

## On Untying the Endless Knot, and Other Improbable Things

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# **On Untying the Endless Knot, and Other Improbable Things**

by [secondsflat](#)

## Summary

A casefile revolving, in part, around the events in Demons. Mulder accepts an assignment relating to one of his and Scully's past cases. With Mulder still suffering tranquilizer-induced seizures, how will he and Scully deal with how unexpectedly personal the case suddenly becomes?

# Chapter 1

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MONDAY, APRIL 21, 1997

OUTSIDE CHATTANOOGA, TN

6:23 PM

"I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you about this case. Turn right here."

Scully slows and steers the car toward Mulder's outstretched hand onto a narrow, tree-lined road. In the far distance, wind turbines churn sluggishly in the thick Tennessee air. Sometimes Mulder enjoys hoarding information and doling out little details sparingly, she knows, like they are a precious commodity that shouldn't be wasted on inopportune moments, like briefings. Or Monday nights. Or when your partner asks for them. Scully rolls her eyes.

He used to do this more commonly several years ago, back when he didn't know how much he could trust her. She still affords him the small luxury once in awhile, when she is feeling particularly generous or nostalgic, but she admits to herself that it's slightly different now because she trusts his judgement more, too, even if they don't always agree on exactly why they are investigating a case.

But it's still annoying.

The car is hot. Scully feels full of sparks and flame, like a Catherine wheel, and wound just as tight. She turns the air conditioner up. When she's irritated, like she is now, she simply refuses to indulge him, preferring instead to just wait him out. It's a curiously satisfying form of revenge to see him fidget on long car rides, practically begging her to ask for information. "That's not surprising, Mulder, since you've hardly been forthcoming at all."

"Who, me?" The cold air makes his whole body tingle unpleasantly, and combined with the road noise and passing trees, he is starting to feel just a little claustrophobic in his skin. It's harder to concentrate on the map. Mulder angles the vent away from his face and loosens his tie.

If Scully notices his discomfort, she either chooses not to mention it or thinks he deserves it. She wouldn't be entirely wrong.

"I just think an everyday, run-of-the-mill murder and kidnapping is too straightforward to be an X-File."

Mulder closes one eye and rubs his temple, leaning his head back against the seat. "Jesus, Scully, run-of-the-mill? Maybe you need a vacation or something." Outside his window,

farmland stretches for miles.

It's obvious he is not going down without a fight. Fortunately, four years of working with Fox Mulder has taught Scully the most efficient way to gather details when she needs to: remove just the right brick, and the whole tower will come tumbling down nicely.

"Well, what did the local PD find at the crime scene?"

There is a subtle shift in the energy inside the car as Mulder suddenly becomes more animated, shifting his weight in his seat and gesticulating with his hands as he talks. Scully's nose tingles with anticipation. "That's just it, Scully, there is no crime scene. Officials were able to find very little evidence that an event of any kind had occurred. There were no footprints, no blood spatters, no bodies; hell, the grass where the suspect ostensibly shot the male victim wasn't even flattened. The suspect was seen forcing a woman to leave the area at gunpoint, but no one has been reported missing recently in the surrounding areas. There's essentially nothing to warrant an investigation. Except," He pauses, Scully presumes, for effect, "a single bullet was found in the grass. From a Colt 1851 Navy Revolver."

Bingo.

"So we are here because...?"

Mulder feels carsick. He closes his eyes and listens to the pavement beneath the tires, the cicadas outside his window. He's been doing this a lot, lately-- closing off one sense entirely to avoid being overwhelmed with stimuli. Ever since his disastrous final visit to Dr. Goldstein last week, in fact-- which ended with him hallucinating in the attic of his family's old summer house and Scully about twelve inches from a gunshot to the head-- he's had to learn to slow down and focus in an attempt to prevent himself from seizing. He's gotten a little better at it. What he has found, though, is that his senses tend to be just a bit sharper, crisper, like someone has fine-tuned a staticky radio station in his brain. Whatever Scully said, the procedure did have some benefits, but he generally agrees with her conclusion in hindsight: he needs trepanation like he needs a hole in the head.

Which is to say, sometimes.

"Mulder?" He feels the back of her fingers rest briefly on his forehead, then cheek.

"I'm fine, Scully. It's not... I just need a second."

Scully sighs. "What you need is bed rest and antiepileptics. It's irresponsible to be pushing yourself like this so soon after such a traumatic brain event."

"Then get ready, because you're really going to hate this. The murder allegedly took place in the large field on the property belonging to two of the witnesses."

"Why is that significant?"

"Because," Mulder says, cracking open an eye to watch her as he winds up for the punch, "it's the property previously owned by our friends in the Temple of the Seven Stars."

There have been a precious few cases that have prompted Scully to momentarily abandon her carefully composed façade. The first one he can recall was that time they were in the woods with all those damn little green bugs. The second time it was probably that flukeman thing. Those moments are funny, now, in hindsight, though they're getting fewer and farther between over the years as her naïveté wears off. Still, Mulder secretly relishes them afterwards each and every time they happen because they are a little glimpse back to a different version of her, one whose sense of morality was so much more innocently black and white. It's kind of ironic, he thinks, how those memories can sometimes make him feel homesick for a time when he was missing time. The very plausible state of Oregon can kiss him right on the ass, though.

And here is Dana Scully now, gaping at him from the driver's seat like a dying molly fish. Mulder grins triumphantly.

"Mulder, no. This is crazy. You're crazy."

"I get that a lot."

"Did you even run this by Skinner?"

"You know the saying, 'it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission,' Scully?"

She exhales loudly. "You shouldn't even be *at work*, let alone investigating a case to which you're extremely likely to have a strong emotional attachment." Scully thinks of Melissa Riedal-Ephesian sitting in the hypnotherapist's office, begging Mulder to remember their past lives together. She thinks of Melissa, poisoned and dead, still warm in Mulder's arms. A chill runs through her.

"Aren't you even a little intrigued?"

She turns to him. "Honestly? No. There are hundreds of battle sites in the south. The bullet is obviously a Civil War artifact. I'm sure people find them all the time."

"Oh," he feigns innocence, annoyingly, "They also found the gun and a bloody pocket knife a couple yards away. I just thought the bullet made a more intriguing story."

God dammit.

"It was probably a case of domestic violence. Maybe a cheating spouse or..." She's grasping at straws and they both know it.

Really, she shouldn't be surprised that they're here. Mulder is a conundrum; he always has been. The contradiction of ego wrapped in self-doubt is one she has long associated with him. She has, on occasion, thought him both a genius and insane and been proven right each time. Mulder does absolutely nothing by halves.

"Come on, Scully. I feel fine. We're already here." He tries very hard to keep from sounding like he's begging for her understanding. Scully seethes quietly next to him. "Tomorrow we'll

just go talk to some people, look around a little, and leave. You'll throw around some scientific explanations and we'll be back in DC in time to watch Jeopardy. No big deal."

Scully sighs. "No, it never is."

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BROWNING MOTEL

ROOM 28

6:42 PM

Mulder drops his bag on the bed and immediately moves to open the window. This room feels stale, but there is a crackling electricity to the air here that he hasn't felt for a long time, especially not in DC, and it makes him feel edgy. He can't remember if this is the motel they stayed at the last time they were near Apison, but he wouldn't be surprised since its location relative to the areas of interest and its suspiciously low cost would've made Skinner absolutely weep with joy.

Were there roaches? He kind of remembers roaches.

Mulder stands at the window for a moment while a breeze blows through, stirring the heavy curtains and freeing the dust trapped inside. Scully's moving around in her room on the other side of the connecting door. Truthfully, he kind of agrees with her: they probably shouldn't be here, though he would never admit it. Not because of the seizures or anything-- he doesn't give a shit about that-- but mostly because he should try to be less of a selfish asshole sometimes, just in general, really, but especially now that Scully's sick.

He just feels so lost lately, like he did when he was a kid and no one talked about Samantha after her abduction. A couple months after it happened, he came home from school to find all of Samantha's toys had been packed in boxes and moved to the attic, the new guest room too clean and adult-looking to have ever belonged to an eight-year-old girl. Sometimes, back then, it was like she'd never existed, and he would wonder if he'd even had a sister at all or if he'd just imagined her in great detail. Even as an adult he occasionally finds himself thinking things like *Samantha liked The Osmonds, and Nancy Drew books, and the color yellow*, like some kind of self-appointed guardian of her memory, because who else will remember all the little things that made her? If not for him, she might have already slipped away.

But it's harder in some ways with Scully, because she chooses not to talk about her cancer, and so Mulder doesn't bring it up, either.

He sighs and moves away from the window to sit on the bed. Melissa Riedal-Ephesian died in the field he and Scully would be visiting tomorrow morning. He'd died in that field, once, too. And now there'd been another murder.

Obviously, he didn't love Melissa... not in this lifetime, anyway. He barely knew her, in fact, although parts of her consciousness certainly seemed to know him, or at least past versions of him. The guilt he felt at her passing had more to do with his frustration at the injustice of her life and death than feelings of loyalty because of a past life spent together, although he thinks those feelings were there, too. But there's something enormously appealing about the idea that, even in his darkest moments, even before Scully, he has never really been alone.

Mulder lays back, eyes closed and hands folded behind his neck. He's intrigued by this case, sure, and regardless of all his emotional, back-and-forth bullshit he does see a legitimate reason for them to be there. But the fact of the matter is he's been stretched so tight these past few months, driven by emotion and always scrambling for purchase. He feels a keen sense of urgency, lately, and whether he will admit it to himself or not, his personal mission statement has been reduced to a very short list for the foreseeable future: find Samantha, cure Scully. If he's being honest with himself, maybe part of the reason he jumped on this case, one that he logically knows he is way too personally invested in, is so he can finally have an outlet for all those other feelings he doesn't allow himself to feel.

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Scully hates motels.

She especially hates this motel.

Last time they'd been in the godforsaken state of Tennessee, she'd embarrassingly slept all night in one of these beds with a shower cap on her head because she'd seen a dead roach in the bathroom and she'd be damned if any of those little bastards were going to get in her hair.

Unreasonable? Maybe. But Mulder never found out about the shower cap and management had combed the rooms, so she justified her silliness to herself by mentally reciting the diseases that cockroaches have been known to carry.

This time, the staff at the front desk assures her when she asks at their check-in that the motel has been fumigated since their last visit.

Scully opens the door to her room and immediately kicks off her shoes, spreading her sweaty toes against the thin gray carpet. She has come to have a strong distaste for Apison, Tennessee more in the past few months than she knew it was even possible to dislike a geographical location, though it's certainly not for lack of trying. The scenery is beautiful in its own way and the people generally welcoming, except Ephesian, of course, whose idea of Southern hospitality amounted to offering refreshment in the form of poisoned Kool-Aid. But this place, and Melissa Riedal-Ephesian especially, represent to her a certain level of fate or pre-ordination or whatever that, lately, makes her feel very uncomfortable.

Scully moves to the bathroom and begins removing her earrings. She may not have a psychology degree, but it's not hard to see why Mulder needs this case. He needs closure. It's as simple as that. He needs closure about the murders of Melissa and the rest of the cult members, and he needs to get it in a way that feels like work because otherwise he would never allow himself the luxury of grieving. Who is she to deny him that, at least, regardless of her questions about the validity of the investigation?

Mulder wasn't able to save Samantha, or Melissa, or his father, and there is a tiny little part of Scully that acknowledges it has been a recurring theme in his life, that he has apparently been doomed to lose the people who love him. The thought strikes her like a nail in a coffin and she feels under her nose for blood.

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TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 1997

10:27 AM

This morning, their impatience with each other has manifested itself in a petty, fifteen-minute argument about where to get breakfast.

They finally stop at a tiny little bagel and coffee shop simply because it is more or less on the way. A handwritten sign advertising local produce and goods is taped to cooler against the wall; Mulder studies it while Scully approaches the counter and places an order for both of them with the young man working there.

As she is paying, Mulder approaches the counter with something in his hand.

"This was made in Apison?" He asks, holding the brick of cheese out for the young man to see. The label is a plain brown sticker, just the words TEDLOW FARMS, APISON TN in a semicircle around the top with a cartoonish picture of a cow and, beneath in smaller letters, CHEDDAR. Writing along the bottom proclaims, in quotes, "WORLD'S BEST!". Something about it sparks some recognition in Scully, and she realizes that she remembers the last name Tedlow from the police report. The third witness.

"Oh, yeah. There's a dairy farm over there."

"It wouldn't be owned by a woman named Ruth Tedlow, would it?"

The young man shrugs, punching their order into the register. "I have no idea. A woman does deliver it here every week, though, so could be."

Mulder nods and adds the brick of cheese to the counter with the rest of their purchases.

The ride to the local police station is spent mostly in anticipatory silence, except for the few interesting minutes right after breakfast when Mulder had misread the map and Scully lit into him like a firework.

Now, map spread like a napkin in his lap, Mulder sips his coffee gratingly and in regular intervals from the passenger seat. She swallows her annoyance at the sound and instead just tries to focus on the task at hand. It's not really that she's irritated with him, she knows; it's just that she's always found irritation an easier emotion to display than concern or worry, both of which she also feels in abundance. He seems to be a bit on edge this morning... but then



again, that's not entirely unusual for him when they're on a case. Scully, on the other hand, can almost feel her own tension radiating from her body in the tautness of her skin, the stiff feeling in her shoulders. She rubs the space between her eyes with one finger.

Scully pulls into the parking lot of the police station and shuts the car off. They make their way to the front of the building, the remnants of winter still clinging to the ground in muddy brown patches and making the dull gray of the concrete look even more morose. She sidesteps a dead plant whose shriveled leaves reach right out onto the sidewalk.

The police chief, a portly blonde man named Harrison who looks young for his age, meets them at the door and leads them to his office. It's a small, hot room at the very back of the station. Scully notes the wall behind the desk, which is dotted with pictures: in one, Harrison, wearing sunglasses and a life vest, proudly shows the camera the fish on his line. The ruddiness Scully noticed in his cheeks when they met looks twice as emphasized by his sunburn in the picture. In another shot, a group of men with large bellies relax at a barbeque, toasting the photographer with brown glass bottles. It all feels a little too personal for Scully. She looks away.

Harrison briefs them on everything they've got. It turns out to be very little. "At approximately 6:10 AM on the morning of April 19th, a call was placed to 911 about an alleged murder at the Apison farmhouse. Officers were dispatched shortly thereafter, and upon seeing no immediate danger began investigating the area and gathering information from the three witnesses." Harrison's voice is the flat, dry monotone of someone who has given this speech a hundred times. Still, he is nothing if not professional in his delivery. "Two of the witnesses, Peter Stadler and his wife, April, reported seeing two males and a female having an altercation before the suspect-- one of the males-- dragged the second male approximately twenty yards and shot him, leaving him for dead. The suspect then apparently forced the woman, at gunpoint, to leave the area, though the direction they traveled is unclear. Probable kidnapping. All three witnesses heard indistinct yelling."

Scully crosses her arms and shifts her weight to her back foot. "Any information on the woman who was kidnapped?"

"No, nothing yet, ma'am. No one has been reported missing and the Stadlers and Mrs. Ruth Tedlow could only give us a vague description." Harrison scratches his belly absently.

"What about a description of the perpetrator?"

He sighs and shrugs a single shoulder in half-hearted apology. "Male, maybe 30s or 40s. Approximately six feet or so, using the fence as a guide. Longish brown hair and wearing light colored pants. That's all we've got." He puts his hands on his hips and looks at his feet, which he shuffles a bit, shaking his head. "Our first inclination was that it was a group of antique gun collectors or something just out there shooting who may have had an accident. But that wouldn't explain the complete lack of physical evidence or why the gun was left behind. I have to say, we're a little stumped on this one." Harrison shakes his head. His hair is cropped so close that Scully can see his scalp through it when he turns. She imagines the haircut was a practical decision. "And then there's the pocket knife. The witnesses didn't report seeing a stabbing, but there was blood found on it, clear as day."

Mulder nods. "Could the blood have been from an animal?"

Harrison looks skeptical. "Why would it be?"

"Just trying to examine all angles."

Harrison cocks his head to the side. "I guess it's possible, theoretically speaking, but it's not like the perp was going to defend himself with a pocket knife if he had a gun available. Anyway, the lab is working on an analysis right now. We should have some information for you soon, I hope."

"What about fingerprints?"

He scoffs a bit. "What about them? We couldn't pull anything useful off of the gun. The grass was pretty wet that morning, so that may have been a factor."

Scully shakes her head slightly, eyebrows lowered. "Sorry, but where does Ruth Tedlow come into all of this?"

"She claims to have seen the unknown woman in her cow pasture immediately prior to the alleged murder and kidnapping." He clarifies, somewhat impatiently. "I sent several officers to canvass the woods on the Stadlers' property, hoping to maybe find signs of where the perp had taken the woman, but they turned up nothing. The K-9 unit couldn't even pick up any trails."

There is a beat of silence. Mulder crosses his arms and draws out his bottom lip between two fingers.

"Could we take a look at the evidence?" Scully asks.

"Of course. Follow me."

Harrison leads them into a brightly lit room with old lockers lining the walls. He unlocks one and brings out two evidence bags, placing them delicately on a table in the center of the room.

Mulder steps up to the table and picks up the first evidence bag, which contains the gun. The handle is ivory in color, yellowed like old bones or nicotined teeth. The barrel is long, tapered. It's cumbersome and a bit heavy, unlike his own sleek weapon, and Mulder gently sets it back down on the table. It's clearly an antique; there'd be a certain kind of aesthetic appeal in it if he didn't know what it had been used for.

He moves the gun toward Scully and picks up the pocket knife, which is a solid, dense weight in his hand. The handle is polished wood capped on either end with brass; Mulder can feel its smoothness through the plastic evidence bag. He holds it as though he were using it to cut. It's large, but not overly so-- maybe three, four inches closed-- and Mulder can clearly see dried blood crusting over the hilt and along the blade. The heel of his hand fits comfortably along the shaft, and he realizes that it's because the wood has literally been worn away to accommodate the suspect's grip.

Someone used this knife a lot.

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"So we've essentially got nothing to go on." Mulder says, closing the passenger side door and leaning his head against the headrest. He purses his lips together, the only outward display of annoyance he allows himself to exhibit.

Scully tries to stop herself from muttering sarcastically but doesn't quite succeed. "We never had anything in the first place." She buckles her seatbelt and turns the key, issuing a blast of cool air from the vents.

He slouches in his seat a bit. The rental car is stuffy; the smell of the floral air freshener mixed with the old tobacco scent trapped in the seats is giving him a headache. "Don't forget about the World's Best cheese, Scully."

"If that's the only thing that comes out of this case, I don't think Skinner will approve."

"Maybe we can apologize with the World's Best cheese platter."

The drive to Apison is short, just a few miles from the police station, but it's long enough for the sun to make the internal temperature of the car uncomfortable. Scully pulls into the familiar stone driveway, slowing the car to a crawl. Mulder's heart is beating fast. He wishes he could've convinced Scully he was well enough to drive, if only to give him some feeling of control, no matter how small. He didn't anticipate feeling nervous.

The farmhouse comes into view as they round a gentle curve and Mulder is immediately taken aback. It looks larger than he remembers it; cleaner, too, and more welcoming with a bright, cheery coat of white paint. There are yellow and orange marigolds in window boxes and a vegetable garden started along one edge of the long wooden fence, a gas-powered tiller stalled in the middle. An old grey dog sunbathes by the door.

You'd never know there was a mass suicide here six months ago.

Two horses graze in the field near the house; one is a shiny chestnut brown, the other a dappled white. Mulder looks at them only long enough to note that they are there, and then he avoids looking at the field again. Scully, on the other hand, watches the horses for several long seconds, but she doesn't say anything, just smooths her hair behind her ears and opens the car door.

The first thing Mulder notices when he gets out of the car is the stench. He raises his eyebrows. "Something is rotten in the state of Tennessee," He says.

Scully wrinkles her nose in reply. "If I remember my Intro to Shakespeare class correctly, that line was a reference to the political corruption in Denmark's government. Not cow manure."

Mulder grins and halfheartedly waves a hand in front of his nose. They are apparently downwind of the farm at the top of the hill; he sends a silent thank you up to the big guy that

it's only a balmy 72 degrees outside instead of 90. The thought of having to smell cow shit baking in the sun while he is drenched in sweat makes his stomach turn.

A couple months ago when he'd told Scully he wanted to eventually settle down in a small town just like Home, Pennsylvania, he'd forgotten about cow shit. Jesus Christ.

They stand for a moment observing the property. Last time they were here, the grass was long and brown, the house a sad dilapidated snow cloud grey. There was a chill to the air; not enough to require a jacket, but a sort of sharpness that cut through to the bone when he breathed in. He'd felt especially lonely that winter, he remembers, the weight of his mother's declining health added to his laundry list of personal-but-also-professional problems. Mulder takes a few steps toward the house and cranes his neck to look around the far side. It looks different here, now, in spring. When the Temple of the Seven Stars was using this place, the front yard was filled with broken machinery and old, rusted oil barrels. A useless decaying school bus sat on cinder blocks. It was a junkyard, inside and out.

But all of that is gone, now. The yard is neat and clean, the grass trimmed or kept low in part by the grazing horses. It's strange for both Mulder and Scully to see it so normal-looking.

The hinges on a screen door sound, catching their attention, and Scully turns just as a man steps out. He's barefoot. She sizes him up as he crosses the yard towards them, telling herself it's purely because she's gathering information, and not because... well, just not because. At the very least, it's certainly not because he is tall and slim, dressed in an old pair of work jeans and an untucked plaid shirt, rolled up at the sleeves. She guesses he is probably in his mid fifties, with hair that is a little more salt than pepper.

Well, the case may be questionable but at least the view is nice.

There's something familiar about the way he walks: straight-backed and broad chested, and, Scully thinks, a little like her father. "Hi, you're the FBI agents?" He says. The lack of a Southern accent is notable but not jarring by any means. The man is carrying a mug of coffee by the rim, which he sips from occasionally, curling his forefinger up over his sizeable nose.

"Peter Stadler?" Mulder extends a hand.

"Pete. Nice to meet you." He turns to Scully. His hand is large and calloused and warm from the mug. "Thanks for coming, really." Scully smiles pleasantly. His eyes are very blue.

"I love what you've done with the place, Pete." Mulder says dryly, indicating the fat old dog, a motionless fixture by the door. Pete looks lost until Mulder takes pity on him. "We were here about six months ago on another case."

"Oh!" A sudden understanding appears in Pete's features. "Yeah, thanks. After the previous owners, uh, left--" Pete waves a hand vaguely-- "the bank seized the property and divided it up. My wife April and I moved in not long after. We did a little construction to kind of give the place a fresh start, I guess. Knocked out a couple walls and re-did the living room, things like that. It's a solid house, though." Pete points to the ridge on a hill not far behind the house. "You see the turbines there?" In the distance, Mulder can see a row of white wind turbines lined up neatly and the pressure in his ears fluctuates with every low *whum-whum-*

*whum* of the blades. He winces. Scully doesn't seem bothered by it. "Those are all new, too. They bought one of the lots to expand their farm up there. Used to be a small operation before we moved here, from what I understand, but they bought a bunch of dairy cows and now they pretty much only do cheese."

"That would explain the smell." Scully says in an aside.

Pete chuckles amiably. "You get used to it after awhile." He squints against the late morning sun and looks contemplatively into his coffee cup, swirling the grounds a little as he talks. "Pretty wild what happened here before. All those people..." He sucks in air through his teeth. "I'm not trying to be flippant or crass or anything, but...wow. It's so sad. They didn't deserve that."

Mulder's throat feels dry and painful and all he can do is nod.

"When we moved in, April thought it would be nice to kind of create a memorial, you know? So we planted that little flower garden near where the horses are. 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance,'" He recites, then looks a little embarrassed. "Sorry. 'Hamlet'. I was an English teacher for many, many years."

"What a coincidence; I was an English 101 student for many, many years." Mulder quips.

Pete smiles in appreciation of the joke and pauses to rub the stubble on his chin. "Anyway, the farmhouse by the barn up there is where Ruth lives. I guess you'll probably talk to her soon enough, though."

"Ruth Tedlow?" Mulder has to concentrate to say her name around the thickness of his tongue. His vision suddenly feels very sharp around the edges, images rippling like old glass. It must show on his face because Scully studies him silently for a long moment, eyebrows lowered as she watches him repeatedly contract and relax a fist. He shuffles a little closer to her and away from the field.

"Yeah, she's the other witness. My wife, me, and Ruth." There is a lull in the conversation. "Well, come on inside. We can talk more in there." Pete turns and walks ahead of them toward the door, pausing briefly to lean over and rub the dog's head.

"Married," Mulder sing-songs in Scully's ear.

"Shut up, Mulder." She has the good graces to look embarrassed as they follow Pete to the house. On the cement slab at their feet, a stray cockroach skitters directly into the darkness of a bush. Pete ignores it but Scully sucks in her cheeks and takes a subtle step backwards.

There is a doorknocker mounted on the door shaped like a horse's head with the bridle as the knocker part; it bangs loudly several times when the screen door bounces closed against its frame. Mulder has a moment's hesitation as they enter the little foyer. He can see the large glass door that leads into the house, right to the base of the stairs, the ornate iron work exactly as he remembers. Seeing it again triggers a strange sensation in him, just a little flip of his stomach, the scent memory of vomit and Kool-Aid and the dead weight of Melissa's

body in his arms. He almost turns back to the car. Instead, he closes his eyes, breathes deeply, and steps into the house.

Scully's fingers grasp his arm lightly at the inside of his elbow, but any trepidation he may have had about entering is immediately dissolved when he sees the interior. The wood paneling has been stained dark, the walls scrubbed clean and freshly painted. There are bright area rugs covering the hardwood floors to replace the threadbare ones in Mulder's memory, and lots of sturdy antique furniture. He takes another step into the room. The windows he remembers, cloudy and caked with dust and cobwebs, are now dressed in a white, airy fabric that stirs in the breeze. It feels so much lighter in here; the house has changed so much from six months ago as to be almost unrecognizable, and Mulder releases a breath he didn't know he was holding.

Pete points them to a large living room with a view of the front field and directs them to have a seat. Mulder chooses the long, low couch; Scully sits beside him.

"Can I get you anything? A drink or something? I've got a pot of coffee on..." Pete asks. Both agents shake their heads.

Mulder leans back on the couch and crosses his legs. "Pete, I can't help but notice you don't sound like you're from around these parts."

Pete shakes his head as he takes a seat in the chair across from them. "Not originally, no. April and I are from the Northeast. When we retired, we wanted to have a place where we could keep a couple horses, maybe a couple chickens eventually. Nothing big or anything; we've just always enjoyed riding."

"Whereabouts in the Northeast?" Mulder asks conversationally.

"Vermont, near the border." Pete rubs a hand on the thigh of his jeans. With the other hand, he absently spins the blades of a small windmill knickknack that sits on the table next to him. Having exhausted any interest he has in pleasantries, Mulder settles himself deeper into the couch and just quietly observes for a moment. He likes this part, usually. Details are comforting to Mulder, and not only because they are a necessity in his line of work. Little things that might otherwise escape notice-- a circular stain left on the coffee table from a wet drink; the ashtray that instead of ashes holds three buttons, a Mercury dime, and a pair of fingernail clippers-- tell a story, make these connections more personal. There is a photograph propped against the lamp on the end table; an artfully framed black-and-white of a young woman-- April, he assumes-- leaning primly against a motorcycle with her hands behind her back. She is dressed in mid-century fashion, long skirt and saddle shoes, her hair the tidy, short curls often forced upon young girls by their mothers. By all outward appearances she is just a nice young lady, except for her expression: she looks off-camera, smirking petulantly, one dangerous dimple carving the youthful roundness of her cheek. Mulder smiles. It's a great moment to have caught on film.

Pete swallows before continuing. "I appreciate you coming. It's unsettling, you know? When the police turned up basically nothing I kind of thought I was going crazy." Scully turns her head and looks pointedly up at Mulder, who pushes his mouth to the side and concentrates very hard on the wall. "But I know what I saw."

Mulder nods. "And what does your wife think?"

"She's terrified. She can hardly sleep at night, she's so nervous."

"Where is your wife, Mr. Stadler?" Scully asks, hooking her hands over the knee of her crossed leg. "Can we talk to her?"

Pete rubs one hand over his face briskly. "Um," he exhales loudly. "She's... not well. She got sick not long after we bought the property." His eyes are flat, expressionless. "She had a bad night last night."

Suddenly, Scully is filled with a feeling of dread; it sits like a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach, rolling and crushing her from the inside. In the past few weeks, she has come to know that look she sees on Pete's face very well. She's seen it on the faces of her doctors, and the nurses, and, on occasion, even her partner. She very decidedly doesn't want to be here anymore. "Sick... how?" She asks, but she already knows.

"Cancer. Brain tumor." Scully leans forward slowly and intently, elbows on her knees. She can feel Mulder's knuckles come to rest casually, unconsciously, against the outside of her thigh, in between their bodies where Pete can't see. "We've been in and out of hospitals for the past six weeks. She's been getting worse lately." Pete laughs once, humorlessly, and rubs his forehead. "Hell, seems like everyone's getting cancer around here. Ruth was just diagnosed a few months ago, too. She's got two teenage boys. We thought maybe the runoff from the farm had something to do with it, so we had the water tested and everything, but it came back normal." He sighs. His fingers travel down the bridge of his nose, pinching at his eyes for a moment. "Ugh, sorry, I don't mean to go off like that. We're all stressed, and then to have this happen on top of everything..."

There is an awkward pause until Mulder stands suddenly and moves to the window. "Is this where the murder happened? At the edge of the field?" When Pete nods, Mulder turns back to the view and studies it quietly.

Peripherally, he notices the old dog has moved from its spot by the door and is turning in tight circles, over and over, a shrill whine splitting Mulder's ears even inside the house. He crosses his arms across his chest and frowns. The dog continues, more erratically now. "Does he do that a lot?"

"The circles? Uh, yeah, that started a couple weeks ago. We think he might be going senile. Poor thing's like a hundred or something in human years." Pete says with a little laugh. Mulder nods. Strange, he's never seen a dog act that way before. Tucking the bit of information away for later, he turns his attention back to the field.

"Walk me through it, Pete. What happened that night?"

"Well," Pete takes a deep breath and joins Mulder at the window. "It was a little after six in the morning, and April got up to use the bathroom. She was gone for awhile and I got nervous-- I thought maybe she was sick-- so I got up to find her. She was looking out the window and kind of motioned for me to be quiet, so I walked over to see what she was looking at and she pointed out the three people out there by the old fence, right by that

broken slat." He points. Scully comes up behind them, listening. She can just see the broken slat, but the view is fairly well obstructed by the several large, leafy trees that taper on the inside of the fence, where the horses are. Beyond the fence the trees are much thicker. The hidden view and relative darkness when the murder occurred makes Scully wonder, not for the first time, how much the witnesses actually saw. "I watched them for a couple seconds before I heard all the yelling, then I went to the kitchen phone and called 911 while April stayed in here to relay what was happening. I heard a gunshot, April screamed, and by the time I ran back into the room, all three of the people were gone."

"So you didn't actually see the murder occur?" Scully says this more like an accusation than a question.

Pete seems embarrassed. He cups the back of his neck with one hand. "Well, no, not really. I mean, April was the one who witnessed it. She saw the whole thing, right from the beginning. I just heard the gunshot."

There is a moment of silence while Mulder surveys the field. "I'd like to talk to her, if we could." He says, turning toward Pete. "Do you think she'll be able to answer some questions in a day or two?"

"You can certainly try. She has good days and bad days." Pete says, then hesitates. "Might have to keep it short, though, if you can. I worry about her overdoing it."

Mulder places his hands casually in his pockets. "We'll be as brief as possible. In the meantime, you mind if we go check out the spot where it happened, Pete?"

"No, not at all. Whatever you need." They move together to the door, where Pete shakes each of their hands warmly. He moves aside for Mulder and Scully to step out. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do. April and I are both worried sick about that woman." He seems like such a genuinely nice guy that Mulder doesn't doubt this statement.

"Thanks, Pete. You've been a big help. We'll be in touch." Mulder nods at Pete before placing his hand low on Scully's back, turning her in the direction of the field.

They walk toward the broken slat in the fence that Pete pointed out from the window. From here, it is somewhat difficult to see the house behind them through the tree leaves. What strikes Mulder most, though, is the complete and utter silence of this area. He stands and observes for a moment, unnerved, before finally placing the cause of his discomfort. "Scully, doesn't it seem weird that there's no signs of any wildlife around here?"

She stops and looks around. "Now that you mention it, yeah. It is a little strange."

"Not even any birds..." He mutters.

"Maybe there's going to be a storm."

Mulder points up at the beautifully clear, sunny sky and raises his eyebrows at her. "Was the FBI your second choice after flunking out of meteorology school, Scully?"



Scully gives him a long-suffering look. She watches the high grass knot over Mulder's shoes as he walks toward the fence. "You know, if it weren't for the gun and the pocket knife, I'd be skeptical that the Stadlers saw anything at all."

"Skeptical? Well, that would go against your MO." He grins at her eye roll.

"Prolonged stress can have incredibly adverse effects on the body."

"Sounds like something I told my college girlfriend one night during finals week."

Choosing not to comment, Scully moves closer to the trees and turns so that her back is to the house. "According to Mr. Stadler, this must be where the suspect was standing during the altercation. The victim would've been just about where you are." Scully squares her feet and crosses her arms. "I've gotta say, Mulder, I'm not convinced anyone would even be able to see what was happening out here if they were standing at that window."

Mulder, his back to Scully, touches the gray wood of the broken slat, running his fingers over the rough grain. "Mmm. You may be right, Scully. We'll have to talk to April Stadler to--"

Suddenly, Mulder's knees give and he is leaning hard against the fence. His head... His vision flickers like a television, his senses overwhelmed by static and snippets of conversation so rapid Mulder can't keep up. So much pressure-- He digs the heels of his hands into his temples as the images short circuit through his brain--

*"--to Dalton--"*

*"--so heartbreaking to wait--"*

*"--in your pocket--"*

*"I miss you--"*

There's a fence. This fence. She's here, she came, it's so early. It's in his pocket, soft paper and he can't reach it. Wet. His head is going to burst, oh god, he just knows it. Everything is grey, blue,

red,

red,

red.

Then dark.

"Mulder!"

When he can focus, he is looking down at his hands gripping the fence, fingers white with the effort of supporting his weight. The post feels hard and rough against his back as he swallows lungfuls of tepid air like a drowning man, but it does little to dissolve the pressure in his head. At least he stayed on his feet this time.

"Mulder? Come on, talk to me." His vision is fuzzy, but he notices her for the first time, leaning down directly in front of him and looking into his face. Her hands are under his arms, pulling. "Mulder!"

"Sarah," Mulder breathes. He feels weak and warm, almost like he has the flu. He blinks hard a few times. Finally, his vision clears enough to see the brief look of confusion on Scully's features. And then, all of a sudden, she realizes: Sarah Kavanaugh.

"Mulder--"

"It's okay," he interrupts, forcing a sense of calm into his voice and affecting a terrible genteel southern accent, "I'm just feeling swoony over Whistlin' Joe back there." He grimaces up at her and grips the fence hard, focusing on the roughness of the wood to give his mind something to ground it back into reality. He winces through the pressure in his temples.

"*Swoony*?" She punctuates the word with a little upward lift of her brows.

"Come on," he prods, grinning, "I saw the way you eyeballed him." Distract, distract, distract.

She wants to be stern, but the flush in her cheeks kind of ruins it. "I was not *eyeballing* anyone. And don't change the subject." She pulls him fully to his feet. "We're going to the hospital."

He pulls his arm out of her grasp gently. "Scully, I'm fine. It's just residual effects from the tranquilizer or something." Her lips form a thin line as he brushes seeds off his pants from the tall weeds along the fence. His head is splitting. "We knew this might happen, remember? Besides, I want to interview Ruth Tedlow."

"Later, Mulder. This is serious. If you won't let me take you to the hospital, you at least need to go back to the motel and rest for awhile. I can interview Mrs. Tedlow on my own."

He thinks about arguing with her, even goes so far as to open his mouth in preparation, but stops when he sees the look on her face. "We'll go get some lunch. Okay?" She studies him for a moment, then nods. They start walking back to the car slowly, Scully staying very near to his side.

The ground is muddy and pitted; Mulder's head feels almost like he is swimming as he picks his way carefully through the field. Scully looks up at him with a strange expression on her face. "You shouldn't be here, Mulder. You're obviously still recovering and you're too close to this case."

His teasing voice from before is gone, replaced by one that is quiet and serious and a little sad. "But you are, too, now, Scully."

Scully stops dead, feeling her throat constrict. She touches the back of her neck without thinking but plays it off like she is fixing her hair. "Well, all the more reason for us to get the hell out of Tennessee." Her voice is filled with conviction and emotion and Mulder feels guilt bloom like poison in his chest.

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Continued in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2

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### DAVE'S 24-HOUR DINER

1:21 PM

The diner is Mulder's favorite kind: unpretentious, hygienically questionable, and tables set with paper placemats. Their waitress's name is Marlene, which is just perfect. She wears bright red lipstick and keeps their drinks refilled.

The meal is an unusually somber and plaintive one for them. Mulder's mind is working at half-speed, it feels like, his thoughts trudging through cold molasses to reach coherency. But there is something niggling there that won't let up. What happened to him in that field? He tries to find evidence, any at all, that it was some kind of intense deja-vu experience or something, but he knows the truth: it had been another tranquilizer-induced event. Up until now, his flashbacks have centered on his childhood: a glimpse of Samantha cowering on the stairs; his mother, red-faced and pacing; the Cigarette Smoking Man. Nothing especially cohesive, but he's made a career of putting little scraps of information together into a detailed story. This most recent flashback, though... this one felt different, more like a short-circuit in the hardwiring of the deepest, most hidden part of his brain. A flashback to a past life.

Scully would never buy it.

He takes a bite of his sandwich. But why shouldn't she? The tranquilizer had helped him to remember repressed memories from his childhood, after all; why wouldn't it aid him in digging a little deeper, a little further back in time?

Okay, so a lot further back in time. His inner psychologist, sounding suspiciously like Dana Scully, starts pushing around the term "suggestive memory". But he can't possibly just dismiss all the evidence to the contrary, all the things he and Melissa didn't know they knew. The belief in reincarnation has been taught for thousands of years and by all the world's major religions, after all. It's not something Mulder himself has ever subscribed to, personally, though he has never rejected the concept outright. Religion just makes him uncomfortable.

Sometimes he envies Scully. He envies her certainty, the mainstream acceptance of her own scientifically unprovable beliefs, and the fact that her life quite literally comes with a guidebook that says do this, this, and this and you're doing things right. Sometimes he doesn't even know how to match his socks to his suit, let alone whether he's making the right life choices.

And ever since his visits to Doctor Goldstein, he's not sure if the truths he previously based his whole life around were ever really even truths at all.

So the idea that this flash of a past life has already been corroborated by someone else who was there makes it feel solid, weighty, like something he can finally sink his teeth into and say with certainty yes, this happened. This matters. We can go somewhere from here.

Scully pushes food around on her plate with the flat side of her fork. She has been notably quiet while they eat, but Mulder is a little relieved. His head feels full of water and lead and he's not much in the mood for an argument, good-natured or not. Instead, he tries to draw her into an easy, pleasantly banal conversation with small talk-- how's your mom? What'd you do for Easter?-- but her answers are succinct and distracted.

Mulder puts his sandwich down and takes a drink. He looks at her, then, wilted and pale, and reminds himself that not everything is about him.

Scully's hand is resting on the formica tabletop near her plate; he runs his fingertip in a line between the knuckles of one of her fingers to get her attention before tucking his hand back into his lap. She looks up as if she just remembered he was there.

"I know what you're thinking, Scully. But I don't think we should jump to conclusions. Their cancer could be environmental or even coincidental. There's no reason to assume it was the result of abduction until we can gather more information."

She studies him sharply but briefly. "I know that, Mulder." Her tone is harsher than she intended.

Neither of them talk again for several minutes while they finish eating. Mulder feels a little better now that he has some food in him, but there is a dull ache behind his eyes that bursts in pastel shades and ghost images every time he turns his head. He closes his eyes and pushes the tips of his fingers hard above his eyebrows. "I think..." he starts, rubbing his face with his palms, "I think I would like to go back to the motel for a little while."

Scully looks at him, notes the pallor of his skin and the way his eyes keep not quite focusing on her. She nods. "Okay." She wants to say something more substantial but thinks better of it.

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BROWNING MOTEL

ROOM 28

2:56 PM

By the time they arrive at the motel, Mulder is weak and taciturn. Scully takes his keys from him and opens the door to his room. "Thanks," he mumbles, grimacing. He collapses on the

flowered bedspread and is asleep in minutes.

Scully looks at him for a moment and sighs, involuntarily counting his respirations. She removes his shoes carefully, setting them neatly on the floor near the bed, then gently checks the temperature of his forehead and measures his pulse against her wristwatch before returning to her own room. Leaving the connecting door open just a crack, Scully removes her heels and stretches out on the bed with her laptop.

Her intention is to use this downtime to get some paperwork done, maybe do a little research into the historical significance of the weapons that were found, but her mind feels preoccupied, almost spacey. Two women, living within a stone's throw of each other, both of whom have developed a malignant brain tumor at almost the exact same time. What are the odds?

Pete Stadler said they'd had the water tested. It seemed plausible, that pesticides or chemicals used on the farm could have leached into the water supply and acted as a carcinogen. But the water had come back clean. And why were only the two women afflicted? Why not Pete Stadler, or Ruth Tedlow's husband or sons?

Of course, Scully knows the odds. Or, rather, knows that the chance of it being coincidence is highly unlikely. But there has to be an environmental cause. There has to be. Because the alternative-- that they have just located two more abductees-- is unthinkable.

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23, 1997

TEDLOW FARMS

10:39 AM

Mulder expects the smell of the farm to be unbearable close up, especially because it's warmer today, but it's actually no worse than it was when they were downwind at the Stadlers'. Which, of course, still doesn't mean the smell is in any way tolerable or easy to ignore.

Scully pulls the car to a stop on some grass near a little grove of trees and they both get out. From this high on the hill, Mulder has a bird's-eye view of the entire Stadler residence, including the field where the murder took place. The horses are there again this morning, grazing contentedly. He rolls his sleeves up to the elbows and turns to survey the Tedlow property. There is the farmhouse, where the Tedlows live, which stands next to a large red barn. The barn doors are open and Mulder cranes his neck. It's disappointingly empty, but he hears several loud moos in the distance so the cows must not be far. Next to the barn, almost arranged in a sort of semi-circle, are several more buildings of varying sizes; this, Mulder presumes, is where the Tedlows process cheese. He can see three men working, ducking in

and out of buildings, and he guesses that they are Ruth's husband and teenaged sons. Mulder can just see the cow pasture through the spaces between the buildings.

Scully places a hand on the car, balancing as she attempts to brush some of the dirt from the driveway off of her suede pumps, but just succeeds in rubbing the dirt in. She grimaces and straightens. Maybe pumps were a bad idea.

"Ready?" Mulder asks. Scully nods and they make their way to the front door of the farmhouse, skirting the mud that prevented them from parking closer.

Ruth Tedlow opens the door at their knock. Scully's first thought is odd, but she is struck by how perfectly healthy Ruth looks. She doesn't know what she expected, really, but Ruth is tall and tan, with strong, sturdy limbs and big hands, her short blonde hair curling under a frayed baseball cap. There is no outward indication that she is dying from brain cancer.

Scully pulls out her badge. "Mrs. Tedlow? We're Agents Scully and Mulder from the FBI. We wanted to ask you a few things about the murder that took place on the Stadlers' property."

"Hi, yes. Come on in." She waves them through the door. "Don't worry about your shoes. Dirt's just a fact of life here."

They find themselves in a house built for comfort rather than looks. There are mismatched pieces of furniture in the living room, including a threadbare couch that, Mulder thinks, looks like it would be exceptionally comfortable to sleep on. Framed cross-stitches are hung on several of the walls and a homemade quilt hangs on the back of one chair. There is a homey quality to the place; it feels lived in, here, in a good way. Mulder can't help but make a mental comparison to his childhood home in Chilmark, with its coasters and plastic-covered furniture.

Ruth leads them into the kitchen. "This won't take long, will it?" She asks, pulling out one of the chairs at the oversized table and indicating that they do the same.

There are several loaves of warm raisin bread in glass pans cooling on racks at the far end; Scully breathes in the smell and her mouth waters. She sits, leaning forward and folding her hands on top of the table. "It shouldn't. Did we catch you in the middle of something?"

"It's a farm; there's always plenty to do." Her laugh is breathy and thin.

Scully can see, now that she is closer, a pale pink sunburn spreading delicately over Ruth's cheeks and nose. She can't help but check discretely for any indications of chemotherapy treatment in Ruth's skin and fingernails. "We'll try to keep it brief, then." Scully's smile is polite, if a little distant.

Mulder stands in the room's arched entryway behind Scully. He is quiet for a moment, thinking. "Why don't we talk while you get your chores done, Ruth? Agent Scully is very interested in dairy farming. You can show us around."

Scully gives nothing away, just keeps the cordial smile pasted on her face and narrows her eyes a little. She'll wait to kill him until they're back at the motel.

Ruth blinks, taken slightly aback by the request. She wipes her hands on her jeans. "Oh! Um, sure. Let me just grab my boots. Did you grow up on a farm, Agent Scully?"

They both stand. "Mm, no, not exactly."

The outdoors feels muggy after being in the farmhouse; Mulder swats a determined fly away from his head as they follow Ruth to the barn. There is nothing notable inside except for Ruth's husband and sons, but the cool, dark mustiness is a nice change. It reminds him of the damp basement office. He is almost reluctant to leave when Ruth indicates that they should follow her to the next building, an immense structure that is obviously newer.

Mulder walks through the door and immediately finds himself in a very large room. Huge silver refrigerators and other equipment he can't name are packed densely into the space, making it difficult to see enough to judge the scope of the room beyond the high ceiling. The air in here is warm and buzzing with electricity; Mulder's eyes feel like they are vibrating uncomfortably in their sockets.

"This is where we make and store the cheese," Ruth says. "We used to just do one or two different cheeses and sell at a local farmer's market, but since we bought the land we've been able to expand and sell to some restaurants around town. And we're even looking into some wholesale opportunities for the future, if you can believe it." She smiles and shrugs a little, palms up. "This whole thing's been really great for us."

Mulder thinks back to that dark, gritty room, the floor sticky with Kool-Aid and foamy vomit, filled to the brim with the dead bodies of men, women, and tiny little babies. The watery November sun had shone through the bullet holes in the wall, he remembers; belatedly, he realizes that must be the wall Pete Stadler had had knocked down. He feels a flash of anger at Ruth's casual tone and makes a noncommittal noise deep in the back of his throat. Scully shifts her weight uncomfortably.

"Mrs. Tedlow," she says, keeping her voice neutral. "Where was the kidnap victim when you saw her?"

Ruth's smile fades slowly, like the true reason for their visit had just occurred to her. She starts walking out of the far end of the room, past the long line of humming refrigerators, and gestures for them to follow. "Come this way; I'll show you."

She leads them out near the gentle sloping hill that makes up the cow pasture. Thankfully, the ground is still fairly hard and the grass here is dull and long but mostly matted down; it itches a little on Scully's ankles through her pantyhose. Dodging either mud or manure, Scully laments her pumps, which she is about one cow pie away from resigning to the motel trash can. The cows, huddled under several large, shady trees at the far end of the pasture, are completely unconcerned, which is good because she is sure she looks ridiculous.

Maybe when they get back to DC, she'll buy some new pumps and send Mulder the bill.

Wind turbines line the small ridge that overlooks both the pasture and the Stadlers' house a short distance below; there is little wind today and they churn sluggishly. Still, they're



impressive, Scully thinks. She shades her eyes and looks up toward the top of the nearest one. Standing this close, she can see that it's much bigger than she would've thought.

Ruth stands in front of Mulder. She points a finger and traces a path in the air along the trees just past the turbines. "She came from somewhere over there. I was up milking the cows and I watched her walk down the hill and into the Stadlers' yard, but I didn't see anything more after that. Just heard some yelling and the gunshot."

Mulder looks from the path to the turbine. He takes a few steps closer to it, moving his suit jacket back and placing his hands on his hips. A mangy-looking barn cat, belly sagging with milk, emerges from a bush nearby and winds itself around Scully's leg. She toes it away discretely. "And you didn't think it was strange that this woman was trespassing on your property at six o'clock in the morning?" Scully raises her eyebrows.

Ruth gives her a slightly impatient look. "Of course I thought it was strange. But to be honest, I thought she was just one of the older girls from the Amish farm a couple miles down the road. She was kind of dressed that way. Like, old-fashioned. She had a long skirt and stuff." She shrugs. "But I know the sheriff checked it out and all their kids were at home, so..."

Mulder turns back to the conversation. Pressure builds in his inner ear but he ignores it. The cat, finding no friend in Scully, trots to Mulder and rubs its face on his pants. He ignores that, too. "Did you call out to her? Try to get her attention?"

Ruth shakes her head. "No. I mean, I thought she was Amish; what was she gonna do? It's not like she was gonna steal my cattle or whatever in a skirt like that. I watched her for a minute or two and then when I saw she was headed that way, I just assumed she was cutting through the pasture to get to the main road. People do it sometimes."

Mulder nods. "I see. Can you tell me about the wind turbines, Ruth?"

Ruth smiles, obviously proud. She shades her eyes and looks up to the top of the nearest turbine. "Aren't they great? We use the electricity generated from them to run most of the electrical equipment on the farm, then whatever extra electricity there is gets sold to the utility company. It's a good arrangement; we've been trying to find ways to save money ever since we started expanding the farm, so this has been working out pretty well so far."

"Are the cows ever bothered by them?"

She thinks for a minute, then shakes her head. "No, they don't seem to be. Sometimes they'll go right up to the base and stand, if there's a little shade."

Scully is quiet, surveying the pasture, while Ruth adjusts her baseball cap. After several long seconds, when she has seen all she needs to, she turns back to Ruth. "Mrs. Tedlow, I think we're done out here. Maybe we could sit and talk somewhere more comfortable now."

Ruth nods, putting her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "Sure, let's go back to the house. We can chat in the living room." She moves past Scully toward the farmhouse. Scully turns on her heel, mindful of the unsavory things she would rather not step in, and begins to follow. She looks back over her shoulder when she realizes Mulder isn't coming.

"Mulder? What's wrong?" He is standing near the turbine, arms crossed over his chest.

"I don't know. Do you taste that?"

"Do I... What?" She hopes he's not referring to the cows, because that seems to be what is mostly permeating her sense of smell and taste right now and she would prefer not to think about it.

"Like a metallic taste in your mouth?" Scully looks at him quizzically. "No, I feel okay. It's just a weird sensation..." he trails off, looking around the pasture.

"I don't taste anything. Are you sure you feel okay?"

He ignores her question, hesitating. "I think we should do some testing here."

"What kind of testing?"

"When I know, you'll be the first person I tell." He takes one last look toward the turbines. "Come on, Scully."

Inside the house, Ruth pulls off her tall boots. "Let's talk right in here," she says, indicating the room with all the mismatched furniture. "I need to sit down for awhile. I just have absolutely no energy lately." She laughs apologetically.

As she turns into the room, Mulder's eyes involuntarily go directly to the back of her neck, right to the space between her hair and the neckline of her shirt.

Nothing.

There is no bump, no mark. The skin there is smooth and pink, freckled from the sun. Mulder is unsure how to feel about this information.

Sitting on the well-worn couch, he lowers his voice, leaning forward and speaking gently. "Ruth, Agent Scully and I learned from Pete Stadler that you recently were given a difficult diagnosis."

Ruth has taken a seat in an overstuffed chair to their right, tucking her feet up underneath her body. She looks slightly taken off guard by the statement and her smile falters just a bit. "Yeah. Um..." She takes a big breath and tucks her short hair behind her ears. "I'm not sure how much he told you, but, uh... I've got a malignant brain tumor."

Scully can feel her heart beating fast. She tries to ignore it and instead focuses on making her features as neutral as possible. Mulder nods. "How long ago were you diagnosed?" He asks.

"Ah... About two months, I think?" Her eyes are very bright, suddenly, the color offset by a redness appearing at the outer corners. "I don't... I try not to think about it when I don't have to." She barks out a laugh, humorlessly. "I've got so many other damn things to worry about."

"I understand." Mulder shifts a little in his seat. He can feel Scully beside him, tense and stiff and paying very close attention.

She knows what his next question will be, but she doesn't want him to ask it. Not because she's afraid of the answer; the question has become too personal, too weighty. Over the past several months, Mulder has tried his hardest to understand, treating her too delicately at times and focusing his anger as an outlet in the best ways he knows how: taking as much as he can upon himself and searching, always searching. She thinks back on all the occasions he has accused her of being intentionally private or unemotional around him, and decides that, in some ways-- at least since her diagnosis-- Mulder is exactly the same.

It's not that she is unfeeling. It's that sometimes she feels too much, emotions sparking in her stomach like gasoline and lit matches, and she is afraid that if she opens her mouth, oxygen will seep in and she will explode, scattershot, in reds and greens.

She reaches down inside herself and feels that flame now, constant and red hot. Scully has a strange kind of camaraderie with this woman whether or not she knows it, one Mulder could never come close to understanding, the same she felt with the other women of the MUFON group. She steadies the matches in the pit of her stomach and asks, "Ruth... Have you ever experienced lost time?"

Ruth looks at her, uncomprehending. "I'm not sure what you mean...?"

"Have you ever been unable to account for your whereabouts for an extended period of time?"

She looks confused and frowns a little. "No, I don't think so."

Scully releases a breath and looks at Mulder out of the corner of her eye. She didn't realize until this very moment that she had been preparing herself to hear of Ruth's abduction. She had expected it so fully that she hadn't even considered other possibilities, not really. She looks at Mulder, silently cueing him to take the lead.

Mulder rubs his hands together. "Mrs. Tedlow," he says, standing, "thanks for your time and the tour of your farm. We'll be in touch soon." Ruth unfolds herself from the chair; they make their goodbyes and leave her at the door.

The walk to the car is long and silent. As they get nearer, Scully pulls the keys from her pocket, but Mulder stops her with a hand on her shoulder. "I think it was Sarah."

She turns to face him, confused and sidestepping out of his grip. "What are you talking about?"

"The woman Ruth saw. I think it was Sarah Kavanaugh."

Scully cocks her head to the side. "Mulder--"

"I know, Scully. You don't believe in ghosts. But it kinda fits what we know so far, doesn't it?"

"Except that ghosts aren't real, you mean?" She crosses her arms emphatically, having mostly convinced herself that the visions she saw on their last case-- the one involving bowling alley

employee and unwitting medium Harold Spuller-- were simply creations of her mind brought on through extreme stress and illness and through the power of suggestion. "And what do we even really know? A woman walked through a field. That doesn't exactly narrow it down."

"No, listen, we know she was here during her lifetime. Even Ruth said the woman she saw she was dressed strangely. Would it be such a stretch to put two and two together and assume that the flashback of Sarah and this mystery woman are related, somehow, at the very least?" What he doesn't tell her is that he mostly just has a strong feeling, a hunch, that this is the case.

"...Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Humor me."

Scully shrugs and lifts her eyebrows. "Well, it probably goes without saying that ethereal entities wouldn't be able to manipulate corporeal objects. Like a gun, for instance."

"Yeah, but imagine the autopsy if we found the victim's ghost body." The delight on his face is almost too much for Scully.

"That's a pretty big 'if', Mulder." Scully winces. "You wouldn't really make me autopsy a ghost, would you?"

Mulder puts his hands in his pants pockets. "After four years, you don't know me better than that?" He leans toward her conspiratorially. "I would, yes."

Scully rolls her eyes but makes no move to get in the car. Mulder looks a little uncomfortable, suddenly, squinting against the sun and looking down the driveway to the main road.

"She didn't have a chip, Scully." He says quietly.

Scully sighs, placing her hands on her hips and glancing down at her feet. "I know." She looks up at him. "I checked, too."

"So the cancer could be environmental." Mulder moves to the passenger side and braces his hands on the top of the car. He is starting to feel a little disconnected and fuzzy again. He tries very hard to concentrate on the conversation, but there is a high-pitched buzzing deep in his ear that is hard to ignore.

"It could be, theoretically." Scully pauses. "The obvious question is whether or not the cheese itself is contaminated somehow."

"I think it's unlikely, but it wouldn't hurt to find out when the Health Department was here last. And we could check the hospitals in the area, see if they have an unusually high number of cancer patients." Mulder squints. His vision pulsates with every beat of his heart; he tries very hard to act normally, to convince himself it's just from the heat.

Scully thinks for a minute. "We could check the health data profile for this county. The local health department should have a copy." She shifts her weight. "It would have a record of the

types and frequencies of cancer diagnosed here; we could determine if there's a connection."

"Let's do that. Lucky for us they only sell locally, huh?" Mulder slows his breathing, deliberately taking full, deep breaths and focusing on filling his lungs. His breakfast roils in his stomach. In his head, he begs Scully to get in the car. If he could just sit down...

Scully narrows her eyes. "Mulder, are you--?"

He is vaguely aware of pain in his knees as slams into the ground. He is falling forward, his jaw clenched tight and eyes screwed shut, grasping his head.

And then--

--he is Sullivan Biddle, Confederate soldier. His vision wavers for a moment before finally settling, shimmering along the edges of his eyesight, yellows and reds in watercolor smudges. It is dark, or dawn; the world is silent and crisp with cold. He is in the field. There are bodies around him, but they are not dead bodies. Sleeping, perhaps. He is trying to be quiet.

The grass is wet and sticky with hoarfrost; he feels it on his ankles and in his bones, sharp as pins. He gathers the wool of his uniform, heavy and damp, closer to his body. Strangely, wet wool is a smell he has come to find a small amount of comfort in. He sticks to the inside of the treeline and follows the fence.

There is a bulky weight to his pocket and he reaches a hand in to feel a folded piece of parchment paper, soft as buttery leather and thickly creased. He knows with complete certainty that it is for Sarah, that he has written it for her, but he has no memory of what it says. It doesn't matter.

He stops, waits for her. She will come. The darkness and trees will afford them some privacy, for which he is grateful, but he still knows he is tempting fate by meeting her at all.

He waits a long time. She will come.

He leans against a tree and worries until he sees her, cloaked in wool and anticipation. She smiles as she approaches.

"Sullivan," she breathes, the warm air creating a white fog around their faces that makes his eyes water. They study each other for a long moment, saying nothing, until Sarah catches her breath. "It is so heartbreaking to wait." She says. She grasps his wrists, holding them meaningfully still in between their bodies. "I miss you."

The phrase should fill him with longing, with love and tenderness; instead, he feels a crackling of unease throughout his body, one he can't explain. The feeling grows larger and more forceful, squeezing air from his lungs and echoing in his head, bigger and louder until--

--"Mulder!"

He gasps hugely, ripped from the flashback with the force of cannon fire. He coughs and sputters like he is drowning in an ocean and Scully dragged him onto dry land.

He is flat on his back. He can feel that now, the ground hard beneath his head and small little things digging into his spine and shoulders. They might be musket balls, he thinks. Was he shot? "Mulder, can you hear me?" He is panting. It's so hot. He clutches at his shirt, expecting to feel the scratchy wool of his uniform, and is confused when he encounters only cotton. "Mulder?" She says again. His vision seems too bright and flat, cartoonish; he feels like he is floating. Slowly, he finds Scully's eyes and nods.

She notices the physical symptoms of nausea a second before Mulder feels them and turns him onto his side as he vomits. He raises himself up on his elbows and spits, rubbing the sweat from his face with one hand.

"I'll call an ambulance." She helps him sit the rest of the way up, slowly and carefully, propping his back against the car door.

His head feels like it's in a vice. He closes his eyes, pinching them hard between a forefinger and thumb, his elbows resting on his knees. "Jesus Christ, Scully, just get me out of here."

She feels a flash of anger and wants to chastise him for his complete and utter disregard for his own health. She wants to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he sees reason, or else bodily throw him into the car and drive him to the hospital herself.

Somewhere beneath her anger, though, Scully is introspective enough to realize that it's so easy for her to get angry and blame him for his condition. His seizures make sense, after all. Drill a hole in your head, fill it with tranquilizer, suffer traumatic brain injury. A perfectly logical progression from point A to point B, and in his case, a perfectly preventable one.

But cancer. Who can she get mad at for that?

Mulder registers her silence and leans his head back against the car, eyes closed. "Scully, please. I just wanna lie down for awhile."

She feels her anger falter at his tone, pleading with her not to push it. There's a large, selfish part of her that wants to ask him how he has the nerve to be so reckless with his health right now, right when she so desperately needs him to be passionate and stubborn and insubordinate and heartbreakingly thoughtful, and all the other beautiful things that make him undeniably Mulder, because cancer has made her unsure of everything else in her life. But there's another part of her-- more than a little part-- that can empathize, that knows too well what it's like to feel out of control of her own body. It's the same part of her that sometimes just wants to be done with treatments and hospitals and MRIs and go home, to her own bed, to finish dying.

Four years ago, when she'd first been partnered with Fox Mulder, it used to break her heart to see the genuine bemusement on his face when she was kind to him. She thinks of that Mulder now, the one who needed a friend more than he needed a partner, and feels what was left of her resolve crumble and break. Slowly, gently, she helps him into the back of the car, where he folds himself delicately onto the seat and closes his eyes.

\*

"What's my prognosis, Doc?"

Scully clicks the penlight off and tosses it next to Mulder on the bed. He'd slept deeply on the ride from Ruth Tedlow's farm to the motel, not even waking when she parked the car, but he'd seemed more steady on his feet when she helped him walk to her room. Scully straightens, crossing her arms and rocking back on her heels. "You'll live until I decide when would be the most opportune time to strangle you."

"Ooh, Scully. You promise?"

"Mulder." She warns, putting her hands on her hips.

"Relax. At the suggestion of our friend Mr. Bruckman, I'd rather not tempt fate." She doesn't respond, just raises her eyebrows. He rubs at his jaw. It is dusky with hair. "How long was I out?"

She hesitates. "You seized for roughly two minutes."

He shakes his head a little before continuing quietly. "This time it was different, Scully. I was Sullivan Biddle. I was experiencing a past life in first person." If she feels any shock at his claim, her face is a blank slate. "I had a letter for Sarah; I was meeting her at that fence." That letter... there's something important about it. There's some kind of answer there, but his brain, frustratingly, isn't making the connections. He can feel it eating away at him.

Scully cocks her head to the side and draws her shoulders up. "Even if what you're saying is true, your past life regression sessions were so full of inconsistencies they sounded like a bad B-movie."

Mulder shifts uncomfortably. "Like what?"

Scully takes a deep breath, which she lets out as she talks like she is a deflating balloon. "Well, for starters, how could the Cigarette Smoking Man possibly have been a Gestapo officer in Poland during World War II? He must be in his late sixties, Mulder. He's too old to have had such a recent past life. And even if he was in Poland at that time, he would've still been just a kid."

"So he ages well."

"Mulder, I'm serious."

"I said evil returns as evil, right? Maybe I was conflating two separate lives."

"Okay," Scully exhales loudly through her nose. "But how do you explain Melissa's alleged past life as Sidney, who lived during the Truman administration, if by your own account she would've been a Polish man detained in a German concentration camp during the same time period?" Scully starts pacing a little as she talks. "And what about your relationship with Melissa in this lifetime? If you really were so important to each other, it doesn't make sense that the reason she holds any significance for you whatsoever right now is only because of the belief that you were connected in the past. Other than that, she could've been any other

person we've interacted with at any point in our careers who was in and out of our lives in a matter of days. And, as her husband, shouldn't Ephesian factor into the scenario somehow?"

Mulder bristles, defensive. "Look, Scully, I don't know what to tell you. What about all the other stuff that checked out? You saw the county register yourself at the hall of records." He is more agitated now. "I'm not enough of a romantic to believe Melissa and I are star-crossed lovers or anything--" he ignores the dip of her chin and little 'o' shape of her mouth--"but even despite the inconsistencies in our stories, aren't there enough strange coincidences here for you to at least give the notion of past lives some consideration?"

"Mulder. How do you know you didn't just confabulate being reincarnated with Melissa's soul after *she herself* suggested it to you?" Mulder starts nodding dismissively as she makes the point, which Scully finds supremely irritating. She makes a sharp point with her tongue and sticks it into her lip at the corner of her mouth. "Let's assume you're right about the past lives. You're still putting your blind faith in visions you're having as a result of seizure activity in your brain that may or may not even be true."

Mulder stands, pursing his lips. "I'm not asking you to stay here with me. If you feel like this is a waste of your time, Scully, if you feel like you have something better to do--"

"Mulder!"

"No. There's something going on with that field. The murder, the cancer, the flashbacks. All the pieces are there, you just refuse to see it."

She tips her chin up, a defiant edge to her jawbone. She enunciates her words very carefully. "There is nothing to investigate here, Mulder. Nothing. You are looking for connections that just aren't there."

"Listen, do me a favor and don't worry about me, Scully, okay? I'm going to go make some phone calls. I'll see you later." He crosses the room to the connecting door. He is almost through it and into his own room when his cell phone rings. Impatiently, with one hand on the doorknob, he takes the phone out of his pocket.

"Mulder." He says sharply. His tone softens slightly when he hears the voice on the other end. "What did you find?" Scully watches him carefully, sees him draw in a breath and hold it in, his eyes betraying nothing. "We'll be right there." Mulder ends the call without waiting for a response. He doesn't look at her when he speaks.

"That was Officer Harrison. They have a positive ID from the DNA they got off of the pocket knife."

"It was human blood?"

He turns the phone in his hand. "Yeah."

"Whose?" Scully asks. She notes his posture and can't help but feel a twinge of unease. Mulder looks up to face her now, his eyes guarded.



"Yours."

\*\*\*

Continued in Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING for a very brief and non-explicit scene with allusions to sexual assault.

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APISON POLICE DEPARTMENT

2:31 PM

"There has to be some kind of mistake."

Harrison grimaces, palms up and splayed in apology. The desk next to him is stacked high with papers and manilla envelopes teetering precariously on top. "We thought so too, ma'am, so I had them run the results through the FBI database again. And, well... you're a 99.99% match."

Scully opens her mouth slightly to respond but doesn't know what to say. She turns to Mulder; he is perfectly composed. "But how could that be?"

Mulder squints, meeting Harrison's gaze steadily. The dark wood of the floor and wall paneling makes Mulder's eyes take on more of a brownish hue instead of his usual drab green. The effect is sobering; it darkens his whole face. "I'm assuming all of your lab equipment is up to date? All of your computer software?"

"Listen," Harrison says, pulling his mouth to the side and resting one hand on the nearest stack of papers. The whole tower wobbles a bit but ultimately stays upright. "I was skeptical at first, too. But the DNA doesn't lie. Now," he breathes in deeply, looking at Scully, "the question is how did your blood get on that knife?"

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Agent Scully is just as confused about that as you are." Mulder says shortly. He feels strangely energized after his previous anger with Scully, itching for a fight. If he weren't grounded by the soles of his feet, the charge running through him might electrocute someone.

The thing is, it makes some weird, perfect sense to him that the blood was identified as Scully's. He doesn't know why it didn't surprise him, but if he thinks about it, he realizes that his subconscious made the unlikely discovery long before he was even aware of it. He just... knew.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me!" Harrison says. He places a hand on his fleshy hip and rocks backwards slightly. "I'm not implying anything. It'd be easy enough to prove you weren't involved, if it ever came down to that." His genial wink and tone of voice suggests that he does, indeed, think it might come down to that. Scully swallows, irritated. His nonchalance is really pissing her off.

"I'd like you to run the blood tests again."

"But, ma'am, you don't understand." Harrison smiles, indulging her. Scully's blood boils at the condescension of his flippant little laugh, that special Good Old Boy brand of misogyny she'd encountered, memorably, right from the time she was eight, killed a snake with a BB gun, and vowed to everyone afterward that she would become a veterinarian. She clenches her jaw before Harrison even finishes his thought. "DNA evidence is concrete. When you test a sample, it--"

"I know how DNA works, dammit. I'm a scientist." Scully snaps, her body tense and taut as a rubber band. She pulls herself up to her full height, lips pursed and eyebrows drawn. "I am requesting, as a federal agent, that you run the test again. So I suggest you either do your job and run it again, *sir*, or I will do it myself."

Harrison puts his cap back on his head quietly, smooths it down over his shorn hair. His neck reddens deeply; it climbs all the way up his chin and over his ears.

"I'll have the lab get right on that, ma'am." He says, and disappears into an outer room.

Mulder waits a beat and then lets out a long, low whistle. "Jesus, Scully. You castrated him." He is oddly proud. Mulder turns to her slightly, his excess of energy satiated for the moment as he gathers his suit jacket from the back of a hard wooden chair. He lowers his voice. "Do you think running the tests again will turn up anything different?" He's not exactly convinced; Scully can hear it in his voice. She doesn't answer him, just closes her eyes and touches her fingers to her sinuses. She thinks about all the other blood tests she's subjected herself to, lately, in hopes of getting different answers.

Scully cups one elbow and turns her necklace in her fingers mindlessly as Mulder puts his jacket on. She must have been quiet for too long, because he places a gentle hand on her shoulder and leans in. "Hey," he says, "don't worry about it. I'm sure they've got some pimply grad student back there doing all the labs. There's bound to be some errors, statistically." He gives her shoulder a squeeze. "Besides, we've got a hot date with some filing cabinets."

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HAMILTON COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

3:34 PM

Mulder's badge gets them access to an upstairs room with a few computers and a couple bookshelves, and a resigned admonition to "be quick, because we're closing in half an hour."

The room is well-lit; a row of tall windows covers one wall and the late afternoon sunlight coming in highlights the red in the hardwood floor. Scully sits at one of the computers, a giant, bulky thing that runs noticeably slower than her sleek, government-issued laptop back at the motel. She accesses the data profile from the desktop and begins skimming the information there. Mulder leans over her shoulder, reading, until Scully looks at him in a significant way. He sighs, places his hands behind his head and moves to a window.

He feels restless, full of radio static and electrical current, his extremities like coiled wire. There is something here he can't put his finger on. He closes his eyes. The feeling is grating, frustrating, like he knows he's missing something but he doesn't know what. He can almost feel the leftover hallucinogen still in his brain, dulling the knife edge of his intuition and making him sloppy.

He's not completely useless, however. It hasn't escaped his notice, for instance, that the severity of his seizures seem to be directly related to the time he has spent in or near the field. How exactly that ties in to the recent murder/kidnapping, the possible sighting of Sarah Kavanaugh, and Scully's DNA match, though... he's not sure yet.

"Look," Scully says quietly. She points to several charts wrapped in thick black paragraphs of text. "According to this, it looks like the frequency of cancer in Hamilton County is statistically insignificant when compared the state rate. Not just brain cancer, either; breast cancer, lung cancer... the numbers are fairly close to average, with brain cancer being relatively rare. Statistically speaking, Ruth Tedlow and April Stadler are anomalies."

"Hell of a coincidence that they've both got it, then."

Scully sighs. "Got any other theories?"

"Plenty. But if you mean about the cancer, then no." This casual remark is jarring to Scully's ears. The glibness with which they can discuss other people's cancer makes her throat feel dry and her stomach clench in guilt. She places her elbows on the computer desk and touches the fingers of one hand against her mouth, skimming the document until something catches her eye.

"Mulder, look at this. The Tedlows were cited during an inspection just last month for a roach infestation."

"So?"

"So, do you think maybe the pesticides used in the extermination could be causing the cancer? Formaldehyde is sometimes used in fumigations and it's a known carcinogen."

"But what about April Stadler, then? She was in the hospital for most of the last month, according to her husband."

She doesn't answer. They're both quiet for a long time, thinking, until Scully stands and stretches her back. "Let's call it a day, Mulder. I'm exhausted." She knows he thinks she's saying this for his benefit, because he's pushing himself too hard after this afternoon. And really, he'd be partially right. But the truth is, she is so physically tired and mentally drained, the unsettling DNA results from Harrison occupying every spare corner of her mind, that all she wants to do is cocoon herself in the starched white of the motel sheets and sleep for days. She looks up at him. "We'll interview Mrs. Stadler tomorrow."

Mulder starts to protest, then stops. A strange look crosses his face. "Scully." Awkwardly, he rests the tips of his fingers on her cheekbone and uses his thumb to wipe away the beginning of a nosebleed.

She pulls away quickly when she realizes what he is doing.

"It's okay, I'm fine." She says, turning away from him and toward the door. She fishes in the pocket of her suit jacket for a tissue. Mulder doesn't move. "It's all right."

He looks down at the smear of blood on his thumb and rubs it between his fingers until it dries up and flakes away. They leave, then, and nothing more is said about it.

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## BROWNING MOTEL

### ROOM 26

12:56 AM

The air conditioner in Scully's room is broken, turned permanently in the ON position. She curls up on the bed with the extra blanket from the closet near the bathroom. The room is dark, the only light a yellowish grey flicker coming from the TV. It's some infomercial, some kind of exercise thing, she thinks. The volume is too low to make out clearly. She's not really watching it, anyway.

This case is getting too bizarre, too personal, and Scully had retreated to her bed right after their take-out dinner, expecting to have to stubbornly decline Mulder's wish to continue discussing the case. But he'd agreed with her, forlornly, that they should probably make it an early night.

She feels clammy and unnerved, now, too preoccupied to think of anything else but the blood on that knife. She knows testing it again is useless. The results will be the same. But how could she possibly be a match? She saw the knife only once, in the evidence locker. And she'd never handled it directly, just through the evidence bag... anyway, the DNA sample had already been taken from the knife by the time she and Mulder had gotten to inspect it. Different scenarios run through her mind; she might have thought they were ridiculous, once,

but now she's not so sure. Is her blood stored in some refrigerated vault somewhere, taken from her during the dark, lost months of her abduction? In that case, someone could've physically put her blood on the knife blade. But for what purpose? To somehow frame her? If that had been the objective, the suspect certainly could've done a better job.

Scully rubs her face with a hand, resigned to getting only a few hours of sleep tonight. She can hear Mulder's TV through the wall. He's flipping channels, which means he's having a hard time sleeping, too.

What would happen if she just opened the connecting door and went to him, she wonders? What would it feel like to lay bare all her insecurities and fears about her cancer, all of the things she doesn't even have the guts to tell her own mother?

She's so sick of running into her abduction and its aftermath in the most unexpected of places. Lately, she's even taken to bringing her own pillow and pillowcase when they stay at motels, just in case she gets a nosebleed.

Back when she was first diagnosed, she used to play this twisted game with herself. Or maybe game isn't the right word for it, she doesn't know. But she used to think back several months at a time to significant events and wonder what stage of growth her tumor was in, like a pregnant woman might do with a fetus. When they were in Tennessee last November, was her tumor already in its first stages of development, nothing more than a tiny bundle of cells that would barely have registered on any MRI? Or did that happen later, perhaps when Mulder was imprisoned in Russia?

Sometimes, though, little things make her life feel almost normal: the slight mustiness of the basement office, the timbre of Mulder's voice through a cell phone, the cool feel of her bed after a week away. She never really forgets she has cancer, exactly, but it's occasionally easy to push it to the back of her mind. Until something happens-- and it always does-- to bring it back into focus.

Scully pulls the blankets up above her nose. This growing mass in her head is nothing but a constant reminder of how much of her own life is out of her control.

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THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 1997

STADLER RESIDENCE

10:02 AM

They knock on the door this time, using the bridle of the horse head doorknocker. Pete answers, like they knew he would; he smiles and waves them in. Mulder pauses to give the dog a scratch behind the ears.

"Morning. She's waiting for you." Pete leads them down a short hallway, past several closed doors, to one that is cracked open at the far end. He knocks lightly and peeks in.

"They're here, April. You need anything?" Mulder can hear a voice answer from the other side of the door. Pete turns to address them quietly. "So far, so good today. I'll just be in the kitchen. Let me know if you need anything at all." He nods and leaves them in front of the partially closed door, an air of expectation causing them to pause briefly.

Scully turns and walks in first, leaving the door half open behind her.

"April? Hi." Scully's voice is strange. Too high-pitched and personal; too much bedside manner or something. It's such a sharp contrast to her usual cool, detached tone that it makes him uncomfortable and he tries to get a look at her face as she walks further into the room.

April Stadler is sitting propped up in the bed, casually dressed in sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. The clothes absolutely swallow her frame. She looks so small and fragile, her arms as delicate as twigs and the skin thin and nearly translucent. Mulder imagines he can see every struggling, reedy vein. A thick crocheted hat covers what he assumes is very little hair, though dark wisps escape in some places and frame her eyes. Her face is drawn, almost gaunt, cheekbones and nose standing in stark relief. She was probably very pretty, once.

April coughs bone-rattlingly. Mulder's chest feels tight, like the air in here is all acceptance and no oxygen. He feels ansty, uncomfortable; he needs to get out of this room, needs to do something productive.

"Scully." He says, voice low, beckoning her back to the doorway. She approaches him slowly. "You can handle this, right? I'm going to have one more look around outside, see if we missed anything last time." He looks fleetingly over her shoulder at the bed.

Scully lowers her eyebrows. "Sure, Mulder."

He nods and then, abruptly, he is gone.

"It's really not as bad as it looks," April smiles a little, knowingly. Scully approaches the side of the bed and pulls a chair close. "This isn't all from the chemo. I caught the flu or something like a week and a half ago and it's really hanging on. As if the chemo wasn't terrible enough, right?"

Scully swallows thickly. "He just..." She hesitates, not sure how much to say but feeling the need to form a connection. "I think it just hit a little too close to home for him." Her voice sounds flat and tired to her own ears.

April studies Scully silently for a moment but, thankfully, decides not to ask.

Scully looks around the room for a distraction and finds it in some watercolors hanging on the wall and a pencil-marked canvas sitting nearby on the bed. "Do you paint, April?"

Her face lights up. "I used to be an art teacher. That's how Pete and I met." The nostalgia makes her seem younger, somehow; her eyes brighten and her cheeks flush with color. "We

taught at the same school. It was my first job right out of college, and Pete thought up this elaborate English project for his students that involved them coming to the art room to paint and draw during my free time. I wasn't stupid or anything; I knew he was shy and he was just looking for an opportunity to meet me. Ugh, he was so handsome! He still is, even more now." She says. The love in her voice is obvious and sweet, and Scully can't help but smile a little. She stands and moves to one of the paintings, a chickadee perched on a snowy fence.

"These are really lovely." Scully says sincerely.

"Thanks. They're easy for me to work on when I'm laid up in bed." There is no awkwardness to April's tone, but Scully suddenly feels strange all the same. She returns to her chair by April's bedside.

"April," Scully starts. "I'm sorry to impose when you're obviously not feeling well, but I was hoping you could answer some questions about what you witnessed."

She smooths the bedspread underneath her. "What would you like to know?"

\*

Mulder makes sure to keep his composure until he's a good distance from the house.

Under the guise of once again surveying the area near the fence, he moves toward the shady grouping of trees, crossing through them so that he is mostly hidden from view. Mulder lets out a breath and wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of a hand.

God dammit.

He stands, looking up, angry with himself. He's seen people murdered, for Christ's sake. He's kept his cool around pieces of shit like John Lee Roche and Eugene Tooms. Hell, show him a flukeman, no problem. But this... this weird limbo he and Scully are in, this stasis, is almost more than he can handle.

Unlike Scully, Mulder's not good at just pretending things are okay.

Comfortable and predictable have never been words he would use to describe his own life, true, but it feels even more unstable now, like a building struggling to stay upright after an earthquake rips apart its foundation. He wants to talk to Scully, really talk to her, about her cancer, and how scared he is, and how he's glad she was sent to spy on him four years ago. He wants to tell her all the personal things he never told her, but that would feel too final, too much like a goodbye. So he doesn't say any of it and they keep plugging away instead, dancing awkwardly around doctor's visits and sick time, talking and not talking.

He's not unaware of the changes in her. He can't help but notice everything now, even little things. Like how she always carries a packet of tissues in her purse, and how she touches her face often, inconspicuously checking for nosebleeds. Or how her hair has become dull and brassy, like she is fading away right in front of him, and eventually she will become too unstable to go on and she will burn out, smoldering like the sun.



Mulder flattens his lips together, kicking a little at the ground. Every time he thinks he's one step closer to getting some answers, it turns out to be only a tease. He hates feeling like a horse with a carrot dangling in front of his nose.

Though, he thinks dryly, his carrot is definitely more flying saucer-shaped.

But the fact remains that he needs to feel like he's accomplishing anything at all, so he pushes himself to dig a little deeper, go a little further undercover, in hopes that he'll crack the secrets behind Scully's cancer wide open. Which brings him back to this case, and to the women involved in it.

Mulder is more sure of the links in this case now than ever, now that he's standing in this field, listening to the wind in the tall grass, the insects buzzing. The sun is warm on his face. He just stands, thinking quietly of April and Ruth, of the crime that was committed here, and thinking, always, of Scully.

He thinks of Melissa and her untimely death. He can almost feel his letter to her in his pocket: perhaps a love letter, perhaps an apology. He doesn't know why, but he has the strangest feeling that whatever's in that letter has something significant to do with this case. He just knows he needs to get it to her.

This time his seizure creeps up like a slow, dense fog, invading gradually until he is entirely immersed. He is falling, maybe, or floating, down, down, down, until his cheek rests gently against the cool grass, the smell of wet earth pungent in his nose. Somewhere distant in his mind it occurs to him that his eyes are closed; he breathes in, opens his eyes and becomes--

--"Sullivan!" Sarah whispers. She appears suddenly, quiet and ghost-like, from behind a beech tree. She has come down the hill from the ridge where the nurses have set up their camp. They are near the fence again, he notices; he leans slightly against the post bearing the broken slat. The chilly November air freezes in his nose a bit as she nears.

Sarah picks her way slowly through the frost toward him, delicately lifting her long skirt above her ankles. He feels for the bulkiness of the folded parchment paper in his front pocket. It's there, a constant reminder of his connection to her, his cross to bear.

Suddenly, Mulder feels a sense of urgency that he can't really explain. There is an electricity in the air now, the atmosphere prickling with foreboding and wildfire. He pulls his cap down on his head. He beckons her closer, quickly, looking over his shoulder as he reaches into his pocket. This is it. "Sarah, I--"

She grabs his wrist tightly, halting its progress. Her fingers are hot on his skin, burning with an icy fire that makes him jerk his hand back, just a little. She doesn't let go; instead, she takes both of his hands in hers and cups her fingers around them. "It is so heartbreaking to wait," Sarah says, breathing shallowly. Her voice is too loud, too laced with meaning. Her eyes are strangely bright as a red dawn begins to crest through the trees. "I miss you."

And Mulder knows, suddenly and with conviction, that this is a code.

She has been followed.

His body knows the click of the revolver a split second before his brain, and he turns slowly with his hands up. Even though the man in front of him is sun-spotted and weathered, with deep leathery wrinkles that make him appear as though he is hewn hack-and-slash from the very trees surrounding them, Mulder knows this soul.

Ephesian.

\*

"The guy with the gun looked so familiar to me." April narrows her eyes as if she is looking far into the distance. It's hard for Scully to imagine this frail woman standing at the window witnessing a murder.

"Do you know him from somewhere?"

She shakes her head. "No, that's not it. I don't know; it was more like... his presence. Maybe the way he was standing? I'm not sure. Something about him, though..."

Scully is quiet, letting her remember. When they have sat in silence for several long seconds, she gently prods. "What did he look like?"

April makes a clicking noise with her tongue. "He was pretty far away." She says. "All I really saw was brown hair and light pants when he pulled the other guy into the field. But," April hesitates once more, debating with herself. "I know this sounds weird, but I think the man with the gun and the victim were wearing army uniforms. But not, like, modern army uniforms. Old ones."

\*

"Now, now, Sarah," Ephesian spits out of the side of his mouth, adjusting his stance by spreading his feet a little wider. A small bit of spittle stays glued to his chin, settling in a pockmark. "You know it ain't proper for a gentlewoman to go out galavantin' with a man without proper supervision. Wouldn't want to tarnish your reputation, would you?"

"We were just--" Sarah tries to step forward, but Mulder puts an arm in front of her.

Ephesian indicates Mulder's hand with a jab of his chin. His voice is low and dangerously calm; his mustache is long and greasy and keeps getting stuck in the corners of his mouth. "What's in yer pocket, Biddle?"

The revolver is a steady weight in Ephesian's hand. Mulder doesn't have to check to know that his own large, cumbersome weapon is not here.

Mulder reaches into his pocket and feels the letter there, waiting for Sarah. He pulls it out and hands it to Ephesian instead, who unfolds it slowly, teasingly. "Well, well." He chews on the inside of his cheek disgustingly, making small smacking noises until he reaches the end of the page. It takes him a long time. "*Bragg enroute to Dalton*. Looks like what we got here--" he re-folds the paper and puts it in his breast pocket. Licking a thumb, he runs it lewdly over one bushy eyebrow-- "Are a couple'a goddamn spies."

He'd been a spy?

Oh god, Scully was just going to love the irony in this.

\*

Scully lowers her brow in confusion. "You mean they were dressed like war reenactors?"

"...Yeah," April says, drawing out the word as she thinks. "I guess so. But the murder sure wasn't reenacted, I can tell you that much." She pauses, studying Scully's face. "He just shot the guy, point-blank. I saw the blood. It... was horrible." Her voice wavers a little but doesn't break. "I've never seen so much blood. I mean, there was so much it actually made little rivers in that field. Rivers! I thought I was going to throw up when I saw it." She pauses now, looking down at her hands while she collects her thoughts. "I've never been a shrinking violet, but this whole thing has really scared me. I haven't been outside for days. I mean, who wants to think there was a murder and kidnapping right in their own front yard?" April's voice is quiet and raspy. Scully wants to point out that, technically, they don't have much evidence that a murder even occurred, but she doesn't want to be insensitive.

"April," she says. "You shouldn't be concerned. We're doing everything we can to figure out what happened here."

"I know. I believe that, I do. We're just all nervous and on edge. Even Pete, though he wouldn't admit it." She sighs and rubs her forehead, eyes closed. "It's hard feeling so vulnerable. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I felt like my body was taken away from me. No warning, no nothing. All of a sudden it just wasn't mine anymore. So I started spending more time at home, because that was still my safe place, you know? I still had that." She looks up at Scully. "But now that's been taken away from me, too."

\*

"On your knees, Biddle." Ephesian says lazily. "You can face me and die like a man, or turn your back like the coward you are."

Sarah is crying, leaning heavily against the wooden slats in the fence and trying desperately to maintain her composure. "Please don't kill us. Please."

Ephesian sneers, his teeth crooked and black from tobacco. His tone, when he speaks, is high and falsely reassuring; the effect is chilling. "'Us'? Why, Sarah, my dear, don't you worry your pretty little head. Biddle's going to die," he says, looking meaningfully over her body, "but you might be able to convince me to spare your life." Sarah stands stoically, biting a lip and trying not to sob. Her breath hitches audibly, just once; Mulder swallows. "Get on your knees, Biddle, or I'll make you watch."

There comes a rustling from a little ways behind Ephesian, a slight play of early morning light on ice that catches Mulder's eye. From between the trees there is a flash of color, a glint of steel, and it's gone.

He might've missed it.

Mulder bends excruciatingly slowly, exaggerating each movement, playing for time. He laces his fingers behind his head for extra measure. He hopes Sarah hasn't seen. Oh god, if she noticed and she gives it away... If he can time it right... if he can just hold Ephesian off long enough...

An inky black shadow remains, despite the dawning sun, in a dense grouping of trees behind Ephesian's right shoulder. There is movement right at the center, there, a sort of cascading of velvet or a settling of the cosmos. From this darkness steps a familiar face. His pistol is pointed straight at the back of Ephesian's head.

"Stand down, son."

Mulder sees Ephesian swallow tightly. His arm wavers once under the weight of his revolver, considering his options. Finally, finally, he lowers it to his side and drops it to the ground. Sergeant Warren creeps closer, revolver outstretched, until he is directly behind Ephesian. Mulder stands slowly; he lets out a long breath and studies his sergeant's face carefully.

"How did you...?"

Warren barely spares him a look, his dark eyes instead searching for signs of injury on Sarah. He is disgusted, or pitying, or some combination of the two. "I followed you. I've suspected for a long time."

Mulder says nothing.

"There's no honor in treason," Warren says, adjusting his weapon. He places a hand on Ephesian's shoulder, holding him stiffly at arm's length. "But there's even less honor in killing in cold blood without trying a man first." The look on his face is jarring; Mulder can see the battle happening there, the fight between what is morally right and what is his obligation as a sergeant. He makes his decision, jerking his head to the side and refusing to meet Mulder's eyes. "Get the hell out of here, Biddle. Get as far away as fast as you can, and don't you ever come back again."

Mulder breathes shallowly. He can't move. With Ephesian as a witness, Warren will surely be hanged for letting a traitor go. The thought makes him sick, and he almost doesn't see the little glint of metal near Ephesian's side.

A pocket knife.

"No--!" He shouts, but the sound chokes off when it reaches his tongue. With a speed unexpected from a man his age, Ephesian spins on his heel and plunges the knife up to the hilt in Warren's throat. Sarah screams. A horrible gurgling sound forces its way out of his mouth; blood bubbles up and out onto the ground, and a forceful, foamy spray hits Mulder squarely across the face. It is coppery and warm.

Warren's hands, blood-tinged and slippery, grasp at his throat desperately. In his panic, he pulls the knife out and it drops to the ground a second before Warren himself does.

For one long, terrifying second, Mulder is frozen in place, horrified and sick. Then, something clicks.

Sergeant Warren.

Scully.

It's Scully!

Mulder rushes to Warren's side and falls to his knees, pressing his hands flat and hard against the wound. Blood is everywhere, spraying from Warren's throat and dripping thickly from his mouth and nose.

Nosebleeds, he thinks, before he can stop himself.

With the back of one hand, Mulder impatiently brushes blood from his eyelashes, but it's useless. The blood coats his face and freckles his arms, the sheer amount of it making his stomach turn and his eyes water. Warren grabs the front of Mulder's uniform in a fist. His eyes are wild, unfocused; the desperation in his features painful to see. He draws a rattling breath.

"It's okay," Mulder says quietly, his voice hitching. The acrid smell of Warren's blood makes him cough. He pushes harder against the knife wound, willing it to close. "It's all right."

Without warning, Mulder is thrown to the ground again, curled in on himself and holding his face. He feels an intense pain in his head and for a moment his brain erroneously recognizes it as a seizure. He tastes blood; it may be Warren's but he's not sure.

"I'll show you how we treat turncoats 'round here." Ephesian says. His voice is a tinny whine at Mulder's temple, one he barely recognizes as speech. Mulder can feel something crunching in his jaw and he's sure his nose is broken from Ephesian's well-placed kick to his face. "And it sure as hell ain't a free ticket to the North."

When he can open his eyes, Sarah is cowering at the fence and Ephesian stands over him, holding both his own revolver and Warren's.

Warren is dead.

\*

Scully voice gets caught in a sharp lump in her throat, a thick, painful constriction that prevents her from making any sort of comforting sound. She places a hand on April's arm.

"Don't think I'm feeling sorry for myself, because I'm not." April says. She has an unused tissue in her hands that she pulls apart a little as she talks. She is silent for a moment, perhaps waiting for Scully to move forward with the interview. When she doesn't, April seems to come to some conclusion, the weight of Scully's hand too comforting on her arm to ignore.

She sighs and continues, quietly, glancing at Scully and then away again. "People sometimes ask me if I've made peace with the fact that I'm dying. Oh, they don't mean any harm," she

says at Scully's incredulous look. "It's mostly the religious ones. But I think, you know," --she laughs once-- "fuck that. I don't have to make peace with anything. I'm allowed to be angry about it." April grins slyly at the look of surprise on Scully's face. There is a little spark in her, reminiscent of a firecracker, that Scully has just now seen snap behind April's eyes. It's a small glimpse into April as she once was, Scully assumes. Lithium, calcium, sodium, barium, lit on fire and shot into the sky. "Sorry. I get so mad, sometimes, but I have no one to be mad at. The whole thing just feels so... pointless." She picks at the comforter. "But the truth is, sometimes I feel like I have accepted it. Death, I mean. And that... that is so terrifying."

Scully can hardly breathe. Her voice, when it comes, is thick and raspy. "Why?"

"Because," April says, "I don't know if it's because I've given up-- that I have no fight left in me--or if it's more like me..." she trails off as she tries to think of an accurate phrasing, "... taking charge of my fate. Like I'm not letting the cancer tell me when my time is up, because I'm giving myself permission to die first. Do you know what I mean?"

Scully clears her throat. "Yeah, I think I do."

\*

Scully is dead.

It's the only thing he can think, over and over. Scully is dead, and it isn't because of cancer. It's because of him. Just like he always feared.

His eyes roll blindly into the back of his head. He recognizes vaguely that he is being dragged, but his vision flickers like an old Super 8 film of his childhood, choppy and sped-up and underexposed. There are stretches of complete darkness. The grass is cold and wet on his back where his uniform has ridden up to expose his skin, and that coupled with the rocking motion of being dragged makes him think of floating helplessly in the ocean. A dead man's float. He feels seasick.

And then he stops moving all together.

Ephesian nudges Mulder onto his back roughly with the toe of his boot. Mulder's head lolls indelicately to one side near his shoulder and he opens his eyes.

The sky is vast and dawning blood red above him, filling his range of vision entirely. For a minute, he believes he really has been floating in the ocean; then he realizes that Ephesian has just dragged him into the field, away from the protection of the trees.

"Here's your 'fair trial,' Biddle. Out in the open, with God as your judge."

Time seems to slow down. Ephesian's words stretch long and low in his ears, nonsensical and falling over each other. Mulder thinks of waves breaking on rocks.

And then, Ephesian raises Warren's revolver, aims directly for Mulder's heart, and pulls the trigger.

\*

Silence.

It's not uncomfortable; in fact, it's the strange, fragile, understated sort of silence that she finds herself in with Mulder sometimes, now that she's sick. But with April, there is an understanding involved that Scully feels the need to neither acknowledge nor ignore. April seems to notice it, too. Scully is reminded, suddenly, of Penny Northern and Betsy Hagopian.

April starts to stir, shifting the throw blanket off of her lap. "I hate to ask, but do you think you could open that window for me? I've had a fever and this room gets so stuffy." April points to the far side of the room, where a window looks out into the backyard. Scully unfolds herself from the chair slowly and cracks the window. She stays for just a minute, looking out. There is a low rock fence framing a beautifully landscaped garden; she'd seen it from a far distance yesterday at the Tedlows', but close up, Scully thinks it must be absolutely beautiful in late spring and summertime, when more flowers are in bloom. She imagines Pete out here, digging this garden, turning the soil over and planting every bulb, one by one, for April. Her throat feels tight.

A warm breeze blows through; Scully closes her eyes and feels it on her face. "Can you believe it's only spring and we've already had temperatures in the 70s?" April shakes her head. "That's the one thing I haven't been able to get used to about moving from the north to the south. That, and all the cockroaches." She laughs.

Cockroaches?

Something settles into place in Scully's head, something she must've unconsciously been puzzling out for days. She turns around. "April, how long did you say you've had flu symptoms?"

"Um... It started probably a week and a half ago, maybe two weeks. I'm not really sure. Why?"

"We need to get you to a hospital."

\*

The pain is white hot; Mulder cries out involuntarily, arching his back and gasping for air. A dull ringing fills his ears; it's all he can hear. Suddenly, Sarah is there, cradling his head and crying. She is speaking to him but he can't hear what she is saying, so he watches her mouth move instead until Ephesian pulls her off of him and out of sight.

There is a shout somewhere beyond him, and then there is swell of noise that he feels rather than hears.

There are other soldiers here, everywhere in the field, running past him. He recognizes in passing the souls of Pete and April Stadler, of Ruth Tedlow. They will all die in this field, every one of them, gutted and cold like Scully. And they will all return to it one day, called back just like he was.

He couldn't save her. Oh god, he couldn't save her, in this past lifetime or the present one. He lifts up his hands in front of his face and sees her blood, crusting over his fingernails and drying, rust-colored, on his skin.

Gun shot, knife wound, cancer. He is doomed to lose her every time, every single god damn time.

If this is his eternity, if every lifetime he lives without her is the penance he is forced to pay for some unknown transgression, he instead wants nothing more than for his body and soul to rot in this field forever, never living again, enveloped by darkness and nothingness until the very end of time.

Mulder closes his eyes in acceptance and feels a steady vibration in the ground.

The Union Army has come.

\*

The ambulance is on its way. Scully hangs up her cell phone, intent on finding Mulder to let him know she will be accompanying April to the hospital.

She knows something's wrong the minute she walks outside. It's too still. There's no breeze, no insect sounds. The heat falls around her shoulders like a shroud; it's oppressive and hard to breathe through. She makes her way quickly toward the group of trees.

"Mulder!" Scully sees him then, flat on his back and motionless in the field. She runs the rest of the way toward him, kneeling down and cupping his face. "Mulder. Mulder, come on. Wake up."

He opens his eyes. The evaporating sweat on his skin makes him feel cool, clammy.

He feels as if he's been gone for years; it is so good to see her.

He touches the papery skin of her neck with the very tips of his fingers. Grinning lopsidedly, he runs his thumb along her cheekbone, just once. "Hey, Sarge."

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APRIL 24, 1997

LAKESIDE MEDICAL CENTER

12:39 PM

"April Stadler tested positive for encephalitis, a swelling of the brain resulting from severe toxoplasmosis, which was likely transmitted from contaminated cats on the farm to the



cockroaches we saw at the Stadler residence. That would explain her initial hallucination of the murder, at least partially, and why it was so much more detailed and intense than her husband's hallucination." Scully crosses her legs. "Your theory about the magnetic field produced by the wind turbines and electrical equipment on the farm seems to have merit. The magnetic field around both residences measured unusually high, which probably stimulated brain activity to produce hallucinations of the perpetrator and victims in Peter Stadler and Ruth Tedlow after the suggestions first made by April Stadler. As for how it could have been a shared hallucination..." she pauses, tapping her fingers a bit on the heavy plastic rail separating Mulder and herself. "I don't have any theories, except that maybe they unintentionally fed off of each other's descriptions."

Mulder is turned away from her, looking out the window from his hospital bed. He's been in a bad mood all day.

Scully continues, sighing. "Furthermore, the brain cancer diagnosed in both Ruth Tedlow and April Stadler seems to be a side effect of constant exposure to the same magnetic field, as far as I can tell. It was probably just a matter of time before Peter Stadler and Ruth's family were affected, too." No response. "Incidentally, your seizures also appear to have been triggered by the magnetic field, which accounts for their increased frequency and severity. You were made significantly more susceptible by your brain injury." Scully pauses, waiting for some indication of his interest. Or any reaction at all, really. She is sorely tempted to end with an 'I told you so,' just to see what he'd do. "Mulder, did you hear anything I just said?"

"Magnetic cockroaches," he intones, "got it."

Scully blinks once, owlishly, and chooses not to engage. "The second DNA results were the same; the blood on the knife matched mine. I don't have a scientific explanation as to how it might have gotten there, so I can only assume there was a computer error or contamination somewhere in the process that resulted in a false match."

"It was a match because it was your blood, Scully." He clenches his jaw, irritated. "I watched you die with that knife in your neck."

"Be that as it may," Scully says stiffly, "the case has been closed."

He turns to face her, pursing his lips. "Then what was the point of any of it, Scully? The visions, everything? We know what happened. So what? It doesn't change anything. It's not like we can prosecute a guy who's been dead for a hundred and fifty years." He scoffs. "We still don't even know how the weapons got there."

"No," Scully concedes, "we don't." He snorts derisively, leaning back on his pillows.

Truthfully, Mulder mostly feels angry with himself. He tries to remind himself of that as he runs a hand over his face. "I just hoped... that knowing for sure what happened to me as Sullivan Biddle would change things, somehow. That things would make more sense. I guess that was selfish." It's unbelievably frustrating and disheartening that his life still feels the same, all the good parts and shitty parts and the parts that were just okay still intact, exactly as they were before. Melissa's still dead. Scully still has cancer. And he's no closer to the truth, whatever that even means now.

Scully's eyes soften slightly. "Our time wasn't wasted here, Mulder. In fact, I owe you an apology." She reaches out to place a hand on his arm. "You're the one who figured out the wind turbines and electrical equipment were partially to blame. Ruth Tedlow and especially April Stadler have a better chance at survival now." Scully stops, squeezes his arm slightly. He turns to look at her. "And that... that's a big deal." They lock eyes for a moment until Scully leans back in her chair once more. "Both properties are being exterminated as we speak. Though," she admits, "I'd like to think that would've happened anyway even without my recommendation." He says nothing. She continues, softer. "And as far as the visions are concerned, just because there's not a satisfying resolution doesn't make them insignificant. Maybe they were something you needed to see. Maybe the fact that we may have potentially helped save a few lives in this lifetime is resolution enough."

She squeezes his arm once more, meaningfully, and stands up. She crosses to the door, and after stepping through closes it softly behind her.

Mulder leans back against his pillows and runs a hand through his hair, swallowing against an unexpected lump in his throat. He'd asked Scully, once, if knowing they were friends in previous lives would have changed the way they looked at one another. But now, after everything that has happened here, he thinks he understands.

They chose each other; fate didn't choose for them.

And really, Mulder thinks, isn't that so much more meaningful?

\*\*\*

end.

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