This Is How The World Ends

by Solia

Summary

In 2012 the invasion started, but no one saw it. This oversight cost them - his reputation, her purpose - and sent them in different directions. An unsanctioned case with a familiar threat puts everything at risk, and as they race to save what matters most, standing alone may not be an option. MSR. Angst. Novel-length. Alternative events diverging post-IWTB, ignoring/replacing S10&11.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I am just borrowing them from FOX and Chris Carter's toy collection and promise to put them back exactly where I found them.

Author's Notes: As usual when I don't have the time to begin a new fanfiction journey, a story has wormed its way from wherever it is that stories come from. This fic is a manifestation of my excitement for the new XF series and is my first real XF fic so feedback is much appreciated. Thanks to soodohnimh for introducing me to The X-Files and beginning the obsession, and thanks to AngryHellFish for being so excited and encouraging when you read the first handwritten notes for this fic.
Prologue

The easel in the foyer listed three different events taking place in the hotel that evening. In the Glass Room was the Bryant wedding, its two walls of windows overlooking the romantic city lights; in the Upper Conference Room, up the stairs to the left, the Christmas party for a chain of travel agencies was in full swing; the Lower Conference Room, down the stairs and along a short hall, was booked for the annual members' meeting of The Worldwide Family of Hosts. Cheaply designed and pixelated whether onscreen or printed, the association's little blue logo of an Earth wrapped in two caring arms had been added to the listing, and a bold black arrow pointed the last arrival in the direction of the stairwell.

She knew her lateness would not go unnoticed but it couldn't be helped. Inconspicuous as this conference was, attending was still something to go about very discreetly. The association had a small and steady international membership, a very privileged and proud three hundred and twenty-seven, and when she arrived at the tall double doors, inhaled to steady her nerves and pushed gently to admit herself through the narrowest of gaps she could manage, she found what she expected – all three hundred and twenty-seven members had either made arrangements to be present tonight and were seated around large round tables draped in white linen, or had called in, Skype-like, and were watching the proceedings as staunch disembodied heads from the flat rectangular screens of brand-new tablets.

Each held by one of The Worldwide Family of Hosts' seventy-two pledges.

She quickly joined the long line of them, bowing her head to the displeased glance of the association's Speaker, a Ukrainian gentleman of some political importance and accepting the tablet handed to her by the silent pledge on the end of the line. She directed the tablet's screen and camera towards the front of the conference room so her very important charge, a mid-level dignitary of sorts she was sure (though too wise to risk tilting the screen up, or to even lower her own head, to look), could watch and hear what was said. Once in position she would not dare to move except to breathe and blink; these meetings were much too important to allow the temptation to itch, to cough, to converse with other pledges to compromise the members' involvement in the proceedings for even a second. The faces on the screens, held dutifully and carefully in the hands of the pledges, were a mixture of faces recognisable and utterly unknown – these were the members too identifiable and too busy to attend in person, for their travel here would only draw attention; or they were the members in societal roles too sundry or too secretive to leave their present locations. At least for the time being.

Some screens showed only a wall, or an empty chair. Those members were the ones whose faces were to stay unknown even to the pledges, to the hotel staff who maybe glanced disinterestedly over. The Worldwide Family of Hosts had these few benefactors in very high places, and they preferred to remain anonymous.

The hotel staff shuffled silently between the tables as the Speaker began his opening address. Rolls of bread, curls of butter, stubby little silver knives made their way onto the tables. The members were polite, sparing smiles of thanks, but no words escaped their lips. They were listening to their Speaker, the staff understood; the hotel had been pleased to take this booking once again, now for the third year running. This was an easy group to cater, an easy client to please. Not as extravagant as a wedding but much less effort, and never a complaint directed at the wait staff or the kitchens. Just a room of gentlemen and ladies of excellent manners (and a long line of iPads connected to Skype, apparently arranged by some of the young people holding them, since the older, seated people likely had no clue) and seemingly unparalleled generosity.
The Worldwide Family of Hosts funded an operation to open lives and homes to disadvantaged youth from developing nations, for one year at a time, in privileged communities, where those young people could access healthcare, attend western schools, earn honest money and live in safety. It said so on their booking form, and on their website.

The Speaker addressed the assemblage in English despite his linguistic background. It was a safe base language that each member understood.

"Once again, my friends, thanks to your generosity, three hundred and twenty-seven lives were lived better this year," he said, a projector screen behind him running through a basic powerpoint show of smiling young faces. All anonymous. The Speaker had never met even one of them. A smattering of kind applause moved through the room. The pledges didn't move a muscle. "You have made it possible. Three years ago, the gap between where we were and where we wanted to be was huge – astronomical, some might say. But look now at where we are, the change we have made in the world. We have much to be proud of. Decades of planning, of working together even we would rather not have, of ingenuity in the face of unexpected delays… it pays off in time, and now we are poised to take our great association's next step."

A click of a remote, and the slideshow of faces shut down. A momentary ruffled search through the nearby laptop to find the necessary file. A young waiter nearest to the front smiled gently and offered his assistance; the speaker gratefully accepted, and it was only a few seconds of waiting for the waiter's quick fingers before the projector was showing a new slide, a re-envisioning of the cheap logo, the world now a washed-out powder blue with a bandage in place of the arms. The whole slide had the distinct look of something digitally put together by someone without a clue about graphic design, font size changing in the final paragraph and the title indented accidentally, the creator helpless to correct his error.

"These young people really are a gift to the world," the Speaker said jovially as he took back the podium and the waiter returned to his work with a quick smile over his shoulder. "It's them we are preparing our world for, after all – why we do what we do. For the young. For the new. For the deserving generation of the future. Thank you, young man."

A few people clapped. Again, the pledges dared not. The Speaker returned his attention to the slide, so carefully crafted to look wannabe-professional and unworthy of much notice, and the wait staff continued dishing out bread rolls and offering napkins. How often did they have useless old people flustered and confused by that projector system? Twice, three times a week? But they were patient, professional, unsuspicious, and easily categorised this conference among the many hundreds of uneventful, unmemorable occasions they'd worked in their time of employment.

"Our next move will be to initiate our medical branch, and while I will get into deeper discussion about this later in the evening, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce the staff of this exciting new phase of our association's long history. Please join me in thanking them for their generosity of spirit and their willingness to share their many and varied skills in assisting us to make this happen." And he gestured widely along the line of pledges, and for the first time in the three years of this conference they received a loud round of applause. The pledge on the end tried not to tense in response. The wait staff shared smiles, pretending to take interest in the proceedings, but in reality their professionally grafted expressions bore more sincerity than every pair of hands clapping in the room.

No member was grateful to the pledges. Not one. No matter what they'd done for the members in the past, no matter what lengths they might go to in order to prove their worth. They were still only pledges, lesser, and would never be members. The scale was always tipped, the game forever rigged, and the weight of debt was too heavy to ever repay.
Unless.

Unless.

There was one currency strong enough to wipe the debt and buy a membership. Just one coin, and just one place. Every pledge had been thinking the same thing for almost four years.

Like each of the others in the long, still line, she was determined that the coin was hers. And she would not hesitate to spend it to buy her way out of this servitude and the bleak future it held for them all.

The coin's cost – well, that would be somebody else's price to pay.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. References to real places are entirely fictional representations based on Google searches. Berkshire County Morgue is probably much more exciting than I give it credit for and I apologise wholeheartedly if it has been offended by my ignorant and insensitive descriptions.

Author's Notes: Thankyou to those who read the first chapter of this fic, and thankyou soodohnimh for reviewing. You know I appreciate the feedback :) I know it was short, but for me that's kind of an achievement. Against any and all efforts of mine, this fic has all the potential to get wildly lengthy, but I've learned my lesson about guesswork projections of story length so I will make no assertions at this time.

A few bills crossed the counter.

"Where was the body found?"

The hand that took them had short fingernails, bitten to the quick. Anxiety. Overactive creative mind in a monotonous, boring role.

"In the basement of an apartment block, on the corner of East and Foster," the medical examiner's assistant answered, digging in the pocket of her white lab coat for a chap stick. Dry lips from the recent winds with the change of season. Habitual licking, despite the gradually worsening redness and discomfort. Nothing to distract her from it. She walked her late-night visitor from the front foyer to the exam room in the back. "Neighbours reported a bad smell. One of the officers that went out to investigate sprained his ankle when his foot fell through rotten floorboards. Building should have been condemned, if you ask me. Can't believe they're still going to let people lease those stacked-up, crumbling goat sheds they call apartments. But good thing it happened, or they wouldn't have found Spike here."

She pulled back the sheet covering the body, and Mulder looked down at the large cadaver laid out on the gurney beside him. 'Spike' was not an inappropriate name. Missing only a week, the man appeared years dead. His skin was dried and taut like a mummy, and his fatty tissue was gone, leaving only brittle bones beneath hard, wasted muscle… which had split like wood over tough knobby protrusions on his shoulders and knuckles. Mulder was not a medical expert, but his theory was that the muscle, when living and supple, had glided easily over these retractable appendages, and that the fatty layer below the skin had disguised any lump. The skull and ribcage had collapsed inwards since the autopsy to remove the last meal, though best Mulder could tell, these skeletal components had never been made of bone anyway, but rather something more elastic and flexible that allowed the form to shift to accommodate for large prey. And best of all, relaxed in death, six sharp mandible-like spikes had spilled from the lips, attached somewhere below the tongue.

Again, Mulder was no doctor, but he thought that in conjunction with the crushed and mangled form of an adolescent human male that had been removed from this cadaver's digestive tract post-mortem, this evidence constituted something distinctly not human. A literal man-eater.

Instinctively Mulder glanced up at the door, prepared for her to walk in to perform her
examination, prepared to defend his unvoiced theory, prepared to dance around the definition of impossible with her until a tiny window of compromise opened between their extreme perspectives and the truth shone in on them both, but the days of debating cases with Scully were long over and this was not her type of case. Or rather, this was not the sort of case he could share with her. Back working for the Bureau, she'd be obligated to start a formal FBI investigation, which Mulder's current client was keen to avoid.

Not particularly welcome at the Bureau and freelancing as a paranormal PI for cash, Mulder was keen to get paid and so was keen to meet the violent, disreputable client's demands, so he'd have to solve this one alone.

It was hard to ignore the distinct weight of disappointment that settled in Mulder's stomach. Professional disappointment, he told himself. She would see things here that he couldn't. That's all.

It wasn't all.

"This is what you meant, right?" the assistant asked, shifting from one foot to another. Nervous. The medical examiner wouldn't approve of her showing Mulder in here to check out this body. For simple ethical reasons, or something more? "When you said to call if I saw something weird, this was what you meant? For your novel?"

Devoid of an all-access-pass federal identification badge, he took lots of roles on nowadays to get what information he needed. Tonight's was the role of a science fiction writer, researching for a new work. Ironically, fake names and considered cover stories were almost as effective as his badge had ever been.

"This is definitely weird," Mulder confirmed. He moved behind the head to look down the body. The man, when he was alive, was large and bulky, the sort of frame that fills a whole doorway. That's the way his last would-be victim described him, anyway. "A bear. He stood in the door and I couldn't get out."

The eleven-year-old illegal had watched, horror-struck, as Spike choked the life from her cousin, pinning him still with long retractable bony appendages that extended from his fingers and shoulders while a monstrous mouth of spines expanded to fit the young man's twisted and compressed form inside.

She hadn't admitted to firing the bullet that had killed Spike but Mulder had inferred. He couldn't blame her and understood her position as an unwelcome resident in the country. Going to the police was as much an option as allowing herself to be eaten, which was another reason why Scully and her cavalry couldn't come in on the case. At least now the witness was safe, if permanently scarred from the experience, and Mulder could tell Fierro where his drug mules kept disappearing to. He suspected that the Columbian crime lord would be relieved to have his folklorish beliefs confirmed and to know that none of his associates seemed to have snitched on him, as was his initial fear when they'd disappeared. They'd just been eaten, probably for the lingering taste of narcotics they'd transported on and inside their bodies.

"You don't look surprised," the assistant pressed. Confronted. She didn't know quite what to do with this knowledge, that weird things like this existed and roamed her world. "You expected this. What do you know?"

Mulder shrugged, not wanting to give too much away. His new life relied on anonymity and his ability to be forgettable. A wide, rounded knowledge about the paranormal and the unexplained was strange. Memorable.

"What did your boss tell you to do about it?" he asked instead. The assistant frowned.
"He told me to put it out of my mind," she said uncomfortably, confirming Mulder's suspicion that this was not the very first example of this mutation on this gurney, just the first in this woman's short career. "That it would be gone soon anyway. And he was right," she added, gesturing at the body helplessly. "It's deteriorating by the hour. That's... that's why I called you. I thought, maybe, you could tell me what the fuck it is."

An anxious, highly creative individual, the assistant wasn't going to be able to simply put it out of her mind as she'd been advised. She was going to imagine horrible things everywhere she went.

"I don't know what the fuck it is," Mulder admitted, taking out his phone with a questioning glance at the assistant. She responded with an obliging shrug and he went ahead and snapped several pictures for his client. "I have some theories." And this was where she was supposed to roll her eyes and start shooting those theories down with precision, until he was left with just one – the truth. But the assistant was a far cry from Agent Scully and she didn't know the game, so she simply listened with wide eyes and rapt attention. "In Latin America there's a legend of a blood-sucking humanoid brute called El Viejo del Suco, said to once have been a man whose decline into a monster came about as a result of his deplorable choice to drink the blood of children. It's depicted in horror folklore as a child-eater, but this is a big guy: it's within reason that he would be living off teens and small-statured adults instead."

The assistant stared. "Did... Are you saying that this is a legend?"

Creative, but less open-minded than he'd given her credit for. Mulder considered the bitten nails and the copy of Fifty Shades stashed hurriedly at the reception desk. Hmm, no taste. And worse, no expectation of being surprised by life. Berkshire County Morgue was a boring workplace and she was too creative to be here but she wasn't prepared to accept that interesting things could happen here.

He tried to give her another chance – "It's not that far-fetched. Genetic mutations-" but he was interrupted by the sound of knocking on the front glass doors. Hurriedly Mulder helped her cover the wasted body of Spike, whatever he was, and he bolted for the steely storage closet door while the assistant ran to let the newcomers inside. Mulder barely had the closet door shut behind himself, and caught the edge of the door before it could hit the frame and make a noise.

"-didn't get a call? Normally we wouldn't even be open this late."

"Told you it was the wrong morgue." A man's voice, irritable but prideful in the way someone is when he's proven right.

"...meant to take her to Boston. Shit."

"...can't take her tonight..."

"Well..." The assistant's voice, hesitant and muffled by the distance. "Leave her here, then, and I'll process her. Put her back here."

Mulder twisted to look back out into the exam room through the narrow crack he'd left. The ME's assistant held the door open for two ambulance technicians to bring in a bagged body on a gurney.

"Thanks," the younger of the two men said, relieved. "You'll be saving our asses."

"Your ass," the older one replied snidely. "I told you we were going the wrong way."

"How did you accidentally drive out here?" the assistant asked, surprised. She automatically prepared and dragged over a new examination trolley from the other side of the room. "It's exactly
"They did tell us Berkshire County Morgue, when we collected the body," the older man admitted, "but the transfer papers say Boston."

"Been a rough couple of days at Leominster emergency," the other technician commented, kicking the brakes on at the wheels of the gurney. "Three house fires with fatalities in as many days, and then that pile-up on the highway tonight. Plus all the usual customers. I guess they was distracted. But I swear, I swear the doc said 'take her to Berkshire'. Was already halfway here when Steve read we were meant to be going to Boston. You ready?" he asked his partner, and they hefted the body from their trolley to the new one. "Is the ME here?"

"No, he'll be in after six."

Hidden in the closet, Mulder adjusted his position to check his watch, prepared to wait them out and to watch the ME perform his examination. He wasn't queasy about that sort of thing. He'd watched Scully cut into dozens, maybe a hundred or more corpses. It was almost calming, the quiet and the straightforwardness of her measured and knowledgeable actions, the way she fell into her element. He could watch her dissect for hours, the way other people could sit and watch a pianist or a ballerina.

"Can you sign here to say we delivered, safe and sound?" the first technician asked, holding out a clipboard. The assistant did as requested and was offered another clipboard in exchange. "Notes from the hospital. Dr Lansdowne will want to review before he makes his examination."

"Why? What happened to her?" Curious. Anxious. The assistant was full of no surprises.

"Take a look," the first technician said, already unzipping the bag, but his older colleague frowned and reached to still his hand.

"Don't. It could be– Ugh," he remarked sourly when the opening in the bag revealed the deceased's face and upper body. "What a mess."

Mulder couldn't see much from where he was but from the narrow view he had of the top of the head he gathered it was a woman's body.

"What could cause something like that? The burning?" the assistant asked in a hushed, anxious voice. She seemed to have forgotten all about the writer she'd sneaked in for under-the-table cash. She drew back as a thought hit her. "Do you think it's contagious?"

Her motion revealed the face to Mulder's limited view.

"Hmm, doubt it," the younger driver answered, already bored. He let his partner zip the bag closed again. Didn't consider her concerns. Didn't initiate quarantine procedures. Didn't contact any external authorities for advice. "The medical examiner's problem."

It was a few minutes before they were safely away, vehicle departed from the lot and front doors locked again, and the assistant came back to check on Mulder.

"That was close– Wait, stop!" she demanded worriedly when he strode straight past her on a beeline to the new body. Spike's case was as solved as it was going to get without further resources, which he could only get through government channels, and both the client and the victim's interests were best served by avoiding those channels. One of the downsides of working freelance was the frequency with which he had to forgo digging all the way to the source of the problem. Once the client's question was answered – Where are my drug mules? What's haunting
my house and making it impossible for me to keep tenants? – the deeper questions remained only for Mulder. I found your drug mules; don't you want to know what's eating them? I found your ghost; don't you want to know her story, why she's sticking around? No, no, always no. Most people lacked the curiosity that drove him and were content with the neat head-in-the-sand answer. Accepting this had been a hard-learned lesson, and if he wanted to be able to afford to eat, he had had to learn to let go of cases once the customer was satisfied, rather than when he was satisfied. Because he could keep going. He could follow a trail until every breadcrumb was eaten and every pebble had turned to dust and blown away, and still keep looking for a light in the distance. An answer. He fixated on it until it burned away to nothing and he could be staring at it so hard that he didn't even notice it was gone, or that it had perhaps never existed in the first place.

This kind of fixation had cost him everything. Or more precisely, one thing.

So now he wilfully shrugged off the desire to know more about Spike and filed it firmly in the 'solved' section of his busy mind, and charged determinedly for the new body. His hand was already on the zip when the assistant caught his wrist firmly.

"You can't," she said. "This isn't at all related to your book. You can't just go opening body bags, especially one we haven't examined yet. You could contaminate it."

Mulder tried to contain his anticipation at the thought of what he might have found here. He forced himself to release the zip and to smile at the assistant.

"I won't touch," he promised, tucking his hands behind his back. "You open it. Let's take a look."

"I need to close this place up and go home-"

"I asked you to call me with anything weird," Mulder reminded her. "This is weird, right? A strike of fate redirects an anomalous corpse from the metro morgue to you guys out here, on the same night that I'm here researching for my novel. Tell me that doesn't sound like kismet to you."

"It's a weird night," the assistant admitted, "but there's nothing that weird about this body, from what I can tell so far. It's just gross. And fate's bullshit. There's a perfectly reasonable explanation why the body ended up here. A staff member at the hospital misspoke. They were overrun and overwhelmed."

A perfectly reasonable explanation. "I used to work with someone who always said that. Maybe you're both right. Or maybe I'm right, and there's something in that bag I need to see. Come on," he coaxed, slightly flirtatiously. "I won't tell anyone."

She wasn't moved or impressed, and Mulder reluctantly acknowledged that he wasn't exactly in his prime anymore. It might have worked ten years ago, maybe even as recently as five, but he was definitely off his game since Scully had left. His harmless, shameless flirting with nurses, receptionists and other potential sources of access to information he wanted had never bothered her. He supposed his heart wasn't really in it anymore.

With a sigh he pulled his wallet out again. "Please? It's important."

He thrust two hundred dollars at her and she pursed her lips. But she accepted it, shoved it into her pocket and unzipped the bag.

"One minute. And don't touch."

Mulder didn't need the full minute to know for sure what he'd expected. He breathed only shallowly around the body as he leaned closer to look, despite knowing that it was not contagious.
Excessive frothy blood was gathered on the pale lips and cheeks, down the chin, still dribbling out post-mortem, and bluish veins shone through the translucent, sickly skin all around the mouth, down the throat and across the chest above the neck of her nightgown. Underneath the blood, where it was thickest, the skin was blistered and raw.

She'd been dead at least an hour, Mulder gathered, but she'd been marked for death as soon as she'd contracted this. And it had been a very painful way to go.

The assistant stood back with her arms folded, shaking her head with disbelief at Mulder's fascination.

"You seriously think this is more interesting than that?" she asked incredulously, jerking her thumb at Spike's covered form. "It's messy but it's no withering man-eater."

"No," Mulder agreed, taking in the burst blood vessels in the eyes – asphyxiation – and the flecks of pink tissue and dead black (rotten flesh?) in the bloody froth. What a horrid way to die. "This is just a victim of something very nasty. Excuse me," he said, straightening and withdrawing his cell from his pocket again, "I need to make a phone call."
The call could not have been less welcome.

"Tell him I'm busy," Scully said to the operator, but then quickly corrected herself. "No, wait. Tell him it's one-thirty in the morning." And I'm not taking wild goose chases from anyone, let alone you, at one-thirty in the morning.

She left that last part unsaid. She knew it would be inherent anyway.

"He sounds American… I think it's a national call," the operator said slowly, confused. She thought Scully believed the caller was in another time zone, ignorant of the inappropriate hour. Scully twisted the pen she held between her fingers as she tried to hold onto her patience.

"I don't care where he is," she said crisply. "Just tell him."

"Alright..." and the operator was gone, back to her other external line. Scully hung up.

Goddamn Mulder. She knew it was him, even if the new operator said the caller was "Braidwood; he said he's a contact of yours?" It wasn't a good cover. It wasn't meant to be. It was just meant to entice her to answer the call and go running off into the dark after some phantom Mulder had decided to chase. Sometimes, for reasons she couldn't always explain to herself, he preferred to have her running beside him. Destination, oblivion.

Not tonight.

She turned her attention forcibly back to the surveillance screen behind her.

"What did I miss?" she asked briskly. Warren Colt, her youngest agent, looked back at her from his seat as she crossed the office floor to stand behind him.

"Nothing much, ma'am," he said, ever polite. He pointed at one of the views on the split screen. "He got to the door and stopped outside. Hasn't moved from there."

"Waiting for someone?" she asked. She leaned over his shoulder for the other set of headphones and fitted them over her ears. The soft voices of the agents sitting in the back of the surveillance van filled her ears, talking amongst themselves while they waited for their wired colleague to reach the target. Four strategic cameras had been placed in secret in the hallways of the apartment block over the past few days, lying in wait for this opportunity to catch the suspected bomb-builder and
arms dealer in the act of selling his services to a known anti-government radical.

"It looks like it," Colt agreed. He sat back in his chair slightly, pushing his thick hair back off his face. "Just standing around…"

"Did he knock? Make any sort of signal to the person inside?"

"Nothing. Just walked straight over and leaned on the wall." The young agent suddenly squinted and leaned closer to the screen again. "What's that he's doing with his hand?"

Scully leaned in, too. The man they'd targeted, Alistair Craig, was relaxing against the wall beside the suspect's door, one arm tucked between his back and the plasterboard. The resolution of the feed wasn't perfect but it appeared that there was some movement of his hand or fingers behind his back. Tapping? Clicking? The rest of his body was still, head hanging loosely, casually, looking idly at the hallway floor.

"Can we enhance this image?" Scully asked, but Colt was already shaking his head. Instead she scanned the other camera views available to her for the position of their wired agent. Only two floors away, still in the stairwell, carrying a paper bag of groceries. Scully tapped her pen tip to the screen. "Then can we slow him down? I want to see what the tapping is about."

Colt obediently opened the channel from his mike to the agents in the van. Scully listened to the message as it was transferred across the bridge of the internet. That this could be going down on the other side of the city and she could be here, watching and leading in real time from her office in the FBI's headquarters, was quite the feat of technology. It wasn't available to her in the nineties during her first decade with the Bureau, and it certainly made things more comfortable and flexible. The back of a surveillance van with a gaggle of super-serious counter-terror agents at one-thirty in the morning was not her first pick of places to be, and considering this was not even her case – the boys had come to her because she was more senior and more popular with their Assistant Director, and more likely to get the go-ahead if she proposed the sting instead of one of them – she felt she more than deserved to be in the comfort of the office while the younger agents ran their own operation.

Technology had not yet, however, overcome the barrier to radio waves that was a concrete stairwell, and though she heard the message relayed to the wired agent she saw no change in his pace and heard no response from him. She frowned, and Colt glanced up at her anxiously. He tapped his microphone.

"Boys?" he checked. "What's the story?"

"Desmond isn't responding," a surveillance agent reported unnecessarily. "Must be interference from the stairwell."

Scully narrowed her eyes further, wishing she'd grabbed her glasses, and tried to make out what Craig's hand was doing. There was definitely movement. Repetitive movement. Patterned movement…

"Morse code," she realised, just as she heard the phone ringing again behind her. She reached for the microphone and Colt automatically opened the channel for her. "Stop Desmond. Craig's communicating with our suspect."

"Placing his order?" Colt wondered. Someone else had answered the phone. Scully shrugged uncomfortably.
"Maybe. More likely he's made us."

Colt blinked. "How? We haven't even made contact yet."

"Alistair Craig has made a life of hating the United States government and anything connected to it," Scully said, twirling her pen agitatedly as she tried to come up with an answer. Her mind flew through the profile she'd read, developed by one of the agents in the van. "He's hyper-paranoid, observant…"

Sounds familiar.

"You think he spotted one of the cameras?" Colt asked incredulously.

"Or he recognised Desmond in the entryway." An idea struck her and she directed her next question into the microphone. "Was Desmond part of the surveillance team watching Craig these last few weeks?"

Pause.

"We all worked on this case equally," the agent she would have said was in charge answered evasively. Now she was exasperatedly glad to say she was in charge instead. These agents, despite being highly intelligent and well-trained, lacked the sideways thinking she'd developed in her years investigating the unexplained. They couldn't think for themselves.

"Isn't it feasible," she asked irritably, "that a paranoid radical would develop a good memory for faces?"

The lead agent in the van was silent for another moment. "What should we do, Agent Scully?"

"Agent Scully." The agent behind her held out the phone receiver. "Call for you."

Irritated with the timing, Scully dropped the headphones, microphone and the pen she'd been carrying around onto the desk. She pointed at the view of Alistair Craig as she backed away.

"Get that message down," she ordered Colt, who snatched up her pen immediately. She strode over to the phone. "Scully."

"Agent Scully, I'm sorry to bother you again--"

"You told him, didn't you? You got rid of him, didn't you? But the little red light was glowing beside the number 2, and she knew all too well the voice she would hear if only she pressed that button. So close…"

"The time? Yes. But he's quite… insistent," the operator explained, sounding embarrassed.

"Well, so am I," Scully said firmly. "It's still one-thirty in the morning and I'm still not taking his call."

"He said-" The operator caught herself, and Scully frowned.

"He said what?" she couldn't help asking suspiciously. The red light was so bright. She could change lines easily, with one button. A weak part of her wanted so badly to do it, to hear his voice and go running back to him and to collapse into arms she knew would be open for her and only her. But she'd been strong this long. Mostly. She reminded herself of what had gotten her through all the other times: Mulder was unreliable, Mulder was obsessed, Mulder was reckless. Mulder couldn't
answer the phone when she needed him, yet he expected her to jump to attention for him when he
cared to drop her a line every now and then.

Not happening.

Scully glanced back at Colt and the screen, where now another two agents were watching on,
crewing with nervous anticipation. No change, then. Desmond was still marching into an uncertain
situation and from what she could see, Craig was still at the door. On the phone, the operator was
quiet, and her quiet sounded awkward. She didn't want to pass on Mulder's message, which only
made Scully more determined to hear whatever inappropriate thing he'd said.

"What did he say?"

The answer was timid. "He said it's one-twenty-four, and he'll buy you a new watch if you fly to
Boston."

Ugh. As if Scully needed another reason to roll her eyes at her former partner.

"Please tell Mr Braidwood that if he wants to call me directly, he's welcome to get over himself and
press 'call'," Scully said coolly, though she knew he wouldn't. Mulder knew her number by heart
but he never called it. She never bothered learning his anymore. He burned through cell phones
like no one's business, switching them off after a week or two and cycling to another one in his
collection or a new one altogether, convinced that smartphones were being bugged to track users
and their calls. He was also suspicious of Scully's work colleagues and was certain that others in
her office had access to her phone and would scour through the call log and messages for
information about him. Eye roll, Mulder – like she just left it lying around. So he called only the
office, under different names, and left himself wide open for rejection. Which she didn't always
do, but tonight was really not the night for him to test her patience with his baiting bullshit. "Otherwise
he can call back at eight a.m. tomorrow and I'll take his call then, during business hours. Until then
I don't care what you have to tell him. I'm busy. Good night."

She hung up slightly harder than was strictly necessary, though still not hard enough to totally
banish Mulder from her thoughts. Even thinking about him was a distraction, one she really didn't
need. In honesty, she would like to see him. She would like to hear his voice. But she had a job to
do, with deadlines and lives on the line, and he would inevitably distract her from it. He had a case
for her – that was the only thing he would be calling her for, since personal calls had proven too
difficult for them both – and, simply put, she didn't want to know about it. Cases from Mulder were
invariably hard work with little pay-off, highly reminiscent of their X-Files work. She made herself
look all around the room as she came back to Colt. Agents. Surveillance. Files open on desks, full
of facts, dates, scientific findings, evidence, statements made to police or law enforcement.
Straightforward, solid, tangible things – the things she dealt in before she met Mulder. Thoughts of
Mulder were in direct opposition to the state of mind she was determined to maintain. Mulder was
chaos. A natural disaster. He was the wind, immaterial, unreliable, here one day and evaporated the
next; he was the tornado with its one straight, relentless path of focus while all else was left
untouched, unnoticed. Or maybe he was the comet, the outsider, alien and ambiguous, brilliant and
admired but trapped on a predictable gravitational path he couldn't control, elliptical in the way it
crossed Scully's own orbit every so often before flinging him back out into the far reaches of
space, dragging her slightly off-course each time he did.

She didn't have time for off-course. She didn't have the energy for it. She spent too much time and
energy telling herself so.

"Sounded pleasant," Colt commented innocently when she jammed the headphones back on. She
shot a glance at her probationary agent. He was extremely professional, quick-thinking, possibly
brilliant – she liked him, despite herself, probably better than a lot of the other fully qualified
agents in her department. She'd resented him before she met him, much as Mulder had likely
resented her on paper before she arrived in his basement, this accelerated-through-the-academy,
hand-picked-from-the-army boy with no field experience. And when he'd come in for his first day,
he'd been given the desk next to hers – a big hint, she supposed, that she was meant to take
responsibility for him, though no one had officially asked her. She didn't need a responsibility.
Hadn't asked for one. Had even told AD Tan that she didn't want one. But then he started work,
and now, almost three months into his probationary period, she couldn't imagine the office without
him. He was young and eager to prove himself, driven, determined, the way she remembered
herself being; the manners hammered into him by the grandmother who raised him and his two
years in the army prevented him from protesting the injustice of being withheld from sting after
sting, of being made to stay back here in the office with the boss watching screens while others got
to throw their lives on the line and get into the thick of the action. He was just itching to get a turn
at playing the hero, but Scully couldn't bring herself to let him. Not yet. He was so green, so
idealistic and optimistic and so black-and-white, like she was once, and she knew that once she
sent him out into the field the lines between good guys and bad guys, right and righteous, truth and
fact, would start to blur.

Sometimes, if she could take a trip back in time and cover her own younger eyes, she would.

"New operator," Scully answered begrudgingly as she quickly assessed the situation on the screen.
Alistair Craig was still tapping, looking up and down the hall now. Agent Desmond was one short
flight away from the stairwell door. The voices in her ear told her the rest of the team was still
trying to get in touch with him. "Anything?"

Colt shook his head apologetically. "Sorry, ma'am." He was watching the tapping closely and
trying to record what little he saw on the corner of the pad in front of him. "It's too blurry. I can't
decipher it." He tapped the screen thoughtfully with the end of the pen. "He stopped. Is he…
listening?"

Indeed, the suspect had stilled his hand and seemed to have angled his head down, ear directed
towards the door.

"They're communicating," Scully stated. "Room 623 taps back. Get on the mike," she urged Colt,
"and get him out of there."

It was one thing to send an agent waltzing past a suspect's door with a stage show of fallen
groceries, as Desmond was supposed to have up his sleeve, designed to open a brief dialogue with
the suspect and to get a miniscule sound recorder underneath or at least beside the door. It was
quite another to send that same government agent into an enclosed hallway where an anti-
government radical and a bomb-builder were in secret communications with each other about said
agent, possibly planning an assault in response to Desmond's unwanted presence. This was not
meant to be a confrontation; Scully had not accepted this proposition from her team and taken it for
approval to her superiors with the intention of making an arrest tonight. The risk assessment had
come up 'low' because she'd believed that the suspects would be unaware of the FBI presence.

That did not seem to be the case.

Colt repeated her message. The agents in the van reported again that they couldn't get through to
their agent on the ground, and Scully had them patch her through directly. She knew there would
be a lag, which was why she'd opted to communicate just with the surveillance team and let them
relay her orders through to their agent as necessary, but this snag was frustrating and her many
years of active, high-stakes work on the X-Files had left her almost incapable of standing by while
things started to going wrong if there was any chance that by jumping in herself she might be able to resolve it.

"Agent Desmond, this is Agent Scully," she said clearly into the microphone, hoping. "Stand down. I repeat, stand down. The mission is compromised. Return to your team."

Desmond on the screen made no indication that he'd heard her. Craig went back to tapping. The agents in the van kept fretting and Colt pretended not to. She appreciated that.

"Desmond," she heard the agent in the van stress as the wired agent reached the door, "do not exit the stairwell. I repeat, do not exit the stairwell."

Agent Desmond did not hear the instruction and opened the door. One step into the top floor hallway and the voice of his colleague finally reached him. The agents watching from afar all held their breaths. Alistair Craig looked toward the door, Morse code message paused, fingers still. Desmond hesitated; Scully snatched at the microphone again.

"Agent Desmond, do not react," she ordered in a low voice, seeing the unnatural way he faltered in response to the unexpected voice in his earpiece. Amateur. How was he selected for this task, exactly? And why had she agreed to be named as the mission's supervising agent? "Just keep going. Walk. Like you're meant to be there. He swayed on his feet, eyes locking with those of the likewise frozen Craig. Scully looked to Colt and demanded, "Can he hear me? I thought you said this was a live connection?"

She hadn't even finished asking when the screen showed Desmond recover and continue down the hall, but Craig was not taking any chances. He pushed off the wall and turned on his heel, snacking his hand twice on the door of room 623 as he quickly departed. A warning signal. Made.

"Goddamn it!" Scully ripped the headphones off and tossed them down on the desktop again. It wasn't even her case but she still felt the frustration sharply. The two agents watching on groaned as well. So close! Onscreen, Craig strode out of the camera's line of sight and failed to reappear in any of the other frames. Desmond carried his groceries straight past 623 and further along the hall, following after the target at a pace that could be argued was more casual, but Scully was willing to guess that once Craig was in the stairwell at the other end, he would be running.

Craig knew they were onto him and his bomb-builder. Their whole case might have just gone up in smoke. They'd just lost their chance at getting something concrete they could actually use. They still had no name, no face, nothing to match with the occupant of room 623, and now Craig was going to be twice as difficult to tail as before.

But at least Desmond was safe. Craig hadn't had any plan for deterring the FBI more sinister than simply walking away, which was a relief.

Colt offered a sympathetic smile and gestured at his own headphones, which he was still listening to. "The boys are asking for instructions, ma'am."

Instructions? This was their sting, not hers. She was just a name on the file to make it more appealing to the men upstairs. Her return to the Bureau, proven ingenuity and discontinued relationship to Mulder had ensured her a gleaming reputation. But the agents in the van were not like her. Boy scouts, they functioned better under orders than by their own impetus. She made a mental note – if they wanted her as a supervisor again in future, she'd need to interpret that as 'lead the mission, please'.

"Fall back," she said reluctantly. Colt passed it on. "Make no attempt to apprehend Craig if you see
him exiting the building. He's more useful to us on the streets than in a cell, and we've got nothing new on him that'll hold before a judge."

New anti-terror legislation made it legal for Scully to make arrests for much less, to search that apartment on a whim if she so pleased, but she was reluctant to sink to that level. Her exceptional solve rate was hard-earned; cases thoroughly investigated using ethical procedures and good old-fashioned police work, not slippery laws and convenient loopholes. It had been years now but the memory of hiding Mulder from their own government, who would use the law as a disguise for lies designed to silence his loud and unwanted truth, was forever burnt into Scully's subconscious. She wasn't likely to forget, not even now that she worked for them once again, and that helped her to keep perspective. No government should ever be given that much power, and never in exchange for individual rights. Sometimes the lines blurred – ten years ago she wouldn't have imagined a version of herself that valued any illusion of security over the public's right to truth or personal freedoms, yet here she was, with a whole new interpretation of what it meant to be free and secure, working in Counterterrorism. But there was a truth she was never going to unlearn, no matter who she worked for, no matter whose rules she appeared to obey.

Trust no one.

Colt relayed her directions and Scully rubbed her eyes, tired after a long day, trying to ignore the sound of the fax machine in the corner sparking to life. She had a good idea what that was about, since nobody faxed anymore.

The X-Files were long shut down, one of those hastily torn-out pages several chapters back in the FBI's past, the back cover slammed shut and a brand new blank ledger flicked open in its place. Counterterrorism was Scully's domain once again. Her medical background, her exceptional service record and the impressive increased solve rate her previous (mostly unacknowledged) department had seen when she briefly led it in Mulder's absence, not to mention the decade of meticulous investigative experience in chasing the elusive and the instinct for the detail out of place she'd developed in working so closely with Mulder, which Skinner had forced the interview panel to recognise, had driven the Bureau out to re-recruit her when news filtered back that she'd quit her position at the hospital. In a post-9/11 world, Counterterrorism was a bigger department than when Scully had worked it in the late nineties, staffed to the hilt with people both as paranoid as Mulder and as methodical as Scully. It was serious business, and memories of chasing up the fertiliser purchases of rednecks seemed silly now. Maybe someone still had the job of making those calls – someone being punished, no doubt, as was her burden at the time – but Scully was kept much too busy with managing genuine internal threats to the American public. If it wasn't a bomb scare it was a hijacking, a planned public execution, a hold-up… There were no monsters. Just people in files, on screens, and their extreme beliefs and actions and the consequences. No ghosts, no mutants, no flying fucking saucers and no missing months of memory. It was challenging but straightforward. There was a near-constant stream of misinformation to sort through, a stark contrast to her later years working with Mulder with absolutely nothing to go off, not even lies, and the goal was always clear. Protect the people. Find the culprit before anything happens. Contain the fear.

Cover it all up and pretend like nothing happened.

Make the decision everyday whether the weight of being party to these secrets was worth the cost to the conscience.

Mulder was disappointed in her, she knew. He wouldn't say it but she knew, and that hurt. Part of the policy of misinformation now. A sell-out. One of Them. Fuck him. She'd tried the other road. She'd spent twenty years chasing the truth with him, and she'd seen where it went. Sometimes
ignorance is bliss.

Colt pushed his headphones back and let them hang around his neck with a sigh.

"He knew we were onto him," he commented. "Do you think he recognised Desmond? Maybe next time it should be someone else."

Nice try. "There won't be a next time, at least for a while," Scully said, trying not to get dejected as she crossed the room to the fax machine. The inevitable fax. It was as though Mulder had known that ultimately her very important business here at the office would blow up in her face and she'd suddenly find an opening in her schedule. Checking the fax seemed like admitting to it, which she didn't want to do. She'd told him she was too busy. She didn't want it to be a lie; didn't want him to get thinking he could hook her whenever he wanted. "Craig alerted our guy to our presence. We have to assume now that he's going to be on the lookout for any suspicious activity."

"At least we know now not to knock," Colt said cheerfully. He turned back to his screen and put his headphones back so he could engage with the other agents as they wrapped up their surveillance. Scully nodded reluctantly. He was right. It wasn't a total bust. They'd learnt how to communicate with the bomb-builder, and learnt that knocking was as good as admitting they were cops. But there was nothing they could do with any of that information tonight.

Scully reached the fax machine and collected the single sheet of paper that had printed out. A page of a medical file, she recognised from the layout even before she turned it the right way or started reading. More precisely, a transfer order of a body from the HealthAlliance Hospital to Boston's morgue on Albany Street, which had then been amended in pen to the Berkshire County Morgue. The double underline for emphasis below the time printed at the top (1:28am) made her want to rip the document up but the familiar handwriting scrawled hurriedly across the page, ignorant of the text it was cutting through, made her stomach flutter a little with anticipation.

_Three's a crowd_, he'd written, along with two case numbers. Cryptic fucking Mulder, unable to resist toying with her. Couldn't just write 'I found a case that matches some others in regards to point X, Y and Z'. No. A riddle, a bit of work required before he would issue any reward. As it had been for always.

She stood and read the file carefully, looking for the clue that had caught Mulder's attention. Thirty-eight-year-old female victim. Johannsson, Rebecca Rose. Married. Mother of three. Died in hospital two and half hours ago, where she'd been under treatment for Diffuse Alveolar Haemorrhaging Syndrome – bleeding of the small blood vessels of the lungs.

No alarm bells were ringing in Scully's mind.

As with back in their days of working together, Mulder seemed to delight in the game of hooking Scully, baiting her into certainty that their case was a hoax, a false alarm or some other perfectly explainable phenomena, so that he could quickly turn the tides on her with the detail-out-of-place that made it an X-file and then go racing off through the rough surf with her clinging to the fishing line with the strength of her curiosity. Generally he liked to lead her to that detail so that she would discover it for herself, but nothing stood out here.

Maybe she was losing her touch with this sort of thing, or maybe Mulder was wrong. It wouldn't be the first time.

But it would be uncharacteristic.

She knew she should bin the document. It was only going to cost her time, effort and sanity.
Mulder would be waiting for her at the other end and he would want to play the usual game, pretend they were still friends and string her along like old times. She had things to do here, a report to file about this failed mission and agents to debrief and send home. She did not need to get herself wrapped up in more of Mulder's rubbish.

He was bad for her. He'd screwed everything up. She was better off here, far away, and this case would only drop her straight back into his destructive path.

"Colt," she said, returning to her young agent's side, "are you still logged in? Can you run these case numbers for me?"

She sometimes wondered whether it ever even crossed his mind to refuse, so quickly did he always fulfil her commands. She sometimes wondered whether Mulder had ever noticed how much he bossed and directed her, the way she was aware of her reliance on Colt's obedience.

"What are they?" he asked, curiously, as he glanced at the string of numbers and letters and typed them into the search. Behind them, the other two agents were packing the files away, neatening the office, preparing to go home for the night.

"I have no idea," Scully admitted. "Some dots somebody wants me to connect."

The first case file came up onscreen. Recent. 2014. Scully made no attempt to deter Colt from reading along with her.

"What's this got to do with Craig?" he asked after a moment of reading.

"Nothing at all."

"This came as a fax. Who sent it to you?"

"A jerk I used to work with," Scully said mildly, still scanning. An agent called Harlow had opened this file. A whole family was found dead in their home. Father, mother, teen daughter, preteen son. The police report of the scene was quite specific of the reasons for passing it on to the FBI – the house was tightly locked and no keys were found inside, the family members were found huddled in corners of the locked basement in frightened, cowering positions, and the father had made a petrified call to the police nine days earlier, convinced that someone was going to try to kill him and his family. The report indicated this had been investigated but any documentation was absent from the file. The word 'unsubstantiated' had been added later, in different pen ink.

The case had been closed by one Agent Pierce when the coroner's report showed that the family had died of Diffuse Alveolar Haemorrhaging Syndrome.

Which was not genetic.

Which was not transferred from person to person.

Which was not even a disease, but a symptom of a number of actual conditions, from autoimmune disease to lung infection to drug abuse. The chance of it occurring in four healthy young people at the same time and striking them all suddenly dead was... well, it was at the extreme edge of possibility. Not fucking likely.

"And the other one?" Scully prompted, and Colt had the second file ready in seconds. The Bureau had spent years digitising all of their files, but Scully was still surprised every time one of these came up on a screen. She really thought they would have burnt them all rather than immortalise them in databases.
"An X-file?" Colt questioned, noticing the tag. "What does that mean?"

Oh, to be young and ignorant. "A case we couldn't classify, categorise or easily reference. Something," Scully said, reaching over him to take the mouse so she could scroll down, "no one else wanted to touch. 1981? Really?"

It was a disappointed really, because cases that old invariably had little-to-none to work with, but as she read the disappointment wore through. A college Biology professor and his elderly mother found dead in their apartment. Doors locked, keys taken. Phone disconnected and power disrupted by circuits broken at the switchboard. The scene read like a murder, but the bodies read like a medical tragedy. Blood on their faces was found to have come from the lungs, which had been haemorrhaging. They'd coughed up blood until they died.

No diagnosis had been made for this case, though the symptoms did match the other. The 2014 case looked to have been buried; this one seemed just forgotten.

But Fox Mulder hadn't forgotten a single one of them, Scully was sure.

Different cities, different people, same poorly explained cause of death. Scully gathered that Mulder thought there was something else here, something that was worth crawling out of his self-imposed exile to badger her at one-twenty-four in the morning. She kept scanning, looking for it. Police report… Unhelpful medical examination… Obituary…

She and Colt spotted it at once. Simultaneously they pointed at the single detail that made it all make sense, this whole stupid game of Mulder's.

…survived by his daughter, Rebecca Rose, 4…

Scully pushed away from the desk and went back to the phone. She dialled the operator.

"This is Agent Scully," she said. "I assume Mr Braidwood left a number?"
Disclaimer: I still do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. Santa did not come to the table.

Author's Notes: The new footage has me simultaneously hyped for the upcoming episodes and also convinced that my vision for it is completely wrong, but I'm okay with that. I hope people are enjoying this as we go :)

The medical examiner's assistant's name was Janae, and Mulder had already called her Janet twice since learning it. He was normally good with names but now he was distracted with anticipation. She wasn't pleased, and her mood with him was even worse after she had to call her tired and grumpy boss to inform him of the FBI interest in his latest body. Her conviction that the body presented some kind of danger was lost on the ME, who adamantly refused to come in any earlier than his start time. He instructed Janae to assist with the autopsy despite her protests, and, as an afterthought, suggested she keep the federal attention off the 'anomalous' body. "We don't need them poking around in that," Mulder heard him say through the phone, and he privately agreed. "They can do what they like with the other one."

"I can't believe I accepted money from a stranger off the street to view a dead body in the middle of the night and instead of just getting a reprimand, I'm now stuck here until dawn to supervise some stupid autopsy with some stupid fed," the assistant complained as she hung up. As if supervising stupid autopsies wasn't her job or anything. She shot an accusatory glare at Mulder. "What is this about? You said you were a writer, but you've got the FBI's phone number on your contacts list? Sus, much?"

"No, I just remember it," Mulder corrected. He tried to carry as few phone numbers in his phones as possible. "And what do you have to moan about? You're two hundred and fifty dollars richer. You wouldn't earn that in a shift normally, would you?"

"I also wouldn't get infected and killed by a science fiction pathogen in a normal shift," she replied coolly from behind her counter. She had kicked him out of the morgue and was making him wait in the reception area where she could keep an eye on him. There was a seat but he felt too energised to stay still for long, and kept pacing to wear the restlessness off.

"You're not going to die. As far as I know, it's not contagious."

"As far as you know," Janae repeated, slightly shrilly. "And how much is that? How much does a science fiction writer know about infectious fatal disease? If you are really a writer."

"Depends on how much research he's done." And Mulder had done his fair share.

"I am not taking part in that autopsy," Janae declared, sitting down forcefully in her chair and grabbing for her book. Despite her voiced concerns about the killer germs they'd maybe let out of the Johannsson body bag, she seemed relatively calm about her potential situation, and seemed willing to distract her wayward imagination.
"Why not?"

She frowned up at him. "A science fiction writer walks into a morgue. There's a decaying man- eating humanoid monster with a half-digested immigrant in its gut, and a housewife with some blood on her face. He displays interest in the monster. He calls the FBI when he sees the dead chick." She sat forward, intense. "Mr Braidwood, you sound like you've seen some crazy shit. If that transfer woman worries you more than Spike does, I want nothing to do with it."

It was a fair call, Mulder had to admit, certainly more logical a rejection than what he usually came up against.

"The agent that's coming out is a medical doctor," he said finally. "She can handle the autopsy on her own."

Janae rolled her eyes. She didn't look that well-practiced at it. "I can't believe this agent called you back," she commented in wonder, opening her book and sitting back in her seat. "You were super obnoxious with the operator. Are you sure she'll be interested in this case?"

Honestly, no, Mulder had no reason to be certain of anything with Scully at this point, except that if she could avoid him, she would. He'd been unsurprised by her refusal to take his first call and even less surprised when she'd not come to the phone the second time. Throwing undeniable evidence at her as he had by faxing her in the end from the morgue's machine seemed the only way to guarantee getting her attention these days.

Bar calling her directly, of course. She always said she'd answer if he called directly, but he was increasingly hesitant to call her cell. She hated that he wouldn't, hated the shadowy cloak-and-dagger theme of his coded phone calls and hated what she interpreted as his growing paranoia beginning to encompass even her. She probably wasn't wrong on the front of his paranoia, but he didn't know to make her understand that his mistrust of the government certainly did not extend to her – there was still no one in the world he trusted like he trusted Scully – it was her workmates he did not trust, the people she surrounded herself with like a wall to keep him the hell out of her life. And besides, so long as he called her at work instead of on her cell, he could maintain to himself that he only needed her for professional reasons, and that he never needed her so badly that he had to actually ring her directly.

Telling himself this hadn't helped him to forget her phone number, or her address, or her birthday, or the way she'd said their son's name the first time as she handed the tiny baby into his arms.

Yes, he was very comfortable in his summer residence in the land of denial. Thank you for asking.

Mulder tried not to check his phone for messages or missed calls any more frequently than every six minutes. That would be needy. He read pamphlets. He stared at his shoelaces. He struck up conversation with Janae but it immediately fell flat when he started with, "Hey, Janet?"

"Janae," she corrected again. "Is this friend of yours coming or not?"

"She'll be here." Mulder checked his watch. More than two hours, nearing three, had passed since Scully had called the morgue number he'd left for her. He'd all but snatched the phone from Janae's hand when she answered. It had been only a short call, just the briefest exchange of information. Straight to the point, and that familiar line of hers: "It's me. Where are you?"

"And what will she do when she gets here?" Janae asked now, sitting forward. "Does she know
how to decontaminate the scene? Can she confirm whether we've been infected?" Despite her book, it appeared that her mind hadn't stopped running through terrifying scenarios for the past two hours. "Or is she just coming to take the body away and sweep the case away under the rug as if you and I never stumbled across anything?" Pause. "Are you one of them?"

"Imaginative, much?" Mulder asked mildly. He chose not to tell her that her fears were far from irrational and that yes, almost definitely, she'd chanced her way into a casual cover-up of the drug mule-eating creature that was Spike, and yes, the Johannsson body was quite likely connected to a series of X-files that would indicate many years of lies and cover-ups. Her anxiety didn't need it. Instead he gestured at his casual attire of t-shirt and jeans and posed the question, "Do I look like Will Smith to you?"

A knock came at the front glass door and they both turned as Agent Scully let herself inside. Janae shot Mulder a look.

"She does."

Scully was cute and green when Mulder first met her in 1992 but had managed to get consistently better with age. Her hair was a few shades lighter than last time he'd seen her and now she wore it smooth and sleek, off her face. Her tailored jacket and pencil skirt cut a fantastic figure, accentuated by kitten heels. Despite her tininess, Scully's air of confident professionalism gave her the metaphorical weight required to throw around in her line of work, and she easily commanded attention.

That said, Mulder was slightly biased.

Her eyes, wonderfully blue, sought and met his automatically. Drawn like magnetism, an undeniable physical force. Whatever had gone down between then, however she felt or couldn't be bothered feeling, the connection that had always existed remained still. The door swung closed behind her and Mulder offered her a welcoming smile.

"Playing hard to get, Scully?"

"Not playing hard enough," she answered dryly. "I'm here." She strode past him on her way to Janae's counter. The air that swirled in her wake felt somehow colder than the rest of the room's atmosphere. "I'm Special Agent Dana Scully with the FBI," she said, laying her badge down on the countertop for the assistant to check. "We spoke on the phone. I'm here to inspect the Johannsson body."

The ME's assistant pursed her lips like she wanted to say something, but was too nervous. Instead she pushed a clipboard in Scully's direction.

"Can you sign in, please?"

Scully accepted the clipboard and started to write her name. She frowned; the ink was running out. Hyper-attentive to her every movement, Mulder noticed before Janae did, and stepped over, already reaching into the pocket of his jeans. She usually pretended not to care or notice his motions but her gaze fell to his hip and his hidden hand. He withdrew a pen and offered it to her.

"And you thought I was just happy to see you," he said lightly.

God, that look. Halfway between fuck you Mulder, you're such an idiot and I think you're trying to be funny and I'm secretly pretty amused but I don't want you to think I appreciate anything you say so I'm going to withhold my reaction for now, it was so distinctive of Scully. Her consistency was
Unsurprisingly, she chose to ignore his cheeky remark and simply took the pen. She scribbled her signature and held the pen out to him in return without looking at him.

"Will the ME be joining us?" she asked the assistant. Janae shook her head.

"He'll be in at six," she answered. She tapped her bitten nails on the counter anxiously, debating what to say. She straightened suddenly, the precise wording coming to her: "He asked me to remind you that your jurisdiction extends only to the body connected to your investigation and not to anything else in the facility."

Scully raised her eyebrows; Mulder smirked as he pocketed his pen. And people called him paranoid.

"I'm aware of that," Scully said finally, while Janae squirmed under her cool gaze. "Do you have appropriate protective attire for me to wear for the autopsy, or would that fall outside my jurisdiction, too?"

Colour crept into Janae's cheeks as she nodded meekly. "I'll organise that for you."

"Thank you. Can you direct me to the body now, please?"

The assistant slunk out from behind her desk and led the way to the morgue. Scully glanced suspiciously back at her former partner; he only gestured for her to go ahead, and followed behind her when she did. He tried to keep a casual distance, he really did, but when Janae shoved through the double doors without holding them for the others and both doors swung back at Scully, Mulder found himself right behind her, arm extended over her shoulder to catch one and push it open for her. Instinct, auto-pilot. She didn't thank him, glance back or seem to notice at all. That was somehow more gratifying than an acknowledgement.

Inside, Janae went straight for Spike's table, dragging him quickly into a corner, away from the investigators. Her behaviour made Scully slow down, confused, and Mulder pointed out the new body bag.

"That's your date there."

"And this body displays signs of alveolar haemorrhaging? Blood from the lungs?" Scully asked Janae, ignoring Mulder completely as she approached the bagged corpse. Mulder respected the professional distance she chose and rocked back on his feet like a kid waiting for a show. Scully was not happy to be here – she was making that quite clear – but she was here, which meant that he was onto something and she knew it. Watching her make realisations, come to conclusions, begin to believe… seeing the lights of understanding come on behind her startling eyes… That phenomenon had not lost its magic in all the years he'd known her.

"I, uh, yes," Janae said uncomfortably, handing over the transfer papers that had come in with Rebecca Johannsson's body. Scully accepted them wordlessly and flipped through the pages, scanning like the expert she was. The assistant unconsciously allowed her gaze to fall between the former partners to the white blanket that covered the body that had drawn Mulder here in the first place, and then to drift back to the body that had given him the opportunity to draw Scully here, too. She swallowed and asked, a little tightly, "What happened to her? Is it dangerous?"

"That's what I'm here to determine," Scully answered without looking up. "Were you onsite when the body arrived?"
"Yes." Janae nodded hurriedly.

"Do we have consent from the next of kin to perform this-- Yes, here it is," Scully noted, finding the attachment. "And has the body been disturbed in any way since its arrival?"

Janae blinked and looked worriedly at Mulder. "Uhh…"

"I may have taken a peek," Mulder confessed to Scully, smiling when she glanced coldly up at him, "but I swear I didn't touch."

Scully lowered the forms and turned to face him properly. So he could see the incredulous gleam in her huge blue eyes.

"You sent me cryptic references to two X-files, both relating to possible contagions, and you opened up the body bag?" she clarified. She waved the handful of pages at him irritably. "You could be infected."

Nice to know she cared.

"Is it a contagion?" Janae asked fearfully. Mulder ignored her, focussing instead on trying to placate Scully with another smile.

"I'm not infected," he insisted. "No one who investigated either of the previous cases showed any sign of related illness, during or in the weeks following. It's not transferred from person to person. I just had to be sure of what I was dealing with before I called you. Because, you know," he added innocently, "you're extremely busy and important, and I wouldn't feel right dragging you away from your work unless I was absolutely sure."

Her eyes narrowed. What used to be playful banter was replaced now with this game of throwing knives. Like before, he couldn't have said exactly why he played it with her. When they were younger it was a game of courtship, whether he would admit to it or not. He liked her wit, her intelligence, and he liked the game of challenging her because she played back and because it was his game. Now it was her game, and she was better at it than he was. He likened his own skill at this game to a young puppy trying to play with a cat – no matter how many times she slashed at him he still thought it was good fun and he was still up for another round.

And it was still flirting. Maybe not for her, but definitely on his end. He couldn't help himself, and this was now the only avenue. Saying sweet things would earn him a classic Scully eye roll and a turned back; jokes were ignored; touch was avoided. Antagonising her was the best way of getting an emotional rise out of her, something pure and unscripted that he could connect with.

And even antagonism wasn't a sure fire system.

Scully went back to perusing the forms, inhaling slowly to calm herself.

"You're right, I'm extremely busy," she agreed flatly. "I have an unfinished report waiting for me when I get back to DC. Can we get started? The usual kit," she added to Janae, handing back the transfer papers. The assistant took back the forms slowly, glancing again at Spike.

"The usual?"

"Scrubs, face masks, gloves." Scully ticked off her fingers impatiently. "The usual kit." Nodding hurriedly, Janae scampered away, and the agent turned irritably on her former partner. "What the hell am I doing here, Mulder?"
Warm satisfaction at hearing his name in her mouth conflicted with confusion at the question. "Investigating an X-file," he answered uncertainly. "You got the fax."

"And looked up the files you suggested, yes," Scully agreed dismissively, "but what am I doing here? I'm not your autopsy service."

"Who said that's all I thought of you?" he asked, feigning offence.

"You know this isn't my field anymore-"

"Solving crime isn't your field?" he asked sceptically. She ignored him, carried on.

"-so I'm at a loss as to why you felt you needed to call me out here in the middle of the night to investigate a death that will either be a waste of time or that I'll have to pass on to another department." She paused. "What are you doing in Berkshire County?"

Mulder smiled. "So kind of you to ask," he said affectionately, backing away from her to circle around Spike's gurney. "You almost sound like you're interested."

"Hmm. Then let me try again." She took a breath, rolled her shoulders like she was getting in role. "Why are you here?" Flatter. Bored. "Much better," Mulder commended her. Her sense of humour was intact. He gestured around the exam room. "I'm working."

Raised eyebrow. He'd never been able to do it, not like she could. "Working?"

"Working a case. I started off in central Boston but a lead brought me out here."

"And that's an appropriate look for work now, is it?"

Mulder looked down at himself. So the suits had been traded in for scrappy jeans and old shirts and cosy hoodies? He wasn't an agent of the law anymore. He was allowed to be comfortable. And he didn't live with her anymore so he was under no obligation to shave or cut his hair.

"I'm undercover. You going to pretend you don't like the rugged look, Scully?"

"The homeless drifter look, you mean?" She leaned back against the metal bench behind her that ran along the back of the exam room as she regarded him, tapping her fingernails on the sterile surface either side of her hips. Christ, Scully – did she do that on purpose, knowing the way her posture lengthened her body, the way the hem of her skirt lifted slightly above her knees, the way the waistband tightened across her taut stomach and the buttons of her shirt pulled just slightly, dragging what was left of his attention to her chest? She wasn't vain, so he could assume not, but she was spiteful and intelligent, so he could imagine that, yes, she knew the effect she had on him. How mad would she be if he crossed the room and lifted her up onto that bench? He could be inside her in twenty seconds, max. "This case. Who are you working for?"

Another missed opportunity.

"Josef Fierro."

The relaxed posture collapsed into one no less appealing; she leaned forward, eyes wide, lips parting slightly, incredulous, and pushed off the bench to stride closer, voice dropping to a furious stage whisper. "You're working for a known drug trafficker? Are you insane? You'll be killed."
"Oh, Scully, you do care."

"Don't flatter yourself. The Bureau is watching you, Mulder." As he'd expected. No surprise there. 

"-and if you fuck up somewhere on the line, that's going to come back and bite me. Sometimes they don't even know it's you they're watching, but if you continue to keep the company you have been, you're going to wind up in trouble."

She was right in front of him, close enough to touch. Mulder swallowed a playful retort about the company he'd rather be keeping. He didn't expect it would go down well. Instead he said, "Mr Fierro happens to be a delightfully open-minded gentleman. He put me onto an X-file."

She exhaled in frustration, looked away. "Another fucking X-file."

"You can't have this one. It's my case. Your fed friends will just screw it all up. But," he said conspiratorially, leaning close to whisper to her, "between you and me, if you see an incision in the torso, they cut a man out of there."

She turned to the gurney and grabbed the edge of Spike's blanket. He didn't stop her from pulling it away, even helped her tug the rest off of the foot of the gurney, and accepted the scrunched white fabric when she shoved it at him.

Scully winced at the decomposing remains on the gurney. The state of the body had deteriorated even in the hours since Mulder had seen it. The whole torso had now collapsed and the dried-out flesh had begun to crumble. The mouth appendages were still painfully apparent.

"While my fed friends are off screwing up cases you like to think you'd do better, that delightfully open-minded gentleman did five years in prison for cutting off his brother-in-law's hands and feet, Mulder," Scully said finally with a disapproving scowl. She struggled to drag her gaze away from Spike, even as her words took their conversation in another direction. Curiosity burned behind the cool blue. Her attention flicked from detail to detail. Mulder knew it was only the power of her determination not to get caught up in him that kept her from moving closer, from pacing around to get better views. It was a powerful force. She stayed where she was. "Any other former federal agent would report his whereabouts, not work for him."

But she wouldn't push it. She wouldn't drop even a hint to her colleagues at the Bureau that Fox Mulder was the Ian Fuller they'd connected to Fierro. Mulder had known her long enough to know her loyalty to him, to doing what was right, always outweighed her loyalty to the law – so long as it didn't compromise her own integrity.

One of the many reasons he had fallen in love with her.

Mulder held up his hands. "I'm still in one piece; no need to worry about me, sweetheart."

The eye roll, the arms folded across her chest. The blank swipe of expression as she made the deliberate choice to shut him out. "Cover that up. I didn't see anything. I don't do monsters anymore."

She stalked away, back to the Johannsson body. Mulder laid the sheet back over Spike.

"I thought covering up was your department," he mentioned innocently as he did as she asked. Her arms and face went tense and he knew he'd overstepped the boundaries of the game and actually inflicted hurt. Which was never the objective.

Oops.
She forced a smile and shrugged it off. Which was her way of hurting him back, showing him how little impact his insult could actually have. "So. How do we play this?" She wasn't referring to the imaginary game he considered them to be forever engaged in. He wasn't even sure she knew about it. "You know I can't perform an autopsy and then leave the case for you. I signed in, I flew and rented a car on federal budget-

"Scully, I know," he interrupted. He knew. "I know how it works. You're here in an official capacity. By the books. Don't worry," he assured her, mock-seriously, "I'm well aware that you're not here for anything else." Certainly not for me. "This is your case. Whatever you find – it's yours."

She regarded him with those intensely cool eyes. The punch hidden in his words wasn't lost on her, but she chose to concentrate on the main meaning. Yes, he'd relied on her skills and sense of loyalty to him in the years since their split for the occasional case; if he could utilise her unofficially, without a paper trail, he liked to, because he got the benefit of her insight or connections without having to relinquish control of his investigation.

And got to see her.

In this instance, however, he'd known from the outset that it would be her case. There was a history to draw on, and it was much too big for him to handle on his own. If he was right about this, it was in everyone's interests to simply hand it over to Scully and pretend to have never been involved, so she could open a clean new file and make some serious headway with the resources she had at her disposal. It worked one way or the other: either he worked it and her help was unacknowledged, or she worked it through proper channels and any connection he had to it was omitted from the records. His name was dirty in the hallways of the FBI's Washington Headquarters.

"Well then, Mr Braidwood," Scully said finally, turning away, lifting her bag from the floor and opening it on the workbench running along the back wall, "thank you for the tip."

Janae declined to assist but readily provided Scully with everything she needed for the autopsy before withdrawing to the other side of the viewing window. Mulder waited in the examination room with the bodies while Scully disappeared to change clothes. She was only gone momentarily; when she returned he felt mild disappointment to see she'd already tied her hair back, already donned her protective face mask and glasses… He would have liked to slide those glasses on, or tie that mask on behind her head for her, or tuck a stray lock of hair away. But she returned ready and finished, a clear signal whether she meant it or not that she was independent and self-reliant, that she didn't need him or anyone else.

She almost definitely meant it.

A pair of latex gloves hit Mulder in the side of his head, and he caught them as they tumbled over his shoulder, already turning to smile back at Scully, memory of playful times sharp in his heart and mind. She didn't even look at him as she walked back in.

"Put those on," she said flatly, not the slightest shine of memory colouring her voice. She went to the tray of tools to check that Janae had prepared everything correctly. "I don't suppose you'd go away even if I asked."

"Aw, you know me so well," Mulder said warmly as he opened and stretched the first glove. Still, no response, unless one counted the face mask she shoved in his direction.

"Just stay out of my way."
Mulder acquiesced – it's what he'd been doing for three years now, wasn't it? He drew back to stand against the wall behind her to watch on. To give her space to transform into the timeless, passionless scientist he knew she would become when she got lost in her work.

Scully switched on her voice recorder and started her usual introductory spiel for her own future reference, and for the reference of anyone else investigating this death. Mulder felt his breathing slow, settle into a deeper rhythm. The slow, calm sound of her voice was a powerful relaxant.

"Current time is four-seventeen a.m., December twenty-third. Deceased is Rebecca Johannsson, white female, age thirty-eight. Time of death is confirmed at eleven-fifty p.m. at HealthAlliance Hospital in Leominster." Her voice paused, as though to accommodate the low noise of the zipper in the room, and she let the body bag fall away. Behind the viewing window, Janae visibly craned her neck to see better; Mulder could feel himself doing the same. Scully only missed a beat looking at the body before continuing her observations. Tone unaffected. It seemed to disturb her less than the other two. "Rigor has not yet set in. Deceased has a foamy red residue around the mouth and nose, consistent with a severe case of alveolar haemorrhaging. Burns around the mouth are unaccounted for in doctor's reports from hospital – will investigate. May have occurred post-mortem." She was silent as she looked for a while at this very strange condition. Mulder knew it was unusual, knew it didn't fit with the doctor's prognosis. Scully didn't want to address it yet, didn't want him to be right, and moved on. "Burst capillaries in the eyes, indicative of asphyxiation… likely caused by the treating doctor's ruling of alveolar haemorrhaging," she added, a little darkly, casting a look over her shoulder at her former partner. Mulder only smiled. He was too well-practiced at this sport to bite at her challenge. She wanted to demonstrate to him – and to herself – how foolish it was to think Johannsson's death could be anything more than what her doctors had said, but the fact was that she'd turned up. Which she would not have done if she'd believed he was wrong.

Even if she wanted him to be.

Scully went back to her work. Her desire to prove him wrong did not stop her from doing a thorough job. She took measurements and noted the visible clues, like the pallor of the skin and the appearance of veins and arteries through the skin at the neck. She took samples of the bloody mucus for testing. She removed the victim's clothing and stood back thoughtfully.

"Chest shows signs of bruising," she remarked slowly, as Mulder took a curious step closer, unnoticed, to see a web of blue and purple radiating from the breast up the neck. "No sites of impact. The patterning suggests," she added, leaning closer and running a finger along one deep blue line, "a degradation of the vascular system, resulting in mass internal bleeding from the major and minor arteries leading from the heart and lungs." She straightened reluctantly and turned to Mulder. "Not consistent with any recorded case of alveolar haemorrhaging. Camera."

He couldn't say anything while she had the voice recorder on – she'd made a point of not introducing him, plus it would be questionable if his voice appeared on an official FBI autopsy report when Scully was supposedly out of contact with him – so he silently turned to the table and grabbed the camera for her. She took it without thanks and snapped photographs of what she'd found. Mulder circled the table, looking with interest. Rebecca Johannsson's skin was pallid with death, and the bruising contrasted starkly in blackish, purplish reds. Under the froth about the mouth there was more bruising, and he saw it at the wrists, too, where the veins were closer to the surface. He waited for Scully to lower the camera before tipping the hand gently over to show her. Outside the room, Janae stood on her toes to see what they'd found.

"Bruising extends to other areas of the body, to a lesser extent," Scully noted for the benefit of the recorder. "Wrists, neck… temples, cheeks. Vascular system seems to have… dissolved."
Mulder looked up at her sharply. *Dissolved?* It could *do* that? She met his gaze automatically before realising that she was connecting with him; she broke eye contact and resumed her work. He extended a silent hand and she plonked the camera into it. Dismissed.

He drew back to where he'd started, out of her way, and let the sound of Scully's voice lead his thoughts. Dissolving vascular tissue. Internal bleeding. Haemorrhaging of the lungs. Blood and tissue forming a froth that came out of the mouth. Asphyxiation. Medical X-files like these were of extreme interest to him but did not fall into his field of specialisation, which was why he'd pegged it as one for Scully and the FBI. The two prior cases might never have been connected except for his eagle-like eye for detail, and he knew there was more to each case than what was in the files.

He was counting on Scully to find evidence to prove that.

She was a professional, before anything else – something he'd always admired about her. She took her time and commented on everything that stood out, but never made anything sound worthy of panic or concern. Eventually Janae abandoned her post behind the window to answer the phone, and she did not rush back; in fact she only popped back periodically after that to check on Dr Scully's progress, seeming appeased and relieved that things were not as dire as she'd thought.

Mulder was quite certain things were almost exactly as dire as the assistant had feared, but was glad she'd been calmed enough to go away and do some filing or whatever.

Scully cut the y-section with the precision of a craftsman and sawed through the ribs with the detached efficiency of a carpenter, pulling away the tissue that barred the lungs. Lost in her work, she forgot that she hated him; she forgot that she didn't care for his opinion and that she'd rather be alone. She let him hold things for her and she pointed out what she found with curious interest and didn't flinch when he leaned over her shoulder to look. When she reached the chest cavity she lowered her tools and they both stared.

"Lungs appear to be... missing," she said in listless bewilderment. It was not entirely accurate, though certainly the cavity was notably emptier than those of the cadavers he'd watched her dissect before. Veins and the windpipe and even the passages to the heart (which, aside from some oily black patches, looked to be in relatively good condition) lay disconnected in a state of shredded deterioration, the lungs to which they were joined unrecognisable. Large sections of the organ's wall were missing, big glaring holes open wide, the structure utterly collapsed. It did not appear that the lung tissue had been removed surgically, or even ripped out. In fact, it was not even confirmable that it had been removed at all. A frothy, bloody mess of dissolved tissue, pinkish-red and black, filled what remained of the lungs.

The lungs had been eaten away.

Scully put her tools down and got a swab to dip into the chest. "Lungs show irreparable damage. Approximately sixty percent of the lung tissue has dissolved. Surrounding tissues bear signs of deterioration but not to this extent. There's a small amount of an unidentified black substance – rotted flesh, perhaps? Too small to make out without a microscope. Pinkish, viscous mucus in the place of organs appears to be the remnants of the lungs." She wiped a sample onto a slide for analysis while Mulder watched in developing horror. He'd known this was bad and he'd known Scully would find proof of that but he'd not expected *this*. The case they'd been brought onto in 1999 flashed through the forefront of his mind. Dr Voss. Cigarettes. Tobacco beetles. Genetic engineering gone horribly wrong. "Whatever the cause, the result has been a total dissolution of the
spongy lung tissues. At this point I can only speculate as to the cause. Perhaps the black substance present is an acidic solution-

Mulder's curiosity could take no more. He reached over and turned off the recorder.

"Acid?" he asked. Scully was too absorbed in what she was doing to get mad with him for interrupting. She was taking a larger sample and adding it to a test tube.

"That would explain the way the tissues have dissolved and continued to dissolve post-mortem," she said, focussing on what she was doing. When she had the test tube stoppered she added, reluctantly, "but not how it got there or how it spread. She didn't ingest it. There's no damage to the inside of the mouth, minus a few patches of the burn, which are too recent to have occurred on the way in," she showed him, using a finger to open the jaw, "or the oesophagus, and the worst of the deterioration to the trachea is at the lower end, as if the decomposition began at the lungs and spread out from there."

"Like, beetles hatching inside the lungs?"

Scully drew back from her inspection of Johannsson's mouth to look at him, alarmed.

"Like what happened to you?" she asked, jolted back in time to a point in history when she'd desperately cared for him and pursued a case relentlessly to try to save him. If she noticed the change in her own tone of voice she acted as though she didn't, and anyway, she soon was able to return to her persona of smooth, uncaring Dr Scully. He didn't mind that persona. It was better than resentful, cold Agent Scully. She gestured back into the chest cavity and shook her head no. "The tobacco beetles that developed in your lungs caused heavy damage trying to escape but they didn't eat your flesh."

"I suppose I should be grateful for that."

"Whatever has happened here, it's eaten the lung tissue away. Dissolved it in some sort of chemical reaction. But acid doesn't fit." She stared again into the open chest, thinking. "Acid should have burned down. Gravity. This ate the lungs and some of the venous system and ignored the other organs until the lungs were almost gone." She shook her head. "Fuck."

"What?" Mulder followed her closely when she turned away to store her test tube on the table behind her. She would never have said that on an official recording and usually withheld language like that from her work life altogether, though he'd found, increasingly, that she held back less and less with him since their breakdown.

"I didn't want you to be right," she admitted, writing out the label for the tube. When she put it down she looked up at him reluctantly. "It's alive. It's a pathogen. A virus, or a bacterium, something. I'm not sure yet. But it's eating to survive, not as a result of a chemical reaction."

"You just said there was a chemical reaction happening here."

"In a manner of speaking, there is. Metabolism. It's digesting."

"And it likes lung tissue," Mulder noted, too glad to have her talking to him like things were normal to snatch at the victory of her saying he was right. She nodded.

"And it mightn't be dead," she confessed tightly. "It's kept eating in the hours since her death. The lungs can't have looked like this at the time of death – she died because they were dissolving but up until that point there were semi-functional organs here to breathe with. I may have just let it free in here. I did tell you not to stay."
Mulder ignored that. The doctors who'd worked on the victims of the other cases hadn't contracted anything. "I don't think it's transferable."

"I'm glad you think so," Scully answered coolly, reminding him who the expert was, but she didn't argue, so he thought she agreed. "The main concern is how she got it in the first place, what it is and where it came from, because this is not like anything I've seen in any journal." She knocked the 'resume' button of the recorder with her cleanest knuckle. "Behaviour of decomposition suggests presence of pathogen, likely viral," she went on as if he'd never interrupted. "Lung tissue and major veins have broken down as in digestion but surrounding tissues have been mostly avoided altogether. Inhalation seems likeliest means of contact…"

She didn't address him again during her procedure but when she was finishing up and putting the body back together, she did hand him the slides and point to the microscope further down the workbench. He had never been the scientist in their partnership but he knew how to use a microscope. He set the first glass slide underneath the lens and switched on the light beneath it. Letting her smooth, cool voice become background noise, he sat down on the stool tucked under the bench to take a look.


And familiar.

"Scully?" he called back to her, forgetting the unspoken rule about the recorder. She irritably cursed him and peeled her gloves off so she could handle the recorder and erase the past few seconds. "Scully, come take a look at this." And when she took too long, he added, "Now?"

She strode over as she tried to work the rewind function, attention on the device.

"What?"

Mulder only vacated the stool for her to take and extended a hand for the recorder. She let him have it and obediently lowered her head to the eyepiece to examine the sample she'd taken from the remains of Rebecca Rose Johannsson's lungs.

She looked for a very long moment. Longer than she needed to see what was obvious to Mulder. What would be instantly obvious to her, too.

"That's not possible."

"Scully, if I had a dollar for every time I've heard you say that…"

"You'd be able to afford to bribe me into every autopsy you need for the rest of your working life; I know. But this just can't be what we think it is, Mulder."

"Why not?" he countered, leaning down to give her back her recorder, his interruption erased from its memory. She pulled away from the lens to look up at him. Inches away. He met eyes he'd looked into a thousand times before, cool blue like fresh water lakes, and felt the force of them – the simultaneous fuck off from my sight and are you going to kiss me or not? He realised he probably imagined the latter message but he still heard them both loudly whenever he caught her gaze. "Because we don't want it to be?"

It wasn't often he got to see vulnerability in her these days so he was surprised to see its flash through her clear, expressive eyes and across her pretty face. He was certain if he kissed her now she wouldn't resist.
She dropped her gaze and sighed, raising her hands to press her fingers against tightly closed eyelids.

"Goddamn you, Mulder," she muttered. "You're going to owe me so much more than a new watch."
IV - Scully

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I just own this story, though I'd rather own the franchise.

Black oil.

It was irrefutable, even if she'd told Mulder it was impossible. Because it was just so ridiculously improbable. It had been so long since they'd come across any trace of the dangerous alien substance that she'd happily put it out of her mind, ceased to worry about finding it. Convinced herself that she wouldn't ever again find it. Had made huge life decisions based on her conviction that she'd not find it again. And finding it now, in Rebecca Johannsson's lungs – during an autopsy that Mulder had requested, while Mulder stood watching, almost three years to the day since she'd walked out on him for reasons more complex than just this but related, strongly, to a distinct lack of this – had her very shaken, and she noticed her hands trembling on the steering wheel of the rental car as she drove to the airport. She felt dazed as she navigated customs and flashed her badge to explain her unorthodox baggage, and wired and restless on the short flight back to Washington DC. By the time she arrived back at the FBI headquarters it was daytime and she couldn't remember how many hours she'd been awake.

"I thought you were going to Boston?" Colt said when she walked into the office. With a sigh she lifted her briefcase onto her desk and frowned at the spread of work around her young workmate. He appeared rested, but he'd been in for some time already this morning. "When did you get back?"

"Uh..." She glanced at her watch, ordinary and plain as it was. Two minutes past eight. She wondered whether Mulder really intended to buy her a new one. He'd given her so few presents in their many years of knowing each other – it wasn't his style. "Just now?"

"What did you find?"

Loaded question, and he didn't even know it. Scully tightened her two-handed grip on the handle of her briefcase and glanced around the office. Other agents were in already, heads down, headphones on, fingers clicking on keyboards or leafing through documents or subconsciously fidgeting with pencils. Counterterrorism had several large communal office spaces to accommodate their expansive workforce. The workspace made group communication and collaboration very easy, but for someone with a memory of working in a department of only two agents, in a small, private little basement office, it was also difficult to ever feel like she had the privacy to speak her truth.

Not that she knew for sure that Agent Colt would be open to some of her truths anyway.

She forced a smile, kicking herself for caving to her inner Mulder – the paranoid little voice he'd instilled in her over a hundred cases of suspicious, curious, inexplicable phenomena – and opted against sharing with Colt, instead saying only, "Nothing much. Dead woman. Probably just a big waste of my time."

That much, at least, was not a lie. Mulder's forceful return to her life had already begun to take effect, much as she expected it would, flinging her emotions about and sending her attention
spiralling off into space, into the vacuum where she could only find disappointment, failure and other hollowed-out things.

Where she found herself three years ago and had struggled back from only with immense effort.

"Finished your report," the probationary agent added, suddenly remembering, sifting through the paperwork around him. "It just needs your signature."

"You didn't have to do that," Scully said, surprised and touched – and relieved. She'd forgotten that last night's mission, though not even strictly hers, needed to be written up and documented for Assistant Director Tan, to whom she reported. She reached across and accepted the pages Colt handed her. She leafed through, marvelling at his objectivism, his intuitive way of writing in her voice. He'd done his homework. "I owe you, Agent."

"It needed to be done," he answered with a shrug, and let her read in silence for several minutes. Then: "Actually, something weird happened, and I suppose I wanted to be in your good books before I brought it up," Colt confessed, gesturing at his computer screen, which Scully could not see from where she stood. "I got a friendly little email from Assistant Director Kelley's office enquiring about my current case load."

She tilted her head to the side, thinking. Kelley was a relatively young AD, an 'up-and-comer', having worked his way very quickly through various departments to be where he was today running the Counterintelligence Division. Scully had spoken with him on many occasions, even kind of liked him for his sharp cleverness and attentive sense of humour. She'd suspected from the increased frequency of their meeting in elevators, stairwells and the foyer that he had a bit of a thing for her. "Why? What does he want to know?"

She circled the desks to see his screen, dropping the semi-proofread document back onto his pile of work, and he let her read the email over his shoulder. Short, to-the-point, asking for a list of the cases Colt was currently connected to and actively working, along with any cases he was following.

A routine check-up, hours after logging into the database to view an X-file for her? Coincidence? Mulder's little voice in her head asked sceptically.

Except that AD Kelley had no connection to the X-files and no reason to be keeping tabs on people reviewing them. Any suspicion that he, or anyone else in the Bureau, was spying on her activities was purely speculative, purely paranoid, purely ridiculous and purely a product of spending two hours of this morning with the most speculative, paranoid, ridiculous person she'd ever known. Mulder was the one who saw conspiracy and mistrust around every corner, in every shadow. This was not her life anymore. It wasn't that he was wrong – unfortunately, in their time working together, he'd been too often correct – but living the way he lived, suspicious of everything that moved, shunning openness and honesty and human connection because it might be a trap, was just too exhausting a path for her. He'd worn her thin on hunts in the dark for things that just weren't to be found, and she was not letting his slippery little voice lead her back down that road.

"Did you answer it?"

"I wanted your opinion before I did. I answer to you, and to AD Tan, before I answer to Kelley. He's not our supervisor. Why's he checking up on me? Do you think I did something?"

Scully drew back, suppressing a sigh. She heard her younger self in Colt's flat voice; saw her twenty-eight-year-old self in the defiant set of his jaw and discerning gleam of his eye. He was right – it was strange for Kelley to be probing him, and Colt was well within the realms of
practical and rational to wonder why. The Assistant Director had no reason to ask these questions unless there was a question of his competence (or the files he'd opened last night were flagged, but that was crazy Mulder talking). She knew what it was to feel that niggle of suspicion when something was amiss and to wonder whether to voice it, and to square her shoulders against perceived little slights. She'd had the benefit of a very vocal partner who never shied away from voicing those suspicions, who took her side no matter what and who never let her believe she wasn't the best agent for the job. Colt didn't have that. He only had her.

And he was asking whether he'd taken a misstep.

"You're an excellent agent, Warren," Scully answered finally, going back for her briefcase. "I'm sure it's just routine." Though Kelley could easily have gotten this information from the comfort of his chair, just by a quick check through the FBI's expansive databanks. That he'd emailed a junior agent directly to ask for a comprehensive summary of his current workload, circumventing everyone in between on the chain of command, was irregular, and not routine at all. "CC Tan and I into your reply. If he had any concerns about you he would have seen one of us and you would have heard about it by now. Underperformance is not something this agency would keep a secret from you, I promise."

Colt allowed a half-smirk as he turned back to his screen to send the reply. "Like you would know what this agency does to underperformers, Agent Scully." He glanced at her once more, her endorsement reinstating his quiet confidence. "I'm not sure you're capable of putting a foot out of line."

She retrieved her bag and smiled wryly at him. Like you would know what this agency does to underperformers, Agent Colt. "If you walk straight long enough people stop looking at the erratic trail of zig-zagged footprints behind you." She checked her watch again. The labs would be open. "If anyone's looking for me, tell them I'm at the lab running some tests."

"Alright." Colt kept typing, didn't even look at her. "Where will you really be?"

An automatic question. Scully looked back on her way to the door.

"At the lab," she repeated. Her response surprised Colt and he disengaged from his email to turn his attention to her.

"Oh. Alright. See you later."

She left with her controversial cargo, reflecting on Colt's query. Instinctively willing to cover for her, without question. Loyalty. It was a characteristic she admired in others, perhaps because she'd only known it in so few. Walter Skinner. John Doggett. Monica Reyes. Langly, Byers and Frohike. Fox Mulder.

And herself. Though she mightn't have found it in herself if she hadn't met him, hadn't worked with him, hadn't seen it mirrored in his every action towards her from the very first day. She'd found herself tied to him from the outset, ensnared by his relentless passion and luminous intelligence and infuriating determination to believe in whatever was least likely to be the truth. She'd found herself unable to undermine him the way she'd been assigned to, and even now she found herself bending over backwards to do right by him. Flying to Boston and driving an hour out to Berkshire County to autopsy a victim unrelated to her new department. Failing to report that she'd seen him, that she could connect him with a wanted crime lord and that he could possibly lead the Bureau to unravelling a whole drug cartel, that he'd stumbled across an anomalous body that could be the result of genetic experimentation gone wrong.
Letting him get under her skin. Letting him toy with her. Letting him stay to watch the autopsy even though she knew he would step out if she asked. She hadn't let his presence distract her from her work but it was with great effort that she'd ignored the radiation of nearness he'd exuded from behind her as she'd worked, the full, loaded silence as he watched her motions, the too-familiar, soft scent of him. And all the little things, thoughtful acts of awareness of her – holding a door, offering a pen, taking the camera, fixing the recorder. This was the definition of Mulder she'd always known, the definition she would have given at any point in their long relationship. Considerate. Generous. Warm. Loyal.

Ugh. She lowered the briefcase to a workbench in an empty lab space and rubbed her tired eyes, exasperated with herself. Two hours with Mulder and she was like this. Pathetic, a pet lost for weeks and reunited with her master. No. Mulder had lots of good points, obviously – that was why she'd believed in him, fallen in love with him, defended him, carried and borne his child, run away with him, even followed him long after his crusade was proven finished – but he also had some unredeemable qualities that she simply couldn't change. He was crazy. Unapologetically obsessive. Shamelessly unreasonable. Chronically unreliable. Painfully naïve. Heartbreakingly destructive.

And as far as she could tell, he was happy that way, without her.

That was why she'd left him, and she was right to do so, and time spent right now pining for what she wasn't getting back was time wasted.

Scully unpacked her laptop and the meticulously gathered samples she'd taken from Rebecca Johannsson onto the bench. She knew what she'd seen in the microscope lens but knowing is not knowing, and here, in a white and sterile and monsterless room of science, she would know.

Gloves, facial shield. Blood sample in the centrifuge. Black substance subjected to test after test to strip it down to its component parts, sent away with a lab tech for tests she wasn't qualified to administer but knew she needed. Bloody froth from the mouth and from the lungs analysed for acidity and composition. She fell into the natural habits of her inner scientist, one process and then the next, sequential, common sense, practical, progressive and focussed. Lacking, entirely, in thoughts of Mulder. She felt calm settle over her again as she worked. In this one space, at least, she was in complete control. This was her domain.

But being queen didn't make her a god.

"Shit," she murmured when she had the results she didn't want to see. Faith in science didn't mean she got to choose the outcomes. It just meant she got the facts. Cold. Hard. Uncomfortable.

The black substance pulled from Johannsson's face and lungs was indeed organic, though unrelated to the vast majority of earthly life because its origins were elsewhere. The cells she had were now unresponsive to all stimulus, dead following too many hours removed from its food source. Even adding the black cells to one of the cubic centimetres of uneaten lung tissue she'd cut from the cadaver as a control sample did not reawaken their hunger.

At least this alien pathogen could be killed. It was one relief.

The bloody pink froth expelled from the mouth turned out to be what she expected – liquefied lung tissue, digested in an acidic chemical reaction by the pathogen as it ate its way through the organ, set on survival and growth… and what else? Reproduction, the biological imperative of all earthbound life? There was no evidence of new life, of cell division or of any attempt to escape the body to continue the life cycle. That was odd, Scully reflected. Even the black cells that had escaped in the froth had only been expelled due to the expansion of the bubbly liquid as the
digestive process broke it down, and what was on Johannsson's face post-mortem had likely been in her throat at the time of death, lungs no longer functional enough to draw it back down or cough it up. As the Black Oil had continued to burn through the dying lung tissue even after expiration, more froth would have developed, and once she was in the body bag and on her way to the wrong morgue it would have simply seeped out through the only passageways available, unnoticed; and left on her lifeless skin with nothing left to eat, the dying cells had begun to eat into the lips and cheeks. Though not for long. Skin was not their diet. Thankfully. The cells had died, never having reproduced and never having infected anyone else, as far as she could tell.

Mulder was right. Not contagious.

Fuck him.

She peeled off her gloves and sat down at her laptop. The presence of the Black Oil brought up a lot of uncomfortable memories for her – of Mulder, yes, but also of fear, of hiding, of lies, of mistrust and uncertainty and despair – and it wasn't something she wanted to get involved in again, but she knew it wasn't as simple as making a single little choice. If things were that simple, then deciding to leave Mulder would have meant leaving him behind to become a distant, sad little pinpoint in her history. Like Mulder, the alien disease was woven into too many other complex issues. Aliens among us. Governments spying on their citizens. Morally corrupt men with shadowed faces sacrificing innocents for an agenda the public was forbidden from knowing. Murder. Conspiracy.

William.

Thinking of Mulder was frustrating and distracting; thoughts of their son were more painful than words. She swallowed the pain before it could cut her and shoved her glasses higher on her nose. She logged into the database and opened the search engine.

The fax from last night was in her briefcase and took only a moment of quick leafing to find. She typed the file names into the search and brought both cases up on the screen. Her eyes flashed across the screen, tiredness forgotten. Johannsson's father, a Dr Gray, had died of exactly this condition, as had his mother, nearly three decades earlier, and a whole family just eighteen months ago. What was their relation to the Johannsson/Gray clan? How did they all come into contact with this very dangerous, very specific, very controlled substance? How was it transmitted to them? Why was it eating lung tissue now, when previously its apparent motivation was to control its host, leaving no damage? This strain was clearly different from, though also obviously derived from, the same nightmarish substance she'd investigated in the first half of her career. In which case, the main questions were actually unrelated to the victims.

How was this strain different from the original substance she'd worked against?

Who had repurposed it?

Why?

The first major question she could answer easily enough. She hit 'print' on the files she had open and started a new search, this time for cases with her own name attached as a tag. There were a lot, so she narrowed the search to include Mulder's name. Still, they'd opened and worked over a hundred cases together, and she tried not to let her thoughts linger as she recognised some significant case numbers. She noted with renewed attentiveness how few from this time period were marked 'closed'.

Like you would know what this agency does to underperformers. She did know; better than most.
And she knew better than to think the punishment came from only within the agency itself. She'd seen Mulder chased into exile and she'd felt the pressure of the Bureau's displeasure with him shift to her own shoulders. She'd had her job torn out from under her feet, found her office burnt out, had her home and hotel rooms broken into to recover damning evidence, lost loved ones...

Scully found the files she was looking for and opened them. She'd put these files together herself so it was a quick matter of finding what she wanted – data on the genetic profile of the Black Oil. She scanned the years-old findings, reignited her memory of the substance. Its viscosity, its chemical composition, its specific genetic sequence. It was all still there, in her head, where she'd left it.

She opened her emails. There were a few dull interoffice correspondences that she ignored, the carbon copy of Colt's reply to Kelley and one new one: the results from the tests she'd requested earlier in the morning. She glanced at the time in the corner of her screen and winced. She still couldn't remember how long she'd been awake but knew it was now four hours longer than it had been last time she'd wondered.

What case number was this assigned to? I forgot to ask, went the email, and Scully neglected to reply. She clicked on the attachment and adjusted the size of the window so it would sit side-by-side on the screen with the previous findings.

The similarities were more than the differences but it was the differences that she paid attention to. Lower viscosity, thicker cell walls, differing cell sizes, subtle chromosomal changes. Someone had engineered this new, updated version of the alien pathogen. Someone had done this with purpose.

And it had killed seven people. At least. But why? Was this a weapon… or a monster?

Scully sat back from the screen and rubbed her eyes behind her glasses. Her old life clashed hard with her new one. She'd told Mulder she was through with monsters, senseless killers as they were, but was it preferable to think that this was the work of a weapon, developed for the purpose of terror, focussed and deliberate?

She added more paper to the printer in the corner of the lab and sent the open files there so she'd have a physical copy of it all. She put it into her briefcase, along with the other documents she'd spread around the workbench, and clipped it shut. She made her clinical notes about what she'd found today and emailed them to herself to avoid having them on a hard drive, took and attached digital photos, and then set about tidying the lab. Now that she had all the data she was going to get out of the Johannsson samples she saw no reason to keep them, and followed waste removal procedure to ensure they were safely disposed of.

She had just walked out of the lab space and was heading for the elevator when she heard her name called. She turned.

"Assistant Director Kelley," she said in friendly greeting, aware that she looked a tired mess. Self-consciousness was not in her nature; she'd never spared a second thought for how Mulder regarded her when they worked together, not when she was stiff and tired after a long stakeout or sweat-soaked and dirty after a forest trek or naked and dripping wet in a decontamination shower at the Centre for Disease Control. She'd understood from the moment she met him that Fox Mulder didn't view her as a woman or as an object, but rather as a federal agent and a partner who happened to also be female, not that he seemed to notice, so it had been nothing for her to undress in front of him only days later to have him check what she feared was evidence of abduction on her skin.

AD Hugh Kelley was not Fox Mulder. His interactions with Scully, though respectful and positive, made clear to her that he knew she was a woman. That awareness drew her own, and made her
worry about things she wasn't used to worrying about. How did her hair look? How bad were the rings under her eyes?

Why the fuck did it matter? It wasn't like she was in the market, was it? Look where office romance had gotten her in the past.

"One day I'll catch you unawares and you'll call me Hugh," he said as he got near, smiling widely to show his straight white teeth, nicely arranged. He had a nice smile and he knew it. His brown eyes had a cheerful sparkle and short, thick lashes, and his skin was the colour of rich, freshly ground coffee. About her age, younger than Mulder, Kelley was well-groomed and tidy-looking, wavy dark hair gelled into place, tie always fastened, jacket always crinkle-free, face always clean-shaven. Nothing like the casually unkempt drifter look that Mulder rocked these days.

"Were you looking for me, sir?" Scully chose to ask, deliberately side-stepping his opening remark. She wasn't interested in being on first-name-basis with one of the bosses, though from the appreciative glance she noticed a lab tech throw over her shoulder as she passed, she was in the minority when it concerned AD Kelley.

"What, don't I fit in with the scientists down here, Doctor?" Quirk of the mouth. Cute, she supposed. When she only smiled back, he dropped the act swiftly to maintain the tempo of the conversation. Socially intuitive. "Agent Colt said I could find you here. Are you working on a case?"

"Running a few tests," she confirmed, while the annoying little voice in her head that sounded like Mulder screamed Careful! "I like to do them myself, where I can."

"If I had your talents and skills, I'm sure I would, too," Kelley said easily. "What case is it?"

Two questions about her work, which was none of his business, less than an hour after she'd accessed a series of X-files, and in the same day that Colt had been asked for the same information after opening the same files. The parallels did not escape her notice and the likelihood of coincidence seemed low.

Careful, the voice warned again, and she decided to test the waters.

"I got a tip last night," she said. "Anonymous caller. He said he had new information about an old case."

"The Engel family," Kelley finished for her, knowingly. She nodded automatically, hoping he didn't notice the momentary pause of surprise. It was the old Johannsson X-file she'd thought was flagged to alert him when someone was poking around in it.

"That's right. Do you know it?"

He didn't know the first rule of this dance – trust no one. He nodded reluctantly and said, "Pierce, the agent who worked it, is a friend of mine. Poor bloke. Hard-working bastard, pulls out all the stops, does it for the victims, you know? You'd like him," he added, flashing a pitying smile. "This case took a lot out of him, though."

"Why?" Scully asked, curious. Kelley shrugged and looked up and down the hall uneasily, as though realising he shouldn't be discussing this. Nobody else was in sight, so he leaned closer to drop his voice. She didn't want to but relented, drawing closer, too.

"Between you and me, it was a prick of a case. When Pierce came in on it, it was an active homicide investigation. The extended family had been told by the first agent on scene that the
Engels had been murdered, and he threw himself into it like he always did… but then the evidence just didn't stack up, and he realised it was a huge mistake, just a medical tragedy, and this family had been scared for nothing. But then when he brought in the CDC and downgraded the investigation from homicide, the other agent and some of the family started at him with garbage about cover-ups and whatever. They were relentless. Totally upended his life. But they just wouldn't accept the truth," he said, shaking his head. "Evidence doesn't lie. Facts are facts, don't you agree, Dr Scully?"

Facts aren't truth, and evidence can certainly be twisted into lies, but Scully nodded immediately and said, "Wholeheartedly, sir."

_Sell-out_, Mulder's little voice muttered.

"This caller," Kelley said suddenly, "he didn't leave a name?"

"He did, but I had reason to suspect he was using an alias. Braidwood. It doesn't appear connected to the case, at least insofar as I've read of it."

"No. And he didn't sound familiar?"

Odd question. "No. Who do you think it may have been?"

Kelley sighed. "Engel's cousin was especially aggressive towards Pierce during, and following, the investigation. I wondered if it might have been him."

"Strange that he'd try me, especially after all this time," Scully commented, shifting her briefcase from one hand to the other. Kelley smiled and snorted one breath of laughter.

"Maybe not that strange. He may have heard of your previous work, Agent."

He thought it was funny. The X-Files, a joke now among those old enough to know what it was. She smiled too, hoping her eyes warmed with the false expression despite the frigid wave of offence that filtered through her.

"He must be getting desperate, then," she said. "It was worth a look. Nothing added up. Seems like Agent Pierce did a thorough job the first time around."

Of covering something up.

"I'd vouch for that," Kelley agreed. "Damn fine agent."

"Speaking of fine agents," Scully said, redirecting, "can you tell me what the correspondence with Probationary Agent Colt is about?"

The bright smile faltered. Recovered quickly. "I'd intended to CC you into that email and it was only after I sent it that I realised I'd left you off. Good of him to include you on the reply. We're doing a review of new recruits with consideration for transfer and noticed he'd _twice_ been rejected from taskforces due to enter fieldwork. By _you._" The smile was back in place. "But you're saying he's a good agent?"

"I'm very happy with him, sir. I'd prefer not to lose him, either to another department or to overeagerness in the field."

"So you recommended him stay on desk duty?"
"Until he's ready, yes, sir." Scully paused, meeting his eye firmly. "It was my call to make, on both occasions. They were uncertain situations. I needed agents on the ground that I could predict."

"Of course."

"I'll supervise Colt's fieldwork myself."

"He's lucky to have a mentor as invested in his career as you are, Agent," Kelley said with yet another smile. He walked her to the elevator and pushed the 'up' button. The doors opened immediately for them and they stepped inside. "Alright. I'll recommend against a transfer for Agent Colt. We'll nab someone else's newbie."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"Given your service record, Agent, I think it's only fair you get to pick and choose your team. You've done your time with loonies." The door chime pinged and the doors opened. He stepped out as others squeezed in, and he had to raise his voice a little to be heard. "Have a good day."

Realising something, Scully slipped hurriedly between the two men who had filed in in front of her to grab the door before it could close. "Sir? Hugh?" He heard, turning back with a surprised smile. She said, "There was something you wanted to talk to me about? We got off track talking about my case and my agent."

Caught. He smiled that quick smile again. "I'm afraid I've forgotten what I wanted to say. I guess that's an excuse to talk to you later, right?"

She let the door go and it closed her and her return smile inside. And not an instant too soon. It dropped like a stone as soon as the big doors sealed shut and the lift began to move again. Kelley had already had the conversation he'd come to have. He'd led her to it, let her think it was a casual by-product of meeting in the hall, but it was the real reason he'd come looking for her. He was keeping watch on that Engel file, perhaps others, and whoever accessed the digital copies. So, what he'd told her just now, about his friend Pierce, about the unhappy family of harassing conspiracy theorists… it wasn't just how he felt about it, it was how he wanted her to feel about it.

Manipulation. Why? To protect his friend?

It was all happening again – the secrets, the second-guessing, the tapdance around the truth, the glances over her shoulder, the lies – and it made her feel lightheaded. The elevator felt too small, the air inside too thin, and all the other people in there with her were breathing it all before she could get it down into her own lungs. Lungs which were, for now, perfectly healthy, but for how long? Was someone developing that alien substance into a weapon even now, somewhere within the borders of this very country? This country where she lived and worked and where everyone she loved lived and worked, and the country where she'd set her baby son free to live out his life, safe from all this. Last night she was supervising a sting against a bomb-builder but that suspect paled beside the potential of what she now had evidence of in her briefcase. Whoever killed Rebecca Johannsson had also killed another six people, some of them children and seniors, maybe more, and maybe those investigations had been swept aside in a fit of workplace pride and ignorance, too. Who knew how many similar deaths had been overlooked? Who else might be susceptible? Her? All of Washington DC? William, wherever he was now? How could she think that anyone was ever actually safe?!

She'd left this behind. She'd walked out, turned her back and taken a new direction. She'd abandoned the man she loved because he'd been more in love with this than he was with her.
But it had found her, just the way it always found him.

The disease wasn't infectious but the darkness he bathed in was, and she'd caught it from him.

The doors opened, wrong floor, but Scully almost shoved her way out, desperate to get out of there and into a wider space. The air felt thicker in this hall and she drew deep as the lift closed behind her and took everyone else further up the building's levels.

It was a moment before the shakes in her hands subsided, and even then she still breathed deep and slow, working to maintain control over her body's reactions. Anxiety was not something she'd battled with in her youth but years of following after Mulder had left her more paranoid than she'd like to admit, and thoughts like these stimulated worried, cyclic scenarios in her head that she struggled to deal with. Actual panic attacks were rare for her, and she refused to count this as one. She was just tired, she reasoned. Tired and stressed and strung out because she'd bent to temptation and gone to see him when she knew better.

There were pills in her bag. She knew they were in there, that they'd bring her right down and stabilise her, but she counted to ten and focussed on her breath, alone there in the hallway, and decided she didn't need them. She was okay. She was in control.

It was the most comforting lie she knew of, and expected it was the most commonly believed lie across the adult world. We're in control. We decide. We choose what becomes of our futures, our actions, our bodies. She'd believed it once. Twice. Maybe a dozen times.

She couldn't count the times she'd been proven wrong.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, but I own these versions of them. I keep them locked up in a drawer and let them out every now and then.

Author's Notes: Happy New Year :) I really hope people are enjoying the story – if you are, or if you have any suggestions, please leave feedback, as I thrive on it. It may seem to have had a slow start but after this chapter everybody is in position to get into the guts of the story.

This fic and I are also on FanFiction.Net, if that's your preferred platform.

If the sunlight was wintry and weak outside, it was even more pitiful when filtered through the classroom's dusty pane of window glass. The sad beam touched only lightly on the desks, on the skin of bored and restless students, doing nothing to warm them. The girl beside him tilted her wrist and only the faintest reflection bounced off her watch's face.

Still. In four minutes the final bell would sound, and Christmas vacation would begin, and even the limpest ray of real sunlight would feel like gold after this painful, drawn-out final session of the day. The endless drone of the school's dullest science teacher's lecturing provided the perfect background noise for any daydreamer, and he struggled to listen, knowing Ms B didn't believe in 'winding down' before holidays, knowing that what she was saying now would **definitely** be on the first quiz after the break. He took notes, or tried to – when he blinked at his page he saw only strings of incomprehensible etchings.

The usual. Some people drew squiggles in the margins, spiralling accents on the end of each letter, love hearts above their 'i's, moustaches on faces in the paper. He drew made-up symbols. Boredom has a way of expressing itself when a biro comes into contact with it.

He gave a start when a manila folder was dropped on the desk in front of him. At the top it had his name written in quick permanent marker, and inside was a stack of stapled and marked test papers, all named.

But the handwriting wasn't his, and neither was the grade.

"Ms B," he called, cutting off her lecture, putting a hand up in retrospect when she turned sharp indignant eyes on him. "You gave me Trip's."

"I don't think so."

Wasn't even going to check. Just assumed that because he was the baby of the class that he'd be telling spiteful attention-seeking lies.

"I think I know better than a manila folder who I am, Miss."

Suspiciously she came back to his side and looked. She only needed to check the first quiz in the folder to know he was right. She flicked through the pile she still held for another.
"Aw, you shouldn't have said anything," William Wyatt Wilson, or WWW, or Double-U-Dot, or Dot, or Triple-U, or just Trip, complained across the classroom with a grin. He accepted his folder of completed – and consistently failed – assessment graciously, but totally ignored Ms B's glare at his disruption. "My mom woulda had to go Christmas shopping again to get me enough presents to reward grades like yours, boy genius."

"Tell her to send those presents out to my place," William Van de Kamp answered, opening his own folder to confirm it was his work. Yes, there were the As and the occasional B+ he was accustomed to getting, especially in Senior Biology where he excelled. He'd entered several science competitions in elementary and junior high school and had come here in the fall with the strong recommendation of numerous previous teachers that he be bumped up to a more appropriate class. Extensive testing in the sciences had ensued to find levels that fit. Physics and Chemistry – junior year. Biology – senior. It made him the only fourteen-year-old in the course, but his tendency to daydream and appear inattentive had fuelled Ms B's argument that he wasn't ready to be moved into the college-level class.

"Tell her to check everything for small parts," back-row-hogging jock Jeremy said solemnly, tearing the bottom of a page from his notepad. Will resisted the urge to tighten his hands into fists. He knew what was coming. Paper ball. So unoriginal. Instead he slid his hand into his pocket and waited for the teacher to turn her back. "Little kids can choke so easily, and without a mommy to watch him-"

"All of your scores are there but so are your mistakes," Ms B drilled into them as she distributed the last of the folders, apparently not hearing the blatant bullying taking place at the rear of her classroom. "Read these carefully. Arrogantly you thought you read them carefully the first time but if you had, you wouldn't have made mistakes, would you?" She handed Janie's folder over; William snatched his chance and turned in his seat, rubber band already hooked over his thumb. Jeremy's paper ball was already on its way and he had only a split second to duck. It sailed past his ear and he snapped the band back until it was taut and let go. He spun back to the front just in time for Ms B to place the last folder down and turn to address her class. The thwack of speeding elastic striking skin several rows back was oh so satisfying. As were the sniggers of his classmates. "So. You have this little vacation to revisit where you went wrong on these tests, and in the New Year I expect you'll be in prime position to outdo your prior efforts."

The bell sounded all through the school and Trip's excited "Whoop!" was not the only one to be heard; the hall outside echoed with it from neighbouring classrooms. Ms B's mouth tightened but she released them.

"Have a happy Christmas break," she said, the least genuine farewell Will had ever heard, though he was already halfway out the door to avoid Jeremy's retaliation. It was lucky he was fast.

"She gives us homework and then wishes us a happy Christmas?" Trip demanded as he strode outside into the biting December air and down the front steps of the school. The manila folder with William on the front found its way into the first trash can on the path to the bus stop. "Like I've got a chance in hell of enjoying my vacation if I bring that shit home with me. Here," he added, reaching for Will's folder, pouting when it went inside the younger's backpack, "let me carry that for you, young Master William."

The fact that William V was a freshman doing junior and senior classes was not lost on anyone in a school this small, and open resentment was something he'd had to learn to live with quickly. He'd eagerly accepted the casual friendship offered by the older William, the builder's son, the class
clown with no shame and not a mean bone in his body who'd simply said on Will's first frightened
day, amid cold stares, "You can sit here if you've got white-out – mine just ran out."

An ally was an ally, and Will had stuck with Trip all year, sparingly utilising the connection as a
social shield, never daring to push the friendship too far by expecting to be allowed to sit with him
and his senior friends in the cafeteria or anything serious like that. They took the same bus home,
so occasionally Will sat in the seat behind or in front of him (never beside; he wasn't a little kid, he
didn't need that kind of needy closeness) and sometimes they chatted. About movies, sport, food,
girls… Nothing real, nothing too heavy or serious. Trip mentioned his mom in passing, or
complained about his little sister, or likened cafeteria food to his grandma's awful cooking, but
family was never a central topic. And so Will gladly avoided it.

Vacation was upon them, and Trip was about to have a whole week free of Will's presence, so
William didn't feel too bad about forcing his presence on his older friend now as he glanced over
his shoulder warily for Jeremy. Students dispersed in every direction in little clumps, girls with
their arms linked for warmth as they started their walks home; freshmen boys waving to their
mothers in waiting cars as they said their goodbyes to friends; a cute long-term couple of drama
nerds taking selfies with their phones; a laughing pack of seniors, boys and girls, almost adults,
cutting a path through the younger students on their unhurried way to their own cars. And Will and
Trip and two dozen others, standing around at the bus stop.

Trip's fingers were twitching and his eyes were on the teacher on duty.

"Dying for a smoke," he said to Will in a low voice, jerking his head in the direction he'd begun to
walk in. "Coming?"

Unwilling to be left alone to be found by Jeremy or anyone else who found his enrolment situation
offensive, William followed his friend back into the school grounds. Behind the main building was
the sports shed. The smokers' shed, more like. They crowded behind it like soldiers in a trench,
hunkered protectively over the weapons of their own destruction. William didn't count himself as a
smoker – hadn't his own mother died of cancer? – and knew he'd be in more trouble than his life
was worth if he was ever caught, but the lure of social acceptance to a fourteen-year-old is
powerful.

As was the guilt he felt with every breath he took the poison down into his lungs. Not just guilt for
doing something his parents would have disapproved of; not just for doing something that was bad
for him when he knew better. He felt immeasurably guilty for his own weakness, his inability to
say no, thanks.

He felt guilty for not standing up for himself. Like letting himself down, even in so small a way,
was a heavy crime worthy of the deepest shame.

One day he'd say no. Today was not that day. Trip's friends were already there, already lit up,
incriminating clouds of grey smoke lingering over their heads and drifting above the shed's roof.
The smokers weren't Biology students, so they didn't give a shit how many classes Will had been
promoted through to find a level that suited his abilities, and they greeted him with the same cheer
they offered Trip. The knowledge that there was no school the next day, nor the next, created a
sense of warmth among the students totally contrary to the temperature of the day. Christmas spirit,
William thought ironically as Trip passed him a cigarette.

He hated the taste. He hated the stench of deodorant he needed to gas himself with afterwards to
convince himself he'd go undetected at home. He hated that he hated what he was doing but that he
was doing it anyway. It only reinforced a horrible thought that he had nearly day.
That he wasn't living the life he was meant to be living.

He was living the life others picked for him – taking the classes the school chose, copping the snarky comments from kids like Jeremy, clinging to people like Trip not because they had more than a first name in common but because there was simply no one else. Accepting the cigarette. Accepting. Accepting, accepting, accepting.

Is saving face living?

He always let the cigarette smoulder away between his fingers for long spans between each draw to minimise the amount he actually breathed. So he was only putting the filter to his lips for the third time when a too-near voice cut through the smoke and startled the boys into a flurry of activity, whipping cigarettes from their mouths and stamping furiously into the mud to put them out.

Only Brittany, Trip's 'kid' sister, only a year younger than him and with the authoritative voice of an adult. The boys made noises of complaint about her unannounced arrival and the loss of their cigarettes.

"Answer your phone, jackass," she replied loftily to her brother, extending her hand for a smoke. "Mom called. No bus today. She's picking us up."

Will's heart sank. Bus alone? Jeremy took the same bus.

Trip was unimpressed. "Why?"

Brittany only shrugged and lit her cigarette. The other boys did the same. Trip checked his phone and swore quietly when he saw the missed calls and text messages. He hitched his voice into a high, mocking imitation of his mother.

"'William, please collect your sister from her classroom this afternoon and meet me at the pick-up zone. I have an appointment for you both to have your eyes checked.' Collect Brittany from her classroom? Are you still seven?" he asked his sister incredulously. "And have our eyes checked? If she's worried about our eyesight, why is she sending us text messages? How are we meant to read them?! Sometimes I envy you, young man," he said mournfully to Will. "It must be nice to be an orphan."

A beat of very awkward silence followed.

"Trip, you did not just say that," Brittany scolded, looking at Will with the same wide-eyed, semi-expectant look that the other boys did as they waited to see how he'd react. Her brother seemed to realise that he'd overstepped the mark; his falling expression revealed the moment that he remembered he was joking around with a younger classmate, almost a child, and that he'd made a very insensitive dig.

"Oh, shit. Hey, sorry, man," Trip apologised clumsily, cringing at his own tactlessness.

William forced a smile. "No, you're right. It's lovely. The best. Who needs a mom? Who needs parents? Especially at Christmas time. Thanks," he added, when Trip wordlessly, helplessly, offered his box of cigarettes. His fingers were inside the box; then they weren't. And he hadn't taken one. He hesitated a long time, realising the significance. "I'm good."

"Will, honestly, I wasn't thinking," Trip insisted. "It was a shitty thing to say."

"She's here," Brittany said suddenly, glancing around the side of the shed to see the distant pick-up zone outside the gates. She quickly finished what she could of her smoke and reluctantly handed it
over to a friend. She lifted her arms and tilted her head back in invitation to anyone and said, "Smell me. Can you smell smoke?"

Two boys leaned in to perform the olfactory service and gave their professional headshakes. Will thought it was the most ridiculous ritual, but all the smokers did it. As if it were even reminiscent of a fair test, here, surrounded by a cloud of second-hand smoke, sniffed by smokers who share in the same denial of the lingering smell of smoke on clothing post-smoking.

"Sorry again, man," Trip said, clapping Will's shoulder awkwardly. His tight smile betrayed how honestly terrible he felt about his choice of words. William shrugged him off and smiled back. He didn't want pity. It only led to heavier bullying later down the track. He tugged his backpack under his arm and opened it.

"Forget it. Here. Merry Christmas. And keep the presents," he added, pressing Ms B's folder of quiz results into the other William's hands. "Maybe if you read these instead of just using them to con your way into a bigger Christmas haul you'll pass your finals."

"Oh, don't worry. There's no chance of that." With a bright smile and a wave Trip followed Brittany back towards the gates.

William waited a bit and then drifted away from the other boys with a vague goodbye, which they returned in kind. Most of the kids had been picked up or had started off home by now, except for a few stragglers. He took a wide arc to avoid a group of boys his own age, all of them toweringly tall. Age-appropriate height was something William was still waiting, desperately, for. Sometimes he reflected on how irresponsible his school was, putting an undersized fourteen-year-old boy into a class of resentful underachieving seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds boasting the undeserved bodies of early adults, and strength and aggression to match. He'd never been beaten up, per se, but he'd been knocked around plenty over the last couple of months, shouldered into lockers, tripped over. Curse whatever cruel joke of genetics had left him so small.

The boys, some of them from his English class, didn't notice him, or at least had the grace to ignore him. He didn't want to deal with the snide looks, the comments. Orphan was an old one since his elementary days and one he didn't hear much anymore now that nerd and kiss-ass and freak were in fashion.

He was so focussed on avoiding his peers that he was too late in noticing the yellow bus. Until it pulled away from the bus stop.

"No," he murmured, taking off after it, stomach twisting. It was the only bus that went out as far as his family's farm. Walking home was out of the question. Calling for a lift was worse. He waved urgently and even called out for the bus to stop, to no avail. It ambled off down the street towards the intersection, accelerating as the traffic lights ahead changed to green. William wasted no time with gates; he made a beeline for the bus, vaulting over the fence and bolting down the mostly empty sidewalk, dodging a pair of girls in coats and scarves, his sneakers pounding the cement rhythmically, freezing air stinging his exposed hands and cheeks.

It was a waste. He was quick but only human, breaths coming fast and tight in cold lungs, and the vehicle moved with increasing speed toward the intersection. There was no way he'd catch it, he realised with heavy disappointment. He started to pull up.

Then something inexplicable happened.

The light turned suddenly red. No orange, just straight to red. The bus driver jammed on his brakes; the yellow vehicle lurched forward and the car behind it skidded to a stop, too. William put
on a final burst of speed and raced over the street in pursuit of the bus. It stood there waiting at the intersection, rumbling loudly, and then he was smacking his numb hands on the door, panting.

"Lucky for you the lights are on the fritz," the driver said when Will boarded, "or you would've been walking."

An automatic scan of the bus. Jeremy sitting at the back, as per usual. Kasey the girls' soccer captain had his attention, so Will quickly ducked into an empty seat near the front before Jeremy could decide she could wait until he'd finished with William.

That was close. It was lucky about the lights. In general, William was a pretty lucky guy. Things often worked out in his favour. Not big things, like making friends or getting people to like him, but little things, chance things, like guessing how many jellybeans were in the jar at the school fair or getting the last can of Coke from the vending machine before it malfunctioned. And traffic lights stopping busses, apparently.

"Needs to be serviced," Uncle Gary commented flatly that evening when Will told him the story over dinner. "Like everything else in this town: broken down and no one's interested enough to fix it."

It was a sad truth, Will thought as he washed the dishes quietly in the kitchen and watched his uncle fuss over spreadsheets at the coffee table. Gary Milne was meant to have been a big hotshot investment banker. He was smart, sassy, ruthless, and his career had looked promising. Will remembered loving the visits from Uncle Gary, so few and fast were they as he tried to fit in seeing his only nephew every Christmas of his childhood. Stories of city living and smart suits with shoes that shined, glossy dark hair exactly like Mom's, big smile exactly like Mom's.

That was then. Before. Back when everyone was living the lives they were meant to be living. Supporting his older sister through the sudden death of her husband had not been part of Gary Milne's life plan, but he did it, without complaint. Nursing his sister through sudden and aggressive cancer had not been in the plan, but he did it, without complaint. Just like he'd buried her, settled her accounts and moved here, giving up his career in the process, to raise her son. All without complaint.

But complaining isn't the only sign of unhappiness, and William was desperate to get through school, grow up and urge his uncle back home to the city where he could pick up his life where he'd left off. Managing a farm, fixing tractors and being a parent were not parts of life he'd signed up for, and it showed. He tried to remember when to pay school fees, which size shoes to buy, what flavour yoghurt to stock the fridge with, but parenting was not a job he was ever going to master. Stress manifested as a result of his inability to stay on top of things, and Will and Gary had launched into many ugly rows fuelled on alcohol and teenage hormones. In the years stuck together, the closeness they'd had when Will was a child had worn away with familiarity.

Like the rest of this town: broken down, with no one able to fix it.

It was a sad way to look at life.

"Uncle Gary," Will piped up, deliberately redirecting his depressing line of thought. He put the last plate away in the cupboard and looked over the counter into the living room. Gary had tilted his head towards the kitchen, a sign he was listening, but his eyes were still on the spreadsheets. Good. No snappy response. He was in a good mood. "A butterfly with one hour to live, or a moth you have to keep for the rest of your life?"

Gary visibly disengaged from his work to look up at his nephew. He looked so much like his sister
Sarah, the smiling brunette woman in the photo frames hanging above the crackling fireplace. There was a picture of them together, wiry kids with thick dark hair and wide smiles and squinty eyes narrowed against the summer sun. Will had looked at the picture a thousand times, looking for his own features in theirs. His stature was smaller; his eyes big and blue and not the Milne shape. He must have gotten the Van de Kamp blood, though looking at his parents' wedding photo he knew he didn't look much like his father, either. The picture in the middle in the big frame was the favourite. Mom and Dad, holding baby William above his first birthday cake while a young Uncle Gary blew out the candle for him. Happy times. Will knew Gary had adored his sister, looked up to her and loved her family dearly. It was why he was here, living a life that wasn't his, to fulfil her dying request.

The life wasn't his but the game was. Two options, both randomly selected and wildly different from each other. One choice, along with a justification. It could be as ridiculous or as profound as the players wanted, so long as the decision could be defended with logic. The best argued position was the winner.

"The moth," Gary said finally, surprising Will. "Watching the butterfly die wouldn't be nice. Even the hour you beheld it would be tainted because you know it's limited."

"Isn't it more special because it's limited?" William countered, starting on the cutlery.

"Maybe to some. I think it would be sad, knowing that you've got something special and that you've got to give it up soon. The moth, though," he said, getting to his feet, pleasantly distracted from the financial state of the farm, "the moth stays with you forever. A constant. A friend you'll never lose."

"Who says he's friendly?"

"Things have a way of becoming sacred when they're consistent. When they're loyal. Even when they're not perfect, when they're difficult or challenging, if you know they'll never leave you, it's different. You look at things differently when you know you've got them for always."

William dried the cutlery and thought on his uncle's response. It was a sound argument. A reference to his mostly unspoken affection for William, perhaps? Or too much to ask?

"Alright, I can't outdo that," he relented eventually. "The one-hour butterfly doesn't hold up against that argument. You get a point."


"Turn one of your bank statements over and write on that. Kidding," Will clarified when he saw Gary's horrified expression. Defile a letter from the bank?! The nerve of some people. He turned to the drawer and dropped the dry forks inside, rolling his eyes when he knew Uncle Gary couldn't see. "My bag's beside the door. Grab one of my schoolbooks and rip out one of the pages."

"Somehow I'm sure I'm meant to think that's worse, but I just can't see how it is," Gary admitted, digging through the bag for a notebook. He found one and brought it into the kitchen to find a pen. He flipped through the pages. "What subject's this? Science?"

"Bio."

"Looks serious. They let you into the college-level class yet?"

"They said I'm too short."
"Ha, ha," Gary said, accentuating his sarcastic false laugh. He laid the book down on the counter at the most recent page and opened a drawer, digging about for a pen. "Is that the entry test? Senior project: manipulate your own DNA to reach the necessary height to take this class."

"Exactly. And I stand no chance, because I can't even explain where my red hair came from."

"Well," Uncle Gary said, coming up with an old black pen with a broken lid, "that obviously came from the Van de Kamp side, since the Milnes were proudly ginger-free for three generations until you came along and besmirched the family name." He turned his head to accept the sharp look from his nephew, and then they both grinned. "Kidding. We might have had a great-aunt who was a strawberry blonde, but we had her assassinated."

"It can't have been that big of an embarrassment," Will commented, a flash of memory striking him from somewhere deep and shapeless in his mind. "Mom dyed her hair red for a while, didn't she?"

"Sarah never touched hair dye," Gary refuted, scribbling with the pen to get it working on the page. Will frowned; he'd experienced the same brief memory a hundred times before, just the swiftest impression of images and feelings. A dark bedroom, no details solid enough to grasp. A soft voice, full of love, the voice of a mother speaking to her son, no words remembered but the meaning clear anyway. A face, all features taken by time and underdeveloped memory, framed with red.

"No, I remember," Will said slowly, with certainty. "Maybe it was just for a little while."

"Are they teaching you Navajo?" Gary asked suddenly, ceasing in his efforts to get the pen working. He was reading the page. William shook his head.

"No, they're teaching me punnet squares, recessive and dominant genes. Science, since it's a science class."

"My roommate at college was a Navajo," Gary said quietly, thoughtfully, still staring at the page. "He could read and write this. He could translate it."

"And what? Taught you everything he knew?" Will joked, unable to understand the sudden redirection of conversation or the new intensity his uncle had taken on. "How do you know how to read it?"

Gary turned to his nephew, eyes wide. "Did you write this?" He held the book open to show the daydream etchings. William shrugged, mystified.

"Ms B is so boring I'm lucky not to sleep through that class. Scribbling keeps my hand moving, which keeps my blood moving, which keeps my heart beating." He frowned. "It's not Navajo."

"Who taught you this?"

"No one." Will was getting annoyed now. "I told you, it's just a scribble. I do it when I'm bored shitless, alright?" He snatched the book and flicked through the other pages to show several other examples of similar levels of boredom. "You'll find it in my Math book and History, too. It's nothing."

"This is a language, Will, and I want to know how you learnt it if nobody taught it to you."

William stared at Gary. Gary stared back, firm.

"Are you hearing yourself?" Will asked finally. "I think you lose that point you got for the moth. If nobody taught me, how could I have learned a language?"
Gary didn't back down. "That's what I asked Sarah when she started writing this all over her piano music sheets. Pages and pages and pages of it. Wouldn't have known what it was, except that Dennis saw it."

"Mom knew Navajo?" Will confirmed, confused.

"No," Uncle Gary replied tensely, "she didn't. She just wrote it, everywhere, after she got back, and we never knew where the hell she learned it-"

"Got back? Where did she go?"

"Your neck," Gary said, suddenly urgent, stepping closer to William with his hand outstretched. It was an almost intimidating gesture, and the boy moved away, raising his hands in protest, but bumped into the counter and his uncle grabbed him, hand tight on his shoulder and the other hand rough in his thick red hair and he wrenched his head forward. Angry now, Will shoved him away, demanding to know what that was about, but Uncle Gary let go willingly and was staring at his nephew without hearing the demands. "There's nothing. Thank God."

"What the hell?!" William shouted, frustrated by the dissolved evening. Things had been going just fine. "What are you looking for?"

"Go to bed." Gary was angry, stressed, overwhelmed. He gestured his nephew out of the kitchen. "I'll finish these dishes. Just go. Please."

Will bit back the retort about the early hour, certain it would only degrade into a row. He threw the tea towel down and stomped out of the kitchen. He made sure to stomp extra hard on the stairs as he went up them to his bedroom. He even slammed his door for good measure and turned his stereo right up, blasting heavy metal filled with offensive language through the whole house. He was fuming.

Good to be an orphan, huh? Trip had no idea how frustrating uncles could be. Mom could write Navajo? Will's absent-minded scribbles were letters from that language? Weird, but not inexplicable. Obviously, he'd seen the language somewhere before and had remembered it, which was why it came up out of his subconscious when he was relaxed. You couldn't write in a language you'd never learned.

It was a stupid thing to have argued about.

The anger started to abate.

Will was wrong to have yelled at Uncle Gary. Granted, Gary could have just asked to see his neck, for whatever reason he might have had, but it wasn't as though he was going to hurt Will, so yelling at him was not right.

Uncle Gary did his best, and obviously something had upset him. Something William didn't understand. So he opened his door, letting the pounding music out into the upstairs hallway, and went downstairs to make amends. Uncle Gary was the only family he had left in the world. He barely remembered his dad, the gentle farmer killed in a tractor accident when Will was only two, and his mother had been dead for six years now.

Gary had lost them, too, and he did his best with Will. It was important to remember that, and to know that whatever had triggered the argument tonight had probably been just as upsetting for Gary as it was for Will. More, even.

He took the stairs quickly at first, eager to fix things, but slowed when he heard his uncle's voice.
No one else lived with them. Who was he talking to? There was no reply. Phone. Will crept down the last couple of steps and listened attentively. Dining room. Behind the kitchen. He slipped through the living room, tiptoed through the kitchen, and paused at the arched opening into the dining room. He dared not stick his head through; he just listened.

"... can't go through all of this again, not with him. I don't understand – how can this be happening to him?" Pause. "Yes, that's what I'm telling you, Dennis. The script, it's all there. He says he writes it when he's bored. Sarah used to say it was when her mind was free, when she was playing piano, that's when it came through. It started after her disappearance..." Long pause. Will frowned and leaned as close to the doorway as he dared, breathing very shallowly and straining to hear. "She came back with that scar on her neck, remember? And later when she had an x-ray we..." His voice was muffled by the scraping sound of a chair being pushed back. Will tensed, prepared to bail back to his room to avoid being caught eavesdropping, but then heard the rattle of the curtain rings and realised Uncle Gary was just getting up and looking outside. He was still talking. "...scar on Will. Nothing. So far it's just the writing, but that can't be a coincidence, can it?" Pause; harsh laugh. "Well, it's not like it could be genetic, could it?"

The curtains rattled again, drawn shut, and William backed away from the dining room hearing on the occasional word or phrase. "...infertility... doctors said... don't know what to tell..." He reached the stairs, feeling dizzy and short of breath, like he'd been struck. He held the wooden handrail tightly as he ascended and went back to his room. He turned off the music, which sounded only horrible and disorientating now, changed into pyjamas and laid down in bed.

Did you write this? It's Navajo.

He says he writes it when he's bored. Sarah used to say it was when she was playing piano.

It started after her disappearance. She came back with that scar on her neck. Nothing on Will.

I can't go through all of this again with him.

It's not like it could be genetic.

What on Earth was going on? What was the big deal about knowing another language? Where had Sarah Van de Kamp, perhaps back then still Sarah Milne, learnt it? Where had she gone? 'Disappeared' to? When was this? What had caused the scar and why was Uncle Gary so concerned about her scar that he would look for a matching one on her son? What had the x-ray picked up? What had Gary been through with Sarah that he couldn't handle repeating with Will?

And why couldn't any of this be attributed to genetics?

That comment shook William deepest of all, brought worried thoughts to the surface that he'd never had before, thoughts that rattled his most central beliefs about his life but which carried within them a heavy, dark certainty.

He couldn't sleep. He pretended to be when, hours later, Uncle Gary cracked the door to look inside and check on him. He watched Will for a long time in silence before he went to his own room and the lights went off.

In the morning Uncle Gary's car left early. Gone to the Pryce farm, the note on the fridge said when William raided it. He grabbed the near-empty carton of milk and checked the date. Still good. He took a swig, knowing he was meant to use a glass but feeling rebellious this morning. He was thoughtful and methodical about his movements as he went about readying for the first day of school vacation. Other kids were planning movie marathons, gaming binges, dates with classmates,
grand parties... Everyone had a different approach on optimising their free time. William had other thoughts. Only... he wasn't sure he wanted to go down that path. So he showered. He dressed. He made his bed. He fed the animals.

Then he came back to the house and went to the study. Beside the computer desk was a filing cabinet. His mother hadn't kept it all that tidy, but his more organised uncle had gutted it and put all the paperwork back into it when he'd moved in. Finding what he was looking for ought to be relatively easy.

The filing system was definitely organised, but forty-five minutes of flicking through folders brought up a big fat nothing. Tax, banking, invoices, contracts... boring, boring... He put it all back as he'd found it and opened the cupboard. Christmas decorations – he and Uncle Gary had stopped putting up the tree when he was eleven. Junk, mostly. Headphones they never used, the old computer monitor, some rewritable discs and users' guides. Another useless search.

Uncle Gary always came home for lunch. Will checked his watch and saw his time was limited. He looked around. The study was a bust. Where else would something this important be hidden?

Gary had turned the master bedroom into his own when he'd come to live at the Van de Kamp farm, so William bypassed it completely when he went up the stairs. There was a likelier location.

The Piano Room had been Sarah's favourite space. Even when she was dying of cancer, all of her dark hair shorn away and her hands shaky and brittle, she'd come in here to play her music. William had loved to sit beside her at the cheap upright instrument, hardly as pretty as the classical grand ones she pointed out at music shops through the windows, and she'd taught him to play, to read music, to feel the melodies work their way through him. After she died, he had come in here a lot to feel close with her, but it was never the same. He didn't get the same enjoyment without her there to encourage him. He was not an artist, not a musician; his love for it was not innate like hers was. Her delight in his music was what had made it delightful, and now the delight was gone from the world. He no longer played, though he suspected he would easily pick it back up if he were to sit down at the keys and start.

His fingers twitched with temptation but he turned to the dusty old roll-top writing desk nearby. It was locked. Sarah had sat here to write and compose. This was her space. These were her things. She'd locked them up for a reason, and Gary had left them that way, also for a reason, and they were adults who loved him and their reasons were usually for his own good.

But they'd kept things from him. Significant things. Mom had this whole past of disappearing and writing in foreign tongues that Gary was treating like a big secret, like Will couldn't handle it. Well. He'd learn for himself whether he was strong enough to handle it. He opened the top of the piano and looked down into the dusty innards. The hammers lay dormant. He lowered his hand among the instrument's key mechanisms, glad for once for his fine fingers and the way they slipped into the gaps.

He found what he was looking for and withdrew it. The little key was dusty, dirty, grimy from years shut away inside a piano. He tried it on the desk. It fit perfectly, but turned only with effort, and the roll-top was reluctant to roll away, sticking hard as though determined to abide by the wishes of its mistress. Sarah didn't want you in here, it seemed to remind Will sternly, but human willpower overrode the stubbornness of inanimate wooden furniture, and finally he had the top pushed right back and he was looking at the desktop of the late Sarah Van de Kamp.

At first he thought he was wrong. The desk was littered with sheet music, none of it scrawled over with Navajo, and a scrappy notepad detailed little pieces of inspiration. City rooftops in New York, she'd written. Leaves on the pavement. A park in the centre, solace in the wilds of the cityscape. It
was her creative process, he remembered, to draw from things she saw and experienced and translate it into a piece of music. He'd never felt the same way about the arts but wished he could.

He might have given up except that a prompt of nostalgia urged him to run his fingers along the edge of the desktop. A crack disrupted his fingertip; he lifted experimentally, and the whole desktop came away with a loud crack. He hadn't broken it, he realised, pulling it away. It was a false bottom, a disguised compartment, right here underneath the writing space. He put the desktop down on the floor gently, not wanting to disturb the work Sarah had left strewn on it, and looked into the secret compartment hidden inside the desk.

Papers. Envelopes. Documents held together with paper clips. Slowly he went through them, heart in his throat and tears stinging behind his eyes.

Certificate of adoption. Dated when he was ten months old. Explained why there were no early babyhood photos of him in the house.

Hospital records, with a letter from a paediatric specialist responding to concerns of Sarah's, assuring her that her baby was completely normal.

X-rays with Sarah's name, of her head and neck. When Will held it up to the light his eyes drew immediately to the bright white node at the base of her neck. Shaped like a pill. He ran a hand over the back of his own neck, thinking warily of the way Gary had grabbed at him to check for the same thing.

A large envelope containing a letter from the adoption agency as well as an unopened, regular-sized envelope.

Dear Mrs Van de Kamp,

Regretfully we are unable to pass your correspondence to your son's birth parents. The mother was explicit in her wishes to remain entirely anonymous and we respect the right of parents to confidentiality…

William shook the smaller envelope out. The addressee's name was obscured by a tear made in the paper when a stamp was torn off. Da... lly.

His hands were shaking. Da... lly. That was his mother's name. His birth mother. For six years he'd been an orphan, and last night, realising that Uncle Gary's comment about genetic inheritance could easily (and probably) mean that he was in fact adopted, he'd felt orphaned all over again. All night he'd felt desperately alone, hurt by the realisation that the people he knew as family mightn't have in fact ever been his real family at all. That the reason he couldn't see his own features in the childhood photos of the Milne siblings was that he wasn't related to them. That the jokes about the ginger gene in the Van de Kamp family were staged. That he'd been lied to his whole life.

But this letter, this letter that had never been received… It woke a sense of hope inside him that he hadn't expected. Da... lly. She wanted to remain anonymous, and the torn paper seemed happy to help her achieve that, but wanting to remain anonymous requires being alive to do the wanting. Da... lly had put William up for adoption. He wasn't an orphan when Sarah and Christiaan brought him home.

Maybe he never had been. Maybe Da... lly was still alive.

But she'd given him up, he remembered with a squeeze to his heart that seemed stronger than it ought to have been. He didn't know this woman. Didn't even know all the letters of her name. She
could have had any number of good reasons for wanting to get rid of him. Maybe she was a teenager who'd tried for ten months but ultimately found raising a baby was beyond the scope of her ability. Maybe she was a trainwreck drifter who'd gotten messed up with drugs and in a moment of clarity had realised she needed to give her baby away before she hurt him. Maybe she was a loving housewife, perhaps a musician like Sarah, whose husband had died, and in her grief she'd given up her child so she wouldn't be reminded.

Maybe she was a perfectly normal lady who just hadn't wanted him. That one hurt.

At the bottom of the compartment there was a single sheet in a plastic sheath, turned over so he could only see the aged back of the paper. William carefully lifted it out and turned it to read what it was.

His birth certificate.

William Fox Scully.

Mother's name: Dana Katherine Scully.

His birth date. No father listed.

William withdrew from the desk and sat down at the piano. His lungs felt tight and his head was abuzz with erratic thought. He was adopted. Sarah wasn't his mother. Christiaan wasn't his father. Gary wasn't his uncle. This wasn't the life he'd been born to live. Dal...ly was Dana Katherine Scully. His birth mother. His birth mother. She'd given him up, wanted no further contact. Why? Who was she?

Who was he?

It was way too much to process, and so little of it made sense. The x-ray showing some alien object wedged into Sarah's neck. Uncle Gary's late-night call to his old friend. The 'writing' both Will and Sarah had produced when relaxed, when they were genetically unrelated. Sarah's early worries that there might be something wrong with him.

And a name William had never seen or heard before, but in only a matter of minutes had come to represent so much potential: Dana. Katherine. Scully. The enigma.

Suddenly he made up his mind. He grabbed the desktop and replaced it in position over the now-empty hidden compartment. He reorganised the sheets of music and the notepad of inspiration to their original positions in the desk, and dragged the roll-top back down. He locked it and put the key back inside the piano. He gathered up the puzzle pieces he'd found and took them to his bedroom, where he hid them under his bed. Safe. Uncle Gary never cleaned his room for him.

Then he headed back downstairs to the study.

He didn't need the birth certificate to remember the name, the precise spelling. He booted up the computer, ancient and junky as it was, and waited for the internet browser to load. When it did, he typed the name into the search. It only took a blink for the engine to reach out across the wide internet and bring him a comprehensive list of possible matches.

He scanned the suggested links and their accompanying text. Dana Scully seemed to be the name of a character in a bad film from the year before he was born, played by Tea Leoni. He gave that link a miss and scrolled down. A few news articles cited the name. He clicked on them and they opened in new tabs while he kept looking. There was little here. He switched tabs and read the article.
It was about a foiled extremist attack on a senator in Washington, seven months ago. A Special Agent Dana Scully had given a journalist a few minutes of her time to summarise the situation. No photograph was included, of course. She wasn't the highlight of the article. Will frowned and closed the tab. He read the next article, this one older, written by a different newspaper.

*The FBI's Dana Scully said in an official statement given outside the building that the assailant had been on the Counterterrorism Division's watch list for some time now, and that she and her team were glad to have had opportunity to bring him into custody before anyone could be seriously injured.*

No, this had to be a different Dana Scully. How many were there, anyway? Likely dozens living in the United States. *This* Dana Scully had her life together. She was someone important, an FBI agent working against terrorism. She had no connection to an adopted orphan in Wyoming.

William exited the article and scrolled endlessly. The FBI's Dana Scully seemed like a bit of a superwoman, and he started to kind of wish he'd find evidence that she *was* his birth mother. A scientist, he discovered when he read a news report about a case she'd consulted on. A scientist FBI agent would be a very cool mom.

Pages and pages into the search he clicked on one link accidentally, and tried to hit 'back'. The page loaded anyway. *Archives*, it said at the top. *The Lone Gunmen*. The page looked terribly old, like it had never ever been updated since its creation, circa 1995. A rickety looking forum contained scanned-in copies of newspaper clippings.

Will looked closer at the screen. These were old. From before he was born. Short articles, mostly, nothing front page-worthy. He read a few and started to pick up on a theme. In a word: weird. Allusions to paranormal activity, mentions of crop circles, interviews with witnesses claiming to have seen UFOs… This was a collection of the strange and unexplained, someone's vault of evidence of… what? It wasn't clear. Perhaps it wasn't even clear to the collector.

The name he'd been combing for ever since he'd learned it less than an hour ago stuck out to him, more than once. The FBI scientist gave statements to some of these journalists, too. She'd been in the game for a long time. She was brisk, he gathered, and careful. She didn't say anything more than she could prove.

William had scrolled almost to the bottom when he saw it. It was another article, just like the others, detailing some bizarre case in some ordinary place. Dana Scully was cited as the federal agent who gave the press statement. The news story was printed on very white paper and included a colour photograph of a crowd of law enforcement officers, most of them in uniform, as they cordoned off a crime scene with police tape. A tarp on the ground showed the location of a victim's body, and a woman in a black coat was standing over it. She was small, notably shorter than any of the men around her, with a very fair complexion.

But it wasn't her stature or skin tone that caught Will's attention and made his heart race with possibility.

It was the striking shade of her short red bob.
VI - Mulder

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I'm only borrowing them, but I don't promise to return them in the same condition I received them in. If I upset any of them, please hug the characters for me – I know you people are dying for an excuse.

Author's notes: Thankyou soodohnimh and jubsvj for commenting ;) I really appreciate the time and effort taken to let me know what you think.

He had her hooked. He could tell from the exasperated way she'd ignored his offer of a goodbye handshake when she left him in the County Morgue parking lot that morning. If she wasn't already secretly committed to the case, she would be happy to ridicule it, to hang back for a bit to tease him; she would make a point of saying goodbye because she wouldn't know when she'd next see him. She would probably have let him shake her hand, perhaps let him hold on for a second longer than was appropriate, maybe let him pull her in for a hug…

But she'd done none of that. She'd rolled her eyes and turned on her heel and gotten into her rental car, muttering "Goodnight, Mulder."

Goodnight, as in, I'll see you only too soon. Because I'm committed to this case.

Back in his motel room he uploaded the photos of Spike from his phone and added them to the report he'd been working on for Fierro. He liked to be very thorough, and knew he had a good reputation for it. Fierro had had Mulder's services recommended to him, and was just as likely to suggest him to others. Paranormal investigators were few enough, but specialists of his calibre, experience and qualification were rarer still. This was a business and his skills and professionalism were for sale – they had to be sharper, stronger, better and altogether more desirable than those of the next guy.

The report finalised and polished, he saved it to a flash drive and collapsed onto the bed. It wasn't ideal, this life. Ideally he'd like to sleep in the same bed most nights, his own bed in his own place, with food of his choosing in the cupboards and his own dishes on the table and his clothes hanging in a wardrobe instead of packed into suitcases and a storage unit outside of Washington. This close to Christmas, ideally, he'd have a tree covered in lights and baubles – the baubles he chose and bought each year for his son – in pride of place in his living room, with colourful presents stacked underneath, and he'd be planning what he would cook Scully and William for Christmas dinner.

Ideally, he'd still have Scully in his life, and he'd be doing whatever was necessary to keep her there, rather than continuing the work that had driven her away. Ideally, they would be happy together, and they would still have their son.

Instead, he had reality. He had a drab view of a dirty motel ceiling and the mattress was lumpy. He had no Christmas plans, no family left to enjoy it with. Scully despised him and their son was forever gone, untraceable, exactly as she'd ensured when she organised the adoption.

Something she'd done in desperation. Something he knew she would never have done if she'd
known how close he was at the time to returning to her. Something he knew she hated herself for, that she could never take back and that he would never be able to make her feel okay about.

Sleep was fitful, punctuated with dreams of her. In dreams she was many-faced; close, far, recent, young, fit, deathly sick, pregnant, alone, smiling, crying. He had known her in so many ways and at so many points in her life, and she had known him through so much, too, and loved him and followed him against all better judgement and had never, ever given up on him.

Until, one day, she had.

He wanted to be mad with her, because giving up was below her, but he knew he'd driven her to it. She hadn't wanted to leave. She'd wanted him to change so she wouldn't have to. But he couldn't let go of his work. He couldn't keep track of all the ways he let her down. Missed calls, forgotten messages, dinners left to go cold, erratic changes of plans, a bed all but abandoned… and there was just no excuse for catching a scent, packing his car in the middle of the night and leaving immediately to chase down a lead that any woman would accept year after year, even one as remarkable as Scully. How was she meant to read that kind of behaviour? That he didn't trust her? That he wanted space from her? That he just didn't think of her? That he knew she would be worried but simply didn't care? It seemed clear in the harsh light of retrospect but he'd not seen it that way at the time, even when she'd brought it up countless times, not until she'd walked out the door.

And not come back.

When he woke around midday he showered and dressed, preparing to meet Fierro's Boston middleman, who would either pay him or refer him to a third party qualified to relieve him of his hands and feet for his blatant arrogance in reporting to their boss that drug mules were being eaten by a Latin American legend.

Like every job these days, it was a gamble he just had to take. The cash payments he received for this kind of work enabled him to get by off the grid. He still used his bank accounts, though only sparingly, when he was somewhere he was happy to be seen and tracked. Working for criminals and renegades, obviously, he lived off cash, favours and assumed false names; when he was between jobs or working for more reputable clients, he resumed use of his bank card and ATMs and shied less from surveillance cameras.

All in all, though, he'd really prefer the government never really knew where he was or what he was up to. He knew better than most how that kind of information could be used against him and he was eager to avoid taking that road again. The year he'd spent in hiding had cost him his son, and, he was sure, had begun the slow breakdown between him and Scully that had brought him to where he was today.

Spare time and thoughts of Scully always brought the map out of his backpack, and he spread it now across the messy motel bed. Little symbols marked in pen scattered across the country. Black crosses with tiny little shorthand dates beside them were the most prominent – this was his bread and butter, always had been. Any reports of alien activity were marked with a cross to help him keep track of hotspots and patterns. Crop circles, abduction reports, cattle mutilations… It all added up over time, and he'd been developing this map for the last five years.

Red circles and blue triangles were less frequent but no less important. There were ten triangles, and these showed the residences of abductees who'd contacted him in the latter half of 2012 to report disturbing and escalating dreams about, as they put it, an alien 'auction'. He and Scully had interviewed the ten thoroughly and even she had concurred that the details of the nightmares (shared by ten perfect strangers with no discernible connection) bore uncanny resemblance.
The red circles were what had started the map off. In 2010, a former Soviet soldier had lured Mulder to Moscow to meet in a shady slum of a bar, where he’d given him a single sheet of paper with four handwritten coordinates listed.

"They'll kill me for giving you this," the old man had said in his low, thickly accented voice, dark eyes darting around the bar, "but someone needs to stop this from happening."

"Stop what from happening?"

"Invasion. These sites," the man, Vasiliy, or so he called himself in his introduction, stabbed at the page Mulder now held with one stubby, scarred finger, "are only four of many. Hundreds. I had not time to write the rest. My government, they know this much, but they will not share with the Americans." He levelled his uneven gaze at Mulder. "You must ensure it is known. It is coming."

"Major Dragomirov, how did your government come to know this?"

He became sketchy. "They have their ways, Mr Mulder. I think you would not like to know what becomes of visitors to our planet when they are shot down in Russian airspace, hmm?" He let the implication set in and took another worried look around the room. He leaned closer to be able to drop his voice even lower. He pointed again at the list he'd written, which he claimed he'd come here to hand over knowing his government would kill him for it. "These locations, they are on American soil, but I told you, there are hundreds. And they are everywhere. America, Russia, China, France… All nations are in danger. That is why I ask you here tonight. That is why I tell you this. All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men to do nothing."

Mulder sat back in his seat. "Edmond Burke said that."

"Apparently. The words have never been found in his writings, yet the man is remembered for saying this. What will we be remembered for, Mr Mulder? I? Nothing." Vasiliy Dragomirov sat back as well. His ragged grey stubble grew over the crags of many scars. "By the time you return to America and look for records to confirm my identity, all evidence of my very existence will be gone, and I will be gone also." He had nursed a drink all night and not taken a sip. He turned it slowly in his hand, wiping condensation from the outside of the glass. "For good men to do battle with evil they must relinquish the dreams of heroes to others. Good men are not heroes. I have known heroes. I have seen their fanfare. And I have known good men. I have seen the empty houses, the suicide reports, the offices transformed overnight with a new nameplate on the door. Good men tell no stories. What will matter in a hundred years from tonight? That you are remembered, or that your great-grandson's blood is human?"

Back home, Scully had given him a cool look when he'd burst into the kitchen of their house in the country early the next morning. "Mulder, you'll believe anything." She was obliging, though. She switched on her laptop and searched the coordinates. Dragomirov was right — they were all locations within the United States. Three were urban, one rural.

He was right about something else. When they asked Skinner to log into the Bureau's secure databanks to see what could be found about him, there were no results. Later, Scully asked a colleague with friends in the CIA and they reported that the agency had no information at all about such a person. When she called the Russian Federation's consulate in Washington directly and asked for a way to contact him, she was told that there was no such person as Major Vasily Dragomirov in any branch of the Russian defence force, nor had there ever been.

"That doesn't make it true," Scully had berated him sternly as he'd pushed away from the dining table where they sat and stalked off to his study to find a map, invigorated by the confirmation despite the exhaustion of jetlag. She'd followed. "That just makes it ambiguous and unlikely, which
is not a synonym for the truth."

Ah, but he'd been so sure, and everything he'd found since seemed to indicate he was right. Paranormal activity intensified in the areas surrounding the four coordinates, "and in other places, too, you'll notice," Scully had pointed out, "which would seem to repute your theory of correlation." Channels of information had fallen silent when he'd tried to follow up and people claimed ignorance, "which would also happen if you were wrong." Then the ad he'd put in the back of numerous tabloids had brought in almost a hundred responses, ten of them surprising even the unimpressible Dr Scully with their startling similarity.

And when one cross, one triangle and one circle had shared the same point on the map, she'd come around.

Briefly. Finally.

And then she was gone.

Mulder shook out the map, trying to shake thoughts of Scully away, too. Since she'd left he'd accumulated many more crosses as he followed reports of alien activity across the country, using connections both long-held and newly found from his work. One black cross went through an old neighbourhood just to the north of Boston where a UFO was sighted last year. Below it and to the right was a street he knew well.

Benny the baker was outside his quaint little establishment talking to a deliverer when Mulder pulled up outside in his beat-up sedan. A hand-painted sign hanging over the snugly closed double doors boasted the best daily apple pie in Massachusetts, and a printed-out poster in the window recommended trying Benny's Christmas pudding.

"That come with ice cream?" Mulder asked loudly, locking his car and smiling at the two bewildered-looking men when they glanced over. He pointed at the advertisement in the window. Benny looked up at the sky.

"Maybe if it snows and you hold your bowl out the window." He said goodbye to the delivery man and beckoned Mulder inside into the bakery café's warmth. The bell above the door gave a cheerful little twinkle as they entered. "They haven't found a hole deep enough to throw you in yet, huh?"

Mulder grinned, shook off his coat. "I keep climbing out."

"Good while your luck lasts, I guess." Benny went behind the counter to prepare the pudding. The little shop was empty, the day wearing on and customers flocking instead to the department stores for last-minute Christmas gifts. The baker didn't seem worried about the quiet. "Our mutual friend said you'd be by. You done with the case, then?"

"I closed it off this morning," Mulder confirmed, sliding into one of the smooth booth seats by the front window. Tinsel, fairy lights and false greenery had been artfully arranged around the frosted panes. For Benny, this café was only a hobby, a front, but he worked it with such love and care that no one would ever suspect it was anything less than his whole world. "Got the boss's report with me."

"Ain't my boss." The baker returned from his kitchen with a laptop under his arm and two bowls of Christmas pudding in his hands, complete with a perfectly round snowy white scoop of ice cream and a little berry-and-leaf topper. Cute. He put one in front of Mulder and sat down opposite to dig into his own delicious creation while his computer loaded. "Plans for Christmas?"
"I was thinking of camping outside my ex-girlfriend's house in the snow until she feels sorry for me and lets me in. You?"

"Nothing that sinister. Thinking of hacking the CIA's personnel files with Taryn. Might have a buyer."

"Romantic," Mulder noted, digging in his jacket pocket for the flash drive when Benny gestured for it, laptop ready. "How is Taryn?"

"Shopping up a storm because we have a niece now, and Christmas is all about the children, hadn't you heard? Like a four-month-old gives a shit about presents or Chrismastime." Benny plugged in the drive and opened the file, still shovelling his pudding into his mouth. His pale gaze went flat as he began to read. Mulder stayed quiet, let him concentrate, and allowed himself to just enjoy the pudding.

Benny the baker got his name not because of his little bakery business and hobby of making excellent Christmas pudding, but because he was known to have a finger in every criminal pie. He was something of a broker: his unassuming talent for understanding what people needed and connecting them with specialists in their fields, his total lack of regard for the law and his straightforward, salt-of-the-earth demeanour coalesced perfectly, and underworld types loved him. He maintained tight lips and chose his clients carefully, ensuring trust always went both ways, and he stayed out of disputes. His hacker wife procured adequate leverage over their various connections that they never needed to fear betrayal. Benny was the one who'd recommended Mulder to Fierro in the first place, having utilised the investigator's skills before.

"Bone-like appendages protruding from the mouth," Benny read aloud, clearly entertained. He ate another mouthful of pudding and licked the spoon clean. "Delightful. No wonder you're alone this Christmas, brother. 'How was work today, honey?'"

"She was cool with Spike. She was more worried about the Columbian crime lord I'm wrapped up with and whether I'll be losing my hands and feet."

Benny scoffed. "People are so judgemental. You overreact once, cut off a few appendages, as you put it, and no one ever lets you forget it. Josef's sorry about that. He did his time." Pudding finished, the baker collected the bowls and spoons. Mulder thanked him, told him it was amazing, which it was. He took them back to the kitchen and returned with an envelope. He dropped it on the tabletop. "Count it if you like."

Mulder looked inside and saw cash but didn't bother counting. Benny didn't get his reputation by swindling. Instead he asked, "What's Taryn's going rate?"

"Depends on the job. What do you need?"

Mulder glanced back at the door but he needn't worry; the street outside was deserted. He got out his pen and wrote on the napkin.

"Absolutely anything she finds in any government database on a Dr Henry Gray, died February seventeenth, 1981."

Benny watched him write, twisting his mouth thoughtfully. "That's broad. You looking for anything in particular?" Mulder shrugged, uncertain, and Benny sat forward a little, happy to help. "What's the case?"

"College science professor and his mother killed in a supposed medical tragedy thirty years ago,
then last night his daughter meets exactly the same fate."

"That's it? Happens all the time," the baker said, confused. "My uncle died of the same cancer as my grandad. Disease is often genetic."

"Dissolving lungs isn't, though," Mulder said with a grim smile, and Benny whistled, impressed again. "Last night's victim was only four years old at the time of her father's death so if it's a hit, it's safe to assume the father is the one most central to the case. I've given the case to a friend at the FBI but if this Dr Gray was killed in connection with anything I suspect this case is related to, she's not going to find anything. I'm hoping Taryn might."

Benny accepted the napkin and took back the envelope. He fingered through the notes and took a handful. "Mates rates," he said, showing Mulder what he took. "What do you suspect this Gray to be connected with?"

"I don't know anything for sure yet," Mulder admitted, "but it looks as though Dr Gray, his mother and his daughter, and maybe another unrelated family as well, may have been deliberately infected with an extra-terrestrial virus."

Benny was never shaken by anything, but this news did make him fold his arms and bite the inside of his cheek. Years of recurring waking nightmares had led him to regression therapy, where he'd uncovered memories of taking part in an unsanctioned drug trial as a young man. "By the government?"

He'd hired Mulder to investigate what had been done to him, and Mulder had hired the young hacker Taryn to access the data he needed. It had seemed quite apparent that the United States government had known about the trials, and the attempts to brainwash the surviving test subjects into forgetting the experience, but once Benny had the name of the scientist in charge he'd been happy for Mulder to lay off the case. Presumably he'd passed the name on to one of his many more violent associates, and he'd lived happily ever after with his perfect match.

"Possibly. That's why I'd like Taryn to see whether they have a file on him, and any projects he might have been associated with. He was a scientist, after all. Maybe he worked on the virus."

The baker gazed out the window for a while, thinking. Finally he muttered, "Bastards," and threw half of the money back. "She'll do it. How long will you be in Boston? It might take a few days to get what you need."

"I'm notoriously difficult to get hold of," Mulder said wryly, gesturing for the napkin back and writing another name, an address, a fax and a phone number, "but my friend would love to hear from you if Taryn finds anything."
The mood stabilisers stayed in the bag. She was overreacting. Mulder was rubbing off on her and making her paranoid when there was no good reason to be. Kelley was looking out for his friend, the same way she would have looked out for Mulder. There was a case to work. Scully went back to the office where she'd left Colt. He was sitting at his computer, concentrating as he read whatever he was doing. She dumped her briefcase on the desk beside his and sat down, ignoring him completely.

She grabbed the phone off the desktop and made three calls. The first was to HealthAlliance Hospital in Leominster, where Rebecca Johannsson was admitted and, last night, died. She asked to speak with her treating doctor, but he wasn't on duty, and she spent a frustrating fifteen minutes being connected, disconnected, transferred and put on hold while the busy hospital staff tried to locate someone who could speak to her about the case. She tried to be patient. She'd worked in hospitals. She knew what it was like, how hectic it became. When she was finally put through to a nurse on the respiratory ward, she didn't even care that the woman was uncertain and vague – it was a person, at least, another medical professional, and she was able to get the basics. A two-day stay. Admitted by her very worried husband, whose contact details Scully was glad to receive. Respiratory distress. Rapid deterioration. No apparent cause, as far as the nurse was aware, but the treating doctor may be able to say more once he came back on shift. Scully left a return phone number and urged the nurse to ensure the doctor got back to her.

The second call was to the husband. Erik Johannsson had a soft voice, easily drowned out by the apparent activity of people around him. Presumably he was at home, grieving with his children and extended family. Scully kept the call brief and gentle, explaining who she was and that she was investigating the cause of his wife's death. He sounded overwhelmingly relieved and grateful to hear that, saying he'd received only vague quasi-answers so far, and was quick to agree to release the body to her for further examination and possible quarantine. He asked if he or his children could be infected and when he confirmed that they'd experienced no similar symptoms, Scully assured him it was unlikely. She asked about Rebecca and he choked up as he talked about her easy laugh, her devotion to her children, the book club she went to every Monday night with the other ladies in the street. Housewife, unemployed, well-liked; nothing stood out to explain why she'd been exposed to this fatal virus.

Scully had just asked about Rebecca's friends and family when, audibly in the background, a
doorbell chimed, and Erik Johannsson was called away. He apologised and asked for a return number for later. Scully gave him her cell, and they hung up.

The third call was even more frustrating than the first. She dug in the inner pocket of her tailored jacket for the number she'd dialled last night. Berkshire County Morgue. She typed the number quickly and wedged the receiver between her ear and shoulder to free up her hands. She booted her computer up. It came to life with a swiftness no technology had possessed when she worked this department in the late nineties.

A click, and a second click, and the phone line connected. It was immediately evident that she had a faulty connection. "...lo... nty Morgue, this is..."

"Hello? This is Special Agent Dana Scully with the FBI," she said slowly, hoping the connection at the other end wasn't as poor. Crackles and extended silence did little to enhance her confidence in that hope. "Hello?"

"Hello? Hel... n't hear you..." It was a male voice. "...is Dr La... shire Count..."

"Yes," Scully said, very clearly and loudly, "this is Special Agent Scully, FBI. I was there last night performing an autopsy- Hello? Can you hear me?" More static, and the doctor's voice. "Yes, I can hear you, somewhat, but you're breaking up. This is Agent Scully calling from the FBI about the Johannsson autopsy. Can... Can you hear me at all?"

It was evident Dr Lansdowne couldn't hear her. He spoke right over the top of her, asking who was calling. Irritated, Scully pressed the button to disconnect the call, and dialled again. He answered immediately, but the quality of the line sounded similar.

"...ansdowne at Berksh... orgue... help you?"

"My name is Dana Scully from the FBI and I will be there in two hours to requisition the body of Rebecca Johannsson for further investigation," she said firmly, and leaned forward to hang up. Not all technology was reflective of the times, apparently. Colt glanced subtly up at her.

"Telemarketers must cringe when they see your number on their list," he commented, and she was forced to concede that her last few phone conversations in his presence had definitely supported an image of her that was less than entirely patient.

"Their fault for wasting my time," she answered, picking up the phone once again to organise a requisition team and logging into her computer to find the forms she needed to formally request a body transferred to one of the FBI's medical facilities. She filled them in swiftly (she'd done this a thousand times, it took no time at all) while she waited on hold, flicking open her briefcase to check details against the fax Mulder had sent her last night. When she finally got to talk to the coordinator, the woman was cheerful and helpful and assured her that two agents and transportation for the deceased were booked, and would meet her at the morgue. "You don't even need to present yourself; they can handle it for you," the coordinator said brightly, but Scully had already decided, against her better judgement, knowing who was there, to fly to Boston personally. She hit 'print' and while her printer stirred she attached a digital copy to a quick email to Assistant Director Tan, who oversaw her and the other Counterterrorism agents, as part of a formal request to open a new case so she could officially investigate Johannsson's death. Kelley seemed to want to deter her from the case but he wasn't her supervising agent and as Colt had pointed out, they didn't answer to Kelley.

But she was careful not to label the case 'homicide'. Just in case. She'd apprenticed in the unexplained under Mulder but she was still not in the practice of stepping on toes just because they
were sticking out.

One copy she faxed through to Berkshire County Morgue, adding a neat handwritten note in the corner apologising for the unintelligible phone call and confirming that she planned to arrive in two or three hours to oversee the collection of Johannsson's body. The other copy she shoved into the briefcase with everything else.

She clipped it shut again and inhaled slowly, trying to gather the energy for yet another flight. At best estimate she was now at thirty hours without sleep and she was definitely feeling it. She tried to remember if she'd felt the hours like this when she was a younger agent.

Colt was looking up at her. She snatched the briefcase off the desk and straightened.

"Coming?" she asked, collecting her coat from the back of her chair. Her probationary agent blinked, startled.

"To Boston? Yes, ma'am," he agreed, even before she nodded and picked up the phone again. Trying to contain a sudden grin, he quickly packed up his desk and shut his computer down, probably mid-sentence. Like a big kid, Scully reflected as she organised two flights and requisitioned a rental vehicle in Boston. Sometimes it was obvious that Colt served two years in the military. Sometimes it seemed surprising.

She was only too happy to accept when Colt offered to drive to the airport, and gratefully sank into the deep leather seat of his 1974 Corvette. Anticipation seemed to roll off the young, well-rested agent, while Scully was just eager to have this task done and signed off so she could get home to bed. The drive to the airport gave her time to stare uselessly at the screen of her phone. Returning to Boston only twelve hours after leaving Mulder there felt significant. She'd acted cold with him but she'd known when they parted that it wouldn't be long before she'd see him again. He'd found a real case, and though he said he was 'giving' her the job, he wouldn't be likely to just leave it alone. Years ago, when they were partners working out of the basement, she would have called him as soon as she knew she was headed in his direction. They'd spoken on the phone all the time.

Now she wasn't even sure she had a number for him. He'd given her one, before she left almost three years ago, promised it was a phone he'd always have charged, always have on him and would always answer for her. She'd put that number in her phone. She'd called it once. He hadn't answered. She'd never bothered with it again.

Not that she should have called in the first place.

"Expecting a call, ma'am?" Colt asked while they lined up for their tickets. Scully looked up at him, knocked out of her reverie, and realised she'd been staring at her blank screen again. She smiled and shook her head, switching it off, even though there was still a twenty-minute wait before boarding.

"Lost in thought, I suppose," she claimed. She looked up at the display, rolling through different flight numbers and times and destinations. So many people going so many places, and here she was, just one person, and of all the places she could be going, it was straight back to Mulder… and he didn't even know. Would he care? She tried to return to the present, to what mattered, to what she could control. "I spoke to Kelley. I think he was trying to poach you. I told him to leave you where you are."

Colt was surprised. "He wanted to move me to Counterintelligence?"
"I can ask him to disregard my request," Scully said quickly, realising the young agent hadn't sounded at all upset by the opportunity and hoping she hadn't made a presumption that would affect his career. Colt shook his head just as quickly. They both stepped up as the line shortened.

"No, ma'am, definitely not," he insisted. "I'm very happy where I am. Thank you. For speaking to him on my behalf, I mean, and for recommending I stay in your department. That means a lot. And thank you for this, today. I've never been out in the field."

"Other than your time in Afghanistan," Scully filled in, and he hesitated.

"Other than that," he agreed reluctantly, "but I wouldn't go so far as to call that in the field."

"I would say that's more in the field than most of what I've done," she countered, surprised. She'd grown up with a father in the navy and her brother had entered it, too, straight out of school. She had a very high respect for the armed forces and most especially for those who gave time from their own lives to serve on the front lines of war. "You were involved in an intelligence-gathering operation against a terror cell. I read the overview in your file." She stepped back to let a harried-looking father through with his chain of children on their way to another counter. "There wasn't much elaboration on your role but that's typical of those sorts of ops, isn't it?"

Colt looked straight ahead. "I didn't know you'd read my file."

Scully moved up to close the gap she'd left. "You thought I wouldn't? Your desk is right beside mine – I'm supposed to just trust that you are who you say you are?"

"Who else would I be?"

"A sleeper agent?" she suggested without thought, Alex Krychek flashing through her mind. Colt looked at her in surprise and she tried to lighten her tone, to make fun of what were actually very valid fears. "Shape-shifter, maybe. Perhaps you were a Black-Ops assassin of some kind, sent to infiltrate my department. Perhaps you killed the real Warren Colt and took his place. A look at your photo and a quick read through your experience history seemed pertinent."

Colt had tensed up at the realisation that of course she'd done the basic background check of him, but now relaxed a bit. "Ma'am, if my arrival in your office was good enough cause for you to suspect things like that, you've definitely seen a lot more in the field than I have." If he caught her wry look of acknowledgement, he didn't mention it. "Well, suffice it to say that my time in Afghanistan didn't feel 'in the field'." He smiled and withdrew his ID and badge, shiny and new in his jacket pocket, and looked at it. "I'll finally get to show this to someone other than my grandma."

Cute. "Don't thank me yet," Scully warned. "I fully expect this trip to be extremely dull. You might be wishing you'd stayed in the office to play Solitaire on your computer by the end of today." She took another step closer to the front counter, realising she was being a downer. Her mentor had never tried to bore her out of the job. Quite the opposite, Mulder had done everything he could to try to inspire enthusiasm and excitement in her. That said, Mulder was only ever slightly her senior, not twice her age as she was to Colt, so she thought she deserved a little slack on the enthusiasm front. She tried to relent a bit. "You will get to flash your badge and that is fun the first few times."

The flight was quicker than expected, a tailwind propelling the plane on its way from Washington DC to Boston, and then they were on the ground and out in the car park looking for their rental, which Colt couldn't help noting sadly was much less awesome than his own car. He didn't know his way around so Scully took the wheel and drove them out of the city and west to Berkshire County.
"This case, the old one," Colt said as he sat in the passenger seat and went through the last of what she'd given him, which was not everything. Just the original X-file of Mrs and Dr Gray, some of the tests she'd run today, and the photos and recording she'd made last night and not yet written up. He clicked 'pause' on the audio file and Scully heard her own digitised voice cut off abruptly inside the car. "You got that fax last night. Your old colleague, did he work it? Is that how he knew what to look for?"

"No, he's not that old. He would have read the file at some point," Scully said, taking a turn off. She slowed down behind the back-up of traffic taking the same exit. Christmas traffic. Everybody was on the move, trying to get to the part of the country where their loved ones were. Was she any different? She didn't have to return to Boston herself. She could have trusted the requisition team here to collect the body as evidence, and she could have taken herself home to bed and slept the day away. Instead she was, babysitting Agent Colt's first trip out of the Bureau's headquarters, exhausted with sleep deprivation but strangely awake with the knowledge that she was in the vicinity of Mulder.

Which was ridiculous. She didn't even like Mulder anymore. He made fun of her and led her on, and they couldn't be in the same room together without pissing each other off.

"He's got a good memory, then."

"Like an elephant."

Colt fell silent but she could practically hear the buzz of thoughts that fought to be voiced. She knew she was being coy and unhelpful, leaving him in the dark, and it wasn't fair. But it was for his own good. Until she knew what they were dealing with it was better he knew nothing about the Black Oil and all that entailed.

"This was his hobby," she said finally. "I called it his crusade, which is maybe more accurate. He collected cases like this and we worked them together. That's why he sent it to me when he saw the same elements as the 1981 case." Because he trusts me. "Because he wants to ruin my Christmas."

"Who is he?" Colt asked curiously, but Scully only shrugged and shook her head.

"Just a jerk I used to work with."

Colt left it alone.

The sun was gone by the time they arrived at Berkshire County Morgue but the lights were on inside the building, lighting it yellow against the grey of the evening sky. Déjà vu, Scully thought grimly, pulling up in the same parking space as she had only fifteen hours earlier, only this time she didn't have the antsy, anxious fluttering feeling in her stomach, knowing Mulder was waiting for her on the other side of the doors.

This time she knew what she was going into, and she was in control.

"Where's the requisition team?" she wondered aloud as she surveyed the empty parking lot, the first indication that her last thought was a falsehood told to humour herself. Colt looked around.

"Running late?" he suggested, getting out his phone and closing the car door again to keep the warmth in. "Want me to call them and check?"

"Please," Scully agreed, fishing in the pockets of her coat for her gloves. The car's interior was comfortable but she recalled sharply the contrast when she'd exited this morning's rental. This evening would be just as bitter.
The call went through reasonably fast and Colt spoke to a coordinator. From what he was saying in return, it sounded like the request had been lost or never put through.

"I was standing beside Agent Scully when she booked this requisition," Colt said firmly into the phone, while Scully listened. "She put it through at…" He glanced at his watch. "Two, two-fifteen?" He looked at her for confirmation, listened to the coordinator for a bit. "So, what you're telling me is there's no one coming to transport this body for us. We can't very well load it into the trunk, can we?"

By the time he hung up he'd gotten an assurance that the coordinator who'd taken the earlier call would be reached to clarify the issue, and that another team would be assembled and sent out as soon as possible. "But," Colt recited grimly, "they're not sure they're going to be able to get anyone in the next couple of hours because it's Christmas and they're so short-staffed."

"Well, just as long as they turn up eventually," Scully said with a sigh. She opened the door and stepped out into the cold, shrugging her coat higher on her shoulders to warm her neck. "We can take legal custody of the body now and fly home without it, but I don't want to have to wait for days for them to find a transport. The refrigeration helps but it's best not to let the body deteriorate too much."

"The fresher the better," Colt guessed, and he followed her to the morgue's doors.

"You want to do the talking?" she asked Colt, and when he grinned appreciatively she smiled back. Even when young she'd always been very serious but excitement about the little things in life, like getting to introduce oneself as an FBI agent for the first time, was strangely infectious. It reminded her, she realised suddenly, of being a parent – sharing in the enjoyment of firsts and all things new and unfamiliar.

Was that why she'd found it so easy to befriend Warren Colt? Because being his mentor was the closest thing she could have to mothering her lost son?

She got the door and hoped Colt didn't see her smile falter.

The foyer was as it had been this morning except for its population. Instead of Mulder, scruffy and just-rolled-out-of-bed casual, and Janae the assistant, a wizened-looking man with white hair and wire-rimmed glasses stood behind the counter. Colt squared his shoulders and led the way across the floor as the man looked up blankly.

"Dr Lansdowne?" he asked, and the man nodded, sitting straighter. Colt got to pull his badge for the doctor to view and Scully did the same. "I'm Special Agent Colt with the FBI." He gestured beside him. "I'm not sure if you've already met Agent Scully?"

"No, I haven't had the pleasure," the old man said, pleasantly enough, though without smiling. "What can I do for the FBI this evening?"

"We're here to collect Rebecca Johannsson's body," Colt explained, as Scully passed the requisition form over the counter. The old man frowned and cocked his head to the side.

"Rebecca who?"

"Johannsson," Colt repeated, slightly louder, perhaps wondering, as Scully was, whether they were dealing with a hearing impairment. He nodded at the document on the counter and the ME took it. "Agent Scully faxed a copy of those forms through a few hours ago."

Dr Lansdowne squinted through his glasses, pushed them further up his nose, seemed to read the
page closely. "My phone line's been on the fritz all day. Perhaps the fax has been affected, too, because nothing's come through. I haven't seen this before. Sorry."

And he lowered the page. Looked up at them expectantly. Disarmed and uncertain, Colt looked at Scully. She forced a patient smile at the old doctor. "Then we apologise for the lack of notice. As you can see, everything is in order for this requisition."

"Not everything," Dr Lansdowne disagreed. He passed the forms back to her. "You've got the wrong morgue, agents. This body was never admitted here."

Scully blinked, incredulous. "I'm sorry?"

"She's not here."

"Then where is she?" Colt asked. The doctor shrugged unhelpfully.

"As I said, this woman was never admitted here," he insisted. "Perhaps you were meant to collect your body from the Boston-"

"I'm not at the wrong morgue, Dr Lansdowne, and Mrs Johannsson was here," Scully cut him off. "I was here at four o'clock this morning, performing her autopsy."

"This establishment was closed at four o'clock this morning," the medical examiner said kindly. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. We're very quiet here in Berkshire County. At present, in fact, there are no customers at all." He paused under Scully's disbelieving glare. "Would you care to see?"

"Yes, please," she answered stonily, and followed him out to the examination room. Which was, as he'd said, empty. No Johannsson. No Spike, whatever the hell he was. She hadn't wanted to know – it could only be complicated and bringing a body like that home to the FBI's medical lab would make the men above her cringe at the memory of the Dana Scully they'd lost to the insanity of Fox Mulder. Now, though, she wished she'd taken custody of both, because the empty exam room felt like a kick in the stomach she just did not need. The smell of bleach was strong in the air. She crossed to the long cold bench running along the back of the room. The stool was where she'd left it, tucked under the bench; the microscope hadn't moved, either. But both gurneys were gone, as were the bodies they'd carried, and any evidence they were ever here. Was she going crazy? She felt the increase in her heartrate as anxiety crept in and the sense of control she'd confidently walked in with slipped away. She shook her head, thinking of Mulder, his cheap attacks on her integrity and his charming smile and the way he'd looked at her when she leaned against the bench and teased him about his scruffy look. No one was going to convince her that this morning hadn't happened. She looked back to the door, where Dr Lansdowne stood with Colt. She swallowed the accusations that rose in her throat and tried to consider logical reasons for this. Lansdowne wasn't here this morning. Maybe Janae hadn't mentioned it when she left. Maybe Rebecca Johannsson was sequestered, somehow, in the tiny space of time between her shift ending and his beginning.

She inhaled to the count of three and let the breath out slowly. Calm down. There was always a reasonable explanation.

"A body was brought here by accident last night, around one-thirty. Your assistant Janae admitted the body, and I flew from DC to perform the autopsy. Rebecca Johannsson was diagnosed upon death at hospital of diffuse alveolar haemorrhaging. On the second gurney you had a male, severely decomposed, with abnormal skeletal features, including bony protrusions from the mouth and shoulders. A partially digested human body had been removed from the abdomen."
The ME offered her a tiny smile. "Have you slept, dear? I don't mean any offence, but you look very tired."

Fucking Mulder and his monster stories. "I did not imagine flying for an hour, driving for another hour and spending an hour and a half cutting into a woman's body to find her lungs disintegrated," Scully bit out. "I signed in. At the front."

She pushed past the men in the doorway to return to the foyer, and grabbed the clipboard from the countertop. Thinking of the pen that was out of ink, of Mulder's pen in his pocket, of his stupid joke, she ran her finger down the list of dates and signatures until she got to today's.

Hers was missing.

"I want to speak to Janae," she said firmly, turning back to Dr Lansdowne. His next little smile was tighter.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he said. "Janae hasn't worked here in four months. I caught her stealing from me and had to fire her. I have no way of contacting her."

"What's her full name? I'll track her down myself."

"I'm sorry," Lansdowne said, sounding anything but. "I don't recall. She was quite angry when I fired her and deleted a lot of files from my computer before she left, including her contact details. There's simply no way of getting in touch with her."

Naturally.

"Are you saying that Agent Scully was let onto the premises last night by a disgruntled former employee?" Colt asked sceptically, while she stared at the ME, exasperated and bewildered by this bizarre turn of events. Why was he lying? How did he hope to convince her, she who had been here? And for what purpose? "This Janae broke in to let the FBI carry out an autopsy and then locked up again and went home? A little far-fetched, isn't it?"

"I'm not saying any such thing, Agent," Dr Lansdowne said, becoming steadily less patient with them. "I'm quite at a loss as to what is going on. My last job was sent to the funeral home on Monday and I have been without clientele since then. The body you have come all this way to collect simply isn't here and never was. Janae hasn't set foot in this building since August. What I'm saying, Agent," he said now, voice firm, "is that your partner is incorrect in her facts. If you were ever here, Agent Scully," he added, calming slightly as he turned back to address the senior agent, "your presence would have been noted on the surveillance cameras, and if you'd like access to that footage you'll come back with a warrant."

He gestured to the camera hanging over the front door. She and Colt looked over and saw its little blinking light, indicating that it was recording live footage. Was that there this morning? She couldn't recall.

But she realised something now. Dr Lansdowne's redirection of her awareness to the surveillance was a trap she would walk only too willingly into. Yes, I'll definitely appear on the footage, she would say, knowing it to be true, and would apply for her warrant, but his only reason for drawing her attention to it was if he knew otherwise. She could see in his confident gaze that he was unworried about that outcome. The footage was doctored. She would bet money on it.

And as soon as she applied for a warrant she formalised her own claim to insanity, because it would open a whole criminal investigation, and the footage would be added to the official record.
and it would clearly contradict her. Her credibility couldn't take that hit.

She met Dr Lansdowne's cool, emotionless gaze with her own. Someone got to him, and Janae, too. He had nothing to gain from undermining her case, which meant that someone else had employed him to ensure she got no further.

Supposing, of course, that this was Dr Lansdowne at all.

Colt wasn't happy. "This is ridiculous. Of course she was here." He got out his phone and started dialling, ready to start the process of applying for their warrant before the hour became too late. Scully glanced again at the security camera. For its benefit she dropped her face into her hands and sighed.

"Not tonight, Agent Colt," she said tiredly. "We'll come back with our warrant tomorrow."

"We'll what?"

"Tomorrow," she repeated. "You won't get through to anyone this late. It's two nights out from Christmas."

"Agent Scully," he hissed, leaning close to her, "anything could happen to that footage between now and tomorrow."

Ah, but something's already happened to it. "We'll have to give Dr Lansdowne the benefit of the doubt."

Colt shook his head, unable to connect the dots. He glared at the ME as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. "If you get in there and tamper with that footage tonight-"

"Son, I have no need to tamper with it," Dr Lansdowne answered, cool and superior, making Colt bristle with offence. "I already know what it'll show – your partner was never here and no autopsy took place on these premises."

"We have evidence that proves she conducted an autopsy last night," Colt snapped, spurned by the patronising tone, hand dipping into the inner pocket of his jacket. Realising, Scully quickly grabbed his arm, holding him frozen with his hand still hidden.

"Requisition forms aren't proof, Agent Colt," she said, catching his eye meaningfully and turning firmly to the doctor. "You'll hear from us."

"I'm sure," he replied smoothly. "Good evening, agents."

Colt's mouth was tight as Scully turned him and marched him out of the building. She shoved through the glass doors and said nothing until they were back at the car. When both doors were slammed shut he let loose: "What the fuck just happened? Excuse me," he corrected himself immediately, abashed. Then, "No, really. What was that about?"

Scully let her head fall back against the headrest. It was exactly as bad as she'd tried to tell herself it wasn't. Hadn't she told herself this would happen if she answered that stupid fax? Hadn't she known that following Mulder would lead to something like this?

"That, Colt," she said finally, glaring at the roof, "is the story of my life, chapters 1992 through to about 2012."

"He was lying."
"Yes."

"You were here," he insisted, and she nodded. He finally withdrew the recorder he'd left in his jacket and waved it at her. "You had proof. Ninety minutes of continuous observation. Photographs, still on the camera. And the surveillance cameras, from their angle they would have caught you walking through the doors, signing in and talking with the assistant." And Mulder, she realised. "Leaving him there with those cameras was a mistake. He could edit the footage, or destroy it altogether."

"It's already been done," Scully said wearily. "That's the only reason he told us about the cameras. So we'd apply for a warrant, so it'd become a big deal and everyone would see good, clean footage of an empty foyer that proves me a liar." She looked across at him, feeling bad for bringing him. "It was a set-up."

His eyes were wide and incredulous. "Who would want to set you up?" he demanded.
"Counterterrorism's golden girl? And why?"

"I don't think it's aimed at me, precisely. I think I stumbled onto something no one was meant to find," she admitted slowly. "Johannsson's body was never meant to be at Berkshire; it was only through human error that my contact even caught a whiff of the case, and only luck that had Desmond screw up our sting last night, which freed me up so I had time to come out here. If everything had gone to plan, I would never have done that autopsy."

Colt flicked the recorder in the air. "But you did." She took it.

"This is the only proof of my word," she said, "and that makes it our last card. I didn't want you to show it to the cameras. Lansdowne, if that's who he is, isn't the only one watching them."

"It can't be the only proof," Colt disagreed. "You were here for hours. You must have touched something."

"My prints will have been wiped."

"-and you cut someone open. There would be blood, DNA-

"The room and equipment were recently sterilised. Every blade of the bone saw, every scalpel. The waste will have been burned. There won't be a shred of evidence to back me up. If they've got the balls to tell me I'm wrong, when of course I won't believe it, they've got reason to be confident. The place is stripped clean."

"You were just there this morning," the junior agent reminded her. She smiled wryly out the front windscreen at the yellow lights inside the morgue.

"Fifteen hours is more than enough time to make a body disappear, Agent Colt, and to turn facts into mere opinions to be argued and ignored."

He frowned at her. Again, she could almost hear him thinking. Finally he sat back in the passenger seat with a soft huff, retrieving his phone and muttering, "It sounds pretty unlikely."

She couldn't help the laugh that escaped her. Oh, Mulder, she thought, I have a new appreciation for how frustrating you must have found me.

Colt tried to chase up on the requisition team. Had they already been there and done the job before the agents arrived? No, no record of that, and no record that a transport was ever booked for the Johannsson case. "No active case number, so no job logged against it," Colt reported to Scully
when the call ended in frustration. They sat in silence for a minute. "Where's the body, then?" he asked eventually. "It was there."

"If I knew who we were dealing with, I could give a few possible answers to that, but this is beyond my scope." Inspired, Scully flicked her phone screen on and did a quick internet search. Several holidaying websites came up in the list of options and she selected the first, and changed the parameters to find the worst rated. She turned the car on and backed out of the parking lot. "The question we need to be asking is who would want to hide Johannsson. Who would be threatened by my knowing she was there; so threatened they'd get rid of Janae, doctor the sign-in sheet, edit the surveillance footage, modify the computer's files, sanitise a whole examination room, steal two cadavers and impersonate a medical examiner?"

"Impersonate a medical examiner?" he repeated. "Are you suggesting that Dr Lansdowne was someone else?"

"What evidence do we have otherwise?" Scully countered as she turned out onto a wider street and headed back towards Boston.

"Well, for one, he told us-"

"No, you told him. You gave him an identity to assume when you walked in. For all we know he's a plant. But he's just as likely to be the real thing," she added in frustrated retrospect, putting her pedal down when the road widened and the speed limit changed. "He could have been paid off, or blackmailed. There's no way to know. They'll have covered their tracks." She spared a glance into the silence beside her. Colt stared at her. She could feel the incredulity radiating from him. She knew how it sounded. She'd been in his position before. "Look, Colt; I'm not crazy."

"No, I know," he said immediately. "The body's gone. I've listened to the tape, saw the photos – you clearly cut someone open. And you left the office last night for Boston after receiving a fax from this morgue. I saw it. So I know you aren't making this up. But this ME and the missing bodies and the missing assistant and the missing signature…" He shook his head and looked out his window at the encroaching Massachusetts darkness. Scully pursed her lips, recognising the unwillingness to believe. Kid, I've been there. He turned back to her, eyes catching the glow of oncoming headlights, and his voice was low when he asked, "Does this really happen?"

She released the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"I'm sorry, Colt," she apologised. "I'm afraid I might have pulled you into something much bigger and darker than I expected. I didn't want your career tainted by this sort of thing."

"Short answer: yes?" he guessed. He whistled, a low sound of disbelief, and sat for another long moment in silence. "Alright." He sat forward in his seat and leaned down to his feet for her briefcase. "Alright. Who?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You said the question was who. Who would feel threatened when he realised you'd uncovered Rebecca Johannsson's death?" He pulled the case up onto his lap and switched on the light overhead. "What's the combination?"

"Colt-"

"I'm not going to steal anything."

"No, I know that," Scully said automatically, surprised by the notion. "But you don't need to
involve yourself in this case. I don't need to involve myself," she reminded herself. She splayed her hands open over the steering wheel in helplessness. "This is actually a mess I do not need two nights out from Christmas."

He snorted. "So, what? Give up? That's your solution?"

She heard Mulder's voice and had been waiting so long to hear it from him that she reacted without a thought.

"Fuck you," she snapped before she remembered who she was talking to, and slapped a startled hand over her mouth when she realised. "Oh, God; I'm sorry, Warren. I can't believe I said that. That was completely out of line."

"Not so perfect after all," he said, and when she glanced at him she saw he was smirking. She lowered her hand back to the wheel.

"You're listening to the wrong people if they're telling you I'm perfect," she said, recovering. She cleared her throat lightly, feeling uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. The 'giving up' comment just stung a little, that's all. It's nothing," she added hurriedly, when he dropped his smile and opened his mouth to apologise. "We're both edgy because of this case. It's bad news. We should both walk away."

While we can.

"That's what they want us to do," Colt noted. "They're hiding evidence and obstructing a federal case. That man called you a liar, Agent Scully. And he called me son." He tapped the briefcase enticingly. "There's more to this case, isn't there? More than what you showed me."

Intuitive kid. "There's more but you don't want to see it."

"Combination?"

"It's confronting," Scully insisted. "The implications… Colt, I have been you, sitting where you are, listening to your crazy senior agent rambling about conspiracies and cover-ups."

"And?"

"And I wish I'd been less tenacious." She glanced at him again. "Do you value your career, Agent Colt?"

Colt gave her a level look across the car. "Combination?"

"Ten-thirteen," she relented, and he started on the lock, "but before you get fixated on anything, remember it's all speculative at this point. We're not pushing our luck out here tonight. We're going back to DC to regroup and reassess."

"Understood, ma'am," he said, already reading. He was silent for the rest of the drive.

Boston was a large city and TripAdvisor listed eighty-seven hotels in Boston but only one had a nearly consistent one-star rating, with reviews like 'Don't do it to yourself!' and 'Worst hotel in the universe'. Mulder had always operated on the premise that behaving erratically, contrary to the mainstream, would keep him out of the firing line and off the grid, but he'd done it for so long and Scully had applied this pattern so many times previously to find him that she felt reasonably confident in her choice. She drove through the Cambridge area and found street parking outside the surprisingly busy establishment. Cars filled the parking lot and the lights were bright in the hotel foyer.
"I'll just be a few minutes," she told Colt, unclicking her seatbelt. "Call the office and get us flights home, will you?" He barely acknowledged her, engrossed as he was in the printout of one of her old Black Oil cases. She cringed as she shut the door, locking the warmth inside with him, and tugged on her gloves. What was she doing, leaving those files with him? She was going to ruin his career, or he was going to tell everyone in their department about the crazy things she wrote about in some early cases of hers and he was going to ruin hers.

Something to solve later. He'd only protest if she took them away now, and she'd told him the combination to her briefcase so there was really nowhere to hide them anyway until she got back to DC.

A group of rugged-up backpackers were talking and laughing loudly right outside the reception doors, and she had to excuse herself twice to get past them. Squeezing through the group, she didn't notice a tall man in a coat exiting the foyer until she bumped into him. She murmured her apologies and stepped inside where it was warmer and slightly less crowded, rubbing her shoulder.

Most of the people inside, it turned out, had already checked in, but were saying extended goodnights to their fellow travellers before parting and moving back out into the cold to go to their respective rooms. Scully reached the front desk quite quickly.

"I'm looking for someone. I think he may be a guest here. Can you check for me whether you have a man, surname Braidwood, staying here at the moment?"

The woman nodded. "I know the one. He's been here all week. You just missed him. He just checked out."

Scully felt her stomach sink with disappointment and told herself it was entirely professional.

"How long ago was that?"

"Two minutes ago. He literally just walked out."

Unconsciously Scully touched her fingertips to her shoulder where it still ached slightly from being knocked so hard. "Thank you." She turned and squeezed back through the crowd of backpackers to get outside, and once she was free of them she jogged across the front courtyard to the pavement where she could see up and down the busy street. Dark cars lined the road but there were very few pedestrians out at this time of night, and none of the silhouettes she saw were familiar. "Damn." She went back to the car.

Colt was still reading but he looked up when she opened the door. "You have an admirer," he said, leaning across from his seat to hand her a folded-up little note. She took it, unsure, and he explained, "Some guy knocked on my window and asked me to give you this."

"He knew my name?" she demanded, equal parts hopeful and paranoid. What if it was him? What if it wasn't?

"I don't think so. He said, 'Can you give this to your hot partner?' I'm guessing you caught his eye inside."

She'd opted against flashing her badge so none of the strangers here knew that the young man waiting for her in the car was a fellow law enforcer – he could have been her toyboy lover or even her son. But he'd specified 'partner'. She unfolded the paper and closed the door again, reaching into her jacket for her phone. Colt wound his window down as she moved back onto the pavement.

"You're actually going to call him?" he asked in amazement. She pulled a glove off so she could
He smiled and shook his head, and wound his window back up as he muttered, "Full of surprises."

The handwriting was familiar. The number was not. She got halfway through typing when a ghostly finger of paranoia struck her. She looked around. The cars were dark, empty as far as she could tell. Further down the street there was a public phone box. Each exhalation hanging in the air behind her in a little white cloud, she strode over to it, tugging the glove back on over her frigid hand.

The box was dingy and dirty but functional, and she was glad to be wearing her gloves, not only to keep her fingerprints off the buttons but to keep whatever was on the buttons off her fingertips. She dialled and brought the receiver to her ear.

It rang once.

"Can't stay away, huh, Scully?"

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the glass wall, too relieved for the moment to hear his voice and not someone else's to say anything in response. She swallowed her anxiety, stupid as it was, and opened her eyes.

"You banged my shoulder pretty hard," she answered finally. "I figure you owe me an apology. Face to face."

"As good as face to face sounds, I can't think of any good reason you'd be looking for me," Mulder admitted. "You didn't even use your own phone. Is someone watching you?"

"Other than you?" she asked dryly, turning in the brightly-lit glass box to look up and down the street. He could see her, she was certain; he'd had only two minutes' lead on her, after all, which meant he was close. He'd watched her get out her phone, get the chills, look around, use the payphone. His gaze on her was probably what she'd felt, nothing more. "I don't think so. I think I'm being irrational."

"Irrational? You, Scully?" Pause. "What happened? What are you doing back in Boston? I thought you'd be at work, personally overseeing a thousand and one tests to disprove any momentary shred of belief you found in yourself."

Nice shot. "I already ran the samples I took through the laboratory. It's… what we thought." She was reluctant to even say it. "I had trouble requisitioning the body so I came to secure it myself."

"Not alone. I met your new partner."

"He's a fresh recruit they assigned me. Jealous?"

"Hmm, maybe," Mulder answered, non-committal. "In my experience, being assigned a new partner usually means someone wants to spy on your activities. Do you trust him?"

"Enough that I left him in the car with my handbag. He wants to go chasing an X-file despite a whole host of excellent reasons not to. Remind you of anyone?"

"I like him already."

"Mulder, it's all gone," Scully said with a sigh, turning again to look the other way. Distantly, way down the road, she saw a car door open and a figure step out. She leaned against the dirty glass and shielded her eyes from the harsh overhead light of the payphone box. "Rebecca Johannsson's body
is missing from the morgue. And not even missing – if there was a case here, it's not anymore. They're claiming the body was never admitted and that I was never even there. Janae's MIA and my signature's missing from the sign-in sheet at the front desk and the fucking doctor is just begging for me to issue a warrant to seize the surveillance footage-

"Which will be edited," Mulder finished knowingly. He didn't sound surprised, but only because he expected this outcome almost daily. The figure at the other end of the road was standing perfectly still, hand raised to his ear like he was on his phone, and seemed to be looking in Scully's direction, but she couldn't be sure with the dark and the distance. "They've done a clean-out on you."

"It certainly smelt like it."

"Someone doesn't want you digging. Any idea who?"

"None. And I'm not sure I want to know," she admitted. "I told you this morning, this is not my kind of case anymore. I work for Counterterrorism. End of story."

"Right, because this doesn't fall under your responsibility in Counterterrorism," Mulder said derisively. His tone cut her. "You know what I know. A government wagers its dignity against a chance to save its own sorry ass from an alien colonisation, controls its people through lies and fear, spying on them, experimenting on them for a greater good, violating their rights and taking no responsibility for the human consequences, all the while hiding behind false pretences as though saving face takes any sort of priority over people's lives – and you don't call that terrorism?"

"No, Mulder," Scully answered tiredly. "No one does. They call it 'the state of things', and I've had enough of fighting a fight that can't be won."

"Then I say you have a very narrow definition of the word and an even narrower definition of what your job is."

Incensed, she turned away from the distant little figure in the dark. God, he could be so infuriating. She glared instead at her car, parked outside the dodgiest hotel in Boston. The light was still on inside. Colt was still reading, still reforming his opinion of her from admirable mentor to laughing stock. The idea made her want to melt into the floor of the phone box. She wished now that she'd withheld the files, not flipped out like she had and gotten the junior agent so curious and interested.

"The reason I came to find you," she said now, voice clipped and tight, annoyed because she was the one who came to find him; she was the one who placed the call, not the other way around, "was to tell you that, as expected, the case you gave me has gone bust, and to proceed requires fucking with the kind of shadowy big boys I'd rather keep myself – and my probationary agent – clear of. Whoever they are, they've got an eye on me, and they may have footage of you-"

"From the morgue. Thanks for the warning."

No feeling. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that the figure was still there, distant and still, standing in the cold night air with a cell phone to his ear. She regretted using the payphone now, binding herself to a landline. A tiny part of her wanted to be able to walk right up to him and see his face, stony and unaffectionate as she expected from his tone that it would currently be, and to wrap her arms around him and apologise for being such a bitch to him. But the larger part wanted to stride over and be an even bigger bitch for all the trouble he'd caused her, and for all the hurt. Because no matter what she said or did, no matter how mean or cold or angry or playful or tearful or desperate she'd been in the last three years, since she'd left him she had seen zero genuine emotion from him. No hurt. No anger. No betrayal. No sadness. Nothing.
No reaction at all to what *should* have really hurt, if it meant anything close to what it had meant to her.

If she'd hurt him, he'd never let her see it. It had started long before she left him. He'd gotten deeper and deeper into his work and withdrawn from her; the real Mulder stayed locked inside, defended by the surface – the crude jokes, the thoughtless flirting, the playful banter to deflect honest discussion. When the fighting started, he wouldn't fight back. Didn't care enough. When she threatened to leave he said he would change; when he didn't and she left anyway, all that changed was that things became even more unfairly weighted than before. She was still the one doing all the chasing. He got what he wanted: he got to call her when he felt like seeing her, he got her help on jobs he didn't want to do alone and he got to string her along with cryptic references to X-files and then he got to disappear again. She never got from him what she wanted.

He never said he wanted her back.

He never said he missed her or that he was sorry or that he wished things were different.

He never gave any indication that she possessed the significance to warrant any emotional response as strong as hurt or anger, and that hurt more than anything he could say. The most she got was indifference or disappointment.

And she supposed she deserved the cold shoulder considering she was the one who'd ended things, but it seemed so unfair to have loved someone so intensely through so much and to come out the other side and not know whether she was ever fully loved in return.

"You checked out of your hotel," she said finally, realising she'd let the silence go on, and not wanting to leave things on a negative note. "Are you leaving Boston?"

"I wrapped my case. Got paid. I'm outta here."

"You've got impeccable timing," Scully told him, still watching him through the blurry glass. "Whoever got rid of Johannsson also disposed of your monster. The records will have been destroyed along with everything else they cleared out."

"Well, I'm glad they didn't do that right when I was starting out," Mulder quipped, sounding serious, "or I might have had to walk away from the whole job without doing my duty to find out what was killing innocent people."

He was mocking her. And he was right. Bastard. She hung up as violently as she could, smashing the receiver into its cradle, and she meant to shove away and march back to the car but instead she clung to the phone. Her hand wouldn't come away. Remorse filled her at the realisation she'd severed yet another connection with Mulder, again because she couldn't handle him. Her gloved hand tightened on the receiver where it hung, and, feeling tears of frustration sting the back of her eyes, she leaned forward, pressing her mouth to the back of her hand. Stupid, stupid… He was too much for her, she'd known it for always, since long before she'd gone there, and she'd known this morning when she received the fax and she'd followed it up *anyway*. When they ran he ran faster; when they were confronted he believed harder; when they were knocked down he recovered quicker. Over and over he proved that when they fought he hit harder, too, without effort. She knew she shouldn't let it hurt, that his disappointment shouldn't matter, but knowing it didn't loosen the tightness in her chest.

It might have been as much as a minute before she remembered that Mulder wasn't just a voice on the end of the phone line; he'd been watching her. Inhaling quickly, gathering herself together, she pushed away and looked down the road to where the figure had stood. It was gone. Typical. Gone
as soon as she needed him.

She stepped out of the phone box and returned to the car, wiping her eyes in case. She realised she was shivering. The cold had seeped through her jacket and she wished now that she was wearing trousers instead of her pencil skirt and stockings. She got into the car, teeth chattering.

Colt looked across at her, eyes wide. He had her old X-files spread across his lap and the dashboard. Her heart sank even lower. He'd seen her name on the cover sheet. He knew these were her words, that she'd written seriously about alien viruses and conspiracies and human experimentation and shadow governments and that she'd ultimately signed off on the case.

He was the closest thing she'd had to a friend at work in a decade and now he was never going to look at her the same way again.

"Agent Scully," he said, switching on the heater for her, "this trip has been so much better than a night of solitaire."
The lab was mobile, set up sublimely in the long, narrow compartment of a freight truck. Sterile metallic surfaces gleamed with the shine of something impeccably maintained. Refrigerated storage units hummed behind inconspicuous overhead cupboard doors and any equipment that could be hung from walls or the ceiling were cleverly stashed, accessible when necessary but otherwise out of the way of the busy scientists working at the benches or at one of the medical gurneys that filled the central space of the truck. The whole unit was designed with functionality and efficient use of space as the top priorities.

All pledges were equally worthless in the eyes of the members but a distinct hierarchy existed within their ranks, unspoken yet neatly established. Within that hierarchy, she often felt she was especially disliked for her lack of obvious use. Unlike most of the others, the members hadn't selected her; she was a shoe-in, the raw end of a deal they maybe sometimes regretted making. She was one of the youngest, and hadn't yet managed to prove herself helpful. The initiation of the Worldwide Family of Hosts' medical branch had given her some purpose, at least, and each day she awaited her opportunity to demonstrate her worth.

It was nearly the end of her shift. She was standing in silence at a bench, counting out freshly sterilised tools for one of her superiors' next tests, when the truck's doors were unceremoniously wrenched open from the outside. Everyone jumped a little and looked over, tense – after all, there was one exit alone, and any intrusion meant the end of them and their venture. Three men stepped inside, one shoving another and the third following behind with an unhappy frown creasing his face. Pledges, all three of them, she recognised as the doors were closed behind them. The unhappy man was one of the oldest, and wasn't yet established in his position as a pledge and the apparent resentment he therefore weathered from members. He had a natural way of taking charge that she envied and a voice that sent shivers of fright through her. She'd known him the longest of any of the pledges and she respected his right to take charge over the others the way he did. No one rebuked his authority.

He was Pledge Three. One of the first. They'd chosen him.

She was only Pledge Sixty-Four. One of the least.

The soldier shoving the old scientist probably had a number, too, but she didn't know it; what she did know was that the scientist was unnumbered. He was forced to the side of the first gurney and the other pledges moved silently away. He looked down at the naked body with a pale, sickly look of regret and sadness.
"I didn't want it to come to this, Doctor," Pledge Three said coldly. "I really thought you'd see sense. I did warn you. And it would have been reversible if you hadn't interfered."

The doctor's tight mouth twisted and wobbled with the effort of holding massive emotions inside. His fingers twitched and then reached hesitantly out. He touched the ends of the dead woman's long hair and when his fingertips brushed her cold, pallid skin he sucked in a rough breath that was almost a sob. Such grief – Sixty-Four watched on in horrified fascination. He'd really loved her, she could tell, and now she was gone forever.

"I wanted to make sure you saw for yourself," Pledge Three went on, "how this organisation deals with deserters. When I make a threat, I mean it. You've proven repeatedly that you have little regard for your own life, but I thought her life would have meant something more."

Tight, pained breaths through the nose in an attempt to regain control held the scientist's attention for a while, and then, in a constrained whisper, he asked, "Are you sure you can't reverse this? The others-"

"The others weren't autopsied," the pledge in charge barked, bringing tears of reality to the scientist's eyes and startling the other pledges. "The others didn't have their organs systematically removed, weighed and replaced, disconnected. The others didn't have their ribs sawed open. Rebecca wouldn't have been, either, if you'd left things alone. This is what happens when you try to cheat me, Doctor. This," he snarled, leaning close for impact that was probably lost on the other man, down whose cheeks tears already spilled, "is what will happen to the rest of her family if you don't do your job. Do you understand me, pledge?"

The scientist's face was wet with tears and he didn't pull his eyes from the corpse before him as he nodded slowly. "I understand. It won't happen again."

Pledge Three drew back, satisfied. "Good."

"Who did it?" The doctor's voice was tight and raw, small. He still stared at the dead woman and his tears still fell. "The autopsy. They…" He swallowed the pain but his next words were shaky and high-pitched. "They did a clean job."

Pledge Three turned away heartlessly as the scientist crumpled into sobs. "I've been wondering the same thing." He clicked his fingers at the man nearest to him, and instantly the other was at work at the nearest workstation computer, plugging some sort of drive in.

"We retrieved this with the body," the lab coordinator explained. "There's no audio, unfortunately."

From her position at the other end of the truck, Sixty-Four felt her curiosity draw her and she moved quietly down the aisle in the middle, past more disciplined pledges who wouldn't dare impose themselves on this very intense exchange. Pledge Three pretended not to notice her, even when she reached his side and the screen flickered over to show a stream of footage showing an empty foyer floor. He laid a lazy glare on the coordinator.

"I hope you don't expect me to stand here all night while you search for the few minutes of film that will actually be useful."

The coordinator flushed. "No, sir. I found it earlier. Just…" He rewound to the timestamp he'd located in an earlier search of the video file and sat back to let the scariest pledge of all see for himself.
There was no audio, as the coordinator had said, but body language said a lot. A female attendant, thirtyish, sat behind the morgue's front counter, reading a book with total disinterest in the older man who paced her lobby. He was dressed very casually, almost ragged, and his hair was dark and thick. His shoulders kept rolling as he shifted his hands in and out of his pockets in anticipation. He was waiting for something. Or someone? He struck up conversation with the attendant. Silent. She looked displeased. The conversation was quickly interrupted by the arrival of a third person, who opened a glass door at the bottom of the screen and stepped briskly into view. Both the attendant and the man looked over, their faces turned directly into the blank stare of the hidden camera. The man's face split into a warm smile.

Sixty-Four pointed suddenly at the screen, a jolt of familiarity striking her. "Is that…?"

"Fox Mulder," Pledge Three confirmed, his voice sour. His finger joined hers when the new arrival crossed the foyer and addressed the receptionist, placing a badge on the counter. "And Dana Scully. How poetic."

She didn't know that name but watched the interaction between the two on the screen, or lack of it. The woman's stance in particular was closed and standoffish, though she accepted the pen he offered her. She spoke again to the attendant, and she must have said something to put the staff member in her place; the younger woman blushed and stepped out from behind the counter to lead the other two off-screen.

"Why am I not surprised?" Pledge Three wondered aloud sardonically. He smirked back at the scientist he'd brought here to torture. "There you go, Doctor: take peace in knowing your loved one was taken apart and put back together by the best in the business. Those two," he added, pointing at the display of an empty foyer floor, "are the reason she's dead. Not me." He turned away from the shell-shocked scientist, who stared with fathomless eyes at the screen, and spoke to the lab coordinator. "How has this been handled?"

"After we seized the body, the entire building was decontaminated, sir," Sixty-Four's team leader reported. "There was another body – not sure what it was, exactly, so we disposed of it – and all records were destroyed or edited appropriately to ensure complete deniability. Staff were cleansed." He hesitated, glancing at the screen. At Pledge Three's narrowed look he decided to divulge the rest. "She… the FBI agent… came back today to collect the body. We didn't expect the FBI to be involved, and we didn't expect she would come back personally. She was deflected, but…" He looked back at his superior. "Is she going to be a problem?"

Pledge Three looked thoughtfully at the uneventful stream of this morning's footage from the morgue. "How did she react to the deflection?"

"Not well," Pledge Eighteen spoke up from further down the length of the mobile lab. He anxiously pushed his wire-rimmed glasses further up his nose when attention moved to him. He was another of the older ones, with white hair and a crinkled little face that altogether spelt out the perfect 'mad scientist' vibe. "Naturally she wasn't convinced by the cover since she was the same agent who'd been in that morning. We expected to see a requisition team, not her back again. I thought the whole thing might be blown. I told her she'd need a warrant to seize the surveillance footage – the usual procedure – but then she backed down. I really thought she'd push the issue."

"No," Pledge Three said immediately. He took the controls of the workstation and rewound to where the FBI agent had stepped into the morgue and brought that smile out in her scruffy-looking but better-known companion. "She's been neutralised. She's realised there's a game afoot but she's not big enough to play. I'll arrange for someone to lean on her from up top; she won't cause any more trouble." He hit 'pause'. The agent was handing the pen back to its owner. His eyes were on
"Well, that just leaves one. The usual."

Fox Mulder, Sixty-Four thought, while Pledge Three dragged the doctor away from the corpse and all but threw him at a workbench, where he was instructed to get to work. She’d heard all about the trouble the former FBI agent had made for people in the kind of power the Worldwide Family of Hosts held. Was that what he was doing? Here, in Boston, now? Did he know what the members were up to?

The idea thrilled her.

Her shift ended in twenty minutes.

"Don't waste time, pledge," Pledge Three said harshly as he came back past on his way out, and she quickly nodded, instantly demure, and went back to her station. There was always more to be cleaned, always more to be done that no one else wanted to do.

Pledge Three slammed the doors closed behind him and the atmosphere inside the truck seemed to depressurise instantly. Several workers let out a breath of relief and turned back to their tasks. Sixty-Four carefully stacked a freshly sterilised set of test tubes into a caddy and carried it across the lab to put it away, hyper-aware of the pained, stifled whimpers of the heartbroken scientist trying to work behind her.

She waited long enough that everyone else had lost interest in him before moving over with a clutch of assorted tools under the pretence of restocking his work station.

His eyes were swollen and red, she noticed uncomfortably as she slowly laid out the tools, and they looked without seeing at the flat silver bench. His roughly stubbled cheeks were damp and he kept sniffing moisture back up his nose. Grief was disgusting. But also fascinating. And terrifying.

She hoped to never feel like he felt right now.

"Why did you do it?" she asked in her softest whisper, not even sure he'd hear her despite being so near. He only acknowledged her by closing his eyes and pressing his lips together until they were almost white, trying to hold the emotions inside. She glanced around the lab. No one was paying her any mind. "If they warned you and you knew what they would do… if you loved her…"

He swallowed. He needed to do it a few times before he had control of his larynx. He couldn't look at Sixty-Four.

"Sometimes…" He needed another moment. "Sometimes you can love someone so much, you can find it in yourself to save them from the future."

It was a heavy statement and not one she felt experienced enough or qualified to understand, but she held her tongue. She nodded and finished arranging his new set of tools.

"I'm sorry about your Rebecca," she whispered, and aloud, added, "Is there anything else I can get you before I finish up, Doctor?"

It took a few seconds but he finally looked at her. His eyes were wide and sad and wet.

"Peace of mind," he whispered back. "Please."
He'd miscalculated her patience with him. She hung up. He was annoyed with her and knew now that she was perfectly pissed off with him, too, and he expected her to stalk off. But when she hung onto the phone and lowered her head to rest on the back of her hand, shoulders sagging in defeat, he stood straighter, all irritation with her fleeing him.

He'd hurt her. Was she crying?

The call was disconnected so he jammed the cell phone back into his pocket as he strode up the sidewalk towards her, remorse fuelling him. He hadn't intended to upset her; he knew it was mean but he only ever wanted to prompt honesty out of her. Here she was, blatantly lying to herself and to him, insisting this case was too hard, too dangerous, when she knew, she knew she was uniquely qualified among the whole planet's population to take it on. No one else could do it. No one else had the balls, no one else had the experience and the tenacity and the skill and the intuition for this.

It had to be Scully, or it'd be swept under the same rug as all the innocent by-products of unethical government experimentation that came before Rebecca Johannsson. The same way she herself once was. He knew she knew it, and it made him want to shake her to hear her try to back down. She was scared – fair enough – but he couldn't bear to hear her list of excuses.

She was such a quitter.

If she wanted his help she had only to ask. But she wouldn't ask. She didn't want it. She didn't want him, his work or their history anywhere near her – she'd made that clear in her cold silences and stinging remarks. She was over him.

And yet…

If she didn't care, which was what he told himself, why did she look so broken at nothing more than a sharp word from him?

Apparently, her patience was not the only thing he'd misjudged, and in spite of the bitter cold a flare of hope sparked to life in his chest.

He had crossed half the distance and she was clearer to him now, harsh artificial light of the phone
box discolouring pale red hair and porcelain complexion, heavy coat swallowing the slim, fit figure he knew was beneath. But the little details – that she was shaking, for instance, or that her eyes were open, wet and staring blankly at the numbers of the payphone – became apparent, too, and he almost called out her name when a snake of paranoia flashed through his mind.

She didn't use her own phone.

She's scared.

Even she's scared.

And she doesn't believe in anything.

The thought diverted him from his course and took him up the driveway of the recently closed-down Chinese restaurant beside the motel, not a second too soon; the garden of mid-sized trees that separated the restaurant parking lot from the road provided instant shadowy cover as Scully abruptly drew herself up and looked back for him. She didn't hang around, but, peering back from between the trees at her, Mulder thought he saw her wiping her eyes as she returned to her car.

He watched her go, angry with himself for his cowardice, only managing to justify his actions by studiously watching the quiet street, too. Not that he needed her elusive verification, but when he suspected something amiss and she concurred, it was a pretty conclusive suggestion that his fears were real.

She turned her headlights on and drove away, leaving Mulder with the cold Boston night and the sense of regret that lay in the pit of his stomach, heavy as lead. Talk about missed opportunities. She had come looking for him. And what had he done? Sent her away?

He stayed in the dingy garden, breathing quietly and observing the street. Hardly anyone was out – the only sounds were those of the nearby highway and the occasional shouts of laughter from the backpackers next door. The cars that lined the road were hollow and dark. He waited for one to come to life, to tail Scully, or for a suit to disembark from a hiding place to scope out the payphone to try to trace her call. He waited for something to confirm his worries and his reasons for leaving her there to cry alone in the cold.

But nothing happened.

Shit. He was the worst person in the world. Like he needed it officiated like this.

After fifteen minutes he was frozen through and thoroughly furious with himself, so he stepped out of the scrubby little garden to go back to his car. He threw open the door, ignoring the creak of protest from the hinges, and when he jammed the key into the ignition, it took four attempts before the engine would turn over. When it rumbled to life he switched on the heater and sat there with his numb fingers under the less-than-satisfying stream of air that blasted out.

She'd come looking for him. That both warmed him and chilled him at once. As soon as he'd checked out tonight and turned on his heel to leave he'd seen the dash of bright hair between the heads of the noisy crowd standing around just outside the reception door. He'd assumed it was someone else, a fancy, just his brain seeing what he wanted to see – after all, he'd already seen her once today, and what were the chances of running into her twice? – but as he stepped outside there she was, squeezing between the young travellers. She hadn't even noticed him, which he could pretend didn't sting a bit since he worked hard at looking inconspicuous, and when he'd nudged her he'd apparently knocked her harder than he meant.
He would have loved to have caught her hand instead, caught her off-guard, but after the initial pleasant tingle of surprise at seeing her there he'd felt that flash of fear. He wondered if she understood what it was to live with the constant voice of paranoia in his ear, eating away at his thoughts, destroying normal. Seeing her should have made him feel good: and it did, but then it made him afraid. Scully didn't want to see him, so if she was here she felt she needed to. Something had gone wrong. Instantly, Mulder had assumed she was being followed. Her Bureau had finally decided to finish the job they started years earlier in bringing him down, and of course they'd recognised the resource they had in Dana Scully. All they would need to do was dangle her and he'd come running, or spook her to prompt her to track him down, and they'd have him.

Absolutely, the voice in his head believed that he was the centre of the universe, and absolutely, his logical mind knew how embarrassingly, ridiculously arrogant his mistrustful fears sounded when voiced aloud.

"No one fucking wants you," he told the silent interior of the old car firmly, like he had done countless times before. "No one's coming for you."

He'd said it countless times. But he still walked straight past Scully when he could have stopped and spoken. Face to face, she'd said. He'd still left his number with the fresh-faced child agent in her car. Jealous? He'd still felt justified when he saw her use the payphone. I think I'm being irrational. He'd still chosen to hide in the shadows and leave her standing there, angry and hurt, believing it was the safer action. I've had enough of fighting a fight that can't be won.

Her defeated moment after the call made him feel stupid for the precautions, wish he'd just grabbed her outside the hotel and asked what she was doing there.

There was no taking it back now. He flicked on his blinker to indicate to the total lack of traffic that he was pulling away from the kerb, and drove. He spent a lot of hours in this car, a generally trusty second-hand piece of inconspicuous junk from the early 2000s. It had done almost as many miles as he had done in his extensive cross-country travels over the years. It had a good stereo, and he usually liked to tune it to a new radio station when he arrived in a new city so he could listen to it on high volume to drown out his thoughts in his hours of solitude. After blowing things with Scully again his self-loathing thoughts were especially loud. Tonight, though, he had plenty enough to distract him, and willingly directed his thoughts down the channel of the body of work that had destroyed his relationship with Scully in the first place.

The inexplicable. The mysterious. The paranormal.

Rebecca Johannson's body was missing, along with Spike's, though that didn't worry him so much now that he'd been paid, and she'd died infected with the alien virus. Scully had proof. Ata girl – he knew she would find it. Berkshire County Morgue had been sterilised, rendered useless to the most astute of investigators, their staff disposed of or blackmailed or moved on, and Scully was being deliberately blocked. Whoever had done the clean-out probably had the surveillance footage that showed the pair of them meeting in the morgue's foyer, but that wasn't to say that they knew who either Mulder or Scully were. Johannson went to Berkshire by accident; Mulder had been there that night by fluke; Scully's willingness to join him and perform the autopsy was even more of a surprise. Altogether, for these events to have coincided must have been the work of several planets falling into a mysterious alignment, because it was just so damn unlikely. So this cover-up, this attempt to deflect the investigation, wasn't aimed at Scully; it wasn't somebody's way of getting to him. He should chill out.

Except that this was the Black Oil. The reappearance of the substance after so long was extremely worrisome. In its various forms he'd seen it do unspeakable damage to human lives. He'd seen
people possessed and made to do terrible deeds that they never remembered. He'd seen bodies eaten from the inside out as the virus gestated into an alien beast within them, eventually bursting free of the decomposed host – he recalled two terrifying days and a single-minded trip to Antarctica to rescue Scully from exactly that fate. He himself had been infected with one form of it, repeatedly, during a brief incarceration in Russia, by scientists seeking its cure. For some greater good he was yet to see.

It was bad news, and that someone had sourced it and was handling it again was even worse. That someone was killing with it was very frightening. No wonder Scully had come looking for him. No wonder she was worried. Even he had thought this chapter was done with, especially after what had happened – or rather, not happened – three years ago.

He glanced at his watch. He'd checked out of his dodgy Boston hotel when he did so he'd have the whole night to drive south-west for an early appointment at Stockton University in Atlantic City. He'd left in plenty of time. A quick detour to sate his burning curiosity wouldn't delay him too much.

His excellent memory had retained the image of the hospital transfer pages, most notably the address listed, and led him exactly where he wanted to go. The Johannsson family home was a neat and tidy single-storey brick place on a big garden block in a long, straight street of similar houses. Many of them were decorated with twinkly Christmas lights of differing arrangements. This house had them, but they were switched off. A swing hung from a tree in the front yard. Charming. With an uncomfortable pang Mulder reflected that he would have liked to have made one for his own son while he was growing up. By now the boy would be almost fifteen. Too old for tyre swings. Had someone hung one for him before he outgrew the magic of playing in the yard?

The lights were all out in the house but it wasn't that late yet. When he rang the doorbell nobody answered, and there was no movement inside. He tried the door handle. It was unlocked. He didn't go in. Maybe this was normal, the sort of neighbourhood that trusted way too easily.

He tried the neighbours.

"I'm looking for the Johannssons," he said, when a lady in her sixties came to the door and unlocked it to speak with him. Theory blown. "I heard about Rebecca but it's all happened so fast that I got a jumble of news from different people and I can't make sense of it."

"Were you a friend of hers?" the neighbour asked sympathetically, and Mulder nodded.

"My sister went to school with her," he lied. "I was hoping to see her husband and offer the family our condolences."

"It's such a tragedy," the lady said sadly, wrapping her knitted blanket more tightly around herself to fend off the cold he was letting inside. "She just got sick all of a sudden. This was a pretty mild winter but it just goes to show you, these things, pneumonia and things, anyone can get them. Poor Rebecca. And those poor kids. Right before Christmas, too."

Mulder looked over at the dark house, shifting from foot to foot as the cold affected him as well. "Do you know where they are tonight?"

"Well, they were home all day," she said, following his gaze with a slight frown, "and it seemed that everyone they knew was there with them, and then suddenly about an hour ago everybody just left, all at once. Maybe not that long – maybe forty-five minutes ago? I assumed Erik and the kids were going to stay with one of the cousins or something. Get out of the house where all the sad memories are, you know?"
"That's probably a good idea," he agreed. He smiled. "I'll let you get back inside. Thanks for your help."

He headed back to his car but once the neighbour turned her porch light off he veered back toward the Johannsson place. They'd all disappeared all of a sudden, had they, less than an hour ago? What had happened an hour ago to prompt such a mass departure? He returned to the front door and pushed it gently open. The compact flashlight in the pocket of his thick, warm jacket came out and he began scoping out the inside of the house.

At first there was little to go on. The home was clean, the Christmas tree beautifully decorated in pride of place in the living room. Mulder didn't have a Christmas tree anymore. It was one of the things he missed most about having a home. He'd dropped his boxed-up tree and cheery plastic decorations at a poky thrift shop along with a carload of other household paraphernalia when he'd sold the house in the country. The special ones, though, the few baubles and trinkets of significance, had gone somewhere safe. He brushed the back of his fingers against a child-made pipecleaner candy-cane dangling from one of the branches. School craft? The presents beneath were untouched, still wrapped. He cringed at the labels.

To Mom; For Rebecca; love from Mom. The men behind these experiments never got to see this, the consequences. Presents unopened. Families broken. The kitchen was freshly cleaned, the dishes left to drip dry on the counter. The chairs were pushed in. No evidence here of leaving in a rush or of being forced out.

The bedrooms were a different story. In a girl's room, the closet was wide open and two drawers were upended on the purple bedspread. An arrangement of dolls sported some notable gaps. In a pile by the door was a lunchbox, pencil case, some books, scrunched up school notes… The innards of a school backpack, tipped out to make room.

The family had packed bags and left. Probably a wise choice. But what, or who, had given them the heads up?

The answer was on his way out. As he reached for the front door handle to let himself out a pale square caught his eye, and he flicked the beam of his torchlight up. A post-it note was stuck in the centre of the door, covering the peephole, and a message was neatly transcribed upon it.

A friend requested I move them somewhere safe. Merry Christmas, Mr Fox. 64.

He'd felt guilty for sending Scully on her way miserable without a personal apology but now he felt assured that his distance was the right move. Someone did know he was connected to this investigation; someone had predicted he would come here. Though mysterious in origin and a bit unsettling in its deliberate address of him, the message itself seemed benign, friendly even. Who had moved the family? Which 'friend' had suggested they go into hiding? How did they know him and how did they know he was going to be here?

Benny the baker was of unquestionable loyalty and character and Mulder had no concern that his meeting this afternoon would bring him any unwanted attention. The broker would never dish dirt on one of his clients. The only obvious link that Mulder had to Scully's already-gone-bust case was Berkshire County Morgue. He'd spent a few hours there. He was on the surveillance footage. Janae, if she was still alive, knew he was interested in Johannsson's death, but she hadn't known his real name or anything more about him than what he'd made up on the spot.

Merry Christmas, Mr Fox.

He grabbed the note and left, stepping out of the warmth of the house and into the harsh cold of the winter night outside. Maybe whoever had hidden the family had seen him on the surveillance footage and recognised him. Maybe he was dealing with someone on the inside of this cover-up,
someone with a conscience who had seen what became of Rebecca Johannsson and tried to do the right thing.

Whatever the case, as much as he'd like to keep digging here in Leominster, he had his appointment to keep in the morning, and reluctantly drove out of town. Itirked him to leave something incomplete, and memory of his aborted conversation with Scully only served to worsen the feeling. She didn't want to pursue it. She wanted to be left out of it. She wanted to quit. The very thought made him bristle with impatience with her. How many times had she thrown in her metaphorical fucking towel? She was strong, so intelligent and resourceful and driven and determined, and so it always blindsided him when she gave up. Like a tree that stood for a hundred years suddenly falling down with only the slightest breath of wind. Yes, okay, this investigation would require traversing of some scary territory, and yes, she had already met with resistance, but quitting? Already? It disappointed him. He should be able to count on her.

Wasn't that what she'd promised him when she'd left? Not in so many words, perhaps, but that was the message he'd taken from it. Contemplatively he hooked a finger lightly through the chain around his neck. It brought him immeasurable peace to feel the cool of the gold, as always. No, he hadn't misinterpreted, but maybe he was being unduly harsh in his assessment. After all, she'd returned to Boston personally and opened a case and even included another agent, and when things had turned to shit on her and she could have gone straight to the airport, she'd come looking for him. She'd known how to find him. She'd called. She'd argued. Passionately.

How many times had Scully thrown in her metaphorical towel, and how many times had she sighed and accepted it back from him when he came after her and offered it? Maybe she wanted to be drawn back in. Maybe that was why she'd come after him – so he could talk her around. It was something he'd not really considered before.

It was a five and a half hour drive through a very dark, very cold and very lonely night to reach his destination. Christmas Eve dawned grey and crisp in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and though at this early hour things should have been sleepy and dreary, a few trades were still in business, and vans and pick-up trucks tottered off to worksites to get the day over with quickly, the better to enjoy the coming few days with family and food.

Stockton University was undergoing a large refurbishment. It included a large new extension with science labs, due to be finished sometime late in 2017. Gerard Dixon was one of the technicians planning out and installing the data and communications cables. Mulder walked across the unguarded worksite and let himself into the shell of a new building.

"Most of the boys asked for today off, so we've mostly got the place to ourselves," Dixon called down from the top of an A-frame ladder, his head in among the beams of the unfinished ceiling. "You'll be glad for the privacy when you see what I found for you."

Gerard Dixon was a conspiracy nut who had followed Mulder's career now for many years, from the time when he was semi-regularly appearing at televised UFO conferences across the country. He had written numerous times expressing his admiration while Mulder worked for the Bureau, attended a few conventions to make his acquaintance and had made efforts to maintain the professional friendship online in the years since, in the various old forums they both still lurked in on occasion. Some of Dixon's theories were a little wild, even for Mulder, but in general he was a good investment – he kept in contact with many others in the same field of interest, made it his business to stay up-to-date with all things paranormal/political and, most importantly, considered it his social responsibility to collect data in case Mulder should get in touch and ask for it.

"Bagels?" Mulder offered, opening the bag he'd bought on his way over and sitting down on the
dusty cement floor against an unfinished wall. Smiling and tugging the sagging waistband of his trousers up over his wide hips, Dixon sat down, much more heavily, beside him. Mulder tried not to profile him, feeling that it was judgemental, but the process was automatic. Overweight, and even bigger than the last time they'd met. Mild anxiety, held at bay with an eating habit. Too much time sitting at the computer reading and eating without thought. No one around to distract him from his obsession: no girlfriend, and no wedding band, so no wife. Trust issues, social inadequacy, fuelled by his paranoia. His only real friends were probably the people he'd known the longest, the virtual connections he'd made online in the early days of the internet and the other oddballs he'd met at UFO conventions.

Remind you of anyone?

While they ate, picnicking on the floor, Dixon dragged a duffel bag over from nearby.

"I deleted it all off my computer, of course," he said, "but I made back-up copies of all this, so don't stress. Dusty Underscore Kevin sourced it for me. Remember him? Works for some security outfit in New York. Very trustworthy guy," Dixon added in quick assurance. "A believer. It got him curious when he saw it, and he sent it to me. Anyway. Recognise any of these guys?" He withdrew a handful of pages, each with a number of photographs printed with a good colour printer. Mulder accepted the pages and flipped through. Surveillance footage, it appeared, of a series of strangers, none too familiar. He shook his head. Dixon smiled and took another bite from his bagel. "I suspected as much. First one, there," he said, leaning across to point at the topmost picture with one fat finger, "is Dr Jim Helens, a leading psychiatrist specialising in extremist and paranoid behaviour. He's gained notoriety in some circles meaning this one alone, presumably "for some of the work he's been doing in undermining people like us. Particularly in the last couple of years."

"People like us?"

"Dr Helens made his career out of working with school shooters and bomb-builders – you know, proper crazies," Dixon said knowingly. "He was trying to sort of undo the extreme beliefs and behaviours that led to those tragedies. That was his life's work. But then his attention shifted to the likes of Lieutenant Harvey Newman and."

"Lieutenant who?" Mulder asked through his bagel, completely lost. He didn't know any of these names and felt he should. Apparently he needed to get through those forums more frequently.

"Harvey Newman. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of him. He would have been our country's latest big whistle blower… except that Dr Helens got hold of him and cured him of his extremism. Now he's nowhere, and what he wanted to tell the world-


"Mostly," he agreed. He reached again for the duffel. "It's all gone now, of course, but when he first opened his mouth, some of us were listening. It was worth it. It looked like something you would be interested in so I made sure I got as much as I could."

The next set of documents to be produced were digital photographs of very important-looking documents. A hand, or at least a thumb, holding each page was visible in each shot. Mulder took them in interest, the bagels forgotten.

Each document was stamped CLASSIFIED in bold red.

Each document was incomplete. There were four photos, and each was of a single page of a longer
Just a taster. Just enough to catch the attention of someone who knew what they were looking at.

Just enough to be labelled a traitor to your country and to be disappeared off somewhere to be brainwashed by an unorthodox psychiatrist.

"Where is this from?" Mulder asked, amazed. The first photo was of a list of names – names, social security numbers, nationalities, and three or four different dates – but it only went from Aaronson to Abbott. There could be hundreds more pages to that document. He shuffled the pages to view the second, which was a seemingly random section of a likewise seemingly random floorplan. The third page looked the most useful for his quest: an unformatted list of coordinates on an executive military order to redirect satellites to survey these locations.

In isolation, any of these might have been considered irrelevant, except for the last page. A random page from a transcript with the Central Intelligence Agency's watermark on the letterhead.

**F. Mulder:** Stop what from happening?

**V. Dragomirov:** Invasion. These sites are only four of many. Hundreds. I had not time to write the rest. My government, they know this much, but they will not share with the Americans. You must ensure they know. It is coming.

**F. Mulder:** Major Dragomirov, how did your government come to know this?

**V. Dragomirov:** They have their ways, Mr Mulder. I think you would not like to know what becomes of visitors to our planet when they are shot down in Russian airspace, hmm? These locations, they are on American soil, but I told you, there are hundreds. And they are everywhere. America, Russia, China, France... All nations are in danger. That is why I ask you here tonight. That is why I tell you this. All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men to do nothing.

**F. Mulder:** Edmond Burke said that.

Any, and all, paranoia henceforth seemed suddenly and totally justified.

"They're onto you, Mr Mulder," Dixon said, more awed than worried for him. Anyone worthy of the time of spies and foreign operatives would impress Dixon and his folk. "They've been listening to you. This is proof." He stabbed a finger at the transcript. "Why else would they spy on you, unless they were scared? They're scared of what you know and what you could do. Because they know you're right."

"I've got to admit, as much as I love hearing I'm right, it doesn't feel as good when it's the CIA saying it in classified documents they never intended to share with me," Mulder commented. He looked at his contact and waved the pages. "Thank you, Gerard. Tell me, did Harvey Newman specify where he got these from? Any notion at all?"

"Newman was extremely specific about where to find the rest of these documents, but this is where it gets complicated," Dixon warned, taking the pages from Mulder to flick back to the floor plan. "That's the second floor of the Claymont Office Building in Alexandria, Virginia. Beautiful historical building. They lease out commercial office spaces to private companies. Mostly. Three of the companies tenanting there have been linked to branches of the government, and a few more are questionable. One is a children's psychiatry clinic with very distant connections to Dr Helens, but which is funded by the federal government."
"These photos," Mulder said, returning to the first pile of pages he was handed. "What have they got to do with this? Other than Dr Helens?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Mr Mulder," Dixon said, dropping his voice and taking the pages, spreading them across the dirty work floor. "This is what got Dusty Underscore Kevin so curious. We've all been looking at this building, thinking something's got to be going on there, then he sees this." He pointed at each face as he spoke. "There's Dr Helens, and Luther Fenchurch – CEO of Fenchurch Transportation Systems, a small but growing interstate trucking company – and Dan Tannenbaum's legal firm is just small, too, but they've started taking on bigger fish and representing some significant organic farming groups against larger organisations."

Mulder hadn't connected the dots that Gerard and Dusty Underscore Kevin had clearly been doing, but he now recognised that all of the pictures were taken from the same security camera angle.

"When were these taken?"

"Three nights ago."

December 21. The date made his stomach twist in discomfort.

The significance of the date went over Dixon's head as he drew the pictures back together in excitement. "This is evidence of what I've been saying all along. It's beginning. Little companies, cleverly placed in critical industries – food, transport, medicine – will slowly take over, funded by the government who placed them there."

Mulder forced a smile. This was where their beliefs diverted in opposing directions. He stopped Dixon from his frenetic rearrangement of the pages on the cement.

"Gerard, what links them? So they were in the same place on the same night. That's not conclusive evidence of anything."

"These photos," Dixon said excitedly, "were all taken outside the La Classica Hotel in Los Angeles. And all of these people," he said, taking a pen from his pocket and ticking beside six of the fifteen total photos, "have an office space in the Clayton Building, or connections with someone who does, and here they are in the same place as Dr Helens, the last person to see Harvey Newman, who claimed that the rest of these documents," he gestured at the four incriminating photos, including the transcript of Mulder's not-so-private conversation in Moscow, "are stored in a secure vault in the Clayton Building."

Triumphant, Dixon smiled and went for the last bagel. Mulder collected the pages back up off the floor. His highly analytical mind worked at overtime, sorting through the technician's claims. The connections were there, yes. The classified documents were most certainly genuine, as probably was Harvey Newman's assertion that they were being held somewhere nondescript and unexpected – the lieutenant ought to know, since the photographs seemed to indicate he'd held physical copies of them. The rationale for six businessmen to fly to Los Angeles just before Christmas to meet (when their office spaces were in the same building) was unknown and made it seem quite suspicious, especially given the attendance of this Dr Helens and the Harvey Newman connection. Taking over the world, perhaps not, but at a stretch, the links were there to suggest that some untoward business was afoot.

The door to the vacant and unfinished lab was not even hung yet but Mulder could easily imagine her stepping through it to give him a condescending look. Coincidences, her voice said in his mind, flat-out dismissing Dixon's hard work and demanding more proof before acting on it, and nothing to suggest otherwise except that you received all of this from the same unreliable source. Six men
"working in the same building attending the same function is called socialising. Maybe Newman's documents are hidden in one of the offices in the building – it doesn't conclusively follow that every company leasing space in it must be scheming in a secret government plot, does it?"

"Some of this stuff," he said finally to Dixon, "if you're found to have been in contact with it, you could be in real danger."

Dixon was dismissive. "I told you, I covered my tracks. Deleted it all."

"It was extremely brave of you to handle it at all," Mulder said, and Dixon looked away, pleased and proud of himself. But he didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation. "The last guy they can trace the leak to was made to disappear. I don't want that to happen to you. You and Dusty Kevin put all that together yourselves?"

"And the others," Dixon agreed. He munched happily on his bagel, glad to have been of help and to have been lucky enough to be the one of his circle of quiet little nutcases to have passed on their collective wisdom to their chosen hero. Their anonymity made them valuable because they could collate data undetected but their cowardice meant that they needed Mulder, and others like him, just as much as he needed them. "Holly – she's been around a long time, private investigator outta Nebraska, I think you know her – provided a lot of the background information. She's been worried about some of these guys for a while, about why the government would be funding some of these organisations without being transparent about it. She wasn't sure about giving me what she had but agreed when I said I was giving it all to you."

"I remember Holly," Mulder said, thinking. Holly Ambrose. He'd never physically met her, but he'd corresponded with her a few times in the past. The investigator specialised in bank fraud and tracing money and had one suspicious eye fixed at all times on her government. "I didn't think she cared much for me and what I'm about."

Dixon nodded and licked his fingers.

"She doesn't care much for some of your views, particularly the alien stuff, but she liked your partner at the FBI. She's one of these conservative types," he apologised on her behalf, "you know, like, 'the government's definitely spying on us but no way is extra-terrestrial life involved'. Half-assed. She's followed you for a long time, like we all have, and thinks you're a bit out-there, but she says your fed girlfriend has her head on straight, and if you were as crazy as you look she would have dumped your ass by now." He paused. "A few guys say that, actually."

Mulder grimaced and scrunched up the paper bag he'd brought the bagels in. Story of his life, needing Scully's unquestionable credibility to make him and his beliefs palatable to others. Luckily their relationship had been ambiguous enough throughout its long course that nobody had noticed when it broke down, just as no one had noticed when it became something deeper than friendship. The fact that he no longer lived with her hadn't perturbed anyone's belief that she was his and he was hers, just as no one had let the fact that they lived separately and worked together get in the way of believing the pair were an item long before they really were.

"If she's all that's keeping my integrity intact," he said, getting to his feet, "I'd better get shopping if I want to be in the fed girlfriend's good books for Christmas, or that's my credibility sunk."

"That's just a couple of people," Gerard insisted hastily, pulling himself up with effort despite the almost ten years less abuse his body had on Mulder's. Quality, not quantity, Mulder considered. "Most of us know you're the real deal, whether you've got friends in the FBI or not. And we admire you, sir."
Mulder clapped Gerard Dixon on the shoulder. "Thank you for this, Gerard. If there's anything I-"

"All I want," Dixon interrupted, "is to see the truth come out, and for the people hiding it to be
revealed for the liars they are, before something terrible happens that we could have prevented."

"I'll make sure of it," Mulder promised, tucking the sacred documents inside his jacket. Leaving
here with the sensitive material, even hidden, made him uneasy. "Listen, Gerard… I want you to be
careful. Lay low for a while, alright? No more field trips across the internet to garner evidence for
me."

"Absolutely, Mr Mulder," Dixon said immediately, smiling as Mulder departed. "I'll keep myself
off their radar, if you will, too. Be careful. What we've talked about today… I think it's big, and
whatever's coming, it's close. I'll look out for you on the news!"

Was there any more terrifying parting wish than that?
X - Scully

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. The people who do are probably holding their collective breath this weekend ready for their revival to hit screens and waiting to receive fan responses, and therefore have bigger things to worry about than fanfiction writers playing around with their intellectual property.

Author's Notes: NEW X-FILES IN TWO DAYS! I'm super, super excited, and quite sure that this fic is going in a completely different direction, but I'm enjoying writing it so I still plan to see it out. Back at work, so apologies for the small delay and likely upcoming delays. Thankyou very much to everyone reading but most especially to Aerialz, soodohnimh and Emeline for taking the time to offer commentary and encouragement. I love reading your thoughts and I love to know that you love what you're reading. It definitely motivates me to update when I see that people are waiting on it :) Thanks heaps.

The fire burned cheerfully and warmed the women sitting beside it.

"You didn't."

Scully frowned at the Christmas tree behind her mother and put her teacup down with a graceless thud as she hauled herself to her feet. Maggie Scully sighed and turned in her seat to follow her daughter's angry stride across the living room.

"There's no need to get upset," she insisted. "I can decorate my house how I like."

"Oh, he's counting on it," Scully answered darkly, folding her arms tightly and glaring at the offending glass bauble hanging on one of the branches of the big plastic pine tree. Like the rest in its series, it was pretty, thoughtfully chosen. This time it was uncoloured, just clear blown glass with webs of spun glass hanging within it like cracks in ice. Beautiful. More mature than the childishly sweet hand-painted nutcracker of nine years ago, or the smiling red Santa face of the year before.

This year, Mulder's gift for William was reflective of the young man he must be becoming, somewhere, without them.

"Son of a bitch," she murmured, shaking her head. That bastard. Not that she should be surprised – he'd bought one every year, a sad and quiet ritual in memory of the son she had prevented him from knowing, and when she'd left him she'd left the collection with him, too. It broke her heart every December to see one more bauble, and hurt her even more when she'd tried to tell him she was sorry and he smiled and told her it was okay, this was just his way of remembering, that he wasn't mad, that he'd forgiven her, that she made the right choice, that there was nothing to be ashamed of…

When of course he must be mad.

Of course he wouldn't have forgiven her. Would she have forgiven him if the roles had been
reversed?
No.

And now, because he no longer had a fixed address and presumably had no Christmas tree, he sent those accursed baubles here, to her mother's place, to drive the knife of regretful reminder into her from afar. And Margaret Scully was only too obliging.

"Well, if he knew you were putting up a tree at your place, maybe he would send them to you instead."

Scully spun to look at her, sitting there on her armchair with a firm you-know-I'm-right look on her face.

"Whose side are you on?" she asked incredulously. "You're my mom, not his."

"Oh, Dana." Margaret rolled her eyes in the way that all women in their family seemed genetically prone to doing and got up to take the teacups to the kitchen. "Don't be juvenile. You and Fox have had your issues but he's still part of this family. As is William, if he ever tracks us down," she made sure to mention, driving her own blade of blame into her daughter, silencing any retort. "The baubles are staying, Dana."

The younger Scully turned back to the tree, ignoring the sounds of china chinking together in the next room, tightening her grip on her own crossed arms as desperate unhappiness took its time washing over her. Margaret, unlike Mulder, had never pretended to forgive her for the choice to let her grandson go. For months following her decision to part with William they'd barely spoken, and it was only when her daughter had disappeared with the falsely accused Fox Mulder that she'd apparently decided that she'd rather have her, childless and connected with a disgraced fugitive, than not at all. Now things were better, except around Christmas or William's birthday when the boy inevitably came up in conversation, and Scully knew her mother loved her dearly, would do anything for her, but also knew that she'd never be able to live down that deepest of disappointments.

Was there anyone significant in her life she hadn't let down?

"Have you spoken to him?" Maggie asked when she returned to the room. Scully didn't pretend to misinterpret.

"I'm not discussing Mulder," she said firmly. "I came here to see you. To hear about you."

"You saw him, then?" her mother said brightly as if she'd heard a totally different response. "When?"

"How do you know I saw him?"

"You're snappy and uptight," Maggie answered briskly, rearranging the cards on her mantelpiece, earning herself a narrowed look. "You know, you wouldn't be if you would just-"

"Mom," Scully interrupted loudly, mortified. "No."

"I'm only saying. You're so tense all the time. You're not seeing anyone else." Maggie smiled the tiniest of sly smiles. "There's no harm in indulging every now and then. I'm sure Fox knows exactly which of your buttons to push to destress you-"

"Mom." She pressed her hands over her ears in childish defiance of what her mother was saying.
Maggie had never been quite as conservative as her daughter and in her life as a single, independent woman since she was widowed twenty years ago she’d doubtless enjoyed some of the privileges of single life, but Scully had never become okay with discussing sex with her mother. And it wasn't going to start today.

"Don't be a prude, Dana." But Maggie was smiling. "Alright, so you saw him. Did you talk, or just argue?"

"What do you think we've got to talk about?" Scully countered. Her mother hadn't even seen Mulder in almost four years, and as far as she knew, they hadn't spoken, yet Maggie maintained a very high opinion of him and dropped the occasional unwelcome hint that she wanted him back in her daughter's life. "Yes, we argued. I argued – he can't be bothered." She gave in to temptation and reached out to touch William's new Christmas bauble. Cool to the touch, smooth. Beautiful. He'd chosen well. "I don't even know why I picked up the phone."

"Because you know he misses you," her mother said pointedly, leaning close to clutch her arm when Scully tried to pull quickly away from the accusing beauty of the decoration, holding her in place, "and you miss him, too."

Scully forced a smile to cover the cluster of painful emotions that twisted and heaved inside her as she twisted herself free from her mother's grasp. If he missed her, wouldn't he say so? "You couldn't be further from the truth, Mom." She grabbed her handbag off the armchair and looked through it for her phone. Checked it. No calls. One message, from Colt: *What's next?* "If anyone asks, this conversation never happened, because I'll deny it." Margaret Scully accepted the brush-off. "Are you sure you can't get away just for the weekend? I know Bill and Tara would love to see you."

She was flying out that afternoon to visit Scully's older brother Bill for Christmas. Having lost a husband, a daughter and a grandson, and having several times almost lost Dana, she held very closely the importance of spending time with family.

"Work needs me," Scully lied. Not because she didn't want to see her brother and his wife and kids. Not because she couldn't have taken the weekend off if she'd wanted it. Mostly it was because Christmas weighed more heavily on her than any other visit to her brother's family throughout the year. At Christmas it felt even more glaringly, cruelly obvious that there was a grandchild missing from the small circle of children around the tree opening presents, and it was a blow she could do without. "I'll visit in the new year."

"Alright." Maggie kissed her as they parted at the door. They hugged tightly. "I'll pass on your love."

"Thanks. Watch the roads going out to the airport, they're crazy."

"Merry Christmas, honey."

Most of Counterterrorism Division had requested today and tomorrow off, so the office was quiet, running on a skeleton crew. Even Agent Colt's desk was empty, tidily packed up like the former soldier he was – odd because she'd thought he was in today – but she knew from the text message that his mind wasn't far away from work.

*What's next?*

She was glad he hadn't been more specific in the message. He hadn't learned to look over his
shoulder yet, to twice consider everything he put in words. Mulder had long feared that her phone
would fall into the wrong hands and be used to implicate him, and her, in some insanely unlikely
plot devised within the warped minefield he called his mind, but after the events in Boston she was
inclined to think that erring on the side of caution was not unwise. Neither was abiding by her own
advice.

Trust no one.

She was just about to call Colt to tell him not to put anything else to paper, or within a text or
email, until she'd properly extricated them both from the case, when the office door opened and a
very familiar figure stepped inside. She felt her facial muscles relax into a smile, the most relaxed
she imagined they'd been since Mulder's call.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here on Christmas Eve, Agent Scully?" Walter Skinner asked,
smiling warmly. He crossed the office to her desk and sat down opposite her, an iPad in his hand.

"Terror suspects can't be expected to observe the right of ordinary Americans to enjoy their
Christmas weekend, sir," she answered. She replaced the phone on its cradle and pushed the pile of
paperwork and interoffice memos from the centre of the desk to the side. "To what do I owe the
pleasure of this visit?"

They smiled at each other and the warmth was genuine but the pause was unnecessary – just long
enough for a meaningful look to pass between them. The few other agents in the office were all
within earshot. Skinner was not her direct superior anymore, nor did he operate in this division, so
there was as little reason for him to pay her a professional visit as there was for AD Kelley to be
checking up on Colt.

"Just a social call," he said easily, thumb sliding discreetly across the edge of his iPad to turn the
screen on. "How have you been?"

"Fine. And you?" Scully kept her eyes on his face, off the lit-up screen in his hands. What had he
brought with him on that device? The relaxation his appearance had brought on in her was already
evaporating.

"Busy. I'm hosting Christmas at my place this year. No one told me when I agreed how much there
would be to do. I've been trying to learn how to fold napkins like swans," he said, pulling a clean
handkerchief from his jacket pocket and shaking it loose, "but I'm not having any luck."

The Assistant Director leaned forward to put the iPad on the desk before her under the pretence of
freeing up his hands to work on the napkin swan. It was exactly in her line of sight as she pretended
to watch the sad attempt at origami, and her eyes flew across the screen. It was a request for a new
case file – her request. Hadn't she sent that to Tan? She looked up at Skinner. Why was he showing
her this?

Why did he feel they needed a cover story to distract her colleagues from what he wanted to share
with her?

"Here," she relented, taking the handkerchief from her oldest friend in the Bureau. He'd been her
boss for many years; sometimes she'd trusted him with her life, other times she'd questioned his
motives, but in all situations he'd eventually proven himself her ally. And Mulder's. Skinner and
Mulder had ticked each other off something shocking and on many occasions she'd wondered
whether it was only their mutual affection for her that had kept them from walking away from each
other in outright frustration. They were so different, and yet so similar in the ways that counted.
They believed in the same core values – Mulder also believed in a bit more – and they were good
people, determined to do right by others within the confines of their very strong personal ethical
codes.

She hadn't had reason to doubt him in so long, and so she willingly played along with the charade
of folding the handkerchief for the sake of the office's few onlookers, knowing his intentions would
be sound.

Skinner was older now, well into his sixties, but his smile was the same as ever before. Maybe it
came easier now than it had when she'd been the only-slightly-less-irritating half of his least-liked
duo of liabilities. He accepted the cloth swan when she handed it back.

"I knew you'd know how it was done," he said, admiring her work. "Thank you, Agent Scully."

"What are friends for?" she asked evenly. He started to stand, buttoning his jacket as he did.

"Too right," he agreed. He leaned down for his iPad; his voice dropped right down: "And as your
friend, I suggest you downplay the role of another friend in this."

His words froze the smile on Scully's face. "Downplay?"

"They know he was there. It's best that's all they know. Drop it." He switched the screen of his
tablet off as he straightened up. His parting words were at normal volume, calm and friendly.
"Merry Christmas, Dana."

"Have a lovely Christmas, sir," she responded, genuinely meaning it though the words felt
automatic. On arrival back from Boston last night she'd finally managed to get a decent night's
sleep, but she still felt tired and she struggled to process the underlying meaning to Skinner's coded
warning. The Johannsson/Engel/Gray case – she didn't need any further signals to convince her it
was bad news, and in her mind she had already walked away from it, yet here it was, stirring in the
undertone of Skinner's voice while he told her he knew Mulder was involved. He and others knew.
How? Because of the nature? And why did it matter? She was allowed to consult with whomever
she liked. The choice to omit mentions of Mulder's links to some of her cases was made more out
of spite than rationalism; there wasn't anything wrong with taking his leads, asking for his advice
or getting his perspective as an experienced and professional freelance criminal profiler on a case,
but she preferred to avoid the inevitable raised eyebrows those mentions seemed to bring out in her
superiors when they read her reports.

All in all, Scully just didn't like any of it. Kelley had tried to dissuade her from reopening the Engel
case; Janae the ME's assistant had evaporated after Scully had discovered the Black Oil virus;
Rebecca Johannsson's body was gone, along with all evidence she was ever in Berkshire County;
neither the hospital nor the husband had returned her calls despite assuring her they would; the
series of little miscommunications intended to put her off obtaining the cadaver could be put down
to coincidence, but in conjunction with the rest seemed too sinister; and now Skinner was dropping
hints that she should keep her nose clear. What was this? How deep did it go?

Skinner looked like he would have preferred to say more, but he left with his iPad and handkerchief
swan when the door open suddenly and Agent Colt burst in, calling across the office, "Agent
Scully! Uh, sir," he added, a little sheepishly, when he realised he'd totally ignored the superior
agent walking towards him. He stopped where he was, shoulders back, spine straight and stock
still, and bobbed his head respectfully, a throwback to his brief time as a soldier.

"Agent," Skinner acknowledged, without cheer, and left with a final glance back at Scully. Colt
immediately resumed his fast-paced approach.
"Ma'am," he said breathlessly, crossing the space to their desks with haste and dropping into his own swivel chair, scooting it closer to hers, "I was up all night reading the cases you gave me. That stuff's unbelievable. This virus… your best conclusion as to its origin…" He opened his briefcase on his lap and flicked through its contents, shaking his head. Scully was appreciative of his low tone of voice even as her mood dropped lower. "I could hardly believe what I was reading."

Scully tried to smile but was sure it looked as uncomfortable as it felt. "I don't expect you to accept it on face value, Agent Colt. It was never conclusively understood, nor pinned to any specific individual. It's unlikely the case will ever be solved."

"Yeah, I get that," Colt agreed wholeheartedly, finding the documents and giving them back to her. She reached for her own case and hid them away, berating herself. She should never have let these pages leave her sight, let alone sent them home with her overeager junior agent to tarnish his previously positive idea of her. He leaned past her to turn her computer on. "From the way you described the situation in your final report, it sounds like there are people invested quite heavily in ensuring it's never solved. You were so close to proving something here," he added quietly, intensely, looking pointedly at the file she was locking away. The phone on her desk rang. "Just think of what chaos it would cause if you were able to close it. How much power this gave you. No wonder someone's hiding the proof of it in the Johannsson investigation. This is Agent Colt," he said briskly into the receiver of her phone when she didn't answer it.

She clicked the case shut slowly and regarded her probationary agent in silence as he listened. He sounded… convinced. Motivated. Sure. Passionate. It was not the reaction she'd expected. There was no indication from his demeanour that he was in any way amused by what he'd read or that his opinion of her had been affected at all. Could it really be that he simply believed, without any hesitation, because the solid science was sitting there and the good old fashioned police work had been rigorously recorded?

Colt hung up. "Tan wants to see us in his office. But wait," he said, reaching for her wrist when she made to stand up. She paused at the physical contact; he'd never attempted it before and she tended against allowing it. Except from Mulder. Colt was quick to withdraw his hand once he'd stilled her. "I need to tell you something. Something I noticed this morning. I came in and…" He dropped his voice again when she looked around, and he seemed to realise that there were others in the office. None of whom seemed interested in either of them, but that was never a certainty. "I tried to load the online version of these cases. There are references to other dates and cases, and I wanted to use the digital links. But the Engel file is gone."

"Gone?" Scully repeated in a near-whisper. He nodded urgently as he moved his chair closer, turning to her computer to log in. With her log-in and password, she noticed. The intrusion should feel offensive, a violation, but she hardly felt a thing except surprise that he had picked up so much just from sitting beside her for two months. Surprise, and a heavy sinking feeling. Gone.

"The file is no longer in the database," he said, navigating the mouse's pointer across the screen and opening the internal search engine. "None of the search parameters bring it up – victim's name, case agent, year, nothing. And even if you type the case number itself…" A dialogue box was open for him to do just that, the most direct means of searching, and Scully went to open her briefcase back up to find the paper copy, but he waved at her dismissively and said, "No, don't worry about looking for it. I remember numbers." And he typed it from memory. Pushed 'Enter'.

No file found.

Scully felt uncomfortable with the glowing green font on the screen. Gone? Less than a day after she downloaded it and was gently prodded away from it by AD Kelley?
But it was ridiculous to jump to conclusions. Very Mulder. She asked Colt, "Are you certain you got the number right?"

His return look was level, serious enough that she didn't open the briefcase and offer to read the number to him to confirm. "Are you certain your birthday is February 23rd, 1964, or that your badge number is JTT0331613? I am. I told you, I remember numbers." He exited the search and pushed his chair back to his own desk. "The point is the file has been pulled from the database. Are they even allowed to do that? Just make a whole case disappear from the record?"

"Might have been made classified," Scully suggested uncomfortably, again surprised that her discomfort was less with Colt's familiarity and more with the situation, "but... it depends on which 'they' you're referring to."

"Doesn't that just confirm what you already thought? That you'd stepped into some sort of cover-up?" He waited for her to answer; she only looked away. She didn't need to get involved with this, and neither did he. He wasn't about to let up. "Good thing you printed paper copies before they disappeared that file."

"Tan will be waiting for us," she said abruptly, standing and turning her screen off. "Maybe he'll clarify this for us."

Colt stood, stashing his briefcase under his desk. Scully wasn't willing to do the same. She carried it with her as she followed her younger colleague to the door. He was still talking. "What you gave me, it's not everything, is it? There are other dates and cases. I didn't get a chance to look them up yet, but it makes sense. You dealt with numerous outbreaks, didn't you?" He stepped past her to get the door. So polite. He did it on purpose; Mulder did it without thought. "Was that your role at the time? Bioterrorism?"

She cocked her head, wondering how much to say. It was one thing for Colt to accept that she'd investigated two or three medical cases of possible extra-terrestrial nature without altering his perception of her; it would be quite another to expect him to look at her the same if she said she'd chased spaceships, rumours, lies and monsters for a decade with a very unpopular Bureau legend.

"Not exactly," she said finally, evasively, "but I did take point on quite a few medical cases, including several strains of this same virus. Needless to say, I didn't get many prosecutions back then."

"Before you left the Bureau," Colt guessed, leading the way down the hall to Tan's office. When Scully didn't answer, he glanced back to see her expressionless face – what did he know? – and explained, "I know you spent a number of years as a practising physician before returning to Counterterrorism. What made you come back to law enforcement if you were so drawn to medicine?"

"Poor judgement."

They'd reached Tan's office and let themselves into the anteroom, where his secretary sat at a desk, in the middle of both a very serious-looking call for which she was trying to look up an appointment time on her computer. When she saw the pair of agents she nodded and pointed at the next door, ushering them on to see their boss.

Assistant Director Peter Tan was the solemn sort, unable to see the humour of rhyming his name with storybook characters. He liked things done properly, by the book so to speak, which perhaps accounted for the near-total lack of creative thinking in his department, but appreciated initiative and on-the-spot problem-solving. He and Frank Hofstetter, one of his Section Chiefs, had often
expressed admiration for Scully's rigorous, creative approach to her job, admitting that some of her unorthodox solutions and her eye for the unexpected detail out of place had potentially saved lives that more straightforward investigative work would not have.

Mostly, both liked that she solved whatever she set her sights on and appreciated that she brought a skillset to the department that had been lacking before they'd taken the risk in hunting her down and offering her the job.

Both Tan and Hofstetter were waiting inside the office, sitting opposite each other and going over what looked like a budget.

"Agents, thank you for being prompt," Tan said with only a small glance up at them when they stepped inside and stood waiting, side by side. He abandoned his work with Hofstetter to turn to his computer. "I won't keep you for long. Agent Scully, I received your report. I'm sorry to hear it was unsuccessful but unfortunately for these people, we don't give up that easily. What is your proposal for your team's next move?"

Scully glanced up at Colt. Report? She hadn't submitted a report about what had gone down, or not gone down, in Boston yet. She'd only typed her sparsest, most objective notes, and sent them to her own email to avoid having them saved to a hard drive. Her junior agent looked as unsure as she was. Had he sent a report on her behalf? She hoped not. She cleared her throat lightly and said, "Well, the logical thing to do, to cover all bases, would be to do a sweep of the whole morgue for any evidence that wasn't removed in the initial-"

"Morgue?" Hofstetter interrupted, looking up from his paperwork to squint at her through thick glasses. "Did someone die, Agent?"

She paused, sensing unstable ground. "Yes, sir," she said slowly. "Rebecca Johannsson, from Leominster, Boston."

"Oh, that," Tan said dismissively, immediately. "Yes, I saw that. I'm sorry, Agent, but I read through what you had and didn't see cause to open a new case. I've denied your request." Denied.

"We're discussing your current case," Hofstetter redirected. He smiled at Colt, an encouraging expression. "Agent Colt, I understand you've been assisting Agent Scully."

Her junior partner glanced uneasily at her, the awkwardness of the redirect not lost on him.

"Yes, sir."

"What are your thoughts?"

One of the reasons Scully liked Colt was that he was clever; he thought before he opened his mouth. After a second he said, "That Alistair Craig at least suspected from the time he entered the building that he was being watched, and that he was trying to communicate discreetly with the bomb-builder, maybe giving instructions for what he wanted built, while remaining outside to keep watch for us. The-" but Scully overrode him without thinking.

"I'm sorry, Colt," she interrupted, turning on their superiors. "You've denied my request? On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that you have no case," Tan answered sternly. He turned a forceful glare on Colt. "Continue."
Colt swayed in place, clearly uncomfortable. His eyes slid to his mentor for confirmation. The show of deference to her did not impress their superiors and AD Tan's next words were an indirect strike to her claim on Colt's loyalty.

"Agent Colt, I'm sure I don't need to remind you that the authority of this office supersedes that of a senior agent. Continue."

The obedient solider in Colt won out and he reluctantly carried on his tale. "The… The knock on the door seems to be a warning, sir. The fact that Mr Craig didn't knock upon arrival indicates that the bomb-builder does not answer the door to knockers, eliminating the uninitiated from accidental entry. The Morse communication is possibly coded again, with safe words and identifiers, to ensure the builder's safety. It would be unwise for us to attempt to trick him into granting us access simply by asking him in Morse code without further information."

Hofstetter turned his triumphant smile on Tan. "I told you he was a sound investment."

Rather than appearing proud, Colt lowered his gaze, embarrassed. Tan surveyed him critically.

"I'm sure you're learning a lot as an understudy to one of our department's most uniquely experienced agents. What would you have done differently if you had run Agent Scully's operation two nights ago, Agent?"

Colt looked up in surprise, and Scully felt her eyebrows draw together. The question was completely out of line, considering she was right here. Her junior agent coughed politely.

"Sir, I would make no changes to Agent Scully's approach," he said finally. "Every call she makes is above-board and she makes all efforts to protect her operatives – you are correct to say I'm learning a lot. I'm privileged to have her as a mentor."

Good boy. Scully felt a grain of warmth settle inside her at his solidarity. It was easy to forget after so many years how much difference an ally's belief could make. How long had it been since she'd stood up for someone the way Mulder had stood up for her and the way Colt was backing her now? His show of spine added to hers, she felt strong enough to try again.

"Can we come back to the Johannsson case, please?" she reiterated. She didn't know why she was arguing – she didn't even want the case, what did it matter to her if they shut it down? – but the injustice ate at the levee holding back the ocean of anxiety that ebbed and flowed inside her. The natural defence was indignation. Her own department shouldn't be one of the shadows working against her. "For what reason was my investigation denied before it even began?"

Hofstetter frowned and looked disapproving. Tan only met her gaze evenly.

"You sent me a disjointed collection of allusions to a pair of old cases, one of them closed only recently, and a requisition form for a medical death that neither local law enforcement nor the hospital in which she died requested you to investigate," he said. "To be honest, Agent, I was somewhat disappointed to see your name attached to such a bizarrely groundless request."

"With respect, sir, the case is not groundless," Scully insisted. "The autopsy I performed revealed strong similarities to several previous cases."

"I disagree with that assessment," Tan stated firmly. "I read through the Engel case and saw nothing that justified the link you were trying to make. This syndrome, the blood in the lungs. I understand it can be caused by a wide range of conditions, from drug use to pneumonia. Neither falls within the parameters of our department."
"On that note, where has the Engel case gone?" she asked, staying just as firm. "I looked two minutes ago and the file is no longer on the database."

"Removed for reformatting," Hofstetter said, oh-so-smoothly and almost before she finished asking. "Some formatting issues were noticed when Peter and I reviewed it yesterday. It's not your concern. Your job is to investigate terrorism, not corrupted paragraphing, and there's nothing to investigate here."

"The body I went to claim has disappeared." Scully's statement sounded bold in the heavy silence of the office. "I think that, in itself, should be reason to investigate."

Tan's lip curled, almost a sneer. "Is that so? How spooky. I expect that the body you requested was claimed by the family and sent to the funeral home."

"No," Colt said automatically, drawing the unimpressed looks of his superiors. Scully wanted to kick his leg and shut him up. She was already knee-deep in this; he didn't need to dip his foot in, too. "We were there last night and they told us they had no record at all."

"Nobody invited you to speak, Probationary Agent Colt," Section Chief Hofstetter said sternly, his address of the younger man a complete backflip on the pride he'd shown only a moment earlier. It shut him up just as effectively as a kick would have. "Please step outside."

Scully refused to look at Colt. She should never have answered that stupid fucking fax. He looked like he would have loved nothing more than to disobey but didn't have it in him yet, so he nodded once and left. The door clicked smartly behind him, leaving Scully to the wolves.

She could take them.

"I can't say I'm amused, Agent, but for the sake of the season I'll pretend to be," Tan said coolly, trying to smile. "Your request is denied. There is no case. You have no grounds to pursue it and now you tell me you don't even have a body. This kind of disorganised, incoherent rambling is something one might have expected to see from Agent Mulder," he made sure to mention, and though Scully felt the little flutter in her stomach at the name she didn't allow her gaze to drop from his challenging one, "but not from you."

She said nothing. There is no case. She still held the briefcase she'd walked in with and adjusted her grip, feeling the thin film of nervous sweat under her palm. There was no case, yet she had it all, right here with her. Yet… it wasn't enough. There was no audience for it. She was being iced out, beaten down. It was like she'd told Mulder. The fight wasn't winnable. The brief spark of defiance that Colt's belief in her had ignited dulled to just an ember.

Tan was looking at his screen when he asked, "Was he in Boston?"

No need to ask who 'he' was, but since Colt seemed to have been sent out especially for this part of the conversation, presumably to allow her to save face, she thought she should at least pretend. Scully felt her stomach flutter again and realised it was more from apprehension than excitement. Why did they want to know about Mulder? I suggest you downplay the role of another friend in this. "Agent Colt accompanied me, yes, sir. I wanted to give him the field experience."

Tan smiled wanly and turned the monitor so his agent could see the request form Skinner had had on his iPad only minutes before. "This request screams of your former partner. Please don't think me stupid. You're an excellent agent, and this just isn't your usual practice. What was the extent of Agent Mulder's involvement in this farce?"
"Was he in Boston?" he repeated. She offered something of a shrug. No point lying, then.

"Former Agent Mulder was at the morgue when I arrived. He didn't admit to it but I now suspect he placed the anonymous tip that I followed there. My interest in the case was purely medical. It's something I would have pursued in my early career."

Tan regarded her for a weighty moment. "Does this happen frequently, Agent?"

She misinterpreted on purpose. "Yes, sometimes I take an interest in one case over another due to its nature."

"I mean, does your ex-partner contact you often with anonymous tips and turn up at the investigation?"

"Once is more often than I would like."

She maintained what she hoped was a blank, innocent expression for the long, drawn-out seconds he spent staring her down. It seemed convincing enough. Tan sighed and closed down the request, turning his screen back the right way.

"I do understand that you're a doctor," he relented, softening his voice slightly. "It's natural that you'll feel a certain… sympathy… towards cases of a medical nature. It's also natural that others might try to play on this sympathy."

"You said the body is now gone," Hofstetter spoke up. "Is it possible that Fox Mulder could be involved in that?"

What was he getting at? "To what end? Why would he draw me to Boston for an autopsy and then destroy my evidence?"

The tables turned, Tan and Hofstetter looked uncomfortable and unwilling to offer any answer to that.

"Agent Scully, let's wrap this up. Our department is extremely busy, our work critical, and we simply cannot spare agents to pursue cases of personal interest. I want your assurance that your attention is where it should be-"

"It is, sir," she promised quickly, hearing the familiar little voice in her ear whisper, *Sell-out.*

"-and that a former agent is not influencing the direction of any of the investigations in my department. Now, please, if you don't mind: how do you propose to manage the next phase of your active investigation?"

Scully clasped her hands together over the handle of her briefcase, ashamed to feel the slight tremble of anxiety under her skin, the shakes that came when control was ripped unceremoniously away from her, and outlined some of the conclusions she'd come to after their failed sting and how she planned to apply these to future movements. She took responsibility for not checking whether Alistair Craig would be likely to recognise Agent Desmond. She suggested a feather-light surveillance approach to avoid detection and to maintain surveillance on the bomb-builder's home. Tan was content with her assessment of Craig's profile and the likelihood that he would have gone to ground for the time being, and he was eager to see what she would come up with next. His tone with her changed over the course of the conversation, enough that by the time he dismissed her, he sounded thoroughly pleased with her, and both he and Hofstetter wished her a happy Christmas.
The air in the hallway tasted so sweet, and Scully took a deep breath of it through her mouth as soon as she was out of the secretary's antechamber. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, inhaling slowly, embarrassed by how shaky each breath was.

Mulder was right. She was a sell-out.

"Ma'am?"

Colt stepped out of the office behind her, concern aging his young face. She hadn't even noticed him waiting for her in the antechamber. She must have all but run out of there to get so far ahead of him. She couldn't muster the energy to smile. He closed the door softly.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, running her fingers back through her hair, grounding herself in the sensory stimulation. She was fine, everything was fine, things were going to be just fine, even if absolutely nothing in the past two days had gone her way and even if she'd followed her stupid lovesick heart into a conspiracy much too big for her and even if she'd just been officially shredded in front of her junior agent and even if her mother was hanging baubles from Mulder in William's honour and encouraging her to use her ex as a cheap fuck in the name of stress relief and even if right now that sounded like the most reasonable option available to her. Yes, everything was fucking fine.

"What did they want with you?"

"Hmm? Nothing," she said hastily, shaking her head. Tan and Hofstetter had done her a favour by sending Colt out when they did, saving her the embarrassment of having Mulder's name dredged up and her connection to that unpleasant chapter of Bureau history made evident. "They just wanted to put me in my place, that's all."

Her new partner pointed in the direction they'd just come from. "Are you really going to stand for that?"

"Stand for what?"

"You just had your ass handed to you," he said, appalled, and then realised what he'd just said to a female superior officer and corrected himself. "Sorry, ma'am: I mean, that was completely inappropriate of them. They can't talk to you like that, especially in front of other agents."

"I was insubordinate," Scully reminded him, feeling the tightness in her chest slowly release now that she was free of the confines of that office. Now that she wasn't having her ass handed to her, as Colt put it. He wasn't wrong. They'd torn strips from her and she'd stood and taken it. "So were you."

Colt leaned down to her level and hissed, "They're covering this up. Johannsson's body was not claimed by her family. You did that autopsy. You were there. All these cases are definitely related. And the Engel file, removed for formatting? This is bullshit," he added, shaking his head and looking around. The hall was empty. Christmas Eve. Everybody saner than them was at home with their families. "You can't let them get away with it."

Sigh. "What choice do I have?" She recognised the rage incited by underhanded injustice but felt powerless to combat it. Whatever strength had filled her in the office enough to argue for the validity of the case had drained away by now.

"What choice? You tell them to shove it, and you follow it up. You solve the case, like you do every other time. Lives could depend on it, Agent Scully." He stared at her, incredulous at her
apparent apathy. He dropped his voice again. "We're talking about the possibility of a killer virus not of this earth and you're going to go all 'yes, sir', and drop the case?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, hearing Mulder's voice instead of his. She knew he was right. She was one of a privileged few who knew exactly what they were dealing with, and some of the implications of its appearance. She had a social responsibility, a moral obligation to her fellow humankind, to chase this down or die trying. It was right. It was the only thing to do.

But.

But ultimately she would fail.

She'd tried already, she had, she really had. Hadn't she followed Mulder for twenty years? Hadn't she given him and his cause all she was, only to be faced with the truth: that it was all for nothing? The enemy was faceless and many-faced, a shadowy hydra; for every head taken off in victory another three grew in its place. She was just one person. It was too much. It wasn't fair. And she wasn't going to put herself, and her new partner, through it. She deserved better, surely, but even if she didn't, Colt did.

She forced a bland smile and straightened, shouldering away from the wall. "Drop the case? Colt, you heard them. There's no case here."

He stared at her. "You're serious?"

"You have no idea."

"You have a case!" he insisted, frustrated. "You're going to let them push you around? You're the one with the power here, Agent Scully. You're holding everything you need to prove they're talking through their asses. You have proof, you have photos-"

"I do not," Scully cut him off, glancing over his shoulder. Still, no one. She looked up at him pointedly and lowered her voice to a calmer octave. "I have nothing, and if you have theories that suggest otherwise, I'd ask you to keep those to yourself."

"You didn't tell them?" he demanded, jerking his head at the door beside them in reference to Tan and Hofstetter. She grabbed his arm and dragged him a few paces away where their voices were less likely to be heard by Tan's secretary.

"I do not," Scully cut him off, glancing over his shoulder. Still, no one. She looked up at him pointedly and lowered her voice to a calmer octave. "I have nothing, and if you have theories that suggest otherwise, I'd ask you to keep those to yourself."

"You didn't tell them?" he demanded, jerking his head at the door beside them in reference to Tan and Hofstetter. She grabbed his arm and dragged him a few paces away where their voices were less likely to be heard by Tan's secretary.

"What do you think? Of course not. For the same reason I didn't let you wave the recorder at the cameras last night. If they say request denied and we start screaming about evidence, it'll be buried along with everything else connected to the case."

He was visibly seething with the unfairness of the matter, this huge world of possibility being opened to him and then slammed shut. And she knew he was even madder with her than he was with the men in the office behind them, because he trusted her and had trusted her to be truthful with him and here she was closing down and folding. He tried to gather himself together and asked, in a very low voice, "So... you're just biding your time? Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm not saying anything," she responded noncommittally, "and if you still want to be working for the Bureau come Easter, you'll learn to say nothing, too."

"I'm not worried about my job," Colt said immediately, quickly for someone still on probation, she thought. He frowned at her. "Are you? Is that what this is about? You think your job is on the line? Agent Scully," he said, trying to appeal to her again when she only shrugged, "they're not going to fire you for one act of insubordination. They need you."
Now she knew he hadn't read up on her when she read up on him; at least, not her whole history.

"Colt, I'm not going to stand here and argue with you while who-knows-who listens to us. There is no case. There's no body, no evidence left to gather. We don't have the Bureau's support to investigate. If we went ahead with it anyway," she floated the idea by him and was struck with both disappointment and courage to see the way his expression picked up at the possibility, "we'd be walking straight into the Office of Professional Review. You said it yourself, there are people involved here who would go to great lengths to see us fail. They've got an eye on me, and now on you, too. So we back off. We keep our heads down, give it time. Maybe we pick up the trail later, or maybe we don't. What we don't do is jump in and blow our own cover while they're right there waiting. It isn't worth it."

Colt didn't like it. He was obviously unhappy, but she could see that he understood the need to choose the moment. What he didn't like was the possibility, or probability, that the moment might never come, and that he would have to be alright with that.

"People's lives could be on the line, ma'am," Colt said finally, with less force but with as much conviction as before, and she hated how reasonable and rational he sounded. It was so much easier to argue with a partner who talked in nonsense. Further down the hall, the elevator dinged and the doors began to open. "Respectfully, who are you to claim this isn't worth it?"

Scully's attention was caught by the people exiting the lift. A mother pushed her stroller-bound infant to the door of one of the offices and knocked. A moment later the overworked father, another agent, appeared at the door and delighted over the surprise Christmas Eve visit. The baby was scooped out of her seat and into her father's arms.

Beautiful. Heartbreakingly so. Lovelier than fourteen handpicked Christmas baubles hanging on a tree in an empty house.

Of course it was worth it, and of course, for exactly the same reason, it wasn't.

After the day she'd had, Scully couldn't take the pain of those knives she carried in her heart as they twisted ruthlessly, and she turned abruptly away. She didn't hear Colt calling after her, not over the accusing voices she heard echoing cruelly in her head.


She'd given up believing Mulder would come back and in that dark, hopeless moment of weakness she'd given up believing in her ability to protect her son. She'd given up on William and let him, her mother and Mulder down. She'd given up on Mulder right when he was ready to give up on himself and she'd walked away with nothing, just as she deserved. Now she'd given up on Rebecca Johannsson and cost her husband and children their chance to know the truth about what had been done to her.

It was unforgivable. Having no options wouldn't have stopped Mulder from doing what needed to be done to save lives. She reached for her throat to grasp the crucifix her mother had given her for what comfort it might offer but her throat was bare – she hadn't worn it in years, and it wasn't designed to bring false comfort to cowards.

"Agent Scully-"

Colt caught her arm and tried to slow her, but she ripped herself away and turned on him.

"You don't know what you've got to lose," she snapped, only realising now as her voice cracked
and stuttered that she was on the verge of crying. She wiped her eyes quickly, furious with herself, and missed Colt's apologetic, alarmed look. "It's not just your job or your reputation or your money. There are things they can take that you can never get back. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Warren, but I know how this agency handles rogues and underperformers and I am not taking that road again. Neither should you."

"I would help you," Colt said, more gently now, but Scully was already shaking her head.

"No. No, you won't. You should leave this the fuck alone and get as far from me as you can. Ask for a different mentor. Take a transfer. Do whatever you can to avoid being associated with me." She pressed her fingertips to her temples, overstressed. "You shouldn't have been assigned to me in the first place. Someone fucked us both around. I never wanted a new partner."

That last part came out without her permission and she regretted it instantly. She didn't know what to make of his conflicted expression and he didn't seem to know what to say in response, so the seconds that followed spanned on in silence. And on.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Colt said finally, withdrawing and straightening his posture. "I hope you have a nice Christmas, ma'am."

He didn't wait for a reply. He went straight back to their office. Scully stayed where she was, strong for a moment, and then slumped, feeling crushed and helpless. For a single day it had looked like she might have found a new partner suitable for her mind and style and she'd already managed to obliterate that. Walls had closed in on her investigation and prompted her to give up on a case that she knew warranted extra attention and she'd proven herself once again unworthy of Mulder. No wonder he didn't miss her.

She was sabotaging her own life. She was a mess, a nightmare.

She hadn't been at work for long but she couldn't stick around, not after that confrontation with Colt, so she left. In the car she threw open the briefcase and dug around for the cylinder of pills. There. She shook it to hear the sound of them bouncing against the plastic sides of the container. With her phone she opened her contacts and scrolled to the number she had only once called, and let her thumb hover over the 'call' button.

Choices, choices.

There was nothing wrong with taking prescribed medication. This was what they were for, stabilising uneven and unmanageable emotional states caused by reactions and overreactions to situations outside of her control. Likewise, categorically speaking, there was nothing wrong with calling an ex-boyfriend with whom she was still on speaking terms to ask for advice, nor was there anything wrong with inviting him over to spend Christmas with her when she knew he had nowhere else to go. Strictly speaking, there was nothing wrong with enjoying dinner together and downing a bottle of wine and falling into bed with him, either. Sex would be great but even just the company would suffice tonight.

She wanted to see him. So badly. More than he wanted to see her. But he wasn't spiteful; if she asked for him and he was free he would come for her. All she had to do was call.

But what if he didn't answer?

She dropped the phone onto the seat beside her and opened the container. She swallowed the pill dry. The medication's effects were not instantaneous but the placebo was, and she let her head fall back against the soft headrest in deliberate relaxation. Medicine was her friend; it was consistent
and predictable, chemical cause and chemical effect. It was a more reliable crutch than Mulder. It cleared her head while he only blurred all the lines and muddied all the waters with his second-guessing and mixed messages. Pulling her in, pushing her away. She could do without him.

Every mile her car took her from the J. Edgar Hoover Building brought her a stronger sense of peace. What a *day*. But it was done with now. Colt would get over their conflict and let the case go. If he took her advice and left the department she would be disappointed but at peace knowing it was better for him. Johannsson's family would be paid hush money by someone, somewhere in some filthy shadow. Hofstetter and Tan would be happy to pretend nothing had happened if she resumed playing the part of perfect employee and heeded Skinner's advice to appear unconnected to Mulder. The baby in the hallway would have a lovely first Christmas with her adoring parents and Scully would get through the season, like she always did, and would work to react less stupidly to such reminders of her own lost happiness in future. Just a series of difficult moments, none of which would be repeated tomorrow, so there was no need to feel worried or upset about them anymore. Just a bad day. To think she'd nearly topped it all off with an ill-advised phone call. This had to be the worst Christmas she'd had in a long time, and it didn't even feel like Christmas.

At home it felt even less Christmassy. Amending this was a solid way to busy her thoughts and focus herself. She put up a little Christmas tree she found under her bed. She had her old white angel and a bit of tinsel but her mother had thrown away the other decorations when she'd cleaned out Scully's Georgetown apartment after she'd gone on the run with Mulder. She dug containers and measuring spoons out of her kitchen cupboards and drawers and laid it all out on the counters, and baked a fruitcake. She iced it and placed it in the middle of the table.

There. Christmas.

But there was no one to share it with, since all her family was together without her, elsewhere. She stopped and gauged her work. The little white cake in the centre of the dining room, the bare plastic tree and the distinct feeling of loneliness, as the evening crept on and darkened the room, just seemed all the more dismal than before she'd started.

It wasn't Christmas without a family.

Which was how she found herself at her mother's house. Maggie had left and the place was locked, lights off and every sound, every footprint or bumped chair at least twice as loud as it ought to have been, like noises always were when you were somewhere you weren't meant to be. The baubles Mulder had picked out each year for William were hanging, still and silent and in the dark, and she carefully unpicked each one and wrapped them in dishcloths and packed them into a punchbowl she found in the kitchen.

When she rehung them on her own tree later that night she took her time. She hung the first one, hand-painted fine china with *William* written across it in silver. The first one Mulder ever bought, that year while they hid and moved from town to town to stay alive. How lucky was it to have survived all the moving? She clinked a fingernail against its smooth surface. Beautiful. They all were. She proceeded to hang them one by one, in order, china and wood and glass and plastic and silk, until she came to the latest one. Blown glass. Transparent, simple. Exactly the way she wanted her life to be. Was William's, wherever he was? Was he happy? Were things simple for him? Transparent? She hoped, every day that she thought of him, that he was living a life better than the one she was able to give him, and that his life was too full of joyous things to allow him to think after her, if he even knew she existed.

But one little part of him, the memory of him represented by these baubles – lovingly hand-selected by his father, devotedly safeguarded by his grandmother and now warmly welcomed by his mother
– was right here with her.

"No use us both being alone," she murmured as she poured herself a drink and sat down to admire the tree and its fourteen decorations. "Merry Christmas, William."
XI - Colt

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. That should be quite obvious at this point, since the producers/screenwriters/actors/creator totally did not use the below content for their revival.

Author's Notes: Mulder and Scully back on our screens :D My fic is now officially an AU, ignoring the events of the revival season and continuing in the direction I have already started in. This whole fic is just a crazy conceptualisation I had for how a revival might look, and since I've already planned it out I don't intend to bend it to match the show. This chapter gives voice to my OC Colt, for whom I have developed considerable affection. The concept for his character came from my realisation sometime last year that if the X-Files is relaunched for-realsies, DD and GA would be unlikely to want to play action-orientated leads for a 20-episode-long season year after year, and that a younger pair of agents would probably be cast as substitutes for a portion of the show. So I created Colt, the least annoying version of this I could imagine. I would love to see your thoughts about him.

Thankyou very much Sandy and soodohnimh for taking the time to give feedback, and to those leaving kudos. It's so relieving to see the alert in the inbox - "Oh good, someone liked it - it didn't suck!"

There was always a new sweater.

"Just what I needed," Colt said with false brightness, unwrapping the knitwear and holding it up against himself for his beaming grandmother to admire. This year it was maroon with a pattern of reindeer heads. Looking down, aerial view, they looked like octopuses.

But he'd never tell Nana that.

"Oh, it's perfect!" she said, getting up out of her seat with difficulty, brushing off the attempts of her two daughters to help her, so she could get close to her eldest grandson and pull the edges of the sweater to his shoulders to check the fit. "I was a bit worried you would put on weight, sitting in that office all day, but it looks like we're in luck."

"And you wonder why he never comes home from work, Nana," Aunt Luci commented sardonically. She shared a look with her nephew over Nana's shoulder while the family matriarch fusssed over him.

"Well, aren't you going to put it on?" Nana pressed, ignoring her daughter. Colt smiled and obligingly pushed the paper off his lap to pull the new sweater on over his head. Immediately Tess the Maltese terrier began mauling the wrappings. Elsewhere in the house, his seven younger cousins were screaming and play-fighting with their new nerf guns. He was pretty jealous to realise he was the only grandchild who hadn't received one.

The sweater was on and he looked down. Definitely octopuses.

"Warren, that's your colour," she agreed. She clicked her fingers, faking an idea striking her. "You should get Nana to knit you pants to go with that sweater. You'd have a whole outfit."

"You'd get all the girls," Luci added seriously, before their mother shushed them and they dissolved into giggles.

"Be quiet, you two," Nana instructed, "or you'll be doing the washing up. All of it." They sat back in their seats, sulky, and ceased their teasing. Nana smiled adoringly at Colt, stroked his hair flat the way she liked it. "He doesn't need special outfits to get a lady friend. He's already a good-looking boy."

She hobbled off to yell at the other grandkids, and Luci and Toni smirked at Colt. Easy prey, left all alone to fend for himself. Yes, he'd served in the military. Yes, he'd graduated from the FBI's Academy. Yes, he was a capable, trained, possibly lethal agent of the United States government… but this home was his first battleground, where he'd truly learned to defend himself. To Luciana and Antonia he was the little nephew they both fiercely mocked and fiercely loved. They were only eleven when their fifteen-year-old sister Valentina ran away and came back pregnant, and they had happily adopted the baby Warren as a sort of foster brother when their parents offered to help raise him. They'd mostly, but not always, been nice. Now they had their own kids, roughly the same age gap to Colt as he was to the sisters, and he was quite sure he was much nicer to them than he recalled his aunts being to him.

But he also knew they loved him to pieces and would – and had – beat on anyone who looked at him sideways.

"Such a good-looking boy," Toni concurred in a cooing voice, reaching out to pinch his cheeks. He pulled away good-naturedly. "Takes after his aunty."

"I hope you don't mean you," her twin and genetic identical shot back. She turned her attention back to Colt. "Woollen knitted pants aside, how does a boy with your good looks function in society? How do you get from your front door to that ancient shitbox car of yours? Do you just swim through the masses of gorgeous women crowded outside the doors?"

"I don't see them outside," Toni said, peering out the window and staging concern. "Do you think they're all hiding in the bushes?"

"How do you get rid of them all?" Aunt Luci asked in mock seriousness, leaning forward as if desperately interested. Her sister copied. Colt smiled and leaned forward to swipe Luci's coffee.

"I threaten to introduce them to my family," he said, taking a mouthful before she could stop him. "That tends to get rid of them quick."

There was a playful wrestling match for the coffee cup that almost resulted in a scalding; a splash of coffee flicked over the rim of the cup and both Warren and Luci immediately drew away before they could be hit with it. It landed on the floor and all three looked at one another in dread.

"Nothing to do with me," Toni said instantly, removing herself from the pool of blame like always. Luci looked toward the doorway as Nana's voice came closer, and Colt quickly covered the little wet patch on the carpet with a handful of wrapping paper.

Saved. For now.
"Warren, did you tell the girls that the FBI let you go on your first field trip?" Nana asked warmly when she returned. The girls smirked identical smiles at him. Nana didn't know it but she was the most prolific producer of jeering material in the whole family, and most of the teasing between her daughters and grandson was actually generated from the ignorant things she said.

"Did they let you, did they?" Toni asked innocently. "Go on a field trip? I hope you packed a healthy lunch."

I never wanted a new partner.

"My senior agent took me to Boston," Colt confirmed, too distracted by thoughts of his job to take Toni's bait. Boston… From the time Agent Scully had invited him with her on that flight, things had gone steadily from unusual to odd to weird to downright off, and now he had no idea where he stood with her and with the investigation. The stack-up of inconsistencies and blockages – the unlogged requisition, the unreceived fax, the missing body, the unsigned sign-in sheet, the smug lying medical examiner, the missing assistant, Agent Scully's assertion that the surveillance footage would be doctored, Tan's refusal to approve the case – was all in direct contradiction to what Colt could see were facts. Agent Scully had lab test results linking the black substance found in Johannsson's lungs to old cases from the late nineties and early two thousands, as well as photos of the woman Johannsson as she conducted the autopsy on audio.

Unbelievably, she had scientific evidence that an alien virus had been engineered and mutated to eat human lung tissue, proof of extra-terrestrial life… She had it all in her briefcase, just casually carrying it around the J. Edgar Hoover building like it was nothing.

But ten minutes alone with Assistant Director Tan and Section Chief Hofstetter and she was refusing to act on it. What had they threatened her with? He was still internally seething with disgust at the way they'd spoken to her – The authority of this office supersedes that of a senior agent – and disgust with himself for letting them. They'd pitted him directly against his partner, used him to put her in her place.

"Exotic," Aunt Luci commented, sipping her coffee, gaze slipping to her mother to check she hadn't somehow noticed the stain she and Colt had made. "Better than Afghanistan, I guess?"

"Much," Colt agreed. He hadn't much enjoyed his time serving, but two years' experience was a prerequisite of application to the FBI Academy, and growing up in a military family there had never been any question of which field he'd enter. "We had to collect a body from a morgue."

He didn't go into details about it going missing. It was confidential, for one thing, and neither of his aunts was all that interested anyway. Plus, on top of that, there was so much uncertainty attached to the case – an alien virus, among other insane elements – that he wasn't sure he could explain it even if they wanted to know.

Luci wrinkled her nose. "Ew, gross. Dead bodies?"

"No, reanimated ones," Colt shot back. "Zombies, naturally."

"Warren," Nana chided, swatting his arm and looking around. "Don't talk about horrible things. Your cousins might hear you."

Like they would be frightened of zombie talk. They were probably playing zombies right now with their new nerf guns. Without him.

"So that's your job now, is it? Flying around the country picking up corpses?" Toni clarified,
ignoring Nana's stern frown. Colt shook his head.

"My partner did an autopsy on this body and wanted to bring it back to the labs for further investigation. She's a medical doctor-"

"She?" Toni interrupted in surprise, and Luci wolf-whistled. "Your partner's a girl?"

"She pretty?" Luci pressed cheekily. "Is she your girlfriend?"

They were insufferable. "She's older than you are."

"Ooh, a cougar," Toni exclaimed delightedly, falling back into her seat when Nana hit her shoulder in punishment for her teasing.

"Don't be catty," she scolded, but looked mildly worried. "I'm sure Warren's partner is completely professional-"

"She is," Colt promised his grandmother quickly. "One of the department's best agents. You know, I'm not even sure she likes me. But that's what I asked for, so… Nana, be careful."

Toni and Luci quit their teasing, at least briefly. They looked up at their mother as she uncomfortably lowered herself back onto the sofa between them. She'd been complaining of increasing discomfort to her lower back and hips for over a year now, and her mobility had become noticeably affected. Stubborn to the last, though, she refused to go and see a doctor. Colt was starting to get worried, and he knew his aunts were, too. They didn't live at the house anymore so for them the decline was not as daily evident but more startling when they visited and saw the deterioration.

"I'm fine," Nana insisted irritably, shrugging Luci's hand off her shoulder and settling between the twins. She looked pointedly at her grandson. "What were you saying, Warren?"

He didn't want to talk about Agent Scully anymore. He liked her well enough, or thought he did – she was different from the rest of their office, somehow sharper and more thoughtful and more creative, with a sense of humour that he couldn't quite pick, because for the most part she seemed utterly focussed on her job and then out of nowhere an unexpected flash of wry, intelligent wit would whip through their conversation. For all her outward seriousness, he'd quickly gathered that she didn't take herself as seriously as many of their colleagues. She didn't mind being wrong because she rarely proclaimed herself correct. The rest of the department either deferred to her or stayed out of her way, which Colt in his two months of being there understood to mean she was not to be messed with. In hallways and in passing Colt had heard her referred to as the Ice Queen, and thought it wasn't an entirely unfair assessment. She said little. She avoided personal conversation. The rumour was that she'd refused to take an official partner since her return to the Bureau some years before, and Colt had watched her walk out to investigate something on her own dozens of times. She seemed unwilling to connect with anyone at work except, occasionally, AD Walter Skinner. She did seem closed-off and cold.

*You shouldn't have been assigned to me in the first place. Someone fucked us both around. I never wanted a new partner.*

But she'd told AD Kelley to leave Colt where he was in Counterterrorism and she'd invited him to Boston with her. *Coming?* She'd made him earn her respect but unlike his superiors in the army or men upstairs like Hofstetter and Tan, she'd played fair, never changed the rules or shifted the goal posts.
So yes, he liked her, but after yesterday outside Tan's office he wasn't sure what to think of her and what she thought of him. He'd hit a few nerves under Dana Scully's unflappable, cool exterior, he knew, and his lifetime of dealing with strong women head-on had prompted him to push harder with her than he knew was strictly appropriate considering her seniority. Maybe if she was a man he would have backed off when she said to, but he'd felt confident he could work her around to seeing the strength in herself she'd only just lost faith in.

She'd hit back harder than he was used to. She was definitely a different kettle of fish from his aunts or grandmother. He was pretty sure he'd richly pissed her off.

_Take a transfer._

"Is Val coming for lunch?" Colt redirected the conversation hopefully when he left the silence for a beat too long. Nana had been trying to smile despite her back pain but the expression froze on her face.

"Oh, darling," she said, voice softening. "I tried to call her, I left messages. I'm sure she's just caught up."

"Whacked out on drugs," Toni muttered, raising her hands in helpless defiance when her mother hissed at her to be quiet. "What? We're all thinking it."

"You don't talk about his _mother_ like that around him," Nana stage whispered sternly, as if Colt wasn't sitting directly opposite.

"Ma, he's a big boy," Luci reminded her, copping the same nasty look her twin had. "The armed forces sent him to Afghanistan and put a freaking rifle in his hands and told him to shoot terrorists. The FBI sends him to look at dead bodies. He can handle a bit of reality. He knows what Val's like. Don't you?"

Colt didn't get a chance to answer; Nana was already chastising her daughters for trying to mar his perception of his mother. "A boy should be able to think nice things about his mother, especially on Christmas Day," she sniffed. Toni rolled her eyes.

"If Valentina wanted Warren to have nice thoughts about her, she should have thought of that before she left him to grow up with Luci and I. Like we were ever going to say anything nice about her."

"Speaking of unreliable," Luci said loudly when Nana tried to tell them off more. "Where's Dad?"

That distracted Nana appropriately. She rolled her eyes too and gave up controlling her daughters.

"Working," she said darkly. "Couldn't pull _himself_ away. But he _promised_ to be home for dinner."

"Couldn't pull _himself_ away," Toni snorted. "Like he even tried. Warren, pass me that plate of biscuits, would you?"

"Is he working on something in particular?" Colt asked curiously, fetching the platter from the far side of the coffee table. He stepped carefully over Tess, nudged her away from the wrapping paper bundle that was hiding the coffee stain. Nana shrugged her shoulders into the plush upholstery of her sofa.

"You know your grandfather; never tells me a thing. Something important, I'm sure. But still – what's more important than a man's _family_? At Christmas?"
Aunt Toni took the plate from Colt just as the clamour of children erupted into the living room. His seven cousins – Toni’s three and Luci’s four – came galloping in with their fathers and their nerf guns. Colt took a spongy pellet to the sternum and faked a dramatic death over the arm of his chair for Jeremy’s entertainment. The six-year-old, the youngest grandchild, grinned, but his smile was quickly stolen by the onslaught of shots from his older brother and cousin.

"That's not fair!" Jeremy complained. "I was distracted."

"Your fault," Lachlan called back as the older, more competent children zipped out of the room. The dads, Toni and Luci’s husbands, collapsed into armchairs, clearly exhausted. Jeremy glared after his brother.

"I don't have any points yet," he said, downcast. "They're too fast." He crossed his arms. "I don't want to play anymore."

"You're going to give up?" Colt asked incredulously. "They'll win."

"They'll win anyway. They always win."

"So what? Are you the good guy or the bad guy?" That earned him a frown. Good guy, obviously. "Right. Well, the good guys don't give up. It's in the rules, buddy."

Colt knew he'd had it tough with his antagonistic aunts and his occasional mother, but Jeremy had Luci for a mom, Toni for an aunt and six siblings and cousins who were just as quick to pinch or prod him to get a rise. The boy struggled for a moment, wanting to get on-board with what Colt was saying but unable to find it within himself to see any possibility of a desirable outcome. He looked down, ashamed.

"I can't win. I'm not good enough."


"Here," he said. "We'll get them."

With Jeremy perched on his back like a pack, arms slung around his neck, Colt set off into the house, rifle loaded and at the ready. Young and excitable cousins aged between eight and thirteen were much easier targets to track than Afghani soldiers on their home ground. The kids stomped and squealed as they flew around the house, giving away their positions. Colt was good with a scope, steady and quick with his reflexes. Obviously the nerf gun didn't stand up beside what he'd trained with, but he still picked off his cousins one by one, much to Jeremy's delight, and ended the round with a headshot, the pellet getting stuck in the messy curls on the back of Lachlan's head.

"That's not fair," Lachlan complained now, struggling to disentangle it. "You had proper training. We didn't stand a chance."

"Neither did Jeremy," Colt reminded him, grabbing one of the skinny little arms slung around his neck and crouching so the smallest cousin could safely slide off. The other kids scrambled around him, begging him to join their team. "That should even the points out a bit, hey, sidekick?"

He offered the six-year-old back his gun. Jeremy beamed up at him.

"I didn't think I wanted to play anymore, but I liked the game better when you helped, Warren." He paused. "What's 'sidekick'?"

"Oh, like Robin. Batman," he pointed at himself, "and Robin," pointed at Jeremy. The younger boy
looked mortified at the prospect of being anything less than Batman, but Colt shrugged helplessly. "You're the short one. I'm sorry, I don't make the rules."

The boy frowned and reloaded his plastic rifle. "The short one doesn't always have to be the sidekick, Warren. I can be Batman if I want to."

Jeremy took his nerf gun and sped off up the stairs after Shelby. Colt watched them go and heard the noise escalate throughout the house as the new round started and felt the peacefulness that comes with familiarity. His crazy, noisy family was annoying, embarrassing… and irreplaceably wonderful. He'd missed the kids intensely when he'd served overseas and even though his aunts were the most irritating people he'd known in his life, he adored them and wouldn't swap them for anything.

And Nana, darling old Nana. What would life be without her, without Grandad?

He'd taken only a step toward the living room when a sudden, unwelcome thought struck him.

_You don't know what you've got to lose._

He hadn't really known what to make of Agent Scully's sharp comment yesterday. She'd said it wasn't just his job or reputation, but there were things that could be taken that he hadn't even considered.

Warily Colt looked up the staircase as Shelby squealed delightedly in one of the bedrooms and Lachlan and Hailey scampered stealthily along the landing. She hadn't meant _family_, had she? _People?_

No. That was _insane_. The whole thing was crazy enough without worrying about that secret agent government conspiracy crap. It was not at all that he doubted Agent Scully's perspective on the matter – she'd _definitely_ seen some crazy shit in her time, judging from some of her distinctly _unique_ paranoias – but just that he couldn't imagine a secret so deep and so dark and so dangerous that people would be willing to hurt civilians to preserve it.

Although… killer alien virus genetically engineered by human scientists to infect unsuspecting civilian victims and disintegrate their lungs within days… _That_ was a pretty big secret, and if killing people was all part of the plan, why should killing _more_ people to cover it up be a problem?

Whoever was releasing this virus was killing innocent people. Rebecca Johannsson, suburban housewife and mother of three. Like Aunt Toni. Henry Gray, college teacher. Like Luci's husband Mark. Elsie Gray, elderly housebound woman. Like Nana. And the Engels – just a nice young family. With kids. Like Lachlan, like Shelby, like any of the others. Like Jeremy.

Someone got a cheeky shot in and an argument broke out somewhere in the vicinity of the upstairs bathroom. Jeremy was yelling.

"I shot you! I shot you!"

"That's cheating! I'm not playing anymore."

"You can't _give up_!" Jeremy parroted. "The good guys never give up."

Something inside Colt snapped and he strode to the kitchen where his phone was on the charger. He tried to make a call but it went unanswered. Unsurprising, really. Thoughtfully, he tapped his fingertips on the counter. What was the time? There would be hardly anyone on the roads. He went to the door and grabbed his coat off the rack and his car keys out of the bowl. Nana heard the
jingle and called out to him worriedly.

"Just popping out, Nana," he assured her. "I'll be back for dinner, promise."

"It's not work, is it?" Nana's dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. He shook his head quickly.

"Absolutely not. A work friend," he amended when she kept glaring at him. "Got no family – thought I should just drop in for a bit and offer them some company."

Nana's face cleared. "Oh, that's very kind of you, darling," she said, while Luci wiggled her eyebrows and Toni noted, "Them. How ambiguous."

He left them to their gossip and went out to the drive to start his car. Jesus, it was cold. He blew on his hands in the car while he waited for the engine to warm up. He'd never been to Agent Scully's place before but he'd read her address in her personnel file and he had a good memory for numbers. As he'd guessed, there was nearly nobody out driving, and he made good time, even taking into account his cautiousness with the icy roads. He parked the Corvette outside and looked up at the building his boss lived in. Classic, understated architecture with low-maintenance window sill gardens that probably looked charming when they weren't dead and brown with winter.

Exactly the sort of place he expected to find Dana Scully in. He wondered if she'd even be home.

Colt got out into the spiteful cold and crossed the street. There was no one around, except a bearded man in a coat further down the road, standing around like he was waiting for someone. Wait inside like a normal sane person, Colt thought irritably at the stranger, already reflecting that it was what he should have done himself. His partner was unlikely to be home. It was Christmas Day. She'd be out… somewhere. With… someone? He'd invented the family-free story for Nana's benefit but realised now that he had no idea whether Agent Scully had any family. She never mentioned any. She never mentioned anyone. Kids? Partner? No husband, she didn't wear a ring. Divorced, maybe?

And even if she was home, he was probably the last person she wanted to see right now. Ask for another mentor.

He knocked hard on the door and stood back, blowing clouds of condensation with each breath. Movement caught his eye; he turned to look and saw the bearded man walking purposefully in the opposite direction. Going home to get warm, if he had any sense.

The door opened suddenly and Agent Scully was standing there, looking breathless and expectant. Her expression fell in surprise when she saw who was on her doorstep.

"Colt?"

She was dressed nice, less stiffly than she did for work. Probably she was entertaining. It was Christmas Day, after all. Colt began to question the wisdom of coming over here.

"Yeah, I didn't transfer yet," he said thoughtlessly, an unnecessary jibe. He stopped himself. "Am I interrupting?" he asked, stupidly, gesturing vaguely into the house where her extended family was probably waiting for her. "I didn't even think. I can come back."

Agent Scully stared at him, and then looked up and down the street. Her attention locked onto the departing man with the beard and coat. She watched him as he disappeared around a corner. She stepped out of her house, looking for an instant like she intended to give chase, but then maybe the cold outside air struck her or something because she seemed to wake up to herself. She dropped her gaze and shook her head.
"Uh... no. No," she said again, trying to bring her attention back to her partner. She looked up at him briefly, and then lowered her eyes again, looking straight ahead vacantly. "No, it's fine. What are you doing here?"

She was odd, he'd known that since he met her, but this was distinctly unusual behaviour.

"I just wanted to talk to you. But if you've got people over..."

"There's no one here but me and half a bottle of wine," she said bluntly. She stood back. "Do you want to come in? It's freezing out here." Colt wasn't sure he wanted to have this conversation anymore – he'd been raised battle-ready for dealing with powerful women but Dana Scully was something else entirely – but he was here now so he reluctantly accepted the offer. She frowned as he stepped past her and she closed the door with him inside. He shrugged off his coat and she asked, "Is that... an octopus sweater?"

All of her oddness was easy to forget when reminded of the way she saw the world from the same slightly off-kilter point of view that Colt did, and he turned to her gratefully.

"Thank you. That's what I thought. They're meant to be reindeer."

"Hmm." Scully didn't sound convinced. She reached for his coat and gestured for him to go ahead into the house while she hung it up. Colt took of his shoes and left them beside the door before going any further. Nana would die if she thought he'd traipsed his dirty boots through a lady's home.

Agent Scully was an odd one, for sure, but her house was not. Which made it odd. Everything was tidy, pristine, impersonal. No quirks. No collection of porcelain bulldogs, no mismatched photo frames on the mantelpiece, no ugly rug in front of the fire. The books in the bookshelf looked brand new, unread, and were just medical textbooks. No photo albums. No beloved classics with creased spines.

This was only one room, admittedly, but this was the living room, the heart of the house, and there was no heart here at all. If this place was burning down, Colt couldn't see a single thing that looked significant enough that Agent Scully would grab it on her way out.

Maybe that was the point.

He walked further into the room, unnerved, and stopped, realising he was wrong. The Ice Queen's palace did have a heart. On the window seat of the bay window she'd erected a tiny plastic Christmas tree and decorated it with ten or twenty mismatched baubles. Most of them looked like they were for children, but one, a blown glass ball, looked expensive, designer. Clearly they had meaning and value to her. They were the only personal items she had on display and here they were, arranged in view of the open window overlooking the street. Proof for everyone to see. The place had a heart and so did she. It gave him courage. He turned to face her.

"I'm sorry I was rude to you yesterday," she surprised him by stating. She stood in the doorway, arms folded loosely. On most people that stance looked defensive but on her it looked vulnerable. "It was inappropriate of me. And..." She hesitated. "And if I gave you the impression that I'm unhappy with having you in my department, or as my partner, I want you to know that's incorrect."

It was not the conversation he thought they'd be having. Colt blinked, thinking on her bitter tone yesterday. Ask for a new mentor. Take a transfer. Get as far away from me as you can.

The words came unbidden.
"I asked for you," he said before he could stop himself. She raised an eyebrow questioningly and he kept going, charging blindly through unchartered territory. He didn't know how she would take this but there was nothing else for it. "Not you, per se, but I asked for a challenge and you're what I got."

"A challenge?" Agent Scully repeated. Her expression and tone of voice didn't indicate whether she was offended or uplifted by this description.

"Tan didn't want me in his department," Colt admitted, treading carefully. There were elements to this story, to his story, that he didn't want to share with her. It had come as an unwelcome shock to know she'd read his personnel file, but it shouldn't have surprised him. She was very thorough, and at least a little bit distrustful. He'd reread it when he got home from Boston and been glad to see that his time in Afghanistan was remarkably undetailed and that the other facts he wanted to keep to himself were not made explicit in the file. "After my application interview he caught me outside and told me so. I said, give me a chance to prove I deserve to be here. Give me a senior agent to shadow that I can't possibly impress, the toughest, and you'll see. Assistant Director Skinner overheard. He said, 'Give him to Scully. She'll sort him out'."

She raised both eyebrows incredulously. "Did he now?"

"So I was scared of you, when I first met you," Colt confessed. "Toughest agent in Counterterrorism? I thought I was in for it."

"I think Tan and Skinner may have misrepresented me slightly," Agent Scully said wryly, the beginning of a smile at the corner of her mouth. Colt shook his head.

"No. Well, yeah, they made you out to be a mega-bitch and you're not, of course," he corrected himself hastily, "but I mean, I said to give me a challenge and they gave me you. You didn't want a partner. You definitely didn't want a new recruit to babysit. You don't trust anyone."

The almost-smile was gone. She was quiet. Colt kept going, knowing he'd overstepped a line and there was no way to go now except onwards and deeper.

"You aren't afraid of anything. You quite happily go on missions by yourself without any back-up even though it's against procedure; I don't think you trust anyone enough to watch your back. You feel safer by yourself because you know you can count on yourself." This was such an inappropriate way to address his senior agent and her face gave nothing away. Was she mentally writing up a report about what could easily be taken as a personal harassment charge? Colt came to the end of his argument, sensing defeat but remembering what he'd told his six-year-old cousin and resigning himself to at least seeing out his effort. "You were unimpressible. You were never going to let me off that desk – Tan knew it and that's why he put me there. But you took me to Boston. You didn't need me there. You could have done that requisition yourself. But you took me anyway and you gave me the combination to your briefcase and let me read all those files I know you didn't want me to read. So..." It sounded lame in his head but the crux of his argument had arrived, and there was nothing else left to say. "I have to believe... it's because you decided to trust me, and that you wanted me on-board with all this crazy shit you've found yourself in."

Agent Scully was silent for a very long time, and her silence weighed heavily in the spotless, impersonal living room. She looked like she had a lot going on in her head. Colt kept his breaths very shallow and felt tension in all of his muscles, like he was ready to spring away and run for his life at a moment's notice. He'd never seen her blow up before. He was quite sure it wasn't her style, but was just as sure that she could be vicious and volatile if he rubbed her the wrong way. Which, he knew, he just had.
Scully dropped her arms. "Do you want coffee? Tea?"

Colt stared at her. That whole stupid spiel – had that gone completely over her head? She was already turning away. He felt anger stirring inside him. "I don't want tea and coffee, ma'am! I want to know what we're going to do about Johannsson and the Grays and the Engels! Alien fucking viruses, Dana!" He followed her, furious with being flicked off like that. She'd been unimpressible, yes, but only ever respectful, so for her to turn away and shirk his openness was hurtful. "I want to believe you're as tough as I thought you were and that you won't let assholes like Tan and Hofstetter and Lansdowne stop you from doing what you know is right. I want to believe..."

He'd followed her into her dining room and trailed off when she stopped at the table and, with one hand, flicked open her briefcase. With the other she neatly picked up her service weapon from where she'd left it lying in the centre of the table. She didn't aim it at him, just let it hang loosely at her side, but warning bells went off in Colt's brain and he slowly raised his hands.

"I'll get out, if that's what you want."

"What you said before," Agent Scully said bluntly, turning back to him. The gun she held ensured she owned the power in this discussion, and Colt wasn't going to argue with her. "About getting on-board with the crazy shit. Did you mean it?"

"This notwithstanding? Yeah. I'm not prepared to give up on this case, whatever Tan and his buddies want. Whatever they threatened you with. I know they got to you," he added when her gaze sharpened. "Whatever they said, whatever they've done in the past... They can only do it if they know you're still investigating. What if they didn't know? What if we were quiet about it?"

Scully looked down into her briefcase, thumbing through some of the documents in there. She seemed to be thinking very hard. Colt had known the stakes were high and appreciated that she knew a lot more about it than he did, even respected that her outburst yesterday could not be unfounded, but the fact that she was spending Christmas Day sitting at her dining table with a loaded gun in front of her was very disturbing. Who had she expected to appear when he'd knocked?

What had they taken from her before, and what was she protecting now?

"Even if you were right," she said finally, still not looking at him, "and I did want to trust you, how do I know I can? You're a soldier, ex-military. Your file's been scrubbed of anything specific enough about your time abroad to get a clear idea of who you really are-"

"So has yours," Colt countered. "Years 1990-1992: medical instructor at the Academy. Years 1992-2002: general assignment, save a few months in the middle there on Domestic Terrorism. General assignment? You? They conscripted a doctor for the Academy, with your laundry list of qualifications no less, and then moved her onto general assignment? Specifics not mentioned. Departments not identified. Partners and teammates not recorded."

"So you're suspicious of me and I'm suspicious of you," Agent Scully commented. "If we don't trust each other, how are we supposed to work together on something like this, Colt?"

He hesitated. It was a remark he hadn't expected.

"Your file's scrubbed out but I still trust you," he said finally. "And you must trust me, or you'd never have let me in today, or taken me with you to Berkshire County to collect Johannsson. You would never have given me the combination to your briefcase." He eyed the open the briefcase on the table, something occurring to him. "You just opened that without even looking. Ten-thirteen –
is that a birthday?" He lifted his gaze back to her to find hers challenging and cold. He knew he shouldn't ask but the laughter and voices of his cousins chasing each other through Nana's house with nerf guns invaded his mind for a moment, and he said, quietly, "You said they can take things I don't even know I have. Did you mean people?"

Agent Scully shifted her handgun in her palm, pensive. She looked at him for a long time. Eventually she said, "It would appear that you and I both have pasts we'd rather not discuss. Should we leave it at that?"

Colt was both surprised and relieved. She'd picked up on the unelaborated nature of his file long before he'd expected and she'd never said a thing, never adapted her interactions with him to indicate she thought anything different. And he wasn't sure he wanted an answer to his last question. He nodded. "Alright. That works for me."

"Alright," she agreed. She leaned forward onto the back of a chair and regarded him. "Let's say I want to trust you. Let's say I want to break all the rules I've been living by and investigate this conspiracy in secret with you despite all the good reasons not to. How do I know you're not working for someone? How do I know," she reiterated, "that you aren't going to feed everything I say back to Tan or Hofstetter or somebody you're still connected to back in the military? How do I know you aren't going to put a knife in my back, Colt?"

Colt swallowed, glad now that his file was so bare. Better she get suspicious about a too-light personnel file than freak out reading the truth. She wouldn't understand.

"You don't," he admitted finally. "You're just going to have to trust me."

There was another uncomfortable, unreadable silence. "Coffee? Tea?"

Seriously? "What for?" he demanded as she reached into the briefcase. "No, I don't want any godforsaken tea."

"Something to drink while we go over the case," she said, tossing the files and documents across the table roughly and dropping the gun to the tabletop with a thud. Her gaze was firm, challenging. "I'm making you tea. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt because it's Christmas, but if you fuck me on this, Colt, remember I know exactly which ingestible toxins do and do not show up on tox screens."

She strode into her kitchen. Colt followed meekly, surprised by his narrow, hard-earned, tentative win.

"Do you have hot chocolate?"
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. Or Batman. Always reference yourself, unless you can reference Batman; then, always reference Batman.

Author's Notes: Sorry for that delay. I'm not normally this frazzled but the school year has started back up and I've got my wedding in two weeks, which is making for very little fanfiction time. Still, I persevere! Thanks to everyone following, but especially to Emeinthetardis and soodohnimh for the specific feedback. I hugely appreciate you taking the time to make me a better writer for your entertainment :) I am glad that Colt is well-received. Yes, we'll hear from him a fair bit, especially in scenes where, for the sake of intrigue, Scully or Mulder's perspectives need to be silenced, but obviously this is X-Files and X-Files is about Mulder and Scully, so there's no risk of him stealing the limelight.

Tonight I'm listening to A Thousand Years by Christina Perri. I tend to think of Mulder as a romantic.

The homeless celebrate Christmas, too. Did you know that? This was Mulder's third Christmas with the homeless of Washington DC who opted against overcrowded soup kitchens and community centres and churches and gathered instead on a public outdoor basketball court about seven blocks away from Scully's place. Fifteen or sixteen of them came each year, locals, mostly men but a couple of women, too. They were hospitable, kind, a mass of thick threadbare clothing and shaggy hair and yellow smiles and dirty short fingernails on scabbed hands that waved him over in welcome. They had nothing to give but what they lacked in material and wealth they made up for in spirit and togetherness, and arms strong and weak opened to allow Mulder closer to the barrel they used as a fireplace. Normally cops would be crawling all over this sort of public gathering and minor arson, but today was Christmas, and they weren't doing anyone any harm; a patrol car drifted slowly by and kept going, unwilling to send the cold and hungry away to be alone on today of all days. Tomorrow, things would go back to normal, but for today, the Christmas spirit touched all souls.

"Get closer, friend," a skinny little man with no teeth and deep lines in his face said with concern, edging away and gesturing Mulder onward. "Go ahead; my hands are warm enough, I've been here for hours."

It was an outright lie. Mulder could see the old man's hands shaking, arthritic joints quivering. But the desire to feel Christmassy, to be generous and caring, overruled the man's discomfort. He had survived many bitter winters out here, and he was toughened, hardened. The cold didn't affect him like it would the more fortunate.

Still.

"Alright, thanks, just hold these for me, would you?" Mulder said, taking his hands out of his pockets and tugging his gloves off. He offered them, forced them into the old man's hands when he tried to decline. "I insist." He shrugged his backpack off and sat it on the ground while the other looked hungrily at the gloves he now held.
"Are you quite sure?" the skinny man asked nervously. Mulder wondered about the sort of treatment he'd experienced in the past. He looked unwilling to accept the generosity, perhaps expecting to have it retracted.

"It's Christmas. Of course I'm sure. Who do I give these to?" He lifted trays of sausages, plastic wrapped tight, from his bag. It was so cold out, they hadn't even needed refrigeration since he bought them yesterday. An appreciative murmur rumbled through the group and hands reached out to take the offering, to peel the plastic back, to pat Mulder's shoulder, to shake his hand, to pull him to his feet and to hug him. The skinny man tugged his new gloves on excitedly and shook Mulder's hand with both of his, now warm and steady.

"Are you from the church?" he asked, while other people thanked Mulder or looked around for sticks to use to spike through the sausages. Around them, a democratic system of organisation quickly emerged for deciding which half of the gathering would cook their sausages over the fire first. Mulder shook his head.

"No, I'm not religious. I believe in pretty much everything else, though," he confessed, twisting his scarf around his neck once more as a frigid breeze picked up the ends of his hair and brushed the back of his neck.

"Everything else?"


Nobody laughed.

"Saw a zombie myself," a heavily scarred man with an eye missing commented gruffly while sausages and sticks were divvied up. "Comes around every now and then. He believes in aliens, too."

A couple of people nodded or murmured agreement to that, and apparently that was the end of it. No judgement. Skinny smiled. Nope, not a single tooth in sight.

"There are more important things to worry about than what a man believes in," he said intuitively.

A woman around Mulder's age, who seemed to speak little English when he tried to engage her in polite conversation, handed him a spiked sausage, and he joined them for an early Christmas dinner. It wasn't the same as having a family, but it was a pleasant second. Fulfilling the needs of other people, of bringing happiness and warmth and laughter to a group of people, sharing a space, sharing a meal, without judgement, without the barriers imposed by society... wasn't that family anyway? Skinny and Spanish and Scarface and all the others who'd joined them for Christmas took turns cooking and eating their meal. Happy conversation flowed around juicy mouthfuls and loud laughter punctuated the grey afternoon. Mulder felt the dismal mood he'd arrived in dissipate into the pleasant atmosphere he'd brought to this basketball court, to this little ragtag family of circumstance. It felt good to be able to give someone what they needed.

Like he hadn't been able to do for Scully. Didn't they say insanity was doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome? Then what did they call it when you changed your method for no good reason and expected the same outcome as before?

Scully's probationary agent, who was presumably saner than Mulder – and he wasn't about to contest that presumption – was with her now, working the same angle Mulder would have once taken with her. Pushing the envelope. He hadn't heard anything that was said but he'd seen the guy
pull up in his very cool classic car and get out with a look of determination Mulder recognised from his own repertoire. Agent Dawson's Creek wasn't visiting to exchange presents; he had the look of someone ready for a confrontation. Mulder hadn't stuck around to see how she received it but he felt smug all the same. That's what she got for bringing someone else on board; exactly what she needed – a partner more determined to stick out the case than she was and unwilling to let her back out.

Good. This kid would be good for her. Maybe he could talk her around.

Not that it was the child agent's job, not really, Mulder reflected guiltily. There was a time when he would have fought it out with her himself, but those passionate encounters had simmered down now to antagonistic biting comments, as much his fault as hers. She wouldn't entertain even his most playful attempt at connecting with her, instead treating him with the profoundest cold she could muster. She shot down his every lead, suggestion or invitation and avoided working with him. Nothing in her behaviour encouraged asking twice. He picked his moments.

But it was exactly as he'd realised the other night. Scully wanted him to chase her, something he'd stopped doing.

He knew why he'd stopped trying, he reflected as he ate, as laughter erupted over Scarface's story. Two reasons, really. He'd stopped because she'd told him to, right from the day she'd left. Don't try to call me. Please don't come asking me to change my mind – this is it, Mulder, I'm done. We're done.

He'd assumed she meant it.

He knew she did. So it was respectful to keep a distance. Mostly. Except when he forgot to and gave in to the temptation to reel her back in, and he caught himself shamelessly hitting on her and checking her out and clenching his hands into fists so he didn't touch her. Which only barely counted as leaving her alone.

He bit the last piece of meat off and threw the stick into the fire as kindling. Of course she meant it. She always meant what she said. But he knew her better than anyone. He knew that persistence with her always paid off. Hadn't he roped her into dozens of cases she did not want to take on, simply by asking twice, thrice, by negotiating, bribing, flirting, begging, tempting, demanding she look again? It was worth it then to ensure he had her expertise and competence at his back; what had changed to scare him off pushing the issue with their relationship?

Well – because he was terrified of her. Of being with her. She'd walked away once and nothing had ever cut like that had. Did she even know how much? He doubted it – the only way to handle the total dissolution of his life, of his sense of self-worth, was to shelve it. Not feel. Smile through it. The prospect of inviting her to do it again… How could he do that?

How could he not?

What if he made all the right promises, prioritised her above everything else, offered her everything he had and all that he was, won her over… and he failed her again and burned that bridge once and for all?

Because that was the other reason he'd fallen into this pattern of skimming close and pulling away as soon as he realised he was making progress. He was afraid it would work. He was scared that if he chased her he'd catch up too soon, overtake her and have to keep running to finish his other race, his race to the truth, and when he doubled back to find her she'd be gone. Gone for good.
He was afraid, *petrified*, of sabotaging whatever was left.

"I'll only get one chance," Mulder explained to Skinny and Scarface when they asked why he'd joined them for yet another Christmas. "My devotion to my work drove her away and I can't ask her to take me back while I'm still tied to it. It's going to explode back into my life and consume everything, like it always does. She won't put up with that again. If I promise her everything now and can't deliver I'll lose her forever. I need to *finish* it, prove to her and everyone else that I haven't been wasting my time, that this is worthwhile and important. And then," he said, tucking his freezing fingers under his arms for warmth, "I can go back to her and tell her it's *done*, and I can promise to change and I can mean it."

"What are you doing in the meantime?" Skinny asked, stamping his feet to bring numb toes back to life. Mulder shrugged, looking at his own shoes, a bit embarrassed.

"Giving her space. Arguing. Trying to be friends." Confusing things, maybe? He heard a distant sound and looked up as a plane went over, far ahead of its lagging, droning noise. The roar of the jets had it right – follow at a safe distance without losing sight of its partner and without making any attempt to catch up until the destination was in sight and they both slowed down and landed together on the same foreign landing strip. Obscure metaphors R us. "I think she thinks I'm a jerk, actually."

"You can't walk away from your job?" Scarface asked, frowning against the tender emotions that crossed his face. "This woman's the love of your life."

Mulder smiled, a bit painfully. "Yeah, she is; and I've tried. This work… It's important. People's lives are on the line. Truths I've sought for my *whole life* are inches from my reach. When I'm close I think about nothing else and I know it's going to change the world when I'm done. And I'm close now. I can't in good conscience walk away. Sometimes I wish I could." The winter air was creeping through gaps in his scarf, so he unravelled it to redress it. "It would make things much simpler if I could."

"You're keeping her at a distance because you can't commit until you've fulfilled this other goal," Skinny summarised. "Does she know that's why?"

Good question. "I like to tell myself she knows."

"How do you know she'll still be waiting when you come back for her?"

"I don't," Mulder admitted, pulling the scarf away. Skinny nodded at Mulder's throat. "You have faith," he said knowingly. "I thought you said you didn't believe in God."

Tentatively, Mulder touched the pendant he'd exposed by removing the scarf. It was warm from sitting against his skin, warm like it was when she gave it to him. Warm like she was in every memory he had of her. Warm hands dressing the gunshot wound they'd inflicted, warm lips on his forehead, warm arms wrapped tight around him in comfort, warm body against his…

He wanted her back. He wanted to clip her necklace around her neck and tell her he didn't need it anymore because he was back to stay. If any higher power existed, it must know how badly he wanted this. But God wasn't going to solve his problems, and he couldn't go back to her with his problems still heavy on his shoulders knowing they would soon drag him away from her again.

*This is it, Mulder, I'm done. We're done.*

When the shock wore off from hearing that, he'd only had one stupid thing to ask. *Are you still* with
me? And he'd known straightaway that it was a dumb question to ask, ambiguous without elaboration, but she'd understood because she was Scully and not anyone less, pity and longing and pain in her eyes, and she'd stepped away from the suitcase standing at the door and put the necklace, still warm, in his hand. Would she still be with him? Would she still have his back when he finally put a toe over the wrong line and the military strung him up on false charges again? Would she tell the truth 'til her dying breath and stand by their work and would she always be on his side? Like you wouldn't believe.

"I don't," he said again, "but I believe in her."

Skinny smiled, Scarface made a gruff throat-clearing noise and nodded, and Spanish said, shyly, "You tell."

"You should tell her," Skinny agreed seriously. "It's Christmas, friend. If you don't have to be here with losers like us-"

A displeased murmur went through the group, totally unconnected to Skinny's dialogue, and a few people turned firmly to the fire, drawing close together like they were walling someone out. Totally unlike them. Scarface reached past Skinny, interrupting, and grabbed Mulder's arm to turn him also inward to face the barrel.

"It's the zombie," he told him in a low voice, and Mulder saw that the people around him were tense and frowny with suspiciousness. He craned his neck in interest, trying to see past them. Their backs were turned to the street, where a young man in an oversized orange puffer jacket was strolling along, casting wistful looks their way. His hair was wiry and long, distinctively white blonde, mostly secured in an amateur ponytail. He glanced hurriedly away when Mulder caught his gaze.

"Good skin for a zombie," he commented, watching the stranger walk away. Scarface didn't appreciate the joke.


Spanish spat on the ground in disgust and glared at the young stranger's retreating back.

"What do you mean, you watched him die?" Mulder asked curiously. Scarface's expression was stormy, reflective of those around him. His street family despised the alleged zombie just as much as he did.

"In the seventies I lived for a while in the basement of a bar with a few other guys. Guy called Reece was one of them. Messed up childhood, delusional, but very kind. Sweet, even. I felt sorry for him," Scarface admitted, digging his toe into a crack in the asphalt of the court. "Spouting about aliens and the like. No one else liked him much. Got himself shot." He pointed at his own sternum. "Whole round."

"A whole round?" Mulder repeated, and his companion nodded.

"Mafia-type boys took him out. Left him in the alley. Checked him myself – Swiss cheese, just a damn mess. There ain't no coming back from that." Scarface glaringly pointed after the stranger in the puffer jacket. "Yet there he is."

Mulder thoroughly enjoyed the narrative but Scully's cool, logical voice prompted him to remind those listening, "But that guy can't be older than thirty. You said this happened in the seventies?"
"Exactly. So how does he look so young, hmm?"

Scully again. "Can't it be a different guy? A lookalike?"

"No. It's him."

"How can you be sure?"

"I remember him."

"But after so long?" Mulder pressed, mentally shrugging Scully's voice away. He knew, he knew – it was ridiculous, wholly unlikely, physically impossible, all the usual Scully catchphrases. Scarface folded his arms defensively and frowned heavy brows over his one remaining eye.

"Reece was my lover," he said firmly. "I remember him very well."

Oh. Mulder cleared his throat apologetically. Scarface's missing eye and gnarled hands and matted hair demonstrated the hard life he'd lived in forty-plus years on the streets, but none of it alluded to the trauma of watching his lover take a round of bullets right in front of him.

"When did you start seeing him again?" he asked finally. Scarface looked suspiciously surprised with Mulder's change of tune.

"About three, four years ago. Started seeing him around."

"Have you spoken to him?"

One eye widened with incredulity. "He's a zombie. That's not Reece anymore."

"You don't know that for sure." Mulder pointed in the direction the young man had gone. "Why do you think he walks past this way? Could he be trying to work up the courage to talk to you?"

"I don't want to talk to him," Scarface said, adamant. His frown was the deepest, most uncomfortable expression Mulder had seen in a long time.

"You have your own relationship to sort out before you can play Cupid here," Skinny reminded him, but Mulder wasn't listening. He pressed on with Scarface's story.

"You said he used to talk about aliens. Do you remember anything specific?"

"Some. Said they took him in '73 and when he came back he tried to get back to his real family but they were dead, so he was hiding… Where are you going?" the scarred storyteller demanded when Mulder hitched his backpack onto his other shoulder and started off after the orange puffer jacket.

"Forget the zombie," Skinny called disapprovingly after him. "What about the girl?"

Mulder prided himself on recognising his immediate thought of She can wait as hugely uncool and withholding it from open speech as he waved goodbye to the crowd around the fire and sped up his pace to a jog. Taken by aliens in 1973? Returned? Killed… but now alive? The implications of the disjointed thoughts that tumbled through his head were incredible, massive, earth-shattering.

His shoes pounded the icy pavement. He took a corner too fast and nearly slid over, but caught a street sign pole and swung himself back on-course and carried on down the next street. No orange. No one around. He glanced swiftly down each alleyway he passed. Nothing. Maybe he lived in one of these buildings? Maybe he'd gone in through one of these doors…
One glance down an alley wasn't fast enough and strong hands caught his scarf roughly and yanked. Mulder's feet skidded on the sidewalk as he tried to pull up and as the supposed zombie dragged him off the main street and into the shadow of the two buildings. The younger man shoved him hard into the brick of the exterior wall, and when one hand fell away from his neck it was to curl it into a fist and drive it into his stomach.

"Who the fuck are you and why are you following me?" the other man hissed while Mulder doubled over in unexpected pain. The blonde was surprisingly strong and held the older, heavier man still with just one hand on his neck, twisted into the scarf.

"He said you were sweet," Mulder commented, winded, trying to straighten. "I'm inclined to disagree. Reece."

The blonde had a narrow face, with very white skin and eyebrows so thin and pale they looked like frost had settled on his brow. Flustered, uncomfortable emotions crossed that face now.

"So he remembers my name?" he demanded when he got control of those emotions, and he flippantly pretended they didn't matter. Mulder knew the look. He gave it and he got it. "He's nothing now. Gone soft in the head. I don't give a shit about him."

Denial. "I see we're neighbours," Mulder mentioned, unsettling Reece with the apparent redirect. "I have a summer residence there."

"Who the fuck are you?" Reece asked again, still angry. Mulder pushed on his arm, trying to dislodge him, but he was remarkably strong for someone so thin and wiry.

"Your friend said you were killed in the 1970s."

"He's not my friend," Reece sneered, "and I know what he's said, because he's told all his homeless fucking buddies and they graffiti my building with 'zombie' and spit when I walk past."

"He said you were taken by extra-terrestrials in 1973 and then returned."

Reece scoffed and shoved away from Mulder, essentially letting him go. Neither made any move. Mulder saw that the other had no intention of being open with him without an invitation, and he was more than happy to provide one. He'd been waiting for this for a very long time.

"November 27," Mulder pushed, and Reece's expression spasmed again. "They took you for experiments. They brought you back but there were more tests-"

"No, you fucking stop right there," Reece ordered, stepping forward again and grabbing his shoulders before he could get away. Iron-strong grasps held Mulder in place and drove his upper body down, and, dizzyingly, his head struck the knee intended for it. He was slammed back into the wall and the next fist looked like it was coming for his face. It would be lights out.

"The government knows about it," he said, taking a chance, and the fist froze. "They covered it up. You weren't the only one they took that night. There were others. Men, women, children… a little girl called Samantha. My sister." He swallowed, hoping Reece could see the truth in his eyes, that he believed. "They took her to keep my father in line, but ultimately they killed him. Whose collateral were you?"

Reece stared at him for a long time.

"My father, too," he said finally. "He worked on the Project." He slowly released Mulder, looking over him guardedly. Fist still raised and ready. "Who are you?"
"I'm Fox Mulder." And he had a million questions, so he made himself start with one at a time. 
"You were dead. How are you alive?"

"Fox Mulder?" Reece repeated, disbelieving. "Not the?"

"Wouldn't be too many guys getting around with a name as unfortunate as mine, I'm sure."

"So you really do know," he said, expression shifting just slightly, accepting the possibility of 
being believed. The fist dropped loosely. "You know what those fuckers in their top-secret military 
opifications and untouchable senate positions are really doing. You know they're playing with 
people's lives, covering up the existence of alien life because it'd be inconvenient if we all knew 
but laying our whole planet at their feet to buy themselves time to save their own skins. Yeah," he 
said now, as if only just hearing the question, "they came after me in 1978 and emptied a gun into 
me. Because I had become a threat. Because I knew and I was going to make them pay. And then, I 
wake up." He waved a hand, gesturing at his own body, whole and healthy. "It's October 2011 and 
I've got instructions burned into my brain by crazy alien fuck's."

"Instructions for what?" Not the question Mulder had planned to follow up with, but the most 
pertinent.

"For 2012," Reece answered, as though this were obvious. "For colonisation."

Mulder's stomach turned over. "It happened, didn't it? I was watching, I was waiting for it, but… I 
saw nothing."

And then Scully left, and it just felt all the more crushing.

"There was nothing to see. But they're here. It happened." Reece regarded Mulder with 
increasingly less suspicion, but still obviously wavered on how much to share. "You're going to out 
them. That's what you're trying to do. That's what you're all about, isn't it? I've heard about you. I 
think…" He started to look uneasy. "I don't imagine they like you very much. Are they tailing you? 
As soon as I got back – this time – I got the fuck out of there and so far they haven't tracked me 
down, but sometimes I see them. The Hosts, the pledges. On TV mostly."

"Them? You could identify them?"

"They look like us. They are among us." Reece cocked his head to the side. "I didn't think you 
worked for the FBI anymore, Mr Mulder. Are you building a case against them?" He smirked 
without humour. "You think you're going to bring them to justice?"

"Not me, but I know someone who might be convinced to take something like this as high as it 
goes, if she knew we had the evidence to prove it beyond any doubt."

"You're dreaming," Reece claimed flatly. "There's no justice for these people, conspiring with 
aliens to experiment on innocent people. And you're never going to catch the aliens. They're too 
well-positioned. The instructions ensured it."

"The instructions you woke up with?" Mulder confirmed, and Reece nodded. "What were they?"

"Paving the way." A noise in the main street caught Reece's attention, and though nothing and no 
one presented, he became jumpy, distracted. "It's great to meet a fellow traveller but I shouldn't be 
talking to you. They could be watching you."

"I always assume they are." The burning questions rose to his lips, finally. "Are there more of you? 
Abductees from 1973, revived?"
"I need to go," Reece muttered, becoming more agitated by the second. He started to back away. "I'm sorry for the beat-down. I... sorry. Tell Ross I said hi."

"I can help you," Mulder insisted, trying to follow. "We can take them on together. I just need to know--"

"Maybe some other time," Reece said distractedly, turning and speeding up. "I'm sorry. Good luck, hey?"

Mulder tried to call him back but Reece hurried away without a backward glance. He didn't bother giving chase this time. He watched him go and swore, rubbing his bruised stomach tenderly and kicking at the brick wall behind him. So close! The closest he'd come to understanding what he was doing with his life had just run away in apparent fear for his own safety, and who knew if Mulder would be able to find him again?

The frustration slowly caved in on itself and the light of confirmation shone around the edges. There was nothing to see. But they're here. It happened. It happened. Reece was there, he was part of it, it happened. The fear Mulder had lived with for three years lifted a little and he drew a breath that came a bit easier than the one before it. It happened. He wasn't wrong.

He hadn't demolished his whole life for nothing. It happened. There was only one person he wanted to tell and he found his feet already moving, already taking him there. With effort he redirected and returned to the basketball court. Leave her alone.

Reece had been taken the same night as Samantha, the same night as Cassandra Spender and all the other sacrificial lambs of the Project, and like Samantha, he'd bolted for the hills after his return had proven to be nothing more than a fresh new hell of false security and continued experimentation. Like Samantha, they'd found him, and he'd died. Now he was alive, brought back by some unknown power for some malignant purpose he wanted nothing to do with, and he was hiding once again.

Was it too much to ask whether this, also, was like Samantha?

A tiny sparkle of dare-not-hope danced in the peripherals of his thoughts. Because yes, it was too much to ask. It couldn't be. It wouldn't be. It always turned out not to be.

...But maybe?

There was nothing to see. But they're here. It happened. They were here, already here, already positioned in society. Reece had said so. Sometimes he saw them on TV. On TV. They were prominent, well-placed. Integrated into the community. Reece had awoken from more than thirty years dead with instructions programmed into his brain to help 'pave the way' for alien colonisation. What precisely did that entail? The instructions had ensured that aliens hidden in our society would go unnoticed or unquestioned.

It was happening. It had happened, as Mulder had expected for a decade of lead-up, and the confirmation was almost the best Christmas gift he could imagine having been given. He hadn't wasted all this time. He hadn't destroyed things with Scully for nothing – he was right, all they'd sacrificed and forgone and lost and mourned was justified and the threat was real which meant it could be faced and overcome and moved past. Which meant he really could finish this. Which meant he could demand her back and mean it when he promised it was done with.

Because love could wait, as he'd almost callously called back to Skinny as he ran after someone
else's nightmare, but it shouldn't have to, and it wouldn't wait forever.

"Reece says hi," he said to Scarface when he returned to the barrel. Ross, whose name he hadn't known before then, went stormy again and turned impatiently back to the fire in the growing darkness of impending evening. He glared into the fire with his one remaining eye and warmed dirty, gnarled hands thickened with scar tissue over the flames. He'd lived a hard life. Mulder didn't need to be a profiler to see that this was a damaged human being. What held him back from accepting that his lost love was back from the dead? What about that concept made him so angry that he'd turn others against Reece in spite? He tried to imagine being in the same position – of seeing your lover returned, young and beautiful and exactly as you remembered, while you yourself have aged and grown recognizably, scarred by the trials of life and heartaches your love wasn't there to nurse you through… He couldn't imagine turning his back on a lovely young Scully and refusing to share his fire with her, but he could appreciate the feelings of fear and insecurity that would surface. Judgement was terrifying, and Ross lived every day with it directed at him from any number of strangers and let this slide off his back like water off a duck, but the fear of being judged by Reece was strong enough to keep him from taking the risk in accepting that he was anything more than a shade. A zombie.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Skinny asked curiously, rubbing his new gloves together deliciously, casting worried looks up at Mulder like he expected him to retract the offer and take them back. Mulder shook his head and took his backpack off again. He unzipped it and removed a handful of loose pages.

"No, but I know where she is." He flicked one last time through the documents from Gerard Dixon, from Dusty Underscore Kevin, from Harvey Newman, from the CIA and the military. Originals they were not, so their danger outweighed their value. He dropped them unceremoniously into the barrel and watched them catch immediately, brightening the dying fire. He'd never liked fire but it was perfect for this purpose. It would devour the documents completely, ending the trail. For now. Until he got his hands on the real thing.

Then he'd have a whole storm of shit to navigate through. But that day was not this one. Today was Christmas.

"Not everyone gets a second chance," he reminded Ross over the fire as the incriminating documents burned. "Don't wait until it's gone." They both watched until the paper was, and then Mulder stepped away. "He said hi and he walks past here all the time trying to get your attention. Don't you wonder how much he'd love to say if you just said hi back?"

He got no answer but he didn't expect one, and with a final warm handshake from Skinny he was on his way. His own words echoed in his head, the irony biting him. No way would he allow Scully to go ignored and alone for three years if she'd died and been mysteriously returned, even if he worried what she thought of his aged and unattractive appearance. No way. Instead, he'd allowed her to go somewhat ignored and somewhat alone for three years and because she wasn't dead that seemed less heartless, and he'd allowed her to go ignored and alone in Boston when the better thing to do would be to do as he'd told Ross. Go to her. Drop the communication barrier. Be real with each other.

Just say hi.

It was a start, and the least of what she deserved, of what they deserved. It was Christmas, and hi couldn't hurt. Hi could lead to other things. Hi could open dialogue, real and honest conversation like they hadn't really had in years, where he could admit what she meant to him and not care what she thought about that and explain what he needed to do before he could act on it.
The Corvette drove past when Mulder was three streets from her house. Scully's new partner was heading home, presumably for dinner, though he was probably going to be late. He'd lasted a couple of hours, which was longer than the thirty seconds Mulder knew it took to piss Scully off and lose a very swift and sharp argument with her. What had they talked about? His impression, from the determined way the young agent had approached the house and what Scully had said the other day about his interest in an X-file, was that this was work-related, but he really had no proof of that but his gut feeling. For all he knew, the hotshot agent in the sweet ride could have just fucked her for two hours. Entirely possible. He should feel jealous.

Seven years of chaste courtship told him not to worry about it too much.

Her front light was on and he slowed to a stop. Was she expecting someone else? It shouldn't matter – he wasn't on the run, some criminal. He was allowed to visit her if he wanted to, just like she was allowed to consult with him on federal investigations if she chose to. But paranoia prevented him from being particularly public in his interactions with anyone, and especially with her. What about when he cracked this whole thing – Johannsson, 2012, colonisation, Harvey Newman's documents, the Clayton Building in Virginia, Dr Helens, Reece the zombie – and everything in his life spilt all over the place? When that happened he didn't want Scully anywhere nearby. He wanted her far enough away that none of his dirt splashed on her, not only for her own good but so that she was clean enough to be taken seriously if she ever needed to pull him out.

Like Gerard Dixon had implied, Scully's credibility was the glue that held his own reputation together, and as long as that reputation was helping him get his work done he needed her at a distance.

Even if it killed him to do it. Did it kill her that he did it? Did she hurt when he pushed her away? The terminated phone conversation two nights ago, the violence with which she hung up on him and the defeat in her posture as she pressed her mouth against her hand and stared with wet eyes at nothing, still played uncomfortably across his mind at regular intervals.

He found a patch of pavement directly opposite her living room window and sat down against the building she must look at when she gazed out her window. Which she didn't. But he gazed in through it. The curtains were left open and she had a tree this year. When did she get that? She didn't have it when she left him, and she hadn't put it up for either of the last two Christmases. It was too small and too distant from here to see whether she'd decorated it. No twinkly little lights on it, anyway, and the light from the interior of the house was dim. The living room was darkened but another nearby room had its lights on, letting the yellowy glow emanate softly in to backlight the little tree.

How long passed? He didn't count the minutes, the hours, but it got darker and colder and the wind picked up. He shivered and tightened the scarf around his neck. He considered his car, blocks away, and knew he'd be warmer inside that. But being warm was not the same as being on the same street as Scully on Christmas night, and without the parking permit Scully and her partner's cars sported he couldn't legally park here. He could do without the fine and the comment on his record. Evidence that he was here.

The lights started to go out. She was going to bed. The porch light went dark. Almost a minute later, it came back on. Had she stood there thinking about it, or walked away and then come back to it? And why turn it back on at all? It was late; who else was coming by at this time of night?

Well, Mulder was likely to find out, what with his vantage point and his frozen-solid ass and numb fingers shoved under his armpits. He stood with effort and paced to get the feeling back in his toes and calves. Most of the street was going dark by now, and people had almost finished departing
warm, yellow-lit houses after happy dinners and drinks, starting reluctant cold cars and driving off into the night. Other people were getting their fill of family and staying on, laughing well into the late hours, safe and cozy and welcome indoors.

Everybody was with their loved ones. He wondered whether Ross, Scarface, had ended up going looking for Reece.

Not that it was his business. He was just curious whether the other man was as chickenshit about confronting his own feelings as he was.

He'd done his hundredth lap of the street and all the windows were dark when his restraint gave and he finally crossed the road. He took the steps onto the porch and gazed up at the light she'd left on. No one else had arrived. Who was it for, then? Not daring to hope, he tested the doorknob.

Unlocked. Unlocked. Scully? Was she wasted? He couldn't remember her ever leaving a door unlocked and being drunk or high seemed as unlikely a cause as any other. He turned the handle and the door opened silently. He looked up and down the street. No one else about. He slipped inside where it was much warmer and closed the door behind him. Pressed the push-button-lock. Unlocked – seriously? Was she waiting to be robbed and murdered in her sleep?

Or… A horrible thought occurred to him. He hadn't seen her through any of the windows. Did this place have a back door? Could someone else have been here? Could someone have prevented her from locking up?

Just because it was her place didn't necessitate that she was safe.

He flew up the stairs, heart thudding, and dashed to the bedroom door. It was already ajar and it was dark inside. He slid through the gap and crept into the room, hardly breathing. A little bit of street light fell, greyish white, across the bed, defining a human shape under the covers, but without sound or movement how would he know whether she was sleeping or… not?

He dropped to a crouch as he got closer and leaned over the edge of the bed, trying to see, to hear. This near, he could tell that she was lying curled on her side under the thick, warm blankets, facing away from the window. If she was only sleeping he would hate to wake her, but the unimaginable terror of uncertainty forced his icy, half-numb fingers to hover over her face.

He waited. If she woke now, with an unexpected hand millimetres from covering her nose and mouth in the dark, she would flip. He'd have to hold her, soothe her, sit down on the edge of the bed and whisper that it was only him and let her touch his face to reassure herself as her heart raced in the come-down of fright, and he knew how much harder temptation was to fight off in the dark. He avoided touching her, sure that the feel of his cold fingertips would bring her around all too quickly, but after a few seconds he became aware of a soft, warm, rhythmic sensation against the skin of his hand.

Breath. Relief warmed him from fingers to toes.

Of course she would be fine. No one was after her, no one wanted to hurt her, not now that she was a conventional Bureau agent with no official ties to him and his work. There was no need to worry about her. Even if there was, she was extremely competent, perfectly able to take care of herself, and suspicious enough to intuit when she needed to be more aware of her situation. In working with her he'd always appreciated that; she didn't need him, never did, always stepped out into the field prepared for whatever was thrown at her and ready to back him up and unafraid to try to match him step for step. He'd never had to look back to see if she was there – she always was – and he'd never had to fall back in a chase to find her. If he had, it was because he wanted to, not because she'd
demanded it or expected it. Because he'd chosen to prioritise her over a chance at the truth.

Something he should have done more, maybe.

His eyes were adjusting to the dark of the room and he could make out the familiar contours of her face now. Thick lashes lying on pale skin, red hair splayed across a soft cheek, red lips parted slightly, silently screaming to be touched. He knew better. His fingers were ice-cold and she wasn't his anymore. He should leave her alone. But even in peaceful sleep she was as irresistible as ever – he'd always found it difficult to keep his hands off her, right from the day he'd first met her. Any excuse would do. Lingering for contact when he handed over a file. A guiding hand on her back when they walked into a building. Now, millimetres from her, standing in her bedroom on Christmas night with her soft scent all around him like an intoxicating shroud, the logic of you shouldn't stood no chance. He felt his own breath catch as hers drew in reflexively in response to the frozen, feather-light hint of his fingertips dragging along her lower lip, the softest and faintest contact he could manage. He watched her anxiously but she didn't wake. At the edge of her mouth he curled his fingers to gather the lock of hair that was lying across her face, and gently he lifted it away and laid it back down with the rest behind her ear, the better to see her.

Beautiful. She barely knew it, probably never considered it because she knew she was so much more than whatever someone thought when they looked her up and down, but he noticed every time he looked at her. Intelligent, driven, accomplished, loyal, righteous, compassionate, unexpectedly funny… and beautiful. He let his gaze roam across her face, unwilling to forgo this opportunity while she couldn't turn away or tell him to get fucked, enjoying the pleasure that came from simply looking at her and being near. If asked, he wouldn't hesitate to admit that he loved everything about her, regardless of whether she was innocently slumbering or rolling her eyes and frustrating the life out of him. Here was the person he owed the most, the person who had shaped him and who he had changed for. She was responsible for who he was now. Did she know that? All that was good and strong about the person he'd grown into was because of her and her influence, the demands she'd made of his character, the standards she'd set without words simply through her own actions of faith in him and of dedication to their work.

He owed her everything, and she owed him nothing.

He'd repaid her by leaving their relationship to wither and die while she struggled for years to save it. She deserved better. Right now he didn't have any 'better' to offer, but his short conversation with Reece filled him with optimism that it was attainable.

Mulder leaned close over Scully and pressed a soft, affectionate kiss to her hair. She didn't stir but she did breathe deeper, falling more deeply asleep. He wondered if she sensed his proximity, felt safe, felt comforted. Probably not. All the same he allowed himself one final gentle stroke of her hair and whispered, "The truth is out there, Scully. I'm going to prove it to you. Soon."

The overwhelming temptation was to nudge her over and slide under the covers behind her and to cuddle close against her body and never ever leave, but logic spoke up, louder this time, and you shouldn't won out, so he reluctantly straightened and stepped away from the bed. How long would it be before he was here again? He had work to do, truths to uncover and trails to follow, and until that work was done he really had no place here. Scully would either dig her heels in over the Johannsson case or she wouldn't; he hoped she would, but he needed to focus on his own task. He needed to bury his own demons, or dredge them up for the world to see. He needed to take some big and unwise risks, and as much as he knew it would bolster his confidence to have her at his side, he also knew it was unfair to drag her down this road again.
He needed to leave her alone. For now.

It hurt to walk away. Did it hurt her, when she walked away from him three years ago? Knowing it was best for them both but not knowing if it could be ever taken back?

Downstairs, his resolve was tested. He only meant to check the house, since intruders had been his first fear, but his journey through her home took him past her dining table. He took a flashlight from his handy backpack and directed the beam about, and it landed on an unusual arrangement in the centre of the table. He approached, curious at first. He couldn't help the smile that stretched across his face when he realised what he was looking at.

An invitation.

A plate hosting a thick slice of homemade fruitcake and a dessert fork waited atop a black briefcase. There was nothing else, no note or other indicator as to who this was for, but the case was positioned squarely in the table's centre with the combination lock facing him. No bites had been taken from the cake. Not leftovers. A table set for one.

Slowly he sat down, mostly to prevent himself from running back upstairs. The Christmas cake. The locked briefcase. The unlocked door. The porch light. She'd known he would come.

God, how was he meant to stay away from her after this?

He lifted the plate off the case quietly and shovelled a forkful into his mouth. He knew her cooking; it was spicy and flavoursome. He had a play with the combination lock. Four digits. He tried her birthday. William's birthday. Her mother's birthday. His birthday. Got it. Breathed through the struggle against going back upstairs. Stayed put.

By flashlight he leafed through the contents of Scully's briefcase. She had everything she needed to begin a very solid investigation – her observations from the Johannsson autopsy, documented results from the tests she'd conducted back at her lab, hardcopies of the Engel homicide-turned-cover-up and Gray X-file as well as parts of their work around what he found in Tunguska – but the lack of a folder holding these documents together and the lack of a case file number on each of her tests led him to understand that she probably hadn't been able to secure a formal channel for following this. She'd been blocked by her own people just as surely as she'd been sideswiped by whoever got to the Berkshire Morgue before she did.

He savoured each slow mouthful of the fruitcake as he read and familiarised himself with the case she'd been unable to make. The black substance taken from Rebecca Johannsson's lung tissue was undeniably a relative of the Black Oil he himself had been infected with. Dormant for thousands of years beneath the surface of the Earth, its various forms, natural and synthesised by human interference, had been only increasingly terrifying in their potential for destruction. This one was killing its victims from the inside out and, mysteriously, was making no effort to follow its biological imperative in reproducing. Scully's tests concurred. It begged the question – why?

Because it was a mistake. The answer was obvious to Mulder in its abstractness. Humans had played around with the genome and made mistakes that nature hadn't yet overcome, leaving the otherwise deadly virus irreproducible. Sterile. Johannsson was a field test of sorts. Her father was a scientist, now long-dead and supposedly 'just' a college professor, but not above suspicion of being connected to the Project to develop and vaccinate against this very virus. That explained how she was known to the developers, though not why she was chosen to die, nor why the Engel family had to die, too.

Or whether there was any connection between Johannsson's contraction of an alien virus at the
same time as a delegation of different professionals from the Clayton Building with secret government links met on the opposite side of the country on the anniversary of the sixty-years-awaited alien invasion now confirmed by the formerly deceased Reece, an abductee taken as collateral to ensure the participation of his father working on the Project surrounding the alien virus that had now killed Rebecca Johannsson.

There were more questions than answers right now, but all that meant was that more digging was required.

*It's called jumping to conclusions unless you've got the proof to pave the path between each step, Mulder,* Scully's dryly condescending voice said in his ear, and he whipped around in his seat, remembering he was in her house and she could wake up at any moment and actually appear in the doorway to challenge his theories. But she hadn't. He was still alone.

He wished he wasn't. He could use her on this one.

He dropped the final page of her short-lived investigation back into the briefcase with a sigh. After all they'd been through Scully was all-too-willing to back down under pressure when she sensed her footing was unstable. Mulder fidgeted with the fork as he swallowed the last of the cake. *Her* cake, cake she'd made and cut and plated up and left here for him to find, along with everything she'd been able to pull together on this case he'd sent her on. She'd known he was coming and had left her front door unlocked for him. Why? As an apology, a showing of her cards? 'I did everything I could, look, I can't go any further'. Admitting defeat to him? It just wasn't like her.

No. He reached for the paperwork he'd spread across the table in the – he checked his watch quickly – forty-five minutes he'd sat here. She left this here for him to give him the chance to get up to speed with where she was up to. Because she didn't want to drop it; she wanted to be convinced to keep at it. It's what he would have done at this point in an investigation when they worked together. Come at it from a perspective she struggled with. Offer new ideas. Suggest insane alternatives. Prompt her in directions she would have overlooked. Grab her arm and swing her around when she tried to walk away. She just didn't have anywhere else to get that push and didn't know how to ask for it. Probably didn't know exactly what it was that she wanted.

But he read her signals loud and clear.

Quietly Mulder put all the documentation away, flashlight in his teeth. Scully had already gotten this far and her work had the usual flair of rigour and integrity that he recognised, but she wasn't going to get any further through the Bureau. They, or someone higher more likely, weren't going to let her make this case, make the connections between Rebecca Johannsson's murder and the global conspiracy that was alien invasion, as Major Dragomirov had forewarned him. There were people who wanted this to stay underground, and those who stuck their necks out – Dragomirov himself, or Harvey Newman, for instance – had a habit of finding those necks severed.

If Scully put her neck out while the links were this flimsy, she'd be beheaded just as fast. The fact that she was an excellent agent, an asset, wouldn't save her.

There was a pen in the briefcase, and Mulder wrote *Reece, November 27 1973, street killing 1978, sighted 2015* on the back of one of the lab tests, and after a moment's hesitation signed it *X.* She would understand.

He stashed the clue in with the rest of her investigation and clipped the briefcase shut. He knew he could trust her paranoia and natural cautiousness to study this case only in secret, not to go publicly chasing, but also knew the prompt may give her the beginnings of the link she needed to make before she could really tackle this case head-on.
He placed the plate back where he'd found it, cake devoured, and considered Scully in the phone box in Boston. Scully at the microscope at the morgue, shaking her head and looking at him with big vulnerable eyes. The operator at the FBI passing on Scully's message that it was one-thirty in the morning. She wasn't wrong – this was huge, much too big for her to take on by herself. Now, though, she wasn't alone. At work she had this new partner, a go-getter with an interest in the truth. Mulder knew nothing about him but liked what he'd inferred so far. And in the shadows she had him. She needed him on this as much as she needed her: her rigorous approach to investigating would ensure all bases were covered and the case was solid before it saw the light of public criticism, and her position as a credible scientist, medical professional and government agent made her critical in any plan to spear this conspiracy through the heart. She was the one who would need to fire the arrow.

It would be his job to ensure that arrow was aflame.

Softly, he pushed the chair back in underneath the table as he'd found it. Her place was unnaturally tidy, everything straight and orderly, and he wasn't about to disturb the unlived-in persona she was trying to give the house. Nothing personal, nothing of her and nothing of him and nothing of them, nothing at all to make it look like this was Dana Scully's home, minus the Christmas dessert offering she'd left out for him. And wait – wasn't there a Christmas tree this year? He ducked into the living room, where the impersonality continued, and tiptoed over to the bay window. A two-foot tree sat on the window seat. He switched off the flashlight in case someone outside saw the suspicious flickering beam and approached, overcome with wonder.

Fourteen decorations. His decorations, the baubles he'd collected for their son each Christmas. He touched the newest one, clear with threads of superheated glass strung randomly within it like spiders' webs, like lace, like frost. He'd stressed the importance of the package to the courier when he'd paid for its postage, and he hadn't sent it here. He hadn't expected it would be well-received. Yet here it was, along with its thirteen brothers. Did Maggie give them to her daughter? What had changed in Scully that she was suddenly willing to live with the reminder of William?

Whatever it was, Mulder felt a surge of warmth and affection for the woman sleeping upstairs. He knew she struggled with guilt he would never be able to alleviate. He knew she'd lost her faith and it had crushed her. He knew that she'd wanted more than anything to not come to him in Boston because being around him was difficult for her, but that she'd come anyway, for him, and if he kept feeding her the information she needed to build her case she would follow it to its end and she would stand by what she could prove. He knew that if he ensured she had proof, he could count on her to see this through and to take it as high as it went.

He knew he owed her much more than a watch, but that's what he'd promised and that's what he left her under the Christmas tree adorned with memories they'd missed out on with their son, and hidden inside it he left her with his hope that they'd have other chances to make new memories together. Not now, not until this was done, and not without challenge, but soon.

There was no one else he trusted with it.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files, any of its characters or the definition of angst. I fully credit ownership of all that to FOX and Chris Carter and co.

Author's Notes: Happy Valentine's Day, shippers! It's also Friends' Day in Finland, a good friend tells me, so Ystävänpäivä to all of you, in the spirit of the warmest and most perfect friendship we know: Mulder and Scully.

All that said, this chapter is more angsty than friendsy or romanc ey, but since I didn't exactly theme it around the date (did that for the early chapters, made it Christmas, which then ended up too far in the past and now I'm struggling to keep up) I figure it's still very friendsy and sweet of me to be providing a chapter on Valentine's Day, which makes up for the angst. Hope everyone gets plenty of happiness and affection from their loves, friends and families today to counteract the tone of this chapter.

Thankyou for commenting and offering feedback, Mry and soodohnimh! This flashback chapter is told by Scully but gives some more insight into Mulder's frustrating way of interacting with her when he's consumed by a goal, and also into her reluctance to be pulled back into the unexplained. This was my vision of how, just by being themselves, they might have driven each other away. (Though I still think it was pretty unreasonable of the showrunners to break them up at all.) Scully's turn to be cold, soodohnimh!

21st December, 2012

It wasn't snowing, but there was a biting chill on the wind, and the stars they watched seemed to twinkle a little more sharply than they would on a warmer night. Every time Scully exhaled there was a white cloud of condensation and despite thick gloves, she couldn't really feel her fingers; the last she'd felt her toes properly was at least an hour ago. She had been sitting on this frigid rooftop in Billings, Montana, for three hours and her patience had worn thin. Beside her, the reason for her being out here was carefully adjusting the lens on his telescope. Dark hair that he kept forgetting to get cut hung in his eyes but his concentration was such that it didn't affect him. He noticed nothing except all he wanted to see, which at the moment was activity in the sky, and nothing commonplace like hair, the cold or even Scully could distract him.

This was how Mulder had been as long as Scully had known him, and by now she knew better than to expect him to ever change. She knew him like the back of her hand – his obsessive nature, his keen sense of observation and his knack for making connections that more linear people like herself would fail to notice. Likewise, he knew her just as well. He knew she would do anything for him, even sit all night on a rooftop in the middle of winter watching uneventful skies and being mostly ignored by the love of her life as he stargazed, especially if it meant proving his life's work was justified.

That's why he hadn't even asked.

For a time it had been their life's work, but these past couple of years had been hard. The work had
always been hard, no question, but the familiar frustration of running repeatedly into brick walls of bureaucracy, red tape and retracted witness statements, without the resources of the FBI and with fewer and fewer leads coming to light than ever before... It was wearing on them both. The federal pardon for Mulder had made things worse, not better. It had thrown off the shackles of being in hiding: free to roam, roam he had, and free of the urgency of trying to keep him safe, Scully felt less free than ever. Mulder was burying himself in his work even more deeply than ever, disappearing on her for days at time and returning with a sprained wrist, a vague explanation and a scrap of paper with half a name written on it, and chasing this 'lead' with all that he was until he hit the next wall. Scully had accepted the FBI's invitation to return to her former position as a Counterterrorism agent, which had initially been a means of getting around some of the barriers they kept hitting, but mostly it occupied her time and served as a reminder of how little she was achieving.

Mulder wasn't happy about it. He didn't say so, but he didn't ask about her day or anything when she came home from the office, either. For her part, she didn't particularly feel like telling him about it anyway. She kind of liked that it was separate. She didn't bring it home with her, and she didn't take her home life in with her. At her reinstatement interview she hadn't even batted an eyelid when she'd told the whole panel that she'd broken up with Fox Mulder more than a year before, barely saw him anymore.

Lying was less exhausting than working around the prejudice that came with the truth.

Wondering whether they were wasting their time was the most wearisome part of it all. Scully had let too much in life pass her by for it to be okay for this to simply not work out. She'd prioritised Mulder's crusade over everything, over any chance they'd ever had of enjoying a normal relationship, over their chance to raise their son together... Between them, they'd already given too much, and now, tonight, their faith, time and sacrifices needed to be vindicated.

Mulder stiffened slightly, alert to some change in the patch of sky he was observing, and Scully, alert to any change in her partner's demeanour, looked up at the stars hopefully. 'Hopefully' should have been the wrong word. Tonight was the night, the fateful date on which the mysterious Mayan Calendar ended and, so Mulder had once learned from their very government, on which a long-dreaded alien invasion was set to begin. The logical side of Scully (usually the dominant aspect of her personality) hoped she would look up and see nothing out of the usual. No descending flying saucers, no evidence of extra-terrestrial life, no laser beams. She had seen enough of what some of these not-of-this-Earth races were capable of to know she didn't want them here and wanted the Calendar to be wrong.

In spite of all this, a little shameful part of her, looking hard at those twinkling distant suns, wanted desperately for Mulder to be right. That little part wanted to see the ships fall from the black and wake the world up with their flashing lights and the soft rumble of their futuristic engines, so she could point and scream, "You see? He isn't crazy, he was right all along, and I was right to follow him!"

So everybody would know. So she would know, once and for all.

A tiny glint was moving against the night, but their gasps died in their throats.

"Another plane," Mulder said gloomily. Scully could already make out the faint red flash of the wing light that gave it away. Her partner sighed and pulled away from the telescope to look upwards with his unassisted eyes. "Any change?"

"Nothing," Scully answered dully before she even raised the binoculars to her eyes. Jensen Dale, their client, was visible through the top floor bedroom window of the apartment building across the
block. He was fast asleep, warm beneath his thick blankets, curtains drawn back to give them their view but window tightly shut against the cold outside.

He had the right idea.

"I know it's coming, Scully," Mulder insisted. He didn't need to look at her; she felt the intensity of his assertion.

"I know you do," she assured him, lowering the binoculars to check her watch and blow on her hands. She didn't know for sure that an alien invasion was coming, but she did know for sure that Mulder knew there was, and if there was a skill she was constantly revising in her relationship with Mulder, it was agreeing to disagree and accepting that there was a difference between facts and the truth.

Mulder's truth was that aliens were coming. Tonight. At midnight, and all through tomorrow. The fact was that they had found no viable evidence to support his truth. Those who shared in his belief were wholly unreliable characters with concerning backgrounds of mental health issues and fraud, and Scully was having trouble understanding the dots Mulder was trying to connect here.

She didn't want to tell him he was overreaching. She'd told him enough in the past and it had never done them any good. It had even been incorrect at times.

Jensen Dale was the least dodgy of the people who had responded to Mulder's classified ad. He was a journalist, currently working as a researcher and editor for a popular morning news show – educated, critical, reasonable. Someone Scully could take seriously, even though he was one of dozens of people reporting escalating symptoms of headaches, vivid recurring nightmares and specific paranoia. The symptoms, at least, seemed consistent from case to case, though Scully had sent Jensen and two other abductees for a brain scan and blood tests in order to rule out more earthly causes and found nothing helpful. No implants. No tumours. No irregular blood chemistry.

Nothing to indicate abduction. Nothing to indicate otherwise. Nothing to encourage anyone else (other than Mulder's usual crazies, out of the woodwork) to join them in their investigation or to offer any more resources in their search. The costs were adding up and the options were running low.

Which was what had driven the investigative pair to the desperate measures they now found themselves in. On the roof, in the cold, days out from Christmas, watching a man sleep and watching the skies for signs while people all over the city partied in light-hearted anticipation of the end of the world.

"We should be seeing something by now," Mulder muttered, checking his watch and quickly repositioning his eye. Scully dutifully brought her binoculars back to her eyes and sought out Jensen Dale. There he was, sound asleep, warm and content… "There are only three minutes left until midnight." Mulder paused for a long time. "Something should have happened already. We're a time zone over from where the calendar was created. It's already tomorrow, by that logic."

Scully didn't say anything. She'd already asked the questions – is the Calendar so exact you'd trust it to the very day? Let alone the second? The ancients counted in number systems of base-18 and measured time in 52-year-cycles, too big to be this precise, so how can you believe any vague notion that a cataclysm would be predicted so surely? Could your intel be wrong? Might the invasion be from today's date rather than on it? If you're so sure, wouldn't you rather be at Chichén Itzá or something? It'd be warmer… And she'd already copped the sharp responses, so she wasn't game to test Mulder's strained sense of charity of information tonight.
"We are in the right place, right?" Mulder checked, and Scully swallowed down the nervousness that arose in her at his query. Mulder questioning himself made her feel uncomfortable. She believed because he believed enough for the two of them. That his faith was starting to shake was unsettling. "These are the coordinates?"

"They haven't changed," Scully said, reaching back without looking for the backpack she knew was against the vent. She reached in through the unzipped opening and felt the vague tactile feedback of paper against the thick glove on her frozen fingers. She pulled out the crumpled, dog-eared map they'd carted around with them for the last two years, plotting locations of interest to this case. Despite the well-worn appearance gained from being opened and closed and read and shoved into pockets, there was very little marked on it. Seventeen crosses, marking unsubstantiated claims of alien activity across the nation across the past twenty-eight months. Ten blue triangles, marking the current residences of the respondents to Mulder's ad, claiming shared nightmares foreshadowing an impending alien invasion. And four red circles, the first marks to go on the map, marking the coordinates smuggled to Mulder in a Moscow bar just over two years ago, supposedly by a terrified former Soviet agent from an unidentified department, with a fake name and a false service history, because there was no matching record that Scully could bring up on her databanks at work when they'd tried to verify the man's existence later.

It sounded eye-rollingly preposterous, typical Mulder.

But they were on this roof because, against all Scully's reckoning, one cross, one triangle and one circle had intersected in the exact same place.

Billings, Montana.

"This has to be the place," Mulder agreed, reaching as far as he could to take the map. He didn't need to check it to know what they'd already known a week ago, a day ago, this morning, three hours ago when they'd set up here. "Jensen has to be the fish they're coming to fry." He flicked the map roughly to make it fall open, and glanced between it and the view through his telescope lens. "Even if he's not," he conceded, "and there's someone else on this side of the city marked for abduction, we're up high enough that we should still be able to see it."

Mulder was utterly convinced that they were here to witness an abduction. Scully had more varied worries. Annihilation. Apocalypse. Judgement day. And… nothing.

She thought that for nothing to happen at all would be the worst, because for all of the other eventualities, at least in the act of being blown up she wouldn't be around to suffer them.

Mulder looked for a while at the map, trying desperately to see a pattern emerge that hadn't already. With a frustrated sigh that was almost a growl, Mulder shoved it off of his lap and moved away from his telescope to check again the knobs of the radio transmitter beside him, fine-tuning to the frequency he'd been told would pick up indicators of approaching spacecraft.

He found nothing. Scully kept watching their client. He seemed to be sleeping deeply, body relaxed in a side-sleeper position facing the window. There was no indication from his posture that he was suffering from the nightmares he apparently shared with the other abductees of being locked in a large cage in the centre of a sort of white colosseum while a crowd of frightful aliens heartlessly examined each one, grabbing and holding up for better inspection before throwing back into the frightened group of humans. This morning when they'd seen him, Jensen had been restless and uncomfortable, reluctantly sharing that his latest dream had involved the alien beings picking through the lot for the abductee they each preferred.

"It was like an auction," Jensen had recalled, looking haunted. Dark rings had started to develop
below his eyes and he'd taken a week off from work as stress leave.

An auction for what, both Scully and Mulder were curious to know, but the auctioneer and his audience were nowhere to be seen. The stars stayed put. The radio stayed silent. The seconds ticked by, and Scully could detect no change in Jensen's circumstances. The heat and motion sensors they had set up in the bedroom would provide clearer data later, but increasingly Scully was thinking that this data would be as useless as this exercise of staring through the binoculars.

"This is the channel," Mulder said, hitting the side of the radio to prompt it to locate a frequency that was not transmitting. "This is what they said. I'm dead-on," he added urgently, telling no one in particular except the radio itself as he leaned close to check the needle indicator. "This is the same channel Harris detected that blip pattern on."

Harris. Scully was unable to bring a face forward from her overcrowded memory bank of unreliable witnesses in this case. Several of them had claimed to have detected a radio signal in the vicinity of the alleged alien activity (a.k.a. the crosses on the map) on the corresponding dates. None had recordings or any substantial evidence. What had made Mulder believe this Harris over the others? She couldn't remember. She was tired, on so many levels.

Tonight felt like a culmination of twenty years of work, and it was looking set to be a complete and utter letdown.

"Scully, check this for me," Mulder urged, and his partner obediently dragged herself to her feet, suppressing a sigh and trying to ignore the stiffness in her joints from the cold. She shuffled over in the narrow space they'd set up in, between two vents, and crouched back down beside him. She would have liked for him to slide a warm arm around her and pull her closer, but despite possessing a compassionate and caring personality, Mulder was not prone to examples of affection when he was on a case like this. That he even noticed she was present was more a sign of how big he considered this event, rather than a sign of his feeling for her. He was definitely the loner type, but had latched onto Scully early in their working relationship, appreciating the edge he gained in his war with an ally at his side. She always knew when something was big – it was when he disappeared for a week and then called her, claiming to 'need' her on this. And she always went, whatever she thought of it, however annoyed she was about his thoughtless abandonment. She knew it was not personal. Nothing was more personal to Mulder when he was like this than his work, which was why she shrugged off her disappointment at the lack of attention and looked closely at the needle on the old radio. It was exactly on the second notch after 106, not a hairsbreadth off.

"You're dead-on," she confirmed, and let her frustrated partner take the binoculars from her and hurry to where she'd just been to check on Jensen. She watched him, feeling the disappointment trickle back. Not because he was ignoring her. Not because he was obsessed and everyone thought he was insane. Disappointed because he'd ignored her and obsessed over work that everyone else thought was a joke for the last two decades and tonight it was all meant to be proven worthwhile and every second that passed made it look less and less likely that it would happen.

He wasn't going to give up as easily as she was prepared to.

"He hasn't moved," Mulder commented irritably once he'd looked for five or six seconds at Jensen, and he side-stepped back between the vents to his telescope, squeezing close against Scully without any awareness of her, of their bodies sliding hard against each other. He shoved the binoculars at her. "Watch him. Eighty seconds to go. Something's going to happen."

Scully did as she was told but the heaviness was still building in her chest, and she quietly asked,
"What if it doesn't?"

Not an option. "It will."

Since Mulder's capture at Mount Weather, where it had been revealed to him that the alien race the Syndicate had been working for had already set an invasion date, this date, he and Scully had found almost nothing to substantiate or elaborate upon that information. No further documentation had come to light; no eccentric anthropologist had released any laughable underground study linking the Mayan Calendar with extra-terrestrial activity, or even with unusual mythologies. Nameless weirdos appearing to Mulder in random dark places with wild claims of classified knowledge of incredible government conspiracies had once been plentiful but even this supply had dried up since the guy in Moscow. In the last ten years, they had achieved less than they had in any single year they had worked the X-Files, and if a flying saucer were to materialise in the sky right now over Jensen Dale's apartment building and blow it up with a laser, aside from being absolutely awful it would at least be immensely satisfying, because it would make it all worthwhile.

It would be proof.

Mulder disagreed, or at least pretended to. Whenever she got hopeless he went on a passionate rant about how the lack of information clearly demonstrated the government's tight security measures, the stranglehold they had on the Truth, the importance of their cause. He would close his argument with a reminder of the lengths their own government had gone to in order to silence him in the past, imprisoning him for murders he hadn't committed, subjecting him to torture and attempts at brainwashing, forcing him to defend himself in a rigged military court and chasing him into exile for six years. He was right, of course he was right. It just got so difficult to believe sometimes, but knowing that this date was looming, bringing the Truth with it, that made it possible to keep going.

Whatever was about to happen, Scully needed it to happen. More than Mulder did.

"Fifty-three seconds," Mulder said tensely. "Anything?" As if he didn't think Scully would shout in alarm if something like what he expected to see had happened inside the apartment. She only shook her head, knowing he only wanted an answer if it was the answer he wanted to hear. He said, adamantly, "It's going to happen, Scully."

She nodded and swallowed, ashamed to feel her throat was tight. She was afraid. And not of seeing aliens or watching the world end. All day she'd wondered whether this was her last day on Earth, tried to stay as close to Mulder as she reasonably could without getting in his way, tried to be grateful that if it really was her final minute or hour or day that at least she'd spent it with him, but now she was more afraid to wonder the opposite. What if it wasn't? What if Mulder was wrong? What if this was one huge cosmic joke being played on them? On him, on her?

How was she meant to walk into tomorrow with her whole purpose of the last twenty years stripped from her?

"Forty seconds," Mulder murmured. He turned back to his radio and turned up the volume. He checked the screen of the laptop he had connected it to and squinted closely at the flat line of the channel. Sent off a quick PM to the other fanatics in the chatroom he was logged into. No action yet. "It's going to happen. Any second now…"

He abandoned the useless instruments and stood, staring straight up into the sky. Scully spared him a glance. He wasn't as pretty or as tidy as he'd looked when she met him in 1992 but his eyes – which she would have fallen for eventually, set into any face – still burned with the same feverous, half-crazy sparkle as always, and his voice, low and intense and then upbeat and teasing, still tumbled out of the same playful smile.
Scully quickly went back to her task, feeling her heart rate pick up as Mulder murmured, "Thirty seconds..." She sought their client out in the dark and stared at him hard, without blinking. This was it, tonight was it, something was about to happen, it had to... "Twenty-five seconds. Where are they?" The television journalist slept soundly. "Twenty... Nineteen..."

Fifty yards away, Jensen jerked awake in his bed. 

"Mulder!" Scully already had the second pair of binoculars in her extended hand and his hand was already on them. "Something's happening."

Neither breathed and for a moment all was still as they watched raptly through their lenses. Far away, Jensen was sitting up in bed, breathing hard and resting a hand on his chest like he'd received a terrible fright. Scully felt Mulder's tiny motion beside her and knew he was checking the rest of the room for a cause. Jensen wasn't looking around; if there was anything extraordinary present, he did not acknowledge it. There was no bright beam of light on him and no apparent presence in the room at all, because with a final calming breath, Jensen lay back down and pulled his covers back up to his chin.

Just a nightmare.

Nothing more.

Mulder was silent for a moment. "What? No!" He lowered the lenses quickly and stared in their client's direction, disbelieving. "No, no. It's not a mistake. It's not. Scully?" He turned desperately to his partner and she felt her heart fall away. He waited, eyes wide, silently appealing to her to either explain or keep faith long enough that he could regain it.

But she couldn't do either. She looked down at her watch.

"Four seconds."

Four seconds. They both looked up helplessly at the sky. In four seconds, now three, the world's oldest calendar ended. Time ran out. No one knew what came after. Two seconds. Scully drew a deliberate breath, ready for it to be the last, and tried to brace herself for whatever unexpected shock was waiting for her in the next moment.

One second.

Mulder took her hand. It was more of a shock than if he'd grown antennae. She threaded her fingers with his and held on tight.

They both startled slightly when Mulder's watch beeped softly to mark the hour, and tightened their grip on each other in preparation for the explosions, the screams, the searing heat of savage war, the roar of otherworldly engines.

It didn't come. Not that second. Not the next. Not in any second that came after.

Scully slowly released her last breath. She waited more seconds before daring to draw a new one. Her first breath outside of time. She let it out. Drew another. Kept breathing.

The world had survived the end of time. So had she.

The next breath came out ragged, uncontrolled, almost a sob.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so crushed, and, looking up at her partner, she
recognised the confused expression she read there. It was his lost expression. His does-not-compute face. The face he wore when she told him she had cancer.

He looked at her blankly.

"Nothing happened," he noted, disbelievingly.

"No," she agreed softly. Her chest felt tight and achy. Her breaths still came out rough and jagged as she battled against dissolution into tears. Twenty years… Two careers practically left to rot on the wayside, if not utterly torched. Loved ones lost in the name of fighting for the Truth. Relationships allowed to wither. A child, long desired and miraculously conceived, given away for his own safety, leaving a gaping wound in his mother's heart. And a love that could have been loved for two decades but instead was spent chasing lies, secrets, horrors and all the other things love doesn't need.

All for this. For nothing.

"But… we were in the right place," Mulder insisted. He looked about. "This is the right place! We checked the time zones; all the coordinates matched up. Right place, right time, right target…” His voice was escalating. The dazed and lost phase had already passed and he was moving into the angry denial phase of his usual insanity loop. "Scully, we did everything right."

"Mulder," she sighed, knowing where this led, and pressing her lips together to hold in the irritable reality check that threatened to burst from her when he exclaimed, "No, Scully, this doesn't add up! We've missed something," and pulled his hand from her grip to stride across the roof to his discarded map. "We've missed something. It's here, I know it! I'm not wrong about this, Scully. It's got to be here, staring me in the face…"

Wasn't she always?

Scully had been dreading this night for many years but in the end it far exceeded her worst expectations. She watched helplessly as Mulder spiralled into the dark place he carried around inside himself. He made urgent phone calls and sent short, unpunctuated emails to other crackpot stargazers who were scoping out other UFO hotspots and got even more disappointing news. He fiddled with his radio and got nothing. He searched the internet for new reports of unexplained phenomena and kept hitting refresh with more aggression than was necessary when nothing came up. He looked through his telescope and his binoculars and maintained, vehemently, that there was some tiny clue he was missing that would explain everything, make it all make sense, pull it all together and set them on a new path.

Scully felt like crying but she didn't. She just sat down and watched the stars. Maybe they'd been off by a few minutes, or maybe a few hours? Perhaps, in only a second, in only a minute, in only a day, the skies would light up like Mulder had been fearing since she met him.

But the invasion they were waiting for didn't come. Not that second. Not the next. Not in any second that came after.

And Scully had to accept what she'd been fearing since she met him.

Mulder was wrong.

The Truth was not out there.

And all she'd lost and forgone had been for nothing.
Back at school after the Christmas break, it was like nothing had happened. For the other kids, nothing much had. They went to the movies, saw their grandparents, spent a weekend at their dad's, caught up with friends, got high scores on various X-Box games. The usual. No one else had discovered they were adopted, or if they had, no one had mentioned it, and Will wasn't about to ask anyone.

The Biology quiz went much as he expected. All the stuff Ms B had mentioned in her last lecture before the break was on there. Trip made sure to sit close so he could copy. William did well, like usual, but especially well considering he spent the entire test overthinking and personalising each question. Punnet squares and gene dominance… Red's a recessive hair colour, and he now knew he got his from Dana Katherine Scully, but where did she get hers? A parent, or further back in the gene pool? Genetic counselling hypothetical question about hereditary chromosomal defects… Some of the boys in his class were colour-blind, but William wasn't. Since the defective gene for that condition came on the X chromosome, he knew Dana Katherine Scully wasn't colour blind, either, though his father still could be, if he'd inherited the trait from his mother. There wasn't enough information available for Will to be able to form much of a picture of his father, genetically speaking. He was yet to find a colour photograph of Dana Katherine Scully that showed the colour of her eyes, but so far he'd deduced that his height (or lack thereof), his hair and his complexion all came from her.

She'd made him in her image, and then let him go.

He thought about her a lot. The name on the letter from Sarah Van de Kamp that she never received, the newspaper photograph of her at a crime scene, the statements she gave to journalists… At least once a day he found himself looking at one or another of the documents in his secret stash of evidence under his bed. He felt like something of an investigator himself, guarding this case he had built until he had enough to bring it to light. Dana Katherine Scully, FBI agent, was his birth mother. She'd borne and delivered him, kept him a while, and then given him away. Nothing, nothing in his stash from Sarah's desk or in the stupid Biology quiz or anywhere on the internet indicated why, and it drove Will crazy with frustration. In comparison, the blank space on his birth certificate for the name of a missing father didn't disturb William all that much. He wasted plenty of time thinking about it – why did she leave it blank? Was she unable to remember
his name or was there a more sinister reason? Did he abandon her? Was he married to someone else and unwilling to take responsibility for the result of his affair? Was William the child of a violent sexual encounter? Uncomfortably, he found his thoughts kept straying back to this most sensible explanation for her actions. At the other extreme, was Ms Scully happily married and unfortunate enough to fall into an argument with her husband twenty minutes before she went into labour and did she leave him off the certificate in a moment of hormonal, exhausted spite?

Whoever he was, did the guy even know he'd fathered a child with her? Did she ever tell him? Was she in love with him? Would he be as delighted to have a son as William would be to have a dad?

There was just no knowing, and William found his attention going always back to Dana Katherine Scully, the jagged central puzzle piece around which nothing else quite fit. She was the one person in this whole mess who could give him answers. Uncle Gary still had no clue. Will had opted against telling him what he'd found in Sarah's piano room. They'd both silently agreed to pretend the argument about the Navajo scribbles and Will's neck had never happened, and life had resumed as normal.

Well. Normal, plus a heart-crushing secret. Uncle Gary was not his real uncle. Christiaan Van de Vamp was not his dad. Sarah Van de Kamp was not his mother.

This was not the life he was born to live.

"Bit early to be looking into career paths, isn't it?" Trip asked, lightly knocking his drink bottle against Will's phone to indicate he'd seen what was on the screen. Caught off-guard and feeling guilty, William hurriedly shoved the phone under his jacket.

"Hmm? What?" He looked around but could see no teachers. He was at his classroom early, sitting at his desk and reading from his phone. He didn't have much by way of friends, so this was a perfectly acceptable way for him to spend his lunch hour. Trip sat down in the row in front of him, still chewing on his sandwich.

"Gotta be the tenth time I've seen you reading about the FBI since we came back from Christmas break," he said around his mouthful of bread. "You looking for an early-entrance program into their Academy, boy-genius?"

Will forced a smile. "Just curious. Watched too many documentaries over the break and now I'm a bit obsessed."

"You know what's cool about you, young Master William?" Trip said, already standing and pushing his chair in with the back of the hand holding his bottle. "I don't know anyone else who would admit to spending a whole school vacation being lame, but you just come out with it, no qualms."

"I guess I know I can't do much to worsen my social standing at this school so why not be open about how much of a loser I am?" Will suggested. Trip nodded in acknowledgement.

"True, true," he agreed. "Well, if you change your mind and you want to save face for a few minutes by hanging with some cool kids, don't forget where we are." He winked and left.

William was definitely becoming obsessed. Breaks between classes, bus rides home, weekends, even while he laid awake at night in his bed waiting for sleep to come for him – he spent a ridiculous amount of his week learning anything and everything he could about the FBI, its purpose and its structure, about federal jurisdiction and about landmark legal cases the Bureau had made. He slowly made his way through the whole, extensive archive of the Lone Gunmen's
website, though most of it was batshit-crazy. He found himself increasingly hungry for any detail that would help him form a workable picture of Dana Scully. Who she was. What she did. How she got where she was. Anything.

His opinion of her swayed, but the fascination remained steady. At first he wanted nothing more than to meet her, to look for his own features in her face and to ask her all the questions that were bubbling away inside him. Pretty quickly, though, those idealistic desires had dissolved into an angry phase, and he'd decided he hated her, she was a bitch, she was the horrible and selfish woman who'd dumped him with another family who'd proceeded to die and she'd never looked back. Fuck her, fuck everything about her. She didn't want him then, she didn't deserve to know him now. But even through that phase Will had harboured this continued intrigue. Why? Why did she drop him and run? Why, when he had this increasingly clear memory of a red-haired mother smiling over the edge of his cot, trailing soft fingers over his forehead and nose and whispering words of unconditional and eternal adoration? If she'd loved him, why did she do what she did? Weeks of anger had simmered down now thanks to many hours of quiet introspection and he'd decided that he didn't have enough information to warrant being mad at Dana Scully. He didn't know the circumstances.

But he wanted to.

He'd avoided most interactions since returning to school but Trip's brief visit made him realise it. He looked at the clock on the classroom wall and saw that he still had thirteen minutes before the lesson started. He was being a loner jerk – he had few enough friendships, he should be working to maintain them.

No sooner had he reached the classroom door than he felt a faint pricking feeling at the back of his neck. The hairs stood up like when he was afraid, only there was nothing to be afraid of. He brushed his hand over the skin there and stepped out into the hall.

Something very solid collided with him and sent him sprawling along the linoleum, books and stationery spilling from his unzipped backpack and a sharp pain shooting up his arm from the wrist he shot out to break his fall. A loud crack punctuated the moment. Cackles of mean laughter erupted as he struggled to roll over and sit up, gasping and clutching his throbbing arm against his chest.

Though he'd never broken a bone before, he was quite certain at least one of the bones in the wrist was broken. Attempts to twitch his fingers sent arrows of fire along his frayed nerves.

He was not going to cry.

"Sorry, Van de Kamp," Jeremy drawled with only the most meagre effort at hiding his smile as he and his pack of asshole friends circled past the younger student he'd shoved over. "Didn't see you there. If only you weren't so fun-sized." His friends smirked; some of the girls shared pitying glances that did absolutely nothing to convince William. Jeremy offered a lazy hand and stepped closer, towering over him.

Will assumed he'd inherited his sense of humour by proxy from Uncle Gary, but as for his reckless pride in situations like these, he had no idea where that came from. Maybe Dana Scully. Maybe his unknown father. His arm ached and tears threatened from behind his eyes but he forced himself to live with it as he cast a suspicious look up.

"Speaking of fun-sized, is there a non-paedophilic reason you need to stand with your dick so close to my face? Or is it just for the sake of visibility-"
He inhaled sharply before he could finish the last word; Jeremy's face contorted and his foot lashed out and caught Will in the diaphragm. He automatically coughed, control of his respiratory system stolen from him, and he rolled away, curling to keep his arm safe against his body. Jeremy snarled, "Pervy little midget fuck," and he stalked off, his crowd following in silence. If any of them had objections to what he'd just done, none voiced them.

It took William a few minutes to calm his breathing and to overcome the temptation to cry. His arm caned. No one came by in all that time, so he struggled to his feet and started toward the school nurse's office. She wasn't in. Maybe admin could do a PA call for her or something. He set off again. In the school office he had to wait behind a short line of other students with various complaints and requirements. He tried his fingers again. They moved with relative ease now, the shock of the event subsiding. Tentatively he tried turning his wrist over to test out its flexion. He took it slow but he managed without any new burst of pain. He made a fist. Isolated fingers. Raised and lowered the arm. Twisted the wrist again, faster, in a circle. No new pain, just the residual discomfort from the original impact.

Hmm. Maybe it was just a light sprain after all.

"Hello, William," the school receptionist said with a smile when he reached the front of the line. "What can I do for you?"

"I was looking for the nurse to take a look at my arm. I fell and I think I may have sprained it."

The nurse met him at her room and commented that it was the first time she'd seen him there. He sat on the edge of the Spartan bed and looked around the room and realised she was right. But he hadn't been at the school all that long, so it wasn't that surprising.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with your arm," she said impatiently when he showed her how flexible and perfectly agile it was despite its recent trauma. "What did you say happened?"

No number of anti-bullying talks about speaking up could have changed William's instant response. "Tripped over my shoelaces."

"Hmm." She'd heard it before. Whether she believed it or not, she wasn't going to push it. Her fingers probed along the bones of Will's wrist for bumps or sites of pain. She found neither. "It can't have been all that bad a fall."

"I heard a crack," he said, "and it hurt like h– like anything," he corrected smoothly. "For a few minutes I couldn't even move it." He touched his skin. "It feels really hot."

"And you don't feel any pain now?" The nurse put her things away as the school bell went to signal the end of the break and Will shook his head. "So… you'll be returning to class?"

There was no longer any reason to be there, he realised, feeling a bit foolish for having wasted her time, but he did still find his eyes drifting nervously to the clock. Returning to class? He mentally ran through his timetable and agreed when it came clear to him that Jeremy wasn't in this class. He did his afternoon classes and his arm was perfectly functional and pain-free through it all, enough to mostly put the experience out of his mind. Mostly. On the final bell, he raced through the school and out to the smokers' spot behind the sports shed. He was the first one there but, pressed against the shed and panting slightly from the jog, he had a good view in case anyone had followed.

Was paranoia genetically inherited, and if it was, who graced him with this blessed quality?

It was dumb to think Jeremy would come looking for him. He was a bully of circumstance, taking
opportunities that came to him, and it was arrogant to believe he sought Will out for the purpose of belittling and ridiculing him. Trying to relax, Will sat down against the shed on the frigid ground and got his phone out. His last search was still on the screen. The FBI's Washington offices.

A phone number.

The name on the birth certificate, the photo in the old newspaper clipping, the letter she never read or received… he'd been picturing this Dana Scully as something so distant, something unreachable. Could she be as close as a phone call? The idea was surreal, and struck him with its amazing simplicity. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

Because it was a terrible idea. He had no plan, no rehearsed and tactful speech to explain who he was or what he wanted. He had no notion of what the reaction would be. She'd explicitly asked for no contact. Calling her on a whim could be upsetting for both of them, and could destroy any chance he had of making contact in future.

But it could also be the one and only chance he had of ever hearing her voice. His birth mother.

There was no one else around, and impulsively he dialled the number. His heart was pounding when he raised the phone to his ear, and he was too apprehensive to feel ashamed of the way his hands trembled. He could argue it was the cold.

It rang. And rang.

When an operator called Nicole answered chirpily, Will exhaled heavily the breath he hadn't realised he was holding. He hadn't expected it to be her, had he? He would need a direct line for that.

"Uh, hi," he said, feeling put-upon, knowing it was his own fault for not thinking things through properly. "Can you put me through to Dana Scully, please? She's an FBI agent." As if they couldn't work that part out. He cringed.

"Department?"

Department? He raked back through his memories of what he'd read. "Um… terrorism. No, Counterterrorism."

"Who's calling?"

Her long-lost son. Nope, sounded too melodramatic, and chances were she'd decline to take his call. She'd said no contact, after all, and he was the one breaking the rules. But maybe she'd changed her mind after all this time, or maybe she was open to having her mind changed, if only he could get the chance to talk to her.

"This is her nephew," he said finally, hoping she had one. He thought fast. "There's been a family emergency and we can't get hold of her on her cell. Can you please put me through to her? I'm scared," he added for effect, because he knew he sounded like a kid on the phone.

The operator became concerned. "Just hold, sweetie." The line clicked and played elevator music. William licked his lips nervously and swallowed a few times, mouth dry with anxiety. This was so stupid, so reckless, on so many levels. What would Uncle Gary say if he knew what Will was doing, making secret phone calls behind his back to a woman who didn't want to be called, at the FBI no less? Would he say Will was disrespecting Sarah by chasing this miniscule glimmer of hope? He hugged his knees against his chest, repressing uncomfortable feelings of guilt. Surely not. Sarah Van de Kamp was his mom but it was no one's fault that she died, and she had loved
him wholly and completely. She would have wanted him to have this chance at having a mom again, wouldn't she? Wouldn't any mother?

Was that why Dana Scully gave him up in the first place? So he'd have something she couldn't give him?

The music stopped and the line went live again. "Are you there?"

"Yeah," Will said, sitting up at the return of the operator's voice. Was this it? Was she going to patch him through and was he about to speak to his mother?

"I'm sorry, but your aunt is out of the office at the moment," she apologised, and his heart sank. "Her partner expects her back shortly. He's happy to take your call and try to help. Maybe he can get a message to her."

Damn helpful people. "Uh, it's okay… Um, someone just got home, I'm fine now. Thanks anyway."

He hung up, pulse still thudding with the thrill of the near-miss.

So stupid.

So close.

Maybe he'd given up too soon. He now had confirmation that she existed, beyond any of the documents hidden under his bed. She was real. She had an office, a work partner, a phone number. He looked again at his screen. How well did Dana Scully's partner know her family life? Could he trick the partner into giving him her cell number? Maybe even her address? He dialled again.

Got a different operator.

"Take your prank call someplace else, kid," she said coldly, and hung up. Harsh.

"Your ass frozen off yet?" Trip asked as he ambled over with a few of the usuals. Will made himself smile and stand, dusting his jeans off. He'd hardly noticed but yeah, he was cold, and his backside was damp from sitting in the slush. "Here to start salvaging your reputation, boy genius?"

"I think I'm well past that."

"Me, too. Well, socially retarded or otherwise, it's good to see you back in the world of the trying-to-be-normal. Got time?" Trip offered his pack of cigarettes, a genuine and friendly gesture.

Will waved it away without thought. "No, thanks. But I'll stay and hang still, if that's alright."

"No, it's not alright – if you want to hang with us you have to conform," Trip replied in a teasing tone. He and Will both grinned as he popped the end of his cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "'Course it's alright. If I don't be nice to you there's no way I'm passing this semester in Bio. Trust me, I know which side my bread's buttered on."

"Boys!" A sharp woman's voice cut through, and Trip and a few others ripped their cigarettes out of their mouths with comical speed. Brittany Wilson sauntered over, faux-stern face melting into a smirk when she saw their reactions.

"Aw, shit, Brit," Trip complained. He hadn't thrown his smoke away but some of the others had, and some tried to pick them back up off the snow. He took a long draw and blew the smoke into
his sister's face when she got close enough. She smacked his arm, never shy of standing up for herself. "Put that voice to good use and get a job on a phone sex line or something. Start earning your keep."

Brittany shot back a smart reply, but Will wasn't paying attention. Another stupid idea had struck him.

On the bus ride home he sat with Trip and Brit. Jeremy sat at the back and though Will occasionally felt his gaze on the back of his head or heard obnoxiously loud comments about him, he found his focus on his latest stupid idea gave him the enviable ability to disregard the nastiness.

When half of the bus had been dropped off, including Jeremy and Kasey, connected at the mouth like gross leeches, and while Trip was twisted around talking with someone behind him, Will leaned over the seat in front of him to tap Brit's shoulder.

"Do you think you could make a call for me?" he asked curiously, presenting his phone. She shrugged amicably.

"You mean like, call in sick for you at work, pretend to be your mom? Are you even old enough for a job?"

"Uh… more like a prank call," he admitted, and she turned in her seat, intrigued. He thumbed his screen on and showed her the number. Her eyes widened, impressed by his nerve.

"The FBI?" she read, looking up at him. "For reals? Is that, like, legal?"

"It's just a phone call," he insisted hastily, having not considered those possible ramifications. "And it's on my phone, so they can't trace it to you. I just thought it would be really funny, you know, to see if we could get a call through."

"Yeah, fuck it," Brittany agreed, accepting the phone and hitting call. She switched it to speakerphone and rested it on the backrest between them. "What should I say?"

The phone searched for a signal. The other kids on the bus ignored Will and Brit and continued making their loud background noises. Will pretended to think.

"Ask for… Dana Scully," he said, as if the name had just come to him. "I saw her name on the news. Counterterrorism division."

The phone began to ring. Brittany glanced up at him and repeated, "Counterterrorism? You don't do anything by halves, do you?"

The line connected and the second operator answered. Brittany and William looked up at each other apprehensively. Neither was what you'd call a perfect kid or perfect student, but this was rule-breaking on a whole other level.

"Yes, hello?" Brit's grown-up voice came out sophisticated and in-control. "Can you connect me with Dana Scully, please? Tell her it's her sister calling."

"Which department?" the operator asked, all business. Will had to mouth it to help remind Brittany. "Alright. Will you hold?"

"Sure." The elevator music resumed and Brittany made a small squealing sound of excitement. "It worked! Now what?"
"Okay," Will said, sitting forward, excited as well, prepared to go into the next phase of his thrown-together plan. "Now they'll probably put you through to her partner-"

The music stopped.

"Who is this?"

Will's heart skipped a beat at the demanding female voice. Definitely not the operator. Definitely, somehow, impossibly, familiar.

"Who is this?" the authoritative voice repeated, distinctly unhappy. Will stared at the phone's screen, thrown by the anger he heard. He hadn't thought this through. This was a terrible idea. Trip tuned back into their conversation, glanced between them in interest.

Brittany recovered first, and managed to say, "Uh…” but Dana Scully was not impressed.

"If impersonating an FBI agent's deceased sibling is your idea of a joke, I wonder how funny you'll find it when I run a trace on your number," she said in a clipped sort of voice. "This call is being recorded-"

Hurriedly, Brittany jabbed at the screen to disconnect the call and all but tossed the phone back at Will as if it were set to explode. He caught it against his chest, which felt tight.

He'd just fucked up, royally, and he knew it.

Brit burst into nervous giggles while Trip gaped at her. "Oh my god, we just prank-called the FBI," she told him, while his look of shock turned into one of surprised glee. "I told the operator I was some lady's sister and it turned out her sister is dead…"

The Wilsons laughed, Trip out of surprise and Brit mostly out of relief that it hadn't gone worse, and Will tried to laugh along with them, but when it was their stop and they departed, his smile dropped away, and he disembarked at the very next stop despite it being miles away from the farm. He walked the rest of the way home in the cold, snow slushing underfoot.

He'd heard the voice of his mother. Her accent was different from his.

He'd coerced another student into doing something he knew was wrong. He could have gotten Brittany in trouble.

He'd made up a dumb lie without any real consideration to get through to Dana Scully and in consequence, he'd learned something new about her. She'd once lost a sister. He'd had an aunt, but she was dead. How recently? In what circumstances? And today, he and Brit had walked carelessly all over that sensitive territory.

He'd called his mother and caused her pain. He'd known it was wrong and did it anyway.

The call was stupid and hurtful, and he felt unwell, his chest tight and his stomach roiling with discomfort. She'd said no contact. Perhaps, as an adult with a good deal of life experience, she knew best.

He would never call her again, he decided promptly, trying to make himself feel better. He would leave her alone, as she'd requested. It was the least he could do after what he did today, since he couldn't take it back.

But the cadence of her voice, though angry, stuck with him on repeat in his head, appealing in the
knowledge that this was his mother's voice. As her words ran over and over through his mind, and as he shivered and trudged along the long, quiet roads out to the Van de Kamp property, he came to realise that the guilt and regret he felt was actually twofold. Yes, regret and guilt over upsetting Dana with the thoughtless and unexpected prank call.

Who is this?

But also, regret that he didn't answer her, and guilt at the answer that came immediately, surprisingly to his mind, despite never having thought of himself before today as anyone other than William Fox Van de Kamp.

Who is this?

William Scully.
Six weeks and a whole bottle of air freshener had definitely eliminated any physical scent still lingering in the air, but each time she walked into her house now, from the moment she turned the doorknob and stepped inside, and each time she sat at the dining table, and in particular every night when she settled into bed to sleep, she felt sure that she could still feel him. It left her furious.

On Boxing Day she'd woken warm and well-rested and somehow less alone than most mornings, and when she'd stretched out and found the other side of the bed empty, cold and still firmly tucked in, she'd been momentarily surprised. The half-imagined musk of his scent in the room and the dream memory of his voice whispering her name was enough to fool her brain into forgetting, at least for a second, that he didn't share her bed anymore.

Disappointment melded with some clouded version of excitement and hurt, however, when she ventured downstairs and found the proof that she'd not imagined anything. The slice of cake, devoured; dessert fork, licked clean. When she knocked these away and opened the briefcase beneath, she found everything still inside, albeit out of order. He was here, he was here… And Mulder always had a theory, usually one she didn't want to hear and usually one that would prove at least partially spot-fucking-on. And usually hard work to dredge out of him. He would hide it, make it a dumb game. Heart thudding with desperation, she scanned the pages with quick eyes, turning them over and skimming for a sign that he'd not just read it all and left, left her hanging…

Mulder had been here. He'd taken the porch light and unlocked door as the invitation she meant it as and let himself in, gotten out of that awful cold.

But he hadn't woken her up. He'd come into her bedroom and hadn't roused her. Why not? What stopped him? What consequence of waking her did he hope to avoid by just slipping away? She'd all but let him in, left Christmas cake out for him – did that not clearly communicate a willingness to see him?

Which left her with the conclusion that if he knew she would be happy to see him, the only reason he would choose not to wake her was if he didn't want to. He didn't want to see her. He didn't want to talk to her. He didn't want anything from her but an update on her case and somewhere to warm up.
Her frantic hands slowed in their search through the familiar paperwork of the briefcase. She could find nothing added, no letter or envelope or photograph to point her in a new direction.

She'd slammed the briefcase closed before she finished looking, upset. Upset because this shouldn't upset her so much. Mulder was doing as she'd asked, keeping things professional, distant, and Mulder was doing what Mulder always, always did – going after what caught his interest and leaving her behind in the cold wondering what was going on. He'd inhaled the contents of her briefcase to deepen his understanding of the case and satisfy his burning curiosity, but typically left nothing for her to understand what he was doing, no insight as to where she should go next with the case he had put her onto. No breadcrumbs. Nothing.

She took the dishes to the sink and washed them in water so hot it hurt her hands. She knew better than to be angry with Mulder. He was only doing what he always did, being predictably unreliable and insensitive. It was she who was being stupid, allowing herself to expect him to be any different, to be what she needed, to want her when she wanted him. She knew him by now, and in the wake of their breakdown he'd resumed a pattern from their early days – he was always happiest to make a pass at her if the circumstances ensured she wouldn't reciprocate. If it was safe. When there was a chance she might be on the same page he backed right off. She remembered bringing wine and cheese to his hotel room in Leon County and sitting on his bed, years ago while they'd been working an incidental case together, and remembered how quickly he'd found an excuse to get out of there. It was the same now. Open invitation, and he was on tiptoes. Unwilling to wake her, lest he have to deal with her in an intimate setting where he might have to be real and honest, where their pull on each other might overwhelm them, but unable to resist the lure of the case sitting on the table for him. The job was always the priority, and always served as the perfect distraction from committing to anything else.

She wanted to scream at him.

"Is that the same one as before?" Colt pointed at the screen with one hand and covered a yawn with the other. Scully glanced at his screen and then back at hers. His showed surveillance footage from the building's lobby while hers showed the hallway of the top floor. "They all look the same after a while."

Indeed, countless individuals in hoodies and jeans had crossed both screens in the hours the pair of agents had spent watching these streams of footage, trying to document patterns among the visitors to room 623. It was dull, painstaking work. Alastair Craig was lying low, hadn't yet returned to the scene, but other denizens made repeat habits of visiting that room. Always Morse code for entry. The footage was still too indistinct to make out more than a letter or two in a row. Scully and Colt had not managed to decipher every exchange of finger-taps at the door, but had at least determined that there was a pattern at the beginning of each visit that must be some sort of identifier or password, before the unique message was relayed. Some Morse conversation was required before entry was allowed, and not all tappers were invited in.

Scully rewound her feed slightly and checked the timestamp while Colt did the same. He pushed 'play' and they watched a man's figure slouch across the building's lobby toward the stairs. His face was obscured by the shadow of his hood and his hands were deep in his pockets. When he disappeared from the view of Colt's camera, Scully resumed her own feed, two minutes ahead of his, and a hoody slouched along the hallway. Straight past room 623.

"Doesn't look like it," Scully said, fighting off a sympathetic yawn when Colt yawned again. "Different person. It's..." The yawn won. "Excuse me. It's impossible to tell who we're looking at when they all dress the same. It could be six different men or sixty. It... Stop that," she scolded lightly when her partner yawned once again. He made an apologetic noise.
"We've been sitting here for ages," he complained. When she only shrugged, he added, in challenge, "How long have we been at this today? Seven hours? It's been seven hours. If it's less than seven hours I'll buy lunch. Though it's probably almost dinnertime…"

"Exaggerator," Scully muttered good-naturedly, taking a long look at her new wristwatch. In an added touching and even more confusing story element, she'd found Mulder's Christmas present underneath her tree on Boxing Day. Touching, yes, because he rarely did presents and because though he'd 'promised' her such a gift if she flew to Boston for him, she'd really not expected it; and confusing because if he had the sort of warm thoughts about her that accompanied Christmas gift-giving, why had he not woken her, or left her a note, or slid into bed with her? It just made no sense, which, in itself, was so Mulder.

"Seven hours," Colt confirmed with his own watch when she took too long, "and seventeen minutes. That's it," he announced, switching off his monitor, "I'm done for the day." He looked across at her, waiting. When she continued to stare at her screen, he asked, "Are you really going to keep going? Isn't there something better you could be doing with your time?"

"This is my job, Agent Colt," Scully said demurely without looking at him. "This is all I'm doing with my time. I have no other case to work so I am devoting all of my time and efforts into this investigation. Remember?"

No one in the office was listening to them but she said it anyway as a reminder. In the six weeks since their argument at Christmas, he'd become much more familiar with her, and didn't hold back from sighing loudly and turning his screen back on. The footage was where he'd left it, paused. "Fine. Tell me when." And he hit the 'fast-forward' option to accelerate the feed. Scully did the same with hers. It really was incredibly boring work, watching the twenty-four hour footage for visitors to room 623 and trying to identify them, but it was one of the actions they'd committed to in their last taskforce meeting with Tan and the rest of the team when intelligence was received from external sources regarding a possible domestic attack at an upcoming election event. The whole department was on high alert and nothing could be counted as too trivial if there was any chance at all of a lead.

Aside from the obvious threat to innocent lives, since they'd agreed on Christmas Day to play the role of good, obedient little agents and throw themselves wholly at this case, dedication to each task was a must. Already they had earned their way back into Tan and Hofstetter's good books – Scully's offer to commit herself and her partner to this annoying and menial little surveillance job despite her seniority was looked upon favourably as humble initiative. No further mention had been made of their brief brush with the unexplained and undesirable. Tan had even shaken Colt's hand at the end of January when Colt officially completed his probation and made full agent, as per Scully's recommendation.

"Sometimes it's good to be proven wrong," he'd said, a bit gruffly. "Keep it up."

The door to room 623 was lucky if it was opened more than once a day, so the pair let their footage scroll without paying much mind. The occupant never left, not in almost two months of uninterrupted surveillance, and aside from the weekly grocery-bringer, visitors were few and difficult to identify. Colt idly reached under the desk for Scully's briefcase and opened it with ease on his lap, no thought at all given now to the combination lock that would have once kept him out. She tried to resist the urge to glance worriedly around the room in case they were being watched, and instead made herself keep watching her monitor. She shrunk the window so it could sit at the top of her screen while she worked on her report on the grocery-bringer.

Astrid Haut, age fifty-seven, part-time employed as a sales assistant at an optometry store selling
prescription glasses. She'd been easy enough to identify from the numerous clear shots they had of her from their three cameras still perched inconspicuously around the dingy apartment building Desmond's team had staked out before Christmas. Her cause for association with a nameless, faceless bomb-building hermit had taken a little more digging, but seemed obvious once found.

"If her son was a soldier fighting terror, why is she helping a guy building bombs?" Colt had asked instantly when Scully told him what she'd learned of the woman. He'd stood, tossing his coat and scarf on. "Give me four hours. What was his regiment?" He'd taken the page of notes from his partner without asking, checked, answered his own question. "I might be able to get some more details on that."

It had taken him all day, but he'd made good on his claim. Folders marked 'confidential' landed with a heavy thud in the centre of Scully's desk, and he'd casually refused to discuss how he got them. Astrid Haut's son James was killed in the line of duty in Iraq only three years before. A weapons malfunction was the official cause of death, but these folders revealed a 'friendly fire' incident in the middle of the night. In short, from what Scully could glean, a comrade with a short and alarming history of sudden depressive episodes and night terrors following a harrowing schoolyard bombing had woken in a dissociative state and shot three of his bunkmates, then turned the gun on himself. Post-traumatic stress disorder. Scully could diagnose it from the patient history, it was so clean-cut.

But it wasn't diagnosed. It wasn't even entertained. The soldier had gone untreated and continued to serve on the frontlines under enormous pressure, unfathomable stress and limited sleep. And he'd snapped. Now two men were dead and two would never be the same, and nobody – least of all the military – was willing to take responsibility.

And now Astrid Haut brought groceries every Tuesday to the door of room 623 for an anonymous tenant who was thought to be building explosives for antigovernment radicals. It came as no surprise, really.

Now, almost a week after the discovery that had earned them both handshakes and claps on the back, Colt glanced over at Scully's screen to see why she'd minimised her footage stream. He skimmed over what she was writing and said nothing for a bit, tapping his fingers on the briefcase on his lap. She'd been surprised by how he was taking to this kind of work. His eyes narrowed with the same mixture of contempt and regret as Scully's when they discussed how the late-night shooting had been handled by the military, and he sympathised with Astrid Haut while the other agents in their taskforce sneered her name for her traitorous allegiance. "My Nana would probably do the same if that'd happened to me over there," Colt had commented bleakly at the time. To Scully. He didn't bother sharing personal thoughts with anyone else in the department.

Neither did she, but Colt's empathy was a quality she connected with. She tried not to reflect that she saw Mulder whenever she saw Colt humanising suspects and persons of interest.

Now Colt flicked open the briefcase and flicked through the pages within. They'd agreed to continue with the investigation surrounding Rebecca Johannsson's death on the quiet, and anything new that surfaced from their feather-light brush of the case had been added to the briefcase. Not that there was much. Johannsson's husband and family had disappeared from their Boston home and Rebecca's treating doctor had resigned from the Leominster hospital where she'd died, leaving – conveniently – no forwarding address.

Despite the agreement and the brief rekindling of Scully's passion for the case, she had dragged her feet the whole way with Colt. There was nothing to go on, nothing new, and it was hard to stay motivated when even Mulder couldn't drop a hint on the international day of giving and generosity.
Keeping the investigation secretive and keeping faith that it would pay off were tiresome. She'd lived this way for so long and though she couldn't explain this to Colt, she knew he was getting the brunt of her reluctance.

To his credit, though, he had never complained. Maybe he thought that was just the way she was, stubborn and difficult and erratic. Mulder and Maggie, who knew her best, probably wouldn't disagree. Colt worked hard at their Counterterrorism assignment alongside her in the office but still seemed to have the energy to dissect and dismantle the Johannsson case with her whenever they were alone. He talked new angles in the car when they carpooled occasionally; he posited theories of motives and target groups while they worked late on summary reports in an empty office. He was relentless. He was exhausting.

Like someone else she'd known. She supposed she deserved a partner like Colt.

It was relentlessness that drove him to leaf through the briefcase periodically when he bored of their formal assignment, and relentlessness that had him dig through the papers for the lab reports that had worked their way to the bottom. Relentlessness that made him read it thoroughly once again, and casually check the underside of the page in case it was double-sided.

"When," Scully alerted him when action on her stream of footage caught her attention. She stopped the fast-forward motion and took it back to where a young man in a (surprise!) hoody and jeans came to the door and rapped expertly on the wall with his fingertips. Like the others, this visitor had his face obscured, the feed too grainy to decipher features in the shadow of the hood. A possible discriminating clue was a lock of light-coloured hair straying over one shoulder, so long that Scully paused the video and scrutinised the person's figure, checking this really was a man. The hair length was much more common for a female but the body shape, height and frame all indicated male, so she pressed 'play' to see where it went. The new visitor rapped out his password in very swift Morse code and waited, glancing up and down the hall with some tension evident in his bunched shoulders. The door opened from the inside, nobody visible to the camera angle and only the slightest sliver of the apartment's internals revealed. Grey carpet. Grey wall. The visitor slipped inside and shut the door behind him. Scully rolled the video back and took a screenshot and recorded the timestamp in her running document of visitors so she could cross-check them later against one another. "That was six-oh-three," she reported as she typed. "What time did he arrive?"

No answer. She tabbed over to the column where she was recording arrival times and glanced at Colt for his side of the data collection.

His screen was still on fast-forward.

"Hey, wake up," Scully scolded, more seriously this time, jerking her chair over to reach his keyboard to pause his footage. He barely seemed to notice. He looked up from the page he was reading and held it up for her to see.

"This isn't your writing, ma'am," he said simply, "and it isn't mine."

It was the otherwise blank back of a printed lab report. Mulder's handwriting: *Reece, November 27 1973, street killing 1979, sighted 2015.*

He'd locked the door on his way out. She kept thinking on that. She'd wiped the handle on both sides twice for prints in the weeks that followed, determined to remove all evidence he was ever there. That he'd gone through her fruitless and shut-down investigation and failed to leave anything to nudge her in the direction his faultless instincts suggested had thoroughly pissed her off. That he'd spent Christmas night in her house and not wanted to actually *speak* to her or let her know he was there and that she hadn't heard as much as a whisper from him since was more hurtful than she
wanted to acknowledge, but more than that, the fact that she'd wanted him to visit, wanted him to wake her and wanted him to maybe try once more to win her back was, in light of that had really happened, hugely embarrassing, and so out came the air freshener spray. If she could eliminate the proof of his presence maybe she could also eliminate the hurt and shame associated with it. It had begun to work.

But here, in Colt's outstretched grasp: proof that Mulder was at her dining table on Christmas night. Not leaving her hanging. Offering that little nudge, because actual wholesome evidence was too much to ask from him and that wouldn't be any fun, would it?

If only she'd held faith in him long enough to check the whole briefcase on Boxing Day – she would have found this weeks ago and followed it wherever it went rather than chasing her own tail and wasting all this time. If only.

On the topic of if only, if only he had bothered to wake her the fuck up when he was in her house – he could have just told her this message rather than hope she would stumble across it.

As always, everything the hard way…

"Still here, Agent Scully?"

She started at the unexpected voice and turned quickly towards the open door, feeling guilty; Colt was smoother, lowering the page and returning it to the briefcase in a perfectly natural motion. Assistant Director Hugh Kelley was striding towards them, big charming confident smile beaming.

"Still here, sir," she agreed obediently, and his smile, impossibly, widened.

"One day you'll slip up and call me Hugh," he joked, as usual. Predictable. He stopped right in front of her desk and glanced between her and Colt, offering him a friendly nod of acknowledgement. "Agent Colt." Acknowledgement offered; attention back to Scully. Big smile. "How long have you been sitting in front of those screens? You know you're supposed to take breaks every hour." Ugh, workplace health and safety police. He waited a beat like he was interested in their answer, but went ahead, proving he wasn't. "I'm going down the street for some decent coffee. You want to come with me, Doctor? Take your mandatory break from your workstation? You and your partner look like you could use a hit of caffeine. We can bring one back for him," he added, before she could drag her partner along as a buffer.

Well. There wasn't much room to wriggle in that proposition, was there? "Sure." He was one of the last people she would have chosen for a coffee date and her stomach turned uneasily with memory of AD Kelley spying on her and Colt's initial investigations into the Johannsson death. Obviously he didn't know that she knew that or he wouldn't still be pursuing her, and that was probably preferable. So she turned back to her screen as if she were just finishing something up – Kelley couldn't see from where he stood anyway – and typed Trace that name. Colt watched silently, and she backspaced the directive before anyone else could see it. She stood and pushed her chair in.

"Hot chocolate?" she asked Colt, who was being left behind for the sole purpose of getting Scully alone and whose health as a young person was apparently of less immediate concern to the Assistant Director, and he smiled wryly at her.

"With marshmallows?" he replied in a hopeful tone. A kid in an adult body, a big puppy. But for all his playfulness she detected the hard glint in his eye – the eagerness to follow that new scent, to get digging, to sink his teeth into something. He still had the briefcase on his lap, and she knew he'd be onto that name the second she had Kelley out of the office.

"With marshmallows?" he replied in a hopeful tone. A kid in an adult body, a big puppy. But for all his playfulness she detected the hard glint in his eye – the eagerness to follow that new scent, to get digging, to sink his teeth into something. He still had the briefcase on his lap, and she knew he'd be onto that name the second she had Kelley out of the office.

She wanted to be there with him, chasing Mulder's lead into whatever dark oblivion he'd left for
them. It would be almost as satisfying as chasing it with Mulder himself. *Mulder left us a lead!* The thought was reinvigorating.

She wound her scarf around her neck and pulled herself back into her current situation. Kelley. Colt. Hot chocolate with marshmallows. She rolled her eyes and tugged her hair out from under the scarf. "Sure, and I'll blow on it so it doesn't burn you, shall I?"

"If you don't mind."

It was only very reluctantly that she shrugged on her coat and followed Kelley out.

"I'm torn," Kelley admitted in the hallway as they walked to the elevator. "I can't decide whether I'm glad or kicking myself now I didn't go over your head and poach that partner of yours. I like what I hear about him but you two seem to get along well."

"He's a good fit for our department," Scully answered diplomatically. "I'm sure he'd be great for Counterintelligence, too, but I'm grateful you left him. He's a good agent. I appreciate his competence."

They stepped into the elevator, and Kelley waited for the doors to close before confessing, with that big abashed smile that probably charmed the pants off most women, "I'm also a little jealous you get along so well. Is that ridiculous?"

The smile widened, more teeth, more white. *That* was ridiculous. She felt her lips quirk into a smile at the thought. "Quite."

"Ah, well," he relented, so easy, so casual. He had a social grace and confident directness that she should like — it was so like what she'd always found attractive in her youth, and so unlike what she'd known in her relationship with Mulder — yet she found herself slightly on edge around him. Not to a point of high anxiety, but definitely there was unease simmering under her skin. "I can live with ridiculous. Still, I guess I should be glad in retrospect that I didn't take him, because you probably wouldn't have agreed to coffee today if I'd stolen your new best friend."

"If you'd stolen the best agent under my command," Scully corrected, "you're right, I'd probably still be bitter about it."

"Holds grudges," Kelley commented aloud, adding the note to a mental list. "I'll have to remember that one. How long do they last, on average?"

The lift took them to the ground floor and the 'G' button lit up. Scully's eyes clung to the 'B'. How long had it been since she'd visited the basement office? That would probably answer Kelley's question. She sidestepped the question. "What about you, sir? Do you tend to hold onto the past or look to the future?"

They stepped out. Kelley thought about it.

"I try to be the forgiving type," he admitted. "Key word being *try*. I like to think of myself as a forward thinker and a pretty laid-back guy… but then there are things that bug me for way too long after the fact, and I know that's something for me to work on." He shot her yet another smile, this one a little less exuberant and more gentle. "We can't all be perfect."

It was cold outside and the walk was brisk and crisp and the coffee shop was warm and pleasant, and Hugh Kelley maintained easy conversation all the way. He congratulated her on the chatter he'd heard among her superiors about her find with Astrid Haut. He pointed out advertisements on the sides of busses and asked what reviews she'd heard about those films or products, but steered
clear of treading into weightier topics like the election or religion. He listened avidly to her responses. We can't all be perfect but she was quite sure Kelley considered himself mightily close, and in many regards, he wasn't far wrong. He had that familiar, comfortable air that made her wonder whether their last conversation really was a misunderstanding of hers – he wasn't complicated enough to have been spying on Colt's access to those old cases, surely? And probably, he'd honestly forgotten what he'd come to ask her that day – he wouldn't really have tracked her down just to fish for information about the Engel file. He clearly liked her. Was it so hard to believe he just wanted to make opportunities to talk to her? Thinking otherwise was very Mulder of her.

Too bad Mulder was so often correct.

"Your partner doesn't drink coffee?"

"Inhuman, I know."

Kelley smiled at the unexpected humour and used it to slingshot into the next line of conversation. "You'd be used to that, wouldn't you?" An X-Files joke. Ha. When she didn't bite, he smoothly redirected. "You've been relatively lucky. You've always gotten along quite well with your partners, or so I'm told. Are you still in contact with John Doggett?"

"No, not since I came back to the FBI," Scully confessed. She'd looked him up. Working as the Acting Special Agent in Charge of the Sacramento field office, happily removed from their miserable basement assignment, clean as clean can be. She'd decided against calling him, but he'd called her. *Anything,* he'd said. *Any time. You have my number now.* And she knew he would be as good as his word, loyal to a fault, reliable like no one else she'd ever worked with. *I can't imagine any scenario in which I'd ask you to step back into that life, Agent Doggett.* All she would succeed in doing was drawing them both back in to what they had in common, and she couldn't do that to him. Or to herself. He'd gotten out. Good on him.

She'd left him alone ever since, having long decided that she was 'out' of that life, too. Though of course there was only so far Mulder's influence would allow her to stray.

"And what about Fox Mulder?" Kelley asked, right on cue. Scully forcibly swallowed the hot coffee in her mouth and resisted the urge to clear her throat of the discomfort that rose there. Why did it feel suddenly like this whole conversation, the ruse to get her out of the office for coffee, was intended to bring them to this very topic? And when did she get so damn paranoid?

And when did she start thinking paranoia was anything short of a survival tactic?

She played ignorant, testing the waters. "I don't expect Agents Doggett and Mulder have kept in touch. They worked the department at different times; they barely knew each other."

Kelley rolled with her game. "When was the last time *you* spoke with Fox Mulder?"

He already knew the answer. She could see it in his face as he took a calm sip of coffee. Why, then, ask? What was the real purpose here? To trip her up, to let her tie her own noose of words? She felt steadily more uneasy.

"December." His unconscious nod confirmed her suspicion. "He sent me a tip."

"That put you onto the Engel case," Kelley stated, knowingly. "Does that happen often?"

"No."
"And before that? How long was it since your last contact?"

She raised an eyebrow in lieu of frowning. "I don't know. Months. Maybe a year. We aren't on the best of terms. Why?"

"Could you get hold of him if you wanted to?" Hugh Kelley pushed a little harder, and Scully stopped in her tracks and looked at him. Someone behind her had to avert their path to avoid running into her. Kelley stopped too, looking surprised by her abrupt halt. She studied his face, trying to discern where this was going, where he stood and what he wanted from her. She thought of the phone number hidden in her contacts list. Mulder's warning voice in her head: Lie. She wasn't about to argue with instinct. When she answered her voice was measured and icy.

"If I had a dollar for every person who feigned interest in talking to me so they could get alongside Agent Mulder," she said with a cool smile. She kept her gaze hard while his fluttered down and away, caught out. She sipped her drink and felt its warmth run down her throat, felt the reassurance of Mulder's voice. Stand your ground. "Sorry to have wasted your time, Assistant Director, but no, I don't have Fox Mulder on speed dial. Who wants him?" Kelley sighed and raised his eyes, opening his mouth to begin to explain, but Scully cut him off. "Don't bother, I can guess. Your friend Agent Pierce, something about the Engel family deaths."

Kelley forced a smile. "You're too clever to be legal, Dr Scully."

"Am I? Mulder's stepped on someone's toes and the first thing the Bureau does is look at me like I'm responsible for him – if I was clever I would have buried him somewhere before returning to the FBI."

"This isn't the Bureau," he said quickly, confirming her own silent suspicions. "There's no active investigation. This is just me, asking questions – tactlessly, apparently – as a favour to a friend."

Scully nodded tightly and looked down at the warm paper cups in her hands. Hers was nearly empty. Like her patience for this conversation. AD Kelley had come to her office today with the intention of asking her about Mulder, the same way he'd sought her out in December to bring up his friend's buried cover-up case. To dissuade her from chasing down a lead that would expose another agent, and maybe others in the process. In December she'd wondered what true motives Kelley could possibly have and the implications had scared her; today any fear evaporated immediately into annoyance.

She needed a deflection. A way to turn this conversation on itself so she was getting information instead of the other way around.

"A favour," Scully repeated, and tipped her head back as she skullied the last of her coffee. It was hot, too hot to skull, but she drank it anyway, and lowered the cup with a dispassionate expression on her face. "Can you do me a favour, too, Hugh?" and she said it with disdain, the way she'd spoken to Warren Colt at Christmas, except on that occasion she'd felt bad about it. "Can you tell me why, after twenty-three years, Fox Mulder is still more interesting than I am?"

She stalked away before he could react, throwing her empty coffee cup down into a bin as she passed with more force than was necessary. Asshole. If he and anyone else Mulder had pissed off over the years wanted him, they could do their own fucking police work. She always had to. Mulder had never made it easy, least of all for her, and supposedly she was the person he most often wanted to share his adventures with. Still he hid himself in a labyrinth of false names, diversions, loyal nutcase associates, underground investigations and an irregular rotation of phone numbers, internet hotspots and physical locations. Still he wouldn't come into her house on Christmas night until he knew she was asleep, preferring to freeze in the street. Kelley could go
earn his keep and find Mulder himself.

His shiny shoes pounded the pavement as he jogged to catch up.

"Dana-"

She didn't even look back. "Agent Scully." Back in control.

"Agent Scully," he amended, voice laden with apology that sounded so genuine it could convince the most hardened sceptic. Maybe even her. He fell into step with her brisk pace. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Hey," and he caught her wrist, pulling her to a stop. Her instinct was to rip her hand free and take a step away, because despite his charming white smile and coffee-coloured skin that was so even and smooth and his excellent physical form and easy confidence, he repulsed her on a level she couldn't articulate. His touch ramped up the anxiety that had lain dormant for weeks now, safely locked away, stirred only once when a dumb kid had prank-called pretending to be her sister. But she fought the impulse and held strong. She stopped. She turned to face him, giving her full attention, as much a challenge as acquiescence. He tried the smile again, softer now, apologetic and remorseful. "I am sorry. If I just gave you the idea that I find pretty much anyone more interesting than you, it was incorrect. I find you very interesting – more interesting than I was planning to admit today, to be honest," he confessed with an awkward laugh. When she didn't even crack a smile, he sobered a little. People walked around them on the sidewalk. "I told Pierce I'd talk to you. He didn't suggest I take you out for coffee. I'm not feigning any interest, Agent."

The impulse to run away was still strong but Scully overcame it with effort and looked away to give herself a few moments to compose herself. Decide how to play the situation out.

Finally she swallowed. "I'm sorry, too. That was an overreaction."

"It's okay," he insisted instantly. His eyes sought hers. She kept them to herself for now, gazing down the street.

"I've worked very hard to move past the reputation I got working the X-Files," Scully said by way of explanation, hardly a lie, and Kelley nodded quickly and said, "Of course," in a reasonable, soothing voice, and she added, "To redefine myself as an agent in my own right. I don't need the reminder that I'll always be in Fox Mulder's shadow."

"That's not true," Kelley claimed, suitably redirected, suitably appeased that she was weak and emotional and incapable of making calculated decisions. "If your plan was to distinguish yourself, your efforts are more than paying off as far as the offices above you are concerned. You've impressed a lot of people. Anyone that still says your name and Fox Mulder's in the same breath is usually commenting on how well you've done for yourself in spite of your previous assignment, or how you both showed so much promise but you are the only one that came to anything. No one talks about your former department; whatever associations came with that have been buried under hard work, solid results and brilliant casework. There are people we pass in the hallways every day who don't even know you worked in that basement."

Good to know. Scully forced the ghost of a smile and finally looked back at Kelley. He smiled back, that stupidly charming gleaming-white smile.

"But I did," she said, and his smile faltered a little. "That's why you're standing out here in the cold with me."

"That's not why," he corrected, "but it is why Vic Pierce wanted to talk to you. I am standing in the cold with you because I'd rather you spent the half hour talking to me than to anyone else."
No wonder women in the office stared after him with dreamy faces after he chatted them up. He was good, too smooth to be allowed. Too bad his smoothness and classic good looks were counteracted with an indescribable aura of repulsion.

Scully relented. "What does Pierce want to know?" and Kelley's expression visibly cleared with relief that she would defrost a little for him.

"He started getting the hate mail again," he explained, and proceeded to tell her more than he'd probably initially intended. "Emails, calls, letters. Constant, daily. Gavin Engel, brother of Shane Engel, the deceased, is bordering on a harassment charge. He said someone came to his house and went through the case with him, and told him again that the deaths were definitely malicious and the Bureau – and Pierce – is covering it up. He hasn't let up since. Vic had put this behind him, you know? No man needs this sort of constant hassle."

"Who set Engel off? The same agent as before?"

"My first thought, and Pierce's too, was that upstart little freshie Harlow, but no," Kelley admitted. He looked back at her apologetically. "Gavin Engel said it was Fox Mulder."

Scully looked around to avoid meeting the assistant director's gaze. Mulder. Out there investigating the sides of her case that she couldn't, working in the shadows while she walked in the harshness of the light, where everyone could scrutinise her every step. Thank you.

"It's freezing," she said finally, and started walking again. Kelley turned with her and kept pace at her side. "Your friend's worried about Mulder?"

"He wants to know if he should be. Mulder's got a long-founded reputation for being less than stable. They say you know him best."

Hmm. So, no one at the Bureau mentions both names in the same breath, yet they say she's the expert on Mulder. Did that mean the previous claim was a lie, or that they were someone outside the FBI?

"What sort of trouble does your old friend like to stir up?" Kelley pressed

"All sorts," Scully answered, "if he believes in it."

"Based on what?"

"Do I look like I just flew in from pulling an all-nighter out on the case with Agent Mulder?" Scully asked cynically, and Kelley had to grin apologetically for the presumptuous question. "I wouldn't know. Something, some link or connection that no one else has seen that makes him certain, but not necessarily something he can prove."

"So it could be nothing?"

Unlikely. "Chances are, whatever Mulder thinks he's got, no one will listen to him anyway." Scully glanced quietly up at the assistant director, weighing her thoughts. "If your friend did good solid police work, like you said, then he's got nothing to worry about, least of all from Spooky Mulder."

Kelley missed the underlying sarcasm. He smirked at her swipe at her former partner.

"It sounds to me," Scully continued as they walked back to the office, Colt's hot chocolate keeping her hands warm, "that the only person your friend needs to concern himself with is this Gavin Engel."
Who, thanks to Mulder's prompt, was now squarely in the sights of the conspirators, making him unreachable to Scully.

Diverting attention off any other move she might make in this brief respite.

"On the topic of unstable," Kelley agreed. "Harassing a federal agent? He'll be in front of a judge within the week if this continues. This interference from Mulder was the last thing this man needed. He already lost his brother, as well as his sister-in-law and the niece and nephew." He exhaled, frustrated. "I wish I knew what Mulder thinks he's playing at."

"No one will ever know that. I'm sure you could think of something better to spend a wish on," Scully said, extending a hand ahead of her to push on the door to the J. Edgar Hoover Building. Mulder would have leaned past her to get it, not a thought; Colt would quicken his pace to get ahead of her to hold it for her. Kelley didn't notice, only caught it and stepped through after her when she went inside and let go.

"You're right," Kelley agreed dolefully, following her across the ground floor. "I wish I'd picked a better conversation topic. A discussion about someone you can't stand probably wasn't the most attractive thing I could have chosen to talk about."

"Nope," Scully concurred, and noted the way he glanced at her sidelong. Checking her expression, gauging, looking for a gap in the ice.

She could say goodbye here and leave things awkward and uncomfortable, and know he would chalk this one down as a loss and move on. Easy. She hadn't even needed to let him down; he'd dug his own hole.

At the elevator Scully pushed the 'up' button and inhaled slowly, weighing her options. She'd happily never see Kelley again, never have to second-guess all his cryptic commentary and secret motivations, but he plainly liked her and cheerfully divulged information to her with little manipulation. His friend was the agent who had shut down the Engel case before Agent Harlow could prove anything; Kelley and Pierce were almost certainly involved in the cover-up of those four deaths, and very possibly by extension the cover-up of Rebecca Johannsson's death, and therefore the mutated alien virus that had eaten her lungs, and therefore the whole alien conspiracy.

Hugh Kelley was a lead. A very dangerous lead.

"You can make it up to me with dinner sometime," Scully decided finally, flashing him a quick smile as the elevator doors opened. She stepped inside and turned back to him to see him smiling back, relieved and delighted.

His was nothing compared to the relief she felt when the doors closed, and she slumped against the back of the elevator.

She didn't know how she would survive a dinner date with Kelley. She was exhausted after only thirty minutes of exercising emotional control and regulating her reactions. Anxiety had her nerves dancing beneath her skin. Dinner would kill her.

She inhaled again and leaned forward to jab at the floor numbers to get the lift moving. Dinner was 'sometime', not tonight, and she would cross that ill-advised bridge when she came to it. In the meantime, she could shelve her anger with Mulder for standing her up at Christmas and try to feel grateful for him instead. He'd reignited the spark in the Engel family and drawn federal attention back to that case, which meant that those who were too ignorant or naïve before might take notice of it this time, and those involved in burying it would be on damage control. This isn't the Bureau.
There's no active investigation. The movements of Scully, previously under close watch, had the potential to go unnoticed.

If she was quick.

She pushed another button and changed levels, and took Colt's lukewarm chocolate on a walk to the office she'd been called into dozens of times during her first decade with the Bureau. The secretary looked surprised to see her and let her through almost immediately, no appointment necessary. Walter Skinner was even more surprised.

"What's wrong?" he asked instantly, standing, and Scully made herself smile, realising she had come in with the expression of determination that had struck her in the elevator.

"Nothing," she insisted. "An awkward conversation on my way here, that's all." She gestured questioningly at the chairs opposite him, and he nodded invitingly, and they both sat facing each other across the table. She put the takeaway cup down. "I wondered if you could confirm some things for me."

Skinner's expression became wary. "Possibly. What sort of 'things', Agent Scully?"

"Am I under internal surveillance, sir?"

Long pause.

"Of course not."

"You don't know of anyone watching me? Tracking my cases?"

"I would tell you if I suspected anyone had it in for you. Why would you ask that?"

"Just curious," she lied calmly, fooling no one.

"What's happened?" Skinner demanded, voice low. "What's got you worried?"

"Has Mulder's name been flagged recently?"

Skinner frowned and leaned closer across the big desk. "The last time I heard his name in these halls, I came straight to you. Agent Scully – what is going on?"

"When you came and saw me in December," Scully clarified, "what exactly had you heard?"

"Just in passing, a reference to a case you wanted to open. They weren't happy about it. They said you met Mulder in Boston. I was lucky to overhear that, and haven't heard anything since." He eyed her. "Why? You expected I would have heard something?"

"I don't want to say too much-"

"You never do," Skinner recalled, and they smiled thinly at each other. He went serious again. "Are you safe, Agent? I can organise a security detail-"

"No, I'm fine," she insisted, waving her hands dismissively to stop him when he reached for his phone. "I don't believe I'm in any danger at this time, sir. I'm just checking all possibilities before I jump to any conclusions."

"Then I take it you listened at Christmas when I told you to back off whatever you had followed him into."
There was only so much honesty she could ever offer Walter Skinner, even if they were friends and allies – she knew his position, the way looking out for her could counteract so strongly with pressure from up high that he seemed at times to be impossibly crushed between his loyalties.

"I need to know if an agent still works for the Bureau," she said finally, opting to divert completely and offer him plausible deniability should this ever implode. It wasn't too artful a diversion and it wasn't lost on him, but he didn't fight it. "I can't do the search myself because despite an apparently sparkling reputation and a near-total disassociation from Mulder, I'm still the first name that comes to mind when somewhere, out there, he crosses someone's line."

"So, this is a case you're working with Mulder?" he read into that, and she refused to allow any answer to affect her face.

"That would be irregular," she replied. "This is my case. I think someone thinks I'm working a case with Mulder, or in which Mulder is involved, and may be keeping tabs on some of my activities, including online."

Skinner raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Do you have evidence to back that claim, Agent Scully? That's very serious."

"I'm not making a claim," she answered, because, no, she had no evidence, only mad leaps to conclusions only Mulder would have openly admitted to making. "I'm not certain of anything yet, but I am confident that searching for Agent Harlow on my own log-in will lead to yet another 'casual' conversation translating roughly to 'leave it alone'."

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this?" Skinner asked, brow furrowed in concern. Scully momentarily considered Colt, decided he didn't count.

"No."

Her old friend sat back in his seat. "You could try following their advice. You could leave it alone. It could be wise."

"Could be," she agreed. "You could search the name for me."

He regarded her for so long. Then he turned to his computer and brought up a search. "For your sake," he said sternly as he typed, "this had better not be an errand for Mulder."

"I don't run errands for Mulder," Scully answered coolly, and the assistant director clicked something and read quickly.

"Natalie Harlow," he read from the screen. "Doctor in immune biology and virology. Currently assigned to the Federal DNA Database Unit at Quantico. Do you want the phone number?"

"No, thanks." Scully committed the details to memory. Somehow, she hadn't expected 'that upstart little freshie Harlow' to be someone so established and qualified. She should have known better than to let Kelley's portrayal of the agent taint her own perspective. She stood. "I appreciate the help, sir."

"I'm not sure I did much to help you," he answered. "If you thought you were in trouble, you would come to me, right? You would say so?"

She picked up Colt's room-temperature chocolate and smiled at Skinner. "If I thought I was in trouble and that you could help me without falling in the same pit, yes, definitely, you would be my first port of call."
He didn't look too impressed with that distinction and pursed his lips. "You don't want to hear it, but you're more like him now than you were when you shared that basement."

He was right. She didn't want to hear that.

Back in her current office, agents were busy at their work stations, eyes glued to screens, ears to phones, hands to keyboards and pens and notepads. Colt was the only one who noticed her come in, and he stood, snatching up a handful of printed pages and an A4 envelope and striding quickly towards her.

"Walk with me," he instructed, and she turned and followed him back out. She passed him his drink in silence, waiting for him to talk. She recognised the electric fervour that radiated from him. The same way Hugh Kelley's aura of charm and sleaze and ruthlessness repelled her, this Mulder-like spark intrigued her and was enough to make her follow him without question to the lifts, inside, and to stand patiently while he pressed the button to close the doors. He asked, promptly upon the doors shutting them in alone, "Where can we go that no one will hear us?"

Scully didn't reply, but her action provided the answer. She leaned without any consideration at all to press the 'B' button, and then the lift was descending, all the way down to the lowest floor.

She didn't quite realise what she'd done until they arrived and the doors slid apart. Her breath caught on the exhale, surprised by her own initiative. The hall was still uninviting and ill-lit, ill-used and cluttered with boxes no one had wanted to properly store. The door to Mulder's office was closed; his nameplate was gone, nothing to replace it. Scully waited for the rush of anxiety and resentment and disquiet that would surely accompany this long-avoided reunion with her former workspace.

It didn't come. She felt only calm. Like coming home. What an ironic thought.

Colt moved past her into the hallway, unaware of the significance. She stepped out after him, and the door closed, and the lift left.

"I didn't even know this was down here," Colt admitted, looking around.

"No one will bother us. What did you want to tell me?"

"Excuse me, ma'am, but it's pretty screwy," Colt said worriedly. "I know you're open-minded but this… if I'm putting it together properly… and I think I am… it's more than weird."

"Try me," Scully prompted. Still he hesitated. "Imagine you've forgotten all the rules. What's possible, what's not, what's normal… Just tell me what you found."

All business, Colt put the drink and the big envelope down on top of a pile of nearby boxes, and used the neighbouring tower as a tabletop. He spread the papers across the boxes so she could see.

"Reece Jonathan Dwyer," he said, pointing to the first page, a missing person's poster. "Disappeared from Iowa as a teenager in 1973. Apparently never found. Then over here," and he gestured to a second sheet, "a Reece Johnathan Dwyer, slightly different spelling, appears in DC in the late seventies with a number of minor arrests. Break-ins, minor theft, drunk and disorderly behaviour, suspicion of drug use, vagrancy. Homeless, apparently. He's found dead in 1979 following a pretty hard-core hit in some back alley, identified as the same Reece Johnathan Dwyer by fingerprints. Still no link made by any investigative authority between the missing boy and the dead vagrant."

"But you think they're one and the same?" Scully checked, and saw the photographic evidence her
partner had dug up in his short time alone and no longer needed an answer. The pimply teen in the 1973 missing person's advert wore the same overlong, slightly ratty platinum blonde hair as the hollow-eyed criminal photographed upon arrest for breaking into a DC apartment and stealing cash and jewellery in 1977. The narrow shape of the face and indistinct eyebrows made it even clearer – without a doubt, these were the same person. Authorities working in different divisions in different states had managed to never connect these two cases.

"It gets weirder," Colt asserted, drawing her attention to a third sheet. She frowned; he nodded knowingly. "Whoever got into your briefcase to leave us that tip is onto something, ma'am. This is a drivers' licence for one Reece J. Dwyer, issued by the state of Maryland in 2014."

Better fed, hair brushed but still slightly unkempt, eyes clear of drugs but still somewhat haunted… It was, without a doubt, the same man.

Alive.

Unaged since 1977.

"It's his son," Scully decided. "It has to be."

"It's not," Colt contended. "The original Reece Dwyer died before this one's licence claims he was born."

The same man.

"You're right," Scully said, standing back. "It's impossible." She looked up at him. "I'm going to leave you alone at that computer more often. You pulled this together so fast."

"You really don't know whose handwriting this is?" Colt pushed, turning over the lab report and displaying Mulder's clue again. Scully shrugged.

"It looks familiar," she said vaguely. She went back to gazing at Colt's makeshift tabletop. "How can someone die, and come back to life with no one noticing, and proceed to not age?"

She'd seen Mulder die, seen him come back six months later. Still had no decent explanation for how or why that should be possible, but it happened, whatever official documentation might say. Even he, though, had continued to age as normal upon his resurrection. What made Reece Dwyer special? How was this possible?

And why had Mulder left her this very obscure clue?

"Give me that poster again," she said, dragging the first document, the reproduction of the missing person's advert, closer with a fingertip. She read through the details.

And understood.

"I need to find him," Scully announced suddenly. She looked between the grainy printed photographs in growing excitement. "I need to talk to him. He's back from the dead and he could tell us so much."

"How is this guy connected to our case?" Colt asked urgently, leaning down to get eye contact with her again. "Yeah, it's weird – the source isn't wrong about that – but what connection is there with Rebecca Johannsson? Why would anyone write that on one of our lab reports?"

"Because it's all part of the puzzle."
"What puzzle?"

"This Reece Dwyer, we need to meet him and find out what he knows-"

"About what, ma'am?" Colt demanded, and by now they were both talking in strained, hushed voices with their heads close together. Scully stared at him, wondering how he could not have put it together yet, and remembered that Warren Colt was not Fox Mulder, and did not have the X-Files memorised, and was only new to all of this.

"It's the date that's significant," she explained, trying to calm down and be patient with him. She showed him the 'Missing' poster. "November 27, 1973. Numerous unsolved missing person cases from across the country originate from that date. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of two dozen."

Colt frowned. "All the same day? All unsolved?"

"Officially." She prepared to hit him with the suggestion that had taken her many years to swallow. "Unofficially, they may have been mass-abducted by the government as part of a project working towards cloning human and alien DNA to protect an elite future generation against a killer alien virus similar to the one I found in Rebecca Johannsson's lungs."

Colt stared at her. Blinked. Tilted his head. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Is this for real?" he asked, trying to smile, trying to get her to tell him she was joking. When she didn't, he stared at her for another long moment, and then blurted out, "How do you even know this sort of stuff?"

Scully winced. "I've been trying to avoid admitting that I worked a couple of these sorts of cases, not just the one I showed you."

"And you're perfectly okay with believing what you just told me? You worked the case and saw evidence and honestly believe that."

"It was the only explanation that made sense."

"Made sense," he repeated, looking away and finally taking a swig of his drink, which by now could not be called a hot chocolate. He almost spat it out. "I was only joking about blowing on it to cool it down."

"Please don't talk to anyone else about this, Colt," Scully reminded him, scooping up the pages and folding them up. "I can't be heard talking about alien conspiracies."

"Don't worry, I know the drill," he assured her, looking about for a bin. "Like I'm going to mention it to anyone. Okay," he said now, turning back to face her. "Aliens are real. An extraterrestrial virus is in the possession of parties unknown, but multiple governments know about it. People have been their test subjects in the past. They may be now, too. Reece Dwyer is probably one of those subjects. How am I doing so far?"

"Surprisingly well," Scully admitted. She grabbed the A4 envelope so they didn't leave it behind and went for the elevator 'up' button. The envelope was thick, full of paper. She watched the numbers change slowly as the carriage came down for them.

"Zombies, aliens and killer viruses controlled by governments," Colt muttered. "Makes sense." He hadn't located a bin, so returned to her side as the elevator arrived. He gestured at the envelope she
held and they got back into the lift. "That came for you, almost the minute you left. Courier."

Surprised, she turned it over and saw her details printed neatly in the addressee section. She didn't recognise the handwriting. The sender was apparently one T.E. Shillings from Shillings & Hertz Investment Solutions. She'd never heard of them, and hadn't asked for any investment advice. She tore the end of it open as the lift took them back up.

Inside were dozens of neatly stapled pages. She didn't bother to pull them all out, but those she did see at first glance were obviously not pamphlets on investing. A napkin was pressed flat between the first page and the front of the envelope. She slid her hand into the narrow fit of the very full envelope and pulled it out.

Again, this time on the napkin, her name and details were accurately transcribed.

This time, she recognised the hand.
Sometimes it was easier to just stay away completely.

And other times, it was just too hard. Mulder glanced for the fiftieth time at the takeaway menu he'd received from Gavin Engel, tacked to his dashboard, handwritten message across the coffee section. He knew the words off by heart, knew it was probably unwise to follow their directions, but curiosity was his greatest weakness.

*Our mutual friend wants to meet. Thursday 6pm. 64*

It had come as a surprise, when he'd knocked on Gavin Engel's front door, to see excited recognition in the stranger's face; an even greater surprise when the screen door had flung open and the man's hand had eagerly grasped Mulder's, and he'd said, relieved and delighted, "Mr Mulder. She said you would come."

Who *she* was, the man seemed very reluctant to say. Apparently she'd asked to remain anonymous, only asking Engel to pass on the takeaway menu when the man called Mulder, formerly of the FBI and *exactly* the person the Engel family needed to talk to in order to get their case moving again, turned up. Which she'd been confident he would, and now he had.

The Engels had not lost hope that their family's losses would eventually get the notice they deserved, and had maintained without a doubt in their minds that the FBI's label of a medical tragedy was, in their words, "bullshit". Collectively, Gavin Engel, his sister, his parents and cousin Marcus had kept copies of everything they'd had access to during the original investigation, while
one Agent Harlow ran it and before one less-popular Agent Pierce had railroaded it and made everything from the police report to the hospital records to the other agent suddenly disappear. They'd all materialised at a single call from Gavin, and within an hour Mulder was sitting at the dining table with the whole family, all with the same look of tortured hope in their eyes, going through the case with them, getting it clear in his head and learning the case's strengths and holes. It had been all too easy, by the looks of things, for this guy Pierce to bulldoze this Harlow off into obscurity and rip this case up before she could stop him. Had she been Mulder or even Scully, this would not have happened, they would never have allowed it, but Marcus Engel said she was young – "I don't think she knew what hit her, and then she was gone."

Maybe Agent Harlow didn't have the balls or the clout to follow through with this investigation, but Mulder looked into these desperate faces and thought of the briefcase on Scully's dining table on Christmas night and knew she wouldn't drop it. She might tiptoe around it, cautious as she always was, but that was the point, wasn't it? Scully would keep her hands clear of this case and touch only what no one else was looking at, Mulder would work its dirtier avenues and shoulder any blame or backlash, and when the time came finally to bring it to the surface, to prosecute and point those fingers, it would be Scully, with her clean hands, doing the pointing. He was working from the assumption that she'd guessed his strategy, since it was not far removed from their usual working relationship, but knew that even if she hadn't, she would behave in the same way, regardless. He knew her. She could not close her eyes on the injustice done to this family, and to the Johannssons and who knew how many others, any more than he could.

Plus she had that new partner now, and he seemed motivated enough to keep her on the right track.

The Lion's Share was an independently owned family-style takeaway restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio. Their menu boasted burger meals, twelve flavours of milkshake and pizza calzones. Cross-state driving with haste and determined to be there by 6pm Thursday, not knowing if the message referred to this Thursday or if he'd missed the appointment, Mulder was getting hungry and appreciating his 'mutual friend's suggestion of meeting at a restaurant.

Scully's voice in his head, these days the oft-present voice of condescending reason, reminded him that he should have sent for her. Back in Boston when they'd met over Rebecca Johannsson's corpse, they'd agreed that this was her case, and though circumstances since had made it impossible for him to totally bow out (it was much, much bigger than he'd thought when he'd left her those messages with the FBI phone operator) he knew that he was walking into an unknown situation without a clue. What if he was walking straight into the conspirators' hands? This poorly considered choice could rule him out of the game completely, and then Scully and the case would be frozen in stasis. Any silly choice was much safer with her beside him, or at least waiting in the wings with knowledge of where he was going.

But what if he was being watched? What if she was? What if it was a trap? In any of those cases, it was best she were not involved.

And she'd probably tell him not to go, and that wasn't an option.

The sky was dark by the time he arrived in Cleveland. His navigator found The Lion's Share easily, and he found a parking spot almost right outside the door. It was quiet tonight. A couple of families sat together in booths or at the bar on animal-print stools, drinking milkshakes and chewing on fries and burgers and calzones. Mulder was on his guard but saw nothing to indicate a set-up.

Nor did he see anyone that looked familiar. He sat down in an empty booth and ordered a large cheeseburger meal when the waitress came by with her notepad. He glanced at his watch. Five past six. He hoped he hadn't missed the deadline.
He wondered whether Scully had liked her new watch.

He hadn't seen her in almost two months, though he thought of her every day, usually first thing in the morning and late at night, or whenever something funny or profound struck him and he turned to tell her, and of course she wasn't there. Which he told himself he was okay with – he'd made steady advances on her investigation, as well as opened and closed two of his own, much smaller jobs.

He'd gone way longer without her before. She was probably glad for the break from him and the drama he brought with him. He was afraid to ever ask when they met in case she said yes.

Ten past six.

Quarter past. The meal arrived. He demolished the fries.

Twenty past. He got into the burger and glanced around the diner. A young woman in a headscarf sitting with her dad got up and went to the bathroom. There was no other movement in the place.

Twenty-five past six. The burger was gone, the milkshake was amazing, the young woman had returned to her table and collected her car keys from her older companion, and left. A family got up and went to pay at the counter.

Half past. Everything was eaten and consumed. The waitress cleared it all away. The family was gone. The older man got a phone call. Another family ordered milkshakes for dessert.

Mulder figured he'd missed the appointment. He got out his wallet and started to count out notes.

Someone dropped heavily into the booth opposite him. The gentleman from the other side of the diner.

"Can't be too careful," he said gruffly, glancing around as he slid further along the bench seat. "Had to be sure you weren't followed."

Mulder put the notes down on the table and regarded his 'mutual friend'. He'd never met the man before this evening, he was sure, but he looked painfully familiar. Roughly Mulder's own age, he had thinning, curly hair that was already steely grey and loose, stubbly skin, like someone who'd lost weight suddenly and recently.

"I got your message," Mulder said, taking the menu Gavin Engel had saved for him out of his jacket and laying it on the table. "I take it we have shared interests."

The other man had been gazing worriedly out the window, shoulders crouched low to avoid being seen, but now cast a distrustful look at Mulder. "You don't know who I am. You haven't put it all together then?"

Mulder shrugged. "If I had it all figured out I wouldn't still be chasing leads." He looked over the man's face once more, trying to determine whether maybe he had seen him somewhere before. Cursed with a photographic memory, he was quite certain he'd seen this face, but he couldn't envision any scenario in which they might have met. And those eyes... Green with that ring of hazel like gold around the outside of the iris. They were the most familiar of all. He'd seen them recently.

The other looked at him for a very long time. Then, "Goddamn it. I don't have anyone else to trust. Gray."
It took a moment for that disjointed statement to clear in Mulder's brain as an introduction, another moment for the name to stand out to him and still another for him to make the connection. The obvious connection.

"Gray. Henry Gray?"

"Do you know another Dr Gray?"

An X-file flooded his memory, facts and details and photos. Photos of this man, pre- and post-mortem. In his last living photograph he was laughing, four-year-old daughter on his lap, beer in hand. He was heavier in that photo, but healthier, and about five years younger than he appeared now – thirty-five years later. Mulder wondered how wide his eyes had gone. Zombie scientist? Scully's voice in his head told him to get real and act reasonable. "I read your file, a long time ago. It says you died in 1981."

Which, evidently, you did not, sir.

"I did."

Take that, voice of reason.

"They tell me you're the one to talk to," Gray said dubiously. "You weren't my first choice. They said you're the gatekeeper. They say you'll believe anything I've got to say but you're the real deal, that I can buy your loyalty with the truth. Is that true?"

Supposedly a college biology professor, Henry Gray had been murdered along with his elderly mother with the same alien virus that had later been used to take out his daughter. It seemed safe to assume that Gray was more than just a teacher. That he was no longer dead, despite being distinctly dead in photographs in his case file, and that he'd avoided thirty years of aging, made him all the more interesting.

"Dr Gray, if you're asking if you can trust me, yes, you can trust me," Mulder promised. "You can bet I'll act on what you tell me but not at risk of betraying my source. I don't burn my bridges, sir. I'm in the business of exposing the truth, not exposing whistleblowers."

The formerly deceased scientist still didn't look convinced.

"Oh, I've got truths, alright. What I've got to tell you will shake governments. It puts people I love at immense risk. I cannot let anything happen to them. Sixty-Four hid them but if I tell you what you want to know – how I'm alive, who I'm protecting, what I'm protecting them from and what's coming for them – you must swear to get them to safety. I mean it." He looked stern yet desperate. "I'm trusting you with everything I have, Mr Mulder."

Mulder's curiosity was aflame; his heart twinged in sympathy for a man whose righteousness had endangered his family. Respect, brother. He offered his hand across the table.

"No harm will come to the Johannssons," he said sincerely, knowing innately who they were talking about, remembering Sixty-Four's post-it note. "I will do anything in my power to protect them."

Gray clearly didn't feel up to trusting him but found himself without a better choice. He grasped Mulder's hand and shook it once.

"I want them underground," he said. "Witness protection, maybe. I don't know. I want them impossible to find, even for me. It's the only way for them to be safe."
That hit home. Thinking of Scully and William, Mulder nodded. "I'll arrange it. I have contacts in the FBI. We can ensure there's no paper trail to follow." He paused, seeing Gray's green eyes slowly start to absorb the reassurance. "They're your grandchildren, aren't they?"

"I died at forty-eight years old and I had a four-year-old baby girl. When I woke up I had three grandkids. Go figure. You'll want a pen," Gray said roughly, trying to cover his emotion by breaking eye contact and delving into his pockets for folded-up sheets of notebook paper. Mulder retrieved one from his own inner pocket, patient. Gray tossed the paper onto the table. "Those are the rest of the hits."

Mulder unfolded the topmost page and found a list of addresses. "Hits?"

"Targets for testing the virus," Gray said simply, and Mulder glanced up at him, unsure he'd heard correctly. Was that a straight answer in direct relation to an alien conspiracy? The scientist kept going. "In order of intended assassination. The first one's already been administered. I expected you weeks ago. Even tonight I was worried you'd stood me up again."

He'd come here every Thursday night at six since leaving that menu with Gavin Engel. He made a show of wanting to avoid sharing with Mulder but it was just that: a show. He was desperate to ally with him and get this all out in the open.

"How do you know this?" Mulder asked, despite a large host of other questions clamouring to be raised. Again, Gray didn't hesitate.

"Because I work for them."

"Who's them?"

"Them. The Worldwide Family of Hosts, if you want a label, but them, Mr Mulder."

The name struck a chord of memory. He'd seen that name only recently, brushed it off as an irrelevant link while trying to find the connection between Harvey Newman's leaked documents, the meeting in LA of men who had office space in the Clayton Building and the Russian major who'd risked his life to give Mulder four coordinates, locations he claimed would be invaded come 2012. "Who are they?"

"Do your homework. I'm not here to write the case for you. I'm just here to tell you how I fit into it, because that's what you won't find out from anyone else, and that's what you need to know to understand how vital it is that you crack this open. Anyway, I couldn't even tell you half the names," Gray confessed. "They don't deal with me directly. Pledge Three handles me."

"They go by numbers?" Mulder asked, thinking of the notes. 64. He wondered whether Scully had tracked down Reece in DC yet and what she'd learned from him.

"Anyone revived to serve got a number. I don't have a number. I'm alive because they need me. It's my work they're basing their project on. My research and experimentation with the extraterrestrial genetic coding. It's easier to revive me and put me back to work than to teach what I know to someone else. They tried," the scientist mentioned wistfully, "with Shane. They used him to build the delivery device, but he backed out and tried to go to the authorities. I think you know what happened to him and his family."

The Engels had all been quite unclear on what Shane did for work, other than 'engineer'. This seemed to answer the question.
"You said they revived you?"

"Multiple times," Gray concurred. "I've been the subject of my own experiments, against my will, for insubordination more than once. It's extremely painful, feeling your lungs dissolve in your chest at differing rates each time, choking on your own blood and flesh. I can't begin to describe it." He allowed Mulder a moment to cringe and fully appreciate his torment. "It's the purpose of the virus, my strain, I'm sure you know. To devour the lungs and vascular system, and nothing else."

"Leaving the rest of the body mostly unaffected. Noted."

"Shallow burns to the face and such can be corrected through their healing techniques post-revival, but there are limitations to that technology. The regrowth of the lungs is the priority. Human lungs are weak. Susceptible to this virus and many others, for one, but also unsuitable for prolonged periods in space."

Mulder frowned. "Why should that matter?"

Gray looked out the window skittishly. "A lot of effort goes into selecting subjects and infecting them. The delivery method is far from perfect, as is the reproductive system of the creature. All that effort – you want the end result to be the best possible being it can be, am I right? Especially if space is where you come from."

"Alright," Mulder conceded, moving on quickly, not really understanding but needing to cover as much ground as he could. "You said they experimented on you as well."

"As a means of control, yes. But," Gray said, voice tightening, "when the threat of excruciating death proved ineffective in keeping me in line, Pledge Three made sure the next subject was my Rebecca. My daughter." His green eyes, so similar to the glassy sightless eyes of Rebecca Johannsson, met Mulder's. They were empty. Broken. "You saw her."

"In the Birkshires, yes," Mulder agreed softly. "After."

"She didn't even know I was still alive," Dr Gray said tonelessly, looking away and around the diner. "I never went back to her or her mother. Kept tabs, once I woke up. But never went back for her. It was safer, I thought." His face went tight. "I was wrong."

"You did what you thought was right," Mulder offered, and Gray gave him a sharp look.

"You don't understand," he said harshly. Still hurting. "Can you imagine walking away from a life with your child, letting them grow up without ever knowing you, assuming they're safe and happy but never knowing?"

"I don't need to imagine," Mulder answered. "I wonder about him every single day of my life, and wish to hell and back that I could relive that moment I chose my work over him and walked out that door. I'd stay home with them, or pack them into my car and just drive, anywhere. Then I wouldn't need to wonder."

Up to this point in the conversation, it had seemed apparent that Gray was reporting to Mulder because he felt he had to tell someone. Now his loose-skinned face softened with shared loss.

"Rebecca had a life of her own. Kids. She didn't deserve to die for my disobedience. I bet Pledge Three thought it was good and poetic that she should die by my work. May as well have killed her myself." He was opening up now, voice thickening with emotion.

"This Pledge Three," Mulder redirected, not wanting to let the scientist spiral into his misery. "He
determines who is experimented on? He compiled this list?" He waved the notepaper with the list of addresses. Gray nodded.

"Not just experiments. Rebecca was an experiment. Shane Engel was an experiment. In those cases, death was the main event. Punishment. The others, mostly, are hand-selected. It's their bodies the Hosts want. Death is just the quickest way to get at them."

"What's the criteria? How does he choose the victims?"

"I don't know. Troublemakers, I think."

"I should watch myself, then." Mulder was scribbling madly on the back of the paper. He knew he would remember most of this conversation but didn't want to risk losing track of important details.

Gray's eyes had gone distant. "They brought her to me, after you saw her. They wanted to make sure I knew what I'd cost myself." His mouth went thin as he struggled to keep emotion trapped inside. "I can never have her back. Lungs can be regrown because that's the project's purpose but regeneration has a limit, and it falls far short of mending a sawed-open rib cage, reconnecting disorganised and dissected organs, sealing a sliced trachea..." Dr Gray looked back at Mulder, eyes hard, and Mulder stopped writing. "An autopsied body cannot be revived."

Oh. Mulder dropped the pen slowly and leaned back in his seat, thoughts back-peddling wildly. Oh. He'd massively misjudged the direction of the conversation, and couldn't resist a quick glance around the diner. Coming here was ill-advised. Shit, shit...

Gray said tightly, "I want to talk to her. Your doctor. I saw her on the surveillance tape."

Mulder was already shaking his head no. "Sorry. Can't be done."

"They said her name. Scully. Dana. Have her meet me or our alliance ends here, Mr Mulder," Gray said staunchly, leaning back also. Mulder tried not to frown, disliking the ultimatum and disliking what the scientist was telling him.

They knew he had involved Scully and they knew exactly who they were. "You need me," Gray added stubbornly. "Since they took out Dragomirov and sanitised that Harvey boy, there's no one else who can help you like I can."

"Doesn't mean I can snap my fingers and make somebody appear," Mulder said dismissively, demonstrating. In reality, he was withholding a sigh of relief that he'd refrained from calling Scully out here. As far as Gray was concerned, she was to blame for the permanence of his daughter's death.

"I think you can," Gray countered. "What will it take? I'm not interested in working with only you, Mr Mulder, unless she's part of the deal. I overheard Pledge Three talking about you. He said you work with her often."

"Not that often anymore," Mulder corrected. He decided to try for reasonable. "Listen, Dr Gray – what you've told me today, what you could share in a testimony, it's enough to tip the whole game board over. You're right. I need you. You need me, too, and if we're going to take these people on, we," he gestured between them, "need her. You must understand the precariousness of my position. You and I want the same thing, and there aren't enough people in the same boat as us for me to burn a bridge just because I've built a new one with you. Dr Scully is my resource, and I will decide if she needs to be involved. So far, nothing you've said has convinced me I need to play that card."

"These people," Gray repeated darkly. "These aren't people, Mr Mulder."
"What are they, then?" *Just say the words.*

Gray raised an eyebrow and let that be his answer.

Mulder said nothing, too. Taking a chance on Sixty-Four's message on The Lion's Share menu was a long shot but it had paid off with more direct information than he'd received from a single source pretty much ever, and in this one conversation he'd taken leaps and bounds toward answering the biggest questions of his working life. With Gray he could *end this.* End his obsession. Close the case. Expose the conspiracy. Stop the invasion that had already begun. Sleep at night. But if Dr Gray thought that Mulder would trade in Scully...

"Arrange a meeting for me with your doctor and I'll give you Pledge Three," Gray pressed enticingly. "The worst of them. I can tell you where he lives, what he's done. How he's alive, him and the other numbered ones. The experiments will stop. He's all the evidence you need to finish this whole crusade of yours. You can use him to untangle the *entire* conspiracy, right down to the deepest and most insidious root."

Mulder sighed, regretful, because if he could guarantee his partner's safety it would seem like an *excellent* deal. "He's no good to me if you've killed my insider. Scully is FBI. I need her to prosecute this case and bring it into the light. Otherwise it's just me, and I'm all too easy to label a raving lunatic."

"Kill your insider?" It was Gray's turn to frown. "I don't want to hurt your doctor, Mr Mulder. I just want to meet her. Just consider it, will you?" He waited a beat while Mulder regarded him with uncertainty. "I think we've confused each other. If she's with the Bureau, you may need her help getting some of those names into protective custody," he suggested, reaching across the table to tug the list of addresses back into the centre where they could both see it. He stabbed a finger at the top two names. "Don't bother with the first two. Dunn was infected yesterday. He'll be dead by the weekend. And they hit Powell on Monday, so I expect he's already *not* at the morgue."

*Stephen Powell. Austin Dunn.*

Real people, living and breathing and loved by family or friends or both.

"Isn't there something that can be done for them?" Mulder asked. "If I get to them early, this guy Austin Dunn, before the disintegration gets too advanced...?" Gray's head was shaking, and Mulder heard his question trail away. "You mean, there's nothing? No treatment?"

"No reversal, no cure. I should know. I designed it in its current form."

"Why would you design something so terrible?"

"Because they told me they'd kill my daughter if I didn't." Dr Gray's eyes were cold again, unapologetic. "You're a parent. You know that no matter how *wrong* something is, nothing is so wrong you wouldn't do it for your own child. And I did this for mine. I doomed humanity for Rebecca Rose."

Mulder stared at him, knowing there was nothing he could say. Henry Gray was a brilliant, brilliant scientist. He understood, fully, the consequences of what he'd done for his masters. He understood his own folly. He'd seen his colleague Shane Engel suffer those consequences, and now he'd lost his daughter to it, too.

He cleared his throat. It sounded painful. "The reason Rebecca is dead," Gray went on, "is that I botched the last experiment. Bought our race a little extra time. Pledge Three saw what I'd done.
He administered it to Rebecca instead of the next test subject on the list."

"How did you botch it? What are the experiments for? It seems obvious that the strain kills very effectively."

"Manipulation of the virus at the level of the DNA, like I did, has side-effects," Gray admitted. "My recreation of it has an unstable cell composition. They never mature sufficiently to be able to divide naturally, and so it cannot reproduce. Once the spores take root and the virus activates inside the lungs, it starts to eat, and it eats fast; once it runs out of food, the cells die. There's no reproductive cycle. The experiments are an attempt to slow the virus's metabolic rate and therefore lengthen the lifespan to give the cells time to mature."


"It's never been contagious in this form," Gray said, starting to sound urgent, reaching the whole point of this meeting tonight. "That never seemed to bother anyone. It was just a weapon. When I got cold feet they used it on me. That should have been the end of it. But then 2012 happened, and now I'm awake again and working for other guy, and they want a stockpile of healthy, lungless dead bodies to revive. Mr Mulder," he said, dropping his voice and leaning forward when the waitress passed them, "if they get this monstrosity to reproduce, there won't be any stopping it. It will pass from one victim to the next, wildfire. It can't be treated. It can't be fought with antibiotics or any modern medications. It will kill us all, and we'll be powerless to save ourselves. I'm stalling as best I can but I know they're looking for my grandchildren, and I can't promise I'll choose the ethical path when they've got one of Rebecca's children on the other table."

It was a fair call. "They're trying to create an epidemic. Why?"

"Invasion. Haven't you heard?"

"I heard it already started."

"Do your homework," Gray said again, looking out the window. A car in the parking lot had switched its headlights on. He abruptly slid across the bench seat. "I need to go. Consider my offer. Let me meet your doctor and you can have Pledge Three. You won't be disappointed, I promise."

"Scully did the autopsy at my request," Mulder said now, stilling the scientist. "If you want to blame someone, blame me."

There was a long pause, in which the other man stared blankly at the tabletop. "I do blame someone," said Gray. "Myself. I made the beast. I made it incurable. I crossed the wrong people and called their bluff. The only thing I did right was bribe her treating doctor at Leominster into sending her body to the wrong morgue. Pledge Three had submitted transfer paperwork to get her to Boston even before she expired: he had pledges waiting there to collect her. The redirect to the Birkshires sent them into a tailspin, and, apparently, bought enough time for fate to intervene. I never believed in fate before this Christmas, Mr Mulder," he confessed now, "but I can't help thinking that you finding her at that County Morgue... Calling in your friend at the Bureau... I would never have seen your faces on that surveillance video, never have known there was another way I could fight them. I would have let them win. I would have let them use me to destroy the world, Rebecca's kids included."

He got heavily to his feet.

"I'll have Sixty-Four contact the Russians," he said, standing beside the booth. "They'll know to
expect you, once you get that far down this godforsaken rabbit hole, and they'll put you back in touch with me. Until then, don't try to contact me."

"The kids," Mulder said. "Rebecca's husband. Where are they?"

"I don't know. Sixty-Four will give you the address in a couple of days. Please – protect them like you would protect your own family. They're all I have left."

Henry Gray, reincarnated scientist, headed for the restaurant's doors. Mulder stood suddenly, millions of questions still spinning around his head but choosing the most pertinent, the one that could not wait for next time.

"Dr Gray," he said, making the man pause with the door open. "Why do you want to meet Dr Scully?" The other stared, so Mulder elaborated. "You said I had it wrong; you don't want to hurt her. You don't blame her? For Rebecca?"

"No, I don't blame her."

"Then what do you want with her?"

Outside, the car had pulled slowly out of its parking spot and come around to wait at the doors. Gray stared at Mulder as if surprised he needed to ask at all.

"To thank her, for saving my daughter where I failed," he said softly, and left. He got into the car outside and it drove away, the darkness and the tinted windows eliminating all chance of making out the details of the female driver's face. Sixty-Four. Sixty-Four and Dr Henry Gray. A woman with a number for a name, who'd hidden the Johannssons. A scientist killed for his morals and then revived and forced back to work because he was so good at his work, too good at his work for anyone else to replicate. Mulder sat back down in his seat.

He sat there for a very long time.

What the hell had he walked into? This was bigger than he'd ever suspected. He flattened the pages of the notepad out on the tabletop. Stephen Powell. Austin Dunn. Beside their names he wrote the dates of their infection, according to Gray. He claimed they'd be dead by the weekend. He claimed there was no hope.

Tentatively Mulder touched the tiny gold pendant hanging around his neck with a fingertip.

All night and all day Friday he drove, or so it seemed. He drove until he found a cheap by-the-hour motel and slept; in the morning he got up before the sun, had a shower and a shave, his first in some time, and set out. Powell lived in Prestonsburg, Kentucky. A Google search for his name brought up Floyd County Newspaper stories that mentioned his name. Minor local hero, cop.

It took over five hours to get there, all up, so he arrived right on 9am at the Powell house. Cute little two-storey place with immaculate gardens kept neatly inside a literal white picket fence and a freshly trimmed box hedge, complete with a bird bath, even a white painted loveseat underneath an apple tree. A flagpole stood proudly waving the stars and stripes in the morning breeze.

The American dream.

From the house it was easy to make a decent assessment of the type of people inside and what they would respond best to, and he was glad he'd put on the suit this morning after his shave. He'd read 'cop' in the articles and deduced that introducing himself as 'Fox Mulder, paranormal investigator' or 'Fox Mulder, disgraced FBI agent' would probably not get him through the door. He reached
under the driver's seat for the tattered envelope taped to the underside. He opened it and tipped the contents onto his lap.

Four or five cards (mostly licences), two passports (only one of them real) and a leather-bound ID wallet fell out. These were only for special occasions.

When he worked for the Bureau he'd had his legitimate badge to get him through doors, but since his departure his badge number had been made inactive, making the badge he'd failed to hand in pretty useless when it came to accessing actual investigations or presenting himself to other law enforcers. A phone call or a badge check took thirty seconds to oust him, and to draw federal attention to where he was and what he was doing.

But for civilians, it still did the trick, if he flashed it quickly enough.

Stephen Powell was a police officer, but, infected with a killer virus since Monday, Mulder was betting on the likelihood that Mr Powell would not be the one answering the door; so, tightening his tie and buttoning his jacket, he got out of the car and approached the house.

Mrs Powell was a very pretty woman even when her eyes were red and puffy from a grief-stricken night of sobbing, as they were right now. She opened the door with a look of hope on her face, but it crumpled when she saw a stranger in a suit.

"I'm sorry," she managed as she burst into fresh tears and buried her face in the hand towel she was carrying. "I thought y-y-you were my my br-br-brother."

Mulder flashed his outdated ID and introduced himself. She didn't even glance at the badge. When he said he was here to discuss her husband, she started crying even more loudly, and her brother arrived right then, looking pale and stricken. Mulder had to introduce himself once again, and this time the brother actually took the badge and looked. Without seeing the expiry, apparently, because he handed it straight back. He was in shock, going through motions.

"I'm here about Stephen Powell," Mulder explained. "Is he here?"

"He died this morning," the brother said softly, setting his sister off again. She excused herself back into the house. Her brother spoke with Mulder on the doorstep, looking uncomfortable listening to his sister's heart-wrenching cries inside but without a second thought as to why the FBI would be asking questions about a medical death. They were the follow-the-rules type, both of the siblings, she with her floral day dress and he with his pressed white collar folded neatly over the navy sweater. Both of them wearing plain gold wedding bands. Neither with hair dye, tattoos or visible piercings. The law shows up at your door, you answer their questions, you show respect. "I was at the hospital with him when he... when he went. We've got an appointment with the funeral home this morning."

"Which one?"

"Uh..." The brother delved into his pockets and withdrew a business card. Mulder took it.

"It seems very quick to have chosen a funeral home already."

"The people at the hospital gave me the card," the brother said blankly. "It's the most contact they'd had with me until then. It... It all happened so fast. Stephen was fine, and then all of a sudden, he just... wasn't. He got sick so fast."

"Respiratory illness?" Mulder checked, and the brother nodded. "When was your brother-in-law admitted to hospital?"
"Wednesday night, late. He started coughing blood. That's... That had never happened to him before, so Michelle called 911 when he didn't stop."

"Had he experienced any respiratory problems before, to your knowledge?"

"He... He had asthma," Michelle Powell's brother supplied helpfully, looking utterly lost. "Just mild. Sometimes after a run he'd use his puffer. But Stephen was always so healthy. I don't understand what happened to him. No one at the hospital seemed to be able to give us a straight answer."

"What did they say it was?" Mulder asked. "The doctors."

"Diffuse alveolar haemorrhaging," the younger man recited dutifully, "which means his lungs were bleeding, but they couldn't tell us what caused it. They said maybe pneumonia? That or drugs." He scowled. "Like Michelle needed a comment like *that*. Stephen didn't have a drug addiction. He was the cleanest cop in Prestonsburg." He looked both sad and proud for a moment. "He didn't stand for any nonsense. Last month he pulled over some truck for speeding. Driver tried to talk his way out of handing over his licence and registration, buy his way out of trouble, and when Stephen asked to see what he was ferrying, he tried to say his employer had a defence contract and he didn't need to obey local law enforcement. Couldn't produce any such documentation, of course, so Stephen took him down the station and processed him like any other suspicious driver. Drug test, the lot. Catalogued all the cargo in case it was stolen, you know? Stephen wasn't going to be pushed around. He always did things by the book."

"Did Stephen say what he found in that truck?"

"Medical supplies, I think." The brother looked worriedly into the house, where Mrs Powell was still sobbing relentlessly. He gestured. "Sorry, sir, I should..."

"Yes, definitely," Mulder agreed, stepping aside. "You should be with your family. I'm so sorry for your loss. If you have any problems or questions, please let the Bureau know."

Mulder started back to his car and the brother started inside. He paused and called, confused, "Who do I ask for, again?"

"If you call, say you spoke with Special Agent Scully," Mulder said as he reached his car and unlocked the door. The brother nodded and disappeared through the door of the picturesque little cottage, and Mulder swung into the front seat, muttering, "I may sound a little different on the phone."

The funeral home, he was unsurprised to learn when he called in, did not currently have Stephen Powell's body on-site. He flashed his badge and stormed in with little resistance from the small-town mortician and confirmed for himself that the police officer was nowhere to be found.

"He must be still coming," the mortician squeaked when Mulder demanded answers. "I don't know anything about Stephen. I didn't even know he was dead! I heard he was in hospital, sure, but... His poor wife."

A check of the man's appointment book seemed to prove that he had made no plans to meet with Mrs Powell and her brother on this morning. Mulder produced the business card.

"Stephen Powell's brother-in-law was given this at the hospital this morning."

The mortician squinted at it.
"That's my business name and logo, sure," he said. "I didn't leave any with the hospital though, and... Wait." He pointed at the card. "That's not my phone number."

Racing back to the Powell residence did no good. Mrs Powell and her brother were out, presumably at their appointment with a fake mortician, presumably at the brother's house or somewhere else that was not the actual funeral home. Mulder cursed and kicked the tyre of his trusty car. Such a waste of time. The body was already claimed by them. Selected for his interference with the supply chain of the experiments, Powell was singled out and exterminated all within a week. Gray was right about this one. No hope.

Again, he forcibly stilled himself and touched the cross he wore.

Dunn's listed address was a property in rural Virginia, near Indian Valley. Locating it on Google Maps he was amused to see writing spray-painted in big letters on the rooftops of the four large barn-like buildings: *Fuck. Off. Government. Spies*. Fuck was already blurred out thanks to the eagle eyes at Google, but since the other words were not, it was clear enough what the blur was meant to convey. The majority of the property was fenced off and gated, surrounded by a dense line of mature trees, with the exception of a small section adjoining the road, on which a dingy little rectangular house sat with a short driveway. Looking at the place from the road (which he did with the little 'street view' drop man on Google Maps, and again with his own eyes later that day) it looked deceptively like two different blocks – the isolated but normal semi-suburban home with the carport and driveway, and someone else's farm behind a thick line of trees. But Google Maps said it was one single property, and the farm, if that's what it was, had no other road access but from behind the little house.

Hand-painted signs hanging on the fence indicated a preference for being left alone and a certain degree of unfriendliness toward the government. Graciously, the property owners also warned potential trespassers of the danger posed by their many large dogs. Very thoughtful. Mulder returned his ID to his stash beneath the drivers' seat, and, further up the road with no one around, changed out of the suit and back into something more casual. Jeans, black tee. Leather jacket. He ran a hand through his hair to unsettle the gel he'd applied this morning. The Powells, and others of their type, appreciated a clean-cut professional with a badge knocking politely on their door and asking probing questions in the name of progressing a legitimate agenda. The Dunns, he gathered, would appreciate that rather less.

He didn't even get to knock on their door. He crossed the yard, which was littered with car parts, broken bicycles and balls that weren't there when Google photographed from space, and made it onto the grimy porch, and then stopped short of the door. The barrel of a rifle was sticking through the open window, pointed at him.

It was not a pleasant visit, but as it happened, one of the residents had heard of Fox Mulder, fellow anarchist, which was probably the reason he wasn't blown off the porch, but rather invited inside, if 'invited' was the correct term for the process by which Mulder went from being on the porch at gunpoint to inside the farm-like compound behind the house. Fifteen minutes was all the time they'd give him with Austin Dunn, before the patient became too tired to talk, but that was enough. Enough to know it was bad, and that he was in over his head.

Self-consciously he fidgeted with the pendant, her parting gift to him. Sometimes it was easier to just stay away completely, and other times, it was just too hard. Investigating, chasing leads, making connections and reading people – that was fine, that was his thing, he could do that forever and pull it all together into a neat little package – but this medical side of things was far beyond him. Like with Rebecca Johannsson's autopsy, simply overseeing and passing information back to Scully was not good enough. For her to be able to do something with the information, it needed to
be gathered and recorded by a professional, and for her to be able to do something for the patient, she needed to see the patient.

She needed to be here.

He needed her. He watched the middle-aged farmer-turned-protester sweat and wheeze and cough up flecks of blood, panic streaking across his weathered face. This was awful. This was too much.

"I need to make a phone call."

"We're not taking him to a hospital," his grim and angry wife insisted while Mulder watched the suffering helplessly. "They'll report his location to the government, and use him for experiments. I'll never see him again."

Mulder couldn't argue with that, even though he guessed that her stance was based more on prejudice than on the facts. She folded her flannelette-sleeved arms over her chest and her eldest son shifted the rifle to rest casually across his shoulders. Both of them adamant.

"You're right, Austin was infected deliberately," Mulder agreed, as he'd told them at the door to gain entry. "A hospital's a dangerous place right now. You don't know who to trust. But he needs a doctor." He kept his voice down as Wendy Dunn jerked her head towards the door and he followed her out of the room to stand with her and the sons in the hallway. Her boys all had the same simple home-job haircut, sharp eyes and squared, argumentative jaw. "I have a contact who might be able to help him."

"A doctor. No, thanks," Wendy Dunn hissed. "They're all the same."

"Former doctor," Mulder corrected. "She's seen this before. It's very fast, Mrs Dunn. This morning a man in Kentucky died from the same virus. He was infected on Monday – your husband was targeted on Wednesday. You don't have much time."

"Doctors all have their agenda," the eldest son whispered harshly, desperately. "They serve big pharmaceuticals and government interests. They're the reason my daddy's sick."

"They've been running secret human trials for decades now," the mother added, and Mulder could have screamed in frustration, because yes, this was what'd been saying for years, but this was not the time for people to be digging their heels in about it.

Inspiration struck.

"My associate was abducted by the government in 1994," he said, catching Mrs Dunn's attention. "Right out of her living room. She was experimented on, left with junk DNA in her bloodstream and her ovaries harvested. After a month she turned up comatose in a hospital emergency room. She knows what's at stake and what these people are doing." He took a chance and leaned closer, placing a reassuring hand on Wendy Dunn's shoulder and looking her in the eyes in an urgent appeal. "You're not paranoid and you're not wrong, but right now, you need to trust someone. Dana is the only person in the world I trust, and so far you've trusted me. I can't promise she can save him, but I can promise she won't betray your location." In the room, Austin Dunn coughed thickly. Wendy Dunn pursed her lips indecisively. Mulder pushed his advantage. "Your husband's dying, Mrs Dunn. They're winning. Let me call in an ally. At this point, what have you got to lose?"

The Dunns looked at each other dubiously.

"How quickly did you say the Kentucky man died?" Mrs Dunn asked.
"Four days from infection. It's an unnatural strain, engineered in a lab. Antibiotics and conventional medicine won't cure it. Bed rest certainly isn't going to help. I don't know if there's any chance of stopping it," Mulder admitted. "I just know only one person with the qualifications and experience to try who knows what it is and where it comes from."

"How do we know she's not a government spy?" the eldest son demanded. He narrowed his sharp eyes. "How do we know you aren't?"

"How else would you know where to find us?" one of his brothers pressed.

"I'm not, and she's not," Mulder insisted, digging Gray's list out of his pocket. Geez, Gray couldn't take no for an answer when it came to meeting Scully. These people were looking for any excuse not to. "A contact within the operation brought me this." He let Wendy Dunn read it. "These are all the people who will be targeted for assassination with this virus."

"I know some of these names," she said, sounding shocked as she read. "The Rubensteins had their crops poisoned in the same attack as ours. We were competition for those new GM plots that were popping up everywhere, with their secretive federal funding."

"They tried to wipe us off the playing field by killing our farms," one of the sons told Mulder. "Boy did they live to regret that."

"But your family might not live to gloat another day," Mulder pointed out, as their mother grimly showed the boys the names of people they knew further down the list. "If you piss these assholes off, they'll add your names. And like your dad, once you're infected, there's not a lot you can do."

"Are we going to get sick from looking after him?"

"No. It's not contagious. They don't need it to be. Yet. It's effective enough as a killing machine. But they're working on it. I'm trying to stop them. My doctor is trying to stop them. She may not be able to save Austin – but what if she could develop a cure from his blood work that prevents the rest of you from being infected? That saves the Rubenstein family and everyone else on this list?"

Long pause. Glances between family members. "Do you think there's any hope at all for Austin?"

"I think there's always hope," Mulder confessed, thoughts touching on the little gold cross underneath his shirt.

"The two of you are working against the government's agenda?" Wendy checked suspiciously. "And no one's thrown you in jail or infected you?"

"Oh, they've taken their swings at both of us," Mulder said.

"Right. The abduction." Mrs Dunn looked thoughtful, starting to come around. "Your doctor has no government associations, then?"

Mulder forced a smile and lied right through his teeth. "Nope."

More uncertain glances. A loud cough from inside the room.

"Call your friend," Mrs Dunn said finally, reluctantly, "but until she arrives, you stay here. No outside contact. If she brings anyone, if so much as an ambulance turns up at the front house, your head will be promptly removed from your shoulders. Understood?"

Mulder nodded, uncomfortably aware of the eldest son's hunting rifle. He was his own insurance
They kept him on the compound, which was apparently where they usually lived. The interior of the main barn was highly liveable, walls and mezzanine levels built in, though certainly rough and limited in technology. No TV, no computer. Mulder had to walk to the corner of the property to find any reception for his phone to send his message.

Not to Scully. *Your doctor has no government associations?* *Nope.* She had nothing *but* government associations, and he'd long suspected the Bureau was still watching her idly as a means of watching him. She always said she'd answer if he called her cell but he was yet to do it in case someone else picked up, and the idea of texting her directly was outrageous. *Anyone* could grab her phone off her desk or out of her bag, read her messages, whatever. He loved to believe she was more careful than that but he knew they were dealing with far sneakier people than she would admit. And she was far too trusting. In Boston she'd said she trusted her new partner enough to leave him alone with her bag. And who was he? Probably a spy sent by the conspirators to keep an eye on her and report on her activities.

Not that every agent ever placed to spy on their partner was strictly a villain – Scully had turned out alright.

Still, the child agent could be sitting at his desk right now, beside Scully's. She could leave her seat for two minutes. Mulder's text could come through and flash across the screen. Cover blown, just like that.

So he sent no message to Scully.

*Mom, need D asap. Bring stethoscope, leave gun at home. Come alone. X*

The message finally departed the phone and flew off into the nether. Cold late-winter afternoon air chilled him while he waited for the reply. Behind him in the main barn (the one with *Off* written on the roof) the Dunn family was moving about, preparing the evening meal. Vegetables pulled fresh from the clean soil inside the other barns. Since their farm was killed with aerial pesticides they'd taken to growing in the controlled, indoor environments their government enemies couldn't so easily target.

A soft bleep: *How do I know it's you?*

There was no official password. He could send any number of significant words – William, Melissa, Emily – but instead he unclipped the chain from around his neck, held the pendant in the afternoon sunlight and snapped a photo. No one else knew the significance of the necklace he wore.

It took longer to send than the text message. As soon as it went, he sent a follow-up message as extra confirmation.

*Did she like the watch?*

The reply was fast.

*Where? And yes, she wears it every day.*****

Thank the gods for supportive mother-in-laws. Mulder sent the address.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, or anything much, really. Suing me would be an epic waste of time better spent making new episodes of the X-Files.

Author's Notes: Thank you so much to the people who left the lovely words of encouragement as reviews this week. I really can't say enough how good it feels to log in and find them sitting there waiting to brighten my day. As some of you know, I am a writer outside of fanfiction (novels and a newspaper column) and I am also a schoolteacher and a university student, altogether too busy to be writing fanfiction, but I enjoy it and I justify it to myself by the immediate feedback I get from amazing readers like you – critical, analytical, emotionally invested people – which I can use not only to shape a story you will love, but to shape me into a better writer. So I truly appreciate you taking a few moments to tell me I'm not wasting my time :)

Apres, thank you so very much for braving the comment function, because your review is my favourite kind of feedback - thorough, precise and genuinely helpful in the way you told me what, exactly, you like about the story. I am so warmed to hear how deeply you are invested in the story and I will endeavour to touch base with William again soon for you :) Your comment makes me smile, itsneveroolate; I hadn't intended to write Mulder calling Maggie 'Mom' but when I got to that scene it kind of came out, and felt natural. Jacqs, you'll be glad to know that Mulder and Scully will be back on-page together in two chapters' time, as will you, Tp: thanks for that awesome review! I agree completely with your description of MSR and how Mulder drove it with physical touch and flirtation. They wouldn't have gotten anywhere without him. But likewise, he would also pull back very quickly from any committed emotional reach-out, rarely following through with a second cheeky line or a more obvious touch once he'd made a move, content to leave it ambiguous, which is why it took so long for anything to develop. I think they both knew (and know, at this point in the story) what they mean to each other from quite early on, but that they are both in a sort of denial. If she admits to herself that he's still in love with her, she's got to take responsibility for why they're not together, since she's the one who left; if he lets himself accept she would take him back, he'd end up back in the same predicament of balancing her with his obsessions. Neither one is ready to do that. Soodohnimh: mother-in-law in all the ways that count, except by law, I think, though I haven't decided yet. You're right, I said I would try to keep this one smaller, but who was I kidding? I measure in scenes; I've got twelve 'interactions' between M&S on which the plot hinges, and so far we've only had three of them. It's going to be a long fic. You're going to really like the eighth one. Hi and welcome Defnotmeyo! Thanks so much for leaving feedback. I'm delighted to hear that you enjoyed the read and I hope I can continue to impress you.

Thanks again for your reviews, people, and thanks for all the kudos! Over 100 now! In this chapter, a bunch of flowers is brought to the office. They're for you :)
Improvisation is a skill best exercised in moments of dishonesty.

The A4 envelope Colt had received in her absence from the office, from T.E. Shillings, was a treasure trove of information. A dangerous, dangerous treasure trove that should have been guarded by a genie. A quick leaf through its contents made Scully's insides flip over. The envelope went straight into the briefcase, magical fortress that they both pretended it was, and the briefcase was locked shut by the time the elevator doors opened at their floor. They walked back to their desks, acting natural, but how natural can anyone behave when they're carrying the political equivalent to a time bomb?

They needed to get out. Now.

Colt was calmer. He asked her, mildly, "How's your headache?" and over the next fifteen minutes Scully voiced several complaints of a developing migraine and made a show of visiting the water cooler several times for refills. One of the women in her office commented that she looked strained and pale – was she okay? No, she had a migraine.

"You've been in front of that computer screen for hours," the other agent reminded her, offering painkillers from her handbag. Scully took them with thanks, imagining that whatever she was about to read was likely to bring on a real one anyway. Might as well be proactive. "It's no wonder."

"I'll be alright. I just need to go home and rest," Scully claimed, which was what she would usually say, and rested her hand on her forehead with a small cringe as though experiencing a wave of ill-feeling. The other agent frowned and touched her elbow, concerned.

"Should you be driving?" she asked. "I can take you." Colt overheard his cue and stood, gathering his jacket into his arms and waving once to get their attention.

"Agent Reinhardt? I'll drive her," he said, relieving the other woman of the responsibility. She nodded appreciatively. Scully was aware of others in the office watching on, without much interest but still, watching on.

"I'm fine," she insisted, because it's what they would expect her to say, finishing her plastic cup of water and dropping it into the little bin beside the water dispenser. Colt kept collecting his things, ignoring her except to hold her briefcase out expectantly. She came back for it. The bomb. The handle felt electric. So much potential. So much potential mess. What had Mulder sent her? Or rather, what had he wanted to send her that warranted giving her contact details – all of her official contact details, too, not just the postal address but the FBI phone number and fax that would get through to her department – to this T.E. Shillings of Shillings & Hertz Investment Solutions so as to get it to her undetected?

Well. This was Mulder. He probably wouldn't think twice about executing these kinds of precautions to send a Valentine's Day card. But this was not a card. This was an envelope with pages and pages with the CIA's letterhead. Extremely dangerous information, definitely illegally obtained. She'd not had the chance yet to read any page in full, only that quick glance through in the elevator. The only thing she'd read in full was the napkin squeezed into the front of the envelope.

Mulder's handwriting.

Dr Henry Gray, death Feb 17 1981.

Dana Scully, Counterterrorism, FBI
"Let him take you home," Reinhardt requested, still concerned; as if Scully needed the push. She opened her mouth to acquiesce.

"Let who take you home?"

Both she and Reinhardt turned to the new voice. Reinhardt's concern evaporated and a vibrant smile broke out over her face.

"Assistant Director," she said in greeting. Was that a slightly breathless husk to her voice? Ugh. Scully forced a smile that was no competition for Reinhardt's. Surely she'd already done her time in his presence today, and this was too soon. They'd parted ways not half an hour ago.

"One of these days, you'll call me Hugh," Kelley told Reinhardt playfully, and turned his stupid white grin on Scully, where it had no effect except to make her stomach drop a notch. An obstacle. Time wasted.

"I'll see you on Monday," she said to them both, grabbing her scarf and jacket with the hand that was not clutching the briefcase. The briefcase. She didn't know what new evidence it held but knew it had the potential to end her career if Kelley or Reinhardt, who stood feet away, were to look inside. Her palm felt slippery on the handle just thinking of their nearness.

Jesus, Mulder, why didn't you just paint a bullseye on my back?

"Oh, uh," Kelley said, feigning a lack of words while catching her wrist lightly, his hand only inches now from the briefcase handle, and the touch sent a ripple of anxious ill-feeling through her that the painkillers weren't prepared for, "I was coming to see whether we could make dinner tonight."

Awkward silence. Reinhardt raised her eyebrows in interest. Scully's stomach twisted and she wondered whether the painkillers would come back up. She shouldn't have made the offer. She had no intention, no desire, whatsoever.

"I, uh, can't tonight," she said after a flustered moment. She twisted her scarf around her neck and tossed her coat over her other arm to free up her hand. "I'm going home. I've got a migraine. Sorry."

Kelley's big delicious eyes softened in regret and concern. "No, I'm sorry, to hear it. Are you alright? Can I drive you home?"

Not a chance, Mulder's voice, usually the one of instinct and maybe that's what this was, retorted.

"I'm on it, sir," Colt answered smoothly before she could. He held out her handbag for her to take. "Ma'am."

She smiled at him, appreciating his quick save. He didn't notice; he was locked in Kelley's unblinking stare as the older man tried to assess her partner for threat and challenge. The assistant director exuded testosterone – Colt stood his ground.

"Dana?"

"Mom?"

Margaret Scully had been in the building so few times and she always looked completely out of place, big eyes blinking in the harsh lights of their office, uncertainty painted across her features as
if she'd gotten lost a dozen times on her way up the levels and wasn't sure whether she'd finally found the right room. She saw her daughter and looked relieved, swapping the bunch of flowers she held from one arm to the other as she came over. Kelley and Reinhardt parted so Maggie could step between them and embrace her daughter with one arm. Scully returned the gesture with the one arm available to her, universally confused by this sudden attraction of all manner of distractions.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as Maggie pulled away. *What are you doing here now, while I'm trying to get the hell out of here?* Her mother smiled.

"I wasn't sure I'd catch you," she said, looking around for a clock and smiling vaguely at Kelley and Reinhardt as her gaze passed over them. She pulled her attention back to her daughter. "Your brother asked me to get you these and I thought they could brighten up your office. You spend more time here than at home anyway."

Scully blinked once, trying to process what was just said. She didn't have a migraine before but she might by the time she got away.

"*Bill sent me flowers?*" she repeated. Suddenly noticing the odd out-of-the-loop looks of the others around her, and cleared her throat and introduced everyone, initiating a flurry of handshakes and greetings. "Uh, Mom, this is Agent Reinhardt, one of my colleagues; Assistant Director Kelley…" She paused here, because he took his time delighting in meeting her mother – "Please, just call me Hugh." – insisting she didn't look old enough, telling her how proud she should be to have such a brilliant daughter, laying on the charm as always. Maggie laughed lightly, apparently flattered. *Traitor.* When she could get a word in edgewise, Scully waved a hand over her desk to redirect her mother's attention. "And this is my partner, Warren Colt."

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Colt said, forever polite and endearingly warm, leaning forward to extend a hand across the desks. It looked like a respectful old-fashioned bow.

If Kelley had looked jealous before, he darkened with it further when Maggie's face lit up.

"*Partner,*" she said in surprise, accepting the handshake, seeming to like the feel of the word in her mouth again. "Hmm." *Approval.*

"Mom," Scully said again, "the flowers."

"You know your brother. No clue," Maggie said affectionately, arranging the box in the middle of the desk. "Asked me to pick up some flowers for you. It wasn't until after I bought them that he said they were for your birthday. I would have waited until closer to if I'd realised. Still," she said, smiling at the flowers, "they're nice, aren't they?"

"They're lovely," Scully agreed without looking at them. Flowers were always lovely. It was their job. Just like hers was to get out of this office, into Colt's car and into the briefcase in her hand. "Thanks for dropping them off."

"Are you leaving, dear?" Maggie asked now, noticing the coat and case and handbag. Scully nodded.

"I've got a migraine. Colt's taking me home."

Frown of concern, sparkle of opportunity. "Oh. Darling, I can take you."

Why did everyone need to choose today to be so generous with their time and their driving prowess? "It's okay, Mom. You don't need to."
"It's not a problem, ma'am," Colt said, shrugging his coat on while he waited patiently for this conversation to end. "It's on my way. I don't mind."

Maggie seemed for a moment reluctant. But then she smiled, a little shakily. "That's very sweet of you, Warren. Drive safely, won't you?"

"Always."

"Always," Colt promised, rounding the desks now that he had everything. "Can we walk you back to your car, Mrs Scully?"

Delighted smile. Maggie's weak insistence that she was fine went ignored and Colt gestured for her to lead the way. Kelley maintained that wide smile but his eyes had narrowed, enough to convey his deep irritation with the way Colt's innate respectfulness won over Scully's mother. Reinhardt returned to her own desk; Kelley turned back to Scully.

"See you Monday," she said again, sparing a quick smile to reduce that unwarranted resentment towards her partner. "We can talk about dinner then?"

Those were apparently the magic words. The smile, forced wide, softened into something more genuine.

"See you Monday, Agent," he agreed, and allowed her to leave, toting a briefcase loaded with controversial documents that would set fire to his whole world. She felt his gaze on her back as she walked away, two burning laser points. He wouldn't look at her like that if he knew.

Colt and Maggie exchanged small talk down the hall, down the elevator and all the way to the parking lot. It was brightly lit but silent, creepy in the way all noises echoed around the space. They walked Scully's mother to her car, as Colt had promised.

"Thank you, Warren," she said, warmly, sounding ready to adopt him. She beamed at her daughter, pleased; her expression faltered momentarily as she asked, softly, "Are you sure I can't drive you, Dana?"

"I'm fine," Scully assured her. "There's no migraine. Just an excuse to get out of there."

"Hmm. Away from that assistant director." Maggie's nose lifted slightly in the air, because yes, Kelley had laid down the charm too heavy, making it too clear he was keen on her daughter, and Margaret Scully wasn't interested in a new suitor for her only girl. It wouldn't have mattered what Kelley looked like or said. He wasn't Fox Mulder, and Maggie's heart was set - the father of her grandchild was the only man for her Dana.

Funny that Colt was in the good books. He made Kelley jealous but not Maggie. Maggie wasn't worried about who Dana Scully was friends with, who she worked with, who she trusted with her life, reputation and secrets, whereas Mulder, Scully reflected, would probably feel more threatened by Colt as her new partner and friend than by Kelley's attempts to get her out on a date and into bed.

"Goodnight, Mom," Scully said, before the conversation could escalate. Maggie forced a reluctant smile and hugged her daughter again, this time with both arms. Tightly, warmly. Her elbow knocked Scully's handbag as she pulled away.

"Goodnight, darling. Lovely to meet you, Warren," she added as she got into her car. The agents gave her a wave as they retreated to Colt's beloved Corvette.

"Your mom's nice," Colt commented as he drove out of the car park. Scully tapped her fingernails impatiently on the briefcase on her lap. The plan had been to sit in the car and read, but just as soon
as they'd closed the doors they'd both seen the flaw. A camera was set up at the boom gate, recording when vehicles came and went. As much as she was dying to get into the envelope Mulder's contact had sent, it would raise questions if they were seen walking out of the office at ten to three and weren't filmed driving away for another few hours.

"Aren't they all?" she asked without thinking.


"You don't have to explain. I'm sorry."

"She's just not around, by her own choosing, and that's sometimes not nice to think about," Colt said finally, diplomatically, seeming not to have heard her. "Your mom is the kind of mom I wish mine was."

A boy without a mother. She's not around, by her own choosing. Suicide?

"Did she pass? Your mother? Sorry," she added hastily, realising it was none of her business. Colt shook his head.

"It's okay. No. Val's alive. She missed Christmas again this year, fourth year running. Nana left her messages. She rang back after New Year's to apologise and ask for money. I don't know why she even asks, they never give it to her. They know it'll go to her dealer first chance she gets."

He flexed his hands on the steering wheel, the only clue to the deep emotion attached to this topic.

"I'm sorry, Warren," Scully said, trying to convey the gentleness she should have exercised in entering this conversation. "I shouldn't have asked."

"I don't mind you asking. It's the truth. My mom's a hopeless addict. The best thing she ever did was leave me with Nana. I wouldn't be where I am today if I'd grown up in crack houses, would I?"

"You've come a long way," Scully agreed softly, amazed that she hadn't known all of this already. She'd known he lived with his grandmother, that she'd raised him, but had never felt it appropriate (or particularly pertinent) to ask about the context. "I'm sure your mother is proud of you."

Colt smiled kindly at her. "With respect, ma'am, I don't give a fuck whether Valentina is proud of me. I didn't take up arms for my country and accept deployment to Afghanistan to make her proud. I didn't join the Academy and work my ass off to make her proud. She doesn't get to be proud. All she did was get pregnant. Nana did all the rest."

Scully went silent, as did her tap-tapping fingers. His words had hit something inside her that she'd never expected him to strike, even inadvertently. Warren Colt was someone's son, given up by a mother who didn't feel up to raising him, left to live with someone she believed was better for him. Warren was a William.

And he bore nothing for his mother but resentment.

She doesn't get to be proud. All she did was get pregnant.

It drove a knife through her heart to wonder but the question crashed carelessly through her anyway: Did William feel that way about her?

Scully cleared her throat, hurt and knowing it was irrational to feel that way – Colt didn't know
about her lost son or the circumstances, and certainly hadn't directed those comments at her. She shoved aside her mostly unaddressed feelings and opened the briefcase to redirect her thinking.

Focus.

"T.E. Shillings," she read off the envelope. "Boston."

"Right where the case started for us," Colt stated. "Coincidence? I'm starting to feel like that's a dirty word in this game."

"They happen," Scully felt obligated to insist, but her heart wasn't in it. Colt's attitude towards his birthmother had shaken her, and besides, arguing with him wasn't half as satisfying as arguing such a point with Mulder. She relented. "But in this investigation, it feels safer to assume any correlation is noteworthy."

"And you're positive you don't know any Shillings? Only it seems a very specific load of evidence to be sending you if it's from a stranger." Colt joined a queue of cars at a red light. "You have some powerful friends out there somewhere, ma'am."

"So it seems," she agreed, removing the napkin again from the envelope and tracing her own name in Mulder's handwriting. Colt's eyes were quick; he caught her.

"That's the same writing," he realised. The queue wasn't moving, giving him longer to glance at the message and confirm to himself. "As this morning. Reece Dwyer."

"You're a handwriting analyst now, too?"

"Someone in Boston is trying to help point you in the right direction," Colt said, very seriously. "Whoever this is, writing you messages, they must have gotten into the car while we were in the morgue to get at your briefcase. It's the only time you had it unattended while we were in town, except when you left it with me."

"I suppose," Scully said, because improvisation came almost naturally in the wake of dishonesty, and because admitting to having left the briefcase on the kitchen table for Mulder at Christmas wasn't in the cards for tonight.

It felt like the longest drive ever, and Scully didn't want to take everything out in the car in the afternoon traffic with other, higher cars driving past, drivers glancing down through her window to see CIA – Confidential stamped across the pages she was reading. Not a good look. It was a relief to park, turn off the car and let Colt into her house. She locked the door behind him.

Neither of them spoke as they tipped the contents of the Shillings envelope out onto the dining table. Most of the pages were stapled together into thin sets as a way of grouping information. Colt scanned the first one with tired but young eyes. He inhaled very deeply and very slowly, and raised his eyes to Scully's. She knew he was thinking what she was – that this was exactly as they'd feared, and more, and worse.

It didn't take more than ten minutes for the pair to scan every document and lay it all out across the wide tabletop in semi-categorised piles, and to know they were in a certain degree of hot water if anyone traced this stockpile of government secrets to them.

It was extensive, but all centred around the topic Mulder had given to T.E. Shillings: Dr Henry Gray, death Feb 17 1981. For a simple college professor of Biology, the CIA certainly had taken a deep interest in him, and amassed quite a collection of documents pertaining to him. Birth certificate from 1933. University transcripts demonstrating consistently outstanding results.
Doctoral thesis. Lab reports detailing genetic experiments, hinting at the Black Oil, then more lab reports, more specific, more explicit. Orders for human experiments, signed by military personnel. Photos. Measurements. Correspondence, back and forth between Gray and various others, discussing false job appointments, responsibilities, tasks to be undertaken.

Death certificate from 1981. Autopsy report from 1981, completed and signed by a Dr Doherty.

Birth certificate from 1964.

"Which was it?" Colt demanded, frustrated, looking between the two birth certificates. "These have to be two different people, and someone at the CIA's just filed one in the wrong place."

Scully pressed fingertips to her lips, overwhelmed by and trying to stay afloat in the swimming pool of dredged-up evidence Mulder had organised for her. She would be assassinated if she was caught with this. Hadn't he thought of that? Hadn't he considered how dangerous it was for her to possess information as sensitive and incriminating as this? Did he even care? It wasn't like she could use any of this, not unless he had a private jet waiting for her outside the courtroom where she presented the case to fly her out of the country and into hiding.

These documents had been hacked and stolen from the CIA's secure database. Possessing them was a federal crime.

What the hell did Mulder think he was doing? This was not their game. He was pushing the boundaries of their friendship, risking her career in ways he'd never done before. Not to mention Colt's. Worse, he was risking their investigation, the investigation he had put her onto, and in doing so, everything she and Mulder himself had been working toward in the whole time she'd known him. What was he playing at?

What was he thinking and why did it always have to be a big stupid secret from her?

God help her, he was so damn infuriating.

"Born in '33 matches up with the autopsy report from '81 that says he was forty-eight when he died," Colt said, spreading the relevant documents out in front of him to cross-check. "The other one doesn't make sense – it'd make him seventeen at death, and we know he was a doctor with a four-year-old daughter. So this one's a mistake," he determined, holding up the 1964 birth certificate. Scully shook her head slowly and took it, placing it back beside the original.

"Or," she said grimly, leaning aside to reach for the briefcase. She rifled through it for the sheets of paper Colt had thrown in there earlier today. She unfolded them and laid them down above the birth certificates.


Colt pushed back from the table, chair legs scraping on the floor, shaking his head and grinning in disbelief. "No. I see what you're trying to say, but no. We've been at this too long today; we're overtired…"

"No? Why not?" Scully challenged. "Reece Dwyer died and yet still lives."

"Yes, and that's ridiculous."

"But you accept it."
Colt had gotten to his feet and was stretching, apparently trying to wake himself up. "Yes. I accept that we found one guy who cheated death and skipped out on thirty years of aging. Crazy, but there it is. I don't accept that we found two, two men connected to our case who were killed in suspicious circumstances and popped up three decades later unaged, in one day." He snorted with incredulity. "I know what I said in the car about coincidences-"

"Exactly," Scully interrupted, jumping on his admission. "If you're willing to believe in one case being possible, why is it so unreasonable to consider that the circumstances may have been replicated?"

"Because," Colt answered patiently, reaching for his toes, "it's insane, and I am not. Yet."

"It's the same handwriting," she reminded him, and he sighed and straightened. He rested his forearms heavily on the back of a chair and let his head hang, eyes closed. She kept pushing. "Whoever put us onto Dwyer also wants to flesh out our knowledge of Gray. There are two correlations – the extra-terrestrial experimentation-"

"I'm still waiting for that phrase to not sound crazy."

"-and the resurrection and consequent agelessness," Scully continued as if he hadn't spoken. "If anything, it makes more sense if there are multiple occurrences. It's confirmation – a pattern. It's right there in front of you."

Colt stayed where he was, silent, leaning on the back of the chair, but he did open his eyes and stare at the five pages arranged before him. He stared for half a minute, perhaps, just absorbing and processing. She waited it out.

"Zombies and aliens. For real. How long did it take for you before it stopped sounding like make-believe?" he asked, surprising her. He looked up at her. She shrugged helplessly.

"It still does," she admitted. "On my early assignments I used to argue with my partner constantly about the legitimacy of what we were investigating. It always started off sounding like bad fiction, and even when we were done and we were giving evidence or summarising to our superiors, it still sounded like a joke. We were a joke." She gestured at the tabletop. "But as a scientist, what else am I to make of undeniable evidence?"

He looked back at the tableau they'd created. It only took him a second.

"Alright," he said suddenly, pushing himself upright and pulling the chair back so he could sit back down in it. "Two zombies. What's your imaginary friend trying to communicate to us? Are there more?"

Scully exhaled slowly and sat back, taking her glasses off to rub her eyes in exhaustion. She envied Colt's ability to process something so contradictory to his beliefs, assimilate and move on so quickly, apparently invigorated by it.

"That was the fear, the first time around," she explained. Somewhere nearby, she heard the soft vvrrrr sound of a phone vibrating. She reached again to the floor, feeling for her handbag, which
she'd dumped at her feet. "It didn't happen. The point is that we may be able to find people linked to these experiments by searching for cases like Gray and Dwyer. And I still want to meet Dwyer, and Gray especially, if it's true that he's alive again, too."

"How do we even begin?" Colt wondered, gesturing helplessly at their tabletop spread of incriminating documents. Scully moved her bag onto her lap. It felt heavy. Everything felt heavy. It was the exhaustion, she realised. The long day of staring at screens looking for repeat customers of stupid room whatever-the-fuck-the-number-was as if it even mattered that he might be building a bomb that could kill a dozen people at an election rally when real terrorists were developing and deploying an extra-terrestrial virus that ate people's lungs and killed them. The long day of challenging her own beliefs about what being dead was meant to mean, because to some, apparently, it meant going away for a while and coming back three decades later unaged. The long day of an accelerated heartbeat, blood racing through her veins, knowing that she was in possession of documents that she shouldn't have and that could end her investigation, among other things, and that other people were all around her, oblivious. The long day of dealing with people, of that painful coffee trip with Kelley and the miserable attempt at leaving the building with Colt at the end of the day, of playing a role.

She was so sick of playing a role.

"We don't need to begin," Scully told him, beginning to pack up. "This is too big for us." Too big for you. "We'll be finished if anyone catches us with this before we build a case."

He caught some of the pages and kept them from her before she could sweep it all up. "So we build the case. Don't get caught."

"I don't have to tell you how serious this is. Right now we are committing a federal crime by keeping all of this-"

"Are you going to tell anyone?" Colt challenged. She stared at him, eyes aching from being open too long.

"Of course not."

"Good. Me neither. I suppose that means we're safe."

Scully rubbed her eyes again, harder this time. "Colt, it's not that I don't trust you. Obviously. I do. It's that I don't want to trust you with this. I don't want to trust anyone with this. I don't want either of us involved, anywhere near this."

"But we are involved," Colt reminded her. She shook her head.

"I am involved," she corrected. The vibration buzzed again, this time on her knees. She dug through the bag as she spoke. "I'm invested. I have a history working cases of this nature and I may be... known... to some of the people we are working against. You don't have to be. You should walk away."

"Well, it's a bit late for that," Colt answered, sitting back in his chair and tipping back his head to smile wistfully at her ceiling. She didn't pay much attention. She'd pulled her phone from her bag... only it wasn't her phone. It was a different model, with a different cover. She stared at it a moment, mystified, and then delved back into her bag.

Hers was in there as well. Two phones. One hers, one... not.

Her mother's.
How had it managed to find its way into Scully's bag? They'd barely spent five minutes together today, and the phone hadn't made an appearance. She thumbed it to life and typed the passcode, Melissa's birthday. Her mother was adorably hopeless. She'd had to set the passcode for Maggie early last year when she first got the phone.

The screen brightened; it was the messaging screen. An unknown number, a short conversation.

*Mom, need D asap. Bring stethoscope, leave gun at home. Come alone. X*

*How do I know it's you?*

A photo message that made her breath quicken: her own golden cross necklace, given to her as a child by her mother, left with Mulder as a kind of token or promise when she'd left him, dangling from a hand she knew to be his.

*Did she like the watch?*

*Where? And yes, she wears it every day.*

An address in central Virginia. A fucking address. A physical location where Mulder physically was, and would be, waiting, expecting, her. No puzzle to solve. A straightforward answer.

Given in the least straightforward way Mulder could think up. She reflected now on the second hug her mother had given; tight and warm, and the way her arm had bumped the handbag. She'd dropped it there on purpose. Bait. She'd brought the flowers in as a guise, she'd tried to get her daughter alone to pass on the message but hadn't wanted to raise questions by acting pushy, so she'd left the phone for Scully to find.

"You can always walk away, Colt," Scully said finally, her voice sounding weak to her own ears, eyes still on the screen of her mother's phone, implications smashing through her fuzzy, tired thoughts. Mulder was near. He still wasn't contacting her directly. Because he was right and lines of contact with her were compromised, or because he was paranoid, or both? He was in touch with her mother, apparently, using Maggie as errand girl. A distant puppeteer, still pulling strings in Scully's life despite clearly not wanting to be physically in it. Manipulating. Sending Maggie on silly cloak-and-dagger missions to sneak information to her daughter on his behalf after months without contact. *Mom, need D asap.* Fuck him, and fuck his endearing familial bond with her mother and the way it made her heart pang with sorrow for his loss of his own mother and the questions it had left him with. *Need D asap.* As soon as possible? It sounded urgent.

The instinct was to fly to his side.

Logic told her it was a poor choice, counter to the efforts she'd made to distance herself from his effect on her. Logic told her it meant setting herself up for disappointment and hurt.

Instinct said he needed her and it didn't matter that he wouldn't appreciate it, that he would shrug off her concern with a lame joke or that he would say and do any number of things that would piss her off. Instinct said he wouldn't make contact at all unless he believed he actually needed to – *bring stethoscope* – and that made her tense, ready to stand up and run out the door in case he was injured or in danger.

Logic told her to sit her ass back down – if it were as dire as all that, he would *call*. The message read *leave gun at home. Come alone.* No danger. He wanted her alone, and he wanted her in a medical capacity. Another autopsy, maybe, but this time he wasn't going to the bother of trying to tempt her out with the scent of a new case. So, not official? Or something more personal, hence the
inclusion of her mother on the mission of recruiting her?

How was she meant to know what to make of that information, let alone act on it?

_You can always walk away, Colt._ As in, _you_ can always walk away, and I recommend it, but the same can't be said for us all. Some of us have too much baggage to get very far, and we just walk in circles around it.

"We agreed at Christmas," Colt said now, frowning at her across the table, bring her attention back to the moment. "I'm in. You can't scare me off the case, ma'am."

She sighed again and put the phones down on the table, conflicted. _Think, think._ Think it through like the sane person your partner still thinks you are. Until he doesn't.

Think. Her car wasn't here, and the address was hours and hours of driving away. She needed a flight. A flight would not go unnoticed if, as she suspected, her activity was being noted. Mulder's very dangerous intel was still partially spread across her kitchen table, and the weight of it, coupled with the worrisome conversation today with Kelley, made her nerves dance at the very thought of doing anything unexpected. Of doing anything that could lead Kelley and whoever he associated with to Mulder.

Not that it should be her problem.

Yet somehow, despite what she'd told AD Kelley, it still felt like it was.

"You should be scared," she said finally. "If anyone learns that we have this, all of our legitimate work counts for nothing. We'll be branded criminals." She bit her lip. _Fucking Mulder._ Here was another good reason not to go to him. He'd thoroughly infuriated her with this reckless act. She should leave him hanging, like he did her at Christmas. _Did she like the watch?_ Fuck him. And her mother a little bit, too, for conspiring with him. _Yes, she wears it every day._ "We're spread too thin. Only two of us. We need allies."

Colt lifted the empty envelope and waved it once. "I think you have one."

_You have no idea._ "Allies who won't land us in federal lock-up with a briefcase full of stolen CIA files," she clarified. She switched the screen off on her mother's phone, a decision warring inside her. Running to Mulder was pathetic, a direct insult to her own integrity after _years_ of staying away and _years_ of being kept at arm's length, but denying that it was exactly what she wanted to do was futile. So: defer to reason. It wasn't just pathetic, it was unwise. Her talk with Kelley had convinced her that people were looking for Mulder, and furthermore, her own investigation couldn't really take the heat if she was reassociated with...

Her _own_ investigation.

"I need to go," she announced suddenly, shoving her chair back from the table. "I need to go to Quantico. Now. Today."

"Now? What for?" Colt opened his hands helplessly when she got to her feet. "It's almost the weekend."

"I can make it look like I'm there for our current case." She put the bag on the seat of the chair and kept packing up the files they'd spread everywhere. "I'll visit the Behavioural Analysis Unit and work with one of their agents on a profile for our bomb-builder. Can you book that for me? For this afternoon? And take me back to my car?"
"On a Friday afternoon at the last minute. Sure." Colt got her laptop out of her briefcase anyway, brushing off the papers she was still tossing in on top of it, and switched it on. He logged in with her credentials, offering her a brief condescending look that brought her back to reality. He was right. Finding a profiler willing to meet with her for a lengthy project right before clock-off on a Friday was going to be tricky. She made herself stop packing the briefcase and rethink. Meanwhile, he said, "Let's make it first thing tomorrow morning. Smaller crew, but someone will take your appointment, I'm sure. And we can get your car without looking suspicious. Now," he added, typing earnestly and not looking up, "why are we making this appointment, really? Who are you trying to visit without drawing attention?"

She stared at him. Was she so obvious? She averted her eyes to the innards of her briefcase, embarrassed. Because she shouldn't be going. Mulder hadn't woken her on Christmas night, just read her case files and walked out, and when she needed him he couldn't be bothered answering his phone – but when he wanted her, she was going to come running? Again? Like Boston, which had gotten her tangled in this investigation in the first place? Was she so flimsy?

Pretty much. And it made her so mad with herself. Sifting mindlessly through the documents in the briefcase she came across the copy of the Engel case she'd printed off before it disappeared (for formatting, though it had so far failed to reappear) from the FBI's databanks. Her fingertips alighted across the cover page.

She looked up at her partner. Hard-working, loyal. Being honest with him was out of the question. She improvised.

"Harlow," she answered after too many beats. "She works at Quantico. If anyone's got reason to side with us-"

"No," Colt interrupted. "Nobody else."

"We can't work like this forever," Scully argued. "If you and I are neutralised this whole case falls apart. We need someone who can verify that our investigation has validity if our credibility is ever stamped out."

We need a new me, she realised. Skinner was right. She was Mulder now, she and Colt, and they needed a level-headed scientist to lend weight to their case the same way Mulder had once needed Scully.

The thought was distressing.

"How do you know we can trust her?" Colt demanded. "We've never even met her. She opened a case related to ours, nearly two years ago now, and we're guessing she was shouldered out unwillingly, but maybe she wasn't as committed as we are. Maybe the reason she was taken out so easily was that she didn't really believe."

"Maybe."

"If you're wrong, and she's a flake, letting her in on our investigation could ruin everything," he continued warily. "She could slip up, or worse, she could do us in. It's not like it would be hard for her to find kindling for the fire. Exhibit A," he added, throwing the last of the papers towards the briefcase. The 1964 birth certificate, courtesy of the CIA and whoever Mulder had contracted to send this to Scully. "People are being murdered in the name of a scientific experiment connected to our government. This case is important. Solving it is important. Building a solid case and getting it all the way to a prosecution is important. I'm not prepared to watch it dissolve because some agent I don't even know isn't up to the task."
Scully pondered this, knowing he was making a valid point. Lots of them. But she needed to drive to Virginia, and a cover story, and a reason for a cover story, and Harlow was at least a reason that she was willing to stand by. Harlow was a reason she'd been seeking an excuse for anyway. She could kill two birds with one stone here. "We won't know until we meet her." She met her partner's unwavering look, knowing he didn't like it. "I'll be careful. You think I'd risk our jobs-"

"I'm not worried about my job," Colt said with a frown, and Scully rubbed her temples, wishing she'd not taken the painkillers. A headache would be oh-so-fitting right about now, even preferable to this stark clarity of the position she was in and the ironic cloudiness it created around her choices.

But there was no choice, even if her predestined path took her dangerously close to alienating her only remaining ally.

"Yes, so you've said," she murmured, not wasting the energy required to contemplate his statement and its inherent wrongness, because she knew he wasn't prepared to discuss it with her. However he'd secured his job at the Bureau, he felt highly secure in it, and he didn't want to talk about it. "Well, I worry about mine, and my freedom, and everything else I've got to lose. Nobody knows better than I do the cost of fucking this up. We either do it right or we get the hell out of it. I'm the one afraid to trust you, remember."

Colt's return look was steady and long. "There's something you're not telling me."

She swallowed, guilty. "There's a lot we don't tell each other."

Her words were as effective as a backhand; he looked down. Was silent for so long, loudly silent, the silence of words unspoken. She felt awful. She thought of his unblinking composure under Hugh Kelley's challenging look, his show of deference to her in Tan's office back in December, his knock at her door on Christmas Day and his fearlessness arguing with her, determined that she see her own strength to fulfil the requirements of this investigation. The fact that he'd stayed on Christmas even after she drew a gun on him, and the fact that he'd stuck fast to his every assurance of loyalty and secrecy since.

How long had it taken her to let down these same walls with Mulder? Why should Colt be made to work so hard to earn the same respect? Because he deserved better.

Then: "I'll ring around BAU, try and find someone who'll take your appointment. Today. It'll look legit," he assured her as she exhaled in relief, having not realised she was even holding her breath, "and I'll drive you back to the office. Go and get changed or whatever."

She pressed her lips together, tense and grateful. "Colt, thank you-"

"Don't thank me yet," he warned, looking only at the laptop screen. Her phone vibrated its reminder of the previous messages, and picked it up off the tabletop. The discovery of Maggie's phone had erased the urge to read whatever messages her own phone had received. "It's Friday afternoon. Traffic's going to be a killer, you're going for a night-time appointment your profiler will just love you for, since who wouldn't rather be at work after hours for an unexpected last-minute task instead of out drinking?"

"Not you, I hope," Scully said, finally reading her own messages. Two from the same person.

Can you meet me in my office?
"Why?" Colt asked, frowning again, eyes focussed on the screen as he looked through lists of flights. Scully tapped through the options in her phone and deleted the message history. She assumed Skinner would do the same at his end.

"Because there's something else I need you to do."
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I do not own Morgan Freeman's voice (sadly) or David Caruso but borrowed them here for creative purposes and hope they don't mind. YEEAAHHHHH!

Author's Notes: The scene opens to a sunny Queensland day and Solia sitting at her computer typing out an apology to her readers for the long wait between chapters. Life thrashed me this past fortnight. But here it is! And the next one is fully mapped in my head so I just need a few evenings (hopefully consecutive!) to write it.

For those who read the previous chapter when it was first released, there has been a minor edit since thanks to the advice of AlleyNYC which addresses the airport problem: I am informed that Quantico and DC are not a flight apart but a drive, and so that conversation has been amended, and at the opening of this chapter, Colt is no longer driving Scully to the airport. To save you going back and rereading, all that changed is that he now only books her an appointment with a profiler. Thank you AlleyNYC; I really appreciate this kind of constructive feedback because I otherwise would never know, and the story's viability and consistency would suffer. Dodgy linguistic choices, poor geography… let me know :)

Thanks heaps to threnodynxx, Jesse, herbwelch, chocolatedreams, Cbduke, AlleyNYC and soodohnimh for your comments over the past three weeks. They always make me smile and keep me motivated to carve out time to keep working on upcoming chapters for you. I can't say how appreciative I am of you giving your time and words to me.

What makes us trust, even when all rational indicators tell us not to?

He drove her back toward their office without a word. Once or twice he stole glances at her, sitting there deep in complex thought, one hand buried warmly in the pocket of her coat and the other clenched tightly around the handle of her briefcase. The briefcase, the one that held their whole controversial, precarious investigation. And she was taking it with her to the Quantico offices occupied by hundreds of federal agents (though hopefully most of them would have gone home by the hour she arrived) for a meeting with a profiler she had little interest in seeing, to cover for the actual meeting she was planning with the agent that had first initiated this investigation.

Whose involvement could bring the whole delicate card tower of Colt and Scully's case tumbling down. In spectacular movie-special-effect flames. With background explosions. And with muted music, and perhaps with a poetic Morgan Freeman voiceover.

Artsy.

Colt swallowed a heavily exhalation as Scully pointed wordlessly up ahead at a bus stop, and he pulled over into it. She was determined, determined to go to Virginia, and a lot of people wouldn't have been game enough to fight her on it, but he had, and he hadn't won. Not that he'd expected to. An upbringing with similarly fierce women had given him a starkly realistic understanding of his place in any argument, and he wasn't about to question the natural order of things like that any
more than he was likely to question gravity or evolution. But he was questioning trust, and where it came from, and what it was made of, and why, despite a whole host of good reasons not to – ranging from a gun on Christmas Day to a series of tight-lipped secrets and now to a clearly ill-advised trip to Virginia with their whole investigation on the line – he still found himself trusting Dana Scully.

Trusting her, and getting out of the car, his car, leaving the keys in the ignition.

Trusting her, and holding the door open for her as she got out, rounded the bonnet and climbed back in, this time into the driver's side. He'd never let a girlfriend drive the car, or his grandmother or either of his aunts. No one drove this car bar him. Until now.

He was going to have to trust her.

Reluctantly he closed the door for her, keeping close beside her window as the heavy flow of traffic noisily ploughed on behind him across multiple lanes. Agent Scully settled her hands on the steering wheel, getting a feel for the vehicle, and she glanced up at him, huge blue eyes radiant with gratefulness. He'd never known anyone else who said so little with words but poured expression out through the eyes like she did. In these moments, locked in a look that said, so clearly, thank you, no one else would have done this for me, you're the best, it was easier to justify the ridiculousness of it all.

Trusting her, when so many indicators said not to.

"Thank you, Colt," she murmured, really just lip-synced against the roar of the traffic all around them. She didn't smile; she looked tense and worn-out, like someone cornered. Like someone stuck on a path that terrified her, angered her but couldn't be avoided. He didn't understand it. This trip was her idea. But she wasn't going to talk about it: she'd made that clear.

Which made it rather harder to justify.

"You know we can't be friends anymore if you scratch my car," he said finally, and finally, finally, the ghostly quirk of a smile.

"Likewise," she said, digging in her coat and handing him the keys for her car, but though he smiled back, Colt didn't believe her. He doubted very much that she had an emotional attachment to her car any greater than her attachment to any of her personal possessions. She flexed her fingers around the wheel and looked around the dash. "Any tips?"

"Go easy on the clutch," Colt advised, raising his voice over a truck loudly rumbling by, giving Scully a moment to press down the pedal to feel it out, "or you'll stall it. And if it doesn't turn over the first time, and it won't in the cold, don't stress, just keep trying."

"I'll bring her back tomorrow," his partner promised.

"And the briefcase," he reminded her, and she nodded solemnly.

"I will not risk our hard work, Colt," she said, so seriously. "Call me if anything comes to light, okay? Anything."

"You too," he answered, and then she was driving away, and he was trusting her, apparently confident that she had things under control.

He walked for a while in the frigid afternoon air, shrugging his coat and scarf more snugly over his shoulders and neck, giving in to the loud, heavy exhalation of frustration he'd been holding back
for the past twenty minutes. Outwardly he felt no such confidence in Agent Scully's wayward plan. The decision to go to Quantico had come on suddenly, and the desire to meet Agent Harlow had seemed almost an afterthought, unconnected to what they were discussing at that point. The information was dangerous, they'd agreed. He should walk away from it, she'd said. No one but her needed to be involved, she'd hinted. Then: let's rope in somebody else, untested and unknown, and risk the whole operation by gambling on a stranger's willingness to engage in the same dodgy procedures and not tell anyone. Yes. Great plan. Totally in-line with what I was thinking, and with what we were both just saying.

She wasn't one hundred percent right, he'd come to understand as he'd gotten to know her better these past months he'd worked with her, though she was no less brilliant for it. It wasn't that she lacked anything by way of intelligence or skill or competence; rather, it was that there was something else, something more to her than perhaps other people carried around with them. Secrets. Knowledge. Fears. And something else, something… unstable. He couldn't put his finger on it, couldn't even verify that it concerned him, but he saw the way that element of her persona affected others. He understood now why their workmates generally avoided her. She wasn't scary. She just had the potential to be.

She was crazy. Just a little bit.

And still, he reflected ironically as he waved down a cab, he trusted her. Enough that he had let her leave the state, with his car, with the case he frequently had reason to believe he was more dedicated to than she was. More than once she'd tried to back out of it, or had become reluctant with it. He knew she hadn't wanted to pursue it in the beginning. She had fears attached to this line of inquiry, deep and dense and painful, and he'd kept from prying, half out of respect and half out of cowardice. What had they taken from her to shake an agent like Scully so deeply? What had they done to give her that resigned expression, so grimly determined to chase them yet so miserably afraid? Knowing meant knowing, and Colt didn't want to know what they could take.

Perhaps it was the culmination of all these factors that made him trust her. Her evident terror of what they were doing, yet her continued resolve, however shaky, however inconsistent, and her steadfastness in her loyalty to him. It had never occurred to him that she might pack their investigation in on a whim, a moment of weakness or questioned morality, and deliver him to Tan or Hofstetter as an accomplice to an unsanctioned and, quite frankly now, illegal operation, though he knew the same thought had definitely occurred to her. She said with her words that she trusted him but her eyes, big open books as they were, betrayed the blur of questions she asked herself whenever she was challenged, either by him or by circumstances. Can-I-trust-him-is-he-telling-me-the-truth-who-is-he-loyal-to-what-are-his-motives-can-I-trust-him-how-can-I-know-what-choice-do-I-have? He couldn't imagine living inside her head, the cold and frightened place it must be, a network of neat and efficient systems breaking everything, everything, down into its fundamentals. Everything down to the lowest common denominator. Anything bigger, wider, messier and impossible to quantify – trust, instinct, promises, love, allegiance – were those too complex for her to work with? Was that why she shirked them?

Colt's cab joined the late afternoon traffic and slowed right down along with everyone else. Peak hour. Delightful. You're welcome, Agent Scully. He was mindful of the manila folder tucked underneath his coat. He could question his trust in her and her trust in him for the rest of his life but here against his heart was the proof, as if he really needed it. He knew: relying on somebody else seemed a big enough effort that the strain of it may kill her, and she had chosen to involve Colt in this investigation, chosen to be talked around to pursuing it at Christmas and chosen to leave this task to him while she took the rest with her to Virginia. Somehow, for some unimaginable reason, he was among a select few.
People whose hands Dana Scully would leave her life in.

And she was sending him to meet with another club member.

It took forever to get back to the J. Edgar Hoover Building, but taking the lift up, it felt like he was just here. Just here, running a nationwide search for mentions of the name Reece, attached to the dates left by Agent Scully's mysterious pen pal. Just here, receiving Agent Scully's mail. Just here, in the basement, taking his partner through the impossibility of what he'd found and facing the impossibility of her calm and open-minded response. Just here, in the same elevator, feeling his stomach flutter with discomfort at the tightening of her expression when she pulled a few pages half-free of the envelope, and his own sudden realisation of the same implications as she shoved them back down and said, "We can't be seen reading this."

Just here, getting the eyeball from Assistant Director Kelley, who clearly had a strong keeness for Agent Scully and couldn't read social cues. Colt had grown up around much less tactful and careful females than Scully and was accustomed to much more vocal expressions of like or dislike, but for all her subtlety, he still hadn't missed the 'no thanks' vibe she was putting out to Counter Intelligence's wonder boy. Kelley seemed wilfully oblivious.

And, almost laughably, his faux-casual act today had betrayed a territoriality Colt hadn't expected but hadn't been prepared to cower to. Kelley saw him as a threat to his chances with Agent Scully; as competition. Ha. What an idiot. Colt was half Scully's age, young enough to be her son, and a romantic entanglement had crossed his mind about as often as it had probably crossed hers – zero. Whatever complicated direction his relationship with her was taking, that was not it, and even if through a twist of time and circumstance they'd met at the same age, he couldn't imagine that he'd ever go there. She was difficult, aloof, damaged, way too high maintenance. Like you'd know what hit you if you actually managed to win her over, Hugh.

He didn't go straight for her car. He went to Assistant Director Skinner's office and explained to the secretary that he was here on behalf of Agent Scully, who'd gone home with a migraine but had an appointment to keep with the official inside. She smiled and phoned through to let her boss know. As soon as she nodded and gestured him through, his own phone rang. He took it out and checked the screen. Home. He hesitated a second – Nana was home alone on Fridays – then cancelled the call and set the phone to vibrate. He'd call back after.

Colt hadn't been inside this office before but noted as he stepped through the inner doors that it was strikingly similar to the office of Peter Tan. The same sparse but regal styling, similar furnishings. Bureau chic. Walter Skinner looked up from his huge desk with cool, suspicious eyes behind thin glasses.

Colt stopped and resisted the urge to salute. "Sir. Thank you for seeing me."

"This ought to be good," Skinner replied, sitting back in his seat and gesturing to the one opposite him. "My secretary tells me you're here on Agent Scully's behalf, but, funny thing: Agent Scully didn't notify me that you'd be replacing her."

The assistant director was an intimidating man, intimidating in the same way Scully was and other ways as well. Beneath the cold, Scully had a sort of warmth in her sincerity. Skinner was still largely unknown to Colt and so exuded no such aura. Since elevating in status from underling to partner, his fear of Scully had mostly dissolved. Skinner was terrifying. A tall man built with strong, broad shoulders and a shiny bald head, sitting behind that big desk with that name plaque that read Assistant Director, which was the same title as Tan and Kelley but in this case was pronounced in Colt's head with an exotic inflection that translated to The reason I have my job; could just as easily make it disappear.
Because like the other people at his level, and unlike Scully, Skinner had read Colt's full military service record (at least, as much of it as the military would release) and knew exactly how he'd gotten his employment with the Bureau. The others hadn't liked it; Tan hadn't liked it. But Tan had listened when Skinner suggested partnering the new agent with the unimpressible Agent Scully. Even from those at his own paygrade, Walter Skinner demanded a sort of respect. No wonder he was Agent Scully's only discernible 'friend' – in the exact opposite way from how she carried her feminine strength like a sword, sharp and unexpected, Skinner wore the unimpeachable armour of power that was distinctly masculine in both the source and the unquestioned, certain wielding of it.

Colt was familiar with both types, from childhood and his years of military service, but infinitely more comfortable with powerful women than he was with powerful men.

"She had an urgent appointment at Quantico," he explained as he sat. "She had to leave immediately."

"And she wouldn't dare text me back while driving," Skinner added, voice laced with sarcasm, leaving Colt unsettled. "That would be unsafe."

"I don't know why she didn't message you," Colt admitted honestly, feeling put-upon. This was her idea – she hadn't thought to set it up appropriately? "She only said to me that you wanted to see her but she didn't have time, and asked me to come in her place."

He winced at Skinner's dubious look and despite the honesty of the comment, it clearly wasn't what was necessary to win the older man's trust.

"Do you know why?" Skinner asked finally. Colt hesitated. Trusting Scully was born of necessity and partnership. He barely knew the assistant director. The folder stayed inside his jacket for now.

"She wasn't explicit, sir." Well, in her instructions on what he was to present, she was, but in why, or in what she hoped to gain, she was very vague. "She said you had something to tell her and asked me to pass on anything that comes of this meeting."

"Did she?" Skinner said, rhetorically, smiling humourlessly. He leaned across the desk. "I'm much too busy to waste my time playing games, so I'm going to be frank with you, Agent Colt. I've known Agent Scully for twenty years, through some very complex cases that made her – and me – some very unpleasant enemies; and in that time, can you guess how many times she's sent someone in her place to collect sensitive information from me without informing me first?" He waited, pretending to give Colt time to think, when really it was just time to sweat. And time to feel bowled over by the directness of Skinner's response. "You'll forgive me for my suspiciousness, then, when she visits me for the first time in months and a few hours later, you show up claiming to be here to speak on her behalf. Don't think nobody's tried to fool me before. I'm not the idiot here."

Colt nodded once, slowly, thinking. It was easy to see how Scully and Skinner had become friends. They shared a deep-seated sense of paranoia. Did he really think Colt was here to get dirt on Scully or to steal secrets before they could get to her? What kind of enemies had these two shared in the past?

"I understand the precaution," he said carefully. "I don't expect you-"

"I don't think you have any idea whatsoever, Agent Colt," Skinner interrupted coolly. "If you did, you wouldn't be here. Now," and his eyebrows furrowed, "tell me what you're doing in my office."

It slipped out. "I'd really rather not be, sir."
The assistant director's brow smoothed slightly and he lifted his chin. "Finally some honesty. Alright. Let's go from there. You'd rather not be here, but here you are. Permission to speak freely, soldier," he added, slightly softer.

"Agent Scully wants… me to trust you," Colt admitted, battling with himself internally, because being this direct and open with a superior was in opposition to years of training, and perhaps Skinner understood that, "and I think she sent me here to show you that you can trust me, too. I think that's why she didn't text ahead. So you'd grill me."

Long silence. The weight of the other man's discerning gaze.

"What's she doing in Quantico?" Skinner asked eventually, the first question Colt felt ready for.

"Meeting a profiler at the BAU to develop a working profile for our possible bomb-builder," Colt answered smoothly. Skinner quirked an eyebrow.

"She wants me to trust you but sends you in here to lie to my face?"

Shit, the man was sharp. Colt fumbled for a response. He was only small fry; Agent Scully and the people she played with were the big guys.

"She does have an appointment with an Agent Edlund," he said, and hesitated before adding, reluctantly, taking a gamble, "but she's also visiting an Agent Harlow, off the record."

"And what's that a cover for?"

Colt was lost. "If that's a cover, sir, I don't know what for."

"And she didn't tell you what you and I were meant to be talking about?"

He shook his head, slowly, half-falsely, feeling naked. Then he remembered, "She only said, 'Tell Skinner this is something he can do for us without falling into the same pit'."

That struck something, because behind the glasses, the assistant director's eyes went momentarily wide.

"Is this about Mulder?"

"About what?" Colt asked, trying to place the word. No, not a word, a name. He'd never heard it before but he'd seen it, somewhere. But Skinner's wide eyes had slackened and whatever he'd just been thinking had been wiped from his expression. Hidden. Colt had failed a test.

"Agent Colt, you've worked with Agent Scully for a few months now," Skinner said after a long moment. "I'm sure, if you've been paying attention, you will have realised that the more you get to know her, the less you find you actually know about her."

The personnel file. Colt's internal functions seemed to suddenly slow down.

"What does she know?" he asked before he could stop himself. Skinner shrugged.

"You'd have to ask her that," he drawled, letting Colt sweat for a heavy second before adding, "Your record is still sealed, if that's what you're worried about. And I have no reason to suspect anyone's been granted special access to it."

Colt withheld the sigh of relief only with effort, and marvelled at the source. Had his priorities
changed so much in so short a time? When the mission was sealed he'd been relieved no one would
know what role he'd played; still that was the case, but the shame had shifted to other elements.

From Did I do enough? to Should I have been there at all?

"On paper, I don't like you, Agent Colt," Skinner confessed. "I don't like the military telling the
Bureau we have to take on. It's underhanded. I told Assistant Director Tan to partner you with
Agent Scully because I figured she'd either scare you off the job, oust your true reasons for being
here... or make a decent agent out of you. I'm still waiting for the punch line." He sighed, irritated.
"But that Agent Scully even speaks to you, let alone made you her partner, should speak volumes.
So: be straight with me, because I know she wasn't when I saw her. Is she in trouble?"

The confession took the count of five for Colt to absorb it. I don't like you, Agent Colt. I figured
she'd scare you off the job... oust you... Ouch. But more significant than any of that was the
unexpected emphasis on the last question. Skinner cared.

Half of the man's scare factor evaporated instantly, and what blocks Colt had carried into this office
went with it.

Colt had never been particularly good at the formal, official thing, playing the tedious game of
words, and Skinner clearly wasn't interested in doing that dance anyway. He exhaled and asked,
"Sir, is our conversation in confidence?"

That got Skinner's attention, made him take things a little more seriously. "Absolutely."

"Scully and I aren't in any trouble. Yet." Colt forcibly set his doubts aside and slid a hand into his
jacket for the few documents he'd been left with. He'd trusted her and her instincts this far, despite
all the reasons not to – and she'd gotten very much further on those same instincts, so there was
nothing else for it. He held the folder suspended above the tabletop for one last second of
reluctance. It was a good compromise, he reminded himself. Handing a flower over the fence to a
passer-by without actually inviting them through the gate into the garden. "This is what Agent
Scully wanted me to talk to you about."

He dropped it, letting go of his control of the situation, and Skinner stood so he could reach, and
took it suspiciously. He flicked the cover back and leafed through the few documents inside.

"Reece Johnathan Dwyer," he read off the police report. "What's your interest?"

"The fact that he was killed in 1979 but got his driver's licence renewed in Maryland in 2014
interested us a little bit," Colt said blandly, earning himself a sharp look over the top of the folder.
"The idea that he could somehow take a full round of bullets to the torso, be pronounced dead by a
coroner and be buried by the state when the body wasn't claimed and still be getting around today,
looking like he's my age when he should be older than Agent Scully, also caught our attention."

"You're positive this is the same person?"

"It's a hell of a coincidence if it isn't, sir. Look at the photos."

He watched Skinner's eyes, dark and discerning, skim through the documents with sceptical
intensity. The older man laid each one down on the desk once he'd read it, leaving it there face-up
so his gaze could flick down to it to cross-confirm as he read the next one. His brow furrowed even
further as his fingertip touched down on the missing person's poster for Reece Jonathan Dwyer.

"This date," he said, voice strangely cloudy with slow realisation. "This is why. This is what she's
interested in, isn't it?"
Colt was surprised that the date bore more significance to Skinner than did the agelessness or the zombification, but recalled the way, just hours ago, Scully had honed in on the same detail.

"She said that there are cases confirming more than twenty people were abducted across the country on that same day," he remembered, leaving out what else she'd said. Alien DNA. Government conspiracy. Mass abduction for experimentation. Cloning. He was still assimilating that tale with his internal belief system.

Skinner wasn't going to let him off that easily. "That's right. Did she tell you the story?"

Colt couldn't hold in this sigh, and he looked down and nodded. "The unofficial one, yes."

Skinner's expression, up until this moment displaying a variety of negative ranging from staunchly unimpressed to determined disbelief, now softened just slightly into a small smirk.

"Ah. So you've been initiated. I wish I could tell you it gets easier, but..." He shrugged, deliberately careless. He laid the last page down so he could see them all at once. "And this is exactly what I was worried about. An X-file? Not running errands, my ass."

The frustrated swearing caught Colt off-guard. "Sir?"

"Nothing," Skinner dismissed. He looked up at Colt expectantly. "What does Agent Scully want me to do with this information? I assume this an element of something bigger that she doesn't want to tangle me in. This isn't a case, just a curiosity."

In his pocket, Colt's phone buzzed. He ignored it, let it ring out.

"I'm not able to comment any further on the nature of the investigation without compromising it, except to say that this curiosity may be part of a larger pattern," he told the assistant director. "Agent Scully asks that any similar cases that you come across be sent quietly her way."

"Similar cases? Of abductees returned from the dead thirty years on and applying for Maryland driver's licences?" Skinner asked cynically. Colt tried to smile.

"It would help us out a lot."

"And you can't dig too deep yourselves without the risk of drawing attention," Skinner observed, piling the documents and slipping them back into the manila folder. "Scully expressed concerns about being watched."

"We have reason to believe our progress may be monitored or even impeded if anyone else in the Bureau learns of our larger project, sir. We have already been warned off it by a number of people."

"Including me," Skinner said with a frown. "I told Scully to leave this alone."

Colt frowned too; did Skinner already know? "This?"

His phone vibrated again, another call left to ring out.

"Whatever this is you two are working on. Whatever obscure 'anonymous' tip you're acting on, whatever righteous mission you think you're carrying out. You shouldn't be messing with it. I told her."

"It doesn't look like she listened, sir."

It was Skinner's turn to sigh. He pushed the folder across the desk.
"An inherited trait, I assure you. And she's getting worse. Tell Agent Scully I'll keep an eye open for anything linked but I don't like her chances. Is there anything else I can do for you today, Agent?"

A third call. Colt took out his phone and killed the incoming call from Aunt Luci, and shoved it back into his pocket. He took back the folder from Skinner's desk.

"Just promise me this conversation won't leave this room."

"Agent Colt, if you and Agent Scully are working X-files, believe me, I am the least of your problems," Skinner said irritably, but in the silence that followed, he rubbed his eyes tiredly behind his glasses, and Colt was reminded that this man cared. He continued, much quieter, almost to himself, "Yes, you have my word. Now get the hell out of my office," he instructed, not so quietly, definitely not to himself. Colt leaped to his feet.

"Yes, sir," he agreed obediently, catching himself halfway to a salute and tucking the folder back into his jacket. "Thank you for your time, sir."

"When you speak to Agent Scully, tell her to watch her back," Skinner warned as Colt started for the door. He slowed, listening. "What she came and asked me about today… she wasn't gone five minutes and someone came asking after the same thing. She was right. She needs to watch herself."

"Who was it?" Colt asked, turning back, taking his phone, once again ringing, from his pocket to divert the call to voicemail. Skinner cocked his head, expressionless.

"I'm not in a position to tell you that, Agent."

"Why not?" Colt frowned at the sudden barring of information. Did the guy care or not? He ended yet another call as soon as it began to vibrate. "If Scully's in danger-"

"She's always in danger, Agent Colt, and half the time she puts herself there. I can't tell you who it was because I like my job, and I'm a good deal more useful to you and your partner if I'm able to keep it."

Colt swallowed his frustrated retort and tried to think reasonably. Sharing the who could betray Skinner as the source of the intel; it made sense to keep details to himself if he was going to leak tips to Scully from within their Bureau. He was an assistant director. Their investigation was off-the-books, unauthorised and controversial. For him to be linked to their work, should it be exposed before it was solid enough to present, could depose them all of their positions, and he had the furthest to fall. He didn't know anything much about their case except that he didn't want to be connected to it, but here he was, still giving Colt the time of day and a vague hint that might make more sense to Scully.

"Understood, sir," Colt said finally. He laid a hand on the door handle and tucked his phone away. "I'll let her know."

He didn't ask what she'd asked about; he didn't ask Skinner to elaborate on the conversation he'd had with her or with the person who'd come in straight after asking the same questions. He turned the door handle and opened the door a crack, pausing only when Skinner said his name.

"Just so we're clear," the older man said, opening one of the folders from the pile at the top of his desk and beginning to read, not bothering to look up. "On paper, I still don't like you."

Down the hall, down the stairs, out into the parking lot, Colt still wasn't sure of the meaning of that parting statement. He found Scully's keys in his pockets and got in behind the wheel of her car. As
soon as he shut the door he exhaled heavily, releasing the highly pressurised CO2 of stress and anxiety that had been building up inside him with every breath since he'd left Scully in his car and let her drive off with it to Virginia. In honesty it all had very little to do with her driving his car, and a lot to do with meeting Walter Skinner in these circumstances and giving him a glimpse into their case. And into him. The dude was scary.

Scary, but possibly a friend. Possibly. If not a friend, then definitely an ally to Scully, which in this situation was close enough.

Colt had driven the unfamiliar car out of the parking garage and into the street and had already joined peak hour traffic to begin on his usual path home when his phone rang yet again, and this time he answered it.

"Yeah, what?" he asked of Luci, not aggressively, just the way he'd usually answer the phone to her or her sister. Her response was anything but usual.

"Where the hell are you, Warren?" she demanded angrily. "I've been calling and calling; I've left you voicemails, I sent you text messages-"

"I was in a meeting," he answered, annoyed.

"And you couldn't answer your goddamn phone?!"

What the hell was her problem? "Federal Bureau of Investigation, Luci. National security. No, I couldn't answer my phone. Why? What was so important-"

"It's Nana," she said, and he shut up immediately and listened. And drove, apparently, but he hardly noticed that. "She had a fall. She's going to hospital."

The calls. The call just before he went into Skinner's office. Nana. That was what was so important. He felt cold all over.


"Providence Hospital," she said when she came back to the phone. He drove the path in his head, mapped it out in a second, determined to be there. "I'm on my way there now. And yes, I think she's alright. Toni got there first and went with her in the ambulance. I haven't seen her yet."

"What happened to her?" Colt asked again. Traffic was hardly moving, despite a green light way up ahead. Beside him, the turning-only lane was empty. He didn't want to turn. He jerked the wheel and accelerated; Scully's car had guts and zipped over into the next lane. He put his foot down with the full weight of the cold lead in his stomach and checked over his shoulder for a gap that probably wasn't there. It wasn't, but this car was smaller than his, and much more dextrous. The light was changing. On the orange he whipped across the intersection back into the lane he'd started in, twenty cars ahead and through the lights, tight between two cars with only a loud and angry honk for his troubles. He didn't care. Desperation fuelled him.

"I don't know exactly. Toni dropped by and found Ma at the bottom of the stairs. She took a knock to the head and couldn't get up. A bit delirious, Toni said. Misplaced her marbles."

"Delirious?" He didn't know exactly when the woman who'd raised him had gotten old or exactly when he'd ceased to be her baby and became the adult, but even as she'd slowed up and become
more visibly frail, her mind had never dulled. Delirium was for old people. The idea of her as old scared him.

Falling down stairs. Not getting up. Losing her mind.

"Apparently Nana was checking the house for intruders when she fell," Luci said, and Colt stabbed on the brakes as the cars in front slowed down. Intruders? "But Toni said she checked and there was no one there. Nana's just hearing things."

Or maybe not losing her mind. "Did Toni call the police?"

"No, she called you, and when you didn't answer, she called me, and I called you. What good if it having an FBI agent in the family if-"

"I'll call them. Do you know if Toni touched anything?"

He was already thinking of what the CSIs would do – dust for prints, check for disturbances in dust (not that Nana's place would be dusty), catalogue missing items, look for footprints – in their search for evidence of a break-in. Could someone have broken into the house? Could someone have hurt Nana? Why would anyone do that?

*You don't know what you've got to lose.*

Scully's words hit him like a fist to the throat, and he choked on his inhalation. Surely not…

"No one broke in, Warren. Nana probably tripped over Tess. She shouldn't even have that stupid little dog. It's a hazard. I told you, Toni had a look around."

But when was that? Five, ten minutes after Nana fell? Plenty of time for an assailant to get out unnoticed. And perhaps lucky for his aunt that she had. What kind of human being pushed an old grandmother down a staircase?

What in fuck had Colt gotten himself into?

He pressed his fist to his mouth, distressed. He tried to remind himself that he had no evidence. This was speculation. He was an investigator, not a guesser. Nana was old now and had a stupid little dog that got underfoot and a set of stairs in her house. Luci's hypothesis was just as valid as his fears. He tried to breathe through it. There was every chance that this was exactly how it looked – an accident.

"Have you spoken to Grandad?" The line of cars he was trapped in wasn't moving. Come on, come on…

"Toni said she would. He's interstate. How far away are you?"

"At least half an hour," Colt said in frustration, smacking his hands on the steering wheel and looking around for another sneaky way around this bullshit traffic. Up ahead was a one-way street favouring the other direction. "I'll be there as soon as possible, Luce. Ring me if you hear anything else?"

"Answer your phone," Luci warned, and hung up. Colt immediately dialled the police and that call was much shorter. Address, badge number, circumstances, done. An FBI agent's grandmother being attacked in her home found its way pretty high up the priority list.

Traffic was painfully slow, and up ahead, that one-way street wasn't seeing much action. Would it
really hurt? And the kerb – it's not as though kerbs minded being driven on, was it? Especially for just a short while. Colt cast the phone down on the passenger seat and tightened his hands on the steering wheel. One glance in his mirror to confirm he wasn't going to take out a cyclist or something and he wrenched the wheel sideways. Scully's car mounted the kerb with two wheels relatively easily, and he sped down the road shoulder between the line of vehicles and the footpath. He leaned forward to see down the one-way street as he approached it and saw with relief it was still clear, spun the wheel and flew down it. Right now he appreciated the strike of luck that had landed him with his partner's ride. His beast of a car would never have managed these minor stunts.

At the end, or rather at the beginning since he'd taken it backwards, of the street, his luck engine puttered out, and another car pulled in, legitimately, going the right way, and they both had to slam on their brakes to avoid a collision. Through the windscreens they both blinked at each other in surprise, and then the other driver frowned and flicked his lights at Colt.

"I am not reversing all the way up this stupid street," he muttered, flicking back and revving his engine to give the other the hint. There wasn't room for two vehicles to move past each other. The other car only needed to back up a little bit to let Colt out.

The other driver wasn't impressed. He hit his horn. Colt did the same, harder, and let the brakes off momentarily to let the car jump forward slightly.

"Get out of my way!" he shouted, unheard, waving the other driver away. This holdup was costing him the time he'd gained from his dodgy driving. "I'm not meant to scratch this car but I will bulldoze you out of here."

Losing patience, the other driver wound down his window and leaned out into the cold. Colt did the same.

"What's your deal?" the other man yelled angrily. "This is a one-way street!"

"My grandmother's in hospital," Colt yelled back. The other driver stared for a moment, surprised by the lack of return aggression.

He wound his window back up. He put his car into reverse and moved out of the way. Colt put Scully's car into gear and went around, giving a grateful wave as he slipped through the small gap left between car and 'One Way' street sign. He wove through cars waiting in line for the lights to change and was that much closer to the hospital.

It took twenty-three minutes to get to Providence Hospital. On an average day it should have taken anywhere from twenty-five to half an hour; in this traffic it should have taken forty. He didn't have forty minutes. The ambulance wouldn't have taken forty, not with their screaming sirens and legalised ignorance of red lights. Nana would already be admitted. She would be inside, waiting, without him, and he without her… If someone really had come after her and hurt her, would they try again while she was in hospital? Could they? His heart was thudding with nervous anticipation by the time he ran a red light and pulled in through the hospital's exit gate to park diagonally in a disabled-only parking space. He killed the engine and jumped out, ignoring the looks of witnesses to his erratic driving.

At the front desk they gave him directions and he took off through the sterile halls. Only hours ago he was driving Agent Scully home and they'd ended up on the topic of Nana and Val. Maybe he'd been a little blusterous and harsh in the way he'd depicted his feelings towards his mother – of course he loved Valentina, of course he wanted her to be proud of him, and of course it was painful and embarrassing to admit that he wanted something so childish and unattainable – but what he'd said about his grandmother was one hundred percent true. She'd done everything for him. She was
the parent his too-young mother and her too-young high school boyfriend weren't equipped to be and she was the rock at the centre of Warren Colt's world.

Before working with Dana Scully he'd never imagined his life without Nana in it. You don't know what you've got to lose. Shadows could take people away. It made him feel sick.

And if that's what had happened here… it was his fault. He'd ignored warnings. He'd gone ahead. It was too much.

"Warren!" Toni was standing outside the ward he'd been directed to. She wasn't his mother, she wasn't his sister, but in the same way that Nana was more than just a grandmother to him in this unconventional family, Aunt Toni and her twin were not just aunts. He felt his lungs eject their fill of air at the sight of her, relieved to be in the company of family, of real adults. Toni and Luci were real adults. They would take care of things now. The stress of pressure fell off his shoulders as she strode to meet him and embraced him tightly. Yes, he was a soldier and he'd been posted to Afghanistan and been party to acts he hoped never to speak of again. Yes, he'd made it through the FBI's Academy and taken a position as an agent in Counterterrorism. Yes, he drove his own car and paid his own phone bill and met girls at bars sometimes and did a whole host of other grown-up things like a real adult. But he also preferred hot chocolate over coffee and shot nerf guns with his cousins at Christmas and liked sitting in on rainy nights with his nana watching brainless TV shows about people renovating houses.

"How is she?" Colt asked, pulling out of his aunt's bone-crushing hug to look down into her face. All his life he'd looked up to her and Luci; when he'd overtaken them in height it had been a great victory. Now it seemed crazy that she should be looking up at him, and even crazier to see the relief in her face that mirrored his own. Like he could do anything to help. Like he was any use whatsoever. "I got here as quickly as I could. Traffic was awful."

"She's okay," Aunt Toni assured him, sparing a smile. "They've done x-rays and there's just some fractures. It was just a scare. I don't think any of us had realised she'd gotten so frail."

"Can I see her?"

"Yeah, Luci just got here. I said I'd stay out here and wait for you." Toni gestured to the door, and Colt hurried past. He shoved the door open, breathless.

Nana was propped up in a hospital bed in the middle of ward, complaining about the monitor clipped to her finger, Luci and her four kids lounging all over the bed, fussing over her. Nana's complaining abruptly stopped when she saw her eldest grandson at the door, and her face broke into a warm smile.

"Oh, Warren, darling, don't look so worried," she said, extending her arms, and he went to her, passing beds both empty and occupied without a glance, straight into Nana's hug. Not even an ounce of a real adult here. "You didn't have to come. I'm fine."

"That's not what she said before you got here," Luci countered. She mimicked convincingly: "'This bed makes my back hurt. These blankets are too thin and I'm getting cold. How am I meant to relax with all these computer noises?'"

"Are you alright, Nana?" Colt pressed, squeezing into the tiny space left on the bed between Shelby and Lachlan so he could get a look at her. A sterile cotton pad was taped to her temple and there was a tell-tale stain of red in her hair from where it must have bled. Poor Toni; he could only imagine the horror of walking into the family home and finding one's mother at the foot of the stairs, blood all over her face. "What happened to you? Luci said you heard someone in the house?"
Nana waved the thought aside. "I thought I did, but Antonia checked the whole house. The rug on the stairs must have slipped when I was going up them. That's all. My own silly fault. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, you're in hospital," Colt amended. "What do the doctors say?"

"Oh." Nana's look darkened. "You know doctors, Warren. Making a fuss wherever they can. Got me booked in for some sort of brain scan later because they're worried I may have blacked out."

"MRI, Ma," Toni supplied. "And a whole lot of other tests, too." Nana waved dismissively again.

"It's nonsense. I told you, I'm fine. Just a little cut and some minor fractures."

"Check it out, Warren," Jeremy said excitedly, leaping off the bed and climbing the nearby chair – which none of the family was using, preferring the intimate huddle of the bed – to get at the lightbox on the wall. He tugged the x-ray out before anyone could stop him, smearing little child-handprints all over it, and brought it over to his big cousin. "Nana's bones."

The boy clambered back onto the bed behind Colt, squishing his sister out of the way so he could lie on his cousin's back and slouch over his shoulder. Colt took the x-ray and held it up so the soft lights of the ward would illuminate it from behind. He wished Agent Scully wasn't driving off into the Virginian sunset right now: if she were here she'd be able to help him make much more sense of this unhelpful black and white image.

"Her backbone's all broken into these little bits," Jeremy explained knowledgeably, pointing out the different vertebrae, "because she fell off the stairs."

"She didn't fall off the stairs, she fell down them," Lachlan corrected.

"Those aren't the broken bits, they're meant to be like that," Shelby said suddenly, leaning around her brother and cousin to look. "Spines are made up of lots of smaller bones. That little line… right there…" She pointed to a hairline Colt wouldn't have noticed. "That's one of the fractures they're worried about, Mom said."

The spine and pelvis were clearly visible in the image but parts of each were greyed-out and cloudy, obscured. He pointed and showed Nana.

"What's this from?"

"Being old, darling," she said gently. "Your insides will look like that one day, too."

"Because doctors take these things a little more seriously than Ma does, they're running blood tests to see if they can't find out," Aunt Toni said coolly. Colt handed the x-ray back to Jeremy, fully aware that it would not be safe with Luci's kids but lacking in care factor. They pored over it reverently, loving the idea of skeletons photographed with radiation.

"Nana, tell me what you remember," he urged. "What did you think you heard in the house before Toni found you?"

"Warren, darling."

"Please, Nana, indulge me. I've got a CSI team at the house right now, just in case," he told her, starting an excited conversation between his cousins about the TV show and earning, "Of course you do, David Caruso," from Aunt Luci. He ignored her and added, "I want to be sure, just like the doctors."
Nana sighed and picked at a loose thread in Lachlan's sweater. "I need to mend this, darling." She looked up at Colt. "I was watching TV and I thought I heard doors upstairs, and footsteps. I went to the foot of the stairs and I was sure I heard..." She shook her head, unclear on it all now that so many people had told her otherwise, caught up in the embarrassment of having fallen at all. "I thought I heard someone rummaging around, in the bedroom, but it was probably just Tess. I thought I'd better call you, just in case you were on your way home... then I'd just wait, you see..." She pressed her lips together and cast her eyes down, ashamed. Ashamed that in a moment of weakness she'd hoped her grandson could protect her when she still felt it was her job to protect him. He reached forward and grabbed her hand. All those thoughts before about not being a real adult yet, about being too young to be counted on, they disappeared.

"I'm so sorry I didn't answer," he murmured, hurting. "I was in a meeting. I thought it was important. It wasn't. Not this important."

Because Nana should be able to count on him in times like these. He should have answered. He should have told her to get out of the house and he should have made a beeline for home. She should be able to trust him to be there for her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, wiping her eye irritably and squeezing his hand. "As it turned out, there was nothing in the house to be afraid of bar my own useless body. When you didn't answer I went upstairs to check. Halfway up, the floor suddenly gave out, and I was falling, and that's the last thing I remember until I woke up with Toni shaking me, and I couldn't get up. I'm so embarrassed."

"That's why they're running the MRI," Toni explained to Colt. "It sounds like she may have lost her bearings and her balance, maybe blacked out."

"Or like someone might have yanked that rug from the bottom and taken out her balance that way," Colt suggested. Luci glared.

"Warren," she said warningly. "That's not what happened. Stop trying to scare her into believing something that didn't happen."

"Luci, are you hearing what she said? She was halfway up the stairs when the floor gave out and she fell forwards, not down like gravity would normally dictate."

"And you know that how?" Luci challenged. "When did you get so paranoid?"

"Because he's in the FBI now," Toni reminded her sister. Luci scoffed. Colt nodded pointedly at his grandmother's forehead and the bandage strapped there.

"If she fell backwards the bump would be on the back of her head. It's not. She fell forward, just like I did fifty times growing up when you ripped the carpet out from under my feet while I was going up to bed."

Nana's mouth fell open in indignation at this allegation of violence between her offspring, and Toni raised her hands quickly in defiance, quick to fend off the blame. "That was all Luci. I never did that, Ma."

"Oh, yes you did," Aunt Luci snapped at her twin. "We both did, because Warren never learned."

"Lachlan does that, too," Jeremy dobbed his brother in now, each generation of this family just as bad as the one before. "He pulls on the bottom of the rug and I fall over."

"You have to wait until they're halfway up," Shelby confirmed, while Hayley nodded. "Then they
"Lovely," Nana said sarcastically. She smiled tightly at her daughters. "Nice to know you've been raising your children as bullies." She smiled more warmly at her grandson. "Warren, I'm sure your police friends will let you know if they find anything different, but I really don't think anyone was there. No one's got any reason to hurt me and all the people who know how to exploit that stair carpet are in this room, apparently, unless Antonia has imparted the same wisdom to her own children."

Toni rolled her eyes and Luci looked away, fuming, and the cousins had lost interest in the x-ray and were getting fidgety, responding to the tension in the room. Colt saw that it was time to let it go.

"You're probably right," he relented, rubbing the back of Nana's hand and forcing a smile. "I was just worried about you, Nana."

She smiled back, adoring; and then Jeremy slung his arms around Colt's neck for an affectionate snuggle and Shelby and Hayley fought over the x-ray and Lachlan peeled off his sweater at Nana's request to leave for her to have a look at and Luci struggled to get the x-ray off her daughters and Toni started fussing over Nana's bandage. The other people in the ward probably hated them right now, this noisy, colourful, active, crowded family, but Colt wouldn't have traded them or this moment for the world.

When his phone rang he stepped out of the ward to take the call, ignoring Aunt Luci's, "Good to see you do know how to use that thing." It was the crime scene investigator that had been sent out by the nearest police station. He and his partner had swept the house but found no evidence of a break-in. Windows locked, no damage to any of the doors or their frames, but they'd dusted for prints. Colt promised to get his family members' prints for comparison and directed their attention to the rug on the stairs.

"Is it dislodged? Like someone pulled on the bottom of it?"

"No, sir," the CSI replied. "It's all neat and tucked in. No disturbance there at all."

He frowned. "None? It's not a fixed rug. Wouldn't a fall down the stairs make it slide at least a little?"

"I'd expect so, Agent Colt, but it doesn't span the whole width of the steps. There's a gap either side with just exposed wood. It's not incomprehensible that your grandmother hit the exposed wood and not the rug when she fell. She didn't fall too far. There's blood on the edge of the ninth step, so depending on her height, she can't have been more than five up."

Colt thanked the technicians for their time and hung up. He sat down heavily in one of the chairs outside Nana's ward. No evidence of foul play. Nothing to suggest it wasn't just an accident.

Was this how Agent Scully felt when she walked into that morgue in Berkshire County and saw the empty exam room, reeking of disinfectant and bleach, the evidence she'd just autopsied erased without a trace?

He ran his thumb idly across the black screen of his phone. Maybe Luci and Toni were right. Maybe it was just an accident. Maybe he was being paranoid, as they suggested.

Or maybe he'd seen too much in too short a time to believe that paranoia wasn't an excellent
defence mechanism against a terrifying world. On Christmas Day he'd joked with his aunts about investigating zombies. Ha ha. It had seemed far-fetched then, but a week earlier, alien viruses that dissolved lung tissue and governments that knew about it for sixty years and cover-ups of bodies like Rebecca Johannson's had seemed laughable; a week before today, he wouldn't have listened seriously to any claim of men returning from the dead unaged after decades, but now he had the beginnings of a pattern of such paranormal activity on his person, tucked into his jacket.

Agent Scully had told him not to follow her. She'd tried to discourage him, said they would be dealing with people she couldn't describe but who could, and would, do horrific things to keep their secrets underground. They'd been careful, but did someone know? Skinner had an inkling, but Nana's fall had happened before Colt divulged the contents of the folder, essentially ruling Scully's ally out. She wouldn't have arrived at Quantico yet, so Agent Harlow couldn't yet be blamed.

Maybe no one was to blame. Just an accident. But maybe someone was trying to scare Colt off the investigation. Nana wasn't seriously hurt. Just a warning, perhaps? He glanced back at the door, beyond which he could hear the ruckus of his beloved family annoying the other patients with their self-absorbed, noisy interactions. If his paranoid fears were true, that meant someone had come into his house. Singled out his grandmother. Hurt her. On purpose.

*You don't know what you've got to lose.*

It made his blood run icy cold. He did know what he had to lose. Today it had been threatened. Growing up in her household, Nana had been his protector; now he was an adult, too, and his absolute instinct was to lash out at whatever had hurt her. How dare anyone bring harm to Nana? Chasing down this case with Scully was unsanctioned but right. Lives were on the line. They shouldn't be threatened in the process of trying to save them.

But they had. Nana had been hurt, and could be again. Unless... he backed off? He wanted to scream and rip someone's head off for stepping foot inside his house with malicious intentions toward his grandmother, but what did you rip off a shadow? He had no proof, no name, no face, no lead at all to follow up.

He was powerless, alone with his fears. Paralysed. Exactly where someone out there wanted him.

A few times while he sat there he turned his screen on and almost called Agent Scully. Anger and terror ran in circles around him, and he wanted so badly to talk it through with her. She would hear him out; she would offer rational options for action; she would know what to do next. He got as far as his contacts list. But in the end he didn't. What would he even say to her? *I'm having second thoughts about our case. They got to me. Someone's onto me. Either that or I'm freaking out and losing faith, flaking like you've probably expected I would all along. I also may have earned you a couple of traffic infringement notices.* It was all things she didn't want to hear and would only shake her confidence in him, which after their conversation this afternoon he didn't want to do. He'd fought her hard for the trust he'd gained so far. He wasn't prepared to give it even an inch, not right now.

But when she came back tomorrow, he was going to have to face her. Swap cars, swap stories. And say what? He closed his eyes and sat back against the wall, the only true and honest but so thoroughly disappointing answer bubbling to the surface of his overwhelmed, hardly-mature-enough-to-handle-all-this brain and spilling softly from his lips.

"I don't know if I can do this."
Traffic was the worst.

She told herself she wasn't in a rush – she had an appointment, yes, but she could always come back tomorrow to meet this Edlund, and Agent Harlow didn't know she was coming and mightn't even be in. So, no rush.

Except.

Mulder.

The name didn't even have to be uttered aloud to prompt a response from her. A complex, complicated response. There was urgency, an inescapable desire to be wherever he was, to know if he was alright, to find out whether he needed her and what she could do; there was self-disgust, disbelief that all the effort spent distancing herself had apparently convinced most everybody but her own psyche; there was fury, white-hot and steaming, for the position he'd put her in, first with this untouchable case, and then with the CIA files that could land her in federal prison, and now with the late-afternoon crawl through stop-start traffic. Bumper to bumper. In Colt's ancient Corvette, which despised gear changes. She was wishing she'd kept with her own car, but his idea was strikingly clever and once he'd voiced it she'd felt that arguing was only a formality.

"If you're being watched, your car might flag. No one's looking for my plates."

She supposed he'd worked out she had other motives than the ones she'd said out loud. She also supposed she owed the kid a big hug and a fruit platter or something. Certainly, what she supposed he didn't deserve was the rough treatment that no doubt awaited him in Skinner's office when he arrived unannounced and unexpected. She'd considered messaging ahead but the insane paranoid little voice of Mulder in her head advised against it (anyone could pick up either phone and know what Colt was doing!), and her own knowledge of Walter Skinner told her that for him, actions spoke much louder than words. She could claim to trust her partner but Skinner never would unless he saw reason to firsthand. Sadly for Colt, that meant trial by fire. She supposed he'd be annoyed when she next saw him.

In the lull between surges, she checked her mother's phone for the twentieth, twenty-first and twenty-second times. The message was received two hours ago now. Knowing Mulder, he would have to be in mortal peril at least fifteen minutes before deciding to outsource and call her in, and he'd opted to message her mother, was still stubbornly refusing to call, and was still stubbornly...
refusing to get in direct touch with Scully. *Bring stethoscope.* It implied he was injured, or someone needed medical attention. She'd thrown her kit bag in the back of Colt's car before they left her house, unwanted visions of Mulder bleeding out in a ditch beside some wayward rural Virginian country road swamping her thoughts. But surely, *surely,* if that was the case, he would have called an ambulance? He had to know that she was a state away. He had to know to factor in the time wasted getting the message covertly from Maggie to Scully.

Therefore, logic said: no emergency. He was fine, just yanking her around by the chain of pathetic loyalty she'd never been able to sever. He was prepared to wait. He hadn't minded the months of silence, obviously. He didn't need her, didn't miss her, just called when he wanted something. Time moved differently for Fox Mulder. He was content to wait.

So he would. Fuck him.

Her anger with him sustained her through the whole drive but cooled with the frigidity of contemplation as the minutes and then the hours ticked by since the text message. *Need D asap.* By the time she entered the Quantico offices she was thoroughly, coldly determined that *asap* would be on her terms, since contact was apparently on his.

It never struck her to simply not go.

*Bring stethoscope.*

*Need D.*

*Come alone.*

X.

She didn't read that *X* as a kiss. She read it the same way as she'd read a cross made of masking tape across a window. She read it like a secret code. Theirs.

Agent Edlund was a grizzled and overweight profiler with thick glasses and an even thicker moustache. He ushered Scully into his workspace and sat across from her, taking notes and eating bites from a bowl of instant noodles as they commenced the meeting. He ate the noodles; when they were done he encouraged Scully to keep talking as he stood and went looking in a drawer for a box of biscuits.

He ate the whole way through the meeting. But he stayed back with her as the sun dipped away for the night and the rest of his office filtered out. He went through the case with her detail by detail and took a list of what he still needed to complete the picture he was creating for her agents to work with. His profile was good.

"I still need a few things, but I'll email that list to you," he said, brushing the crumbs of his last biscuit from his chin. "At this point I'd say you're looking for a white male, aged between twenty-five and thirty-five, of average to above average intelligence. Underachiever, probably unemployed long before you began looking into him, but meticulous. A non-confrontational loner. Limited family bonds. This self-imposed isolation is a result of social anxiety. He gets overstimulated by crowds and society and probably enjoys the peace and tranquillity of building his bombs. The design, the beauty of it. I don't see him as being politically motivated, at least not originally," Edlund admitted, reaching for another biscuit. "I think that's specific to his clientele, but he may be beginning to take those views on. He's developing a bit of an inner circle of trusted frequent flyers with this Morse code knocking system. I think he's starting to lean towards that sort as being familiar. It's natural that their motivations will start to become his."
Cover story established, Scully packed up the documents that were hers and thanked Edlund for his time at such short notice. She went to the elevator and instead of returning to the car, found her way to the labs. To the Federal DNA Database Unit.

And asked for Dr Harlow. Even though Colt didn't want her to.

Most of the team was gone, done for the week, but a handful of doctors in white lab coats remained in the central work room of their unit, sitting at high-tech computer systems and working specialised instrumentation that Scully herself would love to get her hands on and play with. Analysing DNA samples and matching crimes with faces – the magic of modern science. If this was where Agent Harlow had ended up after her supposedly ill-fated run-in with them, it really wasn't such a bad punishment. Better than what Scully had been dealt for a similar crime of standing her ground many years earlier.

"Uh, didn't see her leave," one man said, looking bewildered, glancing around. "She's probably still out the back."

He stood and walked her through a few rooms to a large storage space. Inventory.

"There she is," he pointed to a figure near the back of the room, and Scully stopped and thanked him, implying he didn't need to come any further. He got the hint and went back, and she carried on to meet the virologist.

Natalie Harlow had her back to Scully, and didn't turn around as she approached. She was tapping her foot; headphones. The tell-tale cord fed into the pocket of her white lab coat and disappeared at the top end under a sheet of straight, shiny black hair. In her crooked arm she held a clipboard, and with the pen she held in the other hand she shifted boxes on the shelving to better see the labels on them. She recorded something.

Not wanting to frighten her, Scully laid a gentle hand on the other woman's shoulder. She immediately yanked her headphones out and turned, already saying, automatically and irritably, "I'm almost done-"

She stopped when she saw the stranger behind her.

"I'm so sorry-"

"No, I'm sorry," Scully insisted, trying a smile and offering her ID like a peace treaty. Harlow glanced at it only briefly and looked back up, shapely dark eyes cautious. "I'm Dr Dana Scully, out of DC. Counterterrorism. Are you Dr Harlow?"

The younger agent nodded, still notably guarded. "Natalie. What can I do for you, Doctor?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't mind helping me with a case I'm looking into," Scully said, stashing her ID away again and glancing around as inconspicuously as was possible. Nobody visible in the vicinity. She smiled again at Harlow, trying to set a positive tone. "Engel."

She'd looked guarded before but now her face, which was extremely pretty in a doll-like Eurasian way, shut down completely, and her eyes widened with surprise before setting hard. She smiled unconvincingly. "I don't know the case. I'm sorry you came all this way."

"I know you know the case," Scully replied, gentle. "You opened it."

"And look where that got me," Harlow answered swiftly in a low, impulsive voice, possibly before she could stop herself. She adjusted the classy rectangular glasses she wore and pressed her lips
together, then said, more composed: "No, you're right, I did, but another agent did most of the work and closed the case. All I did was get in the way. I don't remember much now."

"That's a pity," Scully told her, "because the file was removed from the Bureau's databanks for formatting last year and was mysteriously never put back up. Your memory might have been the only remaining real account of what happened to that family."

The virologist looked torn, but lowered her eyes. "That is a pity."

"What do you remember?" Scully pressed, and the other shook her head. "Dr Harlow, it was only eighteen months ago. There must be something you can tell me."

"It was just a medical tragedy," Harlow said smoothly, eyes downcast. "It was extremely clear, once Agent Pierce put the pieces together."

"I'm sure it was, once Agent Pierce commandeered your investigation and hung you out to dry," Scully replied, just as smoothly, catching Harlow's attention. "I'm not here to test your pre-rehearsed cover-up lines, Agent Harlow. I appreciate that you've been playing a game of survival, but I'm not one of them."

"Then what's your interest in the Engel case?" the younger quipped in challenge. Because what other reason could anyone have for bringing it up, except to test her resolve, to try to trick her into digging her hole even deeper?

"I'm here for the truth."

"Whose?" And Scully decided right then that she liked the virologist, even though the young agent sighed and looked down again. "I'm sorry, but I just can't talk to you about that case," Harlow said through clenched teeth, glaring at the floor. "It's embarrassing. I screwed up, misjudged. I misinterpreted and misled a family. It was my first case," she admitted with an eye roll, "and for my incompetence, it was also my last."

Scully sighed too and placed her briefcase down on the floor beside her ankle. How many of these frightened witness-types had she and Mulder encountered in their many exploits? They had never ceased to be frustrating and painful, because she understood but she needed more.

"You didn't screw anything up," she started over. "You were right. It was a murder. I have proof. And I'm reopening your case."

"You can't," Harlow said immediately, eyes wide. "They would never let you." Scully shrugged one shoulder delicately, and Harlow shook her head slowly. "You're working an unsanctioned, unofficial case? This case?" Scully didn't answer – she'd said it once, no need to say it again, in case there were ears on them. Harlow pushed on, voice dropping ever lower, "Just leave this one alone, Dr Scully. You don't know who you're dealing with… what they can do…"

"I do know," Scully murmured back, determined that Harlow would understand. "I know what they do, I know what they are. They know me, too, and they've already taken what mattered. But Natalie," she urged, "you were right."

"No, I wasn't," Harlow argued, quietly angry. "If I was right I would have made the case."

"You don't really believe that. That family was murdered, and their deaths were covered up by men in our government. There are others – more deaths, more lies. These are not victims of circumstance. They're selected and murdered. I need your help to bring them justice. To do what's right."
"Do you think I studied for a decade to do the FBI's stocktake?" Harlow demanded, almost a hiss. She waved irritably at the shelving, all the boxes, all the labels. "Inventory. Every day. This is what I'm doing with my motherfucking PhD, doctor. Putting things away in boxes and filing them like someone's monkey slave, and fetching new boxes when a real agent or a real scientist asks for it."

Scully frowned, at the notion, not at the unexpected curse. "Your personnel file says you're assigned to the Federal DNA Database Unit--" "It doesn't say in what capacity."

Scully paused and looked back the way she came. She thought of the incredible and expensive instruments in the previous room, and all those agents examining and extracting and categorising and matching DNA samples to crimes all over the country. Technical, precise, challenging work. For her, that would be so enjoyable, so calming, so focused. Perhaps Harlow would agree. If she were part of that effort.

Which she should be, with her qualifications.

"You're not working on CODIS?"

"There is equipment in that room you came through I've never even touched," Harlow answered coolly, seeming to have some of her confidence back. Scully detected a distinct attitude behind that dollish face, though it seemed to have been tempered by her humbling position here in the FDDU. "I was demoted from 'scientist' to 'assistant technician' when I was transferred here, when somehow my paperwork was filed incorrectly. Can't let me do any of the real work until they clear up that little clerical error."


"This is what I get for trying to do what's right," she responded. "I'm doing my penance for being stupid. No good deed goes unpunished."

"No, none," Scully agreed. "You didn't stand a chance. Do you understand why, Dr Harlow? Shane and Carly Engel and their children were murdered in their home. Their family was lucky enough that you took on their case and recognised it for what it was. You began investigations. Opened channels of inquiry. Did everything right by that family. Then they cottoned onto what you were doing and sent in Pierce to neutralise you. They're teaching you a lesson, but which one you choose to learn is up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you can choose the standard textbook lesson they're dishing out and learn how to submit to their tactics," Scully spelt out, reaching for one of the boxes on the shelf to look inside. Vials, sealed swabs. All packed perfectly by Harlow herself, no doubt. "Or, you can learn to read between the lines. Pierce didn't take over your case because you were messing things up. He did it because you stumbled into something big and you were too close to the truth, and it wouldn't have mattered if you were compliant or troublesome, they would have managed you the same way. They needed the case to go away. That meant you had to go away. Go here." She gestured to Harlow's shelves, her prison. She saw the dark eyes ghost after her hand as it waved around the room. She shoved the box back where she found it and reached for her briefcase at her feet. "You could not possibly have won that battle, Natalie. The game was rigged. You could not have done things any differently and come to any different outcome. You did everything right." She took a risk and produced the hardcopy Engel file. "I've reviewed this a dozen times. Your police work is impeccable. You did everything right."
"It didn't feel like it."

Unsurprising that it didn't feel like she'd done right, when they dragged her name through the mud, when they took her off active field duty, when they transferred her to a fascinating division with no right to take part in any of the tasks or procedures she was qualified to do. But the crime of holding on when her heart told her to? What about that?

"Didn't it?" Harlow dropped her gaze again and clutched her clipboard to her chest. Scully pushed harder. "If you could go back, what would you do differently? What would make you feel better?"

A long silence followed this question, and Scully began to feel like she was the one the question had been put to. If you could go back, what would you do differently?

She had so many regrets.

She'd wished so many times to take back her mistakes.

She'd wanted so badly to undo her wrong choices.

Harlow swallowed. A breath: "Nothing." She looked at Scully, at the printed document in her hands. "Who are you, really? And don't try bullshitting me with 'out of DC'. What's your story and why are we having this conversation?"

Fair enough. Scully appreciated the younger agent's healthy scepticism.

"I'm not bullshitting you, Natalie. I'm a doctor and a physicist. I work out of DC in Counterterrorism as a senior agent but prior to that I worked as a surgeon at Our Lady of Sorrows Hospital, and before that I worked for the Bureau as a company joke just like you are now, though," she conceded, "in a slightly more official capacity than yours."

"Oh?" Harlow raised her thin eyebrows. "You stacked boxes in a storeroom for eighteen months?"

Scully could already tell that they were nothing alike – Harlow was older than Colt by at least four or five years, and their attitude and confidence levels were in exact opposition – but she still heard Colt's words in Harlow's question. Like you would know what this agency does to underperformers. Oh, honey, if only you knew.

She'd made a concerted effort not to let Colt know. His respect and regard were important to her. She had much less invested in Harlow.

"No, I worked out of a basement office for nine years babysitting a nonconformist radical no one else could control, and when that wildcard and I overstepped our bounds they put me in Biosecurity – fertiliser control." Scully smiled tightly. "It's every bit as horrible as it sounds, trust me."

Harlow looked around to give herself time to process this. "And what do you want with me?"

"I want your case reopened, validated and solved, correctly," Scully explained.

"Why?" Harlow quipped. Scully knelt to open her briefcase and put the Engel document back.

"I can't tell you why. I don't know if I can trust you yet."

"You've come this far. You must be expecting me to comply with... whatever it is you want me to do. You still haven't said. Go ahead," Harlow challenged. "Make your pitch."

"All I want you to do," Scully said patiently, clipping the case closed, "is to solve your case. That's
"You'll have to do better than that, because I don't believe you."

Scully regarded the younger, looking up at her. If she had a partner here with her, what would he say? Colt would prompt her to back off for now, play cautious, keep this case between them. Mulder wouldn't tell her to do anything. He'd act off his own instincts, or off hers, because he trusted them more than any person. So she said, "I need your investigation as a precedent. That's all I can tell you without compromising everything I've been working towards."

The virologist inhaled slowly, and Scully prayed that listening to Mulder's voice and trusting her instincts in regards to this woman would pay off.

"That's not the only copy," Harlow admitted finally, coyly, pointing at the briefcase. "I have one, too. Hidden. Along with some of the..." She hesitated – clearly she'd not told anyone else this, ever. She battled with herself, and finally decided to come clean. "The appendices that were missing from the official file."

The missing police report. Maybe more. Harlow could prove to be a most excellent ally, if only Scully could hook her.

"Good, so you can still solve this case, if I can get it reopened for you," Scully murmured, looking the taller doctor directly in the eyes, feeling the growing fervour of converting someone, of bringing someone around. Is this what Mulder felt every time he subjected her to one of his little slideshows in their office? The excitement of winning her over, the quiet satisfaction when she gave in? "I know you don't know me, and I don't know you either, but as you can imagine, I'm thin on allies in this, and the way I see it, you and I have a common interest. I think we can help each other. I can get you what you need to close this case."

Harlow wouldn't have it. "No, you can't. You have no idea--"

"A sample of the virus that killed Shane, Carly, Tanisha and Riley Engel, a full genetic work-up and twenty years of field notes on its evolution and mutations. That should save you some time."

The younger agent sucked her lower lip between her teeth, anxious, unwilling to risk believing that real, tangible proof of what she'd tried to investigate in 2014 still existed, and was being offered freely. "No one has that."

"I do."

The younger woman shook her head and demanded, incredulously, "Who are you?"

Scully went through her pockets and withdrew her last business card. "They know who I am, and they'll be suspicious if they know we've spoken. Can I trust you to keep this conversation between us?"

"All of my samples were destroyed," Harlow whispered, shaking her head in disbelief and taking the card. "The notes I kept from the Engel deaths – murders," she self-corrected. "They're all the evidence I have that I'm not crazy. If anyone learns I still have them, they'll be taken and destroyed. That family relied on me," she explained now, desperately. "I've kept those notes, hoping for a chance one day to dredge it all back up and drag it into the light-"

"So you did know you were right?" Scully interrupted, glad to know the initial denial was only a confidence issue, just a cover. Harlow scoffed.
"I usually am."

The confidence issue seemed to be resolved.

"You still have contact with Gavin Engel," Scully redirected, not a question. Harlow nodded once.
"Tell him to back off from Pierce. Tell him we'll take it from here, but he needs to get himself off Pierce's radar before they tire of deflecting him. He's no good to you as a witness if he's charged with harassment of a federal agent. Don't let him make it easy for them," she warned, checking her watch. Mulder's watch. Mulder. "I need to go. I really hope you understand the possible consequences of telling anyone what we've talked about tonight."

Ironic smile. "Look around. I'm not blabbing."

"That won't happen this time," Scully promised, briefcase tightly in hand. "This time you'll have me."

She walked out without a backwards glance, switching off her phone so it couldn't be tracked, and in the car she had plenty of time to question her decisions. Had she made the right call with the virologist? Certainly she'd gotten a good vibe from Harlow, but how much credibility did her gut instinct get to claim? She knew Colt wouldn't have shared so much, had in fact counselled against sharing anything at all. He was cautious and measured, the very statement of sensible maturity while she, the older, had been behaving rashly ever since Mulder had entered her thoughts today as handwriting on the back of a lab report. God, the impossible effect he had on her! To compromise her very personality and not even have to be in the room, in the state…

She refused to hurry, but somehow each time she glanced down at the speedometer she found Colt's Corvette pushing the speed limit, and she had to lighten her foot on the gas. It was late now, ever fewer cars on the road as she drove further and further from civilisation out into the pitch dark countryside. The cold and the silence and the dark pressed in on her as she drove and drove, and it seemed fitting now that the anger she'd started out with had cooled almost to ice because hot anger would evaporate into nothing in this virtual vacuum, easily forgotten about without the stresses of traffic and slanted afternoon sunbeams in the eyes to sustain it. Cold resentment could survive any environment. It traversed the rolling hills with her, the curving corners and then the long empty straight roads to and from nowhere. It squinted at small signs for turnoffs with her and lost count of far-apart gates and numbered letterboxes with her. Resentment rode with her all the way to the random address on her mother's phone.

That resentment wasn't cold or deep enough to dissuade her from taking the last turn down a long dirt road, and the resentment wasn't heavy enough to hold her heart still when her lights caught the reflectors of a parked car up ahead right outside a funny little ramshackle house. She pulled up slowly and looked through all her windows, wary. The other car was aged and small and looked like the car Mulder had headed for when she'd walked away from him outside Berkshire County Morgue. The house was scruffy with old car parts and broken bicycles and the like scattered across the front yard. The letterbox was rusty and crooked, hand painted with DUNN in block capitals. Behind the house looked like a line of tall trees, maybe the edge of a small pocket of woodland, and beyond that, just night sky. It was too dark and too creepy to tell. The setting somehow did not surprise her at all, but she definitely didn't like it.

Still, she'd turned up, so she supposed she might as well go in. Mulder's message had instructed her not to bring her weapon, which she tried to take as a positive. He'd also asked for her medical expertise. She carefully hid her briefcase under the passenger seat, hating to leave it behind, and retrieved her medical bag from the backseat. She tugged on her gloves and rewound her scarf. She stashed her switched-off phone into the glovebox and wondered whether Colt had messaged since
she'd left Quantico. She wouldn't know until she was back in DC and she turned it back on; she hoped he was still talking to her after his run-in with Skinner. In the meantime, she would keep her mother's phone on her. Once more, she checked the message Maggie was sent.

_Mom, need D asap. Bring stethoscope, leave gun at home. Come alone. X_

It was just procrastination now.

She shoved open the heavy door and pulled herself out of the low bucket seat and into the frigid night air. Her first breath formed as a white cloud in front of her face as she closed the door. She didn't push hard but the sound of the door seemed unreasonably loud in the open expanse of rural silence. In the little house, a light came on in one of the shabby-curtained windows. Good to know someone was up at this late hour. Good to know she was anticipated, not being sent into a decrepit haunted house alone. She felt relief to know someone was home.

The spark of hope that came on in her chest at the same moment was much less welcome. Mulder mightn't even be here, she reminded herself, and if he was, he didn't deserve that kind of reaction. This could be one of his stupid little errands. She really had no idea what he'd sent her out here for, and she should be ready for anything.

She shouldn't expect to see him.

She shouldn't _want_ to.

The porch steps were crumbly and rotten, and she gingerly crossed the landing to knock on the door. Her knuckles had barely struck the frame of the screen when a blinding overhead light came on, and she ceased her knocking to cover her eyes. The inner door opened and she tried to squint, tried to look, but her vision was going to take a few moments to adjust, and that porch light was so harsh and so bright.

"Are you the doctor?" a woman's flat voice asked from just inside the doorway. Scully nodded, stepping back when she heard the screen door handle turn and the hinges squeal in protest as it was swung open toward her. She slid her hand into her jacket for her ID.

"Dana Scully-"

"Dana!"

"Dana Scully-"

"Dana!"

Of all their undiscussed secret codes, that was one of the quickest to send up mental red flags. She couldn't see him through the painful light but she heard Mulder's interruption and could have melted into him when it was his shape that squeezed through the door and blocked the light and his arm that went around her and held her to him for a prolonged second as his other hand, pressed between them, caught hers and prised her badge from her fingers. For that prolonged second his scent and warmth were all she knew, all she could have wanted to know, and then he withdrew and her badge was gone, deftly tucked away inside his own jacket. She tried to look up at him through her lashes, and though he was still indistinct and haloed she didn't miss the flash of a warning look before he turned a charming smile on the woman inside the house. Mrs Dunn?

"I told you she'd be here," he said casually. "My friend, Dr Scully. Alone, as promised."

"Hmm." The woman was unimpressed. Her fingers tap-tapped on something and Scully squinted to see. Was that a hunting rifle? "Who knows you're here, Dr Scully?"

She wished the light hadn't robbed her of her vision, though it was slowly coming back. Yep, hunting rifle. Because that was what you answered the door with. She swallowed and considered
Admitting to being out here without any backup seemed foolish, but she recalled Mulder's message. *Come alone.* "Nobody."

"And what are your government associations, Doctor?" A man's voice this time. Scully squeezed her eyes tightly closed, willing her sight back, because she hadn't realised there was someone else. She opened them and blinked a few times. She thought of her last business card in Harlow's hand, of the federal identification badge hidden in Mulder's jacket and said too-easily, "None. I'm freelance."

Freelance *what*, she didn't know, but figured you couldn't go too far wrong with that answer. She shaded her eyes with her hand and tried to get the lay of the land. The woman was just inside the door, gun in hands, and at her back was an adolescent male, perhaps a son. Having apparently followed Mulder out the screen door, two other young men stood on the porch with them.

"Are you armed?"

"No. I'm a doctor."

"What's in the bag?"

The woman again. Scully fixed her returning sight on the lady, taking in the hardened face, the unkempt hair, the determinedly displeased gaze, the inefficient but intimidating weapon, and said, coolly, "A stethoscope."

"Check her."

The young men had to be her sons, because they responded to her command without question, like soldiers, intuitively, knowing exactly what she meant by it. Both grabbed at Scully at once, before she could react; one snatched her bag out of her hand and the other grasped her arm tightly, painfully. The suddenness and unexpected physical contact, coupled with her still-limited vision and the failure of Mulder to interfere, sent a ripple of anxiety through her, and she tried to step back and away, snapping, "Hey!" but the tall, lanky young man wrenched her back and began patting her down roughly. She tried to stand still, tense as she was, and take it, watching the son checking buttons for secret little cameras. Turning out pockets. Tossing keys onto the porch floor. Pushing her jacket back and off her shoulders and feeling under the neckline of her blouse for wires or recording devices.

"Watch it," Mulder warned when the young man's hands returned to her body and checked under her breasts once, twice, thrice, more than was necessary. He caught the other's elbow and pulled him a step away, and for a moment they glared into each other's eyes. Mulder was considerably bigger, and when he said, "She didn't come here to be harassed. Be gentle, or we'll leave," the younger seemed to decide to take him seriously, and he backed down. He turned back to Scully and resumed the pat-down, much less aggressively and with a bit more respect.

"You two aren't going anywhere," the Dunn woman inside said firmly. To Mulder she said, "You told me she could help."

Scully looked to her former partner as the hands moved down her legs and checked her shoes. He was clean-shaven, she saw now that her sight was adjusting to the harsh lighting. She couldn't think of the last time she'd seen him without the beard. She definitely preferred him this way, the way she'd known him for years and years before their sparkle faded away. The beard was too easy to associate with the difficult times, when Mulder lost interest in her and took himself further and further off the rails.
"I said if anyone could help, it's her, but I also said I couldn't promise anything," he reminded the mother, voice surprisingly gentle considering their interrogatory behaviour and rough treatment of Scully. "Your husband's in a very advanced stage."

"His chances might have been better if you got here sooner," the woman said scornfully to Scully. The pat-down finished and Scully's mother's phone was presented to the woman of the house. Nearby, the eldest brother was still going through her medical bag. Noisily. It was a good thing the neighbours were all so far away here, because in the dead of the night the clanking together of instruments seemed painfully loud.

"You did take your time," Mulder agreed, and the warmth he'd earned by standing up for her cooled quickly.

"I had to come from interstate," Scully defended herself, neglecting to mention the various errands she'd run in the name of covering her tracks, as both involved FBI agents, which she supposedly was not for the purpose of this interaction. She adjusted her jacket, pulling it tighter around herself now that the illegal search of her person was completed. "What's the diagnosis?"

"That's what you're here to tell us, Doc," Mulder said without preamble, but fixed with her impatient glare, he added in an aside, "The family would prefer not to discuss it out in the open."

Scully resisted looking around. There was no one around for miles. Who was going to listen in?

"She's clean, Mama," the eldest brother announced, thrusting the bag through the door. The mother ignored it except to gesture at the floor, and he dropped it just inside the house. The youngest brother stepped over it, coming clear of the house and Scully saw the handful of black fabric he had in his grasp. The mother continued her inspection of Maggie's phone. She broke open the back panel and checked inside. Scully cast an unimpressed look at Mulder, who only shrugged lightly, somewhat apologetically. Who were these nutcases? Disturbingly, they brought Mulder himself to mind: if he'd never met her, never felt the downward tug of her scepticism and never felt the frustration of having to backtrack through his own erratic thinking to justify himself to her, never fallen in love with a steadfast scientist who would keep him grounded in real life for a little longer than he would have managed on his own, would this have been his future? Crazy paranoid wife, crazy paranoid sons, off-the-grid rural living?

Oh, Mulder, you owe me.

"Alright. Bring her," the mother decided finally, reluctantly, beginning to put the phone back together. Her youngest son, weedy and square-jawed and all of fifteen, approached Scully, unravelling the handful of material into what she'd suspected it was: a hood. Scully backed away instinctively, twisting violently out of the waiting grip of one of the other brothers.

"Scully, it's alright," Mulder asserted when he saw her raise her hands defensively. He quickly stepped between her and the advancing teen, stopping him, and gesturing for the brother behind her to wait. His closeness, his presence, they bore down on her like a thick blanket laid across an infant, and brought about the same stillness. She fought to keep the anger in her voice as she responded, "No, it's not," because no, it wasn't alright. "No one is 'bringing' me, and you can forget about the blindfold."

"It's the only way they'll let you onto the property," Mulder explained, extending a hand to the teenager and taking one of the black bags to show her he'd be wearing one too. Scully frowned at his attempt to play down the situation and shoved his hand away when he offered it to her like you'd offer a new collar to a pet to sniff.
"Then I guess I'm going home," she retorted, very coldly. Mulder's face - how did he always time it so well? - fell a little, softening into his disappointed, pleading look, and she suppressed a sigh, exhaling sharply through her nose as the upwelling of feeling for him battled with her irritation. Why couldn't she be stronger? "Mulder, what am I doing here? I drove for hours with no explanation, I'm cold and on arrival my welcome is an illegal body search, a blindfold and no answers. Please," she pressed, dropping her voice to try to cut out the eavesdropping family, to speak only to him, and he rewarded her by leaning closer and giving her his whole, attentive gaze. Eyes warm. She didn't blink, tried to keep her own gaze as hard as his was soft. Wasn't sure if she succeeded. "Tell me what's going on."

"It's another Johannsson," he said, voice low as well, holding her gaze in that spellbinding way he'd always been able to keep her attention, "except you might be able to do something to help this one. I can't tell you anything else out here," he added when she blinked in shocked response to the news, breaking the spell.

"He told us what they did to you," Mrs Dunn said softly, choosing to look at her gun instead of at Scully. "That they took you and used you. How they left you barren."

The surprise of Mulder's revelation was blown apart by the woman's words and the pang of hurt they brought. Her voice was ice when she asked, "Did he?" and she couldn't turn anything short of a furious look on him. That was her horrible secret. Not his to tell. He looked apologetic, but she knew he wasn't, not really. He'd said whatever he'd needed to in order to get these people to trust him, to let him see this living specimen of the alien virus they were chasing. The case always came first, she reminded herself. Her feelings could only ever come second or third or twenty-fourth.

"They used you for experiments?"

Scully didn't know these people and certainly didn't like them. She wanted to hit Mulder for sharing her personal tragedies with these creepy hick strangers but tried to take a beat. Tried to take note of the way the woman refused now to look at her where before she'd been all full of dominating, unblinking glares.


"Your husband's been infected? Respiratory distress, rapid decline?"

It took a moment. Then the woman nodded stiffly. Still, no eye contact. She asked, tightly, "Can we trust you?"

Scully didn't want to tell them anything and wondered whether the same pity for their situation had driven Mulder to share what he had, because she said, "The same people who have infected your husband stole a month of my life to experiment on me and gave me cancer." She looked around. The woman's sons were silent and frightening but now, on second glance, she saw them for what else they were - frightened boys. The whole family was in well over their heads. "I'm on your side. Tell me about your husband's symptoms."

"No." The woman resumed her angry and prideful glaring. "You need to come with us, and you need to wear the hood. Anyone could hear us out here."

Yeah, because this was such a populated area.

Mulder nudged her. "Let these guys bring you inside and you can see for yourself. Please."

He threw the last word on the end the same way she had a moment earlier. Leaning closer, drawing
her unconsciously in. Jerk. Scully looked away, exasperated. Everywhere, there was one of the hick family, waiting, looking fidgety. Another Johannsson – their father and husband was somewhere nearby, dying of the same otherworldly virus that had claimed Rebecca Johannsson, another parent of three, and the whole Engel family. She was just discussing this with Harlow, not thinking for an instant that she would see another case of it so soon. Why hadn't Mulder put Johannsson's name in the message? She would have been here twice as fast.

All three sons sported the same plain haircut. Their mother looked rougher than any of them, but less unimpressed now. Scully's story and her reluctance to be brought onto the property seemed to have convinced her of the doctor's genuineness – a government spy would probably put up less of a fight about being let into the home they were trying to infiltrate.

This was all to avoid looking at Mulder, whose face was smooth for the first time in years and looked hopeful, but who couldn't really be hopeful because he had to know that if she'd turned up, she was already committed. So it irked her when she muttered, "Fine," and he acted surprised before relieved.

His face was the last thing she saw before her vision blacked out. Her head was bagged and her arms were grasped above the elbows. Automatically she tried to pull away; the brothers held on, and steered her around so she was facing the road, not that she could see it. Behind her now, she heard the soft scratching of fabric as Mulder fitted the second hood over his own head. Naturally he asked, "How do I look?"

"It's a bit of a walk," one of the brothers told her, directly to her right, before leading her forward. She went reluctantly: there were steps very close, she couldn't recall how many paces away. The same guide remembered his job and said, "Stairs," and awkwardly, cautiously, she dangled her foot lower and lower until it landed on the first step. She brought her other foot to join it, instincts fighting against the blind decline. Apparently she took too long. The hands tightened on her arms and lifted her roughly, dropping her back on her feet at the ground level. And the brothers began to walk, keeping a quick pace, and her feet struggled to keep up without tripping over themselves or the uneven ground.

Blind, restrained, being led somewhere unknown by strangers – all of it fed the natural impulse to break free and get away, but Mulder's words kept running on loop in her head. It's another Johannsson, except you might be able to do something to help this one. A living example of one of the virus's victims. How sick was he? Mulder had told the woman that her husband was quite advanced. Could he be moved? Could Scully get the man to a hospital to run tests and get samples before unveiling him to the world and uncovering this whole terrible plot? She'd been so mad with Mulder – still was – but what he'd found here might turbocharge her quiet investigation into a full-blown media explosion.

Let's see how big and dark the shadows are when a light so harsh is shone on them.

She tripped heavily over something hard and solid, maybe a car tyre, and only managed to stay upright because the brothers held her that way and kept walking. Her feet hurried to get back into a rhythm that matched theirs. She swallowed the exclamation that rose in her throat. This was their dad they were taking her to. To her, a living specimen, something she had never imagined she would be lucky enough to wield in her fight against the forces that had oppressed and controlled her; but to them, their father, the centre of their universe. Their desperation was valid, even if she didn't like their methods. She tried to focus instead on what she would do with what she found inside. Call Colt, obviously. Get him out here. Call Skinner and clear the path of the obstructions that would surely pop up as soon as any whisper of what she'd found got out. Call Harlow, too. This was exactly what Harlow needed to prove she was right about the Engels and to right the wrongs
against her reputation, and exactly what Colt and Scully needed to tie Rebecca Johannsson and Henry Gray's deaths to Harlow's case. From a solid and public foundation like that, they would be able to pursue the link to abductees like Reece, and therefore the mystery of Reece and Gray's revivals. It would open up the whole crazy mythos of the X-Files, Scully's abduction, the Black Oil testing, Krychek, the involvement of their own government, right back to Mulder's sister's abduction.

It could prove everything Mulder and Scully suffered for was worthwhile.

Behind her, hypersensitive to sound in her blinded state, she heard a grunt of discomfort, and tensed and halted, recognising the sound. "Mulder?" Her guides dragged her onwards, further onto the property. They must be somewhere behind the little house by now, nearing the woodland. Her feet tangled in sticks and pine needles as she tried to turn back, and she was embarrassed to hear the pitchiness of her voice when she repeated herself. "Mulder?"

"I'm here," he assured her from maybe four or five paces back. "Ran into a tyre or something. We're nearly there."

One of the brothers released her and she heard his footsteps quicken to get ahead of the others. There was a crunch of leaves, a drop; a shuffling, scratching sound of leaf litter being pushed aside. Someone kneeling? The urgent sounds of digging through leaves and sticks, and her own breaths. Then the clink of a heavy chain, metal scraping on metal. What was this? Terrifying visions of refrigerators buried in the soil to use as coffins for intruders came to mind. Her breaths came quicker, heart thudded. Voices, the older brothers mocking the youngest for an apparent lack of strength. The remaining brother pulled her to a stop and she stood there in the cold and the quiet and the stillness.

But louder than her own hot breaths inside the hood, louder than her hasty heartbeat, louder than the snark in the boys' voices was another exhalation that was not hers, footsteps coming to a halt to her right. Proximity and body heat against her right side. Mulder. How could one person be the source of such frustration in one minute and bring such calm in the next? His hand brushed hers as his guide's voice left his side and went ahead to the younger to help with whatever he was trying to lift.

The contact must have come unexpectedly to Mulder, because he flinched away before seeming to realise who he'd accidentally touched. Tentatively, unseen, the backs of his fingers drew against the back of her wrist. Stayed there, a gentle and reassuring pressure that did little to slow her erratic pulse.

The brothers still pulled on the chain and sniped at each other, their mother was coming now and she chastised them from somewhere way back about the way they were speaking to one another, and the whole world was still going on around them but Scully couldn't see any of it, and it was easy to imagine that none of it could see her, either. Logically she knew it wasn't the case, and knew it was entirely possible that all four of the hick family were watching her every move, but because she couldn't see it, it was easy to imagine that no one saw her turn her hand outward. Mulder's fingers trailed around to the pulse point on the inside of her wrist and paused only a moment before accepting the invitation and sliding straight down her palm and between her fingers. Slowly, knowing she shouldn't, she closed hers over the top, and they stood side by side in the dark, hands clasped between them for comfort.

It didn't count in the dark. Wasn't that what they'd told themselves when they'd fallen into bed the first time in his Arlington apartment fifteen, sixteen years ago? Back then it was their jobs on the line if they acknowledged the things they felt; now, who even knew what the excuse was. In the
light, Scully's reasons for keeping her distance from her ex-partner were justified and valid. He was unreliable and selfish. Et cetera. Blindfolded and afraid and saturated in his presence, his closeness, none of that mattered. He was Familiarity, Comfort, Safety incarnate and he would never deny her those.

A creak of hinges marked the end of the moment. Scully's guide yanked her forward and she had to drop Mulder's hand. She missed the contact immediately, cold air moving in where his warm skin had been an instant before. The brother leading her said, flatly, "Down," and Scully balked when he pressed a hand on her shoulder.

"We can't see," Mulder reminded them irritably from behind her. "Doesn't this tour come with audio commentary? It's like an underground bunker," he told Scully. "You've got to climb down."

"Down what?" she asked, realising now that she'd been listening to the sounds of the brothers uncovering the trapdoor and opening it. It sounded heavy-duty, perhaps the entry to some kind of bomb shelter. That these people had a bomb shelter on their property did not surprise her in the slightest, and she relaxed slightly. Not buried refrigerator coffins, then.

"A ladder," the mother said now, uncharacteristically helpful. "It wobbles but it's secure."

Scully listened to the sounds of a wooden ladder creaking and knocking against a metallic trapdoor entry frame as someone climbed down it. It did indeed sound wobbly. Again hands pressed her down, and hesitantly, against her instincts – reminding herself: *live specimen* – she lowered herself to her hands and knees and felt about for the mouth of the trapdoor. She found it, found the ladder; it moved as the person descending stepped off the bottom. She sat back on her heels.

"You can't expect anyone to climb down a ladder blindfolded," she argued. From the tone of the young man who answered, she imagined he shrugged unsympathetically.

"He managed," he said, presumably referring to Mulder, and she sighed angrily, because of *course* Mulder managed. Hadn't she just told Kelley off today for reminding her of all the ways Mulder still bested her in the opinions of others? The conversation felt a million years ago.

"If you'd rather not climb a ladder blindfolded," the mother offered now, "you can stay out here. With a bullet. You know too much to go without helping us first."

"I'll go first," Mulder said hastily when Scully started to argue that she knew *nothing* yet because no one had *told* her anything. She felt him move past her, kneel awkwardly at her side and manœuvre onto the ladder. She heard the knocking of wood on metal as he moved down, slowly, one hesitant and unsteady step at a time. She listened hard for indicators of his progress, how deep he declined, whether he slipped or fell. She heard him reach the bottom, heard shoes hit a cement floor. "Come on."

*Living specimen*, she reminded herself as she grasped the top rung of the ladder and felt around to orientate herself. She twisted herself around and over the unseen hole in the ground. She had a rough idea of how deep it was and didn't fancy falling in. Carefully, fearfully, she swung herself onto the ladder. One foot landed easily on a rung, but the other missed. Her stomach dropped and in the moment of uncertainty her other foot slipped from under the unexpected and awkward distribution of her weight. With an uncontrolled gasp she tightened her grip on the ladder and pressed close, chin knocking hard on the rim of the manhole, struggling to find a foothold with her dangling feet.

"Scully?" A blind hand reached up and was accidentally kicked; firmly he caught her ankle and placed it back on a rung. "You okay?"
No. She closed her eyes and breathed through the stress, the throbbing pain in her jaw, giving herself a moment to stabilise and find her footing. "Thank you." She swallowed and started down, surprised when the ladder didn't wobble for her as it had for him. It stayed steady, and when she was halfway down and the seat of her pants bumped lightly into his chest, she understood. He was holding it for her, and she descended straight into his waiting arms, her back against his chest, her hands sliding down the ladder onto his where they still held on for her.

Which was totally romantic, so in this one instance she was glad for the blindfold so he couldn't see her blush and she didn't have to see his smug, self-satisfied expression.

"Hurry up. We've wasted enough time." The brother who'd descended before them guided them away from the ladder so the others could come down, and then they were moving onward. Indeed they were underground, and it was notably musty and still and cold. Every sound echoed closely. The echoes let her know that the bunker was narrow, with a low ceiling. Didn't bother a short person like her, but she wondered if Mulder and the older sons had to stoop. Someone walked her in zigzagging lines, presumably around objects like boxes or furniture or whatever was hidden down here. The underground space was narrow but long. It took many more paces than she expected before she was stopped again and ahead of her, a heavy-sounding door was swung open, and then she was marched through it and almost fell over when her feet caught on a large step.

"Oops, stairs," one of the Dunns said, too late, and Scully yanked back, reaching automatically for the hood. "You can't. We're almost there." Hands grabbed it and held it on her; she gave up with a growl.

"You don't do this often, do you?" she demanded. "If you did you would have realised what a horribly inefficient system this is for getting people inside."

"We try to minimise visitors," the mother said simply, and she took over leading Scully, instructing her all the way up the stairs behind her son.

It was obvious that they were rising out of the ground. It got slowly warmer, and when they reached the top of the stairs the ground became something less harsh, cloppy beneath her shoes. Wood. Floorboards. Were they… indoors? Echoes indicated the space was much more open, and it was warm and breezeless like the inside of a structure.

More zigzags, more doors, then stop. The hood came off without warning. Scully blinked but the light was soft. She was standing in a high-ceilinged hallway outside a closed wooden door, clearly not in the tiny little house out by the road, and the woman stood in front of her. Two of her sons were bringing Mulder over.

"Your friend Mulder says you're an expert," she told Scully. She dropped the medical bag at her feet. "He said you're the only person in the world who might be able to help my husband."

Scully bit back her annoyance at the ridiculous manner in which she was brought here and nodded. "If it's what I think it is, I'm one of very few people who knows its true origins. I'll do whatever I can to help."

The sons removed Mulder's hood and he blinked and shook his hair out of his eyes. The woman hesitated once more before gesturing to the door. "He's through here."

"What's the patient's name?" Scully asked, and the woman only shook her head, looking away and opening the door. She stayed where she was, door held open. Scully was about to ask again – it was only right that she should know his name before meeting him – but Mulder stepped over and put his gentle, guiding hand on her back to push her through the door ahead of him.
"Dr Scully," he said quietly as they entered, "meet Austin Dunn."

The room was sparse and on a bed lay the patient. All of the hopes Scully had built up on her blindfolded walk here of tests and scans done in hospital to prove her case started to crumble. When he saw her, bloodshot eyes widened with desperate hope and blood-spattered face reddened with the effort of drawing breath against near-silent coughing.

This man wasn't going anywhere.
XX - Mulder

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I own my OCs, though, so if it looks like sometimes I'm torturing them, it's okay, no copyright laws are being infringed.

Author's Notes: The usual apology for tardiness. I had planned to stop apologising, but that was before I left you hanging for over a month. In my defence, I completed my manuscript (also late… but that's the authorly way) and submitted it to my editor, which puts me on track for a September release :) I know this doesn't help or affect most of you but it's the reason for my delay, which I felt obligated to convey. Uni starts back today, but that doesn't tend to stop me from writing fanfiction until assessment time. Hopefully I can pick up the pace from here on!

For those who have followed me in the past, you may already know that I write to music, and some songs speak to me or influence me more than others during particular scenes or chapters. In writing the second half of this chapter, I was particularly moved by the sounds, lyrics and imagery of Ghost by Jamie-Lee, Germany's Eurovision contestant 2016. Most of the lines felt true to the near-hopeless state of Mulder and Scully's deteriorated relationship and the thin glimmer of chance that it might (will) be salvaged.

"The story of us… Is it already told?...We're already gone… But still in this together… Our life won't wait for us to live… We don't need a lifetime to figure out what we miss… The love we get is the love we give… A money chest full of love but we hid the key… This is the ghost of you haunting the ghost of me… Lonely in a crowded room together, tell me, who's scared now?... Can we get an alternate ending?"

The world ends all the time, and this is how it goes out. First, you have a world. You create one of these around a person, someone that you count on to always be there. You invest immense levels of emotion in this impossible promise of 'always', and construct around it your own identity, your sense of self-worth, your purpose. You trick yourself into believing, and you believe so hard that you think it's okay to look away. For a second. For a minute. An hour, a day. It doesn't matter. You look away, because you trust it will still be there when you turn back. And it always is.

But then one time, just once, it isn't, and it never is again.

That is how the world ends.

For Mulder, like most people, this had happened many times – when he lost his sister, then his dad, his mother, and eventually with Scully, though in a less permanent sense. The effect of her leaving was the same as if she had died. For the Dunn brothers, it was happening right now. They'd built their lives around a simple construct of 'always'. It consisted of a farm, a strict but devoted mom, each other… and their dad. On Wednesday he'd gone into town, as he usually did on Wednesdays. He'd come back perfectly fine. Now it was almost Saturday, maybe just ticked over, and their world was cracking. They'd walked away, stood with their mother at the door to check the visitor, and now they were looking back, and the truth was frighteningly clear. The world was ending,
their world, and death was waiting in the shadows.

"Jesus, Mulder," Scully whispered, aghast. She couldn't take her eyes off the patient, and he couldn't blame her. Austin Dunn had seriously deteriorated even in the hours since Mulder first saw him. He was struggling for breath, each inhalation clearly a strain, and his face and neck was red with effort. Tiny dots of sweat beaded his forehead. The shine of panic and the red of burst blood vessels was visible in his eyes. Scully looked like she didn't know where to start. She'd dealt with desperately ill patients of all kinds in her time, and Mulder wasn't lying to the Dunns when he said she was the best at what she did. Calm, collected, a medical encyclopaedia: if Mulder was sick or injured or dying, she was the person he would want working on him. But this patient was unexpectedly bad, and she had nothing but her basic medical kit.

"This man should be in a hospital," she said blandly, exactly the wrong thing to say. Wendy Dunn narrowed her eyes.

"He's not going to hospital," she snapped. She jerked her chin at Mulder but stayed in the doorway. None of the Dunns had been inside the room. Austin kept wasting breath sending them back out. "Your friend said you could help."

"Yes, well, he failed to warn me I'd need oxygen and a whole room of specialist hospital equipment," Scully hissed back coldly, making sure that Mulder caught her displeased look before she stepped closer to the man in the bed. His eyes widened as she came closer, desperation accelerating his laboured breaths. She said, softly, "Hello, Mr Dunn. I'm Dr Scully. It's okay, I'm here to help you."

His words cost him so much effort, but he still tried: "D… Don… Don't… Don't come…"

Scully stopped, and his panic receded slightly. Mulder stayed back. He'd gotten very little out of the man earlier, and was surprised Scully had gotten even that much given the degree of decline. Austin hadn't wanted him in the room either.

"Just nod or shake your head," she advised to save his breath. "May I approach you to inspect your symptoms?" Austin was already shaking his head, trying to say no, and Scully raised her hands soothingly. "Okay, I'll stay here. Don't try to talk. Are you afraid of me?"

Austin shook his head again, and Scully looked back at Mulder for clarification. He stepped up to stand at her side and spoke quietly into her ear. "He's worried about cross-infection. He doesn't want to make anyone else sick. I told him it's not infectious," he added, raising his voice to ensure Austin heard, "but he doesn't believe me."

"How… How el…" Coughing, a grisly sprinkle of thick blood landing on cheeks and chin, a struggle to draw breath back in. Scully broke her word to stay back and went to the man's side, grasping his arm when he tried to shift away.

"Shh," she advised. "Mulder's right, there's no chance of me or your family catching this from you. It's a defective virus, unable to reproduce." She turned to the doorway as she knelt beside the bed. "Someone get me clean facecloths and some cool water." Two of the Dunn boys disappeared at the quiet behest of the mother, and Scully continued speaking gently to the father. "There's no risk to anyone else, so you can let us help you now. It was very noble of you, trying to quarantine the illness, but thankfully not necessary in this case."

"If… If it… If it… Not…" Austin Dunn choked and coughed and practically sobbed through Scully's attempts to shush him. "How el…?"
"How else did you catch it, if it's not contagious?" Scully filled in calmly, saving her worried look for Mulder. The flick of her eyes was easy enough for him to interpret, and he went to her. "Help me get him on his side." Together they pulled Dunn closer and tipped him onto his side into recovery position. His body spasmed and shook with the violence of what the simple act of breathing was doing to him. Mulder held him there while Scully rifled through her bag for latex gloves. "You were given a targeted dose of the virus, delivered to you through the respiratory tract, but beyond that I can't honestly answer because I don't know how it was delivered to you."

"I do," Mulder admitted, holding Austin's shoulder in place and reaching over to lift his head and tilt it down toward the bedsheets. Blood from his throat dribbled from his open mouth and pooled, thick and gluggy. With a surprised glance at Mulder's confession, Scully fearlessly placed gloved fingers into the mouth to clear more away, much to the incoherent horror of Wendy Dunn behind them. "I met Gray. He told me Engel was the engineer who developed the delivery system. He told me these are all just field tests."

"Gray?" Scully repeated, taking her fingers away and with her cleaner hand accepting the bowl of water one of the hesitant sons handed her. To the boy she said, "I meant what I said before. You don't have to stay outside. You can't get sick from being near your dad." She didn't wait for an answer, just turned to Austin to wipe the blood and sweat from his face with the wet cloth. Already his coughing was subsiding, his breaths coming slightly easier, the blood and flesh clearing out of the airways. How long had he been lying on his back, letting that accumulate?

"Henry Gray," Mulder confirmed quietly. Still he held the patient for her; she didn't thank him or acknowledge him, but somehow that was always best. "He's alive."

Scully sighed, dabbing cool water on her patient's neck. "I know. It was in the documents you shouldn't have sent to me." Her lips pressed together against something else she wanted to say. She swallowed it and moved on. "He's the same as Reece, whatever he is, whoever he is."

Mulder was glad she'd followed that up and was now on the same page as him in that regard, and also that she'd figured out Henry Gray's involvement on her own, too. The more she figured out without him the better – she was meticulous, the ideal investigator, and would painstakingly cover every base to validate her case. Mulder could tell her what he knew, but so rarely could he definitively prove it the way she demanded. The way a court would demand.

It was Scully's case that was going to bring these bastards down, not Mulder's.

"How is he?" Mrs Dunn asked now, worry and hope colouring her voice. Her husband's shallow breaths were still rapid but the struggle was lessened by the recovery position.

"He really needs a hospital," Scully reiterated, ready to weather the woman's reaction. "There's a lot of equipment that I could use to help determine a best course of action. But," she admitted, ignoring the multiple reminders from the Dunns that Austin was not to go to one, "in this state I don't think I'd risk transporting him. Can we get an ambulance onto the premises? They could bring some of what I need."

"Scully," Mulder warned, shooting her a sharp look while he waved dismissively at Mrs Dunn's suspicious fury and her quiet murmur of, "I knew it." He said, "Relax, she just wants the equipment." To his partner he said, firmly, "Give it up. He's not going to hospital. They will seize him as soon as we use any official channels."

"They?" she repeated, and he cocked his head meaningfully. She understood. She went back to tipping water cautiously into her patient's mouth, wiping away what he coughed back up, spoil with blood and flecks of lung. "Does Gray work for them? Did he tell you why Mr Dunn was
infected? Why anyone is being infected?"

"What does it matter to you?" Wendy Dunn asked suspiciously. "Are you a doctor or an investigator? You sound like a cop."

Scully withheld her short reply and returned her gaze firmly to her patient. Struggling with every restricted inhalation, Austin grabbed at Mulder's hand on his shoulder with clammy, weak fingers. Frightened eyes met his, frightened eyes with red rims as tiny oxygen-starved blood vessels burst throughout the whites. Shaky lips tried to form words.

"What's he saying?" Wendy asked, taking a hesitant half-step inside and stopping herself, still afraid. Mulder shook his head slowly to indicate that he wasn't sure, and leaned closer to listen to the breaths of syllables.

"H…h…h…hur…" Austin breathed, tears still running. Scully wiped them gently away. "N…No… More… Pl… Plea…"

His words dissolved into harsh, wet coughs that would not be stopped. Scully palmed the wet cloth off to the nearest son and directed him to keep wiping the blood and flesh that came up away from the mouth, and she went for the medical bag beside her. A big shoe appeared from nowhere and kicked the bag away from her reach.

"What are you doing?" the eldest son demanded of her, crossing his arms and glaring down at her. She swallowed, but not in fear.

"He's in pain," she said, having heard the same message Mulder had: *It hurts. No more, please.* "I'd like to administer painkillers."

"I'm sure you would. Numb him, leave him helpless and unawares, so he's easy to handle and remove from the premises when your people get here to steal him," Wendy Dunn said coldly, knowledgeably. "You can forget it. Whoever you call in to take him, they're not getting near him."

Fox Mulder thought Dana Scully had the calm and patience of an angel. She inhaled so slowly, staring with big exhausted eyes at her patient as the facts started to add up. She was a scientist but she was a doctor first, and as a doctor she believed her first responsibility was to help the ailing. He loved that about her, along with many other beautiful aspects of a wholly beautiful personality, but right now needed cold, hard scientist Dr Scully, and he needed her to accept the cold, hard facts: Austin Dunn was as good as dead, and the best they could hope for was to get useful data from him before they lost favour with this crazy hermit family and got kicked out or worse.

She had to make it worse.

"Mrs Dunn," she said, standing. "I'm afraid Mr Mulder has misled you about me." He almost choked on his next breath, thinking of the badge in his jacket, how close she'd come to showing it at the door and blowing everything. He opened his mouth to cut her off, swiftly grabbing the youngest Dunn boy by the arm and gesturing for him to take over supporting Austin's side-sleeper position, but she got in first. "I'm not your enemy but nor do I have a cure for your husband. I've never cured anyone of this virus."

Wendy Dunn blinked at Scully, clearly taken aback. "He said you were the leading expert."

"He's generous. There is no leading expert in the public sector. The only claim I have to the title is that I've encountered it before and haven't been killed or bribed into silence yet. This isn't a natural illness," she reminded, waving a hand at the patient beside her, who continued to cough and sputter
as Mulder reached hesitantly for Scully's arm, uneasy with her bluntness. She shook him off. "This is a weaponised biological agent and your husband was targeted by some very dangerous people. People I'd like to see brought to justice, but that won't happen in time for Austin. I'm very sorry."

Mrs Dunn liked it exactly as much as Mulder suspected. She raised her rifle and loaded it in one fluid, practised movement. Heart leaping with frightened protectiveness, Mulder sidestepped into the line of fire between Wendy and Scully, hands raised, calling for calm in the suddenly tense room as Dunn fingers twitched toward Dunn rifles.

"Whoa, whoa," he demanded, eyes darting from one gun to the next in this small, confined space. "I'm sure we can all agree that this doesn't help anyone."

"She's one of them," Mrs Dunn spat, gesturing roughly with her gun barrel for Mulder to get out of the way. "You invited a cop to my home?"

"She's not a cop," Mulder said. He stood his ground and hoped the thoughtless chivalry wouldn't earn him a bullet hole.

"Mulder," Scully murmured softly, laying a hand on his arm, one that he read as shouldn't we be honest here? He elbowed her away. No, that was a terrible idea, and he was glad when the family got the next turn at dialogue rather than her.

"Listen to her talk," the eldest Dunn brother agreed darkly with his mother, fingers itching for his own rifle. "All about false justice. She's involved. She just wants to get him out of here so she can steal him for her company-"

"She isn't," Mulder insisted, trying to exude calm to this highly strung family, trying to placate the distressed and armed woman in the doorway while keeping Scully – unarmed by his own request but antagonistic in her poorly timed honesty – safely behind him. The Dunns tolerated him. They thoroughly mistrusted her. "She's with me."

"Move, or you'll wear her bullet, Mr Mulder," Wendy snarled, jerking her head aside in another attempt to make him move. He stood fast. He didn't put it past these people to act on their impulses, especially in this moment of desperation. The sons were tense, ready, and their mother didn't lower her weapon. She glared at Scully over his shoulder. "Why did you come here if you can't help Austin? What do you want?"

She was close, Scully; close enough that when she swallowed, not in fear, he heard it. "Nothing."

"Lying bitch," a new voice, Austin and Wendy's middle son, bit out. His mother didn't even flinch at the language. His father drew small, wet, difficult breaths that did not suffice. "You're here casing things for them. The government. You were never here to help." "He used to work for the feds," his older brother reminded them all. "She's probably a contact from back then."

"Look," Mulder started, hands still out in the air, but he was cut off.

"I don't serve anyone's agenda," Scully said, forcefully calm. "Here's what I can do. I can give Austin a painkiller and sedative, which will reduce his panic and slow down his breathing so he's not coughing as much. I can keep him in the recovery position so his throat continues to drain and he doesn't get build-up in the airways. I can lower his body temperature so the virus doesn't metabolise as quickly. And I can take some bloods to isolate the strand of your husband's virus so I can compare it with the sample I already have and hopefully then develop a cure, in case any of
your family are targeted in the future. But his lungs have deteriorated beyond repair. Stopping the virus now won't give his lungs back their integrity. I'm sorry there isn't more at this stage. I wish there was."

There was silence. Wendy Dunn regarded Scully for a long time through the sight of her rifle, then moved her gaze slowly to Mulder for verification. He couldn't tell her anything; he wasn't the half of the partnership with the medical doctorate, as Scully had taken to reminding him five years ago when she'd started taking mood stabilising medication and he'd brought up the alterations he noticed in her personality and questioned their necessity. The wide, angry eyes shifted back to Scully, and the disorientated, disbelieving terror bled through the anger as Austin dissolved into coughs again. Eyes flickered to her husband, the way her sons crowded around him in concern. Eyes flicked back up.

"If you're not here serving an agenda, what's the real reason you want to take blood samples? Why do you want to develop a cure? I don't see the motivation."

Because being decent was not a good enough answer. "Mulder says this is just a trial," Scully said. "If someone gets the result they want before a cure is synthesised, what we see happening to Austin could happen to us all."

"And because you were experimented on yourself, you have some special interest, some special qualification?" Mrs Dunn pushed tactlessly. "Or is that just a cover story you sold to him, Cop?"

"Undergoing a traumatic abduction twenty years ago just so she can count on me to think of her first when I gain access to your compound and call her in is a hell of a long-term infiltration plan," Mulder commented evenly. Wendy shrugged, starting to see some of the holes in her pigheaded argument.

"Maybe it wasn't real."

Maybe that's a loaded comment. Mulder glanced dubiously back at Scully, still standing behind him. Maybe none of it was real. The conspiracies they could never quite prove, the monsters he could never quite catch, the phenomena he could never quite measure adequately. There was always the question, lurking like a nervous shadow at the back of Scully's bright blue eyes and on the corner of every uncertain smile and woven between the lines of every "Alright, let's say for argument's sake that you're right…" He could always detect the question she would never ask: is any of this real? He knew she'd not wanted the answer, because then she'd have to ask the one that naturally followed, and ask herself whether she was following a madman.

Whether the man she'd fallen for had already stepped over into a realm beyond reality, and whether she had any hope of pulling him back, and whether it was worth the effort.

"You mean she might have faked the whole thing?" he suggested, trying to offset the tension of the room, trying to make light of the woman's comment, the tiniest trace of mockery and amusement buried in his voice where only Scully would hear it. "I don't know. You wouldn't fake it with me, would you, Scully?"

There was no winning with her tonight. "Wouldn't be the first time," she answered blandly, a low blow, but he appreciated the effort. The game of knives was on, apparently. He loved this game. He always lost. She turned her attention to Mrs Dunn. "I don't owe you a justification for my willingness to help your husband. You can either let me administer pain relief, or you can choose not to, and you can shoot me or let me leave or whatever you want. You've got the gun. But those
are your options."

"Is he going to die?"

There it was. The naked, vulnerable question she'd been afraid to ask all along. Mulder looked down. Scully looked back at her patient, assessing quickly, unhappily.

"I can sedate him," Scully said again, voice strained with the effort of being patient and compassionate in the face of the Dunns' lack of hospitality. "I can take away his pain and help him relax. The panic is making his condition worse. I can extend the time you have together and make it less difficult for him. But yes. I'm very sorry."

Austin choked on a mouthful of watery bile and blood, and Scully abandoned the conversation to return to him, fearlessly leaving Mulder alone in the line of fire. She tilted Austin's head and spoke to him softly while his sons hovered and held him in the recovery position. Mess dripped from his trebly lips. Wendy watched on, horrible truths setting in the thickening cement of her reality.

Her world was dissolving all around her. Mulder could sympathise.

It took a good twenty seconds but finally the airways were clear again and Austin Dunn was able to draw one whole, unimpeded breath. The ones that came after were thinner, shallower, but in those he managed a pair of quiet, strained words. "Do it."

His wife heard. She lowered the gun, and Mulder lowered his hands, heart still thudding.

"Do it," Mrs Dunn repeated, voice shaking. Her sons looked surprised that she would agree to medication and a course of action prescribed by a doctor, let alone the surrender Scully encouraged, but didn't question the decision. "Do it. Please. But," she said, voice hardening again, "nothing leaves this property today. No blood. Nothing that could help the people who did this if you happened to pass evidence to them." She glared at Scully; the doctor met the challenge with years of practice behind her. "If you're being truthful and you're just a good Samaritan, then you'll be grateful when we hand it back to you at some point in the near future. Am I right?"

It wasn't worth the effort to answer. Scully angrily ripped her gloves off and dove back into the bag for a syringe and little bottle of opiate.

"We need that blood," Mulder insisted. Wendy turned cool eyes on him.

"What for? To prosecute a case?" she asked, and he fell silent. They already strongly suspected Scully's allegiance thanks to her straightforward investigator's manner; no need to shake the Dunns' confidence in him, too. "If it's really to make a cure, it won't matter when you get it. It'll keep."

Mulder felt like kicking something. The whole point of being here, all efforts wasted. Why did Scully have to aggravate the situation with fucking facts? The truth – that she was good, that she wanted to help, that she was uniquely qualified to be here – would have sufficed and would have gotten them much further. But she had to go and put her foot in it.

"The other one lasted four days," Ezekiel Dunn said desperately, glancing over at Mulder while his father shook and reddened and wheezed and while Scully drew a dose into her syringe. "You said that. Daddy only got sick on Thursday."

Mulder bit the inside of his cheek, trying to refocus. Trying to cool his irritation with his partner and ground himself in the moment, in the case, in this room and this situation. There would be time to be mad with her later, but he had learned long ago to put feelings aside at work and be objective with her on the job. If he couldn't, and if she couldn't do the same, they would never have made it
through their first case together, let alone survived two decades in each other's lives.

Scully jabbed Austin's pasty, goose-bumped skin and injected the sedative, clearly prepared to be professional despite being called out to a freak show in the middle of the night where she'd been insulted, frisked and threatened. Mulder sighed. Professional. Think. The 'other one'. The 'other one' was the one Mulder was too late to reach, but he didn't say that. Instead he said to the Dunn boy, "My source advised me your father was infected on Wednesday. It must have taken a day to set in and start showing signs." To Scully he said, "I went to visit another case this morning but he'd already succumbed, and his body was distinctly not where it was meant to be when I chased it up." Like Johannsson, but that was something else he didn't bother to say. She knew. "Mr Dunn's rate of decline seems faster."

He lifted his eyebrows at the ash tray in the corner and Scully, catching on to his every subtle gesture or signal, glanced over discreetly. On his walk around the property earlier, trying to get the text message to reach Maggie, he'd found a small home tobacco plantation. Again, he wasn't the doctoral half of their duo, but he figured that the lung deterioration caused by years or decades of smoke damage would ultimately mean that when the Black Oil virus struck, half of the job was done already, reducing the time between infection and death significantly. Big, healthy lungs like Stephen Powell's took longer to devour. Mulder liked to think his own would buy him a few days.

Just as subtly as he, Scully turned her head back to him and nodded, so slightly no one else noticed. Yes, he was right about the smoking. Not that being a non-smoker would have saved the man, since it hadn't helped Powell or Johannsson, and it wouldn't help anyone else on Gray's list.

The drug flooded his system and Dunn quickly relaxed, his breathing still audibly difficult but slower, shallower. Scully did as she'd said she would, instructing the sons in packing ice against the neck and armpits of Austin Dunn, although by this point Mulder suspected this was more so they'd know for their own benefit in case any of the boys were targeted next. She didn't know about the list.

"What happened on Wednesday?" she asked. She looked around at the family when they didn't reply. "This was inhaled. Tell me how."

"To satisfy her medical curiosity," Mulder filled in with a quick calming smile, casting her another warning look.

"Some friends of his were smoking outside the bar," Ezekiel spoke up resignedly, sounding like he'd suspected this was the issue all along but had hoped not to have to bring it up. "One, he hadn't seen in years. Left town when they were boys. We stopped for a beer. He shared his vaporiser with Daddy."

This was news. "Did you catch the guy's name?" Mulder asked, and it was Wendy who answered with, "Austin said he met up with Morris Bletchley." Mulder didn't press further, and neither did Scully. It was a name to pursue once they left. Wendy now rhythmically stroked back her dying husband's hair. Her whole family had drawn together in the minutes since realising Austin was nearly done with life, and they were all touching him in some way, just being near. The mother glanced up at the former partners. "Are you done? Draw the blood you need and tell the boys how to store it. I don't suppose it's any good to you if it's done wrong."

"When will we get it back?" Mulder asked, while Scully opened a new syringe from its sterile packaging. Maybe this situation could still be salvaged. Wendy Dunn smiled thinly.

"When I'm comfortable letting you have it. This is my insurance. For all I know, you could both be liars, and after you leave, a convoy could turn up here to try to seize my husband. No one's taking
Austin. If you betray me, I'm destroying that blood and you get nothing. If you're who you say you are, and nothing happens, you can come collect your samples. But if you tip someone off and my home is attacked, I promise you there will be no evidence here for you to use."

Mulder believed her. He waited for Scully to withdraw the needle from the near-sleeping Austin's arm, and to take a couple of swabs of the black ooze on Austin's lips, then took it all from her and handed it over to the waiting Dunn hands. He detected her annoyance but she still outlined how she wanted the blood and tissue kept until they were willing to release it back to her. She started packing up her bag.

"You can have that back with the blood," Mrs Dunn said, and Ezekiel Dunn and one of his brothers took it all from Scully's hands. "Blood traces and all. We'll keep it all safe for you, but for now, get the hell out." She stood and went idly for the rifle she'd left in the corner. Mulder backed up, playing casual, touching Scully's elbow lightly as he passed her and directing her toward the door. Mrs Dunn nodded to the hoods on the floor and Mulder stooped to grab them obediently. She was still talking. "If anything happens to my family as a result of you two being here, you'll get nothing. Understood?"

Scully didn't like it. Mulder could feel her seething beside him. He forced a smile to cover for her. "Shall we show ourselves out?"

It was decided the sons would take them back the way they came in. Mulder offered a hood to Scully. She snatched it out of his hands with as little physical contact as she could manage. Hard to believe this was the same woman who'd held his hand in the terrified and uncertain blindfolded dark only minutes ago, but of course he knew, it didn't count in the dark. He couldn't expect that tenderness in the harsh light of reality, nor could he offer it in return. Not if there was a chance she'd reciprocate, because then what was he supposed to do?

His world had ended with her once already. He wasn't going to live through that again.

He took one last look at Austin Dunn before lowering the hood over his eyes. His face was less ruddy, and his eyelids were down, hiding the bloodshot whites. His chest rose swiftly and shallowly, but with rhythm and without the interruption of throat-tearing coughs. He would die tonight, certainly. Still. He would die now in peace and without pain, surrounded by family who were no longer afraid to approach him.

The hood went down. The way back was quick, led by sons eager to return to their dying dad. They didn't notice Mulder's loose black blindfold slipping as they navigated the underground bunker, nor did they complain when Scully reached the top of the ladder and cast her hood down behind her without a word, stalking off into the dark. Mulder paused long enough to talk to Ezekiel, the only one of the Dunns who went as far as climbing the ladder with them.

"Momma won't like seeing your friend again, but if you come back next week, you can pick the blood up then," the young man said, watching Scully's departing back. "Can't risk anyone coming after Daddy while he's so weak."

Mulder nodded, but knew the Dunns were kidding themselves if they thought Austin had a week of life remaining, or even more than a few hours. Ezekiel seemed to overhear his thoughts.

"How long?"

The older man cringed. Facts were Scully's domain. "Not long," he said finally. "Listen. When he goes, burn the body. No funeral home. No coroner, no one else, do you understand? That's how they'll get him. Do it yourselves, immediately. Don't let them get what they want. I know your
mom didn't like my friend," he added, jerking his head in Scully's direction. She was most of the way back to the road. "But she's not the one to be afraid of here."

The eldest Dunn boy turned without a word and went back down the ladder, and Mulder left him and his family to their sorrow, just grateful to have gotten in and out of that situation. In the frigid winter night air he jogged after Scully, dodging tyres and junk. Up ahead, she'd returned to the rundown little house, and stooped from the edge of the porch to collect the keys the Dunns had thrown there when she first arrived. She resumed her trajectory for the road, not a single glance back. Mulder felt less secure than that, and kept looking over his shoulder, worried that at any moment Austin Dunn might pass, and in her unstable grief and with her rifle, Mrs Dunn might burst from the trapdoor in the lawn.

Mulder jogged across the road and met Scully at the second car just as she unlocked the door. It wasn't hers, but he recognised the Corvette from Christmas Day. He caught the door wordlessly and held it open for her, still casting furtive glances toward the Dunn property. He didn't need to catch Scully's gaze to know she was as eager to leave as he was. *Fuck. Off. Government. Spies.* He'd known from the first Google search that this family was full-on, but he'd convinced himself it would be worth the risk if he could walk away with the evidence he needed for Scully's developing case against the latest shadow enemy.

Instead they were leaving empty-handed.

Once Scully's legs were inside the car, he pushed the door shut and went up to his own little car. It took two turns of the key to get the engine to start in the cold; behind him, he heard Scully's borrowed Corvette turn over five times before kicking in. He switched on the lights, put the vehicle into gear and headed off quickly, Scully following close behind.

He drove for six minutes before he felt far enough away. He pulled over on the side of a long, straight road to nowhere, not a soul around for miles, and the rumbling classic car stopped behind him, headlights flooding his mirrors until she flicked them off. Both cars were turned off, and both drivers' doors opened simultaneously.

"Could you have been any more of a fed, *Agent?*" Mulder asked, slapping his door closed as he walked over, cold hand sliding into his jacket for her badge. He withdrew it between two fingers like a playing card and held it out to her and she slammed the heavy old door of the Corvette much harder than was necessary. "I don't think they got the hint."

She spun to him and snatched the badge. "I am a fed, Mulder. If that's a problem, perhaps you should have left me out of your dealings." She tucked her identification away, directing her glare at the road to avoid looking at him, but her anger got the better of her and her blue eyes, bright even in the cold darkness, angled back up at him sharply. "What the hell was that? I could have been shot. You could have been shot. And for what?"

"For what?" Mulder repeated, irritated by her narrowness. "Is that really your best question right now?"

"You knew I couldn't save him. You knew they were crazy. *Still* you lured me out here with your message-in-a-bottle bullshit, you used my mom, to get me in a room with a hopeless case in the middle of the night-"

"I sent that message hours ago," Mulder disagreed. "You took your sweet time getting here. Those freaks wouldn't let me leave until you arrived in case you were some sort of government cavalry."

"Oh, were you made to stay there against your will for a few hours?" Scully mocked. "I'm sorry,
did that make you uncomfortable? I should be grateful I was only felt up by adolescent rednecks
and accused of being a government spy while I tried to help a man I had no real means of helping."

Fair point. Mulder tried to take a beat. "I'm sorry for how they treated you. Austin deteriorated
more quickly than I expected, and the family's patience and hospitality went down with him." He
paused, watching her face in the darkness, lit only by the thin light of the cold and distant moon.
Her mouth was tight with frustration with him and her cheeks were frozen pink. Pretty even when
mad. "I did know you couldn't save him. I thought if you were there early enough, it wouldn't have
been so apparent to them. That you'd see the value of what else was there."

"What's that? Evidence?" She was never slow. "Evidence I couldn't use because I lied to get on the
premises and which they would never have released to me if they saw my badge?"

"Evidence they didn't release to you anyway, because you blew it."

It was Scully's turn to take a beat. She looked away again, and he knew she was counting to ten in
her head. One, must-not-kill-him, two, must-not-kill-him, three … Her fingers twitched and she
shoved them into her pockets like they were cold, but immediately withdrew them. She turned
back. "Let's both pretend that after two months without as much as a word, you didn't just blame
me for a situation you orchestrated falling apart, shall we? Otherwise I might feel compelled to get
into my car and leave you here."

"Your car? You and your probationary boy are on 'what's mine's yours' terms already, huh?"

He immediately wished he could take the words back. They reeked of jealousy and were just a
childish reaction to her uninterpretable comment. Two months without as much as a word… Did
that mean she had missed him? I might leave you here. Did she want to be convinced otherwise?
Why did questions like these always leave him crippled in confrontations with her, while someone
else got to sit beside her at work, accompany her to crime scenes and meetings, and exchange
personal possessions like cars and coffee cups and pens without a second thought? Why did Agent
One Direction get the easy road?

It was an easy enough question to answer – Agent One Direction didn't stick his nose deep into the
X-Files and create for himself a lifetime of challenge and dissatisfaction, nor did he fall in love
with his partner and proceed to sabotage the relationship – but Mulder preferred not to think on it.

"Agent Colt finished his probationary period and now operates as my partner," Scully said finally,
stiffly. Her hands returned to her pockets. Came out again, empty. "He suggested his car would be
less likely to be tracked than mine."

Colt. The child agent had a name. "You told him where you were going?" Mulder demanded,
irritated that he even had to ask. Scully having a partner meant there would now be an added
complication to always consider.

She exhaled just as irritably. "Jesus, Mulder. I've never even mentioned your name to Colt, alright?
I don't tell anyone if I'm meeting you. Partly because I don't want to feed your paranoia."

"But mostly," he guessed, "because you don't want anyone to know you still associate with me."

How do you soften the blow of that one?

"Mostly," she agreed evenly. Her gaze challenged him to ask why. Of course he wouldn't. There
was a long moment of silence. Scully broke it. "I sent Colt to Skinner this afternoon. The case is
getting too complex for us to investigate alone." She looked down at her shoe as she lightly kicked
Mulder didn't like the idea of mixing their old friend in their messes but knew Scully would never be clumsy enough to let the Assistant Director all the way in where he could be implicated. If she said she'd put him onto Reece Dwyer, then that was all she'd given him.

"I met Reece on Christmas Day, near your place." Ignore the narrowed eyes at the mention of being around on Christmas. "He should be my age but he's in his twenties. He remembers being shot in '78 and then remembers waking up in 2011. With instructions programmed into his brain."

"Hmm." She was unimpressed. "These details would have been helpful two months ago, perhaps left out in the open for me to work with instead of hidden at the bottom of the briefcase on the back of a sheet I would never look at again until Colt idly stumbled across it today. Today, Mulder."

She'd been busy today, apparently. "Someone brought him back to life, Scully."

"And Gray, too," she reminded him, still angry. "Highly incriminating hacked files from the CIA turned up at my office today. Thank you for that. More evidence I can't use, only this will land me in federal prison if I'm caught with it."

The files from Taryn. That took longer than he expected, but it sounded like it was a gold mine.

"What did it say?"

She looked incredulous. "Because that's what matters – whether the risk paid off, not what the consequences could be for me and my partner. For the case." She shook her head, furious, and elected to take a crisp, professional tone. "The documents showed that he worked for the government on secret projects until his assassination in 1981, and was then 'reborn' in '64 to be fiftyish today instead of eighty-three, as he should be. Someone is producing documents to allow these people – Gray, Reece, probably many others – to reassimilate into society without question."

"And you've got Skinner looking for these others?"

"I hope so, because I can't use this," she said hotly, wrenching the car door open again and kneeling in through the door to get her briefcase out from under a seat. The awkward position and the outward reach of her arms made her trench coat ride up, the tail hem pulling taut. Mulder bit his lip, knowing it was wrong to note how excellent her ass looked while she was so mad with him. As if she overheard his admiring thoughts, she twisted her hips away and sat on the edge of the low bucket seat, flicking the car's yellowy overhead light on so she could search the contents of the briefcase. "I had to send my partner to Skinner blind, with only one half-formed case, Reece's, to sell a story about a pattern I can't prove without revealing documents I can't have." She grabbed a handful of pages and pushed the briefcase off her lap, still open, onto the seat, and got back to her feet. She brandished the paper at him, hitting him across the chest with them, conveying the level of offence she had taken. The papers rustled too loudly in the dead silence of the Virginian winter night. "You are pushing the limits of this friendship, Mulder. I know how these kinds of cases take their hold on you, but everyone else still has to work within the rules, and you don't get to break them on my behalf."

"Pushing the limits of the friendship," Mulder repeated, more snidely than he intended. Her words were bitterly sharp, harshly true. She was much better at this game of knives than he would ever be. "I'm helping you. Everything I've done-"

"Has been entirely self-motivated, or done in the name of the work," Scully finished firmly. "Don't
pretend you gave my contact details to a hacker and had them send me documents that could cost me my job for my personal benefit. I can't use them once this investigation goes formal – you didn't even bother to launder the information. You don't care-" She stopped herself. Broke eye contact. "No, we're not doing this right now. I need…"

She turned away from him and sat back on the edge of the car seat, attention in her briefcase. She acted casual but her hand movements, shuffling documents about and checking slip pockets and corners multiple times, were urgent.

"What are you looking for?" Mulder asked curiously. He leaned in over her shoulder, withdrawing slightly when she swatted at him with the pages without even a glance. He caught her wrist on its way through the second arc, and the contact seemed to give her a jolt. She started and looked at him sharply, other hand frozen in the white snowfield of paper that was the inside of her briefcase.

Did she still feel the electricity, too? Did she feel the same compulsion he did, the compulsion to tug on her wrist and pull her to her feet, to let the briefcase fall away and the documents litter about like leaves, to draw her against him and look into her eyes and feel the warmth of her breath on his face in the moments before they both gave in?

The failure to rip her wrist free said maybe; the contempt in her expression told him not to try it.

But she was wearing the watch. He felt the cool of the metal beneath his fingers.

God, Scully…

"None of your business," she said, and instead of ravishing her he took the pages from her captured hand and released her. He knelt down in the doorway of the car to use the light over her head to read by. Birth certificates, two different birth years, fake letters of appointment for work at various respectable institutions, a death certificate.

"Signed off by a Dr Doherty," he commented. He glanced up at her, barely a breath away. If he shifted and stretched his neck, he could kiss her from here. How many hundreds of times had he been this close, or even closer, in their years as workmates, and not acted on it? It was easier then, but the justification was the same: she won't like it. "Has that name come up anywhere else in connection to all this?"

She shook her head, swallowing and refusing to look at him. "Not yet. I need to be very careful with the names in these documents." She went back through the briefcase, lifting various pages free for emphasis. Mulder took each one of them. She seemed not to notice or mind. "Any one of them could be on someone's radar, and if I go digging…" She dropped her hands into the mess of paper she'd created of her case, defeated. "It's one collapsed passageway after another, Mulder."

He straightened, stepped around the open door and laid the pages out on the bonnet of Agent Colt's car. The night had gone still and nothing blew away. He withdrew his phone and opened the camera application. He switched on the flash and lined up the screen with each document, taking a careful snap, mindful not to get any of the car's distinctive colouring in any of the shots.

"I shudder to even wonder what the extent of all this might be," Scully continued darkly as she got out of the car and followed him. A gentle breath of wind lifted the edge of the page he was trying to focus on and she quickly caught it and repositioned it for him. She got her fingers out of the way of the shot. "How is photographing illegally obtained documentation meant to do anything except to extend the scope of our crime?" She replaced the latest page with another one she'd deemed important from her unwanted collection and he photographed that, too. She didn't need to be asked. "Or is this another way of you helping me, like sharing my personal history with strangers to gain
their favour?"

Mulder lowered his phone and tried to withhold the growl of frustration that rose in his throat as he turned to her. "You know, I knew you'd be pissed about that when I said it."

"And yet you said it anyway." A new page slapped down on the bonnet.

"Yeah, I said it anyway," he snapped, letting himself be stirred up, not realising that she did it to him just as surely as he did it to her, "because once, I worked with a Scully who would have said it herself if she'd understood what was at stake, and what it would give us access to. A living specimen, Scully. How many more opportunities are you going to get to observe a living victim of this new Black Oil virus before we're through with it? No, you couldn't save Austin Dunn, and yes, I knew that when I called you in, but if this thing can be cured you are the one who's going to find it, so yes – I took some risks to get you in there where you could see what it does. You're welcome."

"I didn't thank you," Scully answered back. "Valuable observations aside, I can't begin to synthesise a cure without Dunn's contaminated lung tissue, to compare with Johannsson's. Who knows whether I'll ever get that? And you can blame me and my fed demeanour if you like," she added, "but this was your set-up, and you failed to brief me on how I was meant to act. A text message to my mom saying bring stethoscope, leave gun at home leaves a lot to the imagination."

Mulder took his last photo and scrolled back through the phone to check the pictures for clarity. His words were bitter. "I never had to brief you before." "You were never this big of an asshole before."

"Not true." Mulder tucked his phone away and grabbed all the pages back up, taking little care with them. "If you're so worried about these, why would you risk driving interstate with them in your possession?"

"What else am I meant to do with them?"

Seriously? "You have a fireplace, don't you?" He screwed them up into a ball and shoved it into her hands, then rounded her again, this time to lean into her friend's car for the lighter, knowing from the age of the vehicle it would be there. He took it and tested it. Functional. Mulder straightened and extended the heat source to her. Hesitantly she touched the paper to it. It took a bit, then caught alight. When the flame really took hold, she dropped it to the ground, and they both watched the incriminating documents burn away to nothing on the road in the middle of nowhere. He put the lighter back and asked, casually, "Was that so hard?"

"I don't know. I could ask you the same, about so many things." Her voice was hard, and so were her eyes. "Was it really so hard today to contact me that you had to circumvent me completely and go through my mom and involve her in all this? Was it too hard to mention in the message that I was going into a situation with kooks who would want to blindfold me? Did you think that was okay? Ugh." She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. She waved him away though he made no motion. "No. Don't answer that."

"They're hoarding weapons down there, Scully," Mulder explained, and she opened her eyes to stare at him, and he cringed as he realised how flimsy an excuse this was. "I saw boxes of guns and ammunition when my hood shifted. Probably a stockpile for multiple local families. They weren't going to risk letting us see that, but the bunker is the quickest way onto the compound from the house. The only gate is well on the other side, a vehicular access."
"Gun traffickers. Those are like used car salesmen in the world of Fox Mulder, aren't they? Minor crooks, not even worth your notice. Just your friendly neighbourhood gun traffickers, and you see no potential conflict of interest in inviting a currently employed FBI agent to meet them." She pressed fingertips to her temples and sighed. "You make my head hurt."

Causing her headaches was never his intention. Arguing with her in the middle of the night in the middle of Virginian nowhere wasn't, either. They should be somewhere warm together, asleep at this hour, or maybe still up, deep in existential discussion or shallow in cheap commentary about a cheesy film they were watching. Together, on his couch. Or hers. Little boy, a teen by now, asleep between them, or more likely awake with headphones in ears and eyes fixed on a handheld screen, passively-aggressively faking participation in family time. But present. With them. Where they all belonged.

Instead he was here. She was here. One was not. This was sad. This was what it had come to.

"When you went back to Boston to claim Johannsson," he said now, making an effort to keep his voice soft and controlled, because the point of working together was to move forward, not stagnate in resentment, "they had taken her, the same people who revived Reece and Gray. He called them the Worldwide Family of Hosts. They were going to do the same to Rebecca Johannsson, but they couldn't. Your autopsy rendered her body unusable. Dr Gray is grateful," Mulder added quickly, seeing the stricken look on his partner's face when she suddenly dropped her hands from her face. "I don't know much about this technology yet but it seems that for these people, death is only temporary if the body is intact, minus lungs. They have used multiple deaths and revivals to keep Gray in line."

"In line to do what?"

"To develop the virus into a superbug. These field tests are attempts to extend the thing's life cycle-"

"So it can reproduce," Scully realised. She was silent a moment, incredible brain working overtime. "Engel was the engineer who designed the delivery system. A vaporiser?"

"In this case, yes, but for Powell – the one I checked out early this morning – I think it was an asthma inhaler."

"And Johannsson?"

"Don't know yet, but I may have a lead into the whereabouts of the Johannsson family soon, and I can ask the husband. Gray has an ally, and she's hidden them from this…" He struggled for an appropriate label. "Shadow government?"

Scully sighed again and looked down the road. No headlights, no signs of life or civilisation as far as the eye could see. "It's not just a shadow, Mulder. It's in the government, like before. My own agency jerked me around that night, losing reclamation papers and instructions and replacing operators to put me off their trail while they destroyed evidence. Harlow, the agent who initiated the Engel case, has been doing inventory like an intern since they pulled her, and her transfer papers still haven't been processed to allow her to resume real work. I met her tonight – it's déjà vu, they're doing to her what they did to us. Whole case files have been pulled from the Bureau's databanks. Colt and I have both had reason to suspect our electronic activities are being monitored. And today…" She shook her head, chewing her lower lip. He slid his hands into pockets to prevent either of them from extending toward her and thumbing her lip free of her teeth, from tracing along the cupid-like curves of her mouth. "What are we doing?"
Focus. "What do you mean?"

"This is too big for us. We should never have touched this."

Always the quitter. "It doesn't take much to scare you off these days, does it?"

"Dead men are walking the streets. You've met two of them. Reece was taken with Samantha," Scully noted, and though he often told himself he'd long accepted that scar and moved on from it, his eyes still fell from hers to the cold road. "An alien virus is being weaponised through live field tests on unknowing civilians, and our government knows about it. The CIA is actively covering these operations up and has been since at least the seventies. The Bureau is watching me. You've gone and upset somebody with this Engel family, and suddenly everyone's looking at me again, wondering whether I might be involved somehow. Asking me where you are. Mulder," she appealed, "this is so much bigger than we are."

"I know," he said, stepping closer to her and taking her shoulders, voice impassioned. "This is it, Scully. It's huge. I think this is it."

"This is what?" Her voice was tired. She didn't pull away from him. She rarely did.

"This is what I've been waiting for. A chance to bring these bastards down."

Scully surprised him by laughing, a choked sound that even seemed unexpected to her. Beneath his hands, her shoulders shook with the vibration of the sound, and the smile that the laughter left in its wake was wide and disbelieving.

"What for?" she asked. "You can't beat them, and even if you could, what's the point? What do you get out of it, Mulder? For every step of progress you've ever made in all the years I've known you, you've been knocked back two. When will it be enough for you? Your sister is gone. Your parents. William." She swallowed and her smile dissolved. "What are you fighting for now?"

"I have to finish what I started," he said fiercely. "I have to prove I was right. I have to end this, all of this." For you. For us.

"Why?" Scully demanded, shrugging his hands off now. "The X-Files are done. All our friends and allies are dead. Your career is ancient history. None of it is salvageable. But still you call me in to conduct an autopsy in the middle of the night. Still you conscript me to cases too sensitive to even formally open. Still you chase down these crazy hicks in their Armageddon bunkers and risk both our lives to get me a glimpse of the live virus at work."

"Because this could be it, Scully," he reiterated. "If I can get you everything you need to close this case, it could be the validation we always needed. Proof the X-Files deserved to stay open. Proof that I haven't been off my rocker all these years, proof you weren't crazy to walk the journey with me. It's worth all the risk."

"Say it is," she said boldly. "Say we solve this case, against all odds, and bring down this new Syndicate and drag the truth out into the public eye. Then what? I will continue going to work. But you? What will you do without your obsessions to motivate you?"

Tactful choice of words, Agent Scully. "I won't need obsessions once I've put them to rest. If I end this, I can be free."

He hadn't intended to admit that to her, to allude to his greatest hope, but she was his world and the person he'd most wanted to tell for so long.
His claim only frustrated her. "You can never be free, Mulder. You're ruled by the gravity of your work. Endless loops. You don't know how to exist without it. You'll just find something else to occupy yourself. A new lead. A different phantom."

"Not this time," he said firmly. "When I finish this, I'll finish it. I will be free."

She looked simultaneously mystified and annoyed. "Why would you want to be free of the legacy of the X-Files? It's defined you."

"That's not who I want to be."

"What do you want?"

"Do you really not know?"

The words came out uninvited, and she was never slow. Why else would he want to bury his heavy past, except to regain the thing it had almost ruined? She'd said it herself, everything and everyone else was dead, gone. It took a moment to filter through her disbelief, to land in the expanse of her logic, where she could not deny the obvious interpretation of the words he hadn't meant to say. Shouldn't have said.

She was the one who had ended things, and his attempts at flirtatious playfulness had mostly been rebuked, so it didn't surprise him when the admission backfired. She shook her head slowly.

"No," she said, hardening again. Her voice was thick, each word distinct and careful. "No." She waved him away again, trying to back out of any conversation too sensitive. She got like this toward the end of their relationship, and she'd been like this ever since. He'd been enticing argument out of her ever since, missing the strength of her determined stance and opinion against him almost as much as her presence. Now she forced the ghost of a smile but there was no joy in it. "It's the middle of the night and you're a jerk; we're not having this conversation."

"Listen, Scully," Mulder tried, wanting to touch her. She shook her head again and took a step away.

"Three years," she said, a little breathlessly. "You don't get to insinuate that you're trying to do something as drastic as change for me when you haven't missed me for a second in three years. You're the most self-centred person I've ever known, so don't kid yourself: this is about you, like always."

Haven't missed you?! "It's not always about me-"

"Yes, it is!" she exploded, and the force of her pent-up anger set him back a step. He hadn't seen this much emotion in her in so long and he didn't know what to do with it. "You need an autopsy so you call me. You want CIA files so you have them sent to me. You want access to the Dunns so you use my past and my mother. No thought to the fallout for me. No thought to how that hurts me. You wanted to know where I was up to with my investigation so you came to my house on Christmas, but you didn't leave me any decent leads, except a vague hint you hid in the fucking briefcase, and you didn't even wake me up to let me know you were there."

"What did you want me to do, Scully?" Mulder demanded, the fires of frustration and attraction and anger singeing his words. "Climb into bed with you? Yeah, I thought about it – is that what you want to hear?"

She blinked, looking as if he'd slapped her. Perhaps, with words, he had. He didn't know anymore. He didn't know what she wanted.
"What do you mean, you thought about it?" she asked, voice unexpectedly shaky. From anger? Emotion? Both. "You thought about reaching out to me but instead you decided to sit in my house without me and then ignore me completely for two months?"

"Rewind three years, Scully. You walked out, and you've made it painfully clear since then that you don't want anything like what we had. As far as I'm aware, we're maintaining a professional working relationship. You're the one who wanted it this way."

"I made it clear? I did not want this," Scully argued, gesturing at the space between their bodies. "There's nothing professional about getting me here tonight the way you did, letting me worry about you, when you could have just been straight with me, nor in putting me in a position where I had to lie about who I am and watch a man die, knowing I couldn't do a thing to stop it. You treat me like a personal work tool when you need me and then disregard me and consequences that could affect me when your attention moves elsewhere, Mulder."

She was angry when she arrived at the Dunn residence, he recalled now. Angry about being dragged into a scenario blind after being left in the dark for two months, and the fact that she hadn't found the clue he'd left her until today probably hadn't helped her opinion of him. Add to that the treatment she'd faced from the Dunns, the distinct failure of the operation, the sense of betrayal she apparently felt regarding his sharing of her abduction and cancer, and the fact that this argument was a long time coming, and he had a perfect recipe for disaster.

When in doubt, apologise.

"I don't think of you like that," he said sincerely. "You know that."

"I don't know that," she retorted furiously, taking him by surprise with her volume. "All I know is that whenever you bother to get in touch, it's because you want something and you don't care that I don't want any part of it, and whenever someone mentions your name, my stomach drops because I know I'm going to pay for my connection to you again somehow, and whenever I see you, I need to bring my medicine cabinet with me because there's a guarantee you'll say and do everything wrong and send my stress levels through the roof."

He frowned, concerned and displeased. "I didn't know you were back on the pills, Scully."

Wrong turn. "Go fuck yourself, Mulder," she spat, instantly defensive. The yellow of the Corvette's interior light shone off her hair, off the fine lines of her face. "You're the reason my life looks the way it does. You're why I put myself on medication. You can't even focus on my point for the span of one fucking argument."

He wished he hadn't said anything at all. He wished he'd kept his feelings to himself, because this was not conducive to the ultimate goal of slowly winning her back once he'd put the work to rest. They'd made something out of a professional friendship before; he was confident they could do it again, which was why he'd tried so hard to maintain it, to confer with her regularly even when she fought it, to pull her into his work and to insert himself into hers, to cooperate.

He should have parted with her at the cars outside the Dunns', told her he'd call her tomorrow and wished her a good night. Left things there. Instead he'd said nothing, and wordlessly she'd intuited his intention to debrief elsewhere. She didn't need to be told, and she followed him without question. But the necessary debrief of the investigation wasn't happening. And apparently he was missing the entire point.

The pills were not the point, apparently, even if she'd been thinking of them this whole time. Mulder thought of her hands slipping into her pockets, hoping to find a canister that she knew
wasn't there, a lifeline; the urgent search of the briefcase. How he resented the drugs, the stabilisers she started taking in 2011 on the pretence of taking the edge off for short periods of stress, but which had soon become a steady dosage. He remembered the mellowness, the apathy. The drugs staved off some of the overwhelming anxieties she was battling, certainly – they made her numb, and then numb became a replacement for normal. Maybe that was more comfortable, he didn't know, but he knew it made real feeling look massive, terrifying. He'd tried to tell her, years before, how he could see the change in her. That the mood stabilisers flattened her. She didn't see it as a problem.

He should have seen the signs she was back on them, or perhaps had never taken herself off. The lack of drive to jump on the Johannsson case in the first place, among any number of other investigations he'd thrown her way. The unwillingness to bite back when he teased her. Tonight she was drug-free, and she was struggling with emotion. *Normal* emotion. For all he knew, this was the realest he'd seen her in three or four years – and for the first time in all those years, she was letting him have it. The drugs kept it all at bay and that left her defenceless when they wore off. She would prefer the numbness.

She would choose that over feeling. Over him.

*You're the reason. You're why I put myself on medication.*

"Scully," he tried once more, "this is good. All this needs to be said. I need to hear it. You're pissed off, but you can manage it. You don't need the pills."

She looked ready to stab him. "What I don't need is *you*. The pills aren't the problem, Mulder. I'm not an addict. They just treat the plague on my life that is *you*."

Her knives were always sharpest. She sunk them into his chest and he expected his next breath to be bloody like Austin Dunn's. It came up clean but still hurt. She'd never said anything so cruel in twenty-three years, not even when their relationship broke down and she left him.

For a second, he hated her for saying those words.

"If I am so bad for you," he said flatly, "why the fuck are you here, Scully?"

She stared at him. Threw his words back at him, voice soft. "Do you really not know?"

His chest was tight from her harshness but these recycled words caught his breath in his throat. Maybe he was slower than she, because it seemed a painfully long time before the breath got moving again and drew back down, and in that long time the meaning, the only possible meaning, of her words became obvious.

She was here against all better judgement, against all her protective instincts, against all logic that said he would use her, anger her. She was *still here*.

She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. She settled them on her chest – was it as tight as his? – then fluttered them to her sides, but that proved too awkward and she ran them through her hair and shoved them into pockets and twisted them before her. Her eyes had dropped from his and would not come back.

"Is..." Her voice was cracked, and with a lurch in his stomach he realised he'd brought her close to tears again. Hadn't he learned his lesson in Boston? "Is there anything else?"

Back to business. Mulder didn't want to talk about the case, not now, but sensed it was all she
could handle right now. He dug in his pocket.

"These are the upcoming victims Gray knows of," he said, toneless, offering her the handwritten list. She took it quickly without looking at him. "He said they're chosen by some asshole called Pledge Three."

"Right." Scully's body language was restless. She said she wasn't an addict but for now she looked like one, shaky and unsettled, and he was certain that the first thing she would do when she got home was find those pills and take one. "Will you find what you can on him, then? Exploit this connection you have with Gray. I'll put Skinner onto Morris Bletchley, and I'll work on Dr Doherty."

It was a sensible division of their resources, so Mulder nodded. He didn't mention that he had a free pass to Pledge Three, but only if he handed her over to Henry Gray, whose motives he still questioned. Scully tucked her hands under her arms and shivered. He wanted to open his arms to her and run his hands up and down her arms to warm her up, but did not move. *Do you really not know?* No, he hadn't. Well, he had known he still had her on his side – the cross around his throat was testament to that, and she'd never asked for it back. Her loyalty, her trust, those he could never do without. But more? He'd hoped without much seriousness, assuming it needed to be earned back.

After tonight, he knew it would be hard-earned.

"I'll see what I can get out of the Johannssons when I find them, too," he promised. She just nodded. Tense all over. Vulnerable.

She hadn't meant to show her cards, either.

"I'm going to go," she announced, returning to the open door of Agent Colt's very cool car. "You'll handle this blood sample situation?"

She might have sounded cool and flippant, businesslike, but Mulder heard the little fault lines in her voice as she sat down. He nodded and held her door, ready to close it behind her.

"I'll send it to you?"

"No." She looked straight ahead as she turned the key. "I don't want anything from you." The engine rumbled loudly to life. "I just want you to leave me alone."

It was the last thing he wanted to agree to.

"Be careful," he said after a moment. "Someone's making lungless husks of troublemakers."

She stared firmly through her windscreen for so long without reply that he thought she would just ignore him until he walked away. Just as he stepped back, she reached for the door, and he closed it for her, disappointed. Another few seconds passed, and she wound down the window. The car was so old it had a crank. When it was down, he moved close again, leaning on the sill.

She still didn't look at him but said, quietly, "You, too. This Victor Pierce, who shut down Harlow's investigation into the Engels. I don't know who he is, or whether he's the problem, but he's asking after you. He could be just a name. Because whoever really wants you, Mulder: it's not the Bureau."

Finally she looked at him, but not at his face. Soft, tired eyes lifted to his throat. He gathered what she was looking for, and gently hooked a finger through the delicate chain so she could see he was
wearing it. He'd never noticed her looking before, and wondered why she wanted the confirmation tonight.

She turned from him and put the car into gear. There was so much he still wanted to say – the invasion, the Powells, Samantha, Gray – but he obligingly stepped back and watched her drive away. Soon her tail lights were specks. He sighed and stared up at the stars that had been his fixation for as long as he could remember, the stars he'd been watching in December, 2012, when he'd not noticed how his obsession was degrading what mattered most. Now she was driving away, again.

He'd built his world around her. He'd looked away, and when he looked back she was walking out, suitcase in hand. He would always remember the way his world had crumbled then, obliterated, except – a lifeline. He still held it in his fingers, the warm gold around his neck. Are you still with me? Like you wouldn't believe.

He inhaled the complex air of hopeless misery and sparkling renewed hope. He was always one for believing, or at least wanting to.
The tears didn't fall until she was almost halfway home. Then they wouldn't stop.

It was a much quicker drive heading back than it was battling the traffic out there, but that was out of one populated area and into another at peak hour. The way home from the Dunns' was late and dark and cold. And miserably alone, without even the comfort of her anger as a companion.

She tried getting angry again. He drew her out there for selfish reasons. He conscripted her mother. Her mother thought he was wonderful. He lied about her identity and compromised the legality of any evidence she might have wanted from that residence. He put her at needless risk, and even though she shouldn't be offended by that – hadn't she once appreciated how he didn't treat her like something delicate, how he always gave her the benefit of the doubt and assumed her competence? – he'd let them touch her, blindfold her and take her things. He had the nerve to check her out when he thought she wasn't watching. He criticised her for the medication.

And he was still in love with her.

It was enough to make her absolutely furious, but it seemed she'd run out of steam while she was blowing up at him, and now she was all out, shaky and left with an emptiness that could only be sadness. Tears ran salty tracks down her face and though she wiped the first ones away, too many followed, so she left her hands on the leather of Colt's steering wheel and felt the faint tickle as the water dripped from her chin.

Why did she let Mulder do this to her? This was her life – surely she got a choice in the matter? She didn't know what was left to try: pills, distance, ignoring the phone, cold indifference, and tonight, even open hostility. It hadn't made him go away. None of it did.

And the worst part was that she was glad, because she didn't want him to go away, and that was a problem.

If I am so bad for you, why the fuck are you here?

"Could you really not know, Mulder?" she muttered into the silence, checking her mirrors as she changed lanes to take an upcoming exit. Why the hell else would she turn up? Why would anyone turn up for him, year after year of the same old shit, unless they were hopelessly and tragically in love with him?
God, the *look* on his *face*. On his classically handsome, unexpectedly beardless, heartbreakingly familiar face. Like her admission had knocked the wind out of him. Like he had really not seen that coming. He was as stupid as she was. No wonder they couldn't escape each other. They were a perfect match.

Scully tightened her grip on the steering wheel and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment against the emotion, hardly as relieved as she should be to open her eyes and see her path was still perfectly straight with her lane. What Mulder did to her was overwhelm her. His effect was tumultuous and unavoidable. He couldn't *not* be himself, and she reacted to him and all his contradictions without fail. The memory of his hand finding hers in the dark and his hands steadying the ladder, steadying her, warm on her hips, and the look on his face when she said "Do you really not know?" and the widening of his eyes when that psycho bitch Mrs Dunn pointed her rifle at Scully's chest… The pendant still hanging around his neck even after three years… All of this fondness collided solidly with *He disappears whenever he feels like it* and *Where has he been the last two months?* and *He sells out your right to privacy and independence at the click of his fingers*, his stubborn insistence on being completely insufferable adding to the backlog of frustration he had left festering in her.

He was utterly consumed by his passions. His *obsessions*. And no matter how electric his touch was, no matter how intuitively he responded to her with only a loaded look, no matter *what*, she was always going to come second to his work.

*I'll be free*. Wouldn't she love to see that? But if that was what he wanted, why had he never said? His inexplicable behaviour sent her in mad circles.

And this was why she needed the drugs. To manage the overdose of emotion he generated, to bring her back to the plane of normal.

His influence was far from normal. *He* was far from normal. He was a trainwreck, and she'd *known that* from the first time she ever saw him. She'd still bought a ticket, claimed her seat and watched out the window for the crash.

So she deserved it all, really.

She'd run out of silent tears by the time she arrived home but the anxiety and conflict was still rampant inside her. She parked Colt's car outside her home and let herself into the dark house. She hadn't left any lights on. She was in too much of a rush to get to Mulder in case *bring stethoscope* meant he was hurt. Even though she'd convinced herself she was in no rush to reach him. Even though she'd deliberately placed two appointments between leaving DC and arriving at the Dunns' place.

The fact that she needed to place obstacles in her own way to him was so pathetic. It just showed how minimal and weak her resolve was. How minimal and weak she *knew* her own resolve was.

She slammed the door behind her and jabbed the push-button to lock it. She leaned back on it and hugged her briefcase to her chest like a comfort toy, closing her tired eyes and running a hand through her hair. It disappointed her to find her fingers shaky. Still.

Unwelcome, Mulder's voice spoke in her mind. *You can manage it*. She shoved away from the door and strode upstairs, annoyed to have brought his stupid opinions home with her. What did he even know? Nothing, as always. He had *no idea* what she dealt with and what she could or couldn't manage. If she could manage the anxiety, she wouldn't need the drugs, would she?

In her bedroom she threw the briefcase on her bed and hit the light switch on her way through to the en suite. Brightness flooded her unprepared eyes like it did on the Dunns' porch. This time the
familiar silhouette did not block it out to embrace her and she didn't get to melt into his warmth. His chest, strong and broad and hard, and his arm, looping easily around her like she was a doll, like she belonged there, holding her there for just a moment. Long enough for him to pilfer her badge. He was quick, clever – yet unbelievably thick.

He'd been gone for so long that when her pills had run out, she'd thrown away the canister and forgotten to replace it. It hadn't felt like an urgent priority. She still had a bottle at home, after all, and she'd replace the briefcase's stock soon enough.

Mistake.

You don't need the pills. She yanked the mirror cabinet open without looking at her reflection. It could only be depressing after half an hour of solid crying at two-thirty in the morning. Inside, her fingers scuttled through the bottles, knocking some out of their neat arrangements, knocking lighter ones out of the cabinet altogether. Where was it? Her heartbeat raced against the speed of her search. She had a bottle, she knew she did… I didn't know you were back on the pills, Scully. She didn't pause in her search until frantic fingertips closed on the familiar lid of the mood stabilisers.

Scully almost started crying again, so thorough was her relief. She backed out of the little bathroom, already working at the plastic lid. Mulder didn't understand. He'd never been in love with himself, or perhaps he always had, she couldn't say for sure, but he certainly couldn't appreciate what it felt like to simultaneously want him and know not to and despise him but still feel obligated to leap to his aid at no notice when she knew she couldn't keep up with him the first time around and to hate herself for loving someone who always made her second-best but still feeling the need to pretend not to know. For pretending not to know.

Because she did. She had. Of course she had always known. He wore the fucking necklace, didn't he? He came back without fail every few months of silence, even though she was cold and distant and ignored all his calls. He couldn't stay away. It was she, Scully, who told herself he was unreliable, unpredictable, hopelessly wild… But it was her story. She needed to hear it every now and then to justify why she couldn't undo her choice.

He would let her. She had seen it in his eyes, heard it in his playful jokes, felt it in his idle moments of contact as he gestured her through a door or handed her an instrument. He would have taken her back at any time in these past three years.

Even if they both told themselves he wouldn't. Even if they both told themselves she wouldn't ask.

She got the lid open and stared inside at the little pills. You're pissed off, but you can manage it. She wished she could believe him. She wished she could believe in everything like Mulder could. The way he had always believed in her… She should have been able to do the same in him, but 2012 and the invasion that never was had broken her faith in him, and she'd walked. To preserve her sanity. To show him what he was losing. To see him break and prove to herself he needed her.

She shouldn't have walked. He didn't break, not from what he saw. He never begged, never pleaded, so it was for nothing. She needed him, whatever else she claimed. And now he knew that, if he didn't before.

But… just that once, he was wrong, and it had shaken her all the way down to what was left of her
core beliefs. Mulder was *wrong* about the thing he believed in most. It shouldn't have happened but it did. He was wrong about the invasion, which meant their love had suffered for nothing, *they* had suffered for nothing.

It meant she'd given up William for nothing.

Mulder had to have had the same thought. *She gave away my son and it was all for nothing.*

The guilt and shame and misery and conflict and anxiety rose back up. *You can manage it. You don't need the pills.*

He was wrong. He'd been wrong before.

She brought the bottle impulsively to her lips and tipped it back. She didn't know how many she swallowed. Wondering whether she'd just overdosed was enough to make her stop worrying about what Mulder thought, for a moment at least. She returned to the bathroom and turned on the tap, sticking her head under the faucet for a long drink to move the pills that lodged dry in her throat. The stream of water washed over the various little bottles she'd accidentally knocked into the sink.

She straightened and stared into the basin without seeing. The water stayed on. She didn't care. The medication couldn't possibly take hold this quickly, but as always, the placebo beat the chemicals to their finish line, and she started to feel calmer. She breathed. Her pulse slowed and steadied. Her hands stopped shaking. *I'll be free.* The desire to cry faded. *What did you want me to do, climb into bed with you?* Everything became clear, and slowly she ran her right hand from her left knuckles up her wrist, tugging her sleeve away from her wrist to reveal the gold watch face beneath. *I thought about it.* She touched her throat, but the pendant was around another neck. *Do you really not know?*

He didn't say before because he couldn't. *I'll be free.* He wasn't free, not by a long shot, but he wanted to be. Before that, it didn't matter what he felt, what she felt – nothing could change until the job was finished. And he'd known that.

Why hadn't she? Why did the sadistic scientist in her need to torture him to get the evidence to prove what she already knew?

She was every bit as big a fuck-up as Fox Mulder.

Scully turned the tap off and looked at the mess before her. The bottle of stabilisers was still in her hand. It felt reasonably full, maybe half, though she didn't trust herself to look inside in case it became apparent just how many pills she'd taken. She knew it was too many.

She was so mad with Mulder for putting her at risk tonight. He had never flooded her system with pills. Would never. Since when was risking her life to an irresponsible mouthful of medication preferable to facing her relationship with Mulder?

*This is good. You don't need the pills. You can manage it.*

She couldn't. It all came back up. Her stomach rejected the overdose and she turned to the toilet just in time to heave violently into its bowl. She grasped the sides as she was sick, fingers of her left hand still gripping the offending bottle.

But it wasn't the bottle's fault. She was the idiot.

When it stopped and her stomach was empty, she knelt there a while. He'd been wrong before but that was out of anyone's control. Her dependence on emotional avoidance or suspension was within
someone's control. Hers. He was only wrong about it because she chose for him to be.

She made a decision and pushed away from the toilet onto her knees. She tilted the bottle in her hand; the little tablets tumbled out and fell into the water. When it was empty she tossed the canister into the bin. Then she got to her feet and started sifting through the bottles she'd left in the sink. Painkillers, sleeping pills, antidepressants, mild stimulants for those days when she just couldn't face life... She'd told him she wasn't an addict, and she wasn't, not to any one drug. What she was – she was weak. Dependent. In her fear of dealing with the weight of the emotions that lingered after her choices, she had turned to a string of avoidance strategies.

Strategies for avoiding the truth – that she was in love with Mulder, that she knew he loved her too, that he wasn't perfect, that she wasn't perfect, that she'd screwed it all up just as surely as he had, that she could have it back if only she weren't so fucking proud and ashamed, that she'd abandoned her son and Mulder had forgiven her but she couldn't forgive herself because Mulder had come back even though she'd given up hope he ever would... Because he always came back.... And she should have been strong enough to know that... So many hard truths, and so many strategies.

Now they all went down the drain, one after another, even Panadol and hay fever tablets. Anything that suspended the experience of real went. She knew it was bad for the environment but sometimes one has to put their own needs first.

In bed she lay warm and tucked tightly into her blankets, mouth rinsed, teeth brushed, the briefcase still on the other side where Mulder should have been, his watch still on her wrist. She listened to its soft ticking beside her ear as she snuggled down into her pillow and decided, calmly, objectively, that she was still absolutely furious with Mulder, and being in love with him was really no excuse not to be after the fuck-around he'd treated her to yesterday. She decided she wasn't talking to him, which was fine because she'd told him to stay away, but was prepared to work his case, with him at a safe, professional distance, and fell asleep distracting herself with documents from the briefcase.

He'd burnt some of the most offensive ones, including all mentions of the coroner Dr Doherty she was meant to be tracking down, but there was still plenty she wasn't supposed to have. Dr Gray's colourful history had been so cautiously covered up with a false monotone life. Two false monotone lives. More, perhaps? Mulder said he had been revived multiple times, killed repeatedly (repeatedly?! A bit far-fetched, even for Mulder, surely) as a means of keeping him under control so he'd work on the virus, turning it into the plague someone wanted. The plague whose test subjects included Gray's own daughter.

She couldn't rely on that claim. She needed to hear it from Gray. From Mulder, a former agent, it was only hearsay, and wouldn't stand up in court. He wasn't part of the investigation, either as an investigator or as an implicated person, so nothing he said bore any weight. But at least it gave her some places to start looking for original testimony and source material.

And he'd given her the list of upcoming victims, which was supposedly directly from Gray's hand, and was a big help. She touched it sleepily as wakefulness left her, noting with faint sadness that Austin Dunn's name was second on the list.

Knowing he was probably slipping away from life, even as she slipped into sleep.

She slept in on Saturday and woke to the February cold. Stomach growling and body rested and system clean of medication, she made toast and returned to bed to go through what she had. Scully rested a notepad on her knees and took careful notes on the documents she needed to destroy so she'd know what to look for through legal channels, and listed what she still needed to figure out.
It was a long, though vague, list. She needed to get onto it, and she needed Colt. She was brusque with him the day before. She was lucky, really, that he had stuck with her as long as he had on the thin scraps of truth she fed him. They both had secrets from one another but maybe she didn't need to anymore. She should come clean with him about some of her knowledge about their case. About Mulder. Professionally, anyway, so he knew where the information was coming from. Then they could get started on really digging into this case.

This case that Mulder claimed would free him. Which she would believe when she saw.

When her toast was done and her list was complete, she packed up and locked it all inside the briefcase. She hid it on the highest shelf in her wardrobe and covered it in blankets. Being organised and following that blow-up at Mulder, she felt strangely soothed and together. He was right – the argument needed to happen. It didn't make her feel any less pissy with him but it relieved the stress of carrying around all that anger without him being remotely aware. She felt much more prepared to take on the investigation, and much less paranoid about all the risks involved, than she had in a very long time. Maybe ever, since taking it on.

She felt comfortable driving to Colt's place to swap cars and ready to debrief with him properly, and planned her explanations out in her head on the way over. He should know where her experiences came from, the X-Files. He should know about the conspiracy that saw her repeatedly threatened with reassignment and repeatedly shut down, so he could understand her loyalty to her former partner and her faith in what he brought to her attention, and so he could understand her empathy for Agent Harlow. He really needed to be brought fully on board. It was time.

Time to be straight with someone she trusted, instead of hiding behind pills and other strategies of avoidance.

Scully had carpooled with Colt a few times so she knew where he lived, but had never been inside. She rang ahead but her call went unanswered, and he didn't reply to her message, either, and as she pulled up outside his grandmother's house, she briefly wondered whether he was there. But there was her little car in the driveway, and when she approached the big homely front door, she could hear the telling sounds of human activity inside.

Young human activity. Loud, active young humans, yelling and carrying on.

She knocked hesitantly, and heard through the heavy timber of the door the dull chorus of children's voices calling out to one another that someone was here. A few seconds, and despite an irritated adult's voice instructing not to, the door unlocked and a child stood there, holding it open.

"Hi," she said uncertainly to the boy, who was about ten. "Is Warren here?"

God, by the sound coming from inside, everyone remotely related to this tribe was here. And they were all talking at once.

Colt appeared over the boy's shoulder, taking the child's arm protectively to pull him back before he saw who it was. His expression of annoyance and wariness relaxed when he recognised her.

"Dylan, what did I just tell you?" he asked of the child. "I said don't answer the door without me. You don't know who it'll be. Hi," he added quickly to Scully, lesson in discipline administered. He tugged the boy's arm and tried to send him away, but already the child was answering back.

"Yeah, but I knew you were right behind me."
"Doesn't matter how far away I am; I answer the door. Now go and play." Colt pointed firmly back into the house. The child departed. There was a squeal from over to Colt's left and an angry retort that sounded like "That's what you get!" Colt pressed his lips together and leaned back inside to shout, "Hailey! Leave her alone!"

"She's cheating!"

"I don't care! Behave! For five freaking minutes," he muttered hopelessly, stepping out of the house a little but keeping the door ajar so he could still hear the chaos. He looked helplessly at his partner and she saw that he was exhausted. No wonder. He explained, "Babysitting."

"I can just take my car and go," Scully said, offering his keys. They could talk later—another fight broke out inside. He shook his head and took the keys from her.

"No, it's okay. I need to talk to you anyway. Just..." He pushed the door open and leaned through to yell at them all, however many there were. Sounded like a classroom, on a rainy day, with a relief teacher, with red cordial. Anarchy. "Hey! All of you, give it a rest! I'm talking!"

It didn't really help. The fighting stopped but no one seemed content to simply go quiet. There were various demands and complaints, from who he was talking to and why he was being so bossy today, to who was spoiling the game and when was lunch? Colt sighed and lightly knocked his head on the edge of the door.

"Children, the ultimate contraceptive," he commented. "I'd invite you in... but no one wants to go in there."

"How many are there?" Scully asked in wary wonder. He opened a hand to show five fingers, and held up two more from the hand holding his keys. "Why would you agree to babysit seven kids? Doesn't the Bureau pay you enough?"

"They're my cousins," he explained, pained. "My grandmother normally has them on Saturdays. That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about, actually." He looked hesitant, uncomfortable. Nervous with her. "She's in hospital."

Scully didn't know the woman but she hadn't come here expecting bad news, not after the tumult of yesterday, so when he said that, her stomach dropped. "Is she okay?"

"I- Are you?" He nodded at her face, eyes focusing on her chin, noticing something. She raised her hand to her jaw and felt along the bone. It was a little tender; she'd thought, looking in the mirror, it seemed a bit shadowed this morning. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I fell down a ladder," she said truthfully when she saw in his face that nothing wasn't going to cut it.

"At Quantico?"

"Not at Quantico. Don't worry about it. Your grandmother. What happened to her?"

"To be honest, that's what I'd like to know. I sort of wished you were there with me at the hospital, and I nearly called you, but I knew you were most of the way to Quantico," he confessed. "I thought you might be able to sort through the loving grandmotherly 'I'm fine' BS and the facts and tell me straight whether she's alright. She had a fall, and there's a couple of spinal fractures and a knock on the skull. They also ran an MRI because they think she blacked out." He paused again, biting his lip and looking very worried. "I... I don't know if I believe that."
"Why not?" Scully asked, and he looked back into the house again. He pushed the door all the way open and gestured at something. She leaned aside; she could see a warm and welcoming entryway, and a wooden staircase with a rug running up it.

"That's the staircase she fell down. My aunt found her at the bottom, unconscious. I got CSIs out here yesterday," he said. "They didn't find anything."

His obscure reaction to his grandmother's fall struck Scully with its extremeness. "Colt-

"She thought she heard someone," he said in a low, urgent voice. "That's why she was going upstairs. Then she says the floor came out from under her and she fell." He went inside and she stepped hesitantly after him. Mulder all over again, vague disconnected explanations and all. Colt knelt at the foot of the stairs and tugged loosely on the end of the runner. It came away and he looked up at her. Desperate brown eyes meeting bewildered blue ones. "When I was a kid my aunts used to pull this rug out from under my feet, literally, for a laugh. But this isn't a laugh, ma'am."

Scully stared at him as he straightened. "Agent Colt, what are you saying?"

He looked like he didn't want to be saying it at all. She saw in this moment how young he really was, and how old he'd needed to become in recent times to deal with everything he was seeing and experiencing. Some of that was her fault.

"My family thinks I'm fear-mongering," he admitted, "but Nana tried to call me while I was talking to AD Skinner. I ignored her call." His face twitched. "She wanted me to come home and check the house. When I didn't answer she checked herself. And she ended up in hospital. With a knock on the back of her head, just like if one of my aunts had pulled on the rug and she'd lost her balance and gone backwards. Ma'am," he appealed, dropping his voice again when the explosive noise of his cousins got closer to them, "no one else believes me, but I think someone was here. I think… it was because of me. Of us." He looked around to check none of the children could hear him. Scully could hardly breathe. Her fingers tightened into fists and she tried not to regret flushing all of her stress medication. "Is this what you meant? About the consequences?"

Oh God, Colt… Scully felt her shoulders sag in pity for him. She'd warned him but had hoped he would never really understand what she meant.

"The people we're up against have a tendency to strike us exactly where we least expect it," she answered softly after a moment. They shoot our sisters. Attack our grandmothers. Scare off our closest allies with ambiguous threats no one can substantiate. "That's not necessarily what happened. We might be overreacting."

The comment would probably have inflamed Mulder but it relieved Colt, who appreciated the we that confirmed he wasn't alone in suspecting. Scully crouched at the foot of the staircase and pulled experimentally on the rug. It was loose; she could see how children would unbalance each other for a prank. She could see what Colt was suggesting, see its merits as a theory. But "The CSIs found nothing at all?" Not that that should mean he was wrong, exactly: these people were known for making evidence disappear, and who knew who those CSI detectives really belonged to and whether the job was done properly? "What did the MRI say?"

Because the medical science wouldn't lie to them. If Colt's nana had some pre-existing condition that had caused a black-out, seizure or dizzy spell, the tests would surely have brought that to the light. Colt shrugged.

"Nobody's said yet. Why, should she have results already?"
Scully let the end of the rug slip between her fingers and turned her arm to look at her watch. Pretty and gold, he'd chosen well. It had been nearly a whole day since she sent Colt to Skinner and Nana took her fall, so about twentyish since her admission to hospital and then maybe eighteen hours since the scan, assuming the hospital prioritised it. Which, she reflected now, they probably did not. Scully was accustomed to having things done for her right now because she demanded it so, but also because when she needed results they were for a federal investigation and she had that weight to swing around.

An old woman taking a fall down the stairs? Scully stood. "What hospital?"

"Providence," someone else filled in dutifully before Colt could answer. A small boy, only six or so years old, slunk into the entry hall and affectionately pressed himself into his big cousin's side, smiling faux-shyly at Scully. "Who are you?"

"She's my friend," Colt told the boy, slinging an arm over his shoulder that the boy pulled on, trying to climb him, the playful attention-seeking of a small child realising he is on show. "And also my boss, so don't embarrass me, Bat-kid." But Colt still let the boy clamber onto his back to hug his neck tightly. Elsewhere in the house, another argument had broken out. Colt yelled for peace. He didn't get it.

"Warren's looking after us today," the boy explained proudly to Scully. "My nana's gone to hospital because she fell off the stairs. And she broke her back, but it's supposed to be in lots of bits anyway, my sister said."

He didn't seem altogether worried, but Colt cast Scully a meaningful look as he leaned down so the boy could slide off.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Scully said to the child. He watched her intently, with intelligent dark eyes reminiscent of Colt's, revelling in being spoken to by somebody new. His endearing attentiveness tugged at Scully's heart.

"Are you going to stay and play Monopoly?" he asked brightly. "Warren ran out of money because Shelby cheated and took all his houses, but you can just have his token. He's a shoe."

"Uh, no, I'm not staying that long," Scully said, disarmed by the cuteness of Colt's cousin. She'd not known her own son at this age – she hoped he was at least half this sweet with twice (or thrice… he was very friendly) this boy's fear of strangers. "Maybe next time?"

"Go and steal my money back from your sister, Jeremy," Colt urged, accepting another snuggle. The boy jogged off, yelling, "Warren's friend is joining my team for Monopoly tomorrow!"

How quickly a message could be misconstrued. But if Colt was right about the home invasion and the attack on his grandmother, that message was clear as crystal. Stop. Looking. It didn't need to be aimed at Scully's loved ones to be aimed as much at her as it was her partner.

"I'll call the hospital and see if I can get hold of the results, or at least fast-track the processing," she said in a low voice. "If the scan shows something, we can almost discount the idea of there being someone in the house. If not…" She left it hanging. "We'll sort this out, Colt."

Colt scrubbed at his short hair with his hand. "She's my nana. Who the hell comes after an old lady?" He inhaled deliberately, regaining control. "You warned me. I was arrogant, I didn't believe you. But I shouldn't be shocked. Doomsday plans, zombies, an alien virus, missing corpses in the Berkshires, Tan and Hofstetter dressing you down for trying to follow it up, all those calls to the requisition team that got 'lost'… Why would anyone conducting a conspiracy this massive shy
away from pushing one little old lady off her stairs?" He chewed his lip. It looked like he'd been doing that a lot. "They were trying to get to me, and they got to me."

"If our theory is right, and this wasn't an accident, then this was just a warning," Scully said, trying to be gentle. "She wasn't seriously injured. It was just enough to scare you."

"It worked." He looked up at her, obviously embarrassed, obviously upset. "I know it's shitty of me to back out on you like this when I pushed you so hard to pick up the case, but I think I need to take a break from it. From our work. I don't think..." He faltered and dropped his gaze. She saw the conflict and empathised. "I don't think I can do this anymore. I'm so sorry." His eyes flickered about, trying to find a point of interest to fix on – a shoe, a tile – but unable to come up to hers. "Don't be mad."

She stared at him, and he couldn't meet her stare. This was what he wanted to tell her. He was folding. He was out.

She was on her own. Again. Colt was through. It was the worst blow they could deal her in her investigation without taking her badge or imprisoning Mulder. And that fact made her certain – this was not an accident.

Colt still couldn't look at her, his brow furrowed anxiously over his warm eyes. She recognised the terror in him, the terror of disappointing your mentor and friend in a situation as dire as this and the self-loathing that came with it. She knew it, had lived it, lived it every day. She knew the crush of letting Mulder down and seeing the disappointment in his eyes. Sell-out, drug-taker, fed. She knew it annoyed him, her weakness, her dependence, her resumed allegiance to the bureau that had shunned him, and he had never much held back his opinion in those departments, regardless of whether he actually said it or not.

So Scully heard the words Colt didn't say about himself – disappointment, coward, child – and expected to react the way Mulder would to her, because no reason she gave for backing down was ever good enough for him, the martyr he was... but somehow couldn't bring herself to be angry.

Perhaps nobody knew better than she did how many good reasons there were for backing out of the web of conspiracy she and Mulder had spent their working lives carefully unpicking themselves from.

"Warren," an older boy, in his early teens, complained, walking in without any indication that he noticed the tense atmosphere of the entryway. "You said I couldn't invite Brendan over."

"Go away Lachlan."

"How come you can have a friend visit?"

"Because it's my house," Colt retorted incredulously, rounding on his cousin, "and because I'm an adult, and because this friend is picking her car up. Say hello to Agent Scully from the FBI, Lachlan, or I'll have her arrest you for being a turd."

The boy seemed dubious on Colt's threat but unwilling to test it, so he moodily greeted Scully and sulked back the way he came in.

"They're a pain in the ass but they're my family," Colt said as he watched the boy leave. "I can't do anything that puts them at risk. If someone's using them against me... Please don't hate me."

The plea affected Scully, and she found herself reaching for him without thought, touching his arm momentarily.
"No, Warren," she insisted, withdrawing her hand self-consciously when she saw his eyes alight with surprise on the point of unexpected contact. "I don't hate you. I don't blame you. Your family has to come first. I hope you know I would never ask you to compromise that. Not for work. Not for anything."

"I'm a shit friend. A shit partner. No wonder you didn't want me. I understand if you want me off your team after this."

Scully managed a small, wry smile. "I didn't want anyone. You changed my mind. And you don't get off that easily." When Colt frowned, she explained frankly, "You're still my partner, Agent Colt. No more questionable underground investigation, I understand – I won't involve you in anything beyond the job that appears on our official schedule each day, but I still expect to see you hacking into my computer log-on first thing Monday morning when I arrive."

"It's not really hacking…"

"Displaying a freakish ability to recall strings of numbers, then. Kelley isn't getting you for Counterintelligence," Scully said firmly, "and I'm not looking another fifteen years for another partner. So you're staying."

Colt regarded her for a long, loaded moment, and in it she was aware of how not-young he was, despite not yet hitting his mid-twenties. Here he was, trusted with the responsibility of seven children. He'd trained in the armed forces and had done a tour of Afghanistan. Maybe killed people. He'd made it through the FBI training academy and gained a place in her office, and against all her willpower had impressed her with his unexpected maturity. She had treated him like an equal, or near enough; treated him like someone she could confide in and trust, and that confidence and trust had now proven too heavy.

And now he was saddled with the burden of wondering whether his choices had hurt someone he loved, and Scully felt deeply for him, because that was a very adult burden and she wouldn't have wished it on him, ever. She had liked him exactly as he was, half enthusiastic child, half wise old man, the result of a child raised in a household of old people and adult children. Today, she couldn't really see that person in his eyes. She hoped he wasn't gone.

"You're a good friend," he said finally, "and I'm really honoured to have you for my partner, you know. Thank you for understanding. Will you be alright? Will they come after you next?"

"They might," she admitted, trying not to think about it. Trying not to think about how easily she could be waylaid or silenced as an army of only one, her best alliance now severed. She should have known it was too good to last. "But if you and I appear to resume normal business at work and no longer regularly meet to go over the case, if someone's watching us, it'll look like we're done with it. They might believe we've both backed off."

"The case is too big for you on your own," Colt said, concerned. "Will you bring AD Skinner in?"

Scully shrugged lightly. "Not if I can help it. He's more useful to me with his job than without it."

"He said something similar."

"You spoke to him." Not a question, a redirect. "How did that go?"

Colt whistled softly, a sheepish expression. "You have scary friends, ma'am." He listened momentarily to a fresh argument that had broken out in the next room over hotel prices. Ignored. "Thanks for not calling ahead, by the way. He torched me. But he's going to look into-"
"The case," Scully interrupted him smoothly. "The details are no longer your concern."

He nodded, reluctant. She could tell he hated this, hated backing down from a challenge he had set himself and hated reneging on an arrangement he had made in the interests of his own staunch personal ethics. She remembered so many instances of Mulder behaving the same in the same situation, forcibly grounded by impossible circumstances, miserly and frustrated.

"I'd ask about your trip to Quantico, or not to Quantico, but that would be counter to the whole point of this conversation, wouldn't it?" Colt asked rhetorically, and scratched his head with the keys he still held. "Where the hell were you to fall down a ladder?"

"I'm sure I don't need to remind you that your silence on this matter remains utterly imperative," Scully mentioned. "If you ever said anything…"

"I would never do that to you," he said quickly, seriously. "Never. You have my sincerest word, ma'am. I'll never tell a soul what we've seen. Or not seen. If you need me," he said now, hesitant. "If it gets to be too much… I'm just going to be at the next desk, okay? I'm not gone. I just need… some time. And some reassurance that maybe I'm overreacting." You're not. Even if the scans say Nana's fall was an accident waiting to happen, you're not overreacting to fear for the people you love. Not in this game. "But I'm not going anywhere, and if you need me for anything, I'm there."

So sweet. "Do you have my car keys?"

"Uh, yeah," Colt agreed vaguely, still obviously depressed with himself, and he turned away to go into the living room. Into the den of the noisiest children Scully had ever heard. She followed with trepidation. All seven of them were in here, strewn all over the lounge furniture. The littlest boy, Jeremy, was still adamantly playing Monopoly, the board central on the coffee table, but he was the only one. Two girls were scrabbling with each other for a handful of paper Monopoly money, the eldest boy sitting on an armchair right beside them with his attention glued to his phone screen and apparently not a cent of mind available to be paid to the girls and their loud fight. Two other boys were watching TV, arguing over the remote control, and one little girl was lying upside down on the couch, reading a dog-earred copy of Monopoly instructions, looking for all the world like she might be in the most peaceful place known to man until she found what she was looking for and yelled to the other girls who was wrong. Not a single child seemed roused or bothered by the noise or activity of any of the others, unless they were in the middle of a current quarrel.

Madness. How did Warren Colt turn out so calm, sensible and together out of an environment like this? Or was this the boot camp where he learned to argue as effectively as he did?

In this environment, he was no different to any of the children. He stepped over the legs of the boy on his phone and leaned past the two fighting girls to sift through the Monopoly money and Community Chest cards that had been scattered there, all without seeming to notice the mayhem he was in the middle of. He found the keys and came back to Scully.

"Not a scratch," he promised, handing them over. She smiled, ears ringing.

"Likewise."

He smiled back, tentatively, and admitted, "If you get any speeding tickets or parking infringements, just tell me and I'll pay them. I was… in a rush, to get to the hospital."

Scully didn't voice that his car might have been flagged visiting a family of angry anarchists. She was sure no one had followed her in the rumbling Corvette, but if they had, it was because someone was tailing her, not Colt's car, so there was no need to mention it. It would only stress
him out. They stepped back into the entryway. It did little to soften the noise.

"I don't think anyone will take another shot at her," she said quietly as they moved outside. Colt stayed in the doorway where he could hear the specifics of the arguing. "If this was an attack and someone wanted it to be worse, it would have been worse. This was the desired effect. I'll go and talk to the hospital now. What's your grandmother's name?"

"Nina Giancarlo," Colt answered obediently. "She kept her maiden name. That was considered very radical in her time, she says."

Scully reflected on her own life choices as a woman – not marrying, a smattering of semi-serious but deeply intellectual relationships with older colleagues, having a child out of marriage, giving that child her surname instead of his father's… giving that child away… and was glad to be living in a time when she was allowed to make those choices, even if some of them she would take back if she could.

"I'll call you if I learn anything," she said finally, letting her keys slide from her palm to her fingers, ready for use. "Otherwise I'll see you on Monday. Good luck… in there," she gestured back into the house as she went to her car. Colt nodded despondently and watched her leave.

He felt so guilty, she could tell. She unlocked her door and paused with her hand on the handle. "Don't forget," she said, feeling like it needed to be said, "if you ever need anything… I'm only at the next desk, too."

The grateful and relieved smile she got in return was totally worth it, and on her way over to the hospital she reflected mildly on the failure of the weekend. Fighting with Mulder, losing Colt. She had come here planning to come clean to her partner and was now leaving without having divulged anything. She'd gone to Virginia because she'd assumed Mulder had a good reason to call her there and had left with no evidence of what she'd seen and had lost her kit, hundreds and hundreds of dollars' worth of standard equipment. But she wasn't upset. Not like she should be, reaching for a bottle of pills to displace the barren hopelessness.

The pills only postponed the hopelessness. They didn't fix anything. They were best in the drain.

It was still hopeless. It was always hopeless. But, head clear, she could see the slivers of silver around the edges of the uniform grey clouds. Hugh Kelley thought she was uninvolved and was looking at Gavin Engel and Mulder for suspicious activity. She'd made positive contact with Natalie Harlow. Walter Skinner was waiting in the wings, an unconnected task on his desk that could help her immensely. Henry Gray was alive and reaching out to Mulder, giving him a hit list, displaying a willingness to help the investigation along. Wendy Dunn had given her a name to work with, Morris Bletchley, and might provide Austin's virus samples for analysis. Warren Colt might have been identified as an ally but he'd been appropriately read as a small player and had been knocked out of the game with no harm done to him, for which she was incredibly grateful, and with only minor damage done to somebody he loved. It could have been worse. If Colt's involvement had really scared the conspirators, he'd be more forcibly removed.

He'd called her his friend no less than four times today, and she realised with gentle contentment that though she hadn't said it in return she'd meant it. She didn't have a lot of true friends, couldn't afford them, but Colt fit all the criteria. She cared about him. He cared about her. He was willing to keep this secret for her, even though he didn't want to be part of it any longer.

Even her mom liked him. Bonus.
The staff at Providence Hospital were unwilling to talk to Scully about specifics regarding their patients, but Dr Ames, a surgical colleague from many years before, spotted her standing at the information point on her ward and stopped to say hello. She sent the orderly on her way and took over the discussion.

"Like he said, I can't tell you anything specific without a warrant or an initial order for the scan signed by you," Ames apologised, searching the computer once Scully reiterated her connection to the patient, "but I can say," she said now, straightening and reading off her screen, "that the MRI was performed last night under a high-priority order, and the results have been delivered to the patient earlier today. Does that help you?"

Scully didn't bother messaging that news to Colt – it was pretty unhelpful to him, but it set her mind at ease knowing at least the test had been run, because the last thing Nina Giancarlo and her family needed was for her case to end up stuck in the hospital's backlog.

Her last errand for the day was to stop in at her mother's house and return the phone Wendy Dunn had pulled apart.

"I can't get it working again," she apologised, handing it over and striding inside. "I suppose that's what you get when you plant your cell on your daughter and leave us both to the mercy of Mulder's mysterious escapades. No one gets out unscathed and this time your phone paid for it."

Margaret Scully wasn't appropriately upset about the destruction to her personal property. She locked her front door and trailed after her daughter, trying to get the phone working without any discernible worry.

"You saw him? Was he alright?" she asked. Scully shrugged and didn't look back, attention on the kettle she was filling.

"His usual jackass self, you mean? I suppose so." She replaced the kettle to its cradle with a bit too much force and remembered to breathe through the irritation that rose in her at the very mention of him. You're pissed off, but you can manage it. "You can blame him for the mess your phone's in. It was his paranoid contact that pulled it to pieces looking for spyware."

Maggie didn't care. She put the broken cell on her dining table and came into the kitchen after Dana.

"I'm glad he's alright," she said. "I was worried, after that message. I knew he must have really needed you, and I knew it must be serious if he couldn't contact you directly. I hope no one saw me slip you the phone."

"Yes, Mom, you were very covert. Mulder would be proud." Scully didn't bother adding that Mulder wouldn't have contacted her directly even if it wasn't serious, or how annoyed she was about her ex and her mother teaming up to send her on secret missions. She was sure that part was conveyed in her tone.

"Did you talk things through?"

Maggie was relentless. Scully got teacups out and shook her head. "We fought."

"Dana," her mother sighed, disappointed. "It's been three years."

"And it'll be a bit longer, Mom," Scully sniped tightly, fetching milk from the refrigerator. "It's not as simple as 'I love you' or 'I want to be with you'. It's never been that simple. And Mulder is..." Difficult. Painful. Predictably unreliable. Stubborn. Gorgeous, back to looking sane and intelligent
and alluring with his clean-shaven look. Infuriating. Stupid. No worse than I am. "It's complicated."

"Then why did you go?"

It was Scully's turn to sigh, and she put the milk down. She turned to her mother and leaned back on the kitchen counter. She'd planned on coming clean to Colt today but hadn't been able to. There was so much her mother didn't know, couldn't know, for her own safety.

"Mulder and I…" It was always hard to articulate these things in a way that didn't endanger anybody or let Maggie too close to the shadows Scully worked against. "We're… in deep. With a job. And with… each other," she confessed unwillingly, casting her eyes down to the floor like Colt did when he thought he was letting her down, embarrassed. "It's all extremely delicate and if anyone knew I was working on this case, with him, a lot could be at stake. And even if we both admit there's something still there."

"Which there is," Maggie insisted, but she was frowning with concern at Scully's confession.

"Whatever we might want from each other, there's this job and the whole history that comes with that, and it makes us both into people we don't like. So it's complicated."

"Are you in danger?" She noticed the bruise. "Did someone hurt you?"

Scully shrugged her shoulders in a small motion.

"Not right now. Give it time, and please, stay out of it, Mom. If anyone ever asks, you haven't heard from Mulder since before we broke up, and as far as you were aware, I'm too angry to be in touch with him. Just plead ignorance."

"Alright, alright," Margaret agreed, waving away her daughter's worry to replace it with her own. "But Fox knows what he's doing, doesn't he? It might be dangerous, but he would never let anything happen to you."

"When has that ever made a difference?" Scully asked tiredly. What Mulder would let happen to her had not included the laundry list of workplace injuries, mishaps and tragedies that had befallen her since she met him. Generally, what happened to her was not within his control.

She had never had any real fears about what he would let happen to her. Obviously, at no point in their relationship, even when they were fighting or estranged or newly introduced, would he have let anything awful happen to her in order to get ahead with a job. But he'd always walked a fine line in what he'd risk happening to her, assuming all the while that he knew better or that he could prevent a serious outcome or that he had the power to swoop in at the last moment and pull her out of harm's way. Which he sometimes could and so would. But at times most inconvenient she had found that his power to do this fell short of his own expectations of himself.

She had to look out for herself. He wouldn't have let Wendy Dunn fire on Scully but he must have known it was a risk and he'd allowed the situation to escalate to that point before he stepped in. What if the grieving woman had still pulled the trigger? That range, both Mulder and Scully would have been down, one new bloody hole in their midsections. A matched pair.

Ugh. Being in love with him certainly didn't excuse him his reckless stupidity.

Maggie was fretting a bit now.

"If it's that serious, perhaps you should both leave it alone," she said.
"Again, it's not that simple, Mom."

"Again? I can't lose you again, Dana." She crossed the space of the kitchen to take her daughter's hand. "Last time you told me you two were 'in deep', Fox disappeared and you gave away my grandson, and the two of you had to go underground for years. You can't do that to me again."

Scully squeezed her mother's hand, thinking of Colt and his nana. The fear of losing the people who mattered the most had driven her new partner from her and her crusade; it had driven Scully to and from the crusade many times over the years; it had driven her to send her son to grow up with a stranger to call 'Mom'; it had driven Wendy Dunn to threaten and try to scare off the only people who wanted to help her in her direst moment. It was a powerful motivator.

Mulder's list, Gray's list, was in Scully's pocket, and she drew it out to read it. She could back out right now. Colt was gone. Mulder was at a distance again, where she needed him personally, but not professionally. The case was much too big for her. It was cowardly, and she knew it was morally questionable to ignore evil when you were able to do something about it, but the logical thing to do was let it go. Reduce risk to those she loved.

Doing something morally questionable when he knew better in order to reduce risk to the person Henry Gray loved hadn't kept Rebecca Johannsson alive. Ultimately, his creation would have been used to kill her anyway, when its plague form swept the planet at some worryingly indeterminate point in the future. Was that why he'd gambled with her life?

Sometimes there was a degree of acceptable risk to those you loved in order to protect them from a greater evil.

Which she'd always understood in Mulder's actions when he risked her. He wouldn't let anything happen to her any sooner than she would let someone hurt her mother or Colt would have let someone push his nana down the stairs. But all three had taken the risk when they started down this path.

Colt got to back out. He hadn't understood the risk; it wasn't fair to expect him to see this out. He was a victim swept up in Mulder and Scully's lifelong war. Mulder didn't get to. He claimed he would be free once this was done but that was such bullshit. It was never done, and he was never free, and he never got to walk away.

Neither did she.

"I'm not doing anywhere this time," Scully said. She pocketed the list once again so her mother wouldn't read the details and began to pour the tea. She had a list and a lead she'd agreed to follow up on: Dr Doherty. "Can I use your computer? I need to look up some names."
Steam is just water molecules in an excited state, zooming away from each other at speed. You can see it when you lift the lid on a teapot and the steam puffs out in a little cloud, but quickly expands and disperses as it rises up, up…

By the time it reached the height of the classy white clock hanging on the wall, the steam had truly become its essential self, just molecules, invisible to the eye and assimilated back into the air around. Sixty-Four replaced the lid on the teapot. Winter was about done but the Hosts liked the idea of green tea and its supposedly cleansing qualities, so it was the drink of choice at meets like these.

The whole Family of three-hundred and twenty only met once a year but held smaller, more intimate meets of four to ten members all throughout the year, always in lush, lovely settings like this boardroom on the top floor of the Clayton Office Building in Alexandria.

"The Worldwide Family of Hosts is a generous organisation," Luther Fenchurch was saying in a bored tone. His hands were soaking in shadow dishes of warm water scented with essential oils, and a pledge much prettier than Sixty-Four was working back his cuticles and filing his nails. All he needed was for someone to hand-feed him grapes and he'd be the perfect picture of greed and privilege, a far cry from the notion of generosity he boasted. Either side of him, other Hosts were indulging in favourite mortal vices – Jim Helens received a shoulder massage while Petra Kepler coloured in and Dan Tannenbaum smoked. They got to be themselves here, and do what they liked for an hour, before they had to return to their very busy, high-profile and high-intensity professional lives.

The table was long, with curved sides so that everyone could be seen and heard. No one sat at the head. Not yet. Sixty-Four didn't have a seat at the table. Typically, no pledge did.

Today's meet was an exception.

"I appreciate that, Mr Fenchurch," Pledge Thirty-Nine grovelled, voice slimy and desperate and eyes twitchy in a carefully still face. "I have always appreciated that about the Family. It makes me pleased to serve."

"As it should," Fenchurch said indignantly, "which is why I can't understand how you could bear to let us down like this."
Thirty-Nine held onto his poker face with effort, but allowed himself to look around the table in fear. Sixty-Four began laying out the black ceramic Chinese teacups, leaning between the Hosts unnoticed to place the cups. She didn't dare acknowledge Thirty-Nine, and neither did the nail technician pledge or the masseuse pledge or the scribe pledge standing in the corner with his tablet. The Worldwide Family of Hosts was a family. The pledges belonged to that family but were no family to one another. If he'd let them down, that was his problem.

"I don't understand," Thirty-Nine lied. Dr Helens stretched, and his masseuse paused.

"When was your last target met, pledge?" the psychiatrist asked.

Thirty-Nine's lips pressed together, in part from frustration, in part from fear. He said, "I have experienced some setbacks, I admit. My schedule was put out but I am confident I can catch it back up."

"I'm not so confident," Fenchurch confessed. "Your mission appears to have been compromised."

"You assured us that your skills as a transient citizen would allow you to address each of our goals without detection," Kepler reminded the pledge. She leaned slightly aside to let Sixty-Four place the last teacup, the faintest hint of acknowledgement. Pledges were nothing. "You also insisted that your connection to one of the targets would be an advantage. This does not seem to be the case."

Thirty-Nine was one of the rougher pledges. He was even less suited to the Hosts' scientific agenda than she was, but he was one of those pledges whose prior life made him useful to the Hosts in other ways. His purpose was clear, and the right of other pledges to jeer at him was reduced. There was one chance any pledge had of being anything more than the nothing they were right now, and it seemed obvious that when that opportunity came up, it would be one of the stronger pledges, one of the useful ones, who would snatch it.

Who would break free.

It wasn't going to be Sixty-Four, though a part of her felt it really should. What was she, what had she ever been, but a runaway? Barely nineteen, she had no life experience or skills to offer the Family, and out in society, nobody took her seriously as the adult she'd become. The name she was born with should have carried weight but to the Hosts, who did not understand such things as family pride or prestige, it might have been little more than coincidence, a phantom. What she was before was gone now, and anyone who'd known her would sneer at her new life.

Sixty-Four had at times been jealous of pledges like Thirty-Nine. This was not one of those times.

"I successfully delivered to each of my future clients, including Austin Dunn, up until this week," Thirty-Nine defended. "My most recent target has broken a few of his patterns-"

"He's been tipped off," Petra Kepler interrupted. She kept working on the page of her colouring book. "That's why he's not where you expected him to be. That's why you can't find him."

"As I said, you've been compromised," Fenchurch reiterated coolly, wincing when his manicurist nicked him. She apologised demurely and he turned back to Thirty-Nine. "How could anybody know you were coming unless you have a leak?"

Hardly breathing, Sixty-Four withdrew from the table to collect the teapot from the side table underneath the clock. How indeed? She'd been on edge for weeks, waiting for this meet, fully expecting to be called on the way Thirty-Nine had been, and she'd almost died of terror when she'd been selected as one of the attendants. They know, they know! But so far no one had paid her any
mind, given her any clue at all that she was a subject of interest.

"No one knows," Thirty-Nine claimed, trying to calm the room. Dr Helens leaned back into his masseuse's hands.

"Fox Mulder does," he said, perfectly calmly, nullifying the pledge's placating. Thirty-Nine frowned.

"Am I supposed to be afraid of him? He's just a legend, a has-been."

Sixty-Four excused herself softly and leaned between Fenchurch and Helens to pour their tea. Steam rose, at first a compact white cloud, then thinner, clearer, as it dispersed. She focused on that instead of her fellow pledge. How could she look at him when she was the one who should be in that seat?

Dr Helens was not moved. "He made contact with two of your clients last week, both following your delivery. He's complicated both transactions for us – the family of one we have is now asking uncomfortable questions, and he prevented us from sealing the deal with the second client altogether. They destroyed the payload. Burned the body."

"It didn't take long for Mulder to catch up to you, and now overtake you," Tannenbaum noted. "It seems his gift for transience and hiding in plain sight surpasses even yours, pledge. Perhaps we should offer him a job."

"Four of your upcoming targets have gone dark," Dr Helens said, voice stony. "You haven't even begun your sales pitch on some of them – they weren't scheduled for weeks yet. Somehow, pledge, Mr Mulder has gotten access to your client list, and he's working through it quicker than you are. Can you explain that?"

Steam. Sixty-Four poured more tea, remembered to breathe, remembered to swallow the build-up of nervous saliva that flooded her mouth. Focus on the steam. She could explain it, objectively, but actually explaining it would be much harder. Thirty-Nine was being hung out to dry because she had followed a sudden reckless instinct to ally herself with Henry Gray. She knew it was dangerous. That in itself was simultaneously thrilling and horrifying. Every Thursday as she drove Gray to The Lion's Share, her knuckles were white on the steering wheel, knowing it was her life if she was caught, knowing the risk far outweighed the likelihood of reward.

It wasn't worth it.

But then it was. He turned up. The legend himself, and she saw him across the restaurant with her very own eyes. He was older than she'd expected, but really, she hadn't known what to expect, and from her vantage point of the car she'd watched him waiting for Dr Gray, finishing off his milkshake, pay his bill… and sit back down when Gray arrived. She'd seen him holding the menu she'd left – white-knuckled – with Gavin Engel, and felt a strange thrill to know that he was holding something she had also touched. She'd watched the list change hands and felt the same thrill, this time weighted with lead. It had taken less than twenty minutes for her and Dr Gray alone in the mobile lab to find that work order among the work station's deleted files and transcribe the names and addresses; it took a split second for Gray to give it to Mulder.

"If Mulder has tapped into our operation," Thirty-Nine said staunchly, "it wasn't through me. My work has been nothing but professional. I'm not your leak."

"The client list is decided by Pledge Three, and that is delivered straight to you with no middle man, if I understand correctly," Fenchurch said. He lifted a dripping, soft hand from the bowl of
warm oils to lift his tea to his lips. He blew on it gently. "I try not to get involved so forgive me if I'm mistaken about your processes. The Family expects that pledges will take care of these sorts of matters internally, so it's a great disappointment that those of us at this table should need to hear about such menial and unsavoury tasks at all."

"That's right. The original system hasn't changed. Pledge Three sets the work order. I make the deliveries."

"An efficient system," Kepler commented. "Two pledges. How could it go wrong? You say you're not the leak. Are you then implying that Pledge Three is?"

Thirty-Nine fell silent and his eyes flickered around the room to the other pledges. None of them met his gaze. He was completely on his own, and laying the blame on Pledge Three couldn't be more ill-advised. If it worked and got him out of trouble with the Hosts, it would only land him in deeper trouble with the worst of the pledges.

He wouldn't survive it.

"I'm not implying anything," Thirty-Nine said finally. He laid his hands on the table before him. "All I know is, I'm not your guy. I have done nothing to compromise my mission."

"That you know of," Tannenbaum said coldly. "Clearly, you've done something. If you can't identify what that was, the leak can't be patched. Fox Mulder has caught your scent and will follow you to the ends of the world. The Worldwide Family of Hosts can make use of such a pledge in only one way."

"You have set us back immeasurably," Dr Helens added. "We hereby sentence you to exile."

"What?!" Pledge Thirty-Nine demanded, pushing himself upright by his hands on the table, shocked. No one at the table mirrored his expression and no one was startled by his sudden movement.

"Be glad it isn't worse, pledge," Dan Tannenbaum stated. "We relieve you of all work orders and release you from your service. Go," he added when the pledge tried to argue, "before we change our mind."

Sixty-Four finally allowed herself to look up at her sacrificial lamb. Pledge Thirty-Nine was dumbstruck and stood in place for a very long time. No one tried to prompt him on or offered him any condolence.

This was her fault.

Thirty-Nine took his time leaving, and when he did, it was heavily. His feet dragged in disbelief and the door swung shut behind him. The scribe abandoned his post to lock it behind him.

"Let Mulder chase him," Dr Helens said unconcernedly in the exile's wake. He closed his eyes and let his masseuse get to work on some knots in the base of his neck. "It'll give the man something to do while we get re-established. Keep his attention off what we're trying to do. Pledge," he barked suddenly, and all four in the room jumped. Sixty-Four realised he was addressing her, and her heart nearly stopped. They know! "Refill, please."

Remembering to breathe, Sixty-Four stepped forward and silently poured more green tea into the cup he held out to her.

"How long can we expect that to distract him?" Fenchurch asked. "This Mulder has a talent for
"That he does. And his voice is too loud in too many influential ears for it to be viable to simply have him killed. We're working on a contingency plan, if he can't be shaken," Tannenbaum said, putting the last of his cigarette out in the tray before him and reaching for the folder he'd brought with him. He flicked it open. "Some of the early stages have already gone into motion. There are many levels involved, and it's really a last resort due to the resources required… But if he oversteps, irrevocably, we have a system in place that can silence him within six hours of implementation."

Sixty-Four stood back, hands warm on her teapot. They had a plan for ending Fox Mulder. Not killing him, but permanently grounding him and his crusade. It made her empty stomach turn. She'd dreamed of meeting the legend.

There were ways of killing a legend without killing the man.

"Excellent," Fenchurch said, more warmly than anything else he'd said since sitting down. The pretty pledge working on his hands lifted one out of the water to towel-dry. "And the other one? The doctor?"

"Pledge Three worked a few contacts at the Bureau and above to quash Dr Scully back in December," Jim Helens answered without interest. "The last I heard, it was quite effective in shutting her down before she made a start."

"I heard different," Petra Kepler said stiffly. Helens opened his eyes. "Contacts of mine at the Bureau caught onto some interesting searches being run by her new partner last Friday. I enacted the usual protocol."

"Is she a threat, then?" Fenchurch demanded, irritated by the contradicting information. "Pledge Three said we didn't need to concern ourselves with Dana Scully."

Everyone had an opinion on that.

"She's an ally of Fox Mulder. I think that gives her the potential to be a threat."

"Are we trusting Three on this?"

"He knows them better than we do. This is why we have pledges."

"Friday? She's out of the game since December and kicks back in the same day he resurfaces?"

"He must have contacted her. Put her onto it."

"As far as my contacts can tell, Agent Scully has not been actively investigating down this path for the last two months," Kepler reported once the muttering stopped among her colleagues. "This last week she's been quiet, clocking in and out right on time, no questionable searches from her or her team. She got the hint, I think. But this sudden interest on the same day that Mr Mulder breached our operation with or without the help of Pledge Thirty-Nine seems to confirm Pledge Three's claim that Agent Scully is harmless – provided she's out of Mr Mulder's influence, and provided she's controlled."

Tannenbaum cleared his throat and lightly touched his folder, closed again. "Our contingency plan
ensures a division is made between the pair, and proposes that she be considered expendable in only the direst of circumstances. Her profile isn't so high that we couldn't make her disappear if we needed to, but her history with Mulder might be of use to us, and we can't predict how he might react to her removal. Plus of course," he added, clearing his throat again, "we may still need her for other purposes, due to her history with us."

Sixty-Four returned quietly to the table to refill the cup in front of Kepler. She had little interest in Dana Scully except that she was the ally of Fox Mulder, and was rumoured to be his former lover and (possibly) the mother of his child. There was no proof of it, of course, but that was what was said. In meeting with Mulder, Dr Gray's ultimate goal was to meet this scientist who had autopsied his daughter and prevented her from joining the legions of other dead test subjects lying in stasis. Dr Scully was difficult to reach, safe in her Bureau office and under constant watchful eyes. Mulder, they said, was her gatekeeper. If you could get to him, he could get Scully to you.

But Sixty-Four didn't want Dr Scully. She didn't need to go that far along the chain of whispers. When your coat needs mending, why go to all the trouble of tracking down a tailor just to ask for the address of another? Fox Mulder was her golden ticket. He was the real deal. He could help her, make this association with Gray worthwhile, free her from this endless life of thankless servitude.

If the Family had plans to neutralise him, the risk in helping him was higher, but so too was the risk in not helping him. Abandoning Gray and Mulder now could mean they would shut Mulder down before she got what she needed, and then neither would be of any use to the other.

She couldn't let that happen.

Mulder had to succeed, in one of his tasks, at least. She had to fulfil the next stage in Gray's plan, and get Mulder to the Johannssons, all without tipping anyone here off. It was a delicate, breathless operation.

"Alright," Fenchurch said with a sigh, waving away his manicurist and glancing up at the clock. Time was nearly up for this meet, and right at the end, Sixty-Four had heard from previous attendants, they always extended an invitation to a special visitor. "No further action at this time. Ms Kepler has eyes on the doctor and Mr Tannenbaum is ready to launch on Mr Mulder if necessary. How far has this leak set us back?"

"Our timeline is barely affected," Dr Helens said calmly, in contradiction to how he'd played it to the now-exiled pledge. His masseuse also finished up and retreated to the edge of the room. "We can continue as almost as planned. But the exposure of Thirty-Nine's indiscretion may cost us in currencies more valuable than time."

Dan Tannenbaum picked at his nail irritably. "I was really looking forward to seeing that Dunn character in our lab."

"No good deed goes unpunished," Helens soothed. Kepler put her pencil down and closed her colouring book on it to listen. "His sort think they're battling for the greater good when they come after corporations like yours. In his mind, your clients attacked his livelihood when they poisoned his farm and to him, you and your firm made it possible for them to get away with it, so he feels justified in damaging your offices, not realising how short-sighted his perspective is. It's not their fault. They're... flimsy."

Sixty-Four cradled her cooling teapot in her hands. Flimsy. It was what the Hosts thought of them all. Pledges were only slightly less pathetic than the rest of the population. It was hard not to take that view of yourself on board when you heard it as constantly as she did.
She had to escape. She couldn't keep this up; she couldn't live as a pledge for the rest of her life.

"And as I'm led to believe," Luther Fenchurch mentioned now, settling more comfortably into his chair for the final phase of the meet, "the delivery is a very painful manner of death. It's disappointing to have now lost two subjects to this Mulder and Scully pair, but if your greatest satisfaction was to come from seeing Mr Dunn underfoot, rest assured, that's where he is."

The Hosts followed his example and contentedly fell silent, leaning their heads back in their big leather chairs and either closing their eyes or gazing aimlessly at the ceiling. The scribe obediently went to the light switches and turned them all off. The late daylight still peeped between the blinds of the boardroom, illuminating the space golden.

The bodies of the high-powered, high-profile men and woman slowly went limp, looking for all the world like dolls left behind at a child's tea party when said child loses interest and runs out to play on the swings. Sixty-Four sensed what was coming, and though she saw no change in her Hosts, she felt a chilling tingle pass through her at the thought of what they were doing. What this was.

It only took a few minutes. Dr Helens came back first, twitching and blinking and breaths falling out of their pattern for several beats. The others sat up after him, momentarily disorientated.

How would Fox Mulder act if he knew who the Hosts really were, what they were planning and how vulnerable they were for a couple of seconds at the end of their meets? She shuddered at the forbidden thought and shuddered again to imagine herself as the one to tell him.

"That's sooner than we thought," Kepler said worriedly. "Do you think he can be convinced to wait?"

"Not by us," Fenchurch answered. None of them looked as composed as they had a minute ago.

"We'll have to be ready to receive him," Helens said, ever calm. "And we'll have to ensure him the most superior Host we can offer. Nothing but the best. Are we not a generous Family?"
XXIII - Scully

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. It's just, you know, if FOX isn't playing with them right now, does it really matter if I take them out of the box for a little play? I always put them back before they notice.

Author's Notes: Sorry, sorry, all that. Long story short, my manuscript came back for my final approval, and I insisted on going through it line-by-line. Took forever, being a 160k-word novel, but the result is quality and now it's done. In the meantime, I have written very little of How The World Ends and have felt frequently bad about that. I really wanted to be able to give you guys something in the next couple of days but the promised Mulder chapter is at least a week off completion, so I hope today's sudden hit of inspiration satisfies in the meantime. Sorry it's rough. Thanks to everyone who has been reading and especially to those who have given feedback. You are my favourite type of internet human :)

It was the last place she expected to see him.

The street was alive with colour and motion, red and blue and white anywhere she looked, stars, stripes, laughter, voices, shouts, balloons. The presidential election race brought with it its very own circus. That circus had the potential to dissolve into a brawl very quickly, and law enforcement officers were plotted throughout the crowds that cheered and jeered intermittently at the car of the arriving candidate.

Some fifteen yards away, Colt caught her eye over the heads of a few excited older women who were waving cardboard signs with messages of support for the candidate's conservative position on various politically heated topics. Scully's whole office had come off their main duties today to be here – such public gatherings were to be expected, and were hot targets for acts of domestic terrorism. And run-of-the-mill violence, too. The voices of her team mates were a constant stream in her earpiece.

"No action here."

"Argument breaking out between a group of supporters and an activist over in my area, by the corner. The uniforms need to some help containing it."

"Coming to you."

"Guy with a backpack looking suspicious, heading to you, Agent Colt…"

"I've got eyes on him."

"No, I’ve got him," Scully insisted suddenly, on instinct, spotting the offender in black slipping through the crowd behind Colt. She started toward the shadowy figure, stark against the brightness. His hood covered his face and hair, and his scruffy backpack was oddly shaped and overfull, maybe carrying a bomb, settled between strong shoulders. He moved easily through the masses despite his height and size, and she had no trouble keeping him in her sights as she slid
between groups of people. Colt had also started in the same direction; he was slower, too tall to share her agility, too polite to shove his way through. "Stand down, Agent Colt. Hold your position."

"I can't see you, ma'am," her partner said in her ear. She shrugged a shoulder even though he couldn't see her and kept her determined pace, away from the street, back toward the buildings that lined it.

"Then he probably can't, either."

The crowd was thick and loud, getting steadily louder as the candidate's car pulled into view and strolled slowly along the closed-off street, but as the people surged forward to see, the target stepped free of the tense mass at the back and soon, so would she. Scully dropped her pace to avoid revealing herself, keeping a barrier of a couple of sightseers between him and her, and saw the man, moving faster now that he was not constrained by the crowd, heading north along the footpath. She tried to keep him in view without being seen but quickly lost ground on him.

"Update, Agent Scully?" Desmond, one of her agents, prompted. "Do you need back-up? None of us can see you. Do you have eyes on the target?"

Did she? He was about to disappear from her line of sight, damn it, and she couldn't squeeze between a tightly-packed group of angry university students to keep up… But just short of cutting behind a family of screams and big balloons and placards, he suddenly stopped, like he'd caught a scent. He turned. He pushed back the hood and looked straight at her.

"False alarm," she said breathlessly, stepping free of the screaming crowd so she could see him properly. This was the last place she'd expected to see him. All the awful things she'd said to him the last time they'd spoken flitted through her mind and fell to the wayside of importance, superseded by the warm flutter at the base of her stomach. "Watch the crowd. I'll circle back."

"But ma'am-" Colt started to argue, but the rise in noise from the crowd broke the magic spell and drew Mulder's warm dark gaze from hers. He started to back away. Like a hook in her abdomen, a burst of desperation pulled her after him.

"Watch the crowd," she ordered sharply, breaking into a run when Mulder cast an anxious look back at her over his shoulder as he reached the corner. Two agents and two uniforms were distracted, still trying to manage a quickly escalating shouting match, but Scully didn't join the efforts or even slow down, heart slamming in disappointment when Mulder vanished around the corner of the building. No, no… She shouldn't want to even see him but the prospect of him disappearing on her wrenched at her insides.

She swung around the corner away from the street-facing crowd, frustrated by her inescapable inability to keep up with him ever, and crashed straight into him. Always a collision waiting to happen, really, weren't they? He'd stopped here, just out of sight, on the very fringes of society while the mainstream faced in the opposite direction screaming their opinions on a number of politically-selected topics at one of the smiling public figures chosen by faceless less-public figures to keep everybody squabbling over the same tired debates while dirty hands made unexpected moves in the shadows. It seemed like the perfect metaphor for Mulder's whole life, and it was here that she met him at high speed, here where he caught her shoulders to stabilise her and pivoted on the spot to swing her to a stop, and here where she found herself facing back the way she came, the world in soft focus in the background, Fox Mulder in the foreground with a faintly surprised smile
on his face.

She shouldn't feel that insistent pull of wanting in response to the same look of hunger in his eyes, not after the way they'd left things in Virginia. She should hit him. Tell him to let her go, to fuck off.

"What are you doing here?" she asked instead, incredulous. His smile relaxed a little in reply. He was clean-shaven, the way she liked him best, and, contrary to what he believed, dressed the way she liked, too – not in a suit but in jeans and leather jacket, black shirt pulled across a broad chest. He had no business looking this good.

"What I'm always doing, Scully. Looking for extra-terrestrials. Thought I stood a decent chance here," he added cheekily, jerking his head back over his shoulder at the chaos behind him. She ignored the parade, the voices in her earpiece.

"But last week," she argued, thinking on the terms they'd left things on, leaving her words hanging when Mulder only frowned and reached for her in loving concern. Boundaries were never a thing with him; if she'd wanted to pretend their relationship had any, she should have implemented them right back at the start, before affectionate touches to the cheek and brushing her hair back and supportive hand-holding became the norm. "We said…" How blind had she been, all this time? His hand settled on the curve of her face, thumb brushing her cheek. Mulder wasn't like this with anyone else. She'd told herself this was his version of friendship because wondering whether he meant it came with implications. Consequences. Like falling in love.

"Last week, what?" Colt demanded through her comm. "Where are you? It's all going to shit."

"They need me," Scully said. Why did her voice sound weak? She was never weak. She'd made a point of it.

"Forget them," Mulder urged, voice and eyes and very presence completely mesmerising. "I need you. Come with me."

No explanation, no please. Just the flash of something a little wild through his warm eyes, the tightening of his hand on her shoulder. He needed her. And worse than that, he wanted her. As if that had ever really been in question. As if she would ever refuse him.

"Agent Scully, do you have eyes on this situation? Can you get to us?"

She reluctantly leaned to the side to see past him, his hands dropping from her shoulder and face. The situation she'd run straight past. Had anyone seen her? The candidate's car was rolling past and the argument between supporters and activists had broken into a brawl – everyone was suitably distracted.

"Need back-up at the corner!" Desmond called into her ear, and a few other agents confirmed their responses, their voices mixed with the incoherent shouts of the crowd that encased them all. They would converge on this place in a moment. They would see her, wonder why she wasn't helping. She should be helping.

How, though, when she could barely help herself?

Hand catching hers, Mulder tugged on her, and she willingly abandoned her duty to follow him down the dark, narrow alley between the corner building and the block of dingy old apartments beside it. They jogged through dank puddles and the tatters of old newspapers, running parallel to the crowded parade street and its noise. Mulder easily jumped over a felled garbage can blocking
the alleyway and reached back for Scully to help her over it. The voices filled her ear but her heart was in her throat and she didn't have the imagination to make up a reply.

She stepped up onto the unsteady side of the rusted cylinder, clutching Mulder's hand, and prepared to hop down, but he tugged playfully, compromising her balance. Before she could fall, he scooped an arm behind her thighs and lifted her off the garbage can, already turning as she slid down. Her breath was knocked from her when her back struck the brick alley wall. He leaned his weight into her, pinning her right where she spent her whole existence, between him and a hard place, unable to escape him or do anything to affect the various immoveable barriers they came up against.

His forehead fell lightly against hers and he mouthed, "Sorry," as she gasped back her winded breath, and he had her captivated again, eyes that were simultaneously chocolate and hazel and warm grey locking with hers with the intensity of nearness. Chest pressed against his, heart thudding to the rhythm of his breaths on her face, whole body hyper-alert to the movement of his hands slowly up her body and the tingle in her lips missing the contact of his, she felt dizzy with pent-up desire and barely heard the calls for her attention in her ear. Mulder was close enough to hear, too, but didn't break his gaze from her, eyes searching hers with a look of determined wonder – wonder to have found himself in this situation, determination not to waste it.

She couldn't agree more with that sentiment.

"Agent Scully, it's getting serious over here," Desmond's voice yelled in her ear. She tried to focus on it; heard the sounds of pain and violence around him. Tried to care. "We need you. What should we do?"

Mulder's hands were at her elbows and ran up her arms to her shoulders. She shivered with anticipation as his fingertips rounded her shoulders and his eyes flickered to her mouth and clung there like he couldn't pull his attention away. They'd said horrible things, the both of them, last time. She'd left him three years ago and she'd tried to cut him out of her life. He'd refused to let her walk away from the job that had made and ruined them, and blatantly disrespected her attempts to start afresh. Disrespected her in the way he strung her along, threw her secrets around like currency, expected her to do his bidding at the drop of a hat.

But he was sorry.

Distantly, the sound of gunshots and screams came, and in her ear, over the calls from other agents for everyone to hit the deck, her new partner's voice came, worried for her.

"Agent Scully!" Colt yelled in her ear. "Are you okay?! Where are you?"

In the alley, none of what was happening on the street felt real. Scully dug the speaker out of her ear and dropped it at her feet. She was right where she wanted to be, right where the universe kept dropping her. Mulder's gaze was hot on her face, lustful, his hands sweeping up her neck, and, free of her responsibilities to the rest of the world, she reached for him.

The moment the earpiece struck the cracked, wet cement, his hands closed on her throat. He was stronger than she, and his grip was iron, holding her in place millimetres from his lips. Denied. Then his fingers clenched tighter, and it wasn't only the satisfaction of his kiss she was denied. Her heart skipped a beat, disbelief flashing through her.

She clutched at his hands, trying to pull his fingers away as she gasped uselessly for air. Not a breath got down her windpipe. She tried not to be scared. This was Mulder. He mustn't realise, he mustn't know, must think a little oxygen deprivation is sexy but doesn't realise… She tapped
urgently at his arm to draw his attention to what he was doing. But he only continued to gaze at her with that oddly curious look of his, oblivious.

Her lungs started to burn and the edges of her vision went dark as her oxygen-starved brain processed less and less of the input her sensory organs gave it. She opened her mouth to say his name but there was no room for air to pass by her vocal chords. What was he doing? Why? His hands did not budge, even when she struggled, even when she kicked, even when she struck out at him with her hands. She remained trapped in his grip, pinned between him and the brick wall, right where the universe kept dropping her and right where she kept circling back to.

This wasn't him, it wasn't, couldn't be… A shapeshifter, maybe. A dozen frantic possibilities she would never admit to believing in flew through her mind.

On the ground, the voices of Colt and the rest of their team still called for her. They could have helped, if she'd gone to them when she knew she was meant to. But she had chosen right, hadn't she, because she had gone with her heart, and because she trusted him with that heart and her life and everything else…

He was strangling her. Mulder was choking the life from her with his own hands. The facts suddenly hit her and panic caught up a moment later. She was going to die in this dirty alley, and Mulder was going to let it happen, and no one was going to be able to stop it because she'd followed him so far off the beaten track and not told a soul where she was going, and left everyone who could have helped her distracted and worried.

"Scully?" Mulder asked, ever curious, ever attentive, except impossibly ignorant. "You alright?"

She was dying, starved of air, and he was all she could see. Still she desperately mouthed his name, breathless, wordless, to no result. His inhuman fingers tightened once more, crushing in, and she felt the snap of her tendons and then her vertebrae cracking under the pressure–

"Mulder!"

She sat up gasping in the dark with her own hands on her throat, struggling against twisted damp bedsheets, heart slamming erratically against her ribcage as she drew the sweetest, deepest breaths into her burning lungs against the insistence of her impulse to sob. She pushed blankets and pillows away from her and pulled herself into a sitting position against the bedhead, hugging her legs against her chest and grabbing blindly for the bedside table. Her hand closed on her cell phone and she jabbed at it several times before she got it right and illuminated the screen, casting a harsh but small light around the bedroom.

She was alone, at home, in the middle of the night.

Just a nightmare… Just a bad dream. It took some time for her to calm down. Her pulse raced and her lungs felt tight with emotion. Her whole body shook and she was covered in a thin layer of sweat. She held her sticky pyjama shirt away from her chest and blew on her hot skin, trying to bring her temperature down.

What kind of awful dream was that? Tentatively Scully ran her hands over her throat, remembering with painful clarity the betrayal of her lover's hands, crushing her life from her. She didn't tend to dream so vividly, her logical, waking mind reminded her, and she berated herself now for the stupidity of her dream self. She shouldn't have worked herself into such a panic because she should have known it was just a dream. Didn't she notice in the dream the way she just appeared at the parade without any memory of how she got there and without any awareness of anything beyond that moment? The conspiracy, the fact that she and Mulder couldn't be seen together? Didn't she
question the surrealism of the event, or the way the alley materialised out of nowhere, or the way Mulder's clothing changed from hooded, backpacked baddie into the attire she most liked to see him in? So obviously a dream.

The hopeful desire had felt pretty damn real.

"Ugh," she groaned, embarrassed despite there being no one else around, letting her face drop into her hands for a minute. She should have known it wasn't real because she'd exercised absolutely none of her usual discipline, and she'd run off with him as if that were something she would ever do while her team was being shot at by extremists and as if that were something he would ever ask her to do. And he'd made no attempt to disguise how badly he wanted her, which was not in his pattern of behaviour these days at all, but was clearly an expression of her subconscious wish for him to be honest and open and easy and simple and available. Clearly, just a dream.

But, if that first half of the dream was an expression of her desire for him, what did the violent ending represent? She thought back through the symbology of the nightmare. What was the message? That ending up in dark places with Mulder was a result of her own choices, that when she followed him she was choosing to abandon her other duties, that he was going to be the death of her and he wouldn't even know it? Go find someone else to bother, nightmares – none of that's news. But what if there was a deeper, darker meaning? A warning? The images were frightening and shook her faith in her placement of trust in her former partner–

"Oh, please," she muttered irritably, catching herself mid-thought. She shook her head to clear the absurdness away. She was not in the practice of analysing her dreams as if they bore any significance to her waking life. Looking for meaning in dreams was very Mulder, very psychology major, and she was a scientist. The dreams were just a processing glitch in her brain's attempts to file and organise her experiences, thoughts and memories while she slept. They were not prophesies. That was dumb.

Her skin was tacky with sweat and her hair was stuck to her forehead. Gross. She ran her hands back through her hair to let the cool night air reach her scalp. Her fingertips found the back of her neck, where Mulder's cruel dream hands had wrung the life from her dream self and where the ghost of fear in him still lingered.

Was it her imagination, or was the back of her neck hot? She ran a fingertip over the small scar just below her skull. It was definitely hot, but, she reasoned, so was the rest of her. She'd worked herself into a panic through the nightmare, that was all.

The light of her phone screen kept the room dimly lit, and now she flicked through its menu to her contacts list. She found M. F. Luder and stared at the number.

He would answer, she was sure of it. He'd said so when he first got that SIM card, and she'd believed him. This number's just for you, and I'll keep it charged so you can always get hold of me. I promise. But she'd only tried once to call that number, and it hadn't connected. Out of range. That memory still clung to her, and kept her from hitting 'call'. Because what if he didn't answer? Then what was she meant to do? Better not to call at all.

Besides, Scully reminded herself as she got out of bed and changed out of her sweaty pyjamas into something cooler, what would she say if she did call? Hi, I just had a really confronting dream about you, and now I don't know whether to invite you over or be afraid of you.

Which was even more stupid than any of the dream, of course, because she wasn't going to do either. She was still too mad with him for being right about the drugs and the emotional avoidance and for all the disappointments he'd dealt her last week to want to invite him over for a long time –
the desire to even kiss him in the dream should have been the trigger that alerted her she was living a dream – and, obviously, she was never going to be afraid of him. It was just a dream, and nothing about Fox Mulder scared her, no matter what the dream might have suggested about her subconscious.

Though she did fall back to sleep with her hands covering her throat.
XXIV - Mulder

Russia and the United States have spent half their history being *almost* at war, it sometimes seems.

Gerard Dixon knew it better than most. His collection of questionably obtained government documents and his uncanny ability to garner more on request from any of his shadowy paranoid contacts made him Mulder's first stop in understanding how 'the Russians' played into this giant puzzle.

"Well, they're here, obviously," Dixon said blandly, voice muffled. His upper body was wedged into the roof cavity, copious waist filling the manhole that led to the ceiling space, booted feet splayed unsafely on an A-frame ladder. The refit at Stockton University was coming along swimmingly, and this particular lab was almost complete, meaning that again, he and Mulder had the space to themselves. The other techs and tradespeople on site were in other buildings or outside smoking. "You'd be crazy to assume otherwise. The United States has spy cells planted in the former Soviet Union, feeding back – naturally they have their boys here, too."

Mulder hadn't considered it before but realised it didn't surprise him. He stood at the bottom of the ladder and looked around the swiftly unfolding lab. His experiences with Russia had been less than consistently friendly and his visits to their land likely hadn't endeared him and his name to their government any more than he'd endeared himself to his own. He thought with disdain of Alex Krycek, the persistent pain in the ass that man was, and then of Major Dragomirov, who'd risked his life (and probably paid with it) to put Mulder on his current life path. He thought of the transcript that proved his own government had spies placed in Moscow that had witnessed and recorded his conversation with the major, and knew it was ignorant not to presume Russia was positioned and performing in the exact same manner.
"Makes sense," he commented. "But how does parallel covert military action tie in with the Worldwide Family of Hosts?"

Dixon stepped down one rung on the ladder to extricate his bulk from the square hole in the ceiling and offer Mulder an incredulous stare. "What about that creepy cult doesn't reek of covert ops? They helped sanitise Harvey Newman before he could blow the whistle on whatever the government is hiding – and it was definitely connected to Russia." He went back into the ceiling space to continue his work with wires. "Either an unsanctioned operation so dirty that it would equate to an international scandal they don't think they could ride out, or some uneasy alliance over some bigger secret. Or some middle ground between the two."

"So no one knows?"

Do you really not know? With effort he banished the keenly remembered words from his immediate thoughts, but, as he'd found every day since he said them and heard them thrown back in his face, the words and the feelings that lingered in their wake were never too far away.

"I don't know, but there are definitely people who know," Dixon disagreed. His hand appeared, squeezed uncomfortably between his plump stomach and the hard edge of the ceiling opening, a blue cable clasped in his fist. "Here." Mulder hurried to climb the ladder to reach it but slowed considerably when his first step on the lowest rung made the whole frame sway dangerously. "Whoa, careful," Dixon chastised, and Mulder moved with more caution, stretching his arm and shoulder to reach the cord so he didn't have to go any higher. He pulled on the data cable, and Dixon fed it down to him, talking again, "And those of us who don't know for sure still have some solid theories."

"Do your theories account for extra-terrestrial activity and alien abductions?"

Dixon smirked; this was where their beliefs diverged. "Somehow I doubt the Russians are handpicking Russian-American citizens and asking them to risk charges of conspiracy and treason to spy on aliens. Okay, stop pulling," he directed, starting to back out and glancing down the dangling cord to the pool of blue cabling at Mulder's feet. "That should do it."

Mulder cringed as the ladder swayed and tentatively caught it in both hands. The instinctive act was in essence a repeat of last week at the Dunn property, but the view of Gerard Dixon's backside descending toward him generated entirely dissimilar feelings to the blindfolded, hyper-sensitive experience of Scully's long-admired ass bumping into his chest and sliding down his body, her hands resting over his as she stepped down from that rickety ladder into his arms. He was mindful today to release the ladder and move away before Dixon got that far down.

"When will Wi-Fi be up and running in here?" Mulder asked. Functional on the rest of the campus, the range didn't yet extend this far from the main buildings, so in order to get a stable internet connection in here, there were two choices: personal data, or drag one of the data cables laid out in the ceiling space for the connections that would soon be made in this building through a manhole down into the lab and hook it up to your computer. This was Dixon's plan, and he insisted it would be a better connection and harder to trace – especially once one took into account all the other safeguards, both hard- and software-based, the overweight tech had prepared. Mulder didn't entirely understand what Dixon had excitedly explained he was going to do to the telecommunications in the building, but knew that it was meant to enable them to contact one of the technician's more paranoid friends.

"My company is nearly done with our initial fitting-out. Then all the other trades can get in here and do their bit. I'm contracted to come back sometime next year to install the wireless. April, I think." Dixon walked the cable over to his laptop, set up on a plastic-wrapped lab bench, and
plugged it in. His thick fingers deftly worked the scratch pad, opening and closing programs, and flew across the keyboard typing passwords with surprising speed. Mulder moved to stand beside the younger man with a view of the screen. Using a VPN, Dixon was able to hide his geographical location and Internet Service Provider address from anyone trying to trace their communication. A box on the right-hand side of the screen let them know that their internet was being routed through Latvia, which was suitably obscure for their needs. "Landline is safer anyway. You know," he said, slowing down and casting a look at Mulder over his shoulder, "I was surprised when I saw your message. After our last conversation... Well, I thought you wanted to do this case alone? Just you and your fed girlfriend?"

"I knew you couldn't be trusted to do as you're told and stay clear," Mulder said lightly, getting a pleased smile out of the other, but inside he felt a twist of guilt. Yes, he'd discouraged Gerard from chasing this particular beast because it was dangerous, and yes, he would have preferred to have attacked it without the overeager technician's further involvement. Having very possibly, very permanently fucked things up with Scully, however, he was scant on trustworthy allies, and a fool in his position didn't get to be choosy and couldn't take the luxurious road of protecting everybody by refusing their help. Dixon didn't want his protection and he had resources. So, reluctantly, Mulder was here, endangering him further.

"You were right," Dixon confessed with a sheepish smile, fingers tap-tapping swiftly. "I found heaps more, and the others did, too. Holly found more money, and Dusty Underscore Kevin... It's a big mess, isn't it, this web between Dr Helens and Harvey Newman and the CIA and you?"

"It's a mess," Mulder agreed. He'd spent the past week since parting ways with Scully in rural Virginia chasing down the names and addresses on the list he'd photographed with his phone. It was indeed messy to have to approach strangers and warn them that there was a distinct possibility that they'd been targeted by a shadow government corporation wanting to test biological warfare on them, but, luckily, the sorts of people Dr Gray's employers were targeting were reasonably open to hearing Mulder's side of the story. A lawyer, a journalism student and a retiree, without a lot in common, until they heard they might be under scrutiny.

Troublemakers. The web their stories were helping to form between key names like Harvey Newman and The Worldwide Family of Hosts and The Clayton Building was getting messier, stickier and tighter with every word they shared.

"Your name's been coming up more and more," Dixon told him, trying to sound casual despite an undertone of discomfort. "I always see your name around, you know, just not... this often. Have you pissed anyone off lately?"

Cringe. Other than Scully? "No more than usual."

Dixon shrugged. "Maybe it's nothing. But when I got your message and you asked about Russian involvement, it was fate – I'd just sold a stack of passenger manifests between Russia and Syria to this particular contact. He's in with a group of undercover Russian sleeper agents here on the east coast, trying to get proof that Russia is instigating the war in Syria. It's his personal vendetta, lost a lot of his extended family in the bombings, and he comes across a lot of other data of interest in his digs. If anyone knows, it'll be him. It's ringing," he added, stepping back so Mulder could stand beside him in view of the webcam as the video call tried to dial across numerous diverted connections.

"What's his background?" Mulder asked quietly while it dialled, and dialled, and dialled. Dixon shrugged again.

"Originally? PR. Got sick of covering up after liars and traitors."
"And I can trust him?"


The video call connected, and they were face-to-face with an unfamiliar young man of Eastern European descent. He was gaunt, narrow-cheeked with bulging big eyes, though these were keen, bright and intelligent. The wall behind him was hung with a sheet to hide any distinguishing features of the room he was in, and no doubt his ISP was as misleading as theirs.

"Thanks for meeting us, Sayid," Dixon said brightly. His cheer was not reciprocated.

"You're late. I can give you two minutes, Gerard," the other said brusquely, checking his watch. He jutted his sharp chin at Mulder. "I read up on you. You look better in your I.D. photo. Younger. Tidier."

Mulder forced a smile at the stranger's abruptness. He didn't sound like a public relations expert. "Time isn't always kind. Gerard says you might be able to help me," he said, gesturing at his acquaintance, getting straight to the point with awareness of his two-minute window of opportunity.

"That depends on whether you can help me," Sayid replied dourly. His American accent was only slightly warmed by the undercurrent of a Syrian one, hinting at a Western upbringing but in a bilingual household. "Nothing in this world is free, Mr Mulder."

Dixon had stepped back, like he was going to give Mulder the lead on this conversation, but now he frowned and moved back in line with the other.

"You didn't say anything about payment, Sayid. That isn't fair to bring up now."

Sayid shrugged delicately. "That's your oversight, and not my problem. Mr Mulder? Can I trust you?"

"I'd like to say yes, but I don't know what you're going to ask me to do. I don't even know if I can trust you."

"You can trust me if you can assure me you can deliver a professional, confidential service without spilling the details to that fed you fuck." Sayid paused long enough to make it clear that he knew he was being offensive and was waiting for Mulder's reaction. Public relations, huh? There might have been other factors behind his career change than the alleged ethical conflict. Mulder refused to even blink. He would be in better stead to negotiate with Sayid if he confessed he no longer fucked said fed, but Dixon was right there, and he'd expressly mentioned last time they met that half of Mulder's supporters only supported him because they thought he fucked a fed and she hadn't thrown him to the kerb yet. Sayid continued, "If you can't promise that, our conversation is done. If you can, we're in business."

Mulder said evenly, "Then I guess we're in business."

"I can't afford for the United States government to get involved in any way, Mr Mulder."

"I'm not the United States government. What do you want?"

The man on the other end of the internationally diverted video call glanced at his watch. He hesitated, then pushed away from the computer he worked at. He didn't stand; he rolled back in a wheelchair. Beside Mulder, Dixon stood straighter. He hadn't known.
"I need an errand run for me and my usual runner is starting to look suspicious so I'd rather reach outside my immediate circle. As you can see, my days of running are over."

"I want to know what the connection is between the Worldwide Family of Hosts, Harvey Newman, Henry Gray, the Russian and United States governments… and the abductions," Mulder stated boldly, gauging the contact's reaction to his request. "What kind of errand do you want run in return for that?"

"I can direct you straight to the foremost Russian spy cell in the country," Sayid said casually, rolling forward again. "All I need in return is for certain information to accompany you. I've got their ear, you understand, but this can't come from me or my cover's blown. So I'll tell you what I know, and send you on to them – and they can tell you more, if they don't shoot you on sight – and you deliver the news and leave my name out of it. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like you'll be talking fast for the remaining thirty seconds of our appointment."

"This guy, he really might shoot you, so we're clear. And if he does, I don't know you."

Dixon was getting uncomfortable. He fought government conspiracy with a keyboard. Actual bullets were too much. "Don't kid around, Sayid. You wouldn't send him on a job that dangerous."

"Why wouldn't I?" Sayid asked blandly. "He worked as FBI. They sent him on much worse missions." He levelled his gaze on Mulder. "Are you in or out?"

"I thought we were counting the seconds?" Mulder replied.

Sayid did indeed talk fast. "Mikhail Levin's a U.S. citizen by birth, owns a car wash in Richmond, Virginia, and pays his taxes but he spent summers growing up with his Pa in St Petersburg and did his undergraduate abroad there. He's an unofficial Lieutenant Colonel to the Russian military – no records, don't bother looking. He'll be at work tonight and I want you to knock on his door and tell him the Americans are onto his man Lenkov. That he spoke to the wrong people and they've got the beginnings of a scent. Do not drop my name, or I'll-"

"Where do I say I got the information?" Mulder interrupted, keenly aware of their time running short. They'd wasted all this time establishing what he would do for Sayid and he still was no closer to learning what he came here for.

"You fuck a fed. Surely you can come up with something convincing. Say you overheard it or something – you heard about their cell and realised they could help you if you did them this favour."

"Who exactly is onto Lenkov? Do you have an agent's name, a division?" Mulder asked, wanting to ensure he had his facts right. Sayid shrugged.

"You decide. Lenkov's clean – I need him sent home to be able to enact the next move in my case, and I need it done asap," he said. He glanced at his watch again. There couldn't be more than twelve seconds left. "Levin can tell you more, once you have his trust, but I can tell you this: They're exactly what you think, Mr Mulder," Sayid said frankly, surprising the other with the subject change. "Invaders. The Russians knew because they shot down a reconnaissance flight and interrogated the survivors, but they kept the details to themselves. Harvey Newman was liaison to an undercover team of operatives based illegally in Moscow tasked with digging out what the Russians weren't sharing. Got more than he bargained for. The Worldwide Family of Hosts is a front and what you find behind it will be ugly. Use the Russians before I use them, because after that they'll be out of reach. And keep the feds the hell away. And do it tonight. Good luck."
The connection was cut right on the two-minute mark, apparently the exact length of Sayid's trust in internet security. Dixon exhaled heavily, a loud *phew* to convey his overwhelmed state. Mulder scratched an eyebrow as his thoughts swirled, seeming scattered to the uninitiated but to his practiced mind, organised, gravitating to a core, fundamental truth: that he was right. *They're exactly what you think. Invaders. The Worldwide Family of Hosts is a front. It will be ugly. It was true, all of it, it was true, and here was someone to confirm it.*

And right on schedule, her voice was there in his head too, dry and condescending, just the way he liked it apparently, since that was always how he imagined her sounding. *Confirm is a strong word.* She didn't have to be nearby, or even on speaking terms with him, to remind him that the second-hand word of surnameless, traceless stranger Sayid from the internet meant less than nothing to the case she was struggling to build. If Mulder couldn't prove it to a court, it wasn't evidence he could use to convince Scully back, either.

If that was even still a possibility at this point. He tried not to think about it.

"You... You don't think he meant that, do you?" Dixon asked, clearly taken aback by the whole discussion. "About getting *shot?* Sayid has never talked about things getting *violent* before."

Mulder shrugged. "You know him better than I do. He sounded like he meant it. It sounds like a serious case he's built for himself."

Dixon still looked dumbfounded for a second, then snapped into flustered action, pulling the cable from the laptop's port. "I swear to you, this is not why I put you in touch with him. I didn't know he was going to make such huge demands-"

"It's fine, Gerard," Mulder assured him, unheard. The technician was still insisting, still apologising.

"I'm sorry. I thought he'd be able to tell you more, not just send you on a wild goose chase. You know, you don't have to do it."

"It's not a big deal." Mulder followed his acquaintance as the overweight data technician hurriedly dragged the cable back to the ceiling cavity it hung from and climbed the wobbly ladder to stuff it back in. Gerard was hugely overreacting. "It's a job. He's a businessman. The information I'm asking for is sensitive and probably hard-earned. It's not a shock that he wants something in return."

Gerard Dixon sighed, lips pursed, and threw the last of the cabling into the ceiling haphazardly. "It *is* a big deal," he replied, "because Sayid runs in serious crowds – or rather, doesn't run – and if he says this guy might shoot you-"

"You said you trust him," Mulder reminded the other.

"I do," Dixon said hesitantly. "I do. But... surely there's an easier way... A safer way."

Mulder clapped a hand on the other's shoulder. "No one's going to shoot me. Do you know how many people have shot at me and missed?"

"And you do understand, I didn't know he was going to suggest such a dangerous form of payment," Dixon insisted, ignoring Mulder's assurance. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

Mulder tried to withhold a bemused smile. "Of course I know that." He paused. His smile wilted. "Why? Why do you say that?"
Again, Gerard Dixon looked uncomfortable. "It's probably nothing. I've just… noticed your name coming up a bit more lately, in some circles, like I said. It's probably nothing," he was quick to say again. "People talking about things they know nothing about. I just worry, sometimes, that the wrong people will take notice and decide to… take action." He clenched and unclenched his hands in discomfort. His admiration for Mulder was endearing, as was his heartfelt pride in being able to provide direct assistance to the Fox Mulder. Scully would roll her eyes so hard at devotion like Gerard's, or rather, at Mulder's patience for it and willingness to depend on it. She wouldn't stand for that sort of blind trust – she'd read it as incredibility and apply that to everything else he believed in, too.

Mulder took her lead and mentally disregarded Dixon's concerns.

"They haven't got me yet," he said with an assured smile as he walked away, grabbing his overcoat from the bench where he'd dumped it upon arrival. He checked his watch. "Richmond, huh? I'd better get going if I'm going to get there by tonight."

Dixon wasn't giving up that easily. He followed, suggesting sincerely, "If someone were trying to knock you off, they'd try to make it look like an accident, right? Or like you walked into your own trouble and deserved what you got. They might use a connection like ours, someone you trust, to send you into a situation where they could take you out. Sayid's proposition sounds like exactly that sort of thing. You read about this stuff in books, you know? Mulder?" He stopped, and Mulder had to do the same. Turn back to look at him. Poor Dixon looked so guilt-ridden, believing he'd put his hero in this position of having no choice but to walk into a death trap. "Tell me you're not going by yourself."

"Of course not," Mulder soothed automatically, digging in his coat pocket for his keys and his phone. He waved the cell at his concerned acquaintance as he slung the coat over his arm and started for the door. "I'll call Scully and pick her up on my way through D.C. She can cover me from outside the premises. This Levin won't even know she's there."

Dixon's tense expression visibly relaxed.

"And she's a good shot, right? She'll have your back."

"She isn't one of the ones who missed," Mulder promised wryly, opening the door and pausing. "Thanks for your help today – I owe you."

"You don't owe me anything," Dixon said, waving dismissively, pleased. "Just don't get killed. That'd be letting them win. Get going," he encouraged. "Call her on your way so you don't run late."

Mulder made sure to smile obligingly but the minute he was out of possible sight he put the phone away. Like hell he was calling Scully, directly or otherwise, and asking her to come on a playdate with him to accost a cell of Russian spies this fine midweek afternoon. He could just imagine the thick, incredulous silence that would follow the proposal, and the heavy click of the phone being hung up.

Or worse, for her to say, yeah, alright. They'd survived so much together, but every time he watched her walk away he felt a very real chill of fear – what if that was the last time? What if there was no coming back from the last confrontation? It was always enough to keep him from seeking her out for a while, just in case his fear was proven correct. It would kill him if he ever wrecked things so badly that they couldn't at least put it all aside and just work together professionally. There was a mild terror associated with the idea of her saying yeah, alright, and then sitting in the car with him with nothing to say.
They'd never had awkwardness before. He never wanted to know what that was like.

He got into his car and closed the door against the crisp winter air. It was a beautiful clear day outside but the air had that chill factor and a pretty decent wind to it, too. He'd already resigned himself to spending it mostly in his car, and he'd already privately debated whether that day of driving would involve contacting Scully.

He'd already ruled it out and come up with another plan.

The timing of this job for Sayid couldn't have been worse, but he had only himself to blame. He'd filled the last week while waiting out the Dunns' mourning period with the names from the list. It had kept his mind nicely distracted from reflecting on the disaster he'd made of things with Scully, as well as ominously fleshing out the case. He'd gotten ahead of the infection schedule, warning all three of the month's remaining victims. The first two had managed to avoid their infection date by breaking their routine and declining interaction with strangers, and the third had put himself into hiding before his date could come to pass. Hopefully that meant Mulder had saved all three, and that he had a bit of time up his sleeve before the March victims could be singled out. He had planned to spend today chasing down leads on the Russians Dr Gray had hinted were his next clue to locating him once again, and then feeling out the Dunn family. He hadn't counted on adding a third task into the day.

He turned the key, thinking. Pretty much every place he needed to be today was in Virginia, and he was going to drive right past the capitol to reach his destinations. He really could pick up Scully on his way, but he wouldn't, and it would be hard not to think of her as he drove close by her location and then went straight on past.

He consulted his watch again. It was already into the afternoon. He had places to be, and hours of driving to contemplate Scully. He put the car into gear and departed the university carpark.

It was true – the closer he got to D.C., the more keenly he missed Scully, but it wasn't just because he was alone in the car and geographically proximate that he wished she were there. Aside from regrets about the last conversation they'd had, his mind was also filled with the unsettling truths he'd gleaned from the would-be victims he'd helped save, and what he wanted most right now was for Scully to be sitting in the passenger seat, listening to what he'd learned, dismissing anecdotal red herrings, connecting dots and suggesting links with actual studies and facts beyond the case. For years now, every time he fell asleep he missed the warmth of her beside him and the soft rhythm of her breath, but more than her body, more than her love, even, he missed her mind. He missed her organised, regimented, brilliant brain, a machine of the highest calibre, and the way it processed all that was amazing, or incredible, or crazy, or unexpected, and spat out the simplest possible explanation. She could strip the magic off anything – in a blink of those wonderful blue eyes, she could turn the tooth fairy into just a parent taking a tooth while a child sleeps and replacing it with a quarter – and hand it back to him, mundane and functional and bland. The lowest common denominator.

God, sometimes he'd hated that she could do that and that she insisted on doing that to anything and everything that he found fascinating, the killjoy she could be sometimes, but right now, data swirling in his head, clouded with bias and fear and prejudice, he would be so appreciative of that skill of hers. He needed to make sense of it all and cut the bullshit out. Streamline it into a basic, factual package.

He did possess the ability to think critically, like she did, and it did not escape his sense of irony that when he did, it was her voice he heard in his head.

As he drove south, Mulder reflected on the three would-be victims. On the surface, they seemed so
safe and unconnected, but after walking up to their door and saying, "My name's Fox Mulder and I'm a freelance investigator. I found your name and address on a secret list of unconsenting subjects for illegal biological weapons testing. Can we talk somewhere safe about why anybody would want to silence you?" they were all very quick to suggest chillingly similar reasons for their selection.

The lawyer was a public defender. A very vocal one. His current clients were a volunteer group charged with nuisance and harassment for their recent peaceful protest against the land-clearing of a local woodland to make way for large warehouses. The defender had taken their cause to heart, and was fighting not only the charges, but now the construction itself. It didn't take him long to explain to Mulder why he thought he'd been chosen.

"There are millions of dollars tied up in this project, of course," he'd said, voice hushed, curtains drawn across sunlit windows, "and it's meant to be private money, but go back far enough, and it's not. It's government funds, I know it. It's this long string of account numbers, money moved from one to the next, including through Tannenbaum's, the same legal firm that's representing the other side. It would be very embarrassing for the federal government to be associated with this land clearing, especially considering the local tribal significance of the area, and they've been paying for this legal battle. I mean, I don't have the source yet, but I can feel it. I had to disclose what I have, that this investigation is part of my defence and, honestly, I thought there would be a bigger backlash. This is it, I suppose. A quiet assassination."

"Who are the warehouses for?" Mulder had asked.

"Publicly, they're for Fenchurch Transport Systems for temporary storage, but who knows what they're really for?"

*There's no direct proof of government involvement here,* Scully's voice warned him against jumping to the same conclusions as the lawyer. *There are few blanks in that story.*

The journalism student Cara filled in some of those blanks.

"I picked it for an assignment, and it just kept going," she'd admitted, "so I kept following the trail. Fenchurch Transport is linked with Tannenbaum Solicitors – they operate out of the same building in Alexandria and they both belong to some charity group, or more likely some money-laundering front, called The Worldwide Family of Hosts." She was reluctant at first to share her work, but as she spoke she opened a laptop and started guiding Mulder through the web of documents she'd collated. "Meant to be a support network for disadvantaged children, and their website is full of beautiful testimonials from smaller community groups, but every one of those groups I followed up on was a dead end. Each one either doesn't exist or isn't registered properly, and any money this Family of Hosts is funnelling into them for tax breaks is coming straight back to them as donations made out from other little made-up businesses and community groups. I showed my work to my professor. He advised it was too big for the purpose of the assignment but he said he'd take it to the board anyway. When he came back he was really edgy. He told me to delete it all and not tell anyone else. I thought it was weird but I never thought anyone would try to kill me over this."

"Obviously, you didn't take his advice," Mulder commented, glad, reading the screen. Cara shook her head.

"No, of course not. But I don't know what else to do with it. It's not done, and it's too big to release incomplete."

Mulder didn't leave until she'd printed the lot, and they agreed on a precautionary course of action that would transcend both of them, in case either was compromised.
Lack of evidence isn't evidence, Scully's voice intoned as Mulder drove into the afternoon. Not finding the community groups' registrations doesn't prove the groups and businesses don't exist. It's suspicious, definitely, but not proof of anything.

Frank the retired teacher was blunt on his reason for being targeted, and provided the first link with the former Soviet Union, reminding Mulder of the last prompt from Dr Gray.

"Harvey Newman was a student of mine," he said gruffly through the screen door of his home. "My best student ever, actually. Brilliant kid. We kept in touch for a few years after he graduated, until he was posted overseas. If they're after me, it's because I know what they've done to him, and I know why. I know what they sent him to Russia for. Don't worry, Mr Mulder. They won't find me."

The former educator was as good as his word, and had taken himself off the grid, but not before Mulder had encouraged him to leave his complete testimony in the same manner as Cara's investigation, just in case, as Scully's voice warily insisted, because no single one of these would-be victims could produce a story that would bolster her case, but together, the three started to corroborate one another, and that was getting closer to proving it in a federal court. The old man was reluctant.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

Why did that question keep coming up? Trust no one. The Dunns wondering if they could trust Scully and Mulder, Sayid unsure whether to trust Mulder and vice versa. Mulder shrugged.

"You have to decide for yourself."

He was doing the same right now. As he drove, the details of the ever-widening investigation swirled in his head, and Scully's voice helped to sort through it all. With everyone else, there was always the question – can I trust you and your motives? – but with her, that question had been redundant for twenty years. He didn't ask, he simply did. He trusted her judgement. It was why he let her voice boss him around in his own mental dialogue.

It was why he was going to do what he planned next.

The Dunn property looked much less ominous, though much grottier, during the day. The car parts looked more plentiful, the paint on the little house looked more worn, the rotten step to the porch looked even more splintered and dangerous than it had the other night. He pulled up, crossed the untidy front lawn and knocked on the front door. As before, he was met with the barrel of a shotgun through the window.

Ten undignified and tense minutes later, he was back in his car with a refrigerated cardboard box sitting on the passenger seat. Wendy Dunn wouldn't speak with him, but her son Ezekiel had sent one of his brothers for the box while Mulder stood at the door at gunpoint. For the most part, the Dunns would not answer Mulder at all, except when, frustrated, he asked pointedly, "Did you at least follow my advice?"

A brisk nod, but that was it. Their father's body had been destroyed, and there was no reason for anyone to come to the property now to disturb their peace. There was no evidence to be collected by Dr Gray's employers, nothing to be gained.

Except what was in the refrigerated box.

"You were true to your word and no one came for us," Ezekiel Dunn said flatly when Mulder
thanked him. "Hopefully your friend will be true to hers, and find a way to use this to stop this from happening to anyone else."

Mulder hoped so, too, but Scully had firmly refused his offer to send the Dunn virus samples directly to her. Pride, or disdain, or any other natural negative human reaction preventing her from doing something sensible – she was no saint. He hadn't pushed the matter, and anyway, now he'd worked out a way around it.

People less paranoid than Mulder had a way of being findable. They told people where they were going, they put down their real names on forms, they signed up for gym memberships with their credit cards and gave their real addresses, they put their names on the buzzer to their buildings. In a matter of two phony phone calls, he knew exactly where to find Agent Natalie Harlow.

"Hello, can you put me through to Agent Natalie Harlow, please? This is Dr Kleinschmidt calling back from Stockton University… Yes, I'll hold… Hello Agent Collins, is Natalie Harlow there? No? Oh, this is her cousin, Jimmy – I locked my keys inside her house, I feel like such a prat. Do you know if I can get her on her cell? Left for the gym already? Which gym, do you know? Okay, thanks!"

"Hi, Amanda. Hi, I wonder if you can help me? My cousin Natalie is a member of your gym and I can't get hold of her on her cell. I assume she's in the middle of a session?"

In the parking lot of Better Life, a small twenty-four-hour gym in the middle of Quantico, Mulder opened his phone and ran another search for Harlow, Natalie, FBI, and again brought up the few images that matched. There were thousands of hits, really, but most of them were improperly tagged. Just a few contained photographs of a thirtyish Eurasian woman with shiny dark hair.

A social media profile picture from her younger days popped up in the search. MySpace. That would have to go if he was going to get involved with this woman. The others were less irritating. A college newsletter congratulating Honours student Ms Harlow on a faculty award. A thumbnail image of the doctor from an online journal of virology where she had published a couple of papers.

The same face appeared through the automatic doors of the little gym, hair damp and pulled back tight, and Mulder kicked open the car door and pocketed the phone. Scully had chosen to trust this agent. Harlow had opened the Engel investigation, identified the work of the Black Oil without knowing what she was stepping in, and apparently paid for her righteous mission with her career. Undeleted MySpace profile or not, she was already in, and Scully's judgement had to count for something.

Parked out of view of the door's cameras, Mulder waved to catch Harlow's attention. She noticed and hesitated. She looked uneasily around to confirm both that he was addressing her and not someone else, and that there was no person or camera around to ensure nothing happened to her. Mulder appreciated her healthy mistrust of strangers. Perhaps she could be retrained out of her casual findable ways.

He waved her over and got the box out of the car. Slowly, still glancing around for exits and possible back-up, Agent Harlow approached.

"Do I know you?" she asked curiously when she was in earshot. Mulder closed the car door and moved in front of the bonnet so she'd see he wasn't hiding anything.

"We haven't met," Mulder answered, "but we share a mutual acquaintance. You've spoken with Agent Scully."
At the name, Harlow's shapely dark eyes, so intrigued, went flat and slack. Fake smile. "Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about."

"She visited you. Last Friday."

"I don't know any Agent Scully," the young virologist insisted, adamant, and he reflected that Scully would have warned her of this. *No one can know we've spoken.*

"It's-"

"I don't want to talk to you," Harlow said firmly, already backing away. Smile gone. She started to turn and Mulder resisted the urge to catch her. This wasn't Scully.

"I know you two are involved in a very sensitive situation and I appreciate your unwillingness to discuss it," he said patiently, following her across the parking lot at a respectful distance he would rarely have granted his former partner. She refused to look back; she dug in her gym bag for car keys. "I even expect Scully advised you against telling anyone she'd been to see you. It's good advice. There are people who will do anything to interfere with your work." Mulder raised the little cardboard box, unseen behind her. "I have the evidence you both need to prove yourselves right. To make your case."

He was taking a chance, one he would rather not take, but Scully didn't want direct contact right now and she'd chosen to let Harlow in. The younger agent stopped and spun on her heel suspiciously.

"How do you know what we need to make our case?" she demanded icily. She looked him up and down with as much contempt as she could muster. She did a good job but had nothing on Scully. "Who the hell are you?"

"Fox Mulder," he answered, deciding to be forthright. The name struck no chord of recognition in her guarded eyes. She shrugged haughtily, silently asking whether that was meant to mean something. "I was Scully's partner at the Bureau for nine years."

*That resonated.* "The wildcard in the basement."

"That'd be me," he said with a smile. Nice to know he occasionally came up in conversation, even if it was in strange ways like that. At least she still alluded to having known him, once.

"I didn't realise you were with the Bureau, Agent Mulder," Harlow said with a quick clear of her throat, the closest she was willing to offer in place of an apology. She straightened her back a little, wincing slightly, realising how poorly she'd handled this first meeting with what she gathered was a senior agent. Mulder was quick to put her conscience at ease.

"Drop the 'agent'. I've been freelance since 2002." He offered the box again. "If anybody asks, an anonymous contact gave you this."

"What is it?" Harlow asked, less aggressively now that she knew she was talking to a former colleague. Her expressive eyes betrayed the growing curiosity as she watched the cardboard box in his hand.

"Samples of the virus," Mulder answered frankly, watching with satisfaction as her eyes went wide in shock and she looked up at him from the box. "It's been out of the fridge for nearly an hour now, though, so you'd better have somewhere safe to store it."

"Dr Scully said she had this," Harlow murmured, eyeing the box eagerly.
"This isn't from her," Mulder corrected. "This is for her."

Agent Harlow regarded him for a moment. He could see the intelligence in her eyes, in her dollish, dainty features. A doctorate by thirty; she hadn't mucked around with her time, and that, if nothing else conveyed in her demeanour, reminded him of Scully. "So there are multiple subjects. She's got samples from other victims, and you're giving me – her – a new one." She paused. "Forgive my scepticism, but why would you trust something that dangerous and that valuable to a stranger like me? Why wouldn't you deliver it straight to your partner? I'm finding this a bit hard to swallow."

"Scepticism is a most attractive quality in a woman, believe me. The people you're afraid of, the people you suspect me of working for right now," Mulder explained, "know who I am. They know Agent Scully. I can't be seen giving this to her. But it's important she gets it."

"I'm your messenger," Harlow read between the lines. She didn't sound offended by the concept. Impressed, maybe? Mulder hefted the box lightly.

"This subject died last Friday night from the same affliction as the Engel family you investigated in 2014, but there have been others. Between what Scully has and what I'm giving you today, the two of you should be able to lay some pretty solid foundations for a case. But," Mulder said now, lifting the box clear of her hands, watching as disappointment flashed across her eyes, "this comes with strings attached. Nobody but Scully hears you got this from me. Understood?"

"Yeah, I get it," Harlow promised hurriedly. Mulder still didn't hand it over.

"This case she's brought you into, in whatever capacity she's decided to trust you with, it's very serious, Ms Harlow," he iterated. "People have been killed."

She frowned and turned her full attention from the box to him. "I know it's serious. I've been locked in a storeroom stacking shelves for the last eighteen months, where I can't get into any trouble telling the world what I saw that virus do to that family." She held his gaze with the full force of her attitude, which he gathered from the look was a pretty big thing. "I've learned how to keep my mouth shut, Mr Mulder, if that's what you're worried about. No one else will get their hands on this. I'm sure it was challenge to procure and I won't do anything to jeopardise this investigation. My career depends on this. A whole family depends on this."

Mulder finally lowered the box and let her take it. "Find a way to get that to Scully without drawing any attention to what you've got. You're in very dangerous territory, and it'll be much worse if anyone knew I was involved."

Harlow was already slitting open the box to check its contents. She dropped her gym bag at her feet to dedicate both hands to the task. She stared into the box for a moment, amazed by her strike of luck.

"You, uh, know better than to open that outside of a lab, right?" Mulder checked uneasily, watching closely as she lightly touched the contents, turning the vial to be able to read its label. She didn't answer, but she didn't make any move to do anything stupid, either.

"What stage of infection was this subject at when these samples were taken?" she asked, all business now. Mulder shrugged.

"That information is all with Agent Scully," he said. He didn't want to give too much to this woman. She was a messenger and an assistant to Scully's cause – he didn't like the idea of her off managing the case on her own, regardless of whether she was trustworthy. She was the wildcard here, not Mulder in his basement office. "Now for the second string. Promise you'll use what I've
given you today to develop a cure." Harlow looked up at him again, calculating and guarded. "That's important, Agent. There will be more deaths. Maybe you can prevent some."

"How do you know so much about this?" she asked, both suspicious and full of wonder. Mulder smiled.

"I'm not your informant," he quipped, and her eyes narrowed, and not against the orange rays of the sun setting behind his shoulder. "Good luck, Agent. Oh," he added, pausing to interrupt her irritated demand that he not leave her hanging, "and about your old MySpace profile. One Google search and two phone calls and I knew what you looked like and where to find you. Next time, I hope you won't make it this easy for me – or for them."

He withdrew back to his car, noting the way Harlow's mouth, pursed tightly against her protestations at his departure, curved slightly into the tiniest of smiles. Game on.

Mulder decided he liked her. He liked the guarded curiosity, the runaway mouth and the loosely managed ego, and he liked the work ethic her academic history alluded to. He read a competitive personality from her behaviours and her history, and would be very surprised if his little challenge wasn't wholeheartedly addressed. From his car he saw her quickly unlock her own, throw in her gym bag and peel out of the parking lot. He hoped she was taking those samples straight to an appropriate refrigeration unit to begin work.

He hoped he hadn't misjudged her completely, and hoped she wasn't taking his hard-earned bounty from the Dunn misadventure straight to some new incarnation of the Syndicate.

The sun fell away behind the buildings and Mulder got his phone back out. Remember the days of paper maps? He still kept that rugged old map he'd plotted with Scully in their last years together, buried at the bottom of his backpack, but other than for recording events like that, he used his phones now. He snapped open the back of his current phone and pulled out the memory and the battery. The battery and the phone itself, he stowed in their zip-lock bag, disassembled, and tossed that into the backseat. He'd used it for weeks now, much longer than usual, and that was foolish. Anyone could latch onto his signal, follow him, track him down. He reached under the dashboard, fingers feeling for the crack in the plastic behind the steering wheel where he'd stashed another zip-lock bag. With the swift precision of someone who does this nearly fortnightly, he assembled the phone and transferred the memory he needed – the photographs of the CIA documents he'd burned with Scully, photographs of the documents he'd burned with the homeless on Christmas Day. Then he snapped the little card into pieces. He had a dozen such burner cards, waiting for their short life to begin and end.

He ran a search for Mikhail Levin and his Richmond carwash. Two hours, give or take. Remember the days of paper maps? He still kept that rugged old map he'd plotted with Scully in their last years together, buried at the bottom of his backpack, but other than for recording events like that, he used his phones now. He snapped open the back of his current phone and pulled out the memory and the battery. The battery and the phone itself, he stowed in their zip-lock bag, disassembled, and tossed that into the backseat. He'd used it for weeks now, much longer than usual, and that was foolish. Anyone could latch onto his signal, follow him, track him down. He reached under the dashboard, fingers feeling for the crack in the plastic behind the steering wheel where he'd stashed another zip-lock bag. With the swift precision of someone who does this nearly fortnightly, he assembled the phone and transferred the memory he needed – the photographs of the CIA documents he'd burned with Scully, photographs of the documents he'd burned with the homeless on Christmas Day. Then he snapped the little card into pieces. He had a dozen such burner cards, waiting for their short life to begin and end.

He dug in his backpack for the phone. The phone whose SIM card he never destroyed, the phone he never turned off, the phone he painstakingly kept charged even though nobody ever called it. It was old, no internet connection. He flicked on the screen. No calls. No messages. No activity at all.

No surprise.

It was low on charge, so he plugged it up to the cigarette lighter before he set off for Richmond. He had taught himself over the years not to be disappointed by the inevitable and repeated result.
She never called. She didn't want to talk to him. He should know that by now. He should stop checking. He should turn the phone off, finally, and let it go.

But she was the only person in the world with this number, and if it ever rang, it would be her, and it would be dire. It would have to be, to prompt her to contact him, right? He imagined her ringing a dead phone after being promised it would always be answered for her. He imagined her, somewhere out there in the world, with him on her mind and her fingers on her phone screen, needing him, didn't matter in what regard, and whenever he had this thought, he knew he would never turn that phone off.

Waiting at a stoplight, he touched the gold cross at his throat. Hope was a powerful motivator. It had kept him focussed for years on the X-Files searching for Samantha, and had kept him alive in the months he spent in exile, and now, kept him checking that phone every day. The poster that had hung in his office, their office, had summed up his fundamental truth perfectly: I want to believe. More than anything, Mulder wanted to believe he could win in the end. He wanted to believe he could put this giant conspiracy, haunting him since he was twelve years old, to rest one day at long last, and he wanted to believe he could repair what he had with Scully. He wanted to believe he was heading into a reasonably safe and sensible situation tonight with this Russian contact of Gerard Dixon's contact, this contact who might shoot him without warning. He wanted to believe Gray and Reece weren't the only people back from the dead.

Could hope really bring about all that?

He drove on as the sunlight faded and night dawned, first grey, then black, always cold. He joined the legions of traffic headed for Richmond. He glanced several times at the clock on his dashboard, aware of the increasing lateness. Would Levin still be at work? A Russian spy was unlikely to be as lax about his personal security as newbie agent Harlow, and it would take more than a couple of calls to locate this man's whereabouts.

How much would it upset Sayid's plans if Mulder's message had to wait until morning? If Levin had gone home for the night? What was Sayid's wrath capable of? Mulder thought it best not to test the waters on that one.

The carwash was well and truly closed by the time Mulder arrived, and he drove once around the premises, despairing slightly that he may have missed his window of opportunity, but then he spotted a single lit window, glowing yellow in the little annex office behind the main building. Vague shadows indicated human movement inside. He parked, pulled on a jacket as he got out, and went to knock, only realising as his knuckles connected solidly with the wood of the door that he had no idea what was about to happen. He hadn't planned what he would say. He didn't know how Levin would react, or what he would say in return. He didn't know whether Levin was truly of the temperament to shoot him or whether he was walking into something extremely volatile that was worth killing an intruder for. He hadn't formulated an escape plan in case this went south. He'd just discounted Dixon's concerns and headed out.

He was here on the advice of a stranger from the internet because he was so desperate for anything, anything, to back up what he wanted to believe, and he was here alone and vulnerable because he was too proud to swallow his fears and front up to Scully's place like he should have. Hey, I know we aren't in the best place with each other right now, but I'm following a lead and I'm going in blind. This might be the break we need in your case. Come for a ride to Richmond? Be upfront and transparent. Isn't that what she was mad about last time – one of the things she was mad about last time – the way he'd supposedly misled her to get her to the Dunns'?

Why did he have to do everything the hard way?
The door cracked open and a powerfully built, friendly-looking moustached man of about forty looked out into the night.

"Yes?" Sounding perfectly all-American.

"Mikhail Levin?" Mulder checked, rolling his shoulders in his jacket to make it sit more comfortably against the cold. The man inside nodded, acting curious. He wasn't. Just like Agent Harlow's, his eyes were the giveaway. His instead were flat and unafraid, just playing polite. "I'm Fox Mulder, former FBI. Can I talk to you inside about Lenkov?"

No surprise registered on the bigger, younger man's face, but he did remain silent for a very long beat as he processed the information. Former FBI. Lenkov. Finally Levin nodded once more and stepped back, letting Mulder into the small office. The yellow-lit space was crowded with two cheap desks buried under receipts and crumpled paperwork, and the walls were lined with haphazard shelving and filing cabinets.

"I wondered when you would show up," Levin commented dryly, shutting him inside and turning to regard him with only the mildest interest. Definitely without fear. The man might have been a spy for the country's most contentious rival nation, but he certainly wore no concerns that he might ever be caught out. Mulder assumed he was armed, and assumed he was fast. The Russian leaned back on the door casually, blocking the only exit and ensuring Mulder made that realisation. "Are you wired?"

"No." Mulder removed the jacket he'd only just donned and began to lift his shirt, but Levin waved dismissively.

"The walls are lined. No signal's getting through. I was only asking." Nothing ruffled this man. "If you're here, my mission is compromised. Give me a good reason not to make you disappear, Mr Mulder," he said, and the hint of his Russian accent finally slipped through on those rrrs as he opened his coat to show Mulder his sidearm, fair warning. Mulder appreciated the opportunity to talk himself out of trouble – he'd always been a good talker and talked himself out of much worse.

"Your mission only has one leak," he said calmly, "so once you remove Lenkov from the equation, you're back on track."

"What do you know about Lenkov?" Levin asked, acting unworried. But the fact that Mulder even knew the name had to be throwing up red flags in his well-trained mind. It was enough to make him threaten to make Mulder disappear, anyway.

"I know the Americans are onto him," Mulder said, choosing Sayid's words. "An old contact at the CIA wasn't mindful of which files he had open on his desktop when I went to him for some information on a separate case… which, it turns out, mightn't be so separate after all. It's possible that you and I could be of use to one another, Mr Levin."

"Hmm." Mikhail Levin brushed his thick moustache with a thumb and contemplated the news. "Possibly you're right. Or possibly you belong at the bottom of the nearest river where you can't try to turn me against my own team and sell me out to your government. The infinite possibilities."

"You knew I was coming," Mulder said now, trying a new angle, eager to not find out what the bottom of the nearest river looked like. "You know who I am, which means you know how limited my relationship with my own government is. I have no motivation to sell you out to anyone. I'm just here to negotiate for information."

"And you thought you'd start off the negotiation by delivering me bad news? Solid strategy."
"I thought I'd start off by telling you that your operation has a breach so you can address it before it gets out of hand," Mulder corrected. "Consider it a favour. I could have let you all go down, which you will, sooner rather than later if you don't ship Lenkov out of the situation."

He was assuming the cell contained more than just Levin and Lenkov, otherwise he was going to sound silly. Levin regarded him heavily in silence, deciding.

"I didn't know you were coming," he said finally, turning to a filing cabinet beside the door. He opened the top drawer and dug around at the back; he withdrew a cheap cell phone. "When I took the mission I was given a list of names to watch out for. Yours was on the list."

"Should I be flattered?" Or was it a hit list?

Levin shrugged big shoulders as he calmly switched the phone on. Good to know other paranoids kept burner phones, too. "Depends. Do you like the label 'alien hunter'?"

"I prefer 'paranormal investigator'," Mulder replied, watching what the other man did. Levin's attention was on the cell in his hands. Better there than on his gun.

"I'm sure you do. I'm sure you've been called worse. What does Henry Gray call you?"

Mulder paused, thinking through his answer. Almost any reply would confirm that he knew the scientist lived again, and that he'd been in contact with him. His conversation with Dr Gray at The Lion's Share family restaurant had ended with a prompt for Mulder to go and find 'the Russians', implying some connection. He'd been chasing this connection, and now that he'd found it, he realised he wasn't sure if it was a connection he should make explicit.

He'd really run into this with his head up his ass, distracted with shallow and pointless cyclic worries about Scully and whether or not she hated him. Stupid, stupid. Short answer: yes, she hated him. She also loved him. There; no more pondering required. It was simple.

"He calls me an ally," he said finally, taking a chance, because by now, what did he have to lose? The other was still looking down at his phone, but now opened the door. "What does he call you?"

"A Russian," Levin answered dryly, pulling his gun and letting it hang casually at his side as he stepped outside, "though I was born here and lived here most of my life. Tell me. What would you call me, Mr Mulder," he continued slowly, precisely, lifting the gun level as he backed away from the office into the parking lot, "if I called in my friend to help me dispose of your body after I've put a bullet through you?"


Levin nodded slowly, thinking, and cracked a reluctant half-smile, apparently appreciating Mulder's humour even in dire straits. He raised the phone to his ear and listened to it ring.

One way or the other, Mulder vowed this was the last time he would ever take advice from a stranger on the internet over teaming up with Scully. He looked at the door uneasily.

"Don't do anything stupid," Levin warned, shaking the gun, then his call connected. "Daniil, I'm sorry it's late. Baba is sick. Go and take care of her."

He hung up immediately and dialled another number.

"Vashchenko, I have a Fox Mulder standing in my office. Report in an hour."
Again, Levin hung up quickly. He holstered the gun and this time dismantled the phone as he returned to the radio-silent office. Mulder watched in tense silence to learn of his fate. He gathered that the reference to an ill grandmother was code, but for what, he was unsure he wanted to know.

Mikhail Levin slammed the door behind him, put the pieces of the phone away and turned back to Mulder. "Daniil Lenkov has been a loyal and invaluable teammate. I trust I haven't sent him back to Russia for nothing."

Mulder tried not to sigh with relief. He offered a shrug. "You've got to do what you've got to do to protect the mission."

"You know what my mission here is, then?"

Honesty seemed the best policy. "Not really, no. I only know your mission involves several buzz words I've been chasing for my own personal investigation. The Worldwide Family of Hosts. Dr Gray."

"Lenkov has been my connection to Henry Gray," Levin admitted. "He's been pivotal to my team's work. Without him, I lose that connection." He fingered the lapel of his jacket, thoughtful, implication clear. "I think you might be of use after all, Mr Mulder."

Mulder smiled wryly. "If you're asking me to act as emissary between you and Gray, you don't need to threaten me into that. I'm happy with any in on this action. Anything that can help me answer my questions."

"Because of the aliens," Levin finished. Normally, when someone said that to Mulder, it was in jest, making fun of him, but Levin sounded perfectly serious.

"That's right," Mulder said cautiously. "Because I need to prove — to myself — I'm not crazy for chasing this my whole life."

"I can't guarantee you're not crazy, and I can't guarantee you've got a place working with my team. If Vashchenko comes back with anything less than right about you, we'll be dumping you in that river after all."

"If the options are to either kill me or conscript me, there's no harm in telling me what I want to know," Mulder reasoned. "I've just betrayed CIA secrets to a Russian spy and compromised a federal investigation. Nothing you tell me here is going to be any good to me except for my own crusade," Scully's word, not his, but after carrying her voice around in his head all day it slipped out like it would from her mouth, "so why not just tell me? My life will be over anyway if I try to sell myself back to my own government now."

Mikhail Levin considered. "I guess we've got an hour before Vashchenko rings to damn you with anything you've neglected to mention." He crossed the office to sit behind one of the crowded desks. He shifted piles of crumpled paper around so he could be easily seen over it, and gestured for Mulder to sit opposite in the small chair cramped into the little gap between the desk and the wall of shelving. "You want to know about the Hosts," he stated, still tidying. "That's what we've been conscripted for. To find out what we can about them. You've already started digging. Maybe we can help one another after all."

"You're investigating a private organisation on American soil? You're not spying on America itself?"

"Grow up, Mr Mulder," Levin said idly. "This is much bigger than little squabbles between two
countries. There are plenty of other operatives, here and there, playing the Cold War spy game with each other, but my team is doing the real work – trying to prepare for wholesale invasion."

Mulder sat forward, gripped with interest. "I keep hearing it's already started."

"We've known for decades when it would start," Levin replied. "December, 2012. And it did."

Mulder felt a simultaneous burst of relieved knowing and a jolt of denial. "I was watching that night. I didn't see anything." We didn't see anything.

Levin thumbed his moustache again calmly. "Who said there was anything to see?" he asked rhetorically. "Who said they had to arrive in big spaceships and light up the sky?"

"How else do you stage an intergalactic invasion?" Mulder asked in the same tone. Levin shrugged his broad shoulders delicately, enjoying the position of power in knowing something the other didn't, and perhaps enjoying the opportunity to tell the exciting narrative he'd been living in secret for years now. "How do you get thousands of aliens onto our planet surface without a craft of some sort? They do have ships. I've seen them. I've been in them."

"Maybe the most viable way to achieve such a goal is to think outside the box – the physical box," Levin prompted Mulder's thought process. "When you're invading a planet with seven billion ignorant inhabitants perfectly suited to its environment, who said you have to bring your own bodies?"
XXV - William

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. I get no financial incentives from Facebook for mildly dissing MySpace in the previous chapter, and I own no part in either social media giant.

Author's Notes: *submits final Masters assignment, topic 'fanfiction and copyright'; immediately continues writing fanfiction* Thanks everyone for your patience! University swallowed my life. Shortly, work will do the same as the Australian school year finishes up and final reports need writing. Then it will be Christmas holidays, and I will be in full author mode, writing my next novel. Fanfiction, however ill-advised, always finds a way to stay present in my weekly business, so do not stress if I drop away for a little while. This story wants to be written!

Thanks to those who have commented, for taking the time to share your thoughts. Everyone else, please don't hesitate in reviewing and leaving suggestions for story direction. I am always open to prompts and requests, where they can be worked into the loose structure I am working with. Help me write the story you want to read.

Life is weird, but priorities are weirder.

"Are you sure?" Ms B checked, voice loaded with I know you don't mean that, eyeing her brightest student down the length of her nose. William nodded. Beside him, Trip held his hand out expectantly for the group assignment task sheet she was withholding from the pair.

"What's wrong with us working together?" Trip asked airily. He smiled unconvincingly, betraying his perfect understanding of the teacher's implication. "I'll keep him in line, Miss. He might be a midget but I'll take one for the team and work with him," he said with an exaggerated sigh, clapping Will's shoulder reluctantly, "even if it's to the detriment of my own reputation and grade point average."

"Good to know." Ms B was unimpressed. She tried once more to encourage William to pick a different teammate, one who wouldn't ride his coattails to that free A, as delicately as she could. "The problem with working with friends, boys-

"Who said we're friends?" Will quipped, and she gave up, dropping the task sheet on the desk and walking away. Both Williams smirked, pleased with their win, and the younger of the two grabbed the sheet to read the particulars.

"What's the damage?" Trip asked in a muted voice as Ms B began explaining the premise of the task to the class. Will speed-read the page.

"Twenty minutes' work, max," he whispered, summarising the assignment into the details his partner would actually want, while Ms B told the classroom loudly, "This is a joint task between both partners, and I anticipate that this task will take each team member most of a week to complete, which is why I have set the due date for a fortnight from today."
Trip glanced warily at his younger friend but Will shook his head minutely, assuredly. He could knock this over in no time at all and fly through with at least a B, which wouldn't shock the teacher since he was working with class failure William Wyatt Wilson, and said partner wouldn't really need to do anything at all.

"Twenty minutes," Will promised quietly. "I bet you twenty bucks that's all the time you spend on this assignment."

Trip waved the bet away, alarmed. "I like my money. I'm not stupid enough to bet against you, boy-genius. I trust you."

There was a time when getting top marks would have mattered to Will, but that time was increasingly in the past. Maybe once, as recently as late last year, before the shocking revelations of Christmastime, he would have asked for a driven and high-achieving teammate, and together they would have planned an innovative and exciting biology experiment, conducted it together over the full two weeks, and presented a lengthy and comprehensive lab report to present the findings.

Will's priorities had changed hugely, which was why he sat up that whole night typing up a false experiment, filling fake measurements into tables justifying made-up conclusions, and why he chose a lab partner who wouldn't argue. Two weeks of work done in a single night, with only twenty minutes of work left for Trip, as promised – handwriting the fake measurements into the final table and copying a few supposed observations in his own hand onto some of Will's diagrams, so Ms B couldn't claim the obvious: that Will V had done the whole thing.

Cramming a fortnight's work into a single late night of ten solid hours in front of the computer didn't sound like efficient use of time, but in fact, it freed up the next few evenings and the weekend that other students would be spending meeting up with partners to scratch their heads and get started on this group assignment.

Well.

Some other students.

"Twenty bucks," Will offered. "That's only ten dollars each, and I guarantee at least a B. Send me an example of one of your other assignments so I can match up your writing style, and give me two days. I'm sure you've got better things to do with your time than stupid Bio assignments."

It was a winning sales pitch, and by the end of a very busy fortnight of late nights doing other students' papers, Will was exhausted but eighty dollars richer. He had a slew of happy customers, masquerading as friends, or something of the like. He didn't care. For the first time in a long time, William was focussed on money.

Like most children, he'd gone through the typical phase of fascination with money at about six or seven when he cottoned onto the value and respect adults treated it with. Money let you do things, money bought you stuff, money granted wishes. He'd taken up jobs around the house, paid for by his unwell mother and his harried, overwhelmed uncle who was trying to balance his ailing career with taking care of her, and he'd taken to swiping coins and notes he saw lying around. Collecting, hoarding, the way adults do. It had all gone into a tin, and he'd had big plans for that motherlode, but he'd learned the hard way the false currency that is money when he'd made both his uncle and the hospital receptionist cry by tipping the whole moneybox out on the counter at oncology and asking how much it would cost to make the doctors fix his mom. Nurses had consoled Gary and the receptionist while a brave doctor knelt down next to William and helped him put every coin back into the tin, all forty-eight dollars and twelve cents.
"There are some things money can't buy, love," she'd said gently.

It couldn't buy back a mother's health, but it could buy a bus ticket, and Will had already worked out he would need about five hundred dollars for a return ticket to Washington D.C. and snacks along the way. Too young for a job, and having long spent that forty-eight-twelve on a second-hand bike he had since outgrown and upgraded from, Will had devised another means of funding the purchase.

The late nights did not go unnoticed by Uncle Gary – "Isn't the school working you a bit hard? It's not even finals." – but served as a perfect distractor for the tides of uncomfortable emotions that kept Will in a state of constant conflict. Ever since the ill-considered phone call with Brit, he'd felt utterly sick with himself, and knew he deserved it. He had ruined his first contact with Dana Katherine Scully by including Brittany in a careless, hurtful lie. He'd promised himself right then and there, he would leave his birth mother alone and never call her again.

But her voice. He hadn't known what to expect, and he'd hardly expected the first time he heard her again to be such an unpleasant exchange, and he'd barely heard twenty words from her, but now her voice was on repeat inside his brain. It was like he'd trapped it in there, and he heard it constantly, not just saying the words he'd heard from the phone, but other things, too. Things he'd maybe heard before, or maybe just things he wished he could hear her say, things that Sarah Van de Kamp had said or never lived long enough to say, he wasn't sure. He heard Dana Katherine Scully in his mind wishing him a good sleep every night. He heard her tell him things would be alright when he heard Jeremy making fun of him from the back of the bus. He heard her tell him she loved him to the ends of the earth, all the time.

He wanted to hear that for real. He wanted to hear that she still loved him and that she'd had a really good reason for giving him to the Van de Kamps, and to feel her warmth and love and adoration envelop him as she held him close and whispered that if she'd known he had lost his parents, she would have been there in a heartbeat, because all she ever wanted for him was to have a safe and loving family.

Will felt this pull inside him, constantly, and it was what drove him to pump out page after page of other people's assignments, even as his eyes seemingly melted in their sockets from overuse at one-thirty in the morning on a school night.

But then the tides changed.

"Can you spare a couple of hours today?" Uncle Gary asked on Sunday, leaning into the study while Will smashed the keyboard for the umpteenth hour in a row. When his nephew only replied with a questioning, non-committal, "Hmm?", Gary stepped into the room. "I need some help with the mustering."

It took William a few moments for the oddness of this request to sink in. He pushed his chair away from the computer to physically break his own concentration, and frowned up at his uncle with tired eyes. "*You're* going mustering?"

Gary Milne was a chess champion in school and a desk jockey in the workplace before Sarah got sick. He'd never so much as picked up a rake, let alone driven tractors, ridden horses or trained dogs to assist in gathering up cattle before he'd taken over the farm. In the years since, he'd come a long way, but it helped that the property had some old-time hands who knew the ropes and took as much pity on Gary as they made fun of him. These men had made it possible for the Van de Kamp farm to survive as long as it had without Christiaan and Sarah.

"You and me, hopefully," Gary said, trying out enthusiasm like a new outfit. It didn't quite fit.
William wasn't fooled.

"Well, obviously," he said, turning back to the computer to save his – Taylah and Felicia's – work. "I wouldn't miss the opportunity to see you mustering. What time are the guys getting here?"

"They're not," Gary said, giving William pause once again. "It's getting too expensive to pay for staff on the weekends, so it's just you and me."

Will slowly set about turning the overworked computer off, thoughts just as slow as they moved out of Bio-realm and into the real world. How long ago did Gary decide that? While Will was struggling with the reality of his adoption, his uncle was struggling to keep the farm afloat, and neither had said a word to the other.

"Okay," he agreed warily, still thinking. It wasn't the right season for sales, and the animals had just been vaccinated recently, so why were they gathering the cattle up? Some of the cows were heavily pregnant, ready to calf in the spring. The last thing they wanted to do was stress those animals out and cause them to birth early, while it was still so cold. "I'll get changed."

"Excellent." Gary did seem genuinely pleased that Will was on board. "I'll meet you at the barn in ten."

When William was small, his dad and the farm hands used to muster cattle from horseback, but Uncle Gary had never gotten the hang of horse riding. The horses were replaced with dirt bikes, which he could handle, and which both uncle and nephew had thoroughly enjoyed racing one another around the property on many occasions. Over the years, one by one, the horses had been sold off for cash to keep the farm running. All but one: Rosie, Sarah's favourite. Rosie was usually out at pasture, rarely ridden now except when Will felt up for it, and increasingly he was finding himself without the time to do it. Today Will found Rosie at the paddock fence, watching him pull the bikes out of the barn. She nickered, friendly as always, and he abandoned the bikes to pay her a visit.

Rubbing Rosie's dark, velvety ears, Will felt the crash inside him of his emotions at war. He still heard Dana Katherine Scully's voice in his head all the time, even more clearly now than he remembered her own mother's voice, but being close with Sarah's things – her piano, her horse, her sheet music – left him wracked with guilt. Sarah Van de Kamp raised him. She was his mom. Was it wrong to seek to replace her with the woman who had left him with her? He didn't know. He didn't know what she would want.

Across the yard, he saw Uncle Gary step out of the house, pulling on his jacket sleeves and looking uncomfortable in his slummy attire. They were going to get dirty, spattered with mud and melting snow. Gary had never acclimatised to getting dirty.

He had a loving family. He had Uncle Gary. So why did William feel the pull to find Dana Katherine Scully?

He had no answers, and it was going to take him ages to save the money, which gave him plenty of time to think about what he was going to do if he fronted up in Washington D.C.

"It's just a short venture today," Uncle Gary said cheerily. "We want to cut the six fattest out of the herd. I've got a buyer lined up."

"A private buyer?" Will asked, giving Rosie one last pat and going to meet his uncle at the bikes. "What about your contracts?"
Gary sighed, leaning on the bigger of the motorbikes. "It's so hard to stay competitive with these new organic farms. They're writing new exclusive contracts with the wholesalers which prevent them from buying from me. In a few months when we have the calves and we're ready to sell, there's going to be no one to sell them to." He shrugged apologetically. "We have to take the smaller sales where we can at the moment, until this big legal battle plays out."

William had overheard bitter discussion about this Tannenbaum legal firm between the farm hands and other older community members, but hadn't paid it much mind. Apparently he should have been listening harder. Many farms in the area were struggling to hold onto their age-old arrangements with wholesalers as new farms sprung up boasting new 'organic' farming methods and took out all the contracts. He hadn't realised his farm was in danger from the same threat.

It worried him more than a little. In his mind, the plan had always been to keep the farm alive just long enough for him to finish school. He'd known it would fold eventually, but at graduation time, he'd reasoned, he'd be ready for college, and Uncle Gary shouldn't need to look after him anymore. They could sell the farm and the house and most of the stuff in it, and with the money, pay for Will to start college (because there had never been money set aside for this, and both had long known that Will would be going on to further education) and buy a small flat in the city where Gary could start his own life again. Maybe they'd even live together somewhere, save costs, but probably not – Uncle Gary deserved to have this second chance at his own career and his own dreams, and Will knew he wouldn't be happy to pursue those unless he knew William was perfectly taken care of, enrolled in the best university that would take him, wherever that needed to be. Maybe Will would study in D.C.? Maybe by then he would have a functional relationship with his birth mother, and maybe he could stay with her, which would save him money and mean there would be more money from the farm sale for Uncle Gary, who after all had done all the work...

The farm needed to last. Just another couple of years, that was all.

He swung a leg over his dirt bike and kick-started it. The engine roared to life. "Alright. The six fattest. I'll race you."

It was a gloriously blue late winter's day, and Will and Uncle Gary made no rush of reaching the cattle as they rode up and down hillocks and along the stream that crossed the property, enjoying life. At the herd, Will took charge, cutting into the clump of animals to segregate the biggest. Gary circled those his nephew sent his way, keeping them from rejoining the group. Then, together, they drove the six chosen back to the farmyard.

When they were within sight of the house, William pulled up and pointed at a shiny red sports car waiting in the drive. "Is that your buyer?"

Gary looked just as surprised. "He's not due until tomorrow. Nice car, though."

Will agreed privately, and they drove the cattle into Rosie's paddock and locked them inside before riding back down to the house. Uncle Gary's feelings about the car abruptly changed.

"Do you want to go inside, Will?" he asked tersely, radiating dislike as the suit-wearing, slick man leaning on the bonnet came into decent view. "I don't want you to meet this guy."

It was unlike Gary to say something like that, and William was prepared to do exactly as his uncle asked, but the stranger waved them down as they approached, walking to meet them right at the front door, preventing Will from making his escape inside. They pulled up side-by-side and pulled off their helmets.

"Gary," the stranger said amiably, hands extended in a gesture of confident welcome, as though this
were his home, not theirs. "It's been too long."

"Michael," Gary replied in acknowledgement, hanging his helmet from the handlebars and swinging himself off the filthy bike as gracelessly as he could manage, covered in flecks of mud and dirt. "What are you doing out here?"

The stranger, Michael, swallowed his next friendly, time-wasting words, having been taken off guard by Gary's directness. He reorganised his thoughts to get straight to the point.

"I'm looking for Sarah," he admitted. William felt his stomach twist. Dana and Sarah, it felt like one name or the other was always coming up. Gary stood more upright, affronted.

"You're six years too late," he said flatly. He jerked his head in the direction of the road. "There's a cemetery twelve miles east from here. You can apologise to her there."

Michael the slick stranger was visibly shocked. "She died?!" When Gary and William said nothing, he worked to recover his poise, but it was obvious he'd lost his footing in this conversation. "But when… how…?"

"What are you doing here, Kearney?" Uncle Gary asked again, unsympathetically. He shrugged. "You wanted nothing to do with Sarah for twenty years. Why are you here now?"

"My… My mom," Michael said finally, vaguely, clearly lost. He looked smaller in his classy beige suit all of a sudden. "She's… well, she died, too, three months ago. She named Sarah in the will, God knows why. It's just come back from the lawyer that he couldn't find her and needs to send the money somewhere, basically, to finalise the proceedings. I looked, but couldn't find her online or anything… so I came here. I'd heard, you know, back in the day, that this was where she moved, after…"

The stranger looked around the picturesque farmland. This was not the reunion he'd hoped for. William eyed him curiously.

"Well, I'm sorry you came all this way," Gary said with a false smile. "And I'm sorry about your mom. Nice lady. Sarah always spoke well of her. Goodbye."

It was a dismissal, and Will knew he should have left it alone, but he couldn't help asking, "How did you know Sarah?"

Gary glared at him in warning. Michael stared through his sunglasses, expression blank.

"I knew her from school. I was going to marry her."

"Yeah, well, you didn't," Uncle Gary said before Michael could continue. He ushered his nephew away. "And everyone was better off for it."

"I'm her son," Will called over his uncle's shoulder, and he couldn't explain later why he said it except, embarrassingly, to remind himself of that fact. Whoever had birthed him and whoever Dana Katherine Scully would prove to ultimately be in his future, Sarah Van de Kamp would always be his mom. Maybe it was okay to have two moms. Maybe they would have liked each other, if they'd ever met, and maybe they would have appreciated the role the other had played in their son's life. He wouldn't know.

Michael the suit-wearing sports car driver pulled his sunglasses off and stared at William through deep eyes crowned with Ken-doll eyebrows. "No, you aren't."
That made Gary stop pushing Will away, and both uncle and nephew turned back to the visitor. "Excuse me?" Gary demanded.

"He can't be her son," Michael repeated, certain, annoyed by the claim. He frowned and pointed at Will with his sunglasses. "You're only saying that because of the money. Claiming to be Sarah's doesn't entitle you to my mother's money, you little punk."

"Don't you speak to my nephew like that," Gary retorted. Michael rolled his eyes, disbelieving.

"Sarah couldn't have children. She was infertile. That's what broke our relationship."

William stood, frozen and shocked by this confirmation from yet another source – he was not Sarah and Christiaan's natural son – as Uncle Gary strode back to the other man, seething.

"What broke your relationship was you leaving my sister traumatised and homeless," he snarled into Michael's face. "It had nothing to do with any children you may or may not have wanted. You were a pig of a boyfriend and I'm grateful to God she never married you."

"I left her because she left me," Michael retorted heatedly. "Two days out from our wedding, if you care to recall. And she didn't come back for a month."

"I don't blame her!"

"Where did she go?" William asked, shaken and intrigued by this window into Sarah Milne's life before she was Sarah Van de Kamp and his mother. He'd heard Gary on the phone to his friend about this. Sarah had disappeared for a time, and had come back with a scar on her neck. He'd looked for the same mark on her son and found nothing.

"Will, go inside," Uncle Gary instructed, and Will backed up, prepared to do as he was told, but stopped when Michael answered, spitefully.

"She claimed she was abducted," he sneered, getting in Gary's face with years of pent-up aggression. "She said they experimented on her, and then she started drawing these scribbles everywhere -"

"They're not scribbles," Will interrupted. "It's Navajo. It's a language."

"That's what her brother here tried to say," Michael said with a snarky laugh, "except where does a girl like Sarah learn Navajo? She could never read it or tell me what it said. From there she just started losing the plot, nightmares, sleepwalking, speaking in tongues, and everyone was talking about her; she had to leave town in the end, the crazy bitch -"

Later, Will told himself it was all Uncle Gary. Will's emotions surged just as Sarah's brother struck out at her uncaring ex and Michael was flung back onto the ground with unexpected force. The churned muck and snow of the yard actually splashed outward from where he landed, implying a takedown of some magnitude that did not match Gary's strength or the shove he had administered.

The idea that Will could have done anything to assist the weight of the blow was ludicrous. He hadn't moved from his spot. It was all Uncle Gary, who despite his own look of immense surprise, was clearly stronger than either of them had thought.

Michael stumbled back to his feet, flustered and embarrassed to have been knocked on his ass by the notably smaller man. Gary recovered first from the shock. He pointed at the fabulous sports car.
"Get the hell off my property before I find something to scratch that car of yours," he threatened, and Michael, taking an uneasy look around the yard and noting a pile of scrap wood palings with rusty nails still sticking out of them, backed down. He retreated, sneering over his shoulder.

"You'll regret ruining this suit," he mocked, trying to regain some of his bluster. "I'll tell the lawyer to donate Sarah's share to charity before I let either of you get your hands on it."

"We don't want your money," Gary and Will snapped back at the same time, and together they turned and strode into the house. Through the window, Will watched Michael's cool car try to speed away, forcibly slowed into unimpressiveness by its need to take the curves and bumps of the dirt driveway carefully.

"Wonder how much money it was?" Will mused. Gary shrugged, yanking off his boots and tossing them moodily into the corner. He stood and left the room, body tense and stiff.

"Don't care. Not worth it."

William soon heard the shower running for a while, and then heard Uncle Gary's bedroom door slam shut. Will got tidied up from the ride and went back to Taylah and Felicia's assignment. He'd gotten down almost a further page of raw text before Gary appeared at the door, clean, hair wet and tousled.

He looked highly uncomfortable.

"You, uh… want a sandwich?" he asked hopefully. Will wasn't hungry, but agreed, sensing his uncle's discomfort. In the kitchen they buttered bread in tense silence, Uncle Gary clearly wanting to bring up the altercation with Michael without getting too deep into the topics it led inevitably into, but not knowing how.

"Love lost or love never known?" William asked eventually, flicking open a drawer to grab a pen and a receipt to write up their tally on the back of. Gary looked up from the cold roast chicken he was tearing apart for his sandwich, interested by their game.

"Love never known," he decided. "You can't miss what you never had. You can't be hurt by the loss of something you never even knew."

"But how can you know you've truly lived if you've never loved, or never lost anything you wish back?" Will countered, putting the top slice of bread on top of his sandwich and starting to pack away their ingredients. The importance of playing devil's advocate in this game could not be overstated – regardless of his own position in the debate, it forced the other to truly defend their position and also poked any holes in the argument that could be poked. "How can you know the alternative isn't better? The only choice to make that is truly informed is to choose love lost. Then you know."

"Granted," Gary allowed, leaning back on the bench and starting on his sandwich. Around his mouthful he said, "But..." and chewed and swallowed, then continued, "if you chose the informed path and find it's the unhappy path, there's no going back to ignorance. If you love someone and lose them and you can't live with it, you might never be happy again, whereas if you never loved at all, maybe you're not as happy as those who do know love, but you don't know any better, so where's the harm? Happiness is relative."

"Love never known mightn't be blissful," Will pointed out, preparing to step carefully on unsteady metaphorical ground under the cover of the game. "It could come with its own questions and wistful hopes of living to see that unattainable possibility. Just because you never knew love
doesn't automatically mean you won't desire it. Not knowing could be frustrating and challenging in its own way."

Gary missed the gentle allusion to the family secrets and kept playing. "Perhaps. Ignorance can't be assumed to be synonymous with bliss. But wanting love can be experienced alongside a perfectly functional and fulfilling life. Loss is all-consuming."

William nodded and pondered as he chewed his own sandwich. True, he wanted answers and wanted to know Dana Katherine Scully but could still live happily enough in the meantime. After he lost his mother, was he this functional? Was Gary?

"Ignorance can't be assumed to be bliss and loss can't be assumed to be darkness eternal, either," Will posited when he swallowed. "You and I survived loss."

"For the clarification of the argument, let's classify the love in question as one-true-love love," Gary suggested. "The sickening fateful magnetic stuff. The whole debate falls over otherwise. Everyone loses some love in their lifetime and no one could survive into a stable adulthood without experiencing some form of love in their formative years."

"Alright," Will agreed, putting his metaphorical weight forward into the debate with, "but Mom survived whatever went down in her break-up with that Michael douche."

The conflicted, helpless, stormy look – William had seen the expression on his uncle's face before. Gary paused, recognising now that his nephew had picked this debate on purpose. He took a quiet bite of sandwich and thought, visibly hard.

"That wasn't the one-true-love love we're talking about," he said finally, slowly. "Sarah was young and he had charisma. Losing him was no real loss. She understood that later on, when she found Christiaan."

"Who was her one-true-love love," Will jumped in, releasing his uncle from the topic by steering the conversation back, "and she lost him and still survived."

Gary was clearly relieved by the return to the debate. "Survived physically, for a time, yes, but she wasn't the same."

"But do you think she ever wished she'd never met him at all? Then they wouldn't have had me," Will said precisely, and Gary looked up from his food to meet his eyes. Both gazes were wholly steady, cool. Gary had to know what Will was alluding to. For a long moment, too long to pretend didn't happen, both were silent. Then Will deliberately broke it, lacing back into the debate, "I think she must have been glad for the love lost in Michael so she'd know to appreciate what she found in Dad."

"Again, Michael Kearney wasn't any sort of love worth including in our debate, but I concede to that example. You win," Uncle Gary said, perhaps accelerating the conclusion of the debate to stop discussing the awkward topics attached, crossing the kitchen to mark off Will's win. "Still, I maintain that some things are better not known."

There was an innate curiosity inside William, a strong pull toward knowing that he could never explain or quantify, and that curiosity recoiled at Uncle Gary's claim. He watched his uncle record the result of the first round before asking, bluntly, "Next one: a harsh truth or a white lie?"

Gary straightened, sighing. He looked down at his undersized nephew.

"Will-"
"What happened to Mom?" Will interrupted staunchly. "He said she disappeared. Did she run away?"

"You can't just drop it?"

"You asked me down here to pretend to eat sandwiches so we could talk, didn't you?"

Another sigh. "I suppose." Gary considered the boy for a long moment. "I don't know all the details. Will you accept that before I say anything else?"

Will nodded. That was fair, and probably true, and would allow Uncle Gary to omit details he didn't feel comfortable discussing.

"Sarah was meant to marry Michael," Gary said slowly, carefully. "None of us wanted her to. He was always a dick," he claimed, and Will snorted in amusement, which helped Gary to relax slightly. "Then, two days before the ceremony, she disappeared. She didn't tell anyone she was going. Their place was untouched, and we couldn't find anything missing to indicate she had packed bags or whatever. Michael thought she had run away." He scratched his head here, clearly not happy discussing this. "His mom was worried sick about Sarah and helped me and our parents look for her. Nothing for weeks. Then suddenly… she just turned up. She'd woken up in the nearest hospital to our house with no memory, apparently, of what had happened to her."

"And the Navajo started after that," William stated quietly, putting down the sandwich. "And she had the scar on her neck. That's why you freaked out at Christmastime."

Gary shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what happened to her. She started remembering things but we never confirmed whether it was real. Doctors, white light, experiments. And she did start writing in Navajo; my friend Dennis recognised it. It all sounded crazy, like Michael says, except he lost his patience with her once the memories started surfacing so he threw her out a few months after she got back. I don't know," he said again. "It did sound insane, but she was my sister and she was in such a state – she didn't need questioning."

"She just needed someone to believe her," Will guessed.

"She needed someone to leave it alone," Gary disagreed. "She was so scared. She didn't know what was happening to her, and everyone in our town was talking about her. It's true, she had to leave. We both did. It was horrible." He regarded his nephew. "And… yeah, Sarah did suffer from fertility problems…"

It was obvious that this was the hardest part of all to talk about. Gary had never asked to be a parent and had never agreed on a plan with Sarah for gentle disclosure of the nature of Will's adoption. It wasn't fair. This shouldn't be Gary's responsibility.

"Yet here I am," Will said firmly, unwilling to torture his uncle any further. Gary stared at him, unsure. "She must have found a way around it, right?"

"Right," Sarah's brother answered cautiously. Trying to read Will's true meaning. His nephew pushed on, avoiding the topic.

"When you saw the symbols in my Biology book," he queried, "you got worried the townsfolk would run me out of town, too?"

"If I'm lucky," Gary retorted, and they both grinned weakly at each other, the tension broken. The uncle sighed again and took another bite out of his sandwich. When he swallowed, he said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you this stuff before. I've never known how to talk about it. I don't really know
what the hell happened. It seemed easier to leave it in the past. If Michael the dickbag hadn't rocked up today we might never have discussed it."

"It's okay. It shouldn't have been your job." Will enjoyed the peaceful silence between them for a while, staring at the sandwich on the countertop, listening to his uncle chew. Then he added, "And I shouldn't have instigated things with Michael."

"Mr Dickbag, please, Will," Uncle Gary corrected seriously. "Use proper titles when you're referring to other adults."

"Right, sorry. I should have gone inside when you said."

"Ah, well," Uncle Gary said, forgiving instantly. He stretched, tired out from the ride today. "You should have, but whatever. Things weren't going to go down simply with him anyway. It never did before. And it's probably psychologically healthy for us both that we've had this conversation."

Will picked up his sandwich and resumed eating it. He said, around a mouthful of bread, "Seeing you knock him on his ass was even better than seeing you mustering, just so you know."

"Yeah, I don't know where that came from," Gary admitted, flexing his fingers as though feeling for the strength his hands had displayed earlier. He wasn't brawny or toughened, except by the years spent struggling to play the role of farmer. "I've been wanting to do it for twenty-five years, though."

"Long overdue," Will reasoned. He paused again. "We probably could have used that money, huh?"

"Yeah, probably wouldn't have hurt for me to play a little nicer. But trust me, we're better off homeless than accepting money from scum like that," Uncle Gary insisted. "There'd be strings, or he'd make it damn hard for us to access it. He was always like that with Sarah. He acts now like he cared about her but he never loved her, not really." His next words stuck with Will for months. "You don't abandon someone you love."

It was late that night, once he'd completed Taylah and Felicia's assignment and emailed it to them, that he sat on the floor of his bedroom and pulled the box out from under his bed. Adoption certificate. Unread letter from Sarah Van de Kamp to Dana Scully. Communication from a specialist assuring Sarah that little William was perfectly healthy. Some of the photos and news articles he'd downloaded and printed from the Lone Gunmen archive site. In the yellowy light of his lamp he looked at the photo of Special Agent Scully at a crime scene in the late nineties. Red hair like his, milky white complexion, small stature. "His mother. You don't abandon someone you love."

He had no explanation for why she'd given him up, and he'd determined exactly how he would get them, but now his confidence in his plan was shaken. The words he kept hearing in his head in her voice – what guarantee was there she would have those words to say to him when he turned up uninvited, unexpected, at her door in D.C.? Maybe she didn't love him at all. Maybe that was why she'd abandoned him.

Sarah had lost her one-true-love but had carried on with life so she would be there for her son. She hadn't left him by choice.

Gary had given up his life in his hometown to stick with his outcast sister. He'd dropped everything to take care of her when she got sick. And he'd left his career, life and livelihood to be here for
Uncle Gary had never abandoned anyone he loved. The two of them argued sometimes but Will knew his uncle loved him completely. How else to explain why he had stuck around all these years, mustering against his will, keeping his sister's secrets about her son's parentage? He had gone above and beyond what should have been expected of him as a brother and an uncle.

What harsh truths could Dana Katherine Scully offer that outweighed the loving white lies that characterised the Milne-Van de Kamp family? And what good did Will hope to achieve by shattering her life with the harsh truth that she'd abandoned her son to a mother and father he would soon lose?

It was kinder to leave her alone.

Life is weird, and priorities are weirder, but priorities change. It was without a second thought that Will slipped the eighty dollars into his uncle's wallet the next morning, and he never brought it up. When Gary commented with surprise that he had more cash on him than he'd thought, Will only blinked. A white lie, sometimes, could be better than truth.
Virology is the study of viruses and their behaviour, which is generally a patterned, predetermined and predictable life cycle of excessive multiplication. Like all living things, they follow anticipated rules, right down to their DNA.

How is a virologist meant to react when a virus pops up that follows all but the most fundamental of its rules? When its very *makeup* is impossible?

And how does one go about *curing* it?

"God-fucking-damn it," Harlow sighed, peeling off her gloves so she could plop her chin into her hands and lean on the bench with her elbows, staring in bewildered amazement at the test results. The *fourth round* of test results. The answers were still the same. They were still impossible. They still blew her mind with the implications. "Dr Scully and Mr Mulder, who the hell are you people?" Because you're far from fucking funny if that's what you were aiming for.

She was a scientist from a family of even better scientists and knew that the likeliness of these results being wrong in the *exact* same way four times was perfectly ridiculous, but still found it hard to wrap her head around not only the results, but the fact that two mysterious figures had approached her out of the blue claiming to have dealt with this substance before… and they were, what? *Not* traumatised? *Not* screaming this incredible, impossible, certain truth from the rooftops? *Not* on the news every day calmly explaining to the masses how they and their super-team were handling this situation?

They were assholes, clearly. Jokers. There was no other explanation that made any sense. They’d faked the serious covert conversations and tricked Harlow into believing she was in on something real. That was why nobody else was popping up to confirm their story.

For the millionth time, as soon as she assured herself of this theory, her eyes fell back to the test results, and the theory cracked – because how does one fake *that*?

It had to be real, and Scully and Mulder had to be truth-seekers fighting the oppression Harlow herself had succumbed to. Her experience with Pierce and the internal hush-up of her own aborted investigation into the Engel family deaths suggested that perhaps Scully and Mulder had simply learned to be careful – people in dark places could do dark things to people who stumbled across truths, and Dr Scully had alluded to having been silenced before – and that would seem sensible,
but honestly, could these two be the only ones who knew something as incredible as this? Surely, there had to be others.

Or had been others...

Or… even worse, perhaps… this was exactly what logic dictated, and it was all part of an elaborate and unfair joke at her expense, because this was not possible.

"Are you in here? Natty?"

Sigh. The cycle of frustrated thinking was broken by the worst distraction imaginable. They say when a boy pulls your hair or teases you or otherwise marginalises you as a female, it means he likes you. But that's a lie. All it means is that guy's an asshole.

Exhibit A, Dr Cameron Wells. This particular fuckface was technically a scientist assigned to the Federal DNA Database Unit that Harlow usually wished she properly belonged to, but less technically and more accurately, he was a scientist in a more senior position, with a condescending smile she fantasised about punching whenever she pushed for review of her transfer paperwork delay and he blithely promised to follow it up.

Natalie Harlow tried very hard not to verbalise even half of what she thought.

"Wondered where you'd gotten to. What are you doing here?" Dr Wells asked in a voice drenched with boredom, striding into the lab she'd booked out for the day with a clipboard and without knocking. She'd casually turned over the top page of her test results when she heard his stupid voice. There was no risk he'd spot her priceless treasure, stashed under the counter in a small refrigeration unit that she always referred to as a bar fridge. A small insulated polystyrene container she'd hidden over the back of the fridge of whichever room she was in, every work day of the past three weeks.

"Tests," she replied flatly, straightening up and fixing him with a look of challenge. The fuck's it to you? "Were you looking for me?"

Dr Wells wasn't man enough to hold her gaze. He dropped his eyes to the pages in front of her and jerked his chin at them, suspicious and authoritative. "I didn't commission any tests."

Harlow smiled thinly, holding her ground.

"I didn't say they were for you," she responded, tone cool enough to be antagonistic. She gathered the pages up and Wells took an awkward, affronted step forward. She'd been reasonably pliable at FDDU up until these past few weeks. He didn't know how to manage a woman who answered back, which was generally what she was. "A doctor out of DC asked me to corroborate some results independently for another investigation."

He stopped.

"Ah. That was nice of DC to ask you." Cameron Wells had looked mildly uncomfortable about getting into an argument with her, not having realised it was an option when barging in here uninvited, but now relaxed, smirking a little. He returned his attention to his clipboard rather than offer it to her. "Sometimes it takes a bit to get into the swing of things when you're out of practice, hey? Just as long as it doesn't get in the way of your other tasks. When you get back downstairs, be a sweetheart and find us the Jennings workup from Tuesday, Natty?"

Assigned to inventory at FDDU, she was responsible for organising and cataloguing the samples, evidence and paperwork that went through the department, but her job description did not include
fetching for assholes. Dr Wells seemed not to have been told. He treated her like a gofer, and like she should be grateful to be involved; many of the others had taken to doing the same as a result. After all, she was usually stuck in the storeroom anyway, and could certainly find things more quickly than anyone else, so familiar was she with the cataloguing system. And while she was equally as qualified as he or anyone else on his team, she seemed to differ in his eyes. She apparently didn't deserve the title she'd earned at university – she got Natty, as if she'd ever indicated she liked the stupid nickname and as if she'd ever given anyone permission to start giving her pet names, while everyone else next door got Dr Avery and Dr Oswald and whatnot. Like she was the help, instead of the wasted resource improperly assigned to a glorified cupboard. For a long time she'd let it slide, thinking glumly that she deserved it for her own stupidity and recklessness on that aborted first case. But now she understood what this was – a punishment, a prison – and knew there was a lesson to be learned.

If Dr Scully was to be believed, the lesson to be learned here was of her own choosing, and she did not choose to lay down and be walked over anymore.

"Third shelf, fourth row back, under J," Harlow replied. "Help yourself, Cammy. I'm done for the day."

She waved goodbye with the test results and neated them on the benchtop while Dr Wells stared at her, and she smiled benignly back. Just willing him to try her. He was one of a thousand things about her situation here that pissed her off, and mostly, she tried not to let any of it stir her into saying something regrettable, but increasingly since Dr Scully turned up here last month she'd been finding it hard to hold her tongue.

Wells had nothing, and turned abruptly and left. Harlow was certain she would pay for her insolence in an increased level of hostility in the coming days, but whatever. What more could he do? Initially, and for the majority of the past eighteen months, she'd stepped very lightly, professionally winded by the demotion and not wanting to risk more serious consequences. She could just imagine her father's disappointed expression, one she'd seen a million times but still dreaded, and the words: Your sisters have never been fired… Like a reminder of their impossible standard would help her out of the situation she'd fallen into over the Engel case Pierce had fished her out of. Since Dr Scully's visit, however, her fears had begun to dissolve. If they were going to fire her, wouldn't they have already?

"Asshole," she muttered when she was alone. She knelt in front of the not-bar-fridge and fished around the back between vials of other people's important samples for her secret substance, stashed safely in an insulated polystyrene box. "I'll sweetheart you, motherfucker." She took care not to slam the box down on the counter; instead she snatched her leather jacket from the back of her chair and shrugged it on roughly, taking her anger out on an item that could handle the aggression.

Stupid Wells. Stupid her, for not seeing it before. He was one of the gatekeepers responsible for her internment here. For a year and a half, he'd been part of a joint effort to make her feel useless. Neglecting to address her as Dr Harlow. Refusing to give her eye contact. Failing to take an interest in her transfer hiccoughs. Quoting policy to avoid letting her near any instrumentation or evidence with which she could prove herself talented and skilled. Never once asking for her opinion or offering any positive feedback. Little acts that in isolation should be shrugged off, but as a collective, formed a pattern as distinctive as any virus. This particular virus had slowly, maliciously paralysed its host, leaving Harlow useless and empty, a drone; until Harlow had been told, essentially, that she had the cure. Had had it all along. She wondered now who had asked or even paid Wells to chip away at her.

Spite seemed appropriate.
Because if this was real, this was *so much bigger* than she'd ever suspected.

Harlow shook her head in dizzy disbelief as she grabbed her backpack from the corner and pondered the findings, the four-times-confirmed findings, of her testing. She hadn't yet spoken to Dr Scully out of DC, preferring to have some progress to boast before she did. She'd sneaked out of FDDU whenever she thought she wouldn't be noticed to undertake her own tests on the viral substance she'd managed to extricate from the anonymous bloods Mr Mulder had given to her in the gym car park. Better to know what you're working with, right, rather than to simply wait for Dr Scully's workups and take her science and her word for it?

Maybe not. This shit clumped into an oozy black sludge against the glass wall of the tiny vial when she let it sit too long. It couldn't be prompted to reproduce. Its genetic makeup was total nonsense. Harlow didn't feel like she was in a *more* informed state now than she was before she started. She wondered whether Dr Wells knew the *real* reason he was tasked with humiliating her into silent uselessness? Probably thought it was a favour for that dipshit Pierce. Probably thought it was part of a joke. Definitely not a cover-up of an earth-shattering secret. Because what the *f*uck, Dr Scully, were you dropping me into when you came and saw me?!

Carefully, she buried the latest test results at the bottom and packed the polystyrene box into the bag on top of them, packing wallet, tissues and whatever else around it to keep it steady. She did this every day. When she came to work, the box came, too. When she went home, it came along for the ride, and spent each night in her refrigerator at home. She had not been without it since Fox Mulder gave it to her outside the gym three weeks ago.

She was taking no chances this time around. Not without knowing what she was dealing with.

She twisted her scarf around her neck, slung her backpack over a shoulder and grabbed her helmet out from under the counter. She'd brought everything with her into the lab today, unwilling to go back through the Database Unit, pretty convinced of what the test results would say and not wanting to have to talk to anyone after the shock. Stupid Wells interfering with her plan for solitude.

The last thing she did before leaving was turn off the computers, wiping their browsing histories and saving her digitised results to the USB stick around her neck. No chances. The whole rebuilt Engel case was safely on this one drive. Many late nights and cancelled family dinners had been well-spent on re-familiarising herself with the evidence from the first time around. The side-effect was broken sleep, as hours of staring at the photos of the dead family curled up in their final fatal positions surfaced in her dreams.

The dreams were frightful but did not do anything but make her more determined. The gruesome, decomposing figures in her nightmares were innocent people, a father and mother and their two children, murdered in their home, their deaths *lied about* by people within their own government. Their surviving loved ones knew this. Harlow was their voicebox, and she'd been silent for too long.

And there were others. She had been hand-delivered bloods from a new victim. More lies, more *Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome* bullshit. If this was a joke, it was a very poor one, and whenever the conflict between *it's a big-ass joke on me and this is some scary shit!* exploded in her mind and frustrated her into almost throwing the stupid vials at the wall, she kept coming back to that: if this was a joke, it was in bad taste, but if it wasn't… she wasn't prepared to not act, and couldn't bring herself to walk away.

With that thought she drew her phone and the worn business card from her pocket. It was brand new when she was given it, but how many times had she transferred it from one pair of jeans to the
next day's jacket, into her lab coat, back out to stare at it and wonder whether today she should call, shoved it into her bag when someone came past, gotten it out at home and pinned it to the fridge with a magnet, taken it down the next day and held in her hand the whole afternoon sitting at her table going over the impossible first, second and third test results, trying to decide whether to call?

Today, she called.

She'd tried to give it some time between her meeting with one before approaching the other – Mr Mulder had insisted she ensure nobody connect the dots that this sample came from him – but she was at the extreme stretch of her ability to understand and to believe.

The called connected.

"Scully."

Such an efficient and impersonal greeting. The doctor meant business, and expected calls made to her cell to be straightforward and worth her time. Harlow swallowed, hoping her call would meet the older agent's expectations.

"Dr Scully, this is Agent Natalie Harlow," she began as she strode down the hall toward the elevators. "We met last month at Quantico."

There was a pause.

"I remember," Dr Scully replied, voice slow and dry. Of course she remembered; she'd initiated the conversation. Duh, Natalie. "I've been looking forward to hearing from you."

That was a welcome surprise. No one in the Bureau ever looked forward to hearing from pain-in-the-ass complainer Harlow. "I was hoping I could see you to go over some… things."

Again Scully paused. When she spoke, her voice was careful. Harlow wondered suddenly who she was with, who was listening. She'd never wondered much about that sort of thing before but since being found by a strange man with two phone calls to ignorant acquaintances and a long-forgotten MySpace profile photo she was increasingly cautious. Dr Scully said, "Certainly. Today? I'm in a meeting at the moment but I can meet you afterwards. How quickly can you be on the road?"

"I can leave now," Harlow said, jabbing the elevator call button awkwardly with the same hand that grasped her helmet. "I'll be-

"Excellent, I'll see you when you get here," Dr Scully cut her off, and hung up. The elevator arrived and Harlow lowered her phone to stare at the screen. I think I might be in possession of evidence of extra-terrestrial life being used by human players to interfere with human activity and commit murder, says Natalie. Oh, lovely, come on over and we'll chat, says Dana. What was this?

The parking lot was full of other agents' cars. Modern makes, clean windows, subdued colours, super-safe, boring. Harlow passed Dr Wells' new Jetta and as usual, only refrained from keying the shiny white door because she knew she was on camera.

Sleek and cool as fuck, Harlow's black Ducati 848 was chilling all alone in a car space, kickstand out majestically like it casually knew it deserved the extra room. Often she came out to retrieve the bike and found visitors to the building admiring it or taking photos. She enjoyed their surprise when she fessed up to being its owner. Definitely, it was her most beloved possession, her most expensive investment beyond her education, which she couldn't take full credit for because her parents had paid for her college degree and put her through private schools. The superbike was the expensive cheer-up gift she'd given herself when she was dumped in inventory for CODIS, and
these last couple of weeks, she'd appreciated it even more, even if her father still couldn't look at it. Such a waste of good money. Your sisters didn't throw their money away on a stupid bike. No, they put their good money into house deposits, and now enjoyed lifelong commitments to piles of bricks on slabs of grass and dirt with leaky taps to maintain and fences to paint. Harlow preferred her bike.

At almost 400 pounds when it was full of gas, the bike was quite the beast, and Harlow made a concerted effort to never let it fall over. She fixed her backpack onto her shoulders properly, zipped up her jacket and pulled her helmet on, clipping the chinstrap securely, before she took hold of the handlebars and swung her leg over the seat. Holding the machine upright took a lot of strength, enough that it used to keep her returning to the gym in her shitty little car with her gym gear thrown in the back most afternoons. Since meeting Mr Mulder there, she'd suspended her membership. She didn't like being parted from the virus, even for a gym session, and she didn't want to see him again – she still suspected he was making fun of her.

The bike kicked into life with a satisfying growl, and rumbled low and impressive as it warmed up. Harlow nudged the kickstand away and gave the engine a few revs. Her life was a knot of restrictions and constraints put on her by liars and pretenders, but when she was on the Ducati, she could get fast enough to outrun them. She held the handlebars steady as she started forward and got her feet off the ground. She scanned her pass at the boom gate and sped out into the afternoon sun.

She didn't have to speed to feel like she was flying on this thing. Exposed to open air and with nothing between her visor and the road, everything felt closer, faster, more dangerous, and she knew it was. And she loved that most of all. The daily dose of danger, just enough to keep her from losing her mind at her joke of a workplace. That, and the bonus of agility. In crappy gridlocked traffic, she simply skimmed up the gap left between lanes, twisting and turning between stopped or slow vehicles.

The FBI's Washington offices were within sight soon enough, and she was back in a parking garage. There were more staff here, more officey types in their lame officey cars, and she had to do a few noisy laps before she found a free space. She was oddly pleased when she saw that she was going to be leaving her awesome bike beside what had to be the coolest car in this whole parking lot, a glossy classic Corvette.

Nice to know she wasn't the only federal employee splurging her hard-earned good money on sweet rides.

Harlow backed the bike into the space carefully, always hyper-aware of the machine's impossible weight, and the young driver of the Corvette climbed out of his car to watch her. When she disengaged the engine and snapped out the kickstand, she heard him whistle appreciatively.

"Nice bike," he commented admiringly, voice muffled to her ear by the helmet.

"Thanks," she replied, just as muffled. She tugged her riding gloves off and tucked them under her arm, then used her now-free fingers to unhitch her chinstrap. She pulled the helmet off, freeing her long ponytail and shaking it quickly to give some life back to the compressed strands. She bumped her dislodged glasses back onto her nose with her arm and grinned quickly at the young suit. "Nice car." She meant it. It was gorgeous, and in excellent condition. "What year is that?"

The young man seemed surprised by her interest, and then looked pleased, appreciating a woman who knew a nice car when she saw it, and he grinned back. "1974. Most of her's still original, except for the transmission. And I'm still having trouble with that, even after replacing it." He was gazing at her bike again as she swung off it. "What year is that? 2011?"
"Close. 2012," Harlow corrected. Mr Corvette nodded appreciatively and moved around the long bonnet of his car to better admire the Ducati. Harlow dismounted as gracefully as she could manage, aware of the audience, and backed away a bit so they were standing together where they could properly admire both vehicles. "I love it but sometimes I feel like I'm going to work every day so I can afford to pay the insurance."

Mr Corvette laughed knowingly. She could only imagine the frightful insurance bill he had to meet for his beautiful ride. "How fast have you gotten her to go?"

"Depends. Are you a traffic cop?" Harlow teased, shuffling the helmet and gloves between her hands and arms in an attempt to get enough dexterity in her movements to pocket her key. Mr Corvette automatically took the helmet without a word, and she smiled gratefully, tucking her key into her jacket pocket and zipping it closed. "Thanks." She nodded at the ID badge hidden behind the helmet, clipped to the front of his tidy jacket. "So long as you're not in any department that's going to jump me for confessing."

"Not a traffic cop," he assured her, giving the helmet back and offering his hand. "Warren Colt, Counterterrorism agent and vehicle enthusiast."

Helmet wedged back under her arm, she shook his hand, liking him and his friendly demeanour. From his appearance she'd expected a more Italian-sounding name, but wasn't that surprised, being a similar case herself, Vietnamese-American with a very English name. She'd more than once met someone for the first time and had them comment, "I thought you'd be white."

Yep, welcome to 2016.

"In that case, I got up to 140 once, in the dark, but it scared the fuck out of me and I haven't been brave enough to get that fast again."

Colt grinned. "And I wouldn't think that's even its top speed."

"I've seen footage of them above 170 miles an hour," Harlow agreed, starting toward the entry lifts. Colt locked his car and jogged a few steps to catch up with her.

"You could take it to a track if you wanted to get some decent stretches of straight," he suggested, opening his jacket to stash his keys away, "but at those sorts of speeds, even a long straight would run out pretty quick. Have you been? To a track?"

"No, I've thought about it. Some friends want to do a race day one weekend."

"Do it," Colt encouraged. "It could be fun."

"Oh, it would be, I'm sure," Harlow agreed, "until I lose a race. I'm mildly competitive," she admitted, casting a smile over at him. "Have you taken the Corvette? They have classic car races, don't they, that you can enter?"

Colt laughed again. She liked the sound of it, a genuine sound that wasn't at her expense. "I'd be asked to pull over and let everyone overtake me. She wouldn't handle speeds like that. You ever want an easy race, give me a call – I'm a good sport, my ego can wear a day of losing."

Harlow sniggered, enjoying his sense of humour. She glanced at him when he stopped at the elevator doors and pressed the button, realising that she was involved in natural conversation with a fellow federal agent that didn't centre on work or what someone else wanted her to do for them. Here was somebody who didn't know who she was, didn't think she was worthless or a waste of space. Just a friendly, nice guy who hadn't heard of her or how he was supposed to act around her.
"Are you visiting someone here today?" he asked when the conversation lulled comfortably. The door opened to an empty carriage and he gestured for her to step inside ahead of him. He followed and pushed the button for the doors to close.

"Sort of," Harlow agreed vaguely, squinting through her glasses and leaning past him to read the departments and their levels. From here they could only get to the higher parking levels and the ground level for entry. "I'm assigned at Quantico, but I'm checking in today with an agent on a similar case."

To confirm she isn't playing with me like a cat flicks a gasping goldfish around for fun.

"Oh, really?" Colt took an even deeper interest, realising she was a colleague. He'd been so friendly up until now that it seemed impossible that he hadn't known – at FDDU she was considered less than a colleague, just the help, and she wouldn't get this much direct, polite attention in a whole week over there. Colt was young, younger than she was and much younger than anyone in her department, yet apparently many times more decent a human being than anybody she encountered on a daily basis. "What do you do?"

Cupboard duties. "I work at the Federal DNA Database Unit," Harlow explained, skipping the lamest majority of the truth, wanting to make a good impression. "My doctorate was in virology and immunology."

Colt was suitably impressed. "Very cool." The lift slowly bore them upwards, the levels lighting up as they passed them. "I envy the discipline it must take to put yourself through so many years of study. My partner's the same, painfully qualified." He flashed Harlow a quick grin, and she grinned back. "I just did what I had to do to get into the army, one proper tour and then back again and enrolled in the Academy-"

"Oh, and you envy other people's discipline?" Harlow laughed. "I can't imagine that my understanding of the word even comes close to yours."

Colt shrugged humbly. "I am very good at folding my socks properly and standing still." The lift neared their destination level and he tactfully prepared to end the conversation. "Well, I hope your meeting goes well. It was lovely to meet you today, Dr…?"

She realised she hadn't introduced herself. "Dr Harlow. Natalie," she corrected, because he was nice. Nice people were allowed her first name.

The doors started to open and she expected another handshake but Colt surprised her by slamming a hand onto the buttons of the lift, telling the doors to shut. They shuddered in the process of opening, then slid shut again. The carriage hung in suspended silence.

"You're Agent Harlow?" Colt asked, brown eyes wide. She frowned, withdrawing slightly to step into the corner of the elevator carriage. Her overactive imagination took hold. You're the joke? You're the stupid one who really believes she's in on a super-serious world-class spy-shit secret? You're the one so distracted wondering whether she's lost in a James Bond film she hasn't noticed she's been lulled into a false sense of security?

"What's it to you?" she asked suspiciously, the friendly back and forth of a moment ago broken. "How have you heard of me?"

"You're here to see Agent Scully." A statement, not a question. He was staring at her like he'd only just properly noticed her and he was clearly thinking hard about what to do next.
A million paranoid thoughts flew through her head. Was everyone in the Bureau in on the joke that was marginalising Harlow? Had someone worked out what she was carrying into the Hoover building and sent Colt to intercept her? Was her trust in Scully and later Mulder misplaced, and had they tricked her into bringing this package here at the behest of whoever murdered the Engels?

Harlow refused to confirm Colt's last statement, but he didn't seem to need it. His hand was still on the 'doors close' button and he was still thinking, looking conflicted. Slowly, he dropped his hand and seemed to come to an uneasy decision.

"Agent Scully is my partner," he said finally. Harlow scoffed, mildly afraid of him now despite their initial ease with each other. Military guy, tall, unexpectedly knowledgeable. And she was alone with him in a lift with the virus in her backpack and her whole case hanging around her neck. Stupid, stupid, she should never have been drawn into conversation with him. Military guy, tall, unexpectedly knowledgeable. And she was alone with him in a lift with the virus in her backpack and her whole case hanging around her neck.

"How do I know I can trust you?" Harlow retorted, watching cautiously as he now pressed for the doors to open. Without killing her or directing her attention to a waiting Punk'd crew out in the hall. He gestured her out, gentlemanly, and she did as she was bid unconsciously. He looked uncertain for a moment, then tried again, tentatively. "You opened the Engel case. That's how I know your name. But we can't talk about that here," he added quickly, hitting the 'close' button once more when the doors shuddered again. "I'll take you to see Agent Scully."

"You don't, I guess," he admitted, walking beside her as they made their way through the security checks, showing badges and putting their bags through the X-ray machines. "But I'm going out on a limb and trusting you." He met her gaze briefly. "I hope that's the right thing to do."

Harlow hadn't considered that he would see her as a threat. He went ahead, less to show than she did. She unpacked her pockets and took off her boots so she could step through the man-sized metal detector, attention still stuck with the bag moving slowly through the X-ray machine.

The technicians stopped the conveyor belt.

"Madam, can you explain this?"

They were pointing at the screen, showing the unidentified organic material in her backpack. Harlow hadn't planned a response. She stood there with her boots in her hands, unsettled. The waiting stares were unrelenting.

"Over here, please," a security agent requested firmly, gesturing with the metal detector wand when she didn't move immediately off to the side. What would happen once they opened up her bag? They wouldn't take the samples, would they? Where would she be without Mulder's virus? Back to square one with no solid evidence. "Open the bag, please."

"No, it's quarantined."

Colt returned to her side. He flashed his badge again and authoritatively explained that it was "Evidence in a possible bio-terror investigation. Not to be disturbed or shaken. We've cleared it with Assistant Director Skinner, if you need someone to call to check."

Harlow held her breath while the security agent deliberated. She hadn't considered this very well at all. At Quantico, nobody questioned a virologist walking in with organic material in a polystyrene box. It was a pretty common occurrence at the scientific facility. The Washington offices had only a basic lab setup and few science staff, not to mention a more concerning political environment surrounding its premises. Security had well-justified fears.
"That's fine," security decided, noticing the line building up behind Harlow and Colt. "See to it next time that Mr Skinner sends us a copy of the clearance, alright?"

Colt nodded and Harlow snatched up her bag, trying not to clutch it too protectively against her chest as they carried on. Her new acquaintance looped an arm through the open visor of her helmet and brought it with them, walking tall and straight like the military man he said he used to be. She glanced back at him discreetly as they passed on through the remainder of the security checks unhindered.

"Must be nice to have friends in high places," she commented in a low voice when she sat down to pull her shoes back on. Agent Colt let out a tense breath and she realised the authority she'd heard in his demeanour was put-on.

"Must be," he agreed in the same tone. "I wouldn't know. It's my partner with all the big connections."

His 'painfully qualified' partner, Agent Dana Scully. It was a shift in mental imagery for Harlow to believe that this was the case, but only because she'd met Fox Mulder in the parking lot and he'd called himself her partner. He had said was, he was her partner for nine years, but she'd just connected the two in her head and not anticipated that there was anyone else so close to the situation.

Well, she'd wondered if anyone else knew about the virus situation. Her hands tightened on the bag straps. Was Colt in on it with the older two? Did he know what they were up against? She had to assume he had a pretty good idea—he'd helped get her clear of security when the substance had come to the attention of the guards, no questions asked, and he had voiced concerns that she might be the untrustworthy one. But had he done that because he was a friend, or because he was one of the enemy?

Was Warren Colt one of them, or one of them?

"Pays to note which names she drops," he added, leading her into one of the passages off the security foyer. Harlow followed reluctantly, unsure whether it would be wisest to do so. "One of the advantages of having a mentor as experienced and savvy as she is." He took his phone from inside his jacket and began to compose a message. "I'm letting her know you're here."

Letting someone know, anyway. Harlow thought of the case files compiled on the USB stick against her breastbone. She thought of the virus sample hidden in her backpack. She thought of the dozens of unique memories of the Engel investigation that she alone possessed and which would be gone from the world if she was killed.

"If anything happens to me," she blurted suddenly, lengthening her stride to catch up to him, "everything I know will be released to the media." She couldn't imagine how she might have supposedly set something like this up in so short a time, but it was the first lame movie line that jumped to mind.

Colt looked back at her, surprised and alarmed. "If something happens to you? You're worried about me? That's a first." He stopped at another elevator and pressed 'down'. He held out his phone for her to look at the screen, and she leaned forward to read, still suspicious. The addressee, Dana Scully; the latest message was Got Dr Harlow with me, meet you at B? The logical desire to stay cautious of him cracked a little to see that even in shorthand text messages, he gave her the Dr part of her name. "Satisfied?" He put the phone away and the lift arrived. Again, he gestured her in. She went unwillingly.
"What's B?" she asked. His answer was his action – he pressed the same letter with his knuckle. The lift began down. "The basement? And I'm not meant to suspect you of wanting to kill me?"

"I don't want to kill you," he replied irritably. "I don't want any part of this."

Colt's words hit her oddly. Harlow leaned back against the opposite wall and regarded him cautiously. He couldn't have been with the FBI for long, only in his mid-twenties or so. He wasn't old enough to have even been an agent at the time she'd been disgraced, so there was no connection there between what he knew and the initial case. He had to have read about it later or been told about it, as he said. He'd had a dozen opportunities to hurt her if that was his intention, when they were alone together in the parking lot and now in two lifts. He had made no grab for her backpack and was carrying her heavy helmet – it would make a great weapon if he wanted to strike her.

He wanted no part of this. Harlow raised her bag slightly to draw his attention to it.

"You know what's in here," she stated, testing a theory. Colt didn't even look. He held her gaze, meeting her challenge. Nobody at FDDU gave her eye contact for sustained periods.

"I have an idea," he responded, "and I don't want confirmation."

"Is it a joke?" She didn't mean for her voice to come out as childish as it did. He frowned, momentarily annoyed by her question, but hesitated on the tone of her voice. He seemed to realise her question was serious.

"No," he said finally. "None of it is particularly funny."

Lightly, she slipped her arm through the strap of the bag and slung it loosely over one shoulder. She had liked Colt instantly, but now, through the slow thaw of her suspicion, she felt like she connected with something more of him than just a shared interest in performance vehicles. He had seen the same test results she had, or some other evidence just as compelling, and he knew, and his reaction was so freaking relatable. Denial. Refusal to engage. Not like Dr Scully and Mr Mulder, breezing through life with this knowledge like it ain't no thang. Like they could handle it.

Colt was real. Colt was like her.

She dropped the hostility and tried instead to trust. She found with him, it wasn't hard. "Thanks for getting me through security. That was quick thinking." He shrugged. The 'B' lit up and the elevator pinged as it stopped. The doors opened and she looked out into a poorly lit hall stacked with dusty boxes. He waited, presumably for her to exit first. She pushed off the wall. "Why the basement? Doesn't Dr Scully have an office?"

"She does," Colt admitted, "but it's an open, shared one with the rest of our department. Anybody could overhear your conversation there."

"And here?" Harlow asked, stepping out finally, looking around with interest at the boxes. Case files for archiving, mostly. Crappy system. She looked back at him as she ventured further into the hall. "Just the ghosts of investigations past?"

"Looks like it," he agreed, following. The lift doors closed behind him and took the carriage back up. "I've only been down here once, and I think that's still more than most agents in this building. Agent Scully brought." He hesitated, cutting himself off. He changed tact. "She'll want somewhere private to talk with you."

Harlow let it slide. She knelt beside a tower of old boxes and read the label. Year: 2008. Other boxes looked even older. She straightened. "How long do you think it's been since this level has
been properly tidied up?"

"Uh, never," Colt guessed disdainfully from behind her. He was looking around with the same degree of interest, though. "Obviously the place has never been used so no one's seen any need to clean it up and put things away."

"Oh, the soldier in you must love a pigsty like this," she teased, moving further along the passage, which was narrowing with an increased volume of boxes against the walls. The lights were dim but when she looked back she saw the hint of a smile on Colt's face.

"Strangely enough, no," he remarked idly, "I'm actually conditioned to prefer things a little tidier… and more organised." He stopped beside a box that was on its side, old cardboard split, water-damaged contents spilling onto the floor. "Imagine working down here in this dump."

"No, thanks," Harlow retorted. "The Bureau would have to be pretty desperate for space to want to use this hole, right? Or really hate the agent sent to work here."

She stopped herself, past conversations surfacing in her recent memory uncomfortably.

Oh? You stacked boxes in a storeroom for eighteen months?

No, I worked out of a basement office for nine years babysitting a nonconformist radical.

I was Scully's partner at the Bureau for nine years.

The wildcard in the basement.

Just ahead, through a narrow gap in boxes, was a closed door. The light above it had long gone out, bulb blown presumably, but Harlow squeezed through, eyes glued to the panel of torn paint where a nameplate was ripped off at some point in the past and never replaced.

Colt started after her, curious. "Where are you going?"

"I think this is where they worked," she responded, squinting, stepping over a box blocking the path. "Nine years – they must have really pissed someone off, huh?"

"Who?" Colt asked, putting her helmet down on top of a nearby waist-high box pile.

"I don't know who – isn't that the point of these assholes? That no one knows exactly who they are?"

"What are you talking about?"

Harlow looked back in confusion at Colt and saw that his expression matched hers. He had no idea. Wasn't he Dr Scully's partner? Harlow had met the woman once and she'd told her she used to work down here; she'd met Mr Mulder once and had had the same story confirmed. How was Colt, who worked with the doctor every day, not making the same connections Harlow was?

Unless he wasn't who he said he was?

Harlow's newfound paranoia didn't have time to grow; her backpack knocked a pile of boxes as tall as she was and the tower destabilised. The top three boxes slipped in the resultant shake and slid towards her. She spun quickly to grab them, hands closing on the dusty sides of the boxes at her chest height and pushing away to level it out.

The top box rocked the other way.
"Whoa!" Colt warned, jumping over the box blocking the path to catch the one sliding off the top of Harlow's tower before it could crash onto her head. His timing was perfect, stopping it mere inches from her face. She cringed and then coughed as the dust fell from it into her nose and mouth. Tower stable, she backed away into the closed door where there was a little more space.

"Thanks," she said, watching Colt look around for somewhere safer to put the offending box. It would have hurt if it had hit her, probably knocked her down and probably made a mess they would have had to clean up. "Surely stacking that high is against office health and safety policy."

"I think being down here is against health and safety policy." Colt squeezed through the gap after her and walked a bit further down the passage to where the boxes were fewer, and put his one down in its very own new spot. He straightened, dusting off his hands, and paused, his focus sharpening. He leaned down again and picked something small and dusty off the ground. He came back over to her, holding out the nameplate. "Why do I know that name?"

Harlow turned to look, though she'd already been pretty sure of it as she'd picked her way over. 

*Fox Mulder.*

There was a beat of dead silence, and Harlow hesitantly raised her gaze to Colt's; then behind them, the elevator pinged and the doors opened. Harlow and Colt both glanced over, startled, as Dr Scully stepped out – and froze.

Harlow couldn't have said what expressions passed swiftly over the other scientist's face to see the pair of them standing in front of the door. Colt knew her better, maybe he could have read her better in that moment, but Harlow suspected it had something to do with this door and whatever lay behind it.

"Ma'am," Colt greeted her, respectfully, putting the plate down, moving back through the maze of boxes to reach her, and his partner seemed to recover herself from whatever initially struck her. She smiled, if a little tightly. She looked past him at the newcomer.

"Dr Harlow, thank you for coming, and my apologies for this unusual meeting place," she said. "You were much quicker than I expected."

"You should see her bike," Colt replied, tapping the helmet once on his way past it. He passed his partner, too, leaning an arm into the elevator to hold the door open when it tried to automatically close. "Agents Desmond and McGregor are going to stake out the place tonight. I'll go and get the surveillance ready so you and I can keep watch on them in case anything goes down."

Dr Scully nodded. "Sounds good. Thank you, Agent Colt, I'll see you up there."

Harlow frowned, thrown by the sudden change in topic, as Colt stepped into the lift. "Wait!" She made to go after him, knocking into another tower of boxes. Wincing at her own clumsiness, she stopped, grabbing it before it, too, could topple. He had clasped a hand over the edge of the elevator door so it could not close on him, watching anxiously as she righted the tower and slipped carefully back along the passage. "Wait, you're leaving?"

"Work to do," he agreed. "It's Agent Scully you're here to see. Don't worry, she won't try to kill you either." He released the door and pressed the button for the level he wanted. As the doors started to close, his eyes alighted meaningfully around the basement. "Why would we need to, when you're having such luck with the boxes?"

The elevator took him out of the picture and Dr Scully turned back to Harlow, one eyebrow raised.
"I didn't actually accuse either of you of trying to kill me," Harlow mentioned hastily.

"I'm glad," Dr Scully said, folding her arms casually across her chest. She was little, with an enviable figure that Harlow could only hope to have earned by her late forties and which she accentuated by absolutely rocking the pencil-skirt/chick-suit look. Glossy light red hair tumbled over her shoulders in loose waves. Harlow's sleek black hair was genetically averse to curls, and determinedly re-straightened itself within half an hour of seeing a curling iron. "I'm grateful that your newfound fear of hidden assassins didn't prevent you from following Agent Colt down here, where we can talk freely. You have some things you'd like to discuss?"

Harlow bit her lower lip thoughtfully. She had so many questions, so many uncertainties. She wasn't naturally ordered or straightforward but tried to be for work and academia's sake. In this instance, she really couldn't imagine where to start. She pointed over her shoulder at where Dr Scully had found her.

"Why wasn't your name on the door, too?" she asked, probably the least pertinent of her queries but the first that jumped to mind. Only one nameplate torn off, only one found. Dr Scully frowned, visibly shutting down. Harlow gestured around. "This is the basement, isn't it? The basement, where they sent you and Mulder to punish you for whatever truth you stumbled across the way I cracked open the Engel murders."

Dr Scully was slow in answering. Harlow had gotten the impression the first time they'd met of a very clever, very careful person. She'd have to be, to have known about the virus for twenty years and still have a job like she did.

"Yes, this is the basement," she said eventually. "How does it compare with your storeroom?"

Harlow nodded reluctantly. "You definitely paid for your audacity. But you weren't alone."

"I'm not in contact with Mulder anymore, and his isn't a name you should be throwing around if you want to last at the Bureau."

Scully's voice was hard and it made Harlow hesitate. Mulder had spoken openly about her; she wasn't interested in discussing him. He had, however, said that people weren't to know he was sending things to her. Apparently, not even Dr Scully's own partner knew much about her old one. Under what worrisome circumstances had Mr Mulder left the Bureau to go freelancing?

Harlow had come all this way to find out what the hell the pair was mixed up in that she'd once again fallen into, and swung her backpack off her shoulders onto the nearest box tower.

"He gave me this," she explained, unzipping the bag and wrenching biker gloves and wallet and whatever else out to uncover the polystyrene box. Dr Scully dropped her folded arms and came over to look. Harlow lifted the box clear and handed it over. "I know you said you just wanted me to solve the case but you need to tell me more because I refuse to believe this."

Dr Scully took the box with a light frown and removed the lid; immediately her expression cleared, went blank. She put the lid back on without going through the contents or asking any questions.

She'd seen it before. How?!

"You can believe whatever you choose," she said finally. "As long as you focus on your investigation-"

"You have to tell me what I'm wrapped up in," Harlow insisted. "This has fucked me up; you don't even know."
Dr Scully's big eyes flicked to her suddenly. "Fucked you up, how? You didn't infect yourself?"

"I'm not an idiot. No, I'm not prepared to be the next victim with Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome written all over her death certificate and no one left to call bullshit. I mean," Harlow said carelessly, digging again in the bag and producing the printed test results, "my understanding of the universe has come somewhat undone since your friend rocked up with evidence of the impossible and asked me to bring it to you." She waved the unstapled document, the fraticness of the whole situation finally allowed to express itself. Nobody else would have understood. Nobody else was allowed to hear this rant. Finally seeing Dr Scully was such a relief. "I ran this four times and the answers were the same each time."

The medical doctor and physicist sighed. "Mulder shouldn't have asked you to do that."

"He didn't. Ask me to test it. I was satisfying professional curiosity."

"Professional curiosity?" Scully repeated ironically. It seemed to amuse her. "And are you satisfied?"

Harlow shrugged her shoulders slowly, helplessly. "What kind of crazy Men in Black crap are we dealing with here? You're a doctor, a scientist, an agent of the law… this falls outside all three fields." She looked down at the front page, at those results, plain as day, and felt the same wave of rejection rise inside her. "This is just stupid. It can't be true. Can it?"

Dr Scully dropped the smile and spoke more firmly. "Stick to your base investigation, Dr Harlow. Extra details can only endanger you and therefore the case."

It was Harlow's turn to fold her arms, stubbornness gathering in her gut in rejection's wake. "Your partners both chose to trust me. Why won't you?"

Dr Scully wasn't ruffled, but she was visibly frustrated by the rebuttal. "Misplaced trust has a tendency to land a person in unfavourable circumstances, Doctor. I don't trust you. I want to protect you, your case, and mine. I don't want to involve you more deeply than necessary."

"It's a bit late now, isn't it?" Harlow countered. "I opened the Engel case. I'm your connection to that family. You visited me at the FDDU. Your ex-partner gave me the bloods from the latest infection and I've already run my tests. I already have my answers. I just need your confirmation that I'm not insane."

Dr Scully took a long time in answering, thinking again, looking idly around the untidy basement. "What makes you think I'm qualified to confirm that after nine years down here?" She brought her gaze back to Harlow's. "I wasn't unhappy down here."

Harlow didn't know what to say to that. Like she knew what the former partners had been investigating in this dump. Silence reigned in the basement for a very long minute while she tried to reorder her thoughts.

"You weren't unhappy down here but you were put down here," she said finally, flatly. "You were a company joke, you said. You know how it feels." She waited for Dr Scully to slowly nod. "Then you can imagine how it feels to be given something like this and to wonder whether someone is trying to con you, when you've been the punchline for so long. I don't know how to take this seriously. I have to know: are you and Mulder making fun of me? Is that what this is?"

"Mulder and I aren't even on speaking terms, so we aren't doing anything," Dr Scully said immediately, firmly, but then softened. "No one is making fun of you. No, this is not a joke. You
are not insane. I came to see you because I take you and your work very seriously. Mulder… I suppose he wanted to make sure this got to me.” She raised the box. “He has very good instincts for choosing allies. But you don’t need to get any deeper into this.”

Harlow swallowed her feelings of unexpected graciousness for the words of assurance. “Just tell me what the fuck I’ve found.”

“You tell me what you’ve found.”

“You know exactly what-“

“Yes, but I want to hear you say it,” Dr Scully interrupted. “I want the confirmation that I’m not insane.”

Oh, so we are human, then? "I didn't get a chance to be as thorough with the Engel sample before I was kicked off the case, but this… This isn’t…” Harlow found the words stuck in her mouth. "It's the same stuff and it isn't… Look, I have a fucking PhD and there are four fucking chemical bases that make up life on this planet, and this shit isn't following the rules. This did not evolve with life on Earth." Dr Scully nodded once. Harlow stared at her. “And you are not surprised by those findings even one little bit, are you?”

Scully's mouth quirked slightly into a small, sad smile. "I wish I was. What else did you find?"

"Else? Like that's not enough?!"

"Yes, what else," Dr Scully pushed. "Any evidence of human tampering?"

"Well, yes-"

"And you can prove that?"

"Of course I can," Harlow retorted haughtily. She caught herself, remembering who she was talking to – not that she knew a lot about the other. "I mean, the DNA sequence isn't like anything I've seen before, but there are still rules it should be following, and there are sections that appear… overwritten." She flipped pages in the document and produced the sequence in question. Scully only needed to glance at it briefly to know what she meant. "These breaks in the protein chain have insertions of other viral DNA. Natural DNA, sequences I have been able to map as being taken from other viruses. A chunk of influenza doesn't naturally find itself halfway along the genetic makeup of another virus – unless it's helped."

"I thought so, too," Dr Scully agreed calmly. Too calmly. “Alright, good. You have proof. We can work with that. Who knows you have these samples?"

"Only you, and your boy upstairs."

Dr Scully's expression was impassive as she corrected, "My partner. Agent Colt is the finest operative in my department."

"I'm sorry," Harlow said immediately, wanting to take her boot off and shove it into her mouth. Stupid. She of all people should know better than to undermine someone's professional worth with words. "He really does seem excellent. What I should have said was, your partner seems to know – he helped move me through security with it."

And Harlow’s opinion of Scully hitched up a few rungs for the classy and subtle way she’d automatically stood up for her junior partner.
"I would have advised you against bringing it if I knew you had this," the older woman commented, eyeing the insulated box in her hands, "but it might be good luck for us both that you came to possess it. Who knows Mulder gave it to you?"

"Nobody," Harlow promised.

"Good. Keep it that way. Indefinitely. If anyone ever asks, you didn't catch his name. And the Engel case? How have you progressed with rebuilding that?"

Harlow felt mildly annoyed by the redirection and irritably yanked the lanyard out from under her scarf and jacket. "It's here, everything I had before and what I've been able to put together since with minimal digging, but you're avoiding-"

"We're in highly contentious territory here, Doctor, so let's stick with what we can prove – it'll help keep you afloat, I promise." Scully smiled slightly. "Yes, the virus is extra-terrestrial in origin, but even between us we don't have sufficient evidence to make that case in front of a court."

_The virus is extra-terrestrial in origin._

Harlow stared. "What do you mean, we don't have sufficient evidence? The protein bases-"

"Is it _absolutely impossible_ that the virus didn't evolve alongside the rest of Earth life but in isolation, without ever crossing genetic paths with every other lifeform we have yet classified, spawning from a separate biological origin event?"

"Well, no, not _impossible_, but so ridiculously close that it makes much more sense to assume it came from elsewhere."

"If there's room for doubt, we don't have a case. I don't want you to chase the alien angle-"

"Jesus, the _alien angle_," Harlow repeated, pressing her hand to her forehead and reminding herself that this was her life. "We have an alien angle."

"Listen to me." Dr Scully was firm, grounded. Ridiculously so. "*We* don't have an alien angle. I do. You have a murder angle. People are still being killed with this virus. I autopsied a mother of three at Christmastime with her lungs utterly eaten out of her chest by this thing." She rattled the box lightly and said, "I drew _these_ bloods from a man I couldn't save. Yes, _I_," she repeated when Harlow demanded, "You?!" wondering how the hell the vials had gone from Scully's hands to Mulder's, to Harlow's, supposedly needing to be given back to Scully. It made no sense at all. "And that's absolutely not to come into the investigation. I need a clear road to investigating these deaths and the others, and before I can do that, I need another open or solved case to connect mine to."

"Who was the victim?" Harlow pressed, suddenly excited. Dr Scully met the patient, she could provide all sorts of missing information-

"Anonymous. As is the treating doctor who drew the bloods. Keep it that way or lose your case, Dr Harlow."

Harlow blinked, the surreal conversation washing over her. "Who do you work for, really? You said you were Counterterrorism, but this is not FBI. _Alien angles_ are not FBI."

"I am Counterterrorism. How would you classify the deliberate genetic manipulation and then dissemination of a weaponised virus into the American population, if not as domestic terrorism?" Scully stopped herself once again to look ironic, some private joke or previous conversation with someone else coming to mind. "That is your angle. You're going to apply to reopen this case. You
are not going to mention alien viruses – you'll be laughed out."

"Regardless of whether I mention alien viruses," Harlow argued, "there's no audience for this case. As soon as anyone knows I'm even *thinking* about it, I'll be shut down and out of the Bureau on my ass. I'll be wishing I was only laughed at."

"I told you that's not going to happen this time," Scully reminded her. "There's no medical audience, no homicide audience, not inside this Bureau. But you're going to present this case to Counterterrorism." She put the insulated little box down at gave Harlow a level look. "You're going to have to be very strong."

The younger agent adjusted her glasses on her nose to hide the look of discomfort that passed over her face. 'Strong' was one way to put it. 'Crazy', maybe, to put herself through this again.

"Are you sure you want to go ahead?" Dr Scully asked, voice gentler than before. "If you're going to back out, now's the time. I won't blame you."

Harlow exhaled slowly, four faces she'd never known except in photographs surfacing again in her memory. Shane, Carly, Tanisha and Riley Engel. Why someone had wanted to murder them still didn't make any sense to her. "I'm not backing out. I want an investigation, a real one. I want a prosecution." She paused. "I want a cure for whoever they hit next."

"It's not going to be easy," Scully warned. "You're going to be grilled at the application. Once we push it through, it's going to be you and me against the world for a while."

"What about your partner? Agent Colt?"

Dr Scully was a master of the impassive look. She said, "He isn't part of this. And he's not to be involved unless he involves himself."

These goddamn people.

"Alright," Harlow sighed. "So bring me up to speed. What do I need to know?"

"You need to know that the more you appear to know, the more of a threat they'll consider you, so you'll forgive me for telling you very little at this time. Right now we need to *do* not know. You need to trust me."

"Trust you?" Because Dr Scully had been so forthright up to now, and covert meetings in basements inspired trust. "Why should I trust you when absolutely everybody else is trying to fuck me over?"

"Trust me," Scully responded simply, "because we're on the same side, and because I am trusting you."

Harlow couldn't have said what made up her mind. The words weren't special. The other scientist's demeanour, perhaps, her quiet confidence as she stood there, unthreatened by Harlow's resistance. Her certainty, her belief in Harlow's ability to take this forward. The younger looked down again at the test results that had turned her world over.

Life existed beyond this planet.

Humans had harnessed it, manipulated it and used it against one another.

The Engel family had been assassinated with it.
People inside the Bureau knew about this and had used Harlow's disgrace to cover it up.

None of this was a joke, or even remotely funny.

Harlow frowned, determination setting hard.

"Tell me what to do."
Conference rooms look so sterile and safe and dull with their subdued colours and simple furnishings, but in fact they can be volatile, as savage as any offshore battlefront.

Once a quarter, FBI departments met as a whole staff to check in how everyone was going and to report to the entire team on progress, challenges and requirements for continued success, whether that be budgetary, resourcing, time… Altogether it was a boring affair. Scully picked at her nails during the proceedings, and no one was surprised because she wasn't the only one doing so. Her colleagues were dull, uninspiring even to one another. She tried not to give in to the temptation to roll her eyes at Colt when yet another monologue began. The investigation and its obstacles were explained. Likely required resourcing was discussed. Budgeting reorganisation was promised to allow it. Expected outcomes were laid out plainly for the team in question. They thanked the Assistant Director and his panel and they sat down, to be replaced by the next presenters, and so it went on. All. Over. Again.

Scully had already crisply presented her team's progress on the investigation centred on Room 623 and the potential bomb-builder within and made things easy for the panel by making no requests except more time. Tan and his fellows were pleased with her team's advancements. They now had a name to put to the resident – a former soldier, injured on the frontlines and sent back home – and through his unspoken military connections, Colt had been able to draw official records that painted a bitter picture of damage to both body and mind. It explained why the old lady chose to deliver his groceries, and the records indicated a tragic disfigurement, which went a good way to explaining why the resident needed his groceries delivered at all.

AD Tan had nodded appreciatively as she'd resumed her seat and had called on her opinion a couple of times throughout the following proceedings. She was in his good books, right where she wanted to be. Or at least, right where she wanted the rest of Counterterrorism to perceive her to be for this next trick.

"Thank you, Agent Donahue," Hofstetter said from the head table, looking down at his notes as the latest presenter sat back down. He scribbled something down quickly as he said, "We will take that into consideration. The budget will be reviewed…"

He looked down the table for confirmation; Kylie Field, who often joked she could never have been an agent sent out of the office with a name like hers, flipped open a document folder and skimmed the many figures and tables she had meticulously recorded there.
"I think we should be able to find room for the manpower you require, Agent Donahue, but of course I'll need to get back to you with more precise figures, after I've factored in the requests of the other teams presenting today," she said chirpily. She let the top page fall shut and took up her pen and legal pad. "It may only be for a short period of time, however."

"An extra pair of agents for a week should suffice," Donahue assured her. "Most of the legwork has been done."

"Good," Tan said, stretching his arms forward to release the tension building in his shoulders after two hours of stillness. "I'm glad. We might be able to have that one closed by next weekend."

While the rest of the room likewise behaved restlessly, taking his cue that things were nearly done, he looked over at his assistant. "Is that everything, then?"

Seated at the end of the top table, Tan's assistant had been taking the minutes but now glanced at the schedule beside her elbow. Her tap-tapping fingers went momentarily still as she read. "No, sir, you have one more. A case proposal."

The room had gotten jittery at the anticipation of being able to leave but many eyes lit up with interest at this. Most cases were opened after just an email to the Assistant Director of the appropriate department, or at best, a meeting with said boss. Only very complex, sensitive or challenging cases came to these meetings to be pitched, where evidence could be laid out and other agents could be invited to assist in drawing the necessary conclusions required to make a case viable to pursue.

Even AD Tan sat forward at his assistant's words. He looked out around the room and said, "Go ahead," but no one stood up. Everyone seemed to be looking at everyone else, trying to determine who had the interesting new case to share. Scully feigned mild interest and let her eyes flicker to her watch. Mulder's watch. Showtime.

"She may be waiting outside, sir," the assistant said briskly, standing and reaching for the phone in front of her boss. "If she was late she wouldn't have been let in once the proceedings began. Yes?" She spoke now into the phone. She listened. "Yes, that's right. Please send her in." She hung up. "She's here."

"She?" Tan asked. He looked around the room again. He knew his team. "Who's missing?"

Again the eyes in the room fluttered about, trying to answer his question, but it was simply no one. No one from Counterterrorism was missing, and certainly none of their few female agents.

The door opened tentatively just as Colt took a sip of water from the glass in front of him, and when long bare legs stepped through, followed by a familiar face, he was not the only one who choked on his drink. Agent Harlow closed the door softly behind her, but she didn't need to slam it – she had the room's attention. Her skirt was ever so slightly shorter than it needed to be on her already tall frame, her heels were killer and her long hair was loose around her shoulders.

"Uh, hi," she said, playing at coy and uncertain, or maybe just being coy and uncertain. She looked around the room as though checking for a familiar face. Her eyes touched on Scully's and moved off without reaction on either part. Colt was less cool. He stared at her openly. "Thanks for seeing me."

She stood demurely at the door, both hands gripping the handle of her briefcase, no sign in her elegant posture of the attitude she carried with her everywhere. Assistant Director Tan eyed her with interest. Section Chief Hofstetter offered Harlow a warm smile from the top table and gestured to an empty seat at the U-shape of tables circling the room.
"Please take a seat, Agent. Could you begin by stating your name for the room and the record?"

Harlow's return smile was golden, all confidence and sureness to cover what Scully knew was absolute terror, as she crossed the room to the allocated seat. "Agent Natalie Harlow, Federal DNA Database Unit. I'm a virologist and immune biologist." She laid her briefcase on the table at her spot and looked the Section Chief in the eye, still smiling beautifully. Scully discreetly moved her own attention to the faces on the panel, nudging Colt's ankle with her foot to stop him staring. Hofstetter's smile faltered slightly, recognising the name but apparently unable to place it; Assistant Director Tan seemed in the same boat, because his brow furrowed a little. Harlow smartly unclipped her briefcase and began to unpack her documentation. "I have a case I'd like to present."

No one declined her; nobody in a position to decline her could recall who she was. The Bureau had done such a good job burying her in obscurity that they had personally painted her in camouflage and even their own gatekeepers were waving her through.

Despite the feelings that rose along with him, Scully thought of Mulder, with the big target on his back. Panels like this one had always seen him coming a mile off. His infamy had made them a lot of headway but had also eventually made official channels and sneaking around difficult, if not impossible. Harlow was a Bureau mistake, the perfect Trojan horse, and Scully was grateful to have her, even if this trick would only work once.

Once was all they needed, provided they got it right.

"I believe I have evidence of a bioterrorism threat," Harlow said now, going serious. "An anonymous contact approached me with a blood and tissue sample from an unknown victim, and my studies on this small sample have been quite alarming." She produced a small pile of photocopied pages and started to hand them out. Tan quickly sent his assistant to take over the task so Harlow could continue with her presentation. She relinquished the pages. "Oh – thanks. What you're getting is a summary of the test results I've run on the blood and tissue samples. In it I found both an unknown virus and extensive cellular damage, to an extent I have never seen before."

"A virus," AD Tan repeated slowly, extending a hand to receive his copy of the results. Scully received hers with quiet thanks and pretended to peruse the page as though she hadn't helped to write it. Colt took his with more interest, poring over the page. He wasn't in on this act. Tan looked at Harlow over the top of his paper as she finally sat down. "And what makes you think this is a case for Counterterrorism? Have you spoken with the CDC?"

"My sisters work for the CDC," Harlow answered calmly, surprising Scully, because this hadn't come up in any of their short conversations. "They deal with outbreaks and contagions. At this point I don't have evidence of any outbreak or a large-populace threat, but I do have evidence that this virus was engineered, and an indication that the victim was targeted."

Several agents looked up from their pages with interest at this. Colt glanced again at Scully, incredulous, but she ignored him. She hadn't warned him that this would be happening and perhaps should have. Someone nearby cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Sorry, Agent," Desmond said apologetically, raising the page Harlow had given out. "I'm sure this stuff proves your point perfectly, but could you translate this for the non-virologists in the room?"

Harlow smiled as a few others laughed lightly, confirming that they felt similarly overwhelmed by the science on the page. "The most significant finding is the genome map at the top." She pointed to the computer-generated diagram on her own copy and all eyes fell back to it. "Viruses are living things with very short reproductive cycles, so from year to year we expect to see changes and
mutations even in familiar strains. When this happens, though, the virus itself is still recognisable.
Its overall genetic structure remains very similar. This segment of the code, which I've represented
with blue," she pointed again, and the room followed her instructions, looking intently at their
genome maps, "is recognisable as a strain of Influenza first identified in 2013. It's about nine
percent of this virus's genetic makeup. The protein bonds from point M to point T along the DNA
sequence are a perfect match to the flu of three years ago – all recent mutations omitted. This
therefore is not wild Influenza, but a sample from somebody's collection. Meanwhile the red, which
is a scattered set of code that I found in eight locations along the DNA chain, is Anthrax."

She'd said the magic word. She was officially in the correct room.

"Holy…" Hofstetter sat back in his seat, staring at Harlow's findings. He looked up at her with
wide eyes. "You're sure?"

She nodded seriously, clasping her hands together primly in front of her. Playing her part perfectly.
Scully prepared to play her own. She tapped the page in front of her thoughtfully.

"What's the yellow?" she asked. A few others nodded. The diagram was littered with the terrifying
red, and the chunk of blue stood out, but over half of the DNA sequence was depicted in bright
yellow.

Harlow looked at her politely as if they'd never met before. "I'm afraid I can't answer that yet. I
haven't been able to identify the code as anything on the Bureau's databanks, and I ran it against the
CDC's library of diseases and found no matches."

"A mystery virus?" Field asked quizzically. "Some new strain?"

"As I said, every new transformation of any known virus would still be recognisable," Harlow said.
"This particular genetic sequence has not ever been documented in nature, and in fact is
constructed of proteins that do not occur in nature." She paused, swallowing her feelings on the
impossibility of the alien angle to compose herself for this vital redirect. "It's my belief that we're
looking at a synthetic sequence, built as a vessel for the other dangerous pieces of code."

Anthrax, bioengineering and a possible victim – Harlow had laid down all the right cards and kept
all the incriminating ones – Engel, Pierce and Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome – up her sleeve to throw
down once the room was already committed.

Tan raised his hand to his mouth, appropriately concerned. "These other diseases, the flu and the
Anthrax; they couldn't have gotten in there just through a natural transference process?"

"No, sir," Harlow replied. "As I mentioned, the Influenza genes are old, and I know we all hope
Anthrax in this form is not floating around uncontrolled. On top of that, viruses simply do not cut
themselves up and insert gene sequences this specific into one another."

No one liked that. Colt looked again at Scully. This time she looked back at him, and she saw the
questions in his eyes. Desmond scratched his head uncomfortably.

"So – to be clear – you're saying someone spliced up all these killer germs and put the bits they
wanted into a big fake virus train they'd made in a lab, and now we potentially have a catastrophic
supervirus on our hands?" he checked. Harlow nodded.

"Basically, yes, I think that's what we're looking at."

Desmond stared. "We see it in movies but can people really do that?" He looked immediately to
Scully a few seats away, the scientific resource on his team. "Can they?"
"Yes, they can," she confirmed, looking intently at her page. She raised her eyes to Harlow's shapely brown ones. Time to push the envelope. She had warned the younger that she'd be grilled. "It's one thing to engineer such a thing in a lab and another to release it into the population. What evidence do you have that this is actually a threat?"

Harlow stared at her, taken aback by the unexpected reversal.

"Other than the Anthrax, you mean?" Macgregor asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, other than that," Scully said coolly. Hofstetter nodded reluctantly.

"The presence of Anthrax doesn't prove intent," he agreed, joining her in the position of Devil's advocate in order to truly justify the case. "There's Anthrax stored all over the world in laboratories for study and it's not harming anybody. How do we know that this is being used for purposes of terror?"

All eyes went back to Harlow. She referred back to her handout. "The images at the bottom half of the page show the cell damage caused by the virus in a live victim."

"I see that," Scully said, reading. "Lung tissue? Expelled from the body?"

Harlow pretended to be impressed by Scully's interpretation. "Yes, miss. Displaced by coughing, I would expect. The breakdown of the lung tissue included in the sample was extensive and appears to have been rapid, judging from the-"

"Yes, I agree with that," Scully interrupted dismissively, conveying to the rest of the division that she understood the handout just as well as the virologist presenter. She gathered from the feel of the room that most were relieved to know she, at least, understood the whole problem, right down to the very last word on the page. "The immune response evident in the blood suggests an infection period of only days. But what indication do you have that this is an attack?"

"We deal in deliberate acts of harm against the American population for the purpose of inciting fear and discord," AD Tan reminded Harlow. "The scientific case is compelling but what about motive or impact?"

"At this time I have only one confirmed victim," the virologist admitted, "and as to the identity of that victim, I have no information except what was given to me by the anonymous contact who provided the samples. He said the victim was dead, which is unsurprising considering the state of cellular deterioration evident in the lung tissue, and that the victim was male. My own tests have confirmed biological sex, but his blood was not catalogued in the DNA Database. What I can't confirm – and what I'm here to get help with – is what the contact told me next." She straightened her shoulders. "He said the victim was an anarchist targeted for his political agenda, and that he was not the first victim and that there will be more."

She produced the most convincing piece of evidence yet – the list Gray had written for Mulder, which Mulder had given to Scully and which Scully had now given to Harlow to cement their claim to this case, after calling a few names at the top of the list.

"The contact gave me this list of names and said they were the next targets," Harlow said. "I checked into a few of them. The first two are dead. Advanced pulmonary distress."

Tan waved over his assistant and handed her a note, looking uneasy, while Hofstetter frowned at Harlow.

"If there have been deaths already, why haven't we heard of it before today?" he demanded. Tan's
"The contact advised that the symptoms of this supervirus, while violent, are similar to those of the small pieces of disease implanted into its DNA chain, and were likely to be misdiagnosed and overlooked," Harlow said. "Supposedly the current death toll has been targeted and small, but the supervirus could potentially be released into the populace and kill unnoticed for days or even weeks before we knew about it. I would need to test extensively to be able to tell you the level of contagiousness. In any case, I think it's prudent to begin working on medical countermeasures as soon as possible, developing a treatment for those infected if this should get out."

"I agree," Hofstetter said firmly, jotting a note down. "Your background is in immunology and virology – is this something you are qualified to work on, Agent?"

"Yes, sir. But even with assistance, it could take months to develop. This is such a complex virus."

They were buying it, swallowing the whole thing, committing. Scully couldn't believe her luck, and reached to her throat out of habit – to pray, to wish, to ask – but of course there was nothing there to touch, and she lowered her hand quickly. Under the table she tightened her fist into a hopeful ball, unseen, channelling the nervous tension in her body into her hand. Hoping, hoping…

Field clicked her pen, ready for business. "What sort of resourcing would you require, Agent Harlow? Just an estimate. Manpower, workspace, travel, materials? I'm not familiar with the scientific processes typical of your work."

"To develop a cure?" Harlow thought about it. "I need use of a number of the FDDU's suite of instruments, which I'd be able to negotiate times for myself, but the issue there is red tape. My transfer into the Unit was filed incorrectly and for insurance reasons I don't have clearance to work on the equipment until it's set right. I'm completely qualified and competent."

Field looked up, looking incredulous. "It's just a paperwork issue? Preventing you from doing your job? Have you asked your supervisor about it?"

"I have. I understand the Bureau has had other priorities."

"That's ridiculous." Field got writing again. "I'll chase it up."

Harlow smiled with genuine relief and Scully could almost feel it for her. This restriction had been sorely felt by the younger agent and the promise of it being lifted was hugely empowering.

"While you're budgeting for this case, Miss Field, a cure isn't the only thing we need," Macgregor spoke up. "This is a real threat and it deserves a thorough investigation. Who made it? Why?"

"Is this everything you've got for us to work with?" Marzollo asked Harlow directly, waving the handout. "What about the guy that gave you the blood? What do you know about him?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. I had never seen him before and I have no way of contacting him, but somehow he found me. He approached me outside my gym. He said he'd chosen me specifically."

"Would you recognise him if you saw him again? Could you pick him out of a line-up?"

Harlow and Scully had rehearsed some of these questions. The pretty virologist nodded. "I think so, yes."

The room erupted in voices conferring with one another and asking Harlow more questions, every
agent completely convinced of the worthiness of her case and wanting to get started on it immediately. Scully chanced making eye contact with Colt beside her, letting out a breath very slowly and loosening her fist, daring to hope she'd made it over the threshold. He wove his fingers together behind his neck and leaned back, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Very brave," he admitted under his breath. She knew that he knew now exactly what she was doing. In synchronicity, their gazes shifted over to the movement of Tan's assistant. She brought him a sheet of notepaper with quick dot points in her handwriting. Tan took it and read quickly, intense expression dropping as clarification set in. Colt looked back at Scully meaningfully. They both knew what Tan's assistant had found.

Hofstetter was already deeply committed. He was leaning forward across his desk to be heard by Harlow.

"And did he say – can we have quiet, please?" he called to the room at large, and the noise went down. He turned back to Harlow. "Did he say why he chose you? Instead of coming to Counterterrorism itself?"

The remaining voices switched off to hear the answer. Scully and Colt listened attentively. Here was the line that would split the room.

"He did," Harlow confirmed. "I dealt with a case some time ago that followed a family whose deaths mirrored these symptoms. I have a couple of copies here, actually," she said briskly, flicking open her briefcase again and withdrawing a few stapled documents. "Anyone else wanting to read through it can look it up on the archive database. Case designation…” She checked the cover page of the topmost copy. Beside Scully, she felt the restless shift of Colt as he controlled the impulse to recite the case number from memory. His affinity for recalling strings of numbers was something that rarely came up but did still surprise her.

All around the room, pens clicked as agents wrote the number Harlow read out, and laptops snapped open so searches could begin. Assistant Director Tan frowned worriedly – the disappearance of the 2014 file was about to be revealed to the whole department.

"Frank," he said, trying to get Hofstetter's attention, but his section chief was getting to his feet and extending a hand, ready to move, to approach Harlow and receive the paper copy of the case file from her.

"What was the case?" Hofstetter asked, hand outstretched, and Harlow stood as well, offering the file out.

"Engel."

It had exactly the shattering effect Scully had expected, at least on the two most powerful men in the room. Hofstetter froze, realising how far he'd been drawn along this road he was meant to be guarding, and dropped his hand abruptly in the silence that followed. Every agent at the tables watched in confusion as Agent Harlow, symbol of thorough investigation and hard work, was visibly rejected by a panel member, seemingly for nothing. Field looked up from her budget planning to stare along her table at the faces of the other panellists to try and determine the cause of the sudden silence. Scully watched only Harlow, counting the seconds in her head and pitying the younger agent as she just stood there, files held out before her and expression and hand dropping with her self-esteem.

She was all full of bluster and apparent confidence, but self-esteem was where she lacked, and this fundamental character flaw was what had enabled them to bury her as deep as they had with so
little. They'd given her one good kick and she'd crumpled.

And now she was crumpling again, and if she broke in front of this room, everything they'd worked for was over.

Colt, meanwhile, was the opposite, devoid of bluster and pride but solid in his regard of his own self, and he was also hopelessly kind, so after almost ten uncomfortable seconds of Harlow just standing there and everybody feeling awkward and losing confidence in what was going on, he shoved his chair back and got up. He rounded the table he was seated at and quickly crossed the room to where Harlow stood. He met her eyes briefly as he accepted the files out of her hand, and her return look was one of graciousness as he walked away.

"Has anyone already got it up on their screens?" Colt asked the room, gifted at social conflict resolution after a life lived in that insane house full of noisy, arguing children. He sifted through the handful of copies she'd given him and disseminated the copies around the room, one per table group. Desmond from their table raised a hand and took a copy, and others around him leaned in to look. Scully feigned interest for the sake of her team but she'd already read it – it was a copy of the version she'd downloaded from the database before it was removed, not Harlow's more complete, secret under-the-bed version – and Tan and Hofstetter were already onto the game. They knew she knew the case.

"I can't find it," Donahue said, frowning at his screen. "What was the case number again?"

"Uh," Harlow said, looking around for a spare copy, while Colt gave the last copy a cursory glance as though he was reading it and recited the number automatically. He stopped in front of Hofstetter, who was just now sitting down, and offered the final copy directly to him. The section chief was unimpressed with the silent rebuke and snatched it out of his hand without looking at it.

"No, I've typed the same thing, and I'm coming up with nothing," Marzollo told Donahue from across the conference room. He typed something else. "Doesn't matter what you put into the search parameters, nothing comes up."

"Well, I can't explain that, but the case does exist," Harlow said, sitting down gracefully, some confidence restored by Colt's show of respect.

Tan cleared his throat. "A few cases from that time period were taken down recently for reformatting."

"I'll track it down," Field promised, adding the note to her legal pad. "It should be available to our whole division if we're going to take it forward."

"A decision has yet to be made on that front," Tan replied. He gave Harlow a hard look. "I have a few concerns about the agent's professional conduct and some of the impacts her negligence may have on an investigation."

Harlow adjusted her glasses, her nervous tic, Scully had begun to notice. But her voice was steady when she asked, "Such as?"

"How long have you had these samples, Agent Harlow?"

"Four weeks," she answered honestly. Tan nodded smugly.

"You've been sitting on an engineered virus with hints of Anthrax for four weeks and notified Nobody?"
"I only finished confirming what I had a week ago, at which time I set up this appointment," Harlow answered smoothly, as rehearsed. "I wanted to be sure about what I was dealing with."

"A stranger approached you at the gym and gave you blood samples contaminated with a lethal virus, and told you it was part of a terror plot," Tan summarised. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of it? I'm the Assistant Director for Counterterrorism. Gina," he redirected to his assistant, "can you please list the forms Agent Harlow should have filled in and sent to us before today? And the relevant policies and protocols she has breached."

The assistant mumbled about looking it up and clicked around her computer, but Harlow said, "I know what to do when I receive something like this. I filled them in. I sent them."

"Then where are they?" Tan asked, smiling dangerously, catching her in a lie. Her return look was level, and Scully was proud of her.

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps they were filed incorrectly."

Tan and Hofstetter took her meaning and their eyes narrowed simultaneously. Field scoffed.

"Are we nit-picking about paperwork?" she demanded. "This is Counterterrorism, not Counterintelligence. We've got more important things to worry about than what forms she did or didn't submit. Submit them again," she told Harlow, "and I'll see they're put through correctly."

"Can we go back to the Engel case?" Macgregor asked the room. He addressed Harlow. "You said the contact chose you because of this case and that the deaths mirrored the symptoms of your supervirus. How was this case ruled?"

"The coroner ruled it a medical tragedy," Desmond read. "Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome. Never heard of it, but it sounds like a nasty disease."

"Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome isn't a disease," Scully spoke up suddenly, drawing attention back to herself, including Tan's furious glare. "It's a symptom of other genuine conditions, but all it means is that the lungs bled and were damaged, resulting in blood and tissue being coughed up. It's not an explanation for the deaths – it's a description. Let me see that," she ordered, standing and extending a hand for Desmond's copy of the case file.

Macgregor looked around. "It needs to be reopened. Precedents as far back as 2013? This could have been going on for years without us knowing."

Many agents in the room nodded. Tan looked uncomfortable but tried to smile.

"Reopening a case is always a sensitive task. The families and loved ones have been traumatised enough."

"Actually, I'm still in contact with this particular family," Harlow spoke right over the top of him, "and they have always maintained that there was more to the case than what was found in the first investigation. They have petitioned numerous times for the case to be reopened. They'll be very open to the move."

Scully raised the file to gain attention again. "The autopsy report is missing."

"I didn't close this case," Harlow said. "A more experienced agent took over and handled the wrap-up."

"Not very well, by what I'm hearing," Field commented darkly while she wrote. "I think it warrants
a second look. Peter?"

Tan didn't like it but his whole division was committed, and his budget advisor was on board, too. He fidgeted thoughtfully with his pen, recognising a lost cause when he saw one.

"What does our budget look like for taking on something like this?" he asked. Field had been doing her calculations throughout the presentation.

"Depends how we want to play it," she said, looking over her numbers. "In terms of manpower? Seconding Agent Harlow from the FDDU… They'll expect us to cover that. Three agents full-time for a week, one agent full-time for six weeks or one agent split between this task and another… that would cross into the next quarter, and we can apply for more funding to the investigation after that." She looked up at Harlow. "That would be my recommendation, if you can make do with that very minimal level of assistance for the time being."

"I think that would be perfectly adequate," Harlow said gratefully. "Especially once I have access to the FDDU's resources, too."

"Yes, that's completely stupid. It'll be amended soon, I assure you." Field turned to the rest of the room. "Do we have any nominations for this case?"

For a moment, the conference room was quiet. Scully swallowed minutely, counting the beats so she didn't look too eager. Someone else spoke first.

"I think Agent Scully makes the most sense," Agent Marzollo said finally, to the nods of others around him. "This investigation needs a scientific eye the rest our department doesn't have."

"I agree." Desmond waved the first handout at Scully. "Think you're the only one in the room who could read this."

Scully smiled at that, glad she and Harlow had managed to convince the room of her competency in this area. They weren't quite out of the woods yet, but she was feeling confident. She was feeling good. The entire division was on her side and she'd found a way to publicise a case that Mulder had picked out of obscurity. Things never worked out this good.

She wished Mulder were here to enjoy the moment, too. He'd experienced few enough of these little triumphs in his time at the FBI.

Then warm thoughts of her former partner were chased down by feelings of discomfort, and she shrugged them away before she had to properly acknowledge them.

"Agent Scully is busy running your investigation into the D.C. bomb-builder," Hofstetter reminded Desmond, who shrugged.

"She'll still be with us half the time, overseeing. Right?" he asked of her. Scully nodded once. So did Field.

"That's right. Agent Scully? Do you accept? I'm sure you can manage the responsibility."

Scully tried to look as though she hadn't seen this coming and to act as though she was only just now considering whether she would take it on. "I've juggled multiple projects before, so I don't expect it will be a problem. Certainly, if everyone is in agreement that I would be most suited…"

She let her gaze float across the room and saw no headshakes, and finally came to rest her sights on Tan.
He was so unhappy with her.

"Agent Scully is a pathologist, physicist and senior agent with Counterterrorism," Agent Field informed Harlow briskly. "I expect you'll find her a most valuable asset."

Harlow smiled politely at Scully. "I expect so."

"I think you're uniquely suited to the job, Agent Scully," Tan said smoothly, cuttingly. "With a background like yours, I suppose I should be more surprised it's taken this long for a case like this to find you again."

She knew what he meant. She also knew he wouldn't say more. "Sometimes I do miss medicine, sir."

"Agent Scully is also an excellent and proven leader," Tan told Harlow. "As senior agent, my division will consider her word and her reports final in any dispute on this investigation." Because he thought he could warp her words. He still thought he controlled her. He still thought he had the weaker of the original X-Files dream team and that he could manipulate her. "While I understand this was your case first, Agent Scully will be named case supervisor in writing, due to it being a Counterterrorism investigation, and she will report your findings to me."

Harlow blinked, immediately rubbed the wrong way and wanting to lash out, as was her natural instinct. She reined herself in before she could give him ammunition to shut her down. She cared about the case and wasn't going to put up a fight against losing it if it was going to her one and only ally.

"I understand," she said in a clipped voice. Giving him nothing.

Tan's door of opportunity closed on Harlow and his dark eyes moved to Colt, beside Scully. Poor ignorant Colt, whose brave decision to dip his toe into her world had thrown his into disarray. She'd gone out of her way since his grandmother's accident to separate her work from their work. They were less close today than what they'd been a month ago, she felt – the loneliness of a shared crushing secret like theirs brought with it an instant and unshakeable intimacy that she hadn't had since Mulder, and the wilful removal of Colt from the secret felt like a loss – but they were certainly still friends, resuming the cool professional distance they'd been at when she first took him to Boston. Now, seeing Tan's glare on Colt, she read the threat there. Tan knew she had been keeping her past from Colt. He thought it was out of embarrassment. He didn't know what he would risk if he pushed the young agent unwillingly into the whirlpool Scully had been trying to escape since she met Mulder. She felt the protective urge to stand and put herself between the Assistant Director and her partner, but stayed put.

"How does your partner fit into this?" Tan asked. Scully kept her gaze and voice steady.

"Agent Colt will remain on the bomb-builder investigation and keep me apprised," she responded. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Harlow's attention flicker to her partner briefly. Tan's did, too, and Hofstetter's.

The professional beat-down she'd taken from these two in December was still fresh in her memory but that was behind closed doors. They couldn't throw the X-Files in her face here in front of every agent in the department unless they were prepared to explain what it was, why it was worthy of being used as an insult, and if it was such a dirty word, why they would have headhunted Scully for their team in the first place. It was as embarrassing for them as it was for her.

"On the case without your partner, Agent Colt," Hofstetter said with a smile that supposed to be
friendly. "A good opportunity to prove yourself, I would think."

"Yes, sir," Colt answered automatically, cautious without sounding it. Scully saw it in the way he straightened slightly, and in his stillness. She didn't know what he did in Afghanistan but whether he was a frontline soldier or a sniper, she imagined this was the quiet alertness he had gained from that time. She imagined that from his current tense position he could burst into action very quickly.

"Tell me, Agent Colt," Hofstetter prompted, casually, leaning back in his seat, "where do you think Agents Scully and Harlow should begin their investigation? Where would you begin?"

It was such a stupid exercise, the way the panellists liked to play with Colt and tried to play him off against Scully. Beside her, he turned his head to look at her for a cue, but she didn't return his gaze. She kept hers on Tan, who was quiet, watching this last little dig at her go down before he would be forced to concede and give her what she wanted in front of the whole division.

No guidance offered, Colt went to his instinct to be honest. "I, uh, I would question the legitimacy of the contact," he said, glancing again at his partner, knowing he wasn't being helpful but not knowing what else to say. "I would like to know who he is, what his motive might be for handing over the virus, how he came to possess it and what his connection is to it. I would start there, sir."

Tan and Hofstetter smiled, while Scully finally dropped her gaze from Tan's. It was definitely the most logical starting point for such an investigation, but Mulder's connection could not be found. If anything was going to bring down the gates on this fragile case, it was the mention of his name.

"Sound advice from a quick study. I told you he was a good investment," Hofstetter said to Tan, the second time Scully had heard the claim. Colt looked uncomfortable with it, and looked down at the desk in front of him, troubled.

Tan looked back at Harlow. "Agent, how much knowledge did the man who contacted you with these samples have about them and their origin?"

Harlow took a moment to answer, gathering her wits. She'd thought the interrogation was over and had relaxed. "A fair understanding, I would estimate, from what little he told me."

"Would it be feasible to consider that this same man claiming that this supervirus is and will be used to commit bioterrorism is the same man who is enacting this very plot? Could he be our suspect?"

Scully tried not to react but her stomach tightened. Across the conference room, Harlow was tense, eyes wide, trying admirably hard not to let those eyes flicker to Scully. A single glance would be a dead giveaway – it was one thing for Colt to look to her for guidance like everyone expected him to, but Harlow wasn't meant to know her, and the virologist was also in the discomforting position of knowing who the contact was… and that Scully knew him. Well.

The virologist kept her eyes forward.

"I… suppose it's possible," Harlow admitted finally. "I can't think of any evidence yet that excludes him from the suspect list, although I would question why he would give me the case that would ultimately see him on death row."

"It wouldn't be the first time we've seen a terrorist dangle themselves in front of us like that," Agent Desmond warned her. "A lot of them want the attention, and put themselves in our line of sight deliberately. Send us confessions, photos."

Field cut the conversation short, turning to Tan. "You and I have a meeting with the Deputy
Director in less than an hour and I still need to put these numbers into some sort of draft for him,” she said, gesturing at the legal pad of scribbled figures in front of her. "I'm afraid we need to stop things here."

Tan nodded reluctantly and addressed the room. "Thank you everyone for your time today. All actions agreed upon in today's meeting will be taken now to the Deputy Director and you will be informed of the budget allowances made for your requests by the end of business today."

"Thank you for seeing me," Harlow said, standing and packing her briefcase back up again while others began to stand and stretch. She left it on the desktop while Scully and Colt got up and approached the top desk with her card. "I'd appreciate it if you could email me when the investigation is officially reopened."

Tan accepted her card with a tight smile. "Of course. Excellent presentation, Agent Harlow." He tapped the card on his laptop while he packed everything away. "We'll be keeping our eye on you."

Harlow smiled back uncertainly at what was either a compliment or a threat. Colt glanced meaningfully at his partner as he left the room, knowing as well as she did which one it was. Scully quickly leaned in before her new ally could be destabilised. "Dr Harlow? Agent Scully."

They shook hands and pretended to meet for the first time for the benefit of the majority of the agents still milling out of the room amid their own conversations. The women pretended to arrange a meeting time the next day at Quantico before Kylie Field, a phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, interrupted to get Harlow's badge and personal details so she could chase up the paperwork issue. Scully shared a final secretive smile with Harlow as she turned to leave.

AD Tan was leaving, too. She nodded respectfully, insides tightening slightly when they reached the door at the same moment. She stopped to allow him ahead of her.

"I insist," he said, gesturing her through, and when she exited with a quiet "thanks," he murmured, "Nicely played, but watch your back, Agent."

The low voice over her shoulder chilled her and the nervousness gave her the audacity to ask in the same tone, "Why? Are you going to put a knife in it?"

She stopped in the hallway and turned to face her boss head-on, not liking him behind her now that this thought had occurred to her. He shook his head as he circled past her, glancing back at the door momentarily.

"It's not me you're crossing."

He kept going, and Scully watched him go, exhaling slowly with a sharp awareness of how narrow a victory that was. Tan had fought her but he'd relented under pressure, as she'd expected, because it wasn't his fight. Whose was it? She thought of the other soldiers she knew of – Kelley, Pierce, Hofstetter – and wondered whether they were all just battlers for someone else, someone shadier, for a cause none of them could make out through the fog and shadow cast over it. How many more were there and who was conscripting them and what were they being given or promised or told to make them so determinedly loyal to the cause?

As with a million times before, Scully felt acutely alone in this fight, standing boldly against this shadow agenda and its infinite armies of bad guys, able to count her allies on one hand and not knowing where one of them was, whether one even believed and how much the other two could do for her without compromising themselves.
A soft noise behind her gave her a second's warning before Colt was at her shoulder. "He knows."

He must have been waiting for her beside the door, and he was what Tan had glanced at before leaving, why he hadn't said more. A couple of other agents from other offices stepped out of the conference room and Scully got moving again, her partner falling into step beside her.

"Well, it wasn't exactly covert," Scully pointed out as they followed the thin crowd along the hallway, "but that was the point. It was never going to make it past the gatekeepers unless it was a public assault." She looked down at her shoes as she walked, as the shoes ahead of her turned off the hallway into their own offices. "Undercover operations only takes you so far."

And trying to stay under the radar hadn't protected Colt from the effects of investigating in the shadows.

"Aren't you afraid?" Colt's question was low and serious, only for her. She pretended like the answer was no, and gave the only verbal answer that was both truthful and saved face.

"Not of him."

"Ma'am-"

"I've got nothing left for them to take," she reminded him when he continued to look worried for her. Colt shook his head and whistled, impressed, looking wistfully ahead.

"You two have balls, I have to hand it to you. I wish you would have told me."

Scully smiled gently up at him, hearing the honesty in his voice. "No, you don't."

"I could have helped," he argued. He cringed as they split from the crowd and headed into their own office, which was mostly empty. "More than I did, giving you advice in front of the whole division." He dropped into his chair and swivelled in a depressed circle. "I can't believe I caved to those assholes again. I'm so spineless."

"Shh," Scully scolded as she sat in her own chair beside his, but no one was around to hear him lament. "I'm not mad at you, Colt. It's their favourite game, putting us back in our places, reminding you who you work for and reminding me what power I don't have. You played perfectly, and they know from your answer that you're not involved. It's what we both wanted."

She knew from his look that it was not what he wanted, and that was painful because it wasn't what she wanted, either. She would have had him back on board in a heartbeat, and she'd seen the way his attention lingered on documents she stashed quickly in her briefcase and knew his curiosity had not fallen victim to the same protective terror that had seen him step away from their work for the sake of his family. He wasn't Mulder but she saw flickers of her old partner in her new one, even more frequently now that he lived with a frustrated sense of intrigue. And she knew from her years with Mulder that the only cure for that ailment was a good crazy case to chase, but she'd also seen Colt the day after his grandmother's accident and heard the rational explanation for why he'd chosen to pull out. He'd reasoned and deliberated and decided, and that process was logical and she understood that better than anything. She had to respect the choice he'd come to logically and not give in to his flights of fancy just because she personally wanted him back chasing crazy cases with her.

She was not Fox Mulder and Colt was not Scully. She would not drag him back in his moments of weakness. He deserved the chance to escape this world that Mulder had never afforded her.

As was becoming common by association, a string of unpleasant thoughts chased Mulder's name
through her mind – *selfish, unsafe, untrustworthy* – and she looked away from Colt, blushing, rubbing the back of her neck, feeling the scar and the heat beneath it. She'd known for about a week now and though she yearned to tell someone, to tell Colt, she'd refrained, knowing this fact more than anything else reinforced his decision to abandon their secret case. If he knew what was being done to her, to her *mind*, without her permission, she knew he would flip. Like Mulder would.

But he didn't have to know. That *she* knew was enough. Enough to manage it.

She struggled to redirect, opening her briefcase and rearranging the documents inside for something to do. "And you are not spineless. Nobody else stood and backed Agent Harlow up when she started to sink in there. Not even me."

Instead, she'd let the young scientist flounder helplessly, and had even been one to help hold her head under a few times there. All for the sake of the case. She'd achieved her goal; but would she ever have left an ally out in unfriendly seas like that as a younger agent? Would Mulder?

No. Mulder would have done what Colt did. Stuck it to the man.

Colt smiled his little self-deprecating smile, not knowing what she was thinking. "Yeah, but you're smarter than me." They both heard his phone buzz and he fished it out of his pocket. He read the screen quickly and started to type back his response while he told her, "It doesn't take backbone to do something dumb and draw attention to yourself."

"No, but it takes backbone to do the right thing when nobody else will," Scully corrected, thinking again how perfect Colt's entire nature was for working on a project like the X-Files, wishing things were different. Her young partner scoffed as he texted.

"Maybe," he relented, not willing to argue. "Still, I fully expect Hofstetter will find a way to ensure I regret my moment of righteousness."

"I don't doubt it," Scully replied dryly. "No good deed goes unpunished." Colt glanced up at her quickly with an appreciative smirk of amusement, but when his attention went back to his phone, his expression tensed again, brow furrowing, mouth tightening. Scully spun her chair slightly to the left and nudged her partner's shoe with hers lightly, nodding at the phone. "Everything alright?"

He finished his message. "It's my aunt. She was supposed to take Nana to her hospital appointment today but she's been called into the school – apparently, my cousin got into a fight." He rolled his eyes, and Scully recalled the atmosphere of happy chaos that she'd walked into the day she'd dropped his car back. Kids. "I've got to take her. Do you mind? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"No, go," Scully insisted, spinning her chair further so her legs didn't obstruct him as he stood and cleared his desk. He never left without it in perfect order. "Is she okay?"

Colt was tidying a stack of files but slowed at her question. "I think so. She says it's just another follow-up from the fall." He turned his head to look at her uncertainly. "But she's been for a few of those. It seems like a lot of appointments." He paused. "Is that normal?"

Scully shrugged, unwilling to jump to any conclusion. "Depends on what they're monitoring. I can't comment without seeing charts or scans, obviously, but your grandmother did have quite a serious fall. You told me there were some fractures, as well as a brain scan. In an older person, healing can be significantly slower than in a young person. Prolonged monitoring may be necessary." It was her turn to pause. "Has your grandmother given you any other reason to question whether her appointments are routine?"
"No, ma'am." Colt shook his head and went back to tidying. "She just dismisses any concerns I bring up; says I'm being overprotective. I just worry, you know, about people I care about."

And it was obvious that there was no one he loved more than his grandmother. Where his own mother had failed him, Nana had stepped in. Scully still thought on that conversation from time to time, unexpectedly haunted by the sting of Colt's detachment from the mother who had abandoned him. When she wasn't lying awake avoiding artificial nightmares about Mulder, she was lying there wondering whether her William thought any less of her than Colt thought of Val.

She tried to smile. "I'm sure everything's in order. It's a good hospital, and they know you're FBI – you and I both brought the accident and her treatment into question. They want a flawless patient history if we ever bring it out again. That's probably all there is to it."

"Yeah, probably," Colt agreed. He put his phone back into his pocket. "Thanks. I'll be back as quickly as I can. And, uh," here he paused, glancing quickly around to ensure no one else was in eavesdropping distance, "great going, in there, today. I'm glad for you. You deserved a win." He laid a hand on her desk in lieu of placing it on her shoulder or hand, but she determined the same degree of loyal warmth from the gesture. Like Mulder. "But please, be careful."

He headed for the door, straightening his jacket as he went. She watched him go, reminding herself how little he looked like Mulder, how very different their connection was, and how unfair it would be to expect him to step back into her world and help her the way Mulder would have if he were still at the Bureau.

He stopped suddenly at the office door, rebounding like he'd almost walked into someone, and he had; she heard him immediately apologise, automatically polite as he was.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh – no, it's fine, I'm sorry…"

Agent Harlow, in her rush, had almost crashed into him, and now stood in the doorway, briefcase swinging with the momentum of her halt. They only stood there a moment together, briefly awkward, but Scully felt the faint ghost of the electric jolt she'd experienced when she'd seen them together at the door to her old basement office last week. She hadn't expected her own reaction, but then, she hadn't expected from Colt's urgent text that he and Harlow would see fit to venture through the bomb site that was the basement and find themselves at the door of the room that was once just the copier, and later something much, much more. She'd taken the elevator down wondering what more she would say to Harlow to initiate her without letting her in too deep, and had the doors open to see both the young agents she was trying to protect standing at the exact precipice of the world she did not want to see them fall into.

Standing exactly where she stood, the first time she heard Mulder's voice. Nobody in here but the FBI's most unwanted. Right before she walked inside and met him and let him redirect the whole course of her life.

Harlow and Colt were not Mulder and Scully, and they hadn't even met in the basement – Colt had spoken at length about Harlow's prize motorcycle when Scully had caught him later – but the sense of déjà vu that had struck Scully the first time she saw them together was potent, and returned faintly now. At the office door, Harlow adjusted her glasses while Colt stepped aside, gesturing for her to go ahead past him, assuming she was here to see his partner.

"She's just-"
"No, I'll see her tomorrow," Harlow stopped him dismissively, casting a quick smile in Scully's direction before looking back to Colt. "Actually, it was you I was hoping to see." She hesitated, uncharacteristically lost for words. "I wanted to…" She stopped again, plainly awkward despite her pretty, put-together appearance. Scully could imagine Mulder sitting beside her, muttering observations as he profiled the virologist. High pressure childhood, too busy for real friends, high IQ but low social-emotional intelligence, difficulty expressing true emotion, difficulty accepting help on face value and expressing gratitude… Harlow swallowed and tried again. "Just… thanks."

Colt had made fun of his own choices a minute earlier and Scully had called it backbone, but in truth, standing up for someone was nothing to Warren. He didn't think twice, and certainly didn't expect to be thanked for it. But where Harlow struggled to understand the motives of others and seemed to question every behaviour, especially nice ones, Colt was highly attuned, and must have sensed how much his little action had meant to her. He just shrugged and said, sincerely, "Anytime."

Harlow smiled, confidence restored. "I'll catch you later, then, Mr Corvette." She turned away, but made sure to meet Scully's gaze as she did.

The look in her eyes said a thousand thank-yous, and any question Scully had had about Harlow's dedication to the cause evaporated. The other doctor disappeared, and Colt stayed put for a moment, giving her time to walk away before he left so they didn't end up in the uncomfortable post-farewell tandem walk to the elevator. So thoughtful. He raised his eyes to Scully's as well, sharing his amused look with her before he left, too.

In their absence Scully slowly closed her briefcase and locked it. She'd cut Mulder out of her life for the time being and given Skinner and Doggett the cold shoulder when they'd extended the offer of help, for their own good, but she wasn't alone. She had Harlow now, and Colt at the periphery if she really needed him – she had no doubt he'd be at her side if she asked – and they had an open X-file for the first time since the one-off that had resulted in Mulder's exoneration in 2008.

She sighed and wove her fingers together, pressing her entwined fists to her mouth as she considered her position. She lowered her eyes to the left to her lovely new watch. Mulder's watch. It was the most hopeful things had looked in… well, a long while, and moving forward from here needed to be handled delicately to avoid losing the ground they'd fought for and gained in that conference room.

Conference rooms were indeed battlegrounds and she and her allies had strategically won that round, but she knew the war was far from over, and from here, it could only get bloodier.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, but if any licence-holders are reading this, I'd love love love to write for you, provided you don't try to sue me first.

Author's Notes: We're past the one-year mark and the story is about to tumble into its next act. Every character is poised to take a drastic turn – 2017 is going to start with a bang in The Is How The World Ends. Thanks to all who have followed along so far and especially to those who review or message with their thoughts – feedback is the ultimate gift a reader can give a writer, and I appreciate it so much. I hope you can all see the fruits of your efforts in reviewing my work as I try to embed it in future chapters and make a better story for you all.

Warm holiday wishes! I'll be back in the new year!

Separation does funny things to people. When someone leaves, it's not uncommon for the person left behind to go a bit strange. They lose perspective, and start remembering the missing half with a warped fondness that simply does not reflect the actual state of things before the parting.

Sixty-Four bit her nails and watched Fox Mulder through the windscreen of her car from a nice, safe distance. For ten days straight, he'd been working at this carwash, maintaining cover, presumably learning everything he could from the Russian spy cell he had fallen in with but mostly, she knew, waiting for her. Henry Gray had told him she would be in touch once he found Mikhail Levin, and he had, and now she was terrified at the prospect of actually meeting him.

Mulder represented so much, symbolically for the most part, and since seeing him on the stolen surveillance footage from Berkshire County Morgue, Sixty-Four had felt an electric rush of mixed excitement and anxiety at every thought of him. The havoc he could wreak on the Hosts; the change he could make to the world with his truths; the relief he could grant Gray; the freedom he could grant Sixty-Four. The risk he posed to Sixty-Four. The very likely possibility that meeting him once would lead to a second meeting, and then a third, and would ultimately expose her as a traitor to the other Pledges and totally end her, not to mention throw her plans and Gray's to the winds.

Which was not an option.

She sighed and continued watching him, torn. He'd had a shave since the morgue and since she watched him through the window of the Lion's Share, but now the beard had mostly grown back. His attire was ultra-casual, his hair was too long. She wondered, for the first time, what his rumoured ex, Dana Scully, thought of this look. Gray was obsessed with the FBI scientist, and Sixty-Four now supposed it was not that surprising that Henry would fixate on her over Mulder – he saw the 'Dr' in front of her name and assumed she'd be the one to truly appreciate his position.

Maybe he was right. Dr Scully was an unknown to Sixty-Four and once she'd seen Mulder in that morgue reception she'd done exactly as Gray had and fixated on one over the other, seeing everything she wanted to see in one person and pinning all her hopes there.
All her hopes were with Fox Mulder, but she was too scared to even speak to him. She looked down at her lap, where two twice-folded notes lay, ready to be handed over to the man washing an old Volkswagen, if she ever gathered the courage to drive up to him. What was the problem? She'd driven through the carwash four or five times previously, when it was Daniil Lenkov working there and she'd been ferrying messages between the Russians and Gray. Now that it was Mulder instead, she couldn't do it. So? The messages had to be delivered. Maybe she should bypass the eccentric investigator and go straight to D.C., do what every instinct said not to, do what Gray never could with a face as identifiable as his and walk straight up to Agent Scully and give it to her instead. Tell her, 'Mulder needs to know…' Who was going to second-glance a nineteen-year-old white girl walking the capitol's streets in broad daylight?

Well, other than Dr Scully herself, since the bitch worked for the goddamn Federal Bureau of Investigation and was apparently rather good at it and with her M.D. was presumably reasonably intelligent and had spent a decade working the X-Files with freaking Fox Mulder and had probably read one or two of those stupid fucking files or even just listened to her ex-partner once or twice in her time.

"Fuck." Sixty-Four irritably rested her elbows on her steering wheel and dropped her head into her hands. Scully wasn't an option either – in fact, she was worse, because Sixty-Four couldn't guarantee the doctor's moves or motives. Mulder, she thought, she could count on. He would protect her. Scully, whether fundamentally trustworthy or otherwise, still worked for the government that had once sought Sixty-Four out. She could feel ethically bound to report the contact, or she could arrest the girl and hold her for questioning. What a resource she would be, too, this girl who had served the Worldwide Family of Hosts for the last few years and knew exactly what they were doing. Everything Scully and especially Mulder had ever wanted to know, Sixty-Four could divulge, but the cost was much too high. Sixty-Four had been hunted before, and was in no hurry to resume that life of sleepless terror.

She looked up again through her windscreen, exhaling heavily, resigned and conflicted. She could help Fox Mulder and he could help her, but the cost would be a dredging of her past and a trusting of his government friend, and she wasn't prepared to pay that. Not yet. She'd been on the run from her childhood horrors for so long, only to find herself pledged to the Hosts and their agenda, trapped in an unjust hierarchy she didn't know how to escape. If she let him in, let him know her, all those careful barriers she'd set up inside herself would crumble and the past and present and future would meld. She'd worked hard to not be the helpless little girl who was repeatedly hurt and broken – that girl could not be her future.

The past was a mess she couldn't face.

The present was a mess she couldn't handle.

The future. That was where it was at. Her freedom was waiting somewhere in her future, and that was all she was interested in. Not standing in the chilly spring breeze behind a Richmond carwash, locked in Mulder's warm desperate gaze, reluctantly divulging her past. Not handcuffed to a table in an interrogation room explaining the details of her current situation to Agent Scully. Forward, that was where she was looking. That was why she'd teamed up with Gray. That was why she'd agreed to act as intermediary between Gray and Mulder, and Gray and the Russians. For her future. For her freedom.

She needed these people she'd allied herself, but she didn't owe them anything, least of all a justification.

But if she didn't tell Mulder what she'd heard in that boardroom, he would be sideswiped by the
plans of the Hosts, and it would all be for nothing.

She steeled herself and picked her moment. She dialled the phone number advertised on the slowly revolving sign towering above the business. The closest staff member to the main office, Mulder looked around when he heard the phone ringing. It rang and rang in Sixty-Four's ear while she kicked open her car door and got out, adjusting her oversized sunglasses and touching the vintage-style headscarf to check it was still in place. Across the street, hesitant, Mulder put his sponge down and went to the office, wiping his hands on his jeans as he disappeared inside.

Sixty-Four's ankle boots clopped swiftly on the tarmac as she crossed the street. She listened to the rings and guessed that Mulder must be just now reaching the office phone-

"Levin Carwash, this is Steve."

His voice was exactly as she'd expected, slightly slower than the average spoken pace and coloured with his dry, sarcastic brand of humour, like it was a private joke to him to be answering the office phone of a carwash, especially one that was also the cover for a Russian spy cell. Sixty-Four definitely appreciated the joke and her original plan of hanging up immediately went out the window when challenged by the prospect of speaking to Fox Mulder without having to face him.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," she teased lightly, looking both ways before crossing toward the carwash. "A little overqualified for this dump, aren't you, Mr Fox?"

He didn't answer straightaway. He was insanely brilliant, or brilliantly insane perhaps, and she imagined his bemused expression in the office as he jumped from facts (like that she knew his name and that he would be the one to answer) to plausible inferences (that she knew all about him and knew what he was doing here) and on to faint, possible links.

"Just a little, Miss Sixty-Four," he responded soon enough, unshaken, "but a man's got to earn a living."

He knew her name, or at least the one she bore now. Butterflies erupted in her stomach. "Washing cars?"

"You underestimate what people will pay to see an Oxford-educated national embarrassment cleaning dirt off other people's cars."

She smiled wryly at Mulder's words, walking up the entry ramp to the carwash's main yard. Despite a very serious life, he didn't take himself too seriously, obviously. She stepped carefully over a grate in the cement, where the soapy water was draining to in wide white swirls.

"Besides that," he went on, "I needed something to keep me out of trouble while I waited for you to show up."

"I've been checking here for weeks, and you took your time connecting the dots," she countered. She flicked the notes in her hand, though he couldn't see her. "I have the location of Mr Johannsson and his three children for you, as agreed. You'll ensure they're taken care of?"

"Naturally. Of course," he amended, less smugly. Sensitive to the fact that this family needed his help. "Of course I will."

"And for Levin, I have the details he requested through Lenkov. You'll pass that on?"

"You've never known an errand boy more efficient than this one," Mulder joked. He paused, as if considering something. "Gray said you had information for me?"
The real reason he waited here, washing cars for a national traitor. "Gray said you had to come to the table with your end of the bargain first," Sixty-Four apologised. "He wants-"

"It's not a trade. People aren't currency. Friends are not currency."

The tone wasn't rude, just final. He knew what she was going to say, had been thinking on it, clearly, and his mind was made up, at least with the information he currently had. Sixty-Four was silent for a few seconds, glancing around the yard for onlookers as she re-evaluated her approach. Gray said no sharing until Mulder was prepared to trust them as well and put them in touch with Agent Scully, but the finality left no room for pushing, and she didn't want Mulder to hang up on her. This might be her only chance to talk to him.

"Between you and I, Dr Gray will come around," she put forward bravely after a long moment. "You should know, he means her no harm, but he needs you too much to rely entirely on your willingness to share your friend. So do I."

That part came out without her permission. Mulder was silent, and she stopped at the Volkswagen he was halfway through cleaning, cheeks flushing with unseen embarrassment. The car's owner was nowhere to be seen, nor were any of Levin's other employees, though she could hear them inside the adjoining reception and shop.

"I mean," she said hastily, feeling stupid, "that's why I agreed to help Gray. I'm… I want to get out, Fox," she admitted, face burning. Hoping he even cared. Hoping he would see value in her. Hoping he wouldn't laugh at her, remind her she was nobody, just a homeless runaway with no family and no claim left to the name she had taken from her. "I don't know what else to do."

"Are you in danger?" he asked instantly, and she wanted to cry, not because of her situation but because he didn't dismiss her. Because he even asked. How long had it been since somebody wondered if she was okay when she didn't get home on time, or questioned whether her circumstances were safe? "Levin told me what they're doing to the people they kill. The bodies. Are you at risk?"

"It's my life if I'm caught talking to you," Sixty-Four responded finally, stomach twisting as she thought of Pledge Thirty-Nine and his unexpected exile. If anyone found out that she was talking to this man… But she had to. "I doubt they'd use me – I'm worthless to them – but there are other creative punishments for this kind of betrayal. I shouldn't be talking to you. I shouldn't have even called. It's just Gray-"

"He's doing a very brave thing," Mulder interrupted soothingly, seeming just now to realise how young she was from her childish backpedalling, "and so are you. Sneaking around for him right under the Hosts' noses – it's extremely dangerous, and extremely brave."

He knew so much already. She tapped her foot while she deliberated anxiously, looking up over the Volkswagen. Just inside that little shed office stood the man she was talking to. The proximity was nerve-wracking.

"I… That's not why I'm here. Talking to you. I mean… I hear things." He had to be told. She took a nervous breath and jumped straight into it. "You know what they are. You're digging deep and stepping on a lot of toes. It's been noticed."

"Glad to know my efforts aren't going to waste," he said cheerfully, and she smiled in spite of herself, transported back to a time when she could joke with people, when she had people to joke with. Mulder was the king of inference, and reached the conclusion she was getting to before she could say it, more thoughtful than afraid: "They're planning to kill me, I suppose?"
Sixty-Four tucked the twice-folded notes underneath the car's wiper and turned to leave. "They won't kill you – you're too notorious. They could never bury you deep enough to make you, what you stand for, go away. But... There's a plan in place to silence you if you get much further." She stepped over one of those soapy grates again. "It's your credibility they'll target."

Mulder laughed. "Credibility? You can't think I still have that." Then he went silent, a heavy, loaded silence Sixty-Four waited out rather than break. "Scully."

It was Sixty-Four's turn to draw connections between his erratic thoughts. She walked back up the driveway of the carwash and stopped for a van that was just now driving in. "Her name was mentioned."

"And?" Had one word ever sounded so intense?

"They don't think she's a threat, at least not on her own," she was quick to assure him, wanting to take that edge off of his voice for him. Why did she care? She didn't even know him, and certainly didn't care about his former partner. "They think they've got control of her." She hesitated, not wanting to overstep. "Do they?"

"They think they've got control of you. Do they?" was Mulder's response. Sixty-Four listened to the clop, clop of her boots as she walked away, appreciating his answer and understanding the implication. She wanted him to trust Gray and he wanted her to trust his instincts on Scully. They were all in bed together on this. He said, "If you're worried about her because she's a fed, don't. Our whole fight against the Hosts depends on her, and she'll come through. I promise."

*Our whole fight against the Hosts depends on her.* It didn't fill Sixty-Four with confidence but she figured if she was trusting Mulder, she was already trusting his former partner. In that case: "You need to stay away from her, then. Completely. We can't compromise her. I'll tell Dr Gray that's why you're postponing arranging a meeting. The Hosts have to think you've broken off contact with her."

"Don't they already?" Mulder was suspicious, though not defensive. This wasn't news to him, what she was telling him to do. "What do you know that I don't?"

"It's not something they *said*, exactly," Sixty-Four admitted as she crossed the road. "It's just the impression I got. *Which was,*" she repeated when he prompted her with the same words, "that while the plan to silence you renders you unkillable, it doesn't apply the same way for your friend. There would be no scandal in making her disappear." She got back into her car and by the time she had the key in the ignition, she realised Mulder wasn't talking. She sighed. She'd distracted him with worry. The rumours weren't rumours, then. "They said she was only expendable in the direst of circumstances, and that she's only a problem whenever you get in touch, so if she keeps her head down – and it sounds like she's doing a good job of that – and you don't appear to be leading her movements, there's no reason to think-"

"It'd be easy to make it look like an accident," Mulder mused seriously, to himself, as if he'd not heard that she was still speaking. "She's a frontline senior agent. Arrest gone wrong, bomb not defused properly, clipped in a shootout..." It was like these dangers his old friend faced on a near-daily basis were only now occurring to him. The distraction was short-lived, though, and Mulder's next words were focussed, grounded. "Look, as I said, don't worry about Scully-"

"I'm not worrying about her," Sixty-Four interrupted pointedly. "You said she'll come through, I believe you. What about you? Should I worry whether *you* can deliver? This arrangement with Levin, it's precarious. I'm trusting you with Dr Gray's family and *my* life, Fox, and you're already distracted, thinking about someone else."
"I am not distracted," he argued. "Agent Scully and I wrote the book on avoiding distractions in a professional relationship. I haven't seen her in weeks and if the mission requires it, I won't see her until it's done with. She can take care of herself. You and I, and Gray, need to do our part. What do you need from me to get things moving? Move the Johannssons, pass information to Mr Levin. What should I tell him?"

Through her window, Sixty-Four saw the very same Mr Levin step out of his reception building with the Volkswagen owner, laughing lightly at a shared joke. Levin was entitled to one of those notes but *definitely* not the other. Time was up.

"Go and finish your car, Fox," she said, sad to be ending the conversation. "You missed a spot."

She hung up before he could argue. She stared at the screen until the words 'call ended' dropped away, and tossed the phone onto the seat beside her. There would be more calls, future contact. It felt good to know that. She started the car and checked the road before pulling out into the street. Passing the carwash, she saw Fox Mulder step out of the office and stride straight to the soapy Volkswagen, her hint fresh in his curious, motivated mind. He glanced up as sunlight glinted off her passing vehicle, and through tinted windows and dark oversized sunglasses their gazes met for the first time, and she knew he knew it was her, though he'd never recognise her. Next time she'd wear a different headscarf, different shaped glasses.

He was curious and desperate for more of what she could tell him, but he didn't chase her car, even when she slowed at the intersection. He nodded once in acknowledgement and turned his attention to his cleaning job, and when she last glanced in the mirror, he was picking two twice-folded notes off the windscreen.

The ball was rolling. She would be in touch.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, and I've only just gone back to working full-time, so if you're going to sue me, can you just think on whether that's strictly necessary for a few pay cycles before you make your decision?

Author's Notes: School is back for 2017! My new class is delightful, my classroom is Wonderland themed and six days in I am utterly exhausted with still three more days until the next weekend. So, naturally, in response to the complete lack of free time, I am writing fanfiction. Hope this lengthy chapter was worth the wait – I have been working towards this point in the story for some time and am so excited to be here because these events create the circumstances for other major events in my grand plan. The next few chapters are going to be so much fun :D :D

In the past in other fandoms, when I've been delayed on updating but have an incomplete chapter, I have posted weekly 'sneak peeks' of the content (i.e. first couple of paragraphs, and then the next couple, if necessary) on my Tumblr account to help fill the long gaps. Normally I'd try to have a new chapter every three weeks but if it's going to be longer, I can feed you teasers there until I have a full chapter I'm happy with to share with you. If you like this idea, follow me on Tumblr: six-impossiblethings and I will make this happen :)

Life has a way of making decisions for you, even after you think you've made up your own mind.

Winter was officially over but the fields were still sludgy and mucky, and the cattle they rounded up to show the private buyer were mud-spattered over their thick dull coats. The animals were the heaviest remaining of the herd, and stood docilely in the corral, blinking while Uncle Gary and the buyer haggled uncertainly. Will, sitting atop the wooden fence encasing the cows, looked down at his boot as he scuffed it against a lower paling, scraping some of the mud off the sole. This was the fourth small private sale so far this year. Sneaking entrepreneurial cash earned by writing assignments for his clients (unmotivated older classmates with jobs) into Uncle Gary's wallet was never going to be enough to keep the farm afloat, and he'd hoped to help slow down the inevitable.

He'd underestimated the depth of trouble the farm was in, clearly.

The cows stamped about unconcernedly, maybe mildly annoyed that there wasn't food in here for them but otherwise disproportionately calm considering two men were discussing a price point just a few yards away, and once they left this property, they wouldn't be far away from becoming burgers. Will squinted at them in the afternoon brightness. They had no idea, these animals, and they were so contented. How nice life must be for cows. To not know your own circumstances, to lack the compulsion to question it and to just go along with the flow.

Until you're slaughtered, of course. He screwed up his nose and looked away from the cows. Now that he knew about the farm's unstable future, it kept him up at night. Though William had stopped actively investigating it, he would never be able to unlearn that he was adopted, nor that a woman called Dana Katherine Scully was listed on his birth certificate and still existed somewhere, and he
would never stop wondering why she'd given him up. He was content with his life before he knew
this, or content enough – he remembered the lifelong feeling of misplacement and the niggling
feeling that his life wasn't his, but these were not unhappy or distressing feelings, just… feelings.
Now…

One of the cows wandered over and nudged his knee with her nose, curious and bored. He reached
into the corral and scratched her soft velvety ear.

"Ignorance is bliss," he informed the animal quietly, despite the argument he'd initially made
against the claim weeks ago when he'd debated this concept with his uncle. Because how stressed
and panicked would this beast be if she knew what her life really was? Forfeit, a lie. The purpose of
her existence was to live and then to die to provide sustenance to someone else, and the time of that
death and where she would live until it went down was pretty much being negotiated right in front
of her. The very same human masters who had bred and raised and kept her until now were today
selling her off like the property she was, so they could keep their home and their farm running a
little longer. The cow, at least, would die swiftly when she did; the Van de Kamp farm was
suffering long and slow. One of the farm hands had been laid off. Another, seeing it coming, had
had his last day this week and would be starting next Monday at one of the organic competitors
that had effectively killed business for Gary. Will was under no illusions – the situation was dire.

A price was agreed upon, and the buyer signed the cheque. Still chatting, Uncle Gary waved his
nephew over. The boy pushed off his fence seat to join the men on the ground.

"Will, can you take this inside," he said, handing him the cheque just as soon as he received it,
"and put it in my wallet, and then can you lock up the dogs?"

William nodded as he took the financial lifeline his uncle entrusted him with. The dogs loved
shepherding, and two in particular were notorious for trying to round up unfamiliar vehicles. Many
times they had almost been run over trying to nip at tyres and get behind trucks and cars to redirect
them. The buyer would want to bring his truck down the drive to load up his new cattle, and it
would be a quicker and safer process without the worry of the dogs.

The buyer, Mr Caine, jerked his chin in Will's direction. "You do much riding?"

"Uh, no, not really," Will answered, pausing, surprised to be called on. "Horseback, you mean?"

"Yeah." He nodded meaningfully past Will and looked to Uncle Gary. "She yours, then?"

Gary looked straight through his nephew, and Will spun on the spot, heart skipping uncomfortably.
Behind him, in the nearest paddock, was Rosie, his mother's favourite horse and the last horse left
on the property. She grazed quietly.

"Uh, I'm not-" Gary began, then laughed uncomfortably. "No, not much of a rider either." He
smiled at Will, who knew he was worse than not much of a rider. "She's ours. Part of the family."

William made himself smile back, and departed quickly, reminding himself to feel relieved. He
needn't worry. Uncle Gary was on the same page. The farm could never be in a bad enough state to
let Rosie go. The cows, yes, they raised them for this purpose, to be sold off and to become

He slowed on the way past her paddock. She was old, older than William, with a sway in her long
spine and some patches missing in her raggedy winter coat. Her big dark eyes were glassy with her
years, and while she undoubtedly couldn't see that well anymore, she was still the calmest,
loveliest, gentlest animal he'd ever known. She mostly ignored him as he went on past. Probably
He carried on, clutching the cheque, and didn't look back or look anywhere but straight ahead until he got inside. As soon as the door swung shut behind him, he raced to a window and gazed out at Uncle Gary and Mr Caine. They were engaged deeply in conversation, Gary nodding a lot and looking very interested, Mr Caine trying to explain something serious and gesturing a little too much toward Rosie. William swallowed, surprised to find his throat tight. He'd obsessed in recent months over this stranger Dana Scully, a woman living somewhere in the world who he might one day meet, but he was losing his connection with Sarah Van de Kamp, the woman he had loved and who had loved him wholly in return. Other than the piano room and the familiar features in Uncle Gary's face, Rosie was all that he still had of her. The idea that he and his uncle could lose the farm, Christiaan's farm, was painful – the realisation that this would include the piano room, and the horse, was searing. Someday soon, maybe sooner than William had expected, Uncle Gary with his Milne blood would be all that remained of Sarah.

Surely, surely, Uncle Gary would not sell Rosie to a meat guy, Will assured himself as he turned away forcibly from the window and went looking for the wallet, just like surely he would not sell the piano to someone wanting firewood. Gary remembered Sarah much more strongly than her son did; she was his big sister and his only sibling, and they lived a lifetime together as family. He would not disrespect her in such a way.

Ultimately, though, Will thought uneasily, he and Uncle Gary would have to sell the house. And the piano. And Rosie. They would eventually run out of cattle and firewood to sell, and then they'd cut out sections of the property to offer opportunistic neighbours, and soon enough the house would be empty of everything but the piano and the horse.

And neither would fit in whatever hovel the pair managed to find to move into once the farm finished its death throes.

The phone's ringing cut through his thoughts and he dropped the wallet. Quickly he grabbed it off the floor and snatched for the phone with his other hand.

"Hello, Van de Kamp farm, this is William."

There was a small pause. "Yes, hello. This is Percy Hind from Tannenbaum and Associates, Wyoming. I'm the lawyer handling the estate of Doris Kearney. I'm looking to speak to the next of kin of Sarah Milne."

It was Will's turn to pause at the eerie coincidence of Sarah being on both his thoughts and the thoughts of a stranger at the same moment. His mind quickly connected the dots. Estate. Kearney. Sarah.

"Michael Kearney came out here a few weeks ago," he told the lawyer. "He said his mother named mine in her will but that the money would be going to charity."

"That's not for him to decide," the lawyer said, sounding a little annoyed, and not with Will. "It's my job to ensure Mrs Kearney's wishes are carried out and she was specific in naming Sarah Milne, who Michael now informs me has passed away, which means the same funds of eleven thousand dollars, two hundred and thirty-four dollars are to go to her next of kin. You said you're her son?"

William wandered with the cordless phone back to the window to look out at his uncle. "Yeah, but I'm adopted." He had never said it out loud to anyone. It felt strange, but didn't feel uncomfortable, perhaps because the person on the other end wasn't someone he knew. "Michael Kearney said I'm not entitled to claim Mom's inheritance because I'm not her real son."
He literally heard the lawyer sigh over the phone and could only image what a pain Mr Dickbag was as a client. "Were you legally adopted by Sarah Milne?"

"Yes, but she was Sarah Van de Kamp by then. She and her husband adopted me."

"And when was this?"

"When I was a baby. They're both dead now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Percy Hind said, sounding genuine, for a lawyer. "As a positive, this does seem to make you Sarah Milne's heir. Do you qualify as her next of kin, do you know?"

William was still looking out the window at his uncle. Technically, Gary was Sarah's next of kin. He'd inherited everything legally in her name after her death and had handled the heartbreaking decisions in the days leading up to and following her passing. Eleven thousand dollars would go a long way toward helping the pair hold onto this farm, but would Uncle Gary accept the money? The twisted expression on his face when he faced off against Michael Kearney told William no.


They spoke a little longer, Will giving his postal address and also his school's details if the lawyer wanted to confirm his identity with a more legitimate source before sending eleven thousand dollars away. Upon hanging up, Will shrugged away the mild guilt. He knew Uncle Gary would be unhappy, but eleven thousand dollars? It certainly would go a lot further than his twenty per Bio assignment.

He tossed the wallet back down and ran back outside, whistling to the dogs and calling his apology to the waiting men by simply explaining, "Phone rang!" Both nodded, impatient expressions relaxing completely. He caught the excited farm dogs and locked them up safely in the barn, rubbing their pointed snouts and pointed ears. Outside, he heard Mr Caine bringing his truck down the drive and backing it up to the cattle pen.

"Who was it?" Uncle Gary asked when Will came back to help encourage the cows up the ramp into the back of the truck. They watched the ignorant beasts trot up to their doom.

"Wrong number, turned out, after much confusion," Will lied. He didn't like that it was becoming a trend with him to be dishonest with his uncle, but they still had the buyer here, and Uncle Gary's reaction to hearing Michael Kearney's name was not something either of them wanted in front of someone else.

"I'll hear from you?" Mr Caine asked meaningfully of Gary, once the truck was locked up and the ramp raised. Uncle Gary nodded and they shook hands, and the cows and Mr Caine departed up the driveway.

Will looked up at his uncle, already knowing what it was about but asking anyway, "Why will he hear from you?"

"Don't freak out," Gary warned, as the pair headed for the barn to release the dogs. "He wants Rosie."

Will pressed his lips together. Sarah's horse. He glanced at her. "What did you say?"

"I told him we'd think about it," he assured his nephew. "No decisions were made, I promise."

"I told him that," he agreed. He pulled the pin on the stall and opened the door; the dogs enthusiastically bolted free as if they had been locked up half their lives instead of ten minutes. "I said selling her for pet food was out of the question. He said he's looking for an old horse for his daughter, so she can learn to ride." He paused and they both watched the dogs run past Rosie’s fence. "She's eight, and she lost most of her leg to bone cancer."

Will looked sharply up at his uncle, surprised by this development. "How does she walk?"

"Prosthesis and crutches. She's been in hospital a long time, though, and in a wheelchair for months, so her good leg and the remaining portion of her missing leg are extremely weak. Her therapist recommended she strengthen her legs and core with horse riding. Obviously Mr Caine is looking for an animal that won't move much while she struggles on and won't run away on her."

William was silent a while, reflecting on this news. He really hadn't expected a man inspecting cattle for slaughter would also be on the lookout for a riding horse for his little girl and it hadn't even occurred to him to think of another reason Caine would want Rosie except to destroy her like he would the cows. He imagined an eight-year-old child struck down with cancer. Life had sucked for his family at times, taking his dad almost before he could remember and taking his mom when he was just a boy, but deep down he knew his mother would have died a thousand painful deaths before watching him suffer the same disease.

Oddly, even though he didn't know a thing about the Dana Scully, not really, he believed both of his mothers would have felt the same way about that. No kid should be subjected to what Mr Caine's daughter had survived.

"Rosie would be perfect for that," Will admitted finally, reluctantly, eyeing his mother's beloved horse, "and she'd probably love to be played with and fussed over again. But I don't want to sell her." You don't abandon someone you love, after all, and Rosie was part of this family.

"Me neither," Uncle Gary said. "As I said, we've got time to think about it. We don't have to decide anything today. This is her home, and she's ours."

Only as long as it was their home, William reflected repeatedly over the course of the evening and into the following days. Selling off handfuls of cattle was keeping them afloat week to week but soon enough all that remained would be the scrappiest cows nobody else wanted. He thought occasionally of the Kearney money, but who knew how long that would take to arrive? Estates could be messy things.

"Pick one: a good quality blood diamond the size of a watch face, or a small flawless synthetic made ethically in a lab?" Will put to his uncle a couple of mornings later. Gary looked up from his newspaper.

"You proposing to someone?" he asked, smirking. Will rolled his eyes and dug in the drawer for a pen. Gary scratched his eyebrow, pretty much always up for this game. Things between the two of them had been much smoother since the appearance of Michael Kearney and the resultant discussion about Sarah's past, despite the continuing decline of the farm's prospects that neither of them were openly discussing. "Alright. The synthetic. It's small but it's perfect, and nobody's life was risked or compromised in getting it to the store."

"The synthetic diamond is five minutes old," Will debated. "The blood diamond is ancient and made of incredible conditions within the planet. Its value is immense in comparison."

"I agree it's more meaningful to have a diamond that actually is part dinosaur," Gary said, folding the paper back up, "but while your premise says it's bigger, it also implies the quality is lower, and
most ladies would rather a prettier gem. If I'm moving you out to the barn to make space for my supermodel girlfriend, I'd rather the diamond I can woo her with."

"She's probably a gold digger," Will reasoned. "The blood diamond, despite its flaws, is bigger and real, and worth so much more. Supermodel girlfriend would appreciate the show of financial prowess." He paused a beat. "And you could save the farm."

They'd avoided this topic. Uncle Gary straightened a little in his seat, and thought hard on how to answer.

"If sold, the synthetic diamond would still help my bank account balance, but you're right, certainly not to the same extent," he agreed slowly. "Still, I'd rather lose the farm than get ahead the wrong way. Wouldn't you?"

Will gave his uncle the point without further argument, feeling uncomfortable about his phone call with Percy Hind.

At school, William brokered sales to his classmates – he agreed to a price one day and brought the item to school the next in his backpack and exchanged it for the cash. Small things first: he sold PlayStation games, DVDs and speakers. He sold his old Stormtrooper lamp, his nerf gun, a PlayStation controller, and eventually the console itself. He told anyone who cared enough to ask that he was saving up for concert tickets and the bus ride there and back. That appeased most of his classmates. Many of them were hopeful of getting to the same concert.

"Weird," Trip said lazily one morning as he dropped into the seat beside Will's in Biology class. "I didn't have you pegged as an R 'n' B kind of guy."

"Yeah, well, probably lots you don't know about me," Will answered without looking up from his book. He had stayed up to all hours finishing a Chemistry report for Lara, despite never having offered to write Chemistry assignments but willingly taking on a paying client, and hadn't found time to do his own homework. Tired, stressed, worried about the state of the farm and unsure what the right thing to do about Kearney's money or Rosie was, he found himself increasingly snappy and tense.

"Probably true." Trip started unpacking his things onto the desk in front of him, prepared to copy Will's answers. "Like, what's a boy-genius with no discernible interests except for boring predictable shit like science and, randomly, a strange habit of researching federal law enforcement agencies on his phone, suddenly want pocket money for?"

Will kept writing – Ms B had given them all plenty of time to complete this homework, and he, aside from Trip, was going to be the only one without it done ready for this lesson – but he did slow down, thinking double-time, double-track. Trip had noticed him reading about the FBI? The fundraising, he supposed, was harder to hide, especially since Trip was the one who'd bought his speakers and the extra controller. He lifted his elbow and shifted the book over a bit so that Trip could read his answers.

"Maybe I just really want to see that concert," he reasoned, checking his watch quickly. Class was due to start in two minutes.

"Maybe," Trip agreed innocently. He faked thinking hard. "What's the group called again?" He clicked his fingers as though searching his memory. "You know, the concert you're going to? Who is it you're going to see?" He stopped clicked and smirked, going back to copying. "Since you're such a big fan."
Will rolled his eyes, caught out. "Alright, then maybe the concert is just the convenient cover story for my upcoming brief absence, when I'll go underground to enact my super-secret boy-genius world takeover scheme, and the money is to build my superweapon."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Trip said, copying furiously as Ms B came in and started readying for the lesson at the front, "though I did have a much less awesome, and somewhat related, explanation."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. You're a sullen, serious boy-genius with a concerning interest in the sciences, you research FBI's counterterrorism department when you think no one is looking and you suddenly want money. Obviously," he said calmly, "you're a budding bioterrorist ready to start funding your first horrific contagion."

William snorted with laughter and looked up from his work. "Sounds legit. And I'm going to fund my supervillain laboratory to create this evil contagion with the proceeds of twenty-dollar essays and second-hand PlayStation games?"

"You're a small dude," Trip reasoned. "You don't need a very big lab."

The bell rang and the two hurriedly resumed their work. Ms B began writing the lesson's agenda on the whiteboard. Jeremy and his cronies entered the classroom and Jeremy made sure to bump Will's table on his way past, sending his pencil skittering across his page. There wasn't time to erase the scribble so he just kept going writing without another glance up.

"First of all this morning," Ms B told the class when they were all seated, "I'll be handing back your assignments, marked, and we will go through the mark sheet as a class to give you an idea of where you all gained and lost some points. If you'd like to go over your pair assignment more closely, you can arrange a time with me outside of class. After that, we'll go over this week's homework."

Phew, a few more minutes' time to finish this. Will solidly ignored what was going on around him as he raced through the questions, determined to have the work done. He heard Jeremy speaking to Ms B but didn't pay attention to what was said. His pencil skated across the paper much too fast for Trip to possibly be keeping up with, and it was only when a pile of stapled papers landed on the top of his book that he had to stop. He looked up. Jeremy was standing in front of his desk, smirking down at him with triumph.

"What?" Will demanded, annoyed. Jeremy raised a superior eyebrow.

"I'm handing the assignments back to the people who wrote them for Ms B," he replied, glancing significantly down at the pile that was the whole class's submissions on Will's desk. "These are all yours, aren't they?"

Will's pulse missed a beat. He really hadn't thought this through.

"Jeremy, what are you talking about?" Ms B asked tiredly. She knew her students; she had to know he was an epic jerk, while William was her straight-A accelerated wonder boy. Will should have played on that now, acted the innocent child being picked on by the bully jock, but an impulsiveness he hadn't known before this year kicked in, fuelled by exhaustion and helplessness over the state of the farm and frustration with his conflicted feelings about Rosie and the Kearney money and Dana Scully. And fury that Jeremy would stoop so low just to undermine him. And terror that it might work.
"Good question," he said flatly, pushing the pile of papers off his book and onto the floor, where they scattered. He determinedly went back to finishing his homework. His pencil maybe bit down into the page a little harder than it needed to as he scrawled with concentrated haste.

"William," Ms B warned, coming over to help collect the essays all over the floor. "That was unnecessary."

"William wrote everybody's assignments," Jeremy insisted over his shoulder as the teacher neared. She crouched to pick them up, frowning, and there was an audible collective inhalation in the room. "He got paid for it."

"Don't make claims like that, Jeremy," the teacher scolded, gathering the papers and looking up at Will. He pointedly ignored her, but his focus was less and less on his work. He glared at the paper. Define 'nucleotide'. But his brain felt scattered, aflame with uncontrollable emotion. His skin tingled, all over; his palms burned. He forced his attention to stay with the task and not to drift down the metaphorical hall of possibilities in his mind, even when Ms B prompted him to explain Jeremy's accusation, even when she repeated herself more firmly.

"William, answer the question."

How could he answer the question? Admit he'd broken a fundamental school rule by accepting payment to write other people's assignments? They'd call Uncle Gary, who would be disappointed, and he'd want to know why Will was trying to raise the cash, and they would have to talk about the farm's money problems again and they'd have to finally discuss what was going to happen with Rosie, because it was better than admitting he'd started off gathering money to buy a bus ticket to D.C. to visit the birth mother he was pretty sure wanted nothing to do with him.

And what was going on with his body? His cheeks felt hot but so too did his hands, burning like he'd slapped a high five too hard or hung too long on the monkey bars. His muscles were tense under his skin, like he might react, though he didn't know what he thought he would do. The unprecedented effect – most akin to a panic attack, he supposed, except feeling much more refined and somehow deliberate – made him frightened and confused.

"Alright, I did it," Trip complained, flipping his pen in the air and catching it. "I just needed a bit of extra cash, okay, and it seemed only fair to share a bit of my genius around, you know?"

A few of their silently watching classmates, many of them clients of Will's, snorted with unexpected laughter, which broke into genuine giggles when Ms B ordered, "William Wyatt, be quiet." The teacher blushed, annoyed, and rounded back on Will, whose heart was pounding in his ears. He couldn't look up at her – he knew her face would display nothing positive, and it was nothing compared to what Uncle Gary would look like when he found out.

"He's been selling his crap, trying to earn money," Jeremy went on, and Will could hear the smirk in his voice even over the rush in his ears. His eyes blurred on the next question, something about cell walls. He kept writing, pencil lead flying across the page though his hand burned. He didn't know what he would do if he stopped writing but knew it wouldn't be helpful to his situation. He couldn't remember being this afraid. "Too little still for a job, I guess." Ms B told him to resume his seat, but the senior student wasn't ready to release his cornered prey. He taunted, "And no mommy to ask for lunch money."

William's pencil lead snapped, and he finally had to stop. He tried to focus on his page. Somewhere between nucleotides and mitochondria, his scribbly familiar script had morphed into the alien-looking symbols of the Navajo, and he'd proceeded to write a paragraph of it. He dropped his pencil and was shocked to see the imprints of his thumb and finger grip scorched lightly into the
wood. What was happening?

He couldn't stop himself from replying, in a small, controlled voice, "I have a mom," though really, he should have just shut up. His hands were shaking. His skin was burning up. He felt pricks of sweat behind his ears, under his thick hair.

"Naww, that's sweet," Jeremy mocked, while Ms B demanded he take his seat. "But dead mommies don't count, orphan."

Trip stood up so suddenly that his desk tipped forwards and crashed to the floor, startling Will and distracting him from the sensory onslaught of his own body. "Say that again, fucker."

"William Wyatt!" Ms B shouted, class control lost. Many had sprung up and away at the sound of the thrown desk. Will stayed where he was, staring at his hands, staring at his book. Did this happen to Sarah after she came back from her disappearance? Gary said stuff got weird. If this was her experience, no wonder she and her brother had to leave town.

"I said," Jeremy repeated into Trip's face while Ms B physically pushed him away from the reach of the much bigger boy, "the little orphan's got no mommy because she's dead. And she's probably grateful because her kid grew into a friendless know-it-all weird-ass ginger midget and she didn't live to see it."

Trip looked ready to pounce on him and he might have if Will hadn't suddenly stood up. His mouth was dry, his skin was clammy and his vision wasn't quite clear. His voice, though, sounded oddly strong and calm when he informed Jeremy, "I'm not an orphan, but if that's what you need to tell yourself to fulfil the midget porn fantasy you've been harbouring about me since I joined your class, that's fine. Just don't expect me to join in – I'm not into that weirdo stuff, that's all you."

There was a long silence in the Biology lab, and then Trip burst out laughing, followed immediately by the rest of the class. Jeremy stood stock-still behind Ms B, realising he'd missed the joke and it was on him. His expression contorted.

"What the fuck did you just say to me, you little midget fuck?"

"I said you're into midgets," Will explained blandly over the peals of laughter. "Your fascination with little people is full-on. It makes me uncomfortable, to be honest, especially in the toilets, when I can hear you beating off in the next stall, whispering to yourself about all the ways-"

Will barely had time to react when Ms B was shoved aside and Jeremy came back at him, swinging. He ducked and bolted for the door, heart in his throat, terrified. A hand closed in his hair and yanked; his vision went even fuzzier when his head was slammed into a desktop amid shrieks of students and teacher. There was a shout and then he was free, clinging upright to the desk, wiping his bleeding nose. Trip had Jeremy on the ground, but Will didn't stick around to see what happened. He clambered back to his feet and ran. His tingling hands grabbed the doorframe and he swung himself out into the hall, and from there he absolutely flew down the length of the school and out the front doors.

Nobody stopped him.

Outside in the late April sunshine, Will let his legs carry him as far from that classroom as possible. His lungs felt combustible and his knees felt ready to snap when he finally traced the main road far enough to catch up to a bus. They wouldn't let him on at midmorning with no money or ID, both left back at his desk in the Bio lab, so he sat dejectedly down on the bus stop bench and watched the bus drive off without him.
Struggling to draw enough breath and periodically wiping his bloody nose, Will turned his hands over and looked at the palms. They looked pretty normal, and the heated feeling was decreasing. Had he really burned a pencil with the supernatural heat of his angry skin? It seemed stupid to even consider it, but he'd seen something marked on that pencil. Hadn't he? Or had he hallucinated the event under the stress of Ms B's interrogation and Jeremy's bullying? That sounded more realistic.

The Navajo, though – once he had his book back, he could confirm that one. He'd written the language before, under different circumstances. Where was that coming from, and why was he able to write in a language he'd never learned, like his adoptive mother once had?

*Dead mommies don't count.*

*I have a mom.*

He shoved a hand into his pocket and withdrew his phone with fumbling fingers. A text message from Trip – *U ok bud?* – and a low battery warning. He fired off a quick reply to his classroom protector. *Yep. Thnx.* And then he reopened one of his bookmarked searches and impulsively redialled a number he'd promised himself he'd never call again.

He told the operator he was her nephew, since that had worked before, and then gave pretty much the actual account of his morning to explain why he needed to be put in touch with his aunt *now* because he was upset, alone, cashless and too afraid to call his proper guardian and admit what had happened. The operator took pity, and patched him straight through.

The phone line rang and William lowered his head into his waiting hand, leaning his elbow on his knee. This was such a mistake but he didn't know who else to call. She didn't want to hear from him. He knew that. She'd walked away, heaven knew why, but she had. He should leave her alone. He should leave this whole thing alone.

But her voice. He wanted, right now, to hear it, so badly. He still heard it on loop in his head, daily, and he wanted to hear her tell him he did the right thing, that Jeremy was a dickbag, that Will would be alright, even as he sat here alone at the bus stop with his heart racing and his nose dripping blood and tears stinging his eyes, miles away from her.

"This is Colt."

It was the wrong voice. A man's voice. William didn't know what to say at first. He rubbed his nose. The bleed seemed to be slowing down.

"I… I'm looking for Dana Scully," he said finally. "Is she there? Can I talk to her? Is this the right number?" he added, wondering whether he'd been put through incorrectly.

Colt, whoever he was, paused too, perhaps registering the broken rhythm of the young voice, betraying the physical and emotional distress. "You've called through to the right desk, but she's not here at the moment. This is her partner, Agent Colt. Can I take-"

"When will she be back?" Will asked desperately. "I really need to talk to her."

"Is everything alright?" Agent Colt asked seriously, in that tone of someone who spent time with kids and could intuit when something was amiss. "What's your name?"

"I need to talk to her. It's… It's important."

"She's interstate, I'm afraid, and I'm guessing you don't have her cell. Can I get Agent Scully to call you back?"
Agent Scully. Not *Mom*. Will sat up straight, realising what he was doing. What an utterly stupid thing he was doing. Dana Katherine Scully was an important person with an important job that took her around the country, and here he was, wasting her partner's time trying to get in touch with her when he had no reason to suspect she wanted to hear from him.

"No, thanks," Will said quickly. "It's not that important. You know what, this is just a prank. I didn't think I'd get through. Forget it. I'm sorry." And he hung up, breathing heavily. He switched off his phone and buried it in his pocket, both to conserve battery life and to avoid a terrifying call back from the FBI.

Stupid, stupid. He hauled himself to his feet and kept walking down the main road. It was probably lucky it wasn't Dana Scully who answered, in the end. Like the last time he'd gotten through to her office, he hadn't considered for a second how hurtful or unpleasantly surprising a call from him could be. She'd given him up for a reason, and who was he to question or try to circumvent her decision? She was an adult, and a pretty accomplished and intelligent one at that. She knew best.

How many times did he need to remind himself of this fact?

How many times would he just desperately want a connection with his mom? He wished he'd never found the phone number. Now that he knew it, he'd always know she was just a phone call away.

Both he and Dana Scully stood a better chance of being happy *before* he knew that. Another example of some things being better off not known, as Uncle Gary had said.

The main road led into the centre of town, and though Will had no real desire to hang about in town, home lay beyond that, so that's where he headed. When his constant view of houses morphed into a cluster of shops and businesses and he started seeing more people on the street giving him frightened looks, he found a public toilet and cleaned the blood off his face and neck. Admittedly, he'd looked quite the mess, but the bleeding had long stopped and when he rubbed the bridge of his nose he felt minimal discomfort so he gathered there was no damage done. He managed to scrub most of the fresh red stains out of his shirt front and sleeves, and left there with only rusty wet smears on the collar of his tee. Much less confronting for his conservative townie neighbours.

Will wandered across the main square toward the series of intersections that would take him to the road out of town. It was a quaint old town, this place Gary and Sarah had chosen for her to start over. Clearly a farming-dependent community, half of the businesses in town related directly to the local industry, and most of the people around were classically underdressed in typical small-town country style. Will liked the lack of pretence, but struggled, as he grew to understand it better, with the small-town mentality that came with living somewhere so secular and introspective as this. He'd been raised by out-of-towners and, most recently, by a worldly city-dweller uncle, which made it hard sometimes for him to understand the mindset that drove Jeremy to despise him for being smart enough to take classes with seniors, or which convinced old ladies it was okay to stop Uncle Gary on the street and condemn him for failing to send his nephew to Sunday school with all the other local children.

"You can go when you're older, if you want," Gary had told him casually, years before, "but in the meantime, if you're going to learn anything, it'll be how to think for yourself."

The square was busy with pedestrians, and Will joined the main flow of foot traffic toward the clock tower. Ten past eleven. The cafes around the square and down the nearest streets were opening up for lunch and slow-moving townspeople were flocking to their menu stands. Will was hungry but didn't have the money to buy so didn't even let himself stop to look. He reached the opposite end of the square and waited to cross the road.
Parked on the other side was a weathered old pick-up truck. The driver, a local farmer, was shaking hands with an even more weathered-looking dreadlocked man who had just hopped down off the back. A drifter, Will supposed as he started across the road with a couple of other people. Moving from town to town, looking for work and livelihood. Soon enough he'd find work at one of those organic farms, no doubt, since they were the only ones hiring now.

The driver headed into the produce store and the drifter grabbed his backpack off the back tray of the vehicle just as Will walked past. Colourless eyes surveyed the town out of a scarred, bearded, sun-beaten face, passing straight over Will.

The eyes swung back and locked onto William's, widening in surprise.

Will couldn't have explained exactly what disturbed him so much about the drifter's gaze, nor why he felt so compelled to look straight back. He wondered briefly if he recognised the man, but couldn't place the big, heavy frame, the thick greying auburn beard or the eerie eyes in the unfamiliar aged face. Oddly, there was something other that he felt, some strange other sense like the way intuition manifests as hairs standing up or as a niggling persistent thought, which prompted him to look away, and told him to keep walking, as fast as he could without being obvious.

On the other side of the road, Will joined a crowd squeezing down a narrow walkway. This was always a busy alley, bustling with cafes and bars and other very 'happening' places since it wasn't accessible by car, and he easily lost himself in the crowd. But that niggling persistent worry that had started when he passed the drifter stuck with him, and he had to work very hard not to look over his shoulder to see if he was being followed.

It was irrational, he knew. Instinct had a purpose, communicating messages between the subconscious and conscious minds, but a logical deconstruction of the issue could usually pinpoint the source of the primal worry. In this case, no actual danger had presented itself, and Will was a nondescript, nonthreatening boy with little reason to suspect anyone of taking an interest in him. He was nobody – an orphan farm boy in rural Wyoming, and at the moment, a truant. The drifter must have thought he recognised him, maybe known another boy who looked similar.

That made the most sense.

He tried to put it out of his mind, and followed the main flow of the crowd along the alley to its end, where they passed the busiest lunchtime hotspot, the popular establishment on the corner. Patrons were lounging at outdoor tables this fine sunny late morning, sipping their first beer and iced tea of the day. Tables were positioned close together, right up to the kerb to maximise space.

"Will? William!"

The sound of his name being called made him stop before crossing the next intersection and turn his head, half-expecting it to be the weird dreadlocked drifter guy, but when he saw the owner of the voice, all thoughts of the drifter evaporated. Uncle Gary was sitting at one of the tables furthest back from the walkway, looking at him with confusion. At the same table were a suited stranger and Tim, the longest-serving hand on the Van de Kamp farm and Uncle Gary's single greatest help in running a farming property. Will broke free of the foot traffic and started picking his way between the tables of other patrons while his uncle stood.

"What are you doing here?" Uncle Gary asked. "You're meant to be at school."

"I know," Will admitted apologetically over the heads of seated diners as he squeezed between them. "I didn't expect to see you here. Hasn't the school called you?"
Gary frowned and patted his pockets. "No. I must have left my phone at home. Why, what happened?"

Will cringed. "You're not going to like it."

"Is that blood on your shirt?"

"Yeah. Just mine, though, don't worry, I didn't hurt anyone."

"I'm not worried about anyone else." Uncle Gary obviously wanted to say more, but he shared a 'we'll talk about this later' look with his nephew when the boy reached their table. He smiled reassuringly at the other two men. "Ron, this is my nephew, William."

"Pleasure," the suited man said with a too-white smile, shaking Will's hand across the table.

"Nice to meet you, sir," Will responded politely, and his uncle filled in, "Mr Edelstein works for the bank. We're talking about what we can do for the farm."

Will's stomach turned over, and it was both because of the topic of conversation and because of a fearful shriek back in the alley. They all glanced up and over, as did most people dining at the establishment. There was some sort of commotion but through the crowd, at first, it was hard to determine the cause. People seemed to be falling over. Further staring indicated that they were being pushed and shoved over by one person, and falling over one another in attempts to flee said person. As pedestrians in their conservative country fashion raced to get out of the way, a view of the source of commotion became suddenly clear, and Will's stomach flipped again.

The dreadlocked stranger was charging through the crowd brandishing a large knife, which he seemed mostly to use to threaten people to get out of his way as he grabbed at people and tried to look into their faces. When none of them proved to be who he was looking for, he threw them aside and growled in frustration, pushing further through the group and grabbing at someone else. He broke free of the crowd and started surveying the tightly-packed diners.

"Call the police," Tim said tensely, and Mr Edelstein hurriedly snatched his phone off the tabletop and started dialling. Maybe Tim spoke too loudly, Will would never know, but at that moment, the drifter looked straight at them.

Colourless eyes narrowed. He charged wordlessly, grabbing the tables that blocked his path and tossing them aside as though they weren't super heavy, as though he wasn't also holding a knife that took up most of his palm. His strength seemed impossible. Yells and screams answered every throw when the heavy furniture struck other customers and knocked them to the pavement. Will tried to back up but bumped into the next table, so close. The ill feeling of otherness was back, worse than before.

It all happened so fast. People in the drifter's path tried to scatter between the densely arranged tables and chairs, ducking and screaming when they were hit with chairs that blocked his way. Will and Tim squeezed and pushed their way back, away from the oncoming attacker, while Gary and Mr Edelstein tried to get around the table onto their side to make their escape, too. Phone to his ear, yelling at the emergency operator what department he needed, the banker opted to climb onto his chair and clamber onto the tabletop and jump away. Uncle Gary was halfway around the table when the drifter reached them, knife high in the air like he would bring it down on them and slash them into ribbons. He elbowed the heavy table aside without a glance at the person he'd be striking, and as it fell it crashed solidly into Uncle Gary's leg. Will heard the popping noise even over his uncle's howl of pain as he went down, clutching his knee. One more step and the drifter could sink his knife into Will's chest.
BANG. A huge red hole appeared in the stranger's chest instead, and as Will's ears rang with the explosion, the man swayed in place for a moment, stilled, before collapsing like a ragdoll and bleeding out on the paved dining area among his own scattered mess of furniture. The knife clattered down beside him.

"Oh, Jesus, Sheriff – you saved my life!" someone behind him exclaimed. Will turned around and saw the man who'd been dining at the next table was the town's mayor. "I didn't think there was anything behind those letters…"

Will pulled his attention back to his uncle, who was still pinned under the table. "Uncle Gary!" He ignored the dead man on the ground and grabbed the edge of the heavy table to pull it off of him. Sobbing in what had to be agony, Uncle Gary managed to roll out from underneath, holding his knee. Will looked to Mr Edelstein, who'd jumped to relative safety on the road, where cars were pulling up to see what was happening. "Have them send an ambulance!"

Still on the phone, the banker directed emergency to also send medical assistance to those hurt by in the rampage. The sheriff checked the drifter for signs of life, gun slung over his shoulder while he spoke seriously with the mayor about the recent threatening letters he'd received and whether this attack could be related. Will helplessly knelt beside his uncle, afraid to touch him.

"It's going to be okay," he promised, feeling useless while his only family gasped and howled with pain. "They're sending an ambulance now, and you'll go to hospital, and it'll all be alright…"

It was half true. They did send an ambulance, and Uncle Gary did go to hospital. The ambulance was full with other victims in various states of injury, so Tim offered to drive Will. William was eager to get away from the crime scene that the police were setting up, and from the gruesome bloody corpse on the ground.

The police wanted to get statements from both Tim and Will, but they were short and basic and matched what everyone else said, although Will also added he'd seen the drifter get off the back of a rusty pick-up near the main square. When he couldn't give any further detail, one cop went off to see if the truck remained, and the other got their names and sent the two on their way.

In the car, William was silent and thoughtful. He felt silly for thinking the drifter was coming after him. Of course there was a more obvious target, a political one, though what their conservative mayor could have done to upset the dreadlocked stranger was not clear. What was clear was that William had probably not been in any direct danger if he'd managed to get out of the way, and that purely by bad luck – which was odd for him, because he'd always been so randomly lucky with small things like this – he'd happened to be standing exactly between the mayor and the drifter.

Bad luck. Coincidence. That was all. Hopefully his description of the vehicle that the drifter had come in on had helped the police find out who he was.

Tim tried a couple of times to tell Will that Uncle Gary would be fine, and Will was quick to nod and smile and agree that of course he knew that, and then they would fall silent again. The truth was he'd never seen Uncle Gary in so much pain, or anyone, really, and the vision of his only family member screaming on the ground, pinned beneath the table, rolled around and around in his head without cessation. He still felt so useless and guilty, as he had in the minutes he'd waited with his injured uncle at the crime scene, wishing there was something he could do to alleviate the other's agony.

Will had heard that many kids who lost parents to terminal illness developed aversions to hospitals, but he'd remained rather neutral towards the institutions despite Sarah's death in one, perhaps even kind of liking them. Oddly, or perhaps not considering how sick she'd been and for how long, he
actually had at least as many memories of her in this hospital as he did of her at home. He remembered the kind nurses from his childhood, and his mother's tired grateful smile as she explained that the medical staff were angels who were doing everything they could to help her.

Today, arriving with Tim, it wasn't anything like his childhood memories of the quiet, peaceful oncology ward. Uncle Gary came in through emergency and he was still crying and in obvious distress. The doctors who received him were sharp and hardened, barking orders back and forth to one another and constantly on the move, checking vitals, feeling the injured joint, noting Gary's pained reactions, directing one another to prep a sedative or ready an IV or request an x-ray or whatever, all to the backdrop of mild chaos of the emergency room. Tim and William were at first told to stand back, then by an even firmer doctor, to leave the area altogether and wait in the designated room. No one stopped to answer Will's small voice asking what they thought was wrong, and when Tim led him away to the waiting room, Will felt even worse than he had on the way over.

The wait was excruciating. Tim had a fully charged phone to keep him occupied but Will's was off and almost out of batteries and, to be honest, he was still too afraid to turn it in case he'd been traced by Dana Scully's partner. He didn't seek out engagement or entertainment, however. He just sat, for hours, thinking.

He thought about Uncle Gary, who was hurting, seriously injured, which scared and upset Will. He also felt disproportionately guilty. He knew he hadn't done anything to provoke or invite the attack, and couldn't have stopped it, and that it wasn't even aimed at him, but he felt somehow responsible. Gary shouldn't have even been there, in a finance meeting about a farm he didn't want, that he was only running to fulfil a long-fulfilled promise to his dead sister. If life were fair, he would have been in a coffee shop in the city with other money guys from work while this went down far, far away in this obscure little town he knew nothing much about, but instead, through circumstance and bad luck, he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He thought about the drifter. That eerie focused gaze, the dirty dreadlocks, the knife raised to scare people rather than to cut them. The improbability of his strength as he'd knocked heavy furniture flying. What prompted a person to terrorise others like that?

He thought about Mr Edelstein the banker and the state of the farm. The cattle they regularly rounded up to sell off in small bunches, the impossible spreadsheets of Gary's as he tried to find a way to make it all work. For what? So he could be unhappy for another year, so Will could live the simple farming life Sarah and Christiaan had wanted for him? Ultimately, what did they want? For him to take over the farm? It was just not going to last that long, and even if it did, William had no plans to concentrate his life's efforts onto the Van de Kamp land, no matter what it had meant to his dad. He had a world to explore, and a universe to learn. His parents were dead – Will and Gary were alive, and Gary was trapped in a mindless cycle trying to do what he thought dead people wanted.

He thought about Rosie, and Mr Caine, and Mr Caine's daughter, eight years old and already hacked up in order to save her life from cancer. The child had beaten the odds and was trying to get her life back. Rosie was perfect for that family's needs. She was not doing anything on the Van de Kamp farm except eating grass and being loved, which she could do just as easily at the Caine place. She'd probably get loads more attention from her new besotted owner, and it would be like her life starting over. With Will and Gary, she just reminded them of Sarah.

He thought about Sarah. Who was not a house, or a horse, or even a piano room, but a loving presence alive now only in his memories, which was the safest and warmest place she could be.
He thought about Dana Scully. About a barely remembered, possibly imagined smile over his cot, framed with short red hair like his own. About the stupidity of his attempts to contact her, and the money he'd tried to raise to, at first, get to D.C. to find her.

About the assignments he wouldn't get done tonight.

About Jeremy. He should never have antagonised him. That was dumb. Why had he done it?

About Ms B.

About Trip, sticking up for him when he really didn't have to. It had been a long time since Will had had any friends, having disconnected socially around the passing of his mother and never really re-establishing those relationships. He became just the weird kid, though it wasn't until high school that he'd suffered for it.

Will had heaps to keep his mind busy until a doctor came to see them briefly around mid-afternoon, apparently having just remembered they were there.

"We managed to organise an emergency MRI to have a look at Mr Milne's knee," the doctor explained, mostly to Tim, whose expression was serious and worried. Will supposed he looked the same. "The impact he experienced today has caused a tear in his ACL – the acute cruciate ligament." The doctor indicated on his own leg where this was, along the knee. He continued speaking just to Tim. "It's a grade three sprain. Mr Milne asked us to advise you that he will be having corrective surgery, scheduled for this evening. He's quite heavily sedated right now to help him manage the pain but you'll be able to see him in the morning at the commencement of visiting hours. He'll be out of recovery by then."

"I understand," Tim said, and they both looked pityingly at Will.

"Will you be taking Mr Milne's dependent home?" the doctor asked Tim, and William stood there in silence while they discussed him like he was an object. Uncle Gary's dependent. Not his nephew; not his kid. Way to reinforce the sense of familial and community disconnect Will was already feeling, guys.

Will cleared his throat. "Will my uncle need me to bring anything with me when I visit him tomorrow?"

The doctor paused, apparently having expected a more childish question. Like why can't I see my uncle now? The biggest shortfall to being short – people assuming he was younger and stupider than he was.

"A few changes of clothes would be good," he said finally. "Once he's started recovering it'll help him feel more normal to be in his own clothes. Maybe a couple of books or magazines, his phone and charger… He'll be off his feet for quite a while, and daytime TV could bore anyone to death."

Will wanted to ask how long was quite a while, but knew the doctor would not give him any concrete numbers in case things turned out differently. He nodded and left it at that. Tim took him home.

Will found his first reason to properly smile in hours when he saw his schoolbag against the front door, all books and lunch and pencils packed back inside. No note. Obviously Trip. He must have had his mother drive out here after school so he could return it.

At the house they packed a bag for Uncle Gary and an overnight bag for Will, who would be spending the night on Tim's couch. He left his school things inside the bag, including the Biology
exercise book with the late homework he'd never handed in and the random Navajo scribing, and stuffed clothes and toiletries around it. He found his phone's charger but still didn't turn it on, not yet.

Will and Tim fed the animals and brought Rosie inside the barn where they knew she’d be safe overnight. On the way off the property Will noticed the flag up on the letterbox. He had Tim stop so he could go and check it.

The old lettering of the letterbox still read Van de Kamp, though technically, the name did not fully apply to either of the occupants. He flicked it open and pulled out the mail. He went through it as he climbed back into the car.

Bills, junk mail, wrong address… and a thick envelope addressed to Mr William Van de Kamp from Tannenbaum and Associates, the law firm. Will tore it open, heart thudding with equal parts excitement and guilty apprehension.

Eleven thousand, two hundred and thirty-eight dollars, and forty-six cents. Made out to him. To do with whatever he pleased. Will quietly stashed the cheque back inside the envelope with the accompanying letter from Mr Hind and said nothing of it to Tim.

Tim's wife cooked a hearty, delicious dinner and Will ate everything on his plate even though he didn't realise he was hungry – in fact, he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Their small children had their baths and were put to bed, and the couple chatted to Will briefly before their newest baby woke up and stole back their attention. They turned in early and Will curled up under the blankets on the couch.

He didn't sleep more than two hours that night, and not just because the baby kept wailing all through to morning.

Will tried to act patient the next day while Tim and his wife and their kids started their day in the stupidly early hours. He was already sitting on the end of the couch with the blankets folded neatly on top of the pillow they loaned him. His phone, freshly charged but still turned off, was back in his backpack, which was perched on his knees. He was gracious at breakfast and ate what he was given, even as worry and questions about Uncle Gary's condition ate at him from inside.

Ignorance, it turned out, was certainly not synonymous with bliss.

Finally, finally, they were on their way. Tim would not be staying long at the hospital – he just wanted to see his boss and friend was alright, then he would head back to the farm, which would otherwise be unmanned for yet another day. Will found himself, for the first time, not even remotely worried about the farm. He didn't care if the dogs, in their boredom, escaped the barn and dug big holes under the fences and all the fences fell down and the herd ran into a neighbour's property and the neighbour tried to claim them. He didn't care if the chickens got to keep their eggs today. He didn't care if Rosie's stall wasn't mucked out.

What mattered about the Van de Kamp farm was not the farm itself. He hadn't really realised before.

When Will saw Uncle Gary sitting up tiredly in his recovery bed with his leg in a cast hanging suspended from a strange steel frame, he had to rein himself in from bolting to him and throwing his arms around him in relief. He was sure his return smile to Gary's grin when they caught sight of each other said it all anyway. He walked casually over, though he felt anything but casual.

"Your doctor said some normal clothes would make you feel more normal after the surgery, but I
said normal would be weird for a weird guy like you," Will said, depositing the bag of Gary's things into his uncle's waiting arms. Uncle Gary looked utterly wrecked but he was still smiling, pleased to see Will and Tim, and to Will's unspoken delight, he was not in any obvious pain. He'd laid awake all through the night remembering his uncle's screams and reimagining the face of the drifter in all kinds of demonic renditions. "So I packed kilts and Hawaiian shirts. Odd socks. Women's underwear."

Uncle Gary scoffed but did check his bag quickly in case his nephew wasn't kidding. Appeased, he looked up at Tim and shook his hand. "Thanks for having Will. Sorry I didn't even ask personally – they had me on some pretty serious drugs by the time I remembered to find out what had happened to you two."

Tim brushed the thanks away. "I take it you won't be out checking the fences with me today?"

They all looked at Gary's leg. It hung there, kept still while it began its initial healing. Gary grimaced.

"No. But maybe tomorrow."

They grinned at each other and Tim left shortly after. Will waited until he was gone before lifting himself up to sit beside his uncle on the hospital bed to be closer to him. He would never admit it out loud, but he'd been desperately scared for his uncle yesterday and last night. He had hated, hated, the not-knowing, and had despised the knowing all the more – knowing that Uncle Gary had been seriously injured and was undergoing surgery and would not be visitable until the morning, and all the not-knowing would persist up until that point.

"I packed you some books, and your phone and stuff," Will said, nudging a little closer and going through Gary's care package to show him what he'd picked out. "Your doctor said you'd be off your feet for a while and you'll be bored, so…"

"Listen, it's not going to be that long," Uncle Gary insisted, smiling reassuringly. He shook his head at his leg. "This was just bad luck, and yeah, it's going to slow me down, but the surgeon said the procedure to reattach the bone fragment went very well and if I do my rehab, I should see a full recovery within six months."

"Will you have a wheelchair?"

"Crutches. By the end of the week, doc claims."

Better than a wheelchair, Will supposed. "You won't be able to work the farm. You'd have to hire someone to cover your role. Tim and I can't cover a property that size on our own."

"I know, I know," Uncle Gary said with a sigh, rubbing his forehead. "I haven't thought about it yet, but look, we'll make it work, we'll find a-"

"I don't think we should," William interrupted. "Find a way. I don't think we should."

Gary blinked. The painkillers no doubt made his thinking slow. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid. I get it – the spreadsheets, the meetings with the bank, the staff leaving, the little private sales of our best cattle. The farm's in trouble. I know."

Uncle Gary looked down, embarrassed. "I didn't want you to have to worry about that."

"Well, I do. Did," Will corrected himself. "I mean, I have been worried about it. But now I'm more
worried about you. You've been killing yourself trying to keep Dad's farm alive, and now you physically can't do it. You hate farming."

"I don't... Alright, I hate farming. But it's your home," Uncle Gary explained, confused by Will's direction. "It was your dad's. It's where your mom wanted you to grow up."

"And I have," Will urged his uncle to see. "I've had the childhood she wanted me to have, because of you. And I always knew you'd sell up once I moved out anyway, right? It's not like the country life is the life for you. Now it's going to be hard for you to get around the place-

"I'll be on crutches for a few months, Will, not permanently crippled," Uncle Gary scolded lightly. "Either way. I think we should sell the farm."

Gary had nothing to say for a long moment. "You do?"

"We're going to lose it anyway, aren't we?" Will countered. "I bet that's what the bank guy told you yesterday. Soon enough we won't have enough livestock to call ourselves a farm, and once we start selling off sections of the land, what have we got left anyway? Just the house and yard, and by that point we'll be so desperate we'll sell it for a steal and be left with nothing. I say we should sell the farm while it's still worth something."

"And go where?"

"Wherever you want. Get a little house in town so I don't have to walk a hundred years every time I miss the school bus. I don't know. But then we've still got the rest of the farm's sale to fall back on, instead of struggling to make it week to week. Uncle Gary," Will said now, "the land belongs to you and you've kept it for me, but it's not your farm, and it's not mine. I'd rather live somewhere we're both happy."

"What about Sarah?" Uncle Gary asked softly. "Doesn't the house remind you of her? Don't you want to be in your family's home?"

"Honestly? I don't remember Dad, almost at all, and I find it easier to remember Mom when I'm playing piano or when I'm here." Will gestured to indicate the hospital. "She's not at the house. So no, the house doesn't make me feel closer to my family. You're my family."

"Well," Uncle Gary said, regarding his nephew with curiosity. "Since when are you the economist and the sensible adult in this relationship?"

"Since my supposed sensible adult guardian got his leg half knocked off in an altercation outside a bar in the middle of the day."

They fell into a thoughtful, companionable silence. Will tried to think of the best way to bring up the other things he wanted to say.

"Also... I think you should sell Rosie to Mr Caine."

"Full of surprises today. Why?"

"Because you and I are about to be farmless, one way or another, and Rosie is the sweetest horse in the world, and Mom would be happy knowing she was going to someone who would love and care for her. A little kid? That's perfect."

"A little kid called Sarah," Gary admitted. "Caine's daughter is called Sarah. I didn't tell you
because I thought it would sway your decision."

It would have, Will realised, but only to the same conclusion he'd come to on his own. A little girl called Sarah, battling cancer at the same age Will was when he lost his mom to the same disease, could be helped to regain her independence by Will and Gary letting go of the past.

Put that way, there was no question.

"I'm okay with it, if you are," he said.

"I'd been thinking it was the right thing to do, for Rosie, too," Uncle Gary said. Will dug into his own bag, nodding.

"Also," he said now before he could lose his nerve, "and don't be mad about this-"

"I'm pre-emptively mad, because that request is always followed by some maddening admission."

"Yeah, alright." Will produced the cheque. "Mr Kear-- Mr Dickbag's lawyers called me and I accepted the portion of the estate left in Mom's name."

"You what?!" Uncle Gary leaned forward and grabbed the cheque disbelievingly, blinking through the fog of the painkillers. Will sat fast, even though he knew he was in for a lecture and for once could actually just walk away and leave his uncle stuck here ranting.

"I know it was wrong of me after you'd said you didn't want their money, and it was wrong of me not to tell you, but I knew you'd turn it down and I also knew we needed it to save the farm, so I accepted it. But now… I don't want to flush any more money on the farm. I don't want you to be a farmer."

"I don't want you to grow up to be a farmer, either," Uncle Gary admitted. "I think humanity would suffer a great loss if that's all you did with that oversized brain of yours."

"So I don't really know what to do with this," Will summarised, nodding at the offending cheque. Uncle Gary stared at the total sum of the cheque for a long time. "Eleven thousand dollars, Will."

"I know."

"It's a shitload of money to just be given."

"I know."

"How do you feel about it?" Gary asked finally. "It's yours, made out to you. You can do what you like with this. You could put it towards college."

"Yeah, but then Mr Dickbag's family is paying my way, and the more I think about that, the yuckier it makes me feel," Will admitted, fidgeting with his shoelace. "You said he kicked Mom out and left her homeless. I don't want his help. I should have listened to you."

"It's not technically his money, it's his mother's, and she was alright," Gary reasoned. He shifted uncomfortably in his hospital bed. Will took the cheque back, thoughtful.

"So the money's half alright," he agreed reluctantly. He stared at the numbers and the signature. "Maybe I'll just bank half of it."

"And the other half?"
Will looked out the door of Uncle Gary's room, following the halls in his memory through this hospital to the ward he felt safest in. "I want to donate it to oncology." Maybe help the hospital pay for half a machine, since all their equipment was so expensive, and maybe help them care for sick patients like little Sarah Caine.

Dead people didn't care what you did with money. Sarah and Christiaan Van de Kamp were beyond wanting Gary and Will to keep the farm going. Mr Caine was alive and full of urgent desire to see his daughter well. Will could help.

"This is where Mom is, for me," he said, looking around. "In my memories. In the miracles doctors do. Even though they couldn't save her, they tried so many options and did so much to make it easier for us all."

Uncle Gary patted his back. "I think the hospital would be thrilled." He gazed at his nephew for a while. "Where's all this coming from? You're selling the house, selling Rosie, giving away money? What's come over you?"

Will put the bank cheque back in the envelope and hid it at the bottom of his backpack. He shrugged and tried to articulate where his thoughts had been all night. Couldn't. How could he explain that he'd realised that all that mattered in life was the people in it, and that none of the 'stuff' really did any of the lost people justice and that holding onto that 'stuff' only stopped him and Uncle Gary, and potentially others, from being wholly happy?

"Thought I might be able to convince you I'd been replaced with an alien copy of your real nephew, and scare you into leaving town."

Uncle Gary squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "Can't get rid of me that easily."
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, nor do I intend for this work to be taken as the truth that is out there. This is entirely made up.

Author's Notes: Thanks to everybody who left feedback on the previous chapter! I know it takes time so I appreciate you giving that time to me, simultaneously stoking my ego and making me a better writer. Those who raised qualms regarding my handling of the adoption angle, I thank you for sharing your thoughts. I realise it's a contentious issue and when my writing can make readers feel confronted enough to experience an emotional reaction, I have to take it as a sign that readers are invested and engaged! Mission accomplished – this is, after all, an M rated fic, with mature themes that may be confronting, and it is also a fan work of a show that was all about pushing boundaries and asking the questions some might shirk.

If you have reached this point but feel uncomfortable about my version of William, I thank you for your readership thus far and understand if you choose not to continue. My wider story arc requires a transient, independent William, and the path I have taken through the story is the best way I can achieve this while still staying true to the experiences of adoption within my own family. I do not want to see William 'leave' his family in order to fulfill his role in my story, and this is why he has started off the story already orphaned. Please be reminded that Will is a fictional boy in atypical circumstances who may or may not be discovering he has superpowers and recently learned he was adopted but can find no appropriate outlet for discussing this, and who has already suffered the trauma of losing his mother Sarah at a critical identity-forming age, and has now discovered a phone number that connects him with the most likely candidate for filling that hole but lives daily with the conflict of indecision, and who on top of all this is overtired, hormonal, stressed by awareness of family finances and being bullied. There is no right way for him to be expected to behave and in light of all that, attempts to attach to an idealised figure of stability would be among his most normal behaviours.

It's doubtful they'll ever find scientific evidence for the existence of fate or destiny, but sometimes coincidence comes very close.

"Whoa. Hey," Colt said without thought, looking up from the screen to see his partner enter the office. "I mean, ma'am." He waved her urgently over, taking the video back a nick to pause it at the moment that had caught his attention. Yesterday's odd phone call and his failed attempts to convince the operator to trace the call to find this distressed-sounding boy who knew Scully's name – "We don't trace prank calls, Agent Colt, unless there's some threat implied. Does this qualify?" – instantly forgotten. "Is that what I think it is?"

Scully rounded their desks, dumping her handbag in the middle of hers. "What are we looking at? And how long have you been here?" she added, consulting her watch, the one she'd been wearing since Christmas. She leaned on the back of his office chair to look at his monitor. He pointed at the still image of the hallway outside room 623, residence of former soldier Freddie Wicking a.k.a. the
DC bomb-builder. Their main case. Expression blurred with movement but not so much the tense worry could not be made out, Mrs Astrid Haut was exiting the apartment with a creased, lumpy yellow envelope folded around a solid, curved shape.

"Just got here. Is that a gun?" Colt asked, letting the footage play to show Scully how the old lady had arrived with the bomb-builder's weekly groceries and stepped inside, less than a minute after he'd sat down this morning and switched on his computer to watch the live surveillance – talk about timing. Six minutes later, she'd walked back out, looking petrified and awkwardly stuffing that yellow package into her handbag under her other arm. Scully reached past him to take the mouse and increase the magnification of the paused image, and the two of them squinted uncertainly at the screen.

"Hard to say," she said finally, never one to be determinate. She released the mouse back to him and stood back. They examined the footage from other cameras as the woman left the building, but by the time she came into view, the package was already hidden away in the handbag. There was only that one brief sighting of the crumpled yellow envelope to go off, and multiple reviews did not tell them anything new. Time was ticking, and Astrid Haut was now outside and on the streets, possibly with a gun and possibly with just a suspicious-looking package.

"What do we do?" Colt looked up at Agent Scully and she shrugged slowly, looking uncomfortable about something. "Should I just write it up in the surveillance notes? We don't know for sure it's a weapon. It could be fully registered and she could be licenced."

Scully sighed and took her cell from the pocket of her dressy suit pants. "She's not, and even if she was, she just walked out of a terror suspect's apartment and into peak-hour DC with a firearm she didn't have five minutes ago. We can't take the chance. We have to tail her."

Colt pushed back from his desk, wheely computer chair permitting a smooth slide. "We have to tail her?" How often did he hear that from her? Never would he accuse Agent Scully of being too prissy or important to get her hands dirty, but as senior agent in the department, she generally deferred fieldwork to others, which meant Colt as her partner spent a lot less time pounding the pavement than most of his colleagues.

She raised a playful eyebrow while she flicked through her contacts. "I suppose we could." She raised her phone to her ear and started pacing while she waited for it to connect. She'd barely taken four steps when she stumbled; Colt instinctively reached back for her but she had already grabbed the back of his chair with her free hand. "Shit."

"You alright?" he asked, trying to turn without spinning his chair and unbalancing her. She gingerly lifted a foot off the floor and they both saw the heel spike dangling from the shoe. It had snapped cleanly and nearly snapped her ankle in the process. Scully handed him her ringing phone to free up her hand to tug the shoe off.

"Could have been worse," she assessed, standing in one heel and examining the broken one she held. "I'm fine. It just took me by surprise." She tossed the shoe underneath her desk and kicked off the other one as well to even out her stance, and nudged them both together out of the way with her toes. "New shoes, too. Sorry. Looks like we're grounded."

Colt gave her back her cell and scooted his chair back to his computer, understanding the impact women's shoes could have on plans. He had lived all his life with women. "It's alright. I trust you didn't plan that."

"Of course not. I'm as disappointed as you are," she assured him, and then they shared a smirk while she answered her call.
Purely coincidence. That's all.

A ground team was haphazardly arranged to tail the woman, and Scully and Colt directed from the office. Scully was light with Colt but had little humour for the task or the team that assembled.

"Agent Desmond should not be anywhere near this," she protested to Macgregor, the first man in the area to arrive and get eyes on Haut, over the phone when he told her who he'd asked to meet him. "He's known to persons of interest in this case! That was almost proven at the first sting." Almost. Never willing to stand behind a flawed claim of absolutism.

"You need someone now," Macgregor replied apologetically. "And he's my partner. Marzollo is at least fifteen away. Everyone else I've called is caught up with their own cases." The quietness of this case in recent weeks, despite small breakthroughs, had meant it did not warrant as heavy a departmental presence as it had previously, and personnel had been diverted elsewhere. "Should I call in some hands from another department?"

"No," Scully said shortly, and hung up. "I shouldn't have delegated."

"If you want something done right..." Colt murmured under his breath, getting the surveillance system connected on her computer under her log-ins, which had better clearance than his did and could bypass several of the tedious checkpoints. He felt her gaze on him and tilted his meaningfully down to her bare feet. No further comment.

The operation was best followed by audio and GPS, though both agents snapped several images they sent through for Scully and Colt. The woman went to a park and sat tensely on a bench. Agents Desmond and Macgregor took up positions nearby to observe, and reported back steadily which suspicious characters among the throng of busy commuters looked to be approaching her... and walked straight on past.

This went on for a good forty-five minutes. Occasional photographs showed that Astrid Haut sat on that bench seat, glancing periodically at her watch, hugging her handbag to herself like a lifejacket, eyes wide with fear. Obviously, she was there to meet someone on the bomb-builder's behalf.

Or at least, she was there to look like it.

"There's a guy, mid-to-late forties, dark hair, beard, suit... Middle Eastern appearance," Desmond reported, though Colt voiced that last part in tandem with him, a prediction based on the pattern of Desmond's last five or six suspects. Agent Scully was sitting beside him with her chin in her hands, elbows braced on the edge of her desk and occasionally yawning even though it was only half past eight in the morning. She glanced at him sidelong.

"Good guess," she commented dryly. He smirked confidently.

"It's a gift," he confided. "Watch. And..." He waited for it. "He keeps walking."

The report came immediately. "He didn't stop."

Agent Scully closed her eyes, caught between amusement and frustration. She pushed the headphones off her ears and let them hang around her neck as she rubbed her temple. "I can tell those email reminders about racial profiling have really made a difference to our department's conduct. Excellent." She got her phone back out and read something on the screen. After a moment she typed something back, saying aloud to Colt, "Marzollo's just arrived. Have Desmond switch out. It's too suspicious that he's been there the whole time she has. We might have been made."

She could have made the order herself but she made no move toward the microphone. She pulled
the headset from her neck entirely and dropped it on the desk, standing and returning to his. She wiggled the mouse to get the screen to wake up.

"What are you doing?" Colt asked, microphone off. She shook her head slowly, not looking at him, attention already redirected to his monitor.

"We must have missed something," she insisted, resuming the surveillance of the apartment from the moment the woman stepped out and looking closely at the screen. "Something's off."

Her instinct for that sort of thing was a mysteriously accurate phenomenon that Colt had come to trust, so he didn't question her claim, even though he wanted to. He couldn't think of what else she hoped to see in that grainy brief glimpse of Mrs Haut tucking the gunnish-looking package into her bag, though he saw her replay it several times at different magnifications. Instead of commenting, he left her to it, standing there barefoot looking serious and absorbed, and stayed with the ground operation in the DC park, listening and watching and recording, relaying orders to the team and relaying developments (or lack thereof) to his partner for further orders.

It was familiar territory, this role Scully often left him in. It felt like being back in Afghanistan, except back then he was dying to be away from the monitors and out in the field. Now, he still preferred the field, but he felt content missing out, knowing that inevitably, eventually, the real action found Agent Scully anyway. While Desmond and Macgregor were covering the first survey on the bomb-builder's building back in December, Colt was sitting in the office while Scully got her mysterious fax tipping her about Johannsson.

"What's happening?" Desmond demanded frequently, annoyed to have been pulled. He was out of sight of the park bench, but Agent Scully wasn't happy with just that. She'd had Colt order him to keep walking, down the street and onto a bus. He was the one she believed most likely to be the giveaway, and if the ground team was being watched while they watched Mrs Haut, then standing around in the park for forty-five minutes talking on the phone at rush hour and then hanging up and walking only to the other side of the park to stand around some more, or going to a sleek black car and getting in and going nowhere, was highly suspicious behaviour. Actually physically leaving was way more normal.

"Nothing," Colt said again, and Macgregor and Marzollo agreed. The woman wasn't moving, and no one had arrived to meet her. Almost an hour had passed. Desmond sighed audibly.

"We should change something up. Prompt her into doing something."

"That would be counter to the point of spying on her, wouldn't it?" Colt asked rhetorically, raising an eyebrow the other agents couldn't see. Scully had laid out the parameters of this operation at the beginning. Observation. Distance of minimum thirty yards at all times. She hadn't retracted those orders.

"The old bitch could sit there all day and this could all be a waste of our fucking time. If she does something, we can bring her in and-"

"We have our orders," Colt interrupted, and Desmond scoffed impatiently.

"Yeah, thanks, soldier-boy," he sneered, "but this is my case. You just look up the file and check the first name tagged with it. Sure as fuck isn't yours, so why am I listening to you? Macgregor, change of plans," the field agent said firmly. Colt frowned, uncomfortable with his colleague's willingness to override Agent Scully's leadership.

He wasn't the only one.
"Don't think so, partner," Macgregor replied. "What have we got on Haut, even if we bring her in? It'd just blow our cover. Wicking will know for sure we're watching him."

Desmond started to argue. "Boss says no," Colt shut him down without even checking in with Scully. "She said to hold position. No interference." He looked to her when he overheard her mutter a muted curse. "What?"

Scully was still standing, leaning down to use his computer. Now she stood back, gesturing at the screen for him to look. He rolled closer, abandoning the live operation momentarily.

"She's just a diversion," Agent Scully said while they watched the replay of some twenty minutes ago – none other than the radical and elusive Alistair Craig turning up at room 623's door again after months off the grid, knocking Morse code to get the occupant's attention and going inside with a cooler bag slung over his shoulder. He came back out only a few minutes later. Without the bag.

He left.

He'd come and gone. None of the agents were watching.

A perfectly planned coincidence.

"He was going to crawl back out of the woodwork eventually," Colt mentioned. "Clever, arranging for us to be distracted." He glanced at his partner, noted her disappointment. "You had a feeling, didn't you?"

"Intensely paranoid fundamentalist former soldier picks incompetent ally to smuggle a poorly concealed gun to a nearby park for no apparent reason, without mentioning she should conceal the weapon before stepping into a hallway we're sure he knows is under surveillance?" Scully summed up the less-than-compelling story that had niggled at the back of her brilliant mind and sent her back to the video. "We were predictably quick to swallow the simplest explanation without really thinking."

This seemed to upset her more than Colt felt was reasonable.

"It's not like any of the rest of us thought of it, either," he reminded her, returning to the operation and opening communications to fill in Macgregor, Desmond and Marzollo. Like Scully, the field team were annoyed by their personal oversights in not having considered the possibility and not leaving someone in the vicinity of the apartment building. Desmond forgot his desire to redirect the operation, and did as Agent Scully ordered when she returned to the microphone, disembarking from his bus and heading back toward the apartments, but there was little point. Scully reported that Craig was captured on surveillance footage departing the premises at 8:23am. Even on foot, he could have put a decent distance between himself and the bomb-builder, and without an actual charge to make, the team could devote no further manpower to tracking him down.

According to Macgregor's steady reporting, exactly an hour after taking up her position on the bench, Astrid Haut got to her feet. She withdrew the conspicuously shaped yellow envelope from her handbag and threw it in the next bin she passed. She walked in the direction of her home, Marzollo trailing her from a vast distance.

"Actions, ma'am?" Macgregor asked anxiously. The package looked like a gun, but it had come from a terror suspect's lair. The chance of it being a small explosive was not a laughing matter in their line of work.
"Just…" Scully hesitated. Colt saw a million thoughts cross her bright eyes and he intuited most of them and understood how the bomb-builder had tied their hands. They couldn't approach the bin. They couldn't walk away. "Hold. Don't do anything," she ordered, then withdrew to call AD Tan for direction. In the old days, she'd told Colt before, she would have had the wiggle room to make decisions like these on her own – even when she wasn't in a senior role like she was here in Counterterrorism. She'd rarely gone to her Assistant Director for clearance on major decisions like whether or not to call in a bomb squad. Now, though, red tape restricted a lot of their activity.

"Make a pass," Desmond suggested over the line to Macgregor. "Don't touch, just toss a wrapper or something in and get a look."

Was the guy stupid? Colt felt his brow furrow. "Yeah, in case Wicking has someone hiding in the bushes watching you, so he knows for sure we're spying on their grocery lady, and in case they're into remote detonation. I'm sure they'd appreciate you getting nice and close, Macgregor."

"Yeah, fuck you, Desmond," Macgregor said in annoyance.

"Agent Scully's getting approval for specialist assistance with extracting the package," Colt told the field team, looking up at his partner while she spoke quickly on the phone, updating the Assistant Director on the operation and where it had left them. Her eyes were fixed on Colt's computer screen, showing live footage of the bomb-builder's closed apartment door. He knew she was still annoyed about missing that. If they'd kept their attention on the suspect instead of his ally, they would have seen the visitor arrive at the building. Maybe intercepted him. Progressed their case significantly today. Maybe even seen grounds for an arrest and entering the apartment.

If only Colt hadn't seen Astrid Haut leave with that package. If only he'd turned on his computer ten minutes later and started watching the live action from there. They would have spotted Craig and had much better chances of getting something useful out of today.

"Possibly," he heard Scully answer Tan after a long silence of listening to him. She raised her gaze to the ceiling, frustrated. "That's all the information I have here. The suspect builds bombs, and has been profiled as paranoid and anti-government, but Mrs Haut has no previous criminal history. Even still, I'm not prepared to send someone else to move on the discarded package without your clearance, sir."

Colt jumped when something heavy hit the desktop on his other side, and he turned in his seat, shoving off his headphones.

"Tense in here, Corvette," Agent Harlow noted, flashing him an apologetic smile and tugging off her gloves to lay them beside her helmet. She looked up over him at Scully and they shared a nod of acknowledgement, but Scully was speaking again, trying to get an answer out of Tan. Harlow brought her attention back to Colt and what he was doing. "Looks fun."

She slowly lowered herself into Scully's abandoned chair, transfixed by the GPS dots and dialogue boxes open all over the screen. Her long dark hair fell like a sheet over her leather jacketed shoulder, slightly flattened and damp with sweat along her temples from the helmet. If the FBI agent on the recruitment webpage looked like Natalie Harlow did after a casual thirty-mile ride on her cool-as-fuck Ducati, Colt was sure there'd be a lot more applicants. Likewise, he was sure she'd heard something like that before and didn't need to hear it again, especially from a junior agent she'd met all of twice, so he offered a friendly smile and scooted over so she could see better.

"You missed all the excitement where we tracked an old lady into a park and she did absolutely nothing for an hour," he filled her in. "You've come in at the dull bit where we have to ask the powers above what to do because there's a chance the package she threw in the bin might have been
an explosive."

Harlow nodded, running her fingers along her scalp to loosen her hair, apparently unaware exactly how attractive a motion it was. "Very dull," she agreed. A few photos came up onscreen and Colt put his headphones back on to listen in.

"Guy in a hoodie stopped beside the trashcan," Macgregor reported hastily, sending photos as quickly as he could take them. Through the crowd moving hurriedly through the park on their way to work, a lone figure could be seen standing at the park bin, then reaching in, then holding the package. "He's got it…"

"Ma'am," Colt said over his shoulder, and Scully leaned in to watch with him and Harlow as still photographs showed them the hooded man opening the lumpy yellow envelope and withdrawing something. There wasn't time to order Macgregor out of the scene.

"It's a banana, Agent Scully."

The agents in the office stared at the photographs confirming Macgregor's incredulous claim. The unknown figure seemed to know Macgregor was there, standing facing in his direction and holding the banana up high enough and long enough to be seen clearly before throwing both back into the bin and departing on foot with the crowd.

Harlow glanced sideways at the two Counterterrorism agents, unsure whether to laugh or offer sympathy. Colt shook his head in despair. This whole operation was constructed out of his initial intel, spotting that package on the screen and misconstruing it as a weapon. What a joke.

"It's a fucking what?" Desmond demanded. "Wicking sent that old lady out with a banana to distract us? What is this, a cartoon? Well, follow him!"

Colt quickly conveyed the gist of Desmond's quasi-order to his partner, and she grabbed at the microphone, still holding the phone's receiver with her other hand to her ear. "No, stand down. I repeat, do not pursue. We have no information on this new person of interest and he's issued no indication of threat. Withdraw from the scene and come in. We're done for today." She switched off the mic and said firmly to Colt, "Make sure they let it go," before flashing a quick welcoming smile at Harlow and going back to her call with Tan to explain the unexpected ending.

"It's always stand down with her," Desmond grumbled in Colt's ear.

"Clearly I'm in the wrong department for daily edge-of-your-seat drama," Harlow commented, sitting back while Colt saved the recorded audio and GPS tracking data for later analysis. She rolled her shoulders forward and then back to loosen and dislodge the straps of the backpack she still wore, and Colt pretended not to notice. She brought it around to her lap and unzipped it to go through its contents.

"Clearly. Because a stranger waving a banana is how all our stings end around here," Colt replied. "You're missing out over at the FDDU, sequencing genes and whatever."

Harlow nodded seriously. "I'm applying for an instant transfer. I want in on this banana action."

"I figured that's why you were here," Colt said, but the joke had gone too far to maintain mock solemnity and they both cracked a quick grin. He had to flick the microphone back on to remind Desmond to lay off the other two agents about abandoning their targets. The guy was a real dick today. Actually, he was never highly precise, definitely outcomes-orientated, act-first-think-later, a polar opposite in this office to scientist Scully, whose rigorous attention was always with the
process even at the expense of a desirable result. Desmond wanted this case he'd conceptualised and developed and now kind-of lost to Scully to hurry up and end, preferably in a ball of flaming glory where his work and dedication was recognised. He wanted an arrest and a 'closed' stamp on the file. Colt had never had an issue with the other agent until today, and reminded himself that everybody had off days.

"Actually, I'm here for some help," Harlow explained now, taking a thick stack of stapled documents from her tightly packed bag and flattening their bent corners out on the desk beside her helmet. "Ms Field forced through my transfer into the FDDU and now I'm allowed to use all the facilities – finally – but I've been off active field duty for so long that I need a recommendation to be allowed back out. I was hoping Dr Scully could sign off for me."

"You're a proper agent again?" Colt asked while he worked on finalising the operation. Harlow shrugged and tried not to smile. She had a pretty smile.

"I will be, once these are signed and submitted," she admitted. "They don't even have to be fully processed – just approved and sitting in Field's inbox. I made a fuckload of copies," she added, spreading them across the desk to show him and pushing a handful of print-outs that were clearly not part of this set away from the rest, "in case that bastard Tan tries to fuck me around again… what?" She stopped when Colt waved her quiet and pointed at Scully standing right beside them on the phone to the very same bastard. She cringed; Scully had covered the mouthpiece in solidarity but cast her a meaningful look that told her to be more careful.

"No sir, I didn't hear anything," she lied, and redirected firmly. Colt reached under the desk.

"We're prepared around here in case you can't get your foot to your mouth," he said innocently, offering Harlow the good shoe. She pushed his hand away with a groan.

"I thought she looked shorter today," she mentioned, dropping her head into her hands. "Oh, I'm the worst. She's not going to sign anything for me, is she?"

Colt shrugged. "Don't presume anything with Agent Scully. She's got a tendency to be surprising. So," he said, changing tact for Harlow's benefit. "You were saying you're going to be a real agent again. You'll be allowed back out in the field. That's great."

"Yeah," she agreed, looking up and trying to smile. "I mean, I don't know that I'll really need it, but it's always better to have the capacity for action, isn't it?"

"Oh, I think it'll come in pretty handy up against these guys," Colt muttered without thought, labelling the last of the picture files and hitting save.

He glanced guiltily at the front page of the print-outs she'd pushed aside. It was all computer-generated models of DNA and tables of numbers he would easily remember but have no content for and paragraphs of jargon-heavy text he would probably need to read seven times to understand even slightly. This case, Scully and Harlow's semi-secret case, the case he'd pushed Scully into following in the first place and which seemed to confirm the existence of extra-terrestrial life in a viral form that their own government knew about, was still intensely fascinating to him, and it filled him with remorse to recall that he'd let her down by walking away, and even worse, that he wasn't even happy with the decision. At the time, it had felt like the only choice. Nana's frail form tucked away in a hospital bed had shattered whatever illusion he'd still held of his family's distance from his job, but the further into the past that vision slipped, the less sure he felt about the cause of her fall. It seemed almost silly now to believe the house was broken into without leaving any forensic evidence, or that someone had targeted Nana and yanked on a loose stair carpet to hurt her just to send her grandson a vague and unhelpful warning about a contentious investigation.
The timing of Nana's fall had scared him in its unlikely coincidence with his secretive alliance with Agent Scully, but that's all it was: a coincidence. That's it. And he'd acted on it, and now he was out, and Harlow was in. He felt mildly envious of her sometimes. More often, he just felt guilty for feeling envious – it wasn't her fault – and annoyed with himself for chickening out.

The thing about coincidences is the human brain finds them hard to ignore.

Harlow adjusted her glasses in that nervous way of hers and cleared her throat. "I wasn't sure how much of this case you knew about," she said cautiously. Colt pressed his lips together, thinking how best to answer. There were very few other agents around at this time of morning so it wasn't like they were being listened to, but it was still a sensitive topic, and not one that he should get wrapped up in again.

He forced a smile. "I'm sure with any investigation, it makes things easier to be an active agent, not only a specialist like they've got you doing at the moment. You'll be glad to have this paperwork in."

Harlow hesitated and opened her mouth to say something else.

The phone on Scully's desk rang. She'd rung Tan's office on Colt's desk phone because it was closest in reach at the time, and she was still updating the persistent AD. She caught Colt's gaze and he went to push his headphones off, but stopped when Marzollo reported in that Mrs Haut had just let herself inside her own house and should he stay and keep watch?

"No, that won't be necessary, Agent," Colt said quickly, the urgent bleating of Scully's phone behind Harlow's helmet sucking in his attention. "Agent Scully and Assistant Director Tan have recalled the team to headquarters-"

"The new focus needs to be on analysing the images Macgregor took of this new player and getting an ID," Scully was telling Tan, eye on the unanswered phone. "It's possible we could match him with previous visitors to the apartment caught on camera-"

"I expect there's some sort of debrief planned, though Agent Scully's still reporting back to Tan-"

"Few of the images we've gathered so far have given us much by way of identifiable features but with these new photographs, it's worth going back through-"

Harlow took initiative and grabbed the ringing receiver. "Agent Scully's desk, this is Agent Harlow."

Three different conversations coinciding in the same five-foot square, each vying for attention, Colt tried to focus on coordinating the agents on the ground back to each other and back to headquarters, but the flashing light on Scully's phone indicating yet another call, this one internal, distracted him, as did the serious and surprised tone Harlow's voice took on.

"Can you repeat your husband's name for me?" she asked into Scully's phone, turning her documents over and snatchng for a pen so she could scrawl on the back. The internal call rang out and the light switched off. "Mm-hmm… No, she's here, she's just on another call at the moment… She," Harlow repeated, meeting Colt's gaze when she saw him watching her. "Agent Scully is a woman." She made a face to convey her confusion with the caller as she listened. "I'm very certain. She's standing right beside me." She waved at the senior agent with the scribbled-on back page of her analysis and laid it back down so both partners could read her notes.

Stephen Powell, Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome, Kentucky. List!
"Sir, I need to go," Scully said abruptly to the Assistant Director. She glanced without thought at the mic in front of Colt as she frowned and dug into the pocket of her trousers. "Can I direct Agent Macgregor to you upon his return to finish this debrief? Thanks." She hung up and reached straight for the other telephone. Harlow let the caller know they were being handed over before giving it up. "This is Scully."

She dumped her silenced, ringing cell on the desk on top of Harlow's critical forms.

Flicking the microphone channel back open with a quick, "Boys, you're reporting to Tan on arrival at headquarters for debrief," Colt stole a curious glance at Harlow. The list? His memory wasn't as great for names as it was for numbers and he couldn't recall any of the names on it, but he did recall Harlow producing a handwritten list at the budget meeting and claiming it listed the planned victims for the virus testing. Was one of the victim families on the phone to Scully right now? She spoke much more quietly into the phone than Harlow had, glancing more than once around the room with wary eyes while she took quick notes. She was tense and seemed frustrated, and her tone indicated a less-than-receptive caller. He overheard her ask, "What do you mean, the body wasn't there?" and he tried not to let his imagination run off in the direction of briefcases and CIA documents and Boston legal firms and double birth certificates and flimsy excuses from a medical examiner in a Birkshire County Morgue about a woman's body disappearing.

Damn it, he wished it was still his case, and with the same intensity, he wished he didn't care. Wasn't it terrifying, really, to know that not only was alien life here on Earth, but that it was being weaponised and that this was being covered up by people in authority?

Wasn't it more terrifying to know how much manpower and resourcing and attention was going into minor threats like Astrid Haut's banana (God, how embarrassing… and with Harlow watching, too) and Freddie Wicking's potential bomb-building while an alien virus was actually killing people and supposed alien abductees were actually turning up unaged years after their deaths? The world was going crazy and people in power were actively pointing in the other direction.

"You two are popular," Harlow noted, looking uncertainly at Scully's cell shaking silently on the desktop. "Is she going to answer that?" It rang out. Laid there. Lit up and started ringing again. Scully leaned aside to read the screen, still listening. It was a third attempt to get in touch. Someone really wanted to speak with her.

Harlow offered an open hand, willing to answer her call for her again.

Agent Scully didn't hesitate verbally – her voice did not hitch or pause as she asked her Kentucky caller whether she could visit personally to get a full account for her investigation – but her expression did. Her gaze shifted, almost guiltily, from Harlow to Colt, then dropped altogether. The meaning, whether intended or not, was clear.

Colt leaned across both women to pick up the cell. Call after call after call. The name Walter Skinner was displayed on the screen. "This is Colt."

There was hardly a pause, the pause you expect when you answer someone else's phone and the caller has to gather their thoughts when the voice is the wrong one. Colt remembered suddenly the pause of the boy from yesterday and reminded himself he needed to mention it to Scully, just as soon as they both managed to disengage from phones.

"Agent Colt, why is Agent Scully not answering on any of her lines?" Skinner asked in his dry, demanding voice. Colt swallowed, made nervous by his partner's friend even when the man was not in the same room.
"She's stuck on an important call, sir," he replied, standing to walk a few feet away from the other two. "We've been inundated with."

"I need to talk to her immediately," Skinner interrupted. "Please tell me she's in the building. I don't have time for her to be somewhere else."

"Yes, sir, she is."

"Can you take her call for her? I need her assistance on a case interstate."

"Respectfully, sir, she's on a call related to the same case I brought to you," Colt confided, taking a small lap around the desks, glad to be on a mobile call instead of chained to the tabletop phones. He knew Skinner would understand that hint, but the other man only grunted impatiently.

"What a coincidence." Though he didn't sound particularly amused or intrigued by that idea. More like irritated. "That's what I'm calling about. I found another one like the one you brought me. It was purely luck that it crossed my desk – I've tried to freeze any action on it. I'm hoping it's not swept up before I can get your partner there for the autopsy."

Colt frowned and asked without thinking, "Another what?"

"Another Reece Dwyer. A John Doe went berserk in a crowded town street in the middle of Wyoming yesterday and was shot dead by the local sheriff. Problem is, one national fingerprint search or single glance at the case file in my top drawer brings up the same guy – Morris Bletchley, victim of a fatal hit and run in 2004 that I was already investigating on Agent Scully's behalf for this same case." The Assistant Director paused to let the significance and unlikeliness sink in for the young agent. "I'm pushing at the limits of my daily quota for coincidences and weird, so get Agent Scully for me, will you? This is her department."

Colt had stopped moving. Another one. The contents of Scully's briefcase, lock combination 1031, flooded his attention, and he felt momentarily paralysed with indecision. Skinner didn't know Colt wasn't really in anymore. Scully had sent her partner to him and he'd passed judgement, and on some level he'd deemed the junior agent worthy of trust.

He didn't know Colt was a coward and a sell-out. He didn't know this was Scully and Harlow's case now. Why had Scully put this call to him instead of to her new associate? She had gone to lengths to try to separate Colt from all this, respecting his request. Did she not realise how flimsy his resolve was, how quickly he'd leap back into action with her on this, given the right prompt?

"Agent Colt, time is of the essence," Skinner reminded him. "I have my secretary booking flights as we speak. I want Agent Scully on that plane with me. Tell her I am coming downstairs and taking her to the airport now. And tell her to grab her overnight bag from her locker."

"You're going personally?" Colt had never heard of someone of AD Skinner's paygrade lowering himself to the work of field agents. As soon as he asked, he realised it didn't shock him as much as it would if Tan or Kelley were to head off to oversee an autopsy and requisition. Skinner was unlike other Bureau executives. It was why he and Scully were friends.

"You were with Scully in Boston," the older man said gruffly in reply. "You know what they did. They're not pulling the rug out from under her with me around."

Colt had forgotten. Skinner cared.

He forgot to ask the AD to hold. He didn't bother to wait for Scully to finish her call. He lowered the phone and said to her, ignoring that she was still on her call, "Skinner found Morris Bletchley
dead again in Wyoming and he needs you before the body disappears."

Scully heard. She didn't lower the phone but obviously stopped listening. He saw his own look of indecision mirrored in her eyes when she met his, and heard it in her voice when she asked her caller to hold the line. She pushed the button, deferring her contact, and asked Colt, "Dead again?"

"Like Reece. The Assistant Director is going with you to make sure no one pulls a Dr Lansdowne on you this time. He says to take a bag."

She bit the inside of her lip and tapped the phone at her ear with one finger, indicating her reference to the caller even though the line was not connected. "This woman claims I came to see her the day her husband died and that's exactly what happened to him. But I've never been to Prestonsburg."

"How can someone be dead again?" Harlow repeated curiously. Both Colt and Scully glanced at her, and Colt realised Scully's new partner in science was not clued in to the whole investigation. He nodded at the silent phone in the older scientist's hand.

"It sounds like you're too late for that one," he noted reasonably. "Skinner is coming to get you now."

"I need her account," his partner argued, stuck between two paths. How poetic that these two calls should come through at the same time offering divergent tracks through the same case, after weeks of radio silence, and how curious that both paths were only an option because she happened to be in the office right now instead of in the park. All because of that shoe. "He's on the list. Her husband was infected."

Colt understood her dilemma and knew she was right. The caller's story could back up his and Scully's failure to requisition Rebecca Johannsson's body and add weight to Harlow's investigation into the Engel deaths, revealing more parts of this overwhelming puzzle. It warranted a visit and an official interview.

There wasn't really a choice. Well, there was, but it didn't feel like it. He told Skinner, "We'll see you in a minute, then," and hung up. He put her cell back on the desktop where he'd found it and held a hand out for the landline. He nodded at the forms spread around the helmet and gloves. "Sign those."

Harlow looked between them, mystified, but Scully understood his gesture.

"You don't have to," she insisted, taking up a pen and signing as he instructed without even properly reading them. She withheld the phone, though. "This isn't your problem."

She was right, he knew, yet the phones kept ringing with leads, connections between scraps of unlikely information kept clicking together in the back of his unconscious mind, and frankly, spying on old ladies throwing bananas in city park trashcans was a poor distractor from the fascinating world she'd let him in on. Her world, her department as Skinner put it, kept seeking him out and tempting him.

There was no such thing as fate, surely, but how could he ignore this pull? So much had gone awry today, and on previous days, to bring him to this choice; little coincidences lining up like proverbial ducks to lead him back to the same path again and again. Couldn't he skim the pool of controversy she bathed in without falling all the way in?

"Once," he said, reaching over Harlow to take the phone out of Dana Scully's hand, "I'm sure this
wasn't your problem, either."
XXXI - Skinner

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, nor do I mean to defame or incorrectly depict any town, department or business named here for creative purposes. Thayne is a real town but has no high school, so I've invented one. If it has a medical examiner's office, I'd like to assert that it's probably staffed by highly competent professionals.

Author's Notes: So many reasons to be happy! It's the school holidays, I survived Cyclone Debbie, and my region got the last two days off school, which never, ever happens. Not only did I dutifully mark all my kids' Science books with those two extra days, I also got several thousand words of fanfiction down, which is good news for all of you. We've got a new POV today, which I thought would make this chapter hard to get some length on, but then Skinner surprised me by having heaps to say! When I passed 10,000 words without even meeting William (which I thought was the point of this chapter, along with bringing back Mulder, but the story has a mind of its own, and it took me in its own direction), I knew Skinner's perspective was going to need to be broken in half. A lot is going on here, so I hope you enjoy this chapter and the next few to come.

Housekeeping: William Scully isn't given a birthdate in the series, nor can I find anything concrete in the fanon, so I've allocated him the birthdate of 20th May, 2001… the original airing date of Existence. This roughly lines up with William the following April, where Scully gives him up before he can reach his first birthday. This fic started off in December 2015, and it's now up to April 2016, which thankfully also confirms my assumption that William is almost fifteen. Hurray for happy coincidences, because I didn't plan my timeline out properly until today.

Thanks to everyone who is still reading and reviewing. I know monthly updates are frustrating! This fic is just so huge and ungainly now that I really need to cross-check a lot of my own work by this point to avoid contradicting myself when I produce new content, and I have so many mysteries and subplots woven through that I want to hint at without giving too much away: I think I'm starting to understand how big a challenge writing for the original show much have been!

Two lies don't make a truth, but they can form the basis for a solid friendship.

Unprepared, unsettled and unwilling was how Walter Skinner generally felt when approaching anything that looked remotely like it could be an X-file, but he'd always felt slightly less so on all three fronts when guided to it or through it by Dana Scully. She brought a gravity to the cause the minute she'd stepped into Fox Mulder's basement office, grounding him and his frustrating flights of fancy in her demand for proof and her tight grasp on reality. When she came to Skinner's door with a case to pursue, it sounded almost reasonable in her long-suffering voice as she explained where it might have scientific merit; Mulder's appearance with the same case meant it had not been through her yet, had not passed that first test, that of logic and exasperation, and was likely riddled with good reasons to turn it away. Skinner remembered the way even Mulder's knock would set his
teeth on edge, just knowing this was something he'd regret sanctioning, something the man would never close or answer satisfactorily and something that would probably have repercussions for the rest of them somewhere along the line.

Like Scully's sister.

Like Scully's cancer.

Like Scully's son.

Of course, the path had affected Skinner and Mulder too, made them both drastically ill and put them in nightmarish situations, but Scully had worn the brunt of it, really. And so it struck Skinner as nothing short of inspirational to see her sitting across from him on the plane, glasses on her nose, bright eyes glued to the laptop screen, delving into this new X-file with the entirety of her immeasurable drive and discipline and determination. This was the Scully she'd grown into in her years chasing Mulder's demons; this was the Scully that made Skinner roll his eyes, because he loved her like family and knew her too well.

"What exactly are we looking for out there?" he'd asked her at the airport. "How does this guy figure into it all?"

"Why are you coming with me?" she'd said in reply, and neither could honestly answer, but that was okay. They both knew.

From the minute she'd brusquely claimed not to be running errands for Mulder, Skinner had known for certain that this was Mulder's case, at least in origin. This was not the kind of case Scully went looking for, but rather the sort that came looking for her, often directed her way by her overzealous best friend, a man who loved and trusted her so completely he was left half-blind to her limitations, and a man she loved and trusted so completely that she would step right off the edge of her own limitations with full awareness of what she was doing in order to meet his expectations. They were painfully predictable and they drove Skinner crazy with frustration – he could only imagine what heights of frustration they drove each other to.

But they were also right, always following the path to what was true and right, and sometimes what frustrated him the most was not them, but his own inability to help them. To match them. They fearlessly did what he'd joined the Bureau to do and never fully managed to achieve. He tried, with his hands perpetually tied behind his back with a knot of red tape, to shield them in the broad shadow of his own political influence, where he could. Scully, at least, respected this delicate act, careful in what she told him. Mulder, not one for delicacy, just kept his distance completely now. Skinner hadn't seen him in four years.

Since he'd offered Scully a job back at the Bureau, and she'd taken it.

He'd known she would, and deep down, he'd not been surprised when Mulder stopped answering the phone, so he supposed he'd known that, too. He knew Mulder was deep and erratic, prone to wandering off with his own agenda, and this was in no way a reflection of the value he placed on the people close to him; and he knew that despite a deep sense of honour and integrity, Scully would lie through her teeth to protect those she loved, even to those she loved, and this couldn't be taken as reflection, either. It was why she'd told her interview board, and him, that she had broken things off with Mulder and was no longer in contact, when Skinner knew her well enough to know she was definitely with Mulder whenever anyone wasn't looking, whatever complicated form her relationship with the man had taken in recent years.

It was also why she'd sat in Skinner's office only weeks ago and told him, straight-faced, that she
was not in any trouble and needed no help, and even sent her new lackey Warren Colt to reiterate the same lie.

Scully only lied to Skinner as much as he lied to her, and neither was under any illusion that their friendship was built only on truth; he withheld plenty from her, for her own good, and knew she'd learned to do the same in return, where she thought she could protect his position with plausible deniability. He couldn't always be forthright with her or do much to help – especially when she backed herself into foolhardy situations, like she had by dangling herself in the sights of one AD Hugh Kelley, not that she could be told otherwise – but sometimes, there was enough wriggle room that he could.

And sometimes her name and Mulder's started flashing up in places he'd rather they didn't, and people who shouldn't have an interest started asking him sideways questions about her, and Skinner intuited the tightening of a noose she couldn't yet feel, and he could picture the broken pleading look of Mulder's face the last time he saw him, and he knew Mulder's fate was coming for her and Mulder himself was no longer close enough to catch her if she fell and Mulder would blame him if she did.

This is how he came to be sitting there in an undersized economy class seat on his way to Wyoming to solve a case he'd rather not know about. Fox Mulder didn't need to be physically present to exert his influence over his old friends.

"Bletchley has no previous connection to this town," Scully said across the aisle. The last-minute booking for this flight had left them with few seating options, and none together. This was the closest his secretary had been able to organise, aisle seats one row apart, so Scully had to twist halfway around and Skinner had to lean severely forward to be able to confer. Still. He had her on the flight. Out of DC, away from watchful eyes, in the field where she belonged. He was hardly fresh off the beat anymore, much more accustomed to lengthy meetings and the cushy feel of his office chair. "Local law enforcement have said he was there to assassinate the mayor but that's only speculation, and poor speculation at that. As far as I can see, aside from his general trajectory before he was shot, there's no evidence at all indicating he was there to kill the mayor."

Skinner opened his hands in the sort of shrug one gives when he's crammed into a tiny airplane seat. "Thayne's sheriff's department say that none of the other victims stand out as a likely target. We can go over that list ourselves to be sure, but these sorts of towns, you know – they all know each other by name and reputation. If they say there's nothing…"

"Then there's probably nothing," Scully agreed reluctantly. "Still. It's worth a look, not just into the people actually harmed but anyone who might have been if this rampage had been allowed to continue. Morris Bletchley returns from the dead after all these years so he can attack a small-town mayor over morning tea? For what? The mayor told the first responders," she turned back to her laptop to reread quickly, "he's been getting angry letters from anonymous townspeople over his affiliation with his preferred political party and what this could mean for the town." She glanced back at her old boss and old friend. "You see the issue."

"Bletchley has no reason to care what Mr Mayor's political alignment could mean for this particular town, since apparently, according to one eyewitness, he only arrived in town a couple of minutes before the attack took place." Skinner scrolled through the report on his own laptop. "Not exactly a long-term resident, hmm?"

He reread the short statement taken from the witness. A man matching Bletchley's description was seen in the next street over disembarking from the back of a pick-up truck with a backpack, seemingly arriving. He was seen shaking hands with the driver. It didn't provide any solid evidence
to the picture until read with the statement from the driver, who confirmed he picked up Bletchley on the side of the highway and agreed to bring him into town.

Witness statements were always accompanied by the full name, and Skinner had read so many hundreds of these in his career that more often than not, he skimmed over these superficially and slotted them efficiently into his memory for use on the case without any reflection. On the odd occasion, though, a name would hold his attention for a moment longer. When he knew the witness, for instance, or when a stranger shared a name with someone he knew.

The name William did not register with him, not even with Scully sitting across from him. It went straight into his mental case files.

"A lot of injured," Scully commented now, clicking through another page of the report. "A concussion, one broken tooth, a torn ACL, several more presenting with flesh wounds of varying degrees of severity… No mention of whether any are consistent with a knife," she added, still reading. "Was there any blood on the knife found at the scene?"

Skinner had already read through. "Not that I can tell. The report's vague."

"No forensic work of any kind seems to have been done," his friend sighed, taking her glasses off and rubbing her eyes in mild frustration. "There's not enough here to work off."

"I put a freeze on it, so cut them some slack," Skinner reminded her. "They've just put the case to the side and stepped away for you and I. We've got bigger problems than poor policework, anyway." He looked down at his watch. "I won't be surprised if it's all cleaned out on us if this plane goes any slower."

More than six hours of flight was making him fidgety and nervous. He'd told Scully's partner Colt that no one would dare pull the rug out from under her with him around, but what about before they got there? Bletchley had been dead a full twenty-four hours now, and he could only hope the orders he'd laid down to smother the investigation had prevented word getting to them. Whoever they were this time. There was always a them when working in the shadows with Mulder or Scully.

He had some ideas about who back home might be affiliated, but the them was always someone bigger, someone less tangible.

"I fully anticipate it will be," Scully said honestly. "It'll be a pleasant surprise if we're wrong. At least we have these early reports, even if they're poor. It proves something happened."

Something. What thing? She was being careful with what she told him, too, and he was trying to be patient, recognising the dance of vagueness as necessary for a successful venture between them. She always knew more than she was supposed to and he would rather not be able to confirm that when pressed later by hands heavier than his own, but today it was difficult. Today he'd stepped out for her, knowing if he didn't, she'd lose this chance, but his political grasp on this case was tenuous. Under scrutiny, what would he say about his actions today?

"Without a body we're going to have trouble proving it was who we claim," Skinner countered. Flying to Wyoming personally with an experienced agent from another department was not commonplace behaviour for an Assistant Director, and would be extremely difficult to explain if nothing came of it. "There are a lot of holes in his documented history. He was enrolled in school until November 1973, and started turning up occasionally on rap sheets some years after that, like Dwyer. It seems safe to assume he was one of them. Would that leave any-" Someone nearby coughed and he stopped talking. He was uncomfortably aware of the ridiculous closeness of the people packed around them on this busy flight. Talk about alien abductees returning to life as
zombies to terrorise small rural towns tended to find ears to funnel into, and working any case with Scully – or worse, Mulder – had a tendency to attract all the more willing ears to their vicinity.

She noted his flickering eyes and tread softly, without detail. "There's a chance of there being some identifying evidence with the body to indicate he was taken, if he was, like there was with me." The chip in her neck. "But we shouldn't assume. I can't know until I see the body, and I certainly won't promise it'll help prove anything."

"It never does," Skinner said dryly. "Isn't that the way this works?"

"Only every time." She regarded him a while. "You didn't have to come, you know."

"It'll do me good to get out of that office," Skinner replied, play-acting at casual, though he'd never be able to fool her.

"It'll raise some eyebrows, you getting out of that office to accompany me on a little street brawl case," she countered. "It could be hard to explain."

"You let me worry about that," he advised. "You need this, don't you? To connect the other half of this case you weren't going to follow." This case I told you not to follow. "You're as stubborn as he is."

Her return look was level. "Dr Harlow brought a case to the quarterly and pitched it. I was asked to lead it."

Very convenient. Very Mulder, the way she'd manipulated that situation without getting her hands dirty. Skinner was right in what he'd told her – she was more like him now than she ever was before. His creative recklessness had rubbed off on her, and sometimes it scared Skinner. He'd always believed Mulder would eventually die for his crusade; the realisation that Scully probably would too, and almost had a dozen times already, was sickening.

"So I heard. I read through the proposal. Your new associate has some made some interesting and surprisingly insightful discoveries into this substance provided to her by this anonymous source. Strange that she never demonstrated this brilliance until after you asked me to look her up, but you and I have both seen odder coincidences."

"Maybe it's not such an odd coincidence. Maybe this brilliance was always there but she wasn't afforded the opportunity to demonstrate it, and nobody was looking," Scully responded lightly. "Maybe it was just timing. Like your call today."

She looked down at her feet. In the car, she'd said something about her shoe breaking, but by that point she'd changed into ankle boots from her locker. Skinner hadn't really understood the significance of the shoe, but her vague recount of her morning seemed to connect the breaking of her shoe, her observatory role in a Counterterror sting, phone calls from Kentucky, Tan's office and Skinner's phone, and the way she kept checking her own phone screen for signs of need from her partners Colt and Harlow. Despite their years of friendship, she wasn't one for elaborating or extensive debriefing, so Skinner didn't pry. It made little enough sense without detail.

"I appreciate you calling," she said finally, sincerely, eyes still on her shoes. "And I appreciate the gesture in you coming with me, even if it might cost you in the long run." She glanced back now, eyes deep with remembered knowledge of what he was risking. "You don't have to worry about me."

He smiled. "I know," But I do anyway, he left unsaid, and she smiled back, understanding
perfectly. She went back to the case on her screen.

"Bletchley was born, raised and schooled in Virginia," she commented, "and should be about as old as I am. Yet…" She clicked again on the photographs of the deceased. The slack face lying on a steely morgue table was sun-hardened and scarred, framed with dreadlocks and a thick, greying auburn beard, but at a guess, would be only forty years old. "How does a homeless drifter with this extent of skin damage from rough living and exposure regain a decade to his appearance? It should add a decade."

"As I told your partner on the phone," Skinner answered, shaking his head, "I have already surpassed my quota for weird today. We're now in your territory."

Scully tapped her fingers on the edge of her tray table, thinking. "Not to mention he's been dead for over ten years… The state buried him." She paused and frowned, apparently considering an option she didn't like. She closed her eyes and scratched her eyebrow, dismissing it forcefully. "I guess you and I know that burying a dead man doesn't mean a thing. There's no record at all of him after 2004?"

"Nothing at all. There's a death certificate following the hit and run, twelve years ago, and now there's this. It's literally as though the man did not exist for the years between, at least from a documental perspective, which, logically speaking, should be true. He died. He should not have existed anymore." He paused to listen to an in-flight message about the food trolley. "But apparently, he did. How can someone go unnoticed for so long?"

"I can't begin to speculate," she replied, going back to reading, because she wouldn't speculate, not without more to go on, and because she was unusually skilled in hiding people for years on end.

Hours of flight left them stiff and unexcited about the further hour and a half of driving south to the town of Thayne, but at least gave them both time to sort through the minimal evidence available and to compile their list of questions to clarify moving forward. Skinner relayed his questions by phone to the sheriff's office, where it was promised the legwork would be done immediately to fill any blanks, and someone would meet them at the morgue to do a handover. He stubbornly waited on hold to speak directly to the Bureau's requisitions office leader so he could place an order with the fewest possible ears and therefore the fewest possible leaks. He gave no details except the morgue address and said he'd meet the team at the doors the following morning. His title helped get the process going even without an open case attached to the order.

The first item on the agenda was to see the body. Four-thirty post-meridian would mean shocking delays on the roads anywhere else but this was Wyoming, population tiny, and their rental car soared along vast empty roads to find its way to the nearly-empty parking lot at the morgue.

The sheriff's distinctive car, however, was not the other vehicle in the lot.

"Well, if they're here to steal the body, at least we've caught them in the act," Scully joked lightly as they got out of the rental car and eyed the unmarked black van near the building's double doors. It wasn't funny and they both knew it, but it seemed unlikely enough to almost be laughable. If the smother order hadn't worked and Bletchley's location had escaped to the wrong people, the body was already gone.

"No, he's here," a perplexed medical examiner insisted, surprising them both, when Skinner and Scully flashed their badges and asked. "Sheriff said you lot would be here soon enough to take him, so not to do any work on him at all."

"That's right. Can we ID the body immediately, please?" Scully asked crisply. The medical
professional with 'Dr Hornsby' on his nametag nodded and tried to smile, clearly flustered to have the FBI in his foyer. He fluffed about with paperwork but seemed to pick up on the stony impatient expressions on the faces of both agents.

"Yes – sorry," Hornsby said, hesitating before just shoving all his papers into his assistant's hands and starting down a hall behind him. "This way. He came in yesterday, single bullet wound to the chest. I started cleaning him up after we took prints and photos, but then the sheriff called and said to stop. Said the feds were coming, and we need to cooperate. I've just left him in cold storage."

"You're positive he hasn't been removed from the premises?" Scully checked as they followed. The medical examiner glanced back, thrown by the question.

"Why would he be 'removed'? He's a John Doe, isn't he? Has he been claimed?"

"Doctor," Skinner redirected, "has anyone come to see you about this John Doe? Anyone at all."

Hornsby stopped, confused, and turned back to them. "No one. Is there some sort of security risk with this guy? Should I have done something? Is that why you're here?"

Scully's smile was tight. "We're here to see the body," she reminded once more, following ahead of Skinner when the still-perplexed Dr Hornsby muttered apologies and took them to the door of the cold room. "And then I'd like to conduct an autopsy."

"Agent Scully is a qualified medical professional," Skinner added when he noted the ME glancing at his watch. It was near closing time. Scully's angled look up at him said exactly what he was thinking – it won't matter if there's nothing here to autopsy.

The ME had paused with his hand on the handle of a steel drawer set into the wall. Doe, J. was handwritten on a beige card stuck lopsidedly into the name slot above the handle.

"You want to do the autopsy yourselves?" Dr Hornsby asked slowly, still looking mightily confused. "Where? Here?"

Skinner smiled impatiently at the small-town doctor and looked around the sterile cold room.

"This does appear to be the appropriate facility," he agreed, trying not to sound condescending. Was the man stonewalling them, or just dim? Beside him, Scully nodded at the wall of morbid silver cupboards, all business.

"The body, please, doctor, if it's even still here," she prompted. Her reminder gave him a start, and he pulled the door open.

"I don't know where else you think he could be," the ME mentioned with a shrug, reaching into the cold drawer while the agents leaned down to look inside. There was clearly somebody in there – a good start. Skinner stood back with his arms folded while Scully stepped up to help Hornsby tug the drawer and subsequent body out on its reluctant sliders. Dreadlocks, reddish beard beginning to grey, broad body, flabby stomach, undefined chest, excepting the hole. The face matched the photographs in the report and the hole in his chest matched the description of the kill shot that had taken him down mere feet away from the town's mayor. "You look surprised. Is this your guy?"

Skinner looked across at Scully and watched as her eyes zipped along the cadaver, scanning. They both recognised the dead figure from the crime report photos taken on admission to this morgue and from older documents prior to this man's initial death in 2004. Oddly, he looked no older now, here, dead, than he had back then. His dreadlocks were thicker, perhaps.
And he was here. That really was a surprise.

"This is our guy," Skinner agreed. He watched Scully venture to the corner of the room, pulling one from a tissue box of latex gloves. She came back tugging it over her right hand. The medical examiner watched her in bewilderment, and Skinner redirected the man's attention, "Anything stand out to you in that initial inspection, Dr Hornsby, that you might have left out of the report?"

Blink of confusion. "No. Just that he's very heavy. Why? What is this?"

Scully had tipped the deceased's head to the side to get access to the back of his neck. She leaned over to squint closely at the area, and ran her gloved fingertips over the skin. She straightened with a blank expression and withdrew her hand, righting the head.

No chip, Skinner gathered, despite disappearing off the record at roughly the same time as Samantha Mulder, Cassandra Spender and two dozen other American citizens were reported missing. Interesting development. He looked around, thinking. "We'll require use of your facility, doctor."

"And the necessary equipment to conduct a full autopsy," Scully added. "I don't have my medical kit." She averted her eyes from anyone else's when she said this, embarrassed, though Skinner couldn't imagine why.

The medical examiner hesitated again. This time Skinner didn't read it as suspicious, rather as just a tic. "Do I need to be here for that? Can I just… leave you the keys?"

Skinner and Scully glanced at each other. Nobody was ever happy to leave them alone in their private and professional space. Skinner cleared his throat when Scully didn't answer.

"You… want us to lock the place up for you?"

"Is that alright?"

After a short discussion, it turned out the sheriff had keys to the building – "Sometimes he needs to bring guys in here after hours, you know" – and Dr Hornsby was perfectly content with the idea of the two agents remaining in the building after closing time, since the sheriff was meant to be meeting them here later anyway.

"Alright, well… thank you," Skinner said weakly, having expected more of a fight. He'd come here to throw his weight around on Scully's behalf, but these trusting small-town friendlies were only too accommodating. He looked down again at the dead body on the drawer, still amazed his smother order had worked. News didn't get out of Wyoming, apparently. He got out his phone. "I'll check in with the sheriff and find out what time he's likely to be here. You and your assistant, how late do you stay?"

"Another half hour."

"Can you get my partner kitted out with… whatever she needs." Skinner waved his hand uselessly at Scully, who could probably have handled this case herself. Feeling unhelpful, he headed out to the foyer to make the call. That was something he could do. He drew aside to the corner of the reception room as he entered from the hall, allowing some space to the examiner's young assistant managing a serious conversation with a trio of paramedics. They ignored him completely, exchanging paperwork and explaining things in serious tones.

The sheriff's office was likewise flustered, staff clocking off for the day and not all of Skinner's requests yet fulfilled. He was put apologetically on hold when he first called so the receptionist
could end the call on her other line.

"No, don't worry-" Skinner started to say, but she'd already done it, and now he had to wait. He sighed at the cheery elevator music playing out of his phone. To nobody he muttered, "I only need a second." And this was why he didn't do field work.

Discussion concluded, two medics left. The female went with the assistant up the hall, and Skinner had the foyer to himself. He paced, irritated now by more than just the annoying hold music. He'd made assumptions about this case based on the 'Mulder factor', an unknown and varying quotient which dictated any case Mulder was involved in would inevitably be unnecessarily complicated by shadowy outside forces, but so far it seemed that Scully was correct – she had this under control, and he didn't need to be here. He'd blown it out of proportion and was now wasting his time and Bureau money in Wyoming when he could be working his way through that pile of paperwork on his desk, and he'd have to deal with the impending headache of explaining why he'd accompanied Agent Scully without even the satisfaction of knowing he'd been indispensably helpful.

The line clicked. "Mister Assistant Director? I'm so sorry about that-"

"Not an issue," he jumped in quickly before she could try to put him on hold again. "I don't need much of your time, only to confirm that your sheriff will be meeting my partner and I at the morgue later this evening? Dr, ah…” He looked around for a name plate, but the name, stored securely in his mental vault of case-related trivia, leaped forward after a second to the forefront of his mind. "Hornsby would like him to lock this facility when we've completed our assessment of the deceased."

The receptionist assured him that would be fine, and gave him a brief update on what the little department had been able to complete since his last call. She apologetically touched on the things they hadn't yet finished, but Skinner's attention had been diverted. The two male paramedics had re-entered the building, guiding an empty gurney in through the doors. Paramedics, picking a body up from a morgue?

"How far away is the sheriff?" Skinner asked the woman on the phone, eyeing the situation heading his way. The medics, garbed in plain blue scrubs and faces covered with medical masks, seemed not to have noticed him. They took the gurney in the direction of the hallway. In the direction of the cold room, Scully, and Morris Bletchley.

"He says he'll be there in about an hour," the receptionist said, and Skinner thanked her and hung up. He started after the paramedics, who now took notice as his big frame shifted out of the afternoon shadows of the foyer. They slowed and stopped.

"Good afternoon," he said, glancing back out the door they'd come from. There was no ambulance outside, still only the black van. Their uniforms bore no identifying insignias to indicate their employment or department. Bad news. He withdrew his badge. "I'm Assistant Director Walter Skinner with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This facility is currently under examination. Can you tell me what you're doing here?"

The younger of the paramedics looked appropriately cowed, but the older man, after a beat, composed himself fully and said, "We are with the CDC, sir. We're here to collect a body for quarantine. It may be a containment issue."

All the key buzz words, Skinner thought, to discourage him from putting up a fight; it sounded plenty official on the surface, but he'd brought a doctor with him, and he'd strained through enough medical explanations from her over the years to know that what the paramedic had just done was say nothing at all. 'Quarantine' and 'containment issue' were not informative terms, and the Center
"What's the theorised diagnosis?" Skinner asked, standing his ground. His concerns were founded after all. No ID offered. No case stated. No risk level suggested. This was not the CDC, or at least, not their above-ground force.

The nerve of them, sending their agents to steal the body right out from under his nose.

"We're not sure yet," the older medic said, voice apologetic through his face mask. "We need to get the body to a secure facility for further inspection."

"And what's the name of the body you're here to collect?"

"It's a John Doe, sir. Gunshot death from yesterday."

The door to the cold room opened and the assistant returned with the female medic. Skinner glanced at them to include them in the conversation as he said, impatiently, "The FBI has already taken custody of the John Doe as a part of the investigation into the attack on the mayor. You," he added sternly to the assistant, "should be speaking to your superior before allowing anybody access to that room, regardless of whether there's an active Bureau hold order in place – which, may I remind you, there is." He glared at the young man, who looked even younger as he quailed, intimately aware of his own incompetence. Skinner jutted a chin in the direction of the female paramedic without looking at her. "Did she touch anything?"

The assistant shook his head quickly. "We were looking for Dr Hornsby. He's not in there."

"No, he's with my partner, who is getting ready to conduct an autopsy on the John Doe you're meant to be keeping safe for me." Cracker job. "The papers these people gave you – where are they?"

The assistant garbled something about having left them in the cold room and scuttled off, and the youngest paramedic he'd maybe ever seen, curly dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and what showed of her face around the mask sporting some recent acne marks, spoke up boldly. "You mustn't have heard, agent: the body's a health risk. The CDC has jurisdiction here, and we need to take this autopsy elsewhere to be properly contained and handled by actual doctors."

Eyebrows did not go any higher. "Is that right? I must have missed the part where you or your colleagues showed some sort of identification, especially one linking you to the CDC, or the part where my doctor wasn't an actual doctor, and you must have missed the part where it's Assistant Director Walter Skinner." He held out his badge to the masked medic, whose half-covered face flushed at the challenge. Her eyes, shapely and blue, clung to the badge, realising her overstep. "I'm in charge of this facility and everything in it, John Doe included, until I'm officially told otherwise by the Director. Try swinging around words like 'jurisdiction' with somebody else."

She sounded like a girl, and the longer Skinner looked at her, the younger he was sure she was. Maybe twenty? What was she even doing here? Since when did the CDC, or they, send kids to do their work?

Oddly, she seemed familiar.

"There must be some mistake," the older man said smoothly, shooting a meaningful look at his young colleague while the frightened-looking male medic remained still and silent beside the gurney. "Somewhere, someone's paperwork hasn't been received. We'll put in a phone call and find
"Good idea," Skinner replied sternly, but his gaze was still on the girl. He could not place her, nor could he see enough of her face to positively identify her. He also couldn't work out where he would know a twenty-year-old girl from, other than maybe through a case. Had he interviewed her sometime? He tried to shift his attention back to the speaker, the white-haired man. "Call your boss and see what they say, and then pass the phone to me. I'd like to have a chat about some of the protocols not met on this venture."

No way would they allow a direct line of communication that would utterly obliterate whatever minimal cover these 'agents' had left after Skinner's dressing down. The oldest paramedic patted his pockets theatrically. "It looks like I left my phone in the van."

"Well, you'd better go and get it," Skinner answered, forgetting to withhold his most condescending voice. The white-haired man bowed his head in retreat and started to turn away.

"Sir, I…"

Everyone glanced back down the hall as Scully reappeared in scrubs, securing her distinctive hair under a paper net as she approached. Her attention was with the group, something having distracted her from finishing her sentence. Skinner looked back at the three medics in front of him in time to see the white-haired man swiftly turn away and leave through the front doors, and to see the transfixed girl's red blush drain from her cheeks. The third paramedic, if that's what any of them were, looked ready to faint.

This was not the CDC. Only they would recognise Dana Scully on sight.

Scully ignored the girl completely and watched the older man leave. As she came closer, though, the girl ducked her head as though shy and lifted her shoulder, putting a flimsy barrier between them. She seemed genuinely afraid.

"Have we met before?" Skinner dared to ask the girl, whose whole body tensed at the direct question and whose throat visibly tightened when Scully glanced at her, too. She shook her head too quickly, refusing to look at them. Her face was turned completely away from theirs by now.

"I don't think so. Excuse me, I'll be right back," she said, and took a misstep as she tried to both run and walk away at the same time. She steadied herself and settled into a controlled speed-walk, and escaped the building. Skinner imagined her relief. Scully gestured after her.

"Who is that?" she asked, then clarified. "Him. I know him. What's his name?" she asked of the remaining man. That he stayed upright while he struggled to answer was a massive feat, because he swayed with nervous indecision.

"I… I don't…" He swallowed. "Dr Petersen." He looked around for his own escape, and his wide, anxious eyes found the gurney under his hand. "I'll… put this back."

Skinner ignored him as he dragged the trolley back out. He frowned and asked of his friend, "How do you know him?"

Scully watched the fake paramedic solidly disprove his own cover by failing miserably at steering the empty gurney out of the foyer. "I've met him, but this looks like proof I actually haven't." She looked up at Skinner as the door closed. "Last time I saw him, he was Dr Lansdowne, a medical examiner in Boston. Supposedly." She paused, connecting the dots. "I'm convinced he removed Johannsson's body, sanitised that place and doctored that tape. They're here for Bletchley?"
Skinner nodded. "Claiming to be with the CDC to collect the body for quarantine."

"The perfect cover story," Scully said scornfully, "up to the point where they used the same clean-up crew. Thanks," she added, accepting the requisition papers they'd brought in. The assistant mumbled his excuses and disappeared back up the hall. Skinner leaned over his friend's thin shoulder as she flicked through the pages. "Looks legitimate. Where are they going now?"

"Calling their higher-ups," Skinner said, starting toward the doors with her, but then heard the sound of an engine starting. They sped up, but neither he nor Scully were young or fit enough to chase a getaway car, so they watched through the glass as the van screeched out of the parking lot and careened onto the road. No licence plates. "Or not."

They'd failed their mission, thankfully, but it was still unsettling to be reminded that this was an X-file, and there were other forces at work here, and they would stoop to any level to block progress and bury the truth. They hadn't exactly played their A-game this time, perhaps assuming this would be a simple task of bluffing unsuspicious country folk. It was lucky Skinner had gotten Scully out here when he did – if they'd missed their flight, or taken a longer route to drive here and arrived ten minutes later than they did, Dr Petersen-Lansdowne, his anxious sidekick and the familiar teen paramedic would have successfully spirited twice-dead Bletchley's body away without a trace.

The Mulder factor was in full effect.

"Damn it," Scully muttered, annoyed. She looked ready to kick something and had to settle for throwing the papers she held down heavily on the counter. Skinner raised a hand to placate her but she was having none of it. "No. I have questions for that man! There are two corpses missing from Berkshire County Morgue and the assistant on duty that night has never resurfaced. He passed on the surveillance footage to someone who passed it to someone who passed it to Tan, who tried to shut me down. Not to mention," she added, fuming, "he all but called me a liar in front of Agent Colt."

Oh, no, not in front of Agent Colt. It still surprised Skinner that this friendship had even happened, between the seasoned, jaded and suspicious scientist and the fresh-faced, idealistic newbie soldier boy with military ties Scully would not be so quick to associate with if she knew. More secrets Skinner kept from her, again for her own good. He'd really expected the boy would have abandoned his flash-in-the-pan FBI dream after a few gruelling months with her, but instead the sincere, determined young man he'd performed as at the initial interview seemed to have emerged as Colt's true self, and he'd not only stuck to his guns, he'd impressed Agent Scully somewhere along the line, and she'd come to trust him.

Good thing, because Skinner was never going to like someone he was pressured to hire.

"Look, we'll get them further down the line." While he would happily attest that those ill-witted collectors were not official agents of any government department, he couldn't guarantee they didn't work for someone who was connected to one, and he felt his pocket for his phone, expecting it to ring at any moment. Scully's mention of the tape had rattled him, because Skinner had seen it himself, a silent movie of Agent Scully signing in at a Massachusetts morgue with a pen Mulder handed her, in Peter Tan's office, and it worried him to think the man he'd trusted her to might be connected to these people. The halls of FBI's headquarters were undoubtedly infested with untrustworthy pieces of shit, and of course he knew other powerful men like Tan had their own agendas, too... but even powerful men like Skinner and Tan with AD in front of their names had to answer to people they'd rather not. He'd responded to the girl's stupid bluff with a bluff of his own – the Director was not the only voice he had to listen to. He continued placating his friend, "I'll make some calls, but not until you're clear of this place and no one can tell us to stop. Let's get you
started on that autopsy before the body dissolves out of spite, since finding it at all seems to be a
direct contradiction to the rules of this game,” Skinner suggested, nudging her back up the hall. He
grabbed the legitimate-looking requisition papers. They could try again through more official
channels, and he’d rather the autopsy be done and stitched back up by the time that call came
through. "Any chance they were right about the containment issue?"

She inhaled deliberately, calming herself with effort. "They weren't dressed for decontamination.
It's more cover story. I'm not anticipating finding any viral damage in this body, but even if we do,
there's no risk to us. It's not contagious."

"Good to know."

"Did I hear you ask the woman whether you'd met?" Scully asked, opening the door to the
refrigerated room. Inside, Dr Hornsby and his abashed assistant were preparing the heavy body of
Morris Bletchley for her. Skinner nodded, eyeing the body suspiciously. Nothing seemed affected
or touched, not that he'd know what to look for, really, if this was the sort of zombie/alien virus
case he suspected it to be. "Where do you think you've seen her?"

"She just seemed familiar," Skinner admitted. "I couldn't even see her face properly – I've probably
never met her."

"Hmm," Scully said only, and he knew she was unconvinced. It was odd, he recognised, that of
three strangers chosen to pose as CDC agents way out here in rural Wyoming, both he and Scully
should find two of them familiar, but reflecting on coincidences like that made him feel like
Mulder, and there was no one he'd rather not be.

Skinner derived no joy from watching dead bodies be cut up, but he was not too squeamish, so
after berating the medical examiner and his assistant thoroughly about their responsibilities under
an order like the one he placed on Bletchley and seeing them out, he locked the front doors and
returned to stand in the corner of the exam room typing up the details of the encounter with the
three fake paramedics and processing any simple tasks she put him to. Scully's even narration of
her operation for her voice recorder and the occasional uncomfortable squelch of displaced or cut
tissue provided the room's ambient music. Their phones did not ring, though Scully looked often at
hers.

"I'm removing the sternum and attached rib cage," she said after she finished sawing through the
bones, digging red-gloved hands into the open chest. Her external exam had turned up no evidence
of alien abduction, nor of the initial car accident death. With glugging and scraping sounds, the
bones she mentioned came away like a puzzle piece pulled out and she set it aside. "Gunshot
wound has caused extensive damage to heart and left lung. Lungs are…" She trailed off, staring in.
She cleared her throat. "Lungs are, otherwise, in unexpectedly good condition. And large." She
picked quietly and made incisions for a while, speaking about the thickness of the tissue wall,
before stating again, "Patient's lungs are abnormal in both size and structure."

"How do you mean?" Skinner asked of her, stepping away from his laptop, photos loaded off the
camera. He greatly admired her skill and talent but was no doctor himself, so only cringed looking
down into the demolished chest. The bloodless face, framed with dreadlocks and marked with scars
and darkened with sun exposure, looked so grimly peaceful, perched there above this post-mortem
carnage.

Scully shook her head and reached over to hit the button of her recording device with her mostly-
clean knuckle. Safe to speak, she sighed.

"The last body I opened up for this investigation, I found the lungs almost disintegrated, eaten out
by the virus I'm now studying with Agent Harlow. I didn't expect to see the same here – this death wasn't mislabelled as Alveolar Diffuse Syndrome – but I did expect... This man should be older than me," she reiterated, frustrated. "The body clearly is not. And these lungs are healthier than an athlete's. Look at the external damage, and the discolouration of the fingertips. He's a heavy smoker. Even ignoring the connection to the rest of my case-

"Which you haven't yet shared with me," Skinner reminded her, and she sighed again, starting to look stressed.

"Bletchley may have been the person to infect the last virus victim," she clarified, eyes closed as she parted with information she'd rather not share, "but I'm not meant to know that." She opened her eyes, slanting them at Skinner in a way that told him exactly how she'd come to know it. "So I've been thinking of him more as working with the conspiracy, somehow, which I suggest is why there's no sign of infection. But these lungs are huge," she said again, gesturing helplessly into the chest. "They're not only the largest lungs I have seen inside a human being, the tissue is abnormally thick and muscular."

"What does that mean?" Skinner was lost.

"The walls of the lungs themselves," she explained, reaching back into the body without the wince Skinner couldn't hold in, "are roughly twice the usual thickness you'd expect to see in a fit adult male non-smoker." She showed him a hole she'd made in the right lung. She'd had to cut deep to make it through the wall of tissue. "I can't explain why this would be, but I can postulate that these lungs are – were – unusually strong. A person with lungs built like these would probably be able to hold their breath for unnaturally long periods of time, and withstand immense pressures."

"So he should have been a deep-sea diver instead of a homeless drifter? Are you suggesting he held his breath since he was run over in 2004?"

"No, of course not." Scully began cutting out the heart. "I can't understand the connection either. The only way I see this observation as being helpful to us is..." She hit the button again and continued for the record while she worked. "Lungs oversized and abnormally thick. I theorise that a respiratory system structured so may greatly enhance the blood oxygenation process, which may in part explain the extraordinary strength suggested by witnesses to the deceased's final minutes. The capacity to draw, expel and hold breath is directly linked with the ability of the cardio-vascular system to provide muscles with adequate oxygen." She pulled the heart free and weighed it. "Heart is abnormally heavy, especially given the large portion missing. Suspected hyperplasia of the muscle tissue, which, again, could account for the show of unusual strength." She stopped herself and the recorder again, too. She looked up at her friend. "This is going to sound stupid."

"More stupid than flying six hours to autopsy a man who has now died twice and was almost stolen right out of our hands by fake paramedics in an unmarked black van?"

"More stupid than that." She stood in silence for a few beats, trying to make sense of what she was about to say. Her continuing voice was cautious. "The victims of this virus die with their lungs almost completely removed, and from the genetic design Harlow mapped out, that seems to have been the intention, not just a by-product. This man, a possible employee, infecting others, has abnormally healthy and strong heart and lungs that don't match either his biological age – whether that's years since birth or the age his body seems to think it is – or the wear on the rest of the body. It's almost as if..."

"They're not his," Skinner determined, and she nodded. "Could they be transplants?"

"I would have said so, but there's no scar tissue or other evidence suggesting there's been any such
procedure. If there was, then yes: I would conclude that Bletchley's original heart and lungs were removed at some point in the past and replaced with these, and I would suggest it possible that these lungs were grown in a lab, since they're unlikely to have developed naturally, and their abnormalities would have discouraged transplant surgeons from risking using them in another patient."

"Not to mention the question of how a penniless drifter managed to afford an operation like that. But you've already said there was no transplant. How else could major organs have gotten in there?"

She had a theory, he could tell from the way she hesitated, and she didn't like it. A few times she opened her mouth as though to speak, but in the end shook her head. "I don't know. None of it fits. The lungs aren't original but there's no other way they could be there. This man was dead twelve years ago but here he is, freshly dead and not a day older than he would have been twelve years ago. Whatever the explanation, it seems to also apply to Reece Dwyer and Henry Gray, both of whom have confirmed deaths in the seventies and eighties but are walking around today as if the years between never happened." She inhaled very slowly, grounding herself. "I can't believe this is my life."

She carried on with the autopsy, and Skinner drifted away again, feeling the same.

An hour and a half into the examination, a knock came at the door, and Skinner went to let the sheriff into the premises. He was a gruff old-fashioned man who carried a shotgun, and Skinner was unsurprised to learn that this was the shooter of Bletchley.

"Can't say for sure he was heading for the mayor, but there was nobody else really there in front of him," he said, standing with Skinner and Scully over the open corpse in the exam room. He clearly was unaffected by the deadness and the gore. "The banker, Edelstein. He's a good sort, never known anyone to have a problem with him. Really helps out the little guy. There was a farm hand, nice fellow, a kid, and a farmer, if you can call Milne that. He was one of the worst injured, still in hospital."

"What was the nature of his injury?" Scully asked, attention split between the conversation and the tissue samples she was slicing out of Bletchley. She seemed determined to take one of everything, including at the moment a long rectangular portion of his bicep muscle.

"I don't think he was the target. He got pinned under a big table when this one," the sheriff gestured at Bletchley's wide-open body, "was shoving his way past. Some sort of knee injury. ACL? He was screaming like I'd never heard. Rang and checked up on him last night and the hospital gave me all the details, which I put straight into the report for you. I don't pretend to understand half of what those docs tell me."

Skinner smiled, liking the man's straightforwardness. "And this Milne was the last person between our guy and the mayor, before you took him out?"

"No, there was the kid, Milne's nephew. From where I was standing, it looked like he might have put the knife through the kid to get past. He hadn't actually used the knife up to that point, just waved it around a bit." He paused. "The man was a machine, you understand? I've never seen anyone power through a crowd like that, throw people about like they're weightless and tip over tables like they're made of cardboard. He elbowed the table and it fell onto Milne; I saw the kid trying to lift it off him, and now he's a weedy kid, but those tables are heavy. I hope you're doing a drug test. Whatever your guy here was taking, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was supernatural, because that display of strength was not normal."
"I am running a tox screen," Scully agreed, "but I think our explanation for his strength is at least partly right in front of us. All of his muscles, from his heart to those in his arms and legs, display extreme hyperplasia – an excess of muscle fibres. They're not bigger, nor has he built up this strength through training. It seems he just has incredibly dense muscle, which can maintain incredible strength for long periods without tiring. He's very heavy."

She showed the sheriff the heart while Skinner considered the man's new information. The boy was the first person to seem at genuine risk of harm from the knife – maybe this was more of a custody issue, or a warped kidnapping scenario in which the child was the intended victim in order to enact hurt on the parents? Then again, if Bletchley was pumped full of narcotics, there was no point rationalising his actions.

"This little boy," he redirected. "Who are his parents? Anyone of note?"

An innocent enough question given the information he had at the time.

The sheriff shook his head. "No parents. Both long dead. I knew his father, Christiaan; he went to school with my brother. Nice man. His wife was nice, too, and so's Gary, actually, though he's a useless farmer. He's the wife's brother, and he looks after the kid now. Has for... oh," he gave up trying to count the years, "at least five, six years or so. The kid's in high school these days. Must've skipped class yesterday. He was the one who saw this guy arrive in town. My deputy took his statement."

"William," Scully recalled instantly, glancing up from her work. Skinner's categorised memory files located the same information, but this time his thoughts touched on her. Did she think of her William every time she saw the name written down anywhere, or had that stopped at some point, like it had for Skinner? Did it ever fade for a parent?

"Your memory's better than mine," the sheriff admitted, "and I'm meant to know these people!"

"I just like the name," was her response, along with a small smile, before she turned away to use a microscope behind her. Skinner cleared his throat, not wanting her to get lost in sad thoughts while he needed her focussed.

"So, in short, there's nothing extraordinary about this boy that would make him a potential target?" he asked the officer. The man gestured at the pile of folders he'd brought in with him.

"Everything my staff were able to pull together about anyone hurt yesterday is in there, like you asked. There's nothing extraordinary about any of them – this is just Thayne, after all." He smiled thinly. "I don't envy you, working those big cities. This is the first incident of its kind around here in all my years. It pains me to think the big city bullshit is starting to affect us all the way out here."

"I hope for your sake this is only a once-off," Skinner said genuinely. He glanced at Scully; she'd started bottling her samples in vials. Her photos were all done, organs all weighed and copious notes taken. "Sheriff, has there been any outside interest in this case, other than from me?"

"No sir, other than you, I haven't spoken to anyone outside my office about this. Just like you said."

"You haven't heard from the CDC?" No. "What about journalists?" Nobody, and when given the description of the three fake CDC medics, the sheriff could not place them.

"I'd remember if they had. I locked this case down tight, just as you told me on the phone. If you had a leak, it didn't come from this end."

That didn't make Skinner feel any better, but he pretended to be reassured. Definitely there'd been a
leak of Bletchley's location, and if it didn't come from here, that only left Bureau sources, which was markedly more concerning than small-town incompetence. This case had been passed through a few hands at the FBI before it landed on Skinner's desk and he'd had the chance to act on it.

A tear in space-time erupted beneath his feet and it was the late nineties again, and everybody was a suspect in a world that was one giant conspiracy. He closed his eyes and told himself not to be so paranoid. When he opened them, they were caught in the knowing gaze of his most trusted friend.

No one knew better than she did the ways their own agency worked against the truth and its seekers. There was comfort in that, somehow.

"You're out of practice," Scully commented without prompt when the sheriff stepped out to use the toilet. She was stitching the chest of Morris Bletchley closed again, autopsy completed. She smiled, both exhausted and invigorated. "Everything that's happened today has taken you completely by surprise – it's like you've forgotten that this is how it goes every time."

Flicking through files compiled by the sheriff's people, Skinner moved his glasses on his nose and looked up at her, unable to resist smiling back despite the seriousness of their day. He gestured with the current page at what she was doing. "You love this, don't you? Getting out of that office, chasing shadows with Mulder, even if it must frustrate the hell out of you."

Her gaze dropped to Bletchley's Y-incision, now neatly stitched. "It does frustrate the hell out of me, especially when it doesn't add up, which is always." She raised her eyes and held his steady as she continued, "And Mulder isn't involved. This is my investigation."

Yeah. Right. "The recorder's off, Dana."

"That doesn't mean no one's listening," she replied simply. She set about cleaning the blood smears off Bletchley's cold skin while Skinner tried not to consider her counter too seriously. He hadn't even thought of spyware, possibly hidden all over the room. The girl, the familiar blue-eyed medic – could she have planted an audio device in here when the assistant let her in? Or was the only thing planted a noxious seed of suspicion that Skinner was struggling to shake? Scully was matter-of-fact and didn't sound as worried as he felt, which he hoped meant she intended the comment only as a precaution. "Mulder isn't involved. This is my investigation. And I can draw no satisfying conclusions from this autopsy that will stand up in front of anybody but him, so I may as well not have bothered." She ripped the gloves off in exasperation, glaring down at the dead man as though it were his fault. The anger simmered away quickly, though, and she murmured, "There's so much wrong here."

Skinner let the Mulder thing go and came over to stand opposite her over the body. So tiny, she leaned forward reluctantly to keep their words between just them. Morris Bletchley lay dead and silent between them, unable to share anything he might hear.

"The lungs aren't original. The organs are in rather good condition for their age except for recent signs of alcohol abuse, and even that doesn't indicate a lifetime's worth, maybe only a couple of years. The body is not fifty-four years old, and shows no sign of any of the injuries mentioned in the hit-and-run file. This man was not in that accident, but both this Morris Bletchley and that one share fingerprints, blood type, eye colour, notable skin markings and dental records. I need to get the samples I've taken under a better microscope to find an explanation, as his muscles display hyperplasia, which should take many years of intensive training to achieve."

"They both looked down at the slack belly and broad but clearly untoned chest and shoulders. This man was gifted with size but had not spent time working out. She indicated the scarred, sun-beaten face. "Again, I need better equipment to be sure about this, but it seems that all this scar tissue is the exact same age and depth, and what looks like sun damage only affects the top layers of skin. The scarring is..."
concerningly even, almost cosmetic, and all between two and five years old. I don't know what to think."

She lied to him, yes, but most of the lies she told were to herself. "Yes, you do," Skinner countered. He jerked his head at the closed door. "Spit it out before the sheriff comes back."

Her eyes hated him for making her say it. "If I didn't know better, I'd say it looks as though this body in front of us was created from scratch about three, four years ago, modelled exactly on the Morris Bletchley killed in a 2004 car accident, right down to distinguishing scars and a life's worth of sun damage from outdoor living."

It sounded crazy, and he knew it hurt her to be the one to voice it. Skinner turned her words over in his head and his quick mind held it against everything they'd seen today. It was a sound conclusion, he decided uncomfortably. He could see no holes, and neither could Scully, and normally between the pair of them they could shoot down any theory.

"What makes you sure you know better?" Skinner asked slowly, not trying to incite her annoyance but rather to encourage her to challenge his conclusions. The day he started thinking manmade super-zombies wearing cosmetic scars and infecting people with alien viruses was the most sensible explanation was a day to mark on the calendar. His brain sought a rebuttal and she was always good for those.

Scully glared at him. "Because it's stupid, and because it's not possible to simply recreate a dead man. You can't just grow a functional adult human body overnight and custom-select your lung and muscle types. I've missed something; that's all."

"It would explain Bletchley, Dwyer and Gray," Skinner retorted. "It would explain how three or more men are wandering around decades after their deaths without ever having aged."

"It would require a lot of further evidence to convince me that that is the explanation."

"It would require you to accept there might be a new breed of Super Soldier."

That was it. Her exhale was jagged and she pointed at him accusingly. "Don't. This day has been long enough."

Skinner raised his hands in retreat just as the door opened and the sheriff returned. He wasn't going to argue with her any further, especially not in front of a third party, but if he felt so inclined, he might mention that her concept of 'possible' seemed not to reflect the life she'd lived and the things she'd seen, and he might mention that she was the most gifted physician and most conscientious investigator he knew, which lent little credibility to her claim that she might have missed something. To Skinner, it seemed the less likely possibility.

He and the sheriff helped store the body while Scully changed back into her suit. The sheriff helped them bring the files he'd brought them to the rental car and then locked the building up.

"If you're sticking around, I recommend Rhonda's Inn," he told them through the car window. The sun was setting behind his head. "Clean, and nicer clientele than Golden's."

"We were just going to wait here in the car," Skinner said, indicating his partner sitting beside him. "We've got a requisition team coming out in the morning." And we want to keep an eye on the building in case anyone comes for our evidence. They'd left Scully's samples in the refrigerators inside, not planning to leave the vicinity until it was reopened tomorrow and not wanting them to deteriorate overnight in boxes in the car.
"What, for twelve hours?" The sheriff couldn't believe their doggedness. He shrugged. "Alright, suit yourselves. Here," he reached into his pocket for a card and pen, and scribbled his home number on the back. "Call if you need anything, alright?"

He departed, leaving Skinner and Scully sitting in the car with the dying light of the day yellowing the pages they read as they settled in for the long haul.

Ah, the good old days of going stiff and achy sitting in cars drinking shitty coffee and even shittier food, waiting for crimes to happen. Skinner did not miss it.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said presently into the silence, not looking up from reading.

"You didn't." She didn't look up either. "You're right. All the signs are pointing in that direction." She closed her eyes. "I don't want it to be that, Walter. Not after everything."

"You might not have a choice," he said softly, feeling for her. She shook her head.

"I should get a choice. I gave up enough."

Nothing was truer. He pondered how much to say. "There's something brewing, and you've already got a foot in it. This must be it." He pursed his mouth, struggling with his divided loyalties. "You need to be very careful. There are… eyes on you, now."

Hugh Kelley, the Bureau's rising star AD, seemed to believe both that he stood a chance at seducing Counterterrorism's Ice Queen and that she wouldn't see right through his advances. He'd worked his way quickly up the ranks, helped along by some well-placed friends, but while he'd been around back in the heyday of the X-Files, he obviously had never met the pair back then, or he'd know he stood no chance.

"I know," Scully confirmed, going back to reading. "They want Mulder, not me. And I have bigger concerns than the Bureau."

"What are you talking about?" Skinner demanded, immediately protective. Had she been approached? Threatened?

She delayed answering, an unconscious hand slipping to the nape of her neck. She wasn't going to say. "I just have to keep away from him and they'll never be able to use me to find him."

"That must be hard," Skinner offered, sympathetic. When they battled the first wave of Super Soldiers, she was separated from him, too. The thought of fighting a new version of the same threat, once again without her biggest support, must be so overwhelming.

She dropped her hand and turned a page. "Not really. I told him he's the reason I self-medicate and he's kept his distance ever since."

Right.

"Very mature technique," Skinner said after a moment. He gathered up the notes he'd been reading now that there was no natural light to depend on. "I'm starving. I'll stay and watch this place if you go and get us something to eat. Something," he cringed, opening his door, "decent, please. I realise this is a stakeout but I'm not prepared to relive stakeout food. I'm sure we can do better."

"Definitely out of practice," she confirmed, dropping everything on the vacated passenger seat and starting the car with no further prompting. "I'll find us something. Have you got your firearm?"
He did, so she left. He stood for a moment in the darkening lot, tapping the rolled-up papers against his open hand. Who knew where she'd find something both decent and open, and how long she would be? This street was silent, all other businesses long closed. He retreated against the morgue under the light, and, leaning against the wall, he resumed reading where he left off.

The witnesses to Bletchley's rampage had been listed alphabetically, each with anything from a paragraph through to a couple of pages of details compiled by the sheriff's staff. A lot of it was anecdotal; what they knew of their fellow townsfolk. He'd read most of it by now and flipped to the final page.


Skinner stared at the entry. The world around him was silent and unmoving, as though paused, the way he felt in that moment. He fumbled for his phone, forgetting where he was and what he was doing there. Super Soldiers and fake paramedics and alien abductions and reincarnations and conspiracies, all of what had led him to bring his most damaged and determined friend to this place, all of it suddenly meant nothing. This was completely not possible, and yet...

"I haven't been gone four minutes-"

"You need to come back," Skinner answered breathlessly into the phone, unable to pull his eyes from rereading those words. William Fox... 05/20/2001. "Now."

"On my way," she complied without hesitation. He heard the worry in her voice. "Are you alright? What's happening?"

William. William Fox.

"Dana," he said, "you don't have the best track record for believing what you hear, so I'll let you see for yourself."
 XXXII - Sixty-Four

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, not even the ones I choose not to name but allude to.

Author's Notes: Thanks for the positive feedback on the last chapter. I'm in a very inspired place right now and on Easter school break, so pumping through these word counts. This whole chapter came out of me just today – I literally started it twelve hours ago when I rolled out of bed, so please forgive any resultant errors or oversights. A typically cryptic chapter from the mysterious Pledge 64 for you tonight, laying the necessary seeds and making those sneaky little links. Leave your theories in your comments! :) 

Thanks amazing reader-reviewers. I have so much love for you wonderful people! You guys rule the world. Tell them I said so.

I write to music, and this chapter, in particular Sixty-Four's silent struggle with her stolen identity, was influenced by Breathe No More by Evanescence. Mostly it was the lyrics, which spell out how I think this girl feels, but the sad classic slowness of the piano, Amy Lee's haunting lovely voice and the repeated theme of bleeding out and ceasing to breathe helped build this musical prison for Sixty-Four's state of mind. *I've been looking in the mirror for so long/ That I've come to believe my soul's on the other side/ All the little pieces falling, shatter/ Shards of me too sharp to put back together/ Too small to matter/ But big enough to cut me into so many little pieces… But I know the difference/ Between myself and my reflection/ I just can't help but to wonder/ Which of us do you love?* 

There's I'm not angry, just disappointed, and then there's Pledge Three's reaction, which is most definitely as angry as it is disappointed. But mostly angry.

"Tell me what subbasement level of incompetence one needs to stoop to in order to not only fail a perfectly routine mission, but to deliver our merchandise straight into the hands of the worst possible combination of federal agents!?" he fumed, pacing before the three of them. Pledges Eighteen and Fifty-Eight were standing side-by-side, taking the lecture they knew they could not avoid. Behind them, Sixty-Four sat on the suspended doorstep of the mobile lab, knees pulled up under her chin and eyes on the road, trying not to cry. Still, the correction Assistant Director passed through her mind, and she was glad Pledge Three was not telepathic.

Eighteen adjusted his wire glasses on the end of his nose and said nothing. There was nothing he could say to appease the furious king of pledges, so he didn't bother. Pledge Three levelled his heaviest glare at Fifty-Eight, who had looked ready to pass out in terror since Walter Skinner had first appeared and hadn't yet recovered, not even in the two-hour drive out of Thayne and back to the lab.

"What kind of idiots front up at a morgue and try to steal a corpse with their cover story only half-cocked?" Pledge Three continued to roar. Sixty-Four was sure the scientist pledges inside the truck could hear every word of this. "I gave you badges; I gave you isolation suits. There was a plan!"
How do you possibly screw something like this up?"

The suits. They'd been sloppy. They had been on the right track up until Sixty-Four went with the assistant to view the body without a suit, and the other two returned with the gurney and not their suits. Dumb, dumb… She hugged her legs tighter. She hadn't considered how it would look for her to claim the John Doe needed quarantine and then personally visit the room he was stored in without suiting up to protect herself. The assistant hadn't considered it either, and had led her straight in, as Eighteen said they invariably did whenever he handled this sort of thing. But this was Sixty-Four's first mission like this, and she just hadn't thought about it. Assistant Director Walter Skinner probably had, though.

_Is that right?_ His dry, demeaning voice, even just ringing around her recent memory, sent shivers down her spine. Try swinging around words like 'jurisdiction' with someone else.

"Next time, why don't you just paint them some signs and save yourselves the effort of conveying so clearly what we're up to? I mean, why would you follow the plan through? If you had, we'd have our man back! You three would be running a morgue like experts by now, like you were supposed to. You know: the infiltration plan." Pledge Three's hand went for his pocket but came out empty, a habit of old. He sneered, angry now both with them and with his own unconscious show of habitual weakness. He rounded again on the weakest target. "Do you have any idea what this could mean?" he demanded, and Fifty-Eight just shook his head, petrified. "Of course you don't, or you would never have left one of our own with the most powerful man Mulder has in his arsenal, and goddamn Dr Dana fucking Scully!" He shouted this last name into the lesser pledge's face, flecks of spit punctuating his incomprehensible frustration with the situation. "Have any of you got even the faintest inkling of who she is? What she can do to us? What the hell do you propose I tell the Hosts, hmm?"

Sixty-Four withheld a frightened sob. Pledge Three was scary enough, but she knew him – had known him longer than anyone else here, had known him even before she was pledged to the Worldwide Family of Hosts. The members were something else entirely, monsters beside men. They'd expelled Pledge Thirty-Nine from their ranks for less, and out there in the world, he'd found his death. All he'd done is find himself in Fox Mulder's sights. He hadn't spoken to the man, or traded any information, or done anything to actively undermine the Family's efforts. She had done all of those – what would they do to her if that came up? She was probably safe with those secrets, knowing the Family was unlikely to properly investigate her, but today she was part of a failed operation to retrieve priceless evidence, and along with her team she'd bungled an interaction with two of the cause's greatest enemies.

Exile would be a relief if that's all they did to her.

Pledge Eighteen was one of the chosen ones, specifically selected by the Hosts to work for them in this age of glory. He looked like a wizened old scientist, and actually was. He'd been with their cause since his youth and had never wavered. Never died. He didn't have Three's authority but he had the confidence to speak to him straight.

"Tell them their Bureau connections didn't come to the table," he answered plainly. "You said Dr Scully wouldn't be a problem but apparently she is. Whoever they had in place to muzzle her didn't do a very good job."

Pledge Three didn't like that. "Those are my contacts, and you've got another thing coming if you think I'm going to tell the Hosts I failed them. Try again."

"It was that Assistant Director," Fifty-Eight finally spoke up, voice shaking. "He was in charge there."
Pledge Three snorted derisively. "Walter Skinner? Is that what he told you? No. He was there because she was. I haven't been out of the game long enough for bishops to turn to knights." He paced away from them, visibly seething, thinking hard. He knew so much about the key players in this complex game. Sixty-Four wondered where he kept all the trivia inside his head. "He moved because she moved, and she moves when Mulder does. Look close enough and you'll always find he's the one setting things in motion."

Eighteen rubbed his eyebrow tiredly. "He was nowhere near this, boss," he said. Sadly, thought Sixty-Four, whose whole day would have been made if her hero had been there instead of the feds they'd encountered. "This was a proper FBI intervention. Formal, above-ground. Your 'neutralised' little doctor brought out the big guns this time."

An Assistant Director. Sixty-Four swallowed her terror and closed her eyes tightly against the memory of him. Such an imposing man, with a voice like heavy shoes on gravel in the dark, fearlessly stalking her. She couldn't believe she'd tried to tell him what was what – seeing Thirty-Nine lying there on that steel table, dead and cold with a hole through his chest that would have been through her heart instead if the Hosts had realised that she was the leak, and walking out alive, must have given her a shot of foolhardiness. The way his eyebrows went up, disbelieving… She'd seen then how pathetic she sounded, trying to stand up to this man, when she was nothing, just a runaway, a kid. A pledge. Just like Three had told her.

Have we met before?

"He wouldn't be a big gun if he didn't have ammunition," Pledge Three snarled at Eighteen, who stood his ground. "You fools gave him good reason to be suspicious, turning up without your haz suits and badges, leaving him concrete evidence of your half-hearted interference with your transfer papers."

"It's worked fine every other time," Eighteen argued, "and we had no indication the site would be infested with feds. Least of all those two."

"A look out your window might have indicated a new car in the lot," Three responded harshly, silencing his inferior. "Laziness was going to catch up with you eventually, and now it's blown up in your face in the most spectacular possible fashion. Idiots." He strode away again, glaring off down the empty highway into the late afternoon sun, appearing close to the ground but in fact millions and millions of miles away from them. He inhaled slowly, trying to calm himself. "Skinner is manageable. He always was. I'll handle him." He paused for a long moment, and looked back at Eighteen. Knowing even before he asked. "Did she recognise you?"

Eighteen didn't pretend not to know what he meant. "Yes."

Pledge Three's narrow green eyes moved to Sixty-Four. "What about you?"

She clamped her hands around her knees, miserably recalling the botched afternoon meeting. Seeing the tiny doctor step out into the hall, her breath had caught. The Dana Scully, the one Henry Gray was so desperate to meet, enemy of the Family and, according to Fox Mulder, the hinge on which their every effort relied. Our whole fight against the Hosts depends on her. When Sixty-Four had first seen the pair on the surveillance footage back in December, she'd known nothing about the agent, and what she'd heard since from Gray and from other pledges' quiet discussions gave her little to form a positive opinion. Federal agent. Physician and physicist. Troublemaker. Ex, or maybe current, girlfriend of Fox Mulder, maybe the mother of his child, probable ally of his crusade but possible traitor to his vision.

But Fox had said to trust her, that she'd come through, and Sixty-Four wanted to believe him. He
said what they were doing, working together with Gray, was right, and Scully was the key to success, somehow. He was utterly convinced, and his conviction was inspiring. Alone in at night, she could tell herself she trusted whatever he trusted, because she trusted Fox Mulder.

Still, faced with this woman her idol so obviously idolised, Sixty-Four had felt frozen, and had turned away, terrified and deeply conflicted. In her head, the words *enemy* and *threat* waged war on new, fragile terms like *ally* and *hope*, and she hadn't known what to think or feel. If she'd met Dr Scully in isolation, out on the street with nobody paying attention, she might have been braver, surer, but the Assistant Director had shaken her confidence, and the presence of Eighteen and Fifty-Eight had eliminated whatever remained of her certainty. What could she possibly say? There was so much to say, about Gray, about Rebecca and the Johannssons, about the Family, about the virus project… about Fox. Dr Scully could tell Sixty-Four so much, too, if she were so inclined, though she probably wasn't. She was just as likely to cuff the pledge and drag her away for interrogation in some terrible place Sixty-Four would probably recognise from *before*, when those places were not just nightmares but regular accommodations. She and the gravel-voiced AD, they were more of the same, the government, and therefore not to be trusted.

But Fox was FBI, for years.

And Pledge Three said Dana Scully had been to those places, too, which gave Sixty-Four further cause for debate. They took her, stripped her of her future and her control of her own body. Did she have the same nightmares? Was that why Fox trusted her implicitly and insisted it was safe for Sixty-Four to do the same? Even as she'd watched the older woman approach down that hallway, she'd wondered whether her face betrayed her fascination with this character from the warped legend of Fox Mulder. She'd looked away as soon as that thought occurred to her, and knew that Fifty-Eight had stared for longer, and neither of her companions had mentioned it on the drive back.

So she had missed her opportunity to reach out to the best and riskiest bet she had of making a friend outside the Family of pledges who might be able to help her. Gray would be dumbfounded when she told him she'd stood feet away from this woman he'd found so difficult to get into a room with, and so disappointed to learn she'd squandered the chance to connect, even if there was no other thing she could have done.

Pledge Three was still waiting for an answer, and Sixty-Four's long silence didn't add any weight to her eventual headshake. His brow creased.

"You don't think so, or no, you were not recognised?" he clarified tensely. She bit her lip, still shaky and glad he didn't yell his questions at her like he did the other two.

"Dr Scully only asked after Eighteen," she relayed dutifully. "The Assistant Director seemed to know me." She looked up at Pledge Three, distressed. "How can he know me? I've never met him before."

"That doesn't mean he has never met you," he reminded her irritably, and she dropped her gaze again, wiping her eyes as tears started to spill. There was so much of her life she was never going to get back, the price of someone else's promise, and here it was, costing her again. She dreamed so often of being free of all this, never quite believing it would happen, because even if she did escape this life of nameless servitude, how could she possibly figure back into the world she'd left behind? It had all rolled on without her. The name she'd carried was gone, buried in mystery, and this face she wore had lived lifetimes without her knowledge or consent. Any chance meeting with any person could prompt a "Hey, do I know you?" She was never going to be free of that, and she was never going to be anyone again, anywhere. She would only be Sixty-Four, the most minor and
insignificant pledge.

Except with Fox Mulder. He could help her, she truly believed. His voice on the phone, worried for
her even without knowing who she was, played back to her whenever she was alone and soothed
her fears. He would understand her. With him, she could be someone again. And he would never
hand her over, and he would never make her go back to the lives she'd escaped.

With him, she could live.

Pledge Three was pacing again. "Did we find out what Thirty-Nine was doing there? Why he went
and got himself killed in front of fifty witnesses?"

"No, nothing," Eighteen answered. "Only what you gave us in the file you intercepted, speculation
about him wanting to kill the town's mayor."

"Hmm, yes: the file I thought I'd suppressed. Somehow, it got as far as AD Skinner's desk. And he
acted more quickly than I anticipated."

Sixty-Four stared hard at the road. She'd only passed it on to Erik Johannsson as an email
attachment, yesterday when it was given to her, in the vague hope that when he saw Mulder, who
was coming for the Johannssons sometime this week, he'd pass it on, and it wouldn't be too late. Or
that he'd turn up personally. Imagine that. It was just a stroke of luck, good or bad, she wouldn't
say, that it had reached the Bureau so quickly.

"We couldn't get anyone at the sheriff's to talk to us after we left the morgue," Pledge Eighteen
said. "The sheriff himself wasn't in. I didn't see the body – Sixty-Four did."

They all turned to look at her. She swallowed. "There was nothing I saw that explained why he did
it." Just a big hole through his chest that explained how he went from alive just a few weeks ago,
sitting in a Virginian conference room of steam and Chinese teacups, to dead and cold in western
Wyoming today.

"There has to be a reason. Exile would have hurt but that was weeks ago, and doesn't explain this."
Pledge Three scrubbed at his stubbly chin with one hand, thinking. "It doesn't look like dear Dana
is backing off, so you're out for now," he told Pledge Eighteen. The white-haired scientist nodded,
recognising the necessity of the move. "Lab work only. If you're spotted again, we'll lose you.
You." He turned to Fifty-Eight and frowned, realising he didn't know him all that well. "You go
back to whatever it was you were doing before I put you on collection duty, and Sixty-Four: grow
up."

He glared at her as she looked up at him in miserable surprise. "Wh…What?"

"You heard me. Stop crying. You're not a little girl anymore. If Skinner and Scully can scare you
that easily, you've just proven correct what I told you when you applied for this task."

_You're not ready_, he'd said. _Who's going to take you seriously?_

"You're all dismissed," he said coolly, and turned away from them. Fifty-Eight practically deflated
and all but ran away. Eighteen shook his head and asked Sixty-Four to move so he could go inside
the lab. She got to her feet, stung by Three's hard words. _Grow up._ Nice for him to say. How many
times had she grown up too fast, childhood robbed from her? How old would she be if no one had
interfered?

Rage boiled inside her at the injustice and drove her feet after him.
"I was ready," she claimed as she chased him to the first truck in the convoy. Looking perfectly innocent, three long Fenchurch Transportation Systems trucks lined the side of highway 191 outside of Boulder, pulled over and out of the way. To anybody driving past, they looked like truckers taking a break on an interstate drive, hardly like three mobile laboratories developing biological weapons. Three barely glanced back at her as she jogged to get beside him. "I am ready!"

"There are no child paramedical CDC agents, Sixty-Four," he replied smoothly. "Anyone looking at you twice would have been able to see you were a fake. I should never have sent a teenager."

"I am not a little kid but you have to cut me some slack. I couldn't have known Thirty-Nine's whereabouts had gotten to the FBI, and I couldn't have known it would be those two. Eighteen didn't convince them, either, and he looks like an old doctor."

"Listen." He rounded back on her, and she quailed, because yes, she knew him, but despite their history, he was self-motivated and ultimately self-serving. "Stop taking things so personally. I know it's not your fault that went sideways," he added, dropping his voice so it was just between them. "These things happen when Mulder and Scully are involved. And I know your age isn't your fault, either. But I can't cut you any slack, not in front of them." He nodded back the way they'd come, over her shoulder, and she understood, feeling worse. "I'm already accused of favouritism when it comes to you. If I send you back out after you failed a mission, that reflects badly. And if you want to be taken seriously…” He lifted her chin with a finger so he could look into her face. What rendition of her did he see when he looked upon her? Did he see her, Sixty-Four, or one of the girls she was before? "Try standing beside the others when you're drilled and lectured, instead of sitting on the steps crying."

God, another reminder of her childish uselessness. But she made herself nod. "I'll give that a try."

She withheld the name she'd once called him. Since finding each other again she'd been unsure whether he wanted to hear it from her. He didn't act like he loved her; or maybe he did, but didn't care. She didn't know. It was hard to read. Still, he smiled.

"Good girl," he said softly, squeezing her shoulder briefly. "No one will take you seriously until you get serious, and I know you've got it in you. Don't wait for me to give you the opportunity to prove yourself – go out and take it." He dropped his head close to hers, looking into her recycled eyes with a pair she'd seen and loved in other faces. "We won't always be pledges."

She stared. "What?"

"You heard me." He backed off from her as someone, a driver, opened a truck door and got out for a stretch. His voice resumed an audible, public volume. "It might have been a group effort fuck-up but we're still down a significant item of valuable merchandise. Thirty-Nine is our man, regardless of the exile, and they can unravel everything about us with what that bitch doctor can learn from him. Lucky for you," he added angrily, walking away and pointing back at her, "she doesn't believe half of what she sees. Now get lost: go and fix this mess."

He left her standing there on the silent country roadside, stunned. She knew to disregard the last part, all for show, but before that: We won't always be pledges. He'd never said anything like that to her before. It sounded so rebellious. Is that what he meant by it? She couldn't dare to believe it, that he might think the way she did.

What would that even mean?

She didn't get a chance to ruminate on it, because her phone buzzed in her pocket. Startled, she
dragged it out, walking further away from the trucks where nobody could overhear. She recognised the caller and, with a final look over her shoulder, answered.

"This is Sally. It's safe to talk."

"Just updating you, precious," the man's friendly, grateful voice told her through the cell. She pictured Erik Johannsson, Gray's son-in-law, with his sad, kind smile and eyes and his gentle, gracious way of speaking to her. Precious. Like she mattered, had value. He appreciated her and what she'd done for his family, and his thanks made her feel good about what she was doing, even if he only knew her as a false name. "Your friend Steve delivered us to the house you promised. It's just beautiful. He was thorough – not just names, but accounts, and he gave my kids new records and everything so they can start back at school. Thank you so much for this. You're an absolute angel."

"I'm glad you're all safe," Sixty-Four said genuinely, thinking of Henry Gray's granddaughters and grandson, who'd sat in a warehouse with their dad since Christmas, surviving on what Sixty-Four could arrange to send them, unable to go far in case they were asked for ID they couldn't provide or, worse, recognised. Stir-crazy and homeless, this was how the family had been forced to exist through the miserable winter while they grieved the death of their beloved mother. Now, though, thanks to the note she'd left Fox Mulder, they were back in a house, back to living like a normal family, far away from danger in Idaho Falls. The kids would undoubtedly miss their friends and family back in Leominster, but better to be alive, right?

Sixty-Four's own experience didn't guarantee an affirmative answer, but the Johannssons all seemed very grateful.

"Tired and stiff after that drive," Erik admitted cheerily, "but Steve and I took turns driving to get it over and done with quicker. Some road trip! Days on the road. Oh," he added, remembering, "and I gave him your email as soon as it came through, and cleared my inbox, like you said. He said thanks and he passed it on." He paused. "If it really is related to Rebecca's murder…"

"Did you read it?"

"You said not to open the file, that it might be traced."

"That's right. And what about… Steve?"

"The same. He didn't read it, just forwarded it to someone. He didn't say who."

Someone who passed it to someone who passed it to Assistant Director Walter Skinner. Sixty-Four had set herself up for that humiliating experience today, and had only herself to blame.

That felt kind of good, actually.

"Text me through the details of the accounts he arranged for you and I'll have your benefactor transfer you the funds we promised," she advised. "I hope there's enough furniture there for you to start with." She listened while Erik agreed enthusiastically and thanked her profusely. He'd stopped asking a while back who the mysterious 'benefactor' she worked for was, after she'd apologetically declined to answer for the millionth time, and now he thanked only her, as if she could or would have made this possible for him without Gray's powerful influence over her. As if this latest offering of security and safety had anything more to do with her than a phone call and a twice-folded note under a Volkswagen window wiper. "You don't have to thank me – this is all my friend's doing. Steve. Is… Is he still there with you?"
Since talking to him on the phone at Levin's she'd waited anxiously for the next chance she'd have to speak with him, and held her breath now, hoping for Erik to cheerfully hand the phone over to Fox.

"No, sorry. He just left. Urgent call, he said, but he wanted me to tell you to get in touch, the usual way...?" Erik Johannsson left the sentence hanging, lacking context. Fox Mulder wouldn't have said more than that. Too clever. "Lovely guy. I hope he's alright."

"Why? Did he say he wasn't?" Sixty-Four asked, a pit of concern growing in her stomach for him. Erik made a noise of uncertainty.

"Not exactly. Just, whoever was on the phone, whatever they told him, he looked pretty spooked."

"Did he say where he was going?" Sixty-Four asked, and Erik pondered, "Thayne, I think he said," and her heart skipped a beat. Mulder had never read the file attachment, but the case had found him anyway. In the background, someone else spoke, and Erik answered them before returning to the mouthpiece of his phone to relay the conversation. "Lauren was right beside him when he took the call, and she says he called the person 'Walter'. Does that help, precious?"

Sixty-Four spoke a while longer to Mr Johannsson before she hung up, thoughts spinning. It was surreal – she'd missed meeting Dana Scully by that much, and now Fox Mulder was heading to the same place. The Family's two greatest threats in the one town, in possession of a reanimated pledge's corpse and evidently working together. Against the Family's interests. She should tell someone. She should do something. It was her duty, and they would kill her if it came out later she didn't, but how much could be gained from her silence?

Words from men swirled around her head.

*They think they've got control of you. Do they?*

*No one will take you seriously until you get serious.*

*You must have missed the part where it's Assistant Director Walter Skinner.*

*Grow up. Go and fix this mess.*

*Urgent call. He called him 'Walter'. Thayne, I think he said.*

*I won't see her until this is done with.*

Having fulfilled his favour to Dr Gray, Mulder was suddenly on his way to Thayne, where Thirty-Nine, Scully and Skinner were and where Sixty-Four just was. Surely that wasn't a coincidence? In this whole, huge country? He'd assured her he would avoid his former partner for however long it took for the sake of the cause, having taken on board her warning that the Hosts considered the doctor expendable if she appeared to be under his influence, so whatever the Assistant Director had said, it must be big. Big enough to risk the cause, if Scully's credibility really mattered that much to it, and big enough to risk her life. Had Dr Scully learned something incredible and damning about the pledges from her inevitable autopsy of poor Thirty-Nine?

Or was there something else in Thayne, Wyoming, drawing the old dream team back together? Was Sixty-Four looking at this all wrong? There was still no decent explanation for Thirty-Nine's death, except that he was shot when he went on a rampage through the town's centre. For what reason? Placid and sharp, he'd never done anything like that before.

She was assuming the action in Thayne was caused by her patsy pledge brother's untimely death,
but that was an uncreative outlook, wasn't it? Did this gravitational pull into Thayne centre on something other than the dead pledge?

Could that something be the reason he was dead? Maybe. Even if it wasn't, Mulder and Scully were Sixty-Four's allies now, even if they didn't have a clue who she was and even if they didn't want a useless teenager for an associate. They were her allies because she'd chosen Gray over the dead march into nothingness she'd face as a complacent pledge, and if there was something in Thayne important enough to bring Mulder back to Scully when he knew seeing her put her at risk, it was important enough that Sixty-Four should know about it.

*We won't be pledges forever.*

"Where are you going?" Pledge Three shouted to her out the door of the truck as she marched to the car sitting empty at the front of the convoy.

"To fix my mess," she shouted back, getting into the car. The keys were on the seat. She started it up and headed off into the night, back the way she'd come earlier. She breathed deep the exhilaration of being alone and doing something for herself. Doing something serious.
XXXIII - Harlow

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, and I don't receive monetary reimbursement for depicting Bon Jovi music as epic rock anthems.

Author's Notes: On fire! This is one of three simultaneous chapters I have been working on simultaneously, but as the first one finished it's the first one posted. There are 7,500 words apiece of Skinner POV (William time!) and Scully's flashback (for a little MSR you all deserve) still sitting on my computer, incomplete, and whatever gets finished first will go online first. I am, however, flying to New Zealand this week for Easter, and then go back to school the following week, and I am still secretly trying to complete a Masters thesis, but this last part is apparently even secret to me because I haven't done any of it in my whole week off.

Thanks to those awesome humans of the internet who take the time to share their thoughts and love for the story. I enjoy writing it but it really does take up a lot of my time, which I mostly don't have spare, so I truly appreciate your generosity with your words. They fuel my desire to write urgently and wonderfully for you, and beyond that, I really can't describe how much I love getting your reviews.

Time for Harlow to get a feel for what story universe she stumbled into! Also, for those interested in the whole Solian sensory fanfic experience, the relevant Bon Jovi song that matches this chapter is 'Livin' on a Prayer'. /Whoa, we're halfway there/ Whoa, livin' on a prayer/ Take my hand and we'll make it - I swear/ Whoa, livin' on a prayer/. Not to say we're definitely halfway through this fic yet, but just in case you were interested.

Freedom tastes like a ride in original 1974 Corvette leather bucket seats to Ronald Reagan National Airport after eighteen months sorting boxes in a glorified stores cupboard.

Harlow and Colt were equally inexperienced at organising field work, so setting up their day from his desk that morning took significantly longer than either of them expected. Luckily he was a whiz with computers – young people, Harlow reflected with an inner sigh – and had helped Agent Scully with this procedure quite a few times, booking flights, booking a rental car at the other end, documenting their intended departure from headquarters for the day, and prior to her semi-incarceration, Harlow had handled her first and only week of independent field work herself, so between them they eventually managed to get themselves set up and get out on the road.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I've wanted you to ask me to take a ride with you ever since I first met you," Harlow confessed as he unlocked her door for her. No central locking – originality over practicality. She loved it. She opened the heavy door and looked inside for a moment before getting in, tossing her helmet into the tiny backseat. "This car is fucking cool."

"Is there a wrong way to take that?" Colt asked over the roof, unlocking his own door and sharing a quick grin with her. They both got inside and put their non-retracting seatbelts on. He nodded past her at the parking space beside his. "On that topic, if you ever feel the urge to take me out on that, don't hesitate. Seriously."
She smiled out at her gorgeous Ducati. She'd driven around the underground parking lot until she found the Corvette, delighted to see once again that it had a vacant spot beside it. "It feels weird to leave her here."

It had been a long time since she was out in the field, leaving her vehicle at government buildings to venture out in anonymous rentals. For the past year and a half, wherever she took the bike, that's where she stayed. To work, back home. To the gym, back home. To DC, back home. Not today.

Colt made a pretend sad face and turned the key in the ignition. "We'll tell her all about our adventures when we get back." The engine didn't start, so he tried again. "If we ever get out of here."

The car kicked in after the third try. Windows down, they pulled out of the garage and out onto the street, and Harlow inhaled deeply the toxic city air. Mmm, yes. Freedom. She turned up the radio when Bon Jovi came on, and Colt's approving smile told her he didn't mind her fucking with his stereo dials.

It had scared her a little, handing in those forms. Ms Field had told her all she needed to do was submit them, signed by a superior agent, and she was covered for active duty. After all this time stuck in red-tape limbo, could it really be so simple? Getting Agent Scully to sign them had been much easier than she'd anticipated – the doctor was the only person in the entire Bureau Harlow had even considered, because who else was going to give her the go-ahead, but she'd still prepared a bit of a pitch, just in case Scully needed a bit of a push to agree. *I might come in handy with field clearance. I could do a lot more for the case if I had field clearance.* It was not required. A slew of intense phone calls had kept the two doctors from interacting at all before Agent Colt simply instructed his partner to sign the forms before her, and she had, without even reading them. Then an Assistant Director Walter Skinner, the name Colt had dropped the first time they met, stepped in through the door and hurried Scully along, and she was gone. Forms left for Harlow, signed and ready for submission.

In her experience of perpetual worst-case-scenario, things were just never this easy, so she thought it was perfectly normal to feel apprehensive handing the forms to AD Tan's smiling secretary. She timestamped them and gave Harlow a sort of receipt to say they'd been submitted for processing.

Cleared.

Free.

Colt had looked up from his phone screen in mild interest, not understanding the significance of the moment *at all.* And they'd taken the elevator down to the parking garage, and now they were off, and the wind blew back her hair and the music was awesome and she couldn't keep from smiling.

She was soon reminded that being a real agent, however, involved more than making a getaway from headquarters to a great soundtrack. Her day job was highly analytical, extremely precise, but Harlow was, at heart, a total screw-up, and getting things right had proven to not be her forte. Hadn't Pierce himself told her so, way back when? At the airport, at the check-in counter, she panicked a little when asked for her flight details – where were they? Agent Colt calmly reached past her and presented two printed pages. At the security checks, she learned why FBI agents don't usually wear buckled boots and biker jackets, and sat for an embarrassing length of time stripping all metal detector-inflaming wares off and then putting it all back on again. Beyond patient, Colt stood with her flicking through the stapled pages of their flights and plans, muttering to himself as he quadruple-checked the details he'd input against the tickets handed to him over the check-in counter.
"I'm positive it would be completely lame to call the boss for advice before we've even lifted off
the ground," he mentioned when he became aware of her attention, "but I wish she was here to
check this for me. I hope I've filled all this in properly."

"I'm glad you're here to worry about that," Harlow commented, tying the second boot. "I'd be sure
to end up on a flight to Hawaii or something if I was left to do this on my own."

"That doesn't sound so bad," he replied vaguely, leafing through his collection of pages for the
approval he had ready for the contents of their hand luggage and handing it over to the security
personnel. "Might be a good plan B option if I screw this assignment up."

"If you screw this assignment up?" Harlow echoed as he handed her the jacket fresh from the x-ray
scan. She stood and shrugged it on. He waved the handful of paperwork at her, his face
momentarily betraying his uncertainty.

"Agent Scully usually handles this side of things," he said again. "She knows everything. I don't
know, I mean, she must have filled out these forms fifty thousand times and flown across the
country for work more times than I've drawn breath, but she makes it look easy to just pick up and
go whenever she wants, when in actual fact there's always this bundle of paperwork that needs
doing and she just does it." He accepted his checked document back from the guard with a polite
word of thanks. "I swear, she does half of it on the plane once we've already left."

Rebel. Definitely not consistent with Bureau protocols. "But you're more by-the-book," Harlow
guessed, kind of glad for that fact. Dr Scully still made her nervous, and she wasn't sure she'd feel
quite as secure out on a field adventure with the self-confident boundary-pushing scientist. Colt
seemed one hundred percent more straightforward, and in a semi-secret investigation into a
government-sanctioned killer bioweapon with an 'alien angle', straightforward was one hundred
percent more preferable.

"I think it's more that she's been around the block a few times and knows which corners she can
cut," Colt said honestly. He reached behind him for her backpack when it came through the x-ray
scanners on the conveyor belt and slung it over his shoulder. Harlow resisted the urge to take it
from him, thinking of what she still carried absolutely everywhere on her person. He waited for his
own briefcase to appear and smiled quickly at Harlow. "This is my first assignment on my own,
without Agent Scully. I don't want to let her down."

Harlow doubted his capability to even do that, but said nothing. She'd never had an official partner
– hadn't lasted in her original office long enough to be matched up with anybody – and couldn't
imagine that any search of the FBI would have found her anyone who treated her with as much
respect as Dr Scully and Warren Colt clearly had for each other. Despite appearing irrevocably
different, something about their personalities lined up. When Harlow and Colt chatted idly on the
plane, she learned just how fresh he was – only graduated from the academy last year, only
completed probation in January. Yet in that short time, he'd developed a reciprocal trust with Scully
that Harlow was struggling to find for herself.

Did she trust Agent Scully? Yes, of course; she had to. There was no one else to trust in this weird-
ass game she barely understood, and the other scientist had yet to steer her wrong, provided you
didn't count the grilling she'd personally administered to Harlow during the quarterly where she'd
pitched the case at Scully's own request. Talk about out of nowhere.

Did Agent Scully trust Harlow? Hard to say. Not entirely, that was sure. There was a lot about this
case she had not been let in on, supposedly for her own protection, and she was starting to believe
that Colt, who was until today "not to be involved", was more aware of its true depth than she was.
Like whatever Scully had left for today with an Assistant Director not of her own department: that was clearly not for Harlow to know anything about. *Skinner found Morris Bletchley dead again in Wyoming and he needs you before the body disappears.* Dead again, like that was a thing, and *before the body disappears?* It was hard to shake the memory of big blue eyes sliding from Harlow to Colt, and Colt understanding without being directed. He hadn't said anything more about the nature of the call, and Harlow didn't feel close enough to either of the Counterterror partners to ask.

When they landed, Colt switched his phone back on and read some messages. "Nothing from Agent Scully. I think she'll still be in the air."

"Do we check in with her?" Harlow asked curiously. "Is that how this works?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think so. I mean, technically, probably, we should. She's our team leader. But I'd rather not bother her unless we've got something important to report, and it's definitely too early for her to expect anything from us, anyway."

Harlow got the impression it was half due to Colt's desire to prove himself competent in his superior's eyes and half due to his private knowledge of Scully's mission, and its significance. Momentarily she felt frustrated and jealous, bothered that he was more in-the-know in her own fucking case than she was, but when he started flicking through the forms again, looking for errors, she softened, seeing her own fear of failure in his behaviour. He'd said when they first met that he wasn't competitive, and compared to *her*, he probably wasn't, because no one was competitive like Natalie Harlow was competitive, but the thirst for recognition was the same.

"Don't fret, Corvette," she said finally, snatching the paperwork off him and grabbing her precious backpack off the floor from between her feet. "Have a bit of faith in your previous twenty checks. I'm sure the forms are fine, and Dr Scully wouldn't have sent us if she didn't think we were up to it." She smiled back at him as they joined the compact and eternal aisle line to disembark the plane. "This'll be a piece of cake, you'll see."

Harlow had never been to Kentucky, and admired the landscape as Colt drove them out of Lexington and toward Prestonsburg. The rental car wasn't anything as cool as the Corvette, and Colt begrudgingly commented on its superior handling. They drove with the windows up, the car's modern dullness not inspiring the need to wind them down and experience the rush of air like the Corvette did, and went over the case notes thoroughly between them.

"So our contact's Michelle," Harlow reiterated, trying to get all the details solid in her mind before they arrived. "And the victim was her husband. John."

"Stephen," Colt corrected. He seemed very comfortable driving, though he'd worried a little when they first picked up the vehicle that he might get them lost in this unfamiliar territory. "Police officer. John's Michelle's brother, who supposedly met Agent Scully." He paused. "When she was a man."

Harlow snorted with suppressed laughter. She still hadn't gotten over that particular amusing detail. How anyone would mistake the tiny redhaired agent for a man was beyond her. If the crux of this excursion were not a chance for her to meet someone who'd witnessed the work of the virus firsthand, she'd dismiss it as a joke.

As it happened, there was a serious element to this excursion, and it was definitely not a joke. Stephen Powell had died (cause of death: Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome) the week before Mulder appeared at her gym with week-old tissue samples from an anonymous victim. Granted, he'd indicated a slightly different timeline, Powell's obituary dating his death in the morning of the same day her victim supposedly kicked it at night, but she still wondered whether they were one
and the same. After all, how many victims could there be?

_I've never been to Prestonsburg._ Dr Scully claimed not to have made contact with Powell, yet had all but admitted to having taken the tissue samples they were working off. She'd met that victim. Of course she could be lying about Powell, but why would she? Two men possibly killed in the same week in the same way? How many others were going under the radar?

The way somebody wanted Shane Engel and his family to go.

Not happening.

"Well, there has to have been some sort of mix-up," Harlow said finally. "Maybe Dr Scully was there with someone else, a man-"

"She wasn't," Colt interrupted. Oh, sorry, forgot, that woman's word is as good as God's. "She said she hasn't been here. And if she'd sneaked off here sometime without me, she wouldn't have put me on the case today to go ask this woman why she thinks she's met my partner. She's very strange," he admitted in an aside, "but not forgetful and not stupid."

"Alright, then maybe someone else from the Bureau, a male agent, with a similar name, made contact. An Agent Tully or something."

"More sensible an explanation," Colt agreed, "but still concerning, considering that this is part of your super-secret underground mystery case, and considering the guy's body went missing the same day. The family's been stonewalled ever since."

*Before the body disappears.* How many times had this happened? Harlow had her laptop open on her knees and sifted through the scraps of information they had to work off so far. Powell's obituary said he was a traffic policeman who left behind a loving wife. It said he'd died suddenly in the early hours of the Friday morning from complications arising from an asthma attack.

Excellent cover. Whoever had dismissed the Engel deaths as spontaneous and unquestioned Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome two years ago was back at work but had learned a thing or two about kicking dirt over his tracks.

In Prestonsburg, the two agents found the picturesque little house easily and pulled over out front. The national flag flew proud, and the garden was delightfully overgrown, just enough that it looked charming rather than feral.

Harlow's stomach tightened as she uncliched her seatbelt. She hadn't done a doorknock for work for a year and a half, and memories of how badly her last doorknock had gone still stung. She touched her belly anxiously, feeling the leather of her jacket, and looked down at her boots. Why did she have to dress like a rebellious teenager? She looked across at Colt as he turned off the car and gathered what he needed. He was young, younger than she was, but in a nice brown suit and a tie, that was less obvious. He looked like an FBI agent.

"I'm sorry in advance if I screw this up for you," she said when he opened the door. He paused, letting the door swing shut lightly on his leg. "I probably shouldn't be allowed to talk to witnesses – you might have noticed I lack people skills."

"You lack people skills?" he repeated, mock-serious. "No, I hadn't noticed. It's really normal for people to bring that up."

His playfulness relaxed her, but only slightly. She adjusted her glasses, hoping to come across more certain than she felt. "I probably should have stayed back at your office and spent the day working
out all the paperwork. You're going to get further with these people than I am. I don't exactly *scream* 'professional' and 'competent' on first impression, do I?"

He was silent for a bit. "On first impression, you didn't strike me as someone who cares what other people choose to think. This is your case, Doctor. Yours and Agent Scully's. You're not going to screw it up for me. I'm the ring-in, just here to back you up and drive you around, or whatever else you need me to do. You're the one who started this whole thing. If anyone's going to mess up today, it's going to be me, and I'm sorry in advance." His eyes, dark with thick lashes, probed hers. "Are you still nervous?"

The attentive gaze should have made her uncomfortable – she'd never liked anyone knowing what she was thinking or displaying too much concern, it just felt too weird and too raw. Today, no. It wasn't so much his words but something about the confident, respectful way he delivered them to her that put her at ease. He probably had that effect on most people, so eloquent and open, like someone much older. Harlow tried to smile. She wasn't alone this time. Agent Colt could handle himself, and wasn't going to let her be interrupted mid-conversation by a door slamming open and an arrogant hard-talking Agent Pierce stalking across the room to denounce her work in front of the surviving Engels. Colt wasn't going to let someone bigger and bossier than her drag her out to lecture her on the lawn about her incompetence, and strip her of her authority over this case right then and there.

Tan had given her this case. Well, he'd given it to Dr Scully, and she'd sent Colt in her place. Harlow was in charge.

She hadn't acknowledged that until right now. She was in charge.

"No," she claimed playfully, shoving open her door. "Nothing makes me nervous."

"Of course." Colt grinned and climbed out as well. They shut their doors in unison. "How silly of me to even ask."

Harlow let him knock. She shifted a stray length of her long hair behind her ear, as though that would make a difference to her lack of professional attire. Reminded herself she didn't care. Colt nudged her.

"You can do the introduction."

The inner door opened and a pretty blonde stood behind the screen, staring at them with uncertain eyes. Harlow smiled and presented her badge.

"Mrs Powell? Special Agents Harlow and Colt with the FBI."

"We spoke on the phone," Colt added quickly with his own friendly smile. The woman inside looked surprised, and blushed. The red in her cheeks was visible even in the relative dim of the house's interior.

"I'm, uh… You're not what I expected." She looked up at tall Mediterranean-featured Colt in awkward embarrassment and worry. "You sounded American on the phone."

Colt blinked, clearly thrown, and his smile faltered in confusion. Harlow, more accustomed to this sort of reaction, smiled more broadly.

"We're both American," she said. "The Bureau requires citizenship for entry. We were sent to meet you by Agent Scully, possibly the whitest agent I have ever had the pleasure of working with. We have a picture of her," she added helpfully, overly brightly, turning to Colt. "We can show you."
"No, it's…" Mrs Powell unlocked the screen and backed away, hugely embarrassed. "I'm sorry. Please, come in. I didn't mean to cause offence. It's this business with Stephen," she explained as they filed inside and she locked the doors behind them. The house was very dark inside, as though the building itself was still in mourning. "We're so lost with it all, and it goes so far up. Whoever's behind this has to have government connections, but not our government, of course. It's just made me wary of… foreigners."

Foreigners. Nice. It didn't sound like beautiful all-American housewife Mrs Powell needed her husband's death to stimulate this suspicion of outsiders. Colt looked at Harlow like he'd just walked with her inside a UFO.

"Come this way," Mrs Powell encouraged, leading them to a sweet dining room, where a blonde man with the same rosy cheeks and pressed, tidy style of dress sat drinking tea. He stood when they walked in. "This is my brother, John Macdonald. John, this is the FBI."

"You're FBI?" he asked Harlow in particular, looking from her boots up with no trace of creepy flirtation, simply observing and judging. Colt found his tongue.

"That's right. Agent Warren Colt and Dr Natalie Harlow."

"They're American," Michelle Powell added helpfully.

John looked less surprised by this fact and shook their hands. He was more concerned about their ages.

"Doctor, hey?" he asked, a little sceptically. "Of what, may I ask?"

"Virology and immunology," Harlow replied instantly. "My undergraduate was in biological sciences and I specialised from there."

"Huh. Sorry. I don't mean to interrogate you. You both seem very young," John Macdonald commented uneasily as they all took seats around the small round table. "I don't mean to be rude. I only worry, that is… Our Stephen was murdered," he said with certainty, looking across at his sister, who sat primly and anxiously beside him. "This is very serious for us, and we don't want it dismissed as a joke. Not that I think you're a joke! We just don't want our situation viewed that way because we went through young or inexperienced agents. It's easy to ignore young voices. You understand?"

Harlow did, for sure. John's fear hit very close to home in the context of this case.

"I do," she agreed when Colt only scratched his ear, obviously at a loss as to how to feel about this other than offended. "I've seen it before. I've experienced it before. I respect your concern, but it's not founded here. We work with Dr Scully, who is a former surgeon, a physicist, a twenty-year veteran agent of the FBI, and who is also the head of an open Counterterrorism investigation into a series of murders similar to Stephen's."

"No one's going to dismiss your concerns once Agent Scully's speaking out for you," Colt put in.

"Terrorism?" Michelle asked, covering her mouth with her hands. She looked at her brother with matching wide eyes. "We were right."

No, you were racists. "We're investigating the possibility of a bio-weapon being tested on human subjects on American soil. It's possible Stephen was targeted and killed as part of this project."

"Oh, my goodness." Mrs Powell closed her eyes and crossed her chest. John tapped the side of his
teacup worriedly and pointed quickly at the visitors with the same hand.

"That makes you two Counterterrorism agents?" he clarified. "And you're here to help us?"

"That's right," Harlow agreed, feeling like finally they were getting somewhere. She got her phone out and readied the voice recorder function.

"Forgive my scepticism," John pleaded, "but how can we be so sure of that, when you're…?" His embarrassed gesture at the two agents spelt out his meaning and Colt just dropped his gaze, shaking his head, while Harlow made herself smile patiently.

"Not as white as you'd like?" she guessed, and made both adult siblings blush furiously. She took pity on them, poor nicely presented hick souls as they were. "We're extremely committed to defending this country against all forms of threat, Mr Macdonald, whatever our ancestries."

"You're not going to find two agents who are going to take your cause any more seriously than we do," Colt said firmly, tugging up his own sleeve to reveal a small military tattoo on his forearm. "Do you know what this means?" John Macdonald nodded, deeply embarrassed. Colt rolled his sleeve back before Harlow could stupidly lean closer to see it properly. He nodded at his companion. "Dr Harlow is the world's leading expert on the virus that killed your brother-in-law. She one of the only people to have not only seen what it does to its victims, but to have identified it as a work of terror against civilians, not just the medical tragedy it's being passed off as."

"There are more?" Mrs Powell asked, wide-eyed, turning back to Harlow, who was trying not to feel overly proud about being called 'the world's leading expert' on anything.

"Several. That's why we're here."

"But we can go," Colt added, readying himself to stand, "if that's not good enough."

"No, please don't go," Michelle Powell begged, raising her hands in alarm at the thought. "We're very sorry for the offence." She looked helplessly at her brother, who had visibly relaxed at the notion of Colt as a patriot. "This has been just the worst couple of weeks. My husband died. Everyone we thought we could trust for answers has turned on us or disappeared. We don't know who to trust."

"You decided to call in Agent Scully," Harlow pointed out. "You made a decision to place your trust there. She sent us. Trust us."

"She?" John repeated, looking in confusion at his sister. Colt got his phone out and turned on the screen. "I met Agent Scully. He came here."

"Agent Dana Scully is our team leader and my partner," he said, flicking through the phone's contents. "She denies having ever been to Prestonsburg, or having met either of you."

"Can I record this conversation?" Harlow butted in, and both Michelle and John nodded vaguely, concentrating on Colt. John was thrown.

"No, she – he was a guy. I remember him. Michelle saw him, too."

"Could you be mistaken about the name?" Harlow put forward, switching her recorder on and showing John what she was doing. He nodded once in acknowledgement to that but shook his head vehemently.

"Definitely not. He said, 'If you have any problems, let the Bureau know, and when you call, say
you spoke with Special Agent Scully'."

Colt leaned forward.

"This is Agent Dana Scully." He handed the phone over, a photograph of the scientist's badge clear on the display. John frowned and shook his head.

"No, this isn't… I've never seen this woman before." He let his sister take the phone to look; she too shook her head. "It was a man. I spoke to a man, and he said he was Agent Scully with the FBI. He visited the morning Stephen died."

"It was definitely a man," Michelle concurred. "He came to the door. I was a blubbing mess."

"Did you see his badge?" Harlow asked. Both hesitated before answering her question.

"I did, but I didn't read it," Mrs Powell admitted. "I just thought… FBI… Sure. I didn't think there was any reason to doubt him."

"Me, too. I took it from him and tried to read it, I'm sure. I was pretty messed up myself, I remember all the words just swimming before my eyes. But I remember the photo matched his face." John took the phone again and looked once more at the picture of Scully. He gave it back to Colt. "It wasn't her, even if she was an especially tall woman."

"Well, she's not," Colt said. "It's possible someone was here imitating her, which is a federal crime."

"Why would anyone impersonate her?" Mrs Powell asked curiously. Her brother looked at her incredulously.

"The obvious reason, Michelle. To distract us and get close to us while they made the evidence of what they'd done to Stephen disappear." He turned back to Harlow. "At the hospital they gave us the number for a funeral parlour, and we had an appointment made for us and everything, at some guy's house. It was just a blur, planning what flowers and whatever. When we got home, we had a call from another mortician, Mr Demetrius, from the company we thought we'd just visited, and he only knew Stephen was dead because an FBI agent came and told him. That's when we realised we'd been duped. We tried to call back, got no answer, and then when we drove back past the house the following day, it was totally cleaned out."

"Empty," Michelle said, listlessly. "With a 'for sale' sign out the front. We asked Stephen's friends at work to investigate for us and one of them got as far as telling us the house was being sold by a trucking business. But then we stopped hearing from him." She stared at the tabletop. "How could they clear the place out so quickly? It was only a day."

"The funeral still went ahead, pretty much exactly as we'd planned it with the guy from the parlour," John went on. "We think, anyway. We barely remember what flowers we picked, what music. We turned up, expecting it to be an empty church, but it was all there. Don't know how. All we know," his voice got hard here, "is that Michelle asked for him to be buried, and then when it came to the funeral, and she was handed Stephen's ashes."

"Supposedly." She looked anxiously up at a shelf on the wall, on which sat a simple classic urn. "We don't know whose ashes they are. I never wanted him cremated. But there was no one to talk to about it. The priest who handled the service couldn't tell me who arranged everything – he thought it was John's wife on the phone, and it wasn't. The caterers at the wake were unsure who'd paid for their time. Nothing, nothing went anywhere."
"Our friends aren't talking to us," John mentioned, dejected. "Neither's my wife. They think we've lost the plot, talking about murder and body-snatching and all the rest. We're not crazy, and this is not just grief. There's something wrong here."

Harlow heard him loud and clear. A year and half of letters from a family just as frustrated and helpless as his had left her raring for a chance like this to stand up against them, the shadowy hand behind this cruel game of chess. She leaned forward earnestly.

"I believe you, Mr Macdonald. This is exactly what I have seen in previous cases. Lies, cover-ups. I want to help you." She looked up at the urn, then at Mrs Powell. "The best way I can do that is by getting hold of Stephen's medical records for Dr Scully to examine, and by taking a sample of the ash in that urn for DNA analysis, if you'll let me. I can tell you within a couple of days whether that's your husband in there."

"The hospital 'lost' all the records, but you could try there," Mrs Powell said immediately, excited by the prospect of something actually happening. She got to her feet and reached for the urn. "How much of the ash do you need?"

Awkward. "Do you have a zip lock bag?"

Michelle put the urn down on the table in front of Colt, who leaned back away from it, and excused herself to the kitchen. John looked at Harlow in amazement.

"You can really do that?" he asked. "After they've been cremated."

"Usually. I'm stationed at the Federal DNA Database Unit at Quantico, where I'll have access to all the best instruments. Hopefully I can answer at least one question for you by doing this." Harlow checked her phone to see that it was still recording. Yes, excellent. "Were either of you there when Stephen passed?"

"Yes, I was," John said immediately. "I'd sent Michelle home for sleep – she'd been awake for three days straight, fussing over Stephen as he went downhill. I didn't think he was going to die, especially on my watch. But he did."

"For my record, can you describe the details of Stephen's passing?"

John was slower on the uptake this time. "Days of coughing, getting worse and worse, and nothing the hospital did seemed to help at all. Sedatives seemed to slow it down, but I think that only relaxed things so we didn't hear the coughing so much."

"And the coughing?" Harlow prompted. "Anything unusual that you noticed?"

"He went into hospital on the Wednesday when he started coughing blood. Then there was just more blood, and thicker, every hour. It was like…" He swallowed, the pain and horror still recent. "It was like he was literally coughing his own lungs out. Big chunks of… flesh. Lung, I gather. And little bits of black stuff. And it just kept getting worse until I didn't think there could be anything left in his whole chest, and then it stopped. It all stopped."

They all glanced sorrowfully at the urn that may or may not house the remains of Stephen Powell. What an awful way to go. But what a clear and moving retelling. John's description was the first firsthand account she'd managed to get hold of, the Engel family not having seen Shane's household suffering and dying. This one painful story could help so many.

"Aside from all the suspicious activity that followed Stephen's death," Colt said now, "was there anything else that led you to believe this was a murder, rather than what the hospital ruled?"
John shook his head. "Not really. I mean, it was sudden, and Stephen was perfectly healthy three days beforehand, and nobody at the hospital could give me any real explanation, but I didn't think murder until this stuff started happening, and I reflected on that conversation with Agent Scully – or whoever he was – and what he was even doing here. When I spoke to him, I told him this random story about what a great cop Stephen was, how he'd dragged some defence contract truckers down to the station to book them for speeding even though they tried to weasel their way out. Later on, before his police friends stopped talking to us, one of them told us the merchandise that Stephen seized that day? Released back to the company, and charge dropped."

Colt pushed the urn aside when Michelle returned with her zip lock bag so he could lean forward, attention caught. "What was the name of this company? Do you know?"

"Fenchurch Transportation Systems," John recited. "The same one that had the deed on the house where we went for that funeral appointment."

Harlow felt her stomach turn a little at that connection. What were the chances? She saw Colt contemplating the same information with the same level of seriousness. She tried not to wonder whether he already knew some of this, whether he had more knowledge on the wider case to pin this new name to.

He said, "Mr Macdonald, what can you tell us about the man impersonating Agent Scully?"

"Can you describe him?" Harlow prompted when both John and Michelle looked uncertain. "Height, build, colouring?" She nudged Colt into standing, and he pushed his chair back to acquiesce. "As tall as Agent Colt?"

"About that, yeah," John agreed now, standing as well to get a more level look. "Six foot, maybe a little more. But bigger – broader chest, shoulders. He wore a suit, too." He thought for a bit, exhaled heavily and kept reciting details. "He was older. Fifties. Dark hair. White," he added with an apologetic look at Colt, who this time only smirked as he sat back down. "He seemed nice enough."

"I thought he might have been Jewish," Michelle mentioned in her bright and helpful way. John nodded.

"Might have been. Jewish kind of nose, you know? He asked about what had happened to Stephen, when it started, whether he'd had any previous respiratory illnesses."

"And what did you say?" Colt asked, but Harlow did not listen to John explain about Stephen's mild asthma. She was going over his description of Scully's male stand-in in her head. Who did she know who not only matched that description, but would know to drop Scully's name to help this case find her so he couldn't be implicated? A mouthpiece of the forces infecting innocents and stealing their bodies would not be asking for details on Stephen's illness and death – they would know. Fox Mulder, however, would want to be sure this was really a case his ex-partner could use.

God, what kind of shit was Harlow mixed up in where even the good guys worked so deep undercover?

She tried to tune back in to the conversation and even said a few things as it wound up, but mostly she watched Colt's face for an indication that he'd realised, too, who the mysterious impersonator was.

"At least we have a description," he said later when they got back in the car. "Pity we've got no idea where to start. Who would use her name?" he wondered aloud, while she stared at him. "They
had to know there was a chance Macdonald and Powell would call Scully eventually, and draw us out here. Maybe that was the point?

Oblivious, he pondered this while he started the car. Harlow uncomfortably settled back into her seat and clicked on her belt. Colt had never met Mulder. He couldn't have, or a mind as sharp as his would have made the connection. How was it that Dr Scully let Colt answer her private calls, shared more of the case with him and generally let him know her a lot better than Harlow probably ever would, yet in their months of close-knit partnership, she'd never casually mentioned her previous partner or whatever dubious shit they'd investigated together in that nightmare of a basement?

It made Harlow think that Dana Scully was extremely careful in what she told both of her partners, and that only a sliver of it aligned.

"Before I forget," Colt said suddenly, hand on the brake. "You handled things in there like a pro. Even if you're not particularly white," he added, mock-apologetically, pulling out onto the street.

A compliment for free. Harlow wasn't accustomed to those. She allowed the smile he planted to spread from her heart to her lips. "Thanks. It's because I'm bad-ass."

It was mid-afternoon when they arrived at the hospital, where they got absolutely nowhere and after a whole lot of waiting around had it confirmed that there were no records for Stephen Powell, sorry, and early evening when they arrived at the actual funeral parlour, where the story matched what they'd heard at the Powell cottage. The mortician described Agent Scully the same way John Macdonald did. He confirmed the story about how he found out about Stephen's death from the agent and the false number on the business card. He'd also gone to the house to find it empty. When he asked neighbours how long this fake mortician had been operating there, they were generally very shifty, unwilling to talk. One old lady walking her dog told him she'd seen the place set up earlier in the week, and cleaned out by the end of the Friday, only hours after John and Michelle's appointment.

"Nice helpful lady, sure," Mr Demetrius said sadly, "but she was in my parlour two days later, car accident, so I stopped asking people questions."

Harlow didn't know what to say to that, and even after she and Colt left, she was still dumbfounded.

"Mild asthmatic Stephen Powell dead with severe haemorrhaging of the lungs within a fortnight of pulling a suspicious Fenchurch trucker off the road and confiscating his haul," she recounted as she walked in step with her companion to the mouth of the alley. They'd parked behind the funeral parlour, accessible by a footpath between the building's high brick wall and a chain-link fence bordering a recently demolished lot. The sun had dipped below the surrounding buildings, leaving everything in grey, just enough light to not feel too worried about using an alleyway. "Nice old lady out walking her dog who happens to witness a fake business setting up in a house purchased by Fenchurch Transport and happens to divulge this to an annoyed competitor is run over by a car by the end of the weekend. This is such overkill, it sounds like a bad movie." Colt's phone buzzed and he got it out to read the text. "Is that Dr Scully?"

"No. I haven't heard from her at all. I haven't messaged her either, though." He kept reading messages, presumably from someone else, then. "It's only overkill because we don't know what the truck was hauling. Apparently it was worth all this over-the-top theatre to brush it under the curtain."

They turned down the alley. Harlow kicked a stone, wishing she'd worn better shoes for walking.
From the other end, swinging his keys around his finger and chatting on his phone, another man entered the same alleyway.

"Do you think Powell was targeted because he was a problem?" Harlow asked, thinking of the implications. "It wasn't like the dog lady. His death was planned out. The house, the fake mortician's business card, even someone placed at the hospital to give it to John. Not to mention the virus had to be delivered somehow, and then took a few days to gestate."

"The dog lady seems like a quickie job," Colt concurred, glancing back over his shoulder as they heard laughter at the mouth of the alley. A pair of youngish men around his age had turned the corner behind them. He put his phone away. "Run her down while she's out walking, nobody asks too many questions. But same principle, by the sounds of it. She got in the way. So did Stephen."

"Okay," she allowed, "but if Stephen was selected as a test subject for the virus because he caused a problem for someone's grand villainous plans, should we assume all victims in this investigation follow the same pattern? The Engel family? My anonymous tissue sample guy?"

"Maybe not assume, but it can't hurt to explore the notion," Colt said, veering closer to the brick wall to his right so Harlow could do the same beside him to give the man heading for them space to pass on their left. The guy noticed and acknowledged their considerateness with a swift smile, saying goodbye cheerfully into his phone in a language Harlow didn't recognise but which he followed by hanging up and pocketing the phone. "We might never know anything about anonymous tissue guy but you've got an in with-"

She didn't hear the rest over her own pained expulsion of air as the man passing by her swung his fist into her stomach with immense force, grabbing her by the hair at the same time to drive her head down, doubling her over. She sucked breath down desperately, the unexpected pain skyrocketing her heartrate. She felt her glasses slip forward and off.

"Hey!" she heard Colt's voice but couldn't see him through her own loose hair. She felt the hand release her hair and then felt the wrench on her shoulders of her backpack's straps. That was when she realised she was being attacked – the bag! – and her defensive instincts kicked in. She grabbed for the right strap before it slipped from her arm, twisting with the momentum of the assailant's pull.

Righted and facing back the way she'd come, she tossed her hair quickly out of her face. For all the good that'd do without her glasses. The man who'd seconds ago been smiling and chatting on his phone, harmless, had her backpack in his black-gloved hands and was trying to rip it away from her. Beside her, Agent Colt had drawn his gun from the side holster under his jacket but the two men who'd followed them down the alley rushed him at once, shoving him against the brick wall. Away from her. One of his attackers took lead, slamming his arm back into the bricks at the same time as taking a vicious knee to his midsection. His gun clattered to the cement.

Inspired, Harlow went for her own sidearm.

She hadn't been armed since 2014. She felt her jagged breath catch. Her attacker took advantage of her moment of surprise by swinging one arm at her again, this time smacking her across the head. She felt her neck crick at the unlikely force but did not let go of the bag. Lightly bearded and olive-toned and otherwise blurry-featured, her attacker sneered at her and wrenched again on the bag, so hard that the zipper tore. Some of its precious contents tipped onto the dusty footpath and they both glanced down, then back at each other. Her speeding heart missed a beat.

Whoever he was, he could not get hold of what she was carrying. She took a reckless chance and stepped forward to throw a punch. He was impossibly fast, pushing her wrist aside like it was
nothing and dropping, driving his head and shoulder into her stomach. She felt his hand on the back of her knee, and then she felt an eruption of pain in the back of her head. Takedown, she realised vaguely. She was flat on her back, winded. Vulnerable.

Gasping for breath and dazed, Harlow scrambled back and into a sitting position, blinking hard. Between blinks, she saw her blurry assailant dump her bag on the ground and scoop up one item in each hand. No, no... She looked around, desperate. Behind her, just a couple of feet away in a haze of dark among all the grey, lay Colt's gun.

Her partner was still fielding two thugs, apparently keeping the first one engaged and between himself and the other to avoid having to fight them both at once. He had his first guy in a headlock and in the split second that she was watching, he delivered two sharp elbows to the back. He was busy and in no position to go for the weapon.

Harlow had only glanced his way for but a breath and now looked back at her own attacker to ensure he was where she last saw him. He wasn't. His foot struck the side of her head before she could make a move for Colt's gun, and she was down again, head throbbing. Down again, vulnerable again. She forced herself up onto her arms so she could see, kind of, what was happening.

Her attacker had turned tail and was halfway down the alley with his bounty. Colt had two thugs to deal with but he was better trained than his opponents. He slammed his captured attacker's head into the brick wall, and dropped the body as it went limp. Immediately the third guy swung a huge hook into his face.

"Warren!" Harlow shouted, heart freezing in her chest to see him blinking, momentarily stunned. She had to tear her eyes away from watching in dread as dirty fingers twisted into his collar and dragged his head down to meet another brutal knee, and she turned and grabbed for the gun. As her hand closed the game changed; the headlock guy had managed to get back to his feet and kneed her in the ribs, pushing her off-course. She missed the gun, and he kicked at it as he took his cue to leave, bolting for the alley's entry.

His toe barely nudged it half a yard, and, heart pounding, she crawled the last few steps to snatch it up. She pivoted on her knee to face back at Colt and his opponent. He'd managed to shove the other man off him, though it didn't seem to have deterred him any, and he was coming back to finish Colt off.

"Freeze!" Harlow commanded, trying to get her fingers around the butt and into the position to take a shot if she needed to. She hit the safety and raised the firearm. "FBI!"

She didn't mean to squeeze, but she must have. She fired off a shot, and both men sprung apart, startled. The stranger spun and jumped at the fence, scaling it with ridiculous ease. Colt backed into the brick wall, hands raised, cursing. His attacker vaulted over the six-foot obstacle and seemed to be running almost before he landed on the uneven ground on the other side. Harlow swung the gun after him but he was gone, shielded behind rubble and temporary fencing. Both ends of the alley were deserted.

The whole attack had lasted less than thirty seconds. Professional.

"Jesus fuck, Harlow!" Colt spat, looking down at his side with wide eyes while she patted the ground for her glasses. Miraculously, they were undamaged, just dusty. He held his jacket out and, glasses on, she saw a small round hole through the fabric. It was no buttonhole. She slapped a hand to her mouth, horrified to realise, and lowered the gun quickly. Had she just killed her partner?! "You nearly shot me!"
Nearly? She took a step closer and almost collapsed, her legs were so shaky with shock from the unexpected adrenaline rush. She waited for Colt to bleed out and die right in front of her, exactly as she deserved for being such a shitty friend, but he only looked up at her in disbelief bordering on disgust. His white shirt did not blossom red with blood.

Her hand dropped from her mouth slowly. No, she hadn't hit him. The bullet had gone between him and his opponent, under his arm and through the open front of the jacket itself, piercing the pocket flap. Presumably embedding itself into or ricocheting from the brickwork behind him.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed, but actually she was just so fucking grateful she hadn't fucking killed him. "My glasses... I didn't…"

"Think to mention you can't use a gun?" he guessed coldly, crossing the width of the alley to reach her, hand outstretched. "Give me that before you hurt yourself."

Or you. "I'm sorry." She placed it quickly in his hand, all the day's confidence and bluster demolished in an instant. She couldn't believe what she'd almost done. Just her penchant for screwing up, rearing its ugly head.

"Yeah, you said that," he acknowledged vaguely, taking the weapon properly in his more practiced hand and looking up and down the alley. Their mystery assailants were long gone, and neither of them bothered limping to the mouths of the alley to check whether they'd stopped to chill just around the corner out of sight. Colt turned his attention back to her. "What about you? Are you alright?"

She started to nod automatically, but the very motion made her head swim. "No." She pressed her hand to the back of her skull, feeling for damage. Her stomach ached, her shoulders felt tender from the forceful wrenching they'd experienced and her head throbbed from its numerous strikes, but where she'd hit the ground hurt the worst. Her fingers came away wet and red. "Shit…"

"Shit's right." Colt holstered his gun with one last wary glance around, and with both hands and without asking, he took her head carefully, tilting her face downward and against his chest while he shifted her hair aside to check the severity of her wound. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her breathing, bringing her heartrate back down to something resembling normal. She could smell only him, and the mild burnt smell of his jacket's bullet hole. She winced sharply as Colt's fingers brushed the sore spot, and had to start counting breaths all over again. "Sorry… You're bleeding, but I don't think it's too bad. Then again, I'm not a doctor, and it's dark." He moved another lock of hair over to inspect better but mustn't have found anything more useful to note. "Do you want to go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm fine."

One of his hands dropped to her shoulder. "You're shaking."

"Am not," she said immediately. She pulled away from him, suddenly realising she was standing in an alley being held by a guy she'd met only twice before after just being violently attacked by strangers. He let her go, but grabbed for her arm when she stumbled. Whatever adrenaline rush had powered her through that confrontation, it was receding quicker than a sea at low tide and leaving her muscles in serious deficit. "I'm fine. Field work isn't all it's fucking cracked up to be, but I'm fine. Oh, no." She spotted her bag, torn and abandoned on the ground, and made her way awkwardly over to it, pulse spiking again. No, no… Colt followed.

"What did they take?" he asked, while she knelt uncomfortably, her midsection aching with the compression. She sorted quickly through the paraphernalia on the ground – pens, her badge,
papers, wallet, biker gloves, a notebook – to confirm what she'd seen.

"They took Powell's ashes," she reported, though she'd suspected that. "And my phone." She rubbed her jaw where she'd taken the boot to the face. It was tender and starting to ache. "I threw them both in here after we left their place." She reached for her broken backpack, dreading what she would find.

"That wasn't just bad luck," Colt said. "They knew. They went for you." Harlow nodded, having already realised this, and brought the bag onto her lap. Colt clicked. The virus. "Harlow, don't-

"I have to look," she insisted, pulling open the remains of the bag, but Colt interfered. He tried to tug her upright.

"You could be infected!"

She yanked away from him. "Alternatively I could leave it on the ground and let it leak all over the concrete where it's useless to us. Relax, it's not contagious." She lifted the small Styrofoam box from the irreparable backpack, glad for its size, little enough to fit inside a backpack but too big to get in or out with ease. When the bag tore, the box was the only thing that didn't fall out, crammed at the bottom.

She had thought when her attacker went for her bag that this was what he wanted. She had been sure. But he'd left it. Carefully, terrified, she unpicked the seal on the lid with her nails and lifted it open. Inside, the vials of red and black lay nestled amongst still-cool gel packs and ice bricks wrapped in fabric. Tentatively, she nudged each vial with her little finger to turn them. No cracks, no cracks, no cracks. All intact. She sighed, relieved. Colt knelt beside her with a pained cringe and looked into the box.

"No breakages," she said, showing him for his own peace of mind. He hadn't seen the samples up close before.

"It's easy to forget that you carry this shit around with you," he commented bleakly. "Even though I carried your approval papers around all day and kept handing them over at the airports, it didn't hit me until just now. We've got the virus in a backpack." He scratched his head. "And they didn't take them," he noted, looking around again. No one else came into the alley, although the sound of the gun couldn't have gone unnoticed. "All they took… was everything we gained from coming out here. Your interviews with Macdonald and Powell and then with the mortician, and Stephen Powell's ash." He was right. Harlow closed the lid on her samples, annoyed, while he got his own phone out and started dialling. "Let's see if we can't trace where that asshole went with your phone, huh?"

They picked up her crap off the ground and wrapped it along with the virus samples in the shredded remains of the backpack, then limped to the mouth of the alley where her attacker had bolted. All the while Colt was talking quickly on his phone, getting transferred to who he needed and quoting his badge number, hers, her phone number after she told it to him just once – "I'm good with numbers," he said in an aside – and finally hanging up and waiting for the GPS data to come through on his screen. A little dot lit up, and they were off like hounds after a scent, but the data was old by now, several minutes out, and took them only a block before blinking out. Pieces of Harlow's phone they found behind a pharmacy were smashed up and stashed in bins, kicked down a drain…

"It doesn't look good," Colt said apologetically, lying on his side, arm through a stormwater grate to fetch the shattered shell of what used to be her phone. He handed it up to her and got slowly to his feet, the pain of his confrontation obviously setting in for him, too. "I hope you were due for an
Gloomily, Harlow added it to the collection in her arms. "How are we meant to catch them now?"

"Uh, we were meant to run after them, if that was our aim," Colt replied, dusting himself off. "It was never going to happen. They were too freaking fast. Come on," he suggested, waving her ahead of him and starting to walk back the way they came, "let's revisit Mrs Powell. There was a lot more ash where your baggie came from. They took our evidence but we can get more."

It was bugging Harlow, this fact. The ash was replaceable. The interview was repeatable. Even the intended scare was recoverable. She hefted the swaddled box in her arms as they walked. "Why wouldn't they take this? If they wanted to kill our investigation…"

"They only took what someone at the Powell house would know you had," Colt said, stopping outside the funeral parlour and trying the door. Locked. They were only inside less than ten minutes ago. "They can't have known you were carrying anything more potent for the investigation. All your graphs, all your notes – they fell out and he didn't even touch those."

"So you think someone was watching us with Michelle and John?" She thought back to the lovely cottage. She couldn't recall seeing anybody tending the neighbouring yards, or any extra cars parked in the quiet street. Colt scoffed.

"Hell of a coincidence otherwise, don't you think?" He knocked hard on the door. No response. He peered through the front window. "He's meant to be open another quarter hour. See if we can't get him to repeat what he told you before."

"Should we call Dr Scully now?" Harlow asked. She couldn't help wondering, as she was sure Colt was, whether today's failures would have occurred on her watch, and what the scientist would think when she heard what they'd been through.

"No, not yet," Colt said dismissively, squinting through curtains and knocking again. He looked behind him, seeing the business car parked silently out front where it was before. "Mr Demetrius? Are you in there? It's Agents Colt and Harlow."

"Maybe the gunfire scared him," Harlow suggested when that still didn't work, but she felt uneasy even suggesting it. The man who'd told them how people disappeared after talking in this town had now disappeared. Speaking of coincidences. She looked up and down the street. "No one's called the cops on us."

"On you," Colt corrected, giving up on the mortician. He led the way to the corner. "Once we get back to DC and finish writing all this shit up for Agent Scully, the first thing you and I are doing tomorrow is visiting the range."

Though she'd felt sick with herself at first for thinking she'd shot him, now she only rolled her eyes. Still harping on about it. "I misfired, that's all. He knocked my glasses off and I need them. I know how to use a gun. I just haven't been practising."

After her graceless departure from the field after only a fortnight back in 2014, she'd had her sidearm rebuked and had started her very long transfer to the FDDU. Paperwork tangled in red tape, she hadn't been picked up for any mandatory retraining.

"That's going to change," he advised, dropping his voice and drawing his own gun as they re-entered the alley where they were attacked. It was even darker now. "These guys tonight didn't pull
any punches because you were unarmed or a girl."

The trek back to the car was uneventful, and the car was unharmed. They locked their doors from the inside as soon as they were in, and Colt got them out of there.

From there, though, things did not get better. All the lights were off at the Powell house, and no one answered the door, which swung eerily open when knocked. Calling into the house to make themselves known, the agents tiptoed inside, flipping lights on. Nobody was home. Michelle's chair in the dining room was tipped on its side. John's teacup was where he left it, still half-full, now cold. And Stephen Powell's urn was gone.

"Well, fuck," Harlow said, lost for better words. She looked to Colt for suggestions. He lowered his gun and sighed.

"I guess we call Agent Scully now."
XXXIV - Scully

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. If you happen to be an owner of said intellectual property and you like what I’m laying down, please be advised that my day job has prepared me well for long overworked hours and I’m open to offers of alternative employment as a writer on your upcoming season.

* Author’s Notes: One week back at work and I’ve burnt out my voice, a common ailment of teachers unrelated to squeals of excitement on a Friday afternoon when one finds incredible news on their social media feeds (THE X-FILES IS COMING BACK FOR AN ELEVENTH SEASON OMFGOMFG!!!), so I am relegated to sitting at home with the option of either a) working on my thesis and doing some marking, or b) writing fanfiction, eating vitamin C tablets and watching The X-Files Movie. Naturally, as the diligent student and professional that I am, there remains a pile of maths testing on my lounge room floor beside the XF DVDs and a still-looming deadline for my literature review. Thank me for it with a wordy review. Seriously. It makes me feel a whole lot less of a terrible person.

* This chapter is a flashback that I have been wanting to write for a while but haven’t seen fit to place until now. Maybe it’s still not an appropriate place, right here plonked in the middle of some important action, but it needs to be placed before Mulder’s next chapter (in two chapters’ time) and I ran out of space. I don’t think you guys will mind too much. Enjoy the angst and the gently implied crossover.

* I wrote this chapter to Taylor Swift’s Wonderland, which I think is musically brilliant to write something a little spooky and fun to, with its ups and downs in its pacing, and lyrically perfect for MSR: You held on tight to me/ Cause nothing’s as it seems/ And spinning out of control/ Didn’t they tell us don’t rush into things?/ Didn’t you flash your green eyes at me?/ Haven’t you heard what becomes of curious minds?... Didn’t you calm my fears with a Cheshire cat smile?... It’s all fun and games until somebody loses their mind… We found Wonderland/ You and I got lost in it/ And we pretended it could last forever… And life was never worse but never better…

3rd March, 2014

Departure times were changing again, setting themselves back further and further, but before all times on the screens could be changed, CANCELLED appeared beside every flight number. There was a collective groan from the hundreds of stranded passengers gazing apprehensively up at the giant screens across Chicago O’Hare Airport.

"What? No!" Scully protested, her voice lost among the dozens of louder, angrier voices around her. She was alone in a crowd of many, and looked about in disappointment for some solution to present itself, but nothing did. Nothing conventional, anyway.

"Rotten luck, Scully," he said from close by, and she turned to see him leaning on a railing behind her, looking up at the scores of cancelled flights on the screens. Her stomach fell away like it
always did now when she saw him, half in desperate desire and half in anxious terror of what he might say or not say. It had been a year now since she'd walked out his door without the intention of ever going back, and while she didn't regret it, she deeply, sorely regretted it more often than she would ever admit. Her life was satisfying again; her achievements were noted and respected again; she had control again. It was what she had wanted, to escape that dark gravitation pull of his frustrations with the world, and it was the right thing to do. But when he appeared like this, out of the blue and unannounced, with his hair tousled from outside and his strong leather shoulders dusted with residual snowflakes and his eyes casually gazing over her head pretending to be interested in all the flights, he tested her.

He made her want to forget the reasons she'd left and how comfortable she'd been without him.

She forced herself to take a breath and drop her eyes and count to three. One: she knew what he was here for. Two: she knew what he wasn't here for. Three: she knew it would briefly appear otherwise because he had a gift for that, but letting him in would only start the cycle all over again, and that wasn't good for either of them.

He dropped his eyes to hers just as she lifted them and his melted her with their warmth, and it was very hard to remind herself of how completely those eyes had ruined her, especially when he smiled.

"What do you want, Mulder?" she asked tiredly, initiating the usual self-talk to keep herself from making a fool of herself. It was exhausting but necessary. She could hardly cross the space between them and throw herself at him, could she? She was the one who'd left; he was the one who'd promised to keep his phone on for her and to answer whenever she called, but had failed to pick up the one time she'd cracked and dialled. Never again.

"Want? I don't want anything from you," he said without falter, all the reminder she needed. His smile was light and his eyes momentarily hard, a combination too challenging to read for one who'd torn up the codex and worked so hard to unlearn him. "I was just waiting for a flight and saw you through the crowd. What are the chances of us both being stranded here at the same time?"

"Imagine the odds," she replied ironically, not buying it. He didn't have a bag, while she leaned on the extended handle of her carry-on luggage. "Where are you flying?"

"Nowhere now." He nodded at the screens and shifted over as a disgruntled family bustled past him with zero regard for the people they bumped into. Delayed flights and life's other inconveniences granted citizens special emergency powers to dismiss the personal space and rights of others, didn't you know? He came back to the railing that separated them. "What about you?"

Scully sighed and gestured back at the board. Several score of CANCELLED burned red and bright, and beneath it, smaller screens were dedicated to news coverage of the storm that had grounded the entire air fleet, inaudible over angry voices, monotone public announcements and the rumble of the wild weather outside. "That was my connecting flight home. My half-hour stopover just became an indefinite one."

"And airports are such fun places to wait around," Mulder quipped, smiling when she cast him a tired expression. He looked up and read the service announcements scrolling along the bottom of the screens. "This cell is meant to pelt us until sometime tomorrow morning. No flights until at least then, and after that, only if the planes aren't snowed in."

A group of worried tourists speaking French passed between them and Scully looked back at the screens. He was right, damn him. She'd hoped to beat the building weather event when she'd taken these flights, knowing it was a risk after an abnormally long and heavy winter, but she'd
miscalculated, clearly, and now she was stranded.

In the same city as Mulder. Typical.

He must have ducked underneath the rail because she felt rather than saw him approach.

"This has been a very long day," she confided, and if they were still together he would have wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her neck and kissed her hair. They weren't, so he didn't, and she told herself that was for the best.

"Do you want to get out of here?"

She looked up at him, surprised by the forward-sounding query. "With you? Not particularly."

He didn't take offence, only smiled wider, seemingly enjoying this game of barbs. She'd never understand him.

"Your plane's not getting off the ground in this weather," he reminded her. "What are you planning to do, curl up on some plastic seat and fall asleep to the lullaby of crying babies and whinging passengers? Not to mention that every two minutes," he added when the PA intoned loudly, followed by another unintelligible announcement about the cancelled flights. "I can't really be more repulsive than some of these first-class citizens."

They both watched as an overweight man with a quivering moustache screamed at an attendant behind the service counter. There was a massive and ever-lengthening line behind him of people waiting to do the same.

"Some days, Mulder," Scully responded finally, and he chuckled lightly, and her heart both clenched and soared. It was so easy to be easy with him, so easy to forget that things had stopped being easy. He reached down to her small suitcase and grabbed her coat from where it lay across the top. He shook it out and opened it up.

"Come on," he coaxed, offering it to her. Reluctantly she slid her arms into the sleeves, knowing she was letting herself down, letting him win. "I've been working in town and I've paid up until Wednesday at a little motel. I'll take the couch. If you wait around here," he added, noting her hesitation at the idea of spending the night together, "you're at least fifteen hours away from your next sleep, supposing your flight is smooth enough, and twenty hours away from your next shower. Tell me again I'm the most repulsive option on the table."

A fruitless all-nighter and long stints of driving, flying and waiting left Scully particularly susceptible to Mulder's ploy. A shower and a bed did sound excellent.

*He* sounded excellent.

But he was playing her, like always. Just a toy, something to bat around when he got bored.

"Very generous of you to think of me," she commented, "but you'll forgive me for wondering what's in it for you, since the only times I see you now is when you've got a case you expect me to drop everything to help you solve. What is it this time?"

"All that's in it for me is the pleasure of your company," he replied instantly. "A few months without your scowling silences and sharp demeaning remarks about my motives and I start to miss you, Scully. There's no case. Well," he corrected himself, swaying casually back on his feet, playing innocent, "I *am* working a multiple murder-suicide, and since you're here I could use your opinion on it, but how far am I going to get with it tonight in this weather, right?" He smiled up at
the television, then back at her, knowing he'd piqued her interest. "No autopsies, I promise."

She looked around. The terminal was milling with displaced people, many of them on cell phones loudly trying to reorganise their night now that their flights were not happening. Many were heading for the doors, where they would catch taxis to all the nearest empty hotel rooms, leaving few decent options for her.

Logic said if you don't go with him, you'll regret it and logic said if you do go with him, you'll regret it. Her heart said it would hurt her to spend time with him, like it always did, and her heart said it would pay that price later.

"At least let me take you somewhere for dinner. You've got to eat, don't you?" he asked figuratively, turning into her and lowering his arm behind her, prompting her to turn as well and start walking without a thought, obeying his body language. "We'll check for updates online and I'll get you back here as soon as they get back in the air, whatever time that is."

"Should we be on the roads if it's too dangerous to fly?" She felt her nerves dance to feel his hand settle beside hers and take the handle of her luggage without asking. Classic Mulder, the thoughtless gentleman. She let go, pulling her gloves from her pockets, and went ahead of him when he gestured. The crowd was tight and wayward, people weaving in all directions, and he stuck close behind her so he didn't lose her. She felt the familiar warmth of him at her back, even in the hot crush of the terminal, and it made her all kinds of nervous.

"Are you questioning my driving prowess, Scully?"

She glanced back at him. Said, "Never," in her most unconvincing voice.

He was the best driver she knew, and she'd trust him behind the wheel in this snowstorm before she got into any taxi.

The temperature dropped as they got closer to the doors, and when she squeezed out of the crowd inside into the crowd outside, the wind pummelled her with bitter flecks of snow and ice. She stopped, like many others, squinting, and tried to cover her face with her hands. Even through the gloves she felt the chill.

Warm and insistent, his arm went around her and pulled her toward the left, around the crowd. "I'm parked over this way." His leather-jacketed chest helped to partially shield her face from the blizzard, and though her pride groaned and covered its eyes in embarrassment, she didn't fight his hold as he led her away from the terminal, through confused crowds of displaced passengers and between slow-moving and parked cars blanketed in white. His closeness was all she had for warmth, and pressed against him, she felt the way he shivered. He hadn't dressed properly for this outing. Typical. Pride stood little chance against concern for him, and she stayed close.

An almost ten-minute walk later, both shivering violently, Mulder unlocked his car and opened the side door for her. He pushed the door shut behind her and circled the vehicle, tossing her luggage in the backseat and kicking a drift of snow away from his back tyres before getting into the driver's seat.

"That was refreshing," he joked through chattering teeth, slamming his door and starting the car up. He rubbed his hands together and blew on them while the heater slowly kicked in.

"That's one way to describe it," Scully replied dryly, doing the same. "The news is calling it a whiteout."
"Are they?" He grinned at her, and for a second he was her best friend again, plenty of other things besides at the core of it all just the funniest, realest person she knew, the person who made her realer, who made her funnier. He reached over and she should have pulled away but she forgot to, and let him tousle her loose hair. Powdered snow and chips of ice fell onto her shoulders and lap. "I guess that explains why you look like you just auditioned for Frozen. Did you get the part?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Sure. Opposite you, playing the goofy snowman." She let herself watch him as he rouged the snow out of his own hair. He was irresistible, in every way possible. She wanted to run her hands through his hair under the pretence of helping clear slushy snow out of it, just to remind herself how it felt between her fingers. Her whole left side, significantly warmer than her right, dropped in temperature without his body against her, and she found herself leaning in toward him, actively missing the contact. His smile made something inside her sparkle. His words had manipulated her out of a warm, safe airport and onto a snowstorm trek. Her eyes followed his hands from his head to the heater settings, and she wished he would dare to touch her, because right now, she wouldn't stop him.

Sometimes, she knew, he wanted to. Sometimes she could read it in the way he played with her and the way his eyes lingered on her body or her mouth. There were times he wanted her, just as there were definitely unspeakable times when she wanted him, but he made sure to be clear in other ways that he didn't want her back. He studiously avoided implying he missed her, except in jest, and never asked or told her anything personal. He consistently maintained a lightness between them that felt like normal, but wasn't, because when she threw something down to challenge that lightness – rudeness, or dismissal – he now only smiled, eyes hard, and it killed her. He gave her nothing real, no emotional reaction at all to anything she said or did. No fight. She could no longer upset him, apparently. It always felt good to start with, of course. Whenever he appeared in her life, it was like this – casual and briefly fun, then business, then an argument about work, his or hers, and then radio silence for months. Because ultimately, their relationship now was on his terms, whenever he wanted them to connect or when he had use for her. Their love and friendship had dissolved into simple purpose, and when it didn't serve one, it dissolved altogether into nothing until the next time he needed her.

Make no mistake, she reminded herself as she watched him turn the vents toward her and as she nodded to his question of whether she was warming up. Under the thoughtless gestures of concern and generosity, behind the charming smile and beneath the playful easiness that made being around him feel natural and right, there existed the half-insane egocentric radical who'd driven her away and looked up in surprise when she announced she was leaving.

The same egocentric radical who had not argued or pleaded with her to stay, only asked if she was still on his side.

Like you wouldn't believe.

A silence had fallen between them and his eyes had locked with hers. It was freezing outside but no longer so in here. She cleared her throat and dragged her gaze down before she could do something stupid and embarrassing.

"How far away is your motel?"

He took the drive carefully, for which she was grateful, because the weather conditions were frightful. She couldn't believe he'd driven out here in this, especially considering he'd had no better motive for it than arranging this mysterious path-crossing with her. A few times the wheels slid on the icy road and Scully inhaled sharply, grabbing at the dashboard, before Mulder got the car under control and continued through the dark and the white.
"There are far easier ways to kill me, Mulder."

"Few so dramatic. 'Brilliant FBI agent and deadbeat ex found dead in igloo car on streets of Chicago following ill-advised joyride through snowstorm'."

"Great headline, but you especially cannot die a mundane death, Mulder," she said, thinking of his fan base of lunatics and truth-seekers across the country. "Too many people will suspect a cover-up."

He glanced across at her, his tense grip on the wheel loosening slightly. "You think?" He considered for a moment. "If you died a mundane death, I'd suspect a cover-up. Even if I was driving at the time and caused the crash that killed you."

"You think everything's a cover-up," she reminded him. Snow hammered their windows and made the conditions extremely dangerous, visibility nearly nil, but in here, with Mulder beside her and his competent hands on the wheel, even talking about car accidents, she felt safe. "If you crash tonight and kill me-

"Not my plan, for the record," he interjected. "Please don't haunt me if I accidentally do kill you."

"I'll consider your request." She smiled despite herself and patted her hair lightly, feeling it for dampness. It had started to dry.

"If you did come back as a ghost," he went on, "would you try to investigate your own death? Follow me around and help me solve the mystery? Send me signs, slam doors and move things on Ouija boards?"

"When I die, it won't be a mystery, Mulder. Everyone will know I died of rolling my eyes too hard at you, and nobody will question it. There certainly won't be anyone calling 'cover-up'. Except you," she relented, seeing his outraged expression. Everyone else, she thought, who would consider Mulder's demise suspicious, would likely be half-glad to see her gone. Since her return to the Bureau, contacts that used to be theirs had gone back to being distinctly his, and it was not all because she was being more careful with where she was seen. Fed glowed accusingly in many a wary gaze now.

The reason for Mulder's preoccupation with haunting came clear after they'd arrived at the dingiest, cheapest motel in Chicago. He parked in what passed for a car lot out the back of the brick box of a building, and bundled Scully and her suitcase out and inside through what she assumed was a service entrance but turned out to be the actual door while the front of the place was boarded up for eternal maintenance.

"I like the understated look, don't you?" he asked idly, leading her past the grubby, half-open door of a busy-sounding kitchen as they squeezed up the narrow stairs on their way up to his room like naughty teenagers sneaking in after curfew. She only offered him a bemused look in return. This was exactly his sort of accommodation – cheap, almost uninhabitable. And, it turned out:

"Haunted?"

He looked up at her with a knowing smile from his bowl of cereal. "So they say."

She dropped her spoon into her own bowl and scratched her eyebrow. She sat cross-legged on one end of the ancient musty couch, which she'd announced upon entry to the dank room would be where she slept if he really seriously intended her to sleep here, because the bed had springs sticking out the side of the mattress and visibly stained sheets. The bowl Mulder had presented her
with when she exited the bathroom, showered and redressed, was nestled in her lap. "I don't trust anything they feed me here," he'd said, showing her instead his stash of cereal boxes in his suitcase, beside a huge sack of wholesale table salt, and the bottle of fresh milk in his almost short-circuiting minifridge. Now he sat opposite her, leather jacket discarded in the warmth of the room, and he was telling her about his case. It was the longest she'd spent with him since leaving him, and even that was starting to feel like it had never happened, so natural was the way they orbited one another. The overwhelming strength of his devotion to his work was not a factor when he was like this; he was easy to love like this. She supposed she was easier to put up with, too, relaxed and undefensive.

"Four couples in two months," he began, reaching for his current phone and bringing up a series of photos. The modern budget edition of one of his slideshows. He handed it to her and she obligingly flicked through. Four photographs of couples, varying ages. "One from Fort Lauderdale, one from Detroit, and two more local, elsewhere in Chicago. Different ages, three of them married, one just dating. No connection at all between any of the victims, except for the manner of death."

"Which was ghosts?" Scully guessed sardonically, flicking far enough through his photos to pass the happy snaps and to come across crime scene photos he'd obtained somehow, no doubt illegally. Each one depicted a bloodbath. "God, Mulder, what kind of ghosts do this?"

"That part wasn't the ghosts," he said, adjusting his position to sit closer to her and to see the screen as well. He took over swiping the screen, taking her through the investigation thus far. "All four couples bludgeoned, butchered, or otherwise brutalised, each other to death. All of them started off as murder investigations, looking for signs of intrusions, but everything you see here," he added, zooming in on an elderly couple's linen-and-lace dining room, painted with blood and chips of bone and two unrecognisable bodies, "they did to each other."

Scully stared. She had seen awful things in her job, often alongside this man beside her, but still struggled to imagine the utter hatred it must require to do something like this to another person. To one's favourite person.

"Were there-"

"No histories of domestic violence, no previous criminal records, no indications of previous mental illnesses," Mulder filled in. "Not one couple had reported to family members or friends that they were having marital problems. Needless to say, everyone who knew them was shocked."

"So… what connects these deaths to your haunted motel?" Scully asked, pointing at the peeling paint on the roof with her spoon as she dug into more of her cereal. So much for taking her out for dinner, though somehow, this was nicer. Mulder smiled more widely, glad she'd asked. Always glad to lead her further down his rabbit hole.

"This is my case, remember, Scully. Whatever I tell you, it can't get back to the Bureau."

She scoffed. "Please. Like I'm going to tell anyone I left a perfectly good airport lounge in a snowstorm to listen to ghost stories and eat cereal with you in the grossest motel in the world."

"I've seen grosser," he mentioned, admiring the ceiling almost fondly. He looked back at her. "You've got your laptop, right? No, don't move," he instructed when she lowered her spoon knowingly, getting quickly to his feet and backing over to her suitcase. "I'll get it."

"How did I know you'd ask me that at some point tonight?" she wondered aloud as he came back with the device and plopped back beside her, closer this time. His concept of personal space had always been severely lacking and she'd never found much cause to mind until things between them
became strained. Whenever that had happened, his predisposition for proximity had made her extremely uncomfortable. Tonight, so far, that hadn't hit yet.

"Lucky guess?" he grinned quickly at her, booting up her computer and placing it carefully on her knees, over her cereal bowl, when the login screen came up. She grudgingly typed her password for him and he took the computer back. "The deaths happened in different states and places, but once I got digging, I found more in common. Neighbours say they'd never heard anything from any of these pairs until just before the deaths, when suddenly they heard shouting matches and arguments every night. Over stupid little stuff, too: 'Why did you have to tell the vet the cat has been off his food?' and 'Last time my sister visited you made that pie, and you totally forgot she's gluten-free, you ass'. All of them, in the week before they lost their shit with each other, stayed in a motel together."

"This motel," she gathered. He nodded, cereal forgotten in his excitement to have someone to tell about this. And not just anyone – her, his favourite person to swoop up in the wake of his excitement.

It was how he'd seduced her in the first place. It was also how he'd burnt her out. He was too much.

"A retired couple married for twenty-seven years visiting for a niece's wedding; a young couple needing somewhere to stay while their house was fumigated. No one's exactly staying here for a luxury night away," Mulder acknowledged, looking overhead as a pipe creaked somewhere beyond the cracking plaster. "All of them came here perfectly happy. After they left, they seem to have hated everything about each other. Every single little thing that ever irked them about their partner came back up all at once. So I came here to investigate this building," he went on, clicking and typing, bringing up the FBI database without effort and passing the laptop back to her quickly for her login, "asking questions, you know. And fourteen years ago, there was a double murder. A couple, apparently with some serious load of problems between them, came here to spend the weekend. They spent the whole time in their room screaming about what a dumb idea it was to come here, how pathetic the other was, how they'd be better off without them, and at the end of the weekend, housekeeping found them both torn apart... by each other."

Scully covered her mouth, in part from disgust and in part out of amusement, because the story was so ridiculous. "Mulder," she said seriously, "if you expect me to believe a version of this story in which this place had housekeeping-"

"Alright, the police found them," he said, finding what he was looking for and immediately intensifying, attention gripped by the screen. Still, he leaned himself closer to her, twisting slightly so she could read, too. "Urban legends have a tendency for evolution. I knew something this heavy would have attracted FBI attention. Ben and Christy Parker," he read for her benefit. "Both twenty-nine years old, married six years..."

Scully had warned herself of this but got sucked in anyway, and leaned over his shoulder to read with him as he opened case reports, crime scene photos, statements from family decrying what an awful person either Ben or Christy was to the other, a matched pair of worrisome statements from mental health professionals showing a history of anger management issues and several police reports detailing call-outs handling domestic disputes between the couple at their home. While initially the brutal deaths were assumed the actions of a vicious intruder, forensic evidence soon proved otherwise.

"Small hairs and organic tissue taken from under Christy Parker's fingernails were genetically matched with Benjamin Parker, being found to be eyebrow hairs and eye tissue, respectively,"
Scully read aloud, earning a scrap of Mulder's attention, an amused smile over his shoulder. "This reads beautifully. Makes you wonder why some couples bother when there's so much hatred there. They should have separated years earlier, saved themselves some heartache and, probably, from having to murder each other."

His smile went cold and he turned back to her laptop. "Well, they weren't as wise as some. They died violent deaths here, and in January this year, the snowstorms caused a water main to burst and flood the bottom level. The owners hadn't leased out the 'haunted' room since the murders but couldn't afford not to lease all available space with a whole floor out of use. The blood's long cleaned off, you see."

Scully looked around, realisation dawning, and lowered her spoon back to her bowl. Mismatched furniture, dragged in from other rooms as furnishings were replaced elsewhere in the motel. This was the room. Of course it was. Mulder would have asked for it specifically when he booked in.

"What I think we're dealing with here," he said, ramping up his enthusiasm for this last pitch, the hook, "is a pair of angry spirits, disturbed from their rest and acting out their frustrations by inflicting their hatred for each other on guests, couples, who carry this fury out of here with them and struggle with it until they snap and kill each other. Or some sort of possession, where the ghosts are reliving, so to speak, their final days, trying to find a way out of their destructive cycle so they can move on but too caught up in their own pettiness. I'm still working it out."

She tapped the side of her bowl thoughtfully, no longer hungry. "How long have you been here, working it out?"

"Three nights."

"And you've seen absolutely no paranormal activity," she guessed, unsurprised when he nodded reluctantly. She swallowed, trying not to feel anything, because she'd warned herself this would happen. "Because you're alone."

"It's only a theory." He didn't look back at her. He just opened another file, absorbed more knowledge to substantiate his theory.

"Because the ghosts only possess couples."

"As I said," he said, too calmly, "only a theory."

"Mulder, you said you didn't want anything from me," she reminded him, voice flat to keep out the sound of hurt or anger. He paused, recognising that he'd lost her, which was a bonus for him, and looked up. He tried to redirect her.

"You don't have to do anything," he insisted. She laughed coldly and ran her hands behind her neck to clasp them over the scar there, where she couldn't use them to hit him. This was her own fault. "Benny from Boston gave me the number for two brothers who take care of this sort of thing. He sources fake ID for them through the same guy who does mine."

"Oh, you did not just tell me that," Scully muttered, shaking her head in dark amusement.

"Turns out it's easier to get people to tell you weird stuff they've seen when you flash a badge, and Benny's guy does the best ones. If I find ghosts, I'll call in the experts. You don't have to do anything."

"You are the biggest jerk," she informed him. "Of all the unromantic gestures, Mulder, this one takes the cake, I think."
"Unromantic?" He snapped the laptop shut, giving her his undivided attention. "Who said I was trying to be romantic?"

Nobody. Ever. "It won't work. We're not a couple."

Mulder blinked but his face offered no emotional reaction at all. "I realise that, Scully."

"I was joking in the car," she said flatly, "but honestly, if you wanted to kill me, there are far easier ways."

"I don't want to kill you," he claimed, looking mildly alarmed. She released her neck and raised her hands in frustration.

"You tricked me into coming to a haunted motel room where you think we'll be possessed by vengeful spirits and kill each other. Lovely." She shot him a look and pushed the cereal bowl into his hands. "I knew this would happen. I knew you'd fuck me around."

"What are you worried about?" he demanded lightly, watching her as she swung herself off the couch and started grabbing her things from around the room. They hadn't even touched each other, let alone gone at it, yet somehow, her shoes and coat and damp outfit from earlier had managed to end up spread across the room like she was staying there, too. "You don't even believe in ghosts."

She spun to him, annoyed. "That's not the point, Mulder. You believe in ghosts. You believe this ridiculous story about the killer couple, which means you brought me here expecting my presence would result in us both being possessed by spirits who want to use us to kill each other. You drove through a fucking snowstorm to fetch me back here so you could test out your theory, forgetting that if you happen to be right, this ends very badly. Those other couples," she reminded him, gesturing at his phone, abandoned beside his knee on the scruffy couch, "took three, four days to snap, fuelled only on normal little marital issues like clothes left on the floor and forgetting to change the toilet roll when it finished. You and I..."

Have significantly more emotional baggage than those people.

"Will be dead before morning," Mulder agreed easily. "We're better trained than those people, though. We can do much more efficient damage. One of us may even survive." He took a bite of her cereal and, still chewing, said, "My money's on you. You've got the gun."

They both looked over at what passed for a bedside table, on which she'd left her holster and sidearm. She tried not to imagine, or rather remember, aiming it at him. She shook her head – she was being stupid – and crossed the room for it. She tossed it into her open little suitcase and shut the top.

"It's not funny, Mulder," she said irritably, "and it wasn't fair to bring me here like this. You know I don't do this anymore."

"Do what?" He blinked at her innocently. "Shower in the same building as me?"

Ass. "You know what. Ghosts. The unexplained. This isn't me anymore, and while I'm sure I'm meant to be flattered that you still want me here while you chase your imagination around the dusty attic of your own head."

"Whoa," he interrupted, good-naturedly. "Harsh, Scully. Can we backpedal a little? All this stress is predicated on my theory being right." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Should I assume from this display of displeasure that you think I am?"
"No," she retorted. She went to the bathroom and snatched up her toiletries bag. "I'm not afraid. I'm pissed off. You lied to me to get me here and now I'm stuck with you listening to stupid ghost stories in the least liveable accommodation you have ever brought me to. We went on the run from the United States government for years and never had to stay anywhere this bad." She yanked her hairdryer's plug from the wall and the powerpoint sparked; she flinched and he sat up a little straighter, noticing the motion through the open door. The unspoken show of concern only made her madder. "All the electrics are shot to shit, Mulder, I could have died drying my fucking hair. I'm leaving."

"And going where?" He put the bowls down on the couch cushions and got to his feet, obligingly picking up her laptop and bringing it to her. "Walking home to DC? At least it's warm here."

"For now," she shot back, rubbing her arms without thinking, too angry with him to analyse his words properly. "I don't care where we go. You can come if you want, but I'm not staying here. If the heating's as reliable as the rest of the building's power, we might as well try sleeping in your car. Look at that," she added, almost triumphantly, when the lights flickered. "This place is a blackout waiting to happen. I'm surprised they're even allowed to operate with facilities this poor."

Mulder wasn't listening anymore, she could tell. He had stopped, dropping her laptop on the bed, and was looking at the lights, which continued to flicker without stabilising, burning bright then flashing off and on again. Even the two light switches in the room sparked. He looked back to her and she saw the glow of the fritzing bulbs reflected in his eyes.

"You're cold," he noted, and she went to argue but realised he was right. Her arms were wrapped around herself and her skin was speckled with gooseflesh. When he exhaled, she saw a pale cloud of condensation in the air. "Temp's dropping."

"It's winter, Mulder," she reminded him darkly as he flickered in and out of sight in the unreliable illumination of the motel room. "Cold is part of the package. Not to mention-"

"Shh," he cut her off softly, stepping over to the bedside lamp as it brightened and brightened and brightened. "I think they're coming."

The ghosts. An upheaval of fear rocked her stomach to see his hand reach for the switch as it sparked dangerously. "Don't touch that. You'll get a shock-" He ignored her and that one bulb blew up before he could make contact, and he whipped his hand away. The fear of seeing him hurt evaporated in the frigid room and in its place, rage with him exploded inside her. "Mulder! Why don't you ever fucking listen?!"

Her angry volume drew his surprised attention. Then his brows knitted together and he snapped back, "Because if I listened to half of what came out your mouth, I'd probably still be exactly where you first met me. All you do is tell me what not to do, that I'm wrong… How I put up with your shit all these years, I'll never know."

Normally that would hurt. Not tonight. Anger surged, and every, every single thing he'd ever said or done to scare, hurt, annoy or upset her came back to her all once, too quickly to process properly. A hundred wild goose chases. A thousand stupid comments that other people heard and judged him, and her, for. Ten thousand incomprehensible acts of idiocy in the name of faith, many of which had landed them both in trouble, one of them hurt or worse. A hundred thousand unreadable looks and thoughtless gestures that meant nothing at all, because ultimately, he loved being lost in himself more than he loved her.

"My shit? How many times did my shit land you in front of a panel of suits to explain yourself? I can't count the times your reckless stupidity…" Only, she could. Instantly, each occasion rose fresh
and furious in her mind. "Twenty-two. One hundred and seventy-five if you include times I was in Kersh or Skinner's office trying to justify something you had convinced yourself we should do."

"Oh, there you go, blaming me and my choices for all your life's troubles," Mulder sneered. Behind him, the lights flickered and flashed, shining on his contorted expression harshly, and looking so awful, she liked him even less. "Exactly as I've always known you do. Like you didn't make your own stupid choices."

"You got my dog killed!" she yelled at him, fists clenching in utter hatred for his part in that. How was it she'd never dealt him this anger before? Logically, somewhere niggling at the very back of her consciousness, she realised this injustice was years in the past and also extremely arguable in its correctness, but the anger would not let those thoughts all the way through. It was Mulder's fault.

"You left me locked in a hospital basement cupboard for a weekend with a sandwich because you can't tell me apart from an imposter!" Mulder yelled back, and his glare conveyed the utmost contempt. "What kind of one in five billion are you, anyway?" His hand also balled into a fist, and with effort he reopened it and, with a growl, smacked the lamp. It fell to the floor with a loud clang and the cord ripped from the wall. The sound gave Scully a start, and momentarily she felt hazy, headachy – what was happening? – before another wave of irritating memories ravaged her.

"You shouldn't have gone after Van Blundht on your own!" Scully shouted in return. "Like a million other times you ran off without telling me, leaving me to work things through on my own. If sometimes that backfired on you, well, I'm glad. Though it doesn't seem to have taught you anything."

"If I didn't do things on my own from time to time, you'd have driven me fucking insane," he hissed, stepping over the lamp and leaning down to get to her level, punctuating his choice of words with raised eyebrows and widened eyes, mocking her. "I'd have had to listen to your annoying fucking voice telling me you're wrong, Mulder, just leave it alone, Mulder, what are we doing here, Mulder?"

He was in her face by now, towering over her, and contemptuous like she'd never seen, and yet she refused to be scared. She shoved at his chest, barely dislodging him but for a step.

"Sounds familiar," she jeered. Briefly, her view of him went black, the faulty lights giving out for a full second, and when the brightness returned, she felt a painful throb somewhere in her brain. "A bit like this dump, and every other dump you dragged me into." Ignoring the pain, she shoved again, and he took another half step back. "You had to put that stupid pink flamingo out on the lawn, didn't you?"

"What?" he demanded, rolling his shoulder with her third shove and pushing her arm away before she could try a fourth. "You get mad about the stupidest, stupidest shit, Scully. Yeah I put a pink flamingo out on the lawn – to prove a point and solve a case, which is more than you were doing there." He looked like he wanted to give her a solid shove but raised one hand to his temple and pressed his fingers there, stressed. "I was right in the end, you'll be so kind as to remember – if your memory works that way. I always wonder, since you're never able to corroborate anything I see in your presence."

She wanted to scream. The flashing lights burned the backs of her eyes and Mulder's irritating face was getting hard to glare at clearly, hidden behind blotches of grey in her vision. Her head throbbed with pressure. "You're so fucking smug!"

"And you're a joyless bitch. Who buried me!" he added, grabbing her arm tightly when she went to
"You were dead!" she snarled, furious that he would bring that up and furthermore furious that he had died at all. "Maybe you should have stayed that way."

A loud knocking came at the door and everything changed abruptly. The lights stabilised.

"Mr Manners?" someone called from the hall outside. "Is everything alright?"

Scully breathed deeply, heart thudding, and looked up at her former partner in dawning horror. His hand was tight on her wrist, which was poised to hit him across the mouth, and they stood closer together than they'd been in well over a year. The look of hatred was gone from his face. The well of loathing that had fuelled her for the past thirty seconds had gone dry, and the pressure in her head was completely gone.

She'd just gone mental on him. On Mulder. And everyone in the motel had heard. Oh, God.

"Uh, yeah, I'm – we're fine," Mulder managed, releasing her wrist immediately and taking a step back to give her back her personal space, while she slunk away from him to the edge of the bed. She sat down on top of her own hands, unable to believe she'd just struck at him. She had never hit him before, not in all the times he'd annoyed or angered her, which apparently, when counted up, was quite a lot. Where had that come from? She felt sick with embarrassment. Why had she said those things?

The person outside went away, and Mulder exhaled heavily. "Scully, you're a genius."

"Oh, now you've got something nice to say?" she asked, but any venom to it was weak and lost on him. He dropped down on the creaky bed beside her as though nothing had just transpired, and leaned around her for the laptop. She watched him, expecting to feel angry with him, but that had passed, and she felt only regret and humiliation. Maybe some secret gladness she hadn't said more. Reluctantly she started to speak, hoping that with words, she'd be able to rationalise it to herself, and to him, "Mulder, I -"

"You were right," he interrupted, glancing up at her from his screen with clear, warm eyes, no trace at all of the abhorrence of before. He offered her the open laptop. "We've got history, and that's what the ghosts tap into. Little things that, blown out of proportion, become big, festering sores, weeping unresolved slights. That," he nodded over at the lamp, lying on the floor, "wasn't us."

"It sounded like us," Scully reasoned, as uncomfortable with what he was suggesting as she was with the alternative, which was that they both just momentarily lost their self-control. She obligingly entered her password to log it back in. "The things I said… the things you said…"

Were mean. We shouldn't have said them. But they happened.

"The memories are ours," Mulder acquiesced, typing hurriedly. "The connection of blame is our own, however weak it might be. But the anger isn't ours." He stopped what he was doing to look up at her, sincerity warming his gaze. "I'm not angry you buried me, Scully. I was dead. I'm grateful you didn't autopsy me, or I might never have been able to come back from that."

The honesty burning in his look and the thought of what might have come to pass if she'd done what she should have with his dead body instead of stubbornly insisting on burying him unembalmed drove her eyes down and away from his.

"I don't blame you for Queequeg," she confessed. She hesitated, awkward. "Or for, like, half of what I just said."
"Only half?" Mulder was teasing now, and she tried to relax, but she still felt beyond uncomfortable. He turned the laptop towards her again and let her read the page he'd brought up on the motel's wifi. "Vengeful spirits, Scully. I was right, too. All we had to do to find them was trigger them, which you did. Genius."

The webpage was someone's blog about the paranormal. Hardly a veritable source. She sighed and pulled her hands out from under her thighs, realising the room had returned to its previous warmth, and turned more toward him, bringing her legs up beside her.

"And how did I do that?" she asked, pushing her laptop back to him. He shifted it onto the bed beside them, open. "I am not wasting my night reading that."

"You started an argument," he said matter-of-factly, and she choked on a laugh. "Well, what it dissolved into with their influence wasn't cohesive enough to be called an argument, but you got tetchy, and it drew them out. Now that I've got proof, I can call in the experts to expel the ghosts, and hopefully no one else will die."

He got up off the bed, scooting close past her with their usual painful easiness, and she rocked with the motion of the ancient mattress as his weight lifted off it. She raised an eyebrow at him and asked, condescendingly, "Proof? That's a bit of a big word for what just happened, Mulder."

"What would you call it?" He grabbed his phone back from where he'd left it beside the cereal bowls and started leafing through its electronic contents.

"Uh, a dispute?" Scully suggested delicately. "The beginnings of a fight, maybe. And shitty circuitry, which you should definitely complain about when you check out."

"And what do you hypothesise initiated this fight, if not the displaced anger of two heartbroken spirits impressing their wrongful choices upon us, bending our minds and will with the force of their own remembered hurts? You must have felt the pressure in your head, too, Scully."

"The flickering of the lights caused eyestrain and interfered with our normal neurological processing," she said staunchly, pushing her hair back off her face so she could frown at him unimpeded when he just snorted with disbelieving amusement and continued looking through his phone. "Our behaviour was out of character and out of line but we shouldn't dismiss factors like my exhaustion, your frustration with this case so far and our probable cabin fever due to the storm outside."

"Stir-crazy after an hour?" Mulder scoffed, raising his phone to his ear. He continued addressing her while it dialled. "Get real, Scully. And you trying to hit me after one long day at work? I've seen you dead tired, you've seen me more frustrated; this is nothing. It was Ben and Christy Parker, reliving their gory glory, still trying to get one up on each other." He paused, listening, then lowered the phone. "Voicemail."

"Whose voicemail?" She tried not to blush at the reminder of trying to hit him.

"The experts. I'm told this is their thing, getting rid of things that go bump in the night." The lights glowered as if planned that way, and he looked over at her playfully. "Like our ghosts."

It came on as suddenly as before. Absolute hatred for him and his stupidity, thinking himself funny, thinking himself cute. A horrid comment rose to her lips but she managed to slap both hands over her mouth before it could get out. The lights went crazy. The laptop screen blinked out. Her head filled with mean thoughts too heavy and thick for logic to fight, though it did try. Her eyes ached. His narrowed.
"What?" he challenged. He threw his phone down on the couch. "Spit it out then. Go on. You always hold back. Why don't you just say what you're thinking?"

It was too hard to resist. He was too hard to resist. "I'm thinking about all the insane things you've ever said and how people would always look at me like I was crazy for sticking with you," she fired off, dropping her hands. "I'm thinking of all the times I should have told you what I was thinking because it might have made you stop and use your brain!"

"Oh, really? Are you sure you're not thinking of ways to undermine me?"

"Are you sure you're not thinking of ways to humiliate me?"

"You think you're better than me," he accused, taking an aggressive step forward before awkwardly pulling himself up and pressing the heel of his hand, hard, between his eyes. "You think… because you're smarter than me…"

"You hung up on me for Dr Bambi!" she snapped back, and logic got its first tiny whispered word in: and I was jealous.

"Well, you went and got cancer. Was that not the definition of an overreaction?" he retorted furiously, then drew a shuddery breath. "No, I… That wasn't your…"

In the strobing light of the motel room, he looked briefly confused.

"Don't you dare get confused," she warned angrily, though the anger was getting murky. What was she angry about? The words came anyway, uncensored, and the headache throbbed. "When you're confused, everything suddenly becomes my problem to fix."

"You named our son William Fox," he flung at her. "How could you? It's the worst name, Scully. You must have really hated me to do that to him, you heartless bitch. You heartless…” He got stuck on his words again, frowning and swallowing. He had to force out what he wanted to say. "You… You're the mother of my child."

The lack of anger in his voice left a tiny gap in the blur for her, and his words sunk into her. I'm the mother of his child. He's the father of mine. Logic had its say. Then the laptop screen came suddenly back on, flashing violently, the bathroom door slammed open against the wall, the wall lights flickered even more erratically and the headache amplified, splitting her skull.

But the words stayed with her, even as the pressure to hate squeezed at her, forcing bad memories to the forefront, even as the same bad memories cracked her partner.

"You went with him!" Mulder unleashed, crossing back to stand over her. Anger told her to get up and respond to this challenge, but He's the father of my child kept her sitting on the bed, legs tucked under her, though she certainly tensed. "That cigarette-smoking son of a bitch, you trusted him and you lied to me. You went with him in spite of everything he'd done to you, everything he'd done to me. You just didn't care, did you?"

"Yes, that's exactly-" No, that wasn't why. The migraine vibrated her whole brain but the truth had been planted amongst the hate and ignorance and it would not die. "I didn't… I didn't forget. I was aware-"

Her thick, stunted words were cut short by his anger. "You knew what I would think and you went with him anyway, on a fucking road trip. You trusted him instead of me. I hated you for that." His eyes burned and she heard the truth in it.
None of this was real. These were old pains, and they were past it all. Scully couldn't explain where it was coming from now but she could fight it.

"I don't blame you," she made herself say. Her vision swam with unreleased fury and she had to plant the heels of her hands into her eyes to stop them aching. Block the lights. "I want to blame you – I want to say that whole mistake was your fault because you can be so damn inflexible sometimes – that's what I'm thinking," she confessed, and those words came out much easier than what she said next. "But instead… I'm going to say… that was my fault. You were right to... to be worried. Agh." She had to stop, the pressure squeezing on her temples like she was caught in an invisible vice. She tightened her eyelids and pushed harder with her hands, waiting for the silence to break, for her partner to throw down his next cruel line. He was quiet. Maybe he was fighting it, too? "Mulder… Tell me… something that's… hard to say."

It took him a long time, and like she had, he had to first of all unleash the nasty words that had built up before he could say anything more thoughtful. "I lost Samantha because of you! I had her, I had her back and you had to go and get yourself kidnapped so I would have to make the trade. I should never have chosen you! So what if it wasn't really her, you shouldn't have gone and…” He got control of himself halfway through the tirade. She heard him trail off, his conviction fading, and she made herself look up from her fists. He was visibly struggling, too. The pressure she felt to hate him was driving him as well. "She… It wasn't really her. That wasn't… your fault." He slammed his hands over his ears, trying to block out whatever was influencing him. He raised his voice. "It wasn't your fault!"

It was working. The force pushing her to hate him was straining ever harder and she thought her brain might explode and her blood might boil but she remembered who he was. She remembered how long she'd known him, and logic had a claw in her now, and it reminded her that despite everything bad she was remembering, he was still in her life.

"I feel like telling you everything is your fault," she spat, clearing the hateful words to make way for the truthful ones, "but... if you were so... careless, and..."

"And stubborn," he snapped, talking about her. She nodded and groaned against the pain.

"And spiteful, and so... stupid..." She kneaded her hands into the dirty cover of the bed, trying to ground herself and stay conscious as the headache kicked up a notch.

"Don't forget untrustworthy." Mulder took another stilted step toward her, hitting himself in the side of the head with the palm of his hand. He stumbled, struggling with control as well, and went down on his knees. "Don't forget..."

"If you were... agh, if you were all those things," she rushed to say, maybe yelling it, she didn't know, "I wouldn't be here tonight. We would have killed each other years ago."

That truth pushed against the blind ignorance and she felt a moment of clarity. The pain receded, though it fought, and her vision started to clear, and she saw Mulder in front of her, on his knees, his hand on one of her knees. He was breathing hard, fighting the same inner fight against ripping her apart, first with words and then with his hands.

"We would have killed each other years ago," he repeated, the lights all dimming around them, like they, too, were relaxing. "We didn't."

He stared at her, deliberately, and she stared back, using his eyes as a focus point while she fought
her way back into control of her own impulses and mind. No force was going to make her do anything she didn't choose. No supposed spirit was going to influence her to say anything else she would regret. She was her own master; that was all there was to it, and she would win this battle of wills.

An unearthly shriek rose from nowhere and the onslaught of hate spiked suddenly, more intense than before, and Scully felt control slip away in the agony of the burden as the lights sparked dangerously. She launched forward at Mulder with her hands aimed at his eyes, wanting them gone so they could never exert control over her again.

He was just as quick, though, and caught her arms in fiercely tight hands as he got up off his knees and threw her backwards onto the bed. Before she could get up he was over her, a hand on her throat, a leg between hers, trying to pin her pelvis, and he was shouting into her face, "You never believed in me! That's all I needed from you, and you couldn't do it."

"I don't owe you," she snarled back, getting her leg between them so she could shove him off. She managed to dislodge him enough that he had to release her neck and get back onto his feet. "You don't define me." He came at her again, monstrous in the flickering light, and she kicked viciously, catching his stomach. He doubled over, gasping, yelling that she was a bitch, grabbing for the side table. She pushed herself upright, blinded by unbridled loathing, and saw his hand close on the gun. Logic leapt forward amidst the emotion and she dimly felt her stomach twist. The gun was a game-changer.

"Mulder-" she started to say. His left hand closed on her mouth, fingertips digging into her cheeks, and he wrenched her close. He leaned down to look her straight in the eyes. His swam in hers, threatening to drown in the hate, in the pain, in the desperation.

"You shut up," he hissed. He drove her back and climbed over her, pressing the end of the weapon into her chest. She let her hands lie open beside her head, an unspoken surrender. Her heart pounded. "All this," he tapped himself in the head with the side of the gun and returned it to its target, "is because of you."

Whatever this was, it had its teeth in him. His detestation of her shone in his face in the horror-movie lighting.

"Mulder," she whispered urgently through his fingers, "you're possessed. We both are."

"You're a liar," he roared. "I've been possessed before, I know what it feels like. Modell got hold of me." He winced against a wave of discomfort. "He told me I should shoot you. I should have. I should…" His expression twisted again, an intense battle taking place inside him, and with shaking muscles, he turned the gun away from her, bringing it unwillingly to his own temple. Her heart slammed against her ribs. His hand muffled her protest and his elbows nudged away her hands when she tried to stop him. "I should end this. Before they make me…"

She jerked her head aside and his hand slipped. "Mulder, don't," she pleaded quickly through his fingers, breath catching when he growled in confused agony and switched the safety off.

"I don't want… I…" He fought it, he fought it, and every second she feared he'd pull that trigger on himself. "You should…" He fought a moment longer, then lost, and his arm dropped and the gun came back to her sternum as if drawn by magnets, and the look of pain was banished in favour of a look of hatred. "I should have shot you down in that hospital."

"You couldn't," she reminded him hurriedly. "You couldn't do it."
"Couldn't then," he retorted, pushing down on the gun and removing his hand from her face and raising it in a fist. "You shot me. Fair's fair, Scully." He had his whole weight loaded behind that fist, and he hovered over her. It would knock her out.

The temptation to claw at him and scream obscenities overwhelmed her, circling thoughts of dumb or thoughtless or snarky things Mulder had said before, but logic said he would still win. She'd waged a quiet war against him their whole relationship, determined he would never beat her, but tonight she knew he would, no matter what she did to combat him. One pull of that trigger. The split-second release of the tension built up in his shoulder.

And if he fought it, if he won out over this menace and got the gun back on himself, they would both lose.

His fist slammed into the mattress beside her and she flinched, half in fright and half in reaction to the sudden last-ditch surge of hateful power that jolted the whole room. All Mulder's very worst moments flashed hotly across her awareness – him with Diana, him breezing back from Russia after another unplanned trip, him ceasing contact with her while he was in hiding, him on that rooftop snapping at her that the invasion was coming, he couldn't be wrong… the empty dial tone of the phone he said he'd answer for her but never did… – and the light bulbs flared so brightly they exploded. The room was plunged into darkness and they both cried out in painful protest against the will of their hatred and frustration with one another.

The time had come to destroy each other and their self-control wore thin.

Hers snapped first. She frantically reached up into the black above her and found his shoulder. She hooked her arm over his neck and pulled herself up to meet him. Her mouth crashed with his and even though the gun still dug into her chest, pinned between them, she closed her eyes in absolute relief at the release.

It doesn't count in the dark.

It seemed he felt the same, because he twisted her gun out from between them and cast it aside quickly, shifting his weight to unpin her from her awkward captive pose and instead press himself closer to her, bearing down on her with want instead of dominance. His lips moved knowingly against hers as they kissed blindly, urgently, and her whole body tingled with need as the pressure in her head lost its hold on her.

Ghosts or no, whatever force had set them against each other had not understood that perhaps unlike the previous victims, for Scully and Mulder, resentment and frustration and even sometimes detestation had always been indistinguishable from desire. Wanting to kill him felt the same as wanting to kiss him; wanting to scream at him felt like wanting to hear his voice in her ear. While blaming him and pushing him around had felt good under this hateful influence, feeling his hands in her hair and his breath on her neck and his teeth on her collarbone and his hips grinding against her thigh felt immeasurably better.

God, she would hate herself tomorrow. Right now, though, she arched herself back to let him kiss her throat and ran her hands up his arms, feeling the tense, hard muscle of him. The splitting headache had totally diminished, the pressure satisfied by the relinquished self-control and eyes relaxed in the complete blackness of the motel room. Her hands reached his shoulders and she felt them shift as he lifted himself slightly, coming back to kiss her ready mouth. Their hurried breath and the soft sounds of their hands sliding over each other hungrily were the only noises in the whole world.

At his neck she felt the cool chain and with the fingers of one hand, traced it around to the front. At
his throat, though she couldn't see it in the dark, she touched the tiny gold cross that hung there.

An unexpected buzzing and light source brought them abruptly back to their senses, and they broke apart, glancing at the couch on the other side of the room. Mulder's current phone was lit up and vibrating with an incoming call, shaking away on the seat cushion.

His hand was woven into her hair. Hers was on his back. Their legs were entwined. His body ran the length of hers and beyond, and hers was tucked under him, straining upwards to make contact everywhere she could. And now they were both frozen, realisation striking.

It didn't count in the dark but it was no longer dark, and in horror she shoved him off. He rolled quickly off her, apparently just as embarrassed to have been so swept up, and scrambled off the bed to go for the phone.

Oh, God, oh, God… Scully pressed her hand – seconds ago tracing his sculpted shoulder – to her mouth, feeling sick with her own stupidity. What had she been thinking? A whole year of brush-offs and cold-shouldering him undone in one weak moment.

Mulder grabbed the phone and the light dimmed, blocked against his face. "Yeah?"

He listened, and she flattened her roughened hair in the quiet, sitting up and feeling steadily more humiliated and more vulnerable. What would he think of her now? And why had she given in to him like that? Heart rate returning to normal, appropriate distance restored, it was extremely hard to justify. Even the inexplicable force of hatred for him seemed less real now – so she'd felt mad at him, really mad at him. So he'd said horrible things and she'd said horrible things. A fight like that was bound to happen eventually, right?

She couldn't factor in the gun, which her hand brushed against now. He'd pulled the gun on her, hadn't he? It all seemed so blurry now. She was having trouble remembering.

Mulder wasn't. "Yeah, that's right. I've been trying to get in touch about that ghost case I spoke to you about earlier in the week. I thought maybe it was nothing but tonight my partner came out to the motel and this place is definitely haunted. The spirits are Christy and Ben Parker, a married couple who murdered each other in a fit of violent rage here in this room. I've got an FBI case file that documents their whole miserable marriage."

That's right; whatever else had transpired, that's why she was here. To provide a case file and to prove his point about ghosts. She looked away from him, embarrassment sweeping through her, and she was grateful for the darkness hiding her blush. He'd dragged her here to play ghostbusters and she'd tripped and made out with him. Which he clearly hadn't minded, but that wasn't what was embarrassing. He got what he wanted. She lost, again.

She always lost. Whatever game they played, she always lost. So she'd left, and still he found her and still she lost.

"Well, we're not dead yet, but the dearly departed, disputably domestic Parkers have had a good crack at us, so, yeah: the sooner you boys can get out here, the better." Mulder listened patiently. "Tomorrow? Alright. Yeah, I brought salt. You're sure that'll keep them at bay overnight?"

Overnight. Her hand tightened on the butt of the gun, anxious. There was a total whiteout outside, and Scully had nowhere else to go. She was stuck here all night with Mulder in the dark, after that… Could circumstances be any worse? Would he think…? She got up off the bed, making it creak, and Mulder turned to her.
"Alright, yeah, I can manage that. Okay… Hold on. Scully," he said suddenly, moving after her when she hastened to the bathroom and grabbed the door. She slammed it shut before he could stop her, and she heard the slap of his frustrated palm on the outside. She dropped her head back against the door and breathed deeply, gun hanging at her side. "Come on, what are you doing? It's not safe for us to be out of sight."

She rolled her eyes even though he couldn't see her. "On what evidence do you base that assertion, Mulder?" Because it seemed to her the exact opposite. The events of the last couple of minutes felt fuzzy now, maybe some memory-processing difficulty brought on by the flashing lights, but she knew he'd held a gun to her, and she knew she'd struck out at him – two more horrendous mistakes they couldn't make again if they were separated by a door.

Like kissing him. Stupid. In the dark she knocked her head back against the door, wishing she could just disappear. Dissolve into the floor. Then she wouldn't have to face him.

"We don't know what the ghosts do to victims who try to get some space from each other," he reasoned, his voice sounding like it was right against the door. She pictured him leaning on the other side, forehead pressed against the cheap hollow chipboard, less than two inches away from her, and she mentally kicked herself for wasting energy conjuring images of him when she'd just escaped him. "They could still come for you in there – in fact, they could try ramping things up to get you back out here at me, or they could turn you on yourself. You saw what they did to me before."

Before we hooked up. "There are no ghosts!" she snapped reflexively. "It's in your head!"

"Not just mine, apparently. What?" He paused, and she heard the low buzz of another voice, a digitally compressed one, through his cell. "No, nothing. No, we'll manage. We'll try the salt and I'll call you back if things get any more complicated. I'll see you here tomorrow. Drive safely." She heard the soft beep as he hung up. "I'm not going to hurt you, if that's what you're worried about." He was talking to her again. She swallowed her answer. I know. His voice was still just beyond the door. "You don't have to be scared. Nothing they showed me was going to make me pull that trigger on you. I promise."

God. What did he want from her? Why did he have to be so charming and forthright and endearing in all the gaps between his moments of aloofness and absentness and self-centredness? Did he gain some strange satisfaction from this bizarre ritual of seducing her with that voice and those meaningful monologues, drawing her in close where it would hurt most when he dropped her? Which he always did. She was addicted to him but he was incurably hooked on the chase to the edge of insanity.

She chose her answer carefully, because there was a lot she could have said. "I'm not scared."

"Should I be?" he asked, and she flexed her fingers on the gun guiltily. She'd brought it with her. She couldn't pretend to really understand what was going on here, prompting these irrational bursts of impossible anger and dislike, but she did understand that she'd just shifted the balance of power in her own favour by taking the weapon. She'd knocked herself out of the last spell with logical fear for her own life. If it happened again, would she be able to pull herself out without that spur? Or would she…? She couldn't bear to consider it. He was talking again, his voice drawing away from her as he crossed the room. "Listen, come out. When they come back, we're not going to get a warning with the lights. I need your help with this salt."

She recalled the sack of table salt in his suitcase beside the cereal. "You need water for a sensory deprivation tank, and I don't think freeing yourself of any more of your senses will do either of us any good."
"If there's one thing I can always count on you for, it's a rational explanation that'll appease the dull-minded." She heard the smile in his voice. It only made her feel sour, if in part because she couldn't see it.

"The same rational explanation appeases me, so mind the insults, Mulder. Like I'm supposed to know what you plan to do with a whole twenty pounds of salt."

"I got it from the kitchens here, so I'm certainly not going to eat it." She heard him lifting the bag. "Advice from the experts. My contact said to make a ring of salt and stand inside it. Ghosts can't cross it."

"God help me," Scully muttered, touching her fingertips to the bridge of her nose. "Ghosts can't cross salt. What'll be next?"

"What do you want to be next?" he asked rhetorically. She heard the tear of the plastic packaging. "Next you come out and help me by holding the torchlight so I can pour this salt without any gaps. I don't want them getting through."

"There's no them. Nothing I've seen tonight has left me with the conclusive deduction that we are dealing with spirits."

His sigh clearly conveyed that he was as frustrated with her as she was with him. "It. Whatever. Whatever force has us at each other's throats. You're armed. You could hurt yourself."

Unlikely. The impulse to cause harm was against him. More probable was the scenario in which she shot through the door in the direction of his voice. She half-imagined she could feel his heat through the wood, radiating toward her with all the power of aliveness.

Her next breath out was cold.

Panic struck, and she berated herself for being so easily led by silly associations (cold did not equal ghosts) but that didn't stop her from instinctively squeezing her eyes shut. Her exhalations felt hot on her rapidly cooling lips and she was sure she was casting a cloud of vapour with each one.

"Scully." She heard him moving, turning around, the soft brush of his clothes against the furniture. "Scully, they're here."

They're here. "There's no one else here, Mulder," she insisted, ignoring the genuine fear that gripped her at his words. They're here. The concept was so ridiculous but though she'd left him for being wrong once, the truth was that he rarely was entirely wrong and even the knowledge that a parallel spirit world made no scientific sense at all was not enough to make her open her eyes.

Because what if he wasn't wrong?

What if he was?

"Ben Parker," Mulder said, his voice full of awe. "You don't have to be afraid. I'm not here to cause you any harm."

Silence answered him, and Scully groaned quietly in frustration with him, covering her closed eyes with her spare hand. Why did she have to throw her lot in with a nutcase? Of all the men she could have gotten tangled up with… No, it had to be him, and he had to be crazy. It was enough to make her hate him, and her fingers twitched on the gun.

"Scully, is Christy in there with you?"
Eyes tightly closed, she said firmly, "No, Mulder. Nobody is here."

"I'm looking at Ben Parker. He's here. No, Ben," he said suddenly, "don't leave. Just listen. I know about you and Christy. What you did to each other. How you made each other into people you didn't like. I understand."

He was talking to an empty room in the dark because all he wanted was to believe, and she was standing on the other side of a door with her eyes closed in the dark because all she wanted was not to have to believe. It was a perfect metaphor for their entire relationship. That only annoyed her more.

"Mulder," she scolded through the door, teeth chattering slightly on the second syllable, "shut up, will you?"

He ignored her. "I understand feeling so angry with someone or something you can never inflict enough hurt to break even. And that's the fact of it, Ben. You can't get back at Christy through these other people. It doesn't help to make you feel any better, does it? It won't help you to do the same thing through us. When you use me to lash out, it doesn't hurt Christy. It only hurts us, real people. You can never beat her. Your power struggle with your wife has gone on long enough and in case you hadn't noticed, Scully and I have enough to deal with without your issues on top of it all."

"Mulder!" she reprimanded again, banging the butt of the gun against the door in warning. "Shut up. You're talking to yourself and you sound stupid. There is no one-

"Scully, you'd better not have your eyes closed." His voice was lower for her, private, just between them, but firm with certainty. "She's in there with you. Christy. Listen to yourself," he persisted when she scoffed. "She's got you again – open your eyes and talk to her, before she gets pushy again."

He went back to talking down his ghost while she stayed where she was, trying not to entertain his words. In the hyperawareness of her isolation – the dark, the aloneness – a shudder ran through her when a distinct trail of cold traced along her cheek, as though somebody were touching her. And in its wake she felt the pulse of anger, anger, anger, and her fingers tightened on the gun but all she wanted to do with it was aim it through the door at Mulder and that was never going to happen again.

"Ben, you need to let go," Mulder was saying on the other side of the door, though his voice was dulled by the rising sound of blood rushing in Scully's ears as she squeezed her eyes tighter and fought the push to react to the memories and thoughts as they came up. They were the same memories now, things she'd already felt mad about tonight, and she was just, only just, able to remind herself of that and remind herself of how petty they all were to be mad about.

Mulder throwing pencils into the ceiling.

Mulder missing their son's birth.

Mulder arguing with Skinner.

Mulder knocking her ice cream from her hand.

"Nothing you do to us will hurt Christy," Mulder was saying, dimly, distantly, "and nothing you do to hurt us will alleviate the guilt you must feel. You need to break free of this cycle. Stop reflecting on what you did wrong – you hurt the woman you loved and you can't undo that now – and start
looking forward to what could be next for you. For both of you."

The cold fingertip was joined by three more, and together made a freezing hand that ran up her cheek to her temple, and the memories came faster and angrier, and though her hand shook violently, she raised the gun.

Mulder looking disappointed in her.

Mulder in an ice bath after not listening to her.

Mulder ordering the wrong pizza.

"Christy," she whispered, hating herself for buying into this nonsense, forcing her second hand onto the gun and disarming it, "you will never make me hate him enough to do what you did."

The cold sensation on her face dropped away and the anger that flowed from it faded, too. There was a second of relief, and she breathed deeply, once, ejecting the magazine.

Then, in a burst of cold air, *something* gave her an almighty shove, and she was slammed backward into the door. Simultaneously overwhelmed by fury for Mulder and terror of what was happening, she scrambled with the gun with both hands, pulling it apart like she'd done a hundred times before.

He heard the bang of her body hitting the door and didn't waste any time, calling her name and yanking the door open. She fell out and into him as she tried to regain her balance, the gun's harmless components grasped in her fingers, which had started to shake in the rapidly dropping temperature. She couldn't see him but felt his warmth as he enveloped her and dragged her swiftly across the room, and she pushed a handful of dismantled gun parts at him. She felt his hands take the magazine and her eyes flew open at the spark of genuine electricity his touch, even so light, elicited in her, right to her core.

The ghosts were never going to be able to kill that and everything else they threw was only going to fuel that ever-burning fire.

It was too dark to see him but his silhouette was backlit by some hazy glow, and she knew she was looking sightlessly straight into his face as pulled her across some invisible line, and then everything in her head – Mulder with his arms around Diana, Mulder's phone ringing out, all Mulder's greatest hits of failure on repeat – went quiet at once. The glow went out.

And she was just standing in the dark, in the silence, in the cold, in his arms, both breathing hard.

It might have been as before, except that he lit his phone screen and it was no longer dark. One arm still around her, he cast the phone's light around them, showing her the big circle he'd made with salt. The motel's staff were going to love cleaning this room. They stood in its centre, all their possessions elsewhere in the room.

"We're safe in here," he whispered, and she felt relief at his words, but logic was still going strong, forever at war with him.

"You're crazy if you think salt is going to help us," she whispered back, stomach tightening with irrational worry. The fingers of cold on her face and the knock backward, the incomprehensible pressure in her head as memories and feelings came forth unbidden – surely it was at least half-imagined, surely there was an explanation, surely she'd overreacted in the environment she'd found herself in, trapped in a room with the most dangerously desirable and deranged person in her life, in a snowstorm with the lights out and his crazy paranoid rantings swirling around her impressionable mind.
"Don't pretend you don't feel better in here than you did in there. The salt works. Don't ask me how."

"Placebo effect," she whispered back at him. "You were told it would work, and you told me it would work, so we expected it would. Just like you expected ghosts, so you saw one."

"You didn't see him?" he demanded, their voices still at a whisper. "I didn't imagine him! He was there." He twisted against her to point with his phone toward the couch. "When you came out of the bathroom? I can't believe you're capable of editing out sensory information as blatant as a glowing translucent man standing in your motel room."

"I didn't edit anything out of my experience," Scully disagreed. "You edited him in. You wanted him to appear. You'd expected it for days, and after the overstimulation of the optic nerve and of your brain during the light show we were treated to, you may have hallucinated some extra details to the residual temporary blotches left by the flashes. Perhaps even a mini-seizure."

"An explanation for everything," he said in disgust. "Alright. Explain what knocked you around in there. You just lost your balance, did you? Or did you have a seizure too?"

"No," she answered irritably. "I can't explain that, but a lack of explanation does not automatically denote ghosts."

"What made the noise?"

"Maybe someone in another room?" she suggested, starting to pull away from him. Rational explanations that Mulder took as antagonism were as much that as they were soothers for herself. He tightened his arm around her.

"Maybe," he allowed, voice heavy with the effort of suspending his own disbelief and controlling his temper with her. "Maybe you're right about everything, as per not usual. But use faulty electrical circuits and seizures to explain away the overwhelming impulse I'm getting to throttle you right now."

He towered over her, something she'd always liked, and he was close enough to be intimidating. Fuck me, she willed him against her own, but he never obeyed those sorts of mental directions. Best not. She laid cool fingertips on his lips so she couldn't kiss them and he couldn't say his next frustrated words.

"I think it's better if we don't speak," she murmured. "Harder to argue."

He paused a beat, thinking. "You concede at least that we're not ourselves here." His words slipped between her fingers, warm.

She sighed and relented to this important part of his game, finding what middle ground they did share. "I concede to that, Mulder, but I don't see enough evidence to convince me it's an external force. If you are right, then we shouldn't give your ghosts any ammunition. If I'm right and what we're experiencing is internal irrationalism, we should minimise interactions where we can aggravate each other. It would be arrogant and irresponsible of us to ignore the possibility we're just horrible people in exceptionally bad moods."

He thought on that for a while, still holding her, still dimly lit by the phone's screen. Slowly, he nodded.

"Alright." He let her go and pocketed the pieces of her gun he'd taken. "At least one of us stays
inside this circle at all times, though. Agree," he directed firmly when she tried to shush him and pressed her fingertips harder to his mouth, "and I'll shut up."

She said, "Sure, fine, whatever," and he stepped back from her, and the void between them felt cold and empty. She wanted almost more than anything to take back that void and return to him, but it was the wrong thing to do, and she refrained.

And so began the single most uncomfortable night she had ever spent in his company. On his turn, he dragged all their possessions to the centre of the room. On her turn, she found a spare lightbulb in the bathroom cupboard and changed the light. Neither spoke. The room warmed slightly with the glow of the single bulb but nothing warmed between them.

It seemed appropriate that Mulder had chosen the centre of the room for their safe spot. The bed was filthy. The couch was damp now, their bowls of cereal and milk spilt out at some point after they'd abandoned them. On her turns out of the circle, Scully collected items of clothing to use as pillows and makeshift blankets, and kept feeling the push of the anger – which was definitely not coming from inside her, but she wasn't going to admit that out loud – and piled them in the middle of Mulder's ring while he waited.

Each time she stepped back into the circle, the anger went away.

In its wake was embarrassment. They worked around each other in silence, and she avoided his gaze, feeling the awkwardness swell. In the light, it was easy to dismiss the fears of earlier, as well as her own interpretation of events. She couldn't believe she was spending her night hiding from angry spirits with Mulder, inside a ring of salt recommended by ghost hunters over the phone, and that she'd been afraid. She couldn't believe she'd flipped out in that bathroom, unnerved by Mulder's conviction that she was sharing a space with a dead woman, and that she'd jumped out of there pulling her gun apart like she actually believed anything could control her choices to a point she'd take a shot at Mulder. She couldn't believe she'd tried to hit him.

She couldn't believe she'd kissed him.

She couldn't believe she'd even left the airport with him, knowing this would be the outcome. That she'd just feel stupid, that he'd make it easy for her to make a fool of herself and that he would test her resolve.

Like now. He was looking at her questioningly.

Absolutely not. Everything from the moment he'd appeared on the other side of the handrail had been a mistake, and it was only half his fault. Scully kicked her coat to the other side of the salt ring to become a pillow and knelt at her suitcase. She unzipped the inner pocket and felt around. She should have gone for these as soon as she saw him, or at least as soon as things started to deteriorate with him here.

"Shall we proceed to ignore each other now, or do you think we're safe to behave like sensible civil adults?" he asked casually. "Civil, at least. I can forgo sensible."

Still flirting, still meaning nothing by it, even after twenty years. Jerk. She found the bottle and unscrewed the lid. He took a step closer to see what she was doing and made a noise of disappointment.

"No, don't do that," he said bitterly, making no effort to stop her and without any real hope in his
voice that she would listen. She didn't. She swallowed the pills dry, accepting the rough discomfort as they went down.

"We're not supposed to be talking," she reminded him.

"If I stop talking, will you spit them up?"

"Good night, Mulder."

He sighed, sounding annoyed, and laid down heavily beside her. She glanced at him as she sat down. He was glaring at the ceiling, shaking his head. Frustrated. With her.

She was being cold, she was being unfriendly, she was being dismissive. She knew it.

Immediately she felt guilty, and then she felt angry, with herself. Then… the pills didn't work this fast, but placebo did. She felt composed. If he was annoyed that she deemed it necessary to stabilise herself chemically, that was his problem, not hers, and she was in way responsible for how he chose to feel. He was annoyed about her silence and her medication but also about her unwillingness to believe, which should not surprise him anymore. She was being soft, letting his swaying moods influence her. She was stronger than this. A year alone said so.

She stretched out and settled down with her head on the bundled coat. Stared at the ceiling. Tried to ignore him.

Damn, he made it difficult. He didn't say anything. He didn't touch her or do anything in particular to get her attention. His irresistible aura, a combination of his nearby warmth, his familiar scent and the soothing sound of his breathing, all right there, threatened the strength of her conviction every minute of the night. She didn't sleep. She couldn't sleep, even with the drugs flattening out her everything.

She still remembered the pattern of his breathing well enough to know that he laid awake for hours, too, overactive mind keeping him entertained well into the cold night while she tried her hardest not to think. The events of the night were much too paranormal for her liking and she'd prefer to forget them than reflect too deeply on their possible Mulderish explanations. She was a scientist. She was a Counterterrorism agent. She had her life together. She did not need this.

Sometime after midnight she heard his breaths deepen and she turned her head. His eyes were closed against the dim light of her one-bulb fix, one hand laid across his diaphragm, rising and falling slowly with his quiet, restful respiration. His hair, in desperate need of a cut, lay dark and scattered across his forehead.

He was still beautiful, and she could watch him like this for hours, and she did. Hating herself every moment of it for being, still, the weaker of the two. She'd screamed at him that he did not define her. And he didn't. But he did. He still did. He still had control of her in more ways than she could bear him to know. He could still get her to do anything he liked, from walking out into a snowstorm with him to spending the night in a haunted motel room to tempt angry spirits to possess them both. He could still use her, deliberately try to get her possessed by killer ghosts and have her access private federal files for him, and he could still puppeteer her into playing along. He could still make her so angry. Until the pills, which had only annoyed him, nothing she'd said or done had taken any lasting effect. She'd said horrible things. He hadn't mentioned them or acted hurt. She'd initiated that kiss. He hadn't mentioned it.

It hurt to think she couldn't make him feel anymore, while he made her feel so much she could only manage him with medication.
He so rarely slept properly, so she did nothing to disturb him. He slept the whole night, until wintry white sunlight lit the window, and he opened his eyes. Straight into hers.

His were always arresting, a fascinating colour caught between grey and green and hazel, dark at a distance but up close, light and intriguing. She didn't mean to look into them now.

"You watching me sleep, Scully?" he asked thickly, favouring her with a playful, lazy smile. Caught out, she shoved herself up, wincing at the complaints of her muscles after a night of torturous rest on the hard floor, cheeks flushing with heat. He stretched unselfconsciously while she ran anxious hands through her hair to smooth it, and asked her, "Or just making sure I didn't get possessed overnight?"

"Wondering where you put the rest of my gun so I can pack up and leave," she replied coolly, getting to her knees and grabbing her makeshift bedding-slash-clothing off the floor to shove it into her hand luggage. "Now that you're finally awake."

There was really no need for the meanness, but by now it had been so long since she'd slept, and she was so mad with herself for having come here at all. What time was it? Was the airport operating again? AD Tan would be expecting her back with her report, and instead of waiting diligently in line for her flight, she was here, watching Mulder sleep. Hunting ghosts. Sharing confidential FBI case files with a disgraced and discharged former agent. Kissing said disgrace and enjoying it way too much.

In no such rush but sensing hers, Mulder propped himself up on an elbow. "I don't think we should reconstruct that gun until our ghost problem is solved."

"We don't have a ghost problem," she answered tightly, zipping the bag closed. "You have a ghost problem, and I have a flight to catch. I'm calling a cab. I have a job to go back to, and I'm down exactly one firearm."

"You're down half a firearm," he corrected, smiling at her with his eyes when she rolled hers, "and you can have my half back just as soon as Ben and Christy Parker have been taken care of. Depending on what the weather did last night and what the roads were like," he added, turning his wrist to check the time, "you shouldn't have long to wait."

"I'm not waiting at all," Scully responded. She stood and extended her hand down to him expectantly. He smiled wider and laid back, tucking his hands relaxedly behind his head.

"Help yourself," he said. "I put it in my pocket."

She glanced down his body before she could stop herself and blushed again at the thought of searching his jeans for the rest of her gun, first thing in the morning. Why did she never have anything clever to say back to him during these sorts of exchanges?

As usual, she couldn't win and he couldn't lose, but she was saved from having to decide what to do by a sharp knock at the door. Mulder sat straight up, alert. Scully brushed herself off, finding stray grains of salt on her clothes, and started for the door. Mulder caught her ankle.

"Mulder, what are you-"

"Don't leave the circle," he insisted. "It might be Ben and Christy, trying to prompt us out so they can start on us again."

Irritably, she yanked her foot free. "Don't be ridiculous. Ghosts can't knock on doors. Nothing happened from the time we went to bed; nothing's going to happen now."
"No, Scully," he protested, reaching after her as she stepped briskly out of the circle and over to the door. "Let me."

But she was already there, and cracked the door open. Two tall brunette men in their thirties stood at the threshold. Their jeans were damp at the hems but the shoulders of their casual hooded military jackets were dry and undusted with snow. Good to know the storm had broken.

They looked surprised to see her, obviously expecting Mulder. The taller of the two recovered first, standing straighter and tossing his longish hair out of his eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you so early, ma'am," he said, polite but forthright. He gestured at his partner. "We're Agents Fishburne and Reeves with the Federal Bureau of."

"Don't," Scully interrupted, deeply annoyed, raising a hand to stop him. She opened the door wider so they could see Mulder just getting to his feet in his circle of salt. "I don't do bullshit this early in the morning. He's the one you're here to see," she added with a jerk of her head in Mulder's direction as she retreated back into the room for her small suitcase. The angry influence of last night did not make a play at her this morning, apparently warded off either by company or by the daylight. The two men followed her in uncertainly, thrown by her interruption, hands inside their jackets. She grabbed the extended handle of her bag and turned back to them as they withdrew badges. "I said don't."

In their pause, she pulled her own badge and flicked it open. They were too far back to read it but close enough to know hers was real. They both looked appropriately wary. The shorter haired, less tall of the two, glanced at Mulder for an indication of what was going on. Their job was hunting ghosts and all the other things Mulder had spent his life chasing, but when impersonating the law was a necessary task in uncovering certain truths, it had to cross their minds that the law would come after them. More than likely, they had numerous warrants out already for them.

"Impersonating an agent is a federal crime, and if I arrest you for it I have to admit I was here," she said darkly, pocketing her ID. They mirrored her, still wary. "Don't make my day any worse."

She withdrew the pieces of her gun she'd retained last night and started slotting them expertly together; the strangers took a step back, reaching behind their hips for concealed illegal weapons and already trying to placate her.

"Whoa, lady, just relax there," the shorter of the two warned, while the taller added, "There's no need for that."

"Naww, don't worry about her," Mulder said affectionately, reaching for her and hugging her close by the shoulders before she could move away. She kept constructing her gun, ignoring him and the warmth of his arm around her. "She just wants to get out of here. She's a peach once you get to know her." She felt him shift and glanced aside as he delved his hand into the pocket of his jeans, withdrawing the last of her gun. She went to take it; he whipped it upward out of her grasp, forever playful. She glared up at him and he was smiling. So infuriating. He asked of the brothers, "Is she going to feel any lasting effects of this possession if she leaves?"

"Shouldn't do," the shorter, gruffer brother answered cautiously. "Once we smoke these bastards, any effects you've felt from coming into contact with these spirits will clear up, no matter where you are."

"So I don't need to be here for the ghost cleansing ritual," Scully clarified with a shrug to dislodge
his grip on her. He smiled again.

"Stick around for breakfast and I'll drive you to the airport. You've got to eat, don't you?"

"Bite me, Mulder." She snatched the handful from him, completing her weapon and grabbing the handle of her luggage. He dropped his arm from around her to pick up her coat from the edge of the bed. The two newcomers stared.

"Mulder," the shorter of the two repeated, disbelieving. They looked between the pair with wide and awe-struck eyes. "Are you…?"

"Yes," Mulder agreed intuitively, seriously, at the same time Scully answered, "Leaving." She dragged her suitcase across the thick line of salt and toward the door, pausing only when Mulder touched her shoulder and handed over her coat in silence. She tucked the gun into the high waistband of her pants and tossed the coat over the crook of her arm, and headed out past the two ghost hunters, who were looking at her with appreciative reverence now that they realised who she was. "Have fun," she told them with fresh condescension.

"I'll catch you later, Scully," Mulder called after her. She gave him a dismissive wave over her shoulder and kept going without a backward glance.

"I'm sure you will," she muttered, because inevitably, no matter how deeply she buried her head in the sand or how tightly she held onto the precarious cliff face of her structured new life, he always found his way back to her, given time, and when he did, she always fell. And he always caught her.
XXXV - Skinner

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, and hope that the name Google Maps is under some sort of public domain grey area of copyright law where it's okay to talk about it in your fanfiction in a neutral sense even if you're not the owner.

Author's Notes: A thesis, fanfiction and school reports walk into a bar… The fanfiction gets in line, sadly. But this chapter, which blew out as most of my chapters do, is finally done. It doesn't go the way I anticipated but it serves the greater plot, in which all of these characters still have a lot to say. I hope you guys enjoy this oversized instalment! Feedback is love xx Mulder is our next POV. Leave your requests in the comments – if there's specific you want to see, I'll try to work it in where I can :) Thanks to all those who left a feedback on the last chapter! I live for it, and it definitely contributes to my love of writing this fic. Looks like people are enjoying the flashback-style chapters filling the years between the last film and this fic? Enjoy Skinner in the meantime!

A sceptic never changes her stripes.

"What are the chances?" he made the mistake of asking her, too frustrated by her stubbornness to reflect on how fruitless arguing with her would be. She was having none of it.

"Give me a few concrete numbers and I'll calculate the odds for you," she answered peevishly, staring wilfully out the windscreen, refusing to start the car. She wasn't prepared to believe, even as the evidence he'd provided lay there on her lap in black and white. He sat impatiently beside her on the passenger side, shell-shocked by his own deduction and the possible ramifications. Scully's son. Scully's lost child, released into anonymity for his own safety, might no longer be lost. It was ridiculous. It was impossible.

About as ridiculous and impossible as an infertile woman conceiving him in the first place with her supposedly platonic best friend.

"The same birthdate, Dana," Skinner said again. He waved at the page he'd left it open to. "Look at it. May twentieth, 2001."

It's amazing, he wanted to say. It's a chance, it's hope.

"I remember the date. I was there," she replied coolly. He couldn't understand her determination not to entertain the idea and he sighed, though it came out as more of a frustrated growl. She softened, only slightly, and looked down at the page that had Van de Kamp, William Fox at the top. "There could have been ten thousand children born that day in this country, half of them boys, and there could have been several mothers who picked the same name. It's common enough."

"Fine, there could have been seven hundred Williams for all we know," Skinner acquiesced, willing to see that point, "but how many with the middle name Fox?"
Even in the fresh darkness of twilight, he caught the flash of vulnerability that crossed her familiar features. "I don't know. Maybe three?" Skinner scoffed at her overestimate and she quickly re-evaluated. "Two, I don't know. I thought it was nice, maybe a couple of other parents thought so, too. It's not implausible."

He'd forgotten until now that she'd given her son that absurd name. It certainly wasn't his namesake's idea. Mulder had spent his life hating it and would never have suggested it; why Scully would inflict it on her child, even as a middle name, Skinner would never understand. He recalled now hearing the name for the first time, and being unable to help repeating it back to her, worried she was still loopy with painkillers and hadn't considered properly how that name sounded out loud. *William Fox Scully.* "After good men, the kind I want my son to emulate," she'd said only, and Skinner hadn't pushed.

He pushed now.

"It's not *impossible,*" he granted. "I think it's implausible." Because no one who wasn't in love with a charismatic idiot called Fox would ever curse their child with that name. "What is both possible and even plausible is that the William Fox you gave up for closed adoption fourteen years ago at almost a year of age to protect from a conspiracy of alien-blooded Super Soldiers is the *same* fifteen-year-old William Fox attached to our extremely controversial, possibly extra-terrestrial Super Soldier investigation. The boy made eye contact with Bletchley when he arrived in town," he reminded Scully, even as she squirmed with discomfort in her seat to hear it, "and minutes later, our Super Soldier went berserk on the street, heading straight for him. Who's to say Bletchley didn't follow William from the main square? Who's to say your son isn't the target, Dana? Of all of this? What if?"

"It's Wyoming!" Scully exploded, her disbelief too intense to keep inside. "My son is not in Wyoming. He can't be. He just… isn't." She dropped her head into her hands and kneaded her fingers through her hair, trying to calm down, and Skinner started to see the truth of this cold façade of disbelief. She was her partner's true opposite. She so badly did *not* want to believe, in anything – anything that, if true, could rewrite her world. If William Fox Van de Kamp was in fact her William Fox Scully, everything would be overturned. All bets would be off. The future would go blank. The chance to see her child again was something she'd categorised as impossible. What if it wasn't?

Clearly, the temptation to believe that was too much. He tried to see it from her pessimistic, reductionist world view. What if she chose to believe… and it wasn't true? How many times had she felt that disappointment in her twenty-year internship of insanity with Mulder? He supposed she knew exactly how much she didn't want to feel that crush.

"Why not Wyoming?" Skinner asked now, trying to be gentle and logical. She shook her head, face still hidden in her hands.

"He can't be in the *one town* of Wyoming that I happen to visit. It's too unlikely."

"You've travelled the country," Skinner countered. "Eventually, odds being what they are, you were going to end up close by to where he was, probably without even knowing it. That must have occurred to you before."

"Of course it has!" she snapped. "In every single town and city I have visited or stopped over in or driven straight past, I've had the passing thought that *maybe*, that's where my son is growing up. But he can't be *here.*" Because that would be too good to be true.

The solid logic of a denier.
"You asked the agency to place him with a loving family, in as obscure a location as they could manage." He leaned forward deliberately to make a show of looking out the window at the dead-end town they were in, even though she wasn't looking at him. "You requested a closed adoption. His surname would have been changed." He reached over and tapped the page on her knee, and he saw her split her fingers to look. "This could be him. We need to find him."

"It isn't him," she said immediately, staunchly, not moving, "and if it was him, the best thing I could do is not find him. I can only put him in danger, like I did before."

"He might already be in danger," her friend pointed out. She sat up, dropping her hands from her face. "You just autopsied a twice-dead man who looks like he was grown in a lab, who hospitalised a bunch of people in his final minutes with extreme and unnatural displays of strength, in connection with a number of highly suspicious cases, some of which were cleaned out by the same creeps who turned up to interfere with us today, and this man was shot only a second before sinking a knife into this boy William for no discernible reason. This is an X-file, Dana," he stated clearly, watching her flinch at the painful fact, "and a boy with your son's name looks to be right in the middle of it."

She sat in silent stillness for so long, staring out into the early night, that he wondered whether she would respond. He couldn't imagine the thoughts flying, haphazard and directionless, around that compartmentalised and rigorous brain. Like a wild magic spell cast in a pristine chemistry lab, pinging from surface to surface too fast to watch except for the smashing bottles and books falling from shelves as they're hit. His own brain boggled at the implications.

Finally she whispered, "What do I do, Walter?"

"You start the car, and we drive to the hospital. We talk to William's uncle, a victim in Bletchley's attack. We ask if his William is adopted. We talk to William." Every time he said the name, he saw her blink, hurt. He tried to be gentler; it was difficult, overwhelmed by incomprehensible enthusiasm. What if? What if? "The way I see it, there are only two probable targets for Bletchley's rampage – the mayor, and the Van de Kamp boy, and we've both already agreed the mayor theory is a huge stretch. If the target was your son, that changes the context of this whole investigation."

He couldn't even begin to comprehend what this would mean. A man with two death certificates was already a step outside his comfort zone, and he'd called in Scully to take the reins. For that man to turn out to probably be a new breed of Super Soldier had morphed the ordeal into something from a bad dream, but he was pretty sure he was holding it together reasonably well for a sceptic almost as severe as Scully herself. But William, after all this time? What had started out as a search for answers for Scully's-not-Mulder's case had suddenly deviated completely from Morris Bletchley and left him in the dust of forgotten details.

"And if it's not him?" Scully asked, control seeping back into her voice. This was what she was preparing for. The disappointment.

Skinner refused to let her take the coward's route and back out of this chance. "If it's not him, then another fifteen-year-old boy is the possible target of a conspiracy even you in all your secretive knowledge barely have a grasp on, and we are the only people who know and can help determine whether he's safe."

"It's not him," she maintained, aloof now, confident again. "And he's not fifteen until May."

Trust her to correct on that little detail. "Start the car, Agent Scully. I shouldn't have to make it an order."
"What about Bletchley?" She nodded at the building they were meant to be staking out. Skinner could barely feel the urgency that had made him agree when she suggested it earlier. Now all that mattered was finding this boy. William.

"Those three fake medics we saw here have had a two-hour head start on finding William, if that's what they wanted," he replied. "Nothing we learned this afternoon from that corpse is going to matter if they're here for this boy."

That did it. She did as she was told, and they quickly consulted Google Maps to find the hospital. The town was too tiny for a proper hospital and they had to drive twenty minutes out to the regional medical centre. He saw her swallow and wondered how it would feel to realise she'd maybe been twenty minutes away from her own living, breathing lost baby for the past two hours. She peeled the car out of the lot.

"Aren't you going to call Mulder?" Skinner asked when they were on the main road out of town. She cast him an irritated look that surprised him.

"No. Why would I?"

Umm… "Why wouldn't you?" he countered, just as irritated with her. To pretend at this point that Mulder was not her child's father or that Skinner was not clued into this fact was completely ludicrous. "It's William."

"Maybe."

"He'd want to know," Skinner insisted. Thoughts of the derailed former profiler rose in his mind, but most prominent was the awkward, then painful, conversation in Mulder's military prison cell where he'd had to tell the world-worn, lovelorn father that his child was gone. He'd never seen anybody so shattered, and he was glad in retrospect only that he'd faced that brokenness, because Scully mightn't have handled it alongside her own devastating guilt.

"He'd want me to do my homework before calling him in on a false alarm," she responded coolly, which Skinner couldn't deny. To fill the silence that followed, he got out his phone and thumbed through contacts, knowing already he wouldn't find what he was looking for. He hadn't seen or spoken to Mulder in four years, and even that last contact had been made by the other. He burned through disposable phones and recycled numbers now, Scully had indicated previously, making him near-impossible to find and get hold of. Which was, of course, his intention. Skinner had no number for him and no idea of where he might be.

"I'll call him, then," he offered. "Then he can blame me for any resultant disappointment. Give me the number."

"I don't have a number for him," she said airily, a well-rehearsed answer that probably fooled plenty of others. Another lie for someone she loved. "When we talk it's because he's called the office under a made-up name or he leaves a temporary number somewhere he'll know I'll find it. He has my cell but won't call it – he thinks there's spyware in it, and of course, that everyone wants to come and get him."

Skinner felt his eyebrow arch, surprised and concerned by this suggestion about the security of Bureau-issued communications hardware. "Why? Has he heard something?"

"Speculation." Her smile was too open, too quick. "He's paranoid, Walter."

She sounded so resentful and patronising, talking about Mulder this way. It made Skinner feel
momentarily uncomfortable, like he was talking about Mulder to someone else. It wasn't usual to hear these judgements coming from her.

Cover, he realised, whether she realised it or not.

"I don't think that's news," Skinner pointed out, and she rolled her eyes and went to turn up the radio to shut out any of his further comments. Mature. He swatted her hand away and reiterated his argument. "You should call him. He should know what you're going into. This is big, Dana, whether it turns out to be real or not. Whatever the outcome, he's the person you'll want to talk to afterward."

He was trying to be sensitive, knowing her and what she was like, but she was determined tonight.

"He is the last person I'll want to talk to tonight," she told him firmly. "Whatever the outcome."

So. The binary pair, inseparable when caught in each other's electric orbits, had collided over something – maybe a galaxy of problems, maybe just a speck of cosmic dust, who knew – and consequently swung apart to revolve around each other at a safe, resentful distance until they inevitably fell back together. Again. God, they were exhausting. Skinner gave up.

The hospital was small compared to medical facilities in cities, only a single storey and not even taking up a whole block in the little town that housed it. Apparently it was big enough to service the surrounding little towns, which, from the size of those townships, Skinner did not doubt. The parking lot was only half full, and there was no sign of the black van from earlier. He tried to feel relieved about that and not wonder whether that meant they'd been and gone. Or whether they'd just gone back to the morgue to steal Bletchley.

The staff at the front counter looked as flustered as Dr Hornsby to be approached by the FBI.

"Assistant Director Skinner with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," he said formally and firmly, presenting his badge in sync with his partner. He nodded his head once to the side to indicate her while the nurse on duty stared with wide eyes. "This is Special Agent Dana Scully, MD. We're here about the shooting that took place in Thayne yesterday. We understand several of the victims of that incident were treated at this hospital?"

The nurse nodded anxiously. "Uh, I mean, yes. We discharged a few today…"

"In particular we'd like to speak with a Gary Milne," Scully spoke up, just as authoritative despite her tiny size. "Torn anterior cruciate ligament. I don't imagine he would have been discharged."

She was reluctant, and tried to mention that visiting hours for the day were over, but when the nurse looked from Skinner's determined face to Scully's, which reflected the same impassive stoniness, she relented and led the way.

"He does need his rest," she made sure to say, in defence of her patient, "so if he's asleep…"

They arrived at his door, and he wasn't asleep. Gary Milne was awake, alive and present, three things Skinner hadn't been sure whether it was safe to take for granted on his way over here. He was, however, alone in the room. No teenage boy.

Scully stopped in the doorway beside him and stared into the room at this man she'd never met. Briefly, her expression was conflicted; then it was still. Skinner took lead.

"Gary Milne?"
"Yes." Milne was in his mid-forties, Caucasian, reasonably lean, though that was hard to see through the blankets covering him and the thick bandaging around his leg, raised and immobilised. His hair was dark and his eyes were almond-shaped. He looked at them with sharp curiosity.

If Skinner's instincts were correct, this was the man who was raising Scully's child. He could sense the pre-emptive judgement rolling around inside her, battling itself.

Skinner reintroduced himself and his companion. "We'd like to ask you some questions about the events of yesterday, if you've got the time."

"The FBI? When my nephew gets back from the vending machines, he'll be excited to see you." Milne smiled wryly, a nice smile, and gestured around the room, indicating his circumstances. "It seems I've got the time." His smile faltered a little. "Truth is, I'm glad you guys are here. Hopefully now we'll get some proper answers about what happened."

Skinner didn't need to glance at Scully to know she was thinking the same thing, internally wincing. The nature of an X-file was that there was no guarantee of proper answers. They entered the room and stood at the end of his hospital bed. The nurse hovered by the door.

"Hopefully we can provide you with some of those proper answers," Scully said, making an effort to be both professional and kind despite her unsettled state. It seemed to come easily to her. She nodded at the heavily bandaged leg. "Grade three sprain?"

"That's right." Milne cocked his head to the side, looking at her with interest as she demonstrated an unexpected interest in his circumstances. She met his eyes, judging.

"It's quite a serious injury. May I?" she added, lifting the medical chart off the end of the bed. Milne nodded and she started to read. "Your surgery went well."

"They said it'll be a few months before things are back to normal but I'm expected to make a full recovery."

Scully looked up at him over the top of the clipboard. "That's good to hear. Are you in any pain at the moment?"

"Nope. Practically off my face with painkillers." Milne smiled sheepishly, still gazing at Scully. "They're taking good care of me, doctor."

There was another silence, and Scully and Milne just looked at each other curiously. In the off-chance that this guy was checking her out and thinking inappropriate things that quadrupled in inappropriateness when one took into account what relationship these two possibly shared, Skinner cleared his throat.

"Mr Milne, can you start by telling us what you were doing when you first noticed the suspect?" he asked, and Scully took a little notepad from her pocket. Old-school. She also produced her little handheld recorder. "And do you mind if we record this conversation?"

Milne scoffed at the PC terminology of 'suspect', but spoke easily. "Sure, if you don't mind me slurring – as I said, pretty potent cocktail tonight. I was at the café, sitting outside, having drinks with my farmhand Tim and a representative from the bank, Ronald Edelstein. We were discussing options for my property."

"It was just the three of you there?"

"Oh, well, my nephew showed up at that point," Milne said with a shrug and a glance to the chair
beside the door. Skinner looked to it. A limp backpack lay on the chair cushion, mostly unpacked. "Still don't know exactly what he was doing out of school before the first lunch bell, but I suppose I have bigger things to worry about. I'm letting him slide for now."

The backpack was here. The boy was somewhere in the hospital. Relief.

"Your nephew – William?" Scully asked, the first time she'd said the name since the morgue. It sounded different in her voice this time. Richer. So close…

"Yeah, Will Van de Kamp. You probably have a statement from him? He said he had to talk to the police."

"He did give a statement," Skinner confirmed. "He was the first person to witness our suspect arriving in town on the back of a truck, aside from the driver who picked him up on the side of the road. He was also the last person standing in the suspect's path before he was shot by the sheriff. We're very interested in getting an elaboration from him if we can."

Milne was surprised. "I didn't know Will saw the guy earlier."

"What sort of options were you discussing with Mr Edelstein?"

"Financial ones." Milne paused as the nurse finally left, appeased. "Am I under suspicion, too?"

"These are routine questions," Skinner said simply, irritated by the man's sudden balking. This was yet another reason he did not do field work. Witnesses.

Scully swooped in. "We're investigating the motive of the attacker and it's important we explore all possible explanations, even very unlikely ones. Anything you tell us could be helpful."

"Motive?" Milne frowned. "Wasn't he after the mayor? That's what everyone's told me so far."

Skinner prepared to circle around that and not answer him directly, but Scully got in first, spurred to accelerating this interview to the point where she could go and see for herself whether this nephew of his was her William. This was how her excitement was manifesting.

"We don't know. There's no solid evidence substantiating that at this time. We need to ascertain whether there might have been another target, perhaps a monetary one." Scully paused. "Could it have been you? Your banker?"

In his drug-induced state, Milne had looked quite taken in by her display of intelligent vocabulary but was startled by her suggestions at the end. "God, I hope not. Ron, he's a good guy, I can't think why anyone would come after him. And me – I've got no money."

"That's why I was there. I'm a former investment banker who can't manage a single property. No one's got any reason to come after me. All I've done is farm… poorly… for the last six years."

"And your nephew?" Scully prompted, writing quick notes. She glanced up at the immobile witness to have eye contact with someone when she chanced saying the name again. Like it was sensual to get to say it again. "William?"

"A target?" Gary Milne scratched his head through his dark hair, affronted at first and then concerned. "He's just a kid."

"There's nothing about him that someone might take an interest in?" Skinner asked casually, thinking uncomfortably of Scully's early terrified claims of her infant demonstrating unexplainable abilities. Levitating objects and the like. "Nothing… unusual?"
Milne started to say no, his nephew was a perfectly normal boy, but then hesitated. "Well… I mean he's unusual in ways, you know, like everyone is in their own way."

"In what ways is he unusual?" Skinner pushed. Milne deliberated some more. "The police report places your nephew right in our suspect's path. If there's any chance this man intended to hurt him—"

"He's unusual, but not in ways that would make people want to hurt him. Not adults, anyway. I think he got in a fight yesterday at school, but he hasn't brought it up yet. I think… he struggles a bit, with friends." Gary Milne looked uncomfortable. "Small towns, you know? Small minds, narrow minds. He's outside the box. His mom wanted him raised here, and I've done that, but I don't know how much longer it'll be the right place. He's really smart. The school's accelerated him into senior classes. I can't imagine all his classmates are delighted for him. And…" He trailed off, squirming though he had nowhere to go. "I mean, you know he's an orphan, right?"

It was like he'd slapped Scully across the face. She took a full step backward, away from Milne, and hurriedly pretended to return her attention to her notes. Skinner started talking, trying to distract from her while she struggled.

"And now you're his guardian. For how long now?"

"Six years, since my sister died. I was living in Denver at the time but the lifestyle I was living was incompatible with a sudden eight-year-old." He smiled thinly. "I came here and tried to make the farming thing work. For Will."

"Not many would do that," Skinner said gravely, seeing the good in this person and hoping that this really was the man raising Scully and Mulder's son. There was no mention of adoption, though, which shook his confidence in the theory. "Your sister's death – nothing suspicious?"


It sounded familiar to Skinner but Scully looked up, startled. "I'm sorry? Can you repeat that?"

"Um, it was a tumour," Milne elaborated helpfully. "Between her sinuses and the front of her brain. It was inoperable."

"I'm sorry," Skinner said when Scully just stared. He swallowed and tried not to look at her. The same cancer that had almost killed her had taken this William's mother. Now what were the odds?

Scully flicked her notepad against her palm.

"Does the name Morris Bletchley mean anything to you?" she asked, trying again to ground herself in the conversation and ask useful questions. Milne shook his head, blinking tiredly, clearly hazy with drugs.

"Should it?"

"That's the name of our suspect. This man was from out of town. Was your nephew born in Thayne?"

The hesitation was tangible. "Will… is adopted."

Silence. There. The last piece of the puzzle fell breathlessly into place.

"Do you think that could be relevant?" Skinner asked finally, surprised to find his voice even and
natural. Inside, he didn't feel even or natural. Inside, he was thinking of the corpse Scully had just
autopsied and how close that brought William to the conspiracy she'd hidden him from.
"No." Milne looked embarrassed to have it thought he was making such a stupid link. A smart
man, intelligence all tied up in identity. Like Scully. "I mean, maybe, but I doubt it. Sarah used to
worry – she wondered why someone would give up a ten-month-old baby unless there was
something terribly wrong with him. She took him for tests here at the hospital, but they found
nothing wrong. Perfectly healthy, perfectly normal. She still thought someday, someone would
turn up and want him from her. Nothing ever happened."
"It doesn't sound like a well-founded fear," Skinner agreed, prepared to move away from the idea
for Scully's sake. A ten-month-old baby. Not adopted at birth. "Very specific but not grounded in
anything concrete. I think we can safely disregard-"
"Well, it wasn't entirely unfounded. My sister was… taken… in 1994. We never knew who by, or
what they did to her. She came back different, and I had to move her out of Rock Springs. She lived
in terror of being taken again, or of people coming for her son."
Things had gone so far past the furthest reaches of Skinner's tolerance for weird and unlikely.
Another abductee? Scully took over.
"When Sarah returned, was there something of note implanted in her neck?"
Gary Milne looked shaken. "Yes. Bits of metal. How did you know?"
"And it was after that, she learned she was infertile? That's why she adopted."
"How do you know this?" Milne looked from Scully to Skinner. "We didn't tell people about
this…"
"I've dealt with cases of women kidnapped in the same time period," she said, detached as though
she were not one of them. "The metal chip implants were a sort of… signature."
"I knew it was a cult," Milne said seriously, not far wrong. He tried to sit up, winced when it pulled
on his damaged leg. Scully automatically laid a hand on his shin, stilling him. "They used all sorts
of brainwashing techniques on her to affect her memories, even tried to teach her another language.
It was ridiculous. But nobody believed us. They thought she was a runaway." He ran a hand
through his hair. "Is it possible that this same cult is active again? Do you think they really sent
someone after Will?"
"We don't know, Mr Milne," Skinner said. He glanced at the empty doorway. No child had
appeared, and how long had they been here? It seemed a very long trip to the vending machines.
"It's a long shot but maybe worth investigating, especially in absence of a more convincing
motivation for the suspect's actions. Can we talk to your nephew?"
"We'd like to get a bit more detail from him anyway about the suspect's movements in the town
square before the attack in the alley and on the café," Scully added when Milne hesitated. He
seemed to realise they'd read his expression.
"No, that's fine," he said, shaking his head to alleviate the haze of exhaustion. "Actually, he'd be
more than happy to talk to you. Loves the FBI, always Googling about you guys. I just thought…
Do you think the dreadlock guy could have followed William? Down the alley?"
"We're going to find out," Skinner assured him. "Where can we find William?"


Gary Milne tried to call his nephew but the line didn't even connect. "Phone's off." They found the phone in the boy's backpack, switched off. "That's odd."

Skinner glanced ominously at Scully. This close to the boy and suddenly he wasn't returning from the vending machine and his phone was mysteriously off and left behind? The whole thing stunk of nefarious intervention. He felt under his jacket for his sidearm, thinking through what courses of action he needed to enact before he could reasonably lock this whole place down and search it for this boy. He saw Scully do the same, her shoulders tense.

"Oh!" Milne smiled and shook his head. "You know where he would have gone? Is his music in there?" They checked the bag again and found music player and headphones missing. "Oncology."

If this kid really was Mulder's son, there was no reason to question why the boy would be hanging out in the oncology ward listening to music, or why this would be the obvious answer to someone who knew him well. If this kid was Mulder's, there was no reason to apply reason ever to anything he might do.

"Thanks for your time, Mr Milne," Skinner said. The injured banker-turned-farmer smiled uncomfortably, truly tired now.

"No problem. Can you take him his bag, tell him to turn his phone on? But, hey," he said, looking between them. "Will only knows the basics of the cult stuff with Sarah, and I have never talked with him about the adoption. I'd appreciate it if you could leave it that way. His mother… she wanted him to be safe, and happy. She thought knowing might put him in danger. I don't like lying to him – well, it's not lying," Milne corrected himself, annoyed with his own lack of coherent thoughts under the influence of the painkillers. "Sarah didn't want me to tell him, though I think he's working it out anyway, so I haven't brought it up. Sometimes it feels like lying… I love that kid," he made sure to assert, and it was an entirely sincere statement. "He's my family. Sometimes, I wish I could tell him how we came to be a family, is all, and maybe one day I will…"

"But it's not our place to do that," Scully agreed, tactful. Milne nodded and exhaled, relieved to have it put in sensible terms.

"Thanks, Miss…"

"Scully," she provided, and finally offered a smile as she switched off her recorder. Milne, though falling asleep, smiled back, and held eye contact with her for just that bit too long. She rested a hand lightly on his injured knee. "Get some rest. This will heal faster if you give it the time it needs now. It was… nice to meet you." Skinner put his hand on his partner's shoulder and guided her out of the room. Too awkward. The second they stepped out, she visibly deflated. "Oh, God, oh, God…"

"Shh," Skinner urged, half-pushing her along the hall in the direction of oncology. "Now will you call Mulder?"

It was the wrong thing to say. She groaned and ran her hands hurriedly through her hair, electrified with disbelief.

"Fuck Mulder. Walter, this can't be happening," she insisted. She gestured back the way they came but he kept her marching forward. "Everything he said – it just can't be true! I can't have done everything I did to keep my baby safe, only to deliver him straight back to them. Sarah Van de Kamp," she dropped her voice when a doctor walked past with an iPad, "was an abductee. How could I have given him up and have him end up with someone else almost as dangerous as me? It's not fair!"
"I thought all the other women died," Skinner mentioned quietly. They passed doors, opened and closed, soft hospital voices coming from within.

"So did I," she admitted. "She lasted a lot longer than the others. She mustn't have found the chip until even later than I did – if you never took the chip out, presumably, you'd never develop the tumour. If she never connected with the other women..." She shook her head. "She found it eventually, obviously, and had it taken out. And died. Like I would have." She lightly fingered the scar on the back of her neck, troubled. "I gave my son away to have him orphaned by the same monsters I was hiding him from. All this time, if anyone from the conspiracy had come back for her, they would have found him. Nothing I did made a difference. Oh, God," she said again, moving her hand to cover her mouth in horror. "He lost his mom. To cancer. Cancer I could have prevented, if I'd known who she was."

"There's really no way you could have known there was another woman out there, considering you don't even remember the women present during your own abduction experience," Skinner reminded her. She wasn't listening, caught up in self-spun horror.

"I should have vetted the agency's choice, not be so determined to keep it anonymous. If I'd known... Another abductee..." She scrubbed at her face with her hand, traumatised. "It's a miracle no one found him before now. I threw him right into their path. What have I done?"

"Plenty of real cults were active at the time of your abduction and Sarah Van de Kamp really could have been taken by one of those. Let's not jump to conclusions about the nature of her disappearance," Skinner advised carefully, though he was every bit as convinced as she was on that front. He swung the near-empty schoolbag over one shoulder. "Stick to the case we're working. We'll talk to the boy-" she tensed and shifted under his hand "-and get our facts straight. We can't let on to him who you really are or what our real purpose in speaking with him is."

"What am I supposed to say to him?" she demanded softly. "How am I meant to stand in a room with him and pretend not to know him? Pretend that everything terrible that has happened to him isn't my fault."

"It's not your fault," he shot back, and she twisted away from his grip on her shoulder, physically rejecting his words. He didn't release quick enough and found his fingers clenched around the empty fabric of her jacket, which she now shrugged off to leave hanging in his hand, pretending like the action was deliberate. She was falling apart, and for someone as controlled and tightly wound as she, this was never graceful.

"I'm... going to the bathroom," she said, noticing a restroom door just up the hall and heading for it without waiting for his response. She disappeared inside, and he stood alone in the quiet hospital hall holding her jacket and her son's backpack.

He pitied her, of course he did, but her unregulated emotional responses to everything sinceIt would require you to accept there might be a new breed of Super Soldier left him frustrated and made her challenging to help. She was his friend and he loved her dearly, but he would never know her fully, never truly understand and appreciate the deeply complex being that was Dana Scully. She was hurting and struggling, and Skinner was not the man she needed right now. He sighed, dismayed by his own ineffectiveness, and rolled up the jacket in his arms.

The pockets were not empty.

Her phone was password-protected. Four digits. He glanced up at the closed toilet door and took a chance with 1013. Incorrect. Well, there was really only one other, because she'd never be egotistical enough to use her own birthday. 0520.
The homepage opened and he wasted no time in finding her contacts list. As she'd said, she had no listing for Mulder, or even Fox, but he didn't believe for a second that she had no way at all of contacting him. He went back to M and scanned the entries.

M. F. Luder.

A pseudonym Mulder had once published under to protect the Bureau from inevitable embarrassment. Maybe using it as his cover name was Scully's own private dig, though Skinner was too caught up in the intensity of the evening to consider the joke. He looked again at the bathroom door. She was not going to make this call on her own – she'd made that clear. How long did he have?

The phone began to vibrate, and Warren Colt flashed up on the screen as the incoming contact. What did he want? Wasn't he just conducting an interview somewhere? Answering would take valuable time, seconds or even minutes. Automatically, Skinner hit the cancel button, rejecting the call. Sorry, soldier boy. Bigger problems afoot here.

The screen returned to the contact details for M. F. Luder. Daring him. Like he had a choice.

He hit dial.

It didn't ring for long.

"Scully?"

It had been years since Skinner had heard that voice, and he'd never heard it directed at him with that inflection. What precious few would have? He had often reflected that every person, at some point in their life, deserved to be greeted with the same hopeful, urgent attentiveness that rose in the voices of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully when they worried for each other. It was simultaneously warming and sickening, but it had been there since the beginning: one had doted on the other from the outset, even if she couldn't see it, and one had admired her partner beyond all reason, followed him anywhere he led, even when it went thoroughly against her grain.

They were pathetically in love and no one was going to save them from it, and the tragic, hopeless whirlwind of it was inexplicably enviable.

"Mulder," a quick glance, nobody around, but voice still low anyway, "it's Assistant Director Skinner."

He expected a smartass reply about his attractiveness or his phone voice or something, but Mulder paused only a moment and his response had not a scrap of playfulness to it.

"Where's Scully? Why do you have her phone?"

There really wasn't time for this. Skinner looked around once again. The ladies' room door was closed and there was no one in sight, up or down the hall. It didn't mean there wasn't anyone listening. It didn't mean Scully's phone wasn't bugged, as she'd suggested Mulder thought.

"How quickly can you be in Wyoming?" Skinner asked quietly, but should have known that a redirect so blunt would not work on a man so sharp.

"Depends. Where is she?"

"She's here. I'm with her now at what passes for a hospital outside of Thayne."
"Thayne?" The voice on the phone was alarmed. "What happened!"

Skinner withheld an impatient sigh. These two. "Nothing happened. She's fine. We're investigating a case and she's in the restroom, alright? She doesn't know I'm making this call."

"Then why are you?" Cool now, heartless. Mulder had no leg to stand on in pretending not to care about Scully, but he could still shut down very efficiently, especially when Agent Scully was the topic. Not together was not synonymous with not spoken for, because in the two decades of being well-and-truly spoken for, only about half of that had been together.

"We're going into an interview," Skinner confided, almost whispering now, seeing a pair of nurses step out into the hallway right down the other end, well out of earshot. He watched them; they only conferred over a clipboard and totally ignored him. Could paranoia spread through phone lines? He could swear he was worse when working with Mulder, or even Scully these days. "Agent Scully is not going to handle it well. She's already shaken. I think you should be here for her."

"I'm sure she appreciates your concern," Mulder said immediately, "but trust me, I'm the last person she wants to see."

That's what she said. "Trust me," Skinner countered. One of the nurses went back into the room. The other stood a while longer, etching notes. "You should be here."

"She doesn't want to see me," Mulder insisted firmly. His voice scratched a little, like he was outside somewhere windy. "Our last conversation was… strained."

Skinner didn't find that surprising. Mulder and Scully had been playing this dance of hearts and minds for twenty-three years, and for the last three, they'd both been missing steps, tripping over their own feet and standing on each other's toes, like they'd forgotten all the moves. He didn't need to be in touch with both to see it. But neither one had stepped off the dancefloor, and neither one had gone looking for another dance partner. The song was still playing. They would find their way back to the rhythm of their hearts and minds eventually, and fall back into their old steps.

"If she's upset by the case, there's nothing I can do to help," the disgraced freelancer said with finality. "Having me around will only make it worse."

The nurse started this way. And walked straight into the next room. Disappeared.

"Mulder, listen to me," Skinner growled through clenched teeth, irritated. It was so easy to be irritated with Fox Mulder. He was an irritating, stubborn person. "This is bigger than you two giving each other the silent treatment. Whatever you're doing, drop it. Whatever it takes you, just get here. I don't want to tell you why on the phone. I don't want anyone to overhear."

That got his attention. "Something about the case?"

The case – like Agent Scully was letting Skinner anywhere near the real case. She had learned the art of talking all around the truth from some of the very best liars and manipulators the American government had to offer in her time working the X-Files. She wasn't about to let him in on anything that could implicate him as a co-conspirator in whatever she was up to. She'd already shared so much today, and he knew for sure there was a lot she'd kept to herself.

She'd claimed not to be running errands for Mulder, but clearly he was up to speed so clearly that was a lie. Or perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps she really was running her own show, like she claimed.

With Mulder in a lead role, of course.
"Yes, but not specifically. And not something, someone. Someone I think you would very much like to see, even if you still won't admit your connection to him or his mother."

He was at risk of saying too much, so he stopped. Mulder was at no such risk. He fell thickly silent. Skinner imagined he could hear the unfathomable whir of the man's complex and unconventional brain jerking his thought train from one vaguely related concept to the next until he arrived, impossibly, at a vaguely related conclusion.

"Walter…” Mulder's voice betrayed his usual conflict: a secret scepticism that battled eternally with an idealist's desperate want to believe.

The second nurse came back out of her room and began down the hall. She was looking dead ahead, though without any particular focus on Skinner. Her stride was purposeful and he knew she did not intend on stepping into any of the other rooms. The time was up.

"You need to be here," he reiterated forcefully into the mouthpiece of the phone. "I think we found him."

He ended the call and deleted it from the phone's log. He stuffed it back inside the jacket pocket and had just arranged himself to stand casually when the restroom door swung open and Scully returned. She looked calmer, like she'd splashed water on her face and had a good talk with herself in the mirror.

"Ready?"

"Let's say yes," she suggested, taking back her jacket and walking in stride with him as they started again for the oncology ward. She angled a look up at him. "Thanks for being so patient with me."

"I don't think there's any standard etiquette on how to behave in a situation like this," Skinner responded, and she nodded, already moving on to the next thing she needed to say.

"And thanks for being here with me," she said, without any genuine feeling in her voice. "I'm glad I'm not alone."

She didn't sound grateful, but Skinner saw it in the way she directed her attention forward and exhaled shakily. She was glad he was here. She was trying not to feel anything and doing a terrible job of it, and would hate to have this struggle in front of someone she trusted less.

She was holding it together in this moment, but Skinner was already quite convinced of what they would find in oncology, and didn't expect this self-control to last. At least Mulder was on his way.

"Now, this boy," she said matter-of-factly. Not William now. "Regardless of who he might be, he did watch a stranger take a bullet through the chest yesterday, right in front of him. We should be careful bringing up this event in case we trigger a post-traumatic response."

This was why she did the field work and Skinner stayed behind his desk, because while he probably would have done this anyway in a conversation with a child, it hadn't explicitly occurred to him.

"Hopefully he's getting counselling," he offered, only thinking now how terrifying the Bletchley attack might have been for this boy. "We can recommend it if he isn't yet getting that help."

She nodded. "I might leave a note for the staff to pass to Milne."

Too weird. Milne was occupying the space in William's life that Scully, and Mulder, should have
held, and instead of feeling jealous, Scully's response was one of fascination. A scientist's objective interest, because jealousy would require emotion, and she wasn't prepared to share any of that yet.

"Good idea," Skinner said simply. He turned with her around the corner at the end of the hall and saw the overhead sign for oncology. "Do you have the recorder?"

He saw her eyes cling to the sign as she went through her pockets for the device. She'd almost died in one of these wards. Now, through a strange twist of destiny, her life might start over in one.

"Yes. Here," she said, producing it. Skinner took it, glancing from side to side as they now started passing open doors. She dropped back a little to look in each empty room properly, while he felt his feet carrying him quicker. The ward only had four rooms on each side of the hall, with only three of the eight currently occupied. Somewhere here, through one of these doors, was the boy. Of all Mulder's odd qualities, the thrill of a mystery and the compulsion to chase it was one of a small few Skinner could connect with. He felt it now.

"Can I help you?" a nurse asked, poking his head out of the last room and stilling their search, Skinner in the hall and Scully in the doorway of an empty room. Skinner presented his badge, leaning to the side to see inside that last room. An elderly patient, lying in bed, clearly dying, hooked up to drips and softly beeping machines. Dismal. He glanced back at Scully, hoping she wouldn't come and look and be reminded any more vividly of her own miserable experience. He introduced himself to the nurse and mentioned who they were looking for. The nurse knew straightaway, and nodded at the closed door opposite where Scully still stood. "Nice kid. He's been in there about twenty-five minutes. Might have fallen asleep."

Skinner turned to Scully in disbelief. She was staring at the door, three feet away from her, behind which her son might be waiting. "Did he say why he wants to be in an oncology treatment room?"

"He's been here before, but not for a few years. His mother died in one of these rooms and he used to deliberately sneak onto the wrong bus after school to get out here. Hasn't done for a few years, as I say, but he's had a scare so I guess he's back, seeking the same thing as always."

"Which is?" Skinner asked, deliberately not looking at Scully. *His mother died in one of these rooms* was a conflicting enough comment for him to handle.

"He used to say he was looking for his mom. He's just trying to feel close with her; we never have the heart to send him away, and his uncle's on the premises so where's the harm?"

The nurse returned to his patient and Skinner looked back again at his partner. Whatever confidence she'd found in the bathroom mirror had shattered at the realisation that she was about meet her son in the place he'd lost the woman he'd called Mom.

Her son. It was unbelievable, after all this time, to think he might be so close. Even for Skinner, this was incredible. What would he look like? Almost fifteen, would he be remotely recognisable as that chubby, near-hairless, blue-eyed baby Scully had carried around on her hip in the year Mulder first went off into hiding? Maybe more to the point, *who* would he look like? Would Scully's fine features be visible in the boy's, or Mulder's more conventional, more masculine good looks?

Only one way to find out.

Skinner strode over and grabbed the doorknob, but hesitated on turning it when he realised his partner hadn't moved. She didn't join him at the door. She was standing frozen in place, staring at his hand. One single turn of the handle separating this lonely, lost period of her life from what
might be a new, unrecognisable one. He couldn't imagine what she was feeling.

"Are you alright?" he asked, trying to be gentle. She automatically nodded.

"I'm fine."

She looked the furthest thing from fine. Her face was tight with conflict. Skinner gestured her over; she took a single clunky step and stopped herself again. He frowned, concerned.

"Are you really?"

She didn't seem to know how to answer that. "I can't..." She pressed her lips together, grasping for control as they shook slightly. "I don't..."

"You're not fine," Skinner surmised, as he'd expected from the outset, and she finally shook her head.

"No," she agreed softly. "I can't... meet him here." She met his eyes briefly, then lowered her gaze, humiliated. "I'm not his mom."

"You're his mother," Skinner assured her. She stared at the floor.

"It's not the same thing. And this place... Sarah Van de Kamp died here. It's not okay for me walk into his life here."

Skinner dropped his hand from the doorknob and sighed. Who knew where Mulder was coming from and how long he'd take to arrive? There was no point in waiting for him – he'd just have to pick up the pieces of this tumultuous reunion that Skinner's clumsy hands couldn't sweep up. Leaving this door unopened was not an option, whatever it did to her.

"We can't walk away."

"I know. I wouldn't want to. But..." She couldn't look at him. "I don't want to hurt him."

"You should probably stay out here while I conduct the interview," he said finally, reluctantly, and she looked up in surprise. "If this Van de Kamp turns out to be your child and your name is connected with the interview record, it could be viewed as a conflict of interest in your case, and anything we learn from him this evening may be inadmissible as evidence. First and foremost, we came out here to further your investigation. Any personal consequences need to still be treated like the rest of the official case – our actions here should be professional beyond question."

She leapt on it. The case was the furthest thing from her top priority, just a willing distractor. His compromise gave her the room to nod, and her next breath sounded relieved. She had let fear rule before, and it had cost her this boy in the first place. She couldn't walk away but she couldn't walk in, either, and now she didn't have to decide.

A friend doesn't let a friend make the same mistake twice.

"Good idea," she said, trying to force a quick smile that never quite eventuated. It was an attempt, at least. "Out of sight would be best, then, if we're thinking about the credibility of the case. It might not be him, but..."

It probably was. Skinner had to check himself – he was being the metaphorical Mulder to her literal Scully, making assumptions without the final evidence in front of him. He had to see this boy. See Scully in his face. See Mulder. Already, his imagination was forming false faces for him, a
younger boy version of Scully with dark hair; a young version of Mulder with red hair. The superimposed false Williams were the shallowest imaginings, he was sure, but he would not know how to imagine a more authentic genetic mix of his two most eccentric friends until he actually saw it.

No time like the present. He tipped his head aside to indicate the space beside the door, and she inhaled slowly, stepping away to press her back against the wall. Terrified.

"Are you sure?"

She didn't look at him. "I'll be fine."

Whatever you say, doc. Skinner turned the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The room was small, cream-walled and unattractive, a blank whiteboard pasted not-quite-level on the left wall and a higgledy-piggledy collection of unused instruments and machines – weapons in the eternal war on cancers – against the right wall. In the centre of the room was a tidy hospital bed, and on that was a teenaged boy lying upside-down, feet on the raised headrest and pillow, who sat up in alarm when Skinner walked in.

"Whoa, it's alright," Skinner assured the teen when the boy almost fell off the bed in the effort to simultaneously right himself and yank his earbuds out of his ears. His ID was already in his hand; he raised it. "William Van de Kamp?"

"We weren't trying to cause trouble," the boy said immediately, getting himself upright in a hurry as the bed rocked slightly with his motion. "It was just a joke, and we're sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

The boy got himself steady, grabbing the edge of the hospital bed, and finally faced Skinner properly. His face was unknown, not a match to his poorly conceptualised ideals of a Mulder-Scully blend. Skinner felt disappointment.

"Depends who's asking." The blue eyes, overlarge and overbright, were sharp with suspicion and mild embarrassment at being taken by surprise, but it was his face that Skinner was trying to make sense of. Obviously, this boy was totally unfamiliar – he'd never seen this face before – and yet…

And yet, the longer Skinner looked, the more features stood out, in isolation, as maybe entirely familiar.

"That's my bag," the boy noted, indicating with a quick jerk of his chin the backpack Skinner still had slung over his shoulder.

"Walter Skinner, FBI." He held the badge and bag out in offer and the boy sat forward slowly to take the badge only, something about his unwavering gaze and cautious body language eliciting an eerie sense of déjà vu. Who or what was this boy reminding him of? Mulder, Scully? Someone else entirely? Of course he expected to see similarities, but did that make them real? "I'm here about the attack yesterday that resulted in your uncle's accident. He asked me to bring your bag to you and tell you to turn your phone on."

"FBI?" the boy repeated, examining the badge in his hands with equal parts intrigue and misgiving. His hair was rusty red, his eyebrows fine and mousy brown, his complexion milky fair, exactly the colouring of the baby Scully had given away. His eyes averted down, though, clearly reading whole physicality still and his expression alight with obvious interest, Skinner was struck by the unexpected likeness to Mulder he glimpsed. He tried to isolate what it was, exactly, but by then the
boy had finished reading and startling blue eyes had flicked back up at him, and all he saw as the boy asked warily, sceptically, "They sent an Assistant Director to investigate one homeless death and a wrecked knee?" was Dana Scully.

The eyes were as distinctive as fingerprints.

That disbelieving tone of voice might have been genetic, too. Was she hearing it from outside the door, recognising herself in that voice? The accent was different, the age and gender distinctly not hers, and yet...

"I sent myself," Skinner corrected lightly, dumping the bag beside the boy and accepting the badge back and putting it away. "It's difficult sometimes to get the full story from behind a desk reading other agents' reports."

The boy regarded him with unblinking eyes and Skinner stared back, waiting him out. The eyes were Scully's but the longer he looked, the more of Mulder he saw there, in the definition of his brow, of the height and shape of his forehead, even of his hairline, though the hair was thick and wavy like his mother's.

"Yeah, I'm Will," he relented finally, relaxing slightly and crossing his feet as they dangled from the edge of the hospital bed. Skinner didn't have children so it wasn't easy to judge, especially while William remained seated and elevated, but was this boy small for his age? Dainty, almost, with frail shoulders where Mulder's were strong and broad. Built like Scully, perhaps, or perhaps just awaiting a growth spurt – he wasn't even fifteen, after all, and what did Skinner know about teenagers?

"Your uncle said I could talk to you," Skinner told the boy, who now went through his bag for his cell and switched it on. "I have some questions about the events of yesterday, if you wouldn't mind."

"I already talked to the sheriff's guys. Yesterday. They took a statement."

"I know," Skinner replied calmly. "I read it. That's why I'm here."

"To ask me more questions?" Will clarified. The phone received a few messages, intoning repeatedly, but he tucked it back inside his bag rather than sit and read them. How improbably polite for a teenager.

"That's right."

"And that's really why you're here to see me?"

"Can you think of another reason the FBI would be visiting you?"

William fixed him with a piercing, discerning Mulder look. "No, I guess not. But if I'm not in trouble, I don't have to talk to you at all, right?"

The question was surprising and left of field, but Skinner rolled with it. "No, you don't have to. Witness interviews are all provided on a voluntary basis and I can't force you to give a statement."

"And the only reason you want to talk to me," William – Will, he'd called himself – said slowly, "is my relationship to your investigation?"

"We can talk with your uncle present if you would prefer that," Skinner offered. Will shook his head.
"No, it's fine." He sounded tired all of a sudden, like the air had gone out of him. "Here's fine. I'll answer your questions."

Odd child, Skinner reflected as he withdrew the recorder from his pocket. But what had he expected would be the crossover of Mulder with Scully? Anything close to normal? The boy was lucky his chromosomes didn't just explode on initial contact in a protest against such a contradiction being created.

"Is it alright with you if I record our conversation?"

Will shrugged again. "I don't mind," he said, and Skinner started the recorder from the end of the interview with Gary Milne. He quickly spoke into the microphone – "Interview with witness William Van de Kamp, age fourteen, with consent of guardian, at nine minutes past nineteen hundred, conducted by Assistant Director Skinner, in relation to case number..." – and the boy watched him with increasing interest. When he finished his spiel, Will asked him, "Is this going to go into federal evidence? This interview?"

"Anything of use to the investigation will be compiled as evidence in making our case, yes," Skinner agreed. He placed the recorder down on the hospital bed's end beside the teen. Bright eyes followed it and eyed it with interest. The initial spark of attitude was quickly fading to reveal an intense curiosity that sung absolutely of Fox Mulder.

"And it'll be a real interview? You're not going to talk down to me and avoid questions to be sensitive just because I happen to be fifteen?"

"I'm reliably informed that you don't turn fifteen for another two months," Skinner replied, folding his arms and tolerating the too-familiar eyeroll he got in return, "but certainly, I'll be as straight with you as protocol and professionalism allows."

"Who listens to it?" the boy pressed, nodding at the recorder.

"Just those connected with the case. My partner, her team. Later on, probably their supervisors, and eventually, a court and a judge."

Will considered that. "So it's unlikely that someone working for the Bureau who wasn't directly involved with your case would stumble across it, but if they did, they'd have access to it?"

Odd question. Odd child, Skinner thought again, though the question made him uneasy. Scully had enemies within the agency, some she didn't even know about. Would those quiet adversaries seek out the details and evidence of this otherwise 'nothing' case, and potentially stumble across this interview recording with William? What incredible danger might that put him in? Maybe Skinner shouldn't be recording this. Or maybe this interview should go missing before it found its way into evidence.

"It'll be quite secure, like the rest of our investigation materials," he assured the boy, who actually looked put out by that assurance. Skinner took a chance, unsure with teenagers, knowing anything that seemed like a sure-fire establishment of trust and friendliness was just as likely to be rebuked viciously. "Your uncle said you're interested in law enforcement."

William was quick with his answer this time. "Not interested in law enforcement like on current affair specials – you know, 'his psychological profile demonstrates a long-held fascination with law enforcement'." A serious false newscaster voice took over his own, naturally entertaining though he didn't even know his audience. He dropped it as quickly as he'd adopted it. "Not a terrorist, not a serial killer, whatever Trip told you. Just, like, interested. And really only in your
Bureau, not local or even state law enforcement or justice. And really only recently. I…” He hesitated, Mulder's wit replaced instantly with Scully's measuredness. He continued, more cautiously, "I like to know things."

Skinner nodded, respecting the statement, even if it sounded like a cover to explain away something he wasn't privy to.

"William, what can you tell me about the events of yesterday morning in town?" he asked, trying to keep his initial line of questioning open. The boy scratched his hairline with one fingernail, and for some reason, the gesture brought with it a strong sense of Mulder. Skinner almost turned, intending on making eye contact with Scully to check whether she saw it, too, but he made himself stay still and not give her position away outside the door. He wished she'd walk in, though. Walk in and see this for herself, this boy who every moment looked more like his father, looked more like her.

"Uh, there was an attack," Will said, looking at his shoes while he got his thoughts in order. His eyes shifted across to the device beside him and it was clear he wanted to be helpful on record. "There was some kind of… disruption?… in the crowd, and I looked over and saw that guy with the dreadlocks."

"What was he doing?"

"He had a knife," Will recalled, sounding disturbed, "but it didn't look like he was cutting anybody with it, just… grabbing people and throwing them away. Then he spotted the mayor, sitting at the eatery, and he came over. He was tossing tables aside like they were made of paper, he was so strong. Like… stupid strong. He got up close and raised the knife to slash at the mayor, and that's when the sheriff shot him."

A perfect confirmation of the sheriff's story, retold specifically for law enforcement. No mention of William's own movements, or the harm that befell Gary Milne, only what William expected Skinner wanted to hear.

"How was your uncle hurt?"

William looked surprised to be asked. "The drifter guy was heading our way and at first we didn't know the mayor was behind us, so we tried to get out of the way. Uncle Gary got pinned when the guy shoved the table over on his way past us. It caught his knee and tore his anterior cruciate ligament."

"What makes you think the attacker was a drifter?" Skinner asked, but the boy was Mulder's and Scully's, a meta-thinker, and his mind was jumping well ahead.

"You read my statement," Will quipped, "so you know I saw him arrive in town on the back of someone's pick-up. So I think he was a drifter. Plus, no one in Thayne has dreadlocks."

"You saw him in the main square, and a few minutes later, a few streets away, you saw the same man. Is there any chance he followed you?"

"I didn't talk to him." The boy shifted uncomfortably, remembering. Looking like Scully in the car half an hour ago, or Scully a hundred times in the past, trying not to have to believe something she
didn't like. "We made eye contact, but only for a second, and then I kept going. I don't know what
he did after that, until I saw him gunning for the mayor at the eatery."

"How do you know the mayor was the target?" Skinner asked. The boy frowned up at him, Scully's
eyes darkening under Mulder's brow.

"It's obvious."

You can do better than that. "I'm not sure a judge will accept that one," Skinner countered, and
Will's frown softened slightly, challenged. Skinner berated himself for expecting more from a
child, yet he did, expected an answer more like Scully's; instead he felt a ghost, the familiar sense
of frustration with a brilliant brain that jumped to conclusions it didn't feel like explaining. He
rephrased. "Can you explain why it's obvious?"

"Tim told me that's what they're saying in town," William reasoned now. "Once he looked over our
way, he just came straight over. And anyway, who else would he have been after?"

"I'm wondering that myself." Skinner paused, considering how much to say. Did a boy barely
breaking free of childhood need to know he might have been the target yesterday of an attempted
assassination or kidnapping? The answer depended – would he be in danger after this interview? As
much as Skinner didn't want to frighten Scully's boy, he did want him to be safe and able to spot
risks and avoid them if this didn't end with Bletchley. "Had you ever seen the attacker before
yesterday, when he disembarked from the truck in down?"

"No. Never."

"Does the name 'Morris Bletchley' sound familiar to you?"

"Was that the drifter's name? No," Will added, noting Skinner's impassive expression, a silent
refusal to acknowledge anything until he had his answer. "I don't know that name."

"Have you recently interacted with three individuals posing as CDC agents or morticians? An older
man-"

"Older than you?" Cheeky, unable to resist the opportunity. "Why would someone pose as an
agent?" He sighed in frustration when Skinner refused to answer. "No, no one has told me they're a
CDC agent. What's that, Centre for Disease Control?"

"The group I'm referring to may be connected to the attacker," Skinner said now. "Two men and a
young woman, either in her late teens or early twenties. She has blue eyes and dark hair. Caucasian.
The older man has white hair and glasses. He looks like a wizard," he added reluctantly, unable to
come up with a better description, because he hadn't been looking at the men and hadn't committed
much more to memory. He found it even harder to describe the final member of the trio, despite
that one standing there the longest. "The younger man might be almost thirty."

"I can't think of anyone matching those descriptions," Will apologised. "No wizards. Maybe some
of the people in town, while I was walking…"

"William," Skinner redirected, amazed to think he was addressing the William he'd never expected
to see again, "what were you doing in town, midmorning on a school day? Joining your uncle for a
business meeting?"

Will winced. "I, uh, ditched school. I didn't expect to run into Uncle Gary."

"Do you ditch school often?"
"Are the FBI truant police now?" Will shot back. Skinner felt his patience flicker at the insolence and had to remind himself that this was the boy's sense of humour. He smiled, and found it came out less forced than he expected.

"Your uncle implied you were involved in a fight."

"Not so much a fight. More of a..." Will trailed off, trying to word it properly, and gave up. "More of a situation where I was accused of writing other people's senior Bio assignments for money and vividly insulted by a fellow student much too big and strong for me to take on, so I retaliated by telling the class that Jeremy masturbates in the toilets fantasising about ginger orphan midgets, after he'd just called me exactly that." There was a long silence. "He didn't think it was funny, either. He smacked my head into a desk."

"I... am not surprised he didn't appreciate the joke," Skinner said eventually, shocked by the openness because Scully would never say that. But Mulder would. And Mulder would be reckless about it, too, and accept the violent consequence of his choice to cross somebody's line as just an occupational hazard of being this kind of funny. Will looked similarly blasé, regretful of the injury he'd sustained but not regretful of the joke, and not regretful enough to not do it again. Skinner cleared his throat, embarrassed that the first conversation he'd ever held with his friends' child involved midget porn, and that the child's mother was the one listening in. Mulder would be proud. "Were you hurt?"

"A nosebleed but nothing serious. I bailed before it got worse. I'd asked for it and I was going to get it."

"What prompted your classmate to make the plagiarism accusation?" Skinner asked, thinking back on Milne's assertion that the difficulties Will faced at school were mostly small-town issues, nothing to worry about. This sounded like typical high school drama, but he had to be sure.

"I don't know why he hates me."

"So it was just a spiteful attempt to get you into trouble?" Skinner paused. "Or did you write everybody's assignments?"

"Not everybody's," Will clarified seriously, almost appealing. Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"You were paid for this? Writing assignments that are contributing to other students' senior results and may ultimately affect their college entrance?"

The boy squirmed uncomfortably. "I needed the money," he muttered, cheeks flushing, the first indication of anything short of pure confidence. He knew he'd overstepped an ethical line and he was disappointed in himself. Skinner undid the button of his jacket so he could settle his hands on his hips, not intending to look imposing but probably doing so anyway. William kept his gaze down.

Tut, tut. Dana Scully's son in the middle of a schoolyard plagiarism controversy. Could this day get any weirder?

"Alright," he sighed. "Let's move on. You're right, I'm not the truant police. I'm sure your school and uncle will have plenty to say when everything else blows over. Is it safe to say you're not usually out of school at eleven-fifteen in the morning?" Will nodded quickly, eyes still down. Skinner jumped into the main reason he was here. "I'm trying to establish whether the attacker could have reasonably anticipated you being in town or if you being there at the same time was purely coincidental."
Will looked surprised again, making connections quickly.

"I wasn't his target," he insisted, looking up. Skinner tilted his head.

"Tell me how you know that. Did you feel otherwise at any point during yesterday's attack?"

Skinner pressed, fascinated by the battle between belief and scepticism behind eyes that were hers, a flashback in a new boxset. "You said the attacker came straight at you, knocking chairs, tables and customers aside, and raised his knife when he reached you. Maybe it was the mayor he was aiming for, maybe it wasn't. At that moment, what did you think?"

Will glanced yet again at the recorder. "I thought he wanted to kill me. I got a… yuck feeling about him. I thought he was looking right at me, and I thought it looked like the knife was aimed at me. But then the sheriff shot him," here Will swallowed, evidently disturbed by his up-close first experience of a shooting, "and the mayor spoke up, and I realised it was ridiculous to think the drifter guy was there for me. Maybe he was going to stab me, but only to get me out of the way."

Will forced a quick smile, the dismissive smile of a wilful denier. "It all happened so fast and it was hard to pin down what was really happening for a minute there, but it's much clearer now."

Leave it long enough and the boy would rationalise the whole experience away, reprogram himself to see normality where actually there was deviation, retrain himself to ignore the true memory of this event because it was more socially acceptable to believe what everyone had told him. If he was ever in real danger, he would not see a second attempt coming.

"William," Skinner said reluctantly, making up his mind, "I'm going to be honest with you-"

"People so rarely are when they think you're a little kid."

"I can imagine that's frustrating," Skinner allowed. Like trying to get some speculative, flexible thought out of a conversation with a miniature version of Scully. Pulling teeth. He backtracked and tried to lay it out more explicitly, the way Mulder used to do with young Scully. "You're right – on the surface, a controversial mayor makes more sense as the target of a violent public attack than you do – but if you examine the evidence in front of me, you soon see that the only link we have between Mr Bletchley arriving in the main square, and where he ended up acting out, is you. So, let's be straightforward. Can you think of any reason a stranger from out of town might come to Thayne looking to hurt you?"

Will frowned. "No. I'm nobody. I'm just an orphan."

How wrong you are, boy. Skinner wondered if he'd been closer to the door, whether he'd have heard Scully's heart break to hear her child say that about himself. Either way, he heard the boy's certainty, and was grateful on behalf of past-Scully. This child had not known the life of a fugitive, which had been her fear. This child did not know his significance. He was blissfully unaware. Wasn't he?

"Think," Skinner urged. "No enemies? No previous frightening experiences that might be related?"

"The closest thing I have to an enemy is my school," Will responded, mock-seriously. "The staff colluded to accelerate my studies in science and put me in senior classes with assholes like Jeremy. Clearly, I'm a victim of my own institution, and they have it in for me. But that's all town stuff. Nobody from school would have hired an out-of-town drifter to come in on the one day I skipped school to assassinate me."

"What about from outside of town?"
"Can I see that badge again, please?" The boy extended his hand, frowning. "Assassination? I really don't think you're hearing yourself. No one, in town or out, is plotting against fourteen-year-old know-it-all kids and enlisting Morris Bletchley the Dreadlocked Derelict to butcher me in a public place on the off-chance we happen to cross paths, the one time I skip school."

It did sound stupid, laughable, but Skinner had not presided over the X-Files for all those years only to forget that such seemingly stupid things mostly happened unheard over the sound of condescending laughter. And the child of Mulder and Scully, the target for an assassination? Many times more likely than the average child.

"So you can think of absolutely no motive?" he pushed on, ignoring the dismissiveness, wanting, wanting there to be something, some explanation that was not because I may have been conceived as part of an alien plot. Will seemed to realise Skinner was serious, and, examining the badge he'd been given for a second time, he quirked a truly familiar sceptical eyebrow.

"Absolutely none," he agreed, his father's sarcasm sneaking in on his tone. Every layer that peeled away, every gesture, look, twitch, feature, revealed another clue hinting back to those two. Incredible. Of course Skinner had met and known the children of friends and family before, and seen the jigsaw puzzle of traits borrowed from each parent, but this was something he'd never expected to see – the two people most opposite in the world, seemingly incompatible, harmoniously coexisting in one form. It hardly seemed plausible. "It's not like I have anything anyone would want…" William trailed off, something occurring to him. He looked up at Skinner again, thoughts almost visibly buzzing behind his eyes. "There was… Yesterday, in the letterbox, there was a cheque."

Skinner felt his attention pique. "And this is unusual?"

"Well, yeah. My uncle probably told you, the farm isn't doing so well." William hesitated. "It's been that way for a while, just bleeding money, and I think he thought I wouldn't notice, but now it's reached the point of almost unsalvageable. So this morning he and I talked, and we agreed to try and sell the farm before he has to start subdividing just to stay afloat. But that was after I got this," he explained, coming back to the point and digging inside the schoolbag. He withdrew an envelope that had already been slit open. Skinner's badge was still clutched in his palm. "The timing was pretty cosmic, if I believed in that sort of stuff."

"A sceptic, hey?" Skinner noted, accepting with a sense of hope the folded document Will pulled from the envelope. Maybe, maybe the ulterior motive he was looking for? "You don't believe the universe works in mysterious ways?"

Like the way it brought us to you this very night?

"I believe the universe's mysterious ways are only mysterious because we haven't worked them out yet. I don't think balls of fiery gasses millions of lightyears away are arranging themselves in what we would call patterns from our particular vantage point in space and influencing the activity of a single sentient species out of the probably billions that exist out there."

Jesus, Mulder and Scully rolled into one. How had Milne coped? Skinner tried to shake away the smile that grew on his lips as he opened the page. It was indeed a cheque, made out to Mr William Van de Kamp from the estate of Doris Kearney, for eleven thousand, two hundred and thirty-eight dollars, and forty-six cents.

"What's funny?" Will asked, fidgeting with the ID. Skinner looked up, realising he'd not wiped the smile quickly enough.
"Nothing. You remind me of an old friend. This is a lot-"

"Who's your friend?" Will interrupted swiftly. "Another FBI agent?"

"Who's interviewing who here?" Skinner admonished, not too harshly, though the boy withdrew completely, stung. How much did the boy know? He tried to be gentler. "Is that why you Google the Bureau? You like investigating? Thinking about a future with the FBI?"

Will shrugged. "I like to know things," he said again. He scratched his hairline roughly.

"Give me a call when you finish school, kid. I might have a job for you. Now, this is a lot of money to come to a fourteen-year-old out of the blue," Skinner pressed on, changing tact and waving the cheque. "People have conspired to do harm for less. Do you know the sender?"

"Percy Hind. Lawyer. I've only spoken with him over the phone. He isn't trying to assassinate me, either, before you ask."

"What did you talk about?"

"Would you really hire me?" Will asked, attention splitting like the hairs that settled on his lap, displaced from his thick locks. Teenagers. His sullenness was immediately replaced with a Mulderish hopefulness. "After I finish college and stuff?"

"Not if I remember you as an unhelpful witness," Skinner replied dryly. The boy's mouth twitched in amusement.

"A few weeks ago," he recited dutifully, distractedly tugging an exercise book out of his schoolbag and a pen, "this guy Michael Kearney came to the house, looking for my mom Sarah. He was an ex-boyfriend of hers from way back, before she met my dad, and his mom had really loved her. Uncle Gary had to tell him she's dead. Apparently, his mom had left my mom money in her will, that money," he nodded at the cheque, arranging the book on his lap and pulling his knees up to make a table, "and he was trying to track her down to settle the account. But then he and Uncle Gary got into an argument, and he left, and later on, I got a call from this lawyer," he turned the envelope over to show the sender's address, "to say the money was owed to me as Sarah's heir. Mr Kearney wasn't happy about it but the lawyer said it wasn't his call to make. I'd kind of forgotten about it until I saw the cheque in the mail."

"Why was Mr Kearney unhappy to part with the money, if he was willing to physically drive to your house to find your mother?" It was strange to verbally be calling Sarah Van de Kamp your mother while thinking of Scully as your mother. "He started off alright with it."

William chewed the inside of his cheek and looked down at the recorder, tapping the pen against his leg, silent for a long time as he thought over his response.

"It was when I said I'm Sarah's kid," Will admitted slowly. "He said I couldn't be. He said, she couldn't have children." He looked up now at Skinner, eyes bright with challenge. "I'm adopted. My uncle doesn't know I know… but you don't look surprised."

Out of nowhere, a left hook. What was he insinuating? That he knew his adoptedness was relevant, that he knew Skinner was connected with Scully, that he knew Mulder and Scully were his parents? Or did he in fact know very little, and just want to trick someone into sharing what they thought he already knew? The boy was an unpredictable player. Skinner, a boxer, appreciated the amateur skill, though wondered whether, outside the door, Scully had taken the blow full-force.

"I had considered that you don't look much like your uncle," he replied easily, ducking below the
strike and avoiding that whole can of worms. Milne had asked them not to talk about this. Scully had agreed. End of story. They were the decision-makers here. "Was Mr Kearney bothered by the concept that you may not be the beneficiary's natural child?"

William stared at him for a beat, impassive expression hiding any multitude of thoughts. Had his assertion been a less-than-subtle hint at knowing that Skinner had just brushed aside, or was he hinting at something else even more subtle that Skinner had simply not picked up on? Or was it blunt, just, I think you know I'm adopted because my uncle probably told you? Blunt wasn't usually the Mulder or the Scully way, but this boy wasn't raised by them, so who knew? In any case, Will had to take a moment to reroute his thoughts, his adoption revelation not taking this discussion in the direction he'd anticipated. He flipped open the book and started drawing.

"He was bothered by the concept that I might get my hands on his mother's money and I was the nephew of the guy he'd just had a screaming fit at and who'd knocked him on his ass in the mud. He was humiliated. I think that was the extent of it."

"Your uncle and Mr Kearney had a physical altercation?" Skinner clarified, starting to form a new, plausible theory. William nodded. "And Mr Kearney was reluctant to pass the inheritance on to you, but the decision was taken out of his hands?"

"Uncle Gary said he was a spoilt rich kid in an adult's body," Will said, sketching out his initial outline, though the way he'd angled the book, it was not visible to Skinner. "He said he's petty and a dickbag."

"Petty enough to pay off a drifter to retaliate on his behalf?" It wouldn't have taken much to buy someone who had nothing, and if it wasn't the money that mattered to Kearney but the principle and his pride... It was certainly worth looking into. Maybe the fact that the first homeless transient he'd happened across also happened to be some kind of Super Soldier was simple fluke. Coincidences could happen, right?

"For eleven thousand dollars? You didn't see his car. No one's that petty. He was a dick; that's all I can tell you. The rest is your own insane speculation. You can take a photo or a copy or whatever of that," Will said now, eyes on the cheque still in Skinner's hands while he sketched, "but it's not going into evidence. I've got plans for that money."

"College fund?" Of course this boy would be going to college. A lot of what he said, and the way he tried to wield power in even this conversation between a child witness and an adult Assistant Director, gave the impression of a much older person. Skinner got out his phone and photographed the document.

"Some of it. I'm giving half to this ward."

That took Skinner by surprise. "That's very generous of you."

William shrugged and looked down at his drawing. "It's not that much once you halve it. I wasn't comfortable funding my future on money from someone like Dickbag Kearney. It's dirty and insincere. But Uncle Gary said it isn't really from him, it's from his mom, who was nice. She was giving it out of compassion and love for my mom, so I prefer to think of it as being from her. Michael didn't really love my mom."

"Is that what your uncle said?"

"You're right, I didn't know them together to be able to make that comment," Will acquiesced. He looked to the door, wistful and thoughtful and dark and clouded and troubled and hurt and hopeful
and sad all at once, the classic mix of Mulder. And he said, almost as if he knew she was there, though he'd been given no indication of that, "I only know that you don't abandon someone you love."

Skinner winced, sure he could hear the metaphorical knife sink into the vulnerable heart in the hall. "That's a simplistic view to take. But in the case of Mr Kearney and your mother, we've only got your uncle's word to go off," he added, stepping closer to look at the envelope the cheque had come in. He photographed the return address. Tannenbaum and Associates.

"Have you ever abandoned someone you loved?" Will challenged. "Because being abandoned sucks ass."

Skinner refused to bite, hearing the misplaced passion of both parents rising in the underage voice of their son.

"Yes, I have," he answered coolly. "And not because I didn't love them, but because I was left without other choices. But as I said, in the instance of your mother and this Kearney, your uncle's word is all we have to go off – and he's probably right." He picked up the recorder, leaving it running. "I think we're done here."

Will blushed again. "Sorry. I misunderstood what you meant." Their humility. It wasn't common in people as accomplished as they were, nor in teens. "That was inappropriate of me." He paused. "I guess I've been pushing that boundary for the duration of this interview, huh? I haven't meant any disrespect, I promise."

"Son," Skinner said honestly, "that doesn't even register on my list of inappropriate things that I've been asked. May I?" He opened his hand for his ID, which Will was still holding onto. Reluctantly, the boy handed it over, fingertips pressing it closed. Skinner tucked it into his pocket. "I'm going to look into this Kearney and any connections he might have to what happened in town yesterday. My partner, her team and I will handle the rest of the investigation from our end, and we'll get in touch if there's anything pertinent we find or need from you. But in the meantime, if you don't feel safe, we can arrange to put eyes on you-"

"Wait, eyes on me?" William was already shaking his head, laughing off the notion and going back to his drawing. "Agents spying on me going to school? Not going to happen."

"If there's a reason to believe you're in danger of another attack, you'll find it'll happen whether you like it or not," Skinner warned. "Where are you staying while your uncle is here?"

"Last night I stayed at Tim's, our farm hand, but tonight I'm sleeping here. The nurses caved when I played the 'traumatised orphan missing his injured uncle and dead mom' card. The sassy, knowing smile that flashed was one hundred percent Mulder. "If you can't play it when you need it, what's the point of it? Tim's baby cries all night."

"And you feel safe here? In the cancer ward?"

"Not here, per se. I'll sleep in the chair in Uncle Gary's room to maintain my cover."

"We can arrange alternative accommodations for you while your uncle is unable to care for you," Skinner said, no longer knowing how to enact them but knowing there were provisions in place to protect child victims in Will's position, with a possible threat still out there and no adult physically capable of protecting him. He and Scully could take him in and offer that protection. It would be highly educational for everyone involved.
"My uncle is perfectly able to care for me," Will responded, a little defensively. "That's what he's done my whole life."

Not your *whole* life… "I'm not insinuating otherwise. But if another attempt is made—"

"Another attempt? Imposing there was a first. Your drifter's dead," Will interrupted logically. "He's not coming to get me. People don't just rise up from the dead and start walking around, finishing off what they started, and Dickbag Kearney hasn't had time to locate and conscript a new amoral drifter to take me out, if that was ever actually his goal. Plus," he added a few finishing touches to his picture, "nobody knows I'm here, and visiting hours are over. I'm perfectly safe. But you know all that."

"Knowing the risk is low doesn't eliminate the risk," Skinner countered, ignoring the irony of the boy's specific scepticism. People don't just rise up from the dead. Uh-huh. "Morris Bletchley is dead," again, "but the other three are not, and they've already made very gutsy attempts at pushing their way into this investigation."

The pen froze on the page, mid-stroke.

"I knew there was more to this than a homeless psychopath and a wrecked knee," William said, shaking his head as though annoyed. "Why else would you be here? Assistant Director of the FBI. They're the ones you want, aren't they? What have they really done?"

"I told you," Skinner answered impatiently, unable to discern the boy's irritation. "They impersonated agents and interfered with this investigation. They could be a danger to you."

"I don't think so," Will said, voice harder now than it had been since Skinner arrived. Teenagers and their unpredictable moods. "I appreciate the concern, but I'm not leaving this hospital with you. I'm not leaving my uncle. Consider this my traumatised orphan card, face down in defence mode."

Evidently, their interview was done. "You're probably right," Skinner relented, buttoning up his jacket. "This is a reasonably secure facility and no direct threats have been made against you, so the precaution is probably unnecessary. We don't know for sure whether Kearney was involved, or those other three I mentioned, or if we're completely off-base on that theory, but just in case my suspicions are correct…" He withdrew a business card. "This is my direct cell number. If you see anything, remember anything, need anything—call. Don't bother calling the landline to my desk, you'll just go on hold."

Will sat forward and took the card with tentative fingers. He read the words on the card in a flash and then just looked at it, again clearly thinking, this time looking conflicted. He had something he wanted to ask. It was obvious. But Skinner wasn't going to go there unless the boy led the way. Scully had given up fourteen years with this child to keep him from her world. If he'd stumbled his own way back into it, then Skinner had no qualm grabbing his hand and leading him safely through it, but if he wasn't in, he wasn't going to take him there.

"Thanks," Will managed finally. He looked down at his drawing. "In case my suspicions are correct, have this." He tore the page out of his book and handed it to Skinner. He took the flimsy lined paper and turned it over. The top few lines were clearly schoolwork, notes about genetic terms. How very Scully. On the lower half of the page was the drawing, a cartoon desert island complete with palm tree, bottle and crab—quite a decent hand this boy had for art. And starting from the note-taking around the middle of the page, scribbled in darker pencil, were vaguely familiar symbols Skinner could not read.

"This is Navajo," he said in surprise, and William looked just as surprised that he recognised it.
"Do you learn it as a language at school?"

"Uh..." Will looked like it was hard to explain, then gave up. "Yep. But it's the drawing that's for you."

"Oh. Thanks," Skinner replied, uncertain. He'd been thinking of the boy as being very mature, very insightful and a deep thinker, but he'd never been drawn a picture by a child any older than maybe eight. He paused, not wanting to cause offence. "If you're right about what?"

"You can recycle it if you want," Will answered with a careless shrug, "but if I'm right, when the Dickbag Kearney theory amounts to nothing and nothing else happens, this street attack will eventually drop off the FBI's radar because this is Thayne and no one cares about Thayne, and you and I will probably never meet again if this investigation dries up; and one day I'll be finished school and I'll ring up this number and cheekily call on that job you fake-offered me, and you'll probably be old and retired by then, but," he raised a finger, highly animated in his storytelling, "I'll mention the island picture, and you won't have it anymore but you'll remember how weird it was to get a hand-drawn picture of an island from a teenager, and you'll recall everything about this conversation today. And you'll call your buddies at the FBI and recommend me for the job. It's a long-term investment. I'm just planting the seed."

The interview was over and though the recorder was still running, Skinner chuckled lightly. In this boy, he saw roughly equal parts Scully and Mulder – whether they were there or only imagined, he couldn't have said – but there was also more he did not recognise yet liked all the same. Gary Milne, he supposed, and Sarah Van de Kamp. And William himself. Will was a fun and unique individual, with traits all his own.

He was also right. If the Bletchley investigation blew over or was covered up, there would be no decent excuse for Skinner, or even Scully as a field agent with a little less scrutiny to fear, to fly back here to see the boy again in any official capacity. After this conversation, unless Scully did something active about reconnecting with her son, they would go their separate ways. William would resume his life, ignorant of who had stood just feet away behind a single thin hospital wall. Skinner would return to his desk and set about explaining why he ever went to Wyoming and begin deflecting unwanted attention from the child witness he'd interviewed there. Scully would... what? What would she do? Despite Skinner's certainty through observation and circumstance, they actually had no solid proof that this was her William, and for her to reach out to him now and get digging – after the attempted body-snatching of Morris Bletchley – could only serve to highlight to her enemies where he was.

"In that case, I'll hold onto it," Skinner said, folding up the page and sliding it inside his jacket. Will's eyes followed it a little more intensely than would have been expected, but he was, after all, an odd child. "We'll have to see whose suspicions pay off." Feeling torn but knowing any other action would only create disruption, Skinner switched off the recorder and extended his other hand. "I'm glad to have met you, William. I hope you're incorrect and we cross paths again before you join the Academy."

Will smiled and accepted the handshake. "Me, too."

Skinner started for the door, feeling a vague sense of pre-emptive loss to be walking away from the boy. Scully's boy. Mulder's boy. They should be here. Instead Mulder was elsewhere and Scully was in physical reach but out of sight, invisible, and still hadn't gathered up the courage to walk in. At this point, Skinner knew she wasn't going to. He looked back once, trying to soak the child's appearance into his memory in the likely case that this really was the last time they met.

"Remember," he reminded, hoping he would, nodding at the card in Will's grip. "Anything. Call.
Don't think. Your safety is paramount."

"Expect post-midnight calls when I'm old enough to get underage-wrecked at parties," Will shot back, starting on a new drawing. "I'll remember anything, call, don't think when I need a lift home, and it'll do wonders for my rep to have a by-then-former FBI Assistant Director rock up as my designated D."

That reckless sense of humour again. Skinner deliberated between laughing or frowning, and in the end just stepped out of the hospital room and into the hallway, where his friend stood slumped against the wall, expression blank. Surrounding her was a tangible aura of utter desolation, and momentarily he considered throwing her into the room and closing the door behind her. From the look on her face, it was almost definitely the worst thing he could have done. She'd heard it all and felt everything. She immediately fell into step beside him as he walked away.

Her shoes and his echoed in the oncology hall.

"So?" she whispered eventually, halfway to the bend. She didn't look up at him, and he didn't look over at her. It was too weird, seeing her face so soon after familiarising himself with William's. They were her features first, but now they felt like Will's. And hers were absolutely miserable, and he felt immense guilt for bringing her here and letting her listen to that. You don't abandon someone you love. Like she'd needed to hear that.

"So what?" Skinner murmured back, determined now just to leave, to get Scully out of this place. She was barely holding it together.

"Is he?"

Is he mine? Her voice was so shaky, so very tenuously controlled. The effort of producing any more words might have cracked her.

"Next time, your partner can deal with him," Skinner muttered. "Christ knows he deserves a taste of that attitude."

They turned the corner, Scully looking dead ahead, just a ghost; but Skinner glanced back over his shoulder at the moment they turned, and glimpsed a flash of red – a young head peering around the edge of a doorway long left behind.

You don't abandon someone you love. Yet onward they walked, further and further away. There was nothing else to do. Skinner hadn't imagined what would happen after they met the boy, but it wasn't this, dejectedly, hopelessly departing with nothing.

Scully wouldn't speak, but she was also reluctant to leave. Skinner offered to accompany her back to Will, or to wait for her in the lobby while she returned to oncology, but she only shook her head and looked conflictedly back the way they'd come. In the end he just went back to the car, and she came too, and he looked up Rhonda's Cabins on his phone's maps and drove them there. She looked miserable the whole way.

"I can post a surveillance watch on him," Skinner offered.

"No." Her voice was thick, tight. Flat. "Too many questions, too many people involved. Forget it."

She was right. It was impossible to do off the books, and it only flagged Will's existence to the Bureau and beyond. Skinner tried again.

"We can go back and tell his guardian the truth." His words were punctuated by her demeaning
scoff. He ignored her. "Milne will do what's necessary to protect that boy. He might agree to send him with us, for his safety."

"He's willing to believe his sister was abducted by a cult. That she was an experiment like me and that I'm..." She trailed off, struggling, breath hitching. She swallowed and gazed out the window. "The truth has never helped before, sir, and it's not going to part a family without proof we don't have. Milne has no reason to believe us. It's just as likely to turn him against us."

True again. "Then we'll tell the boy."

Scully was quiet, then said, defeatedly, "That isn't us. We said we wouldn't. And we won't. Just like we won't ruin a totally normal boy's life with stories about conspiracies and evil, and just like we won't take a child away from the only family he has."

"Milne is not the only family William has," Skinner argued, parking the rental outside the office at Rhonda's Cabins. They both got out. "He has you, he has Mulder. Why shouldn't he know that, and know you're here to protect him?"

"He's not in danger!" Scully snapped, losing patience with him again as they strode to the reception. As the sheriff had said, the institution was very nicely put-together, homely and cozy with its little row of log cabins each sporting window flowerboxes painted in bright colours. The gravelly road joining them all was wide, leaving plenty of space between buildings to ensure privacy and car slots. Opposite the cabins was a wild hedge to block the rural excuse for a main road. "The biggest danger to him is still me. I was listening to you in there playing Mulder's advocate, trying to find a convenient explanation to link everything we've found here, but you've ignored the obvious possibility – that Morris Bletchley's origins and motivation for attacking that crowd has no connection whatsoever to the Van de Kamp boy, and that this is just a giant coincidence. Rich pricks do not buy off homeless people to track down the teenage children of ex-girlfriends decades later over the eleven thousand dollar leftovers of their mother's impressive estate. And even if they did, and they were connected with the three at the morgue, and it's all another huge conspiracy: if these people were insidious enough to track the boy into town on the one day he skips school, how have they not found him at his family friend's house overnight and now at the only hospital around? They haven't found him because they aren't looking. It was a coincidence, and not even that big of one; it just seems bigger because I happen to be one of the investigators and the boy may be connected to me."

*May be connected to me.* "If not here for William, what was Bletchley doing in Thayne?"

"I don't know," Scully retorted. "That's why we're here, to find out, and probably that's what Lansdowne and the other two want to know. Maybe they're his handlers, maybe he's an experiment gone rogue, maybe there is more to that mayor than we've bothered to investigate, maybe maybe maybe a lot of things, Walter, but none of it is certain and I am *not* Mulder, so don't ask me to jump to conclusions with you."

Skinner withheld a frustrated sigh and pushed open the door to the reception cabin, a warm lodge with yellow light spilling out of its cute criss-cross windows. Mulder had always frustrated him more, but in times like this, he sympathised with the man, and appreciated that he must have felt like banging his head into a wall many times over the last twenty years. Mulder was a pain in the ass but Scully wasn't exactly a peach. And right now, she was at her worst, destroyed from the inside and building hard new walls around the ruins. There was nothing at all Skinner could do to make her feel better.

She was stony with him while they booked neighbouring cabins, and Rhonda the innkeeper was flustered to have not one but *two* unexpected guests.
"Here are your keys," she stressed, laying out modern keys on big old-fashioned keyrings complete with cowbell. She didn't offer them a double room. They weren't giving off friendly or companionable vibes. "The rooms are made up but I haven't yet stocked them up with the extra towels or pillow chocolates."

Scully took her key. "Don't worry about it. We'll live."

Outside, on their way over to the cabins, Skinner tried once more to bring her around. It had been a long time since he'd seen her this broken, and again, he was useless to help.

"Can we appreciate for a moment here the absolute miracle it is that we found him?" he asked. She didn't reply, kept walking. "Your son's alive, Dana, and he's healthy and well-adjusted and cared for. And now you know where he is, so this, tonight, doesn't have to be the last contact."

"Yes, it does," she answered flatly, "after what I've done to him."

Impatience flickered. "You haven't done anything to him. Life has happened, and life can be harsh. But he's flourishing, Scully, he's-

"He's never going to look at me and see mother," Scully managed, voice shaking. "That was okay when I was never going to see him again, but I can't be Dana Scully, birth mother and abandoner, walking in where his real mom stepped out when what killed her was something I could have prevented. If I had just bothered to look for him earlier, I could have stopped her taking that chip out. He would still have his mom. Instead I let everyone lose, because I'm a coward." She stared at Skinner with those eyes her son had inherited, haunted and sick with herself. The boy's words swam uncomfortably between them. "I walked away from him fourteen years ago and tonight I did it again. I couldn't face my own child. I don't deserve to be his mother."

She walked away from Skinner before he could argue, unlocking her cabin door swiftly and disappearing inside. He heard the door lock, and saw a single light flick on. Its glow was dim and sad; it reflected how he felt as he heavily trudged up the front steps to the porch of his cabin and sat down on the soft sunchair. The night was cool but he didn't feel ready to go inside or even retrieve his bag from the car, and just sat, listening as the pipes of Scully's nearby cabin squeaked – the shower starting.

Had he made the right call, pushing her into this tonight? Skinner fished Will's drawing out of his pocket and unfolded it, viewing it again by the warm light of the porch lamp. The Navajo symbols were unexpected – what school taught Navajo, especially around here? It was a sign of progressive times, he supposed, and considered it a positive step in education. The drawing, though, was apparently the reason for the gift. A cartoon desert island. Was it a metaphor for how alone Will felt, such as in Scully's mind? Or was it really just a drawing?


He adjusted his glasses and leaned closer to the lamp, squinting. The bottle… There was a scroll inside. Very attentive to detail, this boy, which should come as no surprise. Assuming he was their William, of course, which Skinner had just started taking for granted. There was no proof. All the similarities he'd noticed at the hospital – would he have noticed those if he hadn't already spoken to Milne and seen the name William Fox? Would he have considered the boy familiar if he hadn't spent the day with Dana Scully and just spoken to Fox Mulder on the phone for the first time in four years?

The bottle in the drawing was no more or less obvious than any other detail, but now that Skinner
was looking at it, it stood eerily out to him. *Message in a bottle.* It was an appropriate element to have in a beach scene. Did it have writing on it? He looked as closely as he could without the image blurring, and the bottle with its little scroll was tiny and rough with blue pen ink, but he could make out two letters: I and D.

Initials? Someone's name?

Then it hit him. *Message in a bottle.* Skinner went back into his jacket, heart leaping to remember Will's fingers pressing the ID badge closed as he gave it back. He withdrew it and held it in his hands, and slowly let it fall open.

Tucked inside, between photo ID and badge, lay nestled a few thick red hairs. Just in case William's suspicions were correct.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, because this is fanfiction, as indicated by the fanfiction archive at which you have found it.

Author's Notes: Thanks to everyone who hasn't given up on me yet and is still reading! I know, I'm slow these days, and that's not looking like it will change. My thesis is due in October, as is my PhD application, which will make for a very busy girl in the meantime as I continue to work full-time, promote my books and, occasionally, sleep! I am researching the ways writing for fandom (in fanfic or in commercial tie-in novels) benefits and improves writers in their skill and writing craftsmanship. If you are a long-term fanfic writer, especially one who also writes professionally but not necessarily, and you can talk about how fanfic has made you a better writer, I would love to hear from you!

Those who take the time to comment or review and leave your thoughts, I appreciate you so much. This fic is how I spend my very minimal downtime, and it's definitely not selfless – I get immense satisfaction from knowing you are out there in the world reading, engaging and reflecting on my work. Thank you so much.

Back to Mulder now, for a lengthy chapter, where length feels directly proportionate to how guilty I feel for leaving you all hanging. I have looked forward to this chapter for SO long and yet reaching it, it felt like pulling teeth to write. I hope it reads better than it wrote, and I hope to bring you some more material soon x

Comfort is family. Comfort is looking in the rear vision mirror at intervals on a two-and-a-half-day drive and seeing three exhausted siblings passed out on each other's shoulders, crumpled jackets and food crumbs and half-done wordsearch books scattered across their seatbelted laps.

But family isn't only comfort. Family is completion, desperation, the urgent magnetic need to be together when you brush each other's energetic fields. The formerly-Johannsson-now-Collins family and their new town disappearing into the rear vision distance and a wide, empty highway opening before him, Mulder flattened his pedal, eyeing the gas indicator. Should be fine. He'd fuelled up a few hours back and the car was reasonably economical. Good, because he wasn't prepared to stop.

For him, family was one state away. In Wyoming. He'd driven straight through the place just a few hours ago, someone else's family passed out, exhausted, in every seat of his trusty old car. He'd had no idea as his car's balding tyres spun on Wyoming's roads that he was so close, within the same nationally agreed-upon geopolitical straight lines as Scully… and William.

I think we found him.

Scully and Skinner had maybe found William. Every bit as exhausted as the Johannssons he'd just smuggled across the country out of Massachusetts to their newly arranged home in Idaho, Mulder scrubbed at his probably red eyes. It was impossible. It was insane, too crazy even for him to believe, and yet the source – Skinner himself, a voice four years out of the past – was as credible as
it got. They'd found him. Jesus, how? Walter Skinner's anxious, low voice on Scully's phone had read to Mulder like it was an accident, but how did you accidentally trip over a child hidden in the system? For fourteen years? Mulder hadn't even known she was looking. That bothered him maybe more than anything, more than the convenient unlikelihood, that she could have gone looking for their child after all this time of ignoring the past, of pretending to be okay with her own actions, and not told him. So what if they weren't talking? William transcended that arrangement, didn't he?

He growled at the whiny, reluctant car engine as he willed it faster. It had been on the road near-constantly for three days, Mulder and Erik Johannsson tag-teaming the driving through backwater towns and around common roadblocks. The destitute family he'd found hidden in a decommissioned transport warehouse had fought and grumbled endlessly once the initial novelty of being in a car on their way to freedom had worn off, but Mulder hadn't bored of their presence. In the stretches of silence their cramped nearness – Erik beside him, three middle-sized kids bickering or snoozing in the back – stimulated in him thoughts of his own child, and of the boy's mother, and car ride he regretted every day not taking with them.

The car ride out of DC and into oblivion together, where they would all still be, if he'd taken them with him when he left. It would have been like this car ride with this other family, covert, fearful, long, winding. But like this one, in the end the family triumphed, and tumbled gratefully from their seats onto their driveway and in through the doors of their new home.

Maybe his had, too, at the very end, long after he'd thought the book had been closed on him. Tonight he had intended to collapse on the second-hand couch that had, among other randomly selected op-shop furniture, been sent to the 'Collins' household prior to their arrival, courtesy of Sixty-Four's careful arrangements, but now through fate's greatest unexpected twist, he was back in the car he'd been unable to wait to get out of, and he was driving back the way he'd come.

You need to be here. I think we found him.

The impossibility kept rushing him with conflict, equal parts delight and wonder and hope and wariness and scepticism and uncertainty and doubt. William. After all this time? For his two closest friends – close being a relative term, considering he wasn't on speaking terms with either one of them – to simply come across him, today, after three days of Mulder moping over the same lost child, was pretty absurd. Despite Skinner's contact, there were piles of evidence against. First and foremost, Scully hadn't called. It was her phone number that had flashed up on the screen of the cell he kept perpetually charged up, just for her, the only person in the world to know that number, but it wasn't her face that flashed up in his mind when he heard the voice that answered.

If Scully had found William, and there was no doubt in her mind, she would have called him. He was sure. He was sure he hoped so, anyway; he had to allow for the fact that she'd grown and changed in their years together and apart, and he couldn't predict her like he could have twenty years ago. But still, Skinner had said I think, which meant there was doubt, and Scully wouldn't break their mutually agreed silence for I think.

There was doubt. She believed what she could prove, or what she truly felt, and nothing else. Whatever, whoever, they'd found, there was doubt for her. Mulder acknowledged that, and despite the warm ember of hope sparking childishly in his heart, was entirely prepared to be disappointed. Maybe he'd meet his son at the end of the drive, but probably not; maybe he'd hold the boy in his arms again on this very night, but most likely not. She hadn't called, he knew logically, because she didn't want to put him through that disappointment. She'd test the disappointment on herself before recommending it to anyone else, ever the scientist. Ever the martyr. Mulder didn't slow down or divert his course. How quickly can you be in Wyoming? The directions app had said two hours seventeen minutes when he left the house Levin's property investor contact had arranged for the
Johannssons, and by now he'd cut that down to thirty-three minutes. He had used speed limits as
guides for how much to slow down for curves and corners, but otherwise ignored them. Skinner
said she was fine, but he'd also said she was shaken. Why, what had they learned about William, or
the boy they believed to be William, before the call? Had he been raised by drug traffickers, or had
he lost a limb in a freak childhood accident? What had they seen to put the coolest, calmest, most
cyndal duo of feds into such a spin?

"Do you have a William Scully checked in? Or any William?" he asked at the hospital reception
when he breathlessly flew inside, miserable overheated car sagging in relief for this momentary
break in the parking lot. He knew even before the nurse shook her head that it wasn't to be – it was
too much to ask of the universe, to not only guide Scully and Skinner straight to the boy, but to
send Mulder there, too, especially without more accurate detail, such as the boy's surname. Did he
even get to keep the name she gave him, when he was adopted? The nurse said they were lucky
tonight, not a lot of admissions, and no William anywhere in any ward. Mulder accepted this,
reluctantly, though the first tendrils of the disappointment he suspected Scully of trying to protect
him from broke through his outer walls. Not an in-patient. Maybe the boy was a visitor to a patient
when Skinner 'found' him. Maybe the boy was the adopted child of a staff member who had joined
the FBI agents in the lunchroom for a chat between their interviews and divulged details that
indicated he might be hers. There was no way to know without following the few breadcrumbs he
had, and those led to Scully. He lay his badge quickly on the counter, long enough for the nurse to
see and recognise it, not long enough for her to see it was out of date. "Were my colleagues here
earlier?"

"Yes, a man and a woman. I didn't speak to them, I'm sorry. I'm not sure of their names."

"That's alright." Mulder pocketed the badge, glad the nurse wasn't one to question his scruffy
appearance after seeing the two probably pristine agents from before. He could picture them,
Skinner and Scully, intimidating in their supreme coolness and crisp professionalism. "If they were
to stay in town overnight, where would they go? I don't know the area and my calls aren't getting
through."

"Hmm, there's Golden's, which is the bigger complex that most visitors stay at," the nurse
answered, "but any local will tell you to go to Rhonda's Inn. It's only small but much nicer, and out
of the way."

Turning away with a word of thanks, Mulder got the strange impression of being watched, and
looked around. The reception was unpopulated, the nurse's attention back on her screen. A hallway
to his left provided an immediate corner for someone to hide behind, and he leaned aside, trying to
see a shadow or any other indication of human presence. He waited.

Nothing. But that was a pretty normal outcome. He was just jumpy, set on edge by a poor sleep
pattern and an uninformative and worrisome phone call.

He left quickly, wincing to hear the hauntingly Scully-like voice of his inner logic note with a little
too much dry sarcasm that paranoia wasn't usually considered 'pretty normal' even after a weird
phone call, and who in a rural Wyoming hospital did he think would be trying to spy on him
anyway?

He got back in his car and begged it to switch on. His poor car gave him one final chance and
agreed, and they reversed out, with one last glance at the small hospital. More of a medical centre,
actually; what passes for a hospital outside of Thayne. Not having to stay was relieving. When
Skinner had called from inside those walls, ringing on Scully's phone, and mentioned the hospital
after being so evasive with his first couple of responses – how quickly can you be in Wyoming?
She's here. I'm with her now – Mulder's thoughts had naturally spiralled. Scully. Dead. Hurt. Afraid. Oh god, she had been in an accident, hadn't she, an accident in lame-ass Wyoming of all places, almost definitely a set-up, and Skinner wanted to tell him face-to-face. Or her cancer was back, somehow after all this time, and this was where she'd come for secret treatments. Or they'd gotten to her, taken her again, and Skinner had only just found her, dragged out to fucking nowhere and dumped, and he needed Mulder to identify the body. But he should be able to do that himself. Unless she was totally mangled. Maybe there were only birthmarks from under her clothes with which to identify her, marks only Mulder or maybe her mother would know about.

No, thankfully. Just avoiding the phone. Typical, normal Scully behaviour. It seemed Skinner still didn't get it. He knew they were divided, didn't he? Hadn't Mulder told him, four years ago when they'd last spoken, to expect this? Weren't Skinner and Scully close enough that he would have to know where she stood with her former partner, even if she probably didn't really talk about it? Or at the very least, was Skinner not insightful enough to note that they were very deliberately not seen together, which should insinuate – if he wasn't personally up-to-date with their relationship status – that they were avoiding each other for a reason?

Skinner had sounded concerningly, Mulderishly paranoid on the phone, so Mulder made his way to Rhonda's. Out of the way. Quiet. The local favourite, less commercial. It was the one he would have chosen.

The battles were not done in his mind, conflicts of head and heart on numerous levels. Hope versus brutal honesty. Faith versus facts. Scully herself had told him to stay away, but Skinner said they might have found William. Scully had neglected to call, but Skinner had. Sixty-Four had warned that the Worldwide Family of Hosts had eyes on both Mulder and Scully, and may consider her expendable if she was too strongly linked to Mulder, if it became too obvious that she was integral to his plan, which was reason enough to keep his distance and argue with Skinner on the phone about whether she's already shaken was worth breaking that silence for.

It wasn't. She was strong enough to handle any case, anything beyond herself, and did not need his help. Running to her compromised their goal, gave their enemy a reason to harm or discredit her, and the mission was paramount. He needed to win this, to bring down the Worldwide Family of Hosts and expose it for what it was, and he needed her at arm's length to achieve that.

He shouldn't be going. But the mention of William had sent Mulder's resolve into a tailspin. Scully was a power unto herself, but when the case was her, and her son, and her choices, he found his doubts in her. Skinner said she needed him. If she had truly been faced with their child and things were less than ideal, Mulder could imagine that she actually did, for once, need him there, if only as someone to hate more than herself. After all, what was the point of the mission to end all missions if the real goal – Scully – was broken in the process?

Finding William at all was too good to be true. To find him and for the circumstances to be positive was simply asking too much, wasn't it? Skinner's short call had filled Mulder with anxiety and dread, and he didn't have enough information to make any assumptions, so he just drove on into the night, head swimming. Scully, if she really was fine, would fill in the blanks. She would flatten him with facts, dismiss his fanciful fears. Maybe she would introduce their long-lost son to him. Maybe everything was about to change…

The standard-issue, conventional vehicle parked between two of the sweet little log cabins was the first clue he'd wheeled into the right place. The second clue was the tall, imposing frame of Assistant Director Walter Skinner folded over, sitting on the top step of one cabin porch. He stood as soon as Mulder pulled over, and the swinging beams of his headlights briefly caught a worn, tight expression. His stomach dropped further.
Mulder killed the grateful engine and got out. Scully was not around, nor did she appear, annoyed with him for turning up unannounced, annoyed with Skinner for going behind her back in calling him here. William wasn't there, either. Skinner was ominously alone, and his expression looked no less worried to see Mulder here.

"Thanks for coming." Low, flat. No joy or excitement there.

"Where are they?" Mulder asked, rounding the car at a jog, the hope in his chest sinking like lead. Where is my family? "Scully, and William?" How long had it been since he'd been able to put those two names in a single sentence, and say it aloud? How long since he'd seen them both in the same room? He looked past Skinner at the cabin door, closed behind him. "Are they in there?"

Despite the dread growing inside him, he allowed himself to hope again. Reunion. Everything he wanted could be right behind that door. Skinner sighed and looped his thumbs into the pockets of his trousers as Mulder jogged up the steps to join him.

"She is," he confirmed. "We couldn't bring him." They stood a moment on the porch, looking at each other under the light of cute lanterns, seeing the way the world had aged the other. Skinner looked tired, and weary, like he was several steps past done with whatever he'd stepped into here with Scully. This wasn't his world. Then the sounds of the night returned to Mulder's senses: insects entertaining one another with their calls, the breeze whistling through nearby trees and hedges… the waterfall of a shower running. Skinner tilted his head toward the door uneasily.

"She's been in there for almost an hour."

"What, in the shower?" Mulder asked, failing to perceive the issue that was worrying his old friend. His own mind was caught in a depressive loop of four words: We couldn't bring him. William was not here. As usual.

"I've knocked a few times," Skinner said anxiously, demonstrating. The rushing sound of running water did not shut off, nor did it seem to change, as it might if someone were to move under its stream. "I even went and asked the owner for a key to check on her, but she looked at me like I was a pervert." He looked back at Mulder, eyes fearful. "She wouldn't hurt herself, would she?"

Inside, his heart seemed to leap out like a startled cat, striking the walls of his rib cage painfully. The stream of water was perfectly constant, no creaks of footsteps or splashes of water bouncing off a moving body. Almost an hour. He hadn't considered this, not in his whole two-hour drive.

"Why?"

Skinner shrugged, uncomfortable. "I can't shake the thought, since she stormed in there. She seemed… not herself." It was prompt enough for Mulder. He dug in his jacket pocket for what was always there – his lock picking kit, in its little tin. Skinner seemed to check himself when he saw the kit, reeling his worries in. "We're probably overreacting, like the owner said. Agent Scully would never do what we're thinking. We're just tired. Not thinking straight."

"She's on antidepressants that she prescribes herself, so we can't say for sure she's thinking straight, either," he insisted, Skinner's paranoia seeping into his skin. There was so much he didn't know about this situation, so much he still didn't understand, and it only exacerbated the potential terror. The Assistant Director frowned deeply while Mulder fingered through the picks. "How bad was it? With William?"

"She didn't go in to see him," Skinner said, looking back at the door as Mulder found what he was looking for, "but she heard when I did. We barely spoke on the way back, and when we did, it was…"
"Strained," Mulder guessed, starting on the lock. It was a modern keyhole, jagged and reasonably complex. Properly secure. Not that that was going to keep him out. "Do me a favour and don't write me up for breaking into a female agent's sleeping quarters, will you?"

"Better you than me," Skinner replied, voice dry and grateful. The lock clicked unexpectedly soon, and Mulder pushed the door open. The eerily constant rushing of water became louder. The little cabin was neat and homely, sparsely furnished with just a bed and a small table and two chairs, and an unclosed door on the opposite side led to what had to be a tiny bathroom. The two men looked at each other while Mulder pocketed the lock picks. Skinner's expression was conflicted, embarrassed. "If she's fine, I can't be... you know... It wouldn't be right for me to see..." He coughed awkwardly, struggling to find the balance of professionalism and concern, which is a difficult line to locate when you're talking about your opposite-sex colleague, friend and former underling possibly requiring help but definitely being naked, and sending her ex-boyfriend in instead without her consent. "But if you need me-

"I'll be right back," Mulder promised, slipping into the cabin and heading for the bathroom door. As with every moment since Skinner's call, he really had no idea what he was in for around the next bend, and what he feared was only one of many scenarios that could come to be. Scully really could be just fine, standing under the stream of water enjoying the warmth, losing track of time, in which case any intruder would be entirely unwelcome; or she could be lying on the floor of the shower with slit wrists, a victim of the inability she'd fostered inside herself to handle real emotions. She may have slipped over and banged her head, only now coming to, or she may be flat against the tiled wall, head back, hot as fuck with steaming water running over her incredible body, hand between her legs, fulfilling the fantasy he entertained every time he thought of 'Scully' and 'shower' in the same sentence, engaging in a wilful distraction from whatever she and Skinner had learned today.

The range of possibilities were immense, but please, let it be that last option.

At the bathroom door he paused and looked back at Skinner, who stood stock still, waiting for a cue. There was still no tell-tale change in the rush of shower water to indicate movement. Mulder had wondered in the car whether everything might be about to change, and a sickness grew inside him now.

Nothing would be better if he put it off, so he swallowed and leaned until he could see through the door.

The bathroom was little and neat, a cute country basin with handmade soaps arranged in a basket beside a toilet with a knitted toilet roll warmer thing on the top. A relatively modern glass cubicle shower was behind the door, and blessedly clear puddles of spilled water had formed on the tiled floor around it, soaking the bathmats and the abandoned clothing right through.

He saw Scully, and finally heard her. She didn't see him through the steamed glass door, mosaiced to obscurity with condensation and rivulets of shower water, and he backed away quickly before she could. All his worries for her shifted immediately, and he strode back to Skinner, realising what he hadn't bothered to ask, and what Skinner hadn't explicitly said, and what he simply could not reconcile.

"Is she-?"

"What happened?" Mulder demanded at the front door, fear driving him, making him irrational. He pointed back into the cabin. Scully in the shower should have made his day, not flipped it. "What made her like this?"
Skinner panicked. "Like what? What's wrong?"

"She's a mess. What did you see tonight?"

"God, Mulder. Does she need an ambulance?"

Ambulance? Mulder felt like the question was completely out of field, unrelated to what he was having trouble actually asking. "No. Walter, answer me! What happened with William? Is he…?"

He couldn't swallow this time; his throat had gone dry, and it hurt to try. The hospital, the urgency – he'd told himself it was all too good to be true, hadn't he? "Is he alive?"

Skinner stared at him in the loud silent heartbeat that followed, looking exactly as confused and unprepared as Mulder felt. "What? Yes. Of course he is. Is Agent Scully?"

Rewind thirty seconds, and Mulder recalled that this had been a genuine shared fear of theirs, and he hadn't allayed Skinner's before launching into his demands. He inhaled deeply, slowing down his thoughts with effort. Of course he's alive. His son, their William, was alive, or at least the boy Skinner suspected of being theirs.

"She's not hurt. She's… not fine, but I'll take care of it," he assured his friend before he could stop himself. He shouldn't even be here, let alone staying longer, but he couldn't leave Scully like this, nor could he ask Skinner to do more than he already had. Skinner looked heavenwards, relieved. The water continued running in the background as Mulder hesitated, and made himself ask for more, unsure he'd like what he heard. "What happened tonight? How the hell did you find him, all the way out here? And why were you at the hospital?"

Skinner sighed and looked around the picturesque surroundings beyond the porch. "What I'm assuming is your case brought us out here – a mysterious file landing atop my inbox about a man back from the dead, which is probably just a day in the life for you, but happens a little too often these days for me to be comfortable with my place in the universe – and one of the witnesses attached to the investigation was a boy called William. His uncle was hurt in this Bletchley's rampage."

"Morris Bletchley?" Mulder confirmed, surprised. Austin Dunn's childhood friend, disappeared during school and never heard from again until he turned up earlier this year out of the blue to offer Austin a puff from a vaporiser that infected his lungs. Skinner was exactly the opposite of surprised.

"Hmm. Had a feeling that came from you, whatever she says about working alone. Anyway, this William had the same birthdate and bizarre middle name as yours – no offence – and after dissecting what looked too much like a Super Solider and fending off fake officials trying to procure the body for god-knows-who-this-time, it really didn't seem that far-fetched that your kid would be in the centre of it all."

Mulder gazed into the cabin, thoughts in overdrive again. Skinner's words clicked into place in the huge internal puzzle he'd been piecing together over the past few months, and made perfect sense. The first generation of Super Soldiers were gone, but this new breed were certainly deserving of the same moniker. And for the Hosts to send false agents in their stead to collect their misplaced merchandise was not surprising, considering how hard they worked to keep their agenda and operations a secret. So Scully had found one, cut into it and made observations.

She was on their radar now whether Mulder had come tonight or not. And their son was tangential to all of this.
"Is the kid safe? Happy?"

"He's got a decent life, whatever she tries to tell you in there," Skinner assured him, nodding into the cabin to indicate Scully. "He's loved, which is why we didn't extract him. And he's safe – for now. I don't know how strong his connection is to the case, but I'm going to do what I can to keep this buried."

For the longest time, Mulder had questioned the Assistant Director's motives, but for many years now, he'd known to count him as one of his most trusted allies, and he felt a wave of graciousness for the man who would do and had done anything to help him. Even though half of the time, it felt like Skinner wasn't even on his side, he usually found if he dug deep enough that there was some other blockade Skinner was quietly working around to keep him safe from, and invariably, he found, Skinner was always on Scully's side, even when Mulder was going too far or scaring them.

"Thank you," he murmured, taking the doorknob and preparing to go back to Scully, but he paused. "Sir… Are you sure? About William?"

Skinner scratched his eyebrow and reached into his jacket. "Of course there's no certainty without a DNA test, which I intend to have performed as soon as I get back." He opened his badge and for a moment Mulder looked expectantly, unimpressed by the familiar motion. He squinted and looked closer. In the leather hinge of the badge's covering, a scattering of human hair. "She doesn't know, and I don't think she'd be happy if I mentioned it."

"You pulled hair out of Scully's kid?"

"Really? Still 'Scully's kid'? Who are you kidding? Scully's kid hid it there under the pretence of looking at my ID, then left me a cryptic message inside a sketch to ensure I'd find it." Skinner shook his head and carefully put the badge away. "He didn't get that covert bullshit from your partner. I think he had a pretty good idea what I was really doing there, and who I was representing. Aside from all this anecdotal evidence and awaiting genetic confirmation, no, I don't have any solid proof I spoke to the William, but," and he turned again to look forlornly into the cabin, toward the bathroom door and the relentless sound of the shower, shrugging helplessly, "after all these years of your partner frowning at me, glaring at me, suspecting me of something or another, I'd recognise those eyes in any face. Even yours."

It was proof enough, at least for the meantime, and Mulder looked down at his feet, heart twisting. They'd found him. It was real. And still out of reach for him, already a stone's throw into the past, just like when he'd come home from ten months away just a few weeks too late.

Maybe Scully had the right idea as to the appropriate reaction to the news of this day, and maybe Mulder would just go and join her.

"You'll want to listen to this," Skinner added, withdrawing a handheld recording device from another pocket and passing it over. "The last interview, I think I'll wipe rather than admit to evidence, but you should get to hear it." He nodded at the bathroom door. "Good luck. And thanks for getting here."

He turned and tread down the steps, still an imposing figure even in retreat, and Mulder closed the door quietly behind him and slid the recorder into his pocket with his lock picks and car keys. The noise of the shower was louder with the door closed, and the quiet human noises underneath it were more audible to him now than before. How had he missed that when he first came in, mistaking the silence for suicide or autoeroticism? There was no silence at all.

He should go, now, before she knew he'd ever arrived. Being here was in direct violation of his
plan to undermine and combat the Hosts. It was integral that he should expose them; it was the complete validation of everything, everything he had worked for and everything he had sacrificed.

Scully included.

William included.

He went back to the doorway of the bathroom and looked at her, curled up on the floor of the shower like a kitten left out in the rain, the shower stream pouring over her. Her hair, dark with saturation, licked over her arms, which she had wrapped around her legs and her lowered face, and even through the wet glass he could tell that her shoulders shook and heaved with heart-wrenching sobs.

It was the very picture of desolation. He hadn't seen her like this since she'd had to admit to him she'd given away their child.

There was an argument Mulder and Scully had had a thousand times, a bitter, brutal, nasty, blameworthy argument where everyone ended up broken and battered like she was right now, which was why, in fact, they'd only ever had the argument inside his head, and never in real life. It was the argument where he admitted how much he hated her for what she'd chosen to do in desperation, without consultation with him, to their son. It was where he ranted at her for her selfishness and cowardice, for letting him down and for proving herself unworthy of being William's mother. It was where he told her she deserved any pain or sadness or guilt she felt for her actions, because it was all her fault. From there it spiralled quickly and painfully, because his imagined Scully spoke back on behalf of his subconscious, which reminded him that if was going to play the blame game, he had to dole out prizes for his own part in what she'd done. And his subconscious was far from kind.

His subconscious spoke logic, and it was very hard to argue with. She once had said he didn't define her but he knew his actions had defined her choices, and they both had suffered the consequences in the years elapsed.

And after all this time, in spite of every resentful thought he'd almost had but caught himself before fully acknowledging, he wasn't angry. He was still in love with her, and she was still his; and seeing her like this, a tiny heartbroken ball of anguish, he felt the burden of responsibility on his heart, and knew there was nowhere else he could possibly be in this moment and feel right about it, however hard this moment was for him.

This was his family. Comfort didn't just go one way.

Tentatively, Mulder stepped into the bathroom, unnoticed by Scully. His shoes he placed carefully on the sloppy wet tiles, mindful not to slip over, and he reached for the glass shower door. It creaked as it opened, and the cool off-spray of the shower peppered his arm as Scully abruptly looked up and instinctively shoved herself back, still crying. Her eyes were bloodshot and her pale skin blotchy, and her hair was plastered to her head and cheeks. When she saw him, her defensive tenseness fell away, and she burst into fresh tears that blended immediately with the heavy shower water.

"No," she begged, voice shattered, "not you."

Mulder winced and pushed the door open fully. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that."

He pushed his sleeves back as far as they would go and plunged in to turn off the taps, flinching when he felt the temperature of the water. Stone cold. He noticed now the lack of steam in the air,
and the violent way Scully shook in her corner as she cried. Yet both faucets needed plenty of
turning to shut off, indicating that this shower had begun warm or hot and had simply run on full
stream until the hot water system had emptied.

And Scully either hadn't noticed or hadn't cared enough to turn the water off.

"G-Go away," she choked when the shower stopped, her voice muffled, her face hidden.
Humiliated and miserable, she clutched her legs with one arm and curled the other around her head.
Water ran off her in rivers over the pebbles of her goose-bumped bare skin.

"Come on," Mulder murmured, his chest aching to see her like this. He leaned over and gently took
her upper arms in his hands. "Shit, you're freezing."

Her skin was painfully cold to touch, bloodless. He tugged her upright, holding her steady as she
awkwardly unfolded and got her shaky legs underneath herself. She didn't fight, nor did she look up
at him; she only shook and sobbed brokenly, and only took a step when he guided her out of the
cubicle onto the soaked bathmat. She dripped and glistened, Aphrodite straight out of the sea, her
body as he'd imagined in that brief second where he'd considered she might be pleasuring herself,
but through her inconsolable tears he could hear her teeth chattering. Not an appropriate train of
thought, Mulder. Sitting on a shelf on the wall was a single folded towel, which he grabbed and
shook out. It was tiny. Bigger than a handtowel, not bigger than a gym towel. Insufficient. Still, he
released her to wrap the excuse for a towel around her shoulders so she could dry off.

"Y-You sh-sh-shouldn't be h-here," she stammered, not moving. Her arms hung limply, her head
hung, the towel hung over all of her, and she just cried. Shock? From what? Concerned for this
version of Scully who didn't take every opportunity to do everything for herself, unassisted,
Mulder rubbed her shoulders dry with the towel, running it down her arms, over her chest, mindful
not to linger over her breasts, over her stomach, all of which just got wet again as her hair kept
running with ever more water.

"Come on, you're alright," he reassured her quietly, running the towel over her hair, careful not to
rub back and forth because that made it dry scruffily, he'd been chastised in the past. Through the
damp flannel he squeezed cold water out of the ends, then let go and grasped another lock and did
the same. Her eyes stayed tightly closed, even as he tenderly cradled her head in one hand and
patted dry her hairline and face with the edge of the now-damp towel. Around her eyes her skin
was warm, heated by the salt of her tears, but everything else – her nose, her cheeks, her lips, her
ears – was deathly cold. "It's okay. You're okay. Does this place seriously only have one towel?!"
he demanded rhetorically, having scanned the entire bathroom and seeing that there was nothing
else. Maybe there was something in the main room, a drawer or a cupboard or even a pile of soft
laundered towels on the bed he'd completely missed. "Come on," he said again, this time pulling
Scully after him out of the bathroom. She followed clumsily, her legs and feet probably numb with
cold and poor circulation thanks to her compressed position in the shower.

"You should go," she whispered in a rush between uneven breaths. "I d-don't want…"

"To die of hypothermia, I assume," he muttered, unsure whether she heard, looking around. He
could gather, though, what she meant. She didn't want him to see her like this. Messy. Vulnerable.
He didn't blame her. Too late.

There were no towels on the bed, and when he left her standing in the middle of the room to fling
open drawers and to fruitlessly search the one open shelf, he came back empty-handed.

"I guess this place really does have just one towel," he admitted, wiping new drops off her chest
and shoulders before kneeling in front of her to roughly dry her legs with an increasingly wet towel.
Under his hands her legs shook like she might fall down, and it wasn't the good kind of shaking he might have been aiming for in the past when he knelt before her like this. The first few times he'd seen her naked, it had been as platonically asexual as this moment now and he hadn't had any untoward thoughts at the time, but back then he hadn't had a decade of outstanding sexual experiences in his memory to combat as he reminded himself, this was really not the time to notice their intimate proximity, or how absolutely gorgeous she continued to be, even as she cried, even as she shuddered to inhale.

Tentatively Mulder gripped her thighs and twisted her; she turned on the spot, uncharacteristically obedient. It was unnerving, actually, when they'd been at virtual emotional war since sometime 2012 and she'd fought him at every turn since, throwing her cold sharp knives of words and staring him down with those cold sharp eyes whenever he asked anything of her. It was a tough act, an impenetrable solid glass shield, ensuring he didn't get anything from her except what she could offer any stranger: indifference, professional distance, even disdain. He dried water off the curve of her ass, swallowing his conflicted thoughts at the accusingly vibrant scarlet of the ouroborus serpent tattoo, that little reminder of the disastrous consequences of sidelining or underappreciating her when the world started slipping from her control. Like now.

Her back, her side. He looked up at her as she coughed, and finally moved of her own accord, wrapping her wet arms around herself against the cold, like she was holding her emotions inside herself, or trying. She trembled all over.

"Shit, sorry." He was wiping her down with a wet towel, hardly helping matters. He stood quickly and threw it aside, apologising again as she turned almost automatically to face him, and roughly rubbed her arms with his palms, trying to warm her up. She was freezing, the Ice Queen no longer just in name, and another cursory glance around the cutesy cabin confirmed that there was nothing else to dry her with. He could warm her up, though. "Here," he said, leaning forward into her and rolling his shoulders back, tugging the sleeves of his jacket to hurriedly remove it. He swung it around and settled it on her shoulders, even as she shook her head tightly.

"Don't. It's yours," she muttered thickly through her tears, and shrugged like she wanted it off, but this was her stubborn, self-sufficient side coming back to life, and it wasn't to be listened to. He nodded and closed the front of the jacket over her folded arms, hiding her wet breasts from his corruptible eyes and locking his transferred warmth in with her, then wrapped his own arms around her and pulled her tightly against his chest.

"Yeah, but I don't look like Kate Winslet at the end of The Titanic," Mulder countered gently, rubbing her back and resting his chin on the top of her head. He felt her break at his playfulness, and she quaked in his arms as she started crying anew into his shoulder, pressing close, hiding from the world, not fighting him. He held her tighter, shushed her lightly, but otherwise just let her fall to pieces. What else was there to do? She'd found her son and hadn't been able to keep him. She wasn't in a place yet to talk about it, and the way she shook and sobbed, he suspected this was the most she'd let herself feel in a very long time, courtesy of those fucking pills. Speaking of: "Scully, where's your bag?"

He'd looked around the whole cabin looking for towels, and there was no suitcase or overnight bag, either. She had some trouble answering, though it was only one word after some thought. "C-Car."

"Do you want me to get it?" he asked, still rubbing her back, taking a lock of her sopping wet hair in his other hand and wringing it out on the floorboards when he felt her chin quivering against his chest, teeth still chattering uncontrollably. "Is your medication in there?" If ever there was a time it was appropriate for her to take mood stabilisers, now was it. But she shook her head. "Where are
"Gone," she whispered, voice a little more substantial. She turned her face to ensure he heard her when she said, still avoiding his gaze, "I flushed them."

Mulder wasn't sure what to say to that at first. Flushed her meds, as in, down the drain? No longer taking them? That seemed to be the insinuation. "When?" he asked finally.

"After last time." Her breath hitched and she choked on a little sob. "Just one… less way…" She couldn't finish, and the next intelligible thing he was able to make out from her was almost a minute later of heartbroken crying, and sounded like, "Fucking… cold…"

Yeah, she was. She lifted one foot and rubbed it against the back of her other ankle. "Here, sit," he prompted, releasing her from his embrace and guiding her to the edge of the bed. She dropped down, and again he knelt in front of her, this time grasping her feet to check their temperature. "Jesus." Her clothes were on the wet bathroom floor and probably unsalvageable, so he untied his shoelaces and straightened to kick off his sneakers, then peeled his socks off and crouched again. She shied away uncertainly when he grabbed her ankle and rolled his warm, worn sock onto her foot. "After everything you've seen, you're grossed out by my socks?" he asked incredulously. He felt her calf muscle relax at the joke, and he continued with his work. "Baby, if through contact and association I was going to infect you with anything, it'd be reputation, not socks. There." He sat back on his heels and affectionately squeezed her feet through his oversized grey socks. She still wouldn't look at him directly, but she definitely seemed calmer. Family is comfort, and it was working its charm, on both of them. "Better? Granted, I've been wearing these for two days, but that just makes them warmer."

"And dirtier."

A constant surprise. "Oh. Our sense of humour's back, hey?" Mulder raised an eyebrow and hooked his finger in the neck of one sock. "Does that mean you don't want them?"

She pulled her shivering feet away from him and tried to suppress a hiccup, pressing blue-tinged lips together. Mulder got up, leaning past her to wrench the thick quilt and blankets of the bed back. He waited, a silent invitation, and after a beat she did as he hoped, shuffling herself onto the bed and under the blankets. Of course there was a temptation to climb in with her, fuelled by the argument in Virginia where she'd insinuated she would have liked him to on Christmas night, but he knew it was unwise. Firmly he tucked the bed in behind her, trapping her in where she would hopefully start generating some body heat.

The Scully-shaped bump in the bedclothes continued to quake, leaving him doubtful. Mulder retreated into the bathroom, scooping the lump of useless towel off the floorboards as he went. His hands and neck were wet from contact with her hair, and the front of his shirt was sticking to his skin, damp now. It was hard to feel bothered, though; the comfort he had given her in these last few minutes soaking back into his dampened skin, soothing him after a long couple of hours stressing, a long couple of days driving, and a long couple of years missing this kind of familiar intimacy.

In the bathroom he looked for something else to offer her to wear, but as he'd guessed, the runout of water from the shallow shower basin had eliminated this option for tonight. He shook out her inside-out and splashed wet clothes and hung them over the basin and the top of the shower walls, hoping they would dry off overnight. She'd undressed without much notice, apparently, though as he arranged her sensible lace underwear he tried very hard not to imagine this event in careful detail. She was probably crying at the time, and crying was unsexy, he reminded himself. Her gun and holster were strewn carelessly among her crumpled dress pants and twisted blouse. Ugh. He
lay the holster over the toilet, unwilling to touch the gun. He didn't know if she'd been reissued with a weapon since he'd pulled that on her in Chicago, fuelled by the hate of angry love-torn spirits, and the few parallels between that night and this one – together with Scully in a motel room, her evident lack of desire to be there with him, the sound of the shower running with her naked under it – made him edgy, almost superstitious about the gun. Not that he thought he'd get into another atrocious argument with her and threaten to kill her, or that extremely hot making out in the dark was likely to be on the table.

He cringed when he lifted her jacket, its sleeve waterlogged and dark, and felt the weight of full pockets. Badge, notepad with one damp edge of every page, pen, phone. Shit. Mulder pressed the home button and the lock screen brightened, indicating no damage. Password protected. Good girl. Reputation wasn't the only thing she'd caught from him.

He went back out to her and laid the contents of her jacket out on the table, but took a guess at her password and got it on the first go. The home screen unlocked and he tutted lightly.

"Your password's too easy," he mentioned, and heard her scoff through the last of her tears.

"Apparently. Didn't keep Skinner out."

She didn't chastise him for breaking into her personal device, but nor did she go any further and express any resentment toward Mulder for attending at Skinner's request. She just lay under the blankets and shivered. Mulder glanced back down at her phone in his hand, this phone he'd been waiting to hear from for so long, until tonight, when the wrong person had used it to dial him in. For the right reasons. It was right, wasn't it, that he was there?

"You have two missed calls," he commented, thumbing through the options to check who it was. The answer annoyed him but he tried to keep his irritation out of his voice. "Warren Colt."

"Leave it."

Mulder did as she asked and switched off the screen, putting the phone down beside the rest of her things and leaning on the edge of the table. The room went quiet as he watched her. The tears had stopped. Her breathing was still uneven, punctuated by blitzes of chattering teeth. From here he couldn't see her face; since he'd arrived she hadn't let him get a good look at her face, and she'd tried her best not to look at him at all. Typical embarrassed Scully behaviour. Embarrassed or secretive.

"You sh-should go. It's… not safe."

He scratched his ear. "I know."

He shouldn't be here. Really. They both had a lot to lose if anyone other than Skinner knew he was in this cabin with her. The room was paid for by the Bureau credit card, no doubt, and she was here on official business, and if her presence here was linked with his, she would have questions to answer back in DC. Likewise, if Mulder was being watched or followed by the Hosts (though he was reasonably sure he wasn't, or he would never have travelled with the Johannssons) they now had their material with which to discredit Scully before her case could get any traction, and proof that she mattered to him. Those same sick bastards had killed what mattered to Dr Gray, and would have done it over and over again if he and Scully hadn't accidentally stumbled into that conspiracy and autopsied Rebecca Johannsson before knowing what this was.

Scully still didn't. A million times in the last few weeks as his understanding became fuller, he'd fantasised about calling her, turning up on her doorstep or grabbing her hand on the street and
pulling her into a crowded marketplace where no one could follow them, and telling her everything he'd learned. He'd imagined her incredulous look, replaced slowly by that reticent okay-I'll-entertain-it look, eventually replaced by that most coveted look of all: acceptance. Revelation. Belief. Several times he'd come close, but he'd promised Sixty-Four he'd keep his distance, that he'd stay the course and finish the job, for all their sakes.

Well, he'd come here for William, and William wasn't here. He'd entered out of fear for Scully's safety and sanity, and Scully was perfectly safe and apparently, after an hour-long shower and a few weeks drug-free, clean. He'd stayed to comfort her, and she was now somewhat comforted, certainly warmer and drier and calmer than when he arrived. He should go now. She didn't want him here; she'd told him to leave, she hadn't called him in the first place and she wouldn't look at him. Plus, whatever she'd admitted in Virginia the last time they met, she'd still walked out on him three years ago and hadn't looked back. Wasn't that a good enough reason to leave her alone, if none of the others sufficed?

"Are you going now?" she asked softly, no opinion expressed in her voice, testing his resolve. He looked down at his feet, wiggling his bare toes.

"Not while you're wearing half my outfit, I suppose," he mused. It wasn't like he needed his socks or jacket, but it might be difficult for her to dispose of discreetly, the jacket especially. His brain was always thinking like a forensic analyst, considering how he might be caught, pinned down. "And you've got my keys."

She seemed to only now take note of the lumps in the front of his jacket, and shifted slightly underneath the blankets as she felt through the pockets. "Do you want them back?"

There were really no logical reasons for staying, yet his feet wouldn't budge, and his fingertips found their way to the cross at his throat. Wasn't this how he'd lost her in the first place, walking out on moments like this, when she needed him, in favour of the job? Wasn't this what led to the loss of their son? Scully wasn't just his former workmate and his last girlfriend. If she was nothing else, then yes, he should leave now. But she wasn't. She was his partner. She was the mother of his child. She was his best friend.

"Fuck," he muttered, glancing helplessly heavenward. Who was he kidding? He wasn't going anywhere. His hair and fingerprints were already all over this place, if anybody bothered to strip it apart looking for proof. "Scully. Scully," he said again when she didn't respond or move. "Scully, look at me."

"No." Her reply was quiet but firm.

"Why not?"

She was silent for a beat too long. "I don't want to see it."

"See what?" Mulder asked, confused. He leaned forward from the table, trying to see her without actually approaching. "Me?"

"Your look," she choked out through a tight throat, struggling not to cry again. The curves in the blankets that designated her position shifted as she curled tighter, smaller. "Everyone... Everyone whose opinion ever m-mattered to me, I disappoint. I disappointed my father when I left medicine. I disappointed my mother when I left my faith. And y-you." She drew a wet, shaky breath, and he wished he was holding her. "I let you down more than anyone else, a constant disappointment to your high expectations of me. When I'm too weak, when I'm too slow. Whenever I didn't s-stand up for y-you. The p-p-pills, our baby, our work... I've disappointed you over and over, and I see
that look on your face in my head every night, reminding me how utterly I've f-failed you, and my mom and my dad but mostly you, and," she exhaled in a rush and inhaled again quickly before she could lose her nerve, and said all the rest in a hurry before she could break into sobs again, "and his is the only face I've n-never seen with that look, and right now, I can't look at you, because I just know he's got your face and your look and I couldn't... I c-couldn't go in and see him looking at me like that-"

She broke, but around the part where she'd referred to herself failing him he'd broken too. He shoved the blankets aside and climbed into the bed behind her, wrapping himself tightly around her, pulling her close by her hips so she fit perfectly against him, lifting her by her stomach to slide his other arm underneath her and enveloping her in his arms as she started crying again. He pressed his face into the crook of her shoulder and neck, breathing her familiar scent like an addict with cocaine, her wet hair dampening his short beard and his own hair. He tried his best to hold her together but the more she opened up the less of her there seemed to be to hold, and the less substantial he himself felt as she whittled him down with her raw words.

"I betrayed him," she managed brokenly. "He was my b-baby and I gave him away. I was supposed to take care of him, I was his mother. He was meant to be able to count on m-me. He trusted me and I wasn't strong enough to k-keep him, and I let him go. What kind of mother does what I did? I've kept this b-beautiful image in my head of his precious face, his eyes looking up at me full of love and trust I didn't deserve, and tonight I betrayed him – and you – again because I'm a coward, and I couldn't, I just couldn't look at him, and s-see that memory replaced with your disappointment. How can he think anything else of me?" she demanded wildly when Mulder only whispered "Shhh..." into her ear and tightened his grip on her. "I can argue I thought it was for the best, but it wasn't. He didn't get a choice, you didn't get a choice, my mom didn't get a choice, and now after f-fourteen years of lying to myself, wanting to believe I did right by him, my son is exactly what I hoped to save him from: an orphan, and one goddamn step away from them. And I can't do a single fucking thing to help him except walk away again, because all I'll do is make things worse because of my fucking notorious name."

Her words settled heavily on him, not all of them making sense with what little context he had for tonight's encounter but the tone and the slathering of guilt weighted disproportionately. Her notoriety was one of the ways this was his fault, not hers; despite her brilliance, the name Dana Scully was known in their circles as that troublemaker Fox Mulder's sidekick and associate, and she was never going to get a distance from that. This inescapability was what had put her in the position of having to decide whether she was the best guardian for William, and now it was impacting her ability to protect him once again.

"I failed him," she continued berating herself. "I failed you. I had no right. He was yours, too. He was yours. And now he's nobody's. I sent him away to be loved and raised by other people, and you never got to see him smile or laugh or sit up, and I hate that I did and you d-didn't, and those other people got to see him walk and feed himself with a spoon and ride a bike and climb a tree and start school... I took all that away from you." She ducked her face further away, burying herself into the damp pillow. He heard her whispered question: "How can you be here with me after what I did to you?"

A difficult question to answer succinctly. Mulder shifted his head to rest on hers. "You know why I'm here."

"I gave your son away without asking you. I betrayed you in the worst way."

"Scully."
"I lost faith in you," she blurted miserably. "That's why I did it. I didn't think you were ever coming back, even though you _said_ you would, even though you _promised_. I gave up on you, and when I did that, I lost something. I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel anymore, couldn't imagine how I'd find a way to protect him. I should have waited. I should have known you would come through. I should have been as strong as you believed I was." She tensed, holding emotion in with difficulty. "You shouldn't have come here tonight. You should have gone to him instead."

"Scully," he said, tugging his arm out from under her so he could prop himself up on it and try again to get her to look at him. She wouldn't. "Scully, I'm where I want to be."

She shook her head and struggled for an even breath. "We found him. We found William. And I didn't call you, not because I didn't want you to know, because I didn't believe in him at first, because apparently I don't believe in anything-"

"You don't," Mulder interrupted, "but luckily for us, reality, even insanely unlikely reality, doesn't require belief in order to perpetuate."

"Luckily. I don't feel lucky."

"Skinner says William's alive," Mulder reminded her. "That's something we didn't know for sure before tonight, and that's a blessing we never thought we'd have. He told me he's relatively safe and happy. Scully," he prompted gently, "what else did you want?"

"I wanted him to have more than we could have given him. I wanted him to have a dad he could see every day, but the man who adopted him, his dad, is dead. I wanted him to have a mom who wasn't an abduction and a person of interest to all our enemies, and I wanted him to have a mom who'd always be there and protect him from all the worst things in life, but I didn't save him from anything. His mom died. I sent our son away to protect him from everything you and I inevitably attract, lies and conspiracy and death and danger, and all I gave him was a family destined to die anyway, and yesterday he was less than a yard away from Morris Bletchley when he was shot dead, and that man is _definitely_ someone's science experiment."

"Yeah, he probably was," Mulder agreed vaguely, not wanting to get into the case with her while there was so much William stuff he wasn't clear on, and while this topic was finally open between them. Poor William, losing his parents not once but twice. Fortunately he would have no memory of Mulder walking out the door, or of Scully handing him over. "You can't justify your self-punishment with talk about destiny when we have absolutely no evidence to support that concept here. The adoptive parents didn't die of destiny, just like you and I haven't survived this long thanks to destiny. Every choice we've made has defined our paths through life and time, and what if we'd made one single choice differently? We might not be here tonight. Or you might and I might not, or vice versa. The point is, if William had grown up with us instead of the family you gave him to, you can't guarantee it would have been better than what he got. In retrospect you're thinking _if I'd just held onto hope in Mulder another few weeks, we'd be together now_, but you have no proof of that. We couldn't have hidden as effectively as a family of three, or travelled as quickly – we might have been caught. He may still have been hunted; any number of unknown factors may have separated us. We might have lost him some other way, without the chance you had by being proactive to ensure he went somewhere _they_ couldn't reach him. He's alive, and he's out in the world, not in someone's lab or locked in some cult's dungeon. Be grateful, Scully. And forgive yourself: you made the best decision you could, and in that moment, it must have been right, or you would never have done it."

She was starting to calm down again, though still heavy with misery, still shivering slightly with cold. "It's not my forgiveness I need."
"Yes, it is," he insisted, unraveling his other arm from her middle to rub her outer thigh. Palm only, fingertips deliberately raised. Fingertips were sexy, provocative, and that was not the tone he was trying to set. Comfort. Warmth. She didn't react, presumably unaware that her naked lower half was pressed against his jeans. He was not unaware. "You've had mine for a long time. It's only you we're both waiting on." He paused a while, battling with the words inside himself. Her raw vulnerability was speaking to his. "I need your forgiveness, too."

"There is nothing you've done that will ever equate to what I did to you," she whispered. "You never gave up on me. You never betrayed me. You would never have given our-"

"I was his father," Mulder said fiercely, making her flinch at the unexpected passion in his voice. "I should have been there. I should have been there. For him, and for you most of all. I got it all wrong, fucked up to the highest degree. I shouldn't have waited as long as I did to try and hide you; I should have had you out of DC long before you were close to due, and if it still turned out I needed to leave you for a while…" He trailed off, embarrassed. Now, to speak of, it sounded so impossibly ridiculous. A reason, for leaving his partner and newborn alone and defenseless against enemies like the ones he knew would come for her, even for a while? Even if his partner was as competent and incredible as his? "I should have been with you. You shouldn't have needed to make your choice, because you shouldn't have been alone. You should have been able to rely on me. You and William were my family, my responsibility, and I did what I always do – I put the cause first."

She swallowed uneasily, uncomfortable with shifting the blame. "You had to. We agreed."

"Did I have to? I don't know now. I would do everything differently if I could do that time over. I was meant to be back months earlier, like we'd discussed, but there was always something else to chase, always some new lead. I was selfish. Undeserving of him, which is why I wasn't shocked when Skinner told me what you'd done. It seemed fitting." He shouldered the blanket off his arm and raised it to her head, smoothing her hair as it started to curl. She usually avoided getting it wet if she didn't have a hairdryer handy. God, he missed having her around so all these little anecdotes of useless information had some sort of context. "I stayed because I'm arrogant and I always think I know best, like you've said in the past, and I didn't want to know any different. I didn't want to know I'd left you to deal with impossible challenges and that I was failing my family."

"Mulder," she murmured, the first time she'd said his name all night, "you were saving the world."

"Maybe." In a roundabout, long-term way, he'd believed he was, and maybe it could be argued now that he'd been digging up the groundwork then for what he was now doing, in trying to save the world. "It cost me mine, though."

Silence. Did he imagine it, or did she shuffle slightly closer when she shifted next? She seemed to take a long time processing his words.

"There's no destiny, Mulder," she reminded him finally, softly. "If I can't argue could have, should have, neither can you. We don't know what would have happened if you'd stayed. Maybe they would have come for all of us. Maybe Skinner would be out here today identifying our fourteen-years-dead skeletons, dug out of some ditch, and maybe our son would have still ended up an orphan, but gotten stuck in the foster system instead of ending up here with his uncle. Maybe we would have been gloriously happy, but we don't know."

"That's right, we don't. We only have what we know today, and what we know in our hearts. You, Scully," he said, taking her chin in his hand and turning her face so she had to look at him with her swollen, red-rimmed eyes, still shockingly blue, "are not a failure. You are not a disappointment, and look at me: I am not disappointed by you. That pain and guilt you feel? That's what you feel
because you're a mother, the best mother – listen to me," he insisted when she tried to pull away. "I know you. You would have done anything for our child, and you did. You broke your own heart rather than let him come to harm. You risked us, knowing I might never forgive you, and your relationship with your mother."

She stared at him. "She hasn't forgiven me."

"I don't think that's true. In any case, she never understood the extent of what we wanted to protect William from. We couldn't stop them coming for him. Not many parents could make the sacrifice you did. I couldn't have done it. It doesn't make me the better parent, Scully, far from it. It makes me the coward, and you righteous, like always." He felt that mesmerising pull that came with sustained eye contact with her and played the game, holding out. "I have learnt so much from you."

"We're pathetic," she sighed, and he let her chin go. "Twenty-three years and we still can't agree on anything, not even whose fault it is that we're miserable."

It was so stupid, so stupidly true, that Mulder snorted with amusement, and he saw the first radiant crack of a smile at the edge of her mouth. Her lips no longer trembled, and colour was returning to them. With affection he touched the corner of her lips, trying to catch it, and stroked her cheek. Her lashes fluttered down, hiding the blue and the red, breaking eye contact before the usual intensity could build up, the last time they were in a bed together occurring suddenly to him and maybe to her, though the circumstances were very different and he was quite sure they weren't facing any ghosts this time.

"We'll just have to agree to disagree, as always," he said eventually. "How do we always go forward from an impasse like this? We've only been here a million times."

Scully moved in his arms. "We go back to the facts." She had stopped shivering; she pushed the blanket back enough to release her arm, and she was holding the recorder from Skinner. No – it was hers. He recognised it from Rebecca Johannsson's autopsy, having to edit his own voice off the recording. She looked at him again, this time of her own volition. Eyes red and itchy, skin raw and make-up free, hair a damp mess, she was as lovely as ever. She was here. "Our son's alive."

It was relieving to hear it from Skinner but to hear it from her made him smile. "I want to know everything."

Her expression faltered slightly and she turned her gaze back to the recorder. "I don't know much. I didn't meet him – I couldn't-"

"And that's okay," Mulder insisted, but she spoke over him, determined that he should hear it. "Not just for me, for him, too. I didn't want to be the bitch birth mother who abandoned him, but more than that, I didn't want to be the birth mother who walked in where the mother he loved walked out." She fidgeted with the recorder. "Her name was Sarah. The woman who loved my baby, kissed his bruises and sent him to school when he was big enough. She was called Sarah, and she died, in that same ward where we found him. If I'd come looking for William sooner, I could have saved her-"

Sarah. "No 'could have's','" he reminded her. "Of course you would have done what you could to help Sarah if you'd been able at the time, but the truth is, we had no reason to come looking for him before now. We were blessed to have him for the short time we did but aside from that, you and I are, generally speaking, cursed. We've never been safe, we never would have been, and we're not now." He paused. "William doesn't know about us, does he? Skinner said he might."
Scully shrugged against his chest. "I don't know. He said some odd things. He knows he's adopted." It was her turn to pause, still playing with the recorder. She almost smiled again. "He goes by Will."

It was the last thing either of them said for a while, revelling in the idea that their William – a silenced character in the myth of their long life together – was a real person, out there in the world. Somehow, the taking of a nickname, even one they might have given him anyway, made him more real, more believable. It gave him substance.

Scully waved the recorder weakly. "Do you want to hear his voice?"

It wasn't the first on the recorder but they rewound and fast-forwarded and skipped through the voices until they found where Skinner's voice, low and gravelly and probably quite intimidating to a child, identified the particulars of the case and of the interview.

"Is this going into federal evidence? This interview?"

"Is that him?" Mulder asked before he could stop himself, because of course that was the other speaker, the interviewee. Unconsciously he reached for the device in Scully's hand, the closest he would come tonight to touching his son, and he lightly fingered the plastic edge, feeling the faint vibration of sound emitting from the little speaker panel. Will. It sounded nice, a name for a nice kid, which he hoped his had turned out to be. And his voice… "He's a westerner." It almost made him laugh, though it wasn't funny, just… incredible. Real people developed regional accents. Ideas didn't. This was real.

Scully didn't have much to say as they listened, but she splayed her fingers slightly, and Mulder slid his in between, holding the device with her, holding her hand over the sound of their lost-and-found child. This was the intimacy he'd been missing for all these years. Family, or the closest he might ever get to the three of them being together again. William's voice laced around them, warming him with wonder. The tiny baby he'd only held a few times was now a full, real person, with a voice, and opinions, and knowledge, and questions, and a sense of humour. He smirked and sniggered more than once to hear their exasperated friend try to remain patient with some of the boy's quips.

Skinner and Will talked at first about how the interview would be held in evidence, then about Will's interest in law enforcement – "Not interested in law enforcement like on current affair specials – you know, 'his psychological profile demonstrates a long-held fascination with law enforcement'; not a terrorist, not a serial killer, whatever Trip told you. Just, like, interested" – and Will confessed to plagiarising assignments and skipping school after provoking a bully with accusations of schoolyard masturbation over 'ginger orphan midgets'. Mulder winced; his son had had his head smacked into a desk for that one, unsurprisingly. He'd survived similar lapses of judgement at that age and related strongly. They talked about some sort of violent attack the boy was witness to. Skinner was clever with that topic, careful not to give away too much, and the conversation about some possible suspect was delicately handled, too, though the boy had some pretty strong views on that. Mulder felt Scully tense in his arms as though preparing herself for something, and actually felt her flinch when Will's voice said, "I only know that you don't abandon someone you love."

"That was for me, I know it," was all she said on that run-through, and Mulder tried to imagine having to hear all this firsthand, from outside the door, knowing your child is just on the other side. He nestled closer to her, heart twinging. She wasn't the only one guilty of abandonment.

Finally Skinner's voice took them clear of the heavy stuff, and then Will was animatedly explaining a detailed and playful plan for getting Skinner to remember him long enough to hire him in the
future. His kid was funny, or at least, the kind of funny he would appreciate, maybe not others. Not everybody found Mulder funny, which was fair enough.

His kid wasn't just an idea or a sad memory that might never have happened. He was real, out there right now.

And then it was over.

They listened to it all over again, and this time Mulder listened more closely to what was said, not allowing himself to get as lost in the magic of his son's voice. He asked clarifying questions of Scully, and she answered as best as she could, pausing the recording occasionally. Yes, William watched Morris Bletchley take a bullet in a public street. Yes, he was okay. No, there was no definitive evidence that Will was a target, but of course she was uneasy about the possibility. She squeezed for pause. Their son's voice cut off.

"I told Skinner it's all coincidence, and maybe it is," she said, voice husky from her earlier crying. "He wants it to be a simple one-off revenge-and-money thing with this Kearney. I don't think that's it. William's right, it doesn't fit. I think if they wanted him, and they knew he was here, he'd be gone. They'd have him." She twisted slightly, tilting her face toward him. Her hips slid against his groin. She was a huge distraction, her worried expression only a slight dampener. "What have you heard? You've got your ear to the ground on this, no doubt. Have you heard-"

"I haven't heard a thing about him," Mulder assured her honestly, thinking back, hard. Not any indication from Levin's band or any of his associates about a boy of interest, nothing in his short exchanges with Sixty-Four. Gray said nothing at the Lion's Share about Scully's child, didn't appear to know they were ever an item, which made sense since he was dead for most of their romance and most of Will's life. "I'm in on the ground floor and I can't tell you much more than that, but there's been nothing said about William. Skinner's call was a shock. This interview is a shock. I can't think of any reason Morris Bletchley would come for Will, or how he would have found him." He released her hand to run his along her arm, from her shoulder to her elbow, back and forth along the leather of his jacket. "You'd be the first to know if I had."

She rolled away from him again, sighing, apparently oblivious to the effect she had on him, though that was becoming difficult to not notice. She continued the recording, and she cringed again at the hurtful line though she knew it was coming, and then they listened to her interview with Gary Milne, the man raising Will.

"I liked him, what I saw of him," Scully admitted while she rewound, "which wasn't much, but I liked something about him. He seemed..." She found the right spot. "He seemed like the kind of man I was hoping William would go to, if he couldn't have you."

It was a reassuring sentiment, and as Mulder listened to Scully and Skinner interview the new voice, through the slur of tiredness and painkillers he could hear the intelligence in the questions and the thoughtful answers. Milne had the air of a man who had his shit together, stable and placid and measured, which Scully would like, even if she couldn't articulate it.

He listened attentively, soaking in all she'd learned today, and at his insistence they moved on to the autopsy recording from the afternoon. He glanced down at her as her voice, calm and methodical, described the state of Bletchley's unreal lungs and the samples she was taking. She'd taken leaps and bounds from where he'd left her in Virginia, and despite the circumstances he felt a glimmer of pride. He'd known she could manage this investigation from her end, with the help of allies like Skinner. She was tougher and more dogged than she knew.

Catchphrases caught his attention and were filed away in his busy brain with the rest of what he
knew, though he tried not to interrupt. A few things stuck, impossible to file, because even for him, they defied belief.

"Nasopharyngeal carcinoma. God, I hate that name. I never thought I'd hear it again," he admitted when the silence after the recording went on too long. Bits of metal implanted in the back of the neck, missing time, no memory, infertility. Sarah Van de Kamp was another one? He made himself back up. "Normal people get that too, though, right? Not that you're not normal – well, you're not," he amended immediately. "But it's not restricted to cases of government abduction?"

"No, Mulder. 'Normal' people are blessed with the same suffering as what I went through. But the year she went missing, the chip, everything adds up to the same answer. William's mother was part of the same program I was."

"You don't believe that," he insisted. Scully shrugged her shoulder against him. "That's… You would never believe a longshot like that. What are the chances that of all the women in the country looking to adopt, William would go to another abductee?"

"Extreme," Scully confirmed, "but not outside the realm of extreme possibility." She gave him a look over her shoulder, and he shook his head, bemused. If his self of twenty years ago could see him now, lying in bed with his infuriatingly sceptical and much-desired partner (naked, let's not forget: the hot partner is hotter than ever and naked) with her lecturing him about maintaining an open mind. "Why would Gary Milne lie? It could be argued that it became more likely because the pool of women was limited only to those hoping to adopt, hence increasing the likelihood that they would be infertile and unable to conceive their own, and within that pool of infertile women, anyone who had previously been abducted."

"Alright, alright; but I thought you were the last one from your program?" He remembered the pain in her face when she knew the other women had died. He remembered his own desperation to save her from that.

"I thought so too. But if Sarah never connected with the Mutual UFO Network, and they didn't tell her to check for the implant, it might have – seems to have – taken her many years to notice it and to take it out. I wouldn't have noticed it without their prompting."

"Okay, but all the people who didn't take their implants out were called on in those mass exterminations, remember. Skyland Mountain, Kazakhstan… Pennsylvania. You were, against your own will."

"Not everybody died," she reminded him. He shook his head.

"No, but Sarah Van de Kamp wasn't one of the names of the survivors found with you."

"I knew you'd remember details like that. What about Sarah Milne?" Still he shook his head, and she kept thinking. "I don't know what to say. We don't know how many 'lighthouses' remained to call abductees before the events at the dam. Sarah may have been too far away to feel the call that brought me there, and hers may have never come. We'd need to see a list of names, and we've never found any such document, if it even exists." She fell silent, her fingers fidgeting with the recorder. "I wish to God I'd known about her. I wish I could have told her to put the damn thing back. After the dam, the microchip was relatively safe. I hate that William watched her suffer and die of something I could have prevented."

"From something that almost killed you," Mulder reminded her. "If only one person could be saved from this – if God said so, or destiny decreed it, or statistical probability insisted upon it – then I am so grateful it was you, and I am willing to bet Sarah Van de Kamp would be grateful, too,
because if you had died, there would be no William for either of you to love. Besides. We've talked about this already. Maybe you could have prevented the cancer, told her everything, maybe you could have saved her from that suffering and death – only for her to die in a car accident a week later. Maybe with William in the backseat. We can never know the ripple effects of our actions, Scully. One thing leads to another." He nodded at the recorder. "Who would have thought when Austin Dunn gave us the name Morris Bletchley that we'd up following it to our son?"

She didn't seem to find that as comforting as he'd hoped. She slipped her hand behind her neck, under her hair, silent for a long time, looking conflicted. On the table on the other side of the room, her mobile vibrated suddenly, a call going unanswered, but she didn't react, even when Mulder pushed himself up on his elbow to look over, ready to go get it for her.

"Don't bother," she muttered. "It'll be Colt."

Ugh. "Agent Bieber. Shouldn't you pick up? He's called twice already."

"He's not a joke, Mulder. I didn't let them make fun of you; I'm not going to let you make fun of him. I trust him."

The phone kept shaking, shivering like Scully straight out of her shower, only now she was deliciously warm. Mulder resumed smoothing her hair, unable to resist all the opportunities to touch her, unimpeded, uncensored, unwatched. Nobody around to perform for, nothing between them but a jacket. This, tonight, was his Scully, Scully stripped of all her angry uptight masks, broken down to the raw essentials. She didn't seem to have the strength to shove him away or tell him off, and she certainly was off her game of knives, offering so few nasty jibes. This was the Scully he always tried for, when they crossed paths – the Scully who forgot to be mad and just behaved normally, honestly. His best friend.

"Alright, I'm sorry," he said, genuinely, respecting her argument. He was being unnecessarily hard on the kid, considering they'd never met, and it was hardly Colt's fault he was Mulder's replacement. "If you trust him, that's good enough for me." It wasn't, but it would have to be. "He keeps calling. He may need you and your expertise, Senior Agent."

"Now you're mocking me," she said, but she didn't sound mad, and she moved on quickly. "He's in Kentucky, conducting an interview with a pair who think I've met them, when I haven't. I've got you to thank for that mix-up, I suppose?"

"Stephen Powell?" The caller gave up, or it went to message bank. "A magician never reveals his tricks."

"You know everything, don't you," Scully asked, her voice not inflecting upwards as in a question, just lowering like she was making a statement of fact. Her hand seemed to tighten on the back of her neck. "You know how this all ties together, whatever Colt's learning in Kentucky and what Bletchley is and why Rebecca Johannsson was in that morgue with her lungs eaten out of her chest, why that morgue was sanitised and the surveillance stolen, and how Natalie Harlow was benched for opening the Engel case and why A.D. Kelley keeps asking questions about you. You know how Henry Gray, Reece Dwyer and Morris Bletchley are alive and young when they should be dead or old, and you even know why three people pretending to be the CDC tried to elbow in on us today and take Bletchley before I could autopsy him."

"I don't know everything," Mulder corrected cautiously, playing with the ends of her hair. "I don't know anything much about Bletchley or what he was doing here, but I'm not surprised they tried to stop you."
"Did you know I'd met one of them? Dr Lansdowne, the medical examiner at Berkshire County Morgue who tried to convince me I was never there and that Janae the assistant didn't work there anymore, was in Thayne today as Dr Petersen, CDC. It was the same man, Mulder."

"I believe you." Not so slick now, Worldwide Family of Hosts. Scully had a good memory for faces. "Sometimes it feels like they're everywhere. I suppose this is how. All playing roles, all playing parts."

"Are you going to tell me who they are?"

"No." He smiled apologetically, feeling strangely lonely. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to talk the whole thing over and hear it all out loud, get her perspective and her brilliant brain onto it. "One briefcase of leaked CIA documents and a room full of Dunn rifles says there's a delicate balance between telling you too much and not enough, and I'm going to play that very carefully this time. If you can't prove it or explain how you know it, it's no good to your case. It's not fair to lump it on you. It's not safe."

Her fingers moved under her hair. "It's frustrating. Sitting behind the desk on this, it's so big and grey and vague. Every dot I connect matches up with another one on the opposite side of the board, seemingly unrelated, and the web just keeps getting murkier and messier and more massive. I don't think I'll ever get a handle on it. I wish you were working it with me."

"I am," he reminded her, "and you will. You're the best investigator in the Bureau. I wouldn't trust anyone else on this."

"Another opportunity to let you down." But she didn't sound too down about it. "I understand why you can't tell me more. And you shouldn't. I already teeter between 'authoritative' and 'insane' in my team's books, I think. The way Dr Harlow looks at me, halfway between impressed and fearful, it takes me back." She sighed. "She's probably right to look like that. Just tell me: is it as massive and incredible as it feels?"

"World-shattering," he confirmed. He hesitated. "They'll kill us for taking a wrong step."

"So what else is new?" she asked, and his smile grew wider at her hint of dry humour. "It's not safe for either of us, Mulder. Someone's out for you. Should you consider backing off?"

"No. I'm in too deep, I'm too close. I have a plan. And the goal hasn't changed." He let that hang between them for a moment, a reminder to her. She seemed to shrink. He wasn't deterred. "Or maybe it has, maybe it's gotten bigger, because William's out there now. I want this to be over. I want to win this time." I want to win my family back.

"Mulder." She fell thickly silent, and he waited, sensing the withheld information. He wasn't prepared for what she said. "My chip's active again."

He felt instantly numbed. "What?"

"They're using it. I think they think they're being subtle, and I don't think they know I know, or they wouldn't continue."

Mulder grabbed her shoulder and rolled her toward him, onto her back. "What do you mean, they're using it? Sending you places?" She shook her head. "Are you...?" The question got stuck in his throat, the same way *is my son dead* did. "Are you sick? Is it back?" The cancer. The cancer he was just talking about. It made him ill just to look down at her face and not know whether that noxious killer was there behind her features. Those features softened slightly.
"I'm okay," she promised, calming him immensely. "Technically speaking, the cancer never left. I've just been in remission – the tumour is still there, Mulder, there was never an option to remove it. But there have been no indications of a relapse. I'm alright."

"Good." He almost collapsed on top of her in relief, and settled for exhaling his tension. "So…?"

"They're sending me dreams," she confessed, hand still behind her neck, massaging the area in question. "Most nights – maybe every night, and maybe I just don't remember some – once I'm deeply asleep, I get nightmares. And I know what you're thinking, because trust me, I already had these thoughts: it's natural for me to have nightmares after all I've seen, it's normal to experience night terrors and night sweats at my age, it's probably a manifestation of my subconscious worries and frustrations playing out… I know. I don't need you to Scully me and shut down my theory," she added sarcastically, and he closed his mouth sheepishly, because he'd been thinking all those things. How times had changed them. "All those explanations fit perfectly, except that every dream is specifically about you, betraying me in some horrific way, which has never been an explicit fear of mine, and when I wake up, the back of my neck is burning hot, like active hardware running on overdrive. Mulder," Scully said insistently, "I think someone has found a way to access my chip, and is trying to reprogram me."

His thoughts flew wildly in their erratic circles, bouncing off walls and striking other ideas, forming connections. He'd thought the chip was done with, but obviously it was only dormant, and besides, all this time it had been doing something, keeping her cancer in check. The long inactivity indicated what he'd initially thought, that the people fucking with her body chemistry and her brain through that thing were gone and the chip was just a relic of their reign. But it sounded like she was right, and someone had found a way to tap back in. To do as Sixty-Four had suggested, by destroying his credibility.

"They're trying to make you afraid of me," he realised. "They want to undermine your belief in what we're doing." To make her question him. To shake her. "What happens in the dreams?"

"It doesn't matter. They're all the same in formula, but different enough in appearance that I shouldn't notice without conscious analysis. I don't think I'm supposed to wake up," she admitted. "I think I'm supposed to sleep through it, and wake up the next day with a slightly degraded opinion of you and your work. I assume they want me scared enough to rat you out when the time comes, and perhaps to shoot you on sight and save them the trouble."

Except that she worked it out. His clever girl. "You're not afraid?"

"No, they wouldn't actually kill you. I've told you before, you're too dangerous dead, and I know they know that."

"I meant of me. For yourself."

"Since I last saw you, you've strangled me, drowned me, beaten me, smothered me, thrown me from a rooftop, stabbed me… Maybe you should be glad I wasn't armed when you got here." She offered his stricken expression a slightly playful glance as she rolled away from his hand on her heart, settling on her stomach, her face turned away. She nestled herself close, though, not at all the behaviour of someone afraid of him. He stroked her hair fondly, warmed by her trust. "They clearly don't know I'm aware of their strategy, but I am afraid of why anyone would think of trying it, and what level of enemy we're working against if they can get access to something like my implant and consider this a viable option. Because this isn't about me. Someone wants to use me as a tool against you, against whatever moves you're making in the shadows. You shouldn't be anywhere near me. I'm a danger to you as long as I've got this thing embedded in my neck."
"Which will be the rest of your life, because you're never taking it out," he insisted. If it was a choice of cancer or questionable loyalty, he'd take his chances.

"This is very dangerous territory, Mulder, and not territory we've traversed before. I'm scared of what's coming for you. I think something big is about to hit, and I know you know what that is, and I know it's important for me to stay in the dark on some things and find them out for myself, but I'm afraid that this time, what they're going to use against you will be me and I won't know how to stop it. And here I am, with you, a few minutes' drive away from where our son is hidden in plain sight. He may already be implicated. If he's at the centre of this... this whole thing," she said finally, "this web, or even just caught in it, we cannot let them reach him. We can't."

"Of course we can't," Mulder agreed wholeheartedly, not understanding what she meant about that. About the rest, he understood perfectly, and hearing what was being done to her – bastards – answered the question of what the Hosts were planning for him. Maybe he could use it to his advantage. "We're his parents. It's our job to protect him, whether he knows about us or not."

"That's right." She sounded like might cry again. "You're a target, and my own head isn't secure. We're not safe. We have to protect him from us." He heard the truth in her words and felt his heart crumple a little. She meant it didn't matter that they'd found him. Reunion wasn't an option, not now. "I can't tell you what to do..."

"No, you're right." It hurt to admit. "Going to him now undoes all you achieved by hiding him in the first place. It puts him in the crosshairs. We owe it to him to keep eyes off him. Skinner's going to do what he can to bury this leg of the case, and if there's really nothing we can do here to help him, you and I need to walk away. I think that's all we can do. It's what's right. Hours of driving, years of yearning and wondering, for this dead end. He felt like crying too, and swallowed hard, letting a glimmer of his natural optimism flicker to the surface of his emotions. "For now."

Because what's right can change day by day. This didn't have to be forever, but it had to be forever-for-now, until or unless circumstances drastically changed. Pessimistic pragmatist Scully would have trouble understanding this, so he didn't elaborate.

He played with her hair, brushing it smooth with his fingers, one side at least. She kicked his socks off under the blankets and tucked her feet under his calves, drawing comfort. Maybe they'd both pay for this night, but contrary to what he'd thought when he arrived, this was definitely the right place to be. No one else knew his whereabouts – he was extremely careful – and the Johannssons were safe. The Worldwide Family of Hosts did not know who he was with. There was nowhere better to be than curled around his favourite person, sharing comfort like he should have done on Christmas night, sharing in a conversation that should have been had many years earlier. Better late than never.

"I can never have him back," Scully whispered after a long time. "I always knew that, but I didn't think I'd be mere feet away from him and still not be able to have him. He's not William Fox Scully anymore. He's Will Van de Kamp, and he's got a life I can't be part of. I knew it while I listened to him. I'm too dangerous. The most I can do is stand back and throw my arms out and hold back the shit storm that's going to hit him if Bletchley's clean-up crew come back for him."

"Of course you will. It's what you always do, above and beyond and more. He's still yours," Mulder murmured gently into her ear, brushing her drying, curling hair off her neck. The tiny scar still lined the skin under her cranium and it stood out to him because of all the trouble it had caused, but otherwise it was actually quite unobtrusive. "He's ours, wherever he came from, however he came to be, and whoever raised him. Nothing's changed, not for the worse, anyway. He's safe and growing up loved, like he was yesterday. Only now, we know about it. We can be more active in
diverting attention that might sway in his direction. And we can do something about it if he's in more trouble than we've accounted for. I'd say that puts all of us in a better position than yesterday." He touched the scar, feeling for the heat she spoke of, but it was dormant, waiting for her sleep cycle. "Listen. You're probably not going to hear from me for a while."

He saw the edge of her face tighten in a frown. "That's going to be difficult for me to adapt to, Mulder."

"Very different for us, I know," he said, smiling, enjoying the return of her humour. "I can't say how long it'll take, maybe months or even more, but I have a plan. And I know what you're thinking," he acknowledged when he felt her sigh softly. "I can hear your voice in my head. 'This is so typical, Mulder, running off in the night to chase shadows, just walking out on me for some fucking case'. Am I right?"

"No, that's not what I was going to say," she answered, surprising him. "This isn't some case. You said this is the case to end all cases. I was going to ask what you need from me in the meantime. What should I be ready for?"

Christ, he loved her. So fucking perfect. He was still looking at the implant site. Could they really reprogram her? Break down what she felt and believed about him, given enough time and targeted effort? He shuddered to consider it possible.

"I'm going to give you everything," he promised. "The whole conspiracy, I'm going to come to you with proof. What I need from you, my partner, is a case. A strong case, with you at the helm. Can you do that?"

"What do you think I've been trying to do?"

"I need this from you, Scully. It needs to be bulletproof. What you got today, from Bletchley: can you use that? Will it stand?"

Scully sucked her lower lip between her teeth, thinking. Attractively. "I have the autopsy findings on tape and we left the biological samples at the morgue for refrigeration, so, assuming that hasn't been stolen, yes. Skinner and I were going to stake out the morgue to protect the body from those false agents but it didn't seem so important once we realised William might be involved. Chances are, the body's already gone. Hopefully the evidence I stashed is safe, because that's what will really make the difference."

"Good, that's what I need. That's what we need. An open investigation, a history, a legitimate line of inquiry and solid, clean policework. An audience, hungry for an answer. Keep it out of the basement filing cabinet and out from under the rug. Unquestionable, public. When we see each other again, I need you ready to prosecute, pending all those dirty bits and pieces you'd never get hold of formally."

"Prosecute who? And what will you be doing? You can't break the law to provide evidence for a federal case, Mulder. I can't use that."

"Don't worry about that. You do your science, Scully, and your policework, and I'll... do what I do. I know what I'm doing, alright?" He waited for her to respond, but she didn't. It made him unsure. "Are you with me?"

"Aren't you wearing your answer?" His awareness shifted to the warm, tiny gold cross at his throat. Like you wouldn't believe. "Why are you being vague with me? There's no conflict of interest in me just knowing what to do."
"Because," he said evenly, "if I tell you anything else, you'll try to talk me out of it, and it's the only way. Like you with William. I would never have let you do it – even though it was, in retrospect, the only thing to do. I'm taking a leaf out of your book and doing the difficult thing. Don't worry too much," he added when she started to argue. "Just get a viable case together and be prepared to take it all the way, whatever comes out. And stay strong. And don't listen to them."

"Anything else?" she asked ironically. She moved uncomfortably, digging his lock pick kit, keys and phone out of his pockets and dumping them on the bed beside her.

"Yeah." He pressed his lips to the tiny scar at the base of her neck, loving the way it made her shiver when he murmured his next words against her skin. "Trust me."
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. Can I argue this fic is undertaken for research purposes?

Author's Notes: I'M SO SORRY EVERYONE FOR LEAVING YOU FOR SO LONG. This chapter has taken many a stolen evening or early morning and hence has just gone on and one, ending up way longer than I expected but possibly reflective of the length of time taken to get it down. I'm working on my Masters thesis (which is about fanfic – three and a half weeks until deadline!) and simultaneously my PhD application (in which I plan to write about X-Files fandom) and only now that it's spring break here am I not balancing these tasks with full-time classroom teaching. Due to the soonness of all these workloads, you probably won't see another chapter from me until after thesis submission, but who knows? Pressure and time compression generally generates fanfic in me. Expect to hear more from me in November!

This chapter isn't going to overwhelm everybody with the feels like the last one, but it's an important shove forward for our littlest cast member Sixty-Four. I hope it's coherent - I wrote and edited it over dozens and dozens of separate occasions. Our weakest character (I say this with pitying affection; the rest of the cast is so strong, she never stood a chance at outshining our leads) goes toe-to-toe with one of the strongest. In this chapter, I've written her to the song Dark Horse by Amanda Marshall, off an album I have always loved for a lot of reasons. Despite her scarediness she's manned up a little in this chapter, though I still hear Evanescence's Breathe No More in the background. Poor sad messed-up kid she is.

Thanks to everyone who hasn't given up on me, and thanks to those who reviewed the last chapter! I truly appreciate you all :)

Desperation draws all things into sharper focus.

The medical examiner's office in Thayne was very small, very closed, and very familiar. Sixty-Four was only here a few hours ago, having her dignity chopped finely and served back to her on a plate. She sat in the warmth and safety of the car she'd taken off with from the convoy checkpoint, engine off, tapping a matchbox on the steering wheel as she stared at the one yellow lightbulb above the morgue doors. She was back.

Now what?

A wave of inspired determination had driven her back to the scene of her most recent humiliation, but a few hours of silence in the car had sapped that from her and she felt silly and small – exactly what Pledge Three and the rest of them already saw when they looked at her. She had the matches; she had no idea if she had the guts to actually try and set a morgue on fire, but she couldn't go back without achieving something, anything, from this impulsive take-off.

And the fire was only a cover, or that was how she'd reasoned it in her head. She was meant to be tracking down the people she'd aligned herself with. Yet here she sat.
She bit her lip and looked harder at the morgue, trying not to feel again the fear and wretched uselessness she'd experienced under the eyes of Assistant Director Walter Skinner as she made herself revisit every millisecond of that exchange inside this building. If she had somewhere else to start, God knew she would have gone there first, but unfortunately it was practically the only place in this whole stupid town she knew. The Sheriff's office was closed and silent, without even the yellow light overhead, and besides, she reminded herself when her weak, childish inner voice suggested staring at that less intimidating building instead, Skinner and Scully hadn't been there. They'd been here. She'd seen them here. Thirty-Nine was shot in town and brought here. Dr Scully, professional and prepared and terrifyingly proficient-looking in her scrubs, had been ready to perform his autopsy here, and that would have taken a few hours, right? Not that Sixty-Four was any sort of expert on, well… anything. She was only guestimating, and her guestimate lined up pretty closely with the timeframe in which Fox Mulder bailed from Erik Johannsson's new house to come to Thayne.

Here.

And the argument might be made that Dr Scully cut up Thirty-Nine, discovered what he was, rang Fox, and he hurried to see this proof, but it didn't sit right with Sixty-Four. Fox already knew what Thirty-Nine would be; he'd been running with Mikhail Levin and his Russians for weeks. Besides, Erik said he sounded worried, inferring that something was wrong.

And Dana Scully wasn't the one who'd called. AD Skinner, the very thought of whom filled the teenage pledge with anxiousness, was the caller. Somehow this reinforced her idea that it wasn't to do with the autopsy results, since the Assistant Director hadn't conducted it, but she had no actual proof of this.

There was something else here. She knew it, though she couldn't explain how except that her intense scrutiny of Fox Mulder's behaviour and movement patterns over the past few months was throwing up red flags, letting her know this was an anomaly. He'd said he would avoid Dana Scully, and the big meeting in the boardroom had indicated the agent wasn't frequently in touch with the rogue, either. So? What was going on here?

She went back to what she knew. Pledge Thirty-Nine, after banishment, had ended up here in Thayne on the back of a pick-up truck. He'd disembarked, and within minutes had gotten shot, mid-rampage, which in itself was highly uncharacteristic. The mayor theory was bull. Obviously. What did Thirty-Nine care who ran a town as pointless as this one?

Sixty-Four got her phone out and reopened the file Pledge Three had given to his team and had trusted her to keep to herself while he silenced it, but which she had risked everything to pass to Erik Johannsson to pass to Fox Mulder. But Fox hadn't read it. He'd passed it on. Funny that he'd ended up here anyway. Sixty-Four rubbed her tired blue eyes, reading again what she'd already memorised and agonised over.

A wild man came out of nowhere… He didn't seem angry… He wouldn't stop… It was all so fast… He was like a savage, all that wild hair and no communication… He grabbed me and looked in my face, and threw me away like trash and just kept on going without a look back… She skimmed the witness statements, absorbing the general theme of terror and urgency. The John Doe she knew as Pledge Thirty-Nine who was born as Morris Bletchley was shot in the middle of the chest at midmorning in the middle of Thayne in the middle of a crowd of people eating and drinking. Lots of middles. She'd seen the body herself and still felt the chill of that refrigerated room of death where he was soon to be sliced up and opened. Better you than me, sorry. She rubbed her curly dark hair, frustrated by her inability to connect the scattered dots. The allies she'd chosen would probably look down at her in disdain if they all ever met her and then realised how perfectly
average she was. Henry Gray was super-smart, the only man in the world capable of achieving first the Syndicate's, and now the Family's, goal. She was quite sure he only kept her around because he had nobody else to replace her with. Fox was a genius, one in a million, an abstract thinker she could only admire and never hope to match; Dana Scully had a sheaf of achievements and qualifications longer than Sixty-Four's list of years lived, in any body. They, according to Pledge Three and others she spoke to, had need for little other intellectual input than what their partner provided.

Sixty-Four couldn't even meet her own expectations of her personal intelligence. What chance did she stand of impressing anybody else?

Think, think. If she didn't work out where to find them soon, she'd have to either return empty-handed – hugely suspicious and embarrassing – or burn this morgue down to explain her sudden getaway, if it would even catch alight, which she hadn't considered when she stopped for matches at a gas station. Would it catch, would she be caught? Think. Why did her fellow pledge attack that crowd and draw all this attention to their secret? There were many earlier opportunities to disgrace the Family if that was his aim, and again, maybe it was, but this opportunity had cost his life. She remembered him at his trial, choosing his words carefully, opting to accept banishment rather than make accusations against Three, which would certainly have led somewhere similar to this. He wasn't silly; he valued living. Alright, so there had to be another reason. Something that would make him act desperately. She read again. Thirty-Nine was shot in the chest before he could hurt anybody else. Else. He'd hurt numerous people in this random attack. He'd grabbed people and looked them in the eye, then thrown them away and continued. Looking for someone else.

Sixty-Four looked up again at the yellow light of the morgue, turning that thought over in her head with her perfectly average problem-solving skill and processing speed. Thirty-Nine died for a reason. He spotted someone, or wanted something from someone, and he threw himself into harm’s way to get it. Died trying to get it.

He was in there. Whoever he'd been after was not. Also notably absent were the FBI agent and AD who'd so effectively scared Sixty-Four and her requisition team off earlier. No one was stationed to watch the morgue – the absence of Skinner and Scully was unsurprising, since they were big deals and observably did not do stakeouts anymore, but they had not replaced themselves with younger agents or local law enforcement. Weren't they paranoid and ultra-careful, as per their reputation? Didn't they suspect the conspirators would be back like they were with Rebecca Johannsson?

These were smarter people than Sixty-Four. If she had considered it, they would have. Yet. They had abandoned this location. Making her drastic action as easy as she could ask for. She apprehensively fingered the matchbox again, unwilling to act. Why didn't Skinner and Scully stay and watch this place?

It didn't matter. The morgue didn't matter. That was the only explanation. Something else mattered more. Maybe someone.

Sixty-Four felt her heart skip up to a quicker pace as she turned her attention back to the file on her phone, pinching at the screen to read closer and more attentively through new lenses of understanding. She looked this time for the names and details of people hurt or otherwise involved in the attack. It was unhelpful. There was no way of knowing whether any of them were Thirty-Nine's target, though obviously the ones hurt first were less likely. Even the ones hurt last were not necessarily the ones he was aiming for, if he was shot before reaching his destination.

Back where she started.

"Post-mortem payback," she muttered, switching the screen off and staring at the ceiling of the car.
It was her fault Thirty-Nine was dead, after all. She'd done this, with her risky alliances. Her belief in ghosts was restricted to the physical, like herself and Morris Bletchley, but she still felt appropriately frustrated with this seeming haunting. Thirty-Nine's death was just mysterious enough to attract the attention of the Family's Least Wanted but just that little bit too mysterious to make sense to junior sleuth Sixty-Four. She could make herself sick with dizziness chasing the insubstantial threads of this—"Sick!" She unlocked her screen again and scanned the names of the injured. Name, brief summary of injury, statement of whether they were admitted to further medical attention or sent on their way.

Anyone coming to any degree of real harm, from concussion to torn knee, had been sent to the regional hospital, twenty minutes away according to her mapping app. It was worth a try. She'd read the police report. She'd viewed the dead pledge. It wasn't a certainty, but the only other people involved who Sixty-Four hadn't already had access to were the victims. And the most serious victims were in the hospital.

Maybe Dr Scully, MD, was there too, and maybe Fox Mulder was on his way to her. Maybe tonight Sixty-Four would finally connect with her hero, for whatever good it would do in the long run, and make her first steps toward impressing someone in her undersized world. She tossed the matches onto the passenger seat and turned the car back on, glad to be able to postpone her inevitable introduction to amateur arson.

It had frustrated the Worldwide Family of Hosts immensely when they'd realised their mistake in honouring Sixty-Four's place in their ranks – just one of many perceived inconveniences that she represented, really. Only a teen, parents long dead, she'd needed to be taught how to drive in order to be of any particular use to the cause. "You're deluded if you think that's going to fall to me," Pledge Three had informed her primly when she'd asked for lessons at the appropriate age, just a couple of years ago. She wasn't the only one, and so she and the other couple of minors in the cause had been shuffled into one of the Family's charity programs for connecting disadvantaged youth with essential services, and had been signed up for lessons with kindly community volunteers from a local driving school who'd asked awkward questions about how the Family had found her in the foster system and whether she had somewhere safe to stay that night.

Forget the rich parents she was born to, the beautiful house she grew up in and the gene pool of intelligence she'd mostly missed out on. Pledge Sixty-Four was the very definition of disadvantaged youth.

She backed out of the parking lot, hopeful for the first time in a long while. The Family had had her taught to drive because it suited them, the same way it had suited them to give her somewhere to live that was near to their facilities or the way it had suited them to have someone teach her how to sanitise and service a lab so she'd be of use to the science team. She was a servant of minimal value, and everything they did for her was weighed and measured against what they would get out of it. Dr Gray, she knew with regret, wasn't much different, though she felt like her contribution to his world was more appreciated and more noticeable. He seemed to like her. He took her seriously, trusted her, relied on her… but also used her, because it suited him and his purpose, which would ultimately, one day, not require her any longer.

Imagine, though, someone who gave a shit. Imagine someone like the driving instructors, wondering whether you were safe, willing to offer themselves in service to you without an expectation of exponential returns. Imagine someone who cared for you, and not just the part of you that could earn money or achieve some abstract goal, but for you, the person you were, like you bore some kind of intrinsic worth.

Sixty-Four could only just barely remember this sensation – being a daughter, a granddaughter, a
sister, a school friend, being loved – and couldn't explain why she thought she might find this again, especially in an adult man more than twice her age with no understanding of what she'd lived through. Yet Fox's voice in her ear, digitally compressed by the phone line, still asked her soul whether she was safe, an unconditionally worried fatherly question on repeat, and she desired so deeply to feel that again, and had to keep checking her speed on the quiet country roads.

The tiny hospital would have been easy to miss if her phone didn't direct her straight to it. Was Fox here? The parking lot was far from full, but she didn't know his car and it could be one of the few she saw, dark and still. She got out and looked at the single storey medical centre, nerves dancing with an unexpected magnetism, like she was close to something only her intuitive mind could sense. Did that mean she was close to him? She shivered, uneasy. The sanctuary she sought in his presence was unlikely to be there in reality; more probably, he would be with AD Skinner and Dr Scully, who would call her out as one of the interferers from today. They'd arrest her. They'd gag her and drag her off to one of the white rooms of her haunting childhood before she could explain. They'd run tests. Dr Scully in her scrubs and her face shield would hold the scalpel and the needles, and it would begin all over again.

She almost got back in the car, but she'd come so far, and there was no crawling back to the convoy. Meekly she locked the car and headed inside, tucking her wild curls behind her ears, intensely aware of how young and pathetic she was.

Best to work with what you've got, right?

"My phone's dead," she told the receptionist, who was just packing things into her bag, ready to go home for the night and awaiting her replacement. "I was just driving through when it ran out of juice. My mom said my dad would be here tonight, and I was nearby so I was going to stop in and surprise him, but I didn't see his car and I don't know his work phone. He works for the FBI," she added, like a childish afterthought. "Was he here?"

The little girl routine worked much better than the CDC agent one, though it wasn't a sure hit the first time. The nurse offered a small, partially convinced smile and turned to her computer.

"We did have two FBI people here earlier," she agreed cautiously, looking something up. "A man and a lady."

"That's my dad and his partner," Sixty-Four said brightly, playing at relieved and not having to try that hard. They were gone. Thank goodness. No chance of running into those two. "His name's Walter Skinner." That kicked her over into the plane of plausible, apparently lining up with what the receptionist was reading on the screen. She saw it in the older woman's brown eyes, lighting up in recognition. "Do you know where he went?"

"No, sorry, honey," the woman apologised. She nodded at her screen. "He visited a patient, and must have left after that."

Score. "Would we be able to ask the patient if my dad mentioned where to contact him?" she asked, acting nervous. "I feel so stupid, not knowing my own dad's number, and I'm kind of lost – this is the closest he's been to my college since I started, and I thought if I drove out to meet him..." She looked down at her feet, hoping there was a college around here somewhere, and hoping the woman, who'd no doubt gone to college herself, couldn't smell on Sixty-Four the metaphorical stench of the undereducated. "I should have brought my charger. I'm hopeless."

The nurse softened. "He doesn't know you're in town?"

Sixty-Four shook her head. "It was meant to be a surprise. I hardly ever see him."
"You can use our phone here," the nurse started, then remembered: "but you'll need the number… Tell you what," she interrupted herself briskly, making up her mind. She tucked her handbag under the counter. "We'll check if the patient's awake, and if he is, we can ask if your dad left a number. They usually do, don't they? Detectives, and federal agents?"

"Usually," Sixty-Four agreed, hope soaring as she followed the older woman down a hall. This act was getting better results than any ill-fated attempt at being taken seriously as an adult. "Thanks for this."

"If he's asleep, we'll have to leave him that way," the nurse warned, leading the way. "Inpatients are here to rest and recover."

"No, I understand," Sixty-Four said quickly. "My dad wouldn't want me to disturb a sick person's hospital stay. If he's asleep, I'll just drive back to school I guess."

The hallways they walked were mostly empty, the occasional medical professional stepping out of a room and heading one way or another, looking busy and competent. Sixty-Four kept her eyes open and ready to behold Fox Mulder, her body strangely pre-emptive of the encounter she was sure she was about to have. Not like that. Just… her nerves were jingly, in a weird, good way, and the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck started to stick up. It was hard to explain, except maybe as excitement. Anticipation? Inspiration? It felt… powerful.

It built with every step, and all she could think of was the silly game she'd played as a child: getting warmer… getting warmer…

"This is Gary's room up here," the nurse said, nodding at one closed door up ahead. "I'm not sure whether he's a suspect or something. Hopefully your dad didn't scare him and he's still happy to help you out."

Good to know Sixty-Four wasn't the only one terrified by Walter Skinner, although right now, if he pushed open the door they stopped at and came through, she wasn't sure what she'd do. Her electrified nervous system had her feeling jittery and flighty, ready for anything at a moment's notice, and the weird sense of purpose and potential inside her was super-heated by this point, shaky and unstable, like she might burst out laughing or accidentally do something genius.

They had to open the door almost all the way to be able to see the hospital bed behind it, and Sixty-Four couldn't help following the nurse in, drawn like magnetism. Was Fox in here? Was he the thing pulling her here? But all she saw on the first glance was a brunette man in his thirties or forties asleep in the bed, his leg in a long white cast, his soft breaths expanding his ribcage rhythmically under the hospital sheets.

He was not the main event. He was not special. Yet her heart shook in her chest like it wanted to explode with unrealised power, and she didn't know how figurative that simile was. Could she explode? She had a tenuous understanding of anatomy and biology, and hers wasn't in any textbook.

"Sorry, honey," the nurse whispered, turning to leave, prompting Sixty-Four to do the same. It was while pivoting on the spot that she understood, suddenly, with a burst of white-hot clarity.

Beside the door, opposite the bed, were two chairs, creatively rearranged to face one another so that a small figure could curl up across the two. The boy was a young teen, a few years younger than Sixty-Four, still distinctly a child, with rusty-red hair covering white ears, in which ear buds were blasting audible music. His eyes were closed, asleep or maybe just dozing, since it wasn't late yet but this place was undoubtedlly boring, his head propped up on an emptied and rolled-up
backpack on one chair's arm, and the rest of him crunched up to fit within the bounds he'd created from the two armchairs.

If her heart was going to explode, then would have been the moment, and it didn't. Instead her eyes processed the scene quickly and spotted the white card clutched in the boy's hand, eyes soaking in that name she'd only heard for the first time today and had already committed to permanent memory under 'cause for terror'. She pushed lightly past the nurse before she could be stopped and plucked the card quickly away. The boy didn't stir.

She hurried out with the nurse, implications poised to explode in her brain just as soon as she had the space to actually acknowledge what she'd walked in on.

"My dad's card," she explained quietly to the frowning nurse in the hallway, watching the frown dissolve away as she promised to drop the card back at the front desk on her way out. They walked back toward reception, the shaky sense of power fading with every step away from Gary's room. The nurse pointed out a payphone on the wall but again offered the hospital's desk phone. Sixty-Four declined, thinking it would be hard to fake a call when there were all those lines and lights to watch and the nurse standing so close beside her, hearing the lack of return voice on the other end. She thanked the nurse again as she went to the payphone, digging change out of a pocket of her cargo pants. Lots of people didn't carry real money on their person anymore but she liked to, the friendly jingle of coins against her leg when she moved reminding her of happy innocent days walking to the shops to buy sweets with her pocket money.

She jammed the coins into the payphone, reflecting only briefly how rare these things were nowadays when once they were everywhere, and dialled the first number that came to mind. The pizza man's automated voice started asking her about her address and toppings and whatever, but she conducted a one-sided conversation with her imaginary dad for the benefit of the reception nurse who lingered uncertainly for a bit and then, when they smiled at each other and the nurse returned to her post, could probably still hear snippets from around the corner where she finished her packing up.

"I know, Daddy, it was silly," she told the phone, which had now connected her to a real person because the machine couldn't make sense of her order. She kept play-acting, numb to the questions of the pizza guy, numb with shock. "It was one of those things that sounded good in my head…"

Like coming here. 'Go where Fox Mulder, Dana Scully, Assistant Director Walter Skinner and Pledge Thirty-Nine all converge on the map' had sounded reasonable and clever. She'd been sure she'd learn or achieve something worthwhile if she managed to cross paths with them, or even identify what brought them here in the first place.

She hadn't expected this. That boy. How…? She wanted to ask how did his existence, his nearness, make her feel so strangely activated, but it was a waste of a question borne only of awe, because she knew what had to be the answer. The implications, oh, God, the implications. Did the Family know? Did Fox know? Did any of the other pledges know?

This was what Thirty-Nine died for. This feeling, now. He'd found Him. The One. And he'd died without it, his goal unread and misinterpreted by the pledges who came to collect him, and now Sixty-Four had it.

She was the one in the same building as the boy. She was the one, of all the pledges, of all the more useful pledges. What on Earth was she going to do? What in the whole galaxy was she going to do? The pizza guy tried to interrupt her and find out who she was trying to call, but in the end gave up on her and hung up, and she kept talking, pausing occasionally to listen for the receptionist's movements. When she was sure no one would notice, she quietly hung up the
payphone and hurried back to Gary's room, the heated sense of power serving as a better navigational tool than her memory for directions.

The room was as she'd left it a few minutes before, and this time she closed the door softly behind herself. The man in the bed kept snoozing. The boy on the chairs kept snoozing. Her existence went completely unnoticed, but for once she didn't care.

She was in the presence of greatness.

She knew it, could feel it in her very DNA. Every recreated cell, every carefully reconstructed strand of protein, knew who this was, even if she had no name to give to this most revered of strangers, even if she'd never met the child. If destiny was a thing, if stars truly aligned to create the circumstances for the mightiest of life's moments, this must be what that felt like. She'd waited her whole life for this. She'd been made for this. Literally.

The boy, she supposed, had to be connected to this Gary man in the bed, as he was clearly not a patient himself, but when she braved taking another step closer and indulged in a breathless analysis of the child's features, she saw none like the sleeping man's. Instead she saw a different, entirely unexpected yet entirely obvious connection.

No.

Way.

"Holy…" she breathed, struck with dizzy amazement. No freaking way. But there was no mistake. In sleep the boy's face was slack and soft, innocent, the classic shape of his jaw and brow and the line of his hair sticking stubbornly up atop his smooth forehead all so achingly familiar it squeezed Sixty-Four's swollen heart. Of course. The sublimity of this cosmic joke was too poetic to overlook. Was there a God? Maybe, maybe not, but there was the Worldwide Family of Hosts, and they would like to consider themselves as such; and even before them, there was the Syndicate serving the same ultimate purpose, and above and beyond all of these were the beings of real power in this equation, and it was through their machinations, hindered and helped variably by the actions of human interferers and interlopers, that the world's fate unfolded. Did those highest of beings have a sense of humour? Is this what they thought of as a joke?

She stared at the child, intermittently remembering to breathe normally. He just kept sleeping, music berating his eardrums. Oblivious. Probably oblivious to all of what she was thinking, all she represented. If the boy was an intergalactic prank, what would the beings think of Sixty-Four stumbling across him? Was this supposed to be funny, too, or was this a terrible mistake on their part? Because she knew what she was supposed to do now.

She knew, but she just stood there.

The Worldwide Family of Hosts had been looking for this boy, specifically this boy, without giving their servants so much as the first clue of who he was or where to start looking for him, ever since their arrival in 2012. Drilled, or maybe programmed, into every pledge was the importance of finding this boy, the ultimate currency, the most valuable thing a pledge could bring before the Family. They were all, every day, thinking about how they could be the one to get their hands on him, but of course it was a stupid pipedream, because the boy was lost, somewhere out in the world, and pledges were kept busy enough without taking days off to go trawling high schools for kids who gave them feelings that would land them in jail if they verbalised them.

He was not lost. He was in Wyoming, and Sixty-Four had found him.
The boy's lashes fluttered, slipping deeper into his light sleep. He was so little, so much younger and more human than she'd dreamed. The pledge, just a few years older but a dozen lifetimes more scarred, tightened her grip on the business card in her hand, trying to ground herself in reality, in the now. A million years could pass and she wouldn't get bored of staring at this boy and soaking in the incredible sensation of power he generated in her cells, but she didn't have a million years. She had to do something. The correct protocol would be to call Pledge Three, since he was the highest authority she was allowed direct contact with, and report her find. She'd get some accolades, if she was lucky; no, she'd definitely be given some grateful attention by the Family, though Three wasn't the generous father figure she craved and would likely handle the acquisition and thus take most of the glory, if he followed through the way he was supposed to. Regardless, handing the boy, The Boy, over to the Family would improve her standing within it immensely. She'd be special, admired by her fellow pledges.

We won't always be pledges.

Pledge Three's words from earlier cut through the warmth of the boy's potential with the same cold as a chill wind, and she shuddered with uncertainty. What did he mean by that? Did it matter? She knew what he would do in this moment – he'd throw this kid over his shoulder and it would be the last the Gary guy in the bed would hear of him. The last anyone would hear of him. Could she be that ruthless?

They think they've got control of you. Do they?

The boy's fingers, now empty, twitched, and Sixty-Four opened her hand to look at the card she'd taken from him. Assistant Director Walter Skinner. Skinner and Scully had interviewed this Gary and the boy. They knew he was here. This was what they'd called Fox about. It made the most sense. They had stakes in this boy, too, and Sixty-Four had stakes in them.

Fox wouldn't admire her if she followed protocol. He would hate her forever, before he even saw her. He'd have no problem allowing his fed friends to take her to those white sterile rooms in handcuffs. She rubbed her arms self-consciously, thinking of the needles and the pain, and stared again at the special child in front of her. He looked small, frail in sleep, and that face, so young. Just a kid. Kids didn't choose their circumstances. She hadn't chosen hers. What kind of monster was she to willingly subject another child to what she'd experienced? Because she knew it would be little different – needles, tests, white rooms, masked doctors, daily experiences of dehumanisation chipping away at the fear of death until finally it came, a welcome guiding hand in place of a parent's.

Because death had been kinder to her than any parent, in the end.

Surely she, Sixty-Four, could be kinder than death.

She swallowed. If she didn't report this, and it later came out that she had withheld it, she'd be crucified, and the boy would be destroyed anyway. So? Her hyperactive brain, prompted to new levels of inspiration by the nearness of the boy, backtracked quickly, making connections that felt hard half an hour ago. So, nothing. If it came out that she'd failed to turn in the boy, everything would be ruined, so the trick was to ensure it didn't get out. Tell nobody. Not even Dr Gray, her only ally within the Family. Bury this secret. She squeezed her hand half-regrettably, folding the business card in half and pocketing it. She really had intended to give it back, but Skinner and Scully had made themselves conspicuous today and for the boy to remain invisible to the Family, he couldn't be connected to either of them. They probably wanted to help, but they were dangerous associates for this child to have. Sixty-Four couldn't help him if he was in their clutches, and was somewhat relieved by the thought that she would be keeping them apart. Skinner was terrifying.
Skinner and Scully in Thayne was already an established fact, and it had already been identified that they'd come for Thirty-Nine. No obvious connection back to the boy, since it had been such an abstract string of poor connections that had brought Sixty-Four to be standing here following the footsteps of much more creative thinkers than herself. Fox Mulder was a wildcard – there was never knowing who was watching out for him, or what he'd do – but at least he was good at flying under the radar, and probably would get in and out of Thayne without detection by anyone associated with the Family. That meant that the only remaining breadcrumb trail from the convoy of trucks to this boy was—

Slowly, Sixty-Four backed over to the door, turning the handle gently and wincing as it made a sound too small to be heard over the pounding music in the earbuds. The boy kept sleeping, the man kept sleeping. She took a final look at the child, drinking in this sight she never thought she'd see, and let herself silently out into the hall. She exhaled heavily when she was alone.

She was the biggest danger to this boy right now. What if one of the other pledges had followed her from the truck stop? She would lead them right to him. She'd lived these last four years as a constant failure; this didn't have to be another of them. The child didn't need to be collateral to other people's agendas. She could do for him what nobody had bothered to do for her.

She could do right by him, and keep him ignorant. There is a lot to be said for ignorance at times. It's safe.

Moving down the hall, away from him, she felt the withdrawal of his effect, though it wasn't a harsh or sudden drain. She felt a residual glow, a glow she was sure could almost light those matches, set the morgue alight and burn her trail to the ground. What would the other pledges do to feel this? To keep this?

If any of them knew where he was, he'd be either dead or locked up within a day. No question. She shivered again. It wasn't cold in the hospital.

The reception nurse would ask awkward questions about how her phone call went and Sixty-Four started rehearsing cheery answers as she passed the payphone and headed back to the front desk, but as she turned the corner, fake smile pasted on, she suddenly froze and backed up out of sight, her hyped senses taking in the scene and reacting more quickly than usual.

She flattened herself to the wall around the corner, holding her breath, heart thudding. *Fox Mulder*. He was here. The night nurse had been replaced while Sixty-Four was with the child, and a new woman was sitting in her place, speaking with *Fox Mulder* over the counter. He looked tired, she considered with some unwarranted concern as the instant-photo scene in her mind burned clearly, sharp with detail. Crumpled, unkempt. The beard she sometimes saw him with was present but, at least, short. Beards were weird. It made him look old.

The nurse's voice was indistinct, unknown, and Sixty-Four had to strain to tune into it. "... not sure of their names."

"That's alright." *His* voice was immediately clear, her ear ready and waiting for his exact tone though it was lower and should have been harder to catch. "If they were to stay in town overnight, where would they go? I don't know the area and my calls aren't getting through."

Lucky the nurse had traded places – the previous one might have found this second phoneless character seeking the same agents too incredulous. This one didn't know about Sixty-Four, Walter Skinner's fake daughter, and didn't hesitate to answer.

"Hmm," she said, "there's Golden's, which is the bigger complex that most visitors stay at, but any
local will tell you to go to Rhonda's Inn. It's only small but much nicer, and out of the way."

"Thanks for that."

Sixty-Four turned her head to listen hard for anything else, careful not to dip her head far enough that her hair would spill over into visibility from around the corner. She heard receding footsteps, presumably his, but they stopped abruptly. She waited, silent. In his silence she half-believed she could hear his breaths. Why did it feel like he was waiting, too? Was this her chance to step out and meet him?

Maybe she should have, but she froze, unable to imagine the consequences of that choice. A thousand times she'd pictured herself finally meeting her idol, but what came afterward she'd never worked out, and that uncertainty was insurmountable.

His footsteps resumed, and she listened as they faded out the door. Gone. She breathed, frustrated with herself. She wanted to be part of his life. She wanted to know him, for him to know her, to feel welcome in somebody's presence. That was never going to happen as long as she hid from him.

Even revitalised by the aura of the boy, she didn't have it in her to cross that bridge right now. It was the wrong timing. These were the big guys, with big problems and big agendas. Fox Mulder didn't want her to appear right now – his mind was with his real priorities and distractions would not be welcome. She was just little Sixty-Four, who happened to have fallen across the biggest guy of all, potentially. In any case, she should get far, far away and not look back, just try to manage this situation from elsewhere so nobody could trace her footsteps back to this little boy. She could burn a morgue. Yep. Definitely.

She counted to a hundred and left, grabbing her cell phone out and playing with it like a typical nineteen-year-old as she passed the receptionist, who paid her no mind at all. She let her eyes flicker around the foyer just once and spotted what Fox Mulder should have been paranoid enough to notice – the surveillance camera positioned in the corner. He was caught on it now, and so was she, and AD Skinner and Dr Scully, maybe even the boy. Every key player. A goldmine in the wrong hands.

She hadn't requisitioned surveillance footage before but she knew the Family regularly had pledges organise for it to happen, and she knew Eighteen was involved in getting hold of the Berkshire County Morgue tapes. She idly wondered what it would take to get his help as she got back into her car and restarted it. Probably not much, but 'help' wasn't enough. She needed help and silence. Allies.

Ugh, she couldn't leave Thayne. She fidgeted with the unfamiliar keychain, dangling from the ignition. She'd managed to overhear the one part of Fox's conversation she needed to be able to find him, but also knew he was heading straight for his doctor and his assistant director.

Two people she did not want to see again so soon.

She needed to go. Already the convoy would be counting down to her return, aware that she'd had enough time to reach Thayne and do whatever she'd set out to do, and should be on her way back.

Allies, though: she didn't have any where she came from. The only way was forward.

Brimming with anxious reluctance, Sixty-Four drove slowly out of the hospital parking lot, half of her thoughts still with the boy asleep across two pushed-together chairs, the other half with the man who'd come within just a few dozen yards of the boy. Would he have been able to leave if he'd seen the child's face? Would he have felt the reverent eminence of the boy, or would he have
just recognised the inherited features? Because they were *obvious*.

*The* boy. She'd found him. And she couldn't unsee his face, and she couldn't *unknow* who he had to be.

Rhonda's Inn turned out to be a pitch of old log cabins with sweet little front porches and lanterns hanging down, a wild hedge fencing the place off from the main road. She slowed as soon as she saw it, peering intently through the one big gap to see anything she could. Cabins, cars on the gravelly grounds… Two men on a porch. Then the hedge cut off her view, and she muttered irritably to herself, checking both ways along the empty country road before swinging the car about and retracing. There was nobody else about, no one on the road, so she took this approach even more slowly, cutting her headlights down to avoid notice. She inched the car past Rhonda's driveway, squinting to see.

Fox and Walter Skinner, for sure. They were as distinctive as celebrities, impossible to mistake, standing together on the well-lit front porch of one of the nearer cabins with the door held open as they spoke.

She should go. Whatever they were discussing was probably important, and besides, she didn't want to get caught spying.

Fox went inside, and Skinner looked away toward the road, uncomfortable expression lit by the lanterns. Sixty-Four's view was again obscured by the hedge, but her stomach had just twisted to see Fox go into that room. The room's occupant seemed self-evident. Sixty-Four felt heavy with some weird emotion she couldn't identify.

Not jealousy. Eww. At least, not sexual jealousy. She wasn't sure she knew herself well enough to be more certain than that. She drove on for ten or so seconds of conflicted, anxious thinking, then turned the car around for one more bypass, taking it slowly once again, headlights low. She leaned across the passenger seat of the car to get as close a look as possible.

Fox and Skinner were talking again in the doorway. She slowed almost to a stop across the driveway, drinking in Fox's intensely worried expression and worrying for him in return, but then considered how weird and suspicious it would appear if either of them were to notice her obscure driving behaviours. Had something happened to Dr Scully? Did it justify possibly throwing everything else, including Sixty-Four's chance at freedom, to the winds?

She yanked irritably on the wheel and took the car bumpily off the road, throwing on the brake and turning off both the lights and the engine. *Fox, what are you doing?* They'd talked about this. He'd promised to keep away from Dr Scully. He'd said they wrote the book on professional distance, or something like that. Because Sixty-Four had *told him* that the Hosts had an eye on her, and weren't above discrediting or murdering her, and Fox said she was integral to the overall plan.

Apparently, she was more than that, or perhaps less than that, or somehow both. Whatever she was to the case was *not* all she was to *him*.

Well. That much was obvious within about ten seconds of being in that hospital room.

Sixty-Four flicked the keychain dangling down beside her knee, thinking. It didn't come as naturally now as it had in the hospital. The boy really did do something to her, something supernatural, almost. Fox Mulder's priorities were not what she'd thought, but before she'd seen the boy, hers weren't, either, so she shouldn't be so annoyed. She just needed to problem-solve around the issue. Right now, she was due somewhere else. Right now, he was with Dana Scully, *not* keeping himself open and available to Sixty-Four to be able to warn him about the surveillance
tape. How long would he be? Could be all night. Maybe if she waited a few minutes she'd get a clear run at his car to leave him another note, as he'd suggested through her last contact with Erik Johannsson, though she'd have to take a guess as to which car was his.

Resolving to this improvised plan, she leaned aside and flicked open the glove compartment. Any note paper? No, though there was a pen. A good start. She grabbed it and clicked it a few times absent-mindedly, digging through the standard manuals and directories tidily stashed away, hoping to be surprised and find a notepad despite strong evidence to the contrary.

Maybe Mulder was already all over the surveillance footage. A man of many contacts, maybe he'd phoned someone on his way over here, gotten it all sorted out. Or maybe he and his genius girlfriend were organizing that right now, strategizing away like the soldiers they were, seizing the evidence with her legal channels before anyone else could get the jump on them. But what if they hadn't? The boy had to remain a secret.

Living in a digital age under a very digital Worldwide Family of Hosts, Sixty-Four found no paper to write on during her search of the seat pockets, the doors, the backseat or the central console storage. The car was impeccably clean, not even a wrapper to be found. Damn the overly efficient organisation. Unenthused, she reached under her seat, not liking her chances, stretching to pat her fingers along the recently shampooed carpet of the car's inner lining. Nothing.

A sharp rap on the window jolted her to attention; she jumped, startled, but her hand was still wedged under her seat, and the awkward reaction only made her shoulder bump the horn. She cried out weakly at the unexpected sound, though it was short, and wrenched her hand free.

"FBI! Hands where I can see them!"

Her heart slammed against its confines inside her ribcage as she turned toward the voice, squeezing shut her eyes against the disorientating brightness of his flashlight when he swung it in her direction. The indescribable terror of being caught surged through her and made her think wild things – run, hide, attack, cry, scream for help, bite your way out, kick and scratch and don't let them take you – though she knew nothing at all about her situation. She blindly grabbed for the door handle to make her escape but the voice barked the same order and like an animal she froze, quivering with indecision, eyes shut tight. Please let this be a joke, please let him go away, please let this be a bad dream.

"Get your hands up and get out of the car, slowly."

Oh God, oh God. He wasn't going away, and the timbre of his voice was starting to connect with the numb neurons in her brain responsible for short-term memory. A hopeless do-gooder, she unwillingly stuck her hands up in front of her, and when he opened the door for her, she all but fell out into the evening air, chest and throat tight with fear.

She tried to open her eyes but the flashlight beam stung; she tried to breathe but the air wouldn't go down. She said, "Please don't hurt me," and her voice sounded like a little girl's and she wished that disappointed her more.

His voice grated on her ears in gruff response, some demand she didn't process properly or reply to. Sensory overload. The flashlight beam dropped and though her vision still flared with the afterglow, she could open her eyelids, and if she could see herself, she knew she'd look exactly as she sounded – a scared girl, literally shaking with fear, frozen in place beside a borrowed car with her quivery hands extended in front of her like she was warding off a monster.

It wasn't far wrong. Assistant Director Walter Skinner had to be twice her size and more than three
times her age, and exactly one hundred percent more armed than she was right now, staring her down with his huge handgun. His flashlight was aimed at the ground now but its lowered illumination still served to intensify the scene she could barely see, because she could see that the gun was aimed at her. He could end her. He could take her. He could make her go back to the white rooms and she would have neither the power nor the authority to stop him. Nobody would know; nobody would come running to help. Like last time. He was absolutely the most terrifying thing she had encountered in a very long time, Hosts and Pledge Three included, and she was unsurprised to find when she finally drew breath that it was a panicked sob and that her face was wet with tears.

"Step away from the car." She did, unsteadily but obediently, hands out in front of her face to deflect some of the torchlight. "Are you armed?" She shook her head urgently, mumbling an attempt at telling him he had the wrong girl, not that any real words came out for him to take notice of, and her mumbles blocked out his next question. He had to repeat it in his deep, gravelly voice, not dropping the gun. "Who are you?" Was that his perplexed voice? She didn't know. It sounded much the same as his menacing voice. She blinked her tears away, wanting her vision back so she could see what was happening. She felt helpless, trapped. Story of her life. "What's your name and what are you doing here?"

"I'm no one," Sixty-Four insisted immediately, words tumbling over uneven breaths, all of it too fast. "I'm nobody." It was the most honest truth, but Skinner wasn't convinced, she could see it in the way his faceless silhouette didn't budge behind her defensive hands. Panic bubbled inside her; what else could she say? "I'm n-not looking for any troub-trouble, I'm no one, please, don't hurt me…"

"Your name; what is it?"

"Please-"

"Tell me your name," he snarled, taking a threatening step forward, and she cried out her incoherent response pathetically, cowering back against the open car in terror. He stilled. "What did you say?"

She knew she should shut her mouth, but her lips were trembling and wouldn't seal, or at least, that's the excuse she told herself to explain why she stammered out, "S-Sixty-Four. I'm Pl-ledge Sixty-Four."

Privileged information. Who she was, who they let her be, that was privileged information. She'd just shared a privileged Family secret with an assistant director of the FBI. There was no coming back from this kind of overstep. As if she wasn't already, for conspiring with Dr Gray and smuggling the Johannssons and associating with Fox Mulder and not reporting the boy at the hospital, she was now a dead girl walking. Doubly so.

Scoff of disbelief. "Why were you scoping out this address?" Skinner demanded, not wasting a beat, and she shook her head weakly, scraping the insides of her head for an excuse but her thoughts scattered wildly, as afraid as she was. "Driving back and forth at ten miles an hour, staring out your window with your headlights down is unusually suspicious behaviour that most of the sorts I normally deal with know better than to try. You must be a special breed of amateur, Sixty-Four."

"I wasn't…" But he'd seen her. "I…" Have nothing to offer. "I… I was lost. I was lost! Please, please…" Another petrified sob wobbled its way out of her throat and new tears overflowed from
her eyes. She covered her face, humiliated and defeated. She wasn't making a good case. He didn't believe her. He was going to take her in. She couldn't stop him. "Please don't take me back there. Don't hurt me, please. I haven't done anything, I haven't done anything…"

Skinner was heavily silent for a long moment while she shook and cried stupidly. When he spoke again, it was softer, though no less intense, no less authoritative. "Show me your face. I'm not going to hurt you," he added when she shook her head childishly. "Look at me."

What else could she do? Refuse, and be shot or arrested? There was nowhere to run that his bullet couldn't get to first. Reluctantly she lowered her hands, fingers trembling, and raised her face to Skinner's brief flashlight beam. She reopened her eyes when he dropped it away again; by now his strong, nightmarish features were solidifying in her vision, and she saw immediately that he recognised her.

"You were at the morgue," he recalled grimly. His gun was still trained on her. "Where are the others?"

"Gone. I'm alone."

"Don't waste my time. Where are they?"

"I'm not lying!" Sixty-Four almost shouted, volume control lost, her panicky voice echoing in the cavity of the open car beside her. "We drove out of town after we met you, and I came back by myself. I'm telling the truth."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" His eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "How old are you?"

Sixty-Four pressed her lips together, wanting them to stop trembling, knowing he wouldn't like her answer. "It's complicated. My papers say I'm nineteen."

"Christ. Your papers say? You don't know?" He waited, incredulous, while she shrugged uncomfortably. "So… What? You could be a minor?"

The question sounded more for him than for her, but it still stimulated thought in her. Could she be a minor? Maybe, technically. After all, in one regard, she was only a couple of years old; in another, she was ancient. In the regard she counted as her reality, she was nineteen-ish, and had definitely surpassed her eighteenth 'birthday', not that anyone had marked it.

"I… I don't think so."

"Where the hell are your parents?" he asked. Finally, something she could answer honestly.

"Dead. A long time ago." Good riddance.

"So now you collect dead bodies for a shadow government." Skinner looked away for a few seconds. Annoyed? She didn't know how to read him. He turned back, recomposed, no less terrifying. She shivered, certain she knew now how a creature of prey feels when it's confronted by a wolf. "I could have arrested you this afternoon for your fraudulent impersonation, interfering with the course of justice. That wouldn't look good on your record, young lady. CDC, my ass. Who the hell are you people?"

"I'm no one-"

He frowned deeper and she shied away, hands back between them as if it could do anything to protect her. "Don't play games. I know you. I don't know where from-"
"I've never seen you before today-" she began honestly, fearfully, but he cut her off, too. He shook his head and raised the gun away from her, a motion of defeat, and interrupted, "No, don't. You know what? I don't even care. I don't want to know any of this. You can tell it to your defence lawyer, from your prison cell."

Terror erupted in her at the mere mention of imprisonment, and electrified buzz words flooded her conscious mind. *Needles tests screaming white room crying loneliness masked doctors scans*. No. Not again, not ever again. "Don't, please don't." She took a step back; Skinner was opening his jacket, presumably looking for handcuffs. Cuffs that would dig into her skin, chain her to a bedframe, lock her into a space while they conducted their heartless studies… "You can't." Except he could. He could lock her in an eternal cycle of white rooms. Would he? This friend of Fox's? But when he took yet another step closer, starting the spiel of her Miranda rights, she heard a squeak that had to be her own as she bumped back into the car door hinge and the words fell out, unbidden: "I'm here for Fox Mulder!"

She knew immediately she shouldn't have said it. She waited for Skinner to get angry, to explode like Three would. Three was going to be so angry with her when he heard about this transgression. She waited for the slap across her face. She waited for the shouts.

"What do you mean?" No explosion, though he did slowly put his gun back on her, without any particular indication of threat or aggression. He gave up on the handcuff search. Sixty-Four didn't know how to react to a reasonable reaction. She shook with indecision. She shouldn't answer. She should run, except that he'd shoot her or arrest her and then others would torture the same information out of her. The wrong people would get the information.

Skinner was Fox's friend and ally. Skinner was Fox's friend and ally. Skinner was Fox's friend and ally and she didn't have enough of either of those.

"I'm his informant inside the organisation, and I'm no good to him in a jail cell," she added for good measure.

"Mulder uses kids now?" Skinner's mouth quirked down, disapproving. Through her own fear, she felt a tinge of defensiveness for poor Fox.

"He doesn't know how old I am. I was the one who got in touch. He doesn't know who I am."

"Neither do I. Pledge Sixty-Four? What's your real name?"

"That's it. That's all I have. They took my name away when they took me in."

Skinner sighed impatiently. "Listen here. I've had about six times my daily quota of bullshit already-"

"It's the truth," Sixty-Four insisted, eyes following the black hole in the end of his gun when he waved it slightly in gesture. She swallowed helplessly, shell-shocked by the chain of events that brought her to be here right now, staring down the barrel of a gun. What had prompted her back here even after the morgue encounter, knowing this frightening man was still around? "You can trust me. I…" shouldn't say this. "I'm the one who leaked this case file to Fox, and somehow he got it to you. We're on the same side."

Skinner looked at her a long time. She looked through her welling tears into dark, heartless eyes in a cold face. His expression was fixed, stony.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" he asked eventually. She shrugged tightly, scared.
"I don't know. Go and ask him." She nodded in the direction of the cabins, hidden from sight here, though she didn't really want him to do that. This wasn't how she wanted to meet her idol. "No, ring him. He'll tell you who I am."

"You think I have his number?"

"You called him out here," she retorted, which surprised him, made him more wary. Directly against her intention. "No, listen. I just… I hear things."

"Things nobody should have heard," Skinner noted. He jerked his head toward the cabins. "Alright. Let's go and brave knocking on that door."

And interrupt whatever was going down between Mulder and Scully? Nuh-uh. More to the point, follow Skinner away from her car, to sit down for a proper interrogation, before she was properly arrested? Sixty-Four shook her head urgently. "No. I don't…" In the pocket of her cargos, her phone rang, and she jumped, startled into almost a gasp. No, no… She'd been gone too long, they were starting to wonder… "Please, let me leave. They can't know I was here."

"You're awfully skittish," Skinner commented plainly, while the ringtone played out and she worked hard against her inner obedience, which told her to answer the call, and her inner rebel, which told her to burn the phone. "What are you afraid of?"

"Other than you?" she countered, trying to hold it together. It had been a couple of hours. Three and the others were ready to move the convoy on, and they had to have at least an inkling of where Sixty-Four had gone. Would they come looking for her? She was worthless but she was still their property. The ringing continued, piercing her eardrums, and she flattened her hands over her ears, wishing away the noise and the caller. Who was worse? Three or Skinner? "They'll kill me if they know I've spoken to you."

The call rang out. AD Skinner lowered the gun, not putting it away but bringing it down to aim at the ground before her feet, and she exhaled in a heaving, overwhelmed breath. Not a sadistic supervillain. She dropped her hands.

"Does Mulder know you're here?" he asked finally. Sixty-Four shook her head. "Who's calling you?"

"The people I work for." She paused. "Bad people."

"And what would they want that's got you so scared of a ringing phone?"

"I don't want them to know I'm here. I'm… I'm a bad liar," she admitted, "and I haven't thought of a good excuse of why I came back."

"Why did you come back to Thayne?" Skinner questioned. Sixty-Four hesitated.

"I had a hunch."

"A hunch. That's what you're gonna give me?" That was enough for the assistant director. "Jesus Christ, another one. Look, just get in your car, kid." He waved her to it and shook his head, disbelieving. "You're Mulder's informant – whatever, get out of here. I've taken about as much bullshit as I can for one day."

And he started to walk away. He was done with her. He was letting her go.

She should take it and run, far, far away.
But, stupidly, because she was stupid, she called after him, "I need your help."

"Kid, you're mixed up in Mulder's crazy, and all kinds of shit I want nothing to do with," he called back, still walking away. "Try Scully. You need more help than I can offer."

"There was a surveillance camera in the hospital foyer," she blurted before she could stop herself. In the darkness, he stopped, flashlight illuminating a circle on the ground. "It'll show the boy."

It made him stop. It made him turn. As he did, Skinner's gun came back up and her breath caught in the realisation that he could have squeezed that trigger at almost any moment of this exchange and she would have been powerless to prevent it. But he didn't. He just demanded, "What about the boy?"

Skinner had the most discerning face she thought she'd ever seen, and it looked all the sterner lit from beneath by his lowered flashlight beam. She stared at that face, trying to maintain the stupid reckless bravery that had made her speak up earlier today in the morgue and again now. He scared her, god, he scared her, yet he'd done nothing to hurt her, even tried to send her on her way. She inhaled slowly and spoke the words just as slowly.

"The boy you spoke to at the hospital," she said nervously under his angry gaze. "I only found him tonight by accident, because I was trying to follow you and Dr Scully to Fox, but if the wrong people realise who he is…" She brashly wiped her nose, wet from crying. She gathered her wild thoughts and tried to focus them into a succinct form for the stone-faced AD. "I know he's the reason you're all here. I can put that together, and I'm just a dumb kid. If they come sniffing, and they find footage of me walking into that hospital… ten minutes before Fox Mulder, and a few hours after you and Dr Scully, and however long after the boy walked in, too…" They could do math.

Skinner stared back at her, looking shaken. "What will they do to him?"

The flashes bombarded her again, for the slimmest fraction of a second, but it still made her shudder to remember. "Exactly what you think."

"But they don't know where he is? Yet?"

"Not yet."

He nodded, slowly at first and then with more surety. "I'll take care of the footage," he said, with such firm certainty that just like that, she believed him – it was like it was already gone. "What do you care about that boy?"

A sharp redirect, her worries about the surveillance camera dissolved. Sixty-Four scrunched her toes inside her shoes, anxious. She could barely believe she was in conversation with the most frightening man in the FBI, let alone that she'd only met him for the first time a few hours earlier and her life before that was Skinner-nightmare-free, or that this conversation was almost civil. "I…" How was she about to admit this to a total stranger, and one that scared the life out of her, when she'd never said this aloud to anyone else, ever? "I don't want him to live through what happened to me."

Did she imagine that slight softening to his features, or was it some trick of the odd lighting? "Are they hurting you?" he asked, and she realised she'd stopped shaking. She lowered her hands, slowly, inexplicably touched. His gun was still trained on her, but her fear of it was evaporating. All afternoon she'd been quaking in her metaphorical boots about the assistant director who'd crushed her like a bug at the morgue, but now she was thinking straighter. He was bound by the
law, and if he was as connected with Fox and Dr Scully as it appeared, his honour wasn't something she needed to question.

"Fox asked me the same thing, the first time we spoke."

"Well, that's because he's not a complete piece of shit. What do you do for him? Is it putting you in danger?"

"I deliver messages between Dr Gray and Fox Mulder."

Skinner's brows rose. "The Henry Gray with two birth certificates? He's inside this organisation?"

"Not by choice."

"Is everyone connected to this goddamn case returned from the dead?" The AD's eyes narrowed when she started, surprised by his knowledge. But, she chided herself, he worked with Dr Scully, who'd autopsied Thirty-Nine this afternoon. It shouldn't come as a shock that they'd worked it out. The Hosts would be furious. Pledge Three would be furious. "Are you dead?"

The question felt like a shove off a balance beam right onto her ass, and she blushed accordingly, hurt and ashamed and just a dumb kid again. "No. I'm breathing, aren't I?"

"So was Morris Bletchley when the Thayne sheriff put a bullet through him this week, but he wasn't in 2004 when he was killed in a hit-and-run. So?" Skinner paused rhetorically, but continued before she could say anything. "What is he? They sent you and that fake mortician out here, to spirit the body away before we could connect the dots. It must be a good secret." Sixty-Four rubbed her arm self-consciously, unsure now whether she wanted to keep telling him. He'd hurt her feelings with his tactless question. He waited; but her silence seemed to tell him plenty, because he was smart and that was why he had a serious job and she was just an unpaid servant to someone else's agenda. "You're one of them."

"I'm not dead," Sixty-Four mumbled, upset. Skinner didn't look convinced; he looked pitying.

"Were you?"

Asshole. The tears came back, stinging her only just dried eyeballs, and she rubbed them away, feeling pathetic.

"Are you a clone?" His question hung unanswered in the night, drifting against the natural hedge and probably past it to the log cabins beyond, against the open car, along the long country road. Her phone, still deep in the pocket of her cargo pants, started to ring again. Her every muscle contracted in dread. "Well? Are you?"

"I'm real!" Sixty-Four exploded in choked anguish, shoving away from the car and slipping between the open door and the assistant director's gun, no longer scared he might fire it. She stalked a few paces away and turned back to him and his flashlight, which he followed her with but lowered when she turned. "I'm a real, valid person and I don't need to prove that to you, or him, or anyone else! You think because I'm a pledge and I lost my name I don't mean anything? I'm real! I'm real, damn you!"

"Alright," Skinner placated, taken aback, raising a soothing hand, but it did nothing to soothe her as the phone continued to ring, taunting her.

"No, nothing's alright! I'm property; I'm their thing. I have nobody. Nobody's on my side, not even you, and you're supposed to be the good guy, and you're pointing a gun at me! You don't even
believe me – I've risked *everything* to help your friends, and other people too, people you don't even know about, even though it does nothing for me but because it's right, and I came here looking for help for that boy and instead I'm being interrogated, and all the while, *they're* still waiting for me," she added wildly, grabbing her noisy phone out and waving it at him. The screen was lit up; she didn't need to look to know what it would say. "I can't get away. I have to go back. *They're* going to be so mad. They're worse than you or anything you could do to me, so why don't you just… just… put that bullet through me and save me having to explain myself to them? Go on. Go on," she urged angrily, throwing the phone down, feeling the weight of it and of her whole existence fall away as soon as it left her fingers. Maybe it would be a blessing, like it was last time. She waited, hands open, momentarily high on the prospect of being in control. AD Skinner made no move to shoot her; he looked sad for her. The thought filled her with brazen fury, and it burst out when he lowered the gun again. "No! *Fuck* you!"

The insult slipped out of her goody-two-shoes mouth before she could catch it and she slapped her hands over her lips, too late, eyes wide in horror as the anger evaporated as quickly as it came on. She *never* spoke like that. Skinner looked surprised by the outburst. He pressed his lips into a thin line, eyeing her glowing, ringing phone. Sixty-Four looked quickly at the miraculously unbroken screen, dreading what she knew it would read. 3 gleamed up from the grass. Her stomach plummeted, though she'd already known.

The call rang out again, and the tightness in her chest released slightly. After a moment, Skinner did something to the gun with the hand still holding the flashlight. It must have been to disarm it, because he opened his jacket and made a show of putting away. She watched cautiously.

"Alright," he said, showing his empty hand. "Alright. I believe you. If Mulder trusts you, I trust you. You're right – I don't want to know half of this shit anyway. We need to prioritise. First: what's going to happen to you if I let you go back to them?"

*That* was his top priority? *Her*? That had to be a poor joke. But he didn't crack a smile while he waited for her reply.

"You'd really let me go?" she asked, uncertain. He'd walked away a few minutes ago but that seemed a year past, before she'd crossed the I-know-about-the-boy line. "Aren't you… going to arrest me?" Throw me in the white room? Let Dr Scully cut me up?

"Given my relative certainty that you're living proof of an illegal human cloning program running on American soil, and given the risk you've taken to reach out to my agents, no, not tonight. I think you're right that you're no help to Mulder from inside a jail cell." Skinner's tone was flat, firm. Businesslike. She couldn't take offence to that tone. "I think you're more than real – you might be the most important lead they have."

"I… I'll have to explain why I was here," she stammered, meek again. *More than real*. She gestured back at the car. "I bought some matches. I guess I was going…" She blushed furiously, scared again. How was she meant to admit to an assistant director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation that she'd been planning arson? She changed tact. "I drove out here before I really thought this through."

"We'll deal with that next time they ring. But will they *hurt* you?" he pushed, and she shook her head. "Okay, what about the boy? What can I do to protect him?" He waited for her to speak; when she didn't, he prompted, "Do they know about him? Was Bletchley here looking for him?"

Sixty-Four fidgeted with her fingernails. Privileged information, privileged information… But *more than real* overruled that programming BS. "I think he spotted the boy in town. He wasn't here for him, but he saw him, and when he ran for him he got shot."
Alright." That seemed to appease Skinner's limited, practical curiosity. "Is the boy in danger?"

"They don't know he's here. I'm not going to say anything to anyone. He's…" She paused, not sure how to word it, because there was so much she didn't understand. "He's special. I noticed it straight away."

"So did I," Skinner agreed soberly, and Sixty-Four felt a momentary kinship with him. He understood. He knew, she could tell, who else the boy was, and he was invested in that child, and would go to any lengths to protect him.

He really was an ally.

"He's theirs, isn't he?" she asked quietly, not really expecting an answer because it was obvious. "Fox's, and Dana Scully's. He's their son." She waited, and the night answered in silence, and Walter Skinner answered with a sigh and a wordless glance at the rough, natural hedging blocking their view of Rhonda's log cabins. Confirmation enough. Sixty-Four felt like he'd fired his gun right through her brains after all. Fox was a father. "But how… did he end up all the way out here?"

Alone. With some other man.

Skinner looked back to her, expression closed but words relatively gentle. "Who's the informant here, kid?" He cleared his throat, effectively ending that line of discussion. "What else do I need to know?"

"Umm…" So much. "You and Dr Scully are being watched. My organisation has people inside your Bureau-"

"Who?" Skinner was sharp, his voice and his eyes and his expression. "Can you prove that?"

"I'm not a cop. I'm no one. I don't know who. I just… hear things," she finished lamely. "It's how I knew to tell Fox to stay away from Dana Scully. They monitor her for indications of what he's doing, since he's too hard to track. But after you both turned up when we were picking up Thirty-Nine– uh, Morris Bletchley, they're going to be watching you, too. They said so. So, I, uh…" Embarrassed, she dug the business card out of her pocket and held it out. Skinner recognised it immediately, flicking his torchlight onto it. She swallowed. "If the boy contacts you, they'll know, and they'll find him."

The assistant director stared at his own name and phone number, and finally exhaled in defeat. "Christ, I hate it when she's right." He plucked the card reluctantly from her outstretched fingers. "So the kid's whole family is too dangerous to keep an eye on him. How do we help him?"

"We all have to get as far away as possible," Sixty-Four said, feeling like it was an apology, "and not get caught looking back." Both pairs of eyes zeroed in on the phone on the ground when it began to ring again, a cheery tone unmatched to the person on the other end. She stared at it, frozen with indecision. She couldn't leave Three hanging – the repercussions of that could be worse. "And I need a good reason for running away."

"What, dare I ask, were you planning on setting alight?" Skinner asked dryly, not as concerned about the ringing phone as she was. She bit her lip, anxious. But what was left to be afraid of? Skinner hadn't hurt her, wasn't even planning to.

"I… maybe… thought about… burning down the morgue." There. Out.

No fireworks. "Destroy our lead." Pause. "Hugely, hugely illegal. But clever. Will that be enough to distract them from the boy's existence?"
Sixty-Four nodded, seeing suddenly the perfection of the idea. She spoke quickly, spurred by the ringtone. "They don't know I've found him. Their only interest in Thayne is that Thirty-Nine was killed here, and now they're mad that you and Dr Scully got access to him. If they think your investigation is dead, there's no reason for them to look back."

"Are you sure?"

"You should still take the hospital footage, just in case. But if the evidence is gone--"

"Fine." AD Skinner's voice was firm and impossible to argue with as he coached, "Answer and keep it short. Tell them it's already burning, so they can't suggest another course of action. Do it now." There was no room for worry about messing it up. He left no option to break while trying to lie.

She hurriedly knelt and picked up the phone. It took two stabs at the screen to accept the call.

"Yeah, I'm here," she answered, aiming to sound nonchalant or at least not terrified. She looked up at Skinner while Pledge Three's voice slipped into her ear coldly.

"Where have you been?" His voice was more familiar than Skinner's but after this conversation, knowing what was at stake in the local regional hospital, tonight it sounded so much worse. Who would have thought things could turn so sharply?

"I'm coming back soon. Are you still where I left you?"

"For now. Where have you been?" Three asked again, a little harder on the end of the question, no upward inflection to indicate any sort of invitation to answer. There was no invitation, only direction.

"I bought some matches," Sixty-Four responded, holding Skinner's eye contact for strength as she lied to the most powerful man in her life. "The agents cleared out so I took care of it."

Three was silent for a bit. She felt sweat break out on the back of her neck. Did he know she was lying? Was he watching from further up the road, headlights off, a much better sneaker-up-er-er than she was? She looked around, but there was no car, no movement.

"Is there anything left?"

She licked her lips, her mouth dry with nervousness. "Shouldn't be. It's still burning."

"And Thirty-Nine's inside?"

"He was." More silence. She looked up again and saw Skinner still watching her. He nodded almost imperceptibly, a little gift of encouragement. He was happy with her, thought she was doing alright. How pathetic that she noticed things like that. "Unless they packed the body in her handbag?"

"Hilarious. Come on back and we'll get out of this shithole state."

She tried not to sigh loudly in relief as her body loosened, every muscle dropping out of whatever complex knot they were in before. He believed her. "See you soon."

She ended the call and almost collapsed, allowing that sigh to escape now. She breathed in deep; the cool night air filled her, hurting her lungs, but it felt good. They could take it. Skinner watched her dubiously as she shakily got back to her feet.
"I'm not convinced I'm making the most ethical decision in letting you go back to that," he commented. "They scare the hell out of you."

Obviously. "I have to get back. But what about the morgue? I've never-"

"Burnt a building down?" Skinner guessed. "Why am I not surprised? How did a nice kid like you end up ferrying secret messages between a mysterious criminal organisation and a guy like Mulder?"

"It's a long story," Sixty-Four admitted, "and not a nice one."

"You're right – I don't need to know. Well, let's not make it worse by adding arson to that story, because judging from the rest of your stealth skills, you'll probably burn yourself or get caught before you get the building to catch. So," he said, when she started to ask a question beginning with the same word, "you just get out of here. I'll take care of things."

"You'll burn down the morgue?!" Sixty-Four confirmed incredulously. Skinner raised an eyebrow behind his glasses.

"I will do no such thing. In fact, I don't even recall this conversation, or having ever met you. Go on," he urged, nodding to her borrowed car. "Get. Oh," he added, stepping after her when she tentatively moved for the still-open driver's side door, "and take this."

He held out the now-crinkled business card she'd swiped from Fox's son. She stared, the same way he had when she'd held it out to him.

"I realise the dangers to you are similar as to the boy," he confessed, "and I'd hate for you to get caught with this… and I know Mulder must be grateful to have you on the inside, but… Look, there's a reason his friends are limited to the people on this lot. Mulder forgets how serious and dangerous his own shit is, and people die." He looked uncomfortable to have said so much. "Just call if you need anything, alright? I don't like any of this."

Slowly, Sixty-Four took back the card, reminded oddly of the driving instructors Three had set her up with years before. Maybe just because was about to get into a car? She climbed in, lowering herself behind the wheel, mind spinning with surreal, disjointed thoughts. Assistant Director Skinner didn't want her to die. He cared more about her – a stranger, an orphan, a servant, a thing remade by creepy science she couldn't explain – surviving than he did about Fox Mulder's case. She'd come here for Fox, determined as she had been for months that Fox would accept her, care for her, if only she could brave actually meeting him, but weirdly, it was Walter Skinner sending her safely on her way, problems addressed and feeling secure again. He closed the car door behind her. She turned the key in the ignition and let the engine purr to life. She put her seatbelt on and looked out her window at the assistant director.

Weird, how vastly things could change in so short a time.

She wound down the window.

"I told the hospital I was your daughter," she confessed, "so I could find out where you had gone."

"And they told you?" he asked, not missing a beat this time. "Excellent privacy protocols. Shouldn't take much for me to get that footage then." He paused. "Be careful, Sixty-Four."

"You too, Mr Skinner."

He backed up, and she put the car into gear and put him and Rhonda's Cabins in her rear-view
mirror. Between her fingers, gripping the wheel and driving into a very uncertain but much less frightening future, was the card of the first person in a long time who'd shown her genuine kindness, but not the last person she'd feel bad about lying to.

One little lie, though, in a haystack of truth – who was going to count that?
XXXVIII - Scully

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters. Wonder what kind of disclaimer I'll need for a doctorate in X-Files fanfiction?

Author's Notes: I feel like apologies are getting old, but it's definitely warranted in this case. I'm sorry for the incredible wait. So much has happened! I finished my Masters, receiving the highest possible mark for my thesis (which, yes, was about fanfiction!). After much agonising, I quit my safe, secure, permanent, sensible government job as a classroom teacher and spent a week unemployed. Then a week ago I got a tattoo reminding me to Follow the white rabbit after any opportunity that might lead me out of my stalemate life, took a job at a prominent university teaching English Curriculum studies and Writing, received entry into my PhD in fanfiction studies (focusing on the X-Files fandom – thanks soodohnimh for introducing me!), agreed to an offer to publish my Masters thesis in an upcoming book… So in 2018 I'll probably be just as sporadic as I have been this year, except my excuse will be 'becoming Doctor of Fanfic', which theoretically should afford me more time for fanfic-writing. Life is looking much sparklier than it did a fortnight ago!

Thank you to everyone who has patiently waited this out and who has actually decided to come back and trust me for yet another chapter.

It's not the gentle rock of someone slipping out of bed. It's not the sound of the shower running or the toilet flushing. It's not the soft noises of someone ghosting around the room, picking things up, tying shoes. It's not the faint jingle of keys scooped up or the scrape of the door opening. It's not even the muffled exchange of low, tense voices outside or the click of the door pushed shut behind him.

It's the sound of the car starting that wakes her.

Every time.

The rumble of the engine right outside did its usual trick, and she felt herself dragged awake out of a very, very deep sleep. It was morning, apparently, though not bright, at least as far as she could tell through her eyelids. She felt foggy, disorientated. Raw. Her eyes did not want to open, and neither did she want them to. Where was she? The events of yesterday and previous days and dreams were all muddled, but she knew, without thinking about it, that opening her eyes was a mistake. Just another moment… Just another second of pretend…

The car. She heard it and recognised the sound now, that rumble of reality, and forced her eyes open. The cabin was dim, lit quietly by the grey dawn, not that it stopped her eyes from stinging in protest, and she was lying on her side in a comfortable bed that wasn't hers. She shifted against the blankets; naked? She tensed. Alone? Outside, the car pulled away, and instinctively she rolled over… hand landing heavily on empty space. Cold. She had imagined it, crazy after all.

But that side of the bed was unmade. He was here. And now, judging by that familiar noise already dropping below audible range, he was gone.
He'd gone, taking his unique ability to suspend reality with him, leaving her with the same shitty existence he'd found her in. Alone, again.

With an exhausted sigh, Scully let her arm collapse underneath her, though it was barely holding her up more than an inch or two, and her face fell onto the pillow that had been behind her. It was always the sound of the car that woke her, which was frustrating, because any point before that would give her the time to get to him and demand where he thought he was going this time. Russia? Mexico? Roswell? She inhaled, determined to imagine his scent. There was no need to imagine. It was there, on the pillow, on her, and it brought her an unreasonable degree of comfort. This time, she didn't need to ask where he was going. This time, he wasn't sneaking out of their bedroom to hunt whatever he'd just laid awake all night dreaming up. He was, purely and simply, just getting out of there before she woke up.

Charming, you're thinking.

She wasn't annoyed. She didn't get to be annoyed. It was for the best. They'd agreed. Besides, he wasn't hers, they weren't a thing, and to be honest, she was surprised he was still here at whatever-time of morning this was.

No, that was a lie. She wasn't surprised. She wished she was, but she wasn't. Of course he would stay, if he sensed she really needed him to; and of course he would leave before she woke. Had he slept? She reflected on the cloudy, emotional memory of last night and yes, there it was: the softness of his breath on the back of her shoulder as he fell asleep. The small voice recorder clasped in his hand over hers. The warmth and familiar strength of his chest firm at her back, his legs behind and between hers... She suddenly and quite physically missed him, and felt the awful urge to cry.

Ugh. She squeezed her eyes shut, embarrassed, glad no one was there to point out how pathetic she was. Least of all Mulder. What was wrong with her?

She knew the answer. She didn't want to think about it.

She breathed through the tearfulness until it went away. She wished she could just fall back asleep, but she rubbed her achy eyes and felt the swollen lids. Great – her eyes were puffy and her eyelids thick, the all-too-attractive by-product of crying. She pushed herself upright and pressed her fingertips into her closed eyes, thinking back deliriously, carefully, cautious not to falter too heavily on any big emotions. They were thick tripwires laced across every train track of thought, a minefield of pain and regret and sorrow, waiting to be set off. Last night it had been too much, everything exploding, everything going off and raining down on her; but Mulder, beautiful, persistent, thoughtlessly thoughtful Mulder had found her, broken, naked, raw, vulnerable, exactly as she'd avoided being around him for three years... and he'd held on until the explosions stopped.

Because they'd found William.

And she couldn't face him.

And she couldn't keep him.

The very worst possible day. For Mulder to show up right then, when he did, while she was literally a sobbing, sopping mess on the shower floor, maximally unattractive and unlovable, and to drag her out, and dry her, and give her his jacket that smelt just like him, and to rub warmth into her skin, and to tuck her into bed, and to hold her and indulge her while she cried and confessed...

"Oh, God," she muttered, annoyed with herself, running her fingers through her hair. One side
tangled, snaring her hand – the side she'd slept on, while it was still wet and unconditioned and unbrushed. Rookie error. The other side, the side he'd stroked and smoothed while he lay behind her and told her he didn't hate her, didn't blame her, didn't hold any resentment over William, that had dried almost straight. Magic Mulder. Something else she should thank him for, she supposed.

She shoved the blankets off and swung her legs out of the bed before she could get any ideas about snuggling back down into the warmth of his familiar smell – she was not that dependent – and looked down at her feet. Bare. Like the rest of her. Faintly, she felt the ghosts of Mulder's hands on her ankles, sliding his own socks onto her feet. After everything you've seen, you're grossed out by my socks? Baby, if through contact and association I was going to infect you with anything...

The socks were gone. She checked the bed, but they weren't there. Neither was Mulder's jacket or the recorder or the things she'd pulled out of the pockets and left beside her – the jacket which she'd always liked so much and which she'd tried to avoid receiving but which had been so beautifully warm wrapped around her shoulders, smelling exactly like him. Indulging the weak woman inside her who still pined for this very version of him. He was perfect in this mode – so present, so tender, so caring. She recalled the pressure of his hands on her arms, pulling her out of the shower, drying her, rubbing heat back into her skin. She could still feel his arms tight around her, holding her together while she fell apart. His words still swirled inside her ears, inside her head, words of comfort, of unexpected apology, of deep regret, of seriousness. She felt blood flush her cheeks to recall the hard denim of his physical reaction to her pressing against the back of her thigh. The shiver that rode through her whole body when his lips touched the nape of her neck. Trust me. How had she resisted?

With immense effort. Because while she trusted him with her life, she couldn't trust him to stay like this. It didn't last, his perfection only ever a temporary state, something that wore off soon enough, and acting on wanting that man while he was in that zone would have resulted in this same lonely morning. But whatever. She was too exhausted to feel resentful of his erraticism right now. He came through. He didn't have to. He made her a priority in the exact moment she most needed him to and she loved him for it.

There. She loved him. So what? It didn't change anything.

He'd gotten out of there before he could screw up, and had remained considerate and careful to the last – her overnight bag was beside the door, smuggled in from the car, with two large towels on top. The recorder they'd fallen asleep clutching had been migrated safely to the table near her phone. He'd taken all traces of himself to save her having to dispose of or explain his clothing, leaving only his unmade bed to avoid disturbing her sleep.

As if the sound of him leaving wasn't haunting enough to do that anyway.

She got up, retrieved her toiletries bag, and gathered the towels to her chest. If she hadn't been so stubborn and pissy with Skinner last night, she would have had the presence of mind to ask for these when Rhonda the innkeeper mentioned not having stocked the room yet.

The bathroom was still a little steamy, further evidence of Mulder's short stay. She tried not to envision him in here, just minutes before, water running off him, eyes closed under the stream of water, meditative and lost in his own senses. She wished she'd woken earlier, that she wasn't such a deep sleeper in his presence. Scully dampened her own runaway thoughts by redirecting her attention to yesterday's clothes, artfully hung off the sink and the window. Drying, apparently. Imagining poor Mulder picking up after her, picking her clothing out of the shower water she'd managed to spill and hanging everything up, was humbling enough to kill any other wayward thoughts about him. She flicked the water on and felt the stream. Warm. Recent experience told her
that this temperature didn't last forever, but she couldn't recall noticing last night as she dissolved under its cascade, not until Mulder's hands closed on her arms and he made comment of it.

She got in and noticed the pastel-coloured lump of wet soap in the dish. She touched the remaining bubbles on its surface, slightly surprised on further thought that Mulder had opted to stay long enough for a shower. He'd made it clear last night that he was going to be keeping his distance from her for a while, and they'd both agreed it was unsafe for them to be associated at the moment. She'd have thought he would get as far away as soon as he could.

But as she started washing her hair properly she recollected the sensations of last night. On reflection, his scent surrounded her, the scent of stakeouts and long flights, the scent of waking up together, the scent of medical emergencies when he camped out beside her hospital bed and disappeared long enough to chase some bad guy down and return; it wasn't a distinction others would necessarily make, or if they did, they wouldn't likely perceive it with the same sense of desire and security that she did. How long had it been since he'd last showered, and how long would it be before his next one? He was too paranoid to risk staying in motels and hostels too frequently, preferring to spend a few nights every week in his car to throw any observers off his path. Poor Mulder, she thought vaguely as the shampoo suds flowed over her shoulders. He was missing out.

She went about her routine properly. She got dry. She got dressed. She blow-dried her hair. She tried to disguise her puffy eyes and blotchy skin with make-up, though she wasn't sure she succeeded. She packed her toiletries and all her damp clothes into her bag in case they had to leave quickly. She strapped her firearm into place, horrified at the way she must have irresponsibly cast it off in her grief last night. She didn't recall. Luckily the only person who'd broken in and found it was Mulder. As she shrugged her light jacket on over the top of the gun, she saw her phone on the table where Mulder left it last night and reached for it, recalling suddenly that she missed a call while she was in bed.

As her fingers closed around it, a sharp and heavy knock sounded on the door.

"Agent Scully." Skinner. The key, dangling from the lock inside, jingled from the heaviness of the knock. "Get dressed, we need to go."

Frowning, she crossed the little cabin to the door and opened it. Her friend and former boss stood on the landing, unshaven, looking almost as tired as she felt. He glanced up at her from the small yellow paper bag he was writing on, eyes roving quickly across her face. Checking she was alright. Checking she wasn't mad.

She was.

"Good, you're ready. We're checking out. Key?" He held out a hand expectantly, and she tugged the cabin's keyring from the back of her door for him. He took it and dropped it inside the bag. "Shout at me later," he advised, stepping down from the little porch and heading for the rental car. "The sheriff called."

Scully buttoned up her jacket. "Where's the fire?"

Skinner looked back at her sharply, oddly. "The morgue. The fire department just arrived."

Oh. For real. Scully shoved her phone into the inner pocket of her jacket without looking at it and went back inside for her shoes. She was already packed so she grabbed her ID and the recorder from the table, snatched up her bag, and hurried out after Skinner.
"The morgue's on fire?" she clarified, throwing her bag into the backseat he opened for her. She thought of the brick building they'd abandoned last night in favour of tracking down William. How would a structure like that catch alight without a lot of help? She thought of the cadaver she'd autopsied and understood that this was no coincidence. Damn it, they'd even planned to stake the place out like newbies.

"Apparently so," Skinner answered, raising his voice to be heard as he walked away to the main office while she closed the car door and rounded the vehicle to the passenger side. "The sheriff isn't there yet. He called us as soon as he heard." He dropped the little check-out bag of keys into a carved wooden drop box outside the office cabin and returned to start the engine. Scully stood a moment with her hand on the door handle, waiting for her exhausted brain to catch up with what he'd just confirmed, and all the implications that went with that. The building had been set alight. Morris Bletchley's body was inside. Her evidence from this venture out here was inside. She was being sabotaged. Shit, shit. "Agent?"

Her friend's voice pulled her back and she yanked open the door. She got in beside him.

"What does he know at present? Who called it in?"

"A local. That's all he knows. I told you," Skinner reminded her patiently, buckling his seatbelt, "he isn't on the scene yet."

"But the building's made of brick," she said, reassuring herself as much as him with a healthy dose of fact. "It can't be all alight. A lot of what's inside could be perfectly unharmed."

"Could be," Skinner agreed calmly. He turned the key. "Let's not count our chickens yet, hmm?"

"The fire department, if it got there quickly enough, could have scared them off before they got a decent fire going," she continued, daring to hope. "The refrigerator would act like an insulator, so unless they knew I'd hidden the tissue samples… which they couldn't know, unless they got to the ME…" Which they absolutely could have done, because it was them. "He could be dead. Do we know if he's dead?"

"We don't know anything, Agent Scully."

Scully tapped her fingernails restlessly on the windowsill of her door, then realised they weren't speeding off into the dawn, as they would be if Mulder were driving. She glanced suddenly at Skinner across the cab. He was hurrying but he didn't seem appropriately annoyed by this typical X-file mess-around.

"They're ripping the rug out from under us," she said, surprised he didn't see it. "They're trying to sweep this all away, like they always do."

He didn't look at her as he put the car into gear and started down the driveway. "I realise that, Agent Scully."

She waited, but he still didn't glance at her. His profile was stern and unforgiving, an intimidating face of stone to those unfamiliar with his true inner self, and she waited for him to turn his worried brown eyes on her. He didn't.

"What do you know?" she asked suddenly, suspicious. She'd heard Mulder outside the room that morning, talking quietly. To Skinner? Scheming? "What aren't you telling me?"

He frowned slightly, casting her only the briefest of sideways looks. "Aren't those usually my questions?"
"They were hers first, directed at Mulder, usually."

"Why aren't you more upset about this?" Scully reworded, feeling impatient. Why wasn't he driving faster? Why wasn't he telling her what he was thinking? Her evidence was literally going up in smoke, a good eight-minute drive away.

"Because we don't know anything yet," Skinner replied, turning onto the main road and taking off with a subtle glance out his window at the patch of grass on the road shoulder, "and there's nothing we can do about it until we get there."

"Is this about Mulder?" she pushed. Her brain was whirring, trying to connect the dots in the uncaffeinated grey dawn light. Did Mulder have something to do with the fire? She couldn't see how. He would never deliberately sabotage her, especially not in a case he wanted her to pursue. Indeed, he'd all but dragged her to this one. He also wouldn't allow someone else to set a fire that would take out part of her investigation. And on top of all that, Mulder hated fire. He'd faced it time and time again, but she knew it still scared him, big fires, anyway.

Skinner raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Oh, was Mulder here?" He paused for effect while she glared at him. "You're welcome."

Seriously? He knew something, she could tell from his lack of urgency, but he wasn't going to tell, so she sat back in her seat with a frustrated sigh.

"I cannot believe you called him," she commented coolly, staring straight ahead out the window.

"I can't believe you didn't," Skinner retorted. He raised a hand in an irritable gesture of helplessness without taking his eyes off the road. "Who do you two think you're kidding at this point?"

Skinner was an ally and the closest one they had. The reality of her last couple of years as a single woman, estranged from Fox Mulder, while entirely factual, was not one Skinner had ever taken as truth. This trip and the events of last night, Mulder appearing and Scully clearly not sending him away, would only serve to reinforce this conception of Skinner's. She really should try harder with him, to convince him. Not convince, she corrected herself, show. Prove. If he doubted her independence from Mulder, were there others, too? Now more than ever, with whatever Mulder was cooking up, she needed to be seen as detached from her old partner.

Besides, it wasn't like the dream team was reuniting any time soon. In any regard.

"I've told you, we're not together anymore. We haven't been for a long time."

"Mm-hmm. And you weren't together for a long time before you were together, either." He shrugged a little. "Dana, I'm not judging you. It's just a fact that together has never been a factor with you two."

"It is now. And we're not. I cannot believe you let him into my room," Scully added, more sharply. "What happened to protocol, Assistant Director?"

He choked on a surprised laugh. "First off, he let himself into your room. I don't exactly get around with lockpicks in my damn pockets. And if you want to play the game where we question obvious breaches of protocol, Agent, you open up your case history and we're on. I don't think that's a game you should offer to play."

She sighed and rubbed her eyes. She'd walked straight into that one – she put it down to exhaustion, because she was normally cleverer than that. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm just tired, and overwhelmed, and now I'm pissed off about this fire." She paused, getting her words in order.
before she let them out of her mouth this time. "I'm annoyed you called Mulder."

"I thought you would be," her friend acknowledged, tone calm, clearly having moved on from the almost-argument of a second ago. She looked at him again; he was looking ahead, but she noted again that he looked as tired as she was.

"It was the right thing to do," she admitted. It was hard to say, but not harder than the rest. "You were right. He deserved to… to know. That we found William." She swallowed. It hurt a little. The night was already starting to blur in her memory, though it was so recent. "I played him the interview. So he… could hear..." His voice. Her son's voice. Their son's voice. It wasn't a sound she'd ever expected to have the privilege of hearing, let alone live, in person, just a single room away. She cleared her throat, thinking painfully of Mulder's fascination as he reached out to the recorder as though it truly contained their child. He had no opportunity to touch the boy. She'd been close enough that she could have, and she'd squandered the opportunity. But, he'd agreed with her, it was for the best. It was still hard to breathe through the weight of the guilt, no matter what he insisted, but it was what it was. She cleared her throat before she could make herself cry again. "Thank you for your sensitivity last night. It was difficult."

"I can only imagine," Skinner answered soberly. He hesitated. He sounded uncomfortable. "What… are you two planning on doing about… it? About William?"

It felt like failing to say it, and she couldn't face her friend's expression as she uttered it. "Nothing."

"You're really going to walk away?"

The knife of her own guilt twisted in her chest. "Yes. I am. We all should." We all should abandon my twice-orphaned child to whatever fate would naturally befall him, as it could hardly be worse than what would befall him if we stuck around and poisoned his life with our unhealthy presences. It was almost impossible to believe, but she knew it was true. It was the same truth she'd been forced to face when she gave him up the first time. You're better off without me.

Skinner exhaled heavily. "Good. I didn't think so before," he confessed when she looked at him in surprise. "I thought you were making a mistake, walking away from him last night, but you were right. An FBI intervention in the life of a boy connected to Morris Bletchley? That's a magnet for the wrong kind of attention. We're dangerous. You are dangerous." He paused again. "We've already caught that attention, you and I."

Scully sighed as well and went back into her jacket for her phone, reminding herself to check it for those missed calls that she was quite certain came from Colt. "Careful, sir. Your recent interaction with Mulder is showing."

"It wasn't Mulder who told me," Skinner said while she stretched her seatbelt to get inside her jacket. "Listen," he redirected tensely. "Your case – does it have anything to do with cloning?"

Scully gave up on the phone and frowned, adequately distracted. "Cloning?" she repeated, slowly. "What makes you ask that?"

"What we saw in Bletchley's chest. Doesn't cloning explain that best?"

She'd made the same connection, of course, or at least flirted with the idea of it before dismissing it as Mulderish, looking at those absurdly healthy oversized human lungs in that muscular body that should have been weathered and abused, but organ cloning did not explain how any of those body parts got back inside that body without surgery. And full-scale human cloning of an adult, complete with cosmetic addition of scarring, seemed a little ridiculous. Perhaps it was possible, but
the result would be a vegetable, surely. There was no way to synthesise a lifetime's worth of learning and socialisation and experience into a brand-new body. Even if it could, the cloned brain simply wouldn't absorb it, underdeveloped and infantile as it must be to have been grown in a lab rather than naturally forged and reforged through experiences.

So it couldn't be cloning, either.

"Scientific evidence would explain it best," she said finally, "but that's all going up in smoke right now."

"But it could be," her old boss pressed. "These people you're after, they could be cloning."

"Not in any sense I'm yet aware of," Scully answered flatly. "Maybe, I suppose, if everything I understand about cloning – as a scientist and medical professional with more experience in cases of illegal cloning than most – is incorrect, but without evidence to support-"

"I don't suppose you know a Pledge Sixty-Four?"

"A what?"

"Informant of Mulder's." He glanced over at her to see her shake her head slowly. "Turned up here last night just after he did. No sense whatsoever of stealth. She claims that she works for the organisation we're hunting. She told me they're watching us." He hesitated. "I think she's a clone."

Scully shook her head longer than necessary as he kept talking, kind of hoping more of this morning's senseless facts would fall sensibly into place inside it. It didn't work. Mulder had contacts out here in Wyoming, mere miles from William's lifelong location? And one of them went by a stupid codename and claimed to be a clone? Or said or did something that made Skinner think she was a clone, less than a day after viewing a cadaver that could only be explained with some similar science-fiction biomedical genetic engineering? Coincidence? Or was her story a ruse?

The story was always a ruse.

"So he was followed?" Scully asked, prioritising her line of questioning, worry for Mulder pushing forward from the back of her mind. If he was, he had no idea, and that was worthy of concern, because he always thought he was being followed. "Or were we?"

"In this case, she was looking for Mulder, but she tracked him down by tracking us."

Scully swallowed. Exactly as she often feared. She was a highly visible homing beacon, a liability to Mulder's secretive little missions just as much as he was a liability to her transparent Bureau ones. They'd become a danger even to each other. What would they ever be but dangers to their son?

Her heart clenched at the thought. "If this woman tracked us-"

"I've already been to the hospital," Skinner interrupted, calming her. He took the turn back into town. "He's still there, asleep, managing sleep somehow… Don't ask me how, teenagers possess the ability to fall asleep in the most twisted and cramped positions. It seems yours is no exception. But yes, Pledge Sixty-Four worked out we would be there, told the staff she was my daughter to find out where we were, and drove out here to tell us we'd been caught on video surveillance at the hospital and the people she works for will get hold of that footage-"

"And maybe see William on earlier footage." Scully had to stop herself from getting carried away. Breathe. Conclusions were to be reached, not leapt to. "But they won't know what to look for.
We're federal agents; our being at the hospital was never suspicious."

"We're not the only ones on last night's recording," Skinner amended. "Anyone who got hold of it would also see Mulder, and Pledge Sixty-Four herself, all walking into this hospital, making the reason for our being there a whole lot more intriguing to these people and worthy of investigation. We don't need that attention. Will doesn't need that attention. So I've taken the tape." He patted his pocket. "I've also debriefed the staff who interacted with any of us – told them their protocols are bullshit and need to be reviewed."

Restless, Scully covered her mouth with her fingers and tapped her fingertips on her cheek absentmindedly as she thought this over. Skinner made it sound like everything was under control.

"Alright," she said, calming herself with effort. "This woman you think is a clone – is that speculation, or did she say she was? Did you record her, or have her write out a statement?"

So much had progressed just while she slept! But Skinner hesitated again.

"Neither. I let her go."

"Let her go where?"

"I didn't record anything," he explained, infuriatingly. "I'm keeping the whole conversation off the record of this case, to protect her. Like we're doing for Will. She's in with some dangerous people. Skittish thing. The same young lady we saw with the 'agents' trying to fake their way into the morgue yesterday as the CDC. I know her from somewhere, I'm sure of it, but she says yesterday was the first time she's seen me. She's been leaking information to Mulder – I don't want her blood on our hands."

Scully stared at him. She tried to picture the woman from yesterday but her attention had been fixated on the not-Dr Lansdowne. "You didn't take her statement?" she repeated. "More to the point, you didn't arrest her?"

"She said she leaked our current case, to Mulder, and that's how I got it-"

"And you believed her?" Scully asked incredulously. Her boss frowned a little, annoyed by her annoyance. That only annoyed her further. They'd always gotten along very well, two sound minds caught up in the wake of the whirlwind that was Mulder. Since when was he such a flake? "Sir. This young woman impersonated your daughter to manipulate the hospital staff into giving her our location. She was part of a team attempting to steal Bletchley's body. Why would you believe a word she told you? She probably lit the morgue up."

"No," Skinner answered, too fast, too certainly. "I don't think so."

"Based on what evidence?"

"I don't think I should tell you specifics. The conversation's off the record, so you can't use it, but I-"

"Then why are you telling me?" Scully demanded, wanting to rip her hair out in frustration with him. "Why are you telling me any of this? If I can't use it, if there's no actual record and you let the suspect – don't call her an informant," she interrupted before he could interrupt her, and he clamped his mouth shut, "she's a criminal who tried to interfere with our investigation and got caught sneaking around our accommodations in the middle of the night – if you let the suspect go free with no means of tracking her down, then why are you telling me? You know I can't use it. All you're doing is colouring my perspective on the case and potentially influencing my direction
against what the evidence will say. I can't defend a biased or misdirected investigation."

"I understand that," he replied tersely. "That's why they let me be Assistant Director. I didn't record anything she said because then it would be a matter of record – anyone could access it and know what she said. Not just you. And she needs protection because she knows where your son is." He tapped his fingers irritably on the steering wheel. "I can handle the information she provided better from the stand, at the end of this, when you ask me to testify as to what I've just told you."

"I don't want you on the stand, talking about human cloning and girls with codenames, looking and sounding crazy," Scully snapped, heart flipping painfully at the mention of William. "I want you far away from any of this, so far away that when you assure people I'm sane and credible, they believe you. Far enough away that no one tries to... to kill you or..." She struggled, faces flicking through her thoughts. Mulder's father. Diana Fowler. Alvin Kersh. Marita Covarrubias. X, Deep Throat. The list of names struck off, either in death or disgrace, for throwing their lot in with the pair was too long for Skinner's to be added this late in the game. She cleared her throat quickly. "I refuse to see you punished for helping me, so please, stop."

Skinner was silent. Scully was, too. It was heavy and uncomfortable for much too long before she inhaled slowly, forcing herself back to calm. He was trying to be helpful. He honestly thought she was totally in league with Mulder and didn't realise how much of this was news to her. He didn't understand the action plan because he wasn't in on it, and he had to stay that way.

"Any other case, I would be thrilled to have you on the stand backing me up," Scully said finally, carefully, genuinely. "An assistant director testifying he met a human clone in one of my X-file hearings? I can think of times I would have done almost anything for that. But this isn't any other case."

"Because it involves your son."

"No."

He sighed and turned the car. They were getting close. A few blocks away, between buildings, Scully thought she could now see the rising wisps of dark smoke that gave away the location of the fire, but it could have been just cloud.

"I'm telling you because I admire what you've done for William, against your own desires: what you're doing for him," Skinner said softly, craning his neck along with her to see further ahead through the front windscreen, though it didn't help. The cloud was definitely not cloud, however. Definitely smoke. "It must kill you. I thought you'd appreciate knowing you're not on your own this time. We've got someone running interference for us on the other side for once."

The plume of smoke was thickening, darkening, swirling upward. "More than anything, sir, I want to believe you."

"You know, I'm perpetually torn," he admitted. "Stuck somewhere between wanting nothing to do with the two of you and the insanity you bring along with you, and desperately wishing I could do more to help you. Oh, shit," he added, turning into a new street and getting the full view of the tower of smoke rising into the early morning sky. He put on some speed.

"You do help me," Scully said quietly as they came into sight of the building he'd brought her to yesterday, the building she wouldn't have even known to investigate if not for her friend's careful looking out for her, the building that was now on fire because they'd abandoned their watch of it to follow a lead on her child, courtesy of that same friend.
She'd heard William's voice. She'd heard William's voice, and in exchange, she'd lost her evidence in this investigation. Framed that way, wasn't it worth it?

Hard to say. She'd also gained a whole lot more emotional turmoil than she'd been dealing with twenty-four hours ago when she was getting ready to go into work to meet Colt, or when she'd arrived to find herself supervising the sting at the park. Looking ahead at the morgue she'd been in just a few hours ago cutting up Morris Bletchley, and the furious flames devouring its walls and roof, being in the office with Colt felt like a lifetime ago.

Skinner hit the brakes and almost skidded them into the turn into the small parking lot, pulling to a stop behind the big red fire engine that was battling the fire. Two firefighters were managing the noisy hoses, and the sheriff was standing nearby with his hands on his hips, keeping himself between the fire and a small crowd of gathered onlookers. All attention was fixed on the fire, which burned hot, fast and loud.

Scully got out of the car and jogged around the big fire truck, her hopes of salvaging anything going up in the same smoke. The building was engulfed, utterly. The roof was clearly aflame, and bright orange licked up and down the brickwork walls behind the steam made by the powerful hoses. Nothing inside was going to survive this.

The body would be destroyed, if it wasn't stolen in the night, and her samples, safe in the refrigerator, would be, too.

"I thought you two were watching this place?" the sheriff shouted over the noise as he approached. Scully squinted at the law enforcer, surprised, strangely, that he looked the same as he did yesterday. Yesterday he was a help in their case. Today, she realised, he was the sheriff in her son's town. He knew Will Van de Kamp and Gary Milne. This man, this simple tiny Wyoming town sheriff, knew her boy better than she did. Skinner raised his arms in an exasperated shrug.

"I suppose this is what we get for following your advice. What's the story?"

"They're doing what they can," the sheriff said now, still speaking loudly. "They've been hosing it for a good ten minutes and it's just getting bigger and worse." He looked uneasily at the fire crew, who stood terrifyingly close to the roaring fire. "I haven't had the chance to get over there and talk to them, obviously."

"No one saw anything?" Scully asked, just as loudly, while Scully shaded her eyes from the heat and brightness of the blaze. The morgue was ferociously orange, the fire burning wild and fierce. The uncomfortable warmth radiating from it and the instinctual fear that sparked in her amygdala at the proximity to the fire eliminated any feeling of exhaustion and left her alert and nervous. Her mind raced. Physical evidence gone. Would the tape recording she'd made of the autopsy and a set of notes she developed from those observations suffice for the investigation? In the courtroom, yes – having possession of the body wouldn't improve matters there – but in terms of furthering her own understanding of what was truly going on here and making any further connections to the rest of the case, no, she needed more.

Damn it.

"Not that I know of yet. I'm waiting for my deputies to arrive and I'll put them on doorknocking duty. None of these have anything much to say." The sheriff jerked a thumb at the gawkers. "It's an old building, though. Could have been electrical."

"No." Aside from it never being just an electrical fire, Scully pointed to the evidence before her dried-out eyes. "There's a liquid accelerant. The fire's burning up and down brick where it's been
splashed." And all over the roof, and all inside, apparently, judging by the ominous brightness emanating from inside.

"It'll burn until it's spent," Skinner confirmed, sliding his hands under his jacket to sit them on his hips. They all stared up at the fire, unwillingly awed. Scully forced her gaze away, feeling the heat burning her eyeballs, wiping them free of stinging tears. Frustration burned inside her like the fire before her.

"You're sure it was deliberate," the sheriff noted uncomfortably. "With the John Doe's body inside, do you think it's connected?"

"It's worth looking into," Skinner agreed without overstepping into confirmation. "The timing can't be argued. But we shouldn't assume a connection until the evidence proves it," he said with a glance down at Scully. She ignored his attempt at impartiality. Of course it was connected to Bletchley. Of course it was connected to their presence here.

"Someone spent a lot on gasoline to get this fire going," she told the other two loudly. "A transaction like this shouldn't be hard to track. A surveillance camera at the gas station might even have captured our arsonist."

Her colleague shot her a warning look she couldn't read but the sheriff perked up with interest.

"There's a gas pump around the corner. Ted's. I'll call him now and ask him to get his camera recordings and sales from yesterday ready for me to pick up," he said seriously, getting his phone out. Scully shook her head, ignoring the undecipherable glare of her superior.

"It'll be more recent. The last twelve hours." She watched the sheriff dial. "Ask about any suspicious customers late yesterday, possibly in a van." She waited until he nodded and walked off, cheerfully starting with "Morning, Ted!" before turning back to Skinner. "What?"

"It mightn't be in our interests to put local law enforcement onto our suspects," he said flatly. "You don't know who or what we're dealing with."

"You mean it could be your new favourite pet pseudo-informant, and you don't want her caught before she can prove you right, supposing she is who she claims to be," Scully retorted, annoyance inflamed by the literal flames engulfing her reason for flying out here before she'd known her son was in rural Wyoming, too. She couldn't understand Skinner's determined belief in this young woman who'd apparently tracked them down in the middle of the night after attempting to steal Bletchley from under their noses. Dr Lansdowne wasn't who he said he was – what on all of earth made Skinner think 'Pledge Sixty-Four' was who she said she was? Did this fire not strongly imply otherwise?

"No, I mean what I said," Skinner said back, seemingly just as annoyed as she was. Scully felt a vibration at her chest and held up a finger as she opened her jacket for her cell. The screen lit up with the caller's familiar name. Opposite her, Skinner pressed his lips together, channelling patience with effort. "Listen, Dana-

"Forget it," she said shortly. They were both exhausted, and frustrated by this dance of half-truths that they were locked in to protect each other and their respective interests from exposure. "I shouldn't have snapped at you." She waved the phone once and started to back away. "I have to take this."

She turned from him before he could argue and got away from the noise of the fire and the heavy-duty hoses before accepting the incoming call. "Scully."
"Ma'am, I'm sorry it's early." She looked down at her shoes as she rounded the fire engine and strode away, watching them carry her further from the chaos and noise and closer to her partner's familiar voice. Even through the din, Colt sounded polite, respectful, apologetic, mildly worried. He was miles away from this mess. She wished she was, too. "Are you alright? I've been trying to call."

"I'm sorry I keep missing you," she replied, squeezing between two wide-eyed newcomers who were hurrying like moths toward the flame behind her. "Things have been more complex here than I anticipated."

"I figured," Colt said. "When I couldn't get in touch with you, I called Assistant Director Skinner. He said the case had messed you around a bit, gotten personal. He told me to lay off and give you some space. Or something to that effect."

Scully winced. "Sorry about him." Skinner didn't like Colt any more than Mulder did, she gathered, though neither of them knew him well enough to make that judgement. "No, I'm fine. A lead just took us to some… unexpected places… last night. It hit a nerve, that's all. How was Kentucky?"

"It was-" Colt stopped suddenly, or at least, his voice was totally obscured by the loud crack of shattering glass somewhere behind Scully. She ducked instinctively but there was no need. She was far enough away to be safe, standing by the roadside by now. "What the hell was that?"

"The front door, I think," Scully answered, looking over her shoulder. The view was partially blocked by the fire engine, but the attention of the people she could see was on the morgue entrance. "The heat from the fire finally blew out the glass."

"Fire?"

"This is an X-file, Colt," she pointed out flatly, without thinking. "I still don't really know what that means."

She sighed, having forgotten that, but felt too tired to make any effort to backtrack. "Everything I came here for is inside a building that's currently burning to the ground. That is, more or less, the definition of an X-file. And now you're calling relentlessly, even after being told not to. That's the sequel. You've got even more bad news."

"Yeah," he confirmed apologetically. "You're going to love this. We met witnesses to the virus, got a full interview on record and even got a DNA sample of the victim. Just ashes, but apparently Dr Harlow is a bad-ass mad scientist and can pull genetic material out of thin air-"

"Colt, that's excellent," Scully praised him, surprised. Not that he'd succeeded – he and Dr Harlow were both exceptional agents – but that there'd been so much to gain from the impromptu trip south. "Yeah, it was. Until we lost it. Not our fault," he insisted quickly before she could ask. "Harlow and I were attacked by three thugs-"

"What do you mean, attacked?" Scully demanded, insides twisting a little. "Are you alright?" She should have called him straight back last night. She hadn't even considered that her young partner could find himself in harm's way without her on this trip she'd allowed him to take, chasing a case he'd purposely backed out of, too. He was a former soldier, very physically capable, much more so than she was herself, yet the idea of him, and to a lesser degree Dr Harlow who was with him, coming under attack on a venture she had sanctioned and she would otherwise have been on with
them, sparked her protective instinct. She wondered once again, vaguely, whether she'd subconsciously adopted Warren Colt in the place of the absent William. Now she knew where William was, were these feelings misplaced? Were they normal? Were these even normal questions to ask oneself? Multi-faceted guilt washed through her veins.

"I'm alright," he agreed, reassuring her slightly. "A little banged up, and feeling more paranoid than usual. Natalie was taken down pretty hard at one point and hit the back of her head." It took Scully a moment in the hectic early morning jumble to connect Dr Harlow's given name to the face and title she'd memorised. "The hospital held onto her for a few hours for observation but she was cleared in the end, and we're home now. Whoever these guys were, they knew who we were, and they were well-trained. They went straight for us, and they disappeared just as quickly. They took her phone, so don't bother trying to call her, and they eliminated all evidence of Stephen Powell ever being infected. His family included. Everyone we talked to has mysteriously gone astray. Everything we went to Kentucky for might as well have been set on fire, too."

Scully stared at the real fire, hopeless despair expanding inside her. What did Mulder honestly expect her to achieve at her end against these kinds of odds? One step forward, three back; one clever step to the side, one huge shove back to the ground.

It was tempting to throw her hands up and announce herself out of the game. It would be a relief to admit it was too hard to push forward, especially at the very high costs of her team was being targeted and hurt and her son living his life out of her reach because of cases exactly like this.

But her junior agent was still on the phone, waiting for his leader to give instructions. He'd taken a beating for her investigation. She'd already lost her son's childhood. None of this was for nothing, was it? Mulder's voice in her ear, 'Trust me,' made her shake her head at the fire and turn away.

"We'll talk more when I get back," she said finally. "It's never quite as bad as we think. You know, I didn't lose everything. I've got interviews on tape, my superficial autopsy findings, and some very dodgy paperwork." And I found my son. He's alive. "You've got absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing new," Colt confirmed.

"But you were present for the interview," Scully checked, and he agreed, even said there were two interviews of note. "Can you write those up, if you haven't already? I'd bet money you remember it all word for word. Your memory is stellar."

"I'd recommend you be more careful with your money, ma'am, but sure, I'll do that for you today. When will you be back?"

"Hopefully late today." Scully started back to where she'd left Skinner, and spotted him in conversation with the sheriff. The ME stood nearby, distinctly not dead, stricken to see his workplace aflame. "I'll message you when I'm at the airport."

"Okay." He paused, silence loaded and clearly unfinished. "There's more, but it can wait until you're here. I'd rather tell you in person anyway."

"Alright." More? Poor kid, tossed about like this on his first solo mission. "Take it easy today, Agent."

"Thank you, ma'am. Be careful."

Scully hung up just as she reached the men. The fire seemed to be dying down, but the building was visibly gutted. Bletchley's body could not have survived such a blaze, and even if the
refrigerator holding her samples had, the genetic material within would have been exposed to such temperatures that it would no longer be viable.

"You sure you locked up properly last night?" Dr Hornsby asked, trying not to sound accusatory as he watched his premises burn.

"Course I did," the sheriff defended. "Locked it good and tight."

"I don't think it would have made a difference even if you hadn't," Scully pondered loudly over the noise of something crumbling inside. They all winced. "We're going to find out what happened here, Dr Hornsby."

"Is this about the John Doe?" The ME shook his head, bewildered. "Nothing's gone right in this town since you shot that berserker, Sheriff. Things are getting weird."

Good to know it wasn't just them thinking so.

"Ted says he only had one customer last night, and it was James Reinhardt, a local," the sheriff told the FBI agents loudly. "He's been away doing business, arrived back in town around ten to nine last night and needed to fuel up before heading home. Ted says they spoke for a good half hour before James left. I know I'm no FBI agent, but…"

"He doesn't sound like our guy," Skinner concurred. People were starting to lose interest in the fire and had started to filter off back to their homes across the way, or to their cars parked along the street in front of their houses. "This fire was only lit in the last hour. Your gas station attendant really didn't see anyone else all night? Has he opened up already this morning?"

"We're not in the big city out here, mister," the sheriff reminded, smiling slightly. "Ted closes up shop at nine o'clock most weeknights, only stayed open later last night 'cause he was chatting with James. And he doesn't open for another..." He consulted his watch. He was so amiable, so friendly. It was surreal to remember he'd aimed a shotgun in her son's direction just days ago and blasted Morris Bletchley through the chest in the middle of a street café, saving Will's life.

"What if someone needed to refuel after hours?" Scully asked, redirecting her thoughts. "Where would they go?"

"Back along the main highway, there's a truck stop that's open twenty-four hours."

"But that's a fair leg, almost an hour," Hornsby argued. "No one from Thayne uses that pump unless they're heading out on some kind of road trip."

"I can give them a call," the sheriff offered helpfully.

Scully glanced over her shoulder as she heard a sickly-sounding engine grinding in protest behind her. Someone was trying to start their car across the road in the cool, unwilling morning. She understood how the car felt.

"I think we're looking for an out-of-towner," Skinner said, "but in a truck stop, everyone's an out-of-towner. Hardly a chance of distinguishing our arsonist from any other trucker." He shrugged, as though that was the end of it. "I don't hold much hope, honestly."

"This is farm country, isn't it?" Scully asked, surprised by his continued lethargy toward this fire. "Every property beyond this immediate township would have barns and sheds full of tractors and machinery, all running on gasoline. Wouldn't it make more sense for an arsonist to get an accelerant from a local property than to buy it from a gas pump under a surveillance camera?"
"It would," the sheriff agreed cautiously. Another pair of onlookers left. "We did have a problem with theft a few years ago, though, so most places lock up pretty tight at night. And everybody's got dogs. Still, I'll put a watch on reports of theft or trespass. Could lead us to our guy."

"Or woman," Scully cut in. "Most arson is committed by men but we shouldn't rule anything, or anyone, out," she made sure to emphasise, meeting Skinner's exasperated look with her own challenging one. How could he be so blind? Mulder's informant was a nineteen-year-old who was being kept and renamed against her will but was able to sneak away from her captors to follow FBI agents and pass secrets to difficult-to-find outcasts like Mulder? A nice girl, supposedly – was Scully a cynic for presuming the mysterious individual turning up in the dead of night looking for Mulder after trying to sabotage Scully's investigation might not truly be who she said she was? – cluey enough to track Skinner and Scully down in the most obscure, remote location imaginable, and a girl working directly for the people responsible for this whole case.

These same people had tried yesterday to interfere with her autopsy, now the building with all her evidence was on fire.

Coincidence?

The car across the road still wouldn't start. A few houses down, a frazzled-looking man came out of his driveway, toast in his mouth, tugging on a sweater, waving at the neighbour with car problems. The would-be driver got out of his car and they talked animatedly on the side of the road. They caught the attention of the newly departing onlookers and they all stood around together as the car's owner popped the hood of his car. One of the new pair frowned and left, walking quickly toward another house and disappearing into the driveway. The other three poked around in the engine. Scully was suddenly struck with an idea.

"Or," she said, striding away from Skinner and the sheriff. She jogged across the quiet lane to the lifeless car. The locals glanced up at her as she flashed her ID. "Dana Scully, FBI. What seems to be the problem?"

"FBI? My car's not starting," the owner said, pulling his arm free of the engine. He forced a smile. "Not really worthy of the FBI's time, I know."

"Except mine isn't starting either," the second man, now halfway through his cooling toast, pointed out, "and I only had it serviced last month, and I had near on a full tank of gas."

"And you're across the road from a massive fire that couldn't have started without gasoline," Scully noted, pushing up her sleeves. "May I?" She stepped between them to check the fuel level. Totally empty. The arsonist, who Scully had already pegged in her head, hadn't needed to go far at all. No cameras, no witnesses to blab. For someone desperate, with minimal time and resources, but with a quick wit, this was the obvious solution to the accelerant problem. She looked up at the toast man.

"Can we check yours, please?"

The story was the same. Skinner and the sheriff trailed after her, the sheriff looking excited, the assistant director looking wary. Then the third car owner reappeared from his driveway, exclaiming, "My car's the same! Tank's totally drained – it was half full yesterday!"

"It would have taken all the cars in the street," the sheriff commented, looking down the lane at all the other inert vehicles.

"Alright," Skinner called, taking charge, "let's not jump to conclusions. There could be-"

"Nobody touch anything else," Scully interrupted, sick of his dancing around. "If you own or
regularly drive any of these cars, I advise you to get yourself to the sheriff's station now to be fingerprinted. Sheriff, I need a forensic kit as soon as possible so I can dust down these cars for foreign prints. Maybe we can single out those belonging to the thief."

The car owners nodded their approval and the sheriff got on his phone again, and Skinner pulled Scully to the side.

"This isn't a good idea," he hissed. She tugged her arm free of him.

"This is standard practice, sir. It'd be suspicious if I didn't. On top of that," she added coolly, "I'd like to know who's trying to sabotage me."

Skinner's return gaze was steady. "It may not be as you expect."

…For the tiniest slip of a moment, Scully believed in the impossible. Some facts could be argued to back it up. He hadn't slept. He was being cryptic. He wanted this whole case buried.

Could it be?

"It rarely is," she answered finally, a little shaken by the thought she now disposed of as too incredible to entertain. Skinner was a high-profile Bureau employee with many strings at his fingertips. He would never risk his standing by getting his hands this dirty, siphoning fuel from cars in some rough-edged Wyoming town to light fire to a county morgue he himself was assisting in investigating, nor would he need to. He'd be able to find better ways of sweeping this up, if that's what he wanted. And, she knew, this wasn't what he wanted. He had brought her here to help her case. He wanted her to have the evidence she'd just lost.

What a ridiculous concept to have even considered.

He backed down reluctantly, gazing off toward the fire engine and its noisy fight against the morgue fire. After a long moment he said, "You shouldn't be here if we're trying to deflect attention. I'll organise for someone from the closest field office to oversee the processing of the prints, then have them isolate any foreign ones for your perusal. That'll keep the findings in-house. I'll help the sheriff contain this area and direct this arson case so we can have it wrapped quietly."

"Respectfully, sir, I'd like to gather and process my own evidence."

"Respectfully, Agent, you already did," Skinner countered calmly. "I don't know how long it lasts out of refrigeration, so you'd best get it back to headquarters as quickly as possible. I'll book you a flight home."

"I don't want a flight home," Scully started to argue, though he raised a dismissive hand and dialled all the same. "Walter! I don't want to leave William's town! Not yet!"

"Have a bit of faith," he advised. "We did not risk coming out here for nothing."

Behind his glasses, his eyes flicked once toward the morgue, and then he turned away from her to place his call. She half-listened to him as he went through security proceedings, her eyes picking through the scene across the road in a quick deconstruction of his possible cryptic meaning. You already did. Brick single-storey building on fire, evidence inside, body inside. Flames. Smoke. I don't know how long it lasts out of refrigeration. Fire fighters. Hoses. Water. Steam. Haze. Get it back to headquarters. Audience. Fire engine, parked across the parking lot. The rental car, parked haphazardly. Other cars, lining the street, presumably empty of gas. Sheriff's car. Dr Hornsby retreating to his vehicle, local car owners trailing after him, waiting to be driven around the block to be inked and printed at the sheriff's station. Have a bit of faith.
There were no clues. She looked back at Skinner for more guidance. He seemed to have been put on hold, and at the same moment, the sheriff ended his call.

"Dr Hornsby says he'll take these fellas in and get their prints," he told the agents, gesturing at the waiting locals. "Medical examiners come in handy at times like these, hey? I've got a deputy with forensics training who's coming out to help with the fingerprints off these cars."

"Excellent. I'm calling in someone for you to hand those over to. Agent Scully has to go," Skinner said, handing her the keys to the rental car. She accepted them reluctantly, uncertain. The sheriff shook her free hand.

"Thanks for coming out, Agent Scully," he said genuinely. "I'm sorry about the John Doe."

"That's quite fine," Skinner said smoothly. "Agent Scully has everything she needs in the back of the car." He forced a plain smile at her when she just stared at him. "Leave my overnight bag, will you? I'll make sure the field officer is in touch by the end of the day with the digitised prints. Oh, and..." He dug inside his jacket and produced a folded handful of papers. The false requisition papers from the 'CDC agents', including his new friend Pledge Sixty-Four. Scully put them inside her jacket, uncertain and silent. "I don't need to see the report on this venture, Agent. I'll leave it in your capable hands."

Thrown, unsure whether to be angry about being sent away or curious about why, Scully withdrew from them and crossed the road back to the rental car. She got Skinner's overnight bag out from the backseat and tried to be discreet about opening it, but saw nothing of note. She slid it through the open window of the sheriff's car and went back to the rental, glancing up as the deputy arrived with a small box, apparently an old forensic kit. It would do the job just fine, and she itched to don gloves, take hold of the brushes and do it herself.

A fleeting thought brushed by her, and she rounded the car to its back. She popped the lid on the boot of the car.

Right in the middle of the space, there stood an insulated case stolen from inside the morgue, much like the kind used for organ transportation. Scully stared at it. She could guess what was inside. She touched the lid. Cold, or at least cool. It had been smuggled out before the fire was lit, and now sneaked into the car just in the last fifteen minutes.

For her.

She looked around, unsure who she expected to see. At least this ruled out Skinner as the crazy arsonist. But he knew. He'd seen it placed in here, she realised, thinking back to his gaze over her head.

Best not to question good fortune. Scully slammed the boot closed and got into the car, clutching the steering wheel in deep thought. All that she truly needed from the morgue was her recording of the autopsy for her report, and the samples she'd taken for her tests. She had all that, unexpectedly. The body was unnecessary. She could return to DC now knowing she was streaks ahead of where her enemies thought she was, courtesy of this fire. Agent Scully has everything she needs.

But she didn't. She squeezed the steering wheel, feeling emotions she'd tried to suppress all morning fighting their way up. William. Her boy was here, just a few miles away. Her boy was intimately connected to this case, this fire, this shooting, this Supersoldier daylight attack. And there was an arsonist loose and Skinner had secrets and someone was on her side sneaking evidence out of doomed buildings and Colt's mission was a failure and some girl called Pledge Sixty-Four who may or may not be a clone was aware of William and Mulder was pulling away
again to do something doubtlessly stupid and their son was here, after all this time, she'd found him, and she couldn't keep him, and she couldn't know him, and he couldn't know her.

Why did she have to flush those fucking pills?

She inhaled shakily and reached for her throat for comfort, before remembering it was around Mulder's neck. She held that breath and counted to five, then let it out in a whoosh. Yes, Mulder had it. He still wore it, that symbol of her faith and comfort. It was safe with him. Her skin tingled to remember his breath against her neck. Trust me.

She breathed again, and adjusted the seat and mirror to fit her small frame. She thought of her car boot full of evidence her enemies didn't suspect she had; she thought of her junior agent and her virologist, mildly beaten up and waiting for her directions in DC; she thought of Mulder, already on the move, putting distance down between them and plotting his next step in his grand plan. She thought of Gary Milne, hospitalised but kind and intelligent. The man raising her son.

William would be okay, as long as she did her part to draw attention away from him. It didn't matter that she wasn't in his life. Not to him, surely. What mattered was that he had a life, and she could still do something to protect it. Before yesterday, as Mulder had reminded her, she had not honestly known what had become of her baby boy. Now she did. Wasn't that a gift?

She unlocked her phone when it buzzed, and saw a message from Skinner.

We're going to bury his connection to this case. He's going to be alright

She put the car in reverse and carefully backed out of the lot, not wanting to jostle the cargo in the back. She drove out of town and pulled over on some empty country road, out of sight from anyone. She moved the transplant box into the well of the front passenger seat where it wouldn't fall over, and fiddled with the recorder she'd fallen asleep clutching. She got it back to the beginning of William's interview and pushed play.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, but I'm excited as hell for season 11 because it just ticked over to the 3rd here in Australia a few minutes ago and The X-Files is advertised as returning on the 3rd and it probably won't show here until later this week but still. Excitement.

Author's Notes: Oh-em-gee, not long now! I've been in a Star Wars spiral but now TXF will be back on my screen inspiring me, just as I set out on my first semester of my Doctorate, which centres on the X-Files fandom. I am so excited about this year!

Thanks to all those who leave kind or helpful comments after reading. This fic is now longer than two of my novels combined – don't tell my poor readers, they've been waiting a year now for book 4! – and while I of course enjoy crafting it, I can't possibly describe how validating it is to receive considered commentary from wonderful people such as yourselves – fellow X-Files fans, sometimes other writers, but also, people who have shared in the story worlds that run 24/7 in my head.

This chapter comes back to Colt and hopefully connects a few of the loose threads from the last few chapters in a way that's helpful, considering the huge wait between instalments. It's hard to keep details in your head for that long, I know! After all the big momentous chapters, this one followed on nicely from Scully's – he's a milder viewpoint than any of the others, making him easy to write and easy to portray Scully and Harlow who don't have much of a rapport yet, and with his second story arc beginning soon, some seeds needed to be laid out. Enjoy!

Time moves differently on the ground than it does in the air.

He tried to keep himself busy as the day wore on after Agent Scully's text letting him know she was boarding her flight home, but while his awareness of her froze somewhere up in the air over the country, time for him moved achingly slow. Couldn't she be here already?

It didn't help that Colt was alone at the office. On arriving back in DC last night, he'd tried to insist on driving Dr Harlow home, but she was stubborn, like all the women in his life, and refused to go home without her bike. He wasn't sure she should be riding after the injury to the back of her head, but the hospital had released her for the flight home without stitches and she reminded him of that whenever he tried to argue, and so he'd reluctantly brought her back to FBI headquarters for her to don her helmet uncomfortably over her sore head and ride off to Virginia. He hadn't seen her yet today, though she'd at least messaged when she got home safely, from an unfamiliar number, and he'd replied this morning after his call to Agent Scully. Harlow was heading back this afternoon.

In the meantime, Colt was sitting at his desk in the office he shared with Scully and the rest of their team, who variably politely ignored him or outright asked what had happened to him. He'd written up yesterday's interviews, the first with Michelle Powell and her brother John, and the second with Mr Demetrius the observant mortician, first thing upon arrival, at least to the best his memory served. He left a few gaps for Harlow to fill in when she got in, hoping she recalled as well as or better than he did. That the original recording had been stolen and destroyed disappointed him, of
course, but that the siblings and the mortician had gone AWOL immediately after speaking with them about this shady business had him highly disturbed. This was what he'd been trying to keep his family safe from. This was what had scared him off the case, what had started to seem crazy after a while, what had become easy to dismiss yesterday when he offered to take this job. This was not a joke.

He finished the report he and Harlow had put together on their flight back home. He got on the phone to the police department he'd liaised with last night in Prestonsburg regarding the attackers, but they had nothing yet bar his account and his description. He got out of the office a couple of times in the immeasurably long time it took for Scully or Harlow to arrive. He went for a walk and got lunch. He got a look at himself in the mirror in the café bathroom and winced at the black eye that had already bloomed, the swollen split lip, and the scrape down the side of his temple. He looked a right mess. He drove out to his family's post office box to collect the mail for that day. He took a call from his aunt as he locked the box back up and listened to her complain about Nana's grouchy this past week and insisted he hadn't noticed. But there were still so many hours. In between ventures, there was a pile of paperwork to finalise over yesterday's aborted sting on the bomb-builder's grocery lady, which he picked through at no impressive pace – Scully had told him to take it easy, after all – until, mid-to-late-afternoon, an unexpected call from the Denver Field Office gave him something new to focus on. It was Scully's desk phone that rang, though it wasn't uncommon for him to answer for her by this point since she was so rarely sitting there.

"This is Agent Colt, Counterterrorism."

Pause. "Hello. This is Special Agent Spence from Forensics at the Denver Field Office. I was told to call this number for Agent Dana Scully?"

"That's right, you've called the right number," Colt assured the caller. "I'm her partner, but she's currently on a flight. Can I do anything to help, or take a message?"

"It's fine. Your name was given, too. Assistant Director Skinner delivered a knife, and a set of fingerprints for processing this morning from an unspecified crime scene," Agent Spence said. "He was very cagey about it and had it rushed as a high priority. I understand it's part of a very sensitive case, so I haven't run the isolated prints through any databases – he said your partner, and you I guess, would do that yourselves. I've also taken prints from the knife, and swabbed it for blood but there wasn't any. I'm calling to let you know I've forwarded the processed data to the email addresses provided, and I'm storing the data securely at my end as per usual protocols, untagged."

"Uh," Colt said, painfully ineloquent as his brain rushed to keep up, "great." He shoved the phone between his ear and shoulder to free up his hands so he could hurriedly log into his email account. "Thanks for that. Did Mr Skinner say anything else?"

Like, what Colt was meant to do with these prints, or what they were connected to?

"He just told me not to be a hero and get ahead of myself. No processing. That was for you only. Have you received the files?"

Colt's inbox opened up on his screen and two new emails shone whiter than the read ones. "I have."

"Have a good afternoon, then."

"Thanks. You too," Colt said automatically, hanging up vaguely, attention on his new data. He opened everything up to peruse it. The knife situation was cut-and-dry, funnily enough. Partial prints from someone's right hand, no blood. Easy. The other document was more complex. It
seemed that almost a hundred partial prints had been lifted from the metallic surfaces of nine cars. Twenty helpful citizens had provided their full set of prints to assist in ruling them out, and Agent Spence had done that, matching even the finest of slivers of prints to each of the control group. It must have taken him all day.

The remaining prints could be mostly matched to one another, indicating a single unknown person – the suspect. What were Skinner and Scully up to in Wyoming?

Colt was sure Scully would be appropriately unhelpful about it when she returned, so he got started on the task of processing this suspect set. Spence had already organised the partial print compilations into order, assigning them to the most likely fingertip they'd come from, which Colt reformatted for the scanning program before he could run them.

There were numerous databases for prints, all of them massive, so it was helpful if he had somewhere to start. First and foremost, though, he did the obvious thing – he input the two print sets into the comparison program and ran them side by side.

Not a match. Immediately, glaring differences between the parts of the fingers that had touched the cars and the knife lit up on the split screen. Hmm. He'd assumed this was the same case, same guy, but evidently not. Hard to put off, Colt searched for Morris Bletchley. A photograph of a big man with a gingery beard loaded on the screen, eyes out of focus in the mugshot. Small-time crime, repeat offender, killed in a hit-and-run in 2004.

Killed again just this week in Wyoming, apparently, if Skinner could be believed.

"Alrighty, Morris," Colt muttered, dragging print sets around the screen to run a new comparison. The car set was a staunch no, but the partials lifted from the knife's hilt and blade were a 92% match. "Bingo."

Without any full prints available from the weapon, a higher probability just wasn't going to happen. Still, Colt was happy with that result so early in his searching. He saved the finding and also printed it, too late forgetting that the briefcase, locker combination 1013, was not here, because he and Scully didn't work on this together anymore, because he’d backed out on her. He folded up the page and shoved it into his inner jacket pocket alongside the letters he'd collected earlier. The pocket was getting a bit full.

Clearing the search, Colt moved his attention to the car prints. The knife was attached to the aliens-are-real-our-government-knows-about-it-a-virus-is-killing-people-who-speak-out-dead-men-walk-among-us case of Scully's, so he assumed the car prints did, too. He tried them against Reece Dwyer (who had a record) and Stephen Powell (who didn't, but as a law enforcement officer, had provided his prints for quick elimination in such cases) and all the other names connected to their investigation that had nothing on file, and came up with no matches.

Which left him at the mercy of the complete databases. The search algorithm could take requests, so to speak, and could be made to try sets from particular categories first before moving into the more general or obscure collection. He sat for a while picking through his selection criteria for this, but it was mostly a waste of time – he had no idea where to start. So he let the computer go for it, and it started comparing Agent Spence's carefully constructed set with the most violent of recent criminals.

Nothing, nothing, nothing–

A set of keys crashed to the desk beside him and he jumped. Why did he never see her come in?
"Some obnoxious prick took my car park," Harlow complained, kicking Scully's chair to move it out from where it was tucked neatly under the desk. Colt turned in his to look at her; her motions were cautious, stiff, and she did not bend once to pull the chair. Once it was in a more favourable position, she collapsed into it gratefully and spun in a complete circle. "Ahh." She stopped herself, facing him. "You look like shit, Corvette."

"Thanks," he replied easily. "You've looked better yourself."

She had, for sure, though he knew he looked worse on first glance. Yesterday's beating had taken its toll on them both. Even in the chair, her posture was tight, discomforted, a tribute to the hits she'd taken in the ribs and stomach, but most obvious was the purpling down the side of her jaw where she'd been viciously booted. Adding to the dishevelled look, her long hair appeared unbrushed, more voluminous than usual – there was no helmet today and the keys weren't her Ducati's, so he assumed she'd driven a car – and her shapely eyes were unadorned with any makeup, accentuating her tiredness.

"I had to wash the blood out of my hair," she complained, gesturing up at it with a very vague flick of her lower arm only, keeping her upper arms and shoulders still, "which was bad enough, but then it hurt too much to hold a hairdryer, and when I tried to brush it…" She groaned in pained memory. "It was like every fucking follicle was on fire. Plus I'm copping an epic migraine. So this is what you get. Sorry."

He cringed, reflecting on the jolt of horror in his stomach when he'd seen that guy suddenly come at her, striking her with such shocking power and wrenching so brutally on her long, beautiful hair. He hadn't expected to see her harmed; he hadn't expected their jaunt in Kentucky would run any such risks. He certainly hadn't expected a situation where he couldn't do anything to stop it. "Don't apologise. I'm the one who should apologise. I told you I was your back-up." That fact had haunted him all night while he tried to sleep, recalling how he'd failed to recognise that threat, failed to protect his partner, failed to keep his gun, allowing himself into a situation where his gun-shy leader had needed to take it up to save him. Wasn't he the soldier, she the doctor? Why then had she fired the weapon and he tended to her head wound? "Fat lot of use I turned out to be. I'm sorry I let you down."

"You let me down? How? By taking on two fucking thugs instead of three? Who do you think you are, Superman?" Harlow snorted, ladylike as ever. "Shut up. If you weren't there, I'd look like you do, and that'd be even more fucked. Plus," she added, sitting forward with obvious effort, "I would never have held off three dudes and still kept the backpack. Look what just one of them managed to do." She raised one arm across her body to her shoulder, though it was a strained, stiff motion, and tugged the collar of her shirt right down to the crease of her armpit. Colt leaned closer, whistling with remorseful awe at the ugly purple band that had already erupted under her skin in imitation of the bag straps that had been wrenched so hard from her shoulders. She released the fabric of her shirt and it covered her again; they both sat back. "That's nothing on my ribs, but I think they have rules about showing you that in an office like this."

Colt looked around, remembering that there were others at work in his department this afternoon, then realised what she meant by that and concentrated on not blushing, though he knew it was a joke, just her sense of humour. What she had shown him was actually most of her chest, without either of them realising it. Why did he have to realise that now?

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"If you hadn't kept those other two distracted, they would have the virus right now," she finished, voice still just between them. He brought his attention back. "So, don't apologise. There is nowhere near enough vodka around for this to be a decent pity party." She regarded him while he chuffed lightly, and nodded, more seriously, to his face, dark eyes on his swollen lip. "Is that the worst of
"Yeah," he lied, not keen to pull his shirt up and show her his bruised ribs either. The colour hadn't come through in his darker complexion yet anyway, not like it had on her creamy yellow-white skin, but the shadowing foretold of some impending blues and purples. Their adversaries had seemed unnaturally strong in the alley, and their strikes had landed heftily. Colt hoped they felt as sore as he did, wherever they were.

He and Harlow fell quiet, glancing up as another pair of agents in conversation passed. One was Macgregor, who shared a nod of acknowledgement with Colt on his way in, trying to hide his look of curiosity as he noted the state of him and his less-known associate. They looked decidedly worse for wear. Colt turned his chair back to his computer, shaking the mouse when the screen went dark from lack of use.

Harlow looked back to him and tried to scoot closer, though the tensing of her stomach to get the traction made her grimace. "What are you doing?"

"Print search for Agent Scully," Colt answered vaguely, looking quickly over the screen for any sign of completion as the brightness returned. The print set from Agent Spence came back up on the left side, while a myriad of different records zipped by on the right, each compared briefly for similarities but immediately discarded by the program before he could even get a decent look. An unexpected pull on the front of his clothing moved his attention down to see Harlow's finger hooked into the front pocket of his jacket. He lifted his arm away on instinct, as if her hand were a spider. "What are you doing?"

"Nice jacket," she commented, a little remorsefully, plucking on the pocket like a guitar string and letting go. To any onlooker, Colt was certain it looked an extremely weird gesture, her hand in his pocket, almost in his lap... but as she took back her hand from the place where she'd almost shot him, he understood, and the moment became meaningful, sweet, an apology. An oddly sweet weird moment with his weird, oddly sweet new friend.

"Yeah," he said again, relaxing his arm and returning his hand to the mouse, "don't think you're getting out of that trip to the range."

He still couldn't believe she'd misfired his weapon in a public street and literally just missed him, but she smiled, looking relieved to be forgiven. "Can you fix the other one? Like, sew a patch on it, or something?"

"I am not wearing a patch on the front of my jacket. What am I, seven?"

"I said or something," Harlow repeated hastily. "There are shops that might be able to fix it. Tailors, or dressmakers. Something like that."

"I was going to give it to my nana to see what she can do, but I haven't worked out how to explain the bullet hole." Colt hesitated. "I haven't worked out how to explain any of this," he gestured to his face, "either. I managed to get in and out of bed last night without running into anyone at home. Nana has an overdrive mode on her nurturing and protective instincts."

"She sounds formidably adoring." Harlow winced as she reached for her bag. "I found an old brick of a phone in a drawer and messaged my family to let them know it's what I'll be using until I can get a new one. They were largely unsympathetic to my plight, but I didn't really go into details."

The handprint on the right side of the screen stalled for an extended moment, and they both looked up at it as the program checked and rechecked each fingerprint individually against the set on the
left, from Agent Spence. Unfortunately they were all only partials, and larger partials made up by combining the overlaps of thinner partials, but they had some similarities to this set taken from a James John Ste-

The index finger flashed red, and the profile disappeared, discarded by the program, and it began anew, flickering swiftly through the next available options before discarding them even quicker. Still no result.

"What did you say this was for?" Harlow asked, checking her phone. "Something important and exciting, no doubt, like the banana?"

Colt sighed and began to flop back in his seat, but was punished by his aching abs into freezing still. He sat uncomfortably back up. As if he didn't have enough hurt pride and refreshed paranoia to deal with after Kentucky, he still felt completely ridiculous about yesterday morning's misadventure following Astrid Haut. There was nothing untoward about his professional behaviour to worry about – he'd reviewed live surveillance footage, noted an anomaly, brought it to the attention of his immediate supervisor, assisted in managing the case with her from there, exactly as was his job – but it was still a point of embarrassment that the banana gun sting had been founded on his intel. He hoped he didn't get saddled with any sort of reputation from this.

"I'm actually not a hundred percent sure," he admitted. "This print set is for Agent Scully, from an Agent Spence in Denver, who got it from AD Skinner in some hush-hush handover earlier today. All I know is it's a male suspect, connected to a crime unspecified, who touched a whole lot of cars."

"Not vague at all."

"Not at all. But it's probably for the best, as whatever it is really about, probably isn't meant to be discussed out loud in an office like this anyway." He glanced about. No one was close enough to hear, the agents present either sitting at their desks talking to their partners or working at the computers, earphones in to block out the distractions of the office space with music. Everyone else was out on assignment, like he was yesterday, only probably having more success. "It is from Scully and Skinner, after all."

Harlow nodded her understanding, eyes still on her phone. "She scares me still."

"He scares me," Colt confessed, though he remembered not that long ago being afraid of Scully, too. Harlow, to his knowledge, was yet to meet Skinner.

"Pretty far-out that the agent we're working for not only knows everything about everything weird, but also is casually besties with an assistant director; one who does field work, too, no less. So," she changed the subject, looking up from her ancient replacement phone, "I spoke to the police guys in Prestonsburg about Powell, Macdonald and Demetrius. Oh my god, so fucking unhelpful."

Her thin brows drew together irritably, a common expression for her, he'd noticed. "I checked in this morning whether the missing persons report I sent through had been received, and they hadn't processed it yet, which is fine I guess, since they're a little police department and the report came at night, but then I rang back before I left home – useless, fucking useless. You'd think they'd be all over this shit. Stephen was one of their own, and now his wife, brother-in-law and his ashes are missing, and they can't dismiss it fast enough. The first two guys I spoke to said they'd pay a visit to the house sometime today but they were sure it was nothing, maybe just a stunt, that those two had gone off the deep end after Stephen's death and I shouldn't trust anything they told me anyway. Luckily none of them know what a joke I am at the FBI-"

"You are not a joke," Colt couldn't help interjecting. She'd said something similar a few times
yesterday, and he found it incredible that someone so accomplished, dealt such a shitty hand, could think as little of herself as she did. That she would begin to identify with the way she'd been treated. She continued after a half beat as though he hadn't spoken, but her tone was softer.

"-so when I threw my badge number at them and pushed for the next guy up, they said the sergeant was on leave so they transferred me to someone even higher, who managed to be only a higher degree of useless." She exhaled hard in frustration and glared off into the distance. "They checked the house, apparently. No signs of a break-in-

"What?" Colt almost laughed, incredulous. "The door was left open. Stuff was missing."

"I know! I said the same thing. But Lieutenant Asshole says there's no forced entry, no breaks on the door locks or windows. I asked for prints – he says he'll get to it when he can spare the manpower – and I asked for a DNA sweep. He laughed at me. Says I must have gotten too caught up in Michelle and John's sad little narrative. He honestly believes these goody-two-shoes brother and sister hicks in their cardigans and bobby socks have masterminded a scheme to make themselves appear kidnapped, to get attention." Harlow raised a helpless hand. "What the actual fuck?"

"What about Mr Demetrius?" Colt asked, frowning now. He'd spoken to the Prestonsburg police department earlier today, too, about the alley attackers, and though they'd had nothing for him, he hadn't gotten the impression it was for lack of even trying. Then again, he hadn't led with we were interviewing a pair of individuals your entire department thinks are insane and we really believed them, which might have been a factor. Poor Harlow, always sticking her foot in it. His description of the lead thug, Harlow's thug, as a non-English speaker or at least bilingual, and possibly middle eastern in appearance, had seemed to catch their attention, and he'd hoped it would make finding them relatively easy in that otherwise homogenous town. So far, not so.

"According to Lieutenant Asshole, our helpful mortician habitually flies to Greece to visit family, but no one seems to care an awful lot about keeping track of whether he's actually mentioned or advertised a business closure for an upcoming trip, since he's a few shades less white than the rest of them. So I gather that's an 'investigation pending' as well." She leaned right forward, so she could speak under her breath and be heard by nobody but Colt. He leaned toward her, too, keeping her words between them. "This is all so fucking crazy, Warren. We're supposed to be dealing with an alien virus used against civilians by a rogue government body and instead we're dealing with racists. When do we catch a break?"

Her eyes were wide, questioning, and he wished he could give her an answer she'd like, but his short experience in working with Agent Scully and his conversation with her this morning on the phone didn't lend itself well to that wish.

As though drawn by the mere thought of her, a flash of auburn-red at the door caught in the edge of his gaze, and he looked over. He felt his frown tighten, worry doubling inside him at the first sight of his partner entering the office.

She looked awful. Unrested, exhausted, but worse, upset. Fragile, which wasn't a word he would have allocated to her previously.

"Not any time soon, I'm guessing," he said apologetically to Harlow in a quick aside, cringing in discomfort as he forced himself to his feet. "Ma'am?"

Scully had been looking down at a strange polystyrene box she carried by its handle, distracted, but glanced up at his voice. Her eyes, hooded and dull in an ashen face, met his, and she seemed to deflate a little as if in relief to see him, but then she tensed again, gaze sharpening as she took in his
appearance. She stopped in her tracks.

"Colt," she stated, making herself start toward him again. He rounded his desk quickly, stomach twisting like it had when he’d seen Nana in hospital all those weeks ago. Like one of his own had been gotten to. Like he’d been insufficient, somehow. Skinner had alluded to something very sensitive and personal arising in Wyoming. What on earth had happened to her there in the past thirty hours? "I'm sorry I didn't answer your calls. What happened to you?" Scully looked past him to Harlow, just noticing her now. "To both of you?"

"Don't worry about us, the hospital said we'll be fine," Colt insisted, meeting her halfway and looking down at her to confirm his concerns up close. The whites of her eyes were cloudy and reddened, and despite makeup, it was clear to him from the puffiness of her lids that she must have been crying recently. A lot. She smelled faintly of smoke. "You said you were fine. What happened?"

Scully's expressive eyes flickered up at him briefly as she shook her head, lips pressed together tightly. "Not here."

She looked like she might break if she tried to say anything else, and Colt felt mortified at just the idea of her mortification if she were to cry in front of her staff. The others in the office were paying mild attention to them now that they were standing – he could feel their gaze on his back, on the side of his face. Not here. He gestured back for Harlow.

"Can you lock my screen?" he asked as Scully drew away from him and went back in the direction she'd come. The bewildered virologist nodded quickly and leaned over the keyboard to fulfil his request. Colt waited a beat for her so she'd know to follow, then left the office after his partner. He found her at the lift, pressing the 'down' button. There was nobody around at all, and she stood with her feet together, head lowered, eyes cast down, hand clutching the carrycase tensed into a fist. Defeated. It wasn't a look he liked after following her strong and powerful lead all these months. He stopped at her side with his mouth open to say something and with his hand outstretched to do something comforting, like touch her shoulder or elbow or something. But when he reached her, his lips closed and his hand fell. Their friendship wasn't close enough for him to know what she needed, what she wanted, no matter how much he cared about her, no matter how immediately protective he felt to see her upset. He couldn't forget that she was his boss before she was his friend. He couldn't forget that he'd ditched her on this case he'd pushed her into. What kind of friend does that? He just kept finding ways to be ineffectual. He sighed and collapsed back to lean onto the wall beside her, letting the silence wind around them instead. How intense their partnership had grown in only half a year, yet how coolly distant it remained in other ways.

But the silence wasn't cool, or distant. She didn't look at him, even as Harlow entered the hall behind them. She kept her eyes down, and when the elevator dinged its arrival, she murmured only, "Thank you," as if he'd done anything at all.

Maybe shutting up and not pushing matters counted as doing something helpful. Life lessons with Dana Scully.

The door opened to an empty carriage, and Colt gestured his partners in ahead of him. Scully stepped in without a word or thought; Harlow seemed to find his good manners amusing, and curtseyed theatrically before entering. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Nana would never hear his complaints as a child about holding doors for women and girls and waiting for them to use doors ahead of him, not even when his aunts tormented him by insisting he go first whenever he tried to do the right thing, sending his obedient little six-year-old brain into spiralling overload, certain it had to be a trap to get him into trouble. Lots of women didn't like to have doors held for...
them; a rare few even found it offensive. But then there were trolls like Toni and Luci and now Harlow who just enjoyed messing with the system for the sake of toying with his programming. His aunts, he felt, would like Dr Harlow.

He suspected they would be wary of Agent Scully, just as he was. Just as most people were. But they'd possibly connect in conversation, strong, intelligent women from military families. They knew how to speak up for themselves, but also understood discipline. The three agents rode the lift down in dead silence, Harlow fidgeting with the strap of her replacement bag while Colt and Scully stood stock still.

At the bottom, Scully stepped out first. Harlow waited.

"After you," she said to Colt, sounding perfectly serious but for a hint of a smile she couldn't contain. This time, he did roll his eyes at her.

"Get out," he replied lightly, pushing her between her shoulder blades so she went before him. Her downcast smile, mostly hidden from him and only brief, assured him she appreciated the return banter. He wondered if it made her feel included.

The basement was as big of a mess as he'd last seen it. Decrepit boxes stacked precariously everywhere, collapsing in on their water-damaged corners, old documents spilling out the unsealed tops and scattered across the dusty floor. The entire space was a hazard, but by now it felt somewhat familiar – their go-to place for super-secret discussions. Scully, ahead of the younger two, picked a path through the boxes toward that closed door he'd seen last time, but stopped halfway and turned back, settling the odd carrycase on the top of a box pile.

"Tell me something good," she said, looking everywhere but at her team. "God knows I need to hear it."

"We survived. That's about all we've got. What about you?" Colt replied as he followed after Harlow, a hand outstretched in case she bumped any boxes over.

"I survived," Scully agreed wearily. She placed her hand on her hips and inhaled carefully, steeling herself. "The case took a very unexpected turn – several unexpected turns – and it cut a little close to home, that's all. Ghosts from a past I usually pretend I don't have. I'm fine," she assured Colt, and he looked down, sheepish. He mustn't be wearing his convinced expression. She didn't want to talk about it. End of story. Cue convinced look. Beside him, Harlow straightened her glasses uncomfortably.

"Well, I'm not fine," she spoke up finally. "I'm a little overwhelmed, actually. Aside from the trauma of readjusting to my flip phone from 2003 and being beaten up by strangers in the street, three people we spoke to yesterday are mysteriously fucking missing, as is any evidence we ever spoke to them, and nobody in the whole of Prestonsburg's police department wants to help me find them. Yet another victim of this Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome bullshit and all its decriers wiped off the board, seemingly just so the powers that be, whoever the fuck they are, can smile at me indulgently when I make myself look stupid chasing ghosts, like they did with the Engels."

Colt looked down at his feet. Harlow was cruder than most, weirder, less refined, but nothing short of passionate about the people in her investigations. She didn't mention it often, but he knew that first failed case of hers, Shane Engel and family, 2014, haunted her deeply.

"I can handle it," Harlow shot back, stung by Scully's heightened sharpness. "I can handle it, but that doesn't make it fucking right."

"No." Agent Scully backed down. She wasn't aware of the nervousness she inspired in the other doctor, but seemed to realise at least that she'd been unnecessarily harsh. "It doesn't. The same thing just happened in Wyoming. Everything I went there for went up in smoke. Almost." She put a hand on the box she'd brought in with her. "Someone very persistent does not want us to succeed."

"We noticed," Colt commented, tracing his toe through the dust. He jerked his head in their newest partner's direction beside him. "They almost cracked Agent Harlow's skull open in their efforts to deter us." He looked up and saw his supervisor's bloodshot eyes soften. He didn't mean to make her feel guilty, but he still felt spooked by the whole ordeal and did not need the pair of them at each other's throats.

"I'm sorry," Scully said again. "Start at the beginning."

Colt and Harlow alternately summarised and detailed their day yesterday while Scully listened.

"So," she said, one of her few interruptions when they were near the end of their tale, "these attackers – they didn't know you had the virus on your person? They couldn't have, or they would have taken it."

"They only took what they knew we had gained at the Powell residence," Colt confirmed, "and when we got back to the house, both Powell and Macdonald were gone without a trace, and Stephen Powell's ashes were gone, too."

"And nobody believes us," Harlow grumbled.

"Except me," Scully corrected, and the other doctor straightened a little, surprised by the unnecessary show of confidence in her. "And, one day, a court and a judge and a very concerned public. But in the meantime, what do you have to prove what happened? Interview transcripts – Colt?"

Both women looked at him. "Yeah, almost done. Just need your input," he told Harlow.

"You remember what they said?" she asked, sounding amazed. She turned back to Scully. "We don't have much. Our hospital intake record that proves we got beaten the hell up, our plane tickets, a few pieces of my phone, the remnants of my backpack, the hole in Colt's jacket, the statements we made to the police… but most of that just shows we had a really bad time in Kentucky, and not much else."

"What hole in Colt's jacket?" Scully asked, attention caught on this detail that was avoided in the original telling. Harlow winced, realising her misstep. Foot in mouth, much?

"You don't want to know," Colt assured his partner firmly. He turned suddenly to Harlow, one finger raised in her direction as an idea struck him. "Powell, Macdonald and Demetrius all visited that house where the fake funeral parlour operated, and Michelle said a friend of Stephen's at work got them the details on that place after it was cleaned out."

"Fenchurch Transportation Systems," Harlow recited immediately. "The same company that Stephen Powell pissed off when he booked those truckers for speeding and seized their merch, and probably what he was killed for."

"Right. But that police friend who told them that stopped talking to them soon after. What's the bet he was suspended, or pressured to take some time off?"
Harlow gasped excitedly. "Lieutenant Asshole!" she exclaimed, turning eagerly to Scully, who just stared at her with raised brows. The virologist sobered, realising the complete lack of context, and backtracked to explain. "The detectives I spoke to this morning said I couldn't speak to the sergeant because he was on leave, so they transferred me instead to Lieutenant… Lieu… shit, I can't even remember his real name. But he was an asshole."

"If we can find that sergeant, maybe we can find the paperwork on the house and the merchandise Stephen impounded," Colt suggested. Scully smiled a small smile at him in the low light of the basement, subtly pleased, subtly proud.

"Now we're talking. You two did an amazing job in Prestonsburg. I'm sorry it cost you a beating – I would never have sent you-"

"It's fine," Colt interrupted. He paused. "Well, it wasn't fine, it hurt, and…" it made me feel completely incompetent for a while there "I've definitely had better evenings, but we've got something to work with, right?"

"Nice job with the optimism," Harlow commended, dumping her backpack on the box stack beside Scully's polystyrene box so she could go through it. She grimaced against the discomfort of lifting her arm at the shoulder. "If we ignore the hiding, and the three missing people, and the lack of genetic material to test, and the three bad guys on the loose, and the unhelpful local law enforcement, and my phone being destroyed…"

"And we didn't solve the mystery of Sir Agent Scully," Colt added, though in the craze of everything else, this had seemed like one of the less important failings of the mission. Harlow froze, hands buried in her bag. "Whoever spoke to our witnesses the day Stephen Powell died used your name to get intel on the victim, but otherwise, we don't know what he was doing there. He doesn't seem to have done any harm. Mostly, he seems to have inadvertently handed us the case."

Which was maybe the point? It had seemed so strange that someone would use Scully's name so specifically, and then not even to misdirect or sabotage the investigation. It was almost as though the mystery fake agent had wanted them and only them to find their way to the Powells, even lighting their way. It had to be possible that they had allies, right, even if he didn't know who they were, and even if it rarely felt like anyone was on their side? Michelle and John had an ally in Stephen's police force. The Engel family had Agent Harlow. Lots of people had secret, powerful allies. Why not them?


The redhead physicist stared back coolly. Colt didn't understand the interaction, but it was very clear to him that Harlow was implying Scully knew who the imposter was. Ha. Maybe she did, but like that was going to make her spill.

"That could be any number of people," Scully responded eventually. "I wouldn't even hazard a guess with a description that generic." She turned her attention to the box she'd brought in with her and removed the lid. "Do you still have the virus and tissue samples with you?"

Harlow lifted her much smaller box from her bag. "Yeah."

"It's gotten too dangerous for you to carry it around. We need somewhere more permanent for it to live while we're working on this case."
"I don't trust the security in my lab at Quantico."

Scully nodded, and Colt took a step closer, curious as she lifted a tray of vials and glass slides from the chilled contents of the box. "What is that?"

"This," his partner said, "is what our enemies were trying to stop us from getting out of Wyoming. It's the physical evidence from the autopsy I conducted yesterday."

Seeing up close the smears of blood and skin and pink tissue on the slides, and the blood and swabs and larger chunks of flesh inside the vials, Colt drew back abruptly, grossed out. Bits of dead guy, cut out just yesterday. Delightful. Harlow got closer, fascinated.

"Three false CDC agents attempted to requisition the body from us just after we arrived at the morgue. It was lucky we were there and they weren't expecting us. Skinner managed to scare them off. But one of them," Scully turned now to Colt, dull, sad eyes brightening with the fervour of connecting the facts with truth, "was the very same man we met in Berkshire County calling himself Dr Lansdowne-"

"Who told you that you'd never signed in and tried to dare you to ask for the surveillance tapes," he remembered suddenly. The face from his very first field investigation swam instantly to the front of his mind. "They cleaned you out. But you had the autopsy…"

He trailed off. It was easy to forget Harlow wasn't in on everything that was inside the briefcase, combination 1013, and quite difficult to remember now where her involvement was meant to begin and end. Then again, there was stuff the pair of them seemed privy to that he hadn't been let in on, either. Scully didn't appear bothered, even as Harlow looked between them.

"Exactly the same in this instance. I did the autopsy. It was…" She shook her head. "I always tape myself and all my observations as I work, for my report later. And I take samples to process and test when I have the time." She patted the box once. "They think this was all inside the morgue, along with the body that I would have had packaged up and sent up to Quantico today if they hadn't burnt the whole place down early this morning. I told you, Dr Harlow. This is what they do. Undermine us at every turn, try to bury everything we find. We got lucky for once."

Colt whistled appreciatively. This was much more promising than she'd made it sound over the phone, and definitely not matched with her evident emotional state. Harlow was picking through the slides and vials, professional scientist persona in residence now.

"No evidence of infection from our virus," she noted, glancing down at Scully. The older scientist shook her head. "So… what's the connection?"

"For your own protection and the focus of the case, I haven't let you in on everything," she confessed. "But I think it's come time to pool our resources a bit more. This man's name was Morris Bletchley. He was shot in the middle of a street café in small-town Wyoming as he rampaged through a crowd with a knife just a few days ago, displaying unusual strength. He was killed instantly. He also," Scully looked down, appearing briefly uncomfortable, as Colt knew she was with the difficult-to-explain elements of their investigation, "uh…"

"He died in 2004 as the result of a hit-and-run car accident," Colt finished, surprising them both. Harlow withdrew her hand from the tray of samples and said, "He what?" Colt carried on, "I just identified his prints, from the set Assistant Director Skinner sent through Denver's field office."

"Off the knife," Scully continued, looking brighter than she had since arriving. "That proves he was there, even if the body's gone. It proves a dead man, dead more than a decade, walked in that
street and committed a crime this week. If we can prove that, it's hardly a stretch when we say he-

"What the hell are you two talking about?" the younger scientist interrupted. "Dead people? Doing crime?"

"Attached to our virus case is a parallel investigation that needs to happen into individuals who appear to have lived beyond their recorded deaths, returning stronger and possibly younger than their natural lives would have allowed, had they continued," Scully said carefully, but Harlow was shaking her head, trying not to smile.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but did you just say there are alien viruses and zombies?!" She turned to Colt. He had nothing to say but could see words he'd already said and thought previously written in her face. Her smile fell away. "You too? You're not shocked by this?"

"I can't explain it," Colt answered apologetically. "I just can't argue with all the evidence."

"All the evidence? There's more?"

"We don't know exactly how it's happening," Scully redirected before Harlow could fly off the handle. "I can't explain it to you, not yet, not without knowing more. What I can tell you, and which you'd be happy to know, is that Morris Bletchley was already connected to this case before Skinner called me up. He's very probably our main suspect for the murder of Stephen Powell, because he's the main suspect in this case." She took Harlow's box of virus, and virologist's dark eyes widened. Her mouth opened to demand something, but Scully spoke first. "I can't tell you how I know. I can't tell you anything else, because there's no evidence, but I need you two," she glanced between them both, "to find me proof that ties Bletchley to Prestonsburg on the day Powell was infected, and to rural Virginia in the same week. And to this Fenchurch Transport group."

Harlow pulled her glasses off and put them back on again, then paced away a few steps. Colt ran a hand back over his short hair, feeling overwhelmed too. Agent Scully knew so much, but if it was stuff she couldn't explain, which meant she hadn't received the information through traditional, or legal, channels, and she knew that admitting that could compromise their case. Colt wasn't sure how he felt about that. On one hand, he knew it was very bad practice, which could get her into trouble and sink their investigation, and he knew that technically, he should report this, or at the very least, discourage his supervisor's unprofessional behaviour. His upbringing encouraged doing things right, by the book, and his career had only reinforced his moral compass. On the other, she had an answer to questions legal channels were totally ignoring, and in doing so was shining a light on the result her team needed to reach through more appropriate, tidy measures. If the police laughed at the very prospect of a murder but a dodgy contact or unsanctioned interview or sly glance at a schedule could indicate a name and face to a multiple murderer, was it really so unethical?

Colt had to stop asking that. He'd thrown in his lot with Agent Scully. He knew she was unorthodox. He also knew she got things done, with minimal harm. A true doctor.

Harlow was still pacing, playing with her glasses. She stopped and turned back to Scully.

"You know what I'm going to ask."

"Yes, and I'll tell you again," Agent Scully agreed patiently. "I can't tell you."

"But why?" Harlow demanded, her hands curling into dramatic fists, her voice curling into a growl as she clenched her teeth in frustration. "Why can't you tell me? How you know, where this came from, who my poor victim is? I've been carrying his lung tissue around in my fucking backpack – I
should know who he is, and anything else there is to know about him, the poor fuck."

Scully looked down. Colt said, "Because it isn't by the books. And the information can't be seen to be coming from an illegitimate source."

"Yes, thank you, Captain Obvious. Then why are you telling us?" Harlow challenged Scully, stalking closer. "Why are you telling me things I can't use, when you know I can't use it?"

Scully actually smiled, the tiniest hint of the wryest expression but it was definitely there. "I asked Skinner the very same thing this morning. It's a hazard of this job – we have to keep secrets from each other to protect our sources, our integrity."

"How do we trust each other if we can't be honest with each other? This is meant to be a team." The younger doctor shook her head. "What else aren't you telling me?"

"Probably about as much as you aren't telling me."

It was too much for Harlow. "No, that's fucked. I don't have any secrets from you. I'm an open fucking book." Her phone rang, a classic old alert tone, and she distractedly went looking for it in the new bag. "Ask me anything."

"How many times would you estimate you say 'fuck' in a day?" Scully retorted calmly, making Harlow freeze again. Visibly, the younger scientist relaxed, and turned her full attention back to the team leader.

"That's definitely my favourite response ever to 'ask me anything'," she admitted. She withdrew the old phone. "It'd be a dull day if I dropped below thirty, I think. Okay, okay," she redirected, calmed enough to get thinking again, looking down at her tiny phone screen, "when we say 'dead people are committing crimes', we could be looking at some kind of discrepancy with recording details of deaths, or like a cover-up…? Not necessarily zombies, because zombies are for movies, not for the FBI."

"I couldn't agree more," Scully answered immediately. "Some sort of genetic engineering seems the most likely at this point."

"Genetic engineering. Like the virus." Harlow tipped her head back and groaned in pain as the injury on the back of her head was stimulated. She stared at the basement's grotty ceiling for a long moment. "Alright." She straightened and went back to her texting. "Alright, I need a minute to process. Let me finish this."

"The knife prints were a match for Morris Bletchley, but the car prints weren't," Colt told Scully, awkwardly clearing his throat in the tension left in the basement after Harlow's outburst and subsequent turnaround. "The computer's running those now."

"That, uh, that doesn't surprise me," Scully admitted, eyeing Harlow cautiously. The younger woman was busily texting. "Whoever left the prints on the cars is probably the one who burned the morgue down to destroy Bletchley's corpse."

"So, what was it that was so weird about the body?" Colt asked now, stepping closer to his partner, curious. Aside from being proof of, well, zombies, she'd implied it was an oddity, and someone had deemed it serious enough to be obliterated rather than stay in her hands. She went into her jacket pocket for the same recording device he'd listened to on their drive through Boston after the Johannisson autopsy.

"A few things," she confessed. "Some things I'd like to clarify with further testing of the samples I
took. But the main thing that stood out was the state of his lungs and other organic tissue." She started fiddling with the rewind button, playing hints of dialogue before stopping and going back further. "The lungs were incredibly oversized, and healthy. The man's homeless, meant to be dead, overweight and a smoker, but his lungs were healthier and thicker than any I've seen. And his general muscle tone was incredibly, incredibly dense, without any evidence of being worked on or particularly shapely." She hit play on the recorder, and her smooth voice filled the basement, detailing the unusual features of the lungs, and some suggestions as to what this could mean about capacity. At a different point in the autopsy, she spoke about the muscles' unusual thickness, and the likelihood of this explaining the man's reported strength. Harlow didn't look up from her phone, but was clearly listening. When Scully switched off, Harlow's interest kicked her back into the dialogue.

"This guy you cut up – he works, or worked, rather, for the bad guys? And while all our victims have their lungs eaten out of their chests by this virus, your bad guy has double the lung capacity. Helping him suck down more oxygen to feed double-strength muscles." She turned to Colt. "Am I piss-weak, or were our bad guys double-strength, too?"

Colt started slightly, not expecting to pulled in for an opinion. He shrugged a shoulder slightly; it hurt. "Maybe, yeah. I've got to say I hope so, because then I can be less embarrassed."

"Shut up." Harlow went back through Scully's samples and pulled out a vial. "Can I have some of this? I have the most ridiculous theory forming in my head; I'm not even prepared to admit it out loud."

"Good. Yes. Can we get into a lab this evening at Quantico, do you think?"

"I…” Harlow's phone went off again, and she read the message, bewildered and then annoyed. "It seems I'm suddenly booked for the night. First thing in the morning, maybe?"

"I can do that." Scully tapped her fingernails on the box she'd brought in with her. "How do you keep the virus samples viable if you're carrying them around all day?"

"Ice bricks. I stick them in the fridge everywhere I go, but I'm too scared to actually leave them anywhere I'm not."

Scully visibly hesitated. Colt didn't know her well enough to know what she needed when she was hurting, but he knew his partner well enough to know when she was battling with some extreme reluctance. It was a common scenario for her – a common expression, a common air, a common tension. She tapped another rhythm on the box, seeming to make up her mind.

"What if there were somewhere no one would look?" she asked. She put the tray of samples back into the carrycase and picked it up by its handle. Harlow shrugged, and followed when Scully turned and led them deeper into the basement.

"That would be good, I guess."

Colt went around the boxes piled haphazardly all over the place, curious but already seeing where she was going. "What's in there?"

Scully reached the door he and Harlow had stopped at when he'd first brought her down here and she, too, stopped, with her hand on the doorknob. The moment seemed tense, loaded, and she looked down at the floor for a long time. "Nothing but the FBI's most unwanted," she answered finally, and pushed the door open.
Haunted is a descriptor best given to places and people.

The room beyond the basement door was at first sight just an extension of the messy hall – dark, full of boxes, old furniture misarranged about the space, papers on the floor – but when the light was flicked on and it reluctantly came to life, it became slowly apparent that this was an office of sorts.

More quickly apparent was its significance to Dr Scully, who stood frozen in the doorway like she was trapped in some kind of time-distortion field. Harlow had found the doctor scary and unapproachable with her cool distance and emotionless, calculating bravery with this investigation, but framed by that door, the nameplate reading *Fox Mulder* lying on the floor at their feet, she saw a different Agent Scully.

A human one. A moved, vulnerable one.

"Whoa, I can see why you think it'll be safe down here," Colt expressed, breaking the office's spell on Scully, and she stepped in ahead of them quickly. Almost as if by instinct she moved to the pile of boxes opposite the door, which, Harlow saw when she followed her in, was actually burying a desk. Behind the desk was a messy yet evidently deliberate collage of newspaper clippings, printouts, photographs and postcards, all of them curled and yellowed and faded with time, covering a corkboard of a wall beside a faded, torn poster of a UFO flying over a forest. Aliens.
Not even funny.

Harlow picked her way carefully ahead of Colt, noting other indications of abandonment, like an old television on a trolley with a VCR of all things, and the thick grey layer of dust over everything, including the glass wall over the back separating this main area from another space. She didn't know the extent or complete nature of Scully and Mulder's work during their time as partners, but she knew that this was where it had happened, and while she wasn't a particularly superstitious or spiritual person, she could feel the immensity of this place. *This* was their storeroom, where two troublesome agents dipping their feet in unwanted waters were sent to rot in silence but instead where they drew together and pushed back, refusing to be quashed. Refusing to let the truth die.

Their truth, apparently, involved some pretty heavy shit. Harlow's overly dramatic yet mostly rational brain was still pounding with disbelief at the latest instalment to Dr Scully's initiation of crazy: zombies. Zombies, what the fuck? Who the fuck was Dr Scully, really, to be investigating this kind of bullshit, and what the fuck was Fox Mulder's deal to still choose to be involved even after leaving the employ of the Bureau? Fine, it was one thing to do a favour for his old partner, throw her a bone if he happened to come across something helpful, but yesterday she'd realised fully that their 'previous partnership' was not only entirely unknown to Agent Colt, it was also still quite active. Mulder was out there working this same case, in some mysterious capacity, even finding them leads and using coded messages to light their way.

Though maybe Harlow, Colt and Scully weren't the only ones to decode his smoke signals, because someone else had had an eye on the Powell house, and now two perfectly lovely rednecks and their local legitimate mortician were missing.

And Stephen Powell's ashes were gone.

And Harlow and Colt were bashed up by thugs in a dark alley like some kind of cliché.

And in Harlow's hand was a vial of lung tissue that was cut from a man recorded dead *twelve years ago* but autopsied fresh yesterday, and in her spinning-out mind was a half-baked theory that she was already certain would be proven correct, yet could not bring herself to articulate out loud.

What even *was* this, all of this? One part of Harlow said this was very bad news, and she should back away calmly and run, because it was not what she and Dr Scully had been cleared to do at the quarterly and was not what she'd *assumed* they'd *actually* be doing when they were cleared at the quarterly. This was so, *so* much bigger, another part of her realised, and, unable to tell which voice was the overly dramatic and which was the rational, she found that she had little choice but to see it out.

So despite her desire to scream or run away, she did neither, and, zombie-like – no, still not funny – she shuffled around the cramped, messy office space and tried to not think. She concentrated on her headache instead. Much more comforting.

"There's a refrigerator through here," Scully said now, dropping off her carrycase and pushing away from the desk to show her two junior agents to where a small open bar fridge was just visible behind another stack of crumpling boxes. Without being asked, forever chivalrous, Colt squeezed to the front to push the stack aside for her, and Scully knelt to dust off the shelves inside. It was dark, disconnected from the power. "I hope it still works."

Harlow knelt, too, uncomfortably, and felt around on the grimy, dust-carpeted floor with one hand for the power cord. She found it first and tugged it, finding it loose from the wall. "Where's it plug in?"
"Here." Colt, still standing, held his hand out for it and leaned his tall self over the unit to plug it into the wall. She saw his barely withheld wince and the awkwardness of his posture, knowing every movement was serving to remind him of yesterday's beating.

Good thing she hadn't shot him, or he'd be more than wincing now.

The refrigerator's white light immediately brightened and the whirr of its engine woke up. Scully stood easily; Harlow had a little more difficulty, and was only half-surprised by the thoughtful hand on her elbow that pulled her upright when her core didn't engage like she'd hoped. Colt, she was finding, was hopelessly kind and unflinchingly helpful. She thought after her treatment in her small department in Quantico it would be difficult to adjust to behaviour like Colt's. Turns out it wasn't so much.

It made her all the more annoyed that Dr Scully was keeping him in the dark.

"It might be an hour or two before it's cold enough," Scully observed, dusting off her hands. "But as of tomorrow, this can be our base of operations, at least for storage."

Harlow nodded, finding the plan agreeable. Setting up old appliances and nodding were two things she could do given the overwhelming scenario she'd been presented with today.

Not just alien viruses. Not just a threat of biological warfare and a conspiracy to keep it under wraps. Not just disappearing witnesses claiming murder. Other crimes, too, committed by people who were recorded as dying years before, except clearly they hadn't if Dr Scully had autopsied one yesterday.

"You're positive nobody else comes down here?" Colt queried as he gingerly leaned back against the little refrigerator. Harlow rolled her eyes and snatched up the top object from the precarious, dusty pile closest to her.

"Is that even a question?" she asked, waving the video cassette at him. "Are you familiar with these ancient relics, Warren? Nothing's been touched or moved in this place since circa 1995. Were you even born yet?"

"Just." He took the tape and wiped the peeling label with his thumb. "'Beach babes with-

"I'd bet money you don't want to finish that sentence, Agent," Scully interrupted lightly, though his mouth had clamped shut anyway, confirming her theory. He nodded, warily placing the cassette back where Harlow found it, label facing away from her, searing her with curiosity she knew was inappropriate to pursue in this instance. Beach babes with what?! She scrunched her fingers into fists at her sides to restrain them from reaching eagerly for the tape. Dr Scully's big eyes took obvious note of Harlow's show of restraint and one of her fine pale eyebrows arched in mild amusement. "And it was 2002 the room was last used, although the tapes are mostly years older."

"Huh," Colt verbalised as he stood back from the cassette pile. Blushing. Poor sweet lamb. "What's something like that doing here? In this building?"

A better question occurred to Harlow. "How did you know what the title was?"

Scully blinked, missing only a beat as both Harlow and Colt stared at her expectantly. In that beat she was stripped bare again, vulnerable and moved again, but the moment was brief.

"I didn't know the title," she said finally. "I just knew it would be either softcore porn or some kind of home video documentary of tin-foil-hat conspiracy nuts, and beach babes didn't seem to qualify for the latter." She turned to address Colt alone, and Harlow knew her question had been
unwelcome. Touched a nerve. "I knew the agent to whom the tapes belonged. It seems nobody has bothered to visit this space to clean it out since he left, though someone, or several someones, made a habit at some point of coming down here to dump unwanted files in the interim." She looked around the basement office again. "Nothing here looks recent, though."

Harlow idly massaged one of her sore shoulders and ventured across the space to a bench against the wall. Like all the other surfaces in the office it was piled with dirty cardboard boxes of paper files. She unceremoniously flipped the lid on one and coughed at the dust that burst up at her face. She blinked, grateful for once for her glasses. Blowing some of the dust away, she fingered through the faded, brittle papers inside. The dates took a moment to locate.

"More than ten years old," she reported, glancing up to see Scully back at that desk and Colt wandering over in the same direction, gazing upward at a grimy skylight. Wasn't this a basement? It must extend just beyond the external wall of the building to get that little lip through which a narrow window slit could allow light. "Transcripts, by the look."

Scully nodded vaguely, clearly not paying much attention as she ran her hand absentmindedly along the exposed edge of the desk. She circled it, almost reverently, and sat down cautiously in the old office chair behind it. When it didn't creak or collapse, she settled into it. Like a throne.

Colt had reached the back wall between two stacks of old boxes and was checking out the bulletin board. A tinny alert tone from outside the office let Harlow know her temporary phone had received another message. She went back for it, careful to step over the nameplate in the doorway. It felt like it would be a huge mark of disrespect to trod on Fox Mulder's name. She wondered again where Agent Scully's was.

She grabbed her bag and went back into the basement office, flipping open the old phone she'd found in drawer when she got home late last night.

1 new message from Miranda

Ugh. Family. Her eldest sister was trying to organise a last-minute dinner at their parents' house for tonight, which aside from being totally out of character for their family was also really inconvenient considering Harlow's bruised face and shocking hair. She'd tried declining, but Dr Harlow the First was not giving up.

Not up for negotiation. It's for C.

For Christine. Dr Harlow the Second, their middle sister, though for all intents and purposes probably the only sister in Miranda's eyes. The pair were painfully, sickeningly close. Like, eyeroll, finishing each other's sentences, accidentally wearing the same outfit, sharing an ice cream sundae to spare the other the full calorie load. Utterly, utterly lame.

But lame together, in perfect genius tandem, born two years apart to the very day and sharing everything from a birthday to a place on their school's Dux board to a goddamn job at the CDC, while their out-of-step, out-of-place little sister struggled to be noticed in the wide double shadow cast by their brilliance.

Moodily, Harlow stabbed out a response, fingers easily finding the old rhythm of tapping through the letters attached to each key to compose her message. What about C? I told you, I'm not feeling my best. She hit send, then snapped the phone shut and dropped it back into the bag. Doubtless the family had family dinners without her all the time. Why should tonight be such a big deal?

Colt suddenly touched his hand to one of the old photographs on the bulletin board. "Ma'am?"
"Yes." Scully's response sounded resigned more than querying, though either way, she didn't look at him as she opened drawers and moved things around inside them.

"Is this-?"

"Yes," she said again, getting off the chair to reach deeper into the drawer, twisting her arm as though feeling for something on the drawer's ceiling, the desk's underside. Colt turned to stare at her, uncertain, and Harlow, curious again, strode over to see what he'd found.

"It's you," he said, more to himself than to anyone else, turning back to confirm. Harlow leaned close to the old photo of black-jacketed people standing around a crime scene. Even faded, tiny Agent Scully's form was recognisable, along with her red hair, which looked to have been much redder back then. The back then element was evident in the style, very different from how she wore it now. Colt stood back to get a better look of the whole board, then slowly looked around the whole room, as though seeing it for the first time. Finally seeing her at the desk, prising her arm free of the drawers she clearly knew to explore. "This was your office?"

"Was," she agreed, straightening and beginning to unravel the masking tape from a small bundle she'd retrieved from inside the desk, presumably left taped to the underside. "Don't judge me for the mess, though, it didn't look like this when I worked here."

"With the guy with the porn," Colt finished, making her wince. Harlow folded her arms, interested to see how this played out. Dr Scully had kept secrets from her much-adored junior partner. Eventually, they would have to come out.

In the case of this one, apparently today was not the day. Scully spared him a casual glance like they were not talking about anyone of importance.

"That's right. But he's been gone from the Bureau since the turn of the millennium. I don't imagine he'll miss them terribly if we toss them out and repurpose this space. Here." She held out three small keys, freshly freed from their masking tape bindings, and her eyes caught Harlow's. "You asked how we're supposed to trust each other. This is how we start."

By avoiding the topic of Fox Mulder. He had said, when Harlow met him, that he couldn't be associated with his former partner, that no one should know of his involvement with the virus or this case or even with Dr Scully. This evidently went both ways. How dodgy were these people?

Quite. But was Harlow going to back out now like wisdom dictated she should?

"These are the only keys?" she checked, taking one. It was still sticky. How long had it been stuck in there, waiting for queen of paranoia Dr Scully to come back for it and its brothers? The older agent nodded as Colt took his.

"Giving the three of us sole access to this office and the contents of its refrigerator."

"You're full of surprises, Ma'am," Colt commented as he withdrew his keys from his trouser pocket to connect the newest one to the ring. If he had doubts or uncertainties about any of this, they were outweighed by his faith in his senior partner.

"Aren't we all," Scully replied rhetorically. She pocketed the final key and redirected. "Our movements from here, then: where do you two stand with the Prestonsburg police department?"

Harlow glanced at Colt, who was still struggling with his keyring. "Uh, I think I've just about blown my standing there."
"No you haven't," he insisted. He flicked his eyes up to Scully from his keys. "They were less than helpful to Agent Harlow this morning but I've found them fine. That said, I don't think we're going to have our phone call connected to this sergeant if we ring back."

"There were a few news stories about Powell that we read online," Harlow remembered, thinking of other avenues. "If our sergeant is a friend of his, maybe he's one of the commentators in the obituary – there were several comments taken from cops in that article. Or maybe we could stumble across some other reference to a Sergeant Someone in other local news articles. We read a handful about Powell's heroics."

"Or we could talk to Mr Macdonald's wife," Colt suggested. His voice was slightly vague, much of his attention still with slitting the spiral of the keyring so he could get the key onto it. "He said they weren't speaking because she thought he'd gone off the deep end with Michelle, but maybe she'll be more willing to believe now that he's gone missing. Thanks," he added, sounding relieved when Harlow took pity on him and took the keyring away. She dug her thumbnail in between the threads and got it open for the new office key.

"Tread carefully there," Dr Scully warned, "but yes, those sound like excellent leads, and in the instance of the estranged wife, your current state of appearance might actually be beneficial in helping her believe. You didn't beat yourselves up," she explained helpfully when Harlow frowned, confused. "Stephen Powell's family were easy targets for the same treatment you yourself are so familiar with, Agent Harlow, but your bruises and your badges will be harder for her to discount."

Scully sounded more confident than Harlow felt about that. Colt and Scully both carried themselves with more certainty and optimism than she did, perhaps because Colt was young and idealistic still and Scully was self-assured with experience and seniority, or perhaps because neither of them had been dragged out of a field interview to be loudly, publicly chastised on the front lawn by a superior power. In her experience, badges and evidence didn't add up to being believed or validated.

Fake it til you make it, maybe?

"I've also been thinking," Colt mentioned cautiously, accepting his newly threaded keyring back from Harlow. "John Macdonald told us about Stephen Powell's interactions with the irate Fenchurch Transport trucker, and then they told us the fake funeral home was owned by the same company. The merchandise Powell confiscated was released back to them and all charges he'd tried to pin were dropped. When he booked them, they claimed to have a defence contract."

"And the quiet return of all their toys would suggest that's probably true," Dr Scully concurred. He nodded.

"I might have someone I could talk to about that. No promises."

Scully nodded her hesitant approval without comment, and Harlow wondered briefly who he meant. Then she remembered him flashing his military tattoo on his forearm yesterday to John Macdonald. *Defence contract.*

"You have secret military contacts?" she asked without thinking, impressed. Before realising how dumb that sounded. He eyed her, looking mildly uncomfortable.

"Some."

"That's so cool," she confessed enviously. She was feeling incredibly underqualified to be part of this team, what with Colt and his military sources and Dr Scully with her renegade ex-partner out
in the world feeding her leads and her being casually best buds with an assistant director. "I don't have any useful contacts like that."

"I mightn't, either. I'm sure with how deep this runs, they'll tell me to take a hike, but if there's a chance..." His gaze trailed Harlow as her phone went off again and she trudged back across the room to fetch it. "Had they not invented a vibrate function yet when you bought that thing?"

"Can't get it to work," she said, flipping open the old phone. "Sadly." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Colt tilt his head, detecting the innuendo in her tone and unsure how to take it. He was fun to tease.

_No buts. Too important. You were there for mine, you can't miss hers._

"Should I be concerned that you've texted almost all the way through what I would have called a confidential discussion?" Dr Scully asked dryly. She didn't sound too concerned. Harlow waved her phone irritably, focused on responding.

"It's my sister. I'm trying to get out of dinner tonight."

"Your sister who works for the CDC?" Scully queried. Harlow didn't even glance up. _There for your what?_

"They both do." Send. She looked up at her teammates, who were staring at her.

"You have _two sisters_ working for the CDC and think you don't have any useful contacts?" Colt reiterated, raising a confused hand in a sort of shrug gesture in his partner's direction. "A group of three claiming to be CDC tried to intercept Agent Scully's investigation in Wyoming yesterday."

"Actually, I even have their requisition papers," Dr Scully said, brightening even further as this discussion brought more and more options and leads to the table than she'd had available to her when she arrived, looking shattered. "Are either of your sisters in a position to be able to refute the validity of the papers? Or even chase them up and see if there's anything lodged?"

"Probably," Harlow agreed, surprised. It hadn't occurred to her that being related to Drs Harlow and Harlow would ever be anything akin to useful. "Miranda's in some kind of admin-ish role now. I forget what she calls it." Read: I didn't listen when she announced the promotion. The phone bleeped again. "I may be able to negotiate a trade in exchange for turning up tonight."

"I hope so," Dr Scully commented. "I'd also be very interested to see whether we can rule these clean-up crew characters out as CDC personnel – Dr Lansdowne slash Dr Petersen, and also a young woman I don't have a name for. Well. Not a _real_ name."

"Wouldn't surprise me if none of these assholes used their real names," Harlow replied, playing with the flippy hinge of her old phone. Why had these gone so out of fashion? The flip thing was much too fun. "What name have you got to work with?"

"Not a name. Just a number. Sixty-Four. Can you do a little probing? I don't know if it's an ID number, a case number, a codename, what..."

"Might be a military designation," Colt spoke up. "Sixty-fourth regiment, sixty-fourth squadron, something like that."

"Could be, though it doesn't sound like this individual has any of the skills or stealth usually associated with military experience," Scully said. "She's young, much younger than you. But maybe, or maybe she's been hired or manipulated for someone you can get a finger on. But,
Colt…” She hesitated for a long time, letting the self-interruption hang while her partner waited and the silence extended. "There's a possibility this is an ally."

"An ally?" Colt repeated disbelievingly. "Since when do we have any of those? And I thought you said she was part of the clean-up crew that tried to take the Bletchley body from you?"

"My thoughts exactly, and I'm not convinced," Scully admitted immediately, "but either way, she's very young, maybe not of age, and there's a chance this is another type of victim we haven't considered. Nothing about this individual is to be recorded at this time, for her protection."

"Wait." Harlow adjusted her glasses on her nose, unable to find stable footing in here for more than thirty seconds at a time. "Zombies and alien viruses and evil scientists and cover-ups and murders and defence contracts and-"

"And all the rest," Colt finished for her, and she nodded gratefully to be saved from listing all the nouns that were just about to run free from her mouth.

"That's not enough? Now we have numbered high schoolers posing as CDC agents?" The phone bleeped again, insistent, and she remembered she'd ignored the last message. She flipped it open, taking solace in the flip motion. So satisfying. "Like we don't have enough bullshit to deal with. Oh, for fuck's sake," she interrupted herself as she read the screen, instantly mortified. "My sister's getting engaged."

She stared at the message from her eldest sister, which was so simple and did not state what she'd just announced to her uncertain partners. It just said, My engagement. But Harlow was doing the math, or at least, the Facebook stalking, feeling increasingly resentful toward Christine's apparently weak-spined boyfriend if he'd caved to what she knew her math would tell her…

Yep. Facebook memories confirmed it. Two years exactly.

"Oh, they are so lame," she vocalised finally, looking up at Colt and Scully. They were staring, unsure, caught between offering half-hearted congratulations and asking what was wrong. "They think they're fucking twins. I mean, they do look virtually the same, and not just because we're Asian. But they're not, and even if they were, it's stupid. And her stupid boyfriend's playing into it. Oh my god." She shook her head and went back to scrolling the comments on the Facebook memory. "Tell me someone out there has big sisters worse than mine. Do either of you have sisters?"

It was an idle question, but there was a pause that she didn't register at first because she was still scrolling awkwardly with buttons on the phone that wasn't built for web surfing.

"I, uh, no," Colt said finally, starting to tidy up the office. "Technically I'm an only child, but I grew up with my aunts at my grandparents' house. They're like my sisters, for all intents and purposes. And they're annoying, even though they're supposedly adults."

He'd said yesterday he lived with his grandparents. Maybe it had been for longer than she'd thought. "Do they play the 'we wish we were twins' game like mine do?" Harlow asked peevishly, giving up on flip phone Facebook and tossing the phone back at her bag, only half-aiming for the opening like a basketball hoop. Unfortunately it landed perfectly and the phone did not smash on the floor like she'd found her real phone yesterday. Pity. She'd still have to answer that text.

"Well, they are twins," Colt said, sounding apologetic for not being able to agree with her more. "Identical twins. No pretending necessary."
"Oh." Harlow felt her irritation with Miranda and Christine fall flat, not knowing what to say in response. Conversation was not her strong suit, or at least, the art of getting it to flow and recovering from walking it into dead ends. In the silence that followed, though it was probably shorter than she perceived, she struggled to work out how to salvage it. She picked up a box and followed Colt, dumping it beside his, but it was heavy and her shoulders ached from the effort, so she didn't try any more, and no one had said anything. Maybe it was a comfortable silence. She wasn't sure. Not with Scully in the room. Spontaneously she turned to the doctor. "How about you? Any sisters?"

It wasn't even important to know, and she'd berate herself later for not working out how to just drop it before she dug herself into this corner. The older doctor looked briefly scandalised, inhaling as though steeling herself and clearing her throat very awkwardly.

"She… no. Not anymore."

Colt blinked, immediately sympathetic because he was sensitive and quick-thinking and a social genius, apparently, no wonder Dr Scully liked him the best, but because Harlow was an idiot she took the extra beat to work out what not anymore must actually mean and that was long enough for the thoughtless words, "What do you mean, not anymore?" to escape her lips.

Not anymore means, obviously, not anymore. Oops.

"It means she died," Scully answered bluntly, while Harlow's cheeks flushed with apology and shame as she realised, too late.

"I'm… I'm sorry," she stammered, wanting to kick herself. "I didn't think." She closed her mouth and tried not to say anything else, since she was apparently poorly built for conversation with the doctor. But her mouth must have opened in the silence that followed because she heard herself ask, unbidden, "How did it happen?"

"Har-

"My sister was killed," Scully cut Colt's gentle warning off with the sharpness of a knife, "shot – in my apartment, because I'd made myself a target through my work out of this basement, and because yes, she looked enough like me that someone could make that mistake." She kept her bright, frigid gaze steady, maintaining her composure; the silence left by her cutting voice reverberated in Harlow's ears along with past words. They've already taken what mattered. This is what Scully was talking about when they first met, when she said she knew what they were up against. The same forces that told Harlow off on a front lawn in view of a few witnesses murdered Dr Scully's fucking sister, thinking it was her. "Does that answer your question, Doctor?"

Harlow nodded meekly. She knew Dr Scully was under-rested and delicate today, and probably wouldn't have snapped so easily on any other day, but she was sufficiently frightened. She had never imagined stakes so high than even investigators were at risk of elimination. But why hadn't she? Shane Engel and his family had clearly been assassinated. Had Stephen Powell not, too, in the effort to hide Fenchurch Transport's shady defence contract? "I'll shut up."

Colt was staring at her, shaking his head minutely in a what the hell was that? motion that she had no trouble reading. How was it that she could read him and not their supervisor? She wished she could melt into the floor right now and get their gazes off her burning face. Luckily Colt turned back to Scully.

"I didn't realise," he said, more gently, less clumsily. She looked to him. "When you said they can take things away…"
"I understood when you said you didn't want any part of this," she responded, more calmly, less coldly. She paused and then turned her attention to Harlow again, bringing the calm with her. Luckily, because Harlow was more scared of her than ever before. Apparently, she was a motherfucking badass who the shadowy villains had taken some kind of hit out on at some point, yet here she was, alive and flourishing. Winning. "Both of you. You've seen now what our enemies will do to you without hesitation in a public street. They will hurt people around you if it gets them what they want. You can walk away. You don't have to fight this fight with me."

*You can walk away.* What was that, a challenge? And if it was, how could she live with taking it? She owed it to herself, and to the family she'd failed the first time she'd allowed herself to be shoved into a newer, cleaner version of this basement office. Obviously Scully herself had never backed down, or she wouldn't still be here, still picking away at this case that went back years, and if Harlow wanted to push back and make an impact, she was going to need to trust the older doctor and follow her lead.

Even if the older doctor was either a headcase or one of the villains. Or both. People are allowed to be both if they want. We don't discriminate.

"Anyone can walk away," Harlow retorted, glad to find her voice. "That's what *everyone* does. That's why the Engels have no answers."

"That's why the Powells have no Stephen and the Johannssons have no mother," Colt concurred, with less vigour, still sounding shaken by Scully's admission about her sister, "and no one but us is looking into it."

"We can be careful, right?" Harlow asked Dr Scully, watching her face for clues, whatever good that would do. "Like you said when we prepared my pitch at the quarterly. There are certain paths of investigation that will draw more attention than others."

Scully looked between them, waiting, waiting for one or both of them to bail back up the elevator to reality and sensibleness.

"Yes," she said finally. "Yes, and back alleys we can walk parallel to those paths we don't want anyone following us down. Remember we were given that list of names of people who would be targeted by the virus?" *We?* Harlow sucked her lips inside her mouth to bite them, keeping the one overstep of a word from being spoken. *We weren't given shit.* Agent Scully had made that materialise out of nowhere, and Harlow had presented it to the panel at the quarterly. Colt nodded, remembering it the way it had been designed to look, not knowing any different. "I think we should approach a few more of them, get them on our radar before anything happens to them. Though they could be safe now, with Morris Bletchley dead."

"Assuming you're right that he was the dispenser of the virus and therefore the killer," Colt stated. "Which I'm not debating, just putting it out there."

"You're right, it's an assumption," Dr Scully agreed. "I don't have proof, just someone's word, and I can't verify that without something more solid."

"Like evidence." Harlow went back to her phone and decided to reply *Fine. But I need your help with my case. Talk about it after dinner?* "DNA, photographs, prints, testimonies, that kind-"

"We've got print evidence on that knife, and your autopsy, that proves he was alive and therefore physically able to commit the crimes," Colt piped up, interrupting Harlow's sarcastic listing of types of evidence that would be more appropriate that Dr Scully's random dodgy inkling. He opened his jacket and reached into the inner pocket. "Blows his defence's best alibi out of the
"Dead for twelve years' is usually a cast-iron defence," Harlow agreed, rubbing her sore shoulder futilely. She watched Colt withdraw a thick handful of envelopes. "Someone's got some pen pals. Or a lot of personal loans."

"My whole family still uses the same post office box," he explained, shuffling the mail in his hands. He withdrew a folded A4 page and started to unfold it, but his dark eyes clung to the front of the envelope behind it, and he faltered and slowed. He slid the offending letter free of the handful, beginning to frown. "Ma'am…?"

Maybe it was the fact that he was the youngest, or maybe it was the fact that he was endearingly sweet, but both women moved toward him at the same indication of vulnerability, immediately protective. Harlow was closer; she reached his side quicker and peered over his arm at the envelope that had rendered him speechless. It had a hospital's name, logo and department return address at the top for easy identification.

"What is it?" Dr Scully asked as she crossed the room.

"Who's Nina Giancarlo?" Harlow read, glancing up at Colt as Scully pressed on his arm to encourage him to lower it so she could see, tiny thing she was.

"My nana." He looked at Scully, an unspeakable fear bright in his eyes. "What's oncology? Isn't it…?"

Scully withdrew her hand, straightening her posture and wiping her expression like the queen of that move that she was. Harlow, always a full second minimum behind everyone else's translation of social cues, answered for her.

"Cancer," she said helpfully, and he started, inhaling quickly through his mouth. She might as well have hit him if that reaction was what she was going for. "Oh. Fuck."

And she'd done it again. Colt stared at her, horrified to hear his own suspicions out loud.

"My nana has cancer?"

"Does she?" Harlow asked stupidly, bewildered. How was she to know?

"No," Colt snapped at her defensively, but the envelope drew his concerned expression back. Shaking his certainty. "I don't think so. I mean," he waved the letter at his partner, getting upset, "she's never said. She's had all those follow-up appointments since the fall, ma'am; do you think…?"

Scully tried to fix things, taking it from his hand. "It's from the oncology department," she observed, ever reasonable, ever calm, "but that doesn't mean your nana is a patient of theirs."

"Yeah, I'm sure she would have told you," Harlow offered helplessly, distressed by her new friend's distress. Colt was supposed to have his shit together – in all her (relatively few, come to think of it) experiences of him, that was how he'd always presented – and for him to switch roles now was completely unfair. How was she supposed to adapt to be useful?

And wasn't she supposed to be the one in a crisis today having zombie lung in her box of good old alien virus lung juice?

"I don't know about that," he said now, unsure, watching while Scully turned the letter over in her
hands like she was looking for clues. "She never wants me to worry, always brushes me off when I ask about the check-ups. When I ask about anything important. She could be really ill and I wouldn't know. Jesus." He scrubbed his face with his empty hand, overwhelmed. His fingertips scraped over the graze down the side of his temple. "I wouldn't know," he repeated, dumping the other envelopes in Harlow's arms and reaching for the offending one. Scully held onto it tightly when she saw that he meant to tear it open, and they both tugged on it briefly, his eyes desperate and pleading. "Ma'am-"

"Colt, don't," she ordered, struggling with him. "Opening your grandmother's mail without her permission is a federal offence and you're standing inside the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You're a federal agent, not to mention you're her grandson."

"I have to know." He sounded like he was begging her, and though he stopped wrenching on the envelope, he didn't release it.

"You will know," she insisted, not letting go either. "When she's ready to talk about it. It might not be what you think."

"What else could it be?" Harlow wondered aloud. Her experience with cancer was fortunately limited – she had a small local family, few people to lose to illness and misfortune, and minimal knowledge of her mother's extended family in Vietnam. She knew one day something like this would strike her idyllic little world, and seeing it happen to someone else right beside her was a stomach-turner she didn't expect today.

The older doctor gently prised the letter from her partner's grip and smoothed it back out against her side. "We don't know why the hospital is writing to her," Dr Scully soothed him, enviably calm. "It could be the results of a scan or biopsy that have come up benign. It could be call for a routine check-in she's been having annually for years after a scare when you were a child, in which case, no, you wouldn't know. There's no need to panic and jump to conclusions."

"Or it could be a bill for treatment for cancer," Colt realised, shoving his hands into his pockets as though to prevent himself for taking the envelope back from her. Scully felt the thickness of the envelope and looked again at the logo on the front.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. Doesn't feel thick enough."

Because there would be so many medications and resources itemised on a bill like that, Harlow realised. She'd touched very little on oncology through her own course of study but had a good idea of the complexity of it and its treatment. Dr Scully, though, was a former surgeon. Her experience with medicine went well beyond Harlow's level of understanding. So she asked, out of interest, and thinking it might prompt her to say something else informative that would soothe Colt with its rationality, "Have you treated many patients with cancer, Doctor?"

Scully shut down a little. "No, I haven't."

Oh. "But you know so much about it-"

"Don't." Scully was firm, and Harlow bit her lips, hard, to keep her stupidity and ignorance inside. The older doctor turned back to Colt, who was staring, transfixed, at the envelope she still held. "Warren, a sealed letter is too little to go on and not worthy of panic. Talk to her tonight. Tell her you're concerned."

But Colt didn't seem to be listening. "The timing, you know? I walk into AD Skinner's office, Nana falls down the stairs. I fly to Kentucky, and straightaway, this? Every time I throw myself into this,
"You're looking for a pattern that's not there," Scully argued, while Harlow processed his words, uneasy.

"Wait, what are you saying?" she asked him. He made it sound like there was some kind of intent behind his nana's misfortune. "That your family has been targeted by these people, too? Like hers?"

She nodded at their supervisor. He started to agree, but Scully cut him off.

"Not that we've been able to prove. Warren, this isn't connected. This letter was typed, printed, packed and sent before you got on that plane, before Astrid Haut duped us with her banana gun, even. Thirty-six hours ago you were a regular agent with no connection to any of this. Don't start seeing shadows where there aren't any," she added gently, sounding a little desperate herself. "It'll drive you mad. Believe me."

"Says the most paranoid person I know," he muttered, a little more light-hearted than he'd been before. He sighed slowly. "I'm overreacting, huh?"

"You're strung out – we all are," Dr Scully advised.

"I'm sorry," he admonished himself, pulling himself together. He took back the discarded letters from Harlow, lay the print-out on the nearest stack of boxes and stashed the other envelopes back inside his jacket. "I was being stupid. No one can give you cancer."

"Right," Harlow confirmed, though she didn't miss Agent Scully's spine stiffen or the tense way she held out the oncology letter without looking at anyone. "And there might be nothing wrong with her. Don't be embarrassed," she urged when he laughed awkwardly, taking back his grandmother's letter. "She's important to you. Did… did she raise you?"

"Yeah," he concurred, tucking the smoothed-out envelope away carefully and smiling quickly, regathering his usual composure. "Yeah, my mother didn't want me, so my grandparents stepped up."

The blunt, matter-of-fact phrasing struck Harlow hard, and without thinking she demanded, "Why didn't she want you?" Because who wouldn't want this guy as their son?

"Because she was fifteen and wanted more from life, so she went out into the world and made a name for herself as a hopeless drug addict." He buttoned his jacket closed. "Nana filled the gap, I turned out fine."

Harlow hadn't expected his backstory to be so colourful. Abandoned by his mother, adopted by loving grandparents, raised alongside their other children, who happened to be *actual* twins – eat that, Miranda and Christine, you wannabes.

Probably this was the backstory for many, but they were all strangers, and this was sweet Colt, the ultimate nice guy, and the unfairness sparked a flare of anger inside her.

"What kind of mother throws her son away?" she spat, going back to her phone as it tingled once more. Miranda: *Fine, provided you turn up.* Well, obviously I'll *have* to turn up if I want to meet with you to discuss a fucking case, Miri. I'll have to turn up and act happy for Christine and her 'surprise' engagement on the anniversary of yours like it isn't the lamest and most identity-crushing ritual I can imagine for our middle sister. But whatever.

She hadn't noticed at first that the basement had gone quiet, or that the silence had been preceded by a pained gasp from Dr Scully. She looked up when she heard Colt ask her what was wrong.
"Nothing. Nothing. Are we done?" Scully asked briskly, fooling nobody, meeting no one's gaze as she went to check the progress of the refrigerator. Harlow's stomach sank. She'd said something. Again.

"Were you adopted too?" she asked apologetically, feeling bad for bringing it up. Scully frowned, kneeling at the little unit.

"No."

"Well, then-"

"Harlow," Colt started to say, cringing, evidently seeing where this was going before she did.

"I'm sorry!" Harlow announced loudly, raising both hands in surrender before she could make anything worse. "I'm sorry for whatever I said. I just… saw I'd upset you, and tried to work out what it was, about moms and kids, or about moms not wanting their kids, and…" Shit, shit. She was making it worse anyway. Scully slammed the fridge door shut and stood, closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips to her brow, wrapping her other arm around herself. Looking ready to cry. Harlow panicked and tried to fix the mess she was making. "I shouldn't have said anything about shit I don't know about, I don't know shit about you, I'm sorry. I mean it's totally your business, topics like adoption and moms and kids are sensitive-"

"Natalie," Colt warned, raising his hands in an incredulous shrug at her, while Scully, opposite them, pursed her lips, containing something painful, and then burst out, though it came as a loud whisper, "I had a son."

No room had ever been quieter. Had. Had. This time, she heard and registered the tense. Oh god, oh god, Harlow had brought this up, she was ruining everything. And all those topics Scully had avoided…

"Oh fuck," she whispered, mortified with herself. "I'm so… Please don't say he died of cancer, I don't think I can live with myself if-"

"Natalie!" Colt's hand clamped over her mouth, and she slapped her own palm over his, relieved to be rescued from her runaway tongue. He stared at her, disbelieving. "Do you ever stop?"

He released her, and Harlow exhaled the breath that should have carried her to the end of that aborted sentence. She looked over at Scully, deeply embarrassed and feeling truly awful. The other scientist was… laughing. With honest amusement or dark humour or irony, it was unclear, but she was clutching her stomach as she gasped out surprised mirth.

"My son, die of… of cancer?" Scully managed as the laughter ended, still smiling sardonically. "If only it were so simple."

And she laughed again, like something inside her had been released, like she was relieved. Colt glanced at Harlow, worriedly, evidencing that this was not her standard behaviour.

Oh, god, Harlow had broken her. Taking more care with her words this time, Harlow articulated, "I'm sorry I'm such a fuck-up."

The basement was most certainly haunted, and in that moment its very air felt thick below the hollow echoes of Scully's laughter, dense with memory and things unsaid. Harlow had learned so much, all of it unexpected, about her team today, and she felt it all saturating the atmosphere of this enclosed, nearly sacred little bubble of the world, and beneath it, she felt the bubbling tension of all the things they didn't know about each other. Like she'd said out in the hall, she liked to consider
herself an open book, but of course what Colt and Scully didn't know about her could fill piles and piles of boxes just like the ones stored in here.

Imagine how many boxes would be needed for Dr Scully's crazy life experience, or for Colt's time spent in Afghanistan, not to mention all the little details that make a person who they are. Overachieving older sisters too wrapped up in one another to form a true bond with the youngest. Lost sons. Sick nanas.

"You're not a fuck-up," Scully said finally, not looking at anyone, eyes wandering the room, seeing something beyond what her young team saw. Her voice was loaded but her tone was even. Controlled. What did this woman look like when she lost it? Petrifying, no doubt. World-shaking. "You're brilliant, and we're glad to have you. You talk when you're nervous, and you're always nervous. You're nervous because you think you're a fuck-up. I don't think I help." She looked straight at Harlow. "You don't need to be nervous of me. I don't think you're a fuck-up." She paused. "Sometimes, though, I wish you'd shut the fuck up. But I'm sure I'm not unusual in that regard?"

"No," Harlow admitted truthfully. She made herself review her next words before letting them out. "I've been telling myself that, not to be afraid of you, but then you said our enemies tried and failed to assassinate you, and I decided you're worthy of making me nervous."

"Maybe decide for yourself rather than basing your assessment on who wants to kill me," Dr Scully suggested, the trace of her relaxed smile still present. "Tomorrow, Quantico. We'll get to know each other."

Meant to be comforting. Harlow told herself not to think of it as ominous.

Colt checked his watch. "I'll need to get going shortly if I'm going to catch my guy in his office."

Scully's smile vanished. She looked at her shoes, then up at him. "You don't have to."

"Of course I do," he replied instantly, then seemed to realise what she meant, and he reworded it. "I mean, I don't mind. It's the best shot we have, even if it's a long shot."

"I wish it wasn't," Scully admitted, frowning slightly. Worried for him. Wasn't he just going to go ask some questions? Harlow reminded herself that yesterday, she and Colt were only in Kentucky to ask some questions and it had cost them more than they bargained for. Maybe Scully was right to worry. "I really don't think this letter for your nana is related to our investigation, but all the same, please, be careful. Don't draw any unnecessary attention. And if anyone asks-"

"I know. I'm not on the case, just running errands for you." He forced a tight smile. "I've got it under control, ma'am. Trust me."

Scully nodded slowly, somehow clear in her reluctance that trusting him was not the issue. There was as much weirdness between Colt and Scully as there was between Scully and Harlow, though it was very different weirdness. Harlow still hadn't been able to truly figure out his role in this investigation. Yesterday he was her partner, and he was not only competent but also invested, whereas previously, Dr Scully had told Harlow he wasn't involved.

No – he wasn't to be involved, unless he involved himself. Which he had yesterday.

Man, these people had drama.

"Upstairs there's a search running on your log-in for the prints of your car thief," Colt said finally, flicking his gaze upward at the ceiling. "Didn't think you'd want anyone associating me with that. I
can still claim ignorance. And this," he grabbed the page off the box stack at his elbow, "is for the briefcase. Bletchley prints."

Harlow fidgeted with pockmarks in the corner of her battered polystyrene storage box. Claim ignorance. Nana. Shadows. Colt's intermittent involvement in the investigation was for his protection?

Scully nodded to him as she took the page, business again. "Alright. Let's go and take a look. I won't be a minute." She grabbed her new samples and knelt at the refrigerator to unpack them quickly. To Harlow she said, over her shoulder, "It's cold. Would you like yours in here, too?"

Yours. Hers, really, since she had drawn the bloods and the virus sample herself, and it was her ex-partner who'd sent them back to her through Harlow, intending on Scully being the recipient. Yet they'd been in Harlow's care all this time, and the vials inside the insulated box had started to feel like they really were hers. Her contribution. Her responsibility.

"You'll bring it with you tomorrow?" she asked, but she was already handing the box over. She couldn't exactly bring it to her parents' for dinner tonight for Christine's unsurprising engagement.

"First thing," Scully warned, stashing the vials carefully. "I hope you're an early riser, Doctor."

Harlow shared a look with Colt, who was probably the earliest bird in the world as a former soldier, as he started picking his way back to the desk of the basement office. Early wasn't her most favourite word, but she was eager to correct the course of her relationship with the other scientist and setting an alarm was a small price for that.

In the doorway Harlow almost stepped over the nameplate again, but this time stooped for it. Fox Mulder. She'd met the guy once, yet he was everywhere in her new life – in the polystyrene box she'd carried about for a month, in the spaces between the lies and impossible truths Agent Scully uttered in her careful voice, in Agent Colt's ignorance, in the doorway to the office she was going to use to investigate the Engel murders. In all the heavy moments in there, she'd felt like the basement room was haunted. And it was kind of was, though the ghost wasn't dead, he just wasn't here.

Did he wish he was? It was easy to imagine that he was the one member of their team who was missing.

Except of course he was not on their team. Harlow knew barely anything of the man.

Scully was the last one out, and she paused in the doorway longer than necessary to flick off the lights. Harlow held out the nameplate, and Scully took it cautiously, touch light and almost reverent. Most definitely haunted.

"We can come back during the week and start cleaning it up, if you're honestly happy for us to use this office," Colt said. His voice was gentle but it seemed to startle Scully, who quickly pulled the door shut and jammed her key in to lock it. But she slowed herself down and held the doorknob with the key still inside, returning to the moment. Feeling. "We can use somewhere else, if this office is… associated with stuff."

"No," she said after a beat. "It's just a room, and it's the perfect hiding spot. And…" She released the doorknob, pushing so it swung open. She didn't give it more than a cursory glance, but when she leaned inside the office to place the nameplate on one of the box stacks near the door, Harlow saw her fingers linger on it for a tiny moment. She briskly shut the door again and locked it this time. "And this office isn't just associated with my stuff; it's associated with everything our enemies are afraid of. It's perfect." She smiled quickly back at them and pocketed her key. "It's the only
place I've ever truly believed I can change the world. Which we will."

She squeezed past them and they completed the maze back to the elevator with no Indiana Jones-style boulder runs or box towers tumbling. Harlow uncomfortably got her backpack onto her sore shoulders, feeling both weird and light without the familiar weight of the vials.

Both weird and light after the truly awful mess she'd made this afternoon with Scully. She couldn't detect the awkward tension they'd come down here with. Had she, somehow, cleared the air between them or something? Surely not. She wasn't that smooth.

In the comfortable quiet of the lift ride, Harlow tipped her head back to stretch her neck and shoulders, though it made the back of her head twinge painfully. She groaned softly and muttered, "Fucking Prestonsburg."

"Next time you get out in the field, make sure you've got your firearm," Scully insisted. "It's usually a long process for getting you armed after a lay-off like yours, but I'll sign you off-"

"Uh, no, actually, you won't," Colt interrupted with a grim smile. "The long way won't hurt in this instance."

Scully cocked her head suspiciously as Harlow cringed. "Oh? No shortcuts with you? Explains why you two shoved the fieldwork release forms at me yesterday to sign without reading."

Harlow hadn't even been sure she'd known what she was signing, so automatically she'd seemed to etch her name when Colt told her to.

Colt shrugged as the elevator dinged and the doors opened. "I'm just saying."

"Just saying…?" Scully trailed off as she followed him into the hall of their brighter-lit level. The basement already felt like it was far away, another world. No one up here even acknowledged that it existed. How easy it would be to investigate crazy shit down there without anyone noticing.

"Just saying that if you arm her without a few good, long sessions at the range, I won't be partnering with her in the field."

"It was an accident," Harlow reminded him snappishly, feeling a little panicky. She'd thought he wasn't that mad. "I said I was sorry. I am sorry. It won't happen again."

"Should I ask?" Scully asked, starting to sound concerned. Colt shook his head as they filed back into his and Scully's shared department office.

"Nope. It's all in the report, you'll get to it soon enough." They arrived back at their desks, and Harlow hovered behind the partners as they sunk into their seats. Colt wiggled the mouse to wake his computer back up but Scully scooted her chair over and nudged him out of the way so she could enter her password and unlock it. He spun to face Harlow, smiling. His skin was a rich olive that hid most of the damage, but under these lights she could see that more bruising was starting to show through the pigment. His purpling orbital made him look reckless and young. "What do you say? Monday?"

"Monday?" she repeated blankly. His eyes slid to his partner, but she wasn't paying him any mind, so he silently made a gun with his forefinger and thumb and cocked it at Harlow. She rolled her eyes. "Oh, now you're being covert. Yes, Monday's fine. Gives me the weekend to recover. Fuck off Miranda," she muttered, hearing her replacement phone go off again in her backpack but unwilling to tug it off again to find out what she wanted. Or whoever. Her whole family had the number and knew it was the one she was using until further notice, but she didn't really want to talk
to any of them. Not Christine, who was getting engaged on their sister's engagement anniversary and who after this would definitely be getting married next June. Not their mother, who encouraged the twinness and thought it was cute, even though her elder two daughters were in their mid-thirties. Not their dad, who favoured the fake twins over his disappointing youngest, or at least made every attempt to seem to.

Weirdly, despite all the bullshit surrounding them, despite the awkwardness of the exchange in the basement and despite all the stuff she wanted to scream at or rebel against in this situation, the only people she wanted to talk to or hear from right now were right here in front of her. With Scully and Colt, she could accidentally almost shoot them or stab them right in the familial trauma and still be looked at like a respectable professional who was worth something.

More than she could say for her fucking family.

In other news, it turns out ghosts aren't as bound to particular places as she'd thought. Scully finished logging in and the scanning program came up onscreen, a profile in the middle of the wide screen replacing the rapid scan of fingerprints it had been doing before, and both women froze. Harlow bit her tongue, hard, before the words oh shit could be formed. Colt saw Harlow's reaction and spun back to look.

"It's done," he said with interest, sitting forward to read. Harlow didn't need to read the text; she was looking at the photo. Aliens, zombies, fucking ghosts. And the guy wasn't even dead. "Fox Mulder. That's..." Colt sat back and looked between his teammates, no doubt taking in Scully's wide eyes and for-once-failed impassive expression. "That was the name on the floor downstairs."

"Mm," Harlow mumbled noncommittally when Scully didn't answer immediately. This ball was definitely in Scully's court. Colt went back to reading.

"An FBI agent," he went on, glancing over the profile. "Former agent." He tilted his head toward Scully without breaking eye contact with whatever he was reading. "You worked with him?"

Harlow watched as Dr Scully recomposed herself. This was not the result she'd expected. She turned her shock into a more appropriate level of surprise. "For a time, years ago. The prints Skinner sent from Wyoming are a match?"

"One set," Colt agreed, taking the mouse from her and clicking back through the process he'd taken to get that result. "These are the partials from the cars. This Fox guy is the closest match in the system. Ninety-three percent likelihood." He frowned, something not sitting right. "You thought the car prints would give you the arsonist. You think this guy...?"

"No," Scully said, not too vehemently, sounding perfectly confused. "I can't think of why he would, or what he'd be doing in the same rural Wyoming town as Skinner and me. I haven't seen him in years," she added innocently, which Harlow was reasonably certain was a lie. What, you drew the bloods and left them on the side of the road, and Mulder happened across them and passed them on to Harlow to give back to you?

"Could it be a mistake?" Harlow asked delicately, not wanting to fuck up the balance of this tense moment. Colt shrugged; Scully did the same.

"It's a relatively robust algorithm," she said reluctantly, though there was a gratefulfulness shining in the glance she cast up at her. "It doesn't seem likely that the program went wrong." She bit her lip, clearly thrown by this. She glanced around at their very public office space. Everyone else was focused on their own screens, and most desks were empty, but Harlow could see why the basement appealed to the two of them. This was no place for secretiveness. Dr Scully looked back to Colt.
"Can we sit on this? Please? Just until I can do a little digging of my own."

Colt raised his hands off the keyboard and mouse. "We can do whatever you want, ma'am. It's your case."

"Thank you." Dr Scully looked relieved. She cleared her throat. "It's an unexpected result, and even though he's left the Bureau, we should afford Agent Mulder the same courtesy we would any other colleague, and give him the chance to explain his involvement before we point a finger at him."

Her partner nodded thoughtfully, then asked, "What do you think he'll say? I mean," he gestured at the screen, "these are his prints, no really denying that."

Harlow kept her gaze carefully elsewhere when Colt's passed over her. Mulder really was everywhere, but this was unnerving. Minutes after picking his name up out of the dust and dirt of the basement and handing him back to his former partner, his name had been handed to her again, in the form of damning evidence. Mulder had broken into a dozen cars in rural Wyoming and burnt down a morgue? To… what? To destroy the body of the mutant zombie man Morris Bletchley who had probably murdered the victim whose lung tissue he'd smuggled to Harlow all those weeks ago at the gym? Why would he destroy the evidence Dr Scully needed to connect her case when he was so passionate about it when Harlow met him? When he'd gone to such lengths to ferret them the breadcrumbs to Stephen Powell? Who was also probably killed by Morris zombie-man Bletchley who these prints said he'd burnt to nothing.

It didn't add up.

"It wouldn't be above our enemies to plant false evidence," she said when Scully only shook her head, at a loss as to how to handle this spilling of her lives and secrets. Harlow hadn't liked the idea of Colt in the dark, but after all the secrets of Dr Scully's she herself had unwittingly spilt today, she now felt a new sense of protectiveness over this last secret of the other scientist's. "Send us into a spin chasing shadows that aren't there."

Scully exhaled slowly, smiling quickly in grateful agreement for the save, though Harlow didn't really consider it a save, since she couldn't work out any better explanation. Colt looked back at the screen, convinced by Harlow's suggestion, though his analytical mind, apprenticed through months in Agent Scully's tutelage, didn't relent.

"So you both think it's a coincidence?" he posed, obviously not thinking so. "We move into this guy's office and now his prints show up attached to our case? This is the guy with the porn, right?"

Dr Scully's return smile was more natural than her last one. "Yes, the very same, and pathologically phobic of fire, so while I won't claim coincidence, it definitely deserves more digging." She paused, thinking how much more to say. "Fox Mulder is something of an anarchist – he has more enemies than I do. Someone may have something to gain from turning our attention onto him."

"We won't breathe a word until you're happy for us to move," Harlow promised before Colt could ask anything else. He nodded. "If it's a set-up I want to know before I jump into it this time."

"Good thinking." Colt printed the results and got to work clearing the history. He looked like he wanted to say something else a few times, but he just handed over the print-out to his supervisor and efficiently tidied his work area. When he stood and buttoned his jacket thoughtfully, he asked, curiously, "This guy… You had that tip, for Boston…"

"Colt," Agent Scully said briskly, looking up at him emphatically, "who is it you're visiting, again? And what's your connection?"
He shut his mouth and smiled, apparently taking her point. "I'll be in touch."

"Be careful," Scully warned again, and he nodded respectfully to them both as Harlow fell into his abandoned chair and automatically began spinning.

"Always. Monday," he reminded Harlow as he headed out of the office. Harlow made herself dig her shoes into the carpet to stop the bad habit spin so she could give him a falsely excited grin and two thumbs up. Mostly because she was pretty sure their friendship was too young for a sarcastic flip-off to be considered as playfully friendly as she would have intended it.

"It's a date, Corvette," she called after him before thinking it through, enjoying the way he shot his amused smile back at her even though it probably wasn't a joke she should have made aloud in front of his teammates. He caught the doorframe to pause long enough to get the last word.

"In future, you don't need to shoot me to get my attention," he replied, outing her, the ass. "I'm not that hard to impress."

He disappeared, and she pursed her lips. Jerk. She raised a finger in preparation for Dr Scully's demand for explanation.

"For the record, I completely missed and did not hurt your partner," she said as soon as he was out the door. "For the same record, I hate that you keep him in the dark." She didn't care if Dr Scully didn't want to hear it, but the other scientist, when she daringly glanced aside at her, didn't look offended or upset.

"You can update the record as you please – Colt said it's awaiting your input. As for your second concern, in case you hadn't noticed," she responded coolly, taking over the computer that was officially on Colt's desk but which the pair of them seemed to use interchangeably, like they did with her desk, "he keeps as many secrets from me. And that's an arrangement that works for us both."

"But this shit with Mulder," Harlow argued, scooting closer to keep the words between them even though the necessary clenching of her core to propel the chair forward sent a searing rip of pain through her beaten abdomen. She paused long enough to let the pain simmer down. "Isn't it more effort than it's worth to lie to him about someone integral to the investigation whose office we're using and whose prints just flagged as potentially criminal? It can't be beneficial to you to have a partner with only half the story."

"It's a lot of effort, and it's definitely of no benefit to me, except to save me from awkward conversation," Scully agreed cautiously, flicking through tabs on the computer until she found the incomplete write-ups of yesterday's Prestonsburg misadventures. "I like to think it's worthwhile, so long as it protects Warren from another attack on his grandmother."

"Another attack. Harlow automatically reached for her glasses to push them back up her small nose, even though they hadn't slipped. She dropped her voice to a hushed whisper. "What he said about his nana's fall – you think that really was an attack against him?"

"No. It was an attack against me."

Harlow looked into Dr Scully's level gaze, bright and sure despite being evidently tired and worn-out. She let her own gaze drift away across the shared workspace of Agents Scully and Colt. Anyone looking could tell that these partners were surprisingly close considering their age discrepancy and differing personality types. Colt looked up to Scully and was unerringly loyal to her; Scully appreciated what he brought to her team, obviously, but she also plainly cared for him.
on a personal level. Who wouldn't? He was a sweetheart. Except when he dropped Harlow in the shit like that just now, the dick.

After what the senior agent had already experienced in this job, the shadowy *them* punishing Colt could definitely serve as a blatant *back off* message to the observant and invested Dr Scully. And yet…

"You said there was no direct evidence that his grandmother's fall was deliberate."

"A lack of evidence isn't proof of anything, Dr Harlow." Scully stood, pulling the office chair out of the way to let Harlow get at the keyboard. "You should know that better than anyone." Fair point. With discomfort both physical and emotional, Harlow shuffled over to the computer to finish off Colt's transcripts and reports. She had landed herself in some serious shit with these two. Anyone wiser and with less to prove would have stepped away by now. "The facts might say Nana Giancarlo's fall was probably caused by elderly frailty but the truth is we three – and Mulder, too – are targets in a galactic game of poison ball and our opponents don't play fair. That makes our loved ones vulnerable to exploitation."

Harlow inhaled slowly, fixing her eyes determinedly on Colt's report without really taking anything in. Dr Scully was good at scaring her, and her spooky warnings stimulated both Harlow's rational and paranoid sides into wanting to walk away. The risks were higher than she'd realised before this afternoon.

"But this letter today," she reasoned, "from the cancer clinic. *That*'s just a coincidence, right? Like you said…" She was already trailing off, though, because Scully looked uncomfortable. "I hate it when you look like that. You've always got another bit of bad news ready for me."

"I think it's a coincidence," Agent Scully agreed finally. "Something Colt needs to sort out with his family."

"But?" Harlow prompted, waiting for the other shoe.

"Nothing," Dr Scully insisted, sitting down at the other computer to scan the falsified CDC forms. She shrugged while the machine booted up. "Just, maybe rethink that theory of yours that they can't give you cancer. That there's anything they *can't* do."

Harlow let her head fall back with a pained groan and took another slow breath. This time she counted to ten while she stared at the ceiling and ignored the ache.

"You know," she said when she got to ten, "just this once, I'm not even going to ask."
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, or a time-turner or other device that can correct the course of the show's canon. All I have is fanfic, which I will wield with all of my strength for as long as fandom will have me in its ranks.

Author's Notes: For those still sticking around, THANK YOU! I'm sorry for the delays. In good news I have survived the first semester of my doctorate with only minimal stress-crying AND have been on a roll with my original novel since the end of semester. This chapter was written very disjointedly over the months since my last update so I apologise if it reads that way.

The distinction between fact and truth isn't clear at first, but they're hard to reconcile once the difference has been recognised.

The briefcase felt heavier today swinging from her hand as she submitted herself to the usual entry checks at Quantico. Logically she knew it was only by a few leaves of paper, but what was printed on one document was heavy with a fact she couldn't reconcile with the truth she knew in her deepest self: pyrophobic Fox Mulder was the most likely suspect in the morgue blaze that had destroyed Morris Bletchley's corpse.

As impossible as she knew it to be, she also couldn't argue with the computer algorithm that identified the pattern between his file and the prints an Agent Spence prepared and sent on to Agent Colt. Mulder had touched the gas socket on all the cars drained of fuel along the Wyoming street, directly connecting him, and only him, with the accelerant used to engulf the morgue.

Which was insane, because less than an hour before the fire, he was in bed with her, having fallen asleep insisting she stick this case out. This case he gave her. This case that involved their son. This case he would not jeopardise.

"You're all clear," the security guard told her with a swift smile, and with the same expression in return she picked up the carrycase she'd collected from the basement office earlier this morning before driving over the border. No, she was not clear, not clear on anything, though a solid night's sleep had certainly helped. Her baby was an orphan halfway across the country and she couldn't have him; Mulder seemed to have burned her evidence down but the most important evidence had ended up safely in her car anyway; and on top of it all, in a moment of weirdly clear, reckless certainty that seemed cloudy in retrospect, she'd apparently suggested that she, Colt and Harlow use the old basement office from her X-Files days for their evolving investigations.

No, she was not clear, but if the security guard could be fooled, Scully supposed she must be doing a convincing job of appearing so.

Dr Harlow was exactly where her text message said she'd be, in a lab space she'd booked for them, white lab coat snug over her shoulders and rectangular glasses perched tidily on her dainty nose, looking for all the world like a normal scientist at work doing normal science. She had one earbud dangling from her ear and she tapped her foot to her music as she efficiently set up the lab, oblivious to Scully standing on the other side of the door. The ugly bruises from the beating she'd
taken in Kentucky were at their brightest today, and her long dark hair was up for once, coiled at the back of her head in a soft-looking braid.

This was the eccentric virologist Mulder had trusted. This was the agent whose very first case had laid the groundwork for what might be Scully's last. This was also the partner she'd taken on who she'd realised too late was frightened of her. Of her. In this huge horrible world full of things to be frightened of, Scully had put enough distance between herself and her allies that some couldn't tell the difference.

She pushed the door open, and Harlow's shapely eyes flickered up behind her glasses as Scully entered. "Good morning," she said, determined to start over with the younger doctor and make an effort to be friendlier after yesterday's awkwardness.

"Good morning," Harlow replied, sounding cautious. She didn't move except to straighten up, and the silence between the women started to swell.

Scully inhaled slowly through her nose, unsure how to proceed. Mulder had walked to his own rhythm and she wasn't sure she'd ever fallen into step completely, but she'd liked him instantly, and their partnership had worked from day one, for better or worse. Doggett she'd hated on first sight, but he'd quickly proven himself a kindred spirit, honest, professional, rigorously logical, a man of integrity, and they'd worked together in harmonious tandem. She'd been determined not to like Colt but his determination had won out over hers. Like the men she'd worked with in the past, he was calm, collected, reliable and intelligent, and when she was with him, conversation was easy.

Harlow was intelligent, too, and Scully had seen her focus that nervous energy long enough to have a roomful of more experienced counterterrorism agents eating out of her hand. She walked to the beat of her own drum like Mulder, attacked every element of X-files crazy with Doggett's healthy scepticism, and presented with dedication equivalent to Colt's. She should be easy to spend time with.

"I got your-"

"Close the door," Harlow interrupted, and Scully cut herself short, closing her lips and turning to do as her partner requested. This session was going to be uncomfortable. As soon as the door clicked shut, Harlow explained, "I heard Dr Wells is having a bad morning and I don't want his mood and our work to run the risk of coinciding if he happens to stumble in here on one of his rounds, however entertaining it would be to see him try and go toe-to-toe with you." She paused. "Actually, kick it back open. I really want to see that now."

"Dr Wells?" Scully repeated, meeting the young scientist's gaze again. Harlow nodded slowly.

"One of the senior scientists in the FDDU and one of my least favourite people."

"One of?" Scully prompted carefully as she looked around and found a white lab coat for herself. Harlow shrugged, making a visible effort to withhold her wince as she strained her stiff injury.

"I have a list." It sounded like a challenge, the way she said it. A lot of what she said sounded that way. Partly defensive, partly aggressive, earbud still pumping music that Scully could hear from where she stood, defiantly refusing to take it out or pause the track.

"So do I," Scully replied coolly, meeting the young scientist's gaze again. Harlow nodded slowly.
"How high up it do I land myself for almost shooting your partner?"

Scully raised an eyebrow, not having expected Harlow to bring this up. She was clearly still feeling bad about it – maybe this scratchy defensiveness was her way of dealing with it. "Not as high as you'd get for actually hitting him. Extra points for hospitalisation."

The silence swelled again, but it was quickly broken by twin smirks, quirky off-beat senses of humour finally clicking and finding a common rhythm. Harlow was weird but Scully herself was hardly normal, and half of what slipped out of the virologist's mouth was pretty amusing, at least insofar as how embarrassing it was for the doctor herself when her brain caught up with her mouth.

"My sisters walk a fine line at the bottom of my list," Harlow said now, challenge gone from her tone, tugging her music out of her ear and beginning to roll the cord up to put away in her pocket. "Miranda gets a pass this week because she came through for us." She withdrew her folded-up copy of the requisition papers out of the same coat pocket and smoothed them out on the table for Scully to see. "You were right. It's a fake. Miranda processes these kinds of things every day and thought it looked wrong, signed off by people she's never heard of and missing the signatures from the desks it should have crossed. She checked the internal computer system this morning when she got in and messaged through confirmation about fifteen minutes before you got here. No record on the CDC's end."

"Dr Petersen?" Scully came closer, all reservations she'd felt just moments ago about Harlow's character and her own ability to connect with the other woman already evaporated.

"No such person, at least not out in the field in the capacity you described. No Dr Lansdowne, either." Harlow picked up the tissue-style box of disposable gloves from the other end of the counter and tipped it over, finding it empty. She tossed it into the wastepaper bin in the corner and knelt at the cabinet doors below the sink, looking for a new box. Scully ran her hands over the scanned copy of the faked papers that could have caused so much trouble if Skinner hadn't gotten her on that plane. How many others like this had whipped away other evidence before she'd ever heard of it?

But what luck, for once, to have evidence that forces were at work against her case. Scully couldn't help but smile a little. Was this the feeling of intuitive certainty that Mulder experienced on cases like this, knowing as he seemed to that this was 'it', the case to end all their X-file cases?

"What about the girl? Sixty-Four?" she asked, holding little hope after the good fortune they'd already run into. She wasn't sure what answer she wanted, or expected, back from any of her partners' allies about the young fake paramedic Skinner believed was one of Mulder's informants. The girl had tracked Mulder almost to the cabin door, had been part of the requisition team sent to collect Bletchley, went by a secretive codename and had managed to talk her way out of arrest from Skinner. For all of that, Scully wanted proof she was scum. But on the other hand, Skinner was a hard man to convince, with good instincts, and he believed her when she said she was a friend, that she hadn't betrayed William's location or theirs, that she'd in fact leaked this lead to Mulder in the first place, and that she had delivered them the warning about the hospital camera footage out of goodwill despite that she was afraid of her handlers. The girl's escape had not yet prompted any concerning new developments; at least, none that Scully was aware of. Her fingers, pressed hard and flat on the document on the table to keep them still, itch ed with the desperate desire to snatch up her phone and call the Thayne sheriff to check in on William and his uncle at the hospital, or to book herself a ticket to fly straight back there to check for herself.

The itch, truth be told, was not new. Her skin had been alight with restlessness and guilt ever since she left the Wyoming town. Her dreams had been studded with old memories of her baby boy in
her arms, for once her own dreams instead of just those nightmares prompted by the chip in the back of her neck.

However restless and guilty she felt, though, logic prevailed, and logic said if she called a sheriff to check up on a random boy connected to the John Doe shooting in small-town Wyoming, a John Doe who was definitely someone's very expensive and sensitive experiment, she would be drawing direct attention to her son's position. She'd given him a middle name that was too recognisable. Dangerous eyes were already watching that case. She'd done what she could to sweep attention away; Skinner had the damning surveillance tape from the hospital; Mulder had… burnt down the morgue? Perhaps to prevent the requisition teams from trying again, to make them give up on the town and leave?

"Miranda said she'll look into it."

Scully blinked and came back to the present, letting the document fold back on itself without the weight of her hands to keep it flat. "Hmm?"

"The number. Sixty-Four," Harlow repeated, peeling open the new box of gloves and handing a pair to Scully. "The exalted Dr Harlow the First is looking into it."

"Oh. Good. Thank you." Scully pulled the gloves on, feeling the thin, tight latex snap against the burn in her skin, one of a thousand daily reminders of no. No phone call. No flight. No bolting from this lab and running for days and days all the way back to her child. She had to trust. Trust the steps she and her closest friends had taken to deflect attention from him; trust that she could only do damage by going back now.

"Anything from Colt yet?"

Scully looked up, hoping she wasn't coming across distracted. "Not yet. Early days." Her partner had indicated yesterday that he was going to ply one of his military contacts for information about the Fenchurch Transport defence contract that Stephen Powell had stepped on just before his death. "I don't expect to hear from him on a Saturday morning, Agent."

"But he was seeing his scary secret soldier informant yesterday and he could be lying in a ditch somewhere or locked in some dirty prison cell for asking the wrong questions," Harlow argued. "It took those assholes in Prestonsburg hours to make John and Michelle disappear – anything could have happened to Colt by now."

"That's a possibility for all of us every day," Scully reminded the other doctor, clearing the fake forms off the counter and opening the carrycase. "Disappearing Warren Colt, FBI agent and partner of Dana Scully, would be an extremely bold move that would bring more attention to our movement than any of our enemies would want, so I tend to believe he's fine. Besides, he lives with his grandparents. I expect his absence would be noted very swiftly if anything had gone awry."

"I suppose that's the same reason I haven't been bundled into the trunk of a car yet for pissing everybody off along the whole chain of this conspiracy of yours," Harlow commented as the pair of them began to unpack the carrycase onto the benchtop. "I'd like to think my family would make a bit of noise if something happened to me."

"I'm sure they would. Oh," Scully interrupted herself suddenly, remembering. "Did your sister get engaged?"

"Ugh," Harlow groaned, closing her eyes as though it was a truly painful subject. "Yes. The supreme Dr Harlow the Second is engaged to her spineless loser of a boyfriend. Fiancé. Such a
fucking farce. Excuse my… well, my fucking English." Together they laid everything out, and Scully listened while the younger doctor described the family dinner from the night before, the 'surprise' engagement everybody knew was coming and the irritated curiosity directed at Harlow's state of visible injury. Other people's families could be fascinating, and listening helped distract her from thinking about her own. In Wyoming. Vulnerable, without her protection. Her fingers twitched and her skin burned. "The only good thing was that I stayed the night at my parents', and so my mom did my hair for me this morning, which saved my shoulders."

"It looks nice." Scully removed the carrycase from their work area stood back with her itching hands on her hips, surveying the work they had to get through. Focus. The investigation was key.

The investigation had ramifications that could protect William. "Alright."

"Alright," Dr Harlow echoed briskly, rolling her sore shoulders gently and blowing out through her mouth like she was trying to gear herself up for something physically exerting. "What have we got and what's the game plan, Doctor?"

Scully took a similar breath, trying to get her head in the game. She began sliding the vials across the counter, grouping them more efficiently. "Blood and tissue samples from Morris Bletchley, dead four days now, autopsied Thursday. Bicep, trachea, lung, heart, rib, lung again-" She paused while Harlow plucked one out and set it aside. "I also took a small sample of skin for analysis. The scarring looked like it might be… cosmetic. Too uniform, and all the same age, like they were added to brand-new skin to make the body look the age it was meant to be, if he'd never been killed the first time. I think. I…" She pursed her lips. "Well, I'm quite sure, but that's why we're here. To back ourselves, with science."

"This is so effing crazy," Dr Harlow muttered, scratching her nose. She gestured with her other gloved hand at the rest. "And these are from our mystery man, who you definitely didn't meet and you can't tell me anything about."

"That's right," Scully agreed, flashes of feeling her way down a ladder through some weird bunker at redneck gunpoint and hurling cruel words at Mulder on the side of the road afterward streaking through her mind. She watched Harlow nod, resigned but accepting, and felt like she owed her more. "Telling you his name won't do anything except incriminate me and endanger Mulder's reputation."

"Which doesn't need further tarnishing, I gather."

Scully didn't bite, but she didn't need to. Harlow cringed at her own runaway mouth and gestured silently for her to continue.

"His reputation with authority is already relatively shot," she explained, taking her first vial to the work station Harlow had already prepared, tools and slides and little petri dishes ready to go. What a good girl she was. "These days he relies on his notoriety with the underground. Associating too closely with me and the Bureau could be toxic for that image."

She didn't mention that Austin Dunn's expelled, infected lung tissue wouldn't have ever made it into their hands at all if the family had known who she worked for, and Mulder had gotten her near that patient on reputation and stretched truths alone.

Harlow handed her a facemask and began to secure her own over her mouth. "You two have some drama, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it."
"I'm not going to ask." Harlow smiled wryly. "I'm a slow learner but I do learn."

They divvied up the work and got into it. Dr Harlow proved herself an excellent lab partner. She was efficient and meticulous, so different in a lab coat from how she presented in other contexts. She knew where everything was in this workroom, and had prepped most of the equipment Scully could have wanted for her testing. She got through her work quickly so she could run the experiment that was playing most on her mind, with the second vial of Bletchley's lung tissue. Scully left her to it, ignoring the undercurrent of Bon Jovi pumping from the virologist's ears and focusing her own attention on inputting their results into her report on her laptop. Her analysis of the bicep muscle and organic tissue told her little else but what she'd already guessed at the morgue, that the fibres were unusually dense, but she did make an observation of what she thought presented as very visible blood vessels, probably enlarged to feed oxygen to those oversized muscles. Harlow had organised Scully one of the Bureau's top-notch digital microscopes, complete with photography capabilities. "Pays to spend a year and a half in storage – you know where everything is," she explained nonchalantly when Scully expressed her thanks. The girl was worth her weight in gold.

Now Scully uploaded her up-close photos of the tissue samples into her report. They weren't damning. Such a fortunate development in human musculature could be explained by a chance genetic mutation, of course, but coupled with the rest of what she was building up on Bletchley, it definitely helped paint the picture.

The bone she'd taken from the rib was much more helpful. It contained a small amount of bone marrow, which she carefully extracted and transferred to a glass slide for a closer look.

It did not look the way she expected.

"Dr Harlow. Natalie," she repeated, raising her voice when the other scientist didn't hear her the first time. Harlow yanked her headphones out and turned. "You're more qualified than I am to make a judgement on this. This bone marrow…" The immunologist had collapsed under the weight of her curiosity and already crossed the lab, not needing to be convinced. She pushed her glasses tighter on her nose before leaning down to look into the microscope eyepiece. "I've never seen it that colour before. Have you?"

It was only a beat of silence and stillness before Harlow pulled away.

"You're absolutely certain this is the bone marrow you extracted at the autopsy?"

Scully blinked, privately acknowledging that the samples had been out of sight all night, and had turned up in her car trunk without explanation.

"Reasonably certain. All the bloodwork so far as been a match, and we'll run a DNA test on this, too, to back ourselves. The bone fragment I drew it from is the same size and shape as the one I cut from Bletchley." She gestured to the piece of rib she'd sawed out of the John Doe during the autopsy. "Why?"

Harlow scratched her hairline with the back of her gloved hand, looking tired. It was a look Scully knew well from the mirror after decades of trailing around after Mulder's crazy. The younger doctor headed for the glass-doored refrigerator for some new substance neither of them had thought to ready for today.

"I have seen bone marrow like that before," she said, opening the door and digging briefly through the many jars, bottles and vials stashed in there. She was quick – as she said, she knew this place well. "Not since university, though. That sample was from a child. We need to do a leukocyte
Scully stared as Harlow idly tipped the little bottle she'd chosen and returned to the microscope. "A child? Bletchley's bone marrow matches that of a child?"

"Don't act so shocked," Harlow muttered, cracking open the bottle and dipping a clean pipette in. "It's what you expected, isn't it? Get me a clean vial. The skin?" She jerked her head back the central countertop, where the skin sample remained, the last job to process. "The observations you made of the organs on the autopsy tape?" She squeezed the pipette and drew some of the sedimenting agent to add to the vial Scully presented her with. "The body you cut up and your friend Mulder apparently burned to a crisp isn't the age it's supposed to be, right? Anticoagulant. Over there. Where you left it. So if he died twelve years ago or whatever, and whatever happened to bring him back, then… He shouldn't be older than twelve anyway. However the fuck that's possible," she added with a wild shrugging gesture, jumping between instructing and ranting while Scully cottoned on and measured out the appropriate volume of anticoagulant for Harlow's test, "is your job to explain, lady. All yours." She left Scully to finish setting up the leukocyte test and went to the laptop to type in her initial observations of the marrow.

"And this will give us a ballpark idea of the body's age?" Scully verified. She of course understood what bone marrow was and how it played into the great mysterious miracle that was the human body, but Harlow's experience and expertise with the biological sciences, especially on this micro level, outweighed her own.

"Fat cells in bone marrow increase with age," Harlow explained, which Scully already knew, "and leukocytes decrease. The fat cells give it that yellowy colour you're used to seeing. Children's samples don't have that. That'll take at least an hour," she added, nodding back at what Scully was doing, drawing more marrow from the rib segment. "To process."

"The tox screen and our blood tests shouldn't be far off by that point," Scully murmured vaguely as she worked. Harlow nodded again and put her music back in one ear. Aerosmith. Scully was surprised to find she appreciated Harlow's music volume. It was loud enough that she could hear the lyrics from the other side of the lab, loud enough to keep any thoughts that wandered away from the task before her too distracted to find their way to William or Mulder.

Harlow wasn't as easy as Colt and maybe they'd never be warm and familiar in the way Scully was with her junior partner, but she and Harlow had something she and Colt never would: science. Harlow set up and left her lung project to come and work with Scully on the skin analysis, and when she wondered aloud, "Is it weird that I'm enjoying myself?" while she zoomed her microscope and read out measurements for Scully to record, Scully knew she'd found a kindred spirit in the virologist.

She could imagine Mulder's indulgent smile at her shared enjoyment of the slow, meticulous scientific process with Dr Harlow.

"Okay," Harlow announced when they finished packing away their tests on the skin cells. "I'm going to need you standing at my shoulder when I check on my test with the lung, because I already know what it's going to say and I won't believe it otherwise."

"Alright," Scully agreed cautiously, following her partner to the other side of the lab and settling with her hip against the counter as Harlow took two petri dishes out of a temperature-controlled cupboard and placed them carefully before her. "What did you actually do?"

"It's a comparison. Bletchley's lung is in dish A, and dish B has a similarly sized piece of lung tissue from an anonymous donor. Male, same blood type." Scully nodded as Harlow explained her
experiment, knowing that the facility had plenty of such samples in storage for exactly these kinds of comparative tests. Harlow hesitated. "I added the virus."

It was not what Scully had expected to hear. "You what?" She wanted to demand why Harlow would risk exposing them both by opening it in the room without warning, but then her swiftly logical mind recalled: "But it's dead. I've already tried this with Johannsson's virus sample."

"Most of it has died by now but I think keeping it as cold as we have has allowed some cells to stay active. I noticed when I first tested it that its lifecycle accelerates along with its metabolism, which is directly connected to its temperature and food source. Without food, kept cold... it kind of... hibernates. Then each time I wanted to check my results because I thought you and Mulder were trying to punk me, I took a bit, heated it back up..."

"Concerning," Scully noted. Her initial testing, the day after Rebecca Johannsson's autopsy, had proven unhelpful when the black cells failed to respond to a piece of Rebecca's uneaten lung tissue, but that vial, though much fresher, had not been kept so cold, and the experiment had not been run at body temperature. Harlow nodded grimly and moved the first dish onto the microscope's tray.

"Very. Though I don't know how long it can survive like that." She peered into the eyepiece. "Maybe not as long as I thought. It hasn't touched Bletchley's lung, and the cells that looked alive an hour ago are inert. Pass me... Thanks." She'd switched dish A with the one Scully handed her. She looked again, this time for a lot longer. Then: "I fucking knew it..."

"What?" Scully asked, shifting to take Harlow's spot when the virologist moved willingly aside and gestured welcomingly at the microscope. She adjusted the angle of the eyepiece for her own much shorter height and took a look.

It was a familiar microscopic scene of barbarism. The black substance she'd seen first in Rebecca Johannsson's body and then in Austin Dunn's was spread over the mostly demolished, pock-marked lung tissue. Even after months in a polystyrene box kept cold with ice bricks in Natalie's backpack and refrigerator, riding with her to work on a motorbike and being thrown to the ground in a brawl in Kentucky, the virus she'd swabbed from Dunn's dying coughs was alive and starving.

Scully swapped the dish with the first, with Bletchley's, and then understood Harlow's reaction. She'd cut the tissue samples to similar sizes for the most valid comparison, but the pieces were no longer the same size, and this one showed just how much of the control sample had been eaten away in the short time she'd run the experiment. Morris Bletchley's scrap of lung sat grossly in the middle of its petri dish, expired black ooze in a motionless blob beside it.

It was poetically incorrect, the virus he'd most probably infected Dunn with unwilling to attack him. Scully withdrew, ignoring Harlow's nervous foot-tapping and recollecting the night she'd gone out to the Dunn property. Austin had run into an old school friend, Morris, who was breezing through town. They shared a smoke, a pipe, something like that. What a simple delivery method. Of course it wouldn't look suspicious, especially if the deliverer was smoking it, too.

"I knew it. He's immune, isn't he?" Harlow asked finally, unable to withhold her conclusions any longer. "He's... He was... somehow genetically immune to the virus. That's what these super lungs are about. He can infect other people, cart this shit all over the countryside and never worry about himself getting sick."

"I think so," Scully agreed, taking her photographs, beginning to take her measurements. Harlow snapped into gear and intuitively began assisting. "If we're going to assume from the information we've already got that Bletchley – and others – have been somehow grown to replace men already dead in order to carry out this task of murder with the virus – a task for which we are yet to


determine any kind of sound motive – then it stands to reason that adaptations might be made to make these bodies more effective at carrying out this task. Hence the reimagined lungs.

"This is fucking surreal," Harlow commented in disbelief, but didn't slow down in her work. "Are we really talking about this?"

"It was your experiment, Doctor."

"I know, I know. And it fits, doesn't it?" Harlow asked, a little wildly, putting down her tools to gesture dramatically over to the other side of the lab, where the bone marrow was still undergoing its test. "The body appears like an adult but lacks the real signs of aging, especially the signs of a life lived hard, and the bone marrow tells us it's from a skeleton not yet matured. Are you going to say it, or am I?"

Scully pressed her lips together, uncomfortable with how far she'd already led this conversation away from what sounded sane. "I don't want–"

"Goddamn clones. How the fuck–"

"I don't know," Scully interrupted in frustration, trying to concentrate on her work. "I don't know. It shouldn't be possible. I know of no current means of cloning a complete adult body, especially not one with complex brain developments associated with life experience and social interaction, like language, coordination, focus… If there was a way of generating a fully-formed adult clone of Natalie Harlow right here in this lab, right now, she should be a vegetable, or at the very least, a bundle of reflexes and instincts with no ability to interpret her situation, control her own movement patterns or differentiate her surroundings, assuming the clone's brain behaves in the same plastic way as an infant's. Which we can't assume, because the adult brain is structurally different from the infantile brain, but if it is, then we get an infant in an adult body. And then..." Scully shrugged, annoyed with the contradictory impossibility and necessity of this working theory. Facts versus the inevitable truth. "Then it would take a minimum of seven years of intensive care, guidance and interaction to bring that clone to a stage of early independence where, like a normal human child, it could make its own decisions, for better or worse, and attend to its own base needs. Morris Bletchley… Well, there were no solid reports of him communicating or operating at any high level of neural activity in Wyoming the day he was shot, but the off-the-record witness who puts him with our victim right before he fell ill implied that they were speaking. I don't know," Scully said again, straightening from the microscope and sighing. "I really don't want it to be clones."

"Aliens and government cover-ups and zombies and clones," Harlow muttered as she unpicked her gloves and went to the laptop to enter their latest data. "This would make the worst movie."

At that moment Scully caught sight of movement outside the room, a pair of figures passing the window set into the door. One must have glanced idly inside, and now did a double-take. The door cracked as it opened, and there came a sharp inhalation of breath from the approximate direction of the laptop.

"Agent Scully?"

It was akin to a child being caught with one hand in the cookie jar, or perhaps more aptly because Scully and Harlow were adults and there were two of them, akin to being caught in bed together. They both looked toward the door, frozen with hands on microscopes and laptop keyboards, startled out of their concentration, automatically embarrassed though they weren't strictly doing anything wrong. Assistant Director Kelley was leaning through the doorway with a look of cautious puzzlement on his too-attractive face. Symmetrical, full lips were closed over what she knew to be dazzlingly white, too-straight teeth and wavy dark hair was gelled so perfectly that
even on a forty-five-degree lean, not a single strand shifted to comply with gravity. He, too, looked caught-out, guilty. Out from behind him, another man, younger and more pinched-looking, ginger-haired and pale with a sunburnt nose and ear-tips, stepped into the lab, looking uncertainly at Scully and eyes first widening with surprise, then gaining some confidence, when he spotted Harlow in the foreground at the laptop. It was the kind of confidence that manifested as smug superiority.

"Assistant Director." Scully found her voice after an unnecessary beat, his likewise unnecessary look of bewilderment throwing her off. She hooked a finger through the elastic of her face shield to pull it down, revealing the lower half of her face. Working for hours with Harlow, going through the calming rituals of scientific investigation, she had forgotten she was wearing it. She'd managed to forget plenty of things. William. Mulder. Assistant Director Kelley's stupid crush on her and all the half-assed excuses she'd prepared in her head for the next time she ran into him and she had to make good on that dinner she'd agreed to and had thus far managed to avoid. He hadn't been around the Washington offices lately, at least not in the hallways and stairwells where she usually ran into him. Or rather, where he usually ran into her. He always caught her off-guard; today was no different, except that he was also thrown. She could tell in the way his gaze shifted disbeliefingly to Harlow, clearly recognising her. Clearly unhappy. Clearly... worried. So she decided to push her advantage. This was her home soil. "Hugh. What are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

He started slightly at her use of his given name, and had to smile because she smiled. He stepped fully into the lab, his sunburnt friend in his shadow. *Inadequacy buried under a superiority complex sustained through bullying tactics; selects friends in high places for security; weak moral integrity; likely to cave easily to manipulation*. The voice in her head that sounded like Mulder immediately drew on the little information she had of the stranger to build a less-than-flattering profile.

"Yes – of course, I'm sorry," Kelley said now, smoothing things quickly, seemingly to realise he'd been gaping most unbecomingly and incomprehensibly. "I just didn't expect to see you here."

"A scientist in a lab? A rare sight," Scully agreed teasingly, checking that her microscope was stable at the correct zoom before moving away from it to go and stand beside her partner at the laptop. Harlow was visibly tense, hands still frozen solid on the keyboard, eyes warily tracking the two men who'd entered her sacred space. They were evidently not strangers to her, and not people she positively associated with. She relaxed very slightly when Scully joined her, at least insofar as slowly releasing the breath she was holding.

AD Kelley chuffed a single breath of laughter, realising that she was, of course, where she ought to be, and he was the one out of place requiring an explanation. "You're right, I shouldn't be surprised, even on a Saturday morning. I know you like to do your own lab work. Always so thorough. Dr Wells is on staff in the FDDU and he's been updating me on what they do here. Dr Wells," he said, remembering who he was with, tilting his head toward his companion, who straightened, "this is Dr Dana Scully, a senior agent in Counterterrorism."

Wells seemed unsure where he knew the name from, but made himself smile through his apparent uncertainty regarding this scenario. He extended a hand as he moved forward and opened his mouth to say something polite, but Scully, remembering Harlow's list of least favourite people, waved his hand away immediately and cut him off.

"I wouldn't, with what we're working with," she said semi-apologetically, not caring in the slightest if he was offended. The look he'd given Harlow when he walked in told her everything she needed to know about him, and even if it hadn't, the fact that he was with AD Kelley 'updating' him on a
department that had very little to do with Kelley's, in person on a weekend when anything he had to say could undoubtedly be better conveyed in a memo, told her plenty.

"Right," Wells muttered, aptly embarrassed, because in his clumsy carelessness he was a scientist who'd just reached out to shake hands with a scientist in sterile gloves as if he didn't know what the gloves meant. In his moment of awkwardness he struck out emotionally, as Scully's quick profile had expected he would. He picked Harlow, the only target he thought he could take on. "What happened to you?"

"Field experience," she answered, eyes fixed on Dr Wells as she spoke. Scully was reminded of the quarterly, the way her eye contact intensified when she didn't want to give in to the nervous temptation to look at someone else. It couldn't be her, not this time – they were getting along so well now, surely there was no need for the younger doctor to fear her now. No, it had to be Kelley, who even now was regarding Harlow with too-obvious distaste, making the virologist anxious. Scully saw that she kept her hands on her keyboard, rigid and tense, perhaps to stop herself fidgeting with her glasses. "It's less glamorous than the brochures make out. But thanks for asking."

Dr Wells pretended momentarily to not know what she meant, then laughed lightly. "Oh, right. What, you pissed someone off?" He now made a show of noticing her spectacular bruising, as if it weren't very obvious even with half her face covered with a white mask and the other half bespectacled. Intending to make her feel like she'd just assumed care where there in fact wasn't any. Jerk. "Sorry. I meant, what are you doing here? Haven't seen you around the Unit in weeks, Natty."

It sounded friendly enough, a familiar-sounding nickname as if they were on close terms. *Tap, tap.* Harlow clicked her nail on a laptop key, deliberating how to answer for a moment, then seemed to settle on an appropriate response.

"I believe they call it working. And it's Dr Harlow."

Wells blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"My name," she articulated. Some of her tension was gone, and she seemed bolstered by Scully's presence and her own boldness. Whatever this name thing was about, it ran quite deep into her already fragile self-esteem, though she seemed ready for some back-filling of that right now. "Doctor, or Agent if you prefer. I really don't give a--"

"Have you met, sir?" Scully asked Kelley loudly, firmly interrupting her partner before she could sink her foot right in there. Wells couldn't withhold his smirk. "Dr Harlow is on secondment to Counterterrorism." She glanced at Dr Wells, resenting him on Harlow's behalf without even knowing the history. "She was going to waste in the FDDU – I'm not surprised you're feeling her absence down there."

It mightn't have been the smartest move, situating herself so firmly on Team Harlow when Kelley was so clearly not and neutrality might have won her more points in the long run, but in the moment it was worth it to see Wells' smile drop and Harlow's bruised shoulders lift.

Kelley cleared his throat lightly, trying to maintain a semblance of coolness in this awkward situation despite feeling very obviously displeased. Scully was glad to see he was regretting acting on the impulse to come inside the lab.

"Uh, yes," he said with a swift, shiny smile built for sales and marketing. "Agent Harlow and I have met. I was, uh, actually surprised to see you in here working together."
And he turned his dazzling smile on Scully, eyes cold and curious, silently demanding. They'd spoken about Harlow before she even met the virologist; he'd expressed his distaste for the young doctor and her part in his friend Pierce's difficult time with the Engel case. He'd thought he'd gotten her onside, claimed her for Team Pierce simply through his banal storytelling, thinking she was a pushover who followed her heartstrings wherever they were pulled by an angelic sympathetic smile.

Sorry to disappoint, buddy.

So now he felt some kind of betrayal to see Scully with Harlow, a feeling she couldn't have avoided because if he was in on this conspiracy as deep as she thought he was, he should know by now that she was heading the investigation into the Black Oil variant virus that was eating dead lung tissue under the microscope behind her. But even still, it was worth being careful – the extent of Kelley's involvement remained a mystery to her, and she didn't need another enemy.

"I'm supervising Dr Harlow's investigations while she's with Counterterrorism," she explained. "Luckily, they fall perfectly within my field of expertise."

Dr Wells looked unsure, but AD Kelley nodded slowly, sifting through the layers of meaning. On one hand, she was communicating that she remembered his scripted warning of Harlow as a loose cannon with untidy conclusions, but on the other, also firmly reminding him of her own thorough professionalism, ensuring he, and whoever he was working with or for, knew that this time, there would be no room for discrediting the investigative team. They would need to be more imaginative.

"Agent Scully is not only an exemplary field agent and team supervisor, but a physicist and medical doctor," AD Kelley told Dr Wells, flashing a warm but still cautious smile at Scully. Like he was trying to work her out. "She used to teach here at Quantico." Recognition brightened Wells' features - was he a student of hers, back in the day? He wasn't familiar, couldn't have been too outstanding - as Kelley turned his smile on Harlow, who stood tall despite a subtle flinch. "You're incredibly fortunate to be learning from someone so accomplished. I'm sure things will work out better for you this time around, under such esteemed guidance."

Harlow tap-tapped at the keyboard again, a transferred nervous tic. "I'm sure, too. I'm very lucky, sir."

It was about time this painful exchange ended. Scully pushed her mask back up over her mouth as she said, "My current testing is time-sensitive. If there's anything else…?"

"Oh." Kelley seemed to remember he was standing in a lab uninvited, with no knowledge of what potential toxins they were playing with that determined the need for masks, and began backing out. "No. We'll let you continue. It was a delight to see you again, of course."

Dr Wells left with a murmured goodbye, and Scully caught the slip of Kelley's smile as he turned, revealing momentarily his irritated frustration. With her. She jumped on it before it could fester.

"Hugh?" Her voice made him pause in the doorway. "How about next Friday?"

He looked back at her with surprise, and she made sure to keep her gaze steady, glad that the mask prevented her from needing a complete poker face.

"Where would I meet you?" he asked carefully, taking note of Harlow still in the room, still listening. He thought they were dancing a very specific dance.
"I'll be at my desk until five," Scully replied casually. She picked up a tray of vials like she was about to get back to work with it, when in fact it was already packed up that way. Not that Counterintelligence's golden boy would know the difference. "I might see you then."

"Maybe," Kelley agreed, sounding cheered. He wished her goodbye, nodded less warmly at Harlow, and finally left. The door clicked shut behind him, and Scully sighed, putting the vials down. He'd sounded happier. She hoped he was as emotionally shallow and easily led as he had expected her to be, otherwise she was walking a very fine line down the edge of her code of ethics, possibly betraying herself in the process of trying to protect her case. He could be playing her just as she thought she was playing him.

"Hugh?" Harlow repeated, turning disgustedly, to which Scully held both hands up defensively and dropped her chin to her chest in defeat.

"I know, I know," she said miserably. "It's not… Obviously, I'm not…"

"Fucking the bad guy? So I'd hoped. He's a fucking piece of work."

"I know he is. I know he's dangerous, maybe even more than we know, and I know he's connected to Pierce."

"He was there, when I was taken off the Engel case," Harlow explained in a tight voice. "Agent Pierce dragged me out of the house, dressed me down and sent me back to my motel to await instructions. Agent Kelley, as he was known then, turned up four hours later, told me to pack, and drove me to the airport. Funny though, there's nothing mentioned in the official write-up on that case about your boyfriend having anything to do with it, or having ever been there."

She was a woman, and young, and anything but Mulder, but those last words came out with Mulderish bitterness, or at least that's how Scully's ears interpreted it.

"He's not my boyfriend," Scully snapped, surprised by how much the accusation hurt. Harlow stood her ground, glowering. "I'm not dating the assistant director, or anyone, before you go mouthing off. I'm…" She trailed off, losing the heat of her anger when she realised she was telling off Mulder for jumping to unfair conclusions and he wasn't even here. "He's insinuated an interest in me for some time, and has made efforts to 'recruit' me to his way of thinking or his 'side' of this conspiracy, and I can't help but wonder what might happen to our investigation if he loses that interest."

Harlow took a long time in answering. "You're the sacrificial lamb. That's kinda fucked."

"He's got your Engel case square in his sights, even now," Scully told the other doctor. "Back at Christmastime, when Colt accessed the digital file for the first time, it took less than a day for Kelley to start investigating Colt and crawling to me telling sob stories about some sloppy newbie called Agent Harlow who'd derailed his salt-of-the-earth friend's work. He's got it in for you, and he's not keen on Warren. If I'm in his good books--"

"Maybe you can do more to protect us," Harlow finished. She exhaled slowly, wincing as she rubbed her neck with unwilling arms. "Did he really call me sloppy?"

Scully shrugged, returning to her microscope. "I think I paraphrased that bit, but he definitely called you… what was it? An 'upstart little freshie'."

"That motherfucker." Harlow hit the enter key on the laptop to finish her section and wrote another
It took Scully a few moments, her concentration back on her measurements, to process that. "Two spots on what?"

"My list," Harlow reminded her as she abandoned the laptop and returned to the leukocyte test they'd set up. "Overtook my sister for obnoxiously getting engaged like she did. Still just below Wells, though - very disappointing that you didn't get to see him in his full prickish glory, I'd love to see you rip him a new one."

"What do you think Kelley and Wells are really doing today?" Scully asked. Harlow *hmmmed* uncertainly.

"I'm reasonably sure Cammy fucking Wells has been paid off at some point to ensure I stay in some kind of underling role around here, which might have come from Kelley and Pierce, who knows? Perhaps I'm paranoid, but I was much less surprised to see them together today than they were to see us together. Adds up that Wells would be in the pocket of someone big and powerful like Kelley, but I don't know what Wells could have or know that would be of use to someone in so high a role. Add it to our list of mysteries, I guess." She pulled out the stool in front of the leukocyte test they'd set up. "Okay, let's take a look at you…"

She fell silent as she got to work analysing the test, and Scully finished her measurements of the lung experiment Harlow had lost interest in. She took a final look at the control sample. The Black Oil cells were devouring at an advanced rate, starved and desperate. What was it in the Bletchley lung that repelled them? She'd have to pick back through that new data from today's numerous tests and trial each anomaly, but a tiny sparkle of hope now shone through all of this – maybe, in the narrow luck of finding Morris Bletchley in time to autopsy him, in shooing away those fake agents before they could take him, and in publicly 'losing' the body and all its tissues to an otherwise inconvenient fire, maybe she'd been given exactly what she needed to develop a cure or some sort of viable treatment, without their enemies having any idea.

"Turns out our pal Morris is quite the spring chicken," Harlow commented from the other side of the lab. She checked her readout. "Leukocyte count tells us the bone marrow is even younger than we thought. Three to four years."

Scully paused in her deconstruction of Harlow's lung experiment, steriley preparing the samples for incineration. It was both ridiculous and obvious, because they'd already ascertained that the body had to be younger than twelve to be a somehow reincarnated clone of the man who'd died in 2004, but that precise age?

"You're sure?"

"Should we run it again?"

Scully deliberated, knowing the facts would do nothing to mask the truth this time. "It wouldn't hurt, but I think the answer will be the same. Three to four years, hmm?"

"A kindergartner," Harlow agreed dryly, bringing over the results for Scully to see for herself. They were pretty conclusive, the counts falling well within the average range for a child of that age, the test unaware that the subject was a huge dreadlocked dead man.

"So he would have been created sometime in…" Scully knew, but didn't want to say it. Harlow, luckily, had no reason not to.
"2012," she supplied helpfully, popping her earphone back in and starting up her music again - Queen - while Scully stood with the readout in her hands, finding the line between these facts and the truth she didn't want to face harder and harder to make out.
Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, though hypothetically if some of the characters came knocking at my door asking for somewhere to hide after committing some heinous crime, I would probably have a hard time saying no; not that that's what happened, officer. I honestly don't know where any of them are. And no, you can't check under my stairs. That's where I keep my magical orphans. No errant FBI agents here, no sir...

Author's Notes: Thank you to all who have left comments on the last chapter, and thank you to everyone who reads and doesn't totally give up on me. I'm trying to get my fourth book in my fantasy series out by April, and I've been working on my PhD in fanfiction studies. Alongside my first two academic publications (omg-I'm-like-legit-now-omg) I've also spent the time producing my first academic-related X-Files fanfic piece. It's on my profile, go check it out :) Actually it's not that exciting but it's innovative to non-fandom people.

This chapter is very short, sorry, but it's something I could slip in between other commitments. As in, I had today off so I smashed this out. Sorry for any unnoticed errors, I haven't even edited. Hopefully the next one will be a bit more substantial, with some MSR angst for all of my lovely patient readers.

This chapter might also be a bit squeamish for some. Low-level torture. Enjoy? :/

What is the shape of loyalty, and how is it built?

Not like this.

"You thought," Luther Fenchurch mocked, echoing her attempt to explain her actions. A cruel smirk crossed his face; the pretty pledge who worked for him paused to glance back for confirmation, and must have taken the expression as the go-ahead. She continued buffing back and forth with her nail file, and Sixty-Four squirmed and gasped like she was being burned – every stroke seared white-hot. The strong hands on her wrists pinned her in place at the table, weighed down by the two silent soldier pledges at her sides, each at least twice her size.

This was the price of loyalty. To Dr Gray, to Fox Mulder, to Skinner the enemy who'd let her go when he didn't have to believe a word of it, to the boy in the hospital with magic in his veins and a face fashioned after two of the Hosts' most powerful adversaries. Loyalty was shaped like a fresh nail file, like two small bowls of warm water and essential oils, like bitten fingernails filed smooth and then filed smoother and then filed and filed and filed, like swirls of blood spreading across the surface of oil and water. Eerie patterns. Loyalty was ugly.

"You thought you were being helpful, burning down a morgue right under the noses of two of the FBI's peskiest agents and destroying Family property?" Fenchurch reiterated, watching with disdain as she struggled, as tears ran down her face, as another fingertip was scrubbed raw. He tugged the hem of his tailored jacket down to straighten its lines on his host's slim torso as he paced behind his manicurist. It was impossible to miss his perfect fingernails.
thought bitterly before she could stop herself, glad that telepathy wasn't a thing. He cast her a cold smile as he made his next pass as if he heard her. "See, we don't keep you around to think. That's our job. Pledges, especially feeble, defective little things like you, your job is to do. Do what we ask of you. That's enough, Annabel. Next fingernail, it looks a bit ratty." He stopped and regarded her over his manicurist's shoulder as the prettier pledge dipped Sixty-Four's bleeding index finger into the water – blazing pain – and moved to the middle finger. The swift back-forth was fine for the first thirty or forty seconds of each finger. Relief. Sixty-Four relaxed slightly against the holds of her two guards. None of the other pledges made eye contact, not even Annabel, the bitch whose simpering devotion to a Host had granted her the right to have her name back. Fenchurch, though, had no trouble meeting Sixty-Four's pained, defiant gaze. "Do you remember what we sent you and the others to Thayne, Wyoming, to do, pledge?"

Urgently, feeling the heat of Annabel's file start to radiate down her already short nail, Sixty-Four nodded. "To retrieve Pledge Thirty-Nine's body from the morgue. But we couldn't. Three already told you that. Ahh..." She exhaled sharply. The file had buffed away the free edge and had hit the nail bed.

"Pledge Three," Mr Fenchurch corrected her, blinking big grey-blue eyes slowly, carelessly, as she tried instinctively to yank away from the pain. She'd felt worse – she remembered the white rooms clearly, remembered the drills and needles and coloured potions pumped into her blood, burning every nerve – but the memories didn't make her braver or raise her pain threshold. "He did. He also said you returned to Thayne of your own accord. And this was your brilliant plan, was it?"

"They were going to..." She had to stop to breathe, quick and desperate. Made herself swallow the anger. Grow up. We won't always be pledges. "They were... taking the body... I got rid of their evidence. All of it. No case. I... fuck," she burst out when the file split her skin and started rubbing away the flesh of her fingertip. Annabel did not let up. The men either side did not flinch, and neither did Fenchurch, who had heard this expletive from her already for each of the other seven fingers. "I watched them! I made sure! They left, damn it, they left. Case closed. Fuck!"

"And to close that case, you risked exposing us all. You disappoint me, pledge, but perhaps I set my expectations too high. I thought – and you see, that is my job – that you might surprise us. No talents to speak of, of course, but something in that blood, maybe." He dipped a perfect fingertip into one of the bowls and idly traced circles, reanimating the rusty patterns already swirling in it. "Or maybe something is lost when someone dies – I don't know, I don't pretend to understand the particulars of your mortal frailty. What do you think, pledge?" he asked of the man to Sixty-Four's right. He lifted his hand from the bowl and let the reddened water drip from his fingertip. "Does this look, I don't know... washed out to you?"

Over the agonising pain of the sandpapering of her middle finger, over the throbbing in each of the already-scoured fingertips, over the stickiness of her teary cheeks, Sixty-Four felt a surge of humiliation flush her skin red. Like it wasn't shameful enough to be one of the least of the pledges, less than dirt; she was a girl dead and brought back, and not even because anyone wanted her back, but because it was promised. She wasn't even original; hardly even real. She'd wondered before, when she'd hurt herself and seen her blood, just how perfect a recreation it was. Was this the face she'd been intended to have before, in the first life, or were there tiny differences? Were these her fingerprints from before? Were these the same moles and freckles – would she even remember? It wasn't like she had photographs to check.

Annabel finished the middle finger and expertly scooped up the ring finger, pausing in her relentless filing to push back the softened cuticle while Fenchurch flicked the bloody water from his hand.
"I thought our regeneration process was quite sophisticated, but evidently there's room for improvement," he noted as a knock came at the door. He ignored it at first, leaning closer to Sixty-Four to better regard her embarrassed face. "It seems a handful are sporting unfortunate defects – reckless attitudes, low intelligence. Look at you, even now," he pointed out, reaching past Annabel to raise Sixty-Four's chin with his finger. Like Three did sometimes when she cried, only this felt even more sinister, made Three look positively paternal. His proximity made Annabel stop to be able to lean quietly out of his way, giving Sixty-Four a welcome reprieve, even if it came with a humiliating face-to-face with Fenchurch. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Did she? She could tell him so much. That she'd found the boy. That the boy's presence did exactly what they had hoped. That Fox Mulder trusted her. That Assistant Director Skinner had caught her and let her go. That Dana Scully was pivotal to the enemy plan to bring down the Worldwide Family of Hosts. That Dr Gray had betrayed them and that she was working with him. So much. She had only to open her mouth and let it flow, and this torture would stop and she'd be a hero. She'd been reborn into service to the Hosts, reprogrammed to love and serve them. She owed them her whole loyalty. That was her end of her father's bargain.

But the errant shapes swirling in the oils and water, the shapes made by her dripping raw fingers, burning with pain, were not the shapes of loyalty. As much as she wanted the pain to stop, as terrified as she was of what would happen next – exile? execution? – she couldn't shake the shapes she'd seen in recent months.

Fox Mulder adamantly defending Agent Scully's dedication to the efforts against the Hosts, whatever her fed alignment might imply.

Walter Skinner putting himself between Mulder and Scully and the less-than-stealthy Sixty-Four, ready to shoot her for knowing about the boy.

Henry Gray risking more than he had to ensure his daughter's surviving family were protected.

*No one will take you seriously until you get serious,* Pledge Three's voice rung in her head, and the thrilling memory of her every cell dancing at her nearness to the boy in the hospital reminded her just how serious this was.

So she kept her mouth shut.

"Too stupid even to beg," the head of Fenchurch Transportation Systems noted bitterly, ignoring a second firm knock at the door to his Seattle office. He was an extravagant man, rich beyond necessity, with beautiful offices across the country. The convoy had been heading here anyway, all part of its smokescreen of legitimacy, but seeing the curve of enjoyment in Fenchurch's smile as he oversaw her punishment made her certain that he'd flown out to this particular office especially to meet her. She might have been honoured, given different circumstances. She might have been honoured just a few weeks ago, before she'd decided to be something more than one of their pushover pledges. Now she struggled to feel afraid like she should, struggled to revere and admire Fenchurch like she would have before. She'd met fear. "Do you know what we do with defective pledges? What?!" he demanded of the door when the knocker struck again. He straightened; Annabel stayed still, file poised in case he wanted her to continue. He jutted his chin at the door behind Sixty-Four. "Get that."

One of her captors released her wrist and crossed to the door to unlock it. Despite the instinct to slap away the others and curl her injured digits at her chest protectively, she stayed perfectly still, breathing through the continuing hot pain.

"Mr Fenchurch, sir," a weedy male voice, definitely some kind of assistant or secretary, came into
the room. "Ms Kepler is on your private line. She says it's urgent."

He stepped into Sixty-Four's range of vision and extended to Fenchurch a mobile phone, which the boss took and brought straight to his ear. He strode away across the room, speaking quickly to his fellow Host. Annabel sat back in her seat, eyes down. Sixty-Four's absent guard took up position beside her but did not take back her wrist, apparently satisfied with her stillness, and the secretary turned on his heel and left, apparently unconcerned to see a teenager being tortured in his boss's office. So she wasn't just dirt to Hosts and other pledges. Perfectly normal office workers couldn't see worth in her either.

She felt eyes on her, and looked over her shoulder to see that the secretary hadn't entered alone. Pledge Three stood at the door, hands clasped in front of him. He had a range of terrifying expressions, none of them conveying mercy or compassion or surprise or horror, but she half-imagined she saw one or even some of those in his eyes to see what was being done to her. But he didn't move to help. He didn't ask what was going on. He met her gaze with resigned boredom – she'd earned this, after all, and he'd have warned her if she'd asked – and stayed right where he was. She turned away, tuning back into Fenchurch's voice.

"You're sure?" he was asking as he paced. "That's better news that we could have planned for ourselves. But how?" He listened, then his grey-blue eyes shifted back to Sixty-Four. "Actually, I might have the answer to that. Can I call you back?"

He hung up on Petra Kepler and stared for a long moment at the phone's dead screen. He exhaled a refined laugh without opening his mouth, then, very deliberately, placed his phone down on the edge of a bookshelf.

"How'd you do it, pledge?"

She knew he was addressing her. "You'll have to be more specific, sir."

"Pledge," Three barked at her in warning, but Fenchurch laughed again, this time properly, and came back over to them, arms folded loosely.

"It's alright. We saw this attitude during our talk. I thought it was a defect. Idiocy. But Ms Kepler has put another idea in my mind." He nodded at the bowls of water and oil and blood. "Something in the genes. Not such a waste of space after all." He regarded her again, as though seeing her for the first time. "Pride. I didn't even recognise it. In a pledge, of all things. And yet you said nothing while I let Annabel almost take your fingers off."

Her breathing was still too heavy, eight of her fingertips smarting with bright hot pain, and she didn't know what had been said over the phone by Kepler, but she knew her fortunes had turned. She waited him out, not daring to say a word lest she do something to turn them back.

"Ms Kepler's contacts at the FBI have just informed her that the Bureau has finished processing its fingerprinting evidence from the morgue fire in Thayne," Fenchurch explained. "I've been dreading this, of course, waiting to hear how miserably you screwed up. Waiting to hear the damage control plans start rolling in when your stink is found all over that crime scene, connecting us to your careless choices. I mean, it wouldn't be that hard from here to take your fingerprints off, but it wouldn't erase what you left at the scene. Which, as it turns out, was quite extraordinary." He looked up at Three. "The only prints found to indicate an arsonist belong to Fox Mulder, and Kepler's pet at the Bureau just made sure that the best possible person made the official identification."

"Agent Scully," Pledge Three inferred without hesitation, and Fenchurch nodded, smiling wider.
"Laying the groundwork for our plan to divide them. It seems she's sitting on it for now, but can you imagine her reaction? Pledge Sixty-Four, you sly, clever little thing. How did you get Fox Mulder's prints into their search?"

They were... happy with her. This was not an outcome she could have expected when she arrived back at the convoy and weathered Three's discerning look, or when she was called to this office by these two Seattle pledges dressed like security guards. She'd expected to be overlooked, but a morgue fire was too big of a move to go unnoticed. Given that, she'd expected to be flayed – the sandpapering of her fingers was a creative take she hadn't anticipated – and interrogated. She'd expected to be exiled.

Sixty-Four stared up at Fenchurch, this man who should make her tremble, who'd shown her what simple power he had to make her recall how limited she was, but she'd met fear now, and fear was broader, older, gruffer, and didn't need to file little girls' fingers into blood stumps to make itself known. Fear didn't need to announce its power. Fenchurch and the other Hosts did. It was something she'd reflected on for the past two days as the convoy had travelled west, and, staring into the powerful CEO's face, she found herself unshaken. Well, except for unconscious tremors of pain in her useless hands. Didn't count.

She knew things they did not. She had knowledge, and power, they did not. They were not all-powerful. Fear was a man, and he was on her side, his folded business card deep in her pocket like a glowing touchstone only she could sense, and she didn't have to fear them anymore.

It didn't mean she should get stupid – Fenchurch could have her killed or taken apart with a word, if she upset him enough. She was still their property, after all. She was uniquely positioned to finally start taking some control of her own life, and to continue doing that, she needed to think quickly of an answer to his question that would appease him.

Because the truth would not suffice.

"I have my ways," she said, striking for a calm and measured tone. She thought she pulled it off. "He's not as careful as he thinks he is. And I'm... easily unnoticed. Plus," she added, not sure how much embellishment her construction needed to be convincing, unaccustomed to lying on this kind of scale, "I know people."

"What people?"

Damn. "Useful people."

"You aren't going to tell me?" Fenchurch prompted. Annabel, still sitting opposite, looked over at him questioningly, bloody file ready. Bitch. Sixty-Four raised her chin and shook her head determinedly, taking a chance.

"Nope."

Behind her, she heard Three sigh in disappointment, but Fenchurch laughed again.

"A minute ago I thought you were a bundle of defective genes, but now, I think I like you. What do you call this quality, Pledge Three?" He considered for a moment, seemingly waiting for the other man's input. "Spark? Spunk? A certain strain of reckless pride." He shrugged, unable to retrieve the word from his Host's memory. He smiled again at Sixty-Four. "You can keep your secrets, little girl, as long as you keep surprising me like this. Your creative solution in Thayne cost us a dead pledge but looks to have bought us much more. Annabel," he redirected sharply, making the prettier pledge jump, startled. She lived in fear, Sixty-Four realised, relegated to filing nails and
picking up after a psychopath and sometimes having to hurt other people for him in this most ridiculous way. She felt slightly bad for mentally calling her a bitch, knowing in her heart of hearts that Annabel didn't have another choice – that to refuse would cost her more than her own fingertips. "A bottle of blue, please."

The manicurist stood demurely and placed her nail file down on the tabletop. Grimacing, Sixty-Four could see scraps of her skin on its edge. Gross. Her fingers stung with horrific recent memory. Annabel went to the filing cabinet in the other corner.

"You were in Thayne longer than any of the rest of your team, Pledge Sixty-Four," Fenchurch noted, watching Annabel as she opened the cabinet and dug inside. "Do you have anything else to report that we should know about?"

Other than the existence of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully's son, the magical child the whole Worldwide Family of Hosts had been searching for since their arrival in 2012? "No, sir. The town is a dead end."

"Hmm." Fenchurch accepted a small glass bottle from Annabel and held it up to the light for the others to see. "Do you know what this is, little pledge?" Sixty-Four shook her head. "No, I wouldn't suppose you do. They don't make this in your lab truck. Consider it a thank you gift." He jerked his head impatiently at the security guard pledges and they moved away from her. He offered the tiny bottle, smaller than a thumb; it was half-filled with a thick, pale bluish liquid. "This should be enough to soothe those fingers and grow back the skin."

Sixty-Four's left hand had the most unharmed fingers, a grand total of two, and she raised it to accept the bottle. Her ring and pinky fingers wrapped around the cold glass, the rest of her hand trembly with throbbing pain and recent acute trauma. Her fingers of both hands twitched uncontrollably. This was what they had done to her, no apology, just a vial of some soother to make it all better. *We won't always be pledges.*

"Can I go?"

Fenchurch laughed again. "Avoid failing us like you and your team did posing as CDC agents at the morgue, and you'll go many places, pledge."

Sixty-Four hauled herself to her feet and turned silently for the door. Three was waiting for her, and fell into step with her as they departed the room. Her hands still shook; her fingers ran with watery blood.

Watered down, washed out. That was what Fenchurch had said. Maybe something *is* lost when someone dies, and maybe that can't be retrieved. Maybe she could never be that girl she was before. But she was something more now, something more than a runaway, something more than an unwanted child, something more than the least of a Family of pledges. She was an ally. She had kept a secret worth keeping, protected a child in a way no one had protected her, and she *had not broken*. Her hands trembled before her, held stiff and useless like claws in front of her chest as she and Three strode the empty Saturday halls back to the elevator, but they were proof. Proof that she had held strong. Like Fox would. Like Skinner would.

She couldn't remember ever feeling stronger, and that thought kept her head up all the way down the silent elevator ride and across the foyer and into Three's waiting car.

"What did you really do?" he asked quietly as he leaned across her to buckle her seatbelt for her, an uncharacteristically kind act. She shrugged against the seat.
"Nothing I regret," she answered staunchly. He withdrew to lean on her car door, and she looked up at him, squinting a little with the sunlight behind him. "Don't worry, none of it's going to come back on you. I didn't tell him that you knew I'd gone, or that you spoke to me when I did it. He thinks I acted totally on my own."

"You did act on your own." She waited for him to press her, but to her surprise he took a different track. "Do you want some help opening that bottle?"

She looked down at it, clutched in her palm by two fingers, thin blood making her grip sticky. Her hands still shook, but the pain was ebbing to something dull and steady. She shook her head.

"I can wait."

Pledge Three sighed and dug his hand into his pocket. At first she thought it was habitual, reaching for cigarettes he no longer relied on, but he withdrew a book of matches.

"Not mine," he pointed out, and she recognised the box. She'd left them in the car. "Not a one, missing, either."

He knew. He knew what she hadn't been able to say in Fenchurch's office. She shrugged again, looking away and out the front window of the car.

"As I said upstairs, I have my ways."

He nodded slowly. "I wouldn't have sent you here today if I'd know this would happen to you."

"Yes, you would." Sixty-Four kept the biting edge out of her voice; she didn't feel angry about it, it was just fact. "I earned it. But," she held out her ruined hands to illustrate her point, and saw his dark eyes – eyes she'd loved in other faces, in other lives, before any of those lives were cut short, before any of this – follow, regretful to see her injured, almost like he cared, "contrary to how it might appear, I know what I'm doing."

His cold, sarcastic smile in return firmly brought her back to reality on that last thought about his feelings toward her.

"Well, if you've learned the word 'contrary' and you say you know what you're doing, you must be right."
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, though if I did I'd take very good care of them.

Author's Notes: Hi all! Well, all those who still put up with my slow updates. I hope this early Halloween flashback breakup angstfest brings some heart and joy to your day. Thanks to those who left a review of the last chapter and for your lovely words of encouragement! And thanks to everyone who reads :)

17th January, 2013

The writing had always been on the wall, maybe since the first time she stepped into the basement office and shook his hand. In that moment, he'd both anticipated it and wondered how he might accelerate the inevitable – how quickly could he irritate, scare or otherwise deter the Bureau's handpicked goody-two-shoes?

He was glad now to have been so unsuccessful, to have sold her so far short, but ignoring the writing, even seeming to defy it for a blink or a lifetime or however long had passed, had not scrubbed the wall clean. The writing was still there, crisp like fresh ink in every argument, in every frustrated sigh, in every missed dinner, in every relieved smile and demand of "Where have you been?! I was worried." He saw it between the lines of blog posts he was still reading at 4am while she slept in the next room; he saw it in the barcodes of boarding passes as he took his seat on a last-minute whirlwind flight he'd forgotten to tell her about; he saw it in the hours she clocked up on her payslip.

Like all the best improbable scenarios, he wanted to believe. He was determined to believe that the writing and the wall could be beaten. Whenever he caught it out of the corner of his eye, which was less often than it should have been, in honesty – he definitely missed a lot of the wall's appearances, too distracted – he tried to jump on the opportunity to fight the inevitable.

To call home.

To switch off the computer and go to bed.

To make dinner.

And maybe those efforts were what staved it off, but retrospect gave him a brutal new perspective of his own flaws and the part they'd always played. His forgetfulness. His obsessive drive. His fundamental capacity to take her for granted.

So there was no shock for him when he saw the suitcase at the door and determined resignation in dry blue eyes.

He could have begged. Maybe he should have. But he'd known her for so long, pushed her so far, that he knew when not to bother, and he knew there was no winning this round. It had already been fought in the days, hours, minutes that he'd not been present, not been where he should have been,
and nobody had won.

She swallowed and straightened when he stepped out of the bathroom, still towelling his hair. He froze, not because he was shocked but because why now, and he urgently thought through recent events to try and pinpoint the triggering moment. He'd forgotten to load the dishwasher, again. He'd spent money without asking her first, trying to get stolen military satellite images from a shady source he was sure she'd rather not know about. He'd forgotten to come to bed last night. He'd wasted the last three years of her life chasing after a 2012 conspiracy he was absolutely certain of that had, on the big night, turned out to be a total fizzer, and since then he'd been distant, moody, difficult, tense, frustrated, directionless.

So, nothing out of the ordinary.

Which meant, or at least so he deduced, that she'd finally worked out what he'd known all along: she was much too good for his shit, and she was done with it.

He was lucky to have had the years he'd gotten. He dropped his towel on the back of his armchair and she tightened her hand on the extended handle of her suitcase. He wondered vaguely what she'd decided to pack and what she'd decided to abandon, since less than half of her things could fit inside that. Starting over, clean and free. Like she deserved.

Later he'd wonder if she wanted him to beg, wanted him to plead, but he knew in the moment it wasn't going to stop her leaving so he chose to skip to the next line: "Where will you go?"

Deep eyes he would have comfortably looked into for the rest of his life briefly reflected her sharp hurt, then cooled instantly, and he knew it was the wrong thing to say. She shifted a little closer to the suitcase, like it was structural in keeping her upright.

"My mom's, to start with," she answered, very steadily, too steadily. She'd practised this monotone. This had been a long time coming. Not surprising. Her mouth twitched very slightly when she tried to close her lips, when she tried to finish speaking, but the rest of the words wanted to come. Conflicted, not wanting to elaborate but feeling somehow compelled, she added, "Then back to DC somewhere, I suppose."

Unable to break the habit of being clear and honest with him? Or just needing to be clear and honest in that she was leaving for real, and this was no weekend stay at her mother's? Either way, could she be any more carelessly hurtful?

"That'll shorten the commute," he offered emotionlessly. In his ears, over the sound of blood erratically rushing through their vessels, his voice sounded alien, not his. It was the voice of someone distant and uninvested, someone who didn't care for the opinion or favour of the person they were speaking to. That was the furthest possible place from the truth – that his chest hurt with every breath that brought him closer to the inevitable, that his brain was on fire running in circles trying to find a solution, that his throat was tight with unspoken words of anger and regret. But none of this was conveyed in the voice he heard, and none of this was conveyed to the face he had loved for so many of his years when she nodded slowly, resignedly.

"I suppose," she said again. She watched him for a few moments in silence, and he held her gaze, almost in challenge. What was she waiting for? For him to dissolve and break? No, he wasn't going to let her see that. Part of him didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

The other part didn't want to sway her resolve. She deserved to do this. It would be easier if it was clean. If he begged… if he cried, made her see how much he adored her, how much he needed her… if he won her back in this moment, it would be a mistake. He would only lose her again
tomorrow, next week, next year, when he fucked up again.

No. He held her gaze, waiting her out, no expression to let her see into the cracks that were opening up inside him, no words to give away the voices that were screaming around his head. Hers was the loudest. *You should have seen this coming. You could have changed your patterns of behaviour at any time. You knew what you had and now it's walking out.*

"I, uh, I made a casserole," she said awkwardly, dropping her gaze. "To get you through the next couple of nights. It's in the fridge."

She'd been very prepared. He tried not to let that sting. It didn't, really; just reverberated against his hollowed heart, another dull throb to join the dull throb of his heartbeat.

"You don't think I can cook for myself?" It came out like an accusation, colder than he meant. Her eyes came back up to his.

"I know you can't," she replied calmly, and he allowed himself a small smile, because no one had ever known him better, no one had ever been this good for him and he'd ruined it. Even now he was letting it slide straight through his fingers. He closed his fist as though it could make a difference now, and felt his smile turn icy. Frozen and brittle, because if he didn't freeze it, it would melt down his face to the floor where he would join it.

"Well, I guess I'll have to learn," he responded in the same calm tone. Her lips thinned visibly, guilted, and while he so badly wanted her to change her mind right now he also so badly wanted her to stand her ground. Be the strong woman he knew she was. Get what she was owed after all these years, and strike back at the narcissistic, self-loathing creature she'd selflessly shackled herself to out of misplaced love and loyalty. He swallowed. It hurt. *Keep it professional.* "I'll forward your mail to Maggie's, then?"

She nodded quickly, following his lead back to the cool professionalism that would characterise their relationship for years to come. "Yes, please." She looked around the house, sucking her lower lip into her mouth as she tried to decide how to say the next bit. "I left everything I have so far on Harris on the kitchen table. I hope... I hope you find what you're looking for."

*On your own.* It was implicit, underneath her words, and he felt his cheeks redden with shame and realisation. This time, she wasn't going with him chasing shadows and unexplained flashes in the night. Finally, he'd burnt her out, and that night was the turning point. Harris, one of his contacts, had been instrumental in helping him pin down Billings, Montana, as a likely site of the invasion he'd spent so many years anticipating, but since December, he'd gone silent. No one from the conspiracy forum circuit seemed to know what had happened to him.

And, eyes dull and voice weary, his FBI girlfriend had agreed to run down some leads at work for him. If he'd been paying attention, he'd have seen that writing again, neon-bright – the same old wall, with the same message he'd been outrunning since day one in the basement.

*I hope you find what you're looking for.* He smiled again, brittle and forced again. He said, "Yeah, me too," instead of "I don't need to look. I've already got it," and shoved his hands into his pockets so he couldn't extend them to her. He kept his feet planted firmly. He watched her face, loving every curve and every line, and closed his hands into fists inside his pockets in an inner fight against the desire to cup her face with his palms and kiss her and tell her... tell her what? To stay? To put up with more? He wished he could ask that, and promise in return that he would make the changes in himself that he wanted to make to deserve her, but if he could have made those changes he would have. No. He'd done this to them. Later, later he could be mad with her, blame her for leaving him when he still needed her, believe that she played a part in breaking them or that she
was weak and let him down, but right now, in the sobering clarity of the moment of her departure, he knew the whole truth. This was his own fault.

He had done this, and he deserved the clawing ache in his chest, and she deserved all the wide world that waited for her outside that door, even if that truth made him want to cry.

He cleared his throat. "So, uh, you said 'so far' with Harris…?"

"I'm still waiting on one contact to get back to me," she agreed, normality relaxing her voice. It gave him a little spark of optimism. They made good partners, worked superbly together, and if this was all they had left when the romance and sex and love was stripped back, well, it was sure as shit better than what most people were left with. "I'll make sure I pass on whatever he tells me. Should I… post it to you? Would that be best?"

The optimism died in his stomach, and he felt himself deflate. He was lying to himself. Their working relationship had always been something to brag about, but in actual fact, if that was what was left over when their relationship ended – which was mere minutes away, waiting to be marked by the second she walked out that door, he was only prolonging the inevitable here – then it would not be good enough at all. More than her brilliant mind at work, more than her excellent body in his bed, more than her hand in his, what he loved most about her was her friendship. He could do without everything else. Christ, he'd done without the sex for months now, without realising, caught up with his work and frustrations of the mind. The real loss he stood to experience was the loss of his best friend, the soul he trusted above any others, the heart who knew his, the person who had stood at his side and had his back and pulled him out of more trouble over the years than anyone but a best friend could be expected to put up with.

His best friend was leaving, asking whether she could contact him via post from now on.

He hadn't just burnt his lover; he'd unwritten his deepest friendship. How long before he unwrote himself?

"Whatever you think's best," he answered coolly. "Should I do the same if I find work I think is more yours than mine?"

"My phone number won't change," she said, quite gently, quite kindly, and he wanted to rekindle that sparkle of optimism but he didn't dare. He smiled wryly at her.

"You know they're tapping that line."

Her restrained sigh was one of exaggerated patience with his paranoia, one of her least favourite of his qualities. "They're not tapping my phone. You can call me whenever. You know I'll answer."

"Do I?" He couldn't help a deliberate glance down at her heavy-looking suitcase, the elephant in the room both had managed to avoid directly addressing. Her hand tightened again on the handle and her expression closed further. Eyes sharpening. Mouth thinning. The longer they stood here, the further away he drove her, and neither was even moving.

"I'm telling you I will," she said steadily, without warmth, "if it ever occurs to you to call."

Ouch. His surgeon cut through the pretence with medical precision and shone her harsh penlight straight at the malignant mass of brutal truth at the heart of this breakdown, and he felt the slice like it was made with a real knife.

"Neither will mine," he said finally, when he was certain his legs weren't going to give out beneath him. It had just struck him that this was really happening. She was really going. After all this time,
this was happening. "My number."

She laughed, surprised. "Mulder, your phone number always changes."

"Not this one." He'd been prepared, too. Knowing this was coming. He unrooted his feet and made himself walk towards her, hoping his gait looked natural and comfortable, two things he felt anything but. "Give me your phone."

She was reluctant but produced her cell from inside her jacket and placed it without question in his hand when he stopped in front of her. He tried not to wonder whether he'd chosen an appropriate distance for exes. That's what they were about to be. He tried further not to wonder whether he would always notice how pliant she was with him, how her blind trust in him had not faded, how normal it still seemed despite their in-process breakup for her to do as he asked. Would that change next time he saw her? Would she question him where she hadn't before, be wary of him, refuse where once she would have followed without thought? Would he know her like he did in this moment?

Did he know her in this moment like he did in moments before? His Scully had never left him. He raised his eyes from her phone as he worked to survey her quickly. He saw the writing on the wall in the sad, tired lines around her eyes, in the red at their edges, and he saw the woman he'd loved and wanted and breathed for so damn long that he didn't even know how a future without her looked. He wanted to touch her hair and say this was a mistake; he wanted run his fingers across her lips and say he was sorry; he wanted stroke her cheek and promise that she'd adequately scared him and didn't need to go, that things could be different, he could change. Maybe it could be true. With her help maybe he could make it true.

But he handed her back the phone and let his heart crumple a little more at the sight of her wry smile to see the entry into her address book. "M. F. Luder," she read. She looked up at him sceptically, normalcy restored for a brief flicker that he cherished while it lasted. "Excellent cover. No one will ever guess that one."

"If you think of a better one, change it." He swallowed, wanting to prolong the normal, wanting to stretch out the gentle and the playful and the love for as long as he was allowed. "That number won't get recycled. That phone will always be charged up, always be switched on." He swallowed again. "For you."

It swayed her, he could tell, made the writing on the wall fade to the periphery. He saw her expressive blue eyes fill with regret and apology and saw her mouth open, struggling for words to say amidst her inner conflict. He knew her in this moment, he knew her fully. Her mind was saying go. Her heart was tugging her against all logic, against all sense, back to him, and pushing her to stay. God, he wanted her to listen to that voice, like she had every other day of their lives together.

"Won't… won't it be trackable?" she asked, shaking her head to get some clarity. Her hair, which he'd always loved, so vibrant, fanned at the motion, catching morning light from the windows. He'd remember that in the days to come, sitting here drunk and delirious and ruined with this one memory of her hair reflecting red sunlight. "Isn't that why you burn through all the others and jump between numbers?"

Impulsively he touched her hair. She flinched; it was unexpected. He let the strands fall between his fingers. He might not get another chance to feel its softness, its familiar texture, and he wished he could take back every opportunity he'd missed to touch it.

"No one else has this number," he answered. "I haven't given it to anyone, so no one can track it." Heart thudding, probably pumping blood straight out of the holes they'd cut in the organ with this
conversation, he shifted his fingers to her mouth. He felt her sharp intake of breath, waited for her to pull away, but she didn't. Best to say it now, then, before he lost his nerve. "If you ever need anything, I'll answer. I'll…"

*I'll be there.* But he couldn't say it. The words got stuck, his concentration trapped in the overwhelming sensory overload of her. The softness of her lips under the pads of his fingers. The familiar smell of her skin and clothes and hair. The brightness of her beautiful eyes, exactly as sad as he knew his must be. They had invested so much into this, and now… He swallowed again. He heard it, that and her shallow breaths. Their age-old chemistry mesmerised him and he could tell it was the same for her. It would have been no effort to lower his mouth to hers, to start that fire, to wrap his arms around her and lift her, to run his hands through her hair and feel hers in his, to push her against the wall and get his hands under her clothes, to get them off, to unzip his…

Instead, he brushed his fingers from her mouth to her cheek. His body fought every muscle twitch of his exercise in restraint.

"I know," she said finally, and he knew she did, and that understanding hurt even more than relinquishing what would have been excellent sex. She knew he would be there whenever she needed it, she knew what she was to him, she knew his devotion was incapable of compromise or degradation and that he would be ever loyal to her… and she was leaving anyway.

She was leaving.

And she wasn't going to call, because she had made up her mind in all those moments he'd made it up for her. The phone calls he hadn't made, the seduction attempts he'd dismissed because he was too focused, the irritable words he'd spoken when he was frustrated with his work and not with her. She wasn't going to call. Why would she want to?

"And, you know, if you ever need help with a case," he added, casually, dropping his hand and hoping it would take the magnetic tension with it. She nodded, channelling professionalism again.

"Right. Of course. Well, hopefully I won't need you for that. I'm not working the X-Files, remember, just Counterterrorism." She looked at him oddly. "I'm done."

*I'm done.* Not just with him, but with what they'd worked on together. That shocked him more than the fact that he was leaving him. "But… all our work…"

"Your work now," she said, looking much less sad about this, more certain. "I'm done with it. No more dead-end conspiracies and skygazing and inexplicable phenomena."

"It was never about that," he argued, annoyed now. Annoyed that she could whittle it down to such meaningless base elements. "Fighting for the truth, Scully, shining a light on what men with power will do with secrets they shouldn't have and making visible the people they hurt along the way."

"That's what you're upset about," she noted, cold again. "That I'm leaving the work, not that I'm leaving you."

*I'm leaving you.* There, the words, out in the room for them both to cringe at, peeled straight from the wall. He felt a surge of shame and rage.

"Yes!" he fumed, though there was so much more he should have said to better detail the depth of his brokenness. "That's what we stand for."

"That's what we *stood* for," she corrected, and he remembered the suitcase at her side. "I can't do it anymore, Mulder. From now on I stand for fighting evil that can be beaten. Don't fight me on it,
Mulder," she interrupted him when he tried to disagree. "I have already given it everything I had, and it's still not done." She left the details unsaid but he heard them. Her sister. A daughter she'd not been given the chance to know. Their son. Twenty years of her life. And him, lost to her somewhere along the way, too caught up in the work to be what she deserved. "I'm done."

He stood there, rocked to his core. He really was alone. He looked from the suitcase to her face and couldn't help the cold smile that stretched, unforgiving, across his lips. "You're giving up."

It hurt her, he could tell. But she shook her head and muttered, "Whatever. It was a good fight but it's over and it's not having me." She hoisted the heavy-looking suitcase to turn it around. "I should go."

"Do you want me to carry that to the car for you?" he asked, though once he would have taken it without question. He extended a hand, hating that he was questioning his own behaviour around her already, but she raised hers to stop him.

"No. I want to do it myself. Thank you." She opened the door and took a deep, unsteady breath. "Good luck, Mulder. Take care of yourself."

Don't leave. Stay. Take care of me. Love me. I love you. I'm sorry. Please. I need you. You're everything. I don't know who I am without you. I can change. I can be better. I can take us back to better times. Just don't go.

All the best option words did not come through, and he said only, "Yeah. Sure," and she nodded resolutely, a transaction completed, and turned away to leave.

To leave.

"Scully." His voice made her stop and look back. Was that sparkle in her eye the beginnings of tears? "You… You too. Take care."

She nodded again, but with the traces of that soft smile of hers this time, and he knew it was the right thing to say. Permission to go and find herself. A clean break, on good terms, because that was the least of what they deserved.

"Thank you," she murmured, and he knew she understood.

"Just… one more thing," he made himself say, though it came out uneven, ragged. "I know, after this minute ends, you won't be with me anymore." It cut deep to say aloud. He wanted to stop, but there was something he needed to hear, and he needed to bleed first to be allowed to ask it. "I know. But…" He didn't even know how to phrase it, or whether she would get what he was asking. Her glistening eyes held him in their longing gaze while he struggled, and god, he loved her. How could this be ending? "But even if you aren't with me, are you still… with me?"

It made no sense. He wasn't certain even he knew what he had just asked, except that he knew it was a big ask and he might not like the answer. Was she still on his side, when push came to shove? Was she still going to keep his every secret, the lockbox of trustworthiness he'd fallen in love with? Did she still have his back when it counted, as only best friends do? Did she still believe in him? She stared at him, processing, struggling, halfway out the door. Halfway gone.

But she stepped back inside. She left her suitcase on the porch and came back in. She raised her hands to her neck and felt for something under her hair. She stopped right in front of him and reclasped her necklace, then looked up at him.

He felt twenty years of need and want and love and trust and friendship and wholeness in the hold
of her gaze, and felt the equivalent emptiness waiting just beneath it, ready to crush him, ready to end him when she ended them. She took his hand, squeezed it gently, and coiled the chain in his palm. She closed his fingers over the necklace. The gold was still warm from her body heat.

Her voice was cracked and loaded when she spoke.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

She left quickly after that, eager not to let him see the tears as they fell though how could he miss that, and before he could get a handle on the moment it was over and the door was closing behind her, and her car was starting and she was gone, she was gone, and he was still standing where she'd left him.

Drawing a ragged breath before his own tears spilled, he opened his hand. There in his palm was the golden crucifix Maggie had given her daughter as a girl, the delicate gold chain he'd found when she was abducted by Duane Barry and again when she'd been stolen away to Antarctica. Both times he'd kept it close while she was missing, while he worked tirelessly to find a way to bring her back into his life. Both times he'd found her and given it back and their lives together had resumed.

Slowly, heavily, he dropped into his armchair, ignoring the damp towel that tumbled onto his shoulder. He stared at the little ray of hope she'd left him through glassy wet eyes. He wondered how deeply he could read into this. He raised his eyes to the blank wall opposite him and felt the hollowness of his loss and wondered whether the tiny cross could defy the truth he'd been avoiding for two decades.

The writing had been on the wall since the first moment. *She was always going to leave.*

The cross said something else, a message he'd listened to before only in the darkest moments of peril but which should have been his life's mantra. *She can be found but she has to be earned.*

He closed his hand over the cross, heart aching, and let the tears come.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, nor do I profit from the frustrated tears of my readers as they wait endless months for new content.

Author's Notes: MERRY BELATED CHRISTMAS, SHIPPERS! I wanted this done for you by Christmas but at the very least it's here before New Year's. I have been travelling Europe with my family, ticking off bucket list items like GETTING SNOWED ON for the very first time :') and since getting back I have been working hardcore on my next book, which will hopefully be finished next month, in time for editing. Yay? Then back to uni in Feb to continue with my PhD now that it's been approved. As a future Doctor of X-Files Fanfic (okay that's not going to be the degree title but yes, the topic got approved) I know I ought to be doing more to maintain this fic. Adding it to my list of resolutions!

This chapter is Colt's POV and features a sequence at an FBI gun range. Apologies in advance for the numerous misrepresentations some of my gun-competent readers will raise an eyebrow at. I have spent the past few days attracting anti-terror agencies' attention as only a fanfic writer can, watching countless YouTube videos on gun use and Google-mapping the FBI training academy to work out where their firing range is situated by comparing with photos on their official website. Amazing what you can piece together, huh? As always I aim for authenticity so if you're gun-competent and something sticks out as NO WAY THAT'S NOWHERE NEAR HOW IT GOES DOWN SOLIA JEEZ HAVE YOU NEVER HELD A GUN BEFORE then by all means let me know (amidst saying a few nice things, of course). Also, interested to hear everyone's thoughts on the potential of a secondary pairing?

Thank you to my wonderful readers for still following this story, and especially to those who take the time to leave a comment. Enjoy this late Christmas gift, and Happy New Year to all.

Who invented alarm clocks and were they publicly executed? History is littered with people killed for lesser crimes.

Silencing his, Colt stretched out, unwilling to get out of bed just yet to face Monday. He'd lived his life by the alarm clock, as a soldier and before that as a child in a very busy and tightly run household, and he wasn't usually someone to avoid the morning, but today the thinking that came with morning was putting him off.

Nana's letter. Scully's mysterious past. And general work stuff, like the impossibly complex investigation he'd committed himself to and leveraged yet another favour out of his military past for.

He looked up at his ceiling, dim early sunlight filtering through his window to illuminate the pale stains where his glow-in-the-dark stars used to be adhered to the paint. At fourteen he'd climbed on a chair to pick them all off quick smart the first time he'd had a girl over who'd commented, "How cute! I used to have those too!" but he hadn't been careful about tearing them down. Nana had
obligingly painted over the tears but in the right light, he could still see the shapes underneath.

A great metaphor for life right now, he reflected dully, finally sitting upright. People thought that by painting over the past it was going away, but in the right light, it was perfectly obvious to anyone looking.

Pay attention, Nana. Pay attention, Agent Scully.

He got ready for his shower and headed down the hall for the bathroom, pausing outside Nana's bedroom. Inside, he could hear her quiet, even breaths as she continued to sleep. As a little boy he'd done this a lot after a couple of other children at school, shocked that he didn't have a mom but instead had a Val and a nana, informed him that this was quite an unusual arrangement and that nanas had a tendency to die because they were already so old. It had drawn his attention to the number of kids who came into school upset, or missed a few days, when a grandparent died. It started to seem like it was every few months. Worried sick about his own grandparents, and especially about Nana, he'd taken to checking in on her like this, camping outside her room to listen to the proof of her aliveness, and the habit had stuck, becoming his go-to whenever he felt unsettled or anxious. He'd laid off a bit after Toni had tripped over him in the middle of the night on her way to the toilet and had whisperingly sent him back to bed where he was not a hazard. After she'd washed her hands she'd come back and sat with him and explained that the thing about Nana was that she wasn't just a nana, she was also a mom – hers and Luci's mom, and Val's too – and with the twins still in high school, Nana was simply too young to be dying like those other people's grandparents. They were proper old, Toni explained, whereas Nana was actually too young to even be a nana, and Warren was just especially lucky.

That was then. Nana was no longer too young to be a nana, with seven more grandchildren from her grown-up twins. Friday's letter had brought that back into startling relief for him.

Nana had been his world, through school, through Afghanistan, through breakups with girlfriends and fallouts with friends. Nana was home. He didn't know what life would look like without her. And she seemed determined that he not think on it.

"Oh, that's nothing, darling," she'd dismissed after an awkward beat when he brought up the letter by force after ten minutes of her hijacking the conversation with "Warren, what happened?!" Broaching the topic on Saturday morning, the first time he'd seen her since his and Harlow's showdown with the alley boys in Kentucky, when his bruising was at its maximum visibility, had not been ideal. "It'll be a call to come in for a mole check, something like that. You know what doctors are like. I fall into those risk brackets now."

She smiled reassuringly, a paint job over glow-in-the-dark stars – he hadn't missed the conflicted flash of shock that had passed over her face first. Colt felt reasonably positive that mole checks were conducted by lower echelons of the medical profession than cancer doctors in massive hospitals, but couldn't get the topic back once she'd brushed it aside. Nana spent the whole weekend fussing over him, producing ice packs for his lip and black eye that no longer needed ice, tutting at his scraped temple, sending the other grandchildren away when they tried to climb him and thrust toys in his face, patting his arm lovingly. It was made worse by the fact that she found his jacket before he'd worked up the courage to ask her to mend it.

"What's this?! Were you shot?!"

She'd patted him down hurriedly, looking for still-bleeding bullet holes in his torso while Aunt Luci watched on with a smirk over her coffee cup and asked innocently, "Is that blood there, Ma? On his shoulder? Or under his elbow? No, other side…"
"Shut it, Luce," Colt had to say when Nana went into a worried tizz, and he had to come more or less clean about the misfire he'd left out of the original telling. "It was an accident, and it's all been written up. The gun was knocked out of my hand, and Natalie's glasses had been knocked out of her reach—"

"Natalie?" Luci repeated with too much emphasis to be anything but provocative. In the background her daughters shrieked at each other from the TV room where they were meant to be playing a boardgame, and their brother Lachlan shouted for them to shut up, but nobody reacted to the sounds of family harmony. "Now there's a Dana and a Natalie."

"Agent Harlow," Colt corrected, but both his aunt and grandmother were redirected, and he put up with the annoying topic only because it mostly took the focus off the shooting. Nana got out her sewing kit and sat down with her daughter to interrogate him.

"I like her already," Luci teased. "Saving the day by almost shooting the boy. My kind of girl. When do we get to meet her?"

"You don't," Colt replied, crossing the room to kiss Nana's hair when she got started fixing his jacket. "Thanks, Nana. Jeremy," he called, getting the hell out of there. His youngest cousin reappeared at the door he'd been hiding behind, grinning hopefully. "Where's this kite?"

Now it was Monday, and Colt could see the kite tangled regretfully in the top of the big tree in the backyard from the driveway. He threw his briefcase through the window and leaned on the roof of his car to buy himself an extra minute before having to go, staring at Jeremy's kite. He'd have to get up there at some point and get it down. Maybe tomorrow. It wasn't like Nana could climb trees anymore, or like his grandfather was around enough to be relied upon for such tasks. Colt was the man of the house in that regard now. He'd probably welcome the distraction.

Because while he trusted his grandmother with his life, his whole soul, he was realising that he did not trust her to tell him the truth if she thought it might scare him. Maybe there was really nothing wrong, maybe she was fine, but there was no way of knowing, and that was even scarier. And Agent Scully, he'd realised in the same space of time, was no different. Like Nana, she cared about him – he knew it, and appreciated it – and like Nana, he trusted her immensely. She had shown at the beginning of their friendship that she would happily shield him from truths she thought would be challenging to accept, and while he'd thought they were crossing this bridge, he'd seen in her face on Friday that they weren't there yet.

Yes, they had secrets from each other. Yes, that was okay. But this felt different.

The office was quiet when he arrived at his desk. There were a few other agents in, but other than a nod or brief word of acknowledgement, there was no interaction to be had, and no Agent Scully. He sat down behind his computer and looked warily at its blank screen. It was impossible to forget the brief look of shock and conflict on her face when she'd seen the photograph brought up by the fingerprint recognition program. Fox Mulder. The name was striking, unusually memorable, and Colt felt uneasy about it. It came up at all the weirdest moments. It was on the dislodged door plate they'd found to the basement office, which he and Harlow had stepped over the first time they met and which they'd picked up out of the dust only minutes before this computer monitor told them he was the suspect for the arson in Wyoming. It had been dropped by Skinner the first time he'd sat in the assistant director's office, and even then, Colt had felt sure he'd seen it somewhere before.

Someone Scully used to work with, years ago, she'd said, but he still felt odd about it. It'd hung over him all weekend, through his 'secret military contact' meeting as Harlow might put it, while he laid awake at night, while he flew Jeremy's kite with him, even as he obligingly tried on his
mended coat for Nana. He couldn't escape a deep sense that he was missing something important, something even Harlow seemed in on. Fox Mulder, renegade, anarchist, arsonist? Agent Scully's reaction, so similar to Nana's, was hard to shake.

Of course he trusted her. Of course he knew she was handling it, like she said she would. But he was an investigator too, and it was, at minimum, prudent to conduct a background check.

Colt glanced around the office. No one was paying any attention to him. He switched on the computer and was about to log in, but paused with his fingers above the keyboard, remembering to use her log-in details instead of his own. Totally against Bureau policy, but her clearance was higher and it kept his own search history clean of anything that was being watched, as she preferred.

He brought up a new search of the database. Fox Mulder. Thousands of results, some of them restricted, even at Agent Scully's clearance level. Cases worked, reports, budget documents, all dating back decades as Colt scrolled, not knowing what he was looking for. The page continued to load, and then crapped out, the window collapsing and an error message springing up. Too much information for this early on a Monday, perhaps, even for software. Colt tried again, this time going to employee search.

Badge number:

He hadn't been prepared for this, but glanced down, biting his lip and thinking. He'd seen the summarised FBI profile come up on this same screen on Friday afternoon. He brought his hands back to the keyboard and let his fingers flow. Words blurred in his memory but a number sequence jumped out clear as day.

JTT 047101111

He hit enter and the search engine loaded a single option, which he selected. Fox Mulder. The same profile photo filled the top left corner of the screen, and a full, or fuller, set of stats came up with it. Colt's eyes moved haphazardly across the screen, taking in information out of order, still unsure what he expected to find. Years of active duty. Departments worked. Qualifications. Disabled links to case load - another scrubbed profile? Height. Date of birth.

Colt felt his attention catch on that detail. Thirteenth of October. Ten-thirteen. Agent Scully's briefcase code.

Coincidence?

He was startled by the vibration of his phone in his pocket, and withdrew it to see his partner's name onscreen as the caller.

"Speak of the devil," he muttered, minimising the search and answering the call. "Morning, ma'am."

"Good morning, Agent Colt," she answered with her usual and unique brand of cool warmth. He thought she sounded fresher than she had on Friday when he'd last seen her, fragile and clearly shaken by the 'personal' case in Wyoming. His eyes drifted unwillingly back to the blank-again screen where the offending date of birth was burned into his memory. "Are you at the office?"

"I have my feet up on your chair," he confirmed, and she snorted once, lightly, because they both knew he was much too refined to ever dare. Forget cancer scares and mole checks, Nana would die of shame.
"Right. I wanted to check in, since I probably won't see you today. I've got some errands to run this morning and I remembered you were meeting Dr Harlow today at the range. What time is that?"

"About eleven," Colt said with an automatic but unnecessary glance at his watch. "Did the two of you get through all your science on Saturday?"

"We did, and we got some interesting, if not particularly surprising, results," Scully agreed reluctantly. He settled back in his seat, always preferring to feel properly grounded before taking on any more information related to their out-of-this-world case. "The most compelling was the confirmation that Morris Bletchley's bone marrow is only three or four years old, which matches our best estimates of the age of his skin's scarring and is also consistent with the lack of wear to the internal organs. It's given us a hypothesis-in-progress that I'd really rather not admit to out loud. But what about you?" Agent Scully prompted while he tried to process her report. "I got your message."

Oh, yes. She'd texted him late Saturday. *Agent Harlow is worried you're dead in a ditch somewhere. Confirming I'm right to tell her you're fine.* He'd replied that he was and asked if she wanted a call to go over what he'd learned, but she said unless it was urgent, she could wait until Monday. He gathered she had enough on her plate, emotionally recovering from whatever had hit her hard in Wyoming.

"My contact needed some convincing," Colt admitted, shifting his briefcase with his foot. It would feel good to transfer the documents he'd been given to her briefcase, combination ten-thirteen, and add them to their slowly growing case file. Plus it always felt better to pass the responsibility of safeguarding those things onto her. "Thankfully I had a few favours banked, though I might be getting thin on them by now. Long story short, I got what we need."

"Fenchurch's defence contract?"

"It's vague," Colt warned her, unable to dispel the flicker of pride in himself to hear her exhalation of disbelief. "I couldn't get the contract, per se, if a physical copy even exists, but I have the transport schedule, with projected dates, and a sample shipping manifest, as part of an email memo from one Annabel Schmidt on behalf of the office of Mr Luther Fenchurch, CEO."

"And do we have a reply email or something accepting those terms?" Agent Scully asked, cautiously hopeful. "Even if it's vague, with some kind of confirmation…"

"We can wrangle ourselves a search warrant," Colt finished for her, knowing where she was leading. "No, but almost as good: the memo refers to terms agreed upon previously, and these attachments are updated for the new year. A continuation of business already ongoing."

"Agent Colt, you're worth your weight in gold," his partner expressed in gracious amazement. "I want to ask how, but I won't. Just tell me your source is legitimate and we can use this and I'll believe you."

"My source is legitimate and we can use this," Colt promised. He lightly kicked the briefcase again and looked around the office once more. No one appearing to be listening in, but he still dropped his voice down. "The print-out I've got shows the email recipients and I've already done the obligatory Google search of the names. You'll like them. Three defence force, one civilian. Lawyer from Tan-something. Tanner and Associates, something like that. No, Tannenbaum. Names didn't come to him like numbers did. "Big corporate links, land seizures, stuff like that. Not usually connected with government, but that's from a very cursory search."

"That's excellent. Really – I'm not used to having something so concrete from our friends in the
defence forces." She paused, and in her next words he couldn't hear the smile of the previous ones. "The military names. Are any of them aware you have this memo and that there's a potential for it to go public as evidence?"

"I don't think I'd have it if they did," he answered honestly, playing with the mouse for something to do with his hands. The cursor grazed the minimised search tab and the window popped back up onscreen. The unfamiliar face of Fox Mulder was looking at him again.

"Could you be in any danger for possessing that memo?" Agent Scully asked. Colt scoffed, hearing that protectiveness in her voice.

"It's a memo, not a bomb," he said lightly, though he knew what she meant. She worried too much, and he might have found it frustrating after his weekend of reflection on her unnecessarily shielding him from harsh truths the same way Nana did, staring at the profile of the porn-hoarding arsonist former colleague she didn't want to talk about. But he couldn't forget their conversation in the basement last week, and what had come out. She'd lost a kid. He'd had no idea she'd ever been a parent, or that she had lived through such an immense loss. So in the same way he couldn't bring himself to be annoyed with Nana, who'd repeatedly lost her eldest daughter to mental illness and addiction, he couldn't find it in himself to begrudge Agent Scully's instinct to want to protect someone. Even if that someone was him. Even if he could handle himself. He cleared his throat, determined to put her at ease. "No one's coming after me. My source is unimpeachable. And no one's brave enough to cross me if it means crossing him. So don't stress."

He heard his partner exhale in relief but his eyes were still locked with the still image of the Wyoming arsonist. Harlow's voice came unexpectedly back to him. Male in his fifties. Dark hair. Colt's height, broader shoulders, in a suit. White, naturally. Possibly Jewish.

The description John MacDonald and Michelle Powell had given them of Agent Scully, the man who'd visited them the day Stephen died of Diffuse Alveolar Syndrome. Colt rubbed his face with his hand while Agent Scully spoke, starting to feel strangely disconnected.

"Hey," he redirected, wanting to clear this up before this web got any more complicated. "Did you have any luck getting in touch with your old colleague about the fingerprints?"

Casually astute, professionally interested, as he should be. It shouldn't have taken her as long to answer as it did.

"Uh, no," she said finally. "I don't have a number for him anymore – he went off the grid, and I only hear from him very occasionally. But I've posted a bulletin for any other agent still in contact with him to keep an eye out and let me know."

"Good idea," Colt said, feeling slightly relieved by the prospect. He opened a new tab to look at her bulletins to see what she'd written. "Hopefully we hear from him soon and can either clear his name or get some other explanation..."

Luckily she started speaking, covering the way his voice trailed off, because the page had loaded. Active bulletins: 0. He tried loading it again. Nothing. She'd posted nothing. His stomach felt cold.

Why would she lie? Even now, when he tuned back in, she'd taken their conversation in a new direction, artfully working away from Fox Mulder. She did not want to talk about him. That much was obvious. But she also did not want to find him, did not feel totally comfortable moving back into the basement office she'd shared with him, did not want him to be front and centre to their case, and did not want Colt to realise how much this affected her. Some jerk I used to work with. The guy with the porn, the guy ringing the office back in December while they were overseeing the
recon at the bomb builder Freddie Wicking's apartment, the guy with the obscure lead to Boston and the enemies and the alleged determination to ruin her Christmas. Phobic of fire. Wouldn't burn the morgue down. Dismissed, dismissed, dismissed. Added up, he realised, she'd actually mentioned this person many times since Colt had been working with her, and talked right around the subject.

Added up… she was acting afraid.

Colt went back to the profile photo, starting to feel less uneasy and more unhappy. Who was this guy and what had he done to Agent Scully to still have such a hold over her after so many years?

She wasn't the only one who got to feel protective.

"Before I forget," he said when she, too, trailed off, "would you still like Harlow and I to front up to Prestonsburg today to talk to the wife of our missing John MacDonald?"

"Try calling that police department again and checking in that he hasn't been located," Scully suggested. "Then call the wife and see if she'll see you. If she's happy to discuss over the phone, that's even better, but if you think you'll get more out of a personal visit, I'll trust your judgement. Put together the paperwork when you get a chance, forward it to me, I'll approve it."

Hanging up with her a few minutes later, Colt took one more look at the man on his screen. He was probably older than this standard ID photo by now but even at this age, Colt could imagine this man as intimidating. He had the man's-man look of many officers Colt had worked under in the army, the kind who barked orders because they enjoyed it and pushed around anyone they perceived as weaker. The Agent Scully he respected and deferred to could not have always been so brazenly confident. Had she been bullied, disregarded, frightened, made to feel like less than she was?

Colt would try to be gentle on the topic when it inevitably came up again. His partner had so many skeletons in that closet of hers – and he'd thought when he was partnered with her that he would be the one guarding his shady past and associations.

He shut down the search and logged out of Scully's log-in before anyone could notice. He used his morning effectively, making those calls, confirming MacDonald and Powell had not been found, and making sure to work through his routine bomb builder tasks. Summary reports of weekend surveillance. Filing. Follow-up emails. Dull, dull. But it kept his mind busy. Away from Scully's worries, away from Nana's letter.

A bit after ten, he cleaned up his workspace and headed back to his car. It took more than two dozen tries to get the engine to turn over and start, by which time he was frustrated and annoyed. He sat behind the wheel for a few minutes to let it warm up, and texted Harlow to let her know he was running late. No reply.

"Shit," he muttered, realising he'd messaged her old number. She'd been using that flip phone with an old Sim card. He scrolled through his recent contacts and saw the message she'd sent yesterday, requesting him to meet her at the range at Quantico at eleven this morning. He retyped. Sent. No swift smartass reply.

Perhaps she was riding, or driving if she still wasn't up to the bike, or had already started her training session and wasn't looking at her phone.

Colt turned his stereo up loud to leave the car park and for the drive to Virginia. He'd had a pretty good morning and didn't want to spoil it with thinking too much. Nice loud paint to cover his own
glow-in-the-dark stars.

At the other end he flashed his badge and spoke cheerfully to the security staff member at the boom gate. He was waved through and found somewhere to park. The frivolous thought of seeking out Harlow's Ducati to park beside that crossed his mind but he really didn't have that sort of time or the inclination. He didn't know where she parked when she was at her home base instead of Washington.

The outdoor range was appropriately noisy but less busy than he'd expected. He signed in, collected the standard-issue safety equipment and headed out. It was easy to spot Agent Harlow, by herself near the end of the row of clear shields designating booths, ear protection muffling his approach, eye protection over her glasses. He slowed to watch as she loaded her handgun, armed it and raised it in both hands to aim at the distant target. All without much speed, admittedly, but that wasn't what they were here for. Accuracy needed to come first. Speed hadn't helped her last time.

She adjusted her stance, fired four bullets then lowered the gun to see. She'd missed two completely, one had hit the target's shoulder and one through the neck. Not ideal, but they could work with it.

"Bang!" Colt called when he was close enough, and she turned. When she saw him she tugged the earmuffs off and flicked her head to get her ponytail to fall back off her shoulder. His stomach did this weird thing whenever she did that; he couldn't explain it, but her hair did something to him. No, he could explain it – she was damn hot, and standing out here in the sun with her tight jeans over long legs and her biker boots and her leather jacket strewn over her backpack on the ground behind her and the handgun dangling in her hand like she knew what she was doing with it, that fact was not lost on him, and the hair flick thing was apparently just his thing that made him acknowledge it.

Not that she needed to know the thought ever crossed his mind.

"You're late, Corvette," she replied, swinging the gun on her finger. Cringing, he leapt forward the last couple of steps to take it from her, checking she had the safety on. Being unreasonably sexy does not trump the attractiveness of not being shot. She cringed too, realising her careless mistake. "Whoops, sorry. The safety was on, I swear. Wasn't it?" she asked nervously, leaning forward to see it in his hands. He handed it back to her.

"Yeah, it was. Lucky for you," he said casually, offering it back butt-first. A string of loud pops behind him pummelled his eardrum as another shooter took his turn. "If you'd really shot me this time, I'd have to introduce you to my family."

"Lucky. That'd be getting too serious for me," she agreed sombrely as she accepted the weapon. She was much too easy to flirt with, he reflected, but he very much enjoyed the way playful felt safe with her. Like right now, the way she readily hit back with the banter and then smoothly changed gears and topics without any uncomfortable jolts. The one and only thing she was smooth at. She nodded at the target she'd just killed. "What do you think?"

"Was he a violent repeat offender threatening hostages?" Colt asked rhetorically, referring to her kill shot. "If so, nice shot. Except you killed two hostages."

"They were super whiny," Harlow said, getting into position and taking aim again but not getting in a shot before the marshal called for ceasefire and the lights changed to make sure all the deafened shooters knew to stop. She lowered the gun and stepped away from the Perspex shield to her bag, handing Colt the gun again. "I got here early to resit the written test and be run through basic, and look." She knelt and opened her bag. He noticed how much more fluidly she bent today, her ribs
and abdominals evidently recovered from Thursday's beating, but also how loosely she'd ponytailed her hair. He remembered the guilty twist of his stomach when his fingers had come away bloody from finally getting to touch that hair and wondered if the knock on the back of her head and the resultant split of her scalp was still hurting. She produced a form and unfolded it, presenting it to him to see. "Fuckin' signed."

Colt nodded, impressed with her determined approach. He hadn't been sure she'd even show when he said she needed some practise, yet here she was, earlier than him, and had run herself through elementary training sessions all morning to prove to him that she meant business. He could tell she felt bad about the near-shooting, and she'd looked stricken on Friday when he'd told Agent Scully not to partner them in the field until Harlow had been upskilled.

Apparently fieldwork, and his approval, were not things she was willing to compromise.

"Nice," he complimented, earning a bright smile as she stuffed the form back into her bag. She got back to her feet. "So they've ticked you off on loading, unloading…?"

"Taking the gun apart, putting it back together, handgrip, holstering, drawing, safety on, safety off," she recited. She pushed her shoulders back a little with only the slightest indication of a wince, straightening to counteract her embarrassment at the fundamental level of her retraining. "I left it at that – no point in going through the practical assessments without putting in the time, right? And you're here to drill me like the soldier you are to make sure I'm fit to take those assessments. Because you're a real marksman."

"Right." Colt gave her back the gun as the range instructor, who'd supervised the changeover of the targets for fresh ones, called for the shooters to ready themselves for open fire. "You know you could have gone around me – Agent Scully would have pushed this through for you."

Harlow scoffed. "Pfft. Not after your performance, golden boy. We both know who her favourite is."

Colt pretended not to recall the meaning-loaded looks passed between the two scientists, evidencing a stockpile of shared secrets he wasn't yet in on. "All the same. Proud of you, for taking the hard road and going about things the right way. Now, show me your stance," he directed, not missing the coy smile she tried to hide at his words. She turned away, shoving her earmuffs back on, and moved quickly into firing position. He eyed her critically. "Not bad, but a bit rigid. Loosen… yeah, that's it. Lift your arms." He moved the noise-cancelling earphones from around his neck into their more effective position and took a step away from her to watch.

She fired five times. She missed three, hit the ear on kickback and, her arms beginning to drop, hit the hand. Her aim came down to the ground as she finished and Colt stepped back to her, pushing his earmuffs off and tapping her elbow. She knocked her earphones back to hear him.

"Keep your arms up after you've taken your shot," he reminded her, prompting her to fix her aim quickly, "otherwise you're not ready for the next attack. We're going to have to work on that aim. You only got that headshot because the gun was climbing as you fired."

"It feels like it's running away on me," she admitted, deflating slightly and casting him an apologetic look. "I forgot how much harder this is than it looks. But I bet it's second nature to you."

Over her shoulder, the other pair practising had stopped shooting and were finishing up. One agent gave Colt a goodbye wave when their eyes made contact, which he returned.
"Not really. I had to practise, still do. Listen," he said, seeing her confidence slipping when his attention diverted from her briefly, "you've passed all this training before. You know why it's running away on you. You're light; you don't have the mass to ground the force of the recoil. So what do you have to do?"

"Counter it," Harlow answered obediently. "Shoulders forward, weight forward, correct grip."

"Good. Show me."

They both fixed their earmuffs and she got back into position. She leaned more into it this time and popped off three shots. Two were hits in the arm, close together, and the gun stayed steadier in her hands. She lowered it and turned to him, pleased.

"This is why it's worth having snipers for friends," she professed loudly, though it still came through dulled to his ears.

"I wasn't a sniper," he said back at the same doubtlessly obnoxious volume. "I'm not that big a deal. And stop dropping your guard." She turned quickly back to her target, getting back into position. He saw her mouth moving in negative self-talk, telling herself off, though neither of them could hear. "Go again. Aim for centre."

One more bullet through the arm, another three straight past the elbow, all in a neat line. The lights changed and the instructor called for her to stop. She flicked the safety on and holstered the gun while the target was changed.

"You're not that big a deal but you've got some big deal friends," Harlow said pointedly. "How did Friday go?"

Friday – the letter, the basement, the tragic guts of Agent Scully's life story spilling out on the floor, then the rush to the base to catch his contact in his office. Sweet-talking his receptionist, who'd been told not to admit any further visitors for the afternoon. Sitting in those new armchairs opposite the big deal's desk and deciding the old ones were better. Staking his case, skirting the line he was making up as he went along of how much was okay to say and how far was okay to push. Calling in a hefty favour. Coming out victorious. While much more comfortable with powerful women, Colt had done his time with powerful men.

"I'm not dead in a ditch," he said, making her smile wryly. "I've got a document that evidences the defence contract Fenchurch Transport claimed to have, and a sample shipping manifest that might give us an idea of what Stephen Powell impounded that day to get him infected and killed. Also some names we can work with, and a link to a private law firm. I spoke to Agent Scully this morning."

"I bet she's pleased."

Colt nodded. "You survived your weekend appointment with Agent Scully, I see."

The instructor called for her to continue and the lights changed to signal the danger of live rounds. Harlow looked around and saw she was the only one still using the range. She repositioned her earmuffs and resumed her stance behind the shield. Colt too covered his ears but stayed beside her this time to watch her technique from another angle. It was definitely improved already. She fired four shots before the handgun clicked. Empty. They both kicked off their ear protection while she reloaded.

"I wasn't sure I would," she admitted. He watched her eject the empty clip smoothly and replace it.
"She's full-on, huh? I don't know how to read her. I was pretty confident I'd fuck it up like I did the
day before but she was cool. We got a lot done, actually. She's the real deal," she added, evidently
impressed, as she pulled back the slide to chamber the first bullet. Second nature. "She knows her
shit."

"So you're friends now? Science nerd friends?" Colt asked, taking the empty magazine and
dropping it near her bag. Harlow shrugged uncertainly.

"I don't know. I really thought she didn't like me, but shit got interesting when Wells and AD
Kelley rocked up."

"Kelley?" Colt repeated loudly as they both covered their ears again so she could continue firing.
Three shots. Two hits. Slight rise on the trajectory as the recoil took advantage of her tiring arms
and shoulders. "What was he doing at Quantico? Bang," he added impatiently when she lowered
her gun too soon again, poking her in the collarbone. "You're dead. Stop dropping your guard. You
keep it up until you've cleared the scene."

She holstered the gun and yanked the headphones back. "I'm working on it, Jesus. I don't know
what they were doing but it was clearly villainous in intent. Cammy fucking Wells is almost
definitely part of a plot to keep me in that storage cupboard where I can't stir up shit, and now I
think pretty-boy Kelley is the one he's answering to. That guy," she went off suddenly, before Colt
could remind her that the whole world of sinister plots did not revolve around her and that
cupboard, "is a piece of fucking work. He's got a raging hard-on for Dr Scully."

"Yeah, he's a creep," Colt confirmed. He didn't like the assistant director at all, and was
increasingly grateful that Agent Scully had denied him Colt when he'd tried to poach him, even if
Counterintelligence was probably a better fit for him and his skills than with her in
Counterterrorism. "Turns up at our desks fifteen minutes after we've done a search for you or the
Engel case, super obvious bad guy stuff like that. He's been trying to get her out on a date for
months."

"Well he finally succeeded. She had to tell him she'd meet him on Friday for dinner to make him
lose his sourpuss face when he left. He was uber pissed to see her with me."

"Who wouldn't be?"

She rolled her eyes. "The thing that fucks me off the most is she's only going along with his
creepery to protect us. If he thinks he's got a chance of getting in her pants, he's less likely to make
a show of stymying her case or taking down her team. So she's playing this dangerous game of cat
and mousedick to give us time to get far enough ahead that he can't shut us down."

"I love your way with words," Colt said affectionately, replacing his earmuffs yet again as she did.
She took aim once more. He raised his voice. "Don't worry too much about Agent Scully's pants.
She knows what she's up against." She wouldn't be playing if she didn't.

Harlow fired three times in a vertical line up the armpit. She wasn't giving herself time to recover
from the recoil that she still wasn't quite on top of. She unconsciously started to lower the gun to
see how she'd fared, and Colt, irked with this repeated slip, unholstered his own sidearm and raised
it to her chest in a single swift motion. Her weapon was pointed down, her arms trapped below his
where he could see them coming, useless.

"Bang," he said sharply. She started, surprised to see him with a gun, then groaned when he
followed by disengaging his supporting hand to grab the top of her weapon, twisting to loosen her
grip. Complete control. "Keep. Your guard. Up. I know we're on the range and there's no one to
fire on you, but you're training your body in its shooting habits here and in a crisis, the habits you automate here will be what your brain calls on." He lowered his weapon and released hers, and nodded to the target, indicating for her to try again. He moved to the neighbouring Perspex shield to give her some space, wondering if his close attention was interfering with her concentration. He gave a wave to the instructor to let him know he intended to join; the instructor waved a lazy hand back, unconcerned. This was a slow day for him, with no classes scheduled. Colt waited for Harlow to start firing, then took aim at his own distant paper target. Noting the moderate breeze, he adjusted to the right, and calculating the drop at that distance, he lifted the aim slightly before firing.

One-two to the chest, one through the head.

"Fuck me, Corvette," Harlow exclaimed, gesturing irritably at his perfect shots. "How am I supposed to beat that? I thought we weren't killing them?"

He'd forgotten about her competitive streak. Apologising graciously, he brought the handgun back up, took quick aim and fired a fourth shot. Thigh. Takedown. She rolled her eyes again.

"Fuck you," she muttered. He saw the tell-tale drop of her shoulders and knew he'd disheartened her. He knocked his earmuffs back and took aim again.

"Don't be delicate. Look, it's not that hard. Watch me. Feet." He arranged his feet into their by-now natural defensive stance. "Core tight. Shoulders forward. Push into it. Grip." He turned his hands to demonstrate. "Aim. Lift a little – it's gonna drop with gravity, you know this, it was in your written test. Fire." He didn't, because neither of them had their ears covered, but flicked the gun back a bit in a convincing replication of the kickback. "It comes back to centre if your grip's strong. Don't fire again if it doesn't, you'll miss. Come on," he encouraged, dropping out of the stance to go back through it again. This time she obligingly mirrored him. "Feet. Shoulders. Grip. Aim. No, fix your…"

He holstered the gun and came back to her. It was easier to physically reposition her than to explain. She held form as he lightly kicked her shoe, prompting her to slide it back, widening her stance. Better. But that shift of attention made her drop her arms. He pushed the gun back up and moved to stand behind her where he could see over her shoulder. He'd never needed glasses so he wasn't sure how they impacted her vision or her precision.

"Okay, are you aiming centre?" he asked, gauging what this looked like from his position and waiting for her nod before taking her earmuffs from where they hung around her neck to position them over her ears. His fingertips brushed her shiny dark hair. He'd never known any girl to have hair that silky, seriously. He shoved his headphones back on quickly and tapped her shoulder once in signal. She fired. The bullet hole appeared on the target's jawline. Too much kickback.

"My shoulders hurt," she complained loudly, which explained the deteriorating stance. He remembered the way she was wrenched around by the men in the alley trying to steal her backpack. But she held her guard, didn't lower after firing. Progress.

"Yep," Colt agreed vaguely, leaning close to look down the line of her sight over her shoulder, spotting a weakness in her stance. "Can you just…" He started to reach out to touch her, to fix it, but then hesitated, suddenly aware of how close he stood to her, how short a time they'd actually known each other. It was easy to forget, and he didn't want to be that guy. He unconsciously cleared his throat and pointed at her elbow awkwardly, since his hand was halfway there anyway. "Uh, sort of turn your arms in. Gives you more control."

Harlow turned her head to look at him, making the lack of appropriate professional distance he'd
left all the more obvious. He could still see the shadow of purple along her jaw; he could feel the warm air of her exhalation on his skin. Alive. "Is this our Titanic moment, Corvette?" He couldn't help his startled laugh, but was immediately glad for her ease. She nodded at her arms. "Just show me, my arms are fucking done."

Awkwardness demolished, Colt reached around her to grasp both her elbows and twist them inward. Her wrists turned in, too, stabilising her hold on the gun.

"Try that," he suggested, backing off. Appropriateness restored. She narrowed her eyes behind her glasses, lifted to account for drop, and popped off three shots.

All through the torso.

"Fuck yes," she celebrated, but kept her gun raised. "Is our imaginary scene all clear?"

"All clear," Colt confirmed loudly, tugging the earmuffs free. She holstered her disarmed weapon and yanked hers off, too. Shaking her hair out. Just don't look. "Nice work."

"Good, 'cause I'm done." Harlow stretched out her tense joints while Colt politely picked up her discarded things so he could pretend not to notice how her stretching showcased her body. He was not that guy around the office. "What are you doing Friday night?"

"I'm sorry?" Colt straightened with her jacket and backpack, trying to discern the perfectly innocent motive behind that question but coming up blank. He looked around, looking for inspiration. "You mean…?"

"No, fuck you, I am not up for Friday night shooting practise," she said bluntly, following his gaze. "I mean Dr Scully's date with AD Mousedick. She told him to meet her at her desk at five. I think one of us should call her with urgent business at six, six-thirty. And by one of us, I mean you."

A much safer line of conversation. Colt held out her jacket and she took it, shrugged it on. He expertly shifted his gaze to miss when she pulled her hair free.

"I can do that," he said, slinging her backpack over his shoulder and leaning to scoop up the empty magazine as he started to follow her from the range. They both waved their thanks to the instructor, who had company now and was in the middle of animated conversation with a member of security staff. "Why six-thirty and why me?"

"Six-thirty because that's enough time for them to get out of the office, choose a restaurant, order and start eating, but not enough time to finish and for him to try to drive her home or make any creep-fucker moves," Harlow explained as they walked. "Enough time that neither party feels obligated to reschedule. And you because better you than me."

"Ah. Logic prevails," he acknowledged lightly, earning another of her smiles. He kicked at a stone as they crossed the crest separating the range from the rest of the training facility. "You know Kelley hates me too. I won't be doing myself any favours."

"Not everything's about you, Warren Colt," Harlow replied earnestly. They both grinned. She went wide to pass where his stone landed and gave it another kick to keep it moving. "Enough time that neither party feels obligated to reschedule. And you because better you than me."

"I won't be doing myself any favours."

"Not everything's about you, Warren Colt," Harlow replied earnestly. They both grinned. She went wide to pass where his stone landed and gave it another kick to keep it moving. "We've got all week to think up an excuse he won't suspect, and if I'm honest--"

"When are you not?" Painfully so.

"Shut up. If I'm honest, I don't believe anyone – not even AD Mousedick – hates you like that guy hates me. Better for all of us he associates Dr Scully with you than me."
"Be careful with calling him that," Colt warned. "You'll forget his real name. Like Lieutenant Asshole." He sped up to be the next one to kick the stone, amused by the all-too-easy-to-conjure image of Agent Harlow raging about Assistant Director Kelley in front of a roomful of agents and stumbling on his name.

"I just haven't been able to stop thinking about it since Saturday," she admitted. "I've been scared of her, convinced she hates me, and then she sticks her neck out to put Cammy in his place and situate herself firmly on Team Me when it would work better for her if Kelley thought she wasn't. And she's throwing herself out on the train tracks to keep his eyes off what an easy target I make. It's so fucked. Anything could happen to her; that must be terrifying, playing with fire like that. I owe her."

Colt fell back into step with her when the stone got lost too far away, reflecting on her words. "I guess we both do." He thought of how much Agent Scully did to further his career, and how much extra she did in every interaction to shield him from what she perceived as dangers. Like their case, originally. Like Fox Mulder. He owed her immeasurably. "But I don't think she's, you know, afraid of Kelley. I think she's got this."

"Yeah, alright, she probably does, but if she was afraid of him, would either of us know?" Harlow countered. "It's not like she's forthcoming, and she's such a tough chick, it's easy to look at her and think she's not scared of anything."

That gave Colt uncomfortable pause. Agent Scully did get scared, he knew, but Harlow was right, she hid it well. How often had that escaped his notice, hidden behind that practiced exterior? Like Nana, grown-up fears were still glossed over with confident and fierce independence. It made reading them and helping them difficult. Would he know if Scully was afraid of a workmate? Would he know if Nana was sick or well? It made him question his instincts with them both. It made their words harder to trust.

"Hey," he said suddenly, turning to Harlow as they walked. "Weird question. Don't answer if it's too personal."

"Where do you think my line is for 'too personal'?" she asked curiously. "I asked Dr Scully about her murdered sister and dead kid, and stuck my foot right in your absent mother issues. Shoot."

True. She was a runaway mouth. Colt scrubbed at his short hair, trying to work out how to ask. What he was actually asking.

"If you were afraid of something, or someone, connected to your work, to our work… would you tell me?" he asked. "Would I know?"

She didn't even need to think about it. "Absolutely. I'm afraid of zombies, aliens, government conspiracies, incurable viruses, Dr Scully, Agent Pierce, AD Kelley Mousedick, doing inventory, saying the wrong thing, and most recently, alleyways. I think I'm in the wrong job," she commented as they approached the armoury to check in her borrowed weapon and remaining ammunition. "I've told you before, I'm an open fucking book. What about you? What are you afraid of, and would I know it if I saw it?"

The question felt heavier thrown back his way, and he regretted asking. Fear? Faces flashed through his mind, moments in Afghanistan, a handmade Mother's Day card left unread on the windowsill, nerf gun fights with his cousins at Christmas, racing Agent Scully's car through busy DC streets.

"I'm afraid of…" He struggled briefly to articulate it – Harlow didn't interrupt or let him off, she
was far too tactless to know that was the proper thing to do – then realised the words were very clean and simple. "Loss. And letting people down."

"Jesus, that's way too deep for a Monday lunchtime," she complained. "You make my fears sound shallow and superficial. How did you get so goddamn noble? Change the topic. Anything."

Colt smiled, lightened by her blunt redirection. "I think I have a better solution to our Friday dilemma than either of us calling and making a bigger enemy out of Kelly."

"Oh?" Harlow prompted, intrigued. "Don't leave me hanging."

He shrugged idly. "I'm a hit with moms."

"Of course you are," she responded with a smirk. She shook her head. "It's not enough that you're a killer shot who always knows the right thing to say and drives a cool-as-fuck car. You're also so ridiculously charming, you delight potential mothers-in-law everywhere."

"A man can't help being talented, Agent Harlow," he said sincerely. She snorted.

"Indeed." They reached the door of the armoury and she unbuckled the holster from her body as he held the door open for her. At the counter they waited for service and she waved the holstered weapon at him suggestively. "Is it too late to shoot you and get in on that family intro?"
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The X-Files or any of its characters, nor the rights to the many growls/tears of frustration my unconscionable delays may have caused.

Author's Notes: An apology seems redundant, yet I will offer one anyway, as well as a deeply felt thanks to anyone reading this. Thanks for coming back to continue along with this story so long after I left you all hanging. It was not my intention; nor has it ever been my intention to abandon this fic. In short and because I will feel better having explained, I have been suffering from an intense depression that has seen me unable to enjoy creative and playful endeavours that don't make me feel 'busy' or 'productive'. My workload ramped up this year with a new lecturing role, my latest book came out, several of my thesis's chapters had to be prepared for publication in journals and textbooks, and atop all this I have also been continuing my PhD. Then, in April, my cat – the love of my life and my best friend – went into the kidney failure I'd known for years was coming, and had to be put to sleep. I have never been so sad. I knew this would wreck me, having had her most of my life, but I never knew to expect such an insidious devastation. My productivity stayed high on rigid tasks like work and preparing my existing writing for publication, but I have not written anything new, and have had to drop my doctorate down to part-time. Today is Missie's birthday. She would have been eighteen. I have spent it doing the things she loved with my younger cats, playing in the garden and getting the laundry in… and once they fell asleep, I decided to try and do something I loved doing when I had her, and I reopened this document to find a half-written chapter, long-overdue. So it's dedicated to my girl 3 I believe she sent me the inspiration and motivation to finally get this finished.

I won't promise to write again soon, but I will promise to try, as that's a promise I know I won't break. I have the next four chapters planned – the next one is back to Scully. For now, though, I hope you enjoy the return to William that has taken me more than six months to write, and thanks again so very much for reading me. I appreciate you all so much.

It's easy to lose small things. Harder to lose big ones. Like a piano. No one misplaces a piano, but everyone loses keys. Little things go missing all the time. Buttons. Coins. Pens. Goddamn business cards.

Assistant Director Walter Skinner's business card had been in his hand at the hospital, but Will must have fallen asleep listening to music, and somehow lost it. He could not fathom how, or where, any more than a person looking for their missing keys can understand how their keys are not in the bowl or on the hook or wherever they are sure they left them. Upon waking the next morning with a very stiff neck, he'd noticed the lack of thin cardboard in his hand. He'd checked the floor. Checked the seats. Checked his pockets. His bag. The folds of his clothes. The sides of the seats. The floor again. Under Uncle Gary's bed. On top of Uncle Gary's bed, maybe in the sheets at the foot of the bed. The bin. The hall, though he knew he'd had it when he came into the room to doze. He'd even asked the cleaner who'd passed him in said hall whether he'd maybe possibly swept up a white business card in Gary Milne's room, but the cleaner shrugged and said he
hadn't done that room yet.

Inexplicably, perhaps simply because it was a little thing and little things are for losing, the business card connecting him to the stern-looking FBI agent who'd interviewed him and told him anything, call, don't think, was gone.

Like Skinner – that final view of his departing broad figure had burned into William's retinas, not because he was leaving, but because he was not alone. When Will had ducked his head out to see who he was talking to, hearing a low exchange in the hall, he'd seen Assistant Director Skinner turn the corner with another agent.

His partner. A woman. Small in stature, red in hair.

And then she was gone, too.

"Lost something?" Uncle Gary had asked idly, drug-addled and thick-tongued as he struggled that morning to wake. It probably wouldn't have hurt to ask if he'd seen the card, but Will found himself pushing up off the floor for the third time and forcing a convincing smile.

"Just your marbles," he quipped. "No luck here."

"Amateur fool," Gary muttered, shifting to get comfortable before he could fall asleep again. "Like I'd keep them all in the one place."

Losing the business card was more conflicting than upsetting for Will. Not that he believed in signs from the universe or anything as honky as all that, but it seemed that just when life was going along fine, Dana Katherine Scully had been thrust into his path to throw up questions and uncertainties. As soon as he decided to do something about it – learn more, get in touch, whatever – stuff happened to discourage him. Uncle Gary's accident reminding him where his real family was. His ill-advised phone calls making it through but then reminding him he was crossing a line. Right? So then he'd decided not to pursue the idea of this woman.

And she was thrown right back into his path.

So then he took a chance – spoke to Walter Skinner, sneaked some of his hair into the man's ID in the off-chance he really was interested in who Will was and knew his birth mother, accepted his card so he could make contact again in future.

And he'd lost the stupid card. And heard nothing in the days that followed, though he knew that his breadcrumbs were a very long shot. Like anyone other than himself and his crazy uncle would connect the disparate dots between a childish drawing, a message in a bottle, an ID badge and a pinch of genetic material for testing.

Too bad Uncle Gary had trained his mind too well in the arts of abstract logical thinking.

Did Dana Katherine Scully think like he did?

Did Dana Katherine Scully stand outside the hospital room while her partner interviewed him, and choose not to come inside and make herself known?

Did William Fox Van de Kamp nee Scully have any reason left to believe any of this was worth wondering about when absolutely zilch of it was within his control or even remotely answerable?

"What do you want from me, universe?!" Will demanded of his bedroom ceiling, angrily throwing his pencil at it. He was lying on his back in bed, pretending to do homework while the distant and
distinctive thrum of dirt bikes told him that Tim and his friend were heading further out on their rounds of the property. Hurriedly he hid his face under his arm before the pencil could land on his eyelids, not having mastered any useful skills in life like telekinesis or time control. Maybe next week. The pencil bounced off his wrist and clattered to the floorboards.

In the moments that followed, eyes covered, Will glared at nothing. Nothing was conclusive or solid right now, and it sucked. It had been days of this lifeless uncertainty. Days of waiting. He was soon to lose his childhood home, but not yet. His uncle was still in hospital, but would be released soon, no date yet given by the doctors. Mr Caine was coming today to pick up Rosie but hadn't called to confirm a time. Will was going to be in a world of trouble when he went back to school and faced the music of his actions, but that hadn't happened yet and the school wasn't pushing matters of attendance after hearing what had happened to Gary. He had friends there, but none his own age. He was an orphan, but only kind of. He was a Van de Kamp, but he had no memories of the father who'd given him the surname. He was a Milne, but not by blood. He was a Scully, but only by birth, according to records still hidden under his bed. He'd called his birth mother, even gotten through, but not made meaningful contact. Not yet, soon, maybe, almost, somewhat. Everything was hanging in some weird kind of in-between.

The pencil's rolling came to an audible stop. Then nothing.

The dirt bikes revved as they went through a faraway dip. Then nothing.

One of the chickens clucked contentedly. Then nothing.

Then silence. Will was alone with his thoughts, without a business card, without any motivation to finish his homework for Ms B, without anything. Limbo.

How to come back down to the ground when everything was up in the air like this? What would Trip do in a situation that made him feel so off? Make a joke. What would Uncle Gary do? Try to hide it and keep trying hopelessly to fix it. Get annoyed when he couldn't. Assistant Director Walter Skinner probably knew exactly how to deal, purely because he was unreachable. Dana Scully? Get rid of the problem, maybe?

Maybe that was unfair.

But of all the people on his mind, Will knew there was one who'd felt like he did – lost, frustrated, alone, burdened with secrets – and he also knew how she'd dealt with it.

It wasn't deliberate, but he found himself standing at the door to the piano room. He hadn't really played since Sarah died six years ago. He wasn't even sure he still knew how, but that didn't stop him from tentatively sitting down.

It felt eerily welcoming, like he was a little boy again, sitting beside the warm comfort of his mother to join her in a shared hobby.

"I am your son," he murmured to the polished wood of the cover, lifting it to admire the ivory keys. "I don't know much else at the moment." He positioned his hands like he remembered, briefly hoping he didn't look as clumsy and stupid as he was sure he did. It had been a long time. But he closed his eyes and breathed in the dusty smell of the old wood and the room, his mother's special place. He'd tried calling Agent Scully for this, but maybe what he wanted from her, what he thought no longer existed in the world for him, was right here, in this room, all along. Inside himself, if only he could reach it. "I just know I wish I had my mom to talk to."

He depressed one key and felt the resonation of the G in his chest. He felt it quaver there even after
it left his ears, heard the perfection of the sound even though the instrument needed a bit of tuning. It was unexpectedly heart-lifting to hear a sound like that – a sound he made on purpose, a sound he could predict and reproduce. He pressed the key again. Felt the G in his body. Felt the floor beneath his feet.

He didn't move his finger placement. He lowered his middle finger onto F and felt the downward pull of a lower note, a weight in his stomach, reminding him he hadn't eaten this afternoon; he went to the E beside it, felt his backside securely on the bench. He straightened his back, realising he was slouching, and lifted his hand to move it further down the keyboard, half-imagining his mother's hand atop his, positioning it to begin a song together.

*Play it out*, her voice said in his head, ringing back at him from a memory long forgotten, and with total abandon and without any of the self-consciousness he'd come in here with, Will launched into a tuneless, wild rendition of old scale exercises. *Feel it out. No one else has to like it. It's what you feel.* Up and down the keyboard his hands flew, his body strangely grounded by the familiar physical activity and the aimless joy of making music. Sarah Van de Kamp's hands didn't join his, of course, nor did her much more practiced melodies start to entwine with his wild rhythms like they once did, but as his fingers started to ache satisfyingly with the speed and strain, the message of her words was with him. *We aren't playing for anyone else.* Every erratic note, every almost-tune, every severe change in key was another strain of impossible thought, smashed out where he could feel it and make sense of it, at least as much as he needed to. Talking it out with his mom without any words needed.

With cyclic repetitions of a handful of short chords he told her about Uncle Gary, running in quiet circles trying to save a farm that couldn't be saved and now lying in hospital with a ruined leg because he'd been at a long-overdue meeting with the bank at the exact wrong moment. In a brief flat foray at the lower end of the board, fingers jabbing, he told her about Michael Kearney's visit and about the money from Doris (fingers dancing back up at the end there). Trying to recall the pattern of an old song he couldn't remember learning, he awkwardly stepped out the situation with Scully and Skinner and the whole mess of feelings tied to those certificates and letters he'd found in the back of this piano. Then, running his fingers from one end of the keyboard to the other in frantic back and forth motion, he played through the frustration tied to all this – to school, to Jeremy, to all the not-knowing – and the loneliness and the fears. And he just… let go.

For so long, he lost track of time. The music got wilder and wilder, and then came down to slow and almost methodical, then ramped back up to something erratic and nervous as his mental conversation touched on the crazy-eyed dreadlocked hitchhiker and his knife coming down toward Will and the absolute momentary *certainty* that he was there to kill him—

"Did you write that?"

His dancing fingers fell immediately out of rhythm and collapsed all over the keyboard in a tuneless, awkward jolt of sound. Self-consciousness and awareness of his reality flooded back even before he'd turned to see the newcomer at the door, but the defensiveness that followed did not make it to the surface. Leaning heavily on crutches and looking a bit out of breath, an unfamiliar little girl stood watching him. Her cheeks were sun-tanned and spangled with freckles. Her purple shirt sported *My Little Pony*, and her matching bandana protected a mostly hairless head, though some new strawberry locks were beginning to peek around her ears. Her right pants leg had been thoughtfully restitched to warmly accommodate the stump of her amputated limb, and that was hard not to notice, but so too was the curious shine of dark eyes looking with awe at the old piano.

Will twisted further on his seat to address her properly.
"You must be Sarah Caine."

His voice brought her gaze up from the keys, and nervousness flushed through her face. She was young, but old enough to realise she'd intruded and shouldn't be here. With her armpit still firmly on the crutch, she lifted a hand to wave vaguely back at the staircase.

"Your Dad said I should go inside and get you. I mean, your… Your Mr Tim. I called out but… I just heard the piano. I should have stayed at the door," she acknowledged with a nod of self-reproach. Will hadn't heard anyone's voice, nor had he heard her father's truck arrive or Tim's motorbike return, but the angle of the sunlight through the window told him he'd been in here, ignorant to the world, for at least an hour, probably more. He glanced again at her crutches, a thought occurring to him.

"Did you climb up the stairs by yourself?" he asked. The girl frowned.

"I can still do stuff," she retorted, a little defensively, fists tightening on the handholds of her crutches. Will quickly smiled.

"I can see that. I meant, I'm sorry I didn't hear you call out." He paused. There was nothing about this girl's appearance that connected her to his Sarah, but she shared a first name, and she'd been struck with cancer, too. But she'd beaten it, for now at least, and she was here, in the piano room where his mother's presence remained strongest, in the moments after his first return to music in years. "I'm Will."

"Is that piano yours?" little Sarah asked, attention shifting the way only a child's can. Will followed her gaze and stared too at the keys. They looked as they always did, but he felt much calmer, much more… solid… than when he'd first sat down. Whole.

"It was my mom's," he told her. "She was called Sarah, too."

Sarah Caine looked up in warm surprise, pleased, and expertly hobbled forward one step on her crutches. "My dad said your mom was the owner of the horse we came to visit."

"She was. She loved horses and pianos." And me, Will knew completely in that moment, feeling peaceful and okay with all the things he knew and didn't know and wondered and was waiting to know. It was all fine. He was here, in the piano room with the memory of Sarah and the presence of a living one, and he was alive and well, and Uncle Gary was going to be well soon and Tim was outside looking out for him and the school wasn't giving him a hard time and Trip had been texting to check in. And the business card was gone but Walter Skinner was an FBI assistant director and would have no trouble finding him if he needed to, and Dana Katherine Scully didn't need to be a bad person to have reasons for keeping her distance from him. Will was fine.

"I think it's a Sarah thing," the girl told him knowledgeably, bringing herself another step closer. How old was she again? Eight, Gary had said. Neat kid. Will appreciated her spark, her total lack of regard for her missing leg or the fact that she was talking to a relative stranger. "Sarah Villanova in Mrs Denham's class also loves pianos and horses. And me. I love them, too."

Will moved over on the bench. "Do you play?"

Little Sarah blushed slightly but still bravely took his cue and shifted herself closer to the piano bench, her sparkling eyes betraying how much she'd hoped he would let her join him at the instrument. She was much less slick and graceful in sitting down than she was at manoeuvring around on the crutches, but she staunchly did not ask for help as she lowered herself, and Will, though he watched her carefully, did not offer. When she'd plonked herself down beside him, he
wordlessly took the crutches and leaned them against the side of the piano where she could reach them.

She eagerly raised her hands over the keys but did not lower them, not knowing where to start.

"When I was in hospital," she said slowly, looking up and down the keyboard, "I played the keyboard app on my iPad. But it was small."

"That's just a piece of this big piano," Will advised, reaching to place his fingers on the keys in front of her. He played a scale, then lifted his hand away. She immediately replaced it with hers and tried to copy, experimentally pressing on the smooth keys. The sound she made was far from music but her expression lit up even further to hear the old instrument make noise for her. He knew the feeling. Will took her fingers and spread them out on the keys, and stiffly she replaced them, making another attempt. If at first you don't succeed. She kept repeating the scale, getting better each time. "What's your favourite song?"

"Can you teach me a Taylor Swift song?" Sarah asked hopefully. Will cringed.

"Uh, no, sorry. That's a bit advanced for me. How about…" He played a few keys, trying to remember a simple tune or nursery rhyme. One came to him after a bit of playing, and he stepped it out with his fingers. G… C-C, C, D, E, E… E, D, C, D, E, C… Sarah watched quietly, then sat up straighter when she recognised it.

"Incy Wincy Spider!" she exclaimed, reaching out a hand in preparation to copy his movements, but she whipped it back like she'd been burned when a new voice echoed through the house, calling her name out. She leaned past Will to holler back, "Up here, Dad." She sat back with a little regret as hurried footsteps sounded on the stairs. "Maybe I can come back and learn it another time?"

Will handed her the crutches and let her arrange them comfortably under her arms. "Sure, if you don't mind me coming over to your place sometime to visit Sarah's horse?"

Little Sarah beamed as her father arrived at the door, a bit out of breath.

"Sarah," Mr Caine said, relieved to see her perfectly fine. "How did I not guess? The piano. How did you–"

"I walked," she interrupted tersely, with much more precision than Will had known any other eight-year-old to wield. But she dropped the defensive attitude as she remembered something, and started getting awkwardly upright as Tim appeared behind the cattle buyer. "Dad, did you know that the horse we're meeting," she emphasised the word as if he'd used it repeatedly when discussing this day, perhaps in the off-chance the arrangement fell through or that Sarah and Rosie did not hit it off, "belonged to another Sarah? And she played piano, too! Will was teaching me a song. He's the other Sarah's m…" She trailed off, word order escaping her, and rephrased. "The other Sarah is his mom."

Will liked the way her still-developing sense of tense made her say is instead of was.

Mr Caine smiled indulgently, an adoring sparkle in his eyes that mirrored the shine in his daughter's, a look Will wouldn't have guessed he had in his repertoire that first day they'd met. As she clattered past him with her crutches toward the stairs Will hoped she wouldn't attempt unaided, her father lifted his smile to him.

"I remember that Sarah," he said, surprising Will. "Lovely lady. Only met her two or three times, mind, when I first bought my farm," he admitted as he turned to catch up with his daughter and
bundle her up. Tim obligingly took the crutches, and Will followed, intrigued. "Saw her here sometimes when I'd come to do business with Christiaan. She'd be inside, making lunch. Always insisted I stay for a bite – she made a mean corned beef sandwich. And your father… Nicest guy around. First time I met him, I got a flat, not two hundred yards up the road. I'd just been here and bought my first forty head of cattle." He lowered Sarah to her foot at the base of the stairs, and held her while Tim handed back her crutches and she got her balance. "He saw me pull up, could see my truck from the yard I gather, and rode up to check on me. You probably remember, Tim? You were there."

The farm hand nodded. "Couldn't find a spare so we helped you unload, brought them back here and loaded them into Christiaan's truck instead."

"Dropped them all off for me at my farm, free of charge." Mr Caine shrugged and watched Sarah hobble to the front door. "I was new in town so I didn't know to expect that kind of generosity. Good folk," he added with a very quick smile before heading out. Tim shot Will a broader smile, lightly clapping his shoulder, and Will acknowledged that it had been a long time since he'd felt so connected to his parents.

Between the piano's magic, little Sarah, and Mr Caine's unexpected memory of the Van de Kamps, Will was feeling warm and full when he arrived at the fence to introduce Rosie. He didn't think he could feel any better, but when the old horse shoved her nose through the slats to sniff the child and little Sarah brightened somehow even further, touching the mare's silky cheek with reverence, he found that he did, and the good feeling only swelled as he showed the girl and her father all of Rosie's favourite spots to be petted and scratched, and helped Sarah lovingly groom the horse's shiny speckled coat. The old animal revelled in the attention, misbehaving only by repeatedly twisting her head around to sniff and nudge her young attendees while Tim and Mr Caine lazed against the fence nearby and talked shop. Once, reaching too high to brush the graceful neck, Sarah's crutch slid out from beneath her armpit with a loud clatter, knocking Rosie's forelegs on the way down, and the startled child grabbed helplessly at the smooth horse before her fingers became entangled in the long mane. Will reached for her, the men started forward for her, but it was unnecessary. Rosie barely reacted to the noise or the bumps except to turn her head to look, and when Sarah's weight yanked down on her mane, she shook it to dislodge the child, who then landed safely on her bottom in the dirt.

Sarah's sparkle was immediately back, and she left her crutches on the ground as she pulled herself determinedly up against Rosie's front leg. Panting, she reached standing position, and wavered until she could securely lean into the horse's shoulder, balanced on her own one leg but also on the stability of the animal's four. Will saw the shift of weight in his mother's horse's hooves; she was leaning slightly into the child, sensing that she needed the support.

A perfect match.

It was hard to say goodbye to Rosie, to pack all her tack and things into the trailer with Tim, but Will knew he was never going to find a better home for her than what he'd secured for her with the Caines. And though tears stung his eyes while he hugged her neck and breathed her scent, and though his chest hurt as he nodded to Mr Caine's promise that he could come over anytime – especially if he wanted to help teach Sarah to ride – he still felt that good, full, warm feeling as the horse trailer pulled out of the drive, as Tim shouted playfully, "Try and make it more than two hundred this time!" and as he pinned the cheque to the fridge for Uncle Gary to cash when he got home.

It lasted through the night as he finally got into those homework tasks.
It lasted through the next day, when he returned to school to a session with a trauma counsellor where he just talked about being scared and having people to talk to, everything they wanted to hear. The admin staff told him there would be consequences for his plagiarism but they were still investigating who was involved, and would follow it up with him when his uncle was better. He left that unexpectedly benign conversation to find Trip waiting for him in Bio, fresh from suspension and pen in hand, ready to copy Will's notes, and to find that a large portion of the school suddenly knew who he was. He'd expected to be looking over his shoulder at every turn for Jeremy or his cronies, but each time he walked out of a classroom, it seemed, an older student seemed to be passing by, and either nodded, greeted him by name or even stopped to ask him how he was going. Apparently everyone had heard of Gary Milne's accident, the trouble with his farm (to which Will's fundraising had been attributed like it was something sweet or cute) and news of Jeremy's even longer suspension for attacking him had spread, too. Brit confessed on the bus home that a fair few local moms, including theirs, had taken pity and told their kids to look out for him.

"And we were like," she added with an eyeroll, "Mom, you don't need to tell us who Will is, we already sit with him on the bus everyday'. The woman knows nothing."

Will was grateful and warm and whole all the same. Small towns. Mr Caine was right. They could surprise you.

That good feeling might have lasted forever, and it should have, because what he was most looking forward to finally came around.

"Goddamn nightmare of paperwork trying to leave that prison of a place," Uncle Gary grumbled as soon as he arrived home from hospital, and that was the most pleasant a conversation he and his nephew shared for the rest of the week.

Will tried to keep hold of the piano feeling, determined not to lose that to the same mysterious place as all other missing small things, but Uncle Gary's mood upon returning home was infectious. He'd grown frustrated and irritated by hospital procedures and wait times in his final days there as he spent more time lucid and aware of the ward's many inefficiencies, and to top things off, his doctors were also trying to wean him off his painkillers. Too soon, Will thought, because his uncle was in a right shitty mood. Like little Sarah Caine, he clattered awkwardly around the farmhouse on crutches, his knee bandaged over his stitches and his injury. Physiotherapists came to the house a couple of times to work with Gary on stretching it and putting weight on it, but soon Will found him muttering to himself in the kitchen, poring over bills that were piling up, and the next day he overheard him cancelling his upcoming appointments by phone.

"These fucking crutches," Gary complained, louder than usual, struggling to keep them together as he reached for breakfast cereal. He made Sarah Caine look like a dancer by comparison.

"Just a few weeks, remember?" Will got sick of replying, but tried to keep the rational, calm tone he knew his uncle needed.

Gary couldn't get up the stairs, so he slept on the couch, surrounded by his bills and his financial plans, and the draft document he and Will were working together on – somewhat tersely – for the sale of the farm. Gary couldn't drive or ride his motorbike, so other than the school bus and the surprising solace of school, Will was stuck with him at the house. Gary couldn't even get outside easily, so Will and Tim continued to care for the stock in the mornings and evenings. It was much more work than the two could sustainably manage but Gary snappily reminded Will, when he brought it up, that he was the one who'd said not to bother hiring the extra help and to just sell the place, and besides, he didn't bother to say, they couldn't really afford it.
"This place is going to be the death of him," Tim advised Will when they kicked their bike engines off one evening to unveil a loud crash and the sound of Uncle Gary swearing loudly in the house as his crutches skidded out on the polished floorboards for the umpteenth time. Probably attempting the stairs, alone, yet again. Will sighed and took his helmet off. He and his uncle had been getting along so well in the weeks before the dreadlocked drifter Morris Bletchley had barged through the midmorning diners in the centre of Thayne and wrecked Gary's ACL. Joking together, making plans, everything looking like it might work out. Now the Uncle Gary of old was back in force – elusive though always present, hard to get talking, quick to snap, tightly wound and avoiding any topic that might be confronting – and Will felt himself demoted back to 'burdensome dependent'. He'd been enjoying just being uncle and nephew for a time there, and he missed their playful chemistry. It seemed like too big a thing to lose so easily.

"He just needs to slow down," he told the hand. "His doctors keep telling him not to take it so fast and just be patient, and he'll get used to the crutches. But you think he'll listen?" he half-whispered, flinging the helmet into the shed moodily before trying to check his behaviour. He went after the helmet and hung it up properly. Tim followed and hung his beside it.

"I'm free tomorrow afternoon," the farm hand said. "Do you want to head to town after school instead of coming back here, and I'll run Gary in by car? Get him out of the house for a bit, you know? Maybe even stop into Caine's place on the way back, say hi to Rosie."

When Will put the idea to his uncle, Gary was dismissive at first.

"My knee," he said with a vague wave at it. He kept his eyes on his laptop screen, answering emails. "Can't walk much."

World-class avoider. Will wandered into the kitchen to get dinner started, and spotted the Rosie cheque on the fridge door. He leaned over the counter.

"Would you rather–" he began, but Gary was already shaking his head.

"Not in the mood, Will."

"Would you rather," Will persisted, earning an irritated glance up from the screen, "sit around the house for yet another day moping, staring at bills you can't pay, or a refreshing drive through the countryside into a quaint town centre to cash a crisp, never-even-crumpled cheque that will briefly inflate your bank account rather than drain it? And in that second scenario, add in that on that same trip, you'd be joined in town by your most charming nephew, fresh and bright-eyed from a day learning the wonders of the world at our fine local educational institute, who would also be cashing his cheque, which would ensure that one Michael 'Dickbag' Kearney stays short eleven thousand dollars of his mother's estate."

Uncle Gary stared at him. Then he chuckled, despite himself, and rubbed his forehead.

"Quaint town centre, huh?"

"So quaint."

"If you can sell the drive from the farm to Thayne, maybe you should be in advertising." The reluctant curl of a half-smile played at his mouth, and some of the years he seemed to have taken on his shoulders since coming home seemed to fall aside. "I've been kind of a grumpy bastard, haven't I?"

"Uncle Gary," Will replied earnestly, stashing the cheque in his uncle's wallet for safe keeping until
tomorrow so he couldn't forget or lose it like so many small things, "I would never say such a thing to your face."

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