Scully was...well, she was still adamant that she had done the right thing. Even after he'd dropped her back at her apartment, after they'd visited the office - or supposed office - of Spender - she'd insisted that she stood by her actions. He didn't follow her to her apartment then; he was too wound up, and knew that if he said anything, they'd both regret it. So he'd gone back home and tried to busy himself; tried not to think about that slimy old man taking Scully out of town, promising her the answers to everything, while all along putting her life in danger. But of course Mulder could do no such thing and so, after stewing for a few hours, hopped in his car and made the all too familiar drive over to Georgetown to talk to his partner. Only it wasn't his partner who answered the door.

"What do you want?"

Mulder turned back to face the door, wanting to check for himself that Ashley was standing in front of him and hadn't been replaced with a moody shape-shifter. Normally she was pleased to see him, but it seemed that everyone was out of sorts that day. "Is your mom in?" He tried to look past her into the apartment, but Ashley deliberately blocked his gaze.

"What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've done something."

"No I haven't."

"You must have."

"Why?" Now he was confused. "Done what?"

"Mom's been in a bad mood all night," she answered defensively. "She's been in her room since dinner too. Usually she's only grumpy when she's argued with you or if I've been bad. And I haven't," she added as an afterthought, just in case he thought of querying it.

"I haven't done anything," replied Mulder sternly. "You know, it's not always me who causes the arguments."

Ashley's eyes widened. "So you did argue?"

"Not as such." They'd had worse arguments during the course of their partnership anyway. "Now can I speak to your mom please?"

It was clear from Ashley's expression that she wasn't used to him speaking to her in that tone. "She's in her room."

"Can you get her for me? Please?"

"Go yourself."

Scully's daughter through and through, Ashley walked off in the direction of her own bedroom rather than her mom's. As she slammed the door behind her, Mulder sighed to himself and after
ensuring that the front door was firmly closed, he made his way through the apartment. Stretched out beneath the coffee table, Queequeg blinked sleepily at Mulder, but didn't move to greet him or even snarl at him. It seemed that Mulder had managed to piss off all members of the Scully household.

Moments later he stood outside Scully's bedroom and tapped firmly on the door. There didn't appear to be any movement on the other side so he knocked once again. Finally the door opened, revealing a tired-looking Scully. She didn't appear too surprised to see him, and he realized she must have heard him talking to Ashley. "Hi."

"What are you doing here Mulder?" Scully asked, sounding exhausted. She looked it too, clearly not wanting to speak to him. Well tough, he thought to himself. He wanted to talk to her. Without waiting for an answer, she pushed past him and headed in the direction of the living room. "Where's Ashley?"

"In her room. Scully-"

"Don't Mulder," she warned. "Don't start with me. I already know what you're going to say."

"Oh really?"

"You're going to ask me why I went with him. Why I put my trust in him."

"You're damn right I am."

"Mulder, he -"

"You just left Scully, without saying a word."

"He told me that if I told you, the deal was off."

"Of course he did!"

"I wore a wire. I sent you tapes."

"Tapes I conveniently didn't receive."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he had people watching you. Those tapes were never going to get out, and you should have known that."

"I apologize that I wasn't as smart as you thought I should be."

"God Scully!" Mulder exclaimed, his temper getting the better of him. "You could have died! He could have done anything to you! You just ran off without telling anyone -"

"Telling you, you mean!"

"... anything could have happened to you! You left your daughter to run off with some sick sonofabitch -"

"Oh here we go," Scully snarled, giving just as good as she got. "I should have known you'd bring up my parenting capabilities. Ashley was fine, she was at my mom's."

"I know that now. But what would have happened if you'd got yourself killed? What would have
happened to her then? You put your life on the line unnecessarily -"

"I do it all the time working on the X Files,” she countered. "You're only pissed about this because I ditched you, despite the fact you do it to me all the time.”

"I do not -"

"That's bullshit Mulder, and you know it. If the tables had been turned, you'd have happily gone off with him without even sparing me a thought.”

“How the hell could you have gone with him in the first place Scully?” he snapped, ignoring her comment.

“I already told you, I -“

“Forget it,” he snapped, his anger getting the better of him. “We’ve been through this already.”

“No Mulder, I want you to understand why I did it.”

“Oh I understand already,” he said bitterly. “He promised you the answer to everything and you trusted him, because clearly he’s proven in the past just how trustworthy he is.”

“Mulder -“

“Why didn’t you think Scully?”

“I did think!”

“Really? You put your life on the line, you left your daughter and you followed him to God knows where, because he told you to. Scully I thought you had more sense than that! Didn’t you even think of Ashley?”

“How dare you! Of course I did. Ashley was fine and so was I -“

“You told me that someone shot at you. That’s not what I call fine.”

“I’m a grown woman Mulder, I can make my own decisions.”

“You’re a grown woman with a child. You always told me you put Ashley first, but -“

“So you’re calling me a bad mother?”

“I’m saying maybe you should have thought about what you were doing. You should have told me.”

“I don’t have to report back to you Mulder, you’re not my keeper! You ditch me all the time and I’m supposed to just stand there and say nothing, yet the one time I leave you behind, all hell breaks loose!”

“You could have been hurt.”

“And so could you! You have been hurt Mulder, and yet you paid no attention to any concerns I had.”

“That’s different.”
“How? How is it different?”

“Scully, you have responsibilities!”

“So do you,” she retorted, her eyes boring into him. “I’m not the only one who leaves behind an eleven year old girl each time you go to work.”

“You could have been killed Scully, just like last time.”

“Last time?”

“Last time when you ended up with a tattoo and another notch on your bedpost.”

“How…” Scully was momentarily lost for words. “How dare you! I should have known you’d bring this up”

“How have you celebrated this ditch Scully? Is there another tattoo I’ll find out about the next time I see you nak –“

Before he could finish his sentence, the palm of Scully’s hand had connected with his cheek. Through watery eyes, Mulder saw his partner step back, rubbing the hand she’d used to slap him. “Go to hell,” she hissed at him, before turning on her heel and storming out of her apartment, slamming the door behind her.

“Shit.” Mulder cursed, running a hand through his hair. That hadn’t gone well. He turned, catching sight of Ashley stood in the doorway, glaring at him.

“Where’s mom?” She asked accusingly.

“She just popped out,” said Mulder, lying and they both knew it. It was Scully’s apartment, she should have made him leave, not walked out herself.

“What were you arguing about?”

“Nothing.”

“If it was nothing, my mom wouldn’t have left,” she countered. “Is she coming back?”

“What?” Now she fully had his attention. “Of course she is Ash, it’s just a little disagreement.”

“You were both shouting a lot.”

“People shout a lot. You’ve heard us argue before.”

“Mom’s never slapped you before. Why did she slap you?”

“Because…” he paused. “Because I provoked her. I pushed her to hit me. It’s my own fault.”

“Then why don’t you go apologize?”

“Because it’s not as simple as that.”

“Well why don’t you at least try?”

Mulder wanted to warn her about her attitude, but then he realized she was just giving as good as she got, just like her mom. Sighing heavily, he nodded, before turning and heading out of the door
to try and fix things between he and his partner.

He found Scully just outside her apartment building, perched on the steps. The sun had set and there was a chill in the air that hadn’t been there earlier that day. He could just about make out her trembling, and for a moment thought he’d upset her so much that she was in tears. She wasn’t. As he neared her, he noticed that the trembling seemed to be a combination of anger and the cool weather. Instantly he shrugged off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders, trying to ignore the way she flinched at his touch. It was all going wrong, their relationship seemed to be heading in the wrong direction. Just recently on vacation, they’d talked things over and agreed they wanted the same thing, eventually. Now Mulder wasn’t sure what his partner wanted.

“Go home Mulder,” she uttered, her voice strained.

Rather than do as she said, Mulder took a seat on the step next to her. “Come inside.”

“Go home.”

“Come inside and we’ll talk.”

“Go home,” she repeated firmly. “You’ve said enough.”

“I shouldn’t have said all that,” he quickly apologized. “I didn’t mean what I said about the tattoo.”

“I don’t care. Please Mulder, just go.”

“I was scared shitless Scully,” he announced suddenly, surprising them both. “When Skinner said it was a family emergency I thought the worst. I tried calling your mom but she didn’t pick up, so I called all the hospitals to see if you or Ash had been admitted. I thought something had happened with Ashley’s diabetes, and I panicked when I couldn’t get hold of you.” At least, he thought to himself, she looked guilty at that.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, finally turning to face him. “Skinner should have told you not to worry.”

“Even if he had, I’d have still worried”0.

“Mulder.” It was as though all of the fight had left Scully. She sounded tired, resigned, and he wasn’t sure if that scared him more. He knew how to deal with angry Scully. “You need to trust me.”

“I do trust you.”

“You say you do,” she argued. “But you don’t, else you’d respect my decisions. Instead you…ever since…ever since things changed between us, you’ve changed too. It almost feels like you got your leg over and now you think you own me.”

“I do trust you.”

“You say you do,” she argued. “But you don’t, else you’d respect my decisions. Instead you…ever since…ever since things changed between us, you’ve changed too. It almost feels like you got your leg over and now you think you own me.”

“Scully, that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” She asked wearily. “Maybe this has been a mistake Mulder.”

“What has?”

“Us. Maybe…” she sighed. “Maybe we should go back to how things were.”
“No Scully,” Mulder answered without any hesitation. “Please, no.”

“I can’t keep on like this Mulder. I can’t have you making me feel guilty or thinking that you can control what I do.

“Scully, please, listen…” He paused, his eyes searching hers. The last thing he wanted was for her to change her mind about their relationship, especially when she’d said it was something she wanted someday. “If you want to go back to how things were,” he began shakily. “Then I’ll do it. Not because I agree or I want to, but because I’d rather have you as a friend than not in my life at all. But Scully…” he added. “I got scared and I got angry, and I took it out on you, which I shouldn’t have done. This thing between us could be great, and we both know it. Please don’t go back on this. I promise you, I trust you…you and Ash are the only ones I trust, and I promise that I’ll stop being such an asshole.”

Finally she huffed out a laugh. “Mulder, you’ve always been so sure about us, but part of me thinks things were better before.”

“Before when?” he asked. “Because I’ve loved you for a long time Scully, and there’s no way I want to go back on that. Nothing’s changed for me, and I…I don’t want to force you into this, but I don’t want you to regret what could have been.”

“What if I regret this?”

“Do you?” He asked honestly, half dreading the answer. After a moment, Scully shook her head.

“You scare me sometimes,” she whispered, with Mulder barely just hearing her. “Sometimes you’re just so intense that I… -“

“I won’t be, I’ll ease off I swear.”

“You need to respect my decisions. Let me think for myself, and don’t call my parenting skills into question if I do something that you don’t agree with.”

“I won’t,” he answered automatically, willing to agree to just about anything. “Just don’t give up on us Scully.”

“I need time,” she announced, and Mulder felt his heart sink. “I need to think.”

“I’ll give you as much time as you like.”

“Thank you.”

That was as good as he was going to get, he realized. Before Scully could tell him once again to go home, Mulder reached out and cupped her cheek. “I’m an ass Scully, but you have to believe me when I say I’m serious about us.”

“I just need time,” she repeated shakily.

“Ok.” He wanted to kiss her, to promise her that everything would be ok, but he knew she’d just push him away. Instead he got to his feet and after a moment, held out a hand to help Scully up. He tried not to take offence when she stood without hold of his hand, preferring to be independent. Typical Scully.

“Goodnight Mulder,” said Scully, making it clear their conversation was over for the day. He wanted to stay, to spend time with both she and Ashley, but he wasn’t welcome, not today anyway.
She slipped off his jacket and held it out to him.

“Night,” he said reluctantly. He looked up to see Ashley stood at the window, watching the two of them. Forcing a smile, he held his hand up in goodbye to the youngster, before turning on his heel and making his way down the steps. He’d blown it big time, and he wondered whether he’d messed things up for good.

With some big decisions to make, Scully slowly made her way back to her apartment. Of course Ashley was waiting for her, full of questions. “Where’s Mulder?”

“He’s gone home.”

“Why?”

“It’s late.”

“Why didn’t he say goodnight?”

“Because it’s late sweetheart. And you should be getting ready for bed. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Why did you slap him?”

Scully sighed heavily. “I didn’t mean to. I apologized.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry?”

Ashley glared at her mom. “You didn’t apologize. You sent Mulder away.”

“Because it’s late.”

“He said he loved you.”

Realization set in. “You were listening? How did…?” Her daughter must have sneaked outside and earwigged on their conversation.

“He said he loved you and then you sent him home.”

“It’s complicated sweetheart.”

“Why did you say things were better before?”

Scully was pretty sure her daughter didn’t understand what “before” meant, but it was clear Ashley had listened in to their entire conversation. “Not now Ashley.”

“But I thought you loved Mulder –“

“I said not now Ashley!” Scully snapped, and she meant it. Ashley instantly shut up, and stared at her mom with what looked like fear in her eyes. Of course she was scared, Scully mused. She’d already seen her mom hit Mulder. “Now please, just go and get ready for bed.”

Speechless, Ashley ran off towards her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Taking a seat on the couch, Scully placed her head in her hands, wondering if things would ever get back to normal.
A man’s chest greets Scully as her eyes flutter open, soft and welcoming in the morning sunshine. It’s a chest she knows well. Something primal inside of her knows that it’s not quite time for her to wake up and start her day yet, so she rolls over onto her other shoulder and closes her eyes once more. Whether or not her movements woke the man next to her, or he had watched her contentedly slip back into a slumber, seconds later an arm wrapped itself around her middle. Then, a grizzled chin tucked itself in the crook of her neck. In these moments, Dana Scully knew she had never been more loved or cherished than she was in that bed that morning. And her feelings intensified every day, even after all of the years they’d spent together.

“Mmm. I love the way you smell,” he growled at her.

“Like bed-head and bad breath?” Scully smiled.

“Like the most gorgeous woman in the world.”

Their lips found each others’ without the need for vision. It was so easy to kiss him. Easier than breathing. Things became heated quickly, and he was doing things to her that made her gasp.

“Daniel…”

Oh my God, was the first thought that entered her mind after she abruptly awoke. The clock read 4:38, and she could hear the rain hitting her window. Scully was silently glad that the day she was waking up to had nothing in common with the one in her dream. It had felt all too real already.

Daniel Waterston was a name that she’d had to train herself for years to think about only fleetingly. He was the first on her list of ill-advised romantic interests, she was the first to admit. But sometimes, when she was feeling either particularly daring or particularly self-loathing, Scully would allow herself to think about him – his dexterous surgeon’s hands, his beautiful intellect, his take-control attitude – and try not to feel guilty about the persistent tickle that rose up in the pit of her belly whenever she did.

The dream was still a surprise, though. It was rare that she had sexual dreams at all, but in the waking world, she considered herself to be committed to her partner. If anything, the past few months had proven to her that she did love him deeply, even if she sometimes did and said things that made him nervous about that. Perhaps the dream was the result of her recent re-entry into the world of healthy sexual relationships. Perhaps the identity of the man in bed with her had to do with the fact that Mulder had been running her ragged lately investigating the case of three teenagers found dead in a forest in Maryland that he was convinced were victims of alien abduction. She’d done three autopsies in two days and hadn’t even gotten home in time to tell her daughter goodnight on either of them. At that point, she’d cursed his name and promised herself to retain some individuality.

All of her serious relationships had ended for that reason… she would lose herself in them. Just like
she had lost herself in Jack’s pursuit of the Dupres. Just like she had lost herself in Daniel’s passion for medicine. She knew that if she was going to make a relationship with Mulder last, she would have to remain Dana Scully above all else. You are Dana Katherine Scully, was her mantra. You are Dr. Dana Katherine Scully. You are Special Agent Dana Katherine Scully.

The phone on her nightstand rang at that moment, causing her to nearly leap from the bed.

“Scully,” she answered, holding her breath waiting for the voice she knew was coming on the other end of the line.

“Scully, it’s me. Look, I’ve been thinking that I’d like to take another look at the area where Julie Szczesny and her friends were found. I didn’t get the chance to with the local PD around, but I need to do more Geiger readings… you know, look at this in terms of an X-File.”

He may have said more, but Scully couldn’t really focus at the moment. She doubted she would’ve been able to if Mulder decided to deliver this information to her via a circus at the foot of her bed.

“What am I going to do?”

“Oh, that’s what I originally called about. I know it’s a Saturday, but I really want to be able to analyze the results of the autopsies over the weekend, and I know if we don’t get the results of the labs you ran on the girls today that we won’t get to do that. So I need you to pressure and intimidate whoever you need to to get those results back today. I’ll try to be out of Burkitsville by noon and I’ll meet you back at the office to discuss the results of the tests.”

“Mulder… it’s not even five in the morning,” Scully repeated herself.

“Right, but I need to get out there while I still have some time to myself.”

“You are Dana Katherine Scully. You are Dana Katherine Scully. Dreams are unintelligible byproducts of the brain processing the events of our lives. They are not meant to be interpreted. They are not meant to be taken seriously.

And with that, she forced herself out of bed. Maybe if she were lucky she’d get a quick shower and a bowl of cereal before having to go harass some poor interns courtesy of her partner.
Mulder had been on a weird electronic dance craze as of late, and that’s what Scully could hear blaring from their office eight hours later when she came to meet him for lunch. He didn’t even look up when she came in the room, instead proceeded to fiddle with a slideshow.

“I got the lab to rush the results of...” she started, but the music was too loud. Groaning, she moved to turn it off.

“I said, I got the lab to rush the results of the Szczesny autopsy, if you're interested,” Scully tried again.

“I heard you, Scully,” Mulder said, finally acknowledging her presence.

“And Szczesny did indeed drown but not as the result of the inhalation of ectoplasm as you so vehemently suggested.”

“Well, what else could she possibly have drowned in?”

“Margarita mix, upchucked with about 40 ounces of Corcovado Gold tequila which, as it turns out she and her friends rapidly consumed in the woods while trying to reenact the Blair Witch Project.” It had been an embarrassing moment when the intern had recommended she take a whiff of the substance scraped from the third victim’s lips to verify the cause of death.

“Well, I think that demands a little deeper investigation, don't you?”

“No, I don't.”

Mulder must have thought she was on her period because he took her overt bitchiness in stride. But that wasn’t it and Scully was a bit mad at herself that it wasn’t.

“Well, it doesn't matter. We got bigger fish to fry,” Mulder said, moving to the projector as Scully handed him his sandwich. “Have a seat, Scully. Check this out. Is that beautiful or what?”

On the screen were three impressive geometric formations. Beautiful, sure. But, from a scientific standpoint…

“Crop circles, Mulder?”

“Computer-generated crop circles. It’s a fractal image predicted by a computer program and using data of every known occurrence of the phenomena over the past 40 years. What most people don't realize is that, since 1991...”

Mulder’s voice, even obstructed by the sandwich he insisted on trying to eat while talking, lulled Scully into a hypnosis that most people would refer to as “daydreaming.” But “dream” implied that she was thinking about happy things. All Scully could think about was the major fit Ashley had put up this morning when she realized her mom had to go to work instead of taking her shopping like she’d forgotten she had promised to. Though she certainly didn’t approve of Ashley talking back or copping an attitude, Scully couldn’t punish her daughter for feeling disappointed. It was hard for her not to be disappointed in herself.

“…Three years later, in 1994 even more complex formations occurred simultaneously on opposite ends of the English countryside with the Mandelbrot Set…”

There had to be a way to make it up to her. Now that they’d unofficially dropped the Szczesny case, there was no reason for her to stick around at the office on a perfectly good Saturday afternoon. She’d rush to Emma’s after Mulder was done rambling, pick up Ashley, and be able to
hit up the mall and possibly even take her out for a nice dinner afterward if she was up to it. She just wanted to make her daughter happy for a day. If anybody deserved that, it was Ashley.

“... and I'm not wearing any pants right now,” Mulder’s voice penetrated her thoughts. Soon after, his eyes were boring into her, and Scully looked up from her salad.

“Hmm?”

“You're not listening.”

God, he sounded just like the nuns in Catholic school.

“I am,” Scully told him, though the look on his face indicated that he didn’t believe her. “I guess I just don't see the point.”

“The point is that a computer program has shown us that these are not just random, happenstance coincidental occurrences and that same program has predicted that in just 48 hours even more complex formations are going to be laid down in a field near Avebury-- 48 hours, Scully-- but I wouldn't mind getting there earlier if you don't mind.”

“Getting where?” He could not be serious.

“England - I got two tickets on a 5:30 flight.”

So that was why he wanted to clear up the weekend.

“Mulder, I still have to go over to the hospital and-and-and finish the final paperwork on the autopsy you had me do. And, to be honest, it's Saturday and I wouldn't mind, I don't know, seeing my daughter?”

“Well, what the hell does that mean? If you’re implying that I keep you from being a good mom –”

“What it means, Mulder, is I’m not interested in tracking down some sneaky farmers who happened to ace geometry in high school.” He looked a little degraded by her saying that, but she figured it was his fault for knowing her for seven years and still thinking that she’d just jump at the chance to do this with him.

“And besides, I mean... what could you possibly get out of this? Or learn? I mean, it's not even remotely FBI-related.”

“I'll just cancel your ticket,” he said with an uncomfortable finality. Mulder took one last bite of his lunch before throwing it down and moving to leave. “Thanks for lunch.”

Oh no. He didn’t get to just storm out of the office like that. Not without hearing what she had to say.

“Mulder...” Scully was surprised that he turned around from outside in the hallway to look at her. “Look, we're always running. We're always chasing the next big thing. Why don't you ever just stay still?”

Mulder didn’t even pause to consider his answer, as if he’d had it prepared for years.

“I wouldn't know what I'd be missing.”

She did.
“Ash, I’m sorry, but there is no way I’m taking you to see Miss Congeniality,” Scully told her daughter as they walked through the halls of Washington National Hospital. In addition to dinner, Ashley wanted to go see a movie, but was butting heads with her mom as to which one.

“Mom, it’s only PG-13! It’s not like it’s rated R or something. Megan got to see it with her older sisters even!”

“That was Megan’s parents’ decision. This is my decision and I said we’re not going to see it. Besides, I’m sure you’ll like The Tigger Movie a lot more anyway.”

“No way! Tigger is for babies!”

It hurt Scully’s heart to hear her little girl, who had once been so enthralled with Tigger, say that. But she didn’t have much time to think about it as she approached a nurse’s station to ask for her autopsy results. They said “Szczesny” on the outside, but as Scully pulled out the paperwork whilst walking away, she was shocked and confused as to what she found inside.

“Hi, um... I was given the wrong test results,” she told the nurse she had just spoken with, “This, uh, x-ray marked ‘D. Waterston’ was in the envelope marked ‘Szczesny.’ I was expecting autopsy results.” Her heart was racing. It couldn’t be.

“Oh, I’m sorry. They must’ve gotten switched. Sorry for the inconvenience,” the nurse apologized, giving her the correct paperwork. Scully’s hand shook as she took it.

“Thank you. Is the, um... is the ‘D. Waterston’ that was on the x-ray... is that a Dr. Daniel Waterston?” It was a silly question. Of course it wasn’t him. There had to be hundreds of “D. Waterstons” in the DC area.

“Let’s see: Waterston, Waterston... Yes, it is. Admitted yesterday, coronary care unit, room 306.” Scully’s stomach felt like it was sitting in her throat. It was like being in a strange, cyclical nightmare.

“Thank you,” was all she offered the nurse. But, instead of walking back out of the hospital the way she and Ashley came, she started down the hallway in the other direction, desperate to find a directory and coronary care unit, room 306.

“Where are we going?” Ashley asked, struggling to keep up with her mom’s fast pace. Scully didn’t answer her because she had found what she was looking for – a wall map of the hospital. Two floors up and a wing over.

“Mom, where are we going? This isn’t the way out,” Ashley tried once again in the elevator.

“Umm... an old friend of mine is here. I was going to stop by and see him before we left,” Scully tried to mask her anxiousness. She actually didn’t know if she would go into his room or do a cowardly once-over from the hallway. Her body seemed like it was making its way to 306 without giving her time to think about what would happen once she got there.

302... 304... in no time they approached room 306. Scully slowed down, but Ashley kept on walking, not realizing the emotional experience her mother was having. As she came up to the entrance of the room, she could see two figures talking. One was obviously a doctor, and the other...
“Mom, it’s right here,” Ashley called out. Maggie Waterston turned her head toward the doorway for a split second, but Scully had taken her daughter’s hand and dragged her out of her line of sight just in time.

“I know Ash,” Scully said very slowly and through clenched teeth.

“So why don’t you go in?”

“They’re talking… we can’t be rude. We’ll wait until they’re done.”

Maggie had changed so much since Scully last saw her as a young adult, maybe as an 18 or 19-year-old. A young, spunky, funny girl with a trusting nature had turned into a cold, skeptical, haggard woman with a permanent scowl. She had obviously been unhappy for a very long time, Scully deduced after seeing her out of the corner of her eye for just an instant. She waited until she and the doctor walked all the way down the hall before turning around to face room 306.

In slow motion, Scully walked up to the curtain that split the room in two. No no no no no, her head screamed. But her hands didn’t listen. The curtain was pulled back and before her lay a gray, grizzled version of Daniel Waterston. Suddenly, she was 23 again.

“Who is he?” Ashley piped up, a bit too loudly, breaking Scully’s trance-like state of observance.

Scully had opened her mouth to answer her when she heard from behind them, “Can I help you with something?”

It was the doctor from earlier. And even though she’d never seen this man before in her life, Scully suddenly felt so guilty that she felt he could’ve gotten her to confess to killing both Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

“Um, I'm sorry. I'm Dr. Scully. I-I was just in the hospital and...”

“Can we step into the hallway?”

“Yeah.”

In the hallway, Ashley started fidgeting with her shoes. Taking her foot almost all the way out, then slipping it back in. Again and again. While the doctor spoke.

“I'm Dr. Waterston's cardiologist, Paul Kopeikan. Did you say your name was Scully?”

“Uh, yes, Dana Scully.”

“Dr. Waterston’s mentioned you.”

Scully almost laughed in Dr. Kopeikan’s face when he said that. She hadn’t spoken to or seen Daniel in a very long time. There was no way he had mentioned her to him.

“I’m sorry, you must be mistaken.”

“No, you were a student of his, right?”

Strategically, Scully chose not to answer. Too many things were happening at once and she didn’t know what Daniel had told him of their… relationship.

“He has a heart condition?”

“Dr. Waterston came in yesterday with severe chest pains and he ordered us to do an
echocardiogram and a biopsy because he’d had symptoms of an upper respiratory infection the week before. Fortunately, it was the right call,” Kopeikan explained.

“Then it’s serious.”

“But treatable. I have to wake him up soon, if you’d care to…”

“No, that’s alright. But, uh, thank you for your time,” Scully immediately decided. Daniel was almost the biggest risk she had ever taken. Twice now.

“He must've been a wonderful teacher. I've been following his work on constrictive pericarditis for years now,” the doctor fawned. It was then that she realized that whatever capacity Daniel had spoken about her to this man was, he had left a large portion of the truth out of their conversation.

“Yes… he’s a remarkable man,” Scully said, putting her hand on Ashley’s shoulder and guiding her away quickly, thankful she had come out of that situation relatively unscathed.

“Was that man your teacher?” Ashley resumed her line of questioning.

“Yeah, hon, he was. In medical school.”

“I hope he’s okay.”

Momentarily being awoken from her own thoughts in what felt like days, Scully took her daughter into her arms and squeezed her soundly.

In a way, Scully had known that her brief encounter with Daniel that day wouldn’t be the end of things between them. What was a more shocking discovery was when she realized that even though she’d moved to the other side of the country and pursued a career that reminded her nothing of him, his chapter in her life had never been completely finished. He had told her that the reason he scared her was because he represented the things that she secretly longed for. Internally, she knew that he scared her because he wasn’t exactly wrong.

Ashley had been waiting in the car patiently while her mom spoke with Colleen Azar. They’d only gotten a few things at the mall and had had to skip the movie altogether when Mulder called with the address to her home, and Scully was feeling extremely guilty. However, when she got a call on her cell phone beckoning her back to the hospital for the third time that day, she knew she couldn’t ignore it. Daniel had a strange power over her, and it was not something she was unaware of. It was an adrenaline rush, being close to him. He was the first to praise her – always had been. He used to call her his prodigy and made her feel that one day she could change the whole world with her mind. Yet, she was always seeking his approval. During her med school days, no matter how many times he commended her, Daniel had always made it clear that he expected her to be at the top of her game at all times. And she’d fallen into the diversion. If she could just get one more scholarship, make one more discovery, complete one more task, she could relax. But it was never enough, and that day never came. At the time, Scully had credited Daniel with making her the best person she could be. That day – that very strange day – she started to do the same. He was asking for her medical opinion. It was her chance to make him proud again.

Of course she had hesitations about bringing Ashley to the hospital to, effectively, meet Daniel. But fifteen minutes after pulling out of Colleen’s driveway, there she was with her child.

“Aw, Hurricane Scully has arrived,” Daniel greeted her. Everyone else in the room stared at her and Ashley like they were handing out copies of The Watchtower.
“I was summoned.”

“Would you please tell the doc here why he should listen to me?”

Listen to him. It’s scarier than the scariest roller coaster you’ve ever been on, but you’ll never feel so alive again.

“Sir, we’ve already agreed to doses of digoxin that are far beyond what I normally recommend,” Kopeikan tried, in vain, to reason with him.

“I can guarantee you, Doctor, you’re doing it right,” Daniel smiled his sly fox smile.

“But I can’t be responsible for treatment that might exacerbate your illness. There hasn't even been a double-blind analysis of prednisone's effect.”

Prednisone. Scully knew that word. This was her chance to impress Daniel – to make it known to him that she was still a brilliant doctor.

“Prednisone? That won't complicate cardiac arrhythmia. Not if it's just a short burst.”

“There,” Daniel said smugly, “an informed opinion.”

Kopeikan, having had enough of Daniel’s insistency paired with his unwavering sense of authority, shook his head at Scully and left the room. Maggie also glared at Scully.

“You come off so rational but maybe you know less than you think,” she spat at her, leaving the room angrily. Scully could feel Ashley move closer to her as the woman walked by, and she prayed that she was doing the right thing.

“Daniel… this is my daughter, Ashley. Ash, this is Dr. Daniel Waterston. He was one of my professors in medical school,” she explained. Daniel gave her a knowing look at the word “professor” that she ignored.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Ashley said politely.

“It’s very nice to meet you too, young lady.”

“Ash, there’s a lounge down the hall. Dr. Waterston and I are going to talk for just a little bit, so why don’t you go on down there?” Scully suggested. Thankfully, Ashley always had a Harry Potter book on hand, and agreed to go.

“She’s beautiful, Dana. How old is she now?” Daniel inquired once she was out of the room.

“Eleven.”

“She has your eyes. And I can tell she’s got your mind.”

“She’s the best thing that ever happened to me,” Scully whispered, and there was a shared moment of silence between them where they acknowledged the fact that they were parents who had very different relationships with their children.

“You’ll have to excuse Maggie. She's ... been through some difficult times and she's very angry,” Daniel informed her.

“How did she even find out?”
“There are things you don't know... things I'm not proud of.”

“What things?” Scully gulped. How could she have lived for so long thinking that what they’d done hadn’t ruined someone’s life?

“I screwed up, Dana. Things got bad at home after...” he couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence. She just sat there in silence.

“Bad how?”

“I haven't been completely honest with you. It was hard for me... when you walked away. Shut down from my family and needless to say, it was very difficult for Barbara.”

She wished he wouldn’t say her name. She was over a decade removed from the situation and it was starting to feel too real again.

“You divorced.”

“Only after an interminable period of discomfort for us both.” Scully grappled with that information. She’d had a long time to come to terms with the fact that she had once been a woman who had an affair with a married man. But the information that she was a woman who had broken up a family was new and sharp.

“Where did you go?” her voice was barely above a whisper now.

“Here. Washington.”

“When?”

Daniel looked down at his hands as he answered. “Almost ten years ago.”

This news hit her like a ton of bricks, and Scully had to struggle for breath.

“Daniel... you didn’t move here for me?”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen this way, of course.”

Tears clouded her vision. Yet, instead of struggling not to let them fall, she allowed them to flow freely. This was the same Daniel he’d always been, after all. It was no use trying not to cry around him when he knew so much of her already.

“Oh God…” a million knives of guilt were stabbing her at the same time. And yet, she did not become immediately repulsed at herself for thinking of the life she could have had with Daniel.

“You’ve come at such a strange time,” she told him.

“I know, I know. You – you have a life.”

“I don’t know what I have,” she cried. She had said no to a life with no Duane Barry, no Donnie Pfaster, no government conspiracies, no cancer, no sisters getting shot dead in the hallway... and she hadn’t even known it. “I mean, your x-rays were in the wrong envelope. I would have never even known you were here if it wasn’t for a mix-up. It’s just…”

“What do you want Dana?”

“I want everything I should want at this time of my life. Maybe I want the life I didn’t choose.”
That was the truth that made her feel dirty. Because her choices had given her Ashley; had given her Mulder. Scully knew that she’d never trade her daughter for all the comfort and praise in the entire world. But a life with Daniel was compatible with her life with Ashley. Mulder, on the other hand, could never exist in the same spot in her heart if she were to choose Daniel. It was black and white. She did not want to give up Mulder. But she did not want to be afraid of being abducted ever again in her life either.

His hands were always one of the most attractive things about him, and the way he glided his fingers over hers made her feel protected. Loved. Cherished. Like the woman she was in her dream. He laid her head down on his chest, and it was a magical thing to know that after all of the time and space, their hearts could beat together once again. Scully listened to it for several long moments as he stroked her hair.

They occupied the same spiritual soul in that moment, is what Colleen Azar would have said. Whatever they shared, Scully knew the moment it was thrown off balance. She could hear Daniel’s heart speeding up, trying to compensate for its failures. He fell limp underneath her, and then the monitors started beeping.

He couldn’t die. He couldn’t die. Not when they’d just found each other.
Chapter 91

The next morning, Scully left Colleen Azar’s house with a renewed sense of purpose. Even after saving Daniel’s life the previous day, it was something she desperately needed. With Ashley spending over with her mother, Scully knew she had the whole day to prepare herself to make some serious life choices. Colleen had spoken about slowing down – taking time to appreciate what is around you and paying attention to signs that The Universe gives out. And if there wasn’t a giant flashing neon light over Daniel’s head… Scully had ignored Mulder’s middle-of-the-night phone calls, angry that he didn’t even have the decency to wait until a reasonable hour to passive-aggressively chide her for missing his field trip.

The second she stepped into the wing, though, Scully felt sick. Maggie Waterston approached her, angrier than usual.

“Are you happy?” she spat.

“I’m sorry? I was just going to see your father.” Scully explained. When she bought the flowers that were in her hand, she hadn’t thought of the hoops she’d have to jump through to deliver them.

“You can’t. He’s in a coma.”

“Since when?”

“Since about two minutes after you supposedly saved his life. Do you have any idea the hell you’ve created in our lives?”

No. No she didn’t. Not until now.

“Maggie,” she sighed, not wanting to have this conversation a few feet from the room where Daniel lay dying. “to be honest, I left so there wouldn’t be hell in your lives.”

“Don’t try to be reasonable with me. I’m so sick of being reasonable! You’ve moved on, but we’ve had to live with what you left behind!” Maggie yelled and stormed off. Watching her go, Scully noticed the woman swipe at her eyes. She’d never seen her cry before. In fact, over the past two days, Scully had believed Maggie was incapable of any emotion but rage. But what she saw in Maggie was a broken young woman, desperately lashing out at anyone she believed had a part in causing the downfall of her family. It wouldn’t have been an affair, though, if Scully were the only one to blame. Daniel wasn’t even conscious and he was pushing her to do and accept things she wasn’t at all prepared for. Could a relationship born out of the death of a family ever have a chance at survival?

Without directing them to, Scully’s feet took her out of the hospital in the opposite direction of her parked car. She needed to walk. She needed space to breathe.

And who was that woman in the khaki coat and white baseball cap that kept randomly popping in and out of her life that weekend? As soon as Scully spotted her, she desperately needed to know. Who are you? Why are you following me? Could you please help me to change my life? I’m torn between two men. I’ve made tables and charts.

She followed the figure into some sort of temple. Instead of finding the most plainly-dressed stalker to ever exist, though, she found a statue of Buddha.

Nature compelled her to kneel before it. Exhaustion and frustration compelled her to close her eyes.
The rest just happened.

Am I the same woman I was when I first met Daniel?

There she stood, fresh-faced and eager with a bad 80’s haircut. Working late nights in the lab when her professor kissed her and they knocked over the first domino. Teary-eyed when she didn’t even walk at her own graduation for fear of seeing his disappointed expression.

Am I the same person I was when I first joined the FBI?

Fresh-faced eagerness had been replaced by the desire for a new start, as far away from a bad decision as possible. Independence was all she sought, knowing she could never again afford to let her heart make choices for her. Jack Willis had built her up. And broken her.

Am I the same person I was when I became a mom?

That moment… that moment when she realized that everything she ever thought she knew about love was wrong. Before that moment, love had made her happy. Love had occasionally made her cry. It had certainly helped her make some bad decisions. But on that day, love had made her hurt with its completeness. And it hadn’t stopped since.

Am I the same person I was when I met Mulder?

She’d lived a thousand years since she met Fox Mulder. For all of the times she suffered through the X-Files – abduction, Missy’s death, cancer, Emily – he had been beside her. Yes, he ditched her and left her in the dark and sometimes treated her as if she were the fragile woman Scully had promised herself she would never be. But every time she needed him, he had been there to save her. He was the only person she knew that, without a second thought, would lay his life on the line for her or her daughter. She suddenly missed his voice – missed his hand on the small of her back, missed his lame jokes, and missed the gentle breath he let out right before he kissed her. Loving him was the challenge she wanted.

Scully’s eyes flew open. The man in her dream could never have been Daniel.

Who am I?

I am a woman who loves Fox Mulder.

xxxxxxxxx

Having slept fitfully the night before, Scully’s Sunday started out with a cryptic call from Maggie. She’d left the hospital late on Saturday, having tried whatever she could to mend Daniel’s broken heart, even going so far as to hire a homeopathic healer. To her surprise, Daniel’s daughter had supported her when Dr. Kopeikan chastised her attempts, but that phone call made her feel just as desperate as any other time she’d spoken to Maggie had been.

She urgently got dressed and headed down to the hospital, only to find Daniel awake in bed. He didn’t see her approach the room, and it gave her a chance to study him. He really did look like he was a man on hold. Waiting for his life to continue. Scully wondered if she had looked like that before yesterday, before she decided to move on. Maybe she could convince Daniel to move on too. Without her.

“Daniel?” she announced herself, gaining his attention. His glance moved toward her tiredly, almost guiltily.
“You think I’d give up so easily?” he joked. God, he sounded exhausted, and everyone knew it wasn’t the coma alone that had caused it.

The few steps to him that Scully took made her afraid. But she was no longer a bug. And he was no longer a light.

“You were slipping away. Nobody thought you’d come out of this. I’m still in shock,” she said carefully.

“Imagine my shock when my doctor told me of the voodoo ritual you’d arranged for last night.”

“I was afraid it didn’t work.”

Daniel laughed at her, not believing for a minute that anything other than modern medicine could have given him a second chance at life. Just two days ago, Scully would have laughed at herself as well.

“Of course it didn’t work. Don’t be absurd. Where do you get this crap?”

It was the same tone he used to use with her when she was a student and she made a stupid mistake. The kind all students make. It used to make her want to work harder – to please him – but that morning it just made her angry.

“Daniel, that ‘crap’ may have just saved your life, whether you’re open to it or not.”

“It doesn’t matter,” it was obvious he wasn’t used to being spoken to like that. “Look at me,” he commanded her, and she did, “I’m going to get well… and we need to talk about… what happens next for us.”

He was so confident that he had her. There was no way, in his mind, that she had changed at all over the years. She compared this to her relationship with Mulder, who had loved her just as intensely as Daniel. The same Mulder who had waited for seven years for her to lead him to bed and had loved her daughter long before he allowed himself to love her.

“I spoke at length to Maggie,” Scully started, watching as Daniel’s face fell when she mentioned his daughter. “It’s time… that you took responsibility for the hurt you caused in your family. It’s no accident you got sick, Daniel. You’ve been running from the truth for too many years.”

He definitely didn’t want to hear that. Daniel Waterston knew what happened when Dana Scully started to defy him.

“Dana… it was only to be with you. You were all I lived for,” he whispered as if he himself couldn’t believe he had spent ten years waiting for her.

“Daniel, you can’t live for me any longer. You have to live for you and you have to live to fix what’s broken in your life. You have to, Daniel, or you will die.”

“I was closer to death the day after you left than I ever was in this hospital,” his remark was.

“Don’t put this on me. I have a different life now. I’m not a doctor, Daniel. I’m an FBI agent. I’ve got a daughter to think about. You’re so sure that you know me, but I’m not the same person. I wouldn’t have known that if I hadn’t seen you again.”

That was the catharsis Scully needed to fully convince herself that a life with Daniel was not only the wrong decision, but impossible. And all he said was, “I would love your daughter like she was
A noise behind her made Scully aware that Maggie Waterston was standing in the doorway. Her heart hurt for her after hearing Daniel say that. She knew he would love Ashley because she was hers. But he already had a daughter.

“My daughter already has a father”, she answered firmly. “And she loves him very much, as he does her”. Mulder may not have been Ashley’s blood relative, but he certainly treated her like she was his own. “Besides, the reason you are alive right now is to make it up to your little girl,” Scully said, turning her head and smiling back at Maggie. Daniel’s face was unreadable when she looked back at him. She sincerely hoped that she would give up hope for them. Because his form was getting smaller and smaller as she walked away, leaving without saying goodbye.

“Mulder!” Ashley exclaimed later when Maggie dropped her off at Scully’s. Since his and her mother’s fight a few weeks before, she’d been very cautious around him. Trying to balance the love she felt for the both of them. As if their feelings had been spelt out in words and tacked up on the wall above Scully’s fireplace, the air in the room told everyone that all had been resolved.

“What’s up munchkin?” Mulder caught Ashley when she flung herself into his embrace. He was sat on the couch, and breathed deeply when she curled herself into his lap.

“I’m not a munchkin,” she laughed.

“You’ll always be my munchkin,” he said just before he kissed her forehead.

“Did you bring me back anything from England?”

“I brought you two things. They’re in the front pocket of my suitcase.”

Ashley made no move to get up, though.

“Did you hear me?” Mulder asked.

“Yeah,” Ash answered.

“Are you going to go get them?”

“In a little bit,” she smiled. Ashley brought her legs up to meet her body and placed one hand on Mulder’s chest. Then, she touched her nose to the base of his neck and closed her eyes, completely content. Scully, who was watching the scene with her mother from the entryway, felt the sting of tears welling up in her eyes. When she made a dash for the kitchen to dab them, Mulder gave her a concerned look. She just smiled and shook her head.

That was him.

That was the man she and her daughter and her mother and even Queequeg were going to spend the rest of their lives knowing and loving. All the signs, all things, pointed to him. And even for her rebellious tendencies, Scully was determined to follow them.

The whole apartment was dark when Scully opened her eyes. She was no longer on the couch – instead having been moved to her bed after her long and barely-shrouded conversation with Mulder
about fate. Looking over to her right, she expected to see him sprawled out next to her in his signature t-shirt and boxers. But there was no Mulder to be found.

Uncontrollable tears sprang to her eyes. This wasn’t how she wanted the night to end… not the night that changed her life forever. She felt so sorry that Mulder had begun and ended that day thinking nothing had changed between them when the difference between the woman she was when she was last in her bed and the woman she was now was so vast. Scully was in the midst of drying those tears on her sleeve and calling herself silly when she heard Queequeg begin to growl and sneeze like he did whenever he was unhappy.

It was alarming to see that her kitchen light was on, but not when she realized the reason for it. There at the sink, negotiating with her dog, was Mulder.

“How many years have we known each other, Quee? There’s no need for this nonsense,” Mulder said as he knelt down and patted the dog’s back. “We’re not that different, ya know? Nope. We’re both just grumpy old men.”

Queequeg, having had his fill of water, looked up from his dish to study Mulder for a moment. Then, without warning, he put his paws on Mulder’s knees and licked his face. Just once. Scully was glad she saw it.

“Right back at ya, pom pom.”

“Mulder?” Scully asked from the hallway, trying desperately to keep her skeptical face on and not to burst out laughing.

“Oh… hey,” Mulder said, quickly standing up and pretending to act casual.

“I, uh… I didn’t want to disturb you or anything, so I made up a bed on the couch. The dishes are done, Queequeg’s been taken out, I checked on Ashley,” by the time he got to that point of his monologue, Scully had walked right up to him, invading his personal space. Then, much like Queequeg, she kissed him. Unlike Queequeg, she kissed him long, and deep, and thoroughly.

“What was that for?” he asked, surprised, when she finally relented.

“It was for you.”

“Well I should hope so,” Mulder chuckled, loving how sometimes Scully’s inhibitions set with the sun. “But why?”

“It’s fate. Like you said earlier, all of the choices that I’ve made in my life have led me to this very moment. And all of the choices that you’ve made in your life have done the same. And now we’re both here, in my kitchen, and I don’t…” Scully took a deep breath as a smile broke out on her face, “I don’t want to waste another second.”

Mulder had heard his partner say millions of words during the seven years that he’d known her, but those were by far his favorite. They led to his arms around her waist, hers around his neck, and the total comfort that came with knowing you’ve found the one person you can trust to make you completely happy for the rest of your life.
He had her pinned up against the kitchen counter before he knew it, and was running his hands up and down her sides with a delicious heat. It was a shock when she broke away from his mouth, but Scully grabbed his hand before he could even begin to doubt her, and led him to the bedroom.

“Let’s hope you never have to sleep on the couch again,” Scully said seductively, shutting her bedroom door behind her. Mulder was already sitting on her bed, feeling like he’d had a whole six pack without having drank a drop of liquor.

“Come here,” he groaned, taking Scully’s hands and pulling her into the gap of his legs. He was pushing her sweater up so that he could kiss and nip at the soft skin of her stomach. She did the rest of the work in getting the garment off, thankful that Mulder had rid her of her jacket when he took her to bed earlier.

Scully raking her nails through his hair made Mulder purr with sensation. Once taking off her skirt and hose, he helped her crawl into his lap so that he could feel her body surround his. Hands were everywhere. Lips were everywhere. And knowing what they both knew now, it was better than the first time.

“Mmm,” Scully moaned, rocking back and forth in Mulder’s lap, “we need to take care of this.”

“Hang on,” it pained Mulder to say, “I just want this for a moment.” He tightened his arms around her and held her against him, suckling on the crook of her neck while massaging her breast. Scully responded by running her fingers gently down the nape of his neck and lightly scratching his shoulders. Slowly, she started rocking again, circling her hips indicatively.

Eventually, she got him to roll them over on the bed. Above her, Mulder worked on getting his shirt off, getting stuck with it around his head and making her laugh.

“Are you laughing at me Agent Scully?”

“No,” she giggled.

“Really? Because it sounds like you’re laughing at me.”

“I would never!”

“Do you think I’m funny? Do I look like a clown to you?” Mulder did his best Joe Pesci impersonation. Scully laughed.

“I love you, Mulder.” It was the first time she’d said exactly that. It made a warm tingle spread throughout his whole body.

“I love you too,” he was so happy to say. Suddenly, he understood all of the struggles they’d had to go through to get to this moment. He knew that this was exactly what was supposed to happen for them. “You’re shaking,” he noticed, laying on his side next to her and propping his head up on his hand. She snuggled her body up close to his, and he could feel that the tremble he thought was just in her hands actually extended to her whole body. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her onto his chest as he let himself fall back.

“I’m… happy,” was all she offered.

“Do I make you happy, Scully?”

“You know you do.”
He sensed there was more, so the small silence that followed her answer did not bother him.

“But it’s more than that. I think I’m finally letting myself be happy.”

“Well... I couldn’t ask for anything more then.”

“Mulder,” she laughed, looking up at him through hooded eyes. Here they were, in bed, half naked, together, not moving. And he was telling her he was perfectly content.

She stalked up his body, devouring his lips like prey. She was going to show him just how content he could be.

XXXXXXXXXX

Scully stirred as she felt the bed dip. Only just awake, she waited for Ashley’s familiar voice to ring out, to tell her that she was running late and needed to get up. But then she felt lips press light kisses to the corner of her mouth, her jaw, trailing down her neck, and then it all came flooding back. Mulder. Mulder was in her bed. She’d slept with Mulder, and though it wasn’t the first time, this time it felt right. There had been no brushes with death, no tears and certainly no regrets afterwards. This was the man she loved, the man she wanted to commit to – the only man she wanted in her bed. And from the way Mulder was kissing down her body, settling himself into the apex of her thighs, he clearly didn’t want to move from her bed.

“Jesus Mulder”, she breathed as he pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. She looked down as he glanced up, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Morning”, he uttered. Another kiss. “I can’t sleep. Must be jetlag or something”. He went back to work, and Scully’s internal muscles cramped in anticipation.

“Mulder”. She bit her lip hard, trying not to groan out loud. “Ashley’s next door”.

“So be quiet then”. He knew the answer to everything. “Besides, she’s been next door all night, and that didn’t stop you earlier”. Mulder paused. Scully wasn’t pushing him away, but then she didn’t appear too eager either. But then he glanced up again as she propped herself up on her elbows, and nodded shyly, her face flushing. She was embarrassed, but it only made him want her more.

“I’ll be quiet”, she whispered, spreading her legs and just about blowing Mulder’s mind in the process.

XXXXXXXXX

“You have to go”, Scully murmured breathlessly against Mulder’s neck. He lay on top of her bonelessly, thinking to himself that he never wanted to leave. They were so good at this. So good, and he wondered how the hell it took them so long to get here.

“Hmm?”

“You have to go”. Brushing his hair back, Scully pressed her lips to Mulder’s forehead. “Ashley will be awake soon, and I don’t want her to see you”.

“I have stayed over before Scully”, he replied, swooping down to kiss her. For a moment, Scully relaxed, enjoying the kiss far too much and forgetting all about kicking him out. He figured he could get used to winning arguments like this.
“Mmm. Mulder”. Finally she moved her hands to his chest and pushed him off her. “It’s not the same. I don’t want her to know about this just yet”.

Sighing, Mulder reluctantly rolled off his partner. “She’s an intelligent kid”.

“I know, I know. I just…I want to get used to this myself first. And you know Ashley. She’ll run with this. The next thing you know she’ll have told everyone and already have invited them to our wedding”.

Mulder grinned. Scully was right. “[I guess we could always save time and take an ad out in the Washington Post]”. He turned onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow. “[Do you have any regrets Scully?]” He had to know.

“No”, she answered immediately. “[No regrets at all]”. She flashed him a smile that made him want to lock the door and tell Ashley to make her own way to school. “[I wanted it to happen. I just…I want to take time and process this before telling her]”. He could do that. “[But definitely no regrets]”.

“How about a repeat performance sometime?” Mulder knew he sounded desperate, but he was past caring. Scully was like a drug; the more he had of her, the more he wanted.

“Well this weekend we’re at my mom’s. Bill and Charlie are in town”. She glanced over shyly. “[You could come with us?]”

“It’s ok Scully. I don’t want to intrude”.

“You wouldn’t be intruding. Ashley and I would like you there”.

“Bill wouldn’t”.

“Bill’s an ass. My mom would like to see you too. And it’d be nice for you to meet Charlie. Please?” she added, her lips twitching. She knew she had him. “[I’d like to spend time with you. We missed you while you were in England]”.

“From the sounds of it, Daniel kept you busy”. He wondered if he’d gone too far, but thankfully Scully smiled. “[I was thinking maybe I’d call him and thank him for whatever he said]”.

“Mulder…” Scully warned. “[You know, Daniel was once one of the most important people in my life, but that was then. Now he…he’s not the man I thought he was, and you…Mulder you are the person I want to be with. And I’d like you to come to my mom’s, but if you don’t want to, that’s fine. I’ll understand]”. She meant it too.

“I’ll come Scully”.

She smiled. “[Then maybe I could see if my mom could take Ashley the weekend after….]”

Mulder returned her grin, instantly forgetting all about Bill. “[I think a trip to Grandma’s sounds like a great idea]”. He noticed Scully’s eyes dart over to the alarm clock and knew that was his cue to go. “[On that note, I’d better go. See you at the office?]” As Scully nodded, Mulder leaned over and kissed her, feeling her smile against his lips. “[Go back to sleep]”, he murmured as he sat up and got out of bed, searching for the clothes he’d discarded hurriedly the night before. By the time he’d retrieved them all, Scully had fallen back to sleep.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder zipped up his fly and studied his appearance in the mirror. He smoothed down his
dishevelled hair, smiling to himself for the reason it looked such a state. He had a freshly laid look about him. Finally it had happened and Scully had revealed she wanted to be with him. He had half a mind to send flowers to Daniel’s hospital room to thank him for helping Scully come to her realization, but he knew she’d kick his ass.

Smoothing down his t-shirt, Mulder look one final look in the mirror before letting himself out of the bathroom, stopping in his tracks as he noticed Ashley walking towards him. She paused as she caught sight of him, and from the way she blinked sleepily, he knew she hadn’t been awake for long. “Mulder?” She yawned. “What are you doing here? Didn’t you go home?”

“Sssh”. Pressing his finger to his lips to try and quieten her, Mulder moved in towards her. “Your mom’s still asleep”.

Ashley’s eyes widened. “Did you sleep over?”

He nodded. “It was late”.

Her lips curved up into a sleepy grin. “Did you sleep with my mom?”

“Ash!” He could already feel himself blushing. “I’ve stayed over before”.

“Oh my god, are you two together now? Like really together?”

“Ash it’s not…” He paused. Ashley was a clever kid, who’d no doubt know if he was lying, particularly with that shit-eating grin he was currently sporting.

“Listen”, he sighed, well aware Scully was going to kill him if she found out. “You’re not to say anything to anyone, ok? Not even your mom. This is our secret”.

She nodded, now suddenly wide awake. “So are you two together?”

Mulder sighed, and as he nodded, Ashley’s face lit up in delight. “Promise me you won’t say anything”.

“I promise”. She thought for a moment. “Are you going to take mom out on dates?”

Now there was an idea. “Right now”, he replied, not wanting to risk Scully waking up and catching them conspiring. “I’m going home, and you’re going to get ready for school”. Though Ashley nodded, Mulder knew she’d be quizzing him again soon.

“Will I see you tonight?”

“Not tonight”. He figured he’d give Scully a little time to herself to get her head around the latest developments between them. “But I’ll see you at the weekend, at your grandma’s”.

“Ok”. She smiled as he kissed the top of her head. “See you soon Mulder”.

“Bye”. And as Mulder left his partner’s apartment, he thought more about Ashley’s suggestion of taking Scully out on a date. But first he just had to deal with the small matter of big brother Bill.
“Are you sure about this?”

“Sure about what?”

“That you want to do this? I mean it’s an entire afternoon –“

“Do you not want me to do this?”

“No, no. I mean yes, yes I do, but only if you want to. It’s an afternoon with Bill.”

Mulder, Scully, Ashley and Queequeg all stood on the doorstep of Maggie’s house. Bill and Charlie were in town, their vacations coinciding with one another for the first time in what felt like years, and so a Scully family reunion had been organised. Though it wasn’t the first family gathering Mulder had attended, this was the first time he’d seen Bill since Scully had found – and lost – Emily, and he wasn’t particularly looking forward to spending the day with him, especially now he and Scully were together. Maggie still didn’t know about the change in their relationship, and Mulder was happy to keep it that way, at least until Bill was safely on the plane back to San Diego.

“I can handle Bill,” replied Mulder.

Ashley turned to face him, clearly not believing him. “I’ll protect you Mulder.”

“Thanks.” Somehow he knew he’d be needing all the help he could get.

A few moments after Ashley tapped on the door, Maggie opened it, pleased to see them all – even Mulder. That was three Scullys on his side. He was pretty sure Tara at least tolerated him; now he just had to deal with Bill and Charlie, who he’d never met. He just hoped Bill hadn’t told his brother too much about him.

“Come in, come in,” Maggie urged, hugging her daughter and granddaughter as they stepped inside. Ashley immediately took off Queequeg’s leash and he went running off towards the kitchen, no doubt in search of snacks. “Hello Fox,” she added, saving him a hug. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” Mulder replied politely, though he knew Scully was responsible for his invitation.

“Your cousins are in the living room,” Maggie told Ashley as she took her coat. “You might want to keep Queequeg away from Matty though; he’s already been scratched by Tabytha when he tried to tackle her.”

Ashley nodded and ran off in search of her relatives. “Charlie and Claire are in there too. Bill and Tara are just out in the yard setting everything up. Come on through.”

Mulder wanted to dart into the living room – it was the lesser of two evils potentially – but Maggie intended for them to follow her. Before he could move, Scully put a hand out to stop him, and waited for her mom to disappear before she whispered. “If he says anything, just ignore him. He’s just doing it to get a rise out of you.”

“I promise I’ll be on my best behaviour Scully.”
“I know you will. It’s him I’m worried about.”

“He doesn’t scare me.” Mulder tried to sound convincing, telling himself that Bill wouldn’t start anything at his mom’s. He hoped. “C’mon.” As he placed his hand on the small of Scully’s back, he felt her freeze. “Sorry,” he murmured, realizing they were supposed to be being subtle. It was going to be a long day.

Mulder certainly kept to his promise of being on his best behaviour. He was nothing but polite as he was introduced to members of the Scully family he’d never met before – Charlie, his wife Claire and their two sons, Oliver and Ben – and he’d even managed a polite hello to Bill. Tara was warm in her greeting and even little Matthew appeared to be pleased to see Mulder, even though the last time he’d seen him, he’d been barely a few days old. No sooner had introductions been made, Ashley came bounding out into the kitchen, requesting the presence of Mulder. “Mulder! Mulder! Come play basketball with us!”

“Mulder’s talking sweetheart,” answered Scully, before he could speak. He wasn’t speaking actually, just listening as the women in the room caught up on the latest news and gossip. Bill and Charlie were thankfully in the other room, putting together a table for Maggie. Mulder had been about to offer to help, but Scully shook her head, moving in to whisper that it would no doubt end in an argument between her brothers, and he didn’t want to get in the way of that.

“Please Mulder, I need you on my team.”

He grinned over at her. “You don’t need me.”

“I do! Ollie’s on the team at school now and Ben says he’s going to kick my ass.”

“Ashley!” warned Scully, just as Claire shouted at her son for leading his cousin astray.

“Sorry.” She didn’t look very sorry. “Please Mulder? I need you on my team.”

Mulder nodded reluctantly, though inwardly he was relieved that he had an excuse to get out of the house. “Alright then. If the ladies don’t mind,” he added, hoping that they didn’t. Scully seemed to know what he was thinking and gave him a smile, while he noted that Maggie, Claire and Tara all seemed to look at him with adoration in their eyes. He tried not to grin.

He had barely left the room when the women all turned on Scully. “He seems nice,” Claire said, her eyes twinkling. “Cute.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is “hot” Claire,” Tara said with a laugh. Scully said nothing, but she could feel herself flush. She shifted awkwardly.

“That too. I love the way he looks at you Dana.”

“Oh he does.” Even Maggie decided to join in with the conversation. “He’s looked at her like that for a long time now.”

“Like what?” Scully decided to play dumb, not wanting to move an inch. They weren’t going to get a peep out of her. What she and Mulder had was still new, and she didn’t want everyone knowing just yet.

“Like you’re the only person in his world,” Tara responded. “I wish Bill looked at me like that sometimes.”
“And looked like that,” teased her sister-in-law.

Scully shook her head, smiling.

“He’s so good with Ashley,” added Maggie. “He always has been. She’s so comfortable with him, and it’s so good to see.”

“A hot guy and he’s good with kids. Why haven’t you tied him down yet Dana?”

“It’s not like that,” Scully said to Claire. “We’re just friends.”

“You do seem a lot closer,” observed Maggie. “I must admit when you asked if Mulder could accompany you this weekend, I got my hopes up. Not to mention next weekend.”

“Next weekend?” asked Tara, pausing to scoop Matthew into her arms as he tottered into the kitchen, the big kids having left him behind.

“I’m taking care of Ashley all weekend.”

“All weekend?” All three women looked over at Scully.

“She wanted to spend time with her grandma.” It was a weak excuse and she knew it. “Mulder and I have work to do.”

“At the weekend?”

“We work weekends.”

“Alllllll weekend?”

Scully glared at Tara. She was blushing now. “Potentially. Listen mom, if it’s a problem –“

“It’s no problem sweetheart,” Maggie replied, realizing how uncomfortable her daughter was getting. “I’m always happy to help.”

“Just make sure he buys you dinner first,” Claire advised Scully, and all four women laughed.

“Hey,” said Bill, entering the kitchen. “What’s so funny?”

“It doesn’t matter honey,” Tara replied, leading to further laughter. “There are some things you don’t want to know.”

*That was an understatement* thought Scully, hoping that the rest of the day went without interrogations. Little did she know.

xxxxxxxxx

“So what’s Mulder doing here?” Scully was out in the kitchen making drinks, while the rest of the family were – or at least she thought they were – out in the yard. Mulder had disappeared upstairs, no doubt wanting a brief respite from the craziness he was having to endure; constant questioning from all sides, Charlie’s sons eager to hear more about his encounters with monsters, their mother and father trying to become acquainted with the man they’d never met, but had heard so much about. He was no doubt trying to escape out of the bathroom window, Scully mused as she glanced up at Bill, who entered the kitchen.

As soon as her brother mentioned Mulder’s name, Scully rolled her eyes. She should have known
he’d have something to say about it. “Mom invited him.”

“It’s a family gathering.”

“And Mulder’s like family.”

“Not to me he isn’t.”

“Well then it’s a good job you weren’t in charge of the invitations.”

“It isn’t enough that he drags you away from your family at the best of times. Now he’s coming along to family-only –”

“Bill,” Scully said sternly. “Not now. Today is supposed to be a nice, chilled out day. I’m not arguing with you. Mom invited Mulder, and both Ashley and I wanted him to come too. That’s the end of it.”

“Do you really want him around Ashley?”

Scully glanced back at her brother, accidentally spilling a trickle of boiling water on her hand. Cursing, she moved over to the sink, running her hand under cold water. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on Dana, he’s hardly the most stable guy. I know Ashley’s in need of a father figure, but Mulder isn’t it.”

“How can you say that?”

“Just look at the number of times he’s almost gotten you killed Dana!”

“Anything I do is because I choose to do it.”

“He’s got you brainwashed.”

“How dare you,” Scully hissed. Wiping her hand on a towel and turning to face her brother, her arms folded in front of her. “Despite what you might think, Mulder is a good man. He doesn’t force me to do anything, and I for one am glad that he’s there for Ashley.”

Bill scoffed, shaking his head. “He’s not good for her Dana. He’s not the kind of father figure she needs in her life.”

“I disagree,” she countered.

“Listen she’s a good kid –“

“And that’s also thanks to Mulder.”

“Mulder,” Bill repeated skeptically. “Are you two together?” he asked accusingly.

“Even if we were, it’s none of your damn business.”

“What is it about Mulder?”

“Mulder has been there for her ever since she was little. When she couldn’t sleep because she thought there were monsters underneath her bed, Mulder was there to chase them away.”
“I wonder who put the idea of monsters in her head.”

Scully ignored her brother. “When she used to get sick, Mulder was there to hold her hair and rub her back and tell her everything was ok. When she rode a bike for the first time without stabilisers, Mulder was there to see it and cheer her on, not to mention her first school play and her first swim meet. When I had cancer and thought I was going to die, Mulder was there for her. When her own father didn’t even want to see her, Mulder was there instead.”

“Jack was –“

Scully wasn’t about to listen to any excuses. “Do you know how many times Jack saw his daughter before he died?”

After a moment, Bill shook his head. He looked worried, as though he knew he’d be shocked at the answer.

“Five. I can count those times on one hand,” she stressed. “He probably wouldn’t have even known her if he’d passed her on the street. And I know,” she added, before her brother could beat her to it. “That he never wanted children, and that I shouldn’t have expected anything more from him, but do you know how that made me feel? Do you know how it makes Ashley feel?” Another shake of the head. “Unloved,” she answered. “I’ve lost count of the number of times Ashley’s asked me over the years why her dad never wanted to see her, and what it was she did to make him feel that way towards her and I can’t answer that, because I don’t understand it myself.”

Absorbing his sister’s words, Bill finally spoke. “I had no idea.”

“So that’s why I let Mulder into our lives and why I want him to continue to be in our lives. Because he wants to be around my daughter, and because she wants to be around him. Despite what you might think Bill, he’s a good man. He adores Ashley, and she worships the ground he walks on. I can’t stand in the way of that, and quite frankly, I don’t want to. Mulder may not be Ashley’s biological dad, but he’s her father in every other respect. I hope, for your sake, that one day your kids look at you with the amount of adoration Ashley does Mulder.”

Bill was silent, and that’s when Scully knew she had him. “Come on,” she said, when he didn’t answer back. “I’m going to take the drinks outside. Can you go and call Charlie please? And don’t be an ass to Mulder,” she added, wanting just one day where everyone got on.

-----------------------

Mulder headed towards the kitchen, wondering whether Scully needed help with the drinks. As he approached, he saw Ashley stood just outside the doorway, listening to whatever was going on in the kitchen. She turned to face him as she heard him walk towards her, and pressed a finger to her lips to quieten him.

“What’s going on?” he whispered as he came to stand by her side.

“Mom and Uncle Bill are arguing.”

“About what?” As if he had to ask. There was only one thing Bill and Scully argued about when Mulder was around. He edged closer to the door, where he could make out his partner’s frustrated voice responding to her brother.

“How dare you. Despite what you might think, Mulder is a good man. He doesn’t force me to do anything, and I for one am glad that he’s there for Ashley.”
So the argument wasn’t about Mulder leading Scully astray, but her daughter. He placed his hands on Ashley’s shoulders, squeezing her tight.

“He’s not good for her Dana,” argued Bill. “He’s not the kind of father figure she needs in her life.”

“I disagree.”

“Listen she’s a good kid –“

“And that’s also thanks to Mulder.”

“Mulder…Are you two together?”

Mulder shifted awkwardly, while Ashley grinned up at him. She’d stuck to her promise and hadn’t mentioned anything about catching him sneaking out of Scully’s bedroom just days before. But still, she’d been giving him knowing looks all day.

“Even if we were, it’s none of your damn business.”

“What is it about Mulder?”

Mulder wasn’t entirely sure Ashley should be listening to the argument, but he knew there was no way she was going to move without a fight.

“Mulder has been there for her ever since she was little. When she couldn’t sleep because she thought there were monsters underneath her bed, Mulder was there to chase them away.”

“I wonder who put the idea of monsters in her head.”

*Asshole* thought Mulder, frowning, but of course Scully had his back. She always did.

“When she used to get sick,” she responded matter-of-factly. “Mulder was there to hold her hair and rub her back and tell her everything was ok. When she rode a bike for the first time without stabilisers, Mulder was there to see it and cheer her on, not to mention her first school play and her first swim meet. When I had cancer and thought I was going to die, Mulder was there for her. When her own father didn’t even want to see her, Mulder was there instead.”

Ok now Mulder wasn’t so sure they should be listening. He tugged on Ashley’s shoulders, but she remained in her place adamantly.

“Ash,” he whispered, but she shook her head at him. She wasn’t going anywhere.

“Jack was –“

“Do you know how many times Jack saw his daughter before he died? Five. I can count those times on one hand. He probably wouldn’t have even known her if he’d passed her on the street. And I know that he never wanted children, and that I shouldn’t have expected anything more from him, but do you know how that made me feel? Do you know how it makes Ashley feel?” A pause. “Unloved. I’ve lost count of the number of times Ashley’s asked me over the years why her dad never wanted to see her, and what it was she did to make him feel that way towards her and I can’t answer that, because I don’t understand it myself.”

Finally Mulder managed to drag Ashley away, back into the hallway out of earshot of her mom and Bill. As he turned her to face him, he noticed that tears were trailing down her cheeks. The poor little kid. She’d always wondered why her dad never spent any time with her.
“Hey,” he soothed, pulling her into his arms. She was tense, rigid, not giving him anything.

“My dad didn’t love me,” she sniffed. “He didn’t want to be around me.”

He wished she hadn’t overheard that conversation. “Ash, your dad did, he –”

“No he didn’t. Mom just said so. He didn’t want to see me.” She flinched as Mulder tried to wipe her tears away. “He hated me.”

“Your dad did not hate you,” stressed Mulder, wondering how much more this little girl had to endure. “Your mom said he’d never planned to have children. He wasn’t ready. That was nothing to do with you at all. It was your dad’s problem, not yours.” He knew his words weren’t making her feel any better. “And you know what? It doesn’t matter what your dad thought.” That was technically a lie. Ashley certainly cared about her dad’s opinion of her. “You wanna know why?”

After a moment, Ashley shook her head. “Because I love you kiddo.” He crouched down, cradling her face in her hands. “You’re my little girl and I love you more than you’ll ever know. Your mom’s right. I’m not your biological dad, but as far as I’m concerned, you are mine.”

“You never wanted children either though,” Ashley responded accusingly.

“Who said that?” He grinned. “I never thought kids would be in my future, but then I met you. You changed my mind about all that, and I can’t imagine life without you. You’re one of the most important people in my life, and I’m going to remind you of that every day. So you see,” he continued, realizing with relief that Ashley’s tears were subsiding. “It doesn’t matter what your dad thought, because you are still loved so very much. And personally, I think your dad was an idiot for not realizing how awesome you are. I’m just glad I get to hang out with you and watch you grow up into the most amazing young lady. And I’m going to stick around too, and be here for you for a long long time.”

“Please don’t leave me Mulder.”

“Oh sweetheart, I’m never going to leave you, ever.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Ashley wrapped her arms around Mulder’s neck, hugging him so tightly he could barely breathe, but he didn’t care. All he cared about was making the little girl – his little girl happy. “I love you Mulder,” she murmured against his neck, and as Mulder brushed his hands through her hair, he repeated the words back to her. It was then that he sensed movement in front of him, and his eyes darted up to see Bill stood in the doorway. For a moment he thought Scully’s brother was going to say something, to interrupt their moment and tell Ashley to keep away from Mulder, but he didn’t. What looked like tears glistened in Bill’s eyes, and Mulder knew he’d heard the entire exchange. He said nothing though, still watching them.

“Now,” said Mulder once Ashley had finally released him. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up, and I’ll meet you outside?”

“Can we go home?” Ashley asked hopefully.

“Not yet kiddo. But it’ll be cool to catch up with your cousins.”

“I guess,” she answered, clearly not sharing his enthusiasm.
“C’mon, you can do this. I’ll see you outside shortly.”

As Ashley reluctantly ran upstairs, Mulder walked towards the kitchen, passing by Bill. He wasn’t too surprised when Scully’s brother held out a hand to stop him from getting by. “She’s a good kid.”

“She’s a great kid.”

“Dana says you’re partly responsible for that.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“On the contrary, I think you’ve done a lot.” Bill nodded towards the stairs. “I umm…I underestimated the part you play in Ashley’s life, and I had no idea the role you played. Thank you…” he said, words which seemed to surprise both himself and Mulder. “…for being there for her, and for Dana too. They’ve been through a lot and I’m glad…” he sighed, and Mulder realized how hard it was for him to thank him. “I’m glad they had someone there for them.” Mulder’s eyes widened as Bill then held out his hand, and he moved to shake it. “It’s clear you mean a lot to Ashley.”

“She means a lot to me too.”

“I’m guessing we’ll be seeing a lot of you in the future at family events.”

“Maybe.”

“You take care of them Mulder.”

“I will.” And he meant it too.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder headed on out into the kitchen, his eyes catching sight of Scully as she attempted to balance a full tray of drinks in one hand, and open the back door with the other. “Hey let me help,” he said, careful not to startle her so that she dropped the tray.

“Thanks.” Smiling gratefully, Scully stepped back and waited for her partner to join her. He did, though he made no move to open the door, instead turning to face her.

“What?” She asked after a moment, feeling self-conscious as he studied her.

“Thank you.”

“Shouldn’t I be thanking you?” she nodded towards the door.

“I mean for earlier. With Bill.”

Scully’s smile faded, and she shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t realize you heard that.”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t about to mention Ashley; at least not yet. He didn’t want to start World War 3 between Scully and Bill, and he figured – or at least hoped – that Bill would apologize to his niece for what she overheard. “How come you didn’t deny our relationship to Bill?”

“Relationship?”

Ok, he was worried now. “Isn’t that what we have? Or have you changed…?” he trailed off as he
saw his partner smirk. “Ha ha.”

“Like I told Bill, it was none of his business. Besides,” she said coyly. “It’s no secret that you’re the most important man in my life, not to mention Ashley’s, and I wanted him to realize that you’re going to be around for a long time. I hope so anyway,” she added with a grin. “And I want you to know that I don’t want to hide our relationship. Not once Ashley knows anyway. You’ve been so patient with me in recent years and you put up with my terms. Not many men would do that you know.”

“I’m not like other men,” joked Mulder, though he appreciated his partner’s words.

“I just wanted you to know that I have faith in you Mulder. I have faith in us.”

Returning her smile, Mulder reached out, simply resting his hand on her hip. Though he wanted to kiss her, he made no move towards her, well aware her family were nearby. “I love you” he murmured, before reaching out to open the door for her and following her out into the yard.

“...........

“So,” said Charlie, as Scully came to stand by his side, handing him a beer. He was the self-proclaimed Head Chef, taking charge of the barbecue. Bill had offered to help out, but their partnership soon came to an end after an argument over chicken legs. Now Bill was no doubt sulking to Tara, while Mulder had been roped in to a game of basketball with the kids. Not that he minded, Scully noted with a wry smile. “How long has it been going on?”

“Has what been going on?” She took a sip of her juice, offering to be on driving duty to allow Mulder a drink. She figured after an afternoon with her family, he’d be the one in desperate need for alcohol.

“You and Mulder.”

His words took Scully by surprise, and she coughed hard, tears filling her eyes as she tried not to choke on her drink. Charlie grinned as he watched her compose herself. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh come off it Dana. It’s obvious.”

“What’s obvious?”

“The way you’re looking at one another.”

“And how are we looking at one another?”

“Similar to how I’m looking at this food,” he quipped, taking another swig of beer. He always did like to make fun of her, and now he was older, he didn’t stop.

“Quit it Charlie.”

“I heard you out in the kitchen earlier.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” But Scully’s smile betrayed her.

“I knew it! How long?”

“Will you shut your mouth?!” Scully exclaimed, looking around the garden to make sure no one was listening in. Thankfully they weren’t. “Not long,” she added. “It’s all pretty new.”

“Very funny. It’s not public knowledge either so keep your mouth shut.”

“Aye aye captain,” he replied sarcastically, raising his free hand in salute. “So how is it? I mean how is he treating you?” he added, laughing. “I don’t want to know about that.”

Scully felt herself blush. “It’s going good.”

“He’s treating you ok? You know Bill has his reservations about him.”

“I know. Bill has made his feelings clear over the years. I think he’s coming round though.”

“He doesn’t think Mulder’s good enough for you.”

“He doesn’t think anyone’s good enough for me.”

“Truth.”

“Mulder’s a great guy, and he adores Ashley.”

“I can see that,” said Charlie, his eyes settling on Mulder as lifted Ashley up high in the air so she could make a slam dunk. “He’s good with her.”

“He’s great with her. Ashley loves him in return.”

Charlie nodded. “Does he make you happy?”

“You know what?” Scully said without hesitation. “He does.”

Lifting his bottle in a toast, Charlie patted his sister on the back. “I’ll drink to that.”
Scully pitched forward onto Mulder as she came, contracting around him. Three, four, five strokes later and he followed right behind her, bucking up into her. It was good, so good, and he ran his hands over her back as they both came down from their high. He noted with some amusement that they were both still fully clothed; Scully’s skirt was bunched around her waist and her cream blouse undone, her lacy black bra in full view. He hadn’t even managed to unhook it. The bra had taunted him all day after he caught sight of it in the office when she’d removed her jacket. She’d done it on purpose, had done it to distract him, he was sure of it, and now he was finally getting a close up view of it. He pressed his lips to her jaw, half tempted to leave a mark, to claim her as his own, but he knew she’d kill him, and he’d already pissed her off enough that day. Of course, that had led to some mind-blowing sex on the couch, so he made a mental note to annoy her at work as much as possible. It was only their second time – at least only their second time since Scully had told him she loved him, and already it felt like they’d been together for years. He couldn’t wait for the following weekend, where they could have time alone.

“That was…” Scully began, trying to catch her breath.

“God Scully. We’re good at this.”

She grinned against him. “Uh huh.”

“If I’d have known we were this good, I’d have seduced you years ago.” He heard her chuckle and pulled back to look at her. “What?” He clearly didn’t get the joke.

“Who says I’d have slept with you then?”

“You wouldn’t?” When she didn’t say anything he felt his ego deflate, until she leant forward and gave him a tender kiss and then all was forgiven.

“I think we got here when we were meant to,” she finally replied, pressing her forehead to his. “It just means we have to make up for lost time.”

Mulder grinned. “Yes we do. And if you give me an hour or so we can make up for last time again.”

“It’s a nice thought Stud…but Mom will be bringing Ashley home soon.”

“I thought we were going to tell Ashley soon.”

“Good point.” He began nibbling her neck, chuckling as Scully shrunk back. “Ticklish?” He raised his eyebrows in challenge, and Scully shook her head.

“Don’t even think about it. If you tickle me, I’ll shoot you.”

Raking his hands up and down her sides, Mulder’s grin widened. “I don’t see where you could possibly be hiding a gun on your person Scully.”

“Oh you’d be surprised…”

“So are we going to tell Ash tonight?” Not that there was anything to tell; Ashley already knew,
though Scully wasn’t aware of that.

“I think we should. We can’t hide it for –“ She paused as though listening for something, before her eyes went wide. “Shit. Get up!”

“What?”

“I hear voices. Get up!”

Before he could even register what happened, Scully had lifted herself off of him and run off, leaving Mulder alone. He stood up, making himself look presentable. No sooner had he sat back down, the front door opened and in walked Ashley, followed by Maggie. Smiling, Mulder greeted the two of them, secretly relieved his partner had good hearing.

Xxxxxxxxxxx

“How was your day sweetheart?” Scully asked, taking a seat opposite Ashley and Mulder at the dining table. Ashley was chasing some sweetcorn around her plate, seemingly disinterested in her dinner. Her mom looked over at Mulder who shrugged, not sure why the youngster was so quiet.

“It was ok,” Ashley sighed, the tone of her voice suggesting that it was anything but.

“You want a refill?” Mulder asked, gesturing to the empty glass that sat in front of the youngster. She nodded.

“Please.”

Collecting her glass along with his own, Mulder stood and headed out into the kitchen, allowing Scully and Ashley time to talk.

“How was your day sweetheart?” Scully asked, taking a seat opposite Ashley and Mulder at the dining table. Ashley was chasing some sweetcorn around her plate, seemingly disinterested in her dinner. Her mom looked over at Mulder who shrugged, not sure why the youngster was so quiet.

“It was ok,” Ashley sighed, the tone of her voice suggesting that it was anything but.

“You want a refill?” Mulder asked, gesturing to the empty glass that sat in front of the youngster. She nodded.

“Please.”

Collecting her glass along with his own, Mulder stood and headed out into the kitchen, allowing Scully and Ashley time to talk.

“Has something happened?”

“No.” Ashley didn’t sound too sure.

“Why was school just “ok”?”

“Holly isn’t coming next weekend.”

“To Megan’s sleepover?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

“Her stepdad said she can’t. Because she’s not coming, Megan’s going to cancel.”

“But I thought Holly was coming?”

“Her mom said she could but her stepdad overruled her and said Holly has to go out with them instead.” Ashley’s disappointment was evident as she played with her food.

“There’ll be another time sweetheart.”

“It’s not fair. Holly was always allowed out, but now her stepdad won’t let her.”

“I guess she has to have family time every now and then, just like you do.”
“I know,” Ashley sighed heavily. “But you’re fair and you let me go to sleepovers. So did Holly’s mom before she got married. I’m so glad it’s just us mom,” she added, while Scully stopped in her tracks. Here she and Mulder were about to come clean about their relationship, while Ashley was quite happy having her mom to herself.

Unaware of the conversation, Mulder sauntered back in to the dining area, armed with two full glasses of water. He placed one to Ashley’s right before sitting back down next to her. “Hey, wanna hear something that will cheer you up?”

As Ashley gave him a weary look, Mulder felt something connect with his ankle. He winced in pain and shot Scully a look. She was trying to tell him something, but he couldn’t quite make out what. “Your mom and I have something to tell you.” Another blow to the ankle, and this time he knew for sure that Scully had been the culprit. This time when he looked over to her, her eyes were wide and she shook her head just barely. He frowned. Scully had been all for sharing their news with Ashley, but now for some reason she’d changed her mind.

“What Mulder?” Aware that he now had her attention but that his news wasn’t welcome, Mulder racked his brain for something to say.

“There’s dessert in the fridge.”

xxxxx

“Are you going to tell me what happened earlier?” Mulder asked, as Scully entered the living room, Queequeg hot on her heels. Ashley had just gone off to bed after a marathon round of Mario Kart with Mulder, finally giving them a chance to talk. “So much for “hey let’s tell Ashley tonight”.”

Smiling sheepishly, Scully took a seat next to him, her hand immediately coming to rest on top of his thigh. “I’m sorry.”

“I thought we’d agreed.”

“We did.”

“And then you changed your mind.” There was no hint of accusation in his voice, just disappointment.

“I know, and I’m sorry. When you were out in the kitchen, Ashley was talking about her friend and then said how glad she was that it’s just her and me. I don’t know, it just didn’t feel like the right time.”

“Will it ever feel like the right time?”

“Of course it will.” She took hold of his hand. “Mulder this is…Ashley has never really known what it’s like for me to be in a relationship, and this is a big thing for the both of us. For all of us actually.” He nodded in agreement. “It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever told her. I know she wants us together and she worships the ground you walk on, but it’s a lot for her to take in. I just wanted it to feel right before we said anything. I’m sorry.”

Softening, Mulder let go of Scully’s hand then, slipping his arm around her, pulled her in towards him, kissing her forehead. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It can wait.”
“Tomorrow?”

“Whenever feels right.” He felt her tense against him. “I mean it. One more day can’t hurt.” He wanted to tell her that Ashley already knew something had happened between them, but it didn’t feel like the right time. Besides, he knew Scully would feel put out that neither of them had said anything to her.

“I know you wanted to tell her.”

“It’s ok. We will tell her. Like you said, it’s a big step to take. She’s used to us always being around one another, but not like this.”

“I do love you, you know.”

“I know. And I love you too. That’s why I’ll wait.” After kissing him, Scully pulled away, and stifled a yawn. “Am I boring you?”

“I’m sorry, I’m tired.”

“That’s ok.” Glancing down at his watch, Mulder released his hold on Scully. “I’d better head off.”

“You can stay if you like.”

“What about Ashley?”

“She’s asleep.”

Mulder shook his head. “No, I mean what are we going to tell her in the morning? She knows we aren’t working tonight.”

“We’ll make sure we’re awake before her. It’s just been a long day. I’m not proposing anything, but I’d like to fall asleep next to you tonight.”

It was rare that Scully asked Mulder for anything and so, after realizing that he’d like to fall asleep next to her too, he nodded. “Ok. I’ll stay.”

Smiling gratefully, Scully picked up the remote, switched the television off and then, getting to her feet, took hold of her partner’s hand and led him to bed.

xxxxxxxxxx

“Jesus,” whispered Mulder barely 30 minutes later, slipping into bed and pulling his side of the comforter up over him. “Your bathroom floor is freezing.” As though trying to prove his point, he shifted closer to Scully, pressing his icy cold feet against hers. She took a sharp intake of breath as she felt the chill.

“Ouch, Mulder!”

“Ssssh!” Chuckling, Mulder killed the lamp and then shifted in the bed, pulling Scully in towards him. “You’re so hot.”

“Thanks.”

“And you’re warm too.”

“Oh that’s bad,” Scully whispered, groaning at his poor attempt at a joke. She nuzzled up to
Mulder, pressing a kiss to his neck as she threw her leg over his. He hummed contentedly, running his hand up and down her back. As she began a trail of kisses up towards his ear, small alarm bells sounded off in his head.

“Umm Scully?”

“Hmm?”

“I thought you didn’t want to do this tonight.”

“I didn’t.” This time a kiss to the back of his ear, with a hint of tongue. “I changed my mind.” Mulder willed himself not to get his hopes up, aware that Scully was tired, and Ashley was sleeping next door. But then Scully captured his lips with her own, slipping her tongue into his mouth, and he forgot all about protesting.

The kiss intensified quickly, clothes were shed and pretty soon Mulder found himself inside of his partner once again. “God you feel good,” he exclaimed, a little louder than he intended, but it wasn’t his fault. When he was inside of Scully, he couldn’t think straight.

“Can you go…” Scully murmured breathlessly, raking her fingernails up and down his back, well aware it drove him crazy. “Just a little bit faster?”

Mulder sped up his thrusts, unable to deny her anything even though he knew it would be his undoing. Barely half a dozen strokes later and he felt Scully contract around him, letting out a sound almost like a wail as she climaxed. Mulder tried to ignore her, knowing full well she would be his undoing. “Holy crap Scully –“

“Mom, are you ok?” Without warning the door burst open and Ashley appeared. Thankfully the lights were out, thought Scully, as Mulder pulled up off of her, and they both quickly sat up, grateful for the comforter concealing their modesty. But it seemed they weren’t quite as quick as they hoped, if Ashley’s reaction was anything to go by.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, clearly flustered. “I heard a shout and I’m….I’m sorry.” Backtracking out of the room, Ashley turned on her heel and hurried back to her own room, leaving Mulder and Scully alone with their embarrassment.

“Oh my god,” Scully groaned. “I’m the worst mom in the world.”

“Want me to go talk to her?” Mulder asked, hoping that Scully would decline his offer. He was still struggling to think straight.

Scully shook her head in the moonlight. “I’ll go. I think it’s better coming from me.” Giving him an apologetic kiss, Scully pushed back the duvet and got out of bed, grabbing her bathrobe from the side and putting it on as she made her way away from her daughter. When she reached the bedroom, she found Ashley already back in bed, about to switch out her lamp. When her daughter caught her eye and looked away, Scully knew that Ashley knew exactly what she and Mulder had been up to. “Are you ok sweetheart?” she asked nervously. She hadn’t been given training on how to deal with a daughter who’d just caught her having sex with a man she thought was just a family friend.

Scully was going to tell Ashley about the shift in her and Mulder’s relationship – honestly she was – but now she didn’t need to. Ashley had seen for herself exactly what was going on between them.

“I’m sorry.” Ashley sounded just as embarrassed as her mom felt. “I heard you shout and I called and you didn’t answer. I was worried. I’m sorry, I should have knocked.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for. I’m the one who should be saying sorry,” said Scully as she
headed on into her daughter’s room and perched on the edge of the bed. “We didn’t mean for that to happen. I…I presume you know what you saw?”

Ashley nodded, and both mother and daughter were spotting matching red cheeks. “I should have told you that Mulder and I were more than friends.” Before Ashley could interrupt, to say she already knew, Scully continued. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up. I know Mulder means the world to you. I’m just sorry that you found out like this. It’s important to remember that Mulder and I care a lot about one another.”

“You said that people have sex when they love one another,” answered Ashley timidly.

“They do.”

“Do you love Mulder?”

After a moment, Scully nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“What?”

“I heard you cry out. That’s why I walked in.”

Scully just wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. “No, he didn’t sweetie. Mulder would never hurt me.”

Ashley nodded to herself. “Good.”

“I should have asked you your thoughts about this. Well not this,” Scully stressed. “But about Mulder and I. Because if you have a problem with us being together, you need to tell me, and you need to remember that you are still the most important person in my life. It’s been the two of us for so long –”

“And Mulder too,” Ashley argued, and Scully had to agree.

“…We both still love you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Will you get married?”

Scully hesitated before shaking her head. “It’s complicated baby. Mulder and I work together. We’re not getting married anytime soon, but that doesn’t mean we don’t love one another.”

“Will Mulder stay over more often?”

“That’s up to you.”

“It’s ok with me if he does,” replied Ashley after considering her answer. “I promise I’ll knock next time.”

Chuckling, Scully reached out and embraced her daughter, sad in a way that Ashley was growing up – that she was having this conversation with her baby. She also made a mental note to check that the lock on her door still worked. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Now get some sleep.”
“Ok.” Ashley settled herself down into the bed as Scully pulled the covers up over her daughter. “Will Mulder be staying for breakfast?”

“Uh, he might.” Scully hadn’t thought that far ahead, and she wasn’t entirely sure Mulder would want to stay after their unexpected interruption. “Is it ok if he does?”

Ashley nodded, before letting out an impressive yawn. “Now get to sleep young lady, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night night.” It didn’t take long for Ashley to fall asleep, and Scully sat by her daughter’s bedside until she drifted off, before heading back to her own room.

When she entered, she found Mulder sat at the end of the bed, now dressed in his boxers and t-shirt, looking up expectantly. He looked like a man on trial, waiting to learn his fate, and Scully couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t look so scared Mulder.” She closed the door firmly and padded over to where he sat, coming to a standstill right in front of him.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to leave.”

“Ashley says it’s ok if you stay for breakfast.”

At this he relaxed somewhat. Stepping forward into the vee of his legs, Scully took hold of his hands and placed them on her back, wanting him to hold her.

“Is she ok?”

“She’s fine. A little confused, not to mention embarrassed.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s a rite of passage. I walked in on my parents once.”

“Oh god.” Mulder rested his head against her stomach. “I can’t believe she saw us.”

“I’m sorry, it was my fault.”

“I shouldn’t have made you feel so good.” Mulder laughed as Scully’s hand connected with the back of his head. “Is she ever going to speak to me again?”

“Ashley’s fine. Once the initial embarrassment was over she was back to her usual self.”

“God.”

“I know I said I wanted to tell her about us this evening, but that wasn’t quite the way I wanted it to happen,” said Scully, laughing to herself as she stepped out of Mulder’s arms. Slipping off her bathrobe, she located her pjs that she’d hurriedly discarded earlier, and put them back on. “Just in case,” she quipped, her eyes twinkling.

“You want me to sleep on the sofa?” It seemed Mulder was having a hard time with his guilt.

“It’s a bit late for that.” Climbing back into bed, Scully glanced over and realized he wasn’t joking. “No Mulder, I want you to sleep in my bed.”

“That’s what you said earlier, and look what happened.”

“This time I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”
“I am irresistible though. Just remember that.”

“Shut up Mulder, and get into bed.”

Finally grinning to himself, Mulder did as Scully said, and made a mental note to see about a lock on her bedroom door.

When Mulder woke and glanced at the clock, he noticed it was just before eight. Too late to go back to sleep, but too early to wake Scully, he got out of bed, careful not to jostle his partner as she slumbered on beside him, wrapped up in the comforter. It was no wonder he was so damn cold, he thought to himself with a smile. She’d stolen most of the covers. Slipping into his jeans, Mulder headed to the bathroom to relieve himself and wash up, before continuing to the kitchen, where he decided to make a start on breakfast. When he opened the fridge however, he realized he didn’t have a great deal to work with. Closing the door, Mulder turned towards the cupboards, hoping Scully at least had some bread, when he noticed Ashley stood in the doorway. “Morning,” he said cheerfully – a little too cheerfully.

“Morning.” Her eyes were downcast, unwilling to meet his gaze.

“Has your mom got any eggs in the cupboard?”

Ashley shrugged. Things were awkward, far more awkward than Mulder anticipated, and he had no idea how to make it better.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“I’ll get something later,” Ashley replied as she turned to walk away from him.

Realizing she was going to do her utmost to avoid him, Mulder decided he wasn’t about to let that happen. “Ok,” he said firmly, not about to take ‘no’ for an answer. “Go get dressed and I’ll take you for breakfast. We need to talk.”

They headed out to a bakery barely ten minutes’ walk from Scully’s apartment. Mulder had attempted to make light conversation, but Ashley had simply provided him with the minimal of answers. She wasn’t making it easy for him. Arriving at the bakery, Mulder ordered a selection of pastries to them all, keeping a selection back for Scully, a cup of coffee for himself and a juice for Ashley, then directed her to a table in the corner. She sat down and immediately started on breakfast, her eyes downcast as she tried to shut him out. Mulder took a seat next to her, determined that she wasn’t going to ignore him for much longer.

“Alright then, what’s the matter?” Ashley stared at him blankly. “If this is about last night, then I’m sorry. I know your mom has spoken to you already about that, but –“

“If you hurt my mom,” the youngster warned. “I’ll kill you.” If she hadn’t looked so serious, Mulder would have laughed.

“What makes you think I’ll hurt her?”
She shrugged. “She loved my dad once and he hurt her. I don’t want the same to happen to her again.”

“I am not Jack,” he replied firmly. “I love your mom, and I’d never knowingly hurt her.

“You love her?” She met his eye this time, and despite the fact she was trying to act annoyed with him, she looked delighted by his admission.

“That surprises you?” After a moment, she shook her head. “I have admitted it before you know.”

“Mom said she didn’t know if you were serious.”

“Well I am.”

“And she loves you too?”

“She does. You know,” he added. “I’m not trying to come between you and your mom. As far as I’m concerned, this changes nothing. I know what you guys have, and I’d never try to take your mom away from you. I love you both.”

“I know,” Ashley admitted, taking a swig of her drink. “Are you going to stay at ours more?”

“That’s up to you and your mom.”

“Are you going to live with us?”

“Hold your horses there Ash, one step at a time. Your mom and I aren’t going to rush into anything.”

“Are you at least going to take her out on a date?” She asked once again. She had a point.

“I might, if that’s ok with you. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a good idea.”

“Yeah?” She nodded. “Well maybe you can help me plan something.”

“Ok.” She seemed happier now. “You should take her somewhere nice, with candles. And pull her chair out for her and tell her she looks pretty. And bring flowers too.”

Mulder couldn’t help but grin. Scully would probably want him checked over by a medical professional if he turned up on her doorstep with a dozen roses. That or have him arrested, thinking Eddie van Blundht had returned. “I could do that.”

“But you have to treat her nice because she deserves it. You can’t ever make her cry though, because I don’t like to see her cry.”

“I don’t like to see her cry either.”

“Just don’t hurt her. Because I love you, but I’ll still kick your butt if you upset my mom.”

“Ash.” His breakfast forgotten, Mulder reached across for her hand. “I promise I won’t.”

“Cross your heart.”

“I cross my heart that I’ll do whatever it takes to make your mom happy, ok?” She nodded. “So
we’re ok now?”

After a beat, Ashley’s lips curved up into a grin. “We’re ok.”

By the time they returned to Scully’s apartment, she was up and recently-showered, clad in a pale blue bathrobe with her hair wet, the ends beginning to curl. Sat on the sofa nursing a freshly-brewed coffee, she jumped up as the door opened, her expression full of uncertainty. “Hi,” she said nervously. “I got your note. I wasn’t sure what time to expect you back.” Setting down her mug, she smoothed down her robe. “Did you guys have a good breakfast?”

As Ashley closed the front door, Mulder walked over to his partner, kissing her on the lips as he handed her the bag of pastries. He knew she’d complain about the calories, but it still wouldn’t stop her from tucking in. “We come bearing gifts.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Everything ok?”

“Everything’s ok.” Glancing back at Ashley, Mulder winked at the teenager before turning back to her mom. “Hey Scully. Are you free next Saturday?”

“Why?”

“Because you and I are on a date. And this time,” he added in a soft whisper, so only she could hear. “We find a babysitter.”
Chapter 94

When the door opened, the last thing Mulder expected to see was his partner stood opposite him, still dressed in the work attire he’d last seen her in two hours ago, minus the shoes. It was the weekend they’d – or at least he’d – been waiting for ever since Scully had suggested she ask Maggie to take Ashley for the weekend. Mulder was there to take Scully out for dinner – on their first actual date – and then after that they didn’t have any firm plans, but he presumed he’d be spending the night, if not the best part of the weekend at Chez Scully’s. Apparently not.

She looked up guiltily, and it was then that he realized that his plans for the evening were on tenterhooks. “I know I said tonight’s location was a surprise Scully, but I’d have thought you’d have known it wasn’t the office.”

When she didn’t laugh, he knew he’d be eating takeout at best. “Mulder, where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you?”

“I’ve been at home.”

“You haven’t been answering your cell.”

“My phone hasn’t…wait a second…” Retrieving his cell phone, Mulder tried pressing the power button. “Damn it, my battery’s dead. What’s up?”

“My mom’s sick. She can’t take Ashley this weekend. I’m sorry.” She looked it too; she’d been looking forward to their dinner date ever since Mulder had suggested it earlier that week. It would have been a chance for the two of them to spend time together outside of work, not to mention give them time to talk alone. Since the morning after Ashley had caught them and learned about their relationship, they hadn’t really seen each other, save for work, and neither were about to discuss their love life in the office. He’d called her a few nights ago, checking that Maggie was still ok to look after Ashley, and telling Scully they had reservations. Though he hadn’t told her where for, he had insisted it was at least a step or two up from McDonalds. Now it appeared his plans would have to be put on hold. “I called Emma too, but she’s got other plans tonight.”

“It’s ok.” A thought came to mind. Their dinner for two could easily become one for three, he was sure of it, though no doubt the venue would have to change thanks to a picky Ashley. “Scully, get dressed.”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I said? My mom can’t take Ashley.”

“I know, but go get dressed.”

“Mulder –“

“ASHLEY?” Mulder called out, hoping that Ashley could hear him from her bedroom over the sound of her music. He tried again, and this time she must have heard his shout, as moments later she wandered out into the living room, smiling, albeit shyly as she recognised her visitor. They were back on good terms after their recent breakfast together, but things still seemed a little awkward.

“Hi Mulder.”

“How do you fancy going out to dinner tonight?”

After a moment she nodded. “Cool.”
“Go put on your glad rags and meet me out front in half an hour.”

“Can I get pizza?”

“I’m sure I can do pizza.” Satisfied with his answer, Ashley ran off in the direction of her bedroom, no doubt to raid her wardrobe for the perfect outfit.

Scully looked between her partner and daughter. “Mulder, I’m not ready.”

“I know you’re not. So Go. Get. Dressed,” he repeated insistently.

“Where are we going?”

“Out. Scully, please. You have half an hour.” He looked at his watch. “Make that 28 minutes, and the longer you talk, the less time you’ll have.”

“I need a shower.”

“So go shower.”

“I’m sorry about this.”

Mulder sobered and reached out, pulling her in towards him. Scully attempted to push him away, mindful of the fact her daughter was only in the next room.

“Mulder –“

“Scully, you have nothing to apologize for.”

“I know we weren’t supposed to have company tonight.”

“No, we weren’t, but it’ll be fun. You know I love spending time with Ashley, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but this wasn’t what you had in mind.”

“Well I must admit, I did imagine sneaking a few more kisses than I will now.” He leaned in and pressed his lips against Scully’s, and smiled as she jumped back.

“Mulder, I don’t want to make Ashley uncomf– “

“I know, I know, I promise I’ll behave myself. Now go get ready. 27 minutes Scully.”

Sighing dramatically, Scully stepped out of his grasp and walked away, already missing his touch.

Xxxxxxxxxxx

What was supposed to be a top-rated restaurant had to become just a regular diner with the addition of Ashley and her sometimes fussy eating habits. She certainly didn’t seem to mind and thankfully neither did Scully, no doubt relieved that she wouldn’t have to do the dishes that evening. Though it certainly wasn’t the way Mulder expected the night to pan out, he always loved spending time with both Scully and Ashley. He’d just have to wait to get Scully by herself.

“Are you sure you’re gonna eat all those?” he asked Ashley, who’d just polished off a burger as big as she was, and was now making a start on her fries.

“Why, you want some?”
As he made a move to sneak a fry, she tapped him on the hand. “Yes I’m going to eat all those.”

“Please don’t make yourself sick just to prove a point to Mulder,” Scully warned. “I remember that happening before.”

“I can’t believe you guys were going to come here without me,” said Ashley.

“Well, we weren’t exactly planning to come here at first,” answered Mulder carefully. “But we knew it was your favorite place to eat.”

“Where were you going to go if I went to Grandma’s?”

“I’m not sure sweetheart.” Scully looked over at her partner for confirmation. “Mulder was organizing it.”

“Oh just another place a few blocks away from here,” he said dismissively, not wanting to ruin the surprise for next time.

“Wait.” Suddenly it clicked. “Is this like a date?” Ashley asked suddenly, glancing between both adults. “Was this why I was going to Grandma’s? I thought you were just going out for dinner!”

She was too damn intelligent, thought Mulder. Either that or he was too damn obvious. He saw Scully blush and knew his cheeks were matching. “Do you ever stop asking questions?” he asked with a grin. Ashley smiled, knowing full well she was right. “You brought mom to a diner on a date?”

“Well, I –“

“You should have gone to a real restaurant, with candles and -“

That had been the idea. “Well we were supposed to but –“ Before Mulder could continue, Ashley directed her questioning to Scully. “Hey mom, where did you go on your first date?”

“My first ever date?”

“Uh uh.”

“Umm let me think.”

“How old were you?”

“I was sixteen,” Scully replied.

“Don’t even think about dating when you’re sixteen,” Mulder warned Ashley. “I’m not letting you out of the house until you’re at least thirty six.”

She poked her tongue out at him in response before resuming her interrogation. “What was his name?”

“His name was Shaun.”

“Shaun,” Mulder repeated to himself, now suddenly interested.

“Where you did you go?”

“We went bowling,” answered Scully, and Ashley wrinkled her nose in disgust.
“Bowling? On a first date?”

“We were sixteen!”

“Was he cute?”

Mulder wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer to Ashley’s question.

“He was. He turned up early —”

“Did he bring flowers?”

“He did.” Scully smiled, and Mulder realized that Shaun had one up on him. He’d turned up at Scully’s apartment empty handed. “They looked like they’d been stolen from my neighbor’s yard though.”

“So you went bowling?” Ashley asked.

“We did. And when I kicked his ass two games in a row, he got grumpy and took me home, barely speaking to me.”

“Did you see him again?” Mulder asked.

“I did. Although funnily enough we never went bowling again.”

“That sounds fun,” commented Ashley.

“It was.” Scully gave Mulder a sweet smile as she realized he was jealous of a sixteen year old guy Scully hadn’t laid eyes on in years. “But you know what? I’m having a lot more fun tonight than I did then.”

They were the right words, and Mulder grinned back over at her. Little did she know he had a plan forming.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“I am so stuffed I don’t think I can ever eat anything ever again.”

“I told you not to eat dessert.”

“It was so good though.”

“Well then, you only have yourself to blame.”

Mulder grinned from the driving seat. It made him smile when Ashley and Scully were like this. He was, of course, keeping quiet, not wanting to get drawn into any argument.

“Hey Mulder?” came a voice from the backseat.

“Hmm?”

“Where are we going?”

Scully leaned forward in the passenger seat, trying to see if she recognized the neighborhood they were driving through. “This isn’t the way home.”

“Who said we’re going home?” He saw Scully glance at her watch. “It’s still early, and I’m pretty
sure Ashley doesn’t turn into a pumpkin until at least ten.”

“Or eleven,” the youngster in question piped up. “Or maybe midnight.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

And she did when, moments later, Mulder pulled up into a parking lot. He saw a look of recognition cross Scully’s face before she turned to him, shaking her head with a grin. “What are you like?”

“Bowling? Cool!” Suddenly Ashley’s discomfort was long forgotten.

“Mulder –“

“Hey Mulder, if mom beats you, are you going to ignore her like Shaun did?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Killing the engine, he turned to wink at Ashley. “Your mom’s not going to beat me.”

“Oh really?” Scully asked skeptically. “Who says?”

“I say. I’m great at bowling Scully.”

“And I’m not?”

“Maybe Shaun was just bad.”

“And maybe you should put your money where your mouth is.”

“Alright.” Unbuckling his seatbelt, Mulder grabbed the keys and slipped them into his pocket. “What’s the bet?”

“If I win, you have to do all the paperwork this month. Including expenses.”

“Aw Mom!” complained Ashley. “That’s boring!”

“Paperwork is boring sweetheart.”

Ashley shook her head. “It needs to be a real bet. Like…like if Mulder loses, he has to take you to a big fancy, expensive restaurant on your next date.”

“Ashley,” Scully warned, but now Mulder was interested.

“And if I win?” He clearly had no intention of losing.

“If you win, you get to take mom to a baseball match. Just the two of you.”

“Baseball?” Scully scrunched up her face.

“Sorry Scully,” Mulder said, extending his hand out. “Looks like you get another tutorial in baseball.”

“That’s if you win,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“When I win.” He glanced between the two girls. “In fact, to try and even it out a little more, I’ll
even let you two play as a team. Two versus one.”

After looking at Ashley for confirmation, Scully leaned forward in her seat, and shook her partner’s hand. “You’re on.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Mulder paused in the tying of his shoelaces to glance up, noticing his partner standing at the counter, her hands on her hips. Grinning, Ashley headed away from her mom and over towards him, taking a seat next to him.

“What’s up with your mom?”

“They don’t have her shoe size.”

“Oh?”

“They only have big huge clown feet sizes.” She giggled. “So she either has to play in them, or not play at all.”

“Well if she’s not playing at all, that means I’ve won the bet.”

As he resumed tying his shoes, he heard Ashley laugh once again. “Nice shoes mom.” He sat back up, unable to stifle his laughter as he saw Scully carefully making her way towards them in shoes that were way too big for her. “Don’t even say anything Fox Mulder,” she warned, as Mulder stood to greet her. “Or I’ll shoot you.”

“Take me out to the ballgame,” he grinned, and led them towards their lane.

“Yes!” Mulder exclaimed as the second ball knocked down the three remaining pins, earning him a spare. He turned to face Scully and Ashley, triumphant.

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Big deal,” she said, not particularly happy that Mulder had scored big on his first round.

“Big deal? It’s a spare.” He nudged Ashley as she walked past him to select her bowling ball. “Don’t be a sore loser.”

“Whatever.” Having selected her ball, Ashley walked up to the lane and prepared to bowl.

“Go steady Ash, whatever you do, don’t miss —”

“Mulder —” warned Scully, just as Ashley turned to chastise him, letting go of the ball.

“Damn it!” she cursed, watching as the ball went running down the lane, near to the gutter.

“Language Ashley,” but Ashley wasn’t listening to her mom, instead her attention caught by the ball, which had spun and was now nearing the middle of the lane.

“Oh my god!” she exclaimed, as the ball went crashing into the center of the pins, knocking all ten of them down. She turned to face her mom, jumping up and down. “I got a strike mom! I got a strike!”
“You did!” Scully stood to high five her daughter, then turned to Mulder, grinning smugly.
“Dinner’s on you then.”
“Hey mom. How about this?” Scully looked up at Ashley, who held a long, grey dress in her hand, and considered it.

“Hmm it’s ok.”

“Shall I add it to the “maybe” pile?”

“Ok.” Scully returned her attention to the rail in front of her, and sifted through the dozens of dresses, trying to find one she actually liked. It was D-Day, or at least D-Night – Date Night – the evening that Mulder was going to take her to a far too expensive restaurant, in return for Scully and Ashley whipping his ass in their bowling contest the previous weekend. Despite the fact his pride had been dented, Mulder was a gracious loser, immediately making reservations for the two of them. Scully had tried to protest – after all it was a very expensive restaurant, but Mulder had insisted. It had been in the terms and conditions of the bet after all, and they’d shook on it. Ashley was excited at the prospect of their first real date, and so had encouraged her mom to go shopping for the perfect dress. Scully had protested that she had enough clothes as it was, but she never could say no to her daughter.

“This one?”

When Scully looked up, she noticed Ashley was now holding up what looked to be a mid-length midnight blue dress. She considered it. “I like it. What do you think?”

Ashley grinned.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Ok.” Glancing at her reflection one more time in the mirror, Scully turned and then pulled open the curtain to her changing booth. Ashley stood the opposite side, a grin forming on her face as she took in her mom’s appearance. “What do you think?”

“I think Mulder will love it,” Ashley replied.

“I don’t care about Mulder right now; I want to know what you think.”

“I love it too. You look beautiful mom.”

“Thank you.” Scully turned back towards the mirror, chewing her lip in thought. The dress was indeed mid-length, falling to just above the knee. It was a sleeveless gown with a plunging – though not indecent – neckline, accentuating her curves, but it was a dress she’d wear in front of her mom. Ashley was right though, she thought to herself with a small smile. Mulder would love it. “I think this is the one.”

She caught sight of Ashley behind her, nodding. “I think you’re right mom.”

“Ok. Can you help me with the zipper?”

Ashley stepped into the room and pulled on the zip of the dress. As Scully watched her daughter in the mirror, she noticed that something seemed to be on her mind; Ashley appeared deep in thought. “Are you ok baby?”
Ashley nodded.

“Are you ok with Mulder and I doing this?” she asked, a thought that had been worrying her ever since Ashley had found out about their relationship. Though Ashley was used to Mulder being around, she hadn’t ever really seen Scully in a relationship before. This was all new to her.

“I’m happy for you.”

Smiling, Scully turned back to her daughter. “What’s wrong sweetheart?”

As Ashley shrugged, her mom noticed with horror that her eyes had clouded with tears.

“Ashley, you know you can tell me anything.” Realizing the curtain was still open, Scully pulled it shut, affording her and her daughter some privacy from any passing customers.

“I like Mulder,” she said, sniffing.

Scully couldn’t help but chuckle. “I know you do baby.”

“Am I a bad person for loving him more than my dad?”

There it was again. Every now and then Ashley brought up the subject of Jack and made Scully feel terrible that her daughter had missed out on time with him.

“Of course you’re not,” she said, forgetting all about the dress and pulling Ashley into her arms. She could feel her daughter’s tears soaking through the material, but she didn’t care. She’d buy the dress regardless if it meant being about to console Ashley. “You’re not a bad person at all.”

“I know my dad didn’t love me,” Ashley sniffed as she pulled away. “I heard you telling Uncle Bill when we were at grandma’s the other week.”

“Bill….” Scully trailed off, remembering the afternoon in her mom’s kitchen, explaining to her brother how Jack never bothered with his daughter.

“I know he didn’t want to spend time with me, and I know he never wanted me.”

“Baby –“

“It’s ok,” she said. “I heard you say.”

“I’m sorry you heard that,” Scully admitted, sad that Ashley had kept it to herself since then. “It wasn’t you your dad didn’t want. He never wanted children. I wish it had been different and he spent more time with you. I’m sorry he did that to you and he made you feel unloved.”

“Mulder loves me,” stated Ashley, wiping away her tears.

“I know he does, and I’m so glad you have him.”

“He heard Uncle Bill too.”

Scully grimaced. She could kill her brother sometimes, and now was no exception. She made a mental note later that day to apologize to Mulder too. “I’m sorry that you both heard that. Your Uncle Bill was out of line.”

“Mulder said it didn’t matter what my dad thought of me.”
“He did?” Scully brushed her daughter’s hair back from her face, looking into her watery eyes. She felt like crying herself.

“He said that he may not be my real dad, but that I was his anyway.”

The realization that Mulder said those words to Ashley – and truly meant them – made Scully’s own eyes fill with tears. “He’s right.”

“So I’m ok with you guys dating.”

Smiling, Scully nodded. “It means a lot to hear you say that. And I’m sorry that your Uncle Bill said all that, and I’m so sorry about your dad. He was making more of an effort before he died though, and he did want to spend more time with you. Just remember though that whatever happens, Mulder and I both love you, and we’re so proud of you. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, and I don’t regret any of it. If your dad could see you now, I bet he’d kick himself at everything he’s missed out on.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. I may be pretty biased but I think you’re awesome, and so does Mulder.”

“I love you mom,” said Ashley, stepping into her mom’s arms once again.

“I love you too. Do you want to come to dinner with me and Mulder tonight?” Scully wasn’t sure she wanted to leave Ashley at her friend’s house if she was so upset.

Ashley shook her head against her. “Maybe next time.”

“Ok.”

“Tonight is your fancy date.”

There was the child she recognized, thought Scully, as Ashley stepped back, a cheeky smile now gracing her lips.

“It is. I’m going to need your help getting ready.”

“Can I do your makeup?”

“Um…” It had been a while since Scully had let her, and the last time resulted in a lot of makeup remover. “You can paint my nails?”

Ashley seemed satisfied at that. “Deal.”

“Well then, let me go buy this dress, and then how about we go get a drink before heading home to get ready?” Her daughter nodded, her mood now lifted. “I’ll be out in a sec,” she said, as Ashley started to head out of the room to give her mom some privacy. “Oh and sweetheart?” Ashley turned to face her. “Don’t ever feel guilty for loving Mulder,” she said, grateful once again that he was there for her daughter.
“Ok sweetheart, call me tomorrow when you’re ready and I’ll come collect you.”

“Ok.” Ashley tapped on the door of her friend Holly’s house and waited patiently for someone to answer.

“Behave yourself,” Scully warned.

“You behave yourself,” her daughter retorted with a grin, the tears she shed when they were out shopping now a thing of the past. “And tell Mulder not to play Mario without me.”

“Mulder and I are going out to dinner.”

“I know. But isn’t he staying over?”

Scully’s cheeks reddened. “Umm I’m not sure.”

“Well if he wants to stay over, he can. It’s cool with me.”

“Thank you,” her mom answered, unsure of what to say. She couldn’t quite believe she was having this conversation with her daughter. Thankfully their chat was interrupted by Holly opening the door, giving Scully the excuse she needed to leave.

Xxxxxxxxxx

“Oh my god.” Scully got into the car, closing the door firmly behind her.

“What?” Mulder sat behind the wheel, tapping his fingers along to a song on the radio, chewing on one of his endless supply of sunflower seeds. He paused to look over at his partner.

“I think Ashley just gave us permission to have sex tonight.”

Mulder blinked and coughed on his sunflower seed. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“You wanna go have sex?” he asked after a moment, a grin forming.

“Well…” Scully, bless her heart, actually pretended to give it some serious thought. “I am quite hungry.”

“Right.”

“And the bet was dinner.”

“It was.”

“So…eat first, have sex later?”

As Scully smirked, Mulder started up the car, eager to get on with their date.

xxxxxxxxxx

“This place is nice,” commented Scully, glancing around the restaurant as she sipped her sparkling
“It is.” Mulder shifted uncomfortably, his hand moving to loosen his tie oh so slightly. Scully smiled to herself. It was endearing to see just how out of his depth he looked sitting in the classy restaurant. Granted, Scully herself felt out of place; usually the two of them settled for cheap diners rather than actual restaurants with stainless steel cutlery, real napkins and candles glimmering on the table. Hell this place didn’t even feature prices on the menu – that was how expensive it was. It was no wonder both of them felt a little uncomfortable – their meal tonight would probably cost in the region of a month’s salary if the look of the restaurant was anything to go by.

Mulder looked up as Scully suddenly got to her feet and walked around the table to stand beside him. “Get up Mulder.”

“What?”

“Get up.”

He did as she asked, wondering what was wrong; whether she wanted to leave. His confusion only intensified when Scully reached out and pushed his jacket off of his shoulders. “Scully –“

“Ssh.”

She removed his jacket, reaching around to drape it over the back of his chair, and then her hands moved in for his tie. He stilled. “Scully,” he murmured. “I know I asked about having sex earlier, but I didn’t mean here.”

Grinning, she shook her head. “Shut up Mulder.” Once his tie was removed, she loosened the top button of his shirt, then stood back to admire her handiwork. “Much better.”

“You don’t like my tie?”

“Actually,” she said as she returned to her seat. “For once your tie isn’t too bad. It just looked like it was choking you. Now you at least look comfortable,” she added, though Mulder still looked a little apprehensive.

Returning her smile, Mulder sat down and took a swig of his own water, his eyes never leaving hers. It was unnerving, thought Scully, but at the same time she relished it. She was pretty sure that no man had ever looked at her the way Mulder was at that moment.

“You look good Scully,” he said suddenly.

She gave him a shy smile. “Thank you.” She was wearing the blue dress she’d bought earlier that day with Ashley’s approval, and matching peep toe shoes they’d found after their break for coffee. She didn’t think she looked too different to any other time Mulder had seen her, save for her dress and a smidgen more makeup than usual, but Mulder clearly thought otherwise. “This place is great,” she tried again. “I’m not sure how you managed to wangle us reservations here, but you did a good job. It’s been a while since I’ve visited a proper restaurant.”

“What about your nights out with Ellen?”

“Bar food,” she explained with a grin. This time she opted for a drink of her wine, having been alternating between that and her water, not wanting the alcohol to go to her head too quickly.

“Ah of course.” That always explained why she was so buzzed when she returned home, Mulder realized, trying not to laugh at the memory of Scully last time, performing her little striptease for water.
him out in the living room and calling him “honey.” “So umm…how’s Ash?”

Scully cocked her head, eyeing him strangely. “Mulder, you saw her less than an hour ago.”

Busted. “I know, I meant at school. She hasn’t mentioned it lately and –“

“Mulder, what’s wrong?”

“What?”

“You look like you’d rather be anywhere else but here at the moment, and now you’re only wanting to talk about Ashley. Is something bothering you?”

After a moment, Mulder let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. He took a quick sip of beer for courage. “I guess I’m a little nervous” he admitted quietly.

“You’re nervous?” Thankfully Scully didn’t laugh, though she did look at him as though he’d sprouted an extra head. “What about?”

“This,” he said gesturing around them. “Tonight….this….us…I mean jeez, do you know how long it’s been since I went on an actual date?” Scully shook her head. “Me either!”

“Mulder,” Scully admonished, smiling at him. “It’s just me.”

“I know, and that makes it worse. I mean…” he corrected himself. “I want to make tonight good for you.”

“You are already. This place is great, the wine tastes good and the food looks delicious. You’re already doing a great job Mulder, you don’t have to be nervous.” Neglecting her drink, Scully reached across the table and took hold of his hand. “You know that I’m a sure thing, don’t you?”

Finally Mulder laughed, squeezing her hand in thanks. “I just don’t want to disappoint you.”

“You’re not. You’re here, I’m here and tonight could be fun, as long as you just relax and be yourself. You know, I’m nervous too, I haven’t been on a date in…” she sighed, remembering her last official date, one that ended with a tattoo and a brush with death. “…a long time.”

“That makes two of us.”

“So please,” she said, letting go of his hand as she saw their waitress approaching. “Just relax. It’ll be ok.”

Xxxxxxxxxx

The meal was more than ok; delicious in fact, and after they’d both filled themselves to the brim on good food and wine, Mulder and Scully left the restaurant; Mulder having insisted on paying the hefty check. Neither seemed in a particular rush to head home, so they took a stroll down the waterfront, hand in hand, taking advantage of the mild evening.

“It’s kinda weird without Ashley here,” commented Mulder, as they came to a standstill by a bench by the water. Scully sat down and so Mulder followed her, not relinquishing hold of her hand for anything.

“By weird do you mean quiet?” Scully asked with a smile.

“Well that too. What time is she due home tomorrow?”
“I’m not sure. She’s going to call me when it’s acceptable to pick her up, so I imagine mid-afternoon. I daresay she’ll have some last minute homework she’ll need to get done that she’s neglected to mention.”

“Besides her forgetful nature when it comes to homework, she’s a good kid,” remarked Mulder.

“She could have turned out worse,” Scully agreed. “I know kids who’ve been through less than she has and turned out to be trouble. It’s thanks to you she’s turned out like she has,” she added, completely serious.

“Me?”

“You’ve given her stability, and she never had that before.”

“You’re the one who’s given her that Scully.”

She shook her head. “She has a father figure in you, and you help to provide a solid foundation for her. There aren’t a lot of guys who would do that. Well none that I know, besides you. Plus Ashley worships the ground you walk on –“

“Oh she idolizes you Scully.”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head once again. “I bet, if you and I moved to opposite ends of the country, Ashley would follow you. She’s a daddy’s girl,” she admitted shyly, and Mulder grinned. He squeezed her hand, letting her know that he appreciated her words; that he could get used to her words.

“She’d soon come running back to you when she realizes my culinary expertise consists of reheating leftovers.”

“That’s true,” admitted Scully with a chuckle. “Although she does love leftovers.”

“Thanks to me. You say I’ve given her stability, but actually I’ve just passed on my bad habits.”

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, sobering. “Ashley told me that you both overheard my conversation with Bill at my mom’s.”

After a moment, Mulder gave a brief nod. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry he said those things.”

“It’s ok –“

“No, it’s not. You are a part of mine and Ashley’s lives, and he shouldn’t have spoken about you like that.”

“You certainly put him in his place.”

Scully gave a small smile before continuing. “Ashley also told me what you said to her afterwards.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She was a little upset earlier over Jack.” She heard Mulder sigh, and knew he felt exactly the same as she did. “And she was feeling a little guilty.”
“Guilty?”

“Guilty over loving you more than Jack.” As Mulder processed her words, Scully continued. “I told her not to though; that it’s only natural, that you’re more of a father than Jack ever was. So she told me what you’d said to her that afternoon, which is why I wanted to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I know. But I just wanted you to know that we’re glad we have you.” Leaning in, Scully kissed him on the lips.

“I’m glad you do too.”

“So,” she said, kissing him once more for good measure. “Ashley is away for the night, which means we have the place to ourselves.”

“Mmmm.” He just couldn’t get enough of kissing Scully.

“We’ve both been fed and watered.”

“We have.”

“We’ve taken a walk.”

“We have indeed.”

Grinning wickedly, Scully got to her feed and tugged on Mulder’s hand. “C’mon, let’s go home.”

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Ow, damn it!”

Mulder broke from the kiss as he knocked into the sofa, feeling Scully giggle against him. He changed course, directing them towards the bedroom, his concentration faltering as he felt Scully’s hands begin work on his belt buckle. His shoes lay somewhere just inside of the door, and god knows where his jacket was. Jesus, if they weren’t careful they weren’t even going to make it to the bed. His own hands migrated down to Scully’s hips and he pulled her against him as they finally entered the bedroom. As his hands began to slide her dress up, Scully pulled away ever so slightly. “Bed,” she ordered, her eyes fully dilated.

Unable to stop himself, Mulder kissed her again, directing her towards the bed. He laid her out on the mattress, crawling on top of her and settling himself in between her thighs, pressing himself against her through the material of their clothes. He began to trail kisses down Scully’s body, and as he moved to nuzzle her ear, he was distracted by something to his left. He stopped abruptly, and Scully instantly opened her eyes, looking up at him in confusion. “Mulder?”

Mulder stared into the eyes of Queequeg, noticing that for once, the little mutt was wagging his tail at him. Sighing, he glanced back at Scully. “I thought Queequeg was at your neighbor’s?”

Following his gaze, Scully chuckled. “We were only going to be out for a few hours, I figured he was ok.”

Trying to ignore the canine, Mulder returned to the task at work, sliding his hands up Scully’s legs, gently pushing her dress up to reveal the tantalising glimpse of her dark underwear. However he was still aware he was being watched.
“Damn it.”

“What?” Scully glanced between man and dog. “He probably wants to go out.”

“That damn mutt!” Lifting himself up off of his partner, Mulder rose from the bed, getting to his feet and walking over the door. “Come on then,” he ordered, and Queequeg obediently followed him out towards the front door. He made sure he was back within minutes, his mind focused on the woman half naked waiting for him in bed. Thankfully as soon as they were back in the apartment, Queequeg headed straight out into the kitchen for his water, no longer concerned with interrupting activities in the bedroom.

As Mulder re-entered the bedroom, he couldn’t help but let out a frustrated sigh. Scully was now fast asleep on top of the comforter, her dress now pulled down back in place to conceal her modesty. Realizing the night was now over he padded back over to the bed, and settled himself on the mattress next to her, his brain trying to communicate with the rest of his body that the fun had come to an end. “I hate that damn dog,” he murmured to himself.

Suddenly the body next to him sprung to life, and Scully began to laugh, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. It was then he realized it had all been an act; she hadn’t been asleep at all.

“You –“

“I’m sorry,” uttered Scully in between giggles. “I couldn’t resist.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“You should have seen your face!” Her laughter only intensified as Mulder reached out and pulled her on top of him.

“So you’re not asleep.”

“I’m not asleep.”

“Tired?”

She ground against him. “Not tired.”

And as Mulder pulled her in for a kiss, he realized the night wasn’t over just yet.

xxxxxxxx

Mulder slowly floated awake as he felt someone shift against him. His eyes opened as he felt a feather-light kiss against the corner of his mouth. “Morning.”

“Morning.” He cleared his throat, licking his lips and wishing he had a glass of water, though he wasn’t about to move from the bed to get one.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I did. I could get used to this,” he remarked, as Scully’s hands crept beneath the comforter, edging lower. “I could definitely get used to that.”

They froze as they heard a knock at the front door.

“Who’s that?”
“No one,” Scully replied, not ceasing her trail down his body. “Probably just the mailman.”

“No, she said she’d call me. It’s probably just a neighbor or someone.”

“In that case ignore it,” Mulder urged, pulling her back in towards him. Moments later there was another knock. “If it’s your mom, I think I’m going to cry.”

“It’s not mom. She’s at my aunt’s for the week. It’s ok. Whoever it is will go away.”

Before Mulder could question her, she had jumped out of bed and was hastily rooting through her discarded clothes for her underwear. She then reached for her bathrobe and slipped it on hurriedly.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Ellen.”

“Ellen? She’ll go away.”

“She might not. She has a key.”

“She has a key? Why the hell does she have a key?”

“She just does. Now get dressed,” Scully hissed as she stepped out into the hallway and closed the door firmly behind her. She had just reached the front door when she heard the sound of a key in the lock, and moments later Ellen entered the apartment.

“Oh!” Her friend seemed surprised to find her home. “I’m sorry, I thought you were out.”

“No, I was asleep.” Ellen glanced at her watch. “I had a long day yesterday.”

Thankfully Ellen asked no more questions, and instead held out a garment bag. “I’ve just brought Ashley’s bridesmaid’s dress. My mom’s taken it up now so it shouldn’t trail so much when she walks.”

“Thank you.” Scully accepted the bag. “Would you like a coffee or something?” No sooner had she asked the question then she regretted it. The last thing she wanted was for Ellen to stay while Mulder was only in the next room. Though her friend knew that she and Mulder had slept together the once, Scully hadn’t yet told her about the latest developments.

“That would be…” Ellen paused, her eyes fixed on something to Scully’s left. Following her friend’s gaze, Scully saw Mulder’s shoes that he’d kicked off not long after entering her apartment the previous night. “Sorry, am I interrupting?” Just as Scully was about to say no, she saw Ellen’s attention go to Mulder’s jacket, flung over the back of the couch. “Dana Scully,” Ellen whispered conspiratorially. “Do you have a man here?” Scully couldn’t deny it; after all, Ellen would no doubt know she was lying when she saw Mulder’s discarded tie and pants en route to the bedroom.
“Yes,” she finally answered, feeling her face flush.

Ellen grinned. “Please god tell me it’s Mulder, otherwise I’m going to have to shake some sense into you. The man is hot—“

“Morning Ellen.”

Both women looked up to see Mulder at the entrance to the living room. Ellen’s smile widened. “Morning Mulder.” She looked back at Scully. “I’m sorry for interrupting, I just thought I’d let you have this. You’re coming to the wedding, aren’t you Mulder?”

“Wedding?”

“My sister’s getting married. Ashley’s going to be bridesmaid now, and we’d love for Dana to bring a plus one.”

Scully blushed, while Mulder looked over at her for confirmation. “We umm…we’ll see.”

“Good. Well I’m sure you guys are busy with your umm…your paperwork,” Ellen grinned wickedly. “So I’ll leave you guys to it.”

“Please don’t go on my account,” Mulder protested.

“No, it’s fine, I have to get going anyway. We’ll catch up soon?” she said to Scully, who nodded. “We have a lot to talk about, I can tell.”

“See you soon,” replied Scully as she followed her friend back towards the door.

“Bye Mulder.”

“Bye Ellen.”

As she opened the door, Ellen turned to look at them both one last time before leaving. “It’s about time you guys.”

Mulder came up behind Scully, slipping his arms around her waist. She turned around in his arms to face him.

“Well at least it wasn’t quite so embarrassing as when Ash found out.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Just wait until she interrogates me next time she sees me,” Scully smiled up at him. “So now you have an invitation to the wedding…what do you think?”

“You mean you want to be seen out in public with me?”

“I did last night. I’m sure I can cope again. Plus Ashley’s now bridesmaid, and I know she’d want you there.”

“When is it?”

“A few weeks. Please?”

“I’ll check my social calendar, but I’m sure I can find a space for you guys.”

“Thank you.”
“So…” Mulder leaned in for a kiss, and Scully realized that not only had he managed to get dressed, he’d also brushed his teeth. “…We’re not at work today, and Ash won’t be home for a few hours. What should we do to pass the time? He flashed her a smile as she pretended to think.

“Well I do have laundry and I really should go grocery shopping - ”

Mulder grinned. “Think again.”

“Whatcha reading?”

Ashley was curled up against Mulder’s side on the couch, half engrossed in a book. He could tell she was fighting sleep, having spent most of the previous night awake at Holly’s sleepover. He wrapped an arm around her, smiling to himself as her head immediately went into the crook of his neck.

“Harry Potter.”

“Now there’s a surprise.”

“There’s a new book coming out soon. I need to re-read them all in time.”

“Which one are you reading now?”

“The Chamber of Secrets.”


“How do you know that?”

“I just do. That’s the one with Tom Riddle’s diary, isn’t it?”

The youngster grinned. “Have you read it?”

“I may have done.”

“How come?”

“Your mom said you were both reading them, I was intrigued.”

Satisfied, Ashley resumed her position in Mulder’s arms and continued reading, while Mulder went back to the movie on television. Scully was out in the kitchen doing the dishes, having banished the two of them to the sofa. Ashley had been cranky ever since she’d been picked up, the lack of sleep obviously getting to her, and so Mulder had been placed in charge of keeping her amused. It wasn’t long before Mulder felt something touch his leg, and as he looked down he realized Ashley had fallen asleep; the book falling from her grasp. Saving her page, he placed the book on the table to his right, pressed his lips to Ashley’s warm forehead, and sat back on the sofa. Moments later, Scully wandered into the living room and took in the scene before her. She smiled at the picture they made. “Did you bore her to sleep?”

“Ha ha,” he deadpanned, smiling as Scully made her way over to the sofa and took a seat on the other side of Ashley. “Harry Potter did.”

“I should wake her and get her to bed.”
Mulder followed Scully’s gaze, taking in Ashley’s peaceful expression. It would be a shame to disturb her. “It’s ok. I’ll take her in a bit.”

Nodding, Scully then made herself comfortable on the couch, until, barely thirty minutes later, she joined her daughter in a peaceful sleep.
Chapter 97

Scully tried – and failed to conceal a grin as she caught sight of Mulder’s expression. He sat up straighter in his seat, frowning as he took in the scene before him. Suddenly realizing he was being watched, he smiled sheepishly at his partner.

“Relax Mulder,” she said, chuckling as she took a sip of champagne.

“If he gets any closer to her, I’ll shoot him.”

“It’s Trent, Mulder. He and Ashley are like brother and sister.”

“Still,” he said, his gaze returning to the two kids on the dancefloor. “If his hands go any lower than her shoulders, there’ll be trouble.” It was the day of Joanne, Ellen’s sister’s wedding, and after a successful ceremony, the party was continuing. Ellen had pestered her son Trent, an usher, into asking Ashley to dance, leaving Mulder and Scully alone at their table. Neither kid looked particularly ecstatic about dancing, but still they got on with it.

“God Mulder,” Scully smirked. “What are you going to be like when she starts dating?”

“Like I said before. It’s never going to happen. He’ll have to get past me first.”

Scully shook her head, still amused at how protective Mulder was of Ashley.

As the song ended, Trent and Ashley instantly let go of one another and stepped away. Rather than return to her table, Ashley caught sight of Ellen’s niece, Maddie, and ran off towards her. When another slow song started up, Scully found that this time she was the subject of Mulder’s gaze.

“What?”

“C’mon Scully,” he said, jerking his head towards the dancefloor.

“What?” she asked, feigning ignorance.

“Let’s dance.”

“Dance?”

Mulder got to his feet and held out a hand towards her. After a moment, Scully took hold of it and stood up, letting him lead her to the dance floor. She turned and stepped into his arms, feeling his hands slide around the back of her body. “I thought you said hands no lower than the shoulders?” she accused, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I like to think we can make an exception,” he said, his hands inching lower.

“Mulder!” Scully tapped his chest. “This is my best friend’s family!”

“I’m kidding Scully.” His hands moved to safe territory and Scully relaxed.

“So where did you go yesterday?”

“Yesterday?” Mulder tensed.

“Yesterday, when you left me at the office to leave early. Was it to do with a certain trip we have planned next week to Hollywood?”
“It could be,” he teased, but something in his voice made Scully realize he wasn’t quite telling the truth.

“What was it Mulder? There had to be a reason why you left early. Usually I’m the one dragging you out of the office.”

“Oh,” he tried to sound casual. “It was nothing. I just had a doctor’s appointment. Just a check-up.”

“If all you needed was a check-up, I could have looked you over Mulder.”

“I know that, but you know I can’t keep my vitals steady when a beautiful red-headed doctor is running her hands all over me.”

Scully grinned, though Mulder could tell she was worried. “Is everything ok?”

“Besides the fact I’m growing older and my hairline is slightly receding, everything’s fine.”

Thankfully, she seemed to accept that. The last thing Mulder wanted to get into was the fact he’d been suffering from headaches, terrible headaches for a while now. Yesterday he’d got the news he was dreading. Now wasn’t the time to ruin Scully’s day, let alone Ashley’s.

“Thank you for coming today,” Scully murmured against him as they swayed on the dance floor, interrupting his thoughts. “I’m very glad you did.”

“Me too.” He meant it too. Initially he’d been a little apprehensive at attending the wedding, especially as he knew very few people. But it had been a good day, and the first time he, Scully and Ashley had appeared in public as a family. It was worth it too, to see how confident and beautiful Ashley looked in her bridesmaid dress as she accompanied the bride down the aisle. “It’s been fun.”

“It has.”

“I’ve never really been to that many weddings.”

“Except your own of course,” Scully quipped, then pulled back slightly, smiling to let him know she was joking. She knew now that Diana was part of Mulder’s past, but that she – or anyone else – weren’t going to come between her and Mulder. They were stronger than that.

“Well there was that. It was nothing like this though.”

“No?”

“Not at all. Today has been all about love and family and friends, and a real celebration. My wedding was…well it was just a quick ceremony, and then it all went back to normal almost straight away. No fanfares, no big white meringue dresses, just a quick “I do” and that was it.”

“It sounds nice in some ways,” commented Scully. “None of that fuss or stress or expense.”

“Did you ever think about it?”

“Marriage?”

“Yeah. With Jack I mean.”

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “I guess part of me always believed in the fairy tale happy ending. At the time I thought he was the one for me, before Ashley came along, but then everything changed.”
“You know Scully, I did love Diana –“

“I know.”

“Let me finish,” he said with a smile. “I did love Diana, but what we had was nothing compared to now.”

“Mulder –“

He saw Scully’s cheeks pink, and knew it was nothing to do with the champagne, and everything to do with his words. “I love you Scully.”

“I know you do.”

“And I’m happy.”

She grinned. “Me too.”

He said it so quietly, she almost didn’t hear it. “Marry me.”

“Hmm?”

“Marry me.” Mulder had expected Scully to be surprised, but he wasn’t quite expecting her to chuckle. “What?”

“Oh come on Mulder!”

“I’m serious.”

Scully instantly sobered, obviously thinking he was in fact joking. “You’re what?”

“I mean it. Let’s get married.”

Her eyes widened, and Scully came to a standstill, halting their dance. She stared at him long and hard, as though trying to read his thoughts.

“Say something Scully,” urged Mulder, trying to work out whether her silence was a good thing or a bad. Usually he could tell roughly, but this was a whole new Scully expression. Finally, after all these years, he’d rendered her speechless. “I mean this. I think we should get married. I love you, you love me. Let’s make it official.”

“I umm…Mulder, it’s…I mean –“ Scully felt a blow to her stomach. Finally she’d heard the words every woman wanted to hear, and yet it wasn’t what she wanted. Not yet.

He tried not to let his disappointment show, as a flustered Scully tried to explain why she was obviously about to say no. “You don’t want to marry me?”

“It’s not that.”

“I just wanted to make it official.” He was trying not to beg, but he wished she’d have said yes. “It’s ok Scully –“

“No it’s not –“

“I understand.”
“Mulder,” she said firmly, and this time he stopped. “I don’t want you to hate me for saying no.”

“You’re definitely saying no then.”

“I’m sorry.”

He licked his lips, wishing he could get off the damn dance floor. He wished he’d never even uttered the words. Though he wasn’t entirely convinced she’d say yes in the first place, he wasn’t quite expecting rejection to hurt so bad. “May I ask why?”

“Why now Mulder? Aren’t you happy?”

“Of course I am, that’s why I asked.”

“I know, but it’s a big step.”

“I know that Scully.”

“Please let me finish.” Mulder nodded for her to continue. “I love you Mulder, please don’t doubt that. I guess I don’t feel the need to rush. I’m happy as we are; more than happy, and I just want to enjoy this some more before we move on to the next step. Besides, there are other things to consider with marriage, like working together. I love what we have and I already know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me that.”

Mulder relaxed at her words, though he still couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. “So you’re not saying no outright, just not yet?”

After a moment Scully nodded, her smile returning. “Not yet.”

“But some day.”

“Someday,” she agreed, reaching up to kiss Mulder on the lips chastely.

He smiled sadly, hoping that by ‘someday’, she meant ‘soon’. “Just...just remember that I asked, ok?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Scully searched Mulder’s face, trying to read him, but for once she couldn’t.

After a moment, Mulder sighed heavily and shook his head, snapping out of his thoughts. “Nothing, I just want you to know I’m serious.”

“I know you are and I love you for asking. But we don’t need marriage right now. We’re already married in lots of ways.”

“I want to help you, and Ashley.” He wanted to make sure they were comfortable, that they’d have help when he...when the worst happened.

“That’s why you proposed?”

“Of course not. I proposed because I love you and I want to be a family with you and Ash.”

“We are a family.”

Mulder nodded, though Scully could tell something else was on his mind.
“Are you ok?”

“Would you consider me adopting Ashley?”

Whatever she was expecting, it certainly wasn’t that.

“What?” she asked after a moment.

“You know how I feel about her, don’t you?” She nodded quickly. “I love her just like she was my own daughter. Like I said, I want us to be a family; a real one. I want Ashley to know that I want her, that I’m serious about being a father to her.”

“Mulder, it’s –“

“Hear me out Scully, don’t say no just yet –“

“I’m not saying no.”

“You’re not?”

“I’m saying that this is a big thing Mulder. It involves a lot of thought, and a lot of hard work. It’s not simple and it’s a big step.”

“I know that. It’s the biggest decision I’ve ever made in my life. And I know I’ve thought about it for a long, long time. I want this. I want you guys, and I want it to be official. I want Ashley to be mine.”

“Ok,” Scully uttered, after a brief pause, clearly shocked at the second bombshell he’d dropped on her.

“Ok ok?”

“Ok I’ll think about it. It’s a big thing,” she repeated.

“I know it is, and the fact that you’re even thinking about it properly is more than I ever imagined. Thank you. Take your time.”

“I will.” After a moment, she smiled. “You’re a good man Mulder.”

“Remember that the next time you’re charged with my expense reports, ok?”

“Shut up Mulder,” huffed Scully, and settled back into the dance, this time with a lot to think about.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“I’m sooooo tired I could sleep for a week,” commented Ashley as she stepped into her apartment, with Mulder and Scully close behind. As soon as the door closed, Scully kicked off the peep toe heels she was wearing, and sighed in relief. They looked good, but hurt like a bitch, she’d told Mulder after their dance, when she’d led him back to her seats and quickly removed her shoes beneath the table.

“Bed then young lady,” ordered Scully, realizing just how tired her daughter must be when for once she didn’t argue, but instead headed straight towards her bedroom.

“Would you like a drink?” Scully asked Mulder when the two of them were alone. He stood by the
sofa awkwardly, his coat still on and his keys still in his hand.

“I um…I’d better be going,” he said, giving a thin smile. Scully frowned.

“Oh. Aren’t you staying?” When he shrugged, she continued, clearly uncertain. “I presumed you were but if you um…if you want to go that’s fine, I just –“

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to stay.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I thought after what happened earlier you might appreciate some time away from me.”

It took Scully a moment to understand what he was referring to. “Oh! No Mulder,” she tried to explain. “I have a lot to think about, that’s true, but I don’t want to push you away. Whatever happens, I don’t want this to come between us, or to ruin things between us.”

“It won’t,” he promised.

“Well then,” she said, taking his hand. “I’d like you to stay. If you want to.”

“I’d like that too.”

“Mulder!” came a voice from the other room.

“I’ve been summoned,” he said shyly, squeezing Scully’s hand for good measure, letting her know there were no hard feelings, before he headed off in the direction of Ashley’s bedroom. Scully wandered off in the direction of the kitchen, where she flicked on the light and pottered about; refilling Queequeg’s water bowl. When there was still no sign of Mulder ten minutes later, curiosity got the better of her, and she made her way to her daughter’s bedroom. She paused in the doorway of Ashley’s room, noticing that the youngster in question was now fast asleep. Mulder sat by her bedside, running his hand through her hair absentmindedly, himself deep in thought. He looked at Ashley with such love and adoration, the way Scully always wished Jack had looked at their daughter. And now here he was, offering to make them a real family. Once upon a time he’d agreed to father Scully’s child, the baby that never was, and now he was volunteering to be the father of her other child. As Scully headed back to the living room, unwilling to interrupt her partner, she knew she had a lot to think about.
“Ash, are you almost ready to go? Mulder will be here in a few minutes.” Scully hurried out of the bathroom, fixing an earring as she crossed to her bed. She then smoothed down her hair before slipping on her heels. Aware she was being watched, she glanced up to see her daughter’s eyes on her. “What?”

Ashley grinned. “You look pretty, mom.”

Scully softened. “Thank you sweetheart.”

“I like your hair.”

Scully’s hands instantly went up, touching her headband. “Does it make me look like a mom who’s trying hard to stay young?”

Shaking her head, Ashley giggled. “It looks good. Mulder will definitely think you look pretty.”

Her cheeks pinking, Scully tried to shift attention away from herself. She still got embarrassed when her relationship with Mulder was spoken about, just like a love-sick teenager. “You look beautiful baby.”

Ashley spun around, her recently-purchased off-white dress floating out. She’d gone shopping with her mom and grandmother earlier that day, deciding that the original dress she’d packed wasn’t right for the occasion. “Mom?”

“Hmm?” Scully’s eyes darted around the room, in search of her jacket. Mulder was going to be there any second.

“Are famous people going to be there tonight?”

“It’s a film premiere,” replied Scully absent-mindedly. “I daresay some might.”

“Do you think the Backstreet Boys will be?”

Biting back a smile, Scully located her jacket and slipped it on. All she needed was her purse and she was ready. Ashley however didn’t appear to be in any rush. “I don’t know if this film is their kind of thing.”

“Oh.” It clearly wasn’t the answer that Ashley was expecting. Before she could quiz her mom further on invitees, there was a knock at the door. “I’ll get it!”

“No Ashley, you finish getting ready and I’ll…” It was too late though, and Scully sighed as her daughter ran over to the door, throwing it open. Thankfully though, it wasn’t Mulder. “Hi Grandma.”

“I wasn’t sure if I was coming to you or you coming to me,” said Maggie, walking into the room as Ashley closed the door behind her, smiling as she took in her daughter and granddaughters’ appearances. “Wow.”

“Is it too much?”

“Not at all,” she told Scully. “Fox is a very lucky man.”
“I’m not dressing like this for Mulder,” her daughter stressed. “It’s a film premiere. People will be dressed up.”

“Of course.” Maggie was having none of it.

“How long is the movie?” asked Ashley.

“I’m not actually sure,” answered Scully. “A few hour’s max.”

“What are we doing afterwards?”

“You’re coming back to the hotel with your grandma and getting something to eat.”

“Where are you and Mulder going to be?”

It was Maggie’s idea. After the four of them had travelled out to LA for the film premiere and had spent a little time sightseeing, Maggie had taken her daughter aside and offered to babysit, allowing Mulder and Scully one night alone. “We’re going to be caught up with the producers.”

“Are you going to be in this movie mom?” asked Ashley, finally – to Scully’s relief – sitting down on her bed to put on her shoes.

“No, I’ve already told you, Mulder and I were just consulted on it.” Well, plagued by the director. “We were just invited to see the movie.”

“And they paid for you to come over?”

“They invited all of us.”

“How come Mulder isn’t sleeping in your room when he does at home?”

“I’ll get it –“ Scully was thankful for the knock on the door, not wanting her daughter’s questioning to go too far. She only hoped Ashley was more subtle later that night in the presence of A.D. Skinner.

Xxxxxxxxxx

“How are we going to be remembered now cos of this movie?” Mulder sat side-by-side with Scully, sulking. The movie was a failure; Federman had mocked everything he and Scully worked for, and had turned the X-Files into a laughing stock. Hell, even his and Scully’s relationship had been made a mockery, with movie Scully saddling up alongside AD Skinner. He hadn’t been able to watch it any longer, and had got up out of his side and walked away from his partner, Ashley and Maggie. Ashley seemed engrossed in both the movie and her popcorn and had hardly batted an eyelid, but Scully knew her partner wasn’t happy, and so she’d followed him back to the set where she’d found him in amongst the graveyard with his own popcorn.

“Well hopefully the movie will tank,” she answered. It deserved to; it was hardly an Oscar-winning production.

“What about all the dead people who are forever silent and can’t tell their stories anymore?” Mulder went on, not really listening to her; his mind on his own upcoming death sentence. “They’re all going to have to rely on Hollywood to show the future how we lived and it’ll all become oversimplified and trivialized and Cigarette-Smoking Pontificized and become as plastic and meaningless as this stupid plastic Lazarus Bowl.”
Scully tried not to laugh, she really did. “I think the dead are beyond caring what people think about them. Hopefully we can adopt the same attitude. Besides, Ashley thinks we’re the height of cool now we’ve been immortalized on the big screen.” She grinned. “You do know that there aren’t real dead people out there, right? That this is a movie set?”

“The dead are everywhere Scully.”

“Well,” she replied, determined to get her partner out of his mood. “We’re alive. And we’re relatively young, and my mom is happily to look after Ashley allllll night –“

“All night?”

“And Skinner was so tickled by the movie-“

“I bet he was.”

“That he has given us a Bureau credit card to use for the evening.” Giggling, Scully held up the card. Her laughter was infectious and Mulder couldn’t help but smile. Scully had been through so much, that he’d do anything to get her to laugh. “C’mon,” she said, taking hold of Mulder’s arm and helping him up onto his feet. They ran down the slope they were sat on, walking out of the set hand in hand. “Mulder, I have something to confess,” admitted Scully on their way out.

“What’s that?”

“I’m in love with Associate Producer Walter Skinner.”

Laughing, Mulder dumped his bowl of popcorn over a statue as he passed. “Ah, me too.” They walked silently for a while, still holding hands. They were in LA – the only people who knew them were still inside the theater, so for now they could enjoy being out in public together. Not that Mulder particularly cared if Skinner caught them; he had an idea his boss knew exactly how he felt about his partner. Besides, Skinner had turned up to the premiere with two women on his arm – he was clearly going to enjoy the night, and so was Mulder.

“Where are we going?” he asked when there was no clear destination in sight.

“Well,” answered Scully. “We have a limo driver at our disposal. I see food and copious amounts of alcohol in our near future.”

“And your mom’s ok with Ash?”

Scully grinned up at her partner. “Yes, she has looked after her before, not to mention raised four children of her own.”

“I meant she doesn’t mind?”

“She suggested it.”

“I knew I loved your mom Scully.” As his partner giggled mischievously, Mulder let go of her hand, and after putting his arm around her, led her to their limo.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“The movie was cool!” Ashley commented to her grandmother as they left the theater, pausing briefly to greet Tea Leoni and Gary Shandling on their way out.

“It certainly was interesting,” Maggie replied, leading her daughter out onto the sidewalk and in the
direction of their hotel. “I don’t think it was quite what I was expecting.”

“I wonder why Mulder walked out?”

“Maybe he didn’t like the movie. It wasn’t a particularly serious take on the work he and your mom do.”

“Were they trying to say that mom loves Mr Skinner?” Ashley looked up at her grandmother, clearly displeased with the insinuation.

“I don’t know sweetheart.”

“Because she doesn’t.”

“I know that.”

“Maybe that’s why Mulder left.”

“I would think Fox knows that isn’t the case.”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound too convinced. “Do we have to go back now?”

“It’s getting late,” Maggie replied, glancing down at her watch. “We need to grab some dinner before you go to bed, else your sugars will be all over the place.”

“Why can’t we eat with mom and Mulder?”

“Because they’re busy tonight.”

“Busy having sex,” Ashley responded matter-of-factly.

“Ashley Scully!” Maggie exclaimed. “Wash your mouth out.”

“What?” She was the picture of innocence. “They probably are.”

“What your mother and Fox get up to in their own time is their own business. They have a lot of people to meet because of this movie though, so I daresay they’re doing that. It’ll be late by the time they get back, and you’ll be long asleep by the time they do. And if you continue to speak like that,” she warned. “You’ll be going to bed as soon as we get back.”

Ashley huffed out a sigh, but reluctantly continued to follow her grandmother down the street. “You’re growing up far too quickly,” Maggie continued, trying to hide her smile, not wanting to encourage her granddaughter any further.

Scully sighed contentedly, leaning her head back in the crook of Mulder’s neck. The two of them lay boneless, soaking in a lukewarm bubble bath. Her skin was wrinkling, and she knew they’d been in there a long time, but she couldn’t move. She didn’t want to move. “I think I could stay here forever,” she slurried, her eyes heavy. It was getting late, way past her bedtime, but she wasn’t sure she wanted the night to end just yet. They’d been back at the hotel barely an hour; no sooner had they made their way to Mulder’s room – Scully’s was still cluttered, her and Ashley’s clothes scattered all over the place in an unusual move – Mulder had her dress bunched up against her waist and was demonstrating just how good it was to have a babysitter for the evening. Sated, the two of them had stumbled to the bath, where they’d been soaking ever since.
“In LA?” Mulder sounded surprised.

Scully shook her head against him. “In this bath. I don’t think I ever want to move.”

“You’ll get hungry soon.”

“I’ll call for room service.” Sure enough there was a phone by the toilet.

“They’ll certainly get an eyeful.”

“It beats a tip I’m sure.”

Mulder huffed against her. “This has been fun.”

“This bath?”

“This trip.”

She knew what he meant. “Mmm.”

“We should do it again sometime. Perhaps one day soon we could get away, maybe somewhere different. Take a week off and just go. Avoid all mention of the X-Files, lock ourselves in our room and continue to conserve water like this.”

He was surprised when Scully stiffened against him. “And what about Ashley?”

“What?”

“She is my daughter Mulder; I can’t just leave her.”

“I know that.”

“I know we’re together now, but I can’t abandon her for a dirty week away.”

“Scully – “

“I’m sorry but – “

“Scully, when I say we should go away, I mean “we.” The three of us.” He wanted to make more memories with the two of them.

Feeling stupid, Scully calmed. “Oh.”

“Well maybe four. I was thinking Ashley could bring a friend. We can get a hotel suite or something, and just make sure our room has a good lock on it. And an en-suite.”

She grinned. A family holiday. “It would be good to get away again.”

“It would.”

“And you do have a lot of vacation days to take.”

“I’m sure I can lend some to you too.”

“Ashley was talking about inviting one of her friends here.”

“So maybe next time then?”
“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Scully pressed her lips against Mulder’s neck. “Maybe we should book somewhere when we get back.”

“Not right now?”

She could hear the amusement in his voice and moved to tease his earlobe with her teeth. She felt him suck in his breath. “Not right now. I have plans for you.”

“Oh really?”

“Mmm.”

His hands dipped lower beneath the water, and this time it was Scully’s turn to gasp. “First I was thinking you could get me a towel, then order room service, and finally carry me to bed. Because I’m far too tired,” she added dramatically. “Oh I guess I could call AD Skinner and ask him.”

“Think again G-Woman,” Mulder growled, kissing her hard and making her forget all about their boss.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Oh look! There’s Tom Cruise mom!” Ashley exclaimed, pointing down at her feet. She lifted her disposable camera that Mulder had bought her a few days previously and snapped away, before rushing on ahead, in search of the next name she recognized. “Hey Mulder, look!”

The man in question went over to join her, Scully and Maggie lagging behind as they strolled down the Walk of Fame. It was their last day in LA and so they were doing some last-minute sightseeing before heading on to the airport.

“You know,” Maggie commented. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so happy.” She was talking about Ashley of course, the youngster who hadn’t stopped smiling since the minute they’d stepped off the plane.

“I know,” agreed Scully. “Me either.” It was satisfying to see her daughter so content.

“Or you for that matter.”

“Mom –“

“I’m not saying anything; just remarking on how lovely it is to see you both smile again. You and Fox are good together,” Maggie added with a smile, to her daughter’s surprise. Scully knew Mulder wouldn’t have been her mom’s choice for her. “I know I don’t necessarily like the danger that Fox represents in your life, but I see the way he looks at you.”

“And Ashley.”

Maggie nodded. “You look happy.”

“We are.”

“Ever since Jack, I’ve just wanted you to find someone who loves you, who’ll give you what you deserve. I’m happy for you Dana.”
“Mulder umm…” Scully glanced over, making sure the man in question and Ashley were out of earshot. “Mulder asked me recently about adopting Ashley.”

Maggie didn’t appear too surprised. “What did you say?”

“I said I’d think about it. There’s a lot to consider, plus we have to talk to Ashley.”

“She’d jump at it.”

“I know.”

“You know, Mulder will always be in her life, no matter what happens. This just cements it.”

“I know,” Scully replied again, watching her daughter as she dragged Mulder further along the sidewalk in search of another star. “And I know how good it will do her; how it will boost her self-esteem. Jack never wanted her and she seems so aware of that, so for her to know that Mulder wants her as his daughter –“

“You sound like you’ve already reached your decision.”

“Do you think I’d be making a mistake?”

Maggie thought for a moment. “It’s a big decision, but it’s yours to make. You need to do whatever makes both you and Ashley happy.”

“I just want what’s best for her,” Scully replied.

“Well then I think you have your answer.”

“Mom! Here’s Mickey Mouse!” Ashley called, putting an end to the conversation.

“Be right there,” Scully answered, and headed off to continue her vacation.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

“Here you go,” Mulder said, holding a styrofoam cup out towards his partner. “I left your mom and Ash in a souvenir shop. The last thing I saw was your mom handing over her credit card and Ashley picking up a gigantic soft toy.”

Scully groaned, smiling gratefully as she took her coffee from him. “She soon won’t fit in her bedroom with all the crap she owns.”

“Quality crap,” Mulder commented, taking a seat next to his partner. “Well expensive crap anyway.”

“She’s spoilt.”

“She deserves to be.”

Shaking her head, Scully’s grin widened. “And she has you wrapped around her little finger.”

“Guilty as charged,” he replied, taking a sip of his coffee, immediately regretting it as he realized it was far too hot to drink. “You Scully women have me at your mercy.”

“Mulder…” Aware they were alone for the moment, Scully decided to broach something with her partner. “I’ve been thinking.”
“About?” He looked concerned.

“About your offer.”

“Marriage?”

She shook her head quickly. “No, no I stand by what I said. I mean about Ashley…”

“The adoption?”

“Yeah.”

Mulder gave her a searching look, trying to gauge her thoughts. “So you’ve been thinking.”

“It’s all I’ve been thinking about today,” she admitted.

“And have you reached any decisions?”

“I have.”

“Go on.” His coffee was now forgotten.

“It’s an incredibly generous offer,” Scully began. “And I can’t thank you enough for wanting to. I love you for wanting to,” she added.

“I sense a big ‘but’ coming.”

After a moment, Scully shook her head. “I think you knew what you were getting yourself into when you started spending time with us. I’ve said for a while now that as far as I’m concerned, you’re Ashley’s father, and I know she thinks of you as her dad. If you want to do this, it’s ok with me.” Mulder let out the breath he’d been holding. “But I want to talk to Ashley about it, and what it entails. And I want to make sure you’re doing this because it’s something you want; not because you feel that you should.” She already knew the answer.

“I want this,” Mulder replied honestly. “I want to be there for her, and I never want you or her to want for anything.”

It was Scully’s turn to search him with her eyes. “Well then…” she said after a moment, leaning in and pecking his lips, once, then twice for good measure. “We’ll talk to her soon.”

“Soon,” Mulder agreed, grateful that Scully was happy for him to make it official. Now they just had to talk to Ashley, before it was too late, he thought to himself with a sad smile.
“Morning.”

Mulder looked up in time to see Ashley walking into the kitchen, her hand covering her mouth as she let out a huge yawn.

“Good morning sunshine. Eggs?”

“No sooner had Ashley helped herself to a glass of water, Scully followed her daughter into the kitchen.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” chorused both Mulder and Ashley.

Scully padded over to Mulder, accepting a kiss to her forehead, before moving towards the fridge. She poured herself a small glass of orange juice, smiling apologetically at her daughter. Ashley’s sugars had been up following their return from LA, and so she was back on a strict diet. “That smells good,” she commented to Mulder.

“I hope you’re hungry. I made enough to feed your entire apartment block.”

Scully joined her daughter at the table and they waited for Mulder to serve up their breakfast.

“This is yum,” said Ashley, once breakfast was in front of them and they’d begun to tuck in. “You’re hired.”

“Hired?” asked Mulder, midway through a mouthful of toast.

“As my personal slave.”

“You can’t afford me.”

“I’ll throw in Yankees tickets. When Uncle Charlie’s friend can get us some for free,” she added, and Scully grinned. She caught Mulder’s attention, reading the question in his eyes, and after a moment she gave him a small nod. After taking a sip of orange juice, she cleared her throat and shifted nervously in her seat.

“Ashley?”

The youngster in question paused in her eating, eyeing both grown-ups suspiciously. “What did I do?”

“Sorry?”

“What did I do? You only call me by my full name if something’s wrong or if I’m in trouble. Is something wrong?”

“No,” both Mulder and Scully rushed to reassure her. “Not at all.”

“Then what is it?”

“We have something we’d like to talk to you about.”
Instantly Ashley’s eyes lit up, and she was practically bouncing on her seat in excitement. “Are you getting married?”

“No!” exclaimed Scully, just as Mulder responded with a “Not yet.”

“Not yet? Is Mulder moving in?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” her mom replied, trying to settle her daughter. Her disappointment showed. “What is it?”

“Mulder has something he’d like to ask you.”

Ashley’s piercing blue eyes met Mulder’s. He smiled thinly, suddenly nervous, aware at just how much he wanted it. “I umm…I spoke to your mom a little while ago about umm…well…” he sighed, realizing he wasn’t getting anywhere. “Ash, how would you feel about me adopting you?”

She scrunched up her face, clearly not understanding. “Huh?”

“I was wondering what you’d think to me adopting you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it means that I would take responsibility for you. I mean, alongside your mom of course.”

“And if anything happened to me,” added Scully. “It would mean that Mulder would be your primary guardian.”

“Or if anything happened to me, you would –“

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Ashley asked both adults. “Are you ok?”

“We’re both fine sweetheart,” Scully reassured her daughter. Mulder looked down at his plate, unwilling to blatantly lie to the youngster. He couldn’t tell her; he couldn’t turn her world upside down.

“Then why do you want to adopt me?” she quizzed Mulder.

Smiling, he reached out and took hold of her hand. “Because I want us to be a family. I want to make it official, I want to be there for you and to make sure you know that I love you.”

“Does that mean you’d be my dad?”

“I don’t want to take your dad’s place,” he insisted. “You have a dad, and neither your mom nor I want you to forget that. He’s a part of you, and nothing will change that. But I want to help take care of you.”

“It’s a big step,” Scully added. “There would have to be ground rules. I mean if you get into trouble, Mulder can punish you, and it’s not going to be all fun and games. I just want you to think about that, ok?”

Ashley nodded.

“I don’t want you to answer now,” said Mulder. “Take some time and think about it. Talk it over with your mom.”
“Ok.” After a moment she got up from her seat and stepped over to Mulder, throwing her arms around his shoulders. “Thank you,” she whispered against him.

“You’re more than welcome.”

Scully smiled at the scene, then looked at her watch. “Ok, I’d better hurry. Ellen is picking me up in less than an hour.”

“I thought we were going to go to the mall,” protested Ashley. “I need new sneakers.”

“They’ll have to wait,” said Scully, standing up and collecting the now empty plates.

“But mom –“

“I never said it would be this weekend. You knew Ellen and I had plans today; that’s why Mulder’s taking care of you.”

“But I need them –“

“Well –“

“I could take Ash shopping?” Mulder suggested, eager to dampen the argument that was likely to erupt at any moment.

“You?” Scully asked skeptically.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shook her head. “Nothing but….it’s the mall Mulder. On a Saturday. And it’s Ashley, in shopping mode.”

“I’m not that bad,” her daughter insisted, already looking forward to shopping with Mulder.

“She’s worse.”

“I am not –“

“We’ll be fine.”

“Famous last words,” smirked his partner.

“It won’t take long Mulder.”

“It’s fine. Get dressed and we’ll go.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” said Scully, half sorry she wasn’t going to be there to witness it.

Xxxxxxxxx

“So we can cross sneakers off our list,” said Mulder, as they exited the sports store and headed back out into the mall. He tried not to grimace at the sheer number of people around – it was a Saturday morning after all, but Ashley seemed to be having fun. “Is there anything else you need?” As long as it wasn’t as expensive as the sneakers, he thought to himself.

“I don’t think so…” mused Ashley, though she didn’t sound too sure.

“Anything you need for school?”
“Nuh uh. It’s Saturday. It’s illegal to say the ‘s’ word.”

“Right,” Mulder grinned.

“Can we go have a look at posters?”

“Posters?”

“For my room.”

“Posters of…?" He asked, already knowing the answer.

“Maybe the Backstreet Boys?” she answered with a cheeky grin.

“Do you have any space left on your walls?”

“I have the ceiling.”

“Ah of course.”

They wandered along the concourse, Ashley momentarily distracted by the window display of a jewellery store they passed. “If you adopt me, you could ask my mom to marry you. Then we’d be a real family.”

Mulder thought about playing dumb, but he knew Ashley was too smart for that. “You know, I did propose to your mom recently.”

Ashley stopped. “You did?”

“Oh huh…”

“Did she say yes?” It came out as practically a squeal. Mulder steered her to the side, out of the way of oncoming shoppers.

“No.” As Ashley’s face fell, Mulder placed a hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “I’m sorry sweetheart.”

“Why did she say no?” Clearly Ashley couldn’t comprehend why her mom wouldn’t accept immediately.

“Well, she didn’t want to change things between us. She’s happy with how things are right now.”

Ashley frowned. “When did you ask her?”

“At the wedding.”

It took her a moment to recall exactly what wedding he was talking about. When she did, her face scrunched up in disgust. “You proposed at someone’s wedding?”

“Yeah…” he answered uncertainly.

“You shouldn’t have done that. It’s not cool. Mom wouldn’t have wanted to upstage the bride and groom. Did you get down on one knee?”

“Umm…no?”

“Did you even get her a ring?”
“What is this? Twenty questions?”

“You didn’t even get her a ring?” Ashley shook her head in disbelief. “That’s why she said no!”

“Why?”

“Because all girls want a guy to propose properly. With flowers and candles and music and a ring.”

“Ash, your mom isn’t into romance.”

“She would be for a proposal!”

“She said no.”

“Because you didn’t ask her properly. You need to ask her again.”

“She’ll only say no,” protested Mulder.

“Not if you get her a ring.”

“But….” Mulder stopped, absorbing Ashley’s words. She was right; his proposal had been a spur of the moment a decision, severely lacking any romance. “Do you really think it would help?”

“It’s worth a try,” she answered. “If you make it special for her, she should say yes.”

“Ok, I can make it special.” He was fast catching on to Ashley’s enthusiasm.

“Take her to a fancy restaurant.”

“I can do that.”

“Oh! Or when we go away for our next vacation.”

Ah yes, the vacation he and Scully had booked just a few days after returning home from Hollywood. “Sorted.”

“And get her a ring.”

“I can do that.”

“Shall we go look?”

As if she needed to ask. “Let’s go.”

Before he could head off, Ashley reached out and took hold of his hand. “Mulder?”

“Yeah?”

“I want you to adopt me,” she said seriously. “If you still want to.”

It took him a moment to register her words; his mind still focused on the fact he was going to propose to Scully once again, but as soon as he did, he sprang into action, stepping forward and pulling Ashley into his arms. “Of course I do,” he said, meaning every single word. “I want to very much.”

“Ok,” she said, pulling back ever so slightly to beam up at him.
“Ok. Let’s go buy an engagement ring, find you a poster, then we’ll go home and talk to your mom tonight.”

“Ok.”

With that, Mulder led Ashley to the jewellery store, feeling better than he had done in a long time.

“I like this one.”

Mulder looked up to see what Ashley was pointing at. He chuckled. “You can see it from space.”

“It’s cute.”

“You might think so. Your mom would hate it.”

Sulking, Ashley moved onto the next ring. Mulder himself was browsing along seemingly endless rows of rings. Each time he found one he thought was suitable, Ashley would shake head, or comment that Scully would be more likely to decline the proposal once again.

A few minutes later, he heard an excited shriek. He left the display he was looking at and went over to her. “Look Mulder!” she said excitedly. “This is the one.”

He looked at the ring she was pointing at. A thin gold band, with three small but nonetheless impressive diamonds. It was certainly better than the rock she’d pointed out just moments before. “I like it,” he said.

Ashley nodded. “It’s the three of us,” she explained.

It was perfect.
Scully walked into the office, with Ashley hot on her heels. She tried not to roll her eyes when she noticed Jenn was in the room with her partner.

“Hey Mulder,” said Ashley, seemingly unaware of the tension in the room.

“Hey. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Skinner called me Mulder,” replied Scully. “Is everything all right?”

“You don’t remember disappearing off the face of the earth for about an hour this morning?”

She looked puzzled. “No.”

“I wish,” Ashley piped up. “I had a geography exam this morning.”

“How did it go?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think I failed completely.”

“Well then I guess everything’s ok.”

“Mul –” Scully began, before turning and glaring at Jenn. “Could you give us a minute please?”

“Sure.” But Jenn didn’t move from her spot. Stepping in towards Mulder, Scully was about to speak, but realized she hadn’t heard the other woman move. “Like today?” she said sarcastically, then turning to find, that actually, Jenn was no longer in the room. She wandered over to where she last stood, trying to see if she was hiding anywhere. She wasn’t. “Where the hell did she go?”

Scully asked Mulder, shocked. He didn’t look so surprised.

Crossing his arms, he closed his eyes and nodded. “Boink!”

“Is she really a genie?” Ashley asked, clearly impressed.

“No sweetheart. It’s got to be hypnotism or mesmerism or…something.”

“She’s a genie,” said Mulder, ignoring his partner.

“That’s so cool! Can I get three wishes?”

“Get in line kiddo.”

“Mulder –“

“Scully it is what it is. You examined an invisible body, remember?”

“I thought I did.”

Mulder groaned in disappointment. “Oh!”

Scully turned to her daughter. “Ashley, can you wait outside for a moment please?”

“I don’t want to.”
“Well I want you to. We’ll only be a few minutes.”

“But –“

“Now please,” Scully said firmly, and Ashley knew not to argue.

“Fine,” she said, sighing dramatically and stomping out of the room, leaving the two adults to battle it out.

Ashley sighed as she waited in the corridor for her mom and Mulder to finish ‘talking’, or arguing no doubt. She didn’t understand why she wasn’t allowed to listen in, and right now she didn’t care; she just wanted them to leave and go home, so they could get on with their day.

As Ashley turned to pace back down the hallway, she startled as she noticed the Genie woman standing right in front of her. She hadn’t been there moments before, and Ashley hadn’t heard any signs of movement. “Where did you come from?” she asked, clearly impressed.

The woman shrugged. “I was sent out too.”

“Are you really a genie?”

“What do you think?”

“Mulder thinks you are, and he’s real clever. My mom thinks he’s being stupid though so…”

“Who do you agree with?”

Ashley narrowed her eyes at the lady, trying to get the measure of her. “I agree with Mulder.”

“He is a smart man,” she agreed. “Sometimes.”

“That’s so cool!” exclaimed Ashley, realizing she was right. “Can I get some wishes?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” the woman explained, no doubt having been asked the same question a thousand times over.

“But Mulder has some?”

“He has one more left.”

Ashley nodded. “I hope he uses it for something cool.”

“Well he already asked for world peace.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. “That’s awesome. I don’t think I’d ask for world peace though.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“No.”

“That’s probably a good thing. Mulder regretted it. So…” now she was slightly intrigued. “What would you ask for?”

The youngster thought for a moment. “I’d ask for my mom and Mulder to be happy.”
“Really?” This surprised the genie, in more ways than one.

“I’d ask for them to get married and live together and be happy. And I’d ask for Queequeg and Mulder to get on rather than hating each other so much.”

“Queequeg?”

“My dog.”

“Right.”

“And I’d ask for the adoption to go through straight away so Mulder could be my dad. And I’d want my mom to have a baby too, because I know she really wanted one, and she was so upset when she was told it wouldn’t happen. I just want them to be happy together,” she said with a shrug, unaware that as well as the genie, her mom and Mulder were now listening in, having finished their discussion. “And if I had a spare wish I’d ask for a puppy, and I’d give you a wish too. You must be soooo tired of just making everyone else’s wishes come true.”

“You could say that,” Jenn answered with a smile.

Aware that they now had an audience, Ashley stood up straight, looking over uncertainly at her mom and Mulder. Scully had tears glistening in her eyes, while Mulder had a hand on his partner’s shoulder, squeezing it firmly.

“Are we ready to go mom?” asked Ashley.

“We sure are sweetheart.”

“I’ve got a few things I need to get sorted here,” said Mulder. “But I’ll see you tonight?”

“Not tonight. I’m at Megan’s tonight.”

“Ok, well I’ll catch you tomorrow,” he said, heading over to Ashley and kissing her crown, ignoring the pointed looks Jenn was throwing his way. As Scully and Ashley made their way out of the basement, he turned to the genie.

“You ready?” she asked.

“You ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“I can’t believe you don’t want butter on your popcorn,” said Mulder, as he made his way over to the sofa to sit next to his partner. “Ugh. It’s un-American.”

Ignoring him, Scully leaned forward, picking up the video case to see what movie Mulder had chosen for them. When he’d heard that Ashley would be away overnight, he called Scully after his dealings with Jenn, inviting her over for a movie night, complete with beer and popcorn. Scully had turned up, complete with her overnight bag and the news that Queequeg was at her neighbor’s. She’d read his invitation right. “Caddyshack Mulder?”

“It’s a classic American movie.”

Scully opened the beer he’d handed her, figuring she’d need it if she was going to watch Caddyshack. “That’s what every guy says. It’s a guy movie.”
“Ok, when you invite me over to your place, we can watch Steel Magnolias. I’ll braid your hair and Ash can paint my nails.”

“Again,” Scully smirked, throwing her beer cap in the direction of the trash can, hearing the clink that let her know she hit her target. Mulder did the same, missing by miles, and Scully couldn’t help but chuckle. “So uh…what’s the occasion?”

“I don’t know. Just felt like the thing to do. Cheers.” They clinked bottles before both taking a sip of beer.

“I don’t know if you noticed but umm, I never made the world a happier place,” said Mulder, thinking about his final wish.

“Well,” answered Scully after a moment. “I’m fairly happy. That’s something.”

It certainly was, thought Mulder as they shared a smile.

“So what was your final wish, anyway?” Scully asked casually, though Mulder knew she was desperate to find out. He looked at her, then flashed her a grin and took another sip of beer, saying nothing as the movie began. “Come on Mulder,” she tried again. “Tell me!”

“I thought you didn’t believe in it?”

“Well, I mean…obviously not –“

“In that case you don’t believe I had a third wish.”

“But you do,” she stressed. “And Ashley believes you.”

“Speaking of Ashley, Jenn said she’d never met anyone quite so selfless as her, especially given her age.”

Scully smiled proudly. “She has her moments.”

“You know, if I thought it would have worked perfectly, I’d have tried wishing something similar to Ash. I mean, maybe not the new puppy idea, but the rest of it. But then I figured if I wished you pregnant, you’d end up giving birth to ten kids in one go, or something would go wrong.”

“It’s ok Mulder,” said Scully, taking hold of his hand. “I appreciate the thought, from both you and Ashley. But you know, I’ve made peace with it. I accept that it’s not going to happen, and I’m happy with the fact that I have Ashley, and you.” She gave Mulder a smile that made him want to go get the engagement ring that sat in the drawer next to his bed; the ring he’d promised Ashley he’d present to Scully when they went away on their family vacation. He stayed seated.

“And speaking of Ashley,” he said, squeezing Scully’s hand before letting go, and leaning forward to place his beer and the popcorn on the coffee table. “I got something for her.” He stood up and headed out into the kitchen, returning a few moments later.

“You don’t have to get her anything else Mulder; you spoil her enough as it is.”

“I know, but this is different,” he explained, as he sat back down on the couch. “I umm…with the adoption moving forward, I wanted to give her this,” he said, as he opened his hand to reveal a key.

“What is it?”

“It’s a key.”
“I can see that.”

“To this apartment.”

“You’re giving her your apartment?” Scully asked, raising her eyebrows; her grin telling him she was joking.

“I thought she could have it, if she wants it, and any time she wants to stay over, or you want to go out with Ellen or your mom or someone, she could stay over. If she wanted to,” he added uncertainly. “I want her to feel like she’s welcome here.”

“Mulder, you realize we’re not getting divorced, don’t you?”

“Ha-ha,” he deadpanned. “I just wanted her to feel welcome,” he repeated. “And if you go out, I want to give her the option of staying over here.”

“Well, thank you,” Scully said after a moment. “I’m sure Ashley will appreciate it. However, unless you want your apartment inundated with hyperactive eleven year olds and their Backstreet Boys CDs, I wouldn’t let her in here unsupervised.”

“Of course not,” replied Mulder.

“Well then thank you.”

“I’m not done yet.”

“You’re not?”

“I got her this.” He handed over an envelope to Scully, who peered inside and pulled out a bunch of papers. He gave her a moment to read them through, and smiled to himself when Scully’s eyes widened, and a hand flew to her mouth. “Mulder –“

“I know what you’re going to say.”

“I can’t accept this.”

“It’s not yours to accept. It’s Ashley’s –“

“It’s too much.”

“I want her to have it. That’s why I set it up for her.”

“Mulder –“

“Scully, it’s a trust fund. Call it an IOU to her for the birthdays and Christmases I missed out on.” And the ones he will miss out on, he thought sadly.

“What?” Scully finally tore her eyes away from the account summary in front of her.

“If I’m going to be like a father to her, I want to provide for her. If anything happens to me she’ll get most of it anyway,” he said, grateful his voice didn’t betray him. “She can’t access this money until she’s 18, so there’s no chance of her throwing it all away on posters or concert tickets. Not for a few years yet anyway.”

“We can’t accept this. It’s too much.”
“Well that’s tough,” he said cheerily. “Because you’re going to have to. You told Ash that I get some say in her life, and this is what I’m saying. She can put it towards college or travelling or a house or anything that will set her up in life. You don’t have to do this alone Scully. I want to help you.”

After a moment she nodded, though he could tell she still wanted to argue at the amount of money he’d put by for Ashley. She was worth it, he told himself. And he wanted to make sure she would be ok – at least financially – when he wasn’t around. “Thank you.”

“You can show your thanks if you like,” he said, nudging her shoulder playfully.

“How?” Scully asked cautiously, her eyes narrowing.

“Agreeing to have butter on your popcorn.”

“Never!” she said with a grin, leaning forward to take a handful of the popcorn before settling back on the sofa, this time in Mulder’s arms.

“Well then, after we’ve finished Caddyshack, we can watch Die Hard, and then maybe Robocop.”

“Switch off the TV Mulder, and I’ll make it worth your while later,” Scully uttered, chuckling when Mulder immediately reached for the remote and threatened to stop the movie. “God, you’re such a guy.”

“Well my wish just came true. What can I say?” he said, reaching for Scully.

She froze. “You didn’t really?”

“I thought you didn’t believe in all that.”

“But you wouldn’t have wasted a wish on this?”

“It was a very good wish. For the both of us.”

Luckily, she knew he was joking. “You’re an idiot. Now pass me the popcorn,” she ordered with a grin, and settled back to watch the movie.
“Hey, how are you feeling?” Mulder asked, stepping into Scully’s bedroom. His partner was huddled beneath the covers once again having recently returned from yet another trip to the bathroom. Ashley had called him less than an hour ago, telling him that her mom was sick and asking if she could spend the night at his, after he’d dropped her off at the local ice rink for her friend’s birthday party. He’d insisted on going over to Scully’s apartment to collect Ash, but also to check whether or not her mom needed any help.

Scully blinked sleepily up at him, smiling thinly. Her cheeks were flushed red, and Mulder immediately placed his hand on her forehead, noting that her temperature seemed up slightly. “Mmm ok,” she said, not quite convincingly.

“How long has this been going on?” She’d seemed fine at the office the previous day. They’d gone home to their respective apartments, and spent the night apart.

“I picked Ashley up from Emma’s last night, and as soon as I got home it hit me.”

“Ashley said you’d been sick?”

“Yeah.” She grimaced.

“Was it something you ate?” He cast his mind back to the previous day at lunchtime. He and Scully had gone to a nearby deli, but she hadn’t eaten anything out of the ordinary.

“I think it’s just a bug. Emma was saying she had it over the weekend.”

“Is there anything I can get you?”

Scully shook her head, then looked as though she immediately regretted the action. “Ashley got me some water a little while ago.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll be fine. Thanks for taking her this afternoon.”

“Why don’t I stay over? I can keep Ash and Queequeg out of your hair and then I’ll be here if you’re sick again?”

“No Mulder, I’ll be fine.”

“That’s what you always say,” he said, running a hand through her hair.

“Ashley doesn’t like seeing me sick. I just need some rest and then I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“Please Mulder,” she pleaded. “Ashley really wants to go to this party and I don’t want to let her down.”

“Of course I’ll take her. I’ll come back here and —“

“Mulder, I’ll call you tonight after the party, and I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m sure after a night’s rest I’ll be fine.”
“Are you sure?”
“I’m positive.”

“Mulder –“ Ashley’s voice rang out impatiently.
“I guess I’d better go,” he said, making no effort to move.
“You’d better.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can get you?”
“I’m sure.”

“So damn independent,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss Scully, grinning when she reached out and put her hand against his chest, trying to push him back.
“What?”
“Mulder, I’m sick.”
“And?”

“I vomited barely ten minutes ago. I’m sweaty and I’m hot –“ Mulder wiggled his eyebrows. “and I haven’t showered since yesterday morning.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said, choosing instead to place a kiss on her nose.
“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m glad that your illness hasn’t affected your sense of humour.”

“Enjoy the party.”

As Mulder got to his feet, he turned and mock glared at his partner. “I knew it, you feigned sickness to get out of this, didn’t you?”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Ok,” said Mulder, walking back over to the door. “Love you.”

But when he glanced back, Scully had drifted off to sleep.

xxxxxxxxxx

“Is anyone sat here?”

Mulder looked up to see a guy hovering awkwardly by the empty seat next to him. He shook his head, signalling it was free, and then turned his attention back to the ice rink in front of him. Ashley, who at first had been unsteady on her feet and had taken a few nasty tumbles (but in true Scully fashion, she’d dusted herself off and insisted she was ok to continue), had now mastered the art of ice skating, or at least managing to stay on her feet. The main thing though was that she appeared to be having the time of her life, skating around with her friends.

“I’m Gary,” the other man suddenly spoke up. He was a father of one of the kids, Mulder presumed, but he’d never met him before. With the exception of Ashley’s closest friends, Mulder
had barely met the other kids’ parents, except for exchanging polite hellos and goodbyes at parties.

“Mulder.”

“Which one’s yours?” asked Gary, following Mulder’s gaze out onto the ice.

“The one clinging on to the side for dear life.”

“You’re Ashley’s dad?”

“Yeah,” he answered without even thinking. Hopefully it would soon be official too.

“I’m Shannon’s dad.”

“Right.” Mulder wasn’t quite sure which of the kids out on the ice was Shannon, but he’d heard Ashley mention her a few times.

“You drew the short straw then?”

“Sorry?”

“Having to spend the day here.”

“Her mom’s got flu.”

“I envy her. Two hours of making nice with moms who are always busy bragging about how awesome their kids are. They always have to go one better than the next person. Plus ice skating? I mean at least the kids have outgrown Princess parties, but this is dull.”

“The kids seem to be enjoying it,” commented Mulder, hoping he didn’t have to put up with Gary for the next hour. If he felt that strongly about being at the party, maybe he should leave, he thought to himself.

“Life would be much easier if Shannon liked sport like her brothers.”

“Ashley does.”

“You’re lucky. It wouldn’t be so bad hanging out at these parties if she did –“

“Hey Mulder!” Ashley called out, letting go of the bar to skate in his direction – successfully, he noted with pride – without holding on to anything.

“Go Ash!” he cheered, before turning back to Shannon’s father. “I don’t care what she likes or doesn’t like, I just like hanging out with my daughter. It was good to meet you,” he added, getting to his feet and going to greet his little girl.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

They stopped off at a diner on the way home. Though there’d been snacks at the party, Ashley had complained she was still hungry, and as Mulder didn’t have much at home – at least still in date – he’d decided they’d eat out. As they browsed the menu, Ashley spoke enthusiastically about the party and thanked Mulder for taking her. He could tell that she was concerned about Scully, but tried to put her mind at rest. Ever since Scully’s cancer, Ashley had always been worried about her mom, even if she had the slightest hint of a cold. Not that Mulder could blame her; he often felt the same.
“You know it’s just a stomach bug, don’t you?”

After a moment, Ashley nodded. “Do you think she’s ok?”

“I called her as you were finishing up skating, and she said she was feeling better.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, he told himself. Scully had informed him that she’d vomited a few times that afternoon, which had made her feel better – at least for a little while. Mulder had made her promise that she’d call him if she was sick again, but as yet he’d heard nothing. Hopefully she was resting; getting her strength back.

“Do you think she’ll be ok tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. I hope so.”

“If she’s not, do I get to stay over again?” Ashley almost sounded hopeful at the prospect.

“If your mom’s still sick, we’ll go back home and take care of her.”

“Ok.” Ashley straightened up as their waitress approached them, and scanned the menu once again as Mulder gave his order. She looked up, smiling sweetly. “As mom isn’t here, can I get a cheeseburger and fries, and a chocolate milkshake? And I might get dessert.”

“No you won’t,” Mulder said firmly.

Ashley’s smile faded. “But I’m hungry.”

“Can you give us a minute please?” Mulder asked the waitress, and waited until she was out of earshot before he explained. “You’re not getting all that. It’s not good for you.”

“It’s fine.”

“Your mom said your sugars are all over the place.”

“Please Mulder? I’ll be fine,” she stressed, making those puppy dog eyes at him that he never could resist. This time however, he resisted.

“No,” he stressed. “Sorry kiddo, just get a diet soda. Besides, there’s no way you can eat all that tonight. You’ll never sleep.”

“You let me before.”

“That was before. Your sugars were fine then.”

“I’ll just take a bigger shot.”

“No you won’t. You’re not having a milkshake and that’s final.”

“I don’t want a stupid soda.”

“And I don’t want to see you back in hospital soon? Do you?” he asked, well aware that he had a point, and Ashley shook her head reluctantly. “That’s where you’ll be if you keep this up. Your mom might not be watching you right now, but I am.”

“Sometimes Mulder,” said Ashley, suddenly not quite so happy at spending time with her favorite person. “You’re no fun.”
“That’s life squirt,” he answered, gesturing to the waitress that they were finally ready to order.

“Mulder?”

“How did you know it was me?”

“You’re the only person who calls me at this hour.”

Smiling to himself, Mulder settled back on the sofa, pulling the comforter over him. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

“Better really? Or you’re just saying that to get me off your case?”

“No actually better. I had some toast a little while ago and as of yet it hasn’t made a reappearance.”

“Thanks for that visual.”

“You’re welcome. How’s it going?”

"Not too good,” Mulder admitted.

"Oh?”

“Well, he sighed, running a hand through his hair. Where to start? "It started off ok.”

"Right..." prompted Scully, eager to know more.

"And now I think Ash hates me.”

Scully didn't seem too concerned. In fact he could hear the amusement in her voice. "What happened?"

"We had a war of words. When we were out at dinner tonight, she wasn't particularly happy when I told her she had to revise her order.”

"That's it?"

"She didn't talk to me during dinner. Then when we got home she refused to help me with the dishes, and got angry when I told her it was bedtime. She told me she hated me and stormed off to bed. I'm a terrible dad Scully.” Scully didn't help his mood by laughing. "Thanks for your support.”

"She doesn't hate you Mulder,” she reassured him. "Far from it. She just realizes your relationship is changing what with the potential adoption, so she's testing the boundaries.”

"Yeah well I wish she wouldn't. She made me feel terrible about it.”

"For what it's worth, you sound like you handled it just fine. She needs to know she can't always get her own way around you.”

"I guess..." He didn't sound too sure.

"Tomorrow she'll have forgotten all about it and will be back to normal. She doesn't hate you,” she repeated, telling him what he already knew. It still hurt to be told that though, he thought to
himself, though it was an inevitable part of parenting. "Don't worry about it. We argue all the time and as of yet she hasn't disowned me."

"You're right," Mulder agreed, letting out a deep breath. "I just feel like a shitty person."

"I know, but you're not."

"Thanks."

"Welcome. I'm sorry I left you with a grumpy pre-teen. How was the party?"

"Ash enjoyed it, and so did the other excitable girls. No broken bones either which was a nice surprise."

"Sorry I missed it."

"You just concentrate on getting better." He paused while Scully let out a yawn, then checked the time on the TV display. "I'd better let you get some sleep."

"I guess."

"Are you sure you're going to be ok? We could come back home if you like?"

"I'll be fine, honest."

"Ok." This time he believed her. "I'll bring Ash back in the morning. I can make you breakfast. I make mean dry toast."

"I may take you up on that. Call me if you need me in the meantime."

"Hey, isn't that my line?"

"I know, but just in case Ashley is difficult first thing."

"I will. G'night Scully."

"Goodnight Dad," she teased, then hung up.

Smiling, Mulder hung up the phone and placed it back on the coffee table. He sat back on the sofa, closing his eyes as he let out another deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he was surprised to see Ashley stood in front of him.

"Jesus!" he exclaimed as he jumped in his seat. "I thought you were asleep. "I thought you were asleep." She certainly didn't look as though she'd been asleep, her hair still in place and her eyes wide open but downcast. She looked ashamed, he realized, and he suddenly knew an apology was coming.

"Did I really make you feel bad?" She asked quietly.

"You should be asleep."

"I know. I heard you talking to mom though. Did I make you feel bad?"

Mulder could hear the sadness in her voice. "No, not really," he said, reaching out and taking hold of her hand, pulling her in front of him. "I just don't like it when we argue."

"Me either."
“I don’t want to be the bad guy.”

“You’re not.”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“I know,” she said solemnly. “I’m sorry for being a bitch.”

“Hey –“

Without saying anything, Ashley walked off back in the direction of the bedroom. She returned a few moments later, and held out a dollar bill. “Sorry.”

“Keep up your cussing and you’ll buy me that Yankees season ticket.” He was relieved to see Ashley’s lips curve up into a smile. “That’s better.”

“I’m sorry for arguing with you,” she said, sitting down next to him.

“I accept your apology. I’m sorry for arguing with you too.”

“Do you still want to adopt me?”

Mulder grinned, then pretended to give it some thought. “That depends. Are you going to do what I say?”

“That depends,” Ashley mimicked, relieved when she realized he was joking.

“I like being your friend Ash, but there will be times when you don’t like what I say or ask you to do, just like when your mom asks you to do something you don’t want to, whether it’s the dishes or taking your medicine or something else.”

“I know.”

“Your mom and I spoke to you about what the adoption means. I just don’t want you to think I’m an asshole if I’m ever strict with you.”

“Ahem,” Ashley coughed, and then held out her hand this time.

Shaking his head, Mulder grinned, and handed the dollar bill back to her. “Ok, you win this time.”

“It’s your fault for starting the swear box.”

“It’s your fault for using bad language.”

“I heard it allllll from you.”

“Are we good?” Mulder asked, sobering for a moment.

Seconds later, Ashley nodded, then shifted so she was sitting in his arms. “We’re good. I don’t hate you Mulder.”

“I know. Right,” he said, squeezing her. “It’s late, and I told your mom we’d go back early in the morning.”

“Is she ok?”

“She’s feeling better.”
“Good.”

“You’d better get back to bed. It’s late,” he repeated, noticing that Ashley didn’t seem in any hurry to move.

“Can I just stay here a minute?” she asked.

Mulder smiled sadly to himself. There would come a time soon when he wasn’t around any longer to hold her; when he would no longer see his little girl. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Of course you can.”

And that’s where they stayed.
Chapter 102

When Mulder heard the knock at the door of his motel room, his first thought was that it was Scully. They were like celebrities in Oregon though, so he called out, just in case. “Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

He relaxed somewhat as he heard the familiar tones of his partner’s voice, but his smile soon faded when he opened the door and discovered that Scully didn’t look too good. “What’s wrong Scully?” he asked, hoping she wasn’t coming down with yet another bug, or something worse. She’d already collapsed in the forest, and he was worried for her.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” she answered, somewhat shakily.

“Come in.” He drew her into the room, noticing she couldn’t stop shaking.

“I umm…I was starting to get ready for bed and I started to feel really dizzy….vertigo or something….and then I just…I started to get chills.”

She certainly wasn’t herself. Mulder immediately pulled down the blankets on the bed. “You want me to call a doctor?”

“No, I just…I just want to get warm.”

He thought about calling for a doctor anyway – after all, Scully was a terrible patient – but she just seemed to want to get warm. He could do that. He watched as she got into bed, and helped her to remove her shoes before he pulled the blankets up for her. Moving behind her, he then settled himself on the bed, wrapping his arm around her to spoon her.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Something wasn’t quite right though. Mulder could feel it. Scully hadn’t been right in herself for a few weeks now, but here in Oregon, she seemed to be worse. Dark thoughts kept entering his head, memories of headaches and nosebleeds and cancer. He made a mental note to force her to get a doctor’s appointment when they got back to DC. She couldn’t be sick; not now when everything was happening. Not now when he wasn’t sure how long he had left himself.

“It’s not worth it Scully,” he said moments later.

“What?”

“I want you to go home.” Home to doctors and her daughter and to safety.

“Oh Mulder, I’m going to be fine,” said Scully, dismissing his worries.

“No, I’ve been thinking about it. Looking at you tonight, holding that baby, knowing everything that’s been taken away from you. A chance for another baby, a sibling for Ashley, and your health…” When Scully sat holding the baby, Mulder couldn’t help but think about what she’d like holding their child; their baby that wasn’t meant to be. It hurt him to watch the scene, well aware of everything she’d lost, because of their cause. Because of him. “I think that…I don’t know, maybe they’re right?”

“Who’s right?”
“The FBI. Maybe what they say is true, though for all the wrong reasons. It’s the personal costs that are too high.”

He could tell she was crying, and he moved to whisper into her ear. “There’s so much more you need to do with your life. Ashley needs you.”

“She needs you too,” Scully said, sniffing.

“I know Scully. There’s just so much more than this. There has to be an end Scully.” Kissing her cheek, he settled in behind her, smiling sadly as Scully took hold of his hand and pressed her lips to it.

After a moment, she finally spoke. “Are you saying you want rid of me?”

“No, no of course not,” Mulder reassured her. “I just want you to know that if you don’t want to do this, I understand. I don’t want you to keep getting hurt. You’ve already lost so much through this; your sister, the chance to have more children.”

“I want to be with you,” she said, slowly turning and wrapping her arms around him.

“I’m not talking about us Scully, I’m talking about X Files. I certainly wouldn’t give you up easily.”

“I want to be with you,” she repeated. “I want answers too, we both deserve them.”

Realizing he wasn’t about to win the argument, Mulder nodded, and relaxed, both glad he wasn’t about to lose his partner, but also worried that her decision might come back to haunt her.

xxxxxxxxxxx

“Hey,” Mulder stepped inside Scully’s apartment, closing the door behind him. Ashley was stretched out on the couch, engrossed in a school book while listening along to the television at the same time. Multitasking, she often told Mulder, but he wasn’t quite convinced she could take everything in.

“Hey. Where’s your mom?”

Ashley put her book down, but made no effort to move. “She’s making dinner. I hope you’re hungry because she’s made a lot of spaghetti.”

“Good, I’m starved.” Removing his jacket, Mulder walked over to the couch and sat down next to Ashley. She immediately rested her feet on his lap. “How’s it going?”

“Ok.”

“Have you done all your homework?”

“Some. It’s not urgent though.”

“I’m sure you can find the time after dinner.”

“Not tonight,” she said. “I wanted to see you before you went to Oregon tomorrow.”

“Right.” Returning to Oregon, but this time without Scully. He’d insisted that she didn’t go with him, that she was in danger out there being an abductee. Scully had reluctantly agreed to stay behind, but only on the condition that Skinner went with him.
“Are you staying tonight?”

“If it’s ok with you. I have to leave early though.”

“Can you wake me before you go?”

“Of course, if you want me to.”

“I want to say goodbye.”

Mulder grinned. “It’s only for a few days Ash.”

“I know, but I wanted to say goodbye. Mom doesn’t want you to go without her,” she added, and Mulder nodded. He knew that.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, it’ll do your mom some good to have a few days away from me. It’ll be like a vacation.”

“When you come back, can we go see the Yankees some time?”

“Of course.”

“Cool. Can you get me a present from Oregon?”

“I guess I can do that. What do you want?”

“Something expensive.”

Grinning, Mulder moved to tickle the bottom of Ashley’s foot, holding it in place as she struggled to get away. “I guess I can do that.”

“Let me go,” Ash giggled, attempting to sit up so she could hit him. “Stop stop stop!”

“Dinner’s ready.” Scully announced coming out into the living room, though she didn’t particularly feel like eating it herself. Her stomach felt a little off, though she knew it was no doubt nausea at the thought of Mulder leaving without her. She wanted to have his back, like always. As she took in the scene in front of her, she sighed, unable to stop herself from smiling. “When you children are done, come on through.” Mulder jumped up to follow his partner towards the dining table, but not before Ashley delivered a quick slap to his arm. He was going to miss her in Oregon.

Xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mulder collapsed onto his back, breathing heavily. Moments later, he felt Scully’s arm snake across his torso, and her lips press against his jaw.

“Don’t go to Oregon,” she murmured, and Mulder huffed out a laugh.

“You’re not playing fair. You know I’ll agree to anything when you’re naked.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I won’t be long.”

“I should be with you.”

“I’ve gone places without you before.”
“I know, but this seems different. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“You? A bad feeling?”

“I should be there to have your back,” she replied, ignoring him.

“Skinner will be with me. Though I admit, he doesn’t look half as good as you in a skirt and heels.”

Scully however, made no effort to laugh.

“I’ll be ok, and I’ll be back in no time.”

“You’d better be.”

“Listen, if things don’t add up, I’ll call you, or I’ll leave.”

“Promise?”

She sounded so much like a child-like Ashley that Mulder couldn’t help but smile. “I promise.”

“Good.”

If only he’d stuck to his promise.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Wake up sleepyhead,” Mulder called, bending down to kiss Ashley’s forehead. He smiled as her eyes fluttered open, and her face scrunched up.

“What’s going on?”

“You asked me to call you.” Repeatedly actually. She’d made him promise before she went to bed the previous night that he’d wake her and say goodbye.

“It’s not time yet,” she said sleepily, her eyes slamming shut. “It’s early.”

“It’s six o clock.”

“I don’t wanna go to school today Mulder,” she groaned, her eyes opening once more.

“Sorry kiddo. Just a few more days and then it’s the weekend.”

“Will you be back then?” She rolled onto her side to face him.

“I hope so.”

“Ok.”

“Be good for your mom.”

“I will.”

He didn’t quite believe that. “Try not to get into too much trouble while I’m gone. And take care of yourself too.”

“I will. I’ll miss you.”
“I’ll miss you too. I’ll call you tonight.”

“You’d better.”

“I promise.”

He grinned, then kissed her forehead again. “I love you.”

“Love you right back.”

“Now go back to sleep. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

As Mulder reached the door to Ashley’s bedroom, he heard her voice call out softly. “Mulder?”

He turned, smiling to himself as he saw Ashley sitting up in bed with her arms open, her hair dishevelled and pillow marks tattooed on her face. He went back and gave her one final hug, wishing he didn’t have to leave, but knowing it was something he had to do. “Love you,” he said, feeling her squeeze him in response.

“Love you too.”

With that, he stood and walked out of Ashley’s bedroom, unaware that it would be the last time he saw her for some time.
Chapter 103

Maggie Scully sat up as she heard the sound of a car pull up outside, and headlights illuminated her dimly-lit living room. As she heard a car door close, she got to her feet and headed towards the front door. She hoped it was Dana; she’d been worried sick about her daughter ever since she’d received a phone call earlier that day from Mr Skinner, explaining that Dana had been rushed to hospital after collapsing at work. Exhaustion he’d told her. When she’d told him she would come straight to the hospital, he’d insisted it wasn’t necessary, that Dana was resting, and that there was no need to worry Ashley. Yet there was something in his voice that told her there was every need. Dana herself had called just a short while ago, explaining she was being discharged and would come to pick up Ashley. She hadn’t stayed on the phone for long, and Maggie couldn’t help but worry that something was wrong. Her first thought was that the cancer had returned; after all, there was always a risk, but she prayed she was wrong. Ashley was too young to lose her mom, and Dana had only recently found happiness with Fox.

The sound of the doorbell startled Maggie from her thoughts, and she immediately opened the door. Sure enough, Dana stood opposite, and to Maggie’s horror, as soon as she saw her mom, she burst into tears.

“Dana?”

“Oh mom!”

As Dana moved into her arms, Maggie noticed Mr Skinner standing by the car. He nodded grimly towards her, then got back into the vehicle and drove off. Collecting her thoughts, Maggie gently ushered her daughter into the house, closing the door behind her, and led her into the living room. “Dana, what’s wrong?”

But Scully was too upset to speak; practically hysterical. It must be the cancer, thought Maggie. But then she wondered why Mr Skinner had brought her daughter home, rather than her partner. Unless something had happened to Fox, she suddenly realized. Feeling her legs turn to jelly, Maggie guided her daughter to sit on the sofa, and followed suit. “What’s happened?” she asked her daughter, her voice surprisingly calm considering the fact her heart and mind were both racing.

“Mulder, he – “ A sob escaped Dana, and she shook her head, her tears continuing to fall.

“He…he….” Her breathing was unsteady, but Dana was determined to speak. “Mulder’s gone, and I’m pregnant.”

It was a good job Maggie was sitting down. “Pregnant?” she whispered, clearly astonished. “But I
thought…I didn’t think you could?”

“I’m pregnant,” Dana repeated. “But Mulder’s gone, he’s…he’s been taken.”

“Taken?” It certainly wasn’t what Maggie was expecting her daughter to say. “What do you mean?”

“He was taken, like I…like I was. And now I…now I don’t know where he is.”

“Mom?”

Both Maggie and her daughter tensed, and turned to see Ashley stood in the doorway. From the look of horror on her face, she’d heard everything. “Where’s Mulder?”

“Ashley, sweetheart,” Maggie interrupted. “Go back to bed please. I’ll be up in a minute.”

“No,” she said sternly, before addressing her mom once more. “Where’s Mulder? What’s happening? Why are you crying? Where’s Mulder?”

“I don’t know baby.” Her face crumpled. “He’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“Ashley, your mom doesn’t know –“

“Well she needs to go and find him.”

“Sweetheart, it’s not –“

“You need to find Mulder,” Ashley repeated, her voice stronger this time. “You need to go and find him and get him back.”

“Baby…” Getting to her feet, Scully made her way over to the youngster on unsteady legs. As she reached out to take Ashley into her arms, Ashley pushed her away. “Go and find Mulder,” she ordered.

“I can’t.”

“Please!”

“I don’t know where he is baby.”

“I want Mulder!”

“I know, I know…I want him too,” Scully sobbed, as finally Ashley collapsed into her arms in tears. Moments later, she felt Maggie’s arms encircle them both.

“You’ll be ok,” she murmured. “We’ll find Fox.”

Scully only hoped they would. And soon.

Xxxxxxxxxx

“Are you ok baby?”

Scully helped Ashley back into bed and pulled the covers up over her. Though Ashley had finally stopped crying, she was still sniffing hard; the odd hiccup escaping. It had taken her a long time to
calm down – Scully too for that matter. Mulder was always the person there to help them in bad times. Now he was gone…Scully didn’t even want to think about it.

“I just want Mulder,” Ashley said solemnly, her face crumpling once again as a new set of tears fell. Scully couldn’t help but join her. It was too much to take in, first the doctor telling her she was pregnant, and then the news about Mulder. She needed him there; she needed him to hold her and to tell her everything was going to be ok. She needed him to tell her that he’d always known they’d get their miracle someday.

“I know sweetheart,” said Scully through her own tears. “I’m going to do my best to find him.”

“What if you don’t?”
She didn’t even want to think about that. “I’ll do my very very best.”

Ashley didn’t look quite convinced. She scooted back, making room for her mom, and Scully stood up and stretched out on the bed next to her daughter.

“You and I have to stick together,” said Scully, reaching out and smoothing down Ashley’s hair. “We have to be strong, for Mulder. He wouldn’t want to see you crying.”

“He wouldn’t want to see you cry either.”

“I know, I know. We both have to be strong.”

“Do you think Mulder misses us right now?”

“Sweetheart, I think whenever Mulder isn’t with us, he misses us. I’m sure wherever he is, he’s trying desperately to come home to us.”

“I heard you tell Grandma that you’re having a baby.”

After a moment, Scully nodded. She’d originally planned to keep her pregnancy quiet from her daughter, at least until she’d managed to get her own head around it. “I am.”

“I thought you couldn’t have another baby?”

“So did I?”

“Is it Mulder’s baby?”

“It is.”

Ashley gave her mom a sad smile. “We need to find Mulder real soon. He’s going to be so excited about the baby.”

“Yeah, he is.” Scully willed herself not to cry anymore. She’d only upset Ashley further.

“Do you think he’ll be back for when my adoption goes through?”

Oh god. Scully hadn’t even thought about that. “You know what? Don’t think about that. You just think about getting some rest and staying strong for when Mulder comes back.”

“We’ll be ok mom,” Ashley said uncertainly.

“We sure will. Now,” she said, leaning to kiss her daughter. “Try to get some sleep.” She had some
phone calls to make, to check in with the Gunmen to see if they had any news at all.

“Will you stay with me?”

“Of course.” As Ashley lifted the comforter, Scully got into the bed properly; her daughter instantly drifting back into her arms. “We’re going to be ok baby.”

“We will. We’ll find Mulder, and tell him about the baby, and it’ll be ok.”

Scully said a silent prayer that her daughter was right.
“Mom?”

Scully grimaced as she heard her daughter calling her softly. She hoped Ashley hadn’t had another nightmare, she couldn’t quite deal with that at the moment. Ever since Mulder had disappeared, just over four weeks ago now, Ashley’s sleep had been disrupted with nightmares about the man she adored; images of him being tortured, calling for them both, and sometimes of him never coming back plagued the youngster’s mind.

Before she could answer, Scully turned and vomited into the toilet bowl. The sounds of her retching brought Ashley to the bathroom, and she opened the door without even knocking and flicked on the light.

“Mom?”

“I’m ok,” Scully managed to utter, before she was sick again. She was ok, she was fine. At least that’s what she’d been telling everyone for the past month. She was ok…Ashley was going to be ok…It was just something she ate…Why yes, she was feeling a little run down lately…No, there wasn’t any need for a doctor…Mulder was coming home very soon…But as the weeks progressed, Scully wasn’t sure she believed it anymore, though she hoped it was true. She needed him back by her side, comforting Ashley when she had bad dreams, holding her own hair back when the morning sickness hit her at odd times of the day. Just as she was trying to get her head around Mulder’s disappearance, she was also trying to comprehend the startling news that she was pregnant. She hadn’t believed the doctor when he’d told her the news, and had insisted they re-run the tests. When they reached the same conclusion, she had to face facts…she was going to have Mulder’s baby, and he was nowhere to be seen. Memories of her previous pregnancy instantly came flooding back; memories of having to deal with the news on her own, of having to raise a child by herself. Unless she found Mulder soon, there was a pretty big chance she’d have to do it all over again. Alone.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing baby, I’m fine.”

“You’re sick.”

“It’s just morning sickness.”

Ashley frowned. “But it’s not morning.”

“I know, it hits…it hits at any time,” she said carefully, trying to determine whether or not she was going to be sick again. Thankfully not that time. Morning sickness had hit her in full force, but so far she’d managed to work around it – at least in the office. Agent Doggett didn’t know her well enough to wonder why she looked so pale in the morning, or turned her nose up at the smell of strong coffee. Nor did he have any clue that whenever she disappeared to talk with AD Skinner, she was actually rushing to the ladies bathroom to become reacquainted with the breakfast she’d forced down earlier that morning.

“Can I get you anything?”

“No thank you.” Before Scully could even think about trying to stand up, Ashley got down on the floor beside her, folding her legs beneath her Indian style. “Did you have a nightmare sweetheart?”
After a moment, Ashley nodded. “About Mulder.”

Scully nodded in understanding. She was pretty sure that if she could actually get to sleep, she’d have nightmares too.

“He was in a room, by himself and strapped to a chair. He had these weird things going into his face, stretching his skin…” Ashley raised her hands and proceeded to demonstrate to her mom. “And he was shouting in pain. Shouting for you and for me. He wanted us to find him, and I called back to him but he didn’t hear me…”

“Oh Ashley.” Satisfied that her stomach had settled for the moment, Scully put her arm around her daughter.

“Do you think Mulder’s in any pain?”

“I don’t know,” Scully replied, well aware that her daughter was too old to be lied to. “I hope not.”

“I do too.”

“We have to think positive. Mulder wouldn’t want you to be upset. He liked to see you smile and laugh.”

“I don’t think I have much to smile about at the moment,” Ashley answered forlornly. “I just want Mulder back.”

“Me too. But until he comes back, you need to stay positive, and healthy too. Now you’ve got school tomorrow, so you should go back to bed.”

“I’m not sure I can sleep. I don’t want to have the nightmare again.”

“Do you want to sleep in my room tonight?”

Though Scully knew her daughter was more than old enough to stay in her own room, since Mulder’s disappearance, she had slept in her bed from time to time. It gave her some comfort, even if she spent some nights in tears, clinging on to her mom for dear life as they talked about Mulder and their wish for him to return home soon.

“Can I?”

“Of course you can,” said Scully, hugging her daughter tightly. “You go on in while I wash up. I’ll be there soon sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” replied Ashley, tears clouding her eyes. Slowly she got to her feet and shuffled out of the bathroom, while Scully cursed her partner once again for leaving them.

Xxxxxx

"Who are you?"

Ashley stopped in her tracks as she saw the strange man seated in front of her at Mulder's desk. She knew most of the people her mom worked with, but he was new. Plus he was sitting at Mulder's desk, looking pretty comfortable there too. She frowned as he looked up and smiled.

"Can I help you? Are you lost?"

"I'm waiting for my mom.”
"You must have got separated from your tour. I'll call -"

"Who are you?" She repeated.

"I'm Agent Doggett. Don't worry sweetheart, I'll help you find her."

"Don't call me sweetheart," she said firmly. Mulder called her sweetheart, and this man wasn't anything like Mulder.

"Ashley, don't be rude," ordered Scully as she stepped into the office behind her daughter. "I thought you were going to wait for me upstairs."

"They recognized me and said I could come down." Ashley had always been able to charm the security guys.

"Where’s Emma?"

"She left. I got a security tag," she said, pointing to the badge she was wearing.

"You know this little lady?" Agent Doggett asked Scully, getting to his feet.

"I'm not a little lady."

"This is my daughter, Ashley. Ashley, play nice with Agent Doggett please." Scully looked at her watch, while Ashley glared at the man in front of her.

"Nice to meet you Ashley."

"Why are you sat at Mulder's desk?"

"I umm...I'm helping your mom to look for him."

"From behind a desk?"

"Ashley!" Scully warned, before giving Doggett an apologetic glance. She’d also got off on the wrong foot with her new partner, though they’d called a truce of late. Still, she was embarrassed that Ashley had also taken an immediate dislike to him. At least she hadn’t thrown a glass of water over him, Scully thought to herself. "I'm sorry. Right, we'd better get going."

"Of course. Well it was nice to meet you Ashley," said Doggett, who looked uncomfortable. He could tell that Ashley wasn’t too keen on him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow John,” said Scully, before her daughter could jump in with another sarcastic comment. She looked as Ashley stepped past her and walked towards the desk, her gaze caught by an image behind Agent Doggett. He turned to try and work out what it was she was looking at. She kept walking, until she was practically touching an old newspaper clipping of her mom and Mulder at a crime scene. As she fingered the paper lightly, Doggett leaned back to murmur to her. “You know, you can have that if you want.”

She looked at him as though she was debating whether to argue with him, but then appeared to think better of it. “Yes please,” she whispered back, and gave Doggett a small smile as he proceeded to remove the clipping from the noticeboard and hand it to her.

“Ok, Ash we need to go now else we’ll be late” said Scully, trying not to fall apart at the way her daughter looked at the photo of Mulder with such hope in her eyes.
“Ok.” Ashley started to follow her mom out of the office, but then turned back to face Doggett. “Thank you Agent Doggett.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, his smile soon fading once the two girls left the office. It was clear they were both hurting over their loss. He needed to find Mulder, and soon.

Scully bit back tears as she registered the image on the screen in front of her. She glanced to her right, noting Ashley’s look of amazement, before turning her attention back to the monitor. Back to her other child. Her 12-week scan was in progress, and she’d just laid eyes on Baby Number 2 or the very first time. Baby Mulder. Finally, after all these weeks after being told she was pregnant, she finally had the evidence right in front of her eyes. She really was having a baby, she had finally gotten her miracle. The thought just made her want to cry; both with happiness and sadness. Mulder should have been in the room with them; he should have been there to share in the joy. Instead he was god knows where, while Scully was being driven out of her mind trying to find any trace of him.

“Everything looks good,” the female technician said, to Scully’s relief. She’d asked Ashley if she’d like to go along with her to her appointment, both wanting the company, and wanting Ashley to feel like she was a part of the pregnancy; not wanting her daughter to feel left out. As she’d walked Ashley to the car in the Bureau parking lot, she’d warned her daughter that the scan wasn’t guaranteed to bring good news; that the first trimester was the most crucial time and that sometimes things could go wrong. Thankfully though, everything seemed to be going just fine.

“You see that?” Scully asked Ashley, as the technician proceeded to check the baby’s heartrate. “It’s your baby brother or sister.”

“My half brother or sister,” she stressed, though Scully didn’t appear to hear her, instead concentrating as the baby was checked over on screen.

“I’ll get a printout for you,” the other woman said, smiling down at Scully. “Would you like an extra one to take to dad?”

As Scully’s face fell and she began to explain that thank you, but no, it wasn’t necessary, Ashley took one final look at the screen and then walked out of the consultation room, unable to listen any longer.

Scully found her daughter sitting in the corridor. Her eyes downcast, Ashley was focused on something in front of her. The newspaper picture, Scully realized, as she moved closer. Ashley looked so small; so young sat just ahead of her, pain etched on her face. She looked like she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, and Scully realized that sadly, she probably was. She’d experienced enough in her lifetime already, and now this. She’d lost the man she idolized; her second father. “Are you ok sweetheart?”

After a moment, Ashley nodded, but she didn’t look up. Scully noticed she seemed to be biting back tears. “I’m sorry for walking out,” she murmured, as her mom took a seat next to her.

“What happened?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”
Ashley shook her head, then seemed to think better of it. “I just felt bad for Mulder. I’m sad he’s not here to see the baby. It’s his baby,” she added softly.

“I’m sad too. I wish he was here to see it. But I’m glad you’re here,” said Scully, taking hold of her daughter’s hand and squeezing it. “I couldn’t do this without you here.”

“Are you scared?”

As Ashley looked up at Scully, her mom nodded. “I’m terrified.”

Ashley seemed surprised. “What of?”

“Of not finding Mulder before the baby comes. Of doing it alone.”

“Were you this scared when you found out you were having me?”

“When I found out I was pregnant with you, I was so happy and excited. The terror came later I think, after I’d told your dad and I realized it was just going to be the two of us. And then, when you were born…I had no experience of babies, and every time you cried, I panicked that something was wrong or that you were sick. This time…this time I’m scared of doing it alone again, but I know a little of what to expect. And I have you,” she said, smiling thinly. “You’re my baby too.”

Ashley didn’t return her grin, instead frowning. "I won’t be soon."

“You’ll always be my baby, no matter what happens. You’re my first-born, and we’ve been through so much together. Nothing will ever change that.”

“I’m not Mulder’s baby though.”

So that was some of the issue, Scully realized. There was already a hint of jealousy between Ashley and the new baby, though Scully couldn’t really blame her daughter. It had always been the two of them; three including Mulder. Now in just a few months’ time, the new baby was going to take up most of Scully’s attention. Ashley was going to have to share her mom. Mulder too, if he ever returned. “I disagree,” Scully argued. “Mulder thinks of you as his own daughter. He wouldn’t have offered to adopt you if that wasn’t the case. He loves you and nothing’s going to change that.”

Scully squeezed her daughter’s hand once again. “And this baby is going to love you too. You’re going to be his or her big sister, and he or she will need you to be there for them, and to show them how it’s done. Are you ok with this?” she asked hesitantly. “There’s been so much to take in lately that I hadn’t got round to asking you about the baby and what you thought.”

“I just want you to be happy,” Ashley replied softly.

“Oh sweetheart. I’m happy as long as you’re happy.”

“I’ll be happy when you find Mulder,” the youngster answered, looking down sadly at the picture once again.

“Me too,” said Scully, her free hand instinctively moving to rest on her abdomen. “Me too.”
Another dead end.

Scully stalked into her motel room, slamming the door angrily behind her. She pulled off her jacket, throwing it in the direction of her bed, not minding the fact she’d missed it completely, and kicked off her shoes. Another dead end. She and Agent Doggett had headed out to Washington State following reports of strange activity – possible UFO sightings too – and even the Gunmen had sounded hopeful when they’d heard the news. Of course Scully should have known it wasn’t to be; that she wasn’t any closer to finding Mulder. Maybe she wouldn’t ever find him.

When her cell phone suddenly began to chirp, Scully immediately answered it, hoping that there was news about Mulder – maybe the lead wasn’t a dead end after all.

“Scully.”

“Dana?”

It wasn’t AD Skinner on the phone, Scully realized; her heart sinking yet again with more disappointment. “Mom? Is everything ok?” When Maggie didn’t answer immediately, Scully knew something was wrong. “What’s happened?” She sat up, looking around for her shoes, getting ready to leave immediately. “Mom, where’s Ashley?”

“I’m at the hospital.” Maggie’s voice was hard to read. With her shoes back on, Scully grabbed her bag and began gathering her things to pack.

“Mom –“

“Ashley collapsed at school this morning –“

“And you only just called me?”

“I’ve been trying all morning Dana, but you never picked up!” Maggie snapped. Scully flinched.

“Is she ok?”

“It’s her diabetes. From what they’ve told me, it sounds as though she hasn’t been taking good care of herself lately and has been a little silly with her diet.” Scully heard the accusation in her voice. She hadn’t been taking good care of her daughter lately. Her mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of finding Mulder. “She’s asking for you.”

Scully felt terrible. Ashley needed her, and yet she was on the other side of the country. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m heading to the airport now. I’ll get a flight as soon as I can. Tell Ashley that I love her, and that I’ll see her soon.” She made a mental note to call Doggett the instant her mom rang off. He could stay if he wanted, but she was going home.

“You can’t keep doing this Dana,” Maggie warned. “You can’t keep leaving your daughter behind. Fox wouldn’t want that. You should be here, looking after yourself and the baby. Both your babies.”

And as Scully hung up, she realized her mom had a point. She did need to be there for her daughter, but she also needed to find Mulder. And soon, before she lost everything.
Scully stopped in her tracks as she approached Ashley’s hospital room. Of all the people she’d expected to see there, her brother Bill certainly wasn’t one of them. Curiosity and the need to see her daughter got the better of her, and so she quickly opened the door and stepped into the room. She noticed with a sad smile that Bill was holding his niece’s hand, but he soon let go and stood up when he saw his sister. “Dana?”

“What are you doing here? Where’s mom?”

“I sent her home. She was exhausted. You look like hell Dana.”

“Yeah well…I’ve been rushing back to get here.”

“What were you doing out in Washington State?” Something in Bill’s voice told Scully that he knew full well what she was doing there.

“I was looking for Mulder.”

“And did you find him?”

She clenched her fists. She wouldn’t bite. She wouldn’t. “Not this time.”

“A wasted trip. Another wasted trip,” he corrected himself.

“Listen Bill, I know you’ve never liked Mulder and always hated the thought of us, but I need to find him.”

“You need to be here.”

“I don’t want to discuss this now.”

“I think it’s the perfect time to discuss it.”

“Just because you –“

“This is nothing to do with me. I’m talking about you and Ashley.”

“What about us?” Scully asked, her eyes darting to her daughter sound asleep in the bed. Ashley, thankfully, looked as though she was sleeping peacefully, though she was a deathly pale color. She looked ill, and Scully had obviously ignored the warning signs, despite the fact she was supposedly a doctor. She really wasn’t cut out to be a mom, she thought to herself.

“Just look at yourself Dana,” Bill hissed, his own eyes darting to Ashley to make sure she didn’t stir. She slept on. “You’re a mess.”

“I’m –“

“Looking for Mulder, I know. But you’re exhausted. You’re barely at home, and by the look of it, I’d say you’re barely eating either. And you’re pregnant.”

There was a pause as Scully processed his words. “Mom told you,” she said accusingly.

“She’s worried about you. We all are.”

“So you’re here to lecture me on how irresponsible I am? How I’m a bad mom and an idiot for
getting pregnant again? I seem to recall you getting a good kick out of it last time.”

“No,” Bill answered softly. “No, I’m not.”

“Well then what is this all about?”

“I’m just asking you to take care of yourself,” he said softly. “You’re running yourself into the ground, and you’re putting your health, not to mention the baby’s, at risk. Mulder would hate to think he was responsible for any of that.”

“And how do you know what Mulder thinks?” Scully asked defensively, though she shifted awkwardly at his words.

“Because I know that he loves you. And I know he’d love that baby if he were here. The last thing he’d want was for anything to happen to you. Or Ashley either; I’ve seen how much he loves her.”

Scully softened. She knew deep down that Bill was right, even though it hurt to admit it. “I need to find him Bill,” she whispered, her voice breaking as tears clouded her eyes.

“I know you do, and you will. But for the moment, you have to concentrate on yourself and Ashley. And the baby to. I get what you’re doing, I really do.”

“What?”

“If Tara was missing, I’d move heaven and earth to find her.” Scully nodded. He did get it. “But your search will all be in vain if Mulder doesn’t have anyone to come home to. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to you or the kids. And Dana, you need to just stop and look after yourself. You look exhausted.”

“I am,” she admitted.

“And you’ve got to eat. You’re carrying Mulder’s baby.”

Scully’s tears spilled over. “I know.”

“And your little girl is hurting too. She’s not the same Ashley anymore. She barely uttered three words to me or mom over the past two days. She needs you.”

“I know,” Scully sniffed. She felt guilty enough as it was. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll find Mulder,” Bill promised her.

“Really?”

“Did something happen out in Washington?”

“No, but I just don’t know any more Bill. Why haven’t I found him yet?”

“Mulder loves you. He adores Ashley and I’m sure he’d be over the moon to hear about this baby. I have no doubt he’s trying his hardest to get back to you.”

“You hate Mulder,” she said, clearly skeptical.

“I know I do. But you love him, so I’m going to have to put up with him. Besides, I want him to come home, so I can kick his ass for getting my little sister knocked up.”
Scully laughed through her tears. “Thank you for being here for Ashley.”

“That’s what families are for. And Dana? I know I may not always agree with you, but I love you, and I hate to see you unhappy.”

“I know.”

“You’ll get through this. Both you and Ashley will.”

Scully nodded. She only hoped Bill was right.

xxxxxxxxxx

Scully smiled sleepily as Ashley’s eyelids fluttered open. She ran a hand through her daughter’s hair as she came back into consciousness.

“Hey baby.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” Scully quickly grabbed a cup of water for her daughter as Ashley licked her lips. “How are you feeling sweetheart?”

“My head hurts.”

“I’m not surprised,” she replied, kissing her daughter’s temple. “You gave us quite a fright. Do you remember what happened?”

“Not much.”

“You collapsed at school. The doctors say your insulin levels are all over the place. You’ll need to stay in for a little while and then we can go home.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok baby,” Scully said reassuringly. “It’s my fault too. I haven’t exactly been here for you lately.”

Ashley took a sip of water. “Did you find Mulder?”

After a moment, Scully shook her head and forced a smile. “No sweetheart, I didn’t.”

“Maybe next time,” the little girl said hopefully.

“You know what? I’ve been thinking,” Scully began. “Neither of us have been taking good care of ourselves, have we?” Ashley shook her head. “That needs to change. We need to be strong for Mulder. He wouldn’t want to see either of us ill, and he’d hate the thought of you being in hospital right now. So you and I are going to get some help to get us through this and feeling better again.” It was something that Bill had suggested to his sister during their talk, before he left her for the night. She had to admit that her brother had a point. “I know there are probably some things you want to talk about concerning Mulder’s disappearance and the baby that you don’t want to worry me about, so how about we arrange some more sessions with Julie if she’s available? Or maybe another therapist if she isn’t. What do you think?”

Ashley pondered her mom’s question for a long time before answering in a small voice. “I think that would be a good idea.”
“Good.” Scully smiled, her first genuine smile for days. “I’m going to speak to someone too. We both have a lot going on, and I think it would do us both some good to talk about it.”

“Ok.”

“We’re going to be ok baby.”

“What about Mulder?”

Scully hesitated ever so slightly. “Mr Skinner is going to help us look for him.”

Ashley didn’t look too excited at the prospect. “Can we trust him mom?” She sounded so much like Mulder, that Scully couldn’t help but huff out a laugh.

“We can trust him,” she answered. It had taken her a long time to reach that conclusion herself. “But don’t you worry about that now,” she added, as she saw Ashley bite back a yawn. “You just concentrate on getting better. Get some rest baby.”

“Will you stay?”

“Of course I will. I’m not going anywhere.”

Satisfied, Ashley scooted back on the bed to make room for her mom. Smiling, Scully stood and, after shrugging off her jacket and shoes, climbed up onto the bed. Ashley immediately went into her arms, snuggling up against her, and soon she drifted off into a peaceful sleep. It wasn’t long before her mom joined her.
Hello, my name is Dana. I was umm…I was given the details of this group by my mom who thought it might be a good idea to talk with women in a similar position.”

Scully glanced nervously around the room at the circle of women who stared back at her. It had been Maggie’s idea for her to attend the church group for single moms. She figured her daughter might need someone to talk to, and Scully figured she was right. After all, Ashley was now attending therapy sessions, and Scully herself had promised to seek help. “I’m a single mom. I have a daughter, Ashley, who’s eleven. Almost twelve actually. Her real dad passed away when she was four. And…and I’m pregnant.”

She was relieved to find that none of the other women looked as though they were judging her. Instead they were listening intently to her every word. “My baby’s father he…he disappeared. He was abducted.” She didn’t want them to think that Mulder had walked out on her. “He didn’t even know I was pregnant.” She swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat. “And if he doesn’t come back soon I’m going to have to do all this by myself all over again. And that scares me. I’ve already had one child growing up not knowing who her father is, and I don’t want it to happen again. Plus I don’t even want to think about what it’ll do to Ashley to lose another father. She adores Mulder.”

“How is your daughter doing?” asked a lady to Scully’s left.

“I don’t know. I don’t think she’s letting on to me how she’s really feeling. She’s devastated obviously; she loved…loves,” Scully corrected herself. “Mulder like he’s her father. Right now she’s at a therapy session.” She shook her head. “Eleven years old and she’s in therapy.”

“It’ll probably do her good to talk,” said another lady, and Scully nodded absentmindedly.

“I think she’s jealous of the baby,” she continued. “It’s been just us for so long, and she’s always been the center of attention, but now that’s about to change. She’s a great kid though, and I really don’t know how I’d get through this without her. She’s keeping me sane throughout all this.”

“My husband passed three months ago,” said another woman to Scully’s right. She was visibly pregnant; fit to bursting practically, and Scully initially smiled sympathetically before sobering, realizing that in just a few months, that would be her. “Our children are what encourage me to get up in the morning and get on with life.”

“I’m sorry,” Scully replied, well aware she wasn’t the only one with problems. “How do you cope?”

“You just do,” the other lady answered, and Scully nodded sadly. “And you’ll cope too Dana, whatever happens. I’m sure you’ll find Mulder soon, but you seem like a strong person, with a great family around you. You’ll cope.”

“I know,” said Scully sadly. She didn’t want to have to cope though. She wanted Mulder back to help her and tell her everything was going to be ok. That wasn’t likely to happen anytime soon though, so for now she knew she had to at least attempt to get on with her life, and get some help in doing so. “I know.”

“How are you feeling?”
Ashley thought long and hard before answering carefully. “Worried. Scared.”

“Scared?”

“Scared that Mulder might not come home.”

“What scares you about that?”

Ashley shrugged. She thought that was obvious. Julie however, thought otherwise, or else just wanted Ashley to say the words out loud. It was her second therapy session and she wasn’t feeling any better. In fact, she felt worse, because telling Julie everything that happened, just made it all seem even more real. “I’m scared because I love him and I want him to come home. If he doesn’t come home, my mom’s going to be upset. I’m scared because if he doesn’t come back, there’ll be a chance that he’s dead. I don’t know what my mom will do if he dies and…” she stopped herself and shook her head.

Julie frowned. “And?”

“And,” Ashley uttered, biting her lip nervously. “And it’ll mean that everyone I love dies. I don’t want Mulder to die. I don’t think we can cope if he is dead.”

“What makes you think Mulder is dead?”

“My mom does. I heard her talking to my grandma about it, telling her there was a chance he was dead. I think she was upset though, but I still don’t want him to die.”

“There is a chance he’s still alive.”

Ashley nodded. “But everyone dies. My grandpa and my aunt. What if they died because of me? What if Mulder dies because he loved me too? And then if my mom dies, I won’t have anyone.”

“Ashley,” Julie said reassuringly, sitting forward in her seat. “You are not responsible for anyone dying. You know that don’t you?”

After a moment she nodded. “I know,” she said quietly. “But sometimes I feel like it’s all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. Not at all. You’ve lost a lot of people close to you, and I know it’s incredibly hard for you. I’m sure Mulder disappearing is also stirring up a lot of bad memories for you.”

“It is,” Ashley agreed. “I keep thinking about my dad. My real dad,” she added, though it was clear in her mind who she considered to be her father. “Maybe I shouldn’t have loved Mulder so much.”

“Your dad would have wanted you to be happy.”

“That’s what my mom says.”

“And how is your mom?”

“She’s ok. She’s tired though, and she cries a lot when she thinks I’m asleep. She blames it on her hormones though.”

“Ah yes,” commented Julie. “She’s having a baby.”

“Mulder’s baby,” Ashley corrected.
“How do you feel about that?”

“My mom wanted another baby.”

“I asked how you felt.”

“I don’t know. My mom wanted a baby so I’m glad she gets to have one.” She paused. “But…”

“But?” Ashley looked worried. “You know, anything you say here is completely confidential. Your mom doesn’t have to know about anything you say here.”

Ashley must have decided to trust Julie, because she spoke up. “I worry that my mom will be so busy with the new baby that we won’t spend any time together and –“

“And?”

“Sometimes I think she’ll love the baby more than me because it’s Mulder’s.”

“Do you believe that?”

“My mom loves Mulder.”

“She loved your dad too.”

“But not as much as Mulder.”

“And that’s why you think she’ll love the baby more?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, Ashley as a mother myself, I can tell you that your mom won’t feel that way. Yes she’ll be busy with the new baby, but that doesn’t mean she’ll love you any less. How do you feel about Mulder being the baby’s dad?”

“I don’t mind,” said Ashley, shrugging.

“Really?”

“Mulder wanted to adopt me, so I know he loves me. I just wish the adoption had gone through already. I want Mulder to be my dad. So I guess I’m a little bit jealous about the baby,” she admitted.

“That’s understandable. But like you’ve already said, Mulder loves you, and he wants to make it official. He’s already like a dad to you and I’m sure he won’t treat the new baby any differently to how he does you.”

“I hope not,” said Ashley sadly. In fact, she hoped a lot of things; the main thing being that Mulder returned home. Soon.

“Mulder makes you happy.”

“He does.”

“Well, your happiness is the most important thing.”

“I’ll be happy when Mulder comes back,” said Ashley, repeating words she’d said to her mom not
so long ago. She didn’t see the sorrowful expression on Julie’s face. And she wasn’t to know what was about to happen that would turn her world upside down.
Chapter 107

Scully tapped on the door, her eyes filling with tears as she realized that she didn’t want it to open. She was dreading it in fact. Her heart was in her mouth, and she as pretty sure she was just moments away from vomiting. Only this time it had nothing to do with morning sickness. Mulder was dead. Finally she’d found him, but it wasn’t the happy reunion she’d been hoping for. It didn’t even involve Mulder turning up unannounced in a hospital, fighting for his life just as she had done herself years before. No, instead she’d found him, battered and bruised and dead in the woods. He was gone. The man she loved. The man who’d promised her that he’d never leave her or her daughter was now dead. Ashley had lost another father. Scully had lost another lover. Her new baby would never know its dad, just like Mulder would never know that they finally got their miracle. And now she was on the doorstep of her motel room, just moments away from having to tell Ashley that the man she adored was dead. This time, when she was told about abductees returning, Ashly had insisted on accompanying her mom. Scully had argued it would likely be a waste of time, even though she had hope that as Teresa Hoese had returned, Mulder would too. But Ashley was adamant, and so she and Maggie had accompanied Scully on her travels. Now Scully was wishing her daughter was back at home – at least it would have given her some time to prepare for what she was going to tell her, as well as time to try and absorb the news herself too. Mulder was gone. She was never going to see him again. She was never going to be able to look into his eyes. She’d once said she wanted babies with those eyes, and it was true. She still did. She would never hear Mulder speak again; never hear him say her name or tell her he loved her, or talk about mothmen or flukeworms.

He was gone for good.

Just as Scully felt the tears begin to fall, the door opened and Maggie stood before her, a look of concern etched on her face, which was quickly followed by comprehension. Ashley stood behind her, and Scully immediately wiped her tears away. It was too late though.

“Mom?” Ashley stepped forward; her eyes never leaving her mom’s. Scully saw the moment her daughter finally realized what had happened. Ashley’s face crumpled, and what little hope she had left vanished from her body instantly. “No,” she uttered, shaking her head. Her eyes darted between Scully and Maggie as she backed away. “No, Mulder isn’t dead.”

“I’m so sorry sweetheart,” said Scully, her voice breaking with emotion. She approached Ashley, frowning when her daughter stepped out of her reach.

“You’re lying,” Ashley snapped, promptly bursting into tears. “Mulder isn’t dead, and you’re a liar if you say he is.”

“We found his body just a short while ago,” replied Scully calmly, her own tears falling in earnest. “There was nothing we could do. He’s been…he’d been dead for a while.”

Ashley’s eyes flared. “Where is he?”

“He’s at the hospital. There’ll need to be an…” Scully stopped herself, unable to finish her sentence. She couldn’t bear to think of the autopsy; of a stranger slicing through Mulder’s skin.

“I want to see him,” her daughter demanded.

“Baby, you can’t.”
“I want to see him.”

“Mulder has been through a lot. He’s not himself. Why don’t you remember him how he was -?”

“I want to see Mulder.”

“Ashley -“

“Dana,” Maggie spoke up, her own tears falling. “Maybe it’ll help.”

“It won’t -“

“It might help Ashley understand.”

“Please mom?” Ashley begged. And so, after realizing her mom was right, Scully prepared for her and her daughter to say goodbye to the man they both loved.

Scully opened the door and stepped inside of the room, her eyes immediately darting towards Ashley to her left rather than what was in front of her. In front of her was Mulder’s body, and Scully knew that if she looked at him at that very moment, she’d fall to pieces. She needed to be strong for Ashley. Ashley, who’d collapsed in tears back at the hotel, but had quietened down in the car on the way to the hospital. Though her tears had stopped, she was now shaking uncontrollably, despite the fact she was wrapped in Scully’s jacket as well as her own. Reality was now settling in for the youngster. For months now they’d both been living in a limbo of sorts, waiting for Mulder to return, but now they knew for sure. Mulder was never coming back.

Ashley stood rooted to the spot, her eyes trained solely on the body in front of her. "Daddy?" came a small voice, a voice that broke Scully's heart. If there’d been any doubt what the youngster thought of Mulder, her words confirmed it. Scully only wished Mulder was alive to hear Ashley say it. "Daddy?" She ran forward, evading her mom's grasp as she rushed over to the gurney. Her right hand went to Mulder's bare chest, covered in scars similar to his face. Scully dreaded to think what he’d been through in his last moments. "Wake up." She pushed against him, hard. "Wake up!" The next thing Scully knew, Ashley was pressing both hands against his chest, as though trying to resuscitate him. "Please wake up.”

"Ashley, baby..." Unable to watch any longer, Scully hurried over to her daughter, trying to pull her off of Mulder. Ashley however was strong when she was determined.

"He's not waking up.”

“Mulder’s not going to wake up sweetheart.”

"You're a doctor mom," pleaded Ashley, as she turned to face her mom momentarily, tears trailing down her cheeks. "You can help him.”

"I tried.” And she did too. Scully hadn't wanted to give up on Mulder without a fight.

Shaking her head, Ashley focused her attention back on to the man in front of her. "Please Mulder, wake up.”

"Sweetheart, he's dead.”

"No he's not.”
"I'm sorry baby."

"No! You're lying!"

"I wish I was."

"But he can't be dead. He can't!"

"I wish I could tell you he wasn't baby, but he is."

Ashley’s crying only intensified, and when she finally realised that her compressions weren’t ever going to wake Mulder, she immediately flung herself into Scully’s outstretched arms. “Bring him back mom. Please bring him back,” she sobbed.

“I tried Ashley, I really did. We tried everything we could baby, but Mulder isn’t coming back. I wish to god he was,” she added through her own tears. So many emotions raced through her body. She was angry, so damn angry at Mulder for leaving them alone, even though he’d promised he never would. And yet she felt overwhelming sorrow, for herself, her daughter and her unborn child, who would never know its father. Mulder was never going to be in their lives again; they were going to have to learn to live without him. She wished to god she could bring him back, because she wasn’t certain she was going to be able to cope without him by her side.

Ashley seemed to echo her thoughts as she slumped down onto the floor beside the man she considered to be her father. “I don’t want life without Mulder.”

Easing herself onto the floor next to her daughter, Scully pulled her into her arms. She couldn’t help but wish Mulder would hear Ashley’s cries and get up off the damn gurney. Of course, it didn’t happen. “I know baby. I don’t either. But Mulder would want us to carry on.”

“I just want Mulder back,” sniffed Ashley.

“I know,” echoed Scully as she broke down. “Me too.”

xxxxx

“We have to go,” Scully said a little while later, once Ashley had settled down and her tears subsided. “It’s late sweetheart.”

“I don’t want to leave Mulder.”

“Me either. But you have to remember that it’s not Mulder, not really.”

“Do you think Mulder can hear us right now? And see us?”

“I think so.” Actually, Scully wasn’t quite so sure what she believed any more, but she didn’t want to upset her daughter any further. “I think he’ll be sad that he’s not here with us, but so very proud of you right now.”

“Do you think he knew he was going to die? Do you think he was in pain?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, unwilling to lie to Ashley. “I hope not.” The scars on Mulder’s body suggested otherwise.

“Will there be an autopsy?”

“Yes,” Scully said sadly.
“I don’t want it to happen. I don’t want someone to cut Mulder up,” she sniffed.

“We need to know how –“

“No mom, please don’t let them touch him.”

After a moment, Scully nodded. Her daughter was right. Scully didn’t want anyone to touch him either. She’d make a few calls once Ashley was settled back at the hotel. “Ok, Ok…But we can’t think about that right now. Mulder wouldn’t want us to. We need to get going soon baby.” She stood up and then held out her hands, helping Ashley to her feet. Ashley immediately hugged her tightly.

“Can I say goodbye to Mulder?”

“Of course you can.”

Stepping out of her mother’s arms, Ashley approached the gurney once again, and after some hesitation, she took hold of Mulder’s hand, her bottom lip trembling as she realized this was goodbye. “Hi Mulder,” she said, taking measured breaths to compose herself. “I just wanted to say that I love you very much and I… I always will. Thank you for reading me bedtime stories and for scaring away the monsters when I was little and for taking me to baseball games. And for the awesome presents you used to get me.” She sniffed. “It’s not fair,” she said after a moment. “It’s not fair because you made me and my mom so happy. You left us and now we don’t get to see you again. I never imagined that you wouldn’t come home to us. It’s still sinking in that I’m never going to see you or hug you or read Harry Potter with you ever again.” Scully blinked back yet more tears. “Thank you for being the best dad in the world, and for loving me like you did. I hope you’re watching over us, and that if you ever see my real dad, he thanks you for taking care of me. I’ll never ever forget you.” A sob escaped. “And I promise I’ll take care of mom and tell the baby all about you. And I’ll never ever stop loving you.” As Ashley’s tears spilled over, she leant across and kissed Mulder’s cheek. “I miss you,” she added sadly.

Scully took hold of her daughter’s hand, her tears coming quicker as Ashley immediately flung herself into her arms sobbing, leaving Scully to say her own goodbye. “We did it Mulder,” she whispered. “We got our miracle.” And then carefully, without disturbing Ashley, Scully gave her partner one final kiss on the lips, squeezing his hand and uttering a last “I love you,” before she led Ashley out of the room to begin the hard task of getting on with their lives without Mulder.
Scully let out a deep breath as she finished wiping up the last of the dishes. As she placed the towel back on the counter, she placed her hand on the gentle swell of her abdomen for reassurance. It was still there. Ever since Mulder had died, she’d felt as though she was living in a dream world and that at any moment she’d wake up to find her partner beside her, laughing and joking rather than stretched out in a coffin at the funeral home. The funeral was the following day, and everyone who had called in to offer their sympathies to Scully told her that normal life would recommence after the service. Scully however, wasn’t sure that normal life would ever resume. She thought about Ashley out in the living room; her eyes focused on the television in front of her, yet Scully was pretty certain she wasn’t listening to a word of what was happening on screen. Her once bubbly and energetic little girl had changed in recent days. She was quiet and withdrawn, quick to break down into tears at any given moment. Not that Scully could blame her of course. Ashley had lost another father figure; the only true one she’d ever known. Scully had once told Mulder that her daughter was a daddy’s girl, and she was right. Her daughter was grieving hard over his death. Ashley had yet to go back to school following Mulder’s death; her teacher had agreed that she could take some time off until after the funeral, but besides crawling into bed with Scully each night after a nightmare, and clinging onto her mom for dear life, her daughter wasn’t really speaking, and certainly wasn’t herself.

As Scully stood up straight and summoned the energy to go out of the kitchen, she caught sight of Ashley standing in the doorway, her eyes downcast. “Are you ok sweetheart? Would you like a drink?”

Ashley shook her head; her socked foot tracing patterns on the floor.

“Is everything ok?”

“Can we go to Mulder’s apartment?”

That certainly wasn’t what Scully was expecting her to say. “Tonight?”

Her daughter nodded as she looked up at her mom.

“Are you sure?”

“We need to feed his fish.”

“His fish are fed Ashley. The Gunmen have been doing it.”

“I just want to see Mulder’s things.”

Scully wasn’t entirely sure that was a good idea just yet. She’d been to his apartment the previous day and that had ended in tears. “Maybe we can go another day?”

Ashley pouted. “Can we go tonight? Please? I want to be close to Mulder right now.”

After a moment, Scully relented. Ashley was under a lot of pressure, and was no doubt feeling the strain with the funeral now just hours away. “Ok, get your coat and we’ll go now.” As Ashley wandered out of the room, Scully willed herself to be strong for her daughter once again.

xxxxxxxxx
When Scully unlocked the door to Mulder’s apartment, she expected Ashley to go on in ahead of her like normal. What she certainly didn’t anticipate was Ashley hanging back reluctantly, as though she was afraid. “Are you coming?” Ashley didn’t look too certain. “It’s ok baby. There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“I keep expecting to see Mulder’s body again,” she admitted.

Scully put an arm around her daughter. “I know. He’s not here though. It doesn’t look any different to the last time we were here.”

“It is different though,” said Ashley sadly.

“I know,” her mom agreed. “You know, we don’t have to do this today. We can go home and try again another day if you like?”

Ashley considered her mom’s words, but after a moment shook her head. “No, we’ll go in now.”

“Ok.”

Scully opened the door and watched as Ashley walked into the apartment very cautiously, as though she was expecting someone to jump out at her. Scully realized after a moment, that Ashley was waiting for Mulder to greet them at the door, or call out for them from the kitchen or the bedroom. But it didn’t happen. Just as she reached the kitchen, Ashley stopped and turned to face her mom, her bright blue eyes filled with tears. She brushed them away before they even had the chance to fall. “I’m not going to cry,” she said out loud; whether it was to her mom or herself Scully didn’t know, but she nodded in encouragement. She was telling herself the same thing. Ever since she’d found Mulder’s body, she felt as though all she’d been doing was crying. It was both the shock and upset of losing Mulder, and at seeing Ashley so upset. When Jack had died, she’d had a few tears but she’d been far too young to truly understand her loss. Now though she knew only too well how hard it was to carry on after losing someone you loved.

“Anytime you want to leave, just say the word and we’ll go,” said Scully, eyeing Ashley cautiously as she unbuttoned her coat and slipped it off, placing it on the back of Mulder’s dining room chair. When she was satisfied that Ashley wasn’t going to cry, Scully headed over to the fish tank, noticing immediately that one was floating on top of the water.

“Damn it,” she uttered, loud enough for Ashley to hear.

“What’s the matter mom?”

“Nothing,” she said, shielding her daughter from the tank. Ashley had had enough death to last her a lifetime. Scully wasn’t able to add to her woes.

Thankfully, Ashley didn’t press her. “Can I go into Mulder’s bedroom?”

“Sure honey,” her mom answered absentmindedly, grateful that Ashley would give her a few moments alone to dispose of the dead fish.

When Ashley still hadn’t reappeared long after Mulder’s ex-goldfish had been disposed of, Scully went looking for her. She paused in the doorway to Mulder’s bedroom as she saw Ashley hunting through his chest of drawers. “Sweetheart what are you doing?” She didn’t particularly feel like going through Mulder’s belongings just yet. It was too soon.

Ashley immediately spun around as though she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t. “I umm…nothing.”
That caught Scully’s attention. “What are you looking for?” In the youngster’s hand was one of Mulder’s t-shirts, but that didn’t appear to be what she wanted.

Ashley appeared to be having an inward argument with herself. It was a long time before she spoke. “I wasn’t sure whether to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

Ashley’s head dropped as she refused to make eye contact with her mom. “Mulder told me not to say anything.”

At the mention of her partner’s name, Scully felt a blow to her stomach. “Ashley –“

“He wanted it to be a surprise but now…now he’s not coming back.” Her eyes finally met her mom’s. “He’d have wanted you to have it.”

“Have what?” It was then that Scully saw something else in her daughter’s hand, along with the t-shirt. A small, black velvet box. A jewellery box. She felt sick.

“Ashley, what do you have there?”

Her daughter edged forward, biting her lip. “I didn’t know when to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Before Mulder left he…we went to the mall.”

Scully remembered the day. “For sneakers.”

Ashley nodded. “And for this.” She held out the box to her mom, and on shaky legs, Scully padded up to her daughter, taking it from her grasp. As she opened it, she felt her legs give way. Luckily the bed was behind her to break her fall. “Oh my god,” she gasped, looking down at the engagement ring Ashley had helped Mulder pick out.

“He was going to ask you to marry him again on vacation.” The vacation they had booked for a few weeks’ time. The family vacation they were looking forward to. The family vacation they’d never have. “I told him if he got you a ring you might say yes.”

Scully’s free hand flew to her mouth as she tried to process what her daughter was telling her. She felt tears spring to her eyes, and she was powerless to stop them from falling. “It’s beautiful,” she sniffed.

“I picked it out,” Ashley said shakily. “I told him the diamonds reminded him of us.”

“They do,” her mom agreed.

“Would you have said yes?”

After a moment, Scully peeled her eyes away from the engagement band and up to meet her daughter’s. She gave a small nod. “I think I would have done.” It was difficult to say now that Mulder was no longer around. When he’d first proposed, she’d told him that she didn’t want marriage; that they didn’t need it, but if he’d proposed properly, with a ring…and with Ashley around…she would have probably reconsidered.

“He’d want you to have the ring,” said Ashley, her bottom lip trembling. “You should keep it.”
With shaking hands, Scully lifted the ring out of the box, and placed it on the appropriate finger. It fit perfectly. Of course it did. Everything about the ring was perfect. The only thing missing was Mulder. “Thank you for telling me,” she sniffed. Too many thoughts were racing through her head. Maybe if she’d have accepted his earlier proposal, Mulder would never have left for Oregon. Or if she’d gone to the doctors that little bit earlier about her dizziness and nausea, he’d have been there when she discovered she was pregnant. There was no way he’d have left her had he known they were having a baby.

Ashley approached her mom and took a seat next to her on the bed, before falling back to stretch out on the bed. Scully shifted so she was mirroring her daughter, and wrapped her arm around her daughter, pulling her in towards her.

“I miss Mulder,” murmured Ashley into the crook of her mom’s neck.

“Me too sweetheart. I don’t think we’re ever going to stop.”

“It hurts.”

“I know it does. We just have to remember the good times we had with Mulder. I know he’s not here now, but we knew him for a long time, and we should be grateful for that.” Scully didn’t believe what she was saying either. Nothing compensated for Mulder no longer being around. “It’ll get easier, I promise.”

Ashley shifted on the bed. “I can still smell him on the pillow,” she said.

“Yeah?” Scully was surprised. She’d spent so many nights since Mulder’s disappearance sleeping in his bed, desperate to be close to him.

“Mmmhmmm. And on his t-shirt.”

“When the funeral’s over and we’re feeling stronger, we’ll come back and go through Mulder’s things. You can pick out some things you’d like to keep to remember him by.”

“I won’t ever forget him,” a solemn Ashley promised.

“I know you won’t. But it might be nice to have a few of his things. I’m sure he’d want you to.”

“Can I have his basketball?”

“Of course you can. I think he’d want you to have it. Just don’t play it in the house.”

“Mulder would want me to.”

Scully gave her daughter a sad smile. “He would, wouldn’t he?”

“Shall we keep some of his things for the baby?”

“You know what? I think we should.”

“That way the baby will know what Mulder liked.”

“Yeah…” Scully bit down hard on her lip. Every time anyone mentioned the baby, she felt a blow to her stomach. She was right, she and Ashley were lucky to have known Mulder over the years. The baby would never know its father, only by the photos they had around the house of him, the odd voicemail Scully still had on her machine, and a few home movies taken at Ashley’s birthdays and Christmases over the years. They’d never know how it felt to be loved by Mulder. It wasn’t
“Can I have his Yankees shirt too?” Ashley asked, interrupting her mom’s thoughts.

“You can have whatever you like.”

“I just want Mulder back,” her daughter announced, before another wave of tears came. Scully comforted her daughter, dreading the thought of the following day and having to say goodbye to Mulder for good.
Chapter 109

Ashley opened the door, letting out the breath she’d been holding when she noticed Ellen standing in front of her. Behind her mom’s friend stood Trent, looking both very formal and uncomfortable in his dark suit. Both mother and son smiled sympathetically at her.

“Hi sweetheart,” said Ellen, as she reached out and took Ashley into her arms. Ashley held on for a moment after Ellen started to pull away, which caught her attention. “How are you doing? Is everything ok?”

Ashley nodded unconvincingly. Everything was far from ok. Mulder was dead, her mom was distraught and Ashley didn’t know what to do. She just wanted to run back to bed, get back underneath the covers and will herself to wake up from this living nightmare. Only she’d tried that already, and each time she woke up, things stayed as they were. Mulder was still gone.

“Where’s your mom?”

“She’s in the bathroom.”

“Is she ready?”

Ashley shrugged. “She’s been in there a while.” She saw Ellen’s look of understanding.

“I’ll go check on her. We’ll be out in a moment,” said Ellen, passing on through the apartment, leaving the kids alone.

Wordlessly Trent followed Ashley over to the sofa, taking a seat next to her. Ashley thought about flicking on the television to distract them, but she quickly decided against it. She didn’t feel like watching TV, not today. She didn’t want to see happy endings or people getting on with their lives. Not on the day they were going to bury Mulder.

Trent cleared his throat, awkwardly. Ashley hated that he couldn’t be himself around her; that he now appeared to be looking at her like she’d grown an extra head. Everyone was acting awkwardly around her. Her grandma kept looking at her through tear-filled eyes, her mom, up until now, wouldn’t let her out of her eyesight, and even her best friends hadn’t known what to say to her when she’d called them a few nights ago to check in with them about homework. Mulder was dead and now she was all alone.

“I’m sorry about Mulder,” the boy sitting next to her suddenly announced.

Ashley glanced over at him and nodded sadly. “Mulder died,” she said, the words feeling foreign to her. It was the first time she’d actually spoken them out loud.

“I know.”

“It’s his funeral today.”

Trent narrowed his eyes at her, clearly confused. “I know. That’s why we’re here.”

“I know,” she replied. “I thought that if I said the words out loud, it would all seem real. But it doesn’t. Mulder’s dead,” she repeated. “My dad died,” she added, before catching sight of Trent looking incredibly uncomfortable.
“My grandma died,” he finally answered.

“Does it get any easier?” She knew the answer, but she just wanted someone to tell her the truth. Her mom had promised it would get easier, that they would learn to come to terms with their loss, but Ashley knew that not a day would go by when she didn’t miss Mulder.

“No.”

Ashley nodded sadly. “I thought not.”

“It sucks.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, wondering for the thousandth time if her mom was ok in the bathroom. “Yeah it does.”

“Dana?”

Ellen tapped on the bathroom door, listening out for any signs of movement on the other side. She heard nothing.

“Dana? It’s me.”

When there was no reply, Ellen tried the handle, relieved when she realized that at least her friend hadn’t locked herself inside. She opened the door, feeling a lump form in her throat as she saw Dana sat on the toilet, fully clothed ready for the funeral. Tears were streaming down her friend’s cheeks as she looked up at her.

“Oh sweetheart.” Ellen immediately dropped onto her knees in front of Dana, placing a hand on her leg.

“I can’t do this El,” sobbed Scully, sniffing hard. She made no effort to wipe her eyes.

“I know Dana, I know.”

“I can’t say goodbye to him, I can’t.”

“Dana –“

“I have to go and be strong for Ashley but I can’t El, I can’t.”

“You don’t have to be strong for anyone honey. That’s why I’m here and why your mom’s coming. You need to grieve.”

“He left us!” Scully’s tears intensified. “He left us and now I have to pick up the pieces and be strong for Ashley and have his baby. How am I going to have his baby?” she asked through her tears. “Why did he leave us?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. Life isn’t fair sweetheart, but you’ll be ok.”

Scully scoffed. “I don’t know how we’re going to be.”

“Because you’re strong,” Ellen reassured her friend, reaching a hand up to brush Scully’s hair away from her face. “You and Ashley are. And you have us to help take care of you.”
“I want Mulder,” said Scully, echoing her daughter’s words from the previous night.

“I know.”

“He asked me to marry him El,” she hiccupped. “He asked me to marry him and I said no. He brought me a ring.” Scully lifted her left hand, where she wore the ring in question. Ellen couldn’t help but weep alongside her friend. It wasn’t fair, it just wasn’t fair. “I should have said yes.”

“He knew how you felt about him Dana. Mulder knew you loved him. You guys were practically married as it was.”

“If I’d have said yes he’d never have gone away. It’s my fault –”

“It is not your fault,” Ellen stressed. “None of this is your fault. Mulder would have gone regardless. You cannot blame yourself Dana.”

“I should have made him listen to me.”

“You used to say yourself that Mulder was stubborn. He was determined to go no matter what you said. You can’t have changed anything.” Ellen pulled her friend into her arms, feeling Dana’s cries intensify. “I wish to god this hadn’t happened to you Dana, I really do. But I’m here for you and for Ashley. And this little baby of yours…” she said, pulling away briefly to place her hand tenderly on Scully’s slight bump. “…is going to be so loved. And we’ll tell him or her all about their daddy, and how much he loved all of you.”

“I can’t do it.”

“You can,” Ellen urged. “You can and you will. You just need to be strong for today, and then you’ll be ok.”

“I’m not going to go.”

“If that’s what you want, I’ll understand. But I think you’ll regret not saying goodbye to him.”

Scully seemed to ponder her friend’s words, her shoulders slumping in defeat. Ellen hugged her once again. “I’ll be there with you, right by your side.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. Now…” Ellen caught sight of her watch as she pulled away. “Your mom’s going to be here shortly, and I’m sure Ashley will come looking for us very soon.” Scully looked dismayed at the thought. “Let’s take a deep breath, wash up and then we’ll get through this ok? All of us… together.”

After a moment, Scully nodded, then took hold of her friend’s hand, allowing her to pull her to her feet. She took a deep breath, like Ellen suggested, and prepared to say goodbye to the love of her life.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Ashley watched as Mulder’s coffin entered the ground. She felt her mom squeeze her hand, and instinctively squeezed back. She was half tempted to throw herself onto the coffin to stop them from taking Mulder away from her, but she didn’t. Her mom’s grip held her in place. She glanced up to her right, watching as her mom wiped away her tears, flanked by Maggie on her other side. To Ashley’s left were Ellen and Trent. Ellen also appeared to be crying, but Trent was staring
straight ahead, as though his thoughts were miles away. Ashley couldn’t blame him; she wished she wasn’t here right now either.

As soon as Mulder’s coffin was buried, Ashley felt her mom step forward to throw a rose in on top of it. Everyone waited for her to speak, but as Scully opened her mouth, she felt the tears form and shook her head, unable to talk. Ashley looked at the flower she was holding, then cleared her throat. She tried to ignore all of the people who were now looking at her.

“Mulder…” she began, licking her lips. She was going to do this, she told herself. She was going to be brave for Mulder. “When I first met Mulder I was really little and afraid of the dark. He taught me that there was no such thing as monsters, and that I didn’t have to be scared anymore.” She felt her mom’s grip on her hand intensify. “He taught me how to ride a bike and swim on my back and burp the alphabet when my mom was out of the room, and I’m just sad that he won’t be around to teach my baby brother or sister any of that. He was the best dad anyone could have asked for and I’m grateful that he chose me. My mom and I will miss him every single day, and we’ll never stop loving him.” As she finished, she threw her rose down into the grave, and finally allowed her tears to fall.

Scully stared hard at the grave in front of her. Her mom and Ellen had led a sobbing Ashley away, giving Scully a few moments alone to say goodbye. She’d tried so hard so stay strong throughout the service, but now her daughter was finally out of sight, she felt the pressure ease just a little. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw AD Skinner lingering nearby, and she was grateful to him for not interrupting her moment. “He was the last,” she said, feeling the emotion in her voice. “His father and mother…his sister…all gone. I think the real tragedy, is that for all of his pain and searching, the truth that he worked so hard to find was never truly revealed to him.” Skinner said nothing, instead just listening, though Scully did notice him glance back at Ashley. “I can’t truly believe that I’m really standing here,” she added, her voice breaking.

“I know,” he finally said. “And I don’t truly believe that Mulder’s the last.”

He was right of course. Mulder wasn’t the last; there was still the baby to think about. But Scully couldn’t think about that; not right at that moment. Feeling the emotion overwhelm her, she knelt down and scooped up a handful of dirty before scattering it over Mulder’s coffin. As she stood, she turned and placed her head against Skinner’s chest as she cried. He held her wordlessly, well aware of exactly what Mulder meant to her and her family.

When finally her tears had stopped, Scully pulled away, smiling sadly up at her boss. Skinner placed his arm at the small of her back and she resisted the urge to pull away, well aware that was Mulder’s spot. She was going to have to get used to him no longer being around. As they walked over to Maggie and Ellen, Scully saw Ashley coming towards her, and she paused as her daughter stepped into her arms.

“And I don’t truly believe that Mulder’s the last.”

He was right of course. Mulder wasn’t the last; there was still the baby to think about. But Scully couldn’t think about that; not right at that moment. Feeling the emotion overwhelm her, she knelt down and scooped up a handful of dirty before scattering it over Mulder’s coffin. As she stood, she turned and placed her head against Skinner’s chest as she cried. He held her wordlessly, well aware of exactly what Mulder meant to her and her family.

When finally her tears had stopped, Scully pulled away, smiling sadly up at her boss. Skinner placed his arm at the small of her back and she resisted the urge to pull away, well aware that was Mulder’s spot. She was going to have to get used to him no longer being around. As they walked over to Maggie and Ellen, Scully saw Ashley coming towards her, and she paused as her daughter stepped into her arms.

“Are you ok mom?”

“I’m fine sweetheart.”

Skinner smiled down at the youngster. “You know,” he said to her. “Mulder would be so incredibly proud of you today.”

“You think so?” Ashley seemed to stand up a little bit straighter at his words.

“I know so. I knew how he felt about you the first time I saw you with him.”
“I loved him too.” Ashley smiled sadly, tears welling in her eyes. Scully reached out to place an arm around her daughter, grateful to her boss for trying to make Ashley feel better.

“You were good for him. You both were,” he added, catching Scully’s eye. “I have no doubt that you both made him a better person.”

“I just wish we could see him again,” Ashley said sorrowfully, and Skinner nodded in understanding. Little did they know that one day, Ashley’s wish would come true.
The urge to pee woke Scully up from her restless sleep. Disoriented, it took her a moment to realize that she was on the floor instead of in bed. Mulder’s shirt was balled up in her hands, wrinkled and tear-stained. Dammit, she whispered to herself, reaching around to rub her own back. Four out of five doctors would recommend pregnant women sleep on a surface more supportive than the floor, and Scully knew she was going to pay for it later.

It was one of those nights where the baby appeared to be pressing on her bladder, so Scully prepared herself for the long haul. Whatever rest she’d gotten after crying herself to sleep would have to be it for the night, because she knew that until Junior moved, she’d be up every twenty minutes going to the bathroom. Not even her baby would allow her a few minutes of escape from a world where she’d had to bury her partner in the ground.

She was on her way to the living room for some mindless late-night TV when she heard it. A high-pitched sob, almost like a scream, coming from her daughter’s room. Without wasting time to grab her gun (she knew she’d never need it if someone was threatening Ashley), she flung the door to Ashley’s room open, only to find her curled up, alone, on her bed, clutching her pillow not unlike Scully had been clutching Mulder’s shirt not that long ago. Tears sprang to Scully’s eyes at seeing her little girl so upset. Even harder to come to terms with, still, was the fact that there was nothing she could do for her – nothing she could do to take her pain away. Scully wasn’t even sure how to deal with her own cavernous despair. But she made her way to Ashley’s side anyway.

“Mommy,” she wept, holding her arms out. It had been a long time since she’d called her “mommy,” but these were special circumstances. Not too special, Scully realized, her heart breaking when she thought of how her daughter had lost two fathers in her life.

“What happened baby?” Scully asked, Ashley’s nose and tears coming into contact with her neck.

It took a minute, but Ashley finally managed to form words through her sobs. “Every time I wake up, I have to remember.”

Scully knew exactly what she was referring to. It was the price they had to pay for the release. “I know,” Her voice wavered, revealing just how close she was to losing it herself.

“I just want it to go away mommy. It feels,” she had to pause as her tears got the better of her, “it feels like somebody stole my heart from me.”

Mulder had. He’d stolen from the both of them, and he would be taking their hearts and their futures with him to the grave. Tucked them neatly into the inside pockets of his suit.

“I’m sorry honey. I’m sorry I can’t take your hurt away.”

“I don’t think… I don’t think I’ll ever be happy again,” Ashley said with a deadly seriousness. It was the same hopelessness that Scully had harbored since finding Mulder in the field. Scully
realized, though, that whatever misery hung over her head, her twelve-year-old daughter should not have to face the same. If there was one thing that Mulder would have told her right then, it was that she should always have hope. Scully didn’t know whether or not she should thank or curse him for never giving up, but it meant that she had to do the same. If not for her, then for her child.

“You will be happy, sweet heart. You will be happy again one day.”

“No mom,” Ashley hiccupped, so sure of this one thing even though her world was in a state of upheaval, “I can’t.”

“Mulder wouldn’t want that. Mulder wanted… Mulder wants,” Scully corrected herself, “you to be happy. And to achieve anything you set your mind to. Not to be sad for your whole life.”

“Do you think you’ll ever be happy again?”

It was a valid question. No matter what she told Ashley, Scully knew that wishing her partner was alive and with her was going to take up a large part of the rest of her life. One day, a man may ask her out on a date. Would she go? One day, Ash would get married. Who would walk her down the aisle? One day… soon… her baby would be born into a world less the most amazing man ever to have lived. How could she tell him or her about their father without breaking down into a terrible mess? There was only one certainty in her life anymore, and that was that she would never be the same person again. Where happiness fell into the equation, she did not know.

“I want to be.”

“I don’t. It feels wrong.”

“Why does it feel wrong?”

“I don’t want to laugh and be happy when I know Mulder is dead and he’s never going to get to do those things again.”

“Ash… that’s not how it is. Mulder is in heaven, you said it yourself. He’s with his mom and dad, and with Samantha. He’s not in any pain. He’s not sad. You being happy doesn’t mean you don’t love him, or that you forgot about him. It’s what he’d want.”

Ashley’s breathing was evening out, but tears still fell from her tired eyes. She knew her mom was right. But it wasn’t compatible with what she felt.

“It’s going to take time. Nobody grieves the same.”

“It isn’t just grieving, mom. My life… I just feel so lost without him,” she started crying again in earnest, clutching onto her mother as if something were trying to tear them apart.

“Me too baby,” Scully couldn’t stop her tears from falling at that point, feeling guilty each time one wetted her daughter’s tousled hair.

“How are we gonna make it?” Ashley asked as if she believed they were the only two left in the whole world.

“I don’t exactly know right now. But,” she took her daughter’s hand with purpose, “we will. And baby, if you ever feel like you can’t do it… can’t get out of bed and face the world… I will carry you. I will make sure that you are okay because I am your mom. Alright?”

Ashley nodded her head slightly before completely collapsing into her mom’s embrace. As she was
rubbing her back, the weight of the situation hit Scully completely. In her weakest moment, she would still have to be strong for her child... soon children. No matter what was happening, she needed to get them through it. Once again, she felt like cursing Mulder for putting her through this. But she thought back to her abduction, or at least what she'd heard about the time period afterward. She thought about Mulder, relentlessly searching high and low for her while being an emotional support system for her young daughter. Or during her cancer, when everybody gave up on her but him. During her abduction to Antarctica, and even their failed attempts at in-vitro treatments... he had so much strength. And now he'd passed the torch to her.

After another trip to the bathroom, Scully led Ashley to her room (to her bed this time), climbed under the covers with her. The loss of Mulder was becoming more real than ever before to them both. But while Ashley cried with sadness and anger until eventually succumbing to sleep, Scully smiled a small smile through her tears. A framed picture of the three of them sat on her nightstand, lying face down from a weaker moment, and she reached over to grab it. He smiled back at her from the glossy confines, and at that moment she felt him in the room with her, smiling at her and her daughter. Their daughter. For a moment, she smiled back at him.

Mulder was gone. All she had left of him were memories and the fleeting kisses she felt sometimes between asleep and awake. She wondered how long she would still be able to hear his voice in her head... his laugh. Eventually, she knew, these things would become foggy and slowly fade away. But it was okay. Everything was going to be alright.
Scully marched through the grass with intent, her eyes trained on her destination ahead of her. As she reached the grave, she practically threw the flowers she was holding onto the headstone, feeling a mixture of grief and anger. Mulder’s name on the headstone glared back at her, and she felt tears cloud her eyes as she realized she couldn’t hate him, even though she desperately wanted to.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked out loud, hoping that somehow, Mulder could hear her. “You knew all that time, and you didn’t think to mention it?” Scully paused momentarily, before cursing herself. He wasn’t going to reply. He was dead after all. “Jesus Mulder, you were dying!”

Silence. Scully’s nails dug into her skin as she clenched her fists, willing herself to calm down. It had been Agent Doggett who’d told her; that he’d found Mulder’s medical records which had described in detail the brain tumor he’d had. He’d been dying, and he’d neglected to mention that fact to her. Hell, he’d proposed to her and offered to adopt Ashley, yet he hadn’t mentioned anything about the ticking time bomb growing inside his body. No sooner had Doggett told Scully the news, she’d picked up her purse and stormed wordlessly out of the office. Only she hadn’t driven immediately to Mulder’s grave. No. First she’d gone to the hospital for her scheduled twenty week scan. She’d watched through watery eyes as she saw her baby on screen once again. Their baby. This time Ashley hadn’t been around to take Scully’s mind off of the fact that Mulder wasn’t by her side; that he wasn’t there to witness their little miracle taking shape. The baby was developing well, she’d been told, and did she want to know the sex? Scully nodded, but all she could focus on was the fact that Mulder had lied to her. He’d asked him outright if he was ok, and he’d said he was. And then he’d proposed.

“How could you lie to me?” she asked, biting back a sob. “You could have told me. You said I was the only one you could trust, but yet you couldn’t trust me with this?” Taking a deep breath, Scully bent down and began setting the flowers properly on the stone.

“I had a scan today,” she continued, trying to calm down. “For the baby.” Part of her felt stupid for speaking out loud, knowing full well that Mulder wasn’t around to hear her, but she wanted to believe he was watching her. She hoped he felt damn guilty for all the pain he’d caused her. “It’s a boy Mulder,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “We’re having a boy…I know you used to talk about a little girl, but I think you’d like this. You could have taught him how to play basketball and taken him to Yankees games with Ashley…” she trailed off, no longer about to think about what else Mulder would miss out on. “I’ve been thinking about names, and what you’d have liked. Obviously not Fox,” she added with the hint of a smile, recalling how much he used to hate his first name; how he used to smile politely whenever Maggie used it, and how when Ashley was younger and in a particularly cheeky mood, she used to dance around in front of him, chanting “Fox, Fox, Fox” until Mulder sprung up and chased her around the house. “I was thinking something traditional. I think you’d approve of that, right?” No answer. Of course there was no answer. “He’s doing good. Growing well. I think he’ll take after you in the height department. That’s why I’m so fat right now,” she said, her hands falling to her abdomen. She wasn’t quite as big as she should have been, she’d been warned, and she needed to start taking better care of herself. She’d readily agreed. She’d already lost Mulder; the last thing she wanted was to lose his baby too. She couldn’t take anything else going wrong.

“Ashley and I will tell him all about you. He’ll always know who his daddy was and what a great person you were.” Scully’s smile faded. “Why didn’t you tell me Mulder?! I could have helped you. We could have got you some treatment.” Treatment to delay rather than cure, she thought.
sadly. “I haven’t told Ashley, not about this. I’m not going to. She’s...she’s not doing too well as it is,” she admitted. “She’s not herself, and her schoolwork is starting to suffer. We’re going away for a few days tomorrow,” added Scully. “Back to LA, remember? The vacation you booked for us.” The vacation Mulder had booked even though he knew he was dying. He’d obviously planned to still be around to go with them, but as Scully had discovered over the years, life was often a bitch. “I’m hoping it does her good to get away. Both of us actually. My family have been great, even Bill actually, but I think it’ll do us both good to get away and have some time to ourselves. You’ll be on our minds though. You always are.” She cleared her throat. “I told Ashley that we’d visit you together shortly. She just needs some time to get used to you here.” Ashley had been suffering from nightmares ever since the funeral, waking up hysterical as images of Mulder buried in the ground plagued her dreams. It was something she and Julie were working on during their therapy sessions, but it would take a while before her daughter felt ready to visit his grave again. “But she thinks of you all the time. I told you she was a daddy’s girl, and I was right. She misses her daddy terrible. I wish you were there to hear her when she called her that.” It would have made Mulder’s life, she was sure of it. “She misses you. We both do. And I just wish you were here so we could tell you that.” Just one more day; one more day for them to spend with Mulder and tell him how they felt, and all about the baby.

“I love you,” she added, running her hand over the top of the headstone. “I’ll speak to you soon,” said Scully, before turning and walking away, unaware that she’d get a chance to speak to him again one day soon.

“I’ll just freshen up and we can head out to dinner,” said Scully, peering her head round the door into Ashley’s room. They’d arrived into LA earlier that morning, and after a bite to eat and a walk through town, they’d arrived at the hotel Mulder had booked for them. He’d done a great job. Their hotel suite was huge; too big in fact for just Scully and Ashley. Her daughter had declined the offer of bringing a friend, just wanting to spend time with her mom. With two bedrooms, a large lounge area and a bathroom almost as big as their apartment back in DC, they had everything they needed. Except for Mulder. He should have been there with them, making suggestive comments to Scully about checking out the bathtub, and taking Ashley sightseeing, but instead there was a huge gap in their lives without him.

“Ok,” said Ashley, though she didn’t appear to be listening; her mind elsewhere.

“Are you ok sweetheart?”

Ashley met her mom’s eye before looking down, picking at a piece of lint on her jeans. “Yeah. I just wish Mulder was here.”

“I know. I do too.”

“I feel bad.”

“Bad?”

“I feel like I shouldn’t be enjoying myself here.”

“Because Mulder isn’t here?”

Without looking up, Ashley nodded.

“Mulder would want you to have fun. He booked this for us, specifically for us all to enjoy
ourselves."

“He should be here though.”

“I know he should Maybe he is.”

“Not really though.”

“No,” agreed Scully. “And I know he’d be so upset that he couldn’t be here with us. But he wouldn’t want you to feel sad. He’d want to see you laugh and smile and spend lots of money and eat lots of food.”

“Like chocolate cake?” Ashley asked, remembering all of the times she used to order it, and Mulder helped her eat it.

“Exactly. Now give me ten minutes and we’ll go find the largest piece of chocolate cake that LA has to offer.”

“And eat it for Mulder.” A ghost of a smile graced Ashley’s lips.

Her mom nodded, and returned her grin. “For Mulder.”

xxxxxxx

All in all it had been a promising few days for Scully and Ashley. They spent a lot of their weekend talking about Mulder; both about his death and memories of him when he was alive. Ashley seemed to show signs of the girl she used to be, smiling and laughing more than Scully had seen her do in months. They were still hurting, but healing too. Their last day was spent at Santa Monica, with Ashley requesting just one last walk along the beach before they headed home.

“Remember when we came to the beach with Mulder? And he threatened to throw me in the ocean?”

Scully grinned at the memory. “I do.”

“And you kissed Mulder too.”

“I did.”

“That was a fun vacation.”

“Yes, yes it was.”

“And do you remember when we went to the beach just after Emily died?”

How could she forget? She was a mess back then too. “I do.”

“Mulder told us then that we’d be ok. And he was right.” Scully often wondered where her baby had gone. Ashley was much older than her years; no doubt a result of her having to grow up fast.

“He was.”

“And right now he’d tell us the same. We’ll be ok,” she added with certainty. “But we’ll still miss him. And we won’t ever forget him.”

Before Scully could answer, she felt a firm kick in her abdomen. The baby had been showing signs
of movement for a few weeks now, but this was the first time she’d felt him kick when she was standing upright. If she was looking for a sign from Mulder that he was with them, this was it. She smiled a watery smile and pulled Ashley into her arms, feeling so unbelievably proud of her daughter. “You’re right. We’re going to be just fine.”
Chapter 112

Scully marched down the corridor, her eyes trained firmly on the two men ahead of her. She took a deep breath, willing herself not to fall apart. As she approached them, she got straight to the point, not bothering with niceties. “Is it true?”

Skinner looked uncomfortable. “Slow down.”

His reply gave her the answer she needed. “No. I want to see him.”

“I know you do.”

“No, I need to see him, damn it!” she demanded.

“You’re not going in there.” Reaching out, Skinner grabbed hold of Scully’s arms, holding her in place. “Scully, you can’t.”

“Tell me it’s true,” she whispered, desperate to go into the room and see it for herself. “Tell me.”

After a moment, Skinner nodded. “He’s in there.”

Scully’s hand flew to her mouth in shock. Mulder. Mulder was behind the door. Mulder who just a short while ago was buried deep in the ground, was now in the hospital. And, if Skinner’s phone call was anything to go by, there was a chance he was alive. Scully could barely comprehend it. God knows how she’d managed to drive to Maryland without causing an accident – her thoughts were all over the place. It had been three months ago since they’d found Mulder’s body, and she and Ashley were only just coming to terms with his death. Now though…now there was a slight chance they were going to get Mulder back. “Oh my god,” she murmured, her eyes welling up with tears.

“The doctor is examining him,” said Doggett, clearly uncomfortable about the whole situation. “I’ll go in and find out what’s happening.”

Still in shock, Scully nodded absentmindedly. She looked up at Skinner, who was regarding her with concern. It was then she remembered something. “Sir, I need to ask a favor of you.”

“What is it Dana?”

*Dana*. Since Mulder’s abduction and the announcement of Scully’s pregnancy, Skinner had been treating her as though she was fragile. Though Scully was grateful he was there for her and Ashley, she couldn’t help but wish he still regarded her as an equal at times.

“Ashley is in the waiting room,” she said, watching as Skinner’s look of concern turned into a frown.

“Jesus Scully – “

“I know,” she answered forcefully. “My mom is out of town, and I couldn’t get through to my babysitter. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Did you tell her?”

Scully’s eyes narrowed. “Like hell I did! She’s been through enough as it is. I couldn’t stand to see her hopes dashed again. I told her it was a case.”
“You did the right thing.”

“She can’t stay here though,” Scully continued, and Skinner nodded in agreement.

“I’ll take her to a motel.”

“Thank you sir, I appreciate it. I appreciate everything,” she added softly, and Skinner reached out to place his hand tenderly on top of her shoulder.

“I hope it all works out Scully.”

She smiled thinly. “Me too sir. Me too.”

xxxxxxxxxx

Skinner opened the door to the waiting room, forcing a smile as Ashley turned to look over at him. She was seated on the sofa, with her legs curled up beneath her as the television played on in the background. She smiled as she recognized her visitor, though he couldn’t help but notice she looked behind him in search for her mom.

“Hi Ashley.”

“Hello Mr Skinner,” she replied politely. Skinner was reminded of a time many years ago now, when Mulder had taught her to call him ‘Skinman’ instead. Now, since Mulder’s death, she’d grown up a lot. He noticed she wasn’t the same young girl she had been, and he felt bad for her for that. And now, potentially, her world was going to be turned upside down once again. He hoped it worked out ok for her, and for Scully.

“Your mom’s asked me to come and get you. We’ll get you settled in at a motel for the night.”

“Oh.” Ashley’s smile faded. “Where’s my mom?”

“She’s going to be here a while longer.”

“Can I see her?”

“She’s busy now.” It wasn’t a good idea. Even if Scully was still in the corridor where he’d left her, there was still a chance Ashley could catch sight of Mulder, or even hear his name being mentioned. “I’m sorry,” he added, sensing her disappointment.

“Ok,” she said dejectedly.

“She has her cell phone on her though. We’ll call her once we’re settled at the motel.”

Realizing Skinner was doing his best to help, Ashley smiled thinly. “Thanks.”

“Are you ready?”

She nodded, picking up her jacket and getting to her feet. “Yup.”

“Let’s go,” he said, steering her out of the waiting room and away from Mulder’s body.

xxxxxxxxxx

Scully looked up hopefully as Agent Doggett exited Mulder’s hospital room. She headed towards him, her hand on her stomach as she felt Mulder Junior making his presence known. “What did
they say?” Doggett said nothing, and Scully’s eyes filled with tears. “I need to see him.”


Biting her lip, Scully stared hard at Doggett, before stepping past him and entering the hospital room. When she first caught sight of Mulder stretched out in the bed, she felt her legs threaten to buckle from beneath her. All kinds of medical tubes were emerging from his body, but all she could focus on was the steady rhythm of the heart monitor. Mulder was alive; at least the machines were keeping him alive anyway. She never thought she’d see him again. She’d wished for just one more day with him, and now it appeared there was a chance she would get her wish. Approaching the bed, she reached out, placing her hand on Mulder’s chest, feeling his heart beat beneath her. She choked back a sob as she realized his skin was warm – at least warmer than the last time she’d touched him, back in the morgue. He was – at least she hoped – coming back to him. Leaning down, Scully embraced her formerly-dead partner before collapsing into tears, hoping that for once, things finally went their way.

xxxxxxx

Skinner frowned over at Ashley, who was sat on the opposite motel bed to him, and showed absolutely no signs of tiring. “What time do you usually go to bed?” he tried – and failed – to ask casually.

Ashley tore her eyes away from the television long enough to glance at her watch quickly. “Not for a while yet.”

“Right,” Skinner sighed, wondering whether to let her stay up for a while longer, or order her to bed. Scully would no doubt want him to do the latter, but he figured she was only a kid; a kid who had been through a lot.

“What time is my mom getting back?”

“I’m not sure,” he answered truthfully. He’d called Scully once they’d arrived at the hotel, knowing full well she wasn’t going to pick up, and let Ashley leave a message. Scully would contact them when she was ready. “She’s busy at the moment.”

“What is the case about?”

“Hmm?” Skinner pretended not to hear, buying himself some time to try to think up an excuse.

“What is my mom doing?”

“It’s uh…it’s very important.”

The television was now forgotten. “Uh huh. But what is it you’re investigating?”

“I can’t tell you I’m afraid.” It was a poor answer and they both knew it.

“My mom seemed upset when you called her.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah. She barely spoke three words during the drive. She looked like she was trying hard not to cry.”

“She’s pregnant. Her hormones must be all over the place.”
Ashley eyed him carefully. “Does this have something to do with Mulder?”

She was her mom’s daughter through and through. “What makes you say that?” He hadn’t expected her to give an answer.

Narrowing her eyes, Ashley chewed on her bottom lip, as though deep in thought. She was putting all the pieces of evidence together, Skinner realized. “It’s something important enough to drag mom and me away from home at night. Since Mulder died, she’s been trying to spend as much time at home as possible. Plus she was so worried and upset, and I know it’s nothing to do with my grandma, because she’s with my Uncle in San Diego, and I spoke to her this afternoon. So I think it’s connected to Mulder.”

“Ashley,” Skinner said sternly. “It’s nothing, don’t –“

“So it is to do with Mulder?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yeah but…but you didn’t say it wasn’t either.”

“No, I –“

“I can see it in your eyes!” she said, jumping up. “You’re not meeting my eyes, so that means you have something to hide. I saw that in a TV show,” she said, by way of explanation. “What’s happened about Mulder?” Her previous excitement dimmed a little. “He’s dead anyway,” she added dejectedly.

“Ashley –“

“What’s happened?” she asked, a hint of desperation in her voice. “Is it something to do with his grave?” She narrowed her eyes. “Is it something to do with his body?”

And with that, Skinner knew he had to tell Ashley the truth. How though, he wasn’t sure, especially seeing as though he was struggling to understand it all himself. “I don’t know how to tell you this…” he began, before telling Ashley all he knew about Mulder.

Scully jolted awake as the door opened and Doggett entered the room. Placing a hand on her belly for reassurance, she looked up at him as he took in her appearance. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but it had been a long day. She made no move to let go of Mulder’s hand. Hell, she’d only just got him back, there was no way on earth she was letting go again.

“You asked me not to come in here Agent Doggett. I hope you’re not asking me to leave.”

“Concern for your well-being, Agent Scully. That’s all it’s ever for. I felt this was a bad idea from the start, I told the Assistant Director so. Worrying about the effect it might have on you.”

“You mean finding Mulder alive?”

“I know you came in here with the doctors. I’m sure you must have asked them what his chances are.”

His words were like a slap in the face. Letting go of Mulder’s hand, Scully got to her feet and marched over towards Doggett. “Agent Doggett…However I felt about you when we first met, you
changed my opinion with the quality of your character and of your work. Now, I am thankful to know you and I am thankful for your concern…but no matter what Mulder’s chances are, the choice not to open up that grave was wrong. And not because of me personally, but as my partner on the X-Files. Now, the truth may hurt, but it’s all that matters.”

“What truth?”

“About what caused this.”

Before Doggett could answer, the door burst open and in ran a familiar figure. “Mulder!”

Doggett reached out to try and stop Ashley, but she was too quick for him, and flung herself onto Mulder’s body, jolting the wires that were keeping him alive. As the alarms sounded out, Doggett reacted quickly enough to pull the youngster away, while Scully rushed to Mulder’s side.

“What is she doing here?” Scully yelled as Skinner arrived on the scene to find chaos.

A shocked and tearful Ashley backed away. “What did I do?”

“Get her out of here,” a doctor demanded as a team of medical experts ran into the room. “Everybody out. Now!”

And within seconds, Skinner was leading a distraught Ashley out of the room, leaving her to wonder if she’d hurt Mulder just as she’d finally got him back.

xxxxxx

Scully exited the OR, lowering her mask as she took in the sight of her visibly shaken daughter. Poor Ashley. She’d been through so much already, and now this. As Scully came to a stop next to Ashley, she carefully lowered herself into a chair on the opposite side of her daughter to Skinner. She opened her mouth to speak, but Ashley beat her to it.

“I’m so sorry mom. I didn’t mean to hurt Mulder. I was excited to see him, but I didn’t mean to do this. I didn’t mean to kill him again.”

Scully would have laughed at the absurdity of her daughter’s words, except for the fact that Mulder had been dead. And now he was very much alive.

“Sweetheart,” she began, wrapping her arm around her daughter. The move only served to make Ashley cry harder. “He’s going to be ok.”

Doggett looked over at Scully in disbelief. “He’s going to make it?”

“I don’t know. I…I really don’t know how we could’ve known.”

“What?”

“That by keeping him on life support, we were incubating the virus. We were hastening it along.”

“How did you figure it out?”

“When Ashley caught the wires, Mulder’s temperature dropped rapidly without affecting his vital signs.”

“You mean –“

Scully nodded, then squeezed her daughter. “Baby, you saved Mulder. I know you think you hurt
him, but you did the best thing you possibly could.”

“Really?” Ashley looked up at her mom, not entirely sure whether to believe her.

“Uh huh.”

“What about the vaccine?” asked Doggett.

“If we can stabilize him and his temperature, we can give him courses of antivirals. I think it could work.”

“Is Mulder going to be ok?” Ashley asked in disbelief.

Scully met her daughter’s eyes, and felt her own well with tears. After a moment she gave her a watery smile. “I think he might be.”

Scully focused on her partner’s hand as she gently rubbed his fingers, willing him to wake up, or at least show some sign of regaining consciousness. She glanced up briefly, smiling to herself at the scene in front of her. Ashley was curled up against Mulder’s side, fast asleep. Scully knew she should wake her daughter up and get her to move, but the truth was she didn’t want to disturb her. She never ever thought she’d see the two of them together again; that she’d be here, holding Mulder’s hand while Ashley was by his side. She half expected to wake up and find herself back in Georgetown in bed, having discovered it was all a dream. As Scully looked back down, she suddenly caught sight of Mulder’s hand twitching. Her eyes darted up to look at him, and she noticed his head shift ever so slightly on the pillow.

“Mulder,” she breathed, hardly believing what was happening. She grinned as suddenly her partner’s hazel eyes – the eyes she never thought she’d see again – came into focus, and he turned to look over at her. Her bottom lip trembled as she tried to think of what to say. After all these years, Fox Mulder had finally rendered her speechless. “Hi,” she finally said.

Mulder looked at her blankly, before realizing there was someone else in the room. He glanced down at Ashley, before returning his attention to Scully. “Who are you?” he whispered, and Scully felt all her hopes dashed. Her smile faded, and she tried to find the words to respond. He didn’t know her. He didn’t remember her or Ashley and… Scully’s eyes narrowed as Mulder gave her a small smile, and then she realized he was only joking. Mulder remembered her. Mulder was breathing; he was alive and in front of her, smiling and joking, and he remembered her. Scully returned his grin as she finally succumbed to her tears. “Oh my god,” she murmured. “Don’t do that to me.”

She watched as Mulder glanced back down at Ashley, and pressed his lips to the youngster’s forehead. She didn’t think her heart could get any fuller. Slowly Ashley came awake. It took her quite a while before she realized that she wasn’t dreaming, and that Mulder was very much alive.

“Hey Tigger.”

In response, Ashley buried her head in Mulder’s neck and squeezed him, demonstrating without words just how much she missed him. His hand came up to frame her neck and hold her against him.

“I love you Mulder.”
“Love you too,” he said, before looking back at Scully.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve been through?” she asked in disbelief.

“Only what I see in your face.”

Scully reached out, stroking his hair, then pressed her face to his chest, feeling his heart beat – this time without medical help – beneath her.

“Anybody miss me?” Mulder asked, smiling as Ashley whispered an excitable “yes” in his ear, and Scully laughed against him. That was an understatement. Scully and Ashley clung on to Mulder as he finally succumbed to sleep, so glad to have him back in their lives.
Scully entered the hospital room behind her daughter, using Ashley as a human shield to hide her belly. Now wasn’t a good time to tell Mulder about her pregnancy; it was early days and he was still trying to come to terms with the news of his death, let alone the additional shock of the baby.

“Hey Mulder,” said Ashley, heading over to him as he sat up in bed, and giving him a hug.

Scully used this distraction as an opportunity to take a seat without him spotting her. “How are you feeling?” she asked. He looked well and the doctors were astounded with his progress.

“Not bad for a dead guy,” he quipped, realizing he’d said the wrong thing as Ashley pulled away, wounded.

“That’s not funny,” she sulked.

“I’m sorry.” He squeezed her hand as she perched herself next to him. “You guys here to get me out of this joint?”

“I wish,” said Ashley, as Scully shook her head.

“The doctors still need to run some tests Mulder –“

“I’m fed up with their damn tests. I feel good, a hell of a lot better than I did a few days ago, so I don’t see what they’re worried about.”

Ashley stood up from the bed. “I’m going to get a drink,” she said, walking out of the room before either adult could comment.

“Was it something I said?”

Scully frowned. “You might think it’s a laughing matter Mulder, but we don’t. Ashley certainly doesn’t,” she added, reminded of just how upset her daughter had been over Mulder’s death. In the two days he’d been back in the land of the living, Ashley had been showing signs of returning to her former self. She didn’t need to hear Mulder joking about his death. “She’s been through a lot. I know everyone has, but she certainly isn’t taking any of this lightly.”

Mulder at least had the decency to look ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he said sheepishly. “I’m just struggling to take all of this in.”

“We all are,” replied Scully just as Ashley re-entered the room, carrying a cup of water.

“Hey.” Mulder held out a hand towards her. “C’mere.” Ashley approached him uncertainly. “I’m sorry for joking,” he said, taking hold of her hand. “I know it’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Will you forgive me?”

Without hesitating, Ashley put down her water before turning and leaning in for a hug. “I missed you,” she whispered, her words muffled against Mulder’s shoulder.

“I missed you too.” He pulled back; his hand moving to gesture at her ponytail. “Your hair’s getting long.”
“I’ve been growing it.”

“So I see. What else has been happening since I’ve been away?”

Ashley glanced over at Scully, who shook her head. Not now. When, she didn’t know. “Not much,” she said after a moment.

“How’s school?”

“Ok. It’s school,” she added, by way of explanation.

“How’s Queequeg?”

At last Ashley smiled. “He’s ok. He missed you.”

“He did?” Mulder chuckled. Somehow he didn’t quite believe that.

“He did. We all did,” she announced.

That was an understatement.

Scully stirred as she heard the sound of the door opening. She opened her eyes, blinking sleepily, as Agent Doggett came into view. She noted he didn’t look impressed, and prepared herself for a lecture. It didn’t take him long to start.

“Agent Scully. I thought I’d find you here.”

She shifted in her chair. The baby was pressing awkwardly against her bladder, and she knew she didn’t have long before she had to go to the bathroom. “Is there something you need Agent Doggett?”

She was surprised when he shook his head. “I don’t need anything. You however, need some rest.” Neither partner saw Mulder open his eyes ever so briefly, before closing them again. He didn’t, however, go back to sleep.

“I’m fine. I’m resting here,” she answered, smiling politely, when her meaning was clear. Butt out.

“You’re dead on your feet,” said Doggett, wincing as he realized what he’d said. “You can’t keep doing this Dana. Mulder is doing ok. There’s no need for you to be here all hours of the day.”

“I just wanted to be here in case he wakes.”

Doggett looked over at Mulder. “He looks out for the count at the moment. C’mon,” he said, with a jerk of his head. ‘I’ll treat you to dinner. Ashley’s back at the motel and according to her just a few minutes ago when I called, she’s “wasting away.” Come out to dinner with us.”

“John –.”

“You need to eat. You’ve gotta keep yourself healthy for the sake of that baby.”

Mulder managed not to react, even though his mind was reeling.

“I know, and I appreciate your concern,” said Scully, wondering whether she had the energy to argue. She didn’t.
“Mulder will be fine. The nursing staff have your cell phone and they’ll call if anything changes with him. You can’t keep sleeping at the hospital. You need a decent meal and a decent bed, and Ashley needs to spend time with her mom.”

Scully nodded reluctantly, while Mulder quickly sneaked a quick look to his right. Sure enough, Scully had her hands framing an impressive pregnancy bump.

Before he closed his eyes again, he noticed a ring on her wedding finger. He swallowed hard, wishing they’d both just leave so he could try and process what was happening. He had no idea who this Doggett was, but he didn’t like him. He obviously knew Scully and Ashley well, and was concerned about their welfare.

“I’ll bring you both back in the morning,” Doggett reassured Scully, and she nodded.

“Thank you.”

Mulder heard rustling as she obviously struggled to her feet. He listened as they two of them made their way over to the door, and headed out of his room, leaving him to think about everything he’d just heard.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Can I get a soda?” Ashley asked, as she and her mom walked down the corridor towards Mulder’s room.

Scully looked down at her daughter. She admittedly hadn’t spent a lot of time with her daughter save from when they were visiting Mulder, so she imagined that, thanks to Skinner and Doggett, Ashley’s diet had been a little off these past few days. “Diet only please.”

“I know,” Ashley sighed, reaching out to take some quarters from her mom, before continuing down the hallway in search of the vending machine.

Smiling to herself, Scully turned and entered Mulder’s hospital room, frowning when she noticed he was asleep again. He’d been sleeping a lot over the past day or so. She only hoped he was regaining his strength, rather than spiralling into depression. As she entered the room, she headed on over to his bed, where she tenderly laid her hand against his chest. Just checking. Her hand moved to his forehead to check he didn’t have a temperature. It was normal. Thankfully, despite everything he’d been through, Mulder was back to normal, and Scully still found it all hard to believe.

As Scully pulled back, she startled as Mulder suddenly opened his eyes and reached out, his hand brushing against her stomach. “Jesus –”

“Congratulations Scully,” he said, and it was then she realized he hadn’t been sleeping at all when she’d entered the room.

“I –”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Scully stepped back, her hand automatically coming to rest on her abdomen. Mulder Junior kicked in response, as though he knew he was being spoken about. “You’ve had a lot to take in over the past few days.”

“Were you hiding it from me?”
Scully found she couldn’t quite hold his gaze for long. “Of course not,” she huffed.

“Right.” He didn’t believe her. “Congratulations,” he repeated, his voice devoid of emotion. For once, Scully couldn’t read him.

“Thank you.”

“I’m happy for you.”

Happy for you. Scully felt her heart sink, but before she could respond, Ashley came walking into the room armed with her soda. “Hey Mulder!” she said, unaware of the moment she’d just interrupted.

Sitting up, Mulder smiled. “Hey trouble,” he said, giving Scully a look that suggested their conversation was far from over.
“Mom, what’s wrong with Queequeg?” Ashley asked from the floor in the kitchen where her dog was laying lethargically. Scully glanced over from her newspaper to take a look. She hadn’t noticed anything different about him lately and was pretty sure Ashley was just imagining things.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not eating.”

“You must be mistaken, honey. Did you forget filling his bowl after we got home from the hospital last night?”

“No. I did fill it last night. And I put a biscuit in there yesterday morning as a treat for him and it’s still there.”

That piqued Scully’s interest and soon she was on the floor next to her daughter, running a hand over Queequeg’s back.

“Now that must be wrong. Queequeg would never refuse a treat.” That prompted Ashley to spring up and run to the counter where they kept a jar specifically for Queequeg’s dog treats. She offered him one, but the dog showed no interest.

“What’s wrong little Quee?” Scully cooed. Ashley set the biscuit right in front of his nose, but he made no move to eat it.

“Mom, I’m really worried about him,” Ashley whimpered, assuming the worst.

“Ash, he’s probably just got an upset stomach. There’s nothing to cry about.”

“Dogs get upset stomachs?”

“Yup. Just like people.”

Queequeg let out a deep sigh, as if bored with their conversation. Ashley focused her attention back on tending to him immediately.

“Listen, I have the day off. I’m visiting Mulder at the hospital later this morning, but I can take Queequeg to the vet beforehand if it will make you feel better.”

“It will,” Ashley let her mom know.

“Then I’ll do it. And the vet will tell me the same thing I just told you. Now go get your stuff together for school so we can leave at a decent time this morning, okay? It’s your first day back, you don’t want to be late.”

Ashley nodded, but before she got up, she leaned over and kissed her dog on the head.
“I love you Queequeg,” she said before scampering off to get ready for her day.

xxxxxxxxx

Queequeg was about as pissed off as a dog could be, laying on the cold examination table with a stranger poking and prodding him. The vet made a few hmm’s and haa’s, but was not forthcoming with his thoughts. As a doctor, this behavior made Scully concerned. She knew those noises, but she didn’t want to succumb to unnecessary worry for no reason.

Finally, Dr. Peters looked up at her. “And about how old did you say Queequeg was?” he asked.

“I don’t exactly know. He belonged to an elderly woman before he came to live with my daughter and me. We’ve had him for over five years.”

“There’s a hard mass in his stomach. Sometimes as dogs age, they develop fatty tumors that are really of no concern, but this feels a little different. I’d like to take a few x-rays if you don’t mind Ms. Scully.”

“Umm, yeah, sure. Do whatever you need to do,” she stammered. Her heart felt heavy as she watched Dr. Peters carry the dog out of the room. First the worry over Mulder, and now this. If anything was wrong with him, she didn’t know how she would be able to break it to Ashley.

xxxxxxxxx

“Okay, so I’ve got the x-rays here,” Dr. Peters greeted Scully the following day as she was ushered into a back room by a tech. Queequeg was laying on yet another table, and didn’t even look up when Scully came into view. “Just as I suspected, there is a mass in his stomach.”

“Could it be a foreign body? Maybe he swallowed something?” Scully hoped her words didn’t sound as shaky as they felt coming out.

“I don’t think that’s the case ma’am. A foreign body would appear as more of a definite shape, but this… this is most likely organic.” Scully knew that as soon as she saw the image against the light, though. She just didn’t want to believe it.

“So what are you thinking?”

“It’s hard to say, considering his age. But if I was a betting man, I’d go with cancer,” he said with as much sympathy as he could. Scully’s eyes filled with tears.

She couldn’t tell her daughter that. Ashley had only just gotten over the shock of losing Mulder only to have him come back to her. And now this.

“What can we do for him?” Scully said with determination.

“Ms. Scully… there’s not a lot we can do. In my opinion, he’s not stable enough to make it through a surgery. I could refer you to a specialist for chemo and radiation, but you’d be spending big bucks to buy him maybe three more months of hell.”

“So what you’re saying is he’s suffering?”

“Based on my examination, I’d have to say yes.”

“He was fine just a few days ago.”

“Dogs have a way of hiding illness from us.”
As the harsh realization descended upon her, there was no way Scully could keep her feelings in check. She didn’t even try to hide her emotions from the vet, who placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I can’t tell my daughter.” Mulder was back but he wasn’t himself, there was a baby on the way and it didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that this news was going to send Ashley over the edge. Again. She and Queequeg were close, and it was going to be a hard blow to her heart to lose him.

“You don’t have to decide right now. Take all the time you need.”

Scully nodded. She had a big decision to make.

xxxxxxxx

“Sweetheart?”

Ashley glanced back over her shoulder as she sat at her desk in the midst of her homework. When Scully picked her up from school earlier that afternoon, her daughter was dismayed to discover she’d been given homework on her first day back. Scully had been trying to pluck up the courage to tell her about Queequeg all evening. At first she’d been reluctant to tell her; thinking that perhaps it would be best to have Queequeg put down without Ashley’s knowledge, and tell her later. But then she talked it over with Maggie, who’d managed to persuade her otherwise. It would help Ashley to be involved, she’d told her. At least she’d be able to say goodbye, and it might help her come to terms with Queequeg’s death if she had that opportunity. Scully eventually agreed, but then she faced another dilemma. How to tell her?

“Hey mom.” Ashley went back to her homework, her head buried in the notepad she was writing in.

Entering her daughter’s room, Scully perched on the edge of Ashley’s bed, her hands folded in her lap. “Baby, can you stop that for a second please?”

“Sure.” As if she needed an excuse. Ashley swung her chair round to face her mom, then did another full circle for fun. She grinned as it finally came to a standstill.

“I’ve got something to tell you. This isn’t going to be easy, but I just want you to listen until I’ve finished. Can you do that for me?”

Ashley’s face fell, and she immediately looked worried. “Is something wrong with Mulder?”

Of course that would be where her mind first went. She’d only just got Mulder back – the last thing she wanted was to lose him again.

“No, no not at all. Mulder’s fine.”

“He seems a little odd,” her daughter admitted, the relief that he was ok evident on her face. “He’s not the same. He seems angry.”

“I think Mulder is just a little confused right now. He’s been through a lot, and he just needs time to come to terms with everything that’s happened.”

“I guess. I miss him. The old Mulder,” Ashley said wistfully.

“I know, I do too. I’m sure he’s in there somewhere. He just needs time.”

Ashley nodded, then suddenly realized her mom had wanted to talk to her. “If it’s not Mulder,
what’s wrong?”

“As you know, I went to the vets today to collect Queequeg.” Scully looked for signs of realization from her daughter, but Ashley instead sat, listening intently.

“Did the vet say what was wrong?” Scully had been allowed to bring Queequeg home while she made her decision. Their dog was currently feeling very sorry for himself out in the living room, curled up in his bed.

“Baby, Queequeg has a large mass inside of his body.”

“A mass?”

“A tumor. The vet has done some tests, and they think it’s cancerous.”

Finally she got it. “Queequeg has cancer?”

Scully nodded, reaching out and taking hold of her mom’s hands. “I’m sorry.”

“But…but you had cancer.”

“I know.”

“And you’re ok now. Is Queequeg going to be ok?”

Scully’s face crumpled as she shook her head. “The mass is already quite large. Queequeg is in a lot of pain, and it’s not going to get any better.”

“Can’t they remove the mass?”

“It’s in an awkward position. Even if they were able to remove it, there are some major risks associated with the operation. Queequeg might not be able to walk again.”

“So…so what are you saying?” Ashley’s eyes filled with tears as Scully tried to find the words.

Before she could speak though, her daughter got up from her seat and hurried out of the bedroom.

“Ashley –“ Scully got to her feet and set off in search of her daughter. She found her in the living room, sat Indian style on the floor next to Queequeg, coaching the dog affectionately. Tears trailed down her daughter’s cheeks.

“I don’t want him to die,” she said through her tears.

“I know.” With great difficulty given her rotund stomach, Scully sat down next to her daughter, placing her arm around her. Queequeg looked incredibly sorry for himself; as though he was aware of the pain he was causing his family.

“Why is life so unfair?”

“I don’t sweetheart, I really don’t know.”

“When does Queequeg have to be put down?”

Scully chewed her lip. “It can be whenever he want but…but just remember that he’s in a lot of pain.”

“So the sooner the better?” Ashley asked, and her mom flinched.
“The better it is for him anyway.”

“He’s part of the family.”

“I know he is. He’ll be sorely missed.”

“It’s not fair. The baby won’t get to know him.”

“No, no the baby won’t.”

“How will they do it?”

“Do what?”

“Put him down?”

“They’ll give him an injection.”

“So it won’t hurt?” Ashley asked hopefully.

“No, no it’s painless,” her mom reassured her.

“And it’s for the best?”

“You don’t want to see Queequeg sick do you?” Ashley shook her head. “Or in pain?” Another negative. “I don’t like the thought of him not being around either, but I can’t bear to think of him in any pain.”

“It’s not fair on him,” her daughter agreed.

“No, no it’s not.”

“Can I say goodbye, before…before it happens?”

Squeezing her daughter, Scully nodded. “Of course you can. Nothing’s going to happen tonight. I’ll call the vet’s in the morning.”

Ashley nodded sadly, wiping away a tear before she resumed stroking Queequeg. “It’s ok Quee. You’re not going to be in pain for much longer. We’re going to miss you though,” she added as Queequeg licked her hand, as though appreciating her words.

Scully bit back tears, wondering exactly when life was going to give them a break.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX

“You’ve been the best gift anyone has ever given me,” Ashley said to Queequeg the next morning. She was all ready for school, but was in no hurry to leave, well aware that when she returned home that afternoon, Queequeg wasn’t going to be there. For once, Scully wasn’t rushing her daughter, aware she needed time to say her goodbye. “You’ve been here for me when I was upset, and I have to thank you for that.” She brushed her hand through Queequeg’s fur, pretending she couldn’t feel the lump inside him that was killing him. “We’re going to miss you. I’m sure even Mulder will when he finds out. It’s for your own good though,” she added matter-of-factly. “It wouldn’t be fair on you to keep you alive. Your pain would get worse, and you wouldn’t have any quality of life.” They were the exact words Scully had told her daughter the previous night, when Ashley was too upset to sleep. Poor girl, Scully thought. She’d only just been sleeping properly following Mulder’s death, and now she was back to square one.
“We’ll miss you every single day. There’ll never be another dog like you Quee. I’ll never forget the time you ran all over Mulder’s bed with muddy paws, or the time you spat up in his shoe.” She smiled fondly at the memories. Scully, who was sat at the kitchen table listening to every word, also grinned.

“Do you think we should call Mulder?” Ashley suddenly asked.

Scully thought about it for a moment. Mulder hadn’t exactly been sociable since his return, and she figured that he wouldn’t have much of a reaction to the news. After all, he’d been dead himself just a matter of days ago. Queequeg’s woes would no doubt sound insignificant to him after all he’d been through. “I’ll tell him when I’m at the hospital later.” After dropping Ashley off at school, Scully was heading to the hospital to speak to Mulder’s doctor for a full update, and perhaps even take him home if he was still progressing well. Then later that afternoon…that would be when she would say goodbye to Queequeg for the last time. “I’ll tell him later sweetheart. There’s nothing Mulder can do and I’m sure he’ll say goodbye to Queequeg in his own time.”

Ashley nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t want to go to school. I don’t want to leave him.”

“He won’t be alone for long.”

“And you’ll be with him? Until the end?”

“I will,” Scully said with certainty. She was dreading it, but she was going to be there.

“Ok.” Ashley patted Queequeg once more, then leant down and kissed his head. “Love you Quee. Sleep well.”

With that, Ashley reluctantly got to her feet and headed to get her coat, leaving Scully to face the thought of saying goodbye to yet another member of her family.
Scully entered the hospital room alongside Mulder’s doctor to find her former partner sat on the bed, looking far away and clearly uncomfortable. Her first thought was that he was in pain – since his…recovery, as she called it…he’d sworn he was ok, but she wasn’t so sure. His body had been through so much, that she was afraid there would be some effects. “Mulder…?” she asked, concerned. “You ok?”

He didn’t answer immediately; instead taking a moment to collect himself, before turning to face the two of them. “Yeah, for a guy who was uh…in a coffin not too long ago, I think I’m doing pretty damn good.” Scully didn’t share his smile. There was too much death. “Where’s Ash?”

“She’s back at school.” At least he didn’t ask how Ashley was, otherwise Scully would have had to tell him about how she’d left her daughter biting back tears at the school gate; still upset over the thought of losing Queequeg later that afternoon.

“Is everything ok?” Mulder asked, noticing her solemn expression.

“Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Queequeg’s sick.” She shook her head, coming back to herself. “Anyway, how are you doing?”

“I don’t quite have my legs under me…yet.” Standing up, Mulder walked over to the other side of the room, unable to look at them any longer.

“Well, you might want to consider sitting down when you hear what we have to tell you.”

The tone of Scully’s voice told Mulder that he should do as she said. He prepared himself for more bad news. “Uh oh.”

“Now it’s uh…it’s good news. It’s…it’s miraculous news.”

He certainly wasn’t expecting that. He waited for Scully to speak, but she let the doctor take the lead.

“I can’t possibly exaggerate the inconceivability of you sitting here,” said Doctor Lim. “Let’s be honest, your condition may be more incredible than your recovery.”

Scully interrupted, unable to stay silent any longer. “Whatever neurological disorder you were suffering from, it’s no longer detectable. After a course of transfusions and antivirals, it has rid your body of the virus that was invading it. The scars on your face, on your hands, on your feet, on your chest, they…they seem to be repairing themselves.” She looked on as Mulder lifted his hand to touch the scars she spoke of. “Mulder, you are in perfect health.” At least something was going right for them, she thought.

He didn’t see to share her enthusiasm. “Wow.”

“How do you feel Agent Mulder?” his doctor asked.

“Like Austin Powers.” Both he and Scully forced a smile, though neither felt the situation was a laughing matter. “So you’re here to take me home?”

Scully nodded.
“Where is home?”

She shifted uncomfortably, though Mulder wasn’t sure if she felt awkward or if it was due to the baby. His eyes betraying him, he glanced down at her abdomen, feeling his chest tighten as he took in her pregnant figure.

“I kept your apartment.”

At Scully’s words, Mulder lifted his head, staring her straight in the eye. She’d kept his apartment. He’d been dead for three months, and still she’d kept paying his rent. He couldn’t quite understand why she’d do that, but he was grateful he still had his own space. “Back to normal,” he muttered, sneaking another look at her stomach. What a joke, he thought. Things would never be normal again.

“Must feel good to be home,” Scully commented as she entered Mulder’s apartment carrying his overnight bag. He’d offered to carry it for her, but she was adamant she could do it. She was pregnant after all; not an invalid.

“Mmm.” Mulder didn’t sound too keen to be home, but rather than dwell on it, Scully headed on through to his bedroom to dispose of his bag. When she returned to the living room, she found her partner looking around his apartment, trying to see what had been changed in the months that he’d gone. Not a lot actually; they both realized. Scully hadn’t the heart, the energy or the strength to sort out his apartment following his death. She saw it as a retreat too – she and Ashley could come here if they wanted to be close to Mulder. Plus she wanted their child to get an insight into their father. Now though, they’d be getting the real thing – if Mulder ever acknowledged their unborn child.

“Something looks different.”

“It’s clean,” said Scully, a little sheepishly, and Mulder chuckled. He knew. He knew she’d kept his apartment and kept it clean, but he didn’t know why.

“Ah, that’s it.”

There was an awkward silence. Scully couldn’t remember the last time such a thing had occurred. They’d both been so comfortable around one another – at least before his abduction. Now he was back and different, and it felt as though nothing was ever going to be the same again.

Mulder looked into the fish tank. “Missing a Molly.”

“Yeah. She wasn’t as lucky as you.”

Mulder wasn’t entirely sure he would call himself lucky, he thought to himself. He still bore the scares and the memories of what had happened to him. In some ways, he mused, he’d rather have stayed dead, then lived with those images.

“Mulder,” Scully continued. “I don’t know if you’ll ever understand what it was like. First learning of your abduction…and then searching for you and finding you dead. And now to have you back and –” Her voice hitched.

“Well you act like you’re surprised,” he joked. After all she’d seen on the X-Files. When she didn’t return his smile, Mulder looked away, unable to meet her eye.
“I prayed a lot,” she said. “Both Ashley and I did. And now our prayers have been answered.”

“In more ways than one,” said Mulder, looking down at her stomach.

Scully followed his gaze. Finally they were going to talk about this.

“Yeah.”

“I’m happy for you.” His words stopped her in her tracks. *Happy for you*. Not them, but you. “I think I know…how much that means to you.”

*To us* she wanted to correct him. Her eyes filled with tears. “Mulder –” she began, but he cut her off.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound cold or ungrateful. I just…I have no idea where I fit in right now. I just..uh…I’m having a little trouble…processing everything.”

*It’s your baby!* Scully thought. She wanted him to ask her about the baby, but instead he said nothing. He clearly didn’t have a clue – or maybe he didn’t want to know. When their IVF treatments had failed, Mulder had been the one to tell her not to give up on a miracle; that one day they’d get their baby. But now he was back and their miracle was on the way, but Mulder acted as though he’d rather be anywhere than with them. It certainly wasn’t the reaction she’d dreamt of when she found out he was alive and would live to see their baby born. The opposite in fact.

“You fit in right where you did before,” she began, sniffing. As far as Ashley and I are concerned, you fit in with us. Nothing’s changed.”

“Everything’s changed Scully,” he said, and in those three words he managed to break her heart once again. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want her or Ashley or their new baby.

“Right,” she said, unable to listen any further.

“Scully, it’s not you –“

“Don’t,” she said, having had enough. “Don’t say it.”

“Scully –“

“I have to go,” she said suddenly, turning on her heel and heading towards the door. She couldn’t listen to anything more.”

“Let me explain.”

“I don’t have time,” she said without looking around. “I have to go. I have a dog to put down.”

“A dog? What…? Has something happened to Queequeg?”

As Scully opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, she turned to face Mulder, her eyes flaming. “Like you care,” she hissed. “You hated the damn dog anyway.”

And before he could protest, she’d slammed the door in his face, leaving him to wonder why he even bothered to come back.

xxxxxxxxxxx

Scully watched as Ashley chased a few strands of spaghetti around her plate with a fork. Her
daughter had been quiet since Scully had picked her up from school, simply asking her if
Queequeg had gone, then retreating into her own little world when Scully confirmed that he had.
He’d slipped away peacefully, she’d told her daughter; neglecting to mention the moment – the last
moment as Scully said goodbye – when Queequeg caught her eye and gave her a sad look, as
though he knew exactly what was going to happen to him. Not only was Ashley quiet, she also
seemed to be off her food, deciding to play with it rather than eat it.

“It doesn’t feel the same without Queequeg,” Ashley spoke up.

“No,” Scully said sadly. “No it doesn’t.”

“It seems odd that he’s not underneath the table begging for my food.”

A slow smile formed on Scully’s face. “It does. He was good at that. It didn’t help that you liked to
drop your food.”

“He was hungry.” At last Ashley smiled.

“He did have his own food you know.”

“I know, but ours was so much tastier.”

“I suppose he told you that, did he?”

Ashley nodded. “Uh huh.” She sighed and put her fork down. “Did you tell Mulder about
Queequeg?”

Scully was tempted to scoff. Mulder wouldn’t have listened anyway, she thought. “Not exactly.”

“Why not?”

“Well…Mulder is going through a lot right now.”

“But he knew Queequeg.”

“I know, but –“

“Has something happened?”

“Hmm?” Scully busied herself with her own spaghetti, buying herself some time. “No, of course
not.”

“You’re lying,” Ashley said suddenly. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m not a baby mom, you can’t just tell me that and shut me up. What’s happened?”

Scully sighed. Ashley had a point. “Sweetheart, Mulder has been through a lot. He’s confused and
probably a little bit angry, and is struggling to take in everything that’s happened. He’s been
through a lot,” she repeated.

“So have we,” Ashley protested, and her mom nodded.

“I know, but Mulder just needs some time. Right now…” she thought about softening the blow, but
her daughter deserved the truth. “Right now honestly, I don’t think he’d care that much about
Queequeg. He’s trying to sort out his own problems.”

“Doesn’t he care about us anymore?” Ashley couldn’t really believe what she was hearing. Mulder always worried about them. At least, the old Mulder did.

“He does. Of course he does, he just…it’s just taking him a while to remember everything, and to go back to how things were.”

Ashley thought for a moment. “But he’s happy about the baby, isn’t he?”

That was the big question, Scully thought. “Of course he’s happy for us,” she said slowly, repeating his earlier words, the words that had been like a knife to her stomach. “He’s just trying to figure out where he fits in in all of this.”

“What does that mean?” Ashley asked, narrowing her eyes.

“It means…it means that right now, we have to get used to it just being the three of us. Mulder will come around in time.”

“He doesn’t want the baby?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I’m not sure what he wants right now.”

Ashley pushed her plate away from her, no longer interested in her food. “Does he want us anymore? He wanted to adopt me before,” she sulked.

“I know.” Scully reached out and took hold of her daughter’s hand, her own dinner now forgotten. “You need to give Mulder time. We both do, and…and we might have to face up to the fact that he’s changed. But we’ll be ok,” she added, forcing a smile. “We always are.”

Ashley nodded as she looked down at her plate. “Yeah,” she said sadly. As her mom struggled to her feet and began clearing away the dishes, Ashley had a plan forming in her mind. Mulder may be trying to avoid her, but she wasn’t going to let him get away with it. And sure enough, when Scully looked in to Ashley’s room barely fifteen minutes later, her daughter had gone.

Mulder stirred as he heard a knock at the front door. Since he’d returned back to the land of the living, he’d been sleeping a lot. Scully would have told him he needed his rest, but he was more convinced he just didn’t want to be conscious. When he was conscious he saw everything he’d missed in his absence; he realized how everyone had carried on with their lives. Sleeping was a relief – when it wasn’t plagued by nightmares.

Rubbing his eyes, he got to his feet and padded over to the door. There was only one person it could be, he thought to himself. No doubt Scully was back to check on him, and make sure he wasn’t back out there looking for little grey men. As he looked out of the spyhole, he was shocked to discover that it wasn’t his partner on the other side of the door. Close, but not quite.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as he opened the door, not bothering with formalities. He glanced out into the corridor, realizing Ashley was alone. “Where’s your mom?” He looked back down at her, then shook his head in disapproval. “God Ash, tell me you didn’t.”

“I needed to talk to you,” she said.

“Do I owe the cab driver?” he asked, remembering the last time she ran off and turned up on his
“No.”

“I suppose your mom doesn’t know you’re here?” As if on cue, the phone started ringing. Leaving Ashley to close the door, Mulder headed towards the phone and answered it on the second ring. “She’s here,” he said immediately. “Yeah, I know…I’ll bring her back now. No it’s ok…I’ll be fine Scully,” he sighed, before ringing off. He glared at Ashley. “You’re in trouble young lady.”

“I know,” she said as she made her way over to the couch and took a seat without being invited.

“Well, before I take you home to face your doom, would you like a drink?” She shook her head. “There’s water, or juice, and I think your mom got me some soda the other day.” Still she said nothing, her gaze resting firmly on her hands in her lap. “Ok, what is it?” Enough was enough, he told himself. Something was wrong with Ashley, and he was determined to find out what it was. “What’s wrong?” He took a seat next to her.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she finally spoke.

“Oh really? You turn up on my doorstep unannounced, you’ve been giving me the silent treatment and death glares and –“

“You were dead,” she replied sadly, her words immediately cutting to Mulder’s core. “You were dead and we had to bury you in the ground, and mom cried every night for you. She thought I didn’t know, but I did, and I also know that when I stayed round Grandma’s, my mom stayed here at your place, even though she knew you weren’t here or ever coming back. And now you’re back, and you’ve changed, and you don’t seem to love me or mom any more, or care about the baby, but my mom still loves you. You’re an asshole.”

“Watch your mouth young lady,” Mulder warned, his heart racing. She’d always been a well behaved, happy child and he’d never seen her like this; never heard her cuss before.

“Or what? You’re not my father,” she said, and her announcement was like a dagger to Mulder. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Oh no,” he said, feeling the anger well up in him. “You do not get to play that card with me.”

“It’s true.”

“The hell it is. I am your father, I’ve spent the last god knows how many years acting like a father to you, caring for you and –“

“Well why are you behaving like this then?” Ashley cried, stopping Mulder in his tracks. “You are an asshole, because even if you hate me or my mom, she’s having a baby and it needs to know its dad. I didn’t really know my real dad, and it’s not fair if it happens to my brother or sister too.” Her voice cracked as tears sprung to her eyes, and Mulder reached out, frustrated when she shifted on the couch, moving out of his reach.

“Ashley.”

“So that’s why I’m giving you the silent treatment. Because you don’t know what we went through without you. We had to bury you,” she repeated, finally succumbing to the tears. “And now you’re back and everything’s different. You don’t care about us anymore.”

This time Mulder scooted across and took her in his arms, relieved when she didn’t pull away.
“Ashley, I’m not going to pretend I know what you went through when I was gone.” What he did know was that she’d been through a lot in her short life. “But things are complicated. You’re too young to understand but –“

Ashley sat forward, removing herself from his grasp. “I’m not a baby. I might be young but I know what’s going on. My mom loves you, and I thought you loved her too, but –“

“Despite what you might think Ashley, I do love your mom, and I love you too, but it’s…it’s complicated.”

“Why?”

“Because…because I was away for a long time, and your mom moved on.”

She looked at him incredulously. “No she didn’t. She spent the whole time looking for you. When you were…when you were dead, she was so sad.”

“The baby…” Mulder drifted off. He didn’t want to reveal his deepest fears to Scully’s daughter. The last time he’d set eyes on his partner, she’d been unable to conceive; their attempts at IVF all failing. But now here she was, a little over seven month’s pregnant. Everything had changed.

“Mom thinks you don’t want the baby, just like my dad didn’t want me.”

Realisation setting in, Mulder reached out and wiped Ashley’s tears away. “I didn’t know what your mom wants. I don’t know what your mom wants.”

“You. We just want you.” Her words were to the point, but it was what Mulder needed. Scully had never been one for confiding in Mulder her deepest feelings, and he was almost relieved he’d had the chance to talk to Ashley, even if it only made him realise just how much of an idiot he’d been lately.

“Have I really been an asshole?”

She managed a small smile in return. “Yup. A big one. An enormous one actually.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “It’s ok.”

“No, it’s not, but it will be. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Maybe you should make it up to my mom.”

“Since when did you become such a know-it-all?” Smiling, Mulder pressed his lips to Ashley’s crown. “I’ll talk to her.”

“Soon?”

“Very soon. Come on, let’s get you home.”

“Not just yet,” she replied, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. Mulder relaxed into the embrace, realising just how much he’d missed the little girl in his arms. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Really? Even though you called me an asshole?”

She grinned against him. “Don’t tell mom.”
“I suppose I can keep it a secret.” He sobered. “I’m sorry Ash, the last thing I wanted to do was upset you. I’ll make it up to you, ok?”

“Ok.”

“But first, we’d better get you home before your mom calls out a search party for us both.” No sooner had he spoke the words, the phone rung, disturbing him from his thoughts. “I bet I know who that is,” he commented, reluctantly pulling away from Ashley. Getting to his feet, he headed over to his desk and picked up the phone. “We’re coming, we’re coming. Don’t worry, I’ll lecture her on the dangers of travelling across town on the way.” With that, he hung up, grabbed his car keys and looked over at Ashley expectantly. “Let’s go.”
“Don’t even think about going anywhere other than your bedroom young lady,” Scully ordered, as Ashley stepped through the front door, closely followed by Mulder. “You are grounded. For life.”

Ashley said nothing, instead shooting Mulder a pointed look before sulking off in the direction of her bedroom. Closing the door behind him, Mulder gave Scully a thin smile, frowning as she returned to her task of folding laundry. “Thanks for bringing her back,” was all she said.

“You’re welcome. Kids eh?”

“Mmm.” She wouldn’t meet his eye, and wasn’t exactly full of conversation, but Mulder wasn’t going to leave just yet. He’d promised Ashley he’d talk to her mom, and knew he needed to do it soon before he wimped out and Scully brushed it all aside. He knew she hated confrontation, but they needed to talk.

“I guess you’d better get used to it with another one on the way.”

“I’ll cope.”

“Of course.” She definitely wasn’t in the mood for talking. “I didn’t say you wouldn’t.”

“Listen,” said Scully, folding up a t-shirt. “Is there a point to this?”

“Sorry?”

“This morning you pretty much told me you needed time to get your head around everything. Well I’m giving you that time.”

“We need to talk.”

“I think you’ve said enough.”

“Scully -”

Suddenly she threw a previously folded skirt of Ashley’s back onto the sofa and looked up at him, her hands on her hips. Her face had reddened, and Mulder knew he was about to see the angry side of Scully.

“You were dying,” she hissed. “You knew you were dying and you never said a damn word!”

That certainly wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

“I’m so-“

“Don’t. Don’t you dare say you’re sorry! You’re not sorry! You asked me to marry you even though you knew you were dying. You wanted to adopt my daughter, even though you knew you were dying. How could you do that to her? How could you deprive her of her father?”

“I wanted her to be safe. I didn’t want either of you to worry about money when I was gone.”

It was the wrong thing to say and they both knew it. “So that’s why you asked us? So we could have your money?”
“No –“

“God damn it Mulder, do you really think that’s what we cared about? That...we’ve spent the past few months not caring that you were dead, because we still had your money?”

“No, of course not.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because the last thing I wanted to do was worry you!” he answered back.

“Well guess what Mulder?” Scully asked. “I was worried. I was out of my mind with worry when you were abducted. You run off against my advisement, and you die and I have to find out from someone else that you knew you were dying. How do you think that made me feel?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

“I told you not to go to Oregon.”

“Scully, I had to.”

“No you didn’t. I told you not to go but you did. You left me and you left your children.” She didn’t give him the chance to pick up on her comment. “We’ve been to hell and back these past few months. God damn it Mulder, you died! We had to bury you! I had to pick up the pieces while my daughter said goodbye to another father. Mulder, Ashley was...she was so distraught. I had to prise her off of your body when we found you. She was beside herself, convinced she could somehow bring you back to life.” Scully huffed out a bitter laugh. “Maybe I should have let her try.”

“Scully –“

“When she saw your body, she collapsed into tears. I’ve never seen her like it before in my life. She called you daddy,” she stressed, making Mulder feel like a world-class asshole. Ashley was right, he thought to himself. “She had to mourn another father. And this time it was a hundred times worse, because as far as she was concerned, you were her father.” He tried not to linger on her use of past tense. “She slept in my bed every night for a month afterwards. She couldn’t fall asleep, she couldn’t concentrate at school, she started hitting out and getting into trouble.”

“If I’d known...” he began, but Scully beat him to it.

“You said yourself that you needed to go. You’re so self-obsessed sometimes and you don’t even stop to think about anyone else. It’s like now, I know you’ve been through hell on earth – “

“You have no idea,” Mulder finally snapped. “You have no idea what I went through.”

“Well why don’t you try telling me,” Scully argued. “Rather than keeping everything bottled up and acting like I’m the enemy. I know you suffered, but we did too.”

“Yeah well, you got on with your lives.”

Scully pursed her lips in anger. He didn’t get it; he really didn’t get it. “Only because we had to!”

Feeling the frustration threatening to overwhelm her, Scully walked off towards the kitchen. Mulder followed her, finding her by the cupboard, grabbing herself a glass. She slammed it a little too hard on the counter, but it didn’t break. It was a good job too, Mulder thought. His partner
seemed so angry, that he was convinced she’d stab him with a shard of glass. He watched as she poured herself a glass of water, taking a small sip before setting it back down on the counter.

“You have no idea what we went through Mulder,” she said, spinning around to face him. “We had to bury you. We had to try to figure out how to live without you.”

“Well I’m sure Agent Doggett helped.”

“Agent Doggett?” Scully scoffed. “You cannot be serious.”

“I saw you at the hospital with him. He seems to have settled himself in your life pretty damn well.”

“He helped me find you,” she argued. “If it wasn’t for him and AD Skinner, you wouldn’t be standing here now.”

“Well I guess we both have to thank him.”

“What is your problem?” Realization set in. “Oh, so you think that your side of the bed was still warm when I invited Agent Doggett into it? That...despite the fact I’m wearing your ring...” she held up her left hand; the ring that Mulder and Ashley chose shortly before his abduction glistening in the light. “…I still decided to get my kicks elsewhere?”

Mulder said nothing, but his silence only served to inflame Scully. “Jesus Mulder! Agent Doggett is my god damn partner, just like this is your god damn baby!” And before Mulder could even register what was happening, Scully had removed the ring and launched it across the kitchen towards him. He shifted out of the way, grimacing as the ring hit the cupboard door behind him and ricocheted back across the room. “Go to hell,” Scully spat, moving to walk out of the kitchen.

“Scully –“

“Get out! Get out of my apartment right now!” When he made no effort to move, Scully uttered “go to hell” under her breath, then stormed out of the kitchen.

Moments later, he heard her bedroom door slam. The conversation was over.

“That went well,” Mulder murmured to himself, running a shaky hand through his hair as he glanced around the kitchen. Scully’s apartment may have been the same as it always had been, but she and Ashley had changed. They were still hurting, just as he was, and he knew he was to blame. If only he hadn’t gone to Oregon...Sighing heavily, Mulder headed out of the kitchen, not even bothering to retrieve the ring. He hesitated as he stepped into the living room as though at a fork in the road. Should he stay, or should he go? His mind suddenly made up he continued to the front door. Scully wanted him to leave, so he was going to. As his hand closed around the door handle however, a voice stopped him in his tracks. “Don’t go.”

He turned to see Ashley leaning against the doorway to the living room now dressed in her pjs, all ready for bed. Tears were streaming down her face, and Mulder knew without asking that she’d heard every word of his argument with Scully.

“Ash –“

“Please don’t go.”

“Your mom doesn’t want me here.”
“That’s because you pissed her off.” He didn’t even bother to lecture her on her language. “You need to apologize.”

“Not now Ash. Go back to your room and I’ll see you soon.”

“No,” she said defiantly. “I’m not going back to my room. I’m not a child.”

He wasn’t prepared to get into another argument. “Suit yourself,” he said as he turned back to the door.

“Don’t leave us again.”

There. Ashley had said the only thing that would get Mulder to stay. This time, when he faced her, his earlier frustration had vanished, and he felt nothing but sympathy for the little girl. His little girl. “Ash—“

“I don’t want you to leave us again. We can’t live without you Mulder.”

Crossing the living room in just a few strides, Mulder opened his arms, and Ashley walked into them, hugging him tightly as her tears continued to fall. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d seen her in such a state. “I’m just giving your mom some space like she wants.”

“She just wants you,” Ashley sobbed. “Just say you’re sorry.”

“I’m not sure she’ll listen.”

“Keep telling her.”

“I pissed her off pretty badly.”

“Just try,” the youngster pleaded. “Try for me.”

He couldn’t ever deny her. “Ok,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll give it a go. Now wipe those tears away, ok?” he ordered, kissing her forehead. “You’ve already cried too much over me.”

“Don’t go.”

“I’m not going to go,” he promised. “C’mon, let’s get you to bed.”

She shook her head. “You need to go and speak to mom.”

“And I will, shortly. C’mon.” Putting his arm around Ashley, Mulder led her back to her bedroom. He lifted her comforter as she climbed back into bed, frowning as she continued to cry despite the fact he’d assured her he wasn’t leaving her. “Hey,” he said, sinking onto his knees next to the bed. “You need to calm down sweetheart. It’s ok,” he said, kissing her warm forehead. “Everything will be fine.” Ashley didn’t look as though she believed him. “Deep breath in….deep breath out…” Ashley copied him as he moved to wipe away her tears with a tissue he’d grabbed by her bedside. “No more tears Ash.” Discarding the tissue, he then began running a hand through her hair, trying to soothe her. “I know you’ve been through a hell of a lot in your life, and I know that I’m to blame for that. I’m sorry. The last thing I want to do is to hurt you or your mom.”

Ashley sniffed. “We love you though.”

“I know you do, and I love you both too. I’m sorry I went to Oregon. I mean it. If I’d have known what was going to happen or what I’d miss out on…” He’d missed Ashley’s birthday, Christmas and Scully’s birthday for starters, not to mention the majority of Scully’s pregnancy. “I should have
stayed. And I’m so sorry for what you went through while I was gone. I’m sorry you had to bury me, and I really am sorry about Queequeg. I liked him.” At Ashley’s look of disbelief, he smiled. “Ok maybe I didn’t like him as such. Maybe we just tolerated one another.” He was relieved when Ashley gave him a small grin; her tears subsiding. “And I’m sorry for how I’ve behaved since I got back. I’ve been so wrapped up in my thoughts, that I didn’t even consider how much you and your mom were hurting. I’m sorry for acting like a first-prize asshole.”

“That’s ok,” Ashley hiccupped. He could see something was on her mind, and moments later she voiced her concerns. “Mulder?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you only want to adopt me because of the money?”

Mulder stopped stroking her hair. His hand moved to cup her face. Poor kid. After everything she’d been through and heard, it was no wonder she still believed she wasn’t wanted. “No,” he said firmly. “Not at all. Yes I wanted you and your mom to be secure but I wanted to adopt you because I love you. I wanted you and everyone else in the world to know that.”

“Do you still love me now?”

He grinned. “More than ever.” Ashley relaxed. “You are growing up into a smart, strong, beautiful young lady, and I couldn’t be prouder of you. I love you.”

“Love you too,” Ashley sniffed, shifting on the bed and wrapping her arms around Mulder, gripping him tightly. “Now go speak to my mom.”

“Yes m’am,” he chuckled. “Get some sleep.”

“Ok. See you soon?”

“Of course.” At least he hoped so.

Kissing her cheek, Mulder rose from the floor and headed out of Ashley’s bedroom, flicking off the light before closing the door behind him. He startled as he saw Scully waiting for him out in the hallway. From the tears in her eyes, she’d clearly been listening in to his conversation with Ashley. Like mother like daughter, he mused.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly, trying to gauge Ashley’s mood. “I know you asked me to leave, but Ash got upset and I was just trying to settle her down.”

“Just like old times,” Scully sniffed.

Mulder was relieved that her earlier anger seemed to have faded – at least for the moment. “No it’s not,” he said softly. “It’s not, but I want it to be. I want it to be so badly.”

Scully nodded in understanding. “I know. Me too.” She turned and padded back towards the living room. Mulder followed, smiling sadly to himself as he noticed his partner’s walk – or rather her waddle. He wouldn’t comment though – even if they’d been on good terms he was certain she’d shoot him again if he mentioned that.

“Listen Scully…” he began as they reached the living room and Scully faced him. “I owe you one hell of an apology, I know.” She said nothing, waiting for him to continue. “The last thing I wanted was to hurt you, you or Ashley. I feel terrible about everything you’ve been through, but it’s just so…I can’t explain. I’m just struggling to take all of this in.”
“You’re acting like you’re the only one who is,” Scully argued. “I know you’ve suffered, but – “

“They had me in this chair,” Mulder revealed. “They had me locked into this chair and they’d pulled my skin out – “

“Ashley had dreams about that.”

Somehow that didn’t surprise Mulder. “I can’t get that out of my head. Scully, I’m so screwed up right now.”

“Do you blame me?” she suddenly asked? “Do you blame me for not finding you sooner? Of not saving you?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you think I sat at home and just let other people look at you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Because I didn’t. I tried so hard to find you Mulder, I really did. And then Ashley ended up in hospital, and I had a scare with my pregnancy –“

“What happened?”

“You weren’t here!” she exclaimed, mindful of the fact Ashley was trying to sleep. “You weren’t here and we just fell apart. I didn’t know what to do Mulder,” she added, her tears finally falling. “And I could barely cope with one child, and yet there I was preparing to bring another into the world. And I just felt so awful, because we both so desperately wanted a baby and you weren’t here to see it, and I couldn’t feel happy about this…” Her hands went to her stomach. “Because I knew you wouldn’t be there to share it with me. My heart has been torn apart over the past few months, and I didn’t know how to be strong, I didn’t know how to help Ashley or this baby.”

“Scully –“

“And now you’re back.” She smiled through her tears. “You’re back and you’re alive and you’re breathing, but you’re so distant and cold and you’re acting like I’m your enemy, like I’m the one who put you on that ship and hurt you. You say you don’t know where you fit in right now Mulder, but neither do I, and I just don’t know what to do to make it better.” She lifted a hand to cover her mouth as a sob escaped. “I had to live without you, and I didn’t know how. And now I just feel like you hate me, and Ashley and this baby, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Please Scully.” Finally unable to resist, Mulder stepped in towards her and reached out, preparing to embrace her. Before he could even touch her though, Scully’s fist flew out and connected with his chest. “Don’t you dare touch me,” she warned, her eyes flaring. “I hate you Mulder.”

“I know you do.” It didn’t deter him though.

“I hate that you left us.”

“I know. I do too.”

Another slap to the chest. “I hate that you went back to Oregon.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I hate that you weren’t here for us.”
That slap hurt, but Mulder relished it. It made him feel alive, and he knew it was helping Scully to finally get out some of the anger she’d been bottling up since Mulder’s abduction. “I do too.”

“I hate you.” Another blow. “I hate you.”

“I know Scully.” This time when he reached for her, she came willingly into his arms, slumping against him as much as her swollen stomach would allow. Though she’d changed physically, she was still the Scully he remembered, still fitting into his arms like she belonged there. He breathed in her scent, realizing just how much he’d missed her.

“I couldn’t cope without you Mulder,” she sobbed against him, her tears soaking through his shirt. He hated how upset she was, all because of him.

“You did just fine,” he soothed, brushing back her hair. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ashley stood in the doorway, tears streaming down her face as she took in the scene. He wanted to go to her, to take her into his arms too, but Scully continued.

“I was so scared.”

“I know, I know you were. I can’t imagine how scared you must have been but…Scully you did an amazing job keeping everything together. You’re so strong…you’ve always been so strong. You know your strength was one of the first things that made me fall in love with you. I’m back now Scully, I’m here and I just need some time but…you don’t have to be strong anymore, not by yourself. You have me and I promise I won’t leave you again. I know I’ve been a cold bastard lately, but I want you in my life. I want you all in my life.” He pulled away. “Did we really?” His gaze lowered to her abdomen. “We did this?”

“We did.”

“Wow.”

Scully smiled, her first genuine smile since Mulder had first woken in the hospital. “Yeah.”

“When?”

“Well…I think Caddyshack played a part.”

Mulder grinned, remembering that night. “When are you due?”

“In about six weeks.”

“Wow.” There was a mixture of amazement and terror on Mulder’s face. “And everything’s ok?”

“Everything’s fine. More than fine.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

Scully nodded. “I umm…I tried looking for the ring, while you were in with Ashley. I’m sorry, I couldn’t see it. I’ll get Ashley to check tomorrow, but I think it’s gone under the counter — “

“It’s ok,” Mulder said, smiling. The ring was the last thing on his mind. “We’ll find it. It’s umm…it probably needs updating though.”

“Oh?” Scully looked confused.

“When Ash helped me choose it, she said it represented the three of us. Now…well now there’s
“Yeah,” she said, fresh tears threatening to fall. “Yeah there is.”

“I umm…it’s getting late. I’d better go.”

“You can stay…” Scully suddenly realized she was pushing him. “Right, ok.”

“I’ll umm…I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah.”

A thought came to mind. “Would it be ok if I collected Ash from school tomorrow?”

He was trying, and she knew it. “I think she’d like that.”

“Great, so I’ll umm…I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“See you then.”

There was a brief moment of awkwardness as Mulder debated what to do. Before his abduction, he’d have kissed her without even thinking. But now…now things were different, though they were mending slowly. “Night Scully,” he said, reaching out and squeezing her hand.

“Goodnight Mulder.”

And as Mulder let himself out of the door, both he and Scully breathed a sigh of relief that eventually they were going to be ok.
As Ashley headed towards the school gates and saw a familiar figure ahead of her, her face immediately broke out into a wide grin. Quickly saying goodbye to her friends, she hurried over to Mulder and gave him a brief hug, mindful of the fact her friends were watching and she definitely wasn’t a baby, but needing to remind herself that Mulder was actually real and back and standing in front of her. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought Emma was collecting me today?”

“She was, but your mom said I could, so I called Emma and gave her the afternoon off.” Remembering old times, Mulder held out a hand and Ashley gave him her bag as they began walking to his car. Some things never changed, he thought to himself with a grin.

“So you and mom are ok now?”

“Don’t pretend you weren’t listening last night.”

Ashley smiled sheepishly. “Not to all of it. I couldn’t hear you once mom stopped shouting.”

“Well, we’re ok. At least we will be. It’s going to take some time.”

Ashley nodded in understanding as they reached his car. “That’s better than arguing.”

“A lot better,” he agreed.

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.” Mulder unlocked his vehicle and they both got inside. “So we’ve got a couple of hours to kill before your mom finishes work. What do you say we head to a diner for a milkshake? It’ll be just like old times.”

Ashley scrunched up her nose. “We could go to a coffee shop instead?”

“Coffee?” Mulder glanced across at the youngster as though she’d grown a second head. “Ok, who are you and what have you done with Ashley?”

“Ha ha,” she deadpanned. “I’m not allowed milkshakes right now. I have to be good.”

“Your mom said you were in hospital when I was gone?”

She nodded. “I wasn’t very careful with my sugars.”

Mulder reached over and squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“S’ok. It was my own fault.” She shrugged. “It’s all ok now.”

“Yes it is. So coffee it is.”

“And then we’ll go get mom from work?”

“We can do, or if not, we’ll see her at home.”
Ashley looked at him searchingly. “You might not see John even if we do go to mom’s office.”

“Who said I don’t want to see John?” Mulder started up the car and put it into drive. “I’m sure he’s a great guy.”

“Mmmhmm.” Ashley smirked, knowing full well that he didn’t agree with what he was saying. “He’s ok. He’s nowhere near as fun as you though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t even like baseball.”

Mulder gave a mock gasp of horror. “How dare he?”

“Right?”

“Well, I’m glad you had sometime there for you while I was gone.”

Ashley took hold of Mulder’s hand. “He was nice. But he wasn’t you. I’m real glad you’re back Mulder.”

For the first time in days, Mulder had no doubt he agreed. “Me too.”

Mulder wandered into the kitchen, carrying a stack of plates. Scully stood by the sink, rinsing out a glass before placing it on the draining board. She glanced over at him as he paused and raked his eyes down her body, taking in her appearance and her sockless feet. “Don’t say anything Mulder,” she warned with a grin.

“I’m saying nothing,” he said, headed over to stand next to her, placing the dishes down on the counter. “Nothing at all about you being barefoot and pregnant.”

Her smile widened as she dipped her hand back into the water and splashed him.

“Hey!”

“I told you not to say anything!”

“You should have known better.”

“I guess I should by now.”

“Thanks for dinner,” he said, grabbing a cloth and moving to Scully’s other side to wipe up the dishes. It had been a good evening. At first, when Scully returned home from work, there had been just the slightest hint of tension in the air, as both she and Mulder tried to work out how to act around one another. But then barely minutes later, they both relaxed, and it had been almost like old times – smiling, joking, and talking about pretty much everything except the X-Files. That was still a moot point to Mulder – he wondered where he was going to fit in now that Agent Doggett was Scully’s so-called partner. They’d deal with that another day, he told himself. Today had been a good day. He wasn’t going to ruin it.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for collecting Ashley up from school. Did you have a good afternoon?”

“We did,” he said, sighing contentedly. “God Scully, she’s grown up so much.”
“I know.”

“She’s…I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. She’s always been her own person, but now she’s becoming a lady. She’s got opinions –“

“Too many opinions,” Scully commented, reaching for another plate.

“Well there is that. But she’s got a sensible head on her shoulders.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “She’s grown up recently.”

“I realize I had a lot to do with that.”

“Mulder…” Scully forgot all about the dishes and grabbed a towel, drying her hands. She then reached out and took hold of his. “Stop.” He looked confused. “Stop blaming yourself. Listen,” she sighed. “We can keep going over this again and again, but it’s not going to help. It’s not your fault; you didn’t know what was going to happen.” It took Scully a lot to say it, he knew, considering everything she’d been through because of him. She’d clearly been thinking since their argument the previous evening.

“Everything I’ve missed out on…”

“You’re here now.”

“I know but—” Letting go of her hand, Mulder nodded down at her. “Look at you Scully, you’re about to drop. I’ve missed out on your whole pregnancy.”

“For starters, I’m not literally about to drop. Secondly, thank you for not pointing out that I’m the size of an elephant right now.” That at least got a chuckle from him. “But like I said, you’re here now. And there was a time not so long ago when neither Ashley nor I expected that. The fact that you’re here is like a dream come true…anything else is just a bonus.”

“Yeah well it shouldn’t be,” Mulder replied, his thumb tracing circles over Scully’s hand. “You should want more of me Scully. You’ll get it though, I promise. I know I’m still trying to take all of this in, but I want to be there for you. And for Ashley.” He smiled. “And this little kid too.”

She shared his smile. “Or not so little. Like I said, I’m the size of an elephant.”

“You look good though.”

“You mean huge.”

Mulder huffed out a laugh. “No, you look good. You’re glowing.”

“It’s hormones.”

“It’s cute. You know what else is cute? The fact you can’t reach the sink anymore.” He ducked out of the way as Scully moved to slap him.

“Mulder?” she said after a moment.

“Hmm?”

“Did you really think Agent Doggett was…?” she trailed off, though he knew exactly what she was asking.
“No,” he said immediately, shaking his head. “I was being an ass. I just… I hated the fact that I wasn’t here for you; that he got to experience some of this with you and take care of Ashley –“

“The first day I met him, I threw a cup of water over him.”

He tried – and failed to conceal a grin. “You did?”

“Uh huh.”

“That’s my girl.”

Scully sobered. “Don’t ever think we replaced you. In any way.”

“I know, I know you didn’t.”

“This is your child.”

Swallowing hard, Mulder nodded, though Scully noted with a bemused smile that he was now sporting his panic face. “I know.”

“You don’t have to look so scared though. I’m not asking –“

“Maybe you should,” he said seriously. “I want to be there for you.”

“I’m not rushing. Not at all. Take your time,” she smiled. “We’ll be here for you.”

“I know you will,” he said, remembering a time when Scully needed time to think about their relationship. Now he just needed time to try to come to terms with everything that had happened over the past six months. “But you said everything’s good? With the baby?”

“Everything’s great. Growing well, moving and kicking a lot.”

“Kicking?”

“Yeah.” Biting her lip, Scully suddenly took hold of his hand and guided it to her stomach. She moved it around until finally settling on a place, then pressed gently on her abdomen. “It was kicking a lot during dinner when you were talking.”

“Not even born yet and already signalling for me to shut up? This is definitely your child Scully.” He paused, holding his breath as he waited for any sign of movement from his baby.

“I think it’s asleep right now,” Scully said a moment later with a frown. She moved Mulder’s hand to the other side of her stomach and waited, but still there was nothing. “It’s definitely your child Mulder, it’s stubborn.”

“You’re funny,” he replied, making no effort to move his hand. “I didn’t expect your stomach to be so hard.”

“I do have a baby inside of me.”

“I know but…” he shrugged. “You keep saying “it.” Do you know the sex?”

“No,” Scully said, but her eyes betrayed her.

Mulder narrowed his own eyes at her. “You’re lying,” he said a moment later.
“I’m not.”

“You are! You’re making the same face Ashley does when she’s trying to hide something!”

“I don’t know –“

“You know Scully, am I right?”

After a moment, she nodded. “It’s a –“

“Hang on, no!” Mulder said, lifting his arms and covering his ears with his hands. “Don’t tell me!”

“You asked!”

“No,” he said, relaxing. “I asked if you knew. I don’t want to know. Not yet. It’ll be a surprise. Another surprise,” he added with a grin.

“Ok, I won’t spill,” Scully agreed. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Yeah…” He looked a little scared at the prospect.

“Just remember that I’m not asking anything of you.”

“Scully,” Mulder said, getting frustrated. “I get it, I get that you know what you’re doing, and I get that you’ve done this whole pregnancy thing before by yourself pretty damn successfully, but I’m here. We’ve already figured out I’m an asshole, but I’m an asshole who’s here and who wants to help. And I give a mean backrub.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling sweetly. “I may take you up on that sometime. This kid knows how to get into the most awkward of positions.”

“Anytime.”

Mulder caught Scully’s eye and before he even registered what he was doing, he was leaning in for a kiss. It had been so long; too damn long, since they’d done this, he thought to himself as his lips neared hers, and he was thankful when she didn’t make any move to pull away or slap him and tell him to leave. She wanted it too.

“Hey Mulder, the game’s about to start –“ Ashley suddenly called, her voice getting louder as she made her way towards the kitchen, unaware of the moment she was interrupting. By the time she entered the room, Mulder and Scully had jumped apart and were busying themselves with the dishes. Their reunion would have to wait for another day.
“Hey.”

Mulder looked surprised to see Scully open the door. She wasn’t who he was expecting. “Hi.”

“Come in.”

“Is she ready?”

Scully shook her head. “Come in.”

Mulder stepped into the apartment, closing the door behind him. He was there to take Ashley swimming. After his coffee date with the youngster just over a week ago, he’d offered to take her to the pool, to spend time with her and try and get their relationship back to where it had been before his abduction. Plus he figured Scully could do with some time to herself. She was almost eight months’ pregnant now and was tiring easily; juggling work, a pre-teen and her pregnancy taking its toll.

Mulder glanced around the living room for signs that Ashley was even remotely ready. Her swimming bag was nowhere in sight, so he looked at Scully for confirmation. “How long until she’s ready?”

Scully sighed and lowered herself onto the couch. Sensing he wasn’t going anywhere soon, Mulder joined her. “She’s not going Mulder. I’m sorry. I was going to call you but I thought Ashley might want to see you anyway.”

“Oh, that’s ok. Why not? Doesn’t she want to go swimming?”

“Oh she does, deep down.”

“What’s the problem?”

“She’s had a bad day.”

“Something happen at school?”

“What didn’t happen at school?” Scully remarked dryly. “She had a falling out with Megan.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah. Of course they’ll be friends again tomorrow I’m sure, but to Ashley it’s the end of the world.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Young girls can be fickle. I remember I was always having arguments with my friends over nothing at that age. One day one friend wouldn’t be speaking to you; the next day you’d make up but then fall out with someone else.”

“Girls,” Mulder uttered, shaking his head.

“Tell me about it. I had one unhappy daughter when I picked her up from school.”
“So she and Megan argued?”

“They did. And then Megan decided to call Ashley fat. As well as ugly and stupid, but it’s the “fat” comment that’s stuck with her.”

“Ash isn’t fat!”

“We both know that Mulder, but girls will be girls.”

“So that’s why she doesn’t want to go swimming?”

“Well, that and she started her period yesterday.”

“What?”

“I know,” Scully said, a sad smile on her face. “Our baby’s growing up.”

“Tell me about it. I swear it was only yesterday she was prancing around here as a five year old, wearing your heels and makeup.”

“I know. So she won’t be swimming today.”

“Is she in her bedroom?”

Scully nodded. “Feeling very sorry for herself.”

“I’ll go talk to her,” Mulder said, already getting to his feet. Scully smiled gratefully, pleased to see that her Mulder, who’d do anything to make Ashley happy, was finally back.

“Hey.” Mulder tapped twice on Ashley’s door and entered her room. The youngster was laid flat out on her stomach on her bed, flicking through a magazine as Destiny’s Child sounded out in the background. “What, no Backstreet Boys?” he asked, and Ashley looked up to wrinkle her nose at him in disgust.

“Please, they are so not cool anymore.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“But you used to love them?”

Ashley shrugged, before returning her attention to her magazine. “I used to think they were ok.”

Mulder bit back a smile, remembering the hours they’d spent in the mall while Ashley picked out posters of the band. “How are you doing?” He walked over to the bed and perched on the edge of the mattress. Ashley immediately sat up and shifted back so she was sitting against the wall, her legs crossed.

“Did mom tell you to come and talk to me?”

“No she didn’t. She said you’d had a bad day at school.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she replied solemnly.
“I’m sorry you and Megan had a disagreement.”

“S’ok.”

“No, it’s not. But you mustn’t let it get to you. I’m sure you’ll both make up soon.”

“I don’t care. Megan sucks.”

“She certainly does for what she said about you.” Ashley said nothing but lowered her head. Mulder made himself comfortable on the bed, scooting back so he sat next to her. “You are not stupid, you are certainly not ugly, and you are definitely not fat. Don’t let Megan, or anyone else put you down. You’re beautiful.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my dad,” she muttered, and Mulder felt his heart skip a beat. Ashley didn’t seem to notice her slip up.

“I’m not just saying that, I promise you. Megan is probably just jealous or something. Take it from me Ash, girls are weird.” He was relieved when she gave him a small smile. “I’ve known girls for a long time and I still don’t understand them, but from what I gather, and from what your mom has told me, this kinda thing happens a lot. Don’t take it personally though, and don’t let anyone make you feel like crap.” He smiled to himself as Ashley leaned in towards him, and he put his arm around her.

“Sorry we can’t go swimming.”

“It’s ok, we can go another time. Perhaps we can do something fun at the weekend?”

Ashley stiffened. “I’m supposed to be going to Megan’s house. I guess I won’t be going now.”

“Wait and see. If you don’t though, we’ll definitely do something fun.”

“And mom too?”

“Of course.” Like a family, Mulder thought to himself.

xxxxxxx

“Is she ok?” Mulder asked Scully as she walked back into the living room, rubbing circles on her protruding stomach. After dinner, Ashley had retreated to her bedroom to finish her homework – at least that was her excuse – and for once Scully had let her go, realizing her daughter needed some time to herself. She had however, just gone in to check her daughter was finally turning in for the night, and was relieved to see Ashley was already in bed. A few minutes later, and after a quick chat with her mom, she was fast asleep.

“She’s fine, she just has a few typical teenage issues with her self-esteem, plus she’s hormonal.” She sighed as she slowly but carefully lowered herself down onto the sofa, and Mulder bit back a smile as he saw her struggle. She was practically fit to bursting, not that he’d ever risk his life by saying it out loud. “I hoped she might avoid this stage.”

“Hmm?”

“Doubting herself; worrying about what other people think of her.”

“I think that’s just a rite of passage,” replied Mulder. “She’s a confident girl most of the time, maybe it’s just a bad week.”
“Maybe,” Scully answered, though she didn’t sound convinced. “I just hope she didn’t beat herself up like I did at that age.”

“You Scully?”

She didn’t answer him. “Sometimes I wish there was a manual for raising girls.”

“You should write one, we might be needing it in a few weeks.” He looked down at her stomach and smiled. “Or maybe we’ll need one for boys.”

“Maybe.”

He could hear the playfulness in her voice. “So…” he asked casually. “Will you be drawing on your experience in raising a daughter or…?”

“Or…?” She returned his grin. “I thought you didn’t want to know?”

“I changed my mind.”

“But you wanted to be surprised?”

“I was surprised, you’re pregnant. That’s a good enough surprise for me.”

“You’ve lasted this long Mulder, why now?”

“I don’t know, I just…I just want to know. Not that it matters to me either way, as long as the baby is healthy, because let’s face it, we didn’t think this would happen.”

“And now you want to know?”

“I do Scully. I’ve been thinking about this a lot, ever since you told me you knew the sex. This is the most important thing I’ve ever done in my life. I’ve missed out on so much already and I want to know if I should start shopping for pink or blue outfits. I mean you might not want to tell me –”

“No,” Scully reached out and took hold of his hand. She couldn’t believe that they were having this conversation, that Mulder was taking such an interest. She never thought it would happen – his indifference as he recovered in hospital had hurt her, and she’d assumed when she’d dropped him at his apartment and he’d told her he was happy for her, that she would be bringing up this child alone. Thankfully it appeared she was wrong. “I just didn’t know how you felt about this.”

With her free hand she gestured to her stomach. “I can’t imagine how hard things have been for you recently, waking up to find that everything had changed. I never even asked if you wanted this, I just assumed –”

“You assumed correctly. I mean, I’m scared shitless about this whole thing, which is why I don’t want to go into it blind. I’ve been reading up on it and what to expect from raising boys or girls –”

Scully cut him off with a laugh. “Mulder, I wish you’d put as much forethought into your expense reports.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I just want to be the best dad that I can be.”

“You will be,” she replied, squeezing his hand. “You’re already a great dad to Ashley, and I know you will be again this time with Junior.”

“So is that baby boy junior, or baby girl junior?”
“It’s a boy,” Scully whispered after a long pause, tears pricking her eyes.

“A boy?”

She nodded, her eyes searching his. “Are you disappointed?”

“Disappointed?” He was anything but. Scully was pregnant with his child; his son – she was happy and glowing and beautiful and he loved her.

“I know last time you spoke about a girl.”

He though back to the morning after they discovered their last round of IVF had failed, when he told Scully how he imagined a little girl just like Ashley. “I know I did, but Scully…as long as this baby is healthy, with your nose and hopefully not mine and maybe your eyes, I didn’t mind if it was a boy or girl.”

“So a boy’s ok?” Scully asked cautiously.

“It’s more than ok.” He grinned before hesitating, which gave his partner cause for concern.

“You look worried.”

There was a moment of silence before he replied. “I’m not. I just…a boy…what if he hates me Scully?”

“Mulder, he’ll go through a stage of hating us both.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, but I’m just saying, I’m worried too.”

“What if I drop him?”

She chuckled. “Every parent worries about dropping their child. You won’t.”

“What if I get mad and hit him when he’s older?”

“You won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Mulder, I know you, I know you would never hit our child. I trust you. Besides, I wouldn’t let you.”

“I didn’t think my father would but….” He didn’t need to finish his sentence.

“You are not your father Mulder. You’re a better man than he could have ever hoped to be. Just trust yourself. Yes there will probably come a day when the two of you argue, just like when Ashley and I do, but you won’t be that person.” She took his hand and placed it on her stomach, trying to reassure him. “Here, he’s really active tonight.” She pressed it hard against her. “I think he’s trying to tell you to stop worrying too.”

Mulder waited patiently, and was rewarded moments later when he felt a swift kick against the palm of his hand. Instantly his face lit up, and Scully felt her eyes well with tears as she saw his look of amazement. She’d been waiting – and hoping for this moment ever since she found out she was pregnant. “Wow,” he said, clearly overwhelmed.
“Yeah.”

“That’s…that’s um…pretty cool.” Scully smiled. “Does it hurt?”

“It can be uncomfortable at times, but it’s reassuring too,” she replied, her hand still covering Mulder’s. “When he’s moving and kicking, I know he’s ok.”

“He’s really active right now,” Mulder commented, shifting his hand ever so slightly to follow the baby’s movements.

“He’s just saying hi to his daddy.”

“Daddy,” Mulder whispered to himself. “I never thought I’d hear that.”

“You’d better get used to it. Pretty soon you’ll be hearing it all the time. You know,” she began, remembering to herself a time just a few months ago, when she heard Ashley finally call him that. Unfortunately Mulder wasn’t there to hear it. “Ashley called you daddy once.”

“You told me,” he said. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to hear it.”

“I’m sure she’ll say it again one day.”

“Daddy though?”

“Oh she will when she wants something.”

Mulder grinned. Scully had a point. “This is pretty awesome,” he said, nodding towards her stomach.

“It is,” she agreed with a smile. “A surprise, but awesome all the same.”

“When did you find out?”

“I collapsed and was taken to hospital the day you went to Oregon.” She saw Mulder’s smile fade. “The Gunmen tried calling you but –”

“It was too late.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding sadly.

“I’m sorry Scully, if I’d have known –”

“You’re here now,” she said, placing her finger on his lips to silence him. “We can keep going over this again and again but it won’t change anything. You’re here now, and that’s the most important part.”

Nodding, Mulder then surprised himself by pressing his lips to Scully’s finger. He looked her straight in the eye, waiting for her to pull back, but it didn’t happen. Slowly she lowered her hand, before edging closer, leaning in towards him to kiss him. It had been too long, and this time there wasn’t going to be an interruption – Ashley was asleep, and if the phone even threatened to ring, Mulder was likely to shoot at it. Finally their lips touched, and at that moment it felt to Mulder as though no time had passed at all – that it wasn’t more than six months ago since they’d done this; that he hadn’t been abducted and tortured and died and gone to hell and back…

As Scully pulled away, Mulder reached down to lift her shirt. Her hand immediately came out to stop him. “Mulder –”
“I just want to see you,” he said.

“I’ve… I’m not the same Mulder. I’m pregnant.”

He grinned. “So I can see.”

“I’m unsightly.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“I’m huge.”

“You’re still tiny.”

“I have an outie.”

“Let me see.”

After a moment, Scully lowered her hand, and allowed Mulder to lift her shirt to reveal her bump.

“Wow.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Wow, as in, “I’ve never seen a person that huge before” or –“

“You’re pregnant Scully,” he said, resting his hand once again on the bump. As if saying hello, Mulder Junior kicked, and Mulder watched in awe as Scully’s stomach moved. “Whoa.” His eyes met Scully’s. “That’s awesome. I mean it’s weird, but it’s awesome.”

“You’re calling me weird?”

She was joking and he knew it. “Of course I’m not. You look great.” As though to reassure her, Mulder moved in for another kiss. When finally they broke for air, both partners were sporting equally shy smiles. Scully chewed her lip nervously, which made Mulder just want to kiss her again. He moved in but was surprised when she held out a hand to stop him in his tracks. His disappointment didn’t last however. “Stay,” she whispered, before nibbling his lower lip.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She looked at him hesitantly. “If you’re sure. I don’t want to rush you –“

“No! No you’re not rushing me but I… I don’t want to hurt you, or the baby.”

“You’re not going to hurt us.” Pulling away, Scully slowly got to her feet, before holding a hand out to him. “I’d like you to stay and…” she hesitated, and Mulder was quick to interrupt.

“And…?”

“Maybe demonstrate how good you are at those backrubs.”

As Mulder stood, he grinned. “I see, you don’t really want me; you just want a masseuse.”

“Something like that.”

“C’mon G Woman,” he said taking hold of Scully’s hand and leading her to the bedroom. “I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

xxxxxxxxx
“Scully?”

“Mmmm?”

“I think I might have just got you pregnant.”

Scully snorted, and carefully rolled over to face her partner. “It’s a bit late for that.”

“You ok?”

“I’m fine.”

He frowned. “Fine? Did I hurt –“

“I’m good Mulder, relax,” she said, her eyelids drooping.

He tried to do as she said, and let his hand rest on her stomach as he closed his eyes, the movement of the baby soothing him. “He’s not ready to sleep just yet.”

“He’s responding to my heart rate.”

“Because I rocked your world?”

“Something like that,” she said sarcastically.

“I can’t believe that in a few weeks he’ll be here.”

“Hmm.”

“What about a crib and –“

“It’s on order ready to be delivered.”

“Ok, well I can help put it together.”

“Thank you. Mulder?” she asked a moment later.

“Yeah?”

“Would you be my birthing partner?”

He was quiet for so long that Scully wondered whether he’d actually fallen asleep. “Ok.”

“Are you sure?”

Opening his eyes, Mulder studied his partner. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, else I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Well I’m sure too.”

“It won’t be pretty.”

“I know that. I can hold your hand and make whale noises –“

“Don’t you dare.” She smiled when she realized he was joking. “Are you sure?”
He nodded against the pillow. “Of course, I want to be there for you.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.” Mulder leaned in and kissed Scully, sensing she was close to falling asleep. “I guess we’re having a baby then.”

Scully chuckled. “I guess so.”

Mulder watched as his partner closed her eyes and quickly drifted off to sleep. Sitting up, he flicked out the light, before laying back down to face Scully.
“Good morning Sunshine,” Mulder greeted Ashley as she padded out into the kitchen, trying – and failing – to stifle a yawn. Her hair was tousled and her eyes heavy, and Mulder knew she hadn’t been awake for long.

“Morning.” She headed over to him and stood next to him at the counter. Moments later she turned and attempted to lift herself up onto the counter, failing miserably. Mulder chuckled, shaking his head, and briefly turned his attention away from the eggs he was making to give her a hand and help her up. “Thank you,” she said.

“You're welcome. How are you feeling today?”

“Ok.”

“Better?”

“Better.” Ashley blinked. “You slept over?”

“I did.” Mulder bit back a grin.

Ashley smiled. “So does that mean you and mom are good?”

He nodded at her. “We’re good. But…” he said, already aware she was getting her hopes up. “It’s still early days. I realize I still have to make it up to you and your mom.”

“Breakfast is a good start.”

Mulder chuckled, then watched as Ashley leaned over and turned up the radio. The familiar sound of Elvis filled the kitchen. “Let’s rock,” he began singing, as Ashley giggled. “Everybody let’s rock.”

“Not Elvis again,” a sleepy-looking Scully commented as she walked out into the kitchen.

“He is the King Scully,” Mulder said, pausing to kiss his partner before returning his attention to breakfast.

“He's the best mom.”

“When did you turn my daughter into such a fan Mulder?”

“It was a loooong time ago,” he commented.

“I remember that day,” said Ashley. “I stayed at your apartment for the weekend.”

“You did? Where was I?” Scully asked.

There was an awkward pause. “It was umm…when you were missing,” Mulder replied. “Ash asked to spend the weekend at my place.”

“Right.” They never really spoke about what happened while Scully was missing, but she was glad her mom and daughter had Mulder to help them through the difficult time. “Dare I ask what you guys got up to?”
“Well, I remember this little troublemaker woke me up requesting peanut butter –“

“Those were the days…” Ashley remarked.

“And then she almost threw a tantrum when I mentioned Elvis and she didn’t know who he was.”

“I did not!” Ashley exclaimed, shaking her head at Scully, who grinned.

“She did.”

“I remember dancing to Elvis with you,” the youngster admitted. “And then I kept asking Grandma to buy me an Elvis CD.”

“So that’s where you got the CD.”

Ashley sobered. “I kept listening to it while you were gone,” she told Mulder. “It reminded me of you, but then when you…when we found you…it was too hard.”

“I’m sorry,” he said and, after serving up the eggs onto three plates, he moved to hug the youngster, smiling to himself when she wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug.

“S’ok.”

“You wanna go set the table while I finish breakfast?”

Nodding, Ashley pulled away and hopped off the counter, before making her way out of the kitchen.

“She seems happier this morning,” Scully remarked.

“I’m glad. I don’t like seeing her upset. She’s had too much of that lately,” said Mulder, well aware he was responsible for a lot of that.

“If it’s any consolation, this is the happiest I’ve seen her in quite a few months. She’s so pleased to have you back. We both are,” she added, walking into his arms and accepting a kiss. “Morning.”

“Good morning.” Mulder placed his hand on Scully’s abdomen. “Is he awake?”

Scully grimaced. “Not yet, but he seems to be sitting in a really awkward position, so I’m hoping he’ll be more active later and move.”

“Speaking of later, I’ll drop Ash off at school this morning.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Then I need to head back to my apartment for a little while.”

“Oh?”

It had come to him earlier that morning, as he lay awake with Scully in his arms. He’d found it when he was clearing out his mom’s house shortly after her death, and for some reason he’d kept it. Maybe he’d known all along that they’d get their miracle one day.

“I’ll see you later though?”

“Of course.” Scully reached over and took hold of two of the plates. “I’d best take this into Ash.”
"Of course. She's hormonal and upset, she needs food."

Scully grinned. "I'm glad we have you well trained."

"I can't believe how grown up she is Scully," Mulder remarked as he picked up the remaining plate. "It doesn't seem five minutes ago that Mini Scully sat on my kitchen counter, swiping peanut butter out of the jar and crying because she didn't know Elvis. I mean she's awesome now, but I miss those days."

"Tell me about it," Scully agreed. "It's ok though. Pretty soon there'll be another little Elvis fan on the scene, I'm sure."

Mulder grinned. "I sure hope so."

Mulder knocked on the door and waited patiently for his partner to answer. He knew now that she was considerably pregnant that it took her a while longer to get to the door, and he wasn’t about to rush her – now she was considerably pregnant, she was also considerably hormonal, and he’d already been on the receiving end of one of her rants. He wasn’t about to annoy her again anytime soon. Just as he knocked once more, the door opened to reveal his pregnant, clad in midnight blue maternity pajamas and her bathrobe. He was amused to notice that she seemed surprised to see him, despite the fact he’d told her earlier that morning that he’d be back. "Mulder?"

“What?”

“I was just about to jump in the shower but I was waiting for the pizza man."

“You got something going on with the pizza man I should know about?” he joked, but Scully didn’t seem to get it.

“The pizza man?” she asked, clearly confused.

“Well correct me if I’m wrong, but you just said you were waiting for the pizza man to jump in the shower."

“No what I mean was the pizza man’s usually late and so…” she trailed off, smiling as she realized she was digging herself into a hole, and that Mulder was joking. “You want to come in?”

“Thank you.”

“I feel like I’m stuck in an episode of Mad About You,” Scully said, as she headed off towards the bathroom, leaving Mulder to close the door behind him. Walking into the living room, he removed a package from behind his back and quickly hid it beneath a cushion on the sofa. “Well uh yeah… but small technicality. Mad about You was about a married couple, and we just work together.”

What a joke, he thought to himself. They worked together, slept together, co-parented a pre-teen together, and were about to have a baby together.

“Yeah, well you know what I’m talking about.”

“I do, I do. What, what I’m trying to say is that uh…we have no good reliable information on this man.” He stood up straight as Scully wandered back into the living room. “I mean, what I am saying is the pizza man is not above suspicion,” he said, pointing at her belly.

“Ah, I see,” she humored him. As she caught his eye, Mulder glanced over to the couch. Following
his gaze, Scully caught sight of the present he’d attempted to hide on the couch. “Is that for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice package.”

He resisted the urge to fire back an innuendo. It was too easy. “Thank you.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Oh uh…I was going through some stuff after my mother died and um, it’s just an old family keepsake and I wanted you to have it”

“Well, I’m touched.”

Before Scully could get started on tearing open the paper, like Mulder knew she was desperate to do, there was a knock at the door. “Little Caesar I presume?” he said, mock-accusingly, and Scully smiled sheepishly. Deep down Mulder was bemused at her cravings – she couldn’t even go a whole day without pizza. It was definitely his son she was carrying. He strode over to the door and opened it. Before him stood a tall, scrawny pizza guy – or rather, pizza boy. Mulder sized him up, before turning round to eye his partner intently. She sighed.

“Hi, just uh…give it to the man with the funny look on his face.”

The pizza guy wasn’t impressed. “Yeah, it’s $29.08.”

Mulder’s eyebrows rose as he pulled out his wallet, while Scully took a seat. “$29.08? What’d she get on it, a tank of gas?” Before the pizza guy could reply, Mulder heard his partner’s sudden intake of pain. He turned to find her doubled over, her hand on her stomach. “Scully?” She didn’t respond; the pain too much for her to speak. “Scully?” Within seconds he was by her side, holding her hand and trying not to grimace as she squeezed him tightly. Something was wrong. “Call 911,” he ordered the delivery man, who thankfully did as he said and ran towards the phone. Mulder could barely make out the guy’s voice demanding an ambulance; he was too busy focusing on Scully; trying to find out what was wrong with her. “It’s ok,” he said reassuringly. “You’re going to be ok.”

He hoped he was right.

xxxxxxxxxxx

It certainly wasn’t the afternoon Mulder intended. His initial idea that morning had been to go back to Scully’s, grab some lunch with her, maybe chill out on the couch or sneak a nap with her until it was time to collect Ashley from school. He definitely hadn’t anticipated his partner being rushed to hospital, in an unbearable amount of pain. She wasn’t in labor, she’d managed to tell the paramedics, but something was wrong with the baby. Mulder couldn’t help but fear the worst, and also wonder if he was somewhat responsible – after all, he’d slept with Scully the night before. Yes sex was allowed during pregnancy, but he shouldn’t have pushed her – he should have waited.

“That Scully?” The nurse at Washington Medical Center greeted them as the paramedics rushed Scully into the hospital. “Dana? She’s got what? Abdominal pains?”

“Her doctor is Dr. Speake,” Mulder said, thankful that he’d paid attention to his partner when she’d told him about her appointments.

“Oh, he’s been called.”
“She,” Mulder corrected, but the nurse paid no attention.

“Who are you? The husband?”

“No –” He was about to go on and explain that he was Scully’s partner, but she cut him off abruptly.

“Then you wait outside,” she ordered, and lead the medical team through a set of double doors; Scully disappearing from Mulder’s sight. As he stood alone in the corridor, he suddenly recognized Agent Doggett heading this way.

“Agent Mulder, what happened?”

“How’d you find out?” he demanded, his frustration getting the better of him. Doggett was the last person Mulder wanted to see at that moment.

“I was dropping something off. The landlord told me.”

“Are you the husband?” The nurse approached and quizzed Doggett. Mulder said nothing, instead biting his tongue. He knew if he spoke, he’d tell the man where to go. He turned up like a bad penny. Ashley seemed to like him and even Scully tolerated him, but Mulder had no time for him. He knew he should have been grateful that Doggett was there for his family during his absence, but he was jealous that he wasn’t around himself.

“No,” said Doggett, looking at Mulder, as though expecting him to speak up. Before he could say anything however, his cell phone rang. “Excuse me,” he said stepping away from the two of them, albeit briefly. Scully was in pain, his child was at risk, and nothing was going to take him away from them until he knew they were both going to be ok.

xxxxxxxxxx

“Hey Mulder.”

Coming out of school, Ashley caught sight of him and ran over, grinning widely. Her bad mood from the previous day was now a thing of the past.

“Hey. Good day?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “Megan apologized.”

Women, he thought to himself. “That’s great. I hope you didn’t let her off too easily though?”

“I didn’t.”

“So you’re all good?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good.” Taking Ashley’s bag, Mulder led Ashley to the car, letting her into the vehicle before walking round and getting into the driver’s side. Before he started the car though, he shifted in his seat to face the youngster. “Ash, I’ve got something to tell you, but before I do, I need you not to panic.”

That didn’t quite come out the way he planned, and he could see Ashley’s mind already starting to fear the worst. “What’s happened? Where’s mom? Is she ok?”
“She’s ok,” he reassured her. At least that’s what the nurse told him before he left the hospital. She was stable. “She had some abdominal pains and so she was taken to hospital.”

“Hospital? Is the baby coming?”

“No, she’s not in labor.”

Ashley looked worried. “Is the baby ok?”

Mulder hesitated. All he’d been able to establish was that Scully and the baby were undergoing tests. He wasn’t able to find out anything else, because he wasn’t her husband. Apparently partners in every other respect wasn’t enough. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “But I hope so. They’re running tests on your mom as we speak. I don’t want you to worry, ok? She’s going to be fine.” He hoped so anyway. Even when she was dying from cancer, Scully always insisted she was fine, and she seemed to soak up the pain. Today though she didn’t, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her in such a bad way. He tried not to think about that as he reassured Ashley.

“Can we visit her?”

He nodded. “I’ll take us to the hospital now. Be warned though, you might not be allowed in to see your mom. I wasn’t. The head nurse is a bitch.”

“You distract her and I’ll sneak in?”

Mulder gave her a small smile before starting the car. “You got it.”

“Mom?” Ashley entered the hospital room cautiously, her eyes never leaving her mother in the bed.

Scully’s eyes opened and she blinked sleepily, a smile forming on her face as she registered her visitor. “Hey baby.”

Ashley approached the bed, then took hold of her mom’s hand. She eyed her nervously. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine sweetheart,” her mom replied cautiously, her other hand moving to her stomach. “They’re keeping me in for observation, but I’m going to be fine.”

“And the baby?”

“He’s kicking well. I think he’s wondering what’s going on.” Scully glanced towards the door as a nurse entered. “Where’s Mulder?”

“He’s waiting outside,” answered Ashley. “They won’t let him in.”

“What?” Scully looked over at the nurse as she began checking her chart. “Why not?”

“He said he wasn’t your husband,” the nurse replied.

“He’s not, but he’s my partner.” Agent Scully – the Scully who wouldn’t be pushed around – came out to play. “And he’s the baby’s father. Can you send him in please?”

With a sting in her tail, the nurse checked Scully’s blood pressure before heading back outside.
“Mulder said she was a bitch,” Ashley remarked quietly.

Scully chuckled, then instantly sobered. “Language.”

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not, but don’t do it again. At least not so I can hear it –“

She was interrupted by Mulder entering the room, and instantly her face lit up. She could tell Mulder looked relieved to see she was conscious.

“Hey,” you’re awake.”

“Yeah.”

Closing the door behind him, Mulder walked over to the bed, coming to a stop next to Ashley.

“What did the doctor say?”

“That I had a partial abruption. Which means that my placenta started to tear away from the uterine wall,” she explained for Ashley’s benefit. “They’re going to need to monitor me for a while.”

“But you’re going to be fine?” Mulder asked.

“Yeah.”

Letting out the breath he was holding, Mulder reached out and rested his hand on Scully’s abdomen for reassurance. As though sensing his daddy was nearby, Baby Mulder kicked out, and both parents shared a smile. Mulder wasn’t sure he’d ever tire of feeling the baby move, and likewise, Scully didn’t think she’d ever tire of seeing Mulder’s expression of wonder. She’d dreamt of it a lot in the months that Mulder was missing and then of course, when he was dead, and now it was finally happening.

“I’m glad,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Scully’s eyes narrowed. “For what?”

“It’s my fault.”

“What is?”

“This –“

“Hey mom,” Ashley interrupted, stepping forward, breaking the contact between Mulder and Scully. Mulder couldn’t help but wonder if she’d done it on purpose. Scully had told him that though Ashley seemed excited by the prospect of her new baby brother, she also seemed a little envious – after all, she’d been the center of everyone’s attention up until now. “I got full marks on my Physics test today.”

“You did? Well done sweetheart.”

“And Megan and I made up, so I can still go to her sleepover this weekend.”

“That’s great.” Scully returned her attention to Mulder. “What have you been up to?”

“I’ve actually been chatting with Agent Doggett and this umm female Agent from New Orleans?”
“Agent Reyes?”

“Yeah.”

“I like her.”

Mulder chuckled. “You’re nothing at all alike.”

“Well, then neither are you and I,” Scully replied, and Mulder had to admit that she had a point. They were very different, but they were good together.

Mulder entered the living room, armed with two plates, cutlery and his gift for Scully. Ashley was over at her friend Holly’s house, giving Scully the opportunity to settle in back home after finally being released from hospital, with strict instructions to take it easy. After taking Scully back to her apartment and dropping Ashley off at her friend’s house, Mulder stopped by a pizza place to pick up dinner, hoping to reward Scully with the pizza she’d missed out on when she was rushed to hospital.

As he headed towards the sofa, Mulder placed the gift box on the table behind, and then joined his partner on the couch.

“Mulder,” she said. “You never fail to surprise me. I just wish I felt like eating it now.”

“That’s cool. We can just wait for the cheese to congeal and eat it later.”

He saw that by the look on Scully’s face, she didn’t share his enthusiasm. “You miss your regular pizza man, don’t you?”

Scully pouted. “Yes. That’s ok though, he’s coming by later.” She laughed when she saw Mulder’s wounded expression, and moments later he shared her smile. He could take the pizza guy any day. Reaching behind him, he grabbed the package and handed it to his partner. “I bet you forgot about that, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t actually. I thought about it a lot while I was lying in my hospital bed, wondering what on earth you could have given me.”

Mulder watched as she tore open the packaging. “And?”

He saw her face light up. “Oh my god. Oh Mulder,” she said, removing the rag doll from the box. “Is it what you imagined?”

“Not even close,” Scully replied, laughing.

“And umm…I found something for Ash too,” he said, removing a little parcel from his pocket. “It was my mom’s necklace.”

“Mulder...You don’t have to do that.”

“I know,” he replied, seriously. “If Samantha was alive it would have gone to her but...” His partner gave him a sympathetic smile. “…So it should go to my first born. I want Ash to have it,” he said, his words bring tears to Scully’s eyes. “I’m sure if she doesn’t like it I can get it remodelled or something.”
“I’m sure she’ll love it,” Scully reassured him, taking hold of his hand. “You know she loves anythig you get her.”

Nodding, Mulder glanced over at the doll. “Oh my…” Mulder commented. “That’s the wrong doll actually.”

Scully lifted the doll as though to hit him with it, and they both laughed. “But then that’s the other gift that you gave me Mulder,” she said. Mulder gave her a questioning look. “Courage, to believe. And I hope that’s a gift I can pass on.”

Mulder grinned as he looked down at her stomach. “As long as he gets your nose, I’m good.”

She chuckled. “Well, from the way I’m measuring right now, he’s definitely going to take after you in the height department.”

“Thank god,” he joked. “I hope he’s just like Ash,” he added a few moments later.

Scully nodded in agreement. “Oh I think that’s entirely possible. You’ve been so influential in her life. She takes after you in so many ways.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“She’s stubborn, argumentative, likes to break the rules, and she loves Elvis. She’s basically you Mulder.”

He grinned smugly. “I’m especially proud of Elvis actually.” He watched as Scully placed the doll back in the box, and then took it from her, placing it back on the table. He saw her eye the pizza. “You changing your mind about that?”

After a moment, Scully nodded, albeit reluctantly. “Junior is getting hungry. I guess a slice won’t hurt.”

Leaning forward, Mulder cut a slice of pizza and transferred it to a plate before passing it back to her. “You feeling ok?” he asked.

“We’re good,” she said, cutting into the pizza. “So glad to be home.” She took a small bite. “Mulder?” she asked, as he placed two slices of pizza onto his own plate, forgoing the cutlery. “Yesterday in the hospital, you said you were sorry. What were you apologizing for?”

“I know it was my fault, for you ending up in hospital.”

“Your fault?” Scully asked, clearly bemused. “How do you figure that one out?”

“Well, I mean the night before, we…” he trailed off, but Scully suddenly realized just why he was blaming himself.

“Mulder,” she said with a grin. “I think I can safely say that you were not responsible for this. I know you, “rocked my world,” as you called it, but a lot of things can cause this – my age for one. This wasn’t your fault.” She shook her head. “I see you still haven’t figured out how to stop blaming yourself for everything that happens to me.”

“I just don’t want to hurt you Scully. Not anymore,” he added, well aware of all the hurt and pain he’d caused her, particularly in recent months.

“I know, and you won’t. Are you going to be ok for the birth?” she asked. “Because I’m going to be
in pain, and I’m probably going to want to kill you. I don’t want you taking it personally.”

“Ha-ha,” Mulder deadpanned. “You know what I mean.”

“I know. But you have to stop blaming yourself. You’re not responsible for everything that happens to me. You don’t repeatedly hurt me, or Ashley, and you know what? We’ve both lived without you, and we didn’t like it, so whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with us.” She reached out and took hold of his hand, placing it on her belly. Moments later he felt the baby elbow him. “See, he agrees. He’s telling you to shut up and get him some more pizza.”

“My pizza’s good enough for you now?”

“I guess it’ll have to do,” Scully replied, as Mulder gave her another slice and then sat back to enjoy the rest of their evening together.
Chapter 120

Scully opened the door and let Mulder inside, relieved that for once, he was actually early. Their first Lamaze class was that evening, and Scully didn’t want them to be late. Thankfully, Mulder understood its importance.

“Hey,” he said, stepping into her apartment. “Ready to roll?”

“Yeah, I’ll just grab my keys.”

“Hey, don’t forget this,” he said, spotting a pillow on the couch. Mulder picked it up and tucked it up his sweater, imitating a pregnant lady. “Relax the back, breath in…breath out.”

Scully didn’t share his smile. She still felt odd about the events of earlier that day. Her check-up with her doctor had resulted in her being placed on maternity leave early – her slightly elevated blood pressure and recent partial abruption a cause for concern. “How do you know all these things Mulder?” she asked. Deep down she was impressed – and relieved – that he was taking an interest.

“I’m unemployed. I have a lot of time on my hands. Oprah,” he added. “I watch a lot of Oprah.”

“Thank you for doing this with me.”

“You don’t have to thank me Scully. This is important. It’s our baby.” He sensed she had something else on her mind. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know,” Scully sighed. “I uh…maybe it’s just hormones or I just…it’s just…I’m just feeling so strange about all this.”

“This, having a baby this?” he asked, concerned.

“No, no,” she rushed to reassure him. “I want this. It’s just leaving work I guess. I mean, I walked out of that office today feeling like a deserter.”

“You paid your dues there Scully. More than paid them,” Mulder said, thinking about everything his partner had endured over the years. “You’re concerned about Agent Doggett?”

“You know, the entire time I was down there, I had someone to watch my back.”

“I’m betting that Agent Doggett can take care of himself. He’s a big boy. You gotta worry about the little boy. And girl.”

Finally she smiled. “Speaking of the not-so-little girl, my mom’s going to give her dinner, so we don’t have to worry about rushing back after.”

“Great, I’ll buy you dinner?”

“That depends on whether or not you’ve lost your appetite during class.” Mulder said nothing, but his expression gave him away. “If that’s your panic face now Mulder, just wait until I’m in labor.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said unconvincingly.

Famous last words.

Xxxxxxxxx
Mulder smiled politely as a room full of couples stared over at him and Scully as she spoke. He felt as though he was back at school, making introductions on his first day.

“I’m Dana,” he heard his partner say. “And this is my partner, Mulder.” For one horrible second he thought she was going to call him Fox. He squeezed her hips gently in silent thanks. “I’m due to give birth in just under four weeks. It’s our second child – we already have a daughter, but she’s twelve, so obviously we’re a little rusty with everything.” As Scully went on to explain more about the birth she hoped for, Mulder couldn’t help but focus on her words. “Our second child,” she’d told them, and in many ways it was true. As far as he was concerned, he was Ashley’s dad, but he couldn’t help but wish it was really the case. He wished he’d have been there to see her as a baby. Scully had told him all about it over the years, but it wasn’t the same. He could picture her as a baby, learning her way in the world, starting to crawl and eventually walk and talk. He had visions of her getting older, revealing her mom’s secrets to anyone within earshot, scaling the kitchen counter to help herself to cookies, drawing all over the walls, and then insisting with her bright blue eyes that it wasn’t her. He hated the fact he’d missed out on all that, but he knew he was lucky to still have her in his life. One day soon, he’d ask about adopting her again; hoping that once again Ashley and Scully trusted him enough to agree. In the meantime, he realized that though he may not have been there for Ashley as a baby, in just a few weeks’ time her brother was going to enter the world. This time, Mulder was determined to be there every step of the way.

xxxxxxxxx

“What are you ordering?”

Mulder glanced up from the menu he hadn’t been reading, and gave his partner a disgusted look.

“Are you serious?”

“What?”

“You really think I feel like eating after watching that?”

Scully bit back a smile. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“No, it was worse.”

“All of the things you’ve seen…all of the mutilated corpses and blood and guts, and yet a little childbirth is your downfall?” When the Lamaze instructor told the group they’d be watching a video of a baby being born, Scully had felt Mulder tense behind her, but she’d presumed he’d be ok. After all, she thought he was used to a little blood. Apparently not. As the video progressed, she’d felt his grip on her tighten, and by the end, when she’d turned to look at him, he was sporting a deathly pale complexion along with a look of horror.

“It’s just…” he struggled to find the words. He was having a hard time thinking about anything but that damn video, and the thought of Scully having to go through all of it in just a few weeks. Hell, he was going to have to be in the room with her and watch it all again. “I never realized it was so intense.”

Scully raised her eyebrows. “Intense? What did you think was going to happen? The stork -?”

“Of course not –“

“It’s not the most pleasant of experiences,” Scully agreed. “It’s like pushing a bowling ball out of your ass.” She couldn’t help but smile as she saw Mulder pale. “Buuut, at the end of it, you get a beautiful baby. And you forget that I’ve already given birth once. I’m crossing my fingers that this
time it’ll be a little easier.”

“God Scully,” said Mulder, shaking his head. “How the hell did you do it on your own?”

“Well I didn’t have much choice. Once I found out I was pregnant, I knew there was only one way she was coming out, besides a C-Section. But it’s true what they say, once the baby is in your arms, you do forget all the pain – at least for a while. Ashley was worth it. As much as she likes to push my buttons now, I don’t regret any of it.” Her hands moved to her abdomen. “And I honestly never thought this baby would happen.” Even Mulder managed a smile. “To me, he’s a miracle. I don’t care how much it hurts; I’ll just be glad to hold him in my arms. Plus I hear that hospitals have good drugs nowadays.”

Mulder chuckled. “I’ll be fighting you for them.”

“You know, I’m nervous too.”

“Really? You’re a pro Scully.”

“It’s been over twelve years since Ashley was born, and I can’t remember half of what I did then. There’s not just the worry of the birth either, I worry about when he’s here. What if I’m not a good mom? What if he stops breathing in the night? What if I have him in bed with me and I suffocate him? What if he hates me?”

“You’re a great mom Scully. You’re amazing with Ash and you’re going to be just as awesome this time round. You don’t have to worry.”

“And neither do you. We’ll get through it. We’re already co-parenting a teenage girl. How much harder can it be?”

“Ah but this time the kid has got Mulder DNA. Basically Scully, there’s no hope,” he grinned.

“Great.”

“Were you scared last time?”

“Petrified,” she admitted. “My pregnancy passed so quickly that I didn’t really have a chance to worry about it until it was too late. Missy was a great help too.”

“She was there for the birth?”

Scully nodded. “I honestly thought Jack might be, but obviously it didn’t happen, so she stepped in. She was great, so calm and composed. She was the first person besides the midwife to hold Ashley. She always said that’s why they were so close.” She sighed. “I wish she was here now.”

Mulder nodded in understanding. “I know. If it’s any consolation, you’ve got me.”

“Mulder.” Scully removed one hand from her belly and placed in on top of his arm. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to do this.”

“No,” he interrupted. “I do.”

“Don’t feel you have to. I’m sure my mom would –“

“Scully, I want to be there for you.” Even if he had been having second thoughts, her telling him that she’d hoped Jack would be there for Ashley’s birth – even though right from the outset he’d pretty much ignored her pregnancy – would have convinced him. “I’m going to be there for you,”
he corrected himself. “I just hate the thought of you in pain.”

“It’ll be worth it,” she said, and he nodded.

“Just do me a favor.”

“What?”

“If at any point I pass out, don’t tell the kid when he’s older. And don’t tell Ash either; she’ll never let me live this down.”

“Deal,” Scully replied with a smile.

“Can I take your orders folks?” As the waitress approached them, they pulled back, and Mulder picked up the menu and briefly scanned it. “Can I get the steak?”

“I thought you said you weren’t hungry?” Scully said in disbelief.

“I wasn’t, but I figure I have to keep my strength up for the birth. I’ve got a tough time ahead of me,” he added, trying – and failing – to dodge Scully as she delivered a smack to his arm.
“Dana? How are you feeling?”

Scully looked up to see her sister walk into the room. She grimaced as she felt another contraction hit. All thoughts of Missy were at the back of her mind as she breathed her way through the pain. When at last it was finally over – at least for now – she registered that her sister was now by her side, holding her hand.

“What are you doing here?” she said weakly.

“I thought I’d come and give mom a break. You guys have been at this for hours.” One look at her sister’s face, and Missy knew she’d said the wrong thing. “Well you have,” she added. “You’re doing so well Dana.”

“I’m not getting anywhere,” she replied, clearly frustrated. “This damn baby isn’t going anywhere.” Scully had been in labor a little over 14 hours, and there was still no sign of her baby. Her waters had broken earlier that afternoon, but it appeared that Baby Scully was going to be as stubborn as his or her father. “Have you heard from Jack?”

After a moment, Missy shook her head. “I called and left another message, but I’ve heard nothing.”

“Right.” Before she could stop herself, Scully felt tears clouding her eyes.

“Oh Dana –“

“It’s ok,” she sniffed, shaking her head. “I just thought…I thought he might change his mind. He seemed interested the last time I spoke to him.”

“Jack is only interested in himself,” said Melissa, in a bit to cheer her sister up. Instead it did the complete opposite, and Scully’s tears spilled over.

“What am I going to tell the baby Missy? How can I tell it that their daddy doesn’t give a crap about them?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Missy took hold of Scully’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “Now I may not be this baby’s dad, but I’m her aunt –“

“Or his.”

“It’s going to be a girl,” she said with a smile. “I know it. Anyway,” she continued. “I’m here for you.”

“Will you stay?” Scully pleaded, feeling the makings of another contraction coming on. “For the birth?”

“Of course,” answered Melissa. She wasn’t about to leave her sister, not when Jack had already let her down. Scully had always said he didn’t want children, but like her sister, Missy thought he might come around. Apparently not. “I’ll stay for as long as you need me.”

Scully said nothing, focusing on the pain that was building. She squeezed her sister’s hand and concentrated on her breathing.
“She’s so beautiful Dana.” Missy sat by her sister’s bedside, not taking her eyes off of the small pink bundle in Scully’s arms. The baby was less than an hour old, and both Scully and Missy were completely and utterly in love with her. Melissa was at the birth, taking Maggie and Jack’s spots as Scully’s birthing partner, and she’d been there the whole time – holding her sister’s hand as she pushed, coaching her through her contractions, and finally taking the baby from the midwife and passing her over to her tearful yet overjoyed mom.

“I know.” Scully’s earlier disappointment of Jack’s no-show was now firmly behind her. Now she couldn’t stop smiling at the sight of her daughter. Missy was right – it was a little girl. The most beautiful little girl she’d ever laid eyes on. Every single moment – the worry over her pregnancy, and the pain of her labor – was worth it. Her little girl had the bluest eyes Scully had ever seen – though she knew they could easily change color – and wisps of fair hair currently hidden under a tiny pink hat. She had the cutest button nose, Jack’s lips and chin, and ten fingers and toes. In short, she was perfect.

“What are you going to call her?”

Scully’s eyes narrowed as she studied her daughter. *Her daughter*. She was a mom. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I was thinking about Grace.”

“Grace? That’s pretty. A pretty name for a pretty girl.”

“Mmm.”

“You’re not sure?” Finally tearing her eyes away from the baby, Melissa looked up at her sister. Scully shook her head. “Grace was Jack’s mom’s name. I thought if it was a girl, it would be nice for him to…” she paused. “But now I don’t think he cares.”

Reaching out, Missy squeezed her sister’s arm. “Grace is a nice name.”

“I don’t think I want to call her Grace.”

“Ok. What are you going for instead?”

“I’m not sure.” Scully ran a hand down her daughter’s cheek, unable to stop the smile that formed on her face. She was smitten. “I could think of plenty of boys’ names, but Grace was my only option for a girl. What do you think?”

“I can think of plenty of cute girls’ names.”

“I don’t want anything crazy though like Destiny or Moonbeam.”

Missy laughed. “I can’t believe you think I’d call my daughter that.”

“You mean you wouldn’t?”

“No. I always thought that if I had a daughter, I’d call her Ashley.”

“Ashley,” Scully repeated thoughtfully. “I like Ashley.”

“If you want it, it’s yours.”

“No Missy,” Scully said, shaking her head at her sister. “It’s your name. I couldn’t do that.”

“But you like it?”
Ater a moment, she nodded. “But it’s yours.”

“Dana, I think I can safely say that after just seeing you give birth, I never want to go through that myself. If you like Ashley, you can have it. One of us might as well make use of it.”

Biting her lip, Scully glanced back down at her daughter. “Ashley,” she cooed, testing the name out. “Are you sure?” she asked Missy.

“Of course I am. I want you to have it. And of course,” she added. “When she asks who gave her this really cool name, you have to give me credit.”

“I love you.”

“Love you right back,” Missy said, kissing her sister’s cheek. “And welcome to the world Ashley.”

“Ashley,” Scully agreed. “Ashley Elizabeth Scully.”

It was settled.

xxxxx

“Ashley.”

Ashley blinked sleepily up at her mom. Recently fed and sated, she was just moments away from falling back to sleep. Scully knew she should be trying to sleep too – at least, that’s what both her mom and the nurse had advised her, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of her daughter. She figured she’d have to get used to no sleep for quite some time.

“Hey baby girl.” Scully grinned as Ashley let out a yawn. She just wanted to eat up the little girl. “I’m your mommy.” The word still felt foreign to her. She couldn’t believe that finally she was a mom. “I’ve been waiting to meet you for a long, long time. It feels so weird to finally have you here.” In a way, Scully missed having her baby in her stomach – then she felt she could protect her, but now Ashley was finally here, there were other things to worry about. “It’s just you and me for now,” she explained, her heart still hurting over the fact that still she hadn’t heard anything from Jack. Not that she should have been surprised, she mused. He had been honest with her right from the start. “Your daddy, he…I’m hoping he comes round once he sees you. I think he just needs some time. But you know what? You and me, we’re going to be just fine. You have lots of people here already who can’t wait to meet you. You’re not going to want for anything, and you’re going to be so loved. You already are,” she added. “And I hope that one day, your dad is going to meet you and love you, and be there for you. He’ll see your first day at school and he’ll teach you how to swim and hit a baseball. He’ll be there to warn off any future boyfriends, and he’ll give you away on your wedding day.” Scully’s eyes filled with tears. She knew deep down sadly, that none of those things would happen. “But until then, we’ll be ok. We’re strong,” she said, carefully wiping away a tear, before pressing her lips to Ashley’s temple. She’d never tire of the smell of baby powder. “And we have each other.” Scully huffed out a laugh as she realized her baby girl had fallen back to sleep. “You’re already ignoring me, that’s a good start,” she said with a grin.

“Sleep well Ashley.”

xxxxx

“I can’t believe you almost called Ashley Grace.”

“Mmm.” Scully’s eyes closed as she struggled to stay awake. Mulder was stretched out behind her; his hands kneading the small of her back, and she was so relaxed, she knew she wouldn’t be awake for much longer. He’d asked her earlier that evening about Ashley’s birth – though he’d heard it all
before – and so Scully had retold the story, this time adding in how Missy had ended up naming her daughter.

“Wow. I mean, Grace is a cool name, but I can’t imagine her being anything but Ashley.”

“I know. She definitely suited the name.”

“What did Jack think of it when you finally told him?”

Scully scoffed. “He knew I was thinking about Grace, so he was very surprised to find out I’d changed my mind. I’m glad I did though. From that moment he knew that I was in charge, and that he had no right to butt in.”

Mulder nodded, deep in thought. He knew that his initial reaction to the new baby was similar in a way to that of Jack’s, and he hated himself for it. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, and Scully arched back, trying to catch his words.

“Hmm? What for?”

“For being an ass when I came back.”

She knew what he was saying, and reached behind her, her hand coming to rest on his thigh. “You’re here now, that’s all that matters.”

“I want this baby,” he insisted.

“I know you do. You know,” she added. “I told Ashley that one day her dad would teach her how to swim and hit a baseball —”

“I’m sorry Jack didn’t do that for her.”

“But you did,” she said craning her neck to look back at him. “You did all of it. She’s so lucky to have you. We both are. Well,” she corrected herself. “All three of us are.”

Mulder kissed the back of her neck in thanks. “I’m glad I could be a part of it all. And I’m sorry Missy isn’t here for you this time.”

“Me too.” Scully chuckled. “If it’s any consolation though, she did say she never wanted to see another birth ever again. She was quite traumatised. You have it all to look forward to.”

“I can’t wait,” he said uncertainly.

“Like I said Mulder, if you don’t —”

“I do, I do.”

“Ok, but you don’t have to.”

“I know, but I want to. I can’t wait to meet him.”

She smiled. “Me either.”

“You said you had a lot of boys’ names ready for when Ashley was born. Does that mean you’ve got this one locked in?”

“I have a good idea,” Scully replied evasively. Mulder had told her he didn’t mind what the baby
was called, as long as it was more traditional than Fox. It couldn’t be much worse, he’d told her.

“And what –“

“You’ll find out soon enough Mulder,” she said with a grin, and she heard her partner sigh behind her.

Very soon, she mused. In just a couple of weeks, their baby was going to arrive, and nothing would ever be the same again. She couldn’t wait.
“You know, it would be a lot easier for everyone if you would just tell us the sex Dana. Did you hear me?”

Scully entered the room, ignoring her mom as she arranged pink and blue balloons. Beside her, Ashley shot Scully a hopeful look, no doubt wanting her to rescue her from Maggie’s questioning. It was the day of Scully’s baby shower. Maggie – along with Ellen – had insisted that she have one, though Scully had protested, not wanting to be the center of attention. She was outnumbered; even more so when both Ashley and Mulder agreed it was a good idea.

“Yes I heard you,” she replied. “Mom, for about the thousandth time, you can wait. Didn’t you have to wait with us?”

“Well I know it’s a boy,” Maggie insisted, and Scully shot her daughter a warning look. “I can just tell by the way you’re carrying it’s a boy.”

“Well, see, you obviously don’t need me to tell you because you already know.”

“Then it’s a boy?”

Scully said nothing as she rinsed out her cup, only serving to frustrate her mom further. “Oh it’s the least you could tell your mother considering everything else you’re keeping a secret –“

“What secrets mom? You know everything.”

“Not the baby’s sex.” Maggie caught sight of Ashley smirking beside her. “I can’t believe you haven’t caved and told me,” she told her granddaughter.

“Mulder’s giving me fifty bucks if I keep it a secret.”

“Mulder knows?”

“Of course he does mom, he’s the –“ Scully was interrupted by a knock at the door. “We told people noon, right?” Both Ashley and Maggie nodded.

Grateful for the interruption, Scully headed to the door. She opened it, revealing an unfamiliar woman holding two bunches of flowers – one pink and one blue. She was clearly part of the baby shower, but how Scully didn’t know.

“Hi,” the woman said. “Your mom said to cover all the bases. I’m Lizzy Gill.”

“Hi Lizzy,” Maggie greeted her as though they were old friends. “Let me give you a hand with that. I asked Lizzy to help out today,” she informed Scully.

“Oh. Hi.”

“These are going to need some water. Congratulations by the way.” Lizzie strolled into the apartment confidently.

“Mom,” Scully said quietly to Maggie. “What do we need help with?”

“I don’t know, it’s just…well you should have to worry. You have to let people do for you. She’s a very highly recommended baby nurse by the way.”
“Oh mom,” Scully groaned, wishing that for once, her mom would stop worrying about her. As a mother herself though, she knew that day would never come.

XXXXXXXX

“This has got to be a conspiracy,” said Scully as she opened a gift box containing two dolls, one in pink and the other in blue. She lifted them up for her friends and family to see, and tried not to wince as she heard them all “ooh” and “aaah” her gift. It had been a long afternoon.

“Aw, maybe it’ll be twins,” her mom’s friend said.

“Thank you, but I would settle for one very healthy boy.”

“Oh?”

“Or girl.”

“So many secrets Margaret,” Scully’s aunt said to her mom.

“What do you expect? My daughter works for the FBI.” As the women laughed, Maggie accidentally knocked over a glass of wine. Before anyone could react, Lizzy was on the scene, armed with a towel.

“I got it. Here, moving in…the white tornado.”

“Thank you Lizzy,” Maggie said.

“No problem.”

Scully could feel her mom’s gaze on her. As she looked up, Maggie spoke. “Just think about it”

Nodding, Scully then turned her attention to the next gift. She read the label and smiled over at her best friend. “Oh Ellen!” She exclaimed, tearing open the packaging to reveal a baby bath. Finally something neutral, perfect for a boy or girl. “This is perfect!”

“I remember you saying you still needed to get one.” Ellen watched as Scully opened another parcel; this one containing impossibly tiny onesies in a neutral white colour. Unlike the others in the room, Ellen didn’t want to know the sex. She knew how much Scully had wanted another child, and just wished her friend an easy delivery, and a healthy baby at the end of it.

“They’re adorable –“

There was a knock at the door. “I’ll get it!” Ashley volunteered, jumping up from her seat eagerly, her initial excitement over the baby shower waning when she realized it was just an afternoon of Scully and her friends sitting around and talking about stretch marks, birthing plans and breast feeding. As Ashley ran for the door, Scully started on another gift.

“Mulder!”

Scully paused in her unwrapping and looked up, sure enough seeing her partner stood at the door. Suddenly she noticed that everyone’s attention had turned to Mulder in the doorway. She stood up and padded over to him. To his credit, Mulder actually looked guilty for interrupting. “What are you doing here?”

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, blushing as he realized that the room full of women were hanging on his every word. “I completely forgot today was your baby shower. I came by to see about putting
the crib together.”

“Aww.” Scully resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she heard her mom and friends behind her.

“Hey Mulder!” Ellen called. “Come on in.”

“No it’s ok, I don’t want to interrupt –“

“I’ll help you with the crib,” Ashley volunteered, eager to spend time with Mulder as well as have a
genuine reason to leave the party.

“No it’s ok.”

“Please! Grandma keeps asking me about the baby and it’s driving me insane.”

“I heard that,” Maggie called.

Mulder looked at Scully for guidance. “I can swing by later,” he suggested.

After a moment, Scully shook her head. The damage was already done. The conversation would
now be focused on how helpful Mulder was, and then Maggie and Ellen would point out to
everyone just what a good father he was to Ashley. Scully knew her mom would never have chosen
Mulder for her, but even Maggie had to admit he was great with Ashley.

“It ok’s ok. I can’t help out for a while though. I’ve got to entertain,” she whispered under her
breath. She didn’t look overjoyed at the thought.

Mulder chuckled. “I’d like to see you try Scully. I’m pretty sure that if you got down on the floor,
you’d never get up again. Hey!” he exclaimed, as Scully delivered a soft slap to his arm.

“Watch it Mulder.”

“Well, I’ll leave you ladies to it,” he said, removing his jacket and stepping into the apartment.
“You giving me a hand Squirt?” Relieved, Ashley nodded. “Nice to see you ladies,” he said to the
women, some familiar and some not, then headed towards the bedroom.

Closing the front door behind her, Scully painted a smile on her face and turned to see a sea of
smiling faces. “Damn it Dana, he’s hot!” Ellen exclaimed.

Feeling her cheeks flush, Scully headed a huff of laughter, and knew Mulder had heard every
word. There’d be no stopping him now. “Right,” she said, trying her utmost to change the subject.
“Who wants cake?”

xxxxx

“So who’s this Lizzy woman?” Mulder asked as his fingers dug into the arch of Scully’s foot. She
groaned in appreciation.

“She’s someone my mom has hired to help me out.”

“Help you out?” Mulder frowned, though Scully wasn’t sure if it was in concentration or at her
words.

“Help around the house now and once the baby’s born. She’s a nanny apparently, and used to
dealing with babies. I told my mom I’d give her a week’s trial.”
“Why do we need help?”

“Because…oh that feels good,” she said. Mulder smirked. “Because right now I’m supposed to be on bed rest. And then when the baby’s here –“

“I’ll be here. I am here,” he stressed.

“So you’ll clean my bathroom?”

“If you need me to?”

“And wash my smalls?”

“I’d love to.”

Scully paused. Mulder used her silence as an opportunity to interrupt. “Listen Scully,” he said, placing her foot back on his lap and squeezing her ankle. “I get that you can do this. I understand that you’ve done this all before. Alone too. But this time it’s different. I’m here, and I’m here to help. If that means cleaning bathrooms and washing out dirty diapers, then so be it.”

“I’m sorry –“

“I know that you’re more than capable of doing this all by yourself, but you don’t have to.”

“I know,” Scully said, slowly bringing her feet back onto the floor and shifting on the couch so she was next to him.

“I may not have given you reason to believe me in recent months –“

“You’re here now. Listen, let’s just let Lizzy help out for a week to make my mom happy, and then I’ll tell her she won’t be needed. If you’re sure?”

Wrapping an arm around Scully, Mulder nodded. “I’m unemployed. I have a lot of time on my hands. Although if you want me to wear a maid’s outfit, you can think again.”

“I think I can live without that.”

“So we’ve got a deal?”

“We’ve got a deal,” Scully agreed as she settled into his arms, relieved that this time, everything seemed to be different.

Scully decided to give her mom – and Lizzie – a chance, and so gave her new ‘home help’ a week’s trial, just to see how it went. So far so good, she thought to herself, a couple of days later let as she took a prenatal vitamin. Even Ashley’s mood seemed to have improved with the addition of Lizzie, although Scully was pretty sure that was because her daughter loved having someone around to wait on her hand and foot. Just as Scully was about to swallow her pill, the door opened and in walked Lizzie, making Scully jump.

“Dana?”

“Mmm hmm?”

“Oh sorry,” Lizzie said as Scully swallowed her tablet.
“Horse pills.”

“I’m about to leave. Your dinner’s in the oven, Ashley’s busy with her science project, and I’ve just made her a drink. And I just wanted to say that I hope this is working out. I know it’s important to your mom.”

“It is. And uh…I appreciate your help. I didn’t quite realize how much I needed it,” Scully said truthfully. She didn’t realize how tired she was now she was in her last few weeks of pregnancy. Yes Mulder was around and helped out when he could, and Ashley did chores when pocket money was involved, but it was the little things.

“Well, I’ll see you.”

“Bye.”

Scully took another pill as Lizzie walked out of the bathroom, her hand moving to her stomach as she felt the baby shift within her. She felt more relaxed since Lizzy had been on the scene, though she hated to admit it to her mom – and to Mulder. Maybe she’d have a word with him and convince him that it wouldn’t hurt to have Lizzy help out for a few hours a day, she thought, as she headed out of the room to check on dinner.

xxxxxxxx

Scully paused as she washed her hair, hearing the sound of the phone ring. Ashley was at school but Lizzy was in the kitchen, and so she waited for her to pick up. When the phone continued to ring, Scully called out. “Lizzy, are you going to get that?” No answer. “Lizzy?” Sighing to herself, Scully got out of the shower, wrapping her robe around her, and rushed for the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey Scully, it’s me.” Mulder’s voice rang out. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” she said, a little breathlessly. “I just ran from the shower.” She looked up as she heard the sound of a door being closed.

“I need to see you,” Mulder continued. “I’ve got Skinner with me. It’s not something that can really wait.”

“What?”

“It’s about your pregnancy. Skinner’s got some questions based on some new information.”

“What?” Scully asked, only half listening. She was trying to work out what Lizzy was doing, and why she was being so quiet about it. “Mulder, what are you talking about?”

“Evidence of interference by someone.”

Her blood running cold, Scully hung up the phone and headed back towards the bathroom. She opened the door without knocking, her eyes wide with horror as she saw Lizzie with a bottle of pills in her hand. “What are you doing? What do you think you’re doing with those?” she asked, as she realized her helper was tampering with her pills. Scully hurried forward and grabbed the bottle from Lizzy, who looked scared. “Who are you?” Scully demanded. “Who are you?!”

xxxxxxxx

“Everything ok?”
As Scully’s doctor stepped out of the room, leaving her to get dressed, Mulder headed inside, trying to read his partner’s expression. He’d been outside in the waiting room with Maggie, fretting as Scully and the baby were checked over at the hospital. Barely an hour before Mulder had received a phone call that he certainly wasn’t expecting, and one he knew he’d remember for a long time. He’d been talking with Skinner when Scully had called to say she’d discovered Lizzy tampering with her prenatal vitamins. Scully’s new helper had apparently been trying to harm the baby. Quickly leaving Skinner and getting into the car, Mulder then broke the speed limit as her drove to Scully’s and then took her to the hospital. He’d left Skinner and Doggett to deal with Lizzy, knowing that at that very moment he didn’t trust himself to be in the same room as her, aware that she’d put Scully and the baby’s lives in jeopardy. Thankfully everything was ok and they’d both been given the all-clear.

“Your mom’s waiting outside,” he said, helping her into her jacket.

“I’m not sure I want to speak to her right now,” Scully admitted.

“Scully –”

“She invited Lizzy into my home Mulder. She put all of our lives in jeopardy. I’ll have to get Ashley checked over too. What if she’s tried to drug her too?”

“Scully –” Mulder reached out and placed a hand on her arm, stopping her in her tracks. “The last thing your mom wanted to do was hurt you or the kids. She was duped too and I know she feels terrible about it. She was doing what she thought was best. You know that Scully.”

With tears clouding her eyes, she glanced down at her abdomen. “I thought I was going to lose him Mulder. I thought she’d done something –”

“I know,” he said, lifting her chin so she met his eye. “He’s ok. I’m not going to let anyone harm him.”

“What do they want with him?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’m not letting anyone come near you or him again.”

Little did they know what was about to happen.
"What’s the matter?"

Stopping the car, Mulder unbuckled his seat belt and looked over at Ashley, who wasn’t moving. They didn’t have time to hang around, he thought to himself, and so he leant over and unbuckled her belt. “Nothing.”

“You’re lying.”

“Ash, we don’t have time for this. I’ll explain once we’re inside ok?”

“But –“

“Please do me a favor and do as I say just for once.” Ashley quietened, and Mulder immediately felt guilty for taking his frustration out on her. “Listen, I’m sorry,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I really don’t have time to explain. We need to go inside and we need to do it fast. When you’re inside, I need you to grab a bag and fill it with your clothes ok?” A worried looking Ashley nodded. “I’ll grab you some food, and your insulin. Please, just hurry, and I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.”

“Is mom ok?” Ashley asked quietly.

“She’s fine. We’re going to get her now, and we’re going to leave. C’mon, let’s go.”

After taking Scully home from the hospital just a few hours before, Mulder had gone back to the office to speak with Lizzy Gill and listened in horror as she’d told him that his baby was special; that essentially, Scully and the baby were in danger. Rushing out of the room, he’d immediately driven to pick up Ashley from her friend’s house, wanting to make sure she was safe too, before driving her back home, ignoring the fact that he was well over the speed limit. There was no time to lose.

As he and Ashley hurried along to the apartment, Mulder cursed as he realized he’d forgotten his key. He knocked on the door and heard Scully call out. “Yes?”

“It’s me.” He tapped his foot impatiently while he waited for Scully to answer.

“Hey baby,” she said to Ashley as she opened the door.

“Hi.”

“How was school?”

Unable to listen to small talk, Mulder steered Ashley into the apartment and closed the door behind him. Scully sensed his uneasiness. “What’s wrong?”

“You here alone?”

“Yes. My mom just went to the –“

Mulder suddenly placed his hands on Scully’s shoulders and directed her towards her bedroom. “Ash, go!” Ashley did as she said and immediately hurried to her room.

“What?”
“Listen Scully, whatever you can’t get elsewhere, just throw it together?”

Scully stopped. “Mulder, to go where? No, just stop! Can you tell me what’s wrong? Is it something to do with the baby?”

“No, the baby is fine. It’s you who’s in danger now Scully,” he said, relieved Ashley was no longer in earshot.

“From who? Mulder, from what?”

“I don’t know, I’m not sure. I’m not sure about anything. I just know I’ve got to get you out of here.”

“Look Mulder, look! I can’t take this! I can’t put Ashley through this, and I can’t live like this – as the object of some unending X-File.”

“This isn’t about the X-Files Scully. It’s only about you. Now, you are going to have this baby, and I’m going to do everything I can to protect it. I just can’t do that here.”

Scully considered his words before sighing. She trusted him, and she knew that if he said they had to leave, they had to leave.

“Mulder?” Mulder placed his cell to his ear, and listened as Agent Doggett’s voice came through.

“I’m at Doctor Parenti’s office. Billy Miles called us looking to turn himself in, only he ain’t here.”

“Agent Doggett –“

“I know, something’s wrong. Something doesn’t make any sense.”

Before Mulder could reply, the lights in Scully’s apartment suddenly went out. He hung up the phone and turned to his partner. “Leave the suitcase.” He called out to Ashley in the other room. “Ash! Grab your things now, we’re leaving.” As Scully picked up her jacket and put it on, Mulder ran to collect Ashley, relieving her of her bag of clothes and food. He then led her and Scully out of the apartment and down the back stairs, out into the night towards the car. He took Scully’s keys from her. “Get in,” he ordered the two of them. “Mulder, Ashley…lock your doors.”

“I don’t think that matters much Scully.” He did it anyway.

“Mom, what’s happening?” A terrified Ashley asked, having locked her door. She then screamed in horror as the man walking towards them was suddenly ploughed down by an oncoming car. The vehicle then pulled up beside them and the window rolled down.

“Krycek,” Mulder murmured beneath his breath.

A man they hadn’t seen in some time then revealed himself. “We haven’t got much time. Get in.”

Scully turned her attention back to Billy Miles, her eyes widening in horror as she saw him stagger to his feet, blood pouring from his head. There was no way he should have survived the accident, not with the speed Krycek was going. It was then she realized they didn’t have much choice than to
go with Krycek. “Mulder?”

“Let’s go!” Krycek urged.

“C’mon Ash,” Mulder urged, as he jumped out of the car and opened the back door, ushering Ashley out of the vehicle. He then rushed over to Krycek’s, opened the door and helped her and Scully into the back, before getting into the passenger seat. No sooner were they all inside, Krycek reversed back onto the main road, and raced off, none of them looking back.

xxxxxxxxxx

“What’s happening Mom?” Ashley asked as she sat next to Scully on the couch in Skinner’s offer. Skinner, Mulder, Doggett and Krycek were all discussing the events of that evening, and Scully was trying her hardest not to let Ashley hear, though she knew that was practically impossible. “Do we still have to leave?”

“I think so.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not safe for us right now.”

“How come?”

It was then that Scully heard Mulder mention her name, asking what they wanted with her.

“They want my baby,” she suddenly spoke up, looking over at Krycek. “Why?”

“They didn’t even know about it. I don’t know exactly how they could have found out just how… how important it is…how special.”

“My baby is normal.”

“Your baby was a miracle. Born of a barren mother’s barren womb.” Scully swallowed. Her baby was a miracle, but tests had proven he was normal.

“Are you saying that they’re afraid of it?” Mulder asked Krycek.

“They’re afraid of its implications. That it could somehow be greater than them. Something…more human than human.”

“I don’t believe this,” Scully whispered, seeing Ashley squeeze her hand. She squeezed back, wishing her daughter didn’t have to listen to this.”

“You wanted to destroy her child,” Skinner accused Krycek.

“I wanted to destroy the truth before they learned the truth.”

“That there’s a god,” said Mulder. “A higher power.”

“I don’t believe this crap,” said Doggett, unimpressed. “I don’t believe you’re all sitting around here listening to it even when you know this man’s a liar. Worse than that.”

“You can believe what you want,” Krycek argued. “But I don’t think you can take the chance that I’m wrong.” He was right and they all knew it – except for Doggett. “There’s no hospital that’s safe enough. She may never make it out of this building.” Scully shivered at Krycek’s words.
There was too much to worry about – both her unborn son and her daughter who sat by her side, her eyes wide in horror as she listened to the conversation.

“If we’re going to get Scully out of here, we’re going to need some help,” said Mulder.

“What should I do?” She instinctively placed her hand on her swollen stomach, trying to soothe her unborn child, who was kicking in earnest, no doubt sensing his mother’s worry and uncertainty.

“We need to get you out of DC,” Mulder explained gently. “Far away from here, somewhere they can’t find you.” His heart raced. The truth was he had no idea where she could go and be safe.

“Where?”

“We’ll figure something out, but you need to leave immediately. Ash can go to your mom’s.”

“No!” Ashley protested. “I want to stay with you,” she said to her mom. She was clearly scared and didn’t want to be separated from Scully. Mulder could sympathise.

“Of course you can,” said Scully, looking up at Mulder, who nodded.

“I’ll call Agent Reyes.” He walked over towards the window and pulled out his mobile phone. He’d just dialled Monica’s number when Scully called out to him.

“Mulder.”

“Yes?” he said, walking over to the sofa.

“Don’t call her.”

“Scully,” he murmured. “You can’t drive yourself. In case you’ve forgotten, you’re nine month’s pregnant. Besides, you’ll need someone to help should Junior decide to make an entrance. Someone over the age of thirteen.”

“But…” Scully’s eyes welled with tears as she realised her plans for a safe, normal hospital birth had now been scuppered. She should have known better, things never turned out how she planned. “But Monica’s never delivered a baby before.”

“Neither have I.” Mulder cancelled the call and slipped his phone back in his pocket. He knelt down in front of her, placing his hands on her knees. “But you trust her.”

“I trust you Mulder.” Scully felt her voice break and willed herself not to cry, not now. The tears could fall later.

“Scully, I can’t come with you. I have to stay here, we need answers.”

“We need you Mulder.” Out of the corner of her eye Scully saw Skinner and Krycek turn to Doggett and speak in hushed tones, attempting to give the couple some privacy. “We’ve already established that Ashley and I don’t do well without you.”

“Scully –”

She took hold of Mulder’s right hand and placed it on her stomach, noticing the look of shock that registered on his face as she did so. Ashley shifted uncomfortable. “What about the baby Mulder? I can’t do this with anyone else. You agreed to be my birthing partner-”

“I don’t know how to deliver a baby. What if something goes wrong – what if I pass out or can’t do
it? What if I lead them straight to you and Ash and the baby?”

“You can protect us. You can do anything you want, but I just want you with us.” Mulder thought about protesting further, but he saw the look of determination on Scully’s face, the way her eyes, glistening with tears, pleaded with him, the way her hand grasped his on the spot where her unborn baby kicked. He knew from eight years of experience that she only asked for help when she truly needed it. Right now she was desperate. “Ok,” he sighed. “I’ll come.”

“Thank you.” As Scully smiled in gratitude a lonely tear fell down her cheek. Mulder wiped it away with his thumb then stood up, reluctant to let go of her. Scully instantly felt the loss of his touch, and by the rate of kicks the baby delivered to her stomach, could’ve sworn her child felt the same way. She wrapped her arm around Ashley and pulled her in towards her. “You ok sweetheart?”

“Yeah.” Ashley didn’t sound too certain.

“We’ll be ok.” Scully hoped she was right.

As Mulder headed over, Skinner and Krycek turned their attention back to the couple. “What’s the plan Mulder?”

“I’m going with Scully.”

“What?” Krycek’s eyes flashed with anger.

“It’s the best option.”

“We need you here Mulder.”

“And Scully needs me too. This is non-negotiable,” he said sternly.

Skinner, no doubt predicting this would happen, nodded. After a moment, Krycek sighed. “Ok.” Mulder turned back to Scully and Ashley. His family. “Let’s go.”

To be continued.
Scully woke up, disorientated. Slowly focusing on her surroundings, she realised she was in the passenger seat of a car. Mulder was to her left, and as she glanced in the mirror, she saw Ashley asleep in the back seat. The realisation of what was happening came flooding back. ‘Oh god, I was hoping this was all a dream. When did the sun come up?’ She shifted in her seat, feeling her baby begin to wake and make himself known.

‘About six hours ago. Somewhere back in North Carolina’.

‘Where are we?’

‘We just crossed into Georgia. Long way from home Scully’.

‘Well…under the circumstances’.

Mulder glanced down at Scully’s stomach, then smiled thinly at her. ‘Right. We can’t be too safe’.

‘Are you alright Mulder?’

He took a deep breath and nodded. ‘I should ask how you’re doing. I mean, you’re the one who’s going to have this baby’. The thought of Scully giving birth in the middle of nowhere petrified him. He’d already run through the scenarios in his head – if something went wrong, there’d be no one around for miles, and both Scully and her child could be in danger.

‘That’s it, isn’t it? What you’re really worried about?’

‘Aside from whatever danger we’re in…Where we’re going doesn’t sound like…there’s all that much in the way of a…facility. You know what I mean? I’ve never delivered a baby’.

‘Well, you’ve at least seen a video of it, so you’re more experienced than Agent Reyes’. Mulder smiled at her again. Scully took hold of his hand and squeezed it. Just the simple touch of his hand made her feel better, like they could get through whatever was thrown at them. She knew she’d never be able to do this without him.

“This wasn’t the weekend I was expecting.”

“Tell me about it. I told Skinner to call Ashley’s school tomorrow.”

“Right.” Scully glanced back at her daughter. “I wish she’d have gone to my mom’s.”

“She’ll be ok Scully,” Mulder assured her. “She’s strong.”

“She is,” she agreed. “But sometimes I wonder how much more she can take.”

“I promise, I won’t let anything happen to either of you. All three of you,” he corrected himself. “They won’t even find out where we are.”

Little did he know he was going to eat his words.

xxxxxxxxxxxx

It was nightfall when they arrived. Their home for the next few days or possibly longer was literally in the middle of nowhere, a deserted area. Scully tried not to let her disappointment show.
She knew deep down it would be like this – basic – but actually standing in front of the rundown place her baby would be born hit home. She, Ashley and Mulder were literally on their own. It was the three of them against the world. Mulder stopped the car and switched off the headlights. He wanted to say something, to apologise to Scully for the way things had turned out. She deserved so much better. Instead he watched as she got out of the car, and he followed suit. He opened the back door and helped Ashley out of the car before retrieving their supplies from the trunk. Scully had her hands on her lower back, trying to knead out the pressure that had built there during their long journey.

‘End of the road’.

‘Yeah’, Scully replied thoughtfully. ‘Literally. If anybody finds us out here, it really will be a miracle.”

“Where exactly are we?” asked Ashley.

‘Democrat Hot Springs”

“It looks like something out of a horror film.”

Mulder glared at the youngster. He was feeling nervous as it was. “According to Agent Doggett, this is where people used to come for the waters – until the springs dried up and they quit coming. He was born here’.

‘Really? Well that’s comforting I guess’. Scully didn’t sound convinced, but she knew it was the best they could get. ‘So, where shall we set up?’

Mulder took a look around, his eyes settling on a building just in front of them. ‘Over here’. He led Scully to the abandoned building, his hand taking the place of hers in the small of her back. Ashley followed behind, scuffing her sneakers on the track. ‘You ok?’

She sighed. ‘Just a little stiff from the journey’.

‘Sorry. I didn’t want to make any more stops than we had to’.

‘I understand. The sooner we got here the better’.

“You keeping up Squirt?” Mulder called behind him.

“Yeah.” Ashley had been quiet as soon as she’d woken up from her nap. Mulder knew she was nervous, just as he and Scully were, and he’d done his best to try and cheer her up. It seemed however that Ashley wasn’t quite willing to leave her contemplative world just yet.

“She’ll be fine,” Scully murmured, not entirely convincingly.

As they entered the building, Mulder pulled out his flashlight and lit up the room. A thick layer of dust covered everything in sight, including a bed in the middle of the room.

‘This is nice’. Mulder couldn’t fail to detect the sarcasm in Scully’s voice. She patted his arm to show she knew they couldn’t do any better. She walked cautiously across the room where she’d spotted a sink, covered in cobwebs and dust. Turning the handle in the hope of finding water, nothing happened. She should have known. ‘Well there’s no water from this rock. We’re going to need some water and a place to boil it. Along with sterile supplies and a clean place to do this delivery’. She was surprised at how calm and professional she sounded, almost as though it wasn’t her own baby’s delivery she was talking about. Mulder on the other hand, looked like he was about
to vomit. He smiled weakly at her, his face sporting his panic look. ‘Just think of the stories we can tell the kid when he’s older’. Scully smiled back, hoping that she’d get the chance to see her child grow up. She’d worry about that later. Right now they had a job to do.

“I guess we’d better get started on clearing this up,” he said pointedly to Ashley. “C’mon trouble, you ready to give me a hand?”

“This is where we’re staying?” The youngster asked, disgust evident in her voice.

“Ashley,” Scully warned. “Please don’t start. Not tonight. This is the best we can do right now.”

“Why can’t we just go home?” Ashley whined. “Why do we have to stay in this stupid place?”

“Because back home there are people who want your brother. We don’t know why, and we don’t know what they want with him.” There was no use lying to her. “We’re safe here. All of us. It’s just for a few days max.” God he hoped that was the case. “When it’s all blown over, we can go home and get on with our lives.”

“This sucks,” Ashley sighed. Both Mulder and Scully had to agree.

xxxxxxxxx

“Scully. Come see what you think’. Scully waddled into the building, ignoring Mulder’s grin at the way she moved. He moved to the side to let her through the door, and she raised her eyebrows, as though challenging him to comment on her size. Her thoughts were interrupted as she saw what Mulder and Ashley had been up to since he’d ushered her outside. ‘Mulder! Oh my goodness. Look at this. Look at you. Wow!’ It was as though she’d stepped into a different building. Like she was on one of those home makeover shows on television. For starters everything was clean – there was no cobweb or patch of dust in sight. The bed had been made with fresh sheets, and he’d placed another set nearby. Unlit candles were scattered around the room. Scully bit her lip, holding in the tears that threatened to fall. “And Ashley, you guys did such a great job! Thank you!”

Ashley shrugged. “Mulder did most of it.”

“But you helped. Thank you sweetheart,” Scully said, pressing her lips to the Ashley’s forehead. Her daughter however didn’t seem to appreciate the thanks and shrugged out of her grasp. “You should thank Mulder.”

Scully smiled warmly at Mulder, who looked relieved that she appreciated his efforts. ‘I found the sheets folded up in a cabinet upstairs. And a nice porcelain basin and whole box of candles. Now all we need is some mood music. Like whale song’. He winked, letting her know he was joking. Scully raised her eyebrows.

‘Whale song?’

‘Or you could sing Scully. You know how much I appreciated you doing that for me last time’.

“When did you sing to Mulder?” An inquisitive Ashley suddenly asked.

“I didn’t –“

“You did. In the forest remember?”

“What did you sing?”
“Jeremiah was a Bullfrog,” Mulder recalled with a smile.

Ashley frowned at her mom. “You guys are weird.”

“Thanks,” Mulder grinned.

‘As I was saying,’ Scully interrupted, stepping forward and slipping her hand into Mulder’s.

“Thank you both for um…putting this together. It’s not what I planned, but it’s very nice’. Mulder turned towards her and placed his other hand on her bump, smiling as he felt the swift kick of the baby. Ashley turned away, unable to watch Mulder pay attention to the baby – she felt left out whenever he focused on her mom and the baby. As Mulder opened his mouth to speak, he was distracted by a movement outside.

Scully felt him tense. ‘What?’

‘There’s someone out there. Stay here, both of you’. Removing his gun from the holster, Mulder cautiously stepped outside. No one was in sight. He walked down the street, and after seeing and hearing nothing, lowered his weapon. Suddenly he heard a rumble of an engine in the distance, and saw a vehicle approaching. He raised his gun again and watched as an SUV raced round the corner and drove towards him. The vehicle came to a standstill just in front of him. ‘Get out of the car! I’m a Federal Agent!’ He stood rooted to the spot as a middle-aged woman, a game warden, stepped out of the vehicle, her hands raised in surrender. ‘I don’t care who you are. Let’s start by putting that weapon away. Just point it down now’. Mulder lowered his weapon, a tiny voice in the back of his head telling him not to trust this stranger, but the rest well aware that he and Scully needed help. ‘I’m a Federal Agent’, he explained.

‘I heard you the first time. Just let me see some identification’. Mulder nodded and watched as she reached into her jacket pocket. He had his gun ready just in case she pulled any sudden moves. Thankfully she didn’t, and as she showed him her ID, Mulder breathed a sigh of relieve that they had someone else on their side.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

‘Scully? Ashley?’ Mulder lead the warden into the building and was greeted by Scully, who was waddling to the door with her badge out. Ashley lurked close behind. ‘I’m sure this looks untoward but my life is in danger. And my baby’s and possibly my daughter’s. There’s a man who’s pursuing us and it’s very important that he not find us here’.

The stranger thought for a moment, clearing considering Scully’s words. ‘We get hunters in here taking deer and game off-season. I’ve heard every excuse in the book, but this one’s far too original’. She looked over at Scully’s bulging stomach; Mulder’s eyes followed her path. ‘You don’t, uh, plan to have it here?’

‘It’s not as crazy as it sounds’. Mulder interrupted. ‘I mean, I hope it’s not’. He could tell from the stranger’s expression that she clearly thought they were out of their minds.

“Who’s going to deliver it? Your daughter?”

“No,” Ashley interrupted, not liking this woman, whoever she was.

‘Scully’s a doctor,” Mulder interrupted. “She can coach me’.

‘And what if something goes wrong? If you’re a doctor you know the risks. You’re unprepared here’. They knew it, but they couldn’t think of it. Not now.
'This man, he’s extremely dangerous’. Scully caught the eye of the warden, silently pleading that she’d understand her and Mulder’s worries. The woman sighed.

‘I got a first aid kit in my truck. It’s pretty basic but better to have than not. I’ll be back with some towels and proper swaddling’.

‘Thank you’. As the woman exited the building, Mulder looked over at Ashley, noticing her uneasy expression. “You ok?”

“I don’t like her.”

“She’s got supplies Ashley,” Scully warned.

“There’s something about her.”

“She’s the best we’ve got now,” Mulder answered. He glanced at Scully. ‘You ok?’ She let out the breath she was holding and nodded. ‘Yeah. You ready to do this?’

Mulder looked shocked. ‘You mean-’

‘Not right this moment Mulder’. Scully smiled at his look of concern. ‘I mean when it happens’.

‘Yeah’. He didn’t sound too sure. ‘We can do this’. Looking outside, he realised the night was drawing in. ‘Ash, you’d better eat something. I’ll see if I can knock you up a Mulder special.” He turned his attention to her mom. “How bout I light some candles and you get settled? You must be dead on your feet Scully’.

‘A nap would be nice’, she admitted. ‘But I don’t think Junior’s going to let up for a while’.

‘Is he making his presence known tonight?’

Scully nodded, narrowing her eyes. ‘He’s being very active’.

Mulder stepped in closer, out of the corner of his eye noticing that Ashley had wandered out of the room, hopefully in search of food. She needed to keep her sugar levels up. “She’s not happy with me.”

“She’s not happy with either of us,” replied Scully. “She’s realizing that pretty soon, it’s not going to be all about her. She’s jealous.”

“She has no reason to be.”

“Both you and I know that, but she doesn’t. Not now anyway.” Walking across the room, Scully carefully lowered herself into a seat while Mulder lit a few candles thanks to a box of matches he found in the kitchen. Satisfied there was enough light in the room for the time being, he went to fill a bucket of water, which he then poured into a basin next to her. ‘Thank you. Thank you’. Scully sighed grateful, damping a cloth in the water and pressing it to her forehead and neck. It was hot, there was no doubt about it, and it didn’t help matters that she was heavily pregnant. She looked up and saw Mulder gazing down at her, his face full of love and tenderness. ‘You look beautiful Scully’.

‘Thank you’. For a moment she didn’t know how to respond. Mulder wasn’t usually free with his compliments, and it was rare he spoke such words of affection. ‘You lie though, I’m the size of a house, I couldn’t possibly be beautiful’. 
Mulder got to his knees, sitting up on them so he was level with her eyes. ‘You’re always beautiful, and right now you’re glowing. Pregnancy suits you’. He thought for a moment. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t really told you this before’.

‘I never thought this would happen’. Scully gestured down to her bump. ‘I dreamt of it one day, but then I guess… I guess I just gave up hope’.

‘Never give up on a miracle’. He reached out and placed his hand on her stomach, feeling each kick, a look of amazement on his face. Scully smiled as she remembered the last time Mulder had uttered that same sentence. Mulder looked down at the basin by her side. ‘We need some more water’. Reluctantly he stood to his feet, kissing Scully’s forehead on the way up, and collected the bucket. Stepping outside, he walked over to the pump across the street and began collecting water. As the bucket began to weigh down, Mulder noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Thinking it was an intruder, he spun round, intending to use the bucket as a weapon if needs be. He came face to face with the warden, a shotgun in her hand by her side. ‘I’m sorry’, he smiled apologetically.

‘That’s ok. You’re on edge, that’s understandable’. She looked at the bucket in his arms, like a weapon trained on her. Mulder took the container back to his side, and together they walked back to the house where Scully was. She was on her way outside to meet them, wondering what had taken so long’.

‘Sorry I’m late’, the warden explained. ‘I thought I saw someone down the street but it must have been my eyes playing tricks on me’. Mulder looked over at Scully, who was biting her lip in concentration. He knew exactly what she was thinking, she was wondering if they’d found her. Their hiding place was supposed to be safe, somewhere they couldn’t find, where Scully could deliver her child safely without them coming to harm the baby. ‘I checked the street thoroughly and couldn’t find anyone’. Mulder noticed the shotgun she was holding in her arms – she didn’t mess about.

Taking his own gun from his jacket, Mulder headed for the door. ‘I’m going to double check’.

‘No, you can’t do that’.

‘Scully I’ll only be gone, I need to check. If there is someone out there we need to deal with them’.

‘No, I mean, I just felt a contraction’. His eyes followed her gaze down to her stomach.

‘What?’ He knew without a doubt he was sporting his panic face.

‘I think I’m in labour’. Taking a deep breath, Mulder rushed over towards Scully, who looked a little scared too. She moved her hand to her stomach, rubbing in gentle circles, while her other hand reached out for his. She gripped his hand and Mulder nodded. They were ready to do this.
When Dana Scully first gave birth twelve and a half years ago, her labor lasted seventeen hours before Ashley was born. Though she knew from her medical background that second labors were usually quicker, she had no idea it would be quite so fast this time round. However it appeared that Baby Mulder was eager to make his appearance in the real world. No sooner had Scully announced that her contractions had begun, Mulder immediately transformed into Nervous Father Mode. Though they both knew there was a possibility that Scully would go into labor, they didn’t anticipate it happening so soon. Thankfully the game warden was there to try and calm him down, and Scully felt reassured that this woman would help her during the birth.

“They’re two minutes apart now,” she announced, dampening a cloth for Scully. “It’s not going to be long.” Mulder swallowed hard, while Ashley immediately went to her mother’s side, clearly concerned. Following a pretty heavy contraction, as she noticed her daughter’s worried expression, Scully smiled, and tucked a strand of hair behind Ashley’s ear. “I’m ok sweetheart,” she reassured her daughter. “It’s just labor.”

“Does it hurt?”

“A little,” Scully admitted. “The pain will intensify, but it’s ok. I’ve done this before.”

Ashley didn’t look convinced, scared to see her mom in any kind of pain. “Shouldn’t you go to a hospital?”

“I can’t sweetheart. Not just yet. It’s not safe.”

“What if something’s wrong with the baby?”

“How’s this?” Mulder asked, deliberately interrupting. Though Ashley was voicing everyone’s worries, he didn’t want Scully to think about that right now. “It’s clean I swear,” he added, holding up a gray t-shirt of his. Scully had wanted something remotely comfortable to give birth in, and it looked as though that was the only option.

“That’s great,” said Scully, feeling another contraction already on its way. She grimaced, and immediately reached out, taking hold of Ashley’s hand.

“Ow!” Ashley exclaimed. “That hurts.”

“You should try childbirth,” Scully uttered through gritted teeth, and Mulder had to smile. Not that he dare let Scully see of course – he’d heard stories of pregnant women in labor, and he knew that if she thought he was laughing at her, she’d find her gun and shoot him – labor or no labor. His smile soon faded however when he looked down at his eyes caught sight of the warden’s neck beneath her shirt and he noticed the bumps on her skin. She wasn’t human, he realized with horror. She wasn’t human and Scully and the baby were in danger. They’d found them, despite the fact they’d taken care not to be followed. He glanced back up at Scully, hoping to get her attention, but of course she was preoccupied. Ashley was focusing on her mom, and Mulder knew it was up to him. He waited until Scully’s contraction was over before he seized his opportunity. “Let’s get you changed Scully,” he said, taking the t-shirt over to her. “Can we have a minute?” he asked the warden.

“Mulder,” Scully sighed. “It’s ok.” All thoughts of her modesty were now out of the window.

He shook his head. “It’s ok. You don’t mind, do you?” he asked, and the woman reluctantly shook
her head. She turned around and wandered away from the bed, still staying in the room, but out of earshot. Mulder immediately rushed over to the bed and started helping Scully with her clothes. “We need to get out of here,” he whispered to both Ashley and Scully.

“What? Mulder –“

“Ssssh,” he warned Scully. “We don’t have much time. It’s not safe here.”

“The baby is coming,” she hissed back. “We can’t leave.”

Deep down he knew that. “Ok,” he sighed, trying to rack his brain for ideas. “Whatever happens, I need you both to stay calm.” Ashley looked anything but. “Ash, you need to do what I say, ok? And if I tell you to run, you run.”

“What’s happening?” Ashley asked.

“Are we ready?” The warden interrupted, turning round to see that Scully was now clad in the shirt.

“Yeah,” Mulder said, forcing a smile. “We’re ready.”

xxxxxxxxxx

Mulder wandered back into the room carrying a bucket of cold water, eyeing the warden carefully as he set it alongside a tub of boiling water. He’d been reluctant to leave Scully and Ashley alone with her while he went to get the water, but labor was taking its toll on his partner, and she needed refreshments. He handed the woman a glass of water. “Here you go.”

He watched as she handed the water to Scully, who gratefully took a sip. “Thank you.”

Without warning, Mulder suddenly picked up the bucket of boiling water, and flung it into the warden’s face. As she screamed in agony, he pulled out his gun and pointed it at her. “Move!”

“Mulder?” Scully asked, clearly confused. She was in no fit state to argue though as another contraction hit her.

“Move out of here!” Mulder ordered the warden, and followed her as she crawled towards the door.

“What’s happening?” Scully called.

“Mulder?”

At Ashley’s words, Mulder called back. “Stay with your mom Ash. I’ll be right back.” He turned back to the woman, frowning at her. “Who are you?” He looked up as he saw cars approaching the building. They were no longer alone.

“This baby will be born,” said the warden, her face blistering from the hot water.

Mulder lowered the gun, visibly shocked as he noticed figures get out of the vehicles and approach the building. Their efforts to go into hiding were all for nothing. And now here they were, in the middle of nowhere, and Scully was about to give birth with no medical supplies. He tried counting the number of bodies approaching him but soon lost count – they were outnumbered for sure, and Mulder didn’t have a clue how they were going to get through this. As though realizing what was going on outside, Scully let out a scream, and Ashley’s voice rang out. “Mulder!”

Coming to his senses, Mulder ran back into the building, to his partner. Scully was gripping
Ashley’s hand tightly, groaning as a particularly strong contraction ripped through her. “What’s happening?” she asked Mulder as he settled himself down in between Scully’s legs. Her labor was advancing quickly, and he knew the baby would be with them soon. Their son had inherited his poor sense of timing, he thought to himself sadly. “It’s ok Dana,” he said; the use of her first name only serving to worry her further.

“What….? What…?”

“It’s going to be ok.” Mulder held his gun out towards Ashley. “Ash, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Mulder, what the hell is going on?” Scully demanded.

He chose to ignore her. “If anyone comes within a foot of you or your mom, I want you to fire this, ok?”

“Mulder, she is twelve years’ old, she can’t –“ Scully paused, Billy Miles entered the room, a group of people following him. “No!” she groaned.

With shaking hands, Ashley took hold of the gun. “Baby I’m sorry to even ask you,” Mulder continued. “But your mom is about to give birth. These people are not human. If they come any closer, you shoot them and you run, ok? Run and don’t look back. Do you understand?”

After a moment, a trembling Ashley nodded, eyeing the strangers with fear.

As he placed a hand on Scully’s leg, Mulder felt her tense, and knew another contraction was on the way. “It’s ok Scully,” he encouraged. “You’ve got this.” He tried not to think about the people behind him; the people who wanted to take his son. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ashley with the gun trained on them, and once again he felt awful for how her life had turned out.

“This is my baby,” Scully uttered as the contraction threatened to overcome her.

“You’ve got to push Dana.” Mulder looked down and could see what appeared to be the makings of the baby’s head. Not long to go. He swallowed hard. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to happen.

“Please don’t let them take him!” she pleaded, and Mulder felt his heart break.

“I’m not going to. Scully you need to push.”

“Please Mulder, please don’t let this happen.”

“Push.”

“Please –“

As Scully screamed, Mulder saw the baby’s head begin to emerge. It was happening. Realizing that Scully was too focused on the people standing behind him, he abandoned his position temporarily, reaching up to cup her cheeks. “Scully,” he said as he brushed away her tears. “You need to push,” he urged her. “Pretend they’re not here.”

“They’re going to take him,” she whimpered.

“No, I’m not going to let them. You need to put them out of your head, and focus on delivering the baby.”

“But –“
“They’re not here Scully,” he continued. “They’re not here. It’s just us. It’s just you, me and Ashley and pretty soon our son.”

Scully shook her head. “Please don’t let this happen.”

“I won’t, I won’t. I promise you. Now the baby is coming, and you need to push. I promise you it’ll be over soon, but first you need to do this. Ok?”

Fresh tears falling, Scully nodded.

“Ok, when you feel your next contra –“ Mulder could see by the fear in Scully’s eyes that the contraction was already on its way. “Push Scully!”

“He’s mine!” She screamed, as she bore down.

“Harder! Harder Scully!”

Mulder could feel eyes watching him, but he didn’t turn around; his focus on Scully and the baby in front of him. To her right he could see Ashley standing rigid, the gun still trained on the strangers. The baby’s shoulders were almost out now, and Scully was pushing hard; her body betraying her wish to keep her son safe. He tried to recall what they’d been taught at Lamaze class.

“Keep breathing Dana, keep breathing.”

“Please don’t let them take him!”

“Push! Push! Push Scully push!”

Scully did as he said, straining hard as the baby’s shoulders finally emerged, followed by the rest of him. Mulder took him into his arms, working to clear his airways. “He’s here,” he breathed, as though Scully didn’t know that she’d finally pushed the baby out. Before he could say anything more, the baby suddenly took a deep breath and let out a shrill cry. Mulder let out a nervous laugh as he realized the baby was ok – more than ok – and was making his presence known.

Scully sank back on the bed, her eyes never leaving Billy Miles. She was exhausted, completely and utterly exhausted, but she would still kill anyone who tried to take her son.

“Ok, ok,” Mulder soothed the baby, wrapping him in a warm towel. Through watery eyes he lifted the baby and transferred him to Scully’s arms before kissing her forehead. Scully’s face crumpled as the tears began to fall and the reality set in. They had their baby. The two of them were so transfixed on their son that they didn’t register what was happening until they heard Ashley gasp.

Mulder spun round quickly, preparing to launch himself at whoever was coming for the baby. What he certainly didn’t expect to see was Billy Miles walking out of the room, a line of people moving to follow him. They were leaving. Whatever they were hoping for hadn’t happened, and so they were leaving empty handed. It was then he heard the sounds of the helicopter. He turned back to look at Scully, smiling in relief. “You hear that?” he asked her. “Help is on its way.”

As the helicopter drew nearer, Mulder rose from the floor and hurried out of the building. He was relieved to see Agents Doggett and Reyes running toward him.

“Mulder!”

He looked into their concerned faces.
“How is she?” Reyes asked.

“She’s inside,” he replied. “She needs to get to the hospital.”

He ushered them inside, needing their help to get Scully, Ashley and the baby to be named later to the helicopter. Ashley trained the gun on them as they entered, and all three adults stopped in their tracks.

“Ash, it’s us,” Mulder said calmly, sensing Doggett raising his hands next to him. Reyes tensed beside him. Mulder could tell she didn’t quite believe him, so he turned and offered her the back of his neck. “You see? It’s me, it’s Mulder.” As he turned back, he was relieved to see she’d lowered the gun. His attention immediately went to Scully. “Hey, I brought reinforcements,” he said tenderly as he approached her on the bed. His heart contracted as he took in the sight of her holding the baby. Their baby.

“What about Billy?” she asked wearily, her voice hoarse from her labor.

“He’s gone. They’ve all gone.” Fresh tears threatened to spill from Scully’s eyes. “There’s a helicopter outside to get you guys to the hospital.” He bent down as he prepared to lift her, then glanced back at Ashley. “Ash, you ready to go?”

Ashley stared straight ahead, transfixed. Mulder’s words fell on deaf ears.

“Ashley?”

She was in shock he realized. Her body was shaking and tears welled up in her eyes.

As Mulder looked over at Doggett, the other agent nodded. “You get her. I’ll bring Dana.”

Had they had more time and not been in danger, Mulder would have commended on the use of Scully’s first name. Instead he pulled back the back of Doggett’s collar, breathing a sigh of relief as he was greeted with pink skin. “Just checking,” he murmured. “You take care of them,” he warned moments later. The threat was evident in his voice.

“Of course,” Doggett assured him, and then after Reyes took hold of the baby, he bent to lift Scully into his arms. Mulder meanwhile approached Ashley, who was still holding the gun by her side. “Ash? It’s me.” She said nothing; her entire frame shaking. “Ash, it’s ok. You can put the gun down now baby. They’ve gone. We’re safe. Agent Doggett and Monica are here to help. Everything’s going to be just fine. We can go now.” Still nothing. Mulder carefully reached down and took hold of the gun, taking care to make no sudden movements. He was relieved when Ashley relinquished it without a struggle. “Everything’s ok baby,” he said, returning the gun to the holster and then taking hold of her hand. “You saved us. I’m so proud of you. So proud. We’re going to get you and your mom to the hospital now, and then we can go home.”

Finally she looked at him, registering his presence. “Mulder?”

He smiled sadly. “Yeah, it’s me sweetheart. C’mon, let’s get you out of here.” Without warning he bent and lifted her into his arms as though she was a child. Ashley immediately wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in the crook of her neck, just like she always did. Mulder swallowed the lump in his throat. “I love you baby,” he said, following Doggett, Reyes, Scully and the baby out of the building and towards the helicopter. To safety.

To be continued.
Mulder had never been so glad to see a hospital in his entire life. Thankfully the helicopter ride was relatively short, and it seemed as though he and Ash had no sooner taken their seats when they were landing on the rooftop of the hospital. The nursing staff were already waiting for them, and as soon as they landed they were loading Scully and the baby onto a stretcher and hurrying her inside. Mulder followed closely behind, Ashley still in his arms. She hadn’t uttered a word during the journey; her head tucked in the crook of his neck as she shook against him. As Mulder carried her inside, he suddenly realized he was being pulled in two directions – Ashley needed to be checked out, while Scully and the baby were also going to be examined.

“Mulder?”

Scully called from in front of him. He turned to Agents Doggett and Reyes and caught Monica’s eye. “Monica, will you go with Ashley?” When she nodded, he lowered Ashley to the floor, and bent down to look at her. “Ash, Monica is going to get you checked over by a doctor ok? I need to go with your mom but I’ll be back with you very shortly.” Ashley sniffed, then nodded. “Good girl.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Monica will stay with you, ok? You can trust her. I’ll see you soon.”

Standing up straight, he glanced back at Agent Reyes. “Take care of her,” he warned, then trotted down the corridor back towards Scully. She was taken into an examination room, and a nurse stepped forward to try and take the baby from her. “Mulder!”

“I’m here,” he called.

“Go with him.”

Doing as he was told, Mulder followed the nurse and his son, watching as she began examining him. The baby wasn’t too keen on the stranger handling him, and made his discomfort known. Smiling to himself, Mulder finally allowed himself to get a good look at the baby. He was relieved to see what appeared to be Scully and Ashley’s nose – thankfully his son hadn’t inherited his own. He also seemed to have Scully’s colouring – fair hair was suddenly tucked beneath a tiny hat as the baby was wrapped up. Suddenly the woman picked up the baby and turned towards Mulder. “Eight pounds and five inches, 52 centimetres long. A healthy baby boy. Congratulations dad.” With that she transferred the baby into Mulder’s arms, just about rendering him speechless in the process. How his legs didn’t give out, Mulder didn’t know, but he was just grateful he didn’t drop the baby. His son. He was holding his son. Baby Mulder had fallen back to sleep; no doubt taking after his mom and sister in his ability to sleep anywhere. Mulder looked down into his son’s face. Scully’s nose for sure, and her chin too. He was perfect.

Blinking back tears, Mulder looked up at Scully, noting that the medical staff seemed to have almost finished with their examination. He carefully walked over to her bedside, every so often glancing down at the baby to make sure he was ok – and to remind himself that it was really happening. Scully grinned over at him as she saw him approaching. She looked exhausted, but Mulder had never seen her look so beautiful. She was the mother of his child – his children – and she was so damn brave, and Mulder fell in love with her all over again. As he reached her side and the baby came into view, tears glistened in her eyes.

“Hey mom,” Mulder said softly, passing his son over to her. He perched on the mattress next to her, then moved to kiss her lips.
“Hey dad,” she said as he pulled away, her voice breaking. “Is he ok?”

Mulder nodded, grinning at her words. “He’s perfect.”

Mulder found Ashley in the waiting room, curled up on the sofa next to Agent Reyes, with her legs tucked under her body. She looked exhausted, and petrified. Her eyes met his as he entered the room. “Hey sweetheart,” he said softly, heading over to take a seat next to her. “How are you doing?” He waited for her to drift into his arms, but she remained firmly upright.

“I’m fine.”

She was so much like her mom. She was anything but fine. “I’ll leave you guys to it,” said Reyes, getting to her feet. “Ashley’s been given the all-clear. How’s Dana?”

“She’s ok.”

“I might go and check on her.”

“She’d like that,” Mulder said, and after squeezing Ashley’s shoulder, Reyes left the room. Mulder turned his attention to Ashley. “Your mom and the baby are settled in now. They’re doing great, no thanks to you.” She shrugged. “Your mom wants to see you before I take you to a motel.”

"Why aren’t we going home together?" Ashley asked.

"The doctor just wants your mom to stay in hospital for a few days. It's the same for anyone who's just had a baby. We’re hoping she can be transferred back to DC tomorrow. Your mom is going to be absolutely fine Ash." She said nothing. "You know, I’m so proud of you for what you did tonight,” Mulder continued. "I asked a lot of you, but you did it so well. You were so brave Ash, so brave, and your mom and I can't thank you enough.”

That was all Ashley needed to burst into tears. Instantly Mulder pulled her into his arms, holding her tight as finally her fear and emotion spilled out. For someone so young, she'd been to hell and back, not least barely two hours ago when she was forced to hold a gun and protect the lives of her mother and baby brother. Jeez, Mulder thought to himself, it was a wonder she still tolerated being in the same room as him, after everything he'd put her through.

"It's ok,” he murmured, brushing a hand through her hair, his lips moving to press against her warm forehead. "It's going to be ok.”

"I was so scared!” She cried, her body convulsing with heavy sobs.

"I know you were. I'm so sorry for even putting you in that situation.” He and Scully figured Ashley would be safer with them. They should have known better - she should have gone to Maggie's instead; that way she wouldn't have had to stand guard against a room full of super soldiers all after her baby brother. She'd have been blissfully unaware back in Baltimore.

“I thought they were going to kill us.”

“I know. I did too.” At least, he thought they were going to kill the baby. “But they didn’t, and that’s because of you. You were so brave,” he murmured against her warm forehead. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that, I really am.”

Ashley said nothing, instead grabbing Mulder tightly, her tears soaking his shirt. Her fingers were
digging into his skin, but he didn’t care – if it reassure her, that was all that mattered. It seemed like an age before she finally quietened and pulled away to look at him with heavy eyes. “Can we go soon?”

“Of course we can. We’ll just say goodnight to your mom and brother.” The word still felt foreign to Mulder, but he liked the sound of it.

“Is mom going to be safe here?”

“She is,” he assured her. “Her room is being guarded and no one can get to them. We’re safe now. Those people are gone and they’re not coming back.” He hoped not anyway. “C’mon,” he added, helping Ashley to her feet. “Let’s go meet your brother.”

As Ashley and Mulder approached Scully’s room, Doggett and a fellow agent, who were standing guard on the door, sprung to attention. Doggett relaxed as Mulder quickly turned, showing him the back of his neck, and then he turned to speak to Ashley. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m ok,” she replied solemnly.

Reaching out, Doggett placed his hand on Ashley’s shoulder. “No you’re not,” he said softly. “But you will be.”

Ashley’s eyes filled with tears. “Can I see my mom?”

“Of course,” he answered, stepping aside. “She’s been waiting for you.”

Stepping forward, Ashley opened the door to Scully’s room, with Mulder right behind her. Scully glanced up, a relieved smile forming when she recognized her visitors. “Hi baby,” she said in greeting to her first born, who promptly burst into tears. “Oh sweetheart.” Holding the baby in one arm, Scully reached out with the other, and Ashley immediately ran over for a hug. “It’s ok.”

“I was so scared.”

“I know, I was too.” Scully glanced over the top of her daughter’s head towards Mulder, giving him a worried look. “But it’s ok now. They’ve gone and we’re all safe.”

“What if they come back?”

“We’ve got a lot of people looking out for us now,” said Mulder, walking over towards the bed to sit down next to Ashley. “They wouldn’t dare come back.” He glanced down at the tiny bundle in Scully’s arms – his son, he reminded himself yet again – and couldn’t help but smile at the sight. Scully was nursing the baby, and it appeared that Mulder Junior took after his dad appetite-wise. Mulder’s heart contracted as he caught Scully’s gaze and she returned his smile. His family – his whole world – were next to him on the bed, and he wasn’t going to let anyone harm them. They’d had more than their fair share of suffering, and it was time they were finally given a break.

“Promise?” Ashley turned to look at Mulder, still in her mom’s embrace. She sounded so much like the Ashley he’d first met; young Ashley who’d put her faith in him from the word ‘go’ and truly believed he would keep her safe. He wasn’t going to let her down.

“I promise that I won’t let anyone hurt you. Don’t worry Ash,” he said, reaching out to wipe a tear from her eye. “You’re safe. We all are –“ He was interrupted as the baby stopped suckling and shifted in Scully’s arms. All three pairs of eyes fixed on him, and his parents shared a smile. Scully
released her grasp on Ashley to adjust her gown, and Ashley immediately got to her feet. “Can we go?” she suddenly asked Mulder.

“Hmmm?”

“I’m tired.”

Mulder eyed her cautiously. “Ok,” he said, a moment later. “Let’s go find a motel.”

And as Ashley said goodbye to her mom, Mulder realized that not everyone was excited about the new baby.

xxxxxxx

Mulder pressed the channel button on the remote, sighing when another commercial greeted him. It was just past midnight, but he was still too wired to sleep – the events of the past few days catching up with him.

He was a father. The baby – his baby – was now a little over 24 hours old, and he and Scully were now safely in hospital back in DC, having transferred back earlier that afternoon. Mulder and Ashley had stayed with Scully for a little while before heading to Mulder’s apartment at Ashley’s insistence. Now Ashley was fast asleep in Mulder’s bedroom – or so he thought – while Mulder was out on the sofa, wide awake and thinking. He had a son. A healthy, beautiful baby son, who thankfully seemed to have inherited his mom and sister’s looks. And Mulder had Ashley too – his other child as far as he was concerned, though she’d been incredibly subdued since they left Georgia. Whether it was the shock of what had happened during the baby’s birth, or just the fact she now felt put out by her brother’s arrival he wasn’t sure, but he was determined to get to the bottom of it. He hated to see her so upset.

As though she knew he was thinking about her, Ashley suddenly padded out into the living room. Mulder muted the TV and set down the remote. “Hey. What are you doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she sniffed, making her way round to sit on the sofa.

“Did you have a nightmare?”

Ashley shook her head. “Not tonight. Why aren’t you asleep?”

Mulder smiled thinly. “I couldn’t sleep either.”

“So you’re watching TV?”

“I’m trying to find something good on.”

“Can I watch with you?”

Mulder thought about being a responsible parent and telling her to go back to bed, but he knew it wouldn’t happen. “Just for a bit,” he said as a compromise. “You ok?”

Ashley sighed. “Sometimes when I close my eyes I still see those people.”

“Me too.”

“What did they want?”

“I don’t know. I think they thought that your brother was something he’s not.”
“Like what?”

It was hardly suitable bedtime conversation. “They thought he was special. It doesn’t matter what they thought though. What matters is that they left, and they’re not coming back.” He hoped they wouldn’t come back. He’d be ready for them just in case.

“Why did they leave?”

“I don’t know.” As Ashley leaned in towards him, Mulder put his arm around her, smiling as she snuggled up against him. He rearranged the comforter so it was covering her too. “I’m sorry you had to go through that…both you and your mom. I promise you though that it’s going to be different from now on. You guys have been through so much crap because of me, but not anymore. You’ve got a new baby brother now, and it’s going to be a new start for us.”

“Does that mean everything’s going to change?” He could hear the concern in her voice.

“Not at all,” Mulder assured her. “You’re still going to have to put up with me.”

“That’s good,” Ashley replied as she scooted down, resting her head on Mulder’s leg. As she settled down, he began running a hand through her hair.

“Oh you say that now…” he joked.

“Can we do something fun tomorrow?”

“Umm…I’m supposed to pick your mom up from the hospital.”

“Grandma could do it?”

He wanted to spend time with Scully and the baby, but he also knew Ashley needed to spend time with him, to make her feel better and wanted too. “I’ll call her in the morning.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “Maybe we could go to a baseball game soon. Like old times,” she said sleepily, her eyelids growing heavy.

Mulder smiled to himself. “Sounds like a plan.”

Satisfied, Ashley closed her eyes. It was clear something was on her mind, but she wasn’t going to say anything. Mulder would talk to her about it soon, he told himself. As he continued to stroke her hair, Mulder watched as Ashley slowly drifted off to sleep. Despite the fact he was still on a high, Mulder closed his eyes, and it wasn’t long before he joined her.
Mulder unlocked the door to Scully’s apartment, taking care not to make too much noise. He figured that perhaps she, the baby and Ashley may be taking a nap – after all, they were all exhausted. He’d spent the morning with Ashley at the zoo, trying to cheer her up but to no avail. She was brighter than she had been the previous day though, and seemed to be glad to be spending time with Mulder. He noticed though that when he spoke about them buying a toy from the gift shop for the baby, she went quiet once again. After the two of them grabbed lunch, Mulder dropped Ashley off at her grandma’s, as Maggie wanted the youngster to go with her to pick Scully and the baby up from the hospital. He returned to his apartment via the mall, wanting to buy some gifts for them before heading home. After pottering about in his apartment for a while, and getting sick of his own company, he jumped back into his car and headed over to Scully’s. Maggie had obviously left, as her car was nowhere to be seen, but as Mulder headed into Scully’s apartment, he realized they weren’t alone. The Gunmen were visiting her and the baby, and as they caught sight of Mulder, they said their goodbyes and made their way out into the living room.

“We didn’t hear you come in,” said Frohike.

“We were just dropping off gifts,” Langly added.

“We just wanted to—”

“See it with your own eyes?” Mulder interrupted Byers. The baby was a miracle, but not in the way that Billy Miles and the others thought.

“It’s incredible you know?” said Frohike. “You delivering the baby. Doggett and Reyes arriving in time to save Scully. Getting her to a hospital.”

“We still don’t know how they did it.”

Mulder smiled. “There was a light. They followed it.”

“Guess we got our next headline,” Langly commented, as the Gunmen placed their gifts on the table and then left. Pausing for a moment, Mulder continued towards Scully’s bedroom, grinning widely as he saw his partner sat on the edge of the bed, the baby, bundled in blankets, in her arms.

“How’s everybody doing?” he asked, and Scully smiled up at him.

“We’re doing just fine.”

Getting to her feet, Scully carried the baby over to Mulder. He lifted the blanket away from the baby’s face, wanting a good look at his son. His son. It was the first time he’d managed to study his son in full detail, without medical staff or Ashley interrupting. “Hi.”

The baby began to fuss. “None of that,” said Mulder as Scully transferred the baby into his eager arms. He grinned widely as he managed not to drop the baby. No sooner was his son in his arms, then he stopped fussing. Mulder had the magic touch. “Hi.” He glanced up at Scully. “What are you going to call him?” He’d asked her about names in the hospital, but at that point Scully hadn’t made a firm decision. Apparently she’d had time to think about it.

“William...after your father.” Scully’s smile widened as Mulder took in the news.

William. A good, strong, traditional name. A family name – both Scully and his own fathers’
names.

“Well, I don’t know. He’s…he’s got your coloring and your eyes. But he looks suspiciously like Assistant Director Skinner.”

They both laughed.

“I don’t understand Mulder,” Scully continued, her smile fading. “They came to take him from us – why they didn’t.”

“I don’t quite understand that either. Except that maybe he isn’t what they thought he was. That doesn’t make him any less of a miracle though, does it?”

“From the moment I became pregnant, I feared the truth…about how….and why. And I know that you feared it too.”

“I think what we feared were the possibilities. The truth we both know.”

“What is that?”

The truth was, William was a healthy baby boy, born not from an experiment but the traditional way. William ate, he slept, he pooped and he cried – he was human. He was Mulder and Scully’s son – nothing else. Wordlessly Mulder closed the gap between them, still holding the baby, and kissed his partner on the lips. Scully returned the embrace, reaching out to cup his arm.

The two of them sprung apart as William began to fuss as though he didn’t like to be left out, and Mulder beamed down at his son, still finding it hard to believe he was finally here. “Jealous William?” he cooed. “You’ve got to learn to share your mom.”

Scully grinned. “I forgot this part where my body’s not my own for the next few months. Not that I mind,” she added. “He’s worth it.”

“He certainly is.” Their little miracle, all eight pounds and five ounces of him, wrapped up in Mulder’s arms. Mulder wasn’t sure it could get better than that.

“Where’s Ash?” He asked, realizing the apartment was quiet.

“In her room.” Something in Scully’s tone made him look up, concerned.

“Is she ok?”

“Just quiet. She’s hardly come out of her room since she’s been home. I think she feels a little put out.” Before Mulder could quiz her further, William began to fuss once more, his face red as he prepared to let out a wail. “I think he’s hungry,” Scully murmured, wondering just how much such a little thing could eat. “He takes after you in that respect.”

Reluctantly Mulder handed the baby back to his mom, already missing his warmth. “I’ll ignore that comment and go talk to Ash, while you feed the little man here.” He made no effort to move, instead following Scully as she wandered back over to the bed and gingerly sat down, wincing as she made herself comfortable, unbuttoning her pajama top. “You ok?”

“Just a little sore. It’s what happens when he inherits daddy’s big fat head too.”

“You’re just too kind,” Mulder replied, amused, as he bent to kiss her cheek. William latched on immediately and Scully sighed in relief. Before emotion took hold of Mulder, he straightened up.
“I’ll be right back.”

Ashley’s door was pulled to, and though it wasn’t closed, the meaning was clear. Knocking lightly, Mulder pushed open the door, frowning as he saw the youngster stretched out face down on the bed, her head turned away from him. Music sounded out from her CD player, but he knew she’d heard him from the way her body tensed. “Can I come in?” Silence. “Ashley?”

“You’re going to anyway.”

As he stepped into her room, Ashley made no attempt to move. Whatever he’d done, Mulder thought, he was in the dog house. “I was just checking you’re ok.”

“I’m fine.” She was less convincing than her mom was when she tried that feeble lie.

“You’re quiet. Don’t you want to come out into the living room with us? Your mom’s just feeding William, but she’ll be out soon, and I thought we could get takeout.”

“I’m not hungry.” Still she didn’t budge, and he could hear the accusation in her voice. “You guys go.”

“Ash…” Sighing heavily, Mulder tried again. “There’s a little baby out there who’d like to meet his big sister.”

“I’ve met him already.”

He knew where she was going with this. “I’d like to spend some time with you too.”

“We spent time together this morning. Besides, you’re busy with William.” His suspicions were right.

“I’m never too busy for you.” Mulder took a seat on the bed, perched on the edge of the mattress, and rested his hand on her back. Still she didn’t move. “I know what this is about, why you’re being quiet with me, and so I just thought I’d let you know that you’re wrong.”

At this, Ashley shifted to look up at him, her eyes narrowing. “What do you mean? I didn’t say anything.”

“I know, that’s the problem.” Mulder ignored Ashley’s roll of the eyes. “You know that your mom loves you don’t you? I know she’s busy at the moment, but that doesn’t mean she loves you any less. William’s just a baby and babies are very demanding.” After a moment, Ashley nodded, though her eyes no longer held his. “And you know that I still love you.” This time she shrugged, and Mulder noticed with horror that tears glistened in her eyes. “Oh Ash.” Taking hold of her hand, Mulder pulled the reluctant youngster into a sitting position, and wrapped his arms around her as she began to cry. “I know that William is my son and I love him, but I love you too. I don’t feel any different towards him than I do you, and as far as I’m concerned, you’re my child just as much as William is.”

“You’re just saying that,” she hiccups against him, though Mulder felt her tighten her hold of him.

“Really? You really think I’d let just any kid vomit down me? Or let just anyone put make up on me?”
“That was ages ago.”

“What about today? You think I’d go to the zoo with just anyone? Or baseball? You’re my baseball buddy.”

“For now,” she said, somewhat bitterly. “Until William’s older.”

“And then we’ll all go together. Just because your brother’s here, it doesn’t mean I’m going to ignore you. You know I think the world of you Ash, and nothing’s going to change that, ok? I’m still going to be here for you, and go to baseball with you and listen to you and your friends gossip about whether your mom and I are going to get married.”

“Are you going to get married?” She asked, her voice muffled against his t-shirt.

“One step at a time eh?” It wasn’t that he hadn’t thought about it – it had been on his mind ever since William had been born, but he knew he and Scully needed to get their heads around the new addition to the family before they made things official.

“Are you going to move in?”

“That’s up to you and your mom.” It was something else he and Scully hadn’t spoken about.

“I hope you do.”

“Does this mean you believe me? You’re my girl, you know that don’t you?”

After a moment she nodded, and Mulder let out a sigh of relief. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“My dad was happier without me, so I thought you might be too.”

Her words made Mulder never want to let go of her. Ashley had been through so much, she’d been hurt so many times and seemed to be waiting for the next bad thing to happen to her. He’d spend the rest of his life protecting her if he could. “Never. Your dad was –“


“I think we established not so long ago that you’re not allowed to use that word, but yes, he was in a way. But he gave me you, so I guess I have that to be thankful for. And you have to remember that I’m not him. I’m going to be here for you guys, for your mom and William and you forever, ok? Even in a couple of years’ time when you think that everything I say and do is embarrassing, I’m still going to be here, because I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Sensing movement to his left, Mulder looked up to see Scully standing in the doorway, a sated William now asleep in her arms. Judging from her soft expression, Mulder knew she’d heard their exchange. “Can we interrupt?”

“Sure.” Mulder shifted on the bed to make room for his partner, but made no effort to let go of Ashley. Scully sat to his left, and with her free hand reached out to take hold of Ashley’s. “Are you ok sweetheart?”

Ashley nodded sheepishly against Mulder’s chest. “Hey,” he murmured in her ear. “There’s a little guy here who’d like to meet his big sister properly, what do you say?”
“I might drop him,” she replied uncertainly.

“That’s what I thought too when I first held him, but it’s ok, you won’t.”

With Mulder’s encouragement, Ashley let go of him and sat back on the bed. Scully got up and walked over towards her then carefully transferred William into her daughter’s arms. “There you go,” Scully commented as she made her way back to sit next to Mulder. He caught her eye and grinned, relieved that Ashley was ok, that she was finally taking an interest in William, and that she knew she was still important to both Mulder and Scully. “You’re a natural.”

“Not too much of a natural though,” Mulder warned.

“He’s so small,” commented Ashley.

“You were even smaller.”

“Really?” Ashley didn’t even take her eyes off of her brother; she was mesmerized.

“Uh huh. William looks a lot like you did at that age though.”

Thankfully, thought Mulder. It appeared their son was going to take after his mom and sister in the looks department, though if his long length was anything to go by, he was going to inherit Mulder’s height. “So what do you think?” He asked. “Shall we keep him?”

After a moment Ashley nodded, her face breaking out into a smile. “Yeah,” she answered, pressing her lips to William’s forehead. “Let’s keep him.”

xxxxxxxxx

Mulder looked down at his son, smiling to himself as William shifted in his arms, letting out a tiny yawn. It was amazing, he thought, just how quickly he fell in love with the little boy. William had only been in their lives for a few days, and Mulder knew he’d do anything for him. Even Ashley, after pretending not to be interested in her new brother, now thought the world of him. She’d barely put him down that evening – not even to eat her dinner. It was only when her eyes began to droop and Scully ordered her to bed that she relinquished hold of him. It was amazing the difference a few hours made.

“Don’t tell me you’re tired already? You’ve only just woken up. It’s a tough life being a baby.” William looked directly at his father, frowning, and Mulder laughed. “You know, you look just like your mom there, just before she’s about to lay in to me for not doing my expense reports.” William looked a lot like Scully. “So, right now I feel I should be imparting important worldly advice onto you, but I don’t think I’m the best person for that. Your mom knows a lot more than I do. What I will say though, is always listen to your mom. She knows what she’s talking about, and…” he whispered conspiratorially… “don’t tell her this, but she’s often right.”

William whimpered. “It’s ok, your mom will be out soon. Just give her a minute to get herself together.” William didn’t look too happy at this prospect. “I’ve no idea what she does in there, but I’ve discovered it’s best not to ask. Don’t try and figure women out Will, it’s too complicated. Just nod and smile where your mom and Ash are concerned. Especially Ash. She can be quite bossy sometimes, but we love her for it. Just don’t spit up down her hair else she’ll hate you for it. In fact don’t touch her hair period. She’s cool though, and she’s going to be a great big sister for you, but I think you already know that. You’re very lucky in that respect, and incredibly lucky with your mom. She’s smart, kind, and she’ll do anything for you. She loves you so much and she always will.”
When William began to fuss once again, Mulder began rocking him gently, smiling as William grabbed hold of his finger and squeezed it. “She’s strong too, just like you. And then there’s me. I’m not entirely sure how to do this ‘dad’ business, but I promise you I’ll do my best. I know I was scared when I found out about you, but that was me, nothing to do with you. I didn’t exactly have the best relationship with my parents, especially my dad, and I don’t want that to happen to you. I don’t want to be a bad father. So for what it’s worth, I love you, I approve of you and I will always be there for you, no matter what happens. Even when you become a bratty teenager and swear you hate me, or get into trouble. I’m your dad and I love you. We’ll get through it and –” Mulder huffed out a laugh as William began sucking on his t-shirt, wriggling in his arms. “Ok, ok, your mom will be here soon.”

“I’m here.” Mulder looked up to see Scully in the doorway. She’d been there a while he realized, but had been unwilling to interrupt his chat to their son. She made her way across the room and settled herself in the bed next to Mulder, who handed William over to her. Within seconds he was in her arms and feeding contentedly, while Scully let out a relieved sigh.

“He does eat a lot,” Mulder commented, rolling onto his side to watch them.

“Like I said, he’s just like you.” Scully grinned down at him. “Mulder, you could never be a bad father.”

“Never say never Scully.”

“You need to trust yourself. I do. Ashley does, and I’m pretty sure she’ll tell William just how much of a good dad you are. You’ve already proven yourself.”

Mulder smiled thinly. He certainly loved William, and knew he’d do everything he could to protect him – just like he would Ashley and Scully. “Hey Scully?” he asked moments later.

“Hmm?”

Mulder reached out, tracing light circles over her hand. “Marry me.”

Scully rolled her eyes in a move that surprised him. “You did not just ask me that.”

“I did.”

“Mulder.”

“What?”

“You don’t mean it – “

“Of course I do! I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t mean it.” He sighed. “I’m guessing it’s a no then. Again.”

“It’s…” Scully tried to find the right words. “It’s not an outright no.”

“No?”

“No. It’s a ‘ask me later’ no.”

Mulder finally allowed himself to smile. “Ask you later?”

“Ask me later when I’m no longer sleep-deprived or leaking or unable to sit down properly. Ask me when I’ve at least had a shower.”
He huffed out a laugh, and leaned up to kiss her cheek. “You smell good though.”

“Mulder –“

“I know, I know. I guess I’ll just have to keep asking then.”

“I guess you will.”

“You’re going to keep me around for a while then?”

Scully pretended to think. “I guess we will do. Right William?” William had nodded off and was now fast asleep. “He agrees.” She grinned. “Mulder?” she asked a moment later, after she’d re-buttoned her gown. “How would you feel about moving in?”

“Moving in where?”

Scully eyed her partner cautiously, then reached out and slapped him when she realized he was joking – he knew exactly what she was talking about. “William and I, and I’m sure I speak for Ashley too, would like you to move in with us. Here. At least until we get a bigger place.”

“I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

“Good.”

“Does that mean we’re going steady now?”

Scully chuckled. “I guess it does. Unless…” she paused, her expression serious once again. “If you have any doubts.”

“No, no doubts.” Sitting up, he pressed his lips against hers, before moving to kiss William’s crown. “No doubts at all. I want this.”

“Good.” Scully then handed William over to his dad. “In that case you get diaper duty next time.”

Groaning, Mulder got out of bed and padded over to the moses basket, carefully laying William down in it. “Forget everything I said Will,” he joked, making his way back to the bed. “Your mom’s evil. And asleep,” he added quietly, noticing that Scully’s eyes were already closed, her breathing even. Amazed at her ability to sleep, but also not surprised given the fact she was exhausted, Mulder crawled in next to her then flicked out the light, before closing his eyes and drifting off himself.
Chapter 128

Scully jolted awake, her eyes immediately fixing on the moses basket to her right. She noticed with horror that it was empty, that William wasn’t there, and her mind flashed back onto the dream she’d just woken from. Well, it was more of a nightmare. She’d been in labor, but this time Billy Miles had taken her son. Mulder had been powerless to stop him, and Scully had to look on helplessly as William was taken from her sight. She shivered at the memory of it all.

“Hey.” A voice to her left rang out, and Scully let out a shaky breath as she turned to see Mulder sat up in bed next to her, William cradled in his arms. Mulder looked concerned as he saw Scully’s eyes fill with tears. “Bad dream?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah.”

“He’s safe Scully,” he replied as she shifted herself into a seated position, leaning over to see for herself, that William, clad only in his diaper, was indeed fine, and currently fast asleep in his father’s arms. “He woke up about twenty minutes ago for a diaper change, which wasn’t incident free.”

Scully’s eyes met his. “What happened?”

“Let’s just say that William wasn’t the only one who needed changing. The kid’s got good aim.” So that explained why Mulder was also shirtless, his tee that he wore to go to bed in the previous evening no doubt now soaking in the tub. Scully chuckled, feeling the last strands of anxiety from her nightmare drift away. William was fine, he was safe. It was just a dream.

“I guess we’d better get used to it, it might not be the last time he does that.”

“Why don’t you go back to sleep? He’s not due another feed for an hour or so. You need your rest.”

“What about you?”

“Well…” Smiling sheepishly, Mulder moved William to his shoulder, pausing to press his lips to the peach fuzz crowning his son’s head. “I thought I might pop over to my apartment soon and get some of my things sorted. If the offer is still open,” he added hesitantly, as though wondering whether Scully had changed her mind. Of course she hadn’t.

“You know it is Mulder.” They shared a grin. “Bring whatever you want. The fish may have to wait a day or two though, I need to clear some space first.”

“There’s no rush. I’m sure I can bribe Frohike to pop in and feed them in the meantime.”

“You can leave your videotapes there though,” Scully added, almost as an afterthought, before letting out an impressive yawn. She kissed William’s forehead and then Mulder’s cheek, before settling down back into bed. She’d forgotten just how tiring newborns could be, and this time she had someone around to help. How she coped alone with Ashley she’d never know.

“Yeah, I’m a responsible adult now I’m a father.”

“There is that.” Scully closed her eyes and prepared to surrender herself to sleep. “Not to mention the fact you won’t be needing them anymore.” With that she drifted back off, leaving Mulder to wonder just how he managed to get so damn lucky.
Scully hurried into the living room upon hearing William’s escalated cries. When she’d woken him barely half an hour before he hadn’t been interested in eating. Now, if his cries were anything to go by, he was starving. She picked up her red-faced son and immediately settled herself onto the sofa. William’s cries settled into whimpers, but Scully knew it wouldn’t stay that way for long. Unbuttoning her pajama top, she had William latched on within moments, and felt a sense of relief as he began to suckle. Her eyes came to rest on several suitcases sat by the door. Mulder’s suitcases. He’d only spent a few hours back at his apartment before he returned with most of his belongings, and then he’d hopped straight into the shower. Scully had no idea where they were going to put everything, but then again she didn’t care. The main thing was that they were all together.

As Scully switched William to her other breast, she heard movement behind her. Seconds later Ashley appeared by her side, yawning widely. “Morning mom.”

“Morning sleepyhead.” Scully leaned over and kissed her daughter as she sat down next to her. “I take it you slept well bearing in mind it’s just after ten?”

“Mmm.” Ashley nodded, resting her head against her mom’s arm and closing her eyes. “I think I heard William crying in the middle of the night.”

“I’m sorry baby. I was hoping you’d sleep through it.”

“Babies cry a lot.”

“Yes they do. Hopefully when we get a new place you won’t hear him so much.”

Ashley didn’t seem to pick up on her mom’s announcement. “Did I cry that much?”

“I think so. Like you said, babies cry a lot.” Scully glanced down at William, noticing that he’d fallen asleep at her breast. Buttoning her shirt back up, she moved him to her shoulder and began rubbing his back. “William looks so much like you did when you were his age. You were smaller though, you were absolutely tiny.”

“Wow.” As Ashley opened her eyes, she caught sight of the suitcases in front of her, and her smile quickly faded. She frowned. “Whose are they?”

“They’re Mulder’s.”

“Mulder’s?” Ashley jumped up from the sofa, turning to face her mom. “Why? Where is Mulder going?”

“Ashley –”

“Are you sending him away?” William stirred as his sister raised her voice. “You can’t make Mulder go away!”

“I’m –”

“I hate -“

“Hey hey hey!” interrupted Mulder, pulling a black tee over his head as he entered the living room. “What’s going on?” His hair was dripping wet from his shower as he looked between Scully and Ashley, waiting for answers.
Ashley immediately ran into his arms. “Don’t go away Mulder!”

“What?” He pulled back to look the youngster in the eyes. She was deadly serious, he realized.

“Don’t go. I don’t want you to go away.”

“Ashley,” Mulder said firmly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She looked confused. “But your bags are all packed.”

Realizing she’d jumped to the wrong conclusion, Mulder smiled over at Scully, who was trying to soothe a fussing William back to sleep. “I think you’d better sit down,” he answered, leading her back over to the sofa and sitting her down next to Scully. “First of all, I think you’d better apologize to your mom for the way you just spoke about her. That was uncalled for.”

“But –“

“Ashley,” he warned again, and this time she took note.

“I’m sorry mom.”

Scully nodded, eyeing Mulder as he perched on the edge of the coffee table opposite them. “We should have spoken to you about this,” said Scully, relieved that William had calmed down again. At least one of her kids was content for the time being. “But I thought you’d be ok with it, especially as you only mentioned it yourself a week or two ago.”

“Mentioned what?” asked a clearly impatient Ashley.

“Ash,” Mulder began. “Your mom has asked me to move in with you guys.” His announcement was greeted with silence. “I mean that’s if you want me to.” A smile began to form on Ashley’s face. “If there’s a problem, I –“

“Oh my god are you serious?!” Ashley looked over to her mom for confirmation, and Scully nodded. “This is the best news ever!” Jumping up off of the sofa, the little girl ran over to hug Mulder first before embracing her mom and settling back down next to her.

Scully chuckled. “By that reaction I presume you’re ok with it?”

“Uh huh,” Ashley nodded enthusiastically, to the relief of the two adults in the room. “This is the best surprise ever!”

“You know, pretty soon we’re going to have to move to a bigger place.”

“But Mulder’s coming with us, right?”

Scully grinned. “Right.” She noticed Mulder share her smile and wondered just how they managed to get to that point – moving in together with Ashley and a newborn baby. She certainly couldn’t have predicted that happening when she walked into his office eight years before.

“So…” Ashley began thoughtfully, her gaze darting between her mom and Mulder. “If you’re moving in with us Mulder, what does that mean about my adoption?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you still want to adopt me?” she asked in a small voice.
Mulder glanced over at Scully, who smiled. “Well, I admit, since last time you have developed an
degree that I could do without…” Ashley’s grin faded. “And we’re talked already about your use
of cuss words. But,” he added, before her hopes faded completely. “I’d still like to. If you do and
it’s still ok with your mom.”

“I want you to,” Ashley confirmed. “If you don’t mind.”

Mulder chuckled. “Of course I don’t mind.”

The youngster chewed her lip, as though something else was on her mind. “Do you want me to call
you ‘dad?’”

Mulder stared at the youngster in shock. Whatever he thought she was going to say, it certainly
wasn’t that. He looked over at Scully, noticing that she didn’t look quite so surprised. She merely
shrugged and raised her eyebrows at him, as if to say it was his decision. He let out the breath he’d
been holding. “Well,” he began, somewhat shakily. “That’s up to both you and your mom. But if
you ever wanted to call me that, and it’s ok with your mom, it’s more than ok with me. I’d love it
in fact.”

Until that point, Mulder didn’t think Ashley’s smile could get any wider. He was wrong. Before
she answered him, Ashley turned to Scully. “Is it ok mom?” Scully opened her mouth to speak. “I
know I have a dad already, and I promise I won’t forget him, but I love Mulder too, and he is
coming to live with us. Plus,” she added quietly. “William will call him dad.”

So that was the real reason, thought Scully; not that she could blame her daughter. Mulder had
been more of a father to Ashley than Jack ever was, and as far as her daughter was concerned,
Mulder was her dad. And of course he treated her like she was his own, and Scully knew it would
always be that way, even now with the arrival of William. “Sweetheart, if you want to call Mulder
‘dad’, I don’t have any objections, just as long as you think about Jack from time to time.” She
knew she would.

“I will, I will I promise.” Ashley hugged her mom, pressed a kiss to William’s forehead and ran
over to Mulder, wrapping her arms around him. Hugging Ashley – his daughter – back, Mulder
cought his partner’s watery eyes and grinned, mouthing “thank you” at her.

“Of course,” continued Scully. “That does mean that Mulder can officially ground you the next
time you develop an attitude.”

“I’ll be good, I promise.”

Laughing, Mulder shook his head. “Famous last words.”

“I will!”

“Well if you want to be good, why don’t you go get dressed and we’ll go get some breakfast for
everyone.”

“Ok,” Ashley hugged him once again. “I love you dad.” With that she let go of him and ran off in
the direction of her bedroom, eager to get ready. Mulder looked over at Scully, tears pricking his
eyes.

“She just called me dad,” he uttered, clearly amazed at hearing her say it for the first time – the
first time she wasn’t half asleep.

Scully grinned, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Yes she did.” She was happy for him; happy
for the both of them. “You better get used to it, you’ll be hearing it in stereo in a year or so.”

Getting up from the coffee table, Mulder joined his partner and son on the couch, wrapping his arm around the both of them. He ran his free hand down William’s back, as though to reassure himself that his son was real, that all of this was really happening. He suspected he’d be feeling this way for many years to come. He still had no idea why Scully chose him – after everything she’d been through, she deserved better – but he was so glad she had. He’d taken her for granted in the past, he knew that now, but he promised himself that he’d spend the rest of his days making it up to her, and making sure that she and the kids – their kids, he thought with a smile – were happy. “You know what?” he said. “I’m looking forward to it.” And he was.

“Dad?” came a voice from the doorway to Ashley’s bedroom. Scully huffed out a laugh.

“Hmm?”

“Can we make pancakes when we get back?”

“I thought we were going out to buy breakfast?”

“We are. But I want pancakes too.” Scully snickered.

“Sure.” He nudged Scully. “Don’t say it.”

“What?”

“That I’m under the thumb.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good.”

“But you are. Completely.”

“Shut up Scully.” Leaning over, Mulder kissed Scully tenderly on the lips before sitting back contentedly, happy to relax with his family.

The end.
“Daddy, I’m hungry.”

Mulder looked up as his daughter entered the lounge area of their hotel suite. Eyeing his watch, he realized that if they didn’t soon make a move, they were going to be late.

“How is it that you only call me “daddy” when you want something?”

“I just want some food.” She plonked herself down on his lap, pouting. “I’m sooo hungry daddy.”

“You’re mom asked you barely ten minutes ago if you were hungry and you said no.” Reaching out, Mulder traced his hand over the middle of her dress. “This is pretty,” he said, pointing first to the flowers adorning the lower half of the cream dress, and then the one clipped into her curly hair. “It matches your hair.”

“Don’t mess up my hair!” she shrieked, the thought of food momentarily forgotten.

“Ok, ok, I won’t. You’re worse than your mom sometimes. Speaking of your mom, how’s she doing?”

“She’s good.”

“You remember our surprise for later?”

She nodded. “It’s a secret.”

“Where’s William?”

“In his room.”

“And how’s Ashley doing?”

“She looks pretty,” commented Ellie, Mulder and Scully’s youngest daughter, as she rested her head in the crook of her father’s neck, forgetting all about her hair. Aged just seven years old, she was a daddy’s girl through and through, though she was the spitting image of her mom and older sister, aside from her coloring. Piercing blue eyes, a button-like nose, and Scully’s chin, Ellie had chestnut brown hair and Mulder’s darker complexion, and was a more laid back version of Ashley. As the baby of the family, she was spoilt rotten by her parents, brother and sister, especially Ashley, who doted on her. Even twelve year old William, who was the living definition of a grumpy teenager – at least, according to Mulder, seemed to adore her, though the same couldn’t be said when she was first born.

Soon after William’s birth, Mulder and Scully decided to let nature take its own course when it came to birth control. If they had another child – great – but if not, they were more than happy with their little family. When, five years later, there was still just the four of them, they’d stopped thinking about a third child. So when Scully suffered a bout of sickness, they’d put it down to a stomach bug that had been doing the rounds at William’s pre-school. Two weeks later, she collapsed at work and a subsequent round of tests revealed the news that she certainly wasn’t expecting – she was six week’s pregnant. The news came as a shock, but they were delighted to
learn there would be a new addition to the family. A 20-week sonogram told them she was expecting a girl, and the rest of her pregnancy passed without incident. Mulder was there throughout – from the first bouts of morning sickness to the textbook delivery, this time in the comfort of a hospital rather than the middle of nowhere, and he willingly relinquished midwifery duty to the professionals. Six pound, ten ounce Ellie Grace Mulder completed the family, to William’s disgust. He’d told his classmates and teacher he was having a brother, and they believed him up until the moment Scully turned up to collect him at school, carrying a tiny bundle of cuteness wrapped up in pink. Thankfully as the years passed, William managed to get over his disappointment.

“Is Ashley ready yet?”

“Almost. She needed mommy to help with her dress, and I said I was hungry and so they said you had some chocolate I could have.” She grinned cheekily as Mulder gave her a doubtful look.

“Nice try troublemaker, but I distinctly remember your mom banning chocolate until after you’ve walked down the aisle. Your sister would like at least one picture with you in a clean dress.”

It was the day they’d been looking forward to – and dreading – for almost two years now, ever since Ashley had returned home from a romantic weekend in New York with her long term boyfriend Tyler and announced he’d popped the question. Her wedding day. Though her parents were happy for her, they found it hard to believe that their little girl had grown up and was getting married. And she was their little girl. She had been Mulder’s from the moment he’d met her, when she wanted him to help rid her bedroom of the monsters hiding beneath her bed. Jack may have been present at her conception, but that was about the only influence he’d had on her. She was a fairheaded version of her mom, but thanks to all the time she’d spent with Mulder over the years, she’d developed his curiosity, his stubbornness (though he was pretty sure that was Scully’s doing), and his habit for breaking the rules from time to time. And Mulder had been there for the milestones in her life – the loss of her first tooth, starting high school, graduating from college to begin a career as a vet, to her engagement. She and Tyler met at college and began dating just over a year later. Mulder wanted to hate him, he honestly did, but it had now been six years and he’d yet to find a reason to. Tyler was polite, funny and caring, he brought Scully flowers whenever he came to dinner, was a surrogate “cool” older brother for William, and even humoured Ellie when she forced him to attend dinner parties with her Barbies. And – most importantly – he idolized Ashley, who after everything she’d been through, deserved nothing but the best. When he’d approached Mulder shortly before his and Ashley’s vacation to ask for her hand in marriage, Mulder welcomed him into the family with open arms.

“But I’m hungry daddy,” whined Ellie. “I won’t be strong enough to carry my flowers unless I have some food.”

Mulder had to laugh at her words. Occasionally when she was tired, her dramatic side came out, reminding him of her sister when she was the same age. “Ok, ok, let me see if I can find you something to eat that won’t make a mess. But if you’re not hungry later when the food is served, your mom will kill me.”

“Why will I kill you this time?” Scully asked, walking out into the lounge area, fixing an earring. “What’s your dad done now Ellie?

The little girl sighed. “Mommy I’m hungry.”

“How’s Ashley?” Mulder interrupted, feeling nervous for his older daughter. She’d been incredibly calm in the run up to the wedding, even earlier that morning when she turned up at their hotel suite to get ready with Scully and Ellie.
“She’s fine. She’s asked us to go on ahead of you two,” replied Scully as she took a seat next to Mulder and their daughter. She ran a hand through Ellie’s wavy locks. Mulder noticed she didn’t fuss when her mom touched her hair. “Your hair looks beautiful baby girl. Do you like it?”

“Oh huh.”

“How are you holding up?” Mulder asked, taking in his partner’s appearance. Her hair had grown over the years, and was now shoulder length. Today it had been curled and all pulled back, secured by a navy clips that matched the sleeveless mid-length dress she was wearing. She looked beautiful, definitely not like a fifty year old, but her eyes were soft and wet – Mulder could tell she was barely keeping it together.

“I’m ok.” She didn’t sound too sure.

“Really?”

“No” she conceded, leaning into his side. Mulder wrapped his free arm around her and pulled her in towards him. “Our baby’s getting married Mulder.”

“I know.”

“How did she grow up so fast?”

“I thought I was your baby?”

Grateful for the interruption, Scully leaned across and kissed Ellie’s cheek. “You are all my babies. Speaking of which, where’s William?”

“Mommy, I don’t want to share a room with William tonight,” Ellie whined.

“You shared a room last night.”

“He told me ghost stories and I didn’t like it.”

“He told you ghost stories?” asked Scully, shooting a warning look over at Mulder. “I wonder where he got those from?” she added dryly. “Just tell him “no” if he tries it again tonight. Where is your brother?”

“He’s in the bedroom talking to his girlfriend,” replied Ellie, and Scully nodded in understanding. A confused Mulder looked between the girls in his arms. “Wait, William has a girlfriend?”

Ellie nodded. “Alice.”

“Who’s Alice?”

“She’s in his English class,” explained Scully, clearly bemused at Mulder’s shock.

“How do you know that?”

“He told me.”

“How come he told you and not me?”

“Because it’s only fair that at least one of our kids comes to me and not you.”

She was right; both Ashley and Ellie were daddy’s girls, especially their youngest daughter. With
her dark brown hair and cheeky grin, she reminded Mulder so much of his sister, and the way she 
sometimes terrorized William brought back memories of Samantha doing the same to him. But 
William was a mommy’s boy in both looks and personality. “You didn’t tell me,” he sulked.

“I thought you guessed when I asked you to have “the talk” with him?”

“What talk?” asked Ellie, food now forgotten. It was amazing what kids picked up on even when 
you didn’t think they were listening, thought Mulder, as he gave them a look that said they’d talk 
later.

“Never you mind Flower Girl,” answered her mom, kissing her once more and wishing he could 
stay that age and that innocent forever. It seemed like only yesterday that Ashley was the same age, 
and now here she was, about to get married and start a family of her own. Though Scully hoped 
she took her time with that – Mulder would likely have a breakdown if a little being called him 
“grandpa” anytime soon.

“Will you give me the talk daddy?”

“Not at least for another thirty years.”

“Why?”

“Ok enough talking. Ellie, go get your brother please and then let’s make a move.” As Ellie 
jumped up off of her dad’s lap and raced off to find her brother, Scully turned to her partner, 
sensing his nervousness. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” he replied unconvincingly.

“You know,” began Scully, leaning over to lightly peck at his lips. “It’s not that we’re losing 
Ashley. We’re just gaining another son.” She grinned as Mulder paled.

“The son we have already costs us more than enough. I think I’ll pass.”

xxxxxxx

No sooner had Scully and the kids made their way out of the hotel suite, with Scully promising 
Ellie she would find her some food, the bedroom door opened and out walked Ashley. She took 
Mulder’s breath away. Her long blonde hair and been curled and pinned up, like Scully’s, with 
flowers woven through, while the dress she wore was long and elegant, a strapless ivory number, 
fitted at the waist before flaring out. She was beautiful.

“Wow,” commented Mulder, his voice thick with emotion.

Ashley smiled nervously, as though waiting for his approval. His opinion had always been 
important to her and throughout her life she’d strived to make him proud. And he was.

“Hi,” she replied as Mulder stood up and walked over to her.

“You look beautiful.”

His words brought tears to her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Are you ready?”

“Are you ready?”
Mulder chuckled. “I am.”

Ashley hesitated. “Dad…?” Even now Mulder loved hearing that word, especially from Ashley, even if it was followed by a request for money or a lift somewhere. It had taken them a long time to get there, but it was worth it. When William had been born, Mulder had assured Ashley that he felt the same for both her and her brother – that he loved them equally – that as far as he was concerned, they were both his children. He stood by that, he loved all three of his kids. His only regret was that he hadn’t known Ashley as a baby or toddler, that he hadn’t been there for her first milestones. But he had more than made up for it over the years.

“Yeah?”

“When you married Diana…”

Mulder bit back a smile, remembering how as a child, Ashley hadn’t been impressed with his former partner. “Yeah?”

“Did you…did you think you’d be together forever?”

“I…” His eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why, are you having doubts? Because if you are, you –“

“I’m not,” she replied instantly. “I’m sure about Tyler. I guess I was just wondering.”

“Well…” he mused. “If I’m completely honest, I don’t know if I did. I don’t know if I even thought about it at the time. I…I loved her and I wanted to be with her at the time, but…I don’t think we really thought too much about the future.”

“What about mom? When did you know she was the one?”

“When she was sick,” admitted Mulder. “I knew she meant a lot to me a lot earlier than that, but it was then I realized I couldn’t lose her.” He smiled. “Or you.”

“I remember asking to live with you.”

“I only wished I could have said yes at the time. But at least it worked out ok in the end.”

“I got my wish.”

“You helped us get together you know.”

Ashley grinned proudly. “No I didn’t.”

“You did. Back when you were cheeky and adorable and –“

“And I called you to scare away monsters?”

“And you drew on my wall.”

“And I painted your nails.”

Laughing, Mulder shook his head. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

Sobering, Ashley moved in closer to her dad and squeezed his hand. She took a deep, measured breath before speaking. “Dad, I know that….” She tried again, swallowing hard. Mulder knew that whatever she was about to say, it clearly meant a lot to her. “I know that Jack wasn’t a great dad. I don’t really remember him, except for the fact he was never around. I know he didn’t want me –“
“Ash,” interrupted Mulder, gripping her hand tight. “It wasn’t you –“

“I know, but I also know I hardly ever saw him. I just remember you taking me to the zoo instead of him.”

“He wanted to come.”

Ashley nodded. “But he didn’t. You did, and you were there for me long before you and mom got together, even though I was nothing to you –“

“That’s not true –“

“But all I’m saying is that you were there for me long before I called you dad. And as far as I’m concerned, you are my dad.” Her voice cracked as she spoke. “And I just wanted you to know that, and to know how much I love you for adopting me and being my dad.” Feeling himself fight back tears, Mulder reached out as Ashley stepped into his arms. “I look at you with Ellie and you’re no different with her than you were with me, and I just wish I was yours.”

“You are mine,” Mulder answered, realizing his daughter was now crying. “The adoption certificate just proves what we knew already. You’re my little girl.” Ashley sniffed. “Hey, it’s your wedding day, you’re not allowed to cry.”

“You’re crying too.”

“I’ve got something in my eye.”

Huffing against him, Ashley pulled back, smiling as Mulder kissed her forehead. “I love you dad.”

“I love you too. Now…” he said, wiping her tears away. “Let’s go get married.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Scully sat at the table, deep in conversation with Maggie about the day’s events. The service had gone off without a hitch – the weather beautiful enough for them to get married outside – and Ashley was now Mrs Scott. The photos had been taken, a wedding breakfast served, and the speeches had been a hit, especially Mulder’s, which had made the bride, her mother and her grandmother shed a few tears. Now Mulder, William and Ellie had disappeared to who knew where, leaving Scully to do the rounds and chat with her family. “Mom?”

Scully looked up as Ashley approached the table, smiling proudly at her beautiful daughter. “Hi sweetheart. Have you seen your dad?”

Ashley looked nervous for a split second before answering. “He’s outside. We’re having to take a few more pictures and we need you.”

“More pictures?” They’d already taken what felt like hundreds to Scully, and she wasn’t even the bride. Somehow though, thankfully, Ellie had managed not to complain until the very end.

“You can never have enough wedding photos,” commented Maggie.

“Surely you don’t need any more of me?”

“I just wanted to get a few more of us mom, then I promise we’re all done.”

“Alright,” sighed Scully as she got to her feet, smoothing down her dress. “Do you need your grandma to come?”
“Umm no,” Ashley replied apologetically. “Just you for now.”

“Go ahead,” urged Maggie. “Your brother promised me a dance.”

Leaving her mom to find Charlie, Scully followed her daughter, who paused momentarily to link arms with her. “Dad did a great job with his speech.”

“He’s been worrying about that for weeks.” They headed out of the hotel building and towards the river close to where Ashley and Tyler had said their vows. Scully could see that the area had been lit up by candlelight. “Ashley, it’s getting dark. Are you sure you want more pictures outside?”

“It’ll be fine mom,” her daughter reassured her.

“Ok then.” Scully didn’t sound too convinced. Still she knew better than to argue with a bride on her wedding day. “I still can’t believe you’re married. My baby!”

Ashley grinned, her whole face lighting up. She looked so happy, Scully thought, and she deserved it too. “I know. It still doesn’t seem real. This day is going by in a blur.”

“Well enjoy it. You’ve certainly put enough effort into it.”

As they approached the pavilion, Scully was aware of five familiar figures ahead of her, dimly lit by the candlelight, but before she could process it all, Ashley suddenly paused and drew her in for a hug. “I love you mom,” she said, embracing her tightly.

“Oh baby, I love you too.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. If Tyler and I are half as happy as you and dad are, that’s more than enough for me.” Pulling away, Ashley’s eyes caught sight of something – or someone – behind Scully, and her smile widened. Taking hold of her mom’s hand, she led her forward, until Scully realized who she’d been smiling at. Mulder. And the reason she was smiling, was because he was down on bended knee. To his left stood Tyler and William, while Ellie sat on one of the chairs that had been set out for the wedding. She jumped up, grinning eagerly as soon as she noticed her mom.

Tears immediately sprung to Scully’s eyes. “Mulder…?” she asked cautiously. “What are you doing?”

He smiled. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Get up.” She couldn’t believe what appeared to be happening. Her family had been in on it the whole time. She’d been set up.

“In a second, I have something to ask you first.”

“Mulder-“

“Get over here Scully.” His grin widened as he ignored her.

“You’ll ruin your pants on the grass.”

“I don’t care.”

“Those stains will never come out.” Scully was rambling now, tears threatening to fall at any moment. Ashley squeezed her arm reassuringly before walking over to stand by her little sister.
“Scully, will you shut up for a second? I’m trying to propose.”

There, he’d said it, just in case she hadn’t gotten the hint with him on bended knee holding out a diamond ring to her. Taking a very shaky breath, Scully stepped forward almost hesitantly, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat. It the ring, she noticed through watery eyes as she moved closer. The same ring Ashley had presented to her when Mulder had died. The ring he’d bought for her, intending to ask her to marry him all those years ago. The same ring she’d thrown at him and could never find, presuming it had been lost down the back of the counter forever. Apparently not.

“Where did you find that?”

Mulder grinned. “Ashley found it that night and gave it to me later. I’ve been keeping it ever since, waiting for the right moment.” Scully sniffed as she realized that the three diamonds now represented their three children. “Marry me.”

“Mulder, not now.”

“Why not?” Still his smile didn’t fade, though Scully could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

“It’s Ashley and Tyler’s wedding day.”

“It’s ok mom,” Ashley spoke up, and Tyler nodded in agreement. “I was the one who suggested that dad did it today.”

“It was the only way I’d get you here,” added Mulder. “Usually you do anything you can do avoid a proposal.”

“That’s not true,” Scully sniffed. “I said yes once.”

“You were also high on drugs because you’d just given birth to Ellie. I’m pretty sure you’d have agreed to anything that day.” He had a point, she conceded. “So how about it Scully? I know we always said we didn’t need it, that it wouldn’t change anything between us, but I want you to be my wife.” Scully’s tears spilled over. “I think you know by now how much you mean to me, but if you have any doubt, I love you. I’ve loved you for a long long time, even back when you wore those awful jackets with the giant shoulder pads….”

Ellie turned to her sister, confused. “What does daddy mean?”

“He’s just being weird,” answered William but even he was grinning as he watched his parents.

“And I’m pretty damn sure you love me too. We’ve faced so much together, but you saved me time and time again, and you gave me three beautiful children.” Scully was crying in earnest now as she lifted a hand to wipe her eyes. Mulder got up from the ground and closed the gap between them, taking hold of her free hand. His eyes were wet too, she realized, and she fell in love with him all over again. “You helped me through illness and death and loss and flukemen and a lot of other things that these guys don’t need to know about. You once said you wouldn’t change a day, and neither would I. I’d do it all again if it meant standing here in front of you now, even if I am still coming to terms with the fact that one day soon we’re going to be grandparents.” Finally Scully laughed, leaning into him as he pressed his lips to her forehead. “So I’m asking you…Dana Katherine Scully…love of my life, mother of my kids…”

“Maker of your lunch?” Scully supplied, her voice thick with emotion.

“That too. Will you please, finally do me the honor of being my wife?”
Mulder held his breath as he waited for Scully to answer. It seemed to take forever. Even the kids started to get impatient, with Ellie practically bouncing up and down. Mulder wasn’t going to rush her though, even though he was desperate for her answer. Finally William spoke up. “Say yes mom!”

His words managed to break Scully out of her spell, and after sniffing hard she nodded, grinning up at her partner…her husband to be. “Yes,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“YES!” Ellie exclaimed, running over to embrace her parents. Barely taking his eyes off of Scully, Mulder leaned down to pull Ellie up into his arms, before kissing her mom soundly. He could barely make out William, Ashley and Tyler’s congratulations as he embraced Scully, putting on a display that was bordering on inappropriate in front of the kids. Breathlessly they pulled apart, and as Scully reached her hand up to rub his cheek, he realized he was crying too. “Finally,” he smirked, pressing his forehead to Scully’s.

She nodded, laughing nervously. “We did it.”

Scully sat in her chair, smiling at the scene in front of her. Ellie had ordered Mulder to dance, and was currently stood on her daddy’s shoes as he shuffled them around the corner of the dance floor. To their right, Ashley and Tyler were enjoying yet another dance together as man and wife. As she returned her attention to her partner – or fiancé – she reminded herself, her right index finger caressing the unfamiliar yet familiar shape of her engagement ring, Mulder looked over at her and caught her eye. *Get over here Scully*, he mouthed, and without hesitation she rose from her seat and wandered over to them.

“Are you guys having fun?” she asked as she neared them, and Ellie glanced up to nod at her mom. Mulder lifted his daughter up into his arms, settling her on his hip, while with his now free hand, he pulled Scully in towards him.

“How about you?”

“You know what? I’m having a good day actually.”

“We could really wipe the smile off Bill’s face right now,” Mulder commented as he glanced across the room at Scully’s brother and sister-in-law who were also up on the dancefloor.

“We could,” Scully agreed, grinning mischievously. “But I don’t want to be responsible for giving my brother a coronary. I figured I’ll wait until they get home and call Tara with the news. She can pass it on.”

“Wimp.”

“At least he’ll be back on the other side of the country. He won’t be able to hit you from there.”

“You make a good argument.” As Scully laughed, they resumed their dancing. Mulder caught sight of William walking across the dancefloor with his cousin Matthew. “Hey Will,” he called.

“Where’s your tie?”

William frowned. “Where’s yours?” Without waiting for a response, he continued towards the
table and took a seat.

“Honestly, that kid hates me.”

“No he doesn’t.”

“We should have given him up for adoption. It would have saved us a lot of hassle.”

“Why would we give William up for adoption?” Ellie asked seriously, her eyes wide in concern. Scully glared at her partner.

“We wouldn’t sweetheart,” she reassured her. “Your daddy’s trying to be funny.”

“Trying?”

“Hey daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I sleep with you and mommy tonight?”

Mulder tried – and failed – to hide a grimace. Sleeping in the same bed as Ellie pretty much ended up in not sleeping at all. His daughter tended to take up the majority of the bed, while Mulder and Scully clung onto the edges for dear life. “What’s wrong with your room?”

“Will said there was a monster hiding under my bed.”

Scully smiled. “I remember when Ashley used to say that too.” So did Mulder. It was how he first met the youngster.

“So there is a monster underneath my bed?”

“Your mom didn’t mean that,” Mulder said. “There’s no such thing as monsters.” He glared at Scully as she smirked, no doubt thinking she’d been telling him that for years. “You’ll be fine. But...” he added, looking into Ellie’s eyes and realizing he was about to lose the battle. “I guess you can sleep with us. But just for tonight.”

“She’s got you wrapped around her little finger.”

“When we get married, we’re having a honeymoon, and we’re leaving the kids at home.”

“Alone?” Ellie asked in horror.

“No baby, you can stay at Grandma’s. Or Ashley’s.”

“By the time we finally get married, Ashley will probably have a few kids of her own. She won’t want ours.” Scully grinned as she saw Mulder pale. “What?”

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“She is married.”

“She’s still my baby.”

“I thought I was your baby?” repeated Ellie.

“You are. I –“
“Dad?” Mulder looked to see Ashley walking towards him, with Tyler close behind. “Hey. Can I cut in?”

“Of course you can sweetheart,” said Scully, taking Ellie from Mulder’s arms. He left the two of them dancing together with Tyler and stepped in towards his first-born.

“You did it,” she said excitedly, stepping in to his arms.

“So did you.”

“I’m so glad she said yes.”

“God me too. I couldn’t have handled yet another no.” Ashley laughed. “It was all thanks to you though. It all was, right from the word go.”

“I’m just glad it was you. I love you dad.”

Grinning, Mulder hugged his daughter. “Love you too Tigger.”

The end of the whole story!

Chapter End Notes

I have recently been writing some chapters which bridge the gap between Nothing Important Happened Today and Ashley's wedding - Another Man's Child Revisited, which I'll start posting on here as a separate story, as well as little snippets from the universe that randomly pop into my head. Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!