Destiny
Writergal2000
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Destiny by WriterGal2000

Spoilers: Requiem hasn’t happened.

Rated: R

Category: M/S/Sk friendship; some MSR

Summary: Mulder’s behavior suddenly becomes erratic, his actions evasive as he forces Scully away from a case that’s been given to him under mysterious circumstances. And eventually Fox Mulder is faced with the decision of a lifetime.

Author’s Notes: I’m posting this story because after writing “Light from Shadows” I received many kind e-mails asking for more. So this is until I finish the next one.

Except for the first and last chapters, this story was written two years ago on a dare. I’m ashamed to admit this, but at the time a friend suggested I write an X-File story and I replied, “What’s an X-File?”

I accept your condolences.

Anyway, after watching almost every episode my friend had on tape, I was hooked. (Big surprise, huh?) So I accepted the challenge. What I didn’t realize until later was that the mythology arc was just one segment of the series, but that is what I had used to base my story. This story has been critiqued by some of the most avid X-Philers. And unanimous assessment convinced me it was ready for the real test.

You.

Now, as a loyal fan, I hate the mythology aspect and I won’t read them. And I don’t blame
you if you don’t either. But this one is really different — not so far out that it can’t be believed, even with all that’s happened in seasons 6 and 7. Give it a try. You’ll find plenty of angst and a close relationship with the partners. I’ve gone back and edited, so there is more “friendship” than I originally wrote.

Also if you read “Light From Shadows” you’ll see two familiar characters have popped up in this story. It’s a coincidence – remember I wrote most of this 2 years ago. I don’t have a fixation on them.

Chapter 1

PRESENT DAY
DANA SCULLY’S APARTMENT
10:18 p.m.

Special Agent Dana Scully shuddered slightly as thunder crashed loudly and the lights in the apartment flickered once. She closed the file folder and tossed it into her partner’s open briefcase, the papers sliding out, then she sank back on the sofa and sighed heavily.

Mulder looked over at her, his eyebrow raised in question.

“I take it we’re done for the night?” he asked.

“I am. You can sit here ’til the sun comes up going over that bogus witness report for the twenty-seventh time — but I’m going to bed.”

“Bogus?” he asked, watching his partner rise from the sofa and stretch.

“You’ve heard all of my conjecture on this case; I have nothing new to add.”

“Conjecture?” he said, stung by her words. “That’s a polite way of saying I’m full of shit.”

“Mulder …”

“Fine,” he answered shortly, shoving the stack of papers back in the folder and snapping the briefcase closed.

Scully shifted from one foot to the other, trying to find a way to smooth out his ruffled feathers. When he picked up their coffee mugs from the table, she followed him into the kitchen. He was certainly not masking his irritation.

“Mulder, look …”

“You made your point, Scully. More than once. Sometimes I wonder why you even bother with me.”

He sounded like a hurt little boy, and Scully had to work at not smiling. It reminded her of when her brother used to ride his tricycle to the corner of the yard and sit there, pouting.

Scully tapped him on the shoulder and when he turned around, her smile broadened. “We both know the answer to that,” she said, waggling her eyebrows at him, trying to lighten his
mood.

He rolled his eyes at her and turned back to the sink, determined she wouldn’t break his stubborn streak. He rinsed out the mugs and put them in the dishwasher, but as he made his way out of the kitchen, she purposely stepped in front of him. He stopped, looking down at her as she put her arms around his neck and placed her hands on the back of his head.

Mulder tried to be angry, as he stood there with his arms at his sides, but it was hard as he looked down into twinkling blue eyes and a demure smile on those luscious lips.

He sighed effectively. “What, Scully?”

“You’ll never admit this, but if I were to agree with you about a para-normal case, that would baffle you more than the case itself.”

Scully saw his lips twitch as he fought to maintain his indignation.

“I dare you to try it,” he said softly.

“You know where your dares have gotten us before,” she said smoothly.

Finally his mouth curled into a faint smile. “Are you inviting me to stay?”

Realizing he had misinterpreted what she meant, Scully sagged a little and Mulder recognized her body language before she even spoke the words. She felt him stiffen.

“Mulder, we both need sleep. That means you at your apartment, and me at mine.”

“Fine,” he said curtly.

He ducked under her arms and physically moved her aside as he grabbed his briefcase off the table and went to retrieve his coat from the hall tree. She followed him once again to the front door as he jammed his arms into the sleeves of his coat.

“Hey, come on,” she said with tenderness.

“Come on what?” he asked, playing ignorant, trying to pull the collar of his coat out with one hand, holding the briefcase tightly with the other hand, as if he set it down Scully might toss it out the window.

“Mulder, you’ve been on edge today. In fact, the last few days. Like something is bothering you.”

He let out a breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds. She waited patiently until he looked at her again.

“You know what, Scully? You’re right. But I don’t even know what it is. It’s like ...” He shook his head, frustrated with trying to understand and explain what he was feeling. “It’s like there’s something poking me in the back, but every time I turn around it’s gone.”

She was silent, but she took both his hands in hers and brought one of them up to her lips where she kissed his palm. Her sensual touch was like a soothing massage and he immediately relaxed.
“Mulder, I’m tired. Nothing more. And I’m trying to do what’s best for you by sending you home at a decent hour. You’re reading something into this that isn’t there. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I guess it’s just that time of month, Scully – PMS.”

She tilted her head slightly and frowned, waiting for him to explain, which he did.

“Paranoid Mulder Syndrome,” he answered.

“You only get that once a month?” she quickly threw back at him.

In Mulder’s present mood, he wasn’t sure how to take that. But Scully’s sudden smile was what he had come to expect and love about her – that little quirk of her mouth that seemed to animate her eyebrows at the same time.

Just gazing at her seemed to affect his coordination as he fumbled with his coat collar. Scully reached up and he felt her fingers lightly graze his neck, sending a tingly warmth through his skin as she straightened the collar.

He saw the caring in her eyes, the easy way she tempered his anxiety. And he realized once again that he was being unreasonable and … not himself. But being cognizant of that didn’t make it any easier to remedy.

“Thanks,” he said, trying not to expose how much she could disorient him with just a touch.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He nodded, still a little off balance at her detachment. His partner had an uncanny way of sensing Mulder’s moods, even when he mortared up every crack to keep Scully from seeing inside him.

But right now he felt vulnerable and although he had opened himself up to her scrutiny, she couldn’t – or wouldn’t acknowledge it. Mulder thought it ironic that one of the few times he welcomed – even in his own way encouraged — her concerned questioning, she wasn’t biting.

He snapped out of his thoughts to realize she was holding the door open. Without meaning to be obvious, he again frowned at her. She responded by taking the lapels of his raincoat in her hands and pulling his head down toward her. He was still trying to sort out her seemingly contradictory actions when he felt her lips at the corner of his mouth. Before he could respond, she had backed away from him and moved out of the doorway.

<Scully, ask me what’s wrong?>

<Scully, ask me to stay.>

<Scully, can’t you see how fucking confused I am!>

“Goodnight, Scully,” Mulder said softly, feeling less in control than his voice implied.

“Drive carefully,” she answered. “It’s starting to rain.”

He nodded and stepped into the doorway, pausing with his hand on the doorknob to glance at her one more time. She smiled and gently closed the door, leaving him standing in the
empty hallway.

Scully leaned heavily against the door, torn by her emotions. She was just as attuned to her partner’s inner turmoil as she always was. All the signs were there, and more: the slight puffiness in his eyelids that attested to sleepless nights; tiny lines around his mouth from tension; the unconscious tapping of his foot and cracking his knuckles that signaled something inside him wanted to get out; and most of all, his blunt openness in regard to a relationship beyond partnership that they shared, but seldom spoke of.

When Fox Mulder exposed himself emotionally, it signified only one thing.

A cry for help.

Scully briefly closed her eyes and pressed her head against the closed door for a second, knowing he was still on the other side. It hurt her to turn him away because she could give him some of the answers he was seeking.

But there was something she had to do first.

—X—X—

10:55 P.M.
SAME NIGHT

It was a warehouse district, but there was activity going on even at this late hour; some of the businesses were shipping and delivering twenty-four hours a day.

Scully slowed her car and peered through the rain-splattered windshield in the direction of her headlights. When she saw the orange and green neon sign of the mattress factory, she shut off her car lights.

Immediately she saw the figure come out of the darkness into a pool of amber light cast from a dull streetlamp. Unsnapping the strap securing her gun, she opened the car door and stepped out. The heavy rain had stopped temporarily but a fine mist was coming down. Scully hurried across the street, avoiding the deeper puddles filling the potholes.

As she approached the figure, the man wordlessly walked a step up to the mattress factory and unlocked the door. With one hand gripping the handle of her holstered gun, Scully warily followed him into the building. It was pitch black for only a second until the man turned on a small desk lamp.

In the deep shadows of the room, their eyes met.

Mr. X nodded toward a chair in front of the desk but Scully shook her head.

“No thanks. You said this wouldn’t take long.”

“No longer than it has to be. How’s Agent Mulder?”

Scully hesitated, careful of anything she revealed about her partner, especially to this man. “Confused,” she answered.

“Is he remembering anything?”
“I wouldn’t call it remembering. Not yet. But knowing Mulder’s mind as I do, I’d bet it’s only a matter of time.”

Mr. X was silent a moment, staring at a fixed point on the table.

“We have to proceed very cautiously, Agent Scully. There’s a trigger mechanism that would be catastrophic if tripped.”

“Then why chance it at all?”

“Can’t you answer your own question?”

He glared at her and she felt a sudden chill in the room as if an icy wind blew through an open window.

“Because you don’t want to stop these memories,” she stated as a fact.

Mr. X moved away from the desk to stand closer to Scully. She would normally have felt threatened, but knew it was merely intimidation. He should know her better than that by now.

“We knew there would come a time when his memories would begin to break through, and in fact that was part of the plan from the beginning, he said, taking a step back to give her a little more personal space. “Have you told him anything more?”

“No,” she said harshly. “If you recall, you came to me two years ago, while Agent Mulder was still in the hospital, and you threatened both of us if I didn’t cooperate. I did what you ordered.”

“Tell me again what you told Mulder.”

She glared at him, wanting nothing more than to walk out of the building and drive home. But she didn’t understand exactly what she was dealing with, and that made her afraid for her partner. She relented to his demand, but her voice indicated it wasn’t by choice.

“I told my partner about North Carolina and things that Skinner would verify. But that’s all.”

“Nothing about Phoenix?”

“No. As per your threat.”

“Not back then, and not now?”

“No!” she stated more emphatically.

Mr. X eyed her warily, trying to read any lie on her face, or in her posture. He couldn’t detect it, but he knew that the brilliant female agent could be a formidable opponent.

“Agent Mulder can be persuasive,” he said. “I know he must have been relentless in his demand for the truth.”

“Relentless is his mild form of obsessive. He grilled me almost to the point of shooting him when he tried to get answers two years ago. But I did what you asked, and no matter what the reason, I’ll never forgive myself for it.”
“Why?”

“Because you made me lie to him.”

“And he lied to you. So you’re even. Get over it.” He ignored the flame in her eyes. “Agent Scully,” he said calmly, “we’re not trying to hurt Agent Mulder. On the contrary. But this situation must be controlled, and we will control it.”

“Why was it so dangerous for him to have that information two years ago but you want me to encourage him to remember now?”

“Don’t misunderstand me; it is still dangerous. But for one thing, the consortium is dead, so that threat is removed. But there’s…” he stopped, studying her. “There’s so much more than you could ever comprehend.”

“Try me,” she said bluntly.

“No,” he said with equal force.

Mr. X saw her eyes light with fire and she took a deep breath, ready to take him on for the sake of her partner.

“Right now my partner is experiencing things he doesn’t understand. He told me it’s like he gets a jolt of some familiar sensation and he knows it means something, but it’s gone before he has a chance to even analyze it. Like waking suddenly from a graphic dream, but the instant you open your eyes, all that’s left of the dream is the aftereffect. There are no details and no clear pictures. And it’s beginning to drive him crazy.”

She saw Mr. X nodding as if he understood what she was describing. Scully went on, more calmly, hoping he would open up to her for the sake of her partner, whom she knew Mr. X had put himself on the line for in the past.

“Unless you’re planning on giving Agent Mulder all the answers, then making him re-walk the path of these memories will only make them worse. Something happened in Phoenix that was extremely hard on him. I won’t do anything that causes that to surface again. I won’t,” she said brusquely.

Mr. X studied her, and she knew he was contemplating how much to tell her. She kept her face passive, concerned. She saw his eyes travel over her slowly, and for some insane reason, Scully compared it to the wicked witch sizing up Hansel.

Finally Mr. X spoke. “Your partner was given some very powerful suggestions along with …” He stopped.

“Drugs and a neuro-invasion that to anyone else would be considered science fiction.”

“Much as a headache goes away with aspirin, so Agent’s Mulder’s anxieties will be calmed with re-living some of his experiences. And they’ll start to bring him answers.”

“What if you’re wrong? He has an eidetic memory, so it doesn’t work like yours and mine. You want me to help you play a mind game with him. Hasn’t he been through enough of that this year?”
“What he went through with his brain surgery has, in part, stimulated these memories. It was no accident. It’s all been part of the plan.”

Scully closed her eyes, sickened at the thought of her partner, the man she loved, being used in such a cruel, vicious manner. She opened her eyes when Mr. X spoke to her again.

“Agent Scully, I’ll be as honest with you as I can. We’re playing a blind hand here.”

“Then look at the cards.”

“It wouldn’t matter. We don’t know what we’re playing against.”

Scully scoffed at him, shaking her head. “Let’s stop talking in metaphors. I get the impression you don’t know what the hell you’re doing. I don’t care, as long as it doesn’t endanger my partner.”

“I’m trying to minimize that. Unlike two years ago, it’s important for Agent Mulder to start assembling some of the puzzle pieces.”

“I repeat my question. Why now? Just because the consortium is dead -”

“That’s only part of it.”

Scully waited, finally crossing her arms over her chest and fixing him with a look of impatience. Mr. X took a step back and leaned against the desk.

“There is no chance of the digital tape finding its way into Agent Mulder’s hands. And as long as that is secure, his memories are less of a threat.”

“But then why encourage them in the first place? Why not let them stay buried?”

Because he needs to begin to prepare.”

Scully didn’t like the tone of his answer. She suddenly felt goose bumps on her flesh. Mr. X held his gaze on her, like he was reading her mind. She countered with equal intensity. But the standoff served no purpose and Scully was anxious to end the meeting. Even though she had met Mr. X with the intention of helping her partner, she still felt guilty about having gone behind Mulder’s back.

“Prepare for what? She asked apprehensively, not sure she wanted to hear the answer. But then she recognized that dismissive attitude which was an aspect of his character that she had come to despise. He shunned her question as if it was beneath him to even consider answering it.

“Why involve me this time? Why not shut me out like you did two years ago?” she asked bitterly.

Mr. X hesitated before he answered, looking a little amused. Scully found no humor in the situation.

“So many questions, Agent Scully.”

“Just answer them and quit fucking around with me!” she demanded, struggling to hold her
temper in check.

The tall dark man smiled in spite of her obvious contempt for him. Scully was aware of the fact that the mysterious man standing before her had supplied her partner with valuable information over the years. And had he not given AD Skinner the coordinates to find Mulder in Dead Horse, Alaska - albeit with physical persuasion - Mulder would have died. The same could also be said for the ‘unknown’ person who carried an unconscious Mulder out of a train car seconds before it exploded.

But despite those factors and more, Scully knew that X had his own agenda, and she wondered how far he would go if his own neck was in a noose.

He reached inside his shirt pocket and removed a small, blue envelope which he held in his hand.

“Agent Mulder has a tendency to disregard protocol and even common sense when he’s on a mission. You are the only person who can stop him in his tracks and make him re-evaluate. In this case, that is vital. You’re going to have to keep him from unraveling, because he’s only going to remember bits and pieces, and it may not all fit together.”

“How do I help him make sense of it?”

“You don’t. Simply repeat what you’ve told him. With his own memories coming back, it might make a little more sense.”

Scully was still confused. She couldn’t understand how any of this was going to help her partner. She saw X watching her closely, and then it suddenly dawned on her. The shock was apparent on her face.

“Agent Mulder’s restored memories are not random, are they? They were selected.”

X’s quiet demeanor gave her his answer without a word spoken.

“You bastard,” she whispered.

“The memories we allow to surface may be manipulated, but the events happened none-the-less.”

X handed her the blue envelope and Scully opened the flap, briefly looking inside, already knowing what the contents were. She pointed the envelope at X like it was a weapon.

“So this is supposed to ... what? Open up that cave of information that you sealed shut with god-knows-what means?”

“I’ll say it once again,” he said slowly, as if speaking to a stubborn child. “We believe that if you can trace the path that he followed two years ago, it might spark something in his memory, yes. And to further answer your question of why we’re involving you this time, that’s simple. Because he’s going to need you.”

Scully placed the envelope inside her coat pocket. Having heard all she needed to hear, she turned to go. But X caught her by the arm and held her, not with undue force, but firmly.

“You and Agent Mulder will be watched. If you get into trouble, you know how to signal
<Add masking tape to the packing list> Scully thought wryly.

She turned again and had just reached the door when he called to her.

“Agent Scully ... have fun,” he said dryly. “But stay close to Mulder. He needs to be stronger than he’s ever been in his life.”

She heeded his words silently, trying to gauge what he might mean by that. She took two more steps toward the door but was stopped momentarily by his next statement, which sounded frighteningly ominous.

“So will you.”

Mr. X watched the FBI agent trying to grasp the underlying meaning of his words, as if the answer might lie behind his dark eyes. Then she turned and walked back out into the rain.

He knew the weeks ahead were unpredictable. Scully was right – they didn’t really know what they were doing. When a situation has no precedent, you follow your instincts.

God help them if they were wrong.

But if anyone could make sense of madness and hold it together, it was Fox Mulder. Then add to the equation his equally brilliant, yet more cautious partner, and there was no better team to lay odds on.

Mr. X turned off the desk lamp, then moved carefully in the dark room over to the window. Peering through the near-closed blinds, he saw the car’s headlights come on and then the vehicle turned around and drove away. He looked up at the halo of gold glowing around the streetlamp and watched the steady rainfall within the circle of light.

And he let the events of two years ago consume him ...

—X—X—

Chapter 2

APRIL 12, 1998
11:19 p.m.
DOSSETT FAMILY RESIDENCE
TENLYTOWN, D.C.

The house was dark inside as shadowy figures moved about and spoke in hushed voices. Intermittent flashes of blue lightning cast eerie light throughout the rooms. The four intruders, wearing ski masks and carrying handguns, had burst through the kitchen door. Using high-powered binoculars through an open-curtained window, they had been observing the husband and wife, dressed in their nightclothes, sitting at the kitchen table, presumably going over bills. The commotion in the kitchen caused by the frightened couple woke their 10 year-old son. As the family stood by, the men turned off lights in the house and checked out the rooms. The mother panicked for an instant when she saw one of the men glance inside the nursery where her baby slept. But then, to her relief, he softly closed the door to the room as if not to wake the baby.
The men then hurried the family down to the basement. The ten year-old boy clung to his mother who, although trembling with fear, tried to reassure her child that everything would be okay. The men oddly enough did not search for anything, nor did their purpose for breaking in appear to be robbery. They moved quickly, seeming to execute a well-rehearsed plan.

The father suspected the cause of the break-in, and he was afraid they were there to harm his family, nothing more.

Once in the basement, one of the men spread a blanket out on the cold linoleum floor and ordered the family to lay face down on the blanket, their hands beneath them. As the father laid down next to his child, who was between the two parents, a gun was placed on the back of his neck. He heard a voice whisper in his ear.

“We know about Timmonds and Pappas. Who was the fourth person who accessed the data bank?”

The father prayed there was one chance that his family’s lives would be spared, and that was to give them the name they wanted. One or both of those two people had obviously given them his name. He wondered if they were still alive.

“Peter Jameson. He lives in McLean, Virginia.”

“Anybody else?”

“No,” he said, his voice cracking with terror, “I swear.”

He felt the gun removed from his neck and he turned slightly to look up at the man. “Timmonds had the tape and there are no hard copies.”

He saw the masked man nodding slightly, not knowing whether the man believed him, or knew he was lying. The mother reached over and slipped her hand over her son’s and pleaded with the men.

“Don’t harm my children. Please, just take anything you want.”

The masked man’s voice was calm, controlled. “We’re leaving. Face the floor and don’t move. If you look up, you’ll be shot.”

The mother whispered to the child to close his eyes and not move. She suddenly felt that everything was going to be all right; if they had wanted to kill all of them they would have gotten the baby out of the nursery. She squeezed her son’s hand to relay the message that it was almost over.

And then it was over.

—X—X—

APARTMENT 42, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
APRIL 13, 1998, 12:05 A.M.

FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder was asleep on the couch in his apartment when he was awakened by the phone ringing. Sleepily he looked at the clock: 12:05 a.m. A flash of
lightning momentarily illuminated the room, followed by a clap of thunder as Mulder’s hand fumbled to pick up the receiver of the phone on the table.

“H’lo,” he mumbled.

A gravelly voice on the other end spoke slowly, “There’s been another one.”

Half asleep, Mulder sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Another what?”

“Extermination,” came the stranger’s blunt reply.

Mulder was awake now. He reached over and flicked on the lamp, squinting against the sudden light, then grabbed a pencil and paper off the table. “Give me the details,” he said.

The gruff-voiced man hesitated and through the phone Mulder could hear traffic swishing on the wet streets.

“Alan Dossett and family. 2901 —”

“Family?” Mulder asked sickly.

“2901 Lexington Street.”

Mulder hurriedly scribbled the address. “Wait, don’t hang up! Why do you keep giving me this information?”

There was a long pause where Mulder heard the man sigh deeply, his voice sounding irritated. “You’re not digging deep enough, Agent Mulder.”

“Who are you? Who —!”

The phone went dead.

—X—X—

DOSSETT FAMILY RESIDENCE
TENLYTOWN, D.C.
1:20 A.M.

Mulder pulled up to a house in an average neighborhood where many police cars and other vehicles were parked. Red and blue flashing lights gave the scene an ominous look. People were standing on their porches or in their garages, out of the rain, but curious. He flashed his ID as he exited his car and entered the house. A box of disposable latex gloves was on the living room table and he put on a pair.

“Where are they?” he asked a police officer as he showed his federal identification.

“In the basement.”

Mulder went down the steep steps to find officers taking prints and photographs. The basement was ordinary, apparently used more as a laundry room and general storage area. The floor had linoleum tiles, which had curled in places; the walls were unfinished plasterboard. He glanced over at the bodies, not yet covered, and his eyes fell on the child. All three were face down with their hands underneath their bodies. He noticed the mother’s
hand under the child’s body. He noted the blood spatter pattern on the wall above each victim’s head.

Mulder approached an officer who was attempting to lift a print from the stairway banister. “Who’s in charge of this investigation?”

The officer pointed to a plainclothes detective. “Detective Brusso,” he answered.

Mulder walked over to him, but waited until he finished giving some instruction to a uniformed officer. The detective was around 50-ish with thinning blonde hair. From the looks of his height and weight he probably played some college football somewhere. He reminded Mulder of that television actor who often portrayed the role of police detective. His name escaped him for the moment.

The detective turned in Mulder’s direction and Mulder stepped toward him. “Detective, I’m Special Agent Fox Mulder, FBI.”

“FBI? How’d you find out about this so fast? We haven’t even called the Coroner yet.”

“An informant. This killing may be linked to two out-of-state murders. Can you give me some brief details?”

“Yeah. I hate these kinds of cases. We’ll use all the help we can get.”

He and Mulder walked back over to the bodies and Brusso briefly scanned his note pad. “Execution style murder — gunshot to the back of the head. Husband, wife, young child. Apparently they were told to lie face down with their hands underneath them. They must have believed they wouldn’t be harmed, because there are no other marks, no restraints on the bodies.” The detective pointed to the floor. “They laid down a blanket. How thoughtful,” he sneered.

Mulder kneeled down, examining the entry wound of each victim. His eyes lingered again on the child. Cases like this were especially disturbing. No matter how much research he did, how many psychological profiles he published, he would never fully comprehend how any human being could kill as cold-blooded as this.

“Looks like the same caliber weapon. One shooter.” Mulder stated.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so.”

Mulder frowned and the detective motioned for him to follow him upstairs. They proceeded up the creaky wooden steps, exiting into a hallway that opened into the living room. Two more plainclothes officers were writing down statements from two elderly witnesses.

Detective Brusso interrupted. “Excuse me, Parks. This is an agent with the FBI. We’ll take over here for a minute.” As Officer Parks walked away, Brusso looked at the older gentleman being questioned by the officer. “Mr. …” he stopped, forgetting the man’s name.

“Gordon,” the elderly man answered. “I live next door.”

“And I’m Mrs. Kelly. I live across the street.”

“Mrs. Kelly,” said Brusso, “can you kind of reiterate what you told me for Agent Mulder?”
“As we told the detective, the family only moved here a short time ago. They kept to themselves; even the young boy didn’t seem to play with the other neighborhood kids. But the times I did have a chance to say hello, they seemed friendly enough. What a terrible tragedy. I keep saying we need to organize a Block Watch.”

“Would you mind telling Agent Mulder what you heard?” Brusso asked of both neighbors.

The two witnesses looked at each other, and the man went first. “I was watching David Letterman. She likes Jay Leno,” he said, as the two exchanged smiles.

Mulder glanced over at Detective Brusso who raised his eyebrows, having heard these remarks before, as Mr. Gordon continued. “Just after the commercial, I heard a loud boom. At first I didn’t think it was a gunshot because it was so loud. But I guess it was.”

“I heard the same thing, Mr. Mulder. I don’t know what a gunshot sounds like, except on TV, and it didn’t sound like that,” Mrs. Kelley joined in.

Mulder nodded, writing down what they said in a small notebook. His eyes glanced down to the floor and he saw that Mrs. Kelly was wearing a pair of bright pink fuzzy slippers with her lime green sweat suit. Mr. Gordon was wearing gray slacks, a chestnut-colored golf shirt and tennis shoes with no socks. Apparently both individuals had dressed quickly.

“Then what?” Mulder asked, making eye contact with both of them.

They looked at each other and shrugged. The man explained further. “I looked out the window, but didn’t see anything unusual.”

Mulder nodded. “Did you notice any vehicles next door? Anybody outside?”

“Can’t say that I did.”

“Ma’am?” Mulder directed to the woman.

“Oh dear. I’m afraid I didn’t look outside. Jay was getting ready to have a man on his show who could play marching tunes on his teeth.”

Mulder tried not to show a reaction. The older man touched Mulder’s arm and winked. “That’s why I watch Letterman.”

Mulder gave him a faint smile and thought a minute. “Are each of you saying you only heard one shot?”

They both nodded. Mulder looked at the detective who gave an look. “Thank you. If I have any further questions, would either of you mind if I called you later?”

Neither objected and Detective Brusso spoke up. “I have their phone numbers in the report. You’ll get a copy.”

Mulder smiled at the couple. “Thank you for your cooperation. Here’s my card. In case you think of anything else, you can call me or Detective Brusso.”

He walked back into the hallway with the detective. Mulder noticed on the wall an 8”x10” framed photograph of a fighter plane mixed in with various family pictures. He looked away quickly, not wanting to reflect on the lives these people lived; not wanting to feel the
tragedy of what happened in this house. Detective Brusso avoided looking at the pictures as well.

“Agent Mulder, there’s one more aspect of this case that you aren’t aware of.”

“What’s that?”

“An 18 month old baby was left unharmed in a crib in that bedroom,” he said, pointing down the hall.

Again, Mulder looked surprised. He walked through the doorway into the nursery. The clean smell of baby lotion permeated the air. The room was painted powder blue. One wall was papered with colorful cartoon-drawn airplanes. A short, white dresser held a lamp in the shape of Snoopy in a red bi-plane. Several crib toys were strewn on the floor. Mulder picked up a soft brown teddy bear whose rubber nose showed obvious tooth marks.

Mulder suddenly remembered his sister, Samantha, had a stuffed toy wolf she used to drag around by its tail. One day the tail finally came off and Mulder had to convince his tearful little sister that she hadn’t killed it.

Mulder snapped back to the present. Detective Brusso was explaining that the baby was with Child Protective Services until the next of kin could be notified.

“Who made the 911 call?” Mulder asked.

“We think the killer or killers.”

“Why do you think that?”

“The call was made from here. The 911 operator who took the call said no one appeared to be on the line, but the line was left open allowing an immediate trace. When police arrived they found the receiver lying on the kitchen counter. Whoever did it wanted their crime known immediately.”

Mulder thought over what he had said. He didn’t want to share all his hunches right now, but maybe there was another explanation.

“Agent Mulder, do you want to see the boy’s room?”

Mulder’s memory suddenly flashed a vision of police officers entering Samantha’s room following her disappearance.

“No,” Mulder answered bluntly.

Mulder took out his ID wallet and retrieved a business card. He wrote on the back of his card and handed it to Brusso. “That’s my office number. I’ve written my cell phone number on the back. Would you fax me the report as soon as it’s completed?”

“Sure. Is this going to be shared information?”

“To tell you the truth, you probably have much more to go on than I do. But yes, I’ll forward anything I have to you.”

“You said an informant called you.”

https://x-libris.xf-redux.com/story/destiny/
“A voice on the phone, nothing more. I have no idea who this individual is or why he is linking this to two other homicides.”

Mulder took a deep breath and glanced away absently for a moment. He remembered the strange caller’s threat that it was Mulder’s responsibility to stop the killings. He knew that wasn’t true, yet he was still feeling some kind of guilt.

“I guess I’ve got some digging to do. But I will keep you posted,” Mulder stated.

He turned to leave, but he recalled something and stopped to face the detective again. “Has anyone ever told you that you look like Brian Dennehey, the actor?”

“No, my wife mostly compares me to a horse’s ass.”

—X—X—

Chapter 3

APT. #35
ANNAPOlis, MARYLAND
6:15 A.M., APRIL 13, 1998

Scully, in her bathrobe, was fixing coffee. She had been up late working on a possible behavior model of a serial killer in Sheridan, Wyoming. The local FBI had contacted Quantico to request the assistance of the FBI’s top profilers. Assistant Director Walter Skinner immediately assigned Special Agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder to the case.

After reviewing the facts and the background of the three victims, Mulder admitted that he was having trouble ‘connecting’ to this case. That happened sometimes with profilers when, for no apparent reason, they just couldn’t establish a basis to develop. The victims in this case were all female hairdressers, all single, all over 35 years old. Each had been electrocuted in the bathtub with a hair dryer. Autopsies revealed large amounts of alcohol in their bloodstream, which indicated they were probably placed in the tub of water after they passed out, whereupon the electric hair dryer was turned on then dropped into the water.

At first, Mulder thought it was a joke. Even after he realized it wasn’t, he couldn’t seem to come up with a serious profile. The first suspect he suggested they focus on was an individual with a bad haircut. Unfortunately, he added, that would have to include all high-ranking military officers. Mulder went on to suggest suspects such as Carrot Top, Don King, Dennis Rodman and Bill Gates. The only person who could absolutely be eliminated as a suspect was Miami Dolphins coach, Jimmy Johnson. Scully didn’t know who he was talking about. Then he changed directions and stated perhaps it was a Rogaine failure, so they should focus on Rod Steiger, Demi Moore and the entire NBA. But when Mulder recommended that Scully find out where Assistant Director Skinner was the nights of the murders, she drew the line. She unplugged his laptop, handed him his jacket and ordered him out of her apartment so she could work. Mulder laughed all the way out the door.

Later, trying to put the profile together, Scully found that his remarks kept coming back to her, making it difficult even for her to concentrate on the case. Profiling wasn’t her forte, but someone had to give this case the serious consideration it was due. Eventually though, in the wee hours of the morning, she finished.
When the phone rang, she dumped the coffee into the filter, turned down her radio and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Morning Scully.”

“Mulder. You just finish your morning run?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I’m at the office.”

Scully looked up at her kitchen clock. “At 6:15?”

“Since 4:45,” he yawned, “and I’m feeling every minute of it. How about you? Did you finish that profile?”

“Yes. Thanks so much for your help,” she answered, hearing him chuckle on the other end. She took a coffee cup out of the cabinet and opened the refrigerator, taking out the creamer. “What’s up?”

“I got a call from the Raid Man last night.”

“There’s been another ‘extermination’?”

“So he says.”

Scully hesitated. Absently, she parted her kitchen window curtain and looked out at the rain. She saw her neighbor standing at his car, getting soaked by the rain as he fought to close his umbrella. “Mulder, I just heard a report on the radio about a family found dead in their home.”

“That’s the one.”

“Have you been out there?”

“Briefly. I’m going to check into the family’s background a little more. The Raid Man says I’m not digging deep enough.”

“How many does this make, Mulder?”

“He’s called me three times.”

Scully heard a catch in his voice and a deep sigh from him. She had a mental image of him sitting at his desk, his feet propped up on the corner, probably jiggling a handful of sunflower seeds. When she suggested once that he should start the morning with more of a complete breakfast, he added a Diet Dr. Pepper.

“Scully, are you coming in soon?”

“I’m getting in the shower, then I’ll be right there.”

“Good. I’ll save you a donut.”

“No you won’t,” she stated from past experience.
Mulder smiled and hung up.

—X—X—

FBI HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mulder was at the computer when Scully came in. She set her dripping umbrella and coat in a closet. “Morning again,” she greeted. “Lousy weather, huh?”

“Not if you’re a duck.”

He got up to pour them both a cup of coffee. “I can’t find any real link between these three murders, Scully. There is one unusual aspect though. I’ll tell you about that in a minute.”

“Okay. Tell me what you know of this last killing.”

Mulder handed Scully her coffee and picked up some papers. “Detective Brusso faxed me his police report. Deceased is male, age 42, female, age 41, 10-year-old son. Time of death — and they’re almost exact with this because of the 911 call — 11:25 p.m.”

“Who called 911?”

“This is the first strange element. 911 is called, but instead of the phone being hung up, it’s left laying open on a kitchen counter — upstairs from the bodies.”

“Someone wanted an immediate response.”

“Yeah. But why? Could it be because an 18 month old baby was left sleeping in a crib?”

Scully pondered the information. “Wait a minute, Mulder. Are you telling me, some psycho went in there, killed three people, including a 10 year-old boy, then was concerned about the welfare of a baby?”

“Scully, if we have a psycho here, why was the baby untouched?”

She thought a minute then shook her head. “Maybe the killer missed it.”

“Have you ever been in a home where there’s a baby?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’ll get my point. There was evidence everywhere that a baby was in the house — from toys, to diapers, to baby food jars on the kitchen counter right next to where the call to the police was made.”

“So you’re saying the killer or killers might have only eliminated potential witnesses to something?”

“Could be. Let me give you another unusual fact. I spoke with two neighbors who were up watching TV. They both heard what sounded like a single shot at about the time the coroner fixes death.”

“A single shot?”
Mulder nodded. “Just one. Scully, how do you kill three people with one shot?”

The corner of her mouth curled into a smile. “The magic bullet theory?”

“Do I look like the Warren Commission? Even I wouldn’t have suggested that,” he countered.

“Any other neighbors interviewed?”

“They were still asking questions when I left. I’m sure there will be more, but these two people were wide awake. They know what they heard.”

Scully obviously looked confused. “I’m not making any connections yet.”

Mulder smiled. “Well, I’ve had all morning to think about this, plus I’ve pulled the files on the other two murders. Tell me what you think about this.” He popped a disk into the computer and entered a file number. “Here’s the police report I got from the Charlotte P.D. on Jacob Timmonds, Raid Man’s first extermination call to me. This murder occurred a week ago.”

Scully began to skim the document reading out loud from it. The victim lived alone and was shot while he was asleep. There were no signs of forced entry.

Mulder pointed to a paragraph on the screen. “Read this part.”

“In an empty bedroom, police found a laundry basket full of dog food and a small inflatable pool full of water.”

Scully narrowed her eyes at Mulder, prompting his deduction.

“Timmonds wasn’t found for 5 days. During that time, his dog had plenty of food and water.”

“Mulder, if you’re implying what I think you’re implying, you can’t be serious,” Scully said, in a reserved tone of voice.

“Can you explain a swimming pool in the bedroom, Scully? The dog had two small empty bowls in the kitchen. Not only that, but there were no prints on the pool. None. Not even the victim’s. It was wiped clean. But wait, there’s more,” Mulder said quickly, watching her roll her eyes at him. He popped in another disk. “This was the Raid Man’s second extermination call, two days after the Timmonds murder. Martin and Shirley Pappas who lived in Fort Wayne, Indiana.”

Mulder poured himself another cup of coffee as Scully scanned the computer screen. He noticed the tailored suit she was wearing, a heavy cotton pants and jacket in moss green with silver buttons down the front. It brought out the contrast of her shimmering red-gold hair.

“That’s a good color on you, Scully.”

“Thank you,” she answered absently, so preoccupied with reading she was barely aware of the compliment. She moved the text down, then stopped and continued reading. “Same MO, shot in the back of the head ... witnesses heard one shot.”
She looked at Mulder. One shot.

“Keep going,” he urged.

“Both victims were discovered in the den, sitting side by side in kitchen chairs facing the wall.” Scully looked up at Mulder. “So none of the victims faced their killer. That’s not unusual.”

“Again, neither was bound. But I did a little more digging and found out that Mrs. Pappas was recovering from recent knee replacement surgery.”

Scully cocked her head and gave Mulder a wary look. She watched him pull a package of sunflower seeds from his desk drawer and remove the paperclip that held it closed.

“I’m almost afraid to ask what that has to do with anything,” Scully remarked, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I think they let her sit in a chair rather than be uncomfortable on the floor while they shot her,” he answered bluntly.

Scully blinked slowly and gave Mulder a look like <let me call someone to come get you>.

“Mulder,” she said with heavy sarcasm in her voice and a glint in her eye, “this is looking more like the work of aliens.”

He ignored her ridicule. “Scully, bear with me a minute.”

“Are you suggesting these are some kind of mercy killings; that we have a Good Samaritan who just happens to possess homicidal tendencies? Because if you are, I gotta’ tell you I feel much more secure with your UFO theories.”

Mulder sighed deeply. “You’re not listening.”

She turned completely around in her chair to face him as he came around and sat on the edge of the desk, looking down at her.

“You have my undivided attention, Mulder,” she said sarcastically.

—X—X—

Chapter 4

AGENT FOX MULDER’S OFFICE

He took a deep breath. “In the first killing, the dog was taken care of. In the second killing, the female victim was allowed to sit during her execution.” Mulder motioned with his finger for her to hold her tongue for a minute while he continued. “And in the last killing, a baby was spared. In both multiple killings, only one shot was heard. How is that possible when two people are shot at one crime scene, and three at another? Remember, the shot was reported to be louder than normal. And none of the victims faced their killers.”

“There had to be two shooters, or three, as the case may be, who fired at exactly the same moment.”
Mulder nodded, then went on to explain his hypothesis. “When you shoot one person, the other, or others, realize for one terrifying, indescribable moment, what’s coming. But if all the victims are shot at the same time, facing away from the shooters, they would never know what hit them.”

“So we have a compassionate killer, or killers?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Also, in all three crimes, there was no obvious search of the house and it appears nothing was stolen. Murder seems to be the only reason for going in there.”

The lights flickered and there was a loud crack of thunder. Scully started to stand with her mug and Mulder saw it was empty. He took it and refilled it. As he came back to the desk, she was holding the donut box.

“Mulder, what’s this?” she said, holding the box out to him.

He grimaced. “Oh,” he said simply.

“This box is empty.”

“Is it?” he asked innocently, but not convincingly.

Scully nodded, waiting for his explanation.

“Well, I guess it’s just another one of those unexplained mysteries that —”

“Like most of your theories, Mulder, not so mysterious. I had my heart set on a lemon-filled.”

Mulder only shrugged. Scully’s tough demeanor subsided. “You owe me.” Mulder nodded and Scully tossed the empty box into the garbage can. “Have you talked to Skinner about this?” she asked.

“I, uh, was waiting for you.”

“I see. You expect me to rally in your corner after you eat all the donuts.”

Mulder turned on the charm. “He’ll listen if we both agree on this. Besides, you’re so good with him,” he complimented.

“You think this is an X-File?”

“It has all the characteristics of an X-File. Not to mention the mysterious caller who obviously wants us involved.”

“He wants you involved.”

“Us,” Mulder correctly emphatically. “We’re a team and anybody who know me, knows that.”

He saw her considering the unusual aspects of the cases. Mulder put his hand on her arm and she looked up at him. His lightheartedness was gone and she could see that he was dead serious now.
His voice was lower and softer. “Scully, this morning I saw a 10 year-old boy with half of his head blown away. I don’t want to get anymore phone calls in the middle of the night.”

She hadn’t stopped to consider the impact of the murder on her partner until just now, and the fact that someone was urging him to investigate it further. “You’re right, Mulder. Let’s go talk to Skinner.”

At that moment a tremendous boom of thunder shook the windows, causing both of them to flinch, and look at each other with the same portentous thought.

—X—X—

Agents Scully and Mulder came out of Assistant Director Walter Skinner’s office and started back to their office. Scully playfully yanked on Mulder’s tie. “You owe me more than donuts, Mulder.”

Grinning, he held the door for her as she went into their office. Scully sat down and watched Mulder walk over to the file cabinet and pull out the top drawer. Absently he flipped through the folders, not looking for anything in particular.

“Okay, where do we start?” she asked.

She waited for him to answer, thinking he probably had it all figured out. When he got in his contemplative mode, as it appeared he was in now, there was no telling which direction his mind would go. He certainly had a knack for considering all possibilities; of course, where Fox Mulder was concerned, nothing was outside the realm of possibility.

He caught her off guard once again when he slammed the file drawer shut and turned to her. “I’ve been thinking about having one of those moon roofs put in my car. It would be great for days like this. You know, drive along, the rain beating down over your head, pop in some James Taylor tunes. What do you think, Scully?” he asked, walking back over to his desk.

She sighed, meaning, <let’s get to work>, which Mulder easily recognized.

He sat back down at the computer. Staring at the blank screen for what seemed like an eternity, he then began punching buttons. “Let’s try something. Let’s assume all our victims were silenced because they knew something. Scully, can you hand me that folder behind you?”

She did, and Mulder looked up the names of the other victims. There were no geographical correlations. He checked all the employment information that was in the files. There was no connection between any of them. He thought a minute, then entered a search into the computer.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“Military background. There was a framed photo of an F-16 on the wall of the Dossett family home.”

While the computer searched, Mulder and Scully both read through additional notes. Finally the computer beeped, signaling the search was complete. Confounded, Mulder pointed to the screen to point out one puzzling result of the computer search. For each man, the
inquiry produced the same answer: ‘Information unavailable’ instead of ‘None.’

“That’s odd, don’t you think?” he asked Scully.

She had to agree. The data could have been missed on one individual, but not three.

Mulder cracked a sunflower seed between his teeth. He held out the bag to Scully but she shook her head.

“This is a new flavor, Scully. You should try one.”

“Barbecue or salsa?”

“No,” he said deadpan, “lemon filled.”

Their eyes locked, an often-played stare-down competition of who would crack first, and Mulder soon lost, breaking into a wide grin. Scully retained her composure, but with difficulty. “I may hurt you before the day is over.”

He laughed and re-clipped the sunflower seed bag. Scully pointed with her chin toward the computer screen. “Where do we go with this?”

Mulder stood and put his hand on her back, indicating it was time for them to leave. “I know someone we can talk to at the Pentagon,” he said with a wink.

—X—X—

The rest of the afternoon they spent digging in files and crosschecking the details of the three crimes. Since they could not uncover specific information on the victims’ military background, they made an appointment the following day to meet with Mulder’s contact at the Pentagon, an Air Force Colonel who had worked with Mulder before on cases and was happy to assist.

Scully and Mulder decided to have an early dinner, since they had not stopped for lunch. One of the things Scully had to get used to when she was transferred to the X-Files was the routine — or lack thereof. Coming from her teaching position at the FBI Academy, her schedule had been predictable: eight to five, weekends off. Now, the hours were often long and the days ran together. But she seemed to have found something she didn’t expect — excitement from the challenge to science that the X-Files posed.

During the time that the X-Files were shut down, she realized how disillusioned she became with mundane work. She knew that part of that discontent was the loss of her partner.

Never had she experienced such satisfaction as when she and Mulder could close an X-File, because in each instance the odds seemed against them.

They were just getting out of the car when Mulder’s cell phone rang. He answered as he and Scully hurried under an awning to get out of the rain.

The voice on the other end was harsh. “I’ve got another one for you.”

Mulder didn’t immediately recognize the voice, then it hit him. The Raid Man. He was still puzzled, as well as concerned, that the caller had gotten his private number.

“Are you there, Mulder?”
“What is your interest in this,” Mulder said sharply.

His tone of voice alerted Scully, who listened carefully. She could see right away that these calls were upsetting to Mulder.

“Write this down,” the caller demanded.

“No! You tell me what your connection is and why you have this information!”

“Peter, Janet, Colby and Mandy Jameson.”

Mulder was stunned. Four people. Another family. Scully saw the color drain from his face as he clutched the phone tighter.

“Listen you son-of-a-bitch —”

“Keep digging, Agent Mulder. It won’t end until you stop it.”

“Give me something to go on! Don’t hang up on me!”

Mulder heard a noise over the phone. “Don’t —” he heard a dial tone. “Dammit!”

Scully was afraid he was going to throw his phone against the wall, so she put a restraining hand on his arm. His face was one of anger and shock.

“Mulder, what is it?”

Still shaken, he couldn’t’ answer right away.

She pulled him gently by the arm. “Let’s go.”

—X—X—

JAMESON FAMILY RESIDENCE
McLEAN, VIRGINIA
6:30 P.M.

Just as the sun was setting, they entered another house where emergency vehicles and television trucks lined the street. Mulder was very quiet as Scully made introductions with the police and they went into a back bedroom to view the bodies. All four had been shot execution-style. The victims were a mother, father, and two children under the age of 8. Mulder had seen all he needed to see. He turned and walked onto the back porch. Scully, watching him walk out, asked a few more questions, took some notes, then joined him on the porch. She could see his distress, and more than that, his anger bubbling just below the surface, but he needed to get past it.

Mulder watched her lean back against a wooden post and put her hands in her coat pockets. “Mulder, the crime scene is in there, not out here,” she said shortly.

His eyes narrowed, and he looked at her. <Oh, really?>

“This guy is taunting you. You’re letting him get to you.”

“He said I’d have to be the one to stop it.”
“Well, let’s get the forensics on this first. There are homicides in the city without being linked together.”

“He called, Scully! That links it to the other ones!”

“Okay. Okay,” she said, trying to calm him by remaining calm herself. “You can’t take this personally, Mulder.”

“The hell I can’t! Maybe if I had dug into these cases in the beginning like I was told —”

“Stop it, Mulder,” Scully said sharply.

He rubbed his eyes with one hand, then crossed his arms and took a deep breath, leaning back against the house. An officer came out the back door and went down the steps into the yard as Scully stepped closer to Mulder, lowering her voice.

“You said it yourself, this Raid Man has given you nothing to go on. Maybe he’s just a weirdo.”

“He knows about the murders minutes after they happen. And how did he get my cell phone number?”

“Mulder, you don’t know that. He probably has a police scanner. As far as your cell phone number, I can think of half a dozen ways anyone can get that, and so can you.”

Scully was quiet for a minute, watching Mulder stare out across the yard. She said softly, “Do you think the caller could be the killer, that he’s playing some cat and mouse game with you — catch me if you can?”

“I’ve thought of that. My instincts tell me no.”

Scully smiled. “You’ve got pretty good instincts.”

The door to the back porch opened and Mulder turned around. He saw a familiar figure, who greeted him.

“Agent Mulder. I was told you were here.”

“Detective Brusso, this is my partner, Special Agent Dana Scully.” Mulder said to Scully, watching the two shake hands. “He’s leading the investigation on the Dossett murders.”

“Were you notified of this by your informant again?” Brusso asked.

Mulder hesitated, feeling uneasy about the peculiarity of his involvement in these murders. “Yes. Agent Scully and I have been doing extensive background checks on the victims and cross-checking any similarities between these murders.”

“Have you come up with anything?”

Mulder glanced at Scully who remained silent. “Actually, detective, these murders are going to be handed over to the FBI. We’re convinced there’s a serial killer at work here. There are some unusual aspects to these cases and the Bureau has access to some resources the local police department doesn’t have.”
Mulder waited for his reaction. Most police departments do not like being bumped by the FBI. He was relieved when Brusso shrugged.

“It’s not like our homicide division is looking for work, Agent Mulder. I’ll be more than happy to hand it over to you. If your resources can help find this guy, more power to you.”

“Thank you. We’ll be requesting all the reports, interviews and analysis that you’ve done on the Dossett and Jameson cases.”

The detective nodded, and wished Mulder and Scully good luck. As an afterthought, he added, “If you know of anyone who wants an African Gray, we found it flying around the house when we got there. Someone let it out of its cage.”

Scully and Mulder exchanged looks, but said nothing, only indicated they would let him know if they found someone who wanted a bird. They watched the detective cross the yard to speak with an officer.

Scully frowned. “He kind of looks like that actor on TV — what’s his name?”

Mulder squinted at her and said, straight-faced, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He opened the door and motioned her to enter first. There was a lot of work to do while they waited for the rest of the federal homicide team to arrive.

—X—X—

After a full day of work and the exhausting and emotional hours collecting evidence at the murder scene, both agents went home. Mulder put a John Jarvis CD in the stereo and turned the volume up. He plopped on the sofa and shut his eyes to all the horrors he had seen the last two days. But the visions were not so easy to dismiss.

He found that at times of immense stress, thoughts of his sister, Samantha, came to him. One of the Jameson children was a little girl about the same age Samantha was when she disappeared. Mulder could not help but put the face of his sister to that dead child.

He stood up and went into the kitchen where he grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. He took one long swallow, then slowly turned the can upside down over the sink, watching the frothy liquid run down the drain.

—X—X—

Scully tried to relax in bed with a book but she could not concentrate on her reading. She thought about starting her own psychological profile on the killer or killers, but knew that distancing herself from this kind of work, if only for a few hours, was vital to her own mental health. She knew Mulder would be trying to do the same thing, but probably having an even tougher time.

She worried about her partner sometimes. The disappearance of his sister intensified his compulsion to solve crimes involving children. What happened in his past was part of his nature, and nothing was going to change that. The best she could do for him was to balance out his emotional passion and drive, his relentless pursuit of the truth, with her own scientific proficiencies. After all, since working with Fox Mulder, she had learned that emotional intensity and hard evidence made for a good team.
Her eyes wandered to the phone and she thought about calling him, but changed her mind. Sometimes Mulder needed his own space to deal with things, and when he didn’t, he let her know.

—X—X—

APRIL 14, 1998
8:00 A.M.

The following morning, Mulder picked Scully up at her apartment for their meeting with Colonel Hodson. The rain had stopped but it was cold and overcast. As she fastened her seatbelt, he reached under his seat to retrieve a sack of donuts which he put in her lap.

“Surprise,” he said.

“How did you know I didn’t have time to eat?”

“I didn’t. I figured you could force one down just to be polite.”

Scully peeked into the bag. “I hope you got —”

“Lemon filled. Yes, ma’am.”

Scully spread the napkin in her lap and took a donut out of the bag. “So, Mulder, tell me about Colonel Hodson,” she said, taking a bite of the donut. “What’s the story with him?”

She saw that familiar hesitation she got from her partner when he was reluctant to reveal information about his sources. Instead of getting an answer from him, she got a shrug.

“Come on, Mulder,” she prodded, teasing him a little. “Tell me some deep dark secret.”

He looked over at her and reached over to wipe some powdered sugar from the corner of her mouth, then licked the sugar off his finger.

“Well, all right. But you can’t repeat this, Scully.” He hesitated again, waiting until he had finished turning the car around the corner and stopped for a red light.

He leaned toward her and whispered dramatically, “Colonel Hodson is no Tiger Woods.”

—X—X—

THE PENTAGON
ALEXANDRIA, VA

When they reached the Pentagon, they showed their ID’s to a very young Marine who took their weapons before asking them to step through the metal detector. Instinctively, Scully still cringed when she went through, but no alarm sounded. Another Marine escorted them to an information desk. A young man dressed in a suit took their ID’s and punched their names and federal identification numbers into a computer.

Only seconds later he looked up at the agents and smiled. “You’re meeting with Colonel Hodson. Please wait in the lobby over there. He’ll be right down.”

Scully watched soldiers, businessmen and foreign dignitaries go in and out of the building.
She wondered what purpose each of them might have in the headquarters of our Government’s Department of Defense. She’d probably rather not know.

Mulder had picked up a Sports Illustrated from a table and was flipping through it. They heard footsteps approaching and looked up to see Colonel Hodson coming toward them, his hand outstretched. Mulder shook hands with him.

“Thanks for seeing us on such short notice, Colonel. This is my partner, Dana Scully,” Mulder introduced.

“Nice to meet you Agent Scully.” He shook her hand and motioned toward the elevator. “Let’s go up to my office.”

As they entered an elevator, they didn’t notice an older man in uniform watching them from behind a desk. As the elevator doors closed, he picked up the phone to make a call.

—X—X—

MUNICH, GERMANY

1:00 P.M.

In an office on the other side of the world, the phone rang. It continued to ring several times before an older gentleman hesitantly picked it up. He would not be surprised by the voice on the other end; he had been expecting the call. He answered in German and the brief conversation proceeded in German. Through the phone line, which carried thinly over land and sea, he heard foreboding in the caller’s strained voice.

“Es ist begonnen [It’s begun],” the caller said bluntly. “Agent Mulder wird näher [Agent Mulder is getting close]. Rufen sie die anderen an [Call the others].”

Without uttering a single word, the old gentleman hung up the receiver slowly, then sat back in his chair, deeply contemplating where their next actions would lead.

—X—X—

As they entered Hodson’s office, Mulder was acutely aware that Hodson left the door open. Mulder understood the significance of that. He probably should have filled Scully in a little more, but Hodson had asked him not to reveal certain specifics to his partner. Mulder had to honor that request, and by the same token, he explained that only limited information on the case would given to Hodson.

Colonel Hodson’s office was smaller than Scully expected. There were numerous framed photos of military aircraft on the walls. One photo was of the Colonel and President Bush playing golf.

Sitting in front of Hodson’s desk, neither of the agents could see his computer screen. The Colonel looked across at them. “You say the FBI data banks are inconclusive for military records?”

“Yeah. Nothing on any of them,” Mulder remarked.

They waited patiently, listening to the clicking of the computer keys as Hodson accessed his
computer. Mulder pulled a notepaper from inside his coat pocket listing the name of the four murdered men and handed it to Hodson. The Colonel looked at the note a long time, as if trying to figure out the best way to go about getting the information they requested. Then he typed in the first name, birthday and social security number of Jacob Timmonds, who was first on the list. The computer beeped and Hodson looked at Mulder.

“Bingo!” Hodson exclaimed.

“Okay,” Mulder said, looking satisfactorily at Scully, “that’s number one. How about victim number two —”

Hodson suddenly looked startled. “Victim? Are these men dead?”

Mulder nodded. Scully seemed to be more attuned to the Colonel’s reaction, but she didn’t know what to make of it. Hodson then turned back to the computer and Scully sensed an unexplainable change in him. She had found though, that most people felt uncomfortable prying into a deceased’s past. Mulder confessed once that even at a crime scene where the victims were dead, he felt like he was violating their privacy.

Hodson went through the same process, and again the computer located a military file. Mulder turned to look at Scully’s reaction, and she at least looked intrigued. Hodson entered the other two names and waited. None of them were surprised when a service record popped on the screen for Jameson and Dossett, but Scully was not impressed yet.

Colonel Hodson read off the brief military descriptions of each man. Timmonds and Pappas both served one tour of duty in Vietnam in the late 1960’s. Both men received minor shrapnel wounds. Jameson was at N.A.S. Pensacola through 1991 and Dossett, a marine, spent 8 years in the Philippines and North Africa from 1976 to 1984. It didn’t appear from the records that any of the men’s paths ever crossed.

Mulder rubbed his chin. “It seems significant that all four would have a service record.”

Scully disagreed. “Timmonds and Pappas are older. They served when the draft was in effect, during the Vietnam War. The other two, well, coincidence.”

“Scully, there’s some measure of coincidence in everything; that’s what makes life fun,” he said, giving her a satisfied grin.

Hodson stood. “I hate to rush you, but I have a conference in 15 minutes.”

The agents rose and once again shook his hand. “Thanks for your help, Colonel. Even if it’s not solid evidence, at least it’s a start,” Mulder said.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

—X—X—

Chapter 5

Mulder and Scully walked briskly to their car following their meeting with Colonel Hodson. They had discovered nothing remarkable about the service records of the three individuals. Then again, they didn’t expect anything significant to be in an accessible military data bank.
Mulder tossed the keys to Scully and she caught them as he dug his hands in the pockets of his overcoat and leaned against the car.

“What is it, Mulder?”

He shook his head, not able to put his finger on it. “Something’s missing.”

“A lot is missing.”

“No, I mean ... I don’t know what I mean. I have this sick feeling that this is happening elsewhere, in another part of the country, not just here, or North Carolina or Indiana, but maybe in several places.”

“Is this your paranoid conspiracy mode I’m seeing? That’s not entirely rational, Mulder, not at this point.”

Mulder’s eyes instantly met Scully’s and she saw a muscle tighten in his jaw.

<Wrong thing to say> she thought.

When he spoke, his voice was sharp. “Oh, right. Let’s not forget who the rational one of us is,” he snapped.

Scully ignored his remark. She knew it best not to get into a confrontation with him when his mind had taken this direction. He was obviously still edgy about the phone caller urging him to solve this case.

Mulder looked down at the ground and she waited quietly as he composed his thoughts. He shifted slightly and looked up at her as the wind tousled his unruly hair. He smiled faintly.

“Sorry. See what sugar overload will do to you?”

Scully nodded briefly. Mulder held out an open palm to her, indicating he wanted the keys back. “I’ll drive,” he said. “Rational people make me nervous.”

She dropped the keys in his hand and she couldn’t help but grin at him, but kept silent. As they got in the car, the sun began to break through the clouds.

—X—X—

MUNICH, GERMANY

6:30 P.M.

Three men sat in a darkened room in Munich, Germany. Had anyone entered the room, they would have been unable to distinguish their facial features as they sat concealed by the shadows in the room. The room smelled of cigarette smoke and furniture polish. The three men were from different backgrounds: one was American, one German, and one Russian. The Russian spoke nervously in broken English.

“He following the course?”

The other two men nodded. The German snubbed out a cigarette and his hand shook as he absently drew a circle in the ashes. Then he looked at the other two men, clearing his throat to conceal a shiver that ran down his spine. “What comes next?” he asked, barely
above a whisper.

The American sat forward in his chair, arms resting on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him. His voice was strained. “The photograph.”

All three men, sitting beyond a pool of soft light spilling from a pale shade, glanced at one another solemnly. They had reached a crossroad, a point of no return where the future of the world hung precariously on the actions of a few men.

The American stood anxiously and turned his back to the other two as he faced the window and lit another cigarette. He spoke without turning around. “We will have to watch him very closely from here on.”

“And what about his partner? Can we depend on him to —”

The Russian was interrupted as the American turned around to face the two men, the tip of his cigarette glowing in the dark, and his voice was blunt. “We will have to trust that events will fall into place.”

“And if there is a confrontation with his partner?” the German asked.

The American drew deeply on the cigarette and exhaled slowly. “He will do what he must do. I know this man well. We can be assured of that.”

Quiet consumed the room again. They each became noticeably aware of the loud ticking of a clock on top of a small table.

It seemed to symbolize a countdown.

—X—X—

LATER THAT NIGHT

Mulder was dozing on the couch in his darkened living room when he was awakened by a scraping noise in the hall outside his apartment. Grabbing his gun from the table, he moved quietly toward the door, then noticed a manila envelope had been slid underneath the door. After picking up the envelope, he unlocked the front door and carefully cracked it open just wide enough to stick his head out and scan the corridor. It was empty. He re-locked the door then took the envelope into the kitchen where he turned on the light to examine the contents.

Dumping the contents on the table, one photo slid facedown from the envelope. Mulder picked it up and turned it over. The photograph was a 5"x7" color glossy taken in front of some type of stone cathedral. The focal point of the picture was of four men getting into a car. Two of the men on the far side of the car were facing the camera; one man was walking around the back of the car, while another, opening the rear passenger door, had his back to the camera, thus concealing his face. Yet another man sat in the driver’s seat of the car, but his features were fuzzy.

Mulder instantly recognized two of the men — Alan Dossett and Peter Jameson.

—X—X—
Mulder grabbed Scully in the hallway the first thing next morning and they went straight to the Photo Lab. He filled her in as they walked. She admitted this case was taking odd turns and agreed that someone was prodding them to find answers.

A photo technician used a computer enhancement to enlarge the photo. Mulder had pulled photos on Jacob Timmonds and David Pappas. As the photo enlarged on the screen in front of them, the technician focused it.

Mulder walked to the screen and pointed to the two images. “That’s it, Scully. Alan Dossett, David Pappas and Peter Jameson. I’d bet my Stones collection this man,” Mulder said, tapping the screen on the figure whose back was turned, “is Jacob Timmonds.”

Scully studied the image. Mulder was right, which meant this investigation was heading in a dangerous direction.

Mulder walked back over beside her and Scully spoke to the technician. “Can you try and clarify the driver?”

“I’ll try,” the photo technician answered.

He began punching buttons on the computer. Mulder looked at Scully and she saw apprehension in his face, and something else. He saw her scrutinizing him and the corner of his mouth raised in a lopsided smile.

He leaned toward her and whispered, “What were you saying about my paranoid conspiracy mode?”

Her expression said that she conceded, at least for now. Mulder looked back up at the screen as the picture began to clear. As the features of the driver began to focus, Mulder began to recognize characteristics and the picture captured his full attention. The photo gradually became sharp enough to give the unidentified driver a face. The features were still a little fuzzy, and had that man been a stranger he might have been difficult to identify. But the agents knew this man. Scully’s face registered shock, and instinctively she looked at Mulder. He was tense, his hazel eyes steely and cold.

Scully touched his arm, breaking his gaze. In astonishment, staring at the grainy, full-blown image on the screen, Mulder mouthed the words:

“Alex Krycek.”

—X—X—

Mulder sat at his desk. Scully entered the office, closing the door behind her, and set a paper cup of water in front of him. She took the chair opposite him. He was deep in thought.

“Mulder?”

He blinked at her and opened his drawer where he took out some aspirin. “What does this mean, Scully? What the hell does this mean?”
He swallowed the pills, dropping the bottle in the drawer and slamming it shut. Agitated, unable to sit still, he stood and rubbed his eyes. Scully didn’t have any answers either. Mulder sat on the edge of the desk. He looked exhausted already.

“Krycek has only been seen a couple of times since he disappeared with the digital tape of the coded MJ Documents. Do you think this could have anything to do with that digital tape, Scully?” he asked lowly as if afraid to be overheard.

“I don’t know. I don’t think we should jump to conclusions.”

“But don’t you see! Those men and their families were killed because of something they knew. Something big. They were silenced. What would be important enough to resort to murdering a whole family? And the way they were killed, it was almost like the killers felt... somehow...” Mulder was at a loss to describe his intuition.

“Like they didn’t really want to kill them so they made it as easy as possible on them?”

“Exactly. The brutality of these murders, killing of the wives and children, is to scare whomever else might talk. Scully, had there never been a phone call from the Raid Man, we might never have put two and two together to make five.”

Scully had to admit to herself that it made about as much sense as Mulder’s math. Now they were back to the question of who to trust with information. Scully knew that Mulder would be contemplating the same question. What was unspoken between them so far was the personal tragedy that had come from trying to reveal the data on that tape the first time it had been in their possession, the grief caused by the murders of people close to Agents Mulder and Scully.

Mulder was jolted out of his thoughts by his cell phone ringing. When he answered, he recognized the frantic voice of Langley.

“Mulder, can you get over here right away?”

“What’s up?”

“We’ve got something for you,” he answered, his voice sounding strange.

Mulder’s quick-thinking mind began gathering facts together.

<No> he thought, <it can’t be that, it’s too much to hope for>.

Scully saw his pained expression as he pursed his lips and briefly shut his eyes.

“We’ll be right there,” he assured.

As he slipped his phone back inside his coat, he answered Scully’s questioning look. “That was Langley. He says to get over to the Lone Gunmen headquarters right away. He’s got something for us.”

Scully didn’t feel like conjecturing either but she was apprehensive about the pattern of events taking place. “Don’t you think it’s odd how these pieces are coming together?”

“What do you mean?” Mulder asked.
"I'm not sure. It just seems that as opposed to finding leads, Mulder, we're following leads."

He understood what she was saying. "You mean the clues are like a trail of breadcrumbs? Contrived coincidences?"

Scully only shrugged. She had the nagging suspicion that they were playing roles in some pre-written script, and god only knows who's directing.

"Well, Gretal," Mulder said, crushing the paper cup in his fist and throwing it across the room into the wastebasket, "let's go follow another one."

She stood with Mulder and they silently walked out of the room together.

—X—X—

LONE GUNMEN’S HEADQUARTERS

Frohike quickly ushered them in and locked the door behind him. Mulder sensed a tenseness in his friends. In spite of their paranoid natures, they had always trusted him and he knew their information was reliable. Of course, they had good reason to be paranoid since they often received classified governmental information gathered from computer hackers like Kenneth Soona.

In 1994, Soona successfully hacked into the Department of Defense and was able to access Top Secret governmental files. He downloaded the information onto a digital tape. That tape contained the Roswell incident as well as the highly classified “MJ” or Majestic Documents which supposedly chronologued the government’s investigations into extraterrestrial contact with the Earth. Soona had been the one to hand over the digital tape to Mulder in the Botanic Garden in Washington one night. Disclosure of that tape led to global ramifications, along with the death of Mulder’s father and the mistaken death of Scully’s sister. Soona had been killed for his part, and Mulder almost met the same fate. That was the price that was paid to keep the secret.

Frohike looked at Scully, and she saw that he was nervous. "Mulder, she shouldn’t be involved in this," Frohike said.

"What are you talking about?" Mulder asked, throwing a look Scully’s way.

"This is a dangerous crowd we’re dancing with."

"She’s not just a pretty face, Frohike, she’s my partner," Mulder said bluntly, stifling any remarks that Scully herself was about to add. "Now, what do you have for us?"

The three men looked at each other. Byers went to a combination safe in the corner and opened it. He took out a large brown envelope, which he pensively handed to Mulder. Mulder opened the end and angled it so a small, square metal object dropped into his palm.

<The digital tape>.

Mulder’s head turned slowly toward Scully and there was unspoken communication between the two of them.

Take it and go," Byers whispered urgently. "Too many people have died for this."
“We’re right back where we left off,” Mulder said softly.

Byers slowly shook his head. “No, you’re not. This is still coded, but the copy protect has been removed.”

“What!” Mulder exclaimed incredulously.

“Which means it could have been copied,” Frohike informed.

“So it might be a matter of who decodes it first,” Mulder reasoned.

“Well, I think your sources are probably better than ours in that area,” Byers admitted.

Mulder stuck the tape in his pocket and motioned for Scully to go. No one spoke another word as they left the Lone Gunmen and went back to their car.

Mulder quickly drove away from the building, but when he got outside of town, he pulled over on a side road. Gripping the top of the steering wheel, he stared at the windshield wipers swishing across the wet glass. Then he looked at his partner.

“Scully, what are we going to do?”

For a long moment, she didn’t speak but when she did answer her voice was tense with emotion and confusion. Their eyes met and they both shared the pain of the past.

“I don’t know, Mulder,” she said softly. “People have started dying again because of this tape. We have two choices — either we destroy it, or expose it.”

“And if we destroy it, then all these deaths were for nothing.”

“But how many do we save? I think we need to give ourselves some time, not rush into a decision,” Scully suggested

“You’re right. But we need to try and find out exactly what’s on that tape.”

—X—X—

MUNICH, GERMANY

4:20 P.M.

The American sat facing the window, a trail of cigarette smoke curling toward the ceiling. The phone receiver was cradled between his shoulder and ear. “He may have the tape by now. We have to move fast.”

“There are those who would have Agent Mulder killed,” the voice on the other end stated.

“At all costs he must be protected. He must! And the sooner we can get the truth to him, the safer he’ll be; the safer we’ll all be.”

“What about those he talks to in the meantime? His partner?”

The American absently tapped a pencil on his desk. “That won’t matter once he knows the truth.”
“The truth could be dangerous. What if somehow he doesn’t follow the course?” the voice asked.

“He will. That’s why he was chosen. The truth is the only way to get him to turn over the tape.” There was a long pause, as the American twirled the pencil between his fingers. “Make the phone call,” he ordered, as the pencil snapped in two within his grasp. Then he hung up.

—X—X—

FBI HEADQUARTERS
5:45 P.M.

Scully and Mulder were back in the office. He had loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top shirt button. They were both nervous about viewing the tape. Whoever removed the copy protect did so for the purpose of revealing something. The question that Scully had raised was whether someone was helping them, or manipulating them. Still, there was only one way to find out.

Mulder popped the tape in the slot and just as he was accessing the directory, Assistant Director Skinner walked in. Mulder froze, and Scully caught her breath, watching her boss advance toward Mulder’s desk.

“Agent Mulder, the Sections Chief is looking for you.”

“Why?” he answered as nonchalantly as possible, leaning back casually in his chair.

“He didn’t tell me that. He just said to let you know he wants to see you. I think it has to do with these serial killings,” Skinner answered.

Mulder threw an apprehensive glance at Scully. “I’m waiting for a phone call, then I’ll go see him.”

“He’s just leaving. Go now,” he ordered abruptly.

Mulder hesitated, his eyes falling on the slot in his computer. Scully stood and went toward Mulder’s desk. “Go ahead. I’ll take the call.”

Reluctantly Mulder followed Skinner out of his office.

Scully waited for a call from the Lone Gunmen. She and Mulder needed some answers, like where did the tape come from, and who knew Mulder had picked it up. Both agents had learned hard lessons from their last experience possessing this tape.

Scully ejected the tape and slipped it in her purse. Mulder’s phone rang and she picked it up. “Agent Scully,” she answered.

There was momentary silence on the other end, the caller not expecting Scully to answer Mulder’s phone.

“Agent Scully, this is Byers. I’m returning Mulder’s call.”

“He’s not here. He told me to talk to you.”
Scully heard his reluctance to talk to her and it agitated her. "Come on, Byers. Mulder and I are up to our necks in this together. If you can't trust me by now —"

"What do you want to know?"

"Where you got the tape and who knows we have it?"

Scully could hear talking in the background. The voices were muffled. She was trying to be patient but didn’t know who might walk into Mulder’s office at any moment.

Finally Byers came back on the line. "Agent Scully, we shouldn’t talk about this on the phone. Have Mulder call us later."

"Wait, don’t hang up!" She heard the click and put the phone down.

It seemed like forever until Mulder came back into his office. He flung the door open and threw a folder across the desk.

Scully looked up at him. "I take it this is not another sugar overload."

"We’re off the case, Scully," he spat out fiercely.

"What! Why? Who made that decision?"

Mulder grabbed his coat and tossed it over his shoulder. He saw that the tape wasn’t in the computer and when he looked at Scully she took it out of her purse and handed it to him. He slipped it into his coat pocket and started out of the office. Scully started to call after him but he stopped when the phone on his desk rang. He answered it impatiently.

"Mulder," he snapped.

"Agent Mulder, I’ve heard the news. They’ve made a big mistake taking you off the case."

Mulder instantly recognized the gruff voice as the Raid Man. Scully saw his face flash with rage.

"Then you know better than to call me with your latest crime of the week!"

"That’s not why I called. I want to arrange a meeting," the voice said.

Mulder gripped the phone receiver tightly. "Oh, yeah! Well you can kiss my ass you —"

"I’m here to help you, Agent Mulder. But we must meet alone."

"No deal. I have a partner," Mulder said, looking at Scully who listened closely to Mulder’s conversation.

"I have information for you. This is much more important than a murder case. But I’ll meet only with you. Or no deal."

"No deal."
“Fine.”

Mulder had tried bluffing him but realized he was about to hang up. “Wait!” Mulder shouted. He heard the line still open. “Where?” he asked.

Scully saw him taking a mental note of what the caller was telling him. After a minute, without any verbal closing, Mulder hung up the phone. He turned away from Scully and she caught him by the arm. She looked astounded that Mulder would leave without her.

“Wait a minute! Mulder, talk to me!”

“I can’t now. That was the Raid Man. I’ve got to meet him alone.”

Now Scully was the one angry. Her grip tightened on his arm and Mulder saw flame in her eyes.

“You can’t do that! It could be a trap! Mulder, you’re not thinking straight!”

“Scully, maybe that’s the only thing going for me right now!”

“You’re upset! Too much has happened too quickly! But you can’t run off and meet some psycho who has the inside track on murders which he may himself be committing!”

“I’ll call you,” Mulder said calmly.

He pulled away from her grasp but she grabbed him again, more firmly this time.

“No! I’m not going to let you do this! You’re walking right into a trap!”

“Scully, we need answers!”

She was shaking her head, gripping his arm even tighter. When Mulder saw the fear in his partner’s eyes and realized his safety was the cause of that fear, his anger abated. He placed his hands on her shoulders and bent toward her, bringing his face closer to hers. The look in her eyes was all too familiar to him – apprehension and the pain of losing her sister had re-visited her.

“There is no way to move forward on what we’re dealing with without taking risks. But we’re ahead of the game in knowing that,” Mulder tried to reassure.

When she answered him, her voice was clipped, but strained. “You would never allow me to do what you’re about to do.”

Scully felt her emotions rising dangerously close to the surface, but if it was a way to knock common sense into her partner, she didn’t care.

“Why do you take such risks! Do you think you’re going to live forever?” she snapped at him.

“Just like the song, Scully, if you believe in forever, then life is just a one-night stand.”

She had reached her exasperation point with him. She stepped back out of his reach and his hands fell from her shoulders.
“You don’t believe in forever!” she accused.

But he took a step toward her, closing the distance again, his gaze locked on hers.

“You’re wrong,” he said softly. “I have to believe in forever. I have to believe that if I never see my sister again in this life, I’ll see her in the next.”

Scully was silenced by his admission. Mulder took another step closer to her, as if proximity to her would absorb her anger.

“And I have to believe that if something ever happens to one of us, that we’ll meet again. Somewhere.”

Not only was her anger gone, but she wanted to fall into his arms. Except their relationship wasn’t quite there yet. There had been hugs and comforting touches, but not the kind that Scully had in her mind at that moment. And as well as her partner could read her, he might instantly interpret her feelings for exactly what they were.

She knew ways of reaching inside of him and turning him around, and it always worked with a touch, or moving her body close to him. Fox Mulder was one man whose cold resolve could melt under a warm hand. But because Scully’s own feelings were so precarious, she had to use words instead.

“Mulder, please. Don’t do this. Don’t make me wonder whether you’re okay or not. You’re my partner, and that makes us responsible for each other. If anything happens to you …”

Mulder heard her voice break and he was momentarily thrown off balance by her emotional confession. He might have misinterpreted the passion in her words, but there was no mistaking it in her face.

Mulder was moved beyond words for a moment, but knew that he had to follow through with the meeting. He felt his partner pick up his wrist, and her fingers moved lightly up and down his arm. So intense was her focus on him, she probably wasn’t even aware she was doing it.

His voice softened. “Scully …” He said her name like a sweet kiss. “I’m meeting him at a public bar.” He hesitated, still seeing her anxiety. “The Sports Tavern in the Adams Morgan District. I give you my word – I won’t leave there with him, but I want your word that you won’t follow me there.”

She realized that by telling her where he was going, he already trusted that she would comply with his request. But it wasn’t any easier to give in and let him walk out the door.

When she sagged a little, he knew he’d won the argument, but he felt more like the loser.

Scully relented, as she usually did, but she made it clear she was not happy about it, by backing away from her partner so he couldn’t touch her.

“At least give me the tape,” she said.

He thought about it and knew she was right. He handed it over, saw the concern in her face, and stepped forward again, brushing her cheek with his thumb. “I’ll be fine. I’ll call you in a little while. Will you be at home?”
She nodded, then watched him hurry out of the office. She felt like their control was slipping away from them, like events were being orchestrated by parties unknown — dangerous parties. There were too many unanswered questions left over from the first time the digital tape appeared.

Scully drove to her apartment. She watched the streets and traffic behind her for any sign that she was being followed. Having the tape in her possession again gave her a dreaded sense of déjà vu. Now, once again, she and Mulder had to watch every step they took. They could trust no one but each other.

Scully felt more secure once she was inside her apartment with the doors locked. She placed the tape under some clothes in her dresser and sat down at her computer to catch up on some work. But all she could think about was where Mulder was, whether he was all right, and what dark tunnel the digital tape might lead them into this time.

—X—X—

Chapter 6

ADAMS MORGAN DISTRICT
6:45 P.M.

Mulder entered a small, quiet bar and took a table in the back. The waitress immediately came up and he ordered a soda water with lime, lots of ice. He was wound tighter than a top and needed to relax. Soda water wasn’t exactly the ticket for that, but he needed to stay sharp and alert for anything.

Slowly sipping his drink, he kept glancing up at the clock over the bar. A colorful neon sign on the wall above his head flickered intermittently, the faint buzzing beginning to irritate him.

He was staring down at his glass when he realized a figure was standing at his table. As he looked up the man slid into the bench seat beside Mulder. He set down a half-full mug of beer, so Mulder knew he had been here awhile, probably watching the agent from across the room. He was of medium height, but slightly heavyset, about 50 years old, with thick, gray hair. He looked around the bar, then back at Mulder.

“Are you alone?” the man asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Mulder said shortly.

“Where’s your partner?”

“She had to bake a cake,” he answered dryly.

The man laid a folder in front of Mulder, glancing around suspiciously as he did so. “You should take a look at this. There are —”

“Who are you?” Mulder interrupted, his eyes piercing. “And why have you been contacting me?”

The man looked agitated and impatient. “Agent Mulder, I came a long way to talk to you.”
“You don’t live in Washington or the surrounding area?”

“That doesn’t matter —”

“It matters to me,” Mulder said briskly. “How do I know you aren’t the one committing these murders.”

“Because you know there is more than one gunman ... and because I’m Darren Timmonds. Jacob Timmonds, the first victim, was my brother.”

Mulder studied his face and believed him. He nodded for him to go on as he opened the folder and began to scan the pages.

“He told me if anything ever went wrong, to contact Agent Fox Mulder with the FBI He said you’d know what to do.”

<How do these people find me?>

Timmonds nervously took a drink of his beer. “My brother was part of a military organization called the Blue Sky Project.”

“I know about Blue Sky. The Air Force created them as watchdogs for their own Project Blue Book and other UFO investigations. They’re supposed to make the public think the Air Force is policing itself, but nobody really believes that. I know this: they don’t have information sensitive enough to be killed for.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Somehow top secret governmental files were downloaded from a digital tape into the Blue Sky data base.”

<The sky has fallen>, Mulder thought. He began to see the connection, but there were unexplained gaps. Using information the Lone Gunmen had given him, he decided to test the man’s knowledge.

“But those files can’t be read. They’re encrypted,” Mulder said.

“So you know about the tape? But did you know it can be copied?”

Mulder tried to show surprise. “Go on.”

“It’s not a guess who had the files. There was an actual meeting between four of them to determine what to do about it.”

“Why not just draw targets on their backs?” Mulder shook his head. “You’d think government people would know better.”

Timmonds shrugged. Mulder realized Timmonds was leaving it to him to figure it out.

“Are you telling me that anyone who had access to the files is being ‘exterminated’?”

“You know what the stakes are better than I do, Agent Mulder.”

That was the only answer he needed. Mulder rattled the ice in his glass and set it on the napkin. He leaned closer to Timmonds and his voice was hushed. “Have you ever heard the name Krycek?”
Mulder saw the man’s eyes widen in surprise. He suspected there was a lot the man knew. Mulder wished he had Scully with him to try to make sense of all this.

Timmonds’ voice lowered and he blinked quickly. “How do you know Krycek?”

“He was the last one seen with the digital tape.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, impressed with Mulder’s knowledge.

Mulder was a little confused. “Why did you react like that when I mentioned Krycek’s name if you didn’t know he was the one who had the tape?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t know that. But it’s suspected that Krycek is the one responsible for the murders.”

Mulder felt his head spinning. He rubbed his eyes, feeling fatigue wash over his body. Keeping his thoughts to himself, he began to consider the reasons for everything that was happening. He needed to get away from here. “What do you want me to do?” Mulder asked coldly.

“Expose the contents on the tape. It’s the only way to stop the killings.”

Mulder didn’t flinch as he asked the next question. “Where is the tape?” he asked flatly.

Timmonds shook his head, clasped his hands on the table. “I don’t know. But I’m told that if anybody can find it, it’s you. You don’t have much time though; if you don’t find it soon, they will.”

“How do you know?”

“They put a transponder chip in it.”

Mulder froze and went pale.

<Oh God! No!>

He struggled to maintain his composure. “You mean they’re able to track it?”

Timmonds nodded, but frowned. Mulder’s reaction had been too spontaneous for him to mask his emotion. Timmonds watched as the agent suddenly bolted from his seat and headed for the back door. Mulder didn’t even notice, seconds later, that Timmonds was right behind him.

As Mulder ran, he fumbled in his coat pocket for his phone. He became vaguely aware of Timmonds’ presence when the man called out to him, but Mulder didn’t slow down. Running toward his car, he punched in Scully’s phone number. Holding the phone to his ear, with his other hand he dug in his pocket for the car keys.

“Agent Mulder, wait!” Timmonds yelled out to him, “There’s more!”

Timmons caught up to him at the car. Mulder unlocked the car door, then getting no answer from Scully’s home phone he dialed her cell phone. Timmonds stood at his elbow, confused at Mulder’s panic. Still no answer to his call, he opened his car door and slid into the seat. His silent plea willed her to answer the phone, but there was no response. Mulder
pulled on the car door, then realized Timmonds was preventing him from closing it.

“Get out of here!” Mulder shouted

“You can’t just —”

Suddenly, in the cold quiet of the deserted alleyway, Mulder heard the unmistakable sound of a silencer at close range. Timmonds was thrown violently against Mulder’s car, then he crumpled to the ground. Blood covered the car’s side window. Mulder ducked down in the seat of the car and pulled out his 9mm Smith & Wesson. Breathing heavily, he waited. There was only the sound of the rain hitting the windshield for what seemed like an eternity. Mulder felt trapped inside the car. He glanced in every direction around him, expecting to see one or more shooters appear at the window.

“This is it. This is the death vision Clyde Bruckman saw when he asked me if I wanted to know how I died.” Mulder would never forget Bruckman’s answer when Mulder affirmed that he would like to know. ‘No, you don’t,’ was Bruckman’s response that, to this day, sends chills down Mulder’s spine. He thought about it more than he should, particularly when he believed he was facing imminent death.

Mulder heard footsteps approaching on the wet street. Cocking his gun, he watched for an image to appear on the other side of the foggy glass. Time seemed to slow down, the seconds ticking off in his brain as he anticipated the killer stalking him from an unknown direction. Then he heard his name being called.

“Agent Mulder, get out of the car,” the voice spoke sedately.

Through the rain-spattered windshield Mulder saw a dark figure holding a gun pointed at him. He got out of the car, stepping over the body of Darren Timmonds. He saw the exit wound in the front of Timmonds’ neck that tore his throat open and looked away from his dead eyes that stared up at his killer. Mulder held his hands up, his gun dangling loosely on his finger. He swallowed hard, wondering if he only had seconds to live. Then he faced the gunman. What he saw shocked him further. The tall black man stood before him in a long overcoat.

“Mr. X,” Mulder mumbled, astonished, stunned almost beyond words, but relieved.

Mr. X stuck his gun back in his belt, never taking his eyes off Mulder. “Go, Agent Mulder!” he ordered curtly.

“I thought you were dead,” Mulder said with incredulity.

“Not everything dies, Agent. Mulder.”

Mulder looked down at Timmonds lying motionless in a rain puddle, blood flowing from the side of his neck to form a watery pool.

“Tell him that.” Mulder said harshly.

As his shock wore off, Mulder began to discern the facts before him. He had just witnessed a cold-blooded killing and yet his initial reaction was relief when the killer stepped forth. Now he was torn between getting to Scully and leaving the scene of a homicide. Several people in the bar had seen him and Timmonds together. Mulder had given no thought at
the time of how strange it may have seemed to the bar patrons to see him racing out the back door with Timmonds behind.

Mr. X spoke again and his voice was stern and impatient. “Agent Mulder, go to your partner! Now! I’ll take care of this!”

Mulder wanted to scream, ‘You murdered this man!’ but his thoughts for his partner’s safety consumed him. He jumped into his car and squealed out of the alley, never looking back. Again, he tried Scully’s home number.

“Come on, Scully,” he pleaded to himself. And again he tried her cell phone, but there was no answer.

Visions his worst nightmares couldn’t conjure up flashed in his mind — of Scully’s sister, Melissa, entering Scully’s apartment and being mistakenly shot and killed. He raced through red lights and dodged traffic, barely missing a delivery truck, his car slipping and sliding through the puddles.

Scully’s apartment was just around the corner. As his brakes locked and the car skidded to a halt, his eyes quickly scanned the street for any sign of danger. He pulled his gun and dashed up the walkway, entering through the outer door and running down the short hallway. Still glancing nervously around him, he found Scully’s key on his keyring and unlocked the door to her apartment. Holding his gun with both hands up in front of his face, and taking a deep breath, he kicked open the door, gun outstretched in front of him, eyes flicking left and right.

“SCULLY!”

As his eyes panned the room, he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Then he caught movement and he swung the gun in that direction. Scully had walked out from the hallway wrapped only in a damp towel, her hair dripping wet.

Seeing his partner in the sights of his gun, Mulder instantly raised the barrel toward the ceiling. Relief overwhelmed him to the point that he bent over, resting his hands on his knees for an instant, catching his breath, letting the pounding in his chest subside.

Scully was confused, but knew something was wrong. “Mulder, what —”

He stood up, turned around and closed and locked the door. Sticking his gun back in his holster, he went to the front window and peeked through the blinds. “Scully, get dressed! Hurry!”

She knew her partner better than to waste time asking questions so she quickly went into her bedroom. As she opened her dresser drawer she heard him call out to her from the hall.

“Scully, where’s the tape?”

Still in her towel, she reached back in the drawer and removed it. She went into the hall and handed it to Mulder. He started to turn away and head back into the living room, but she caught the front of his white shirt. It was splattered with blood.

“You’re hurt, Mulder.”
“No, no, not now. Please, hurry.”

He went into the kitchen and opened a drawer where he knew she kept small tools. He removed a screwdriver, then sat down at the kitchen table. Quickly but carefully he tried to unscrew the back of the tape, but the screws were too tiny. Frantically, he looked around the living room. He went back down the hallway, standing just outside the bedroom.

“Scully, I’m coming in,” he warned.

He entered just as she pulled her shirt down over her jeans, but his attention was not on her. She saw him looking around the room and his eyes fixed on top of her dresser. As she sat to put on her socks and tennis shoes, Mulder grabbed a small silver jewelry box and emptied out the contents on the dresser. She saw him put the tape inside the box and turn to her, waiting impatiently as she put on her shoes.

He went back into the living room and again looked out the window as she joined him. Grabbing her coat from the back of the kitchen chair, he then took her by the arm and pulled her toward the door, drawing his gun as he did so.

Once they were in the car driving away from the apartment house, Scully saw him checking the rearview mirror every few seconds. His gun rested in his lap, the jewelry box underneath the seat. She waited for him to calm down before she asked any questions.

Satisfied that they were not being followed, Mulder’s grip lessened on the steering wheel. He looked over at Scully and she saw the tension in his face.

“You were in the shower,” he said almost accusingly. “That’s why you didn’t hear your phone. You should always have it where you can hear it,” he lectured, his voice a little tighter.

Scully didn’t contradict him. She didn’t know yet what he had been through that night, or what happened to cause him to race to her apartment, but she could see that he was scared.

“Scully, X is alive,” Mulder told her, still finding it hard to believe himself.

She looked as shocked as he had been when Mr. X first appeared to Mulder. Looking out the car window, Scully knew they were heading in a different direction than home.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To see the Lone Gunmen.”

“Mulder, what happened tonight?

Watching his face, she could tell that he was vaguely aware of her speaking to him. His mind was a thousand miles away. He glanced at her and her expression told him she was waiting for an answer.

“Don’t ask me anything right now,” he said, preoccupied with a million thoughts that pick-axed his brain.

—X—X—
LONE GUNMEN’S HEADQUARTERS

Mulder impatiently pounded on the door. “Byers, Langley, Frohike, it’s Mulder! Open the door!”

There was a brief pause then Mulder recognized Langley’s voice. “What’s the password?”

“OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!” Mulder screamed.

Langley’s voice was barely audible on the other side. “That’ll do.”

After a series of locks clicked open, Langley let them in. Byers and Frohike were also in the room and Scully noticed they all looked tense. She knew the situation was dangerous, that there were people who would stop at nothing to get the digital tape before its contents could be exposed. As yet, no one even knew what the tape contained.

Mulder set the silver box on the table and took out the tape. His voice was sharp and his face stern. “There’s a transponder chip in here! Did you know that when you gave it to me!”

The Lone Gunmen looked at each other in surprise, as if one of them might know the answer.

Mulder’s patience was strained beyond limits and he grabbed the front of Langley’s shirt. “Did you know!” Mulder yelled again.

Before Langley could answer, Scully stepped between them. “Mulder! They wouldn’t do that!” she defended.

“No!” Langley answered, looking at his two friends for confirmation. They both shook their heads.

“How could we know?” Byers asked.

“Find that chip and get it out of there!” Mulder ordered.

Mulder and Scully stepped aside as Langley grabbed a drill and examined the back of the tape. While the three of them worked to open the tape and find the chip, Mulder, exhausted, sank into a chair.

Scully pulled up a chair opposite him and leaned in close, keeping her voice low. “What happened tonight? Who did you meet with?”

“The Raid Man’s name was Darren Timmonds.”

“Timmonds?”

“Yes. Jacob Timmonds’ brother.”

Mulder went on to explain about the Blue Sky Project and how several members of that project had gained access to the files on the digital tape. Thus, they were being systematically murdered to keep them from talking. Scully was stunned to hear that Krycek was suspected of downloading the secret documents into the Blue Sky computer, then somehow being involved in the murders. She seemed as perplexed as Mulder.
“Why would he do that?” she asked, glancing over at the Lone Gunmen who were huddled over the digital tape.

“I’ve given it a lot of thought the last hour. What if Krycek was paid for the information, if Blue Sky bought the tape. Then to make it look like they had obtained the information elsewhere, he was involved in the plans to silence them.”

“But it was known that Krycek had the tape. Where else would Blue Sky have gotten the tape if it wasn’t from Krycek?”

“I don’t know,” Mulder said, despondently.

Scully saw Mulder’s frustration as he ran his hand through his hair and leaned his head back against the wall. Scully touched the front of his bloody shirt.

“Mulder, let me look at you. You’re hurt?”

“No, I’m not. It’s not my blood.”

Before he could explain whose blood it was, Frohike walked over to Mulder who stood up to hear what he had to say.

“It’s done. We found the chip. It’s destroyed. Good thinking blocking the signal inside the silver box,” Frohike said. “And thank god we had kept it in the safe.”

Mulder took the tape back and put it in his coat pocket. “You never told me how you got the tape in the first place,” he stated.

Byers answered the question. “A friend of a friend of a friend. That’s how our network operates. But it’s possible, Mulder, that this is not the original tape.”

“What do you mean?”

“The files were in the Blue Sky Program. From there, they could have been copied. Not only could there be a hard copy, but another digital tape – or several.”

The thought never occurred to Mulder or Scully, and they looked at each other, stunned. Mulder absently put his hand around the tape in his pocket. “Then Krycek could still have the original tape.”

“Not only that, Mulder,” Scully added, “but how do we know the documents on this tape weren’t falsified and then intentionally planted in the Blue Sky program? This whole thing could be a hoax.”

“Then why the murders, Scully?”

She looked amazed that he would ask that. “How many murders have there been, Mulder, to perpetuate a hoax?” she asked softly, knowing he would see the truth in that.

As if the situation wasn’t already bewildering, all they needed were more confusing possibilities. Mulder didn’t know what to say, and his expression told as much.

Frohike touched Mulder on the elbow. “As much as I enjoy your company, especially yours, Scully, I would suggest the two of you get out of here right now.”
“What about you guys?” Mulder asked, concerned.

“We’ll lay low for awhile, keep our ears open. Someone’s bound to talk,” Langley answered.

“You have my cell phone number. Call me if anything comes up, or if you’re in trouble.” Mulder looked apologetically at each of them. “I’m sorry about when I came in here a few minutes ago.”

“Forget it, Mulder.” Frohike said.

“Yeah, just be careful,” Byers added, as Langley nodded in agreement.

—X—X—

Chapter 7

Scully was demanding answers from Mulder. He had been preoccupied with getting the tracking device out of the digital tape. Now he and Scully could finally be alone so he could explain Darren Timmonds’ murder.

Mulder was driving and Scully was puzzled when they stopped outside the Washington Botanic Garden. They walked inside together where they sat on one of the benches and could finally relax a little. Scully pulled the collar of her coat up to protect her neck from the brisk wind. Mulder looked around and smiled. Then he sadly shook his head.

“What is it, Mulder?”

“This is where it began, Scully, where Kenneth Soona gave me the digital tape. Right here. All these flowers, such a pretty place for a covert meeting of conspiracy, don’t you think?” he asked satirically.

“I think you better give me some answers.”

Mulder nodded and leaned forward, his arms on his knees. “I’ve got to contact Mr. X.”

“Why?”

“He shot Timmonds in cold blood, Scully. Right in front of me.” Mulder’s laugh was cynical. “And I’m probably the number one suspect.”

“You left the scene of a murder?”

“I had to get to you. Timmonds had just told me about the transponder chip. Mr. X said he would take care of the body.”

“Why did he do it?”

Mulder was wondering the same thing as he slowly shook his head. “I don’t know. But Mr. X knew where I was going. He told me to get to you. Scully, I’m so confused,” he said, briefly closing his eyes.

Mulder then leaned back against the bench and hunched his shoulders to keep the wind off his neck. In the quiet of the garden, he heard the soft gurgling of bubblers in the flowerbed
next to where he and Scully sat close to each other. He watched Scully reach down and pick up a blood-red rose petal from the ground. Gently she rubbed its soft, silken texture between her fingers. It reminded him of a few years back, when he and his partner had reached a difficult point in their relationship, whereby they concluded that time away from each other was long overdue.

Mulder clearly remembered the events of that cold November night. While he was trying to question an informant, Scully wandered over to the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Watching her out of the corner of his eye as the Russian informant told his story, Mulder saw Scully bend and pick up something from the base of the wall, looking at it briefly, then putting it in her pocket. Later, back in his office, he expressed aggravation at her disinterest in the case. Scully further angered him by comparing his informant’s ridiculous story to an old Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon. As Mulder’s irritation built, Scully pulled the red rose petal out of her pocket and laid it on his desk. She then proceeded to tell him that she had become not only absorbed by Mulder’s work, but swallowed up and consumed by it. She admitted to him that before her days and nights at the Bureau began to run together, she had had a life. Mulder didn’t take her frustration nor her dissatisfaction very seriously — at first. It was only after she was apart from him that he realized how much he depended on her in his work, and in his life. For the first time, she had been the one to put up the wall between them, throwing Mulder completely off balance. The rose petal, which stayed on Mulder’s desk the entire time they had been away from each other, had been a symbol of Scully’s discontent. It prompted Mulder to re-evaluate their partnership, as well as the personal, but private, feelings he had for Scully.

Thank god he had.

“What are you thinking about, Mulder?” she asked quietly, snapping him back to the present.

Lightly, he touched the petal in the palm of her hand. With a faint smile, he said, “Rocky and Bullwinkle.”

Scully was determined not to give him the satisfaction of stumping her, so she kept her expression stoic. “Which episode?”

“Where Natasha and Boris have Rocky tied to a railroad track and —”

“Oh, every episode.”

Mulder snickered. “And while Rocky, struggling to free himself, hears the train whistle in the distance, Mr. Peabody happens along.”

He hesitated, searching Scully’s face for recognition. “Ring a bell?”

“Keep going.”

“Despite the approaching train, Rocky and Mr. Peabody proceed to get into this philosophical discussion — “

“Kind of like you and me,” she interrupted again.

“Yeah. Only there’s a mutual respect for the other one’s opinion. No second-guessing.”
Scully ignored the taunt and Mulder went on. “Anyway, as it turns out, before Rocky becomes road kill, Bullwinkle arrives to save the day. It’s not so much that he’s bent on saving Rocky — I mean, after all, if Bullwinkle leaves him to his fate, he then gets top billing — but it turns out he’s trying to help a dairy farmer catch a stray cow and he needs the rope.”

Scully looked at him warily, “You’re making this up.”

“What? You think it’s too intense for a cartoon?” he asked sarcasstically.

“I’m wondering what’s your point?”

“I didn’t say I had one. You asked what I was thinking.”

She gave him a terse look that said, <don’t play this game with me>.

“All right. Here we are, caught in a web of sorts, tied to the tracks. But the people who come along, who could save us, can’t see the trouble we’re in.”

“The Mr. Peabody’s.”

“Yes. And the ones who do help us, do so only because it somehow benefits them. There’s something they need from us, so they damn well better untie us before the train gets here.”

Scully still wasn’t sure she was following his analogy. They were both looking at the petal in Scully’s palm when a sudden wind gusted through the garden, lifting the petal into the air where it swirled a moment, then disappeared in a whirlwind of leaves.

A long look passed between them. Then Mulder sighed and shook his head. He stretched his arm out along the top of the bench. “I wasn’t making a point Scully.” He smiled faintly. “And I wasn’t comparing our partnership to Rocky and Bullwinkle.”

“Thank you,” she said dryly.

“I just wonder sometimes what would happen if — for God knows what reason — we couldn’t rely on each other for help.”

“I think we have one ally, though he’ll never openly admit it,” Scully remarked.

“Walter Peabody?” he joked.

That brought an unexpected grin from Scully. Mulder’s impromptu humor was hard to ignore sometimes.

Scully leaned back against the bench and looked up at the sky. A few stars peeked through the thin clouds. Through the treetops, they twinkled like tiny white lights strung on a Christmas tree.

Mulder watched her, remarking with awe, “Beautiful, isn’t it? Makes you wonder which points of light are still there, and which ones burned out thousands of years ago.”

“It’s hard to conceive of one of those brilliant lights as a burned-out sun.”
“Just think Scully. One of these days someone on another planet, in another universe, will sit under the stars, just as we are tonight, and look up at the light from our sun which has since burned out. And they’ll wonder the same thing.”


“That’s sad, chilling to even imagine the earth not existing in the universe.”

Mulder smiled. “Live for today, because in a million years we won’t be here. Some scientists predict the earth will exist for only 4,000 more years. When you think in terms like that, even a billion years seems too near, doesn’t it? I mean — 4,000 years — that figure’s unthinkable.”

Mulder saw her eyes seem to cloud over in deep thought, sending her into a dream-like state. She tilted her head back, resting it on his outstretched arm, and gazed up at the sky for several minutes. Mulder was enjoying the comfort of her head resting against the sleeve of his coat. When she finally lifted her head and turned to face him, she spoke softly, deliberately.

“Doesn’t it make you wonder what we’re missing out on, what we’re denying ourselves?”

Mulder heard hidden meaning in her words. He thought he detected the slightest hint of regret in her expression and intuitively he thought she was talking about the two of them.

Puzzled, he narrowed his eyes and cocked his head slightly. “What do you mean by that, Scully?”

For a minute he thought she would answer him seriously, perhaps admitting some private yearning. Her eyes seemed to reach into him, holding him. But instead, she hunched her shoulders and pursed her lips.

“I don’t know,” she said absently, staring off into the distance, dismissing whatever thoughts had lingered on the edge of confession.

Then within a second’s passing, she was detached once again, as if re-grounding herself to the issues at hand. Mulder would not get the response he hoped for — not tonight anyway.

Mulder leaned forward on his knees, looking sideways at his partner, who was slumped against the wooden bench, her eyes locked with his. There was more said by their expressions than words could ever convey. In the quiet of the garden, which was becoming shrouded by a misty fog rolling in, they relished the peace and quiet.

For a few moments anyway, the troubled world they knew was far away, like a pinpoint of light twinkling in the night sky.

—X—X—

OFFICE OF THE RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC CORP.
WASHINGTON, D.C.
9:00 P.M.

The Russian was on the phone in his office. He repeatedly turned a glass water globe upside down, watching the snow fall on a miniature model of the Kremlin. Sitting in a
leather chair at his desk, he swiveled around to face the window. Raindrops splattered against the pane. The rain, like golden glitter, fell under the streetlight.

The Russian was visibly angry and nervous as he shouted into the phone. “The signal is gone! Do you understand what I’m saying — the SIGNAL IS GONE! We don’t know where the tape was in transit, whether Mulder has it! It changed hands too many times!” His accent was heavy.

The Russian stood up, still holding the globe, listening to the voice on the other end. He closed the blinds and turned away from the window.

His voice was calmer, a decision having been made. “We must assume Mr. Mulder has the tape. The only way he’s going to give it up is with the truth... It’s time.”

The globe slipped out of his hand onto the hardwood floor and shattered into pieces, the water running into a puddle underneath the desk.

—X—X—

Mulder and Scully had both decided that for right now it was unsafe to stay in their apartments. They accompanied each other to their apartments to get clothes and what they’d need for a few days, then they rented two motel rooms in another part of the city.

Both agents were tired. Mulder, although anxious to see what was on the tape, couldn’t risk going to his office. But there was another part of him that dreaded what he might find. What could he believe? Scully was right, the “accidental” uploading of such top-secret material could have been intentional. Krycek could very well have sold the information and kept the original tape as life insurance. Krycek, knowing that his life would be meaningless once the information was out, could very well have planned the murders to keep the secrets from being exposed. Maybe the documents were tampered with to send them on the all-too-familiar wild goose chase.

Then again, maybe not.

It had started raining again that night. Mulder picked up Chinese food from a little restaurant around the corner from the motel and they ate a late dinner sitting on the bed in Scully’s adjoining room. Neither felt like talking anymore tonight. Mulder agreed with Scully that they would have to be careful about their movements being too predictable, especially since someone would be trying to find them — if they hadn’t already. It wasn’t hard for anyone to figure out that the digital tape would probably find its way into Mulder’s hands, as it had before.

After dinner, Mulder stretched out on the bed and turned on the TV to watch a baseball game as a means of distraction, but couldn’t have told anyone which teams were playing. Scully sat at the small dining table and opened her laptop. She was typing a chronology of events when her cell phone rang. She looked at Mulder who instantly muted the TV.

Maybe that’s Skinner,” he said as Scully answered the phone.

She heard his familiar voice. “Agent Scully, I had a message to call you. Where are you?”

Scully nodded at Mulder, confirming that it was Assistant Director Skinner.
“Sir, we’re in a motel,” Scully answered.

“Mulder is with you?”

Scully looked at Mulder, who was trying to make sense out of one side of the conversation. “Yes, he’s here with me,” she answered.

“Tell me where you are. I’m coming over.”

Scully put her hand over the receiver and whispered to her partner, “He wants to come here.”

Mulder thought quickly, and gave Scully a look like, <what do you think?> But she obviously didn’t know what to do.

<I’ve got to trust someone other than my partner>, Mulder thought to himself. He nodded and Scully gave him their location.

—X—X—

Mulder had been watching the parking lot through a gap in the curtain and saw Skinner pull up. He didn’t see any other cars that might be following.

Scully opened the door before he could knock and she took his raincoat, then joined him and Mulder at the small table. A hanging Tiffany lamp cast warm light upon the three figures. The baseball game droned in the background.

Skinner took note of the appearance of his two agents right away and saw how drawn and tired they looked.

“Sir,” Mulder started, “do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“I heard that the digital tape has surfaced again.”

“It has. And the two murders you took us off were part of a plot to eliminate those who had access to that tape.”

“I’m not going to ask you if you have the tape. As we all know tragically well, these people will stop at nothing to get it back. They are so frantic to recover it that you could suffer horribly if they even suspect that you have it.”

Mulder clasped his hands across the table. Scully waited for him to speak, not knowing which direction he would go with the conversation.

“Sir, can we speak off the record?”

“No, Agent Mulder, we cannot.”

“Then there are things I can’t tell you,” he said flatly.

Skinner copied Mulder’s gesture and also clasped his hands together, leaning on the table toward Mulder. “Listen to me carefully. I’m being watched right now —”

Skinner saw both agents, suddenly alarmed, look toward the window. He explained quickly.
“No, I don’t mean this minute. I was very careful about coming here. Even if they do follow me, they have to be very careful how they handle you.”

Mulder frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Just that ... Agent Mulder, you have friends in high places. Word has gotten to them about what’s happened and they don’t want a repeat of last time, with your father and Scully’s sister —

“Oh, but it’s okay to butcher 3 children along with their parents!”

“Calm down.”

Mulder looked at Scully and she knew he was pondering whether to reveal something to Skinner, but it seemed that he was trying to relay some telepathic message to her first. Scully put her hand on Mulder’s arm, telling him wordlessly to hold on a minute.

“Sir, are you aware of Krycek’s involvement?” she asked.

“No, I mean about the murders.”

“There’s nothing but speculation, rumors and confusion right now. Believe me, no one has any answers.”

Mulder leaned back in his chair and Skinner met his eyes. Mulder’s voice was quiet. “There was a murder tonight,” he said cautiously.

Skinner frowned. “Where?”

“In the Adams Morgan District, in the alley behind the Sports Tavern. Do you know about that?”

Skinner searched Mulder’s face, looking for clues, then shook his head. Mulder looked at Scully, as if to say, . Mr. X had said he’d take care of it.

“Were you involved, Agent Mulder?” Skinner asked, as offhandy as possible.

Mulder pursed his lips and could sense Scully’s tension beside him. “I ... guess not,” he said absently.

Skinner considered it, then let his remark go. That’s what Mulder liked about Skinner — when he didn’t want to hear the answer, he didn’t ask the question.

“Agent Mulder, I came here to give you some advice. And I strongly urge you to take it. I don’t have to tell you that even though there are those who would protect you, there are those who want to see you gone. If you’ve got the tape, give it back. Channel it through the same sources you got it from, but give it back. You can’t even be sure what’s on there is factual.”

Mulder had heard all this before. He sighed deeply and looked up at the ceiling. This was one continuous nightmare. He had to keep telling himself that revealing what was in those secret documents was worth sacrificing lives for — just as others believed it was worth
sacrificing lives to conceal the documents. Mulder had decided a long time ago that the truth was more important than his own life, but the question had become whether he had the right to decide the fate of anyone else when it came to his quest for truth. That was the dilemma he struggled with now, especially as he looked across the table at his partner.

Skinner was waiting for an answer, and Mulder finally nodded. The two agents remained at the table as Skinner quietly retrieved his coat off the bed.

“I’m not putting either of you on any assignment right now. Get this mess cleaned up. And keep me posted.”

Both agents nodded that they would do as he asked, and then Skinner walked out.

Scully, looking at Mulder beside her, saw a distant look in his eyes. She knew that nothing she could do or say would make it better right now because she knew that deep down inside, Mulder was fighting old demons, the biggest being his unwavering belief that he was doing the right thing.

Many times Scully disagreed with his theories, or how he proceeded, but unless she felt he was foolishly off base, she had to trust his judgment. She was still learning about the dark avenues traveled by shadowy conspirators, about the lies and deception, false leads, cover-ups — all the aspects that defined the X-Files. She knew that Mulder was over-cautious about sharing information with her, whether it be for her safety or to protect the confidentiality of long-time informants. Her partnership with Fox Mulder was an exercise in patience, and often blind faith.

The agents retired to their own rooms tired and talked out, deciding they would start fresh in the morning. Now Scully lay in bed listening to the comforting sound of steady rain hitting the aluminum awnings over the windows. She knew Mulder had been right in trusting Skinner. Their boss was loyal to the agents, and had protected them on numerous occasions, but they also realized that he had to answer to people who may not have the same agenda.

Scully knew Skinner was caught in the middle, trying to help her and her partner do their job, while trying to pretend like he was hampering them. She often wondered why the balancing act didn’t drive him crazy. Mulder’s unorthodox methods certainly kept Skinner answering to his superiors regarding Mulder’s actions, but Scully believed Skinner wouldn’t want it any other way.

When it came to perceiving people, she was pretty good at reading between the lines; it was, after all, her job and she had both men pegged pretty well. Their outward animosity toward each other was a cover, a necessary front because it was the only way to keep the wolves off of Mulder.

As a result of all that was happening, Scully was in an introspective mood. She thought about how far they had come together since that first introduction in the basement office. Although her ‘shell of hard evidence’ was still hard to crack, Mulder had poked definite holes in it. He was patient, but persistent, as he led her gently down the path of believing in something that defied proof.

As she laid there listening to the rain, she smiled to herself, recalling one of the few times she had caught him off guard and speechless. Mulder was participating in an unauthorized surveillance of Eugene Tooms. Scully had shown up to relieve him, but Mulder, afraid that
he might be the cause of an official reprimand on Scully’s career record, asked her not to get involved. She admitted to him that she would not put her career on the line for anyone but him. Obviously surprised and not knowing how to respond, the quick-tongued Fox Mulder was rendered speechless. It was a bold statement for the young female agent to make, and it helped to define their relationship early on.

One thing she had learned about herself and her partner — both of them, in a life and death situation, would not hesitate to sacrifice their life for the other one. Comforted by that thought alone, and finally able to relax, Scully closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

She didn’t hear Mulder’s motel door open, or his car drive off into the night — using the first opportunity he’d had to hide the digital tape.

—X—X—

Chapter 8

SENATOR RICHARD MATHESON’S OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 16, 1998, 6:15 A.M.

The Russian sat in a chair facing Senator Matheson at his desk. The Senator looked stern, but worried. He didn’t like the man across from him, and trusted him even less, but events of the past few days had given him no choice but to go forward with the plan.

Matheson’s voice was direct. “Mulder is not to be harmed, not in any way.”

“He’ll resist.”

“If you expect that, then you should be prepared for it.”

“And his partner?”

Matheson smiled wryly. “You ask me stupid questions. What do you think Mulder would do if his partner were harmed? Must I remind you that when Mulder broke into the DOD he risked his life, his career and national security — all to save his partner. If you want a situation to go completely wrong, then lay a hand on Agent Scully and see what happens.”

“Once Mulder sees the truth, it won’t matter what we’ve done to anyone close to him. You said so yourself.”

“What I said,” Matheson said, emphasizing each word, “was that Mulder would believe the truth, as it’s proved to him, no matter how abominable the truth is. What you forget is that he has emotions just like everyone else, very passionate ones I might add, and he has a breaking point just like everyone else.”

The Russian lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling. “So there are limits, even with Mulder.”

“Of course there are. We got the tape back the first time, didn’t we? His partner was influential in that decision.”

“Then how do we know he wouldn’t hand over the tape again if her life were threatened?
Perhaps all this is unnecessary.”

Matheson stared at the man with hardened eyes. He hated the thought of putting Mulder’s and Scully’s life in this man’s hands, even temporarily. He knew that a man who didn’t have all the facts often made ignorant judgments.

“Because it has gone beyond that,” Matheson explained. “Must I remind you that more than one individual may be in possession of the files? Agent Mulder is the only one who could ever convince anyone that the files are bogus and to disregard them.”

“And he must see the truth to do that?”

Matheson nodded regretfully. “I don’t see any other way.”

He watched the Russian stand and slip his cigarette pack inside his coat.

The Russian’s voice was impassive. “Then we’ll get started.”

—X—X—

LIBERTY MOTEL
7:30 A.M.

Mulder was dressed and ready to go. He and Scully had felt a little more reassured after talking with Director Skinner. That was one man whom you definitely wanted on your team. Even when Skinner pulled away from a case occasionally and indicated that Mulder and Scully were on their own, they could pretty well bet that he was still working behind the scenes for them.

Mulder had talked to Scully on the phone just moments before and she was going to drive over to the convenience store to buy a newspaper.

He was in the bathroom packing his shaving kit when he heard his front door being unlocked. Even though each of them had a key to the other’s room — for emergency purposes — it alarmed him. He heard the door open.

“Scully?” he called anxiously, holding rein on his paranoia as he dumped items from the sink counter into the leather kit. “I hope you’re walking in with coffee.”

When there was no answer, he put the shaving kit on the sink and walked out of the bathroom. Standing in the center of the room were three men in dark clothing, holding guns on him. Mulder froze.

“Do you take cream?” one of them asked.

—X—X—

Scully got no response knocking on Mulder’s door, so she used her key. When she entered the room the first thing she saw was his travel bag on the bed.

“Mulder?” she called, walking toward the bathroom.

His shaving kit was on the sink. A damp bath towel was slung over the top of the shower. Walking back into the bedroom she checked the closet and saw that his suit was gone.
Scully thought maybe he walked down to the office or decided to get his own coffee. She started to walk out of the room, then stopped.

Mulder’s gun was lying on top of the TV.

—X—X—

Mulder sat between two men in the back seat of a limousine while the third man drove. A blindfold had been put over his eyes and his own handcuffs used to secure his hands behind his back.

“At least you’re kidnapping me in style. Does this limo have a bar? I don’t usually drink this early in the morning, but I could definitely make an exception if —”

“Shut up, Agent Mulder,” a voice said gruffly.

Mulder decided they weren’t in the mood for conversation so he would do as the man asked. He rode quietly and none of the three men spoke to him or to each other. He felt the car speed up and knew they must be on the freeway, but he had no idea what direction they were going.

“Hey,” Mulder said coolly, “could you guys at least drive through Burger King? You didn’t give me time to eat breakfast.”

Mulder tried to act composed with his situation, when in actuality he was scared — not just for himself but everyone involved with him.

He guessed they had driven for about a hour when the car slowed down, made a turn, then sped up again. He listened carefully for any sound that might help recreate his mysterious journey later - if he lived to tell about it — but the limo was closed up tight. He didn’t hear so much as a car horn.

After about 20 minutes more, the car came to a brief stop, then proceeded for a short distance, then stopped again. He heard the car doors opening and one man grabbed him by the elbow, pulling him across the seat out of the car. A strong wind whipped his coat and he could hear a loud engine. There were several voices around him, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

The man holding his right arm pulled him forward and another man took his left arm. After a few steps, they stopped. The roaring noise made it necessary for the man to shout in his ear.

“We’re going up some stairs, Agent Mulder. Take your time.”

He was led up some steep steps. He knew he was boarding an airplane. The stairway was narrow, so one man was behind him with a hand on Mulder’s back to guide him forward. It was slow going since Mulder couldn’t see the steps in front of him, nor could he balance himself using the rail because his hands were cuffed behind his back. As he got to the top, another man in front of him put his hand on top of Mulder’s head and forced him to duck down. Once inside the plane, the noise decreased. He was guided down the narrow aisle, then felt someone unlocking the handcuffs. Mulder rubbed his wrists and felt his coat being removed.
“Don’t touch the blindfold or we’ll put the cuffs back on,” he heard a voice say.

He was gently pushed down into a seat and felt a seatbelt being buckled around him.

“I’m glad you guys at least adhere to FAA regulations,” Mulder said uneasily. “I don’t guess I can ask where we’re going.”

Mulder heard a calm voice in the seat next to him. “Just relax, Agent Mulder.”

The voice sounded vaguely familiar to him.

Resigned to his current fate, he decided to do just that as he put his head back. But then he felt strong hands hold his wrists down on the armrests and an arm was put around his throat, holding him against the back of the seat. Someone unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt and pushed the sleeve up. Instantly Mulder realized what they were doing and he struggled against it, but it was useless. He felt a sharp prick inside the crook of his arm.

“No, don’t!” he yelled as he pulled against the restraint. He felt a stinging sensation and almost instantly he became lightheaded. The blackness behind the blindfold turned gray as his struggling eased, and by the time the needle was removed from his arm he had blacked out.

—X—X—

FBI HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
9:00 A.M. EST

Director Skinner was at his desk when his door opened suddenly and Scully charged in, closing it behind her. Scowling, he dropped his pen and looked up at her as she came to the front of his desk. Immediately he saw that she was anxious.

“Mulder’s gone,” she blurted out.

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” Skinner asked, nonchalantly — <what else is new?>

But Scully would not be brushed off so easily. Her voice was harsh. “He’s gone, sir.”

“He’s not gone, Scully. He’s off chasing cigar-shaped swamp gas,” he answered, picking up his pen and turning his attention back to his paperwork.

Scully took Mulder’s gun out of her purse and laid it on Skinner’s desk. “Without his gun?”

That got Skinner’s attention. He motioned to the chair and Scully sat down. Skinner leaned over his desk toward her. “Does Mulder know where the digital tape is?” he asked bluntly.

Scully didn’t move a muscle. Skinner didn’t blame her for not answering. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know where it was, although he suspected Mulder knew.

“Scully, if they have Mulder, then we have to wait for them to call the shots. My contacts in this area are limited. I’ll make some phone calls, but it’s doubtful I’ll get any answers. But be prepared.”

“For what, sir?”
“To make a decision whether to bargain for Mulder’s life.”

“You’re assuming I know where the tape is. I don’t, sir. They can hold a gun to Mulder’s head and cock the hammer, and I couldn’t tell them where it was.”

Skinner nodded. He believed her. Scully put Mulder’s gun back in her purse and stood up. “I may know someone who can help.”

Skinner didn’t ask who. He nodded to Scully and told her he would find out anything he could. In the meantime, all they could do was wait.

—X—X—

SOMEWHERE OVER THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.

“Fox. Fox, wake up.”

Mulder heard a voice from very far away, and he fought his way up through the blackness. His head was spinning and he thought he might be sick. He heard whispering around him, and the loud voice speaking to him again.

“Fox …”

Mulder’s eyelids felt heavy, but he slowly forced them open. His eyes were no longer blindfolded, and the light sent shards of pain through his pupils. He grimaced and rubbed his eyes, and the pain subsided. When he opened them again, his eyes were still blurry, but his focus was gradually sharpening. He blinked several times before his vision cleared enough to make out the images around him.

A glass of water was in front of his face.

“Drink this,” the familiar voice said.

Realizing he was very thirsty, he downed half the glass and it was taken from his hand.

At first he couldn’t remember where he was, then he saw the interior of the airplane. He felt a hand on his arm, and the voice again call his name.

“Fox.”

The voice was beside him and he turned his head.

He was stunned when he saw who sat next to him and for a split second he thought he was hallucinating. But the image was too clear, and the face held concern.

“Senator Matheson,” Mulder said hoarsely, struggling to mask his shock.

“Hello, Fox. Are you feeling better?”

Mulder didn’t know what to say. He felt betrayed and his face showed it. He turned his head away, and shook it sadly.

“It’s not what you think, Fox. I want you to listen to me.”
“It’s not what I think!” he asked angrily. “What the hell should I think, Senator!” he snapped bitterly.

“I can promise you that all your questions will be answered.”

“If I hand over the tape.”

“That will be your decision.”

Mulder scoffed out loud. Matheson touched his arm and Mulder jerked away as if burned.

“Get your hands off of me! I trusted you!”

Matheson nodded, completely understanding Mulder’s bitter disappointment. Mulder looked out the window, but they were above the clouds so he could see no landmarks.

“Tell me where we’re going,” Mulder asked furiously.

“I can’t do that. For your own safety, you must not know where we’re going.”

Mulder felt a glimmer of hope in his remark, but was afraid to believe anything at this point. Matheson’s voice was soft; his manner was what Mulder had been used to in the years he had known him, but this was something Mulder never believed him capable of doing. Mulder put his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. This hurt like hell.

“Fox, you are going to be given answers. You are going to see things that only a handful of people in the world have seen, and you will have to make a decision. I know what you are feeling right now, wondering who to trust, who to believe, what to believe. But right now, Fox, you need to do what you do best …”

Matheson stopped, hoping to get a reaction from Mulder, and he did when he saw his young friend turn toward him once again. Matheson finished his statement. “You need to keep an open mind.”

Mulder looked deep into Matheson’s eyes, trying to read something there. He thought he saw what he had always seen, but if that were true, then why was this happening?

Mulder’s voice was anxious. “Is my partner all right?”

“Of course,” Matheson answered.

Mulder felt the plane descending. Two burly men came from the front of the private plane and stood next to the seat Mulder was in.

Matheson spoke, and he sounded regretful. “We’re getting ready to land. I’m sorry, you need to be blindfolded and handcuffed again.”

Mulder was submissive, not because he was outnumbered, but because some shred of hope inside of him reminded him that the people he trusted often acted contradictory to that trust.

The plane touched down and Mulder was again led down the steps. This time though, Matheson was his guide.
Mulder noticed that the weather was much warmer than in Washington and very dry. The air was absent that wet-sheet feel of humidity, with a slight breeze carrying the scent of dust. He was put in a car and driven to an undisclosed location. From there he was hurried into a building and down a long corridor.

He couldn’t tell how many men accompanied him, but as they stopped to get into an elevator, he heard several sets of footsteps continue down the corridor. He thought he was with Matheson and only one other man in the elevator. He felt the elevator descending and it took a short time before it stopped and the doors opened. Mulder was led down another hallway and then a hand on his arm made him stop. He heard the tones of a code being punched into a keypad, and then heard what sounded like two heavy metal doors sliding open, one time-delayed just behind the other one.

It reminded him of a bank vault. Once he was inside, he heard the doors close behind him. He felt his handcuffs being removed, as was the blindfold. He squinted, focusing his vision, and saw that he was in a dimly lit room. Young soldiers in camouflage with sidearms sat at stations and as Mulder studied the lighted panels in front of the soldiers, he realized where he was.

In a missile silo.

“Gentleman,” Mulder said, “I appreciate all your secrecy. Did you know that the Tucson missile silo gives tours to school children.”

“This way, Fox,” Matheson motioned to a room adjacent to the control room.

Mulder could see another figure sitting at a long table in the darkened room. When he and Matheson entered, another heavy door shut behind them, startling Mulder. He moved over closer to the table where the lighting was better and immediately recognized the other man seated there.

It was Mr. X.

The black man didn’t smile, but nodded his greeting. Mulder felt his mind and body becoming numbed by the shocks he was experiencing. He couldn’t even react anymore except to manage a disgusted smirk.

The door slid open and a third man entered the room. He was familiar to Mulder, and it took a minute to remember where he had seen him. Then he recalled it with clarity: he was the man who Scully and Mulder confronted at Victor Klemper’s greenhouse, only to be told by him that Klemper had died. He was the man who warned Agent Scully at Mulder’s father’s funeral that her life was in danger.

As the door closed behind him, the Well Manicured Man took the chair next to Mulder.

“Fox, I think you two have met,” Matheson introduced.

Mulder looked unimpressed. The Well Manicured Man turned to Matheson. “Have the effects of the drugs worn off sufficiently?”

“Yes. He should be alert enough to understand.”

“Understand what?” Mulder asked sharply, tired of hearing himself talked about in the third
Mr. X spoke in a commanding voice. “Agent Mulder, we are going to give you information in stages because you could not possibly process all the facts at one time. We know you have the digital tape.”

“I don’t have it. I’ve been trying to get it,” Mulder lied.

The three men looked at each other and Mulder could tell they didn’t believe him. Matheson picked up the dialogue from there.

“Let’s hope, for all our sakes, that you do have it. We’re not here to threaten you. We’re here to prove how critical the information is on that tape, and why it must be secured.”

Mr. X moved in his chair and got Mulder’s attention. “Agent Mulder,” he started, “we are not the ones responsible for what happened last time you were in possession of the digital tape. Krycek was an assassin for, shall we say, another entity.”

Matheson nodded. “When Krycek showed up outside your apartment and tried to kill you, he made the most serious mistake of his life. We then made an attempt on his life, but failed. That’s when he fled the country, only to surface again recently.”

Mulder listened closely. He wanted so much to believe these men, especially the two he had trusted over the past years. But he had to remain wary because he had been fooled so many times before by people he thought he could trust. Matheson and Mr. X were confident in that they both knew how much Mulder needed to trust them again, that he desperately needed allies in high places.

Mulder was struggling to make all the pieces fit into the same puzzle.

When the Well Manicured Man spoke, his voice was soft and Mulder got the impression this man was very much in charge of the situation.

“Mr. Mulder, we need to go back a long way and start this story. Ask questions, but don’t get defensive, and don’t rush to conclusions before we’ve given the facts,” said the Well Manicured Man.

“Fox,” Matheson said kindly, “this isn’t going to be easy, so you’ll have to be patient with the answers.”

The room was cold, probably because it was underground and the computer equipment required a cooler temperature, but in spite of that, Mulder’s hands were clammy. Mulder saw the men look at each other and sensed that even now they had reservations about what they were going to tell him.

He stopped them before they could start. “Wait a minute. I want to ask one question before we begin. My partner is as entangled in this as I am. Why were we separated? Why isn’t she here? Could it be because she’s the skeptic and she wouldn’t buy your story as easily as I might?”

Matheson tried to smile. “That’s one reason. This is going to be hard enough for you to accept.”
“What’s hard to accept is that I’ve been lied to by the people that I confided in.”

Mr. X looked him squarely in the eye. “Trust no one, Agent Mulder.”

“But I do! There is someone I trust explicitly, without question, and that’s my partner. And right now I need someone I know I can trust.”

Mulder thought he detected a look of sympathy from Matheson, but Mr. X looked unaffected.

The Well Manicured Man even showed a hint of understanding as he nodded. “Mr. Mulder, again, be patient. Part of what we tell you will explain your partner’s role in this.”

It was obvious that Mulder looked agitated, and was working to control his temper. He didn’t look satisfied with their answers. These people had learned how to wear false exteriors.

Mulder saw Mr. X narrow his eyes and his look was hard.

“Agent Mulder, if you confide in your partner, she will be killed,” he said bluntly.

They saw a reaction from Mulder. His eyes became cold as he looked at each of them. Matheson knew they were going to lose his receptivity unless there was an explanation at this point. He glared at Mr. X who was obviously insensitive to Mulder’s confusion.

“Fox, what you are about to learn goes so far beyond national security that you would not only shoot your own partner, but your mother to keep the truth hidden,” Matheson stated.

To Mulder, that was the most profound statement he had ever heard. “Never!” he spat vehemently.

“The only way to keep Agent Scully safe,” Matheson added, “is for her to know nothing.”

Matheson poured a glass of ice water from a silver pitcher sitting on the table and set it in front of Mulder, who intentionally did not touch it.

The Well Manicured Man leaned on the table and began his story. “Agent Mulder, you asked a question one day, to which you received the answer: ‘They’ve been here for a long, long time.’ Do you remember that?”

<Deep Throat.> Mulder blinked, but kept his face unreadable. He knew they asked questions they already knew the answers to.

The Well Manicured Man continued. “Extraterrestrial contact with us was not a mistake resulting from a crash. It was intentional. They had been observing our planet for hundreds of years. They won’t say exactly how long. They had a message for us and it was finally time to deliver it.”

“Are you talking about Roswell, 1947?”

“No, North Dakota, 1902.”

—X—X—
Chapter 9

“1902?” Mulder asked, warily.

Matheson noticed Mulder’s reaction and interjected. “Naturally, a cover-up began immediately. It was easier back then, without mass communication. Word didn’t spread instantaneously through satellite transmissions. As the message unfolded and the proof was undeniable, the need for security became essential. It was decided that except for a select core of people, anyone having knowledge of the aliens would have to be silenced.”

“Exterminated,” Mulder emphasized with a sneer.

“Yes. Those that remained to create and perpetuate the hoax regarding UFO’s were not immune to the same punishment. Many of them had family members who were assassinated to insure their loyalty and their silence. It was probably unnecessary because the consequence of revealing the secret would have meant the death of everyone involved anyway.”

Mulder reached for the glass of water and took a drink, gripping it tightly so they wouldn’t see his hands shaking. “What kind of message could possibly justify murder?”

Matheson hesitated, glancing at the other two men, then said tersely, “What the aliens revealed to us was our future.”

There was dead silence in the room. Mulder didn’t need to read their faces. If they were lying, they would be far better at it than he could detect. A shiver went down his spine, as his intuition and instinct told him they were telling the truth. His silence was exactly the reaction the three men had hoped for. They had counted on his open mind to help him accept the truth, as it had so many times in the past.

But he also believed that because of his readiness to accept extreme possibilities, they just might be playing him for a patsy.

“I think you guys have been watching too many ‘Twilight Zone’ reruns,” Mulder said casually.

Mr. X brushed off Mulder’s snide remark and surprised the agent with his calm demeanor. “Agent Mulder, many, many lives depend on your willingness to believe what we tell you.”

That was a little harder to take. Mulder did not yet understand how he could figure so prominently in this.

<Why me?>

The men saw the questions on his face and guessed what he was thinking. He never dreamed it would get more unimaginable than this, but he was about to find out that this was the tip of the iceberg.

“Your name is in some top secret documents, along with your father’s,” The Well Manicured Man admitted.

Mulder finally found his voice. “Tell me something I don’t know.”
Mulder saw Matheson look at The Well Manicured Man for further explanation, and he went on. “Mr. Mulder, we’re not talking about recent documents. Your name appears in documents which were written about the time your grandfather was born.”

Mulder couldn’t sit in the chair any longer. He stood and paced across the floor, his mind trying desperately to fathom what he was being told. The three men knew he needed time to absorb it all. They were patient. Matheson knew Mulder better than the others, so he knew the young man was trying to put it all in order.

Finally Mulder sat back down. “I don’t understand what you’re telling me,” he admitted, anxiously.

The men looked at each other to determine who would explain, and through non-verbal communication, it was decided that The Well Manicured Man would continue.

“Mr. Mulder, the year was 1902. It would be impossible to understand our present-day technology back then, let alone alien technology. And there was a translation problem — there just isn’t language for the alien theories. What we could understand is these beings from another world had been able to time travel into our future. They travel through what we can fractionally interpret as some sort of dimension corridor.”

The Well Manicured Man hesitated, trying to gauge Mulder’s reaction so far, but the agent’s face revealed nothing so he continued.

“The information they gained from that future travel, they brought to individuals in our government at that time, in 1902. World governments, even then, realized the enormity of that disclosure. It needed to be preserved for future generations, but kept secret. They must have been tremendously challenged by who to trust with the information. It had to be individuals who could never be influenced by world politics to reveal the message. The decision was made that the message would be written and coded by the Navajo in their language. As the years passed, the files were entrusted to only a handful of individuals around the world.”

Mulder looked puzzled. “But I understood that the top secret files were government cover-ups of UFO investigations — Roswell, the MJ files —”

Mulder stopped, seeing the men shaking their heads. Matheson said to him, “That was a smoke screen for what the documents really contained.”

“Which was?” Mulder questioned.

“What was going to happen to us in the future.”

Mulder rubbed his eyes. His mind tried frantically to grasp the inconceivable. “Are you saying these beings were here to help us?”

Matheson nodded, sensing that Mulder found that preposterous.

“Senator, as we both know …,” Mulder looked around the table at each of them, “… as we all know, these aliens have deceived us and murdered and —”

“Fox,” Matheson interrupted, “some of the murders were necessary. They were working with us to protect the secret. But apart from that, there is a revolutionary group from this
other world that believes interference with our history is wrong.”

Mulder’s smile was twisted. “You mean like Captain Kirk’s upholding the Prime Directive?”

Mulder saw that Matheson and Mr. X understood, but the Well Manicured Man was puzzled. “I don’t know this Captain Kirk, but I assure you he had absolutely nothing to do with any of this?” he stated in complete seriousness.

Mulder glanced at the faces of the other two men and saw the faint traces of amusement, as if the three of them had just shared a common joke. In any other situation, it might have been funny to him.

“So not only do we have to distinguish the good guys and the bad guys from our planet, but from theirs as well?” he asked.

Mr. X answered him. “I’ll say it again. Trust no one, Agent Mulder.”

“Present company excluded, I presume,” Mulder stated shrewdly. “You said the MJ Documents were a smokescreen. For what?”

The Well Manicured Man spoke distinctly. “There is a sub file within the MJ files. That information was encrypted in a type of reverse code. The digital tape you had in your possession, and now have once again,” the Well Manicured Man declared, ignoring Mulder’s previous denial, “does contain top secret information. It was put there to prevent anyone from looking further into the files. If they did, they would find the Merchandise, which also has its own code.”

Mulder was startled at mention of the word Merchandise. His father spoke of it the night he was murdered.

“My father knew this, didn’t he? Don’t look at each other for permission to answer! Didn’t he!” Mulder demanded, bolting out of the chair, leaning with his hands on the table.

“Fox … yes, to an extent,” Matheson answered. “But he believed what everyone was told to believe, and that was that the Merchandise was the MJ files — that a governmental cover-up existed on extraterrestrial contact. That’s all. Your father knew his name was in the files, but he thought …” Matheson stopped.

“He thought what!” Mulder shouted.

“… that it was in context to some genetic testing that had been done with alien technology,” Matheson finished.

<Oh my god> Mulder thought. His eyes blazed and he clenched his fists. His anger was a mask for his fear and they all knew it.

“You’re talking about cloning, and some sort of hybrid testing that was done! That much I know my father was involved in!” Mulder said emphatically.

“Agent Mulder,” Mr. X spoke sharply, “we’re getting ahead of —”

“Does this have anything to do with my sister! Does this involve my sister!” Mulder shouted.
Matheson knew that was coming. Mulder would not allow the conversation to go on without some answers about his sister. Mr. X knew it as well.

The Well Manicured Man and Matheson looked to Mr. X to answer him. “Agent Mulder, it has been known for a long time, even before you were born, what your part is in this country’s future. For some of us, our only mission is to protect you. That’s why Krycek had to run when he attempted to kill you. He had no idea who was watching, or why.”

“That’s not what I asked!” Mulder snapped.

“I’m trying to answer your question. What I’m telling you is that because your part in this is so essential, it had to be insured that you would follow the course laid out for you. In other words, it was felt that some event would need to take place which would send you on this path.”

Mulder began to assimilate the facts. He paled and had to sit back down. He looked to Matheson to verify the truth and Matheson could not meet his eyes.

When Mr. X spoke it was direct and void of any compassion. “Your sister was taken so that when the time came, you would do the work needed of you.”

In his most horrific nightmare, he hadn’t expected that. Mulder’s composure turned to hostility. His eyes flared with rage and his voice trembled with fury.

“YOU BASTARDS! Matheson, you and my dad were friends! YOU SON-OF-A —”

Mulder lunged across the table and grabbed Matheson by the front of the shirt as the Well Manicured Man jumped back from the table. Mr. X moved as quickly as Mulder, anticipating his actions, and grabbed him around the neck, at the same time pinning his left arm behind him and pulling him back against the wall. Mulder was no match for Mr. X’s size and strength and he was immediately overpowered. He struggled, but what he had just learned was weakening his resistance and finally his body surrendered and Mr. X forced him gently back into the chair.

Matheson was visibly shaken as well. “Fox, you must hear the rest.”

As if barely hearing him, Mulder shook his head. Visions of that night at his parents’ home, of his sister disappearing into a blinding white light, swarmed in his head. He was oblivious to the others in the room, and to Matheson who, despite the attack minutes ago, came around to Mulder’s side of the table and sat in the chair next to him.

Matheson’s voice was stern. “If you never want to hear the reasons, if you want to wonder why for the rest of your life, then we’ll let you go.”

Matheson ignored the sharp glare from the other two men. Mulder finally raised his head and looked into the Senator’s eyes, and Matheson saw something in Mulder’s eyes he never expected to see.

Matheson took a deep breath. “What we must prove to you is that at all costs, no matter how many lives are sacrificed, there is a reason far greater to do it. I know you can’t possibly imagine such a reason, but there is, Fox. There is.”

Mulder was in near-shock and nothing he heard right now could be sanely comprehended.
But he had to ask the question that burned inside of him with almost a consuming fire.

“Who took my sister?”

None of the three men answered. Mulder’s eyes bore into Matheson’s. “Where is she?”

“Fox, time is critical right now —”

Leaping out of his chair, Mulder stood over Matheson, barely holding on to his control.

“WHERE IS SHE!” he demanded, his teeth clenched and his fists pounding the table.

Matheson’s voice was curt. “We will tell you everything when this is over.”

“I want to know NOW, or you can find somebody else to play your stupid little games! I’ll be NO FUCKING part of this!” Mulder threatened.

Matheson’s eyes never left Mulder’s as he slowly stood up to confront him at eye level. Mulder saw and felt the awesome power of the man he thought he had known for so long. The Senator’s words were icy and direct.

“If you don’t help us, you may never find your sister.” He let that sink in, seeing a momentary flicker of challenge in Mulder’s expression, then it vanished. Matheson’s tone was softer, but still formidable. “Sit down.”

Mulder defied his authority as long as he could, but the contest served no purpose. He knew he would do whatever they told him to do if it meant seeing his sister again. Slowly, Mulder sank into the chair. The three men had backed off, giving Mulder time to calm down and in some way trying to let him know that they were not his enemies. Mulder knew he had to leave the subject of his sister alone for now. He saw Matheson half smile, but it looked more like an apology.

“What is Krycek’s role in this?” Mulder finally asked.

The Well Manicured Man spoke with distaste. “He’s a fool! A money-grabbing fool! He sold the digital tape to someone in Blue Sky. We had been told the tape was destroyed when the attempt was made on his life with the car bombing. He thought that we believed that, so he thought he was safe.”

“But he was killing the people he sold the tape to,” Mulder said, confused.

Mulder saw the three men look at each other, baffled, and he realized another shocking truth. “The people, the families that were killed, you did that,” Mulder stated flatly, so drained of emotion he could no longer act with the rage he felt inside. Mulder thought he read the answer in Matheson’s expression. He smiled sickly and shook his head. “You bastards,” he whispered wearily.

“Fox,” Matheson put his hand on his arm but Mulder moved his arm away. “Fox, those files must be confiscated and contained.”

“You can’t possibly kill everyone who might have had access to them! Don’t you see, if they’ve been copied, there’s no telling who’s seen them!”

“We know the information will go through channels. You are the conduit,” Matheson
answered further.

“How do you know that!”

“Mr. Mulder,” the Well Manicured Man said distinctly, “you are the inside man, the one government man that they will trust. Anyone in your network knows that if those files are endorsed by you, they will be authentic. By the same token, if they are discredited by you, they are as reliable as comic books.”

“Fox, no matter how many people read those files, if you expose them as bogus, the information will be worthless,” Matheson explained.

“But they’re not bogus,” Mulder said defiantly. “That’s why you’ve brought me here, to bring me over to your side, whatever your purpose is!”

The Well Manicured Man took a step toward Mulder and his eyes were penetrating.

“Precisely.”

Mulder held his gaze for a long time as if trying to see more than he was being told.

Mr. X stood and put his hand on Mulder’s shoulder. “Stay here,” he ordered, then motioned for the others to leave the room with him. Mulder was too drained to offer any argument. He was relieved to be alone, to let his mind sink into an abyss.

Not much time passed before Mr. X re-entered the room. Mulder didn’t look up, didn’t acknowledge him, but Mr. X spoke to him anyway.

“We’re going to leave you here for a little while. We’ll bring you something to eat. Do you need anything else?”

Mulder slowly looked up at him and Mr. X could only imagine what unspoken thoughts were in Mulder’s head. He left him alone in the room.

Mulder had succumbed to his exhausted mental state. Crossing his arms on the table, he laid his head down and went to sleep. It was the only way to find peace for his tormented soul.

—X—X—

AGENT FOX MULDER’S APARTMENT
5:30 P.M.

Scully was careful entering Mulder’s apartment. Weapon drawn, she checked all the rooms. She halfway expected to find that someone had searched for the digital tape, but it appeared that nothing was disturbed.

Walking over to his computer, she turned it on. He had left her an e-mail one time when he disappeared, and she hoped he might have done so again. To her disappointment, there was nothing there. She turned the computer off again.

After raising the window blind, Scully then opened Mulder’s desk drawer where she removed the roll of masking tape. Tearing off a long strip, she placed it diagonally on the window. She tore off another strip the same length and crisscrossed it, forming an “X” on
the glass pane. She turned on the lamp and tilted the shade toward the window.

Scully looked around the room, remembering times she had been here with Mulder, wondering if anything would ever be the same after this was over, if it was ever over. She let her mind disassociate with everything by hypnotically watching the fish swimming in Mulder’s aquarium. Scully shook out a few fish flakes into the water, watching the fish snatch them as the flakes slowly sank to the bottom of the tank. Removing her coat, she walked to the couch and sat down.

Long after the sun set, she continued to wait patiently in the dark.

—X—X—

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.
2:30 P.M., M.S.T.

Mulder’s body had fought back the shock by shutting down. But he wasn’t in a deep sleep, and the sound of the heavy door woke him. As if in slow motion, he lifted his head and blankly watched the three men take the same seats as before, Matheson once again across from him. It was then that Mulder noticed an untouched tray of food in the center of the table. He wasn’t aware that two hours had passed.

When Matheson spoke, Mulder looked up at him with fatigued eyes. “Fox, this isn’t a missile silo. It’s a vault.”

Mulder nodded. “More DNA files like in West Virginia?”

“No. Will you come with us?”

<Like I have a choice.>

Mulder hesitated, wanting to be difficult, but not having the energy. He stood and picked up his coat off the back of the chair where he looped it with one finger over his back. Submissively, he followed The Well Manicured Man and Matheson, with Mr. X bringing up the rear.

They walked back to the main control room and once again entered the elevator. Mulder noticed there was only one button indicating up or down. Next to the button was a lighted panel about six inches square and a numeric keypad just below that. All three men placed their hands on the panel where a light bar scanned their palm prints, then each punched in a separate numbered code on the keypad.

“Fox,” said Matheson, “put your palm on the scanner.”

“I’m not in the system.”

“Yes, you are. This elevator has a sensor that detects heartbeats. A separate palm print must be scanned for each one that it detects. There are only a few prints in the system, but one of them is yours.”

“It eliminates the possible entry at gunpoint from someone who has no registered palm print or separate numeric code,” The Well Manicured Man explained further.
Mulder placed his palm over the scanner. Matheson punched in a code for Mulder, then pushed the button and the elevator began to descend.

“You got a bowling alley down here?” Mulder asked, not feeling the least bit humorous, but trying to convince himself he hadn’t been overwhelmed yet.

Mulder estimated they descended a few hundred feet, then the elevator stopped and opened. Another steel door was in front of them and to the right of that, a 4”x4” steel plate mounted on the wall with another numeric keypad below that. Matheson quickly entered another set of numbers, then pulled the lever on the plate and it opened. Inside was a key which Matheson carried over to a slot in the wall panel next to the door. He pushed a small white button next to the key slot and Mulder heard a voice come through a speaker on the wall.

“Ready on your signal, sir,” the voice said.

“On three,” Matheson spoke into the speaker.

He inserted the key into the slot. The Well Manicured Man leaned toward Mulder and whispered, “There’s also a voice analyzer which verifies the audio imprint.”

“One, two, three,” Matheson counted.

On three, Matheson turned the key which Mulder assumed was simultaneous with another key from one of the soldiers in the control room. The big door began to slowly slide open and Mulder saw that the thickness of the steel was about 12 inches. Matheson then replaced the key in the wall compartment and secured it before entering the area beyond the door, thus locking them in the containment area.

Mulder found himself in a fairly small room crowded with 3 Titan missiles. As he heard the door reseal behind them, he turned to Matheson and frowned. “I thought you said —”

Before Mulder could finish, Mr. X had typed in a sequence of keys on a desk computer which appeared to be turned off. A wall section slid open revealing yet another elevator.

“Holy shit,” Mulder exclaimed. “What’s down there, the Betty Crocker kitchens?”

They stepped in the elevator, another palm scan and numeric code was entered and the elevator descended again. It opened automatically when it reached the bottom. Mulder stood, stunned, and Mr. X had to take him by the elbow and lead him out of the elevator.

He was looking down a corridor which appeared to be endless. He walked a few feet ahead and the corridor branched off into ells which stretched farther than the eye could see. The corridors were filled with what appeared to be huge filing drawers stacked to a height of about 100 feet. The front of the cabinet was flush with the steel wall. It was similar to what Mulder had seen in West Virginia when he and Scully discovered the underground mine vault containing the DNA files of millions of individuals. But this was on a scale so infinitely larger it was mind-boggling.

Mulder could hear a compressor pumping cool air in the tunnel. Mr. X flipped a switch and the lights came on, but they were faint, making the area shadowy and dark. He could see a catwalk above him about midpoint of the height of the cabinets, which followed the path of the corridors. The three men allowed Mulder a chance to absorb his surroundings.
He turned to them finally. “What are these?”

“A little of the past, a record of our future,” Matheson answered.

“You expect me to believe all this!”

“No,” the Well Manicured Man said simply. “Just as our government didn’t believe it until they were shown unquestionable proof. Of course they had an advantage because you, me, all of us here, we did not have personal contact with the beings who brought us this proof. It’s a little easier to believe the message when the messenger is standing in front of you, and that messenger is from another world. Just about anything becomes believable then.”

“Is that what I’m going to see? The proof?”

“You will find your own proof. But yes, it’s all here,” Matheson stated.

—X—X—

Chapter 10

Mulder and the others followed Matheson to one of the cabinets. Each cabinet drawer was about the size of a small refrigerator. There was a plate on the front of one cabinet which read:

NOVEMBER, 1921.

Matheson pressed a small green button and the drawer slowly slid out. There were three tiers of files in the drawer, one above the other. The drawer was divided into alphabetic sections. Mulder tried to determine how far back the drawer went, but the light ran out before the drawer did. Matheson pushed the button again and the drawer stopped. He reached behind a tab marked “NEW YORK TIMES” and removed a thick document. It only took an instant for Mulder to realize it was a newspaper, with every page laminated for protection against age and elements.

As he looked through the New York Times section, he saw there were 30 papers, one for every day in November, 1921. Behind that section was a tab marking a different newspaper publication, and again 30 papers for each day in November, 1921. And behind that another, and another and so on. That meant these cabinets must contain newspapers from all over the U.S. and the world, with each newspaper reporting for every day of the year.

As Mulder looked down the branching corridors filled with duplicate cabinets, he began to realize the enormity of what he was seeing. “What period of time does this span?” he asked.

The Well Manicured Man answered, “From the start of this century to beyond the millennium.”

“This is how the future is recorded?”

“Can you think of a better way?” Matheson asked.

Mulder looked more closely at the paper he held in his hands. The headlines of the New York Times, dated November 12, 1921, read:
He flipped through the pages and it appeared to be a complete newspaper with sports news, ads, local, national and international stories.

“The past is recorded history. But how do you prove or disprove the future?” Mulder asked, skeptical.

“There are ways to test certain things,” Mr. X added.

“Show me.” Mulder said bluntly.

The Well Manicured Man took the paper out of Mulder’s hand and replaced it in the cabinet, closing it by pushing the button again.

“The only way you’ll believe what you’re about to see here is if you prove it for yourself. Follow me.”

They walked straight down the corridor, turned to the right and walked several hundred yards. Mulder looked around, wondering if in fact all those cabinets contained what he was told. It seemed unbelievable. Certainly no hoax could consist of such an elaborate scheme as this. It would take decades to reproduce thousands of newspapers all over the world for each day of the year for over a hundred years. The thought was staggering. Besides, what would be the purpose? The government was much more clever and time sensitive than that. Mulder had to admit to himself it didn’t sound like something our government would do, even to support a hoax.

They reached a metal staircase and climbed it to the top where the walkway wound through the cabinets, making easy access to the upper cabinets. No one spoke, but the hard-soled shoes of the men clanked on the catwalk. Finally they stopped in front of a cabinet. Mulder noticed the date, APRIL, 1998.

The drawer was opened and Matheson pushed the button, stopping it at Saturday, April 18th. Mulder looked at Matheson. “That’s day after tomorrow.”

Matheson nodded his head. “In this section there are newspapers from every major city in the world for April 18, 1998. We want you to select a city, read the events of that day from this newspaper accounting, and choose one event to verify. We’re running out of time, Fox, or we would allow you to choose whatever day you want. This way, although we know the day, we don’t know which city you will have chosen, or what event you want to witness.”

“Witness? I’m not sure I —” Mulder started.

Mr. X interrupted. “Choose something you don’t think could possibly be predicted. We want no doubt in your mind that what is contained in these future files is authentic.”

“In other words, if I read in this Saturday paper about an earthquake in the San Fernando Valley, that means I will experience it tomorrow, Friday,?” Mulder asked, incredibly.

“Yes, but that’s too common,” Matheson said. “That could be predicted by almost anyone at any time. Natural disasters are a bad example because there are weather patterns and climatic conditions that can precede an event. Plane crashes, auto accidents, anything that
you read about could technically be staged. Of course, it would mean that since we don’t know what city you’re going to, we’d have to create hundreds of events. We would have to make sure John Doe drove his car through a stop sign and collided with Mr. John Smith at the appropriate time and place. Almost impossible, yet there could be an ounce of doubt. We want no doubt in your mind. Choose something that can’t be fixed, Fox.”

Mr. X pointed to the ceiling, and Mulder looked up, seeing a video camera mounted on the wall.

“We’ll be watching you. Look through as many as you want. You can’t take anything out of here, nor can you write anything down, so memorize all that you can. That shouldn’t be too tough for you. When you’re through, close the drawer and we’ll come back for you.”

“This is crazy,” Mulder said, feeling apprehensive. “Besides, I don’t understand the purpose of this unless you’re going to show me what’s in the future.”

Matheson surprised him by putting his hand on Mulder’s shoulder. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

They left him standing there in the hazy light. Mulder already knew what to look for. Paging through the New York Times had given him an idea. He just needed a place.

He pulled papers from several different cities and studied them. He knew almost instantly where he was going. He just needed to get some details.

After studying an event for over an hour, memorizing every detail he could, he stopped and read about one other incident that occurred and was reported in the Saturday paper. His mind collected all the data he could and then he put it back and surreptitiously pulled out three more papers from different cities, just as decoys. They might follow him to whatever destination he chose, but if possible he didn’t want them knowing until the last minute where he was going.

An hour later he was ready to leave. His head hurt. He was confused and a little scared wondering about what was expected of him. He hoped he wasn’t part of a tremendous conspiracy to deface the truth. He didn’t think he had the strength to deal with such adversity right now.

All three men came for him and he was led out the same way he came in. An identical coded key box had to be accessed to get back to the main elevator. He was taken back into the holding room off the main control room. Nobody sat down. Mulder didn’t know what was going to happen next.

Mr. X walked close to him and his voice was soft, but deep. “Agent Mulder, we have a story for you to tell your partner and Director Skinner.”

Mulder listened to Mr. X lay out a plan for him. It sounded reasonable. It was also partially true. Mr. X had stressed that regardless of what Mulder thought of each of them right now, for his partner’s safety, he must trust them. Mulder was promised that Scully’s part in this would be revealed to him at the same time the Merchandise was shown him. Matheson acknowledged that he knew it would be awkward, if not almost impossible, to limit Scully’s involvement, but he stressed emphatically that to do otherwise could mean her death. Mulder didn’t need to understand why right now. It was enough that dangerous men ordered it.
He was told that after he returned to Washington on Saturday — following his trip on Friday to verify the newspaper account — he would be contacted. Once again he would be brought to this location by the same method of transportation, and he would again be drugged.

Thankfully, he realized that in spite of what he would be shown, they were still trying to protect him.

Mulder put his coat on. “I just hope I can convince Scully with this story. She reads me like a book.”

Mulder had turned toward the door when Mr. X called out to him. “Agent Mulder.”

Just as Mulder turned back around he felt a powerful blow to his cheek. Blackness enveloped him immediately as if someone had turned out a light. He never felt the other two men catch him before he hit the floor.

—X—X—

LIBERTY MOTEL
APRIL 17, 1998, 1:35 A.M.

A noise woke Scully and she laid in the bed listening for it again. There was someone knocking at her door. Jumping out of bed, she threw on her robe, then looked through the peephole. Shocked and relieved at the same time, she flung the door open.

“Mulder!” she exclaimed, pulling him into the room.

Quickly she locked the door behind her. Mulder was gingerly making his way to the bed to sit down and she went to him. Right away she saw his left eye bruised and swollen almost shut.

She took a brief perfunctory check of him as she sat next to him, noticing foremost his sluggish behavior, not realizing that the cause of it was not the blow to his head, but having been awakened from his drug-induced sleep just minutes ago in the backseat of the limo.

“Lay back,” she said, gently pushing him back on the bed.

She went in the bathroom and dampened a washcloth with cool water. When she came back in the room Mulder was sitting up on the bed.

“Lay back down,” she ordered, sitting next to him.

“No, I’m okay, Scully.”

“You’re not okay. That hard a blow could have caused a concussion. Do you have any idea how long you were out?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were,” she said sharply, infuriated that he would dismiss her expertise by expecting her to believe a lie. “You wouldn’t be woozy if you hadn’t been knocked out. So don’t give me any of your shit!”

“Ouch,” he said, referring to her stinging words, not her treatment of the wound.
“Any blurred vision?” she asked, lifting each eyelid, being especially careful with the left one.

“Nuh ... well, it’s a little fuzzy, but better than it was.”

“Headache?”

“No.”

She examined the injury more closely and noticed a cut just above his cheekbone where it had bled a little bit. It was not serious, not even requiring stitches. Carefully she cleaned the cut, pausing every time he winced.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” she asked, running her hand through his hair, checking for bumps.

“No. Just my pride. I didn’t see it coming.”

“Unbutton your shirt.”

“You first.”

She was contemplating adding another injury to his list, but then saw that his fingers were slow. He was still having some trouble with his coordination. So while he unfastened the top buttons, she started at the bottom.

“Oooh, Scully, you -”

“Shut up, Mulder.”

She opened his shirt and looked carefully for bruising around his rib area, running her fingers expertly over his skin. Satisfied that he was okay, she dropped her hands, but still watched his eyes closely.

“Who did this to you? Start at the beginning, from this morning.”

Mulder sighed heavily. “There’s not that much to tell. Somehow three men got in my room and took me at gunpoint. I was blindfolded and driven ... somewhere ... to some warehouse. There were two other men there and they started to interrogate me.”

“About the tape?”

“No, about my brand of underwear. Anyway, I told them I didn’t have the tape, and I didn’t know who did.”

“And they believed you?”

“Eventually. They think that whoever does have it will eventually turn it over to me, which in an ironic way, saves my ass for now.”

“It took all day to say that much?” she asked doubtfully.

Mulder knew she would start tearing the story apart. That’s what he would expect her to do, in fact it’s what he would demand that she do — anytime but now.
Mulder saw the concern and skepticism on her face and for his sake as well as hers, he tried to lighten the situation. “Nice robe, Scully. Good color on you. What do they call that, ‘apricot’?”

“Cut the crap, Mulder. I’m not in the mood for any funny stuff from you,” she said, her voice more biting than he expected.

Mulder put his hands behind his neck and stretched. “Don’t worry, Scully. I’m too tired and weak to act out my fantasies.”

Her reaction caught him off guard when she bolted off the bed and hurled the washcloth across the room into the sink. Her anger surprised him.

“Dammit, Mulder! I’ve been looking for you all day! Skinner called every contact he could think of! I used the Lone Gunmen to track down possible sources in their network that might have heard something on your whereabouts. I even sat at your apartment most of the night waiting for your mysterious Mr. X!”

Mulder suddenly realized what his partner must have been going through. He hadn’t considered her fear — thinking he could be dead. It was dangerous for her to go to his apartment. He measured the concern she felt for him by the risk she had taken.

Mulder saw that she was waiting for some answers, but that her anger had subsided into <talk to me>.

“Scully, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that’s better!” she said with dramatic sarcasm. “Apology accepted, now can we go to Disneyland?”

He didn’t know how to answer until he saw her eyes soften and understood that she needed her outburst to relieve the tension and fear that had built up during the time he was missing.

Mulder couldn’t resist his nature. “I just figured you watched free HBO all night.”

She didn’t remark. Sometimes she understood his nature even better than he did himself. She knew he relied on humor to try and downplay a stressful situation. Mulder stood and stretched again, trying to somehow speed up the dissipation of the drugs in his system.

“Do you think we could bribe some coffee out of the desk clerk?” he asked.

“We can try.”

“Would you, while I get washed up a little bit?”

“I’m reluctant to let you out of my sight,” she half-kidded.

Mulder thought about it, having to remind himself what he knew, that she didn’t know. He had been told by Mr. X that he would be watched; that wherever he went, he would have protection. He didn’t understand it, but he gladly accepted it for himself, and especially for his partner.

“We’ll be okay, Scully. Really.”
Reluctantly she agreed. As Mulder touched the doorknob he heard her call his name. When he looked over his shoulder at her, she was holding out his gun.

“You might want this.”

—X—X—

APRIL 17, 1998
LATER THAT MORNING

The rain had stopped but it was still overcast, the chilly air thick with humidity. Mulder had pretty much convinced Scully that they were safe for the time being because no one believed he had the tape in his possession yet. Scully was impressed with the obvious secrecy in the anti-government network, since the tape had in fact passed through many hands to get to Mulder’s. That meant no one was talking. It showed a lot more integrity than good old Uncle Sam.

Last night, Mulder had told the story that Mr. X told him to tell her. He explained again to Scully about the Blue Sky Project and the files that had been downloaded. Then he went on to tell her something else, something that was extremely difficult for him to tell because it was a lie. He told her there was a possibility the documents that were downloaded were fakes, and the murders of Dossett and the others were to perpetuate the hoax. She needed many more answers from him, but both had been exhausted and needed sleep.

This morning Mulder was finding that the events of the last 24 hours seemed surreal to him, like a bad dream. He would catch himself drifting away from Scully’s conversation and wondering if what he experienced really happened. He knew it did; he was just having trouble accepting it.

Scully and Mulder entered the motel coffee shop and were seated in a booth. They sat close to each other to keep their voices low. Scully’s sharp eye scanned the restaurant, wondering if they were being watched. Mulder didn’t bother. He now knew the people who watched them were not a threat as long as they needed something from him, something he wasn’t sure he could give them.

Coffee was put in front of them and it wasn’t until the waitress walked away that Scully asked the question he had been dreading. “Where’s the digital tape, Mulder?”

“It’s in a safe place. I’ve got to be very careful about carrying it on me right now. I’ve waited too long for it to be snatched away from me before I can read it.”

“Where is it, Mulder?” she repeated again.

<If you confide in your partner, she will be killed.>

He leaned close to her and whispered, “It’s better that you not know.”

“Are you afraid that if I’m ever forced to make a choice, I’d hand over the tape in order to save your life?”

Mulder didn’t want to answer truthfully. “No, I don’t think for a minute you’d do that,” he said sarcastically.
He started to pick up the coffee cup but Scully’s hand clamped down on his wrist and the cup clattered against the saucer. Hot, steaming coffee sloshed over the rim. As he met her eyes he saw the intensity there.

“You know where it is. What if you were faced with the same choice concerning my life?”

“That’s different. You didn’t join this crusade by choice.”

“Not in the beginning. But this isn’t your own personal crusade, Mulder. Not anymore. I’ve lost almost as much as you have. I’ve been asked no less than a dozen times if I want to change assignments. The answer is no. No, not now. No, not ever. Not until we find the truth,” she said firmly.

She wasn’t making this easy. Mulder placed a paper napkin under his cup to soak up the spilled coffee. Then he took a deep breath and braced himself for what he was going to say.

“Scully, I didn’t ask for a partner on the X-Files.” He saw her shocked, hurt expression and quickly explained. “Because of this very thing — the more people that are involved, the less control I have. Working with a partner that I’d sacrifice my life for gives the opponent leverage against me.”

Mulder slid a little closer to her when he saw that despite his declaration of devotion, her anger persisted. “Listen to me. I’m prepared to die for the truth. I’ve been prepared for a long time. I’ve lost almost everything to this thing, Scully. Not just my sister, my father, and even my mother to some extent, but my life.”

Mulder looked past Scully to the register where he watched a child put a penny in a gumball machine.

“Scully, I wasn’t always like this. Up until I was 12 years old, I was a pretty normal kid — hard as that may be to believe. I played sports, I had my share of juvenile pranks. I grew up in a normal household. The biggest mystery to me then, was how to throw a knuckle ball. Then one night, all that changed. Even if I hadn’t been witness to what happened to my sister, my childhood was changed forever. My parents became strangers. They argued, they cried, they whispered and shouted behind locked doors. Strange men came in and out of my house at all hours of the day and night.”

He hesitated, reliving his nightmarish past and Scully put her hand on his arm. She could feel his tension, but she knew he needed to tell her this. It was long overdue.

“At 12 years old, I learned what it was to be afraid. REALLY afraid. And there was no one to turn to for answers. When I tried to talk to my parents, they pushed me away and I was forbidden to talk about it. There was no laughter in our house anymore, there was fear.”

Scully could hear the resentment in his voice.

“As time went on, I wanted my sister back, but I wanted something more. I wanted my family and my life back. I wanted my mom to make popcorn and iced tea and I wanted the three of us to play Parcheesi on the living room floor,” he said ruefully, “but instead I hid in my bedroom, scared to death.”

“Scared that what happened to your sister would happen to you?”
Mulder smiled faintly and shook his head. “No. Scared that what happened to my parents would happen to me. I wanted to be a kid again, and I wanted to trust,” Mulder said, emphasizing the word. Then he added with a sad smile, “And I really missed the Parcheesi games.”

Mulder waited as the waitress refilled their cups and then walked away. Mulder looked into Scully’s eyes and saw an understanding there.

“I’ve lived with lies all my life, Scully. All my life – from the two people whom in all the world I should have been able to trust. And I’ve never known why. Everything that happened back then, made me who I am today. Unlike you, I didn’t walk into an office and proclaim myself ready to work on the X-Files. I’ve lived the X-files. I just want answers.”

Mulder again moved closer to her, their faces were inches apart and there was an intensity in his eyes. “But there’s a limit, even with me. I’ve told you what I’m prepared for, but I’m not prepared to lose you. All my work, all my energy, all that I’ve lost, it’s for nothing if I lose you. I’m telling you, undeniably, I could not go on if I lost you. So to protect myself, my work, I have to protect you.”

Scully was shaken. What he had told her made so many things fall into place. Mulder poured some cream into Scully’s coffee and stirred it. Then he picked up his own cup and leaned back against the booth.

Scully stared into her coffee for a minute, then looked up at him again.

“You know, Mulder, when I joined the Bureau, I thought there were certain characteristics that an agent must possess to be effective, such as complete logic, a reliance on hard evidence, and the ability to detach yourself emotionally. You possess none of those traits. But I must tell you, now that I’ve worked with you, I have a greater respect for Skinner.”

Mulder frowned, “How’s that?”

“Because he saw something else in you. He saw your passion and the drive that pushes you beyond the limits, to dare to believe. And that’s exactly what it takes to successfully investigate the X-Files. You’ve taught me that much.”

“I appreciate what you have said. More than you know. But I rely on that part of you that doubts, that seeks hard evidence. We don’t need two ‘spooks’ working on the X-Files. It’s our differences, Scully, that make us a unique team. We compliment each other.”

Scully nodded in agreement, but then cocked her head at him. “Of course there’s the issue of the donuts.”

Mulder’s smile confessed his guilt, and the waitress set their breakfasts in front of them then left again.

“Now,” Mulder said in a different tone, laying his hands flat upon the table, “with all that said and done, I must test your allegiance.”

“In what way?”

“We’re leaving for the airport in two hours.”
Scully frowned. “Where are we going?”

“Phoenix, Arizona.”

“Does Skinner know about this?”

Mulder bit the corner of his lower lip, and cocked his head, a gesture Scully was familiar with when he chose not to answer.

“Great,” she said, sarcastically.

Mulder gave her that boyish look that was almost irresistible and put his lips close to her ear. “Trust me.”

—X—X—

Chapter 11

PHOENIX, ARIZONA
6:15 P.M. M.S.T.

It was naturally a warm evening in Phoenix. This time of year though, the weather could fool you. It could be 95 one day and 65 the next; plus, Arizona was experiencing the El Niño phenomenon, which meant there was a remote chance of rain.

Mulder had told Scully to dress casually, so before they left the motel in Phoenix, they had changed into tee shirts, jeans and tennis shoes. Scully got the impression they were going to hike somewhere.

She was surprised when they parked in a garage in downtown Phoenix and started walking with scores of other people. Scully looked around her and noticed almost everybody was wearing either green or purple shirts and baseball caps. She noticed they were walking in the direction of bright stadium lights.

“Mulder, are we going to a baseball game?”

“This is the new expansion team, Scully, the Diamondbacks. New team, new stadium. They’re playing the Florida Marlins.”

She stopped and caught him by the arm. “Wait a minute. We flew here to go to a baseball game?”

“Do you have any idea who you have to know to get tickets to this game? Their whole season is sold out.”

Scully, shaking her head at him, started walking again.

Mulder’s enthusiasm made him talkative. “Plus, did you hear me, Scully? The Marlins — the winner of the ‘97 World Series!” Mulder went on almost like he was talking to himself. “Of course, with all the trades, they’re hardly the same team, but ...” He stopped talking when he saw Scully yawn. “Am I boring you, Scully?”

He could tell that his partner was not happy, but the night air scented with orange
blossoms, the excitement of a baseball game, and probably a hot dog with all the fixings would soften her up.

“We’re gonna’ get fired,” she stated flatly.

“Lighten up. It’s a beautiful night. We need this.”

“Mulder …”

“I’ll tell you what — we’ll leave after Benitez singles in the bottom of the 8th, bringing in Bell and Lee and giving the Diamondbacks a 7 to 4 lead. Okay?”

She narrowed her eyes at him wondering <what the hell did you just say>, then remarked casually, “That’s highly unlikely considering their 4 and 11 record so far.”

Mulder slowly turned his head and his mouth dropped open. “Scully, you’re scaring me.”

“Sports Talk Radio, remember? You got me hooked the night of the Tooms stakeout.”

Mulder had to chuckle. But he hid what he was really thinking. He wished he were just here to enjoy the game. He had remembered certain statistics about the game, which he had read in the Arizona Republic’s Saturday edition — the paper he pulled out of the cabinet in the underground vault.

Being a brand new team, there was a lot of hype on the game; more statistical information was written in the newspaper than you would see after a few more seasons of play. Mulder had chosen a baseball game because while you may get lucky predicting the score and the winning team, it seemed impossible to duplicate all the statistics that went into a baseball game — runs, hits, errors, highlights — it all had to be exact.

Mulder picked up their tickets at Will Call and they found their seats five rows behind home plate. The retractable roof was open, and the stars were clear and bright. Scully, although puzzled as to why they were really here, had to admit to herself that this was what they needed.

The crowd was noisy. She could feel the excitement around her of the new park and the first season of National League Baseball in Phoenix and it was fun to be a part of it. Mulder returned to his seat with two hot dogs and two cokes for them. Scully smiled, noticing he was wearing a black Diamondback baseball cap with the team logo in gold. He was as relaxed as she had seen him in a long time, yet there was something else, something she felt he was holding back. But right now it didn’t matter. She didn’t want to spoil the mood.

As she unwrapped the foil around her hot dog, Mulder leaned toward her, talking above the announcer who was giving stats on the players.

“Scully, did you know there’s a swimming pool in right field?”

She blinked at him. “Oh? Well there’s a tennis court in the ladies’ restroom.”

“I’m not kidding.”

He pointed to right field and Scully clearly saw there was a swimming pool and Jacuzzi just behind the fence.
Mulder only smiled at her surprise. “Medina is the starting pitcher for the Marlins. He’ll be relieved by Sanchez in the fifth. Blair, the starter for the D-Backs will go six-and-a-third innings.

Scully looked at him, but said nothing as she took a bite out of her hotdog.

Mulder couldn’t help but look around and wonder if he had been followed. Maybe his ‘shadow’, if he had one, hadn’t been able to procure a ticket.

A very large woman squeezed in front of everyone in the row, making her way to her seat. She held a large popcorn and coke in her hands and a Snickers bar between her teeth. She took the seat next to Mulder and smiled at him as she sat down.

“Think it will rain tonight?” she asked him after she’d dropped the candy bar in her lap.

“Excuse me?” Mulder asked, not expecting a question.

“The weatherman said 40% chance of rain. But they’re never right. It only rains when we’ve got a 20% chance. I’d be surprised to even see clouds.”

“It won’t rain till after the game ... probably,” Mulder added when she frowned at his statement.

Scully leaned over, hearing the conversation, and looked at Mulder who winked at her.

<You’ll see.>

Following a general commentary about tonight’s color guard, there was an announcement that a special guest would sing the national anthem.

“Pat Morita from the Karate Kid,” Mulder said matter-of-factly.

Scully nearly choked on a bite of hot dog. “Mr. Miagi is going to sing the Star Spangled Banner?” she asked with a smirk.

Mulder nodded. When Morita’s name was announced, Scully looked through the program, but there was only mention of a surprise guest. She was beginning to have suspicions that this game meant more than a reprieve from the pressure and stress of the case. She was also noticing that although Mulder was obviously enjoying himself, he seemed tense and preoccupied. Though he seemed to know what was going to happen before it happened, he seemed anxious when his prediction was correct.

As the game progressed, Mulder got quieter and more introverted. Scully wondered if maybe he was just thinking about what they had to return to. She found herself getting into the game as the innings passed. The crowd loved their new national pastime and it was easy to get caught up in the excitement. She knew that Mulder loved baseball, but Scully noticed his anxiety seemed to increase.

Something very strange was going on since he had been able to accurately predict specific aspects of the game. But this was no place for an explanation. She was sure he would fill her in later.

Mulder was right. In the bottom of the fifth inning Medina did give up two back-to-back
triples by Brent Brede and Jay Bell and Sanchez came in as relief for the Marlins. With Bell on third base, Travis Lee stepped to the plate.

Scully decided it was time to impress her know-it-all partner with some stats of her own. “Lee is one of their top hitters. In fact he’s leading the rookies. A base hit will bring Bell in,” she said smugly.

Mulder shrugged, as if almost embarrassed to comment. “Lee’s going to strike out. But Matt Williams will single to left, scoring Bell. Floyd, in left field, will let the ball get by him, allowing Williams to take third. But he’ll be stranded there after Garcia strikes out and Fabregas flies out to center,” Mulder answered matter-of-factly.

Scully munched on a handful of CrackerJacks. She looked to her partner. “Mulder, have you been on the Psychic Hotline again?”

He only smiled, and turned his attention back to the game. There was a definite change in him. He seemed to be watching the game with more intensity, as if he had bet a year’s wages on the outcome.

As the game progressed, the plays Mulder described developed exactly as he had prognosticated, including a wild throw to first base by Diamondback pitcher Russ Springer in the seventh inning. The error allowed Johnson to score from third, tying the score. Although that kind of error is rare in the Majors, Mulder foretold it. A little stunned, Scully started to remark, but Mulder caught the attention of the cotton candy vendor and was digging money out of his pocket. As he unwrapped the cellophane and pulled off a portion of the confection, he saw Scully’s disapproval.

“What’s wrong?” Mulder asked.

“It’s pure sugar. I’m worried about overload with you.”

“Probably too late,” he answered, stuffing a wad of pink candy in his mouth.

Scully had to laugh. Mulder eyed her dubiously as she reached over and pulled off a large portion of the candy for herself.

In the bottom of the eighth, another Diamondbacks rally put Devon White on third and Jay Bell on second, just as Mulder had predicted before the game.

Mulder leaned close to Scully. “I’ll be back in a minute. Would you like a cappuccino?”

“At the rate I’m going, I’m gonna need an antacid. It’s the bottom of the eighth, Mulder. Benitez is supposed to single, driving in Bell and Lee,” she said with a raised eyebrow and some sarcasm.

Mulder only smiled and stood up. “He will.”

Scully was puzzled at the tone of his answer. It was as if he regretted it. She watched him make his way to the aisle, then climb the steps and disappear.

Mulder was standing in line for a cappuccino. He didn’t really want one, he just didn’t want to see the Benitez hit, which would verify the predictions he previously read on the game. He wasn’t sure what it would mean to have this proof, and it made him very anxious.
He chose to sip his coffee standing in the breezeway, watching the game on overhead TV’s. He didn’t notice a man standing next to him until the man spoke.

“Enjoying the game, Agent Mulder?”

Startled, Mulder turned but the man was looking at the TV monitor. Mulder ignored the question.

“You decided to bring your partner.”

“She doesn’t know anything except what I was told to tell her,” Mulder assured him.

“Good. Keep it that way. We’ll hear from you tomorrow then?”

Mulder got right in his face, forcing eye contact and the man took a step back. “Don’t threaten me! I don’t think the people you work for would like that,” Mulder snapped.

The man backed down, realizing that Agent Fox Mulder was not someone to bluff or intimidate. Mulder watched him casually walk off down the concourse. He turned away from the TV monitor and leaned against one of the concrete pillars. He could hear the game being called on the loud speaker, as well as from the monitor, though he tried to shut out the words.

Benitez was up. Mulder heard the pitch count on the batter, then closed his eyes briefly. A few seconds later he heard the crack of the bat and the slow-building reaction of the crowd, which escalated into a roar — the unmistakable cheering of runs being scored by the home team.

Mulder was a million miles away when he felt a hand on his arm.

“You were right,” Scully said, perplexed.

Mulder instantly looked at his watch, then took her by the elbow. “Let’s get out of here,” he said quickly, tossing the full cup of coffee in the trashcan. Scully couldn’t imagine what would make him want to leave the baseball game in such a hurry.

Neither spoke as they walked briskly to the car and pulled out of the garage. Scully waited for his explanation, and started to demand answers, then realized they were heading the opposite direction of the motel. She saw Mulder again look at his watch, then accelerate the car.

“Where are we going?” Scully asked finally.

Mulder disregarded her question. “Scully, look at the map. Am I going the right way toward Camelback Road?”

She just looked at him. She could see his hands gripping the steering wheel. Irritated, he reached across and opened the glove compartment, grabbing the map. “Please,” he said impatiently, holding it out to her.

Shaking her head, perturbed and not understanding what was going on with him, she turned on the overhead light and checked the map. She looked up and caught a street sign. “We’re going the right way. It’s about 3 miles ahead.”
Again, Mulder increased the car’s speed. He swerved around a van, crossing in and out of traffic and accelerated through a yellow light. While he was driving, he seemed to be looking for something on either side of the road.

“Mulder, what —”

He changed lanes again on the left to pass a slower moving car. Scully saw him lean forward in the seat, seeing something up ahead. She glanced in that direction, but didn’t know what caught his attention. Mulder moved the car into the right lane and hit the brake pretty hard, jerking both of them against the shoulder harnesses.

“Scully, put your window down,” he ordered.

“Mulder …”

“Put your window down!” he shouted at her.

Mulder rarely displayed a temper, and Scully was so started by his behavior that her reaction time was slow, so Mulder used the electric control buttons on the left door panel to roll her window down. Their car, traveling well below the speed limit, pulled up alongside a bicyclist. Mulder kept the car in pace with the bike. Scully noticed the rider was a teenage boy who was listening to a radio headset.

“Excuse me!” Mulder shouted, leaning toward Scully’s side of the car, trying to get the rider’s attention, while glancing at the roadway in front of him. “Hey, kid!” he yelled louder.

The teen glanced over but couldn’t hear what the stranger in the white car was saying to him, so he kept riding. Mulder honked the horn. “Hey, could you just stop a second!”

Ignoring Mulder, the bicyclist went up on the sidewalk, still traveling straight ahead, but pulling away from the agents’ car. Scully was watching Mulder and she saw him looking ahead at the intersection, then over at the biker. She thought she detected panic on his face.

“Mulder …?”

Mulder’s hands gripped the steering wheel even tighter as he continued to watch the teenager, trying to keep the car even with him.

“STOP!” he shouted, but his plea went unheard. Mulder’s voice croaked hoarsely, “Please stop,” he pleaded quietly, knowing it was useless to yell.

He honked the horn again but the bicyclist probably could not hear anything except the music coming from the headset. Ironically, years of Stranger-Danger training from protective parents would keep this boy from acknowledging any other kind of harm that might come his way.

“Scully,” Mulder said frantically, “show him your ID! HURRY!”

She grabbed her purse off the floorboard and fumbled in it quickly, as Mulder waited impatiently, carefully navigating the traffic in front of and beside him. When she finally found it, she flipped open the leather wallet and held it out the open window toward the boy.
“Federal agents! Stop your bike!” Scully yelled, but the boy was looking straight ahead.

“HEY!” Mulder screamed. “HEY! KID!”

But the bicyclist, still on the sidewalk, was too far from their car to see them trying desperately to get his attention. He had increased his speed on the bike and pulled slightly ahead of the agents’ car. Scully looked over at the biker and up at the traffic signal but there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary. As the teen approached the corner, heading north, he never slowed his bike. Instead, he timed the light and rode his bike through the intersection into the crosswalk.

Then Scully saw it.

<OH JESUS!>

A car coming from the opposite direction, east to west, was also timing the light, speeding up as it turned yellow with the intent of going through the intersection on red. The bicyclist, wearing dark clothing at night, was difficult to see. Had he stopped to walk his bike across the street, he would have seen the car coming and simply waited until it passed; also, the driver of the car would have had time to see the bicyclist starting into the crosswalk instead of the sudden blur he saw instantly in the path of his car.

Neither the car nor the bicyclist could stop. Poor timing on the part of them both led to a terrible collision. The agents saw the car hit the bicyclist broadside, tossing the boy like a rag doll into the air and up over the top of the car that hit him. The momentum of the impact threw the boy into the windshield of a westbound car, which was stopped at the light. The windshield shattered, the safety glass buckling inward, as the boy then rolled limply off the hood of the car onto the street.

Mulder pulled the car into the bus lane and instinctively Scully jumped out and went to give help, along with other people who had stopped their vehicles. Mulder didn’t get out of the car. There was no point to it, and he didn’t want to see the outcome of the accident.

Several minutes later, after emergency vehicles had arrived, Scully returned to their car. She found Mulder sitting quietly in the seat, eyes straight ahead. Still shaken, Scully got in and shut the door. She sat there, ashen and disturbed, as more sirens could be heard in the distance.

Bewildered, Scully turned to her partner. “He’s dead. Killed instantly. But then you knew that,” she said, dumbfounded. “You tried to stop him.”

Scully could hardly believe what she was saying, but she had seen it happen with her own eyes. Mulder’s expression was a blank and he refused to look at her. Police cars began to enter the scene, and an officer directed Mulder to pull his car ahead. As if in a trance, he drove away.

Scully didn’t talk to Mulder. She was taking time to sort out her thoughts ... and questions. Right now, she didn’t even know where to begin with him.

She was surprised when he spoke, his voice with no inflection of emotion. “We’re not going back yet, Scully. Instead of catching the red eye, we’ll leave in the morning.”

When she didn’t answer, Mulder looked over at her and she saw that although he looked a
little dazed, he had calmed down.

“Is that okay with you?” he asked her softly.

She nodded, watching the first raindrops hit the windshield.

—X—X—

RAMADA INN MOTEL
DOWNTOWN PHOENIX, ARIZONA
11:40 p.m.

Mulder was lying on the bed in the motel room staring at the ceiling. His mind was a jumble of questions. It seemed that the more answers he got, the more confused he became. He was extremely disturbed by the teenage traffic victim. But even more frightening was the fact that he knew it was going to happen, and he couldn't change it.

If that's true of the future, then where’s the benefit of knowing anything in advance. What did all this mean in terms of what he was being told about his part in future events? How could anything or anyone defy fate?

Mulder had been afraid many times in his life, but this time he was terrified. Something was in that vault that would change him forever. He wondered if he had the courage to meet it.

There was a knock on the adjoining door. “It’s unlocked,” he answered.

Scully came in carrying a coffee for each of them. Mulder sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Scully set his coffee on the nightstand and sat next to him. Barely above a whisper, Mulder thanked her. She blew in her coffee, trying to cool it down a little.

“I thought it never rained in Phoenix,” she remarked, trying to break the ice.

“Did you notice all those dry river beds we flew over?”

Scully nodded and Mulder smiled faintly.

“There’s a joke about a man from Phoenix visiting New York. Someone asked him what he thought about the Hudson River, and he remarked, ‘Well, I really didn’t get a good look at it. It was full of water the whole time.’”

Scully saw him smile, but his voice and his expression lacked the sparkle she was used to when he tried to be funny. She watched him carefully sip the hot coffee, seeing through his eyes that he was in a very far-off place. Scully was sensitive to his mood, but didn’t want that to sway her from demanding answers. She knew he must have been expecting it sooner or later.

“I came by here about an hour ago to see if you wanted to get something to eat,” she said. “Where were you?”

“I went for a walk.”

“In the rain?”

“Rain? This isn’t rain, Scully. In Arizona they call it ‘drizzle.’”
There was a heavy silence between them. Now was the time, Scully thought, as she took a deep breath. But before she could get any words out, Mulder held up his hand. “Look, I know what you’re going to say?”

Scully scoffed out loud and nodded. “I’ll bet you do.”

“That’s not what I mean. I know you need an explanation, but ...” he stopped, not quite sure how to proceed.

“Mulder, something happened when you were abducted by those men. Something you’re not telling me. Everything since that time has been a mystery.”

Mulder set his coffee down on the night table and stood up, walking slowly to the dresser where he leaned back against it, facing Scully.

When she spoke to him, her voice was cutting, and he knew she had every right to be upset with him.

“I remember what you said about protecting me, but dammit, Mulder, I’m your partner! You can’t expect me to just blindly follow you around! My job is on the line here, too! Skinner hasn’t authorized any trip here; he doesn’t even know where we are!”

Mulder rubbed his eyes and his temples as if he had a splitting headache. What he had was worse.

Scully went on, her voice harsh. “You knew all the details of that baseball game; you knew what was going to happen to that boy on the bike.”

Scully could see his pained expression but if he wanted understanding, then he should level with her. She was digging for anything.

“I know, somehow, this has to do with the digital tape. Have you already put it in someone’s hands, Mulder? Am I going to see it on the Internet tomorrow?”

“No,” he said tiredly.

She stood and went over to stand directly in front of him. He met her angry gaze with trepidation.

“I deserve some answers,” Scully said curtly. “If you have to protect me by keeping me in the dark, then what good am I to you as a partner?”

He couldn’t answer that question. Scully could tell by his posture that he had no intention of explaining anything. He saw her eyes blazing, and when she turned to walk out he quickly grabbed her by the shoulders and held her firmly. Startled, as well as puzzled, she glared at him.

Suddenly everything crashed down on him at once — the fear of being taken against his will, the confusion about whether to believe those he had always trusted, the secrets in the underground vault, the shocking revelation about his sister, the ultimate horror of wondering if the boy killed on the bike meant fate was predestined and unchangeable.

Finally, he was overwhelmed by the realization that all these unfathomable events were
elements of the darkest truth of all – a truth, he had been warned, that was so staggering it defied belief.

He wasn’t yet prepared for the next journey where he would pass beyond the limits of extreme possibilities into the realm of reprehensible certainty.

Scully was ready to lash out at him until she looked into his eyes. She saw a haunted look there, something beyond the fear and pain they had both come to expect from their dangerous work. She felt him shudder, and when he spoke his voice cracked.

“Scully, don’t walk out on me. Not now.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Please.”

She had never seen her partner this way before. He was the strong one. He was hard to read sometimes, but he was always in control. Only now she saw him mentally collapsing in front of her and she didn’t know why. She couldn’t be angry anymore, but she didn’t know how to help him either.

To her astonishment, Mulder’s head dropped to her shoulder, his arms wrapped around her and he began to cry. Scully held him tightly, scared for the first time.

Scared for both of them.

—X—X—

Chapter 12

PHOENIX, ARIZONA
NEXT MORNING, APRIL 18, 1998
6:30 A.M.

The rain clouds were gone. The blinding Arizona sun peeked around billowy cumulus clouds that floated across a brilliant blue sky. Mulder went to the car to put his bag and Scully’s in the trunk.

She was standing just inside his doorway and saw the morning edition of the Arizona Republic newspaper lying open on the bed. Noticing something curious, she wandered over to it. It was open to the sports section and she saw that a portion of it had been torn out. It appeared to be part of an article on the baseball game. She heard the trunk slam and walked back outside.

“All set?” Mulder asked.

She nodded. As Mulder went to the driver’s side, he saw three people standing next to his car. One of them was pointing up at the sky and the others strained to see something. Curious, Mulder stepped over next to them and looked up also, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“What are you looking at?” he asked the group.

The older gentleman with the camera looked startled for an instant, then relaxed when he saw Mulder smile at him.

“Oh, clouds. We don’t see clouds much in Phoenix,” the man said, aiming the camera and
taking a picture of the sky.

Mulder bit his lower lip and nodded slowly, cautiously backing away from the man. He whispered in Scully’s ear. “Let’s get out of here. The heat has gotten to these folks.”

“Now you know what people think the first time they meet you, Mulder.”

“Ha. Ha,” he said dryly.

They got in the car and started for the airport. Their conversations were brief. For the time being, Scully avoided bringing up what had happened the night before, or Mulder’s emotional reaction in the motel room. She knew her partner well. If she could get him in a lighter mood, he would open up to her. Actually, her part was simple. All she had to do was sit back and listen to one of Mulder’s stories, which he loved to tell, and pretty soon both of them would be in a lighter mood.

Mulder told her about a former FBI buddy who recently retired and bought a farm in Africa. He had been trying to convince Mulder to buy an adjacent lot, claiming that maybe his X-File work might be getting to him. Mulder had declined, but said it had nothing to do with his fear of the local voodoo people.

He said it so straight-faced that Scully burst out laughing. She wondered if there were any circumstances, which would hinder Mulder’s humor. It was truly a gift he had to keeping his sanity, and the sanity of those working with him.

Scully chuckled again when Mulder grinned at her. He seemed so different this morning, yet she knew that his calm was not effortless. Under that cloak of quiescence that he wore, he concealed something so frightening he wasn’t willing to share it with her.

Very cautiously, Scully turned the conversation to last night. She started out by assuring him that she wanted to help, but she needed to understand what was going on — why they had come to Phoenix, and especially what hidden meaning there was in a simple baseball game.

Having said that, Scully instantly saw Mulder’s face darken. Without him saying a word to her, she knew that he had pulled away from her once more. His body tense, his eyes fixed on the road, they drove in silence. Scully’s acute sense told her that whatever Mulder was withholding from her, he, too, was trying to understand it. Instead of feeling angry, she felt a foreboding, a warning from inside herself that said maybe she wasn’t ready for what she wanted to know.

When they stopped at a red light, Mulder slowly looked over at her. His eyes confirmed her intuition. He looked like a frightened child who believes that something is hiding under the bed, or watching from inside the dark closet. Scully had never believed in bogeymen, but she believed in them now. And she knew that eventually something was going to reach out from under the bed and grab them both by the ankles.

—X—X—

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Upon arriving back in town, they decided to bite the bullet and report directly to Skinner. They knew, even though it was Saturday, they’d find him at work. When they entered his
office he was livid, but also relieved. He motioned them to sit, then leaned back in his chair.

“Do you know how much manpower we’ve wasted looking for you two? Did you know a cell phone doesn’t ring if it’s not turned on?” he asked sternly.

“Is that like ‘does the refrigerator light go off when -’” Mulder stopped, feeling Scully’s sharp kick to his shin.

She threw him a <Skinner’s-not-in-the-mood-for-your-shit> look and he saw the AD’s jaw twitch, a sign that his temper was just a breath away.

Skinner scrutinized Mulder and frowned, “What happened to your eye?”

“Scully and I were arm wrestling and -”

“Knock it off!” Skinner snapped, in no mood for Mulder’s attempt to downplay the seriousness of the situation.

Mulder chanced a quick look at Scully.

she smirked.

Skinner picked up a pen and rolled it between his fingers. “I could make a damn good educated guess as to what happened.”

Scully’s and Mulder’s silence was as discernible as a presence in the room. Skinner hadn’t expected an explanation, nor did he really want one.

“This situation right now is very precarious. Word is that you don’t have the tape. But you can bet they’re waiting for the right moment to get it to you. I think as far as your safety goes right now, neither of you are in any danger.”

Scully looked at Mulder and saw that he agreed with that statement. Skinner leaned forward on his desk. “Agent Mulder, I’ve said this to you before. If you’re wise, you’ll refuse that tape when it’s offered to you. This could start all over again. Is it worth it?”

“Is the truth ever worth it, sir?” Mulder asked.

Skinner thought a minute then stood from his chair and came over to sit on the edge of his desk in front of his two agents. He spoke to both of them, but his eyes stayed mostly on Mulder.

“Back in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, very few people knew that the Joint Chiefs of Staff held a secret meeting, where they took a vote to approve initiating a first strike on the Soviet Union. The vote was unanimous.”

Skinner saw their surprised reactions and he went on. “The message was then sent to President Kennedy, giving him the go ahead to launch nuclear missiles.”

He let that statement sink in, feeling the weight of those words. “Kennedy was appalled, not even aware that such a meeting or a vote had taken place. Word is that he was so shocked and disappointed, that he broke down. He refused, without hesitation, to be the president who would initiate global nuclear war.”
Mulder considered the consequences of that decision.

<Thank God for Kennedy>.

“Agent Mulder, that truth was never brought to the American people. How do you think Americans would have felt about their government had they learned that we were a signature away from possible global annihilation?”

“But that was a decision of national defense, sir.”

“How do you know this isn’t?”

His words struck Mulder. Maybe Skinner was right and didn’t even know it. Is it possible that this whole cover-up could have less to do with truth than with the national defense of the country?

Mulder chose his words carefully. “I think there is a certain path this county is on, sir. We can’t possibly know what to do, and what not to do. We have to hope that our actions are predestined toward our continued existence, and not our demise.”

“That would make a good college graduation speech, Agent Mulder, but few things said at those ceremonies have anything to do with real life.”

Mulder looked at Scully, wondering if she agreed with Skinner.

Skinner stood and walked to the other side of his desk. “Please keep me informed of your whereabouts. As I recall, you have paperwork to complete and turn over on the Dossett and Jameson homicides.”

Skinner sat down and picked up some papers, indicating the meeting was over.

—X—X—

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

9:25 P.M.

Mulder had decided he needed to release some tension and jog for a while. He loved running at night under the light of the moon. The sky was partly cloudy, the wind crisp, but he would be warm in a few minutes after working up a sweat. He ran hard, as if he could somehow put miles between himself and the thing that he knew he couldn’t avoid much longer.

His partner was becoming impatient. He understood her frustration with him. If the roles were reversed, he would be furious about being kept in the dark. But the truth of the matter was, even without the threat to her safety, he really couldn’t explain the answers he had. The answers only generated a flood of questions. It might make sense to a madman. Another week of this and that’s exactly what he’d be.

Mulder rounded the corner toward his apartment, breathing heavily, feeling the cool air rush into his lungs. His adrenalin was giving him energy, and his endorphin level gave him a temporary sense of euphoria.

Maybe things weren’t so bad after all. There wasn’t anything, so far, that he and Scully
hadn’t been able to work out together. There had been things out of their control, tragic events that challenged their persistence. But they hung together, weathered the storm, and vowed they would not abandon their mission. There may be setbacks, but they would learn from them and use the time wisely to move forward.

Mulder stopped outside his apartment building and sat on the steps to catch his breath. He watched some clouds pass in front of the moon. He caught movement to his left, and turned to see two men in long black overcoats passing under the misty streetlight. They approached him slowly, non-threatening, and Mulder knew, instinctively, they had come for him. They both were standing with the streetlight directly behind them, so he could not see their faces, but one of them spoke in a calm voice.

“Agent Mulder, are you ready? The car is around the corner.”

Mulder reluctantly stood up. “Well, you might want to let me shower first, or we’ll be riding with the windows down.”

—X—X—

MULDER’S APARTMENT
APRIL 19, 6:20 A.M.

Scully used her key to open Mulder’s apartment. She entered, not expecting him to be there since her calls had gone unanswered. She glanced around the apartment, finding it just as she had found it before — everything in place, nothing out of the ordinary. Then she checked the other rooms. His gun was gone from the bedroom closet.

There were times in the past when Mulder was missing that Scully knew it was not by his choice. But strong intuition told her that this time, somehow, her partner was involved in his own disappearance. His trying to exclude her from the investigation was convincing evidence to support her belief.

Scully was disturbed by the notion that by letting Mulder call the shots, he could close the door on her anytime he wanted. Scully pondered that for a minute. When the stakes are high, as they are now, they need more than ever to work as a team. Mulder wasn’t holding up his end of the bargain. She also knew that he didn’t always make the best decisions. Often Mulder’s strong sense of ‘wanting to believe’ clouded his reason. That’s when she stepped in, and he usually listened. This time, though, he was putting too much distance between them for her to step in.

Entering the living room again, she walked over to the fish tank and watched as a bright blue fish completely buried itself under the tiny colored pebbles on the bottom of the tank.

<Now why does that remind me of Mulder?>

Once again, Scully stood in the center of the living room, looking toward the window, which was still taped with an “X.”

“Dammit, Mulder. Not again,” she said to herself.

—X—X—

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.
Mulder was brought into the holding room where again The Well Manicured Man, Senator Matheson, and Mr. X were seated. He took a chair across the table from Matheson who poured him some coffee from a silver carafe and put a plate of pastries in front of him. Mulder accepted the coffee, but ignored the food.

“Did you get any sleep, Fox?” Matheson asked.

“I had a little help, remember?” he answered, absently rubbing his arm where so far he had been anesthetized three times.

Mulder pinched his cotton shirt material between his thumb and forefinger. “Thanks for the change of clothes. These are mine, by the way, but for the life of me I can’t remember giving any of you a key to my apartment.”

Mr. X poured some coffee for himself. “Agent Mulder, we know what happened in Arizona.”

Mulder’s voice sharpened, but did not increase in volume. “Do you? Then maybe you can answer something for me. Why wasn’t I able to change the bike accident? What good is it to know something of the future if you can’t alter the outcome? What meaning does it have for all of this!” he said waving his arm in the air.

“It can’t be done that quickly,” Mr. X answered.

Mulder’s temper was getting away from him. “Oh, how convenient! So if I had left the game an inning earlier —?”

“No.” said Matheson. “It takes hundreds of subtle changes to affect a major event. It takes time, Fox. In this case, years.”

“I don’t believe you!”

The Well Manicured Man, sitting next to Mulder, surprised him by briefly touching him on the arm.

“Think about it. If we were to travel back in time, or forward, and by one act alone change history, then our world would be inconstant. There would be no past or present. So there are … what might you call them? … ‘safety measures’ built in, which are there for the very purpose of changing the future. But gradually, not all at once.”

Mulder contemplated that theory. It made sense. If there was a way to time travel, it certainly could be a dangerous tool for manipulating the future. Two opposing forces could conceivably create a condition whereby the same moment in time repeated itself for eternity. Mulder shivered. The concept was too disturbing to try and figure out. It’s like trying to imagine what’s beyond the end of the universe. Our minds are not equipped to grasp such an idea.

“I’d like to go back down to the vault, reaffirm what I read. I took mental notes at the baseball game, and I’d like to confirm that,” Mulder stated.

There was no disagreement with his request. In fact they seemed eager to oblige him. While the two of them waited, Mulder was led by Mr. X alone down to the vault and to the APRIL, 1998 cabinet.
Mulder retrieved the Arizona Republic newspaper for April 18th, and turned to the sports section, which reported on the game he attended the day before. Mr. X saw Mulder remove a jagged section of newspaper from his shirt pocket, and compare the two articles. Mr. X waited patiently, seeing the impact it had on Mulder.

The articles were exact, word for word, comma for comma. Baseball statistics couldn’t be predicted with exact accuracy. Runs, hits, errors, strikeouts, fielding changes, designated hitters, even the number in attendance was right on the button. It was all there.

Mulder said nothing, but replaced the periodical and nodded to Mr. X that he was finished. His face was solemn, his demeanor hard to read as they started back up to the holding room.

Matheson and the Well Manicured Man saw the change in him when he entered the room.

“Mr. Mulder,” started the Well Manicured Man, “from what you’ve seen and experienced so far, are you convinced that there is a chronicle of future events in this vault?”

Mulder thought long and hard. He didn’t want to admit it. It was like his search for the truth — he wanted answers, but was apprehensive about confronting the evidence. He felt very alone and wished his ever-questioning partner could be there to confirm or deny. He would have to determine the truth by himself.

A memory crossed his mind. When he went to Arecibo, Puerto Rico, to verify incoming radio signals from an unknown source in space, he was eager to see proof. But at night, when the winds came, and the building was bathed in brilliant white light, he became more afraid than he’d ever been in his life. Knowing that what he sought was coming through the locked door, he panicked, pulling his gun and firing repeatedly at the very thing he had hoped to contact.

He felt that way now, trying to summon the courage to face a truth, which would change him forever. Without speaking, he looked at the three men around the table. He had trusted them with his life. If this was some grand deception, then there was no one to trust anymore, and his search was over.

“Mr. Mulder,” said the Well Manicured Man in a kind voice, “there is no describing how difficult this is to conceive. But what we have shown you is a grain of sand on the beach. The enormity of what lies in this vault is mind-altering. It staggers the imagination. We know this. Even with what limited proof you had, we doubted you could fathom such information. We three, and many before us, have been slowly indoctrinated over the years. You have been asked to believe this in a matter of days.”

Mulder didn’t know what to say. He had no idea what they were talking about. But he sensed their own fear, their own desperation to make him believe.

Matheson said softly, “We’ve brought someone here that can help you, someone who knows what’s hidden from all the world in this place — a man who’s grandfather and father helped bring the truth to us.”

Matheson stood up and went to the door. Slowly he opened it. Mulder looked up, apprehensive, not knowing who or what he would see. A tall figure came through the doorway, an older man with long, flowing white hair encircled by a red bandanna, and intense but compassionate black eyes set in a weathered face.
Mulder’s mouth dropped open and his racing heart skipped a beat. He stood slowly, as if moving through water, to grasp the man’s outstretched hand, but instead was drawn safely and securely into the old Navajo’s strong embrace.

“Albert,” Mulder whispered.

“So, my young friend,” Albert Hosteen said softly, “the white buffalo has finally come home.”

—X—

F.B.I. HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 19, 1998 – 9:20 A.M.

Agent Scully sat at Mulder’s desk trying to find something in his computer that might give her a clue to where he was. She tried to access his personal Rolodex but couldn’t break the password. He had used “TRUSTNO1” on his home computer, but not here.

Suddenly the door opened and Skinner charged into Mulder’s office. Startled, Scully looked up from the computer. She hadn’t expected to find Skinner in on a Sunday morning. He was wearing jeans and a green polo shirt. It was one of the few times Scully had seen him wearing something other than a dress shirt and a tie.

“Where’s Agent Mulder?” he asked briskly.

Scully hesitated. “How’d you know I was here?”

“I called your place and Mulder’s and when I got no answer, I called here and talked to security. Where’s Mulder?”

“Uh, he said ... there was ... he had to talk to someone,” she stammered.

Skinner gave her a hard look. “You don’t know where he is, do you? he said matter-of-factly.

Scully wasn’t in the mood for a confrontation with Skinner. Her instincts told her Mulder was safe, that he had chosen to disappear by choice and she was irritated. She didn’t need to be in the hot seat from her boss because of Mulder’s selfish disregard for her. If her partner didn’t bother to tell her where he was going, then she certainly wasn’t going to cover for him. Not this time.

“No, sir, I don’t,” she snapped.

Realizing her anger, Skinner closed the door behind him and came closer to Scully. “What’s going on, Agent Scully?”

“I wish I knew, sir. I tried to call Agent Mulder this morning, but there was no answer. I checked his apartment, but he wasn’t at home. There was nothing to suspect that anything was wrong.”

“Well, something’s wrong all right. That damn tape! Scully, if you know where it is —”

“Sir,” Scully’s voice was razor-sharp and Skinner realized he wasn’t the sole cause of her
anger, “if I knew where that tape was, I’d have it on Dateline tonight. I made a mistake the first time, convincing Mulder to hand it over and let you make a deal for our lives, because the damage had already been done! Mulder’s father was dead and my sister was dying! Maybe if I had listened to him, let the newspapers splatter the news across the world we wouldn’t be here now!”

“No, that wasn’t the answer! The world might have learned the truth — whether they believed it or not is something else — but you and Mulder would have been dead!” Skinner took a deep breath, realizing his anger was misdirected. “The time wasn’t right, Dana. There was more work to do. It just wasn’t time.”

“When is the right time, sir? It seems like more people are dying in order to conceal the truth, than might die if the truth were told.”

“Don’t believe it.”

She looked into his eyes to see if she could understand what he meant by that, but his face was stone. Scully flicked off the computer in disgust and stood up. As she brushed by Skinner he grabbed her gently but firmly by the arm.

“Where are you going?”

Scully cocked her head, having to consider the question before she could answer. “To wait for Mulder. And this time he’ll be lucky to get off with just a black eye!”

She jerked away from Skinner, flung the door open and slammed it behind her. Skinner leaned back against the desk and stared across the room at a poster whose black lettering taunted him with ‘The Truth Is Out There.’

Skinner snickered. “Yeah, right,” he mumbled, leaving the office, the door slamming shut for the second time.

— X —

Chapter 13

SOMEBEHRE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.

Albert and Matheson escorted Mulder to the lower chamber of the vault where the cabinets were. Mulder was surprised, but relieved when Albert passed the same security clearances.

There was one other person, besides his partner, whom Mulder trusted in the entire world, and that was Albert Hosteen. Scully had found him through the Offices of the Navajo Nation when they needed a Navajo code talker to decipher the MJ files the first time the tape came into Mulder’s possession. Mulder had suspected all along that it was more than coincidence that Albert happened to be the one Scully was connected to, since it turned out he had helped code the original documents. But if it was true that a sub file with its own unique code was hidden within the MJ files, then what Mulder was led to believe was that Albert’s father or grandfather coded that sub file, the so-called ‘Merchandise.’ It hadn’t seemed like four years since Mulder first met Albert Hosteen. It had been in the midst of much turmoil and tragedy. Mulder’s father had just been killed. Mulder, who was suffering from a psychosis brought on by someone tainting the water in his apartment building, believed his
father’s murderer to be Alex Krycek. In a physical confrontation with Krycek, Mulder was able to get Krycek’s gun away from him.

Scully happened on the scene just as her partner was about to pull the trigger on the unarmed man. Scully’s pleas to Mulder to put the gun down were ignored, so she shot her partner in the shoulder, as Krycek ran away.

Scully then drove for two days cross country, with Mulder unconscious in the back seat. Their destination was Farmington, New Mexico. When Mulder woke up in the Farmington motel room, Albert Hosteen’s face was the first one he saw above his bed. Albert had admitted to Mulder and Scully that he had been given a sign, an omen that Mulder was coming.

A few days later, Albert and a group of Navajos found Mulder almost dead in the desert after he escaped from a burning boxcar. He was carried into a hogan and placed on a bed of leaves. Meticulous designs of colored sand were created on the floor of the hogan, while the strong smoke of burning incense drifted throughout the day and night.

The ritual was all part of the Blessing Way Ceremony, which was performed by Albert and the Navajo healers to save Mulder’s life. The Ceremony coincided with the birth of a rare white buffalo. Navajo legend spoke of such a birth being the portent of some miraculous change.

Mulder believed in the Navajo rituals of chants and charms. There was a time when he had to trust his life and his partner’s life to this wise old Indian.

Now he had to do it again.

When the three men reached the vault area, Matheson again turned on the lights and motioned Mulder over to a table and chairs. The three men sat, Matheson across the table from Mulder and Albert.

“Fox,” Matheson said cautiously, “before we begin, you need to answer one question.”

Mulder saw that both men watched him intently.

“Do you have the digital tape?” Matheson asked directly.

Mulder had been asked to confess a dangerous thing. Instinctively he looked at Albert. The old Navajo’s black eyes bore into Mulder’s and he gave one stiff nod of his head. Mulder looked back at Matheson, who waited patiently for him to answer in his own time.

“Yes,” Mulder said distinctly.

Both men seemed to relax. Matheson looked especially relieved as he touched Mulder’s arm to thank him for this ultimate trust.

“Fox, there is a lot of reading to do. The date you begin with is not far in the future — only a few months. But what precipitates that is what’s happening now,” Matheson explained.

Mulder was silent, glancing at Albert who apparently knew the story.

Matheson went on. “Deep Throat told you what you wanted to know — that they have been
here for a long time. And our government is doing what you suspected all along: using alien technology in various areas, including medicine, but also in our defense system.”

So there it is. Mulder nodded, not knowing which questions to ask yet, so Matheson continued.

“The most deadly threat to this country, and in fact the world, is not the use of nuclear or chemical weapons, but the use of biological weapons. As you know, there is an ongoing battle with Middle Eastern powers to inspect their facilities for germ warfare. Using some of this alien technology we have been able to neutralize the effects of all of the biological viruses we know about. It’s the new ones that scare us, the ones we don’t know about. Advanced technology is useless without knowing the composition of new contagions.”

Mulder nodded again, understanding and agreeing with what he said.

“Fox, imagine what would happen if some unknown contagion with no known antidote, were released into a population. An air-borne contagion.”

“There would be no stopping it. It would spread worldwide,” Mulder answered.

Matheson stood with Albert, and motioned for Mulder to follow. They walked through various corridors, which seemed to Mulder like a maze until they came to a section of cabinets, which were marked, from 1912 to 1917.

“But this is the past. I thought you said —” Mulder stopped seeing Matheson shaking his head.

“No. This is not the past. These cabinets are intentionally mislabeled.”

Mulder half-smiled. “Do you offer a class to learn the security in this place?”

Matheson pulled out the drawer. “This is where you’ll begin, but to save time, I’ll give you a brief synopsis of world events leading up to this date. Let’s have a seat.”

Another wooden table and chairs were against the wall, and they again sat down. Matheson leaned across the table.

“As you know, the conflicts between the U.S. and the Middle Eastern powers have increased rapidly in the last few months. Most of the focus for the last ten years has been on Iraq and Iran. Continued pressure and sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on Iraq resulted in a regime that lacked popular support, being commonly thought to be both corrupt and inefficient. By the latter part of 1998, the internal political situation in Iraq deteriorated steadily. Then in November, an attempt at a coup d’état was made by a group of military dissidents to overthrow the government. The coup failed. But what wasn’t realized until later was that it was merely a diversionary tactic to slip terrorists into Qatar, where an army of considerable number was building.”

“The CIA had no knowledge of this?” Mulder asked.

“We were watching Iraq. Defections in mass numbers were commonplace, and there were more pressing issues elsewhere in the region. Qatar was an interesting choice in itself. Our history with them goes back ten years. In 1988, the US Senate Appropriations Committee approved a motion to seek the prohibition of weapons sale to Qatar, following the discovery
of 12 US-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in Qatar’s possession. Qatar refused to reveal the source of the missiles, which were, oddly enough, observed in a military parade.”

Matheson unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and casually rolled his sleeves up. “The Appropriations Committee must have believed they carried more clout than they did, because they considered the problem solved and kind of forgot about Qatar. Plus, Qatar had condemned Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in August of 1990, allowing deployment of foreign forces on its soil as part of the multinational attempt to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. US, Canadian and French troops were stationed there, as well as Egyptian forces. Qatari armed forces subsequently participated in the military operation to liberate Kuwait. What I’m getting at is that sometimes it’s confusing to know exactly where Qatar stands on political issues. They seem to ride the fence.”

“Are you saying all this was a smoke screen?”

“Not entirely. The Qatar government, along with the Coalition, was too concerned with the Iraq situation to pay attention to the massing of a terrorist group in its own country. However, the CIA, along with the Security Council soon learned the name of the leader of the militants, who called themselves the Al-Masha’al, ‘The Torch.’ The self-appointed dictator of the group, Khalid Jahaf, was power-hungry, blood thirsty and, some believe, the third anti-Christ.”

That hit a familiar note with Mulder. Matheson saw his reaction and questioned it, so Mulder explained.

“I’ve read the quatrains of Nostradamus. He predicted death and devastation such as the world had never known around 1999. He said it would start in the Middle East, with the third anti-Christ.”

An astounding thought struck Mulder. “Nostradamus was frighteningly accurate about events hundreds of years in the future. No one in history has ever accurately predicted that far ahead. Makes you wonder where he got all his vision.”

Mulder saw Matheson look at Albert, but neither commented. Mulder wished he knew what they were thinking.

“Well, it makes me wonder,” he said.

Matheson nodded and went on with the story. “Jahaf’s terrorists raided the UN Embassy in Baghdad, brutalizing the personnel there, killing two Marines and a British ambassador. By this time, Americans were sick and tired of being manipulated by these Middle Eastern bullies. Our government saw this as Iraqi-connected, which is what Jahaf wanted us to believe. Numerous confrontations between Iraq, our Naval Fleet, the British Air Force and the Israeli Air Force finally led to an attack, backed by the UN, upon Iraq. What started out as a pushing match was now a full-fledged war. While we began a slow burn of destruction, the real instigator sat back and fueled the fire. We had wanted war with Iraq as badly as we wanted to enter World War II. And it would have been a washout, a repeat of what happened in the Gulf War because the Iraqi army and weapons were even less of a match for the United States, let alone the UN alliance.”

“You said would have been a washout.”

“Yes. Unfortunately our aggressions were aimed in the wrong direction.”
Matheson looked down at the table for a minute and Mulder saw Albert shift uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair.

“I think you need to find out the rest for yourself, Fox.”

Matheson and Albert stood again and Mulder followed them back over to the cabinet as Matheson continued to explain the purpose for the cabinets. “There are thousands of different newspaper editions for each day forward. It will go fast if you just stick with one or two American papers. All the foreign papers are, of course, in that language. If you want to check the accuracy you could go back and forth between periodicals.”

Mulder nodded.

“We’ll come back in a few hours, see if you need anything. Any questions?”

Mulder just kind of shrugged. He looked a little anxious.

Matheson put his hand on his shoulder. “Fox, you’re going to see your name in these records; you’ll understand what part you play. You’re going to read the most disturbing things you could ever imagine. Keep an open mind. You’ll have to constantly remind yourself that what you are reading is our future. Remember who it came from. You got just a taste of future events when you went to Arizona. Keep in mind, Fox, that for decades the people who have secured this vault have seen these newspaper records come true. And most important, keep telling yourself that the reason we are doing this, the whole purpose for all of this, is to change what those headlines say.”

Mulder swallowed hard. If ever there was a truth to be seen, it was in the face of Senator Matheson and Albert Hosteen. Albert also put his hand on Mulder’s arm as a gesture of assurance, and then they both walked down the dim corridor.

—X—X—

MUNICH, GERMANY
PRIVATE ESTATE
4:30 P.M.

The German used silver tongs to drop two ice cubes in a crystal glass. From a matching cut-crystal decanter he poured two fingers of Scotch over the ice, then the same amount of liquor into another glass without ice. He handed the American the Scotch on the rocks, then sat across from him in an identical leather wingback chair.

Between them the fireplace burned brightly. The flames reflected dully in the dark cherry paneling, which covered each wall from floor to ceiling.

The American swirled the ice in his drink with his finger. “Agent Mulder is in the vault.”

“Yes. We’ll know soon how he reacts to the truth.”

Both men quietly contemplated their own private thoughts as they sipped their drinks. The German stretched his legs out and held his drink with both hands in his lap.

“What about Agent Scully? What does our surveillance team report?”
The American sighed deeply. “That she is becoming restless.”

“Then she will, no doubt, try to persuade Agent Mulder to confide in her.”

The American shook his head. “He won’t. He has been warned of the consequences and he cares too much about her.”

The German scoffed. “These are F.B.I. agents, not Romeo and Juliet.”

The American took a cigarette pack from inside his coat and shook out one cigarette. “You don’t understand their history.”

“History?”

The German waited patiently as the American flipped open a gold lighter and lit the cigarette. He took a long drag and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

“A partner for Agent Mulder was carefully considered. Do you think it was chance that a beautiful young scientist was selected? A woman?”

“I’m listening.”

“The very nature of the X-Files isolates them and makes them rely exclusively on each other. Ultimately, that kind of trust leads to a unique relationship. Couple that with ... biology ... and you have agents who will do just about anything to protect each other. More so with the man. It’s just human nature.”

The German saw the confident, almost cocky way the American assessed the agents’ characters. He apparently knew them better than he had originally admitted. But the German knew that the two individuals were both obstinate.

“I worry that Agent Scully will not accept her insignificant part in this investigation,” he asked.

“Granted, that is a concern,” admitted the American. “That’s why we’re watching her. But the important thing is that Mulder understands the danger to her. Remember, he worked alone for a long time. He knows how to adapt.”

The American took another puff on his cigarette, then tossed it into the fireplace.

“Scully’s steadfast reluctance to believe, drives Mulder harder. And Mulder’s headstrong determination to reject science, makes Scully look deeper. Now, isn’t that what we want?”

The German nodded. “Let’s just hope they don’t end up like Romeo and Juliet.”

—X—X—

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES

Mulder read mostly the New York Times. There were reports every day on confrontations, which Mulder knew, would escalate the already existing problems. It was frightening to see a puzzle coming together with pieces of what was beginning to stir up right now in parts of the Middle East. He wondered: if it was known where all this was headed, why weren’t the people responsible eliminated. Then he remembered Matheson saying that they needed to
move slowly to effect change.

Mulder was now up to May of 1999. There was dissension in the United States over how we had handled Iraq. The country was divided between supporting diplomatic solutions to Iraq’s failure to comply with U.N. directives, and using military force. Most of the country was ready for action, believing that delay had already given Iraq time to hide more weapons or develop new ones. Many were afraid it was too late, that we had literally talked ourselves to death. Our allies, always on the side of caution, had been a major factor in our reluctance to attack. But now they, too, were weary of the game.

Military experts believed we had given Iraq time and opportunity to move weapons to neighboring countries, possibly Syria or Yemen. So now the problems had crossed beyond the boundaries of Iraq. The U.N., by using tongue instead of tank, now faced expanding military action to include more Arab nations. Innocent victims would suffer — populations who had no knowledge of the decisions made behind the closed doors of government. Men, women and children would die because their country harbored weapons they knew nothing about.

But then what is war, if not the slaughter of innocent citizens?

The United States of America had done what it swore on the graves of hundreds of thousands of young soldiers it would never do again: it had created another Vietnam. Only this time, the magnitude was monumental.

As Mulder pulled another paper from the cabinet, unexpectedly his eyes caught the bold, black headlines which read:

“TOP SECRET DOCUMENTS UNCOVERED!
WE ARE NOT ALONE!”

Mulder’s heart began to race and his mouth went dry as he began to read the articles which dominated the entire front page.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL CONTACT IS OFFICIALLY CONFIRMED!

There were reactions from all over the world. People were panicking and flocking to churches. It was being called the second revelation of the world, next to the birth of Christ.

But there was something amiss.

Mulder looked at the date again — May, 1999. Something was definitely wrong. The time line was off. Suddenly Mulder’s confusion began to make sense and he was overwhelmed by the unthinkable.

<What the hell are they doing to me!>

Mulder again looked down at the newspaper, not wanting to believe that he was, again, part of an elaborate hoax — wanting to believe even less that the men he trusted were lying to him. He was consumed with rage at the magnitude of this atrocity. He slammed the paper down on the table and shoved the heavy table back against the wall.

“What are you doing to me!” he yelled, knowing he would be heard and observed on the video camera.
Mulder pounded on the cabinet with both fists. “Damn you to hell, Matheson! DO YOU HEAR ME!”

Again he pounded the cabinet, leaning against it with his arms over his head, closing his eyes and resting his head against the cold metal. He had never felt so defeated in all his life.

When Matheson walked briskly, almost running, into the vault he found Mulder sitting quietly at the table, slumped in a chair. Mulder’s eyes followed Matheson as he pulled a chair up close to him.

“Fox?” he asked cautiously as if Mulder might shatter into a thousand pieces.

For a long moment, neither man spoke. Matheson waited, suspecting what Mulder had figured out, but wanting him to ask the questions.

Mulder breathed deeply and blinked slowly. “I’m not jumping through your hoops anymore,” he said softly.

Matheson looked apologetic. “One of us should have stayed down here with you. These newspapers don’t fill in all the gaps because there were things that were never revealed.”

Mulder looked skeptical.

Matheson put his arms on the table and leaned across it. “Tell me what you don’t understand, Fox.”

Matheson had earned his trust a long time ago, but Mulder had learned that, like the old cliché, the mirror has two faces. Mulder paused a long time, wondering if an explanation was even worth the effort.

“I thought you said these papers are authentic! Isn’t all this a record of history, a daily account!”

Matheson looked puzzled. “Well, yes.”

“Then why does this newspaper article give the date of alien disclosure as May of 1999. That’s almost a year from now, Senator! How can that be? The digital tape is out there now! 1998! Explain why this supposed accurate newspaper account is a year off “

Matheson was shaking his head. “No, no. Listen to me. We knew this would become confusing, especially when there are so many incidentals with huge implications that could be easily missed. But we don’t know what you’ll miss, and we can’t explain the confusion before the fact. It wouldn’t make sense.”

“Try it now. You have nothing to lose,” Mulder said, his tone challenging.

—X—X—

Chapter 14

Matheson picked up the paper that Mulder had thrown on the floor and looked at the date. Then he stood and went to the metal cabinet. Pulling a paper from the drawer, he sat in the
chair next to Mulder and spread the paper out. Mulder noticed that it was one day prior to the one he had been reading. He had just skimmed this issue briefly. Matheson turned to a section toward the back and pointed to an article that Mulder had missed. He tapped it, indicating Mulder was to read it:

“SEARCH INTENSIFIES FOR DOD HACKER”

The article was brief:

///The C.I.A. and F.B.I. continue their search for the leader of a group of techno-anarchists who early last year received Top Secret Department of Defense computer files. Those highly classified military documents have since been decoded. It is not known what the interest is in the files, nor what was done with the data. The files contain information regarding the location of military installations utilized during the Gulf War.///

The article went on to describe that secrecy was maintained due to the possibility that the military bases might again be deployed.

“This article is bullshit,” Mulder said.

“Of course it is. This was the last attempt at a cover-up, hoping somehow to obtain the files before they reached the public. But you missed this entry. What you read was the following day’s, which confirmed the existence of extraterrestrials. The key, Fox, is the fact that according to this May 1999 issue, the files were stolen early last year. That’s now.”

Matheson hesitated, trying to put a harrowing set of circumstances into a simpler context. He decided there were additional facts that the young agent needed in order to make sense of such a complex puzzle.

“Fox, listen carefully. The history in this vault tells us that you were successful in discrediting the bogus copy of the decoded MJ Documents. There was so much confusion about what was the truth and what wasn’t, that it was useless to try and introduce authentic documents. You convinced your inside people that the real truth was on the digital tape in your possession. You accomplished that. But what went wrong is that you then handed over that digital tape to credible people within your network, and they began decoding it. Are you following me so far?”

Mulder nodded hesitantly, but his expression was still one of doubt.

Matheson pointed to the article where Mulder had stopped. “In April of 1999, the United Nations Extraterrestrial Coalition, UNEC, learned why it was taking so long for the anarchist network to decode the MJ Documents. It was because they had discovered the sub file and they were trying to decode the Merchandise.”

Matheson let that disclosure sink in and finally saw a change on Mulder’s face.

He went on. “UNEC knew they were not going to release what they knew about the MJ Documents until they had also decoded the Merchandise and had the whole picture. UNEC had to act quickly.”

Matheson saw that he had Mulder’s complete attention. The Senator closed his eyes for a moment and Mulder waited patiently until he opened them again and leaned closer to Mulder to emphasize what he was about to tell him.
“Fox, try to imagine how the world population would react if it were revealed that not only is there alien life living on our planet, but they have come to warn us about the inevitable biological annihilation of all human life.”

The impact of Matheson’s words was riveting.

“That is the essence of the Merchandise. UNEC knew it was only a matter of time before the code was cracked. They needed to create chaos, a diversion so profound that it might cause a breakdown within the anarchist network which would give UNEC more time to find the digital tape.”

Mulder finally saw where Matheson was going with these facts and his mind fought to absorb the implications. Matheson knew he had figured it out, and he waited for Mulder for confirm it.

“Senator, are you saying that the United Nations Coalition, this self-appointed protector of planet Earth, revealed the contents of everything on the digital tape except the Merchandise?”

Matheson answered barely above a whisper, “Yes.” Still speaking in a subdued voice, he dared reach over and lay his hand on Mulder’s arm, expecting Mulder to pull away, but Mulder didn’t move. He began to understand the secret that Matheson and the other men lived with every day; the immense burden each of them accepted.

Mulder tried desperately to understand what the Merchandise could contain that would justify the disclosure of the MJ files by world governments — a secret that up until that time was so earth shattering it was kept hidden for decades through lies and murder.

Now Mulder was a part of that.

<Is this the truth I sought?> he asked himself with growing alarm.

For the first time, Mulder realized that the world he had known was not a sturdy, solid, spinning mass, but rather a fragile ball — balancing precariously on the brink of destruction.

Matheson’s voice sounded like he was in a tunnel. “They had no idea that what they had done was taken a giant leap in the direction of destiny.”

“Why would they do that? Given what they knew, the extreme measures carried out for decades to protect the information, why would they, themselves, reveal it?”

“Need I explain the nature of our government? They may make a stupid decision just to avoid that same stupid decision being made for them. In this case though, it was only a matter of time before the whole thing exploded in their face. So they decided to detonate it themselves.”

Mulder looked pensive as he sought more answers. “Sir, I’m confused about this chronology of our future. It seems that we’ve had numerous attempts to alter this course.”

Matheson smiled for the first time. “No, there is no way to comprehend time travel. Time continuum is a paradox. If you try to understand the time sequences, you’ll drive yourself crazy.”
Mulder was trying desperately to pull himself up to some level of understanding. But the harder he thought about it, the closer he came to slipping off the edge.

“Fox, I think subconsciously you’re looking for reasons not to believe all this because the implications are catastrophic.” Matheson’s voice was compassionate. “Do you think maybe that’s what’s going on?”

Mulder knew he was right, and didn’t need to answer. He felt Matheson briefly squeeze his arm and he looked up.

“Can you go on from here, Fox?”

Mulder hesitated, leaning back in the chair. Matheson recognized that familiar look in the young man’s eyes, the telltale signs that Mulder was disappearing within himself. Matheson wondered only for an instant where Mulder’s mental flight had taken him.

Then he was back.

“Senator, have you ever waded out into the ocean, about waist deep? When you try to swim, the waves pound you back toward shore while the undertow tries to pull you out to sea. That’s how I feel right now.”

Matheson nodded, completely understanding. He stood up. “Fox, I guess the best we can do is try and keep our head above the water.”

And with that said, Matheson turned and left Mulder in the dead silence of a cold room.

—X—X—

Mulder went back to the next day’s newspaper. The headlined article explained how through an anarchist network, a digital tape containing top-secret UFO investigations had been decoded. The files on the tape, referred to as the MJ, or “Majestic” files, were actually Department of Defense confirmed contacts with extraterrestrial beings. The files listed dates, locations, names of witnesses and a full accounting of each incident. It even went on to describe the specific cover-up by military personnel.

The UFO reports dated back to the earliest known documented sighting in Norfolk, Virginia, April 6, 1860. There were hundreds of international sightings, including the report of a UFO climbing steeply over Port Moresby, New Guinea in August of 1953. That UFO was captured on film by a man named Drury, who was the Deputy Regional Director of Civil Aviation. The film was sent to the Air Technical Intelligence Center in Dayton, Ohio for analysis. The US Air Force never released a public report of that analysis. But the report is contained on the digital tape.

The files, of course, discuss Roswell in detail, the Michigan Lights, and thousands of others along with a fairly recent sighting by Shuttle astronauts of a spacecraft entering Earth’s atmosphere. There were digital photographs, hundreds of them. A sophisticated hoax was devised to debunk an alien autopsy, which actually took place, but the real one was not filmed.

Mulder looked through other newspaper issues on that same day, seeing that the whole world stood mesmerized by the confirmation of alien visitors to our planet. The UFO articles overshadowed the worsening Middle Eastern crisis. It was the perfect diversion for the Al-
Masha’al to escalate their dirty work.

In the days that followed, as the public’s shock began to wear off, the anger toward world leaders for their part in denial and cover-up was apparent. What followed was a torrent of mistrust. The United States, along with other world powers, decided it was futile and foolish to rely on ‘plausible denial’ any longer. So the truth became known that there had been an internal United Nations, so to speak, who were aware of the alien contacts and who periodically met to coordinate cover-ups.

To Mulder, it all made sense — all the walls he came up against, the fabricated stories, the missing witnesses, elaborate clean-up procedures to dispose of evidence. There had been times, when confronted with accusations of paranoia, that he questioned his own perceptions and judgment. Along with his growing apprehension of where this was leading, he also felt relief. As he had been warned though, the shell of cover-up began to crack even more as the truth fought its way out.

It seemed that every militant anti-government, anarchist-type, flag-burning fanatical rebel came out of the woodwork with stories of alien/earthling corroboration in almost every field — medicine, energy, technology, ecology, even the stock market. Alien abductions now seemed the explanation for the disappearances of Amelia Earhart, Jimmy Hoffa, and even Elvis.

And then one undeniable partnership with the aliens was realized — the military. The lid was finally off the biggest secret the world had ever known, and there was no way to control the repercussions that followed — the chaos and avalanche of accusations against the government for their efforts, whether justified or not, to deceive the American people.

Military officers, finally free to speak for the first time, admitted that specifications for new aircraft came from designs listed only as “Classified.” The United States Air Force, along with the British, the French, the Italians, the Japanese and even former Soviet military leaders all continued to deny the use of alien technology in aircraft and weaponry advancement. No one believed them anymore. Little Pig had cried ‘wolf’ too long.

Mulder turned to a back page to finish a front-page story, and another headline sent him reeling:

“F.B.I. ADMITS LONG-TERM U.F.O. INVESTIGATIONS.”

///The Federal Bureau of Investigation admitted that in 1994, they were in possession of what is believed to be the same digital tape containing the MJ files. In charge of the investigation at that time was Special Agent Fox Mulder. When Agent Mulder attempted to confirm the authenticity of the digital tape, an attempt was made on his life.

It is not known how the digital tape ended up, once again, behind the closed doors of the Department of Defense where it has remained locked away for the last four years. It is believed, although not confirmed, that Agent Mulder may have been instrumental in obtaining the digital tape a year ago, leading to exposure of the MJ files.

The F.B.I. also reluctantly, but truthfully, admits that their efforts to investigate U.F.O. sightings and abductions over the past 50 years have been hampered by upper-government agencies such as the C.I.A. and N.S.A (National Security Agency).///

<It’s all falling apart> Mulder thought, like pulling a thread along a seam. Everybody’s
blaming everybody else.

He read through, skimming mostly, hundreds of articles. Finally, catastrophe hit. The headline Mulder had been dreading:

“IRAQ CONDEMS U.S./ALIEN PACT
Threatens Retaliation Unless U.S. Agrees
To Shared Technology”

There was too much out there to deny that the United States, along with other alliances, was using alien technology in warfare as well as medical advances. Long before an alien presence was known, Americans had begun to believe that the speed of progress in this country involved more than obtaining a higher education. Without any proof at all, many believed we were using some type of alien technology. So the majority of the public accepted this fact as mere confirmation of what they already suspected. The government had insulted their intelligence long enough; this was payback time.

Naturally, the United Nations refused to give warfare technology to its Middle Eastern threat. That was like handing a loaded gun to a child who hates your guts.

And then it happened.

Iraqi forces fired on and sank a French peacekeeping ship in the Persian Gulf. Two days later, an American cargo plane loaded with troops bound for Saudi Arabia blew up on the ground, killing 82 young soldiers.

The United States appeared to take a back seat position, fearing terrorist acts might head to America, but the White House was calling the shots. The UN ordered an air strike against an Iraqi military base in Baghdad. Most of the Iraqi troops had moved farther north, anticipating the attack, so the air strikes followed them right into the heart of the cities. If Iraq thought America was too humane to ever bomb innocent civilians in their homes, they must have forgotten a little world history.

Namely Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On July 18, 1999, the United States, along with allied forces, declared war on Iraq.

Mulder stopped reading. He stood up and rubbed his eyes. His emotions were like the tumbling colors in a kaleidoscope. He needed a breather. History was racing by him in huge gulps and he felt like he was drowning. Looking at his watch, it had been a little over six hours. He wasn’t hungry, but he could use some coffee.

And he missed his partner.

Surely these powerful men could manipulate the circumstances and protect Agent Scully as well as protecting him. Maybe he could negotiate with them somehow, convince them to allow his partner to join him in exchange for his cooperation.

Mulder believed that the threat against Scully’s life might be merely a stronghold tactic to better control him. If they needed him that badly, then they could be forced to compromise.

Maybe.
He decided he would talk to Matheson, convince him that he needed Scully with him.

Mulder heard footsteps coming down the corridor. A moment later Mr. X was standing in front of him.

“You look like you could use a break, Agent Mulder.”

Mulder just nodded. He followed Mr. X to the elevator. He was emotionally drained for the time being but knew he would need to keep going.

Because the worst was yet to come.

—X—X—

LONE GUNMEN HEADQUARTERS
WASHINGTON, D.C.
3:00 P.M.

Langley answered the knock on the door after seeing on the video camera that it was Dana Scully. She was ushered in quickly, and right away the three Lone Gunmen noticed her anxiety.

Scully didn’t waste any time telling them what she wanted. “Who knows that Mulder has the tape?”

“Just the three of us for sure. But those who passed it down to us will assume he has it.”

“Assuming isn’t proof,” Scully said bluntly.

Frohike opened a silver flask and poured a finger of amber liquid into a small plastic cup. When he saw Scully watching him, he held up the flask.

“Tea time. Would you care to join me?” he asked offhandedly.

She surprised Frohike when she said she would. Instantly he went for another glass.

“Agent Scully,” said Byers, “these people don’t need proof. Our orders were to turn it over to Mulder. There’s no reason why we wouldn’t have done that.”

Scully nodded, thinking. “Do you know if there are copies of the digital tape out there somewhere?”

They looked at each other and Byers answered. “We don’t know for sure. There’s not much talk.”

“Agent Scully,” Langley added, “until those documents are decoded and released, we are all in danger. What is Mulder waiting for? He knows through our network we have contacts at all the major newspapers and radio stations.

Byers jumped into the conversation. “Our Internet access alone will break the barrier of silence. The government wouldn’t dare bring attention to themselves by displaying force after the truth is known.”

“That’s the sort of thing you watch for, for God’s sake,” Langly added.
Scully looked at each of them and her voice was grim. “Mulder is missing. I don’t suppose...

She was answered with blank faces. Frohike handed her the scotch and she swirled it in the glass for a moment, listening to the soft clink of the ice cubes. It was obvious from the look on their faces they didn’t know where Mulder was. Her odd behavior told them she was nervous and worried.

“I think the delay is because Mulder’s afraid to take full responsibility for this. We all know what happened four years ago. Find out what you can,” Scully stated decisively.

She saw that they were apprehensive and it angered her all of the sudden. Her voice became sharp as she turned to each of them.

“I’m not testing your loyalty to Mulder! I have a stake in this, too! My sister deserves that the truth be known. She was killed in my place, to keep that truth hidden! If I allow that to happen, then she died for nothing! Just like Mulder’s father. We share a common loss, Mulder and I, and we share a common goal. Don’t underestimate my desire for justice!” she said icily.

“Justice, or revenge, Agent Scully?” Byers asked.

“There’s a fine line between the two. Besides, what difference could it possibly make to you!”

With that said, she downed the alcohol in one gulp, bringing the glass down hard on the table. To their stunned silence, she gave each of them a piercing look, and left. The three Gunmen, surprised by Agent Scully’s bizarre behavior, exchanged glances.

Scully knew they would find out what they could. She also sensed that they trusted her because Mulder trusted her.

For right now, there was nothing more Scully could do. She started back to her apartment to wait for news of, or from, Mulder. She didn’t notice the car parked across the street with two men in the front seat. It pulled out into traffic behind her, staying two car lengths behind as she drove home.

Just as Scully entered and locked the door to her apartment, the phone began ringing. Throw ing her purse and keys on the table, she reached over and picked up the receiver. The caller was an operator at the F.B.I. who was notifying her that a Colonel Hodson was trying to reach Agent Mulder, but asked for Agent Scully when Mulder couldn’t be located. Scully drew a blank for a minute at the mention of the Colonel’s name, then remembered she and Mulder had visited him at the Pentagon to look up the military records of the murder victims.

She wondered why he would call. She took down his number, thanked the operator, then immediately called Hodson back. He answered on the first ring.

“Colonel Hodson, this is Dana Scully. I got a message you called.”

“Yes, I need to speak with you and Agent Mulder right away.”

Scully heard the anxiousness in his voice and tried to reassure him. “Agent Mulder is
unavailable, but I’ll be happy to meet with you.”

There was no hesitation from him. “Good. Do you know where the Gaslight Lodge is in Arlington?”

“I can find it.”

“They have a coffee house. Can you be there in one hour?”

Scully looked at her watch. “Yes.”

“Agent Scully, no one is to know of this meeting. I’ve worked with Agent Mulder for a long time and I know he can be trusted. I assume that as his partner, I can expect the same of you.”

“Absolutely, Colonel. I’ll see you in one hour.”

Scully slowly hung up the phone, wondering where this was leading. Thinking back on the meeting with Hodson, she remembered that he appeared nervous. Mulder hadn’t seemed to notice — he was too busy trying to find some indistinct link between the murdered men’s service records.

Scully grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

<Well, fine, Mulder. If you don’t need a partner, wherever you are, then neither do I.>

—X—X—

Chapter 15

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.

4:15 P.M.

Mulder had some lunch — a few bites of a sandwich and a large cup of coffee. He generally stayed away from coffee unless he really needed it to stay alert. Right now he felt like intravenous injections of caffeine were what he needed.

This time the Well Manicured Man accompanied him. Mulder knew him the least of the four men. There was some degree of distrust because he had formulated an opinion early on that this man was working against him. But he was here in what was probably the most secure, concealed installation in the world, and he was with the three men that Mulder did trust. Plus, the Well Manicured Man had once warned Scully that her life was in danger. If he hadn’t, Scully would have taken the bullet instead of her sister.

As they walked to the cabinet, they talked to fill the awkward void.

“Mr. Mulder, do you have any questions?”

“Not about this. But there’s something else I’d like to know about. In 1952, under intense public pressure, the CIA appointed an investigator to the Roswell Incident.”

The Well Manicured Man raised an eyebrow. He knew Mulder was testing his knowledge. “Yes. His name was Frederick Durant. He had been involved with Project Blue Book. Why do
you ask that?”

“A few years ago I saw him in an interview that was filmed 30 years after the Roswell incident. I remembered his face. He was one of the men that came to our house many times after my sister disappeared. He also came to my parents’ summer house, and very few did that. And he was one of the men in the photo along with my father, Klemper, you …”

The Well Manicured Man saw that Mulder wanted him to complete the story, to make sense of a vague memory. He looked at the young man’s face, recalling when he, too, was young and demanded answers. He wished now that someone had chosen to protect him, as they had sworn to protect Mulder from his own inquisitiveness.

Mulder stopped in the corridor and faced him. “I asked you once, as we stood in Klemper’s greenhouse and I tried to fit pieces of a puzzle together, if there was more. You told me, ‘yes.’”

“I think what I said was, ‘More than you’ll ever know.’ Mr. Mulder, I cannot possibly relate every incident of history over the past 50 years. Consider yourself fortunate, because there are things I wish even I didn’t know.”

“Such as?”

The Well Manicured Man hesitated only an instant. “At your father’s funeral, I told your partner something. She asked who our consortium was, what we did. I said, ‘We predict the future, and the best way to predict the future is to invent it.’”

Mulder contemplated that statement, then walked back to the table, which had a few papers, stacked on top. The Well Manicured man could tell that Mulder was hesitating asking a question.

“You want to know about your father, don’t you?” he asked the young agent.

“I’m not sure. I just remember the last thing he said to me before he died.”

Flashes of memory passed before Mulder’s eyes and it was painful. The Well Manicured Man looked questioningly at him.

“He said, ‘forgive me,’” Mulder said with regret. “But forgive him for what?”

“Mr. Mulder, all I can tell you is this: your father did what he had to do; we all did. Young men make young mistakes. Here in this place we’ve been given a chance to atone for those mistakes. Your father would be proud that you’re here, trying to help us do that.”

Mulder said nothing and the Well Manicured Man started back down the corridor.

“We’ll be back in a few hours,” he said over his shoulder.

—X—X—

GASLIGHT COFFEE HOUSE
5:00 P.M.

It had started to rain again as Scully pulled up to the coffee house. By training and habit
she looked around the parking lot trying to spot anyone who might be lingering about or sitting in a car. A few people were walking in for dinner, but nobody looked suspicious.

Scully entered, looked around briefly, then saw Hodson, dressed in civilian clothes, waving at her. She joined him at a table for two in a corner of the restaurant.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, rising out of politeness as she sat in the small booth across the table from him.

Scully smiled and nodded. “You sounded like it might be urgent.”

A waitress interrupted, pouring Scully a coffee when she turned her cup over. Hodson offered to buy dinner. Scully accepted and ordered a fruit salad and quiche.

“Agent Scully,” Hodson started, his voice hushed, “I couldn’t talk to you or Agent Mulder the other day. I suspected that someone was clocking how long our meeting lasted. As you may recall, I told you I was expected in a conference? Not true.”

“But if you had something to tell us, why did you wait five days to call back?”

“I was doing some checking on my own; verifying some facts before I passed them on to you. Plus, I did try to get Agent Mulder for a couple of days. Guess he’s out of town?”

<Hell if I know.>

“What facts, Colonel?” she asked, ignoring his question.

Scully saw him glance around the restaurant nervously. When he raised his coffee cup, she could see his hand shaking. He leaned across the table.

“Those four men you and Mulder asked about were murdered, weren’t they?”

Scully, careful about how much she would admit, thought briefly about the question, then nodded.

Hodson also nodded, as if he expected the confirmation. “Agent Scully, six years ago Jacob Timmonds was on the brink of being washed out of the Air Force after a spotless career.”

“Why?”

“In 1992, while on leave in Lafayette, Louisiana, he claimed he was chased by a U.F.O.”

“What!”

“After thorough investigation and interrogation, Timmonds admitted that when he and his brother were in their teens, they were abducted by aliens.”

Scully’s only reaction was to blink slowly and raise her eyebrows.

<That figures.>

Scully bit her lip to keep from screaming <ANYONE ON THE PLANET WHO HAS NOT BEEN ABDUCTED, PLEASE RAISE YOUR HAND!>
Hodson hesitated while the waitress set a silver creamer on the table.

“Timmonds fought back. He threatened to go public with his story and to expose a cover-up to anyone who would listen, whether it be the Associated Press or the tabloids. He didn’t care. The Air Force was worried. They don’t like these stories coming from military officers. So to compromise, the Air Force appointed him the director of their newly developed Blue Sky Program. The decision had a two-fold purpose: to shut him up and to keep an eye on him.”

Scully began trying to incorporate these new facts into what she and Mulder knew of the murders and the digital tape. Scully slowly stirred the cream in her coffee, the spoon gently tapping against the side of the china cup.

“Colonel, does Mulder know all this?”

Hodson hesitated, knowing he was probably putting Mulder in hot water with his partner. “Yes, he does. But in all fairness, Agent Scully, I asked him to be discreet with information until ... well, until I had a chance to meet you face to face.”

She seemed okay with that answer. “Do you think the Air Force could be responsible for Timmonds’ death, or any of these deaths?”

“I ... hope not,” he stuttered. “I can’t believe they would do something like that.”

“Then why the urgency to talk to me? You must think something is wrong, particularly if you believed our meeting with you was of interest to someone.”

“Jacob Timmonds had a brother living in Abingdon, Virginia. He recently came to Washington, D.C.”

“The same brother who claimed to be abducted?” Scully asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you know why he came here?”

“Yes. To meet with Agent Mulder.”

Scully didn’t want to admit she already knew that. Hodson explained that when Blue Sky started up, he, too, was part of the Project. That’s how he met Jacob Timmonds. Scully, surprised at that divulgence, then asked, apprehensively, if Hodson also claimed to be an abductee. To her relief, he smiled and shook his head, no.

Hodson had been part of Project Blue Book, and was subsequently assigned to Blue Sky to pretty much keep an eye on Timmonds and the others. It was crazy, he admitted, watchdogs watching the watchdogs. After a few years of chasing phony sightings and nonexistent radar blips, Hodson was reassigned to the Pentagon. He had no further contact with anyone at Blue Sky for almost ten years until four days ago when Darren Timmonds called and asked to see him. They set a lunch date for Thursday, but Timmonds never showed up.

Scully has no response. <Dead men have trouble keeping appointments.>
Scully’s mind was working to put these facts in order. “Colonel, did Agent Mulder also know of your past association with Blue Sky?”

Scully saw him hesitating again, but then he nodded once. No matter what Hodson had asked of Mulder, she felt a little agitated that her partner had not briefed her about Colonel Hodson’s part in all this.

“Why didn’t you mention you knew Jacob Timmonds when we gave you the list of victims and you saw Timmonds’ name?”

“Because I was afraid of who might be watching or listening. I wanted the meeting to appear very above board. Do you understand?”

Scully didn’t answer. She didn’t know Hodson well enough to understand his withholding information. If Mulder were here, she could follow his lead, as she often did with his contacts. She realized that at the time she and Mulder met with Hodson, they had not learned of the digital tape, thus, they knew nothing about Blue Sky.

But Scully wondered why, when Mulder met with Darren Timmonds and was told about the files being in the Blue Sky computers, he didn’t mention to her about Colonel Hodson’s connection with Blue Sky. Perhaps Mulder didn’t know whether the two of them had been with Blue Sky at the same time, but it wasn’t like him not to find out. Then again, since Wednesday night, Mulder hadn’t been around much to ask anybody anything.

It must have crossed his mind, however, and he chose not to share it with her. A spark of anger coursed through her. She couldn’t withhold information from her partner anymore than she could play gin rummy with the fluke monster.

Hodson was wondering what Agent Scully was thinking. He took a drink of ice water and wiped his fingers on his napkin. “Agent Scully, did Mulder meet with Darren Timmonds? That was his purpose in coming to Washington.”

Colonel Hodson, a trained aviator and interrogator, tried to read more in Agent Scully’s eyes than she might be willing to say, but her look was impenetrable. Scully saw their waitress approaching with their dinners and she took her elbows off the table. Her plate of fruit and quiche and Hodson’s chicken fried steak were put in front of them. Hodson thanked the young girl and she left the table. Scully knew he was waiting for her answer.

She hesitated, picking a seed off a watermelon wedge. “Colonel …” Scully stopped. She was trying to earn the trust of one of Mulder’s sources. Yet she couldn’t reveal more than she thought Mulder would. Cautiously, she started again. “I think that you are in a position where having too much knowledge, or the wrong kind of knowledge could be risky. Do you agree?”

Hodson considered her remark. <This is one bright lady. What a lucky son-of-a-gun> he thought of Mulder.

Scully was looking at him, frowning, and for a split second Hodson thought she had read his mind. Then he couldn’t help but smile at her.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking about a conversation Agent Mulder and I had right after you two were assigned together.”
“Oh?”

“He said something like, Beauty and Brains teams up with Arrogance and Aliens.”

Scully was amused, but her emotions were contradictory right now. Mulder made her feel that way a lot, having to decide whether to hug him or slug him.

<Where are you, Mulder?>

“How’s your quiche?” Hodson asked.

“Delicious. I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Scully dabbed her mouth with the napkin. “Colonel, do you know if, besides his brother, Jacob Timmonds had any relatives.”

“There’s a sister, still living in Charlotte, I assume. I know because a few years ago she attended a surprise birthday party for Timmonds given by the Blue Sky staff.”

“Charlotte? Is that where Blue Sky is based?”

“Yes. At a private facility, not far from the Marine base. The whole point is to give the impression that Blue Sky is not operated by the military.”

Scully knew right away what she wanted to do. She wasn’t clear on where this would lead her, but at the very least it might convince her partner that she would not be kept in the dark.

Besides, she had something to prove to herself as well.

Scully cut into the flaky crust, watching the steam rise from the pastry. “I need to ask you a favor. But don’t ask me why.”

Hodson swallowed a bite of meat. “Now you’re beginning to sound like Agent Mulder.”

—X—X—

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.
LATER THAT NIGHT

Mulder spent the entire day reading the terrifying chronology of how the world had gone mad. This was no longer a war of man and machine. It was a war of advantage — who had the most powerful technology and wasn’t afraid to use it. A discovery as great as the world had ever known had come to light, but the primitive violence of our world overshadowed that historic revelation. The comfortable belief of most people was that if our little planet Earth were confronted by beings from another world, all nations would unite. We now knew this to be a myth. It simply gave us another reason to fight, to hate.

Now, well into the night, Mulder read about a future that could never be. He was sickened by a world turned against itself, even in the face of an advanced race from another time and place. We must have seemed like scavengers, like spoiled children refusing to share their toys. Only these toys were weapons of mass destruction.

When Senator Matheson came to get Mulder, he found him asleep at the table. For a
moment he watched this young man whom he had brought under his wing years ago. He had nourished him, feeding him scraps of information with the hope of finding the truth, often sending him into dark and dangerous places for answers. Matheson understood the ridicule Mulder sometimes endured simply because he opened his mind to the ‘extreme possibilities.’ Fox Mulder was intelligent enough to realize that when we arrogantly believe we can explain every aspect of science and nature, then we have closed our minds.

Matheson was envious of Mulder’s freedom from government strings that moved people like puppets across a stage. From his Senate office, he lived vicariously through Mulder’s work because they shared the same dreams, the same passion for discovering all that life contains — any life.

Matheson put his hand on Mulder’s arm and Mulder lifted his head. He sat back in the chair, rubbing his eyes as Matheson sat in the chair across from him.

“What time is it?” Mulder asked.

“Almost midnight. I’ll take you back to your room. You’ll be comfortable there.”

Matheson could see the signs of severe strain in his young friend. Mulder looked hard at the man whom he had respected and followed for so long. There were still countless questions, but one in particular which haunted Mulder and he had to ask it.

“How could you have ordered those murders – of the men and their families? I have known you to be a compassionate man, someone who is greatly concerned with life. How could you do it?”

Mulder saw the pain his question caused in the face of the Senator, and saw his body slump. Matheson looked down at the table where he traced his finger along a groove in the wood. Then he met Mulder’s eyes again.

“We didn’t order any of those people killed, Fox. The assassins were hired by the other entity protecting the MJ Documents. But we created that entity; therefore, we are responsible for Frankenstein’s victims. In order to secure the Merchandise we demand that at all costs the MJ Documents are to be concealed. Then we turn our heads to the actions of those men who carry out our orders.”

Mulder knew there had to be more to this man who had shared his ambitions, his quest. He was sure they shared the same despair right now.

He saw Matheson roll his head back and let out a deep breath.

“Fox, there are things men do — despicable things — to preserve peace, but more importantly, to preserve life. If you had been old enough to serve in the Vietnam War, you would have seen things far worse than this. When a six year old child is standing in front of you with his finger on the trigger of a rifle, you make a split decision whether to blow him away, or go home in a body bag. You wipe out an entire village with napalm because they’re hiding snipers. Or maybe you put a gun to the temple of your own sergeant because he took a fatal hit in the stomach, but the enemy is approaching and you can’t wait for him to die slowly in the jungle.”

Matheson shook his head sadly. Mulder knew what he said was true, sacrifices have to be made; the good of the many outweighing the good of the one. But that reality was a bitter
pill to swallow.

“My partner...,” Mulder started.

“What about her?”

“I need her,” he said bluntly.

Mulder saw lines of worry again cross Matheson’s face. Once again the Senator seemed to focus on the table while he collected his thoughts. Mulder waited patiently. He knew he didn’t have to explain further; Matheson knew how important Scully was to him.

“Fox, we’ll talk about this later. There’s something else I want to show you. But not now. Tomorrow night. Right now you need to sleep. We want you to return to Washington later tomorrow, if possible. We can’t keep a lid on this much longer and if that happens —

“More people will die?” Mulder interrupted harshly.

“More people are going to die anyway;” he said truthfully, “that’s unavoidable. If we can’t continue to alter the course of events, if it gets away from us, then the future of this planet reads accurately in this vault. And we’re all doomed.”

—X—X—

APARTMENT 35
10:30 P.M.

Scully’s attempts to contact Mulder were futile. She had a gut feeling that when he was ready to talk, he would contact her. She had been through this with him many times before when he suddenly disappeared. It seemed more like instinct, spur of the moment, than a conscious effort on his part to desert her.

There had been exceptions, of course, and this might be one of them. Scully knew there was a double standard where disappearances were concerned. Mulder expected her to be accountable to him at all times — not that she conceded to his wishes — but she dealt with his expectations in her own way.

She had just finished making airline reservations to Charlotte, North Carolina for early the next morning, when there was a knock on her door. Grabbing her gun off the coffee table, she looked out the peephole. It was Langley, Byers and Frohike, so she let them in. She felt some optimism in that they wouldn’t be here if they didn’t know something.

“Come on in, guys.”

“We’ve got some news,” Langley said.

“Good,” Scully answered, laying her gun back on the table.

“No, it’s not good,” Byers added.

Scully braced herself and asked the next question. “Do you know something about Mulder?”

All three of them shook their heads and Byers said, “We haven’t heard anything about
Mulder. It’s like he dropped off the face of the planet.”

“We’ve got a huge network,” said Frohike, “and Mulder’s face is about as familiar as Elvis, but, unlike the latter, there have been no sightings of Special Agent Fox Mulder.”

Scully went into the kitchen to make coffee and indicated for the three of them to sit at the table. They waited until she had served their coffee and was seated with them before they told her what they had learned.

“A price has been asked for a copy of the MJ Files,” Langley said bluntly.

“What! How did someone get a copy?”

“We don’t know,” Byers said hesitantly, “but there’s speculation,” he said, cutting his eyes at his other two friends.

“Yeah,” Frohike grunted, “which I’ll never believe.”

Scully understood the implication. “Are you saying Mulder turned the tape over to someone?”

“Well, either that,” Byers explained, “or it means a copy was made before the digital tape was given to Mulder. Either way, it doesn’t matter now whether Mulder has the tape or not. It’s already out there.”

“Then where’s Mulder?” Scully asked.

They shrugged but looked uncomfortable.

“What are you not telling me?” Scully asked.

Frohike spoke under his breath as he sipped his coffee. “This is bullshit.”

Langley ran his hand through his long blond hair then clasped his hands on the table. “Word on the street is that Mulder has sold out. He’s been bought.”

Scully was appalled. She was speechless for an instant. “That’s absurd! What kind of people are you working with?”

“People that — like Mulder — ‘trust no one,’” Byers said. “Mulder has had the tape for several days. He has hidden it and no one has seen it, including you. He disappears for long periods of time, apparently meeting with someone. Is it like him not to keep you informed? And now suddenly a copy is up for sale.”

“You actually think Mulder would sell out for money! Are you out of your mind!”

“We didn’t say we believe that!” Langley shot back.

“No, of course not,” Byers added. “Someone is trying to discredit Mulder, cast doubt on him. But how do we defend him? He won’t even talk to any of us.”

Even though Scully had wondered the same things, this attack on her partner made her instantly defensive of him. “So what!” she snapped. “From what we’ve all been told, the files on that tape are the most highly classified documents our government possesses.
We’ve seen what they’ll do to get them back. Maybe somehow Mulder is caught in the middle. Maybe ...”

Scully stopped, frustrated not having answers and still angry with Mulder for putting her in this position by not leveling with her. The four of them sat quietly, sipping their coffee, their doubts hanging in the air like the stench from something rotten.

Scully could tell by the expression on their faces that she had judged them too harshly. They had always been willing to help Mulder — and her — whenever asked. Scully was actually the new kid on the block because the Lone Gunmen and her partner went back a long way together. She had no right to accuse them of being any less confused and concerned than she was about Mulder’s strange behavior lately.

“Look, I understand the trust between you guys and Mulder.”

“An understatement,” Frohike said bluntly.

“What?” she asked, frowning.

“The word trust was invented for Fox Mulder,” Byers added.

Frohike turned in his chair to face her more directly. “Think about it, Agent Scully ... We operate an underground, anti-government network, and yet a federal agent and his partner come and go freely through our headquarters.”

His statement affirmed that their trust had extended to Scully. She started to remark but she saw Frohike smiling.

“What?” she questioned.

“I was just remembering the day you had been assigned to Agent Mulder. He came over that evening to talk about it.”

<That seemed to be a hot topic for him at the time.>

“Do I want to hear what he had to say?” she asked pensively.

She saw Langly and Byers exchanging amused looks. Frohike continued.

“He said you were sent to spy on him, that the Bureau was playing the oldest game in the world — sending a beautiful woman in as a distraction.”

Scully smiled and shook her head.

Langley chuckled. “Mulder said no beautiful woman would ever distract him from seeking the truth ... if he could just remember what that truth was.”

Scully was amused, and complimented at the same time.

“But Mulder is smarter than that,” Byers added. “I probably don’t have to tell you, of all people, that Mulder’s perception, when it comes to judging character, is uncanny. He gave you more credit than maybe the Bureau did. He said your partnership would work and you would eventually become close.”
Scully saw them looking at her as if they expected some kind of personal confirmation. She didn’t need to tell them what they already knew. Her expression let them know she was grateful for the story.

“Yes, we’re close. In fact, I can’t even tell you what I’d do to Agent Mulder if he were close right now,” he said with a slight edge to her tone.

She ignored the silent looks they exchanged around the table and stood up.

“Let me get you guys some more coffee.”

—X—X—

Chapter 16

SOMEBWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES
APRIL 20, 6:45 A.M.

Mulder sat alone in the holding room sipping coffee. He had slept restlessly. His thoughts turned to Scully, knowing she was probably worried about him, yet angry at the same time. He hoped he could put everything back together when he got back to Washington, because he knew he would eventually need her help. He knew that nothing would ever be the same with the knowledge he was acquiring.

The door opened and Mulder looked up to see Albert Hosteen come into the room. Albert smiled warmly at Mulder and grasped his outstretched hand in both of his. The old Navajo could see that the FBI agent was tired. Without the two of them speaking any words, Mulder stood once again and Albert led him out of the room.

Mulder and Albert went back to the table in the vault but Albert didn’t leave. When he took a seat, and his demeanor suggested that he would remain there, Mulder frowned.

“You’re staying with me?”

“Yes. This is the most difficult part of the history to comprehend. If you have questions, I might be able to answer them for you.”

“You don’t doubt any of this one bit, do you?”

Albert shook his head without hesitation. Mulder’s expression held unasked questions. Albert waited patiently as he gathered his thoughts. They had been through a lot together, most of it unspoken. Albert had known of Mulder’s journey to the other world when his body, on the brink of death, had chosen to surrender its life. It was the Navajo healers and the ceremony performed by Albert, which called the Holy Ones to Mulder’s bedside to save him. There was a bond between the two men, linked by spirit as well as purpose.

“Albert, three years ago when my partner first asked you to decode the digital tape, you knew you couldn’t do that, didn’t you?”

He nodded, his face unreadable, but he spoke with assurance. “You’re asking me if I would have lied to you.”

Mulder’s silence was his answer, so Albert went on. “There was no need. I knew that events
would come about which would make it unnecessary for me to speak an untruth. I knew that our destiny was for us to work together Agent Mulder.”

Albert could see that Mulder had more questions, and he put a firm hand on his young friend’s arm. “These questions are of no consequence. Time is our enemy right now.”

Mulder understood, and he went back to the files to continue his reading.

—X—X—

As the months of the future went on, the United States, as well as other super powers, was under fire from governments all over the world for having used alien intervention to gain a military advantage. Although Iraq threatened to release a biological weapon, it was an idle threat. Iraq was not ready for self-destruction. They knew they had no defense against their own weapons.

It was the same old story — the U.S. accounted to no one for their actions, and even when they were asked to explain, the implied answer was, what are you going to do about it. So the threats went back and forth. Iraq, now aware of the US/alien pact, knew their own weapons could be used again them. Even if a serum could be developed quickly using alien technology, the US would certainly use it at their discretion, being selecting with distribution. The US felt secure with that advantage.

What no one expected was the sudden, astounding announcement that was broadcast through satellite channels worldwide that a terrorist group, the Al-Masha’al, who were operating in an undisclosed location, was prepared to detonate a bomb with a biological warhead. The United States was shocked beyond belief. With all the US satellite technology and sophisticated surveillance equipment, as well as brilliant covert operations, the Al-Masha’al had gone unnoticed. Blame began to fall in every corner of the government. Never had there been such dissension within the ranks of the agencies. Who was to be believed; was there one enemy? Two? A corroboration? Of all that prevailed, the thing that dominated was chaos.

The terrorist group warned that a virulent strain of the Hantavirus had been developed, a strain which had mutated through the fusion of cells from Anthrax virus. The worst part was not that it was a virus, which was immune to all the known antigens currently being experimented with, but that through transmutations it was now completely airborne.

The group’s demands were astronomical: political and terrorist prisoners released, withdrawal of all US forces in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, and the most mind-boggling demand of all — alien technology on human cloning.

<Good god!> Mulder thought. <That would be like a Neo-Nazi group using DNA material to clone thousands of Hitlers.>

There was no way to meet the demands. The United States didn’t even know where to look for the terrorists. There was angry debate between political and military leaders as to whether the terrorists did indeed have such a weapon, and if so, would they actually use it. We were frighteningly aware that these irrational groups sacrificed their lives in the name of a cause. They had little to live for in this life, and their religious belief was that their greater reward was in the next life. It is impossible to negotiate or bargain with someone who has nothing to lose, particularly if that person not only doesn’t fear death, but welcomes it.
The terrorists warned that if the US didn’t start demonstrating positive responses to the demands within 72 hours, they would drop the bomb. They knew that an Executive Order could open prison cell doors in a matter of hours, freeing hundreds of political prisoners. The U.S. knew that such a release would only strengthen the Al-Masha’al, make the remaining demands harder to ignore. Since the United States had not been dealt the winning hand, they had to bluff. They issued a statement that there would be no compromise with the terrorists; however, they promised that a UN delegation would be appointed to hear their grievances.

<We’ll get to you; take a number.>

The U.S. had hoped that the UN’s position against this worldwide threat would gain support from the other Arab nations. But experts in Middle Eastern ideology believed differently. They explained that in March of 1990, Iraq’s conviction for espionage and subsequent execution of an Iranian-born UK journalist, Farzad Bazoft, provoked international outrage. As its relations with the West deteriorated, Iraq’s standing in the Arab world improved as expressions of support for Iraq were elicited from the Arab League and from individual Arab states.

In April, 1990, after Hussein had justified the production of Iraq’s chemical weapons as a deterrent against a nuclear attack by Israel, there were further expressions of support, even from Iraq’s staunchest Arab rival, Syria, for Iraq’s right to defend itself. So the U.S. could not count on common sense from other nations in the region, even if their own safety might be in jeopardy.

Mulder paced the corridor as Albert watched him. The young man was in mental turmoil and Albert felt for him. He had known Mulder to be unusually acute when it came to perceiving the nature of things. His passion for truth was the byproduct of his sensitivity and his honesty. And now it was tearing him apart.

Albert closed his eyes briefly and said a prayer. It was going to get much worse for Agent Mulder and he would need strength not only from the spirits in this world, but from beyond.

The newspapers described the fervor of the United States, as well as its allies, to find the Al-Masha’al. Executions all over the Asian continent and terrorist bombings in European cities increased. Paranoia was the prevalent contagion at present. Innocent people were tortured and killed if there was any hint they might have information about Jahaf and his army.

Time was running out. The 72-hour period was fast approaching, as the world braced for some kind of retaliation.

What they got was silence. Three days following the deadline, there was still no communication from Jahaf. No one believed they had gone away but there was a sort of stalemate, each one waiting for the other to make a move. There was optimism from government officials that perhaps Jahaf was considering another plan, one which could be more easily complied with than his original demands. Should we be deciding on the shape of the negotiation table? Military terrorist experts knew better.

On the third day into the new Millennium, a bomb exploded over Sidney, Australia.

—X—X—
CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA
8:45 A.M.

When Scully arrived in North Carolina, the air was cool, but damp. She had always enjoyed visiting this part of the South. There was a lot of history here; a lot of living in the past was still going on.

Colonel Hodson had gone back to his office following their meeting last night, and called her with the name and address of Jacob Timmonds’ sister. She was divorced, raising two teenage sons, working as a CSR for the phone company. It was curious to Scully that there would be so much information on the sister of a serviceman.

<Chalk it up to the Big Brother files.>

Now she was beginning to think like Mulder.

Scully had gone over in her mind how to approach her, what to say. The death of one brother and the disappearance of another was probably devastating to her. The question was, how much did she know or suspect?

She found the house easily. It was small, but well kept, situated in a quiet neighborhood. There was a 1991 Honda Civic parked in the driveway. Scully knew, by calling the phone company earlier that morning, that Ms. Elliott’s shift was from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Scully parked her rental car at the curb in front of the house then walked up the steps onto the porch. The house looked and smelled freshly painted. Scully took out her ID and rang the doorbell. A few seconds later the door opened slightly, but a chain lock secured it. A woman’s face peeked out through the crack.

“Yes?” she asked warily.

“Mrs. Joan Elliott?”

“Who are you?” she asked cautiously before acknowledging her identity.

Scully detected fear in her voice. She had a feeling as soon as she showed her ID the door would slam in her face.

“Mrs. Elliott, don’t be alarmed. I would just like to talk to you for a few minutes. Your brother, Darren, came to Washington recently to talk to my partner.”

“Your partner?”

<Well, here goes.> “Yes, ma’am. I’m with the FBI,” Scully said, holding up her identification.

The door closed quickly. Scully realized this woman knew there was reason to be afraid. Scully took a step closer to the door and spoke without any kind of authority in her voice.

“Joan, I’m here because a few days ago your brother came to us for help. We want to find out what happened to Jacob.”

Scully waited, quickly considering the options if Mrs. Elliott refused to talk to her. Scully hated the thought of coming to North Carolina for nothing, and her only lead in this case
coming to a dead end.

She had almost decided to leave when the door opened again, the chain still in place. Scully looked up eagerly and waited for the woman to speak.

“What’s your partner’s name?”

“Fox Mulder.”

In so many instances, the name ‘Fox Mulder’ was like a password. Scully was often amazed that mere mention of his name was like rubbing Aladdin’s lamp. This time was no exception as Scully saw the door close briefly and she heard the chain sliding back. Mrs. Elliott reluctantly opened the door and once Scully was inside, she re-locked it.

Scully saw that she indeed was afraid. It is difficult to disguise an expression of fear. Her face looked tired, drawn, with lines of worry creasing her forehead. Scully guessed she had probably aged in appearance over the last few weeks when her life turned upside down.

Mrs. Elliott led Scully into the living room. The furniture looked old, but the room was comfortable. Scully noticed a Nintendo unit laying on the carpet by the television. The TV was turned off, but she could see that the Nintendo was on. She glanced down the short hallway and noticed that one of the bedroom doors was closed. Mrs. Elliott sat on the sofa and Scully chose an overstuffed chair next to it.

“Could I get you some coffee, or some iced tea?” Joan asked nervously.

“No,” Scully smiled, trying to relax her, “I’m fine.”

“Where’s Fox Mulder?” she asked abruptly.

“He’s talking to some other people in Washington.”

Scully saw her face suddenly contort and she looked ready to cry. She was nervously twisting a gold bracelet around her wrist. Scully wanted her to know she was someone she could trust. She moved over next to her on the couch to show that this was not a matter of government business, but that she cared about this woman and her family.

“Joan, what is it?”

“Do you know where Darren is?” she asked, nervously twisting a ring around her little finger.

<Oh, hell.> Scully knew she would have to lie. She wished Mulder hadn’t told her about Mr. X killing Timmonds, so at least she wouldn’t know what the answer was. She read the apprehension and dread in the woman’s face.

“I’m sorry. I don’t.”

Well, that wasn’t completely a lie. As far as she knew, Darren Timmonds’ body hadn’t been found. Scully knew what the next question was going to be.

“Did Darren meet with Agent Mulder?” she asked.

Scully slowly shook her head and when she did, the woman started to cry. It was as if she
knew her brother was dead without being told. But why did she think that? What did she know? Scully needed to have those answers. She saw a box of tissues on the kitchen counter and she brought them to her, again sitting next to her on the sofa.

“Joan, you need to tell me why you’re afraid. Do you know anything about a digital tape?”

Suddenly the woman’s eyes widened and she looked around frantically as if a SWAT team might come bursting through the door. Scully felt sorry for her. The digital tape seemed to carry a curse with it, like the defiled tombs of ancient kings. Unlike Scully and Mulder, who had each other as well as others who would look out for them, there was no one to protect someone like Joan Elliott and her sons. Scully knew, realistically, that she couldn’t even assure her of that.

“Joan, you’re going to have to trust me. Tell me why Jacob was killed and why you believe something might have happened to Darren. I’m not ...” Scully stopped, taking a deep breath, trying to better explain herself. “Look, Agent Mulder and I are investigating these deaths. You know there are more than one, don’t you?”

Joan didn’t answer but there was no surprise on her face either.

Scully went on. “We are not writing up reports or filing paperwork or releasing any names of people we talk to. Believe me, Joan, we know how dangerous it is to possess that information. But we need some answers so we can stop whoever is doing this.”

Scully saw the woman looking deeply into her eyes, as if to weigh the truth of her words. She knew Joan had nowhere to turn, no one to trust. No one realized the significance of trust more than Scully and her partner.

Scully gently put her hand on top of her wrist. “Please tell me what you know.”

Joan wiped her eyes with the tissue and sat back against the sofa. “Jacob worked with a UFO group here in Charlotte. They were connected to the military somehow. He liked to talk a lot about his work. It was all public record, you know.”

Joan explained some of the history of Blue Sky and how her brother, Jacob, came to be involved. What she did not confide to Scully was the claim of abduction by the brothers. She didn’t recall any of the names of the people working on the Project. She heard stories, not details. Then one night several weeks ago, Jacob called her. He was very excited about some Top Secret government files which appeared in the Blue Sky computer, files which the government denied ever existed. He told her that these files allegedly dealt with UFO investigations and knowledge by the government of contact with extraterrestrials, but the files were encrypted so it was impossible to read them.

A few days after the information appeared, Jacob called again, but this time he was upset and scared. Jacob told her that he found out the files had been stolen from the government and the information was so top secret that threats were being made against those who had access to the files.

“Did Jacob tell you who was making the threats?”

“No. I just assumed it was the government. But I figured, hell, it's our government, what would they do? Maybe sic the IRS on them or something.”
Joan pulled a fresh tissue and wiped her eyes again. Scully didn’t rush her.

“When I talked to Jacob again, he said that he had talked to Darren and Darren was coming to Charlotte.”

“Why?”

Joan’s eyes filled with tears again and she worked to gain control of her voice before she continued. Obviously, from this point on in the story, her brothers made mistakes, thus sealing their fate.

“A man had contacted Jacob and the others. He said what was loaded into Blue Sky was only a portion of what was contained on a digital tape. He claimed to have that tape which contained all the files and he wanted to make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“For money. Apparently he was desperate to get out of the country. Blue Sky had an expense account and all the money was drawn out of that to pay for the tape.”

“How much money, do you know?”

She shook her head. Suddenly Scully heard a door open down the hall and she and Joan both looked in that direction. A young teenage boy hesitantly took a couple of steps down the hall and stopped at the entrance to the living room.

“Mom?”

“Go back in your room,” his mother answered anxiously. “Go on. Everything is all right.”

Scully saw the boy looking at her as if to verify that his mother was telling the truth and that she was in no danger from the stranger sitting on their sofa. Once the boy disappeared, Joan was even more upset. Her son was a reminder that her family’s lives were in danger from something they couldn’t even understand.

Scully touched her wrist again to bring her back to the story. “Joan, do you remember if Jacob told you the name of the man who wanted money for the tape?”

“His name was ... Kritchner, or Kryler, or ...”

“Krycek?”

Joan’s reaction corresponded with her answer. “Yes. I think that was it.”

“And was the deal made?”

“Yes. But then Jacob and Darren argued about what to do with the tape. Jacob had contacts and he wanted to expose the tape through them. Besides, they thought it would be difficult to decode them. Someone else would have to do that. Your partner’s name was mentioned. But they agreed it was too dangerous for either of them to be carrying it around, so they gave the tape to someone who had been associated with Blue Sky, who would get it to Fox Mulder.”

“Do you know who that person was?”
“No. Darren, though, didn’t trust anybody who worked with the government, so he convinced Jacob to make another tape from the files that were in the Blue Sky data banks. Then the files in Blue Sky were erased.”

It was beginning to make sense to Scully. She wondered how much of this Mulder knew, or what he might be able to add. Mulder’s reputation continued to amaze her. His contacts seemed to be in all areas of the globe — and, as he liked to believe, even beyond.

“What happened to the copy of the tape?”

“I don’t know whether Jacob kept it or Darren took it.”

“Do you know if a hard copy of the files was printed out?”

She thought about that a minute. Scully realized that all this must have been terribly confusing at the time, especially for someone who was getting second-hand information.

“Yes. There was a hard copy in case someone got hold of the tape. Sort of insurance, I guess.”

“And what happened to the hard copy?”

“It was given to someone in one of those UFO groups — Night Cap?” she questioned.

“NICAP,” Scully corrected.

“It was right after that when Jacob and Darren stopped talking about all this. And they told me not to ever mention anything to anyone again. My kids were never to repeat anything they heard either.”

Scully began to sort things out. From the information Joan gave her, apparently there was the original digital tape in Krycek’s possession, which he uploaded – in part – to the Blue Sky data base, a second tape made from those uploaded files in Blue Sky, and then a hard copy printed from the second tape.

Scully didn’t need to ask about Jacob’s murder. She doubted that Joan had any knowledge beyond what was on the police report. Scully knew that the military, or the government, or both, had taken Jacob and Darren Timmonds very seriously. Scully suspected it had something to do with their claim of abduction. If they had exposed the existence of the Top Secret documents, while backing up their story with some kind of physical proof of abduction <like a metal implant>, more people might have listened, thus making it harder to discredit them.

Scully hated to upset Joan further, but there was no way around asking the question that Scully needed an answer to. She used her words and tone very cautiously.

“Joan, there is something I would like to confirm. And unfortunately, there is only one way to do this. But it is vital to our investigation.”

“What is it?”

“Would you give me permission to examine Jacob’s body?”

The distraught woman looked confused. “Jacob’s been buried.”
Scully nodded sympathetically, as well as apologetically. “I know.”

The woman paled and her hand went to her mouth.

“I’m a doctor,” Scully explained. “I don’t need to perform an autopsy, I just need to ... look for something.”

Scully felt a chill go down her spine when she thought about the chip that had been placed behind her own neck. Duane Barry had three of them — one in his gums, sinus cavity, and in his abdomen. Scully knew all the places to look.

Tears ran again down Joan’s face and she looked on the verge of a breakdown. Scully took her hand and her words were as soothing as she could make them.

“You just need to sign a piece of paper. I’ll do it quickly and everything will be back as it was. I promise you that.”

Joan was shaking her head as if trying to deny that any of this was happening. Knowing that her son was in the other room, she was trying very hard to control herself, but the fear was overwhelming, and Scully knew that.

“Joan, the more we know, the more anybody knows, the less danger you’re in. You are not the only threat to them. There are others who know more than you do. I say this to you in all honesty. Believe me, if I felt that my coming here would jeopardize you or your sons in any way, I wouldn’t have come. There is a way to put an end to this, and what I’ve asked of you is just one step toward doing that.”

Now it was up to this terrified woman to decide what to do. Scully knew she could probably get a court order, but that would take time. She was anxious to get back to Washington, hopefully finding Mulder there waiting for her.

Joan briefly shut her eyes, and nodded her head. Scully squeezed her hand for reassurance. She stood up from the sofa and Joan looked up at her.

Scully forced a smile. “It will be all right. I’ll bring the paper by for you to sign in just a little while.”

“And what about Darren?” Joan asked, her voice choked with fear.

Scully had nothing to say. Joan broke down again and Scully knew she needed to leave her alone.

—X—X—

Chapter 17

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

Scully called the local FBI office in Charlotte. She knew it would be easier for them to handle the paperwork from the County Attorney’s Office and the Medical Examiner’s Office. She gave her identification number to an Agent Ribbons who knew nothing about the Timmonds’ murder. It appeared that the local police department was investigating the murder, even though it had been linked to the Washington murders, which were now
assigned to federal jurisdiction.

She gave Agent Ribbons her cell phone number and told him it was urgent that he expedite the exhumation. She hoped to be in Charlotte only two days. Ribbons told her of a motel close by so she drove over there to check in. She caught herself almost asking if they had free HBO, then remembered Mulder wasn’t with her.

—X—X—

SOMEBEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.
LATER THAT DAY

The initial reaction to the bomb that exploded over Sydney was disbelief. The reports that came out were that indeed some type of warhead had detonated in the skies above Sidney, but there was no confirmation that it contained any biological warhead.

Government officials, practiced in hiding the truth, were urging people not to panic. But within 24 hours, the truth was known.

A sickness began to grip the country, starting with a hemorrhagic fever that led to brain swelling, massive internal bleeding, respiratory failure, and death — all within 36 hours after being infected. Hospitals began to fill up, but their patients were in the morgue before their blood tests even came back.

There was widespread panic, but not before thousands of Australians, fearing their government might not be telling the truth about the bomb, had fled the country within hours after the bomb exploded. These people had become infected at the moment of detonation, carrying with them the potential for wiping out the human race.

Mulder read about the death rate sweeping the world. Hospital personnel were naturally among the first infected as patients were brought in. Within days there was no medical help for the victims. People were dying in their homes and in the streets. A wave of mass suicide occurred after those newly infected had witnessed the agony of death by the virus. Parents who feared they would pre-decease their children, thus leaving them alone and uncared for, performed infanticide. This real-life ‘On the Beach’ drama was sweeping the continents, and unlike the fallout of nuclear war, there was no place to hide from an invisible germ.

The U.S. now admittedly used their alien technology to try and find a cure, but it was a race against time, and the virus had too big a head start. Even if a cure was found, it could not be produced quick enough and in ample quantity to prevent the rapid spread of the virus. The situation seemed hopeless.

Mulder realized, as he looked through the cabinet, that the number of publications had diminished. Many of the foreign papers were missing. The thought came to him in horror — there’s no one to cover the stories, to run the presses. These countries are dead.

His hands were sweating and his head throbbed. Albert sat quietly, watching the morbid facts revealed in Mulder’s face. His mind was traveling at light speed; flashes of memory and puzzle pieces began to take shape. Mulder closed his eyes. He willed the blackness behind his lids to creep into his mind, to darken the visions there just for an instant so he could regain his equilibrium. He felt disassociated from reality.

Then Albert’s hand was on his arm, gently pulling his hand away from his face, and he
opened his eyes.

“Agent Mulder, you’re not through. Finish it.”

Albert’s voice was ominous. <How much worse could it get>, Mulder thought. He turned back to the cabinet, but stopped and leaned weakly against the table, feeling exhausted, both physically and mentally.

“Albert, I need to stop for awhile.”

“No. You’re almost finished. While your mind is numbed, you need to finish. Sit down, and I’ll bring the rest.”

Mulder nodded hypnotically, and sat back down as Albert retrieved the last of the publications from the cabinet. They were very sparse. The New York Times was missing so Mulder turned to the LA Times.

Within days, Europe had fallen silent. Satellite transmissions sent gruesome pictures of streets littered with bodies. In pastures and fields, every creature was dead.

Mulder shut his eyes and leaned back in the chair. He visualized the death sweeping the world, of innocent people struck down while in the midst of their everyday lives. He saw children on playgrounds, laughing as they played a game of tag, or sitting in school passing notes behind the teacher’s back as she wrote on the blackboard. He saw stadiums filled with cheering crowds; a cold beer passing through the hands of people down an aisle to the guy on the end in the Diamondback hat. In offices everywhere, businessmen shook hands with associates and clients. Women in grocery stores thumbed through the same magazines, as the cashier bagged their food. Money exchanged hands as routinely as taking a breath.

All casual contact with the people in our world now resulted in deadly consequences. There was no way to avoid the plague, unless you buried yourself underground, which, in short time, would be your fate anyway.

The only life presumed still existing would be in the sea. Ironic, Mulder thought, that life will once again have to crawl its way up on the shore, and hopefully by the time it has evolved into its present form of ‘intelligence’ the sun has not swallowed up the earth. Fortunately, for our planet, there may not be enough years left for man’s re-emergence.

Science was not going to win this battle. We had finally used our high-tech knowledge to eradicate the most self-righteous, destructive, violent, ecological predator on the planet — man. But maybe, through science, we could somehow salvage what was left.

In the first days of the infection in Europe, a contingency plan had been discussed if the virus appeared in the United States. No aircraft from anywhere in the world were allowed into the U.S. Hundreds of commercial airliners were shot down over the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Ships were sunk. Thousands of Americans, hoping to flee the plague by returning to the United States, were killed as they tried to re-enter the country.

But the panic-induced defense was futile. The perimeter set up to protect America had already been breached.
The first outbreak of the virus in the United States appeared in New York City, presumably the entry point of fleeing Australians and others. Panic naturally spread like fire through the city, but there was no way to escape. All mass transportation had been discontinued. Now the news across the ocean was not just a story in print, but it was real — here in America — and terror shrieked through the streets like a wounded banshee.

One victim would be spared. The only lady immune to this fate was one made of stone, who stood proudly at the edge of the harbor, a torch held above her head, watching those, who came to her as the symbol of freedom, fall at her feet.

The U.S. government knew that the disease would run rampant throughout the United States in a matter of days. Now, with time running out, and options along with it, the contingency plan had to be carried out in full measure because there was nothing to lose if it failed. What the world was now faced with was total annihilation. In less than a month, the human race would be eradicated from the planet unless a desperate strategy was attempted.

On January 13, 2000, in desperation and without warning, the United States exploded a nuclear bomb over New York City.

The hope was that a combination of radiation and heat would kill the virus, thus stopping the infection. If it worked, more launches were planned for other American states, as well as other countries, that might become infected. There was added justification in such an act — sudden vaporization seemed a more humane end than the day-long suffering caused by the virus.

It was well known what the global effects of nuclear winter would be if multiple nuclear blasts were unleashed upon the Earth. But that scenario would leave at least some survivors, though the quality of life would hardly be worth living through.

Mulder tried to grasp the magnitude of the decisions that had to be made, what kind of chaos and insanity dominated the minds of those making those decisions.

He suddenly remembered the movie, ‘Fail Safe’, which had impressed him as a teenager. In the classic drama, the only way for the U.S. President to convince the Soviet President that the missile attack on Moscow had been a mistake, thus averting ensuing attacks, was for the American President to balance out the tragedy by destroying New York City. What made his decision even more profoundly devastating was the fact that the President’s wife was in New York City at the time.

Mulder remembered the compassion he had felt for the fictitious President in having to choose his country over someone he loved. As a teenager he had tried to imagine whether he could have made such a decision. Now he had a better understanding of the grim choice — preservation of the masses outweighing the preservation of the one — no matter how important that one was.

He looked down at the cold, dark print of the newspaper. Before he even read what the outcome would be, he knew the truth.

The nuclear blast didn’t work. The virus raged on.

Albert watched as Mulder slammed the paper on the table and shoved his chair back against the wall. His jaw tense and his eyes red from fatigue, he went to the cabinet and
searched for dates beyond the 13th of January. There were sparse publications up through the 17th, then no more accounting. The cabinet was empty. There was no more history to write.

The only witnesses left to the holocaust, were beings who were not born on planet Earth.

—X—X—

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA
WOODLAND MOTEL
3:45 P.M.

Scully was using her laptop while she waited for the phone call from Agent Ribbons. She had hoped the paperwork could be cleared today so she could examine the body the following day. There was a sudden knock at the door. She peeked out the curtain and saw two young men, one tall and thin, the other tall and stocky, in suits and sunglasses standing near the window. She opened the door.

“Special Agent Dana Scully?” the thin man asked.

“Yes, I’m Agent Scully.”

Both men pulled out flat badges which held identification. Scully peered closely at both of them. Central Intelligence Agency.

<Great.> She knew what was coming before they opened their mouths.

“You’re opening up an investigation on the Jacob Timmonds murder?” Stocky CIA Man stated.

“It’s been open. We just took it over. Our Washington office has linked his murder with three others and we have been given federal jurisdiction on this case,” she said bluntly, knowing her credentials were as impressive to these men as Monopoly money.

“You’ve requested an exhumation of Jacob Timmonds’ body,” Thin CIA man commented.

“Yes. What’s your concern with this?” she asked forthright, refusing to be intimidated.

“This investigation now requires a Level 5 security clearance, Agent Scully,” Thin CIA Man advised.

<Where is Deep Throat now that I need him?>

Scully shook her head and gave each of the men a look of disgust. Their manner was typically indifferent.

“So I guess my request is denied,” she said coolly.

They both nodded. Scully wondered how anyone could get satisfaction simply out of standing in someone’s way. She doubted that the CIA was conducting any kind of investigation. It went even higher than that. They were merely the ‘wall of men’, as Mulder liked to describe them.

Stocky CIA Man handed Scully an envelope and she took it and looked inside. It was a plane
ticket.

“We’re sorry for the inconvenience so we’ve changed your airline reservation for you. It would not be a good idea to speak to anyone regarding this case — particularly Mrs. Elliott.”

His tone was threatening and the sunglasses were too dark for her to read anything in his or the other man’s eyes. She knew she had reached a dead end. Even Mulder knew when to quit with these guys.

The CIA men knew Agent Dana Scully by reputation, so they knew she could be persistent, but she was known to exercise common sense over stubborn impulse — a trait they did not believe her partner exhibited with equaled consistency. They could tell by her posture and facial expression that she would not challenge them.

Scully watched both men smile smugly and walk back to their car. Slowly, they pulled away, knowing she was watching them, but not giving her the satisfaction of even a second glance.

<Assholes!>

Scully packed her bag quickly, then checked out of the motel. If the desk clerk wondered about the brief check-in, he showed no indication it was unusual.

<You think you’ve heard all the excuses — how about if I told you the CIA is running me out of town!>

Scully knew that either she was being watched, or Joan Elliott’s house was being watched, or both, but it didn’t matter to her. The CIA wouldn’t be surprised to see her check out the Elliott house before she left town. Their ‘suggestion’ not to talk to Joan was practically an invitation. Scully knew what she’d find there.

Joan’s car was gone from the driveway. Scully walked up on the porch to look in the window, and saw that the door was slightly ajar. Cautiously, she pushed it open and called out Joan’s name. She listened, but only heard the tinkling of wind chimes in an open kitchen window. Drawing her gun just to be safe, Scully entered the house and proceeded to check out the rooms.

Everything seemed just as she’d seen it earlier this morning. A glass of watered-down soda was sitting on the coffee table. She entered the master bedroom. The room was neat, the bed made. On the dresser were several bottles of perfume and jars of body cream. Then she opened the closet door. Bare hangers dangled from the rod. There were a few pieces of clothing still on the hangers, and on the floor of the closet, but the rest of the clothing and shoes were gone.

Scully then checked the boys’ bedroom and also found the closet empty of clothes. Stacks of board games and boxes of baseball cards were left on the shelf.

She walked back into the living room and put her gun back in her holster. She stood in the silent room, imagining that not long ago this house had probably resounded with everyday life from the family that lived here. She pictured the mom and kids at the dinner table, sharing parts of their day, or sitting together on the sofa with popcorn, watching an evening movie.
Now Scully wondered where they’d gone, if they even had a place to go. These are the people who innocently get caught in this horrible web of cover-up and murder. Joan will most likely never understand what happened to her brothers or why, and she and her children will forever be looking over their shoulders, wondering if there’s a reason to keep running. How afraid do you have to be to leave all that you own behind?

Scully took a step toward the front door then noticed something. She smiled faintly to herself, realizing they got away with at least one prized possession: the Nintendo.

—X—X—

SOMEBEWHERE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN U.S.
8:35 P.M. M.S.T.

Mulder had been moved to another room, but he barely noticed the surroundings. It was more comfortable here, with leather sofas and wingback chairs, a Persian rug on the floor. Bookcases lined one wall and in the corner was a built-in bar. Small brass lamps sitting atop two matching tables cast subdued lighting in the room which was paneled floor to ceiling in cherry wood. Mulder was aware of people moving around him, shadows falling in and out of his line of vision, but he ignored them.

As he sat on the sofa, a crystal glass was set on the table in front of him filled with a golden liquid over ice. He looked up to see who set it down and Senator Matheson touched his shoulder.

“Drink it, Fox.”

“It’s going to take more than this,” Mulder said, distracted.

Matheson sat on the other end of the sofa, while Albert and the Well Manicured Man each sat in a chair facing him.

“Where’s Mr. X?” Mulder asked.

“You’ll talk with him again, but not here,” answered the Well Manicured Man.

“Was Deep Throat part of this?” Mulder asked, indicating with a vague wave of his arm.

The men looked at each other, careful in answering.

“Yes. Very much,” Matheson replied with regret at his absence.

The Well Manicured Man lit a cigarette. “Mr. Mulder, you must be putting pieces together, things you’ve learned over the years that remain a mystery.”

Mulder looked across the table at him, realizing there was something in particular he was referring to. But his mind was working like molasses.

“Do you recall a conversation we had in Klemper’s greenhouse shortly after your father died?” the Well Manicured Man asked.

That sparked Mulder’s memory and some of the things he had seen over the years began to make sense. As if a light suddenly came on, his head snapped toward the Well Manicured Man.
“This is why the cloning experiments are going on now, isn’t it? The DNA storage, preservation of ova and the fertility research, the hybrid testing.” Mulder’s mind was racing through thoughts. “My God, it’s in case this attempt to alter the world’s fate fails, that we can somehow preserve our human race!”

Mulder looked at each of their faces and saw the truth there. As the Well Manicured Man inhaled on the cigarette, the end glowed bright red. Mulder focused on that red dot until the Well Manicured Man answered him.

“The aliens were immune to the virus. That’s why the hybrids were created, so that if this Day of Judgment comes to pass, there would be a colony — at least some semblance of human creatures, to continue.”

<Colony.> How many times had he heard that word?

Mulder picked up the drink and took a long, slow swallow, realizing it was brandy, feeling the warmth travel through his cold body.

“Fox,” started Matheson, “we must move quickly. We know there is at least one hard copy of the tape out there. You have to get it back and we have to destroy it so this never happens again.”

“How do you propose I do that? My disappearances have undoubtedly caused suspicion and distrust within the network.”

Albert spoke up and his voice was soft, but authoritative. “Agent Mulder, they need to trust someone, just as you do. It will be their inclination to believe you so their link with the government is restored.”

“So I just give them a convincing lie.”

Mulder lowered his head. <They’ve won. The Fox succumbs to the hunt.> He knew Scully would be disappointed in him. Once again the need for his partner overcame him.

“I can’t deceive my partner anymore. When I show up back in Washington, no explanation except the truth will be good enough for her. We have never kept anything from each other, and we have never lied to each other. I can’t do this. Don’t you understand? I’m sorry, but I just don’t have the heart to convincingly lie to her.”

Mulder saw the three men looking at each other. Matheson looked away from the hard glare given him by the Well Manicured Man and his eyes fell on Mulder’s drink glass. For a long moment there was a heavy silence in the room and Mulder sensed their thoughts were in tandem, but no one wanted to speak.

Finally, Matheson looked up at the Well Manicured Man, who said to him curtly, “You must show him.”

Matheson looked to Albert, who nodded slowly. Reluctantly, Matheson reached over for his jacket lying on the back of the sofa, and he pulled a square piece of paper from the inside pocket. Slowly he unfolded it.

“Fox, this was copied from one of the Washington papers. I’ve obscured the exact day, but the month and year are there. We thought we’d probably have to show this to you. I’m
He handed the paper to Mulder, who saw that it was a Xerox copy of a newspaper article dated this month, April, 1998. The day had been blacked out. The article read:

FBI AGENT FOUND MURDERED

/// A Special Agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigations was found dead in her apartment Thursday morning. The body of Special Agent Dana Scully was discovered by her partner, Fox Mulder, after she failed to show up for work. Cause of death has not been released by the FBI, but it has been ruled a homicide. Miss Scully, previously an instructor in the Behavioral Sciences section of the FBI Academy at Quantico had been with the Bureau ...///

Mulder bolted from the sofa, crumpling the paper in his fist.

“NOOOO!” he screamed.

As if trying to obliterate what he just read, he covered his eyes with his fists, his body bending forward as if he’d been punched in the stomach.

“NO! NO!” he screamed again, his body still doubled over in anguish.

Matheson stood beside him, but felt helpless. No one moved until Mulder straightened up and faced Matheson, his eyes filled with a fear greater that Matheson had never seen on the young man’s face before. Mulder’s expression begged for further explanation.

Mr. X stepped closer to Mulder. “Your partner is wandering into dangerous territory, Agent Mulder. As we speak, she’s in Charlotte, North Carolina with Jacob Timmonds’ sister.”

Mulder, stunned beyond words, felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He fought the nausea that was so intense he instantly broke out into a cold sweat.

“Fox, if you don’t get your partner out of this, she’ll be killed,” Matheson said bluntly.

Mulder reacted violently to the threat. “Why! If you’re the ones directing this — !”

“No, you don’t understand ...” Matheson looked to the Well Manicured Man, who stepped closer to Mulder. His voice was direct, but not unkind.

“Agent Mulder, remember that there is a faction of this government whose purpose is to protect the MJ files, because that’s all they know about. We created the MJ files as a smoke screen for the real cover-up — the Merchandise. We have limited control over the actions of those trying to confiscate the MJ files.”

“But what difference would it make whether I actually told her? Wouldn’t they assume that I did!” Mulder said, panic rising in his voice.

Mulder looked between the three men. There was more they weren’t telling him. Matheson took the crumpled paper out of Mulder’s hand.

“Fox, the more you tell her, the more involved she becomes, and her actions ultimately lead to her death. She cannot be a part of this; you must let them assume that you have chosen to handle this alone.”
Mulder took a deep breath, willing control over his body and his thoughts again. He wondered if there had been enough changes already to alter Scully’s fate, along with the fate of the entire world. How could he know whether altering the course wasn’t actually going in the direction that fate had mapped out? Would he be re-writing the script, or acting out the pages fatefully written?

The Well Manicured Man took two steps toward Mulder and lit another cigarette. He took a long puff and blew the smoke toward the ceiling.

“Mr. Mulder, what you have learned here is what is referred to as the Merchandise. This is what is contained on that digital tape. It must never be realized. If those documents can be destroyed, it will be as if nothing ever happened. The continuum will be back on course and the future will play out peacefully. Years from now when you actually discover the truth about alien contact and expose it, there will be no threat of biological or nuclear weapons. That is your future mission, and that is what you must keep in mind.”

“Fox,” Matheson added, “you must help re-write the future so that your own destiny takes place. Get the original tape and the copy of the document back to us,” he said bluntly.

Mulder didn’t know whether these men were his friends, or his worst enemies. But he knew he had no choice but to believe them, and trust them.

He picked up his coat, putting it on slowly. Feeling the crushing weight of responsibility, he seemed to move in slow motion. He looked around the dimly lit room, the men’s shadows elongated on the walls as if the horrid beasts within them had been revealed by the light.

Mulder closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly weakened by the numbness that washed over his body. For one brief moment, he experienced the despair that comes when faced with an impossible task.

Then like an answer to his prayer, Scully’s face was before him. He saw that twinkle in her eyes, the familiar cock of her head and up-turned smile when she was about to challenge him on one of his theories. The sweet sound of her voice whispered in his ear, words from their past together.

Ditto.

With sudden determination upon realizing what he needed to do, he lifted his head and faced the men in the room. They saw the change in him, the strength they knew he possessed. His dark eyes revealed the driving force behind his passionate belief in discovering the truth.

Like a slap in the face, the purpose behind the sacrifices he had made in his life became clear. The path he had been on for so long led here, to this time and place. The world was in trouble, and he had a role to play in its final fate.

His resolution was to save millions of lives, but his passion was in saving one life — Dana Katherine Scully.

Mulder’s hazel eyes turned steely gray as he looked upon each of the men with indomitable intensity. His body was rigid, elusive to the masked fervor behind the calm.

“All right,” he said, with surprising authority in his voice, “I’m ready.”
Chapter 18

APARTMENT 35
11:40 P.M.
LATE THAT NIGHT

Agent Scully sat in her robe at her computer trying to concentrate on typing her observations of the Phoenix trip and events that occurred in Charlotte. The record would be for her files only. She wasn’t sure what any of this meant to the investigation, or even who to ask, except her partner.

Finally, unable to make sense of her own thoughts, she shut off the computer and went to bed. Crawling in between the sheets, lying there in the dark, her thoughts turned to her partner.

The rain and wind outside were usually soothing, but Scully was worried about where Mulder might be, whether he was out in the storm somewhere, or maybe in a place where it wasn’t even storming.

Even though he might be safe, she knew something was terribly wrong.

Upon her return to Washington she had been disappointed as well as concerned, that Mulder was still gone. For tonight anyway, she gave up trying to figure it all out and let her mind and body succumb to her exhaustion.

Sometime later, Scully started to awaken from the depths of sleep by a noise near her bed. Before she could react, a hand went over her mouth. Startled, her eyes flew open and she began to struggle but instantly heard a familiar voice at her ear.

“Scully, it’s me. It’s Mulder,” he reassured quickly.

She turned her head slightly and he was right in her face, kneeling by the side of her bed. He removed his hand and Scully sat up, fuming as she turned on the bedside lamp.

“What the hell are you doing!” she snapped, still recovering from her startled awakening.

“What! Have you ever heard of a doorbell!”

“I was afraid you’d shoot me.”

“I don’t shoot people who ring my doorbell, Mulder! Besides, once I heard your voice -”

“That’s what I’m saying,” he interrupted.

He stood to move out of the way as she flung the covers back angrily and brushed by him. He could see she was infuriated with him, but he also sensed her relief. He watched her put on a thick white robe over her purple satin pajamas. He was afraid his voice might reveal how he was feeling right now, seeing her in the flesh and blood after reading the article on her death. He had always turned to distraction to hide certain feelings, and now was no exception.
“That’s a good color on you, Scully.”

“Don’t start with that, Mulder. I will shoot you.”

Under his breath he mumbled, “Don’t I know.” Fortunately for him, she didn’t hear his remark.

He followed her into the kitchen where she turned on the dimmer switch over the table rather than the bright overhead light in the kitchen ceiling. Mulder sat down at the table, watching her fix a pot of coffee. His eyes dropped to his clasped hands as his mind began to free-fall into the maelstrom that his life had become. In the background of his thoughts, he heard the coffee beginning to perk, but he didn’t look up so he didn’t realize Scully was watching him.

She was alarmed at his appearance. He hadn’t shaved, his hair was unruly, as if wind-blown, his shirt partially untucked. But his eyes were the give-away to whatever he had experienced while he was missing. Not only was his face drained of color, but his movements seemed sluggish, as if it were an effort to move at all.

Mulder blinked back to reality when he heard the coffee mug being put down in front of him on the butcher-block table. He looked up at Scully as she sat across from him and he tried to smile. He took a sip of the strong, hot coffee. It tasted good. Scully was waiting patiently for him to collect his thoughts as he tried to prepare himself for what was coming.

Briefly, he shut his eyes, willing his mind to leave his body so he wouldn’t be here to face her. But it didn’t work. When he opened them again, she was still waiting for him to start talking.

For a long moment, they stared across the table at each other. Scully’s concern for her partner stopped short of sympathy. She could not tolerate his secrecy, nor his refusal to confide in her. Mulder understood that all too well, but he was at an absolute loss how to explain to her, without revealing the truth, why it had to be this way.

“Scully, I know this is not how we’re used to working together.”

“No, it’s not. And I won’t work like this,” she said icily.

All Mulder could think about on the way back to Washington was what he would say to Scully. He had to protect her, and no matter how many options he considered, there was only one sure way to do that. Now the moment had come and there was only one way to say it. Inwardly, Mulder braced himself.

“Then request a transfer.”

He could hardly stand the look on her face. It turned from shock, to anger in the blink of an eye. A minute ticked off as Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully tried to rely on their uncanny ability to read each other. Mulder didn’t even know what he was feeling, let alone his partner. And Scully considered that this was not a time for introspection or a wordy philosophical discussion; she should just beat the hell out of him. Mulder did read that on her face.

“Is that your way of not having to answer for anything,” Scully said as calmly as possible.
She knew Mulder expected outrage from her, so she would try to keep her cool, throw him off balance. She was determined that he would not manipulate her emotions as easily as he had manipulated the events of the last few days.

When Mulder met her eyes, she hardly recognized him. Something was frighteningly different about the way he looked at her.

“What I’m doing to you isn’t right.”

“Then change it. Who’s in control, Mulder? Don’t you realize this is what they’ve wanted all along, to split us up? We got close once, we’re getting close again.”

Mulder was slowly shaking his head. Scully found it increasingly difficult to control her temper.

“Don’t let them do this! We have never been able to have the advantage without working together!”

“Scully …”

“Dammit, Mulder! I don’t believe this is what you want!” she shouted in frustration.

“This thing is bigger than we are! No one’s in control! Don’t you see – THERE IS NO CONTROL!” he shouted back, his own true words ripping into him.

Scully switched direction on him. “Where’s the digital tape?”

Mulder rubbed his eyes. <Here we go again.>

He suddenly felt like he couldn’t go on with this deception any longer. He was completely drained both physically and emotionally, and he still had a long way to go before this was finished.

Then Scully caught him off guard. “I met with your Colonel Hodson.”

He only sat there in silence, knowing this was coming but unable to react to it.

Scully said bitterly, “Thanks for filling me in.”

Mulder felt like he was grasping a thick rope that was his lifeline to safety. But some unseen force was pulling against him and he was losing his grip. A part of him wanted to let go, take his chances, and see where he ended up. But that wasn’t his nature. He had always thrived on a challenge, running eagerly in the direction of the unknown. Sometimes the hardest part was trying to figure out whether this was the time to trust your instincts, or whether you were just looking for the easy way out.

He heard a voice somewhere in the distance and blinked.

“Mulder …”

Mulder opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He would rather remain mute than resort to lying again. But he knew Scully wasn’t finished with him yet.

“I also went to see Jacob Timmonds’ sister in Charlotte. But then, somehow, I think you
know that,” she stated bitterly.

Scully looked for a reaction from him but his face was stone. He knew that a confrontation with his partner would only lead to more lies and confusion.

Mulder stood silently, walked back into the living room and picked up his coat from the back of the sofa. That angered Scully even more. Once again he planned to walk out the door without giving her any explanation. What Scully was feeling was worse than hostile; she felt estranged, alienated. Now that was the perfect word to describe it.

Angrily she shoved her chair back and confronted him. “You’re not even interested! If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you were on drugs or possessed by one of your little green men who’s determined to drive us both insane!” Scully scoffed and shook her head. “I’m not believing this.”

He turned to look at her and she was absolutely bewildered. In his mind, Mulder saw the headlines again which predicted her death and it restored his purpose. He had to remind himself that what he was doing was critical to Scully’s survival. He would have to fix things later.

She saw his eyes narrow, which indicated his resolve to maintain this posture.

“Do you even know why Darren Timmonds was murdered? Do you!” she asked sharply.

Mulder looked at her in shock. He realized the answer was no. He had accepted Mr. X’s horrible deed as somehow justified without even questioning why. He wanted to have the answers, but he couldn’t go down this path with her.

“Scully, I have to go,” he said wearily.

She ignored his disregard to hear the truth and told him anyway. “Because Darren and Jacob Timmonds are the ones who copied the digital tape and then transferred that document to NICAP.”

Despite his attempt to appear unaffected by the information, Scully saw his reaction to it. She knew he was hearing this for the first time.

“He was going to blow the whistle on the whole thing if you refused to help him. That’s why he came to you.”

Mulder was silent. His partner did good work, and he was proud of her. At any other time he would have told her so. Mulder had worked hard to bring Scully into his world, to challenge her belief in science with his theories. He knew her respect for him had helped open her mind to possibilities she never imagined. And now, in trying to help him, she was putting her life in jeopardy.

“I went to Charlotte to follow a lead, Mulder! That’s when the Men in Black showed up and pulled the plug — exercised some Level 5 security clearance bullshit! Do you know anything about that?”

“No,” he answered, almost in a whisper. He knew who blocked the way, but not exactly why. Right now he didn’t care.
Scully was desperately trying to reach him. She switched gears again. “Why haven’t you done anything with the tape? After all this time, you keep it hidden.”

Mulder was shaking his head, not wanting to answer any more questions, but Scully was persistent because she was scared.

“Where do you go when you disappear? Who have you been meeting with?”

“Scully, stop it, please.”

She went on, ignoring his plea. “Mulder, word on the street is that you can’t be trusted anymore. Your actions have been inconsistent, secretive and they’re afraid somebody’s got something on you. Do you hear what I’m saying — that you’ve sold out!”

There was no mistaking his shock and devastation. Scully didn’t let up. “So why did you come here tonight? Just to tell me we’re through? That you want to do this alone?” she snapped, hurting and confused.

“We’re not through,” he answered desperately. “Just for now …”

Mulder was so tired he could hardly talk. “You asked why I came here. I came because I needed to see you,” he said softly.

He put on his coat and walked over to the window. The rain had stopped, the clouds were dispersing and the moon floated like a silver ball on a black current.

Scully walked over and stood next to him. Her voice was strained, sad. “I feel like I don’t know you anymore.”

<That makes two of us.>

She watched him stare silently through the wooden blinds as if he were not even in the same room with her. Finally, when he spoke, his voice was hushed.

“We’re not who we are. Remember that, Scully?” Mulder asked with a wry smile as he opened the blinds wider to get a better look at the moon. “Did you ever watch the movie, ‘The Wolfman,’ — the original with Lon Chaney? He’s standing at the window, staring into the night, trying to understand what he’s become. His soliloquy is one of desperation: ‘Although a man be pure at heart and say his prayers at night, he may be a beast when the wolfs bane blooms, and the moon is full and bright.’”

Mulder turned to Scully to see her reaction, but she didn’t give him one.

“What he’s really trying to say is that no matter how hard we try to be good, there are forces that can turn us against ourselves,” Mulder finished quietly.

Scully didn’t know how to respond as she watched Mulder again look out the window. She saw him frown and squint.

He noticed a black car parked across the street. He knew it hadn’t been there when he arrived at Scully’s apartment. He reasoned that they must be following him, and if so, then those were the good guys. But no sooner did he think that when his instincts told him differently. If they had been following him, why was their car parked facing the opposite
direction from his car?

He peered closer at the car. From the reflection of the streetlight on the glass, he could tell that the passenger’s window was being rolled down and a glint of something flashed in the open space.

Suddenly training and experience kicked in. Instantly, Mulder threw his arms around Scully and dove with her to the floor. A shot rang out and a lamp on the other side of the room shattered. Mulder, who was on top of Scully on the floor, pulled his gun.

“Are you all right?” he asked, seeing that she was dazed from hitting the floor so hard.

“Yeah. I think so,” she said, breathless.

Mulder started to crawl across the floor when a second shot was fired, coming through the window and striking the wall in almost exactly the same place. Instinctively he again covered Scully’s body with his own.

“Stay down, Scully!” he shouted as he crawled to the back door of the apartment.

He flung the door open, exiting into an alley and ran around to the front of the building. He could hear tires squealing and he ran faster. He saw the car accelerating and heard the tires spinning on the slick street. Frantically digging in his pocket for his keys as he ran, he found them and unlocked his car.

By the time he had started the car, thrown it into gear, made a quick U-turn and floored the accelerator, the black car was turning left at the end of the street. Mulder sped up, knowing that the street was a dead end in that direction with no outlets. He was hoping to cut them off as they came back the other way.

As Mulder reached the corner, he looked down the street and saw that the other car had not turned around yet. Mulder pulled his car into the middle of the intersection, put it in park and jumped out. He could see the taillights of the other car approaching the dead end, apparently looking for an outlet.

Suddenly, Mulder saw the car’s brake lights come on, the back of the car lurched forward as the brakes locked, and the car lost control, sliding sideways. When the back of the car struck a parked van, it flipped, continuing to slide on its roof until it violently struck a light pole and came to rest upside down.

Mulder quickly got back in his car but before he could start down the street another car suddenly pulled out from the curb, stopping in front of him and cutting him off.

<WHAT THE HELL!>

Impulsively he slid across the seat, exiting through the passenger door where he pointed his gun over the roof of his car toward the driver of the other car.

“Exit your car with your hands up!” Mulder ordered.

The driver’s door of the other car was opening before he even finished the sentence and the driver got out. Immediately he recognized the familiar form.
Mr. X.

Mulder relaxed, lowering his gun, but was confused. Mr. X approached him quickly.

“Get in your car and drive off! NOW Agent Mulder!”

“I thought you were protecting us!”

“I’ll contact you later! Go!”

Mulder was furious and terrified, realizing that there might be nothing he could do to change the fate of his partner, but he was going to do everything in his power to try.

He slammed his fist on the hood of the car. “No!” he screamed. “You promised to protect my partner! If anything happens to her, I’m finished! Done! DO YOU HEAR ME!”

“The consequences are much bigger than one life, Agent Mulder, and you know that!”

“I DON’T FUCKING CARE!” he screamed, shaking with rage. “You do your job or EVERYBODY pays the price!”

Mr. X doubted that Mulder would carry through with his threat. He was acting out of fear and impulse right now, but split second decisions could alter the course of events. Mr. X wasn’t prepared to gamble with Mulder’s emotions right now.

Mulder looked down the street and saw men dragging bodies out of the flipped car. Sirens could be heard approaching from a distance. His stance challenged the black man, who finally acquiesced.

“All right!” Mr. X said impatiently. “We’ll do all we can to protect your partner!”

Blue and red lights could be seen reflecting off the buildings as the emergency vehicles approached.

“Go, Agent Mulder!”

Mulder wasted no time getting back in his car and screeching away just as curious onlookers began coming out of their apartments.

When Mulder pulled up in front of Scully’s house again, he saw she had dressed and was rushing out the front door with her gun. He met her on the sidewalk, taking her arm to stop her, but she resisted.

“Mulder, what happened?”

<Oh fuck. Now what do I tell her?>

He couldn’t tell her they got away because she would hear about the crash the next morning and never believe it was unrelated.

“Mulder, those police sirens stopped just down the street! Did they get the shooter?”

“Scully, let’s just go back in the house,” he said, putting his gun back in the holster.
She looked at him incredulously, like he had just asked her if she wanted to dance.

“Mulder, we were just shot at! I want to know what’s going on!” she demanded.

There was determination in her eyes but she saw him standing firm.

“Fine!” she snapped. “Then just stand there! I’m going to check it out!”

Scully started to walk past him toward the street but Mulder grasped her arm with one hand and gripped the front of her open coat with the other hand, holding her tightly. Surprised, she glanced down at his hand clutching her by the coat. She was ready to unleash her fury upon him when he began shaking his head.

His voice was barely above a whisper. “I can’t let you go. I can’t,” he said, apologetically.

Scully heard an inflection in his voice she had never heard before. It was as if he had no choice in either of their actions. Mulder hated the way she was looking at him. He made up his mind then and there that this had gone far enough. She deserved more than this — she deserved to know the whole truth, but that was out of the question. He decided he would have to tell her something or he would never be able to repair the damage.

“I don’t know who those men were, Scully, but they’ve been taken care of,” he said, deciding on a partial truth.

“What do you mean?”

Mulder let go of her coat and raised his arm, palm up, toward her apartment building.

“Please,” he said.

She stood in front of him a long time, trying desperately to find some trace of the Fox Mulder she had come to know so well over the years. But this man standing in front of her paled in comparison to the partner she knew. And that thought terrified her.

Scully didn’t even want to remotely consider what had happened to make her partner this afraid.

—X—X—

Chapter 19

DANA SCULLY’S APARTMENT

Scully finally relented but not by choice. When they got in the house, Mulder went to the window and inspected the two clean bullet holes through the glass. As Scully was picking up the pieces of the broken lamp, Mulder picked up his coffee cup from the table and went into the kitchen where he poured out the cold coffee and poured himself another hot cup. He took several swallows, watching Scully walk into the kitchen and put the broken pieces into the garbage.

His adrenalin levels had helped clear his head a little and given him some temporary energy to deal with his partner. He took Scully by the hand and pulled her over closer to him. She didn’t resist.
Mulder’s conscience was screaming at him and inwardly he shuddered with loathing and self-contempt. But there were no choices left to him. He had to lie once again to his partner.

“Listen to me carefully. I’m going to arrange to hand over the tape. I thought if we laid low for a while it would be safe to transfer it. But I think time is running out.”

Surprised, Scully frowned. “Mulder, don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“The copy of the files has turned up. Someone’s trying to black market it.”

Mulder felt as if someone were squeezing his heart. Scully saw the color drain from his face. He turned to set his coffee cup on the counter and his hand was so unsteady that he had to grab the cup before it clattered to the floor.

He had been told that there was a possibility that the digital tape he possessed was a copy and Krycek still had the original. Now he wondered how many copies there were, since he had one, someone in the anarchist network had one, and Krycek might still have the original.

The terrifying thought went through his mind that they could not change fate, and this was an indication that they were playing a game they had already forfeited.

He realized Scully had asked him a question, but he wasn’t listening.

“Mulder? I said why would that be so bad? It takes the pressure off of us. If it’s known that there is another document out there, then we’re not the only threat. This time, some way or another, the truth is going to come out. Isn’t that what you want?” she asked, confused by his reaction.

Mulder’s heart was pounding as thoughts raced through his mind more quickly than he could make sense of them. He felt like he could snap at any minute.

When he had left the vault, he was overwhelmed with responsibility, but his most constant thought had been to keep his partner safe — that seemed to be the only thing he could immediately control. Now, with the threat of the tape being exposed and all the events that would follow, he found himself considering revealing portions of what he knew to Scully so she could help him retrieve whatever copies of the tape were out there.

Hours ago he had sworn to himself that at all cost, he would protect his partner. But now things were different.

So they were right, Mulder thought; when the fate of the world is at stake, individual lives seem inconsequential — even the life of someone you care most about in the whole world.

Mulder knew that if he enlisted Scully’s help, he might be signing her death warrant. The very idea that he would consider jeopardizing her life, along with the exhausted state he was already in, made him almost faint.

Scully grabbed him as he swayed unsteadily. She was guiding him to a chair where he sat, still trying to sort out what he would do. He watched her, as if in a heavy fog, as she poured
him a glass of water and put it in his hand. She ordered him to drink it and he did, closing his eyes as if the cool water could cool his fevered mind.

He looked into Scully’s eyes, <what must she be thinking>, and knew what he had to do. He took another drink of water then took a deep breath.

<God, don’t let my actions be part of that fateful script.> Scully sat across from him and he saw that she was concerned, but completely baffled.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, almost dreading his answer. “Mulder, you’re scaring me.”

Her trembling voice sliced through him like a sword. Almost frantically he grabbed both her hands, squeezing her fingers.

“Scully, I have to tell you something. But first I have to talk to someone. I’m not trying to stall, I’m trying to do the right thing, and I’m so ...” his expression changed from controlled shock to despair. “... I don’t know what the right thing is. I just need to make a phone call. I’ll be right back.”

Scully didn’t know what to think anymore, but she wanted to believe him. He seemed fragile right now, as if she pushed too hard he would crack into pieces. Mulder read everything she was thinking in her face. Through his pleading eyes and the touch of his hands, he offered an apology. She was satisfied to get any answers at all, so she sat quietly at the table as he backed away from her and went out the door.

Mulder went down to his car, got in and locked the door. He sat there a minute, watching the raindrops run in rivulets down the window. He glanced down the street at the homes and apartment buildings where people slept peacefully behind the dark windows, oblivious to all the horrible things that can go wrong during the night. He dialed a number on his cell phone and waited nervously as it rang. Then it was answered.

“Hello?”

“Senator Matheson, it’s Fox Mulder.”

Matheson could hear the strain in his voice. “Fox, what’s wrong?”

Mulder began to relate what Scully had told him about the copy. He also told him that those in the underground were questioning his loyalty and commitment to their cause. Matheson was equally disturbed by all that Mulder said.

“Sir, Scully tells me there’s even word that I’ve sold out,” he said with ironic disgust. “So how do you propose I redeem myself enough for anyone to trust handing over the hard copy to me?”

“Fox, the plan is not for you to give us the cassette tape, but to give them the tape. Giving the underground network the digital tape will assure their trust in you. Then you can convince them that what was loaded into the Blue Sky data base was a hoax, counterfeit, meant to cloud the truth about which files are genuine.”

“There are rumors that there is more than one tape, possibly several documents. Do you know what the truth is?”
“Fox, you have the original tape, the only one that contains the Merchandise.”

“How do you know that for certain?”

Mulder sensed the tension through the phone line. Whatever Matheson was about to tell him it wasn’t easy for him.

“After Jacob Timmonds was murdered, his house was searched. We had information that he had made a copy of the digital tape, and in fact we found it. The hard copy that is out there came not from the original tape, which you have, but from the tape copy in Timmonds’ home. We knew the original tape was making its way to you.”

Matheson gave Mulder a minute to comprehend what he had told him. Then his voice became urgent. “Fox, you’ve got to get that hard copy back. Of course, it doesn’t contain the Merchandise, but what it does contain is enough to put Armageddon on the calendar.”

“Easier said than done. These anarchists trust no one. That’s how they survive.”

“Fox, you are the link. You must regain control and re-establish trust within the underground network. Otherwise, your position in the network is compromised, you’re discredited and your communication lines shut down. That cannot happen.”

Mulder steadied his voice. “You didn’t say what happens after I turn over the digital tape. Obviously it doesn’t end there.”

Silence on the other end of the line persisted a long time. Mulder waited patiently, but silence was the only answer Matheson would give.

One thing Mulder had painfully learned the last few days was when to stop asking questions. But he had another purpose for seeking Matheson’s advice. He was faced with a dilemma more desperate than he had ever encountered.

“Sir, I went to Agent Scully tonight and suggested she transfer to another department, to get away from me and all of this. I did it so she would be safe. Now, here I am getting ready to ask for her help. In spite of all that I saw, the horror of reading of her death ...” he said, his voice cracking, “I bring her right into the thick of it, maybe down the very path that will take her away from me forever. What do I do, sir?” he asked despairingly.

“Fox, I don’t know what the outcome will be by involving your partner, but I don’t think she can help you. Now maybe you begin to understand how difficult it is to alter fate. You are attacked from every direction in an attempt to keep our destiny on course.”

“Maybe it really is our destiny, sir.”

“If that were true, then why did these beings come to warn us, to help us? We’ve been given another chance. There must be a reason for it.”

Mulder had no answer. He decided not to mention Scully’s conversation with Hodson. Matheson and the others had known of her trip to North Carolina, which meant she was being followed. So they probably knew everything else. Knowing they were keeping an eye on his partner made Mulder feel a little more secure. He thought he should keep it at that.

Matheson listened to him sigh deeply, the weight of the world – literally — on his shoulders.
“What do you want to tell her, Fox?”

<Everything. What a bastard I am.>

“As about the sub file. Only that it exists.”

“All right, but you must convince her that you need to work alone on this. Do whatever it takes. And do not, under any circumstances, let her go with you to deliver the tape. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Yes.”

“Be very careful. It’s hard to know who to trust right now. And keep in touch.”

“I will, sir. Bye.”

As the connection with Matheson ended, once again Mulder was consumed by the feeling of isolation. Fatigue exacerbated his loss of self-confidence. He needed help, but there was only one person he could safely ask.

<Dad, if you’re near, I’m in trouble. Stay close for a while.>

Mulder went back to Scully’s apartment. She watched him remove his coat, laying it on the chair then he sat next to her on the sofa. He noticed she had lit a white candle on the coffee table and his eyes were drawn to the flickering flame.

Once again, Mulder reminded himself what would happen if the contents of the tape were revealed now. He had to prevent that from happening — at all costs.

He didn’t like her silence and the wariness in her expression when she looked at him. It was time for some explanations. He swallowed hard and looked her in the eye.

“Everyone seems to be concerned about why I’ve had the tape for so long and done nothing with it.” He shut his eyes briefly, gathering the courage to go on, ignoring the nausea that suddenly gripped him.

“Scully, what only a handful of people know is that there is a second coded sub file on the tape. I didn’t want the tape handed over until that second code is broken,” he lied.

“A sub-file containing what?”

“Government documents even more secret than the MJ files.”

“How did you find out about that?”

“One of my sources. Anyway, the copy that is out there is a fake because although the data within the MJ files can be transferred, the sub-file cannot. I have the original. And that’s what we really want to decipher.”

“What could be on there, Mulder?”

He shook his head, looking down to prevent her from seeing the lies. Mulder steadied himself and faced his partner. Affectionately, he touched the gold cross at her throat.
“Scully, there are too many players in this right now. I’ve got to discredit the copy that’s out there. If top-secret files begin appearing from different sources, none of them will be believed. The truth will be buried beneath false documents. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Are you repeating yourself?” she asked sharply. “You want me to transfer out of the X-Files so you can work alone?”

Mulder saw the anxiety in her eyes. The truth would fix that, he thought, but then he blinked and saw again the headlines of the newspaper article.

“No. I didn’t mean that. But this one time, Scully, I need to act alone. I need you to show those who question my intentions that you support and you trust in me, by backing off. I think that’s the message that has to go to the person receiving the tape from me. Remember how paranoid these guys are, and there are a lot of stories out there right now. If there’s a question of trusting me, whom they’ve dealt with for a long time, then what must they think about you? Do you see now what I’m saying?”

Mulder tried to hide his tension. He saw Scully weighing the facts, trying to find the truth in his eyes. He knew as well as she did that his excuse was weak. She could punch a million holes in it, but she just didn’t have the energy.

“If that’s the way you want it, Mulder,” she said, resigned.

“Scully, it’s not the way I want it. Believe me.”

Scully’s silence had Mulder hoping she would concede to his best judgment. But her chilling words stung him.

“Well, maybe you should have asked me to back off before my sister took a bullet for me. Then she might still be here,” she said coldly.

Mulder felt the stab like a knife slashing across his soul. She had every right to attack him. Mulder had never felt so alone. He had been content working alone on the X-Files before Scully was assigned to him, but now he knew what he had been missing during that time. She was a part of his life now and he never wanted to change that.

He watched hot wax drip slowly down the side of the candle, hardening on the bottom of the crystal coaster. Slowly, he stood up from the sofa.

“I’m going to make contact to expose the tape. Those bastards deserve it. Then maybe this will end once and for all.”

Mulder thought, so this is what I’ve become — the Wolfman.

Scully still said nothing, nor did she rise from the sofa when he put his coat on. She was distant from him, confused and disappointed, but he couldn’t help that. The hardest part was that when this was over, he still could never fully explain why he did the things he had done.

“Scully, I’ll call you later. Tomorrow. Okay?”

<PLEASE SAY SOMETHING!> he wanted to scream.
She just continued to look at him with that blank stare. Mulder opened the front door, locked it, and slowly closed it, never looking back at his partner.

—X—X—

APRIL 21st
7:40 A.M.

Mulder contacted the Lone Gunmen the next morning and told them to arrange a meeting where he could turn over the digital tape in exchange for the hard copy. He wanted it made clear that by relinquishing the tape, there would be no doubt about what his purpose was and who his loyalty was with. He added that he would still use his sources to decode the documents, if that’s what they wanted. He also told them about the falsity of any copy of the MJ documents except his.

He made no mention of the sub-files, but strongly made the point that if false documents were put on the network, their whole underground medium would be disreputed and may never recover. By releasing the wrong information, the network would be helping the government achieve its purpose — confusion. Plus, Mulder warned, if his instructions weren’t followed, he could personally damage the integrity of their organization and plant the seeds of doubt until the whole thing collapsed into oblivion.

Mulder needed the Gunmen to carry his message. He knew they had a very good reputation within the organization and if they backed Mulder, it could be risky for anyone to oppose them. The backbone of their network was that they worked together and believed in the same things. Dissension within the ranks would mean disaster.

They got the message loud and clear. There was relief on their part that Mulder was so adamant about getting the true files on the network. They felt guilty about ever having a fleeting doubt about his purpose. So they assured him that they would make contact and the deal could be made tonight.

F.B.I. HEADQUARTERS
9:30 A.M.

Mulder was at his desk reading a report, trying to keep his mind occupied. He had slipped into his office quietly, not wanting to talk with anyone. Anxiously he waited for the phone call setting the meeting.

His door opened and Director Skinner came in. He glanced up at Mulder, saw he was alone, and then deliberately closed the door behind him. Mulder said nothing as he watched Skinner walk across the room and sit on the edge of the desk facing him. It was apparent right away that something was wrong, but Mulder waited patiently for Skinner to speak.

“Agent Mulder, I’ve got some disturbing news.”

Mulder saw Skinner look down at his hands.

<After what I’ve seen, sir, I highly doubt it.>

“Am I in someone’s parking space?” Mulder asked.

Skinner ignored his attempt at humor. “This morning Agent Scully handed in a transfer
request. She wants to go back to Quantico.”

Mulder hoped his expression didn’t reveal his cardiac rhythms. He suddenly felt lightheaded and queasy, but Skinner didn’t detect the slightest twitch.

“Did you hear what I said?” Skinner asked, irritated at Mulder’s composure.

“Yes. I don’t know what to say. If she feels this is what she has to do —”

“That’s fucking bullshit, Mulder, and you know it! Something’s going on here, something you’re not telling me!”

Mulder leaned back in his chair. Skinner, watching him closely, now saw something different in Mulder’s face. Maybe he had judged him too quickly because there was definitely a look of depression in his eyes. His whole demeanor lacked the spark that defined Fox Mulder.

Skinner lowered his voice. “Let me tell you something, Agent Mulder. And if you ever repeat this, I’ll deny it. You and your partner are about the best thing that ever happened to this Bureau. Your work has made this agency one of the strongest in the federal government, because you have awakened the watchdogs. And I know what it’s done to both of you. I’ve seen this digital tape destroy lives. Don’t let it destroy you and Scully. If you do, they’ve won.”

Skinner stood and started across the room, stopping to look once again at the poster on the wall. He turned to face Mulder again.

“Fox, the truth may be out there, but the key to finding it is right here in this room.”

Mulder’s eye contact with Skinner communicated much more than could be said with words. As Mulder watched the Assistant Director walk out, a thread of hope ran through him. Skinner was a powerful ally and Mulder would need all the help he could get to reason with his partner when this was over with.

Mulder sighed, opened his desk drawer and took out the aspirin bottle.

—X—X—

4:20 P.M.
AGENT MULDER’S APARTMENT

Mulder received a phone call from Byers informing him that their contact man agreed to meet Mulder at the designated place at 9:00 that night. The man would bring with him the copy of the false MJ files, in exchange for the cassette in Mulder’s possession.

<Then it will be over and I can reassemble my shattered life. Or maybe I’ll look into that parcel of land in Africa.>

Earlier that day, as he looked at the objects in his office which symbolized his belief in his work, Mulder wondered if they would ever have the same meaning for him again. How could they? As Mulder thought about that, he felt a change overtake him. How could he ever be the same man he was a week ago? Maybe that’s what Scully saw and why she had to leave.
There was a knock on Mulder’s door, someone he was expecting, and he immediately opened it.

“Senator Matheson, thank you for coming.”

Matheson entered quickly. “This is risky, Fox.”

“I know. But ... please, sit down.”

Matheson sat on the couch and Mulder took the chair across from him. Matheson was nervous, but tried to remain calm for Mulder’s sake because the young man was obviously struggling with everything he had learned in the last few days.

“I need to know what’s going to happen tonight. You know the time and place, so I assume someone will be watching us.”

Matheson nodded slowly.

“I just take the documents, hand over the tape, and that’s it?” Mulder asked.

“For your part. We’ll take it from there.”

Mulder knew his question hadn’t been answered. He didn’t really expect that Matheson would give him much information.

“I don’t want anyone else hurt. I won’t lead this guy into a trap.”

“Fox, don’t concern yourself with all the details. It has been carefully planned out. There are two objectives here — for us to retrieve the hard copy from the underground and the cassette from you so that everything is back in our hands, and to restore your position of trust in the network so that your work can continue.”

Matheson heard Mulder snicker and smile ruefully. “So that my work can continue? How? How do I do that!” he asked disheartedly.

Mulder stood, walking to the window where hours ago he had removed the tape that Scully placed there for help. Matheson saw his frustration and was ready to listen.

“My work is fueled by my belief, my passion for seeking the truth. Now I know the truth.”

“Fox, the work must go on as if nothing’s changed.”

“But it has changed! I’ve changed! Are you saying I must continue to pursue leads that I pretend to investigate. And then if I do uncover evidence, I withhold it because it’s not time for the world to know what I know? Do I chase my tail in circles, sir, and drag my innocent partner along with me, all the while proclaiming a government cover-up, until the time is right!” Mulder’s voice softened. “There’s no passion in that, sir. I have then become one of them, one of you. A deceiver, a perpetrator of lies. As someone once said to me, I have become my father.”

<Sorry, Dad.>

Mulder made too much sense. Matheson could see Mulder’s conflicting emotions fighting for dominance. He knew that the mission could not succeed without Fox Mulder. But right now,
the Fox Mulder he knew was locked inside this shell, and the impersonator was Fox Mulder in physical form only – not so different from a clone.

Matheson watched as his young friend sank into the chair at the desk and gaze out the window for an instant until he buried his head in his hands. He understood Mulder’s suffering. <We’ve destroyed his work, taken his partner away, and given him a terrible burden to live with>, Matheson thought. <We’ve led him too far into the forest and the birds have eaten the breadcrumbs. He thinks he’s hopelessly lost.>

Matheson stood and slowly approached Mulder, but didn’t dare touch him because he wasn’t sure how close to the surface Mulder’s hostility was.

“Fox, we’ll help you. Just get through tonight ... trust me.”

That caused Mulder to look up with anguished eyes and an expression of incredulity. Matheson knew what had to be done, especially considering the night wasn’t over, and Mulder still had one more ordeal to get through.

—X—X—

Chapter 20

BOTANIC GARDEN
8:50 P.M.

The sky was clear and crisp. Mulder sat on a bench and once again recalled the first time he had met Kenneth Soona here four years ago — the first time he laid eyes on the digital tape. He felt it now in his jacket pocket, a cold piece of metal that contained information dangerous enough to change the fate of the world. Dangerous to kill for, again and again.

As he looked up at the bright stars, he wondered about a world being kept safe through lies and murder. Maybe a holocaust was in order after all. Mulder smiled wryly to himself.

<That’s one way to get rid of the IRS.>

Mulder felt resigned to repeat history here in the Botanic Garden, and that’s why he chose to meet here. But also, because he had hidden the digital tape here the night he left Scully at the motel. Too bad to have such memories of so beautiful a place.

There was movement on the walkway beyond the rose bushes and Mulder stood up. A young man was approaching him, his coat flapping in the breeze. Under the lamplight Mulder could see that he was in his 20’s, tall like Soona, but with blonde curly hair. He was wearing a NICAP hat and for one hopeful moment when the reality of the past escaped him, Mulder thought he was looking at Max Fenig. Then he remembered Max was dead.

The man stopped in front of Mulder, looking around nervously. He felt a little intimidated standing before the man he had heard so much about – a legend almost.

“Agent Mulder,” he greeted, his eyes still scanning the garden.

Mulder stood rigid, his hands in his pockets. “You have the copy?”

“Yes. This is all we know about, but the word is out about any fakes, so the true document
will be safe.”

“Good.”

The young man pulled a manila envelope from his coat and handed it to Mulder.

<God, this is so familiar!> Mulder quickly checked the contents, finding the hard copy. He stuck his hand in his pocket, feeling the tape, and hesitated as flashes of past history flooded his mind.

He thought briefly about the murders that brought him into this case in the first place, back to the hell he barely escaped from once before. Then he thought about his father and Scully’s sister and wondered if they would forgive him for what he was about to do.

The young man was waiting patiently, though a bit perplexed at Mulder’s hesitation.

“This is what we’ve been waiting for, Agent Mulder. This is a good thing you’re doing. It’s encouraging to know there’s one person in the federal government we can trust,” he said with a smile.

Mulder felt sick. He pulled the tape from his pocket and, as if time had slowed down, saw his own arm reaching out to place the digital tape in the young man’s eager hand.

The scent of the flowers was suddenly strong; the chill wind brushed his cheek …

The man’s fingers closed around the tape and he smiled at Mulder.

A bird cooed softly in one of the trees as the leaves rustled softly …

The young man put the tape into the deep pocket of his coat and turned to walk away.

Mulder suddenly felt the hairs stand up on the back of his head.

<Don’t walk, run!>

That’s when Mulder heard the sound — a sound he heard for the second time since this whole nightmare began — the sickening sputter of a silencer. Mulder watched in shock as the young man’s head exploded in blood and he fell instantly to the ground.

<OH NO, NOT AGAIN! THIS ISN’T HAPPENING!>

Before Mulder could react with anything more than horror, a figure stepped from the bushes. Mulder was reaching for his gun when he heard his name and saw a gun pointed his direction.

“Stop right there, Agent Mulder.” the man’s voice said urgently.

The figure, unrecognizable in the shadows, stepped into the light and Mulder’s fear turned to outrage.

“X! Why! Why did you have to kill him!”

“For you, Agent Mulder,” the black man answered quickly.
“For me!” he cried, appalled at the reason, feeling every muscle in his body tighten in crazed fury.

Mr. X lowered the gun, walking closer to Mulder. “Knocking him down and taking the tape is something you are capable of doing. This …” Mr. X said, pointing to the body as a pool of blood formed under his head, “is not something you would do. It had to look like you were both set up. There was no other way.” His voice was dull, as if he’d just swatted a fly rather than killed a man.

“Men have been killed for this tape; why not this time? It will look suspicious!”

Mulder saw Mr. X take the cassette out of the young man’s hand. He held out his other hand to Mulder for the envelope, but Mulder, nauseated and incensed at the killing, held on to the envelope.

“Are you saying it’s not going to look suspicious for all the evidence to disappear and the man I was supposed to make the deal with ends up dead!” Mulder shouted, shaking with anger.

“That’s not quite how it goes,” Mr. X answered him.

Unbelievably, Mr. X pointed the gun at him and Mulder froze in terror. His mind went blank.

In the next instant, he found himself not caring if it all ended right here and now. He had nothing to gain anymore and no fight left in him. Everyone he had believed in had betrayed him, except his partner. He was the betrayer, turning her away from him because he was told to do it. He had gone against his own instincts this time and look where it got him. Well, he deserved this fitting end.

Mr. X looked down the barrel of the gun. “Don’t move, Agent Mulder. Don’t … move.”

Mulder closed his eyes and held his breath. Mr. X sighted the gun carefully, took aim at Mulder’s mid-section, and pulled the trigger.

Mulder heard the shot at the same instant he felt a hot pain tear through his side, knocking him to the ground. Laying on his back, staring up at the stars which were blurring, he heard movement and voices around him.

Fighting unconsciousness, he felt himself being lifted off the ground and carried off.

Mulder wasn’t aware of being put in a black van parked across the street from the Garden. Nor was he aware, 20 minutes later, of being taken out of the van and carried back to the area of the Garden where the young man lay dead.

He never heard the two shots fired in the quiet air as he was laid back on the ground next to the body of the NICAP victim, in the very spot where his own blood had stained the sidewalk.

—X—

10:10 P.M.
AGENT SCULLY’S APARTMENT
Dana Scully was using her key to open her front door when a man dressed entirely in black stepped from behind the wall. She was startled until she recognized him as Mr. X.

“Agent Scully, you aren’t answering your phone,” he said in a soft, but deep voice.

“I didn’t take it with me,” she said bluntly. “What do you want?”

“We need to talk.”

She had to admit she was curious. Mr. X didn’t make house calls to anyone but Mulder, and he had, in the past, even refused to talk to anyone but Mulder.

After hesitating a long time, Scully motioned him in and closed the door. She saw him looking around the apartment, as if scrutinizing every inch of it.

“To what do I owe this honor?” Scully said with sarcasm.

“I heard a rumor. I’d like you to refute it.”

Scully knew exactly what he was talking about. If she didn’t know Mr. X so well by reputation, she might have guessed that Mulder sent him to talk to her. But that wasn’t Mr. X’s style. No one sent him anywhere.

“You sources must be breaking down if you were told it was a rumor. Yes, I asked for a transfer out of the X-Files.”

“Agent Mulder needs you,” he said abruptly.

Scully mocked him with a crooked smile and shook her head. “No. Agent Mulder doesn’t need anybody.”

Mr. X moved a step closer to Scully and held her with his eyes.

“I should think in the five years that you’ve worked together, you’d know him better than that. And I expect more out of you. This is a childish, stupid thing you’re doing, Agent Scully, very uncharacteristic of an FBI agent. Not to mention a bad career choice.”

Scully turned away from him but he firmly grabbed her arm, spinning her back around. She started to defend herself, then saw the look on his face and thought better of it.

“Hear me out,” Mr. X said harshly. “You and Mulder have been involved in something way over your heads. What I will confide to you, I confide only because his mission is jeopardized if you desert him.”

“If I desert him? So now you’re a stand-up comic,” she said without any hint of humor.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp. Despite her outward anger, Mr. X knew she was frustrated and worried. And because she was desperate for answers, she would listen to what he had to say. But he kept the short distance between them, as if his close proximity to her might exaggerate his intimidation.

Mr. X’s mysterious nature was dark and ominous, but Scully knew he was one of Mulder’s strongest allies. She also knew he was a dangerous man, capable of doing almost anything to anybody.
His deep voice was sinister, captivating. “We all answer to somebody, Agent Scully. For some of us, that job is easier because we know who they are. For Agent Mulder, it’s a never-ending struggle who to listen to, who to believe, which path to choose. Because around every corner there is someone waiting to confuse him, deceive him, maybe even kill him. He has taken you with him into dangerous situations. Ask yourself this question, ‘why not this time?’ If you really think Agent Mulder’s choices and decisions were his own, then you underestimate the players.”

His assumption angered her. “No, I don’t! Look at what Mulder and I have lost, the heinous crimes we’ve witnessed, the brutal murders — for a purpose that still evades us!”

Mr. X nodded slowly. “So how much power or control do you think your partner has with these people?”

He took a couple of steps toward the door, his hands in his pockets, before facing Scully again.

“You complicated things when you became Mulder’s partner, because now Mulder has more to watch than his own back.”

Scully started to say something, but Mr. X’s jaw tightened and he held up one finger, indicating he didn’t want to be interrupted.

“You have made him more cautious, Agent Scully, and that has probably saved his life on more than one occasion. If you walk out on him now, you are making a terrible mistake. You are blaming him for something he has no control over.”

Mr. X could see Scully’s eyes soften, her posture less rigid and he knew he was getting through to her.

“They scared him bad, this time. Real bad. If he hadn’t done exactly as he was told, you’d be dead right now.”

Scully believed every word he said. This was a man who only acted for his own benefit. Although he denounced Scully’s decision to leave the X-Files because it would negatively impact the investigations, she thought there was more to it than that. She sensed it had more to do with Mr. X’s relationship with Mulder.

Mr. X walked to the front door, putting his hand on the doorknob, but paused to speak to Scully again.

“Like I said, he needs you right now, probably more than he ever has in his life.”

Seeing that she wasn’t going to respond, he opened the door to leave. Then as an afterthought, pushed it closed again.

“Oh, Agent Scully, if you change your mind, he’s at Bethesda Hospital. He’s been shot.”

Then he closed the door on the agent, standing frozen by his chilling words.

—X—X—

BETHESDA NAVAL HOSPITAL
On the drive to the hospital, Scully tried to block out every horrible scenario her mind tortured her with. She had nursed her partner through numerous types of injuries. But this was a gunshot.

<A gunshot.>

Where did he take the hit? Leg? Arm?

Chest.

Head.

<Dear God.>

Scully hurried down the hallway of the Emergency Room, frantically searching for a familiar face. Finally she saw several uniformed officers and recognized two FBI agents, then spotted Assistant Director Skinner. He had his back to her and was writing on a note pad.

She put her hand on his back, “Sir?”

Skinner turned around and was relieved to see her. Right away he saw the worry on her face.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you,” he said. “Where the hell have you been?”

“I was at my mother’s. What happened?” Scully asked anxiously.

“Agent Mulder and his contact were ambushed. The dead man’s name was Jared Adams. He worked with NICAP and was —”

“Sir … sir …” Scully interrupted impatiently, “is Mulder okay?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s going to be fine, Scully. He was lucky; the bullet went through his side, missed his organs.”

She closed her eyes and let out a shuddering breath. She faced Skinner again when she felt his hand on her arm, but he said nothing. Obviously he was waiting for her to give him some answers.

Scully was in the unusual position of not knowing where Mulder had been or what the circumstances of the shooting were.

“What was he doing?” she asked.

Skinner looked at her, puzzled. “Agent Mulder was attempting to pass the digital tape to someone in the underground. You didn’t know that?”

Before Scully could answer or ask any more questions, a doctor walked through the doors of Intensive Care. He had spoken with Skinner earlier, discovering he could authorize medical treatment for Fox Mulder, so he approached him again.

Skinner made the introductions. “Dr. Bordon, this is Dana Scully, Agent Mulder’s partner.”
“How do you do? You’re the one he’s been asking for.” he said, shaking her hand. “Can we step in here a minute?”

They followed him into a private waiting room where they all sat down. Scully was anxious, even though Skinner had assured her that Mulder would be all right. She could tell from the doctor’s demeanor that he was ready to give them something other than good news.

“As I told you, Mr. Skinner, the bullet wound is not a serious injury. He was extremely lucky. What I am concerned about are the two abrasions on his head.”

“Abrasions?” Scully asked.

“Yes, on either side of his temple, there is what appears to be some kind of — almost like a burn, like what you’d get if you received an electrical shock.”

The doctor’s words suddenly brought a recollection to Scully. In a split second her mind recalled a incident in Idaho. Mulder had sneaked onto a military base where he believed that he witnessed something while he was there, some type of unidentified craft, before being discovered and captured by the military. Yet when he had been released to Scully the next day, he appeared dazed, with no memory of what he had seen on the base, nor of any events that entire day. His mind was a blank, and he was never able to remember what happened.

Scully had seen the same type of marks on his forehead then as the doctor was describing now.

Scully turned her attention back to the doctor who continued to explain Mulder’s condition.

“... of course, it’s not an electrical shock. It must have happened when he fell; his head hit something on the pavement. I don’t know what would cause that. Also, his eyes are very red-rimmed with some kind of inflammation. That’s what alerted me to the possibility of hemorrhage. But ... anyway —”

“Doctor, have you spoken to him?” Scully asked.

“Yes. He’s conscious right now.”

“Can he remember anything?” Scully questioned, glancing at Skinner.

The doctor sighed and looked perplexed. “Well, that’s the thing. He remembers nothing.”

“He doesn’t know what happened to him tonight?” Skinner asked.

“He couldn’t tell me what happened to him last week.”

Skinner frowned and looked at Scully, who remained silent. He couldn’t deduct from her posture whether she had any answers.

The doctor seemed to be considering possibilities, but then just shrugged. “I’m going to run a CAT scan on him and some other neurological tests. Even if we find a cause, we probably can’t alter the result. His memory may come back to him on its own, and it may not. If it doesn’t, I don’t think losing a week is any big deal, unless he proposed marriage to somebody or ordered a new car,” the doctor said lightheartedly with a smile.
<Or his partner walked out on him>, Scully thought.

When the doctor stood up, Scully and Skinner did, too.

“Can I see him,” Scully said anxiously.

“They’ve already taken him down. It’ll be about 2 hours. Go get some coffee; I’ll talk to you in a little while,” the doctor said to both of them, reassuredly touching Scully on the arm when he saw her concern.

The doctor walked out, but Scully sat back down, so Skinner sat down next to her. He could tell she was worried, distracted. In spite of the fact that Scully had asked for a transfer from the X-Files, he thought it odd that Mulder would be doing something as dangerous as delivering the digital tape without his partner even aware of the exchange. The fact that she was at her mother’s with her cell phone off was even more unusual.

Skinner knew his agents had been under tremendous pressure the last week. It was ironic that Mulder might not be able to recall any of it. Or maybe it was a blessing in disguise.

Scully asked Skinner to explain what he knew about what had happened tonight. He said that through his own contacts, he learned that Mulder had arranged to hand over the digital tape to a man in the underground. Then about 9:35, a 911 call came in after witnesses outside the Botanic Garden heard two gunshots. When police arrived they found both Mulder and the other man shot, the other man, fatally. The digital tape, of course, was gone.

Skinner went on to explain that even though Mulder’s wound was non-life threatening, he had bled pretty badly. Since the Garden was closed for the evening, had the shots not been heard he might have been laying there all night before help came. So he was pretty lucky in more ways than one.

He told Scully he saw Mulder briefly after he was brought in, but he was not conscious at the time so he was unable to talk to him. That was before he realized that answers from Mulder would not be forthcoming.

Skinner watched Scully closely, wondering what might be going through her mind right now. He had not had the opportunity to talk with her regarding her decision to leave the X-Files, but he wasn’t about to let her go without a fight. Now seemed a good time to approach the subject.

“Agent Scully, this morning I told Agent Mulder about your request for a transfer.”

Skinner hesitated, watching a pained expression cross Scully’s face. He thought that maybe sitting in here in a hospital waiting room might make it more difficult for her to leave her partner. Hoping she was vulnerable, he continued to challenge her on her decision.

“Scully, I don’t —”

“Sir, with all due respect,” she cut him off, “it’s my decision,” she ended bluntly.

Skinner sighed with resignation. He leaned back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling, wondering if he should push it any further. Scully’s voice was indeed decisive and strong.
Skinner looked through the windows of the waiting room, where other FBI personnel waited in the hallway, showing support for a fellow agent.

If Mulder couldn’t remember events of the last week, he would have to be told again of Scully’s request to transfer. Skinner felt like there was more he should do. He anticipated that Scully’s concern for her partner might cause her to re-think her decision. But how should he approach it without angering her and thus making her more determined to leave.

He was wrapped up in his own thoughts when he felt Scully’s hand briefly touch his knee, surprising him.

“Sir, perhaps the one advantage to Mulder’s lapse of memory is that maybe he’ll never know the mistake I almost made.”

Skinner tried to read her meaning by her expression, wondering if he had heard her right, or whether his own wishful thinking had deceived his ears. But then he saw Scully smile and he felt his tenseness begin to melt away. It was like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Scully didn’t miss his reaction. She stood up.

“Sir, would you like some coffee?”

“I’ll go with you. Looks like it’ll be awhile before we can see him.”

Scully nodded very slowly, looking distracted and preoccupied.

Skinner stood up and leaned toward her. “Scully, are you holding up all right?”

“Yes, sir. I’m just relieved to see this chapter end ... again. To tell you the truth, I hope I never see or hear of that digital tape again.”

“You and me both.”

—X—X—

Chapter 21

BETHESDA HOSPITAL

Scully was able to see Mulder when the tests were completed and he was finally brought into a private room. He was asleep by that time, so she still didn’t get to talk to him. But it was comforting for her to sit quietly by his bedside, watching him breathe slowly.

The neurological tests were all negative for any kind of brain hemorrhage, skull fracture or concussion. But, as the doctor explained, even a minor blow to the head in the wrong place could cause memory loss.

Scully had examined the marks on Mulder’s forehead and the redness around his eyes. She knew where they came from. She suspected Skinner did, too.

As she sat on the edge of the bed, watching her partner sleep, she was absorbed in conflicting emotions. Now that the intense pressure was over, there was a clearer picture of what Mulder had been faced with. She should have realized from experience that the men he dealt with didn’t offer options. They gave ultimatums, which, if not followed, could result
in serious consequences.

Although Scully still had strong reservations about Mr. X, she believed that there must be reasons, beyond what she knew, for him to attempt to keep her and Mulder together on the X-Files. Her pride and self-ego had obscured two vital aspects concerning the X-Files: the methods of investigation were unorthodox, and often you had to play by somebody else’s rules. Mulder had followed somebody else’s rules this time, keeping her pretty much in the dark, and the one thing he had asked her to do, was trust him. She had surrendered that trust by demanding answers that Mulder couldn’t give.

Somehow though, it all came out in the end and the result was a deeper bond between her and her partner — especially for her. This had been a defining moment in their relationship, but Scully knew they had, once again, beaten the odds.

Scully watched Mulder’s quiet, deep breathing. The events of the last few days, the purpose behind his actions — in all probability they were locked away in some dark inaccessible part of his brain, or erased entirely. She suspected that as time passed, Mulder would become more troubled by those blank spaces in his mind.

Scully considered ways she might help him recall bits and pieces of the past days’ events. She was certain that even returning to a location would not trigger much memory for him. The people who stole those memories were too thorough. But perhaps just the familiarity of a place might give her partner some subconscious peace of mind. Scully would give it a lot of thought the next few days.

She would think about it not only for the sake of her partner, but for herself. Scully knew that her knowledge was all they had to go on. She hadn’t shared much of the information she had with him — just bits and pieces. But there was an ever-increasing urge within herself to tell what she knew. Mulder often referred to this ‘quest’ as his own personal pursuit, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Scully had traveled the same path with him, and thus needed her own answers. The key was to unlock her partner’s mind.

There had been a time when unanswered questions could be explained through hard science. But since then, her work with Fox Mulder on the X-Files had opened new doors, new ways of thinking. It was exciting, but scary at the same time. It meant questioning the very foundation of her beliefs.

Scully realized that this new introspection would not have been possible without the deep respect she felt for her partner. She knew that the depth of her involvement had more to do with the man she worked with than belief in the work. Some day she would need to tell him that.

But not yet.

It was still difficult for her to share any new insight, or confide to him that maybe there was ‘something out there.’ To admit such a notion might change the very nature of their relationship. She wasn’t sure Mulder was ready for that. She was damn sure she wasn’t.

There would be other opportunities to learn the truth and Agents Dana Scully and Fox Mulder would find that truth. But for now it was time to heal, both physically and mentally for both of them.

Perhaps this time, they would gain strength from not knowing all the answers.
BETHESDA HOSPITAL
ROOM 402, APRIL 22, 1998
7:30 A.M.

Mulder finished off a glass of orange juice and gingerly set the empty cup on the side table. He was extremely sore, but not in too much pain. There was a knock on his door and he looked up, expecting to see Scully, but was surprised when Senator Matheson entered the room.

“Hello, Fox,” he said, seeing his bewilderment.

“Sir? How did you know I was here?”

Matheson didn’t directly answer the question. He smiled and shrugged as he scooted a chair close to the bed and sat down.

“I heard you were pretty lucky that bullet didn’t kill you.”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“Do you know that the digital tape surfaced again?”

Mulder hesitated, blinked slowly and then nodded, surprised that he could even recall that much, though it was hazy. Mulder stared at Matheson, and almost as if mental telepathy were taking place, he suddenly realized that Matheson was there to fill in some gaps.

“Sir, can you tell me what you know?”

Matheson’s explanation was simple and brief. He told Mulder that the digital tape had found its way once again into Mulder’s hands, but that there was confusion about whether the information contained on the tape was genuine. To complicate matters further, someone was trying to black market a bogus copy of the files. Matheson emphasized how much damage a falsified document could do to the credibility of the real document. He went on to explain that apparently Mulder had made contact with someone who would use underground channels to expose the files on the digital tape.

When Mulder asked why he, himself, didn’t expose the files, he learned that a deal was made, a trade — the digital tape for the bogus copy. Matheson then confided to him, with reluctance, that Mulder’s integrity had been in question and that by turning over the tape he would re-establish himself within the underground network. He reminded Mulder how important his position was in that network as far as receiving tips and classified information.

Matheson relayed that he had read the police report and he went on to describe what it contained. There were a lot of assumptions made, but it was pretty clear that someone had followed the contact man into the Garden, then ambushed him and Mulder, escaping with the digital tape and the falsified document. So far, his whereabouts were unknown. In all likelihood, everything was back in the hands of the government.

Mulder sighed deeply. “I don’t remember any of this.” His voice was dispirited. “They took it all away,” he said pointing to the marks on his forehead. “They’ve done this to me before,
gone into my head and just erased what they didn’t want me to remember.” In a barely audible voice, he said to Matheson, “I guess I let you down again, sir.”

Matheson wished he could console him with the truth. Agent Mulder had no idea what part he had played in the future of the world.

He looked long and hard at Mulder and then his face softened. “No, Fox. Not at all.” It was all he could say.

“They haven’t won, sir. These setbacks only make Scully and I more determined than ever to find the truth. One of these days all the pieces are going to come together. If we can learn something from defeat, then we’re that much closer,” he said with conviction.

Matheson smiled, his thoughts unspoken. Mulder sounded resolute.

“They can go into my mind, erasing all that I learn, but until they completely remove my brain, I’ll be a formidable opponent.”

“Not having a brain might present some limitations, Fox,” Matheson kidded.

“Career wise? Well, I could go to law school, or …” Mulder’s eyes twinkled, “run for Congress.”

Matheson laughed out loud. “Thank god they didn’t take your sense of humor.”

They both heard a knock on the door and Scully peeked her head in. She was startled to see Mulder’s visitor.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said starting to duck out.

But Matheson instantly stood. He would have to be blind not to have seen the look on Mulder’s face when he saw his partner at the door.

“No, Agent Scully, come in.” He reached out to shake hands with her. “Nice to see you. Take care of our boy here. I’ll be in touch, Fox,” he said, smiling.

As Matheson brushed past Scully and the door closed behind him, Scully raised her eyebrows to Mulder, impressed at his distinguished visitor, although suspecting what their connection to each other was.

Mulder gave her a warm smile as she came toward him. “Well, it’s about time you got here, partner,” Mulder joshed.

“It’s still too early for visiting hours. I had to flash my badge to get past Attila at the desk.”

“I was hoping your pretty face would be the first thing I saw this morning.”

“Sorry. Looks like Senator Matheson beat me to it,” Scully said, sitting gently on the edge of his bed next to him.

“No, he didn’t. I woke up to a bearded sumo wrestler with a gold earring and a tattoo, who looked more like a bodyguard than a male nurse.” Mulder’s expression then took the form of a pout. “And you weren’t here.”
“Well, I asked them to move a cot in here so I could hold your hand all night, but they only
do that in Pediatrics.”

“Funny.”

Scully grinned, then surprised him by kissing his cheek. “For your information, I was here
most of the night – right there in that uncomfortable chair – until Skinner threatened to re-
open the Fluke Monster case unless I went home.”

Mulder chuckled as Scully felt his cheek for warmth.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Mulder snickered. “They tell me I was shot. How’s that for an answer?”

She saw his face suddenly cloud with uncertainty as his mind searched for answers. Scully
reached in her purse.

“I brought you a present.”

Mulder looked pleased, as he opened the plastic bag. Inside was a videotape, and as he
read the title, he frowned and looked questioningly at her.

“Cooking Tips from NFL Cheerleaders?”

“Well, you gave me a video once when I was in the hospital, ‘Super Stars of the Super
Bowl.’ I’m returning the gratitude. Besides, it looks like your kind of video,” she said with a
twitch in her smile.

They both knew what they were avoiding with the small talk. Scully saw Mulder’s pensive
look again, and knew he needed to know what happened.

“Scully, you know what they did to me.” His remark was a statement, not a question.

“I have a pretty good idea.”

“You’re going to have to help me remember.”

Scully flinched slightly and looked over toward the window. Mulder frowned, seeing her sigh
deply.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She looked into his eyes again. “Mulder, we ... sort of went in separate directions on this. I’ll
tell you what I can, but I’m afraid I can’t answer a lot of questions for you.”

Mulder looked completely baffled by that statement and, oddly, it lifted Scully’s spirits a
little. It felt good to her to have her partner wondering why the two of them didn’t know
every move the other one made, as was usual for them.

“We had to have gotten close. Otherwise, why would they take those memories away? I
need to know what they took from me and why, Scully.”

“Mulder, I don’t think you’re ever going to know. If other people knew what you knew, it
would be pointless to destroy your memory, wouldn’t it? They were clever this time; they forced you to work alone.”

“Forced? What do you mean?”

Scully shook her head. This discussion wasn’t going to lead to anywhere but frustration and disappointment. She put her hand on his arm. “We’re not beaten, Mulder.”

He knew what she was trying to say. “I know that. I know.”

He looked long and deep into her eyes, but she knew he was merely fixed on a point as he contemplated an idea. Then he sighed softly. “Maybe it’s just not time, Scully.”

“What do you mean?”

He seemed to be searching for answers in the dark recesses of memory, not even sure he knew what he meant by that. Again, he looked a long time at Scully without speaking, as if maybe she could help him find the answers he was looking for. He sensed some thread of knowledge within himself, something he couldn’t put his finger on.

“I don’t know what I mean. I just think maybe we’re not supposed to find the truth yet, like we have more work to do or something. I don’t know. I guess my faith leads me to believe that everything will happen when it’s supposed to happen.”

Mulder then smiled and grasped Scully’s hand tightly and she squeezed back, symbolizing that they were still as strong as ever in their quest.

—X—X—

ONE WEEK LATER
DANA SCULLY’S APARTMENT
6:00 P.M.

Scully answered the knock on her door, knowing even before she checked the peephole who it was. Her partner came into the apartment wearing jeans and a long-sleeved purple tee shirt. He looked much more relaxed and healthier than he had a week ago.

After spending days questioning everyone he could think of to try and determine what had happened, he finally reconciled to the fact that there was nothing to put together. Somehow, though, it revived him, gave him a more positive outlook for the future. Mulder couldn’t explain it, but for Scully it was refreshing to see him bounce back.

As Scully shut the door, she turned to him and smiled slyly. “That’s a good color on you, Mulder.”

Knowing she was mocking him, he scowled dramatically at her. “I just came from the Lone Gunmen. Frohike sends his love.”

“How nice. How are our underground apostles?”

“I guess things are back to normal. They got word that someone in McKinney, Texas took a photo of a UFO buzzing a nudist colony. They’re asking me to authenticate the photo.”

“Have you seen it yet? Do you think the photo’s authentic?”
“Yep. Looks like a real girl to me,” he said winking at her.

“Well, it appears you and your ‘aliens’ share the same moral ground, Mulder. This won’t be an ‘on-site’ investigation, will it?”

He disregarded her cut. “It’s a hoax, Scully. Why would a nudist be carrying a camera?”

She gave him her usual roll of the eyes, then walked into the kitchen. Still mindful of his recent wound, carefully he sank back into the comfort of the overstuffed chair.

The aroma of a Patchouli incense stick burning on the fireplace mantle was subtle, the wispy smoke drifting through the room. Two thick white candles were also lit on the mantel, one of them a birthday present from him. The atmosphere was calming, the lighting soft.

Mulder felt relaxed here; it was a safe haven from the demons that waited for his vulnerable moments when they could slither through the cracks in his life.

Watching him from the kitchen, Scully saw that he was in that far-away place again. He snapped out of it when she carried in a tray holding a bowl of popcorn and two iced teas. She set it on the coffee table, then sat back down on the sofa. Mulder got out of the chair and plopped down on the sofa next to her.

“Well I smelled popcorn,” he said, not wasting any time grabbing a handful.

“Mulder, I have a surprise for you.”

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, wary of his partner’s sense of humor. God knows payback time for him was long overdue.

Scully reached behind the sofa where she pulled out a rectangle-shaped box wrapped in gift paper. She handed it to him.

“This is for us,” she said softly.

Now he was really at a loss for words.

<‘I’m going to owe her big time.’>

He was puzzled at her motive, but her demeanor suggested that it was no big deal. Just between friends.

“Open it,” Scully said, seeing his hesitation.

“I hate to ruin this cute little dinosaur paper,” he teased.

Scully shrugged. “It was left over from my god-son’s birthday. It was either that or Christmas paper, and I thought the dinosaurs were fitting for you, Mulder.”

He opened one end of the package and slid his hand through the top of the paper, separating it. The paper slid off the top of the box.

When Mulder saw what the gift was, he got very quiet. Scully watched his thumb glide over the letters on the box as if he could will his memories to come alive.
It was a Parcheesi game.

“Is this why you asked me if my evening was free?”

She smiled and nodded. Then he looked at her, a little perplexed. He could tell by her expression that she knew the significance of the game. But he didn’t know how she knew it.

“My family used to play Parcheesi every weekend, before Samantha disappeared. How did you know?” Mulder asked softly.

“You told me once.”

Mulder nodded, trying to recall when he might have said that, but nothing came to him.

“And my mother would fix ...” he stopped, looking at the coffee table.

“Popcorn and iced tea,” Scully finished for him.

He was quiet for a long time as he stared at the familiar game box and Scully could only imagine what memories he was reliving. She didn’t want to make the moment awkward for him, but she noticed his eyes glisten and knew that he was genuinely touched.

“Are you okay, partner?” she asked, concerned.

His head lifted and he grinned. “Oh yeah!”

Scully stood up, grabbing him by the sleeve and gently pulling him off the sofa. “Then come on. Let’s play.”

They sat cross-legged on the carpet in front of the fireplace. The fire burned slowly as the wood popped and crackled. Mulder took his tennis shoes off as Scully set the popcorn bowl between them. Mulder was now enthusiastic as he lifted the lid from the game, set up the playing surface and tore open the cellophane containing the wooden pieces. Scully knew that the best medicine for her partner was to challenge his competitive spirit.

“I’ll be blue. What color do you want, Scully?”

“Yellow.”

Mulder handed her the yellow pieces. “Perfect. Samantha was always yellow,” he said smiling, taking a drink of his tea.

Scully put her pieces on the board. “You’re not one of those people that make up rules as you go along, are you, Mulder?”

He shook his head, giving her a look like

Scully watched him picking through the popcorn. She wondered why men had a habit of looking at each kernel before they ate it.


“Nothing. Roll to see who goes first.”
They each picked up a die. Scully dropped hers in the center of the board — a five. Mulder shook his die violently in both hands, then blew on it and winked at Scully before rolling it across the length of the board — a two. Scully started to pick up the dice but Mulder put his hand over hers. She looked up, puzzled.

“Scully, in Parcheesi, the low roll goes first,” he said matter-of-factly.

<Oh, so you want to play dirty, huh?> Scully’s narrowed eyes conveyed. She intentionally kept her expression blank, making Mulder wonder what she was thinking or what she was going to do. They sat very still, two equal competitors, their eyes locked, their hands poised over the dice.

Then Scully relented and started to rise from the floor. Mulder put his hand on her shoulder, keeping her in her place.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Scully’s smile was cunning. “To get my gun.”

—X—X—

9:30 P.M.
THE SAME NIGHT.

Mulder came down the steps of Scully’s apartment. His footsteps were light; he felt like he had been born into a new world. He took a deep breath of rain-dampened air. The clouds had moved out, the stars were crystal clear, and the breeze was cool and crisp. The park across the street was mostly deserted with only a few young people talking and laughing under the golden mist of a streetlight at the edge of the parking lot. Mulder didn’t want to get in his car yet; he wanted to enjoy the night.

He crossed the street and sat on a park bench, looking up at the stars. He still couldn’t explain the reasons for his recent euphoria, but it didn’t matter to him. Somehow he felt like something had been accomplished in spite of the fact that the digital tape mysteriously disappeared again. There were no clues to substantiate that feeling, but Mulder had learned to trust his instincts. His uncanny ability to second-guess and to hit the target when everyone else was shooting in the trees was what earned him the nickname Spooky in the academy. He didn’t mind the name; events in his life had thickened his shell and made him more tolerant of other people’s shallow perceptions.

He knew that another reason for his confidence was the reassurance he had about his partner. It must have been difficult for Scully to have been separated from him and not given the facts in the investigation.

Yet she stuck by him.

He hoped she knew him well enough by now to understand that very often he had little or no choice in the decisions that had to be made. Obviously, she understood that very well.

Mulder was still a little puzzled by the visit by Senator Matheson. His instincts also told him that Matheson must have had more to do with circumstances surrounding the digital tape than Matheson would admit. Asking him questions would be futile, because Mulder knew that if Senator Matheson didn’t volunteer information, it was pointless to ask. The Senator’s
willingness to divulge facts to Mulder concerning the government’s hidden agenda often made his position precarious at times. So Mulder had to tread lightly and accept whatever he was told, piecemeal or not.

He was encouraged by the fact that a man like Matheson, whom Mulder admired tremendously, trusted him with information and appreciated his abilities. That was even more rewarding than a paycheck.

And probably the most surprising, and pleasing part of the story that Scully was able to fill in, was that Mr. X was alive. With the death of Deep Throat, Mulder felt Mr. X’s demise left him without the inside confidant that he had come to depend on. He and Mr. X had their differences, which at times came to physical blows, but he knew the mysterious black man worked not only in Mulder’s best interests, but to fulfill an agenda that Mulder had only vague clues about.

<You’re right, Marita Covarrubias, not everything dies.>

As his eyes roamed the heavens, Mulder spotted the Big Dipper. He looked over to find the Little Dipper when suddenly he felt something jump into his lap. He looked down to see a young terrier trying to lick his face. At the same time, Mulder saw a young girl running toward him, an empty leash dangling in her hand.


The dog, oblivious to his master, was more interested in making a new friend. Mulder held on to the little dog for her, letting it lick his neck and arms. He was amused; the dog’s owner was not.

She sat down next to Mulder and secured the dog on his leash, then pulled him into her own lap.

“Bad dog!” she scolded, somewhat pitifully, at the same time planting a big kiss on the puppy’s snout. Then she addressed Mulder. “I’m so sorry. He flunked obedience school.”

“It’s okay. Sometimes dogs, like people, have to follow their own course. He’s a cute dog. What did you call him?” Mulder said kindly.

“Sagan. You see, my grandfather gave me my first telescope when I was eight and then for my tenth birthday my dad bought me the book, ‘Cosmos’.”

Mulder was nodding, making the connection ahead of her, but she continued to explain.

“I really got hooked on astronomy. I got my puppy on the day that I found out Carl Sagan — the astronomer? — died. So I named him Sagan.”

Mulder watched her scratching the young dog’s ears as he squirmed to lick her face.

“Mr. Sagan would be honored, I’m sure,” Mulder said softly.

The young girl looked up into the sky, then back at Mulder. “What were you looking at?” she asked.

“The stars,” he said simply.
“I read one time, in one of my books, that if you look up into the heavens, watch for about 20 minutes or so, you will see something in the sky that shouldn’t be there — something that wasn’t there yesterday and won’t be there tomorrow. Do you believe that?” she asked inquisitively.

Mulder hesitated a long time, looking into her eager eyes, seeing the face of expectation, of fresh enthusiasm. He smiled and nodded. “Yes, I do.”

She looked relieved, as if his answer meant the world to her, and she hugged her puppy.

“So do I. And I hope one of these days I’m one of the people that proves they’re out there.”

Mulder silently watched her eyes spanning the vastness of space, as if tonight she would begin her search.

Then she grinned and looked back at him. “Wouldn’t that be so cool!”

Mulder only chuckled and gazed upward once again into the dark sky.

—X—X—

Chapter 22

PRESENT DAY
12:10 a.m.
FOX MULDER’S APARTMENT

Scully stood in the dim hallway in front of apartment 42. She found the silver key from her vast assortment on her key ring and inserted it into the lock. The door opened soundlessly, and she entered, relocking it and closing it behind her.

The apartment was illuminated only by the fish tank. Peering down the hallway, she saw that the bedroom was also dark. It seemed to her a little early for Fox Mulder to be asleep, but she could hear no sounds at all.

She removed her coat and tossed it on the sofa, then she made her way toward the bedroom. Oddly, it didn’t appear that Mulder heard her enter the apartment, so she knew he wasn’t awake. But she didn’t want to startle him by moving around in the dark, in case he wasn’t in deep sleep yet.

Scully reached into the bathroom, flicking on the nightlight and calling her partner’s name at the same time.

“Mulder?”

Still nothing. She could see his form in the bed, lying on his side under a blanket. He was wearing a gray tee shirt. Quietly, she walked over to the bed and slowly eased onto the mattress next to him, with him facing her. Then she bent over and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Mulder ...”

At her touch and the sound of a voice, he was startled awake. But before the spark of panic
could ignite, he heard the voice again.

“It’s me, partner.”

His eyes opened, trying to focus and adjust in the dark room, as he felt the familiar touch of her hand travel up from his shoulder to his cheek. She saw him smile as his eyes traveled over her tight red sweater and jeans.

“Hey,” she said fondly, “since when did you turn into such a heavy sleeper?”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth when she noticed a prescription bottle on his nightstand. Frowning, she reached for it as Mulder sat up, rubbing his eyes. He saw her reading the label.

“I just took one. I promise,” he reassured.

She set the bottle down and looked at him with a medical eye, gauging whether he was telling the truth. He knew what she was doing, and he chuckled.

“Why did you take a sleeping pill, Mulder?”

He leaned toward her and lowered his voice to a whisper, as if he were telling her a secret.

“Because … I couldn’t … sleep.”

Scully realized it had been a stupid question, and she grinned and nodded. But underneath, she understood the reason for his restlessness.

That’s why she was here.

There was a flash of lightning through the curtains, followed by booming thunder. Mulder saw her flinch slightly and it amused him.

“Frightened by the storm, little girl?” he teased.

“Actually I came over here to make sure you weren’t hiding under the bed.”

“And if I was, would you drag me out or crawl underneath with me?”

“There’s not enough room under the bed,” she countered.

“For what?” he asked, barely suppressing a smile.

She grinned. “For anything.”

“Like hop-scotch?”

She chuckled. “Do you always have to have the last word?”

He considered it briefly, then nodded, which made her laugh even more. Then Scully leaned sideways on the blanket, placing her right elbow on his thigh and resting her head in her right hand.”
“Mulder, have you ever seen the movie, ‘The Wolfman,’ with — what’s that guy’s name —?”

“Lon Chaney?”

“Yeah, the original one back in the 30’s, or whatever.”

“The black and white version?”

“Yeah. Have you?”

He nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“I was in the video store the other day buying a movie for my godson, and they were playing it on the overhead TV’s. I got caught up in it. The dialogue was so ... crisp, eerie. It’s so well written it makes you hang on every word.”

“It’s one of my favorite movies. It’s the classic example of man’s loss of self-control which becomes the beast within him.”

“That reminds me of the soliloquy where he’s standing at the window.”

Mulder watched her quietly, with piqued interest and curiosity. Scully saw his eyes become fixed and his body was perfectly still. She stretched her arm out over his legs and laid her cheek against his blanketed thigh, looking up at him. No doubt he was aware of her position, but his eyes never moved.

“He’s staring out at the night, isn’t he Mulder?” There was no response from her partner, and she continued. “Although a man be pure at heart and say his prayers at night, he may be a beast when the wolfs bane blooms, and the moon is full and bright."

She waited patiently for a response from him, and she could tell from knowing him so well, that he was looking inward. Scully almost felt a physical reaction when Mulder’s eyes changed somehow, and at that instant she knew his inward probe was now focused on her. The sensation she experienced was uncanny, but not unfamiliar.

No doubt he was feeling that poking stick again.

Then he snapped out of it and reached over to grab the prescription bottle off the night table. Scully raised her head and frowned as he seemed to scrutinize the bottle.

“What, Mulder?”

“These pills are making me hallucinate. I thought I just heard you recite a quote from a horror movie.”

She scrunched her nose at him. “Very funny.”

“You remembered all that from the video store?”

Scully shrugged and again laid her head against his legs. Mulder put the prescription bottle on the table and settled back on the pillow against the headboard.

In the subdued light, he took in his partner’s soft features. Her pupils were fully dilated, catching what light they could, making them sparkle, so that her eyes were both dark and
luminous at the same time. Her red-gold hair caught shimmers of the same light, and it’s smooth-as-silk texture begged to be touched.

Mulder couldn’t resist as he reached down to where her head rested warmly against him and combed his fingers through her hair, watching the burnished strands fall back into place.

“Why are you here, Scully?” he asked quietly.

She had been watching him absorb her, and for a moment she was spellbound. She knew how she affected him. And that observation wasn’t so much the result of seven years of a partnership, as it was the simple fact of being a woman. But even so, she was awed by the sheer pull of his magnetism. She was drawn to him in a way that at first had scared her because she found herself relinquishing control to him. But she learned quickly that it was her trust and faith in him that had opened the secret passageway into Dana Scully’s heart.

His expression was quizzical as he saw her returning his scrutiny. She sat up, then reached out to touch his cheek once again and to let the warmth in her eyes melt his apprehension.

“I was afraid you’d gotten the wrong idea when I left here earlier,” she explained.

“Oh, you mean because I figured you were going to wake Skinner up in the middle of the night to demand a transfer out of the state so you wouldn’t have to -”

“That’s enough,” she scolded lightly.

Mulder saw the warning look on her face and sighed heavily. “I was the one being a little possessive, Scully. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately. But …” Mulder took another deep breath, then plunged ahead. “… I want you close by. I need you close by.”

Scully ran her thumb over his lower lip. “I’m here,” she said in a whisper.

She would have been content to gaze forever into his beautiful, compassionate face. But there was a purpose behind her visit. And if she didn’t break eye contact with him right this second, she would lose sight of that purpose – for tonight anyway.

“Mulder, I have a surprise for you. An early birthday present actually. But it can’t wait.”

“You’re going to give it to me tonight?”

She nodded and his face brightened.

“Is it parked at the curb?” he joked.

“Yeah, right. What could I possibly find to match your personality?”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “Something fast, sleek, and black?”

“Like the Bat Mobile?” To his answering nod, she added, “I was thinking more like the Oscar Mayer Weiner Mobile?”

Scully chuckled, watching his eyes dance with amusement.

“Weiner Mobile? Are you implying that - ?”
“My comment had nothing whatsoever to do with anatomy.”

There was a moment of comfortable silence, with their eyes locked on each other.

“How about if I get up and make some coffee?” Mulder asked.

Scully quickly put a gentle restraining hand on his shoulder. “How about you stay right where you are.”

She reached across to the lamp, then stopped. “Can I turn this on?”

Mulder nodded, but she still hesitated. Then she explained why.

“Sometimes when you’ve taken a prescription sleeping pill and you wake up right afterwards, it will upset your stomach. Are you feeling okay, Mulder?”

“Yes. Still a little tired. But I’m FINE,” he emphasized, using her favorite word. “You can turn it on.”

The sudden light, even though it was very dim, still made him squint for a few seconds. He saw Scully reach into the back pocket of her jeans and take out a small blue envelope. She turned it over in her hand a couple of times before putting it in Mulder’s palm.

Mulder opened the flap and peered inside, recognizing immediately what the contents were. He smiled, taking out two tickets for a baseball game. Leaning a little closer to the light, he read the face of the tickets. Then his face lit up even more. His eyes were bright as he looked at Scully in surprise.

“Scully, these are for an Arizona Diamondbacks game! How the hell – how’d you know I’ve wanted to see that new expansion team? And did you know the ballpark has a swimming pool in right field!”

“Oh, yeah?” she questioned. “Well, I’ll believe it when I see it,” she added with quiet emphasis.

Watching him, Scully saw his expression suddenly go blank, as if a fleeting recollection passed quickly through his mind. Then he blinked and it was gone.

Mulder shook his head in amazement. “God, you scare me sometimes!” he said excited.

Scully laughed, pleased with his excitement. “Well, we need a couple of days off, Mulder. And for once, even Skinner agreed. Phoenix, Arizona seems like a good place to start,” she said, with a twinkle in her eye.

He didn’t know what to say. He placed the tickets on the night table and faced her again. It still amazed him that she could so completely turn him around. A couple of hours ago he was at a very low point, questioning in his own mind how Scully felt about him, and not even understanding his own feelings. He couldn’t put his finger on the cause, but there was a restlessness, a persistent inner turmoil that he wasn’t able to resolve.

Now here she was, putting his fears to rest, reassuring him, and lifting his spirits in a way only she could.

She broke his thoughts when she spoke.
“I’ve arranged everything, Mulder. I found a hotel in downtown Phoenix within walking distance of the stadium.”

He was still speechless, but his eyes revealed his immense gratitude.

Scully brushed her fingertips down his bare arm. “You treated me to baseball on my birthday. I decided to return the favor – although I hardly think my gift measures up.”

Scully’s eyes twinkled and Mulder grinned.

“It was fun, wasn’t it?” he asked.

“I learned a lot that night,” she said coyly.

There was so much he wanted to say to her, but he didn’t want to push it – remembering earlier in the evening when he seemed to take everything she said the wrong way.

Scully was watching his face and she saw the traces of misgiving written cleanly across his features. She knew she had been evasive earlier, and she was feeling guilty about her clandestine activities. There were things going on inside her partner that only she could remedy.

And she knew where to start.

“Mulder, our plane leaves late tomorrow afternoon. I thought we could get settled in the hotel, have a nice dinner, then just relax in the room and order a movie. Have some wine.”

She saw his lips curl into a smile and he sighed with contentment as if she had just described heaven.

“Then we can get up the next morning and visit some of the sights around town. Alice Cooper has a pretty cool restaurant near the ballpark called ‘Cooperstown.’ We could check it out. The game is at seven o’clock, and since it’s cooled off a little in Phoenix, they’ll have the roof open. It will be beautiful.”

He gazed at her, hardly able to fathom that this amazing woman was here with him.

“You’re beautiful,” he said softly. “Thank you, Scully.”

Static blue lightning flashed in the window, drawing their attention for an instant.

“It’s really storming out there. Not a good night to be driving,” she said.

“Well …” he stopped.

“Well, what?” she prompted, innocently.

He just smiled and shrugged. In one fluid motion, she got off the bed and walked over to his dresser. He watched her open the bottom drawer and pick out one of his tee shirts, which she put on top of the dresser.

“I don’t know how closely you’ve been following the National League,” she said, kicking off her tennis shoes and pulling off her socks, “but the Diamondbacks are in the Wild Card race – although it’s not looking very hopeful.”
Mulder tried to pay attention to her words as she unzipped her jeans...

“They’ve been plagued with injuries all year – Williams, Stottlemyre, Durazo …”

... and dragged them down her hips where they fell to the floor. As she stepped out of
them, his eyes traveled up her bare, shapely legs...

“… which seems to have affected not only their defensive play, but their hitting as well …”

... to her pale blue lace panties, just peeking out from underneath her long sweater.

Her eyes only left his briefly as she was removing her clothing and she continued on with
her conversation.

“It was a foregone conclusion at the beginning of the year that the Diamondbacks would
win the Western Division, but -”

Mulder lost the next few sentences as he watched her grab the hem of her sweater and pull
it over her head, dropping it on top of her jeans.

Scully acted like she had no idea what effect she was having on her partner as she casually
reached behind her back with one hand to unfasten the clasp on her matching blue bra.

Mulder’s eyes briefly snapped up to meet hers when he realized she was repeating a
question to him.

“… two-point-something ERA?” she asked.

“Uh, um …” he stuttered, losing the battle to maintain eye contact with her.

There was no way he was going to be able to utter another word as his partner's ...

<Partner?>

<No, not partner, not tonight.>

... Scully’s bra slipped down her slender arms to the floor. Mulder could hear background
noise, and knew she was still talking to him, but his focus was on her beautiful, full breasts
that bounced slightly as she turned slightly to pick up the tee shirt off the dresser.

He knew the strip tease was on purpose, that she was playing with him.

And she knew he knew. But she wasn’t finished.

As Scully walked toward the bed, she put her arms through the tee shirt. But she took her
time putting it on, resting the shirt against her stomach as she settled back on the bed
beside him.

Mulder caught his breath as she raised her arms in the air and let the tee-shirt slip down
over her head. When it caught on the ledge of her breasts, she casually took hold of the
fabric between her breasts and pulled it down over her chest. Then she reached over and
turned off the lamp.

Even in the subdued light, it was easy to discern Mulder’s flushed cheeks and his fingers
fumbling with the blanket. She was enjoying the difficulty he was having trying to keep his composure and pay attention to her conversation.

Mulder knew she was watching him and loving every minute of his crumbled composure. After all, it would have been rude not to acknowledge those lovely breasts! He struggled to appear nonchalant, as if this were an every-day occurrence, but his body had already let him know where he stood with that notion.

“So ...” she asked coolly, “what do you think?”

Mulder dragged his eyes up to hers. For one of the first times in his life, coherent thought escaped him. It was then that he realized he had stopped breathing. He took a gulp of air and when he spoke his voice sounded hollow and distant.

“Do you know anything about the team?” he croaked.

Scully was speechless.

<He didn’t hear a word I said – thank goodness!>

Then she laughed out loud and scooted up farther on the bed so their hips touched. When she smiled warmly at him, he knew what she wanted.

Gently his arms circled around her waist, drawing her to his body. She put her hands on his shoulders, looking down into his smiling eyes.

“I have a confession to make,” he said as an odd note crept into his voice.

She gave him a questioning frown, and he explained.

“Remember that time when my bedroom was cleaned out and all this furniture appeared? Well, guess what I found amid some of the rearranged boxes?”

She shrugged.

“An Arizona Diamondbacks hat. I ... don’t ever remember buying it, and I know it wasn’t a gift.”

“Where do you think it came from?” she asked quietly.

“I have no idea.”

“Well,” she said with enthusiasm, “bring it along!”

When Scully felt the slight pressure at her back, she leaned into him, kissing him deeply. Mulder pulled the covers back and Scully pulled her legs up on the bed and snuggled into his shoulder. Her eyes closed in silent bliss as she felt a gentle kiss on her forehead.

The storm continued to rage outside the windows, rain and lightning and howling wind bringing chaos to an otherwise quiet night. But inside the dark bedroom, cozy under a warm blanket, were a man and a woman who knew the dangers of the storm, who backed each other up, felt each other’s joy and pain — whose lives and souls were intertwined.

No matter what they would be faced with in the coming days, weeks, months and years,
they would face it together with combined strength and trust.

Mulder felt soft breathing against his neck and he laid his cheek against her hair, closing his eyes and joining her in sleep.

—X—X—

On the wet street below, a lone figure in a black raincoat stood in the shadows. Looking up at the apartment building, he saw the light go out behind the curtain in the room on the 4th floor.

Smiling to himself, he disappeared into the night.

—X—X—

END OF STORY

Author’s Note: All the references to Qatar, the UFO incidents reported back in history, and people named are real. I didn’t make them up — I did a lot of research. I learned a lot, and I wanted to pass it on.

M.

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